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Schmidt, James. "The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 57:4, pp. 625-644. (1996)

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/2411>

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The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel

James Schmidt

I. Of the many works that crossed from France into Germany during the “long” eighteenth century, none took as circuitous a route as *Rameau's Nephew*. Begun by Diderot in 1761 but never published during his lifetime, the dialogue was among the works sent to Catherine the Great after his death in 1784. A copy of the manuscript was brought to Jena late in 1804, where it was read by Schiller and passed on to Goethe, who immediately set about translating it into German. Goethe's translation was published in the Spring of 1805 but, as Goethe later complained, made little impact on the German reading public.¹ There was, however, one notable exception: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Hegel's interpretation of Diderot's dialogue in his 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* has long been an topic of considerable interest. Marxists—and, for that matter, Marx himself—have regarded the *Phenomenology's* discussion of Diderot as illustrative of Hegel's interest in the social and economic foundations of modern society.² For Lionel Trilling, it marked an important step in the genesis of the modern ideal of “authenticity.”³ More recently, the tensions between Diderot's “dialogizing” of the Enlightenment and the

¹ For the early publishing history of *Rameau's Nephew*, see Roland Mortier, *Diderot en Allemagne (1750-1850)* (Paris, 1954), 254-63; for Goethe's complaint see “Nachträgliches zu Rameaus Neffe” in *Goethes Werke* (36 vols.; Stuttgart, 1866-68), XXV, 290, and 269-96.

² Marx to Engels, 15 April 1869. Later Marxian critics include Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (London, 1975), 495-97; Henri Mougín, “Hegel et le Neveu de Rameau,” *Europe*, 24 (1946), 1-11; Gottfried Stiehler, “‘Rameau's Neffe’ und die ‘Phänomenologie des Geistes’ von Hegel,” *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin: Gesellschafts- und sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe*, 13 (1964), 163-67; and Marie-Jeanne Königson, “Hegel, Adam Smith, et Diderot,” *Hegel et le Siècle des Lumières*, ed. Jacques D'Hondt (Paris, 1974), 51-70.

³ *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 26-52; cf. E. J. Hundert, “A Satire of Self-Disclosure: From Hegel Through Rameau to the Augustans,” *JHI*, 47 (1986), 235-48.

Hegelian dialectic have been explored by a number of commentators.⁴ Less attention, however, has been paid to the fact that the words Hegel appropriated were not, strictly speaking, Diderot's, but rather came from Goethe's translation.⁵ Before *Rameau's Nephew* could appear in the pages of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, it first passed into German in a translation that, no less than Hegel, inserted the text into a rather different context from the one in which it had originated.

A consideration of Hegel's appropriation of *Rameau's Nephew* thus involves us in questions about the transporting, translating, and transposing of works across borders, languages, and genres. I will begin by examining briefly how Goethe went about presenting an eighteenth century French text to a nineteenth-century German audience. I will then explore, at greater length, how Hegel went about situating this most peculiar of dialogues into his most baffling of books. Finally, I will reflect on some of the tensions between what Diderot wrote and what Hegel attempted to do with it.

II. "Now, think of a city like Paris," Goethe told Eckermann, bemoaning the "isolated, miserable sort of life" to which German intellectuals had been condemned. In Paris one could find "all of the leading minds of a great kingdom all together at the same spot, mutually instructing and advancing one another through daily contact, conflict, and rivalry." The leading German intellectuals, in contrast, were scattered about: "There is one in Vienna, another in Berlin, another in Königsberg, another in Bonn or Düsseldorf, all fifty to a hundred miles away from each other, so that personal contact and personal exchange of ideas count as rare events." In Paris "the best from the realms of nature and art from throughout the world lies open for daily inspection," while "every passage over a bridge or a square recalls a mighty past" and "every street corner has evolved into a piece of history." It was a city where "men such as Molière, Voltaire, Diderot, and the like have kept up a current of intellect such as has not been found in a single spot anywhere else in the entire world."⁶ Weimar, quite clearly, was not Paris.

Rameau's Nephew was so thoroughly a creature of Paris that the mere thought of rendering it into German might have dismayed a weaker soul than Goethe. *Moi* and *Lui* begin a conversation at the Café de la Régence that will

⁴ Hans Robert Jauss, "The Dialogical and the Dialectical *Neveu de Rameau*; or, The Reciprocity between Diderot and Socrates, Hegel and Diderot" in *Question and Answer: Forms of Dialogic Understanding*, tr. Michael Hays (Minneapolis, 1989), 118-47; James Hulbert, "Diderot in the Text of Hegel: A Question of Intertextuality," *Studies in Romanticism*, 22 (1983), 267-91; David W. Price, "Hegel's Intertextual Dialectic: Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*," *Clio*, 20 (1991), 223-33; and Suzanne Gearhart, *The Interrupted Dialectic: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and their Tragic Other* (Baltimore, 1992), 157-81.

⁵ See Price, 226, for an exception to this generalization.

⁶ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe* (Zurich, 1948), 628-29 (conversation of 3 May 1827).

lead them from discussions of the contest between French and Italian styles in music to a consideration of the prospects for human autonomy. In between they will pass over such matters as the social utility of geniuses, the tension between aesthetics and morality, the proper upbringing of children, and the structure of social dependency, pausing from time to time as *Lui* loses himself in increasingly wilder pantomimes. Along the way the two will drop a host of names of contemporaries, some famous, some infamous, and a few quite obscure.

For Goethe any understanding of *Rameau's Nephew* had to start by making sense of the context in which the work first appeared; and for him this meant seeing the book as Diderot's response to the opponents of the *Encyclopedie*. He appended to his translation, as an aid to the reader, a series of brief notes on individuals and subjects mentioned in the text, which—in an unintentional homage to Diderot's great *machine de guerre*—followed one another in alphabetical order. The bulk of these notes consist of brief sketches of the leading philosophes (“d’Alembert,” “Montesquieu,” “Voltaire”), their opponents (“Palissot,” “Poinsinet,” “Fréron”), and prominent figures in theater and music (“Dorat,” “Duni,” “Lully,” “Rameau”). Goethe also included a discussion of “The *Philosophes*”—Palissot’s 1760 comedy ridiculing the Encyclopedists—and followed it with a translation of Voltaire’s letter to Palissot defending the philosophes.⁷ The entry “Taste” discussed differences between French and German poetry and speculated on the relationship of “taste” and “genius,” while “Music” explained the contest between French and Italian musical styles in eighteenth-century Paris, concluding that French art during this period was “mannered in a way that is almost unbelievable to us and divorced from all authentic artistic truth and simplicity.”⁸ But the most important of the notes for understanding how Goethe approached the work he translated is the one entitled, appropriately enough, “Rameau’s Nephew.”

Since the note is nestled between “Rameau” and “Tencin (Madame de),” the reader might well expect that it would discuss the life and career of Jean-François Rameau, lapsed seminarian, unsuccessful composer, impoverished harpsichord teacher, loud-mouthed wit, and social parasite.⁹ This is not the case. Indeed, at the time of Goethe’s translation, Jean-Philippe Rameau’s odd relation had lapsed into such utter obscurity that Schiller assumed he was a fiction created by Diderot.¹⁰ Goethe’s note instead is devoted to a discus-

⁷ Goethe had seen the play as a child; see *The Autobiography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, tr. John Oxenford (2 vols.; Chicago, 1974), I, 96.

⁸ See Goethe’s notes to his translation of *Rameaus Neffe*, in *Goethes Werke*, XXV, 268.

⁹ See Milton F. Seiden, “Jean-François Rameau and Diderot’s *Nevue*,” *Diderot Studies*, I (1949), 143-91.

¹⁰ Schiller’s letter to Körner described the work as “ein Gespräch welches der (fingirte) Neffe des Musicus Rameau mit Diderot führt,” *Schillers Briefwechsel mit Körner* (4 vols.; Leipzig, 1847), IV, 484. Seiden, 186, notes that the Assézat-Tourneux edition of Diderot’s *Oeuvres* mistranslates the letter so that “fingirte” modifies

sion of Diderot's book itself and to its role in the conflict between the philosophes and their enemies. Diderot, Goethe wrote,

uses all the powers of his mind to depict the flatterers and parasites in the full extent of their depravity, in no way sparing their patrons. At the same time the author is concerned to classify his literary enemies as precisely the same kind of hypocrites and flatterers.

In what Goethe regarded as a masterstroke, Diderot combined this portrait of his enemies with a discussion of controversies surrounding French music, thus imparting a "consistency and dignity" to the work that it might otherwise have lacked.

for while in the person of Rameau's nephew a decidedly dependent nature, capable under outside stimulus of every evil, is expressed, and thus arouses our scorn and even our hate, yet these feeling are mitigated because he is manifested as a not entirely talentless, fantastical-practical musician.

Diderot thus managed to create a figure who epitomized the "entire species" of "flatterers and toadies" but nevertheless appeared as "an individually characterized being."¹¹

For Goethe the Nephew was the creature of a particular culture. While the German, he argued, can live happily in isolation from others, the Frenchman "is a social man, and he lives and exists, he stands and falls in society."¹² And the society in which he stands and falls is singularly incapable of judging the talents of individuals. Disputes over artistic merit invariably degenerate into attacks on an opponent's moral failings, which in Goethe's eyes is to lose sight of what ought to be at issue. While one's wife or children and one's fellow-citizens or superiors may be able to judge the moral worth of one's actions, one's morality is not properly a concern of society at large. Morality (*Sittlichkeit*) involves demands that individuals make upon themselves, and the question of how well an individual lives up to these demands must be judged by God and by the individual's own heart. Society makes claims on the individual only in his role "as a man of ability, activity, intellect, and talent."¹³ Thus what is ultimately at issue in the dispute

"Gespräch" rather than "Neffe," thus giving the impression that Schiller thought that the dialogue, and not the Nephew, was imaginary. For Goethe's discussion of doubts about the Nephew's existence, which were not put to rest until the 1820s, see his "Nachträgliches zu Rameaus Neffe," in *Rameaus Neffe*, 296-99.

¹¹ Goethe, *Rameaus Neffe*, 282-83

¹² *Ibid.*, 254.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 285.

between Palissot and Diderot is a fundamental disagreement about the social relevance of morality, and it is this that Goethe sees as animating *Rameau's Nephew*. Palissot attacks the philosophes for their moral failings, while *Rameau's Nephew* portrays the social depravity of the clique that stood behind Palissot's *Les Philosophes*.¹⁴

III. Goethe's translation of *Rameau's Nephew* was published in May 1805. Less than a year later, Hegel began work on second half of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, into which he inserted three quotations from Goethe's translation.¹⁵ To insert *Rameau's Nephew* into the *Phenomenology* is to wrap a riddle in an enigma. For if *Rameau's Nephew* is a frequently puzzling book, the difficulties of the *Phenomenology* are legendary. It has annoyed generations of readers, beginning with its own author. In a letter written to Schelling shortly after its publication Hegel bemoaned the "wretched confusion" that had reigned during the writing, publishing, printing, and distribution of the book and begged forgiveness for the "want of form in the last sections" of the work.¹⁶ Into the midst of this confusion Hegel dropped Rameau's eccentric nephew.

The Nephew appears in Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology*, the point where the book significantly expands its focus. The first five chapters of the *Phenomenology* are concerned with "shapes of consciousness" (*Gestalten des Bewußtseins*), examining relationships between consciousness and the world that range from primitive attempts to designate the "here" and the "now" to reason's attempts to observe the laws of nature and postulate moral laws. But with Chapter VI—"Geist"—the *Phenomenology* moves beyond the reconstruction of the stages through which an individual subject passes upon engaging in systematic self-reflection and considers "real Spirits, actualities in the strict meaning of the word" which "instead of being shapes merely of consciousness, are shapes of a world" (*Gestalten einer Welt*).¹⁷

Chapter VI surveys three such "worlds": "The True Spirit. Ethical Life" (*Der wahre Geist. Die Sittlichkeit*), "The Self-Estranged Spirit. Culture" (*Der sich entfremdete Geist. Die Bildung*), and "The Self-Certain Spirit. Morality" (*Der seiner selbst gewisse Geist. Die Moralität*). The account of *Sittlichkeit* deals with the Greek polis, the account of *Bildung* embraces European culture from the rise of absolutist state, through the Enlightenment, to the French Revolution, while the discussion of *Moralität*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 286

¹⁵ For a chronology of Hegel's work on the *Phenomenology* see the editors' note to Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede in Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg, 1980), IX, 461-63.

¹⁶ Letter to Schelling of 1 May 1807, in Hegel, *Briefe von und an Hegel* (4 vols.; Hamburg, 1952-60), I, 161-62.

¹⁷ Hegel, *Werke* (20 vols.; Frankfurt, 1970), III, 326 (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller [Oxford, 1977], 265).

is less concerned with a particular epoch than with a specific way of thinking about moral problems: the ethics of conviction spawned by Kantian morality. The “worlds” Hegel examines are perhaps best understood as constellations of norms, values, and conventions which bind—and in some cases fail to bind—individuals together into a community. His use of the term “*Geist*” thus might be likened, as Judith Shklar suggested, to Montesquieu’s *esprit général*: “the totality of attitudes, rules, institutions, habits and beliefs that make up a political culture.”¹⁸ Hegel’s attempt to articulate the values that animate these worlds does not, however, confine itself to an analysis of the political culture of each period. Rather, his account takes its point of departure from the interpretation of a few crucial literary texts. The analysis of the world of *Sittlichkeit* draws heavily from the *Antigone*, while the world of *Moralität* is epitomized by the account of the “beautiful soul” in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* and Jacobi’s *Woldemar*.¹⁹ The domain of “*Bildung*” finds its voice in the cynical observations and mad pantomimes of Rameau’s nephew.

If the Nephew would seem to be an unlikely spokesman for “culture,” it should be remembered that Hegel’s use of the term “*Bildung*” was itself rather odd.²⁰ The term originated in Pietist theology where Christ’s “image” (*Bild*)—present in the soul of man insofar as man had been “formed” (*bildet*) in the image of God—was the ideal which must guide the cultivation (*Bildung*) of one’s talents and dispositions.²¹ It was also employed within the natural philosophy of Paracelsus, Böhme, and Leibniz to denote the development or “unfolding” of certain potentialities within an organism.²² It was used in something approximating this sense by Moses Mendelssohn in his 1784 response to the question “What is Enlightenment?”—an essay that Hegel copied out, while a gymnasium student, into one of the notebooks that he carried with him throughout his life.²³ The term also had wide usage in pedagogical theorists read by the young Hegel, such as Joachim Heinrich Campe, who were concerned with how the “development” (*Ausbildung*) and “education” (*Bildung*) of the citizenry might be fostered through pedagogi-

¹⁸ Judith Shklar, *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind* (Cambridge, 1976), 42-43, 142-45.

¹⁹ For Goethe, see Hyppolite, 501 and Donald Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Albany, 1985), 100; for Jacobi, see the editors’ note in Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, IX, 518.

²⁰ See Shklar, 44, 151 and Trilling, 43.

²¹ See E. L. Stahl, *Die Religiöse und die Humanitätsphilosophische Bildungsidee* (Bern, 1934), 97-101 and Hans Sperber, “Der Einfluss des Pietismus auf die Sprache des 18 Jahrhunderts,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, VIII (1930), 508-9.

²² Rudolf Vierhaus, “*Bildung*,” in O. Brunner, W. Linze, R. Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (8 vols.; Stuttgart, 1972-73), I, 510.

²³ See Johannes Hoffmeister, *Dokumente zu Hegels Entwicklung* (Stuttgart, 1936), 140-43.

cal reform.²⁴ Finally, the term enjoyed an even more influential usage in the writings of Herder—most notably his *Auch einer Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774). Here *Bildung* denoted not simply “education” or “teaching” but rather all of those experiences which give a people a coherent identity and a sense of a common destiny.²⁵

In the *Phenomenology* Hegel employed the concept in two related ways. In Preface and Introduction to the book he spoke of the “*Bildung* of Spirit” or the “*Bildung* of consciousness”—employing the terms to describe the process by which spirit and consciousness develop. In Chapter VI the term denotes a particular historical period in which individuals have assumed responsibility for their own self-fashioning.²⁶ What is striking in both uses is that Hegel eschews the conventional image of *Bildung* as an organic unfolding of a form immanent in an individual or a people and instead presents *Bildung* as a process of relentless self-estrangement.

In the short Introduction to the *Phenomenology* Hegel described consciousness’s education as a “pathway of *doubt*, or more precisely the way of despair” which leads to “a state of despair about all the so-called natural ideas, thoughts, and opinions.”²⁷ Whatever remains within “the limits of a natural life” perishes if it is driven beyond itself. Consciousness, however, continually “suffers violence at its own hands,” it constantly “goes beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself.”²⁸ *Zerrissenheit*—the state of being torn to pieces—is the “natural” element of consciousness. As Hegel wrote in one of the odder aphorisms in his Jena notebooks, “A mended sock is better than a torn one; not so for self-consciousness.”²⁹

Hegel’s account in Chapter VI of the “world” of *Bildung* likewise dispenses with any sense of *Bildung* as a process of organic or harmonious development. The “World of the Self-estranged Spirit” is “double, divided, and self-opposed,” it is a world where nothing is “grounded within itself” and where everything “has its being in something outside of and alien to it.”³⁰ This sense that the modern age was distinguished by alienation and division pervaded Hegel’s writings throughout the Jena period.³¹ Hence, even

²⁴ Vierhaus, 511-15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 515-17.

²⁶ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 31-32, 73, 363-90 (*Phenomenology*, 16-17; 50; 297-321). See John H. Smith, *The Spirit and its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel’s Philosophy of Bildung* (Ithaca, 1988), 200-201.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 72-73 (49-50). For a discussion of this process, see Charles Taylor, “The Opening Arguments of the *Phenomenology*,” in Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York, 1972), 157-61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 74 (51).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 558. For a discussion see Smith, 207.

³⁰ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 361 (*Phenomenology*, 295).

³¹ For a discussion, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, tr. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 16-31.

before work had begun on the *Phenomenology*, Hegel had come to see *Bildung* as a process marked by division and dismemberment, creating a world that was defined by its self-estrangement.³² All that he needed to find, as he wrestled with his increasingly unwieldy *Bildungsroman* of the Spirit, was a literary work that could play the same role, for the world of “the self-estranged spirit,” that the *Antigone* had played vis-a-vis antiquity. With the appearance of Goethe’s translation of *Rameau’s Nephew* in the spring of 1805, Hegel’s search ended.

IV. Hegel quoted *Rameau’s Nephew* three times in the *Phenomenology*, an amount of attention matched by no other work. On none of these occasions, however, does Hegel account for the origin of the words enclosed within the quotation marks. The most he offers is the statement, at the start of the longest of his three quotations from the book, that the language spoken by the self-estranged spirit resembles “the madness of the musician” who,

heaped upon each other and mixed up thirty arias, Italian, French, tragic, comic, of every sort of character; now with a base voice he descended into Hell, then, contracting his throat, he rent the vaults of heaven with a falsetto tone alternately raging and soothing, imperious and mocking.³³

The passage quoted is memorable enough that readers of Goethe’s translation might catch the reference. But Hegel’s other two quotations are a good deal more obscure. The first occurs early in the discussion of the world of the self-estranged spirit when Hegel argues that in the world of culture, individuality has worth and standing only to the extent that it “forms [*bildet*] itself into what it is in itself.” “Natural” individuality, he explains, is only an “assumed existence” (*gemeinte Dasein*), it is only a “kind [*Art*] of existence.”³⁴ He then quotes a brief passage from *Rameau’s Nephew*, explaining that

“Kind” [*Art*] is not quite the same as *espèce*, “the most horrid of all nicknames; for it denotes mediocrity and expresses the highest degree of contempt.” “Kind” and “good of its kind” [*in seiner Art gut*] are, however, German expressions which add an air of honesty to this meaning, as if it were not really meant so badly; or, again,

³² See, for example, Hegel, *Werke*, II, 20-22 (translated by H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf as *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* [Albany, 1977], 89-91).

³³ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 387 (317-18). Hegel quotes (231) Goethe’s translation (*Le Neveu de Rameau*, ed. Jean Fabre [Geneva, 1963], 83; *Rameau’s Nephew and Other Works*, tr. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen [Indianapolis, 1956], 67).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 364 (298).

consciousness is, in fact, not yet aware what “kind,” and what “culture” and “reality” are.³⁵

Hegel’s third quotation from *Rameau’s Nephew* occurs later in the *Phenomenology*, in the course of his account of the struggle between faith and enlightenment. Hegel explains how the spirit of enlightenment so thoroughly permeates the domain of pure faith that it takes “complete possession of all the vitals and members of the unconscious idol.” Quoting Diderot one last time, Hegel continues, “then ‘one fine morning it gives its comrade a shove with the elbow, and bang! crash! the idol lies on the floor.’”³⁶

The first point to note about Hegel’s use of *Rameau’s Nephew* is that Hegel merged the words of Goethe’s translation almost imperceptively into his own. The footnotes that take us out of Hegel’s monstrous sentences and down to the bottom of the page, where we are reminded that another’s words are being spoken, were added by later editors and translators. The *Phenomenology* began its career without them. The only notice Hegel gives that another voice is speaking is the quotation marks that enclose his borrowings. It is up to the reader to know who speaks in those quotations, just as it is up to the reader to recognize that the discussion of the duties of sisters to brothers in the *Phenomenology*’s analysis of ethical life summons up the *Antigone*. The readers of the *Phenomenology* are called upon to recognize such figures as Antigone, the Nephew, and the Beautiful Soul as sedimented layers of their own culture, as forms through which the world-spirit has passed and forms which they, having been shaped by the this spirit as well, can now recollect.

Commentators have often noted a second peculiarity in Hegel’s quotations from *Rameau’s Nephew*: he uses them in rather different contexts than they occupy in Diderot’s book.³⁷ Take, for example, Hegel’s quotation of the Nephew’s characterization of “*espèce*” as “the most horrid of all nicknames.” In Diderot’s text, *Moi* expresses wonder that Rameau can have such delicate discrimination and remarkable sensitivity in musical matters, but nevertheless can be “blind to the beauties of morality, so insensible to the charm of virtue.” The Nephew attributes this failing either to his own natural constitution—“virtue requires a special sense that I lack, a fiber that has not been granted to me”—or to his upbringing—“I have spent my life with good musicians and bad people, whence my ear has become very sharp and my heart quite deaf.” This prompts *Moi* to ask why Rameau isn’t concerned to provide his son with an education that might check his family’s natural disposition towards immorality. Rameau responds that if his son is destined

³⁵ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 364-65 (*Phenomenology*, 298) quoting Goethe’s translation 235 (Fabre, 90; Barzun and Bowen, 72).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, III, 403 (332) quoting Goethe’s translation, 229 (Fabre 82; Barzun and Bowen 66).

³⁷ For discussions of this point see Jauss, 136-47, Hulbert, 276-83, and Price, 227-28.

to be a good man such an education would be useless, and if his son is destined for the life of a ne'er-do-well, such education would be harmful because his education and his natural inclinations would work at cross purposes and

he would be pulled by two contrary forces that would make him go askew down the path of life—like so many others I see who are equally clumsy in good and evil deeds. They are the ones we call “types,” [*espèce*] the most frightening of all epithets because it indicates mediocrity and the lowest degree of contempt. A great scoundrel is a great scoundrel, but he isn't a “type.”³⁸

In Diderot's text the Nephew suggests that the attempt to overcome the natural disposition through education breeds mediocre “types.” Hegel, in contrast, employs the passage to argue that it is the merely “assumed existence” of natural, uneducated individuality that is stigmatized as—if not quite a “type”—then at least a “kind of being.”³⁹

Hegel also alters the context of the two other quotations he employs. In the original context, the passage Hegel uses for his description of the triumph of the Enlightenment over Christianity is employed as a description of the way in which the Jesuits introduced Christianity into China, a description which the Nephew in turn uses as an analogy for the ultimate triumph of Italian musical styles over the French.⁴⁰ The passage describing the Nephew's pantomime of operatic arias is completed by a quotation taken from Rameau's less extravagant, but more morally disquieting, pantomime of the Nephew's seducing of a young woman for his master. It is this pantomime—and not the performance of operatic arias—that *Moi* sees as a “rigmorole of wisdom and folly,” both appalling in its “absolute shamefulness” and striking in its “perfect frankness and truth.”⁴¹ Here, as in the quotation involving the fallen idol, Hegel takes a passage that is concerned with aesthetic questions and redeploys it in a context where moral questions are at issue.⁴²

³⁸ *Goethes Werke*, XXV, 235 (Fabre, 89-90; Barzun and Bowen, 71-72, translation modified).

³⁹ See Jauss, 138-39, and Herbert Dieckmann, “Diderots *Le Neveu de Rameau* und Hegels Interpretation des Werkes,” *Wolfenbütteler Forschungen*, 10 (1980), 164-65.

⁴⁰ See Jauss, 143-44.

⁴¹ The passage cited in Hegel, *Werke*, III, 387 (*Phenomenology*, 317-18) inserts p. 182 of Goethe's translation (Fabre 24; Barzun and Bowen, 23) into the longer passage from p. 231 (Fabre, 83; Barzun and Bowen, 67). Matters are further complicated by the presence of an unclosed (and misplaced) quotation mark in the *Phenomenology*. For discussions of Hegel's construction of this quotation see Jauss, 140-43, Price, 225-26, and Dieckmann, 166-67.

⁴² For a discussion, see Gearhart, 165-68.

Hegel's appropriation of *Rameau's Nephew* in the *Phenomenology* departs from Diderot's original in one final respect. In his selections from the text Hegel pays almost no attention to the arguments that *Moi* advances against the Nephew. This emphasis on the Nephew is, to a degree, unremarkable. Just as *Lui* is the dominant figure in *Rameau's Nephew*, so too the "lacerated consciousness" (*zerrissene Bewußtsein*) is central to Hegel's analysis. Yet Hegel diminishes the role of the "tranquil" or "simple" consciousness far below the role *Moi* plays in Diderot's dialogue. Hegel states that when faced with the utterances of the lacerated consciousness, the simple consciousness (*einfachen Bewußtsein*) "can be no more than monosyllabic [*einsilbig*]" or can only repeat what the lacerated consciousness has already said, and "in so doing commits the folly of imagining that it is saying something new and different."⁴³

While Diderot's *Moi* is never as talkative as *Lui* and while there are several moments when *Moi*, appalled by what he is hearing from *Lui*, cuts off the discussion by changing the subject, Hegel's suggestion that *Moi* is progressively driven into silence by *Lui* is misleading. It is in fact precisely at the close of the dialogue that *Moi* energetically opposes *Lui* by drawing out the implications of *Lui*'s account of the dependence of individuals upon one another in modern society and then insisting that it is only the philosopher who can escape from the "beggar's pantomime" and live freely. There may well be inadequacies in this defense of the philosophical life, but *Moi* is certainly *capable* of responding to *Lui*. It is Hegel's appropriation of *Rameau's Nephew*, and *not* Diderot's dialogue, that reduces the *Moi* to monosyllables.

The *Phenomenology of Spirit* thus effects what might be characterized as a second translation of *Rameau's Nephew*. Into his own account of the "self-estranged spirit," Hegel wove the words Goethe used to translate Diderot's text, using them in ways that often ran counter to Goethe's understanding of the text he was translating. While for Goethe the Nephew's musical abilities had served to mitigate his moral depravity, for Hegel the Nephew's musical pantomimes, no less than his moral cynicism, expressed a consciousness that was lacerated, divided, and perverted. And while Goethe saw the wild pantomimes and erratic chatter of the Nephew as a condemnation of those who had attacked Diderot and his colleagues, in Hegel's retelling it is *Lui*, not *Moi*, who emerges triumphant. What are we to make of these differences? And does Hegel's transformation of Diderot's text hold up?

V. Ernst Robert Curtius once argued that Goethe failed to understand Diderot's general intent because he neglected to pursue the clue Diderot provided when he employed a quotation from Horace's *Satires* as the motto

⁴³ Hegel, *Werke* III, 387-88 (*Phenomenology*, 318, translation modified).

for *Rameau's Nephew*.⁴⁴ The words “Vertumnis, quotquot sunt, natus iniquis” (“Born when every single Vertumnis [the god who presides over the changing of the seasons and takes whatever form he desires] was out of sorts”) are used by the slave Davus to describe the unstable Roman Senator Priscus, who for Davus illustrates that a man cannot be said to be free if he remains under the ever-changing the sway of the passions.⁴⁵ In Curtius’s reading, the Nephew’s pantomimes are not—as Goethe would have it—a way of imparting individual characteristics to a figure intended to exemplify an entire species of flatterers and toadies. Instead they show us an individual who, like Priscus, is enslaved to the passions and to vice. True freedom can only be attained by *Moi*—identified by Curtius as “Denis le philosophe”—who proudly models himself on Diogenes and liberates himself from all dependence.⁴⁶

Curtius’s interpretation of *Rameau's Nephew* as an affirmation of stoic virtues has raised as many difficulties as it resolved.⁴⁷ Yet his criticism of Goethe does call attention to a curious aspect of Goethe’s reading. While there is now a well-established tradition of seeing *Rameau's Nephew* as centrally concerned with the problem of what sort of moral philosophy is possible in the wake of the Enlightenment’s relentless critique of traditional values,⁴⁸ Goethe himself does not appear to have thought that *Rameau's Nephew* was concerned with “morality” (*Sittlichkeit*) at all. He insisted that “No one belongs to the world as a moral man” and argued instead that it was “ability, activity, intellect, and talent” which bound an individual to others.⁴⁹ Judgments about individual morality do not, for Goethe, fall within the province of society, but judgments about “ability, activity, intellect, and talent” are properly social concerns. Thus, in Goethe’s reading, *Rameau's Nephew* is not concerned with the *morality* of *Moi* or *Lui*. Rather, in the Nephew, Diderot artfully constructed a figure capable of bringing the reader to judge the worth of the philosophes and their critics in terms of their contributions to society.

It would be equally misleading, but for rather different reasons, to characterize Hegel’s interpretation of *Rameau's Nephew* as focusing on questions of “morality” in the peculiar sense in which Hegel employed the

⁴⁴ Curtius, “Diderot and Horace,” *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, tr. Willard R. Task (New York, 1953), 573-83.

⁴⁵ See Michael Bernstein, *Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero* (Princeton, 1992), 60.

⁴⁶ Curtius, 582.

⁴⁷ See Herbert Dieckmann, “The Relationship between Diderot’s *Satire I* and *Satire II*,” *Romanic Review*, 43 (1952), 12-26, and the discussion in Jauss, 121.

⁴⁸ For the classic version of this argument see Carl Becker, “The Dilemma of Diderot,” *Philosophical Review*, 24 (1915), 54-71. For two recent formulations of it, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981), 45-50, and Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment: Rousseau and the Philosophes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 94-106.

⁴⁹ Goethe, *Rameaus Neffe*, 285.

term. One of the main concerns of the *Phenomenology's* chapter on "Geist" was to draw a distinction between what Hegel termed *Sittlichkeit* (usually translated as "ethical life") and *Moralität*. Hegel used *Moralität* to designate judgments that appeal to individual intentions and to conscience. This form of judgment, which Hegel associates with Kantian moral philosophy, resembles what Goethe seems to have had in mind when he argued that the question of whether an individual had fulfilled the demands of what he termed *Sittlichkeit* was best decided by God, by the individual's own heart, and by "those to whom he is true and good."⁵⁰ Hegel, however, distinguished *Sittlichkeit* from *Moralität* and consistently reserved the former term for that type of evaluation which takes its point of reference from the role individuals occupy as members of particular ethical communities. For example (to cite the case that serves as Hegel's *locus classicus*), in ancient Athens, the obligation to bury one's brother is neither a matter of "love" nor of "feeling" nor an action that is justified by an appeal to conscience. It is instead a responsibility that flows directly from one's membership in a family—a "natural ethical community."⁵¹ What fascinated Hegel about Sophocles' *Antigone* was that in *Antigone* he found an individual who *consciously* carried out her ethical duties, and was thus uniquely able to bring to full awareness the contradictory demands which are made on her by Creon's dictates and by her duties to Polynices.⁵²

The world of the Nephew, however, is neither the world of ethical community nor the world of the Kantian moral subject. *Bildung* is instead a world that is "doubled, divided, and self-opposed."⁵³ Accordingly, Hegel's analysis of culture's "realm of actuality" (*Reich der Wirklichkeit*) involves the unfolding of a series of dichotomies, culminating in the juxtaposition of Diderot's *Lui* and *Moi*. Hegel offers a sketch of the political life of early modern Europe that focuses on the opposition between "state power" and "wealth."⁵⁴ Under the absolutist state individuals are bound together directly and immediately and whatever "individuality" they possess is expressed in their status as members of a political community living under a system of positive laws.⁵⁵ The system of "wealth" allows for a more "mediated" type of unity. In an argument that owes much to Adam Smith, Hegel suggests that the individual's pursuit of private and particular ends ultimately leads to the insight that "in working for himself he is at the same time working for all and all are working for him."⁵⁶ This tension between state power and wealth gives rise to two rather different forms of consciousness: a "noble" (*edel-*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁵¹ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 328-34 (*Phenomenology*, 266-72).

⁵² *Ibid.*, III, 347-49 (283-84).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, III, 361 (293).

⁵⁴ For a discussion of Hegel's account, see Lewis Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Gainesville, 1984), 104-15.

⁵⁵ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 367-68 (300-301).

⁵⁶ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 368 (*Phenomenology*, 302).

mütige) consciousness which aligns itself with state power, embraces it as its “good,” and looks askance at the world of wealth, and a “base” (*niederträchtige*) consciousness which “sees in the sovereign power a fetter” and seeks satisfaction in the pursuit of wealth. The base consciousness pays lip service to state power, all the while nourishing a “secret malice” which keeps it “always on the point of revolt.”

Its relationship with wealth, however, is no more satisfying than its relation to the state. All that its pursuit of material well-being produces is a consciousness of itself as “an isolated individual,” blessed with but a “transitory enjoyment” of riches which it comes to both love and hate.⁵⁷ The “noble” consciousness, having renounced wealth and possessions in order to devote itself to a “heroism of service,” comes to an equally unhappy end. As a “haughty vassal,” acting in the name of state power, it knows itself to be “esteemed” in the “general opinion,” but it never experiences that “gratitude” which only a specific individual could grant. Speaking a “language of counsel,” and allegedly advancing only the general interests of the community, its “chatter about the *general good*” in fact conceals a concern for “its *own best interest*.” Even a vassal who undergoes the supreme sacrifice for the state, risking death in its defense, emerges from the brush with death with only a “particular self-interest”: the preservation of his own existence.⁵⁸ Thus at the end of this stage of Hegel’s account, the noble consciousness, no less than the base, maintains a contradiction between its own particular interests and those of the state. It too, like the base consciousness, remains always on the point of revolt.⁵⁹

What Hegel seeks is a renunciation of individuality that will be as complete as that which results from death in service to the state, but which nevertheless allows the individual to survive the act of renunciation. He finds this renunciation accomplished through the medium of language.⁶⁰ It is only within the universal and anonymous system of pronouns that individuals can assert their particularity, and this claim of uniqueness and particularity can be successful only if it is understood as but one instance of the general category of “assertions of individuality.” Through an act of self-alienation in which allegedly unique and individual experiences are articulated within an intersubjectively shared system of communication, “the pure I” at last obtains the recognition of others.

Having now shifted the locus of analysis from consciousness to language, Hegel reformulates the relationship of the noble consciousness to state power in terms of a contrast between two “moments of language”: “the *abstract universal*, called ‘the general good’ ” and “the pure self” which,

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 372 (305).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 373-75 (306-7). Hegel here recapitulates themes initially introduced in the well-known account of the dialectic of master and slave.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 375 (307).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 375-76 (308).

serving the state, disavows all consciousness of its particular existence.⁶¹ Initially, the two remain as alien from each other as before. The “pure self” has won no real power from the state, all it receives is “honor,” while state power, insofar as it is merely a “general good” that is in everyone’s interest, lacks the ability to will or to decide.⁶² It is only within a form of discourse which Hegel dubs the “language of flattery” that the contradiction between the interests of the individual and the general good are, to a degree, mitigated. The “heroism of silent service” is replaced by a “heroism of flattery” in which the nobility comes to play the purely “ornamental” function of surrounding the throne of an “unlimited monarch,” constantly reassuring its occupant that his rule is indeed universal. The monarch, set off from everyone else by virtue of his “name,” accomplishes the task of giving state power a recognizable identity through the use of the first person singular—“*L’Etat c’est moi.*”⁶³

This, then, is the world in which Jean-François Rameau performs his “beggar’s pantomime.” Dependent on the monarch for its livelihood, the noble consciousness is reduced to the same status as the base consciousness.⁶⁴ In a world where wealth rules, where those with riches suppose that “they have procured another’s self through the gift of a meal” and remain oblivious to the seething resentment and barely suppressed rebellion of those they have allegedly purchased, only the “lacerated consciousness” speaks the truth.⁶⁵ Thus, Rameau, surveying the motley crew assembled at Bertin’s table for a free meal, muses aloud that the current guest of honor will soon have to give up his place at the head of the table, like others who have sat there before him, and will eventually have to take his place beside Rameau, “another poor bugger like you who *siedo sempre come un maestoso cazzo fra duoi coglioni.*”⁶⁶ The circulation of guests at Bertin’s table mimics the fate of all demarcations within the world of *Bildung*: like cash, they are always exchangeable. The “lacerated consciousness” recognizes that “neither the *actuality* of power and wealth nor their specific *concepts*, ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ or the consciousness of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (the noble and the ignoble consciousness), possess truth.” The ultimate power in the world of *Bildung* is instead that “disintegrative play” (*auflösende Spiel*) of discourse and judgment which—like Rameau’s rude quip—penetrates all the pretensions of

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, III, 378 (310).

⁶² *Ibid.*, III, 377-78 (310).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, III, 378 (310-11). For a discussion, see Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. S. Cherniak and J. Heckman (Evanston, 1974), 404-6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 381 (312-13). Hinchman, 115, sees this as an allusion to the *noblesse de robe*, drawn to monarch because of the positions he could offer them.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 383-84 (315).

⁶⁶ Goethe, *Rameaus Neffe*, 213 (Fabre, 63; Barzun and Bowen, 51). Bertin’s mistress is—appropriately enough—“penetrée de la vérité” of Rameau’s comparison, but Bertin, outraged, banishes him from the table.

culture and strips the significance from everything it addresses. While the “honest consciousness” still clings to a faith in the objective reality of those things that are wittily talked about, the “lacerated consciousness” recognizes that this destructive chatter rules the world of culture.⁶⁷

For Hegel there thus is no point in distinguishing what Rameau has to say about musical matters from what he says about morality. What is important in the figure of Rameau is the particular stance he takes towards the *entire* world of culture. Rameau’s views on music, like his views on morality, are governed by a single interest: self-preservation. In teaching music, his primary interest lies not in teaching his student to play the harpsichord but rather in making sure that the student’s family will continue to pay for his services. When he reads Theophrastus, La Bruyère, and Molière he does not derive moral lessons of the sort that moved *Moi* to praise them as “excellent books.” Instead, he learns strategies for survival in a world where language and action have become completely disconnected and one must learn

what to do and what not to say. When I read *The Miser*, I say to myself: “Be as miserly as you like, but don’t talk like the miser.” When I read *Tartuffe*, I say: “Be a hypocrite if you choose, but don’t talk like one.” Keep any useful vices, but don’t acquire the tone and air which would make you ridiculous. Vice offends men only from time to time; but the symptoms of vice offend day and night.⁶⁸

The Nephew inhabits a world where virtues have been separated from the institutions which once defined and required them. What one is and how one appears are now—as Rousseau had argued in the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*—two different things. In such a world, everyone takes up their positions and dances their pantomimes in a vain effort to survive. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Hegel could not take *Moi*’s endorsement of Stoic virtues any more seriously than the Nephew did. In the world of the self-estranged spirit someone who imitates Diogenes has not exempted himself from the “beggar’s pantomime”—withdrawing from the world is but another way of taking up a position *within* the world. And for Nephew it is not a particularly attractive one.

What matters to Hegel about the Nephew, then, is less *what* he has to say than *the way* in which he says it. “The language of laceration,” Hegel writes, “is the perfect language and the authentic existent Spirit of this entire world of culture.”⁶⁹ What must have struck Hegel upon first encountering *Rameau’s Nephew* was the remarkable polyphony of voices and topics that ran through the dialogue. If *Antigone* brought to full consciousness the tension in the ancient ethical community between the demands of the polity and

⁶⁷ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 385-86 (*Phenomenology*, 316-17).

⁶⁸ Goethe, *Rameaus Neffe*, 211 (Fabre, 60; Barzun and Bowen, 49-50).

⁶⁹ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 384 (*Phenomenology*, 316).

the demands of the household, then *Rameau's Nephew* showed him a world that was so divided against itself that one could scarcely begin to map the lines of conflict. Tragedy was possible in Antigone's world because agents have clearly defined roles to play and duties to perform. Whatever it is that is going on in *Rameau's Nephew*, it is something other than tragedy.

VI. "When one tells a story," Diderot reminds his reader at the start of "This is Not a Story," "there has to be someone to listen; and if the story runs to any length, it is rare for the storyteller not sometimes to be interrupted by his listener."⁷⁰ Diderot was acutely aware that all narratives are haunted by a host of contingencies. Speakers in Diderot's dialogues continually interrupt one another, stumble into dead ends, and sometimes completely lose track of their argument. We should count ourselves lucky that we eventually learn what it was that led to Rameau's being expelled from Bertin's table. After all, in *Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*, we never hear the conclusion of the story of Jacques's loves. Reading Diderot is not like listening to a lecture; it is more like going to a carnival.⁷¹ In *The Indiscreet Jewels* a twist of a magic ring starts women's genitalia chattering about what they have been up to. One of the voices in *D'Alembert's Dream* issues from a man ranting in his sleep, replaying in distorted form a conversation that took place earlier in the dialogue. Towards the end of *The Paradox of the Actor* we find ourselves listening to one of the speakers carry on an internal dialogue without our being entirely clear as to who is speaking. The narrator of *Jacques the Fatalist* threatens to abandon Jacques and his master and follow a character who has just passed through a scene. And when Jacques and his master fall asleep at the end of the second chapter, the narrator joins them, leaving us alone to stare at the blank page and wonder what is going on while they are all snoring.

Hegel's taste in narratives was considerably tamer than Diderot's. While he acknowledged Diderot's mastery of the dialogue form, he nevertheless maintained that in an ideal dialogue there must be one interlocutor who "holds all the strings of progress" and thus remains master over the conversation. For Hegel a well-formed dialogue is organized around a clearly laid out sequence of questions and answers which have the result of directing attention not simply to the final conclusion but also secures acquiescence on every step towards that conclusion.⁷² A reader who approaches *Rameau's Nephew* expecting a dialogue of this sort will be disappointed. While the discussion does progress through a number of different topics, it is difficult to find a single over-arching order to the discussion. Nor is there a clear conclusion to be drawn at the end. The dialogue's closing line—"He who

⁷⁰ Diderot, *This is Not a Story and Other Stories*, tr. P. N. Furbank (Columbia, Mo., 1991), 17.

⁷¹ For this reason, few recent studies of Diderot manage to avoid mentioning Bakhtin.

⁷² Hegel, *Werke*, XI, 269-70. See the discussion in Hulbert, 275-76.

laughs last, laughs best”—leaves us utterly in the dark as to who will have the final laugh after the two interlocutors part.

In *Rameau's Nephew* there are three voices, not two,⁷³ a frequently overlooked point that, if pursued, allows us to appreciate the tension which persists, in spite of Hegel's efforts at appropriation, between *Rameau's Nephew* and the *Phenomenology*. The words spoken by *Lui* and *Moi* are set out in dialogue form, introduced only by these pronouns and a dash. But at other times, a third voice intrudes, providing a narrative that describes the Nephew's pantomimes, recounts the setting of the dialogue, and reports *Moi's* reactions to *Lui's* utterances. Because this third voice has access to *Moi's* feelings and thoughts, we easily assume that this narrator must be *Moi*. This overlooks a small but important difference. If the narrator is indeed *Moi*, it is *Moi* after the encounter with *Lui*. The narrator is recounting a conversation that has taken place in the past, offering a transcript of the words that were spoken and a description of *Lui's* actions and *Moi's* reactions.

When Hegel incorporated portions of *Rameau's Nephew* into the *Phenomenology*, he performed a type of translation across genres that he had practiced on a number of other occasions: he recast Diderot's dialogue into expository prose.⁷⁴ Where Diderot closed the dialogue without deciding who had carried the argument, in Hegel's transformation of the dialogue the Nephew has the last laugh, while the "peaceful consciousness" is reduced to silence. The Nephew is so clearly for Hegel the dominant figure that very phrase Hegel uses to describe the world of culture—"Entfremdung des Geistes"—is the same phrase Goethe used to translate "alienation d'esprit"—which was used in the French original to characterize the condition of the Nephew during his furious pantomime of operatic arias.⁷⁵ For Hegel, the Nephew is not simply a "lacerated consciousness" (*zerrissene Bewußtsein*); he is also the "consciousness of inversion" (*Bewußtsein der Vehrkehrung*).⁷⁶ Spirit discloses itself in language as "the inversion of all concepts and realities, the universal deception of itself and others; and the shamelessness which gives utterance to this deception is just for that reason the greatest truth."⁷⁷ The terms Hegel employs to describe the Nephew echo earlier parts of the *Phenomenology*. In describing Rameau as a *zerrissene Bewußtsein*, Hegel recalls the discussion in the Introduction of how consciousness tears itself to pieces in the course of its *Bildung*, while the phrase *Bewußtsein der Vehrkehr* invokes the closing chapter of the first section of the *Phenomenology*, in which the "inverted world" (*verkehrte Welt*) is juxtaposed to a "tranquil kingdom of laws" (*ruhige Reich der Gesetze*).⁷⁸ These parallels in

⁷³ See Hulbert, 278.

⁷⁴ For a discussion, see Smith, 211.

⁷⁵ *Goethes Werke*, XXV, 230 (Fabre, 83; Barzun and Bowen, 67).

⁷⁶ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 386 (*Phenomenology*, 317).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 386-87 (317).

⁷⁸ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 128-36 (*Phenomenology*, 97-103). Price (226-27) offers a brief discussion of the "associative link" between the "inverted world" and *Rameau's Nephew*.

terminology suggest an affinity between *Rameau's Nephew* and the *Phenomenology* that goes beyond the use of the Nephew to illustrate a particular, and now superseded, form of consciousness. Just as the section of the *Phenomenology* that analyzes the "actuality" of *Bildung* attributes to a particular historical period the more general process by which the Spirit's "Bildung" is accomplished, so too the figure that epitomizes this process, the "lacerated" and "inverted" consciousness of the Nephew, is something more than just another image in Hegel's picture gallery. He personifies the central lesson of the dialectic: nothing remains true, since all certitudes must be abandoned on the path of doubt and despair down which consciousness relentlessly plods. To the extent that the Nephew epitomizes not just the world of the "self-estranged spirit," but rather the very movement of the dialectic itself, Diderot's erratic musician threatens to escape across the boundaries Hegel had drawn around him.

While Hegel minimizes *Moi* as a participant in the debate, he was nevertheless aware of the role *Moi* played within the narrative structure of *Rameau's Nephew* as the figure responsible for recounting the entire conversation.⁷⁹ The "peaceful consciousness" has no particular insight into the world of culture. Unlike the "lacerated consciousness" it has not suffered "the feeling that all its defenses have broken down, that every part of its being has been tortured on the rack and every bone broken." But it alone can collect, comprehend, present the witty insights of the "lacerated consciousness."⁸⁰ The Nephew can pass judgments on everything, he can express the perversions and inversions of the world of *Bildung*, but he lacks the ability to comprehend what he has said.⁸¹ Here, too, there are affinities with the broader argument of the *Phenomenology* itself.

Like *Rameau's Nephew*, the *Phenomenology* might be characterized as a compendium of insights, uttered by a multitude of speakers, and brought together by a narrator who simply collects and organizes what has been said into a unified whole. In the *Phenomenology*, as in *Rameau's Nephew*, there are three voices. Hegel sometimes provides an account of how something appears "für es," that is, how something appears to the consciousness which undergoes that which is being recollected. At other times, Hegel describes how something appears "für uns," how it appears to the narrator and to the reader who is following the narration. Finally, Hegel sometimes characterizes a description as capturing how something is "an sich," how something is "in itself." In a move that reduces these three standpoints to two, Hegel consistently opposes the characterizations that are "for it" to those which are "in itself" and consistently identifies the standpoint of the "in itself" with

⁷⁹ This has been appreciated by Roger Laufer, "Structure et Signification du 'Neveu de Rameau' de Diderot," *Revue des sciences humaines*, 100 (1960), 400.

⁸⁰ Hegel, *Werke*, III, 398-99 (*Phenomenology*, 328-29).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, III, 390 (320).

the “for us.”⁸² The narrator and the reader thus come to occupy the comfortable position of knowing the intrinsic truth of that which the experiencing consciousness can only know from its own limited perspective. The narrator in the *Phenomenology* occupies a temporal position roughly analogous to the narrator in *Rameau’s Nephew*. In both the narrator recollects a sequence of incidents that have already occurred. But where the narrator in *Rameau’s Nephew* claims privileged access to only one standpoint in the discussion—*Moi’s* perspective—the narrator of the *Phenomenology* purports to recount not simply how things appeared *to us*, but also how things really were. It is precisely this claim that has proven difficult for today’s readers to accept, at least in part because we have learned, most notably from Diderot himself, to be suspicious of narrators who claim to know everything, to tell us everything, and never to fall asleep.

It would be much too facile to pose the tension between the *Phenomenology* and *Rameau’s Nephew* in terms of an opposition between a narrative that is “closed” and “totalizing” and a narrative that is “open” and “dialogical.”⁸³ Diderot, no less than Hegel, was moved by the dream of encyclopedic unity and devoted a considerable portion of his energy to pursuits that the *Nephew* would have scorned. Hegel, no less than Diderot, had a passion for the unique and the particular—indeed, his contemporaries often denounced his empiricism and materialism.⁸⁴ If it is difficult to see how Hegel could have confined the corrosive energy of the “self-estranged spirit” to one part of the *Phenomenology*, it is equally difficult to see how the wild chatter of *Rameau’s Nephew* could have been kept from infecting the solemn pages of Diderot’s *Encyclopedia*—perhaps that is why Diderot kept the manuscript locked in a drawer. For both Hegel and Diderot the great challenge of the Enlightenment remained the order of the day: to remain faithful to the “systematic spirit” without falling prey to the sterile “system of spirit.” When Hegel read *Rameau’s Nephew*, perhaps he found something more than another picture for his gallery of images. In its creator he might well have recognized a kindred spirit.

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⁸² For a critical discussion of differing interpretations of the Hegelian “we,” see Kenley R. Dove, “Hegel’s Phenomenological Method,” *Review of Metaphysics*, 23 (1970), 627-41.

⁸³ For arguments along these lines see Jauss, 143-47 and Hulbert, 288-91. Cf. Price 232-33.

⁸⁴ See M. J. Petry’s discussion in *Hegel’s Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* (3 vols.; Dordrecht, 1978), I, x-xix.