DIDEROT'S THOUGHTS ON ART AND STYLE

WITH SOME OF HIS SHORTER ESSAYS, SELECTED AND TRANSLATED

BY

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"Praemia, delicias quoque vitœ funditus omnes
Carmina picturas, et daedala signa polire,
Usus et impigres simul experientia mentis
Paulatim docuit pedetemtim progresidentis
Sic unumquicquid paulatim prostrabit setas
In medium ratioque in luminis erigit oras."

—LUcretius.

"All the prizes, all the elegancies, too, of life, without exception, poems, pictures, and the chiselling fine-wrought statues, all these things practice, together with the acquired knowledge of the untiring mind, taught men by slow degrees as they advanced on the way step by step. Thus time by degrees brings each several thing forth before men's eyes, and reason raises them up into the borders of light."—Ty. H. Munro.

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A LETTER ABOUT THE BLIND, FOR THE USE OF THOSE WHO CAN SEE.

Possunt, nec posse videntur.*
(Virg. "Æneid," v., 231.)

London, 1749.
It was the same day that the Prussian (Helmer) operated on Simoneau's daughter for cataract that we went to question the blind man from Puisaud. He is intelligent and has made a good many acquaintances; he knows a little chemistry and has followed with some profit the lectures on botany at the Jardin du Roi. His father was a distinguished professor of philosophy at the

* The original is "Possunt quia posse videntur." ("They succeed because they think they will succeed.") Diderot has adapted this to a new version which may be paraphrased: "They succeed though they do not see that they succeed."—TRANSLATOR'S NOTE.
University of Paris. The son was left a competence, which would have been sufficient to enable him to live comfortably and enjoy such pleasures as his loss of sight would allow him, but the love of pleasure led him astray when he was young; he got first into bad company, and then into difficulties. At last he retired to a small provincial town, from whence he pays a yearly visit to Paris, bringing with him liqueurs which he distils himself and which are much liked.

We reached our blind friend's house about five o'clock in the evening and found him teaching his son by means of raised letters. He had only been up an hour, for I must tell you that his day begins when ours is ending. His habit is to look after his household affairs and to work while others rest. At midnight he can move about freely, without annoying anyone, and his first care is to put by everything which has been used during the day, so that when his wife wakes up she usually finds the house set in order. The difficulty which the blind have in finding anything which is out of its place makes them love order, and I have perceived that those who live with them share that quality, whether it be from the force of good example or from a feeling of compassion for them; for how miserable the blind would be if they were not surrounded by little attentions, when even we who are not blind would be much to be pitied if we had to
forego them. Great services are like large gold or silver coins which we rarely use, but little attentions are the small change which passes continually from hand to hand.

Our blind man can form a correct judgment of symmetry. Symmetry, which is perhaps somewhat a matter of pure convention with us, is certainly so in many ways between the blind man and us who see. By force of constant study, through touch of disposition of the parts forming a whole, which we call beautiful, a blind man learns to apply that term rightly. But when he says, "That is beautiful," he does not judge, he merely declares the judgment formed by those who see. And is not this what three-fourths of the audience of a play do when they have heard it, or the readers of a book do when they have read it? Beauty is merely a name to the blind man, when it is apart from utility. And, with one sense less, how many things there are of which he does not even know the use! Are not the blind much to be pitied for having their idea of beauty limited by what is useful? How much they lose! The only advantage they gain from that loss is that their ideas of what is beautiful, though less manifold, are more definite than those of clear-sighted philosophers who have written a great deal on this subject.

This blind man mentions a looking-glass continually, but, of course, he does not know
what the word really means, and yet he never puts a looking-glass the wrong way. He talks so well and sensibly of many things which are absolutely unknown to him that intercourse with him would considerably lessen the force of induction, which we all unconsciously make from what passes in our minds to what passes in the minds of others.

I asked him what he understood by a mirror.

"It is an instrument," he answered, "which sets things in relief at a distance from themselves, if they are suitably placed in reference to it."

If Descartes had been born blind I think he would have approved of this definition. For consider, pray, the nicety with which he has combined certain ideas to obtain it.

Our blind man only knows objects by touch. From what others have told him he is aware that they know objects by sight, as he does by touch; he also has been told that one cannot see one's own face, although one can touch it. He, therefore, concludes that sight is a sort of touch which extends to distant objects, and is not applied to our face.

Besides, touch only gives him the idea of a raised surface. A looking-glass, therefore, he adds, is an instrument which presents us in relief outside ourselves. How many famous philosophers, with less subtlety, have reached
conclusions equally false! But if a mirror astonished our blind man, how much greater must have been his surprise when we told him that there are some instruments which enlarge objects, while others, without doubling them, bring them nearer or further, and reveal their smallest parts to the eyes of naturalists, while others again multiply them, and others change their shape altogether. He asked us a hundred different questions on these phenomena. For instance, he asked us if only naturalists could see with a microscope, and if only astronomers could see with a telescope; if the instrument which magnifies objects is bigger than that which diminishes them; if that which brings them near is shorter than that which sends them farther off. But what puzzled him most was that our other self, which according to his idea a mirror produces in relief, can escape the sense of touch.

"Here," said he, "are two senses which are brought to contradict each other by a little instrument; a more perfect instrument would perhaps reconcile these contradictions and yet not make the objects more real; perhaps a third instrument, more perfect and less deceptive, would make these contradictions disappear and show us our mistake."

"And how would you describe the eye?" asked M. de ——

"It is," answered the blind man, "an
organ on which the air strikes, as this stick does on my hand." This answer surprised us exceedingly, and whilst we looked wonderingly at each other, he went on: "This is true, that if I place my hand between your eyes and an object, my hand is present to you and the object is absent. The same thing happens when I search for something with my stick, and come across something else."

He has a surprising memory for sounds, and can distinguish as many differences in voices as we can in faces; he can perceive an infinite variety of tones which escape us because we have not the same necessity for observing them as the blind man has. The aid which our senses mutually afford each other prevents our bringing any one of them to perfection. Our blind man told us with reference to this that he would have been tempted to regard us as superior beings in intelligence, and himself much to be pitied if he had not found that we were less gifted in other ways than he was. This remark suggested another to us. If this blind man, we said, thinks himself to be at least as gifted as we who see, may not an animal if it reasons, which we can hardly doubt it does, hold the same opinion with regard to men, when it weighs its own evident advantages over man, and is hardly aware of those which man possesses over the animal.

"He has arms," the gnat may say, "but I
have wings." "He has weapons, indeed," says the lion, "but we have claws." The elephant will look upon us as insects, and all the animals, seeing that we have reason, yet lack instinct, will think that their instinct is superior to our reason.

One of us asked the blind man if he wished very much to be able to see.

"I think," he said, "that, if curiosity did not impel me to choose sight, I would just as soon have long arms. It seems to me that my hands would tell me more of what is going on in the moon than your eyes or your telescopes; and, besides, the eyes fail sooner to see than the hands to touch. It would, therefore, do just as well to improve the sense I already possess rather than to grant me the one I lack."

Our blind man knows so exactly the direction from which any sound or voice comes that I am convinced that the blind might be skilful and dangerous marksmen. I will give you an instance which will show you how unwise it would be to await a stone thrown by a blind man, or to be within pistol shot if he were accustomed to the use of that weapon. This blind man quarrelled when he was young with one of his brothers, who got the worst of it, for, annoyed by his disagreeable remarks, the blind man took up the first missile he could find, and, throwing it at him, struck him in the middle of the forehead and knocked him down.
This affair and some others brought him before the magistrate. Those outward signs of authority which affect us so much produce no impression on the blind, and our friend stood in the presence of the magistrate as if before an equal. Threats had no effect upon him.

"What will you do to me?" he asked of M. Hérault.

"I will put you in an underground prison," answered the magistrate.

"Ah! sir," said the blind man, "I have been in one for 25 years."

What an answer, madame! And what a text to preach on for a man as fond of moralizing as I am. We pass out of life as if leaving an enchanting scene, but the blind as passing out of prison; if we have greater pleasure in life, you must allow that he feels less regret at dying.

The blind man of Puisaud judges of his nearness to the fire by the heat, and of a vessel being full by the noise made when pouring in a liquid; and he judges of his nearness to objects by the action of the air on his face. He is so sensitive to the least changes in the currents of air that he can distinguish between a street and a closed alley. He is an excellent judge of the weight of objects and the capacity of vessels, and can measure with his fingers as with a pair of compasses, so that in that respect I would
take his measurements rather than those of twenty people with eyes. He is also as sensitive to the smoothness of surfaces as to the tones of voices, and he can even make little things with a turning lathe and use a needle. He can also take to pieces and put together again any ordinary machine, and knows enough of music to play a piece of which he has been taught the notes and time. By the succession of actions and thoughts he can calculate the duration of time with greater accuracy than we can.

He married in order to have the advantage of possessing a pair of eyes. When we expressed our surprise at his facility in doing so many things, he said—

"You are not blind, gentlemen, I know by what you say, and you are surprised at what I am able to do; but why are you not also astonished that I can speak?"

I think there is more philosophy in his answer than the utterer knew himself; for it is somewhat strange that we learn to speak so easily. We have a number of ideas which cannot be represented by outward forms, and which have, so to say, no body, and we are obliged to find terms for them by making use of a number of delicate analogies which we see between these terms and the ideas which they suggest. A man born blind must therefore find it difficult to learn to speak, because there are a much greater number of objects
which do not appeal to his senses, and he has thus a smaller number of sensible objects to compare and combine in order to represent his ideas. For instance, how can he rightly use the word *expression* (with reference to the countenance)? It is a kind of charm which is produced by means which do not appeal to a blind man; and we ourselves, who see, often find it hard to explain where it resides; if it is in the eyes, then touch is of no avail in conveying it; and what does a blind man know of dull eyes, or sparkling or speaking eyes?

As I have never doubted that the state of our organs and our senses exercises a great influence on our metaphysics and morals, and that even those ideas which seem purely intellectual, so to say, are very dependent on the conformation of our bodies, I began to question our blind man about vices and virtues. The first thing that I remarked was that he had an immense aversion to theft, and this came from two reasons—firstly, because it was easy to steal from him without his perceiving it; and, secondly, because it was easy to find out when he stole. Yet he knows very well how to take precautions for himself against us who can see, nor is he ignorant of the ways of concealing a theft.

I suspect that blind people, as they can only be affected by the sound, and not by the sight of misery, will be more inhuman than
others, for water and blood, when poured on the ground, sound alike in his ear. And are we not ourselves less moved by compassion when the object is distant, and does not the small size of the object have the same effect on us as want of sight on the blind? So much do our virtues depend on our sensations and the extent to which outward objects affect us! In fact, I hardly doubt that many people, if it were not for the fear of punishment, would as little scruple to kill a man, when he was so far off as to be no bigger than a swallow, as they would to slaughter an ox. If we pity a horse in pain, and yet crush an ant without scruple, are we not acting on this principle? Ah, madam! how different the morality of the blind is to ours; and that of a deaf man would again differ from that of the blind; and if some being had one more sense than ours would he not find our morality defective, to say the least of it?

If a man who had only been able to see for a day or two found himself in the midst of a blind nation, he would either have to hold his peace or be considered a fool. Every day he would tell them of some new wonder, which would only be a wonder to them, and which their great thinkers would refuse to believe. Might not the defenders of religion find a useful argument from the fact that this obstinate unbelief, which yet was so natural in some respects, had so little basis? If you
will for a moment imagine such a state of things, it will remind you by analogy of the persecutions undergone by those who had the misfortune to discover truth in the dark ages, and were imprudent enough to reveal it to their blind contemporaries, and found their bitterest enemies were those who, from their circumstances and education, would have seemed most likely to receive it willingly.

But I will now leave the morals and metaphysics of the blind, and pass on to less important matters which yet have lately been the chief subjects of observation with regard to the blind since the arrival of the Prussian oculist. And first, what idea does a born blind form of the shapes of objects? By the movements of his own body, and by stretching his hand in various directions, and passing his fingers continuously over an object he obtains an idea of space. If he slips his fingers along a tightly-stretched string he gets the idea of a straight line; if the string is lax he gets the idea of a curve. He can remember touching successive points and can then combine the memory of these points into a shape. His mind does not work as ours does; we combine coloured points, at least that is the way in which I imagine a shape, and I suppose that others do so in like manner; that is, I imagine a background of one colour and points of another colour standing out from that background. But the blind
man can only remember touching certain points and combine by force of memory. I believe that we who see never imagine any shape without colouring it, and that if we are given little balls in the dark we immediately think of them as white or black, or some colour or other, for if we did not we should be in the case of the blind, who only remember the sensations excited at the ends of their fingers by the touch of the balls. Our memory of sensations of touch is feeble from want of exercise as compared to that of the blind; yet if we press the forefinger and thumb together we are distinctly conscious of the pressure long after it has ceased. While it lasted our mind seemed more at the end of our fingers than in our brain, and if ever a philosopher born blind and dumb should construct a man after the fashion of Descartes, he will certainly put the seat of his mind at the ends of his fingers, for thence come the greater part of his sensations and knowledge.

But if a blind man’s imagination consists in remembering and combining surfaces which he has touched, and that of a man with eyes consists of the faculty of remembering coloured and visible surfaces, it follows that a blind man’s ideas are more abstract than ours, and that in purely speculative matters he will be less likely to be deceived; for abstraction consists in separating in thought the qualities of a body either one from another, or from the body itself, which is their foundation; and
the error arises when this separation is done in a wrong way, or at a wrong time; in a wrong way in metaphysical questions, and at a wrong time in applied mathematics. There is perhaps one sure method of falling into error in metaphysics, and that is not sufficiently to simplify the subject one is treating; while an infallible way of reaching wrong results in applied mathematics is to suppose the objects simpler than they really are. There is one kind of abstraction of which so few people are capable that it seems reserved for purely intellectual beings; it is that by which everything would be reduced to numerical units. We must allow that the results of such a geometry would be very exact, and its formulas very comprehensive. But units, pure and simple, are symbols too vague and general for us. Our senses bring us back to symbols more suitable to our comprehension and to the conformation of our organs. Indeed, we have arranged so that these symbols may be common to us, and serve, as it were, for a depository for the exchange of our ideas. The alphabet appeals to our eyes, articulate sounds to our ears, but we have no language for the sense of touch,* although there is a way in which we might appeal to it and obtain answers from it. For want of this language we have absolutely no means of communicating with those who are born blind, deaf, and

* The finger alphabet was not then invented.—Translator's Note.
dumb;* they grow, but remain in a state of imbecility. Perhaps they would have ideas if we could communicate with them from infancy in some uniform way; for instance, if we were to trace on the hand the same letters that we do on paper and associated always the same meaning to them, and if the usual letters are too slow to use for the sense of touch, other signs might be arranged with a grammar and dictionary.

There are three gates by which knowledge can enter our minds, and we keep one barred for want of signs. If the other two had been neglected we should now be reduced to the condition of animals. And just as a squeeze is the only sign we have to the touch, so a scream would have been the only sign to the hearing. It is when we have lost one sense that we appreciate the advantages of the symbols given to the others; and those unfortunate people who chance to be blind, deaf, and dumb would be delighted if there were a clear and precise language for the sense of touch.

It is much easier to use signs already invented than to invent them for oneself, as one is forced to do when there are none ready to hand. What an advantage it would have been to Saunderson if he had found an arithmetic arranged with signs for the touch when

* The case of Laura Bridgeman in this century shows what has since been done by means of the finger alphabet.
—Translator's Note.
he was five years old instead of having to invent one for himself at the age of twenty-five. This Saunderson, madame, is another blind man whom you will be interested to hear of.

He used the same instrument for algebrail calculations as for the description of rectilineal figures. He divided one large square into four smaller squares; at each point where two lines met was a hole for a large pin, and in the centre where four lines met was also a hole where a pin with either a small or a large head could be put. In this way he had nine holes, which represented respectively the nine numbers; a large-headed pin in the centre signified zero, a small-headed pin in the centre 1; a large-headed pin in the centre and a small one in the hole immediately above it 2; if the small one were placed in the right-hand corner, the large one being in the centre, it would 3, if in right-hand middle hole 4; right-hand lower hole 5; middle lower hole 6; left-hand lower 7; left-hand middle 8; left-hand upper 9. Here are ten different symbols for the touch, and now imagine a tablet with horizontal rows of such squares; such was the instrument used by Saunderson for his calculations. He used the same tablet for demonstrating the properties of rectilinear figures, arranging the pins so as to form the required figures. His fingers passed over the tablets with astonishing rapidity, and he was thus able to make elaborate calculations. Sometimes he
stretched silk threads instead of using pins to complete his rectilinear figures. He left some other instruments which facilitated his geometrical studies, but it is not known how he employed them. Some geometer might try to find out the function of four solid pieces, of wood, in the shape of rectangular parallelopipeds, of which each was eleven inches long by five and a half inches wide, and rather more than half-an-inch thick; the two larger opposite surfaces were divided into little squares similar to the tablet I have described, but they were only pierced with holes in certain places, and the pins driven into the head. Each surface had nine little tablets each with ten numbers, and these are the numbers in one of the tablets:—

\[
\begin{align*}
9 & 4 & 0 & 8 & 4 \\
2 & 4 & 1 & 8 & 6 \\
4 & 1 & 7 & 9 & 2 \\
5 & 4 & 2 & 8 & 4 \\
6 & 3 & 9 & 6 & 8 \\
7 & 1 & 8 & 8 & 0 \\
7 & 8 & 5 & 6 & 8 \\
8 & 4 & 3 & 5 & 8 \\
8 & 9 & 4 & 6 & 4 \\
9 & 4 & 0 & 3 & 0
\end{align*}
\]

He is the author of an excellent work of its kind, "The Elements of Algebra," where the only signs of its author's blindness are the peculiarity of certain demonstrations, which a man who could see would probably not
have thought of. It is to him that we owe the division of the cube into six equal pyramids, whose apex is at the centre of the cube, and the base of each is one of the faces. It is used as a simple proof that every pyramid is the third part of a prism of the same height and base. His taste for mathematics, his small means, and the advice of his friends determined him to give public lectures on mathematics. His great facility for clear demonstration encouraged his friends to believe that he would be a successful teacher, for he taught his pupils as if they could not see, and a blind man who can argue clearly to the blind must be doubly clear to those who have eyes to see. His biographers say that he often used happy expressions. I can believe it; but you will ask, "What do you mean by a happy expression?" I answer, madam, it is using terms which belong to one sense, for example, touch, and which are metaphorical to another sense, say the sight; from hence results a double light on the subject to the hearer, the direct light of the natural use of the term and the reflected light of the metaphor.* It is

* "The process of metaphor comprises two periods, the one in which metaphor is still visible and in which the name, while designating the second object, calls up the image of the first. . . . It keeps the mind on the alert, by causing it to seize, in a rapid comparison, different relations between the object of its thought and the object to which it is compared."—A. DARMESTETER (Translator's Note).
evident that in these cases Saunderson, with all his genius, was not aware of the full meaning of the terms he employed. But does not this happen to any of us at times? It may happen to idiots, who now and then make excellent jokes, and to clever people who say a foolish thing, yet neither the fools nor the wise are aware of what they have said.*

I have remarked that a want of words in a foreign language has produced the same result in strangers who are not yet familiar with the language; they are obliged to say what they want to say in very few words, and this obliges them to use some terms in a very happy manner. But as all languages are poor in words suited to writers with lively imaginations, they are in the same situation as clever foreigners; the variety of situations which they invent, the delicate shades of character which they perceive, the naïveté of the pictures which they wish to draw, all these things draw them out of the usual groove in speaking, and oblige them to use terms of speech which are to be admired

* This reminds me of a schoolmaster and a stupid boy whom he had to flog occasionally. One day the master found the boy fishing, and asked why he preferred that to more athletic games. "Don't you know," he said to the boy, "what they say of fishing, that it is a rod with a fool at one end and a worm at the other?" "And pray, sir," said the boy, "when you give me the rod which is the worm?"—Translator's Note.
Diderot's Thoughts on Art and Style. 265

when they are neither pedantic nor obscure, faults which are more or less easily forgiven, according to the reader's powers of mind and knowledge of language. This it why M. de Marivaux is the French author who most pleases the English, and Tacitus the Latin author whom thinkers most admire. The eccentricities of language escape the modern reader, and he is only conscious of the veracity of style.

Saunderson was a most successful professor of mathematics at Cambridge. He gave lessons in optics, and lectured on the nature of light and colours, and explained the theory of vision; he wrote on the properties of lenses, and on the phenomena of the rainbow, and on several other subjects connected with sight and its organ.