

Story for performance #989
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Writer/s: [Nola Farman](#)

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At first I assumed that Diderot was on the verge of offering me an apology. However, in his clever way, he had turned the argument upon my own head. To suggest that I had entrapped these companions of my imagination, like a ravenous spider, was unsupportable. My irritation was monumental. All the disagreements I believed I could take up with him welled up. I struggled to put together a network of words in which he would finally be ensnared. Then I could consume him; take him in. To ingest him would give me the strength to regurgitate—to finally be rid of his influence.

'Ah, m'sieur!' I began tentatively enough, 'You surprise me! Having encountered in me, one of your own characters who has not only escaped your clutches but also set out upon the road to independent authorship—gathered about her the figments of an imagination uncluttered by the constraints of publication, distribution and readership, in order to find a way in this life, are you not better informed about a world in which we are all, to some extent, blind?'

As I spoke I slowly walked around him: I kicked at the odd leaf, crunched a foot on an occasional twig. I bent down, and picked up a small stone. At moments, as if to emphasise a point, I tossed it in the air and caught it with an easy snap of the wrist.

'But you see, m'sieur, is it not true that the characters within literary works look out from the text at their own authors? Have you not from time to time experienced their anger, their disagreement, their discomfort with the world in which you have placed them? I know that such empathy is not beyond your ken. I know this because you once tried to place yourself in the shoes of a blind man. Your curiosity has led you to consider many points of view. Nevertheless, at the risk of committing a major digression, I will point out your own blindness a propos the works of Boucher, which I address with a question that I neither wish nor expect you to answer at this time: why did you not take some of Boucher's paintings to the Hermitage? Perhaps the respect due to his talent will come long after his death. Do you not think of the misery that the lack of recognition must cause him in his own lifetime? In your own words you have said 'There is a fundamental question which there is often occasion to teach: the recognition of one's own inadequacy.'

Diderot opened his mouth to speak, but relentlessly, I went on even as I tried to stop.

'You see, m'sieur, I have learned from my experience with you. Perhaps after all, I will return to the convent if only to assist the women to come to the realisation that the expression of their sexuality is not morbid as you imply. When I consider the powers of the Mother Superior, could such a hierarchy be dismantled? I say yes, certainly within the terms of the literary imagination, which knows no bounds.'

Diderot closed his mouth (and at this point, dear listener, you may put some coffee into yours as well as a morsel of that delicious gâteau from the Black Forest).

'You say that I have trapped my characters in a web of my making. To a certain extent you are correct but I must ask you, does a writer construct these characters? Or do the characters construct the author? In other words, as both author and literary character, do you and I really exist? Do our senses through which we feel ourselves to be alive contradict each other—misinform us? Perhaps it would take your blind man to know the difference.'

I noticed that Diderot's mouth was open once again. I also saw that in my circling of him, I had worn a deep track.

Before he could speak, I said, 'It is we who are trapped, M'sieur Diderot, not our characters. Have I not proved to you that they each have a life of their own beyond and yet, paradoxically, within the covers of the book? At least give them the chance to take the choices that are their due! Please understand that I am grateful that you placed me outside the walls of the convent—as the king would say, you gave me a sporting chance. Now let me turn to my own characters—Pascal, Enrique, Hervé and Reynard—who have both performed and informed me of their deep satisfaction with their way of life.'

To give him credit, and unsurprisingly, I could see that Diderot took my meaning.

'My dear scribe', he said, 'I can see that I am caught in your net. As a result, strange as it may seem we can be free of each other. While you have been speaking, I have observed your people as they wake up and go into the day. See over there, that Hervé and Reynard have caught one of the Marqueyssac goats. You will have fresh warm milk for your breakfast! By the fire Pascal has brewed a steaming pot of coffee thanks to Tobias Smollett! Enrique is returning with a generous supply of eggs, I'm sure from the stables of the inn at La Roque Gageac. No doubt the ostler there is sporting an uncomfortable lump on the back of his head!'

I cried out, 'Diderot! Diderot! Stop my friend! You are taking over my characters before I have finished with them! I do not wish to have to start again by giving them a new plot and new names! I am attached to them as...'

Diderot had caught my eye and was smiling with a knowing good nature.

'There, my friend, you see how it goes!, 'Our blind man points with such exactness at the place a noise comes from'...but speak up, I do not wish to have the last word.'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nola Farman.