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Diderot and Society: The Philosophe As Gazetteer; the Testimony of the Correspondence¹

At the conclusion of the narrative portion of his bibliographical essay on the Diderot correspondence, Benoît Melançon points to the tremendous amount of research still to be done on the literary aspects of the letters, particularly on aspects of the dialogue, punctuation, its oral character and vocabulary.² These are undoubtedly sound prescriptions for further research but they are unnecessarily restrictive because close readings of the Diderot letters are now beginning to yield up a rich mine of information not only in matters esthetic but in diverse ideological and even theological domains.³

Correspondence As Gazette

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Diderot correspondence lies in its value as a kind of journalistic mirror or gazette, through which he filters, in his inimitable and eloquent way, his love for Sophie Volland,⁴ current events, philosophical musing, and the social whirl.⁵ Unlike the misanthropic Rousseau and the often testy Voltaire, Diderot was a warm individual who loved to spend his recreational moments among friends eating, drinking, walking and chatting about a wide range of topics from the sublime to the mundane. Recreational hours were not to be spent in the same pursuits as those of the day. Busy people need frivolous things to help them relax, he tells Sophie Volland: "Dissenter, examiner, combiner, analyser, serait un nouveau travail pour eux. En général ces gens, le soir, préfèrent Arlequin à Cinna . . ." (299).⁶

Diderot mirrored those activities in letters to Sophie Volland, his paramour and to other friends. In the midst of long and often rambling dissertations to her, he would describe life at d'Holbach's country

estate at Le Grandval,⁷ a few miles from Paris. There with the baron, his wife, his mother-in-law, Mme. d'Aine, Father Hoop (a Scot who had no ecclesiastical rank but to whom Diderot accords the honorific "Father"), Charles-Georges Le Roy (who wrote articles on rural themes for the *Encyclopédie*) and Father Galliani (an Italian cleric who also wrote for the *Encyclopédie*, on the grain trade) Diderot would enjoy casual card games, country hikes, vintage wines and endless conversations.⁸

Peter France also mentions that some of Diderot's involvement in the social whirl came from his visits to Mme. d'Epinay's home at La Chevrette and to La Briche, places which were also havens for Rousseau. Mme. d'Epinay was Grimm's mistress for twenty-seven years and her entourage included people like Mme. d'Houdetot and her lover, the officer-poet Saint-Lambert. Diderot did not, of course, have to leave Paris in order to become enmeshed in social activities. In Paris his work with the *Encyclopédie* brought him into contact with people like Damilaville (who used his position at the tax office to secure mailing privileges for Diderot) and his mistress Mme. Duclos and her eventual replacement Mme. de Maux. In Paris Diderot also maintained close contact with Buffon, Helvétius, Marmontel, Sedaine, Falconet and Vanloo.⁹

Importance of Social Commentary

Diderot's descriptions in the correspondence of his active social life are important for several reasons. They are precious legacies which testify to the contours of his character and tastes but they also provide important data for the social history of the eighteenth-century in the way they furnish word portraits of the social mores of his epoch.¹⁰ This aspect of his correspondence also illustrates Diderot's manner of filtering the mundane through his creative mind and transforming, through his literary prism,¹¹ the ordinary into the absorbing. In a note to Mme. de Premontval as early as 1748 he justifies the need to point up the foibles of mankind by referring to people like Rabelais, Montaigne, La Motte-le-Vayer, Swift and others who retained their reputations as wise men despite their criticism of society.(16)

Diderot's skill as a social critic comes from the fact that he brings to his society portraits the same kind of trained eye he used in his art criticism. Diderot describes a scene in the d'Holbach drawing room almost with the same precision as he does a painting by Chardin or Boucher. After a sumptuous lunch at Le Grandval in October of 1759

(more sumptuous even than what one gets in Paris) Diderot tells Sophie Volland how, stick in hand, he, the baron and the ladies went off for a walk. The exercise must have been salutary because he describes how they walked everywhere, refusing to stop for hills, woods, bogs or farm fields. With d'Holbach Diderot spent almost four hours in the walk talking about history, politics, chemistry, physics and morality (145).

Leisure Hours

Conversation at Le Grandval was not always, of course, on such weighty topics. More often than not the period before dinner at the baron's estate was spent in chatter before the fireplace and judging from the excellent cuisine usually served, the nature of the meal to be consumed was probably at the top of the conversation agenda. Inevitably the dinner was followed by the nature walks which took Diderot and his companion almost up to Isle (454).

When the coterie around d'Holbach at Le Grandval were not taking their post prandial walk, they were engaged in a variety of recreational pursuits, which included billiards, music and card games. Piquet and chouette (the latter game had one player opposing two others) were favorites and were played just before dinner. D'Holbach was a notoriously poor player and Diderot notes that despite this he, d'Holbach, enjoyed the game. After dinner the card games were generally resumed (145). Diderot, however, never let his card playing interfere with his consciousness of who was present and what was going on. During a game of piquet with Mme. Geoffrin, d'Alainville and the baron at Le Grandval, Diderot did not fail to observe that Mme. Rodier was dressed in a dark red dress ("qui lui séait mal") which prompted d'Holbach to tell her that she looked like an Easter egg. He also observed that his card partner, Mme. Geoffrin was dressed in a refined way, reporting to Sophie Volland that the latter's outfit was "une étoffe simple, d'une couleur austère, des manches larges, le linge le plus uni et le plus fin, et puis la netteté la plus recherchée de tout côté" (201).

Chess was another preoccupation of Diderot. The concentration it required might explain why cards were preferred over that game at Le Grandval. In Paris, however, Diderot's interest in chess was easily met. In October of 1762, after failing to find his friends at Montamy's house, he repaired to the café de la Régence where he witnessed an extraordinary argument over a chess move. The details of that argument are reproduced for Sophie Volland in exciting detail. The

Régence attracted the best chess players in Paris¹² and it was significant that in the game in question one of the players checkmated his opponent's queen. A bitter argument then ensued over the legitimacy of the move, necessitating the intervention of the Marquis de Légal who ruled not only on the rules of the game but on the morality of the players. The question of whether the pieces had touched each other and the concept of bad faith were introduced as elements in the judgment (297).¹³

Level of Discourse

Diderot's letters furnish a rich repository of comment on the substance of the numerous talks which he and his companions in Paris and in the countryside had during their moments of relaxation. Before the age of radio, television and telephones, conversation, like letter-writing was a major form of personal *divertissement*. The conversations reproduced by Diderot in his correspondence remind one of G.M. Young's observation that those who are engaged in the historian's *métier* have to read the documents of an age until they can hear the people speak.¹⁴ In perusing the Diderot correspondence the reader is struck by the immediacy of the conversations filtered through his agile mind.¹⁵

Talk, especially at Le Grandval, went on into the late hours of the night, until eleven o'clock sometimes (145). Conversations recorded in the letters are unusually long as Diderot provides snatches of the dialogue between himself and his interlocutor. In October of 1759, for example, he recalls for Sophie that d'Alembert saw him at Le Grandval for the first time since he, Diderot, had lost his father and that the famous mathematician made ritualistic inquiries about family matters before broaching the subject of Diderot's work on the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot quotes d'Alembert's complaints about his financial problems—he had lost his pension from the Russian and French academies—and then records his reproach to d'Alembert regarding the latter's inappropriate behavior six months previously when he had abandoned the project.

Diderot leaves no doubt in his reconstruction of the conversation with d'Alembert that he disapproved mightily of the latter's conduct with various booksellers over certain financial questions and did not hesitate to reprove d'Alembert (150). In reproaching d'Alembert, Diderot makes a distinction between the latter's behavior and the justice of his cause.

Les torts qu'ils ont avec moi ne m'empêchent pas de voir ceux que vous avez avec eux. Après toute cette ostentation de fierté, convenez vous que le rôle que vous faites à présent est bien misérable. Quoi qu'il en soit, votre demande me paraît vile, mais juste. (150)¹⁶

The same evening Diderot also spoke with le Montamy about virtue but indicates uncharacteristically that he no longer remembers what he actually said, whereupon he records the substance of the exchange. The gist of their talk was that people believe themselves capable of becoming virtuous overnight, that they retain their dirty laundry as long as they are content to follow their iniquitous paths. According to Diderot,

ils en font tout leur vie parce qu'on ne quitte pas une habitude vicieuse comme une chemise. C'est pis que la peau du centaure Nessus. On ne l'arrache pas sans douleur et sans cris; on a plutôt de rester comme on est. (150)

The conversation with le Montamy also affords Diderot an opportunity to discourse on the ingredients for happiness. A good spirit, a just heart and wealth proportionate to one's estate are for Diderot the indispensable factors. Le Montamy recalls for Diderot a similar definition offered by Etienne de Silhouette before he became minister of finance in March of 1759. But Silhouette's financial aspirations—thirty thousand pounds a year—prompts Diderot to remark that had he personally heard Silhouette make the statement he would have considered him a "fripon."

Perhaps the most esteemed of the conversationalists whom Diderot encountered in the baron's circle was Galliani, notable for his intelligence, wit and charm. In letters to Mme. de Maux (527) and to Falconet (531) Diderot celebrates Galliani's skills, and remarks to his sculptor friend that he loves Galliani "à la folie." As an example of the latter's wit Diderot cites his paradox to the effect that one has the least freedom in the freest societies. The proof? Constantinople—where there are virtually no impediments to action and yet no freedom (527).

Not all the conversations to which Diderot refers in the correspondence were so weighty in content. Conversations are more light-hearted in the countryside, and one requires so little to have fun, Diderot tells Sophie in a note from Chevrette in September of 1760 as he describes the laughter and comic exchanges among the guests, one of whom remarked that there were more fools in their circle than anywhere else, to which Diderot replies that it would be useless to count them because you would always forget one (182). Another

frequent topic of discourse was the proper conduct of women and the degree of “retenue” they were required to maintain when they heard things they should not have heard (302).

Gossip

In his “conversations à distance” with Sophie, Diderot also engages occasionally in old fashioned gossip. In July of 1762 he recounts the story of a woman of 33 who refused to marry but who wanted a child nonetheless. Diderot reproduces the request this woman made of a forty-year-old man whom she had studied carefully before approaching him.

Ce dont il s'agit, c'est d'avoir la complaisance de me faire un enfant. Voyez, monsieur, si vous voulez me rendre ce service. Je ne vous dissimulerais pas que votre refus me causerait le plus grand chagrin. Ce n'est point, je vous jure, mon amour-propre qui souffrira. Je me rends justice, je sais ce que je veux; mais la plupart de ceux qui ne seraient que trop disposés à me prouver que je suis aimable ne vont point à mes vues: et il faut que ces vues que je crois honnêtes, et auxquelles je suis violemment attachée, soient trompées si elles souffrent quelque obstacle invincible de votre part. J'ignore point que vous êtes marié. Peut-être votre coeur est-il plus engagé dans une passion à laquelle je ne voudrais pas, pour toute chose au monde, que vous manquassiez. Il y a plus: si vous en étiez capable, peut-être ne seriez-vous plus digne d'être le père de l'enfant dont je veux être la mère. Je ne demande rien de vous qu'un atome de vie que je voudrais pouvoir recevoir autrement que la nature l'a voulu. (261)

The elegance and eloquence which Diderot lends to this request, especially the reference to the borrowing of a mere atom of life suggests a rather fine editorial revision by Diderot in the reconstruction of the woman's interesting proposition.

There are occasions in the Diderot letters when the great editor of the *Encyclopédie* seems to revert to the role of the society columnist. This is seen in his comments about Suart's infatuation with Baron d'Holbach's wife. His passion for her was so great that he was driven to tears—which prompted the baroness to comment that since she didn't want to cry along with him, he would have to turn around (261). Suart apparently was a womanizer and Diderot tells Sophie that Mme. Nechre invited him (Diderot) over as a precaution against Suart's campaign to make love to her as well, an exercise which he carries on says Diderot “avec un assiduité à tromper le baron” (345).

Stories about unrequited love and about love-notes (302) appear often in Diderot's gazette-correspondence. Sophie learns in Sep-

tember of 1768 of Mme. Philippe, a woman who married M. de Lavillemenu despite the fact that he stated clearly he would not sleep with her. Despite her wiles, he remained steadfast in his refusal. The marriage lasted three months. Comments Diderot:

Je me suis interrogé là-dessus, et je me suis avoué que si Satan en personne et métamorphosé convenablement, s'en venait à deux heures du matin pleurer, gémir à côté de mon oreiller, je n'aurais jamais le courage de le renvoyer mécontent. (500)

The foolishness of mankind is a theme addressed by Diderot in his letter to Mme. de Maux in May of 1769 as he describes a heated discussion which took place at Saint Cloud over man's capacity to improve. Diderot suggests that while man is more enlightened than his forebears he is not necessarily better.

Je leur fis sur les préjugés une fable qui leur plût, et qui vous plaira parce qu'elle est simple et qu'elle a de la finesse. Un jour, lui-disais-je, un philosophe demandait à un homme du monde: Si le bal de l'Opéra durait toute l'année, que pensez-vous qu'il en arrivât? Ce qui arriverait, c'est que tous les masques-là sont les symboles de nos erreurs. Priez Dieu que le bal dure, et ils finiront par être reconnus. (532)

Ordinarily Diderot was pleased with the level of discourse among his social friends. On one occasion only does he report that idle conversation is unhelpful in cementing the bonhomie of friendship. This observation comes in a letter describing the illness which was afflicting Mme. d'Holbach in 1765. Diderot expresses his dissatisfaction at the way in which d'Holbach's friends (une vingtaine d'hommes) surrounded his ailing and bedridden wife with tense conversation about politics and philosophy, an activity hardly calculated to remedy her ills. He informs Sophie that because of this he recommended to the baron, on one of their walks, that academic discussion be held in his quarters, that the number of visitors to his wife's sick room be limited and that conversation there be steered towards more salutary themes (367).

Dining

If walking and talking are the two main preoccupations of the correspondence, a third, subsidiary interest must be food. Diderot rarely misses an opportunity in writing to Sophie about the delicacies he has consumed, and the occasional digestive problems occasioned by that consumption. The word "dinâmes" does not refer to the mere

ingesting of food but rather to the satellite activities which accompany that exercise. Dinners were opportunities to relax with friends and business associates such as Naigeon, Suart, Morellet and Galliani (527). Whether he is with Le Montamy (150), d'Holbach (527) or at La Charette (179) Diderot ordinarily waxes eloquent about the cuisine offered. Typical of his enthusiasm is the remark recorded on September 15, 1760 to Sophie: "nous dinâmes splendidement, gaiment et longtemps. Des glaces; ah! mes amis, quelles glaces! C'est là qu'il fallait être pour en prendre de bonnes, vous qui les aimez" (179).

Sherbet is not the only food which Diderot celebrates. He seems to have had a liking for eel and other delicacies as well.

On nous apporte tous les jours de Champigny les plus furieuses et les plus perfides anguilles; et puis les melons d'Astracan; et puis de la saurcroute; et puis des perdrix au choix; et puis des perdreaux à la crapaudine; et puis des babas; et puis des pâtés; et puis des tourtres; et puis douze estomacs qu'il faudrait avoir et puis un estomac où il faut mettre comme pour douze. Heureusement on boit en proportion, et tout passe. (453)

The references to his food likings constitute one of the most humanizing aspects of the Diderot correspondence and reveal a side of him quite different from the controlled intellectual who directed the most ambitious publishing venture in the eighteenth-century. When it came to food Diderot was not a strict disciplinarian. He furnishes Sophie with detail both about the various meals he consumed and about the untoward consequences of his occasional gluttony. In November of 1760, for example, he indicates that despite an upset stomach and a decision not to go down for dinner he appeared at his host's table. The sight of pears disarmed him completely and he began to eat one after another. The result? "Je les sens aujourd'hui à six heures comme je sortais de table. Le thé n'a rien fait . . ." (212).¹⁷

Ailments

Perhaps the best example of Diderot's love of food is found in the June 5, 1765 letter to Sophie.

Je mangeai comme un louveteau, ou comme notre ami M. Gaschon quand le dîner est délicieux. Je bus des vins de toutes sortes de noms; un melon d'une perfidie incroyable m'attendait là; et croyez-vous qu'il fût possible de résister à un fromage glacé? Et puis de liqueurs; et puis du café; et puis une indigestion abominable qui m'a tenu sur le pied toute la nuit, et qui m'a fait passer la matinée entre la théière et un autre vaisseau qu'il n'est pas honnête de nommer. (333)

Diderot's eating and drinking habits were undoubtedly the cause of his many digestive problems, as he concedes in a letter to Dr. Tronchin. They come, he reports, after excessive eating but sometimes even after an ordinary meal. The problem occurs sometimes before he begins to eat, he informs the doctor. What is significant in his self-diagnosis is Diderot's addendum that no matter what the discomfort, it never affects his appetite (164).¹⁸ Other letters suggest that his stomach problems were occasionally serious enough to keep him away from the dining table. In a note to Mme. d'Épinay he describes one such bout with stomach pain that forced him to go off to warm his feet to fight off his symptoms of chill and nausea. Nothing helped (190).¹⁹

Character Portraits²⁰

Diderot's various indispositions, as recorded in the letters, never dulled his interest in other people. As part of his involvement in the social whirl in the country or in Paris he was constantly meeting old and new friends, accounts of which he constantly shared with Sophie. In one or two sharply chiselled sentences Diderot seems able to describe the most important traits about the individuals under scrutiny. He informs Sophie in 1760 that Baron Dieskau, a friend of the famous *maréchal de Saxe*, who served in Canada, was "criblé de blessures," but that despite continuing afflictions he continued to be a congenial interlocutor (212).²¹ In the same month he expresses less affection for Thieriot, Voltaire's friend, because of his, Thieriot's, intimidating memory. He staggered Diderot with a recitation exercise in which he quoted verses "de tous les poètes du monde" (219).

One of the most fascinating character sketches in the letters concern La Condamine, whose hearing problems Diderot informs Sophie, were caused by scientific experiments in astronomy conducted by La Condamine in Colombia. Now the Académie Française was using his deafness as an excuse to bar him from membership. Diderot leaves no doubt about his own views on the subject when he comments.

Ne trouvez-vous pas cela bien cruel. Il ne lui manquait qu'à perdre ses yeux dans les sables brûlants des bords de la rivière de l'Amazone, et puis ils auraient dit que cet homme n'était plus bon qu'à noyer. Ces injustices me désespèrent. (219)

La Condamine was not the only person who had problems with the Académie. Thomas, the author of the *Ode sur le Temps*, is the subject of a discussion by Diderot on July 21, 1765, in a note to Sophie describing a talk he had with d'Holbach about the poet's chances of

entering the Académie. He bemoans the fact that Thomas has enemies in that institution but fears that Thomas will hold him, Diderot, responsible if he is not elected (337).²² Mme. d'Aine had another problem, Diderot tells Sophie in a letter written in October of 1767. It was a theological one involving belief in the soul and immortality. Diderot reports, with obvious endorsement, Mme. d'Aine's evolution into an "esprit fort." Why? Because she now believes that the soul rots in the earth with the body. Diderot also approves of her reluctance to read the Bible and her decision to read it in the same way she read novels (456).

Diderot jumps from religion to politics in 1768 as he reflects on the retirement, after five years in office, of Clément Charles François de Laverdy, from the post of *contrôleur général*. He is uncharacteristically harsh in reviewing Laverdy's record. Diderot accuses him of having embezzled two hundred thousand pounds and arranged a fifty thousand pound pension for himself. So many people are involved in the financial skullduggery that a lot of cooperation is required to permit one to commit larceny on that scale. "Messieurs du Parlement devraient bien concevoir à la fin qu'un homme peut être un aigle dans sa chambre et n'être qu'un sot en finance" (500).²³

Henri Lefevre was undoubtedly correct when he referred to Diderot's letters as "resplendent, beyond all literature and writing, with the directness of the spoken word, the luminous warmth of communication, the living presence as a man."²⁴ That presence is felt throughout Diderot's comments on the social whirl which preoccupied so much of his life.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the Killam Foundation of Canada for its generous financial assistance—which provided research time for a thorough survey of the correspondence literature in eighteenth-century France.
2. Benoît Melançon, "Du dialogue: la Correspondance de Diderot," *Etudes françaises* 22-23 (Hiver 1988), 156-157. I should like to thank my colleague, Professor Paul Socken of the University of Waterloo, for directing my attention to the Melançon essay.
3. For an analysis of the way in which Diderot slips into a theological framework in his correspondence see my "Diderot, Falconet and the Theology of Art: The Testimony of the Correspondence," in a future number of *Orbis Litterarum*. It should also be noted that the Diderot correspondence can be profitably audited for analyses of Diderot's views on a wide range of issues not dealt with in the current research on the letters.
4. The number of articles and monograph studies of this aspect of the correspondence seems to be expanding exponentially. See, among others, Jacques Chouillet, *Denis Diderot-Sophie Volland. Un dialogue a une voix* (Paris, 1986); Martine Meyer Darmon, "L'art du portrait

- dans les "Lettres à Sophie Volland," *French Review* 32, 1 (octobre 1958), 22-31; Rolf Geissler, "Diderots als Briefschreiber: zur Rezeption seiner *Lettres à Sophie Volland* in Frankreich und Deutschland," *Beiträge zur Romanischen Philologie*, 24, Heft 2 (1985), 345-352.
5. In his magisterial essay *La Correspondance de Diderot: Son intérêt documentaire, psychologique et littéraire* (New York, 1939) Lester Krakeur (Crocker) does, of course, allude to many of the themes which flowed from the circle of d'Holbach and the coterie at Grandval (93-96). Crocker's focus, however, is more general and less specific than ours. In his *The Converse of the Pen* (Chicago, 1986), Bruce Redford uses the term "acts of intimacy" to describe six major letter-writers in eighteenth-century England. The term appears quite appropriate for Diderot as well. Crocker (31) suggests, however, that many of those conversations are with himself.
 6. All quotations, translations and paraphrases from the Diderot correspondence come from the sixteen-volume G. Roth/J. Varloot edition (Paris, 1955-1970). The orthography has been modernized throughout.
 7. Life at Le Grandval was so serene that when he returned to Paris Diderot found his reentry into the metropolitan orbit fraught with problems. After one such return in November of 1769, he reports to Sophie that eight different problems were awaiting him. They included a disagreement with d'Holbach, contentious encounters with Grimm, kidney problems, remorse over his correspondence, Galliani's essays, his daughter's vomiting, the suicide of a colleague, Desbrosses and a fire starting when he fell asleep (587).
 8. See Peter France, *Diderot's Letters to Sophie Volland* (London, 1972), 6-9.
 9. *Ibid.*, 9.
 10. One of the Diderot letters, dated August 18, 1765, even alludes to traffic problems in eighteenth-century Paris. Returning from the rue des Vieux Augustins one evening Diderot's cab was hit by another cabriolet which subsequently crashed into a café. He didn't get home until after two in the morning (345).
 11. With regard to the art of Diderot's letters, Crocker (100) says that his correspondence "est comme une fenêtre sans rideaux, par laquelle on surprend, dans toute son intimité sans fard et sans contrainte, l'âme nue du philosophe et celle de son milieu. Le réalisme, la variété, le mouvement qu'on y trouve, sont ceux de la vie plutôt que d'une création littéraire." We would not concur entirely with Crocker's view because our understanding of a literary creation would encompass Diderot's letters, whether or not there was a conscious attempt to produce literature.
 12. Roth indicates that these players are mentioned in *Le Neveu de Rameau* and that the Marquis de Légal mentioned in the letter was M. de Kermery, the best chess player in France (297).
 13. "La loi selon lui [le Marquis de Légal] dans le cas douteux doit toujours être contre celui qui peut avoir été de mauvaise foi" (297).
 14. Quoted in Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Renaissance Essays* (Chicago, 1985), 76.
 15. The themes in the conversation within the context of the social whirl are merely a small part of the reflections and meditations which Diderot engages in throughout the correspondence. The subjects instanced here are merely representative samples. A thematic analysis of the wide range of Diderot's reflections and meditations in the correspondence has only been partially begun.
 16. Roth in his note to this letter points out that the conversation between Diderot and d'Alembert "consacre la défection du géomètre et son manque de foi en l'oeuvre commune." Mme. de Vandeuil writes in her *Mémoires*, moreover, that the argument over the book-sellers and the *Encyclopédie* did not cause her father to depreciate d'Alembert's friendship or talent but the dispute did alter somewhat the closeness of their former relationship. Mme. de Vandeuil writes: "Toutes les fois qu'ils se retrouvaient, ils se traitaient comme s'ils ne se fussent jamais quittés; mais ils étaient quelquefois deux ans sans se voir."
 17. Diderot apparently never learned his lesson about the danger of pears to his digestive system. In 1770 he tells Sophie that he almost died from indigestion. "Cela ne pouvait ni remonter ni descendre. J'ai gardé sur mon estomac pendant plus de quinze heures un poids effroyable qui m'étouffait et qui ne se laissait pas ébranler par l'eau chaude, par quelque côté que je la prise" (637).
 18. Roth suggests that modern medicine would diagnose Diderot's problem as "aérophagie," a gas condition brought on by an excessive intake of air.

19. Diderot was not the only person affected by severe stomach problems. Sophie apparently suffered from a similar indisposition (278) and d'Alembert (340) had such a bad case that Diderot was frightened when he saw him. "Il avait le visage bouffi, les yeux hagards, les lèvres brûlés et le teint d'un noir livide et plombé." Indigestion, moreover, is not the only ailment about which Diderot complains in his letters. His "case history" includes complaints about throat problems (34), general fatigue (35), dysentery (41), head colds (42, 62), vomiting (21, 44), rheumatism (49), neck pains (56), chest pains (57, 79), gout (60, 64, 65), kidney function (21, 76) and migraine headaches (73).
20. Of the quality of the character portraits in the letters, Jean Varloot in his *Points de vue sur la correspondance de Diderot* (Paris, 1971), says: "C'est comme un album de photographies qu'il adresse à l'amie lointaine. Mais ces images sont déjà retouchées par le photographe. Ces portraits sont moins référentiels que déjà opacifié par certain art spontané du locuteur, plus important en vérité que les larmes qui pourraient tremper sa missive"(20).
21. In another communication a short time later Diderot furnishes clinical details about the extent of Dieskau's injury "avec un faux urêthe pratiqué à la cuisse, par lequel il rend les urines, si vous voulez appeler cela vivre" (214).
22. Roth indicates that Thomas was admitted to the Académie Française in 1767. Diderot's apprehensions were unwarranted.
23. Crocker, 51, points out that in his letters Diderot was much more critical of government, of the clergy and of the Parlement than he was in his published writings. He believed that it was so vice-ridden and corrupt that it was beyond saving. In a hint of revolutionary ardor Diderot says that the only way to restore vigor to the French nation was to follow the way in which Medea rejuvenated her father, cutting him up and boiling him!
24. Quoted in France, 1-2.