

Le neveu de Rameau

Diderot

July 31- August 6, 2019

I read the book while down in the US Virgin Islands around New Year 1974. It was in an English translation appearing in a black Penguin edition, which also included 'D'Alembert's Dream'. It was on the island of St-John and the sun was beating down on the sand, and the salt water seeped into you skin and nose. I recall my father-in-law-to-be politely inquiring whether the book was any good, and some curt and irritated response by me, as if there would be any point in such a question. What do I remember from that reading? In fact not much, only a disparaging remark on the triviality of the imagination. As I did not encounter this in my second reading more than forty-five years later, I conclude that this must belong to the companion story¹.

Now this story, or to be more precise, dialogue was never published during Diderot's lifetime, but was buried in his Nachlass, out of which it made some erratic appearances. A German friend of Diderot by the name of Grimm² relayed a ms of the dialogue to Goethe who made a German translation, or interpretation (one does not suspect it to be too pedantically faithful) which in its turn became the basis for a French translation. The original French ms was thought to have been lost, but was miraculously retrieved by chance in 1891 by a collector browsing through the book stall along the Seine in Paris and chancing upon some bound volumes mostly containing erotica. The ms was neatly handwritten in Diderot's hand, which is an indication that he took it rather seriously.

Now Rameau was a famous composer in his time, and his nephew actually did exist, although maybe not as quite as flamboyant a character as Diderot makes him out to be. Living in the shadow of his uncle, he was no mean musician himself, but there is a big gap between the very good, who may have some measure of genius, and those who are merely good, meaning blessed with considerable talent and thereby able to appreciate their superiors, in a way the common man is incapable of, and thereby realizing the great gulf that separates them from the real masters, a gulf the common man is thus both too ignorant to realize as well as too indifferent to care. Part of the dialogue is about music in which the French school, with Rameau at the head, is contrasted to the Italian, the latter which was getting to have more and more influence. While the French music is formal,

¹ And indeed, with modern technology one finds a pdf-file of the text in which one can make a search on *imagination* and sure enough the last references gives bingo. *D'ALEMBERT. - Vous avez raison; ce qui ne m'empêchera pas de demander au docteur s'il est bien persuadé qu'une forme qui ne ressemblerait à rien, ne s'engendrerait jamais dans l'imagination, et ne se produirait point dans le récit. BORDEU. - Je le crois. Tout le délire de cette faculté se réduit au talent de ces charlatans qui, de plusieurs animaux dépecés, en composent un bizarre qu'on n'a jamais vu en nature.*

² The baron Frederic-Melchior Grimm (1723-1807), according to many owing his literary reputation as a successful sponger (along the lines of the Nephew?) among the influential. There seems to be no connection to the brother Grimms.

the Italians speak directly to the senses, one gathers from the interchange. Diderot, in the guise of the first person refereed to 'Moi', pronounces some general ideas on what music should be, and thus, according to many critics, lays himself bare to harsh but relevant criticism as to his profound musical ignorance. Now, the dialogue is not about music but morality, in particular social morality. Rameau in spite of his talents is a sponger making his living by playing the fool and thereby able to entertain his social and financial betters. He cultivates the image of the totally irresponsible individual with an amount of cynicism that both scandalizes and shocks the 'I' of the dialogue as well as fascinates him. His problem is now that having been a bit too frank and audacious he has alienated his hosts and been turned out of their house. Diderot, standing as the 'I', advises him to make up with his hosts, to get on their good graces again, but Rameau is somewhat held back by pride.

To get ahead in life talent is of course a help, but far from sufficient, what really matters is how you get on with people, whom you know and thus how well connected you are. Being adept at say mathematics does not count for much in this world, it will not make you rich only allow you to scrape by; but if you have some little knack for music, you can always teach the children of the vain and rich, and thereby being able to live comfortably. In the end the nephew, referred to as 'Lui', champions unabashedly (or tongue in cheek?) a life ultimately based on satisfying the basic, and hence baser needs of the individual; to eat sumptuously, to fornicate (preferably with beautiful women) regularly and to evacuate your bowels, all in comfort.

The rambling discussion, and it is very much in its rambling nature the dialogue attains its charm both as to the imagination and its realism, comes to an abrupt end, as all such discussions are bound to do, as the nephew suddenly recalls an appointment at the opera. Thus, like most discussions in real life, it remains unresolved, maybe to be taken up by future readers.

The dialogue is, as noted, delightful, but one is at a loss to ascribe to it some greater philosophical debt, on the other hand one may be misled by the lightness of its tone to fully appreciate its seriousness. While my first reading was in English, my second was in French, however, helped by the very penguin edition I was initially referring too. Thus the language is sufficiently sophisticated to give the simple reader some serious trouble.

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