

extension and laws of motion, as classical Cartesian mechanicism claimed. Pondering the creation of life, much like many other thinkers of his time, Maupertuis concluded that it was correct to treat matter in categories broader than “inanimate”:⁷⁷¹ “the physical properties of matter alone will never explain the creation of any organic body,”⁷⁷² he wrote. This is why he also claimed it had to be seen as capable of thinking, feeling, and perceiving.

According to Maupertuis, spiritualized matter is not static, it is not affected solely from the outside. He was convinced that “[l]ife [activity] is a spontaneous product of matter.”⁷⁷³ Though a Newtonist, Maupertuis came close to agreeing with Leibniz here.⁷⁷⁴ In both, we find a typically Rococo conviction of the inextinguishable vitality of the world on every level: “the sphere of inanimate nature is a special case in nature as such, normally endowed with thought and life.”⁷⁷⁵ Like Leibniz (and the young Voltaire), Maupertuis was convinced of the purposeful aim of a dynamic nature. Their world was still essentially one of a metaphysical order, fundamentally unknowable, as Newton had explained, and which could not be denied if one observed the harmony of nature. Maupertuis was so impressed by the harmony of creation that he even formulated his own, highly interesting law of the least quantity of action: “nature always uses the simplest means to generate its effects.”⁷⁷⁶ This law was an expression of dynamic optimism, but also the conviction that man, as part of the overall structure, should also go by the principle of moderation.⁷⁷⁷

⁷⁷¹ This postulate was declared, for instance, by the most famous French natural scientist of the day, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count Buffon in *Histoire générale des animaux* (The General History of Animals, 1749), introducing the hypothesis of “organic molecules” as a principle of organic life (Zapašnik, *Filozofia...*, p. 288). Butterfield writes: “[Buffon] was prepared to think that a special act of creation was not necessary to account for the emergence of living creatures on this planet, regarding life as, so to speak, a quality or potentiality of matter itself. He held something like Leibniz’s idea that every plant and animal was composed of a mass of minute particles, each of which was a pattern of the whole individual” (Butterfield, *The Origins...*, p. 237). We encounter a similar materialization of the monad in Diderot. Of the other anti-mechanistic scholars of the first half of the eighteenth century, we should mention Benôit de Maillet, author of *Telliamed* (1748), which presented a proto-evolutionary concept of natural history.

⁷⁷² Quoted in: Bednarczyk, *Filozofia...*, p. 138.

⁷⁷³ Zapašnik, *Filozofia...*, p. 290.

⁷⁷⁴ Cassirer mentions this in *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*.

⁷⁷⁵ Bednarczyk, *Filozofia...*, p. 149.

⁷⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–151.

⁷⁷⁷ We might recall the reconstruction of Maupertuis’s reasoning by Bednarczyk: “When Reason [...] created matter and gave it thought, it made the source of purposeful action in itself, in thought, which it portioned out, becoming its ‘messenger’ in the realm of nature, acting independently of it, invariably and always purposefully. While this Reason simultaneously organized nature by the principle of the least action, the source of purpose was the Highest Reason itself, and the act of establishment was not to be repeated, while the principle was a direct product of the Highest Reason’s thought, once and for all subordinating all movement in nature to itself” (*ibid.*, p. 151).

Maupertuis suggested that philosophy was a kind of compromise between new contents and a classicist form. The concept of moderation was fundamental to him. The *philosophes* did not stop there, however. The libertinism of the Regency period kept gaining in popularity; it was a near-hedonism, Epicurean not only in physics, but in morals as well. Educated doctors were particularly susceptible, as they understood through their professional practice that it was difficult to maintain that life was moral by nature, as the Deists claimed. This is why Julien Offray de la Mettrie, perhaps the most famed doctor-philosopher of the time, denied the spiritualization of matter.⁷⁷⁸ Of course, he confessed, its properties included the fact that it thinks, yearns, and feels, but this did not mean that the rational mind should be a model of reality. On the contrary, the body is a model. And the spirit? Well, it simply does not exist, if by the spirit we mean a substance separate from matter, whether permanently helping to create the universe, or setting it in motion when history began. Nothing apart from matter has ever existed, said La Mettrie.

To this day, he suffers from an unjust stereotype, that he saw nature “in terms of ‘springs, gears, cogs, and levers.’”⁷⁷⁹ Drawing from the philosopher’s entire oeuvre, Marian Skrzypek has demonstrated that quite the reverse was the case. True, La Mettrie wrote *Machine Man* (1747), but in this case, the machine is nothing else than an organism.⁷⁸⁰ Devoid of a soul, true, but very much alive, even vivacious, feeling, pleasure-seeking, striving for happiness. On the one hand, he was inspired by medical research, which La Mettrie conducted as a doctor, alluding to Maupertuis’ atomism.⁷⁸¹ On the other, he sought to give a foundation to the Rococo libertine attitude, to appreciate sensual pleasures, to praise love, erotic or otherwise, in the spirit of the Roman Epicureanism of Lucretius and Ovid.⁷⁸² This makes it all the more difficult to speak of the soulless mechanicism of early-Enlightenment materialism. In La Mettrie’s writing, life was a constant presence.

Skrzypek writes: “La Mettrie gives substance, which is identical to matter, attributes of extension, spontaneous movement, and sensitivity.”⁷⁸³ He points out⁷⁸⁴ that the doctor’s thinking was greatly indebted to Scholasticism (and, with it, to Aristotle), especially in his philosophical debut, *Treatise on the Soul* (1745), and that this could be seen as a sign of regression. And yet this affiliation was needed to break

⁷⁷⁸ See: Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, Cambridge 1996.

⁷⁷⁹ Marian Skrzypek, “Wprowadzenie do filozofii La Mettriego,” in: La Mettrie, *Dzieła filozoficzne*, Warsaw 2010, p. VII.

⁷⁸⁰ We should recall that La Mettrie also wrote *Man as Plant* (1748) and *Animals as More Than Machines* (1748–1749).

⁷⁸¹ La Mettrie and Maupertuis knew each other well. Maupertuis helped La Mettrie come to Berlin, where the latter spent the most productive years of his life and died of indigestion, for which he was derided – it demonstrated a total lack of moderation (Skrzypek, “Wprowadzenie...,” p. XVI).

⁷⁸² *Ibid.*, p. XXI.

⁷⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. XXIV.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. XXII–XXIV.

through the cold mechanicism of Cartesianism, to restore an *élan* to the material world. Thus, if the metaphor of man as a machine was introduced, it was only to materialize the concept of the soul, and not to make it an automaton. La Mettrie's machine is a sensitive and fundamentally dynamic machine:

the organism is initially active (not *reactive*), it is the organism (not its surroundings) where we find the source of the activity manifesting itself as sensitivity, which in turn takes the form of movement. This movement, and sensitivity with it, is a trait that belongs to the substantial nature of animated bodies.⁷⁸⁵

This is the context in which we ought to place the soul, which in no way vanishes from La Mettrie's writings.⁷⁸⁶ It is no longer a separate substance, but a property of the body – its vitality, its straining toward the world, its longing to be a part of it, to seek adventure.

In *Treatise on the Soul* we read: “the faculty to feel alone shapes all the intellectual faculties.”⁷⁸⁷ There is not talk, of course, of inborn ideas. There are only impressions gathered by the senses, and thus we might claim that our thoughts depend on our bodies. La Mettrie clearly pointed to the brain's key significance for human existence. The brain, not the metaphysical soul, was responsible for a person's states and the actions they pursued. This biological determinism did not mean, however, that people worked like automatons. As material beings, they were constantly moving and restless. They were driven by needs tied to pleasure or pain. We cannot autonomously determine what we will find pleasant or painful, but we do have a kind of freedom in our “faculty to feel.”

Putting “feeling” at the heart of his reflections leads La Mettrie to claim human beings are creatures of passions. Yet this is a peculiar brand of sentimentalism. “We naturally wish for what suits the present state of our body,”⁷⁸⁸ La Mettrie claims, and thus a biological determinism prevails in the realm of the passions. At any rate, this is why La Mettrie was favorably inclined toward passions of every sort – essentially, we are not responsible for having them, as they are a part of the physical make-up nature has given us.⁷⁸⁹ Importantly for our story, this meant that La Mettrie discarded the Stoic ideal of the ascetic in favor of an Epicurean hedonism, though the image of the philosopher as a debaucherous immoralist is the stuff of myth. As Skrzypek writes: “the Epicurean La Mettrie is gentle and humane, understanding, sociable, and jolly. Thus, while not pretending to perfection, he enjoys

⁷⁸⁵ Bednarczyk, *Filozofia...*, p. 100.

⁷⁸⁶ Skrzypek, “Wprowadzenie...,” p. XLVII.

⁷⁸⁷ La Mettrie, *Histoire de l'âme*, La Haye 1745, p. 343.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁷⁸⁹ Skrzypek, “Wprowadzenie...,” p. LXXI.

life and seeks to liberate others from the superstitions that prevent them from taking advantage of its great pleasures.”⁷⁹⁰

We have lingered on Maupertuis and La Mettrie, figures from outside the *Encyclopedie* circles, only because their views help us to illuminate the materialist worldview in figures most often tied to the Encyclopedists' camp, such as in the works of Paul Thiry, Baron d'Holbach.⁷⁹¹ In a manner of speaking, he tempers these two extremes. Holbach took his conviction that nature was a structure from Maupertuis, though he rejected the spiritualization of matter. From La Mettrie, in turn, he took materialist monism, but distanced himself from its immoralism. The result was *The System of Nature* (1770), a treatise with a title that was surprising, not to say utterly opposed to the anti-systemic spirit of the Enlightenment; yet its contents were not atypical of the epoch, being far from systematic.

Holbach was a polemicist by temperament, much like his friends, Diderot, Helvétius, and Grimm, who met regularly in the salon run by Mme. d'Holbach. He was not a born writer like them, which does not mean he did not share their passion for journalism. He often even radicalized it, as in his critique of religion, as Holbach was perhaps the foremost atheist among the Encyclopedists.⁷⁹² Yet it is not this aspect of his work that interests us, but the basic philosophical premises contained in *The System of Nature*, which allows us to hear the final chord of mechanicism, making way for a vital and actionist materialism of Diderot, a silent partner of the system signed by Baron Holbach.

Holbach was a multifaceted scholar. He was most interested in the study of inanimate nature, most of all chemistry and geology. He tried not to give short shrift to the emerging study of biology, but his point of departure more tended to be inanimate matter, unlike Maupertuis. Though he was no mechanicism,⁷⁹³ the reader is immediately struck by the impression that this *System of Nature* is lifeless, as Goethe later opined.⁷⁹⁴ Let us look at a fragment:

Man is a being purely physical: the moral man is nothing more than this physical being considered under a certain point of view, that is to say, with relation to some of his modes of action, arising out of his particular organization. But is not this organization itself the work of Nature? The motion or impulse to action of which he is susceptible, is that not physical? His visible actions, as well as the invisible motion interiorly excited

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. LXXI–LXXII.

⁷⁹¹ I adopt the spelling of the name from: Marian Skrzypek, *Holbach*, Warsaw 1978. Skrzypek explains why this version is correct, unlike Paul-Henri d'Holbach, used in the Polish edition of: *System przyrody czyli prawa świata fizycznego i moralnego*, trans. Jadwiga Jabłońska and Halina Suwała, Warsaw 1957.

⁷⁹² Skrzypek has a great deal to say on the topic in *Holbach*, pp. 50–73.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., pp. 41–49.

⁷⁹⁴ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Truth and Fiction Relating to My Life*, Vol. 2, London 1902.

by his will or his thoughts, are equally the natural effects, the natural consequences, of his peculiar mechanism, and the impulse he receives from those beings by whom he is surrounded.⁷⁹⁵

These thoughts might remind us of La Mettrie, yet Holbach's vision more fits the term "man-machine" in its stereotypical reading. Allegedly, Holbach also "placed stress on bodies' independent power in the microcosmos – they are not moved, they move by their own force."⁷⁹⁶ Except that he still envisioned nature as an orderly mechanism and not as an unbridled force. We see this in his important category of the "great whole" (*grand tout*): "beings [...] depend on the general system of the great whole, or that universal nature, of which they form a part; to which every thing that exists is necessarily submitted, and attached."⁷⁹⁷

Holbach took the notion of the great whole from physics and geology, scientific disciplines that work on a grand scale. This made it easy to lose sight of the singular, such as the individual person. As part of the great whole, man was utterly subject to its laws, resulting in the view that

human actions were determined by the physical laws of attraction, repulsion, and inertia. Man attracts analogous and related substances, and avoids those he cannot assimilate, as there are no relational ties between them and those substances. In this concept of Holbach's we easily glean a projection of Newtonian physics and chemistry [...] onto anthropology.⁷⁹⁸

Small wonder that he agreed with La Mettrie that if the soul exists it only "makes part of our body,"⁷⁹⁹ and thus that the body is the key to understanding our attitudes, feelings, and thoughts.⁸⁰⁰

From this sort of materialist perspective there was precious little space left for freedom, or in fact, none at all. This view is often found in the *philosophes* when they try to be objective. Here is Diderot: "So I am what I am because it was inevitable that I should be. Change the whole and of necessity you change me."⁸⁰¹ Or Voltaire:

To be really free is to have power. My liberty consists in doing what I choose: but I must necessarily choose what I will; otherwise it would be without reason, without cause,

⁷⁹⁵ Holbach, *The System...*, Vol. I, p. 11.

⁷⁹⁶ Skrzypek, *Holbach*, p. 31.

⁷⁹⁷ Holbach, *The System...*, Vol. I, pp. 15–16.

⁷⁹⁸ Skrzypek, *Holbach*, p. 77.

⁷⁹⁹ Holbach, *The System of Nature*, Vol. I, p. 343.

⁸⁰⁰ As demonstrated, for instance, by this excerpt: "the physician would collect from morals the key to the human heart: and in curing the body, he would sometimes be assured of curing the mind" (*ibid.*, p. 61). We might note that this highly reductionist argument is returning in our day.

⁸⁰¹ Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew / D'Alembert's Dream*, London–New York 1966, p. 110.

which is impossible. My liberty consists in walking when I have a mind to walk, and I have not the gout.⁸⁰²

The icing on the cake comes from Holbach:

The will [...] is a modification of the brain, by which it is disposed to action, or prepared to give play to the organs. This will is necessarily determined by the qualities, good or bad, agreeable or painful, of the object or the motive that acts upon his senses, or of which the idea remains with him, and is resuscitated by his memory.⁸⁰³

And a bit later on: "In the moral as well as in the physical world, every thing that happens is a necessary consequence of causes, either visible or concealed, which are of necessity obliged to act after their peculiar essences. *In man, free agency is nothing more than necessity contained within himself.*"⁸⁰⁴

Holbach called this doctrine fatalism. Even if this was not his intention, the word had a pessimistic ring to it, particularly in times when political activism was on the rise. A purely deterministic materialism brought with it real peril – an unqualified affirmation of reality, in which there was no room for autonomy or revolt. This is why the worldview of more penetrating minds, such as Voltaire and Diderot, was never reduced to this mode of thinking, despite quoting and occasionally agreeing with *The System of Nature*. Moreover, Holbach himself drew back from extreme fatalism in his later works, such as *Système social* (The Social System, 1773) or *Ethocracy* (1776).⁸⁰⁵ The Enlightenment swiftly understood that, if it were to adopt materialism, it would be of a kind that found room for activity, for change. Let us have a look at Voltaire. Reflections on determinism led him to a dual conclusion. At the start of his career, when he promoted Newton and was delighted by the rational structure of the perfect watchmaker's world, he accepted determinism and essentially agreed with Pope's motto that "everything is good."⁸⁰⁶ Later, however, he ceased to see man's submission to the laws of nature and history as something splendid. Voltaire perceived the inadequacy of optimism,⁸⁰⁷ which

⁸⁰² Voltaire, "The Ignorant Philosopher," in: *The Complete Romances*, New York 2007, p. 429.

⁸⁰³ Holbach, *The System of Nature*, Vol. I, p. 89.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁸⁰⁵ Skrzypek, *Holbach*, pp. 96–97.

⁸⁰⁶ Cf. Voltaire, *Elements...* True, here we find reservations about the existence of evil in the human world, but Voltaire more focuses on the riches and harmony of the physical world, of which God is the first cause. He is even more optimistic in "The Worliding" and "Defense of the Worliding," as Bronisław Baczko comments in *Hiob, mój przyjaciel. Obietnice szczęścia i nieuchronność zła*, trans. Jerzy Niecikowski, Warsaw 2001, pp. 22–34.

⁸⁰⁷ We see this clearly in the satire *Candide, or: Optimism*, trans. Burton Raffel, New Haven–London 2005, and in the article "Everything is Good" from the *Philosophical Dictionary*, London–New York 2004. Bronisław Baczko points out the role that knowledge of the earthquake in Lisbon played in

further deepened the skepticism brewing in his work on Newton. Certain knowledge about the whole of reality is not possible; nor is it possible to make perfect relations between people. Yet does this mean that we should altogether give up on acting? Voltaire never took his pessimism so far. True, he claimed that people's task was, above all, to relieve each other's misery, writing: "We are all formed of frailty and error; let us pardon reciprocally each other's folly."⁸⁰⁸ Yet practically at the same time, he called out:

Must we therefore remain idle in darkness, or must we light a flambeau, at which envy and calumny will rekindle their torches? For my part, I think that truth should no more be hidden before these monsters, than that we should abstain from taking nourishment, lest we should be poisoned.⁸⁰⁹

Knowing the eternal laws of nature did not have to lead to passivity.⁸¹⁰ Even if from a scientific, philosophical point of view, freedom seemed to be a pipe dream, there was still the practical, historical point of view.⁸¹¹ From this perspective, we can look at man as a dynamic creature, gradually climbing the ladder of development.⁸¹² In the kingdom of nature he has a special domain – the land of culture, where progress is observed.

this turn of events. This made Voltaire understand the tangibly real presence of evil in this best of all worlds: "Whereas before, it seemed, he failed to notice, now the inevitability of evil appeared in an extreme and utterly new form" (Baczko, *Hiob...*, p. 17). For David Wootton's translation of "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," see *Candide and Related Texts*, Indianapolis 2000, pp. 99–108.

⁸⁰⁸ Voltaire, "Tolerance," in: *The Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. H. I. Woolf, New York 1924.

⁸⁰⁹ Voltaire, "The Ignorant Philosopher," p. 460.

⁸¹⁰ Although in *Treatise on Tolerance* he wrote that virtue was superior to knowledge, this was not aimed at knowledge as such, but at knowledge convinced of its infallibility. "The fewer dogmas one has to deal with, the fewer the disputes over them; and the fewer the disputes, the less the risk of calamity," Voltaire sums up (Voltaire, *Treatise on Tolerance*, p. 87). This is surely why he provides this famous advice in *Candide*: "we need to work our fields" (Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 129), which sounds almost like encouragement to work on the basics. There was no point in embarking on great projects, but nor should one withdraw from life. "Voltaire did not dream of a just society, but of rule of law; he did not dream of a happy community, but of a people who were less unhappy and more affluent; he did not long for a transparent and rational society, but for a state that ensured tolerance and supported the development of the sciences and arts" (Baczko, *Hiob...*, p. 76).

⁸¹¹ Baczko writes: "Following the whole sensualist-empirical approach, freedom is not negative, it is not independent of conditions, of external necessities it cannot avoid. Stressing a dependency on surroundings does not, therefore, entail negating action – it was an affirmation of the actions of the concrete individual, actions arising from their passions, their diverse ties to reality, mainly expressed in people's needs" (Bronisław Baczko, "Wstęp," in: idem (ed.), *Filozofia francuskiego oświecenia*, p. 51).

⁸¹² We see this clearly in Montesquieu in *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), where we read a confession of fundamental quandary characteristic of a breakthrough period: "Man, as a physical being, is governed by invariable laws like other bodies. As an intelligent being, he constantly violates the laws god has established and changes those he himself establishes; he must guide himself, and yet he is a limited

The Enlightenment was taking bolder steps toward an active society. Materialist fatalism could not be the main prop in this process. The life awakened in the Rococo era seemed to be smothered in a work like *The System of Nature*, and there was a yearning to emphasize and justify human vitality, spontaneity, and activity. The recipe for restrained materialistic fatalism came from English philosophy, with which, as we have said, the *philosophes* were basically all fascinated. As we recall, according to Locke, who made man a *tabula rasa* inscribed with experience, human existence was not solely passive. Man was not only condemned to being tossed by external influences, to passively accumulating impressions. In France, this way of thinking was adopted by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, who laid the foundation for dynamic sensualism, which entered the bloodstream of French culture and influenced Noverre, among others.

Condillac gained the Encyclopedists' recognition with *Traité des Systèmes* (Treatise on Systems, 1749), an extensive critique of seventeenth-century metaphysicians, but he truly made his mark in French intellectual history as the author of two works of epistemology: *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746)⁸¹³ and *Treatise on the Sensations* (1754).⁸¹⁴ On the one hand, Condillac took a critical approach to Locke, accusing him of stopping halfway.⁸¹⁵ The former radicalized the principle that nothing is in the mind that was not previously in the senses, denying the autonomous nature of reflection that Locke had preserved: "Judgment, reflection, desires, passions, and so forth are only sensation itself differently transformed."⁸¹⁶ According to Cassirer, on the other hand, Condillac was faithful to Locke, in his program for studying the origin of human knowledge, for reconstructing our minds, "[not] content merely to present the growth of the mind and the progressive variety of its forms, he wants rather to elucidate the tendency of this growth and to penetrate into its real moving forces."⁸¹⁷ In this effort, he based his work on Locke's thesis of "uneasiness" as what powers human existence. Locke had already stated that, in Cassirer's words:

In order to understand the latent energy behind all the metamorphoses of the mind, which does not permit it to retain any form but drives it on to ever new shapes and

being; he is subject to ignorance and error, as are all finite intelligences; he loses even the imperfect knowledge he has" (Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler et al., Cambridge 1989, p. 5).

⁸¹³ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. Hans Aarsleff, Cambridge 2001.

⁸¹⁴ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, "Treatise on the Sensations," in: *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Franklin Philip, New York 1982.

⁸¹⁵ Zapašnik (*Filozofia...*, pp. 83–95) stresses the dependence of Condillac's epistemology on the work of Malebranche.

⁸¹⁶ Condillac, "Treatise...", p. 171.

⁸¹⁷ Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, p. 102.

operations, one must assume in the mind an original moving principle. This principle is not to be found in mere ideation and thought but only in desiring and striving. Thus the impulse precedes knowledge and forms its indispensable presupposition.⁸¹⁸

All that was left to Condillac was to confirm this intuition, creating a sensualist vision of man, centered on feelings.

In *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, we read: “Things attract our attention by the aspect that is most relevant to our disposition, our passions, and our condition of life.”⁸¹⁹ We observe here, as in Leibniz, a discovery of the irrational, or perhaps rather the arational foundation to human existence, except that Condillac was far more down-to-earth than the former.⁸²⁰ He saw the drive behind our entire existence as merely seeking pleasure and avoiding pain: “the action of all our faculties is focused on this object.”⁸²¹ We ought to underline that Condillac was not a self-proclaimed materialist. In his first work, he openly stated that the body and soul are two different substances.⁸²² By the same token, he did not examine the soul separately, in its pure form, he studied the state in which it is clearly dependent on the body, i.e., the human condition after the original sin.⁸²³ He wrote: “Our only aim must be to consult experience, and to reason from those facts alone that no one can call into doubt.”⁸²⁴ Metaphysics, the despised “system,” was to be replaced by a positive study of cognition.

Condillac’s “positive science” in its mature form of *Treatise on the Sensations*, was pure sensualism. The “self” governed by feelings of pleasure and pain sought impressions to build knowledge. The tools here are the senses, the human body.

⁸¹⁸ Ibid.

⁸¹⁹ Condillac, *An Essay...*, p. 24. Cassirer comments: “Attention focuses on that which in some sense immediately concerns the individual [from his surroundings], that is, which answers his needs and inclinations” (Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, p. 104).

⁸²⁰ Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, p. 104. Later, we read: “The logical order of our ideas, according to Condillac, is not a primary, but a derived fact; it is only a sort of reflection of the biological order. What on a given occasion seems to be so essential, depends not so much on the nature of things as on the direction of our interest; and our interest is determined by that which is advantageous for us and necessary for our self-preservation” (ibid.). Zapašnik, in turns, comments: “the choice of an object of perception, and an act of attention by which the content reaches the mind, were depicted as practical in nature; both a perception and an error in cognition, the train of ideas in thought and memory, come from the same sources as needs” (Zapašnik, *Filozofia...*, p. 177).

⁸²¹ Condillac, “Treatise...,” p. 166.

⁸²² Condillac, *An Essay...*

⁸²³ As a clergyman, Condillac, safeguarded himself against potential accusations from the religious orthodoxy: “The soul can absolutely acquire knowledge without the help of sense. Before the Fall an altogether different system prevailed from the one in which the soul exists today. Exempt from ignorance and concupiscence, it ruled the senses, and suspended and modified their action as it pleased. Thus it had ideas prior to the use of the senses. But things have changed greatly owing to its disobedience. God has deprived it of all its power” (ibid., p. 13).

⁸²⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

Condillac thought touch was the fundamental sense. Without their other senses, he believed a person still

exists first by its sensitivity to the action of the various parts of its body on each other, and above all to respiratory movements: and there you have the least degree of sensation to which a man can be reduced who is limited to the sense of touch alone. I will call this “basic sentience” because animal life begins and depends uniquely on this activity of the machine.⁸²⁵

This is a highly significant thesis, as it confirms human existence in physiology. The sensualist self is the material and embodied self, though Condillac does not say it up front. This was left to others, such as La Mettrie and André-François Boureau-Deslandes, from whom Condillac took the concept of the animated statue,⁸²⁶ and, above all, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot and Diderot. We owe an observation that is key to this chapter, and in fact the whole of this book, to Stanisław Zapaśnik: that the sensualist materialism of the Enlightenment conceived in the spirit of Condillac gave birth to the modern vision of agency, taking as its point of departure “not the structure of thoughts and ideas, but of experiences tied to the material body.”⁸²⁷ Here we have a truly revolutionary worldview, grasped by Eric Voegelin as follows: “The orientation toward a transcendental reality is inverted and a new foundation is sought in the direction of the somatic basis of existence.”⁸²⁸

Zapaśnik claims that the first to fully articulate the Enlightenment vision of agency was the physiocrat Turgot, based on the observations of Locke, Freret, Boureau-Deslandes, Condillac, and refuting Maupertuis (with whom he nonetheless agreed to some extent). This took place in his article on “Existence” in the *Encyclopedie*, which described a dynamic model of existence based on something Turgot called an internal sense (*tact interieur*). According to Zapaśnik, an internal sense is a kind of spontaneously experienced testimonial of human vitality. It allows us to feel we are active beings. It informs us of our straining toward things, it is proof of the practical nature of human cognition.⁸²⁹ This makes man feel like an autonomous being, discovering the power of agency inside of him, in his experiences and emotions. This was a cultural revolution.

Let us cite Zapaśnik *in extenso*:

Here, for the first time [...] in the history of European philosophical thought, the experiencing “self” is not defined by its manner of participating in an order beyond

⁸²⁵ Condillac, “Treatise...,” p. 225.

⁸²⁶ On this concept of Boureau-Deslandes’s, cf. Zapaśnik, *Filozofia...*, p. 277.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁸²⁸ Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, Durham 1975, p. 42.

⁸²⁹ Zapaśnik, *Filozofia...*, pp. 110–111.

the senses. The self of Christian philosophy was necessarily conceived as tied to the mind of God. The Cartesian self was an exertion of the consciousness cutting through the concrete nature of its own content, which was damming its movement, to discover, to oppose that content, the order of geometrical ideas beyond it, in which it [the self] participates, upon which depended its ability to define itself as a subject, and also guaranteed the certainty of the knowledge it possessed. Turgot's "self" is consciousness conceived as ever-present, an irreducible center of experience, thus setting itself apart from all its content. This is the start and condition for movement of thought, seeking – for itself and only within the scope of its own capacities – the criteria for the certainty of its knowledge.⁸³⁰

Turgot showed man was an energetic, dynamic creature, not a passive receptor. The other sensualists of the period made similar statements. In the Enlightenment anthropology, the individual had ceased to be a reactive element subject to the order of the Whole, and began to be guided by a sense of personal interest, striving to gain as much autonomy as possible within the Whole, yearning to sample sensual pleasures on their own terms. The individual made an attempt to shape the Whole, from a conviction that the essence of the Whole was contained in individual experiences. Agency and the subject were made equivalent. It was against this backdrop that the conflict between the aspirations of the individual and society was described in works by La Mettrie, later by Holbach, and above all in the philosophy of Diderot. In previous centuries, this conflict was always resolved in favor of society, yet in the Enlightenment we see the emergence of the individual who is above society. Initially, the brilliant artist was put in this role, his rights most vociferously proclaimed by Diderot; but soon this concept was enlarged to every individual who had the strength to oppose the pressure of conventions. Such was the case with the Marquis de Sade, whom Zapašnik calls the first eighteenth-century individualist.⁸³¹ As we shall see, the political consequences of this were enormous.

The energy given to individual beings was attributed to the passions. The Enlightenment tried to free itself from the oppressive determinism, searching for what could elevate man once more over the rest of creation. Reason was unfit for this role, as the enlightened French tended to believe that it was only good for calculating. As such, they believed that a rational man was unlikely to be tempted to perform great deeds. Moral autonomy required a different fuel. Claude-Adrien Helvétius, who circulated among the Encyclopedists and creatively developed Condillac's doctrine, claimed that this could be the emotions: "The passions are to ethics what movement is to physics. Movement creates, annihilates, preserves, and animates

⁸³⁰ Ibid., pp. 112–113.

⁸³¹ Ibid., p. 384. We will be taking a closer look at Sade in the next chapter.

everything; without movement, everything dies; similarly, the passions give life to the moral world.”⁸³²

The motif of the passions that charge human lives, by which humankind can surpass its natural limitations and act heroically, was nothing new to France. It suffices to recall Pascal’s “order of the heart,” but even in Descartes and Malebranche we find no condemnation of the feelings as such, only the injunction that they be suitably controlled. In the first half of the eighteenth century this path was taken by Rémond de Saint-Mard and Luc de Clapiers, Marquis Vauvenargues. For both, the passions drove human life. According to Zapaśnik, Saint-Mard believed that:

The mind is merely a viewer, passively observing the effects as the passions emerge. Its intervention is a disruption, not an aid in achieving happiness, given that wisdom itself is a passion. These were views that could have been attributed to Pascal, were it not for the sharp differences in opinion between them when it came to the real consequences of the original sin. All the passions are good, Rémond assured us.⁸³³

In Vauvenargues, we find less optimism and more heroism. He was a soldier who died at thirty-two years of age, and was highly esteemed by Voltaire, partly for creating a vision of man stripped of illusions of triumphant rationalism. Vauvenargues was frank: “Our passions in no way differ from us ourselves; among them are those that are the very stuff and content of our soul.”⁸³⁴ This is why an existence pursuing the mirage of peace makes no sense. Life as such is merely restlessness, a constant involvement incompatible with contemplation: “the wise men are also mistaken in admonishing peace and moderation to those who are created for action and passionate living.”⁸³⁵

We find an important trope in Vauvenargues’s diagnosis that the emotional nature of human existence is the attempt to break through determinism. While it is true that we are subject to all sorts of necessities, and that we cannot speak of freedom as a decision with no conditions, this does not make us captives. If we give ourselves entirely to our passions, if we experience existence to the full, and do not distance ourselves from it in search of the illusion of security, we are authentic, and therefore free. Vauvenargues was no optimist, and so his giving the emotions a key existential role had nothing to do with triumphalism. Its concept was not immorality, allowing individuals to emancipate themselves from social restrictions. But even in Vauvenargues, we see a striving to emancipate the individual existence,

⁸³² Ibid., p. 255.

⁸³³ Ibid., p. 167.

⁸³⁴ Quoted from: Bogdan Suchodolski, *Rozwój nowożytnej filozofii człowieka*, Warsaw 1967, p. 706.

⁸³⁵ Quoted in: *ibid.*

a practically modern individualism, especially because the passions are what every individual autonomously experiences as the essence of life.

Helvétius offered an original adaption of the conviction of the emotional nature of human existence that was spreading at that time.⁸³⁶ In the treatise *Essay on the Mind*, we read: “laziness is natural to man [...] attention gives him pain and fatigue; he [...] gravitates incessantly towards repose as bodies towards a centre.”⁸³⁷ It might seem that this view is opposite to Vauvenargues’.⁸³⁸ We are tempted to see it as a manifestation of the degeneration of aristocracy that Helvétius represented – the ideal of chivalric action replaced by a libertine marasmus. And yet Helvétius was highly critical of his class, suggesting that anthropology be based on not one, but two factors of human nature: on boredom and the passions. Together, they prohibit us from saying that man is slothful by nature. What drives the passions? A yearning for pleasure, Helvétius said: “We therefore constantly desire new impressions, in order to put us in mind every instant of our existence; because every one of these informations affords us pleasure.”⁸³⁹ Though we are prone to idleness, when it is prolonged it becomes unbearable. Pleasure only guarantees variance, which is why we strive for action, we are marked by an unquenchable unrest. This is tied to our constitution, as sensory creatures. We operate on the principle of stimulation, which we actively seek. This search is governed by the principle of striving for pleasure and avoiding pain. It comes from *amour soi*, self-love, which Helvétius saw as the basic trait of human existence. He did not see *amour soi* as superficial hedonism. In *Essay on the Mind* we find a truly groundbreaking thought: “It is therefore to strong passions that we owe the invention and wonders of arts; and consequently they are to be considered as the germ productive of genius and the powerful spring that carries men to great actions.”⁸⁴⁰ What makes this thought modern is what comes next: “By the word Strong-Passion, I mean a passion, the object of which is so necessary to our happiness, that without the possession of it life would be insupportable.”⁸⁴¹

Let us take a closer look at this fragment, as it shows the innovative nature of Helvétius’s mechanism for ordering the passions, a supplement to Turgot’s general diagnosis. In the premodern era, in an aristocratic society, the passions were to be tamed in the name of a rationally discovered Order, while in the modern era, in a bourgeois society, they were meant to be unleashed – to express the inner human

⁸³⁶ Helvétius’s direct inspiration, Condillac, wrote: “The influence of the passions is so great that without it the understanding is virtually at a standstill, so much that for lack of passions there is barely any intellect left. For certain talents they are even absolutely necessary” (Condillac, *An Essay...*, p. 69).

⁸³⁷ Claude-Adrien Helvétius, *Essays on the Mind*, trans. William Mudford, London 1807, pp. 223–224.

⁸³⁸ Voegelin writes of Vauvenargues’s “existential emotionalism” as compared to Helvétius’s “instrumental emotionalism” (Voegelin, *From the Enlightenment...*, pp. 44–46).

⁸³⁹ Helvétius, *Essays...*, p. 224.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 229–230.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

essence and, with it, being as such. The most creative pursuit is the individual's striving for autonomy. This is why, as an example of "Strong-Passions," Helvétius mentions the longing for freedom.⁸⁴² If you wish to be free, "dare to condemn death; kings will then tremble before thee, whilst thou alone shalt fear no person,"⁸⁴³ we read in *Essay on the Mind*. Small wonder that this book was condemned by all the conservative forces in France, and that Nietzsche read it carefully. It was feared, though at the same time the strength discovered in the individual soul embodied in *passion fortes* was appreciated. They "can execute the greatest actions, defy dangers, pain, death, and heaven itself."⁸⁴⁴ Thus, God died.

Helvétius ushered in an apotheosis of emotion that was key to the history of the Modern Era. He wrote a logical ending to a tale inspired, on the one hand, by Pascal and Malebranche, and on the other, by Locke. Humanity was rebuilt as an active ability to emotionally experience impressions. The emotional being was the individual, who strove to constantly expand their sphere of influence. Inhibitions such as tradition or superhuman authorities were pared away. Agency was internalized; for Helvétius, Turgot, Rousseau, and Diderot, each individual could express it autonomously, if only they followed an inner impulse. The soul ceased to be God's property, it attained deification. This is the deeper content of the Enlightenment project. French culture of the latter half of the eighteenth century expressed this transformation through the efforts of emotionally charged "geniuses." Among them was Noverre.

The *Philosophes* and Dance

When we probe deeply into Helvétius's *Essay on the Mind*, we find some thoughts that take us closer to understanding the immediate context of Noverre's reforms, to help in describing the soul, which he sought to address and express through his ballets. The following fragment is worth quoting: "only a strong passion, which, being more perspicuous than good sense, can teach us to distinguish the extraordinary from the impossible, which men of sense are ever confounding."⁸⁴⁵ Or, a few pages on:

⁸⁴² Like the Encyclopedists, he was a staunch opponent of despotism, whether political or religious.

⁸⁴³ Helvétius, *Essays...*, p. 230.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid. Small wonder that a twentieth-century Christian thinker like Voegelin still felt compelled to give a violent refutation of Helvétius's views, writing: "Enlightened utilitarianism [of which Helvétius was a pioneer] is but the first in a series of totalitarian, sectarian movements to be followed later by Positivism, Communism and National Socialism" (Voegelin, *From Enlightenment...*, p. 52). It seems a rather eccentric idea to make Helvétius a precursor to Nazism, yet Voegelin's argument is worth exploring.

⁸⁴⁵ Helvétius, *Essays...*, p. 235.

Indolence is always the predominant quality in a man of sense: he has nothing of that activity of the soul, by which a great man in power forms new springs for moving the world, or sows the seeds of future events. It is only to the man of passion, and to him who thirsts after glory, that the book of futurity is open.⁸⁴⁶

In terms of the ballet stage, the “man of sense” was, of course, the ballet master, holding on to classicist, rational rules, and the dancer they set in motion on the opera stage, performing complex technical evolutions purely for show. Meanwhile, the man of great passions was Noverre himself, longing to fill the stage with expressive characters tossed about by *passions fortes*.⁸⁴⁷

The basic question that the Enlightenment anthropology brought to the dance scene was: How to express great passions through movement? Formalized, technically complicated dance choreographies were not up to the task. These were merely the passionless and conventional work of the “rational man.” The same formula that we discovered in theater discourse emerged in sensualist philosophy. This was a revitalization of ancient pantomime conceived as a mystery play of emotions. The key term here was the gesture, for this was how pantomime was viewed – as the art of a very profoundly conceived gesture.

The gesture was plumbed by Enlightenment thought of the mid-eighteenth century. In a nutshell, gesture was materialized passion. Charles Batteux called attention to its enormous role in conversation in *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe* (The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle, 1746). He believed that articulated language was a tool of reason, while tone of voice and gesture were tools of the heart, and therefore, articulated language was incapable of fully expressing a human being.⁸⁴⁸ Batteux’s thought was taken up by Condillac, who claimed that gestures and inarticulate sounds were the germ of interpersonal communication. Living in a state of nature, individuals’ “mutual discourse made them connect the cries of each passion to the perceptions of which they were the natural signs. They usually accompanied the cries with some movement, gesture, or action that made the expression more striking (*plus sensible*).”⁸⁴⁹ Condillac claimed that while articulated language developed slowly and with difficulty, *langage d’action* (the language of action) became richer sooner, because “sensible images were more readily within [...] reach than articulated sounds.”⁸⁵⁰ This is why Condillac was not surprised that ancient cultures, such as the Hebrews, readily and frequently used pantomime.⁸⁵¹ According

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 239.

⁸⁴⁷ Interestingly, Helvétius counts the Great Dupré among those of great passions (ibid., p. 246).

⁸⁴⁸ Chazin-Bennahum, *Cahusac...*, p. 174.

⁸⁴⁹ Condillac, *Essay on the Origin...*, p. 114.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

⁸⁵¹ As another reason, Condillac pointed to the nature of the people of the East, whose “character naturally inclined them to a mode of conversation which so readily exercised their vivacity by movement and so greatly suited it by a perpetual representation of sensible images” (ibid., p. 117).

to *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, these are the roots of dance – it was initially the most evocative form of communication, the art of gesture. It was applied “to instruct the people in matters that most deeply concerned them, such as government and religion, for the reason that by acting with greater force on the imagination, the impression was more lasting. Its expression even had a strong and noble quality which the languages, being still weak and barren, could not approach.”⁸⁵²

Not everyone agreed with Condillac. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who longed for a universal, immediately comprehensible language, thought that pantomime was not entirely suited for this role. He wrote: “Although the language of gesture and spoken language are equally natural, still the first is easier and depends less upon conventions.”⁸⁵³ Yet this advantage paled before what most troubled Rousseau:

But when it is a question of stirring the heart and inflaming the passions, it is an altogether different matter [...]. The passions have their gestures, but they also have their accents; and these accents, which thrill us, these tones of voice that cannot fail to be heard, penetrate to the very depths of the heart, carrying there the emotions they wring from us, forcing us in spite of ourselves to feel what we hear.⁸⁵⁴

As a musician, Rousseau was far more sensitive to sounds than to movement. This led him to deprecate the role of dance: “while visible signs can render a more exact imitation, sounds more effectively arouse interest.”⁸⁵⁵ Pantomime is not the art of expressing emotion, it is merely a tool for communicating content: “need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words.”⁸⁵⁶ Music gradually emerged from the first words, which makes it the universal language for expressing emotions, and not dance. This does not mean that Rousseau trivialized dance entirely.

Although Rousseau sought the deepest emotions of the human soul in music, his theory could also be applied to dance. When he wrote: “The study of philosophy and the progress of reason, while having perfected grammar, deprive language of its vital, passionate quality which made it so singable,”⁸⁵⁷ by analogy we could easily apply this conclusion to the reform of the dance stage. Enlightenment thoughts on dance followed these lines precisely. There was a wholesale critique of the rationalist teaching system that led to the technicalization of the dancing body. Though once admired, the Great Dupré became a symbol of anachronistic disciplinary strategies for the Encyclopedists.⁸⁵⁸ They pointed out that people like

⁸⁵² Ibid., p. 118.

⁸⁵³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran, Chicago–London 1966, p. 6.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 8–9.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

⁸⁵⁸ Foster, *Choreography & Narrative...*, p. 32.

Rameau had deprived dance of its “vital and honest tone.” It had been replaced by uniformization, which Saint-Mard had critiqued in *Refléxions sur l’opéra* (Reflections on Opera, 1743), writing of “cardboard dancers that one moves by means of machines.”⁸⁵⁹ Condillac also condemned mechanization in dance. He did stress there were two types: a dance of gestures, whose task was to communicate content, and a dance of steps, which since history began “was used for the expression of certain states of mind, especially joy.”⁸⁶⁰ Yet he added that both kinds should be diverse and neither should be merely a physical exercise or a show for empty applause:

There are different genres of dance, from the simplest to the one that is least so. They are all good, provided they express something, and the degree of their perfection increases with the variety and scope of the expression. A dance that expresses grace and dignity is good; a dance that creates a sort of conversation or dialogue seems to me better. The least perfect is the dance that merely requires strength, dexterity, and agility, because its aim does not have sufficient interest.⁸⁶¹

A harsher tone was struck some years later by Friedrich Melchior, Baron von Grimm, and Johann Georg Sulzer, criticizing the ballets performed in Paris as monotonous and chiefly focused on technique instead of the imitation of nature. As Grimm worded it:

ballets in the French opera are nothing but an academy of dance, where before the audience the mediocre subjects practice the forming, the breaking, and the forming again of the same figures [...]. [A] man of taste does not see in those ballets any diversity; he cannot but regret that so many skillful dancers are used only for doing steps and tricks.⁸⁶²

Sulzer was even more acrid:

One sees bizarrely dressed people with gestures and faults even more bizarre, with forced attitudes and movements which say nothing, madly traversing the stage [...]. Nothing is more absurd than making a *divertissement* so insipid follow a serious drama.⁸⁶³

For somewhat different reasons, Rousseau also criticized the presence of dance in operatic spectacles. In his *Dictionary of Music*, he wrote in the “Opera” entry that dance “by no means deserves the name of art, when it speaks nothing to

⁸⁵⁹ Quoted from: Giles, *Dance...*, p. 259.

⁸⁶⁰ Condillac, *Essay on the Origin...*, p. 118.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁸⁶² Quoted from: Giles, *Dance...*, pp. 253–254.

⁸⁶³ Quoted from: *ibid.*, p. 257.

the mind,”⁸⁶⁴ and this, unfortunately, was what he believed to be the state of things on the French stages. Dance sequences interrupted the action of the theatrical performance, spoiling the mood. Dance was little more than an ornament devoid of content, and thus, according to Rousseau, quite dispensable. Moreover, Rousseau believed that body language should not accompany spoken language, as it does in opera, as this leads to absurdity: “The language of the gesture being the resource of dumb Persons, or those who cannot understand each other, becomes ridiculous between those who speak. We do not answer words by antic tricks, or gestures by discourse.”⁸⁶⁵ This is why he thought dance ought to be barred from the opera, and made into a spectacle unto itself, like the dessert after a main course: “though we ought not to debase a tragic action by leaps, and inter-leaps (*entrechats*), we may still terminate a spectacle very agreeably, by giving a ballet after the opera, as a little entertainment (*petite pièce*) after the tragedy.”⁸⁶⁶ We should stress that Rousseau spoke out against shows of technique and for the dramatization of dance: “It would be much worse, if these fêtes presented the spectator with nothing but a leap without union, and a dance without an object; a gothic and barbarous tissue, in a kind of work, wherein every thing should be painting and imitation.”⁸⁶⁷

Enlightenment thinkers differed in their sensitivity to the beauty of dance. For Rousseau, whose views we shall be exploring in detail in the coming chapter, dance had a certain charm, but the basic condition for its existence was the right context. Dance was not to be mixed with other forms of expression that Rousseau considered more profound: verbal communication and, above all, music. He felt it was important to ensure the viewer understood the content of the performance: “To begin then by giving ballets in action (*ballets en action*), without having first established the convention of gestures, is to speak a language to persons who have not its dictionary, and who, consequently, will not understand it in the least.”⁸⁶⁸ Marmontel, on the other hand, took a different view of dance in the “Pantomime” *Encyclopedia* entry. He stressed the power of communication through gestures, but he did not want to reduce dance to pantomime, clearly setting the two apart.⁸⁶⁹ Like Condillac, he believed that dance less communicated content than basic states of emotion:

all peoples, even the most savage, have an inbred inclination for dancing as much as for singing. Nature has given us both as the vague expression of joy and pleasure, or, rather, as a movement that goes along with such a disposition of the soul. We do not dance

⁸⁶⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Dictionary of Music*, trans. William Waring, London 2010, p. 299.

⁸⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁸⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁸⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁸⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁸⁶⁹ Saint-Mard made a similar statement.

to express a feeling or a thought; we dance for the sake of dancing, in order to comply with the natural activity that youth, health, rest, and joy provide us with.⁸⁷⁰

These words show that Marmontel understood dance unlike Rousseau, and was capable of seeing it as more than silent speech. This way of thinking was characteristic of the branch of the Enlightenment that favored Epicureanism. In *Machine Man*, for instance, La Mettrie made a case for dance as a space of sensory pleasure: “Sometimes poetry or painting, sometimes music or architecture, singing, dance, etc., ravish connoisseurs with pleasure.”⁸⁷¹ Though Voltaire had no urge to dance himself, he was favorably inclined toward the pleasures it could bring. There were also less unequivocal voices. Helvétius, for instance, on the one hand appreciated everything that helped keep the body in shape, believing that people were happier when they were strong and fit,⁸⁷² and on the other, condemned dance when its sole aim was sensory pleasure. In the latter case, this concerned the aristocratic hedonism Helvétius despised, which he linked to balls and theatrical performances. They could not provide satisfaction, he said, as they only led to excess.⁸⁷³ This is surely why Helvétius cautioned against putting too much stock in dance,⁸⁷⁴ which does not mean he condemned it.⁸⁷⁵ Yet such views were in the minority, and dance occupied a far more important place in the reflections of some Encyclopedists than Helvétius supposed.

Let us look at Louis de Cahusac, a librettist working with Jean-Philippe Rameau from the 1740s onward and the author of dance-related entries for the *Encyclopedia*. In 1754’s *La danse ancienne et moderne ou Traité historique de la danse* (Ancient and Modern Dance, or: A Historical Treatise on Dance) he traced the history of dance as carefully as he could, and then outlined his ideal for the art. This was an ancient ideal, but he claimed that antiquity ought to be seen merely as a point of departure for creating an authentically contemporary form of stage dance, which

⁸⁷⁰ Quoted in: Giles, *Dance...*, pp. 251–252.

⁸⁷¹ La Mettrie, *Man, a Machine*, trans. Richard A. Watson and Maya Rybalka, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1994, p. 22.

⁸⁷² Claude Adrien Helvétius, *A Treatise on Man, His Intellectual Qualities and His Education*, trans. W. Hooper, London 1777.

⁸⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

⁸⁷⁴ The symbol of this superstition in *Essay on the Mind* is Marcel: “When Marcel, with his hand placed on his forehead, his eyes fixed, his body without motion, and in the attitude of profound meditation, on seeing a young lady dance, cries out, ‘What variety in a minute!’ doubtless, this dancing-master then perceived in the manner of bending, rising, and performing the steps, elegancies invisible to common eyes; and therefore his exclamation is no farther ridiculous than in the too great importance it places on trifles” (Helvétius, *Essay on the Mind*, pp. 35–36). For another example with Marcel, see p. 477.

⁸⁷⁵ Holbach was similarly cautious, stating that dance could damage your health (Skrzypek, *Holbach*, p. 102).

he called *ballet d'action*.⁸⁷⁶ Cahusac, who adored Sallé's talent,⁸⁷⁷ insisted that dance performances should first and foremost tell a story with a clear construction. Movement was meant to be totally subordinate to the story, with no unnecessary ornament or dispensable *entrées*, without steps strictly for applause, which did not mean that dance technique was suddenly invalid. The aim was to portray inner states, and a tool for this was working with gestures, which the author saw as the quintessence of emotion. In this way, Cahusac sought to create an artistic imitation of nature, thus probing into the essence, displaying the elementary powers governing humanity, breaking with artificial conventions in favor of a clear simplicity. By this vision, dance was an inseparable companion of music in portraying what was most primordial – impressions and emotions.

Here we might quote some important statements from Cahusac's work, showing how far the perception of dance had changed in the course of only a century. Foster has shown that, in the seventeenth century, Menestrier sought the roots of dance in collective religious practices, which made dance a tool for building social bonds. The Enlightenment saw things quite differently.⁸⁷⁸ Cahusac writes of the origins of dance:

Man had sensations at the first moment that he breathed; and the tones of his voice, the play of his features, the movements of his body, were simply expressions of what he felt... The body was peaceful or agitated; the eyes flamed or smouldered; the arms opened or closed, rose toward heaven or sank to the earth; the feet formed steps slow or rapid; all the body, in short, responded by postures, attitudes, leaps, shudders to the sound with which the soul expressed its emotions. Thus song, which is the primitive expression of emotion, developed from itself a second which is in man, and it is this expression that we have named dance.⁸⁷⁹

Here we have a thought-provoking sensualism in dance. Cahusac joined La Mettrie, Condillac, and Helvétius in seeing man as a being that mainly absorbed impressions, inevitably accompanied by emotions. This is human nature – rationality appears only as it overlaps upon this core. Sensory impressions stimulate the individual, and this requires external expression. This gives man a natural proclivity for music and dance. Dance communicates inner states for which no proper words can be found. It is a universal medium. This was the depiction in Cahusac's history, which showed that dance had accompanied humanity in all its incarnations. The

⁸⁷⁶ In reconstructing Cahusac's theory, we base our work on: Chazin-Bennahum, *Cahusac...*, pp. 168–178 and Susan Leigh Foster, "Organizing Dance's History," in: Ellen W. Goellner, Jacqueline Shea Murphy (eds.), *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, New Brunswick, NJ 1995, pp. 231–246.

⁸⁷⁷ Nye, *Mime...*, pp. 122–123; McCleave, *Marie Sallé, a Wise Professional Woman...*, p. 172.

⁸⁷⁸ Foster, *Organizing...*, pp. 231–232.

⁸⁷⁹ Quoted in: *Ibid.*, p. 231.

ancients understood its power, though this was then lost for a time. Only in the Enlightenment was this cardinal error corrected. This meant a return to the ancient roots, but only to elevate the art of dance to new heights.

Foster shows that in shaping *ballet d'action*, the key was the emphasis Cahusac put on individual emotionality, in place of social conventions.⁸⁸⁰ It was in just these categories that Noverre perceived dance, though we must recall that we are not speaking of Expressionism as we now understand it. "Affections were represented, portrayed, but not 'dredged up from the soul,' not thrust forth from the agitated inner being,"⁸⁸¹ or perhaps, that "agitated inner being" was not yet the utterly authentic "self," it was a kind of idealization of the individual drama. Yet this does not change the fact that something of remarkable importance transpired for the shaping of modern dance – the motor driving the dancing body became the inner drama that moved the portrayed individual.

Dancing out Passions – *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* and Its Aftermath

In the Enlightenment, the culture of dancing rationality began to be reshaped into a culture of dancing emotions. Cahusac's ideal ballet, and Noverre's works along with it, drew from the highly popular ideal of *sensibilité*.

Here the dancer was no longer a perfectly moving instrument, they were a "sensitive soul" in search of a sense of fulfillment in the depths of their emotions. This is the soul described in the novels of Abbé Prévost, the soul that Rousseau praised in the *New Heloise*, the soul that was portrayed on stage in the tearjerker comedies (*comédie larmoyante*) of the extremely popular Pierre-Claude Nivelles de La Chaussée. In the mid-eighteenth century the touching and "natural" triumphed in many fields in France. Nature remained idealized in this context, but this was not an ideal of the orderly nature rooted in a rational metaphysics of a century past. Reality became sentimentalized, and with it, art, theater, dance...

Enlightenment "nature" was increasingly elemental, energetic, dynamic. Its heart was rent by passions that squeezed tears from people's eyes by the bucket. In this ideological community, traditional aesthetic forms were seen more as artificial than subtle. There was waning appreciation for products of theatrical convention, for cool reasoning. Paris, and, gradually, all of Europe along with it, demanded

⁸⁸⁰ "Enlightenment concern with expressive gesture, with gesture that depicts the intimate feelings of each character in a story, stems from its capacity to portray individual sensibilities rather than social standing" (ibid., p. 234).

⁸⁸¹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, trans. William Austin, Cambridge 1982, p. 18.

simple, direct emotions. We see this clearly in opera, which, in the 1750s, had seen the victory of the Italian style over the French. The Buffonists,⁸⁸² among them Rousseau, Grimm, and Holbach, were opposed to the model associated with Rameau, in favor of artists from Italy, who won the hearts of the Encyclopedists with works like Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (The Servant Turned Mistress, 1733, Parisian premiere 1752). Rousseau praised it for the primacy of melody, which for him was the emotional and expressive aspect of music, as opposed to harmony, which he saw as its rational and theoretical aspect.⁸⁸³ He also liked that the protagonists of the *opere buffe* were ordinary folk, not mythologized or historical heroes, and most of all, that it had a light and joyful tone.

Interestingly enough, the Italians even influenced the serious French opera style, which gained vivacity, emotion, and expression. The catalyst for change in French opera was Christoph Willibald Gluck, whose composing career began in Vienna, writing music for operas in the Italian style. This ambitious and original artist swiftly reached the conclusion that showy vocals and spectacular staging effects, for which a slender plot was mere pretext, were not enough to satisfy him. With librettist Ranieri de Calzabigi and choreographer Gasparo Angiolini, Gluck began to conceive works with coherent plots that were dramatic in a modern way.⁸⁸⁴ When he went to Paris, he made public tribute to Rousseau for his writings on music, and wanted to express his views in the language of musical theater, which is why he developed the slogan "simplicity and unity."⁸⁸⁵ He wanted to fuse Italian melody and expression, but without the southern mannerisms, to French elegance and gravity. This meant he discarded what had so attracted the moderns, the "marvels" (*merveilleux*).⁸⁸⁶ The Rococo sumptuousness that served to move the hearts of viewers was to be replaced by psychological drama. The point was not so much to make the audience like the performance as to have them be moved by it.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the stages of Paris were ruled by emotions, owing to Voltaire, Marivaux, de La Chaussée, Gluck, and others. As Diderot half-mockingly noted in *Rameau's Nephew*:

Our passions have to be strong [...]. We need exclamations, interjections, suspensions, interruptions, affirmations, and negations. We call out, invoke, clamor, groan, weep,

⁸⁸² Proponents of the light *opera buffa* who argued its superiority over the more distinguished French tradition of Lully and Rameau.

⁸⁸³ From the 1750s onward, mainly for personal reasons, Rousseau became a harsh opponent of Rameau, whom he had previously admired. For more on the subject, see: Skowron, *Mysl...*, pp. 102–212.

⁸⁸⁴ We ought to mention *Le Festin de Pierre* (Pierre's Feast, 1761), a ballet with a compact narrative based on Molière's *Don Juan* and the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Orpheus and Eurydice, 1762).

⁸⁸⁵ Skowron, *Mysl...*, pp. 164–171.

⁸⁸⁶ Aubrey S. Garlington, Jr., "'Le Merveilleux' and Operatic Reform in 18th-Century French Opera," *The Musical Quarterly* 1963, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 484–497.

and laugh openly. No more witticisms, epigrams, neat thoughts – they are too unlike nature. And don't get it into your head that the old theatrical acting and declamation can give us a pattern to follow. Not likely! We want it more energetic, less mannered, more genuine. Simple speeches, the ordinary utterance of passion, will be all the more necessary that our French language is more monotonous, less accented. The animal cry or that of a man in a passion will supply the accent...⁸⁸⁷

We might recall the “tears of blood” that Garrick's acting inspired in Noverre. Their magnetism came from the reassessment we have mentioned. The body on stage became a conduit for the passions. Its performance was to be the cry that Diderot described. The kinesis of order replaced by the kinesis of the spasm. This is the context behind Noverre's telling words:

I think, Sir, that this art has remained in its infancy only because its effects have been limited, like those of fireworks designed simply to gratify the eyes; although this art shares with the best plays the advantage of inspiring, moving, and captivating the spectator by the charm of its interest and illusion. No one has suspected its power of speaking to the heart.⁸⁸⁸

As an adherent of the school of *sensibilité*, Noverre appealed:

let us not practise steps only, let us study the passions. In training ourselves to feel them, the difficulty of expressing them will vanish, then the features will receive their impressions from the sentiments within, they will give force to exterior movements and paint in lines of fire the disorder of the senses and the anxiety within us.⁸⁸⁹

As a proponent of Cahusac, he demanded:

If [the arts'] effect be limited to dazzling the eyes without moving the heart, without rousing the passions, without disturbing the soul, from that moment they will cease to be pleasing. The voice of nature and the faithful expression of sentiment will always transport emotions into the least sensitive souls; pleasure is a tribute that the heart cannot refuse to the things which flatter and interest it.⁸⁹⁰

At the same time as Cahusac and Grimm were writing their works on dance, the career of the future author of *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* was only beginning.

⁸⁸⁷ Denis Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen, Indianapolis–Cambridge 2001, p. 70.

⁸⁸⁸ Noverre, *Letters...*, p. 11.

⁸⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Upon his return from England, he attempted to find a post in the capital, but without success. He set off once more for the provinces – to Lyons. That was where he set out his ideas in writing, but also prepared many performances, in which he tried to bring them to life.⁸⁹¹ These were so admired that he was offered employment by Charles Eugene, Duke of Württemberg. Noverre published his *Letters* in Stuttgart, swiftly earning the applause of the Encyclopedists, in part because his attack on the traditionalism of the Opera resonated with their critique of political and cultural traditionalism.

We should stress how the views of Noverre and the *philosophes* conjoined. Noverre opposed the perception of the dancer as no more than a machine, much as he criticized a view of the human body solely as a mechanism governed by the immaterial soul.⁸⁹² At the same time, there was no talk of entirely discarding dance techniques, that is, the irrationalization of dance, as there was no talk of it in the Encyclopedists, whose artistic program was senti-mentalism, and not irrational expressivism. In many places in the *Letters*, Noverre showed that the development of technique meant progress in dance. His aim, like that of Cahusac or Grimm, was to make the dancer a more sensitive machine,⁸⁹³ to inject emotion into their technique while they remained under the sway of reason.⁸⁹⁴ This is why *Letters on Dancing and Ballets* is such a model Enlightenment text, much as the works of Voltaire, Holbach, and Diderot. It allows us to touch the beating heart of the kinesis of the day, to see how the eighteenth century mobilized the individual to act.

Noverre wrote that the ballet master should “imitate nature, it is a noble model and never misleads those who follow it.”⁸⁹⁵ There was nothing original here. Batteux had already clearly declared that art ought to be an imitation of nature. Yet Noverre added something remarkably important to this notion: “Action, in relation to dancing, is the art of transferring *our* sentiments and passions to the souls of the spectators by means of the true expression of our movements, gestures, and features.”⁸⁹⁶ The essence of ballets of action was to be the personalization of nature. Most of all, Noverre wanted to imitate what was dynamic, the life-giving impulse, manifested by the emotions buzzing in people. This meant nature was not just our surroundings. Ballet and art were not mere reports. Their task was to access what

⁸⁹¹ A list of Noverre’s works is supplied by Lynham, *The Chevalier Noverre...*, pp. 165–173.

⁸⁹² Foster, *Choreography & Narrative...*, pp. 74–78.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79.

⁸⁹⁴ “It must not be understood from this that I seek to abolish the customary arm movements, all difficult and brilliant steps, and all the elegant positions in dancing; I ask for more variety and expression in the arms, I wish to see them speak with more energy; they express sentiment and voluptuousness, but this is not sufficient; they have yet to depict fury, jealousy, spite, inconstancy, grief, vengeance, irony, all the passions of man” (Noverre, *Letters...*, p. 104).

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁸⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99, emphasis – W. K.

drives reality, and, with it, humanity – the inner motion of being, which was always individual, but in this individualism, it was something fundamentally universal: “A well-composed ballet is a living picture of the passions, manners, customs, ceremonies and customs of *all* nations of the globe, consequently, it must be expressive in all its details and speak to the soul through the eyes.”⁸⁹⁷ Noverre agreed entirely with Cahusac, whom he defended from the dance traditionalists’ attacks in *Letters*.⁸⁹⁸ The conservatives, whose model representatives in Noverre’s work are the Opera directors,⁸⁹⁹ were incapable of seeing the power of the primordial gesture Cahusac described. It involved the expression of the natural power of a human as a sensory being, something which all individuals share.

Believing in the power of the gesture, in pantomime as the essence of dance, meant disposing of all technicality artificiality and formalities, everything that distracted from the main task – portraying and releasing passions. Noverre wrote:

Instructed in the fundamental principles of our art, let us follow the movements of our soul; it cannot betray us when it is subject to a lively feeling, and if at those moments it cause the arms to make such and such a gesture, this gesture is always just and correct and sure in its effect. The passions are the springs which actuate the machine; whatever movements result from it, they cannot fail to be expressive. After this, it cannot but be concluded that the sterile rules of a school must disappear from the *danse d’action* to give place to natural expression.⁹⁰⁰

Noverre’s truth came from experience. As for Diderot, nature meant, most of all, being active. When Noverre spoke of the unnatural, he was condemning the Opera’s academic affectation.⁹⁰¹ Yet this does not mean that Noverre gave up on stylizing the dancing body. On the contrary, there can be no talk of naturalism here. Authenticity requires intellectual effort, because a person is not strictly a sensory being. Nature is to be imitated, but also actively corrected. In other words, the act of imitation is not literal copying, but a creative and synthetic grasp and stylization of nature:

Nature does not always afford us models of perfection, hence one must possess the art of correcting them, of presenting them in a pleasing light, at an appropriate moment,

⁸⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 16, emphasis – W. K.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁹ Noverre venomously stated: “it is a profanation, with them [the Opera directors] not to follow blindly the old laws and ancient rubrics which have been handed down from father to son” (ibid., p. 58).

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹⁰¹ “While taste is sacrificed to difficulties, while there is no reasoning so that dancing is made to consist of *tours de force* and tumbling, a low trade will be made of a charming art; dancing, so far from making progress, will degenerate and again sink into obscurity, and I dare to say into the decline in which it was no more than a century ago” (ibid., p. 104).

in agreeable situations which, while veiling their defects, still confer on them the graces and charms which they ought to possess to be really beautiful.⁹⁰²

This is why Noverre's works did not forego technique, nor did he intend to abandon a traditional notion of dance, as an arrangement of steps and not as a pantomime. The point was not merely for the dancer to release energy from within. Only when corrected could nature become truly natural – as the rational basis of a worldview, a universal principle. In this regard, we can speak of a characteristic Enlightenment dualism in Noverre: nature as a point of departure – observable facts; and nature as a destination – unbending rules extracted from reality as an ideal model.⁹⁰³

In this context, the ballet master had a vital role. It was his job to synthesize and set in motion. In imitating nature, it was he who in fact was perfecting it. He ceased to be a guardian of orthodoxy imposed from above, and became a demiurge, the true author of the ballet, a creator of reality. The ballet script was just as essential as the arrangement of steps, or even more essential. This is why Noverre included scripts he had written in the *Letters*. These were meant to prove his choreographic talent in the modern sense of the word. It was no longer the composition of movements, but the whole course of the performance that the ballet master oversaw. A dance theater separate from the dramatic theater was born. The choreographer stood at the summit of the hierarchy. He worked with the composer, set designer, and costume designer, not as one voice in a team, but as the coordinator – he initiated and supervised the work, he called out: ACTION! This was an extremely important shift – the center of the dance universe was no longer the dancing master, codifying and teaching the rules of performance, or compiling steps, nor the dancer as a virtuoso of the performance, but the artist-choreographer, transmitting *his* feelings and passions to the viewer. Ballet became a space of the individual creative genius. The innovative individual created it, not just arranged it, as was the case in the prevailing anonymous convention.

Although Enlightenment pantomime could sometimes be conventional, it was more expressive and individualized than the social dances that had earlier been used to build spectacles. In classicism and even the Rococo, it was the form or outer shape that reigned supreme. Noverre, on the other hand, almost always appealed to the interior, to personalized emotions. This is an important moment,

⁹⁰² Ibid., pp. 41–42.

⁹⁰³ Baczko reconstructs this Enlightenment dualism as follows: “The ‘return to the roots’ in interpreting humanist reality takes on a dual nature [in the ‘age of light’]; in some renditions, this concerns the genesis of an institution, a system of beliefs and values, etc., drawing from facts as the only real things for reason to hold onto; in others, this is a question of their rationale, of a principle grounded by the concept of human nature in nature itself, generally conceived as a universal, rational order” (Bronisław Baczko, *Rousseau: samotność i wspólnota*, Warsaw 1964, p. 100).

intersecting with the gradual decline of aristocratic and religious authorities and the development of an egalitarian rhetoric of senti-mentalism. It was skill and talent, not birthright or a slavish fidelity to tradition, that were to decide upon success. A universal sensitivity rooted in a feeling for common sense became the ultimate arbiter. Noverre might have repeated after Voltaire:

The more clearly I saw that people differed with regard to climate, custom, language, laws, religion, and level of intelligence, the more I noted that all operated on the same moral basis. Though they may know nothing of theology, all have a basic sense of just and unjust. All came to possess these notions as their minds developed.⁹⁰⁴

Here we should stress that the appreciation of emotion in *ballet d'action* was not a case of open egotism. The Enlightenment clearly followed the injunction of: "Expression [...] is not to be directly related to [...] a real person."⁹⁰⁵ When Noverre spoke of "his" feelings, he had in mind universal human feelings, which were his as well. Expression was individualized in dance, but it did not immediately become idiosyncratic, so to speak. In terms of the turn toward emotions, we may be surprised at the technical terminology that is everywhere in Noverre, emphasizing that the choreographer was, above all, a rational specialist. Let us take a look at his work method:

First I draw up a plan and adjust it to the needs of my play; in other words, I remove all overly dry segments which proceed too calmly and add various episodes according to need and circumstances, from which to develop the flow of the action, extend it, or polish it. In putting my thoughts down on paper, I never forget that I am composing for dance. Knowing, on the one hand, the shortcomings of this art, and on the other its capabilities, I aim to select things that are clear, comprehensible, interesting, and able to create a picture.⁹⁰⁶

This surprise vanishes when we realize that individualized emotion was still universal in the Enlightenment. Thus, to make his work possible, the ballet master had to be endowed with the spark of authentic dance talent (the expressive aspect), which Noverre often stresses, and simultaneously hold the requisite knowledge – historical, social, musical, but also geometrical⁹⁰⁷ and anatomical⁹⁰⁸ (the formal aspect). The *Letters* provide a highly characteristic comparison:

⁹⁰⁴ Quoted in: Baczek, *Hiob...*, pp. 67–68 [owing to the lack of reference, I have been forced to translate from the Polish – trans.].

⁹⁰⁵ Dahlhaus, *Aesthetics...*, p. 22.

⁹⁰⁶ Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka...*, p. 93.

⁹⁰⁷ "An acquaintance with geometry cannot but be helpful: it will impart neatness to the figures, order to the combinations, precision to the forms and, in lessening moments of tedium, lend accuracy to the execution" (*ibid.*, p. 33).

⁹⁰⁸ Studying anatomy, the ballet master discovers "with ease the natural and habitual defects of physique which so often impede a pupil's progress. Understanding the cause of evil, he will easily remedy it;

A good engineer will not seize on the feeblest works of a fortified place, if they be commanded by heights defended by men able to dislodge him. The sole means of achieving his aim is to make himself master of the principal defences and to carry them, because those which are weaker will then only be able to offer a feeble resistance or must themselves surrender. There are arts like fortified places and artists who resemble engineers. It is not a question of skimming the surface of the art, it must be probed to the depths. It is not enough to apply oneself to the minor details, for to seize upon superficial things only is to degenerate into mediocrity and obscurity.⁹⁰⁹

The ballet master/engineer was meant to be guided by the ideals of progress. This signified less discarding all rules than trying to overcome the weaknesses of the idiom to date. Noverre often stressed that the foundations of a classicist training were still the point of departure, though he strove to expand and enrich them. He writes, for instance, that it is essential to animate the arms, which had been neglected in dance at the expense of the legs. He also urges using facial features to be expressive.⁹¹⁰ He utterly rejects masks, which were still popular on stages during his time, but also knows that this will demand dedication to give the face due attention in the training process.⁹¹¹ Thus, we can see that technique was not abandoned entirely, only adapted. It was meant to serve new goals, which did not at all suggest that the bodies subject to it were more free. For Noverre and his contemporaries, ballet still meant a physical regime, requiring rigorous discipline from dancers. The attempt to eliminate the Cartesian dualism is a novelty of sorts (it is not by chance that Aristotle is the only ancient philosopher Noverre quotes in the *Letters*): “In order that our art may arrive at that degree of the sublime which I demand and hope for it, it is imperative for dancers to divide their time and studies between

and basing his lessons and counsel on a strict and careful examination, they cannot but be profitable” (ibid., p. 35). Significantly, as it shows that he had yet to abandon mechanicism, Noverre presents the ballet master as a model of a royal equerry, who, owing to his studies of the horse’s anatomy, created a method of achieving control, with effort from neither the horse nor the rider. When we take this into account, we begin to see that perceiving the Paris Opera ballet as a “riders’ stable” only expressed a deeply-rooted conviction in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 105.

⁹¹⁰ Here we clearly see Garrick’s influence. The English actor would not declaim, and, analogously, Noverre’s dancers did not offer mere shows of technique. Garrick tried to always stay in character, to perform as naturally as possible, and so in Noverre, movement was always meant to further the action, and dance depict the internal states of the protagonists. Finally, Garrick stressed facial expressions rendering a whole palette of emotions, and so in Noverre, too, the face reflected the action.

⁹¹¹ Noverre passionately decried a lack of control over facial expressions: “Every dancer whose face alters as the result of his physical efforts, and whose features are continually in a state of convulsion, is a bad dancer who disregards the first principles of his art, who concerns himself only with the mechanical side of dancing, and who has never penetrated its spirit. Such a person is only fitted to attempt dangerous leaps; the spring-board should be the stage since he sacrifices the miming, spirit and charm of his art to a debasing routine, for, instead of studying how to depict and feel, he applies himself only to the physical side of his talent” (Noverre, *Letters...*, p. 86).

the mind and the body, and that both become the object of their application.”⁹¹² Yet let us recall that he was not speaking of the dancing Renaissance courtiers saturated with the ideals of humanism, but of the professional dancers educated in the schools opened by Louis XIV. Noverre mobilized these craftsmen – playthings for the pleasure of the court viewer – for intellectual work. The body was not meant to be a passive instrument, it was to acquire self-consciousness, while remaining an object of disciplinary techniques.

According to Noverre, ballet “is a type of more or less complicated machinery,”⁹¹³ but these machines were not soulless. The task of the ballet master was to avoid mechanical gestures and arrangements of steps, creating living organisms based on profound rules of mechanics. There was some contradiction in this task, which was swiftly discovered and against which Romanticism revolted, yet in Noverre’s time it had yet to be perceived. Optimism and an enthusiasm for mobilization prevailed. Ballets were created according to the new model alongside a modern, progressive world. Individuality and freedom became the basic values in culture; in Noverre we encounter this passage:

I cannot [...] isolate any precise method of composition; talent, taste, and imagination cannot be loaned to anyone. Every person has their own way of creating and comprehending, just as every person has their own appearance and style. My principles are general and changing, and every ballet master can adapt them to their own requirements and their own demands, much as every woman chooses a hairdo to match her face.⁹¹⁴

When we take these words into consideration, we are not surprised at Noverre’s aversion to notation. He believed he was incapable of capturing what made a performance exceptional, the individual nuances, it was more standardizing and confining dance than freeing it.

Enlightenment in dance meant a struggle for a new kinesis. The word “action” was no accident here, it alluded to initiative, canceling the monopoly on the right to mobilization. Modifying Ranciere’s terminology,⁹¹⁵ we might say that the moveable was to be torn from the talons of a central unit and given to the hands of talented individuals, the principles of its division were to undergo change in the spirit of democratization. Much as the Encyclopedists struggled against the authority of the institutionalized religions in the name of the free use of reason, Noverre stood up against the courtly ballet master community, so that the body could be exercised not only to enhance the prestige of its mentor, but also to express a new worldview.

⁹¹² Ibid., p. 108.

⁹¹³ Ibid., p. 33.

⁹¹⁴ Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka...*, p. 84.

⁹¹⁵ On the adaptation we suggest, cf. the introduction to the present book.

Discarding the masks meant a greater individualization of the dancers than ever before. Emphasizing the emotions expressed throughout the body showed the drama of the human condition. Dance was to be serious, for the situation of the individual in the world was serious. It was now an active, autonomous individual, not a hierarchical community in the center of the events on stage. We see this vividly in the libretto of Noverre's most famous ballet, *Jason et Médée*, with its suspense, dramatic decisions, and unbridled passions. Action ballets in his rendition were acts of political autonomization, ushering in an expressive kinesiology to replace the old disciplinary one.⁹¹⁶

Despite resistance from the conservatives, Noverre's reform caught on. This was the expression of a deeper ferment. For many years, unable to find employment at the Paris Opera, Noverre worked outside of France – in Stuttgart, then in Vienna, and briefly in Milan. In these last two cities, his ideas clashed with those of Gasparo Angiolini. The latter stressed that his master, Franz Hilverding,⁹¹⁷ had staged dramatic dance spectacles in Vienna as far back as the 1740s; these were based on the expression of the entire body, and thus went far beyond the prevailing standards on the French stages of the time. Angiolini noted that Hilverding had created a new idiom in dance, and thus, as his pupil, he had the right to dictate its principles. A dispute broke out,⁹¹⁸ additionally complicated by the fact that both Noverre and Angiolini had worked with Gluck, whose reform surely helped promote action ballet on stages across Europe.⁹¹⁹ Yet it is not so much the dispute that interests us as the fact that, owing to Noverre and Angiolini, *ballet d'action* caught on throughout the continent.⁹²⁰ It was staged in France, Italy, Austria, the Germanic states, and even in Russia and Poland.⁹²¹

Leading dancers of the Opera began traveling to see Noverre in Stuttgart, hoping to collaborate with him. Their names – Gaetano Vestris, Maximilien Gardel, and Jean Dauberval – now appear in every dance history book as symbols of the turn

⁹¹⁶ The Enlightenment reevaluation did not mean, as Foucault often stressed, the loosening of discipline, only its evolution in the use of power. The body was no longer to be disciplined from without, but was increasingly meant to discipline itself, i.e., through a demand for expression. In *ballet d'action* emotions were not expressed spontaneously, but based on the requisite (and not entirely new) technique. This meant we had disciplined expression. The basic shift was not so much from physical discipline to physical expression as from disciplinary power through an external form to disciplinary power through expressing what was "inside."

⁹¹⁷ We have mentioned the possible influence of Marie Sallé on Hilverding, and the fact that one of the dancers in the ballet master's Vienna productions was the wife of Garrick, whom Noverre admired.

⁹¹⁸ For the details, see: Laura Carones, "Noverre and Angiolini: Polemical Letters," *Dance Research* 1987, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 42–54.

⁹¹⁹ Noverre wrote dance sequences for the first version of *Alceste* (1767), presented at the Burgtheater in Vienna.

⁹²⁰ The international nature of the reform is particularly emphasized by Nye, *Mime...*

⁹²¹ On the stagings of *Jason et Médée* on Warsaw's stages in the late eighteenth century, see: Irena Turska, "Warszawski rękopis dzieła J. G. Noverre'a," in: Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka...*, p. 20.

toward *ballet d'action*, but also as examples of the central figures shaped by what was now basically the star system. They were mostly famed as dancers of brilliant technique. Vestris was the heir to the Great Dupré as the master of the *noble* style, Gardel and Dauberval might be called his pupils, though the latter also took instruction from Noverre in Lyons in his youth. Each of them had choreographic talent, which they developed during their stay in Stuttgart,⁹²² returning to Paris to change French stage dance for good.

Gardel and Dauberval, and especially Vestris, were far more expressive and dynamic than the previous generations had been. The Opera's female soloists – Marie-Madeleine Guimard (Ill. 142), Marie Allard, and Anne Heinel⁹²³ – also had dramatic talent. This predestined France's premiere dance ensemble to begin to bring about Noverre's reform. It started with brief episodes inserted in opera spectacles. Dauberval put a pantomime duo (*pas de deux pantomime*) for himself and Allard (Ill. 143) in *Sylvie* (1766), which Noverre noted with enormous satisfaction, calling his pupil a pioneer of the new form on the Paris opera stage.⁹²⁴ Vestris would not be left behind, inserting into one act of the opera *Ismène et Isménias* (1770) his adaption of Noverre's action ballet about Medea and Jason, the latter role of which he had danced in Stuttgart. The press reports indicate that the adaptation was less radical than what Noverre had offered. Grimm disappointedly commented:

in the ballets of Noverre dancing and rhythmical walking are kept very distinct. Dance is used only in great passionate movements, at decisive moments, whereas in the [mimed] scenes the performers walk – in time, it is true, but without dancing. The transition from rhythmical walking to dancing, and from dancing to rhythmical walking, is as indispensable in this form of spectacle as the transitions in opera from recitative to aria and from aria to recitative; dance for dance's sake can only take place when the action of the dance is complete.⁹²⁵

Vestris was incapable of eliminating dance in the dramatic sequences of his performances, which, according to Grimm, deprived his ballets of the desired effect – the most progressive proponents of the enlightened audiences expected not just beautiful movements, but physical drama as well. This clearly shows that Nye was correct in stating that *ballet d'action* as an Enlightenment ideal ought more to be called danced drama than dramatic dance.⁹²⁶ This was its innovation and radicalism – it gave pantomime absolute priority. True, Noverre inserted popular

⁹²² Ivor Guest provides a colorful description in his brilliantly documented *The Ballet of the Enlightenment: The Establishment of the Ballet d'Action in France, 1770–1793*, London 1996, pp. 29–35.

⁹²³ Heinel was a German who began her career in Stuttgart, where she appeared in Noverre's performances.

⁹²⁴ Guest, *The Ballet...*, pp. 34–35.

⁹²⁵ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹²⁶ Nye, *Mime...*



142. Jacques-Louis David, *Mademoiselle Guimard*, 1773–1775



143. J. B. Tillard (based on a picture by L. C. de Carmontelle), an engraving depicting Jean Dauberval and Marie Allard in a pantomime duo from the opera *Sylvie*, 1766

dances of the day, such as the *chaconne* or *contredanse*, but this was only a kind of ornament in a dramatic structure rendered through gestures, facial expressions, and movements of the entire body. When *ballet d'action* appeared on the Paris opera stage, the scale was still tipped toward the dance spectacle, which meant the reform was initially partial, at least according to a viewer as progressive as Grimm.

The turn toward the dramatization of the movement sequences intensified with Vestris' appointment as ballet master of the Opera in 1770. Two years later, he staged *Endymion*, a dance spectacle with no trace of opera, and thus a ballet in the modern sense of the word. Previously, ballets had been one component of the opera, attributed to the composer and librettist. In the hierarchy of importance, the ballet master held a position nearer to the set designer, his role considered more technical than creative. *Endymion* was announced as Vestris' independent creation. We might call this the symbolic consecration of Noverre's ambitions. Yet Grimm still turned up his nose, seeing that the production had too much dance ornamentation for his taste, and too little pantomime.⁹²⁷ He only saw artistic success in the re-adaptation of *Jason et Médée*, which Vestris tackled in 1776, taking a more restrictive approach to Noverre's recommendations. Heinel secured the triumph with her role as Medea. A critic at *Mercure de France* wrote: "Her dancing, her gestures, her attitudes, her facial expressions form a rapidly changing and impressive picture which thrills and carries away the audience, so powerful is the art of pantomime when performed with such precision and naturalness."⁹²⁸ Thus came the institutionaliza-

⁹²⁷ Guest, *The Ballet...*, pp. 57–60.

⁹²⁸ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 77.

tion of the turn toward action in France.⁹²⁹ Opera composer François Gossec wrote a kind of declaration of faith in this transformation: “pantomime action is more forceful and less restricted than action which is sung, [...] because in a scene without words it is possible to indulge more freely in the most animated of expressions and the strongest gestures.”⁹³⁰ The longing for an emotional *crescendo* we found in the Encyclopedists entered the mainstream.

Working with Gluck in Vienna, Noverre, like the composer himself, found himself in the orbit of the Austrian court, landing the post of dance teacher for Princess Marie Antoinette. When she became Queen of France, fortune smiled upon him at last – bypassing the principle of succession,⁹³¹ he was named ballet master at the Opera, a position he had long dreamed of holding. The successes gained in Paris at the time by Gluck, with a bit of help from Vestris and Gardel in composing the ballet sequences for his operas, boded well. The most prestigious stage in France was now open to portraying authentic emotions and human dramas in dance, its idealized Rococo levity retired into the past. Dance was no longer seen as a visually appealing intermission in an opera, it was an autonomous spectacle, as Gardel most adamantly proclaimed.⁹³² Noverre attempted to fix these tendencies, staging new versions of works that had earned applause in Vienna. These were ballets with a high degree of dramatism, often steeped in pathos, requiring thespian talents from the dancers. In *Apelles et Campaspe, ou la Générosité d'Alexandre* (Apelles and Campaspe, or: The Generosity of Alexandre, 1776), Noverre's themes were love, envy, and generosity. *Les Horaces* (1777), in turn, was an adaptation of Pierre Corneille's tragedy, in which war and love intertwined, creating a bloody conflict.

Noverre did everything in his power to make his dancers expressive, even risking accusations of bad taste in *Les Horaces*.⁹³³ His ambition was the utmost realism, he wanted viewers to shed “tears of blood” (Ill. 144). Yet audiences were not yet entirely ready, much as the Opera was not prepared to stage the uncompromising choreography. The costumes were too sumptuous, they used wigs unsuited to

⁹²⁹ We also find traces of a dramatic, narrative approach to dance and the use of pantomime on other stages of Paris. We might mention, for example, the work by Antoine Pitrot, ballet master at the Comédie Italienne, and Jean-Barthélemy Lany, choreographer of productions at the Comédie Française (Foster, *Choreography & Narrative...*, p. 93).

⁹³⁰ Quoted in: Guest, *The Ballet...*, p. 79.

⁹³¹ This pained Gardel and Dauberval, aspiring to take over Vestris' legacy; they began to plot against their old master, which led to his departure from the Opera only five years after becoming ballet master. Guest offers a long and colorful description of this in *The Ballet...*, pp. 83–171.

⁹³² He suggested celebrating the coronation of Louis XVI with an extravagant *ballet d'action* titled *L'Avènement de Titus à l'Empire* (Titus Appears in the Empire). The project never came to be, but it indicates Gardel's grand ambitions (ibid., pp. 71–72).

⁹³³ Guest, *The Ballet...*, pp. 105–106.



144. Francesco Bartolozzi (published by John Boydell), an engraving of Gaetano Vestrisa (Jason), Giovanna Bacelli (Creusa), and Adelaïde Simonet (Medea) in *Jason et Medée* by Jean-Georges Noverre, London staging 1781

the stories, and the dancers were too eager to show off their technical skills. Tragedy in dance largely remained in the realm of intentions.⁹³⁴

Noverre was far more successful with a lighter repertoire, especially with pastoral themes, which the eighteenth-century upper crust still adored. When Noverre staged a lively, dramatized, yet light-handed and even trivial duet of a smitten shepherd and his chimeric object of adoration, titled *Les Caprices de Galathée* (1776), audiences were delighted. *Les Ruses de l'Amour* (The Pranks of Love, 1777), about the adventures of Venus, Cupid, and their retinue, was similarly received.⁹³⁵ These works might have been called traditional for their time, as they drew from tastes that had been set by the Rococo. Grimm found traces of Watteau and Boucher in them, as in Noverre's following bagatelle, *Les Petits Riens* (The Small Trifles, 1778), partly set to music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who was only starting off. In composing them, the choreographer followed a path marked out by the Opéra-Comique, where, we might recall, he began his stage career. This was a kind of compromise – it provided a lot of room for pantomime, but under the safe umbrella of a whimsical genre theme. Here viewers were far more appreciative of the gesticulations and facial expressions, more eager to forgive the dancers their exaggeration. Thus, when Noverre made a ballet adaptation of a sentimental opera with a libretto by Marmontel, *Annette et Lubin* (original version 1761, ballet version 1778) from the Comédie Italienne repertoire, his popularity soared.

⁹³⁴ Noverre stated in his program text that “the style most suitable for expression in terms of dancing is the tragic” (Noverre, *Letters...*, p. 21).

⁹³⁵ A description of this ballet, also staged in Lyons as *La Toilette de Vénus* (1757), is provided by Noverre in *Letters...*, pp. 145–149.

Success with a light repertoire was too little, however, to save Noverre's job, which was chiefly contested by Gardel, who, as a pupil of Vestris, saw himself as a rightful successor. Worn out by his struggles with the institution, the caprices of viewers, and the plotting of his fellow professionals, Noverre ultimately threw in the towel. With him the brief era of tragic pantomime on the Paris Opera stage came to an end, though this does not mean that dance returned to being an attractive bauble. After Noverre's departure from the Opera, *ballets d'action* continued their reign, except in a lighter spirit, drawing from the comic opera. Gardel specialized in this kind of repertoire. Until the appearance of Romantic ballet, his works enjoyed the greatest popularity. Audiences came in droves to his adaptations of Favart's works. His sentimental ballets about love beat all the box-office records: *La Chercheuse de esprit* (Scholar of the Soul, 1778) and *Le Caprice amoureux, ou Ninette à la cour* (An Amorous Caprice, or: Ninette at Court, 1778) as did dance melodramas made almost entirely to boulevard theater standards,⁹³⁶ like *Mirsa* (1779), or Gardel's biggest hit, also about love, *Le Premier Navigateur* (The First Navigator, 1785).

In contemporary terms, Gardel's work was a pop version of *ballets d'action*. It had even more pantomime than Noverre's plays. Gardel also wanted to touch his audience, after all. Yet his pieces were less profound than those like *Les Horaces*, and certainly flashier. This meant they prompted critical comments like: "Were the pantomimes of the ancient world mannered and were they, so to speak, *danced* as ours are? No, they were powerfully performed in a noble manner, and not with jumps. How can our interest be caught by a man leaping about to express his sorrow?"⁹³⁷ Such comments, however, came from the specialists. The vast majority of viewers accepted the action ballet, especially when seasoned with melodrama, and so the tears of blood they shed had a sweet aftertaste. This, then, was the end point of the radical reform that blunted its own radicalism from the very outset.

We should pause on this moment, as it shows a sociologically interesting aspect of senti-mentalism in Enlightenment ballet. The realism the audience longed to see on stage was a fake realism. *Ballets d'action* were essentially based on an artificiality of dance truth, presaging the "truth" of nineteenth-century romances and the soap operas of its day. People and their emotions were not depicted precisely as they were, for that would have been unattractive, dull, or simply ugly from the audience's point of view. Enlightenment viewers thought emotions deserved to be shown only by a person of nobility, as Noverre stated. Let us cite a significant fragment of his work:

⁹³⁶ The boulevard theaters began to gradually replace fairground theaters in the mid-eighteenth century as purveyors of simple entertainment, though the latter also survived until the Revolution. Jean-Baptiste Nicolet, head of the Grands-Danseurs du Roi, was an important figure in this process. The name indicates the importance of the kinetic aspect of boulevard theater performances, whose actors had to be skilled gymnasts, mimes, and dancers all at once.

⁹³⁷ Quoted in: Guest, *The Ballet...*, p. 232.

If, for instance, he [a ballet master] wish to depict jealousy and all its succeeding moments of fury and despair, he will take as his model a man whose natural violence and brutality have been masked by a veneer of education; in a way, a porter would be a good enough model, but his appearance will not commend him to the audience; a stick in his hands would compensate for his lack of expression, but this representation, although taken from life, would disgust the spectators and exhibit a shocking picture of human imperfections. Besides, the actions of a jealous rag-picker would be less picturesque than those of a man of loftier feeling.⁹³⁸

We also quote Noverre because this statement might be seen as a paraphrase of the excerpt from Guglielmo we had occasion to cite at the opening of Chapter One. We recall that the latter claimed that dance “is completely alien to, and the mortal enemy of, vile and rude mechanicals who often, with corrupt souls and treacherous minds, turn it from a liberal art and virtuous science into something adulterous and ignoble.”⁹³⁹ When we juxtapose this with Noverre’s convictions, we see that Enlightenment dance still served as a tool for distinction. According to the *Letters on Dancing and Ballets*, the dancer was mainly meant to portray the higher social strata. Noverre, though of lowly birth, had aristocratic sympathies. Small wonder that he felt closest to the philosophy of Voltaire, who was also attracted by the aristocracy. Both viewed the simple man with suspicion, mainly as a threat. They saw the aristocrat, unlike the simple man, as a moral creature, an individual in the sense that began to emerge in the mid eighteenth century. Noverre wrote frankly:

The rude rustic can only afford a single gesture to the painter since, in his search for vengeance, he gains from its accomplishment but a low and worthless satisfaction. The man of breeding can, on the contrary, provide the painter with a multitude of pictures: he expresses his passion and distress in a hundred different ways and always with both vigour and nobility. What diversity and contrast in his gestures! What risings and fallings in his transports! What varying shades of expression on his features! What animation in his looks! How expressive is his silence! The moment when he finds his jealousy unfounded offers pictures more varied and more seductive still, and of a softer and more pleasing tone. These are the features that a *maître de ballet* ought to visualise instinctively.⁹⁴⁰

According to Noverre, only a person of noble birth is torn by doubts and pangs of conscience worth viewing, while a simple fellow merely knows how to take primitive joy in their crimes. Nonetheless, “good breeding” was not viewed as it had been. One could be called “well-bred” not only when one was not nobly born, like Voltaire,

⁹³⁸ Noverre, *Letters...*, pp. 40–41.

⁹³⁹ See note 1 in Chapter One of the first volume.

⁹⁴⁰ Noverre, *Letters...*, p. 41.

but even when one was not noble at all, as in the case of Diderot and Noverre. By public opinion, they were perceived as the nobility, as they were brought up well and refined. Refinement was not understood in terms of having mastered certain rituals, but as a sensitivity of heart. A sensitive soul was thus made into a “well-born” person. This meant that many members of the third estate could consider themselves the elite, among them, the *philosophes*, who had not the fortune to be of noble birth. On the one hand, they distanced themselves from the old mannered aristocracy, from various dreary posers, whose sole claim to fame was their blood and their courtly manners. On the other hand, we must recall that the Enlightenment still kept a practical distance from the lower levels of society, even if it sympathized with them in theory.⁹⁴¹ The *philosophes* camp was quite reserved when it came to the masses. It supposed they had a backwards mentality or paternalistically patted them on the head. This is why, if a simple person appeared in a ballet, it was still a droll inhabitant of a pastoral utopia. True, they were given certain value – they could show intelligence, they could be physically fit, but they were never sublime. This role was left to persons of “higher birth.” In Noverre this was the ancient hero, but in Gardel it was the bourgeois protagonist, with whom the Opera viewers identified more readily.

Noverre described the tastes of his epoch as follows: “the audience likes to be transported by the sublime, in general people want to be moved.”⁹⁴² Yet his conclusions were over-ambitious:

What genre, then, is more appropriate for shaking the soul and capturing the heart than the tragic? It is a faithful looking glass for our own emotions, feelings, and passions. The image drawn from everyday life evokes just a fleeting impression; here imitation is all the harder in that the viewer has the opportunity to compare, and having the original before their eyes, can more easily judge the flaws in the copy.⁹⁴³

And yet viewers scarcely focused on the flaws in the copies, for they saw a mirror of their own emotions in them, and not in tales of Medea or Alexander the Great.⁹⁴⁴ In the latter case it was too hard to be moved, as the stories were too tragic. The viewers turned away from what called for rigorous morality. They wanted to be

⁹⁴¹ We will return to this important theme in the next chapter.

⁹⁴² Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka*..., p. 65.

⁹⁴³ Ibid.

⁹⁴⁴ Beaumarchais w *Essai sur le genre dramatique serieux* (Essay on the Genre of Serious Drama, 1767) wrote: “What care I, a peaceful subject in an eighteenth-century monarchy, for the revolutions of Athens and Rome? What real interest can I take in the death of a tyrant from the Peloponnese? In the sacrifice of a young princess in Aulis? None of that has anything to do with me; there is no moral consequence which applies to me. For what is a moral consequence? It is the fruitful result and the personal application of the reflections which an event unleashes in us” (in: Michael J. Sidnell [ed.], *Sources of Dramatic Theory*, Vol. 2, Cambridge 1994, p. 130).

free to cry, to feel emotions where simple intuition sufficed.⁹⁴⁵ They wanted to see themselves on stage,⁹⁴⁶ albeit in an idealized rendering, and this was supplied by action ballet when it was melodramatic, and not tragic, when it cast aside its ancient costumes in favor of what may be called social drama. In this way we might attempt to grasp the wholesale cultural shift we are describing in this chapter. Classicism was tragic, and the Enlightenment melodramatic. Classicism drew the curtain on the aristocratic epoch, the Enlightenment began the era of the bourgeoisie.

The Lively Bourgeois according to Diderot

Péter Szondi calls attention to the sociological aspect of the reassessment that took place in the Enlightenment theater, expressed by Denis Diderot.⁹⁴⁷ Diderot posited that theatrical spectacles should drop their focus on what he called the *coup de théâtre*, i.e., on unexpected plot twists, and endeavor to present realistic *tableaux* as painterly compositions, depicting powerful, yet not improbable passions, occurring in a space viewers knew from their everyday lives. Szondi interprets this change as expressing a transition from aristocratic to bourgeois tastes: “Unexpected plot twists (*coups de théâtre*) should not occur in a good bourgeois society. The Wheel of Fortune is an emblem of the old world [...]. *Coups de théâtre* occur at court, they reflect the whims of princes, plots, camarillas, deceptions.”⁹⁴⁸

Noverre had not spoken out clearly against the *coup de théâtre*, nor had he given it special attention. He saw the vital principle to be fidelity to nature, which precluded overblown concepts and excessive formalism in composition.⁹⁴⁹ As such, we can read his work as an effort to create realistic *tableaux*:

The moment is the soul of the picture – it is hard to capture, and even harder to render authentically. [This, however, is the ballet master’s task.] Nature! Nature! And our works will be more beautiful, though we deny all art that has nothing in common with nature,

⁹⁴⁵ Here we should stress the *ballet d’action*’s postulate of comprehensibility, the legibility of plot. There was an appreciation for spectacles without symbolism or allegorical images, only communicative, compact action (Guest, *The Ballet...*, pp. 149–150).

⁹⁴⁶ We quote Beaumarchais once more: “The heart’s true interest lies in the relationship between one human being and another, not between an ordinary mortal and a king. Thus the splendor of rank does not increase the interest which I take in the protagonist, but rather diminishes it. The nearer the suffering man’s status is to my own, the more power his misfortunes have over my soul,” *ibid.*, p. 129.

⁹⁴⁷ Marek Dębowski mentions this in the introduction to: Denis Diderot, *Pisma estetycznoteatralne*, trans. Marek Dębowski et al., Gdańsk 2008, p. 22.

⁹⁴⁸ Quoted in: *ibid.*

⁹⁴⁹ For this reason, Noverre, like Diderot, opposed an excess of symmetry on stage (Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka...*, pp. 68–72).

if it is not graced by the simplicity of nature. Only then can art transport us, when it is veiled, it only emerges truly triumphant when we forget it and create a picture of nature.⁹⁵⁰

Noverre expressed a longing for “naturalness” characteristic of the whole Enlightenment. The imitation of nature we have highlighted became the task of the creative individual. Emotion was increasingly individualized and subjective, whereas in the Renaissance and classicist period it drew its strength from the yearning for objectivity that inspired it. Emotions move toward individuality, form toward generality. These are opposite vectors. Enlightenment culture increasingly and clearly chose the subjective slant, which tied in to its bourgeois nature. The bourgeoisie itself, as we said in the introduction, was shaped between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, based on a Socratic-Christian tradition where we might find the germ of modern individualism. The Enlightenment turned out to be a moment when bourgeois individualism became a hegemonic force, in Gramsci’s sense of the term. Noverre appeared in the world of dance at just this moment, but was still significantly shaped by an aristocratic sensitivity, which made his theory clearly inconsistent. It was particularly split, as it were, where social issues were concerned. On the one hand, Noverre was, like the Encyclopedists, fascinated by the practical,⁹⁵¹ by everyday life in all its varieties.⁹⁵² On the other, he showed a predilection for portraying people of the noble estates, for tackling heroic themes with the greatest passion, for alluding to the classicist tragedians – Corneille and Racine. Though in all of the above we glimpse the germ of a quality we have called bourgeois, they are somewhat undeveloped. Individualism remained laced with aristocratic distinction, and thus failed to fully satisfy the mature tastes of the Enlightenment.

Noverre was admired, but as we have seen, his program was swiftly altered toward melodrama. We do find traces in the maestro’s ballets – *Les Jalousies ou les fêtes du serail* (Jealousies, or: Celebrations in a Seraglio, 1758), *L’Amour Corsaire ou l’Embarquement pour Cythère* (A Corsair in Love, or: A Journey to Cythera, 1758–1759), and *Les Jaloux sans Rival* (An Envious Man Without a Rival, 1759) – yet it was only his pupils, Maximilien Gardel, his brother Pierre, and Jean Dauberval, who made the ballet a fully bourgeois spectacle. On the one hand, they broke with the radicalism of the young Noverre, striking a balance between the pantomime

⁹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

⁹⁵¹ “How many different pictures the ballet master finds among craftsmen! Each strikes different poses depending on the postures and movements needed for their daily work. Their gait, how they hold themselves and move about to perform their craft, and always so picturesque, should be captured by an artist!” (ibid., pp. 40–41).

⁹⁵² “Crowded streets, public walks, tea gardens, rural pastimes and country occupations, a village wedding, hunting, fishing, the harvest and the vintage, a lover’s mode of presenting a blossom to his lass, the rustic manner of watering a flower, of bird’s-nesting and of playing on a reed-pipe, all will provide him with pictures as charming as they are varied and widely different in colour and character” (Noverre, *Letters*, p. 38).

and the dance, to make the spectacles appeal more to those mainly in search of visual entertainment. On the other, they greatly modernized its aesthetic, stressing the realism of the emotional conflicts that were readily recognized by viewers who identified with the dramas on stage. Dauberval and the Gardel brothers thus became allies in the theatrical reform posited by Diderot.

Diderot was a restless spirit, who gave original expression to what might be called actionist subjectivity – the last preparatory step in shaping modernity in dance. Diderot was not the sole authority here, and Rousseau undoubtedly had a greater direct impact on French culture of the day; yet Zapašnik writes that “[e]ssentially the main responsibility for spreading the impulse for individualistic tendencies rests not on Rousseau, but on Diderot.”⁹⁵³ Our task is not to tip the scales one way or the other, which is why we shall give our attention to both figures. Rousseau will be the subject of the final chapter. Diderot, as one of the initiators behind *bal-let d'action*, should come first.

Philosophy textbooks rarely mention that Diderot was the only one of the *philosophes* we have mentioned⁹⁵⁴ who wrote a text containing the script for a ballet. This was “Conversations on *The Natural Son*,” in which he canvassed for the creation of a new theatrical genre – a bourgeois drama, a genre between tragedy and comedy. This strikes us as highly significant. Here we see one of the most radical Encyclopedists, a materialist struggling against religious fanaticism and political absolutism, emphatically sharing his idea for a ballet whose protagonists are a young farmhand and a village maid.⁹⁵⁵ How to explain this interest? Why did Diderot feel the need to think and write about ballet? What does his ballet on paper tell us about the Enlightenment kinesiology? In what worldview context ought we to situate it?

We will begin with the last question. Diderot made Enlightenment philosophy into a fully bourgeois worldview in the sense we have been using in this book. He has a practically contemporary view of the human condition. Diderot is modern, much like Rousseau, but unlike Voltaire and Noverre. The latter pair shut the door on the aristocratic model, while the former duo – and the Gardel brothers and Dauberval in the world of dance – opened the door to a culture that to this day shapes Western society, centered on such concepts as individuality, personality, authenticity, emotionality, equality, spontaneity, energy, action, and genius. Diderot, our close relative, could have said this, without venturing much exaggeration. Let us try to view him as a modern choreographer, aspiring to show the depths of human existence.

As with a great many thinkers, for Diderot's first intellectual experiences were of capital importance. At an early stage of his philosophical development, after reading

⁹⁵³ Zapašnik, *Filozofia...*, p. 372.

⁹⁵⁴ We do not include Noverre here, of course.

⁹⁵⁵ The ballet script can be read in: Diderot, *Pisma...*, pp. 116–119.

Shaftesbury,⁹⁵⁶ he became interested in enthusiasm, and thus great passions. Enthusiasm conceived as an internal drive, the activity of the spirit, became an integral part of his anthropology, prefiguring Romanticism, in a manner of speaking. As Isaiah Berlin puts it: “Diderot is perfectly aware that there is such a thing as the irrational element in man, that there are unconscious depths in which all kinds of dark forces move.”⁹⁵⁷ This brought him closer to Leibniz, though Diderot supported materialism. Every person is an energetic being, marked by an insatiable drive for expansion, which is particularly evident in great individuals. To name this energy, Diderot drew from the epoch’s conventional vocabulary, from which he took the concept of the passions. When he sat down to write his first work, *Philosophical Thoughts*, he began it thus:

People are for ever declaiming against the passions; they attribute to them all the pains that man endures, and forget that they are also the source of all his pleasures. [...] it is passions alone, and strong passions, that can elevate the soul to great things. Without them, there is no sublime, either in morality or in achievement.⁹⁵⁸

We will note some motifs already encountered in La Mettrie. But Diderot, like Helvétius, went further. Focusing on enthusiasm, he drew attention to the outstanding individual.

Diderot wrote: “Deadened passions degrade men of extraordinary quality.”⁹⁵⁹ He saw the “extraordinary” as an inner strength, unlike Helvétius, who claimed that an individual is only the outcome of upbringing. Diderot understood sensualism not as a doctrine describing human susceptibility to their environment, but rather was an activist, seeking justification for his viewpoint in the outstanding individuals he admired. “In [Diderot’s] aesthetics, enthusiasm became a source of genius, in ethics a condition of heroism, of great and disinterested deeds. In theory, it leads societies to revolutionary urges.”⁹⁶⁰ Later as well, when Diderot seemed to have dived completely into the stream of materialism, this theory of enthusiasm never entirely vanished from his work. This ought not to surprise us when we note Diderot’s gradual conversion to atheism. While in the first, Deist phase of his work, we can still speak of one main causative factor – a rationally conceived God – in his theory, as a consistent materialist he sees the Cause solely in the forces of nature,

⁹⁵⁶ In 1745, Diderot made a French adaptation of *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* titled *Essai sur le mérite et la vertu*.

⁹⁵⁷ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, London 2000, p. 51.

⁹⁵⁸ Denis Diderot, “Philosophical Thoughts,” in: idem, *Early Philosophical Works*, trans. Margeret Jourdain, Chicago–London 1916, p. 27.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁹⁶⁰ Marian Skrzypek, *Diderot*, Warsaw 1982, pp. 82–83. We might note that Helvétius, with whom, as we have said, Diderot disagreed, wrote in a similar vein, cf. Voegelin, *From Enlightenment...*

interpreting enthusiasm as their symptom. This materialism was certainly no longer mechanicism, it was the germ of something that, at the risk of being anachronistic, we might call vitalism. Here the great people most fully embodied the power of life.

In Diderot we have an emphasis on the creativity within people. Small wonder, then, that in his unfinished “Elements of Physiology” he wrote:

nothing is more contrary to nature than habitual meditation or the condition of men of learning. Man is born to act [...]. It has been well remarked that there is in man an energy which solicits employment, but that which study gives is not the true one, since it concentrates it and is accompanied by forgetfulness of all animal things.⁹⁶¹

This is another reason why Diderot might be called a modern thinker – for he openly reminded us of our animal nature, radicalizing the efforts of Gassendi and La Fontaine.⁹⁶² According to Diderot, man ought not to boast of his advantage over his “lesser brothers,” as they had advantages over him as well: “Instinct better guides an animal than a man. In an animal it takes its pure form, in a man it is weakened by reason and enlightenment.”⁹⁶³ As we shall see, this did not mean that Diderot was proposing a return to nature in the spirit of Rousseau. The contrary was true, which led to a parting of ways between these two very like-minded thinkers at the start of their creative paths. Yet until the end of his days, Diderot was fascinated by the spontaneous and elemental. He persistently fought any intellectual approach that sought to create a single mold to contain all of reality.⁹⁶⁴

For this reason as well, Diderot is not far removed – he is always critical, forever in a state of intellectual excitement. He was a fundamentally anti-systemic philosopher – forever asking questions and hesitating, not finding contentment in skepticism, but forever pressing forward intellectually, delighting in the energy buzzing in his body and mind. In philosophy, as in life, Diderot wanted one thing – to act. We see him as extremely mobilized, not by external authorities, but

⁹⁶¹ Denis Diderot, “Elements of Physiology,” in: *Diderot, Interpreter of Nature*, trans. Jean Stewart and Jonathan Kemp, New York 1963, p. 141.

⁹⁶² On the animal, he wrote: “Are you going to assert with Descartes that it is a purely imitative machine? Little children will laugh at you, and philosophers will retort that if this be a machine then you, too, are a machine. If you admit that between the animal and yourself the difference is merely one of organization, you will be showing good sense and reason, you will be honest” (Denis Diderot, “Conversation between D’Alembert and Diderot,” in: *ibid.*, p. 58).

⁹⁶³ Diderot, *Elementy fizjologii* (fragments), trans. Marian Skrzypek, in: Skrzypek, *Diderot*, p. 292.

⁹⁶⁴ We might call him an eclectic, if we accept Diderot’s definition in the *Encyclopedia*: “The eclectic is a philosopher who, by riding roughshod over prejudice, tradition, antiquity, universal consent, authority, in a word, everything that subjugates the mass of minds, dares to think for himself, goes back to the most clear and general principles, examines and discusses them, while admitting only what can be confirmed by his experience and reason” (Diderot, “Eclecticism,” trans. Stephen J. Genzler, *Denis Diderot’s The Encyclopedia: Selections*, New York 1967, p. 86). Of course, here we have the influence of the Cartesian critical method, though interpreted in the spirit of empiricism.

by an inner impulse. This is a sign of an utterly fundamental change, described by Cassirer as follows:

Diderot's thinking does not strive for crystallization, for expression in definitive formulas. It is and remains a fluid and fleeting element; but it is precisely in this elasticity that Diderot believes he can come nearer to reality, which itself knows no rest but is forever in flux. This infinitely changing universe can only be understood by a flexible manner of thinking [...]. By virtue of this fundamental characteristic Diderot becomes one of the first to divorce himself from the static philosophy of the eighteenth century and to change this philosophy into a truly dynamic view of the world.⁹⁶⁵

Dynamism appeared in Diderot in every field of analysis, from physics to aesthetics. His materialism was an intriguing variant on atomism, with the concept of the molecule as the smallest element. The world was the sum of these indestructible particles, constantly making new configurations: "Everything changes, everything passes away – only the Whole endures. The world is perpetually beginning and ending; every moment is its beginning and end; there has never been any other kind of world, and there never will be any other."⁹⁶⁶ There is only eternal matter, the one and only Whole, which is constantly in motion, for molecules are also beings graced with inner life. As Skrzypek writes:

In assembling a catalog of the unchanging material aspects of molecules, Diderot lists, alongside extension, possession of their own energy, as well as sensitivity. [...] This is one reason why Diderot does not believe nature is ever at rest. It only has various kinds of motion: external, manifested by the mechanical action of one body on another, proportional to their masses, and internal, the strength of various particles or arising from various molecules' effect on one another. Both external and internal movement involve an energy, power, or tension that, in later works, Diderot calls *nisus*.⁹⁶⁷

In the specialist literature, it is said here that Diderot materialized Leibniz's monads.⁹⁶⁸ his vision of the world was, indeed, as dynamic as Leibniz's, though it was far more secularized.

According to Diderot, forces are at work in everything, always mobilizing to act, even on a micro-cellular level. Like La Mettrie, he was fascinated by the natural

⁹⁶⁵ Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 90–91.

⁹⁶⁶ Diderot, "D'Alembert's Dream," in: *Rameau's Nephew and Other Works*, p. 117.

⁹⁶⁷ Skrzypek, *Diderot*, pp. 60, 63. Diderot himself wrote: "The transference of a body from one place to another is not itself motion, it is the consequence of motion. Motion exists equally in the body displaced and in the body that remains stationary. [...] Take away the obstacle that prevents the displacement of a stationary body, and it will be transferred" (Diderot, "Conversation between...", pp. 49–50).

⁹⁶⁸ Skrzypek, *Filozofia Diderota*, p. 35.

science of his day. He was familiar with research on microorganisms, on the mobility of the parts of the body separated from the rest, on multiplication. His world was not only one of physics, but, most of all, of biology, which meant the concept of energy occupied an important place, as did sensitivity, excitement, life.⁹⁶⁹ He went so far as to claim that there was no such thing as dead matter, only matter that was dormant, as it were, in which the life was disguised.⁹⁷⁰ Sensitivity, vitality, was a trait of the world on every level, which leads us to acknowledge his philosophy as a kind of proto-vitalism. This was not an isolated tendency at the time. Jean-Baptiste Robinet, for example, whom Lovejoy called “one of the earlier prophets of the *élan vital*,”⁹⁷¹ thought similarly. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Romanticism radicalized these strands of thought, making “life” a key word. But back in the Enlightenment we find words like these, quoted from Diderot’s *Elements of Physiology*: “Without life, nothing can be explained, nothing. Or without sentience. Or without the living and sensitive nerves.”⁹⁷² Or from *D’Alembert’s Dream*: “The real miracle is life itself – sensitivity – and this miracle can be accounted for....”⁹⁷³ From this standpoint, there was no room for seeing the body as a mechanism.⁹⁷⁴ There was no place for God.⁹⁷⁵ There was not even room for death.⁹⁷⁶

This led Diderot to show man as parts shot through with the vital impulse of the Whole. He too is made up of sensitive molecules, he too is an organism prone to stimuli, on the one hand the same as plants and animals, yet specific as well.

⁹⁶⁹ Diderot, “Elements of Physiology.” In this context, it ought not to surprise us that Diderot explored the concept of sex. “He is also convinced that every healthy sex drive [...] causes a ‘near-divine enthusiasm’ and that ‘in our most sublime thoughts and deepest sensitivity there is something joined to our sex organs’” (Skrzypek, *Diderot*, p. 85).

⁹⁷⁰ Skrzypek, *Diderot*, pp. 63–64. He saw an example of how inanimate matter becomes animate in eating (Diderot, “Conversation between...”). He wrote: “in order to avoid making a simple supposition that explains everything, namely the faculty of sensation as a general property of matter or a product of its organization, you are giving up common sense and plunging headlong into an abyss of mysteries, contradictions, and absurdities” (*ibid.*, p. 59).

⁹⁷¹ Lovejoy, *The Great Chain...*, p. 281. Further on, we read: “the fundamental reality in nature for him [Robinet] is not matter but *l’activité*; and the pageant of evolution is the manifestation of the expansive, self-differentiating energy, the creative urge, of this *puissance active*” (p. 281). Natural scientist Herbert Butterfield interprets these views similarly in *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800*.

⁹⁷² Diderot, “Elements of Physiology,” in: *Selected Writings*, trans. Derek Colman, New York–London 1966, p. 273.

⁹⁷³ Diderot, “D’Alembert’s Dream,” p. 119.

⁹⁷⁴ Cf. Zapašnik, *Filozofia...*, pp. 308–309.

⁹⁷⁵ “[I]f matter is eternal, and if movement alone could arrange and imprint it originally with all the forms that we see preserved in it, what need have I for your Prince,” asks Diderot through a protagonist in *The Skeptic’s Walk* (Denis Diderot, *The Skeptic’s Walk*, trans. Kirk Watson, independently published, 2018, p. 70).

⁹⁷⁶ “As long as I am alive, I act and react as a mass; when I am dead I shall act and react in the form of disparate molecules... Does this mean that I shall never die? Well, of course, in that sense I shall never die, neither I nor anything else for that matter... Being born, living, dying – these are only changes of form...” (Diderot, “D’Alembert’s Dream,” p. 125).

To understand him, we cannot think in terms of abstract models, we need to see the concrete person – a body planted in a particular political and social context. This means the necessity of conducting moral, historical, and experimental studies.⁹⁷⁷ Small wonder that we find Diderot in the role of the *spiritus movens* of the Encyclopedia project, cultivating an empirical and pragmatic stance like Bacon's.⁹⁷⁸ This led him toward a theory of humanity we might call physiological sensualism.⁹⁷⁹ Human beings are built of highly sensitive material. They are tossed into the world as a *tabula rasa*, though with an insatiable appetite for life. Their physical state is of fundamental significance to their actions. In the famous "Letter on the Blind," Diderot wrote: "I have never doubted the great influence of our senses and organs on our metaphysics and morals, nor that our most purely intellectual ideas, if I may call them that, are closely related to the organisation of our bodies."⁹⁸⁰ Here we should stress, however, that Diderot's philosophy was not pure sensualism. He disagreed with Helvétius' statement that "feeling is thinking," as he saw this reduction as a primitive tactic that could not be borne out in the facts. So what exactly do the facts say?

In the "Elements of Physiology" we find an important, and very modern, statement: "The essence of man is the brain, not the outer construct."⁹⁸¹ True, the brain for Diderot was not what contemporary neurology and cognitive science have accustomed us to. He described it as a "bundle of threads,"⁹⁸² using the metaphor of a spider spinning its web, i.e., the nervous system. He believed that the slightest damage to the brain changed the whole of the person. All of this derived from pioneering studies during his time, but in this biologism Diderot was capable of going beyond a passive sensualism. This was through calling attention to the multi-aspectual nature of our mental life, which he tied to the autonomy of the brain. Diderot did not believe a person was merely a passive receptor of impressions. As he wrote in *D'Alembert's Dream*: "The center of the bundle gives orders and all the other parts obey."⁹⁸³ Every person holds the creative principle, a kind of motor that drives their actions. This is the brain, conceived as "reason, judgment, imagination, madness, idiocy, ferocity, instinct."⁹⁸⁴ And here we slowly begin to reach an understanding of agency that came with the late Enlightenment, partly through Diderot. The sole active force in the world became the individual existence, drawing energy from a material

⁹⁷⁷ Diderot, "On the Interpretation of Nature," in: idem, *Diderot, Interpreter of Nature*.

⁹⁷⁸ Skrzypek, *Diderot*, pp. 111–112.

⁹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 109.

⁹⁸⁰ Denis Diderot, "Letter on the Blind," in: Kate E. Tunstall, *Blindness and Enlightenment*, New York–London 2011, n.p.

⁹⁸¹ Diderot, *Elementy fizjologii* (fragments), in: Skrzypek, *Diderot*, p. 299.

⁹⁸² Diderot, "D'Alembert's Dream."

⁹⁸³ Ibid., p. 148.

⁹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

understanding of vital processes. There could be no talk of metaphysical powers. Even the Great Whole is nothing more than a constellation of individual subjects, who can be reduced to their brains – undoubtedly complex, but utterly material.

Diderot made every effort to combat the sentimentalism rampant all around him. At the start of his creative path, he wrote: “It is the very height of madness to propose the ruin of the passions.”⁹⁸⁵ But even then he knew that practical life could not be subject to emotions alone: “It would be fortunate [...] for a man to have strong passions? Certainly, if they are all in harmony. Establish a just harmony among them, and you need fear no convulsions and disorders.”⁹⁸⁶ In his mature phase, in *D'Alembert's Dream*, Diderot developed this thought further, placing less stress on the advantages in being passionate, and more on the control over the passions exerted by a well-developed brain. He wrote:

Sensibility [...] or extreme mobility in certain threads of the network – that is the dominant attribute of mediocre people. [...] what exactly is a person who is said to have sensibility? He is a creature who is moved in all things by the behavior of his diaphragm. Just let a well-chosen word catch his ear, just let his eye light upon an odd situation, and – lo and behold – all of a sudden his insides are in a commotion, every fiber in his nervous system is agitated, he begins to tremble from head to foot, he may be struck dumb with terror, he weeps floods of tears, sighs and groans almost suffocate the poor fellow, his voice fails him – in short, the center of the bundle of fibers doesn't know what's going to become of it.⁹⁸⁷

This acrid portrait of the sensitive soul that Rousseau described, who was touched by Voltaire's tragedies and the teary comedies of de La Chaussée, or in reading Richardson or Prévost. Diderot opposed this sentimental existence with a model that was essentially rationalist, alluding to classicist ethics in the spirit of Descartes: “In the event that a great man has unfortunately inherited that type of disposition [tending to be emotional], he must work unceasingly to overcome it, to dominate his sensibility, to make himself the master of his impulses and to safeguard the center of the bundle in all its rights.”⁹⁸⁸ This was not about eliminating the passions, for these were an indispensable drive behind our existence, but about controlling them: “The fools and the people of excessive sensibility will be on the stage; he will be observing them from the pit, for he is a wise man.”⁹⁸⁹

⁹⁸⁵ Diderot, “Philosophical Thoughts,” p. 28.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid. Elsewhere, Diderot writes: “the passions always incline us toward the good, as they only inspire us to desire happiness; the mind is a poor guide, sending us down the wrong route to happiness. We err, as we incorrectly suppose that reason deceives us, and not nature” (quoted in: Skrzypek, *Diderot*, p. 175).

⁹⁸⁷ Diderot, “D'Alembert's Dream,” p. 155.

⁹⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 155.

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

At this point, we might ask Diderot a vital question. How is it possible to gain control of one's emotions given that "one is strong if he is able, as a result of education, habit or organization, to dominate the various threads"?⁹⁹⁰ Is "habit" here the conscious shaping of an ability, or is it more the result of chance circumstances? How is Diderot's "work on himself" meant to take place if a person is defined by their brain, which, in turn, is given to them by nature, or shaped by habitual processes over which they basically have no control?

In Diderot's discussions of freedom, which we might call somewhat unsatisfactory, we have the first modern model of the subject. Diderot's works constantly vacillate between determinism and freedom. When he spoke from the standpoint of a natural scientist and doctor, the former perspective prevailed. In "Elements of Physiology," we read:

Two philosophers are quarreling and unable to reach an understanding; the subject, for example, is man's freedom. One says: "man is free, I feel it"; the other says: "man is not free, I feel it." The first is speaking of man in the abstract, of man not driven by any stimuli, of man who exists only in dreams or in concepts for discussion. The second speaks of man in reality, acting and moving about.⁹⁹¹

Things are much the same in *D'Alembert's Dream*: "a so-called voluntary act is nothing but the most recent of our actions and the necessary effect of one single cause: ourselves. This is a very complex cause, but it is a single cause just the same."⁹⁹²

Yet Diderot was not only a scholar. He could not give himself entirely to scientism, as he keenly felt that his existence, though restricted by the laws of nature, had an irreducible spontaneity, a kind of sublimity that arose from man's exceptional place in nature. This is why he railed against determinism, on behalf of humanism: "I am a man and I require causes proper to a man."⁹⁹³ Here we observe an anthropocentrism that contradicts the Great Whole, and the appreciation of "lesser brothers." For Diderot, as for many thinkers of the Renaissance, man remained the measure of all things. He would not consent to have animals treated like machines, yet he also stated that only man gives meaning to the world and makes existence important. Thus the pathos of this fragment found in his article "The Encyclopedia," which he inserted in the dictionary he edited:

[I]f one banishes from the face of the earth the thinking and contemplating entity, man, then the sublime and moving spectacle of nature will be but a sad and silent scene; the universe will be hushed; darkness and silence will regain their sway. All will be changed

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

⁹⁹¹ Diderot, *Elementy fizjologii* (fragments), in: Baczkowski (ed.), *Filozofia francuskiego oświecenia*, p. 212.

⁹⁹² Diderot, "D'Alembert's Dream," p. 160.

⁹⁹³ Quoted in: Skrzypek, *Diderot*, pp. 89–90.

into a vast solitude where unobserved phenomena take their course unseen and unheard. It is only the presence of men that makes the presence of other beings significant. What better plan, then, in writing the history of these beings, than to subordinate oneself to this consideration? Why should we not introduce man into our Encyclopedia, giving him the same place that he occupies in the universe? Why should we not make him the center of all that is? Is there, in all infinite space, any point of origin from which we could more advantageously draw the extended lines which we plan to produce to all the other points?⁹⁹⁴

Despite his anthropocentrism, Diderot's faith in man's freedom partly derived from contemplating human frailty. People had grown accustomed to the thought that reason made them exceptional in the world of nature, but human reason as critical reflection on reality harms sensory capabilities, the ability to act instinctively, which is highly effective in practice, as animals show by example. This is a paradox of sorts: "Man's perfectibility springs from the fact that all his senses are so weak that none of them can ever predominate over the organ of his reason."⁹⁹⁵ This had been perceived already by La Mettrie.⁹⁹⁶ Yet it was not hedonism, but a heroic sort of idealism that Diderot suggested. Let us give the floor to a great authority on his work:

In the name of "causes proper to man," Diderot undermines extreme utilitarianism and the associated category of personal interest, as conditions of all human actions. Unlike animals, man is not driven by sensory pleasure and his own advantage alone, but also acts disinterestedly, toward a great idea, without hope of reward, even risking his own life. In this way, Diderot acknowledges man's autonomy and stresses the active role of subjectivity, initiating a breakthrough in Enlightenment anthropology.⁹⁹⁷

Diderot's philosophy is "a peculiar combination of determinism and indeterminism: a man is a passive cog in the machine of nature and a product shaped by the nature of the conditions of social life; yet it is up to his reason and experience to determine if he will be reconciled with his condition, or will change it profoundly."⁹⁹⁸ Here we return to dilemmas that elude a purely rationalist standpoint. *Jacques*

⁹⁹⁴ Diderot, "The Encyclopedia," in: *Rameau's Nephew...*, pp. 292–293.

⁹⁹⁵ Diderot, "Elements of Physiology," p. 171.

⁹⁹⁶ We should stress that La Mettrie did not see man as a higher creature: "the imbecile or the idiot are animals in human form, in the same way as the clever ape is a little man in another form; and that, since everything depends absolutely on differences in organisation, a well-constructed animal who has learned astronomy can predict an eclipse, as he can predict recovery or death when his genius and good eyesight have benefited from some time at the school of Hippocrates and at patients' bedsides" (La Mettrie, *Machine Man...*, p. 38).

⁹⁹⁷ Skrzypek, *Diderot*, p. 90.

⁹⁹⁸ Jerzy Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*. Wydanie nowe, Warsaw 2002, p. 96.

the Fatalist shows the latter is incapable of dealing with the problem of freedom. Jacques believes that everything happens by necessity. His master believes in free decisions. Both are correct, Diderot claims.⁹⁹⁹ To avoid a stalemate, which would clash with the spirit of mobilization that infuses his works, Diderot had to make a cut of sorts, to arbitrarily tip the scales to one side. He spoke up for freedom: “one is a fatalist, and at every moment thinks, speaks, and writes as if bound by a superstitious freedom.”¹⁰⁰⁰ This choice was dictated by the preeminence of practice over speculation in his mode of existence. Practice was conceived as a typically human activity, as creatively interfering with the world. Crucially, Diderot joined the concepts of practice and morality, which forced him to accept the hypothesis of freedom. Without freedom, there would be “neither moral good nor moral evil, neither justice nor injustice, neither obligation nor rights.”¹⁰⁰¹ Yet justice and injustice exist, a person feels it in the depth of their heart, and thus morality and freedom exist as well. In this way, Diderot’s worldview was supported by emotions, the pangs of the heart.

Diderot would not permit a world without morality, for that would be a world without great people, without good enthusiasm. This made the philosopher an apologist for creativity. He believed it was a biological element that works through creative individuals. It was in creativity that man finds the power to act that the Enlightenment began to profess through Diderot. An important aspect of this theory is the imagination, which Diderot conceived as a force distinct from reason, though equally part of the mind. He stood up for the rights of the imagination, refusing to admit the cultural hegemony of rationality, which he called the spirit of philosophy:

The philosophical spirit needs more narrow comparisons, stricter, more rigorous; its progress is the enemy of movement and figures. Its reign of images passes insofar as that of things extends. It introduces by reason an exactness, a precision, a method, forgive the word, a type of pedantry which will kill everything.¹⁰⁰²

This is why Diderot’s ideal was not, primarily, the philosopher, but the brilliant artist.

Diderot might seem to us a Romantic when he demands appreciation for the genius, whom he understood much like Beaumarchais:

Genius that is ever on the alert for something new, that is impatient, that chafes under the restrictions of what is already known, suspects something more, something beyond the known; agitated and set in motion by this impelling force, the genius, his mind in

⁹⁹⁹ Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist*.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Quoted in: Skrzypek, *Diderot*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁰¹ Diderot, “Natural Right,” in: *Selected Writings*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁰² Diderot, *On Art and Artists*, trans. John S. D. Glaus, ed. Jean Seznec, London–New York 2011, p. 45.

torment, impatient, struggling to free himself, grows; and finally, breaking down the barrier of prejudice, he presses forward, out beyond the known borders. Sometimes he loses his way, but still it is he alone who carries the beacon far into the night of the possible, toward which others strive to follow him.¹⁰⁰³

Yet we must recall that Diderot was less interested in elevating feeling above reason than establishing the proper relations between them. As we have seen, this is the context for Diderot's "great man" – someone who can constructively use the energy stored in the passions. A great person is not simply a bundle of passions, but someone who can virtuously master them. He rationalizes his enthusiasms.

Diderot built his expressive rationalism less on a conviction of the structured and permanent nature of reality than on a diagnosis of its eternal flux and abundance. Diderot the rationalist understood perfectly that reality, to this way of understanding, could not simply be copied by artists, as its vitality deflects all attempts to be directly translated into the language of art. This is why, according to his theory, the artistic genius was not a master of imitating nature, as he was in classicism, but was meant to extract its essence, to use his own language to speak of life, energy, and the eternal straining of molecules to act. Diderot wanted him to achieve this not by blindly casting himself into the life-giving whirl of the world, but by forever practicing synthesis, striving to build intellectual distance, to delve with the mind, not into the external forms of the world, but into its inner principles.

Genius creates in an ongoing dialectic tension between the passions and reason. There could be no denying either impulse behind practice. This was partly because, however high he soared above mediocrity, as Diderot expected,¹⁰⁰⁴ not even a genius ever worked in a vacuum, in isolation. Diderot needed solitude,¹⁰⁰⁵ but even

¹⁰⁰³ Beaumarchais, "Essay on the Serious Drama," trans. Barrett H. Clark, https://sites.broadviewpress.com/lessons/DramaAnthology/BeaumarchaisSeriousDrama/BeaumarchaisSeriousDrama_print.html (accessed: 10.04.2020).

¹⁰⁰⁴ This is how we might explain his elitarian immoralist statements such as: "I hate all those mean actions which only reveal a contemptible character, but I've no hatred for great crimes" (Denis Diderot, "Salon of 1765," in: *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bremner, London–New York 1994, p. 235). We should note the justification Diderot provides: "firstly because they make fine paintings and fine tragedies; and then, because great, sublime actions and great crimes are marked by the same strength of purpose" (ibid.). For more on Diderot's "immoralism," cf. Skrzypek, *Filozofia Diderota*, pp. 186–191. There we find remarks on the similarities and differences between Diderot and the Marquis de Sade, and the former's "Romanticism."

¹⁰⁰⁵ In several places Diderot vies with Rousseau's yearning descriptions of the sublime lone contemplation of nature. This excerpt is especially compelling: "Here it is that nature can be seen. This is the sacred abode of enthusiasm. If a man has been granted the gift of genius he quits the town and its people. He takes pleasure, as his heart inclines him, in mingling his tears with the crystal waters of a spring, in bearing flowers to a grave, in walking lightly across the tender grass of a meadow, in wandering slowly through fertile fields, in contemplating the work of men, in fleeing to the depths of the forests. He loves their secret horror. He wanders on. He seeks a cavern to inspire him. Who is it that mingles his voice with the torrent falling from the mountainside? Who feels the sublime

more, he needed company. For this reason, his philosophy almost never longs to return to nature in the sense of Rousseau's *A Discourse on Inequality*, to a state in which individuals live in a state of joyful autarchy.¹⁰⁰⁶ In this, too, we see evidence of rationality prevailing over emotions in Diderot. The task of the individual is less to shout out their individual, pre-social being than to communicate with others, to express a shared condition. Without communication, man becomes a twisted creature: "Man is born to live in society. Separate him, isolate him, and his way of thinking will become incoherent, his character will change, a thousand foolish fancies will spring up in his heart, bizarre ideas will take root in his mind like brambles in the wilderness."¹⁰⁰⁷ This means there was basically no way out of social life. Moreover, in spite of the shortcomings of real societies, it was a state more advantageous than the brutality of nature. Thus, the key to happiness was not a return to savagery, an idea that Diderot and Voltaire mocked, but equipping society properly. Here, too, the concept of genius could find its application. The good legislator, the enlightened ruler, was something akin to a political genius. He knew how to find a vent for the energy of his subjects.

The most essential thing in social life was to avoid slipping into either extreme – primitivism on the one hand, luxury on the other.

If the seat of an individual's happiness in society is sufficiency, a state in-between excessive wealth and misery, does the invention of the species not find its expression in

nature of a wilderness? Who listens to his heart in the silence of solitude? It is he. Our poet dwells on the banks of a lake. He casts his eyes over the waters and his genius takes flight. There he is gripped by that spirit, now tranquil, now violent, which lifts his soul or calms it as it will... O nature, all that is good has its place in your breast! You are the fertile source of every truth!..." (Denis Diderot, "Conversations on *The Natural Son*," in: *Selected Writings...*, p. 18). Indeed, the Enlightenment and Romanticism are closer than they may seem. This is even more evident in this fragment: "Ruins suggest noble thoughts to me; that everything decays and dies and passes away, only the world remains and time endures. What an old world it is! My path lies between two eternities. [...] What is my ephemeral existence as compared to that of this work which is being hollowed out, to this forest whose trees are falling, to those shattered buildings above my head? [...] In that vast and solitary desert I shall hear nothing – the noise of life is far away. I may talk aloud to myself and complain, and shed tears, without a listener or any to disturb me" (Denis Diderot, "Salons: A Selection," in: *Diderot's Thoughts on Art and Style*, trans. Beatrix L. Tollemache, London 1904, pp. 51–52). Reading these words, it comes as no surprise that Diderot's favorite painters included Claude-Joseph Vernet (Ill. 145) and Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg (Ill. 146), with their stormy seas and moody landscapes (cf. Diderot, "Salons..."). Much as Romantic painters drew inspiration from them, in Diderot, Goethe, Schlegel, and Novalis may have found a kindred soul...

¹⁰⁰⁶ An exception is parts of "The Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville," in: Denis Diderot, *Political Writings*, trans. John Hope Mason and Edward Wokler, Cambridge 1992. We read: "If you propose to be [man's] tyrant, civilise him; poison him as best you can with a morality contrary to nature. Shackle him in all possible ways. Obstruct his every step with a thousand obstacles. Encumber him with terrifying phantoms. Keep the war inside him perpetually enflamed, and make sure that natural man is always chained beneath the heel of moral man" (ibid., p. 72).

¹⁰⁰⁷ Denis Diderot, *The Nun*, trans. Russell Guolbourne, Oxford–New York 2005, p. 104.



145. Claude-Joseph Vernet, *Le naufrage* (The Shipwreck), 1772



146. Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg, *Naufrage en grande tempête* (The Wreck of a Ship in a Great Storm), 1760s

happy moderation, somewhere between the enormous masses of excessive things and the discomforts and impoverishment of the savage?¹⁰⁰⁸

We should especially note the first part of this opposition. Diderot often opposed what might be called mannerism, particularly when it took the form of Rococo hedonism. This made him wary toward the concept of good taste, which was the chief principle of the Rococo:

great taste is like a razor's edge onto which it is difficult to balance. Soon customs are corrupted; reason's empire is extended [...] Speech becomes epigrammatic, ingenuous, laconic, and sententious; the arts corrupt themselves through refinement. One finds the old roads blocked by sublime models that one is desperate to equal. One writes poetics; one imagines new genres; one becomes a singularity, bizarre, stylized.¹⁰⁰⁹

According to Diderot, the France of his day was such a society, or at least the so-called fine society.

In *Rameau's Nephew* we find a masterful portrait of a personality shaped by Rococo ideals and, thus, whose sole desires were comfort and pleasure.¹⁰¹⁰ This is the titular character, a fundamentally inauthentic man,¹⁰¹¹ as he always focuses his existence on others'. Diderot himself was sometimes tormented by the feeling that he was leading an artificial life, immeasurably distant from what he felt most deep inside.¹⁰¹² In this he saw the greatest agony of his time – man's alienation from his own self. Let us note that this sense could only surface when a person began to be fully conscious of this "self," when it became something precious and worth defending, when, like Diderot, a person identified with it. This identification and the alienation that inevitably followed should also be regarded as a modern and essentially bourgeois experience, characteristic of the world where the individual triumphed over the collective.

To deal with this depressing alienation, Diderot believed it was necessary to make customs healthier. This did not mean a moralism in the spirit of reactionary conservatism. He did not reject his epoch's morality entirely, only what struck him as manneristic.¹⁰¹³ This is why, for example, he did not rail against sexual debauchery

¹⁰⁰⁸ Denis Diderot, "Fragmenty z teki pewnego filozofa," trans. Bohdan Strumiński, in: Baczek (ed.), *Filozofia francuskiego oświecenia*, p. 222.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Diderot, *On Art and Artists*, p. 137.

¹⁰¹⁰ Cf. the Nephew's characteristic statement: "to drink good wines, gorge on choice food, tumble pretty women, sleep in downy beds – outside of that, all is vanity" (Diderot, *Rameau's...*, p. 35).

¹⁰¹¹ The quintessence of the Nephew's inauthentic existence can be found in his cry: "The mask! The mask! I'd give a finger of my right hand to have thought of the mask" (ibid., p. 44).

¹⁰¹² Skrzypek, *Diderot*, pp. 96–97. For a wider discussion of this issue, see idem, *Filozofia Diderota*, pp. 87–108.

¹⁰¹³ "I am far from despising sensual pleasures. I have a palate too and it is tickled by a delicate wine or dish; I have eyes and a heart and I like to look at a pretty woman, like to feel the curve of her breast

in the name of purity or the denial of erotic pleasures, but only stood up for a productive sexuality that led to the multiplication of citizens.¹⁰¹⁴ He argued for what was robust, vital, and dynamic. Every kind of sexual excess – whether ascetic or hedonist – struck him as harming natural fertility.¹⁰¹⁵

Much as he rejected a dry rationalism or an ecstatic emotionalism, Diderot refused to accept a social life modeled on an orgy¹⁰¹⁶ or a monastery. His was the middle way, not in the sense of being lukewarm, but in giving dynamism to what was humble, rational, natural. Here he evoked the ideal society of Tahiti described by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in his highly popular *Voyage autour du monde* (A Voyage Around the World, 1771).¹⁰¹⁷ Here too he was perhaps most akin to Rousseau when describing an inhabitant of this island:

we do not wish to barter what you call our ignorance for your useless knowledge. [...] We knew only one disease, that to which all men, all animals, all plants have been condemned: old age. [...] Wretched man! You must henceforward bear the guilt either of the ravages that your tainted caresses are destined to make among this people or of the murders we shall commit to halt the poison's progress. But a short while ago, the young Tahitian maiden yielded herself in embraces to the Tahitian youth [...] Without fear and without shame, in the presence of all, surrounded by a circle of innocent Tahitians, to the sound of flutes, between two dances, she accepted the caresses of the man her young heart and the secret voice of her senses had chosen.¹⁰¹⁸

under my hand, press her lips to mine, drink bliss from her eyes and die of ecstasy in her arms. Sometimes a gay party with my friends, even if it becomes a little rowdy, is not displeasing to me. But I must confess that I find it infinitely sweeter to succor the unfortunate, to disentangle a bad business, to give helpful advice, to read some pleasant book, to take a walk with a man or woman who is dear to me, to spend a few instructive hours with my children, to write a page of good prose, to carry out my duties, or to tell her whom I love something tender and true which brings her arms around my neck" (Diderot, *Rameau's...*, p. 36). We see here that Diderot had a decidedly bourgeois, not aristocratic sensitivity.

¹⁰¹⁴ Let us note how Diderot praises a picture presented at the Salon in 1765: "This is a work of talent and high moral tone; it preaches in favour of big families and very movingly portrays the happiness and inestimable value of domestic harmony. It says to every man of good heart and good sense: look after your family, give your wife children, give her as many as you can, give them only to her, and be sure you'll be happy in your home" (Diderot, "The Salons...", p. 246).

¹⁰¹⁵ In *Jacques the Fatalist*, Diderot thunders against the delusional moralists for whom the very mention of sexuality is impure: "What harm were you ever done by something as natural, necessary, and right as genital activity, that you should wish all mention of it from your conversation and would imagine that your mouth and eyes and ears would be polluted if it reached them?" (Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist*, p. 185).

¹⁰¹⁶ Diderot loathed Boucher, whom he accused of immortality. The eroticism portrayed by the maestro of the Rococo was too obsessive for him. Diderot himself appreciated erotic pleasures, but not in a mannerist Rococo form. "[Boucher] only takes up his brush to show me tits and bums. I'm quite happy to see them, but I don't want people to show them to me," he wrote (Diderot, "The Salons," p. 180).

¹⁰¹⁷ Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *A Voyage Round the World*, trans. John Reinhold Forster, Cambridge 2011.

¹⁰¹⁸ Diderot, "Supplement to...", pp. 42–44.

After what we have said, it may surprise us how frequently Diderot appeals to the concept of nature in his comments on Bougainville. We have seen he had no intention of returning to this state, so why ought he be delighted by the “savages”? When we take a closer look, we discover that what attracted him to this vision of Tahiti was not the simple lack of (Western) civilization, but its alternate form. The Tahitians were not savages. Their mode of life was a culture of simplicity, companionship, freedom,¹⁰¹⁹ in which there was not yet a division between “to be” and “to seem.” We believe it is in this sense that Diderot writes of the superiority of natural law over positive law, asking:

Doesn't man, as man, take precedence over man in his legal capacity? Isn't the natural wisdom of humanity many times more sacred than that of some lawgiver? We call ourselves civilized, yet often we behave worse than savages. Apparently we have to go monotonously on, century after century, repeating the same errors and the same excesses, before we can achieve even a faint glimmering of sound judgment.¹⁰²⁰

The instinct he mentions here is not a primitive whim, it is basically the genius we mentioned above – pure activity tempered by simple, healthy morality. Diderot believed that French culture was waiting for a wave of such genius, as it was drowning in a sea of forms and conventions.

The Disquieting Charisma of Rameau's Nephew

To give culture a dynamic quality, it was necessary to expand the field of the visible, of what could be depicted. As Diderot understood, action is the child of the imagination, the images that appear before a person's eyes and mobilize them. This is why he gave such attention to art, especially the visual arts, theater, and dance. In all these fields, he sought a reevaluation of the themes that were presented. He also urged changes in their form of presentation. He was dissatisfied by a heroic or tragic model in painting or theater, as he was by the over-aesthetic Rococo trifles of painters or the whimsical comedies on various stages. Like many of his contemporaries, he did not find a space for his sensibility in these fields. As we have seen, Diderot strove to be always moving, to make his existence dynamic. This is why he demanded art have enthusiasm, the same quality with which we began in tracing his intellectual path.

¹⁰¹⁹ Such as this description: “Nothing there was deemed evil by sentiment or law apart from what was evil by nature. Work and harvesting were there undertaken in common. Their notion of property was very limited. The attraction of love, reduced to a simple physical appetite, gave rise among them to none of our disorders. The whole island seemed like one large family” (ibid., p. 66).

¹⁰²⁰ Diderot, “A Conversation between a Father and His Children,” in: *Rameau's Nephew*..., p. 269.

Diderot wrote:

Enthusiasm is born from some natural object. If the mind has seen it from various and striking aspects, then the object fills it, agitates it, torments it. The imagination takes fire, the passions are aroused. We are successively astonished, moved, outraged, and angry. Without enthusiasm [...] the true idea does not present itself.¹⁰²¹

The French culture of the mid-eighteenth century, with its opera-ballets, declaimed tragedies, stilted painting, Rococo trifles, and its primitive fairground humor lacked precisely this sort of enthusiasm, that is, an existential disquiet. It was safe, stable, flat. This is why Diderot demanded new forms and new subjects. From this came his affection for realism, a certain kind of senti-mentalism we might call a “heroicization of everyday life.”

In Diderot’s senti-mentalism we find a bourgeois sensitivity in an essentially modern form. The world is a highly dynamic whole, which makes every individual dynamic as well. It has an energy caged in it that we might call good enthusiasm. It is marked by simplicity, naturalness, and an absence of mannerism. This is why real life is neither in the aristocratic consumption of luxuries, which brings only satiety, nor in the primitive existence of the masses, with all their biases and superstitions. The only man in the full sense of the word, the natural man, is, according to Diderot, the bourgeois guided by common sense and enamored with the simple life – noble in his heart, not in his blood, bold through the inner strength of his love, and not because of an external code of honor, honest but without affectations. This was the sort of person for whom Diderot struggled – and this was the person art, including dance, ought to portray.

In the history of theater textbooks, we find Diderot’s name in the chapter on the evolution of the bourgeois drama. Apart from Lessing, he was its most outstanding theorist, and the author of two attempts at stage productions in this spirit: *The Illegitimate Son* (1757) and *The Father of the Family* (1758), which did not immediately win large audiences, though they did point the way for more talented successors. Diderot placed the bourgeois drama between tragedy and comedy. Thus, he wrote of the “serious genre” (*le genre sérieux*),¹⁰²² in which he included the domestic tragedy and the serious comedy.¹⁰²³ Any dramatic works could fit within the “serious genre”:

any dramatic composition, even though it contains no laughable absurdity, no perils to make us shudder, will always hold the interest if the poet adopts the tone that we

¹⁰²¹ Diderot, “Conversations on *The Natural Son*,” p. 91.

¹⁰²² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁰²³ Denis Diderot, “On Dramatic Poetry,” in: *Selected Writings*, pp. 103–107.

ourselves use in serious matters and if the action evolves through a series of perplexities and hindrances.¹⁰²⁴

Had he been writing directly about dance, Diderot would have taken the side of Gardel and Dauberval, and not Noverre. Like them, he was incapable of identifying with the protagonists of the classical tragedies. He was less interested in public life, though of course he did not deplore it, than in what was private and intimate. He admired the plays of Voltaire, Racine, and Crébillon père, but he considered them to be overwrought and stilted; they did not move him. On stage, he wanted to see actions “most commonly met with in real life,”¹⁰²⁵ not the banal, of course, but the sublime. The “serious genre” was meant to provide this sort of experience.

Diderot’s realism necessitated a holistic reform of the theater. In an earlier novel, the piquant and satirical *Indiscreet Jewels* (1748), he smuggled a critique of contemporaneous French culture under the guise of a tale of an Oriental court, lauding a realist theater that would reject a complex (not to say convoluted) plot in favor of social realism.¹⁰²⁶ This work bemoaned the star system, in which art was subordinate to the actors, and not the reverse.¹⁰²⁷ He was put off by “the stiff carriage of the actors, the oddity of their dress, the extravagance of their gestures, the pomposity of their strange rhymed, cadenced language, and hundreds of other shocking dissonances.”¹⁰²⁸ Later, in his work promoting the “serious genre,” he developed these themes fully.

Part of the suggested reform involved moving bodies on stage. Like the dance reformers, Diderot drew from ancient pantomime.¹⁰²⁹ He was convinced that only a character surrendering to the relevant emotions themselves could hope to move the viewer.¹⁰³⁰ It was time to be done with the endless talk, with the unnatural declamation. A highly mobilized actor should take the stage, depicting psychological truth like a physical spasm. Diderot demands an authenticity on a pre-logical plane:

¹⁰²⁴ Diderot, “Conversations on...,” pp. 98–99.

¹⁰²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁰²⁶ He wrote: “the perfection of a play consists in an imitation of an action so exact that the spectator, being continually deceived, imagines himself part of the action itself” (Denis Diderot, *The Indiscreet Jewels*, trans. Sophie Hawkes, New York 1993, p. 165).

¹⁰²⁷ Diderot, *The Indiscreet Jewels*.

¹⁰²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

¹⁰²⁹ Diderot, “Conversations...,” pp. 92–93. In spite of his reservations toward it, Italian comedy was another model for Diderot. Of its actors, he wrote: “We may find something original and free-spirited in their behavior, something difficult to name, but which I like, and which everyone would, were it not sullied with absurd intrigues and tasteless dialogues. In the wild actors I glean merry-makers who long to enjoy themselves, possessed by unleashed imaginations. I prefer their madness to stiffness, heaviness, and posturing” (Diderot, *O poezji dramatycznej*, p. 201).

¹⁰³⁰ This is why, in a letter to Miss Jodin, Diderot recommends: “As few gestures as possible; frequent gesturing impairs the power of expression and undermines nobility. Movement should be expressed with the face, eyes, and entire body, not only with the arms” (Denis Diderot, “Listy do panny Jodin,” in: *Pisma...*, p. 288).

What is it that moves us when we see a man animated by some great passion? Is it his words? Sometimes. But what never fails to stir us is cries, inarticulate words, a broken voice, a group of monosyllables with pauses in between, a murmur, impossible to describe, deep in the throat or between the teeth. [...] The voice, the tone, the gestures, the stage movements – these are what belong to the actor. And these are the things that strike us.¹⁰³¹

What strikes today's reader is Diderot's sensitivity to physical stimulus,¹⁰³² which the classicist tragedy utterly expelled from the stage. In this regard he was closer to the English theater, which had been animated in the eighteenth century by Garrick, than the French equivalent. This means he was a forerunner of the physical communication that was only to be fully developed by the modernist renditions of theater and dance in the early twentieth century.

How was the theater to be made expressive? A painting analogy played a crucial role here, as the crux of Diderot's argument. Theater should take a lesson from such masterful painters as Jean-Baptiste Greuze,¹⁰³³ who, according to Chaunu, belonged to the "two great aesthetic axes of the latter half of the eighteenth century: the closed family circle and the asceticism of work, the superiority of products made by human hands."¹⁰³⁴ This was how Diderot treated painting as a model for the hard work of synthesizing nature on stage. He liked pictures that were realistic, yet noble, where, as in Greuze, one found a heroicization of everyday life – of work and the family. This was also the kind of portrayal he wanted in the theater. The painterliness of the *genre sérieux* was not, therefore, meant to bring a purely visual sensitivity to the theater, it was not meant to transcend the anecdotal, it was a strategy for creating an expressive dramatic genre. This is what could be learned from Greuze – emotional sublimity joined to social realism. Diderot saw him as a master in that he was sensitive and close to nature, but also brilliantly kept a handle on the composition.

Here we come to a crucial reservation with which Diderot equipped his theory of expressive acting. This was the subject of his famous *The Paradox of the Actor*,

¹⁰³¹ Diderot, "Conversations...", p. 94.

¹⁰³² Cf. an image that resembles proto-Expressionist choreography, included in "A Conversation between a Father and His Children": "Those women ([father] went on), I can almost see them now – some rolling over and over all around the room, pulling out great fistfuls of their own hair, tearing at their faces and breasts with their nails. Some foaming at the mouth, held their babies by the heels and were all ready to dash their brains out on the stone floor if we hadn't stopped them. The men laid hold of the chairs, tipped over the tables, and smashed everything that came to hand; some of them started to set fire to the house, while others got down on all fours and scratched at the floor with their fingernails as though they were trying to dig up the old priest in order to tear his corpse to pieces. Above this bedlam I could hear the children's shrieks, for they were as much overcome by despair as their elders, even though they didn't quite know what it was all about, clinging to their mothers' dresses only to be savagely thrust aside" (Denis Diderot, "A Conversation...", p. 237).

¹⁰³³ We find an apologia for him in the *Salon* 1765.

¹⁰³⁴ Chaunu, *Cywilizacja Oświecenia*, p. 367.

a book which basically repeats a single idea in a variety of ways – the actor should not be a slave to the emotions they create. Diderot reminds the actor not to slip into pure emotion, but to capture it “cold” through technique: “I want him to have a lot of judgment, for me there needs to be a cool, calm spectator inside this man, so I demand sagacity and no feeling,”¹⁰³⁵ he wrote. This text casts a very interesting light on the “tears of blood” Noverre dreamed of. “An actor’s tears pour down from his mind,”¹⁰³⁶ Diderot stated. The actor was thus meant to adopt the stance of a wise man devoid of sentimental illusions. The truth of the stage was not mere imitation.

Just think for a moment about what on the stage is called *truth* [Diderot tells us]. Does it mean showing things as they are in nature? Not at all. Truth in this sense would simply be the ordinary. What then is the truth of the stage? It is the conformity of the actions, the speeches, the face, the voice, the movement, the gesture, with an ideal model.¹⁰³⁷

The ideal model is nothing other than a synthetic grasp of the real. It presupposes taking a step back from the world, into one’s own passions, which are still acknowledged to be the deepest essence of acting. This step back cannot entail a flight into pure form, it is meant to be deeply rooted in nature, in real situations, conflicts, actions. Acting is the ability to analyze them, requiring a sense of involvement.

Diderot wanted a theater that would depart from “character” portraits we mentioned in Watteau, depicting people’s conditions in his present-day society. He did not want the theater to show a king or a knight, but “the man of letters, the philosopher, the trader, the judge, the lawyer, the politician, the citizen, the magistrate, the financier, the great noble, the intendent.”¹⁰³⁸ This analysis, which we might call sociological, made Diderot realize that these are social roles which individuals *perform*, though as more than mere representatives of these roles. This is why it was not meant to be just models, but very concrete lives that were to be presented on stage. Diderot urged:

A man’s condition, with its duties, its advantages, its difficulties, must provide the basis of a dramatic work. I believe this source is more productive, more extensive and more valuable than that of character. If there was the least bit of exaggeration in a character, a spectator could say to himself: that is not me. But he cannot avoid noticing that

¹⁰³⁵ Denis Diderot, “The Paradox of the Actor,” in: *Selected Writings...*, p. 103. A few pages on, in the same tone: “the strokes of inspired beauty, the fortuitous touches which they distribute through their works and whose sudden appearance surprises even them, are effective and successful in an altogether more assured way than what they threw off in a flight of fancy. It needs a cool head to temper the frenzy of enthusiasm” (ibid., p. 105).

¹⁰³⁶ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁰³⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰³⁸ Diderot, “Conversations on *The Natural Son*,” p. 61.

the station in life being portrayed before him is his own; he cannot be unaware of his own duties. He must necessarily apply what he hears to himself.¹⁰³⁹

The imperative here was an internal one. Watching a clerk on stage, the clerk observed himself, and thus decidedly had a far more intimate bond with the performance than if he was watching a pastoral comedy or a heroic tragedy. This, in turn, imposed moral obligations. The bourgeois drama was meant to be a space of mobilization, precisely due to this mechanism of direct identification with the protagonist. The sublimity Diderot wanted had nothing to do with contemplation. It was meant to stimulate, following the principle that observed movement inspires inner movement, which translates into external movement that mobilizes people inside, and so on, endlessly.

Thus, we had the bourgeoisie on either side of the stage. In Diderot, the bourgeois actor as a virtuoso of emotion meets the bourgeois viewer in search of passions that excite them personally. The performance is an engine and distiller of movement, which was forever increasing in Enlightenment culture. Movement in the affective sphere was accompanied by growing instability in the social and political space. The French Enlightenment can be called, at times, a state of constant movement, which ultimately destabilized the classicist Order on behalf of the bourgeois logic of History. The changes in the theater were a result of this, and illustrate it splendidly. The bourgeois drama in its mature form was preceded by attempts to build a bourgeois theatricality, such as those by Lesage in *Turcaret* or Voltaire in *The Prodigal Son*. The aforementioned La Chaussée was also important, in whom, as Jerzy Adamski writes,

the weepy and touching situations concealed a defense of moral and emotional stances extolled by the French bourgeoisie at the time; most of all, the ideal of the family, and utterly opposed to the philosophy of sensual pleasure that was lauded by the court aristocracy, the ranks of wealthy parvenus, libertine poetry, and frivolous prose.¹⁰⁴⁰

Diderot's project might be seen as the crowning of this tendency. At the same time, it triggered further change. Michel-Jean Sedaine and Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and then Beaumarchais, achieved success through developing his ideas. In their plays, the bourgeois worldview was expressed to the full.¹⁰⁴¹

Let us have a look at Mercier:

The poet, always equipped with a marvelous sensitivity, extends the moral code, making divisions according to his inner sense. He does not judge people according to laws

¹⁰³⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Jerzy Adamski, *Historia literatury francuskiej*, Wrocław 1989, p. 169.

¹⁰⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 172–176.

carved in stone or written on parchment, but according to hidden and unseen criteria that are generally acknowledged, the ones we might say create the fragile fabric of our conscience. This is the wellspring of moral philosophy, which in no way recalls the law of the world.¹⁰⁴²

This is the bourgeois morality, and the poet in Mercier's text is the model bourgeois subject. Here is a clear declaration of a new life attitude. The criteria for evaluating good and bad, correct and incorrect, true and false, no longer consisted of reason guided by objective laws, but internal, subjective feeling. The order of the heart triumphed, in every domain. It is not laws, but the conscience that rules; not the rules of the world, but private existence. The main subject of interest is not life on the outside, but inner life. Let us recall the words of Philippe Ariès, who expressed this cultural transformation perfectly:

Starting in the eighteenth century, people began defending themselves against a society whose constant intercourse had hitherto been the source of education, reputation and wealth. Henceforth a fundamental movement would destroy the old connections between masters and servants, great and small, friends or clients. [...] Everywhere it reinforced private life at the expense of neighbourly relationships, friendships, and traditional contacts.¹⁰⁴³

In the bourgeois world, the nearby, familiar, and sentimental prevailed. This was in part because metaphysical systems were in retreat. The bourgeois lived in the here and now, not searching for meaning in refined speculation, but in what was right at hand. Let us have a look at some Enlightenment painting, such as pictures by the aforementioned Greuze.¹⁰⁴⁴ He was fond of maudlin family scenes, dramas played out in modest rooms between, for example, a degenerate son, a suffering father, and a cowed mother (Ill. 147, 148). He also painted saccharine portraits of children – here a beloved doll, there a puppy. We may note the emotional torment in the children's eyes, in their poses and props.¹⁰⁴⁵ The same goes for the adult figures in the pictures of Maurice Quentin de La Tour and Jean-Baptiste Perronneau. The Enlightenment “[p]ortrait reaches past the outer appearance, always managing to perceive the truth under the clothes and the soul in the gaze.”¹⁰⁴⁶ Here is

¹⁰⁴² Louis-Sébastien Mercier, “O teatrze, czyli nowa próba sztuki dramatycznej,” trans. Ewa Rządowska, in: Udalska (ed.), *O dramacie...*, p. 391.

¹⁰⁴³ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick, New York 1962, p. 406.

¹⁰⁴⁴ “My friend, this man Greuze will be the ruin of you,” Diderot wrote, delighted by the painter's evocative works (Diderot, “The Salons,” p. 246).

¹⁰⁴⁵ Have a look at the analysis of *The Girl Weeping for Her Dead Bird* by Diderot. This is an outstanding example of an Enlightenment sensibility (Diderot, “The Salons,” pp. 236–238).

¹⁰⁴⁶ Chaunu, *Cywilizacja Oświecenia*, p. 366.



147. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La malédiction paternelle: Le Fils ingrat* (The Father's Curse: The Ungrateful Son), 1777



148. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *La malédiction paternelle: Le Fils puni* (The Father's Curse: The Son Punished), 1778



149. Jean-Baptiste Perronneau, *Jean-Georges Noverre*, mid 18th century

the individual psychology no longer reserved for kings and saints, but also accessible to clerks, ladies running salons, tradesmen, philosophers, and dancers. Perronneau depicted Noverre (Ill. 149) – how much action there was in that frontal gaze, how alluring those facial features... And finally, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. This master of the still life (Ill. 150, 151) was adored by Diderot, who enthused:

this china vase is china; [...] these olives are really separated from the eye by the water they are floating in; these biscuits are there to be picked up and eaten, this orange to be cut open and squeezed, this glass of wine to be drunk, these fruits to be peeled, this pie to be sliced with a knife. [...] Ah Chardin! What you mix on your palette is not white, red and black; it's the very substance of things; what you take on the tip of your brush and fix to the canvas are the very air and light themselves.¹⁰⁴⁷

Let us not laugh at this mysticism of the pie. The elevation of the everyday is a key facet of modernity. It contains a stride toward democracy, as pie, wine, and oranges are for one and all. But this is also specific to the experience of the middle-of-the-road thinkers. For the aristocracy, pie was too plebeian to be seen as beautiful. For a commoner, it was too ordinary to be contemplated for a moment. Through making the ordinary sublime, the bourgeois showed that everyday life could be a source of meaning. Previously, high culture was meant to laugh at it; the modern person wept at everyday life, while finding energy to act in it.

Diderot described his yearning for the heroic everyday in a highly characteristic manner:

¹⁰⁴⁷ Diderot, "The Salons," p. 186.



150. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Nature morte avec carafe et fruits* (Still Life with Glass Flask and Fruit), 1750



151. Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Verre d'eau et pichet* (Glass of Water and Pitcher), ca. 1760

I can feel that sublimity; it is in the words of a father who said to the son who supported him in his old age: "My son, our debts are settled. I gave life to you, and you have restored it to me." And in those of another father who said to his son: "Always speak the truth. Never make a promise which you do not intend to keep. I entreat you by these feet, which I warmed by my hands, when you were in your cradle."¹⁰⁴⁸

Before the Enlightenment, it would have been absurd to have thought that sublimity and warming a child's feet could have gone hand-in-hand. For Diderot, and modernity with him, this combination was natural. Human existence was made more intimate, the private was elevated, and a tenderness in family relations became the ideal of human relations.

An expression of making the private sublime was the *genre sérieux* on stage. This gave rise to a sensitivity still exploited by dramas and soap operas of our day. In "Conversations on *The Natural Son*," the initiator of the serious genre and the author's *portes paroles* is a man named Dorval. At one point he tells his interlocutor, who still subscribes to a classicist paradigm, some significant words:

What! Can you not imagine the effect upon you of a real background, authentic dress, speeches adapted to actions, simple actions, dangers which you cannot fail to have feared for your relations, your friends, yourself? A sudden change in fortune, the fear of public disgrace, the consequences of poverty, a passion which leads a man to ruin, from ruin to despair, from despair to violent death, these are not infrequent events. And do you think they would not move you as much as the fictitious death of a tyrant, or the sacrifice of a child on the altars of the gods of Athens or Rome?¹⁰⁴⁹

Diderot had no doubt – a personal misfortune was more moving than the fall of a tyrant, and a child whimpering in their cradle here and now was more compelling than a child sacrificed on an altar to the gods.

In Ariès, we read of the eighteenth century: "The old code of manners was an art of living in public and together. The new [bourgeois] code of manners emphasized the need to respect the privacy of others."¹⁰⁵⁰ And a bit further on: "The history of modern manners can be reduced in part to [the] long effort to break away from others, to escape from a society whose pressure has become unbearable."¹⁰⁵¹ Ariès denies that this means individualism. He speaks of human existence coming down to the family. Yet it seems he understands individualization in a narrow sense – as a lack of care for others. Enlightenment individualism was something else. It noted the creative potential in every individual, seeing them as singular and

¹⁰⁴⁸ Diderot, "Conversations...", p. 56.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood...*, p. 399.

¹⁰⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 406–407.

unique beings. It did not preclude devotion to others. The point was that a person devoted themselves to the community as an inviolable “I,” not as a rank-and-file representative of a social group. This shift toward the family was a fact, as was the conviction that every member of a family was an individual. This only increased in the nineteenth century. It suffices to compare the family members in Molière’s plays, such as *The Miser*, and the families portrayed by Balzac, as in *Le Père Goriot*, to see the difference.

The stress on intimacy and the private space, on every person’s unique inner life, was there from the start of the Enlightenment. In Dubos we find an important statement on the individuality of a person in a crowd:

The case is pretty near the same, with regard to the minds and characters of men, as with respect to their countenances. Man’s face is composed of the same parts, of two eyes, one mouth, &c. and yet men’s countenances are all different, because they are differently composed. [...] two characters perfectly alike are a much greater phenomenon in nature, than two faces of a complete resemblance. [...] All men appear alike to limited capacities: to people of a better understanding they all seem different: But every man is an original to a poet born with a comic genius.¹⁰⁵²

Diderot was one such genius, stating: “All across the world, perhaps, you will find no two people quite alike, showing utter similarity.”¹⁰⁵³ This had to have an impact on his theory of stage dance, perceived as a creative space for expressing individual emotions.

For Diderot, as for Noverre, the stage dance of his time, with its complex figures, was too cold and abstract. He also found it too aristocratic, a trait that Noverre had also despised. Diderot wanted a theater for the people, not only for the connoisseurs of the upper crust. He wrote: “there are no longer any public spectacles,”¹⁰⁵⁴ such as the citizens of Athens and Rome enjoyed. For this reason, too, he proposed showing simple lives and characters on stage, not necessarily from the highest social strata, though not from the lower depths either:¹⁰⁵⁵ “The subject must be an important one and the plot must be simple, domestic and close to real life.”¹⁰⁵⁶ This was the direction for stage dance; according to Diderot, its main strength was in the expressiveness and synthesis of the moving images. What required many words

¹⁰⁵² Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting, and Music* (1719), trans. Thomas Nugent, London 1748, pp. 191, 193.

¹⁰⁵³ Diderot, *O poezji dramatycznej*, p. 215.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Diderot, “Conversations...,” p. 35.

¹⁰⁵⁵ He was biased against servants, for instance, whom he wanted to exclude from the serious genre (*ibid.*, p. 49).

¹⁰⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

in a drama could be contained in a dancer's single gesture or in an evocative *tableau*, in the vein of Greuze, for instance.

The expressive gesture was meant to oppose the mannerist gesture. Diderot was decidedly against the classicist school of dance, symbolized, for him, by Marcel. He often attacked the latter in his writings. Let us quote one such attack, as it gives us excellent insight into the author's intentions:

I have once mentioned that the famous Marcel made his pupils artificial, and I will not retract this statement. The suppleness, allure, and subtlety of his limbs stripped the body of its simple, natural movements; these he replaced with conventional poses, which he knew better than anyone in the world. [...] I may agree that his pupil splendidly performs the French aping of respect, but I shall never believe that this pupil should know better than anyone else how to grieve at a death or a lover's betrayal, or fall to the feet of an enraged father. Marcel's entire art boils down to a knowledge of a few pirouettes that are obligatory in fine society.¹⁰⁵⁷

Noverre, as we recall, complained of the same thing – he saw the Opera as a space for producing moving machines, devoid of intelligence, imagination, and sensitivity, incapable of expressing deeper experiences.¹⁰⁵⁸ Diderot built on this critique. He viewed classicist dance as an embodiment of the conventions that confined a person, a symbol of existence and a social system against which the Enlightenment struggled. Rameau's nephew speaks of a repressed existence: "I crawl on the earth, look about me, and take my position."¹⁰⁵⁹ In a society of an outdated order, non-functional dependencies, pressure, and profound injustices, there could be no talk of an authentic life. Thus, everyone began a degrading dance:

The King takes a position before his mistress and before God; he dances his pantomime steps. The minister trips it too, as courtier, flatterer, footman and beggar before his king. The crown of self-seekers dance all your positions in a hundred ways, each viler than the next, in front of the minister. The noble Abbe, in furred cape and cloak, dances

¹⁰⁵⁷ Diderot, *Salon 1765*, trans. Jerzy Stadnicki, Warsaw 2009, p. 156 (the English translations do not include this fragment).

¹⁰⁵⁸ When Diderot sought to show one of his protagonists' stupidity, he wrote that she was "ignorant as a dancer at the Opera" (Denis Diderot, "Mistyfikacja, czyli historia portretów," in: *Mistyfikacja. Sen d'Alemberta*, p. 23). In *The Indiscreet Jewels*, he made this biting comment: "you have admired Nini's agility and Saligo's speed; answer me sincerely then – do you think that these creatures have the soul elsewhere than in their legs? And have you not noticed that in Volucer and Zelindor the head obeys the feet? The eternal temptation of the dancer is to contemplate his legs. At every step his attentive eyes follow his foot's lead, and his head bows respectfully before his feet" (Diderot, *The Indiscreet Jewels*, pp. 124–125).

¹⁰⁵⁹ Diderot, *Rameau's...*, p. 82. We should note that the Nephew does not especially revolt against this state of things: "I just watched the others and acted like them, better, perhaps, because I am more frankly impudent, a better actor" (*ibid.*, p. 41).

attendance once a week at least before the official who appoints to benefices. Really, what you call the beggar's pantomime is what makes the world go round.¹⁰⁶⁰

Marian Skrzypek points out that "what makes the world go round" is a *branle* in the original, the circular folk dance that we have encountered. Perhaps this terminological tactic might be interpreted as an anti-plebeian gesture. Yet it seems that most essential to Diderot was the metaphorical aspect of the circular *branle*, which Skrzypek teases out.¹⁰⁶¹ The wheel of conventions is forever turning, becoming a vicious circle of oppression.

Diderot called the pantomime of artificial posturing and mannerist gestures "vile."¹⁰⁶² He opposed it to the modern, expressive, unaffected pantomime. When he thought of the dance of the future, as we have seen, he gave it a sense of despair, of falling to the feet of an enraged father. Only the body was capable of expressing the sublimity in the bourgeois heart. In a letter to Voltaire, Diderot wrote: "silence and pantomime express pathos that no orator can achieve."¹⁰⁶³ Here we find the Enlightenment faith in the power of the primitive gesture we saw in Cahusac. We note sentimentalism and a proposed realism. Diderot did not understand dance that wanted to operate through spatial form. Like Rousseau, he was utterly immune to the beauty of corporeal geometry. He testily remarked:

I should be glad if someone would tell me what meaning all these dances have, such as the minuet, the passe-pied, the riga-doon, the allemande, the saraband, which follow a set pattern. This man is performing movements of immense gracefulness; in every one of them I see ease, gentleness and nobility; but what is he imitating? This is not singing, it is just running through the scales.¹⁰⁶⁴

This does not mean that Diderot sought to utterly eliminate what was specific to dance. He wrote that dance was "rhythmic pantomime," not just pantomime as such. Nonetheless, it was the aspect of pantomime, and thus, of representation, that certainly interested him most.

Diderot's ideal of dance is clearly shown in the script for the dance spectacle at the opening of "Conversations on *The Natural Son*" cited at the beginning of our survey of his philosophy. Diderot adheres to a dictum that Noverre would have appreciated: "A dance is a poem. This poem should therefore have a performance of its own."¹⁰⁶⁵ It is an imitation by means of movements, which demands the collaboration

¹⁰⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁰⁶¹ Skrzypek, *Filozofia Diderota*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁶² Diderot, *Rameau's...*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁶³ Quoted in: Skrzypek, *Filozofia Diderota*, p. 97.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Diderot, "Conversations...", p. 68.

¹⁰⁶⁵ As we have seen, this was Rousseau's view.



152. Jean-Antoine Watteau, *La Danse Champêtre* (Country Dance), 1706–1710

of the poet, the painter, the composer and the mime.”¹⁰⁶⁶ The result is a tale that has much in common with Noverre’s rustic stagings, and the mood of some works by Watteau, such as *La Danse Champêtre* (The Country Dance, 1706–1710) (Ill. 152). As such, we could say that this was a step backward with regard to the bourgeois drama. Yet for Diderot, the realism of the dance performance was vital, aesthetically alluding more to the anecdotal pictures of Greuze than to the idealized canvases of Fragonard. Let us have a look at the subject of the ballet: “A peasant boy and girl are coming home from the fields in the evening. They meet in a little wood near their village and decide to rehearse a dance which they have to perform together the following Sunday, beneath the great elm tree.”¹⁰⁶⁷ Here there is no more Rococo idealization of the countryside in an Arcadian spirit, it is more a social observation, though its theme is rather trivial. Diderot is paving the way for Dauberval and his *La fille mal gardée*, which we will be examining in the final chapter.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Diderot, “Conversations...,” p. 68.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 69.

Diderot's script exudes respect for the hardworking country life and a fascination for its healthy, spontaneous recreations. Though the two main protagonists are children, they have a temper, and they have personalities that derive from a condition that Diderot wanted to portray on stage. We find out nothing about the kind of dance the young people are rehearsing, which is consistent with Diderot's aversion to set forms. Far more essential is the script of mimed steps and gestures. Their conditions and personalities are not related through minuets and *passe-pieds*. An individual temperament requires an unconventional choreography. A dance of individuals replaced choreography.

Let us have a look at the rustic ballet Diderot designed, at his theory of dance, and finally, the "existential choreography" in his writings, from the standpoint of *Rameau's Nephew*. Here we find a remarkable scene. The nephew has begun to extol the advantages of Italian music over French. He is excited at the thought of the Italian fluidity, melody, the emotional weight of the Italian music. He begins to sing arias, slowly drifting into a sort of musical-kinetic trance, which Diderot describes as follows: "Now in a baritone voice he sank to the pit; then straining in falsetto he tore to shreds the upper notes of some air, imitating the while the stance, walk and gestures of the several characters; being in succession furious, mollified, lordly, sneering."¹⁰⁶⁸ Diderot was not alone in being unable to tear his eyes from the nephew; all the patrons of the café in which the scene was unfolding were turned toward him. Passers-by watched through the window. The Nephew was increasingly consumed by his emotions. He gave a true display of expressive movement whose dynamics Garrick himself would have admired:

waving about like a madman, being in himself a dancer and ballerina, singer and prima donna, all of them together and the whole orchestra, the whole theater; then redividing himself into twenty separate roles, running, stopping, glowing at the eyes like one possessed, frothing at the mouth. [...] What did he not attempt to show me? He wept, laughed, sighed, looked placid or melting or enraged. He was a woman in a spasm of grief, a wretched man sunk in despair, a temple being erected, birds growing silent at sunset, waters murmuring through cool and solitary places or else cascading from a mountain-top, a storm, a hurricane, the anguish of those about to die mingled with the whistling of the wind and the noise of thunder. He was night and its gloom, shade and silence.¹⁰⁶⁹

True – the Nephew is not retaining his distance, which means he is not a good actor. Losing himself in the performance, he commits the cardinal sin of emotionality. And yet, Diderot admits: "[He gripped] our souls and [kept] them suspended in the most singular state of being I have ever experienced. Did I admire? Yes,

¹⁰⁶⁸ Diderot, *Rameau's...*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

I did admire.”¹⁰⁷⁰ This admiration surprises us, and Diderot as well. It is a sign of having moved from an aristocratic sensibility, which would have seen the Nephew as little more than grotesque, to a bourgeois sensibility, which was not capable of mocking him. In rational categories, his performance is little more than a charge, a bit of buffoonery, yet Diderot is touched, not amused. It appears that this comes from the Enlightenment’s yearning to capture the dynamism of the world in an individual existence. The trance into which the Nephew falls expresses his vitality, but also the energy that the Enlightenment spurred in every nook of reality – on a physical, social, and political plane. In this we almost glimpse the madness of the Revolution. The bizarre pantomime becomes moving because it knows no compromise, because of the extreme commitment of the individual being moved by the elemental “dance of emotion” – a modern, bourgeois form of agency.

In our view, the Nephew’s performance is, for Diderot, a shameful kinetic ideal, only suggested in his theory of dance, an ideal that was only to be fully realized by modernist dancers in the early twentieth century – from Isadora Duncan to Mary Wigman. To be “gloom, shade, and silence” in a dance, and thus mysterious, sublime, opaque – these are very modern aspirations. The Nephew is a model representative of the petty bourgeoisie as a kind of “social condition,” whose depiction on stage was posited by the theory of bourgeois drama. It has not been reduced to recognizable traits, it has something original about it, something Diderot was incapable of understanding, which made it fascinating to him. The Nephew’s originality is a puzzle. It is hard to lock into a socio-psychological mold. It becomes a unique individual. In this opacity is the modern notion of a person. During their dialogue, the interlocutor repeatedly chastises the Nephew, but also discovers they have something in common, despite all the affectations and mannerisms in the latter. This connection is based on the Nephew’s singularity, something hard to pin down, which Diderot also saw in himself. In this manner, against a backdrop of sentimental realism, in a space of the heroic everyday, the kinetic language of the bourgeois subject was formed, eager to prove to itself and the world that it – the subject – was like no other, and was thoroughly authentic in its movement – that it was an active, powerful SELF.

The Kinetic Politics of the *Ballet d'action* and the Social Dance

Diderot shared a belief in a universal human nature with the Enlightenment. This belief, however, was not a universalism in the sense of a simple equivalence of conditions. People resembled one another, but in being unique as individuals. In this we see the specificity of Diderot’s individualistic point of view. As Zapaśnik puts

¹⁰⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

it, Diderot “introduces an [...] *internal* principle to define the content of individual [...] experiences.”¹⁰⁷¹ This principle is of a moral nature. An important novelty with regard to earlier attempts to build an individualistic point of view, as in Montaigne or Descartes, is that there is no appeal to an external, objective, and superior order. This is contained in Diderot’s aesthetics, including its imperative to make dance expressive. The consequences were enormous, as Zapaśnik brilliantly grasped:

Searching for objective bases for the ideal of beauty, [Diderot] found nothing more certain than the will of the artist. However, the real outcome of his investigations escaped him, as he believed too strongly that nature itself spoke through genius. His successors showed more insight, as they acquired growing evidence for art’s ability to create its own reality, irreducible to what nature made. The mind lost its passivity in step with the growth of the artist’s sense of pride and independence. Small wonder, then, that since God was dead, man had to imagine himself in the likeness of another man, albeit one equipped with the divine ability to create.¹⁰⁷²

In philosophy in the spirit of Diderot, an active and creative individual mind inextricably tied to the expressive body was infected with the virus of mobilization. Life meant constant action, an incessant drive to externalize an interior that could not be fully expressed. As such, dance could not be merely a formalized mingling, a way of building social distinction, or a source of simple pleasure. Dance was meant to serve individualization, it was to shake human existence to the depths. Only looking at it as such do we fully realize what Noverre had in mind when he wrote: “Action [...] is an arrow that pierces the heart, tearing apart the breast.”¹⁰⁷³

In the first half of the eighteenth century, action was perceived quite differently.¹⁰⁷⁴ It was nothing more than an external sign of emotion. Actions were cataloged in just as emotions were. One example of this is Le Brun’s famous lexicon, in which various passions were assigned matching facial expressions.¹⁰⁷⁵ By this model, which instrumentalized physical actions, there was no room for spontaneous expression, for its diversity. Convention ruled bodily expression. In the Enlightenment, this gradually changed. Action began to serve inner expression, tension of an individualized nature, just as emotion became individual. It would be hard to speak of an essential difference between emotion and the expression of emotion. Passion and action combined into one whole. Action on stage ceased to be mere form and became an experience. This adhered to the premise to imitate nature; not

¹⁰⁷¹ Zapaśnik, *Filozofia...*, p. 372.

¹⁰⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 571.

¹⁰⁷³ Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka...*, p. 169.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Changes in understanding the term “action” are covered in: McCleave, *Marie Sallé and the Development...*, pp. 4–8.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Charles Le Brun, *Conférence de M. Le Brun sur l’expression générale et particulière*, 1698.

to copy it, but to pursue it, which meant that art, including theater and dance, was founded on natural impulses, on inner emotions creative individuals drew from contact with nature, and not on external images of that nature.¹⁰⁷⁶

Let us have a look at what Rousseau wrote about action in the context of music:

[The musician will] not only agitate the sea, animate the flame of a conflagration, make rivulets flow, the rain fall, and torrents swell, but he will paint the horrors of a boundless desert, calm the tempest, render the air tranquil and serene [...]. He will not directly represent things, but excite in the soul the same movement which we feel in seeing them.¹⁰⁷⁷

Pantomime dance is far more limited than music in making action emote, as it must, to a certain degree, be imitative; nonetheless, for Enlightenment thinkers, its essence was inner movement. According to Cahusac, Noverre, and Diderot, the dancer was not meant to imitate observed behavior, they were to generate their own actions on stage based on their own emotions stirred by the ballet master's subject. This autonomy was brilliantly expressed in *Dictionnaire de Danse* (The Dictionary of Dance, 1787) just two years before the Revolution: "the dancer must go beyond the conventional rules regarding arm gestures in dance, introducing sufficient variety to express the passions. The soul of the dancer, rather than a set of rules, should guide the performance."¹⁰⁷⁸

To achieve this level of involvement, the traditional model of education no longer sufficed. It was necessary to abandon the custom of squeezing dance students into the universal corset of technique proscribed by an outside authority,¹⁰⁷⁹ a model example of which for the Enlightenment authors was Marcel's work in education.¹⁰⁸⁰ As opposed to such practices, Noverre chastised the ballet master if he tried to make the dancers his copies. In Noverre's vision, dance was no place for uniformity. He promoted choreographic and educational work that drew from the natural talents of each individual (Ill. 153). To the ballet masters he suggests,

not to trust yourselves and to learn [...] to dig in the souls of the dancers below you. Exploring their preferences, abilities, and tendencies, they will learn to cast them correctly, and this harmonious and understanding division of the various types will promote

¹⁰⁷⁶ Cf. Foster, *Choreography & Narrative...*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Rousseau, *A Dictionary of Music*, trans. William Waring, London 1779, pp. 198–199.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Quoted in: McCleave, *Marie Sallé and the Development...*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁷⁹ An example of this squeeze, in a literal sense, was a machine for twisting legs, popular in the first half of the eighteenth century, meant to help the feet spread further in the first position. It is mentioned by Foster, *Choreography & Narrative...*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁸⁰ This practice is described in detail by Regine Astier, "François Marcel and the Art of Teaching Dance in the Eighteenth Century," *Dance Research* 1984, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 11–23.



153. Marguerite Gérard, *La leçon de danse* (The Dancing Lesson), second half of the 18th century

the most natural expression. People hold the germ of all possible talents, all possible abilities, and the art is in culling those that have the greatest chance for development, growth, and bearing fruit.¹⁰⁸¹

¹⁰⁸¹ Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka...*, p. 79.

These recommendations are a significant manifestation of Enlightenment individualism and the associated faith in the capabilities of every individual. Here the choreographer became more of a midwife helping the dancer to bear the fruits of their talent, to discover their inner dynamism, than a sculptor molding a passive and shapeless material, devoid of attributes, waited for a form to be extracted.¹⁰⁸²

The *ballet d'action* project might be seen as a liberation of dancers' and choreographers' individual expressive capabilities. This is described concisely by Foster:

The action ballet [...] designated each body as the site of an autonomous individuality. Each body had been trained individually, learning to align itself without the aid of postural props, relying instead on the fortifying exercises that it initiated. Each body's actions on stage caused reactions registered in the behavior of surrounding characters. But their identities did not depend upon a set of mutually recognized and executed patternings of movement. Instead, characters propelled themselves autonomously around the stage. Their gestured proclamations marked the individual implementation of a seemingly universal and innate system of communication. The motivation and facility for communication originated within each body and not in a socially constructed and politically imposed codification of conduct.¹⁰⁸³

Dance performances served as a model for operating in the social space, which the enlightened increasingly defined as a meeting space for independent individuals, perhaps a forerunner of modern atomism. This was, in part, the repercussion of liberal ideologies, which began their march toward the dominant worldview in the mid-eighteenth century. As Foucault has noted, the physiocrats were the first in France to think in these categories. In the economy, they put enormous stress on the free trade of grain. Their premise was that state interference in the economy be as limited as possible. From this came the famous motto *laissez-faire, laissez-passer* (let do, let pass), which remains a liberal slogan to this day. For Foucault, this is a symbol of the transition to a new epoch in cultural history, the end of the aristocratic model based on the concept of discipline and the beginning of bourgeois modernity as encouragement for constant mobilization.¹⁰⁸⁴ For us, it is a sign of the modernization of kinesiology, a theoretical framework for bourgeois kinetic politics.

¹⁰⁸² For more on this topic, cf. Foster, *Choreography & Narrative...*, pp. 111–113.

¹⁰⁸³ Ibid., p. 122.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Foucault writes: "you could read the principle of the free circulation of grain as the consequence of a theoretical field and also as an episode in the mutation of technologies of power and an episode in the installment of this technique of apparatuses of security that seems to me to be one of the typical features of modern societies" (Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, trans. Graham Burchell, New York 2009, p. 34).

Foucault splendidly captured the necessary change in power tactics that came with the shift from an aristocratic to a bourgeois society with the awakening individualism. There was great appeal in giving each person an autonomy based on a conviction of their absolute singularity. Yet how to make these individuals collaborate? What to do to create a kind of community? What kind of community could this be? Diderot sought an answer in the notion of self-restriction, of which only the rational virtuoso (the *philosophe*) or the artistic genius was capable:

It's the same with a play as with a well-ordered society, where everyone sacrifices some of his original rights for the good of the whole. Who will best appreciate the extent of this sacrifice? Will it be the enthusiast, the fanatic? Indeed not. In society it will be the just man; in the theater, the actor who has a cool head.¹⁰⁸⁵

But how to shape the “just man”? Is it enough to tend to each person individually, and then the community will be born of its own accord, as the liberals seemed to believe?

The Enlightenment gave no clear answer to this last question. In Rousseau's case, for instance, it tended toward an extremely individualistic model, but it also sought a space in which the individuals could support social contacts. As we have seen, the salons flourished. Cafes appeared in droves. People met in city gardens, in the foyers of theaters and the Opera. We ought to approach the social dance of the eighteenth century in this context, as it shows traces of opposition against political liberalism – dissent to the individualism that emanated from the stage during *ballet d'action*.

At the threshold of the 1750s, a sharp observer noted: “The minuet is no longer danced anywhere. Perhaps it will return to fashion, but for the moment it is gone. We only see *contre-danses*.”¹⁰⁸⁶ Why did the minuet wane in spite of its enormous popularity? It seems we ought to seek our answer in the social transformations of the period. Astier writes that the minuet

produces a distinctive hypnotic quality reminiscent of that of early Renaissance dances. [It] is the one dance in the eighteenth century which retained in its essence the fundamental principles of early dances. [...] The minuet became the yardstick by which good breeding, polished manners and excellence in dancing could be appraised.¹⁰⁸⁷

Thus conceived, the minuet was the last phase of the era in which dance was a tool of aristocratic distinction. When the bourgeoisie liberated itself from

¹⁰⁸⁵ Diderot, “The Paradox of the Actor,” in: *Selected Writings on Art...*, p. 114.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Quoted in: Astier, “François Marcel...,” p. 20.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

the influence of the aristocratic myth in the mid-eighteenth century, to a large degree through Enlightenment philosophers, the classicist minuet naturally lost its appeal.

The minuet's sophisticated movement and majestic air did not sit well with the energy being released from the bourgeois bodies. This is why, from early in the century, lighter varieties of dance gained in popularity, also of folk derivation, as was more or less openly admitted. The swift, gentle *passe-pied*¹⁰⁸⁸ was quite popular in the opera ballets, which had conquered both the aristocratic and the bourgeois salons. At the libertine *fêtes*, and later for less frivolous occasions as well, the gavotte was king, which

like the minuet was based on a stylized pantomime of flirtations, though these were presented in a lighter, more symbolic, and thus witty form; full of exaggerated grace and somewhat artificial fawning, of soft, whimsical lines, it was a full expression of the Rococo style.¹⁰⁸⁹

The softness and wit of the gavotte and the lightness of the *passe-pied* blazed a trail for the more spontaneous kinetic pleasures of the latter half of the century. In the late Enlightenment, the *musette* gained ground, a "lively, spry dance in the idyllic style,"¹⁰⁹⁰ as did the simple *allemande*. Here and there, the circle dance of the *rigaudon* also became popular, as Diderot mentioned. Initially, this was a charming dance involving the exchange of partners, but over time it shifted into a couples dance.¹⁰⁹¹ Yet, as the above-quoted observer noted, the *contredanses* were the most popular.

In the eighteenth century, as in the centuries that came before, it was not only in the court and the aristocratic residences (the higher strata) that dances were held, but also in the simple halls and during inclusive open-air *fêtes* (the lower strata) (Ill. 154). In an important development, the latter sphere began prevailing. In 1715, the institution of public balls emerged (some of them masked balls), which we might acknowledge to be another manifestation of the transformation toward the intimization and democratization of human relations we have been describing. These public dances were a precursor to today's dance clubs. "People enjoyed themselves freely and merrily, and the fondness for dance and a good time began rising to higher and higher spheres of the bourgeoisie."¹⁰⁹² It was at the bourgeois balls, but also among the aristocrats,

¹⁰⁸⁸ Irena Turska, *Krótki zarys historii tańca i baletu*, Cracow 2009, p. 110.

¹⁰⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁰⁹¹ More on the subject in the colorful article by Violet Alford, "The Rigaudon," *The Musical Quarterly* 1944, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 277–296.

¹⁰⁹² Irena Turska, *Krótki zarys...*, p. 133.



154. Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo, *Ballo in paese* (Village Dance), ca. 1756

that the *contre-danses* began to soar in popularity (Ill. 155).¹⁰⁹³ While the minuets, gavottes, *musette*, and *allemande* were mainly danced in couples, often, as in the minuet, the emphasis was more on individual performance than contact with the partner; in the *contre-danses*, as we recall, the pleasure came from being part of a dancing group.

We should stress that, when they were adopted in France, the *contre-danses* became even more communal than in England.¹⁰⁹⁴ The kinetic space occupied by “folk dances” came to hold group dances based on a square figure – a *cotillon*, and then a quadrille. The former was initially defined as a kind of *branle*,¹⁰⁹⁵ which perfectly renders the sort of pleasure drawn from the cotillions. The point was the essentially ludic joy in being together, the opportunity to flirt with a large number of

¹⁰⁹³ We might recall that the *contre-danses* imported from England had already won popularity in Versailles. Beginning in the 1680s, some of the wealthy had gained an appreciation for the simple, collective pleasures they provided (Cohen, *Art, Dance and the Body...*, p. 161).

¹⁰⁹⁴ Turska has noted that the French contredanse “was based more on dancing in a circle than in two lines” (Turska, *Krótki zarys...*, p. 137), and thus the basic unit was the group, not the couple.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Ingrid Brainard, “New Dances for the Ball: The Annual Collections of France and England in the 18th Century,” *Early Music* 1986, Vol. 14, No. 2, p. 167. As it developed, the *branle* itself became more of a couples than a group dance. Only in the eighteenth century did it return to its communal character, becoming a variant of the contredanse with gavotte music (Richard Semmens, “Branles, Gavottes and Contredanses in the Later Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries,” *Dance Research* 1997, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 35–62).



155. Artist unknown, engraving depicting a *contre-danse* in the Scottish style, late 18th century

partners, which, owing to the crowd, had no sexual undertones.¹⁰⁹⁶ The quadrille attracted people on the same basis, which kept it popular throughout the nineteenth century, as a counterweight to the waltz, allowing direct male-female contact with possible erotic subtext.

Yet we should stress that there would have been no fashion for the *contre-danses*, were it not for the progress of individualism, which was a source of both the light and the darkness of the bourgeois existence. On the one hand, the bourgeoisie longed to relish its autonomy, to express its individuality, a kinetic extension of which was the action ballet. On the other hand, the bourgeois subject felt that it was building autonomy at the expense of traditional communal forms, that social bonds were weakening. Individualism bore fruit in a sense of uprootedness, a yearning to be part of a collective that would provide a sense of security. This is why the bourgeois subject tossed themselves into the whirlwind of substitute communities of various sorts. Group dances were such substitute kinetic communities. Their intent was to serve a function that had been there for centuries, expressing a collective identity on a physical level. Yet now this operated in a modern fashion.

¹⁰⁹⁶ This does not mean that the late Enlightenment knew no erotic dances. True, they were shown in the closed libertine circles, but all of Paris talked about them. Here a famous Opera dancer, Miss Guimard, appeared in a lesser-known role. She staged frivolous spectacles in her home, featuring the *fricassee*. Łojek explains: "This was an earlier model of the can-can, except it was danced in an outfit that shielded the dancer's charms from the public to a far lesser degree, and was combined with lascivious pantomime" (Łojek, *Wiek...*, p. 83).

The ludic nature of the *contre-danses* should even more be placed in air quotes than the English *country dances*. Their community was highly dynamic, simulated¹⁰⁹⁷ with full commitment, precisely when the real community was crumbling, or perhaps decaying. Individualism would not be undone. The social body was consumed by the virus of mobilization.

Toward the Revolution

The *cotillon* and quadrille might be seen as an attempt to build a modern kinetic bourgeois community appealing to folk models and aristocratic appearance, but without falling into salon mannerism or ludic bawdiness. The interpersonal relations they expressed were typical for the Enlightenment. Baczko wrote that during this time “the emotional ties between people were seen as concrete and natural as opposed to the rigid formulae of the rationalist ethic and the conventions of court etiquette, as well as the ‘artificial’ division between the estates.”¹⁰⁹⁸ In terms of the Enlightenment social dance, “naturalness” meant individualization within a collective. This individualization was made possible through a simplification of form, making dance primarily an experience of expressing joy, “being oneself” alongside others. Previously, aristocratic dance idioms mainly disciplined the body, stressing technique and details of execution. In the quadrille and *cotillon* technique did not vanish, of course, though it did at least certainly shift into the background in this period. A sense of community was built through freeing, not confining, individuals. We can speak of a basically similar tendency in Enlightenment ballet, where the body subjugated to the geometric Order of the arrangements was replaced by the individualized body expressing emotional states.

The passion for creating joyful dance collectives and the passion for expressing individual emotions were perceived as the essence of existence, even life as such, walking hand-in-hand under one banner: ACTION! In both fields dance was ruled by a longing for the authentic, the spontaneous, for movement conceived as endless commotion of the mind and the senses. This understanding of kinesis is a sign of a culture not of Order, but of History, not of calm but of striving, not of contemplation but of unending, insatiable action. This is “being for movement” in all its glory.

Here we return to Foucault. He noted that the bourgeois society had discarded organization based on disciplinary devices. Modernity entails thinking in terms of openness and circulation. Foucault says: “Discipline is essentially centripetal. [...]”

¹⁰⁹⁷ In Jean Baudrillard’s sense of the term: “The Precession of Simulacra,” in: *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, Ann Arbor 2006.

¹⁰⁹⁸ Baczko (ed.), *Filozofia francuskiego oświecenia*, p. 46.

Discipline concentrates, focuses, and encloses.”¹⁰⁹⁹ This is in contrast to the modern power, appealing to the concept of security in place of discipline: “apparatuses of security [...] have the constant tendency to expand; they are centrifugal. [...] Security therefore involves organizing, or anyway allowing the development of ever-wider circuits.”¹¹⁰⁰ This diagnosis is key – the Enlightenment introduces the postulate of free movement as a basic principle of culture. In previous times, people were mainly meant to subjugate themselves to power, to an external, overriding structure. In modernity it is power that serves the people, at least outwardly. In the aristocratic era, the individual was disciplined; in the bourgeois era the individual is protected. Paradoxical as it may sound, one method of security is freeing the individual from their cultural restrictions. The Enlightenment ideal means “ensuring that things are always in movement, constantly moving around.”¹¹⁰¹ A key issue here is pointed out by Foucault – the freedom turns out to be an internal striving, but also a tool of regulation.

The Enlightenment was a time of multifaceted liberalization. A turn toward naturalness, spontaneity, authenticity, and freedom. We will be speaking of the myth of *liberté* in the following chapter, but we should note one thing now, to conclude this part of our study. From a perspective of progressive liberalization, man is increasingly seen in terms of a dynamic being who does not fit the classicist format. There could be no talk of a soul outside of the body, no metaphysical subject steering the material object. It is subjectivity, and with it – agency, that is located in a corporeal being in the world – it inhabits the emotional sphere. The concepts of needs, desires,¹¹⁰² passions, aspirations, and experiences are used in its description. This explains the dream of power that would not operate through prohibitions, and of an authentic subject “being themselves.” Foucault writes: “The game of liberalism – not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow their course; *laisser faire, passer et aller* – basically and fundamentally means acting so that reality develops, goes its way, and follows its own course according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself.”¹¹⁰³ This natural and non-interfering policy is, of course, a utopia. The Enlightenment did not simply resign from all sorts of discipline, it disciplined itself through “liberation,” by a constant circulation of subjects. Power operated through internal drives, and not external authorities.

Paul Hazard summed up activism as a constitutive principle of the late Enlightenment as follows: “However, we must play our part; the present slips between our fingers and is gone; our thoughts and ideas are born to die, we are powerless to

¹⁰⁹⁹ Foucault, *Security...*, p. 44.

¹¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 65.

¹¹⁰² On the key role of desire in the eighteenth-century physiocratic economy cf. *ibid.*

¹¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 48. Cf. Diderot’s words: “Would you rather [man] be happy and free? Then don’t meddle in his affairs” (Diderot, “Supplement...,” p. 72).

retain them; our sole resource lies in unwearying action and meeting the perpetual flux of things with perpetual renovation.”¹¹⁰⁴ In the day of Noverre, Diderot, and like-minded writers, French culture, and with it, European culture, was increasingly turning toward a widespread mobilization. Their tone, which we today, in hindsight, might see as ominous, was an expression of optimism at the time. The activist Enlightenment was a worldview in search of strong support for the theses it laid down, yet with a great deal of belief in the possibility of finding them in the active person. On the one hand, the individual still had to learn to use reason correctly, as, according to the *philosophes*: “naturalness [...] is constantly accessible to agents and techniques of transformation, on condition that these agents and techniques are at once enlightened, reflected, analytical, calculated, and calculating.”¹¹⁰⁵ On the other hand was the premise of the awakening of the passions, as, according to the Enlightenment, they fueled human creativity. Man was not meant to live contemplating reality from a distance, but rather be actively involved. In political terms this meant that the measure of the value of community in which people were to live was the excitement it generated within them. Man did not only want to rationally improve society, but also, to employ a Noverrean metaphor, “that it [society] pierce his heart like an arrow.” The prevailing social order in the time of the *philosophes* struck them as cold and alien. They longed to replace it with an order that moved them. This threw open a space for the revolution – first the tangible one that broke out in 1789, and later a more enduring one, largely driven by the cult of emotions.

¹¹⁰⁴ Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing*, trans. J. Lewis May, New Haven 1954, p. 342.

¹¹⁰⁵ Foucault, *Security...*, p. 71.

CHAPTER VI

Bright Dance of Freedom, Dark Steps of Terror – The Kinesis of the Revolution

The oldest ballet that has been more or less continuously staged from its premiere to the present day is Jean Dauberval's *La fille mal gardée* (The Wayward Daughter).¹¹⁰⁶ The premiere was held on July 1, 1789. Two weeks later came the storming of the Bastille. There is something highly significant in the fact that Dauberval's work, dating back to the French Revolution, is the ballet that turned out to have the strongest, deepest roots. Noverre and Weaver's work was pulled from the ballet repertoire at one point, and even when attempts are made to reconstruct them, these are efforts to reanimate dance history.¹¹⁰⁷ With *La fille mal gardée* it is another story, as it has been playing more or less continuously for the past two hundred years. This does not mean it was performed for the whole time, or that its performances have not changed from the Revolution era. Dauberval's choreography has not been preserved, for it was not noted down.¹¹⁰⁸ Yet the subject – a very simple plot, as we shall see, perhaps now even striking us as bland – remained of interest through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It has inspired a whole range of

¹¹⁰⁶ Another Enlightenment ballet what has survived to our time with (so they say) choreography basically intact is *Amors og Balletmasterens Luner* (The Whims of Cupid and the Ballet Master, 1786), composed by Vincenzo Galeotti for the Danish Royal Ballet. Yet this work never became an international phenomenon. It survived in the repertoire of a local group, one famed for its high level of dance technique throughout the nineteenth century, most of all for the work by Auguste Bournonville, yet not such a vital touchstone as the Paris Opera ballet in the first half of the century, and later, the Czar's ballet. This is why we believe that *La fille mal gardée* ushers in modern dance, and not Galeotti's work, which is more of a historical artifact.

¹¹⁰⁷ Galeotti's ballet also seems antiquated to the contemporary viewer.

¹¹⁰⁸ Enlightenment choreographers, following Noverre's lead, were skeptical of the capacity to inscribe three-dimensional kinetic events like dance into a two-dimensional code of symbols.

stagings.¹¹⁰⁹ It seems Dauberval's work had a fully modern sensibility that was only germinating in Noverre and Weaver. This sensibility was shaped in part by the Revolution, understood as more than an event in political history. This does not mean that we can call Dauberval's ballet a radical political or even artistic manifesto. On the contrary, it contains nothing that is stereotypically associated with the Revolution – no guillotines, no terror, no overtly republican remarks. This is a love story, told in light, pastoral tones. And yet it is for this generic banality that *La fille mal gardée* deserves our special attention. Why has this *ballet d'action* survived till today? And what was its tie to the Revolution? These questions will be the subject of our closing chapter, for the answer rounds off our genealogy of modern dance.

There can be no doubt that the link between *La fille mal gardée* and the revolutionary ferment is indirect. The revolution had, at the very least, a wary regard for ballets on the theater stage. But when we dig deeper, we discover that there was a relationship between Dauberval's work and the Revolution, as both ballet and the coup, conceived as a socio-political transformation, spring from the same cultural source, and go hand-in-hand as we uncover the foundations behind them. In this respect, we might say that they would not have taken the form they did without the stirring of the conditions that allowed them to arise. In both cases we find evidence of a fully formed bourgeois kinesism. We repeat, this was not yet a particular understanding of what was meant by the term "bourgeois," it was a hegemonic understanding, a specific form of being human that, for the purposes of this book, we are calling "modern."

At first glance, we might fail to see a commonality between them, especially given that, over its course, the Revolution increasingly departed from the kinetic politics in the *ballet d'action*. The theater was viewed with more and more suspicion, and fine-tuned choreography along with it. We will investigate this in the present chapter. Yet in *La fille mal gardée*, there is something the Revolution never quite negated. This was not the shape of its plot, not its style of dance. It was what we might call, in Hegelian terms, its spirit, one that also fired the Revolution. A spirit we find even today in ourselves, even if we see Dauberval's ballet as a droll relic of the past, even if the Revolution seems a remote and even alien political uprising from the history books. One of this book's theses is that we remain children of Dauberval's dance, and, as citizens of democratic societies, children of the Revolution. The first argument may be harder to defend than the second, for it is less intuitive. Many people in contemporary dance build their identities in opposition to classical ballet. Nonetheless, this opposition is still proof of inheritance. Dance in the modern era is deeply indebted to classical ballet, and the first modern classical

¹¹⁰⁹ In the twentieth century, *La fille mal gardée* was staged by Alexander Gorsky, Frederick Ashton, and Ivo Cramer, among others. Cramer's version is an effort to reconstruct the original, which makes it most worth examining.

ballet was *La fille mal gardée*. This makes us children of Dauberval. But we are also heirs to the Revolution, for even if our democracies are imperfect, they still grapple with the task of those who stormed the Bastille, one contained in two postulates most difficult to combine: freedom and equality.

Much of the West presently negates the call to equality, but we should note that the arguments they now appeal to are unlike those in aristocratic societies. True, we have aristocrats in our day as well, but these are nostalgic aristocrats, basically heritage pieces or those who justify differences between people through biology, “aristocratic genes,” which would not exist without modern, professional, bourgeois science. We far more seldom encounter those who reject the premise of freedom. True, it can be understood in a variety of ways, it need not be republican freedom. One can long for a dictatorship, yet this too is presently founded on the revolutionary myth of freedom. The state monarchy has become impossible. In today’s West, it is hard to imagine an enlightened absolutism or a society organically divided into hierarchically structured and deeply dependent strata. The individual, the SELF, has triumphed. We see the world from this perspective even when we express a longing for the collective. We are still living in times of bourgeois individualism, whose political cornerstone is the Revolution. We also find this individualism in *La fille mal gardée*. The previous chapters have been methodically working up to it, showing the stages leading to the apotheosis of the SELF – from Italian humanism, through Montaigne and Descartes, to Locke and the Encyclopedists. It remains to show how these sources joined into a raging stream, and how this modeled a kinesis.

To describe the triumph of individualism in the kinetic sphere, we must look not only at the Revolution and the dance of the time, but also at a person in whom, alongside Diderot, we have an entirely modern philosopher of the Enlightenment – Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is our view that, without a deep understanding of his works, we cannot fully understand the foundation upon which the Revolution and *La fille mal gardée* were built. In the former case, the connection is fairly plain, but Dauberval was also highly influenced by Rousseau, albeit indirectly. This is why we shall have to devote more attention to Rousseau than any of the other thinkers covered here.

These three phenomena – the Revolution, Rousseau, *La fille mal gardée* – and the basic relationships between them are the content of this chapter. The last stage in a cultural contest in which the bourgeoisie emerged victorious, and with it, modern dance, stoked by the flames of the Revolution and inspired by Rousseau. He was the voice of the culture that produced *A Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, but also *La fille mal gardée*. This does not mean, of course, that these works were a simple application of his ideas. It would be unwary to inflate his influence in this way. Rousseau was not a conscious architect of the new society, he was not pulling the rulers’ strings. It was just that in what he wrote – though in his

day he was a “marginal figure,” with very little impact on actual politics – the spirit of modernity took shape, shedding its rationalist ballast. It is this spirit we would like to pin down. The Revolution, the work of Dauberval, the dilemmas of the *Social Contract* and *Emile*, are a code to be broken. They conceal potent myths, whose power affects us to this day. It is most fascinating to see how these myths have shaped kinetic reality.

The Call of Freedom, the “Choreography” of Progress

Let us start with the Revolution, with an attempt to understand it not only in a political sense, but more broadly, in its cultural dimension. Among the revolutionary myths, two are vital to us – the myths of freedom and progress. In shaping either, an absolute key was the Revolution’s conviction that it began a new era – politically, socially, and culturally. True, in seventeenth-century England the king had been tried and led to the gallows, but the political change from this event was not as fundamental as what occurred a century later in France. Cromwell had established something like a republic, but this could not compare with the republic proclaimed in 1792 in Paris. The English revolution was waged against a monarchist horizon, which is why the swift and effective Restoration came as no great surprise. The French Revolution also ultimately led to a sort of restoration of the monarchy when Napoleon, the true heir to the Revolution, declared himself emperor. Yet this was modern monarchism, quite unlike the British sort. We could call Napoleon a “self-made monarch” – declaring himself king, raising himself to dictatorial status by his own abilities, not through the power of tradition. In this regard, he was an entirely different individual from Charles II, raised to power by the Restoration, or William III, enthroned by the Glorious Revolution. We might say that even if the Revolution did not free itself from the spirit of monarchism and did not trigger the full democratization of the political sphere, it still profoundly reshaped monarchism from within, infecting it with bourgeois individualism. The downfall of the Bourbon restoration showed that, after the Revolution, power could still be monarchistic, but not traditional. This is why the Revolution was a major political breakthrough.¹¹¹⁰ The Revolutionaries themselves realized the fundamental nature

¹¹¹⁰ The literature on the Revolution counts hundreds, if not thousands, of volumes, and is always growing. The dance historian has to choose from these riches. We have decided to base our thoughts on classic, mainly twentieth-century works of diverse political sympathies. François Furet has noted that everyone who writes on the Revolution automatically falls into one of two camps – the apologists or the critics. He believed it was impossible to take a neutral approach to the Revolution, much as there is generally acknowledged to be something like objective distance from the medieval monarchy. This would seem to result from the modernity of the Revolution itself. Nonetheless, we note

of the changes they had begun. Moreover, they mythologized their innovations, believing themselves to be more progressive than they really were. For them, the Revolution was a new beginning, almost an absolute point zero, when they could totally break with the past.¹¹¹¹ Tocqueville had challenged this myth, showing that the Revolution essentially continued the political transformation that had begun during the absolute monarchy. This process, he felt, was the shaping of the modern state, in which the multi-tier estate hierarchy he idealized was replaced by a two-stream relationship: a centralized power – the gathering of unified individuals. Tocqueville wrote of the absolutist state that it was:

no more social hierarchy, no more well-demarcated classes, no more fixed ranks; a people composed of almost identical and entirely equal individuals, an indistinct mass recognized as the only legitimate sovereign but carefully deprived of all the faculties that might allow it to rule or even oversee its government by itself; above it, a single designated official charged with acting in its name without consulting it; to control that official, a public reason deprived of organs; to stop him, revolutions and not laws – *de jure* a subordinate agent but *de facto* a master.¹¹¹²

In the days of Louis XIV and Colbert there was not yet, of course, talk of people as sovereigns. The estates retained their formal existence, but the ruler was less an agent than an autocrat. Yet the real social situation was far from this model. The conflict equilibrium that the ruler had to manage, while steadily working toward the absolutism of the Crown, was slipping out of control. Despite his power,

that the fact of objectivity being illusory need not entail an extreme politicization of our own stance, which is why we are drawing from a range of works that might alternately be called Marxist, liberal-minded, or conservative. These are: Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, Cambridge 2011; Albert Mathiez, *Rewolucja francuska*, trans. Włodzimierz Dzwonkowski, Witold Łukaszewicz and Tadeusz Landeck, Warsaw 1956; Pierre Gaxotte, *Wielka rewolucja francuska*, trans. Jan Furuhielm, Warsaw 1935; Walter Markov, Albert Soboul, *Wielka Rewolucja Francuzów 1789*, trans. Elke Morciniec, Wrocław 1984; François Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec Rewolucji Francuskiej*, trans. Barbara Janicka, Cracow–Warsaw 1994; Jan Baszkiewicz, Stefan Meller, *Rewolucja francuska 1789–1794. Społeczeństwo obywatelskie*, Warsaw 1983; Jan Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi 1789–1794. Studium świadomości rewolucyjnej*, Warsaw 1989; Bronisław Baczek, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, trans. Wiktor Dłuski, Gdańsk 2010. We should mention that the works by Tocqueville and Furet are of particular importance to us, as is Baszkiewicz's examination of revolutionary consciousness. We will also be making reference to works of a more specific nature, among which we should single out Mona Ozouf's brilliant *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Cambridge–London 1994, which, despite its focus on one aspect of revolutionary life, affords a splendid view of the revolutionary consciousness as such.

¹¹¹¹ It would be hard to find a clearer expression of this than the introduction of a new calendar, making the establishment of the Republic point zero, a new beginning in time. One of the creators of the calendar, Gilbert Romme, wrote: "Time opens a new volume of history; it walks differently and on a new path, it is simple and dignified, like equality; so too it must use a new stylus to mark the years of the reborn France" (quoted in: Baszkiewicz, Meller, *Rewolucja...*, p. 466).

¹¹¹² Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime...*, p. 147.

the king was a slave to social pressures. In order to rule, it was not that he ought to, but rather was forced to, mobilize the centralization mechanisms Tocqueville described. An administrative network was built up, with a new type of person adopting a powerful role: specialists and bureaucrats. These were middle-of-the-road people, cast from a similar mold. In search of new ideas, increasingly critical of society. People who “claim[ed] to understand the idea of the state better than the king himself.”¹¹¹³

Herbert Butterfield pointed out that the Louis XIV saw “the transfer of scientific methods to politics.”¹¹¹⁴ The idea of rationalizing politics was forged in the smithy of Cartesian criticism, and was known to the Sun King himself. The *philosophes* came from this environment, educated through the absolutist monarchy and sharing its desires. Enlightenment people craved precisely what the absolute monarch reserved only for himself, as the sole agent of the Order – political power and autonomy. The Enlightenment would not have produced its critique of absolute power without absolutism, as Tocqueville aptly stressed. There would have been no modern individualism were it not for the social fragmentation that replaced the estate society. This fragmentation was an instrument of seventeenth-century absolutist rulers for pacifying social unrest. Previously, society had been based on precise and organic mutual dependencies between the nobility, the Church, and the people. Absolutism upset these relations, leading to a paradoxical situation where people became quite similar to one another, yet “divided into small groups alien and indifferent to one another.”¹¹¹⁵ This is how Tocqueville saw the social world just before the Revolution. France was becoming an increasingly atomized society, consumed by conflicts, with no one taking a holistic perspective. This laid the groundwork for modern individualism.¹¹¹⁶

The Revolution took political absolutist strategies to their logical conclusion. Yet in this process, new qualities were discovered, new ways of thinking and acting unknown to the *ancien régime*. The worldview was increasingly emotional, as we mentioned in the previous chapter. Political rationalism was replaced by political senti-mentalism. This made the Revolution both the child of the old order and the founding act of a new one. Tocqueville himself noted this:

¹¹¹³ Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science 1300–1800*, New York–London 1965, p. 183.

¹¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹¹¹⁵ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime...*, p. 80.

¹¹¹⁶ “Our fathers did not have the word *individualism*, which we have forged for our own use, because in their day there was no such thing as an individual who did not belong to a group and could see himself as standing absolutely alone; yet each of the thousand small groups of which French society was composed thought only of itself. It was, if I may put it this way, a sort of collective individualism, which prepared souls for the true individualism that we have come to know” (*ibid.*, p. 91).

In the French Revolution, however, religious laws were abolished even as civil laws were overturned, so that the human mind lost its bearings altogether. It no longer knew what to hold on to or where to stop, and one witnessed the *emergence of revolutionaries of a previously unknown species*, who carried boldness to the point of folly, whom no innovation could surprise nor scruple slow, and who never shrank from executing any design.¹¹¹⁷

This is a moment that interests us. Who are these “revolutionaries of a previously unknown species”? Could this not be generalized – is he not speaking of a new “species” of person?

The Revolution came out against tradition and religion, which it saw strictly as a joint source of inhumane privileges and social divisions negating the absolutely fundamental fact of human equality, discovered through reasoning. This equality was pointed out by Descartes, though he limited it to a purely intellectual sphere. The Enlightenment politicized equality. It demonstrated that social hierarchies ought not to be absolute, should not be metaphysically justified. The rational intent annihilates them, which inspired people to imagine a world without hierarchies, which immediately meant advancing toward this kind of world. This shift from thought to action had been prepared by *philosophes*, but it took place in a new sort of person – revolutionaries who flew their actions on banners. From time to time, all the leading figures of the Revolution met under these banners. Georges Danton, Camille Desmoulins, Maximilien Robespierre, Louis de Saint-Just, Jean-Paul Marat – at one point or another they all declared: “enough talk.” The Revolution was a proverbial move from words to deeds in the fullest sense. Man became an activist. Activism was infectious. All of reality was mobilized.¹¹¹⁸ Otherwise there would have been no Bastille, no overthrow of the monarchy, and, finally, there would have been no Terror.

Constant mobilization would not have existed without Enlightenment optimism, without a faith in the power of a rationally developed design for reality. Again, Tocqueville is worth quoting:

When one studies the history of our Revolution, one finds that the spirit that guided it was precisely the same spirit that gave rise to so many abstract books on government: The same fondness for general theories, complete systems of legislation, and exact

¹¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 142, emphasis – W. K. The fragment continues: “One must not think, moreover, that these new beings were the singular and ephemeral creations of a moment, destined to vanish when it did. They have since formed a race that has perpetuated itself and spread to all the civilized corners of the earth, a race that has everywhere retained the same appearance, the same passions, and the same character. It was in the world when we were born; it is still with us today” (ibid.). Here Tocqueville had in mind the political radicals of the nineteenth century, though the following century took this radicalism to the next level.

¹¹¹⁸ On how the drive to act was interpreted by the people of the revolution, cf. Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, pp. 124–126.

symmetry in the law; the same contempt for existing facts; the same confidence in theory; the same taste for the original, ingenious, and novel in institutions; the same urge to remake the entire constitution in accordance with the rules of logic and a coherent plan, rather than seek to amend its faulty parts.¹¹¹⁹

And yet the Revolution is not a book about revolution. Robespierre, Marat, and its other most influential participants were writers, but we might say only “incidentally.” Their contributions to modernity were not writing brochures, but the deeds that accompanied them. Of course, these deeds would not have existed without words, but the opposite is equally important. The words of Robespierre or Marat were matched by their deeds, something we cannot say for Voltaire, or even Diderot. This difference is fundamental. It shows that the virus of mobilization had prevailed, that it had transformed the European spirit. Movement, change, novelty, and revolt were no longer the exception, they were the rule for society, everyday reality. This was one result, perhaps the most important, of the Revolution: human reality was now constantly in revolt, it entered the culture’s bloodstream, revolt became the crux of existence, at least for part of society.

This revolt needed an engine behind it, an ongoing stimulus. This was the idea of freedom. Furet pointed out that there was no one Revolution.¹¹²⁰ The peasants were revolting in the Great Terror for something different than what the sans-culottes battled for in Paris. And something entirely different than Marat or Honoré Gabriel Riqueti, the famous Count Mirabeau. From the outset, the Revolution had no coherent program. It was an ongoing dispute. But it was this lack of coherence that we might acknowledge to be wholly revolutionary. The state of continuing destabilization was unsettling for the people of the old order, but only because they were raised with prospects of a stable Order. The Revolution institutionalized a new perspective, which Foucault called History,¹¹²¹ though “Freedom” strikes us as more accurate. This was the slogan with which the Revolution would constantly be preoccupied, and consequently, our political life revolves around it as well. Freedom was a principle for the Revolutionaries, an object of longing, Freedom replaced God. It fused various sorts of revolutions described by Furet.

It is remarkably significant that it had no clear, widely-acknowledged definition. This is why Freedom was so seductive, because everyone could make it what they wanted. This is why it united beyond divisions. Though murky, it was everywhere – in newspaper articles and everyday conversations, in works of art and during Revolutionary ceremonies. Freedom was painted, sculpted, played during marches and

¹¹¹⁹ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime...*, p. 134.

¹¹²⁰ Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec...*, p. 15.

¹¹²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London–New York 2005.

processions. People sang for Freedom, people battled for Freedom. Freedom needed basically no justification, it was its own justification. It became a new Absolute.¹¹²²

Of course, Freedom was also a constant source of anxiety for the Revolutionaries, which is why they tried to define good and bad freedom. For the moderate wing, the good Freedom was clothed as liberal rights, in which the individual could think as they wanted, running business freely. Tolerance was a practical slogan. This was gentle freedom. But there was also fierce and uncompromising freedom, dripping with blood. This was freedom constantly threatened by monarchistic conspiracies, embattled freedom that had to keep rising against the weaker, conciliatory freedom of the moderates. To some degree, this was the freedom of republicans in the first phase of the Revolution, when they struggled against the constitutional monarchists, and this was decidedly the freedom of the Montagnards in the second phase, when they came out against the Girondins. This is not the place to go into the details of the disputes that historians have painstakingly reconstructed.¹¹²³ What is important to us is the very energy that drove the Revolution to dissent, the dispute over “true” freedom, which inspired a kind of infinite openness, change as a normal state of affairs. As Baszkiewicz writes: “We were dealing with [...] a profound lack of stability in revolutionary politics, as part of its nature, and as such, periodic confessions of faith that the Revolution would ‘stabilize’ inevitably only provided an opening to raise the stakes.”¹¹²⁴

The Revolution desired Freedom.

It was greedily craved; it was mainly conceived as liberation from the corset of despotism. Yet freedom – for those who thought more deeply – also meant the opportunity to create something entirely new, the chance to break with the routine of existence, to avoid repeating the old gestures and behaviors, to discard the tired paths and models for a career in life. People finally felt liberated from the old burdens, concerns, humiliations, and restrictions. They had an exhilarating sense of escaping from the old world and opening up a field of opportunities they could not yet precisely define. The goals which free people set are sometimes foggy, often imprecise, which allows them to be surpassed, for the limits of the possible can be constantly pushed back.¹¹²⁵

Let us turn special attention to the specifics of the liberty the Revolution brought. Liberty was not merely an intellectual issue. It was not only about liberalizing

¹¹²² “Freedom (always with a capital letter) is a synonym for both the Revolution and the new social order. The spell cast by liberty was incredible: in public and private statements by people of various professions, opinions, and generations, the cult of Freedom was frenetic and exalted” (Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 133).

¹¹²³ Cf. e.g. Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, pp. 145–150.

¹¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

the economy (which the Jacobins restricted, at any rate), or dropping censorship, the opportunity to hold free discussions on the institutional state of Freedom. Liberty was a holistic psychophysical state. Baszkiewicz writes of the Revolutionaries shedding their corsets. Interestingly enough, on the opera stage precisely this sort of change was visible – dancers' costumes became far lighter and looser than in the *ancien régime*. This was one symptom of laxity. The Revolution put bodies and minds in a state of constant movement. We see this particularly in Paris, where SOMETHING was almost always going on. "Something" meant various events – from riots to holidays, from discussions in clubs to going for a walk in search of bread, from banquets to slaughter. In all these events we find one common property – a readiness to act, initiative, very often grassroots. And above all, movement, plenty of movement, which, Robespierre said, might "be termed revolt by the oppressor, though it is no more than the legitimate exercise of an inalienable and natural right of the oppressed man."¹¹²⁶ We might well stress this statement – the unlimited right to move.¹¹²⁷

True, efforts were often made to inhibit this freedom during the Revolution. The ongoing movement terrified the Revolutionaries themselves on more than one occasion. The mobilized body had no desire to easily surrender itself. The Revolution brought the real threat of counter-revolutionary violence, stripping defiant bodies of the capacity for movement. But even the Terror, with all its rhetoric of order and systematization, came from the social energy released by the Revolution, making man a constant experimenter, making him heave all of reality on his shoulders, prompting him to act on grand scale. For this indeed was the Terror – an authoritarian gesture of bodies freed from their traditional bonds, it was their Action: shedding one corset and dressing in another, rationally conceived, autonomously imposed. The Terror, as a restriction on the individual freedom of those who conspired against true Freedom, was, according to its architects, an expression of true Freedom. The Terror was an expression of liberty – appropriated by some, yet total. We should recall that it was not stopped quickly, and even the Thermidorians, who built their identity on the struggle against the bloodthirsty tyrant Robespierre, did not reject the Terror as a tool for achieving Freedom.

And thus, revolutionary freedom is liberty as an intoxicating state of non-definition and open possibility, including terror. The Revolution had much in common

¹¹²⁶ Quoted in: *A History of the Two Indies*, Peter Jimack (ed.), New York–London 2017.

¹¹²⁷ The Revolution lived by the faith in its capabilities. This faith made it able to face the major external military threats. It is striking that, in the military field, the Revolution's trademark was the *levée en masse*, the mass mobilization. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens moved to fight across the country. We can only imagine the traffic. This too was driven by Freedom that promised liberty. Naturally, there was also resistance to general recruiting, but it pales before the mass enthusiasm to defend the homeland in danger – a homeland that had only begun its march toward a brighter future.

with total improvisation. It could be seen as a “real-time composition.” The old system was a constant opening of arrangements established from above. It strove to bind movement – of individuals, societies, and rulers – in rigid frameworks. The Revolution meant breaking them apart. There was no looking back, no attempts to fit things into existing molds;¹¹²⁸ new formulae were tried out, with a readiness to abandon them at any moment, if they should be recognized as insufficiently revolutionary. The Revolution was in constant motion, geared toward the future, and so too was its bodies – fevered, frantic, mobilized. They thrust themselves into a whirl of total improvisation with enormous faith that they themselves were capable of creating new, increasingly liberated and democratic choreographies.

The energy of revolutionary bodies can be aptly described by the notion of progress, which is seldom given a corporeal dimension, though of course it was kinetic, though it expresses the constant movement of bodies progressing. Progress was the second of two modern myths that the Revolution institutionalized. Let us now turn to Nicolas de Condorcet, an heir to the physiocratic wing of the Enlightenment and a Girondist, who made enormous efforts to historically justify the notion of progress.

For Condorcet, who spoke on behalf of revolutionary optimism, the notion of progress was nothing less than an expression of faith in the infinite nature of human capabilities. Let us have a look at his “Sketch” (1794). Its second page contains the mandate: “nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties [...] the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite [...] the progress of this perfectibility [is] from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it.”¹¹²⁹ At the end of the work we find these astonishing words:

Would it be absurd then to suppose that this perfection of the human species might be capable of indefinite progress, that the day will come when death will be due only to extraordinary accidents or to the decay of the vital forces, and that ultimately the average span between birth and decay will have no assignable value?¹¹³⁰

Could we imagine a more utopian dream? The Revolution wanted to create a world in which death would be of secondary importance. A world centered on the vital, healthy body, bursting with joy. In Condorcet, this mad optimism came from a sincere admiration for reason and science. He was one of those Enlightenment people who paved the way for nineteenth-century positivism. Although he

¹¹²⁸ Here are some typical statements from the sans-culottes: “We take our examples only from ourselves,” “Why should we be copyists if we ourselves can be the model” (quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 221).

¹¹²⁹ Antoine Nicolas Condorcet, “The Sketch,” in: *Political Writings*, trans. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbanati, Cambridge 2012, p. 2.

¹¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–146.

spoke up on politics, he never took a radical stance.¹¹³¹ He saw the state's basic task to be in public education, and not in radically changing the model of power. Yet at the same time, his doctrine had great emancipatory potential.¹¹³² In his work, man, in conquering death, boldly marched on as an athletic individual, confident of his strength, fully believing in the success of his life's improvisation, autonomous.¹¹³³

It was not Condorcet, naturally, who invented the notion of progress. It was already there in Leibniz, who wrote: "In addition to the beauties and perfections of the totality of the divine works, we must also recognize a certain constant and unbounded progress in the whole universe, so that it always proceeds to greater development."¹¹³⁴ This thought remained coherent with a religious worldview, so it would be hard to call it subversive. This view of the gradual development of the universe, which one might call the progress of creation, is not essentially opposed to a faith in God, who could have created this sort of progressive world. Over time, however, questions were posed not only about the progress of nature,¹¹³⁵ but also about the logic of societies' development. Before the age or reason it was possible to speak of development in society only if it was tied to the world moving toward the second coming of Christ. This teleology seemed little more than superstition to Enlightenment minds. "For the idea of progress to arise, the idea of Providence had to be eliminated. Progress had to be the work of man – only modern times saw

¹¹³¹ He perished in a purge by the Montagnards, accusing the Girondists of moderantism, which they saw as equivalent to treason.

¹¹³² Zapaśnik notes that Condorcet opposed the concept of absolute truth independent of the cognizant subject. Condorcet "argued that we were only given human knowledge. This was tantamount to seeing the human mind as the co-creator of the truths it learned, not merely their passive receiver" (Stanisław Zapaśnik, *Filozofia a kultura Francji XVIII wieku*, Warsaw 1982, p. 332).

¹¹³³ As Voegelin notes in his perhaps overly harsh criticism of Condorcet, the progress of the human spirit in his view was a program that imposed a Western standard on every civilization. Condorcet also wrote with both a certain envy and a clear sense of superiority that the progress of non-European peoples "is likely to be more rapid and certain than our own because they can receive from us everything that we have had to find out for ourselves, and in order to understand those simple truths and infallible methods which we have acquired only after long error, all that they need to do is to follow the expositions and proofs that appear in our speeches and writings" (Condorcet, "The Sketch," p. 129). The sensitive ear will pick up a tone characteristic of twentieth-century modernization theory which can still be heard in the public space. Voegelin mercilessly critiques the "Sketch" as "the first systematic project elaborated by a Western totalitarian for the radical destruction of all civilizations of mankind, the high civilizations as well as the less differentiated native civilizations, and to transform the surface of the globe into the habitat of a standardized mankind which is formed by the ideology of a handful of megalomaniac intellectuals" (Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, Durham 1975, p. 132). There is a deep affinity between the concepts of progress and *Gleichschaltung* in this concept.

¹¹³⁴ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "On the Ultimate Origination of Things," trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, *Philosophical Essays*, Indianapolis–Cambridge 1989, p. 154.

¹¹³⁵ We might note that the temporalization of the Chain of Being paved the way for the theory of evolution, which began to take shape in the mid-eighteenth century (Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*, Cambridge–London 1964).

a concept of history that could be conceived as something humans ‘created.’”¹¹³⁶ This was Voltaire’s secular vision of history. He, in turn, taught the second generation of the Enlightenment, most of all Turgot and Condorcet – “the priest of the religion of progress,” whose Inquisition was the Revolution. Cassirer brilliantly condensed Voltaire’s view of history:

A natural science was emancipated from theology by the knowledge of the mechanical laws of natural processes, the same service is to be performed by psychology for the historical world. And psychological analysis finally determines the real meaning of the idea of progress. It explains and justifies this idea, but also indicates its limitations and keeps its application well within these bounds. Psychological analysis shows that humanity cannot exceed the limits of its ‘nature’; but its nature is not given all at once, for it has to evolve gradually and assert itself constantly against obstacles.¹¹³⁷

We should remember that the Encyclopedists were not historical optimists, they did not declare that man had unlimited power to shape himself, history, or the world. True, as Karl Löwith has pointed out, in *Essai sur les mœurs* Voltaire took a very important step toward a bourgeois utopia.¹¹³⁸ Nonetheless, this did not signify a sure conviction of the supremacy of man in the world. After all, the same Voltaire once wrote: “A slave to every thing that surrounds me, instead of being a king; chained to a single point, and environed with immensity; I will begin by searching into myself.”¹¹³⁹ He was seconded in his approach to the logic of history by Diderot, in whom Marian Skrzypek found a “fatalistic pessimism [...] reducing man’s active role in history to a minimum.”¹¹⁴⁰ The Encyclopedists thus departed from a conviction of the objective laws of history, which could only be discovered, but certainly not created, by man. Yet this was not the goal of Enlightenment thought. The closer it got to the Revolution, the louder it spoke of human autonomy, of the right to initiate sociopolitical change, if reality did not measure up to rationally constructed ideals.

Given that everything was governed by the universal laws of nature, which were the same for everybody, there was no God-given hierarchy, and thus no reason why some should live far better than others. The reigning system is in no way sanctioned by divine right or the law of nature, it has no logical or natural necessity,

¹¹³⁶ Zdzisław Krasnodebski, *Upadek idei postępu*, Warsaw 1991, p. 21.

¹¹³⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove, Princeton 1951, p. 220.

¹¹³⁸ “The enormous success of Voltaire’s essay is due mainly to the fact that it provided the rising bourgeoisie with a historical justification of its own ideals by suggesting all history was leading up to the eighteenth century” (Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago–London 1949, p. 107).

¹¹³⁹ Voltaire, “The Ignorant Philosopher,” in: *The Complete Romances*, New York 2007, p. 422.

¹¹⁴⁰ Marian Skrzypek, *Diderot*, Warsaw 1982, p. 222.

and therefore can be overthrown. Such thoughts are found in the Encyclopedists. Yet it was not they who stormed the Bastille. This was left to the generation who read them, who were even more under the spell of Rousseau. This was less a generation of rationalists than idealists, not enlightened but stoked with emotion. The *Encyclopedia*-era Enlightenment could not work up to a bold gesture of autonomy, as performed by Condorcet, precisely because it was too rational-minded. If Voltaire had lived to see the publication of “The Sketch,” he would probably have reached for his pen to discredit it, for one rarely comes across a book so passionate and so naively optimistic. To show the profound, unwavering faith in the autonomy of the human being characteristic of the Revolutionaries, Enlightenment rationalism was not enough. It had to be combined with a gushing emotionality in the spirit of Rousseau.¹¹⁴¹ We will be mentioning this later; for now, let us return to the idea of progress.

When the idea of both natural and social progress had taken shape, it swiftly entered general circulation. This was the perspective from which the Revolution perceived reality. Like Voltaire before them, the Revolutionaries believed that “the purpose and meaning of history are to improve by our own reason the condition of man, to make him less ignorant, ‘better and happier.’”¹¹⁴² As such, not paradoxically, it was in the period of the Revolution that the idea of progress began to be viewed in terms of an apotheosis of the present. Habermas writes that the dynamic consciousness the late eighteenth century roused corresponds to “the new experience of an advancing and accelerating of historical events [...] as does the insight into the chronological simultaneity of historically nonsynchronous developments. At this time the image of history as a uniform process that generates problems is formed.”¹¹⁴³ It was this concept of history that engendered a sense of the present as temporary. Modernity broke down time into past, present, and future as fragmentary dimensions of social space, albeit joined in a single continuum. Modern man experiences reality from the perspective of both “before” and “after,” which are autonomous dimensions. The past was no longer organically present as tradition, it became history. Meanwhile, at the close of the eighteenth century, the future was a plan, the subject of calculation, a project expressing the basic premise of the Revolution – activity. Both the past and the future were to serve the present.

¹¹⁴¹ We realize all too well that Condorcet openly criticized Rousseau’s excessive emotionalism. He did not like the education program in *Emile*. The apotheosis of science in “The Sketch” utterly disagreed with Rousseau’s thesis that science led to the ruin of customs. As such, we search in vain for Rousseauisms in Condorcet in terms of content. Not so when it comes to the tone of “The Sketch,” which is enthusiastic and passionate. We find it much closer to the style of Rousseau than of d’Alembert, for instance.

¹¹⁴² Löwith, *Meaning in...*, p. 107.

¹¹⁴³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge 2007, p. 4.

Habermas writes: “A present that understands itself from the horizon of the modern age as the actuality of the most recent period has to recapitulate the break brought about with the past as a *continuous renewal*.”¹¹⁴⁴ The eternal present is another name for the freedom we mentioned at the start of this section. Progress and freedom intersect in social practice. Modern activity is a constant breaking of bonds, it is the innovation that representatives of the *ancien régime* so despised.¹¹⁴⁵ Duke Louis Philippe I wrote disparagingly of the Revolution: “There were no longer clearly defined duties, everything was mixed up, everything was upset, even morality, which one would have thought constant, yet it ceased to suffice as a guide to action....”¹¹⁴⁶ Yet one could take quite a different look at reality, as did those who enthusiastically went to work on the Revolution. “It is in our power to start the world once again,”¹¹⁴⁷ said Thomas Paine, a tireless revolutionary who appeared in Paris as a relatively moderate activist. Condorcet would surely have cosigned this enthusiastic conviction. It is hard to imagine a more unequivocal declaration of faith in human initiative, a worldview more colored by activism. This was mobilization in full.

We sum up with some words from Baczko, who grasped the essence of revolutionary progress:

The gains of the revolution, both concrete and limited – a system of representation, freedom of the press, public political debate, and a better justice system – are conceived as a tangible precursor to a different future, a just and equal society, social transparency and a transformed world, in a word, a reborn man and revitalized humanity. The Revolution is also that mysterious and mystifying moment when relativity offers a foretaste of the absolute. Political voluntarism emanates an illusory certainty that collective courage is capable of collapsing every line between the possible and the impossible.¹¹⁴⁸

The Revolution was far more than a political operation – it was the rebirth of man and the renewal of life. Society threw itself into a whirl of activity. The existence of its members was profoundly transformed. Peace and rest, on the one hand, became a much-desired climax to the course of events, and on the other, began to be associated with opposition to the Revolution, with support for the counter-revolution: “If for one second you lose your revolutionary dynamism, then *adieu*, patriots!

¹¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹⁴⁵ We might quote the conservative minister Vergennes to Louis XVI: “It was the good fortune of the French to be forever suppressing their fondness for innovation, to which their [national] character inclined them” (quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 13. Baszkiewicz does not provide references for his quotes, and so, by necessity, we have translated them from Polish – trans.).

¹¹⁴⁶ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 48.

¹¹⁴⁷ Quoted in: *ibid.*

¹¹⁴⁸ Baczko, *Rewolucja...*, p. 46.

Your end will be near.”¹¹⁴⁹ Progress and freedom were the pillars of a culture of constant acceleration, a culture of movement that engenders only movement. Calm was merely a mirage, fuel for a culture of the *perpetuum mobile*.

The Revolution as Bourgeois

Who, precisely, were the Revolutionaries? Let us now try to find an answer to this question, to understand the social dimension of modernity, which was a work of the Revolution, and thus to understand bourgeois culture, whose forming we trace in this book. Our portrait will be, to some extent, impressionistic, as we have no room for an in-depth systematic analysis. Our hope is, however, that the impression of the Revolution as dynamically amorphous will show the reader that the world was also reborn in a social sense in the year 1789.

We might borrow an essential facet of revolutionary power from Furet. As a result of the Revolution, power broke with traditional institutions. We observe:

a radical shift of the place of power. All the great leaders of the Revolution were aware of it, as they all owed their temporary advantage to it. All of them – Sieyes and Mirabeau, Barnave and Brissot, Danton and Robespierre, to name only the parliamentary leaders – were consecutive figures in one great revolutionary act that had the value of power: the discourse of equality. At the moment of their greatest influence, they all wielded that force of opinion that would now less support their power than be the very essence of power itself.¹¹⁵⁰

Simply put – power stepped out into the street, or: the street, the masses, the public, gained power.

This was part of the constant mobilization of the Revolution – stirring the power of public opinion. In France, as Habermas noted, there was a true explosion of activity in the public sphere. “The Revolution created in France overnight, although with less stability, what in Great Britain had taken more than a century of steady evolution: the institutions, which until then had been lacking, for critical public debate of political matters.”¹¹⁵¹ Everything was under discussion in the Revolution, everything and everyone was studied carefully. There were endless speeches in Parliament, lively conversations in the streets, squares, and parks. The crowds

¹¹⁴⁹ A statement by a member of the L’Homme-Armé people’s club (quoted in: Markov, Soboul, *Wielka Rewolucja...*, p. 292).

¹¹⁵⁰ Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec...*, p. 69.

¹¹⁵¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge 2011, pp. 69–70.

we now strongly associate with the Revolution gathered in clubs, including the famous ones of the Jacobins and the Cordeliers, where people shouted, berated their opponents, celebrated their victories, and decried misrepresentations. We could say that, practically from one day to the next, the society became radically politicized.

Journalism thrived on these grounds of the public debate.

Generally speaking, between June of 1789 and August of 1792, censorship did not exist. France turned into a great fairground of opinions; all were permitted, everyone could be called to task. And thus everyone wrote down what they were thinking, what they were going to think, while debating their adversaries to their dying breaths.¹¹⁵²

Small wonder that first among the architects of the Revolution were those who knew how to use the power of the press: Mirabeau, Desmoulins, Marat, Jacques Hébert, and Robespierre, who published his own newspaper for some time. We will not be interested in the anecdotal level of this journalism, rather the underlying need to express oneself, to shout one's views, the need for individual expression as "the voice of opinion." This was an entirely different way of doing politics than office councils – the gatherings of the old system. This change had a societal foundation.

Furet writes of the victory of the social over the political during the Revolution,¹¹⁵³ but it might be better to speak of the socialization of politics through the Revolution – in making politics extremely emotional it did not eliminate them, and the state was not abolished, as we have mentioned with regard to Tocqueville. Still, we should note that the society of the Revolution was entirely unlike that of the Louis XIV era. Marat thus reconstructed the social make-up of the Revolutionary camp:

it is made up of servants, peons, workers, craftsmen, merchants, negotiators, farmers, non-titled landowners and rentiers, teachers, artists, doctors, writers, scholars, lower-level judges, servants of the Altar, soldiers of land and sea; a numberless and invincible legion, which holds all the lights of knowledge, talent, power, and virtue.¹¹⁵⁴

We confess this sounds very impressive. Yet what could a peon have in common with a rentier, a farmer with a soldier, an artist with a lower judge? Generally speaking – they were all bourgeoisie.

¹¹⁵² Baszkiewicz, Meller, *Rewolucja...*, p. 369.

¹¹⁵³ "If the Revolution is a discovery, an imbalance, if it mobilizes so many unknown forces that the traditional political mechanisms had to undergo change, this is because it enters an empty space, or expands into a sphere of power that was off limits yesterday, but is suddenly claimed for itself. In this dialogue between societies and their states, which is one of the main threads of history, after the Revolution everything tilted from the state and toward society. For the Revolution mobilized the latter, and disarmed the former" (Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec...*, p. 33). This was the case, at least in the first phase of the Revolution, until the dictatorship of the Jacobins, who reanimated the state.

¹¹⁵⁴ Quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, pp. 73–74.

In Marxist historiography we find the opinion that the Revolution was the work of the bourgeoisie, which strove for economic liberalism, breaking the resistance of the people heading toward communism. This is why Marxist scholars have often seen the Revolution as a wasted opportunity. The betrayed protagonists were the *sans-culottes*, whose hands made the Revolution, though they did not profit from it at all.¹¹⁵⁵ Conservatives also like to look at the outbreak of the Revolution as a conspiracy of part of society. They most often blame libertine intellectuals and atheists. Was the Revolution truly a conspiracy of one faction of society?

In our view, the Revolution had no clear foundation in class. We least object to the thesis that it was anti-nobility, but we must bear in mind that, at least at the outset, the Revolution was largely the work of people from the first estate. There would have been no first constitution had it not been for Marquis La Fayette and Count Mirabeau. Some of the aristocracy followed their lead and joined the Revolution. The same went for the clergy, especially of the lower levels, who also somewhat concurred with the revolutionary ideals, searching for overlap with the ideas of the Gospel. At one point, a priest even headed one of the Revolution's most radical camps (we refer, of course, to Jacques Roux leading the *Enragés*). But there were also clergy among the more moderate voices of the Revolution – the abbot Sieyes, the bishop Talleyrand. Thus, the second estate also had a hand in the coup, it was not solely the work of the third estate.

Even if we assume that the Revolution was the work of the *tiers état*, what would this mean, precisely? True, the Revolution was more urban than rural.¹¹⁵⁶ Many peasants revolted against the changes, particularly against the anti-religious aspect of the Revolutionary program. It suffices to recall the Vendée. But it was not as though the entire French countryside was counter-Revolutionary. Mona Ozouf demonstrates that it had its enthusiasm for freedom.¹¹⁵⁷ Thus, we cannot simply say that the Revolution was the work of the city-dwelling third estate. Perhaps, then, it was the work of the middle class? The participation of the masses (the “fourth estate,” a group in itself difficult to describe as uniform), as Marxist historiography stresses, prevents us from making this claim. It was the masses who stormed the Bastille, who forced the king to move, who murdered the prisoners – and so the revolution was a people's movement? Not quite. Let us quote a vital observation, grounded in Soboul and Cobb's studies on the *sans-culottes*:

many a bourgeois, priest, or even nobleman absorbed *sans-culotte* opinions and political behavior, which meant that he was accepted by them as their own. And the reverse:

¹¹⁵⁵ This was what Mathiez and Soboul thought, if we permit ourselves a minor simplification of their views.

¹¹⁵⁶ Markov and Soboul write of “the urban thinking of the Robespierrists, and the Jacobins as such” (Markov, Soboul, *Wielka Rewolucja...*, p. 309).

¹¹⁵⁷ Ozouf, *Festivals...*

in the sans-culottes' minds the aristocrats were not only *les ci-devant*, the old privileged class; they were all those who regretted the past order and who disapproved of the Revolution, regardless of where they came from in society: bourgeoisie, lawyers, staunch priests, officers. And even the peasants and craftspeople were gained for the counter-Revolution, demonstrating in the streets of the cities and towns, crying out: *Vive le roi, au diable la nation!*¹¹⁵⁸

Essentially, we have two streams in the Revolutionary society, two human "classes": the counter-Revolutionaries and the Revolutionaries, the moderates and the radicals, the privileged and the democrats, the adherents of traditional captivity and the tribunes of modern freedom, the passéists and the activists. These, essentially, were the lines of the real class conflict. Being a Revolutionary meant being for movement and change. For several years, up until Thermidor, this revolution held sway in opinion, with all those who sought the applause of the masses in its orbit. It would be easy to chart the string of failures of those individuals who decided to speak up for caution, for moderation. Moderantism became a derogatory term. The constitutional monarchist La Fayette became anathema when the pendulum swung toward republicanism. Mirabeau's politics were condemned as soon as they were branded moderate,¹¹⁵⁹ though he himself remained a national hero, at least until his dealings with the court were revealed. As we can see, those who were radical in 1789, thus winning the public opinion, were, in subsequent years, obstacles in striving for total freedom. Things were much the same when it came to the Girondins, who, up to a certain point, walked arm-in-arm with the Jacobins. As soon as they slowed down, stopped, and appealed for prudence, they collapsed. Antonio Gramsci called the Girondins a passive revolution.¹¹⁶⁰ It was the Montagnards, he felt, that had "the greatest energy, strength of decision and determination,"¹¹⁶¹ while the Girondists hesitated. Nonetheless, we cannot say the Girondists were bourgeois, and the Montagnards sans-culottes. Both before the division and after their program was radicalized, when Danton and Robespierre remained on the battlefield, and eventually, only the Incorruptible, supported by Saint-Just and other extreme radicals, the Jacobins realized that they could not be a class-based group in the narrow sense of the word. They knew that every class holds a static element that strives to secure

¹¹⁵⁸ Baszkiewicz, Meller, *Rewolucja...*, p. 149.

¹¹⁵⁹ When the Revolution had entered the phase of building institutions, Mirabeau said: "We are not savages that have come naked from the shores of the Orinoco to make a society. We are an old nation, doubtless too old with regard to our epoch. We have a government that has long existed, before that a king, and long-dead superstitions. All this should be adapted to the Revolution – insofar as possible – and avoid the dangers of violent change" (quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 183).

¹¹⁶⁰ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 149.

¹¹⁶¹ Quoted in: *ibid.*

comfort and peace, while they saw stabilization as non-revolutionary. This is why they were forever radicalizing: “We wanted to triumph at any cost, to be in power to ensure the rule of principles.”¹¹⁶² Note the choice of words. “Revolutionaries of an unknown species” assured the rule of principles, and not a particular social class.

The concept of principles was just as indistinct as the concept of Freedom. There was no appeal to a select part of society, allies were sought throughout it. Baszkiewicz observes that “Jacobin legislation tried to give satisfaction to the various social forces behind the revolutionary front, coordinating interests to serve a unification strategy.”¹¹⁶³ We should remember that when Hébert unleashed his dechristianization campaign, Robespierre dealt with it summarily, considering atheism to be anti-revolutionary, an aristocratic invention that only stoked divisions. According to the Incorruptible, egalitarian tendencies in the sphere of property, often heard among the radicals, could have brought similar results.¹¹⁶⁴ It was only in the period of the fiercest military struggle that the Jacobins yielded to the masses, introducing solutions that placed equality above individual freedom.¹¹⁶⁵ Yet they never broke entirely with liberalism. Baszkiewicz writes of Jacobin egalitarianism as decisive, yet avoiding extremes.¹¹⁶⁶ This diagnosis is confirmed by Robespierre’s handling of the “Enraged Ones.” The Jacobins did not want to leave the initiative to the people, they wanted to win it for their own aims, to ensure the Revolutionaries had what they felt was the correct temperature. More important than specific economics interests, whether of the bourgeoisie or the poor, were the general principles.

Despite their populist declaration, the leaders of the Revolution viewed the poor and uneducated warily from the very start.¹¹⁶⁷

Behind this concept was a vision of the masses as a powerful force swayed by irrational convulsions, passions, and fleeting impressions. “Stimulated and herd-like, it violently thrashes about, blindly throwing itself into danger and peril, neither calculating nor reasoning” – here is a portrait of the people according to Count Mirabeau.¹¹⁶⁸

¹¹⁶² The words of Jacques Nicolas Billaud-Varenne, quoted in: *ibid.*

¹¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142. The Revolutionaries were relying on the authority of the Enlightenment critics of property law: Meslier, Mably, and Morelly. For more on the topic, cf. Baszkiewicz, Meller, *Rewolucja...*, pp. 253–261.

¹¹⁶⁵ This meant, in part, the introduction of maximum prices.

¹¹⁶⁶ Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 159.

¹¹⁶⁷ The reservation in the first post-Revolution constitution of voting laws only for “active citizens” (possessing requisite property) is highly symptomatic. The great majority of citizens was not sufficiently wealthy, which meant their systemic passivity. Here we see a tendency for monopolization. The Jacobins’ constitution made all men equal in this regard, but was not enacted.

¹¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Abbot Sieyès had very similar concerns,¹¹⁶⁹ but they were not foreign to the Jacobin radicals either. Saint-Just originated the saying that “the people are an eternal child,”¹¹⁷⁰ whom, we assume, needed to be led by the hand.

This created a Jacobin paternalism,¹¹⁷¹ based on an instrumental treatment of the masses. At the same time, the Revolution in full bloom was by no means solely bourgeois. Robespierre wrote in his private journal: “Internal threat comes from the bourgeoisie; to conquer it we need an alliance with the people... We must arm the sans-culottes, stoke their rage, enlighten them.”¹¹⁷² Who, then, if not the narrowly defined bourgeoisie or the sans-culottes, were the “Revolutionaries of an unknown species”? In what way, precisely, were these Revolutionaries bourgeois?

To respond to this question, we need to have a look at the most active wing of the Revolution, to trace what led to the ongoing radicalization of their attitude. We shall do this taking as our example a person more associated with the Revolution than any other – Robespierre. Freedom and progress were his guiding slogans. He believed that, to live a revolutionary existence, one had to identify with them entirely. This meant that they were always to take precedence over lesser values that were closer to everyday life, like sympathy, mercy, and moderation. According to modern revolutionaries like Robespierre, the Revolution could not compromise with reality. It could not back down from its principles by one millimeter. This could not be understood by those who, like Mirabeau and Danton, were excessively humane, showing weakness – who were, to some degree, realists, and most of all wanted to mediate between factions. This conciliatoriness was their downfall. The Revolution spoke for no one faction, only for itself.

We should note a vital detail in Robespierre’s rhetoric – the Revolution always appears in the singular. We believe this expresses Robespierre’s essentially individualistic way of seeing the Revolution. To explain this thought, we should introduce one more concept from the Revolutionary dictionary, perhaps as pivotal as freedom and equality: the notion of virtue. In the article that opens the first issue of the paper he founded, Robespierre wrote:

¹¹⁶⁹ Cf. Bronisław Baczko, *Hiob, mój przyjaciel. Obietnice szczęścia i nieuchronność zła*, trans. Jerzy Niecikowski, Warsaw 2001, pp. 290–291.

¹¹⁷⁰ Quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 268. Even Marat, the tribune of the people, uttered his sentence: “The people assess situations badly, they rarely see them for what they really are, and even more seldom have a sense of the whole, and almost never have a clear sense of how events are going to develop” (quoted in: *ibid.*).

¹¹⁷¹ This is best demonstrated, perhaps, by the words of Jean Dussaulx, an activist in line with the Girondins, a juror of a competition for a Revolution almanac, which was meant to build Revolutionary consciousness among rural inhabitants. “The jury was delighted that a cobbler was among the competition participants. ‘And why not,’ cried Dussaulx, ‘if he thinks and seeks what is good? Is he not a man and a citizen like us, this cobbler?’” (Baczko, *Hiob...*, p. 300).

¹¹⁷² Quoted in: Jan Baszkiewicz, *Historia Francji*, Wrocław 1974, p. 440.

The soul of a republic is *vertu* – that is, the love of the fatherland and the high-minded devotion that resolves all private interests into the general interest. The enemies of the republic are those dastardly egoists, those ambitious and corrupt men [...] Taken together you are the most generous, the most moral of peoples.¹¹⁷³

Let us note the absolute priority of the sum over the parts in Robespierre's rhetoric. He sees all that is individual as open to the temptation of sliding into egoism. The soul of the republic is in the abstract, in virtue, and the threat is in the concrete, in people. This is why there is nothing worse than private interests, than the factions against which Robespierre fought furiously, regardless of whether his opponent was the Girondists, the Dantonists, the "Enraged," or the Hébertists. The Revolution could not be in the name of free trade, but nor could it usher in the enslavement of trade. It could not maintain privileges, nor could it artificially obliterate natural differences. What, then, was it to do? Elsewhere, Robespierre says: "in place of an easygoing, frivolous, and discontented people, we would create one that is happy, powerful, and stouthearted."¹¹⁷⁴ This is why in his worldview Virtue was intimately linked with Terror. Here is a famous fragment: "Terror is merely justice, prompt, severe, and inflexible. It is therefore an execution of virtue and results from the application of democracy to the most pressing needs of the country."¹¹⁷⁵ We might suspect this is cynical agitation, but it was something more. The Jacobins demanded Terror through the mouth of Robespierre, for then they could bask in their power, interpreted as moral purity, thus combating self-interest.

It might have seemed that Robespierre was a model collectivist, that he always looked from the perspective of the collective. And yet the language of his statement betrays his intentions. The Nation, Freedom, Virtue – all these words in the singular reveal Robespierre's inability to adopt a collective view, despite always speaking of the threat of the "private."¹¹⁷⁶ For the most consistent Revolutionary, whom Robespierre was, the collective remained a foreign entity. Unlike Danton or Mirabeau, the Incorruptible was never a favorite of the masses. From the beginning to the end, he was alone in his uncompromising stance.¹¹⁷⁷ In his vision it seemed absolutely necessary, but it inevitably led the Revolution toward the singular. Much as Louis XIV probably said "*l'état c'est moi*," Robespierre in the depths of his soul whispered: "*Le revolution c'est moi*." His biographer notes a significant paradox here:

¹¹⁷³ Quoted in: Ruth Scurr, *Fatal Purity: Robespierre and the French Revolution*, New York 2006, pp. 230–231.

¹¹⁷⁴ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 303.

¹¹⁷⁵ Quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 304.

¹¹⁷⁶ It is worth recalling that the most famous document of the Revolution was *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, and not *The Declaration of the Rights of People and Citizens*.

¹¹⁷⁷ We might recall the solitude of Descartes, Pascal, and Louis XIV, and note how profound was Tocqueville's intuition speaking of the Revolution as an extension of the old order, as a march toward individualism.

No one else spoke so insistently, so predictably, or so protractedly about himself in the Revolution. Yet no one else could have been relied upon to put his personal feelings aside with Robespierre's relentless commitment to what he believed was the common good. No friendship, no bribe, no pleasure, no pain could deflect him from pursuing what he saw as the people's cause.¹¹⁷⁸

Robespierre was a servant of the People, and not concrete people. "We must entrust the fate of Freedom to the hands of eternal Truth, and not transitory people,"¹¹⁷⁹ he apparently said. Yet how was this to be done? The Incorruptible said it was necessary to shoulder the weight of representing the People, to become an Individual who will uplift all the weak and irresponsible individuals, relieving them of their responsibility. He felt that this, in turn, meant gathering all the power in the hands of one Individual, who would then be no dictator, but the People as a whole. This is why both those who accused Robespierre of dictatorial tendencies and he himself, who bridled at the suggestion, were correct. They saw him as only one man, while he saw himself as the Man, the defender of the rights of the People. Rousseau had prepared the groundwork for this conviction in writing of the ideal legislator: "a superior intelligence would be necessary who could see all the passions of men without experiencing any of them; who would have no affinity with our nature and yet know it thoroughly [...] Gods would be necessary to give laws to men."¹¹⁸⁰ Robespierre, who was passionately fond of quoting Rousseau, was clearly inspired by this fragment, as he totally identified with the Revolution, appointing himself its Legislator, its god.¹¹⁸¹

A revolution like the one Robespierre embodied could not fathom a democratic horizon, and thus was unable to enact the rule of the many. Power essentially remained absolutist – the power of a single center, preferably a single person.¹¹⁸² This was the general drift of constitutional monarchists and radicals both. Marat openly spoke in favor of a dictatorship,¹¹⁸³ but Robespierre too, who warned fervently against dictatorships, could not free himself from a fondness for personal rule lifted from the *ancien régime*.¹¹⁸⁴ Small wonder that the Revolution ulti-

¹¹⁷⁸ Scurr, *Fatal...*, p. 312.

¹¹⁷⁹ Quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 213.

¹¹⁸⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn, New Haven–London 2002, p. 180.

¹¹⁸¹ Cf. Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec...*, pp. 73–74; Scurr, *Fatal...*

¹¹⁸² When the Revolution broke out, few, and certainly not Robespierre, thought of removing the monarchy. A yearning for a powerful executive agent is described by Baszkiewicz in *Francuzi...*, p. 194. Voices of opposition only arose in the war with Austria and the Prussians when doubts over Louis XVI's loyalties were stoked by his attempted flight across the border.

¹¹⁸³ Scurr, *Fatal...*

¹¹⁸⁴ The rumor accompanying the downfall of Robespierre that he intended to marry the daughter of Louis XVI and crown himself king shows how the Revolution never ceased to think in "royal"

mately put power in the hands of a powerful personality like Napoleon, who was crowned emperor. This meant Tocqueville was correct in stating that the collective individualism of the old system laid the groundwork for the modern individualism of the bourgeois society.

The principle of Revolutionary individualism was the aforementioned Virtue, also appearing in Robespierre in the singular. To embody Virtue, it was necessary to eliminate elements that threatened it: unorthodox views, conciliatory positions, political doubts. There could only be one Virtue, which is why the Revolution in no way signified less power or less of the state – on the contrary. Following such a vision of politics, the Jacobins conducted a centralization project, doing whatever they could to suppress decentralization tendencies (this was one reason for the quarrel with the Girondins, accused of federalism). Robespierre thundered:

Democracy perishes through two distortions – the aristocratism of the rulers or the people's contempt for the authorities they themselves have installed; a contempt which means that any cabal and any personage seeks to appropriate power for himself and leads the people, through disorderly excesses, to destroy the government or to dictatorial governance.¹¹⁸⁵

In our day, we are struck by Robespierre's blindness in failing to see that he was precisely such a personage. We might say this was the result of extreme calculation, but the biographies of the Incorruptible show he was far more than a power-hungry cynic. Robespierre truly believed in his words, truly perceived himself in terms of a force of nature, and not as a concrete person. One hundred years later, Lenin was to think in a similar way.

Robespierre's Revolution crushed any sort of pluralism. It took away women's rights to political debate, persecuted the political initiatives of the "fourth estate," such as the "Enraged" movement, brutally suppressed the peasant uprisings, and pacified insubordinate cities. All of this was done in the name of Order, Virtue, and Freedom. It was an attempt to build a political and cultural hegemony. Robespierre's Revolution was essentially a totalitarian project. It gave itself a monopoly on truth. This is an extremely dark side of bourgeois culture, but it cannot be passed over in silence.

The Revolution was a project of the faultless, powerful SELF represented by the supreme human subject – the Incorruptible Legislator. The theoretical underpinning of this vision was provided by the *philosophes*, but it was only the "revolutionaries of an unknown species," the modern individualists, who stood up its

categories. The history of this rumor was traced by Bronisław Baczko, *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre*, trans. Michel Petheram, Cambridge 1994.

¹¹⁸⁵ Quoted in: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi...*, p. 205.

practical rights, those who, as Tocqueville wrote, “carried boldness to the point of folly, whom no innovation could surprise nor scruple slow, and who never shrank from executing any design.”¹¹⁸⁶ With such revolutionaries – people such as Robespierre – an extremely authoritarian, dynamic, dictatorial vision of the subject usurping the right to represent the whole of society entered politics, brutally crushing all other ways of apprehending the social world. Here we see a trace of the liberalism of the physiocrats, but also what absolutism left behind. The ruler’s autonomy was liberated and power began circulating among individuals aspiring to take hold of it. From the Revolution to the present day, political life can be reduced to this sort of competition. Everyone speaks about the common good, while everyone strives to define, and thus appropriate, this good in an autonomous fashion. Democracy, or common government, remained a utopia for Robespierre, as it does for us. It is the all-powerful dictator who triumphs, convinced of the faultlessness of his SELF. It is in this sense that we speak of the bourgeois nature of the Revolution – it was a craving of power and a conviction of the absolute correctness of its views that joined the peon and the rentier, the farmer and the soldier, the artist and the judge of the lower courts, and that joins them even now.

Rousseau, the High Priest of Virtue

If we would like a precise understanding of the Revolutionary bourgeois SELF, we need to look at the work of an author whom Robespierre admired enough to quote in his articles and speeches, making him a true oracle – Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Many concepts from Robespierre’s political vocabulary – Virtue, Conscience, the Highest Being – were drawn from Rousseau. Ruth Scurr even mentions anecdotally that Robespierre slept with the *Social Contract* under his pillow.¹¹⁸⁷ He was certainly not alone in admiring Rousseau’s works to the point of having them nearby at practically all times. Marat and Desmoulins were other heirs to his thinking. We might say in general that Rousseau was the most important patron of the Revolution, its chief authority.

Noting that the Revolutionaries were forever quoting Rousseau, Baczkó stresses he was cited rather freely: “We can easily demonstrate something along the lines of a fuzzy Rousseauism.”¹¹⁸⁸ The Revolutionary propaganda glossed over the discrepancies between Revolutionary practice and the social theory Rousseau suggested. This does not mean that the Revolution stooped to manipulation, especially

¹¹⁸⁶ Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime...*, p. 142.

¹¹⁸⁷ Cf. Scurr, *Fatal...*, p. 231.

¹¹⁸⁸ Baczkó, *Hiob...*, p. 218.

since Rousseau's writings are inconsistent and can be variously interpreted. Despite differences in details, there is a clear tie between Rousseau's thoughts and the Revolutionary worldview. We might say that Rousseau created the emotional climate in which the Revolution took shape. Furet writes that "he created the cultural substance of the Revolutionary consciousness and practice."¹¹⁸⁹ Perhaps some Revolutionaries knew Rousseau's ideas only second-hand,¹¹⁹⁰ but this was because they had entered the culture's bloodstream. Without his works there would have been no Revolution as we knew it – under the banner of Virtue in a Jacobin cap. Why? Because he put forward the Revolutionary demands for individual autonomy in terms of virtue, and he developed a political theory meant to serve the execution of these demands. While Turgot, Helvétius, and Diderot came close to grasping the essence of the bourgeois existence, Rousseau spoke from its heart.

If we were to point to a statement which encapsulates the nature of modern culture, we would cite the passage that begins the *Confessions*. Rousseau declares:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. *Simply myself*. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even to say that *I am like no one in the whole world*. I may be no better, but at least *I am different*.¹¹⁹¹

This paragraph, and particularly the italicized fragments, brilliantly show that what almost obsessively interested Rousseau was individual authenticity. He tried to get to its source. In a marvelous study, Jean Starobinski wrote:

The quest for origins is a movement toward the *central* positions of the self, but in a situation increasingly *eccentric* and marginal with respect to other human beings. In Hegel's terms, the man governed by the law of the heart [and thus shaped by Rousseau's thought] moves closer and closer to the "mania of presumption."¹¹⁹²

Based on Rousseau's example, we plainly see how dangerous it is to perceive human existence in terms of emotional subjectivity, so typical for modernity. Let us see how the "mania of presumption" unfolded.

In one of his first works, Rousseau wrote:

¹¹⁸⁹ Furet, *Prawdziwy koniec...*, p. 42.

¹¹⁹⁰ This is what Baczkowski states, *Hiob...*, p. 218.

¹¹⁹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, trans. J. M. Cohen, Baltimore 1963, p. 17, emphasis – W. K.

¹¹⁹² Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. Arthur Goldhamer, Chicago–London 1971, p. 276.

Allowing that nature intended we should always enjoy good health, I dare almost affirm that a state of reflection is a state against nature, and that the man who meditates is a degenerate animal.¹¹⁹³

Elsewhere, we find this declaration: “To exist is to feel; our feeling is undoubtedly earlier than our intelligence.”¹¹⁹⁴ These words sketch the basis of Rousseau’s total critique of modern civilization. While Pascal did not disavow reason entirely in stressing its limitations, and Helvétius methodically and rationally proved the power of emotion, Rousseau was, as Bertrand Russell phrased it, “the initiator of systems of thought which infer non-human facts from human emotions.”¹¹⁹⁵ Implacable, or even dogmatic in his critique of reason, he threw himself into emotions like none before him. Let us track Rousseau’s impulse, his emotions, delving into the vagaries and contradictions of his theses, not only to cast more light on the Revolution, but also to become acquainted with the kinesis of the late eighteenth century.

Bronisław Baczko subtitled his monograph on Rousseau “Solitude and Community.”¹¹⁹⁶ Solitude is a key motif in the work of Jean-Jacques. He might be called the creator of a new, activist, and thoroughly modern model of solitude, quite unlike what we find in Montaigne, Descartes, or Pascal. This does not mean he owed them nothing – quite the contrary. In one essay, Baczko calls him “a man of the margins.”¹¹⁹⁷ He is not referring to the margins in a narrow sense, as being in conflict with the law, but the margins as a holistic approach to life, a basic impulse informing an experience of the world. For almost all his life, Rousseau felt out of place among people. He could not get along without them, but he could not live with them. He felt removed, uprooted, floundering between cliques and classes – the son of a watchmaker from Geneva, who was to become one of the first mass intellectual stars, only to pull back at the peak of his success. By the same token, Rousseau was not a philosophizing aristocrat like Helvétius or Holbach, he was not worldly like Voltaire, not a man of science like d’Alembert, but neither did he love life in its sensory aspect like the Enlightenment thinker closest to him, Diderot. We can see this as a highly personal feature, but also a sign of the times, for Rousseau appeared at a time of the profound destabilization of the social system. He was a personality who was difficult to grasp, unusually focused on himself, and

¹¹⁹³ Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind*, ed. Lester K. Born, New York 1967, p. 183. The fragment immediately preceding it reads: “most of our ills are of our own making [...] and we might have avoided them all by adhering to the simple, uniform and solitary way of life prescribed to us by nature” (ibid.). We should note the link between health and isolation, and sickness and reflection. The latter Rousseau associated with a developed state of socialization.

¹¹⁹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Barbara Foxley, pdfbooks.co.za, p. 267.

¹¹⁹⁵ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London–New York 2004, p. 733.

¹¹⁹⁶ Bronisław Baczko, *Rousseau: samotność i wspólnota*, Warsaw 1964.

¹¹⁹⁷ Baczko, *Hiob...*, p. 157.

thus a prototype for an emerging typical personality. He was an autonomous individual in constant search for the meaning behind his autonomy.

His philosophical work begins with a sense of discontent, observing a disharmony in the outside world. According to Rousseau, things were not so good as the optimist view of the early eighteenth century stated. Progress in civilization is just an empty phrase, he thought. For in fact, reality, though it seems more and more explicable and predictable, is increasingly foreign to us. The sensitive, reflective individual felt somehow repelled from it, felt the ground move beneath their feet. There came a sense of the aridity and even injustice of life. Rousseau based his first discourse on this feeling, offering an answer to a question posed by the Academy of Dijon in 1749: "Has the rebirth of the arts and sciences led to an improvement in customs?"

As we might expect, he replied in the negative. Rousseau appeared to draw a perverse sense of pleasure from finding arguments to support this controversial thesis. One of his bases was the gathering conviction that the essence of humanity was not rational calculation, but a maximum sense of the fullness of existence rooted in physicality. We see this physical aspect of Rousseau's thinking at the very opening of his discourse:

The mind has its needs, as does the body. The latter make up the foundations of society, the former make it pleasant. While government and laws provide for the security and well-being of assembled men, the sciences, the letters, and the arts – less despotic and perhaps more powerful – spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains with which men are burdened, stifle in them the feeling of that original freedom for which they seemed to have been born, make them love their slavery and fashion them into what are called civilized peoples.¹¹⁹⁸

Science and art are in fact *pars pro toto* of the project of Western civilization. Modern civilization, whose quintessence, for Rousseau, was his contemporary Paris, emerges from his pen chiefly as a bodily constraint, a restriction on freedom conceived as a total expression of one's personality.

Several years after his first discourse, in writing *Emile*, his treatise on upbringing, Rousseau did not shy from stating: "Not only is it quite a mistake that true reason is developed apart from the body,"¹¹⁹⁹ it is quite the opposite. In training the mind, modern culture shaped deficient people. Bound by vain knowledge, the body becomes weak, loses the energy with which nature equipped it. This is why he advises the educator: "Would you cultivate your pupil's intelligence, cultivate the strength

¹¹⁹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts," in: *The Major Political Writings*, trans. John T. Scott, Chicago–London 2012, p. 55.

¹¹⁹⁹ Rousseau, *Emile*..., p. 95.

it is meant to control. Give his body constant exercise, make it strong and healthy, in order to make him good and wise; let him work, let him do things, let him run and shout, let him always be on the go.”¹²⁰⁰

Civilization kills spontaneity and naturalness, creating a world of delusion, appearances, and artificial social forms.¹²⁰¹ Rousseau was far from the first to critique this. We might also recall Montaigne, Pascal, or Jean de La Bruyère’s bitter words on fashion, strutting about in town, and the hollowness of social meetings in *Characters*.¹²⁰² Rousseau was not the first to long for physical exertion instead of refined and over-intellectual frivolity. A generation earlier, we find a similar tone in Montesquieu, for instance, who moaned:

To some extent the regard for glory and true worth is slowly losing ground among us. Philosophy has gained ground, and the old ideas about heroism, and bravery, and chivalry, have faded away. Indifference about the life to come, which leads to softness and self-indulgence in this one, renders us careless and incapable of anything that demands an effort.¹²⁰³

A similar longing for heroism saturated the work of Vauvenargues. Ultimately, Diderot rebelled, in the same period as Rousseau, against the hollow forms, the pernicious society for show.¹²⁰⁴ What set Rousseau apart was the extremity of his critiques and the conclusions he drew from them.

At the start of his creative path, Rousseau struck out quite boldly against modern mobilization under the banner of the intellect. He attacked philosophers and literary writers for corrupting the healthy, spontaneous body:

luxury, licentiousness, and slavery have in all ages been the punishment for the prideful efforts we have made to leave that happy ignorance in which eternal wisdom had placed us. The thick veil with which it has covered all its operations seemed to warn us clearly enough that it did not destine us for vain studies.¹²⁰⁵

Modern civilization ignored this warning, and mostly paid, according to Rousseau, with a drop in vitality, a deficit in decisiveness. He saw this state as perilous:

¹²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹²⁰¹ Rousseau could not abide salon games, sophisticated manners, aristocratic distinctions of all types. He believed that worldly people were basically inauthentic: “The man of the world almost always wears a mask. He is scarcely ever himself and is almost a stranger to himself; he is ill at ease when he is forced into his own company. Not what he is, but what he seems, is all he cares for” (ibid., p. 202).

¹²⁰² Jean de La Bruyère, *The Characters, or: The Manners of the Age*, trans. N. Rowe, London 1752.

¹²⁰³ Quoted in: Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century: From Montesquieu to Lessing*, trans. J. Lewis May, New Haven 1954, p. 336.

¹²⁰⁴ As we have shown, much of Diderot’s “Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville” is in the spirit of Rousseau.

¹²⁰⁵ Rousseau, “Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts,” p. 62.

“The taste for letters, philosophy, and the fine arts softens bodies and souls. Work in the study renders men delicate, weakens their temperament, and the soul retains its vigor with difficulty when the body has lost its vigor.”¹²⁰⁶

Rousseau’s positive points of reference were the Roman Republic and Sparta. He lauded their kinetic politics as models: “The ancient republics of Greece, with that wisdom which shined forth in most of their institutions, forbade their citizens all those sedate and sedentary occupations which, by weighing down and corrupting the body, soon enervate the vigor of the soul.”¹²⁰⁷ Here we have a characteristic gesture – Rousseau strove to demobilize modern rationalism in the name of mobilization with heroic, essentially military traits. He dreamed of a community of noble, physically fit warriors, not thinkers and artists, and this dream often recurs in his work.

Yet it would be a mistake to see Rousseau as a mere bandwagoner. What ancient thinker could have written the following: “life is not breath, but action, the use of our senses, our mind, our faculties, every part of ourselves which makes us conscious of our being. *Life consists less in length of days than in the keen sense of living*”?¹²⁰⁸ Action enhancing a sense of life was an extremely modern notion.

At the close of the first discourse we find a characteristic, rather windy invocation: “Almighty God, thou who holds all spirits in thy hands, deliver us from the enlightenment and fatal arts of our fathers and give us back ignorance, innocence, and poverty, the sole goods that might create our happiness and which are precious in thy sight.”¹²⁰⁹ After the work was published, Rousseau was accused of having written a banal apotheosis of the primitive. He was branded an obscurantist. He defended himself as best he could. In a response to a criticism of the first discourse levied by Stanisław Leszczyński, Duke of Lorraine and the titular King of Poland, Rousseau clearly set apart two kinds of ignorance: a brutal kind that “renders men similar to beasts,”¹²¹⁰ and a rational kind. The latter, “which consists in restricting one’s curiosity to the scope of the faculties one has received,”¹²¹¹ Rousseau defended, as this ignorance “finds all its felicity in retreating into itself, in confirming itself in its innocence, and has no need to seek a false and vain happiness in the opinion others might have of its enlightenment.”¹²¹² Thus, the point was not

¹²⁰⁶ Rousseau, “Preface to ‘Narcissus,’” trans. Christopher Kelly, in: idem, *On Philosophy, Morality, and Religion*, Hanover–London 2007, p. 25.

¹²⁰⁷ Rousseau, “Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts,” p. 68.

¹²⁰⁸ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 9, emphasis – W.K.

¹²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

¹²¹⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “First Discourse: Replies,” in *The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevich, Cambridge 1997, p. 49.

¹²¹¹ Ibid.

¹²¹² Ibid. There is a similar tone to a thought in “Preface to *Narcissus*”: “Taken in an abstract manner, science deserves all of our admiration. The mad science of men is worthy only of scorn and disdain” (Rousseau, “Preface...,” p. 24).

for people to get back down on all fours. He was not after a simple-minded rejection of civilization, nor a general revolt:

never has a people, once corrupted, been known to return to virtue [...] their hearts, once spoiled, will be so forever; no remedy remains, short of some great revolution almost as much to be feared as the evil it might cure, and which it is blameworthy to desire and impossible to foresee.¹²¹³

What was Rousseau really suggesting? He sought to change people's sensitivity and consciousness, to impose restrictions on instincts and conventions.¹²¹⁴

Rousseau seemed to mollify the radicalism of his theses¹²¹⁵ in writing to Leszczyński:

Let us [...] let the Sciences and the Arts in some measure temper the ferociousness of the men they have corrupted; let us strive wisely to divert them, and try to deceive their passions. Let us feed those Tigers something, to keep them from devouring our children. A wicked person's enlightenment is, on balance, less to be feared than is his brutal stupidity.¹²¹⁶

Yet this clear concession to civilization was, it soon turned out, merely a tactical maneuver. Rousseau did not intend to remain in a conciliatory position. He had not derided the whole of modern culture only to reconcile himself to it. Feeding the tigers was not for him. He was more interested in nurturing the internal tiger, in rousing and cultivating it.

¹²¹³ Rousseau, "First Discourse...", pp. 50–51.

¹²¹⁴ Reading *Emile*, we might get the impression that Rousseau was a stoic. As in this fragment: "Oh man! Live your own life and you will no longer be wretched. Keep to your appointed place in the order of nature and nothing can tear you from it. Do not kick against the stern law of necessity" (Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 49). Or this one: "learn to lose what may be taken from you; learn to forsake all things at the command of virtue" (ibid., p. 433). But this was a special stoicism fueled by the passions, not a rational viewpoint, which was merely a retrospective tool for structuring what was primarily authentic. Rousseau's stoicism was described by Starobinski in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau...*

¹²¹⁵ Rousseau's surprising conservatism is noted by Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau...*, p. 380, note 34. A bit further on in the main text, we read: "If Rousseau's philosophy is revolutionary, it is revolutionary in the name of an eternal human nature rather than of historical progress. (In order to see Rousseau's work as a decisive factor in eighteenth-century political developments, that work must be *interpreted*)" (ibid., p. 21). Undoubtedly, Rousseau was no mere political activist. He was no warrior for an alternative social system, though in the *Social Contract* he designed his ideal and in *Emile* he wrote: "The crisis is approaching, and we are on the edge of a revolution" (Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 166). His writings were not simply a struggle against absolutism, a fight for democracy. He was not after social progress. He was after something more, and his was what most substantially influenced his successors' way of thinking about politics. Perhaps it is not the *Social Contract*, but *Emile* and *The New Heloise* that are Rousseau's basic political texts in our day.

¹²¹⁶ Rousseau, "First Discourse...", p. 51.

Leo Strauss, who was a remarkably insightful thinker, described the essence of Rousseau's philosophical project as follows:

freedom is a higher good than life. In fact, [Rousseau] tends to identify freedom with virtue or with goodness. He says that freedom is obedience to the law which one has given to one's self. This means, in the first place, that not merely obedience to the law but legislation itself must originate in the individual. It means, secondly, that freedom is not so much either the condition or consequence of virtue as virtue itself. What is true of virtue can also be said of goodness, which Rousseau distinguished from virtue: freedom is identical with goodness; to be free, or to be one's self, is to be good – this is one meaning of his thesis that man is by nature good.¹²¹⁷

"Man is by nature good." This simple catchphrase contained the essence of the mighty impact Rousseau had on culture, equating Freedom, Virtue, and Goodness, and placing the resulting identity in an individualized conscience. The point of support, whose instability Rousseau embraced, was the notion of "feelings" mentioned at the opening of this sub-chapter. Here is another of his characteristic aphorisms: "reason crawls but the soul is exalted; if we are small by intelligence, we are great by our feelings."¹²¹⁸ Rousseau spoke up loudly for the rights of feelings, which he felt had been neglected by seventeenth-century rationalism, and even by the Encyclopedists. In *Discourse on Inequality* he stressed that the human constitution was based on a play between two factors – reason and emotion, writing in the spirit of Diderot:

Let moralists say what they will, the human understanding is greatly indebted to the passions, which, on their side, are likewise universally allowed to be greatly indebted to the understanding. It is by the activity of our passions, that our reason improves; we covet knowledge merely because we covet enjoyment; and it is impossible to conceive, why a man who exempt from fears and desires should take the trouble to reason.¹²¹⁹

In *Emile*, in turn, we read: "Our passions are the chief means of self-preservation; to try to destroy them is therefore as absurd as it is useless; this would be to overcome nature, to reshape God's handiwork."¹²²⁰

With the faith in the power of feelings came the subjectivity of morality. In the "Moral Letters," Rousseau summed up his finding as such: "There is [...] in the depths of all souls an innate principle of justice and moral truth anterior to all national prejudices, to all maxims of education. This principle is the involuntary

¹²¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago–London 1965, p. 278.

¹²¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Moral Letters," in: *On Philosophy, Morality...*, pp. 88–89.

¹²¹⁹ Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourse...*, p. 188–189.

¹²²⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 182.

rule based on which we judge our actions and those of others as good or bad in spite of our own maxims, and it is to this principle that I give the name of conscience.”¹²²¹ Conscience and feelings also went hand-in-hand in *Emile*. Jean-Jacques claimed that moral principles could not be explained, they had to be experienced: “If good is good, it must be good in the depth of our heart.”¹²²² Charles Taylor thus explains Rousseau’s operation, which was of fundamental significance for European culture: “The distinction of vice and virtue, of good and depraved will, has been aligned with the distinction between dependence on self and dependence on others. Goodness is identified with freedom, with finding the motives for one’s actions within oneself.”¹²²³ The first step toward internalizing morality, toward subjectivizing goodness, it seems, was the rational ignorance posited in the first discourse.

In identifying Goodness, Liberty, and Conscience, the term “nature” came in handy; it was in constant use in Rousseau’s day, and was therefore equivocal. We shall not be delving into the complexities tied to the Enlightenment concept of nature,¹²²⁴ it suffices to observe that in it, Rousseau sought the foundation for his thought, which he evoked as the basic justification for his claims. This does not mean he approached it naively. He understood that nature was not easy to grasp, that it could not come down to walking on all fours. He called it a state “which, if it ever did, does not now, and in all probability never will exist, and of which, notwithstanding, it is absolutely necessary to have just notions to judge properly of our present state.”¹²²⁵ Thus, nature was a foundation built on the intuition Rousseau valued most.

Rousseau opts for the immediate, not the irrational. Immediate certainty may be associated with either emotion, sensation, or reason. As long as immediacy obtains, Rousseau sees no hierarchy between the “sensible immediate” and the “rational immediate.”¹²²⁶

Nature is a state of immediate “being oneself,” a sense of authenticity born at the very bottom of the heart. This does not make it utterly irrational. It is more of an anxiety that endlessly haunts existence – a trembling, pulsing nerve that proves an individual is alive. Here is a kinetic state highly characteristic of Rousseau, to which

¹²²¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Moral Letters,” p. 93.

¹²²² Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 264.

¹²²³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge 1989, p. 361. Later, we read: “Rousseau is at the origin point of a great deal of contemporary culture, of the philosophies of self-exploration, as well as of the creeds which make Rousseau self-determining freedom [on an individual level, but later collectively as well] the key to virtue. He is the starting point of a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy” (ibid., pp. 362–363).

¹²²⁴ This is splendidly achieved by Bacsko, *Rousseau...*, pp. 91–117.

¹²²⁵ Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourse...*, p. 169.

¹²²⁶ Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau...*, p. 41.

all his thoughts and actions pertain. Starobinski captured this beautifully, writing that, for Jean-Jacques, nature was “the very motion that makes stable identity impossible. Such a move gives the oscillation a validity that it appeared at first to lack. The ‘self’ is not the unattainable position of rest but the anxiety that makes tranquility impossible.”¹²²⁷ This does not mean that Rousseau affirmed anxiety, that he fully identified with nature as movement. His drama was in constantly trying to calm this movement, striving, at all costs, for a “lost” (or, in fact, impossible) immobility.

According to Rousseau, the lone, sensitive individual was perfection. What constitutes it? Rousseau writes:

confining myself to the first and most simple operations of the human soul, I think I can distinguish in it two principles prior to reason; one of them interests us deeply in our own preservation and welfare,¹²²⁸ the other inspires us with a natural aversion to seeing any other being, but especially any being like ourselves, suffer or perish.¹²²⁹

The second “operation of the human soul” introduces fairly strong and rather arbitrary anthropological assumptions, quite unlike those that served Hobbes – that *homo homini lupus* in a state of nature. Rousseau came out strongly against Hobbes’s views, claiming that the state of everyone for himself is in society, rather. The state of nature was the peaceful coexistence of isolated empathetic individuals who cared for one another.

The flip side of the activism diagnosed in the soul was an intriguing kinetic utopia, as opposed to the above-described kinesis of existential anxiety. This was the tranquility of man in nature, which Rousseau sometimes called “idleness,”¹²³⁰ with an aftertaste of paradise lost. The man in nature “sighs for nothing but repose or liberty; he desires only to live, and to be exempt from labor; nay, the ataraxy of the most confirmed Stoic falls short of his profound indifference to every other subject.”¹²³¹ In the depths of his soul, Jean-Jacques longed for this ataraxy all his life. This was fully revealed in his later writings. His yearning was not unlike Diderot’s competing impulses. Rousseau too dreamed of losing his sense of alienation when confronted by the surrounding world. But unlike Diderot, he was prepared to abandon the achievements of civilization. Starobinski described the repercussions of Rousseau’s utopia:

¹²²⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

¹²²⁸ Elsewhere, Rousseau calls it “self-love,” as opposed to the egotistical “selfishness” found in society. One might call this something like a self-preservation instinct (Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourse...*, p. 256).

¹²²⁹ Ibid., p. 171.

¹²³⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

¹²³¹ Ibid., p. 244.

In this state of perfect self-sufficiency, [natural] man does not need to transform the world in order to satisfy his needs. Here we have an “animal” and “sensationalist” version of the Stoic ideal of autarchy. Man does not look outside himself, nor does he look beyond the present moment. In a word, he lives in the *immediate*. If each sensation is new, the apparent discontinuity is merely a way of experiencing the *continuity* of the immediate.¹²³²

Although Rousseau dreamed of a state of nature as the simple idleness of the unsocialized, he was too intelligent to limit his philosophy to this. He perfectly understood there was no return to nature, that a state of pre-rational bliss was a pure utopia. He wanted to achieve the “savagery of the immediate” not by discarding his customs, but by straining to build a social system that would limit the degeneration, a reminiscence of the golden age Rousseau situated between the “idleness” of a state of nature and the falsehoods, conventions, and weakness of Enlightenment civilization. Jean-Jacques posited dealing with pathologies through work on oneself. This was his “wildness of the heart.” In *Emile*, we read:

What is meant by a virtuous man? He who can conquer his affections; for then he follows his reason, his conscience; he does his duty; he is his own master and nothing can turn him from the right way. [...] control your heart, my Emile, and you will be virtuous!¹²³³

Only individuals of this sort can join to make a healthy social organism. As such, they ought to be made, based on the model of natural education presented in *Emile*.

The treatise starts off with a bang: “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.”¹²³⁴ It might seem that degeneracy is inevitable, given that we live among others. Yet Rousseau does not lay down his arms. He suggests education through dissuasion.¹²³⁵ “The education of the earliest years should be merely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error.”¹²³⁶ Most of all, Rousseau cautions against giving students premature knowledge. He wants to preserve the innocence of childhood for as long as possible. He does not want education to be the teaching of skills. Here he strikes a tone of pathos: “Life is the trade I would teach him [his ward]. When he leaves me, I grant you, he will be neither a magistrate, a soldier, nor a priest; he will be a man.”¹²³⁷ But what does it mean to be a man?

¹²³² Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau...*, p. 25.

¹²³³ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 431.

¹²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹²³⁵ Let us hear what he recommends: “What must be done to train this exceptional man! We can do much, but the chief thing is to prevent anything being done” (*ibid.*, p. 8).

¹²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

To have a conscience, to be primarily driven by natural urges, which Rousseau believes to be good in themselves. Where does this lead? We quote a significant passage:

Our first duties are to ourselves; our first feelings are centred on self; all our instincts are at first directed to our own preservation and our own welfare. Thus the first notion of justice springs not from what we owe to others, but from what is due to us.¹²³⁸

For Rousseau, the self is a point of departure and a destination. As Locke would have put it, it is a *tabula rasa*,¹²³⁹ though stamped with autotelic value. It was regarded as essentially unique, owing to the freedom it shares, Rousseau believed, with the Highest Power. Rousseau's individualism was expressed by a protagonist of the *New Heloise*, Monsieur de Wolmar: "In addition to the constitution common to the species, each individual brings with him at birth a particular temperament which determines his genius and character, and should be neither changed nor constrained, but formed and perfected."¹²⁴⁰ We now see where Jean-Jacques was heading. The natural education he suggests means nurturing the inner, original essence of every individual, which might be called their authenticity. Rousseau's educational program is based on the conviction that justice and kindness are no mere abstract terms, no mere moral conceptions framed by the understanding, but true affections of the heart enlightened by reason, the natural outcome of our primitive affections; that by reason alone, unaided by conscience, we cannot establish any natural law, and that all natural right is a vain dream if it does not rest upon some instinctive need of the human heart.¹²⁴¹

This is why education should be governed by the principle of instilling natural freedom.

When we read Rousseau's works, we find what makes him the godfather of modern culture – his effusiveness. Even in positing that emotions be tamed, he is violently driven by them. Ultimately, we are dealing with an emotional debauchery. In the Renaissance and classicism, reason harnessed the passions. In Rousseau, this was chiefly the job of the conscience, which meant that, in fact, man never truly emerged from the tangle of sentiments. This is perhaps most evident in his epistolary novel, *Julie, or: The New Heloise*, a love story of two "sensitive souls," Julie and Saint-Preux, condemned to an unrequited love that captured eighteenth-century readers like no other. Though they love one another, they cannot be together. Thus, they undergo the heroic effort of a long-distance relationship, foregoing

¹²³⁸ Ibid., p. 64.

¹²³⁹ Ibid., p. 45.

¹²⁴⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or: The New Heloise*, trans. Philip Stewart and Jean Vaché, Hanover–London 1997, p. 461.

¹²⁴¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 207.

erotic contact for something that might be called a pact of virtue. Julie takes old, incisive Wolmar for a husband, while Saint-Preux lives with his yearnings. The denial the “lovers” practice is the novel’s main theme. This denial is a source of bliss that, for them, surpasses physical love.¹²⁴² This motif greatly appealed to Robespierre – the passion for smothering the passions turns out to be most powerful of all. Though extreme, this juxtaposition of sentimental lovers and the sentimental revolutionary is not devoid of sense. This Rousseauian passion of virtue drove the increasingly radical Revolution. The Revolution could not be stopped because rational arguments did not give its main actors a sense of sensual satisfaction. The purification had to continue, even intensify. Robespierre’s revolution was an “orgy of virtue,” much like the one that united Julie and Saint-Preux, those archetypal sensitive souls.

Robespierre was a sensitive soul, as was Saint-Just. Let us quote the latter’s revolutionary credo:

The revolutionary is unbending. But he is rational, he is restrained, he is simple, without false modesty; he is the implacable enemy of all falsehood, all leniency; all tenderness. [...] The revolutionary is a man of honor; he is polite without being desultory, but sincere because he is one with his heart. [...] his righteousness is no trick of the mind, it is a fully contemplated trait of the heart.¹²⁴³

The educator could have said just the same about Emile, and Wolmar about Julie. The revolutionary was a Rousseauian man in the full sense of the term. He despised tricks of the mind. Here we had something more than the disdain for wise men so typical of the sans-culottes and, above all, the “Enraged.”¹²⁴⁴ True, in Rousseau we find this simple sort of resentment as well, but if his program could be reduced to this entirely, he would never have become a myth. Something more was needed, as we also find in Wolmar:

only fiery souls know how to fight and win. All great struggles, all sublime acts are their doing; cold reason has never accomplished anything illustrious, and passions are overcome only by being set against each other. When the passion of virtue arises, it alone rules and keeps everything in balance.¹²⁴⁵

¹²⁴² Here is what Julie says when trying to confirm her decision to reject Saint-Preux: “There is no passion that gives us so strong an illusion as love: its violence is taken for a sign of its durability; the heart, replete with so sweet a sentiment, extends it, so to speak, into the future, and as long as that love lasts one believes it will never end. But on the contrary, its very ardor consumes it” (Rousseau, *Julie*..., p. 306).

¹²⁴³ Quoted in: Baczkowski, *Hiob*..., pp. 309–310.

¹²⁴⁴ On this disdain, see: Baszkiewicz, *Francuzi*..., p. 108.

¹²⁴⁵ Rousseau, *Julie*..., p. 405.

This was the genius of Rousseau – the ability to infect with Virtue as a passion. Robespierre was among the first victims of this infection, but surely not the last.

The Legislator

We note that in *The New Heloise* Wolmar does not speak of a singular “fiery soul,” which was the subject of special attention in *Emile*, but of souls in the plural. Although Rousseau thought that society stained the purity of the individual, he also saw this as a natural necessity.¹²⁴⁶ He wrote: “Man’s weakness makes him sociable. Our common sufferings draw our hearts to our fellow-creatures; we should have no duties to mankind if we were not men.”¹²⁴⁷ Man must live in society, so Rousseau decided to inspect how it was organized. This translated into the design of the *Social Contract*, his most openly political book, which was released nine years after the Second Discourse, and in the same year as *Emile*. In the *Confessions*, we read that the impulse to write came when Rousseau was secretary to the French ambassador in Venice. This was when he began contemplating the problem of power. Over time, his vision became clearer: “I had seen that everything is rooted in politics and that, whatever might be attempted, no people would ever be other than the nature of their government made them.”¹²⁴⁸

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau speaks even more unequivocally than he did in the second discourse. He declares that moving to a state of socialization is progress, not a downfall, as it makes man a moral creature. As an idle animal, he is beyond good and evil, but as a disciplined citizen he could be entirely good. Of the state of socialization, Rousseau says:

Although, in this state, [man] is deprived of many advantages that he derives from nature, he acquires equally great ones in return; his faculties are exercised and developed; his ideas are expanded; his feelings are ennobled; his whole soul is exalted to such a degree that, if the abuses of this new condition did not often degrade him below that from which he has emerged, he ought to bless without ceasing the happy moment that released him from it for ever, and transformed him from a stupid and ignorant animal into an intelligent being and man.¹²⁴⁹

The moral potential of socialization, according to Jean-Jacques, is only brought to fruition when a society is founded on a social contract that utterly absorbs

¹²⁴⁶ Cf. Strauss, *Natural Right...*, p. 261.

¹²⁴⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 192.

¹²⁴⁸ Rousseau, *Confessions*, p. 377.

¹²⁴⁹ Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourse...*, pp. 22–23.

every individual. Here Rousseau makes a fairly radical turn from individualism toward collectivism, from solitariness to the community, following a conviction expressed in *Emile*: “self-interest misleads us; the hope of the just is the only sure guide.”¹²⁵⁰ This would appear inconsistent. Yet we will show that, behind the mask of the community, the irreducible, autonomous, monstrous individual remains in Jean-Jacques’ thinking – and later, in Robespierre’s. Justice that requires a social contract ultimately becomes an individualized justice.

The principle of the social contract is “the total alienation to the whole community of each associate with all his rights; for, in the first place, since each gives himself up entirely, the conditions are equal for all; and, the conditions being equal for all, no one has any interest in making them burdensome to others.”¹²⁵¹ Thus, we are dealing with an imperative to fully surrender to the collective. Importantly, Rousseau always stressed that this collective could not be reduced to any of its parts. The sovereign is a whole, whose every part had to be unconditionally submissive. Rousseau called this whole the general will. This was about total equality, which meant there could be no discrimination or favoritism. At the same time, a significant possibility, or even imperative, comes to the fore: “whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do so by the whole body; which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free.”¹²⁵² Total submission to the whole leaves no room for free individual expression. All chances for this were lost after leaving a state of nature. Yet Rousseau revels in this subordination. Why?

At the heart of the *Social Contract* is the conviction that people are, by nature, good, and that when the right institutional frameworks are created this goodness will be kept, and the imperfections of nature removed:

instead of destroying natural equality, the fundamental pact, on the contrary, substitutes a moral and lawful equality for the physical inequality which nature imposed on men, so that, although unequal in strength or intellect, they all become equal by convention and legal right.¹²⁵³

This is the most “Enlightened” of Jean-Jacques’s concepts, a conviction prefiguring Kant: “the impulse of mere appetite is slavery, while obedience to a self-prescribed law is liberty.”¹²⁵⁴ It implies an unpleasant necessity for the individual, which the rational, fully socialized man is obliged to accept:

¹²⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 294.

¹²⁵¹ Rousseau, *Social Contract*..., p. 18.

¹²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Now, the citizen is not a judge of the peril to which the law requires that he should expose himself; and when the prince [as an executor of the general will] has said to him: "It is expedient for the State that you should die," he ought to die, since it is only on this condition that he has lived in security up to that time, and since his life is no longer merely a gift of nature, but a conditional gift of the State.¹²⁵⁵

This introduces a total shift. Man somehow regains his goodness, but in quite altered circumstances. We may even get the impression that this is no longer the author of *Emile*. Gone is the primacy of emotion: "men recover the immediacy they had previously enjoyed in the state of nature. What they discover now, however, is not merely the primitive immediacy of sensation and feeling but the immediacy of the autonomous will and reasonable intellect."¹²⁵⁶ A condition for achieving freedom is the total rationalization of life. Rousseau says this plainly, and is most forceful about it: "[Individuals] must be compelled to conform their wills to their reason; the people must be taught to know what they require. Then from the public enlightenment results the union of the understanding and the will in the social body; and from that the close cooperation of the parts, and, lastly, the maximum power of the whole."¹²⁵⁷

Here we come to a key maneuver that the Jacobins borrowed from Rousseau, and which later justified many modern dictatorships in democratic costume and decor. It is camouflaged as rational necessity, but in fact arises from an authoritarian, irrational impulse. For Jean-Jacques, democracy is not a constant negotiation under the circumstances of an irreducible pluralism of convictions, it is a myth to be defended against those recognized as its enemies. Democracy should thus be carefully protected, and the general will represented properly. This is precisely what Robespierre wanted – to teach the people what they wanted. We find a similar gesture in dogmatic Marxism – the proletariat needed to be educated to see its real needs and true role, which is why the Party was necessary – and in the Nazi cultural policies of *Gleichschaltung*. For the general will is not the will of all, nor of the individual. What, then, is it?

The principles for determining the general will in the *Social Contract* could be its least clear fragment. Rousseau offers this, for example:

There is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will; the latter regards only the common interest, while the former has regard to private interests, and is merely a sum of particular wills; but take away from these same wills the plus and minuses which cancel one another, and the general will remains as the sum of the differences.¹²⁵⁸

¹²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 36.

¹²⁵⁶ Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau...*, p. 31.

¹²⁵⁷ Rousseau, *Social Contract...*, p. 41.

¹²⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 30–31.

A mysterious operation, to say the least. We do not know precisely what these pluses and minuses are. So how to do this arithmetic? With disarming simplicity, Rousseau recommends: “If the people came to a resolution when adequately informed and without any communication among the citizens, the general will would always result from the great number of slight differences, and the resolution would always be good.”¹²⁵⁹ For Rousseau, the preferred place to display the general will was a gathering of the citizens of the republic to debate matters of state and make decisions through plebiscite.¹²⁶⁰ This is a most time-consuming task, not really manageable in larger groups, such as modern states, as Rousseau realized. What ought to be done in a country like France, where the general will falls silent, where “the State, on the verge of ruin, no longer subsists except in a vain and illusory form, [...] the social bond is broken in all hearts, [...] the basest interest shelters itself under the sacred name of the public welfare”?¹²⁶¹ We find no answer in the *Social Contract*. We do find it, however, in *Emile*.

In writing about freedom, Rousseau makes an important reservation that might well apply to a ward: it is a “well governed” freedom.¹²⁶² This opens the field for the educator,¹²⁶³ and thus, *per analogiam*, for the legislator as well. What should be done to salvage the core freedom, to express the general will? It should be embodied, one must become it, devote oneself to it entirely – appropriate it. Rousseau does warn against tyranny, which he joined the Enlightenment as a whole in despising.¹²⁶⁴ He claims to be siding with social equality, with the People. He declares the primacy of legislative power over executive. It would seem this is full democracy. Yet we know that “the more closely packed a numerous population is, the less power

¹²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

¹²⁶⁰ Here we see Rousseau’s brutal realism, most often veiled behind emancipatory pathos. The freedom he proposes cannot be executed when all people are equal. We see this in his example of the Greek city-states. “Is liberty maintained only with the help of slavery? Perhaps; extremes meet. Everything which is not according to nature has its inconveniences, and civil society more than all the rest. There are circumstances so unfortunate that people can preserve their freedom only at the expense of that of others, and the citizen cannot be completely free when the slave is enslaved to the utmost. Such was the position of Sparta. As for you, modern nations, you have no slaves, but you are slaves; you pay for your freedom with your own. In vain do you boast of this preference; I find in it more of cowardice than of humanity” (ibid., p. 101). It is hard to miss a tone characteristic of modern totalitarian governments.

¹²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 110.

¹²⁶² Ibid., p. 76.

¹²⁶³ Robert Spaemann notes that “‘if it is not permitted for anything to be done’ [...], so that Emile would not become ‘a man subject to another man’ and ‘kept his original self’ [...], [education] requires the organizing of a miniature world and the long involvement of a celibate educator who raises a single ward” (Robert Spaemann, *Rousseau – człowiek czy obywatel. Dylemat nowożytności*, trans. Jarosław Merecki, Warsaw 2011, p. 142). Rousseau clearly realized that this eliminated the possibility of his method becoming widespread.

¹²⁶⁴ Though he speaks up for dictatorships as effective in times of social crisis, citing examples from Roman times (Rousseau, *Social Contract*..., pp. 130–133).

has a government to usurp the sovereignty.”¹²⁶⁵ A large country requires a monarch figure to hold it together, one who “represents a collective being.”¹²⁶⁶ At any rate, the people, according to Rousseau, are short-sighted by nature, focusing on their particular interests. While he does claim that “[a]ll distinctions of rank fade away before the eyes of a thoughtful person; he sees the same passions, the same feelings in the noble and the guttersnipe,”¹²⁶⁷ this sort of egalitarianism is beyond the average man of the people. Only the Legislator is capable of carving out the distance that saves him, raising him above self-interest.

Rousseau ends the chapter of the *Social Contract* on democracy with these words: “If there were a nation of gods, it would be governed democratically. So perfect a government is unsuited to men.”¹²⁶⁸ The people are everything, as Sieyès would have had it, but the people are also child-like. The rule of legislation, that disembodied fiction that Rousseau appears to force, is basically impossible without the Legislator: “a superior intelligence would be necessary who could see all the passions of men without experiencing any of them.”¹²⁶⁹ The people had to be taken by the hand, as Wolmar leads his servant, and the educator Emile.¹²⁷⁰ The general will could fall silent, and then it had to be reanimated, given a voice; one had to become its voice. The people less needed a representative than a creator. Rousseau undoubtedly saw himself in this role, as Robespierre did as well. The latter believed that the Terror could be a creative tool. Rousseau stopped at recommending manipulation to educators:

Take the opposite course with your pupil; let him always think he is master while you are really master. There is no subjection so complete as that which preserves the forms of freedom; it is thus that the will itself is taken captive. Is not this poor child, without knowledge, strength, or wisdom, entirely at your mercy? [...] No doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. He should never take a step you have not foreseen, nor utter a word you could not foretell.¹²⁷¹

Here we cross into the territory of kinetic politics, which the Revolution attempted to adapt, but which was fully developed by the modern power structures to come.

¹²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 86.

¹²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

¹²⁶⁷ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 197.

¹²⁶⁸ Rousseau, *Social Contract*..., p. 71.

¹²⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

¹²⁷⁰ Cf. Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau*...

¹²⁷¹ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 89.