



CHRISTIE V. McDONALD

The Dialogue of Writing  
Essays in Eighteenth-Century  
French Literature

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CHRISTIE V. McDONALD

## The Dialogue of Writing Essays in Eighteenth-Century French Literature

To the extent that writing has long been considered a substitute for "living" conversation, dialogue has been a quintessential metaphor for language as communication. This volume closely analyzes dialogue, both as a literary genre and as a critical principle underlying the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Diderot. In her analysis, the author examines relationships between texts and writers, between texts and readers, and between texts and other texts (intertextuality). Drawing extensively upon deconstructionist critical sources, as well as upon sociological and anthropological explorations of reading and writing, this volume provides valuable insight into the wonderfully complex acts of writing and reading, the "dialogue of writing."

Of interest to students of eighteenth-century French literature, this work is also important to those interested in contemporary literary criticism, its theory and practice, as well as to students of Barthes, Derrida, and Benveniste. The volume also presents fascinating applications of the thought of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

*Christie McDonald teaches in Etudes françaises at Université de Montréal.*

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THE DIALOGUE OF WRITING  
ESSAYS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY  
FRENCH LITERATURE

*To my father and my mother  
John and Dorothy Eisner McDonald*

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## Preface

Dialogue "inhabits" us daily, as much in our conversations as in our readings, and yet we may still question the nature of this so apparently familiar activity. Although in common usage dialogue may indicate a talk between two people, as it may refer in the limited sense to a literary technique, or even to an entire work in which interlocutors speak in alternation, there occurs within the tradition of the dialogue form a much broader investigation and critique of the manner in which dialogue founds, or confounds, objective truth as the basis for social communication. To the extent that writing has long been considered a substitute for "living" dialogue within the tradition of Western culture, dialogue furnished a quintessential metaphor for language in its communicative function. Within this tradition, dialogue presupposed two subjects anterior to the discursive encounter, and the status of the speaking subject thus depended upon an aesthetics of representation in which writing always pointed to a truth that was beyond it. Written dialogue was, in short, another name for conversation.

Because problems of language cannot be separated from their articulation in a social context, the traditional view of dialogue carried with it the utopian dream of a society present to itself, closer to some pure origin, in which all men would communicate in the blissful transparency of their being. As Claude Lévi-Strauss has put it: "Man is inseparable from language and language implicates society." The dialogue that runs through the chapters of this book will refer intermit-



tently to conceptions of society and to the ideologies that support these conceptions. Because the texts with which I deal were so designed as to foil any single "right" or "proper" reading, discussion of the relationship between literature and ideology has been subsumed into the larger question of meaning and interpretation within the texts. That is, because these texts displace the hermeneutic process of reading as the completion of writing through understanding, no explicit or thematic ideological statement can emerge from them. The overall premise here is that an ideological reading does not, in any case, take a text and merely juxtapose it, in its ideological content, to external historical facts. In its complex relationship to both a literary tradition as well as to its contextual surroundings, the text carries on and reproduces in its own particular way the very ideology out of which it grows.

In the texts that I have selected, the use of the dialogue form channels the tradition of writing within Western culture in a complex fashion. As a genre hybrid of literature and philosophy, dialogue manifests a conflict that is internal to it: it is both a dialectical method whose goal is the revelation of truth, and, at the same time, the performance of the method in writing. Dialogue dramatizes how an interlocutor speaks about something in language and simultaneously reflects, whether implicitly or explicitly, upon the act of communication in language. It dramatizes thereby, and this is what is for me most crucial, how, in the exchange that all writing presupposes, the text conveys a conceptual message while playing upon its own self-referentiality. The uses of the term dialogue (along with its corollary, utopia) vary from the restricted to the broader sense according to the dictates of the text under scrutiny. While such a shifting definition may prove disconcerting, it reflects, I believe, the way in which (at least for these texts) larger critical and philosophical issues are filtered through local questions.

Part One was written in stages over a period of time, as were the other parts. It emerges out of the dilemma of how to read "now" what was written "then"; and this, we know, is a problem limited neither to a given historical period nor to a specific school of criticism. My own concern with the questions of writing and the "text" has been caught in the relationship between North American criticism and critical theory as it has developed over the last twenty years in Europe. Specifically regarding the "text" and its theorization, at least three facts were decisive in the European context: first, the impact of the Russian formalist school and, to a lesser extent, New Criticism during the 1960s; then, the breakdown of barriers among the disciplines of the social sciences; finally, the theoretical and practical elaboration of writing (*l'écriture*) and the text in the work of Roland Barthes and, especially, Jacques Derrida. What was to mark the specificity of the text was a relationship to the sign (upon which it depended for its definition and

validation) and to the system of signs, and this meant ultimately that textual analysis would only become a science to the extent that it called into question its own discourse. Thus, writing does not have communication as its primary function; it is that space in which the subject explores how he is at once structured and dismantled at the moment that he enters into the system of language. Because the text cannot be totally circumscribed by its theoretical discourse, it cannot become the model transcendent to the description or interpretation of every text; each text is, to some extent, its own model.

Part One deals then with the way in which dialogue leads into broad theories of language and writing that disallow the establishment of a totalizing theory. My contention is that, although some (though by no means all) of the more recent theories have broken with the traditional view that dialogue represents conversation, the assumption that dialogue in the Enlightenment was rational discourse directed at rationality remains largely unchallenged. The following analyses question this assumption by showing that not only were Rousseau and Diderot highly skilled strategists in the art of dialectical argumentation, but so sly were they in their use of this hybrid genre that they established—each in a different manner—new criteria for interpreting texts. Theirs was a coded art, one that took dialogue, and the model of reading dependent upon it, out of the interpersonal realm traditionally associated with dialogue (whether between interlocutors or between a narrator and his presumed reader) and brought it into the complex relationship that one text entertains with another.

Parts Two and Three are devoted to readings of texts by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot, with some closing remarks on E. T. A. Hoffmann's "reading" of Diderot. None of these readings should be mistaken for a simple illustration of the theoretical problems raised in Part One, because each contests the ability of language to remain metacritical and does so through the fictions of the dialogue. The chapters in these parts remain discrete analyses, though they incessantly return to the same questions. All of the analyses confront problems of truth and methods of reaching it. All of them ask epistemological questions through dialogue, whether considered in its broad or more limited sense. All question the status of literature as fiction and deal, in one way or another, with the problem of interpretation as it emerges through dialogue in the act of reading and writing.

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*Christie V. McDonald*

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## Author's Note

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PART ONE

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Setting the Stage—Afterwards



# Dialogue

Almost all definitions of the word "dialogue" begin with a given: the verbal relationship between two or more interlocutors. Here it will be necessary to start with this minimal definition and constantly to return to it throughout the following chapters because dialogue, in the limited sense of the term, remains an important form of verbal interaction.

It is with respect to the status of the subject in language that two modes of dialogue may initially be introduced: one in which language functions as communication and is the mediating vehicle for meaning and truth; the other in which language cannot "simply communicate," in which a disruption or dispersion takes place that prevents any totalizing process of meaning.

Regarding the first mode, Emile Benveniste sums up a tradition in which language, in its communicative function, is fundamentally allocutionary, that is, fundamentally dialogue. Benveniste starts with the premise that language is an *instrument of communication* and then asks, "To what does it owe this property?" His response is that it is the condition of dialogue which establishes the subject in language: "It is this condition of dialogue which constitutes the person."<sup>1</sup> And dialogue emerges from the reciprocity between the pronouns "I" and "thou." "I" designates the person who is speaking, and no other, at the moment when he/she is speaking, and "thou," as the second person singular, is

1 Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 260. All translations from Benveniste's work are my own.



simultaneously designated in that utterance. Then, "I" becomes "thou" in the speech of the one who was "thou" and is now "I." For Benveniste, it is the pronominal axis between "I" and "thou," as personal forms, which determines them mutually and contrasts with the "absence of person" in the third person singular: "... the third person singular is not a person; it is even the verbal form whose function is to express the *non-person*."<sup>2</sup> The crucial difference between the deictic forms "I" and "thou," as opposed to the third person singular, "he" or "she," is that each time they are uttered the subject to which they refer is unique, whereas the third person singular can refer to an infinity of subjects. Whence the paradox of a subject who expresses his uniqueness through a sign which is common to us all: "I."

What makes Benveniste's analysis so useful is the apparently restrictive linguistic definition that he has given to the concept of subjectivity. "The subjectivity that we are dealing with here is the ability of the speaker to establish himself as the 'subject'..." We maintain that this 'subjectivity'... is merely the emergence within the human being of a fundamental property of language. He who says 'ego' is 'ego.' Here we find the basis of subjectivity which is determined by the linguistic status of the 'person.'<sup>3</sup> Subjectivity is, then, the appropriation of language by the speaking subject, and the reality to which it refers is (and can only be) the reality of discourse itself; Benveniste's analysis remains limited, moreover, to oral discourse.

If subjectivity, as Benveniste defines it, is the basis of all discourse, it is intersubjectivity—the relationship of one interlocutor to another—which renders possible linguistic communication: "Language is for man a means, the only means in fact, to reach another man, to transmit a message to him and to receive one from him. Consequently, language poses and presupposes the other."<sup>4</sup> This is the statement that leads Benveniste to the transition between individual and social discourse: "Society is given immediately with language. In its turn, society only holds together through the common usage of signs of communication."<sup>5</sup> When carried to its logical limit such a linkage suggests a rigorous continuity between the premises which underly the individual speech act and those which subtend the larger political structure.

Although Benveniste defines subjectivity at the level of linguistic structure and thereby presumably does not deal with the notion of a subject which lies behind or beyond language, he nevertheless remains firmly within a metaphysical tradition which, since Descartes, presup-

2 Ibid., 1:228.

3 Ibid., 1:260.

4 Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 91.

5 Ibid.