

opinion they have a right notion of life. They consume it in music, gardens, wine, and delicate eating, while we are tormenting our brains with some scheme of politics, or studying some science to which we can never attain, or, if we do, cannot persuade other people to set that value upon it we do ourselves. 'Tis certain what we feel and see is properly (if any thing is properly) our own; but the good of fame, the folly of praise, are hardly purchased, and, when obtained, a poor recompence for loss of time and health. We die or grow old before we can reap the fruit of our labours. Considering what short-liv'd weak animals men are, is there any study so beneficial as the study of present pleasure? I dare not pursue this theme; perhaps I have already said too much, but I depend upon the true knowledge you have of my heart. I don't expect from you the insipid railleries I should suffer from another in answer to this letter. You know how to divide the idea of pleasure from that of vice, and they are only mingled in the heads of fools. — But I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration in saying, that I had rather be a rich *effendi* with all his ignorance, than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge. I am, sir, etc., etc.

5

DENIS DIDEROT

Encyclopedia

1751

Denis Diderot (1713–1784) began life as a relatively poor youth in the French provinces. By the 1730s, he had made his way to Paris. He gradually left the Catholicism of his youth and even briefly made a living writing risqué novels. But he had grander plans and abilities. By the 1740s, Diderot, allied with a consortium of publishers eager for profit, decided to compile an encyclopedia of philosophy and the mechanical arts. He had a model in the English Cyclopaedia; or, An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences (1728) by Ephraim Chambers, which

Denis Diderot, *The Encyclopedia: Selections*, ed. and trans. Stephen Gendzier (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 92–95.

Diderot as editor, assisted by the mathematician Jean d'Alembert, intended to redo and expand. They invented a "tree of knowledge," an elaborate chart intended to illustrate all of human knowledge. The inspiration for the chart came from the writings of Francis Bacon (see page 157). More than two hundred writers, from the famous to the obscure, were assigned articles, and more than fourteen hundred subscribers were enlisted.

In 1751, the most famous work of the French Enlightenment appeared: the first volume of Diderot's Encyclopédie, with a preface by d'Alembert. The preface proclaimed a new era, inspired by John Locke's ideas about learning and dedicated to Bacon's investigation of nature, to improvement through the practical arts, and to skepticism toward official dogmas—an era that would be thoroughly secular. In his article "Encyclopedia," reprinted here, Diderot further explained the mission, arguing that the project aimed to enlighten the entire human race.

ENCYCLOPEDIA (*Philosophy*). This word means the *interrelation of all knowledge*; it is made up of the Greek prefix *en*, in, and the nouns *kyklos*, circle, and *paideia*, instruction, science, knowledge. In truth, the aim of an *encyclopedia* is to collect all the knowledge scattered over the face of the earth, to present its general outlines and structure to the men with whom we live, and to transmit this to those who will come after us, so that the work of past centuries may be useful to the following centuries, that our children, by becoming more educated, may at the same time become more virtuous and happier, and that we may not die without having deserved well of the human race. . . .

We have seen that our *Encyclopedia* could only have been the endeavor of a philosophical century; that this age has dawned, and that fame, while raising to immortality the names of those who will perfect man's knowledge in the future, will perhaps not disdain to remember our own names. We have been heartened by the ever so consoling and agreeable idea that people may speak to one another about us, too, when we shall no longer be alive; we have been encouraged by hearing from the mouths of a few of our contemporaries a certain voluptuous murmur that suggests what may be said of us by those happy and educated men in whose interests we have sacrificed ourselves, whom we esteem and whom we love, even though they have not yet been born. We have felt within ourselves the development of those seeds of emulation which have moved us to renounce the better part of ourselves to accomplish our task, and which have

ravished away into the void the few moments of our existence of which we are genuinely proud. Indeed, man reveals himself to his contemporaries and is seen by them for what he is: a peculiar mixture of sublime attributes and shameful weaknesses. But our weaknesses follow our mortal remains into the tomb and disappear with them; the same earth covers them both, and there remains only the total result of our attributes immortalized in the monuments we raise to ourselves or in the memorials that we owe to public respect and gratitude—honors which a proper awareness of our own deserts enables us to enjoy in anticipation, an enjoyment that is as pure, as great, and as real as any other pleasure and in which there is nothing imaginary except, perhaps, the titles on which we base our pretensions. Our own claims are deposited in the pages of this work, and posterity will judge them.

I have said that it could only belong to a philosophical age to attempt an *encyclopedia*; and I have said this because such a work constantly demands more intellectual daring than is commonly found in ages of pusillanimous taste. All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings.... We must ride roughshod over all these ancient puerilities, overturn the barriers that reason never erected, give back to the arts and sciences the liberty that is so precious to them.... We have for quite some time needed a reasoning age when men would no longer seek the rules in classical authors but in nature, when men would be conscious of what is false and true about so many arbitrary treatises on aesthetics: and I take the term *treatise on aesthetics* in its most general meaning, that of a system of given rules to which it is claimed that one must conform in any genre whatsoever in order to succeed....

It would be desirable for the government to authorize people to go into the factories and shops, to see the craftsmen at their work, to question them, to draw the tools, the machines, and even the premises.

There are special circumstances when craftsmen are so secretive about their techniques that the shortest way of learning about them would be to apprentice oneself to a master or to have some trustworthy person do this. There would be few secrets that one would fail to bring to light by this method, and all these secrets would have to be divulged without any exception.

I know that this feeling is not shared by everyone. These are narrow minds, deformed souls, who are indifferent to the fate of the

human race and who are so enclosed in their little group that they see nothing beyond its special interest. These men insist on being called good citizens, and I consent to this, provided that they permit me to call them *bad men*. To listen to them talk, one would say that a successful *encyclopedia*, that a general history of the mechanical arts, should only take the form of an enormous manuscript that would be carefully locked up in the king's library, inaccessible to all other eyes but his, an official document of the state, not meant to be consulted by the people. What is the good of divulging the knowledge a nation possesses, its private transactions, its inventions, its industrial processes, its resources, its trade secrets, its enlightenment, its arts, and all its wisdom? Are not these the things to which it owes a part of its superiority over the rival nations that surround it? This is what they say; and this is what they might add: would it not be desirable if, instead of enlightening the foreigner, we could spread darkness over him or even plunge all the rest of the world into barbarism so that we could dominate more securely over everyone? These people do not realize that they occupy only a single point on our globe and that they will endure only a moment in its existence. To this point and to this moment they would sacrifice the happiness of future ages and that of the entire human race.

They know as well as anyone that the average duration of empires is not more than two thousand years and that in less time, perhaps, the name *Frenchman*, a name that will endure forever in history, will be sought after in vain over the surface of the earth. These considerations do not broaden their point of view; for it seems that the word *humanity* is for them a word without meaning. All the same, they should be consistent! For they also fulminate against the impenetrability of the Egyptian sanctuaries; they deplore the loss of the knowledge of the ancients; they accuse the writers of the past for having been silent or negligent in writing so badly on an infinite number of important subjects; and these illogical critics do not see that they demand of the writers of earlier ages something they call a crime when it is committed by a contemporary, that they are blaming others for having done what they think it honorable to do.

pope and the people more than he feared the bellicosity and imperialism of the absolutist states. He journeyed to Berlin and for a time thought that Frederick the Great would bring the Enlightenment to Germany. But in the end, he abandoned that dream, while still remaining fond of all things English.

MID-CENTURY CRISIS

In the mid-1700s, France invaded the Low Countries, arriving in Brussels in 1746 and in the southern part of the Dutch republic by 1747. The ghost of Louis XIV had returned. Britain, Austria, and Prussia were caught up in this imperialist war, known as the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), which also reverberated in the American colonies. The French king, Louis XV, had a mixed reputation for competence, and the French army fluctuated between brilliant success and dismal defeat. The king's mistress, Madame de Pompadour, was wildly unpopular, and discontent over the court's antics was palpable. In the corridor from Amsterdam to Paris, conspiracies against the king surfaced, and in Paris the prisons began to be filled with publishers, Freemasons, pornographers, critics, and would-be conspirators. By 1750, the mood within enlightened circles, particularly in France, had shifted. Wit, sarcasm, and bawdiness had given way to a search for new philosophical systems and new ways of organizing knowledge. A consensus was forming—France needed to be reformed—and as a result, Paris soon became the capital of the Enlightenment.

Voltaire had pioneered the way for philosophical commentators, and all sorts of men followed his lead. They flocked to Paris and took up with publishers hungry for a bestseller, even a clandestine one. Into this world came the impecunious sons of provincial artisans, such as Diderot, and foreigners such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau from Geneva. All had to live by their pens, and they became critics of music and art as well as of society and government.

By 1750, the Enlightenment had left its northern roots and become remarkably Parisian. Censorship had begun to lift, and after the war restlessness with the status quo replaced an earlier self-confidence. In addition, the French scientific academies, unlike the colleges run by the clergy, had taken up the new science and begun to make original contributions in Newtonian mathematics and physics. Soon their originality outstripped the more practical-minded English Newtonians.

A remarkable confluence of people and events—war without much glory, the arrogance of the French court, more liberal censors, an

excess of hungry publishers, and simply a new generation—made members of the older generation such as Voltaire seem like moderates. The new direction taken by the philosophes and writers after 1750 might best be characterized as radical. They removed God and in his place inserted the blind forces of matter in motion. On both sides of the English Channel materialism became the rage. According to this view, human beings are merely matter in motion—nothing more, nothing less. According to one British radical late in the century, the phenomena of the mind are “to be explained upon principles *purely Physical*.” This view was met with a “fury of opposition.”⁶⁸ To the philosophes and their followers, the human soul was irrelevant.

Roughly between 1747 and 1758, some of the most audacious works of the Enlightenment rolled off the presses. The first was *L'Homme machine* (Man the Machine, 1747), published in the Dutch republic. The author, Julien La Mettrie, argued that humans can be understood solely as mechanisms devoid of a soul. He had arrived at that conclusion from his reading of Descartes and his study of medicine. So radical and controversial was this view that his Dutch publisher had to disavow La Mettrie's ideas, explaining that he had published them only because of his belief in freedom of the press. Eventually, the publisher even wrote a book attacking La Mettrie, but by then the damage had been done.

Far more entertaining than La Mettrie's hefty tome was an anonymous French pornographic novel, *Thérèse philosophe* (1748), which preaches materialism while detailing erotic exploits. The title character, Thérèse, was invented by a consortium of publishers, distributors, bookbinders, and possibly one writer, the marquis d'Argens, a minor philosophe and Freemason who graced the court in Berlin, where irreligion had become fashionable. In the book, Thérèse runs away from a convent (where she experienced much pleasure) and takes up a life of fornication interspersed with philosophizing. She is a materialist, and a funny one to boot. She explains that human beings are only matter in motion and so should enjoy themselves while they can. Fortunately for the censors, the book was fairly expensive, and hence its influence was limited to the elite. Even so, the group that had sold the book was imprisoned.

The English equivalent to *Thérèse philosophe* was *Fanny Hill; or, Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749) by John Cleland. One of the

⁶⁸John Thelwall, *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement: The Fairy of the Lake . . . Effusions of Relative and Social Feeling . . .* (London: R. Phillips and Jas. Ridgeway, 1801), xxiii, describing his views in the 1790s.



Figure 11. Denis Diderot

Diderot looks very solemn here, but he was a man of great sentiment who could weep or laugh at will. His intellectual range was extraordinary: art and theater critic, novelist, letter writer, encyclopedist, satirist, and above all a social being who loved polite society.

The Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania.

most widely read novels in the English language (it has even been made into at least two Hollywood films), *Fanny Hill* contains the stuff of men's dreams: "Oh then! The fiery touch of his fingers determines me, and my fears melting away before the growing intolerable heat, my thighs disclose of themselves and yield all liberty to his hand." Fanny could live with wild abandon; she became matter in motion. Cleland may have intended to mock the new literary genre of the novel of sentiment, at the same time revealing its power. The novel seemed to loosen all literary and philosophical restraint in England.

In this explosive literary atmosphere, fame could be made by wit, not necessarily by birth. Denis Diderot (see Figure 11) may be taken as a model of the self-made man in a world that was still very much

dominated by private wealth. Born in 1713, the child of a craftsman, Diderot came from a family notable only for its many priests and nuns. At age thirteen, he thought of becoming a cleric. Possibly with that goal in mind, the precocious, Jesuit-educated youth arrived in Paris, penniless and eager to be further educated. Diderot surfaced in 1748 with a publication about Newtonian mathematics. By then, he was a husband and father, and among his many literary friends was the young Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Possibly inspired by Voltaire's *Letters concerning the English Nation*, Diderot taught himself English. Hard-pressed for money, he began to make his way as a translator. His early translation (really a paraphrase) of a work on merit and virtue by the third earl of Shaftesbury reveals the enormous impact of English thought and Whig writers on Diderot. From Shaftesbury he learned that human beings are endowed with an inherent moral sense, and when combined with the materialism that he picked up from other texts, this idea set him on a path toward atheism. Using a method of intellectual development closer to eclecticism than to systematic study, Diderot borrowed from the ancients and the moderns. Slowly, in the late 1740s, he migrated from an anticlerical deism to atheism and materialism.

Diderot believed that the soul is a superfluous hypothesis, that matter has existed for all eternity, and that it may even display the capacity for thought and feeling. He would spend much of his later intellectual energy working out the implications of these materialist positions. First, Diderot needed to make a living. Economic necessity and philosophical daring led him to try his hand at the outrageous and the profitable. His deistic and clandestinely published book, *Pensées philosophiques* (Philosophic Thoughts, 1746), contained aphorisms such as "What is God? A question which is asked of children, and which philosophers have a great deal of trouble answering (XXV)." Although the book was condemned by the Parlement of Paris, the main French judicial body, ten editions of it appeared in the eighteenth century. Diderot became emboldened, perhaps overly confident about how easy it was to hide his identity. His anonymous pornographic novel, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*—still his most reprinted and translated work—combined with other scandalous pieces resulted in his being imprisoned in July 1749.

Before 1789, France had no writ of habeas corpus, and Diderot could have stayed in jail for years. But his publishers and friends wrote on his behalf to anyone with any authority or influence. Among those who championed his cause were Voltaire, Fontenelle, Buffon,

and d'Alembert. Diderot gave up some information about the clandestine publishing world, and in the autumn he was freed. He never forgot the experience, nor did the other philosophes. Jailing people for their ideas only deepened the crisis.

Diderot's publishers set him to work as editor of one of the largest print ventures ever undertaken—an encyclopedia of all learning. The publication of his *Encyclopédie* in 1751 (see Document 5) was the turning point in the mid-century crisis. It, too, got Diderot and his publishers in trouble with the authorities, who eventually suspended its publication. But at least no one went to jail, although a few of the contributors went to Amsterdam and Berlin to wait out the storm. One turned up as the orator in the main Amsterdam Masonic lodge, and lodges became good places to sell volumes of the controversial encyclopedia.

Encyclopedias had long been the fashion, beginning with Pierre Bayle and his *Dictionnaire* in 1697. The genre sought to capture the new learning while entertaining readers with witty asides and biting criticism of Louis XIV. Bayle's work reflected this style and made clear his dislike of clergy who entertained theocratic fantasies aimed at enhancing their power. With elaborate footnotes and marginalia, encyclopedias teased the censors and amused readers. Edition after edition came out in every European language, but Diderot's was by far the most ambitious. In the end, more than two hundred contributors were enlisted to write articles on everything from the soul to the printing press.

Arranged alphabetically, Diderot's *Encyclopédie* exhibits enlightened and reformist thought. The article on enjoyment heralds the joys of human sexuality without apology. The article on the soul uses footnotes to make clear that it probably does not exist. Written by one of Diderot's friends, the abbé Yvon, who has been described as the metaphysician of the *Encyclopédie*, the article reveals that materialism lay at the heart of the encyclopedia. Diderot himself proclaimed that "it could only belong to a philosophical age to attempt an *encyclopedia*. . . . All things must be examined, debated, investigated without exception and without regard for anyone's feelings. . . . We must . . . overturn the barriers that reason never erected, give back to the arts and sciences the liberty that is so precious to them" (see Document 5). The gauntlet had been thrown down, and everything once deemed sacred was now open to criticism and debate. Of course, with the more than sixty thousand entries, it was possible to learn about everything from the art of printing to textile dyeing, and in the process to ignore the skepticism and materialism at the book's core. But that did not dampen the wrath of the authorities.

When the Paris censors closed down Diderot's enterprise, he moved part of his production to the Netherlands and the firm associated with Marc Michel Rey, who became the greatest publisher of late Enlightenment texts.⁶⁹ Gradually, despite fights with the censors, each volume appeared, making its way to Paris and abroad. The foremost historian of Diderot's great venture thinks that about twenty-five thousand copies of the multivolume encyclopedia came into circulation.⁷⁰ By today's standard, that is a trivial number. But it is important to remember that dozens of people read each copy, and the effect rippled through Europe and America. One enterprising priest in the Austrian Netherlands, the abbé of the village of Saint-Hubert, even went to Brussels to buy a copy of the encyclopedia because he had heard about its emphasis on new technology. He was eager to find new ways to extract the coal on his land. Diderot was probably of little help to him, but there, in rural Flanders, could be found a copy of the most sensational book of the century.

Farther north in Holland, Jean Rousset de Missy wrote to ask his publisher friend for some of Diderot's exported volumes: "Do you realize that if . . . the 10 enormous volumes of the *Encyclopédie* [had been allowed] it would have led rapidly to Pantheism; the wits, the blue stockings, the light ladies, the dandies, all these Italian, English and French deists and atheists would have been rid of the yoke of religion."⁷¹ That was a lot to ask of one encyclopedia, but Rousset's excitement reflects the mood at mid-century. There would be no turning back from the task of debunking the sacred. Kings, clergy, and their doctrines would be judged in the court of public opinion, no longer able to hide behind the piety of the superstitious.

ROUSSEAU

By the 1750s, Diderot and his friends had become the literary and intellectual sensation of Paris, and into this circle came the brilliant, if neurotic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (see Figure 12). Within months of his arrival, this citizen of Calvinist Geneva began to find fault with the philosophes. In Rousseau's view, they were active participants in the

⁶⁹For evidence of Rey's involvement as discovered in Dutch archives, see Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 260–62.

⁷⁰Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 299–323.

⁷¹Marchand MSS, University of Leiden; cited in Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment*, 215.