Reason, Fools and Rameau's Nephew

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In the autumn of 1993, I found myself called upon to give the concluding address to a conference in Stockholm—jointly sponsored by the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden, the Royal Institute of Technology, and the Swedish Center for Working Life—entitled: "Skill and Technology: on Diderot, Education and the Third Culture". One focus of the conference was Diderot's Dialogue, *Rameau's Nephew*, my appreciation of which has, I hope, been properly enhanced as a result of having sat through not only a dramatisation of it in German but also an operatic version, by a Finnish composer, with a Swedish libretto.

Nobody knows for sure whether or not Denis Diderot had a conversation with Jean-François Rameau, nephew of the composer, in the Café de la Régence in Paris, in April 1761. Nor does it matter. Diderot certainly wrote the first draft of the Dialogue in that year, reworking it in 1773, 1778 and 1782, the year before he died. The history of this short text (less than seventy pages in the Flammarion edition) is so extraordinary that one almost suspects Diderot himself of having somehow arranged it.

Although it has been described as "the very centre of his writing"[1] and has provoked a still burgeoning library of commentary and interpretation, the Dialogue was never published or referred to by Diderot in his lifetime, and it first saw the light of day in a German translation, done by an admiring Goethe from a French manuscript which he had been lent by Schiller, who seems to have obtained it from a German officer in St Petersburg. Goethe's translation appeared in 1805.

It exerted considerable influence on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (the first of the two passages on which I shall comment later in this article seems, for example, to have helped shape the dialectic of lordship and bondage) and it first appeared in French in a translation back from Goethe's German—Diderot's own carefully prepared manuscript only being discovered, quite by chance, in a second-hand bookshop in Paris, in 1891. (In 1865, incidentally, Karl Marx told his

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daughter that Diderot was his favourite prose writer and, in 1869, he sent a copy of *Rameau's Nephew* to Engels.[2])

Rameau's Nephew is a conversation between two characters: "Moi", a *philosophe*, a sober spokesman for Enlightenment virtues and values, a person of endless curiosity but somewhat conventional imagination, and "Lui", the nephew, a more or less professional sycophant, hanger-on, procurer, resident buffoon in the household of M. Bertin—which was a centre of opposition to Diderot and the Encyclopedists. (Perhaps we should say that Lui *had* been resident buffoon in the Bertin ménage because, as we discover in the course of the conversation, he has recently been thrown out after insulting—which is to say, obscenely speaking the truth to—a priest, a fellow-guest at Bertin's table.)

Lui, the individualist, the amoralist, the anarchist, in restless quest of recognition as a "genius", while despising the disruptive egotism characteristic of genius in its conventional forms, is a musician of real, if modest, talent. And yet, he *is* a genius, not only as a social parasite but also—as Diderot's text displays far more eloquently than any utterance could do—as a mime artist, a conjurer of wordless evocations not only of the social world but of the natural, unreasoning world as well.

From a literary point of view, these mimes are heart and centre of the text (and, incidentally, the best reason why dramatisations of the Dialogue are doomed to failure). Interrupting, unavoidably, the dialogue form, they are described, by Moi, in passages of such brilliance as to set question-marks against the exactness of any *philosophe's* scientific ordering of things - for does not Lui depict the world, in wordless gesture, more accurately and eloquently than any fruit of all Moi's erudition could do? - and yet, it is Moi's pen that sets down in words this physical description. We shall return to this.

"Moi" and "Lui" are usually translated "I" and "He". I prefer to render them as "Me" and "He" (or "Him"), which seems at least to hint at something other than complete identity between the author of the text and *each* of his two acting subjects. This is important, because it is a great mistake to suppose that "Me" is simply Diderot and "He" just someone else, an other. It is not for nothing that the *philosophe* comes across, not unsympathetically, but somewhat drably, while all the colour and panache, vitality and danger, emanate from He. Yet, lest we turn sentimental, and grow too fond of this amoral and subversive layabout, the dialogue ends with He's chilling description of how he put his wife out "on the game". And we know, reading this, as Diderot knew when he wrote it, that the real-life Rameau's wife died, in

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childbirth, in the early summer of 1761.

So much for preliminaries. *Rameau's Nephew* raises, to my mind, two distinct, but by no means unconnected, sets of issues. The first concerns the connotations of "reason": of rationality, knowledge, wisdom, and related notions. For the second we might formulate the principle: in order to ascertain what is of most interest, theologically, in the work of the great atheists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, pay little or no attention to what they have to say about "religion". Concentrate, instead, on what they have to say about the things which matter to them most, and on the way in which they say it.[3]

At least in academic circles, we speak more easily, these days, of "reason", and of "rationality", than we do of "wisdom". Not that we have lost all sense of connection between these two clusters of ideas. People may reason well or badly but, when we describe someone's behaviour as "unreasonable", or "irrational", we are usually implying something more like folly than a weak grasp upon the rules of inference.

With what, in different contexts, then, do we contrast "reason"? With whimsy, perhaps, or feeling; with faith, quite often, and, on occasion, with insanity. (The concatenated associations are, or should be, quite disturbing.)

"It is clearly manifest that history, poetry, and philosophy flow from the three distinct fountains of the mind, viz., the memory, the imagination, and the reason; without any possibility of increasing their number. For history and experience are one and the same thing; so are philosophy and the sciences".[4] Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* was first published in 1605. Although we still tend, as Bacon did, sharply to distinguish "science" from "history", and "experience" from "philosophy", our reasons for doing so are rather different from his. They no longer, for example, rest upon an assumed disjunction between memory and argument (not, at least, if we have learnt anything from what is known as "hermeneutics").

Bacon's world, the world of early Stuart England, is very different from that, a century and a half later, of the Encyclopedists' Paris. Yet one of the surprising things about Diderot's Prospectus for the Encyclopedia (published in 1750) is the extent to which he took over—lock, stock, and almost barrel—Bacon's scheme of things.

(To show this I have, in Table A, set out the elements of Bacon's table of Contents on the pattern of Diderot's *Système Figuré des Conoissances* [sic!] *Humaines*, which appears as Table B. One difference between them, as Furbank remarks, is that whereas Bacon excluded what we might call *sacra doctrina* from his scheme, Diderot

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incorporated *all* of theology within "philosophy", the field of "reason".[5])

The sustained dissociation, in both schemes, of argument from memory, of "reason" from "experience", sets reason's quest, the quest for ordering and ordered sanity or wisdom, freewheeling in the void. Reason, order, the enlightened mind, thus senses itself vulnerable to *dis*order, chaos, madness. There may have been, in Diderot, an effervescent optimism, a boundless sense of possibility; but if, as seems to be agreed, there was no room for the tragic vision in his scheme of things, neither do we find there the kind of smugness, the cocky self-assurance, that some other forms of "rationalism" exhibit.

Thus, if one of the things that I would emphasise is the apparently spontaneous and untroubled way in which the Baconian disjunction of argument from memory, of "reason" from "experience", is carried forward into the very heart of French Enlightenment, another would be the recognition, in Diderot's case if not in that of his contemporaries, of the consequent *vulnerability* of "reason".

It is, moreover, worth remarking that, notwithstanding Diderot's strategic differentiation between reason, memory and imagination, he is almost Wittgensteinian in his insistence on the *diversity* of reason, on the many different guises reason has. Thus, with characteristic disregard for the apparent inconsistency, his identification of reason with but one of what Bacon called "the three distinct fountains of the mind" exists in counterpoint to a more general sense of reason as specifying that which differentiates human from nonhuman nature, while yet doing so in such a manner as to suggest, ironically, that truly human, truly reasonable, human reason is really very rare.

"Haven't you noticed", he wrote to a friend in 1773, "that the diversity of that prerogative, which we call 'reason', is so great that, on its own, it corresponds to the full range of animal instincts?"[6]. And he runs through a list: the human wolf, the human tiger, human fox; the pike, devouring everything; the snake, self-coiled in a hundred ways; the bear, the crow, and so on. Nothing, he says, is more rare than the man who is simply human through and through: "Rien de plus rare qu'un homme qui soit homme de toute pièce'

The King's Fool

HIM: There is no better part to play, with the great ones of this world, than that of fool. There once used to be an official King's Fool, but there has never been an official King's Wise Man. I'm Bertin's fool, and fool to many others: yours, perhaps, at this moment; or, perhaps, you're mine. A really wise person wouldn't have a fool. So anyone who has a fool isn't wise; and, if he isn't wise, he's a fool; and, perhaps, if he's a king, his own fool's fool.[8]

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On this, the first of two brief passages that I have chosen to illustrate my reading of the Dialogue, there are four things to be said. In the first place, there are advantages, in these matters, in working with a text first written in a foreign tongue. It keeps us on our toes. Thus, for example, "fool" is a sound enough translation of "fou". But how different would be the sense if, instead, we rendered "fou" as "clown", or "jester", "idiot", or "madman" (from many points of view, equally plausible translations)?

Secondly, notice that the *sense* of "wisdom" (and hence, of "reason", of "philosophy", and of much else besides) is, as it were, counter-defined, delimited, or called in question, by the sense of folly or unreason rather than the other way round.

At the beginning of the Dialogue, this is not yet clear: "Come rain or shine, my custom is to go for a stroll in the Palais-Royal every afternoon at about five. ... I hold discussions with myself on politics, love, taste or philosophy, and let my thoughts wander in complete abandon, leaving them free to follow the first wise or foolish idea that comes along".[9] Almost the first hint of danger comes when the nephew exclaims: "You know, of course, that I am an ignoramus, a fool, a lunatic, rude, lazy ... an out and out shirker, a rogue, a gormandizer".[10]

How should we decode this seeming self-abnegation? The nephew knows (it seems) that he is a fool. But, knowing that, he's wise. And what of us? The question must be asked, because the phrase: "yours, perhaps, at this moment; or, perhaps, you're mine" is one of a handful of places in the Dialogue in which the reader is alerted to the uneasy recognition that it is *me*, the reader—and not a character *called* "Me"—who is being addressed!

In the third place, it is worth noting the line of reading that runs, through Hegel and Marx, to Michel Foucault. Foucault devoted the Preface to the Third Part of his History of Madness to a discussion of *Rameau's Nephew*. His comment on our text: "and so unreason becomes reason's reason - at least insofar as reason only knows itself as possession"[11] reminds us of the young Marx: "Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it".[12]

Finally, notice that there is at least a hint (even though we are reading Diderot) that the "fool" performs, if not messianic, then at least prophetic functions. Thus, at the beginning of the Dialogue, the nephew is introduced as one of those eccentrics, on the margins of society, who, when "one of them appears in a company of people he is the speck of yeast that leavens the whole [c'est un grain de levain qui fermente] and restores to each of us a portion of his natural individuality. He stirs

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people up and gives them a shaking, makes them take sides, brings out the truth, shows who are really good and unmasks the villains. It is then that the [man of good sense] listens and sorts people out''.[13]

Foucault's comment on this passage, with its echo of I Corinthians 5:6, is that folly, unwisdom, unreason, is thus charged with making truth's way in the world. Of course, the wise ones of this world, insofar as they discern the truth that folly speaks, have their own way of neutralising it. As He says (and Foucault picks this up): "If we" (outsiders, layabouts, the unrespectable) "say something good it is just by accident, like lunatics or visionaries".[14]

The Sound of Silence

But you would have gone off into roars of laughter at the way he mimicked the various instruments. With cheeks puffed out and a hoarse, dark tone he did the horns and bassoons, a bright, nasal tone for the oboes, quickening his voice with incredible agility for the stringed instruments to which he tried to get the closest approximation; he whistled the recorders and cooed the flutes, shouting, singing and throwing himself about like a mad thing: a one-man show featuring dancers, male and female, singers of both sexes, a whole orchestra, a complete opera-house, dividing himself into twenty different stage parts, tearing up and down, stopping, like one possessed, with flashing eyes and foaming mouth. The weather was terribly hot, and the sweat running down the furrows of his brow and cheeks mingled with the powder from his hair and ran in streaks down the top of his coat. What didn't he do? He wept, laughed, sighed, his gaze was tender, soft or furious: a woman swooning with grief, a poor wretch abandoned in the depth of his despair, a temple rising into view, birds falling silent at eventide, waters murmuring in a cool, solitary place or tumbling in torrents down the mountain side, a thunderstorm, a hurricane, the shrieks of the dying mingling with the howling of the tempest and the crash of thunder; night with its shadows, darkness and silence, for even silence itself can be depicted in sound.[15]

I know at least one distinguished *diderotien* who considers this the most beautiful passage in the Dialogue. Perhaps, therefore, the less heavy-footed comment it receives from me, the better. There are just two features of it to which I would draw attention.

In the first place, as I indicated earlier, the paradox of Diderot's brilliant *literary* rendering, through this description, of He's *wordless* evocations of the world, goes to the heart of the philosophy of this most anti-Cartesian of spokesmen for "Enlightenment".[16] The paradox is pushed as far as it will go: Diderot writes so brilliantly that, reading his

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text, we think we can imagine what is being described, but how, might one suppose, did He succeed in giving *physical* expression to birdsong ceasing at the setting sun, to temples rising into view, and so on?

In the second place, what *kind* of "night" is it, "with its shadows, darkness and silence", that can be depicted in this fool's pantomime? Can we *name* the silence which the fool, in his antic wisdom, *shows*? There are, of course, many different ways in which such questions might be answered. But any answer worth our serious consideration would surely stand just as far from glib, supposedly quite clear and "rational" apologies for what the early modern world decided to call "theism" as it would from the easy, careless, tap-room atheism in which (like our contemporaries) so many of Diderot's friends and colleagues tended to indulge.

Foucault was, like Diderot, I think, a *serious* atheist. Commenting on the darkness of that "night with its shadows", he speaks of the "vertigo" of reason's self-unravelling, in which the truth of the world is only sustained as the interior of an absolute void, the absence of all shape and meaning.[17]

Rameau's Nephew ends enigmatically. He is off to the opera: "What's on?" "Something of Dauvergne's. There are some quite nice things in his music; the pity of it is that he wasn't the first to write them. There are always some of the dead who plague the living. Can't be helped. ... Good-bye, Mr Philosopher. Isn't it true that I am always the same?" "Alas, yes, unfortunately." "So long as I have that misfortune for another forty years! He laughs best who laughs last".[18]

The nephew's parting laughter, as Foucault heard it, is not hilarity, but a kind of cry. Unreason remains, ironically, solitary: its suffering is the sadness of a hunger whose depths cannot be plumbed.[19] Foucault, it seems to me, rightly picks up the difference between the laughter at the end, the laughter into darkness, and the "roars of laughter" which the mime initially provoked. And, in that difference, in the contrast of those cries, the pantomime, fool's genius, lacking all complacency, has something of the character of a *De Profundis*.

1 Peter France, *Diderot* (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 75.

2 See P.N.Furbank, *Diderot. A Critical Biography* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1992), p. 467.

3 I tried to keep this principle in mind, some years ago, when writing a book about Karl Marx. See Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope. A Theologian's Reflections on the Thought of Karl Marx* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981).

4 Francis Bacon, "First Part of the Great Instauration. The Dignity and Advancement of Learning, in Nine Books", Bk II, Chapter I, in Joseph Devey, ed., *The Physical and Metaphysical Works of Lord Bacon* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1864), p. 78.

5 See Furbank, *Diderot*, p. 37. I have greatly simplified Diderot's scheme, which is

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reproduced in full on Furbank, p. 77.

6 See Jean-Claude Bonnet, ed., *Diderot. Le Neveu de Rameau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1983), p. 163.

7 Loc. cit.

8 I have risked my own translation of the passage, because Leonard Tancock's, in the Penguin Classics edition, has "jester" for "fool", which loses the implicit contrast between folly and reason. See Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew and d'Alembert's Dream*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin, 1966),p.83.

"LUI: Il n'y a point de meilleur rôle auprès des grands que celui de fou. Longtemps il y a eu le fou du roi en titre; en aucun, il n'y a eu en titre le sage du roi. Moi je suis le fou de Bertin et de beaucoup d'autres, le vôtre peut-être dans ce moment; ou peut-être vous, le mien. Celui qui serait sage n'aurait point de fou. Celui donc qui a un fou n'est pas sage; s'il n'est pas sage, il est fou; et peut-être, fût-il roi, le fou de son fou" (Bonnet, op. cit., p. 91).

9 Tancock, p. 33.

10 Ibid., p. 45.

11 Michel Foucault, *Folie et Déraison. Histoire de la Folie à l'Age* Classique (Paris: Plon, 1961), p. 417.

12 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts", *Early Writings*, introd. Lucio Colletti, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 351. See Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, p. 89.

13 *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 40. I have rendered "l'homme de bon sens" (Bonnet, p. 47) as "man of good sense" in preference to Tancock's "wise man" (p. 35).

14 *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 40. "Si nous disons quelque chose de bien, c'est comme des fous, ou des inspirés; par hasard" (Bonnet, p. 52). The text used by Foucault, interestingly, has "philosophes" for "inspirés" (see Foucault, *Folie et Déraison*, p. 419).

15 *Rameau's Nephew*, pp. 103-104. The literary quality of the passage is so central to the argument that I give the French text of the closing lines: "Que ne lui vis-je pas faire? Il pleurait, il riait, il soupirait; il regardait, ou attendri, ou tranquille, ou furieux; c'était une femme qui se pâme de douleur; c'était un malheureux livré à tout son désespoir; un temple qui s'élève; des oiseaux qui se taisent au soleil couchant; des eaux ou qui murmurent dans un lieu solitaire et frais, ou qui descendent en torrent du haut des montagnes; un orage; une tempête, la plainte de ceux qui vont périr, mêlée au sifflement des vents, au fracas du tonnerre; c'était la nuit, avec ses ténèbres; c'était l'ombre et le silence; car le silence même se peint par des sons" (Bonnet, p. 110).

16 According to Foucault, *Rameau's Nephew* offers us, "au milieu du xviiie siècle, et bien avant que ne soit totalement entendue la parole de Descartes, une leçon bien plus anticartésienne que tout Locke, tout Voltaire ou tout Hume" (op. cit., p. 421).

17 "Ce vertige, où la vérité du monde ne se maintient qu'à l'intérieur d'un vide absolu" (Ibid., p. 423).

18 *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 125; "Rira bien qui rira le dernier" (Bonnet, p. 130).

19 "Le délire reste ironiquement seul: la souffrance de la faim reste insondable douleur" (Foucault, op. cit., p. 424).

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TABLE A

LEARNING

MEMORY

- HISTORY
  - Civil
    - Ecclesiastical
      - General History of the Church
      - History of Prophecy
      - History of Providence
    - Civil
      - Memoirs
      - Antiquities
      - Perfect History
  - Natural
    - Generations
      - H. of the Heavens
      - History of Meteors
      - H. of Earth and Sea
      - H. of Massive or Collective Bodies
      - History of Species
    - Praeter-generations
      - Monsters
    - Arts
      - Agricultural
      - Manual
      - Mechanical

REASON

- PHILOSOPHY
  - God
    - Natural Theology
    - Metaphysics
      - of Final Causes
      - of Form
  - Natural (Speculative)
    - Physics (Efficient Causes & Matter)
      - Sciences of the Principles of Things
      - Sciences of the Structure of Things
      - Sciences of the Variety of Things
  - Natural (Practical)
    - Magic (Experimental Philosophy)
    - Mechanics
  - Man
    - Human
      - Body (Medicinal, Cosmetic, Athletic & Voluptuary Arts)
      - Soul (Inspired Essence, & Sensible or Produced Soul)
    - Civil
      - Art of Conversation
      - Art of Negotiation
      - Art of State Policy

IMAGINATION

- POETRY
  - Narrative
  - Dramatic
  - Parabolic

Any one *will easily perceive the justness of this division that* recurs to the origin of our ideas. Individuals first strike the sense, which is as it were the port or entrance of the understanding. Then the understanding ruminates upon these images or impressions received from the sense, either simply reviewing them, or wantonly counterfeiting and imitating them, or forming them into certain classes by composition or separation. Thus it is clearly manifest that history, poetry, and philosophy flow from *the three distinct fountains* of the mind, viz., the memory, the imagination, and the reason; without any possibility of increasing their number. For history and experience are one and the same thing; so are *philosophy and the sciences*.

Nor does divine learning require any other division; for though revelation and sense may differ both in matter and manner, yet the spirit of man and its cells are the same; and in this case receive, as it were, different liquors through different conduits. Theology, therefore, consists - 1. of sacred history; 2. parable, or divine poesy; and 3. of holy doctrine or precept, as its fixed philosophy. As for prophecy, which seems a part redundant, it is no more than a species of history; divine history having this prerogative over human, that the narration may precede, as well as succeed the fact. (Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, 1605, Book II, Chapter 1)

Having now, excellent king, with our small bark of knowledge, sailed over and *surrounded* the globe of the sciences, as well the old world as the new (let posterity judge with what success), we should pay our vows and conclude; did there not still remain another part to be viewed; viz., sacred or inspired theology. But if we were disposed to survey it, *we must quit* the small vessel of human reason, and put ourselves on board the ship of the Church, which alone possesses the divine needle for justly shaping the course. Nor will the stars of philosophy, that have hitherto principally lent their light, be of farther service to us; and, *therefore*, it were not improper to be silent, also, upon this subject, as well as upon that of government. For which reason, we will omit the just distribution of it, and only contribute ... a few particulars in the way of good wishes.... We shall, therefore, only propose *three appendages* of theology; treating not of the matter already formed, or to be formed by divinity, but only of the manner of forming it.

...For if we should believe only such things as are agreeable to our reason, we assent to the matter, and not to the author: which is no more than we do to a suspected witness....And, therefore, the more absurd and incredible any divine mystery is, the greater honour we do to God in believing it; and so much the more noble the victory of faith...

... Let us, therefore, conclude, that sacred theology must be drawn from the word and oracles of God; not from the light of nature, or the dictates of reason (Book IX)

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TABLE B

Système Figuré des Connoissances Humaines

ENTENDEMENT

MEMOIRE				RAISON				IMAGINATION		
HISTOIRE	Sacrée Ecclésiastique			PHILOSOPHIE	Métaphysique générale ou ontologie			POESIE	Narrative	Poème epique, Madrigal, Roman.
	Civile	Histoire Civile	Mémoires, Antiquités, Histoire Complète		Science de Dieu	Théologie Naturelle, Théologie Révélée, Science des esprits bien et malfaisants			Dramatique	Tragédie, Comédie, Opéra, Pastorales
		Histoire Litt.							Parabolique	Allégories
	Naturelle	Uniformité de la nature	Histoire céleste		Science de l'homme	Pneumatologie ou science de l'âme				
			Histoire des Météores de la terre, de la mer, des minéraux, des végétaux, des animaux, des éléments			Logique	Art de penser, Art de retenir, Art de Communiquer			
		Ecarts de la nature	Prodiges célestes, Météores Prodigieux, Prodiges sur la terre et la mer, Minéraux monstrueux, Végétaux monstrueux, Animaux monstrueux, Prodiges des éléments			Morale	Générale, Particulière			
		Usages de la nature	Arts, Métiers, Manufactures		Science de la nature	Métaphysique des corps ou physique générale				
						Mathématiques	Pures, Mixtes, Physicomathématique			
						Physique particulière	Zoologie, Astronomie physique, Météorologie, Cosmologie, Botanique, Minéralogie, Chimie			

For the vast field that Diderot and d'Alembert were to deal with, a "'tree of knowledge' based, like Buffon's, upon *things* (i.e. upon the *objects* of knowledge) seemed to them totally impracticable; thus they opted instead, as Francis Bacon before them, for a system based upon human faculties (that is to say, on the *sources* of knowledge). Of these faculties, *memory, reason* and *imagination* were to be regarded as the most fundamental, and to them would correspond the three great branches of knowledge, History, Philosophy and Poetry, with their various subdivisions - the whole ramification being eventually set out in Diderot's *Prospectus* in the form of an elaborate chart or 'Illustrated System of Human Knowledge'. The 'tree' adopted was fairly close to Bacon's in *The Advancement of Learning*, but differed from it, significantly, in treating revealed religion as a mere branch of 'philosophy'" (Furbank, *Diderot*, pp. 36-37).

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