HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Jacques le Fataliste (1768-1780)

Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

Large terms, like Enlightenment and Romanticism, intrude everywhere onto the cultural map of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. The two terms connote different, but often intersecting, developments, the Enlightenment noteworthy in the sciences and philosophy, Romanticism, taking its debut from the beginning of the 19th century, rich in new developments in the arts and imaginative creativity. Denis Diderot, is known for many original essays, and above all for his seminal and directive work, th*e Encyclopedie* (1745-1772), which offers us a stunning compendium of intellectual knowledge and understanding available to 18th century Europeans.

In various essays Diderot expresses a world view which inherits multiple perspectives of his time. (Chief texts would include *L*e paradoxe sur le comedien, which deals with the ambiguities of the actor's mind, *Le nevue de Rameau, a wide ranging colloquial dialogue, staged in a* Parisian cafe; and *Jacques le Fataliste*, with which we deal here. In the background of all these works lies the above mentioned Encyclopedia. into and from which Diderot was continually pouring fresh sources of knowledge, which was rapidly being converted into 'knowledge.' The comparison with our own technical age is far from accidental. A long lasting Industrial revolution provided a backdrop to all the large changes in human consciousness with which we are involved here. High tech and the first combustible train engines are not that far from one another.

The point at which Diderot moves most inventively into the conception of the new man. and of his new possibilities, is best expressed in a lengthy dialogue between Jacques, his Master, a narrator, a non-descript figure called the captain, who hails from Jacques' putative army days--nothing is to be taken quite at face value here--and an odd assortment of figures drawn from differing spheres of life. Among these characters, whom Jacques and his master 'encounter,' in the course of a long, goalless journey to nowhere together, and in which they entertain one another with tales of their love affairs, transpire such unexpected developments as the complete disappearance of the main character, Jacques, the abrupt text invasion of unknown persons, and radical character transformation of figures we thought we knew. The panorama of events brought on display, here, ties in with the philosophy Jacques has recounted to his master from the start, and that represents a kind of Existentialism before the fact. (The philosophical school of Existentialism, which we associate with thinkers like Kierkegaard or, a century later, Jean Paul Sartre, has much in common with the view of man being roughly disengaged from experience by eighteenth century experience.) The existential viewpoint unfolded by Diderot, in J*acques le fataliste*, is fundamentally this, as Jacques puts it to his master. Everything that happens on earth has been scripted above, in advance of its taking place on earth. I cannot make a move without its being part of a larger pattern of reality. The constant shifting of centers of meaning dictates that the shape of reality, in which I am a constituent part, is changing. Thus so am I changing, with the reality I belong to. The implications of this world view, which coheres with the ideas Diderot often expresses in his work, goes back in cultural history to the thinking of the ancient Roman poet, Lucretius, and forward into the thought of Diderot's own time. Laurence Sterne, contemporary to Diderot, writes in *Tristram Shandy* a prototype for Jacques, full of the same kinds of querying of the nature of fiction. and the nature of selfhood. It is seminal creativity, and places Diderot in the front rank of modernity shaping writers.