

Diderot and the Art of Letter-writing:

a Literary and Rhetorical Study of the *Correspondance*.

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PhD. The University of Edinburgh. 2001.



I declare that this thesis has been composed by me and is entirely my own work. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Abstract of Thesis.

The aim of this study is to give a coherent overview of the *Correspondance* in terms of epistolarity and as a text that is amenable to critical literary analysis in its own right. The *Correspondance* is analysed in terms of rhetoric. Diderot employs rhetoric to tailor his letters to their addressees. Thus an integral part of letter-writing which is examined throughout is the adoption by Diderot of different epistolary personae and the various means of persuasion used.

The first chapter is a discussion of the essential historical background needed in order to understand the epistolary form as practised in the eighteenth century. The second chapter is an introduction to the issues surrounding the publication history of the *Correspondance* and its various editions. The different genres of letters found in the *Correspondance* are then examined. These are categorized by using seventeenth and eighteenth century letter manuals as the basis for the definition of these genres.

The focus of the study then moves to a detailed analysis of the letters. The third chapter is a consideration of constant features of the epistolary form and how these relate to Diderot's actual letter writing practice. These constants which appear in most writing about epistolarity are absence, temporal distortion and the creation of epistolary personae.

This is followed by a discussion of the letters in terms of sensibility, and the discourse of love and friendship, focusing on the letters to Anne-Toinette Champion, Sophie Volland and Grimm. The discourses of love and friendship are very much interrelated in Diderot's letters.

The fifth chapter is an analysis of the different forms of wit and humour in the *Correspondance*. Wit and humour are another means of reinforcing the reader centred and interactive nature of letters.

The sixth chapter is an examination of the letter as a substitute for conversation and the techniques used to report conversation in the letters written from Grandval. Reported conversation features greatly in these letters and is a striking aspect of Diderot's epistolary practice.

The final chapter is an examination of the polemic and persuasive use of argumentation by Diderot in his more combative letters. Published forms of epistolary debate such as the letters to Père Berthier and to Falconet are studied as well as more personal combative letters written to his brother and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Diderot's use of rhetoric to seek help on the behalf of others is also considered.

List of Abbreviations.

Diderot, Denis, *Correspondance*, ed. Versini, Laurent, (Paris, 1997) will be abbreviated as *Corres.* This will be the standard edition of reference unless otherwise indicated.

Diderot, Denis, *Correspondance*, eds. Roth, Georges, and Varloot, Jean (Paris, 1955-1970) will be referred to as *Corres.*, Roth, Georges or Varloot, Jean as appropriate.

References to the following periodicals will be abbreviated thus:

Diderot Studies.

DS.

Recherches sur Diderot et sur l' Encyclopédie.

RDE.

Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France.

RHLF.

Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth Century.

SVEC.

*For my parents Yvonne and Colin Roberts
With all my love and gratitude.*

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Introduction.

Diderot's *Correspondance* is a varied and stylistically complex collection of letters which are much more than a mere testimony of his personal and professional life. However, the extent of the correspondence which is extant is surprisingly slight when compared to some contemporary correspondences. While Rousseau and Voltaire wrote some 15300 and 6000 letters respectively, there are a mere 780 letters written by Diderot which are extant, including fragmentary notes and letters whose attribution is possibly doubtful.

One explanation for the small number of letters remaining is that Diderot only achieved relative literary fame in middle age and then was only really known for his work as editor of the *Encyclopédie* by his contemporaries. People are much more likely to keep the letters they receive from someone who is a public figure. Diderot must presumably have written a great number of letters to the contributors to the *Encyclopédie* but these were not kept by the recipients who perhaps felt that evidence of their own involvement in this work was compromising, or they simply did not keep all their correspondence. Diderot, unlike Rousseau, does not appear to have kept copies of his letters so we are largely reliant upon the addressees of his letters having kept them. The manner in which the letters that have remained have passed into the public domain is in itself quite a complicated and baroque tale. The first edition which published Diderot's letters in any great number was edited by Paulin in 1830-31. *Les Mémoires, correspondance et ouvrages inédits de Diderot* published 139 letters written to Sophie Volland and 13 letters written to Falconet, these were based upon a copy of the copy of the letters sent to Saint Petersburg after Diderot's death by his daughter. This copy was then in turn copied in rather dubious

circumstances by Jeudy-Dugour who in some manner had gained access to the library in the Hermitage which was closed to all. This same copy was then used by Assézat and Tourneux in their *Œuvres Complètes*. They had no recourse to the original copies and were not able to study the documents kept in Russia. The two most important editions which extended the range of letters published and which meticulously verified the text used, as well as having recourse to the original documents, were the *Correspondance inédite*, edited by André Babelon in 1931, which greatly increased the range of letters, and the authoritative edition by Georges Roth and Jean Varloot which had the great advantage of being based upon the manuscripts and the Fonds Vandeul for the first time. Jacques Chouillet describes the vagaries of the Fonds Vandeul in this manner:

Quant aux pérégrinations du *Fonds Vandeul*, elles sont plutôt, comme le dit H. Dieckmann, 'du domaine du roman d'aventure que de l'héritage littéraire.' L'ensemble de ces papiers, rassemblés par la fille de Diderot, épouse de Caroillon de Vandeul resta au xixe siècle dans la famille de Vandeul, puis entra au xxe siècle par voie d'extinction, dans la famille Le Vavasseur, en Normandie. Ils y étaient encore en 1948 lorsque le professeur Dieckmann en entreprit l'inventaire, dont les résultats furent publiés en 1951. Nous voilà maintenant en possession d'un instrument de travail, qui, joint aux trente-deux volumes du fonds de Léninegrad, s'impose à tout éditeur sérieux et nous amène à renouveler de fond en comble notre connaissance des textes.¹

The problems which editors of the *Correspondance* have met with and the relative merits and different approaches to the letters in different editions are discussed at greater length in chapter two of this thesis.

Much emphasis has been placed upon the letters Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland and these have been published without the other letters Diderot wrote. Some

¹ Chouillet, Jacques, *Diderot* (Paris, 1977), p. 19.

five hundred and fifty letters are believed to have been written but only about 196 of these remain. The first letter we have is number 135 in the series which the correspondents numbered and Diderot would have known Sophie Volland for four years by this date. These letters have been seen to provide the reader with an impression of the *philosophe* in love and it has been thought that their great charm is largely due to this love story. Very little information can be gained about Sophie Volland as none of her letters remain. Jacques Chouillet sums up what little is known about Sophie Volland in the introduction to his work *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland*.

Un dialogue à une voix:

Le nom de Sophie Volland n'est d'ailleurs que l'assemblage d'un prêtre-nom littéraire et d'un nom de famille, celui-là bien réel. Sur cette Louise-Henriette, nous n'avons que deux renseignements certains: son acte de baptême, fait le jour de sa naissance, le vendredi 27 novembre 1716 en l'église St-Eustache, et son testament olographe daté du 20 juin 1772, ouvert le 23 février 1784 le lendemain de son décès. [...] Diderot y est nommé : « Je donne et lègue à Monsieur Diderot sept petits volumes des *Essais* de Montaigne, reliés en maroquin rouge plus une bague que j'appelle ma pauline ». Enfin nous avons quelques détails sur le mode de vie qui fut le sien après la mort de sa mère et son installation rue Montmartre à partir de mai 1774 : l'inventaire fait le 2 mars 1784 après son décès signale des meubles confortables, une cave bien garnie, un joli trousseau (les revenus de Louise-Henriette s'élevaient à 7000 livres). En revanche on est surpris par la minceur de sa bibliothèque: 81 volumes, dont un *Dictionnaire* qui, ô surprise, n'est même pas l'œuvre de Diderot. Il s'agit du *Dictionnaire* de Joubert.²

Arthur Wilson, who made great use of the *Correspondance* to write his biography of Diderot, reflects perhaps rather ungallantly upon the enigma which is Sophie Volland, as he seems to assume that she could not have been as intelligent a woman as Diderot believed her to be:

Much of what is known about Diderot, the most revealing and the most precious information, comes from his correspondence with Sophie Volland. It

² Chouillet, Jacques, *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland. Un dialogue à une voix* (Paris, 1986), p.10.

is posterity's loss that, in contrast, so little is known of Sophie herself. Was the quality of her mind what Diderot thought it to be, or did he mistake the echoing of his own ideas as the evidence of a powerful intelligence in her? It would not have been the first or last time that Diderot admired himself by seeing in a person or a book something that was not there but was simply a projection of his own personality.³

This seems rather more revelatory of the writer of this passage rather than of Diderot.

Interestingly Jacques Chouillet takes quite the opposite view:

Elle fut pour lui la partenaire idéale [...] avec qui l'hypothèse d'une conversation d'égal à égal a quelque chance de s'instaurer, au-delà de la différence des sexes.⁴

It can be argued that this is the real charm and originality of this exchange of letters and perhaps a reason why they can be read with such enjoyment today.

Unfortunately the letters to Sophie Volland and the *Correspondance* as a whole have often been read as texts that reveal the psyche of Diderot, which rather obscures the original intent and function of these letters. However, Versini in the introduction to his edition of the *Correspondance* sees the eclectic nature of the letters and the interests and milieux represented in them as being the cause of their enduring charm:

Si on pense moins, d'ordinaire, à Diderot qu'à Voltaire, à Mme Du Deffand, à Mlle de Lespinasse ou à Mme de Graffigny pour définir le style épistolaire du xviii^e siècle, les lettres de Diderot nous renseignent aussi précieusement sur bien des milieux, et d'abord sur la synagogue d'Holbach, véhiculent des dizaines de tours pittoresques, populaires, champenois, personnels, des néologismes expressifs, et sont indispensables pour corriger ce que l'image du directeur de l'*Encyclopédie* peut, malgré ses audaces, avoir d'officiel ou de retenu, pour nous mettre au fait de ses amours, de ses enthousiasmes, de ses idées fixes comme la quadrature du cercle, pour nous le faire écouter avec son franc-parler, dans une conversation par écrit où il est aussi spontané qu'il l'était de vive voix [...]⁵

³ Wilson, Arthur M., *Diderot, The Testing Years, 1713-1759* (Oxford, 1957), p. 231.

⁴ Chouillet, Jacques, *Diderot* (Paris, 1977), p. 174.

⁵ Diderot, Denis, *Correspondance*, ed. Versini, Laurent, (Paris, 1997) in introduction p. I. The Versini edition will be used as the standard edition of reference throughout unless otherwise specified. The

The apparent spontaneous nature of these particular letters and Diderot's no doubt conscious attempt to render them as close to conversation as possible make them especially immediate. Diderot's letters can also be compared to a form of writer's notebook in which he tried out amusing anecdotes and philosophical theories before elaborating them further at a later stage, when writing *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* or *Jacques le fataliste* to give just two well known examples :

La correspondance apparaît surtout comme le magasin où Diderot se pourvoira en 'petites circonstances si liées à la chose' qui fondent le conte historique, ou le laboratoire où il essaie des anecdotes exemplaires.⁶

This is one of the main perspectives from which Diderot's letters have been viewed: that is as a source book for his other works and as a means of understanding his artistic inspiration. But the *Correspondance* is much more than an artistic testing ground. Indeed Sophie Volland and the other readers of the letters were the main readership of these anecdotes and ideas which were not widely published, if at all, in his lifetime. So their importance and function in the letters were of paramount importance for Diderot. The addressees of his letters were his touchstone for gauging what the reaction of posterity might be.

The predominant approach towards correspondences, and Diderot's *Correspondance* in particular, has been a biographical one. The *Correspondance* has been quite naturally used to fill in the gaps in Diderot's biography. This is evidently only useful when it can help to elucidate certain factual issues. Indeed Wilson, Crocker and Versini have used the *Correspondance* for this purpose. However this

Roth-Varloot edition is used when it includes letters which are not to be found in the Versini edition.

⁶ Versini, p. XIII.

biographical focus can then be taken too far, and often has been, when the *Correspondance* has been viewed as reflecting Diderot the man and being seen as an uncomplicated manifestation of his true psychology. Carol Sherman sees this as being a form of reading which has been applied by critics when writing about the style of Diderot's writing:

In trying to account for Diderot's brilliant and disconcerting style, critics have generally searched in a single locus, that of the author's person: his biography, his personality, and his psychology. In other words, most commentary of his work has tended to be that of psychological geneticism. This kind of criticism practices a selection which seems particularly deforming in the case of the philosophe. [...] While it is true that the frontier between the object created and the creating subject is often difficult to discern, few literary works, and least of all those written during the Enlightenment, can claim to the sort of immaculate conception that the virtual identity of subject and object supposes.⁷

Many readings of correspondences take the identity of writing subject and object as a given. It is very distorting when this approach is applied to letter-writing. Recent studies on autobiography have helped to lead the way towards a conception of epistolary which does not fall into this trap, one which is so easy to fall into due to the persuasive force of the letter-writing voice. By concentrating on a literary and critical reading of the *Correspondance* we have attempted to offer an approach which sheds light upon the structures of these texts.

This psychological approach is rather flawed as it neglects to consider the nature of letters being written for a reader and being directly tailored to achieve a favourable response from the addressee. The correspondences of writers are often subject to this approach which aims to reveal the 'real' person behind the great writer. Jean-Claude Bonnet asserts that love letters are typically read from this angle

⁷ Sherman, Carol, *Diderot and the Art of Dialogue* (Geneva, 1976), p. 14.

as they have the appearance of revealing a more intimate and personal side of the letter-writer. He states that such readings of the *Lettres à Sophie Volland* have been widespread and detrimental to their status within the corpus of Diderot's writing :

A la *lettre d'amour* où l'auteur endosse en principe le rôle de l'amoureux, l'histoire littéraire fait un sort particulier en considérant qu'il s'agit d'un moment privilégié: celui où l'identité est enfin dévoilée et se stabilise. De cette prétendue surprise du Moi intime et déshabillé, on sait ce qu'on peut tirer comme interprétation biographique et comme illustration anecdotique. [...]

Cela n'a pas suffi à décourager Sainte-Beuve qui a cru pouvoir s'autoriser des *Lettres à Sophie Volland* pour construire, selon sa méthode, un *portrait littéraire*. Certain d'avoir reproduit une physionomie ressemblante et *trouvé l'homme*, il en a tiré des applications pour la compréhension de l'œuvre. Cette opération interprétative, même inspirée par une sympathie et une familiarité certaines, a eu jusqu'à notre époque des effets négatifs sur la lecture de Diderot, qu'elle a beaucoup retardée. [...] Appliquée aux *Lettres à Sophie Volland*, l'interprétation biographique d'inspiration humaniste et qui se fonde sur l'illusion référentielle, n'offre qu'un simulacre de consistance, car ce texte n'est pas moins complexe, bizarre et lacunaire que les autres. [...] Il est impossible de reléguer les *Lettres à Sophie Volland* dans une sorte de hors d'œuvre flou et de leur assigner une place banale, comme s'il s'agissait d'un simple répertoire et d'un secteur à part, avec de moindres marques littéraires, où pour une fois domine le naturel, car c'est dans la lettre d'amour, façonnée par l'infirmité de l'absence, que se trame et s'apprête, tout autant que dans l'expérience encyclopédique, la disposition singulière de toute l'œuvre.⁸

We would whole-heartedly agree with this position as until quite recent times the *Correspondance* has been viewed as an ancillary text, or as a form of uncomplicated authentic autobiographical representation of Diderot. This rather naïve approach can be represented by works such as: *Salons du xviiiè siècle* by Marguerite Gotz and Madeleine Maire, (Paris, 1949). The authors use Diderot's letters to describe the *Salons* which took place at La Chevrette and Grandval, passages are quoted or paraphrased from the letters and are seen to represent a true and unbiased account of

⁸ Bonnet Jean-Claude, 'L'écrit amoureux ou le fou de Sophie.' pp. 105-114. In *Colloque international Diderot (1713-1784) Paris-Sèvres-Reims-Langres. 4-11 juillet 1984*, ed. Chouillet, Anne-Marie, (Paris, 1985), p. 106.

those present. This approach to letters as a historical document or source is not uncommon and is one which quite ignores the subjectivity and dialogic nature of the letter. Charly Guyot has a similar method of presenting the *Correspondance* in *Diderot par lui-même* (Paris, 1959) which, in keeping with this rather old-fashioned series, uses excerpts from Diderot's works and letters to form a type of biography, which is seen as an authentic expression of Diderot's personality and views as it employs his works to form a portrait of him.

A biographical reading of the correspondences of authors is one that is very prevalent, and correspondences are often represented from this perspective in book reviews or in their introductory foreword. For example the letters of Sylvia Plath have been viewed as providing information about the root of her mental illness and poetic inspiration. This neglects the fact that anyone with a literary sensibility is unlikely to write letters in a purely authentic manner which reveals their 'inner being'. Proust's letters have been viewed as a means of ascertaining to what extent *A la recherche du temps perdu* is autobiographical, and Flaubert's letters to Louise Colet have been seen as a literary manifesto and the nature of the love affair between the two writers has been focused upon with interest. Cézanne's letters to Zola have had their status as letters rather obscured due to the nature of the two correspondents and Zola's depiction of his former friend in an unflattering light in *L'Oeuvre*. Such readings of correspondences see the letter as a truly authentic expression of the voice and personality of the letter-writer.

Another manner of reading correspondences which is still evident, especially in a series of articles by Arnold Ages which cover various topics such as politics and

religion, is the use of the letters as a source book for reflections upon Diderot's personal beliefs.⁹ Once again the nature of the letter and the fact that the views that are expressed are directed towards a specific addressee(s) is largely ignored. Correspondences are often viewed as some form of fossilized historical document.

Recent doctoral theses on the *Correspondance* make some interesting points but they generally use approaches which are somewhat flawed. Often much attention is placed upon the *Correspondance* as a psychological testament to the life of the man behind the letters. Well-known letters are used as examples and similar ground has been gone over in other works and articles.

Diderot conteur dans la correspondance: L'Influence d'Homère, de Platon et de Montaigne sur le style de Diderot conteur, by Nancy Molavi, (University of Missouri-Columbia, 1975) restricts the scope of study to anecdotes and story telling in the letters. Much emphasis is placed upon Diderot's apparent admiration for the Illiad and this gives the basis for a comparison of Homer and Diderot's style. This suggestion is very unconvincing given the fundamental linguistic differences between ancient Greek and French. Rhythm in the Correspondance is also looked at and generally in a manner which is similar to Leo Spitzer's analysis of rhythm in Diderot's writing.¹⁰

⁹ For example articles published by him in 1990 and 1991: 'Diderot and Society. The Philosophe as Gazetteer, the Testimony of he Correspondence'. *Dalhousie review* (lxix (89)) 5-16, 'Diderot, Falconet and the Theology of Art. The Testimony of the Correspondence.' *Orbis litt.* Xlv (90) 211-233. 'Diderot and Literary Aesthetics. The Testimony of the Correspondence'. *Neohelicon* (xviii I (91)), 203-217.

¹⁰ Spitzer, Leo, 'The Style of Diderot' in *Linguistics and Literary History. Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton, 1967), 135-169.

Another recent thesis is Genevieve Cammarge's *L'Inquiétude de la vertu ou le moi dans la correspondance de Diderot*. (Thèse 3^e cycle Université de Toulouse II, 1988.) Although there is an interesting analysis of the role of virtue in the letters and Diderot's construction of a persona as an *homme de bien*, the letters are read from both a literary and autobiographical basis which is not an approach which is completely convincing. In the abstract of her thesis she says of introspection in the letters:

Mais cet élan est traversé par l'interrogation psychologique qui fait de Diderot un des premiers penseurs de l'intériorité. Conscient des limites de l'introspection et se refusant à la complaisance de l'aveu, l'épistolier est à l'affût des signes qui, chez les autres, décèlent l'action confuse de forces cachées. Dans les lettres à Sophie Volland, le travail de la jalousie et le sentiment de l'impossible transparence donnent lieu à des stratégies de vérité particulièrement retorses.

We would disagree with this notion that Diderot's letters reveal a great awareness of introspection or of a true will to analyse the self. This position is discussed in much greater depth when Diderot's journal-like letters are examined at a later stage in the thesis. Diderot's position as an introspective writer has been greatly exaggerated.

Another thesis which analyses the *Correspondance* in an unconvincing manner is *Homo duplex: A Character Study of Diderot Based upon his Correspondence and Certain Philosophical Works*, by Joyce Ann Richards. (New York at Albany, 1969). This study sets out to be a character study of Diderot that uses the *Correspondance* as a source. Her method is the use of "personal documents as an approach to the human personality". There is great use of Freud's theories to explain certain character traits. In another chapter she discusses materialism in a manner which largely paraphrases the *Rêve de d'Alembert*.

Jacques Chouillet's work on the *Correspondance* has greatly influenced those who have written about it afterwards. In *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland. Un dialogue à une voix*, he gives a very comprehensive overview of the nature of this epistolary relationship. He sees the letters Diderot writes to Sophie Volland as being very much orientated towards the addressee. The letter is a form of answer to some previous question, conversation or letter:

Mais il faut élargir encore le cercle de l'échange et se demander si toute écriture, du moment qu'elle prend la forme d'une lettre, n'est pas en elle-même une réponse: réponse à une question (quelquefois), ou bien réponse à une attente (en principe toujours). Même si l'attente n'est que supposée, ce qui est presque toujours le cas, elle est la condition de l'échange. Il faut se mettre dans la situation qui est celle de Diderot à l'époque où il écrit ses lettres les plus longues (1759-62; avec une résurgence en 1767) : c'est une période de grande séparation où il n'existe pour l'écrivain qu'un moyen d'évoquer la bien-aimée absente, faire comme si elle attendait ce jeu de la parole, faire comme si elle l'entendait, faire comme si elle lui parlait. Ces paroles entendues deviennent à leur tour les paroles de l'écrivain qui les réinvestit d'un sens nouveau, si bien que le dialogue-un dialogue à une voix-ne s'arrête jamais.¹¹

Such a vision of the *Correspondance* has very much influenced this study. This is then summarized as follows:

Il faut donner à cette relation son sens le plus fort. De tout ce qui vient d'être dit, il résulte :

- 1) que les lettres de Diderot à Sophie sont des textes orientés et finalisés,
- 2) que la présence de Sophie s'y manifeste même quand il n'est pas question d'elle.
- 3) qu'une multitude de « rapports secrets » unissent de manière explicite ou implicite, l'objet textuel et le désir dont il est l'empreinte visible.¹²

This is very much applicable to the letters written to Sophie Volland but cannot be applied entirely to the letters Diderot writes to others, although his epistolary practice

¹¹ Chouillet, Jacques, *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland. Un dialogue à une voix* (Paris, 1986), p.18.

¹² *Op. cit.* pp. 19-20.

is very much centred upon the addressees of his letters and their expectations. We will consider this in some depth later. Jacques Chouillet sees the first letter written to Sophie Volland that is extant, from Marly, to be an example of this because the description of the gardens, the statues, the Baron de Gleichen's grief are all related back to his love for Sophie Volland.

Jacques Chouillet quotes Jacques Proust, and suggests that all the anecdotes Diderot quotes have as their ultimate aim the amusement and seduction of the reader, Sophie Volland:

Mais tout dire, ce n'est pas dire n'importe comment. Jacques Proust a montré de quelle manière en passant dans ses lettres « de l'exemple au conte », en présentant sa version d'un conte de l'abbé Galiani, il avait fait en sorte que « le souci du vrai s'y mêle au désir de paraître » et que c'est finalement pour Sophie « que se joue cette parade incessante de vérité et de vertu ». Ceci explique tout à la fois les apostrophes à la destinataire, la forme dialoguée, le questionnement, et ce que J. Proust appelle un « inlassable travail de séduction ».¹³

Another feature of the letters that Chouillet examines in some depth is the expression of jealousy and its different manifestations in the letters to Sophie. This is an area which is important but which we have not considered essential in our examination of the letters. This tension within these letters is often ignored or hidden by a concentration upon the discourse of love. It is also difficult to enter into a discussion of the nature of jealousy in these letters without speculating excessively on the nature of the relationships of those involved. Chouillet also views the letters to Sophie Volland as revealing the contrast between love and desire. He sees love as being closer to friendship and more enduring than desire which eventually fades

¹³ *Op. cit.* p. 23.

away. Although this has the persuasive force of a cliché about sexual relationships, it cannot be entirely convincingly applied to Sophie and Diderot as apart from his letters very little is known about the true nature of their relationship. This veers dangerously close to the biographical approach to correspondences.

The most recent and authoritative work on the *Correspondance* which aims to consider these letters as an epistolary work worthy of literary study in its own right is *Diderot épistolier* by Benoît Melançon. His aim is to provide a poetics of the epistolary form, as has already been achieved for autobiography and diary writing.

He states his aim thus:

L'objectif du présent ouvrage est donc double: il s'agit, d'une part, de décrire et d'analyser la pratique de Denis Diderot épistolier dans ses lettres familières, soit 779 textes écrits entre 1742 et 1784; d'autre part, grâce au rapprochement de cette correspondance avec d'autres qui lui sont contemporaines, qu'elles soient dues à des écrivains célèbres ou à des inconnus, de contribuer à l'élaboration d'une poétique de la lettre familière au xviii^e siècle.¹⁴

The first part of this aim is fulfilled quite exhaustively and could be used as a 'concordance'. For example, when discussing absence he provides detailed references to the occurrences of the figures of rhetoric Diderot employs in relation to absence. The second part of his aim has not been completely achieved as he does not really go much further, or shed much more light on the subject, than general works upon epistolarity by Janet Altman, Charles Porter and even the book aimed at French university students by Marie-Claire Grassi have done. However this work would form an excellent basis for further study on eighteenth century letters due to the breadth of sources used by Melançon. His claim that the correspondences of Mme du

¹⁴ Melançon, Benoît, *Diderot épistolier: contribution à une poétique de la lettre familière au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 1995), p. 6.

Deffand, Mme d'Épinay, Voltaire, Rousseau, Julie de Lespinasse and Mme de Graffigny are representative of letter-writing practice in the eighteenth century in general is doubtful. These letter-writers could not be seen as completely representative of their age, and those who were not writers at the very least mixed in literary/ artistic circles, perhaps their correspondences are representative of those with literary interests, but whether they can be seen to relate to those of the aristocracy and educated bourgeoisie is another matter.

The other slight reservation about *Diderot l'épistolier* is that, whilst the theme of absence is treated exhaustively, it is also rather over-emphasized due to the intense focus placed upon it. This has a distorting effect upon the reading of the letters proposed because the centrality of absence to the epistolary form is at the most mundane level, self-evident. The same could be said about the second chapter which covers temporal aspects of the letters and would again be very useful as a 'concordance'. The wide scope of the bibliographical information given in this work is also of great use.

Our examination of the *Correspondance* is a broader overview of Diderot's use of the epistolary form and the underlying structures which can be discerned within it. Our aim is to provide a coherent literary reading of the *Correspondance* as a means of demonstrating that correspondences are not a minor or secondary literary form. We are not only concerned with the familiar letter. Rather we propose a reading of the published *Correspondance* and the whole range of genres of letters written by Diderot, which subsequent editors have deemed fit to include. So the focus of our study is much less specific and more general than that carried out by Melançon.

An area which Melançon has neglected to mention in any detail in *Diderot l'épistolier* is the use of wit and humour in Diderot's letters. Humour is a very important component of the familiar letter and helps to give an air of immediacy and intimacy to such letters. Other areas which we will focus on are his adoption of various letter-writing personae and the means of persuasion he uses to both convince and 'seduce' the addressees of his letters. Our aim is to consider the letters in terms of epistolarity and as a corpus which can be read as a whole.

In order to consider the *Correspondance* within the tradition of French letter-writing and the historical context of the letter form, we have made much use of various seventeenth and eighteenth century letter and etiquette manuals. The most useful work which provides an analysis of these and questions of etiquette from the late middle ages to modern times is the *Dictionnaire raisonné de la politesse et du savoir-vivre du moyen âge à nos jours*, edited by Alain Montandon. This is part of a whole series of works on etiquette and there is a research centre at Clermont-Ferrand dedicated to this field.¹⁵ This is a particularly entertaining and informative reference work which sheds light upon an often ill-defined area of social history. We have found it useful to consider the epistolary rules suggested by these prescriptive works if only as a basis for comparing idealized practice with actual practice.

General works on epistolarity, such as *Epistolarity* by Janet Altman, and a series of articles by Bernard Bray and Roger Duchêne which view the letters of Mme

¹⁵ Other works in the field of etiquette are: Elias, Norbett, *The Civilizing Process. The History of Manners*, tr. Jephcott, Edmund, (Oxford, 1978). Fumaroli, Marc, ed., *Histoire de la rhétorique dans l'Europe moderne, 1450-1950* (Paris, 1999). Montandon, Alain, *Bibliographie des traités du savoir-vivre en Europe* (Clermont Ferrand, 1995).

de Sévigné from different perspectives, have been of great use. Janet Altman's work although largely concerned with epistolary novels can be very usefully adapted to the examination of real correspondences. Bray and Duchêne particularly raise the question of the nature of authenticity of a published correspondence and what its status should be.

We have referred to the work of Roland Barthes and Mikhaïl Bakhtin where we have thought that their methodologies could throw some light upon our analysis of the letters in a manner which would not be too intrusive, and would be sympathetic to the text without leading to any anachronistic parallels or conclusions. We would consider any readings of correspondences, which are too strongly based upon critical theories which have their roots in Freudian or Lacanian theory, to be a confusion of the letter-writing self and the actual psychological subject who wrote and was influenced by literary and social conventions in their writing. Such approaches can too easily give an anachronistic reading by imparting psychological relevance and undue weight to every stylistic technique and rhetorical device employed. This study will not draw inferences from Diderot's letter-writing about his psychological identity in general. Evidently his epistolary identity and psychological character were interconnected. The focus of this study is centred upon the generic nature of the letters rather than any insights to be gained about Diderot as a biographical subject. However at times, especially when considering love and sensibility we do venture some remarks based upon Diderot's self-representation in these letters which could be seen to be speculating upon Diderot as a psychological

subject. This is not the predominant approach that this study takes and is only used when there is a compelling reason to do so.

Organization of the Thesis.

In the first chapter the history of letter-writing is traced from classical letter-writers such as Cicero and Pliny down to the eighteenth century in France. These early classical published correspondences present the reader with an epistolary genre of writing which has great similarities to the letter form as practised by Diderot. A consideration of the letter and published correspondences is also required in order to place the epistolary genre and Diderot's letters within the context of a long tradition of letter-writing. Many of the fundamental rules of the eighteenth century letter manuals are calqued upon the classical rules of rhetoric and letter-writing so it is important to consider the foundations of the genre.

The second chapter builds upon this historical background and concentrates upon the *Correspondance*. The publishing history and different editions of the *Correspondance* are discussed, and the different methods used by various editors are evaluated. After describing how the corpus of letters by Diderot came to be published in its present form, we will categorize the genres of letters to be found in the *Correspondance*. The definitions used to classify the letters of the *Correspondance* will be based upon those given by the seventeenth and eighteenth century letter manuals. A type of letter which is a form of familiar letter, which is described in some detail, is the journal letter. Diderot refers several times to letters as

a journal which he keeps. These letters have an initial appearance of being an introspective account similar to autobiographical writing but this is very deceptive. The claims which have been made about this subsection of Diderot's letters as being a precursor of autobiography are refuted by revealing the dichotomy between the project Diderot sets himself and the actual nature of his letters.

The literary and rhetorical analysis of the *Correspondance* commences with an examination of constant features of the epistolary form and how these relate to Diderot's letter-writing practice. These constants which are referred to by Janet Altman, Marie-Claire Grassi and which feature extensively in Melançon's study are absence, temporal distortion in the letter and the creation of epistolary personae. Absence, and how the letter-writer attempts to overcome it, is central to the very nature of the letter form whose basic function is to provide a means of communication with those to whom the letter-writer is unable to speak in person. The use of tenses and moods is different in the epistolary form due to the nature of the time delay between the writing of the letter and the addressee receiving it. The adoption of different epistolary personae by Diderot is quite difficult to separate from other features of his letter-writing practice as these personae are the foundations upon which his letters are based.

The final four chapters discuss different forms of discourse within the *Correspondance*. Chapter four: Diderot, Man of Emotion, is an analysis of sensibility and the discourses of love and friendship in the letters written to Anne-Toinette Champion, Sophie Volland, and Grimm. Chapter five is concerned with humour and wit in the *Correspondance*. Here the use and structural aspects of different forms of

humour and wit are examined. This is an area which has often been neglected, yet wit and humour are prevalent throughout the letters. It is very much a defining feature of Diderot's self-presentation and epistolary style. Different forms of anecdote and of humour such as self-deprecation and bawdy comedy are studied in terms of the structures of humour as described by Henri Bergson, Walter Nash and Mikhaïl Bakhtin. Chapter six is a discussion of the letter and conversation. Letter-writing has often been compared to conversation. At times Diderot conceives of the letter in these terms and also employs various stylistic techniques to render his letters more conversational and immediate in tone. Conversations at Grandval feature in the letters to Sophie Volland as reported dialogues. Here we will analyse the different methods used to convey the essence of these engaging conversations which are replete with philosophical debate and humorous anecdotes and repartee. Chapter seven examines the more combative and polemic letters in the *Correspondance*. Here Diderot's use of logos and pathos to persuade his addressee is scrutinized. The published letter debates, the letters written to père Berthier in defence of the *Prospectus* of the *Encyclopédie* and the letters written to Falconet which form the debate about posterity, known as the *Pour et Contre*, are discussed in this light. The other argumentative letters to be found in the *Correspondance* which are particularly striking are those written to his brother and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Another side of argumentation and persuasion which is revealed in the *Correspondance* is the use of letters by Diderot to appeal for help and preferment for others.

A rhetorical analysis of Diderot's letters appeared to be the most neutral and appropriate means of seeing the letter form as a genre which would be amenable to

literary study whilst avoiding the pitfalls of biographical speculation. Rhetoric might be considered rather archaic, but it is at the centre of many different forms of discourse even if the theory of rhetoric might be presented in a different manner. Georges Molinié in his *Dictionnaire de rhétorique* (Paris, 1992) emphasizes the continuing predominance of rhetoric even if it is no longer officially studied in France:

En outre, il y a toujours une rhétorique privée de la séduction; une rhétorique du barreau, inextinguible et absolument rémanente, qui peut justement être conduite à user du maximum de ruses selon les circonstances extérieures; une rhétorique de la chaire, à plus ou moins haut régime selon les époques et les pays (les très grands prédicateurs se succèdent encore de nos jours à Notre-Dame de Paris; et le renouveau des fondamentalismes a rappelé la force de l'éloquence musulmane); une rhétorique syndicale; une omni-présente et toujours plus perfectionnée rhétorique commerciale (avec la publicité, et avec aussi les langages des techniques de ventes et des relations humaines).¹⁶

Rhetoric would have been very much a feature of Diderot's education and thus his letter-writing practice. The letter manuals are based upon the rules of rhetoric, and the use of such stylistic tropes would have been very much second nature to an educated writer. The epistolary form is one which depends upon a favourable reception by its readers in a much more concrete manner than other literary forms. If a letter is not persuasive, this can have a very real effect upon the business and personal relationships of the letter-writer.

The focus of this study is the use of rhetoric and other stylistic means of persuasion employed by Diderot to entertain, convince and interact with the addressee(s) of his letters. The epistolary form is one which – if it is to be mastered – requires great rhetorical skill, as a letter is a direct appeal to an addressee. The letter-

¹⁶ Molinié, Georges, *Dictionnaire de rhétorique* (Paris, 1992), pp. 15-16.

writer (and Diderot is not alone in this) crafts her/his letters around their expectations of the likely response that a reader will have to their argumentation. Even Diderot's self-presentation in the letters is based around his conception of what personality traits were likely to appeal to the reader, when writing his letters he had to be conscious of the reception they would receive by their addressee(s) and so the poetics of the letter is very much reader-centred.

Chapter One. A Brief History of Epistolarity.

Before discussing Diderot's correspondence in detail, we believe that it is necessary to consider the influence of historical models of letter-writing. The tradition of publicly available correspondences is one which can be traced back to classical Latin. These historical models shaped the form of letter-writing for centuries. Even in Diderot's lifetime these correspondences were still considered to be the best stylistic models for letter-writing. In order to discuss Diderot's correspondence, it is important to consider the historical background to letter-writing, published correspondences and epistolary forms. In this chapter we shall trace the development of the letter form, from classical Latin to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Epistolary novels, the epistolary form, used as a means of philosophical debate, and important published correspondences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will also be viewed as essential background, required to place Diderot's letters in their appropriate historical and literary context.

Classical Letters as a Stylistic Model.

Letters written in Latin, or even those written much later in French, emulated these correspondences. Cicero¹ and Pliny² were recognized as the supreme Latin letter-writers. Cicero's letters were available in separate collections after his death. The letters were selected after Cicero's death by his freedman, Tiro, to

¹ For an introduction to Cicero's letters in English translation, Cicero, *Selected Letters* (London, 1986), translated by Shackleton Bailey, D. R. gives a representative selection of letters written to a variety of correspondents. There is also a 10 volume edition of the correspondence with textual commentary, by Shackleton Bailey: Cicero, *Correspondence* (C. U. P. 1965-80). For biographical detail see Fuhrman, Manfred, *Cicero and the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1992).

² For Pliny, a good starting point is the Loeb edition of his letters, translated into English. *Letters of Pliny* (London, 1915), translated by Melmoth, William and for more historical background, Sherwin-White, A. N., *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966).

represent the epistolary skill and wisdom of his former master. Over nine hundred of his letters survive, although many more appear to have been extant during antiquity. There is a similar range and scope of genre and content to that found in letters written in the eighteenth century. The form of the letter is easily recognizable as being the form still in use today. Letters written to family and friends, depending on their content, are formal or familiar. In Cicero's correspondence, there is discussion of political and philosophical matters and concerns of a very personal nature, such as a letter describing his failure to find a means of consolation for the grief he felt at his daughter's death, philosophy having been unable to provide any solace.

This genre of letter-writing, which is a familiar means of communication between absent friends, as practised by Cicero, can be seen to be not dissimilar from Diderot's vision of letter-writing. For example Cicero says (*Ad. Fam.* 16, 16, 2): « te totum in litteris vidi », (I saw you completely in your letter), which suggests that the letter form has the power to provide direct communication between those who are absent. The notion of the letter as a privileged space for communication away from everyday distractions and as a means of real communion with the other is already seen as one of its unique features.

Pliny's letters are considered in the eighteenth century to be another prime example of mastery of the epistolary form. Pliny's letters which emulate Cicero are however clearly written with publication in mind and are intended for posterity, whilst Cicero's letters were published posthumously. However this does not mean that he did not write with posterity in mind.

The influence of such letter-writers was prolonged into the eighteenth century by classical education, and in particular by the Jesuits' pedagogical methods with their emphasis on classical study, oratory and mastery of Latin. The imitation of classical works was seen as a valuable means of achieving the style of writing and expression which was desired. Cicero and Pliny were used as models upon which students were expected to base their style of writing. Such methods of education were the norm in Diderot's time. An educated writer of French would be expected to have absorbed the style and skilful manipulation of rhetoric as demonstrated by the great classical authors. Thus it is relevant to consider the format and aims of such exercises as they provide a link and continuum between the classical authors and the style of writing admired and advocated in the eighteenth century. In *L'Exercice de la parole, fragments d'une rhétorique Jésuite*, by André Collinot and Francine Mazière, the translation exercises upon which the Jesuits based their pedagogical methods are described. The main aim of such translations, from and into Latin, was that of emulation of the style of the Latin author. The following excerpt probably refers to Cicero's speeches but his letters could equally serve as such a model for emulation, and were viewed as a gold standard of literary expression:

Cette appropriation de la langue de l'autre, plus exactement de son écriture, se fait selon une imitation réglée comme suit:

‘Pour ce qui regarde l'imitation d'un auteur, exercice fort utile pour former le style, le meilleur moyen est de traduire en français un passage de Cicéron, et puis, au bout de quelque temps, de retraduire ce passage en latin. Vous comparerez alors cette dernière traduction avec le passage de Cicéron, vous corrigerez vos fautes sur lui et vous verrez alors très facilement la différence qu'il y a entre le style de Cicéron et le vôtre[...] Faites l'analyse d'un discours de Cicéron ou d'un des morceaux remarquables de ce discours; vous en remarquerez en gros les arguments et les figures, puis vous traiterez vous-même le sujet, et vous recouvrirez de chair cette espèce de squelette; enfin,

vous comparerez votre composition avec celle de Cicéron, et vous verrez la distance qui vous en sépare.³

When considering classical forms of epistolarity, we can readily find similarities between these early forms and letter-writing as practised by Diderot. Much of this is arguably due to the continuation of the classical tradition in French education and literary forms. Michel Foucault describes some classical forms of letter-writing and fragmentary journal-style writing, which are particularly interesting due to their resemblance to some aspects of Diderot's correspondence. He gives an account of the different forms of self expression in journal-like *hupomnēmata*, and correspondences in the late classical period. The earliest forms of letter-writing, or of fragmentary writing which collected together anecdotes, quotations and reflections upon life, can be seen to be the ancestors of epistolary writing in the eighteenth century and of what was later to become diary writing. These early forms reveal a nascent need for self-expression and the roots of an ever increasing subjectivity, in the epistolary form and writing in general, which reached its apogee in the twentieth century. Foucault describes the forms of self-expression to be found in the *hupomnēmata* in the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D.:

Comme élément de l'entraînement de soi, l'écriture a, pour utiliser une expression qu'on trouve chez Plutarque, une fonction *éthopoiétique*: elle est un opérateur de la transformation de la vérité en *éthos*.

Cette écriture *éthopoiétique*, telle qu'elle apparaît à travers les documents du I^{er} et du II^e siècles, semble s'être logée à l'extérieur de deux formes déjà connues et utilisées à d'autres fins, les *hupomnēmata* et la *correspondance*.

This transformation of the truth, the lived reality, into a literary ethos is central to all of Diderot's writings which take their inspiration from real characters and anecdotes

³ Collinot, André, Mazière, Francine, *L'Exercice de la parole, fragments d'une rhétorique Jésuite* (Paris, 1987), p. 50.

told in conversation. The *Correspondance* is just such a patchwork of real events, reported conversations and ideas, which are transformed into the literary ethos of these letters, and so denote Diderot's epistolary personality whilst having originated in his everyday life. Such an adaption of the everyday is perhaps a way of attempting to make sense of the mundane. Foucault then explains the type of material which is to be found in the *Hupomnêmata*:

Les *Hupomnêmata*, au sens technique, pouvaient être des livres de compte, des registres publics, des carnets individuels servant d'aide-mémoire. Leur usage comme livre de vie, guide de conduite semble être devenu chose courante dans tout un public cultivé.⁴

The *Hupomnêmata* generally contained quotations, excerpts from works which had been read or heard, accounts of events witnessed or read about, and ideas which had been heard about or which had been thought of by the writer. In a sense, they were rather akin to the type of notebook an author might keep in which s/he would note down interesting expressions and dialogues heard for eventual use in another context.

It is possible to see that there is a similar inspiration behind the *Hupomnêmata* and the letters Diderot writes to Sophie Volland from Grandval in which he relates his activities to her, what his friends have said, and his ideas about a wide range of topics. However, although these letters are used by Diderot in order to express his personality, like the *hupomnêmata*, these letters are by no means as subjective as a modern letter or diary would be. The concept of the self and the revelation of the inner self and subconscious in writing was an alien concept to someone of Diderot's

⁴ Foucault, Michel, 'L'écriture de soi', *Corps écrit*, n° 5: *L'Autoportrait* (février 1983), pp. 3-23. Quoted from Foucault, Michel, *Dits et écrits* (Paris, 1983), p. 418.

generation, although Jean–Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* are a forerunner in this field of writing. Thus the *Hypomnēmata* are not introspective in the modern sense:

[...] il s’agit non de poursuivre l’indicible, non de révéler le caché, non de dire le non-dit, mais de capter au contraire le déjà-dit; rassembler ce qu’on a pu entendre ou lire, et cela pour une fin qui n’est rien de moins que la constitution de soi.⁵

Foucault then describes the function and format of early correspondences in terms of expressing and creating a description of the self and defining one’s place in society. In a quotation from Seneca the letter is compared to a conversation, and such comparisons have been a constant feature of writing about epistolarity. The letter is seen to be as much a dialogue which the letter-writer has with her/himself as with her/his reader. Diderot’s letters, as we have said, are reader centred but the letter is also used as a means for the writer to reflect upon her/his own life and relationships. This does not mean that the letter is not targeted towards its reader but rather that by the very nature of the act of writing the letter-writer also engages in a dialogue with her/his own thoughts. The first reader of a letter is its writer. We shall see later on that Diderot highlights certain aspects of his personality in letters to his correspondents, and in so doing the process of letter-writing is a form of conversation with himself, in which he explores different facets of his social self and different forms of literary ethos.

C’est que, Sénèque le rappelle, lorsqu’on écrit, on lit ce qu’on écrit tout comme en disant quelque chose on entend qu’on le dit. (Sénèque, *Lettres à Lucilius* s9-10.)

‘La lettre qu’on envoie agit, par le geste même de l’écriture, sur celui qui l’adresse, comme elle agit par la lecture et la relecture sur celui qui la reçoit.’⁶

⁵ Foucault, p. 419.

⁶ Foucault, p. 423.

For the classical writers of such letters, the description of self was a form of secular confession, a means of regulating one's behaviour as it was put under the scrutiny of others. Writing such letters was a means of spurring oneself ever onwards in the pursuit of self-improvement. The function of such letters would have been largely fulfilled by the confessional and the *Directeur de conscience* in the eighteenth century and yet there is still a connection here with Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland. Diderot portrays his daily life in letters to Sophie in order to prove to her that he is truly an *honnête homme* worthy of her love. As Foucault says:

La lettre qu'on envoie pour aider son correspondant - le conseiller, l'exhorter, l'admonester, le consoler - constitue pour le scripteur une matière d'entraînement: un peu comme les soldats en temps de paix s'exercent au maniement des armes, les avis qu'on donne aux autres dans l'urgence de leur situation sont une façon de se préparer soi-même à une semblable éventualité.⁷

We can see another form of similarity between this type of letter-writing and much of Diderot's *Correspondance* in which he represents himself in the rôle of the philosophical *honnête homme*. Diderot consciously places himself in the lineage of the ancient philosophers, and sees the epistolary form as an apt medium in which to formulate the moral code of conduct to be followed by the *honnête homme*, and to reveal his attempts to be worthy of such a name himself.

According to Foucault, Seneca had a similar view of correspondence:

Il est remarquable que Sénèque entamant une lettre où il doit exposer à Lucilius sa vie de tous les jours rappelle la maxime morale que *nous devons régler notre vie comme si tout le monde la regardait* et le principe philosophique que rien de nous-même n'est célé à dieu qui est sans cesse présent à nos âmes. Par la missive, on s'ouvre au regard des autres et on loge le correspondant à la place du dieu intérieur. Elle est une manière de nous donner

⁷ Foucault, p. 424.

à ce regard dont nous devons nous dire qu'il est en train de plonger au fond de notre cœur *in pectus intimum introspicere* au moment où nous pensons.⁸

[...] Dans le cas du récit épistolaire de soi-même, il s'agit de faire venir à coïncidence le regard de l'autre et celui qu'on porte sur soi quand on mesure ses actions quotidiennes aux règles d'une technique de vie.⁹

This can be seen to be very much in line with the rationale behind many of Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland in which he submits his daily life to Sophie's judgement. *Introspicere* does not have the modern analytical sense of introspection. Introspection in the modern sense of the word is to examine and observe one's own mental and emotional processes rather than to reflect upon one's actions as an outsider would. Such passages in Diderot's letters also stem from a natural desire for lovers to share every moment with their loved one. Diderot can be seen to be following in a long line of letter-writers who found a unique space and voice in which to analyse and express their experience of life in the epistolary form.

Early Developments in Letter-writing in France.

We shall now move on and consider the developments in letter-writing which would influence the form of correspondences published in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by considering the influence of the letters of Justus Lipsius and Pasquier.

Justus Lipsius published his letters in Latin in 1586 and this correspondence is often seen to be a turning point in the publication of letters, as Lipsius's claim

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 426.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 430.

was to convey the spontaneity and everyday familiarity of letter-writing rather than a rhetorical *tour de force*. What Lipsius describes in his preface as the desired preparation and education for a letter-writer is worth noting as it can be seen to be representative of a common current of opinion. According to Marc Fumaroli, Lipsius outlines the desired training for a letter-writer in a preface which can be seen as an artistic manifesto:

Lipse distingue trois étapes dans l'éducation de l'épistolier: la première, fondée sur l'imitation scolaire de Cicéron et des Cicéroniens humanistes, donnera au style écrit la correction et la netteté élémentaires; la seconde, brodant avec plus de liberté sur cette trame solide, imitera des auteurs moins académiques et entre autres les comiques, Plaute et Térence. C'est en quelque manière à cette étape que s'était arrêté Erasme. La troisième, que Lipse qualifie d'« adulte », ouvre à l'« ingenium » de l'épistolier « toute la lyre » de la littérature antique, et en particulier ses trois cordes les plus tendues, les trois « attiques » latins, Salluste, Sénèque, et Tacite. Pour se préparer au « premier jet » de la lettre, l'épistolier devra en outre se constituer des recueils de citations (*excerpta*) d'ornements (*ornamentum*) de tours de phrases (*dictio*), de vocabulaire (*formulae*).¹⁰

Writing at the same time as Lipsius, Etienne Pasquier decided to publish his letters which were, unusually for the period, written in French. However these letters very much adhered to the Latin model. There is no apparent awareness on the part of Pasquier that, by writing in the vernacular, he would open up a new readership for his work such as courtiers and women who were not proficient in Latin.¹¹ Pasquier is typical of a current in epistolarity which would resemble Pliny's letters, as they are formal letters concerned with affairs of state and academic/philosophical debate rather than familiar letters.

¹⁰ Fumaroli, Marc, 'Genèse de l'épistolographie classique: Rhétorique humaniste de la lettre, de Pétrarque à Juste Lipse.', *RHLF*, 1978 (78), 886-900.

¹¹ However Pasquier would have been aware of the Pléiade's objectives for the use of French.

There appear to be two traditions of letter-writing which continue from ancient to modern times: those correspondences which are written with publication in mind, and which, eschewing the familiar, emphasize the stylistic prowess and contemporary importance of the writer, and those which embrace familiar and personal letters whilst not ignoring matters of political or historical moment.

Pasquier in his first letter, explains why he will not include more personal letters in the volume of correspondence in the following manner:

Livre I, Lettre I.

A M. Loisel, avocat à la cour du parlement de Paris. Il rend raison pourquoi il expose ses lettres en public.

Aussi pour dire le vrai, quel besoin est-il que le peuple entende mes affaires privées? Affaires, dis-je, le plus du temps sans discours, et auxquelles je n'aurai voulu que folâtrer et donner carrière à ma plume avec mes compagnons et amis. Car d'éventer celles qui importent à ma famille, tout ainsi que ce ne serait chose assurée, aussi semblerait-il que ce fût un jeu d'enfant.¹²

The most famous correspondence in the eighteenth century was the letters of Mme de Sévigné which we shall look at in some detail shortly. By way of contrast we can consider the correspondence of Voiture, as his correspondence represents a different style of seventeenth century letter-writing. Voiture had mastered the typically seventeenth century art of writing letters replete with gallantry and preciosity, style was all important and took precedence over content. His letters were published in 1650 by his nephew Martin Pinchesne, there were some 300 letters, 60 of which were love letters. Marie-Claire Grassi in *Lire l' épistolaire*,

¹² For more information see Duchêne, Roger, 'Le Lecteur des lettres.', *RHLF*, 1978 (No.78), 977-990.

gives an example of Voiture's style of expression, such highly polished wit being a feature of refined society and artistic circles in the seventeenth century. The preciousness of his style can be seen in this excerpt taken from a letter written by him to Mlle de Rambouillet in 1639, in which he employs the common trope of the death of a rejected lover.

Mademoiselle, personne n'est encore mort de votre absence, hormis moi, et je ne crains point de vous le dire ainsi crûment pour ce que je crois que vous ne vous en souciez guère.

[...]

Je suis bien aise que le bruit de ma mort ne coure pas sitôt et je fais la meilleure mine que je puis afin que l'on ne s'en doute pas [...] En vérité, si j'étais encore dans le monde, une des choses qui m'y feraient autant de dépit, serait le peu de discrétion qu'ont certaines gens à faire courir toutes sortes de choses [...] Je vous supplie, au reste, mademoiselle, de ne point rire en lisant ceci: car sans mentir, c'est fort mal fait de se moquer des trépassés, et si vous étiez en ma place, vous ne seriez pas bien aise qu'on en usât de la sorte.¹³

Voiture's preciousness contrasts with the apparent naturalness and spontaneity of Mme de Sévigné's correspondence. Let us now consider Mme de Sévigné's letters in more detail.

Mme de Sévigné.

Mme de Sévigné's letters, very soon after their publication, became the benchmark for stylish correspondence and by the 1750s and 60s had become the accepted model for letter-writers to emulate. We can see just how popular Mme de Sévigné's letters were by looking at the number of editions printed after they were first published in 1726. A new edition appeared every few years. In the

¹³ Grassi, Marie-Claire, *Lire l' épistolaire* (Paris, 1998), pp. 85-86.

Catalogue général des livres imprimés de la bibliothèque nationale (1947, Vol. 171.) there are eighteen pages of entries for Mme de Sévigné. These include the *édition de Troyes*, 1725, *édition de Rouen*, 1726, *édition de la Haye*, 1726, *édition de Perrin*, 1734. There were multiple reprints of these editions and numerous editions were published throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed the correspondence was so popular that works based upon it such as the *Sevigniana* were widely read, which contained the edited highlights of the letters.

Her letters were fairly heavily doctored by their editor, Perrin, and some of the much praised clarity and spontaneity of the letters was actually created by him. Perrin considered his job to be one of creating a correspondence fit for publication, rather than faithfully publishing the letters as they appeared in their original manuscript form. The implication is that, if Mme de Sévigné herself had considered publishing these letters, she would have rewritten and edited sections of them. Mme de Sévigné never gave public readings of her daughter's letters but would read selected passages to her intimates as a way of praising her daughter's qualities. Roger Duchêne, who has done much work on the letters of Mme de Sévigné and the transformation of the original manuscript letters into the form in which they were later published, says of the original readings of the letters:

Pas une seule fois la marquise ne se montre lisant publiquement une lettre de sa fille: c'est toujours en confidence qu'elle communique des passages à des proches ou des amis intimes, comme des occasions de parler de l'absente et de célébrer ses mérites. Pour se concilier cette grâce, il faut la mériter par des qualités morales de sympathie et de cœur: l'admiration va d'abord à la qualité de la tendresse de Mme de Grignan, ensuite à son style. Lorsqu'ils

interviennent, les lecteurs (secondaires) ne sont pas un public, mais des confidents.¹⁴

What Roger Duchêne says about this concept of what was fit for publication or not in terms of a correspondence is relevant to the manner in which the Vandeuils edited Diderot's letters before considering them publishable. The original work was seen as the basis for improvement and alteration, as opposed to our modern concerns of getting as close to the original text as possible. A correspondence was expected to conform to the generally accepted epistolary norms and the work of an editor was to ensure that it did so:

[...] à la fin du XVII^e siècle et au début du XVIII^e encore, la lettre n'apparaît publiable que si elle a été écrite pour la publication en respectant les lois du genre épistolaire, ou si elle a été ultérieurement remaniée en fonction d'elles. La correspondance réellement échangée ne pouvait être que le matériau de la correspondance publiée. Tout se passe comme s'il y avait deux niveaux de lecture, celui des lecteurs choisis qui se laissent emporter par la curiosité ou le caractère insolite des œuvres non achevées et celui du public, constitué de lecteurs critiques jugeant l'œuvre imprimée selon les règles et d'après la conformité à un idéal épistolaire traditionnel. L'existence des deux états du texte correspondant aux deux lectures confirme pleinement qu'il ne faut pas confondre divulgation en manuscrit et diffusion par l'imprimé.¹⁵

Roger Duchêne says of Perrin's work :

Car le rôle de Denis-Marius Perrin, chargé par Mme de Simiane d'établir la vulgate des lettres de sa grand-mère, n'a pas seulement consisté, comme on l'a trop longtemps affirmé, à opérer des coupures destinées à ménager l'honorabilité des familles qui s'y trouvaient mentionnées. A cette besogne, qui ne lui aurait demandé ni beaucoup de soin ni beaucoup de temps, il a ajouté celle de réviseur méticuleux, s'appliquant longuement à « mettre la dernière main » à l'ouvrage posthume [...] Parce que l'on a, en ce temps-là, une certaine idée de l'œuvre littéraire, la publication est un seuil: elle oblige à écrire autrement et, si l'auteur ne l'a pas fait, son éditeur a le devoir de remanier le texte à sa place.¹⁶

¹⁴ Duchêne, Roger, 'Du destinataire au public, ou les métamorphoses d'une correspondance privée.', *RHLF*, 1976 (76) 29-46. p. 40.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 42-43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 43.

At the crux of this issue is the problem of where to place a correspondence generically as it is neither autobiography, diary nor fiction. The eighteenth century view that a correspondence such as Mme de Sévigné's needed to be adapted for publication is an indication that letters, unless intended for publication, needed to be partially rewritten in order to conform to what was expected of a literary genre. The reader of a published private correspondence is never the intended reader, or the addressee of the letters, so the reading-process itself is rather different for this genre of writing than say the reading-process of a novel. The reader of these published correspondences is always one step removed from the epistolary process and reads as an observer of this epistolary exchange rather than as a participant.

The Letter Manual.

No letter-writer or writer of any kind writes completely in isolation, so it is important to consider the accepted norms and rules for letter-writing as found in letter manuals or *secrétaires*. In this thesis the letter manuals and *secrétaires* written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries will be referred to frequently. The issues dealt with in such manuals were stylistic but with an emphasis upon etiquette. Matters such as the forms of address to use, according to the relative social rank of letter-writer and addressee and gender of the correspondents, were of great importance. The vogue for letter manuals originated in the *Segretario*, written in sixteenth-century Italy for the court secretaries of princely states. Such manuals gave advice about how to write political and business letters and were in a sense the epistolary manual to be read alongside *Il principe* by Machiavelli. Like the letter, the epistolary

manual has a long history. Claudio Guillén relates the history of these manuals in ‘On the edge of literariness: The writing of letters’¹⁷. The first of the Hellenistic manuals was the *Epistolary Types* (Tupoi epistolikai), which was originally attributed to Demetrius. In this work, he recommended to a friend twenty-one types of letters and gave a brief explanation and example for each. Some of the categories of letter given were: friendly, commendatory, blaming, reproachful, consoling, censorious, admonishing, supplicatory, apologetic, congratulatory, etc. This work is thought to be pre-Christian in date, but possibly revised in the third century A.D. A later manual, thought to date from the fourth to sixth century A.D. is *Epistolary Characters*, which is attributed to Libanius or Proclus and is more highly developed as it has forty-one categories of letters with accompanying sample letters. Such classical letter manuals continued to be influential during the Middle Ages. The first printed European letter manual according to Guillén was Spanish and written by Gaspar de Texeda, called *Cosa neuva: Primer libro de cartas mensajeras*, and it was re-edited several times and followed by a second book in 1552, *Segundo libro de cartas mensajeras, en estilo cortesano, a infinitos propositos*. The title of this second manual already emphasized the attention the letter-writer needed to pay to questions of social rank and politeness. The letter manual which influenced British and French letter manuals and was largely copied by them, *Del Secretario*, was written by the Venetian publisher Francesco Sansovino in 1564. Gabriel Chappuys was the first Frenchman to translate this work and he published his version of it, *Secrétaire*, in

¹⁷ Guillén, Claudio, ‘On the Edge of Literariness: The Writing of Letters’, *Comparative Literature studies*, (Vol. 31, no. 1, 1994), 1-24, pp. 3-4.

1588. The letter manuals written in French in the seventeenth century placed the same emphasis upon rank as the manual written by Texeda and included the correct means of address and formulae of politeness and respect to be used, as well as the width of margin to leave: the greater the margin left, the higher the rank of the person written to. Once again in terms of epistolarity, the roots of the letter manual date back to classical times and the forms and genres of letters described have not changed to any great extent. The letter was still formed of an *exordium*, *narratio*, *argumentatio* and a *peroratio*. The classical models and rules of rhetoric were adapted to everyday concerns, especially for those who wished to write letters which did not reveal their lack of education, sophistication or social finesse. Jean Puget de la Serre in *Le secretaire a la mode* (sic), (1651) considers the role of the letter manual to be one which provides stylish models to be emulated, combined with general rules concerning correspondence. Everyone needed to communicate by letters at times, so such a manual would provide those lacking much social finesse with the rules and models upon which to base their correspondence according to their own requirements:

Il n'y a rien de si commun que d'écrire des lettres. Mais ce n'est pas une chose commune de les bien dresser. La nécessité de la vie fait que chacun s'en mêle. Car les ignorans aussi bien que les doctes ont souvent besoin de communiquer avec leurs amis absens. Mais ordinairement il n'a y que les gens d'estude qui le sçachent faire avec grace. Pour apprendre il faut avoir de beaux exemples qu'on puisse imiter, et de bons preceptes qui servent de conduite. C'est pourquoi j'ai voulu joindre aux elegantes lettres du secrétaire à la mode: une petite instruction contenant les principales reigles de cet art.¹⁸

¹⁸ De la Serre, Jean, Puget, *Le Secretaire a la mode* (Rouen chez Robert Doré, 1651) pp. 3-4.

The publishing success of such manuals can be linked to the increasing wealth of the merchant classes and the *noblesse de robe*. Such manuals in addition to the equally popular works on etiquette would have been avidly read by people like Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, M. Jourdain.

The *Encyclopédie*, given its aim to collate information and to summarize the contemporary state of understanding of all branches of knowledge, seems to be a good point of reference from which to gain a picture of the eighteenth-century view of the history of epistolarity. It is interesting to see what qualities were to be desired in a letter according to the *Encyclopédie*. The articles we shall consider were not written by Diderot. The article *Epistolaire* was written by the Abbé Mallet who held rather traditional views on literature and philosophy. However, due to his known conservatism, we can consider his view of the epistolary form to be the accepted and representative view of the time. Many of the letter-writers he cites as masters of their art, such as Cicero, Pliny and Mme de Sévigné, have already been mentioned in this chapter in relation to the development of epistolarity. In the article *Epistolaire* (adj. Belles-lettres.) Cicero's letters are given as an example of good epistolary practice as are the letters of Mme de Sévigné. Various types of letters are mentioned such as Seneca's letters which, because they were predestined for publication, are seen as lacking in spontaneity and too carefully crafted:

Epistolaire, (adj. Belles-lettres)

Il est plus facile de sentir que de définir les qualités que doit avoir le style *épistolaire*; les lettres de Cicéron suffisent pour en donner une juste idée. Il y en a de pur compliment, de remerciement, de louange, de recommandation; on en trouve d'enjouées, dans lesquelles il badine avec beaucoup d'aisance et de grace; d'autres graves et sérieuses, dans lesquelles il examine et traite des affaires importantes[...] Mais les épîtres de Senèque sont trop travaillées: ce n'est point un homme qui parle à son ami, c'est un rhéteur qui arrange des

phrases pour se faire admirer; l'esprit y pétille à chaque ligne, mais le sentiment et l'effusion de cœur ne s'y trouvent pas.

Dans notre langue nous n'avons guère de lettres politiques que celles du Cardinal d'Ossat, qui sous un style un peu suranné, contiennent des maximes profondes et des détails intéressants pour le commerce ordinaire de la vie. Celles de Madame de Sévigné sont généralement les plus estimées.

Celles de Balzac, même les lettres choisies, sont trop guindées, et sentent trop le travail: le tour nombreux et périodique de ses phrases, est diamétralement opposé à l'aisance et à la naïveté de la conversation, que le genre *épistolaire* se propose de copier. Pour celles de Voiture quelque ingénieuses qu'elles soient, le ton en est trop singulier et le style trop peu exact, pour que personne ambitionnât aujourd'hui d'écrire comme cet auteur.

On pourroit encore moins proposer pour modèle certains recueils de lettres faites à tête reposée, et avec un dessein prémédité d'y mettre de l'esprit; telles que les lettres du chevalier d'Her***, les lettres à la Marquise, etc. Le soin qu'on a pris de les embellir à l'excès, est précisément ce qui les masque et les défigure; en retranchant la moitié de l'estime qu'elles eurent autrefois, il leur resteroit la portion qu'elles méritent.¹⁹

Modern letter-writers are seen, according to the article 'Lettres des modernes,' to excel in writing in a natural and free-flowing style but their main weakness, according to the author of this article, is in the frivolity and triviality of their subject matter:

Lettres des modernes (genre épistol.)

Nos lettres modernes, bien différentes de celles dont nous venons de parler, peuvent avoir à leur louange le style simple, libre, familier, vif et naturel; mais elles ne contiennent que de petits faits, de petites nouvelles, et ne peignent que le jargon d'un temps et un siècle où la fausse politesse, a mis le mensonge partout: ce ne sont que frivoles compliments de gens qui veulent se tromper, et qui ne se trompent: c'est un remplissage d'idées futiles de société, que nous appelons devoirs. Nos *lettres* roulent rarement sur de grands intérêts, sur de véritables sentiments, sur des épanchements de confiance d'amis, qui ne se

¹⁹ Diderot and D'Alembert, *L'Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et métiers*. p. 816. Tome IV. Volume I facsimile edition by Readex microprint corporation, New York, 1969. The author of the article 'Epistolaire' the abbé Mallet, contributed articles about commerce, history, literature and religion. He published two rather conservative works about literature *Principes pour la lecture des poètes*, 1743, and *Essai sur l'étude des belles-lettres*, 1747. He greatly disapproved of the work of Hobbes and Locke. We can assume that the views expressed in his article are very much the established, contemporary view of the epistolary genre. For more information about the encyclopedists see *The Encyclopedists as Individuals*, S V E C, 257, 1988, by Kafker, Frank and Kafker, Serena.

déguisent rien, et qui cherchent à se tout dire; enfin elles ont presque toutes une espece de monotonie, qui commence et qui finit de même.

The unidentified author of the article selects modern letters which he considers to be of note: the *Lettres portugaises* and the letters supposedly written by Abélard and Héloïse are seen as true portrayals of the anguish of love, and were believed to be authentic correspondences at the time. The other correspondences which are singled out are all correspondences which are particularly rich in content and which combine the genres of prose and poetry. The love letters mentioned are also notable for their poeticization of the discourse of love. Thus the epistolary form was not merely appreciated for its spontaneity and naturalness by the author of this article but also as a fairly malleable literary genre which could lend itself to poetic self-expression. As perhaps is common with all literary criticism at any given moment, the hey day of letter-writing is seen here to be mainly in the past.

The Practicalities of Letter-writing.

There is of course a more practical side to letter-writing, the actual means of delivering and receiving letters and the type of equipment used to write a letter which we should mention in passing. When discussing epistolarity an important practical consideration is the state and manner of the transport infrastructure and postal service of the country concerned. Eighteenth century France saw relatively rapid improvements made in the main highways and bridges which reduced journey and delivery times greatly. The main thoroughfares were the only part of the transport infrastructure (roads, canals, waterways) that were controlled by the state which devoted an increasing amount of its budget to it. In 1700, 0.86% was spent on it.

This rose to 4.16% in 1789. At the beginning of the century, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre called for the road network to be improved in order to encourage commercial trade. At the same time the *ingénieurs des ponts et chaussées* gained more power and authority. By 1756 they had their own college in addition to their increased power due to their status as civil servants. The new roads and bridges which were constructed according to more scientific principles were generally more direct and could be used in all weather conditions. Journey times also decreased due to improvements in the design of coaches and carriages. Stagecoaches appeared which could travel 25 leagues a day (i.e.100km) and later coaches called « turgotines » took only a day to reach Amiens from Paris. From the 1760s onwards, the towns and cities in the Parisian basin were only a day's journey from Paris, at the very worst the journey would take two days, and in the next twenty years journey times halved, Rennes to Paris fell from 8 days to 3 days, Bordeaux to Paris from 14 to 5.5 days, Toulouse to Paris from 15.5 to 7.5 days and Strasbourg to Paris from 11.5 to 4.5 days.²⁰

The paper used was rather thick and coarse as it was more suited to the goose quills used for writing. An envelope was formed out of the letter itself, one side of the paper being written on and then folded over, and then it was sealed with sealing wax. In eighteenth century France the person to whom the letter was addressed was the person who had to pay for the cost of delivery of the letter on receiving it. Diderot circumvented this by using his friend Damilaville's tax office post-bag, thus

²⁰ For more details see Chaline, Olivier, *La France au XVIIIe siècle 1715-1787* (Paris, 1996), pp.139-142.

sparing Sophie Volland the cost of receiving his letters. Unsealed letters were charged a lower delivery rate until modern times. Stamps were first invented in Britain in 1840 and were introduced in France in 1849 and since then it has been the sender of the letter who pays for its delivery.²¹

The readers of letters were often multiple, as it would be common to address many members of the family or social group in a letter, if not explicitly, implicitly so. Letter-writing and the reading out of interesting passages of letters received from various correspondents to friends was very much a social activity. For the leisured classes, letter-writing would often be an activity which would take up several hours a day. However obvious it is, it must be remembered that this is easily explained as letter-writing was the only means to keep in contact with relatives and friends not present and that travel was not only lengthy but hazardous. It was also one of the few pastimes open to women which would occupy both their time and minds.

The Epistolary Novel and Other Forms of Epistolary Writing.

We shall now consider the letter as a generic form. Some key works which are representative of the varied genres of epistolary writing are for example, the *Lettres portugaises* (1669), an epistolary novel; the *Provinciales* (1656-1657) by Pascal, where the letter form is used in theological and philosophical debate; and a published non-fictional correspondence, the letters of Mme de Sévigné. The *Lettres portugaises* were so convincing that they were believed to be the authentic expression of unrequited love and they were not discovered until 1810 to be fictional

²¹ For more information see: Grassi, Marie-Claire, *Lire l'épistolaire* (Paris, 1998), pp. 9-11.

letters written by Gabriel de Lavergne, Sieur de Guilleragues. The great popularity of these letters led to an increased interest in the epistolary novel, which gave great scope for expression and the possibility of having multiple narrators.

The epistolary form was also often used in philosophical or polemical writing, sometimes involving real or imagined journeys. Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* is another work which is critical of the state of affairs in France and uses satire to reach its target. The *Lettres persanes* can almost be seen as a hybrid between the use of the letter form for philosophical debate and the epistolary novel, as it has similar aims to a philosophical open letter and has the form of a novel. The premise of the novel is that of a Persian noble, Usbek, and his entourage travelling outside of their country and culture for the first time and staying in Paris. Both servants and master write home to friends and family. The servants receive letters back from eunuchs in the harem, Usbek receives letters from friends, servants and his favourite wives, so this gives the *Lettres persanes* the air of a real correspondence due to the interchange of letters in both directions. Usbek reports home about the strange customs of the French in a naïve manner which due to its apparent ingenuity is both satirical and comic. At the same time, the letters Usbek receives provide a critique of Persian society and life in the harem, which is also a rich vein of comedy which Montesquieu exploits. The *Lettres persanes* starts with a common trope used by many epistolary novels, namely that the letters have been found by an outsider and then published due to their great interest. In this case the letters are published by the Persians' landlord in Paris:

Les persans qui écrivent ici étaient logés avec moi; nous passions notre vie ensemble. Comme ils me regardaient comme un homme d'un autre monde, ils ne me cachaient rien. En effet, des gens transplantés de si loin ne pouvaient

plus avoir de secrets. Ils me communiquaient la plupart de leurs lettres; je les copiai. J'en surpris même quelques-unes dont ils se seraient bien gardés de me faire confidence, tant elles étaient mortifiantes par la vanité et la jalousie.²²

The editor/ landlord is completely unaware that the Persians are not as he believes envious of his society but rather incredulous that a so-called civilized nation can be quite so chaotic and corrupt. The editor then explains why these translated letters might seem rather polished and strangely French in their style.

Je ne fais donc que l'office de traducteur: toute ma peine a été de mettre l'ouvrage à nos mœurs. J'ai soulagé le lecteur du langage asiatique autant que je l'ai pu, et l'ai sauvé d'une infinité d'expressions sublimes, qui l'auraient ennuyé jusque dans les nues.²³

This is once again a common feature of the preface to such a work, in which the fictional editor explains their alterations to the original letters which might cause the letters to be rather too polished to issue from a real correspondence.

Diderot himself used the epistolary form in the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, and in the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, as well as in his novel *La Religieuse*, whose original inspiration was a practical joke carried out via letters in order to trick the Marquis de Croismare into returning to Paris to help the fictional young nun. The *Lettre sur les aveugles à l'usage de ceux qui voient* is quite typical of the epistolary form of open letter widely used at the time, as a form suited to philosophical, theological and scientific debate. The only really epistolary part of the work is its very opening lines, which start conversationally as a form of dedication and are thought to refer to Mme de Puisieux whose need for money caused Diderot to write this letter. Another possibility is that it is dedicated to Mme de Prémontval:

²² Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris, 1947), p. 9-10.

²³ *Lettres persanes*, p. 10.

Je me doutais bien, madame, que l'aveugle-née, à qui M. de Réamur vient de faire abattre le cataracte, ne vous apprendrait pas ce que vous vouliez savoir; mais je n'avais garde de deviner que ce ne serait ni sa faute, ni la vôtre.²⁴

This part of the letter which is addressed to a specific reader is the extent of the epistolary nature of this letter, which takes the typical form of the philosophical open letter. There are many dialogic elements within the letter such as the fictional death-bed conversation between the brilliant mathematician, Saunderson, who was blind from birth, and the Rev. Gervaise Holmes, in which Saunderson refutes the existence of God. The dialogism of the letter connects it to the epistolary form but this could be said of most of Diderot's work which has a strong link with, and similar voice to his epistolary writing. Such use of the epistolary form made complicated subjects more accessible to the reader and followed on from ancient models of philosophical writing.

He frequently contributed to the *Correspondance littéraire*, edited and compiled by his friend Melchior Grimm. This rather exclusive literary and cultural review was subscribed to by many of the crowned heads of Europe, such as the Duchess of Saxe-Gotha, the Landgrave of Hesse, the Queen of Sweden, and Catherine the Great amongst others. Notably Diderot's *Salons* appeared here for the first time and extracts of many of his other works were only ever published in the *Correspondance littéraire* during his lifetime. We shall look at the manner in which Grimm presents Diderot and how Diderot portrays himself in the *Correspondance littéraire* in the next chapter, where we will consider his various epistolary and public personae. For the moment we will consider briefly the nature of some of his

²⁴ Diderot, *Œuvres philosophiques* (Paris, 1964), ed. Vernière, Paul, p. 81.

work published here. The *Correspondance littéraire* was a monthly newsletter and as such had an intimate tone which underlined its exclusivity. Open letters written by Diderot appeared within it as did short dialogues and reported anecdotes, all of which easily fit within the epistolary genre. For example, in the issue of July 1756, a letter is published written by M. Diderot to M. Landois, about the subject of liberty and freewill.²⁵ Diderot demonstrates his literary and philosophical skill in such letters. In the same volume, a letter written by Diderot to Pigalle about the planned mausoleum for the Maréchal de Saxe appears and is an opportunity for him to display his discernment as a connoisseur of sculpture.²⁶ Such an epistolary form of debate was frequent in the eighteenth century.

The vogue for the epistolary form has much to do with a desire to present fiction and philosophical writing in a form which did not overly differentiate it from everyday forms of communication and to give it added verisimilitude by its resemblance to common forms of discourse. This impulse to disguise the ‘coding of the narrative situation’, as Roland Barthes calls it in *L’Aventure sémiologique*, is prevalent from the early modern period to the present day, with the current vogue for ‘faction’ and films which pose as documentaries whilst being purely fictional creations. This is very much at the root of the popularity of the epistolary form as it resembled the most common means of communication of its day and so had great mimetic force, as well as giving a certain immediacy to whatever was written in that

²⁵ *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister etc.* (notes, table générale par Maurice Tourneux) Volume iii. (Paris, 1878) (Nendeln/ Liechtenstein, Kraus reprint, 1968) pp. 249-255.

²⁶ *Op. cit.* pp. 298-300.

genre. The epistolary form was also well suited to self-expression in a time when politically and religiously there was only one accepted monolithic voice, that of the governing powers, and an epistolary pamphlet, by the very implicit dialogism of the genre, was a means of breaking down the monologic discourse of the absolute monarchy and of the Church. The epistolary form was both admirably suited to being the medium for theological/ philosophical and political debate as well as being a strongly mimetic form in which to write works of fiction. It is interesting to consider what Roland Barthes says about the 'disinauguration' of the narrative code as it is used in epistolary novels and other forms of art:

Mais, pour le courant, notre société escamote aussi soigneusement que possible le codage de la situation de récit: on ne compte plus les procédés de narration qui tentent de naturaliser le récit qui va suivre, en feignant de lui donner pour cause une occasion naturelle, et, si l'on peut dire, de le « désinaugurer »: romans par lettres, manuscrits prétendument retrouvés, auteur qui a rencontré le narrateur, films qui lancent leur histoire avant le générique. La répugnance à afficher ses codes marque la société bourgeoise et la culture de masse qui en est issue: à l'une et à l'autre, il faut des signes qui n'aient pas l'air de signes. Ceci n'est pourtant, si l'on peut dire, qu'un épiphénomène structural: si familier, si négligent que soit aujourd'hui le fait d'ouvrir un roman, un journal ou un poste de télévision, rien ne peut empêcher que cet acte modeste n'installe en nous, d'un seul coup et dans son entier, le code narratif dont nous allons avoir besoin.²⁷

Whilst the reader of an epistolary novel is fully aware of the fictional nature of the work, the form it borrows from, everyday discourse helps to blur the boundaries a little between fiction and fact and this helps the reader's voluntary suspension of disbelief. The fashion for the epistolary form and the epistolary novel also reflect the popularity of letter-writing, the basis of the epistolary novel being a form and an

²⁷ Barthes, Roland, *L' Aventure sémiologique* (Paris, 1985), pp. 199-200.

activity in which every reader partook. Hence the general ability of the reader to identify with the protagonists.

Another feature central to many a novel is the ease with which the letter -writer can don the cloak of any persona she/he wishes and her/his use of rhetoric will do the rest. The epistolary novel sought its inspiration in real correspondences and correspondents were equally influenced by the fictional correspondences they had read. A common device is that a letter in the borrowed persona is contrasted with a letter to a confidant revealing the true intentions and character of the writer. There is generally great interplay between letters to various correspondents which then reveal the multifaceted nature of narrative, and provide a certain fragmentary objectivity as a whole in opposition to the subjectivity of each individual letter. This is a technique much used by Richardson in *Clarissa* where Lovelace's character is revealed, in stark contrast to his letters to Clarissa, in letters to his fellow rakes and accomplices.

Diderot as a Reader of Epistolary Works, Especially Richardson.

We will now consider Diderot as a reader of correspondences and epistolary novels. Diderot's contemporaries were avid readers of epistolary novels, correspondences and philosophical and religious works written in the epistolary form. Diderot was a great admirer of the English author, Samuel Richardson, whose best works are the epistolary novels, *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. However, he refers surprisingly little to other epistolary works in his *Correspondance*. His references to Mme de Sévigné's letters are anecdotal and do not refer to the quality of her writing or the nature of

letter-writing. These references to her letters are merely used as literary allusions to a work Sophie will have read as well:

A Sophie Volland Au Grandval, ce 20 octobre (1760)

Ô! chère amie, combien je suis bavard. Ne pourrai-je jamais, comme disait Mme de Sévigné qui était aussi bavarde et aussi gloutonne: « Quoi! ne plus manger et me taire? »²⁸

Here Diderot identifies with Mme de Sévigné as a letter-writer but also, and more specifically, as a fellow talkative glutton. In Diderot's other direct reference to Mme de Sévigné's letters in the *Correspondance*, he adapts the Abbé Têtu's last words to Mme de Sévigné to the situation he is writing about. He uses these emotive last words as a joke when he writes about Mlle d'Autrey who is humorously supposed to be inconsolably in love with Diderot. He also advises his daughter to keep her away from the edge of lakes in case she is too grief stricken:

Si par hasard vous lui remarquiez de l'ennui; de la mélancolie; quelques larmes furtives, consolez-la, et assurez-la bien que je suis l'homme du monde le moins inconstant. Dites-lui du ton affectueux dont l'abbé Têtu disait adieu à Mme de Sévigné: 'Hé bien! ma belle amie, ne vous désespérez pas; vous nous reverrez.'²⁹

He also mentions in a letter to Grimm, dated from Langres, on 8th September 1770, a small collection of letters written by Henri IV which the archive in Langres possessed. Diderot sees these letters as being of great importance even if their content contains little of real interest. He believes them to be important as historical relics:

Vous aurez à mon retour et le sermon épistolaire de Mimi; et la lettre sur Bourbonne; et celle sur Langres; et peut être une petite collection de lettres de Henri IV. Il a écrit à différents officiers de cette ville. Il y a dans nos archives des billets de sa main et de la main des Guises. Les siens, ne fussent-ils grands

²⁸ *Corres.*, p. 272. Versini edition (as all subsequent references unless otherwise stated).

²⁹ *Corres.*, p. 1288.

comme un ongle, ne contenussent-ils rien de bien important, sont sacrés. Si nos provinciaux n'étaient pas d'une jalousie absurde, je vous répondrais bien de vous apparaître avec ce petit trésor. Mais avec les gens à qui j'ai à faire, on ne saurait compter sur rien.³⁰

We have no real indication of what Diderot would have intended to do with these letters, possibly he hoped to publish them. It is pertinent to our own study of Diderot's letters that he considered letters to be an historical document of worth if written by someone of note, such as the Guise family or Henri IV. This does cause us to wonder if he had any intention of using his own letters as a way of preserving his memory for posterity. Did he consider himself to be a figure of sufficient importance for his letters to form part of the works he hoped would be published after his death?

He comments upon his reading of *Clarissa* (which he introduced to the Vollandes in translation) more than upon any other epistolary work in his *Correspondance*. Diderot specifically wrote about Richardson in his *Eloge de Richardson*, which was first published by l'Abbé Arnaud in *Le Journal étranger* in January 1762. This article itself was very popular due to the passionate enthusiasm with which Diderot praised Richardson. The Abbé Prévost took heed of Diderot's comments about his abridged translation of *Clarissa* and published Diderot's *Eloge de Richardson* as a foreword to his *Supplément à Clarisse* (1762). It was included in all subsequent editions of the novel. Herder in the *Gazette de Koenigsberg* (17 August 1767) said of Diderot's *Eloge* that: « Tout est plein de feu, plein d'âme, plein de sentiment, plein de vie. »³¹

³⁰ *Corres.*, p. 1028-1029.

³¹ For more information see P. Vernière's introduction to Diderot, Denis, *Eloge de Richardson*, pp. 23-48 in Diderot, Denis, *Œuvres esthétiques* (Paris, 1959).

He sees these novels as having a didactic purpose to reveal the importance of virtue and decent actions. Richardson uses the novel for a moral purpose whereas novels had been generally considered to be morally corrupting. Diderot introduces the *Eloge de Richardson*, in the following manner:

Par un roman, on a entendu jusqu'à ce jour un tissu d'événements chimériques et frivoles, dont la lecture était dangereuse pour le goût et pour les mœurs. Je voudrais bien qu'on trouvât un autre nom pour les ouvrages de Richardson, qui élèvent l'esprit, qui touchent l'âme, qui respirent partout l'amour du bien, et qu'on appelle aussi des romans.³²

Diderot rarely mentions the specific nature of these novels as epistolary novels. When he does refer to them as being written in the epistolary form, it is to underline the importance of each incident and to show how the Abbé Prévost's abridgement of the work spoils its whole effect by excluding some letters. Diderot compares this to the effect that several letters missing would have upon a real correspondence:

Une idée qui m'est venue quelquefois en rêvant aux ouvrages de Richardson, c'est que j'avais acheté un vieux château; qu'en visitant un jour ses appartements, j'avais aperçu dans un angle une armoire qu'on n'avait pas ouverte depuis longtemps, et que l'ayant enfoncée, j'y avais trouvé pêle-mêle les lettres de Clarisse et de Paméla. Après en avoir lu quelques-unes, avec quel empressement ne les aurais-je pas [rangées] par ordre de dates! Quel chagrin n'aurais-je pas senti, s'il y avait eu quelque lacune entre elles, croit-on que j'eusse souffert qu'une main téméraire (j'ai presque dit sacrilège) en eût supprimé une ligne?

Vous qui n'avez lu les ouvrages de Richardson que dans votre élégante traduction française, et qui croyez les connaître, vous vous trompez.³³

Diderot's 'dream' is the standard premise with which an epistolary novel starts by claiming that it is a real correspondence that has been found in a drawer. Diderot seemed to find Richardson's fictional letters close enough to real letters for verisimilitude not to pose a problem.

³² *Eloge de Richardson*, p. 30.

³³ *Eloge.*, p. 36.

One aspect of Richardson's work which Diderot praises and which relates directly to its epistolary nature is Richardson's skill at depicting many varied characters. For Diderot each character is differentiated by her/his means of expression and style of letter:

Un homme qui a du goût ne prendra point une lettre de Mme Norton pour la lettre d'une des tantes de Clarisse, la lettre d'une tante pour celle d'une autre tante ou de Mme Harlove, quoiqu'il arrive que ces personnages soient dans la même position, dans les mêmes sentiments relativement au même objet. Dans ce livre immortel, comme dans la nature au printemps, on ne trouve point deux feuilles qui soient d'un même vert. Quelle immense variété de nuances! S'il est difficile à celui qui lit de les saisir, combien n'a-t-il pas été difficile à l'auteur de les trouver et de les peindre !³⁴

The epistolary nature of Richardson's work appears to have added to Diderot's enjoyment of the work, as it allows characters such as Lovelace to adopt several personae. However the epistolary form of the work is largely incidental to the pleasure he gains from reading Richardson.

In this chapter, we have attempted to give an overview of the main historical features and attitudes to letter-writing which formed the tradition of letter-writing of which Diderot's *Correspondance* is a part. The history of letter-writing influenced the form and the content of what was deemed suitable for inclusion in a letter. These were the conventions of the time when Diderot was writing, which importantly was a period in which the epistolary novel and epistolary debates were flourishing. The understanding of the history of letter-writing that we have gained in this chapter will

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 39.

help us to consider the *Correspondance* in terms of its appropriate historic and generic setting and will influence our interpretation of the letters in later chapters.

Chapter Two. Diderot-The Letter-writer.

The History of the Editions of the Correspondance.

In this chapter we shall consider Diderot as a letter-writer in general terms. We will commence by establishing what is known about the corpus of letters which has come to form the *Correspondance*. The process of publishing any form of text is often long and arduous. The search for a definitive version of Diderot's correspondence by successive editors has not been without its difficulties and challenges. Here we will attempt to give a brief overview of the text's history and of the problems which editors were faced with when choosing between variants found in different source materials, such as the original manuscripts and copies of Diderot's letters.

In order to gain a full understanding of Diderot's *Correspondance*, it is useful to have a knowledge of its publication history and its even more unusual and circuitous path to publication itself. Its editors have often influenced critical perceptions and readings of the *Correspondance*. It took almost two centuries after Diderot's death for the collection of letters which we call the *Correspondance* of Diderot to reach something like its present form, which we owe to Georges Roth and Jean Varloot. In this there will be an overview of various editions of the *Oeuvres complètes*, and the interpretation and importance given to the correspondence by subsequent editors will be examined. We will commence our discussion by studying the *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot* by Jean Assézat and Maurice Tourneux published in Paris in 1876, and will review Assézat and Tourneux's account of the compilation of their edition and the sources they used. We will look next at André Babelon's edition of the *Lettres à Sophie Volland*, Paris, 1930, and then we will examine further

editions of the *Œuvres complètes*, which (like Assézat and Tourneux before them) include letters Diderot wrote to Falconet, Mlle Jodin and others as well as the letters written to Sophie Volland. Each editor interprets the correspondence of Diderot in a slightly different manner, and this is visible not only in what is said about the letters in the introduction to these editions but also the manner in which they are set out.

The *Oeuvres complètes*, by Assézat and Tourneux, 1876, published the letters written to Falconet by Diderot as the first example of letters written by Diderot. This serves to emphasize Diderot as a *philosophe* and intellectual as many of these letters are the letters which formed the epistolary debate about posterity, the *Pour et Contre*. These letters were published here for the first time in their entirety. Some of the letters had already been published in 1831 by M. Walferin in volume III of his *Mémoires et ouvrages inédits* of Diderot. These letters were based upon a copy of the originals belonging to the Vandeuil family. New letters came to light after the death of Falconet's grand-daughter, the child resulting from the marriage of the former Mlle Collot to Falconet's son, Pierre. The history of these letters is described thus in the Assézat and Tourneux edition:

Mme La baronne de Jankowitz de Jeszenisce, fille de Mme Pierre-Etienne Falconet, née Collot, et veuve de baron de Jankowitz, qui fut préfet et député de la Meurthe, mourut à Versailles, le 1er janvier 1866, léguant à la ville de Nancy une liasse de papiers provenant de son grand-père, divers portraits peints par son père, enfin quelques bustes en plâtre et en marbre de sa mère. Les tableaux et dessins qui avaient appartenu à Falconet furent vendus à Paris, le 10 décembre 1866.

Lorsque M. Charles Cournault, alors conservateur du Musée Lorrain, dépouilla le volumineux dossier qui y avait été déposé, il y retrouva vingt-deux lettres inédites de Diderot, ainsi que deux copies, très raturées par Falconet, de la discussion sur la postérité [...] Les lettres de Diderot s'arrêtaient en 1773, avant son départ pour la Russie; Mme de Jankowitz, obéissant à un scrupule

filiat exagéré, avait brûlé les autres autographes de Diderot et les copies que Falconet avait gardées de ses réponses.¹

Perhaps it is even rather surprising that any of these letters survived given the rather complicated relationship Mlle Collot had with Falconet *père* and *fils*, eloping with Pierre Falconet, the son of her lover, after having lived with his father for several years. The versions of these letters upon which Assézat and Tourneux based their edition appeared in *La Revue moderne* and *La Gazette des beaux arts*.²

Assézat and Tourneux then published the letters to Sophie Volland in the same volume of the *Oeuvres complètes*. Once again these letters to a specific correspondent are grouped together as a discrete unit rather than as part of Diderot's letter-writing as a whole. In the nineteenth volume of their *Oeuvres complètes*, a section called 'Correspondance générale' is to be found in which letters to Voltaire, Galiani and others are found as well as letters written to Diderot. Such an arrangement of Diderot's correspondence perhaps leads to a rather disordered reading of the correspondence as a whole, as the reader is encouraged to read the letters written to Falconet, Mlle Jodin, Abbé Le Monnier and Sophie Volland as completely self-standing texts which are not connected to any wider sense of Diderot as a letter-writer, or to his letter-writing style as a whole. Such letters were often written at similar times to each other and so they seem stripped of their wider context by being separated in such a manner. Assézat and Tourneux in doing this were also

¹ Diderot, Denis, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume III, ed. J. Assézat et Maurice Tourneux (Paris, 1876), *Notice préliminaire*, III, pp. 79-80.

² M. Cournault publia d'abord dans la *Revue moderne* (1er novembre+1er décembre 1866 + 1er janvier +1er février 1867) toute la correspondance intime des deux amis, puis dans la *Gazette des beaux arts* (Tome II (2ème période, 1869, P.117-144) une étude biographique, très complète sur Etienne-Maurice Falconet et Marie-Anne Collot[...] (*Op. cit.*, p. 80.)

following their sources in which the letters were collected together in just such a manner.

Assézat and Tourneux in their *Notice préliminaire* to the Sophie Volland letters explain the history behind the sources of their edition of these letters and the mysterious manner in which they appeared on the market:

Par quelle suite de hasards un homme de lettres français naturalisé russe, Jeudy-Dugour, eut-il entre les mains un ensemble d'œuvres qui semblaient à jamais perdues? Comment fut-il à même de vendre à Paulin les matériaux des quatre volumes imprimés sous le titre de *Mémoires, correspondance et ouvrages inédits* de Diderot? Pourquoi ajoute-t-on: *Publiés d'après les manuscrits confiés en mourant par l'auteur à Grimm*? Jeudy-Dugour eut-il le crédit de pénétrer dans la bibliothèque de l'Ermitage, sévèrement fermée pendant tout le règne de Nicolas 1er? Ou plutôt sont-ce les originaux mêmes possédés par Grimm qu'il céda à Paulin? Il ne peut être question de copies pour un prix aussi élevé que celui dont il fait mention dans une lettre d'affaires, adressée à Beuchot et communiquée par M. Olivier Barbier[...]

Outre les lettres à Mlle Volland, le *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, les *Voyages à Bourbonne et Langres*, une partie des lettres à Falconet, la *Promenade du sceptique*, l'*Entretien avec d'Alembert*, et *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* étaient offerts pour la première fois au public. M. Jules Taschereau s'était chargé de surveiller l'impression; mais il fut interrompu dans cette publication, comme dans celle de Grimm, par la révolution de 1830 et pria N.A. Chaudé, son ami, de les terminer toutes deux.

[...]

Le trésor découvert et vendu par Jeudy-Dugour n'était pas épuisé, puisqu'en 1834 *La Revue rétrospective* put encore faire connaître comme inédits: *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* les notices sur Michel Van Loo et sur Rouelle, les *Trois chapitres*.³

Assézat and Tourneux then discuss the editions upon which theirs is based.

Unlike more recent editors they were unable to consult the original manuscripts and copies, and appear to have been oblivious of the need to do so in order to produce a text which is as authentic as possible. Assézat and Tourneux relied totally upon work

³ *Op. cit.* p. 350-351.

already carried out by other scholars as far as the letters Diderot wrote were concerned, and they did so uncritically:

Nous réimprimons sur le texte de 1830, sans pouvoir le contrôler sur aucune copie ancienne ou récente. Il en existe bien une à Saint-Pétersbourg en deux volumes in -4, mais M. Léon Godard ne l'a point collationnée, pensant qu'il n'aurait aucune variante à y relever. Si cet examen avait lieu, il démontrerait, par cela même qu'il n'offrirait rien de nouveau, quelles lacunes nous privent d'une partie de ces admirables lettres. Elles embrassent une période de quinze ans; mais nous n'avons en réalité que huit mois de 1759 (et la lettre du 15 mai n'est visiblement pas la première), six mois de 1760, deux mois de 1761, et quatre mois de 1762. Après une interruption de près de deux ans, les lettres se multiplient en 1765 ; 1766 nous en fournit trois, 1767 huit, 1768 une dizaine, 1769 neuf et 1770 quatre. Nouvelle interruption de plus de deux ans et demi; le voyage en Russie et les deux séjours en Hollande donnent six lettres, la plupart fort courtes. Et c'est tout; ce long roman n'a pas d'épilogue.⁴

Whilst there still remain to this day considerable gaps in the Sophie Volland correspondence, more letters have come to light since the Assézat and Tourneux edition. In the Versini edition there are the same amount of letters as cited above for the years, 1759, 1761, 1762 and 1765. However we now have letters from February to December in 1760, and nine letters for 1766, ten letters for 1767, fifteen letters for 1768, twelve for 1769 and five letters written in 1770. This fills in certain gaps, and we can assume that the majority of the other letters missing were destroyed by Sophie Volland or Diderot. Other gaps throughout the year are often due to the fact that, when Sophie was in Paris, Diderot had no need to write to her as often, as he could speak to her in person.

Assézat and Tourneux's confidence that an examination of the original letters or other copies would have been fruitless, or added little of any worth, reveals the flaws in this edition. We will address the pitfalls and the unreliability of these copies

⁴ *Op. cit.* p. 352.

and original manuscript versions for editors of Diderot's *Correspondance* later on in this chapter.

The nineteenth volume of the Assézat and Tourneux edition contains letters and fragments of letters Diderot wrote to the Abbé Le Monnier in a separate section, and they are based exactly upon an edition by M. Brière who owned the original letters. This rather over-emphasizes and gives undue prominence to Diderot's relationship with Le Monnier. Abbé Le Monnier was the chaplain of La Sainte Chapelle and a Latin scholar and a friend of the Vandeul family. Diderot mainly wrote to him to ask him about Terence, as he was a Terence expert and had translated Terence's plays (1771). He is interesting in as much as he shows that the Vollands moved in ecclesiastical and academic circles.

Assézat and Tourneux present their compilation of other letters written by Diderot in the section of the edition called 'Correspondance générale' in the following manner:

Naigeon, à qui la tâche eût été plus facile qu'à tout autre, n'a point pris la peine de réunir les lettres de Diderot; l'édition Belin en avait rassemblé dix-neuf auxquelles l'édition Brière joignit, outre les correspondances avec le Monnier et Mlle Jodin, douze lettres inédites, ainsi que divers billets ou réponses de Voltaire, Rousseau, Galiani, Mme Riccoboni. Nous en offrons près du triple; dans ce nombre trente environ sont inédites, et le reste était dispersé dans des recueils peu consultés ou dans des publications plus récentes.⁵

Chronology has been a problem which has beset all editors of Diderot's correspondence in their search for authenticity. Yet again original manuscripts and the variant copies of the letters have been compared by later editors to further

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 415.

elucidate some of these problems, which is a method which Assézat and Tourneux did not employ.

The next edition we shall consider is Babelon's edition of the Sophie Volland correspondence published in 1930. The introduction to volume I starts with a biographical summary of Diderot's life and relationship with Sophie Volland, and Babelon's depiction of Diderot's personality as seen through his letters. The introduction to this edition starts with a quotation from a letter he wrote to Sophie Volland on 15th October 1760:

“Chère amie, je suis désespéré; il faut qu'il y ait une douzaine de mes lettres en l'air. Il y en a une surtout très étendue, grand papier, à sept ou huit feuilles coupées.” Cette phrase témoigne à quel point Diderot, qui fut si prodigue des trésors de son imagination, attachait de prix à ses lettres à Sophie Volland. Il y tenait non point comme à des billets, dont on craint de voir le secret dévoilé, mais comme à un document où il a tout exprimé de lui-même. Mêlé intimement à la passion, embrasé par elle, le désir à la fois de se répandre et de se retrouver: tel est le sens profond de ces lettres.⁶

André Babelon imposes a psychological reading upon these letters from the very beginning of the introduction to the work and, by so doing, guides the reader's responses to Diderot's text. Diderot is represented here as a passionate lover whose other great passion was self-expression. Babelon, in contrast to Assézat and Tourneux, paid great attention to the quality of the copy of Diderot's letters he was basing his edition upon and was fully aware that the letters were frequently heavily censored and doctored by hands other than Diderot's own, such as the Vandeuls and Naigeon.

Jusqu'ici ces *Lettres* n'avaient jamais vu le jour dans leur texte original. Il n'en avait encore été publié qu'une copie au second degré où la censure de mains étrangères s'était doublement exercée.

⁶ Diderot, Denis, *Lettres à Sophie Volland* (Paris, 1930), edited by Babelon, André, volume I, p. 7.

Grimm, le premier, donna, d'après une de ces copies, trois passages des *Lettres* dans sa *Correspondance*, plus tard l'édition Brière publia les fragments de deux lettres de même provenance. Enfin, en 1829, un Français établi en Russie, A. Jeudy-Dugour, vendit à l'éditeur Paulin des copies qu'il avait faites d'après celles qui avaient été envoyées en Russie, au musée de l'Ermitage, par Mme de Vandeuil. Paulin s'empresse de les utiliser pour son édition en 4 volumes: *Mémoires, correspondance et ouvrages inédits de Diderot, publiés d'après les manuscrits confiés en mourant par l'auteur à Grimm*. Ce titre sensationnel - puisque l'on croyait à juste raison dispersés ou même perdus les papiers de Grimm - était inexact et n'avait d'autre but que de dissimuler la provenance des manuscrits.

Et c'est ce texte que reproduisit, sans y rien modifier, l'édition en 1876.⁷

The flawed approach of Assézat and Tourneux is revealed here as their edition is based uncritically upon a heavily flawed text which they do not even consider evaluating critically. Babelon then continues to describe the sources he has based his edition upon and the major pitfalls which editors are faced with, namely the alterations made by the Vandeuils to the letters:

Or, aujourd'hui, outre les manuscrits originaux que nous révélons et dont nous donnons plus loin la description, nous dévoilons l'existence d'une autre copie, fort curieuse, qui semble avoir servi de prototype au manuscrit du musée de l'Ermitage. Son texte est en effet intermédiaire entre celui des manuscrits originaux et celui de l'édition Garnier.

Cette copie en trois volumes in-4°, qui contient sauf une, toutes les lettres des manuscrits originaux, y compris les inédites, a été corrigée par M. de Vandeuil, qui eut un très grand rôle dans la révision des oeuvres posthumes de Diderot, et qui, à plusieurs reprises, a ajouté, de sa main, des passages sans aucun doute de Diderot. Ces passages ne se trouvent pas dans les manuscrits originaux qui nous sont conservés. Appartenaient-ils à d'autres lettres que celles où ils figurent et détruites par M. de Vandeuil ? Toujours est-il que l'hypothèse d'un double manuscrit original dont l'un aurait contenu plus de texte que l'autre doit être selon vraisemblance écartée, puisque, d'une part, Diderot dit lui-même à Sophie qu'il ne gardait aucun double de ses lettres, et que, d'autre part, les manuscrits originaux portent encore, pour un grand nombre de lettres, l'adresse et le cachet, ce qui indique formellement qu'ils ne sont pas un double autographe.

Ces passages ajoutés par M. de Vandeuil, nous les donnons en variantes à la fin de chaque tome de notre édition.

⁷ *Op. cit.* p. 13.

Cette copie, en dehors des corrections de M. de Vandeuil, est l'oeuvre de deux copistes. A partir de la lettre 166, apparaît une autre écriture, plus régulière. Voici l'avertissement, revu lui-même par M. de Vandeuil, en tête du tome 1er :

Cette correspondance est incomplète, parce que Diderot a rendu à Mlle Voland (sic) les lettres qu'il en avait reçues et que Mlle Voland a brûlé une partie de celles de M. Diderot comme l'on avait eu l'attention de numéroter toutes les lettres dans l'ordre de leur réception, il est aisé de connaître le nombre de celles qui manquent, et le temps à peu près où elles ont été écrites. La copie qu'on va lire ne renferme que les lettres et fragments laissés par Mlle Voland à une de ses amies qui en a fait le sacrifice à la fille de M. Diderot.

En l'absence de renseignements plus précis, nous sommes amené à faire des suppositions. Il est certain que les *Lettres de Diderot à Sophie Volland*, chez les contemporains au courant de leurs relations, ont donné naissance à toute une série d'explications et de déformations volontaires.⁸

It can hence be seen that whilst Babelon reviews some parts of the background history of the letters in a way that is similar to that employed by Assézat and Tourneux, he does so much more critically and considers the relative merits and failings of the source material and previous editions. Babelon exercised a much more critical appraisal of the copies and manuscripts in his search for the authentic voice of Diderot as revealed in his letters. He also realized the importance of the alterations and the erasures to be found in the various copies of the letters. He considered these to be of three different kinds: i) those due to censorship of the letters by the Vandeuils, ii) alterations possibly made by Diderot himself as he was known to constantly revise his texts, and iii) different versions of texts in Naigeon's hand. Babelon believed that some of these fragments written by Naigeon were sections of letters which Diderot had destroyed and these fragments formed an appendix to Babelon's edition.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 13-15.

Babelon published 187 letters written to Sophie Volland. He believed that there were originally 553 letters written to Sophie Volland, according to the system by which the letters both manuscript and copies are numbered:

Elles sont presque toutes numérotées en effet sur le manuscrit original et sur la copie. La première de la copie porte le n°135, avec la note : *Les 134 premières lettres sont perdues. Sur le manuscrit original, ce numéro a été barré.*

La date de cette première lettre sur le manuscrit original est de la main de M. de Vandeuil: mai 1759; Diderot avait écrit seulement: *Ce vendredi matin.* Et sur la copie, M. de Vandeuil précisa: *Paris, le 10 mai 1759.*

D'après la date vraisemblable où Diderot rencontra Sophie, nous calculons qu'environ trois années de correspondance sont perdues: les lettres où s'exprimaient sans doute les premiers élans, les plus ardents et les plus angoissés, de la passion.⁹

Once again Babelon suggests an interpretation of Diderot's life and letters to the reader by assuming that the missing letters written during the first few years of Diderot's acquaintance with Sophie were written with incendiary passion.

In terms of the more formal aspects of the letters Babelon is keen to make his edition as 'authentic' as possible. Babelon decides to follow Diderot's spelling in his edition in order to preserve what he saw as the living spontaneous voice of Diderot as revealed in his letters:

Afin de conserver l'impression vivante du premier jet nous avons rétabli l'orthographe même de Diderot, mais afin de ne pas nuire à la lecture nous avons modernisé la ponctuation.¹⁰

We will look at the issues surrounding punctuation and spelling and the different inconsistencies and variations to be found in the manuscripts and copies of

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 17.

the letters, and the different approaches editors have taken, at a later stage in this chapter.

The next edition of the *Œuvres complètes*, which we shall look at in terms of the correspondence and its place within the wider scheme of the collected works is the edition for Le Club français du livre, 1969, edited by Roger Lewinter. This version of the complete works is interesting as all the works are ordered chronologically, with an aim of providing the reader with an overview of the development in Diderot's interests and views through time. Most editions order the various texts according to genre, grouping philosophical writings together, and the texts about art and esthetics together etc. Here the correspondence is published at the end of each volume, and the letters from the years covered by the other texts are to be found as a form of biographical backdrop. For example in volume I, published in 1969, we find the following texts and letters: *Épître à M. B****, *Essai de M. S*** sur le mérite et la vertu*, *Pensées philosophiques*, *La Promenade du sceptique*, *L'Oiseau blanc, conte bleu*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, *Mémoires de Mme de Vandeuil*, *Correspondance de 1742 à 1748*. Each volume has the same layout, the correspondence for the period of time covered by the other works contained in the volume is appended at the end.

The objective of this edition and its presentation is to counter the myth of Diderot the rational materialist, which was created by the manner in which his works were presented by Naigeon, and then Assézat and Tourneux, and to reveal Diderot to be a much more complex figure:

Naigeon, son éditeur et disciple, dans son militantisme des Lumières, s'efforça d'imposer, à l'exclusion de toutes les autres, l'image du philosophe polémiste; et le XIXe siècle vécut sur cette idée reçue.

En 1875, Assézat donna la première édition « complète » de ses œuvres; c'est demeurée la seule; elle acheva aussi la destruction de Diderot, commencée dès 1798 par Naigeon: dans la présentation rationaliste d'Assézat, celui-ci devenait en effet le prophète de tous les matérialismes - plus philosophe, moins écrivain que jamais. Et comme il passait pour « la plus allemande de nos têtes françaises », on découvrait dans sa pensée nombre de contradictions qui affaiblissaient singulièrement la portée.

Il fallut attendre les années trente pour assister à la naissance d'un intérêt véritable et soutenu pour Diderot. Sa figure, lentement, transparait dessous tous les masques qu'il s'est lui-même choisis, ou dont on l'a arbitrairement affublé.

La présente édition, qui veut enfin rendre ses œuvres complètes largement accessibles, sera et restera longtemps la première et seule édition de « lecture ». Par ce mot, nous entendons que Diderot est essentiellement un écrivain: un moraliste qui cherche comment justifier l'écriture, pour pouvoir vivre par l'écriture.¹¹

The aim here is to reinstate a more accurate reading of Diderot and his works and to make this accessible to the reader, especially the more general reader. The letters themselves play an important role in this edition as they are used to fill in the biographical background to the more literary and philosophical works and to give a broader vision of Diderot the man:

La présente édition, en outre, proposera, en même temps que l'œuvre littéraire de Diderot, sa correspondance, qui constituera en quelque sorte l'appareil critique auquel nous avons cru bon ici de renoncer: elle restituera le climat culturel, historique et personnel de Diderot, le contexte où son œuvre se détache et se dérobe. Notre dette est ici immense envers Georges Roth, qui a publié aux Editions de Minuit la *Correspondance* générale de Diderot un travail gigantesque que Jean Varloot est en train d'achever. Sans cette édition, nous n'aurions jamais pu concevoir la nôtre. Car c'est le texte de la correspondance établi par Georges Roth que nous reprenons; et les indications biographiques relatives à la correspondance, contenues dans l'index, utiliseront pour l'essentiel les éléments historiques fournis par Georges Roth que nous

¹¹ Diderot, Denis, *Œuvres complètes. Edition chronologique* (Paris, 1969), ed. Lewinter, Roger, pp. 3-4.

repreçons; et les indications biographiques relatives à la correspondance, contenues dans l'index, qui nous le restitue dans sa lisibilité première.¹²

The *Correspondance*, as we will see, is a complex and vivid text which repays closer study in its own right and is a pleasurable read in itself for the more casual non-academic reader. The Georges Roth and Jean Varloot edition is still the seminal work in the field and the historical background it provides is also excellent. Georges Roth, in the preface to the first volume of correspondence, relates the publication history of the corpus of letters and then describes the methods he has used to compile his edition. One striking difference between this edition and the earlier editions is that it contains many more letters. These letters had been discovered and published by researchers and had also been found by archivists, book dealers and owners of private collections of letters and documents. Due to these numerous sources Georges Roth was able to publish previously unknown letters.

Another vital difference between the Roth-Varloot edition and the Assézat-Tourneux edition, for example, was Roth's ability to consult original letters and copies, which form the Fonds Diderot-Vandeul in the Bibliothèque Nationale. He was able to study these letters in meticulous detail, and by so doing, rediscover words and at times paragraphs which had previously been omitted by editors. As Roth said, even the omission of an adverb could completely distort Diderot's intended meaning of a sentence:

L'absence d'un adverbe ou d'un simple préfixe ont fait dire à Diderot le contraire de sa pensée. Par exemple: 'Le baron [d'Holbach] entra dans une violente colère; quant à moi, je ne fus pas indigné' lit-on dans une lettre à

¹² *Op. cit.* p. 5.

Sophie. Qui se méfierait d'un texte aussi clair ? Or, en fait, Diderot a écrit: 'Je ne fus *pas moins* indigné.¹³

This emphasizes the extent of the task which faced Roth and the unreliability of earlier editions, which did not have access to original letters and copies.

Georges Roth chose to organize his edition in a chronological manner as this would allow the reader to follow Diderot's social, intellectual, and literary development. Roth includes background historical and biographical information to accompany the letters. This is a very useful resource in itself, as it provides the essential information needed in order to understand the relevance and content of certain letters. However there were many problems surrounding the dating of letters as Diderot rarely dated his letters. When he did date his letters, he often wrote the incorrect date. The method used for dating the letters in this edition was largely deductive. Some letters, which could not be dated with much certainty, were placed in the Roth edition, after the section they appear to belong to.

Roth standardized Diderot's spelling where necessary. He did not follow Diderot's personal idiosyncracies in this matter as:

[...] nous estimons fâcheuse la pratique consistant à mettre sous les yeux du lecteur des incohérences de graphie. En retenant sur elles l'attention, on la détourne de la pensée de l'écrivain. Nous avons donc ramené l'orthographe des lettres à l'usage établi au moment où elles furent écrites.¹⁴

Punctuation is also modernized. Diderot barely punctuated his letters at all.

Punctuation is added to the letters by editors to aid the modern reader's comprehension of the letters:

¹³ Diderot, Denis, *Correspondance, I* (Paris, 1955), ed. Roth, Georges. Preface, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Op. cit.* p. 14.

Diderot écrit comme il parlait: intarissablement. Aussi ménage-t-il la place. Phrases et paragraphes se pressent et s'enchaînent. Dans la masse compacte d'une page, l'œil ne parvient pas à déceler l'endroit où doit s'articuler le raisonnement ou le récit.

Georges Roth managed to overcome some of the problems other editors faced or neglected to address, and to produce what is still the definitive edition of the *Correspondance*.

However we have referred largely to the Versini edition, as its compact one volume form, although devoid of the critical apparatus which ensures that the Roth-Varloot *Correspondance* must still be read first and used as a work of reference for the academic reader, allows the reader to read the *Correspondance* as a continuous text and dialogue between Diderot and his correspondents. The aim of the Versini edition, as part of the *Bouquins* series published by Robert Laffont, was to publish the most important letters by Diderot in one easily accessible volume. This edition does not appear to be particularly innovative in any noticeable manner.

The Hermann edition of the complete works of Diderot, in the 'Plan de l'édition' of volume I, Paris, 1975, states the intention to publish the *Correspondance générale* in volumes XXVII to XXXII which are still to appear, and these volumes are to be based upon the edition of the *Correspondance* by Georges Roth and Jean Varloot. These volumes are to follow all of Diderot's other works, which are grouped together by genre of writing and thematically.

We shall now consider the questions and problems surrounding the publication and editing of Diderot's letters in more detail. After Diderot's death, his son-in law and daughter collected together his letters and the various manuscripts of his unpublished works with the intention of publishing them. This was the basis of what

is now called the Fonds Vandeul which, in addition to the manuscripts in St. Petersburg, is the principal source material used by editors of Diderot's works. However they considered that their task was not only that of collating the works, but also that of censoring any elements considered too coarse, blasphemous or which reflected badly upon the family. This has caused many of the manuscripts in the Fonds Vandeul to be rather problematic from the point of view of the modern editor in search of a definitive text, as the original text when obliterated by the Vandeuls is not always discernible, even by infra-red light, under the obliterations and the passages of writing which were erased by scraping off the surface of the paper. Another problem is that Diderot, who published very little during his lifetime, constantly rewrote and amended his works over the years. Although this is not directly relevant to the *Correspondance*, it is important as it reveals Diderot's manner of writing.

Paul Vernière says of this:

Mais pour Diderot le problème est ailleurs. Entre la *Lettre sur les aveugles*, de 1749 et les deux moutures de *La vie de Sénèque* de la fin de sa vie, Diderot ne publie publiquement rien, si l'on exclut *L'Encyclopédie* et des textes anodins. Il est resté fidèle au fameux « testament de mort » conseillé par d'Alembert, et ses œuvres pendant presque 40 ans vont s'accumuler au tiroir. Mais ce n'est pas pour y dormir; car continuellement, surtout après l'achèvement de *L'Encyclopédie*, Diderot non seulement accumulera ce que la servante de Proust appelait des « paperolles », mais il aura à cœur de les intégrer à ses grandes œuvres par la technique toute particulière du « bourrage ».

[...]

Chez Diderot, il n'y a pas de deuxième coulée. C'est un travail d'intégration et d'absorption où de nouveaux textes, récits et anecdotes, d'inspiration souvent différente, mais liés par quelques connotations à l'ouvrage principal, sont insérés et absorbés non sans quelque risque de disparate.

[...]

Voilà pourquoi le choix du meilleur texte ne saurait répondre chez Diderot à une technicité éditoriale, à une méthode unique, mais devrait faire sa part à une esthétique, à un certain degré d'impressionnisme.¹⁵

This method of writing throws some light upon the manner in which Diderot includes many anecdotes in his letters to Sophie Volland. These anecdotes are often ordered and structured within these letters by associations and connotations which link them with the main content of the letter. This appears to be quite similar to Diderot's method of inserting related anecdotes into works at a later date.

Paul Vernière considers manuscripts written before Diderot's death which are in the Fonds Vandeul to have little real value for editors, due to the many alterations made by the Vandeuls:

Tous les manuscrits antérieurs à la mort de Diderot, qui sont restés au fonds Vandeul et qui ont été l'objet d'une « toilette » de la part des Vandeul, n'ont de valeur que dans la mesure où leur leçon originale peut être retrouvée sous les corrections ultérieures. D'après notre expérience, même à la lecture aux infra-rouges, les caviardages et grattages rendent cette restitution difficile.¹⁶

Diderot quite possibly intended, at some stage, for at least some if not all the letters which are extant today to be published. This is so because several copies of these letters survived, such as a copy of these letters which was sent to Catherine the Great of Russia and the copy of these letters which the Vandeuls worked upon.

Michel Delon believes that there is evidence that Diderot had prepared these letters for publication:

Nous possédons un recueil de lettres autographes à Sophie, la copie envoyée à Catherine II d'un certain nombre de ces lettres, qui a servi de texte de référence aux éditeurs du xix^e siècle et une copie sur laquelle ont travaillé les Vandeul. Leur travail, d'après les différentes couches de transformation du texte, a dû se

¹⁵ Vernière, Paul, 'Le Choix du meilleur texte dans l'édition des œuvres de Diderot' p. 16 in *Diderot, autographes, copies, éditions* (Paris, 1986), eds. Didier, Béatrice, and Neefs, Jacques.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 17.

dérouler en plusieurs étapes. Il manifeste leur intention de publier la correspondance avec Sophie. Mais il n'est pas interdit de se demander si Diderot lui-même n'a pas repris certaines lettres sinon l'ensemble et songé à en tirer une publication. On serait curieux de savoir de quand datent 1°/ la restitution des correspondances de Sophie et de Denis et 2°/ la destruction des missives manquantes. Une note en tête de la copie Vandeuil indique que Diderot aurait rendu ses lettres à Sophie unilatéralement, que celle-ci aurait détruit une partie de la correspondance reçue du philosophe et aurait remis le reste à une de ses amies grâce à laquelle il serait revenu entre les mains de Mme de Vandeuil. Si l'on accepte une telle version des faits, Diderot ne peut avoir eu l'occasion de revoir son texte, à moins qu'il ait gardé des copies de ses envois, ce qu'il nie. Il n'est pas absolument certain que toutes les corrections autographes soient effectivement les lettres reçues par Sophie. La restauration des manuscrits à la Bibliothèque Nationale interdit toute interprétation des lettres sur grand papier qui ne portent pas le cachet de la poste ni de marque de pliure apparente. Il s'agit sans doute de missives accompagnant un envoi. Si Diderot ne garde pas de double de certaines lettres, est-il absolument impossible qu'il en ait relu certaines, la plume à la main, bien après les avoir rédigées ?¹⁷

All these questions are of great importance to the *Correspondance* but they remain unanswered. It would be fascinating to know if Sophie Volland asked for her letters to be returned, fearing that Diderot might publish them, or if she wanted them returned after a break down in their relationship. Indeed, should it alter our perspective when reading these letters if we consider them to have been intended for publication at some date by Diderot? These letters are the most 'literary' of Diderot's *Correspondance* and contain the greatest stylistic range of expression. Yet it is impossible to truly ascertain if this means that they were part of a literary project for future publication. This also raises the question of whether Diderot would have published the more personal parts of his letters addressed to Sophie Volland. Perhaps the missing letters are precisely those of a more intimate nature which Diderot and/or Sophie Volland did not consider fit for publication. If the letters to her were destined

¹⁷ Delon, Michel, 'La circulation de l'écriture', p. 132, in *Diderot, autographes copies, éditions* (Paris, 1986), eds. Didier, Béatrice, and Neefs, Jacques.

to be published, he was also consciously immortalizing their relationship and his image for posterity as the *philosophe amoureux*. The nature of these letters was also rather uncomfortable for the Vandeuls who, whilst wishing to profit from Diderot's work, might not have wished to make Angélique's father's infidelities public. We have chosen to consider the letters to Sophie Volland as an actual correspondence in its entirety, whilst remaining very aware that the passages of literary virtuosity and reported dialogues in these letters cause them to be a generic hybrid of sorts. These letters could very possibly have been written with posthumous publication in mind, although there is no concrete evidence to suggest or to disprove this theory. It is due to their literariness and the manner in which they contrast clearly with the other letters in the *Correspondance* that these letters are often published as a discrete volume on their own and have even been a set text for the *agrégation*.

Michel Delon continues in the same article to consider some of the problems raised by the missing letters from the Sophie Volland correspondence:

Un second ensemble de questions porte sur les lacunes. Sont-elles toutes de la même origine? Il manque tantôt des lettres entières tantôt des pages. Les amants numérotaient fréquemment leurs lettres au cours d'un même voyage pour s'y retrouver malgré les incertitudes de la poste. Une seconde numérotation couvrant l'ensemble de la correspondance permet de repérer les absences. Mais cette numérotation exhaustive n'est pas toujours exactement la même dans le recueil autographe et dans la copie Vandeul. Les fragments et lettres dont il manque la première page peuvent être rattachés à une autre missive ou considérés comme des envois séparés. L'ensemble des lettres dont nous disposons aujourd'hui relève-t-il d'un choix de Sophie? Certaines suppressions datent-elles des Vandeul? Diderot a-t-il pu jamais intervenir? En d'autres termes, les critères de sélection n'ont-ils été que moraux ou familiaux? Sans compter que certaines lettres ont été perdues par la poste et ne sont jamais arrivées à destination, que d'autres ont pu être égarées plus tard par mégarde.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 132-133.

Delon suggests that the first of the letters to Sophie Volland which is extant, written from Marly, has the appearance of being chosen as a suitable letter with which to start a collection of letters due to its descriptions of the gardens and its innocuous content. Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland are peculiar in that the first letter to survive is the 135th. A large proportion of the correspondence between Diderot and Sophie is thus silenced. Delon explains how this letter, even in its opening words relating to Diderot's departure, seems rather too appropriate to be coincidentally the first remaining letter which takes the reader on Diderot's journey of autoportraiture in his letters to Sophie:

“Nous partîmes hier à huit heures pour Marly. Nous y arrivâmes à dix heures et demie.” On connaît l'incipit de la correspondance à Sophie. Est-ce par une pure illusion finaliste que ce départ, dans la 135^e lettre, apparaît comme l'ouverture d'un ensemble ? Cette lettre est essentiellement descriptive et ne pouvait choquer aucune susceptibilité morale ou sociale [...] Elle ne pouvait que plaire à des éditeurs soucieux de présenter un Diderot brillant causeur dans un xviii^e siècle mondain et artiste. [...] La numérotation et la datation sont en tout cas dues aux Vandeuil et ne peuvent être tenues pour des certitudes. On est forcé de se fier à elles à défaut d'autres documents, mais on ne peut fonder sur elles trop de raisonnements.¹⁹

Delon's argument for the Marly letter being deliberately chosen as the starting point for the collection of letters is very convincing but it still remains nothing more than supposition which cannot, by its very nature, be proven.

Mme Riccoboni actually wrote to Monsieur de Vandeuil, who presumably had written to her asking for any letters written to her by his father-in-law to be sent to him. We can assume that she was far from unusual in having destroyed these letters, which accounts for the quantity of missing letters. Diderot in his lifetime was only

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

really well known for his role as editor of the *Encyclopédie*, and so many people might not have considered him a famous enough person for them to think it worth keeping his letters for posterity:

In 1786 Mme Riccoboni wrote to Monsieur de Vandeul: « Je suis fâchée, Monsieur, que mon habitude de ne garder aucune lettre où l'on me parle de mes ouvrages, m'ait fait brûler celles de Monsieur Diderot. »²⁰

Some unpublished letters are still being found in archives or private collections where they have been placed amongst miscellaneous letters and documents. They tend to be isolated letters written to people with whom Diderot did not correspond frequently and are generally what could be called business letters.²¹

The process of compiling an edition of any work is a complex one. As we have seen Diderot's letters and works are especially problematic due to the alterations made by the Vandeuls, by Naigeon, and by Diderot himself who constantly revised his texts. The editors of Diderot's works have had to be conscious of these many inconsistencies and the reasoning which underpinned them. We should be aware of these issues when reading the *Correspondance* as we can infer little from the punctuation, spelling and paragraphing of the letters as they are all standardized by the various editors of these letters.

The form in which Diderot's letters are presented by editors is another area open to much debate. Many editors have modernized the spelling. However the

²⁰ *Mme Riccoboni's Letters to David Hume, David Garrick and Sir Robert Liston. 1764-1783*, SVEC 149, 1976, edited by J. C. Nichols. p. 26.

²¹ For a discussion of the nature of Diderot's correspondence in the last years of his life and its relative merits as a reliable biographical source see : Renwick, John, 'La Correspondance des dernières années', 63-75, in *Diderot-Les dernières années 1770-84*, ed. France, Peter and Strugnell, Anthony (Edinburgh, 1985).

Roth-Varloot *Correspondance* is faithful to the original spelling where Diderot is consistent and follows normal eighteenth century practice. The Versini edition modernizes spelling, although the Varloot-Roth approach of only modernizing, or standardizing, Diderot's spelling and grammar where strictly necessary for purposes of comprehension, is preferable due to its greater authenticity and fidelity to the text. However it is more complicated when we consider the question of punctuation. This varies even in the manuscripts and Diderot does not always follow the same practice throughout. At times, he indicates in the manuscripts that he is quoting something Sophie said, or citing a title of a work, by underlining these passages in the letters. Sometimes Diderot underlines certain passages in his letters to emphasize this statement and yet there are many other letters in which he neglects to do so. Delon outlines some of the problems posed for the editor by this erratic use of underlining by Diderot:

Elle [l'édition] devra également prêter attention aux soulignements. Là encore, la pratique de Diderot varie beaucoup. On ne peut établir de règles strictes. On constate que notre philosophe utilise parfois le soulignement expressif et parfois le soulignement qui signale la reprise d'un texte allogène. J'appelle soulignement expressif la mise en valeur d'un élément qui tient à cœur au scripteur, qu'il signale à l'attention de son correspondant. Doit-on mettre dans cette catégorie deux lettres au père de fin 1757 et début 1758 qui soulignent jusqu'à dix lignes de suite ? Ces soulignements qui sont bien de la même encre que le reste de la lettre n'ont pas été respectés par les éditeurs. Roth a transformé l'opposition des dix premières lignes soulignées et des six suivantes qui ne le sont pas, dans la lettre du 29 novembre 1757, en un changement de paragraphe. Le soulignement exprimerait l'émotion de l'épistolier qui se débat dans les difficultés familiales et la solennité de la promesse faite au père. Il en va de même dans la lettre du 27 janvier suivant, sans que l'interprétation du soulignement de certaines phrases plutôt que d'autres soit évidente.

Le soulignement désigne par ailleurs les titres, les citations, les formules rapportées. Il n'est pas systématique. Telle citation du *Satyricon* ou de la Bible (début novembre 1760 et 21 novembre 1762) est soulignée, tandis qu'une exclamation de Mme de Sévigné (20 octobre 1760) ne l'est pas, pas plus qu'une réplique du *Joueur* (18 octobre 1760). Les expressions de M. et Mme d'Houdetout, de Mme d'Holbach, de Damilaville dans la lettre du 14 juillet 1762

sont toutes soulignées, mais quinze jours plus tard, celle de la fille de la rue de la Parcheminerie qui évite à l'écrivain une vérole ne l'est pas. Dans l'édition des Œuvres complètes publiée par le club français du livre, ces soulignements sont rendus par des guillemets.²²

The reader of the *Correspondance* must be aware of the fact that s/he is not only reading Diderot's text but also the editor's interpretation of the text. The example Delon gives of the alternation between underlined text and plain text being transcribed by Roth into two separate paragraphs is an important one. It shows the reader that s/he can infer very little from formal aspects of the letters such as paragraphing or underlining. The editor needs to adopt a consistent and standardized approach to such issues, but this does not reflect the inconsistency of the letter-writer, nor does it always reflect the letter-writer's original intentions. Diderot used very little paragraphing. Yet all editors of the *Correspondance* order the letters in paragraphs according to the editor's interpretation of where it would be most logical and syntactically correct to divide the letter into paragraphs. One of the reasons why Diderot used paragraphs so rarely in his letters was to save space on expensive paper. In a similar manner, Diderot used little punctuation if the copies and original letters to be found in the Fonds Vandeul at the B.N.F. are any indication of his letter-writing practice. Yet the Versini edition punctuates according to twentieth century rules of punctuation and the Roth-Varloot edition, upon which it is largely based, also punctuates fully. One might argue that such modernization and standardization makes the *Correspondance* much more accessible to the reader than if it followed the manuscripts and original copies in containing few paragraphs and little punctuation. Yet such formal structures do affect and influence our reading of the letters. A

²² *Ibid.* p. 137-138

change of paragraph perhaps separates ideas which were intrinsically linked in Diderot's view, or the addition of a semi-colon could give a different stress to part of a sentence than was originally intended. This also relates to the hybrid generic status of a collection of letters which, once published, become subject to the norms of presentation and publication to which other genres of writing are normally subject. The collection of letters must be presented in a standardized form reminiscent of literary fiction. An editor, whilst seeking an authentic approach to a text, must also be consistent in her/his approach to this text and thus many of the writer's inconsistencies will be ironed out and standardized. For example, Diderot's constant misspelling of Damilaville's name as Daminaville is only mentioned in the biographical index at the back of the Versini edition and Damilaville's name is corrected in all letters. These are all vital issues which we should bear in mind whilst reading the *Correspondance*. We will now return to the text and the background details to it which help to facilitate our reading of the letters.

The Epistolary Genres Found in the Correspondance.

Having considered the pre-history of the text we will try to classify the general generic types of letters which survive. We will also consider these in terms of the genres and categories of letters as given by the letter manuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The categories into which we consider Diderot's letters to fall are: familiar letters (what De la Serre called *Lettres de Visite*), business letters, letters written for publication and deliberative letters. Letters to certain correspondents tend

to fall into specific categories although there is a certain amount of overlapping of genre in some letters.

We can assert fairly confidently that the letters written to Sophie Volland are familiar letters, even if some letters contain elements which could also be defined as relating to business or be defined as love letters. For example, in a letter written on 5 September 1760, Diderot describes his social activities and his opinion about *Tancredè* to Sophie, whilst also mentioning the Volland's tax affairs that Damilaville had been asked to help with:

Ne craignez rien de Damilaville. C'est un homme qui fait tout bien. Continuez de vous servir de cette voie; mais rassurez-moi sur votre M. Gillet. Je n'ai pas encore été à portée de faire entendre à M. de Bucheley qu'il avait été joué par ses collègues; cela se fera. (*Corres.*, p. 210.)

Whilst by contrast in the same letter Diderot continues his journal-style depiction of his day-to-day routine:

Je vais reprendre mon journal depuis ma dernière lettre. J'étais venu ici. Je vous avais écrit. Il était tard. Damilaville m'invita à souper chez lui. J'acceptai. Je suis un glouton. Je mangeai une tourte entière. (*Corres.*, p. 210.)

However the predominant ethos of these letters is that of the familiar letter which, as a genre, is seen to have all the variety of content of a conversation.

We can see that Diderot's letters to Grimm, although familiar letters, are also concerned with business matters, as Diderot informs Grimm of his progress in writing articles which will appear in the *Correspondance littéraire*. Grimm has both a business relationship and a friendship with him, so the two aspects of their relationship are as inseparable in their letters as they were in life. For example Diderot writes to Grimm on 10th November 1769 and mentions *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* and *Regrets sur ma vieille robe de chambre* which was apparently greatly admired by the daughter of the Duke of Brunswick-Lunebourg, who had been sent

the pages by Grimm. Although evidently mentioning one's work to a friend is still very much part of a familiar letter's normal content, such letters are also useful for the literary historian in order to date the periods when Diderot was writing certain works.

Diderot's letters to his friend Damilaville are also familiar letters, even though they are often little more than notes in which he arranges to collect and send post to Sophie Volland by making use of Damilaville's civil service post-bag. The business letters which are contained in the *Correspondance* are surprisingly few in number and are mainly written to Le Breton about matters relating to the publication of the *Encyclopédie*. He must have written numerous business letters to contributors and printers about the *Encyclopédie* but these appear to be no longer extant. They were no doubt destroyed at the time due to the controversial and subversive nature of the project or because they were not seen as being likely to have any interest for posterity.

The letters he wrote to Falconet with the aim of publishing them as the *Pour et Contre*, an epistolary debate about the nature of posterity, also contain more personal postscripts relating to their friendship which were not destined for publication. There are also a few letters written to Falconet which are purely personal and familiar letters and are not entirely of the deliberative genre, as are the letters which form the debate about posterity. However there is always a persuasive and deliberative tone in his letters to Falconet, as throughout these missives he tries to convince his friend that he ought to marry Mlle Collot, his pupil and lover. Falconet eventually became quite offended at his friend's continual well-meaning interference, and the manner in

which Diderot defends himself gives us an indication of the general argumentative tone which pervades all of his letters to Falconet:

Vous n'êtes point marié ?' - Eh bien ! tant pis pour vous, mon ami, car je connais bien la seule femme que vous eussiez épousée. Il y a deux ans qu'on vous croit époux et qu'on me le dit; et il y a deux ans que je réponds que je le saurais. (*Corres.*, p. 862.)

The definitions of epistolary forms found in the *secrétaires*, are the most constant forms of definition of different genres of letters, and remain so. As said in the preceding chapter, the letter manuals themselves were based upon the standard interpretation of classical rhetoric of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and were rarely innovative in any matter apart from contemporary concerns with etiquette surrounding rank. Model letters were taken from literature and published correspondences in works such as Pierre Ortigue de Vaumorière's *Lettres sur toutes sortes de sujets*, (Paris : J. Guignard, 1690), to inspire and be emulated by the reader of the letter manual. Jean Puget de la Serre in *Le Secrétaire à la mode* (1651), gives examples of different genres of letters which his reader would need to write. He enumerates the following categories and describes which situations would require which type of letter. The categories of letters he gives are:

Lettres d'affaires, Lettres d'avis, Lettres de conseil, Lettres de remontrance, Lettres de commandement, Lettres de prière, Lettres de recommandation, Lettres d'offre de secours, Lettres de plainte, Lettres de reproche, Lettres d'excuse, Lettres de compliment, Lettres de visite, Lettres de congratulation, Lettres de remerciement, Lettres de raillerie, Lettres meslées, Lettres de response.

These are conventional categories and include the catch-all category of the *Lettres meslées* for letters whose content would be associated with more than one type of letter. Many of Diderot's letters could be called *Lettres meslées*, as Diderot often

writes to Grimm, for example, about business affairs but also writes about more personal matters in the same letter.

Jean Puget de la Serre defines the categories which he calls *Lettres de visite*, in the following terms:

Les *lettres de visite* servent à entretenir l'amitié entre les absents, et tiennent le lieu des visites qu'on donneroit à ses amis, si on demouroit proche d'eux. Là on peut dire, qu'on n'a point de plus grand contentement que de discourir par lettres avec eux, puis que nostre esloignement ne permet pas que nous le facions de bouche [...]²³

This is the traditional view of the letter as a conversation which takes place between absent friends and was the accepted definition of the letter form even when Cicero was writing. Most of Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland, if not all the letters written to her, fall into this category. Some letters are more complex than others, as sections of them could be classified as love letters, whilst other parts could be called *Lettre de gazette* as Diderot relates the latest literary and theatrical scandal and news to Sophie Volland.

The category of *Lettres meslées* is, in a sense, an anti-category as it is defined by De la Serre, because it is a category which does not really attempt to classify the type of letter which forms it:

Elles sont les plus communes de toutes. Car il arrive rarement qu'on escrive des lettres qui ne parlent que d'un sujet. Et les *Lettres d'affaires* se commencent ou se finissent d'ordinaire par des compliments.²⁴

²³ *Op. cit.* p. 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 35.

Likewise the category of the *Lettres de response* provides little of startling novelty even for the most inexperienced novice letter-writer. We are advised that we should tailor our response to the letter we have received :

Celles à qui on répond en prescrivent la matiere, et n'est requis autre chose que d'y satisfaire de point en point, selon que nous en avons le moyen ou que la prudence nous le permet.²⁵

The following category, the *Lettre de compliment*, is not really a genre of letter-writing which Diderot can be said to practise, and such stylized *politesse* was really at its height in the seventeenth century. When Diderot does write to dignitaries such as Galitzine or Catherine the Great of Russia, he follows the rules of *bienséance*, but these letters themselves are what could loosely be called business letters as they relate to Diderot's pension awarded by Catherine the Great and to his role in buying French artworks for the Empress.

Another category of letter which is mentioned by Pierre Ortigue de Vaumorière in his work *Lettres sur toutes sortes de sujets*, 1690, but not mentioned by De la Serre, are the *Lettres du genre deliberatif*. Some of the examples Vaumorière gives of deliberative letters might appear rather ridiculous to a modern reader, as the letter manual was possibly even designed as much to be a fairly entertaining *exercice de style* as a practical guide to letter-writing. The model deliberative letters given by Ortigue de Vaumorière have the following titles :

Lettre pour porter un Ami à se marier, p. 220, Lettre pour porter un Ami à s'adonner au commerce, p. 225, Lettre pour porter un Ami de venir passer quelques jours à la campagne, p. 229, Lettre pour persuader à un Ami de revenir de la campagne à Paris, p. 232, Lettre à Mademoiselle *** pour la détourner d'un mariage qu'on lui proposait, p. 303, Lettre d'un nouveau

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 36.

converti pour exhorter son frere à renoncer au Calvinisme, p. 257, Lettre à Monsieur le Marquis de B*** pour le prier de s'entremettre pour faire reüssir un mariage, p. 303, Lettre d'un homme de qualité pour attirer chez lui un homme de merite, dont la fortune n'était bien établie, p. 317.

The rather arbitrary and contradictory nature of these letters owes much to the letter manual's aim to amuse as well as inform. However this is a genre of letter-writing which applies to many of Diderot's letters. The letters he wrote to Mlle Jodin fit the category of deliberative letters very neatly, as he wrote to her not only to put some order into her financial affairs but also to persuade her to amend her behaviour and to improve her style of acting. We shall look at the specific techniques which Diderot uses when writing deliberative letters and the manner in which he structures his arguments in a later chapter.

A genre of letters which should be considered here in some depth is the letters Diderot called his 'Journal', written to Sophie Volland. These letters are difficult to define as a sub-section of his letters to Sophie Volland for the good reason that the very first letter which is extant, written from Marly, 11th May 1759, is very similar to some of the long journal-like letters. It is also difficult to say with any certainty when exactly he stops writing in such a manner. By 1768 he tends to address his letters routinely to Sophie and the rest of her family, and the letters written appear to be progressively less elaborate and intimate. These letters are so ill-defined that a paragraph within one letter might fulfil the stated function, while several pages of another letter might contain journal-like material. It is necessary to consider some of the developments taking place in life-writing in the eighteenth century in order to discuss Diderot's journal letters. Arguably one, if not the most important, work in

terms of life-writing is Rousseau's *Confessions*, which is seen as the first modern autobiography.

Private diaries as such were not widely kept until the nineteenth century, and at first many of these were kept on the advice of a young person's father-confessor as a means of analysing her/his behaviour, as a form of confession and as an aid to self-correction. These had as their model St Augustine's *Confessions*, and other spiritual writings of a similar ilk. The *livre de raison* was a form of journal rather like a ship's log in which a landowner might record estate matters and weather conditions. Malik Allam, who has studied twentieth century French diary writers from a sociological point of view, found that they all had some formal educational background in writing, and that a great driving force behind the writing of a diary was the need to make some sense of their lives:

La perception globale de la pratique de l'écriture personnelle sous forme de journal est celle d'un lieu de dialectique avec le réel. Le diariste essaye de le conserver, de le travestir, de le préparer, de le rendre moins flou, plus palpable [...].²⁶

Diderot does preserve reality in these journal-letters by enumerating events and, most importantly, reporting conversations. However, Diderot's epistolary project is a journal only in the sense that it is an attempt to give an account and to keep a record of how he spent his days rather than to be a truly introspective analysis of his daily actions and motivations.

²⁶ Allam, Malik, *Journaux intimes, une sociologie de l'écriture personnelle* (Paris, 1996), p. 15.

The other crucial aspect about these journal letters is that Diderot wished this type of letter-writing to be reciprocal, and he exhorted Sophie Volland to follow his example and to record the conversations she had with her family:

Mes lettres sont variées? Et les vôtres le seront, et plus agréablement encore que les miennes, quand vous pourrez vous résoudre, comme moi, à m'envoyer vos conversations d'Isle. Vous verrez que ce que vous, Mme Legendre et madame votre mère direz sur un sujet ou de goût, ou de caractère, ou d'affaires, ou de conduite, ou de mode, ou de ridicule, ou de vice, ou de vertu, ou d'histoire ou de morale, ne vaudra pas mieux que les boutades de l'Ecoissais, que les fautes de Mme d'Aine, que la mauvaise humeur du baron, et que mon marivaudage. (*Corres.*, pp. 316-317.)

Rather than a 'journal intime' he proposes an intellectual diary of ideas. But apparently the project always remained one-sided, and was thus unsatisfactory for Diderot. We must presume Sophie had protested that she did not have such a ready source of witty comments and new ideas to consign to her letters. However it appears that what Diderot wished to read was an authentic account of her days and conversations, no matter how mundane they might appear to her.

Whenever Diderot's journal project is mentioned, the following letter written on the 14th of July 1762 is quoted. He starts this reflection upon the study of human nature by stating that the varied subject matter of his letters to Sophie is an accurate account of his life:

Combien j'ai de choses à vous dire, les unes gaies, les autres tristes. Mes lettres sont une histoire assez fidèle de la vie. (*Corres.*, p. 375.)

The importance of this letter is often over-emphasized because, when it is taken in isolation, it gives a very misleading impression of the scope of this project:

Comment, ai-je dit, un astronome passe trente ans de sa vie au haut d'un observatoire, l'œil appliqué le jour et la nuit à l'extrémité d'un télescope pour déterminer le mouvement d'un astre, et personne ne s'étudiera soi-même, n'aura le courage de nous tenir un registre exact de toutes les pensées de son esprit, de tous les mouvements de son cœur, de toutes ses peines, de tous ses

plaisirs; et des siècles innombrables se passeront sans qu'on sache si la vie est une bonne ou une mauvaise chose, si la nature humaine est bonne ou méchante, ce qui fait notre bonheur et notre malheur. Mais il faudrait bien du courage pour ne rien celer. On s'accuserait peut-être plus aisément du projet d'un grand crime, que d'un petit sentiment obscur vil et bas. Il en coûterait peut-être moins pour écrire sur son registre: « J'ai désiré le trône aux dépens de la vie de celui qui l'occupe », que pour écrire: « Un jour que j'étais au bain parmi un grand nombre de jeunes gens, j'en remarquai un d'une beauté surprenante, et je ne pus jamais m'empêcher de m'approcher de lui. » Cette espèce d'examen ne serait pas non plus sans utilité pour soi. Je suis sûr qu'on serait jaloux à la longue de n'avoir à porter en compte le soir que des choses honnêtes. Je vous demanderais, à vous: « Diriez-vous tout? » Faites un peu la même question à Uranie; car il faudrait absolument renoncer à un projet de sincérité qui vous effraierait. Pour moi, dans l'éloignement où je suis de vous, je ne sache rien qui vous rapproche de moi, comme de vous dire tout et de vous rendre présente à mes actions par mon récit. (*Corres.*, p. 375.)

Diderot seems to suggest that human nature could be studied in an empirical way and that it would be something which could be scientifically evaluated. Versini, in the foot-notes to his edition, says about this passage that it is evidence that the letters Diderot writes to Sophie Volland fulfil the same function that the *Confessions* do for Rousseau. Although this argument is tempting, it is rather simplistic for the good reason that Diderot sets up a model for confessional letters, which he does not really meet. We are spared the enumeration of his various affairs, (obviously this would not be a means of gaining favour from Sophie), and we do not have an analysis of the 'base' actions which Diderot had in mind when writing this.

Jerome Schwarz also sees this passage to be the real starting point for Diderot's consideration of introspection and of whether he would be really capable of studying himself in such detail:

Certainly it is no longer a question in Diderot's mind whether introspection is possible, but only whether it is possible for *him*. It is difficult, and it demands courage and sincerity. This passage expresses glimmers of doubt concerning the value of scientific knowledge. Perhaps Diderot feels his life slipping away from him and that the drudgery of the *Encyclopédie* is keeping him from investigating what is most important of all: himself and his destiny. After a

dozen years of work on the project, perhaps Diderot is beginning to question its fruitfulness in the context of his own existence.²⁷

We would certainly agree that Diderot attempts to analyse his actions and his life in an introspective manner but it seems that he is never truly capable of doing so. This is also, no doubt, in part due to the epistolary nature of this writing which, as such, has to focus upon the reader of the letters and their interests. The letter-writer who would truly portray her/himself by detailing all her/his faults and weaknesses could well jeopardize her/his relationship with the letter reader due to such honesty. This is a risk which Diderot understandably did not take.

The passage about the attractive young man in the bathhouse is often cited as an admission in itself, but it is carefully phrased by Diderot so that it is ambiguous:

Il en coûterait peut-être moins pour écrire sur son registre: "J'ai désiré le trône aux dépens de la vie de celui qui l'occupe", que pour écrire: "Un jour que j'étais au bain parmi un grand nombre de jeunes gens, j'en remarquai un d'une beauté surprenante, et je ne pus jamais m'empêcher de m'approcher de lui."
(*Corres.*, p.375.)

After all, it would be unwise to presume that the desire to commit regicide was one of his darkest secrets as well. He deliberately distances himself from this by placing such an admission/ false admission in a bathhouse, which rather gives an echo of ancient Rome, as does the idea of coveting the throne. Of course, this could all be a game of double bluff. In particular this discussion of introspection does not signal a stream of confessions which show Diderot in an unattractive light to Sophie. When he writes of events which have formed his character, for example as when he was a rather dissolute young man he learnt to avoid the company of prostitutes, he

²⁷ Schwarz, Jerome, *The 'Essais' and the Shaping of Diderot's Humanism* (Geneva, 1966), p. 109.

emphasizes his personal attractiveness and his probity. He presents himself as

attractive to these ladies, so that Sophie realizes what a catch he was as a young man:

Peu à peu vous me rappellerez toute ma vie. Tenez, je gagerais cent contre un que mon aversion pour ces sortes de créatures vient moins d'éducation, de goût honnête, de délicatesse naturelle, de bon caractère, que de deux aventures qui me sont arrivées à un âge propre à recevoir des impressions fortes. Je ne sais pourquoi je ne vous en ai jamais dit un mot. Je n'y repense pas sans avoir la chair de poule.

Ah! que la Vénus des carrefours m'est hideuse!... Une fois je fus invité à souper dans une maison suspecte, mais que je ne connaissais pas sur ce pied. [...] Je plaisais, et je m'en apercevais à des regards et à d'autres signes qui n'étaient pas équivoques. (*Corres.*, pp. 395-396.)

It should be noted that at the end of the passage about introspection and the desires and actions which are rarely revealed, Diderot emphasizes that this project should be reciprocal. This reciprocity and avowal of secrets is very much interconnected with the discourse of love. The journal project appears to falter in part due to its rather one-sided nature.

The connection has often been made between Diderot's work and means of expression and the works of Montaigne which he greatly appreciated. The journal aspect of Diderot's letters is one area where such comparisons are revelatory and pertinent. His description of his days is as distinct from a modern journal as are Montaigne's *Essais*. we would suggest that both writers reveal their intellectual life and thoughts in their respective writings. Diderot is probably less introspective and truly reflective about himself than was Montaigne. There is a very similar wide-ranging and discursive element to Diderot's letters which could be seen to be influenced by the *Essais*. It would be possible to imagine him writing these letters to Sophie with the idea that these would serve as a form of amusement and education which could be dipped into at a later stage like a 'livre de chevet'. Perhaps he really

did identify with Montaigne who had resigned from mayoral duties, as he himself had resigned from public philosophical and intellectual debate, relying on posterity. Lester Crocker recognized a resemblance between the *Essais* and the

Correspondance:

Oserons-nous dire que la *Correspondance* nous fait penser un peu aux *Essais* de Montaigne? C'est le même style de causerie intime, de sages commentaires mélangés de curieuses anecdotes, d'imprévu venant du manque de suite: on en retire la même impression de saveur et de charme.²⁸

Jerome Schwarz sees Diderot's form of journal-keeping to be similar in spirit to Montaigne's manner of self expression:

For Diderot, self-study and self-portraiture are inseparable from his need for relationships with his contemporaries and ultimately with posterity. Like Montaigne, Diderot discovers that self-study is only possible through self-portraiture, which in turn demands an audience, whether it be interlocutor, correspondent or reader.

Diderot is wary however, of using self-study as a basis for ethical philosophy. It is for this reason that he is dissatisfied with Helvetius' portrait of man: *Et voilà la véritable histoire de la vie, et non toutes ces suppositions sophistiques où je remarque beaucoup de sagacité sans nulle vérité; des détails charmants et des conséquences absurdes; et toujours le portrait de l'auteur proposé comme le portrait de l'homme.* (A-T, II, 312).²⁹

This is very different from Rousseau's supposed aim, in the *Confessions*, of providing a study of himself which would offer a means of studying people in general by studying one person in detail. Of course it would be a gross exaggeration even to suggest that there is this level of exploration of the self, or of introspection, in the *Correspondance*. Diderot's journal largely becomes a depiction of the public and social self, and is used by him to depict himself as a social being rather than to isolate the qualities which set him apart from other people. Nor does Diderot really

²⁸ Krakeur [Crocker], Lester, *La Correspondance de Diderot* (New York, 1939), p. 101.

²⁹ Schwarz, Jerome, *The 'Essais'*, p. 109.

analyse in depth his relationships with others. Admittedly he writes at length of the great esteem in which he holds Grimm and the Vollands, but the true dynamics of these relationships are not explored. Sophie Volland remains a shadowy figure and the reader of the letters learns less about Grimm's character than Falconet's or even the Père Hoop's.

Benoît Melançon in *Diderot épistolier* stresses the coincidence of both Diderot and Rousseau entering into autobiographical projects at the same time:

La période durant laquelle Diderot est le plus souvent tenté par l'écriture autobiographique est précisément celle de l'écriture des *Confessions* de Rousseau, et il est dès lors légitime de constater que peu après le milieu du siècle une modification de la conscience de soi, dont on n'a peut-être pas assez vu qu'elle faisait sentir ses effets plusieurs années avant la révolution, commence de se manifester. Comment expliquer, sinon, que la difficulté de ne rien cacher dans l'écriture intime s'exprime chez les deux « frères ennemis » dans des termes quasi-identiques ?³⁰

What should really be considered here is that Rousseau's autobiographical project was suggested to him by his editor Marc-Michel Rey, who Georges May believes was well aware of the tradition of English spiritual autobiographies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On 31st December 1761 he wrote a letter to Rousseau saying: « Une chose que j'ambitionne depuis longtemps [...] ce serait votre vie ».³¹ We think it is important to realize that an editor was aware that the public would read and was likely to be very interested in such an account, as – in the same way- he would have been conscious of the popularity of spiritual

³⁰ Melançon, Benoît, *Diderot épistolier*, p. 424.

³¹ May, Georges, *L'Autobiographie* (Paris, 1984), p. 21. He also gives useful background information about forms of autobiographical writing prior to the late eighteenth century/ early nineteenth century development of this genre.

autobiographies. The role of publishers should always be borne in mind when one considers the inspiration behind a work.

Diderot writes something closer to memoirs than to autobiography or a *journal intime* because he demonstrates a lesser sense of introspection than does Rousseau in the *Confessions*. Perhaps he did consider that these journal-like letters could be the basis for some manner of published memoirs. Epistolary memoirs were a fairly popular form at the time. Indeed, Mme d'Épinay's pseudo-memoirs which Diderot helped write and which were written as a riposte to anything that Rousseau would write about his friends, were written in the form of letters, albeit fictional ones written long after the event.

Mélançon does point out that Diderot and Rousseau were far from isolated in compiling works or notes of an autobiographical nature, although we do think he over stresses the autobiographical aspect of Diderot's journal-style letters:

La tentation du journal intime, de cette écriture au jour le jour, pour soi ou, plus précisément, pour cet autre soi que devient celui qui a tenu son journal et qui se relit, n'apparaît pas non plus au xviii^e siècle que sous le plume de Diderot, loin s'en faut; c'est ce que mettent en lumière certains aspects de l'œuvre de Voltaire et de Rousseau. Tout au long de sa vie, le premier inscrit dans ses *Carnets* des impressions fugitives, des pensées, des notes de lecture, des réflexions. Or quelques-uns de ces fragments sont accompagnés d'une date précise, par exemple : « Aujourd'hui 19^e janvier 1766 ». Ainsi, celui qui évoque, dans les *Mémoires pour servir à la vie de M. de Voltaire*, le « ridicule de parler de moi à moi-même », se montre tenté, sinon par l'introspection, du moins par l'écriture au jour le jour à l'horizon de laquelle se profile une éventuelle relecture.³²

Diderot's journal letters can be placed somewhere between a diary of daily events with little real in-depth introspection, an autobiography which recounts fairly

³² Mélançon, p. 426.

limited past events and which is intended to create a fairly favourable impression of the subject and a writer's *Carnet* filled with interesting snippets of conversations overheard, or anecdotes and ideas which could be used elsewhere. As these are letters, it is questionable how much of the autobiographical anecdotes are really designed more to please or interest Sophie Volland, rather than to strip away the layers of personae to reveal the inner self. They seem to be used to reinforce Diderot's epistolary personae. In terms of revealing parts of his life which are really 'le vil et le bas', it is debatable that he does so apart from revealing his jealousy about Sophie's sister.

A theme which will recur frequently is the many different or multifaceted epistolary masks Diderot wears. Although these personae are clearly discernible, we feel it is futile to attempt to discover if there is any psychological truth behind these masks he adopts. These were obviously aspects of his personality that he considered would be attractive to others or how he would have liked to appear to others. These epistolary personae are the artificial construction of a self-image which is very closely interrelated with his view of his relationship with others. In the genre of autobiography, this question of personae is more fraught and complex as there is the assumption, or claim, that what is contained in an autobiography is the truth, often truths about the person which were too painful to reveal in any other way than posthumously. Philippe Lejeune discusses this in *Le Pacte autobiographique*, and the issues he raises are equally valid for the study of correspondences which have often been read rather naïvely in the manner of an uncritical reading of autobiography,

which considers the means of expression by a writer to be uniquely revealing of their inner psyche:

Personne et langage: On a vu plus haut que l'on pouvait légitimement se demander à propos de la *première personne*, si c'était la personne psychologique (conçue naïvement comme extérieure au langage), qui s'exprimait en se servant de la personne grammaticale comme d'un instrument, ou si la personne psychologique n'était pas un *effet* de l'énonciation elle-même. Le mot *personne* contribue à l'ambiguïté. S'il n'y a pas de personne en dehors du langage, comme le langage c'est autrui, il faudrait en arriver à l'idée que le discours autobiographique, loin de renvoyer, comme chacun se l'imagine, au *moi* monnayé en une série de noms propres, serait au contraire un discours aliéné, une voix mythologique par laquelle chacun serait possédé. Naturellement, les autobiographes sont en général au plus loin des problèmes du héros beckettien de *L'Innommable* se demandant: qui dit *Je* en lui[...].³³

Here we are light years away from Diderot's conception of life-writing, which in itself might be seen to create a fictional construct of a life but was written by someone who believed that it would be possible to study human nature in some conclusive manner, in the same way as it is possible to trace the movement of the stars. Diderot's journal project in our view falters at the first hurdle he has set for himself: that of revealing all, even the most shameful events, because what little he reveals are carefully edited, selected highlights and anything shameful is conveniently placed some time in the past, as an anecdote about youthful errors which can be seen in an indulgent light.

These journal letters or aspects of them will be considered later, especially in terms of the reported conversations within them. It is, however, fascinating that Diderot has adapted the genre of the familiar letter to include these aspects of diary

³³ Lejeune, Philippe, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975), p. 34.

and autobiographical writing, whilst still retaining their fundamental epistolary nature.

The genres of letters and the definitions of genre given in this chapter will be at the core of our reading of the *Correspondance*. The journal letters also reveal how difficult it is to categorize letters and how a published correspondence is both part of the public and private domain. Having considered the problems which have beset editors of Diderot's correspondence and the historical background of the published correspondence in this chapter, we will analyse Diderot's *Correspondance* in terms of some constant features of epistolarity. By studying what appear to be constant features of the epistolary form we can gain a greater understanding of Diderot's epistolary practice.

Chapter Three. Some Constant Features of the Epistolary Form.

Diderot's letters do not reveal any strikingly unusual practice as regards the letter-writing features which are referred to in most general critical works about epistolarity, such as absence, the temporal distortion to be found in letters and the adoption of epistolary personae by the letter-writer. Nonetheless these features are worthy of comment as they are defining elements of the form in which he writes. All of these constant elements of letter-writing are employed by Diderot to affect his reader. He uses them as means of achieving effects of pathos and, with his adoption of epistolary personae, of creating the very ethos of his letter and message.

A central leitmotif running through our discussion of the *Correspondance* will be an examination of the methods Diderot uses to appeal to his reader, and to interact with her/him. Roland Barthes' concept of the act of writing being akin to the act of seduction seems very apposite. This takes place literally in Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland, as the letter itself is very much part of their game of seduction. Roland Barthes says of the writer of a text, that s/he must write as if s/he requires the text to attract and to seduce the reader. Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland emphasize the ludic nature of the reading process. The pleasure Diderot gained in writing them, and that he hoped that Sophie would have in reading them, is palpable. For example running jokes, such as the reference to the monk who lives with the Le Bretons, are all evidence of this approach to the epistolary art. The 'cénobite' here, of course, being a pig that they kept in their garden:

Ce cénobite est un personnage très heureux qui s'est établi dans un coin de la basse-cour. Il boit, il mange; il s'engraisse à vue d'oeil. (*Corres.*, p. 358.)

This seduction of his reader with laughter as part of his epistolary artillery is just the type of approach which a successful text should have according to Roland Barthes, as it should be centred upon attracting and enticing its reader:

Ce lecteur, il faut que je le cherche, (que je le 'drague'), *sans savoir où il est*. Un espace de la jouissance est alors créé. Ce n'est pas la 'personne' de l'autre qui m'est nécessaire, c'est l'espace: la possibilité d'une dialectique du désir, d'une *imprévision* de la jouissance: que les jeux ne soient pas faits, qu'il y ait un jeu.¹

Diderot in his letters is writing in a form which is essentially dialogic. This intensifies the game of seducing the reader. In order to write an effective letter he had to strive to convince his reader of the validity of his viewpoint or the sincerity of his love, in a manner similar to that in which the literary text should appeal to its reader, if the reader is to gain pleasure from the act of reading:

Le texte que vous écrivez doit me donner la preuve *qu' il me désire*. Cette preuve existe: c'est l'écriture. L'écriture est ceci: la science des jouissances du langage, son *Kamasutra* (de cette science, il n'y a qu'un traité: l'écriture elle-même.)²

The letter was one stage upon which Diderot played and experimented with many roles in order to please and gain the acceptance and applause of his audience. It is in this light that we will consider some of the constant features of epistolarity and their use by Diderot.

Absence.

General works on epistolarity refer to aspects of the genre which, if not unique to the genre of letters, define it and set it apart from other genres of writing. The most

¹ Barthes, Roland, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris, 1973), p. 11.

² *Op. cit.* p. 13.

obvious of these features is absence. It is a prerequisite of the epistolary form that the letter-writer wishes to communicate with someone who is absent. Antoine Furetière gives a definition of the letter in his *Dictionnaire* of 1690, which is based upon the central concept of absence being an essential component of the genre:

La *lettre* se dit d'un écrit qu'on envoie à un absent pour lui faire entendre sa pensée. Les amis s'écrivent des lettres de compliments, de nouvelles, de sciences, de curiosités, de consolation; les amants des lettres de galanterie, de tendresse; les procureurs, les agents, des lettres d'affaires, de recommandations [...] ³

Different letter-writers use varying strategies to overcome this central barrier to communication which is at the core of letter-writing. Indeed the same letter-writer is likely to employ different techniques, depending on the nature of the letter written and her/his relationship with her/his correspondent.

The dichotomy and tension between presence and absence is the central axis around which letters are constructed, and leads to letters existing in a form of fictionalized reality. Hence the present tense of the letter-writer is a past tense for its reader and the two are always antithetical. In a sense, the temporal scale of a letter is imbued with a certain hypothetical or subjunctive mood caused by the inherent time delay between the moment of writing and reading a letter. Marie-Claire Grassi describes the letter, due to this temporal delay, as a highly fictionalized form of writing:

Sur le plan ontologique, la lettre a été pendant des siècles un intermédiaire irremplaçable entre la présence et l'absence. C'est une écriture fictive de re-création du réel. Elle n'a eu d'autre but que de dire que l'on existe, que l'on est bien portant et surtout de l'exiger, dans la réciprocité: 'Votre santé, votre repos, vos affaires, ce sont les trois points de mon esprit [...] lire vos lettres et vous écrire font la première affaire de ma vie', écrit Mme de Sévigné à sa fille. La

³ As quoted by Grassi, M.-C, in *Lire l'épistolaire*, p. 2.

lettre scande les étapes de la vie, c'est avant tout un faire-part des événements de l'existence, naissance, mariage, maladie, mort.

[...]

La lettre se place dans le temps du présent fragile marqué du sceau de l'attente. Elle se situe entre le passé révolu et le futur attendu, entre la nostalgie de la présence abolie et l'anticipation anxieuse d'un retour. Mais le présent se veut négation de l'absence, abolition des distances géographiques et temporelles, et instaure donc un mode de discours fictionnel. Le lexique de la temporalité, « hier, avant, demain, bientôt, et le style hyperbolique, des « millions de baisers », se conjuguent étroitement avec le temps des verbes. Par l'absence, l'écriture de la lettre, dans sa réalité, est déjà une écriture de fiction.⁴

Grassi suggests that the issue of absence is very much interrelated with the distortion of the temporal aspect of letters due to the time-delay between the writing and the reading of the letter. Diderot often attempts to imagine what his reader is doing at the moment when he is writing to her/him. Grassi refers to such a fictionalized reality. This is a form of emotional reality which only exists within the framework of the letter. Janet Altman also considers the peculiarly epistolary mood of certain tenses to be a prime element of epistolary rhetoric. She outlines these general temporal aspects of epistolarity as follows:

'A present tense, which figures prominently as a pivot for past and future. Like the diary writer, the letter writer is anchored in a present - time from which he looks toward both past and future events. The relationship of both temporal aspects to the present is important in the unfolding of letter narrative.

Temporal polyvalence. The temporal aspect of any given epistolary statement is relative to innumerable moments: the actual time that an act described is performed; the moment when it is written down; the respective times that the letter is dispatched, received, read, reread. (Such time lags distinguish epistolary from theatrical dialogue).⁵

⁴ Grassi, p. 6.

⁵ Altman, Janet, Gurkin, *Epistolarity. Approaches to a Form* (Ohio, 1982), p. 117.

Altman then outlines three impossible hurdles which the epistolary present faces. These impossibilities are what gives the epistolary present such a fictionalized relation to time:

The epistolary present is caught up in three impossibilities :

1 The impossibility of the narrative being simultaneous with the event (when the event is not part of the writing itself); hence a time of narration that must always be out of phase with the time of the event narrated. That is, the letter writer can only say “I have just done” or “I will soon do”.

2 The impossibility of the written present remaining valid (especially when the important events are the writing itself e.g., the expression of sentiments); the unseizability and precariousness of *now* is constantly reflected in the epistolary scismogram, wherein one moment’s sentiment is contradicted or modified by the next. That is, though the letter writer can say, “I feel, I believe, I am writing...” his present is valid only for that moment, as subsequent moments demonstrate.

3 Since the present of the letter writer is never the present of his addressee, epistolary discourse is caught up in the impossibility of a dialogue in the present. That is, “I feel” cannot be interpreted by the addressee as “you feel” but rather as “you felt when you wrote this letter[...]⁶

An understanding of how this temporal scale works is essential to an understanding of the epistolary form. It can be manipulated by the letter-writer to heighten literary effects such as pathos, for example. However, the letter-writer often is perfectly unaware of these temporal difficulties as they are an accepted convention of the epistolary form.

In relation to absence we shall examine Diderot’s strategies to overcome this great tension at the heart of letter-writing. Janet Altman, in her introduction to *Epistolarity. Approaches to a Form* chooses a quotation from Franz Kafka’s *Briefe auf Milena* which is particularly pertinent to our discussion because it describes the nature of absence at the core of letter-writing, and how this causes an exchange of

⁶ Altman, p. 129.

letters to be a highly fictionalized form of discourse, akin to a ghostly discourse between spectres:

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced - from a purely theoretical point of view - a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness.⁷

This is relevant to our area of study because Kafka addresses the problem of the letter-writer who often unconsciously creates a fictionalized self-portrait in letters which is unique to these letters and becomes concretized over time by the exchange of letters. These fictionalized self-portraits affect the whole ethos of the letter written, and we shall consider Diderot's many epistolary personae later on in this chapter. Indeed, it is the ghostly spectre of Diderot the letter-writer and those of his correspondents which are revealed in the *Correspondance*.

To continue our discussion of absence in the *Correspondance* we will consider what Benoît Melançon says in *Diderot l'épistolier*, about the paradox of absence. The central paradox he discusses is the pleasure which Diderot gains from writing to Sophie Volland, despite his sorrow at their separation which has necessitated this correspondence. Melançon says of the function of absence in a correspondance :

Qu'elle soit volontaire ou non, l'absence est concurremment la source de la correspondance (sa condition), un des motifs attendus et ce qui sans cesse la relance, la réinscrit dans le circuit de l'échange, du commerce épistolaire. Comme le note Bernard Beugnot,

“La lettre dit à la fois la béance d'une relation interrompue et le besoin de l'autre; mais elle demeure discours solitaire et sa forme est la déception de ce qui la fait accéder à l'être, l'attente d'une présence, puisque dans l'instant

⁷ Quoted as Preface, Altman.

éphémère de sa composition et de sa lecture, elle abolit et concrétise la séparation.”

Entre l’absence et la présence, cette “déception” est ce qui donne, d’abord et avant tout, sa spécificité à la lettre.

En effet, l’absence, vécue comme négativité, comme dysphorie, explique et justifie l’écriture de la lettre, vécue, elle, comme positivité, comme euphorie. De là, le paradoxe qui lui donne, au moins partiellement, sa nature générique. Comme l’écrivait Madame de Sévigné à sa fille, Madame de Grignan: “Eh quoi, ma fille, j’aime à vous écrire, cela est épouvantable, c’est donc que j’aime votre absence!” De même, Diderot pense l’absence comme un “mal” qu’il “chérit” (III, 83) ou dont il refuse de guérir:

“Malheur à celui qui cherche des distractions; il en trouvera; il guérira de son mal, et je veux garder le mien jusqu’au moment où tout finit. Je crains de vous aller voir; il le faudra pourtant; le sort nous traite comme si la peine était nécessaire à la durée de nos liens”, (II, 138)⁸

This does hold true for Diderot’s correspondence, but the role played by absence, whilst being important, should perhaps not be over-emphasized as it is in fact a rather self-evident feature of letter-writing. Diderot does enjoy the opportunity afforded by corresponding with Sophie Volland to reveal details of his everyday life and different facets of his personality but his letters to Grimm reveal no real acceptance of absence.

Absence and the means used to compensate for it are very much integral to the writer’s relationship with her/ his addressee, and the manner in which this theme is treated is revelatory of the perception the letter-writer has of the reader, and the aim with which the letter was written. For Diderot, as for many letter-writers, the epistolary relationship formed by letter-writing is at times experienced as a more intense “communion of souls” than the everyday commerce of conversation. Both participants in such correspondences can represent themselves in a more favourable

⁸ Melançon, Benoît, *Op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.

light than would be possible in conversation. In the passage Melançon quoted, taken from Diderot's letter written about the gardens at Marly, Diderot compares his suffering at being separated from Sophie to the Baron de Gleichen's grief. It is true that here he rather appears to enjoy and glory in the suffering caused by being separated from Sophie, as it proves the strength of his love for her. However we would argue that this letter is as much about the role a lover is expected to play as about absence in any real sense. This is very much a trope of the discourse of love. Diderot presents himself as the almost stereotypical melancholic lover, and as such in the sentence "Malheur à celui qui cherche des distractions; il en trouvera; il guérira de son mal, et je veux garder le mien jusqu'au moment où tout finit." The word "mal" refers rather to his love for Sophie, which causes him to miss her, than to absence, as Melançon reads it. It is Diderot's love for Sophie which causes absence to be a bittersweet experience which is referred to here.

Grimm's frequent absences are experienced by Diderot as something which has to be endured, and, in terms of their relationship, correspondence scarcely palliates the gap left by Grimm's absence from Paris. A leitmotif which runs through Diderot's letters to Grimm is his anguish and frustration at Grimm's infrequent replies to his letters. Silence, the negation of communication, is what is most feared by Diderot as it can be interpreted in so many ways, and the longer the period of time he is without receiving a letter from Grimm, the more pessimistic his interpretation of this silence is likely to become. Diderot quite probably suspected that his friend forgot about, and neglected, his old Parisian friends when mixing with German nobles. He treats the topic of absence here as a means to exert the force of pathos

upon Grimm and thus to persuade him to write to his friend. This use of pathos also rather flatters Grimm, as it shows Diderot to be bereft without his friend who is now occupied with moving in more 'exalted' circles. Diderot had already written a very long letter to Grimm, in Geneva, on May 1st, and he still hadn't received a letter from his friend by the time he wrote this letter on 20th May 1759:

Serait-il bien sûr que mon silence vous fit autant souffrir que je souffre du vôtre? Mais est-ce que vous n'avez reçu un volume de mon écriture, de cette écriture dont vous désespérez de voir une ligne? Pour Dieu homme cruel, envoyez-moi un billet, grand comme l'ongle, qui dise seulement que vous vous portez bien, et que vous m'aimez. (*Corres.*, p. 99.)

Diderot uses many strategies to render his letters more immediate to his reader and thus more intimate in an attempt to overcome the barriers to communication caused by absence. These techniques will be studied in more detail in the chapter on the letter and conversation. A crucial aspect of absence which did cause distress to Diderot, as we have said, is the interruption of communication, and Diderot was frequently worried that his letters to Sophie had been intercepted or not delivered for some reason. The letter is a fragile form of communication relying as it does upon the delivery of a message:

Voici ma quatrième. La première m'a fort inquiété. J'ai cru qu'elle avait été interceptée, et par qui encore? Vous l'avez reçue à Châlons. Les deux suivantes ont été écrites, à Vitry, à l'adresse de M. de Maux; l'une sous le contreseing de M. de Courteilles[...]

L'autre tout simplement par la poste, [...]

Hier samedi, au soir, Damilaville m'envoya vos numéros 4 et 5. Croyez-vous que, par le besoin que j'ai d'entendre parler de vous, je ne conçoive pas tout celui que vous avez d'entendre parler [de] moi? Je ne serais pas assez aimé; si les jours de poste n'étaient pas pour vous et pour moi des jours de fête, et je n'aimerais pas assez. Mais puisqu'il est si doux pour nous de nous écrire; puisque c'est la seule consolation qui nous reste, puisque ce reste de commerce doit nous tenir lieu de tout pendant deux mois au moins, tâchons, s'il se peut, de mettre quelque arrangement dans notre correspondance. (*Corres.*, p. 203.)

This encapsulates not only Diderot's real concerns about his letters reaching their destination but also the very real importance Sophie's letters had for him. Once the order in which letters are delivered gets disturbed, the essential reciprocity and meaning of the epistolary dialogue breaks down. This happens fairly frequently to his letters to Sophie and he said in general of the time-delay between replying to letters and writing them:

Je cause un peu avec vous comme ce voyageur à qui son camarade disait: 'Voilà une belle prairie', et qui lui répondait au bout d'une lieue: 'Oui, elle est fort belle.' (*Corres.*, p. 280.)

This serves to highlight Diderot's awareness of the failings of this medium and his great understanding of the reading process, as he sees this problem both from the point of view of the reader, and from that of the letter-writer as well. This quotation connects with the next area which we shall look at, as this equally describes the temporal scale of the letter form. A very similar distortion happens with the present tense as used in epistolary discourse.

Temporal Aspects of Epistolarity.

To start with we will consider the different functions which the present tense fulfils in Diderot's *Correspondance*. It should be noted that Diderot's practice is perfectly conventional. The duration of this time-delay being dependent on the means and speed of delivery and the geographical distance between writers, this can vary from anything from a couple of hours to several weeks. The delivery times for Diderot's correspondence vary greatly. The *Correspondance* contains some notes he left for Sophie Volland when he had hoped to find her home, only to be disappointed and

find her out. The time-delay between Diderot writing this note, and Sophie receiving it, would have been only a few hours at the most, as opposed to letters written to Isle which would have taken several days to arrive:

Je conçois, mon amie, qu'il n'y a aucune espérance de vous voir ce soir. Je ne vins point hier, parce que j'avais été invité la semaine passée par le comte d'Oginski à l'entendre jouer de la harpe; ce qui se fit hier en secret.

[...]

Bonsoir ma tendre amie; à demain! J'aime à croire que vous n'avez point été indisposée. J'ai bien des choses à vous dire; n'oubliez pas de m'en faire ressouvenir. Mais où êtes-vous à l'heure qu'il est, qu'il ne fait plus assez de jour pour écrire, ni apparemment pour choisir des étoffes? (*Corres.*, p. 202.)

In the second half of this extract we can see an example of the frequent redundancy of statements written in the present tense in the epistolary genre. Here the present tense refers to the time of writing the letter, when Diderot imagined what could have kept Sophie busy until that time in the evening. However, this question was only strictly relevant at the time of writing. Once Sophie had returned home and read the note, this present tense would have referred to past events, what she was doing rather than what she is doing at the time the letter is written. In a manner of speaking, the use of the present tense here only refers to the time of writing of the letter, regardless of the eventual moment when the letter would be read, and this statement would be less relevant then than when written. However it has emotional relevance, as it demonstrates to Sophie his concern and affection for her, by revealing that she is so present in his thoughts. This occurs frequently in the *Correspondance*, especially in this type of note written whilst waiting for Sophie to arrive. This imaginative use of the present tense in which the writer seeks to share such moments with their correspondent, and by so doing participate in some manner in their activities, is also a means for the writer to reveal that the other person is always present in her/his

thoughts. Another similar example is a note written to Sophie Volland on 21st

December 1759:

Il est neuf heures sonnées. Je perds l'espérance de vous voir. [...]

Bonsoir, bonsoir. Voilà dix heures à votre pendule; c'est-à-dire neuf heures et demie au moins par toute terre. (*Corres.*, pp. 194-195.)

The very precise time references here, are employed to indicate to Sophie precisely when Diderot was waiting for her and thinking about her. He notes the time when he started writing the letter, and the time when he finishes writing it, as he cannot wait any longer for her to return home. This epistolary use of the present tense, which refers to the act and time of writing so precisely, automatically acts as a perfect tense as soon as it is written, as it no longer refers to a continuous action. Diderot often employs this tense in such a manner as to overcome absence. The present tense here by its very immediacy acts as a conduit between the time of writing and later when the letter is actually read. Such passages reveal the writer's attentiveness to the very minutiae of the correspondent's life and the fact that the reader is at the very centre of her/his thoughts and of the letter written to her/him. This present tense is used by Diderot to conjure up the presence of Sophie, as if he is having a simultaneous conversation with her at the time of writing. Thus she has a very palpable presence in this letter because it is completely centred upon her, the addressee. There is an interesting reference here to the subjectivity of time as the Vollands keep their clock fast and so experience a different time to others. Letter-writers in general have just such a subjective relationship with time because, in their imagined epistolary dialogues, they bridge expanses of time by bringing the future event of the letter being read into their lived present time, by this epistolary use of the present tense.

Another such example of this hypothetical present is to be found in a letter written on 25th October 1761 to Sophie Volland, in which Diderot describes the dreams or fantasies he has in which he talks to her directly. Such dreams are very similar to the imagined conversations in the letters and act as a means of summoning up the presence of the loved one in the imagination:

Je passe une partie des nuits à vous parler et à vous écrire, comme si je ne devais plus vous revoir. Cela n'est pas gai; mais cela est du moins fort tendre. N'allez pas compter ces instants entre les plus mauvais. Je sens alors combien vous m'êtes chère, et par l'effet que je produis sur vous, je vois combien je suis chéri. Je vous ai dit des choses très douces. J'ai vu toute votre sensibilité, et le lendemain je fuis et j'espère de vous revoir. (*Corres.*, p. 372)

As in the imagined conversations in his letters, here in his dreams he imagines Sophie's responses to his pledges of love. This can be seen as a metaphor for the *Correspondance*.

Diderot, like most letter-writers, frequently makes statements which are only relevant at the time of writing and will become a little irrelevant by the time the letter is received and read:

Dieu soit loué, en voilà quatre d'arrivées! Il en reste trois qui vont à vous, sans compter celle-ci. (*Corres.*, p. 512.)

This statement reveals his relief at having received these letters from Sophie.

Another statement which refers purely to the time of writing can be found in a letter

He writes to Sophie when he is ill:

Voyons si je parviendrai à vous écrire un mot. Me voilà dans l'état d'un corps saint, ou je n'y serai jamais. Depuis plusieurs jours, j'ai supprimé toute nourriture solide[...] (*Corres.*, p. 368.)

Evidently, the very fact that he has managed to write this answers his query about whether he will be able to manage to write to her or not. However, as such, this adds a conversational tone and immediacy to the letter. Such comments act as a means of

keeping in contact, as indeed much of what is said in conversation does not function to carry information, but merely as a means of communicating one's presence and attitude towards the other speaker. Hence such elements in Diderot's letters are not utterances which are intended to carry semantic meaning or information, but which have a social and emotional import which cannot be analysed in terms of the information they carry alone.

Diderot is fully aware that the time scale referred to in a letter can become quite confusing for readers when they receive a letter finally several days later. When he wants to ensure that a certain date is understood, he defines precisely what he means by writing the word 'today' by surrounding this with other date markers. When he reports the Dauphin's death to Sophie, he pinpoints the day of writing precisely:

Nous avons perdu aujourd'hui vendredi, veille de Saint-Thomas, Monsieur le Dauphin [...] (*Corres.*, p. 575.)

He often imagines what Sophie and her mother are doing whilst he writes to them. In this manner the present tense is almost akin to the subjunctive mood as it is often used to refer to imagined and purely hypothetical events and emotions:

A l'heure où je vous écris, vous êtes seule avec maman, et vous faites la fable du pigeon sédentaire et du pigeon voyageur. (*Corres.*, p. 576)

Once again this type of utterance appears to be written unconsciously as much for the benefit of the letter-writer as for the reader of the letter. This use of the present tense also confers some reality upon this imagined connection between the writer's lived present and that of the reader of the letter. Once this letter is received, this statement

will refer to what the reader *was* possibly doing several days ago when the letter was being written.

Diderot also uses the epistolary present tense to anticipate the reaction of his reader to his letter. In an epistolary dialogue the actual time-delay between the act of writing and the reception of the letter is largely ignored. The present tense is used to refer to the virtual time-scale of the letter, which includes the literal present time of writing and the virtual imagined future event of the letter being read. Once again this reveals his letters as being reader centred. Diderot in works such as *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* and his *contes*, by his ability to unpick the threads of the narrative process, reveals his great understanding of the act of reading and the need for the reader to participate in the reading process:

Il me prend une bonne envie de vous gronder. Comment? Vous êtes quinze jours sans entendre parler de moi, et vous ne vous en plaignez pas?

[...]

Mon amie, ne t'afflige pas. Je ne pense pas ce que je te dis là. (*Corres.*, p. 583.)

The imperative of “ne t'afflige pas” which refers to the time of reading of the letter, acts as a means of predicting Sophie’s reaction to the letter and thus Diderot also participates in the reading process.⁹ This is another method of rendering the letter more immediate and overcoming the distancing effect of epistolary dialogue, making it more akin to a conversation. We can see that what Janet Altman calls temporal

⁹ Chouillet sees such comments, in *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland, Un dialogue à une voix* (Paris, 1986), to be part of a two way exchange of teasing comments, which show a certain tension to have existed in the relationship. Sophie seems to have been more than capable of making rather sarcastic comments at times : En même temps s'exalte et se précise l'identité de chaque partenaire. Celle de Sophie, en général, n'est ni complaisante, ni mièvre: « Tenez, ne faites plus de fautes; quand vous les réparez, vous les aggravez » (p. 78). Une certaine tendance au sarcasme y est perceptible [...] p. 16.

polyvalence is very much a feature of Diderot's *Correspondance*, as he uses the present tense to refer to future and past events as well as hypothetical events and actions. Such temporal polyvalence can be seen to be at work in a letter Diderot wrote on 29th December 1766 to Falconet who had just arrived in St. Petersburg:

Oui, mon ami, mon tendre ami, embrassez-moi, embrassons-nous. Vous arrivez, et tout en arrivant vous apprenez que la bienfaisante impératrice marie la fille de votre ami. (*Corres.*, p. 715.)

These hypothetical future events would already have happened by the time Falconet received the letter. Such depictions of the imaginary actions of a friend are intended to show that Diderot is frequently thinking about Falconet, and that in some small way he is with his absent friend in spirit. Diderot uses the present tense in a very similar manner in another letter, written in July 1767, to Falconet in which Diderot inquires about his friend's activities:

Eh bien! mon ami, où en êtes-vous? Profitez vous de l'absence de la cour, et du retour de la belle saison? Ce cheval respire-t-il? S'élance-t-il fièrement vers les contrées barbares? (*Corres.*, p. 741.)

The present tense for Diderot as a letter-writer is completely polyvalent as it can be employed here to refer to what he imagines Falconet might be doing at the time that he is writing to him, and also to refer to what he will be doing in several weeks time when Falconet actually receives the letter. The future tense is often redundant in epistolary discourse as events it refers to will often have already taken place. The present tense often fulfils its role and acts as a future tense, when written, and as an inferred past tense, when read.

However Diderot at times also uses the future tense in a manner similar to his usage of the epistolary present tense when referring to the act of writing. Diderot

demonstrates that his letter and thoughts are centred upon his reader, Falconet.

Interestingly such polyvalent usage of tense does not seem to be particularly language specific but to relate to the epistolary genre itself regardless of the language written in. Such usage of tense by Diderot is typical of epistolary writing and the epistolary relation to tense and time which is distorted by the time-delay between writing and reading a letter.

Self-referentiality.

As we have already seen even when concentrating on the unique nature of the epistolary temporal scale, many of the examples chosen from the *Correspondance* were self-reflexive in that they referred directly to the act of letter-writing. The epistolary form is a particularly self-referential genre. Claudio Guillén refers to this prevalent use of metalanguage in the epistolary form which he sees as indicating the inherently “literary” nature of the epistolary genre:

Barbara Johnson remarks (with respect to Derrida’s reading of Lacan on Poe) that the letter ‘can be described as that which poses the question of its own rhetorical status’. [...]

The more the letter writer enters the regions of literariness the more he frets and worries about what he is doing. He concerns himself with the status and function of his act. He wonders – as in Cicero, for example, and his successors - about the appropriateness of the subject matter and of the style that he has chosen. The letter and the novel are kindred genres in many ways and this is one of them: the frequency of the critical metalanguage, the constant consciousness of theory.¹⁰

For Diderot who earned his living as a man of letters it is perhaps inevitable that the letter would present itself to him as a form in which to reflect upon the nature

¹⁰ Guillén, Claudio, ‘On the Edge of Literariness: the Writing of Letters’ in *Comparative literature studies* (Vol. 31, no. 1, 1994) 1-24.

of writing and the ability of language to convey meaning. Diderot at times even showed an awareness of a certain crisis in language, as the signifiers he uses do not truly convey the signified as he intends them to. Probably the most famous and moving example of this phenomenon is the letter Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland, from Damilaville's house, soon after the death of his father. Due to a literal lack of light in Damilaville's house and his emotional state, Diderot is unsure if he can convey his love for Sophie by writing. Language, especially written language, has difficulty conveying strong emotion:

J'écris sans voir. Je suis venu. Je voulais vous baiser la main et m'en retourner. Je m'en retournerai sans cette récompense. Mais ne serai-je pas assez récompensé si je vous ai montré combien je vous aime? Il est neuf heures. Je vous écris que je vous aime; je veux du moins vous l'écrire; mais je ne sais si la plume se prête à mon désir. Ne viendrez-vous point pour que je vous le dise, et que je m'enfue ?

[...]

Voilà la première fois que j'écris dans les ténèbres. Cette situation devrait m'inspirer des choses bien tendres. Je n'en éprouve qu'une c'est que je ne saurais sortir d'ici. L'espoir de vous voir un moment m'y retient, et je continue de vous parler, sans savoir si je forme des caractères. Partout où il n'y aura rien, lisez que je vous aime.(*Corres.*, p.107.)

We could conclude that language itself is seen as being rather tenebrous here, and that language is very much a system of Platonic shadows which only reflects half its true nature. Thus language is scarcely mimetic as it is always unable to grasp the essence of an emotion.

Diderot writes in a letter to the Abbé Galiani in 1773 that he believes that all languages work according to the same system:

Et pour vous soulager un peu de ce ramage barbare des grammairiens, souffrez que je m'arrête un moment sur le merveilleux de cette importante machine qu'on appelle une langue. L'entendement humain est le petit cadre sur lequel vient se peindre l'image de la nature; et la langue est la contre-épreuve de cette image infinie. De là, cette ressemblance, cette uniformité de moyens dans

toutes les langues, qui ont été, qui sont et qui seront. De là, le plus ou moins d'aptitude d'un peuple à entendre, écrire ou parler une autre langue, morte ou vivante, que sa langue naturelle. De là, le Latin des Français plus mauvais que celui des Italiens; le Latin des Allemands, des Anglais, des Danois, des Russes, plus mauvais que celui des Français; et chez toutes les nations, toutes les femmes bien élevées plus propres à fixer la pureté de la langue que les savants, que les orateurs, que les poètes. Les savants l'entendent; les orateurs l'harmonisent; les poètes brisent ses entraves: ce sont des fous sublimes qui ont leur franc parler. (*Corres.*, p. 1176.)

Here, theoretically, Diderot does not appear to be aware of any fractures in the relationship between signified and signifier. Yet when Diderot writes of his actual writing experience these tensions reappear, but here when considering the theory of language he adopts a conventional standpoint. It is only when frustrated by his own ability to convey precisely what he wishes to say that language appears to be a much more complex and problematic system.

Comments made about language in the *Correspondance* show Diderot's awareness of its limits as a system of conveying meaning. His view of language is one which can be seen to be akin to primitivism, for him ideally language should regain its original purity. This is quite different to the modern view of language based upon Saussure's theories which considers there to be a plurality of meanings and that signifiers are arbitrary with meaning being context based. When writing to Falconet in July 1767, Diderot reflects upon the moral and philosophical effect of what he considers to be the debased modern usage of language and the limited range of vocabulary used in everyday conversation. Diderot sees language as a philosophical and political tool which could exert pressure for real social change, if people were made aware of the original meaning and import of words such as justice and virtue:

C'est donc l'idiome qu'il faut réinstaurer, travailler, étendre, à moins qu'on ne veuille, comme à la Chine, faire servir le soulier de l'enfant au pied de l'homme. Il faut apprendre aux peuples qui prononcent aujourd'hui, comme il y a quatre cents ans, les mots de vice, de vertu, de rois, de prêtres, de ministres, de lois, de gouvernement, quelles sont les véritables idées qu'ils doivent y attacher aujourd'hui. C'est de l'idiome d'un peuple qu'il faut s'occuper, quand on veut en faire un peuple juste raisonnable et sensé. Cela est d'autant plus important que, si vous réfléchissez un moment sur la célérité incompréhensible de la conversation, vous concevrez que les hommes ne préféreraient pas vingt phrases dans toute une journée, s'ils s'imposaient la nécessité de voir distinctement à chaque mot qu'ils prononcent, quelle est ou l'idée ou la collection d'idées qu'ils y attachent. Quand je dis les hommes, je parle de vous et de moi. Jugez par là de l'importance des précautions à prendre sur la valeur d'une monnaie si courante qu'on est dans l'habitude et la nécessité de la donner et de la recevoir sans en regarder l'empreinte. (*Corres.*, p. 745.)

This relates very much also to the role played by the *Encyclopédie* in re-interpreting and defining words from an Enlightenment *philosophe* perspective. Articles relating to government and theology were intended to create debate and challenge the official and conventional view of such subjects. Diderot appears to view the greater part of conversations to lack any real substance and the conversationalists as using language lazily without reflecting upon the true import of their utterances, this is pertinent to the *Correspondance*, which contains many passages of reported conversation. Here Diderot is consciously writing in the role of the *philosophe*, but he also considers language to be soiled and contaminated by the corruption of the original meanings of words. In a much earlier letter of 18th August 1759, he wrote to Sophie Volland:

Je suis si accoutumé à vous trouver innocente. Voilà une phrase singulière. Mais d'où vient donc que les expressions les plus honnêtes sont presque devenues ridicules ? En vérité nous avons tout gâté; jusqu'à [la] langue, jusqu'aux mots. Il y a apparemment au milieu de la pièce une tache d'huile qui s'est tellement étendue qu'elle a gagné jusqu'à la lisière. (*Corres.*, p. 151.)

The use of the concrete metaphor of the spreading oil stain graphically emphasizes the insidious nature of this slippage of meaning and connotation which he sees language as being prone to. He sees a need for language to return to a purer more

natural form, just as some of the *philosophes* thought society should learn from the civilization of the Pacific islanders, or return to the philosophical templates for living set out by the ancient philosophers.

The self-reflexive comment in which Diderot analyses what he has just written is a common feature of epistolarity in general, where the letter-writer comments upon the act and nature of writing. This adds an effect of *mise en abyme* to the letters. The writer criticizes his own craft, and deconstructs the façade of a mimetic dialogue and of a letter-writing persona which he has carefully constructed, by revealing the shifting sands of attribution of meaning in the system of language used. Such self-reflexive comments are a form of confession, often used by Diderot to pre-empt his reader's possible reactions to his letter.

Diderot often criticizes or comments upon what he has written in his letters. As in a *post scriptum* added to the head of a letter he wrote to Sophie Volland, in which he states that he has been so carried away with the topic he was writing about that he had forgotten to write about any of the subjects he had intended to raise in this letter: (Où il n' y a pas un mot de ce que j'avais à vous dire.) (*Corres.*, p. 386.) This shows what an inveterate editor Diderot was, as he could not resist commenting upon his writing. However many letter-writers are highly self-critical and this would be a far from exceptional comment for a professional writer to make.

Diderot comments, once again in a letter to Falconet, upon the limited forms of artistic expression offered by language. He suggests that there are fewer great poets than artists, as the medium of language is particularly difficult to manipulate in a creative manner. The following extract, written on the 5th of September 1766, forms

part of the *Pour et Contre*, and it is evident that, in a debate about posterity, he would inevitably reflect upon the nature of creativity. Given that this description of the difficulties which beset a poet attempting to follow in the footsteps of the great poets of antiquity relates to his craft as a writer, it is relevant to our discussion of the

Correspondance:

La palette du poète, c'est la langue. Jugez combien de fois il arrive que cette palette est pauvre, sans qu'il soit au pouvoir du génie même de l'enrichir. Le poète sent l'effet, et il lui est impossible de le rendre. Son idiome le condamne à être monotone, malgré qu'il en ait, et quand il a tiré de ses couleurs tout ce qu'il en pouvait tirer, et qu'il vient à comparer sa composition avec quelque composition grecque ou romaine, il trouve qu'il est faible, froid et gris, sans qu'il ait jamais pu se rendre plus vigoureux. (*Corres.*, pp. 697-698.)

We can relate this to statements we have already looked at in which Diderot laments the lack of purity of the language since, for Diderot, the golden age of literature and civilization was very much that of Ancient Greece and Rome. This was, of course, a fairly conventional view. These civilizations were very important to Diderot because they were highly sophisticated societies with non-Christian moral codes, and as such could provide a template for a secular society.

Self-reflexive comments about the nature of writing by Diderot show him to be always aware of his position as the writer and the *philosophe*, and thus of other people's expectations concerning the style in which he writes:

Il était neuf heures du soir passées. Je causais avec lui tête à tête, ce qui ne nous était pas arrivé depuis longtemps, quoique nous ayons toujours trouvé l'un à l'autre, à nous retirer de la foule et à fermer la porte sur nous, une douceur infinie... (Voilà «une douceur infinie» qu'il fallait placer plus tôt; mais je ne saurais me résoudre à récrire deux lignes pour une négligence de style. (*Corres.*, p. 509.)

His criticism of what he has just written also reveals the amount of thought which goes into the letter-writing process, which is far from being completely spontaneous.

Even his apparent negligence is possibly a deliberate pose to reveal his spontaneity.

A similar reference to the style of the letter can be found in a letter written to Damilaville in which Diderot refers to the handwriting of Damilaville and others which is much more spaced out than his own:

Je vous salue et vous embrasse; si j'avais voulu allonger mes lettres en pattes de sauterelles, comme vous savez tous faire, mes quatre pages seraient pleines, et trompé par l'espace, vous auriez cru, sur la foi de mon griffonage allongé, que j'avais beaucoup écrit. Mais je ne sais rien surfaire. (*Corres.*, p. 265.)

Such references to the form of the letter are fairly frequent in Diderot's correspondence, due to his awareness perhaps of his position as a writer and the expectations of others. The act of writing and the decision to write in a certain manner are thus shared by the reader and the writer. This gives a certain impression of the act of letter-writing as being a collaborative process. Diderot comments about the illegibility of his hand-writing in a letter to Falconet, who must have complained about having to decipher long passages of writing:

Mais admirez donc comme mon écriture est belle! Pour cette fois, vous ne m'interprétez pas comme les auteurs dont on ne possède pas parfaitement la langue, devant certains mots par leur cortège. Pour moi, JE VOUS LIS ET VOUS ENTENDS TOUT COURANT; SOYEZ-EN SUR. Cela est pourtant bien étrange, CAR VOUS N'ETES PAS TOUJOURS CLAIR. (*Corres.*, p. 866. Capitals as in text.)

Self-reflexive references to the act of writing are often very much related to redundant statements in the present tense which we have looked at earlier in this chapter. For example there are frequent references of a similar kind to this one taken from a letter written to Sophie Volland, on 19th November 1760:

Je n'ai pas la force de vous écrire. Je suis accablé d'un rhume de cerveau, j'ai une courbature qui m'entrepren les bras, les épaules, les jambes; et puis de la chaleur, de la fièvre. (*Corres.*, p. 318.)

Such references refer to the situation in which the letter was being written. There are others which are of particular interest to the biographer or historian interested in knowing what projects Diderot was involved in at any given time. For example:

Je n'ai pas le temps de causer davantage avec vous. J'ai employé mes trois fêtes à travailler comme un forçat pour d'honnêtes gens que je connais un peu, qui ont fait une découverte importante, et à qui je n'ai pu refuser le service de l'exposer.¹¹ (*Corres.*, p. 418.)

Diderot makes several references to the dangers of entering into a clandestine correspondence, and the great problems discovery of this can cause. In a letter to Vialet, he describes the conversation and thoughts inspired by reading *Clarissa* with the Vollands, in an attempt to explain to Vialet why he was so opposed to Vialet's secret correspondence with Mme Legendre. Here fiction mirrors reality and becomes a convenient metaphor for the real dangers of an actual correspondence:

Dans ces entrefaites, ces dames lurent « Clarisse » dont tous les malheurs avaient commencé par un pareil commerce. Elles revinrent de leur campagne. Ce roman que la mère et les filles avaient si diversement jugé fit l'éternel sujet de nos entretiens et de nos disputes. Un jour, la conversation tomba sur les lettres, cette ressource si dangereuse et si nécessaire aux amants séparés. Je prétendis que le temps qui combinait sans cesse les événements amenait à la longue tout ce qui pouvait arriver, et qu'un hasard au-dessus de toute humaine prudence jetait tôt ou tard un de ces papiers fatals entre les mains de celui à qui il n'était pas adressé; qu'il y en avait dix mille exemples connus, cent mille autres qu'on ignorait, et que je défiais de me citer deux amants d'une date de quelques années à qui ce malheur ne fût arrivé, ou qui n'en eussent été plusieurs fois menacés, un seul procès en séparation pour cause de galanterie où il n'y eût des lettres produites.

J'ajoutai que, malgré cela, je n'aurais jamais la force de me priver, ni la cruauté d'interdire aux autres une consolation aussi douce, et la seule qui restât dans l'éloignement; mais à condition toutefois qu'on s'aimerait à la folie, car le moyen de faire entendre raison à deux têtes tournées ? (*Corres.*, p. 797.)

¹¹ It is thought that this refers to Montamy and others working with him. They were trying to discover the secret of how to paint on porcelain and Diderot published their results in 1765 in his *Traité des couleurs*.

Once again we have a link with the role played by absence in letter-writing and Diderot reveals here, in this letter to Violet, the importance his correspondence with Sophie has had for him in spite of its inadvisability. For according to him, for those truly in love, such an exchange of letters provides some solace. However the very real importance and danger of entering into compromising correspondences should not be underestimated.

Letter-writing Personae.

We will move on now to consider another feature of the epistolary genre which we will return to in later chapters, Diderot's creation of several letter-writing personae. This really is the crux of all Diderot's letters, since whatever he writes is written with a certain bias and reveals a different facet of his letter-writing personalities, and the type of relationship he had or wished to have with his correspondent. Diderot, as a man of letters and a letter-writer, portrayed himself in many roles and, as we have seen, was particularly adept at doing so in real life. It is difficult to ascertain how closely these aspects of his personality that he decided to depict in his writing actually reflected the real man, or the person he would have liked to have been. As Diderot said, we build a statue of ourselves within our minds as an idealized state but it becomes difficult to differentiate ourselves from the persona we would like to adopt. We will encounter these various personae in later chapters as we consider the depiction of conversation and emotion in the *Correspondance*.

Diderot often represented himself in his letters, the *Correspondance littéraire*, and elsewhere as an enthusiastic, scatterbrained intellectual. Even up until recently,

this image that Diderot created for himself has been the most common depiction of Diderot the writer. Yet this seems strangely at odds with the very real, organizational skills and stamina Diderot must have possessed as editor of such an immense and innovative project as the *Encyclopédie*. Georges Daniel describes Diderot's self-representation in *Le Style de Diderot, légende et structure*:

C'est lui qui chaque fois qu'il a eu l'occasion de se mettre en scène dans ses écrits, s'est peint sous les traits d'un rêveur naïf et maladroit, d'un homme de lettres dispersé, bousculé, sans cesse interrompu dans son travail; avec cela, paresseux, bavard, fantasque, désinvolte, mais surtout distrait, submergé par le nombre de ses idées et la force de ses sentiments de travers, confondant les dates et les jours.¹²

Diderot often presents himself in such a manner in the letters to Sophie Volland such as in his well-known remark about the Langrois being like weathervanes, as they change their minds as often as the wind changes direction:

Les habitants de ce pays ont beaucoup d'esprit, trop de vivacité, une inconstance de girouettes. Cela vient je crois, des vicissitudes de leur atmosphère qui passe en vingt-quatre heures du froid au chaud, du calme à l'orage, du serein au pluvieux; il est impossible que ces effets ne se fassent sentir sur eux, et que leurs âmes soient quelque temps de suite dans une même assiette. Elles s'accoutument ainsi dès la plus tendre enfance à tourner à tout vent. La tête d'un langrois est sur ses épaules comme un coq d'église au haut d'un clocher. Elle n'est jamais fixe dans un point; et si elle revient à celui qu'elle a quitté, ce n'est pas pour s'y arrêter. Avec une rapidité surprenante dans les mouvements, dans les désirs, dans les projets, dans les fantaisies, dans les idées, ils ont le parler lent. [...]

Pour moi, je suis de mon pays; seulement le séjour de la capitale, et l'application assidue m'ont un peu corrigé. Je suis constant dans mes goûts. Ce qui m'a plu une fois me plaît toujours, parce que mon choix m'est toujours motivé. (*Corres.*, p. 136.)

This description of the character of the people from his home town seems to have formed the basis also for Diderot's self-representation, at times, as the mercurial

¹² Daniel, Georges, *Le Style de Diderot, légende et structure* (Geneva, 1986), p. 2.

philosophe. This representation of himself, as someone who often sees both sides of the argument, can be seen to be linked to Diderot's great use of dialogue and borrowed voices in his philosophical writings. We could say that such a form of self-representation is almost a forerunner of the Romantic sensibility, and the representation of the artist and intellectual as an exceptional person. There is something of the disdain associated with an aristocratic dislike of being associated with anything resembling work here. Diderot also developed this persona to give the appearance that his work was spontaneous and was not really the product of much hard work and planning.

Diderot's contemporaries knew very few of the works for which he is now renowned, and based their impression of Diderot the public figure and *philosophe* on a very few works, in addition to his public persona. The public persona he projected appears to bear many similarities to the character of Rameau's nephew, in its theatricality and liking for telling endless anecdotes. Rather like the reader of the *Neveu de Rameau*, we are at times, when reading the *Correspondance*, tempted to question whether this is a facet of the 'real' Diderot, or if it is a merely another side of the character he played to mask his true personality. It is practically impossible to know who is *Lui* and who is *Moi*, and if there is any real differentiation between the two facets of his persona. Georges Daniel outlines contemporary comments about Diderot, which consolidate the image of him which has been accepted by posterity fairly uncritically until quite recently, which gave him the reputation of a contradictory man and his literary style thus being disordered and second rate:

A quelques rares exceptions près, les contemporains de Diderot ne connaissent même pas l'existence de la plupart des œuvres que nous citons. Les contradictions du critique d'art, du moraliste et du philosophe ne pouvaient

donc les frapper que dans la mesure où la fréquentation de l'homme les leur avait révélées. Le petit nombre de témoignages qui nous sont parvenus sur la nature divisée et contradictoire de l'auteur de *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* ne concerne en général que son caractère et son comportement. Luneau de Boisjermain reproche à Diderot le constant démenti que ses actes infligent à ses paroles: "Toute votre vie vous avez dit que vous aimez la tranquillité et le repos, et vous avez toujours couru après ce qui les fait perdre." Il s'en prend surtout à son cabotinage. C'est également du cabotin, du "Garrick de la philosophie" que Mme Necker peint la pantomime violemment contrastée: "Diderot passait successivement des petitesesses aux exagérations, de la colère à l'enthousiasme; ses yeux étaient égarés, il n'écoutait personne, et cependant il cherchait ses phrases pour y mettre de l'esprit." Etonnante faculté de passer d'un extrême à l'autre que soulignent à leur tour Catherine II et Mlle de Lespinasse, laquelle, rapportant un mot de l'impératrice: "Je vous [à Diderot] vois quelquefois cent ans, et souvent aussi je vous vois un enfant de douze ans", ajoute: "cela est doux, cela est joli, et cela peint Diderot."

Plus à même que quiconque de juger un homme dans l'intimité duquel il a vécu pendant près de vingt ans, Naigeon résume ainsi son impression: "Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait eu un être plus contrasté que lui."¹³

Georges Daniel then relates this to the prevalent misconceptions about Diderot's literary style and merit.

Very little can be gleaned of Diderot's public persona which could be called unbiased or objective. However it is interesting to compare the police report written about Diderot after his release from imprisonment in Vincennes. Here we have a depiction of Diderot as a religious dissenter rather than the harmlessly eccentric enthusiast of later years:

C'est un jeune homme qui fait le bel esprit et se fait trophée d'impiété, très dangereux; parlant des saints mystères avec mépris, disant que lorsqu'il viendrait au dernier moment de sa vie, il se confesserait comme les autres et qu'il recevrait ce que l'on appelle Dieu, qu'il ne le fera point par devoir, mais par rapport à sa famille de crainte qu'on ne leur reproche qu'il est mort sans religion.¹⁴

¹³ Daniel, Georges, *Op. cit.* p. 13.

¹⁴ Darnton, Robert, *Gens de lettres, gens du livre* (Paris, 1992), translated by Revellat, M. A., p. 73, More information about the police's view of the young Diderot can be found in Darnton, Robert, *The Great Cat Massacre* (London, 1984), pp. 175-177 and pp. 179- 181.

Even here there is a hint that Diderot gave the impression of someone consciously playing a role for maximum effect. According to the report, Diderot merely “fait le bel esprit” and he “se fait trophée de l’impiété”. We gain the impression that he takes on the mantle of the atheist to gain a reputation for himself as a controversial thinker and to differentiate himself from others. There is more than a hint here of someone who is consciously adopting a role, as Diderot appears to later in life. This is similar to his later adoption of the role of the eccentric enthusiast. He had a pressing need in later life to construct a public role for himself, as he was unable to publish most of his philosophical works in his life-time as he could not risk imprisonment or exile, due to his concern for his wife and daughter. This self-representation, as the *philosophe* who has a myriad of concurrent ideas and projects, which runs throughout the *Correspondance* is not completely artificial when one considers the body of work Diderot wrote, in addition to the project of the *Encyclopédie* which occupied most of his working life. At times in the *Pour et contre*, there are indications of Diderot’s own hopes and aspirations that his work will be recognized by posterity. As he said to Falconet [15 février 1766] :

Il fut un temps où un littérateur, jaloux de la perfection de son travail, le gardait vingt ans, trente ans dans un portefeuille. Cependant une jouissance idéale remplaçait la jouissance actuelle dont il se privait. Il vivait sur l’espérance de laisser après lui un ouvrage et un nom immortels. Si cet homme est un fou, toutes mes idées de sagesse sont renversées. (*Corres.*, p. 604.)

The writer he depicts here, if not ostensibly a self-portrait, is someone who is in exactly the same position as him. His public creation of the persona of the

More details about this report can be found in, Venturi, Franco, *La jeunesse de Diderot (de 1713 à 1753)*, (Paris, 1939), and *Le origini dell enciclopedia* (Rome, 1946).

enthusiastic intellectual, as we have seen him described by the contemporaries quoted by Georges Daniel, was his means of revealing some of his ideas and creativity to others as he was prevented from doing so by any other means. The letters to Sophie Volland, with their wide ranging discussion of philosophical topics, were another means for Diderot to air his views, which otherwise would have remained silenced during his lifetime.

Diderot's depiction of himself - as a leitmotif throughout his letters - as the *philosophe* can be connected to another discernible persona of the *honnête homme* which is part and parcel of his secular moral code. The *honnête homme* is a morally upright and just figure who is not dissimilar to his self-representation as a father and thus family man. The concept of the *honnête homme* had generally been equivalent to the gentleman in English, with all its connotations of social standing, manners and a certain code of honour. In the eighteenth century the definition of the *honnête homme* gradually became less a matter of aristocratic manners and distinction and more a definition of moral probity and sociability. According to Fiorato, the whole emphasis of etiquette shifted its focus away from social discrimination and became more egalitarian in its aims:

En effet, contrairement à la courtoisie, qui est distinctive, donc discriminatoire, la politesse, qui connaît au XVIIIe siècle une grande divulgation sociale, implique l'égalité dans les rapports entre les hommes et elle peut s'acquérir par l'éducation et l'expérience. C'est pourquoi elle connaît une certaine dépréciation aux yeux même de la noblesse, tentée de la considérer comme une pratique conventionnelle sans distinction [...]¹⁵

¹⁵ Fiorato, Adelin-Charles, 'Simulation / dissimulation' 801-839. In Montandon, Alain, *Dictionnaire raisonné de la politesse et du savoir-vivre* (Paris, 1995), 838-839.

Diderot often represents himself in the light of several personae in one letter. In the letters to Mademoiselle Jodin this is particularly evident. Diderot depicts himself in turn as a family man and an *honnête homme*, when he attempts to help the Jodin family because he was a friend of the late Monsieur Jodin, a Swiss clockmaker. In the same letters he, also represents himself as Diderot the *philosophe* and public figure, as well as emphasizing his knowledge of the theatre because he was also a playwright. For example in the following extract from the end of December 1766 we can see Diderot giving her the advice her father would have given, if he were still alive. Thus Diderot takes on a familiar paternal tone here, and then later in the letter he returns to the persona of Diderot the respected *philosophe* and playwright:

Il est fort difficile, Mademoiselle, de vous donner un bon conseil! Je vois presque égalité d'inconvénients aux différents partis que vous avez à prendre. Il est sûr qu'on se gâte à une mauvaise école, et qu'il n'y a que des vices à gagner avec des comédiens vicieux. [...]

[...]

Etudiez donc, travaillez, acquérez quelque argent; défaites-vous des gros défauts de votre jeu, et puis venez ici voir la scène, et passez les jours et les nuits à vous conformer aux bons modèles[...]

Votre mère a été sur le point d'acheter des meubles; elle a loué un logement, il ne lui reste plus qu'à se conformer à vos vues, selon le parti que vous suivrez. Elle n'ira point se réinstaller chez votre oncle; cet homme est dans l'indigence et serait plus à charge qu'utile. [...] (*Corres.*, pp. 719-20.)

Here Diderot takes on different roles in the same letter, each discernible persona being another facet of his personality and tailored to the type of advice he has to give Mademoiselle Jodin, ranging from moral advice, financial and domestic affairs to advice about the quality of her acting. He played each of these roles in turn in his daily life. The letters to Mlle Jodin are unusual in that his two worlds, that of 'M. Diderot, respectable family man and husband of Anne-Toinette', and his social and

professional world of the *philosophe*, are inter-connected, whilst in everyday life they were generally very much separated.

When considering Diderot's self-representation and his adoption of various epistolary personae, it is relevant to compare Grimm's depiction of him with his self-representation in the *Correspondance littéraire*. Diderot's character, as represented here, is very much that of the impassioned, enthusiastic *philosophe* as described by Georges Daniel. Diderot and his anecdotes and reviews of the arts were familiar features for the readers of the *Correspondance littéraire*. He was known largely in his lifetime for his editorship of the *Encyclopédie* alone so he was keen to reveal the different facets of his work and personality, even if only to a few foreign heads of state rather than the French public. This readership of supposedly enlightened despots and opinion makers provided international recognition for him as well as being a means by which to seek patronage. He is represented in the *Correspondance littéraire* as a mercurial talent, whose interests are eclectic to say the very least. If we consider some of the articles attributed to Diderot and the references to him in the newsletters of 1758, a rather broad range of subjects is revealed. This all helped to lead to the reputation Diderot's work had for some time of being disorderly and chaotic, and thus inferior to the work of others such as Voltaire and Rousseau. In the *Correspondance littéraire* of 15 June 1758 there is a 'Chanson dans le goût de la romance par M. Diderot'. The song is a fairly traditional love song although it is interesting that the name of the loved one is Sophie and presumably this is dedicated to Sophie Volland:

Je sais que pour sa Sophie
Souvent ses larmes coulaient;

Mais quelquefois attendrie,
Ses lèvres les recueillaient;
Je sais que pour sa Sophie
Souvent ses larmes coulaient.

Celui dont j'ai dit la peine
Aima jusques au trépas.
Aima-t-il une inhumaine?
Ma chanson ne le dit pas;
Celui dont j'ai dit la peine
Aima jusques au trépas.¹⁶

Such light-hearted contributions to the *Correspondance littéraire* are designed to demonstrate that Diderot has many talents and is far from being an austere philosopher. The following month Diderot reviewed Cochin's *Voyage d'Italie*:

M. Cochin, secrétaire perpétuel de l'Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, garde des dessins du roi, grand dessinateur, graveur de la première classe, et homme d'esprit, vient de publier son *Voyage d'Italie*, en trois petits volumes. C'est une suite de jugements rapides, courts et sévères, de presque tous les morceaux de peinture, de sculpture et d'architecture, tant anciens que modernes, qui ont quelque réputation dans les principales villes d'Italie, excepté Rome.¹⁷

This review shows Diderot in the role of connoisseur and critic whose views about such a work carries some considerable weight.

In the issue of 15 January 1759 Grimm compares Diderot to David Hume, and portrays him as being even more of a true genius who is a fiery and inspirational talent. This description of Diderot is not too dissimilar from the artistic persona one would expect some decades later of a Romantic poet or artist. Here the description and persona of Diderot revealed to the public is not far removed from that of the *cabotin*, Rameau's nephew. Here he is represented as a very theatrical figure, and his

¹⁶ Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister etc. *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, notices, notes, table générale par Maurice Tourneux, Paris 1878, Volume IV (Nendeln/Liechtenstein, 1968), pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, vol.IV, pp. 15-16.

creation of several epistolary personae shows that he frequently struck different epistolary, literary and social poses as a means of differentiating himself from others. This was a means of creating a personality which was striking and memorable, and which might be a manner of creating an image for posterity. Grimm wrote:

David Hume est aujourd'hui un des meilleurs esprits d'Angleterre; et comme les philosophes appartiennent moins à leur patrie qu'à l'univers, qu'ils éclairent, on peut compter celui que je viens de nommer dans le petit nombre de ceux qui par leurs lumières et par leurs travaux ont mérité du genre humain.

[...]

Il n'a pas le coloris, ni peut-être la profondeur du génie de M. Diderot. Le philosophe français a l'air d'un homme inspiré: agité par le démon de la lumière et de la vérité, il obéit, il écrit comme malgré lui, il élève la voix, il perce dans les abîmes immenses où sont cachés les ressorts de l'univers et de ses êtres; il prend le caractère de toutes les vérités qu'il annonce; et lorsqu'elles s'élèvent et se déroberont à notre entendement, il devient sublime et quelquefois obscur comme elles; doué d'une imagination vive et brillante, il communique son enthousiasme, il embrase tout ce qui l'approche. Le philosophe anglais est un sage paisible et aimable qui a l'air de s'occuper de la vérité pour son amusement.¹⁸

Diderot is represented as having almost childlike enthusiasm. He is seen as an inspired prophet like Dorval. Once again mercurial spontaneity is the quality of Diderot's work which is stressed.

When Diderot writes for the *Correspondance littéraire*, his comments are generally carefully stage-managed by Grimm, and he is seen to be an authority upon every topic he comments upon, no matter how disparate. In the May 1755 issue, Diderot is presented as a great stylist of the language and, although far from being

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 69.

accepted into the Académie française himself, his view of the type of maiden speech

M. de Châteaubrun should have given is praised uncritically by Grimm:

Voici le discours de réception de M. de Châteaubrun, suivant ces idées:
« Messieurs (d'un ton pathétique, élevé et touchant) , Charles de Secondat de Montesquieu est l'auteur du *Temple de Gnide...*, des *Lettres persanes ...*, des *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence...*, et de *L'Esprit des lois...* (silence ... puis en baissant les yeux et affaiblissant la voix) : Voilà, messieurs, l'homme auquel il m'était réservé de succéder dans cette Académie... »

Si M. de Châteaubrun eût osé prononcer ce discours de cette manière, il aurait sans doute excité dans l'assemblée un mouvement général d'admiration pour lui et pour celui qu'il remplace. Ces impressions sont infaillibles. Nous en éprouvons tous les jours les effets sur le théâtre de la Comédie Française. Mais ce n'est ni le nouvel académicien ni moi qui avons imaginé ce discours, c'est M. Diderot. Pour M. de Châteaubrun, il a trouvé plus court de donner à son discours la forme ordinaire, ce qui le rend froid, long et insipide; ces défauts, inséparables peut-être de la forme établie, ne l'ont point empêché d'être applaudi.¹⁹

The maximum emphasis is placed by Grimm upon Diderot's eloquence by the concealment of the identity of the person who suggested this form of speech.

The manner in which anecdotes are set and related in the *Correspondance littéraire* is rather reminiscent of the way Diderot reports anecdotes in his letters to Sophie Volland. For example, an anecdote is told in the issue of 1st August 1755 about how Diderot met the Abbé Le Petit who had some literary pretensions, but, apparently, very little artistic talent. It is quite probable that Diderot or Grimm could have reported quite faithfully the conversation which took place:

- Un madrigal de sept cents vers! s'écria le philosophe; grand Dieu! Et sur quel sujet? – C'est que, répondit ce curé en souriant finement, mon valet a eu le malheur de faire un enfant à ma servante, et cela m'a donné un assez beau champ, comme vous allez voir. » En disant cela, il tira de sa poche un grand cahier de papier. M. Diderot effrayé de cette lecture, lui dit: « Monsieur le curé, je vous trouve bien blâmable d'employer votre loisir à de pareils sujets; quand

¹⁹ *Ibid*, iii, pp. 26-27.

on a un génie aussi sûr que le vôtre, on doit faire des tragédies, et non pas s'amuser à des madrigaux. Permettez-moi donc de vous dire que je n'écouterai pas un seul vers de votre façon avant que vous ne nous ayez apporté une tragédie. –Vous avez raison, répliqua le curé, c'est que je suis trop timide. »

C'est ainsi que le sage de la Montagne fut quitte du madrigal; mais quelle fut sa surprise de voir arriver, il y a quinze jours, le curé de Mont-Chauvet avec la tragédie de *David et Bethsabée!*²⁰

Diderot is also represented here as *le philosophe*, a name and persona he used frequently himself, and here by Grimm as 'le sage de la Montagne' because he lived in the area of Paris called the montagne Sainte-Geneviève. Once again this heightens and creates his profile in addition to his relative fame as the editor of the *Encyclopédie*. This is very much in keeping with the manner in which he represents himself in his letters to Sophie, and no doubt with the image of himself he wished to project in the public sphere.

His adoption of the persona of the *honnête homme*, the virtuous but secular man, is based upon his admiration for his father's great moral qualities. His father's piety is almost incidental to the man's inherent goodness and generous concern for others. We can see his father as described in *Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants ou du danger de se mettre au-dessus des lois*:

Mon père, homme d'un excellent jugement, mais homme pieux, était renommé dans sa province pour sa probité rigoureuse. Il fut, plus d'une fois, choisi pour arbitre entre ses concitoyens; et des étrangers qu'il ne connaissait pas lui confièrent souvent l'exécution de leurs dernières volontés. Les pauvres pleurèrent sa perte, lorsqu'il mourut. Pendant sa maladie, les grands et les petits marquèrent l'intérêt qu'ils prenaient à sa conversation. Lorsqu'on sut qu'il approchait de sa fin, toute la ville fut attristée. Son image sera toujours présente à ma mémoire; il me semble que je le vois dans son fauteuil à bras, avec son maintien tranquille et son visage serein.²¹

²⁰ *Ibid*, III, p. 61. Diderot moved to the rue Taranne (Saint-Germain-des-Prés) during this year, so this reference to him as the 'sage de la montagne' must predate his move and so provides a means of dating this anecdote.

²¹ *Œuvres philosophiques de Diderot*, ed. Vernière, Paul, (Paris, 1964), p. 409.

Diderot often depicts himself in his letters to Grimm and Sophie as a devoted father. This emphasis upon his paternal affection and domestic life is another side of his life and personality which he privileges in his letters. He was no doubt genuinely very fond of his daughter. But such an emphasis was another means of differentiating himself from his contemporaries, especially the other *philosophes* and in particular his former friend, Rousseau. Diderot demonstrates that the fashionable concern for the upbringing of children, generated by Rousseau's works, and the general vogue for expression of emotion and sensibility is nothing new. As far as he is concerned it is something he has always practiced, as an *honnête homme* and family man. So a passage in one of Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland, such as the description which follows of his daughter presenting him with a bouquet on his Saint's day, has this dual function of describing domestic events and revealing to his childless friends the extent to which he combines all the desired qualities of a sensitive *honnête homme*:

J'ai fait mon voyage, et je suis revenu pour me faire haranguer et fêter. L'enfant avait un compliment tout prêt; et il ne fallait pas que la peine de l'avoir appris fût perdue; et la mère avait projeté un grand dîner pour le dimanche. L'enfant a prononcé sa petite harangue à ravir; au milieu, comme il se trouvait quelques mots de prononciation difficile, elle s'est arrêtée et m'a dit: 'Mon papa, c'est que je suis brèche-dent. (*Corres.*, p. 363)

This demonstrates the required sensibility of the *honnête homme*, as well as being a charming anecdote.

A letter written to Sophie Volland on 25th May 1759 describes the idealized view Sophie probably had of him, and his wish never to destroy this but rather to live up to this image:

J'ai élevé dans son cœur une statue que je ne voudrais jamais briser. Quelle douleur pour elle si je me rendais coupable d'une action qui m'avilît à ses yeux !(*Corres.*, p. 100.)

Diderot is intensely aware of the image he hopes to project as an *honnête homme* and he wishes to do more than portray the persona by becoming that person himself. In the following chapters we will see all the personae studied in this chapter highlighted in Diderot's letters.

As we have demonstrated, Diderot's epistolary practice is not unusual in terms of his use of epistolary tense and his attempts to overcome absence which are core aspects of the letter form. However it is vital to consider these formal aspects of epistolarity as they are integral to all correspondence. In the next chapter we will consider an important aspect of Diderot's letter-writing: sensibility. This is a vital aspect of his self-representation.

Diderot's writing is imbued with the language of sensibility and sentiment. He depicts himself in his letters as a man of great sensibility, which is very much part of his persona as an *honnête homme*. In this chapter we will concentrate upon his use of the discourse of love and friendship in his letters. we will begin by considering the eighteenth century cult of sensibility. we will then continue by considering the genre of the love letter in general, before moving on to study Diderot's use of the discourse of love in detail. In the *Correspondance*, he appears to have written two distinct forms of love letter to the two most important women in his life, Anne-Toinette Champion, who was later to become his wife, and Sophie Volland. We will examine these two types of love letter and the manner of Diderot's expression of his love for both women. His use of the discourse of love will also be shown to be almost identical to the manner in which he writes to his close friend Grimm.

The Aesthetics of Sensibility.

Diderot's sensibility is most evidently displayed in his *Salons* where his response to the visual arts is primarily an emotional one, and where heart appears to predominate over reason. An emotional response is preferred to the coldly critical and technical approach of the *académiciens*. Diderot reflects here a general move towards a representation of more private and personal virtues in the arts. This is epitomized in his *dramas bourgeois*. Simon Schama in *Citizens* describes the ever-increasing popularity of sensibility and public self-representation in terms of emotionality in the years immediately preceding the Revolution. He sees this pre-romantic stance and individualism as being factors behind social change:

What was being proclaimed was the antithesis of rococo court culture with its wasteful indulgence in decoration, its insistence on wit and manner, graciousness and style. In place of these amoral formal effects, esteem was to be transferred to the realm of virtue. In this new world, heart was to be preferred to head; emotion to reason; nature to culture; spontaneity to calculation; simplicity to the ornate [...]. Lavish use of words like *tendresse* (tenderness) and *âme* (soul) conferred immediate membership in the community of Sensibility; and words that had been used more casually, like *amitié* (friendship), were invested with feelings of intense intimacy. Verbs like *s'enivrer* (to become drunk) when coupled with *plaisir* or *passion* became attributes of a noble rather than a depraved character. The key word was *sensibilité*: the intuitive capacity for intense feeling. To possess *un coeur sensible* (a feeling heart) was the precondition for morality.¹

It is interesting to consider Diderot's eagerness to represent himself in his works and letters in relation to this general cultural and philosophical change. His conscious self-representation as the *homme sensible* is as much a pose designed to reveal his modernity as is his philosophic stance as an atheist; although this does not necessarily mean that he did not hold such views in all sincerity.

Pierre Trahard, who wrote a four-volume study of sensibility and French writers of the eighteenth century, sees sensibility as demonstrated by authors such as Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as being an analytical state not just a purely irrational one of heightened emotion:

Etre sensible, pour Prévost, Diderot et Jean-Jacques, ce n'est pas se borner à sentir, c'est se rendre compte que l'on sent, étudier la sensation, réfléchir sur ses émotions lorsque la première flamme est tombée; c'est au besoin, provoquer la sensation pour l'analyser avec un raffinement cruel; c'est en un mot, prendre conscience du sentiment qu'on éprouve. C'est aussi réagir, immédiatement et vivement, à la moindre émotion, la traduire par des paroles et par des gestes au lieu de l'enfermer en soi, montrer aux autres qu'on est ému pour les émouvoir à leur tour. Cette émotion, prompte à se manifester, n'est pas provoquée par les seuls phénomènes de l'ordre affectif; elle l'est par des idées

¹ Schama, Simon, *Citizens, A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), pp. 147-9.

abstraites, par des hypothèses philosophiques ou scientifiques, par un raisonnement.²

Diderot can be seen to explore and attempt to understand his emotions in just such a manner in his love letters to Sophie Volland. It is relevant to consider his depiction of himself as an emotive man in his letters before we move on to consider the more private realm of the emotions of love and friendship, and to analyse his use of the discourse of love. We will therefore consider Diderot's depiction of his emotional responses to aesthetic stimuli.

In a letter written to Mme de Maux in November 1769, Diderot refers to a painting of ruins by Robert which he also wrote about in his *Salon de 1767*. He links the beauty of this work to the exaltation felt by lovers, who he says are the only category of people who could fully appreciate the power of this painting:

Ceux qui n'ont pas aimé ne sont pas dignes de s'arrêter devant les ruines de Robert. Que diront-elles à ceux qui n'ont ni ressouvenirs ni souhaits, rien de tendre et de touchant qui tempère la tristesse de leurs idées? [...]

Heureux celui qui a reçu de la nature une âme sensible et mobile! Il porte en lui la source d'une multitude d'instantanés délicieux que les autres ignorent. Tous les hommes s'affligent, mais c'est lui seul qui sait se plaindre et pleurer [...] C'est son coeur qui lie ses idées. (*Corres.*, p. 993.)

For Diderot sensibility is not just a means of poeticizing everyday experience, but it is also a means of access to a higher plane of awareness of the beauty of life and art. As a writer, he seeks inspiration in his responses to stimuli such as art, and he tries to convey the full emotional impact certain works have upon him in his art criticism. Romantic love is valued here as it is seen as almost a Platonic means of achieving a

² Trahard, Pierre, *Les Maîtres de la sensibilité française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1931), vol. I, pp. 18-19.

greater understanding of true beauty. We will return to Diderot's use of the Platonic discourse of love at a later stage in this chapter.

His praise of the work of Richardson is typical of the response of the *homme sensible* as opposed to Sophie Volland's practical and unromantic reaction to *Pamela*, which she obviously saw as an unexceptional tale of the rather exaggerated tribulations of a servant girl. Here we have reason embodied in Sophie's response, opposed to that governed by the heart in Diderot's response to the novel. Diderot, being better versed in the language of sensibility than Sophie, is able to read this novel on a different level of perception:

Combien petitement vous voyez le sujet de *Paméla*! Cela fait pitié! Non, Mademoiselle, non, ce n'est pas l'histoire d'une femme de chambre tracassée par un jeune libertin. C'est le combat de la vertu, de la religion, de l'honnêteté, de la vérité, de la bonté, sans force, sans appui, avilie, s'il est possible qu'elle le soit, dans toutes les circonstances imaginables, par la dépendance, l'abjection, la pauvreté, contre la grandeur, l'opulence, le vice et toutes ses puissances infernales. (*Corres.*, p. 437.)

Diderot would also respond in a similar manner to music. He was greatly affected by the musician Osbrück:

Je vous jure, mon amie, que je n'exagère point quand je vous dis que je me suis senti frémir et changer de visage et que j'ai vu les visages des autres changer comme le mien et que je n'aurais pas douté qu'ils n'eussent éprouvé le même frémissement, quand ils ne me l'auraient pas avoué. Ajoutez à cela la main la plus légère, l'exécution la plus brillante et la plus précise, l'harmonie la plus pure et la plus sévère; et plus de la part de cet Osbrück, une âme douce et sensible, une tête chaude, enthousiaste, qui s'allume, qui se perd, et qui s'oublie si parfaitement qu'à la fin d'un morceau, il a l'air effaré d'un homme qui revient d'un rêve. (*Corres.*, pp. 550-551.)

Not only is the music beautiful but the musician fits the part of the Romantic and expressive musician. This very much brings to mind the enthusiasm of the great mimic, Rameau's nephew. Here we can see that Diderot uses precisely the type of

lexicon of the *homme sensible*, as described by Simon Schama, where everything is described in terms of exaggerated and intensified emotion.

Diderot's view of sensibility and artistic inspiration changed quite dramatically between writing the *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, in 1756, and the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, which he started to formulate in 1769. Dorval, the poet genius in *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, is very much the *homme sensible* par excellence. His description of nature as his muse is a very Romantic view of the nature of artistic talent:

L'enthousiasme naît d'un objet de la nature. Si l'esprit l'a vu sous des aspects frappants et divers, il en est occupé, agité, tourmenté. L'imagination s'échauffe; la passion s'émeut. On est successivement étonné, attendri, indigné, courroucé. Sans l'enthousiasme, ou l'idée véritable ne se présente point, ou si, par hasard, on la rencontre, on ne peut la poursuivre [...] Le poète sent le moment de l'enthousiasme; c'est après qu'il a médité. Il s'annonce en lui par un frémissement; c'est une chaleur forte et permanente qui l'embrase, qui le fait haleter, qui le consume, qui le tue; mais qui donne l'âme, la vie à tout ce qu'il touche. [...] Il ne connaîtrait de soulagement qu'à verser au dehors un torrent d'idées qui se pressent, se heurtent et se chassent.³

The poet Dorval is possessed by his ideas. The intellect appears to be very much interconnected with Dorval's emotions. Sensibility is seen very differently by Diderot later on when he considers the emotional and intellectual processes behind acting and what makes a person an excellent rather than an average actor. He comments on the first version of the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, which he wrote for the *Correspondance littéraire*, in a letter he wrote to Grimm in 1769:

J'ai jugé tous ces gredins que vous m'avez envoyés. Celui intitulé *Garrick, ou du jeu théâtral* m'a fait faire un morceau qui mériterait bien d'être mis dans un meilleur ordre. Mais je l'ai donné à M.Hénault tel qu'il est sauf à y revenir sur sa copie. Avec un peu de soin, je n'aurais peut-être jamais rien écrit où il y eût plus de finesse et de vue. C'est un beau paradoxe. Je prétends que c'est la

³ *Œuvres esthétiques*, ed. Vernière, Paul, *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*, pp. 71-175. p. 98.

sensibilité qui fait les comédiens médiocres; l'extrême sensibilité, les comédiens bornés; le sens froid et la tête, les comédiens sublimes. (*Corres.*, pp. 996-997.)

Diderot's own self-depiction in his letters is more akin to that of Dorval, as the enthusiastic creator of works of genius. However it is common for authors to state that what they have created stems from the muse, rather than from many hours of reflection and hard work. The creation of the epistolary persona of the man who is guided by sensibility rather than pure reason is one that is designed again to interest and seduce the addressees of his letters. The question of sensibility for Diderot is a much more complex issue than his self-representation in his letters gives the impression.

Before discussing the love letters written to his wife and Sophie Volland, we should describe the nature of the letters written to Mme de Maux. The letters which Diderot wrote to her are rather different to those he wrote to Sophie Volland, and although they are letters written to a mistress, this is rather incidental as they are concerned with philosophical matters rather than the discourse of love. Some of these letters deal with themes that are very similar to earlier letters to Sophie Volland, such as materialism (*Corres.*, pp. 984-985.), or the effect which natural beauty has upon the spirit (*Corres.*, p. 985.), which is reminiscent of Diderot's enjoyment of the gardens at Marly. Yet this is all that these letters contain. They are part of a debate about certain philosophical topics and are devoid of any elements of the familiar letter such as news about friends and day-to-day events. These letters are more akin to literary essays than love letters of any shape or form. The letter Diderot wrote from Grandval in October 1769 to Mme de Maux would not be out of place in the

Salons, or the *Correspondance littéraire*, as can be ascertained from the following section of this letter:

J'avais apporté ici une âme serrée, un esprit obscurci de vapeurs noires. Il me semble que je suis un peu mieux. Les sensations douces, lorsqu'elles sont continues, calment sans qu'on s'en aperçoive les mouvements les plus violents. On ne se défend pas de cette paix de la nature qui règne sans cesse autour de soi. On s'en défend d'autant moins qu'elle agit imperceptiblement. (*Corres.*, p. 985.)

The letter continues in the same vein both thematically and stylistically. However it is only when he writes to Grimm that there is any reference to the tumultuous nature of this relationship. The letters written to Mme de Maux which survive show no sign of the passionate nature of the affair, and it is by no means certain that she is in fact the true addressee of these letters. Diderot might have decided to capitalize upon what he possibly thought was the charm and attraction of his personality as the *philosophe* in these letters. More personal letters may have existed and been destroyed. These letters are really an anomaly because - though written whilst he was having an affair with Mme de Maux - the discourse of love and any key elements usually to be found in love letters such as declarations of love are absent from them.

The Discourse of Love in Diderot's Letters to Anne-Toinette Champion.

If we consider correspondences, love letters are generally exchanged at dramatic or important moments in the affair, such as the beginning of a relationship, enforced periods of absence or as a means of communication in a forbidden affair. Once these obstacles are removed the letters often have no function to fulfil. For example once Diderot marries Anne-Toinette Champion, there is no need for him to write to her, apart from when he is occasionally away from home, and then these letters are about

domestic affairs, and cannot be said to be love letters. In the same manner, Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland are much more infrequent when he is able to see her in person, in Paris. When she moves to Paris, after her mother's death, the letters stop. This is perhaps due to a gradual decrease in the intensity of their friendship, but also to there being no obstacles preventing them from meeting whenever they wanted. It is this limitation in the duration of a love affair which gives the genre of the love letter its intensity and its interest for the reader. The love letters in Diderot's *Correspondance* fall into just this category of letters which fulfil a vital role in the course of the love affair. After his escape from being held captive in a monastery, at the order of his family (in order to prevent him from marrying Anne-Toinette Champion), he writes to her in order to persuade her to marry him in spite of his family's disapproval. In contrast to this the letters Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland were a means of keeping their love affair alive, during long periods of separation. For the readers of such correspondences, part of the enjoyment is that the reader is presented with the story of a love affair at its height, in which the intensity of emotion is frozen in time.

He wrote letters to Anne-Toinette Champion as a means of furthering his courtship of her, and of communicating with her whilst avoiding her mother's strict chaperonage. These letters adhere more closely to the generic form of the love letter than do the letters to Sophie Volland, which are wide ranging in their content and which are much closer to the form of the familiar letter as described in the letter-writing manuals. The addressee of a love letter, as well as its writer, have certain expectations and notions of the nature of a love letter. Any given culture and

language has certain topoi for the expression of love. We could assume that these would be for Anne-Toinette Champion the common forms of love discourse to be found in popular culture, song and folklore. The few letters written by her which remain show her spelling to be rudimentary and largely phonetic, so we might assume that she was not a great reader of such novels, although one does not necessarily preclude the other. However she would know the general topoi of the discourse of love.

Diderot in his letters to Anne-Toinette Champion frequently uses forms of address which are a common part of the discourse of love used by lovers. Such forms of address act as a means of bonding and of demonstrating affectionate, exclusive possession of the loved one because they mimic the baby talk one would use with a child. Diderot uses a diminutive form of Anne-Toinette's name as a nickname in this courtship correspondence:

Un petit bonjour à Tonton. Comment se porte-t-elle aujourd'hui? A-t-elle fait une bonne nuit? (*Corres.*, p. 3.)

He can be seen to indulge in a form of amorous role-play writing to her as if to a very young girl, both as a means of showing affection and of distinguishing his discourse from that of other potential suitors. In fact he states his claims to her affections by writing in such a manner. His use of the third person singular when writing directly to her is yet again a return to nursery language, and the manner in which an adult would address a child indirectly. Such a semi-paternal tone is another generic role played by the suitor: that of the replacement of the father, the protector.

By continuing the examination of the use of language in the rest of this letter, other means which he uses to secure his place in her heart as her preferred suitor can be detected:

Qu'avez-vous donc, ma chère Nanette? Seriez-vous agitée de quelque inquiétude? Serait-ce le chagrin qui dérangerait votre santé? Ouvrez-moi votre coeur; ne suis-je pas destiné à partager vos plaisirs et vos peines? Devez-vous cacher quelque chose à un Ninot qui n'a rien de secret pour vous? Votre confiance ne doit-elle pas être une suite de votre tendresse? Vous êtes la plus injuste de toutes les femmes, si vous soupçonnez encore la sincérité de mes promesses. (*Corres.*, p. 3.)

At this stage in the relationship Diderot is not on sufficiently close terms with her, to be able to address her as 'tu'. In the eighteenth century the usage of 'tu' was very much restricted to address very close family or intimate friends. The use of the possessive, 'ma chère', is quite typical of a lover's discourse and mirrors the possessive nature of the relationship. In a similar manner, the use of another diminutive of Anne-Toinette's name, "Nanette", is another form of bonding used to consolidate the special relationship the lover wishes to have with the beloved. The implied intimacy of the use of a nickname introduces the lover to the inner circle of family and close friends. Diderot's use of repeated questions is another method used to emphasize his affection for her by stressing his solicitude and concern. He refers to himself as Ninot which is almost a mirror image of Tonton and the similarity in sound of the two diminutives, lends to the two names an air of togetherness and belonging. He refers to himself in the third person as "Un Ninot", which stresses the importance played by the adoption of personae in the discourse of love. These names are reminiscent of the type of names which lovers in a pastoral song or story would be given. He then continues to stress his fidelity, and in so doing, he uses a trope which is frequently used in the discourse of love, hyperbole. Hyperbole is very much

a feature of the discourse of love not only due to its effect of emphasis, but also because it reflects the intensity of deeply felt passion and love which are extreme emotions:

Si Tonton est fidèle à Ninot, et si le coeur de Ninot est à toute épreuve, le sort peut bien différer notre bonheur; mais serait-il quelque chose au monde qui pût nous rendre malheureux? Dans la situation où nous sommes tous deux, nous n'avons à craindre du temps que le retardement de nos plaisirs; car nous nous verrons toujours, et nous nous le dirons, jusqu'à ce que nous recevions un doux regard de la fortune. (*Corres.*, p. 3.)

Here we have a close juxtaposition of the names "Tonton" and "Ninot" and as these juxtaposed names are so similar, the implication is that their attitude to fidelity should be one and the same. Here, as in the most clichéd of expressions of love, Diderot states that as they have each other it is impossible for them to be unhappy, whatever fortune holds in store for them. There is, of course, also a thinly veiled reference to his ability to wait until the wedding night, if need be for his "plaisirs" to be consummated.

This letter then continues in another typical vein for a love letter as he writes of his concern and interest in the state of her health:

Il faut vivre et se conserver pour ce qu'on aime. Au moins songez-y bien ma chère amie; depuis que mes jours sont attachés aux vôtres, si vous tombiez malade, vous me feriez mourir cent fois.

He describes his sympathy for Anne-Toinette Champion and he uses this to assert that they have a unique bond and are spiritually united. He then employs a very common topos of love poetry, that if his loved one was to fall ill he would suffer a thousand deaths himself. He also wishes to endear himself further to her by the use of pathos here, as he claims that he has been extremely hurt by her doubts about his fidelity. He uses hyperbole in order to move her so that she will treat him more

favourably. All of which is very much part of the standard topus of the discourse of love. Indeed, Marie-Claire Grassi sees hyperbole to be one of the defining features of love letters:

Sur le plan du style, la lettre se marque par le rythme spécifique de l'utilisation des trois temps, présent, imparfait, futur, par l'expression hyperbolique des sentiments, par la force du dialogisme, par l'impératif, véritable injonction amoureuse. Sur le plan thématique, elle présente une unicité ou une quasi unicité du thème: on ne parle que de son amour.⁴

Some of this does not really apply to Diderot's letters, as they are certainly more thematically diverse than the generally fictional correspondences upon which Grassi bases this assertion.

One might consider there to be a surprising lack of original expression in this letter, which is a rather typical generic love letter. Yet the form of the love letter is in itself one which does not readily lend itself to original ideas or use of language. One's expectations of what is acceptable and desired in a love letter are very much governed by the prevailing cultural, social and religious structures of the society in which one lives. The expression and very concept of love is so stereotyped because, outside of these shared cultural stereotypes, it is an emotion which is very difficult to define and as such stretches the boundaries of language and imagination in order to do so – this is all the more true since every individual's mental outlook is likely to be different. Roland Barthes comments upon the difficulty one faces when wishing to express emotion in a letter as the standard phrases, which in the example he gives, one uses to express sympathy for the loss of a loved-one, appear hollow and meaningless due to their frequent use:

⁴ Grassi, Marie-Claire, *Lire l'épistolaire* (Paris, 1998), p. 94.

Un ami vient de perdre quelqu'un qu'il aime et je veux lui dire ma compassion. Je me mets alors à lui écrire spontanément une lettre. Cependant les mots que je trouve ne me satisfont pas: ce sont des "phrases": je fais des "phrases" avec le plus aimant de moi-même; je me dis alors que le message que je veux faire parvenir à cet ami, et qui est ma compassion même, pourrait en somme se réduire à un simple mot: *condoléances*. Cependant la fin même de la communication s'y oppose, car ce serait là un message froid, et par conséquent *inversé*, puisque ce que je veux communiquer, c'est la chaleur même de ma compassion. J'en conclus que pour redresser mon message (c'est-à-dire en somme pour qu'il soit exact), il faut non seulement que je le varie, mais encore que cette variation soit originale et comme inventée.⁵

This is a dilemma which the letter-writer is faced with in many situations. The writer of a love letter has to try to anticipate the addressee's reaction to stereotypical expressions of love, whether these would be acceptable or not. Diderot might also have considered that, due to Anne-Toinette's fairly basic education, (which someone of her class and gender would have received), she would have responded better to a conventional love letter. However the next letter which we will discuss totally contradicts this notion.

As readers we should not fall into the trap either of believing that originality of thought and expression is the mark of authenticity. In fact it is quite probable that a love letter which is replete with strikingly original metaphors for love might reveal the letter-writer to be more in love with language than with the recipient of the letter. This relates to another problem which has beset the study of the correspondence of writers or intellectuals since many a reader has sought in their letters similar originality of thought or modes of expression as are to be found in their works, only to be left frequently disappointed. For example, the correspondence of Anthony Trollope is notably dry and shows none of the descriptive powers to be found in his

⁵ Barthes, Roland, *Essais critiques* (Paris, 1964), preface, pp. 11-12.

novels. Many of Diderot's letters do in fact bear the stamp of his philosophical and literary works. Yet, depending on the genre of the letter written and the recipient, equally some do not.

The most atypical of the letters written to Anne-Toinette Champion is one which does not appear to have been written with the nature of the letter's addressee fully in mind. This letter might have been more suitably written to a male friend who would have shared similar preoccupations, rather than to a young woman. This letter written in 1742 is largely humorous in tone and commences with "Vivat, ma chère Maman." (*Corres.*, p. 4.) The use of *maman* as a term of affection was in fairly common usage, Jean-Jacques Rousseau always addressed Mme de Warens as Maman. This "Vivat" could possibly have been a humorous form of address used by Diderot and his friends, but it sits rather uneasily with the nature of the letter and the recipient with its schoolboy use of Latin. This humorous use of Latin does not seem entirely appropriate when one considers that, at the most, all Anne-Toinette Champion's knowledge of the language could have been was a smattering or recognition of ecclesiastical Latin which probably did not extend beyond reciting the *Ave Maria* or the *Pater Noster*. Diderot continues this letter in a similar manner as if writing to a male friend who might understand and sympathize with his reluctance at entering into a profession:

Je viens de recevoir une lettre du Papa. Après un sermon de deux aunes plus long qu'à l'ordinaire, liberté plénière de faire tout ce que je voudrai, pourvu que je fasse quelque chose.

It does seem that he neglected to adapt this letter to the nature of his correspondent as it is unlikely that Anne-Toinette Champion who, with her mother, had to take in

laundry and rough work to earn a living, would understand a graduate's unwillingness to obtain a professional standing. This letter would do little to allay her mother's doubts about Diderot as a suitor due to his rather bohemian lifestyle and uncertain financial prospects.

We could well imagine that comments such as 'un sermon de deux aunes plus long qu'à l'ordinaire' and 'liberté plénière' would have been more appropriate if they had been written to one of Diderot's male friends, rather than the girl he was in love with who, given her background and financial circumstances, would be unlikely to find such *insouciance* endearing.

Diderot then mocks his father's almost superstitious mingling of the religious and the secular, once again a comment unlikely to gain favour with, or amuse, the pious Anne-Toinette Champion:

Persisté-je dans la résolution d'entrer chez le procureur? Ordre donné de m'en chercher un bon, et de payer le premier quartier sonica. Mais c'est à des conditions tout à fait comiques: que je ne manquerai pas préalablement d'invoquer le Saint-Esprit et d'approcher du très saint sacrement de l'eucharistie. Avez-vous jamais ouï dire qu'on se préparât ainsi à entrer chez le procureur! Riez-en donc un peu, Mademoiselle.

However this is very difficult to really judge, since all we know about Anne-Toinette Champion is what was said about her by Diderot, their daughter, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, so it is impossible to gain any real unbiased impression of what she was like as a young woman. Perhaps Diderot's unconventionality was considered to be a not inconsiderable part of his charm by her.

The letter then ends in a manner which also sets it apart from the other letters written to Anne-Toinette Champion, because it ends with a comic poem written about a cold sore, not the most romantic of fare:

Mon baubau ne m'empêche pas de vous embrasser de tout mon coeur. Diderot.

Sur le baubau dont ma lèvre est atteinte
Chacun raisonne ainsi qu'il plaît à Dieu;
Du froid, dit l'un, c'est la cruelle empreinte;
Consolez-vous, dit l'autre, c'est l'adieu
D'une fièvre qui s'est éteinte.

This poem is appended to the end of the letter, as a form of postscript after being linked to the letter by the closing formula, which is the only indication in the letter which denotes that the letter is written to a young women, as the tone of the letter in general is rather masculine.

This poem might, however, refer to a shared joke about this cold sore, and the sharing of jokes in itself is an important component in the building of a relationship and the complicity needed for a friendship to last. This may well suggest that a shared sense of humour was part of the basis of their relationship.

The greater part of Diderot's correspondence with Anne-Toinette Champion contains, however, repeated assertions that he is sincerely in love with her and faithful to her:

Ne doutez point, ma chère amie, de celui que vous avez accepté; vous le possédez à de trop justes titres pour qu'il puisse vous échapper. Ninot vous a donné sa parole; et il a trop d'amour, d'honneur et de goût pour la retirer jamais. (*Corres.*, p. 5.)

He asserts his love not only at the time of writing but for eternity. This is typical of the hyperbolic nature of the discourse of love which only allows for grand gestures rather than gradations of sentiment.

The letters which Diderot writes on his return to Paris after being held captive by his family are heart-felt pleas to Anne-Toinette Champion to reconsider her rejection of him. In these letters he needed to use the rhetoric of the love letter and his assertions of love to the best effect in an attempt to move Anne-Toinette Champion to such an extent that she would accept his hand in marriage. Diderot once again employs pathos rather than logos. He uses pathos to appeal to her emotions because in practical terms he is even less of an acceptable match now, given his family's strong disapproval of any link with the Champion family.

Diderot wrote a letter in mid 1743 which is largely structured by antithesis, that of the difference between the treatment he received from Anne-Toinette Champion before his visit to Langres and how he was treated by her afterwards:

Ce qui fait le bonheur des époux, c'est leur tendresse mutuelle. J'en ai pour vous plus que jamais, mais j'ai lieu de croire que vous n'en avez plus pour moi. Eh! S'il vous en restait un peu, choisiriez-vous pour m'accabler de chagrins le moment où je me prépare à réparer tout celui que je vous ai causé? Je suis toujours le même; mais combien je vous trouve changée! (*Corres.*, pp. 12-13.)

Diderot structures his argument here upon the great reversal in her apparent feelings for him. Ironically, now that he is even more determined than ever to marry her, she no longer appears to have the same depth of feelings for him. Diderot then depicts his great distress by saying that he is only able to express his feelings in writing because, if he confronted her in person, he would only annoy and irritate her by bursting into tears. The letter form is just such a privileged space in which one can express oneself more freely than when faced with the other person. Diderot attempts to appeal to Anne-Toinette Champion's emotions in this letter by representing

himself as a distraught and desolate figure who would inspire compassion and pity in anyone else's heart:

Je prends le parti de vous écrire; car dans l'état où vous m'avez mis, je ne vous parlerais point sans pleurer, et je me suis aperçu que mes larmes vous importunent. Ici, ma tristesse ne gêne personne; et pour m'y livrer, je n'ai besoin de me cacher derrière une porte. J'ai même la triste satisfaction de me persuader que, si vous étiez témoin, vous ne continueriez pas d'y être insensible. Je suis l'homme du monde qui souhaite le plus ce que vous désirez le moins: d'être votre époux. (*Corres.*, p.13.)

Interestingly, in this letter Diderot returns to the more formal use of 'vous', whilst in letters such as one written to Anne-Toinette Champion in 1743, (*Corres.*, p. 12.), he progressively addressed her as 'tu' denoting the increasing intimacy between the two lovers. The opposition between the use of 'tu' and 'vous' is very striking as 'tu' was reserved for rare use with very close family and children or social 'inferiors'. Diderot once again uses a rather hyperbolic structure coupled with antithesis in "je suis l'homme du monde qui souhaite le plus ce que vous désirez le moins [...]." This eloquent phrase adds extra force to the impact of what Diderot wishes to say, as does its position at the end of the letter which gives the letter a final sting in the tail. Diderot's depiction of himself as a cruelly treated forlorn lover obviously achieved its desired effect as this is the last extant letter that was written to Anne-Toinette Champion before their marriage. His letters to her contain many declarations of his love for her, the seriousness of his intentions and his fidelity. Roland Barthes says of such declarations of love in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* that they have a certain force in shaping and reflecting the nature of a relationship:

Déclaration. Propension du sujet amoureux à entretenir abondamment, avec une émotion contenue, l'être aimé, de son amour, de lui, de soi, d'eux: la

déclaration ne porte pas sur l'aveu de l'amour, mais sur la forme, infiniment commentée, de la relation amoureuse.⁶

In his letters to Anne-Toinette Champion, Diderot has a constant need to repeat such declarations in order to maintain his relationship and to convince Anne-Toinette Champion that her doubts about him are unfounded. In a less fragile relationship, there would not be such a need to repeat such declarations and continually to reassure one's lover of one's fidelity. Such declarations of love are one of the defining features of the generic love letter.

The Discourse of Love in the Letters to Sophie Volland.

We will now look at the discourse of love in the letters to Sophie Volland. To begin with we will focus upon the declarations and assertions of love and fidelity to be found in this correspondence, which can be said to be a love affair kept alive and lived through the exchange of letters. Most letters which Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland contain some form of declaration of love, even if the remaining content of the letter might be seen to be more typical of a familiar letter than a love letter. These declarations run through the letters as a leitmotif. We can see that, as Roland Barthes said of declarations of love, they reflect the nature of their relationship, and are vital for Diderot and Sophie Volland to keep their affection for one another alive during long periods of separation. These declarations and expressions of love - due to their range of expression - contrast notably with the much earlier love letters which Diderot wrote to Anne-Toinette Champion. Diderot does not use one favourite

⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, (Paris, 1977), p. 8.

phrase for declaring his love and endlessly repeat it. Instead he often finds new and original means of doing this. we will consider a selection of such declarations since there are interesting similarities of form behind these declarations and attestations of love, most of which are actually based upon the same stylistic structure which is none the less able to generate consistently varied expressions of love. By looking at the first extant letter written to Sophie Volland, the use of such a structure to form declarations of love can be seen to be already in place. Diderot visits the gardens at Marly and, in a famous description of the contemplative solitude of a garden, he compares - as we have already seen - his melancholy at being separated from Sophie Volland to the Baron Gleichen's grief at the Margravine de Bayreuth's death:

Il faut regarder les statues comme des êtres qui aiment la solitude et qui la cherchent, des poètes, des philosophes, des amants, et ces êtres ne sont pas communs.

[...] Je portais tout à travers ces objets des pas errants et une âme mélancolique. Les autres nous devançaient à grands pas, et nous les suivions lentement, le baron de Gleichen, et moi. Je me trouvais bien à côté de cet homme. C'est que nous éprouvions au-dedans de nous un sentiment commun et secret. C'est une chose incroyable comme les âmes sensibles s'entendent presque sans se parler.

[...]

Nous nous parlions peu; nous sentions beaucoup; nous souffrions tous deux; mais il était plus à plaindre que moi. Je tournais de temps en temps mes yeux vers la ville; les siens étaient souvent attachés à la terre; ils y cherchaient un objet qui n'est plus. (*Corres.*, p. 96.)

Diderot takes as his starting point the description of the garden, which is imbued with a certain tranquil melancholy. The statues which are dotted about the garden are seen to be akin to other solitary romantic figures, such as poets and lovers. He then continues to describe the garden in such a way that it becomes almost indistinguishable from his missing Sophie Volland and the Baron de Gleichen's

grief. The calm beauty of the garden is particularly suited to their melancholic contemplation of absent loved ones. This description of their mood reflected in the garden is used by him to link this description of the garden to his love for Sophie Volland and to form a declaration of his love for her.⁷ Here, in this garden, he is completely cut off from Sophie Volland's social circle, and so the city seems even more distant and remote. He uses the Baron de Gleichen's grief as a convenient foil for his own sadness at separation from Sophie Volland. It is also relevant to note his emphasis upon his response to the beauty of the garden, as that of an *homme sensible* who responds emotionally to beauty as much as to the Baron's grief, which acts as a form of catalyst for his own sadness. Once again we can see Diderot using the discourse of sensibility in this description of the melancholic garden. The Baron de Gleichen and Diderot himself are portrayed by him as exceptional beings like the poets or statues who are endowed with a rare gift of sensitivity and depth of feeling. He is at pains to represent himself to Sophie Volland as a man of great sensibility, not only in aesthetic matters but as a man "in touch with his emotions".

His expressions of love for her often have a basis in some concrete event or description, which then becomes intertwined and connected with his emotional life. Such attestations of love can be seen to be part and parcel of his journal-project of letters which inform Sophie of his daily routine and thoughts. Such structures are also to be found in the next attestation of love which we will examine. When Diderot returns to Langres to settle family affairs after his father's death, he once again uses

⁷ Jacques Chouillet uses this letter to demonstrate how Diderot's letters are constructed around the figure of Sophie Volland and his love for her, *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland. Un dialogue à une voix*, pp. 20-21.

his experience as a concrete example upon which to base his declaration of love. The basis of such declarations is generally topical or relevant to the time of writing in some manner. Diderot expresses his love for Sophie Volland as it is felt by him or manifests itself at the time of writing. Thus, in this example, he realizes that his newly mature and calm reaction to his brother and sister, and his boredom in Langres is due to the change which being in love has caused upon his temperament:

Mon frère et ma soeur seront mieux partagés que moi, et je m'en réjouis. Qu'ils s'approprient tout ce qui leur conveindra, et qu'ils me renvoient. Pourquoi m'accommodais-je autrefois si bien de la vie qu'on mène ici, et ne puis-je la supporter aujourd'hui? C'est ma Sophie, que je n'aimais pas et que j'aime. (*Corres.*, p. 124.)

This expression of love is specific to the time of writing, and for him every moment can in some way be related to his love for her. The use of antithesis here underlines the change in his attitude now that he loves Sophie Volland, as opposed to his attitude before he was in love.

During the same visit to Langres, he writes a letter [3rd August 1759] in which he relates an anecdote told to him about a son closing the eyelids of his dying father too hastily, before his father had actually died, and the father's reaction to this. In the midst of repeating this anecdote and telling Sophie Volland about his father's close female friend who died the day after him, he links the practice of closing the eyelids of the dead to his shared fantasy with Sophie Volland of a château in which they could live out their idyll. Death and the preparation of the bodies of the dead is a rather uncommon topic upon which to base an assertion of one's love for someone, but this underlines his method of relating his love to her with his current preoccupations:

Fermer les yeux est une expression figurée à Paris; ici c'est une action d'humanité réelle. [...]

Nous nous fermerons tous les yeux les uns aux autres dans le petit château; et le dernier sera bien à plaindre, n'est-ce pas? (*Corres.*, p. 128.)

This expression of love can be connected thematically to one of the more famous declarations of love in the *Correspondance*, in which Diderot links materialist theories with his desire to be reunited with Sophie Volland after death. This desire is highly problematic and unusual for an atheist, and for Diderot such a reunion is only deemed possible at a molecular level after their bodies have decomposed. He combines his enthusiasm for materialism with the symbol of the polyp, which is able to divide and redivide itself and still be able to live in order to attest his love for her in this most original manner:

On croit qu'il n'y a qu'un polype; et pourquoi la nature entière ne serait-elle pas de même ordre? Lorsque le polype est divisé en cent mille parties, l'animal primitif et générateur n'est plus; mais tous ses principes sont vivants.

Ô ma Sophie, il me resterait donc un espoir de vous toucher, de vous sentir, de vous aimer, de vous chercher, de m'unir, de me confondre avec vous, quand nous ne serons plus! S'il y avait dans nos principes une loi d'affinité, s'il nous était réservé de composer un être commun, si je devais dans la suite des siècles refaire un tout avec vous, si les molécules de votre amant dissous venaient à s'agiter, à se mouvoir et à rechercher les vôtres éparses dans la nature! Laissez-moi cette chimère; elle m'est douce; elle m'assurerait l'éternité en vous et avec vous. (*Corres.*, pp. 171-172.)

Very unusually the scientific discourse of materialism is grafted onto the discourse of love, because they are usually diametrically opposed to each other: and this is all the more unusual given that materialists tended to reduce the concept of love to little more than a biological urge required for the continuation of the species. Diderot also reworks a Platonic myth here, that of each person having once formed half of a hermaphrodite being. Thus we are all condemned to be eternally in search of our missing half. Here the component molecules of Sophie Volland and Diderot are

searching for the molecules of their lover. The mixing together and recomposition of their molecules to form another living organism which will live on after they die is what happens at a genetic level when two lovers have a child together. This is of course impossible for Sophie Volland due to the adulterous nature of their relationship, as well as the strong social and religious stigma of unmarried motherhood, and her age all being factors that would have made having a child unthinkable. Diderot uses a series of actions: ‘vous toucher, vous sentir etc.’ to convey the imperative need and desperation of the molecules to form a union with the lover’s molecules, and so to be reunited after death.

To return to the examination of the structure which underpins Diderot’s declarations of love, it can be seen that he generally uses a process of amplification in which he takes a subject which might not even appear directly related to his love for Sophie Volland and then builds upon this description and extends it to use it as a metaphor or simile for his love. For example when he stops, on his return from Langres, at a small village after his father’s death, he suspects that, whilst he is eating, the coachman is getting drunk with the innkeeper. He then links this suspected drunkenness with the drunkenness of love which he experiences, due to his love for her:

Qu’ils s’enivrent; n’est ce pas là leur consolation? Ils le sont de vin, je le suis d’amour; je n’ai pas le courage de les blâmer. Demain, ils expieront leur ivresse; elle sera passée et la mienne durera. (*Corres.*, p. 144.)

This declaration of love is once again formed upon a concrete description which forms part of the central narrative of the letter and which is then amplified and used as an extended metaphor of his love.

Although Diderot uses similar methods to form each declaration, each one is unique as it is based upon varied and topical concerns. In fact, they almost form a record of Diderot's preoccupations in their own rights. He at times relates his recent reading matter to his love for Sophie Volland. When he is reading the letters of Abélard and Héloïse, such thematic links between these love letters and his own are evident. Although the letters he is referring to here are verse imitations of the original letters:⁸

J'ai été occupé toute la matinée d'Héloïse et d'Abélard. Elle disait 'j'aimerais mieux être la maîtresse de mon philosophe que la femme du plus grand roi du monde', et je disais, moi: combien cet homme fut aimé! (*Corres.*, pp. 168-169.)

No doubt Diderot particularly identified with the tale of illicit love between a great philosopher/theologian and his pupil.

Another example of a declaration of love for Sophie which is based upon Diderot's reading is a reference to *Daphnis et Chloé*, by Longus, which he relates to his own reaction if Sophie Volland were suddenly to appear before him after long months of separation:

Lorsque Daphnis revit sa Chloé, après un long et cruel hiver qui les avait séparés, la première fois sa vue se troubla, ses genoux se déroberent sous lui; il chancelait, il allait tomber, si Chloé ne lui avait tendu les bras pour le soutenir. Mon amie, si par quelque enchantement je vous retrouvais tout à coup à côté de moi, il y a des moments où j'en pourrais mourir de joie. (*Corres.*, p. 219.)

⁸ Versini says of this in the footnotes to his edition: 'Non pas des lettres authentiques en vers latins des célèbres amants du xiie siècle, mais de leurs suites ou imitations sous forme d'héroïdes ou lettres amoureuses en vers dont le xviiiie siècle s'enchantait comme de cris authentiques de la passion, et que multiplièrent Colardeau (1757, 1758, 1759), Dorat (1737, 1759), après Pope (1717) ou Feutry (1751). C'est cette vogue qui suggéra à Rousseau de rebaptiser sa Julie. Diderot, lui, est en train de rédiger l'article « Scolastiques » de l'*Encyclopédie* qui fait une place à Abélard.' (*Corres.*, pp. 168-169.)

It is very hard, however, to say how much, if at all, Diderot's love letters were influenced by such reading. Probably the influence was minor as his letters to Sophie Volland tend to be very much anchored in his daily life and concerns.

It is interesting to note Roland Barthes' comparison of the desire for lovers to continually express their love for one another as an act of linguistic love-making which is never completely satiated:

1. Le langage est une peau: je frotte mon langage contre l'autre. C'est comme si j'avais des mots en guise de doigts, ou des doigts au bout de mes mots. Mon langage tremble de désir. L'émoi vient d'un double contact: d'une part, toute une activité de discours vient relever discrètement, un signifié unique qui est 'je te désire', et le libère, l'alimente, le ramifie, le fait exploser (le langage jouit de se toucher lui-même); d'autre part, j'enroule l'autre dans mes mots, je le caresse, je le frôle, j'entretiens ce frôlage, je me dépense à faire durer le commentaire auquel je soumetts la relation.

Parler amoureuxment, c'est dépenser sans terme, sans crise; c'est pratiquer un rapport sans orgasme. Il existe peut-être une forme littéraire de ce *coitus reservatus*: c'est le marivaudage.⁹

This can be related to Diderot's correspondence with Sophie Volland as the only contact and communication that they have for many months is via their letters. These letters, and the declarations of love contained in them, are a means to keep their love alive and to sublimate the desire for a physical caress by the use of the linguistic caress of the letter. Love letters and Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland have a certain desperate sterility about them, as the letter-writer struggles against the obstacles with which absence presents their relationship.

However, whilst we are focusing upon love letters and the discourse of love, there are two more aspects of the *Correspondance* which we should consider. These

⁹ Barthes, Roland, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*, p. 87.

are the role played in Diderot's discourse of love by the physical nature of the letter itself. At times Diderot tries to bridge the void caused by absence by adding extra immediacy to his letters to Sophie Volland by referring to the material presence of the letter:

Je baise tes deux dernières lettres. Ce sont les caractères que tu as tracés, et en les traçant, ta main touchait les intervalles qui séparent les lignes. Adieu, mon ami. Vous baiserez au bout de cette ligne, car j'y aurai baisé aussi. Là, là. Adieu. (*Corres.*, p. 206.)

For Diderot, her letters bear a trace of her physical presence as Sophie Volland's handwriting has left the stamp of her personality upon the letter. The letter having been written upon, held and kissed by the loved one, leaves a faint trace and reminder of her/his physical presence.

He refers to the pen and paper he has borrowed from the village priest at Gudmont to write his letter to Sophie Volland. The priest, of course, believed him to be about some important affairs of state, and certainly did not suspect him of writing to his mistress. For Diderot, this makes the act of writing this letter all the more amusing as he imagines that the quill he uses to write to his mistress has been used to write hellfire-and-brimstone sermons. Thus there is a very neat irony and antithesis between the sermons written using this quill by the priest, possibly condemning adulterers, and the nature of the letter Diderot is writing with this same quill:

Ô l'heureux pays où il n'y a ni plume, ni encre, ni papier, que ce qu'il en faut au curé pour inscrire le nom des enfants qu'on y fait. Je suis à douze lieues de Langres, dans un village où c'est à la complaisance du pasteur que je dois le plaisir de causer avec ma Sophie [...] L'homme saint qui m'a prêté le seul tronçon de plume qu'il ait, me croit occupé de quelque grande affaire; et n'a-t-il pas raison? (*Corres.*, p. 141.)

This reference to the actual writing of this letter and the provenance of the ink and paper with which it is written provides a strong atemporal link between Diderot at the time of writing and Sophie Volland when she reads the letter a few days later. Once again Diderot uses a concrete event anchored in his daily experience to evoke his love for Sophie Volland.

Love and Virtue.

A theme which runs throughout the letters to Sophie is virtue and Diderot's duty, as an *honnête homme* and lover, to lead a virtuous life. Here we will examine his notion of her great virtue and goodness, and his belief that, as her lover, he should follow her example, and live up to his ideal as the *honnête homme* in order to be worthy of her love for him. In our first example, he relates the idea of the merit of a lover's virtue to the physical enjoyment and comfort to be had from a loving relationship. In this letter, written in May 1759, he states that the physical enjoyment to be had holding a virtuous man in one's arms far outweighs the pleasure to be had by the common herd of lovers who do not value goodness:

Qu'il est doux d'ouvrir ses bras, quand c'est pour y recevoir et pour y serrer un homme de bien. C'est cette idée qui consacre les caresses; qu'est-ce que les caresses de deux amants, lorsqu'elles ne peuvent être l'expression du cas infini qu'ils font d'eux-mêmes? Qu'il y a de petitesse et de misère dans les transports des amants ordinaires! (*Corres.*, p. 100.)

This stress upon the pure nature of their love and moral probity is particularly interesting given the adulterous nature of their affair. Yet Diderot contrasts their love, which has a moral and emotional basis, with other relationships which are based solely upon physical attraction and desire. The force of this comparison resides

in the use of the simple antithesis with the “petitesse” and “misère” of the “transports” of other lovers. Diderot said earlier in this same letter that to be worthy of Sophie he must set himself a code of moral conduct and that Sophie Volland is to be the judge of his actions:

Faisons en sorte mon amie, que notre vie soit sans mensonge. Plus je vous estimerai, plus vous me serez chère; plus je vous montrerai de vertus, plus vous m'aimerez. Combien je redouterais le vice, quand je n'aurais pour juge que ma Sophie. (*Corres.*, p.100.)

It is very probable that this was also written to allay doubts about his fidelity and to show to what an extent he intended to become a reformed character due to the influence of his love. It is also very much a part of his journal project that Sophie is to be the judge of his actions. This also serves to illustrate how interlinked this project is with the discourse of love. This can all be seen to be an apologia for the adulterous nature of the affair, and a means of distancing it and differentiating it from the rather tawdry and sordid run-of-the-mill affairs of their contemporaries.

Diderot then depicts a step-by-step re-enactment of sorts of an embrace between himself and Sophie Volland. At the moral, physical and emotional climax of this embrace he then defies the right of the moral majority to deny them such innocent pleasure:

Venez, ma Sophie, venez. Je sens mon coeur échauffé. Cet attendrissement qui vous embellit va paraître sur ce visage. Il y est. Ah! Que n'êtes-vous à côté de moi pour en jouir! Si vous me voyiez dans ce moment, que vous seriez heureuse! Que ces yeux qui se mouillent, que ces regards, que toute cette physionomie serait à votre gré! Et pourquoi s'opiniâtrent-ils à troubler deux êtres dont le ciel se plaisait à contempler le bonheur? Ils ne savent pas tout le mal qu'ils font; il faut leur pardonner. (*Corres.*, p.100.)

Not only does he make a classical allusion to ‘le ciel’ as the heavens, or gods, which for an atheist is surely a concept devoid of meaning, but he also echoes the Gospels

here. He indirectly quotes St. Luke 23, V. 34. "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do". Diderot's use of this well-known phrase is to reinforce the status of the lovers, himself and Sophie Volland, as innocent martyrs of the ignorance and prejudice of others, as they have broken no laws of nature in loving each other. He borrows the discourse of the Bible and subverts it by using this quotation to condemn those who disapprove of his love affair.

In July of the same year, 1759, he swears his love and fidelity for her, in a manner which emphasizes her superior moral qualities:

Je n'ai point encore commis le crime, et je ne commencerai pas à le commettre; je suis tout pour vous, vous êtes tout pour moi; nous supporterons ensemble les peines qu'il plaira au sort de nous envoyer. Vous allégeriez les miennes j'allégerai les vôtres.

[...]

Je suis aimé, et je le suis de la plus digne des femmes. Je suis à ses pieds; c'est ma place, et je les baise. (*Corres.*, p. 120.)

Here we almost have an echo of the modern wedding vows of loving one another for better and worse. The image presented of Sophie Volland is one which recalls chivalric love, as Diderot represents himself as barely worthy to kiss her feet (incidentally another indirect Biblical reference here to Mary Magdalene). He employs another common stylistic feature to be found in his epistolary style, as here he refers to her as "la plus digne des femmes" indirectly, rather than writing "vous êtes" etc., this adds an air of gravitas and emphasis to the statement, as if it is not merely his opinion that she is the most worthy of women but an accepted fact.

Diderot often directly refers to himself in his letters to Sophie Volland as an *homme de bien* and links this moral but secular vision of the world to the exceptional

nature of their love for each other. Once again in the following assertion of love, from 15th July 1759, he connects this moral aspect of their love with the physical pleasure to be gained from a kiss:

Bonjour, ma tendre amie. Je vous baise, oh! Je vous baise bien, n'est-il pas vrai? Et c'est toujours le même plaisir pour moi... toujours. Ils n'en croiront rien; mais cela sera en dépit de tous ces proverbes, fussent-ils de Salomon. Cet homme-là avait trop de femmes pour entendre quelque chose à l'âme de l'homme de bien, qui n'en estime et n'en aime qu'une. (*Corres.*, p. 115.)

He contrasts his wisdom in matters of love and moral conduct with the epitome of wisdom: King Solomon. Their love is so exceptional and pure that King Solomon, spoiled by the pleasures of the harem, would not be able to comprehend it. Such cynical proverbs about the duration of love do not apply to a love so great as theirs, is the implication. Once again he borrows from a well-known source and then subverts it, which gives an air of added authority to his assertion.

A common feature of the discourse of love which has been employed in the last few examples is an emphasis upon the exceptional and rare nature of the love which the lovers experience. Lovers write about their love in a way which is intended to stress that their love transcends the everyday experience of the average person. Such expressions of eternal fidelity are particularly suited to epistolary discourse, as love letters tend to be written at the height of an affair and at moments of passionate intensity and because, in such a frame of mind, the writer is much more likely to write in general and hyperbolic terms, rather than to consider carefully the absolute truth of what s/he is writing. The discourse is naturally hyperbolic, and it is almost an unwritten convention of the discourse of love that both lovers voluntarily suspend their disbelief at the validity of such comments.

Three is Company, for Diderot.

Diderot often referred to his love for Mme Legendre and his great affection for Grimm in the letters he wrote to Sophie Volland. The need for the presence of both Grimm and Sophie Volland in order for him to be happy seems to be equally important. Much has been written in this context also of Diderot's references to Sophie Volland and her sister Mme Legendre.¹⁰

He frequently refers an expression of his love for Sophie Volland to a comment about her sister or Grimm. It almost seems that there has to be some form of tripartite structure behind expressions of affection or that friends must form a trio of sorts, with Diderot as the central link which joins the other two friends. We can find many instances of him indulging in some form of sexual fantasy about the nature of the two sisters' affection for each other. It is as if, in some manner, he transfers his desire for Sophie Volland to her sister, Mme Legendre, and gains some pleasure and titillation from imagining her replacing him as her lover:

Si votre soeur se résout à ce que nous lui demandons, et que vous nous ayez tous les deux, Sophie prenez garde. Ne la regardez pas plus tendrement que moi. Ne la baisez pas plus souvent. Si cela vous arrive, je le saurai. (*Corres.*, p. 101.)

As he apparently desires both sisters, he imagines that the sisters themselves experience sexual desire for each other. He transfers his own desires upon them in this fantasy. Such passages also recall *La Religieuse* in which the innocent young nun's seduction by the lesbian Mother Superior functions as much to titillate and amuse the male reader as to reveal the "denaturing" effects of monastic life. He often

¹⁰ Jacques Chouillet describes in some detail the tensions and jealousies which beset the relationship in *Denis Diderot, Sophie Volland. Un dialogue à une voix* (Paris, 1986).

refers to the relationship between the two sisters in rather equivocal terms, hinting at lesbian undertones in their behaviour. For example Diderot writes of his habit of blowing kisses at a portrait of Sophie Volland in his possession. Since its glass is broken, he cannot kiss it directly now, and this leads him to think of the manner in which Emilie, Mme Legendre's daughter, blows kisses at her mother. This in turn causes him to reconsider the nature of the kisses between the two sisters:

Depuis que la glace est cassée, je fais le petit bec; j'approche mes doigts de ma bouche et je vous envoie des baisers, comme Emilie à sa maman. Nous nous rapprocherons; et ces lèvres se poseront encore sur celles que j'aime. En attendant, je ne permets votre bouche qu'à votre soeur. Je ne souffre point, je dirais presque que j'aime, à lui succéder. Il me semble qu'alors je presse son âme entre la vôtre et la mienne. C'est un flocon de neige qui se résoudra peut-être entre deux charbons ardents. Qu'elle fut aimable, le jour que nous nous séparâmes! (*Corres.*, p. 126.)

There is even the rather surprising suggestion that their mother has hinted to Diderot about her daughter's attraction to other women:

Madame votre mère prétend que votre soeur aime les femmes, et il est sûr qu'elle vous aime beaucoup; et puis cette manière voluptueuse et tendre dont elle se penche quelque fois sur vous; et puis ces doigts singulièrement pressés entre les vôtres! (*Corres.*, p. 223.)

One gains the impression of Diderot getting carried away by his own fantasy as he enumerates and dwells upon the suspect actions of Mme Legendre.

We will now concentrate upon Diderot's comments about Grimm and Sophie Volland, forming a trio. The trio, or Diderot's need to express his affection for two people in his letters, is less ambivalent when he writes of his affection for Grimm and Sophie, although his affection for Grimm has also been seen as a sign of crypto-homosexuality. It is as if he is trying (probably unconsciously) to compensate for the failure of his marriage by creating strong bonds of affection with Grimm and Sophie Volland, who, he hopes, will somehow fill the emotional gap left by the death of his

parents and the unhappiness of his home life. He frequently connects his love for Grimm with his love for Sophie Volland and vice versa, and in so doing he seems to seek the emotional support often to be found in a family. For example, he often bases such declarations of love for both Sophie Volland and Grimm upon similar structures as the declarations of love studied earlier. In the letter written on 25th May 1759 to Sophie Volland, he mentions a play he is going to see purely so that he can provide a review for Grimm. This then causes him to mention his great affection for Grimm and Sophie Volland:

J'irai ce soir à la comédie nouvelle et c'est encore pour lui que j'irai. Les trois belles âmes que la vôtre, la mienne et la sienne! S'il m'en manquait une des deux autres, qui est-ce qui remplirait ce vide terrible? Vivez tous les deux, si vous ne voulez pas que je sois la voix qui crie dans le désert. (*Corres.*, pp. 100-101.)

This reference to Matthew (3, v. 3) 'The voice of one crying in the desert', which refers to John the Baptist, is a vivid description of the utter desolation he would face without the affection of one of these two dear friends. Paris would become an arid wilderness for him, without affection and love. This adaptation of another well-known phrase from the Bible adds an extra force to this bleak expression of loneliness due to the force of its cultural and religious resonances. This further serves to underline his emotional dependency upon Grimm and Sophie Volland. Later in the same year, Diderot writes from Langres on July 31st 1759, about their fantasy of the "château" to Sophie Volland, and he states their need, in this imaginary home, for a third person to act as their confidant and friend:

Si pendant mon absence il vous arrive de retourner quelquefois au petit château, que je sois avec vous. Je rêve aussi de mon côté à perfectionner cet établissement, et je trouve qu'on y aurait besoin d'un personnage qui fit entre eux le rôle de conciliateur commun. Qu'en pensez-vous? Tout bien considéré,

j'aimerais mieux que cette fonction fût confiée à une femme qu'à un homme.
(*Corres.*, p. 125.)

Even in this shared daydream of the "château" he feels the need to have an intermediary and a third person present.

There are numerous examples in the *Correspondance* when Diderot writes to Grimm and describes both his affection for Grimm and his love for Sophie Volland, in the same ways that he writes of his love for both friends in his letters to Sophie Volland:

Est-ce que vous ne saurez pas que nous sommes trois? Ne vous offensez pas, mon ami, que je la compte avec nous. En vérité c'est la plus belle âme de femme, comme la vôtre est la plus belle âme d'homme, qu'il y ait sous le ciel.
(*Corres.*, p. 102-103.)

Diderot generally refers to the double loss he suffers when both friends are absent. It is relevant to note that Diderot's correspondence with Sophie Volland is not governed by any formal constraints based upon her gender. He appears to consider her to be a true friend on an equal footing with Grimm, but with the added advantage that she is a woman he is in love with, as well as a friend. He recounts, on 11th May 1759, how the Baron d'Holbach told a rather shocking story as was his wont, and then says how this would not have been deemed shocking by Sophie Volland who had none of the false feminine modesty of some women:

Il n'aurait ni embarrassé ni offensé ma Sophie, parce que ma Sophie est homme et femme, quand il lui plaît. Il n'aurait ni offensé ni embarrassé mon ami Grimm, parce qu'il permet à l'imagination ses écarts, et que le mot ne lui déplaît que quand il est mal placé. Ô combien il fut regretté, cet ami! (*Corres.*, p. 97.)

He often links comments about her with comments about Grimm as if one name causes him immediately to associate it with the name of his other friend. He appears to have associatively linked Sophie Volland with Grimm. Diderot repeats 'il n'aurait

ni embarrassé ni offensé' yet reserves the order of the past participles to underline the complementarity and similarity between the temperaments of Grimm and Sophie Volland.

His expression of his love for both Grimm and Sophie is very reminiscent of the most famous trio of friends in antiquity, Orestes, Pylades and Electra.¹¹ Pylades is an exceptional friend who is willing to lay down his life for his friend Orestes, and share his punishment and subsequent exile for matricide. Pylades is also the fiancé of Orestes' sister Electra. Euripides represents the three as inseparable, and Pylades as the most loyal of friends possible. In *Orestes*, the chorus says about Pylades:

See where thy brother comes condemned to die, and with him Pylades, most loyal of friends, true as a brother, guiding the feeble steps of Orestes, as he paces carefully at his side.¹²

Most strikingly Electra is described as having the spirit of a man in a formulation that rather recalls Diderot's description of Sophie as having both masculine and feminine qualities. Euripides depiction of Electra is even more striking given the extremely low status and esteem in which women were held in ancient Greece. Orestes says of his sister to Pylades:

O thou that hast the spirit of a man, though thy body clearly shows thee a tender woman, how far more worthy though to live than die! This, Pylades, is the peerless woman thou wilt lose to thy sorrow, or, shouldst thou live, wilt marry to thy joy!¹³

¹¹ Indeed the *conte*, *Les Deux amis de Bourbonne*, starts with a direct reference to Orestes and Pylades : Il y avait ici deux hommes, que l'on pourrait appeler les Oreste et Pylade de Bourbonne. L'un se nommait Olivier, et l'autre Félix; ils étaient nés le même jour, dans la même maison, et de deux sœurs. p.75, *Contes et Entretiens*, ed. Pérol, Lucette, (Paris, 1977), *Les Deux amis de Bourbonne*, pp. 75-88.

¹² Euripides, *Orestes*, in *The Plays of Euripides*, translated by Coleridge, Edward, P., (London, 1891), p. 312.

¹³ Euripides, p. 319.

Diderot appears very much to be borrowing this framework for describing his friendships with Grimm and Sophie and in using these terms he stresses their exemplarity. Theirs is not a banal friendship but one akin to that of the most loyal friends in antiquity. Hence by borrowing the discourse of Euripides, he dramatizes his own relationships and casts himself and his friends in an heroic mould. Like Orestes, Diderot has the support of a male friend and in Sophie he has the love of a woman who, like Electra, is seen to possess masculine virtues.

However, in September 1759, Diderot realizes that his excitement at the return of Grimm is not as great as it would once have been, as his love for Sophie Volland and seeing her has become his priority:

J'aime Grimm. Dans d'autres circonstances mon coeur aurait tressailli à la seule pensée que j'allais le recouvrer et l'embrasser; avec quelle impatience n'aurais-je pas attendu cet homme si cher! A peine y pensai-je. C'est vous, c'est vous seule qui m'occupez. Vous anéantissez tout dans mon coeur et dans mon esprit. Je ne connois plus ni bonheur ni peine qui me soucie, si j'ai sur vous l'alarme la plus légère. Est-ce ainsi que vous aimez? Est-ce ainsi que vous voulez être aimée? (*Corres.*, p. 159.)

Such passages in the *Correspondance* have led many critics to consider this relationship to have been rather more than a close friendship, due to the supposedly homo-erotic manner in which he writes of his affection for Grimm. we believe that this neglects to take into account the rather different masculine manners in the eighteenth century and the effusive character of Diderot. Diderot took great pride in his sensibility and the fact that he was an emotional man, and here he is referring to his usual lover-like excitement at being reunited with Grimm which pales into insignificance, however, when compared with his love for Sophie Volland. When he writes about homosexuality, Diderot always does so in a condemnatory, if not

blatantly homophobic, manner, and there seems to be no real evidence in the *Correspondance* that this does anything other than reflect his real views. Of course even this apparent dislike of homosexuality could be read as someone attempting to cover up their real inclinations by the use of a smoke screen. At this distance in time it is impossible to ascertain the true nature of Diderot's friendship with Grimm. In any case an attempt to read it in terms of sexuality falls outside the scope of our present study.

Diderot's friendship with Grimm is given special prominence in the *Salons*, in dialogues with Grimm and references to him. It is also very much emphasized elsewhere in the *Correspondance littéraire* (where the *Salons* were first published). As was said in a previous chapter when we considered Diderot's public persona as reflected in the *Correspondance littéraire*, it was very useful for Grimm to depict himself, and to be depicted, as so great a friend of such a figure as the editor of the *Encyclopédie*. These intellectual connections would convince his readership of the crowned heads of Europe that they were privy to unique articles and insights written by those at the cutting edge of French thought. This great friendship is also a literary construct, seen outside the letters we are concerned with, and in a wider context of the *Correspondance littéraire*. For example, in the *Salons de 1767*, he discusses the relative merits of various portraits which have been made of him and he describes how Grimm had had a painting of him (by an obscure painter, Garand) engraved and was waiting for him to immortalize it with a dedication. Such is the representation throughout the works of a devoted friendship between the two men. Once again a need to have a portrait of a dear friend is equally standard behaviour for lovers, and

part of the discourse of love as it is of friendship, the two being very much interlinked. Diderot may well have confused the journalistic relationship with a true friendship, or rather Grimm's journalistic voice with his real nature, as opposed to his nature as an opportunist and self-appointed courtier and aide to German nobles.

The letters he writes to Grimm fulfil two functions: he is able to write of his love for Sophie Volland as well as keep him up to date with the latest news. Diderot had many other close friends such as Damilaville and Falconet but none of these friendships were as intense nor were the letters written to other friends as revelatory of Diderot's emotional needs as his letters to Grimm and Sophie Volland. Such as this letter sent to Grimm in Geneva on 1st May 1759:

Je vais donc passer la matinée à causer avec vous; oui mon ami, la matinée toute entière. J'ai tout plein de choses à vous dire, mais la plus pressée, celle que je sens à chaque instant, c'est qu'il n'y a personne ici depuis que vous n'y êtes plus. Je n'ai personne à qui je puisse parler d'elle; qu'elle à qui j'aime parler de vous [...].(*Corres.*, p. 88.)

Not only is this very similar to passages we could find in a letter written to Sophie Volland, but as well Diderot refers directly to his need to have Grimm as a confidant to whom he can speak of his affair with Sophie Volland. He also states that he enjoys telling Sophie Volland about Grimm. As we have seen, there is a certain complementarity here in the roles which his friends play in his life. For him, his affection for Grimm has to be reflected and counterbalanced by his love for Sophie Volland and vice versa.

A leitmotif which we have seen in the letters written to Sophie Volland is that her virtuous nature makes him strive to become a better person. Diderot also refers to Grimm, in a similar manner, as someone of great worth. Certain passages of

Diderot's letters to Grimm and Sophie Volland are practically interchangeable as he expresses his love and esteem for them both in the same style. Of course the correspondence with Sophie Volland also contains passages which emphasize the sexual nature of Diderot's relationship with her which differentiate it from his friendship with Grimm. In the following excerpt from a letter written to Grimm on 1st May 1759, we can see just how close Diderot's declarations of love and virtue to Grimm are to those to Sophie Volland, and how Diderot's mode of expression is very much the same in these letters:

Mais vous pensez à tout; vous sentez si juste; vous faites tout bien; sans cesse vous m'humiliez. Et elle m'humilie aussi quelquefois: en vérité, je ne sais pas comment j'aime si fort deux êtres qui font que je me méprise. (*Corres.*, p. 88.)

He places himself in the position of a morally inferior person, who is not worthy of the love of two such exceptional people. As we have already seen, the exceptional nature of one's loved one is very much part of the discourse of love, and for Diderot the discourses of love and friendship are extremely similar. It should be noted that self-improvement due to loving a morally superior person is an important aspect of love which is discussed in Plato's *Symposium*. Young men are advised only to become the lover of a virtuous man whose experience they can learn from. Eryximachus, the doctor, concludes his speech about the nature of love by emphasizing the positive force of love, which is virtuous, and not a mere expression of lust:

So then love in general exercises a multifarious and great, or, to speak more accurately, an omnipotent sway, but it is the love whose object is good and whose fulfilment is attended by sobriety and virtue, whether in heaven or earth, that possesses the greater power, and is the author of all our happiness, and

makes it possible for us to live in harmony and concord with our fellow-creatures and with the gods, our masters.¹⁴

Notions of Platonic love and neo-Platonism, with their great influence upon French Renaissance poetry and culture had become part of the standard lexicon and imagery of love by the eighteenth century. Love is an important means by which a Platonic philosopher, following Socrates' example, can reach an eventual understanding of ultimate beauty and truth:

When a man starting from this sensible world and making his way upward by a right use of his feeling of love for boys, begins to catch sight of that beauty, he is very near his goal. This is the right way of approaching or being initiated into the mysteries of love, to begin with examples of beauty in this world, and using them as steps to ascend continually with that absolute beauty as one's aim, from one instance of physical beauty to two and from two to all, then from physical beauty to moral beauty, and from moral beauty to the beauty of knowledge, until from knowledge of various kinds one arrives at the supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty, and knows at last what absolute beauty is.¹⁵

Such is the standard philosophical background to the discourse of love as practised by Diderot. It is vital for him to place his discourse of love outside models based upon Christian morality. Since such references had become part of the French discourse of love, to allude consciously or even unconsciously to classical works was unexceptional for an educated person in the eighteenth century. This could be seen to raise the question of homosexuality again, but we see this rather in the light of an emphasis upon the imparting and sharing of knowledge in a relationship.

The closing formulae of Diderot's letters to Grimm are often rather akin to those which might be written to a lover as in the same letter written on 1st May 1759:

¹⁴ Plato, *Symposium*, translated by Hamilton Walter (London, 1951), p. 57.

¹⁵ Plato, p. 94.

Adieu, le seul ami que j'aie et que je veuille avoir. Et qui est-ce qui serait digne de vous remplacer? Je vous tends les bras d'ici, mais je n'ose vous appeler. Soyez content. Soyez heureux. Et que je le sache. (*Corres.*, p. 95.)

Once again such expressions are an attempt at breaking down the physical and temporal barriers of absence with which the letter-writer is faced.

In a letter written on 20th May, in the same year, Diderot closes a letter using a version of the same closing formula: 'Du moins soyez heureux, et me l'apprenez. Mon ami, je me jette entre vos bras d'ici, et je me soulage. Un mot de réponse.' This closing formula, with its very physical and vivid expression of Diderot's wish and need to be with his friend, reveals both the depth of his emotional vulnerability and his reliance upon Grimm to fulfil this need. This also reveals to what a great extent Grimm's tardiness in replying to letters affected him. For Diderot, Grimm's frequent absences are often hard to bear and his letters at least provide some kind of solace for the loss of his companionship. He finds some comfort by rereading Grimm's letters whilst waiting for the next letter to arrive. On 3rd July 1759, he was to write:

Il n'y a plus que vos lettres que je puisse lire avec plaisir et attendre avec impatience. Je reviens sur les anciennes, au défaut des nouvelles. (*Corres.*, p. 112.)

However Diderot's wait for the next post to bring a letter from Grimm seems never ending. Such is his sense of loss due to his friend's absence that ten days later he returns to the same question:

Trois éternelles semaines sans recevoir un mot de vous. J'oublie tout, excepté que mon ami ne se souvient guère de moi. (*Ibid.*)

The impression gained of Diderot's personality by reading the *Correspondance* and especially the aspects of his letters studied in this chapter is of an emotionally needy man, who sought the fulfilment and affection lacking in his marriage in his

close friendships. The intensity of his friendship with Grimm is revealed in the strength of language employed and in the almost palpable tones of distress in which a letter that Diderot wrote, (which was never sent to Grimm) in 1781 is written.¹⁶ He had finally realized that Grimm's real views and interests were *anti-philosophic* and that he had used him as a useful tool by which to gain favour with Catherine the Great, and other crowned heads:

Mon ami, vous avez la gangrène; peut être n'a t'elle [pas fait] assez de progrès pour être incurable.¹⁷

Diderot's distress and contempt for his friend's views, which he sees as a complete betrayal of what he thought was a true friendship, is evident in the use of physical expressions in the letter to describe Grimm's moral, decay and infection. In the *Correspondance*, the reader follows the beginning of this friendship starting with the end of his friendship with Jean-Jacques Rousseau which Grimm and Mme d'Epinau orchestrated to a large extent and then we see his eventual realization, many years later, that his friend has a hidden perfidious side which he never suspected. We shall consider such conflictual letters in some detail in a later chapter.

The rhetoric of love and emotion is central to Diderot's letter-writing and his whole epistolary persona in such letters is based upon sensibility. Diderot's attestations of love to Sophie are firmly rooted in his everyday experience and so this emphasizes their authenticity. Love and friendship can be seen to share the same discourse in Diderot's letters to Sophie and Grimm, although it must be noted that

¹⁶ This letter is discussed in greater depth in Chapter seven when Diderot's use of polemic in letters is studied.

¹⁷ *Correspondance*, XV., Varloot, Jean, (Paris, 1970), pp. 210-227, Lettre 925, p. 226.

the letters he wrote to Grimm are much more affectionate in tone than letters written to other male friends such as Damilaville. In terms of Diderot's letters the heart can be seen to rule the head and in chapter seven we will see that Diderot makes much more use of pathos as a tool of persuasion than he does of logos.

A very important aspect of Diderot's epistolary personae is humour. It is a vital component of Diderot's letters, especially those to Sophie Volland. The mask of the joker is one of the many epistolary masks he adopts. Diderot's persona as a joke teller is one that is very difficult to define, precisely because his use of humour runs through all of his writing. This is very much a feature of Diderot as a conversationalist. An important skill in conversation is, of course, a talent to amuse. Here we shall attempt to analyse some of the prevalent forms of humour and joke-telling in Diderot's letters, as these are very much features of his epistolary discourse.

A great difficulty when considering humour is that much of it is based upon contextual elements and, especially in terms of epistolary humour, we have the added complication that many jokes or pieces of humour are primarily focussed upon shared experiences or 'in' jokes between the correspondents. All humour is based upon a field of cultural experience and knowledge which is shared by the joke teller and her/his audience. Once a joke has to be explained, it has become, at the very least, partially redundant if not dead. This is the problem which faces those who wish to attempt a reading of humorous texts for which they do not share the same historical or cultural references as their original intended audience. Having said this, once one has become acclimatized to certain contexts many humorous works do function according to certain fairly universal and generic principles (at least as far as European culture is concerned). Walter Nash comments that many of the most complex jokes have a very short shelf life for these reasons:

It is an odd reflection that some of the most perceptive, ingenious, 'intellectual' jokes are so conditioned by topical reference that they die within months not to be resurrected, even by half a page of exegesis; while others, devoid of all import above the commonplace, survive in their impoverished way from generation to generation.¹

We shall consider, in the 'Letter and Conversation', Diderot's depiction of himself at the centre of a sociable group that places a high value upon a member of the group's ability to participate in the exchange of witticisms. Inter-activity between the speaker and listener or between the writer and reader is a vital aspect of humour. Not only do the joke-teller and her/his target audience need to share a certain amount of cultural and linguistic knowledge, but the reader also has to enter fully into the reading or listening process. There is a connection between the need for the reader to participate actively in the joke and the process of the seduction of the reader. Humour is an ideal means by which the text can seduce the reader. As Nash sees it, the listener to a tall tale has to accept the apparent logic of the joke, in order for her/him to be tricked later by the joke-teller:

In the transaction of any tall tale, there is an *executant*, who fixes the rules, and a *respondent*, who accepts the conditions offered, and paradoxically allows himself to be duped in order to enjoy the superiority of his insight. A joke can be a perverse experience, psychologically; the understanding is degraded so that it may rise again.²

A joke needs to be clearly intended and signposted as a humorous comment if the reader/listener is going to respond to it in the appropriate manner:

If the intention to joke is not clearly signalled, making a sort of contract between executant and respondent, laughter is compromised.³

¹ Nash, Walter, *The Language of Humour. Style and Technique in Comic Discourse* (New York, 1985), pp. xii-xiii. Other works on the analysis of comedy which are useful are : Ross, Alison, *The Language of Humour* (London, 1998), Chiaro, Delia, *The Language of Jokes. Analysing Verbal Play* (London, 1992), and Bergson, Henri, *Le Rire* (Paris, 1908).

² Nash, p. 5.

³ Nash, p. 6.

As Diderot's letters which contain humorous elements are largely written to friends and acquaintances this facilitates this contract, for the good reason that his taste for certain types of jokes was known by his addressees and the manner in which he would introduce humorous material in conversation would be recognized.

Wit and satire were great philosophical tools. Sardonic wit will be discussed in terms of the combative letters Diderot wrote to the Père Berthier, in chapter seven. Thus this use of wit will be returned to later. One only has to think of the works of Voltaire or Montesquieu to realize the important place humour had in the discourse of the Enlightenment, not only to entertain the reader but also to sugar the pill of the writer's message.

An ability to be an amusing conversationalist was highly valued in court circles and this was a great feature of the etiquette manual - *Il Cortegiano* - which really launched the whole genre. Mercedes Blanco sees the practice advocated in this book as being representative of the place that wit had in courtly circles:

Or, de toutes les règles applicables au sein de cette pratique quotidienne de la parole, les plus abondantes et détaillées concernant ce que Castiglione appelle les mots plaisants et les facéties[...]. Le long développement sur les *facezie* est introduit en ces termes: "[...] qu'il ne lui manque jamais [au courtisan] des discours bons et convenables à son interlocuteur, et qu'il sache avec une certaine douceur réjouir les esprits de ceux qui l'écoutent et avec des mots plaisants et des facéties les induire judicieusement à la gaieté et au rire, de sorte que, sans jamais en arriver à ennuyer, il fasse continuellement plaisir."⁴

This holds true also for Diderot's social circle, as reflected in his letters, who appear to value friends who can participate fully in humorous convivial conversation.

⁴ Blanco, Mercedes, 'Esprit', in *Dictionnaire raisonné de la politesse et du savoir-vivre*, ed. Montandon, Alain, (Paris, 1995), pp. 329 – 358. (p. 339).

An aspect of wit which is not particularly discernible in Diderot's letters is the popular use of mockery in social gatherings as a form of verbal jousting, in which remarks made about others were apt to be quite hurtful even if they were wittily phrased. Such humour could at times be especially cruel and mocking, and this was another area of conversation about which the etiquette manuals provided guidance:

La raillerie doit d'abord être débarrassée de ses épines, purgée de son agressivité. M. de Scudéry la distingue clairement de la satire acerbe, qui attaque sans ménagements:

“Il faut qu'il y ait un si grand intervalle entre la raillerie et la satire qu'on ne puisse jamais prendre l'une pour l'autre. Je sais bien qu'on dit que si la raillerie n'est un peu piquante, elle ne plaît pas; mais pour moi, je la considère autrement. En effet, je veux bien qu'elle soit surprenante, et qu'elle touche même sensiblement ceux à qui elle s'adresse, mais je ne veux pas que les piquères en soient profondes.” (*Les Conversations ...*, p. 572.)⁵

We shall address the issue of humour and cruelty in relation to the *Correspondance* later in this chapter. According to Morvan de Bellegarde such humour and wit needed to be practiced ideally amongst a select circle of like-minded people:

On peut faire le plaisant avec des gens polis, et qui ont de l'esprit, et qui entendent raillerie, et qui entrent dans l'intention de celui qui parle. (*Réflexions sur la politesse des mœurs, avec des maximes pour la société civile*, 1697).⁶

Humour in Reported Conversations.

Bearing these concepts in mind, we shall begin by considering the humour in Diderot's letters from Grandval. In these letters, he is at pains to present himself as forming an integral part of this group. we will start by considering how some of these

⁵ Quoted by Bertrand, Dominique, 'Raillerie' in *Dictionnaire raisonné de la politesse et du savoir-vivre*, pp. 731-750. (p. 740).

⁶ Bertrand, Dominique, *Op. cit.* p. 748.

reported anecdotes function as humour. When discussing conversation and the letter, We will note how Diderot frames his reported anecdotes in an attempt to replace them in their original context. This framing of these reported anecdotes is also an effective manner of signalling to the reader that the anecdote to be recounted is intended to be humorous. In the following example Diderot relates a tale which Galiani has told his friends. This anecdote itself functions in a manner that is generic to many forms of humour: a statement is made, followed by a rejoinder from another speaker. These generic markers clearly signal the intention to make a humorous comment. In addition to this, the appearance of the Abbé Galiani himself in the letters functions in a similar manner because, when he is mentioned, a reported anecdote or witticism generally follows:

Le petit abbé y sera aussi avec ses contes. Je ne sais où il les prend, mais il ne tarit point. Il nous disait la dernière fois que nous l'avons eu, qu'une femme se mourait, et se mourait d'une certaine maladie cruelle qu'on prend avec beaucoup de plaisir; et que le prêtre qui l'exhortait lui disait: « Allons, Madame un peu de résignation; offrez à Dieu votre mal. – Beau présent à lui offrir! » répondait la malade. (*Corres.*, p. 447.)

This joke functions around the ambiguity of the word 'offrir' and the deliberate misunderstanding of the context in which the word is employed by a woman clearly suffering from venereal disease. This is what Walter Nash calls the 'locus' of the joke, the central point around which the humour of the joke is organized. Here the contract of conversation is broken by a 'defective exchange', as the woman alters the context in which the word 'offrir' is used.

Diderot represents this joke as one of the many humorous comments made by Galiani which he has enjoyed. Thus, his representation of this anecdote as a choice morsel of Galiani's humour indicates to Sophie Volland the light in which it should

be read. He depicts himself both as a joke teller but even more frequently as someone who enjoys and appreciates the jokes told by others such as the Abbé Galiani. He emphasizes his own appreciation of humour and sense of humour in this manner.

A large proportion of the humorous elements related in Diderot's letters are jokes which have been told to him by others. His friends are often given the *beau rôle*. But in so doing he valorizes himself because he forms part of this group. This is particularly striking in our next example. Here, Diderot plays the role of the straight man in a comic duo, who provides the feeder line for the comic so that s/he can reply with a pithy punchline. Galiani provides the locus of the joke in relating what is purely a descriptive comment about the trees at Versailles to the courtiers themselves:

Je disais des arbres du parc de Versailles qu'ils étaient hauts, droits et minces, et l'abbé Galiani ajoutait: « Comme les courtisans ». L'abbé est inépuisable de mots et de traits plaisants. (*Corres.*, p. 234.)

Many of the humorous passages in the *Correspondance* function in this manner.

Diderot often provides the situation or context upon which a humorous comment can be built by others. He presents himself as being surrounded by many entertaining friends, whilst also being congenial company and a consummate humourist himself. Such letters give Sophie some of the entertainment and enjoyment to be gained from the pleasant company she is deprived of when she is with her mother at Isle. In a letter he writes to her, he introduces the topic of the Chinese by providing her with some of the surprising and interesting details the Père Hoop recounted to him:

Encore un mot de nos Chinois, et puis plus. Ils ne savent ce que c'est que la promenade. Celui qui sortirait de chez lui sans affaire et qu'on verrait aller et venir sous des arbres passerait pour des fous. (*Corres.*, p. 256.)

Having set the tone for the next anecdote, he then uses the borrowed voice of the Père Hoop to relate the self-possession the Chinese are supposed to have, and their skill in trickery:

« Une fois, dit le père Hoop, je fus un de ces sots ou de ces étourdis-là. C'est-à-dire que je fus trompé par un commerçant Chinois et fripon. J'allai lui représenter combien il m'avait lésé. « Cela est vrai, me répondit-il, vous l'êtes beaucoup; mais il faut payer. » je n'en pus jamais tirer autre chose, et je payai. En recevant mon argent: « Etranger, me dit-il, tu vois bien que tu n'as pas gagné un sol à te mettre en colère. Eh! que ne payais-tu tout de suite, sans te fâcher? Cela eût été beaucoup mieux. »

Here the humour in the situation resides in the conflict between the cultural expectations and shared sense of logic common to both the reader and the Père Hoop on the one hand, and the dishonest merchant's behaviour on the other. The logic of probability is compelling, and humorous anecdotes or situations often play with the reader/listener's expectations and sense of logic in this way. One can readily imagine that the merchant was even more wily than the Père Hoop believed him to be, and that his actions were not really representative of any unusual form of logic, but of a man who profited from the credulity of foreigners by duping them. Jokes and humorous anecdotes are often revealing of the joke teller's vision of the world, by showing us what they themselves believe to be amusing and absurd. The anecdote which Père Hoop told has the teller - rather unusually - as the butt of the joke although the Chinese merchant's audacity is meant to astound us. Somewhat unexpectedly perhaps, we do not gain any negative impression of the Chinese from Diderot's letters, rather one of naïve amazement and admiration for what was seen as a successful secular society. Foreigners are not used as stereotypical butts of humour in these letters.

This anecdote was reworked many times and has been used to identify Diderot as the author of a passage in the *Histoire des deux Indes*. Much of the information the Père Hoop gave him about the Chinese was also re-used by him in this work. The Père Hoop's amusing and interesting comments, reported in the letters, demonstrate Diderot's great thirst and enthusiasm for new knowledge.

Diderot often borrows the voice of others in his philosophical writings. But this stratagem can also be discerned in his letters. A humorous tale about Montesquieu and the problems he encountered with spoken English, despite having a very good reading knowledge of the language, is told as if it was told by Montesquieu himself:

Il y avait bientôt une heure que je lui parlais anglais, lorsqu'il me dit :
« Monsieur, je vous prie de me parler en anglais, car je n'entends pas le français. »

Then, in the same letter, Suard is reported and used as another borrowed voice in which to relate another humorous anecdote that is connected to Montesquieu:

Suard, à qui le même président disait un jour, en causant religion: « Convenez, Monsieur Suard, que la confession est une bonne chose. –D'accord, Monsieur le président, lui répondit Suard, mais convenez aussi que l'absolution en est une mauvaise. » (*Corres.*, p. 443.)

Many examples of Diderot re-using tales in his literary works which he wrote about in his letters can be found. Many of the incidents in *Jacques le fataliste* were inspired either by real events which he had heard about or stories which he had been told. He relates a story about sharing a carriage with a draughtsman for the *Encyclopédie* and a woman known to the latter, whom Diderot suspects is a prostitute. The incident which he recounts has an unexpected comic and embarrassing outcome for him. The comic circumstances of getting out of a carriage

with a prostitute, in the full view of many passers-by, is then re-used by him years later in *Jacques le fataliste*. It appears first in the *Correspondance* thus:

Mais crac! à l'entrée de la rue voilà une des soupentes qui casse, et Destouches qui va donner de la tête contre celle de la fille, et moi de la tête contre un des côtés du carrosse. Destouches descend par le côté renversé; moi et la demoiselle par l'autre côté, et cela à la vue de la compagnie la plus nombreuse et la moins choisie. (*Corres.*, p. 243.)

This form of humour is very visual in nature and akin to the sort of slapstick to be found in theatrical farces. Here, rather than all the comic force of the anecdote residing in one word or phrase, the reader is presented with a comic *tableau*. This is what Walter Nash defines as a free-flowing anecdote. It could possibly be posited that such free-flowing anecdotes are particularly suited to the narrative flow of the letter form whose structure is fairly open ended and generically ill defined.

A similar loose anecdotal structure is illustrated by Diderot's description of his accident caused by running around teasing swans. The general comic force of the anecdote here resides in his self-representation in this rather improbable light. The fact that this is a middle aged man, indulging in such activities makes this incident even more ridiculous and humorous:

Je m'amusais à les exercer, et quand ils étaient arrivés à un des bouts de leur empire, aussitôt je leur apparaissais à l'autre. Pour cet effet il fallait que je courusse de toute ma vitesse. [...] Cela ne m'a pas empêché de plaisanter sur ma chute qui me tient en pantoufle, la jambe étendue sur un tabouret. (*Corres.*, p. 221.)

Self-deprecation.

Diderot often represents himself in a self-deprecatory light in his letters to Sophie Volland:

Je m'arrondis comme une boule. Mme Legendre, comme vous m'allez détester! Mon ventre lutte avec effort contre les boutons de ma veste, et s'indigne de ne pouvoir briser cet obstacle, surtout après dîner. (*Corres.*, p. 276.)

Here much of the humour is based upon the vivid image of the ever-expanding gluttonous *philosophe*.⁷ The theme of his gluttony runs through his self-depiction in the *Correspondance* like a leitmotif. Another example of this can be found in a free-flowing anecdote which has a comic climax of sorts in Diderot's refusal to follow the advice given by the doctors:

Dimanche passé, Damilaville me persuada qu'il fallait guérir de tout cela avec du vin de champagne et de la bonne compagnie. Son remède me plut. J'acceptai. Lundi donc, le ventre à table, le dos au feu, je causai, je disputai, je plaisantai, je bus, je mangeai, depuis une heure jusqu'à dix du soir. La nuit du lundi au mardi a été affreuse. J'ai cru que je mourrais. Le mardi, en dépit du docteur Dubourg, du chirurgien Louis, de Mme Diderot, j'étais habillé à neuf heures et dans les rues à dix. Je n'en ai pas été plus mal. (*Corres.*, pp. 318-319.)

This is an example of the stereotypical humorous representation of doctors. In this passage the repetition of his actions in an almost feverish manner mirrors his self-representation as an enthusiast.

Self-deprecation is also a comic device that defuses a possible negative reaction by others. Diderot attempts to disarm his reader, in both senses of the word. He often represents himself in a humorous light in letters to his friend Grimm. When he lost a stick - for example - he wrote a note to his friend to ask if he had found it. But his missive shows full awareness of the stick as an affectation of style on his

⁷ Servanne Woodward writes about the significance of scatological references in the letters to Sophie Volland. She sees this as a manifestation of Diderot's physical desire for Sophie, as a means of making the visceral present in the letter. 'Sur l' échange épistolaire et gastr(onom)ique des lettres à Sophie Volland', *Diderot Studies*, xxv (93) 135-146.

part. He writes in a consciously *précieux* style to mirror the foppishness of using a stick as a mere accessory:

En attendant, ne pourriez-vous pas regarder au coin de votre cheminée pour voir si vous n'y découvriez pas la grande, la belle, la sublime canne?

Si elle n'y est pas, je crains bien qu'elle n'ait passé entre les mains d'un autre possesseur. La pauvre canne sentira toute la différence de sa nouvelle et de sa première condition. Je la portais en l'air, comme quelqu'un qui la montre aux passants; au lieu que la voilà réduite à servir d'appui à quelque lourd et pesant personnage dont elle éprouvera toute la pesanteur à chaque pas. Ma canne! Ma pauvre canne!

Ce qui me console de l'avoir perdue, c'est que c'était un domestique tout à fait inutile que je ne remplacerai pas. (*Corres.*, p. 1103.)

Here he uses a favoured trope of hyperbole and the comic device of borrowing a form of discourse more appropriate to other situations. The stick here is personified as if it were a real servant. This all serves to emphasize his affectation and - hence - the ridiculous nature of using this stick when he does not really need to.

When one thinks of humour in Diderot's letters, it comes as rather a surprise to find that there are several humorous passages in letters written by Diderot to his wife from Russia. These letters contrast somewhat with the impression of his marriage which we gain from reading complaints about his wife in his letters to Grimm and Sophie Volland written some twenty years before. In these letters from Russia there is much humour in his self-representation, and there probably would have been no great place left for vanity in letters written after so many years of marriage. Diderot had found the long journey to Russia to be ageing. Here he links old men with the dilapidated armchairs in which they spend so much time that they become barely distinguishable from the latter:

Remuez le vieux fauteuil, il crie, il se désassemble; remuez le vieux corps qui se repose dans le vieux fauteuil, même inconvenient; remuez la vieille âme qui repose dans le vieux corps, c'est toute la même chose. [...]

Voici mon épitaphe: « Il y a longtemps qu'il est mort, et ses enfants le cherchent encore dans son vieux fauteuil. » On n'écrira cet [te] épitaphe que dix ans après que le vieux fauteuil et moi nous nous serons séparés. (*Corres.*, p. 1193.)

The image of the old man who resembles his chair is extended here to the point of absurdity to give a comic effect. Such exaggerated absurdity is to be found in another humorous passage in this letter that also serves to emphasise that, when he returns to France, he will not willingly wander far from home again. Here he sets up the expectations of his wife and then progressively undermines them:

Puisque je ne travaille jamais mieux et que je ne me porte jamais aussi bien que sur les grands chemins, dis-moi, est-ce qu'au lieu de m'en revenir tout bêtement par le même chemin ou par la mer, je ne ferais pas mieux de m'en aller à Moscou, de gagner la grande muraille de Chine, de rentrer en Asie, de faire une petite salamalec au Maroquin, au Turc, à Constantinople? [...]

Tu diras que c'est là se demener diablement; et tu auras raison. Tu diras que ce n'est pas la peine de tant tourner, pour trouver le dernier sommeil; et tu auras raison. (*Corres.*, p. 1193.)

This passage starts off innocuously enough, although the claim that he is able to work well whilst travelling is ironic given the discomfort he experienced travelling. But this sets up the premise for the increasingly far fetched enumeration of places he might stop off at on the way home.

Another type of humour which can be discerned in Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland is the playful use of whimsy and quaint details. This can be illustrated by the manner in which he relates the genealogy of Mme d'Épinay's dog, Pouf. The humour functions here by virtue of the discourse used by Diderot, a discourse redolent with false gravity to describe the dog's parentage being more suited to the context of human relationships. This anecdote complies with one of the norms of comedy discussed by Henri Bergson in *Le Rire*:

On obtiendra toujours un effet comique en transposant l'expression naturelle d'une idée dans un autre ton.⁸

We can see that this is the premise upon which the humour of this passage is based:

Mais puisque je suis en train de vous écrire toutes nos minuties, il ne faut pas que j'oublie de vous raconter comme quoi Pouf, le fils de Thisbé, qui avait fait concevoir de lui de si grandes espérances, a jeté la division parmi nous. Thisbé est une élégante; Sibéli la vit et l'aima. Sibéli a été élevé à la cour des rois. D'abord Thisbé fit la coquette. Sibéli se piqua de constance; et au bout de trois heures Thisbé couronna ses feux. (*Corres.*, p. 259.)

There is great bathetic contrast here between the parody of the discourse of romantic fiction or poetry and the final 'chute' of the line where the virtuous lady gives in to her suitor's demands after an assiduous three hour long courtship.

Much playful whimsy can be discerned in the shared fantasy of the 'château' to which Diderot and Sophie Volland could escape to live out their love affair in their imaginations:

A propos, si c'est aux environs de Pékin que nous allons, il faut que vous laissiez ici vos pieds. Les femmes n'en portent point là. Tout vient à elles. Elles ne vont à rien. (*Corres.*, p. 283.)

Similar whimsical statements can also be seen in more philosophically orientated comments made in the letters:

Et les poissons de nos fossés, à qui nous nous amusons à jeter du pain après le dîner, que pensent-ils de cette manne qui leur tombe du ciel en automne? N'y a-t-il pas là quelque Moïse écaillé qui se fait honneur de notre bienfaisance? (*Corres.*, p. 274)

Bawdy Humour and the Carnavalesque.

The taboo elements of jokes are seen by Alison Ross, in *The Language of Humour*, as having the effect of psychic release. One can imagine that the effect of release

⁸ Bergson, Henri, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris, 1908), p. 125.

would be all the greater when to doubt the principles of religion was still very unconventional, if not dangerous. An enjoyment of risqué humour is evident in Diderot's literary works, such as the adventures of *Jacques le fataliste* and in his *conte bleu*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, as well as in more ostensibly philosophical works such as *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. Such anecdotes are not completely gratuitous, as they are often related to some philosophical concept. An example of such an anecdote, which breaks several rules of etiquette and decency (and which in addition is blasphemous), is a story which Diderot relates in the terms in which d'Holbach allegedly told it to the company at Grandval. This distancing method of relating tales, as told by others, is one we will examine in more depth later in the next chapter. This tale-retold to Sophie Volland in a letter dated 20th October 1760- is deliberately shocking, as it mixes reference to excrement with reference to Christ, although theoretically the tale has a factual basis in the Tibetan reverence for the Lama's waste:

Et puis voilà le baron à qui la colique n'a pas ôté son ton original et polisson: 'Maman, connaissez-vous le grand Lama ? – Je ne connais ni le grand ni le petit. – C'est un prêtre du Thibet. - Du Thibet ou d'ailleurs, si c'est un bon prêtre, je le respecte. - Un jour de l'année qu'il a bien dîné, il passe dans sa garde-robe. - Grand bien lui fasse. Et là... -Voici quelque cochonnerie. – Qu'appellez-vous une cochonnerie, s'il vous plaît? Un besoin, ce me semble, assez simple, assez naturel et assez général, et que, malgré votre spiritualisme, vous satisfaites comme votre meunière. Mais puisque cochonnerie y a , quand le grand Lama a fait sa cochonnerie, on la prend comme une chose sacrée; on la met en poudre, et on l'envoie par petits paquets à tous les princes souverains qui la prennent en thé les jours de dévotion. - Quelle folie! - Folie ou non c'est un fait. Mais vous croyez donc que si l'on vous faisait présent d'une crotte de Jésus-Christ, vous n'en seriez pas bien fière? Et vous croyez que si l'on faisait présent à un janséniste d'une crotte du bienheureux diacre, il ne ferait pas enchâsser dans l'or et qu'elle tarderait beaucoup à opérer un miracle? (*Corres.*, pp. 273-4.)

Diderot is perfectly aware of the doubly shocking nature of the anecdote, being both blasphemous and scabrous. He tempers this somewhat by framing the anecdote as being the words of the Baron d'Holbach and by including Mme d'Aine's responses which reveal a certain disapproval of her son-in-law's speech, although, as often, her responses are also included for comic effect as a foil to d'Holbach's polemic. Sophie is included in the circle who will understand the point of the anecdote, namely: that all religions are superstitious and equally ridiculous as regards their relics. However, he adds the proviso:

Ne lisez pas cela à Mme Legendre. Elle n'aime pas ce ton-là. Mais à vous je vous dirai que le fait du grand Lama est certain [...] (*Corres.*, p. 274.)

Such comments would not be appreciated by all, and so are restricted to the private parts of the letters addressed to Sophie. A great function of these letters is that of playful enjoyment and entertainment. No doubt Diderot played a double game of teasing Sophie Volland who, as an unmarried woman, might be supposed in theory to be innocently unaware of the full meaning of some sexual jokes. Gabriela Vidan sees such jokes as one of the primary functions and features of the Sophie Volland correspondence:

Diderot ne craint pas de choquer Sophie, car divertir en se divertissant par le bavardage est une des premières fonctions de ces lettres.⁹

We should not underestimate, however, the danger which could be run in writing such passages, were these letters to fall into the wrong or malicious hands. Blasphemy was still a crime which could be severely punished. The letter manuals and *secrétaires* make explicit the advice that one should be very careful about what

⁹ Vidan, Gabriela, 'Style libertin et imagination ludique dans la correspondance de Diderot.' *SVEC*, 90 (1972), 1731-1750.

one commits to paper, as, unlike a conversation, a letter remains as durable testimony. Pierre Ortigue de Vaumorière provides the standard advice, which was as applicable to life in the seventeenth century as in the eighteenth century:

Comme nous pouvons parler de toutes les choses que nous voïons, et même de toutes celles qui nous tombent dans l'imagination, il ne faut pas douter qu'il ne nous soit permis aussi d'en écrire. Mais ce doit être avec plus de précaution encore que n'en demande de la conversation, puisque les écrits demeurent au pouvoir de celui à qui nous les envoïons, et qu'il les peut montrer quand il veut.¹⁰

Such letters could also be highly compromising for the recipient, especially in Sophie's case as an unmarried woman.

A type of humour which often approaches the taboo is bawdy humour, which Diderot much enjoyed. This is a taste he shared with his Grandval friends, especially Mme d'Aine. She is often at the centre of reported anecdotes that could be said to reveal a robust and rather earthy sense of humour. A notable example of this is an account of her accidentally relieving herself over an Abbé on whom she had sat astride like a horse. (*Corres.*, pp. 185-186.) This anecdote raises the question of two important aspects of comedy: the morality of laughter and the carnivalesque nature of bawdy humour. In writing about this incident, Diderot is keen to stress the merit of Mme d'Aine in buying the Abbé a new suit to replace the one she ruined, so that he does not suffer financially from their rough horseplay:

Mme d'Aine est honorable. Le petit prêtre est pauvre. Dès le lendemain, il y eut ordre d'acheter un habit complet. (*Corres.*, p. 186.)

Henri Bergson even goes as far as to define humour as a mode of expression which only engages our intellect and does not engage our sympathy for others:

¹⁰ De Vaumorière, Pierre, Ortigue, *Lettres sur toutes sortes de sujets* (Paris, 1690), p. 45.

Le comique exige donc enfin, pour produire tout son effet, quelque chose comme une anesthésie momentanée du cœur. Il s'adresse à l'intelligence pure.¹¹

Diderot as an *honnête homme* can only participate in the laughter of the group when he knows that nobody will really suffer from the humour. However, when Mme d'Aine's son is fascinated by Mme de Charmoy's rather hairy arms, and the dinner guests also find this a subject for laughter, he comments afterwards on their cruelty, in spite of having wept with laughter himself at the time:

Elle prétend qu'il lui a fait mal; mais cela n'est pas vrai. C'est la mauvaise plaisanterie et nos ris inhumains qui lui ont fait mal. (*Corres.*, p. 273.)

This - as Henri Bergson said - also emphasizes the social aspect of humour:

On ne goûterait pas le comique si l'on se sentait isolé. Il semble que le rire ait besoin d'un écho.¹²

This assertion perhaps is not entirely valid. However it certainly can be related to a dinner party at which everyone is overcome with laughter due to the hilarity of the moment. Humour and laughter as well as being infectious, and outward signs of belonging and bonding with a group, are often instantaneous. For something to be humorous it needs to be readily accessible.

The other aspect of humour which Mme d'Aine's exploits with the Abbé bring to light is the carnivalesque side to bawdy humour. For example, this type of humour can be used for subversive means, because it breaks the rules of polite society and reveals what is usually hidden. Such humour is evident in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, and as such provides light relief. However, it is also intrinsically linked with the content of the work which overturns the accepted models for society and of

¹¹ Bergson, Henri, p. 6.

¹² Bergson, p. 6.

understanding the material world and life itself, with all the inherent religious and political implications that this entails. *Jacques le fataliste* also makes much use of such folk humour, and in a very appropriate manner, since the protagonist of the work is really Jacques and not his master (and it is even debatable who is the real master of whom). Bawdy humour is seen as a great leveller and Diderot describes his enjoyment of this incident involving Mme d'Aine to the Vollands in terms which one could liken to the enjoyment of good hearty peasant food, rather than sophisticated restaurant cooking:

Pour nous, grossiers habitants du Grandval, il ne nous en faut pas davantage pour nous amuser et le jour et le lendemain. (*Corres.*, p.186.)

Diderot associates such humour with their setting in the country, albeit in a country manor house. However such humour is considered as being of a low register associated more with the proletariat than any other sector of society (although it was no doubt used and enjoyed by all). Of course one could say that such simplicity is as close to nature as Marie-Antoinette's farming experiences at Le Petit Trianon. Bakhtin saw bawdy humour, especially in relation to Rabelais, as having great political importance and as being a means for the population of reclaiming some very limited power over their existence, through the sense of release provided by their laughter. It is interesting in terms of the wider picture of the use of comedy by Diderot and his fellow anti-establishment writers that Bakhtin said (no doubt with covert reference to the contemporary situation in the Soviet Union):

Laughter on the contrary overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority.¹³

¹³ Morris, Pam, *The Bakhtin Reader* (London, 1994), p. 209. Work quoted: Bakhtin, M. M., *Rabelais and his World* (1965).

Certainly humour, which needs the full participation of the listener/reader, invites a dialogue, which is precisely what an abusive regime seeks to eradicate. The euphoric quality of humour is also one that is difficult to control and manage, and would probably be a form of mass hysteria which, once orchestrated, would be difficult to manipulate and control.

Black Humour.

A type of humour, which is only rarely found in the *Correspondance*, and which is not one that we would immediately associate with Diderot, is black humour. This is evident when he writes of old age and the general poor state of health of his friends and family. Black humour is similar to the carnivalesque in that its main function is to overcome fear, by pointing out the absurd in even the most horrible situations.

Thus by mentioning the unspeakable, it becomes manageable in some form:

Nous tombons tous en ruine les uns à côté des autres. Le baron est devenu sujet à des coliques néphrétiques accompagnées des symptômes les plus effrayants. [...] Ajoutez à ce péril, celui des demi-connaissances en chimie, médecine et pharmacie, et une impatience naturelle qui lui fait essayer dix médicaments dans une matinée. [...] Moi, j'ai toujours l'âme et l'esprit dans le berceau; mais le reste du corps se traîne vers Saint-Sulpice. Je ne fais plus un pas que vers ce côté-là. (*Corres.*, p. 1103.)

The humour here, within this bleak picture of the deteriorating health of all his friends and family, is provided by amplification. No one is spared. Even the young Nageon is 'jaune comme un coing'. The Baron's health is not helped by his own dabbling in the sciences; so his reaction to his illness is rather typical of his character. And this would no doubt be expected to cause Grimm to smile since, even in illness, his friend reacts in a typical manner. This also adds a touch of bathos.

Diderot structures the description of himself upon the antithesis of how he feels mentally and his physical age. Saint Sulpice was the nearest graveyard to where he lived. It is perhaps important that this is written to a contemporary who can identify with Diderot's distress and general impression that everyone's health is failing. Black humour is also used here to give a sense of community and cohesion to this universal experience, which includes his reader Grimm. Humour could be seen as an important bonding aspect in friendship.

Long Running Jokes.

Diderot is very fond of long running 'mystifications' which are often the literary equivalent of practical jokes. *La Religieuse* is supposed to have started life as one. In many of these long running jokes, his main aim appears to be to tease his reader in withholding the one piece of information which is the real key to understanding the tale and upon which he expects the reader to focus her/his attention. The locus of humour here is this central lacuna. One such example is the mention he makes of a woman in her early thirties who wishes to be a mother, without becoming married or having to have a love affair with the father of her child. Diderot mentions a man in his forties whom she has asked to be the father. The information he gives Sophie Volland is deliberately ambiguous and is an attempt to cause jealousy. (*Corres.*, p. 385.) A more innocent example is a description of a monk who lives with the Lebreton's. It becomes progressively obvious that this gentleman who rather enjoys his food is in fact a pig. (*Corres.*, p. 358.) This joke is also another instance of the

transposition of one form of discourse into another context. He was rather disappointed that this joke did not prove to be very mystifying:

Enfin vous l'avez donc deviné, mon cénobite! C'est bien de ma faute. Il n'a tenu qu'à moi de vous y intéresser plus d'un mois, sans que vous trouvassiez le mot de l'énigme. Mais si je vous trompais jamais, je voudrais que ce fût en matière plus grave. Oh! Quel bond vous faites en arrière. Rassurez-vous. Je ne vous tromperai jamais. (*Corres.*, p. 371.)

He makes the most of the opportunity provided here to tease Sophie by the use of the pun on the verb 'tromper' as meaning both to trick her and to cheat on her. This also offers the means of stating his fidelity towards her.

Humour in the *Correspondance* is very much part and parcel of Diderot's epistolary persona. Humour is related to the discourse of love because it can be used as a means to amuse and entertain the reader. It is also interlinked with conversation and Diderot's representation of it in his letters. Satire and sardonic wit are very much part of his combative discourse as will be noted when we consider the open letters written to the Père Berthier, in chapter seven. Humour and its structures should always be borne in mind when reading Diderot's letters. We will see many of these structures employed by Diderot, when we consider the techniques he uses to report conversations and anecdotes in the next chapter.

Epistolary discourse and conversation can be seen to bear natural similarities to each other. In fact it is a common trope of the letter-writer to write of the discourse of the letter as chatting with their correspondents. The rules of epistolary etiquette in the eighteenth century were - as we know - based upon the suggested models for polite conversation, as well as on the rules of rhetoric and respect for rank.

Roger Duchêne describes the similarities between conversation and epistolary discourse, whilst emphasizing the differences which set the two apart:

Sous sa forme habituelle, si la lettre ressemble à la conversation, c'est donc seulement à une forme particulière et restreinte de conversation, le dialogue. Elle va d'une personne à une autre personne, disons de A à B. Encore s'introduit-il dans le dialogue écrit une possibilité de perturbation que ne connaît pas le dialogue parlé: la lettre peut être perdue ou interceptée; elle peut aussi n'être pas envoyée. On peut annuler un écrit; on ne peut pas reprendre des paroles prononcées.¹

He also stresses the importance of the frequency of letter-writing and of the postal service which influence an epistolary correspondence in a manner similar to the frequency of meetings between conversationalists:

On peut varier le nombre, les jours, la durée des conversations et le nombre des intervenants. La lettre varie avec le nombre et le rythme des courriers, et selon la façon dont les correspondants les utilisent. Le dialogue n'est aussi complet et parfait que possible que si chacun des deux partenaires envoie au moins une lettre à chaque départ de la poste.²

In this chapter we will examine such similarities between conversation and epistolary conversation in relation to Diderot's letters, and in the representation of reported conversations in the *Correspondance*.

¹Duchêne, Roger, 'Lettre et Conversation', in *Art de la lettre, art de la conversation* (Actes du colloque de Wolfenbüttel, octobre 1991), p. 94.

²Duchêne, p. 97.

The predominant impression most general readers have of the intellectual and social life of the leisured classes in the eighteenth century is that of the *salon*, where the presence of writers and *philosophes* would add a certain colour and piquancy to the conversation, or - depending on the nature of the *salon* - help to stimulate debate. The importance of such *salons*, especially the *salons littéraires* and those held by influential women such as Mlle de Lespinasse and Mme du Deffand, should not be underestimated. There is a reflection, in the surviving correspondences of the eighteenth century, of this milieu where social and intellectual discourse was highly valued. Diderot, unlike many of his contemporaries, was not a great frequenter of *salons*, where often writers and intellectuals were invited to provide little more than entertainment as curious figures. However, in addition to socializing with the Baron d'Holbach's 'synagogue', as d'Holbach's circle of fellow atheists and *philosophes* was called, Diderot also met like-minded or congenial company at other organized *soirées*. Laurent Versini details some of these social groups of which Diderot was a member. It is interesting to note these because no doubt Diderot's social life influenced his writing, especially the conversational elements of his letters which can be said to reflect in some manner the type of conversation he enjoyed with his friends:

Chez Mlle Quinault, tante de Mme de Maux et ancienne actrice de la Comédie-Française, le ton est au contraire très libre. On n'y vient pas pour la table, la maîtresse des lieux n'étant pas fortunée, mais pour rivaliser d'audace et de mots osés. Diderot s'y joint à la société du bout du banc, ainsi dénommée parce qu'on y dîne 'sur le bout du banc', c'est à dire de peu; elle réunit l'antiquaire Caylus, Marivaux, Piron, D'Alembert, Collé, Crébillon fils, Duclos, etc. Les mêmes forment la société du caveau, qui se réunit d'abord chez l'épicier Gallet à la pointe Saint-Eustache, puis dans le caveau du cabaret Landelle au coin de la rue Dauphine: le musicien Rameau, le peintre Boucher, Helvétius, beaucoup de dramaturges, Crébillon père d'abord et Saurin protégé d'Helvétius, puis

Fagan, Gresset, Panard, le chanteur Jélyotte, rejoignent Piron, Collé et les autres, soit beaucoup de joyeux pourvoyeurs du théâtre de La Foire.

[...]

Mme Geoffrin (1699-1777), veuve d'un manufacturier et secrétaire du roi fort riche, ouvrit en 1749 son salon appelé 'le royaume de la rue Saint-Honoré', à l'emplacement de l'actuel numéro 374, en prenant la succession du salon de Mme Tencin que Diderot n'a pas connu [...]. Le lundi, elle recevait les artistes, peintres - Carle Vanloo, Boucher, La Tour, Vien, Vernet, Lagrenée, sculpteurs - Bouchardon - architectes - Soufflot, et le mercredi les gens de lettres, Fontenelle, Montesquieu, Marivaux, Voltaire, D'Alembert, Helvétius, Mlle de Lespinasse, Buffon, d'Holbach, Grimm, Suard, Saint-Lambert, Morellet, Marmontel... Mais Diderot ne restait pas à dîner, n'ayant pas de sympathie pour la dame qui pourtant cherchait à se l'attacher, un peu indiscrètement et tyranniquement, en lui offrant par exemple, en 1769, la réfection de son bureau et la fameuse robe de chambre à ramages qui fit tant regretter au philosophe la précédente. Il aimait mieux la rencontrer chez d'Holbach - où elle s'ennuyait.¹

Such bohemian company frequented by Diderot chez Mlle Quinault is clearly reflected in his liking for recounting to Sophie Volland the risqué jokes he had heard when staying at Grandval. we will consider the nature of the reported conversations in these letters he wrote from Grandval later on in this chapter. It should be mentioned that the dialogue form was the favoured form for ancient philosophers, and the *Symposium* takes the form of debate over dinner. Diderot in relating his own conversations with friends about philosophical topics is very consciously following in the footsteps of the ancient philosophers.

Letter manuals often made comparisons between letter-writing and the art of conversation. It was a common rule of the *secrétaires* that, whilst a writer should adhere to the rules of politeness in all letters, the familiar letter written to friends should have some of the naturalness and range of subject matter of a conversation. A letter written as if it were part of a conversation with a friend became the standard

³ Versini, Laurent, *Denis Diderot alias frère Tonpla* (Paris, 1996), p. 97.

definition of the genre of familiar letters. *L'Art de bien parler et de bien écrire en français* by M. Beauvais, defines the genres of eighteenth century epistolarity in just such a manner:

Le style épistolaire doit se conformer à la nature des lettres qu'on écrit. On peut distinguer deux sortes de lettres: les unes philosophiques, où l'on traite d'une manière libre quelque sujet littéraire; les autres familières qui sont une espèce de conversation entre les absents: le style de celles-ci doit ressembler à celui d'un entretien, tel qu'on l'auroit avec la personne même, si elle étoit présente.⁴

The familiar letter necessitated a certain depth of friendship to exist between correspondents. La Marquise du Deffand, in a letter to Horace Walpole, provides us with a description of the familiarity and trust needed between letter-writers for them to be able to conduct a satisfactory, familiar correspondence. The letter-writer in this genre of letter reveals more about his life, opinions and personality than in any other. Therefore, it is essential to be able to exchange these intimate details, whilst having complete confidence in one's correspondent. In this letter that the Marquise du Deffand writes, on Sunday 11th September 1768, she describes her relief that her correspondence with Voltaire has ceased, since the requisite familiarity for a correspondence had become an imposition:

Je n'entends plus parler de Voltaire, et je n'en suis point fâchée; il faut que j'aime infiniment les gens pour avoir du plaisir à leur écrire; il faut pouvoir dire ce qu'on pense: en qui peut-on avoir cette confiance ? Elle est souvent dangereuse pour ceux qui l'ont, et encore plus souvent pour ceux pour qui on l'a.⁵

Here we have a summary of some of the main concerns of the letter manuals which we have discussed. Importantly, however, the reference here is to a real

⁴ Beauvais, M., *L'Art de bien parler et de bien écrire en français* (Valade, 1773), p. 283.

⁵ Madame la Marquise du Deffand. *Lettres à H. Walpole, Voltaire et quelques autres* (Paris, 1979), p. 51.

correspondence, rather than to the hypothetical ones of the letter manuals. Familiar letter-writing for La Marquise du Deffand required a certain level of intimacy between the correspondents. This openness provides pleasure, which is gained by recounting one's private moments and thoughts. If, however, this openness is flawed in any way, letter-writing can become a chore for either one of the correspondents or both. Such confidence and trust in one's correspondent can be dangerous, as both the letter manuals and la Marquise du Deffand state. There is always the danger of an illicit relationship being revealed by the existence of a secret correspondence. All of these are very real concerns which Diderot, like other letter-writers, would have had to consider.

The other point of interest here is the importance placed upon the pleasure to be gained from letter-writing. Writing familiar letters was for many a pleasurable activity and a means of occupying their time. Many people, Voltaire and la Marquise du Deffand included, carried on correspondences with many varied acquaintances, some of whom they might never have met. For such correspondences, pleasure and entertainment is the *sine qua non*. Diderot's extant correspondence is rather different in nature in that the vast majority of letters written are to absent friends and acquaintances, so whilst the pleasure to be found in corresponding is important, these letters were also written in order to remain in contact with these friends and to confer about business matters, or to pass on information or news. There are certain constraints upon such letters because they do not form part of a purely epistolary relationship, but part of the interchange of real friendships as opposed to that of pen friends.

We have already mentioned the many parallels between an epistolary conversation, the domain of the familiar letter, and actual spoken discourse. However, these can be highly deceptive, since the time delay which exists between the writing of the letter and its reception can distort the relevance of what is said, and change its very meaning. Diderot is aware of the distorted time-scale of epistolary writing, where the writer writes of immediate or present events and emotions, which, when the letter is finally read, are already at least several days old. He makes this point explicitly to Sophie Volland on October 26th 1760:

Si vous ne vous rappelez pas vos lettres depuis le numéro 22 jusqu'au numéro 29 que je viens de recevoir, vous n'entendrez rien à ceci.

Je cause un peu avec vous comme ce voyageur à qui son camarade disait: 'Voilà une belle prairie', et qui lui répondait au bout d'une lieue: 'Oui, elle est fort belle.' (*Corres.*, p. 280.)

Numbering letters received and sent was a common practice, not just to avoid misunderstandings if letters crossed in the post, but more importantly to be able to see if any letters went missing before reaching their destination. There is also an indication here that Diderot was not always the most assiduous of correspondents. Unlike a conversation where one responds directly to such comments, in an epistolary discourse the writer is free to save up such replies for when they feel like responding. The conversationalist can do this only at the risk of being seen to be a bore, or highly evasive, and is likely to put a stop to any conversation in such a way. Diderot could be seen to contravene the rules of conversational etiquette here, as he does not answer the points raised by Sophie Volland in a consecutive order, but saves them for one long letter, thus causing his letter to be disjointed.

The Letter as Causerie.

In many letters, Diderot, like most correspondents, makes the link between letter-writing and conversation. He frequently refers to the act of writing to someone in his letters as 'causer'. 'Causer' according to the definitions and examples given in the *Trésor de la langue française*, (CNRS, 1977), had the same general meaning in the eighteenth century as it does in modern French, in that it refers to spoken conversation. There is no indication that it refers to written discourse. It was seen to be equivalent to 'bavarder', or to 'parler avec indiscretion', very much like 'to chat' or 'to gossip' in English. To some extent any letter can be said, to use Chouillet's term for the Sophie Volland correspondence, to be a 'dialogue à une voix', and can easily become a 'dialogue de sourds' when letters cross in the post and misunderstandings arise. Bearing all of this in mind, it would be appropriate to look at Diderot's direct references to writing to his friends, expressed in the same terms that would be used for a spoken conversation.

Diderot's letters to Grimm no doubt provided him with some solace during Grimm's many trips away from Paris. In these letters he often writes of the act of writing to his friend as having a chat with him, 'causer'. For example (A Paris, ce 1^{er} mai 1759):

Je vais donc passer la matinée à causer avec vous; oui, mon ami, la matinée tout entière. J'ai tout plein de choses à vous dire, mais la plus pressée, celle que je sens à chaque instant, c'est qu'il n'y a personne depuis que vous n'y êtes plus. (*Corres.*, p. 88.)

Here the written conversation Diderot has with his friend aids him to imagine that he is really bridging the gap of absence at the moment of writing. It is a pale imitation of a real conversation, but still a pleasurable activity, a privileged time set apart from

everyday domestic affairs and business concerns. The letter ends with the following sentence:

Eh bien ! Mon ami, ai-je assez causé ? (*Corres.*, p. 95.)

Diderot thus excuses inconsistencies in replying to letters with a long, chatty letter, a technique he uses with other correspondents. He compensates for infrequency in writing by the quantity he writes.

‘Causer’ is frequently used by Diderot in his letters to Sophie Volland to describe the act of corresponding with her. The following examples all come from the same letter written from Gudmont, près Vignory, on 16th August 1759:

[...] dans un village où c’est à la complaisance du pasteur que je dois le plaisir de causer avec ma Sophie. (*Corres.*, p. 141.)

Later on in the same letter he writes of the exclusive pleasure which is the act of writing to a loved one, where interruptions are not welcomed:

Bonnes gens n’allez pas si vite; j’ai une faim dévorante, mais j’aime encore mieux causer avec ma Sophie que manger. (*Corres.*, p. 142.)

Finally the letter ends with the revealing comment that, although Diderot in writing the letter gains pleasure from describing in detail every one of his actions, he has not really considered if Sophie Volland will find this of interest. However, this comment in itself shows his awareness of the dialogic nature of epistolary discourse:

Ah ! ma Sophie, si vous m’aviez vu manger. Mais que je suis bête. Je vous crois attentive à tout ce que je fais. (*Corres.*, p. 143.)

Such a letter as this, which provides almost a running commentary on Diderot’s dinner and actions, is very much part of the ‘journal’ project, referred to in chapter two. Diderot intended to combat the loneliness he felt owing to Sophie’s absence by including in his letters the minutiae of his days. In this letter, there is an awareness

that this might be more for his own benefit than tailored to the reader's interests. This is much more of a danger for the letter-writer than the conversationalist, as the writer does not have the immediate response and reaction to his discourse that the speaker does.

For Diderot, as for most people then and now, conversation was one of the great pleasures of life. Diderot commented upon the ephemeral and ungraspable nature of the pleasures of conversation. Conversation, as an immediate form of discourse, is far from easily fixed in the rather static form of written discourse. In his letters from Grandval, he attempts to convey some of the pleasure gained from conversation with friends:

Pourquoi ces gentillesses de conversation qu'on a entendues avec tant de plaisir, s'émoussent-elles quand on les rend? C'est qu'on les présente isolées; c'est que l'intérêt du moment et de l'à-propos n'y est plus. (*Corres.*, p. 175.)

Conversation is described in terms of something which is frothy, soft and pleasurable. There is the notion here that by changing the format of the words spoken, from conversation to a written form, much is lost. As we shall see later in this chapter, it is to overcome some of these difficulties that Diderot would set his reported anecdotes against the background of what, we are meant to suppose, is the usual animated conversation of an afternoon at Grandval. The date on the letter, also, is an attempt to render the letter more immediate and to bridge the gap between the time of writing and reading of a letter, in its reference to the time Diderot started writing this letter. The fact that this letter was written at midnight also adds to its intimacy, as Sophie can imagine him writing alone by candlelight.

Diderot writes to Sophie Volland, (30th December 1765), of some long conversations he has enjoyed with her sister, Mme Legendre :

Nous avons déjà fait une ou deux causeries à perte de vue. (*Corres.*, p. 578.)

For Diderot, conversation is a pleasure rather like food and drink, which he enjoys indulging in, often in an excessive manner. In the same letter, he mentions leaving Mme Legendre alone with her admirer Perronet since he had not seen her for a while. Diderot refers to the correspondence Perronet and Mme Legendre had kept up during Perronet's absence:

Je crus qu'il était honnête de laisser ensemble des gens qui ne s'étaient vus depuis si longtemps et qui devaient avoir beaucoup de choses à se dire, toutes celles qu'ils s'étaient écrites. (*Corres.*, p. 579.)

Interestingly, Diderot assumes that the conversation they will have when left alone will be very similar to the type of discourse in their letters. We can possibly infer that, as this comment implies, for Diderot there was not a great divide between the manner in which he spoke and wrote. Diderot no doubt writes of this reunion, as it reminds him of the times when, finally reunited with Sophie Volland, he could express his love for her in person.

One of the greatest faults in conversation, according to the various manuals of social etiquette popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was to bore the assembled company by insisting upon one subject, or even by making a show of one's knowledge. The *juste milieu* of amusement and propriety was the desired effect, rather than any great substance in conversation. Form took precedence. Madeleine de Scudéry, amongst many others, said this in *Conversations sur divers sujets* :

Il n'y a rien de plus ennuyeux que de se trouver en conversation avec ces sortes de gens qui s'attachent à la première chose dont on parle et qui l'approfondissent tellement, que toute une après dînée on ne change jamais de discours. Car comme la conversation doit être libre et naturelle, et que tous ceux qui forment la compagnie ont également droit de la changer comme bon leur semble, c'est une chose importune que de trouver des gens opiniâtres...⁶

Vaumorière writes in a similar vein, noting that to amuse people in a conversation there is no need to have any great knowledge or particular conversational skill, but instead a certain mediocrity, which is pleasant, is sought. Such mediocrity is not pejorative, but rather it is the notion of seeking an ideal, middle ground, which is pleasing to all:

Il ne faut pas, pour se rendre agréable dans la conversation, ne dire que des choses subtiles ou élevées. Il n'est pas nécessaire de montrer un grand fonds de science et une vaste étendue de génie. Il suffit de parler d'un air aisé, et que dans ce que l'on dit, rien ne sente l'affectation ni la contrainte [...] ⁷

Diderot's letters, however, present conversation as a much more lively affair than a conversation which followed all of the prescriptive rules of the manuals would be. We should remember that the rules for polite conversation were intended for mixed social gatherings and court events, whilst Diderot wrote for a select audience of readers; the conversations he reports are generally those engaged in by a close circle of like-minded friends. It is highly probable that during his lengthy and assiduous correspondence with Sophie Volland, his letters catered for her taste for gossip intermingled with philosophy and risqué jokes. He attempts to amuse Sophie and render his daily activity faithfully in his journal-like letters. However, apparently this style of letter-writing was not reciprocated. In one letter Diderot replies to a

⁶ Scudéry, *Conversations sur divers sujets* (Lyon, 1680), p. 26. as quoted in Montandon, A., 'Les Bienséances de la conversation', in Bray, and Strosetski, *Art de la lettre, art de la conversation*, 61-79.

⁷ Vaumorière, *L'Art de plaire dans la conversation* (Paris, 1688), p. 230.

comment from Sophie Volland which is, one assumes, praise for his varied and interesting letters, and he encourages her to depart from the standard letter format and to reveal more of her day in her letters:

Mes lettres sont variées? Et les vôtres seront, et plus agréablement encore que les miennes, quand vous pourrez vous résoudre, comme moi à m'envoyer vos conversations d'Isle. (*Corres.*, p. 316-317.)

Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland are the precious substitute for private conversations which they cannot have, due to separation and the inevitable presence of a third party chaperone, such as Mlle Boileau, when they do meet. Diderot is especially frustrated by the constant stream of visitors who often interrupt his letter-writing:

Je suis accablé de visites; je suis interrompu à chaque ligne, et je ne souffre pas patiemment qu'on vienne me distraire quand je suis avec vous. (*Corres.*, p. 121-122.)

This also illustrates the fact that letters are often written at several sittings and are interrupted and then taken up again. This can also account, at times, for a certain *décousu* style to be found in correspondences. The frequent absences of both Grimm and Sophie leave a gap of someone close to talk to. Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland are often close to the form of a private conversation which has asides to Sophie's sisters. These letters are akin to two people in a crowded room having a private conversation, but at times addressing others and joining in with the general *meslée*.

A staple piece of advice from the etiquette manuals, which Diderot frequently ignores in his letters is the need to draw a veil over all reference to bodily functions in conversation or letters. Scatological jokes such as the anecdote about the Tibetan

Lama (studied in the previous chapter) written to an unmarried lady are even beyond the remit of what the reader of the etiquette manual is warned against. Diderot, as a materialist, would have disagreed with Courtin's opinion that all aspects of human nature which remind us of our animal nature are to be treated as taboo subjects. For Courtin, fine manners are what separates man from the beast, and no doubt implicitly the noble from the base 'common' man:

De même la nature ayant voulu cacher certaines parties de notre corps, et certaines actions; le consentement et l'usage s'accordent tellement à les tenir cachées pour garder l'honnesteté, que celui-là passeroit pour le plus des-honneste du monde, qui découvreroit publiquement ce qui ne se doit point découvrir, ou feroit quelques actions, et profereroit quelques paroles, pour les exprimer, contre l'honneur, pour ainsi dire, et la pudeur de la nature.

Pour les autres actions dont la nature ne se cache point, et qui nous font cependant communes avec les animaux, comme cracher, tousser, éternuer, manger, boire, etc. Parce que la raison nous dicte naturellement, que plus nous nous éloignons de la manière des bestes, plus nous approchons de la perfection, où l'homme tend par un principe naturel, pour répondre à la dignité de son être; le consentement de l'honnesteté veut aussi, que puisque l'on ne peut pas se dispenser de ces actions, qui sont naturellement indispensables, on les fasse le plus honnêtement, c'est à dire le moins approchant des bestes qu'il est possible.⁸

This is completely in opposition to many of Diderot's ideas, as expressed in the *Lettre sur les Aveugles*, *Le Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* and *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. In Diderot's opinion, it is due to some of these rather hypocritical, civilizing processes, operated by the Church and society on the masses, that many social ills and personal unhappiness are caused. In terms of the general Enlightenment movement, there was a general reaction against some of the artificial constraints placed upon people by organized religion and by the state, and a move

⁸ Courtin, Antoine, *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se Pratique en France parmi les honnestes gens*, cinquième édition, revue, corrigée et augmentée (1766), pp. 12-13.

towards a return to certain basic, natural laws. The *honnête homme*, as Diderot sees him, is a plain speaking, frank and decent citizen, who has no need of fine manners and religion to lead a just and decent life. Courtin's *honneste homme* is roughly equivalent to our English term of a gentleman, with all that it implies of refined manners and high social status, quite the contrary of Diderot's *honnête homme*.

In *Jacques le fataliste*, Diderot portrays Jacques as defending the right to use words such as 'foutre', which are in his view no more shocking than any other because all that such words describe is the physical act of procreation. This can be seen to be very close to Diderot's own views about using certain registers of language, particularly in his letters. He applies the same type of logic here that he displays when debunking religious dogma, which, being a matter of spiritual faith, does not in most cases withstand direct logical enquiry. Here we could not be more in conflict with the rules of etiquette, as Diderot, via Jacques, reclaims words which have become taboo and unutterable. This is also an unattributed quotation of Montaigne, which emphasizes what an age-old debate this really is.⁹ Interestingly, the language used is still deemed offensive enough for the modern - day editors to have kept the asterisked version of the verb for decency's sake. This is reminiscent of the *Lady Chatterly's Lover* trial, where the defence successfully argued that the similar spelling of 'f-' in the text only rendered the verb more obscene, in treating it as something unspeakable. Jacques says of the use of such words:

⁹ See Schwartz, Jerome, *Diderot and Montaigne* (Geneva, 1966), p. 51 : 'In *Jacques le fataliste* [...] Diderot adapts at will a passage from Montaigne's essay 'Sur des vers de Virgile' in defense of the novel's mild licentiousness. He follows Montaigne in censuring the reader for his hypocrisy and for blushing at the mention of the sexual act. (*Essais*, Coste, iii, v. 70f ; Pléiade, 947).

F-tez comme des ânes débatés; mais permettez-moi que je dise f...tre; je vous passe l'action, passez-moi le mot. Vous prononcez hardiment tuer, voler, trahir, et l'autre vous ne l'oseriez qu'entre les dents!

[...]

Et que vous a fait l'action génitale, si naturelle, si nécessaire et si juste, pour en exclure le signe de vos entretiens, et pour imaginer que votre bouche, vos yeux et vos oreilles en seraient souillés? ¹⁰

This can be seen as a reflection of Diderot's own views. In the letters he writes from Grandval a variety of register and subjects are to be found, which is fitting for someone who sees some prescriptive rules of etiquette as false prudery. A letter such as the one he wrote to Sophie Volland, from Grandval, 30th October 1759, is a prime example of a polyphony of reported speakers, and of a wide range of subjects dealt with, including Islam and Islamic law, gardens, gossip about an absent friend, badinage between speakers, Persian poetry and his love for Sophie Volland. It was just such a mixture of subject - matter and genre which caused many contemporary critics, and later ones, when reading his published work which is deliberately wide ranging and *décousu*, to condemn Diderot as a mere enthusiastic dilettante. La Harpe is representative of this accusation of dilettantism against Diderot:

Il avait naturellement une extrême avidité de connaissances, et c'est à peu près tout ce qu'il eut de philosophie; car d'ailleurs, son esprit ressemblait à ces estomacs chauds et avides qui dévorent tout et ne digèrent rien, et ce ne sont pas ceux des hommes sains. ¹¹

La Harpe's use of such a vivid image to convey his dislike of Diderot's style is consciously employed to give an impression of Diderot as a vulgar writer, by this reference to digestion. However, the epistolary form was an apt genre for this type of

¹⁰ Denis, Diderot, *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (Paris, 1973), p. 261.

¹¹ La Harpe, J. F., *Lycée ou cours de littérature ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1824), p. 886.

writing and it was common practice to relate gossip and everyday events in letters, though not generally in such a virtuoso style as practised by Diderot.¹²

Diderot conveyed his enthusiasm for the *Salon de 1765*, which he had just written, in a letter to Sophie Volland where he praises its variety of genres. One can imagine this being precisely the style of text which La Harpe criticized. The mix of genres and registers of language in the *Salon*, which lend it its vivid immediacy, are just the qualities that Diderot displays in his letters to Sophie Volland. For example (10th November 1765):

C'est certainement la meilleure chose que j'ai faite depuis que je cultive les lettres, de quelque manière qu'on la considère, soit par la diversité des tons, la variété des objets et l'abondance des idées qui n'ont jamais, j'imagine, passé par aucune tête que la mienne. C'est une mine de plaisanteries tantôt légères, tantôt fortes. Quelquefois c'est la conversation toute pure comme on la fait au coin du feu. D'autres fois, c'est tout ce qu'on peut imaginer ou d'éloquent ou de profond. (*Corres.*, p. 544.)

That Diderot should be so proud of, and contented with, this *Salon* reveals that such a variety of styles was central to his artistic aims. This reference to fireside chats also underlines his aim to make these dialogues immediate and intimate like a real conversation. Writing in such a manner, with an eclectic range of styles, provided a personalized and natural-seeming response to the paintings exhibited, in the same way as it placed the stamp of his personality upon his letters.

From what we can infer from reading the *Correspondance*, Diderot would have appreciated a certain variety of style and subject-matter in the published

¹² Montandon, Alain, *Dictionnaire raisonné de la politesse et du savoir-vivre: du moyen âge à nos jours* (Paris, 1995), p. 549 'Au XVIIIe siècle, les lettres écrites au quotidien racontent des anecdotes, insolites, amusantes, relatent des faits, des événements, anticipent les nouvelles, propagent les rumeurs: la lettre se fait gazette.'

correspondences he read. In the *Correspondance littéraire*, Grimm relates Diderot's opinion that a work cannot be wholly condemned or criticized if it contains elements of quality. This is pertinent, as it follows a section of highly critical reviews of published correspondences:

Il y a des gens, me disait l'autre jour M. Diderot, qui semblent n'avoir d'autre objet dans leurs lectures que celui de trouver les défauts d'un ouvrage. Je les compare à un homme qui se promènerait sur le bord de la mer uniquement occupé à ramasser du sable et des cailloux. C'est de l'or pur que j'y viens chercher, et pourvu que j'en découvre quelques grains que je recueille précieusement, peu m'importe tout le reste.¹³

Such a proclaimed taste for a few gems of worth, even if they are found in a dull or worthless setting, is clearly quite contrary to La Harpe's literary tastes. A real correspondence can be expected to resemble Diderot's extended metaphor. There will be passages of great interest, even literary *tours de force*, and mundane passages relating everyday business.

Stylistic Techniques Employed to Render Letters More Conversational.

Leo Spitzer in 'The Style of Diderot'¹⁴ examines the rhythmical structure of Diderot's writing and shows how, in an article in *L'Encyclopédie*, entitled 'Jouissance', the rhythmical tensions within the passage mirror sexual tension and its final release in climax. In the argumentum of his article Leo Spitzer states:

I had often been struck, in reading Diderot, by a rhythmic pattern in which I seemed to hear the echo of Diderot's speaking voice: a self-accentuating rhythm, suggesting that the 'speaker' is swept away by a wave of passion which tends to flood all limits. This pattern (which is a feature quite at variance with classical style) is apt to appear, with varied nuances, anywhere in

¹³ *Correspondance Littéraire*, xi, pp. 164-165. Décembre 1775.

¹⁴ Spitzer, Leo, 'The Style of Diderot', 135-169. In *Linguistics and Literary History. Essays in Stylistics* (Princeton University Press, 1967.)

Diderot's writings, didactic as well as narrative (or epistolary). The conclusion seemed obvious that this rhythm was conditioned by a certain nervous temperament which instead of being tempered by style, was allowed to energize style.¹⁵

We would consider these rhythmic structures to be very much akin to those used by a story-teller, or comedian, to add dramatic tension to a narrative. Hence Diderot's reported anecdotes and tales have kept much of the essence and charm of a well-told story. This rhythmic style was quite possibly very much part of Diderot's speech patterns, but whether this is revelatory of personality or not is quite a different matter. What is evident is a stylistic preference. Similar examples of this use of rhythm to convey excitement and almost breathless *emportement* can be found in Diderot's letters. For example, he describes his emotional response to witnessing someone doing a good deed in a manner which is almost a text book example of the style of sensibility. Sensation after sensation is described. This demonstrates another feature of Diderot's style - amplification - which reflects his self-representation as a great enthusiast:

Alors il me semble que mon cœur s'étende au-dedans de moi, qu'il nage; je ne sais quelle sensation délicieuse et subtile me parcourt partout; j'ai peine à respirer; il s'excite à toute la surface de mon corps comme un frémissement; c'est surtout au haut au front, à l'origine des cheveux qu'il se fait sentir; et puis les symptômes de l'admiration et du plaisir viennent se mêler sur mon visage avec ceux de la joie, et mes yeux se remplissent de larmes. (*Corres.*, pp. 261-262.)

Diderot enumerates the physical symptoms of sensibility. This amplification of these physical effects builds up suspense until the passage and the enthusiasm reach a form of climax in the release of tears caused by this strong emotion. This is also highly reminiscent of the depiction of Dorval and his response to nature and other artistic

¹⁵ Spitzer, p. 135.

stimuli in *Les Entretiens du fils naturel*. Another more prosaic example of a very similar use of rhythm and amplification can be found in a letter in which he describes how his whole household are invalids due to one ailment or another :

Me voilà donc de retour à Paris. J'arrive, et je trouve Jeanneton convalescente de plusieurs abcès à la gorge, pour lesquels elle a été saignée plusieurs fois, et qu'il a fallu ouvrir à la lancette, les uns après les autres; ma femme au vin de quinquina, pour une fièvre réglée dont elle a eu les premiers accès dans les premiers jours de mon départ, et qu'on n'a point encore pu déraciner; la petite fille avec le nez galeux, la fièvre, et les amygdales enflées. Ainsi me voilà dans un hôpital, et je suis où je dois être, car je ne me porte pas trop bien. J'ai l'estomac tout à fait dérangé. (*Corres.*, pp. 297-298.)

To convey the almost unbearable situation at home, he uses the effect of describing each illness in quick succession to convey the impression of being surrounded by invalids. The frequency with which he describes events or emotions in such a manner reveals this rhythmic structure in his writing to be very much a feature of his epistolary and literary style. One could assume that this would have been reflected in his speech patterns. Although this is a persuasive idea it must none the less remain pure conjecture.

Another technique Diderot uses to make his epistolary style more immediate, and thus closer to a conversation, is apostrophe - the interpellation of the reader or another absent party. This is often employed in a rather polyphonic manner.

Diderot's letters to Sophie are often peopled with the presence of more than one person:

Voilà ce que je suis quand je m'intéresse vivement à celui qui fait le bien. O ma Sophie, combien de beaux moments je vous dois! Combien je vous en devrai encore! O Angélique, ma chère enfant; je te parle ici et tu ne m'entends pas; mais si tu lis jamais ces mots quand je ne serai plus, car tu me survivras, tu verras que je m'occupais de toi [...] (*Corres.*, p. 262.)

It could be argued that such a rhetorical flourish actually takes a step back from conversation. Yet this mode of address is particularly emphatic. It places the natural dialogic form of the letter in a more immediate context. This adds another layer of dialogue to the letter, making the letter a polyphonic form for Diderot.

Diderot often interpellates his reader in a manner which is designed to stress his affection for the reader and to confer some of the reciprocity of conversation on the letter form. Some examples of the use of apostrophe and interpellation of the reader are more formal in register than others. For example, when Diderot writes to David Hume, his use of apostrophe is reminiscent of its use by an orator, whilst it still conveys Diderot's affection for his Scottish colleague:

Ah! mon cher philosophe! pleurons et gémissons sur le sort de la philosophie. Nous prêchons la sagesse à des sourds, et nous sommes bien encore loin du siècle de la raison. (*Corres.*, p. 937.)

Diderot utilizes this at first apparently typically literary device to convey a sense of closeness with his reader and to add a conversational tone to his letters by emphasizing their dialogic nature. In the letters to Sophie Volland, this is often linked with a range of terms of address and affection which he employed when writing to her. Once again this adds a lightness of tone which could be associated with conversation. For example:

Oh, que oui! vous avez bien deviné cela, bonne amie! (*Corres.*, p. 976.)

Bonjour, ma bonne, ma tendre amie. (*Corres.*, p. 967.)

Point de vin, mademoiselle? – Cela vous plaît à dire. (*Corres.*, p. 897.)

There are similar uses of apostrophe and interpellation in the vast majority of Diderot's letters. For example he writes in a letter to Falconet :

Ah! mon ami, que vous avez bien fait de vous en tirer aussi supérieurement, car on ne vous eût pas pardonné la médiocrité! (*Corres.*, p. 1201.)

And to his wife and daughter at about the same time:

Ah! ma femme! ah! ma fille il faut vous aimer tendrement pour vous regretter au milieu de ces séductions! (*Corre.*, p. 1206.)

This can also be seen to be very much a form of expression which emphasizes the sensibility of the writer. Diderot chooses to stress his passionate concern for those he writes to in this manner. This is the epistolary equivalent of frequently referring to one's interlocutor by name in a conversation, in order to give the impression that they have the speaker's full attention.

Referring again to the letter written to David Hume which we have just quoted, it is possible to ascertain other techniques Diderot uses to add a conversational tone to his letters. There is - for example - the rather colloquial use of 'Qu'en dites-vous?' and then the use of teasing humour and familiarity which is used in this letter which also serves as a letter of introduction for Doctor Benjamin Rush:

Ayez donc la bonté d'ouvrir votre porte, et d'offrir votre face ronde et riante de bernardin à un jeune pensylvain qui a juré de ne pas repasser les mers sans vous avoir rendu son hommage. (*Corres.*, p. 937.)

This use of *badinage* is also an attempt to reflect the camaraderie of conversation and is possibly a particularly masculine manner of showing affection for a friend by the use of humour. Another example of this conversational use of humour and familiarity is to be found in a letter to Voltaire. It starts with a jocular reference to the rumours which were circulating about the sixty-nine year old Voltaire and Judith de Saussure who was only twenty-seven:

Qu'une jeune femme ait eu la vanité de coucher avec l'homme unique de son siècle, je n'en suis pas trop surpris. J'en serais même édifié si l'on voulait. Mais que vous... Je ne saurais croire cette folie-là. C'est un conte. (*Corres.*, p. 1152-1153.)

Diderot also uses such forms of light comedy in his letters to the Vollands to render them more immediate. For example the missive dated 24th July 1769:

Je me prosterne aux pieds de maman, et je la supplie de ne me plus faire les gros yeux. Je tâcherai à l'avenir d'être plus joli garçon. (*Corres.*, p. 954.)

Jean-Pierre Seguin suggests that the references to the addressee of Diderot's letters, and the sense of a real presence of the addressee, which the reader of the *Correspondance* gains, is illusory. This is evident especially in letters written to several correspondents about the same event. Each letter appears to be tailored to each addressee's interests and reflects their personality, as perceived by Diderot, or as he would like it to be. Seguin says that: ¹⁶

Il se produit un effet analogue lorsque nous lisons 'sa correspondance': son écriture simule un processus de communication orale, et à la faveur de cette illusion nous croyons à la réalité du destinataire interpellé - auquel nous nous identifions. Je voudrais montrer que celui-ci est beaucoup plus une figure actantielle tirant sa cohérence de l'écriture elle-même que la représentation conforme du personnage référentiel dont il prend le nom, en dégageant de quelques lettres les indices de ce 'destinataire illusoire'. J'ai choisi pour cela de comparer des lettres à première vue semblables: à son retour de Russie, faisant étape à La Haye en avril 1774, Diderot raconte son voyage à sept destinataires différents, et l'on se persuade vite en le lisant que ce ne sont pas les nécessités d'informations spécifiques qui justifient les variantes d'une lettre à l'autre, mais bien cette image projetée de son correspondant. ¹⁷

Seguin gives the example that Diderot described a Dutch editor differently to each correspondent, subtly adjusting his description to comply with his conception of his correspondent. Seguin sees such slight alterations in the form of expression used in these letters to be evidence of Diderot's attempts to make his letters appear

¹⁶ Seguin, Jean-Pierre, 'L'Illusion du destinataire chez Diderot: un aspect de la stratégie persuasive' in *Stratégies discursives, Actes du colloque du Centre des recherches linguistiques et sémiologiques de Lyon, 20-22 mai 1977*, 217-235.

¹⁷ Seguin, p. 217.

spontaneous and conversational in tone. Seguin compares such letters to postcards, as Diderot covers the same material in each letter:

Comme un banal rédacteur de cartes postales, Diderot a ici trois choses à dire: voyage, santé, commentaire.¹⁸

This, however, is fairly standard letter-writing practice, and Diderot did not copy one formulaic letter verbatim and send it to all his correspondents. What is pertinent to this study is the fact that the adjustments he made to these letters were often to add an air of spontaneity and a conversational tone. It is this use of a conversational tone which, as Seguin says, conjures up for the modern reader of the *Correspondance* an impression of the real presence of Diderot's correspondent via these letters. Seguin argues that the figure of the correspondent is deceptive, and makes much of a particularly affectionate letter Diderot writes to his wife from La Haye, in which she is presented in an idealized light and where, indeed, he represents himself as a dutiful husband. We suggest that this represents Diderot's real emotional need, after a long and arduous journey and stay in Russia, still far away from home - to believe in the myth of a stable and loving domestic life. No doubt in spite of his strained relationship with his wife, he missed the familiarity of home. We agree wholeheartedly that the skill Diderot uses in adding a conversational tone and spontaneity to his letters masks the fact that certain letters are destined for multiple correspondents.

Diderot famously asserted, in the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, that there is nothing disjointed in the dreams of an invalid or a madman and that there is a connecting

¹⁸ Seguin, p. 220.

thread which runs throughout them. There is always a connection or 'correspondance' in seemingly incoherent thoughts. In a letter written to Sophie Volland, from Grandval on 20th October 1760, he discusses this concept of association in relation to the apparently circuitous and random order that conversation takes:

C'est une chose singulière que la conversation, surtout lorsque la compagnie est un peu nombreuse. Voyez les circuits que nous avons faits. Les rêves d'un malade en délire ne sont pas plus hétéroclites. Cependant, comme il n'y a rien de décousu ni dans la tête d'un homme qui rêve, ni dans celle d'un fou, tout tient aussi dans la conversation; mais il serait quelquefois bien difficile de retrouver les chaînons imperceptibles qui ont attiré tant d'idées disparates. Un homme jette un mot qu'il détache de ce qui a précédé et suivi dans sa tête; un autre en fait autant; et puis attrappe qui pourra. Une seule qualité physique peut conduire l'esprit qui s'en occupe à une infinité de choses diverses. Prenons une couleur, le jaune, par exemple. L'or est jaune, la soie est jaune, le souci est jaune, la bile est jaune, la paille est jaune; à combien d'autres fils ce fil jaune ne répond-il pas ? La folie, le rêve, le décousu de la conversation consistent à passer d'un objet à un autre par l'entremise d'une qualité commune.

Le fou ne s'aperçoit pas qu'il en change. Il tient un brin de paille jaune et luisante à la main, et il crie qu'il a saisi un rayon du soleil. Combien d'hommes qui ressemblent à ce fou sans s'en douter; et moi-même peut-être dans ce moment ? (*Corres.*, p. 271.)

Diderot does more than describe the associative structures which we can see to be behind the Grandval conversations, and conversations in general. He also prefigures the psychiatric use and relevance of word association tests. It is precisely this structure of associations which are the framework of his letters. Such an interconnected, associative style is quite fitting for the letter form according to the *secrétaires*, which consider the structural order of the letter form to be relatively fluid. However, Beauvais, writing in the latter part of the eighteenth century, considered such apparent disorder only to be permissible if it was caused by great passion:

Lorsqu'on traite des objets différens, qui n'ont ensemble aucune liaison, il importe peu quelle place on leur assigne; pour vu qu'on ne les confonde pas l'un avec l'autre, et que chacun soit traité séparément dans tous ses rapports.
[...]

Mais ce désordre, en fait de style épistolaire, n'est tolérable que lorsqu'il est autorisé par quelque grande passion, ou par des circonstances terribles qui mettent l'âme hors de son assiette ordinaire.¹⁹

Diderot's writing has been noted for its supposed *décousu* structure. Naigeon thought that Diderot's style was very similar to Montaigne's manner of writing.

Jerome Schwarz considers Naigeon's argument to be quite persuasive. He quotes

Naigeon thus:

The disorder of the *Essais* is the result of an art and a method whose principles are hidden: 'Personne ne savait mieux que lui ce que sa manière d'écrire pouvait avoir de choquant pour les esprits vulgaires; il a prévu leur critique, et sans y répondre directement, il a révélé lui-même le secret de sa méthode, et enseigné l'art de lire son livre et de l'entendre.'²⁰ He then quotes the well-known lines from *De la vanité*, the essay which has been so misunderstood even in the present century, and uses them to justify Diderot's *alleged* digressions: '*Je m'esgare, mais plutot par licence que par mesgarde. Mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois c'est de loing, et se regardent, mais d'une veue oblique.*' (III, IX), ce passage peut servir à justifier les prétendus écarts de Diderot, qui ne sont d'ailleurs ni aussi nombreux, ni aussi hardis que ceux de Montaigne. On voit que dans ces deux philosophes, doués d'une imagination vive et forte, et d'une grande pénétration, ils avaient leur source, ou si l'on veut leur raison, dans l'habitude de méditer profondément les questions dont ils s'occupaient; dans cette inquiétude d'esprit que donne le besoin de connaître, et qui les portait, comme par instinct, à chercher dans une matière tout ce qu'on peut y voir [...].²¹

This supposed disorder is really a false one which gives an air of natural spontaneity to carefully thought out and planned argument. Diderot is a particularly impassioned and enthusiastic writer whose most frequent form of expression in his letters is self-

¹⁹ Beauvais, M., *L'Art de bien parler et de bien écrire en français* (Valade, 1773), p. 280.

²⁰ Naigeon, *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de Denis Diderot* (Paris, 1821), p. 373. Quoted in Schwartz, Jerome, *Diderot and Montaigne*, p. 17.

²¹ Schwartz, p. 17.

evidently the discourse of sensibility. However, what Diderot practices and describes is only a surface disorder. There is always an underlying connection or association behind his apparently *décousu* structure. According to him, a mentally ill person might hold a shiny, yellow straw in their hand and say that s/he was holding a sunbeam in her/his hand. This link is not tenuous. In reality it is merely the difference between a metaphor and a metonym. At a profound structural level one sees Diderot jumping a link in the associative process, and this gives a *décousu* impression. The links in the order of a conversation are implicit, and are held to be tacitly understood: just as the mentally ill person does not make the link that the straw looks like a sunbeam explicit, the conversationalist does not always express clearly the link between their comment and the previous one made. Such links are held to be understood by all, with no need to render them explicit. If we examine the letter to Sophie Volland written from Grandval on 28th October 1760, we can see just such a structural framework in this letter's ordering of subject matter. The letter commences with an explanation, which Sophie Volland had asked for, of the word *spleen* and how the Père Hoop is affected by it, as were the rather dour and melancholic British people in general:

Vous ne savez pas ce que c'est que le 'spline' ou les vapeurs anglaises? Je ne le savais pas non plus. Je le demandai à notre Ecossais dans notre dernière promenade, et voici ce qu'il me répondit:

'Je sens depuis vingt ans un malaise général, plus ou moins fâcheux. Je n'ai jamais la tête libre [...]' (*Corres.*, p. 287.)

The Père Hoop, as quoted by Diderot, then describes his depression. Diderot comments upon the Père Hoop's sociable nature in spite of his 'spleen'. This then leads him to mention the topic of the stormy weather they have been having, which is

linked to the preceding topic by the fact that the Père Hoop is disturbed by the high winds:

‘Eh bien! avec cela, mon amie cet homme est encore de la société la plus agréable. Il lui reste je ne sais quoi de sa gaieté première, qui se remarque toujours dans son expression [...]

Voilà des vents, une pluie, de la tempête, un murmure sourd qui font retentir sans cesse nos corridors, dont il est désespéré.

J’aime moi, ces vents violents, cette pluie que j’entends frapper nos gouttières pendant la nuit; cet orage qui agite avec fracas les arbres qui nous entourent; cette basse continue qui gronde autour de moi [...] Tibulle sentait comme moi, mais je suis seul dans mon lit, et lui il y tenait entre ses bras celle dont il était aimé [...]

Eh! non, je ne crois pas que vous m’oubliez, même quand je vous le dis.

J’ai reçu toutes vos lettres [...] (*Corres.*, pp. 288-289.)

We can see just such a structure based upon association here. The bad weather is linked to the Père Hoop by his dislike of gales. Diderot, on the other hand, enjoys being curled up cosily in bed when it is wet and windy outside. This reminds him of Tibulle and his lover Délie, which in turn causes him to fantasize about creeping into Sophie’s bedroom, with the howling wind masking the sound of their lovemaking. Whilst indulging this fantasy, Diderot is reminded of a comment Sophie made in one of her letters, and in turn this then causes him to mention the letters he has received from her. Such links between what appear to be very disparate subjects become apparent when carefully examined, as do the links in the most circuitous of conversations.

When we examine another letter to Sophie Volland, (*Corres.*, pp. 976-979.), we can see similar associative links in place. These links are held to be understood and thus are not made explicit. This gives to Diderot’s letters some of the apparent

disorder which is often found in conversation. The letter begins with a response to a comment Sophie Volland made in a previous letter about Grimm:

Oh, que oui! vous avez bien deviné cela bonne amie! Il m'écrivait la veille de la dernière représentation, de Berlin, qu'il ne lui restait plus que cinq ou six cents lieues à faire.

He then describes what happened on the last night of the play and how this led to the visit of a young lawyer, M. Dupaty, who showed him some of his work. He describes this young man's enlightened attitudes. Up to this point in the letter each topic is closely linked, and they all fit into the theme of the last night of the play and the events which followed this. Whilst informing Sophie about recent events in his life, he then comments upon the tedious nature of standing in for Grimm as interim editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*. This then has no discernible connection with the next section of the letter:

J'ai encore huit ou dix jours au moins à porter l'ennuyeux tablier. Je pense que depuis que vous vous êtes félicitées du retour du beau temps, si les eaux de la Marne se sont enflées en proportion de celles de la Seine, la bourbeuse rivière couvre les vordes et vous tient assiégées dans votre château.

This is then followed by a comment about comets. There had recently been one visible in the sky over Paris. There is no direct reference to this apart from a reflection that people are less superstitious about comets than they used to be. The comet might be associated in his mind with the change in the weather:

Il y a longtemps qu'on a dépouillé les comètes de toute influence sur nos affaires.

Then, with no apparent link between this and the previous comment, he refers to a Doctor Villichy or Villic whom Sophie Volland had mentioned in her last letter. The only connection there seems to be is that this part of the letter is apparently a type of gazette in which Diderot attempts to inform Sophie Volland about the people and

events she has enquired about in her previous letters. He then associates the doctor's methods with the idea that having a glass of wine is a good and rather pleasant remedy for most ailments. This in turn leads him to ask about the Vollands' vines. There is then no real link between this and comments about Perronet's new bridge although evidently this was a topic of interest for the Vollands who knew Perronet. A whole section of this letter is then concerned with news about acquaintances of the Vollands. He then mentions his dialogues which would form the *Rêve de d'Alembert* and how he would like to read it out aloud to her first. This emphasizes the performative aspect of his dialogues. The letter then continues with general badinage.

He then reflects in this letter upon the nature of his letters to Sophie and his aim to please her in everything he writes about:

Je veux mourir si je vois dans ce fragment épistolaire autre chose que ce que vous y voyez: un homme qui, à l'occasion d'une bagatelle qui a pu vous être agréable, pousse sa pointe, et court après l'avantage d'avoir à se justifier auprès [de] vous des tendres sentiments qu'il a pris sans votre aveu, et qu'il ne désespérait pas de vous faire agréer.

The closing statement of the letter then refers back to his earlier comment about being very tired due to the amount of extra work he had to do due to Grimm's absence. Even the most disjointed section of this letter could be said to be held together and have a certain order because these topics, although disparate, are all related to people or subjects Sophie Volland had expressed an interest in. It should be remembered that Diderot's letters would often be written at several sittings and at times over a period of days. This would account for a certain lack of linkage between topics, particularly if he was picking up the narrative thread of a letter which had been interrupted some time before.

Falconet accused Diderot's letters for the *Pour et contre* of being rather disordered in their argumentation. However they appear less disordered than the letters to Sophie Volland, therefore it appears to be Diderot's longer familiar letters which have certain *décousu* elements although, even within these, associative links can generally be discerned.

Reported Conversation in the Grandval Letters.

The emphasis placed upon sociability in the etiquette manuals, and their guidelines for polite conversation, are targeted at a select portion of society. A restricted social circle, where only people of similar social rank would mix, would preserve this sociable veneer. Diderot was not from the same social background as most of d'Holbach's circle, but they all shared similar tastes and the same intellectual and philosophical outlook. When Diderot's letters refer to such select groups, they present a view of society and social interaction which is largely harmonious. We shall examine this harmonious view of congenial company and Diderot's depiction of such conversations. The manner in which Diderot portrays the conversations in which he participated at Grandval is rather unusual, and we will scrutinize the methods he uses to render the vivacity and immediacy of these interchanges.

A narrative technique which Diderot frequently uses is the framing of anecdotes by setting the scene for them, by introducing the time, place and participants in the conversation. This produces the effect of a tableau and could be said to resemble visual techniques which are often associated with painting, cinema or theatre. Consider the following letter to Sophie Volland [30th October 1759]:

Il était temps que nous regagnassions le salon. Nous y voilà; les femmes étalées sur le fond, les hommes rangés autour du foyer. Ici l'on se réchauffe; là on respire. On est encore en silence, mais ce ne sera pas pour longtemps. C'est Mme d'Holbach qui a parlé la première, et elle a dit: 'Maman, que ne faites-vous une partie ? - Non; j'aime mieux me reposer et bavarder.- Comme vous voudrez. Reposons-nous et bavardons.'

Il est inutile que je vous nomme dans la suite les interlocuteurs. Vous les connaissez tous. (*Corres.*, p. 178.)

Diderot, in introducing his reported dialogues by the use of such tableaux, reveals the influence of the paintings by Greuze which he so admired. Greuze would paint scenes such as the homecoming of a soldier, in which the gestures of the family members would convey the high emotional force of the scene. Diderot, in the *Salons*, and elsewhere, reveals his visual sensibility and imagination. One can note also a certain theatricality in such 'stage setting' of the Grandval conversations, and one must not forget the importance of dialogue and the positioning of the participants for the dramatist.

Such an introduction serves to include the reader, Sophie Volland, in the ensuing conversation and to set what is a wide-ranging and fairly *décousu* depiction of conversation in a neat framework. As much as 'il était une fois' functions as a generic marker indicating to the reader/listener the genre of tale they are about to hear, this introduction sets the reported conversation firmly in its context. It places Diderot in two roles, that of the narrator of the conversation and that of participant in the conversation which he describes. Diderot portrays himself as a character in this reported dialogue. There is a dramatized version of Diderot conversing, as well as the Diderot who is reporting this conversation.

By the time that this letter had been written, Sophie Volland recognized the nature of the Grandval conversations and the characterization of the usual

conversationalists well enough for Diderot to dispense with introducing each speaker when they enter the conversation. Each speaker makes her/his contribution to the conversation, without her/his identity always being evident. This makes the ensuing polyphony seem even more harmonious.

The introduction of an anecdote, ostensibly told by Galiani, features in a letter written to Sophie Volland a year later, in October, 1760. Here Diderot uses the same framing technique. He leads into the anecdote by relating the conversation between Grimm and M. Le Roy about genius, which inspired Galiani to tell a related anecdote:

Il s'agissait entre Grimm et M. Le Roy du génie qui crée et de la méthode qui ordonne. Grimm déteste la méthode.

[...]

'Mais c'est la méthode qui fait valoir. - et qui gêne. - Sans elle on ne profiterait de rien. - Qu'en se fatiguant, et cela n'en serait que mieux. Où est la nécessité que tant de gens sachent autre chose que leur métier?' Ils dirent beaucoup de choses que je ne vous rapporte pas, et ils en diraient encore si l'abbé Galiani ne les eût interrompus comme ceci: 'Mes amis, je me rappelle une fable. Ecoutez-la. Elle sera peut-être un peu longue, mais elle ne vous ennuiera pas.' (*Corres.*, p. 267.)

The use of an introduction, which replaces the anecdote in the original context in which it was told, is a rather organic approach to the reporting of conversation. What is meant by *organic*, is Diderot's intention for the anecdotes to flow naturally, in the context of conversation. This apparent verisimilitude is possibly flawed, as it seems that Galiani's disclaimer about the length of his fable is more for the benefit of the reader than the listener.

Here Diderot takes on the role of an objective observer and narrator, rather than that of an active participant in the dialogue. He is at one and the same time the

narrator, 'je' and a passive listener to the reported anecdote. By reinserting this anecdote in its setting, he attempts to remove some of the distortion which takes place when an utterance is retold in a form other than its original state. He also tries to recreate some of Galiani's famous, story-telling skills.

It is relevant here to consider what Bakhtin says about speech acts, which helps to throw some light upon the processes at work in Diderot's reported conversations. According to Bakhtin, all utterances are in a sense a reverberation or echo of other speech acts. In other words, all speech acts/all language react against some prior statement, whether consciously or not. It is useful to relate the reported conversation and dialogue in the *Correspondance* to such concepts because Diderot, in his experiments with the genre of reported dialogue, seems to be exploring some of these inherent linguistic tensions. Bakhtin describes these concepts in the following terms in 'The Problem of Speech Genres':

Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere. The very boundaries of the utterance are determined by a change of speech subjects. Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. These mutual reflections determine their character. Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication. Every utterance must be regarded primarily as a 'response' to proceeding utterances of the given sphere (we understand the word 'response' in the broadest sense). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account. After all, as regards a given question, in a given matter and so forth, the utterance occupies a particular definite position in a given sphere of communication. It is impossible to determine its position without correlating it with other positions. Therefore, each utterance is filled with various kinds of responsive reactions to other utterances of the given sphere of speech communication. These reactions take various forms: other's utterances can be introduced directly into the context of the utterance, or one may introduce only individual words or sentences, which then act as representations of the whole utterance. Both whole utterances and individual words can retain their alien expression, but they can also be re-

accentuated (ironically, indignantly, reverently, and so forth). Other's utterances can be repeated with varying degrees of reinterpretation.²²

Diderot, by conveying the original surrounding context of Galiani's anecdote, tries to overcome some of the distortion which is caused by 're-accentuation'. The potentially 'alien expression' is domesticated, as Diderot places it in a context where its purpose is to provide entertainment and amusement. That is to say that, by the very fact that he relates these anecdotes in his letters, he indicates to the reader that he considers them to be interesting and amusing. Diderot as a letter-writer chose to report selected fragments of conversation in his letters, and this indicates that what he considered fit for inclusion in his letters to Sophie Volland would be both informative and entertaining. In other words these anecdotes are essentially 're-accentuated' in this manner.

Bakhtin then continues in the same essay to refer to the effect which quotation has on the original utterance:

The other's speech thus has a dual expression: its own, that is, the other's, and the expression of the utterance that encloses the speech. All this takes place primarily when the other's speech (even if it is only one word, which here acquires the force of an entire utterance) is openly introduced and clearly demarcated (in quotation marks). Echoes of the change of speech subjects and their dialogical interrelations can be heard clearly here. But any utterance, when it is studied in greater depth under the concrete conditions of speech communication, reveals to us many half-concealed or completely concealed words of others with varying degrees of foreignness. Therefore the utterance appears to be furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and dialogic overtones, greatly weakened utterance boundaries that are completely permeable to the author's expression. The utterance proves to be a very complex and multiplanar phenomenon if considered not in isolation and with respect to its author (the speaker) only, but as a link in the chain of speech communication and with respect to the other, related utterances

²² Bakhtin, M. M., 'The Problem of Speech Genres' pp. 60-102 in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, translated by Vern W. Mc Gee, edited by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 91

(these relations are usually disclosed not on the verbal compositional and stylistic-plane, but only on the referentially semantic plane).²³

Even Diderot's own comments, as portrayed in the polyphonic Grandval dialogues, contain many 'foreign' elements, as many of his philosophic conversations are based upon his reading of various works and contributions to the *Encyclopédie*. His comments about the Saracens, or the Chinese are largely based upon such sources. Bakhtin states that by the act of quoting an utterance, we add to it a certain dialogic nature, due to the interplay between our act of quoting and the original utterance. This dialogic nature of quotation is even further emphasized by the already dialogic nature of the utterances which Diderot quotes. This adds an additional richness to the echoing of utterances in these letters. Yet, as these are framed by Diderot and transposed to another genre by him, everything becomes infused with Diderot's style and perspective. The fact that these conversations are the edited highlights of all the conversations which took part in a given day also subverts their original nature. He has placed his personal stamp upon these utterances, by choosing which anecdotes he will tell to Sophie Volland. His aim, of course, was not to report conversation in a completely authentic form but rather to convey to Sophie some of the pleasure and interest he gained from these lively discussions with his friends.

Returning to the letter written from Grandval on 30th October 1759 to Sophie Volland, it is evident that Diderot struggles against such homogenizing forces here, by presenting speech in a manner which is as close as possible to the original

²³ Bakhtin, p. 93.

polyphony of conversation. The different voices are differentiated by personality and to an extent by gender, as the male speakers tend to introduce philosophical topics, and the female characters, such as Mme d'Aine, provide the comic light relief within the overall structure of these conversations. There is no form of social differentiation or *hetero-glossia* as all the speakers are from similar backgrounds and Diderot, although of more bourgeois origins, is very much assimilated into this social group. However their speech is not represented in a homogenous manner. Rather each speaker is denoted by the way in which her/his speech characterizes her/his personality. Each person has distinctive ways of talking and topics of interest which s/he is more likely to talk about. This manner of presenting conversation allows the utterances to keep part of their original 'foreignness', as the reader is clearly reminded that these are ostensibly the reported words of the speakers and not

Diderot's own words:

Eh bien! philosophe, où en êtes-vous de votre besogne? - J'en suis aux Arabes et aux Sarrasins. - A Mahomet, le meilleur ami des femmes? - Oui et le plus grand ennemi de la raison. - Voilà une impertinente remarque. - Madame, ce n'est point une remarque, c'est un fait. - Autre sottise.. - L'hégire! quel animal est-ce là? - Madame, c'est la grande époque des musulmans. - Me voilà bien avancée. Je n'entends pas plus son époque. Ils ont la rage de parler Grec. [...]

Tel fut Orphée, chez les Grecs, Moïse chez les hébreux, Numa chez les romains.- Point de nouvelles de Paris. Mes buis ne seront pas plantés cet automne. Ce Berlize est un baguenaudier. Il m'en faut cent cinquante bottes, et il m'envoie quatre-vingts. - Ces plates-bandes feront fort bien. Qu'en pensez-vous? - A merveilles. - Je voudrais bien que le Charon revît son jardin. - Les premiers législateurs des nations étaient chargés d'interpréter la volonté des dieux. [...]

Madame, ce qu'ils disent là est fort beau. - Je me soucie bien de ce qu'ils disent. Je pense à mes buis. Il y a longtemps que nous n'avons vu la parfaite union. - Tant mieux. - Ils sont pourtant à Saint-Maur. - Qu'ils y restent! - Cette femme-là est plus ferme que toutes les femmes ensemble. - Jamais elle ne sait ce qu'elle veut. (*Corres.*, pp. 178-9.)

Diderot, in portraying his own discussion of a subject such as Islamic history, conceals his own use of quotation, and of other sources he read whilst editing the *Encyclopédie*. He enlivens his imparting of new knowledge to Sophie Volland by relaying it in a dramatized conversational form.

The explanations of certain points are not purely for Mme d'Aine's benefit. They provide a comic counterbalance to the main debate and they explain areas which would no doubt also be unclear for the reader, Sophie Volland herself. Here the figure of Mme d'Aine, in her interjections such as 'l'hégire ! Quel animal est-ce là ?', fulfills the rôle of a dramatized reader. These are, albeit in a modified manner, the questions Sophie Volland would be likely to raise. It would be quite possible, if not probable, for Sophie Volland to be unaware that the hegira was Muhammad's departure from Mecca to Medina in AD 622, and that the muslim era is dated from this point in time. There is an effect of *mise en abyme* evident here, as Diderot represents himself as a speaker, and reports his listeners' responses to his comments. This is then mirrored in its turn by the act of transposing this dialogue to the letter form, and by the actual reaction of the reader, which in its turn is anticipated and prefigured by the figure of Mme d'Aine and the other listeners.

Diderot also attempts to incorporate into these letters the serendipitous nature of conversation. He does so by reporting conversations which are going on at the same time as the main conversation. For example Mme d'Aine and another woman start to discuss the delivery of young box trees for her garden, whilst the main conversation is still concerned with religious and philosophical matters.

Conversation is apt to have many participants, and if several people are present,

simultaneous conversations are likely to start alongside the general conversation, with participants who may partake in two or three conversational groups dipping into conversations here and there, wherever they have something relevant to say. This representation of the several simultaneous strands of conversation is another means of reinserting the conversation into its original context, and of staving off some of the distortion of the quotation process.

The other important function of such a polyphonic approach is the possibility it gives of being able to add on various layers of comic effect and contrast. Mme d'Aine, or rather we should say the figure of Mme d'Aine as represented in Diderot's letters, often acts as a catalyst for a change in register of language and genre of conversation. Here, in the midst of the general conversation about Mecca, Mademoiselle Anselme is teased about the supposed ugliness of her backside:

Mademoiselle Anselme? – Madame? - Vous avez bien le plus vilain cul qui se puisse. - En vérité, ma belle-mère, vous êtes d'une folie! - Aux séraills, mon gendre! ...Oh! mademoiselle, un très vilain cul. – Je ne m'en soucie guère. Je ne le vois pas. - Mais c'est qu'il est noir, ridé, maigre, sec, petit, plissé, chagriné, si Saint Pierre le savait il en rabattrait un peu. - Elle a un si joli visage! Comment aurait-elle un si vilain cul ? - Voilà mon philosophe qui m'a devant lui, et qui conclut du visage au cul. Tant y a que le sien est fort laid et que je m'en crois, car je l'ai vu. –Vous l'avez vu, madame? –Oui, je l'ai vu...toute la nuit, en rêve. – Eh bien! philosophe? – Je ne sais plus où j' en suis. – Eh! laissez là ces folles. - Ma foi, elles parlent d'un cul qui m'a tourné la tête. - Vous en étiez à l'acte religieux annuel et au déclin de la superstition nationale. - M'y voilà. (*Corres.*, p. 180.)

The short, sharp repartee here adds to the momentum of the humour. This also functions as a means of teasing Sophie, as well as being amusing by its stark contrast to the surrounding reported dialogue. Diderot represents himself surrounded by women and engaging in openly sexual banter with them. Whilst he includes Sophie Volland by writing these letters about the humorous badinage which takes place,

such letters also emphasize her exclusion from this group. He often represents himself at the centre of animated conversation, and in this manner it is as if he is stressing his popularity and merit to her, making it clear to her that she is far from being the only lady who finds him amusing.

Diderot's letters to Sophie Volland contain many such comic scenes and humorous anecdotes which Galiani has told the assembled company. Diderot was, however, very aware that a joke is often better told orally, and that it loses some of its vivacity in being written down. Diderot, on 25th November 1760, sketches out the bare bones of a joke told by Galiani, but then states that he would be unable to do the joke justice in his letter as he would not be able to convey all the responses of the characters as expertly as Galiani:

J'en aurais bien un autre meilleur à vous faire, mais je n'en ai pas le temps; et puis cela ne vous amuserait peut-être pas autant écrit que cela nous amuse récité. Sans cela, je vous peindrai un archevêque contrefaisant une duchesse dans le lit de la duchesse, et se faisant donner le pot de chambre par un cardinal. Mais pour cela il faut savoir, comme l'abbé, tous les propos de l'archevêque en duchesse, tous les propos du cardinal trompé, les sonnettes tirées et personne ne venant; les sonnettes toujours tirées et personne toujours ne venant, le besoin pressant de la duchesse, enfin l'offre officieuse du cardinal, et la manière dont il est détrompé. (*Corres.*, p. 329.)

He has already given us the framework of the joke, and he leaves it to the reader's imagination to guess the dialogue between the cross-dressing archbishop and the cardinal who hands him the chamber pot.

In a letter written from Grandval on October 12th 1760, Diderot frames the ensuing reported dialogue by setting the tableau-like scene of Mme d'Holbach sewing. He stresses her beauty, perhaps rather more than is necessary (or would be appreciated by Sophie Volland):

Mme d'Holbach était à son métier. Je me suis approché d'elle. Oh! Qu'elle était belle! Le beau teint! La belle santé! et puis, quel vêtement! C'est une coiffure en cheveux avec une espèce d'habit de marmotte d'un taffetas rouge, couvert partout d'une gaze à travers la blancheur de laquelle on voit percer, çà et là, la couleur de rose. 'Vous revenez de la Chevrette ? - Oui, madame. - Vous vous y êtes amusé ? - Oui, madame, assez. - Aussi, vous y êtes resté longtemps ? - Grimm et Mme d'Épinay m'ont retenu un jour, et puis encore un jour, et puis de jour en jour on touche au bout de la semaine. - En attendant que vous vinssiez, maman en a fait de bons contes. - Cela se peut, Madame. Mais ce sont des contes. - Pourquoi ? - C'est qu'il faut que cela soit. - Je n'entends pas. - Vous n'entendez pas qu'il y a des choses sacrées dans ce monde ? - Eh! Oui, a-t-elle ajouté en baissant les yeux et en souriant avec malice; et dont il est bien de se tenir à quelque distance.' Voilà de ces mots qu'elle a appris de M. Le Roy. (*Corres.*, p. 247.)

He enumerates the various attributes and details which make Mme d'Holbach so attractive with almost breathless *emportement*. He represents himself in this conversation as being in awe of her presence and giving short and respectful replies to her questions such as 'Oui, madame'. There is very little purpose in reporting this conversation other than to show that he plays an important role in the society of Grandval because, in his absence, Mme d'Aine was the main person to fulfill the function of amusing conversationalist. There is no doubt that Diderot displays a certain amount of vanity, and the Grandval letters reveal that he was proud of his position as a valued conversationalist. There is more than a hint here of a flirtatious nature to this conversation, and in his description of Mme d'Holbach's dress, it is clear that he is by no means indifferent to her charms. Diderot might teasingly have intended to make Sophie Volland jealous. This section of the letter, whilst fitting into the journal project, rather than serving to bridge the gap of absence, widens it with this anecdote. Whilst he includes her in his day in detail by describing his arrival in Grandval, it also serves to emphasize the difference between his social life in Grandval and her's at Isle.

In a similar vein, Diderot emphasizes the fundamentally different nature of the experience of hearing an anecdote, told by the very person who experienced the event, to that of having a tale told by a third party. This can be related to what Bahktin says about the distorting effect of the quotation and the reporting of utterances, which always lose something of their original nature when reported. He described in early November 1760 to Sophie Volland the pride and interest he had in being told of certain military exploits by Baron Dieskau in person:

Ah! mon amie, quelle différence entre lire l'histoire et entendre l'homme! Les choses intéressent bien autrement . D'où vient cet intérêt? Est-ce du rôle de celui qui raconte, ou du rôle de celui qui écoute? Serait-ce que nous serions flattés de la préférence du sort qui nous adresse à celui à qui tant de choses extraordinaires sont arrivées, et de l'avantage que nous aurons sur les autres par le degré de certitude que nous acquérons, et par celui que nous serons en droit d'exiger lorsque nous redirons à notre tour ce que nous aurons entendu? On est bien fier, quand on raconte de pouvoir ajouter: celui à qui cela est arrivé, je l'ai vu; c'est de lui-même que je tiens la chose. (*Corres.*, p. 304.)

This refers precisely to what happens in the Grandval letters, where Diderot to an extent appropriates these anecdotes, and the reader is always aware of Diderot's presence as a listener who had the great fortune to meet the original speaker. In some small way, some of the glory or wit of the speaker becomes conferred upon the person who has met such famous characters, and he /she is, as Diderot says, able to tell their friends that they actually met them. Sophie Volland, at a stage farther removed, is able to share in this experience, and the passages of such letters act as a type of chronicle for her.

The framing of anecdotes in these letters is also typical of Diderot's narrative style in that he introduces a subject step-by-step, so that the narrative takes on a certain rhythmic momentum as it reaches its climax /conclusion. This is very much

part of the art of joke telling, which reaches its climax in a punchline. Yet again an anecdote which reflects this involves Mme d'Aine and her son:

Imaginez que nous sommes quatorze ou quinze à table, sur la fin du repas, et mon fils d'Aine assis à la gauche de Charmoy. Il est ordinairement familier avec elle. Il lui prend la main; il veut voir le bras; il relève la manchette. (*Corres.*, p. 273.)

Diderot chooses a narrative present tense to render the scene all the more immediate. This is a visual description of the scene, which could be told in a much less dramatic manner by simply stating that Mme d'Aine's son upset Mme de Charmoy by playing with the rather evident, dark hair on her arms. Another narrative feature, which is so recurrent that it is typically Diderotian, is the description of action in three parts. Such tripartite action is found throughout the *Correspondance*. This shows the influence of Diderot's classical education as much as anything else. Here, its function is to add to the comic timing of the final riposte by Mme d'Aine, ' Qui est-ce qui a jamais épluché une femme à table ?'

The letters Diderot writes to Sophie Volland not only report conversations, but are also an attempt by him to recreate the conversations he would have had with her if he had been able to see her in person. These letters are probably the closest impression we will ever gain of Diderot as a conversationalist and as a part of the Baron's social group. The Grandval letters are important due to the skill with which Diderot reports these conversations, a skill which is so evident that they lose little of their original vivacity. As a result they provide invaluable information about eighteenth century sociability and the art of conversation. Diderot's practice in reporting conversation in his letters is particularly original and striking. The methods

used to render these reported dialogues as authentic as possible stand out as a most unusual feature of Diderot's epistolary art.²⁴

²⁴ Other works which are useful when considering the conversational and dialogic nature of Diderot's letters and especially his other works are: Sherman, Carol, *Diderot and the Art of Dialogue* (Geneva, 1976); Dieckmann, Herbert, *Cinq leçons sur Diderot* (Geneva, 1959); Caplan, Jay, *Framed Narratives Diderot's Genealogy of the Beholder* (Manchester, 1986). The introduction which discusses sensibility as a dialogic impulse and the concept of the tableau is of particular relevance.

One important aspect of the *Correspondance* is often overlooked, namely: the many conflictual letters which Diderot wrote, letters in which he tried to persuade the correspondent to accept his point of view. These letters are denoted by their lack of polyphony. They are monologic, only one opinion and position are acceptable, Diderot's own. The literature of the Enlightenment and Diderot's own work can be seen to be polemic writing which used the persuasive tools of wit and pathos as philosophical weapons. An example of this which we will discuss in this chapter is the letters he wrote to the *Journal de Trévoux*. His philosophical works and the *Encyclopédie* are examples of his great skill in conveying an argument whilst entertaining his readers.

The first type of these letters which we will discuss are those which Diderot wrote to Rousseau, Le Breton, Grimm, Falconet and his brother. These letters are written at a point of crisis in these relationships where there is little or no common ground remaining between the correspondents. We will examine the effectiveness of the methods Diderot uses to persuade the addressees that their beliefs and actions are wrong and ill-founded. The letters which Diderot wrote to Rousseau and his brother, the canon, are especially interesting since they are some of the few letters which represent both sides of the correspondence. These letters can be seen to be the written continuation of quite emotionally damaging personal polemics and conflicts. In the vast majority of letters which we shall examine, Diderot depicts himself once again as a man of feeling and sensibility. He portrays himself as an *honnête homme*, and uses the full persuasive force of this persona to influence his readers.

We will then study a second form of polemical letter which requires the writer to utilize his/her powers of persuasion: this is the open letter, and the polemical letter in the public sphere of published writing. Diderot, as the editor of the *Encyclopédie*, was closely involved in its publicity campaign, and in the search for subscribers to the publication. Its *Prospectus* caused a controversy which threatened the existence of the *Encyclopédie*. He wrote two open letters, which were published in pamphlet form, addressed to Père Berthier, the editor of the *Journal de Trévoux*, who had written an article critical of the *Prospectus*. We will consider the rôle played by these letters in the struggle to gain official approval and public interest for the *Encyclopédie*.

Having considered the means of argumentation Diderot used in letters which had a very real impact, such as the letters written to Rousseau which only served to widen the rift between the two friends, we will continue our discussion of polemical and persuasive letters by looking at a third type, namely: the letters he exchanged with Falconet, with the intention of publishing them at a later date. It is pertinent to examine the means of argumentation used by Diderot in the rather artificial context of letters destined for publication, and those which were written about actual, personal disagreements.

Finally, we shall attend to a fourth manifestation of Diderot's epistolary activity which is linked to these polemical forms of persuasive writing, namely: those letters he wrote to solicit help from various well-connected and powerful people, generally to seek help for others. Here, to achieve the latter he had to persuade potential benefactors, and in order to do so he had to use a form of polite and

convincing argumentation which might be seen to be lacking in some of the overtly combative letters which we will be studying in this chapter. Running throughout these letters, and many of the more combative letters, is his description of himself as an *honnête homme*, and his use of the discourse of sensibility in order to persuade his reader by the use of pathos. He makes much more use of pathos as a rhetorical tool than he does of logos in these letters. This is part and parcel of Diderot's self-representation as a man of feeling rather than of cold-blooded logic.

In this chapter, we will show the importance of the letter in the struggles and conflicts of Diderot's personal and professional life. For example, the open letter, in particular, was an important literary genre in the eighteenth century, and was often used to express political and religious dissent. Diderot campaigned on the behalf of Don Pablo Olavidés, a Peruvian nobleman who was sentenced by the Inquisition as a heretic in 1778. He managed to escape from prison in 1780. Diderot used the *Correspondance littéraire* to raise international consciousness about this affair, and as a result saved him from persecution and enabled him to gain asylum in France, under the name of the Comte de Pilos. The importance and utility of open letters and pamphlets in preventing some of the worst cases of religious intolerance, and abuse of power and hence of human rights, should not be underestimated. These letters do not, of course, form part of the *Correspondance*, but it is important to be aware of the other type of controversial and campaigning writing by Diderot and other *philosophes*, and the importance and power of such advocacy.

We will start our examination of persuasive and disputatious letters by considering those letters which have both sides of the correspondence still extant.

Thus far we have looked at conversation as a purely non-confrontational and pleasurable form of discourse as reflected in the *Correspondance*. This is only one facet of conversation and indeed of Diderot's correspondence. There are very few letters remaining from Diderot's correspondents but the majority of those which are extant are those written in opposition to Diderot's views. The Roth-Varloot edition of the *Correspondance* includes letters from Diderot's correspondents. Such letters can give the reader quite a different impression of Diderot, the conversationalist and the man, than the one we gain from reading the letters to Sophie Volland. In reading these letters written to Sophie, we have a true dialogue in terms of question and response. Yet in the letters we will look at there is little or no synthesis of opinion, or common ground, between the views of the two correspondents.

One example of this type of letter is the letter Diderot's father wrote to him when he was imprisoned in Vincennes. This is in reply to one of the many letters he wrote at the time to his family and the prison authorities, proclaiming his complete innocence and misfortune. These false protestations are overblown and rather arrogant, as he was in no position to dupe the authorities or his father. Diderot no doubt attempted to appeal to his father's sentiments of paternal duty. Even in the letter Diderot wrote to Monsieur Berryer, *lieutenant général de police*, he attempted to use pathos and hyperbole to counter any evidence against him:

Malgré les douleurs de corps et les peines d'esprit dont je suis accablé, je suis pressé d'un intérêt plus touchant et plus tendre. J'ai laissé à la maison une femme et un enfant; une femme désolée et un enfant au berceau. Ils ne subsistaient que par moi; je leur manque (et ce sera bientôt pour toujours), que vont-ils devenir ? (*Corres.*, p. 17.)

If we read an edition of the *Correspondance* which does not include the following letter from his father, such as the Versini edition, we might assume that Diderot's rhetorical pleas for help had some effect or had been completely ignored. However, Diderot's letter written to his father (published by Georges Roth) failed completely in its aims, and, if anything, by its falsehood only removed what pity his father would have had for his errant son. The letter from his father was written on 3rd September 1749:

Mon fils,

J'ai reçu les deux lettres que vous m'avez écrites en dernier lieu, qui m'apprennent votre détention et le motif d'icelle, mais je ne sçaurois m'empêcher de vous dire qu'il faut absolument qu'il [y] ait eu d'autres raisons que celles que vous m'alléguez dans une de vos lettres pour vous avoir fait mettre entre quatre murailles. Tout ce qui vient de la part du souverain est bien respectable, et il faut y obéir dans tous les cas. Si, dans le premier interrogat que vous avez subi, vous y aviez justifié votre conduite, supposant [qu'elle] peut l'être, assurément vous n'auriez pas gardé la sélule aussi longtemps que vous l'avez fait, et je pense que Monsieur de Voumend n'aurait pas voulu d'une satisfaction aussi dure, que celle que vous avez essuyée.

(*Correspondance.I*, Roth, Georges, (Paris, 1955) p. 92, Lettre 24.)

Here we can see a real dialogue in progress, as we have both sides of the correspondence. Yet there is no agreement. Diderot's father is not only informed of his life by contacts in Paris, such as Frère Ange, but also rightly assumes that his son is still keeping undesirable company and expressing views against religion.

Replies also survive to the final letters Diderot wrote to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These letters give a sense of an initial, heated disagreement being continued in letter form, and only becoming more acrimonious as letter follows letter. A letter allows the writer the time to lay out her/his argument with care and to analyse the actions of the other, whilst a face-to-face oral argument is often distorted by anger. A written slight upon one's character, however, can only increase in

hurtfulness as it remains as evidence of the perfidy of its writer. Diderot represents himself in his letters to Sophie Volland and others as a sociable, tolerant, *honnête homme*, but in these last letters to his former good friend he appears to be rather hectoring, and self-righteous. There can be no greater contrast to the polyphony of the Grandval letters than these letters where only one view is considered acceptable or valid and that is the one held by Diderot. He represents himself as acting in Rousseau's best interests, but he counters any idea of Rousseau's that, as these are his personal concerns, it is not the place of Diderot to lecture him. As we can see in the following letter, written on 22nd October 1757, he obstinately advises his friend and, in so doing shows no awareness of the insulting and patronizing nature of such advice:

Je suis fait pour vous aimer et pour vous donner du chagrin. J'apprends que Mme d'Epinaï va à Genève, et je n'entends point dire que vous l'accompagniez. Mon ami, content de Mme d'Epinaï, il faut partir avec elle, mécontent il faut partir beaucoup plus vite. Êtes-vous surchargé du poids des obligations que vous lui avez ? Voilà une occasion de vous acquitter en partie et de vous soulager. Trouverez-vous une autre occasion dans votre vie de lui témoigner votre reconnaissance ? Elle va dans un pays où elle sera comme tombée des nues. Elle est malade, elle aura besoin d'amusement et de distraction.

L'hiver? Voyez, mon ami. L'objection de votre santé peut être beaucoup plus forte que je ne le crois. Mais êtes-vous plus mal aujourd'hui que vous ne l'étiez il y a un mois, et que vous ne le serez au commencement du printemps? Ferez-vous dans trois mois d'ici le voyage plus commodément qu'aujourd'hui ? (*Correspondance.*, Roth, p. 66.)

The tone of this letter with its unsolicited advice is also one which brooks no disagreement. Diderot anticipates all of Rousseau's objections and dismisses them. Even the objection of his poor health is belittled. This letter is akin to that of an authoritarian parent writing to an errant child. The writer disallows the validity of any reason for not acting in the manner s/he prescribes. Diderot removes all space for

dialogue, as he even presupposes the arguments Rousseau would raise, and negates them. He mixes the language of sensibility with an apparent use of logos which denies the validity of Rousseau's views. He even uses hyperbole in an aggressive manner, saying that, if he was made ill by travelling by carriage, he would follow behind on foot:

Pour moi, je vous avoue que si je ne pouvais supporter la chaise, je prendrais un bâton et je la suivrais. Et puis, ne craignez-vous point qu'on ne mésinterprète votre conduite ? On vous soupçonnera ou d'ingratitude ou d'un autre motif secret. (*Ibid.*)

In this letter Diderot presents emotional hyperbole as if it is very much part of a chain of logical cause and effect.

As both sides of this embittered exchange of letters exist, it is relevant to consider a letter written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau on 2nd March 1758 to Diderot. There is thought to have been no reply from Diderot to this letter, and, as we have seen from the previously quoted letter, by this stage there was little left to be said by either party since their positions of opposition were so firmly entrenched.

De Jean-Jacques Rousseau Le 2 mars 1758.

Il faut, mon cher Diderot, que je vous écrive encore une fois en ma vie. Vous ne m'en avez que trop dispensé; mais le plus grand crime de cet homme que vous noircissez d'une si étrange manière est de ne pouvoir se détacher de vous.

[...]

Je suis un méchant homme, n'est-ce pas? Vous en avez les témoignages les plus sûrs; cela vous est bien attesté. Quand vous avez commencé de l'apprendre, il y avait seize ans que j'étais pour vous un homme de bien, et quarante ans que je l'étais pour tout le monde. En pouvez-vous dire autant de ceux qui vous ont communiqué cette belle découverte? Si l'on peut porter à faux si longtemps le masque d'un honnête homme, quelle preuve avez-vous que le masque ne couvre pas leur visage aussi bien. Est-ce un moyen bien propre à donner du poids à leur autorité que de charger en secret un homme absent, hors d'état de se défendre? Mais ce n'est pas de cela qu'il s'agit. (*Correspondance II*. Roth, Georges, (Paris, 1956) p. 44. Lettre 91.)

The framework of this letter allows only two responses: that of apology or, as Diderot no doubt felt that none was due, to ignore the letter. Rousseau appears to have wished to continue the argument, and to change Diderot's opinion of his actions. Rousseau refers directly here to the false façade of Diderot's new friends, Mme d'Epinau and Grimm, who were thought to have acted to destroy his friendship with Rousseau. It took Diderot many years to suspect Grimm of being able to act in such a manner. When he did finally realize that Grimm held many anti-Enlightenment views, he wrote a letter, which he never sent, which in some ways mirrors the letter from Rousseau discussed above. That letter contains another expression of outrage that an apparent friend has hidden his true nature and opinions for many years. This is, of course, coincidental and is due to the similar nature of the letters which effectively signal the end of close friendships. For the reader of the published *Correspondance*, there is a rather neat irony in this letter, as Diderot regrets that he did not know Grimm's true character years before, when he was introduced to him by Rousseau. He was just such a masked friend as Rousseau referred to in the previously mentioned letter of many years before:

Mon ami, vous avez la gangrène; peut être n'a t'elle [pas fait] assez de progrès pour être incurable. Vous auriez besoin je crois d'un peu de soliloque; ce n'est pas ce que j'ai le courage de vous dire, c'est ce que vous vous direz à vous même qui vous guérira.

Je cesserai plutôt de vivre que de vous aimer, mais je ne serais jamais devenu votre ami, si vous eussiez parlé chez Jean-Jacques où je vous rencontrai pour la première fois comme vous parlâtes hier chez l'innoculateur Brador. Quoi donc! Seroit ce une façon de renier l'abbé, inspirée par la crainte que votre intimité connue avec ce proscrit ne vous desservit auprès des grands? (*Correspondance*, XV., Varloot. (Paris. 1970.) pp. 210-227. Lettre 925. p. 226.)

Diderot frankly displays his disgust and disappointment at discovering his friend's contempt for the Abbé Raynal. He realizes that Grimm would only support his

friends in as far as they were useful contacts for him, but would be only too ready to denounce them if he felt his position was threatened by association with them. It is believed that this letter was never actually sent. After this discovery of his friend's true nature, his relationship with Grimm became much less close. He understood that he would have to wait for an opportune moment to give this letter to Grimm, if the letter were ever to do any good and make Grimm re-evaluate his views, rather than to serve to strengthen them by purely enraging him:

Cette lettre que je viens de vous écrire à la hâte, vous l'enverrai je ? Oui. Mais quand ? Quand je vous estimerai assez pour croire que vous la lirez sans humeur. Adieu. Ce 25 mars 1781. (*Corres.*, XV., p. 227.)

This letter displays a function of letter-writing which has the same relation to dialogic letters as a soliloquy has to a conversation. In other words, this letter, as it was never sent, acted as a means for Diderot to express his disappointment and outrage, without having to reveal the treachery of his friend to a third party.

Diderot was not able to confront Grimm directly at his daughter Angélique's house when Grimm criticized the Abbé Raynal, nor did he confront him before when he had expressed the same opinions at Mme de Vermenoux's house. This is perhaps because he did not want to cause a confrontational scene in public and so disrupt social harmony. One could posit that letter-writers, especially of letters which are never truly destined to be sent, often display a certain *esprit d'escalier*, the letter form giving them the opportunity to express themselves with the requisite composure and wit which they found lacking when they were face-to-face with their opponent. This is the advantage the epistolary form has over conversation, as it allows the writer time to reflect upon the composition of the letter, whereas the

conversationalist must react swiftly and to-the-point. Indeed the letter has the added advantage, that, once written, we can decide whether to send it or not, whereas a hastily uttered comment cannot be retracted.

Diderot wrote to Falconet in a similar manner, when his friendship with him was severely damaged by Falconet's great outrage at Diderot's false attribution to him of the *Antidote aux menteries de l'abbé Chappe*, when it was actually written by Catherine the Great. Diderot was deeply wounded by his friend's treatment of him, for this was a genuine mistake on his part. We can see some similarities between the letter he wrote to Falconet protesting against such harsh treatment and those written to Grimm and Rousseau, when those relationships also broke down irreparably. There is a similar tone of hurt indignation and appeal to the sentiments of his addressees using pathos. There is also the same type of condemnation of their actions, whilst Diderot still hopes that his comments would cause them to re-adjust their behaviour. Diderot has the belief that if they followed his advice, their characters could still be redeemed. As he wrote to Falconet on 21st August 1771:

Ceci, mon ami (car je ne saurais m'empêcher de vous appeler de ce nom), n'est point une réponse à la lettre outrageante que vous m'avez écrite. J'attends que l'indignation et la douleur soient sorties de mon cœur, pour vous faire rougir de vos injures réfléchies et rédigées par paragraphes. Il se pourrait faire que j'eusse commis quelque faute grave que ma conscience ne me reprochât pas. Mais je ne me pardonnerais jamais celle que vous avez commise en traitant un homme dont les sentiments ne vous sont pas suspects, aussi indignement que vous l'avez fait. Prenez-y garde: la solitude de Pétersbourg et la faveur d'une grande souveraine vous corrompent. Vous êtes menacé de devenir méchant; car le premier pas est de voir la méchanceté où elle n'est pas; et ce pas, vous l'avez fait. (*Corres.*, p.1079.)

What seems to be especially shocking for Diderot is that his friend was able to commit to paper, point by point, these unfounded grievances against him. A written

argument or disagreement can be especially powerful, for the good reason that the writer has carefully considered these points and considered them fit to send to the addressee.

Another famous example of a letter written by Diderot, which in no uncertain terms expresses his deep-felt hurt and outrage at being abused by someone he considered a friend and on the side of the *philosophes*, is a letter he wrote to Le Breton, the publisher of the *Encyclopédie*, who, he discovered, had been secretly abridging and censoring the *Encyclopédie* to remove the philosophic commentary contained in the articles. He saw the work of his contributors adulterated, and was particularly disgusted at the underhand manner in which they had all been treated.

Many years later Grimm wrote of this episode in the *Correspondance littéraire*:

[...] M. Le Breton voulut encore prévenir les orages dont il se croyait menacé au moment de la publication. En conséquence, il s'érigea avec son prote, à l'insu de tout le monde, en souverain arbitre et censeur de tous les articles de l'Encyclopédie. [Ils] retranchaient, coupaient, supprimaient tout ce qui leur paraissait hardi ou propre à faire du bruit et exciter les clameurs des dévôts et des ennemis, et réduisaient, ainsi de leur chef et autorité, le plus grand nombre des meilleurs articles à l'état de fragments mutilés et dépouillés de tout ce qu'ils avaient de précieux, sans s'embarrasser de la liaison des morceaux de ces squelettes déchiquetés, ou bien en les réunissant par les coutures les plus impertinentes [...].¹

Le Breton craftily had Diderot and the other contributors in a double bind, as they could not protest in public at the treatment of the *Encyclopédie* as they were working on volumes which had not received official permission for publication. Diderot's letter [12th November 1764] to Le Breton stresses his perfidy and

¹ *Correspondance littéraire*, janvier 1771, ix, pp. 206-209.

cowardice, and that this cowardice will only gain him dishonour and ignominy when it is known how he has acted:

Ne m'en sachez nul gré, monsieur; ce n'est pas pour vous que je reviens. Vous m'avez mis dans le cœur un poignard que votre vue ne peut qu'enfoncer davantage. Ce n'est pas non plus par attachement à l'ouvrage, que je ne sçaurois que dédaigner dans l'état où il est. Vous ne me soupçonnez pas, je crois, de céder à l'intérêt. Quand vous ne m'auriez pas mis de tout temps au-dessus de ce soupçon, ce qui me revient à présent est si peu de chose qu'il m'est aisé de faire un emploi de mon temps moins pénible et plus avantageux. Je ne cours pas enfin après la gloire de finir une entreprise importante qui m'occupe et fait mon supplice depuis vingt ans; dans un moment, vous concevrez combien cette gloire est peu sûre. (*Corres.* p. 486.)

He stresses his own lack of personal and financial interest in writing to condemn Le Breton for his shameful censorship of the *Encyclopédie*, so that by contrast Le Breton's actions are emphasized as being egotistical and due to personal avarice, at the expense of years of devoted hard work by the contributors and Diderot. The emotive and figurative terms in which he commences this letter graphically convey the very real betrayal of which he has been a victim. He sees this as very much an abuse of his good name, as other contributors and subscribers might assume that he had authorized these alterations. He continues to express his anger at this betrayal by using the word 'massacrer' to describe the emotional scarring, as being like being stabbed in the back. Diderot's oblique reference to posthumous fame and his deep sense of being betrayed by those he had entrusted with this role as intermediaries reveals how great a crisis this was for him. In a similar manner, he describes the violence with which the manuscript and the authors of it were treated:

Je ne puis me défendre d'une espèce de commisération pour vos associés, qui n'entrent pour rien dans la trahison que vous m'avez faite, et qui en seront peut-être avec vous les victimes. Vous m'avez lâchement trompé deux ans de suite. Vous avez massacré ou fait massacrer par une bête brute le travail de vingt honnêtes gens qui vous ont consacré leur tems, leurs talents et leurs veilles gratuitement, par amour du bien et de la vérité, et sur le seul espoir de

voir paroître leurs idées et d'en recueillir quelque considération qu'ils ont bien méritée, dont votre injustice et votre ingratitude les aura privés.

Mais songez bien à ce que je vous prédis: A peine votre livre paraîtra-t-il qu'ils iront aux articles de leur composition, et que voyant de leurs propres yeux l'injure que vous leur avez faite, ils ne se contiendront pas, ils jetteront les hauts cris. Les cris de MM. Diderot, de Saint-Lambert, Turgot, d'Holbach, de Jaucourt et autres, tous si respectables pour vous et si peu respectés, seront répétés par la multitude. Vos souscripteurs diront qu'ils ont souscrit pour mon ouvrage, et que c'est presque le vôtre que vous leur donnez. Amis, ennemis, associés, élèveront leur voix contre vous. On fera passer le livre pour une plate et misérable rapsodie. (*Corres.*, p. 486.)

Diderot is aware that Le Breton censored the manuscripts in order to avoid any scandal caused by the philosophical slant behind the factual elements of the *Encyclopédie*, so he stresses to Le Breton that, once his betrayal is noticed by the other contributors, he will not escape what he fears most: a public scandal. He will not even escape being reprimanded by the enemies of the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot stresses the financial implications as well. Once the subscribers to the *Encyclopédie* realized that all they had was a dry collection of facts rather than the work proposed in the *Prospectus*, they would be quick to make their disapproval known. Le Breton's actions, instead of saving him from the financial ruin which he so feared, could well have given his worst fear concrete form. By adulterating the *Encyclopédie*, he had created a book which was of no great interest to anyone and certainly not worth the expense of a subscription:

Voltaire, qui nous cherchera et ne trouvera point, ces journalistes et tous les écrivains périodiques, qui ne demandent pas mieux que de nous décrier, répandront dans la ville, dans la province, en pays étrangers, que cette volumineuse compilation, qui doit coûter encore tant d'argent au public, n'est qu'un ramas d'insipides rognures. Une petite partie de votre édition se distribuera lentement, et le reste pourra vous demeurer en maculatures.

Ne vous y trompez pas: le dommage ne sera pas en exacte proportion avec les suppressions que vous vous êtes permises; quelque importantes et considérables qu'elles soient, il sera infiniment plus grand qu'elles.

(*Corres.*, p.486.)

Diderot is very careful in this letter to make his point clearly and relatively concisely, and to leave Le Breton with no doubt that, by his actions, he has not only gained Diderot's contempt but has created his own downfall. He describes the manner in which Le Breton abridged the *Encyclopédie* in very visceral terms of violence: it has been castrated and mutilated. This mutilation is very palpable for Diderot who saw twenty-five years of hard work destroyed:

Vous avez oublié que ce n'est pas aux choses courantes, sensées et communes que vous deviez vos premiers succès; qu'il n'y a peut-être pas deux hommes dans le monde qui se soient donné la peine de lire une ligne d'histoire, de géographie, de mathématiques, et même d'arts, et que ce qu'on y a recherché et ce qu'on y recherchera, c'est la philosophie ferme et hardie de quelques-uns de vos travailleurs. Vous l'avez châtrée, dépecée, mutilée, mise en lambeaux, sans jugement, sans ménagement et sans goût. Vous nous avez rendus insipides et plats. Vous avez banni de votre livre ce qui en a fait, ce qui aurait fait encore l'attrait, le piquant, l'intéressant et la nouveauté. Vous en serez châtié par la perte pécuniaire et par le déshonneur. C'est votre affaire. (*Corres.*, p. 487.)

Diderot continues in a similar vein, and at several points in the letter he compares Le Breton to the vandals who destroyed many priceless works of art and scholarship of the ancient world, reputedly causing the Dark Ages. Le Breton's crime against truth and knowledge is seen as being equally barbaric and heinous. Once again he describes this editing of the work in terms of violent bloodshed. The person who acted for Le Breton in abridging the *Encyclopédie* is called a 'boucher'. The violence is cold-bloodedly brutal and mindless. This is in stark contrast to the years of meticulous work that they can so quickly obliterate, like the vandals who destroyed centuries of knowledge. Such violent imagery conveys Diderot's deep shock at learning of this unauthorized abridgement of his work:

Voilà donc ce qui résulte de vingt-cinq ans de travaux, de peines, de dépenses, de dangers, de mortifications de toute espèce! Un inepte, un Ostrogoth détruit tout en un moment. Je parle de votre boucher, de celui à qui vous avez remis le soin de nous démembrer. Il se trouve, à la fin, que le plus grand dommage que

nous ayons souffert, que le mépris, la honte, le discrédit, la ruine, la risée, nous viennent du principal propriétaire de la chose! (*Corres.*, p. 488.)

Diderot can be seen to reinforce his argument in this letter by repetition and amplification of the argument each time it is repeated. He needed to emphasize his outrage and he did so by the use of amplification. Few letters pertaining to the *Encyclopédie* remain and we can only speculate at the reasons why Le Breton kept such a letter, perhaps he did so purely out of a publisher's habit of keeping all paperwork pertaining to business transactions.

A very similar form of conflictual letter-writing can be found throughout his correspondence with his younger brother. What biographical knowledge we have of the Diderot family suggests that the relationship between the two brothers was never close. This was not helped by their diametrically opposed views and beliefs as regards that most contentious of subjects: religion. If we compare the letters written by each brother, we can see that there is more than a hint of a *dialogue de sourds* as once again there is no common ground. For example, on 29th November 1757, Diderot writes that he is most upset that his brother was offended by some of the views expressed in *Le Fils Naturel*:

J'apprends cher frère, que mon dernier ouvrage vous a donné beaucoup de chagrin. Si cela est, je voudrais ne l'avoir point fait. Je ne suis pas assez jaloux de la gloire littéraire pour préférer cette fumée à la tranquillité d'un frère. Soyez sûr que l'approbation de tout l'univers sur une chose aussi indifférente qu'une comédie, n'équivaut pas, à mon jugement, un moment de votre peine. (*Corres.*, p. 69.)

His brother's reaction is, quite naturally perhaps, to understand these apologies as piecemeal apologies which have no real value or meaning. There is no real common ground between the brothers, as Diderot surely had no intention of moderating his views on religion nor of reconsidering his rejection of its

'superstitious' nature. Diderot's brother certainly cannot be accused of hiding his true feelings in his reply which expresses his disapproval:

J'avois pensé, mon frère, que vous aviez prévu que votre ouvrage me donneroit beaucoup de chagrin, et que, pour le diminuer ou plutôt l'éloigner un peu, vous aviez eu pendant mon dernier séjour à Paris l'attention de ne m'en rien dire, et même la précaution de n'en parler en ma présence qu'à mots couverts dans une visite que M. de Piolenc vous rendit lorsque vous vous disposeriez à le donner au public. Vous connoissez assez ma façon de penser pour ressentir toute la peine que peut me causer un pareil ouvrage, et pour n'avoir aucun doute à ce sujet.

Vous me proposez d'entrer en dispute sur les propositions que j'y trouve répréhensibles. Vous me permettrez de ne pas accepter le défi. Il ne conviendrait pas entre frères. D'ailleurs vous avez trop mal reçu les représentations que je vous avois faites bonnement sur un mot contre le religion qui m'avoit beaucoup peiné dans une de vos lettres pour m'en poser de nouveau. Ce que je disois alors, je me croirois obligé de vous le répéter encore parce que la même chose se trouve dans votre ouvrage et sans doute que, ferme et constant dans vos principes, vous me feriez la même réponse: que je suis un fanatique, que tant pis pour moy si j'ai besoin de ma religion pour être honnête homme, que vous ne sentez pas ce besoin, que vous êtes content de la vôtre, que vous n'en changerez jamais. (*Correspondance, II.*, Roth, p. 22. Lettre 83.)

Communication and real dialogue between the two brothers has broken down to such a point beyond repair that the Abbé Pierre Diderot is able to provide a summary of the manner in which their exchanges usually proceed, and in so doing suggests that such circular arguments should come to an end. Their correspondence had become formulaic and neither brother was likely to retract his views or to compromise. There was nothing left to say. Once again these letters reflect a crisis-point in a relationship. The correspondence between the two brothers continues because of family obligations but remains at this point of no return.

However, at important family moments, Diderot felt that contact needed to be restored between him and his brother. Such an occasion is that of his daughter Angélique's marriage to Caroillon Vandeul. Diderot hoped that his brother would

give the marriage his blessing. Yet the Abbé at this point reiterates all the past slights and disagreements in such vitriolic terms that the relationship between the two brothers deteriorates even further. An attempt at reconciliation was made by Angélique writing a letter to her uncle, in the hope that he could not refuse his blessing of the marriage to an innocent and pious young girl. In her letter, of [21st August 1772], she stresses the religious education she received and her own piety in contrast to the views held by her father:

Mon cher Oncle,

Il y a longtems que je suis affligée de la division qui règne entre vous et mon papa, et je n'ai jamais pu concevoir qu'elle pût durer aussi longtems entre deux frères qui ont l'un et l'autre de l'esprit et le cœur aussi bien fait; et je m'étais flattée qu'une circonstance aussi importante que celle de mon établissement seroit bien capable de réunir toute la famille.

[...]

C'est maman dont la piété est généralement reconnue, qui a été entièrement chargée de mon éducation. J'avois à peine cinq ans que j'étois admise au grand catéchisme de la paroisse. (*Correspondance*, XII., Roth, Georges, (Paris, 1965) p. 105.)

This letter was designed to counter what were conceived to be the majority of her uncle's objections, as it emphasizes the propriety of her upbringing, and distances her from her father and his controversial views. Yet again, this is an example of a letter which totally fails to reach its objectives. The reply from her uncle, of [27th August 1772] is particularly virulent in its condemnation of Diderot's family and the reputation of Caroillon de Vandeuil:

Mademoiselle,

Vous n'ignorez pas que je ne reconnais pour parents que les personnes qui ont de la religion. J'ai des violents soupçons sur vous à cet égard. J'ai eu des doutes sur votre religion; mais, depuis que j'ai appris votre mariage avec M. Caroillon l'aîné, par les bruits publics, et tout nouvellement par M. Caroillon lui même, j'ai plus que des doutes. [...]

Il est notoire que M. Caroillon n'a pas de religion. Que voulez-vous que je pense de la vôtre, vu surtout l'inclination que vous paraissez avoir pour lui ? (*Corres.*, *XII.*, Roth, pp.112-113.)

The letters exchanged become even more acerbic and the debate more envenomed. The Abbé reveals the depth of his anger and resentment in a further letter to his brother, as he includes in the litany of wrongs that his brother has committed, his secret marriage, and his jealousy that the latter received an expensive education:

Je me trompe: vous radotiez déjà quand vous vouliez tenir votre mariage secret, sans doute par un motif de désintéressement, et que, dans le même temps, vous vouliez me faire tenir publiquement votre enfant.

Je conviens que j'ai eu tort de vous défier; je sais que vous êtes prêt à tout. Vous faites bien de ne pas barbouiller davantage de papiers. Huit feuillets entiers de barbouillage, c'est trop. Au surplus, je ne sçais ni grec, ni hébreu. Il faut être grec au moins pour sentir la force de vos raisonnements, la solidité de vos réponses, la douceur de vos compliments. (*Corres.*, *XII.*, lettre 786. p.188.)

The Abbé is not only contemptuously dismissive of Diderot's last letter which he calls 'barbouillage' but he also ends his letter on this note without any form of closing formula. It can be seen that Diderot neglected an important factor in epistolary art in his letter, that of using the correct register of language, according to the genre of letter written and the identity of one's correspondent. The inclusion of classical quotations and allusions would seem inappropriate in a letter written to his brother, who, in addition to being less highly-educated than Diderot, appears to have been something of a self-proclaimed philistine. However, if the aim of the letter was not to engineer a reconciliation but to rile his brother, in some manner the use of such quotations would be a suitable and apparently innocent means of achieving this.

No replies have survived to most letters of the *Correspondance*, and this makes the task of ascertaining the nature of the reception they received rather difficult. The

letters we have just examined generally show a lack of concession by both parties concerned, and the letters written by them are unsuccessful, as they do not serve to convince the recipient of the validity of the arguments. A letter's real success at the time of writing can only be evaluated in terms of its reception. The letters Diderot and his daughter wrote in order to bring about some form of family reconciliation only served to reinforce the Abbé's disapproval of his brother and his family. This is a very different aspect of social discourse than that to be found in the Grandval letters, or indeed in the *secrétaires* and manuals of etiquette, which depict a world of civilized sociability. However the sociability of the etiquette manuals and their guidelines for polite conversation are targeted at a select portion of society.

Having considered some rather acerbic, personal, conflictual letters, we will move on to consider the two open letters Diderot wrote as part of the combat to gain publicity and approval for the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot's writing of what is ostensibly an open letter directed to the attention of the editor of the *Journal de Trévoux*, Père Berthier, is an important example of the rôle played by letters in publicizing the *Encyclopédie*, and in fuelling the controversy surrounding its publication. Diderot wrote two of these 'open letters' with an extract from the *Encyclopédie* appended. Since these letters were published as a form of pamphlet, we cannot consider them as such to be true letters. However, as these letters have been included in both editions of the *Correspondance*, the Georges Roth and Jean Varloot edition, as well as the Versini edition, we believe that they are worthy of study, but in the same manner as the Falconet correspondence concerning posterity. Here we must also be aware that these are examples of the use of the letter form which is distinct from actual

correspondence. The open letter form consciously copies the familiar letter to give an air of spontaneity to public debate. The two letters to Père Berthier were replied to in the *Journal de Trévoux* and, as they elicit a response, can be seen to be close to real correspondence in their nature. Another justification for considering these letters is that they provide another example of Diderot's use of persuasion in conflictual letters. Moreover these are some of the few remaining letters, or open letters, concerning the *Encyclopédie* which remain. Much of Diderot's business correspondence from this time has been destroyed or lost. It was quite possibly destroyed at the time due to the frequent risks and dangers run by the *Encyclopédistes*, and it would be unwise to keep any papers which could possibly be incriminating. Jacques Proust believes that there is some evidence that these open letters were in fact written by d'Alembert and that the aim of the letters was to create a publicity campaign for the *Encyclopédie*:

Ces deux lettres ouvertes, qui sont officiellement de Diderot, mais qui seraient en fait selon l'abbé Goujet, de d'Alembert, ne sont pas de simples répliques dictées par les circonstances: les directeurs de l'*Encyclopédie* songent probablement à transformer la querelle naissante en campagne de promotion pour leur ouvrage et à menager un effet d'attente.²

However, bearing this possibility in mind, it is still possible to study these open letters, assuming that the case for them being written by d'Alembert was not overwhelming, as these letters are included in the most recent edition of the *Correspondance* by Versini.

² Proust, Jacques, *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* (Geneva-Paris, 1982), p. 62. As quoted in Mortier & Trousson, *Dictionnaire de Diderot*, (Paris, 1999).

An article by Père Berthier which criticized the *Prospectus* of the *Encyclopédie* and the project as a whole appeared in the second January issue of the *Journal de Trévoux* in 1751. Père Berthier was especially critical of the classification of the arts and sciences suggested by Diderot. This system of classification, or tree of knowledge, was based upon Bacon's system, and was considered by many to be plagiarism and inferior to the system it was copied from. Arthur N. Wilson said of this exchange of open letters:

This was a vigorous exercise in polemics, but contained nothing of interest beyond the dispute itself, although the contemporary journalist Clément spoke of it as being 'full of fire, wit and charm.'³

It is precisely as an exercise of Diderot's polemical skill that we will study these letters. Diderot takes obvious pleasure in his ironic argumentation and rhetorical skill. He responded to Père Berthier's criticism by writing an open letter which Georges Roth called 'à la fois courtoise et ironique, qui mettra les rieurs de son côté.' An example of this ironic approach to Père Berthier's criticism is that Diderot explains the absence of journals in his tree of knowledge by the fact that he believes there is a lack of decent journalists. The letter, of January 1751, is replete with such humorous gibes at the Père Berthier's expense:

Je n'ai pas eu, comme vous l'observez fort bien, *des idées assez vastes* pour placer *les journaux* dans l'arbre encyclopédique. Je vous avouerai pourtant que j'y avais pensé; mais cela était embarrassant; une énumération exacte n'admet point de préférence, et le petit nombre des excellents journalistes m'auraient su mauvais gré du voisinage que je leur aurais donné. Si je suis descendu jusqu'à la pédagogie, ce n'a pas été faute de prévoir que vous prendriez cette peine. J'aurais bien voulu aussi mériter les remerciements que vous faites à Bacon pour avoir loué la société des jésuites; car je n'ai pas attendu pour l'estimer que vous y fissiez parler de vous; mais j'ai cru que ces éloges, quoique justes, auraient été déplacés dans un arbre encyclopédique. Cette omission sera

³Wilson, Arthur N., *Diderot: The Testing Years, 1713-1759* (Oxford, 1957), p. 125.

réparée dans le corps même de l'ouvrage. Nous y rendrons le témoignage le plus authentique aux services importants, et très réels, que votre compagnie a rendus à la république des lettres. (*Corres.*, p. 23.)

We can see that Diderot does reply to the Père Berthier's comments but the manner in which he does respond is perhaps not apt, due to the serious nature of the debate about the *Prospectus*. Double-edged compliments about the contribution the Jesuits have made to literature are not only designed to rile the Père Berthier; but also to amuse readers who might not share his outlook. He makes full use of the comic and polemic power of irony in this letter. He wished to fuel an exchange of letters which would cause the Père Berthier to reply in kind via the *Journal de Trévoux*. To sustain an exchange of letters, he appeared to believe that he had to oppose Père Berthier vehemently, whilst primarily entertaining his readers with his wit rather than entering into the finer details of the philosophy behind the *Encyclopédie*. This would be necessary in itself to gain readers for these pamphlets in addition to the *Prospectus*, which would interest those who were primarily interested in the rationale behind the project. The second letter, dated 2nd February 1751, has a similarly sardonic tone and avoids the central areas of criticism which the *Encyclopédie* faced:

Je ne doute point que messieurs de l'*Encyclopédie* que vous connaissez ne soient fort bons Chrétiens. Il est bien difficile que cela soit autrement, quand on est de vos amis; et c'est pour cela que j'ambitionne d'être du nombre. Leurs noms, comme vous l'observez, auraient sans doute *jeté un grand éclat sur le mien*. Cette réflexion est trop juste et trop vraie pour être désobligeante. Mais le premier volume de l'*Encyclopédie* ne vous laissera là-dessus rien à désirer. En attendant qu'il paraisse, je me contenterai d'honorer quelquefois mon nom par la splendeur du vôtre, puisque vous voulez bien m'en accorder la permission. (*Corres.*, p. 26.)

One of Diderot's tasks as editor of the *Encyclopédie* would have been to raise the profile of the project in order to gain as many subscribers as possible. However, these open letters might be considered to be partially counter-productive, as the

flippant tone in which Diderot answers criticism does little either to convince critics of the seriousness of the project or to promote confidence in the credentials of the contributors. However the pamphlet has always been a fairly subversive genre of writing in which humour of sometimes the blackest kind is used to criticize authority, and, for a pamphlet, Diderot's humour here is fairly *bon enfant*. These open letters were the start of what became a much more dangerous controversy surrounding the *Prospectus*, one which threatened the very existence of the whole project.

In the letter Diderot wrote in January 1751 to the Père Berthier, Diderot appears to have confused the *Journal des Navigateurs* and the *Journal de Trévoux*. Much mileage could be made by opponents of the *Encyclopédie* of such factual errors made by the editor of a reference book. He replies to such accusations in the following terms:

Je n'ignore point la différence qu'il y a entre les *Journaux de Trévoux* et les *Journaux des Navigateurs* ni la figure que les uns et les autres font dans le monde, et vous ne devez pas appréhender, mon révérend père, que je vous confonde jamais avec l'amiral Anson. Le seul rapport que je pourrais trouver entre un voyageur et un journaliste, c'est qu'ils ne disent pas toujours la vérité; mais cette ressemblance est usée et ne saurait vous convenir. (*Corres.*, p. 25.)

Diderot responds to this criticism by turning the tables on the Père Berthier. He side-steps the main issue and uses the opportunity it gives him for another *bon mot* at the expense of his adversary. He also makes the comic extension of his prior mistake in confusing publications, by stating that at least he would never confuse the Père Berthier with the Admiral Anson.

This point is then taken up by one of the anonymous writers of the open letters against the *Encyclopédie* which Georges Roth includes as an appendix in his edition. These letters once again were pamphlets published by opponents of the

Encyclopédie. The anonymous author of this letter ironically excuses Diderot's error. The writer thus implies that Diderot, in showing his ignorance here, reveals himself as nothing more than a mere plagiarist:

Lettre de M***, l'un des XXI, A M. Diderot, Directeur de la manufacture encyclopédique, [14 février 1751]

On a pris la liberté de vous avertir que vous avez malheureusement confondu le *Journal des Navigateurs* avec les journaux littéraires. Il étoit difficile de les distinguer dans l'ouvrage de Chancelier Bacon, qui n'écrivoit que soixante ans avant que ceux-ci fussent inventés. (*Corres.*, I., Roth, p. 267.)

Although one could argue that such an open letter was written by opponents of the *Encyclopédie*, many of the arguments are perfectly valid statements which would only serve to weaken his cause.

The *Prospectus* which sold 8000 copies, which was a very successful print-run at the time, was not aided by Diderot's publicity efforts. Those who had not read the *Prospectus* would no doubt have been influenced by the surrounding controversy, and many would have based their opinion of the project upon these critical reviews. Indeed Versini describes the letters Diderot wrote as 'violentés'.⁴ We suggest rather that although these letters are surprisingly sardonic or ironic in tone, they are not necessarily violent. The *Encyclopédie* did need a strong advocate for its cause, but Diderot's sarcasm does little to convey the impression that the work will be carefully researched and logical. Very little written evidence remains concerning this controversy, although it is evident that it took on quite unexpected proportions. The lack of seriousness of Diderot's letters is taken issue with:

Monsieur,

⁴ Versini, *Denis Diderot alias frère Tonpla* (Paris, 1996), p. 111.

Vos lettres ont sans doute le succès que vous leur désirez. Du moins je suppose pour un instant qu'elles amusent le R. P. Berthier, que vous n'y mettez point de fadeur, qu'elles sont lues avec empressement et avec plaisir. Je veux croire que vous êtes un de ces hommes rares, nés pour l'honneur de leur patrie et de leur siècle, un de ces êtres singuliers, qui réunissent plusieurs mérites et plusieurs talents, dont le génie embrasse toutes les sciences et tous les arts, et dont les connaissances infinies sont rangées dans le plus bel ordre, dans l'*Ordre encyclopédique*. Je conviens encore que vos vues ont été de prévenir le public en votre faveur, de lui plaire, de vous prêter à son goût, de surprendre peut-être ses suffrages, de lui épargner de longues dissertations, *les discussions sérieuses*, une réponse trop suivie et trop raisonnée.⁵

One could assume that such a reaction to Diderot's light hearted defence of the *Prospectus* would not be unusual. Since the *Encyclopédie* was beset with many opponents from the beginning, to defend and promote the *Prospectus* and the various sources behind its inspiration, he eschewed the style of academic debate. He decided to pit his wits against the Père Berthier, but no doubt it gave many readers of the exchange of letters the impression that Diderot lacked the required gravitas to be the editor of such a project.

The second open letter that Georges Roth includes criticizes the lack of logical argumentation displayed in the letters Diderot writes to the Père Berthier:

Vous commencez pour vanter beaucoup *la logique*, afin de pouvoir abandonner, quand il vous plaira, l'état de la question. Comme vous êtes *bien aise que le public vous lise*, vous auriez tort de raisonner conséquemment. Votre première Lettre paroît; le public, dont vous ambitionnez les suffrages, est curieux de voir comment vous vous justifiez, mais qu'il est agréablement surpris de trouver à la place des raisons solides qu'il avoit le droit d'attendre de vous, que vous *souhaitez à votre adversaire un bon voyage*. Le trait est des plus heureux, et rectifie admirablement le *Prospectus* de l'encyclopédie. (*Corres. I*, p. 266.)

The overtly sarcastic tone of many of the letters to the Père Berthier is rather reminiscent of the style of letter Diderot wrote to his brother, and indeed in both sets

⁵ *Corres. I*, Roth, Georges, Lettres ouvertes suscitées par le polémique entre le Père Berthier et Diderot. Appendice p. 263. p. 265. Letter 78.

of letters there is no common ground between the correspondents. In both exchanges of letters, the aggressive nature of Diderot's replies serves to entrench further the opposition's position. This is, of course, not to underestimate the strength of opposition there would have been anyway to any project by Diderot and his collaborators. This initial opposition, and that caused by the *Prospectus* and the nature of Diderot's defence of it, were compounded by the controversy surrounding the Abbé de Prades' thesis. As he was one of the contributors to the *Encyclopédie*, the *Encyclopédie* was being attacked indirectly via the latter. Georges Roth includes some extracts from the Marquis d'Argenson's diary which throw a contemporary light upon the affair, and show that it was evident at the time that the scandal caused by the Abbé de Prades' thesis was more than an academic, theological controversy:

25 décembre.-Il y a un grand orage contre le *Dictionnaire encyclopédique*, et cet orage vient des Jésuites [...] Que fait-on contre les auteurs de ce grand et utile livre? On les accuse d'impiété, de là cette accusation contre la thèse sorbonnique de l'abbé de Prades, l'un d'eux, où il n'y a pas de quoi fouetter un chat. (*Corres*, I., Roth, p. 135.)

We can certainly doubt Diderot's wisdom in taking on the might of the Company of Jesus at the moment when he was combating doubts surrounding the feasibility of compiling such a comprehensive and innovative work as the *Encyclopédie*. As the Jesuits were increasingly facing powerful opposition from the Jansenist movement, they were keen to stifle any criticism of their order. However there were attempts at reconciliation by the Père Castel, another Jesuit, who wished to reconcile Diderot and the Père Berthier. Diderot eventually regretted having made enemies of the Jesuits, who still had some powerful supporters. According to Georges Roth, Diderot makes these regrets explicit in his article 'Jésuite' in the *Encyclopédie*:

Le directeur de l'encyclopédie cherche visiblement à faire sa paix avec le 'Journal de Trévoux'. On pourra lire en 1765, dans l'article « Jésuite », qui est de sa plume : « les jésuites se sont brouillés avec les gens de lettres *au moment où ceux-ci allaient prendre parti pour eux* contre leurs implacables et tristes ennemis [les Jansénistes]. (*Corres, I, p.116.*)

Diderot and his contemporaries also fought important philosophical and moral battles by the use of the open letter and pamphlets. Diderot bravely published, on 12th October 1752, the pamphlet entitled *Suite de l'apologie de M. l'abbé de Prades*, whilst others who supported the Abbé de Prades in private such as Galiani, D'Holbach and Raynal, remained publicly silent. In this work, Diderot chose an appropriate target in the Jansenist, Caylus. This gave the impression, by the effect of contrast, that Diderot was a supporter of the powers-that-be and a holder of orthodox religious views.

Thus far, we have considered the struggle of the writer and the rôle of letters within this, as well as the conflictual letters to family and former friends which reveal a harsher side to Diderot's letter-writing persona than is evident elsewhere. We will now turn to the letters he exchanged with Falconet which formed the debate about posterity. This polemic is created purely with publication in mind, but it is relevant to consider his methods of argumentation, and to see if there are any similarities in tone between these letters and other conflictual letters written by him. Diderot's style of debate in the letters to Falconet still has some of the sardonically aggressive undertones to be found in the letters written to the *Journal de Trévoux*. Here it is essential that there is a central dichotomy between Diderot and Falconet's views. For a published interchange of ideas to work, disagreement about the central concepts is an *a priori* constituent.

In this debate Diderot frequently appears to reserve the right to have the upper hand in the debate as he is the professional writer.

Vous n'êtes point bête, je vous le jure; vous avez fait seulement un petit pas du côté du vrai. Si j'en fais un autre, nous pourrons bien nous donner la main. (*Corres.*, p. 591.)

Falconet replies in equally combative terms countering Diderot's statement and seeing much of what he says as 'tracasserie':

Quand on a été élevé un peu durement, on est fait aux coups. Ainsi je reçois de bonne grâce vos tracasseries et j'attends la réponse à ma précédente.

Vous croyez que j'ai fait un pas du côté du vrai; je vous assure que ce pas étoit fait avant que nous eussions entamé la question. (*Corres.*, VI, p. 48.)

These passages of argumentation in the letters add a personal and immediate touch to a debate about such an abstract concept as posterity. They structure the debate, providing a leitmotif which runs through the exchange, since in each letter there are similar passages relating to the argument /debate being entered into by the two friends.

In another letter written on 15th February 1766, he describes the methods he uses to reply to Falconet's letters. He suggests that he will structure his replies more clearly in future letters. He appears at times in this exchange of letters and ideas to have taken exception to some of Falconet's statements and not to have accepted criticism easily. We have already seen this fairly inflexible approach in letters to his family and friends:

J'ai suivi le conseil que vous m'avez donné. J'ai repris vos lettres. Je les ai placées devant moi, et j'ai écrit à mesure que je les lisais. Si je n'ai pas répondu à tout ce n'est ni dissimulation, ni finesse, ni même insuffisance; c'est inadvertance pure. Si vous connaissez mes amis avec qui je ferraille sans cesse, tous vous diraient que personne n'avoue plus franchement que moi une bonne botte, bien appliquée. Je vous présenterai mes idées isolées les unes des autres, parce que ce sera vous épargner la peine de les découdre. Je vous les présenterai d'une manière courte, sèche et abstraite, parce que sous cette forme

elles en donneront peut être moins de prise à votre subtilité. Je les dépouillerai de tout le faste oratoire, parce que vous êtes ombrageux, et que ma 'Cicéronnerie' pourrait vous mettre en méfiance. (*Corres.*, p. 600.)

Much of this itself is an oratorical flourish. Diderot's praise of Falconet's skill in subverting his arguments is as much a generic feature of such debates as are the rhetorical passages that Falconet characterizes as Diderot's *Cicéronnerie*. He criticizes this because it is not underpinned by any real response to his comments. This is reminiscent of the *Journal de Trévoux* controversy and Diderot's avoidance of the central issues.

Diderot also describes the pleasure he gains from a stimulating argument with friends, and presents himself as someone who enjoys the intellectual fisticuffs of debate. He represents this as a frequent activity in which he partakes with his friends, and suggests that he can accept criticism with equanimity when it is justified. We can see that this comment relates to many of these letters to Falconet which are designed for publication, where the enjoyment to be gained from argument and counter-argument seems to be as important to Diderot and Falconet as the actual debate focusing on posterity. We can see some of this pleasure in argument reflected in the letters from Grandval which Diderot wrote to Sophie Volland: although the reported dialogues are harmonious, the ideas expressed in them are frequently questioned by one of the "conversationalists" and thus have to be justified by the "speaker". Even within a non-conflictual representation of conversation, there is some of the give and take of the argument and debate which Diderot enjoyed.

In these letters, Falconet's rôle and that of Diderot are fairly clearly delineated. Diderot represents himself as the *philosophe* and man of letters who is a connoisseur

of the arts, whereas Falconet is seen as the sculptor possessing the manual skills and talent to produce a lasting monument. Falconet clearly accepts this role as he frequently praises Diderot's literary skill and knowledge of classical sources, as in a letter written on 25th February 1766:

J'ai eu vingt fois envie de vous donner pour toute réponse ces trois mots: vous avez raison. J'ai dit: sa tête est un foyer où se rassemblent tous les feux de l'imagination; c'est le rendez-vous de toutes les richesses littéraires. Son cœur est vivement affecté d'un sentiment essentiel à son bonheur et à la perfection de ses ouvrages; pourquoi le contredire? j'ai ajouté: il vient à moi sans apprêt; il se fait petit pour m'atteindre, et je mords la poussière. Que serois je devenu s'il se fût armé de sa « Cicéronnerie ».

[...]

Je ne m'adresse point au littérateur. Il est trop haut pour moi. C'est au philosophe, au raisonneur. Je vous répondrai à mesure que je lirai, par sauts et par bonds, à peu près comme vous avez fait. (*Corres.*, VI., Roth, p. 112.)

Falconet in his hyperbolic praise of Diderot's skill is himself writing in an ostensibly literary form of discourse. Once again he refers to the ordering of Diderot's argument in a manner which indicates its rather disorganized nature. This appears to be a constant theme in this interchange of letters.

He appears at times to have almost overstepped the bounds between the necessary dissent needed for the debate and the vehement criticism which could offend Falconet. His criticism of the weakness of some of Falconet's arguments and the rhetorical gibberish of his arguments is certainly vehement, if not offensive, although we must remember that the very nature of such an epistolary debate requires the participants to disagree with each other. Thus Diderot writes on 5th August 1766:

Sçavez-vous ce qui me passe par la tête lorsque je vous trouve si souvent hors de la question ou à côté, tantôt me tendant la main, tantôt me tournant le dos? Ce n'est pas que vous ignoriez le faible de votre opinion, l'ergoglu de

quelques-unes de vos réponses. Mais vous me payez d'esprit, quand vous me devez de la raison. (*Corres.*, p. 663.)

Diderot's amour-propre appears to suffer somewhat in these exchanges, as he feels it necessary to refer frequently to his status as a writer and *philosophe* who, as such, should dominate the debate. Such statements are at least in part humorous but there was probably more than a little truth behind them.

Diderot refers to his supposed worries that, in re-reading the letters, they will betray their hurried composition and a lack of order in his argumentation. We have already seen that Diderot and Falconet frequently write of the *décousu* nature of the debate, and we can see that this is a typical feature of such an exchange in which the writers openly excuse its apparently hurried and spontaneous nature:

Eh bien donc! Quand recevrons-nous cette brochure que vous avez eu la rage de faire imprimer? j'aurais été bien aise de revoir le tout; surtout ces premiers petits chiffons qui ont été écrits sur le bout de la table. Cela sera peut-être si déguenillés, si traînants, si froids, si mauvais, que je ne vous pardonnerai jamais d'avoir eu si peu d'égards pour la gloire de votre ami. Malheur à vous, si vous avez la supériorité dans cette querelle. Il faut que vous fassiez mieux des statues que moi; mais il faut que je fasse mieux un discours que vous. (*Corres.*, p.728.)

Here Diderot uses the typical disclaimer that the first letters he wrote were mere hurriedly written 'chiffons'.

The Honnête Homme and Persuasion.

The art of persuasion can be used for the purposes of the *honnête homme*, or can be used as a powerful tool by the seducer and the criminal. Diderot portrays the dual usage that a silver tongue can be put to in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. *Lui* wishes that he had the oratorical skill which *Moi* has, and says that with his skillful flattery he would be able to use such literary skills to gain patronage and to insinuate himself

into the company of the rich and gain the confidence of women. *Moi*, however, is only able to use his gift to expose the truth which *Lui* sees as a sad waste of a powerful talent:

Lui.- Tant pis pour vous. Ah si j'avais vos talents.

Moi.- Laissons mes talents; et revenons aux vôtres.

Lui.- Si je savais m'énoncer comme vous. Mais j'ai un diable de ramage saugrenu, moitié des gens du monde et des lettres, moitié de la Halle.

Moi.- Je parle mal. Je ne sais que dire la vérité; et cela ne prend pas toujours, comme vous savez.

Lui.- Mais ce n'est pas pour dire la vérité; au contraire, c'est pour bien dire le mensonge que j'ambitionne votre talent. Si je savais écrire; fagoter un livre, tourner une épître dédicatoire, bien enivrer un sot de son mérite; m'insinuer auprès des femmes.

Moi.- Et tout cela, vous le savez mille fois mieux que moi. Je ne serais pas même digne d'être votre écolier.

Lui.- Combien de grandes qualités perdues, et dont vous ignorez le prix !⁶

Lui sees art only as a useful means of gaining the patronage and favour of the rich. He realizes the importance of getting the register of language one uses right. He is aware that his own discourse is an odd mixture of popular speech and more formal/literary language. However, once this talent is acquired, all Diderot and other writers do is 'fagoter' or 'tourner' a book or sentence. For many critics *Lui* is the *alter ego* of *Moi*, the Diderot who, at times, he is tempted to become. It is *Moi*'s qualities as an *honnête homme* which prevent him from gaining as rich a living from his pen as the unscrupulous *Lui* would if possessed of the same talents.

A parallel can be drawn between the persuasive letters Diderot wrote, and the practical trick he and his friends played upon the marquis de Croismare, which

⁶ Diderot, Denis, *Le Neveu de Rameau et autres dialogues philosophiques*, ed. Varloot, J., (Paris, 1972), p. 116.

resulted in the departure point for *La Religieuse*. Diderot used his persuasive skills to convince the Marquis that the nun whose case had so concerned him was seeking his help, and had no one else to turn to. Here, rather like Rameau's nephew, Diderot uses his talents to convince the marquis of the reality of a falsehood. The whole of *La Religieuse* is written as a means to persuade the reader of the reality of the plight of Suzanne, and to cause the reader to feel pity for her. The reader is seduced into empathizing with the unfortunate young girl. Robert J. Ellrich suggests that Diderot uses the forensic rhetoric of the barrister in *La Religieuse*, and thus Suzanne's memoirs are a brief which she eloquently pleads. He also considers the persuasive force of this work to be a very popular form of rhetorical discourse in the eighteenth century which linked logic and emotion:

La Religieuse, as an example of *éloquence du barreau*, appeals through its rhetorical structure to the mind and heart, to the intellectual and affective faculties of the reader.

There is no doubt that, of the two responses that the narrator wishes to obtain, the affective is vastly preponderant.[...] Suzanne herself, in writing her memoirs, is particularly conscious of the emotional effect of her recital on her reader: '[...] Monsieur le marquis, je vois d'ici tout le mal que je vous cause; mais vous avez voulu savoir si je méritais un peu la compassion que j'attends de vous.' The terms in which she expresses her excuse give a clear indication of the relationship between the emotional tone of the novel and the pragmatic goal Suzanne has in mind.⁷

It is exactly this form of forensic rhetoric which combines an appeal to the emotions, pathos with logos which we can trace throughout the letters Diderot wrote to solicit help.

⁷ Ellrich, Robert J. , 'The Rhetoric of *La Religieuse* and Eighteenth Century Forensic Rhetoric.' *Diderot Studies* (3, 1961), 129-154. p. 144.

A whole legend was built up around the writing of the first letters of the *Religieuse* and their mimetic force which was so powerful that Diderot supposedly started to believe in the character he had created. In the preface to the work, Grimm portrays Diderot as a consummate artist. His *mystification* not only seduces the marquis and causes him to return to Paris to try and help the nun - the whole object of the trick being to cause the marquis to return to the capital from his Normandy estate, it also nearly succeeds in giving the story a life of its own beyond the boundary of the letters, and this forms *La Religieuse*.

The letters which Diderot writes under the guise of Suzanne can be seen to relate to actual letters which he writes soliciting help for others from powerful or rich benefactors. Here, as in those letters, he focuses on elements of the case, which will move the person he is writing to. He already knew that the Marquis de Croismare had been very moved and had tried to help in such a case before. Also as a devoted father and a devout Christian, he would be doubly outraged at the abuse of religion and the plight of a young, innocent girl abandoned by her family in such a cruel way. Suzanne's innocence is stressed to emphasize her vulnerability, and to show that her dislike of life in a religious order masks no ulterior motives. For example, in the following letter written by Suzanne to the Marquis de Croismare in Caen, Diderot and his accomplices write in a naïve and modest manner and stress that the marquis de Croismare's help is Suzanne's final and only hope:

Monsieur, je ne sais à qui j'écris; mais, dans la détresse où je me trouve, qui que vous soyez, c'est à vous que je m'adresse. Si l'on ne m'a point trompée à l'Ecole Militaire et que vous soyez le marquis généreux que je cherche, je bénirai Dieu; si vous ne l'êtes pas, je ne sais ce que je ferai.

[...]

Monsieur, si vous avez été autrefois mon protecteur, que ma situation présente vous touche et qu'elle réveille dans votre cœur quelque sentiment de pitié! Peut-être trouverez-vous de l'indiscrétion à avoir recours à un inconnu dans une circonstance pareille à la mienne. Hélas! Monsieur, si vous saviez l'abandon où je suis réduite, si vous aviez quelque idée de l'inhumanité dont on punit les fautes d'éclat dans les maisons religieuses, vous m'excuseriez! Mais vous avez l'âme sensible, et vous craignez de vous rappeler un jour une créature innocente jetée, pour le reste de sa vie, dans le fond d'un cachot. Secourez-moi, monsieur, secourez-moi!⁸

We can see here that Diderot's intention is to place the marquis in a position where it would be very difficult for him to ignore the pleas for help from an innocent, young girl who has no one else to turn to. In Diderot's actual correspondence, when he writes to solicit aid on the behalf of another, he generally couches the request for help in terms which - if they were to refuse - would make the receiver of the letter appear rather heartless and selfish. As in this letter, he often praises the goodness of heart or, as here, the 'âme sensible' of the reader of the letter who, as an *honnête homme* should fulfill the duty of helping others. Then he projects the image of what awaits the unfortunate person if they are not helped, in a manner similar to the way in which Suzanne suggests the untold horrors of imprisonment which await her if she is not rescued.

Diderot, on a private level, was frequently occupied in helping distant relatives, acquaintances and friends, by requesting help on their behalf from various well-connected contacts. For instance, he wrote to the Abbé de Langeac, seeking help for Mme de Panet who was seduced and abandoned by the Abbé's brother, the Duc de Vrillière. She was reduced to poverty and was terminally ill, but as she did not possess a validated copy of her birth certificate, she was unable to obtain a bed in the

⁸ *La Religieuse*, ed. Desné, Roland, (Paris, 1968), p. 213.

hospicé, Les Incurables. Diderot had already helped her by writing a letter asking for some small financial support from the Duke. In contrast to many of the letters we have looked at in this chapter, here Diderot uses his position and the persuasive force of his argument in an apt manner to produce the desired result. He exhorts the Abbé de Langeac to carry out such a good deed. Although the nature of this advice, which permits no objections, is somewhat reminiscent of the hectoring advice he gave Rousseau, it is well suited to this context. It is part of the Abbé's double duty as a clergyman and the seducer's brother to ease the suffering of the abandoned woman in this small way. Diderot uses the language of sensibility in such letters to emphasize the pathos of the situations in which these needy people find themselves:

Je suis tout à fait sensible aux bons offices que vous nous avez rendus. Vous êtes jeune, vous avez l'âme honnête et sensible; accoutumez-vous de bonne heure au plaisir de faire le bien, aux indifférents, aux amis, au pauvre, au riche, à l'homme heureux, à l'homme malheureux, aux ennemis, aux bons, et même, aux méchants. Quand vous aurez goûté de cette satisfaction, vous ne pourrez plus vous en passer. (*Corres.*, p. 707.)

This could be said to be the expression of the *credo* of the *honnête homme* as seen by Diderot. But such letters are also an opportunity for Diderot to fulfill his duty as an *honnête homme* to help others. He uses a similar means of persuasion in a letter written to Guéneau de Montbelliard, on 27th November 1766, written to seek help for a maid who was mistreated by her brothers after her mother's death. He praises his friend's good judgement and generosity, and makes it rather difficult for him to ignore this appeal to his good nature:

Employez ce que vous avez de fermeté et d'autorité pour amener ces mauvais frères-là à la raison et à la justice. Tout ce que vous arrangerez avec eux sera bien arrangé. (*Corres.*, p. 708.)

One could cite many other such letters from the *Correspondance* where Diderot uses the letter form as a means of seeking practical help for others. These letters contain evidence that Diderot was capable of using tactful means of persuasion – quite different from the overtly conflictual letters we have considered so far in this section.

In a similar manner, Diderot would often write letters of recommendation, trying to persuade the receiver of the letter to aid the person concerned by flattering them and by stressing their generosity. He wrote such a letter to David Hume, on 24th November 1767, seeking help for a relative of one of his wife's friends who had emigrated to Britain. He appeals to Hume for help by emphasizing the duty of the *honnête homme* to help his fellow men, and by saying that Hume is as good a man as he is an author:

C'est un homme auquel Mme Diderot s'intéresse. C'est un parent de ses amis. C'est un honnête homme qui ne s'expatrie avec sa famille par aucun motif qui soit répréhensible. Faites pour lui tout ce que vous attendriez de moi pour quelqu'un que vous m'auriez adressé, et à qui je pourrais être utile. Faites qu'il tire parti de ce qu'il peut avoir de talent. Faites qu'il vive, lui, sa femme, qui est la meilleure femme du monde, et son enfant, qui a du courage et de la raison fort au-delà de la mesure de son âge.

Très aimé et très honoré David, vous savez bien qu'il n'y a aucune loi civile ni religieuse qui ait rompu ni pu rompre le lien de fraternité que la nature a établi entre tous les hommes. Vous savez aussi que ce lien nous attache encore d'une manière plus indispensable et plus sacrée aux malheureux qu'aux autres. Secourez donc de votre mieux celui que je vous adresse. Comme vous n'êtes pas moins excellent homme qu'excellent auteur, vous penserez avec moi, qui n'ai que la moitié de ce mérite, qu'après tout, le soir, quand on se retire et qu'on cause avec soi, on est encore plus content d'une bonne action que d'une belle page. (*Corres.*, p. 810.)

Once again Diderot stresses the exceptional merit of the people for whom he is soliciting aid: the man's wife is the best wife possible, and their child is wise beyond his years. The whole letter is fairly given over to hyperbole: Hume is an excellent author and an excellent man according to Diderot, by the same token that the people

who need help are exceptional people who are deserving of any help they can get. Diderot also relies on his correspondent's having a shared moral outlook. As in the letter addressed to Guéneau de Montbelliard, Diderot underlines his belief that the satisfaction gained from carrying out a good deed is reward enough in itself. We can see that this is a common tactic which Diderot uses in letters in which he solicits help for others.

The closest Diderot came to earning a living from writing flattering dedicatory prefaces was in accepting the patronage of Catherine the Great. However, Diderot tried to retain his personal freedom to tell the truth. This became gradually more problematic, once he became aware of the real nature of Catherine the Great's despotic rule. The letters Diderot wrote to Catherine II, or her emissaries, are another example of his tempering the frequently aggressive expression of his needs and beliefs. Here, instead, he uses a formal and complimentary style aptly tailored to the status of the addressee. A letter Diderot wrote to General Betzki, on 29th November 1766, demonstrates the expression of effusive gratitude for the advance payment by Catherine II of fifty years' stipend as curator of her library. The payment was a considerable sum of money, 50000 livres, which would be valued at at least 3 million francs today:

Monsieur,

Je suis confondu, je reste stupéfait des bontés nouvelles dont il a plu à sa Majesté Impériale de me combler. Jamais grâces n'ont été moins méritées, plus inattendues; et jamais reconnaissance ne fut plus vivement sentie et plus difficile à témoigner.

Grande princesse, je me prosterne à vos pieds, je tends mes deux bras vers vous; je voudrais parler; mais mon âme se serre, ma tête se trouble, mes idées s'embarrassent, je m'attendris comme un enfant, et les vraies expressions du sentiment qui me remplit expirent sur le bord de mes lèvres. (*Corres.*, p. 709.)

This apostrophe directed to Catherine II is in itself a deliberately literary way of expressing gratitude. He consciously uses this style to conform strictly to his persona as a man of letters and devoted courtier, because it is thanks to these activities that he has gained Catherine the Great's patronage. Diderot continues to praise her munificence, and suggests that, due to her generosity to him, her reign is widely accepted by the French to be a just and glorious one. He can be seen to conform to the generic constraints which are present when writing to a royal or powerful patron. Similarly unconditional praise was generally expected of poets or artists. In return for financial aid, they would be expected to sing publicly the praise of their patron:

Ô Catherine! Soyez sûre que vous ne réglez pas plus puissamment sur les cœurs à Pétersbourg qu'à Paris. Vous avez ici une cour et vos courtisans, et ces courtisans ont des âmes nobles, hautes, honnêtes, généreuses, et leur caractère principal est de ne l'être que des héros et de vous. Ce sont tous nos habiles gens; ce sont tous nos honnêtes gens; ce sont tous mes amis. (*Corres.*, p.709.)

He skilfully stresses the powerful and positive effect that her gift has had upon her reputation in France. He suggests that her patronage of him has gained her many supporters. Once he learnt more about the true nature of Catherine the Great's rule of her country, he realized that the acceptance of such patronage was an act which could threaten his moral integrity.

In the letter of 6th December 1775, Diderot wrote to Catherine the Great directly regarding his ideas about education and the plans for a university, we can see that he is careful to adjust the tone of his letter to a register that is appropriate when writing to a monarch. For example, he expresses his ideas much more tentatively than would usually be the case. He even excuses the frank masculine tone of some of the manuscripts which are being sent to her:

Quant à moi, j'ai fait ce que je pouvais faire de mieux; ce qui ne m'empêchera point d'invoquer votre indulgence et de rappeler à Votre Majesté que cette hommerie qu'elle reconnaît dans nos actions et qu'elle nous pardonne, se glisse aussi dans nos écrits. En confiant mon manuscrit à M. Grimm, j'ai exigé qu'il vous fût envoyé tel qu'il était, sans addition et sans retranchement; et c'est qu'il n'aura pas manqué de faire. (*Corres.*, p. 1266.)

Such concerns as adjusting one's use of tone to suit the rank of the person one is writing to are all-important tools when the writer is hoping to gain some advancement from that person. In this particular instance Diderot need not adjust his style too much since it is due to his talents as a writer that he has gained Catherine's patronage. On the other hand - he must be careful not to overstep the boundaries of respect due to a monarch and a patron.

We have seen the important rôle played by these letters in Diderot's life and the need he felt to use his literary skills to convince others of the validity of his argument. Whether in polemical letters and conflictual relationships, or as means to solicit help for others, persuasion is the central aim of these letters.

Conclusion.

The aim of this study has been to contextualize Diderot's letters within the epistolary genre hence there is no one finding with which to conclude this study. Due to the very nature of this thesis this conclusion can only draw together some of these findings.

The fragmentary nature of the epistolary form and of Diderot's letters which often only have one side of the correspondence remaining add to the difficulty in drawing one affirmative conclusion. The epistolary genre itself has generally only been studied in any theoretical depth where epistolary novels are concerned therefore several approaches have been drawn together in this thesis to enable us to consider Diderot's letters in terms of their genre.

Diderot's letters have been seen to be part of a long tradition of letter writing. The structure and generic constraints of the letter form in the eighteenth century still had very much in common with the classical letter and early forms of *écriture intime* such as the *hypomnēmata*. As we have seen Diderot's journal letters are similarly an account of actions and events rather than a truly introspective analysis in the modern sense of scrutinizing emotions and motives. The epistolary genre for Diderot as for Cicero centuries beforehand was a valuable means of engaging in a written dialogue with absent friends.

We have considered the epistolary form as meriting literary study and as a literary sub-genre in itself. It is the one form of written text that the majority of literate people would have produced in the eighteenth century. Indeed the love

letter can be seen to be the most widely practised form of creative writing with its own constraints and generic expectations.

Diderot's letters were considered in this study as being of literary interest rather than as having purely biographical interest. Therefore the history of the publication of the *Correspondance* is of great importance. The texts of the letters which we have today are as authentic as possible but they are not without their lacunae and possible errors due to editorial intervention and the censorship and alterations carried out by the Vandeuils. An awareness of these formal aspects of the *Correspondance* is needed in order to facilitate our understanding of the text.

It is of importance also to consider the constant features of the epistolary form and how these relate to Diderot's letter writing practice. His use of epistolary tense and treatment of absence for example were found to be conventional. However as Diderot's letters have rarely been studied in the context of their genre, it is vital to consider such formal aspects of the *Correspondance* to appreciate it fully. His use of letter-writing personae is of particular interest as he evidently adopts the same roles in these letters as in his other works. For example in the *Salons* he represents himself as the *honnête homme*, father, lover and mercurial enthusiast in turn which are the same personae he privileges in the *Correspondance*.

The most evident character trait which is predominant in his self-representation is sensibility. Chapter four analysed Diderot's use of the language of sensibility and his love letters and letters to close friends. The letters he wrote when courting his wife were contrasted with the more unconventional letters he wrote to Sophie Volland in which the inspirations for his attestations of love were found in the most unusual

situations such as the act of closing the eyes of the dead. In this chapter the *Correspondance* was seen to a richly complex text and a celebration of and testimony to close friendship.

An integral part of all of Diderot's writing is humour. The various comic techniques employed by him were analysed in chapter five. Humour was not only denotive of the art of polemic persuasion in the eighteenth century but also very much a function of social interaction. As readers we gain a privileged insight into the social gatherings and laughter filled dinners at Grandval. Such conversations as reported in the *Correspondance* were a heady mix of bawdy comedy and philosophy, a combination which can be found in all of Diderot's works.

In the *Correspondance* the conversations at Grandval are skilfully re-enacted and framed like tableaux in order to entertain Sophie Volland. Diderot reports these anecdotes and conversations in such a manner that he brings the scene alive for his reader with the minimum amount of distortion of the original utterance.

His polemic letters also use wit as a persuasive weapon and employ pathos and sensibility in order to convince their reader. Diderot's letter which solicit help for others recall his forceful and masterly use of pathos in the *Religieuse*. This chapter also brings to light the very important function of the letter as a means of seeking advancement in the eighteenth century.

This study has aimed to give an overview of the nature of the *Correspondance* as a whole and of Diderot's superior letter-writing skill.

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