

Jacques's Fatal Freedom

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Frequently in the course of Diderot's novel *Jacques le fataliste et son maître*, reference is made to the *grand rouleau* or to the fact that Jacques believes that all human activity is *écrit là-haut*. These two phrases are key formulations of the fatalism in the novel's title. In the eighteenth-century debate on the origins of human knowledge and morality, much of it concerned with biology, we can locate Diderot's thought in reference to the opinions expressed, for example, in Helvétius's *De l'homme*, La Mettrie's *L'Homme-Machine*, Condillac's statue, Locke's metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, and Spinoza's doctrine of the one infinite substance and the need to see things *sub specie aeternitatis*. In passages like those concerning *la fibre* or *la molécule paternelle* in the *Neveu de Rameau* or the slow, incremental progression from species to species in the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot suggests a version of biological determinism in which what will happen is already inscribed, written out, as it were, on the great scroll of physical inheritance. Future actions are already present in the propensities and possibilities of the nascent organism. Diderot's imaginative biological speculations have adumbrated a number of modern notions, most especially those concerning the role of genes, and his fatalism is an intuitive, embryonic version of the "nature versus nurture" issue in modern pedagogy.

At the same time, however, *écrit là-haut* and *le grand rouleau* are literary terms, words that refer to writing. This essay, following up on an observation of Herbert Dieckmann, will deflect Diderot's philosophy of determinism into the channels of narrative.¹ My intention is to analyse

1 Herbert Dieckmann, *Cinq Leçons sur Diderot* (Genève: Droz, 1959), p. 93: "Enfin, Jacques le

Diderot's philosophical fatalism as a theory of narrative and to examine this ideological position in terms of the ludic confrontation of narrator and *lecteur* within the novel. I will show how Diderot's narrative point of view, so subversive of traditional novelistic conventions, sets philosophical determinism and narrative freedom against each other even as it reconciles them both.²



Although Diderot appears to favour fatalism, we may note, as others have done, that his own characters undermine this philosophy. Jacques, the believer in fatalism, acts as if he possesses free will, while his *maître*, the proponent of freedom, behaves like an automaton. The former's actions consistently demonstrate a liberty that belies his words, the latter is defined by the interplay of three accessories: his watch, his tobacco pouch, and "his" Jacques. On the last pages of the novel Jacques arranges for his *maître* to fall off his horse. The master's fall and consequent anger demonstrate that he is not always free to act as he wills, while Jacques's preparation of the whole incident shows that events can be the result of spontaneous or non-predetermined acts by human agents.³ It would seem then that Diderot, as author, has provided an ironic critique of fatalism through the very characters he chooses to express that philosophy. We also know, however, that Diderot took very seriously the philosophy of material determinism and thus the fatalism of his title. Michael O'Dea speaks of a "strict congruence between the main exposition of Jacques's ideas and the works in which Diderot presents what are accepted without question as his own ideas on freedom and necessity."⁴

fataliste offre le meilleur exemple de transposition en récit d'un problème philosophiquement insoluble."

2 See Aram Vartanian, "Jacques le fataliste: A Journey into the Ramifications of a Dilemma," in *Essays on Diderot and the Enlightenment in Honor of Otis Fellows*, ed. John Pappas (Geneva: Droz, 1974), pp. 325-47. Vartanian sees this connection but concludes that in the end it is thwarted by the novel's fictional status. I argue here that each reinforces the other.

3 On the question of Diderot and his determinism, see J. Robert Loy, *Diderot's Determined Fatalist* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), especially pp. 144ff., which discusses this incident.

4 Michael O'Dea, "Freedom, Illusion, and Fate in Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*," *Symposium* 39 (Spring 1985), 40. O'Dea has written a well-argued and convincing essay whose main insight parallels and confirms my own. We develop that point in different ways, however, since he discusses freedom and fate as they are presented in the inserted stories and illusion as the affective reaction of the real reader. I am interested in the fictional reader, the rhetorical character created by Diderot inside the text.

Despite novelists who want to create ambiguous and multivocal works and critics who dispute notions of meaning or intentionality in the text, every novel is a fatal field of words; the words that constitute the novel are printed on the page, and remain unchanging, fixed, and determined for anyone who reads them. Despite his attempts to write a "free" novel, Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* flounders on the perilous shoals of narrative determinism. Cortazar constructed his novel so that it could be read by "following the sequence indicated at the end of each chapter,"⁵ which differs from the sequence of chapters as they are printed. Nothing inside the chapters is changed, however. Freedom exists in the order of reading, but fatalism rules over the words of each constituent unit.

Diderot's text can no more avoid the fatalism of print than any other. Even though Diderot offers more than the usual number of problems for any editor trying to establish a definitive text, there can be no doubt that the words and the episodes of *Jacques le fataliste* do not change from day to day or from one copy of the novel to another. The opening page is always the same, leading inevitably and thus "fatalistically" to the pages that always follow it. What is written cannot be altered. There is no possibility of change, no freedom to be different, no alternative that has not already been written down and thus already incorporated into the novel. Once a narrative is written, freedom and improvisation (here I refer to the actual episodes recounted and not to their possible meanings or associations in the mind of real readers like ourselves) become impossible. What had been a free alternative becomes an inevitable necessity as soon as it is spelled out on the printed page.

Despite the fatalism of print, the iron-clad grip of the written narrative, *Jacques* does permit one tiny glimmer of freedom. Writing (here I follow convention in using that present participle to mean the past, what is written) is determined; reading (a true present participle) is not. To represent this eternally present and liberating act of reading within his novel, Diderot created a fictional *lecteur* who engages in an antagonistic yet collaborative exchange with the narrator. By highlighting the *lecteur* and his role in the production of the ultimate novel, simultaneously complementing and contradicting the narrator, Diderot succeeds in

5 Julio Cortazar, *Hopscotch* (New York: Avon, 1975), p. 5. A number of "reader-participatory" novels, especially those for youngsters, use this same technique. At the end of each episode, several options are listed. The reader selects one and then turns to the page listed for that option and continues reading from that point. These referrals can be so intertwined that the novel never ends, but keeps on prolonging itself in a constant deferring to the next option which always leads to yet another one.

capturing the opposition between the fatalistic written word and the liberating act of reading, between the already determined narration and that same narration's air of improvising as it goes along.

Although for the purposes of analysis I will distinguish between them, this narrator and his *lecteur* are in fact inseparable, two sides of the same coin, symmetrical verbal counterparts collaborating in a single act of narration. The tools we have to investigate this narrative strategy are clumsy indeed when compared to Diderot's doubly articulated apparatus whose twin poles slip in and out of focus, exchanging functions, contradicting each other, and yet co-operating in a manner that is droll and free of pedantry. Obviously there can be no cut-and-dried separation between these two characters. They are two contiguous zones whose boundary is blurred. Any attempt, our own included, to depict them in overly precise or absolute terms is doomed to failure. Nonetheless, while fully accepting the relative nature of any distinction between them, I must insist on the contrast because, while *Jacques* has been extensively studied from the narrator's point of view, there is still something to be learned from the *lecteur's* perspective. While recognizing that only together do the narrator and the *lecteur* constitute the novel's narrative action, I will nonetheless identify each one with a single narrative function, either writing or reading. Even though this does distort the ultimate effect of the novel's subversive and parodic narrative economy, it has the immense advantage of permitting a close investigation of the exchange between narrator and *lecteur* and their vocalization of the dilemma of narrative fatalism.⁶



The freedom implicit in reading can be illustrated by the long-awaited dénouement of the story of Jacques's loves. His story does not have one ending but three. Although different from one another, each has a legitimate claim to being "the" ending. Because there are three of them, however, none can actually be "the" ending. Having three eliminates

⁶ Let me make clear that throughout this essay I will be talking about the fictional reader who is a rhetorical construct embedded in the text, an imaginary personage called *lecteur* written into the novel like all the other characters. Actual or real readers are, of course, always free to interpret what they read. It is not at all my intention to argue that authorial intentionality could be considered deterministic and reader response a form of freedom even when (perhaps especially when) the latter interpretations are singular and unexpected. My topic remains Diderot's fictional handling of rhetorical fatalism.

any assurance of finality or certitude.⁷ The fact that a printed alternative exists deprives each version of its inevitability and its status as the preordained completion of the novel: the principle of fatalism is that, given any set of circumstances, only one result is possible. As narrative, however, all three possibilities co-exist even though they are logically incompatible and mutually exclusive. This triple *dénouement* bestows on the text its freedom to be different, to be other, to evade the crushing finality of a single predictable endpoint. Unwilling to choose among these alternatives, the novel accommodates them all, as equals.

In the same readerly context, we should note that Diderot experienced reading as an extraordinary act of liberation and freedom. Often he would begin to read and, inspired by what he was reading, would fly off in other directions entirely, using his reading material only as a point of departure, turned loose by the text, from the text, liberated by his act of reading to imagine something else, something entirely different from what was written. The classic instance of this liberation (as reported by Grimm in the *préface-annexe* to that novel) is Diderot's reading—and writing!—his own *Religieuse*:⁸

Un jour qu'il était tout entier à ce travail, M. d'Alainville, un de nos amis communs, lui rendit visite et le trouva plongé dans la douleur et le visage inondé de larmes. "Qu'avez-vous donc? lui dit M. d'Alainville; comme vous voilà!—Ce que j'ai, lui répondit M. Diderot, je me désole d'un conte que je me fais."⁹

Overcome by the poignant situation, which as a writer he knows is false since he is inventing it, Diderot as a reader is moved to real tears. He can imagine other sorrows behind the fictional one he is presenting, just as reading about the real Suzanne Simonin provoked the prank letters to Croismare, which in turn inspired the actual novel. Diderot combines in himself the extraordinary tensions between narrating and reading, between the foreknowledge of the end he is planning and the hope he

7 Jean-Claude Guéron, "Lecture encyclopédique de *Jacques le fataliste*: Pour une épistémologie du trouble," *Stanford French Review* 8 (Fall 1984), 335–47. Guéron states that several "énoncés" can coexist, that no single fact exhausts the "champs des possibilités" and that "le texte [...] ne permet pas [...] de lever l'incertitude."

8 See Jean Catrysse's similar commentary on this same passage in his *Diderot et la Mystification* (Paris: A-G Nizet, 1970), pp. 175ff.

9 Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres romanesques*, ed. Henri Bénac (Paris: Garnier, 1962), p. 850. References to *Jacques* are to this edition.

entertains that it will turn out differently. In *Jacques* we find the same tension and the same dichotomy between narrator and *lecteur*. Diderot's personal experience is therefore significant for our point about the liberating force of reading as represented in the novel. Even in a diminished, fictionalized state, reading remains the ultimate freedom, an exhilarating improvisation, an act of free will whose origin is fixed in a text but which can be liberated from any constraints that the text would impose.

But how do the novel's specific narrative strategies articulate this philosophical dilemma? Two characters from the story level parallel the two voices at the narrating level as they all participate in this drama of freedom and determinism. Like the *maître*, the narrator is a determined, fatalistic figure, while Jacques and the *lecteur* possess a greater measure of freedom in their fictional activities.

Although the narrator is a ludic character whose words are most often to be taken with a grain of salt, we should pay more serious attention to his frequent references to what is *écrit là-haut* and the *grand rouleau*. According to his own testimony, the narrator is not really free to invent his story because he appears to be following closely some pre-existing narration. He refuses flights of fancy because he does not want to write a novel, that is, a story he can change and invent at will:

Il est bien évident que je ne fais pas un roman, puisque je néglige ce qu'un romancier ne manquerait pas d'employer. (p. 505)

He rejects the freedom that the novel offers him:

C'est ainsi que cela arriverait dans un roman [...]; mais ceci n'est point un roman, je vous l'ai déjà dit, je crois, et je vous le répète encore. (p. 528)

On several occasions he denies having any freedom to deviate from his story because he is only reproducing what he has heard or learned elsewhere:

Vous allez prendre l'histoire du capitaine de Jacques pour un conte, et vous aurez tort. Je vous proteste que telle qu'il l'a racontée à son maître, tel fut le récit que j'en avais entendu faire aux Invalides, je ne sais en quelle année, le jour de Saint-Louis, à table chez un monsieur de Saint-Etienne, major de l'hôtel. (p. 553)

The comedy of this burlesque footnote in no way invalidates the narrator's claim that he is not at liberty to invent incidents. Diderot is a master

at using droll means to advance serious issues. True, many times the narrator pretends that he could introduce all manner of unforeseen events into his story:

il ne tiendrait qu'à moi que tout cela n'arrivât; mais adieu la vérité de l'histoire, adieu le récit des amours de Jacques. (p. 505)

Un autre que moi, lecteur, ne manquerait pas de garnir ces fourches de leur gibier et de ménager à Jacques une triste reconnaissance. [...] mais la chose n'en serait pas plus vraie. (p. 532)

Vous voyez, lecteur, combien je suis obligé; il ne tiendrait qu'à moi de donner un coup de fouet aux chevaux [...]; mais pour cela, il faudrait mentir, et je n'aime pas le mensonge. (p. 551)

Il ne tiendrait qu'à moi d'arrêter ce cabriolet, et d'en faire sortir [...]; mais je dédaigne toutes ces ressources-là [...] rien n'est plus aisé que de filer un roman. Demeurons dans le vrai. (p. 731)

Lecteur, qui m'empêcherait de jeter ici le cocher, les chevaux, la voiture, les maîtres et les valets dans une fondrière? [...] Mais il n'y eut rien de tout cela. (p. 746)

But each of these examples ends with the narrator's refusing the possibilities he has just evoked and returning to what he calls the "truth."¹⁰ What he tells, therefore, is determined by "what really happened" according to those pre-existing texts which include the *grand rouleau* that is already *écrit là-haut*, what the narrator heard at the Invalides, what is *vrai* and not *mensonge*. Let us note in passing that these temptations towards narrative freedom most often occur when the *lecteur* is present through apostrophe. The demarcation between these two spheres is not airtight and there is always a risk of contagion. Still, the dominant trait of the narrator is his refusal or inability to free himself from the heavy weight of the models that determine what he can retell.

In the closing pages of the novel, another narrator-like figure appears: "L'éditeur ajoute [...]" (p. 777). This editor confirms our suspicion that the narrator whom he closely resembles is not a free agent able to invent

10 See Marie-Hélène Chabut, "Diderot's *Jacques le fataliste*: A Reflection on Historiography and 'Truth,'" *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 249 (1987), 333–39. Although she sees the narrator's paradoxical relations to "truth" much as I do, Chabut ignores the role of the *lecteur* in the production of the text and consequently his influence on this "truth."

his own tale but a copyist limited to reproducing a text that remains otherwise unknown. This editor reveals that, according to "le manuscrit dont je suis le possesseur" (p. 777), there are three different endings to the novel. Two of these endings deserve a brief mention in the light of our interest in this game of pre-texts and of the narrator's propensity to borrow and copy from previous sources. The first dénouement ends comically with the question as to whether Jacques, on his knees, could dry the tears of Denise sitting on a chair "à moins que la chaise ne fût fort basse. Le manuscrit ne le dit pas; mais cela est à supposer" (p. 778, my emphasis). The second version is denounced as copied from *Tristram Shandy* and called a "plagiat." Ironically echoing the narrator's own comic voice, the editor underlines the weight of outside references. By documenting these failures to escape from an inevitable story line, the editor shows how the narrator is circumscribed in what he does and does not tell. We have already seen the latter again and again refuse the freedom associated with novels. He makes repeated claims to present nothing of his own invention: "Tout ce que je vous débite là, lecteur, je le tiens de Jacques" (p. 670). He often appears to be copying from a suppositious manuscript. Despite the unconventional plot of the novel itself (which must be attributed to the complicity of both narrator and *lecteur* and not to either one alone), it seems clear that this narrator is depicted without any real freedom to invent the story he is telling. No matter how ironic or playful the concepts of truth and the already-written scroll may be for Diderot the author, they imply significant limitations on the narrator's freedom: he copies, he repeats, he threatens to invent, but in the end he returns to his script. He is not at liberty to deviate from the path, no matter how wide it may be. He is determined (pun intended) to tell what the burden of writing permits him to tell.¹¹

Jacques and the *lecteur*, on the other hand, retain a fictional freedom that reflects the actual freedom of real readers like ourselves or of Diderot reading *La Religieuse*. They are free to stray from the plot line and to envision other possibilities, other connections, alternative versions that, since they are presented as the products of an eternally present-tense reading act and not a past-tense writing process, are never fixed.

So ambitious a conception of reading narrative is, of course, impossible to record since the very fact of recording and writing it down necessarily deprives it of its improvisational essence. Furthermore, it is difficult to

11 The narrator is alternately solicitous and nonchalant about the source of his narration. Exploring that self-contradictory attitude and the consequent oscillations between slavish imitation and boasts of creativity will have to await another essay, however, since doing so here would lead me too far from my present concentration on the *lecteur*.

separate the narrator and the *lecteur* because they are collaborators in the ultimate effect that mimics the freedom of reading. While something of each one unavoidably rubs off on the other, they are nonetheless different. Even as he is incorporated into the fiction whose retelling he resists, the *lecteur* creates within himself the extra-diegetic freedom to interpret that is central to effective and affective reading. His constant interruptions disturb the fatalistic plot line. He embodies an anti-deterministic attitude even though he is deeply implicated in the fiction's ultimate production through his intimate yet antagonistic co-operation with the narrator. He cannot stop the inevitable narration, but he can delay and deflect it. His questions and objections force the narrator to take into account alternatives that, at first glance, do not fit into the predetermined narration. We remember that the entire novel begins as a response to the *lecteur* and to his impertinent demand for interaction and alternatives:

Comment s'étaient-ils rencontrés? Par hasard, comme tout le monde. Comment s'appelaient-ils? Que vous importe? D'où venaient-ils? Du lieu le plus prochain. Où allaient-ils? Est-ce que l'on sait où l'on va? Que disaient-ils? (p. 493)

This bold and original *incipit* establishes the most characteristic attitude of the *lecteur*, his provocative questions. So critical is his act of questioning that the narrator himself replies to two of these questions with questions of his own, thus transforming the usual declaratory mode of narrative into an interrogatory one. Granted, it is not perfectly clear from Diderot's text whether the *lecteur* actually speaks these questions or whether the narrator repeats and reformulates them. I have already tried to underline the difficulty in distinguishing between these two voices. On one hand, the absence of *tirets* which often indicate a change in interlocutor might suggest that the narrator alone is speaking. On the other, we can read this passage as a true dialogue (what else can explain the *vous* in "Que vous importe?") in which the *lecteur* would literally have the first word, starting the novel with his questions even before the narrator can begin the narration proper. Diderot locates his vision of reading as liberation within the strict confines of a totally predetermined, unchanging, and already known text. In these opening lines the personae of narrator and *lecteur* are mixed and confused even as they stake out their respective areas of co-operative contradiction. Words flow *freely* and in that liberating confusion a critical point is made. For this exhilarating moment the blend of their voices, voices off and voices on, sounds a note of jubilant spontaneity and of escape from the prison-house of narration.

Although absolute distinctions between narrator and *lecteur* are difficult to sustain in a novel as complicated, as paradoxical, and as subversive of its own intentions as *Jacques*, I think that the *lecteur* embodies the will to freedom better than the narrator. He wields, for example, the power to choose among alternatives that the narrator proposes. At the end of a passage about a chateau where Jacques and his *maître* take refuge during a storm early in the novel we read:

aussitôt il tourne bride, et regagne au petit pas, car il n'était jamais pressé ... — Le château immense?—Non, non. Entre les différents gîtes possibles, dont je vous ai fait l'énumération qui précède, choisissez celui qui convient le mieux à la circonstance présente. (p. 515, ellipsis in original)

Here narrative escapes from rigid determinism. Which alternative is in fact the true one? All and none. By allowing (or seeming to allow) the *lecteur* to choose, which of course he never does, Diderot delays permanently any single, and therefore fatalistic, answer. The multiplicity of possibilities presented to the *lecteur* effectively denies the fatalism of the printed word:

je conviendrai de tout ce qu'il vous plaira, mais à condition que vous ne me tracasserez point sur le dernier gîte de Jacques et de son maître; soit qu'ils aient atteint une grande ville [...]; qu'ils aient passé la nuit [...]; qu'ils se soient réfugiés [...]; qu'ils aient été accueillis [...]; qu'ils soient sortis le matin d'une grande auberge [...]; qu'ils aient reçu l'hospitalité chez un curé [...]; ou qu'ils se soient enivrés. (p. 514, my emphasis)

As was the case with the triple dénouement of Jacques's *amours*, various alternatives continue to exist without ever cancelling each other out. All these actions remain within the novel, even if they are not all done. As Robert Mauzi points out: "Ces fictions qu'il rejette, il leur laisse malgré tout le temps de se maintenir furtivement avant de disparaître."¹² I would go even further and claim that they never "disappear" and that they continue to exist more than "furtively." Once mentioned they exist in a limbo of unrealized potential, an eternal present tense of possibility because the *lecteur* never eliminates any one of them despite the narrator's invitation to do so. Holding all these alternatives in an equilibrium which

¹² Robert Mauzi, "La Parodie romanesque dans *Jacques le fataliste*," *Diderot Studies* 6 (1964), 103.

transcends their ability to negate each other, the *lecteur* preserves the precarious freedom of the text precisely because he refuses to cancel any one of them.

Freedom and fatalism confront each other in the characters' attitudes towards narration and thereby parallel the attitudes we have just examined in the narrative act. Plot is determined and fatalistic. If it is not unswervingly directed towards its inevitable end point, "story" goes nowhere and narrative loses both sense and shape. The *maître*, who is more fatalistic than he would like to believe, is inordinately attached to plot. He asks Jacques constantly to continue the story of his *amours* and he is ever impatient to know what happens next in whatever story he is being told. In sharp contrast, Jacques, a nominal fatalist who acts as if he had free will, greatly prefers spontaneous incident and unforeseen accident to a fatally linear plot line. Anything that impedes a story's progress or that moves it into bypaths and cross-channels meets with his approval. As a listener or reader, Jacques delights in the leisurely paced tale, ripe with unexpected events and irrelevant details. He "préfère d'habitude les méandres infinis de la narration" (Mauzi, p. 113) to the master's headlong rush to conclusion. Either as listener or teller, the master goes directly to his predetermined end, just as Jacques is forever getting lost in and by interruptions:

c'est que je n'ai jamais pu suivre mon histoire sans qu'un diable ou un autre ne m'interrompît, et que la vôtre [i.e., the master's] va tout de suite. (p. 736)

While he is telling, for example, the story of his loves, Jacques lets slip a few facts that will distract his *maître*. He is explaining why he has money to pay for the doctor:

j'avais en réserve cinq louis, dont Jean, mon aîné, m'avait fait présent lorsqu'il partit pour son malheureux voyage de Lisbonne ... (Ici Jacques se mit à pleurer.) (p. 529, ellipsis in original)

This interesting detail and Jacques's tears are a trap, however. The wily valet is playing on his master's fatal penchant for demanding the continuation and conclusion of whatever story he is currently listening to.

Le Maître.—Mais qu'est-ce que ton frère Jean était allé chercher à Lisbonne?
Jacques.—Il me semble que vous prenez à tâche de me fourvoyer. Avec vos questions, nous aurons fait le tour du monde avant que d'avoir atteint la fin de mes amours. (p. 530)

The tables are turned in a manner that recalls the complicitous confrontations of narrator and *lecteur*. Maliciously Jacques imputes his own motives to his master: *fourvoyer*. By whetting the *maître*'s appetite for another story and then manipulating his impatience for closure, Jacques indulges in the kind of delayed and deferred narrative that he so admires. He interrupts the story he is currently telling in order to begin yet another episode, that of the père Ange who is a friend of his brother Jean. In the midst of this latter tale, Jacques interrupts himself again and proposes that he revert to the original story line:

Mais, monsieur, si je laissais là l'histoire de frère Jean et que je reprisse celle de mes amours, cela serait peut-être plus gai.

Le Maître.—Non, non; prenons une prise de tabac, voyons l'heure qu'il est et poursuis. (p. 532)

As a reader or listener, the master is a myopic fatalist. Once engaged on the single track of a story line, he will not be easily derailed, even for the story he had avidly requested a few minutes earlier. His narrative determinism is underscored by the accompanying gestures, taking tobacco and checking the time, which are associated with his fatalistic behaviour throughout the novel.

Jacques's efforts to lead his listener astray offer a reversed, mirror image of a similar incident a few pages earlier involving the poet of Pondichéry. As the narrator comments on Jacques's story, he lets fall a reference to an incidental detail that the *lecteur* will not relinquish until it too becomes a full-blown story:

Et si par malheur on ressemblait à un certain poète que j'envoyai à Pondichéry?—Qu'est-ce que ce poète?—Ce poète ... Mais si vous m'interrompez, lecteur, et si je m'interromps moi-même à tout coup, que deviendront les amours de Jacques? Croyez-moi, laissons là le poète ... L'hôte et l'hôtesse s'éloignèrent ... —Non, non, l'histoire du poète de Pondichéry.—Le chirurgien s'approcha du lit de Jacques ... —L'histoire du poète de Pondichéry, l'histoire du poète de Pondichéry.—Un jour, il me vint un jeune poète. (pp. 526–27, ellipses in original)

Several attempts by the narrator to follow his original plot line are overcome by the *lecteur*'s insistence that he divert to the side story. Jacques and the *lecteur* share this taste for jumping from story to story while the *maître* and the narrator prefer to see the current story through to its conclusion.

Immediately following this brief interruption, the text returns to Jacques's story brusquely and without transition. After the poet's last words to the narrator ("—C'est bien mon projet ..."), the next paragraph picks up exactly where the main story was interrupted: "Le chirurgien s'étant approché du lit de Jacques, celui-ci ne lui laissa pas le temps de parler" (p. 528). Moving without transition like this from one narrative level to another violates novelistic conventions. Such a brusque parataxis, juxtaposing incongruous enunciations, teeters on the brink of confusion. On the verge of losing its sense, this page is also at the point of regaining its freedom from the fatal conventions of genre. Deferring conclusions, inserting stories into other stories, and jump-cutting from one scene to another (the term is anachronistic but the technique is obviously not) are all instances of the text's struggling through Jacques and the *lecteur* to realize its freedom within the fatal boundaries of the printed book.

As his frequent interruptions of the innkeeper's wife prove, Jacques does not hesitate to delay or deflect those stories he is listening to.

L'Hôtesse—[...] Mais laissons là les bonnes et les mauvaises têtes que j'ai tournées, et revenons à Mme de La Pommeraye.

Jacques—Si nous buvions d'abord un coup aux mauvaises têtes que vous avez tournées, ou à ma santé? (p. 612)

It is in the name of spontaneity and unpredictability that he interrupts the tale of Mme de La Pommeraye and the Chevalier des Arcis. His purpose is to inquire after those details which deflect the story from its scheduled plot and disperse it in a multitude of unexpected directions. Here the *hôtesse* is recounting how Mme de La Pommeraye is thinking of revenge:

Que fera-t-elle? Elle n'en sait encore rien; elle y rêvera; elle y rêve.

Jacques—Si tandis qu'elle y rêve ... (p. 614, ellipsis in the original)

Jacques reacts instinctively in his attempt to untrack the story. The ellipsis proves that he has nothing planned of his own to substitute. Rather he simply wants something other than that which his narrator has prepared. As a reader Jacques seizes every opportunity to thwart and deflect (*fourvoyer* was the term he employed) the landlady's narrative into a direction she did not intend to follow. Except for the fact that they ultimately harmonize in the final text that we are reading, we might

believe that Jacques's listening and the landlady's speaking are at cross-purposes. In the final novel that is the sum of such separate narrative strands, this ultimate reconciliation reflects the unity that confuses and connects the narrator and the *lecteur* as well as Jacques and the landlady (or his master) despite the momentary antagonisms that separate them.

Even the *maître* comes to recognize Jacques's irresistible drive to digress. Apropos of nothing Jacques remembers a little man perched in a hayloft. At first he refuses to give the man's name because if he does he will have to tell his story. The master replies:

"Allons, mon ami Jacques, nomme-moi le petit homme. Tu t'en meurs d'envie, n'est-ce pas? Satisfais-toi." (p. 710)

He is right and with no more prompting Jacques launches into the episode of the village priest in Suzon's barn. The total novel alone can reconcile Jacques's need to introduce new material and the master's desire to hear each story through to its end.

The complexity of some of these delays and deviations can be astounding. Late in the novel, Jacques is forced to interrupt the story of his *amours* because of a severe cold. His master begins the story of his loves as a substitute. In the course of his master's tale Jacques is outraged by a literary set-piece that his master, ever the traditionalist in matters narrative, sketches out at great length.

Jacques, après avoir dit entre ses dents: Tu me le paieras ce mauvais portrait. (p. 749)

Because it is so conventional and predictable, observing precise rules and following a well-known pattern, this pen portrait is antithetical to all of Jacques's narrative impulses, which spring from improvisation, spontaneity, and unpredictability. To avenge himself, therefore, he interrupts the episode of Desglands and his *emplâtre*, itself an interruption of the story of the master's loves:

Le Maître.—Aussi Jacques, pourquoi m'avez-vous *dérouté*? (p. 749, my emphasis)

Interrupted, delayed, and *dérouté*, the master is obliged to listen to the episode of Desglands's son who wakes the whole chateau and makes everyone dance in the courtyard.

Vous avez sur le coeur le long et ennuyeux portrait de la veuve; mais vous m'avez, je crois, bien rendu cet ennui par la longue et ennuyeuse histoire de la fantaisie de son enfant. (p. 751)

This dance leads nowhere and is at best only a tangential episode, which is precisely the non-causal and non-sequential relationship that Jacques appreciates in storytelling. His strategy can be described as one which provides the obstacles that force narrative to deviate from its predetermined channel. Reacting to these deflections, the narrative here flows from Jacques's loves to the master's, to Desglands's plaster, and finally to Desglands's son, and then back through the sequence but in reverse order. The *maître's* forward, linear impulse is deflected by Jacques's looping curiosity, which constantly tempts him to leave the current story for another one.

—N'êtes-vous pas entre les bras de Mlle Agathe?

—Oui.

—Ne vous y trouvez-vous pas bien?

—Fort bien.

—Restez-y.

—Que j'y reste, cela te plaît à dire.

—Du moins jusqu'à ce que je sache l'histoire de l'emplâtre de Desglands. (p. 747)

The line separating the act of narration from the content of that narration is crossed here as at many other points. The parataxis involving the *lecteur* at the end of the Pondichéry passage echoes the blurring of the narrative *degrés* here. Jacques resists the determinism inherent in literary conventions like the portrait or the separation of narrative levels just as he struggles against the predetermined nature of printed narrative by requesting Desglands's story at this unexpected juncture. He is forever trying to hear or to tell a truly free story.

The privileged status and the ultimate, philosophical significance of the fictional act of reading become most evident when we compare Jacques and his master as listeners. Each has the opportunity to listen to the other tell the story of his loves. Typically the master listens poorly and so makes foolish judgments as to what is happening. He is eager to hear more facts, but, a poor predictor of narrative outcome, he fails to interpret them correctly. On these occasions Jacques can be blunt: "Je crois, mon maître, que vous vous trompez" (p. 569). When Jacques's horse bolts to the scaffolds, the master again proves to be a poor interpreter of signs

(and of horses, we might add). He insists the horse's bolting is an omen that Jacques will die by hanging, which is false. By contrast, Jacques is an astute reader or listener. He can foresee what will occur:

L'autre chose, c'est que je persiste dans l'idée que votre chevalier de Saint-Ouin est un grand fripon; et qu'après avoir partagé votre argent avec les usuriers [...], il cherche à vous embâter de sa maîtresse. (p. 736)

While the *maître* is usually wrong in his observations, Jacques tends to be right. He even congratulates himself on his perspicacity: "Eh bien! mon maître, Jacques a-t-il du nez?" (p. 732). Just as Jacques realizes that his master is being hoodwinked by Saint-Ouin, his double, the *lecteur*, discerns the literary sources that the narrator is exploiting and, since he prefers to copy pre-existing texts rather than invent his own, plagiarizing:

Mais c'est *La Vérité dans le vin*, de Collé ... Lecteur, vous ne savez ce que vous dites; à force de vouloir montrer de l'esprit, vous n'êtes qu'une bête. C'est si peu la vérité dans le vin, que tout au contraire, c'est la fausseté dans le vin. Je vous ai dit une grossièreté, j'en suis fâché, et je vous en demande pardon. (p. 741, ellipsis in original)

The master is angered by Jacques's cleverness as a reader just as the narrator is miffed by his *lecteur*'s ability to catch him out in his literary larceny. An attentive reader, the *lecteur* detects the narrator substituting his own vocabulary for that of his characters. The latter puts "une mortelle heure" in the mouth of Dame Marguerite, "hydrophobe" and "engastrimute" in Jacques's:

mais la vérité, c'est que l'*Engastrimute* est de moi, et qu'on lit sur le texte original: *Ventriloque*. (p. 717)

These are small liberties indeed, substituting one term for its synonym without doing any violence to the sense of the whole. But the critical point is that once again the narrator fails to recognize his freedom and claim his originality. Rather he is content to refer and defer to that problematic "original text." Fatalistic and unfree, he is content to copy where he could create.



Most important, Jacques and the *lecteur* demonstrate that reading and listening require a participation in the narrative process even when it is unwelcome. Bothersome as such active reading may be, it is infinitely preferable to its contrary, lack of interest. Early in the novel the narrator almost panics when he thinks his *lecteur* is no longer listening to him:

Ah! lecteur, la patience avec laquelle vous m'écoutez me prouve le peu d'intérêt que vous prenez à mes deux personnages. (pp. 555–56)

The danger is real. Should the reader's interest wane and he cease to listen, the whole narrative exchange upon which Diderot has constructed his novel would collapse. Reading that is too patient fails to engage the text and interact with it.

The difference between reading and writing and thus between the characters who incarnate each activity is perhaps best evoked when Jacques finally reaches the climax of his amorous relationship with Denise. He begins to caress her. The *maître*, always impatient to get to the end of a story, demands a recounting that is swift and linear, one that goes directly to the point:

—Quand on est arrivé au genou, il y a peu de chemin à faire. (p. 773)

But Jacques will not be rushed, either in his lovemaking or in his narrative delights. Awaiting some unexpected twists in this fatalistic plot, Jacques replies:

—Mon maître, Denise avait la cuisse plus longue qu'une autre. (p. 774)

It is true that Denise's thigh is unusually long: Jacques will never reach "the" climax of his story or his lovemaking because there is not one ending but three, as we have already seen, and that incredible extension will prolong Jacques's *plaisir du texte* beyond all normal bounds. As Robert Mauzi comments, Jacques "sait que le vrai plaisir du récit est de savourer l'attente et de ne pas savoir trop tôt" (p. 116).

As I have tried to illustrate, in the course of their many confrontations the narrator loses his despotic, fatalistic authority over the text while the *lecteur's* role as partner in fashioning the narrative grows. Through the latter's aggressive interventions, Diderot suggests that reading is not passively accepting a predetermined signification; on the contrary, it means the active working out of a text's meaning. The narrator invites his *lecteur*

to make choices, to transform the raw materials of the story line into a finished product. What matters most is the co-operation of the reader in and with the text. The narrator alone is not sufficient; he requires the collusion of his partner and accomplice, the *lecteur*, in an ongoing and never finished process.

Occupying a privileged position throughout the novel, the narrative enunciation is a binary exchange. As the twin act of reading and writing shuttles back and forth between its two poles, the *lecteur* acquires a more obvious and active role in the development of the text through his antagonistic co-operation with the narrator.

Je vois, lecteur, que cela vous fâche; eh bien, reprenez son récit où il l'a laissé, et continuez-le à votre fantaisie. (p. 777)

In the overall narrative economy the narrator enumerates while the *lecteur* chooses:

Il y a deux versions sur ce qui suivit. [...] De ces deux versions, demain, après-demain, vous choisirez, à tête reposée, celle qui vous conviendra le mieux. (p. 653)

Each act is essential although vitally different in the elaboration of the whole. To the narrator's fatalistic task of presenting only those unvariable episodes printed on the page before us, the *lecteur* evokes the liberating possibility that something—anything—else might happen. What is at stake in this depiction of reading and writing is nothing less than a conflict between philosophical determinism and narrative freedom.¹³ Everything that the novel does not contain is remembered in the *lecteur*'s persistent questionings, in his unflagging attempts to delay the remorseless plot line and to include in the final narrative some of the many other possibilities that have, necessarily, been excluded. To the narrator's fatalistic determination to tell one single story through to the end, the *lecteur* exercises his freedom to intrude, to question, and to suggest untold and undetermined alternatives.

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13 Pierre Saint-Armand, "Jacques le fataliste ou Jacques le parasite," *Stanford French Review* 11 (Spring 1987), 109.