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DIDEROT  
AND  
THE ENCYCLOPÆDISTS. .



BY  
*Morley, viscount*  
JOHN MORLEY.

*NEW EDITION.*

NEW YORK:  
SCRIBNER AND WELFORD.

1878.

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CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,  
CRYSTAL PALACE PRESS.

## PREFACE.

THE present work closes a series of studies on the literary preparation for the French Revolution. It differs from the companion volumes on Voltaire and Rousseau, in being much more fully descriptive. In the case of those two famous writers, every educated reader knows more or less of their performances. Of Diderot and his circle, such knowledge cannot be taken for granted, and I have therefore thought it best to occupy a considerable space, which I hope that those who do me the honour to read these pages will not find excessive, with what is little more than transcript or analysis. Such a method will at least enable the reader to see what those ideas really were, which the social and economic condition of France on the eve of the convulsion made so welcome to men. The shortcomings of the encyclopædic group are obvious enough. They have lately been emphasized in the ingenious and one-sided exaggerations of that brilliant man of letters, Mr. Taine. The social significance and the positive quality of much of their writing is more easily missed, and this side of their work it has been one of my principal objects, alike in the case of Voltaire, of Rousseau, and of Diderot, to bring into the prominence that it deserves in the history of opinion.

The edition of Diderot's Works to which the references are made, is that in twenty volumes by the late Mr. Assézat and Mr. Maurice Tourneux. The only other serious book on Diderot with which I am acquainted is Rosenkranz's valuable *Diderot's Leben*, published in 1866, and abounding in full and patient knowledge. Of the numerous criticisms on Diderot by Raumer, Arndt, Hettner, Damiron, Bersot, and above all by Mr. Carlyle, I need not make more particular mention.

May, 1878.

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#### NOTE TO THE NEW EDITION.

Since the following pages were printed, an American correspondent writes to me with reference to the dialogue between Franklin and Raynal, mentioned on page 382:—"I have now before me Volume IV. of the *American Law Journal*, printed at Philadelphia in the year 1813, and at page 458 find in full, 'The Speech of Miss Polly Baker, delivered before a court of judicature in *Connecticut*, where she was prosecuted.'" Raynal, therefore, would have been right if instead of Massachusetts he had said Connecticut, and either Franklin told an untruth, or else Silas Deane.

September, 1878.

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ERRATUM.

On p. 23<sup>2</sup> the date of Mdlle. Voland's death is given as 1774. It ought probably to be 1784 or 1783.

# DIDEROT.

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## CHAPTER I.

### PRELIMINARY.

THERE was a moment in the last <sup>18<sup>th</sup></sup> century when the Gallican church hoped for a return of internal union and prosperity. This brief era of hope coincided almost exactly with the middle of the century. Voltaire was in exile at Berlin. The author of the Persian Letters and the Spirit of Laws was old and near his end. Rousseau was copying music in a garret. The author of <sup>Montesquieu</sup> the Encyclopædia was looked for, but only as a literary project of some associated booksellers. The Jansenists, who had been so many in number and so firm in spirit five-and-twenty years earlier, had now sunk to a small minority of the French clergy. The great ecclesiastical body at length offered an unbroken front to its rivals, the great judicial bodies. A patriotic minister was indeed audacious enough to propose a tax upon ecclesiastical property, but the Church fought the battle and won. Troops had just been despatched to hunt and scatter the Protestants of the desert, and bigots exulted in the thought of pastors swinging on gibbets, and heretical congregations fleeing for their lives before the fire of orthodox musketry. The house of Austria had been forced to suffer spoliation at the hands of the infidel Frederick, but all the world was well aware that the haughty and devout Empress-



Queen would seize a speedy opportunity of taking a crushing vengeance ; France would this time be on the side of righteousness and truth. For the moment a churchman might be pardoned if he thought that superstition, ignorance, abusive privilege, and cruelty were on the eve of the smoothest and most triumphant days that they had known since the Reformation.

We now know how illusory this sanguine anticipation was destined to prove, and how promptly. In little more than forty years after the triumphant enforcement of the odious system of confessional certificates, then the crowning event of ecclesiastical supremacy, Paris saw the Feast of the Supreme Being, and the adoration of the Goddess of Reason. The Church had scarcely begun to dream before she was rudely and peremptorily awakened. She found herself confronted by the most energetic, hardy, and successful assailants whom the spirit of progress ever inspired. Compared with the new attack, Jansenism was no more than a trifling episode in a family quarrel. Thomists and Molinists became as good as confederates, and Quietism barely seemed a heresy. In every age, even in the very depth of the times of faith, there had arisen disturbers of the intellectual peace. Almost each century after the resettlement of Europe by Charlemagne had produced some individual, or some little group, who had ventured to question this or that article of the ecclesiastical creed, to whom broken glimpses of new truth had come, and who had borne witness against the error or inconsistency or inadequateness of old ways of thinking. The questions which presented themselves to the acuter minds of a hundred years ago, were present to the acuter minds who lived hundreds of years before that. The more deeply we penetrate into the history of opinion, the more strongly are we tempted to believe that in the greater matters of speculation no question is altogether new, and hardly any answer is altogether new. But the Church had known how to deal with intellectual insurgents, from Abelard in the twelfth century down to Giordano Bruno and Vanini in the seventeenth. They were isolated ; they were for the most part submissive ; and if they were not, the arm of the Church was very long and her grasp mortal. And all these meritorious precursors were made weak by one cardinal defect, for which no gifts of intellectual acuteness

could compensate. They had the scientific idea, but they lacked the social idea. They could have set opinion right about the efficacy of the syllogism, and the virtue of entities and quiddities. They could have taught Europe earlier than the Church allowed it to learn that the sun does not go round the earth, and that it is the earth which goes round the sun. But they were wholly unfitted to deal with the prodigious difficulties of moral and social direction. This function, so immeasurably more important than the mere discovery of any number of physical relations, it was the glory of the Church to have discharged for some centuries with as much success as the conditions permitted. We are told indeed by writers ignorant alike of human history and human nature, that only physical science can improve the social condition of man. The common sense of the world always rejects this gross fallacy. The acquiescence for so many centuries in the power of the great directing organization of Western Europe, notwithstanding its intellectual inadequateness, was the decisive expression of that rejection.

After the middle of the last century the insurrection against the pretensions of the Church and against the doctrines of Christianity was marked in one of its most important phases by a new and most significant feature. In this phase it was animated at once by the scientific idea and by the social idea. It was an advance both in knowledge and in moral motive. It rested on a conception which was crude and imperfect enough, but which was still almost, like the great ecclesiastical conception itself, a conception of life as a whole. Morality, positive law, social order, economics, the nature and limits of human knowledge, the constitution of the physical universe, had one by one disengaged themselves from theological explanations. The final philosophical movement of the century in France, which was represented by Diderot, now tended to a new social synthesis resting on a purely positive basis. If this movement had only added to its other contents the historic idea, its destination would have been effectually reached. As it was, its leaders surveyed the entire field with as much accuracy and with as wide a range as their instruments allowed, and they scattered over the world a set of ideas which at once entered into energetic rivalry with the ancient

scheme of authority. The great symbol of this new comprehensiveness in the insurrection was the Encyclopædia.

The Encyclopædia was virtually a protest against the old organization, no less than against the old doctrine. Broadly stated, the great central moral of it all was this: that human nature is good, that the world is capable of being made a desirable abiding-place, and that the evil of the world is the fruit of bad education and bad institutions. This cheerful doctrine now strikes on the ear as a commonplace and a truism. A hundred years ago in France it was a wonderful gospel, and the beginning of a new dispensation. It was the great counter-principle to asceticism in life and morals, to formalism in art, to absolutism in the social ordering, to obscurantism in thought. Every social improvement since has been the outcome of that doctrine in one form or another. The conviction that the character and lot of man are indefinitely modifiable for good, was the indispensable antecedent to any general and energetic endeavour to modify the conditions that surround him. The omnipotence of early instruction, of laws, of the method of social order, over the infinitely plastic impulses of the human creature—this was the maxim which brought men of such widely different temperament and leanings to the common enterprise. Everybody can see what wide and deep-reaching bearings such a doctrine possessed; how it raised all the questions connected with psychology and the formation of character; how it went down to the very foundation of morals; into what fresh and unwelcome sunlight it brought the articles of the old theology; with what new importance it clothed all the relations of real knowledge and the practical arts; what intense interest it lent to every detail of economics and legislation and government.

The deadly chagrin with which churchmen saw the encyclopædic fabric rising was very natural. The teaching of the Church paints man as fallen and depraved. The new secular knowledge clashed at a thousand points, alike in letter and in spirit, with the old sacred lore. Even where it did not clash, its vitality of interest and attraction drove the older lore into neglected shade. To stir men's vivid curiosity and hope about the earth was to make their care much less absorbing about the

kingdom of heaven. To awaken in them the spirit of social improvement was ruin to the most scandalous and crying social abuse then existing. The old spiritual power had lost its instinct, once so keen and effective, of wise direction. Instead of being the guide and corrector of the organs of the temporal power, it was the worst of their accomplices. The Encyclopædia was an informal, transitory, and provisional organization of the new spiritual power. The school of which it was the great expounder, achieved a supreme control over opinion by the only title to which control belongs: a more penetrating eye for social exigences and for the means of satisfying them.

Our veteran humorist told us long ago in his whimsical way that the importance of the Acts of the French Philosophes recorded in whole acres of typography is fast exhausting itself, that the famed Encyclopædical Tree has borne no fruit, and that Diderot the great has contracted into Diderot the easily measurable. The humoristic method is a potent instrument for working such contractions and expansions at will. The greatest of men are measurable enough, if you choose to set up a standard that is half transcendental and half cynical. A saner and more patient criticism measures the conspicuous figures of the past differently. It seeks their relations to the great forward movements of the world, and asks to what quarter of the heavens their faces were set, whether towards the east where the new light dawns, or towards the west after the old light has sunk irrevocably down. Above all, a saner criticism bids us remember that pioneers in the progressive way are rare, their lives rude and sorely tried, and their services to mankind beyond price. "Diderot is Diderot," wrote one greater than Carlyle: "a peculiar individuality; whoever holds him or his doings cheaply is a Philistine, and the name of them is legion. Men know neither from God, nor from Nature, nor from their fellows, how to receive with gratitude what is valuable beyond appraisalment" (*Goethe*). An intense philistinism underlay the great spiritual reaction that followed the Revolution, and not even such of its apostles as Wordsworth and Carlyle wholly escaped the taint.

Forty years ago, when Carlyle wrote, it might really seem to a prejudiced observer as if the encyclopædic tree had borne no

fruit. Even then, and even when the critic happened to be a devotee of the sterile transcendentalism then in vogue, one might have expected some recognition of the fact that the seed of all the great improvements bestowed on France by the Revolution, in spite of the woful evils which followed in its train, had been sown by the Encyclopædists. But now that the last vapours of the transcendental reaction are clearing away, we see that the movement initiated by the Encyclopædia is again in full progress. Materialistic solutions in the science of man, humanitarian ends in legislation, naturalism in art, active faith in the improbability of institutions—all these are once more the marks of speculation and the guiding ideas of practical energy. The philosophical parenthesis is at an end. The interruption of eighty years counts for no more than the twinkling of an eye in the history of the transformation of the basis of thought. And the interruption has for the present come to a close. Europe again sees the old enemies face to face; the Church, and a Social Philosophy slowly labouring to build her foundations in positive science. It cannot be other than interesting to examine the aims, the instruments, and the degree of success of those who a century ago saw most comprehensively how profound and far-reaching a metamorphosis awaited the thought of the Western world. We shall do this most properly in connection with Diderot.

Whether we accept or question Comte's strong description of Diderot as the greatest genius of the eighteenth century, it is at least undeniable that he was the one member of the great party of illumination with a real title to the name of thinker. Voltaire and Rousseau were the heads of two important schools, and each of them set deep and unmistakable marks both on the opinion and the events of the century. It would not be difficult to show that their influence was wider than that of the philosopher who discerned the inadequateness of both. But Rousseau was moved by passion and sentiment; Voltaire was only the master of a brilliant and penetrating rationalism. Diderot alone of this famous trio had in his mind the idea of scientific method; alone showed any feeling for a doctrine, and for large organic and constructive conceptions. He had the rare faculty of true philosophic meditation. Though immeasurably inferior both to

Voltaire and Rousseau in gifts of literary expression, he was as far their superior in breadth and reality of artistic principle. He was the originator of a natural, realistic, and sympathetic school of literary criticism. He aspired to impose new forms upon the drama. Both in imaginative creation and in criticism, his work was a constant appeal from the artificial conventions of the classic schools to the actualities of common life. The same spirit united with the tendency of his philosophy to place him among the very few men who have been great and genuine observers of human nature and human existence. So singular and widely active a genius may well interest us, even apart from the important place that he holds in the history of literature and opinion.

## CHAPTER II.

### YOUTH.

DENIS DIDEROT was born at Langres in 1713, being thus a few months younger than Rousseau (1712), nearly twenty years younger than Voltaire (1694), nearly two years younger than Hume (1711), and eleven years older than Kant (1724). His stock was ancient and of good repute. The family had been engaged in the great local industry, the manufacture of cutlery, for no less than two centuries in direct line. Diderot liked to dwell on the historic prowess of his town, from the days of Julius Cæsar and the old Lingones and Sabinus, down to the time of the Great Monarch. With the taste of his generation for tracing moral qualities to a climatic source, he explained a certain vivacity and mobility in the people of his district by the great frequency and violence of its atmospheric changes from hot to cold, from calm to storm, from rain to sunshine. "Thus they learn from earliest infancy to turn to every wind. The man of Langres has a head on his shoulders like the weathercock at the top of the church spire. It is never fixed at one point; if it returns to the point it has left, it is not to stop there. With an amazing rapidity in their movements, their desires, their plans, their fancies, their ideas, they are cumbrous in speech. For myself, I belong to my country side." This was thoroughly true. He inherited all the versatility of his compatriots, all their swift impetuosity, and something of their want of dexterity in expression.

His father was one of the bravest, most upright, most patient, most sensible of men. Diderot never ceased to regret that the old man's portrait had not been taken with his apron on, his spectacles pushed up, and a hand on the grinder's wheel. After his death, none of his neighbours could speak of him to his son without tears in their eyes. Diderot, wild and irregular as were his earlier days, had always a true affection for his father. "One of the sweetest moments of my life," he once said, "was more than thirty years ago, and I remember it as if it were yesterday, when my father saw me coming home from school, my arms laden with the prizes I had carried off, and my shoulders burdened with the wreaths they had given me, which were too big for my brow and had slipped over my head. As soon as he caught sight of me some way off, he threw down his work, hurried to the door to meet me, and fell a-weeping. It is a fine sight—a grave and sterling man melted to tears."<sup>1</sup> Of his mother we know less. He had a sister, who seems to have possessed the rough material of his own qualities. He describes her as "lively, active, cheerful, decided, prompt to take offence, slow to come round again, without much care for present or future, never willing to be imposed on by people or circumstance; free in her ways, still more free in her talk; she is a sort of Diogenes in petticoats. . . . She is the most original and the most strongly-marked creature I know; she is goodness itself, but with a peculiar physiognomy."<sup>2</sup> His only brother showed some of the same native stuff, but of thinner and sourer quality. He became an abbé and a saint, peevish, umbrageous, and as excessively devout as his more famous brother was excessively the opposite. "He would have been a good friend and a good brother," wrote Diderot, "if religion had not bidden him trample under foot such poor weaknesses as these. He is a good Christian, who proves to me every minute of the day how much better it would be to be a good man. He shows that what they call evangelical perfection is only the mischievous art of stifling nature, which would most likely have spoken as lustily in him as in me."<sup>3</sup>

Diderot, like so many others of the eighteenth-century reformers,

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xviii. 505.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 364.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 379.



was a pupil of the Jesuits. An ardent, impetuous, over-genial temperament was the cause of frequent irregularities in conduct. But his quick and active understanding overcame all obstacles. His teachers, ever wisely on the alert for superior capacity, hoped to enlist his talents in the Order. Either they or he planned his escape from home, but his father got to hear of it. "My grandfather," says Diderot's daughter, "kept the profoundest silence, but as he went off to bed took with him the keys of the yard door." When he heard his son going downstairs, he presented himself before him, and asked whither he was bound at twelve o'clock at night. "To Paris," replied the youth, "where I am to join the Jesuits." "That will not be to-night; but your wishes shall be fulfilled. First let us have our sleep." The next morning his father took two places in the coach, and carried him to Paris to the Collège d'Harcourt. He made all the arrangements, and wished his son good-bye. But the good man loved the boy too dearly to leave him without being quite at ease how he would fare; he had the patience to remain a whole fortnight, killing the time and half dead of weariness in an inn, without ever seeing the one object of his stay. At the end of the fortnight, he went to the college, and Diderot used many a time to say that such a mark of tenderness and goodness would have made him go to the other end of the world if his father had required it. "My friend," said his father, "I am come to see if you are well, if you are satisfied with your superiors, with your food, with your companions, and with yourself. If you are not well or not happy, we will go back together to your mother. If you had rather stay where you are, I am come to give you a word, to embrace you, and to leave you my blessing." The boy declared he was perfectly happy; and the principal pronounced him an excellent scholar, though already promising to be a troublesome one.\*

After a couple of years the young Diderot, like other sons of Adam, had to think of earning his bread. The usual struggle followed between youthful genius and old prudence. His father, who was a man of substance, gave him his choice between medicine and law. Law he refused because he did not choose to spend his days in doing other people's business; and medicine, because he

\* *Œuvres*, i. 30.

had no turn for killing. His father resolutely declined to let him have more money on these terms, and Diderot was thrown on his wits.

The man of letters shortly before the middle of the century was as much an outcast and a beggar in Paris as he was in London. Voltaire, Gray, and Richardson were perhaps the only three conspicuous writers of the time, who had never known what it was to want a meal or to go without a shirt. But then none of the three depended on his pen for his livelihood. Every other man of that day whose writings have delighted and instructed the world since, had begun his career, and more than one of them continued and ended it, as a drudge and a vagabond. Fielding and Collins, Goldsmith and Johnson, in England; Goldoni in Italy; Vauvenargues, Marmontel, Rousseau, in France; Winckelmann and Lessing in Germany, had all alike been doubtful of dinner and trembled about a night's lodging. They all knew the life of mean hazard, sorry shift, and petty expedient again and again renewed. It is sorrowful to think how many of the compositions of that time that do most to soothe and elevate some of the best hours of our lives, were written by men with aching hearts, in the midst of haggard perplexities. The man of letters, as distinguished alike from the old-fashioned scholar and the systematic thinker, now first became a distinctly marked type. Macaulay has contrasted the misery of the Grub Street hack of Johnson's time, with the honours accorded to men like Prior and Addison at an earlier date, and the solid sums paid by booksellers to the authors of our own day. But these brilliant passages hardly go lower than the surface of the great change. Its significance lay quite apart from the prices paid for books. The all-important fact about the men of letters in France was that they constituted a new order, that their rise signified the transfer of the spiritual power from ecclesiastical hands, and that, while they were the organs of a new function, they associated it with a new substitute for doctrine. These men were not only the pupils of the Jesuits; they were also their immediate successors as the teachers, the guides, and the directors of society. For two hundred years the followers of Ignatius had taken the intellectual and moral control of Catholic communities out of the failing hands of the Popes and the secular

clergy. Their own hour had now struck. The rationalistic historian has seldom done justice to the services which this great Order rendered to European civilisation. The immorality of many of their maxims, their too frequent connivance at political wrong for the sake of power, their inflexible malice against opponents, and the cupidity and obstructiveness of the years of their decrepitude, have blinded us to the many meritorious pages of the Jesuit chronicle. Even men like Diderot and Voltaire, whose lives were for years made bitter by Jesuit machinations, gave many signs that they recognised the aid which had been rendered by their old masters to the cultivation and enlightenment of Europe. It was from the Jesuit fathers that the men of letters whom they trained, acquired that practical and social habit of mind which made the world and its daily interests so real to them. It was perhaps also his Jesuit preceptors whom the man of letters had to blame for a certain want of rigour and exactitude on the side of morality.

What was this new order which thus struggled into existence, which so speedily made itself felt, and at length so completely succeeded in seizing the lapsed inheritance of the old spiritual organization? Who is this man of letters? A satirist may easily describe him in epigrams of cheap irony; the pedant of the colleges may see in him a frivolous and shallow profaner of the mysteries of learning; the intellectual coxcomb who nurses his own dainty wits in critical sterility, despises him as Sir Piercie Shafton would have despised Lord Lindsay of the Byres. This notwithstanding, the man of letters has his work to do in the critical period of social transition. He is to be distinguished from the great systematic thinker, as well as from the great imaginative creator. He is borne on the wings neither of a broad philosophic conception nor of a lofty poetic conception. He is only the propagator of portions of such a conception, and of the minor ideas which they suggest. Unlike the Jesuit father whom he replaced, he has no organic doctrine, no historic tradition, no effective discipline, and no definite, comprehensive, far-reaching, concentrated aim. The characteristic of his activity is dispersiveness. Its distinction is to popularise such detached ideas as society is in a condition to assimilate; to interest men in these

ideas by dressing them up in varied forms of the literary art ; to guide men through them by judging, empirically and unconnectedly, each case of conduct, of policy, or of new opinion as it arises. We have no wish to exalt the office. On the contrary, I accept the maxim of that deep observer who warned us that "the mania for isolation is the plague of the human throng, and to be strong we must march together. You only obtain anything by developing the spirit of discipline among men."<sup>1</sup> But there are ages of criticism when discipline is impossible, and the evils of isolation are less than the evils of rash and premature organization. Fontenelle was the first and in some respects the greatest type of this important class. He was sceptical, learned, ingenious, eloquent. He stretched hands (1657-1757) from the famous quarrel between Ancients and Moderns down to the Encyclopædia, and from Bossuet and Corneille down to Jean Jacques and Diderot. When he was born, the man of letters did not exist. When he died, the man of letters was the most conspicuous personage in France. But when Diderot first began to roam about the streets of Paris, this enormous change was not yet complete.

For some ten years (1734-1744) Diderot's history is the old tale of hardship and chance ; of fine constancy and excellent faith, not wholly free from an occasional stroke of rascality. For a time he earned a little money by teaching. If the pupil happened to be quick and docile, he grudged no labour, and was content with any fee or none. If the pupil happened to be dull, Diderot never came again, and preferred going supperless to bed. His employers paid him as they chose, in shirts, in a chair or a table, in books, in money, and sometimes they never paid him at all. The prodigious exuberance of his nature inspired him with a sovereign indifference to material details. From the beginning he belonged to those to whom it comes by nature to count life more

<sup>1</sup> *Wahlverwandtschaften*, pt. ii. ch. vii. The reader will do well to consult the philosophical estimate of the function of the man of letters given by Comte, *Philosophie Positive*, v. 512, vi. 192, 287. The best contemporary account of the principles and policy of the men of letters in the eighteenth century is to be found in Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un Tableau, &c.*, pp. 187-9 (Ed. 1847).

than meat, and the body than raiment. The outward things of existence were to him really outward. They never vexed or absorbed his days and nights, nor overcame his vigorous constitutional instinct for the true proportions of external circumstance. He was of the humour of the old philosopher who, when he heard that all his worldly goods had been lost in a shipwreck, only made for answer, *Jubet me fortuna expeditius philosophari*. Once he had the good hap to be appointed tutor to the sons of a man of wealth. He performed his duties zealously, he was well housed and well fed, and he gave the fullest satisfaction to his employer. At the end of three months the mechanical toil had grown unbearable to him. The father of his pupils offered him any terms if he would remain. "Look at me, sir," replied the tutor; "my face is as yellow as a lemon. I am making men of your children, but each day I am becoming a child with them. I am a thousand times too rich and too comfortable in your house; leave it I must. What I want is not to live better, but to avoid dying." Again he plunged from comfort into the life of the garret. If he met any old friend from Langres, he borrowed, and the honest father repaid the loan. His mother's savings were brought to him by a faithful creature who had long served in their house, and who now more than once trudged all the way from home on this errand, and added her own humble earnings to the little stock. Many a time the hours went very slowly for the necessitous man. One Shrove Tuesday he rose in the morning, and found his pockets empty even of so much as a halfpenny. His friends had not invited him to join their squalid Bohemian revels. Hunger and thoughts of old shrovetide merriment and feasting in the far-off home made work impossible. He hastened out of doors and walked about all day visiting such public sights as were open to the penniless. When he returned to his garret at night, his landlady found him in a swoon, and with the compassion of a good soul she forced him to share her supper. "That day," Diderot used to tell his children in later years, "I promised myself that if ever happier times should come, and ever I should have anything, I would never refuse help to any living creature, nor ever condemn him to the misery of such a day as that."<sup>1</sup> And the real interest

<sup>1</sup> Naigeon, p. 24.

of the story lies in the fact that no oath was ever more faithfully kept. There is no greater test of the essential richness of a man's nature than that this squalid adversity, not of the sentimental introspective kind but hard and grinding, and not even kept in countenance by respectability, fails to make him a savage or a miser or a misanthrope.

Diderot had his bitter moments. He knew the gloom and despondency that have their inevitable hour in every solitary and unordered life. But the fits did not last. They left no sour sediment, and this is the sign of health in temperament, provided it be not due to mere callousness. From that horrible quality Diderot assuredly was the farthest removed of anyone of his time. Now and always he walked with a certain large carelessness of spirit. He measured life with a roving and liberal eye. Circumstance and conventions, the words under which men hide things, the oracles of common acceptance, the infinitely diversified properties of human character, the many complexities of our conduct and destiny—all these he watched playing freely around him, and he felt no haste to compress his experience into maxims and system. He was absolutely uncramped by any of the formal mannerisms of the spirit. He was wholly uncorrupted by the affectation of culture with which the great Goethe infected part of the world a generation later. His own life was never made the centre of the world. Self-development and self-idealisation as ends in themselves would have struck Diderot as effeminate drolleries. The daily and hourly interrogation of experience for the sake of building up the fabric of his own character in this wise or that, would have been incomprehensible and a little odious to him in theory, and impossible as a matter of practice. In the midst of all the hardships of his younger time, as afterwards in the midst of crushing Herculean taskwork, he was saved from moral ruin by the inexhaustible geniality and expansiveness of his affections. Nor did he narrow their play by looking only to the external forms of human relation. To Diderot it came easily to act on a principle which most of us only accept in words: he looked not to what people said, nor even to what they did, but wholly to what they were.

Those whom he had once found reason to love and esteem

might do him many an ill turn, without any fear of estranging him. Anyone can measure character by conduct. It is a harder thing to be willing, in cases that touch our own interests, to interpret conduct by previous knowledge of character. His father, for instance, might easily have spared money enough to save him from the harassing privations of Bohemian life in Paris. A less full-blooded and generous person than Diderot would have resented the stoutness of the old man's persistency. Diderot on the contrary felt and delighted to feel, that this conflict of wills was a mere accident which left undisturbed the reality of old love. "The first few years of my life in Paris," he once told an acquaintance, "had been rather irregular; my behaviour was enough to irritate my father, without there being any need to make it worse by exaggeration. Still calumny was not wanting. People told him—well what did they not tell him? An opportunity for going to see him presented itself. I did not give it two thoughts. I set out full of confidence in his goodness. I thought that he would see me, that I should throw myself into his arms, that we should both of us shed tears, and that all would be forgotten. I thought rightly."<sup>1</sup> We may be sure of a stoutness of native stock in any stock where so much tenacity united with such fine confidence on one side, and such generous love on the other. It is commonplace how much waste would be avoided in human life if men would more freely allow their vision to pierce in this way through the distorting veils of egoism, to the reality of sentiment and motive and relationship.

Throughout his life Diderot was blessed with that divine gift of pity, which one that has it could hardly be willing to barter for the understanding of an Aristotle. Nor was it of the sentimental type proper for fine ladies. One of his friends had an aversion for women with child. "What monstrous sentiment!" Diderot wrote; "for my part, that condition has always touched me. I cannot see a woman of the common people so, without a tender commiseration."<sup>2</sup> And Diderot had delicacy and respect in his pity. He tells a story in one of his letters of a poor woman who had suffered some wrong from a priest; she had not money enough to resort to law, until a friend of Diderot took her part.

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 162.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

The suit was gained ; but when the moment came for execution, the priest had vanished with all his goods. The woman came to thank her protector, and to regret the loss he had suffered. "As she chatted, she pulled a shabby snuff-box out of her pocket, and gathered up with the tip of her finger what little snuff remained at the bottom : her benefactor says to her, ' Ah, ah ! you have no more snuff ; give me your box, and I will fill it.' He took the box and put into it a couple of louis, which he covered up with snuff. Now there's an action thoroughly to my taste, and to yours too ! Give, but, if you can, spare to the poor the shame of holding out a hand." <sup>1</sup> And the important thing, as we have said, is that Diderot was as good as his sentiment, Unlike most of the fine talkers of that day, to him these homely and considerate emotions were the most real part of life. Nobody in the world was ever more eager to give succour to others, nor more careless of his own ease.

One singular story of Diderot's heedlessness about himself has often been told before, but we shall be none the worse in an egoistic world for hearing it told again. There came to him one morning a young man, bringing a manuscript in his hand. He begged Diderot to do him the favour of reading it, and to make any remarks he might think useful on the margin. Diderot found it to be a bitter satire upon his own person and writings. On the young man's return, Diderot asked him his grounds for making such an attack. "I am without bread," the satirist answered, "and I hoped you might perhaps give me a few crowns not to print it." Diderot at once forgot everything in pity for the starving scribbler. "I will tell you a way of making more than that by it. The brother of the Duke of Orleans is one of the pious, and he hates me. Dedicate your satire to him, get it bound with his arms on the cover ; take it to him some fine morning, and you will certainly get assistance from him." "But I don't know the prince, and the dedicatory epistle embarrasses me." "Sit down," said Diderot, "and I will write one for you." The dedication was written, the author carried it to the prince, and received a handsome fee. <sup>2</sup>

Marmontel assures us that never was Diderot seen to such

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* i. xlviiii.



advantage as when an author consulted him about a work. "You should have seen him," he says, "take hold of the subject, pierce to the bottom of it, and at a single glance discover of what riches and of what beauty it was susceptible. If he saw that the author missed the right track, instead of listening to the reading, he at once worked up in his head all that the author had left crude and imperfect. Was it a play, he threw new scenes into it, new incidents, new strokes of character; and thinking that he had actually heard all that he had dreamed, he extolled to the skies the work that had just been read to him, and in which, when it saw the light, we found hardly anything that he had quoted from it. . . . He who was one of the most enlightened men of the century, was also one of the most amiable; and in everything that touched moral goodness, when he spoke of it freely, I cannot express the charm of his eloquence. His whole soul was in his eyes and on his lips; never did a countenance better depict the goodness of the heart."<sup>1</sup> Morellet is equally loud in praise, not only of Diderot's conversation, its brilliance, its vivacity, its fertility, its suggestiveness, its sincerity, but also his facility and indulgence to all who sought him, and of the sympathetic readiness with which he gave the very best of himself to others.\*

It is needless to say that such a temper was constantly abused. Three-fourths of Diderot's life were reckoned by his family to have been given up to people who had need of his purse, his knowledge, or his good offices. His daughter compares his library to a shop crowded by a succession of customers, but the customers took whatever wares they sought, not by purchase, but by way of free gift. Luckily for Diderot, he was thus generous by temperament, and not because he expected gratitude. Any necessitous knave with the gift of tears and the mask of sensibility could dupe and prey upon him. In one case he had taken a great deal of trouble for one of these needy and importunate clients; had given him money and advice, and had devoted much time to serve him. At the end of their last interview Diderot escorts his departing friend to the head of the staircase. The grateful client then asks him whether he knows natural history.

<sup>1</sup> Marmontel, *Mém.* vol. ii. b. vii. p. 315.

<sup>2</sup> Morellet, *Mém.* i. p. 29.

“Well, not much,” Diderot replies; “I know an aloe from a lettuce, and a pigeon from a humming-bird.” “Do you know about the *Formica leo*? No? Well, it is a little insect that is wonderfully industrious; it hollows out in the ground a hole shaped like a funnel, it covers the surface with a light fine sand, it attracts other insects, it takes them, it sucks them dry, and then it says to them, ‘M. Diderot, I have the honour to wish you good-day.’”<sup>1</sup>

Yet insolence and ingratitude made no difference to Diderot. His ear always remained as open to every tale of distress, his sensibility always as quickly touched, his time, money, and service always as profusely bestowed. I know not whether to say that this was made more, or that it was made less, of a virtue by his excess of tolerance for social castaways and reprobates. Our rough mode of branding a man as bad revolted him. The common appetite for constituting ourselves public prosecutors for the universe, was to him one of the worst of human weaknesses. “You know,” he used to say, “all the impetuosity of the passions; you have weighed all circumstance in your everlasting balance; you pass sentence on the goodness or the badness of creatures; you set up rewards and penalties among matters which have no proportion nor relation with one another. Are you sure that you have never committed wrong acts, for which you pardoned yourselves because their object was so slight, though at bottom they implied more wickedness than a crime prompted by misery or fury? Even magistrates, supported by experience, by the law, by conventions which force them sometimes to give judgment against the testimony of their own conscience, still tremble as they pronounce the doom of the accused. And since when has it been lawful for the same person to be at once judge and informer?”<sup>2</sup> Such reasoned leniency is the noblest of traits in a man. “I am more affected,” he said, in words of which better men than Diderot might often be reminded, “by the charms of virtue than by the deformity of vice. I turn mildly away from the bad, and I fly to embrace the good. If there is in a work, in a character, in a painting, in a statue, a single fine bit, then on that my eyes

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, i. xlviil.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* xix, 55.

fasten ; I see only that : that is all I remember ; the rest is as good as forgotten."<sup>1</sup>

This is the secret of a rare and admirable temperament. It carried Diderot well through the trial and ordeal of the ragged apprenticeship of letters. What to other men comes by culture, came to him by inborn force and natural capaciousness. We do not know in what way Diderot trained and nourished his understanding. The annotations to his translation of Shaftesbury, as well as his earliest original pieces, show that he had read Montaigne and Pascal, and not only read but meditated on them with an independent mind. They show also that he had been impressed by the *Civitas Dei* of Augustine, and had at least dipped into Terence and Horace, Cicero and Tacitus. His subsequent writings prove that, like the other men of letters of his day, he found in our own literature the chief external stimulant to thought. Above all, he was impressed by the magnificent ideas of the illustrious Bacon, and these ideas were the direct source of the great undertaking of Diderot's life. He is said to have read little and to have meditated much—the right process for the few men of his potent stamp. The work which he had to do for bread, was of the kind that crushes anything short of the strongest faculty. He composed sermons. A missionary once ordered half-a-dozen of them for consumption in the Portuguese colonies, and paid him fifty crowns apiece, which Diderot counted far from the worst bargain of his life. All this was beggarly toil for a man of genius, but Diderot never took the trouble to think of himself as a man of genius, and was quite content with life as it came. If he found himself absolutely without food and without pence, he began moodily to think of abandoning his books and his pen, and of complying with the wishes of his father. A line of Homer, an idea from the *Principia*, an interesting problem in algebra or geometry, was enough to restore the eternally invincible spell of knowledge. And no sooner was this commanding interest touched, than the cloud of uncomfortable circumstance vanished from before the sun, and calm and serenity filled his spirit.

Montesquieu used to declare that he had never known a

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xviii. 376.

chagrin which half an hour of a book was not able to dispel. Diderot had the same fortunate temper.

Yet Diderot was not essentially a man of books. He never fell into the characteristic weakness of the follower of letters, by treating books as ends in themselves, or placing literature before life. Character, passion, circumstance, the real tragi-comedy, not its printed shadow and image, engrossed him. He was in this respect more of the temper of Rousseau, than he was like Voltaire or Fontenelle. "Abstraction made," he used to say, "of my existence and of the happiness of my fellows, what does the rest of nature matter to me?" Yet, as we see, nobody that ever lived was more interested in knowledge. His biographer and disciple remarked the contrast in him between his ardent impetuous disposition and enthusiasm, and his spirit of close unwearied observation. *Faire le bien, connaître le vrai*, was his formula for the perfect life, and defined the only distinction that he cared to recognise between one man and another. And the only motive he ever admitted as reasonable for seeking truth, was as a means of doing good. So strong was his sense of practical life, in the midst of incessant theorising.

At the moment when he had most difficulty in procuring a little bread each day for himself, Diderot conceived a violent passion for a seamstress, Antoinette Champion by name, who happened to live in his neighbourhood. He instantly became importunate for marriage. The mother long protested with prudent vigour against a young man of such headstrong impetuosity, who did nothing and who had nothing, save the art of making speeches that turned her daughter's head. At length the young man's golden tongue won the mother as it had won the daughter. It was agreed that his wishes should be crowned, if he could procure the consent of his family. Diderot fared eagerly and with a sanguine heart to Langres. His father supposed that he had seen the evil of his ways, and was come at last to continue the honest tradition of their name. When the son disclosed the object of his visit, he was treated as a madman and threatened with malediction. Without a word of remonstrance he started back one day for Paris. Madame Champion warned him that his project

must now be for ever at an end. Such unflinching resoluteness is often the last preliminary before surrender. Diderot fell ill. The two women could not bear to think of him lying sick in a room no better than a dog-kennel, without broths and tisanes, lonely and sorrowful. They hastened to nurse him, and when he got well, what he thought the great object of his life was reached. He and his adored were married (1743).<sup>1</sup> As has been said, "Choice in marriage is a great match of cajolery between purpose and invisible hazard : deep criticism of a game of pure chance is time wasted." In Diderot's case, destiny was hostile.

His wife was over thirty. She was dutiful, sage, and pious. She had plenty of that devotion which in small things women so seldom lack. While her husband went to dine out, she remained at home to dine and sup on dry bread, and was pleased to think that the next day she would double the little ordinary for him. Coffee was too dear to be a household luxury, so every day she handed him a few halfpence to have his cup, and to watch the chess-players at the Café de la Régence. When after a year or two she went to make her peace with her father-in-law at Langres, she wound her way round the old man's heart by her affectionate caresses, her respect, her ready industry in the household, her piety, her simplicity. It is, however, unfortunately possible for even the best women to manifest their goodness, their prudence, their devotion, in forms that exasperate. Perhaps it was so here. Diderot at fifty was an orderly and steadfast person, but at thirty the blood of vagabondage was still hot within him. He needed in his companion a robust patience, to match his own too robust activity. One may suppose that if Mirabeau had married Hannah More, the union would have turned out ill, and Diderot's marriage was unluckily of such a type. His wife's narrow pieties and homely solitudes fretted him. He had not learned to count the cost of deranging the fragile sympathy of the hearth. While his wife was away on her visit to his family, he formed a connection with a woman (Madame Puisieux) who seems to have

<sup>1</sup> Madame de Vandeuil says 1744. But M. Jal (*Dict. Crit.* 495) reproduces the certificate of the marriage. Perhaps we may charitably hope that Diderot himself is equally mistaken, when in later years he sets down a disreputable adventure to 1744. (*Œuvres*, xix. 85.)

been as bad and selfish as his wife was the opposite. She was the authoress of some literary pieces, which the world willingly and speedily let die ; but even very moderate pretensions to *bel-esprit* may have seemed wonderfully refreshing to a man wearied to death by the illiterate stupidity of his daily companion.<sup>1</sup> This lasted some three or four years down to 1749. As we shall see, he discovered the infidelity of his mistress and broke with her. But by this time his wife's virtues seem to have gone a little sour, as disregarded prudence and thwarted piety are so apt to do. It was too late now to knit up again the ravelled threads of domestic concord. During a second absence of his wife in Champagne (1754), he formed a new attachment to the daughter of a financier's widow (Mdlle. Voland). This lasted to the end of the lady's days (1764).

There is probably nothing very profitable to be said about all this domestic disorder. We do not know enough of the circumstances to be sure of allotting censure in exact and rightful measure. We have to remember that such irregularities were in the manners of the time. To connect them by way of effect with the new opinions in religion, would be as impertinent as to trace the immoralities of Dubois or Lewis the Fifteenth or the Cardinal de Rohan to the old opinions.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of Madame de Puisieux in her later years, see M<sup>de</sup>. Roland's *Memoirs*, i. 156.

## CHAPTER III.

### EARLY WRITINGS.

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD, expressing a commonplace with the penetrative terseness that made him a master of the apophthegm, pronounced it "not to be enough to have great qualities: a man must have the economy of them." Or, as another writer says: "Empire in this world belongs not so much to wits, to talents, and to industry, as to a certain skilful economy and to the continual management that a man has the art of applying to all his other gifts."<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the peril that haunts superlative propositions, we are inclined to say that Diderot is the most striking illustration of this that the history of letters or speculation has to furnish. If there are many who have missed the mark which they or kindly intimates thought them certain of attaining, this is mostly not for want of economy, but for want of the great qualities which were imputed to them by mistake. To be mediocre, to be sterile, to be futile, are the three fatal endings of many superbly announced potentialities. Such an end nearly always comes of exaggerated faculty, rather than of bad administration of natural gifts. In Diderot were splendid talents. It was the art of prudent stewardship that lay beyond his reach. Hence this singular fact, that he perhaps alone in literature has left a name of almost the first eminence, and impressed his greatness upon men of the strongest and most different intelligence,

<sup>1</sup> Sainte Beuve, *Causeries*, ix. 136.

and yet never produced a masterpiece: many a fine page, as Marmontel said, but no one fine work.

No man that ever wrote was more wholly free from that unquiet self-consciousness which too often makes literary genius pitiful or odious in the flesh. He put on no airs of pretended resignation to inferior production, with bursting hints of the vast superiorities that unfriendly circumstance locked up within him. Yet on one occasion, and only on one, so far as evidence remains, he indulged a natural regret. "And so," he wrote when revising the last sheets of the *Encyclopædia* (July 25, 1765), "in eight or ten days I shall see the end of an undertaking that has occupied me for twenty years; that has not made my fortune by a long way; that has exposed me many a time to the risk of having to quit my country or lose my freedom; and that has consumed a life that I might have made both more useful and more glorious. The sacrifice of talent to need would be less common, if it were only a question of self. One could easily resolve rather to drink water and eat dry crusts and follow the bidding of one's genius in a garret. But for a woman and for children, what can one not resolve? If I sought to make myself of some account in their eyes, I would not say—I have worked thirty years for you: I would say—I have for you renounced for thirty years the vocation of my nature; I have preferred to renounce my tastes in doing what was useful for you, instead of what was agreeable to myself. That is your real obligation to me, and of that you never think."<sup>1</sup>

It is a question, nevertheless, whether Diderot would have achieved masterpieces, even if the pressure of housekeeping had never driven him to seek bread where he could find it. Indeed it is hardly a question. His genius was spacious and original, but it was too dispersive, too facile of diversion, too little disciplined, for the prolonged effort of combination which is indispensable to the greater constructions whether of philosophy or art. The excellent talent of economy and administration had been denied him; that thrift of faculty, which accumulates store and force for concentrated occasions. He was not encyclopædic

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 159. See also *Salons*, 1767, No. 118.



by accident, nor merely from external necessity. The quality of rapid movement, impetuous fancy, versatile idea, which he traced to the climate of his birth-place, marked him from the first for an encyclopædic or some such task. His interest was nearly as promptly and vehemently kindled in one subject as in another; he was always boldly tentative, always fresh and vigorous in suggestion, always instant in search. But this multiplicity of active excitements, and with Diderot every interest rose to the warmth of excitement, was even more hostile to masterpieces than were the exigences of a livelihood. It was not unpardonable in a moment of exhaustion and chagrin to fancy that he had offered up the treasures of his genius to the dull gods of the hearth. But if he had been childless and unwedded, the result would have been the same. He is the munificent prodigal of letters, always believing his substance inexhaustible, never placing a limit to his fancies nor a bound to his outlay. "It is not they who rob me of my life," he wrote; "it is I who give it to them. And what can I do better than accord a portion of it to him who esteems me enough to solicit such a gift? I shall get no praise for it, 'tis true, either now while I am here, nor when I shall exist no longer; but I shall esteem myself for it, and people will love me all the better for it. 'Tis no bad exchange, that of benevolence, against a celebrity that one does not always win, and that nobody wins without a drawback. I have never once regretted the time that I have given to others; I can scarcely say as much for the time that I have used for myself."<sup>a</sup> Remembering how uniformly men of letters take themselves somewhat too seriously, we may be sorry that this unique figure among them, who was in other respects constituted to be so considerable and so effective, did not take himself seriously enough.

Apart from his moral inaptitude for the monumental achievements of authorship, Diderot was endowed with the gifts of the talker rather than with those of the writer. Like Dr. Johnson, he was a great converser rather than the author of great books. If we turn to his writings, we are at some loss to understand the secret of his reputation. They are too often declamatory, ill-

<sup>a</sup> *Les Règles de Claude et de Néron*, § 79.

compacted, broken by frequent apostrophes, ungainly, dislocated, and rambling. He has been described by a consummate judge as the most German of all the French. And his style is deeply marked by that want of feeling for the exquisite, that dulness of edge, that bluntness of stroke, which is the common note of all German literature, save a little of the very highest. In conversation we do not insist on constant precision of phrase, nor on elaborate sustentation of argument. Apostrophe is made natural by the semi-dramatic quality of the situation. Even vehement hyperbole, which is nearly always a disfigurement in written prose, may become impressive or delightful, when it harmonizes with the voice, the glance, the gesture of a fervid and exuberant converser. Hence Diderot's personality invested his talk, as happened in the case of Johnson and of Coleridge, with an imposing interest and a power of inspiration which we should never comprehend from the mere perusal of his writings.

His admirers declared his head to be the ideal head of an Aristotle or a Plato. His brow was wide, lofty, open, gently rounded. The arch of the eyebrow was full of delicacy; the nose of masculine beauty; the habitual expression of the eyes kindly and sympathetic, but as he grew heated in talk, they sparkled like fire; the curves of the mouth bespoke an interesting mixture of finesse, grace, and geniality. His bearing was nonchalant enough, but there was naturally in the carriage of his head, especially when he talked with action, much dignity, energy, and nobleness. It seemed as if enthusiasm were the natural condition for his voice, for his spirit, for every feature. He was only truly Diderot when his thoughts had transported him beyond himself. His ideas were stronger than himself; they swept him along without the power either to stay or to guide their movement. "When I recall Diderot," wrote one of his friends, "the immense variety of his ideas, the amazing multiplicity of his knowledge, the rapid flight, the warmth, the impetuous tumult of his imagination, all the charm and all the disorder of his conversation, I venture to liken his character to nature herself, exactly as he used to conceive her—rich, fertile, abounding in germs of every sort, gentle and fierce, simple and majestic, worthy and sublime, but without any dominating principle, without a master

and without a God."<sup>1</sup> Grétry, the musical composer, declares that Diderot was one of the rare men who had the art of blowing the spark of genius into flame; the first impulses stirred by his glowing imagination were of inspiration divine.<sup>2</sup> Marmontel warns us that he who only knows Diderot in his writings, does not know him at all. We should have listened to his persuasive eloquence, and seen his face aglow with the fire of enthusiasm. It was when he grew animated in talk, and let all the abundance of his ideas flow freely from the source, that he became truly ravishing. In his writings, says Marmontel with obvious truth, he never had the art of forming a whole, and this was because that first process of arranging everything in its place was too slow and too tiresome for him. The want of ensemble vanished in the free and varied course of conversation.<sup>3</sup>

We have to remember then that Diderot was in this respect of the Socratic type, though he was unlike Socrates, in being the disseminator of positive and constructive ideas. His personality exerted a decisive force and influence. In reading the testimony of his friends, we think of the young Aristides saying to Socrates: "I always made progress whenever I was in your neighbourhood, even if I were only in the same house, without being in the same room; but my advancement was greater if I were in the same room with you, and greater still if I could keep my eyes fixed upon you."<sup>4</sup> It has been well said that Diderot, like Socrates, had about him a something dæmonic. He was possessed, and so had the first secret of possessing others. But then to reach excellence in literature, one must also have self-possession; a double current of impulse and deliberation; a free stream of ideas spontaneously obeying a sense of order, harmony, and form. Eloquence in the informal discourse of the parlour or the country walk did not mean in Diderot's case the empty fluency and nugatory emphasis of the ordinary talker of reputation. It must have been both pregnant and copious; declamatory in form, but fresh and substantial in matter; excursive in arrangement, but

<sup>1</sup> Account of Diderot by Meister, printed in Grimm's *Correspondence Littéraire*, xiii. 202-11.

<sup>2</sup> Grétry, quoted in Genin's *Œuv. choisies de Diderot*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> Marmontel, *Mém.* bk. vii. vol. ii. 312.      <sup>4</sup> Plato, *Theages*, 130, c.

forcible and pointed in intention. No doubt, if he was a sage, he was sometimes a sage in a frenzy. He would wind up a peroration by dashing his nightcap passionately against the wall, by way of clencher to the argument. Yet this impetuosity, this turn for declamation, did not hinder his talk from being directly instructive. Younger men of the most various type, from Morellet down to Joubert, men quite competent to detect mere bombast or ardent vagueness, were held captive by the cogency of his understanding. His writings have none of this compulsion. We see the flame, but through a veil of interfused smoke. The expression is not obscure, but it is awkward; not exactly prolix, but heavy, overcharged, and opaque. We miss the vivid precision and the high spirits of Voltaire, the glow and the brooding sonorousness of Rousseau, the pomp of Buffon. To Diderot we go not for charm of style, but for a store of fertile ideas, for some striking studies of human life, and for a vigorous and singular personality.

Diderot's knowledge of our language now did him good service. One of the details of the method by which he taught himself English is curious. Instead of using an Anglo-French dictionary, he always used one in Anglo-Latin. The sense of a Latin or Greek word, he said, is better established, more surely fixed, more definite, less liable to capricious peculiarities of convention, than the vernacular words which the whim or ignorance of the lexicographer may choose. The reader composes his own vocabulary, and gains both correctness and energy.<sup>1</sup> However this may be, his knowledge of English was more accurate than is possessed by most French writers of our own day. Diderot's first work for the booksellers after his marriage seems to have been a translation in three volumes of Stanyan's History of Greece. For this, to the amazement of his wife, he got a hundred crowns. About the same time (1745) he published Principles of Moral Philosophy, or an Essay of Mr. S. on Merit and Virtue. The initial stands for Shaftesbury, and the book translated was his Inquiry concerning Virtue and Merit.

Towards the same time, again, Diderot probably made acquaint-

<sup>1</sup> Art. *Encyclopédie*.

ance with Madame de Puisieux, of whom it has been said with too patent humour that she was without either the virtue or the merit on which her admirer had just been declaiming. We are told that it was her need of money which inspired him with his first original work. As his daughter's memoir, from which the tale comes, is swarming with blunders, this may not be more true than some of her other statements. All that we know of Diderot's sense and sincerity entitles him to the benefit of the doubt. The *Philosophical Thoughts* (1746) are a continuation of the vein of the annotations on the *Essay*. He is said to have thrown these reflections together between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Nor is there anything incredible in such rapid production, when we remember the sweeping impetuosity with which he flung himself into all that he undertook. The *Thoughts* are evidently the fruits of long meditation, and the literary arrangement of them may well have been an easy task. They are a robuster development of the scepticism which was the less important side of Shaftesbury. The parliament of Paris ordered the book to be burnt along with some others (July 7, 1746), partly because they were heterodox, partly because the practice of publishing books without official leave was gaining an unprecedented height of license.<sup>1</sup> This was Diderot's first experience of that hand of authority, which was for thirty years to surround him with mortification and torment. But the disapproval of authority did not check the circulation or influence of the *Thoughts*. They were translated into German and Italian, and were honoured by a shower of hostile criticism. In France they were often reprinted, and even in our own day they are said not wholly to have lost their vogue as a short manual of scepticism.<sup>2</sup>

The historians of literature too often write as if a book were the cause or the controlling force of controversies in which it is really only a symbol, or a proclamation of feelings already in men's minds. We should never occupy ourselves in tracing the thread of a set of opinions, without trying to recognise the movement of living men and concrete circumstance that accompanied and

<sup>1</sup> See Barbier's *Journal*, iv. 166.

<sup>2</sup> The book was among those found in possession of the unfortunate La Barre.

caused the progress of thought. In watching how the beacon-fire flamed from height to height—

φάος δὲ τηλέπομπον οὐκ ἡναίετο  
φρουρὰ, προσαιθρίζουσα πόμπιμονφλόγα—

we should not forget that its source and reference lie in action, in the motion and stirring of confused hosts and multitudes of men. A book, after all, is only the mouthpiece of its author, and the author being human is moved and drawn by the events that occur under his eye. It was not merely because Bacon and Hobbes and Locke had written certain books, that Voltaire and Diderot became free-thinkers and assailed the church. "So long," it has been said, "as a Bossuet, a Fénelon, an Arnauld, a Nicole, were alive, Bayle made few proselytes; the elevation of Dubois and its consequences multiplied unbelievers and indifferents."<sup>1</sup> The force of speculative literature always hangs on practical opportuneness. The economic evils of monasticism, the increasing flagrancy and grossness of superstition, the aggressive factiousness of the ecclesiastics, the cruelty of bigoted tribunals—these things disgusted and wearied the more enlightened spirits, and the English philosophy only held out an inspiring intellectual alternative.<sup>2</sup>

Nor was it accident that drew Diderot's attention to Shaftesbury, rather than to any other of our writers. That author's essay on Enthusiasm had been suggested by the extravagances of the French prophets, poor fanatics from the Cevennes, who had fled to London after the revocation of the edict of Nantes, and whose paroxysms of religious hysteria at length brought them into trouble with the authorities (1707). Paris saw an outbreak of the same

<sup>1</sup> Honegger's *Kritische Geschichte der französischen Cultureinflüsse in den letzten Jahrhunderten*, pp. 267-73.

<sup>2</sup> "Es ist nicht gleichgültig ob eine Folge grosser Gedanken in frischer Ursprünglichkeit auf die Zeitgenossen wirkt, oder ob sie zu einer Mixtur mit reichlichem Zusatz überlieferter Vorurtheile verarbeitet ist. Ebenso wenig ist es gleichgültig welcher Stimmung, welchem Zustande der Geister eine neue Lehre begegnet. Man darf aber kühn behaupten, das für die volle durchführung der von Newton angebahnten Weltanschauung weder eine günstigere Naturanlage, noch eine günstigere Stimmung getroffen werden konnte, als die der Franzosen im 18. Jahrhundert." (Lange's *Gesch. d. Materialismus*, i. 303.) But the writer, like most historians of opinion, does not dwell sufficiently on the co-operation of external social conditions with the progress of logical inference.

kind of ecstasy, though on a much more formidable scale, among the Jansenist fanatics, from 1727 down to 1758, or later. Some of the best attested miracles in the whole history of the supernatural were wrought at the tomb of the Jansenist deacon, Pâris.<sup>1</sup> The works of faith exalted multitudes into convulsive transports; men and women underwent the most cruel tortures, in the hope of securing a descent upon them of the divine grace. The sober citizen, whose journal is so useful a guide to domestic events in France from the Regency to the Peace of 1763, tells us the effect of this hideous revival upon public sentiment. People began to see, he says, what they were to think of the miracles of antiquity. The more they went into these matters, whether miracles or prophecies, the more obscurity they discovered in the one, the more doubt about the other. Who could tell that they had not been accredited and established in remote times with as little foundation as what was then passing under men's very eyes? Just in the same way, the violent and prolonged debates, the intrigue, the tergiversation, which attended the acceptance of the famous Bull Unigenitus, taught shrewd observers how it is that religions establish themselves. They also taught how little respect is due in our minds and consciences to the great points which the universal church claims to have decided.<sup>2</sup>

These are the circumstances which explain the rude and vigorous scepticism of Diderot's first performances. And they explain the influence of Shaftesbury over him. Neither Diderot nor his contemporaries were ready at once to plunge into the broader and firmer negation to which they afterwards committed themselves. No doubt some of the politeness which he shows to Christianity, both in the notes to his translation of Shaftesbury, and in his own *Philosophic Thoughts*, is no more than an ironical deference to established prejudices. The notes to the *Essay on Merit and Virtue* show that Diderot, like all the other French revolvers against established prejudice, had been deeply influenced by the shrewd-witted Montaigne. But the ardour of the disciple pressed objections home with a trenchancy that is very unlike the

<sup>1</sup> See Montgeron's *La Vérité des Miracles de M. de Pâris démontrée* (1737)—an interesting contribution to the pathology of the human mind.

<sup>2</sup> Barbier, 168, 244, &c.

sage distillations of the master. It was from Shaftesbury, however, that he borrowed common sense as a philosophic principle. Shaftesbury had indirectly drawn it from Locke, and through Hutcheson it became the source and sponsor of the Scottish philosophy of that century. This was a weapon exactly adapted for dealing with a theology that was discredited in the eyes of all cool observers by the hysterical extravagances of one set of religionists, and the factious pretensions of their rivals. And no other weapon was at hand. The historic or critical method of investigation was impossible, for the age did not possess the requisite learning. The indirect attack from the side of physical science was equally impossible. The bearing of Newton's great discovery on the current conceptions of the Creator and the supposed system of the divine government, was not yet fully realised. The other scientific ideas which have since made the old hypothesis less credible, were not at that time even conceived.

Diderot did indeed perceive even so early as this that the controversy was passing from the metaphysicians to the physicists. Though he for the moment misinterpreted the ultimate direction of the effect of experimental discovery, he discerned its potency in the field of theological discussion. "It is not from the hands of the metaphysician," he said, "that atheism has received the weightiest strokes. The sublime meditations of Malebranche and Descartes were less calculated to shake materialism than a single observation of Malpighi's. If this dangerous hypothesis is tottering in our days, it is to experimental physics that such a result is due. It is only in the works of Newton, of Muschenbroek, of Hartzoeker, and of Nieuwentit, that people have found satisfactory proofs of the existence of a being of sovereign intelligence. Thanks to the works of these great men, the world is no longer a god; it is a machine with its cords, its pulleys, its springs, its weights."<sup>1</sup> In other words, Diderot had as yet not made his way beyond the halting-place which has been the favourite goal of English physicists from Newton down to Faraday.<sup>2</sup> Consistent materialism had not yet established itself in his mind. Meanwhile he laid about him with his common sense, just as Voltaire

<sup>1</sup> *Pensées Philosophiques*, xviii.

<sup>2</sup> On this, see Lange, i. 294.



did, though Diderot has more weightiness of manner. If his use of the weapon cannot be regarded as a decisive settlement of the true issues, we have to remember that he himself became aware in a very short time of its inadequateness, and proceeded to the discussion, as we shall presently see, from another side.

The scope of the Philosophical Thoughts, and the attitude of Diderot's mind when they were written, may be shown in a few brief passages. The opening words point to the significance of the new time in one direction, and they are the key-note to Diderot's whole character.\* "People are for ever declaiming against the passions; they set down to them all the pains that man endures, and quite forget that they are also the source of all his pleasures. † It is regarded as an affront to reason if one dares to say a word in favour of its rivals. ‡ Yet it is only passions, and strong passions, that can raise the soul to great things. Sober passions produce only the commonplace. Deadened passions degrade men of extraordinary quality. Constraint annihilates the greatness and energy of nature. See that tree; 'tis to the luxury of its branches that you owe the freshness and the wide-spreading breadth of its shade, which you may enjoy till winter comes to despoil it of its leafy tresses. An end to all excellence in poetry, in painting, in music, as soon as superstition has once wrought upon human temperament the effect of old age! It is the very climax of madness to propose to oneself the ruin of the passions. A fine design truly in your pietist, to torment himself like a convict in order to desire nothing, love nothing, feel nothing; and he would end by becoming a true monster, if he were to succeed!" † Many years afterwards he wrote in the same sense to Madame Voland. "I have ever been the apologist of strong passions; they alone move me. Whether they inspire me with admiration or horror, I feel vehemently. If atrocious deeds that dishonour our nature are due to them, it is by them also that we are borne to the marvellous endeavour that elevates it. The man of mediocre passion lives and dies like the brute." And so forth, until the writer is carried to the perplexing position that "if we were bound to choose between Racine, a bad husband, a bad

\* *Pensées Philosophiques.* Œuv. i. 128-9.

father, a false friend, and a sublime poet, and Racine, good father, good husband, good friend, and dull worthy man, I hold to the first. Of Racine, the bad man, what remains? Nothing. Of Racine, the man of genius? The work is eternal." Without attempting to solve this problem in casuistry, we recognise Diderot's mood, and the hatred with which it would be sure to inspire him for the starved and mutilated passions of the Christian type. The humility, chastity, obedience, indolent solitude, which had for centuries been glorified by the Church, were monstrous to this vehement and energetic spirit. The church had placed heroism in effacement. Diderot, borne to the other extreme, left out even discipline. To turn from his maxims on the foundation of conduct, to his maxims on opinion. As we have said, his attitude is that of the sceptic:—

What has never been put in question, has not been proved. What people have not examined without prepossessions, they have not examined thoroughly. Scepticism is the touchstone. (§ 31.)

Incredulity is sometimes the vice of a fool, and credulity the defect of a man of intelligence. The latter sees far into the immensity of the Possible; the former scarcely sees anything possible beyond the Actual. Perhaps this is what produces the timidity of the one, and the temerity of the other.

A demi-scepticism is the mark of a feeble understanding. It reveals a pusillanimous reasoner, who suffers himself to be alarmed by consequences; a superstitious creature, who thinks he is honouring God by the fetters which he imposes on his reason; a kind of unbeliever who is afraid of unmasking himself to himself. For if truth has nothing to lose by examination, as is the demi-sceptic's conviction, what does he think in the bottom of his heart of those privileged notions which he fears to sound, and which are placed in one of the recesses of his brain, as in a sanctuary to which he dares not draw nigh? (§ 34.)

Scepticism does not suit everybody. It supposes profound and impartial examination. He who doubts because he does not know the grounds of credibility, is no better than an ignoramus. The true sceptic has counted and weighed the reasons. But it

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 87. Grimm, Supp. 148.

Is no light matter to weigh arguments. Who of us knows their value with any nicety? Every mind has its own telescope. An objection that disappears in your eyes, is a colossus in mine : you find an argument trivial that to me is overwhelming. . . . If then it is so difficult to weigh reasons, and if there are no questions which have not two sides, and nearly always in equal measure, how come we to decide with such rapidity? (§ 24.)

When the pious cry out against scepticism, it seems to me that they do not understand their own interest, or else that they are inconsistent. If it is certain that a true faith to be embraced, and a false faith to be abandoned, need only to be thoroughly known, then surely it must be highly desirable that universal doubt should spread over the surface of the earth, and that all nations should consent to have the truth of their religions examined. Our missionaries would find a good half of their work done for them. (§ 36.)

One thing to be remembered is that Diderot, like Vauvenargues, Voltaire, Condorcet, always had Pascal in his mind when dealing with apologetics. They all recognised in him a thinker with a love of truth, as distinguished from the mere priest, Catholic, Anglican, Brahman, or another. "Pascal," says Diderot, "was upright, but he was timid and inclined to credulity. An elegant writer and a profound reasoner, he would doubtless have enlightened the world, if Providence had not abandoned him to people who sacrificed his talents to their own antipathies. How much to be regretted, that he did not leave to the theologians of his time the task of settling their own differences; that he did not give himself up to the search for truth, without reserve and without the fear of offending God by using all the intelligence that God had given him. How much to be regretted that he took for masters men who were not worthy to be his disciples, and was foolish enough to think Arnauld, De Sacy, and Nicole, better men than himself." (§ 14.) The *Philosophic Thoughts* are designed for an answer in form to the more famous *Thoughts* of this champion of popular theology. The first of the following extracts, for instance, recalls a memorable illustration of Pascal's sublime pessimism. A few passages will illustrate sufficiently the line of argument which led the foremost men at the open-

ing of the philosophic revolution to reject the pretensions of Christianity :—

What voices ! what cries ! what groans ! Who is it that has shut up in dungeons all these piteous souls ? What crimes have the poor wretches committed ? Who condemns them to such torments ? *The God whom they have offended.* Who then is this God ? *A God full of goodness.* But would a God full of goodness take delight in bathing himself in tears ? If criminals had to calm the furies of a tyrant, what would they do more ? . . . There are people of whom we ought not to say that they fear God, but that they are horribly afraid of him. . . . Judging from the picture they paint of the Supreme Being, from his wrath, from the rigour of his vengeance, from certain comparisons expressive of the ratio between those whom he leaves to perish and those to whom he deigns to stretch out a hand, the most upright soul would be tempted to wish that such a being did not exist. (§§ 7-9.)

You present to an unbeliever a volume of writings of which you claim to show him the divinity. But, before going into your proofs, he will be sure to put some questions about your collection. Has it always been the same ? Why is it less ample now than it was some centuries ago ? By what right have they banished this work or that, which another sect reveres, and preserved this or that, which the other has repudiated ? . . . You only answer all these difficulties by the avowal that the first foundations of the faith are purely human ; that the choice between the manuscripts, the restoration of passages, finally the collection, has been made according to rules of criticism. Well, I do not refuse to concede to the divinity of the sacred books a degree of faith proportioned to the certainty of these rules. (§ 59.)

People agree that it is of the last importance to employ none but solid arguments for the defence of a creed. Yet they would gladly persecute those who attempt to cry down the bad arguments. What then, is it not enough to be a Christian ? Am I also to be one upon wrong grounds ? (§ 57.)

The less probability a fact has, the more does the testimony of history lose its weight. I should have no difficulty in believing a single honest man who should tell me that the king had just won a complete victory over the allies. But if all Paris were to assure me

that a dead man had come to life again, I should not believe a word of it. That a historian should impose upon us, or that a whole people should be mistaken—there is no miracle in that. (§ 46.)

What is God? A question that we put to children, and that philosophers have much trouble to answer. We know the age at which a child ought to learn to read, to sing, to dance, to begin Latin or geometry. It is only in religion that you take no account of his capacity. He scarcely hears what you say, before he is asked, What is God? It is at the same instant, from the same lips, that he learns that there are ghosts, goblins, were-wolves—and a God. (§ 25.)

The diversity of religious opinions has led the deists to invent an argument that is perhaps more singular than sound. Cicero, having to prove that the Romans were the most warlike people in the world, adroitly draws this conclusion from the lips of their rivals. Gauls, to whom if to any, do you yield the palm for courage? To the Romans. Parthians, after you, who are the bravest of men? The Romans. Africans, whom would you fear, if you were to fear any? The Romans. Let us interrogate the religionists in this fashion, say the deists. Chinese, what religion would be the best, if your own were not the best? Naturalism. Mussulmans, what faith would you embrace, if you abjured Mahomet? Naturalism. Christians, what is the true religion, if it be not Christianity? Judaism. But you, O Jews, what is the true religion, if Judaism be false? Naturalism. Now those, continues Cicero, to whom the second place is awarded by unanimous consent, and who do not in turn concede the first place to any—it is those who incontestably deserve that place. (§ 62.)

In all this we notice one constant characteristic of the eighteenth century controversy about revealed religion. The assailant demands of the defender an answer to all the intellectual or logical objections that could possibly be raised by one who had never been a Christian, and who refused to become a Christian until these objections could be met. No account is taken of the mental conditions by which a creed is engendered and limited; nor of the train of historic circumstance which

prepares men to receive it. The modern apologist escapes by explaining religion; the apologist of a hundred years ago was required to prove it. The end of such a method was inevitably a negation. The objective propositions of a creed with supernatural pretensions can never be demonstrated from natural or rationalistic premisses. And if they could be so demonstrated, it would only be on grounds that are equally good for some other creeds with the same pretensions. The sceptic was left triumphantly weighing one revealed system against another in an equal balance.<sup>2</sup>

The position of the writer of the *Philosophical Thoughts* is distinctly theistic. Yet there is at least one striking passage to show how forcibly some of the arguments on the other side impressed him. "I open," says Diderot, "the pages of a celebrated professor, and I read—'Atheists, I concede to you that movement is essential to matter; what conclusion do you draw from that? That the world results from the fortuitous concourse of atoms? You might as well say that Homer's *Iliad*, or Voltaire's *Henriade*, is a result of the fortuitous concourse of written characters.' Now for my part, I should be very sorry to use that reasoning to an atheist; the comparison would give him a very easy game to play. According to the laws of the analysis of chances, he would say to me, I ought not to be surprised that a thing comes to pass when it is possible, and the difficulty of the event is compensated by the number of throws. There is a certain number of throws in which I would safely back myself to bring 100,000 sixes at once with 100,000 dice. Whatever the

<sup>2</sup> Volney, in a book that was famous in its day, *Les Ruines, ou Méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (1791), resorted to a slight difference of method. Instead of leaving the pretensions of the various creeds to cancel one another, he invented a rather striking scene, in which the priests of each creed are made to listen to the professions of their rival, and then inveigh against his superstition and inconsistency. The assumption on which Diderot's argument rests is, that as so many different creeds all make the same exclusive claim, the claim is equally false throughout. Volney's argument turns more directly on the merits, and implies that all religions are equally morbid or pathological products, because they all lead to conduct condemned by their own most characteristic maxims. Volney's concrete presentation of comparative religion was highly effective for destructive purposes, though it would now be justly thought inadequate. (See *Œuvres de Volney*, i. 109, &c.)

definite number of the letters with which I am invited fortuitously to produce the Iliad, there is a certain definite number of throws which would make the proposal advantageous for me ; nay, my advantage would be infinite if the quantity of throws accorded to me were infinite. Now, you grant to me that matter exists from all eternity, and that movement is essential to it. In return for this concession, I will suppose with you that the world has no limits ; that the multitude of atoms is infinite, and that this order, which astonishes you, nowhere contradicts itself. Well, from these reciprocal admissions there follows nothing else unless it be this, that the possibility of engendering the universe fortuitously is very small, but that the number of throws is infinite, or, in other words, that *the difficulty of the event is more than sufficiently compensated by the multitude of the throws. Therefore, if anything ought to be repugnant to reason, it is the supposition that, —matter being in motion from all eternity, and there being perhaps in the infinite number of possible combinations an infinite number of admirable arrangements, — none of these admirable arrangements would have been met with, out of the infinite multitude of all those which matter successively took on. Therefore the mind ought to be more astonished at the hypothetical duration of chaos.*"<sup>1</sup> (§ 21).

In a short continuation of the Philosophical Thoughts, entitled On the Sufficiency of Natural Religion, Diderot took the next step, and turned towards that faith which the votaries of each creed allow to be the best after their own. Even here he is still in the atmosphere of negation. He desires no more than to show that revealed religion confers no advantages which are not already secured by natural religion. "The revealed law contains no moral præcept which I do not find recommended and practised under the law of nature ; therefore it has taught us nothing new upon morality. The revealed law has brought us no new truth ; for what is a truth but a proposition referring to an object, conceived in terms which present clear ideas to me, and the connection of which with one another is intelligible to me ? Now revealed religion has introduced no such propositions to us. What it has added to the natural law consists of five or six propositions which

<sup>1</sup> See on this, Lange, ii. 308.

are not a whit more intelligible to me than if they were expressed in ancient Carthaginian, inasmuch as the ideas represented by the terms, and the connection among these ideas, escape me entirely."<sup>1</sup>

There is no sign in this piece that Diderot had examined the positive grounds of natural religion, or that he was ready with any adequate answer to the argument which Butler had brought forward in the previous decade of the century. We do not see that he is aware as yet of there being as valid objections on his own sceptical principles to the alleged data of naturalistic deism, as to the pretensions of a supernatural religion. He was content with Shaftesbury's position.

Shaftesbury's influence on Diderot was permanent. It did not long remain so full and entire as it was now in the sphere of religious belief, but the traces of it never disappeared from his notions on morals and art. Shaftesbury's cheerfulness and geniality in philosophizing were thoroughly sympathetic to Diderot. The optimistic harmony which the English philosopher, coming after Leibnitz, assumed as the starting-point of his ethical and religious ideas, was not only highly congenial to Diderot's sanguine temperament; it was a most attractive way of escape from the disorderly and confused theological wilderness of sin, asceticism, miracle, and the other monkeries. This naturalistic religion may seem a very unsafe and comfortless halting-place to us. But to men who heard of religion only in connection with the Bull Unigenitus and confessional certificates, with some act of intolerance or cruelty, with futile disputes about grace and the Five Propositions, the naturalism which Shaftesbury taught in prose and Pope versified was like the dawn after the foulness of night. Those who wished to soften the inhuman rigour of the criminal procedure of the time<sup>2</sup> used to appeal from customary

<sup>1</sup> *De la Suffisance de la Religion Naturelle*, § 5.

<sup>2</sup> It is well to remember that torture was not abolished in France until the Revolution. A Catholic writer makes the following judicious remark: "We cannot study the eighteenth century without being struck by the immoral consequences that inevitably followed for the population of Paris from the frequency and the hideous details of criminal executions. In reading the journals of the time, we are amazed at the place taken in popular life by the scenes of the Grève. It was the theatre of the day. The gibbet and the wheel did their



ordinances and written laws to the law natural. The law natural was announced to have preceded any law of human devising. In the same way, those who wished to disperse the darkness of unintelligible dogmas and degraded ecclesiastical usages, appealed to the simplicity, light, and purity of that natural religion which was supposed to have been overlaid and depraved by the special superstitions of the different communities of the world.

"Pope's Essay on Man," wrote Voltaire after his return from England (1728), "seems to me the finest didactic poem, the most useful, the most sublime, that was ever written in any tongue. 'Tis true the whole substance of it is to be found in Shaftesbury's Characteristics, and I do not know why Pope gives all the honour of it to Bolingbroke, without saying a word of the celebrated Shaftesbury, the pupil of Locke."<sup>1</sup> The ground of this enthusiastic appreciation of the English naturalism was not merely that it made morality independent of religion, which Shaftesbury took great pains to do. It also identified religion with all that is beautiful and harmonious in the universal scheme. It surrounded the new faith with a pure and lofty poetry, that enabled it to confront the old on more than equal terms of dignity and elevation. Shaftesbury, and Diderot after him, ennobled human nature by placing the principle of virtue, the sense of goodness, within the breast of man. Diderot held to this idea throughout, as we shall see. That he did so explains a kind of phraseology about virtue and morality in his letters to Madame Voland and elsewhere, which would otherwise sound disagreeably like cant. Finally, Shaftesbury's peculiar attribution of beauty to morality, his reference of ethical matters to a kind of taste, the tolerably equal importance attributed by him to a sense of beauty and to the moral sense, all impressed Diderot with a mark that was not effaced. In the text of the Inquiry the author pronounces it a childish affectation in the eyes of any man who

work almost periodically, and people looked on while poor wretches writhed in slow agony all day long. Sometimes the programme was varied by decapitation and even by the stake. Torture had its legends and its heroes—the every-day talk of the generation which, having begun by seeing Damiens torn by red-hot pincers, was to end by rending Foulon limb from limb." (*Carné, Monarchie française au 18<sup>me</sup> Siècle*, p. 493.)

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres sur les Anglais*, xxiii.

weighs things maturely to deny that there is in moral beings, just as in corporeal objects, a true and essential beauty, a real sublime. The eagerness with which Diderot seized on this idea from the first, is shown in the declamatory foot-note which he here appends to his original.<sup>1</sup> It was the source, by a process of inverted application, of that ethical colouring in his criticisms on art which made them so new and so interesting, because it carried æsthetic beyond technicalities, and associated it with the real impulses and circumstances of human life.<sup>2</sup>

One of Diderot's writings composed about our present date (1747), the *Promenade du Sceptique*, did not see the light until after his death. His daughter tells us that a police agent came one day to the house, and proceeded to search the author's room. He found a manuscript, said, "Good, that is what I am looking for," thrust it into his pocket, and went away. Diderot did his best to recover his piece, but never succeeded.<sup>3</sup> A copy of it came into the hands of Naigeon, and it seems to have been retained by Malesherbes, the director of the press, out of goodwill to the author. If it had been printed, it would certainly have cost him a sojourn in Vincennes.

We have at first some difficulty in realising how the police could know the contents of an obscure author's desk. For one thing we have to remember that Paris, though it had been enormously increased in the days of Law and the System (1719-20),<sup>2</sup> was still of a comparatively manageable size. In 1720, though the population of the whole realm was only fourteen or fifteen millions, that of Paris had reached no less a figure than a million and a half. After the explosion of the System, its artificial expansion naturally came to an end. By the middle of the century the highest estimate of the population does not make it much

<sup>1</sup> *Essai sur le Mérite*, I. ii. § 3. *Œuv.* i. 33.

<sup>2</sup> "Shaftesbury is one of the most important apparitions of the eighteenth century. All the greatest spirits of that time, not only in England, but also Leibnitz, Voltaire, Diderot, Lessing, Mendelssohn, Wieland, and Herder, drew the strongest nourishment from him." (Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte des 18ten Jahrhunderts: 1er Theil*, 188.) See also Lange's *Gesch. des Materialismus*, i. 306, &c. An excellent account of Shaftesbury is given by Mr. Leslie Stephen, in his *Essays on Free-thinking and Plain-speaking*.

<sup>3</sup> *Œuvres*, i. xlvi.

more than eight hundred thousand.<sup>1</sup> This, unlike the socially unwholesome and monstrous agglomerations of Paris or London in our own time, was a population over which police supervision might be made tolerably effective. It was more like a very large provincial town. Again, the inhabitants were marked off into groups or worlds with a definiteness that is now no longer possible. One-fifth of the population, for instance, consisted of domestic servants.<sup>2</sup> There were between twenty-eight and thirty thousand professional beggars.<sup>3</sup> The legal circle was large, and was deeply engrossed by its own interests and troubles. The world of authorship, though extremely noisy and profoundly important, still made only a small group. One effect of a censorship is to produce much gossip and whispering about suspected productions before they see the light, and these whispers let the police into as many secrets as they choose to know.

In Diderot's case, his unsuspecting good-nature to all comers made his affairs accessible enough. His house was the resort of all the starving hacks in Paris, and he has left us more than one graphic picture of the literary drudge of that time. He writes, for instance, about a poor devil to whom he had given a manuscript to copy. "The time for which he had promised it to me expired, and as my man did not appear, I became uneasy, and started in search of him. I found him in a hole about as big as my fist, almost pitch-dark, without the smallest scrap of curtain or hanging to cover the nakedness of his walls, a couple of straw-bottomed chairs, a truckle-bed with a quilt riddled by the moths, a box in the corner of the chimney and rags of every sort stuck upon it, a small tin lamp to which a bottle served as support, and

<sup>1</sup> Jobez, *France sous Louis XV.* ii. 373. There were, in 1725, 24,000 houses, 20,000 carriages, and 120,000 horses. (Martin's *Hist. de France*, xv. 116.)

<sup>2</sup> The records of Paris in this century contain more than one illustration of the turbulence of this odious army of lackeys. Barbier, i. 118. For the way in which their insolence was fostered, see Saint-Simon, xii. 354, &c. The number of lackeys retained seems to have been extraordinarily great in proportion to the total of annual expenditure, and this is a curious point in the manners of the time. See Voltaire, *Dict. Phil.* § v. *Économie Domestique* (liv. 182).

<sup>3</sup> Duclos, *Mém. secrets sur le Règne de Louis XV.* iii. 306.

on a shelf some dozen first-rate books. I sat talking there for three-quarters of an hour. My man was as bare as a worm, lean, black, dry, but perfectly serene. He said nothing, but munched his crust of bread with good appetite, and bestowed a caress from time to time on his beloved, on the miserable bedstead that took up two-thirds of his room. If I had never learnt before that happiness resides in the soul, my Epictetus of Hyacinth Street would have taught it me right thoroughly.”<sup>1</sup>

The history of one of these ragged clients is to our point. “Among those,” he wrote to Madame Voland,<sup>2</sup> “whom chance and misery sent to my address was one Glénat, who knew mathematics, wrote a good hand, and was in want of bread. I did all I could to extricate him from his embarrassments. I went begging for customers for him on every side. If he came at meal-times, I would not let him go; if he lacked shoes, I gave him them; now and then I slipped a shilling into his hands as well. He had the air of the worthiest man in the world, and he even bore his neediness with a certain gaiety that used to amuse me. I was fond of chatting with him; he seemed to set little store by fortune, fame, and most of the other things that charm or dazzle us in life. Seven or eight days ago Damilaville wrote to me to send this man to him, for one of his friends who had a manuscript for him to copy. I send him; the manuscript is entrusted to him—a work on religion and government. I do not know how it came about, but that manuscript is now in the hands of the lieutenant of police. Damilaville gives me word of this. I hasten to my friend Glénat, to warn him to count no more upon me. ‘And why am I not to count upon you?’ ‘Because you are a marked man. The police have their eyes upon you, and ’tis impossible to send work to you.’ ‘But, my dear sir, there’s no risk, so long as you entrust nothing reprehensible to my hands. The police only come here when they scent game. I cannot tell how they do it, but they are never mistaken.’ ‘Ah well, I at any rate know how it is, and you have let me see much more in the matter than I ever expected to learn from you,’ and with that I turn my back on my rascal.” Diderot having occasion to visit

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 91.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 130.

the lieutenant of police, introduced the matter, and could not withhold an energetic remonstrance against such an odious abuse of a man's kindness of heart, as the introduction of spies to his fireside. M. de Sartine laughed and Diderot took his leave, vowing that all the wretches who should come to him for the future, with cuffs dirty and torn, with holes in their stockings and holes in their shoes, with hair all unkempt, in shabby overcoats with many rents, or scanty black suits with starting seams, with all the tones and looks of distressed worth, would henceforth seem to him no better than police emissaries and scoundrels set to spy on him. The vow, we may be sure, was soon forgotten, but the story shows how seriously in one respect the man of letters in France was worse off than his brother in England.

The world would have suffered no irreparable loss if the police had thrown the Sceptic's Walk into the fire. It is an allegory designed to contrast the life of religion, the life of philosophy, and the life of sensual pleasure. Of all forms of composition, an allegory most depends for its success upon the rapidity of the writer's eye for new felicities. Accuracy, verisimilitude, sustentation, count for nothing in comparison with imaginative adroitness and variety. Bunyan had such an eye, and so, with infinitely more vivacity, had Voltaire. Diderot had not the deep sincerity or realism of conviction of the one; nor had he the inimitable power of throwing himself into a fancy, that was possessed by the other. He was the least agile, the least felicitous, the least ready, of composers. His allegory of the avenue of thorns, the avenue of chestnut-trees, and the avenue of flowers, is an allegory, unskilful, obvious, poor, and not any more amusing than if its matter had been set forth without any attempt at fanciful decoration. The blinded saints among the thorns, and the voluptuous sinners among the flowers, are rather mechanical figures. The translation into the dialect required by the allegorical situation, of a sceptic's aversion for gross superstition on the one hand, and for gross hedonism on the other, is forced and wooden. The most interesting of the three sections is the second, containing a discussion in which the respective parts are taken by a deist, a pantheist, a subjective idealist, a sceptic, and an atheist. The allegory falls into the background, and we have

a plain statement of some of the objections that may be made by the sceptical atheist both to revelation and to natural religion. A starry sky calls forth the usual glorification of the maker of so much beauty. "That is all imagination," rejoins the atheist. "It is mere presumption. We have before us an unknown machine, on which certain observations have been made. Ignorant people who have only examined a single wheel of it, of which they hardly know more than a tooth or two, form conjectures upon the way in which their cogs fit in with a hundred thousand other wheels. And then to finish like artisans, they label the work with the name of its author."

The defender justifies this by the argument from a repeater-watch, of which Paley and others have made so much use. We at once ascribe the structure and movement of a repeater-watch to intelligent creation. "No—things are not equal," says the atheist. "You are comparing a finished work, whose origin and manufacture we know, to an infinite piece of complexity, whose beginnings, whose present condition, and whose end are all alike unknown, and about whose author you have nothing better than guesses."

But does not its structure announce an author? "No; you do not see who nor what he is. Who told you that the order you admire here belies itself nowhere else? Are you allowed to conclude from a point in space to infinite space? You pile a vast piece of ground with earth-heaps thrown here or there by chance, but among which the worm and the ant find convenient dwelling-places enough. What would you think of these insects, if, reasoning after your fashion, they fell into raptures over the intelligence of the gardener who had arranged all these materials so delightfully for their convenience?"<sup>1</sup>

In this rudimentary form the chief speaker presses some of the objections to optimistic deism from the point of view of the fixed limitations, the inevitable relativity, of human knowledge. This kind of objection had been more pithily expressed by Pascal long before, in the famous article of his *Thoughts*, on the difficulty of demonstrating the existence of a deity by light of nature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Prom. du Sceptique. Œuv. i. 229.*

<sup>2</sup> "If there is a God, he is infinitely incomprehensible, since, being without parts or limits, he has no relation to us: we are therefore incapable of knowing

Diderot's argument does not extend to dogmatic denial. It only shows that the deist is exposed to an attack from the same sceptical armoury, from which he had drawn his own weapons for attacking revelation. It is impossible to tell how far Diderot went at this moment. The trenchancy with which his atheist urges his reasoning, proves that the writer was fully alive to its force. On the other hand, the atheist is left in the midst of a catastrophe. On his return home, he finds his children murdered, his house pillaged, and his wife carried off. And we are told that he could not complain on his own principles. If the absence of witnesses allowed the robber to commit his crime with impunity, why should he not? Again, there is a passage in which the writer seems to be speaking his own opinions. An interlocutor maintains the importance of keeping the people in bondage to certain prejudices. "What prejudices? If a man once admits the existence of a God, the reality of moral good and evil, the immortality of the soul, future rewards and punishments, what need has he of prejudices? Supposing him initiated in all the mysteries of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, the Trinity, hypostatical union, predestination, incarnation, and the rest, will he be any the better citizen?"<sup>1</sup>

In truth, Diderot's mind was at this time floating in an atmosphere of rationalistic negation, and the moral of his piece, as he hints, points first to the extravagance of Catholicism, next to the vanity of the pleasures of the world, and lastly, to the unfathomable uncertainty of philosophy. Still, we may discern a significant leaning towards the theory of the eternity of matter, which has arranged itself and assumed variety of form by virtue of its inherent quality of motion.\*

It is a characteristic and displeasing mark of the time that Diderot in the midst of these serious speculations, should have set himself (1748) to the composition of a story in the kind which the author of the *Sofa* had made highly popular. The mechanism of this deplorable piece is more grossly disgusting—I mean æsthetically, not morally—than anything to be found elsewhere in

what he is, or if he is. That being so, who shall venture to undertake the solution of the question? Not we, at any rate, who have no relation to him."—*Pensées*, II. iii. 1.

<sup>1</sup> Page 182.

<sup>2</sup> Page 223.

the too voluminous library of impure literature. The idea would seem to have been borrowed from one of the old *Fabliaux*.<sup>1</sup> But what is tolerable in the quaint and naïf verse of the twelfth or thirteenth century, becomes shocking when deliberately rendered by a grave man into bald unblushing prose of the eighteenth. The humour, the rich sparkle, the wit, the merry *gaillardise*, have all vanished; we are left with the vapid dregs of an obscene anachronism. Mr. Carlyle, who knows how to be manly in these matters, and affects none of the hypocritical airs of our conventional criticism, yet has not more energetically than truly pronounced this "the beastliest of all past, present, or future dull novels." As "the next mortal creature, even a Reviewer, again compelled to glance into that book," I have felt the propriety of our humorist's injunction to such a one, "to bathe himself in running water, put on change of raiment, and be unclean until the even." Diderot himself, as might have been expected, soon had the grace to repent him of this shameful book, and could never hear it mentioned without a very lively embarrassment.<sup>2</sup>

As I have said before,<sup>3</sup> it was such books as this, as Crébillon's novels, as Duclos's *Confessions du Comte X.*, and the dissoluteness of manners indicated by them, which invested Rousseau's *New Heloïsa* (1761) with its delightful and irresistible fascinations. Having pointed out elsewhere the significance of the licentiousness from which the philosophic party did not escape untainted,<sup>4</sup> I need not here do more than make two short remarks. First, the corruption which had seized the court after the death of Lewis XIV. in the course of a few years had reached the middle class in the town. The loosening of social fibre, caused by the insensate speculation at the time of Law, no doubt furthered the spread of demoralization. Second, the reaction against the Church involved among its other elements a passionate contempt for all asceticism. This happened to fall in with the general relaxation of morals that followed Lewis's gloomy rigour. Consequently even men of pure

<sup>1</sup> Barbazan's *Fabliaux et Contes*, iii. 409 (ed. 1808). The learned Barbazan's first edition was published in 1756, and so Diderot may well have heard some of the contents of the work then in progress.

<sup>2</sup> Naigeon.

<sup>3</sup> In my *Rousseau*, p. 243 (new ed.).

<sup>4</sup> *Voltaire*, p. 108 (3rd ed.).



life, like Condorcet, carried the theoretical protest against asceticism so far as to vindicate the practical immorality of the time. This is one of those enormous drawbacks that people seldom take into account when they are enumerating the blessings of superstition. Mediæval superstition had produced some advantages, but now came the set-off. Durable morality had been associated with a transitory religious faith. The faith fell into intellectual discredit, and sexual morality shared its decline for a short season. This must always be the natural consequence of building sound ethics on the shifting sands and rotting foundations of theology.

Such literature as these tales of Diderot's, was the mirror both of the ordinary practical sentiment and the philosophic theory. A nation pays dearly for one of these outbreaks, when they happen to stamp themselves in a literary form that endures. There are those who hold that Louvet's *Faublas* is to this day a powerful agent in the depravation of the youth of France. Diderot, however, had not the most characteristic virtues of French writing; he was no master in the art of the naïf, nor in delicate malice, nor in sprightly cynicism. His book, consequently, has not lived, and we need not waste more words upon it. *Chaque esprit a sa lie*, wrote one who for a while had sat at Diderot's feet;<sup>1</sup> and we may dismiss this tale as the lees of Diderot's strong, careless, sensualized understanding. He was afterwards the author of a work, *La Religieuse*, on which the superficial critic may easily pour out the vials of affected wrath. There, however, he was executing a profound pathological study in a serious spirit. If the subject is horrible, we have to blame the composition of human character, or the mischievousness of a human institution. *La Religieuse* is no continuation of the vein of defilement which began and ended with the story of 1748—a story which is one among so many illustrations of Guizot's saying about the eighteenth century, that it was the most tempting and seductive of all centuries, for it promised full satisfaction at once to all the greatneses of humanity and to all its weaknesses. Hettner quotes a passage from the minor writings of Niebuhr, in which the historian compares Diderot with Petronius, as having both of them

<sup>1</sup> Joubert.

been honest and well-intentioned men, who in shameless times were carried towards cynicism by their deep contempt for the prevailing vice. "If Diderot were alive now," says Niebuhr, "and if Petronius had only lived in the fourth instead of the third century, then the painting of obscenity would have been odious to them, and the inducement to it infinitely smaller."<sup>1</sup> There is no trace in Diderot of this deep contempt for the viciousness of his time. All that can be said is that he did not escape it in his earlier years, in spite of the natural wholesomeness and rectitude of his character.

It is worthy of remark that the dissoluteness of the middle portion of the century was not associated with the cynical and contemptuous view about women that usually goes with relaxed morality. There was a more or less distinct consciousness of a truth which has ever since grown into clearer prominence with the advance of thought since the Revolution. It is that the sphere and destiny of women are among the three or four foremost questions in social improvement. This is now perceived on all sides, profound as are the differences of opinion upon the proper solution of the problem. A hundred years ago this perception was vague and indefinite, but there was an unmistakable apprehension that the Catholic ideal of womanhood was no more adequate to the facts of life, than Catholic views about science, or property, or labour, or political order and authority.

Diderot has left some curious and striking reflections upon the fate and character of women. He gives no signs of feeling after social reorganization; he only speaks as one brooding in uneasy meditation over a very mournful perplexity. There is no sentimentalizing, after the fashion of Jean Jacques. He does not neglect the plain physical facts, about which it is so difficult in an age of morbid reserve to speak with freedom, yet about which it is fatal to be silent. He indulged in none of those mischievous flatteries of women, which satisfy narrow observers, or coxcombs, or the uxorious. "Never forget," he said, "that for lack of reflection and principles, nothing penetrates down to a certain profoundness of conviction in the understanding of women. The

<sup>1</sup> Hettner, *Literaturgeschichte des 18ten Jahrhunderts*, ii. 301.

ideas of justice, virtue, vice, goodness, badness, float on the surface of their souls. They have preserved self-love and personal interest with all the energy of nature. Although more civilized than we are outwardly, they have remained true savages inwardly. . . . It is in the passion of love, the access of jealousy, the transports of maternal tenderness, the instants of superstition, the way in which they show epidemic and popular notions, that women amaze us; fair as the seraphin of Klopstock, terrible as the fiends of Milton. . . . The distractions of a busy and contentious life break up our passions. A woman, on the contrary, broods over her passions; they are a fixed point on which her idleness or the frivolity of her duties holds her attention fast. . . . Impenetrable in dissimulation, cruel in vengeance, tenacious in their designs, without scruples about the means of success, animated by a deep and secret hatred against the despotism of man—it seems as if there were among them a sort of league, such as exists among the priests of all nations. . . . The symbol of women in general is that of the Apocalypse, on the front of which is inscribed, *Mystery*. . . . If we have more reason than women have, they have far more instinct than we have.”<sup>2</sup> All this was said in no bitterness, but in the spirit of the strong observer.

Cynical bitterness is as misplaced as frivolous adulation. Diderot had a deep pity for women. Their physical weaknesses moved him to compassion. To these are added the burden of their maternal function, and the burden of unequal laws. “The moment which shall deliver the girl from subjection to her parents is come; her imagination opens to a future thronged by chimæras; her heart swims in secret delight. Rejoice while thou canst, luckless creature! Time would have weakened the tyranny that thou hast left; time will strengthen the tyranny that awaits thee. They choose a husband for her. She becomes a mother. It is in anguish, at the peril of their lives, at the cost of their charms, often to the damage of their health, that they give birth to their little ones. The organs that mark their sex are subject to two incurable maladies. There is, perhaps, no joy comparable to that of the mother as she looks on her first-born; but the moment is

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres*, ii. 260, etc.

dearly bought. Time advances, beauty passes; there come the years of neglect, of spleen, of weariness. 'Tis in pain that Nature disposes them for maternity; in pain and illness, dangerous and prolonged, she brings maternity to its close. What is a woman after that? Neglected by her husband, left by her children, a nullity in society, then piety becomes her one and last resource. In nearly every part of the world, the cruelty of the civil laws against women is added to the cruelty of Nature. They have been treated like weak-minded children. There is no sort of vexation which, among civilized peoples, man cannot inflict upon woman with impunity."<sup>1</sup>

The thought went no further, in Diderot's mind, than this pathetic ejaculation. He left it to the next generation, to Condorcet and others, to attack the problem practically; effectively to assert the true theory that we must look to social emancipation in women, and moral discipline in men, to redress the physical disadvantages. Meanwhile Diderot deserves credit for treating the position and character of women in a civilized society with a sense of reality; and for throwing aside those faded gallantries of poetic and literary convention, that screen a broad and dolorous gulf.

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.* ii. 258-9. *De l'Essai sur les Femmes, par Thomas.* See Grimm's *Corr. Lit.* vii. 451, where the book is disparaged; and viii. 1, where Diderot's view of it is given. Thomas (1732-85) belonged to the philosophical party, but not to the militant section of it. He was a serious and orderly person in his life, and enjoyed the closest friendship with Madame Necker. His enthusiasm for virtue, justice, and freedom, expressed with much magniloquence, made him an idol in the respectable circle which Madame Necker gathered round her. He has been justly, though perhaps harshly, described as a "valetudinarian Grandison." (*Albert's Lit. Française au 18ème Siècle*, p. 423.)

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE NEW PHILOSOPHY.

IT is a common prejudice to treat Voltaire as if he had done nothing save write the *Pucelle* and mock at Habakkuk. Every serious and instructed student knows better. Voltaire's popularization of the philosophy of Newton (1738) was a stimulus of the greatest importance to new thought in France. In a chapter of this work he had explained with his usual matchless terseness and lucidity Berkeley's theory of vision. The principle of this theory is, as every one knows, that figures, magnitudes, situations, distances, are not sensations but inferences; they are not the immediate revelations of sight, but the products of association and intellectual construction; they are not directly judged by vision, but by imagination and experience. If this be so, neither situation, nor distance, nor magnitude, nor figure, would be at once discerned by one born blind, supposing him suddenly to receive sight. Voltaire then describes the results of the operation performed by Cheselden (1728) on a lad who had been blind from his birth. This experiment was believed to confirm all that Locke and Berkeley had foreseen, for it was long before the patient could distinguish objects by size, distance, or shape.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Elémens de la Philosophie de Newton*, Pt. II. ch. vii. Berkeley himself only refers once to Cheselden's case: *Theory of Vision vindicated*, § 71. Professor Fraser, in his important edition of Berkeley's works (i. 444), reproduces from the *Philosophical Transactions* the original account of the operation, which is unfortunately much less clear and definite than Voltaire's emphasized version would make it, though its purport is distinct enough.

Condillac had renewed the interest which Voltaire had first kindled in the subject, by referring to Cheselden's experiment in his first work, which was published in 1746.<sup>1</sup>

It happened that in 1748 Réaumur couched the eyes of a girl who had been born blind. Diderot sought to be admitted to the operation, but the favour was denied him, and he expressed his resentment in terms which, as we shall see, cost him very dear. As he could not witness the experiment, he began to meditate upon the subject, and the result was the *Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who See*, published in 1749—the date, it may be observed in passing, of another very important work in the development of materialistic speculation, David Hartley's *Observations on man, his frame, his duty, and his expectations*. Diderot's real disappointment at not being admitted to the operation was slight. In a vigorous passage he shows the difficulties in the way of conducting such an experiment under the conditions necessary to make it conclusive. To prepare the born-blind to answer philosophical interrogatories truly, and then to put these interrogatories rightly, would have been a feat, he declares, not unworthy of the united talents of Newton, Descartes, Locke, and Leibnitz. Unless the patient were placed in such conditions as this, Diderot thinks there would be more profit in questioning a blind person of good sense, than in the answers of an uneducated person receiving sight for the first time under abnormal and bewildering circumstances.<sup>2</sup> In this he was undoubtedly right. If the experiment could be prepared under the delicate conditions proper to make it demonstrative evidence, it would be final. But the experiment had certainly not been so prepared in his time, and probably never will be.<sup>3</sup>

Read in the light of the rich and elaborate speculative literature which England is producing in our own day, Diderot's once famous Letter on the Blind seems both crude and loose in its

<sup>1</sup> *Essai sur l'Origine des Connaissances humaines*, I. § 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Lett. sur les Aveugles*, 323-4. Condorcet attaches a higher value to Cheselden's operation; *Œuv.* ii. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. McCosh (*Exam. of J. S. Mill's Philosophy*, p. 163) quotes what seems to be the best reported case, by a Dr. Franz, of Leipzig; and Prof. Fraser, in the appendix to Berkeley (*loc. cit.*), quotes another good case by Mr. Nunnely. See also Mill's *Exam. of Hamilton*, p. 288 (3rd ed.)

thinking. Yet considering the state of philosophy in France at the time of its appearance, we are struck by the acuteness, the good sense, and the originality of many of its positions. It was the first effective introduction into France of these great and fundamental principles; that all knowledge is relative to our intelligence, that thought is not the measure of existence, nor the conceivableness of a proposition the test of its truth, and that our experience is not the limit to the possibilities of things. That is an impatient criticism which dismisses the French philosophers with some light word as radically shallow and impotent. Diderot grasped the doctrine of Relativity in some of the most important and far-reaching of all its bearings. The fact that he and his allies used the doctrine as a weapon of combat against the standing organization, is exactly what makes their history worth writing about. The standing organization was the antagonistic doctrine incarnate. It made anthropomorphism and the absolute the very base and spring alike of individual and of social life. No growth was possible until this speculative base had been transformed. Hence the profound significance of what looks like a mere discussion of one of the minor problems of metaphysics. Diderot was not the first to discover Relativity, nor did he establish it; but it was he who introduced it into the literature of his country at the moment when circumstances were ripe for it.

Condillac, as we have said, had published his first work, the *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, three years before (1746.) This was a simple and undeveloped rendering of the doctrine of Locke, that the ultimate source of our notions lies in impressions made upon the senses, shaped and combined by reflection. It was not until 1754 that Condillac published his more celebrated treatise on the *Sensations*, in which he advanced a stride beyond Locke, and instead of tracing our notions to the double source of sensation and reflection, maintained that reflection itself is nothing but sensation "differently transformed." In the first book, again, he had disputed Berkeley's theory of vision: in the second, he gave a reasoned adhesion to it. Now Diderot and Condillac had first been brought together by Rousseau, when all three were needy wanderers about the streets of Paris. They used to dine together once a week at a tavern,

and it was Diderot who persuaded a bookseller to give Condillac a hundred crowns for his first manuscript. "The Paris book-sellers," says Rousseau, "are very arrogant and harsh to beginners; and metaphysics, then extremely little in fashion, did not offer a very particularly attractive subject."<sup>1</sup> The constant intercourse between Diderot and Condillac in the interval between the two works of the great apostle of Sensationalism, may well account for the remarkable development in doctrine. This is one of the many examples of the share of Diderot's energetic and stimulating intelligence, in directing and nourishing the movement of the time, its errors and precipitancies included. On the other hand, the share of Condillac in providing a text for Diderot's first considerable performance, is equally evident.

The Letter on the Blind is an inquiry how far a modification of the five senses, such as the congenital absence of one of them, would involve a corresponding modification of the ordinary notions acquired by men who are normally endowed in their capacity for sensation. It considers the Intellect in a case where it is deprived of one of the senses. The writer opens with an account of a visit made by himself and some friends to a man born blind at Puisaux, a place seventy miles from Paris. They asked him in what way he thought of the eyes. "They are an organ on which the air produces the same effect as my stick upon my hand." A mirror he described "as a machine which sets things in relief away from themselves, if they are properly placed in relation to it." This conception had formed itself in his mind in the following way. The blind man only knows objects by touch. He is aware, on the testimony of others, that we know objects by sight as he knows them by touch; he can form no other notion. He is aware, again, that a man cannot see his own face, though he can touch it. Sight, then, he concludes, is a sort of touch, which only extends to objects different from our own visage, and remote from us. Now touch only conveys to him the idea of relief. A mirror, therefore, must be a machine which sets us in relief out of ourselves. How many philosophers, cries Diderot, have employed less subtlety to reach notions just as untrue?

<sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, II. vii.



The born-blind had a memory for sound in a surprising degree, and countenances do not present more diversity to us than he observed in voices. The voice has for such persons an infinite number of delicate shades that escape us, because we have not the same reason for attention that the blind have. The help that our senses lend to one another, is an obstacle to their perfection.

The blind man said he should have been tempted to regard persons endowed with sight as superior intelligences, if he had not found out a hundred times how inferior we are in other respects. How do we know—Diderot reflects upon this—that all the animals do not reason in the same way, and look upon themselves as our equals or superiors, notwithstanding our more complex and efficient intelligence? They may accord to us a reason with which we should still have much need of their instinct, while they claim to be endowed with an instinct which enables them to do very well without our reason.

When asked whether he should be glad to have sight, the born-blind replied that, apart from curiosity, he would be just as well pleased to have long arms : his hands would tell him what is going on in the moon, better than our eyes or telescopes ; and the eyes cease to see earlier than the hands lose the sense of touch. It would therefore be just as good to perfect in him the organ that he had, as to confer upon him another which he had not. This is untrue. No conceivable perfection of touch would reveal phenomena of light, and the longest arms must leave those phenomena undisclosed.

After recounting various other peculiarities of thought, Diderot notices that the blind man attaches slight importance to the sense of shame. He would hardly understand the utility of clothes, for instance, except as a protection against cold. He frankly told his philosophizing visitors that he could not see why one part of the body should be covered rather than another. "I have never doubted," says Diderot, "that the state of our organs and senses has much influence both on our metaphysics and our morality." This, I may observe, does not in the least show that in a society of human beings, not blind, but endowed with vision, the sense of physical shame is a mere prejudice of which philosophy will

rid us. The fact that a blind man discerns no ill in nakedness, has no bearing on the value or naturalness of shame among people with eyes. And moreover, the fact that delicacy or shame is not a universal human impulse, but is established, and its scope defined, by a varying etiquette, does not in the least affect the utility or wisdom of such an artificial establishment and definition. The grounds of delicacy, though connected with the senses, are fixed by considerations that spring from the social reason. It seems to be true, as Diderot says, that the born-blind are at first without physical delicacy; because delicacy has its root in the consciousness that we are observed, while the born-blind are not conscious that they are observed. It is found that one of the most important parts of their education is to impress this knowledge upon them.\* But the artificiality of a moral acquisition is obviously no test of its worth, nor of the reasons for preserving it. Diderot exclaims, "Ah, madam, how different is the morality of a blind man from ours; and how the morality of the deaf would differ from that of the blind; and if a being should have a sense more than we have, how wofully imperfect would he find our morality!" This is plainly a crude and erroneous way of illustrating the important truth of the strict relativity of ethical standards and maxims. Diderot speaks as if they were relative simply and solely to our five wits, and would vary with them only. Everybody now has learnt that morality depends not merely on the five wits, but on the mental constitution within, and on the social conditions without. It is to these rather than to the number of our senses, that moral ideas are relative.

Passing over various other remarks, we come to those pages in the Letter which apply the principle of relativity to the master-conception of God. Diderot's argument on this point naturally drew keener attention than the more disinterestedly scientific parts of his contribution. People were not strongly agitated by the question whether a blind man who had learned to distinguish a sphere from a cube by touch, would instantly identify each of

\* Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Men and Animals*, c. xiii. p. 312, and also pp. 335-37. This fact, so far as it goes, seems to make against the theory of transmitted sentiments.

them if he received sight.<sup>1</sup> The question whether a blind man has as good reasons for believing in the existence of a God as a man with sight can find, was of more vivid interest. As a matter of fact, Diderot's treatment of the narrower question (pp. 324, etc.) is more closely coherent than his treatment of the wider one, for the simple reason that the special limitation of experience in the born-blind cannot fairly be made to yield any decisive evidence on the great, the insoluble enigma.

Here, as in the other part of his essay, Diderot followed the method of interrogating the blind themselves. In this instance, he turned to the most extraordinary example in history, of intellectual mastery and scientific penetration in one who practically belonged to the class of the born-blind; and this too in dealing with subjects where sight might be thought most indispensable. From 1711 to 1739 one of the professors of mathematics at Cambridge was Nicholas Saunderson, who had lost his sight before he was twelve months old. He was a man of striking mental vigour, an original and efficient teacher, and the author of a book upon algebra which was considered meritorious in its day. His knowledge of optics was highly remarkable. He had distinct ideas of perspective, of the projections of the sphere, and of the forms assumed by plane or solid figures in certain positions. For performing computations he devised a machine of great ingenuity, which also served the purpose, with certain modifications, of representing geometrical diagrams. In religion he was a sceptic or something more, and in his last hours Diderot supposes him to have engaged in a discussion with a minister of religion, upon the arguments for the existence of a deity drawn from final causes.

<sup>1</sup> Locke answered that the man would not distinguish the cube from the sphere, until he had identified by actual touch the source of his former tactual impression with the object making a given visual impression. Condillac, while making just objections to the terms in which Molyneux propounded the question, answered it differently from Locke. Diderot expresses his own opinion thus: "I think that when the eyes of the born-blind are opened for the first time to the light, he will perceive nothing at all; that some time will be necessary for his eye to make experiments for itself; but that it will make these experiments itself, and in its own way, and without the help of touch." This is in harmony with the modern doctrine, that there is an inherited aptitude of structure (in the eye, for instance) but that experience is an essential condition to the development and perfecting of this aptitude.

This discussion Diderot professes to reproduce, and he makes Saunderson discourse with much eloquence and some pathos.

By one of those mystifications which make the French polemical literature of the eighteenth century the despair of bibliographers, Diderot cites as his authority a *Life of Saunderson*, by Dr. Inchlif. He sets forth the title with great circumstantiality, but no such book exists or ever did exist. The Royal Society of London, however, took the jest of fathering atheism on one of its members in bad part, and Diderot was systematically excluded from the honour of admission to that learned body, as he was excluded all his life from the French Academy.

The reasoning which Diderot puts into the professor's mouth is at first a fervid enlargement of the text, that the argument drawn from the wonders of nature is very weak evidence for blind men. Our power of creating new objects, so to speak, by means of a little mirror, is far more incomprehensible to them, than the stars which they have been condemned never to behold. The luminous ball that moves from east to west through the heavens, is a less astonishing thing to them than the fire on the hearth which they can lessen or augment at pleasure. "Why talk to me," says Saunderson, "of all that fine spectacle which has never been made for me? I have been condemned to pass my life in darkness; and you cite marvels that I cannot understand, and that are only evidence for you and for those who see as you do. If you want me to believe in God, you must make me touch him." The minister replied that the sense of touch ought to be enough to reveal the divinity to him in the admirable mechanism of his organs. To this, Saunderson:—"I repeat, all that is not as fine for me as it is for you. But the animal mechanism, even were it as perfect as you pretend, and as I daresay it is—what has it in common with a Being of sovereign intelligence? If it fills you with astonishment, that is perhaps because you are in the habit of treating as a prodigy anything that strikes you as being beyond your own strength. I have been myself so often an object of admiration for you, that I have a

<sup>1</sup> A very intelligent English translation of the *Letter on the Blind* was published in 1773. For some reason or other, Diderot is described on the title-page as Physician to His most Christian Majesty.

poor opinion of what surprises you. I have attracted people from all parts of England, who could not conceive by what means I could work at geometry. Well, you must agree that such persons had not very exact notions about the possibility of things. Is a phenomenon in our notions beyond the power of man? Then we instantly say—'*Tis the handiwork of a God.* Nothing short of that can content our vanity. Why can we not contrive to throw into our talk less pride and more philosophy? If nature offers us some knot that is hard to untie, let us leave it for what it is; do not let us employ for cutting it the hand of a Being, who then immediately becomes in turn a new knot for us, and a knot harder to untie than the first. An Indian tells you that our globe is suspended in the air on the back of an elephant. And the elephant? It stands on a tortoise. And the tortoise? what sustains that? . . . You pity the Indian: and yet one might very well say to you as to him—Mr. Holmes, my good friend, confess your ignorance, and spare me elephant and tortoise.”<sup>1</sup>

The minister very naturally then falls back upon good authority, and asks Saunderson to take the word of Newton, Clarke, and Leibnitz. The blind man answers that though the actual state of the universe may be the illustration of a marvellous and admirable order, still Newton, Clarke, and Leibnitz must leave him freedom of opinion as to its earlier states. And then he foreshadows in a really singular and remarkable way that theory which is believed to be the great triumph of scientific discovery, and which is certainly the great stimulus to speculation, in our own time. As to anterior states “you have no witnesses to confront with me, and your eyes give you no help. Imagine, if you choose, that the order which strikes you so profoundly has subsisted from the beginning. But leave me free to think that it has done no such thing, and that if we went back to the birth of things and scenes, and perceived matter in motion and chaos slowly disentangling itself, we should come across a whole multitude of shapeless creatures, instead of a very few creatures highly organized. If I have no objection to make to what you say about the present condition of things, I may at least question you as to their past condition. I may at least ask of you, for

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, i. 308.

example, who told you—you and Leibnitz and Clarke and Newton—that in the first instances of the formation of animals, some were not without heads and others without feet? I may maintain that these had no stomachs, and those no intestines; that some to whom a stomach, a palate, and teeth seemed to promise permanence, came to an end through some fault of heart or lungs; that the monsters annihilated one another in succession, that all the faulty (*vicieuses*) combinations of matter disappeared, and that *those only survived whose mechanism implied no important mis-adaptation (contradiction), and who had the power of supporting and perpetuating themselves.*

“On this hypothesis, if the first man had happened to have his larynx closed, or had not found suitable food, or had been defective in the parts of generation, or had failed to find a mate, then what would have become of the human race? It would have been still enfolded in the general depuration of the universe; and that arrogant being who calls himself Man, dissolved and scattered among the molecules of matter, would perhaps have remained for all time hidden in the number of mere possibilities.

“If shapeless creatures had never existed, you would not fail to insist that none will ever appear, and that I am throwing myself headlong into chimerical hypotheses. But the order is not even now so perfect, but that monstrous products appear from time to time.”<sup>2</sup>

We have here a distinct enough conception, though in an exceedingly undigested shape, first of incessant Variability in organisms as an actual circumstance, which we may see exemplified in its extreme form in the monstrous deviations of structure that occur from time to time before our own eyes; second, of Adaptation to environment as the determining condition of Survival among the forms that present themselves. Even as a bald and unsustained guess, this was an effective side-blow at the doctrine of final causes—a doctrine, as has been often remarked, which does not survive, in any given set of phenomena, the reduction of these phenomena to terms of matter and motion.

<sup>2</sup> Pages 309, 310.

“I conjecture then,” continues Saunderson, enlarging the idea of the possibilities of matter and motion, “that in the beginning when matter in fermentation gradually brought our universe bursting into being, blind creatures like myself were very common. But why should I not believe of worlds what I believe of animals? How many worlds, mutilated and imperfect, were peradventure dispersed, then re-formed, and are again dispersing at each moment of time in those far-off spaces which I cannot touch and you cannot behold, but where motion combines and will continue to combine masses of matter, until they have chanced on some arrangement in which they may finally persevere! O philosophers, transport yourselves with me on to the confines of the universe, beyond the point where I feel, and you see, organized beings; gaze over that new ocean, and seek across its lawless, aimless heavings some vestiges of that intelligent Being whose wisdom strikes you with such wonder here!

“What is this world? A complex whole, subject to endless revolutions. All these revolutions show a continual tendency to destruction; a swift succession of beings who follow one another, press forward, and vanish; a fleeting symmetry; the order of a moment. I reproached you just now with estimating the perfection of things by your own capacity; and I might accuse you here of measuring its duration by the length of your own days. You judge of the continuous existence of the world, as an ephemeral insect might judge of yours. The world is eternal for you, as you are eternal to the being that lives but for one instant. Yet the insect is the more reasonable of the two. For what a prodigious succession of ephemeral generations attests your eternity! What an immeasurable tradition! Yet shall we all pass away, without the possibility of assigning either the real extension that we filled in space, or the precise time that we shall have endured. Time, matter, space—all, it may be, are no more than a point.”<sup>1</sup>

Diderot sent a copy of his work to Voltaire. The poet replied with his usual playful politeness, but declared his dissent from Saunderson, “who denied God, because he happened to

<sup>1</sup> Page 311.

have been born blind."<sup>2</sup> More pretentious, and infinitely less acute critics than Voltaire, have fixed on the same point in the argument and met it by the same answer; namely, that, blind as he was, Saunderson ought to have recognised an intelligent Being who had provided him with so many substitutes for sight; he ought to have inferred a skilful demiurgus from those ordered relations in the universe, which Thought, independently of Vision, might well have disclosed to him. In truth, this is not the centre of the whole argument. When Saunderson implies that he could only admit a God on condition that he could touch him, he makes a single sense the channel of all possible ideas, and the arbiter of all reasoned combinations of ideas. This is absurd, and Diderot, as we have seen, rapidly passed away from that to the real strength of the position. All the rest of the contention against final causes would have come just as fitly from the lips of a man with vision, as from Saunderson. The hypothetical inference of a deity from the marvels of adaptation to be found in the universe is unjustified, among other reasons, because it ignores or leaves unexplained the marvels of misadaptation in the universe. It makes absolute through eternity a hypothesis which can at its best only be true relatively—not merely to the number of our senses, but—to a few partially chosen phenomena of our own little day. It explains a few striking facts; it leaves wholly unexplained a far greater number of equally striking facts, even if it be not directly contradicted by them. It is the invention of an imaginary agency to account for the scanty successes of creation, and an attribution to that agency of the kind of motives that might have animated a benevolent European living in the eighteenth century. It leaves wholly unaccounted for the prodigious host of monstrous or imperfect organisms, and the appalling law of merciless and incessant destruction.

To us this is the familiar discussion of the day. But let us return to the starting-point of this chapter. In France a hundred and twenty years ago it was the first opening of a decisive breach in the walls that had sheltered the men of Western Europe against outer desolation for some fifteen centuries or more. The com-

<sup>2</sup> *Corr.*, June, 1749.



pletteness of Catholicism, as a self-containing system of life and thought, is now harder for Protestants or Sceptics to realise, than any other fact in the whole history of human society. Catholicism was not only an institution, nor only a religious faith ; it was also a philosophy and a systematized theory of the universe. The Church during its best age directed the moral relations of individual men, and attempted, more or less successfully, to humanise the relations of communities. It satisfied or stimulated the affections by its exaltation of the Virgin Mary as a supreme object of worship ; it nourished the imagination on polytheistic legends of saints and martyrs ; it stirred the religious emotions by touching and impressive rites ; it surrounded its members with emblems of a special and invincible protection. Catholicism, we have again and again to repeat, claimed to deal with life as a whole, and to leave no province of nature, no faculty of man, no need of intelligence or spirit, uncomprehended. But we must not forget that, though this prodigious system had its root in the affections and sympathies of human nature, it was also fenced round by a theory of metaphysic. It rested upon authority and tradition, but it also sought an expression in an intellectual philosophy of things. The essence of this philosophy was to make man the final cause of the universe. Its interpretation of the world was absolute ; its conception of the Creator was absolute ; its account of our intellectual impressions, of our moral rules, of our spiritual ideals, made them all absolute. Now Diderot, when he wrote the Letter on the Blind, perceived that mere rationalistic attacks upon the sacred books, upon the miracles, upon the moral types, of Catholicism, could only be partially effective for destruction, and could have no effect at all in replacing the old ways of thinking by others of more solid truth. The attack must begin in philosophy. The first fruitful process must consist in shifting the point of view, in enlarging the range of the facts to be considered, in pressing the relativity of our ideas, in freeing ourselves from the tyranny of anthropomorphism.

Hobbes's witty definition of the papacy as the ghost of the old Roman Empire sitting enthroned on the grave thereof, may tempt us to forget the all-important truth that the basis of the power of the ghost was essentially different from that of the

dissolved body. The Empire was a political organization, resting on military force. The Church was a social organization, made vital by a conviction. The greatest fact in the intellectual history of the eighteenth century is the decisive revolution that overtook that sustaining conviction. The movement and the men whom we are studying owe all their interest to the share that they had in this immense task. The central conception, that the universe was called into existence only to further its Creator's purpose towards man, became incredible. This absolute proposition was slowly displaced by notions of the limitation of human faculties, and of the comparatively small portion of the whole cosmos or chaos to which we have reason to believe that these faculties give us access. To substitute this relative point of view for the absolute, was the all-important preliminary to the effectual breaking up of the great Catholic construction.

What seems to careless observers a mere metaphysical dispute was in truth, and still is, the decisive quarter of the great battle between theology and a philosophy reconcilable with science. When the Catholic reaction set in, Joseph de Maistre, by far its acutest champion in the region of philosophy, at once made it his first business to attack the principle of relativity with all his force of dialectic, and to reinstate absolute modes of thinking, and the absolute quality of Catholic propositions about religion, knowledge, and government.<sup>1</sup> Yet neither he nor anyone else on his side has ever effectively shaken the solid argument which Diderot fancifully illustrated in the following passage from his reply to Voltaire's letter of thanks for the opuscule: "This marvellous order and these wondrous adaptations, what am I to think of them? That they are metaphysical entities only existing in your own mind. You cover a vast piece of ground with a mass of ruins falling hither or thither at hazard; amid these the worm and the ant find commodious shelter enough. What would you say of these insects, if they were to take for real and final entities the relations of the places which they inhabit to their organization, and then fall into ecstasies over the beauty of their subterranean architecture, and the wonderfully superior intelligence of the

<sup>1</sup> See *Critical Miscellanies: First Series*.

gardener who arranges things so conveniently for them?"<sup>2</sup> This is the notion which Voltaire himself three years afterwards illustrated in the witty fancies of *Micromégas*. The little animalcule in the square cap, who makes the giant laugh in a Homeric manner by its inflated account of itself as the final cause of the universe, is the type of the philosophy on which Catholicism is based.

In the same letter Diderot avows his dissent—hypocritically, we find reason for suspecting—from Saunderson's conclusion. "It is commonly in the night-time," he says, "that the mists arise which obscure in me the existence of God; the rising of the sun never fails to scatter them. But then the darkness is ever-enduring for the blind, and the sun only rises for those who see." Diderot's denial of atheism seems more than suspicious, when one finds him taking so much pains to make out Saunderson's case for him; when he urges the argument following, for instance: "If there had never existed any but material beings, there would never have been spiritual beings; for then the spiritual beings would either have given themselves existence, or else would have received it from the material beings. But if there had never existed any but spiritual beings, you will see that there would never have been material beings. Right philosophy only allows me to suppose in things what I can distinctly perceive in them. Now I perceive no other faculties distinctly in the mind except those of willing and thinking, and I no more conceive that thought and will can act on material beings or on nothing, than I can conceive material beings or nothing acting on spiritual beings." And he winds up his letter thus: "It is very important not to take hemlock for parsley; but not important at all to believe or to disbelieve in God. The world, said Montaigne, is a tennis-ball that he has given to philosophers to toss hither and thither; and I would say nearly as much of the Deity himself."<sup>3</sup>

In concluding our account of this piece, we may mention that Diderot threw out a hint, which is a good illustration of the alert and practically helpful way in which his mind was always seeking new ideas. We have common signs, he said, appealing to

<sup>2</sup> Diderot to Voltaire, 1749. *Œuvres*, xix. 421.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the eye, namely, written characters, and others appealing to the ear, namely, articulate sounds; we have none appealing to touch. "For want of such a language, communication is entirely broken between us and those who are born deaf, dumb, and blind. They grow, but they remain in a state of imbecility. Perhaps they would acquire ideas, if we made ourselves understood by them from childhood in a fixed, determinate, constant, and uniform manner; in short, if we traced on their hand the same characters that we trace upon paper, and invariably attached the same significance to them." The patient benevolence and ingenuity of Dr. Howe of Boston has realised in our own day the value of Diderot's suggestion.

One or two trifling points of literary interest may be noticed in the Letter on the Blind. Diderot refers to "the ingenious expression of an English geometer that *God geometrizes*" (p. 294.) He is unaware apparently of the tradition which attributes the expression to Plato, though it is not found in Plato's writings. Plutarch, I believe, is the first person who mentions the saying, and discusses what Plato exactly meant by it. In truth, it is one of that large class of dicta which look more ingenious than they are true. There is a fine Latin passage by Barrow on the mighty geometry of the universe, and the reader of the *Religio Medici* (p. 42) may remember that Sir Thomas Browne pronounces God to be "like a skilful geometrician."

An odd coincidence of simile is worth mentioning. Diderot says that "great services are like large pieces of money, that we have seldom any occasion to use. Small attentions are a current coin that we always carry in our hands." This is curiously like the saying in the *Tatler* that "A man endowed with great perfections without good breeding is like one who has his pockets full of gold, but wants change for his ordinary occasions." Yet if Diderot had read the *Tatler*, he would certainly have referred to the story in No. 55, how William Jones of Newington, born blind, was brought to sight at the age of twenty—a story told in a manner after Diderot's own heart.

<sup>1</sup> Page 294.

## II.

It is proper in this place to mention a short philosophic piece which Diderot wrote in 1751, his *Letter on the Deaf and Dumb for the Use of those who Hear and Talk*. This is not, like the *Letter on the Blind*, the examination of a case of the Intellect deprived of one or more of the senses. It is substantially a fragment, and a very important fragment, on Æsthetics, and as such there will be something to say about it in another chapter. But there are, perhaps, one or two points at which the *Letter on the Deaf and Dumb* touches the line of thought of the *Letter on the Blind*.

The *Letter* opens on the question of the origin and limits of inversion in language. This at once leads to a discussion of the natural order of ideas and expressions, and that original order, says Diderot, we can only ascertain by a study of the language of gesture. Such a study can be pursued either in assiduous conversation with one who has been deaf and dumb from birth, or by the experiment of a *muet de convention*, a man who foregoes the use of articulate sounds for the sake of experiment as to the process of the formation of language. Generalising this idea, Diderot proceeds to consider man as distributed into as many distinct and separate beings as he has senses. "My idea would be to decompose a man, so to speak, and to examine what he derives from each of the senses with which he is endowed. I have sometimes amused myself with this kind of metaphysical anatomy; and I found that of all the senses, the eye was the most superficial; the ear, the proudest; smell, the most voluptuous; taste, the most superstitious and the most inconstant; touch, the profoundest and the most of a philosopher. It would be amusing to get together a society, each member of which should have no more than one sense; there can be no doubt that they would all treat one another as out of their wits."

This is interesting, because it was said at the time to be the source of one of the most famous fancies in the philosophical literature of the century, the *Statue in Condillac's Treatise on the*

Sensations. Condillac imagined a statue organized like a man, but each sense unfolding itself singly, at the will of an eternal arbiter. The philosopher first admits the exercise of smell to his Frankenstein, and enumerates the mental faculties which might be expected to be set in operation under the changing impressions made upon that one sense. The other senses are imparted to it in turn, one by one, each adding a new group of ideas to the previous stock, until at length the mental equipment is complete.

We may see the extent of the resemblance between Condillac's Statue and Diderot's *muet de convention*, but Diderot at least is free from the charge of borrowing. Condillac's book was published three years (1754) after the Letter on the Deaf and Dumb, and he afterwards wrote a pamphlet defending himself from the charge of having taken the fancy of his Statue from Diderot; nor, for that matter, did Diderot ever make sign or claim in the matter. We have already spoken of the relations between the two philosophers, and though it is a mistake to describe Diderot as one of Condillac's most celebrated pupils,<sup>1</sup> yet there is just as little reason to invert the connection, or to doubt Condillac's own assertion that the Statue was suggested to him by Mademoiselle Ferrand, that remarkable woman to whose stimulating and directing influence he always professed such deep obligation. Attention has been called to the fact that in 1671 a Parisian bookseller published a Latin version of a much more intelligent and scientific fancy than the Statue—the *Philosophus Autodidactus* of the Arabian, Ibn Tophail. This was a romance, in which a human being is suckled by a gazelle on a desert island in the tropics, and grows up in the manner of some Robinson Crusoe with a turn for psychological speculation, and gradually becomes conscious, through observation, of the peculiar properties belonging to his senses.<sup>2</sup>

Of the part of the Letter that concerns gesture, one can only say that it appears astonishingly crude to those who know the progress that has been made since Diderot's time in collecting and generalising the curious groups of fact connected with gesture-language. We can imagine the eager interest that Diderot would

<sup>1</sup> Lewes's *Hist. Philos.* ii. 342.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenkranz, i. 102.

have had in such curious observations as that gesture-language has something like a definite syntax; that it furnishes no means of distinguishing causation from sequence or simultaneity; that savages can understand and be understood with ease and certainty in a deaf-and-dumb school.<sup>1</sup> Diderot was acute enough to see that the questions of language could only be solved, not by the old metaphysical methods, but experientially. For the experiential method in this matter the time was not ripe. It was no wonder, then, that after a few pages, he broke away and hastened to æsthetics.

## III.

Penalties on the publication of heretical opinion did not cease in England with the disappearance of the Licensing Act. But they were at least inflicted by law. It was the Court of King's Bench which, in 1730, visited Woolston with fine and imprisonment, after all the forms of a prosecution had been duly gone through. It was no Bishop's court nor Star Chamber, much less a warrant signed by George the Third or by Bute, which in 1762 condemned Peter Annet to the pillory and the gaol for his *Free Inquirer*. The only evil which overtook Mandeville for his *Fable of the Bees* was to be harmlessly presented (1723) as a public nuisance by the Grand Jury of Middlesex. We may contrast with this the state of things which prepared a revolution in France.

One morning in July, 1749—almost exactly forty years before that July of '89, so memorable in the annals of arbitrary government and state-prisons—a commissary of police and three attendants came to Diderot's house, made a vigorous scrutiny of his papers, and then produced a warrant for his detention. The philosopher, without any ado, told his wife not to expect him home for dinner, stepped into the chaise, and was driven off with his escort to Vincennes. His real offence was a light sneer in the *Letter on the Blind at the mistress of a minister*.<sup>2</sup> The atheistical

<sup>1</sup> Tylor's *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, chaps. ii. and iii.; Lubbock's *Origin of Civilisation*, chap. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Madame Dupré de Saint Maur, who had found favour in the eyes of the Count d'Argenson. D'Argenson, younger brother of the Marquis who had been dismissed in 1747, was in power from 1743 to 1757. Notwithstanding his alleged share in Diderot's imprisonment, he was a tolerably steady protector of the philosophical party.

substance of the essay, however, apart from the pique of a favourite, would have given sufficiently good grounds for a prosecution in England, and in France for that vile substitute for prosecution, the *lettre-de-cachet*. And there happened to be special causes for harshness towards the press at this moment. Verses had been published satirising the king and his manner of life in bitter terms, and a stern raid was made upon all the scribblers in Paris. At the court there had just taken place one of those reactions in favour of the ecclesiastical party, which for thirty years in the court history alternated so frequently with movements in the opposite direction. The gossip of the town set down Diderot's imprisonment to a satire against the Jesuits, of which he was wrongly supposed to be the author.<sup>1</sup> It is not worth while to seek far for a reason, when authority was as able and as ready to thrust men into gaol for a bad reason as for a good one. The writer or the printer of a philosophical treatise was at this moment looked upon in France much as a magistrate now looks on the wretch who vends infamous prints.

The lieutenant of police (Berryer) treated the miserable author with additional severity, for stubbornly refusing to give up the name of the printer. Diderot was well aware that the printer would be sent to the galleys for life, if the lieutenant of police could once lay hands upon him. This personage, we may mention, was afterwards raised to the dignified office of keeper of the seals, as a reward for his industry and skill in providing victims for the royal seraglio at Versailles.<sup>2</sup> The man who had ventured to use his mind, was thrown into the dungeon at Vincennes by the man who played spy and pander for the Pompadour. The official record of a dialogue between Berryer and Denis Diderot, "of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religion," is a singular piece of reading, if we remember that the prisoner's answers were made, "after oath taken by the respondent to speak and answer the truth."

<sup>1</sup> Interrogated if he has not composed a work entitled *Letters on the Blind*.

<sup>2</sup> Answered no.

<sup>3</sup> Barbier, iv. 337.

<sup>4</sup> There is a picture of Berryer, under the name of Orgon, in that very curious book, *L'Ecole de l'Homme*, ii. 73.



“ Interrogated by whom he had caused said work to be printed.

“ Answered that he had not caused the said work to be printed.

“ Interrogated if he knows the name of the author of the said work.

“ Answered that he knows nothing about it.

“ Interrogated whether he has not had said work in manuscript in his possession before it was printed.

“ Answered that he had not had the said manuscript in his possession before or after it was printed.

“ Interrogated whether he has not composed a work which appeared some years ago, entitled *Philosophic Thoughts*.

“ Answered no.”

And so, after a dozen more replies of equal veracity, on reading being made to the respondent of the present interrogatory, Diderot “said that the answers contain the truth, persisted in them, and signed,” as witness his hand. A sorrowful picture, indeed, of the plight of an apostle of a new doctrine. On the other hand, the apostle of the new doctrine was perhaps good enough for the preachers of the old. Two years before this, the priest of the church of Saint Médard had thought it worth while to turn spy and informer. This is the report which the base creature sent to the lieutenant of police (1747) :—

“ Diderot, a man of no profession, living, &c., is a young man who plays the free-thinker, and glories in impiety. He is the author of several works of philosophy, in which he attacks religion. His talk is like his books. He is busy at the composition of one now, which is very dangerous.”

The priest's delation was confirmed presently by a still lower agent of authority, who, in bad grammar and bad spelling, describes “this wretch Diderot as a very dangerous man, who speaks of the holy mysteries of our religion with contempt; who corrupts manners, and who says that when he comes to the last moment of his life, he will have to do like others, will confess, and will receive what we call our God, but it will only be for the sake of his family.”\*

All these things had prepared an unfriendly fate for Diderot when his time at last came, as it came to most of his friends. For a month he was cut off from the outer world. His only company was the *Paradise Lost*, which he happened to have in his pocket

\* Pieces given in Diderot's Works, xx. 121-3.

at the moment of his arrest. He compounded an ink for himself, by scraping the slate at the side of his window, grinding it very fine, and mixing with wine in a broken glass. A toothpick, found by happy accident in the pocket of his waistcoat, served him for pen, and the fly-leaves and margins of the Milton made a repository for his thoughts. With a simple but very characteristic interest in others who might be as unfortunate as himself, he wrote upon the walls of his prison his short recipe for writing materials.\* Diderot might easily have been buried here for months or even years. But, as it happened, the governor of Vincennes was a kinsman of Voltaire's divine Emily, the Marquise du Châtelet. When Voltaire, who was then at Luneville, heard of Diderot's ill-fortune, he proclaimed as usual his detestation of a land where bigots can shut up philosophers under lock and key, and as usual he at once set to work to lessen the wrong. Madame du Châtelet was made to write to the governor, praying him to soften the imprisonment of Socrates-Diderot as much as he could.† It was the last of her good deeds, for she died in circumstances of grotesque tragedy in the following month (Sept. 1749), and her husband, her son, Voltaire, and Saint Lambert, alternately consoled and reproached one another over her grave. Diderot meanwhile had the benefit of her intervention. He was transferred from the dungeon to the château, was allowed to wander about the park on his parole, and to receive visits from his friends. One of the most impulsive of these friends was Jean Jacques. Their first meeting after Diderot's imprisonment has been described by Rousseau himself, in terms at which the phlegmatic will smile—not wisely, for the manner of expressing emotion, like all else, is relative. “After three or four centuries of impatience, I flew into the arms of my friend. O indescribable moment! He was not alone; D’Alembert and the treasurer of the Sainte Chapelle were with him. As I went in, I saw no one but himself. With a single bound and a cry, I pressed his face close to mine, I clasped him tightly in my arms, without speaking to him save by my tears and sobs; I was choking with tenderness and joy.”‡ After this Rousseau used to walk over to see him two

\* Naigeon, p. 131.

† Voltaire's *Corr.* July and Aug. 1749.

‡ *Conf.* II. viii.

or three times a week. It was during one of these walks on a hot summer afternoon, that he first thought of that memorable literary effort, the essay against civilization. He sank down at the foot of a tree, and feverishly wrote a page or two to show to his friend. He tells us that but for Diderot's encouragement he should hardly have executed his design. There is a story that it was Diderot who first suggested to Rousseau to affirm that arts and sciences had corrupted manners. There is no violent improbability in this. Diderot, for all the robustness and penetration of his judgment, was yet often borne by his natural impetuosity towards the region of paradox. His own curious and bold *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* is entirely in the vein of Rousseau's discourse on the superiority of primitive over civilized life. "Prodigious sibyl of the eighteenth century," cries Michelet, "the mighty magician Diderot! He breathed out one day a breath; lo, there sprang up a man—Rousseau."<sup>1</sup> It is hard to believe that such an astonishing genius for literature as Rousseau's could have lain concealed, after he had once inhaled the vivifying air of Paris. Yet the fire and inspiring energy of Diderot may well have been the quickening accident that brought his genius into productive life. All the testimony goes to show that it was so. Whether, however, Diderot is really responsible for the perverse direction of Rousseau's argument is a question of fact, and the evidence is not decisive.\* It would be an odd example of that giant's non-chalance which is always so amazing in Diderot, if he really instigated the most eloquent and passionate writer then alive to denounce art and science as the scourge of mankind, at the very moment when he was himself straining his whole effort to spread the arts and sciences, and to cover them with glory in men's eyes.

Among Diderot's other visitors was Madame de Puisieux. One day she came clad in gay apparel, bound for a merry-making at a neighbouring village. Diderot, conceiving jealous doubts of her fidelity, received assurance that she would be solitary and companionless at the feast, thinking mournfully of her persecuted philosopher lying in prison. She forgot that one

<sup>1</sup> Michelet's *Louis XV.* p. 258.

\* See the present author's *Rousseau*, p. 91.

of the parents of philosophy is curiosity, and that Diderot had trained himself in the school of the sceptics. That evening he scaled the walls of the park of Vincennes, flew to the scene of the festival, and there found what he had expected. In vain for her had he written upon virtue and merit, and the unhallowed friendship came to an end.

After three months of captivity, Diderot was released. The booksellers who were interested in the Encyclopædia were importunate with the authorities to restore its head and chief to an enterprise that stirred universal curiosity.<sup>1</sup> For the first volume of that famous work was now almost ready to appear, and expectation was keen. The idea of the book had occurred to Diderot in 1745, and from 1745 to 1765 it was the absorbing occupation of his life. Of the value and significance of the conception underlying this immense operation, I shall speak in the next chapter. There also I shall describe its history. The circumstances under which these five-and-thirty volumes were given to the world, mark Diderot for one of the few true heroes of literature. They called into play some of the most admirable of human qualities. They required a laboriousness as steady and as prolonged, a wariness as alert, a grasp of plan as firm, a fortitude as patient, unvarying, and unshaken, as men are accustomed to applaud in the engineer who constructs some vast and difficult work, or the commander who directs a hardy and dangerous expedition.

<sup>1</sup> For the two petitions of the booksellers to D'Argenson praying for Diderot's liberty, see M. Assézat's preliminary notice. *Œuv.* xiii. 112, etc.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE ENCYCLOPÆDIA.

THE history of the encyclopædic conception of human knowledge is a much more interesting and important object of inquiry than a list of the various encyclopædic enterprises to be found in the annals of literature. Yet it is proper here to mention some of the attempts in this direction, which preceded our memorable book of the eighteenth century. It is to Aristotle, no doubt, that we must look for the first glimpse of the idea that human knowledge is a totality, whose parts are all closely and organically connected with one another. But the idea that only dawned in that gigantic understanding, was lost for many centuries. The compilations of Pliny are not in a right sense encyclopædic, being presided over by no definite idea of informing order. It was not until the later middle age that any attempt was made to present knowledge as a whole. Albertus Magnus, "the ape of Aristotle" (1193-1280), left for a season the three great questions of the existence of universals, of the modes of the existence of species and genus, and of their place in or out of the bosom of the individuals, and executed a compilation of such physical facts as had been then discovered.<sup>1</sup> A more distinctly encyclopædic work was the book of Vincent de Beauvais (d. 1264), called *Speculum naturale, morale, doctrinale, et historiale*—a compilation from Aquinas in some parts, and from Aristotle in others. Hallam mentions three other com-

<sup>1</sup> Jourdain's *Recherches sur les traductions latines d'Aristote*, p. 325.

pilations of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and observes that their laborious authors did not much improve the materials which they had amassed in their studies, though they sometimes arranged them conveniently. In the mediæval period, as he remarks, the want of capacity to discern probable truths was a very great drawback from the value of their compilations.<sup>1</sup>

Far the most striking production of the thirteenth century in this kind was the *Opus Majus* of Roger Bacon (1267), of which it has been said that it is at once the Encyclopædia and the *Novum Organum* of that age;<sup>2</sup> at once a summary of knowledge, and the suggestion of a truer method. This however was merely the introductory sketch to a vaster encyclopædic work, the *Compendium Philosophiæ*, which was not perfected. "In common with minds of great and comprehensive grasp, his vivid perception of the intimate relationship of the different parts of philosophy, and his desire to raise himself from the dead level of every individual science, induced Bacon to grasp at and embrace the whole."<sup>3</sup> In truth, the encyclopædic spirit was in the air throughout the thirteenth century. It was the century of books bearing the significant titles of *Summa*, or *Universitas*, or *Speculum*.

The same spirit revived towards the middle of the sixteenth century. In 1541 a book was published at Basel by one Ringelberg, which first took the name of *Cyclopædia* that has since then become so familiar a word in Western Europe. This was followed within sixty years by several other works of the same kind. The movement reached its height in a book which remained the best in its order for a century. A German, one J. H. Alsted (1518–1638), published in 1620 an *Encyclopædia scientiarum omnium*. A hundred years later the illustrious Leibnitz pronounced it a worthy task to perfect and amend Alsted's book. What was wanting to the excellent man, he said, was neither labour nor judgment, but material, and the good fortune of such days as ours. And Leibnitz wrote a paper of suggestions for its extension and improvement.<sup>4</sup> Alsted's Encyclopædia is of course written in Latin, and

<sup>1</sup> *Lit. of Europe*, pt. i. ch. ii. § 39.

<sup>2</sup> Whewell's *Hist. Induct. Sci.* xii. c. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Roger Bacon; J. S. Brewer's Pref. pp. 57, 63.

<sup>4</sup> Leibnitii, *Opera* v. 184.

he prefixes to it by way of motto the celebrated lines in which Lucretius declares that nothing is sweeter than to dwell apart in the serene temples of the wise. Though he informs us in the preface that his object was to trace the outlines of the great "latifundium regni philosophici" in a single syntagma, yet he really does no more than arrange a number of separate treatises or manuals, and even dictionaries, within the limits of a couple of folios. As is natural to the spirit of the age in which he wrote, great predominance is given to the verbal sciences of grammar, rhetoric, and formal logic, and a verbal or logical division regulates the distribution of the matter, rather than a scientific regard for its objective relations.

For the true parentage, however, of the Encyclopædia of Diderot and D'Alembert, it is unnecessary to prolong this list. It was Francis Bacon's idea of the systematic classification of knowledge which inspired Diderot, and guided his hand throughout. "If we emerge from this vast operation," he wrote in the Prospectus, "our principal debt will be to the chancellor Bacon, who sketched the plan of a universal dictionary of sciences and arts at a time when there were not, so to say, either arts or sciences." This sense of profound and devoted obligation was shared by D'Alembert, and was expressed a hundred times in the course of the work. No more striking panegyric has ever been passed upon our immortal countryman than is to be found in the Preliminary Discourse.<sup>1</sup> The French Encyclopædia was the direct fruit of Bacon's magnificent conceptions. And if the efficient origin of the Encyclopædia was English, so did the occasion rise in England also.

In 1727 Ephraim Chambers, a Westmoreland Quaker, published in London two folios, entitled, a Cyclopædia or Universal Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences. The idea of it was broad and excellent. "Our view," says Chambers, "was to consider the several matters, not only in themselves, but relatively, or as they respect each other; both to treat them as so many wholes, and as so many parts of some greater whole." The compiler lacked the grasp necessary to realise this laudable purpose. The

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres de D'Alembert*, i. 63.

book has, however, the merit of conciseness, and is a singular monument of literary industry, for it was entirely compiled by Chambers himself. It had a great success, and though its price was high (four guineas), it ran through five editions in eighteen years. On the whole, however, it is meagre, and more like a dictionary than an encyclopædia, such as Alsted's for instance.

Some fifteen years after the publication of Chambers's Cyclopædia, an Englishman (Mills) and a German (Sellius) went to Le Breton with a project for its translation into French. The bookseller obtained the requisite privilege from the government, but he obtained it for himself, and not for the projectors. This trick led to a quarrel, and before it was settled the German died and the Englishman returned to his own country. They left the translation behind them duly executed.<sup>1</sup> Le Breton then carried the undertaking to a certain abbé, Gua de Malves. Gua de Malves (B. 1712) seems to have been a man of a busy and ingenious mind. He was the translator of Berkeley's *Hylas and Philonous*, of Anson's *Voyages*, and of various English tracts on currency and political economy. It is said that he first suggested the idea of a cyclopædia on a fuller plan,<sup>2</sup> but we have no evidence of this. In any case, the project made no advance in his hands. The embarrassed bookseller next applied to Diderot, who was then much in need of work that should bring him bread. His fertile and energetic intelligence transformed the scheme. By an admirable intuition, he divined the opportunity which would be given by the encyclopædic form, of gathering up into a whole all that new thought and modern knowledge, which existed as yet in unsystematic and uninterpreted fragments. His enthusiasm fired Le Breton. It was resolved to make Chambers's work a mere starting-point for a new enterprise of far wider scope.

"The old and learned D'Aguesseau," says Michelet, "notwithstanding the pitiable, the wretched sides of his character, had two lofty sides, his reform of the laws, and a personal passion,

<sup>1</sup> *Mém.* pour J. P. F. Luneau de Boisjermain, 4to, Paris, 1771. See also Diderot's *Prospectus*, "La traduction entière de Chambers nous a passé sous les yeux," etc.

<sup>2</sup> *Biog. Universelle*, s. v.



the taste and urgent need of universality, a certain encyclopædic sense. A young man came to him one day, a man of letters living by his pen, and somewhat under a cloud for one or two hazardous books that lack of bread had driven him to write. Yet this stranger of dubious repute wrought a miracle. With bewilderment the old sage listened to him unrolling the gigantic scheme of a book that should be all books. On his lips, sciences were light and life. It was more than speech, it was creation. One would have said that he had made these sciences, and was still at work, adding, extending, fertilising, ever engendering. The effect was incredible. D'Aguesseau, a moment above himself, forgot the old man, received the infection of genius, and became great with the greatness of the other. He had faith in the young man, and protected the Encyclopædia."<sup>1</sup>

A fresh privilege was procured (Jan. 21, 1746), and as Le Breton's capital was insufficient for a project of this magnitude, he invited three other booksellers to join him, retaining a half share for himself, and allotting the other moiety to them. As Le Breton was not strong enough to bear the material burdens of producing a work on so gigantic a scale as was now proposed, so Diderot felt himself unequal to the task of arranging and supervising every department of a book that was to include the whole circle of the sciences. He was not skilled enough in mathematics, nor in physics, which were then for the most part mathematically conceived. For that province, he associated with himself as an editorial colleague one of the most conspicuous and active members of the philosophical party. Of this eminent man, whose relations with Diderot were for some years so intimate, it is proper that we should say something.

D'Alembert was the natural son of Madame de Tencin, by whom he had been barbarously exposed immediately after his

<sup>1</sup> Michelet, *Louis XV.* 258. D'Aguesseau (1668-1751) has left one piece which ought to be extricated from the thirteen quartos of his works—his memoir of his father (*Œuv.* xiii.). This is one of those records of solid and elevated character, which do more to refresh and invigorate the reader than a whole library of religious or ethical exhortations can do. It has the loftiness, the refined austerity, the touching impressiveness of Tacitus's *Agricola* or Condorcet's *Turgot*, together with a certain grave sweetness that was almost peculiar to the Jansenist school of the seventeenth century.

birth. "The true ancestors of a man of genius," says Condorcet finely upon this circumstance, "are the masters who have gone before him, and his true descendants are disciples that are worthy of him." He was discovered on a November night in the year 1717, by the beadle, in a nearly dying condition on the steps of the church of St. John the Round, from which he afterwards took his Christian name. An honest woman of the common people, with that personal devotion which is less rare among the poor than among the rich, took charge of the foundling. The father, who was an officer of artillery and brother of Destouches, the author of some poor comedies, by-and-by advanced the small sums required to pay for the boy's schooling. D'Alembert proved a brilliant student. Unlike nearly every other member of the encyclopædic party, he was a pupil, not of the Jesuits but of their rivals. The Jansenists recognised the keenness and force of their pupil, and hoped that they had discovered a new Pascal. But he was less docile than his great predecessor in their ranks. When his studies were completed, he devoted himself to geometry, for which he had a passion that nothing could extinguish. For the old monastic vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience, he adopted the manlier substitute of poverty, truth, and liberty—the worthy device of every man of letters. When he awoke in the morning, he thought with delight of the work that had been begun the previous day and would occupy the day before him. In the necessary intervals of his meditations, he recalled the lively pleasure that he felt at the play: at the play, between the acts, he thought of the still greater pleasure that was promised to him by the work of the morrow. His mathematical labours led to valuable results in the principles of equilibrium and the movement of fluids, in a new calculus, and in a new solution of the problem of the precession of the equinoxes.<sup>2</sup>

These contributions to what was then the most popular of the sciences brought him fame, and fame brought him its usual distractions. As soon as a writer has shown himself the possessor of gifts that may be of value to society, then society straightway

<sup>2</sup> A short estimate of D'Alembert's principal scientific pieces, by M. Bertram, is to be found in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, for October, 1865.

sets to work to seduce and hinder him from diligently exercising them. D'Alembert resisted these influences steadfastly. His means were very limited, yet he could never be induced to increase them at the cost either of his social independence or of his scientific pursuits. He lived for forty years under the humble roof of the poor woman who had treated him as a son. "You will never be anything better than a philosopher," she used to cry reproachfully, "and what is a philosopher? 'Tis a madman who torments himself all his life, that people may talk about him when he is dead." D'Alembert zealously adhered to his destination. Frederick the Great vainly tempted him by an offer of the succession to Maupertuis as president of the Academy of Berlin. Although, however, he declined to accept the post, he enjoyed all its authority and prerogative. Frederick always consulted him in filling up vacancies and making appointments. It is a magnanimous trait in D'Alembert's history that he should have procured for Lagrange a position and livelihood at Berlin, warmly commending him as a man of rare and superior genius, although Lagrange had vigorously opposed some of his own mathematical theories. Ten years after Frederick's offer, the other great potentate of the north, Catherine of Russia, besought him to undertake the education of the young grand duke, her son. But neither urgent flatteries and solicitations under the imperial hand, nor the munificent offer of a hundred thousand francs a year, availed to draw him away from his independence and his friends. The great Frederick used to compare him to one of those oriental monarchs, who cherish a strict seclusion in order to enhance their importance and majesty. He did not refuse a pension of some fifty pounds a year from Berlin, and the same amount was bestowed upon him from the privy purse at Versailles. He received a small annual sum in addition from the Academy.

Though the mathematical sciences remained the objects of his special study, D'Alembert was as free as the other great men of the encyclopædic school from the narrowness of the pure specialist. He naturally reminds us of the remarkable saying imputed to Leibnitz, that he only attributed importance to science, because it enabled him to speak with authority in philosophy and religion. His correspondence with Voltaire, extending over the

third quarter of the century, is the most instructive record that we possess of the many-sided doings of that busy time. His series of éloges on the academicians who died between 1700 and 1772 is one of the most interesting works in the department of literary history. He paid the keenest attention to the great and difficult art of writing. Translations from Tacitus, Bacon, and Addison, show his industry in a useful practice. A long collection of synonyms bears witness to his fine discrimination in the use of words. And the clearness, precision, and reserved energy of his own prose mark the success of the pains that he took with style. (He knew the secret. Have lofty sentiments, he said, and your) / manner of writing will be firm and noble.<sup>1</sup> Yet he did not ignore the other side and half of the truth, which is expressed in the saying of another important writer of that day—By taking trouble to speak with precision, one gains the habit of thinking rightly.<sup>2</sup> (Condillac.)

Like so many others to whom literature owes much, D'Alembert was all his life fighting against bad health. Like Voltaire and Rousseau, he was born dying, and he remained delicate and valetudinarian to the end. He had the mental infirmities belonging to his temperament. He was restless, impatient, mobile, susceptible of irritation. When the young Mademoiselle Phlipon, in after years famous as wife of the virtuoso Roland, was taken to a sitting of the Academy, she was curious to see the author of the Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopædia, but his small face and sharp thin voice made her reflect with some disappointment, that the writings of a philosopher are better to know than his mask.<sup>2</sup> In everything except zeal for light and emancipation, D'Alembert was the opposite of Diderot. Where Diderot was exuberant, prodigal, and disordered, D'Alembert was a precisian. Difference of temperament, however, did not prevent their friendship from being for many years cordial and intimate. When the Encyclopædia was planned, it was to D'Alembert, as we have said, that Diderot turned for aid in the mathematical sciences, where his own knowledge was not sufficiently full nor well grounded. They were in strong and singular agreement in their idea of the proper

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres de D'Alembert*, iv. 367.

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres de J. Ph. Roland*, i. 230 (edit. 1800).

place and function of the man of letters. One of the most striking facts about their alliance, and one of the most important facts in the history of the Encyclopædia, is that henceforth the profession of letters became at once definite and independent. Diderot and D'Alembert both of them remained poor, but they were never hangers-on. They did not look to patrons, nor did they bound their vision by Versailles. They were the first to assert the lawful authority of the new priesthood. They revolted deliberately and in set form against the old system of sutorship and protection. "Happy are men of letters," wrote D'Alembert, "if they recognise at last that the surest way of making themselves respectable is to live united and almost shut up among themselves; that by this union they will come, without any trouble, to give the law to the rest of the nation in all affairs of taste and philosophy; that the true esteem is that which is awarded by men who are themselves worthy of esteem. . . . As if the art of instructing and enlightening men were not, after the too rare art of good government, the noblest portion and gift in human reach." <sup>1</sup>

This consciousness of the power and exaltation of their calling, which men of letters now acquired, is much more than the superficial fact which it may at first seem to be. It marked the rise of a new teaching order and the supersession of the old. The highest moral ideas now belonged no longer to the clergy, but to the writers; no longer to official Catholicism, but to that fertilising medley of new notions about human knowledge and human society which then went by the name of philosophy. What is striking is that the ideas sown by philosophy became eventually the source of higher life in Catholicism. If the church of the revolution showed something that we may justly admire, it was because the encyclopædic band had involuntarily and inevitably imparted a measure of their own clear-sightedness, fortitude, moral energy, and spirit of social improvement, to a church which was, when they began their work, an abominable burden on

<sup>1</sup> *Essai sur la Société des Gens de Lettres et des Grands*, etc. *Œuv.* iv. 372. "Write," he says, "as if you loved glory; in conduct, act as if it were indifferent to you." Compare, with reference to the passage in the text, Duclos's remark (*Consid. sur les Mœurs*, ch. xi.): "The man in power commands, but the intelligent govern, because in time they form public opinion, and that sooner or later subjugates every kind of despotism." Only partially true.

the spiritual life of the nation. If the Catholicism of Chateaubriand, of Lamennais, of Montalembert, was a different thing from the Catholicism of a Dubois or a Rohan, from the vile corruptions of the Jesuits and the grovelling superstitions of the later Jansenists, it was the execrated freethinkers whom the church and mankind had to thank for the change. The most enlightened Catholic of to-day ought to admit that Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, were the true reformers of his creed. They supplied it with ideas which saved it from becoming finally a curse to civilization. It was no Christian prelate, but Diderot who burst the bonds of a paralyzing dogma by the magnificent cry, *Détruisez ces enceintes qui rétrécissent vos idées ! Elargissez Dieu !*<sup>X</sup> We see the same phenomenon in our own day. The Christian churches are assimilating as rapidly as their formulæ will permit, the new light and the more generous moral ideas and the higher spirituality of teachers who have abandoned all churches, and who are systematically denounced as enemies of the souls of men. *Sic vos non vobis mellificatis apes !* These transformations of religion by leavening elements contributed from a foreign doctrine, are the most interesting process in the history of truth.

The Encyclopædia became a powerful engine for aiding such a transformation. Because it was this, and because it rallied all that was then best in France round the standard of light and social hope, we ought hardly to grudge time or pains to its history. For it was not merely in the field of religious ideas that the Encyclopædists led France in a new way. They affected the national life on every side, pressing forward with enlightened principles in all the branches of material and political organization. Their union in a great philosophical band gave an impressive significance to their work. The collection within a single set of volumes of a body of new truths, relating to so many of the main interests of men, invested the book and its writers with an aspect of universality, of collective and organic doctrine, which the writers themselves would without doubt have disowned, and which it is easy to dissolve by tests of logic. But the popular impression that the Encyclopædists constituted a single body with

\* *Pensées Philos.* § 26.

a common doctrine and a common aim was practically sound. Comte has pointed out with admirable clearness the merit of the conception of an encyclopædic workshop.<sup>2</sup> It united the members of rival destructive schools in a great constructive task. It furnished a rallying-point for efforts otherwise the most divergent. Their influence was precisely what it would have been, if popular impressions had been literally true. Diderot and D'Alembert did their best to heighten this feeling. They missed no occasion of fixing a sentiment of co-operation and fellowship. They spoke of their dictionary as the transactions of an Academy.<sup>3</sup> Each writer was answerable for his own contribution, but he was in the position of a member of some learned corporation. To every volume, until the great crisis of 1759, was prefixed a list of those who had contributed to it. If a colleague died, the public was informed of the loss that the work had sustained, and his services were worthily commemorated in a formal *éloge*.<sup>4</sup> Feuds, epigrams, and offences were not absent, but on the whole there was steadfast and generous fraternity.

As Voltaire eloquently said, officers of war by land and by sea, magistrates, physicians who knew nature, men of letters whose taste purified knowledge, geometers, physicists, all united in a work that was as useful as it was laborious, without any view of interest, without even seeking fame, as many of them concealed their names; finally without any common understanding and agreement, and therefore without anything of the spirit of party.<sup>4</sup> Turning over the pages on which the list of writers is inscribed, we find in one place or another nearly every name that has helped to make the literature of the time famous. *Montesquieu*, who died in the beginning of 1755, left behind him the unfinished fragment of an article on Taste, and it may be noticed in passing that our good-natured Diderot was the only man of letters who attended the remains of the illustrious writer to the grave.<sup>5</sup> The article itself, though no more than a fragment, has all the charms of *Montesquieu's* delightful style; it is serious without pedantry,

<sup>2</sup> *Phil. Pos.* v. 520. *Polit. Pos.* iii. 584.

<sup>3</sup> See Pref. to vol. iii.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Pref. to vol. vi.

<sup>5</sup> *Siècle de Louis XV.* ch. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Grimm, *Corr. Lit.* i. 273. Diderot, *Œuv.* iv. 15.

graceful without levity, and is rich in observations that are precise and pointed without the vice of emphasis. The great Turgot,<sup>1</sup> diligently solicitous for the success of every enterprise that promised to improve human happiness by adding to knowledge and spreading enlightenment, wrote some of the most valuable articles that the work contained, and his discussion of Endowments perhaps still remains the weightiest contribution to that important subject. Oddly enough, he was one of the very few writers who refused to sign his name to his contributions.<sup>2</sup> His assistance only ceased, when he perceived that the scheme was being coloured by that spirit of sect, which he always counted the worst enemy of the spirit of truth.<sup>3</sup> ~~Jean Jacques Rousseau~~, who had just won a singular reputation by his paradoxes on natural equality and the corruptions of civilization, furnished the articles on music in the first half-dozen volumes. They were not free from mistakes, but his colleagues chivalrously defended him by the plea of careless printing or indifferent copying.<sup>3</sup> The stately Buffon very early in the history of the Encyclopædia sent them an article upon Nature, and the editors made haste to announce to their subscribers the advent of so superb a colleague.<sup>4</sup> The articles on natural history, however, were left by Buffon in his usual majestic fashion to his faithful lieutenant and squire-at-arms, Daubenton. And even his own article seems not to have been printed. Before the eleventh volume appeared, terrible storms had arisen, not a few of the shipmen had parted company, and Buffon may well have been one of them. Certainly the article on Nature, as it stands, can hardly be his.

In the supplementary volumes, which appeared in 1776—ten years after the completion of the original undertaking—two new labourers came into the vineyard, whose names add fresh lustre and give still more serious value to the work. One of these was the prince of the physiologists of the eighteenth century, the great

<sup>1</sup> *Avertissement* to vol. vi. ; also to vol. vii. Turgot's articles were Etymologie, Existence, Expansibilité, Foires, Fondations. The text of these is wrongly inserted among Diderot's contributions to the Encyclopædia, in the new edition of his Works, xv. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Condorcet's *Vie de Turgot*.

<sup>3</sup> Pref. to vol. iii. (1752), and to vol. vi. (1756).

<sup>4</sup> Pref. to vol. ii.



Haller, who contributed an elaborate history of those who had been his predecessors in unfolding the intricate mechanism of the human frame, and analyzing its marvels of complex function. The other was the austere and generous Condorcet. Ever loyal to good causes, and resolute against despairing of the human commonwealth, he began in the pages of the Encyclopædia a career that was brilliant with good promise and high hopes, and ended in the grim hall of the Convention and a nobly tragic death amid the red storm of the Terror.

Among the lesser stars in the encyclopædic firmament are some whose names ought not to be wholly omitted. Forbonnais, one of the most instructive economic writers of the century, contributed articles to the early volumes, which were afterwards republished in his *Elements of Commerce*.<sup>1</sup> The light-hearted Marmontel wrote cheerful articles on Comedy, Eloges, Eclogues, Glory, and other matters of literature and taste. Quesnai, the eminent founder of the economic sect, dealt with two agricultural subjects, and reproduced both his theoretical paradoxes, and his admirable practical maxims, on the material prosperity of nations. Holbach, not yet author of the memorable *System of Nature*, compiled a vast number of the articles on chemistry and mineralogy, chiefly and avowedly from German sources, he being the only writer of the band with a mastery of a language which was at that moment hardly more essential to culture than Russian is now. The name of Duclos should not be passed over, in the list of the foremost men who helped to raise the encyclopædic monument. He was one of the shrewdest and most vigorous intelligences of the time, being in the front rank of men of the second order. His quality was coarse, but this was only the effect of a thoroughly penetrating and masculine understanding. His articles in the Encyclopædia (*Déclamation des Anciens*, *Etiquette*, etc.) are not very remarkable; but the reflections on conduct which he styled *Considérations sur les Mœurs de ce Siècle* (1750), though rather hard in tone, abound in an acuteness, a breadth, a soundness of perception, that entitle the book to the rare distinction, among the writings of moralists and social observers, of still being worth reading. Morellet wrote

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, *Corr. Lit.* i. 130. Forbonnais's chief work is his *Recherches et Considérations sur les finances de la France*.

upon some of the subjects of theology, and his contributions are remarkable as being the chief examples in the record of the encyclopædic body of a distinctly and deliberately historic treatment of religion. "I let people see," he wrote many years after, "that in such a collection as the Encyclopædia we ought to treat the history and experience of the dogmas and discipline of the Christian, exactly like those of the religion of Brahma or Mahomet."<sup>2</sup> This sage and philosophic principle enabled him to write the article, *Fils de Dieu* (vol. vi.), without sliding into Arian, Nestorian, Socinian, or other heretical view on that fantastic theme. We need not linger over the names of other writers, who indeed are now little more than mere shadows of names, such as La Condamine, a scientific traveller of fame and merit in his day and generation; of Du Marsais, the poverty-stricken and unlucky scholar who wrote articles on grammar; of the President Des Brosses, who was unfortunate enough to be in the right in a quarrel about money with Voltaire, and who has since been better known to readers through the fury of the provoked patriarch, than through his own meritorious contributions to the early history of civilization.

The name of one faithful worker in the building of this new Jerusalem ought not to be omitted, though his writings were *multa non multum*. The Chevalier de Jaucourt (1704-1779), as his title shows, was the younger son of a noble house. He studied at Geneva, Cambridge, and Leyden, and published in 1734 a useful account of the life and writings of Leibnitz. When the Encyclopædia was projected, his services were at once secured, and he became its slave from the beginning of A to the end of Z. He wrote articles in his own special subjects of natural history and physical science, but he was always ready to lend his help in other departments, in writing, re-writing, reading, correcting, and all those other humbler necessities of editorship of which the inconsiderate reader knows little and thinks less. Jaucourt revelled in this drudgery. God made him for grinding articles, said Diderot. For six or seven years, he wrote one day, Jaucourt has been in the middle of half-a-dozen secretaries, reading, dictating, slaving, for thirteen or fourteen hours a day,

<sup>2</sup> *Avert.* to vol. ii.

and he is not tired of it even now. When he was told that the work must positively be brought to an end, his countenance fell, and the prospect of release from such happy bondage filled his heart with desolation.<sup>1</sup> "If," says Diderot in the preface to the eighth volume (1765), "we have raised a shout of joy like the sailor when he espies land after a sombre night that has kept him midway between sky and flood, it is to M. de Jaucourt that we are indebted for it. What has he not done for us, especially in these latter times? With what constancy has he not refused all the solicitations, whether of friendship or of authority, that sought to take him away from us? Never has sacrifice of repose, of health, of interest been more absolute and more entire."<sup>2</sup> These modest and unwearying helpers in good works ought not to be wholly forgotten, in a commemoration of more far-shining names.

Besides those who were known to the conductors of the *Encyclopædia*, was a host of unsought volunteers. "The further we proceed," the editors announced in the preface to the sixth volume (1756), "the more are we sensible of the increase both in matter and in number of those who are good enough to second our efforts." They received many articles on the same subject. They were constantly embarrassed by an emulation which, however flattering as a testimony to their work, obliged them to make a difficult choice, or to lose a good article, or to sacrifice one of their regular contributors, or to offend some influential newcomer. Everyone who had a new idea in his head, or what he thought a new idea, sent them an article upon it. Men who were priests or pastors by profession and unbelievers in their hearts, sent them sheaves of articles in which they permitted themselves the delicious luxury of saying a little of what they thought. Women, too, pressed into the great work. Unknown ladies volunteered sprightly explanations of the technicalities of costume, from the falbala which adorned the bottom of their skirts, up to that little knot of riband in the hair, which had come to replace the old appalling edifice of ten stories high, in hierarchic succession of duchess, solitary, musketeer, crescent, firmament, tenth heaven,

<sup>1</sup> Nov. 10, 1760, xix. 24. Also, Oct. 7, 1761, xix. 35.

<sup>2</sup> See also Preface to vol. iii.

and mouse.<sup>1</sup> The oldest contributor was Lenglet du Fresnoy, whose book on the Method of Studying History is still known to those who have examined the development of men's ideas about the relations of the present to the past. Lenglet was born in 1674. The youngest of the band was Condorcet, who was born nearly seventy years later (1743). One veteran, Morellet, who had been the schoolmate of Turgot and Loménie de Brienne, lived to think of many things more urgent than Faith, Fils de Dieu, and Fundamentals. He survived the Revolution, the Terror, the Empire, Waterloo, the Restoration, and died in 1819, within sight of the Holy Alliance and the Peterloo massacre. From the birth of Lenglet to the death of Morellet—what an arc of the circle of western experience!

No one will ask whether the keen eye, and stimulating word, and helpful hand of Voltaire were wanting to an enterprise which was to awaken men to new love of tolerance, enlightenment, charity, and justice. Voltaire was playing the refractory courtier at Potsdam when the first two volumes appeared. With characteristic vehemence, he instantly pronounced it a work which should be the glory of France, and the shame of its persecutors. Diderot and D'Alembert were raising an immortal edifice, and he would gladly furnish them with a little stone here or there, which they might find convenient to stuff into some corner or crevice in the wall. He was incessant in his industry. Unlike those feebler and more consequential spirits, the *petits-mâtres* of thought, by whom editors are harassed and hindered, this great writer was as willing to undertake small subjects as large ones, and to submit to all the mutilations and modifications which the exigences of the work and the difficulties of its conductors recommended to them.<sup>2</sup> As the structure progresses, his enthusiasm waxes warmer. Diderot and his colleague are cutting their wings for a flight to posterity. They are Atlas and Hercules bearing a world upon their shoulders. It is the greatest work in the world; it is a superb pyramid; its printing-office is the office for the instruction of the human race; and so forth, in every phrase of stimulating sympathy and energetic interest. Nor does his

<sup>1</sup> *Avert.* to vol. vi., and s. v. *Fontange*. Grimm, i. 451.

<sup>2</sup> *Corresp. avec D'Alembert* (*Œuv.* lxxv.), Sept. 1755, Feb. 1757, etc.

sympathy blind him to faults of execution. Voltaire's good sense and sound judgment were as much at the service of his friends in warning them of shortcomings, as in eulogising what they achieved. And he had good faith enough to complain to his friends, instead of complaining of them. In one place he tells them, what is perfectly true, that their journeymen are far too declamatory, and too much addicted to substitute vague and puerile dissertations for that solid instruction which is what the reader of an Encyclopædia seeks. In another he remonstrates against certain frivolous affectations, and some of the coxcombries of literary modishness. Everywhere he recommends them to insist on a firm and distinct method in their contributors—etymologies, definitions, examples, reasons, clearness, brevity. "You are badly seconded," he writes; "there are bad soldiers in the army of a great general."<sup>1</sup> "I am sorry to see that the writer of the article *Hell* declares that hell was a point in the doctrine of Moses; now by all the devils that is not true. Why lie about it? Hell is an excellent thing, to be sure, but it is evident that Moses did not know it. 'Tis this world that is hell,"<sup>2</sup>

D'Alembert in reply always admitted the blemishes for which the patriarch and master reproached them, but urged various pleas in extenuation. He explains that Diderot is not always the master, either to reject or to prune the articles that are offered to him.<sup>3</sup> A writer who happened to be useful for many excellent articles would insist as the price of good work that they should find room for his bad work also; and so forth. "No doubt we have bad articles in theology and metaphysics, but with theologians for censors, and a privilege, I defy you to make them any better. There are other articles that are less exposed to the daylight, and in them all is repaired. Time will enable people to distinguish what we have thought from what we have said."<sup>4</sup> This last is a bitter and humiliating word, but before any man hastens to cast a stone, let him first make sure that his own life is free from every trace of hypocritical conformity and mendacious compliance. Condorcet seems to make the only remark that is worth making, when he says that the true shame and disgrace of these dis-

<sup>1</sup> Dec. 22, 1757.

<sup>3</sup> Dec. 13, 1756, April, 1756.

<sup>2</sup> May 24, 1757.

<sup>4</sup> July 21, 1757.

semblings lay not with the writers, whose only other alternative was to leave the stagnation of opinion undisturbed, but with the ecclesiastics and ministers whose tyranny made dissimulation necessary. And the veil imposed by authority did not really serve any purpose of concealment. Every reader was let into the secret of the writer's true opinion of the old mysteries, by means of a piquant phrase, an adroit parallel, a significant reference, an equivocal word of dubious panegyric. Diderot openly explains this in the pages of the Encyclopædia itself. "In all cases," he says, "where a national prejudice would seem to deserve respect, the particular article ought to set it respectfully forth, with its whole procession of attractions and probabilities. But the edifice of mud ought to be overthrown and an unprofitable heap of dust scattered to the wind, by references to articles in which solid principles serve as a base for the opposite truths. This way of undeceiving men operates promptly on minds of the right stamp, and it operates infallibly and without any troublesome consequences, secretly and without disturbance, on minds of every description."<sup>1</sup> "Our fanatics feel the blows," cried D'Alembert complacently, "though they are sorely puzzled to tell from which side they come."<sup>2</sup>

It is one of the most deplorable things in the history of literature to see a man endowed with Diderot's generous conceptions and high social aims, forced to stoop to these odious economies. In reading his Prospectus, and still more directly in his article, *Encyclopédie*, we are struck by the beneficence and breadth of the great designs which inspire and support him. The Encyclopædia, it has been said, was no peaceful storehouse in which scholars and thinkers of all kinds could survey the riches they had acquired; it was a gigantic siege-engine and armoury of weapons of attack.<sup>3</sup> This is only true in a limited sense of one part of the work, and that not the most important part. Such a judgment is only possible for one who has not studied the book itself, or else who is ignorant of the social requirements of France at the time. We shall show this presently in detail. Meanwhile it is enough to make two observations. The implements which

<sup>1</sup> Article *Encyclopédie*.<sup>2</sup> To Volt., Feb. 15, 1757.<sup>3</sup> Hettner's *Literaturgesch. des 18ten Jahrhunderts*, ii. 277.

the circumstances of the time made it necessary to use as weapons of attack, were equally fitted for the acquisition in a happier season of those treasures of thought and knowledge which are the object of disinterested research. And what is still more important, we have to observe that it was the characteristic note and signal glory of the French revolutionary school, to subordinate mere knowledge to the practical work of raising society up from the corruption and paralysis to which it had been brought by the double action of civil and ecclesiastical authority. The efforts of the Encyclopædists were not disinterested in the sense of being vague blows in the air. Their aim was not theory but practice, not literature but life. The Encyclopædists were no doubt all men of battle, and some of them were hardly more than mere partisans. But Diderot at least had constantly in mind the great work which remained after the battle should be won. He was profoundly conscious that the mere accumulation of knowledge of the directly physical facts of the universe would take men a very short way towards reconstruction. And he struck the key-note in such admirable passages as this: "One consideration especially that we ought never to lose from sight is that, if we ever banish man, or the thinking and contemplative being, from above the surface of the earth, this pathetic and sublime spectacle of nature becomes no more than a scene of melancholy and silence. The universe is dumb; the darkness and silence of the night take possession of it. . . . It is the presence of man that gives its interest to the existence of other beings; and what better object can we set before ourselves in the history of these beings, than to accept such a consideration? Why shall we not introduce man into our work in the same place which he holds in the universe? Why shall we not make him a common centre? Is there in infinite space any other point from which we can with greater advantage draw those immense lines that we propose to extend to all other points? What a vivid and softening reaction must result between man and the beings by whom he is surrounded? . . . Man is the single term from which we ought to set out, and to which we ought to trace all back, if we would please, interest, touch, even in the most arid reflections and the driest details. If you take away my own

existence and the happiness of my fellows, of what concern to me is all the rest of nature?"<sup>1</sup>

In this we hear the voice of the new time, as we do in his exclamation that the perfection of an Encyclopædia is the work of centuries; centuries had to elapse before the foundations could be laid; centuries would have to elapse before its completion: "*mais à la postérité, et à L'ÊTRE QUI NE MEURT POINT!*"<sup>2</sup> These exalted ideas were not a substitute for arduous labour. In all that Diderot writes upon his magnificent undertaking, we are struck by his singular union of common sense with elevation, of simplicity with grasp, of suppleness with strength, of modesty with hopeful confidence. On occasions that would have tempted a man of less sincerity and less seriousness to bombast and inflation, his sense of the unavoidable imperfections of so vast a work always makes itself felt through his pride in its lofty aim and beneficent design. The weight of the burden steadied him, and the anxiety of the honest and laborious craftsman mastered the impulses of rhetoric.

Before going further into the general contents of the Encyclopædia, we shall briefly describe the extraordinary succession of obstacles and embarrassments against which its intrepid conductor was compelled to fight his way. The project was fully conceived and its details worked out between ~~1745~~ and 1748. The Encyclopædia was announced in 1750, in a Prospectus of which Diderot was the author. At length in 1751 the first volume of the work itself was given to the public, followed by the second in January, 1752. The clerical party at once discerned what tremendous fortifications, with how deadly an armament, were rising up in face of their camp. The Jesuits had always been jealous of an enterprise in which they had not been invited to take a part. They had expected at least to have the control of the articles on theology. They now were bent on taking the work into their own hands, and orthodoxy hastily set all the machinery of its ally, authority, in vigorous motion.

The first attack was indirect. An abbé de Prades sustained a certain thesis in an official exercise at the Sorbonne, and Diderot

<sup>1</sup> Art. *Encyclopédie*.

<sup>2</sup> *Prospectus*.



was suspected, without good reason, of being its true author. An examination of its propositions was ordered. It was pronounced pernicious, dangerous, and tending to deism, chiefly on account of some too suggestive comparisons between the miraculous healings in the New Testament, and those ascribed in the more ancient legend to Æsculapius. Other grounds of vehement objection were found in the writer's maintenance of the Lockian theory of the origin of our ideas. To deny the innateness of ideas was roundly asserted to be materialism and atheism. The abbé de Prades was condemned, and deprived of his licence (Jan. 27, 1752). As he was known to be a friend of Diderot, and was suspected of being the writer of articles on theology in the Encyclopædia, the design of the Jesuit cabal in ruining De Prades was to discredit the new undertaking, and to induce the government to prohibit it. Their next step was to procure a pastoral from the archbishop of Paris. This document not only condemned the heretical propositions of De Prades, but referred in sombre terms to unnamed works teeming with error and impiety. Everyone understood the reference, and among its effects was an extension of the vogue and notoriety of the Encyclopædia.<sup>1</sup> The Jesuits were not allowed to retain a monopoly of persecuting zeal, and the Jansenists refused to be left behind in the race of hypocritical intrigue. The bishop of Auxerre, who belonged to this party, followed his brother prelate of Paris in a more direct attack, in which he included not only the Encyclopædia, but Montesquieu and Buffon. De Prades took to flight. D'Alembert commended him to Voltaire, then at Berlin. The king was absent, but Voltaire gave royal protection to the fugitive until Frederick's return. De Prades was then at once taken into favour and appointed reader to the king. He proved but a poor martyr, however, for he afterwards retracted his heresies, got a benefice, and was put into prison by Frederick for giving information to his French countrymen during the Seven Years' War.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately neither orthodoxy nor heterodoxy has any exclusive patent for monopoly of rascals.

Meanwhile Diderot wrote on his behalf an energetic and dignified reply to the aggressive pastoral. This apology is not such a

<sup>1</sup> Barbier, v. 151, 153.

<sup>2</sup> Diderot to Volland, *Œuv.* xviii. 361. Carlyle's *Frederick*, bk. 18, ch. 11.

## THE ENCYCLOPÆDIA.



masterpiece of eloquence as the magnificent letter addressed by Rousseau ten years later to the archbishop of Paris, after the pastoral against Emilius. But Diderot's vindication of De Prades is firm, moderate, and closely argumentative. The piece is worth turning to in our own day, when great dignitaries of the churches too often show the same ignorance, the same temerity, and the same reckless want of charity, as the bishop of Auxerre showed a hundred and twenty years ago. They resort to the very same fallacies by way of shield against scientific truths or philosophical speculations that happen not to be easily reconcilable with their official opinions. "I know nothing so indecent," says Diderot, "and nothing so injurious to religion as these vague declamations of theologians against reason. One would suppose, to hear them, that men could only enter into the bosom of Christianity as a herd of cattle enter into a stable; and that we must renounce our common sense either to embrace our religion or to remain in it. . . . Such principles as yours are made to frighten small souls; everything alarms them, because they perceive clearly the consequences of nothing; they set up connections among things which have nothing to do with one another; they spy danger in any method of arguing which is strange to them; they float at hazard between truths and prejudices which they never distinguish, and to which they are equally attached; and all their life is passed in crying out either miracle or impiety." In an eloquent peroration, which is not more eloquent than it is instructive, De Prades is made to turn round on his Jansenist censor, and reproach him with the disturbance with which the intestine rivalries of Jansenist and Jesuit had afflicted the faithful. "It is the abominable testimony of your convulsions," he cries, "that has overthrown the testimony of miracles. It is the fatuous audacity with which your fanatics have confronted persecution, that has annihilated the evidence of the martyrs. It is your declamations against sovereign pontiffs, against bishops, against all the orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, that have covered priest, altar, and creed with opprobrium. If the pope, the bishops, the priests, the simple faithful, the whole church, if its mysteries, its sacraments, its temples, its ceremonies, have fallen into contempt, yours, yours, is the handiwork." X

<sup>1</sup> *Apologie de l'Abbé de Prades. Œuv. i. 482.*

Bourdaloue more than half a century before had taunted the free-thinkers of his day with falseness and inconsistency in taking sides with the Jansenists, whose superstitions they notoriously held in open contempt. The motive for the alliance was tolerably obvious. The Jansenists, apart from their theology, were above all else the representatives of opposition to authority. It was for this that Lewis XIV. counted them worse than atheists. The Jesuits, it has been well said, in keeping down their enemies by force, became the partisans of absolute government, and upheld it on every occasion. The Jansenists, after they had been crushed by violence, began to feel to what excesses power might be brought. From being speculative enemies to freedom as a theory, they became, through the education of persecution, the partisans of freedom in practice. The quarrel of Molinists and Jansenists, from a question of theology, grew into a question of human liberty.<sup>1</sup>

Circumstances had now changed. The free-thinkers were becoming strong enough to represent opposition to authority on their own principles and in their own persons. Diderot's vigorous remonstrance with the bishop of Auxerre incidentally marks for us the definite rupture of philosophic sympathy for the Jansenist champions. "It is your disputatiousness," he said, "which within the last forty years has made far more unbelievers than all the productions of philosophy." As we cannot too clearly realise, it was the flagrant social incompetence of the church which brought what they called Philosophy, that is to say Liberalism, into vogue and power. Locke's Essay had been translated in 1700, but it had made no mark, and as late as 1725 the first edition of the translation remained unsold. It was the weakness and unsightly decrepitude of the ecclesiastics which opened the way for the thinkers.

This victory, however, was not yet. Diderot had still a dismal wilderness to traverse. He was not without secret friends even in the camp of his enemies. After his reply to Père Berthier's attack on the Prospectus, he received an anonymous letter to the effect that if he wished to avenge himself on the Jesuits, there were both important documents and money at his command. Diderot

<sup>1</sup> See Jobez, i. 358.

replied that he was in no want of money, and that he had no time to spare for Jesuit documents.<sup>1</sup> He trusted to reason. Neither reason nor eloquence availed against the credit at court of the ecclesiastical cabal. The sale of the second volume of the Encyclopædia was stopped by orders which Malesherbes was reluctantly compelled to issue. A decree of the king's council (Feb. 7, 1752) suppressed both volumes, as containing maxims hostile to the royal authority and to religion. The publishers were forbidden to reprint them, and the booksellers were forbidden to deliver any copies that might still be in hand. The decree, however, contained no prohibition of the continuance of the work. It was probably not meant to do anything more serious than to pacify the Jesuits, and lend an apparent justification to the officious pastorals of the great prelates. Some even thought that the aim of the government was to forestall severer proceedings on the part of the parliament of lawyers; <sup>2</sup> for corporations of lawyers have seldom been less bigoted or obstructive than corporations of churchmen. Nor were lawyers and priests the only foes. Even the base and despicable jealousies of booksellers counted for something in the storm.<sup>3</sup>

A curious triumph awaited the harassed Diderot. He was compelled, under pain of a second incarceration, to hand over to the authorities all the papers, proof-sheets, and plates in his possession. The Jesuit cabal supposed that if they could obtain the materials for the future volumes, they could easily arrange and manipulate them to suit their own purposes. Their ignorance and presumption were speedily confounded. In taking Diderot's papers, they had forgotten, as Grimm says, to take his head and his genius: they had forgotten to ask him for a key to articles which, so far from understanding, they with some confusion vainly strove even to decipher. The government was obliged (May, 1752) to appeal to Diderot and D'Alembert to resume a work for which their enemies had thus proved themselves incompetent. Yet, by one of the meannesses of decaying authority, the decree of three months before was left suspended over their heads.<sup>4</sup>

The third volume of the Encyclopædia appeared in the autumn

<sup>1</sup> xix. 425.

<sup>2</sup> Barbier, v. 160.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* v. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Grimm, *Corr. Lit.* i. 81. Barbier, v. 170.

of 1753. D'Alembert prefixed an introduction, vindicating himself and his colleague with a manliness, a sincerity, a gravity, a fire, that are admirable and touching. "What," he concluded, "can malignity henceforth devise against two men of letters, trained long since by their meditations to fear neither injustice nor poverty; who having learnt by a long and mournful experience, not to despise, but to mistrust and dread men, have the courage to love them, and the prudence to flee them? . . . After having been the stormy and painful occupation of the most precious years of our life, this work will perhaps be the solace of its close. May it, when both we and our enemies alike have ceased to exist, be a durable monument of the good intention of the one, and the injustice of the other. . . . Let us remember the fable of Bocalini: 'A traveller was disturbed by the importunate chirrupings of the grasshoppers; he would fain have slain them every one, but only got belated and missed his way; he need only have fared peacefully on his road, and the grasshoppers would have died of themselves before the end of a week.'"<sup>2</sup>

A volume was now produced in each year, until the autumn of 1757 and the issue of the seventh volume. This brought the work down to Gyromancy and Gythium. Then there arose storms and divisions which marked a memorable epoch alike in the history of the book, in the life of Diderot and others, and in the thought of the century. The progress of the work in popularity during the five years between 1752 and 1757 had been steady and unbroken. The original subscribers were barely two thousand. When the fourth volume appeared, there were three thousand. The seventh volume found nearly a thousand more.<sup>3</sup> Such prodigious success wrought the chagrin of the party of superstition to fever heat. As each annual volume came from the press and found a wider circle of readers than its predecessor, their malice and irritation waxed a degree more intense. They scattered malignant rumours abroad; they showered pamphlets; no imputation was too odious or too ridiculous for them. Diderot, D'Alembert, Voltaire, Rousseau, Buffon, were declared to have organized a league of writers, with the deliberate purpose of

<sup>2</sup> *Avert.* to vol. iii. *Œuv. de D'Alembert*, iv. 410.

<sup>3</sup> Barbier, v. 170. Grimm, *Corr. Lit.* i. 201; *ib.* ii. 197.

attacking the public tranquillity and overthrowing society. They were denounced as heads of a formal conspiracy, a clandestine association, a midnight band, united in a horrible community of pestilent opinions and sombre interests.

In the seventh volume an article appeared which made the ferment angrier than it had ever been. D'Alembert had lately been the guest of Voltaire at Ferney, whence he had made frequent visits to Geneva. In his intercourse with the ministers of that famous city, he came to the conclusion that their religious opinions were really Socinian, and when he wrote the article on Geneva he stated this. He stated it in such a way as to make their heterodox opinions a credit to Genevese pastors, because he associated disbelief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, in mysteries of faith, and in eternal punishment, with a practical life of admirable simplicity, purity, and tolerance. Each line of this eulogy on the Socinian preachers of Geneva, veiled a burning and contemptuous reproach against the cruel and darkened spirit of the churchmen in France. Jesuit and Jansenist, loose abbés and debauched prelates, felt the quivering of the arrow in the quick, as they read that the morals of the Genevese pastors were exemplary; that they did not pass their lives in furious disputes upon unintelligible points; that they brought no indecent and persecuting accusation against one another before the civil magistrate. There was gall and wormwood to the orthodox bigot in the harmless statement that "Hell, which is one of the principal articles of our belief, has ceased to be one with many of the ministers of Geneva; it would be, according to them, a great insult to the divinity, to imagine that this Being, so full of justice and goodness, is capable of punishing our faults by an eternity of torment: they explain in as good a sense as they can the formal passages of scripture which are contrary to their opinion, declaring that we ought never in the sacred books to take anything literally, that seems to wound humanity and reason." And we may be sure that D'Alembert was thinking less of the consistory and the great council of Geneva, than of the priests and the parliament of Paris, when he praised the protestant pastors, not only for their tolerance, but for confining themselves within their proper functions, and for being the first to set an example of submission to

the magistrates and the laws. The intention of this elaborate and reasoned account of the creed and practice of a handful of preachers in a heretical town, could not be mistaken by those at whom it was directed. It produced in the black ranks of official orthodoxy fully as angry a shock as its writer could have designed.

The church had not yet, we must remember, borrowed the principles of humanity and tolerance from atheists. It was not the comparatively purified Christian doctrine of our own time with which the Encyclopædists did battle, but an organized corporation, with exceptional tribunals, with special material privileges, with dungeons and chains at their disposal. We have to realise that official religion was then a strange union of Byzantine decrepitude, with the energetic ferocity of the Holy Office. Within five years of this indirect plea of D'Alembert for tolerance and humanity, Calas was murdered by the orthodoxy of Toulouse. Nearly ten years later (1766), we find Lewis xv., with the steam of the Parc aux Cerfs about him, rewarded by the loyal acclamations of a Parisian crowd, for descending from his carriage as a priest passed bearing the sacrament, and prostrating himself in the mud before the holy symbol.<sup>1</sup> In the same year the youth La Barre was first tortured, then beheaded, then burnt, for some presumed disrespect to the same holy symbol—then become the hateful ensign of human degradation, of fanatical cruelty, of rancorous superstition. Yet I should be sorry to be unjust. It is to be said that even in these bad days when religion meant cruelty and cabal, the one or two men who boldly withstood to the face the king and the Pompadour for the vileness of their lives, were priests of the church.

D'Alembert's article hardly goes beyond what to us seem the axioms of all men of sense. We must remember the time. Even members of the philosophic party itself, like Grimm, thought the article misplaced and hardy.<sup>2</sup> The Genevese ministers indignantly repudiated the compliment of Socinianism, and the eulogy of being rather less irrational than their neighbours. Voltaire read and

<sup>1</sup> Hardy, quoted by Aubertin, 407-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Corr. Lit.* ii. 271.

read again with delight, and plied the writer with reiterated exhortations in every key, not to allow himself to be driven from the great work by the raging of the heathen and the vain imaginings of the people.<sup>1</sup>

While the storm seemed to be at its height, an incident occurred which let loose a new flood of violent passion. Helvétius published that memorable book in which he was thought to have told all the world its own secret. His *De l'Esprit* came out in 1758.<sup>2</sup> It provoked a general insurrection of public opinion. The devout and the heedless agreed in denouncing it as scandalous, licentious, impious, and pregnant with peril. The philosophic party felt that their ally had dealt a sore blow to liberty of thought and the free expression of opinion. "Philosophy," said Grimm, "by philosophy, as I have said, meaning Liberalism, will long feel the effect of the rising of opinion which this author has caused by his book; and for having described too freely a morality that is bad and false in itself, M. Helvétius will have to reproach himself with all the restraints that are now sure to be imposed on the few men of lofty genius who still are left to us, whose destiny was to enlighten their fellows; and to spread truth over the earth."<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of 1759 the procureur-général laid an information before the court against Helvétius's book, against half-a-dozen minor publications, and finally against the Encyclopædia. The *De l'Esprit* was alleged to be a mere abridgment of the Encyclopædia, and the Encyclopædia was denounced as being the opprobrium of the nation by its impious maxims and its hostility to morals and religion. The court appointed nine commissaries to examine the seven volumes, suspending their further sale or delivery in the meanwhile. When the commissaries sent in their report a month later, the parliament was dissatisfied with its tenour, and appointed four new examiners, two of them being theologians and two of them lawyers. Before the new censors had time to do their work, the Council of State interposed with an arbitrary decree (March, 1759) suppressing the privilege which

<sup>1</sup> To D'Alembert, Dec. 29, 1757, Jan. 1758.

<sup>2</sup> For a short account of Helvétius's book, see a later chapter.

<sup>3</sup> *Corr. Lit.* ii. 292-3.



had been conceded in 1746; prohibiting the sale of the seven volumes already printed, and the printing of any future volumes under pain of exemplary punishment.<sup>1</sup> The motive for this intervention has never been made plain. One view is that the king's government resented the action of the law courts, and that the royal decree was only an episode in the quarrel then raging between the crown and the parliaments. Another opinion is that Malesherbes or Choiseul was anxious to please the dauphin and the Jesuit party at Versailles. The most probable explanation is that the authorities were eager to silence one at least of the three elements of opposition,—the Jansenists, the lawyers, and the philosophers,—who were then distracting the realm. The two former were beyond their direct reach. They threw themselves upon the foe who happened to be most accessible.

The government, however, had no intention of finally exterminating an enemy who might at some future day happen to be a convenient ally. They encouraged or repressed the philosophers according to the political calculations of the moment, sometimes according to the caprices of the king's mistress, or even a minister's mistress. When the clergy braved the royal authority, the hardest productions were received with indulgence. If the government were reduced to satisfy the clergy, then even the very common-places of the new philosophy became ground for accusation. The *Encyclopædia* was naturally exposed in a special degree to such alternations of favour and suspicion.<sup>2</sup> The crisis of 1759 furnishes a curious illustration of this. As we have seen, in the spring of that year the privilege was withdrawn from the four associated booksellers, and the continuance of the work strictly prohibited. Yet the printing was not suspended for a week. Fifty compositors were busily setting up a book which the ordinance of the government had decisively forbidden under heavy penalties. The same kind of connivance was practised to the advantage of other branches of the opposition. Thirty years before this, the organ of the Jansenist party was peremptorily suppressed. The police instituted a rigorous search, and seized the very presses on which the *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques* was being printed. But the journal

<sup>1</sup> Barbier, vii. 125-42.

<sup>2</sup> Lacretelle's *France pendant le 18ème Siècle*, iii. 89.

continued to appear, and was circulated, just as regularly as before.<sup>1</sup>

The history of the policy of authority towards the Encyclopædia is only one episode in the great lesson of the reign of Lewis xv. It was long a common mistake to think of this king's system of government as violent and tyrannical. In truth, its failure and confusion resulted less from the arbitrariness of its procedure, than from the hopeless absence of tenacity, conviction, and consistency in the substance and direction of its objects. And this, again, was the result partly of the complex and intractable nature of the opposition with which successive ministers had to deal, and partly of the overpowering strength of those Asiatic maxims of government which Richelieu and Lewis xiv. had invested with such ruinous prestige. The impatience and charlatanism of emotional or pseudo-scientific admirers of a personal system blind them to the permanent truth, of which the succession of the decrepitude of Lewis xv. to the strength of his great-grandfather, and of the decrepitude of Napoleon III. to the strength of his uncle, are only illustrations.

The true interest of all these details about a mere book lies in the immense significance of the movement of political ideas and forces to which they belong. The true interest of all history lies in the spectacle which it furnishes of the growth and dissolution, the shock and the transformation, incessantly at work among the great groups of human conceptions. The decree against the Encyclopædia marks the central moment of a collision between two antagonistic conceptions which disputed, and in France still dispute, with one another the shaping and control of institutions. One of these ideas is the exclusion of political authority from the sphere and function of directing opinion; it implies the absolute secularization of government. The royal idea prompted the massacre of St. Bartholomew, the dragonnades, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and all the other acts of the same policy, which not only deprived France of thousands of the most conscientious and most ingenious of her sons, but warped and corrupted the integrity of the national conscience. It is natural

<sup>1</sup> Jobez, ii. 464, 538.

that we should feel anger at the arbitrary attempt to arrest Diderot's courageous and enlightened undertaking. Yet in truth it was only the customary inference from an accepted principle, that it is the business or the right of governments to guide thought and regulate its expression. The Jesuits acted on this theory, and resorted to repressive power and the secular arm whenever they could. The Jansenists repudiated the principle, but eagerly practised it whenever the turn of intrigue gave them the chance.

An extraordinary and unforeseen circumstance changed the external bearings of this critical conflict of ideas. The conception of the duties of the temporal authority in the spiritual sphere had been associated hitherto with Catholic doctrine. The decay of that doctrine was rapidly discrediting the conception allied with it. But the movement was interrupted. And it was interrupted by a man who suddenly stepped out from the ranks of the Encyclopædists themselves. Rousseau from his solitary cottage at Montmorency (1758) fulminated the celebrated letter to D'Alembert on Stage-plays. The article on Geneva in the seventh volume of the Encyclopædia had not only praised the pastors for their unbelief; it also assailed the time-honoured doctrine of the churches that the theatre is an institution from hell and an invention of devils. D'Alembert paid a compliment to his patriarch and master at Ferney, as well as shot a bolt at his ecclesiastical foes in Paris, by urging the people of Geneva to shake off irrational prejudices and straightway to set up a playhouse. Rousseau had long been brooding over certain private grievances of his own against Diderot; the dreary story has been told by me before, and happily need not be repeated.<sup>1</sup> He took the occasion of D'Alembert's mischievous suggestion to his native Geneva, not merely to denounce the drama with all the force and eloquence at his command, but formally to declare the breach between himself and Diderot. From this moment he treated the Holbachians, so he contemptuously styled the Encyclopædists, as enemies of the human race and disseminators of the deadliest poisons.

This was no mere quarrel of rival authors. It marked a fundamental divergence in thought, and proclaimed the beginning of a

✓ <sup>1</sup> See *Rousseau*, chaps. 7 and 9.

disastrous reaction in the very heart of the school of illumination. Among the most conspicuous elements of the reaction were these: the subordination of reason to emotion; the displacement of industry, science, energetic and many-sided ingenuity, by dreamy indolence; and finally, what brings us back to our starting-point, the suppression of opinions deemed to be anti-social by the secular arm. The old idea was brought back in a new dress; the absolutist conception of the function of authority, associated with a theistic doctrine. Unfortunately for France, Rousseau's idea prospered, and ended by vanquishing its antagonist. The reason is plain. Rousseau's idea exactly fitted in with the political traditions and institutions of the country. It was more easily and directly compatible than was the contending idea, with that temper and set of men's minds which tradition and institutions had fixed so disastrously deep in the national character.

The crisis of 1758-59, then, is a date of the highest importance. It marks a collision between the old principle of Lewis XIV., of the Bartholomew Massacre, of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and the new rationalistic principle of spiritual emancipation. The old principle was decrepit, it was no longer able to maintain itself; the hounds were furious, but their fury was toothless. Before the new principle could achieve mastery, Rousseau had made mastery impossible. Two men came into the world at this very moment, whom destiny made incarnations of the discordant principles. Danton and Robespierre were both born in 1759. Diderot seems to have had a biblical presentiment, says Michelet. "We feel that he saw, beyond Rousseau, something sinister, a spectre of the future. Diderot-Danton already looks in the face of Rousseau-Robespierre."<sup>1</sup>

A more vexatious incident now befell the all-daring, all-enduring Diderot, than either the decree of the Council or the schism of the heresiarch at Montmorency. D'Alembert declared his intention of abandoning the work, and urged his colleague to do the same. His letters to Voltaire show intelligibly enough how he brought himself to this resolution. "I am worn out," he says, "with the affronts and vexations of every kind that this work draws down

<sup>1</sup> *Louis XV. et Louis XVI.* p. 50.

upon us. The hateful and even infamous satires which they print against us, and which are not only tolerated, but protected, authorised, applauded, nay, actually commanded by the people with power in their hands; the sermons, or rather the tocsins that are rung against us at Versailles in the presence of the king, *nemine reclamante*; the new intolerable inquisition that they are bent on practising against the Encyclopædia, by giving us new censors who are more absurd and more intractable than could be found at Goa; all these reasons, joined to some others, drive me to give up this accursed work once for all." He cared nothing for libels or stinging pamphlets in themselves, but libels permitted or ordered by those who could instantly have suppressed them, were a different thing, especially when they vomited forth the vilest personalities. He admitted that there were other reasons why he was bent on retiring, and it would appear that one of these reasons was dissatisfaction with the financial arrangements of the booksellers.<sup>1</sup>

Voltaire for some time remonstrated against this retreat before the hated *Infâme*. At length his opinion came round to D'Alembert's reiterated assertions of the shame and baseness of men of letters subjecting themselves to the humiliating yoke of ministers, priests, and police. Voltaire wrote to Diderot, protesting that before all things it was necessary to present a firm front to the foe; it would be atrocious weakness to continue the work after D'Alembert had quitted it; it was monstrous that such a genius as Diderot should make himself the slave of booksellers and the victim of fanatics. Must this dictionary, he asked, which is a hundred times more useful than Bayle's, be fettered with the superstition which it should annihilate; must they make terms with scoundrels who keep terms with none; could the enemies of reason, the persecutors of philosophers, the assassins of our kings, still dare to lift up their voices in such a century as that? "Men are on the eve of a great revolution in the human mind, and it is you to whom they are most of all indebted for it."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jan. 11, 1758. Jan. 20, 1758. Diderot to Mlle. Voland, Oct. 11, 1759. See the following chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire to D'Alembert, Jan. to May, 1758. Voltaire to Diderot, Jan. 1758.

More than once Voltaire entreated Diderot to finish his work in a foreign country where his hands would be free. "No," said Diderot in a reply of pathetic energy; "to abandon the work is turning our back upon the breach, and to do precisely what the villains who persecute us desire. If you knew with what joy they have learnt D'Alembert's desertion! It is not for us to wait until the government have punished the brigands to whom they have given us up. Is it for us to complain, when they associate with us in their insults men who are so much better than ever we shall be? What ought we to do then? Do what becomes men of courage,—despise our foes, follow them up, and take advantage, as we have done, of the feebleness of our censors. If D'Alembert resumes, and we complete our work, is not that vengeance enough? . . . After all this, you will believe that I cling at any price to the Encyclopædia, and you will be mistaken. My dear master, I am over forty. I am tired out with tricks and shufflings. I cry from morning till night for rest, rest; and scarcely a day passes when I am not tempted to go and live in obscurity and die in peace in the depths of my old country. There comes a time when all ashes are mingled. Then what will it boot me to have been Voltaire or Diderot, or whether it is your three syllables or my three syllables that survive? One must work, one must be useful, one owes an account of one's gifts, etcetera, etcetera. Be useful to men! Is it quite clear that one does more than amuse them, and that there is much difference between the philosopher and the flute-player? They listen to one or the other with pleasure or disdain, and remain what they were. The Athenians were never wickeder than in the time of Socrates, and perhaps all that they owe to his existence is a crime the more. That there is more spleen than good sense in all this, I admit—and back I go to the Encyclopædia."<sup>2</sup>

Thus for ~~seven years~~ the labour of conducting the vast enterprise fell upon ~~Diderot alone~~. He had not only to write articles upon the most exhausting and various kinds of subjects; he had also to distribute topics among his writers, to shape their manuscripts, to correct proof-sheets, to supervise the preparation of

<sup>2</sup> Diderot to Voltaire, Feb. 19, 1758, xix. 452.

the engravings, to write the text explanatory of them, and all this amid constant apprehension and alarm from the government and the police. He would have been free from persecution at Lausanne or at Leyden. The two great sovereigns of the north who thought it part of the trade of a king to patronise the new philosophy, offered him shelter at Petersburg or Berlin.<sup>1</sup> But how could he transport to the banks of the Neva or the Spree his fifty skilled compositors, his crafty engravers on copper-plate, and all the host of his industrial army? How could he find in those half-barbarous lands the looms and engines and thousand cunning implements and marvellous processes which he had under his eye and ready to his hand in France? And so he held fast to his post on the fifth floor of the house in the Rue Saint Benoît, a standing marvel to the world of letters for all time.

As his toil was drawing to a close, he suddenly received the most mortifying of all the blows that were struck at him in the course of his prolonged, hazardous, and tormenting adventure. After the interruption in 1759, it was resolved to bring out the ten volumes which were still wanting, in a single issue. Le Breton was entrusted with the business of printing them. The manuscript was set in type, Diderot corrected the proof-sheets, saw the revises, and returned each sheet duly marked with his signature for the press. At this point the nefarious operation of Le Breton began. He and his foreman took possession of the sheets, and proceeded to retrench, cut out, and suppress every passage, line, or phrase, that appeared to them to be likely to provoke clamour or the anger of the government. They thus, of their own brute authority, reduced most of the best articles to the condition of fragments mutilated and despoiled of all that had been most valuable in them. The miscreants did not even trouble themselves to secure any appearance of order or continuity in these mangled skeletons of articles. Their murderous work done, they sent the pages to the press, and to make the mischief beyond remedy, they committed all the original manuscripts and proof-sheets to the flames. One day, when the printing was nearly completed (1764), Diderot having occasion to consult an article under the letter S,

<sup>1</sup> To Volan<sup>1</sup>, *Œuv.* xix. 146.

found it entirely spoiled. He stood confounded. An instant's thought revealed the printer's atrocity. He eagerly turned to the articles on which he and his subordinates had taken most pains, and found everywhere the same ravages and disorder. "The discovery," says Grimm, "threw him into a state of frenzy and despair which I shall never forget."<sup>1</sup> He wept tears of rage and torment in the presence of the criminal himself, and before wife and children and sympathising domestics. For weeks he could neither eat nor sleep. "For years," he cried to Le Breton, "you have been basely cheating me. You have massacred, or got a brute beast to massacre, the work of twenty good men who have devoted to you their time, their talents, their vigils, from love of right and truth, from the simple hope of seeing their ideas given to the public, and reaping from them a little consideration richly earned, which your injustice and thanklessness have now stolen from them for ever. . . . You and your book will be dragged through the mire ; you will henceforth be cited as a man who has been guilty of an act of treachery, an act of vile hardihood, to which nothing that has ever happened in this world can be compared. Then you will be able to judge your panic terror, and the cowardly counsels of those barbarous Ostrogoths and stupid Vandals who helped you in the havoc you have made."<sup>2</sup>

Yet he remained undaunted to the very last. His first movement to throw up the work, and denounce Le Breton's outrage to the subscribers and the world, was controlled. His labour had lost its charm. The monument was disfigured and defaced. He never forgot the horrible chagrin, and he never forgave the ignoble author of it. But the last stone was at length laid. In 1765 the subscribers received the concluding ten volumes of letter-press. The eleven volumes of plates were not completed until 1772. The copies bore Neufchâtel on the title-page, and were distributed privately. The clergy in their assembly at once levelled a decree at the new book. The parliament quashed this, not from love of the book, but from hatred of the clergy. The government, however, ordered all who possessed the Encyclopædia to deliver it

<sup>1</sup> *Corr. Lit.* vii. 146.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



over forthwith to the police. Eventually the copies were returned to their owners with some petty curtailments.

Voltaire has left us a vivacious picture of authority in grave consultation over the great engine of destruction. With that we may conclude our account of its strange eventful history.

A servant of Lewis xv. told me that one day the king his master supping at Trianon with a small party, the talk happened to turn first upon the chase, and next on gunpowder. Some one said that the best powder was made of equal parts of saltpetre, of sulphur, and of charcoal. The Duke de la Vallière, better informed, maintained that to make good gunpowder you required one part of sulphur and one of charcoal to five parts of saltpetre.

"It is curious," said the Duke de Nivernois, "that we should amuse ourselves every day in killing partridges at Versailles, and sometimes in killing men or getting ourselves killed on the frontier, without knowing exactly how the killing is done."

"Alas," said Madame de Pompadour, "we are all reduced to that about everything in the world : I don't know how they compound the rouge that I put on my cheeks, and I should be vastly puzzled if they were to ask me how they make my silk stockings."

"Tis a pity, then," said the Duke de la Vallière, "that his Majesty should have confiscated our Encyclopædias, which cost us a hundred pistoles apiece : we should soon find there an answer to all our difficulties."

The king justified the confiscation : he had been warned that one-and-twenty folios, that were to be found on the dressing-tables of all the ladies, were the most dangerous thing in all the world for the kingdom of France ; and he meant to find out for himself whether this were true or not, before letting people read the book. When supper was over, he sent three lackeys for the book, and they returned each with a good deal of difficulty carrying seven volumes.

It was then seen from the article *Powder* that the Duke de la Vallière was right ; and then Madame de Pompadour learnt the difference between the old rouge of Spain, with which the ladies of Madrid coloured their faces, and the rouge of the ladies of Paris. She knew that the Greek and Roman ladies were painted with the purple that came from the *murex*, and that therefore our scarlet is the purple of the ancients ; that there was more saffron in the rouge of Spain, and more cochineal in that of France.

She saw how they made her stockings by loom ; and the machine transported her with amazement.

Everyone threw himself on the volumes like the daughters of Lycomedes on the ornaments of Ulysses ; everyone immediately found all he sought. Those who were at law were surprised to see their affair decided. The king read all about the rights of his crown. "But upon my word," he said, "I can't tell why they spoke so ill of this book." "Do you not see, sire," said the Duke de Nivernois, "it is because the book is so good ; people never cry out against what is mediocre or common in anything. If women seek to throw ridicule on a new arrival, she is sure to be prettier than they are."

All this time they kept on turning over the leaves; and the Count de C—— said aloud—"Sire, how happy you are, that under your reign men should be found capable of understanding all the arts and transmitting them to posterity. Everything is here, from the way to make a pin down to the art of casting and pointing your guns; from the infinitely little up to the infinitely great. Thank God for having brought into the world in your kingdom the men who have done such good work for the whole universe. Other nations must either buy the Encyclopædia, or else they must pirate it. Take all my property if you will, but give me back my Encyclopædia."

"Yet they say," replied the king, "that there are many faults in this work, necessary and admirable as it is."

"Sire," said the Count de C——, "there were at your supper two ragouts which were failures; we left them uneaten, and yet we had excellent cheer. Would you have had them throw all the supper out of the window because of those two ragouts? . . ."

Envy and Ignorance did not count themselves beaten; the two immortal sisters continued their cries, their cabals, their persecutions. What happened? Foreigners brought out four editions of this French book which in France was proscribed, and they gained about 1,800,000 crowns.<sup>2</sup>

In a monotonous world it is a pity to spoil a striking effect, yet one must be vigilant. It has escaped the attention of writers who have reproduced this lively scene, that Madame de Pompadour was dead before the volumes containing Powder and Rouge were born. The twenty-one volumes were not published until 1765, and she died in the spring of the previous year. But the substance of the story is probably true, though Voltaire has only made a slip in a name.

As to the reference with which Voltaire impatiently concludes, we have to remember that the work was being printed at Geneva as it came out in Paris. It was afterwards reprinted as a whole both at Geneva (1777) and at Lausanne (1778). An edition appeared at Leghorn in 1770, and another at Lucca in 1771. Immediately after the completion of the Encyclopædia there began to appear volumes of selections from it. The compilers of these anthologies (for instance of an *Esprit de l'Encyclopédie* published at Geneva in 1768), were free from all intention of proselytizing. They meant only to turn a more or less honest penny by serving up in neat duodecimos the liveliest, most

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres de Voltaire*. Published sometimes among *Faicties*, sometimes among *Mélanges*.

curious, and most amusing pieces to be found in the immense mass of the folios of the original.

The Encyclopædia of Diderot, though not itself the most prodigious achievement on which French booksellers may pride themselves, yet inspired that achievement. In 1782 Panckoucke—a familiar name in the correspondence of Voltaire and the Voltairean family—conceived the plan of a Methodical Encyclopædia. This colossal work, which really consists of a collection of special cyclopædias for each of the special sciences, was not completed until 1832, and comprises one hundred and sixty-six volumes of text, with a score more volumes of plates. It has no unity of doctrine, no equal application of any set of philosophic principles, and no definite social aim. The only encyclopædia since 1772 with which I am acquainted, that is planned with a view to the presentation of a general body of doctrine, is the unfinished *Encyclopédie Nouvelle* of Pierre Leroux and Jean Reynaud. This work was intended to apply the socialistic and spiritualistic ideas of its authors over the whole field of knowledge and speculation. The result is that it furnishes only a series of dissertations, and is not an encyclopædia in the ordinary sense.<sup>1</sup>

The booksellers at first spoke of the Encyclopædia as an affair of two million livres. It appeared, however, that its cost did not go much beyond one million one hundred and forty thousand livres. The gross return was calculated to be nearly twice as much. The price to the subscriber of the seven volumes up to 1757, of the ten volumes issued in 1765, and of the eleven volumes of plates completed in 1772, amounted to nine hundred and eighty livres,<sup>2</sup> or about forty-three pounds sterling of that date, equivalent in value to more than three times the sum in money of to-day.

The payment received by Diderot is a little doubtful, and the terms were evidently changed from time to time. His average salary, after D'Alembert had quitted him, seems to have amounted to about three thousand livres, or one hundred and thirty pounds

<sup>1</sup> See *Œuv. Choisis de Jean Reynaud*, reprinted in 1866. The article on *Encyclopédie* (vol. i.) is an interesting attempt to vindicate Cartesian principles of classification.

<sup>2</sup> See fly-leaf of vol. xxviii.

sterling, per annum. This coincides with Grimm's statement that the total sum received by Diderot was sixty thousand livres, or about two thousand six hundred pounds sterling.<sup>1</sup> And to think, cried Voltaire, when he heard of Diderot's humble wage, that an army contractor makes twenty thousand livres a day! Voltaire himself had made a profit of more than half a million livres by a share in an army contract in the war of 1734, and his yearly income derived from such gains and their prudent investment was as high as seventy thousand livres, representing in value a sum not far short of ten thousand pounds a year of our present money.

## II.

All writers on the movement of illumination in France in the eighteenth century, call our attention to the quick transformation, which took place after the middle of the century, of a speculative or philosophical agitation into a political or social one. Readers often find some difficulty in understanding plainly how or why this metamorphosis was brought about. The metaphysical question which men were then so fond of discussing, whether matter can think, appears very far removed indeed from the sphere of political conceptions. The psychological question whether our ideas are innate, or are solely given to us by experience through the sensations, may strike the publicist as having the least possible to do with the type of a government or the aims of a community. Yet it is really the conclusions to which men come in this region, that determine the quality of the civil sentiment and the significance of political organization. The theological doctors who persecuted De Prades for suggestions of Locke's psychology, and for high treason against Cartesianism, were guided by a right instinct of self-preservation. De Maistre, by far the most acute and penetrating of the Catholic school, was never more clear-sighted than when he made a vigorous and deliberate onslaught upon Bacon the centre of his movement against revolutionary principles.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Mém.* ii. 115. Grimm, vii. 145.

<sup>2</sup> De Maistre says that the reputation of Bacon does not really go further back than the Encyclopædia, and that no true discoverer either knew him or leaned on him for support. (*Examen de la Phil. de Bacon*, ii. 110). Diderot

As we have said before, the immediate force of speculative literature hangs on practical opportuneness. It was not merely because Bacon and Hobbes and Locke had written certain books, that the Encyclopædists, who took up their philosophic succession, inevitably became a powerful political party, and multiplied their adherents in an increasing proportion as the years went on. From various circumstances the attack acquired a significance and a weight in France which it had never possessed in England. For one thing, physical science had in the interval taken immense strides. This both dwarfed the sovereignty of theology and theological metaphysics, and indirectly disposed men's minds for non-theological theories of moral as well as of physical phenomena. In France, again, the objects of the attack were inelastic and unyielding. Political speculation in England followed, and did not precede, political innovation and reform. In France its light played round institutions which were too deeply rooted in absolutism and privilege to be capable of substantial modification. Deism was comparatively impotent against the Church of England, first, because it was an intellectual movement, and not a social one; second, because the constitutional doctrines of the church were flexible. Deism in the hands of its French propagators became connected with social liberalism, because the Catholic church in those days was identified with all the ideas of repression. And the tendencies of deism in France grew more violently destructive, not only because religious superstition was grosser, but because that superstition was incorporated in a strong and inexpandible social structure.

says: "I think I have taught my fellow-citizens to esteem and read Bacon; people have turned over the pages of this profound author more since the last five or six years than has ever been the case before." (xiv. 494). In Professor Fowler's careful and elaborate edition of the *Novum Organum* (*Introd.* p. 104), he disputes the statement of Montucla and others, that the celebrity of Bacon dates from the Encyclopædia. All turns upon what we mean by celebrity. What the Encyclopædists certainly did was to raise Bacon, for a time, to the popular throne from which Voltaire's Newtonianism had pushed Descartes. Mr. Fowler traces a chain of Baconian tradition, no doubt, but he perhaps surrenders nearly as much as is claimed when he admits that "the patronage of Voltaire and the Encyclopædists did much to extend the study of Bacon's writings, besides producing a considerable controversy as to his true meaning on many questions of philosophy and theology."

“It would be a mistake,” wrote that sagacious and well-informed observer, D’Argenson, so early as 1753, “to attribute the loss of religion in France to the English philosophy, which has not gained more than a hundred philosophers or so in Paris, instead of setting it down to the hatred against the priests, which goes to the very last extreme. All minds are turning to discontent and disobedience, and everything is on the high road to a great revolution, both in religion and in government. And it will be a very different thing to that rude Reformation, a medley of superstition and freedom, which came to us from Germany in the sixteenth century! As our nation and our century are enlightened in so very different a fashion, they will go whither they ought to go; they will banish every priest, all priesthood, all revelation, all mystery.” This, however, only represents the destructive side of the vast change which D’Argenson then foresaw, six-and-thirty years before its consummation. That change had also a constructive side. If one of its elements was hate, another and more important element was hope. This constructive and reforming spirit which made its way in the intelligence of the leading men in France from 1750 to 1789, was represented in the encyclopædic confederation, and embodied in their forty folios. And, to return to our first point, it was directly and inseparably associated with the philosophy of Bacon and Locke. What is the connection between their speculations and a vehement and energetic spirit of social reform? We have no space here to do more than barely hint the line of answer. ✓

The broad features of the speculative revolution of which the Encyclopædia was the outcome, lie on the surface of its pages and cannot be mistaken. The transition from Descartes to Newton meant the definite substitution of observation for hypothesis. The exaltation of Bacon meant the advance from supernatural explanations to explanations from experience. The acceptance and development of the Lockian psychology meant the reference of our ideas to bodily sensations, and led men by what they thought a tolerably direct path to the identification of mind with functions of matter. We need not here discuss the philosophical truth or adequateness of these ways of considering the origin and nature of knowledge, or the composition of human character. All

that now concerns us is to mark their tendency. That tendency clearly is to ~~expel Magic as the~~ decisive influence among us, in favour of ordered relations of cause and effect, only to be discovered by intelligent search. The universe began to be more directly conceived as a group of phenomena that are capable of rational and connected explanation. Then, the wider the area of law, the greater is man's consciousness of his power of controlling forces, and securing the results that he desires. Objective interests and their conditions acquire an increasing preponderance in his mind. On the other hand, as the limits of science expand, so do the limits of nescience become more definite. The more we know of the universal order, the more are we persuaded, however gradually and insensibly, that certain matters which men believed themselves to know outside of this phenomenal order, are in truth inaccessible by those instruments of experience and observation to which we are indebted for other knowledge. Hence, a natural inclination to devote our faculty to the forces within our control, and to withdraw it from vain industry about forces—if they be forces—which are beyond our control and beyond our apprehension. Thus man becomes the centre of the world to himself, nature his servant and minister, human society the field of his interests and his exertions. The sensational psychology, again, whether scientifically defensible or not, clearly tends to heighten our idea of the power of education and institutions upon character. The more vividly we realise the share of external impressions in making men what they are, the more ready we shall be to concern ourselves with external conditions and their improvement. The introduction of the positive spirit into the observation of the facts of society was not to be expected until the Cartesian philosophy, with its reliance on inexplicable intuitions and its exaggeration of the method of hypothesis, had been laid aside.

Diderot struck a key-note of difference between the old Catholic spirit and the new social spirit, between quietist superstition and energetic science, in the casual sentence in his article on alms-houses and hospitals: "*It would be far more important to work at the prevention of misery, than to multiply places of refuge for the miserable.*"

It is very easy to show that the Encyclopædists had not

established an impregnable scientific basis for their philosophy. Anybody can now see that their metaphysic and psychology were imperfectly thought out. The important thing is that their metaphysic and psychology were calculated, notwithstanding all their superficialities, to inspire an energetic social spirit, because they were pregnant with humanistic sentiment. To represent the Encyclopædia as the gospel of negation and denial is to omit four-fifths of its contents. Men may certainly, if they please, describe it as merely negative work, for example, to denounce such institutions as examination and punishment by Torture (See *Question, Peine*), but if so, what gospel of affirmation can bring better blessings? <sup>2</sup> If the metaphysic of these writers had been a thousandfold more superficial than it was, what mattered that, so long as they had vision for every one of the great social improvements on which the progress and even the very life of the nation depended? It would be obviously unfair to say that reasoned interest in social improvement is incompatible with a spiritualistic doctrine, but we are justified in saying that energetic faith in possibilities of social progress has been first reached through the philosophy of sensation and experience.

In describing the encyclopædic movement as being, among other things, the development of political interest under the presiding influence of a humanistic philosophy, we are using the name of politics in its widest sense. The economic conditions of a country, and the administration of its laws, are far more vitally related to its well-being than the form of its government. The form of government is indeed a question of the first importance, but then this is owing in a paramount degree to the influence which it may have upon the other two sets of elements in the national life. Form of government is like the fashion of a man's clothes; it may fret or may comfort him, may be imposing or mean, may react upon his spirits to elate or depress them. In either case it is less intimately related to his welfare than the state of his blood and tissues. In saying, then, that the Encyclopædists began a political work, what is meant is that they drew into the

<sup>2</sup> See above, p. 41, *note*.



light of new ideas, groups of institutions, usages, and arrangements which affected the real wellbeing and happiness of France, as closely as nutrition affected the health and strength of an individual Frenchman. It was the Encyclopædists who first stirred opinion in France against the iniquities of colonial tyranny and the abominations of the slave trade. They demonstrated the folly and wastefulness and cruelty of a fiscal system that was eating the life out of the land. They protested in season and out of season against arrangements which made the administration of justice a matter of sale and purchase. They lifted up a strong voice against the atrocious barbarities of an antiquated penal code. It was this band of writers, organized by a harassed man of letters, and not the nobles swarming round Lewis xv., nor the churchmen singing masses, who first grasped the great principle of modern society, the honour that is owed to productive industry. They were vehement for the glories of peace, and passionate against the brazen glories of war.<sup>1</sup>

We are not to suppose that the Encyclopædia was the originating organ of either new methods or new social ideas. The exalted and peculiarly modern views about peace, for instance, were plainly inspired from the writings of the Abbé Saint Pierre (1658-1743)—one of the most original spirits of the century, who deserves to be remembered among other good services as the inventor of the word *bienfaisance*. Again, in the mass of the political articles we feel the immense impulse that was given to sociological discussion by the *Esprit des Lois*. Few questions are debated here, which Montesquieu had not raised, and none are debated without reference to Montesquieu's line of argument. The change of which we are conscious in turning from the *Esprit des Lois* to the Encyclopædia is that political ideas have been grasped as instruments. Philosophy has become patriotism. The Encyclopædists advanced with grave solicitude to the consideration of

<sup>1</sup> D'Alembert was not afraid to contend against the great captain of the age, that the military spirit of Lewis XIV. had been a great curse to Europe. He showed a true appreciation of Frederick's character and conception of his duties as a ruler, in believing that the King of Prussia would rather have had a hundred thousand labourers more, and as many soldiers fewer, if his situation had allowed it. *Corresp. avec le roi de Prusse, Œuv.*, v. 305.

evils, to which the red-heeled parasites of Versailles were insolently and incorrigibly blind.

The articles on Agriculture, for example, are admirable alike for the fulness and precision with which they expose the actual state of France; for the clearness with which they trace its deplorable inadequateness back to the true sources; and for the strong interest and sympathy in the subject, which they both exhibit and inspire. If now and again the touch is too idyllic, it was still a prodigious gain to let the country know in a definite way that of the fifty million arpents of cultivable land in the realm, more than one quarter lay either unbroken or abandoned. And it was a prodigious gain to arouse the attention of the general public to the causes of the forced deterioration of French agriculture, namely, the restrictions on trade in grain, the arbitrariness of the imposts, and the flight of the population to the large towns. Then the demonstration, corroborated in the pages of the Encyclopædia by the too patriotic vaunts of contemporary English writers, of the stimulus given to agriculture by our system of free exports, contained one of the most useful lessons that the French had to learn.

Again, there are some abuses which cannot be more effectively attacked, than by a mere statement of the facts in the plainest and least argumentative terms. The history of such an impost as the tax upon salt (*Gabelle*), and a bold outline of the random and incongruous fashions in which it was levied, were equivalent to a formal indictment. It needed no rhetoric nor discussion to heighten the harsh injustice of the rule that "persons who have changed domicile are still taxed for a certain time in the seat of their former abode, namely, farmers and labourers for one year, and all other tax-payers for two years, provided the parish to which they have removed is within the same district; and if otherwise, then farmers to pay for two years, and other persons for three years" (*Taille*). Thus a man under the given circumstances would have to pay double taxes for three years as a penalty for changing his dwelling. We already hear the murmur of the *cahiers* of five-and-twenty years later in the account of the transports of joy with which the citizens of Lisieux saw the *taille proportionnelle* established (1718), and how numerous other cities

sent up prayers that the same blessing might be conferred on them. "Reasons that it is not for us to divine, caused the rejection of these demands; so hard is it to do a good act, which everybody talks about, much more in order to seem to desire it, than from any intention of really doing it. . . . To illustrate the advantages of this plan, the impost of 1718 with all arrears for five years was discharged in twelve months without needless cost or dispute. By an extravagance more proper than any other to degrade humanity, the common happiness made malcontents of all that class whose prosperity depends on the misery of others,"—that is the privileged class.<sup>1</sup>

It is no innate factiousness, as flighty critics of French affairs sometimes imply, that has made civil equality the passion of modern France. The root of this passion is an undying memory of the curse that was inflicted on its citizens, morally and materially, by the fiscal inequalities of the old régime. The article, *Privilege*, urges the desirableness of inquiring into the grounds of the vast multitude of fiscal exemptions, and of abolishing all that were no longer associated with the performance of real and useful service. "A bourgeois," says the writer, anticipating a cry that was so soon to ring through the land, "a bourgeois in comfortable circumstances, and who could himself pay half of the taille of a whole parish, if it were imposed in its due proportion,—on payment of the amount of his taxes for one or for two years, and often for less; without birth, education, or talents, buys a place in a local salt office, or some useless charge at court, or in the household of some prince. . . . This man proceeds to enjoy in the public eye all the exemptions possessed by the nobility and the high magistracy. . . . From such an abuse of privileges spring two very considerable evils; the poorer part of the citizens are always burdened beyond their strength, though they are the most useful to the State, since this class is composed of those who cultivate the land, and procure a subsistence for the upper classes; the other evil is that privileges disgust persons of education and talent with the idea of entering the magistracy or other professions demanding labour and application, and lead them to prefer small

<sup>1</sup> See Essay on Turgot in my *Critical Miscellanies, Second Series*.

posts and paltry offices." And so forth, with a gravity and moderation, that were then common in political discussion in France. It gradually disappeared in 1789, when it was found that the privileged orders, even at that time, in their *cahiers* steadily demanded the maintenance of every one of their most odious and iniquitous rights.<sup>1</sup> When it is said, then, that the Encyclopædists deliberately prepared the way for a political revolution, let us remember that what they really did was to shed the light of rational discussion on such practical grievances as even the most fatuous conservative in France does not now dream of bringing back.

Let us turn to two other of the most oppressive institutions that then scourged France. First the *Corvée*, or feudal rule which forced every unprivileged farmer and peasant in France to furnish so many days' labour for the maintenance of the highways. Arthur Young tells us, and the statement is confirmed by the Minutes of Turgot, that this wasteful, cruel, and inefficient system was annually the ruin of many hundreds of persons, and he mentions that no less than three hundred farmers were reduced to beggary in filling up a single vale in Lorraine.<sup>2</sup> Under this all-important head, the Encyclopædia has an article that does not merely add to the knowledge of its readers by a history of the *corvées*, but proceeds to discuss, as in a pamphlet or review article, the inconveniences of the prevailing system, and presses schemes for avoiding them. Turgot had not yet shown in practice the only right substitute. The article was printed in 1754, and it was not until ten years later that this great administrator, then become intendant of the Limousin, did away in his district with compulsory personal service on the roads, and required in its place a money payment assessed on the parishes.<sup>3</sup> The writer of the article in the Encyclopædia does not anticipate this obviously rational plan, but he paints a striking picture of the thousand

<sup>1</sup> Such as that their feudal rights should be confirmed; that none but nobles should carry arms, or be eligible for the army; that *lettres-de-cachet* should continue; that the press should not be free; that the wine trade should not be free internally or for export; that breaking up wastes and enclosing commons should be prohibited; that the old arrangement of the militia should remain.—Arthur Young's *France*, ch. xxi. p. 607.

<sup>2</sup> *Travels in France*, ch. xxi.

<sup>3</sup> *Critical Miscellanies, Second Series*, p. 202.

abuses and miserable inefficiencies of the practice of *corvées*, and his piece illustrates that vigorous discussion of social subjects which the Encyclopædia stimulated. It is worth remarking that this writer was a sub-engineer of roads and bridges in the generality of Tours. The case is one example among others of the importance of the Encyclopædia as a centre, to which active-minded men of all kinds might bring the fruits of their thought and observation.

Next to the *corvées*, the monster grievance of the third estate was the system of enrolments for the militia. The article, *Milice*, is very short, but it goes to the root of the matter. The only son of a cultivator of moderate means, forced to quit the paternal roof at the moment when his labour might recompense his straitened parents for the expense of having brought him up, is justly described as an irreparable loss. The writer, after hinting that it would be well, if such an institution were wholly dispensed with, urges that at least its object might be more effectively and more humanely reached by allowing each parish to provide its due contingent of men in its own way. This change was indeed already (1765) being carried out by Turgot in the Limousin, and with excellent results. The writer concludes with the highly civilized remark, that we ought to weigh whether the good of the rural districts, the culture of the land, and population, are not preferable objects to the glory of setting enormous hosts of armed men on foot after the example of Xerxes. Alas, it is one of the discouragements of the student of history, that he often finds highly civilized remarks made one or two or twenty centuries ago, which are just as useful and just as little heeded now as they were when they were made.

The same reflection occurs to one in reading the article on Foundations. As I have already said, this carefully written and sagacious piece still remains the most masterly discussion we possess of the advantages and disadvantages of endowments. Even now, and in our own country, the most fertile and beneficent work to which a statesman of energy and courage could devote himself, would be an application of the wise principles which were established in the Encyclopædia. Passing from *Fondation* to *Foire* in the same volume, also from the pen of Turgot, we see an

almost equally striking example of the economic wisdom of the encyclopædic school. The provincial fairs, with their privileges, exemptions, exclusions, were a conspicuous case of the mischief done by that "mania for regulating and guiding everything," which then infected commercial administration, and interrupted the natural course of trade by imbecile vexations of police. Another vicious example of the same principle is exposed in the article on *Maîtrises*. This must have convinced every reader capable of rising above "the holy laws of prejudice," how bad faith, idleness, disorder, and all the other evils of monopoly were fomented by a system of jealous trade-guilds, carrying compulsory subdivision and restriction of all kinds of skilled labour down to a degree that would have been laughable enough, if it had only been less destructive.

One of the loudest cries in 1789 was for the destruction of game and the great manorial chases or capitaineries. "By game," says Arthur Young, "must be understood whole droves of wild boars, and herds of deer not confined by any wall or pale, but wandering at pleasure over the whole country to the destruction of crops, and to the peopling of the galleys by the wretched peasants who presumed to kill them, in order to save that food which was to support their helpless children."<sup>1</sup> In the same place he enumerates the outrageous and incredible rules which ruined agriculture over hundreds of leagues of country, in order that the seigneurs might have sport. In most matters the seven volumes of the Encyclopædia which were printed before 1757, are more reserved than the ten volumes which were conducted by Diderot alone after the great schism of 1759. On the subject of sport, however, the writer of the article *Chasse* enumerates all the considerations which a patriotic minister could desire to see impressed on public opinion. Some of the paragraphs startle us by their directness and freedom of complaint, and even a very cool reader would still be likely to feel some of the wrath that was stirred in the breast of our shrewd and sober Arthur Young a generation later (1787). "Go to the residence of these great nobles," he says, "wherever it may be, and you would probably find them in

<sup>1</sup> *Travels in France*, p. 600.

the midst of a forest, very well peopled with deer, wild boar, and wolves. Oh! if I were the legislator of France for a day, I would make such great lords skip!"<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to what is perhaps the most striking of all the guiding sentiments of the book. Virgil's *Georgics* have been described as a glorification of labour. The *Encyclopædia* seems inspired by the same motive, the same earnest enthusiasm for all the purposes, interests, and details of productive industry. Diderot, as has been justly said, himself the son of a cutler, might well bring handiwork into honour; assuredly he had inherited from his good father's workshop sympathy and regard for skill and labour.<sup>2</sup> The illustrative plates to which Diderot gave the most laborious attention for a period of almost thirty years, are not only remarkable for their copiousness, their clearness, their finish; and in all these respects they are truly admirable; but they strike us even more by the semi-poetic feeling that transforms the mere representation of a process into an animated scene of human life, stirring the sympathy and touching the imagination of the onlooker as by something dramatic. The bustle, the dexterity, the alert force of the iron foundry, the glass furnace, the gunpowder mill, the silk calendry, are as skilfully reproduced as the more tranquil toil of the dairywoman, the embroiderer, the confectioner, the setter of types, the compounder of drugs, the chaser of metals. The drawings recall that eager and personal interest in his work, that nimble complacency, which is so charming a trait in the best French craftsman. The animation of these great folios of plates is prodigious. They affect one like looking down on the world of Paris from the heights of Montmartre. To turn over volume after volume is like watching a splendid panorama of all the busy life of the time. Minute care is as striking in them as their comprehensiveness. The smallest tool, the knot in a thread, the ply in a cord, the curve of wrist or finger, each has special and proper delineation. The reader smiles at a complete and elaborate set of tailor's patterns. He shudders as he comes upon the knives, the probes, the bandages, the posture, of the wretch about to undergo the most dangerous

<sup>1</sup> *Travels in France*, i. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Rosenkranz*, i. 219.

operation in surgery. In all the chief departments of industry there are plates good enough to serve for practical specifications and working drawings. It has often been told how Diderot himself used to visit the workshops, to watch the men at work, to put a thousand questions, to sit down at the loom, to have the machine pulled to pieces and set together again before his eyes, to slave like any apprentice, and to do bad work, in order, as he says, to be able to instruct others how to do good work. That was no movement of empty rhetoric which made him cry out for the Encyclopædia to become a sanctuary in which human knowledge might find shelter against time and revolutions. He actually took the pains to make it a complete storehouse of the arts, so perfect in detail that they could be at once reconstructed after a deluge in which everything had perished save a single copy of the Encyclopædia. Such details, said D'Alembert, will perhaps seem extremely out of place to certain scholars, for whom a long dissertation on the cookery or the hair-dressing of the ancients, or on the site of a ruined hamlet, or on the baptismal name of some obscure writer of the tenth century, would be vastly interesting and precious. He suggests that details of economy, and of arts and trades, have as good a right to a place as the scholastic philosophy, or some system of rhetoric still in use, or the mysteries of heraldry. Yet none even of these had been passed over.<sup>1</sup>

The importance given to physical science and the practical arts, in the Encyclopædia, is the sign and exemplification of two elements of the great modern transition. It marks both a social and an intellectual revolution. We see in it, first, the distinct association with pacific labour, of honour and a kind of glory, such as had hitherto been reserved for knights and friars, for war and asceticism, for fighting and praying. It is the definite recognition of the basis of a new society. If the nobles and the churchmen could only have understood, as clearly as Diderot and D'Alembert understood, the irresistible forces that were making against the maintenance of the worn-out system, all the worst of the evils attending the great political changes of the last decade of the century would have been avoided. That the nobles

<sup>1</sup> *Avert.* to vol. iii.



and churchmen would not see this, was the fatality of the Revolution. We have a glimpse of the profound transformation of social ideas which was at work, in the five or six lines of the article, *Journalier*. "Journeyman—a workman who labours with his hands, and is paid day-wages. This description of men forms the great part of a nation; it is their lot which a good government ought to keep principally in sight. If the journeyman is miserable, the nation is miserable." And again: "The net profit of a society, if equally distributed, may be preferable to a larger profit, if it be distributed unequally, and have the effect of dividing the people into two classes, one gorged with riches, the other perishing in misery" (*Homme*).

The second element in the modern transition is only the intellectual side of the first. It is the substitution of interest in things for interest in words, of positive knowledge for verbal disputation. Few now dispute the services of the schoolmen to the intellectual development of Europe. But conditions had fully ripened, and it was time to complete the movement of Bacon and Descartes by finally placing verbal analysis, verbal definition, verbal inferences, in their right position. Form was no longer to take precedence of matter. The Encyclopædists are never weary of contrasting their own age of practical rationalism with "the pusillanimous ages of taste." A great collection of books is described in one article (*Bibliomanie*) as a collection of material for the history of the blindness and infatuation of mankind. The gatherer of books is compared to one who should place five or six gems under a pile of common pebbles. If a man of sense buys a work in a dozen volumes, and finds that only half-a-dozen pages are worth reading, he does well to cut out the half-dozen pages and fling the rest into the fire. Finally, it would be no unbecoming device for every great library to have inscribed over its portal, The Bedlam of the Human Mind. At this point one might perhaps suggest to D'Alembert that study of the pathology of the mind is no bad means of surprising the secrets of humanity and life. For his hour, however, the need was not knowledge of the thoughts, dreams, and mental methods of the past, but better mastery of the aids and instruments of active life. In any case Diderot

was right when he expressed his preference for the essay over the treatise: "an essay where the writer throws me one or two ideas of genius, almost isolated, rather than a treatise where the precious gems are stifled beneath a mass of iteration. . . . A man had only one idea; the idea demanded no more than a phrase; this phrase, full of marrow and meaning, would have been seized with relish; washed out in a deluge of words, it wearies and disgusts."<sup>1</sup> Rousseau himself does not surpass Diderot or D'Alembert in contempt for mere bookishness. We wholly misjudge the Encyclopædia, if we treat it either as literature or philosophy.

The attitude of the Encyclopædia to religion is almost universally misrepresented in the common accounts. We are always told that the aim of its conductors was to preach dogmatic atheism. Such a statement could not be made by anyone who had read the theological articles, whether the more or the less important among them. Whether Diderot had himself advanced definitely to the dogma of atheism at this time or not, it is certain that the Encyclopædia represents only the phase of ~~rationalistic scepticism~~. That the criticism was destructive of much of the fabric of popular belief, and was designed to destroy it, is undeniable, as it was inevitable. But when the excesses of '93 and '94—and all the revolutionary excesses put together are but a drop compared with the oceans of bloodshed with which Catholicism and absolutism have made history crimson—when the crimes and confusion of the end of the century are traced by historians to the materialism and atheism of the Encyclopædia, we can only say that such an account is a misrepresentation. The materialism and atheism are not there. The religious attack was prompted and guided by the same social feeling that inspired the economic articles. The priest was the enemy of society, the patron of indolence, the hater of knowledge, the mutineer against the civil laws, the unprofitable devourer of the national substance, the persecutor. ~~Sacerdotalism is the object of the encyclopædic attack.~~ To undermine this, it was necessary first to establish the principle of toleration, because the priest claims to be recognised as the exclusive possessor of saving

<sup>1</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, iv. 24.

doctrine. Second, it was necessary to destroy the principle of miracle, because the priest professes himself in his daily rites the consecrated instrument of thaumaturgy. "Let a man," says Rosenkranz very truly, "turn over hundreds of histories of church, of state, of literature, and in everyone of them he will read that the Encyclopædia spread abroad an irreligious spirit. The accusation has only a relative truth, to the extent that the Encyclopædia assailed the belief in miracles, and the oppression of conscience supported by a priestly aristocracy."<sup>1</sup>

It must be admitted that no consistent and definite language is adhered to from beginning to end. D'Alembert's prophecy that time would disclose to people what the writers really thought, behind what fear of the censorship compelled them to say, is only partially fulfilled.

The idea of miracle is sapped not by direct arguments, but by the indirect influences of science, and the exposition of the successes of scientific method. It was here that the Encyclopædia exerted really destructive power, and it did so in the only way in which power of that kind can be exerted either wisely or effectually. The miracle of a divine revelation, of grace, of the mass, began to wear a different look in men's eyes, as they learned more of the physical processes of the universe. We should describe the work of the Encyclopædia as being to make its readers lose their interest, rather than their belief, in mysteries. This is the normal process of theological dissolution. It unfolded a vast number of scientific conceptions in all branches of human activity, a surprising series of acquisitions, a vivid panorama of victories won by the ingenuity and travail of man. A contemplation of the wonders that man had wrought for himself, replaced meditation on the wonders that were alleged to have been wrought by the gods. The latter were not so much denied by the plain reader, as they were gradually left out of sight and forgotten. Nobody now cares to disprove Jupiter and Juno, Satyrs and Hamadryads.

Diderot constantly insists on the propriety, the importance, the indispensableness, of keeping the provinces of science and philosophy apart from the province of theology. This separation is much sought in our own day as a means of saving theology.

<sup>1</sup> *Diderot's Leben*, i. 157.

Diderot designed it to save philosophy. He felt that the distinct recognition of positive thought as supreme within the widest limits then covered by it, would ultimately lead to the banishment of theological thought to a region of its own, too distant and too infertile for men to weary themselves in pursuit of it. His conception was to supplant the old ways of thinking and the old objects of intellectual interest by new ones. He trusted to the intrinsic fitness and value of the new knowledge and new views of human life, to displace the old. This marks him for a constructive thinker. He replaced barren theological interests that had outlived their time, by all those great groups of living and fruitful interests which glow and sparkle in the volumes of the Encyclopædia. Here was the effective damage that the Encyclopædia inflicted on the church as the organ of a stationary superstition. Some of the articles remind us on what a strange borderland France stood in those days, between debasing credulity and wholesome light. We are so sensible of the new air that breathes impalpably over the book, that when the old theological fancies appear for form's sake, and are solemnly marshalled in orthodox state, the contrast and the incongruity are so marked that one is amused by what looks like a subtle irony, mocking the censor under his very eyes. Who can help smiling at the grave question, *Adam, le premier de tous les hommes, a-t-il été philosophe?* Such disputes as whether it is proper to baptize abortions, ceased to interest a public that had begun to educate itself by discussions on the virtue of Inoculation.

Of the gross defects in the execution of the Encyclopædia nobody was so sensible as Diderot himself. He drew up a truly formidable list of the departments where the work was badly done.<sup>1</sup> But when the blunders and omissions in each subject were all counted, the value of the vast grouping of the subjects was hardly diminished. The union of all these secular acquisitions in a single colossal work invested them with something imposing. Secular knowledge was made to present a massive and sumptuous front. It was pictured before the curious eyes of that generation as a great city of glittering palaces and stately mansions; or else as an immense landscape, with mountains,

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xx. 132.

plains, rocks, waters, forests, animals, and a thousand objects, glorious and beautiful in the sunlight. Theology became visibly a shrivelled thing. Men grew to be conscious of the vastness of the universe. At the same time and by the same process, the Encyclopædia gave them a key to the plan, a guiding thread in the immense labyrinth. The genealogical tree, or classification of arts and sciences, which with a few modifications was borrowed from Bacon and appeared at the end of the Prospectus, is seen to be faulty and inadequate. It distributes the various branches of knowledge with reference to faculties of the human understanding, instead of grouping them according to their objective relations to one another. This led to many awkward results, as when the art of printing is placed by the side of orthography as a subdivision of Logic, to which also is given the art of heraldry or emblazonment. There is awkwardness too in dividing architecture into three heads, and then placing civil architecture under national jurisprudence, and naval architecture under social jurisprudence, while under fine arts no kind of architecture has any place. But when we have multiplied these objections to the uttermost, the effect of the magnificence and vastness of the scheme remains exactly what it was.

Even more important than the exposition of human knowledge, was the exposition of the degrees by which it had been slowly reared. The Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopædia, of which by far the greater and more valuable portion was written by D'Alembert, contains a fine survey of the progress of science, thought, and letters since the revival of learning. It is a generous canonization of the great heroes of secular knowledge. It is rapid, but the contributions of Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Locke, Leibnitz, are thrown into a series that penetrates the reader's mind with the idea of ordered growth and measured progress. This excited a vivid hopefulness of interest, which insensibly but most effectually pressed the sterile propositions of dogmatic theology into a dim and squalid background. Nor was this all. The Preliminary Discourse and the host of articles marshalled behind it, showed that the triumphs of knowledge and true opinion had all been gained on two conditions. The first of these conditions was a firm disregard of authority; the second

was an abstention from the premature concoction of system. The reign of ignorance and prejudice was made inveterate by deference to tradition : the reign of truth was hindered by the artificial boundary-marks set mischievously deep by the authors of systems. As the whole spirit of theology is both essentially authoritative and essentially systematic, this disparagement was full of tolerably direct significance. It told in another way. The Sorbonne, the universities, the doctors, had identified orthodoxy with Cartesianism. "It is hard to believe," says D'Alembert in 1750, "that it is only within the last thirty years that people have even begun to renounce Cartesianism." He might have added that one of the most powerful of his contemporaries, Montesquieu himself, remained a rigid Cartesian to the end of his days. "Our nation," he says, "singularly eager as it is for novelties in all matters of taste, is in matters of science extremely attached to old opinions." This remark remains true of France to the present hour, and it would be an interesting digression, did time allow, to consider its significance. France can at all events count one master innovator, the founder of Cartesianism himself. D'Alembert points out that the disciples violate the first maxims of their chief. He describes the hypothesis of vortices and the doctrine of innate ideas as no longer tenable, and even as ridiculous ; but do not let us forget, he says with a fine movement of candour, that it was Descartes who opened the way ; he who set an example to men of intelligence, of shaking off the yoke of scholasticism, of opinion, of authority—in a word, of prejudices and barbarism. Those who remain faithful to his hypothetical system, while they abandon his method, may be the last of his partisans, but they would assuredly never have been the first of his disciples.

By system the Encyclopædists meant more or less coherent bodies of frivolous conjecture. The true merit of the philosopher or the physicist is described as being to have the spirit of system, yet never to construct a system. The notion expressed in this sentence promises a union of the advantages of an organic synthesis, with the advantages of an open mind and unfettered inquiry. It would be ridiculous to think, says D'Alembert, that there is nothing more to discover in anatomy, because

anatomists devote themselves to researches that may seem to be of no use, and yet often prove to be full of use in their consequences. Nor would it be less absurd to lay a ban on erudition, on the pretext that our learned men often give themselves up to matters of trivial import.

We are constantly struck in the Encyclopædia by a genuine desire to reach the best opinion by the only right way, the way of abundant, many-sided, and liberal discussion. The article, for instance, on *Fermes Générales* contains an examination of the question whether it is more expedient that the taxes of a nation should be gathered by farmers of the revenue, or directly by the agents of the government acting on its behalf and under its supervision. Montesquieu had argued strongly in favour of a Régie, the second of these methods. The writer of the article sets out the nine considerations by which Montesquieu had endeavoured to establish his position, and then he offers on each of them the strongest observations that occur to him in support of the opposite conclusion. At the conclusion of the article, the editors of the Encyclopædia append the following note: "Our professed impartiality and our desire to promote the discussion and clearing up of an important question, have induced us to insert this article. As the Encyclopædia has for its principal aim the public advantage and instruction, we will insert in the article, *Régie*, without taking any side, all such reasons for and against, as people may be willing to submit to us, provided they are stated with due sense and moderation." Alas, when we turn to the article on Régie, the promise is unfulfilled, and a dozen meagre lines disappoint the seeker. But eight years of storm had passed, and many a beneficent intention had been wrecked. The announcement at least shows us the aim and spirit of the original scheme.

Of the line of argument taken in the Encyclopædia as to Toleration we need say nothing. The Encyclopædist were the most ardent propagators of the modern principles of toleration. No one has to be reminded that this was something more than an abstract discussion among the doctors of social philosophy, in a country where youths were broken on the wheel for levity in face of an ecclesiastical procession, where nearly every considerable

man of the century had been either banished or imprisoned for daring to use his mind, and which had been half ruined by the great proscription of Protestants more than once renewed. The article *Tolérance* was greatly admired in its day, and it is an eloquent and earnest reproduction of the pleas of Locke. One rather curious feature in it is the reproduction of the passage from the Social Contract, in which Rousseau explains the right of the magistrate to banish any citizen who has not got religion enough to make him do his duties, and who will not make a profession of civil faith. The writer of the article interprets this as implying that "atheists in particular, who remove from the powerful the only rein, and from the weak their only hope," have no right to claim toleration. This is an unexpected stroke in a work that is vulgarly supposed to be a violent manifesto on behalf of atheism.<sup>1</sup>

Diderot himself in an earlier article (*Intolérance*) had treated the subject with more trenchant energy. He does not argue his points systematically, but launches a series of maxims, as with set teeth, clenched hands, and a brow like a thundercloud. He hails the oppressors of his life, the priests and the parliaments, with a pungency that is exhilarating, and winds up with a description of the intolerant as one who forgets that a man is his fellow, and for holding a different opinion, treats him like a ravening brute; as one who sacrifices the spirit and precepts of his religion to his pride; as the rash fool who thinks that the arch can only be upheld by his hands; as a man who is generally without religion, and to whom it comes easier to have zeal than morals. Every page of the Encyclopædia was, in fact, a plea for toleration. This embittered the hostility of the churchmen to the work more than its attack upon dogma. For most ecclesiastics valued power more dearly than truth. And in power they valued most dearly the atrocious right of silencing, by foul means or fair, all opinions that were not official.

<sup>1</sup> The writer was one Romilly, who had been elected a minister of one of the French Protestant churches in London. See *Memoirs of Sir Samuel Romilly*, vol. i.



## III.

Having thus described the general character and purport of the Encyclopædia, we have still to look at a special portion of it from a more particular point of view. We have already shown how multifarious were Diderot's labours as editor. It remains to give a short account of his labours as a contributor. Everything was on the same vast scale. His industry in writing would have been in itself most astonishing, even if it had not been accompanied by the more depressing fatigue of revising what others had written. Diderot's articles fill more than four of the large volumes of his collected works.

The confusion is immense. The spirit is sometimes historical, sometimes controversial; now critical, now dogmatic. In one place Diderot speaks in his own proper person, in another as the neutral scribe writing to the dictation of an unseen authority. There is no rigorous measure and ordered proportion. We constantly pass from a serious treatise to a sally, from an elaborate history to a caprice. There are not a few pages where we know that Diderot is saying what he does not think. Some of the articles seem only to have found a place because Diderot happened to have taken an interest in their subjects at the moment. After reading Voltaire's concise account of Imagination, we are amazed to find Diderot devoting a larger space than Voltaire had needed for the subject at large, to so subordinate and remote a branch of the matter as the Power of the Imagination in Pregnant Women upon the Unborn Young. The article on Theosophs would hardly have been so disproportionately long as it is, merely for the sake of Paracelsus and Van Helmont and Poiret and the Rosicrucians, unless Diderot happened to be curiously and half-sympathetically brooding over the mixture of inspiration and madness, of charlatany and generous aim, of which these semi-mystic, semi-scientific characters were composed.<sup>1</sup>

Many of Diderot's articles, again, have no rightful place in an

<sup>1</sup> I have no space to quote an interesting page in this article on the characteristics and the varying destinies of genius. "We must rank in this class Pindar, Æschylus, Moses, Jesus Christ, Mahomet, Shakespeare, Roger Bacon, and Paracelsus." xvii. 265-7.

Encyclopædia. *Genius*, for instance, is dealt with in what is neither more nor less than a literary essay, vigorous, suggestive, diffuse; and containing, by the way, the curious assertion that, although there are few errors in Locke and too few truths in Shaftesbury, yet Locke is only an acute and comprehensive intelligence, while Shaftesbury is a genius of the first order.

Under the word *Laborious*, we have only a dozen lines of angry reproach against the despotism that makes men idle by making property uncertain. Under such words as *Frivolous*, *Gallantry*, *Perfection*, *Importance*, *Politeness*, *Melancholy*, *Glorieux*, the reader is amused and edified by miniature essays on manners and character, seldom ending without some pithy sentence and pointed moral. Sometimes (e.g. *Grandeur*) we have a charming piece after the manner of La Bruyère. Under the verb *Naitre*, which is placed in the department of grammar, we find a passage so far removed from grammar as the following:—

“The terms of life and death have nothing absolute; they only designate the successive states of one and the same being; for him who has been strongly nourished in this philosophy, the urn that contains the ashes of a father, a mother, a husband, a mistress, is truly a touching object. There still remains in it life and warmth; these ashes may perhaps even yet feel our tears and give them response; who knows if the movement that our tears stir, as they water those ashes, is wholly without sensibility?”

This little burst of grotesque sentimentalism is one of the pieces that justify the description of Diderot as the most German of all the French.<sup>1</sup> Equally characteristic and more sensible is the writer's outbreak against Formalists. “The formalist knows exactly the proper interval between receiving and returning a visit; he expects you on the exact day at the exact time; if you fail, he thinks himself neglected and takes offence. A single man of this stamp is enough to chill and embarrass a whole company. There is nothing so repugnant to simple and upright souls as

<sup>1</sup> The same idea is found still more ardently expressed in one of his letters to Mdle. de Voland (Oct. 15, 1759, xviii. 408), where he defends the eagerness of those who have loved one another during life, to be placed side by side after death.

formalities; as such people have within themselves the consciousness of the good-will they bear to everybody, they neither plague themselves to be constantly displaying a sentiment that is habitual, nor to be constantly on the watch for it in others." This is analogous to his contempt for the pedants who object to the use of a hybrid word: "If it happens that a composite of a Greek word and a Latin word renders the idea as well, and is easier to pronounce or pleasanter to the ear than a compound of two Greek words and two Latin words, why prefer the latter?" (*Hibrides*). Some articles are simply diatribes against the enemy. *Pardon*, for instance: "It needs much attention, much modesty, much skill to wring from others pardon for our superiority. The men who have executed a foolish work, have never been able to pardon us for projecting a better. We could have got from them pardon for a crime, but never for a good action." And so forth, with much magnanimous acrimony. *Prostitution* is only introduced for the pleasure of applying the unsavoury word to certain critics "of whom we have so many in these days, and of whom we say that they prostitute their pens to money, to favour, to lying, and to all the vices most unworthy of an honourable man."

We are constantly being puzzled and diverted by Diderot's ingenuity in wandering away from the topic nominally in hand, to insinuate some of those doctrines of tolerance, of suspended judgment, or of liberty, which lay so much nearer to his heart than any point of mere erudition. There is a little article on Aius-Locutius, the Announcing Speaker, one of the minor Roman gods. Diderot begins by a few lines describing the rise of the deity into repute. He then quotes Cicero's pleasantry on the friendly divinity, that when nobody in the world had ever heard of him, he delivered a salutary oracle, but after people had built him a fine temple, then the god of speech fell dumb. This suggests to Diderot to wonder with edifying innocence how so religious a people as the Romans endured these irreverent jests in their philosophers. By an easy step we pass to the conditions on which modern philosophers should be allowed by authority to publish their speculations. Diderot throws out the curious hint that it would be best to forbid any writing against government

and religion in the vulgar tongue, and to allow those who write in a learned tongue to publish what they please. And so we bid farewell to Aius-Locutius. In passing, we ask ourselves whether Diderot's suggestion is not available in the discussion of certain questions, where freedom of speech in the vernacular tongue is scarcely compatible with the *reverentia quæ debetur pueris*?

Diderot is never prevented by any mistaken sense of the dignity of his enterprise from interspersing his disquisitions on science and philosophy with such practical thoughts on the common matters of daily life as come into his ingenious head. He suggests, for instance, by way of preventing the frauds of cab-drivers on their masters and on the public, that all payments of fares should be made to appointed officers at the various cab-stations, and that no driver should take up a fare except at one of these stations.<sup>1</sup> In writing about lackeys, after a word on their insolence and on the wretched case in which most of them end their days, he points out that the multitude of them is causing the depopulation of the fields. They are countrymen who have thronged to Paris to avoid military service. Peasants turned lackeys to escape the conscription, just as in our own days they turn priests. Then, says Diderot, this evil ought to be checked by a tax upon liveries; but such a tax is far too sensible ever to be imposed.

Yet, notwithstanding the practical and fervid temper of his understanding, Diderot is not above literary trifling when the humour seizes him. If he can write an exhaustive article on Encyclopædia, or Spinoza, or Academies, or Weaving, he can also stoop to Anagrams, and can tell us that the letters of Frère Jacques Clément, the assassin of Henry III., make up the sinister words, *C'est l'enfer qui m'a créé*. He can write a couple of amusing pages on Onomatomancy, or divination of a man's fortune from his name; and can record with neutral gravity how frequently great empires have been destroyed under princes bearing the same name as their first founders; how, again, certain names are unlucky for princes, as Caius among the Romans, John in France, England, and Scotland, and Henry in France.

We have now and then an anecdote that is worth reading and

<sup>1</sup> xiv. 32.

worth preserving. Thus, under Machiavellist: "I have heard that a philosopher, being asked by a great prince about a refutation of Machiavellism, which the latter had just published, replied, 'Sire, I fancy that the first lesson that Machiavelli would have given to his disciple, would have been to refute his work.'" Whether Voltaire ever did say this to the great Frederick, is very questionable, but it would not have been ill said. After the reader has been taken through a short course of Arabian philosophy, he is enlivened by a selection of poetic sayings about human life from the Rose-garden of Sadi, and the whole article winds up with an eastern fable, of no particular relevancy, of three men finding a treasure, and of one of them poisoning the food for which the other two had sent him; on his return they suddenly fell on him and slew him, and then ate the poisoned food, and so the treasure fell to none of them.<sup>1</sup>

We have spoken in the previous section of the contempt expressed by D'Alembert for mere literary antiquarianism—a very different thing, let us remember, from scientific inquiry into the origin and classification of institutions and social organs. Diderot's article on the Germans is an excellent illustration of this wholesome predominance of the scientific spirit over the superficialities of barren erudition. The word "Allemand," says Diderot, "has a great many etymologies, but they are so forced, that it is almost as well to know none of them, as to know them all. As for the origin of this famous stock, all that has been said on that matter, between Tacitus and Clovis, is simply a tissue of guesses without foundation." Of course in this, some persons will see a shameful levity; others will regard it as showing very good sense, and a right estimate of what is knowable and worth knowing, and what is neither one nor the other. In the article on Celibacy we notice the same temper. A few sentences are enough for the antiquarianism of the subject, what the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans thought and ordained about celibacy. The substance of the article is a reproduction of the Abbé Saint Pierre's discussion of the advantages that would be gained for France, with her

<sup>1</sup> S. v. Sarrasins, xvii. 82. See also xviii. 429, for Diderot's admiration of Sadi.

declining population, if her forty thousand curés were allowed to marry, and to bring into the world eighty thousand children. We may believe that Diderot smiled as he transcribed the Abbé's cunning suggestion that a dispensing power to relieve from the obligation of celibacy should be recognised in the Pope, and that the Roman court should receive a sum of money for every dispensation so granted.

Although, however, Diderot despised mere bookishness, his article on Libraries is one of the longest and most painstaking, furnishing a tolerably complete list of the most famous collections, from the beginning of books down to the latest additions to the King's Library in the Rue Vivienne. In the course of this article he quotes with seeming approval the quaint words in which old Richard of Bury, the author of the *Philobiblon* (1340), praised books as the best of masters, much as the immortal defender of the poet Archias had praised them: "Hi sunt magistri qui nos instruunt sine virgis et ferulis, sine cholera, sine pecuniâ; si accedis non dormiunt; si inquiris non se abscondunt; non obmurmurant si oberres; cachinnos nesciunt si ignores."

In literature proper, as in philosophy, Diderot loses no opportunity of insisting on the need of being content with ~~suspended~~ judgment. For instance, he blames historians of opinion for the readiness with which they attribute notions found in one or two rabbis to the whole of the Jews, or because two or three Fathers say something, boldly set this down as the sentiments of a whole century, although perhaps we have nothing else save these two or three Fathers left of the century, and although we do not know whether their writings were applauded, or were even widely known. "It were to be wished that people should speak less affirmatively, especially on particular points and remote consequences, and that they should only attribute them directly to those in whose writings they are actually to be found. I confess that the history of the sentiments of antiquity would not seem so complete, and that it would be necessary to speak in terms of doubt much more often than is common; but by acting otherwise we expose ourselves to the danger of taking false and uncertain conjectures for ascertained and unquestionable truths. The ordinary man of letters does not readily put up with suspensive expressions, any more than

common people do so." All this is an odd digression to be found under the head of Hylopathianism, but it must always remain wholesome doctrine.

We cannot wonder at Diderot's admiration for Montaigne and for Bayle, who, with Hume, would make the great trinity of scepticism. "The work of Montaigne," said Diderot, "is the touchstone of a good intelligence; you may be sure that any one whom the reading of Montaigne displeases, has some vice either of heart or understanding. As for Bayle, he has had few equals in the art of reasoning, and perhaps no superior; and though he piles doubt upon doubt, he always proceeds with order; an article of his is a living polypus, which divides itself into a number of polypuses, all living, engendered one from the other." Yet Diderot had a feeling of the necessity of advancing beyond the attitude of Bayle and Montaigne. Intellectual suspense and doubt was made difficult to him by his vehement and positive demand for emotional certainties.

Diderot is always ready to fling away his proper subject in a burst of moralising. The article on *Man*, as a branch of natural history, contains a correct if a rather superficial account of that curious animal; at length the writer comes to a table showing the probable duration of life at certain ages. "You will observe," he says, "1st, that the age of seven is that at which you may hope a longer life; 2nd, that at twelve or thirteen you have lived a quarter of your life; at twenty-eight or twenty-nine you have lived half; at fifty more than three quarters." And then he suddenly winds up the whole performance by the exclamation: "O ye who have laboured up to fifty, who are in the enjoyment of comfort, and who still have left to you health and strength, what then are you waiting for before you take rest? How long will you go on saying *To-morrow, to-morrow?*"

There are many casual brilliancies in the way of analogy and parallel, many aptnesses of thought and phrase. The Stoics are called the Jansenists of Paganism. "For a single blade of grass to grow, it is necessary that the whole of nature should co-operate." "A man comes to Pyrrhonism by one of two opposite ways; either because he does not know enough, or because he knows

\* S. v. *Pyrrhonienns*.

too much ; the latter is not the most common way." And so forth.

If we turn to the group of articles dealing with theology, it is difficult for us to know exactly where we are. Sometimes Diderot writes of popular superstitions with the gravity proper to a dictionary of mythology. Sometimes he sews on to the sober grey of his scepticism a purple patch of theistic declamation.<sup>1</sup> The article on Jesus Christ is obviously a mere piece of common form, and more than one passage in his article on *Christianisme* is undoubtedly insincere. When we come to his more careful article, *Providence*, we find it impossible to extract from it a body of coherent propositions of which we could confidently say that they represented his own creed, or the creed that he desired his readers to bear away in their minds.

It is hardly worth while to measure the more or the less of his adherence to Christianity, or even to Deism, as inferred from the *Encyclopædia*. We need only turn to his private letters to find that he is in no degree nor kind an adherent, but the most hardy, contemptuous, and thoroughgoing of opponents. At the risk of shocking devout persons, I am bound to reproduce a passage from one of his letters, in which there can be no doubt that we have Diderot's true mind, as distinguished from what it was convenient to print. "The Christian religion," he says, "is to my mind the most absurd and atrocious in its dogmas ; the most unintelligible, the most metaphysical, the most intertwined and obscure, and consequently the most subject to divisions, sects, schisms, heresies ; the most mischievous for the public tranquillity, the most dangerous to sovereigns by its hierarchic order, its persecutions, its discipline ; the most flat, the most dreary, the most Gothic, and the most gloomy in its ceremonies ; the most puerile and unsociable in its morality, considered not in what is common to it with universal morality, but in what is peculiarly its own, and constitutes it evangelical, apostolical, and Christian morality, which is the most intolerant of all. Lutheranism, freed from some absurdities, is preferable to Catholicism ; Protestantism to Lutheranism, Socinianism to Protestantism, Deism, with temples and ceremonies, to Socinianism. Since it is necessary that man, being

<sup>1</sup> *E.g.* in the article on *Plaisir*, xvi. p. 298.



superstitious by nature, should have a fetish, the simplest and most harmless will be the best fetish."¹ We need not discuss nor extend the quotation; enough has been said to relieve us from the duty of analysing or criticising articles in which Christianity is treated with all the formal respect that the secular authority insisted upon.

This formal respect is not incompatible with many veiled and secret sarcasms, which were as well understood as they were sharply enjoyed by those who read between the lines. It is not surprising that these sarcasms were constantly unjust and shallow. Even those of us who repudiate theology and all its works for ourselves, may feel a shock at the coarseness and impurity of innuendo which now and then disfigures Diderot's treatment of theological as of some other subjects. For this the attitude of the Church itself was much to blame; coarse, virulent, unspiritual as it was in France in those days. Voltaire, Diderot, Holbach, would have written in a very different spirit, even while maintaining and publishing the same attacks on theological opinion, if the Church of France had possessed such a school of teachers as the Church of England found in the Latitudinarians in the seventeenth century; or such as she finds now in the nineteenth century in those who have imported, partly from the poetry of Wordsworth, partly from the historic references of the Oxford Tracts, an equity, a breadth, an elevation, a pensive grace, that effectually forbid the use of those more brutal weapons of controversy which were the only weapons possible in France a century ago.

We have already said so much of the great and important group of articles on arts and trades, that it is unnecessary to add anything further as to Diderot's particular share in them. He visited all the workshops in Paris; he sent for information and specifications to the most important seats of manufacture in the kingdom; he sometimes summoned workmen from the provinces to describe to him the paper works of Montargis, and the silk works and velvet works of Lyons.² Much of Diderot's work, even on great practical subjects, was, no doubt, the reproduction of mere book-knowledge acquired at second-hand. Take, for instance, Agriculture, which was undoubtedly the most important of all

¹ To Damilaville, 1766, xix. 477.

² xx. 34.

subjects for France at that date, as indeed at every other date. There are a dozen pages of practical precepts, for which Diderot was probably indebted to one of the farmers at Grandval. After this, he fills up the article with about twenty pages in which he gives an account of the new system of husbandry, which our English Jethro Tull described to an unbelieving public between 1731 and 1751. Tull's volume was translated into French by Duhamel, with notes and the record of experiments of his own; from this volume Diderot drew the pith of his article. Diderot's only merit in the matter—and it is hardly an inconsiderable one in a world of routine—is that he should have been at the pains to seek the newest lights, and above all that he should have urged the value of fresh experiments in agriculture. Tull was not the safest authority in the world, but it is to be remembered that the shrewd-witted Cobbett thought his ideas on husbandry worth reproducing, seventy years after Diderot had thought them worth compiling into an article.

It was not merely in the details of the practical arts that Diderot wrote from material acquired at second-hand. The article on the Zend-Avesta is taken from the Annual Register for 1762. The long series of articles on the history of philosophy is in effect a reproduction of what he found in Bayle, in Deslandes, and in Brucker. There are one or two considerable exceptions. Perhaps the most important is under the heading of Spinoza, to which we shall return presently. The article on *Hobbisme* contains an analysis, evidently made by the writer's own hand, of the bulk of Hobbes's propositions; it is scarcely, however, illuminated by a word of criticism. If we turn to the article on *Société*, it is true, we find Hobbes's view of the relations between the civil and temporal powers tolerably effectively combatted, but even here Diderot hardly does more than arm himself with the weapons of Locke.

Of course, he honestly refers his readers to these sources of wider information.<sup>1</sup> All that we can say of the articles on the history of philosophy, is that the series is very complete; that Diderot used his matter with intelligence and the spirit of criticism, and that he often throws in luminous remarks and far-reaching

<sup>1</sup> xvi. 280.

suggestions of his own. This was all that the purpose of his book required! To imitate the laborious literary search of Bayle or of Brucker, and to attempt to compile an independent history of philosophy, would have been to sacrifice the *Encyclopædia* as a whole, to the superfluous perfection of a minor part. There is only one imperative condition in such a case, namely, that the writer should pass the accepted material through his own mind before reproducing it. With this condition it was impossible for a man of Diderot's indefatigable energy of spirit, not as a rule to comply.

But this rule too had exceptions. There were cases in which he reproduced, as any mere bookmaker might have done, the thought of his authority, without an attempt to make it his own. Of the confusion and inequalities in which Diderot was landed by this method of mingling the thoughts of other people with his own, there is a curious example in the two articles on *Philosopher* and *Philosophy*. In the first we have an essentially social and practical description of what the philosopher should be; in the second we have a definition of philosophy, which takes us into the regions most remote from what is social and practical. We soar to the airiest heights of verbal analysis and pure formalism. Nothing can be better, so far as it goes, than the picture of the philosopher. Diderot begins by contrasting him with the crowd of people, and clever people, who insist on passing judgment all day long. "They ignore the scope and limits of the human mind; they think it capable of knowing everything; hence they think it a disgrace not to pronounce judgment, and imagine that intelligence consists in that and nothing else. The philosopher believes that it consists in judging rightly. He is better pleased with himself when he has suspended his faculty of coming to a conclusion, than if he had come to a conclusion without the proper grounds. He prefers to brilliancy the pains of rightly distinguishing his ideas, of finding their true extent and exact connection. He is never so attached to a system as not to feel all the force of the objections to it. Most men are so strongly given over to their opinions, that they do not take any trouble to make out those of others. The philosopher, on the other hand, understands what he rejects, with the same breadth and the same accuracy as he understands what

he adopts." Then Diderot turns characteristically from the intellectual to the social side. "Our philosopher does not count himself an exile in the world; he does not suppose himself in an enemy's country; he would fain find pleasure with others, and to find it he must give it; he is a worthy man who wishes to please and to make himself useful. The ordinary philosophers who meditate too much, or rather who meditate to wrong purpose, are as surly and arrogant to all the world as great people are to those whom they do not think their equals; they flee men, and men avoid them. But our philosopher who knows how to divide himself between retreat and the commerce of men is full of humanity. *Civil society is, so to say, a divinity for him on the earth;* he honours it by his probity, by an exact attention to his duties, and by a sincere desire not to be a useless or an embarrassing member of it. The sage has the leaven of order and rule; he is full of the ideas connected with the good of civil society. What experience shows us every day is that the more reason and light people have, the better fitted they are and the more to be relied on for the common intercourse of life."<sup>1</sup>

The transition is startling from this conception of Philosopher as a very high kind of man of the world, to the definition of Philosophy as "the science of possibles quâ possibles." Diderot's own reflection comes back to us, *Combien cette maudite métaphysique fait des fous!*<sup>2</sup> We are abruptly plunged from a Baconian into a Leibnitzian atmosphere. We should naturally have expected some such account of Philosophy as that it begins with a limitation of the questions to which men can hope for an answer, and ends in an ordered arrangement of the principles of knowledge, with ultimate reference to the conditions of morals and the structure of civil societies. We should naturally have expected to find, what indeed we do find, that the characteristic of the philosopher is to "admit nothing without proof, never to acquiesce in illusory notions; to draw rigorously the dividing lines of the certain, the probable, the doubtful; above all things never to pay himself with mere words." But then these wholesome prescriptions come in an article whose definitions and distribution of philosophy are simply a reproduction from Christian Wolff, and the methods

<sup>1</sup> See also article *Indépendance*.

<sup>2</sup> iv. 93.

and dialect of Wolff are as essentially alien from the positive spirit of the Encyclopædia as they were from the mystic spirit of Jacobi.

Wolff's place in the philosophical succession of German speculation (1679-1754) is between Leibnitz and Kant, and until Kant came, his system was dominant in the country of metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> It is from Wolff that Diderot borrows and throws unassimilated into the pages of the Encyclopædia propositions so fundamentally incongruous as this, that "among all possibles there must of necessity be a Being subsisting by himself; otherwise there would be possible things, of the possibility of which no account could be given, an assertion that could never be made." It is a curious thing, and it illustrates again the strangely miscellaneous quality of Diderot's compilation, that the very article which begins by this incorporation of the author of a philosophical system expounded in a score of quartos, ends by a vigorous denunciation of the introduction of the systematic spirit into philosophy.

I shall venture to quote a hardy passage from another article (*Pyrrhoniennne*) which some will think a measure of Diderot's philosophical incompetency, and others will think a measure of his good sense. "We will conclude," he says, "for our part that as all in nature is bound together, there is nothing, properly speaking, of which man has perfect, absolute, and complete knowledge, because for that he would need knowledge of all. Now as all is bound together, it inevitably happens that, from discussion to discussion, he must come to something unknown: then in starting again from this unknown point, we shall be justified in pleading against him the ignorance or the obscurity or the uncertainty of the point preceding, and of that preceding this, and so forth, up to the most evident principle. So we must admit a sort of sobriety in the use of reason. When step by step I have brought a man to some evident proposition, I shall cease to dispute. I will listen no longer to a man who goes on to deny the existence of bodies, the rules of logic, the testimony of the senses, the difference between good and evil, true and false, &c. &c. I will turn my

<sup>1</sup> The reader will find abundant information and criticism upon the Wolffian Philosophy in Professor Edward Caird's *Critical Account of the Philosophy of Kant*, recently published at Glasgow.

back on everybody who tries to lead me away from a simple question, to embark me in discussion as to the nature of matter, of the understanding of thought, and other subjects shoreless and bottomless."<sup>1</sup> Whatever else may be said of this, we have to recognise that it is exactly characteristic of the author. But then why have written on metaphysics at all?

We have mentioned the article on Spinoza. It is characteristic both of the good and the bad sides of Diderot's work. Half of it is merely a reproduction of Bayle's criticisms on Spinoza and his system. The other half consists of original objections propounded by Diderot with marked vigour of thrust against Spinoza, but there is no evidence that he had gone deeper into Spinoza than the first book of the Ethics. There is no certain sign that he had read anything else, or that he had more of that before him than the extracts that were furnished by Bayle. Such treatment of a serious subject hardly conforms to the modern requirements of the literary conscience, for in truth the literary conscience has now turned specialist and shrinks from the encyclopædic. Diderot's objections are, as we have said, pushed with marked energy of speech. "However short a way," he says, "you penetrate into the thick darkness in which Spinoza has wrapped himself up, you discover a succession of abysses into which this audacious reasoner has precipitated himself, of propositions either evidently false or evidently doubtful, of arbitrary principles, substituted for natural principles and sensible truths; an abuse of terms taken for the most part in a wrong sense, a mass of deceptive equivocations, a cloud of palpable contradictions." The system is monstrous, it is absurd and ridiculous. It is Spinoza's plausible method that has deceived people; they supposed that one who employed geometry, and proceeded by way of axioms and definitions, must be on the track of truth. They did not see that these axioms were nothing better than very vague and very uncertain propositions; that the definitions were inexact, defective, and bizarre.

We have no space to follow the reasoning by which Diderot supports this scornful estimate of the famous thinker, of whom it can never be settled whether he be pantheist, atheist, akosmist, or God-intoxicated man. He returns to the charge again and again,

<sup>1</sup> xvi. 491. 2.

as if he felt a certain secret uneasiness lest for scorn so loudly expressed he had not brought forward adequate justification. And the reader feels that Diderot has scarcely hit the true line of cleavage that would have enabled him—from his own point of view—to shatter the Spinosist system. He tries various bouts of logic with Spinoza in connection with detached propositions. Thus he deals with Spinoza's third proposition, that, *in the case of things that have nothing in common with one another, one cannot be the cause of the other*. This proposition, Diderot contends, is false in all moral and occasional causes. The sound of the name of God has nothing in common with the idea of the Creator which that name produces in my mind. A misfortune that overtakes my friend has nothing in common with the grief that I feel in consequence. When I move my arm by an act of will, the movement has nothing in common in its nature with the act of my will; they are very different. I am not a triangle, yet I form the idea of one and I examine its properties. So with the fifth proposition, that *there cannot be in the universe two or more substances of the same nature or the same attributes*. If Spinoza is only talking of the essence of things or of their definition, what he says is naught; for it can only mean that there cannot be in the universe two different essences having the same essence. Who doubts it? But if Spinoza means that there cannot be an essence which is found in various single objects, in the same way as the essence of triangle is found in the triangle A and the triangle B, then he says what is manifestly untrue. It is not, however, until the last two or three pages that Diderot sets forth his dissent in its widest form. "To refute Spinoza," he says at last, "all that is necessary is to stop him at the first step, without taking the trouble to follow him into a mass of consequences; all that we need do is to substitute for the obscure principle which he makes the base of his system, the following: namely, that *there are several substances*—a principle that in its own way is clear to the last degree. And, in fact, what proposition can be clearer, more striking, more close to the understanding and consciousness of man? I here seek no other judge than the most just impression of the common sense that is spread among the human race. . . . Now, since common sense revolts against each of Spinoza's propositions, no less than against the

first, of which they are the pretended proofs, instead of stopping to reason on each of these proofs where common sense is lost, we should be right to say to him :—Your principle is contrary to common sense ; from a principle in which common sense is lost, nothing can issue in which common sense is to be found again.”

The passage sounds unpleasantly like an appeal to the crowd in a matter of science, which is as the sin against the Holy Ghost in these high concerns. What Diderot meant, probably, was to charge Spinoza with inventing a conception of substance which has no relation to objective experience ; and further with giving fantastic answers to questions that were in themselves never worth asking, because the answers must always involve a violent wrench of the terms of experience into the sphere transcending experience, and because, moreover, they can never be verified. Whether he meant this or something else, and whether he would have been right or wrong in such an intention, we may admit that it would have been more satisfactory if in dealing with such a master-type of the metaphysical method as Spinoza, so acute a positive critic as Diderot had taken more pains to give to his objections the utmost breadth of which they were capable.<sup>1</sup>

The article on Leibnitz has less original matter in it than that on Spinoza. The various speculations of that great and energetic intellect in metaphysic, logic, natural theology, natural law, are merely drawn out in a long table of succinct propositions, while the account of the life and character of Leibnitz is simply taken from the excellent éloge which had been published upon him by Fontenelle in 1716. Fontenelle's narrative is reproduced in a generous spirit of admiration and respect for a genius that was like Diderot's own in encyclopædic variety of interest, while it was so far superior to Diderot's in concentration, in subtlety, in precision, in power of construction. If there could exist over our heads, says Diderot, a species of beings who could observe our works as we watch those of creatures at our feet, with what surprise would such beings have seen those four marvellous insects, Bayle,

<sup>1</sup> There are casual criticisms on Spinoza in the articles on *Identity* and *Liberty*.



Descartes, Leibnitz, and Newton. And he then draws up a little calendar of the famous men, out of whom we must choose the name to be placed at the very head of the human race. The list contains, besides Julian the Apostate—who was inserted, we may presume, merely by way of playful insult to the ecclesiastical enemy—Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Trajan, Bacon, and the four great names that have just been cited. Germany derives as much honour from Leibnitz alone, he concludes with unconsidered enthusiasm, as Greece from Plato, Aristotle, and Archimedes, all put together. As we have said, however, there is no criticism, nor any other sign that Diderot had done more than survey the façade of the great Leibnitzian structure admiringly from without.

The article on Liberty would be extremely remarkable, appearing where it does, and coming from a thinker of Diderot's general capacity, if only we could be sure that Diderot was sincere. As it happens, there is good reason to suppose that he was wholly insincere. It is quite as shallow, from the point of view of philosophy, as his article on the Jews or on the Bible is from the point of view of erudition. One reason for this might not be far to seek. We have repeatedly observed how paramount the social aim and the social test are in Diderot's mind over all other considerations. But this reference of all subjects of discussion to the good of society, and this measurement of conclusions by their presumed effect on society, is a method that has its own dangers. The aversion of ecclesiastics to unfettered discussion, lest it should damage institutions and beliefs deemed useful to mankind, is the great leading example of this peril. Diderot, it might be said by those who should contend that he wrote what he thought, did not escape exactly the same predicament, as soon as ever he forgot that of all the things that are good for society, Truth is the best. Now, who will believe that it is Diderot, the persecuted editor of the *Encyclopædia*, and the author of the manly article on Intolerance, who introduces such a passage as the following into the discussion of the everlasting controversy of Free Will and Necessity: "Take away Liberty, and you leave no more vice nor virtue nor merit in the world; rewards are ridiculous, and punishments unjust. The ruin of Liberty overthrows all order and all police, confounds vice and

virtue, authorises every monstrous infamy, extinguishes the last spark of shame and remorse, degrades and disfigures beyond recovery the whole human race. *A doctrine of such enormity as this ought not to be examined in the schools; it ought to be punished by the magistrates.*"<sup>1</sup> Of course, this was exactly what the Jesuits said about a belief in God, about revelation, and about the institutions of the church. To take away these, they said, is to throw down the bulwarks of order, and an attempt to take them away, as by encyclopædists or others, ought to be punished by the magistrates. Diderot had for the moment clearly lost himself.

We need hardly be surprised if an article conceived in this spirit contains no serious contribution to the difficult question with which it deals. Diderot had persuaded himself that, without Free Will, all those emotional moralities in the way of sympathy and benevolence and justice which he adored, would be lowered to the level of mere mechanism. "If men are not free in what they do of good and evil, then," he cries, in what is surely a paroxysm of unreason, "good is no longer good, and evil no longer evil." As if the outward quality and effects of good and evil were not independent of the mental operations which precede human action. Murder would not cease to be an evil, simply because it had been proved that the murderer's will to do a bad deed was the result of antecedents. Acts have marks and consequences of their own, good or bad, whatever may be the state of mind of those who do them. But Diderot does not seem to divine the true issue; he writes as if Necessarians or Determinists denied the existence of volitions, and as if the question were whether volitions do exist. Nobody denies that they exist; the real question is of the conditions under which they exist. Are they determined by antecedents, or are they self-determined, spontaneous, and unconnected? Is Will independent of cause?

Diderot's argumentation is, in fact, merely a protest that man is conscious of a Will. And just as in other parts of his article Diderot by Liberty means only the existence of Will, so by Liberty he means only the healthy condition of the soul, and not its independence of causation. We need not waste words on so dire a confusion, nor on the theory that Will is sometimes dependent on

<sup>1</sup> xv. 501.

cerebral antecedents and sometimes not. The curious thing is that the writer should not have perceived that he was himself in this preposterous theory propounding the very principle which he denounced as destructive to virtue, ruinous to society, and worthy of punishment by the government. For it seems that, after all, the Will of those whose "dispositions are not moderate" is not free; and we may surely say that those whose dispositions are least moderate, are exactly the most violent malefactors against the common weal. One more passage is worth quoting to show how little the writer had seized the true meaning of the debate. "According to you," he says to Bayle, "it is not clear that it is at the pure choice of my will to move my arm or not to move it: if that be so, it is then necessarily determined that within a quarter of an hour from now I shall lift my hand three times together, or that I shall not. Now, if you seriously pretend that I am not free, you cannot refuse an offer that I make you; I will wager a thousand pistoles to one that I will do, in the matter of moving my hand, exactly the opposite to what you back; and you may take your choice. If you do think the wager fair, it can only be because of your necessary and invincible judgment that I am free." As if the will to move or not to move the arm would be uncaused and unaffected by antecedents, when you have just provided so strong an antecedent as the desire to save a thousand pistoles. It was, perhaps, well enough for Voltaire to content himself with vague poetical material for his poetical discourse on Liberty, but from Diderot, whether as editor or as writer, something better might have been expected than a clumsy reproduction of the reasoning by which men like Turretini had turned philosophy into the corrupted handmaid of theology.

The most extraordinary thing about this extraordinary article still remains to be told. It was written, we may suppose, between 1757 and 1762, or about that time. In June, 1756, Diderot wrote to a certain Landois, a fellow-worker on the Encyclopædia, a letter containing the most emphatic possible repudiation of the whole doctrine of Liberty. "Liberty is a word void of sense; there are not and there never can have been free beings; we are only what fits in with the general order, with organization, with education, and with the chain of events. We can no more conceive a being

acting without a motive than we can conceive one of the arms of a balance acting without a weight; and the motive is always exterior and foreign to us, attached either by nature or by some cause or other that is not ourselves. *There is only one sort of causes, properly speaking, and those are physical causes.*"<sup>1</sup> And so forth in the vein of hard and remorseless necessarianism, which we shall find presently in the pages of the System of Nature.<sup>2</sup>

There is only one explanation of this flagrant contradiction. Diderot must have written on Liberty just as he wrote on Jesus Christ or the Bible. He cannot have said what he thought, but only what the persons in authority required him to pretend to think. We may be sure that a letter to an intimate would be more likely to contain his real opinion than an article published in the Encyclopædia. That such mystifications are odious, are shameful, are almost too degrading a price to pay for the gains of such a work, we may all readily enough admit. All that we can do is to note so flagrant a case, as a striking example of the common artifices of the time. One other point we may note. The fervour and dexterity with which Diderot made what he knew to be the worse appear the better cause, make a still more striking example of his astonishing dramatic power of throwing himself, as dialectician, casuist, sophist, into a false and illusive part.

Turning from the philosophical to the political or social group of articles, we find little to add to what has been said in the previous section. One of the most excellent essays in this group is that on Luxury. Diderot opens ingeniously with a list of the propositions that state the supposed evils of luxury, and under each proposition he places the most striking case that he can find in history of its falseness. He goes through the same process with the propositions asserting the gains of luxury to society. Having thus effectually disposed of any wholesale way of dealing with the subject, he proceeds to make a number of observations on the gains and drawbacks of luxury; these are full of sense and freedom from commonplace. Such articles as *Pouvoir, Souverain, Autorité*, do little more than tell over again the old unhistoric story about a society surrendering a portion of its sovereign power to some individual or dynasty to hold in trust. It is worth remarking how

<sup>1</sup> xix. 435-6.

<sup>2</sup> See below, vol. ii.

little democratic were Diderot and his school in any Jacobinical, or anarchic, or even more respectable modern sense. There is in Diderot's contributions many a firm and manly plea for the self-respect of the common people, but not more than once or twice is there a syllable of the disorder which smoulders under the pages of Rousseau. Thus: "When the dwellers among the fields are well treated, the number of proprietors insensibly grows greater, the extreme distance and the vile dependence of poor on rich grow less; hence the people have courage, force of soul, and strength of body; they love their country, they respect the magistrates, they are attached to a prince, to an order, and to laws to which they owe their peace and well-being. And you will no longer see the son of the honourable tiller of the soil so ready to quit the noble calling of his forefathers, nor so ready to go and sully himself with the liveries and with the contempt of the man of wealth."<sup>1</sup>

No one can find fault with democratic sentiment of this kind, nor with the generous commonplaces of the moralist, about virtue being the only claim to honour, and vice the only true source of shame and inferiority. But neither Diderot nor Voltaire ever allowed himself to flatter the crowd for qualities which the crowd can scarcely possess. The little article on Multitude seems merely inserted for the sake of buffeting unwarranted pretensions. "Distrust the judgment of the multitude in all matters of reasoning and philosophy; there its voice is the voice of malice, folly, inhumanity, irrationality, and prejudice. Distrust it again in things that suppose much knowledge or a fine taste. The multitude is ignorant and dulled. Distrust it in morality; it is not capable of strong and generous actions; it rather wonders at such actions than approves them; heroism is almost madness in its eyes. Distrust it in the things of sentiment; is delicacy of sentiment so common a thing that you can accord it to the multitude? In what then is the multitude right? In everything, but only at the end of a very long time, because then it has become an echo, repeating the judgment of a small number of sensible men who shape the judgment of posterity for it beforehand. If you have on your side the

<sup>1</sup> S. v. *Luxe* xvi. 23.

testimony of your conscience, and against you that of the multitude, take comfort and be assured that time does justice." It is far from being a universal gift among men of letters and others to unite this fastidious estimation of the incapacity of the crowd in the higher provinces of the intellectual judgment, with a fervid desire that the life of the crowd should be made worthy of self-respecting men. X

The same hand that wrote the defiance of the populace that has just been quoted, wrote also this short article on Misery: "There are few souls so firm that misery does not in the long run cast them down and degrade them. The poor common people are incredibly stupid. I know not what false dazzling prestige closes their eyes to their present wretchedness, and to the still deeper wretchedness that awaits the years of old age. Misery is the mother of great crimes. It is the sovereigns who make the miserable, and it is they who shall answer in this world and the other for the crimes that misery has committed."

X So far as the mechanism of government is concerned, Diderot writes much as Montesquieu had done. Under the head of *Représentants* he proclaims the advantages, not exactly of government by a representative assembly, but of assisting and advising the royal government by means of such an assembly. There is no thought of universal suffrage. "*It is property that makes the citizen*; every man who has possessions in the state is interested in the state, and whatever be the rank that particular conventions may assign to him, it is always as a proprietor; it is by reason of his possessions that he ought to speak, and that he acquires the right of having himself represented." Yet this very definite statement does not save him from the standing difficulty of a democratic philosophy of politics. Nor can it be reconciled in point of logic with other propositions to which Diderot commits himself in the same article. For instance, he says that "no order of citizens is capable of stipulating for all; if one order had the right, it would very soon come to stipulate only for itself; each class ought to be represented by men who know its condition and its needs; *these needs are only well known to those who actually feel them.*" But then, in that case, the poorest classes are those who have most need of direct representation; they are the most numerous, their X

needs are sharpest, they are the classes to which war, consumption of national capital and way of expending national income, equal laws, judicial administration, and the other concerns of a legislative assembly, come most close. The problem is to reconcile the sore interests of the multitude with the ignorance and the temper imputed in Diderot's own description of them.

An interesting study might be made, if the limits of our subject permitted such a digression, on the new political ideas which a century's experience in England, France, Germany, the American Union, has added to the publicist's stock. Diderot's article on the Legislator is a curious mixture of views which political thinkers have left behind, with views which the most enlightened statesmen have taken up. There is much talk after the fashion of Jean Jacques Rousseau about the admirable legislation of Lycurgus at Sparta, the philosophical government of the great empire of China, and the fine spirit of the institutions of Peru. We perceive that the same influences which made Rousseau's political sentimentalism so popular, also brought even strong heads like Diderot to believe in the unbounded power of a government to mould men at its will, and to impose institutions at discretion. The idea that it is the main function of a government to make its people virtuous, is generally as strong in Diderot as it was in Rousseau, and as it became in Robespierre. He admires the emperors of China, because their edicts are as the exhortation of a father to his children. All edicts, he says, ought to instruct and to exhort as much as they command. Yet two years after the *Encyclopædia* was finished (1774), when Turgot prefaced his reforming edicts by elaborate and reasoned statements of the grounds for them, it was found that his prefaces caused greater provocation than the very laws that they introduced.

Apart from the common form of enthusiasm for the "sublime legislation" of countries which the writer really knew nothing about, the article on the Legislator has some points worth noticing. We have seen how Diderot made the possession of property the true note of citizenship, and of a claim to share in the government. But he did not pay property this compliment for nothing. It is, he says, the business of the legislator to do his best to make up to mankind for the loss of that equality which was one of the

comforts that men surrendered when they gave up the state of nature. Hence the legislator ought to take care that no one shall reach a position of extreme opulence otherwise than by an industry that enriches the state. "He must take care that the charges of society shall fall upon the rich, who enjoy the advantages of society." Even those who agree with Diderot, and are ready to vote for a graduated income-tax, will admit that he comes to his conclusion without knowing or reflecting about either the serious arguments for it, or the serious objections against it.

What is really interesting in this long article is its anticipation of those ideas which in England we associate with the name of Cobden. "All the men of all lands have become necessary to one another for the exchange of the fruits of industry and the products of the soil. Commerce is a new bond among men. Every nation has an interest in these days in the preservation by every other nation of its wealth, its industry, its banks, its luxury, its agriculture. The ruin of Leipzig, of Lisbon, and of Lima has led to bankruptcies on all the exchanges of Europe, and has affected the fortunes of many millions of persons."<sup>1</sup> In the same spirit he foresees the decline of patriotism in its older and narrower sense, and the predominance of the international over the national sentiment. "All nations now have sufficiently just ideas of their neighbours, and consequently they have less enthusiasm for their country than in the old days of ignorance. There is little enthusiasm where there is much light; enthusiasm is nearly always the emotion of a soul that is more passionate than it is instructed. By comparing among all nations laws with laws, talents with talents, and manners with manners, nations will find so little

<sup>1</sup> As an illustration how much these ideas were in the air, the reader may refer to a passage in Sédaine's popular comedy, *The Philosopher without knowing it* (1765), Act II. Sc. iv. Vanderk, among other things, says of the merchant: "Ce n'est pas un temple, ce n'est pas une seule nation qu'il sert; il les sert toutes, et en est servi: c'est l'homme de l'univers. Quelques particuliers audacieux font armer les rois, la guerre s'allume, tout s'embrace, l'Europe est divisée: mais ce négociant anglais, hollandais, russe ou chinois, n'en est pas moins l'ami de mon cœur: nous sommes sur la superficie de la terre autant de fils de soie qui lient ensemble les nations, et les ramènent à la paix par la nécessité du commerce; voilà, mon fils, ce que c'est qu'un honnête négociant."



reason to prefer themselves to others, that if they preserve for their own country that love which is the fruit of personal interest, at least they will lose that enthusiasm which is the fruit of an exclusive self-esteem."

Yet Diderot had the perspicacity to discern the drawbacks to such a revolution in the conditions of social climate. "Commerce, like enlightenment, lessens ferocity, but also, just as enlightenment takes away the enthusiasm of self-esteem, so perhaps commerce takes away the enthusiasm of virtue. It gradually extinguishes the spirit of magnanimous disinterestedness, and replaces it by that of hard justice. By turning men's minds rather to use than beauty, to prudence rather than to greatness, it may be that it injures the strength, the generosity, the nobleness of manners."

All this, whether it comes to much or little, is at least more true than Diderot's assurance that henceforth for any nation in Europe to make conquests must be a moral impossibility. Napoleon Bonaparte was then a child in arms. Whether his career was on the whole a fulfilment or a contradiction of Diderot's proposition, may be disputed.

And so our sketch of the great book must at length end. Let us make one concluding remark. Is it not surprising that a man of Diderot's speculative boldness and power should have failed to rise from the mechanical arrangement of thought and knowledge, up to some higher and more commanding conception of the relation between himself in the eighteenth century, or ourselves in the nineteenth, and all those great systems of thought, method, and belief, which in various epochs and over different spaces of the globe have given to men working answers to the questions that their leading spirits were moved to put to themselves and to the iron universe around them? We constantly feel how near Diderot is to the point of view that would have brought light. We feel how very nearly ready he was to see the mental experiences of the race in east and west, not as superstition, degradation, grovelling error, but as aspects of intellectual effort and aspiration richly worthy of human interest and scientific consideration, and in their aim as well as in their substance all of one

piece with the newest science and the last voices of religious or anti-religious development. Diderot was the one member of the party of Philosophers who was capable of grasping such a thought. If this guiding idea of the unity of the intellectual history of man, and the organic integrity of thought, had happily come into Diderot's mind, we should have had an Encyclopædia indeed; a survey and representation of all the questions and answers of the world, such as would in itself have suggested what questions are best worth putting, and at the same time have furnished its own answers.

For this the moment was not yet. An urgent social task lay before France and before Europe; it could not be postponed until the thinkers had worked out a scheme of philosophic completeness. The thinkers did not seriously make any effort after this completeness. The Encyclopædia was the most serious attempt, and it did not wholly fail. As I replace in my shelves this mountain of volumes, "dusky and huge, enlarging on the sight," I have a presentiment that their pages will seldom again be disturbed by me or by others. They served a great purpose a hundred years ago. They are now a monumental ruin, clothed with all the profuse associations of history. It is no Ozymandias of Egypt, king of kings, whose wrecked shape of stone and sterile memories we contemplate. We think rather of the grey and crumbling walls of an ancient stronghold, reared by the endeavour of stout hands and faithful, whence in its own day and generation a band once went forth against barbarous hordes, to strike a blow for humanity and truth. X

## CHAPTER VI.

### SOCIAL LIFE (1759-1770).

ANYONE must be ignorant of the facts, who supposes that the men of the eighteenth century who did not believe in God, and were as little continent as King David, were therefore no better than the reckless vagabonds of Grub Street. Diderot, after he had once settled down to his huge task, became a very orderly person. It is true that he had an attachment to a lady who was not his wife. Marriage was in those days, among the courtiers and the encyclopædic circle, too habitually regarded as merely an official relation. Provided that there was no official desertion, and no scandal, the world had nothing to say. Diderot was no worse than his neighbours, though we may well be sorry that a man of his generous sympathies and fine impulse was no better than his neighbours. Mademoiselle Voland, after proper deduction made for the manners of the time, was of a respectable and sentimental type. Her family were of good position; she lived with her mother and sisters, and Diderot was on good terms with them all. We have a glimpse of the characteristics of the three ladies in a little dialogue between Diderot and someone whom he met, and who happened to have made their acquaintance. "He informed me that he had passed three months in the country where you are.—*Three months*, said he, *is more than one needs to go mad about Madame Le Gendre.*"—True, but then she is so reserved.—*I scarcely know any woman with such an amount of self-respect.*—She

\* The younger sister of Diderot's Sophie.

is quite right.—*Madame Voland is a woman of rare merit.*—Yes, and her eldest daughter?—*She has the cleverness of a very devil.*—She is very clever, no doubt; but what I especially like is her frankness. I would lay a wager that she has never told a voluntary lie since she came to years of discretion.<sup>1</sup> The relations between Diderot and Sophie Voland were therefore not at all on the common footing of a low amour with a coarse or frivolous woman of the world. All the proprieties of appearance were scrupulously observed. Their mutual passion, though once not wholly without its gallantries, soon took on that worthy and decorous quality into which the ardour of valiant youth is reluctantly softened by middle age, when we gravely comfort it with names of philosophical compliment.

One of the most interesting of all the documentary memorials of the century is to be found in the letters which Diderot wrote to Mademoiselle Voland. No doubt has ever been thrown on the authenticity of these letters, and they bear ample evidence of genuineness, so far as the substance of them is concerned, in their characteristic style. They were first published in 1820, from manuscripts sold to the bookseller the year before by a certain French man of letters, Jeudy-Dugour by name. He became a naturalised Russian, changed his name to Gouroff, and died in the position of councillor of state and director of the university of St. Petersburg. How he came by any papers of Diderot it is impossible to guess. It is assumed that when Mademoiselle Voland died, her family gave his letters and other papers back to Diderot. These, along with other documents, are supposed to have been given by Diderot to Grimm. Thence they went to the Library of the Hermitage at St. Petersburg. Whether Jeudy-Dugour sold copies or originals, and whether he made the copies, if copies they were, from the Library, which was, however, rigorously closed during the reign of Nicholas I., are literary secrets which it is impossible to fathom. So far as Diderot is concerned, some of the spirit of mystification that haunted literature in the eighteenth century, still hovers about it in the nineteenth. This we shall presently find in a still more interesting monument of Diderot than even his letters to Mademoiselle Voland.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> xviii. 454.

<sup>2</sup> See below, the chapter on *Rameau's Nephew*.

They are not a continuous series. It was only when either Diderot was absent from Paris, or his correspondent was away at her mother's house in the country, that letter-writing was necessary. Diderot appears to have written to her openly and without disguise. The letters of Mademoiselle Voland in reply were for obvious reasons not sent to Diderot's house, but under cover to the office of Damilaville, so well known to the reader of Voltaire's correspondence. Damilaville was a commissioner in one of the revenue departments, and it is one among many instances of the connivance between authority and its foes, that most of the letters and packets of Voltaire, Diderot, and the rest of the group, should have been taken in, sent out, guarded, and franked by the head of a government office. The trouble that Damilaville willingly took in order to serve his friends is another example of what we have already remarked as the singular amiability and affectionate solicitude of those times. "Think of Damilaville's attention," says Diderot on one occasion: "to-day is Sunday, and he was obliged to leave his office. He was sure that I should come this evening, for I never fail when I hope for a letter from you. He left the key with two candles on a table, and between the two candles your little letter, and a pleasant note of his own." And by the light of the candles Diderot at once wrote a long answer.<sup>1</sup>

We need not wonder if much is said in these letters of tardy couriers, missing answers, intolerable absences, dreary partings, delicious anticipations. All these are the old eternal talk of men and women, ever since the world began; without them we should hardly know that we are reading the words of man to woman. They are in our present case only the setting of a curiously frank and open picture of a man's life.

It is held by some that one of the best means of giving the sense of a little fixity to lives that are but as the evanescent fabric of a dream and the shadow of smoke, is to secure stability of topographical centre by abiding in the same house. Diderot is one of the few who complied with this condition. For thirty years he occupied the fourth and fifth floors of a house which was still standing not long ago, at the corner of the rue Saint Benoît by the

<sup>1</sup> N<sup>o</sup>v. 10, 1770; xix. 22.

rue Taranne, in that Paris which our tourists leave unexplored, but which is nevertheless the true Paris of the eighteenth century. Of the equipment of his room we have a charming picture by the hand of its occupant. It occurs in his playful *Regrets on My Old Dressing-gown*, so rich in happy and delightful touches.

“What induced me to part with it? It was made for me; I was made for it. It moulded itself to all the turns and outlines of my body without fretting me. I was picturesque and beautiful; its successor, so stiff, so heavy, makes a mere mannikin of me. There was no want to which its complaisance did not lend itself, for indigence is ever obsequious. Was a book covered with dust, one of the lappets offered itself to wipe the dust away. Did the thick ink refuse to flow from the pen, it offered a fold. You saw traced in the long black lines upon it, how many a service it had rendered me. Those long lines announced the man of letters, the writer, the workman. And now I have all the mien of a rich idler; you know not who I may be. I was the absolute master of my old robe; I am the slave of my new one. The dragon that guarded the golden fleece was not more restless than I. Care wraps me about.

“The old man who has delivered himself up bound hand and foot to the caprices of a young giddy pate, says from morning to night: Ah, where is my old, my kind housekeeper? What demon possessed me the day that I dismissed her for this creature? Then he sighs, he weeps. I do not weep nor sigh; but at every moment I say: Cursed be the man who invented the art of making common stuff precious by dyeing it scarlet! Cursed be the costly robe that I stand in awe of! Where is my old, my humble, my obliging piece of homespun?

“That is not all, my friend. Harken to the ravages of luxury—of a luxury that must needs be consistent with itself. My old gown was at one with the things about me. A straw-bottomed chair, a wooden table, a deal shelf that held a few books, and three or four engravings, dimmed by smoke, without a frame, nailed at the four corners to the wall. Among the engravings three or four casts in plaster were hung up; they formed, with my old dressing-gown, the most harmonious indigence. All has become discord. No more ensemble, no more unity, no more beauty.

“The woman who comes into the house of a widower, the minister who steps into the place of a statesman in disgrace, the molinist bishop who gets hold of the diocese of a jansenist bishop—none of these people cause more trouble than the intruding scarlet has caused to me.

“I can bear without disgust the sight of a peasant-woman. The bit of coarse canvas that covers her head, the hair falling about her cheeks, the rags that only half cover her, the poor short skirt that goes no more than half-way down her legs, the naked feet covered with mud—all these things do not wound me; 'tis the image of a condition that I respect, 'tis the sign and summary of a state that is inevitable, that is woful, and that I pity with all my heart. But my gorge rises, and in spite of the scented air that follows her, I turn my eyes from the courtesan, whose fine lace head-gear and torn cuffs, white stockings and worn-out shoes, show me the misery of the day in company with the

opulence of last night. Such would my house have been, if the imperious scarlet had not forced all into harmony with itself. I had two engravings that were not without merit, Poussin's Manna in the Wilderness, and the same painter's Esther before Ahasuerus; the one is driven out in shame by some old man of Rubens's, the Fall of the Manna is scattered to the winds by a Storm of Vernet's. The old straw chair is banished to the ante-room by a luxurious thing of morocco. Homer, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, have been taken from their shelf and shut up in a case of grand marqueterie work, an asylum worthier of them than of me. The wooden table still held its ground, protected by a vast pile of pamphlets and papers heaped pell-mell upon it; they seemed as if they would long protect it from its doom. Yet one day that too was mastered by fate, and in spite of my idleness pamphlets and papers went to arrange themselves in the shelves of a costly bureau. . . . It was thus that the edifying retreat of the philosopher became transformed into the scandalous cabinet of the farmer-general. Thus I too am insulting the national misery.

"Of my early mediocrity there remained only a list carpet. The shabby carpet hardly matches with my luxury. I feel it. But I have sworn and I swear that I will keep this carpet, as the peasant, who was raised from the hut to the palace of his sovereign, still kept his wooden shoes. When in a morning, clad in the sumptuous scarlet, I enter my room, if I lower my eyes I perceive my old list carpet; it recalls to me my early state, and rising pride stands checked. No, my friend, I am not corrupted. My door is open as ever to want; it finds me affable as ever; I listen to its tale, I counsel, I pity, I succour it." . . .

Yet the interior of Socrates-Diderot was as little blessed by domestic sympathy as the interior of the older and greater Socrates. Of course Diderot was far enough from being faultless. His wife is described by Rousseau as a shrew and a scold. It is too plain that she was so; sullen to her husband, impatient with her children, and exacting and unreasonable with her servants.<sup>1</sup> We cannot pretend accurately to divide the blame. The companionship was very dreary, and the picture grievous and most afflicting to our thoughts. Diderot returns in the evening from Holbach's, throws his carpet-bag in at the door, flies off to seek a letter from Mademoiselle Voland, writes one to her, gets back to his house at midnight, finds his daughter ill, puts cheerful and cordial questions to his wife, she replies with a tartness that drives him back into silence.<sup>2</sup> Another time the scene is violent. A torrent of injustice and unreasonableness flows over him for two

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, xix. 81, 91, 129, 133, 145, &c.—passages which Mr. Carlyle and Rosenkranz have either overlooked, or else, without any good reason, disbelieved.

<sup>2</sup> xviii. 293.

long hours, and he wonders what the woman will profit, after she has made him burst a blood-vessel ; he groans in anguish,—“ Ah, how hard life seems to me to bear ! how many a time would I accept the end of it with joy !”<sup>1</sup> So sharp are the goads in a divided house ; so sorely, with ache and smart and deep-welling tears, do men and women rend into shreds the fine web of one another’s lives. But the pity of it, O the pity of it !

There are many brighter intervals which make one willing to suppose that if the wife had been a little more patient, more tolerant, more cheerful, less severely addicted to her sterile superstition, there might have been somewhat more happiness in the house. One misery of the present social ideal of women is that, while it keeps them so systematically ignorant, superstitious, and narrow, it leaves them without humility. “ Be content,” said the great John Wesley to his froward wife, “ be content to be a private insignificant person, known and loved by God and me. Of what importance is your character to mankind ? If you was buried just now, or if you had never lived, what loss would it be to the cause of God ?” This energetic remonstrance can hardly be said to exhaust the matter. Still it puts a wholesome side of the case which Madame Diderot missed, and which better persons are likely to miss, so long as the exclusion of women, by common opinion or by law, from an active participation in the settlement of great issues makes them indifferent to all interests outside domestic egoism, and egoistic and personal religion. Brighter intervals shone in the household. “ I announced my departure,” writes Diderot, “ for next Tuesday. At the first word I saw the faces both of mother and daughter fall. The child had a compliment for my fête-day all ready, and it would not do to let her waste the trouble of having learnt it. The mother had projected a grand dinner for Sunday. Well, we arranged everything perfectly. I made my journey, and came back to be harangued and feasted. The poor child made her little speech in the most bewitching way. In the middle there came some hard words, so she stopped and said to me, ‘ My papa, ’tis because my two front teeth have come out ’—as was true. Then she went on. At the end, as she had a posy to give me, and it could not be found, she

<sup>1</sup> xix. 46.



stopped a second time to say to me—'Here's the worst of the tale; my pinks have got lost.' Then she started off in search of her flowers. We dined in great style. My wife had got all her friends together. I was very gay, eating, drinking, and doing the honours of my table to perfection. On rising from table I stayed among them and played cards instead of going out. I saw them all off between eleven and twelve: I was charming, and if you only knew with whom; what physiognomies, what folk, what talk!"

Another time the child, whispering in his ear, asks why her mother bade her not remind him that the morrow was the mother's fête-day. The presence of the blithe all-hoping young, looking on with innocent unconscious eyes at the veiled tragedy of love turned to bitter discord, gives to such scenes their last touch of piteousness. Diderot, however, observed the day, and presented a bouquet which was neither well nor ill received. At the birthday dinner the master of the house presided. "If you had been behind the curtains, you would have said to yourself, how can all this gossip and twaddle find a place in the same head with certain ideas! And in truth I was charming, and played the fool to a marvel."\*

In the midst of distractions great and small, was an indomitable industry. "I tell you," he wrote, "and I tell all men, when you are ill at ease with yourself, instantly set about some good work. In busying myself to soothe the trouble of another, I forget my own." He was assiduous in teaching his daughter, though he complained that her mother crushed out in a day what it had taken him a month to implant. The booksellers found him the most cheerful and strenuous bondsman that ever booksellers had. He would pass a whole month without a day's break, working ten hours every day at the revision of proof-sheets. Sometimes he remains a whole week without leaving his work-room. He wears out his eyes over plates and diagrams, bristling with figures and letters, and with no more refreshing thought in the midst of this sore toil, than that insult, persecution, torment, trickery, will be the fruit of it. He not only spent whole days bent over his desk, until he had a feeling as of burning flame within him; he also

\* xix. 84. See also 326.

worked through the hours of the night. On one of these occasions, worn out with fatigue and weariness, he fell asleep with his head on his desk ; the light fell down among his papers, and he awoke to find half the books and papers on the desk burnt to ashes. "I kept my own counsel about it," he writes, "because a single hint of such an accident would have robbed my wife of sleep for the rest of her life."<sup>1</sup>

His favourite form of holiday was a visit to Holbach's country house at Grandval. Here he spent some six weeks or more nearly every autumn after 1759. The manner of life there was delightful to him. There was perfect freedom, the mistress of the house neither rendering strict duties of ceremony nor exacting them. Diderot used to rise at six or at eight, and remain in his own room until one, reading, writing, meditating. Nobody was more exquisitely sensible than Diderot to the charm of loitering over books, "over those authors," as he said, "who ravish us from ourselves, in whose hands nature has placed a fairy wand, with which they no sooner touch us, than straightway we forget the evils of life, the darkness lifts from our souls, and we are reconciled to existence."<sup>2</sup> The musing suggestiveness of reading when we read only for reading's sake, and not for reproduction nor direct use, was as delightful to our laborious drudge as to others, but he could indulge himself with little of this sweet idleness. It was in harder labour that he passed most of his mornings. These hours of work achieved, he dressed and went down among his friends. Then came the mid-day dinner, which was sumptuous ; host and guests both ate and drank more than was good for their health. After a short siesta, towards four o'clock they took their sticks and went forth to walk, among woods, over ploughed fields, up hills, through quagmires, delighting in nature. As they went, they talked of history, or politics, or chemistry, of literature, or physics, or morality. At sundown they returned, to find lights and cards on the tables, and they made parties of piquet, interrupted by supper. At half-past ten the game ends, they chat until eleven, and in half an hour more they are all fast asleep.<sup>3</sup> Each day was like the next ; industry, gaiety, bodily comfort, mental activity, diversifying the hours. Grimm was often there, "the most French

<sup>1</sup> xix. 137, 341, etc.

<sup>2</sup> xviii. 535.

<sup>3</sup> xviii. 507, etc.

of all the Germans," and Galiani, the most nimble-witted of men, inexhaustible in story, inimitable in pantomimic narration, and yet with the keenest intellectual penetration shining through all his Neapolitan prank and buffoonery. Holbach cared most for the physical sciences. Marmontel brought a vein of sentimentalism, and Helvétius a vein of cynical formalism. Diderot played Socrates, Panurge, Pantophile; questioning, instructing, combining; pouring out knowledge and suggestion, full of interest in every subject, sympathetic with every vein, relishing alike the newest philosophic hardihood, the last too merry mood of Holbach's mother-in-law, the freshest piece of news brought by a traveller. It was not at Grandval that he found life hard to bear, or would have accepted its close with joy. And indeed if one could by miracle be transported back into the sixth decade of that dead century for a single day, perhaps one might choose that such a day should be passed among the energetic and vivid men who walked of an afternoon among the fields and woods of Grandval.

The unblushing grossness of speech which even the ladies of the party permitted themselves, cannot be reproduced in the decorous print of our age. It is nothing less than inconceivable to us how Diderot can have brought himself to write down, in letters addressed to a woman of good education and decent manners, some of the talk that went on at Grandval. The coarsest schoolboy of these days would wince at such shameless freedoms. But it would be wrong to forget the allowance that must be made for differences in point of fashion. Diderot, for instance, in these very letters is wonderfully frank in his exposure of the details of his health. He describes his indigestions, and other more indescribable obstructions to happiness, as freely as Cicero wrote about the dysentery which punished him, when, after he had resisted oysters and lampreys at supper, he yielded to a dish of beet and mallow so dressed with pot-herbs, *ut nil posset esse suavius*. Whatever men could say to one another or to their surgeons, they saw no harm in saying to women. We have to remember how Sir Walter Scott's great-aunt, about the very time when Diderot was writing to Mademoiselle Voland, had heard Mrs. Aphara Behn's books read aloud for the amusement of large circles, consisting of the first and most creditable society in London. We think of Swift,

in an earlier period of the century, enclosing to Stella some recklessly gross verses of his own upon Bolingbroke, and habitually writing to fine ladies in a way that Falstaff might have thought too bad for Doll Tearsheet. In saying that these coarse impurities are only points of manners, we are as far as possible from meaning that they are on that account unimportant. But it is childish to waste our time in censorious judgment on the individual who does no worse than represent a ruling type. We can only note the difference and pass on.

A characteristic trait in this rural life is Diderot's passion for high winds. They gave him a transport, and to hear the storm at night, tossing the trees, drenching the ground with rain, and filling the air with the bass of its hoarse ground-tones, was one of his keenest delights.<sup>1</sup> Yet Diderot was not of those in whom the feeling for the great effects of nature has something of savagery. He was above all things human, and the human lot was the central source of his innermost meditations. In the midst of gossip is constantly interpolated some passage of fine reflection on life—reflection as sincere, as real, coming as spontaneously from the writer's inmost mood and genuine sentiment, as little tainted either by affectation or by commonness, as ever passed through the mind of a man. Some of these are too characteristic to be omitted, and there is so little of what is exquisite in the flavour of Diderot's style, that he perhaps suffers less from the clumsiness of translation than writers of finer colour or more stirring melody. One of these passages is as follows :—

“The last news from Paris has made the Baron anxious, as he has considerable sums in royal securities. He said to his wife : ‘Listen, my friend ; if this is going on, I put down the carriage, I buy you a good cloak and a good parasol, and for the rest of our days we will bless the minister for ridding us of horses, lackeys, coachmen, ladies'-maids, cooks, great dinner-parties, false friends, tiresome bores, and all the other privileges of opulence.’ And for my part I began to think, that for a man without a wife or child, or any of those connexions that make us long for money, and never leave any superfluity, it would be almost indifferent whether he were poor or rich. This paradox comes of the equality that I discover among various conditions of life, and in the little difference that I allow, in point of happiness, between the master of the house and the hall-porter. If I am sound in mind and body, if I have worth and a pure conscience, if I know the true from the false, if I avoid evil and do good, if I feel the

<sup>1</sup> xviii. 526, 531.

dignity of my being, if nothing lowers me in my own eyes, then people may call me what they will, *My Lord*, or *Sirrah*. To do what is good, to know what is true—that is what distinguishes one man from another; the rest is nothing. The duration of life is so short, its true needs are so narrow, and when we go away, it all matters so little whether we have been somebody or nobody. When the end comes, all that you want is a sorry piece of canvas and four deal boards. In the morning I hear the labourers under my window. Scarce has the day dawned before they are at work with spade and barrow, delving and wheeling. They munch a crust of black bread; they quench their thirst at the flowing stream; at noon they snatch an hour of sleep on the hard ground. They are cheerful; they sing as they work; they exchange their good broad pleasantries with one another; they shout with laughter. At sundown they go home to find their children naked round a smoke-blackened hearth, a woman hideous and dirty, and their lot is neither worse nor better than mine. I came down from my room in bad spirits; I heard talk about the public misery; I sat down to a table full of good cheer without an appetite; I had a stomach overloaded with the dainties of the day before; I grasped a stick and set out for a walk to find relief; I returned to play cards, and cheat the heavy-weighting hours. I had a friend of whom I could not hear; I was far from a woman whom I sighed for. Troubles in the country, troubles in the town, troubles everywhere. He who knows not trouble, is not to be counted among the children of men. All gets paid off in time; the good by the evil, evil by good, and life is naught. Perhaps to-morrow night or Monday morning we may go to pass a day in town; so I shall see the woman for whom I sighed, and recover the man of whom I could not hear. But I shall lose them the next day; and the more I feel the happiness of being with them, the worse I shall suffer at parting. That is the way that all things go. Turn and turn and turn again; there is ever a crumpled rose-leaf to vex you.”<sup>2</sup>

It is not often that we find such active benevolence as Diderot's, in conjunction with such a vein of philosophy as follows:—

“Ah, what a fine comedy this world would be, if only one had not to play a part in it; if one existed, for instance, in some point of space, in that interval of the celestial orbs where the gods of Epicurus slumber, far, far away, whence one could see this globe, on which we strut so big, about the size of a pumpkin, and whence one could watch all the airs and tricks of that two-footed mite who calls itself man. I would fain only look at the scenes of life in reduced size, so that those which are stamped with atrocity may be brought down to an inch in space, and to actors half a line high. But how bizarre, that our sense of revolt against injustice is in the ratio of the space and the mass. I am furious if a large animal unjustly attacks another. I feel nothing at all if it is two atoms that tear and rend. How our senses affect our morality. There is a fine text for philosophizing!”<sup>2</sup>

“What I see every day of physic and physicians does not much heighten

<sup>2</sup> Nov. 2, 1759; xviii. 431.

<sup>2</sup> xix. 82.

my opinion of them. To come into the world in imbecility, in the midst of anguish and cries; to be the toy of ignorance, of error, of necessity, of sickness, of malice, of all passions; to return step by step to that imbecility whence one sprang; from the moment when we lisp our first words, down to the moment when we mumble the words of our dotage, to live among rascals and charlatans of every kind; to lie expiring between a man who feels your pulse, and another man who frets and wears your head; not to know whence one comes, nor why one has come, nor whither one is going—that is what we call the greatest gift of our parents and of nature—human life.”<sup>2</sup>

These sombre meditations hardly represent Diderot's habitual vein; they are rather a reaction and a relief from the busy intensity with which he watches the scene, and is constantly putting interrogatories to human life, as day by day its motley circumstance passes before his eyes. We should scarcely suspect from his frequent repetitions of the mournful eternal chorus of the nullity of man and the vanity of all the things that are under the sun, how alert a watch he kept on incident and character, with what keen and open ear he listened for any curious note of pain, or voice of fine emotion, or odd perversity of fate. All this he does, not in the hard temper of a Balzac, not with the calm or pride of a Goethe, but with an overflowing fulness of spontaneous and uncontrollable sympathy. He is a sentimentalist in the rationalistic century, not with the sentimentalism of misanthropy, such as fired or soured Rousseau, but social, large-hearted, many-sided, careless of the wise rigours of morality. He is never callous nor neutral; on the contrary, he is always approving or disapproving, but not from the standards of the ethical text-books. The casuistry of feeling is of everlasting interest to him, and he is never tired of inventing imaginary cases, or pondering real ones, in which pliant feeling is invoked against the narrowness of duty. These are mostly in a kind of matter which modern taste hardly allows us to reproduce; nor, after all, is there much to be gained by turning the sanctities of human relationship, with all their immeasurable bliss, their immeasurable woe, into the playthings of an idle dialectic. It is pleasanter, and for us English not less instructive than pleasant, to see this dreaming, restless, thrice ingenious spirit, half Titan of the skies, half gnome of the lower earth, entering joyously or pitifully into the simple charm and

<sup>2</sup> xix. 139.

natural tenderness of life as it comes and passes. Nothing delights him more than to hear or to tell such a story as this of Madame D'Epinau. She had given a small lad eighteen sous for a day's work. At night he went home without a farthing. When his mother asked him whether they had given him nothing for his work, he said No. The mother found out that this was untrue, and insisted on knowing what had become of the eighteen sous. The poor little creature had given them to an alehouse-keeper, where his father had been drinking all day; and so he had spared the worthy man a rough scene with his wife when he got home.<sup>1</sup>

From the pathos of kindly youth to the grace of lovable age, the step is not far. "To-day I have dined with a charming woman, who is only eighty years old. She is full of health and cheerfulness; her soul is still all gentleness and tenderness. She talks of love and friendship with the fire and sensibility of a girl of twenty. There were three men of us at table with her; she said to us, 'My friends, a delicate conversation, a true and passionate look, a tear, a touched expression, those are the good things of the world; as for all besides, it is hardly worth talking of. There are certain things that were said to me when I was young, and that I remember to this day, and any one of those words is to be preferred before ten glorious deeds: by my faith, I believe if I heard them even now, my old heart would beat the quicker.' 'Madame, the reason is that your heart has grown no older.' 'No, my son, you are right; it is as young as ever. It is not for having kept me alive so long that I thank God, but for having kept me kind-hearted, gentle, and full of feeling.'"<sup>2</sup> All this was after Diderot's own heart, and he declares such a conversation to be worth more than all the hours of talk on politics and philosophy that he had been having a few days before with some English friends. We may understand how, as we shall presently see, a member of a society that could relish the beauty of such a scene, would be likely to think Englishmen hard, surly, and cheerless.

His letters constantly offer us sensible and imaginative reflection. He amused himself in some country village by talking to an

<sup>1</sup> xix. 107.<sup>2</sup> xix. 181.

old man of eighty. "I love children and old men; the latter seem to me like some singular creatures that have been spared by caprice of fate." He meets some old schoolfellows at Langres, nearly all the rest having gone: "Well, there are two things that warn us of our end, and set us musing—old ruins, and the short duration of those who began life with us." He is taken by a host over-devoted to such joys, to walk among dung-heaps. "After all," he says, "it ought not to offend one's sense. To an honest nose that has preserved its natural innocence, 'tis not a goat, but a bemusked and ambre-scented woman, who smelleth ill."

"When I compare our friendships to our antipathies, I find that the first are thin, small, pinched; we know how to hate, but we do not know how to love."

"A poet who becomes idle, does excellently well to be idle; he ought to be sure that it is not industry that fails, but that his gift is departing from him."

"Comfort the miserable; that is the true way to console yourself for my absence. I recollect saying to the Baron, when he lost his first wife, and was sure that there was not another day's happiness left for him in this world, 'Hasten out of doors, seek out the wretched, console them, and then you will pity yourself, if you dare.'"<sup>1</sup>

"An infinitude of tyrannical things interpose between us and the duties of love and friendship; and we do nothing aright. A man is neither free for his ambition, nor free for his taste, nor free for his passion. And so we all live discontented with ourselves. One of the great inconveniences of the state of society is the multitude of our occupations and, above all, the levity with which we make engagements to dispose of all our future happiness. We marry, we go into business, we have children, all before we have common sense."<sup>2</sup>

After some equivocal speculations as to the conduct of a woman who, by the surrender of herself for a quarter of an hour to the desires of a powerful minister, wins an appointment for her husband and bread for her six children, he exclaims: "In truth, I think Nature heeds neither good nor evil; she is wholly wrapped up in two objects, the preservation of the individual and the

<sup>1</sup> xix. 81.<sup>2</sup> xix. 149.



propagation of the species." True; but the moral distinction between right and wrong is so much wrung from the forces that Diderot here calls Nature.

The intellectual excitement in which he lived and the energy with which he promoted it, sought relief either in calm or else in the play of sensibility. "A delicious repose," he writes in one of his most harassed moments, "a sweet book to read, a walk in some open and solitary spot, a conversation in which one discloses all one's heart, a strong emotion that brings the tears to one's eyes and makes the heart beat faster, whether it comes of some tale of generous action, or of a sentiment of tenderness, of health, of gaiety, of liberty, of indolence—there is the true happiness, nor shall I ever know any other."

*A Point in Rhetoric.*—"Towards six in the evening the party broke up. I remained alone with D., and as we were talking about the Eloges on Descartes that had been sent in to the Academy, I made two remarks that pleased him upon eloquence. One, that it is a mistake to try to stir the passions before convincing the reason, and that the pathetic remains without effect, when it is not prepared by the syllogism. Second, that after the orator had touched me keenly, I could not endure that he should break in upon this melting of the soul with some violent stroke: that the pathetic insists on being followed by something moderate, weak, vague, that should leave room for no contention on my part."

*Hobuch's Impressions of England*—"The Baron has returned from England. He started with the pleasantest anticipations, he had a most agreeable reception, he had excellent health, and yet he has returned out of humour and discontented; discontented with the country, which he found neither as populous nor as well cultivated as people say; discontented with the buildings, that are nearly all bizarre and Gothic; with the gardens, where the affectation of imitating nature is worse than the monotonous symmetry of art; with the taste that heaps up in the palaces what is first-rate, what is good, what is bad, what is detestable, all pell-mell. He is disgusted at the amusements, which have the air of religious ceremonies; with the men, on whose countenances you never see confidence, friendship, gaiety, sociability, but on every face the inscription, 'What is there in common between me and you?'; disgusted with the great people, who are gloomy, cold, proud, haughty, and vain; and with the small people, who are hard, insolent, and barbarous. The only thing that I have heard him praise is the facility of travel: he says there is not a village, even on a cross-road, where you do not find four or five post-chaises and a score of horses ready to start. . . . There is no public education. The colleges—sumptuous buildings—palaces to be compared to the Tuileries, are

\* xix. 90.

\* xix. 163-4.

occupied by rich idlers, who sleep and get drunk one part of the day, and the rest they spend in training, clumsily enough, a parcel of uncouth lads to be clergymen. . . . In the fine places that have been built for public amusements, you could hear a mouse run. A hundred stiff and silent women walk round and round an orchestra that is set up in the middle. The Baron compares these circuits to the seven processions of the Egyptians round the tomb of Osiris. A charming *mot* of my good friend Garrick, is that London is good for the English, but Paris is good for all the world. . . . There is a great mania for conversions and missionaries. Mr. Hume told me a story which will let you know what to think of these pretended conversions of cannibals and Hurons. A minister thought he had done a great stroke in this line; he had the vanity to wish to show his proselyte, and brought him to London. They question his little Huron, and he answers to perfection. They take him to church, and administer the sacrament, where, as you know, the communion is in both kinds. Afterwards, the minister says to him, 'Well, my son, do you not feel yourself more animated with the love of God? Does not the grace of the sacrament work within you? Is not all your soul warmed?' 'Yes,' says the Huron: 'the wine does one good, but I think it would have done still better if it had been brandy.' "

*Two Cases of Conscience.*—"The curé said that unhappy lovers always talked about dying, but that it was very rare to find one who kept his word; still he had seen one case. It was that of a young man of family, called Soulpse. He fell in love with a young lady of beauty and of good character, but without money, and belonging to a dishonoured family. Her father was in the galleys for forgery. The young man, who foresaw all the opposition, and all the good grounds for opposition, that he would have to encounter among his family, did all that he could to cure himself of his passion; but when he was assured of the uselessness of his efforts, he plucked up courage to open the matter to his parents, who wearied themselves with remonstrances. Our lover suddenly stopped them short, saying, 'I know all that you have to say against me; I cannot disapprove of your reasons, which I should be the first to urge against my own son, if I had one. But consider whether you would rather have me dead or badly married; for it is certain that if I do not marry the woman that I love, I shall die of it.' They treated this speech as it deserved; the result does not affect that. The young man fell sick, faded from day to day, and died. 'But, Curé,' said I, 'in the place of the father, what would you have done?' 'I would have called my son; I would have said: Soulpse has been your name hitherto; never forget that it is yours no more; and call yourself by what other name you please. Here is your lawful share of our property; marry the woman you love, so far from here that I may never hear speak of you again, and God bless you.' 'For my part,' said old Madame D'Esclavelles, 'if I had been the mother of the young madman, I would have done exactly as his father did, and let him die.' And upon this there was a tremendous division of opinion, and an uproar that made the room ring again.

"The dispute lasted a long time, and would be going on now, if the curé

<sup>1</sup> Sept. 20, 1765; xix. 179-187.

had not broken it off by putting to us another case. A young priest, discontented with his profession, flees to England, apostatizes, marries according to the law, and has children. After a certain time he longs for his native country; he comes back to France with his children and his wife. After that, again, he is stricken by remorse; he returns to his religion, has scruples about his marriage, and thinks of separating from his wife. He opens his heart to our curé, who finds the case very embarrassing, and not venturing to decide it, refers him to casuists and lawyers. They all decide that he cannot, with a sure conscience, remain with his wife. When the separation, which the wife opposed with all her might, was about to be legally effected—rather against the wishes of our curé—the husband fell dangerously ill. When he knew that he could not recover, he said to the curé: ‘My friend, I wish to make public amends for my backsliding, to receive the sacraments, and to die in the hospital; be kind enough to have me taken there.’ ‘I will take care to do no such thing,’ the curé replied to him. ‘This woman is innocent; she married you according to law; she knew nothing of the obstacles that existed. And these children, what share have they in your sin? You are the only wrongdoer, and it is they who are to be punished! Your wife will be disgraced, your children will be declared illegitimate, and what is the gain of it all?’ And the good curé stuck to his text. He confessed his man, the illness grew worse, he administered the last sacraments. The man died, and his wife and children remained in possession of the titles they had. We all approved the curé’s wisdom, and Grimm insisted on having his portrait taken.”<sup>1</sup>

*Chinese Superiority.*—“Apropos of the Chinese, do you know that with them nobility ascends, and descends never? It is the children who ennoble their ancestors, and not the ancestors the children. And upon my word, that is most sensible. We are greater poets, greater philosophers, greater orators, greater architects, greater astronomers, greater geometers, than these good people; but they understand better than we the science of good sense and virtue; and if peradventure that science should happen to be the first of all sciences, they would be right in saying that they have two eyes and we have only one, and all the rest of the world is blind.”<sup>2</sup>

*Why Women write good Letters.*—“She writes admirably, really admirably. That is because good style is in the heart; and that is why so many women talk and write like angels without ever having learnt either to talk or to write, and why so many pedants will both talk and write ill all the days of their life, though they were never weary of studying,—only without learning.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> xviii. 476-8.

<sup>2</sup> xviii. 479. Comte writes more seriously somewhat in the same sense: “For thirty centuries the priestly castes of China, and still more of India, have been watching our Western transition; to them it must appear mere agitation, as puerile as it is tempestuous, with nothing to harmonize its different phases, but their common inroad upon unity.”—*Positive Polity*, iv. 11. (English Translation).

<sup>3</sup> xix. 233.

"A little adventure has just happened here that proves that all our fine sermons on intolerance have as yet produced but poor fruit. A young man of respectable birth, some say apprentice to an apothecary, others to a grocer, took it into his head to go through a course of chemistry; his master consented, on condition that he should pay for board; the lad agreed. At the end of the quarter the master demanded the money, and it was paid. Soon after, another demand from the master; the apprentice replied that he barely owed a single quarter. The master denied that the first quarter had been paid. The affair was taken into court. The master is put on his oath, and swears. He had no sooner perjured himself than the apprentice produced his receipt, and the master was straightway fined and disgraced. He was a scoundrel who deserved it, but the apprentice was a rash fellow, whose victory was bought at a price dearer than life. He had received, in payment or otherwise, from some colporteur, two copies of *Christianity Unveiled*, and one of them he had sold to his master. The master informs against him. The colporteur, his wife, and his apprentice, are all three arrested, and they have just been pilloried, whipped, and branded, and the apprentice condemned to nine years of the galleys, the colporteur to five years, and the woman to the hospital for life. . . . Do you see the meaning of this judgment? A colporteur brings me a prohibited book. If I buy more than one copy, I am declared to be encouraging unlawful trading, and exposed to a frightful prosecution. You have read the *Man with Forty Crowns*,<sup>1</sup> and will hardly be able to guess why it is placed under the ban in the judgment I am telling you of. It is in consequence of the profound resentment that our lords and masters feel about a certain article, *Tyrant*, in the *Philosophical Dictionary*. They will never forgive Voltaire for saying that it was better to have to do with a single wild beast, which one could avoid, than with a band of little subaltern tigers who are incessantly getting between your legs. . . . To return to those two unfortunate wretches whom they have condemned to the galleys. When they come out, what will become of them? There will be nothing left for them to do, save to turn highway robbers. The ignominious penalties, which take away all resource from a man, are worse than the capital punishment that takes away his life."<sup>2</sup>

*Method and Genius: an Apologue.*—"There was a question between Grimm and M. Le Roy of creative genius and co-ordinating method. Grimm detests method; according to him, it is the pedantry of letters. Those who can only arrange, would do as well to remain idle; those who can only get instruction from what has been arranged, would do as well to remain ignorant. What necessity is there for so many people knowing anything else besides their trade? They said a great many things that I don't report to you, and they would be saying things still, if the Abbé Galiani had not interrupted them:

'My friends, I remember a fable: pray listen to it. One day, in the depths of a forest, a dispute arose between a Nightingale and a Cuckoo. Each prizes its own gift. What bird, said the Cuckoo, has a song so easy, so simple, so natural, so measured, as mine?

<sup>1</sup> Voltaire's Satire on the Economists.

<sup>2</sup> Oct. 8, 1768; xix. 832

What bird, said the Nightingale, has a song sweeter, more varied, more brilliant, more touching, than mine?

*The Cuckoo* : I say few things, but they are things of weight, of order, and people retain them.

*The Nightingale* : I love to use my voice, but I am always fresh, and I never weary. I enchant the woods ; the Cuckoo makes them dismal. He is so attached to the lessons of his mother, that he would not dare to venture a single note that he had not taken from her. Now for me, I recognise no master. I laugh at rules. What comparison between his pedantic method and my glorious bursts ?

The Cuckoo tried several times to interrupt the Nightingale. But nightingales always go on singing, and never listen ; that is rather their weakness. Ours, carried away by his ideas, followed them with rapidity, without paying the least attention to the answers of his rival.

So after some talk and counter-talk, they agreed to refer their quarrel to the judgment of a third animal. But where were they to find this third, equally competent and impartial ? It is not so easy to find a good judge. They sought on every side. As they crossed a meadow, they spied an Ass, one of the gravest and most solemn that ever was seen. Since the creation of the world, no ass had ever had such long ears. 'Ah,' said the Cuckoo, 'our luck is excellent ; our quarrel is a matter of ears : here is our judge. God Almighty made him for the very purpose !'

The Ass went on browsing. He little thought that one day he would have to decide a question of music. But Providence amuses itself with this and many another thing. Our two birds bow very low, compliment him upon his gravity and his judgment, explain the subject of their dispute, and beseech him, with all deference, to listen to their case and decide.

But the Ass, hardly turning his heavy head and without losing a single toothsome blade, makes them a sign with his ears that he is hungry, and that he does not hold his court to-day. The birds persist ; the Ass goes on browsing. At last his hunger was appeased. There were some trees planted by the edge of the meadow. 'Now, if you like,' said he, 'you go there, I will follow ; you shall sing, I will digest ; I will listen, and I'll give you my opinion.'

The birds instantly fly away, and perch on branches. The Ass follows them with the air and the step of a chief justice crossing Westminster Hall : he stretches himself flat on the ground, and says, 'Begin, the court listens.'

Says the Cuckoo : 'My lord, there is not a word to lose. I beg of you to seize carefully the character of my singing ; above all things, deign, my lord, to mark its artifice and its method.' Then filling its throat, and flapping its wings at each note, it sang out, 'Coucou, coucou, coucou, coucou, coucou, coucou.' And after having combined this in every possible way, it fell silent.

The Nightingale, without any prelude, pours forth his voice at once, launches into the most daring modulations, pursues the freshest and most delicate melodies, cadences, pauses, and trills ; now you heard the notes murmuring at the bottom of its throat, like the ripple of the brook as it loses itself among the pebbles ; now you heard them rising and gradually swelling and filling the air, and lingering long-drawn in the skies. It was tender, glad, brilliant, pathetic ; but his music was not made for everybody.

Carried away by enthusiasm, he would be singing still ; but the Ass, who had already yawned more than once, stopped him, and said, ' I suspect that all you have been singing there is uncommonly fine, but I don't understand a word of it : it strikes me as bizarre, incoherent, and confused. It may be you are more scientific than your rival ; but he is more methodic than you, and for my part, I'm for method.'

"And then the abbé, addressing M. Le Roy, and pointing to Grimm with his finger : 'There,' he said, 'is the nightingale, and you the cuckoo ; and I am the ass, who decide in your favour. Good-night.'

"The abbé's stories are capital, but he acts in a way that makes them better still. You would have died with laughing to see him stretch his neck into the air, and imitate the fine note of the nightingale, then fill his throat, and take up the hoarse tone for the cuckoo ; and all that naturally, and without effort. He is pantomime from head to foot."<sup>2</sup>

*Conversation.*—"Tis a singular thing, conversation, especially when the company is tolerably large. Look at the roundabout circuits we took ; the dreams of a patient in delirium are not more incongruous. Still, just as there is nothing absolutely unconnected in the head either of a man who dreams, or of a lunatic, so all hangs together in conversation ; but it would often be extremely hard to find the imperceptible links that have brought so many disparate ideas together. A man lets fall a word which he detaches from what has gone before, and what has followed in his head ; another does the same, and then let him catch the thread who can. A single physical quality may lead the mind that is engaged upon it to an infinity of different things. Take a colour—yellow, for instance ; gold is yellow, silk is yellow, care is yellow, bile is yellow, straw is yellow ; to how many other threads does not this thread answer ? Madness, dreaming, the rambling of conversation, all consist in passing from one object to another, through the medium of some common quality."<sup>2</sup>

*Annihilation.*—"The conversation took a serious turn. They spoke of the horror that we all feel for annihilation.

"'Ah,' cried Father Hoop, 'be good enough to leave me out, if you please. I have been too uncomfortable the first time to have any wish to come back. If they would give me an immortality of bliss for a single day of purgatory, I would not take it. The best that can befall us is to cease to be.'

"This set me musing, and it seemed to me that so long as I was in good health I should agree with Father Hoop ; but that, at the last instant, I should perhaps purchase the happiness of living again by a thousand, nay, ten thousand, years of hell. Ah, my dear, if I thought that I should see you again, I should soon persuade myself of what a daughter once succeeded in persuading her father on his deathbed. He was an old usurer ; a priest had sworn to him that he would be damned unless he made restitution. He resolved to comply, and calling his daughter to his bedside, said to her : 'My child, you thought I should leave you very rich, and so I should ; but the man there insists that I shall burn in hell-fire for ever, if I die without making restitution.' 'You are

<sup>2</sup> xviii. 509.<sup>2</sup> xviii. 513.

talking nonsense, father, with your restitution and your damnation,' the daughter answered; 'with your character you will not have been damned ten years, before you will be perfectly used to it.'

"This struck him as true, and he died without making restitution.

"And so behold us launched into a discussion on life and death, on the world and its alleged Creator.

"Someone remarked that whether there be a God or no, it is impossible to introduce that device either into nature or into a discussion without darkening it.

"Another said that if a single supposition explained all the phenomena, it would not follow from this that it is true; for who knows whether the general order only allows of one reason? What, then, must we think of a supposition which, so far from resolving the one difficulty for the sake of which people imagined it, only makes an infinity of others spring up from it?

"I believe, my dear, that our chat by the fireside still amuses you; so I go on.

"Among these difficulties is one that has been proposed ever since the world has been a world; 'tis that men suffer without having deserved suffering. There has been no answer to it yet. 'Tis the incompatibility of physical and moral evil with the nature of the Eternal Being. This is how the dilemma is put: it is either impotence or bad will; impotence, if he wished to hinder evil and could not; bad will, if he could have hindered it and did not will it. A child would understand that. It is this that has led people to imagine the fault of the first father of us all, original sin, future rewards and punishments, the incarnation, immortality, the two principles of the Manicheans, the Ormuzd and Ahriman of the Persians, the doctrine of emanations, the empire of light and darkness, metempsychosis, optimism, and other absurdities that have found credit among the different nations of the earth, where there is always to be found some hollow vision of a dream, by way of answer to a clear, precise and definite fact.

"On such occasions what is the part of good sense? Why, the part that we took: whatever the optimists may say, we will reply to them that if the universe could not exist without sensible creatures, nor sensible creatures without pain, there was nothing to do but to leave chaos at peace. They had got on very well for a whole eternity without any such piece of folly.

"The world a piece of folly! Ah, my dear, a glorious folly for all that! 'Tis, according to some of the inhabitants of Malabar, one of the seventy-four comedies with which the Eternal amuses himself.

"Leibnitz, the founder of optimism, tells somewhere how there was in the Temple of Memphis a high pyramid of globes placed one above the others; how a priest, being asked by a traveller about this pyramid and its globes, made answer that these were all the possible worlds, and that the most perfect of them all was at the summit; how the traveller, curious to see this most perfect of all possible worlds, mounted to the top of the pyramid, and the first thing that caught his eyes, as they turned towards the globe at the summit, was Tarquin outraging Lucretia."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> xviii. 511-3.

Almost every letter reminds us that we are in the very height of the disputing, arguing, rationalistic century. Diderot delighted in this kind of argument, as Socrates or Dr. Johnson delighted in it. He was above all others the archetype and representative of the passion for moralising, analysing, and philosophizing which made the epoch what it was ; but the rest of the world was all in the same vein. If he came to Paris in a coach from the country, he found a young lady in it, eager to demonstrate that serious passions are nowadays merely ridiculous ; that people only promise themselves pleasure, which they find or not, as the case may be ; that thus they spare themselves all the broken oaths of old days. "I took the liberty of saying that I was still a man of those old days. '*So much the worse for you,*' she said, '*you either deceive or are deceived, and one is as bad as the other.*'"<sup>1</sup> If Grimm and Madame d'Epinay and he were together, they discussed ethics from morning to night ; Diderot always on the side of the view that made most for the dignity and worth of human nature. Grimm is described on one of these occasions as having rather displeased Madame d'Epinay : "he was not sufficiently ready to disapprove the remark of a man of our acquaintance, who said that it was right to observe the most scrupulous probity with one's friends, but that it was mere dupery to treat other people better than they would treat us. We maintained, she and I, that it was right and necessary to be honest and good with all the world without distinction."<sup>2</sup>

Here is another picture of discussion, with an introduction that is thoroughly characteristic of Diderot's temper :

"This man looks at the human race only on its dark side. He does not believe in virtuous actions ; he disparages them, and denies them. If he tells a story, it is always about something scandalous and abominable. I have just told you of the two women of my acquaintance, of whom he took occasion to speak as ill as he could to Madame Le Gendre. They have their defects, no doubt ; but they have also their good qualities. Why be silent about the good qualities, and only pick out the defects ? There is in all that a kind of envy that wounds me—me who read men as I read authors, and who never burden my memory except with things that are good to know and good to imitate. The conversation between Suard and Madame Le Gendre had been very vivacious. They sought the reasons why persons of sensibility were so readily,

<sup>1</sup> xix. 244.<sup>2</sup> xviii. 459.



so strongly, so deliciously moved at the story of a good action. Suard maintained that it was due to a sixth sense that nature had endowed us with, to judge the good and the beautiful. They pressed to know what I thought of it. I answered that this sixth sense was a chimæra; that all was the result of experience in us; that we learnt from our earliest infancy what it was in our instinct to hide or to show. When the motives of our actions, our judgments, our demonstrations, are present to us, we have what is called science; when they are not present to our memory, we have only what is called taste, instinct, and tact. The reasons for showing ourselves sensible to the recital of good actions are numberless: we reveal a quality that is worthy of infinite esteem; we promise to others our esteem, if ever they deserve it by any uncommon or worthy piece of conduct . . . . . Independently of all these views of interest, we have a notion of order, and a taste for order, which we cannot resist, and which drags us along in spite of ourselves. Every fine action implies sacrifice; and it is impossible for us not to pay our homage to self-sacrifice"—and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

Alas, all these endless debates and dialogues lacked the inspiration and the charm with which the genius of a Plato could adorn the narrowest quibble between Socrates and a Sophist. "Diderot," said Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, "is an extraordinary man; he is out of his place in society; he was meant for the chief of a sect, a Greek philosopher, instructing youth. He pleases me greatly, but his manner does not touch my soul."<sup>2</sup> And we understand this. People disputed what virtue is, but the dispute failed in that undefined spirit which makes men love and adore virtue. Goodness is surrounded with no spacious beauty, it is clothed with none of the high associations of spontaneous piety. The discussion seems close, stifling, and airless. Yet ages of loftier speech and greater spirituality have not always been so favourable to the affections or to the attachments of life. In amiability that society has never been surpassed; in sincerity of mutual sympathy and kindness of mutual regard. The common irregularity of morals was seen to be perfectly compatible not merely with a desire to please, but with an honest anxiety to serve.

Of the thorough excellence of Diderot's heart, of his friendliness and unwearied helpfulness, time would fail us to tell. Men's conceptions of friendship differ as widely as their conceptions of other things. Some look to friendship for absolute exemption from all criticism, and for a mutual admiration without limit or

<sup>1</sup> xix. 259.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres de Mdlle. de Lespinasse*, viii. p. 20. (Ed. Asse, 1876.)

conditions. Others mistake it for the right of excessive criticism, in season and out of season. Diderot was content to take friendship as the right, the duty, or the privilege of rendering services, without thought of requiring either them, or gratitude for them, back in return. This we must confess to be rare. No man that ever lived showed more sterling interest in furthering the affairs of others around him. He seemed to admit every claim on his time, his purse, and his talents. A stranger called upon him one day, and begged Diderot to write for him a puffing advertisement of a new pomatum. Diderot with a laugh sat down and wrote what was wanted. The graver occasions of life found him no less ready. Damilaville lost one of his children, and his wife was inconsolable. It was Diderot who was summoned, and who cheerfully went for days together to soothe and divert her mind. For his correspondent and for us he makes the tedium of his story beautiful by recalling the fine saying of a grief-stricken woman in *Metastasio*, when they tried to console her by the example of Abraham, who was ready even to slay his son at the command of God: *Ah, God would never have given such an order to his mother!*

The abbé Le Monnier wrote the worst verses that ever were read, a play that was instantly damned, and a translation of Terence that came into the world dead. But bad writers are always the most shameless intruders on the time of good critics, and we find Diderot willingly spending hours over the abbé's handwriting, which was as wretched as what he wrote, and then spending hours more in offering critical observations on verses that were only fit to be thrown into the fire. The abbé, being absent from Paris and falling short of money, requested Diderot to sell for him his copy of the *Encyclopædia*. "I have sold your *Encyclopædia*," said Diderot, "but did not get so much as I expected, for the rumour spread abroad by those scoundrels of Swiss booksellers, that they were going to issue a revised edition, has done us some harm. Send for the nine hundred and fifty livres (about £40) that belong to you, and if that is not enough for your expenses, besides the drawer that holds your money is another that holds mine. I don't know how much there is, but I will count it all at your disposal."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Aug. 1, 1769; xix. 365.

One Jodin, again, was a literary hack who had been employed on the *Encyclopædia*. He died, leaving a foolish and extravagant widow, and a perverse and violent daughter. The latter went on to the stage, and Diderot took as much trouble in advising her, in seeking appointments for her, in executing her commissions, in investing her earnings, in dealing with her relatives, as if he had been her own father. If his counsels on her art are admirable, there is something that moves us with more than admiration in the good sense, the right feeling, the worthiness of his counsels on conduct. And Diderot did not merely moralise at large. All that he says is real, pointed, and apt for circumstance and person. The petulant damsel to whom they were addressed would not be likely to yawn over the sharp remonstrances, the vigorous plain speaking, the downright honesty and visible sincerity of his friendliness. It appears that she had sense enough not to be offended with the frankness of her father's old employer, for after he has plainly told her that she is violent, rude, vain, and not always too truthful, she still writes to him from Warsaw, from Dresden, from Bordeaux, praying him to procure a certain bracelet for her, to arrange her mother's affairs, to find a good investment for twelve thousand francs. When the mother was in the depths of indigence, Diderot insisted that she should take her meals at his own table. And all this for no other reason than that the troublesome pair had been thrown in his way by the chance of human circumstance, and needed help which he was able, not without sacrifice, to give. Mademoiselle Jodin was hardly worthy of so good a friend. Her parents were Protestants, and as she was a convert, she enjoyed a pension of some eight pounds a year. That did not prevent her from one day indulging in some too sprightly sallies, as the host was carried along the street. For this she was put into prison, and that is our last glimpse of the light creature.<sup>1</sup>

Men knew how to be as wrong-headed and as graceless as women. We have already mentioned the name of Landois in connexion with Diderot's article on Liberty. Landois seems to have been a marvel of unreasonableness, but he was a needy man of letters, and that was enough to make Diderot ready to bear with him and to succour him. He wound up an epistle abounding,

<sup>1</sup> (1765-69) xix. 381-412. Also, p. 318.

after the manner of the worthless failures of the world, in reproaches and grievances against his benefactor, with a cool request about a manuscript that was full of dangerous matter. "Why, that," replied Diderot, "is a work that might well be the ruin of me! And it is after you have on two separate occasions charged me with the most atrocious and deliberate offences towards you, that you now propose that I should revise and print your work! You know that I have a wife and child, that I am a marked man, that you are putting me into the class of hardened offenders; never mind, you don't think of one of these things. You take me for an imbecile, or else you are one. But you are no imbecile. . . . I see through men's designs, and often enough I lend myself to them, without deigning to disabuse them as to the stupidity which they impute to me. It is enough if I perceive in their design some great service for them, and not an excess of inconvenience for myself. It is not I who am the fool, so often as people take me for one." Diderot then seems half to forget to whom he is writing and pours out what reads like a long soliloquy on morals, conduct, and the philosophy of life. He insists that man, with all his high-flying freedom of will, is but a little link in a great chain of events. He is a creature to be modified from without; hence the good effects of example, discourse, education, pleasures, pains, greatness, misery. Hence a sort of philosophy of commiseration, which attaches us strongly to the good, and irritates us no more against the bad than against a wind-storm that fills our eyes with dust. If you adopt such principles as these, they will reconcile you with others and yourself; you will neither praise nor blame yourself for what you are. To reproach others with nothing, to repent yourself of nothing—these are the two first steps towards wisdom; this is the philosophy that reconciles us with the human race and with life.<sup>1</sup>

When he was in the very midst of all the toil and strife that the Encyclopædia brought upon him, he could not refuse to spend three whole days in working like a galley-slave at an account of an important discovery that had been made by some worthy people with whom he was acquainted slightly. "But while I was busy about their affairs, my own are at a stand-still. I write to you

<sup>1</sup> June, 1756; xix. 433-36.

from Le Breton's, with a mass of uncorrected proofs before me, and the printers crying out for them. Still Grimm must be right, when he says that time is not a thing of which we are free to dispose at our own fancy ; that we owe it first and foremost to our friends, our relations, our daily duties ; and that in the lavish profusion of our time on people who are indifferent, there is nothing less than vice."¹ Yet in spite of Grimm's most just remonstrance, the lavish profusion always went on as before.

There was one man, and only one man, for whose perverse and intractable spirit Diderot's most friendly patience, helpfulness, and devotion, were no match. I have already, in dealing with Rousseau,² said as much of the quarrel which he picked with Diderot as the matter requires, and it would be superfluous to go over the ground again from another side. Whether we listen to Rousseau's story or to Diderot's story, our judgment on what happened remains unchanged. We have already seen how warm and close an intimacy subsisted between them in the days when Diderot was a prisoner at Vincennes (1749). When Rousseau made up his mind to leave Paris and turn hermit (1756), there was a loud outcry from the social group at Holbach's. They said to him, in the least theological dialect of their day, what Sir Walter Scott had said to Ballantyne when Ballantyne thought of leaving Edinburgh, that, "when our Saviour himself was to be led into temptation, the first thing the Devil thought of was to get him into the wilderness." Diderot remonstrated rather more loudly than Rousseau's other friends, but there was no breach, and even no coolness. What sort of humours were bred by solitude in Rousseau's wayward mind we know, and the Confessions tell us how for a year and a half he was silently brooding over fancied slights and perhaps real pieces of heedlessness. Grimm, who was Diderot's closest friend next to Mademoiselle Voland, despised Rousseau, and Rousseau detested Grimm. "Grimm," he one day said to a disciple, "is the only man whom I have ever been able to hate." Madame d'Epinau was compelled to go to Geneva for her health, and Grimm easily persuaded Diderot that Rousseau was bound by all the ties of gratitude to accompany his benefactress on the expedition. Diderot wrote to the hermit a very strong

¹ Aug. 1762 ; xix. 112.

² In *Rousseau*, ch. vii.

letter to this effect: it made Rousseau furious. He declined the urgent counsel, he quarrelled outright and violently with Grimm, and after an angry and confusing interview with Diderot, all intercourse ceased with him also. "That man," wrote Diderot, on the evening of this, their last interview, "intrudes into my work; he fills me with trouble, and I feel as if I were haunted by a damned soul at my side. May I never see him more; he would make me believe in devils and hell."<sup>1</sup> And writing afterwards to some friend at Geneva, he recalls the days when he used to pour out the talk of intimacy "with the man who has buried himself at the bottom of a wood, where his soul has been soured and his moral nature has been corrupted. Yet how I pity him! Imagine that I used to love him, that I remember those old days of friendship, and that I see him now with crime on one side and remorse on the other, with deep waters in front of him. He will many a time be the torment of my thought; our common friends have judged between him and me; I have kept them all, and to him there remains not one."<sup>2</sup> It was not in Diderot's nature to bear malice, and when eight years later Rousseau passed through Paris on his ill-starred way to England and the Derbyshire hills, Diderot described the great pleasure that a visit from Rousseau would give to him. "Ah, I do well," he says, "not to let the access to my heart be too easy; when anybody has once found a place in it, he does not leave it without making a grievous rent; 'tis a wound that can never be thoroughly cauterised."<sup>3</sup>

It is needless to remind the neutral reader that Rousseau uses exactly the same kind of language about his heart. For this is the worst of sentimentalism, that it is so readily bent into a substitution of indulgence to oneself for upright and manly judgment about others. Still we may willingly grant that in the present rupture of a long friendship, it was not Diderot who was the real offender. *Too many honest people would be in the wrong*, he most truly said, *if Jean Jacques were in the right*.

Of Grimm, I have already said elsewhere as much as is needful to be said.<sup>4</sup> His judgment in matters of conduct and character was cool and rather hard, but it was generally sound. He had a

<sup>1</sup> Dec. 1757; xix. 446.

<sup>2</sup> xix. 449.

<sup>3</sup> Dec. 20, 1765; xix. 210.

<sup>4</sup> See *Rousseau*, ch. vii.

keen eye for what was hollow in the pretensions of the society in which he lived. Above all, he had the keen eye of his countrymen for his own interests, and for the use which he could make of other people. The best thing that we know in his favour, is that he should have won the friendship of Diderot. Diderot's attachment to Grimm seems like an exaggeration of the excesses of the epoch of sentimentalism in Germany.

He pines for a letter from him, as he pined for letters from Mademoiselle Voland. If Grimm had been absent for a few months, their meeting was like a scene in a melodrama. "With what ardour we enclasped one another. My heart was swimming. I could not speak a word, nor could he. We embraced without speaking, and I shed tears. We were not expecting him. We were all at dessert when he was announced, '*Here is M. Grimm.*' '*M. Grimm,*' I exclaimed, with a loud cry; and starting up, I ran to him and fell on his neck. He sat down, and ate a poor meal, you may be sure. As for me, I could not open my lips either to eat or to speak. He was next to me, and I kept pressing his hand and gazing at him."<sup>1</sup> Mademoiselle Voland appears on some occasion to have compared Diderot with his friend. "No more comparison, I beseech you, my good friend, between Grimm and me. I console myself for his superiority by frankly recognising it. I am vain of the victory that I thus gain over my self-love, and you must not deprive me of that little advantage."<sup>2</sup> Grimm, however, knew better than Diderot how to unite German sentimentalism with a steady selfishness. "I have just received from Grimm," writes good-natured Diderot, "a note that wounds my too sensitive spirit. I had promised to write him a few lines on the exhibition of pictures in the Salon; he writes to me that if it is not ready to-morrow, it will be of no use. I will be revenged for this kind of hardness, and in a way that becomes me. I worked all day yesterday, and all day to-day. I shall pass the night at work, and all to-morrow, and at nine o'clock he shall receive a volume of manuscript."<sup>3</sup> We may doubt whether his German friend would feel the force of a rebuke so extremely convenient to himself.

<sup>1</sup> Oct. 9, 1759; xviii. 397.

<sup>2</sup> Nov. 6, 1760; xix. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Sept. 17, 1761; xix. 47.

While Grimm was amusing himself at Madame D'Épinay's country-house, Diderot was working at the literary correspondence which Grimm was accustomed to send to St. Petersburg and the courts of Germany. While Grimm was hunting pensions and honorary titles at Saxe-Gotha, or currying favour with Frederick and waiting for gold boxes at Potsdam, Diderot was labouring like any journeyman in writing on his behalf accounts and reviews of the books, good, bad, and indifferent, with which the Paris market teemed. When there were no new books to talk about, the ingenious man, with the resource of the born journalist, gave extracts from books that did not exist.\* When we hear of Paris being the centre of European intelligence and literary activity, we may understand that these circular letters of Grimm and Diderot were the machinery by which the light of Paris was diffused among darker lands. It is not too much to say that no contemporary record so intelligent, so independent, so vigorous, so complete, exists of any other remarkable literary epoch.

The abbé Raynal, of whom we shall have more to say in a later chapter, had founded this counterpart of a modern review in 1747, and he sent a copy of it in manuscript once a month to anybody who cared to pay three hundred francs a year. In 1753 Raynal had handed the business over to Grimm, and by him it was continued until 1790, twelve years beyond the life of Voltaire and of Rousseau, and six years after the death of the ablest, most original, and most ungrudging of all those who gave him their help.

An interesting episode in Diderot's life brought him into direct relations with one of the two crowned patrons of the revolutionary literature, who were philosophers in profession and the most arbitrary of despots in their practice. Frederick the Great, whose literary taste was wholly in the vein of the conventional French classic, was never much interested by Diderot's writing, and felt little curiosity about him. Catherine of Russia was sufficiently an admirer of the Encyclopædia to be willing to serve its much-enduring builder. In 1765, when the enterprise was in full course, Diderot was moved by a provident anxiety about the future of his daughter. He had no dower for her in case a suitor should

\* Sept. 17, 1769 ; xix. 320.



present himself, and he had but a scanty substance to leave her in case of his own death. The income of the property which he inherited from his father was regularly handed to his wife for the maintenance of the household. His own earnings, as we have seen, were of no considerable amount. There are men of letters, he wrote in 1767, to whom their industry has brought as much as twenty, thirty, eighty, or even a hundred thousand francs. As for himself, he thought that perhaps the fruit of his literary occupations would come to about forty thousand crowns, or some five thousand pounds sterling. "One could not amass wealth," he said pensively, and his words are of grievous generality for the literary tribe, "but one could acquire ease and comfort, if only these sums were not spread over so many years, did not vanish away as they were gathered in, and had not all been scattered and spent by the time that years had multiplied, wants grown more numerous, eyes grown dim, and mind become blunted and worn."<sup>1</sup> This was his own case. His earnings were never thriftily husbanded. Diderot could not deny himself a book or an engraving that struck his fancy, though he was quite willing to make a present of it to any appreciative admirer the day after he had bought it. He was extravagant in hiring a hackney-coach where another person would have gone on foot, and not seldom the coachman stood for half a day at the door, while the heedless passenger was expatiating within upon truth, virtue, and the fine arts, unconscious of the passing hours and the swollen reckoning. Hence, when the time came, there were no savings. We have to take a man with the defects of his qualities, and as Diderot would not have been Diderot if he had taken time to save money, there is no more to be said.

When it became his duty to provide for his daughter, between 1763 and 1765, he resolved to sell his library. Through Grimm, Diderot's position reached the ears of the Empress of Russia. Her agent was instructed to buy the library at the price fixed by its possessor, and Diderot received sixteen thousand livres, a sum equal to something more than seven hundred pounds sterling of that day. The Empress added a handsome bounty to the bargain. She requested Diderot to consider himself the custodian of the

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres sur le Commerce de la Librairie*, xviii. 47.

new purchase on her behalf, and to receive a thousand livres a year for his pains. The salary was paid for fifty years in advance, and so Diderot drew at once what must have seemed to him the royal sum of between two and three thousand pounds sterling—a figure that would have to be trebled, or perhaps quadrupled, to convey its value in the money of our own day. We may wish for the honour of letters that Diderot had been able to preserve his independence. But pensions were the custom of the time. Voltaire, though a man of solid wealth, did not disdain an allowance from Frederick the Great, and complained shrilly because it was irregularly paid at the very time when he knew that Frederick was so short of money that he was driven to melt his plate. D'Alembert also had his pension from Berlin, and Grimm, as we have seen, picked up unconsidered trifles in half of the northern courts. Frederick offered an allowance to Rousseau, but that strange man, in whom so much that was simple, touching, and lofty, mingled with all that was wayward and perverse, declined to tax the king's strained finances.<sup>1</sup>

It would shed an instructive light upon authorship and the characters of famous men, if we could always know the relations between a writer and his booksellers. Diderot's point of view in considering the great modern engineery and processes of producing and selling books, was invariably, like his practice, that of a man of sound common sense and sterling integrity. We have seen in the previous chapter something of the difficulties of the trade in those days. The booksellers were a close guild of three hundred and sixty members, and the printers were limited to thirty-six. Their privileges brought them little fortune. They were of the lowest credit and repute, and most of them were hardly better than beggars. It was said that not a dozen out of the three hundred and sixty could afford to have more than one coat for his back. They were bound hand and foot by vexatious rules, and their market was gradually spoiled by a band of men whom they hated as interlopers, but whom the public had some reason to bless. No bookseller nor printer could open an establishment outside of the quarter of the University, or on the north side of the bridges. The restriction, which was as old as the introduction

<sup>1</sup> See *Rousseau*, ch. xi.

of printing into France, had its origin in the days when the visits of the royal inspectors to the presses and bookshops were constant and rigorous, and it saved the time of the officials to have all their business close to their hand. Inasmuch, however, as people insisted on having books, and as they did not always choose to be at the pains of making a long journey to the region of the booksellers' shops, hawkers sprang into existence. Men bought books or got them on credit from the booksellers, and carried them in a bag over their shoulders to the houses of likely customers, just as a peddler now carries laces and calico, cheap silks and trumpery jewellery, round the country villages. Even poor women filled their aprons with a few books, took them across the bridges, and knocked at people's doors. This would have been well enough in the eyes of the guild, if the hawkers had been content to buy from the legally patented booksellers. But they began secretly to turn publishers in a small way on their own account. Contraband was here, as always, the natural substitute for free trade. They both issued pirated editions of their own, and they became the great purchasers and distributors of the pirated editions that came in vast bales from Switzerland, from Holland, from the Pope's country of Avignon. To their craft or courage the public owed its copies of works whose circulation was forbidden by the government. The *Persian Letters* of Montesquieu was a prohibited book, but, for all that, there were a hundred editions of it before it had been published twenty years, and every schoolboy could find a copy on the quays for a dozen halfpence. Bayle's *Thoughts on the Comet*, Rousseau's *Emilius* and *Heloisa*, Helvétius's *L'Esprit*, and a thousand other forbidden pieces were in every library, both public and private. The *Social Contract*, printed over and over again in endless editions, was sold for a shilling under the vestibule of the king's own palace. When the police were in earnest, the hawker ran horrible risks, as we saw a few pages further back; for these risks he recompensed himself by his prices. A prohibition by the authorities would send a book up within four-and-twenty hours from half-a-crown to a couple of louis. This only increased the public curiosity, quickened the demand, led to clandestine reprints, and extended the circulation of the book that was nominally suppressed. When the condem-

nation of a book was cried through the streets, the composers said, "Good, another edition!" There was no favour that an unknown author could have asked from the magistrates so valuable to him, as a little decree condemning his work to be torn up and burnt at the foot of the great staircase of the Palace of Justice.<sup>1</sup>

It was this practical impossibility of suppression that interested both the guild of publishers and the government in the conditions of the book trade. The former were always harassed, often kept poor, and sometimes ruined, by systematic piracy and the invasion of their rights. The government, on the other hand, could not help seeing that, as the books could not possibly be kept out of the realm, it was to be regretted that their production conferred no benefit on the manufacturing industry of the realm, the composition, the printing, the casting of type, the fabrication of paper, the preparation of leather and vellum, the making of machines and tools. When Bayle's Dictionary appeared, it was the rage of Europe. Hundreds of the ever-renowned folios found their way into France, and were paid for by French money. The booksellers addressed the minister, and easily persuaded him of the difference, according to the economic light of those days, between an exchange of money against paper, compared with an exchange of paper against paper. The minister replied that this was true, but still that the gates of the kingdom would never be opened to a single copy of Bayle. "The best thing to do," he said, "is to print it here." And the third edition of Bayle was printed in France, much to the contentment of the French printers, binders, and booksellers.

In 1761, the booksellers were afflicted by a new alarm. Foreign pirates and domestic hawkers were doing them mischief enough. But in that year the government struck a blow at the very principle of literary property. The King's Council conferred upon the descendants of La Fontaine the exclusive privilege of publishing their ancestor's works. That is to say, the Council took away without compensation from La Fontaine's publishers, a copyright for which they had paid in hard cash. The whole corporation naturally rose in arms, and in due time the lieutenant of police was obliged to take the whole matter into serious consideration ;

<sup>1</sup> Diderot's *Lettre sur le Commerce de la Librairie* (1767). *Œuv.* xviii.

—whether the maintenance of the guild of publishers was expedient ; whether the royal privilege of publishing a book should be regarded as conferring a definite and unassailable right of property in the publication ; whether the tacit permission to publish what it would have been thought unbecoming to authorise expressly by royal sanction, should not be granted liberally or even universally ; and whether the old restriction of the booksellers to one quarter of the town ought to remain in force any longer. M. de Sartine invited Diderot to write him a memorandum on the subject, and was disappointed to find Diderot staunchly on the side of the booksellers (1767). He makes no secret, indeed, that for his own part he would like to see the whole apparatus of restraint abolished, but meanwhile he is strong for doing all that a system of regulation, as opposed to a system of freedom, can do to make the publication of books a source of prosperity to the bookseller, and of cheap acquisition to the book-buyer. Above all things, Diderot is vehemently in favour of the recognition of literary property, and against such infringement of it as had been ventured upon in the case of *La Fontaine*. He had no reason to be especially friendly to booksellers, but for one thing, he saw that to nullify or to tamper with copyright was in effect to prevent an author from having any commodity to sell, and so to do him the most serious injury possible. And for another thing, Diderot had equity and common sense enough to see that no high-flown nonsense about the dignity of letters and the spiritual power could touch the fact that a book is a piece of marketable ware, and that the men who deal in such wares have as much claim to be protected in their contracts, as those who deal in any other wares.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Those who are interested in the history of authorship may care to know the end of the matter. Copyright is no modern practice, and the perpetual right of authors, or persons to whom they had ceded it, was recognised in France through the whole of the seventeenth century and three-quarters of the eighteenth. The perpetuity of the right had produced literary properties of considerable value ; for example, Boudot's Dictionary was sold by his executors for 24,000 livres ; Prévot's Manual Lexicon and two Dictionaries for 115,000 livres. But in 1777—ten years after Diderot's plea—the Council decreed that copyright was a privilege and an exercise of the royal grace. The motives for this reduction of an author's right from a transferable property to a terminable privilege seem to have been, first, the general mania

There is a vivid illustration of this unexpected business-like quality in Diderot, in a conversation that he once had with D'Alembert. The dialogue is interesting to those who happen to be curious as to the characters of two famous men. It was in 1759, when D'Alembert was tired of the Encyclopædia, and was for making hard terms as the condition of his return to it. "If," said Diderot to him, "six months ago, when we met to deliberate on the continuation of the work, you had then proposed these terms, the booksellers would have closed with them on the spot, but now, when they have the strongest reasons to be out of humour with you, that is another thing."

"And pray, what reasons?"

"Can you ask me?"

"Certainly."

"Then I will tell you. You have a bargain with the booksellers; the terms are stipulated; you have nothing to ask beyond them. If you worked harder than you were bound to do, that was out of your interest in the book, out of friendship to me, out of respect for yourself; people do not pay in money for such motives as these. Still they sent you twenty louis a volume: that makes a hundred and forty louis that you had beyond what was due to you. You plan a journey to Wesel [in 1752, to meet Frederick of Prussia] at a time when you were wanted by them here; they do not detain you; on the contrary, you are short of money, and they supply you. You accept a couple of hundred louis; this debt you forget for two or three years. At the end of that rather long term you bethink you of paying. What do they do? They hand you back your note of hand torn up, with all the air of being very glad to have served you. Then, after all, you turn your back on an undertaking in which they have embarked their whole fortunes: an affair of a couple of millions is a trifle unworthy of the attention of a philosopher like you. . . . But that is not all. You have a fancy for collecting together different pieces scattered through the Encyclopædia; nothing can be more opposed to their interests; they put this to you, you insist, the edition is produced, they advance the cost, you share the profits. It seemed that, after having thus twice paid you for their work, they had a right to look upon it as theirs. Yet you go in search of a bookseller in some quite different direction, and sell him in a mass what does not belong to you."

of the time for drawing up the threads of national life into the hands of the administration, and second, the hope of making money by a tariff of permissions. The Constituent Assembly dealt with the subject with no intelligence nor care, but the Convention passed a law recognising in the author an exclusive right for his life, and giving a property for ten years after his death to heirs or *cessionnaires*. The whole history is elaborately set forth in the collection of documents entitled *La Propriété littéraire au 18ème siècle*. (Hachette, 1859).

“They gave me a thousand grounds for dissatisfaction.”

“*Quelle défaite!* There are no small things between friends. Everything weighs, because friendship is a commerce of purity and delicacy; but are the booksellers your friends? Then your behaviour to them is horrible. If not, then you have nothing to say against them. If the public were called upon to judge between you and them, my friend, you would be covered with shame.”

“What, can it be you, Diderot, who thus take the side of the booksellers?”

“My grievances against them do not prevent me from seeing their grievances against you. After all this show of pride, confess now that you are cutting a very sorry figure?”<sup>1</sup>

All this was the language of good sense, and there is no evidence that Diderot ever swerved from that fair and honourable attitude in his own dealings with the booksellers. Yet he was able to treat them with a sturdy spirit when they forgot themselves. Panckoucke, one of the great publishers of the time, came to him one day. “He was swollen with the arrogance of a parvenu, and thinking apparently that he could use me like one of those poor devils who depend upon him for a crust of bread, he permitted himself to fly into a passion; but it did not succeed at all. I let him go on as he pleased; then I got up abruptly, I took him by the arm, and I said to him: ‘M. Panckoucke, in whatever place it may be, in the street, in church, in a bad house, and to whomsoever it may be, it is always right to keep a civil tongue in one’s head. But that is all the more necessary still, when you speak to a man who has as little patience as I have, and that, too, in his own house. Go to the devil, you and your work. If you would give me twenty thousand louis, and I could do your business for you in the twinkling of an eye, I would not stir a finger. Be kind enough to be off.’”<sup>2</sup>

Before returning from the author to his books, it is interesting to know how he and his circle appeared at this period to some who did not belong to them. Gibbon, for instance, visited Paris in the spring of 1763. “The moment,” he says, “was happily chosen. At the close of a successful war the British name was respected on the continent; *clarum et venerabile nomen gentibus*. Our opinions, our fashions, even our games were adopted in

<sup>1</sup> Oct. 11, 1759; xviii. 401.

<sup>2</sup> xix. 319-20.

France, a ray of national glory illuminated each individual, and every Englishman was supposed to be born a patriot and philosopher." He mentions D'Alembert and Diderot as those among the men of letters whom he saw, who "held the foremost rank in merit, or at least in fame."<sup>1</sup>

Horace Walpole was often in Paris, and often saw the philosophic circle, but it did not please his supercilious humour.

"There was no soul in Paris but philosophers, whom I wished in heaven, though they do not wish themselves so. They are so overbearing and underbred. . . . I sometimes go to Baron d'Holbach's, but I have left off his dinners, as there was no bearing the authors and philosophers and savants of which he has a pigeon-house full. They soon turned my head with a system of antediluvian deluges which they have invented to prove the eternity of matter. . . . In short, nonsense for nonsense, I liked the Jesuits better than the philosophers."<sup>2</sup>

Hume, as everybody knows, found "the men of letters really very agreeable; all of them men of the world, living in entire, or almost entire harmony, among themselves, and quite irreproachable in their morals." He places Diderot among those whose person and conversation he liked best.

We have always heard much of the power of the Salon in the eighteenth century, and it was no doubt a remarkable proof of the incorporation of intellectual interests in manners, that so many groups of men and women should have met habitually every week for the purpose of conversing about the new books and new plays, the fresh principles and fresh ideas, that were produced by the incessant vivacity of the time. The Salon of the eighteenth century passed through various phases; its character shifted with the intellectual mood of the day, but in all its phases it was an institution in which women occupied a place that they have never acquired in any society out of France. We are not here called upon to speculate as to the reasons for this; it is only worth remarking that Diderot was not commonly at his ease in the society of ladies, and that though he was a visitor at Madame Geoffrin's and at Mademoiselle Lespinasse's, yet he was not a

<sup>1</sup> *Miscellaneous Works*, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Walpole to Selwyn. 1765. *Jesse's Selwyn*, ii. 9. See also Walpole to Mann, iv. 283.



constant attendant at any of the famous circles of which women had made themselves the centre. The reader of Madame d'Épinay's memoir is informed how hard she found it to tame Diderot into sociability. "What a pity," she exclaims, "that men of genius and of such eminent merit as M. Diderot should thus wrap themselves up in their philosophy, and disdain the homage that people would eagerly pay them in any society that they would honour with their presence."<sup>1</sup>

One of the soundest social observers of the time was undoubtedly Duclos. His *Considerations on the Manners of the Century*, which was published in 1751, abounds in admirable criticism. He makes two remarks with which we may close our chapter. "The relaxation of morals does not prevent people from being very loud in praise of honour and virtue; those who have least of them know very well how much they are concerned in other people having them." Again, "The French," he said, "are the only people among whom it is possible for morals to be depraved, without either the heart being corrupted, or their courage being weakened."

<sup>1</sup> D'Épinay, ii. 4; 138, 153, etc.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE STAGE.

**THERE** is at first something incredible in the account given by some thinkers of Diderot, as the greatest genius of the eighteenth century; and perhaps an adjustment of such nice degrees of comparison among the high men of the world is at no time very profitable. What is intended by these thoroughgoing panegyrists is that Diderot placed himself at the point of view whence, more comprehensively than was possible from any other, he discerned the long course and the many bearings, the complex faces and the large ramifications, of the huge movement of his day. He seized the great transition at every point, and grasped all the threads that were to be inwoven into the pattern of the new time.

Diderot is in a thousand respects one of the most unsatisfactory of men and of writers. Yet it is hard to deny that to whatever quarter he turned, he caught the rising illumination and was shone upon by the spirit of the coming day. It was no copious and overflowing radiance, but they were the beams of the dawn. Hence, what he has to say, and we shall soon see how much he said, about the two great arts of painting and the drama, though it is fragmentary, though it is insufficient, yet points, as all the rest of his thoughts pointed, along the lines that the best minds of the western world have since traversed. He would, in the old metaphysical language, have called the direction of it a turning to Nature, but if we translate this into more positive terms, just as we have said that the Encyclopædia was a glorification of

pacific industry and of civil justice, so we may say that his whole theory of the drama was a glorification of private virtues and domestic life. And the definite rise of civil justice and industry over feudal privilege and a life of war, and again the elevation of domestic virtue into the place formerly held by patriotic devotion, are the two great sides of a single movement.\* It is quite true that Diderot and the French of that day had only a glimpse of the promised land in art and poetry. The whole moral energy of the generation after Diderot was drawn inevitably into the strong current of social action. The freshly kindled torch of dramatic art passed for nearly half a century to the country of Lessing and Goethe.

There is in the use of a certain kind of abstract language this inconvenience, that the reader may suppose us to be imputing to Diderot a deliberate and systematic survey of the whole movement of his time, and a calculated resolution to further it, now in this way and now in that. It is not necessary to suppose that the movement as a whole was always present to him. Diderot's mind was constantly feeling for explanations; it was never a passive recipient. The drama excited this alert interest just as everything else excited it. He thought about that, as about everything else, originally, that is to say, sincerely and in the spirit of reality.† Whoever turns with a clear eye and proper intellectual capacity in search of the real bearings of what he is about, is sure to find out the strong currents of the time, even though he may never consciously throw them into their most general and abstract expression.

Since Aristotle, said Lessing, no more philosophical mind than Diderot's has treated of the theatre. Lessing himself translated Diderot's two plays, and the *Essay on Dramatic Poetry*, and repeatedly said that without the impulse of Diderot's principles and illustrations his own taste would have taken a different direction. As a dramatist, the author of *Miss Sara Sampson*, of *Emilia Galotti*, and above all that noble dramatic poem, *Nathan the Wise*, could hardly have owed much to the author of such poor stuff as

\* See Comte's *Positive Polity*, vol. iii.

† "That virtue of originality that men so strain after is not newness, as they vainly think (there is nothing new), it is only genuineness."—Ruskin.

*The Natural Son* and *The Father of the Family*. Lessing had some dramatic fire, invention, spontaneous elevation; he had a certain measure, though not a very large one, of poetic impulse. Diderot had nothing of all these, but he had the eye of ~~the philosophic critic~~. Anyone who reads Lessing's dramatic criticisms will see that he did not at all overrate his obligations to his French contemporary.<sup>1</sup> It has been replied to the absurd taunt about the French inventing nothing, that at least Descartes invented German philosophy. Still more true is it that Diderot invented German criticism.

Diderot's thoughts on the stage, besides his completed plays, and a number of fragmentary scenes, are contained principally in the Paradox on the Player, a short treatise on Dramatic Poetry, and three dialogues appended to *The Natural Son*. On the plays a very few words will suffice. *The Natural Son* must, by me at least, be pronounced one of the most vapid performances in dramatic history. Even Lessing, unwilling as he was to say a word against a writer who had taught him so much, is too good a critic not to recognise monotony in the characters, stiffness and affectation in the dialogue, and a pedantic ring in the sentences of new-fangled philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Even in the three critical dialogues that Diderot added to the play, Lessing cannot help discerning the mixture of superficiality with an almost pompous pretension. Rosenkranz, it is true, finds the play rich in fine sentences, in scenes full of effect, in which Diderot's moral enthusiasm expresses itself with impetuous eloquence. But even he admits that the hero's servant is not so far wrong when he cries, "*Il semble que le bon sens se soit enfui de cette maison,*" and adds that the whole atmosphere of the piece is sickly with conscious virtue.<sup>3</sup> For ourselves we are ready for once even to sympathise with Palissot, the hack-writer of the reactionary parties, when he says that *The Natural Son* had neither invention, nor style, nor characters, nor any other single unit of a truly dramatic work. The reader who

<sup>1</sup> Lessing: 1729-81. Diderot: 1713-84. As De Quincey puts it, Lessing may be said to have begun his career precisely in the middle of the last century.

<sup>2</sup> *Hamburg. Dramaturgie*, § 85. Werke, vi. 381. [Ed. 1873.]

<sup>3</sup> *Diderot's Leben*, i. 274, 277.

seeks to realise the nullity of the *genre sérieux* in Diderot's hands, should turn from *The Natural Son* to Goldoni's play of *The True Friend*, from which Diderot borrowed the structure of his play, following it as narrowly as possible to the end of the third act. Seldom has transfusion turned a sparkling draught into anything so flat and vapid. In spite of the applause of the philosophic *claque*, led by Grimm,<sup>1</sup> posterity has ratified the coldness with which it was received by contemporaries. *The Natural Son* was written in 1757, but it was not until 1771 that the directors of the French Comedy could be induced to place it on the stage. The actors detested their task, and as we can very well believe, went sulkily through parts which they had not even taken the trouble to master.<sup>2</sup> The public felt as little interest in the piece as the actors had done, and after a single representation, the play was put aside. Ill-natured critics compared Diderot's play with Rousseau's opera; they insisted that *The Natural Son* and *The Village Conjuror* were a couple of monuments of the presumptuous incompetence of the encyclopædic cabal. The failure of *The Natural Son* as a drama came after it had enjoyed considerable success as a piece of literature, for it had been fourteen years in print. We can only suppose that this success was the fruit of an unflinching partisanship.

It is a curious illustration of the strength of the current passion for moral maxims in season and out of season, that one scene which to the scoffers of that day seemed, as it cannot but seem to everybody to-day, a climax of absurdity and unbecomingness, was hailed by the party as most admirable, for no other reason than that it contained a number of high moralising saws. Constance, a young widow and a model of reason, takes upon herself to combat the resolution of Dorval not to marry, after he has led her to suppose that he has a passion for her, and after a marriage between them has been arranged. "No," he cries, "a man of my character is not such a husband as befits Constance." Constance begs him to reassure himself; tells him that he is mistaken; to enjoy tranquillity, a man must have the approval of his own heart, and perhaps that of other men, and he can have neither unless he

<sup>1</sup> *Corr. Lit.* ii. 103.

<sup>2</sup> See Grimm's account of the performance, *Corr. Lit.* vii. 313.

remains at his post ; it is only the wicked who can bear isolation ; a tender soul cannot view the general system of sensible beings without a strong desire that they should be happy. Dorval, who cuts an extremely sorry figure in such a scene, exclaims, " Ah, but children ! Dorval would have children ! When I think that we are thrown from our very birth into a chaos of prejudices, extravagances, vices, and miseries, the idea makes me shudder !"— " Dòrval, you are beset by phantoms, and no wonder. The history of life is so little known, while the appearance of evil in the universe is so glaring. . . . Dorval, your daughters will be modest and good ; your sons noble and high-minded ; all your children will be charming. . . . There is no fear that a cruel soul should ever grow in my bosom from stock of yours."<sup>1</sup>

We can hardly wonder that players were disgusted, or critics moved to wicked jests. The counterpart to the scene in which Constance persuades Dorval that they would be very happy in one case, is the scene in which Dorval persuades Rosalie that they would be very unhappy in another case. The situations in themselves may command our approval morally, but they certainly do not attract our sympathies dramatically. That a woman should demonstrate to a man in fine sententious language the expediency of marrying her, is not inconsistent with good sense, but it is displeasing. When a man tells a woman that, though love draws in one way, duty draws in the other, we may admire his prudence, but we are glad when so delicate a business comes to an end. In *The Natural Son* the latter scene, though very long, is the less disagreeable of the two. And just as in Diderot's most wordy and tiresome pages we generally find some one phrase, some epithet, some turn of a sentence whose freshness or strength or daring reveals a genius, so in this scene we find a few lines whose energy reminds us that we are not after all in the hands of some obscure playwright, whose works ought long ago to have been eaten by moths or burnt by fire. Those lines are a warning against the temptation so familiar in every age since Paris was a guest in the halls of Menelaus, to take that fatal resolve, All for love and the world well lost. " To do wrong," says Dorval, " is to condemn ourselves to live and to find our pleasure with wrong-

<sup>1</sup> Act IV. sc. 3.

doers ; it is to pass an uncertain and troubled life in one long and never-ending lie ; to have to praise with a blush the virtue that we flung behind us ; to hear from the lips of others harsh words for our own action ; to seek a little calm in sophistical systems, that the breath of a single good man scatters to the winds ; to shut ourselves for ever out from the spring of true joys, the only joys that are virtuous, austere, sublime ; and to give ourselves up, simply as a way of escape from ourselves, to the weariness of those frivolous diversions in which the day flows away in self-oblivion, and our life glides slowly from us and loses itself in waste."<sup>1</sup> A very old story, no doubt ; but natural, true, and in its place.

What adds to the flatness of the play is a device which Diderot introduced on a deliberately adopted principle ; we mean the elaborate setting out of the acting directions. Every movement, every gesture, every silent pause is written down, and we have the impression less of a play, than of some strangely bald romance. In the versified declamation which then reigned on the French stage, nothing was left to natural action, nothing was told by change of position, by movement without speech, or in short by any means other than discourse. Diderot, repudiating the conventions of dramatic art, and consulting nature or reality, saw that there are many scenes in life in which it is more natural to the personages of the scene to move than to speak, in which indeed motion is natural, and speech is altogether unnatural. If this be so in real life, he said, it should be so on the stage, because nothing passes in the world which may not pass also in the theatre ; and as pantomime, or expression of emotion, feeling, purpose, otherwise than by speech, has so much to do in life, the dramatist should make abundant use of pantomime in composing stage-plays. Nor should he trust to the actor's invention and spontaneous sense of appropriateness. He ought to write down the pantomime whenever it adds energy or clearness to the dialogue ; when it binds the parts of the dialogue together ; when it consists in a delicate play that is not easily divined ; and almost always he ought to write it down in the opening of a scene. If anyone is inclined to regard this as superfluous, let

<sup>1</sup> Act V. sc. 3.

him try the experiment of composing a play, and then writing the pantomime, or "business," for it; he will soon see what follies he commits.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever we may think of the practice of writing the action as well as the words for the player, nobody would now dispute the wisdom of what Diderot says as to the part that pantomime fills in the highest kind of dramatic representation. We must agree with his repeated laments over the indigence, for purposes of full and adequate expression, of every language that ever has existed or ever can exist.<sup>3</sup> "My dear master," he wrote to Voltaire on the occasion of a performance of *Tancred*, "if you could have seen Clairon passing across the stage, her knees bending under her, her eyes closed, her arms falling stiff by her side as if they were dead; if you heard the cry that she uttered when she perceives Tancred, you would remain more convinced than ever that silence and pantomime have sometimes a pathos that all the resources of speech can never approach."<sup>3</sup> If we wonder that he should have thought it worth while to lay so much emphasis on what seems so obvious, we have to remember that it did not seem at all obvious to people who were accustomed to the substitution of a mannered and symmetrical declamation for the energetic variety and manifold exuberance of passion and judgment in the daily lives of men.

We have already seen that even when he wrote the Letter on the Deaf and Dumb, Diderot's mind was exercised about gesture as a supplement to discourse. In that Letter he had told a curious story of a bizarre experiment that he was in the habit of making at the theatre. He used to go to the highest seats in the house, thrust his fingers into his ears, and then, to the astonishment of his neighbours, watch the performance with the sharpest interest. As a constant playgoer, he knew the words of the plays by heart, and what he sought was to isolate the gesture of the performers, and to enjoy and criticize that by itself. He kept his ears tightly stopped, so long as the action and play went well with the words as he remembered them, and he only listened when some discord in gesture made him suppose that he had lost his place.

<sup>2</sup> *De la Poésie Dramatique*, ch. xxi.

<sup>3</sup> vii. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Nov. 28, 1760; xix. 457.



The people around him were more and more amazed as they saw him, notwithstanding his stopped ears, shed copious tears in the pathetic passages. "They could not refrain from hazarding questions, to which I answered coldly, 'that everybody had his own way of listening, and that my way was to stop my ears, so as to understand better'—laughing within myself at the talk to which my oddity gave rise, and still more so at the simplicity of some young people who also put their fingers into their ears to hear after my fashion, and were quite astonished that the plan did not succeed."<sup>1</sup> This was an odd and whimsical way of acting on a conviction which lay deep in Diderot's mind, namely, that language is a very poor, misleading, and utterly inadequate instrument for representing what it professes, and what we stupidly suppose it, to represent. Rousseau had expressed the same kind of feeling when he said that definitions might be good things, if only we did not employ words in making them.

A curious circumstance is worth mentioning in connection with the Three Dialogues appended to *The Natural Son*. Diderot informs his readers that the incidents of *The Natural Son* had actually occurred in real life, and that he knew the personages. In the Dialogues it is assumed that the play had been written by the hero himself, and the hero is the chief speaker. Not a word is said from which the reader would guess that Diderot had borrowed the substance of his plot and some of its least insipid scenes from Goldoni. We can hardly wonder that he was charged with plagiarism. Yet it was not deliberate, we may be sure. When Diderot was strongly seized by an idea, outer circumstances were as if they did not exist. He was swept up into the clouds. "Diderot is a good and worthy man," wrote Madame Geoffrin to the King of Poland, "but he has such a bad head, and he is so curiously organized, that he neither sees nor hears what he does see and hear, as the thing really is; he is always like a man who is dreaming, and who thinks all that he has dreamed quite real."<sup>2</sup>

*The Father of the Family*, written in 1758, and first acted in 1761, is very superior to *The Natural Son*; it even enjoyed a

<sup>1</sup> *Lettre sur les Sourds et les Muets*, i. 359.

<sup>2</sup> *Correspond. du Roi Stanislas-Auguste et de M<sup>me</sup>. Geoffrin*, p. 466.

certain popularity. In Germany it became an established favourite, and in Italy it was only less popular than a piece of Goldoni's. The French were not quite so easy to please. In 1761 its reception was undoubtedly favourable, and it ran for more than a week. In 1769 it was reproduced, and, according to Diderot's own account, with enthusiasm. "There was a frightful crowd," he says, "and people hardly remember such a success. I was surprised at it myself. My friends are at the height of exultation. My daughter came home intoxicated with wonder and delight." Even Madame Diderot at length grew ashamed at having to confess that she had not seen her husband's triumph, and throwing aside her horror of the stage, was as deeply moved as everyone else.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding this satisfactory degree of success, and though it was performed as late as 1835, the play never struck root in France. It is indeed a play without any real quality or distinction. "Diderot, in his plays," said Madame de Staël, "put the affectation of nature in the place of the affectation of convention."<sup>2</sup> The effect is still more disagreeable in the first kind of affectation than the second. *The Father of the Family* is made more endurable than *The Natural Son* by a certain rapidity and fire in the action, and a certain vigour in the characters of the impetuous son (Saint-Albin) and the malignant brother-in-law (the Commander). But the dialogue is poor, and the Father of the Family himself is as woolly and mawkish a figure as is usually made out of benevolent intentions and weak purpose combined. The woes of the heavy father of the stage, where there is no true pathos, but only a sentimental version of it, find us very callous. The language has none of that exquisite grace and flexibility which makes a good French comedy of our own day, a piece by Augier, Sandeau, Feuillet, Sardou, so delightful. Diderot was right in urging that there is no reason why a play should be in verse; but then the prose of a play ought to have a point, elegance, and highly-wrought perfection, which shall fill us with a sense of art, though not the art of the poet. Diderot not only did not write comedy in such a style; but he does not even so much as show consciousness that

<sup>1</sup> Aug. 1769, xix. 314-23.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Mr. Sime's excellent *Life of Lessing* (Trübner & Co. 1877), p. 230.

any difference exists between one kind of prose and another. The blurred phrases and clipped sentences of what Diderot would have called Nature, that is to say of real life, are intolerable on the stage. Even he felt this, for his characters, though their dialogue is without wit or finish, are still dull and tame of speech, in a different way from that in which the people whom we may meet are dull and tame. There is an art of a kind, though of an extremely vapid kind.

Again, though he may be right in contending that there is a serious kind of comedy as distinct from that gay comedy which is neighbour to farce—of this we shall see more presently—yet he is certainly wrong in believing that we can willingly endure five acts of serious comedy without a single relieving passage of humour. Contrast of character, where all the characters are realistic and common, is not enough. We crave contrast in the dramatic point of view. We seek occasional change of key. That serious comedy should move a sympathetic tear is reasonable enough; but it is hard to find that it grudges us a single smile. The result of Diderot's method is that the spectator or the reader speedily feels that what he has before him substitutes for dramatic fulness and variety the flat monotony of a homily or a tract. It would be hard to show that there is no true comedy without laughter—Terence's *Hecyra*, for instance—but Diderot certainly overlooked what Lessing and most other critics saw so clearly, that laughter rightly stirred is one of the most powerful agencies in directing the moral sympathies of the audience,—the very end that Diderot most anxiously sought.

It is mere waste of time to bestow serious criticism on Diderot's two plays, or on the various sketches, outlines, and fragments of scenes with which he amused his very slight dramatic faculty. If we wish to study the masterpieces of French comedy in the eighteenth century, we shall promptly shut up the volumes of Diderot, and turn to the ease and soft gracefulness of Marivaux's *Game of Love and Chance*, to the forcible and concentrated sententiousness of Piron's *Mitromanie*, to the salt and racy flavour of Le Sage's *Turcaret*. Gresset, again, and Destouches wrote at least two comedies that were really fit for the stage, and may be read with pleasure to-day. Neither of these compliments

can fairly be paid to *The Natural Son* and *The Father of the Family* Diderot's plays ought to be looked upon merely as sketchy illustrations of a favourite theory ; as the rough drawings on the black board with which a professor of the fine arts may accompany a lecture on oil painting.

One radical part of Diderot's dramatic doctrine is wholly condemned by modern criticism ; and it is the part which his plays were especially designed to enforce. "It is always," he says, "virtue and virtuous people that a man ought to have in view when he writes. Oh, what good would men gain, if all the arts of imitation proposed one common object, and were one day to unite with the laws in making us love virtue and hate vice. It is for the philosopher to address himself to the poet, the painter, the musician, and to cry to them with all his might : *O men of genius, to what end has heaven endowed you with gifts ?* If they listen to him, speedily will the images of debauch cease to cover the walls of our palaces ; our vices will cease to be the organs of crime ; and taste and manners will gain. Can we believe that the action of two old blind people, man and wife, as they sought one another in their aged days, and with tears of tenderness clasped one another's hands and exchanged caresses on the brink of the grave, so to say—that this would not demand the same talent, and would not interest me far more than the spectacle of the violent pleasures with which their senses in all the first freshness of youth were once made drunk ?" <sup>1</sup>

The emphasizing moralists of Diderot's school never understood that virtue may be made attractive, without pulling the reader or the spectator by the sleeve, and urgently shouting in his ear how attractive virtue is. When *The Heart of Midlothian* appeared (1818), a lady wrote about it as follows : "Of late days, especially since it has been the fashion to write moral and even religious novels, one might almost say of the wise good heroines what a lively girl once said of her well-meaning aunt—'On my word she is enough to make anybody wicked.' Had this very story been conducted by a common hand, Effie would have attracted all our concern and sympathy, Jeanie only cold approbation. Whereas Jeanie, without youth, beauty, genius, warm passions, or any other

<sup>1</sup> *De la Poésie Dramatique*, § ii. vii. 313.

novel perfection, is here our object from beginning to end. This is 'enlisting the affections in the cause of virtue' ten times more than ever Richardson did; for whose male and female pedants, all excelling as they are, I never could care half as much as I found myself inclined to do for Jeanie before I finished the first volume."<sup>1</sup>

In other words, you must win us by kindling our sympathy, not by formally commanding our moral approval. To kindle sympathy your personage must be interesting; must touch our pity or wonder or energetic fellow-feeling or sense of moral loveliness, which is a very different thing from touching our mere sense of the distinctions between right and wrong. Direct homily excites no sympathy with the homilist. Deep pensive meditations on the moral puzzles of the world are not at all like didactic discourse. But the *Father of the Family* was exactly fulfilling Diderot's notion of dramatic purpose and utility when he talked to his daughter in such a strain as this: "Marriage, my daughter, is a vocation imposed by nature. . . . He who counts on bliss without alloy knows neither the life of man nor the designs of heaven. If marriage exposes us to cruel pain, it is also the source of the sweetest pleasures. Where are the examples of pure and heartfelt interest, of real tenderness, of inmost confidence, of daily help, of griefs divided, of tears mingled, if they be not in marriage? What is there in the world that the good man prefers to his wife? What is there in the world that a father loves more dearly than his children? O sacred bond, if I think of thee, my whole soul is warmed and elevated!"<sup>2</sup>

But these virtuous ejaculations do not warm and elevate us. In such a case words count for nothing. It is actual presentation of beautiful character, and not talk about it, that touches the spectator. It is the association of interesting action with character, that moves us and inspires such better moods as may be within our compass. Diderot, like many other people before and since, sought to make the stage the great moral teacher. That it may become so, is possible. It will not be by imitating the methods of that colossal type of histrionic failure, the church-pulpit.

<sup>1</sup> Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, iv. 177 (Ed. 1837).

<sup>2</sup> *Père de Famille*, act ii. sc. ii. p. 211.

Exhortation in set speeches always has been, and always will be, the feeblest bulwark against the boiling floods of passion that helpless virtue ever invented, and it matters not at all whether the hortatory speeches are placed on the lips of Mr. Talkative, the son of Saywell, or of some tearful dummy labelled the Father of the Family.

Yet one is half ashamed to use hard words about Diderot. He was so modest about his work, so simple and unpretending, so wholly without restless and fretting ambitions, and so generous in his judgment of others. He made his own dramatic experiment, he thought little enough of it; and he was wholly above the hateful vice of sourly disparaging competitors, whether dead or living. He knew that he was himself no master, but he was manly enough to admire anybody who was nearer to mastery. He was full of unaffected delight at Sedaine's busy and pleasing little comedy, *The Philosopher without knowing it*; it was so simple without being stiff, so eloquent without the shadow of effort or rhetoric. After seeing it, Diderot ran off to the author to embrace him, with many tears of joyful sympathy and gratitude. Sedaine, like Lillo, the author of Diderot's favourite play of *George Barnwell*, was a plain tradesman, and the success of his libretti for comic operas had not spoiled him. He could find no more expansive words for his excited admirer than "*Ah, Monsieur Diderot, que vous êtes beau !*"<sup>2</sup> Diderot was just as sensible of the originality and Aristophanic gaiety of Collé's brilliant play, *Truth in Wine*, though Collé detested the philosophic school from Voltaire downwards, and left behind him a bitterly contemptuous account of *The Natural Son*.<sup>3</sup>

Of all comic writers, however, the author of the *Andria* and the *Heautontimorumenos* was Diderot's favourite. The half-dozen pages upon Terence, which he threw off while the printer's boy waited in the passage (1762), are one of the most easy, flowing and delightful of his fragments; there is such appreciation of Terence's suavity and tact, of his just and fine judgment, of his discrimination and character. He admits that Terence had no verve; for that he commends the young poet to Molière or

<sup>1</sup> xix. 474.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradoxe sur le Comédien*, p. 383.

<sup>3</sup> *Journals*, ii. 331. Also vi. 248; vii. 9.

Aristophanes, but as verve was exactly the quality most wanting to Diderot himself, he easily forgave its absence in Terence, and thought it amply replaced by his moderation, his truth, and his fine taste. Colman is praised for translating Terence, for here, says Diderot, is the lesson of which Colman's countrymen stand most in need. The English comic writers have more verve than taste. "Vanbrugh, Wycherley, Congreve, and some others have painted vices and foibles with vigour; it is not either invention or warmth or gaiety or force that is wanting to their pencil, but rather that unity in the drawing, that precision in the stroke, that truth in colouring, which distinguish portrait from caricature. Especially are they wanting in the art of discerning and seizing those naïf, simple, and yet singular movements of character, which always please and astonish, and render the imitation at once true and piquant."<sup>1</sup> Criticism has really nothing to add to these few lines, and if Diderot in his last years read *The School for Scandal*, or *The Rivals*, he would have found no reason to alter his judgment.

One English play had the honour of being translated by Diderot; this was *The Gamester*, not *The Gamester* of Shirley nor of Garrick, but of Edward Moore (1753). It is a good example of the bourgeois tragedy or domestic drama, which Diderot was so eager to see introduced on to the French stage. The infatuation of Beverley, the tears and virtue of Mrs. Beverley, the prudence of Charlotte and the sage devotion of her lover, the sympathetic remorse of Bates, and even the desperation of Stukely, made up a picture of domestic misery and moral sentiment with which Diderot was sure to fall in love. Lillo's *George Barnwell*, with its direct and urgent moral, was a still greater favourite, and Diderot compared the scene between Maria and Barnwell in prison to the despair of the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles, as the hero is heard shrieking at the mouth of his cavern;<sup>2</sup> just as a more modern critic has thought Lillo's other play, *The Fatal Curiosity*, worthy of comparison with the *Œdipus Tyrannus*.

<sup>1</sup> *Réflexions sur Térence*, v. 228-238. In another place (*De la Poésie Dram.* 370) he says: "Nous avons des comédies. Les Anglais n'ont que des satires, à la vérité pleines de force et de gaieté, mais sans mœurs et sans goût. Les Italiens en sont réduits au drame burlesque."

<sup>2</sup> vii. 95.

Diderot's feeling for Shakespeare seems to have been what we might have anticipated from the whole cast of his temperament. One of the scenes which delighted him most was that moment of awe, when Lady Macbeth silently advances down the stage with her eyes closed, and imitates the action of washing her hands, as wondering that "the old man should have so much blood in him." "I know nothing," he exclaims, "so pathetic in discourse as that woman's silence and the movement of her hands. What an image of remorse!"<sup>1</sup>

It was not to be expected that Diderot should indulge in those indiscriminating superlatives about Shakespeare which are common in Shakespeare's country. But he knew enough about him to feel that he was dealing with a giant. "I will not compare Shakespeare," he said, "to the Belvedere Apollo, nor to the Gladiator, nor to Antinous"—he had compared Terence to the Medicean Venus—"but to the Saint Christopher of Notre Dame, an unshapely colossus, rudely carven, but between whose legs we could all pass without our brows touching him."<sup>2</sup> Not very satisfactory recognition perhaps; but the Saint Christopher is better than Voltaire's drunken savage.

It is not every dramatist who treats the art of acting as seriously as the art of composition. The great author of *Wilhelm Meister* is the most remarkable exception to this rule, and Lessing is only second to him. It is hardly possible for a man to be a great dramatist, and it is simply impossible for a man to be a great critic of the drama, who has not seriously studied the rules, aims, and conditions of stage representation. Hazlitt, for instance, has written some admirable pages about the poetry, the imaginative conception, the language, of Shakespeare's plays, but we find his limit when he says that King Lear is so noble a play that he cannot bear to see it acted. As if a play could be fully judged without reference to the conditions of the very object with which it was written. A play is to be criticized as a play, not merely as a poem. The whole structure of a piece depends on

<sup>1</sup> *Lettre sur les Sourds et les Muets*, i. 355.

<sup>2</sup> *Paradoxe*, viii. 384. The criticism on the detestable rendering of *Hamlet* by Ducis (viii. 471) makes one doubt whether Diderot knew much about Shakespeare.



the fact that it is to be acted ; its striking moments must be great dramatic, not merely beautiful poetic, moments. They must have the intensity of pitch by which the effect of action exceeds the effect of narrative. This intensity is made almost infinitely variable with the variations in the actor's mastery of his art.

Diderot, who threw so penetrating a glance into every subject that he touched, even if it were no more than a glance, has left a number of excellent remarks on histrionics. The key to them all is his everlasting watchword : *Watch nature, follow her simple and spontaneous leading.* The Paradox on the Player is one of the very few of Diderot's pieces of which we can say that, besides containing vigorous thought, it has real finish in point of literary form. There is not the flat tone, the heavy stroke, the loose shambling, that give a certain stamp of commonness to so many of his most elaborate discussions. In the Paradox the thoughts seem to fall with rapidity and precision into their right places ; they are direct ; they are not overloaded with qualifications ; their clear delivery is not choked by a throng of asides and casual ejaculations. Usually Diderot writes as if he were loath to let the sentence go, and to allow the paragraph to come to an end. Here he lays down his proposition, and without rambling passes on to the next. The effort is not kept up quite to the close, for the last half-dozen pages have the ordinary clumsy mannerism of their author.

What is the Paradox ? That a player of the first rank must have much judgment, self-possession, and penetration, *but no sensibility.* An actor with nothing but sense and judgment is apt to be cold ; but an actor with nothing but verve and sensibility is crazy. It is a certain temperament of good sense and warmth combined, that makes the sublime player.<sup>1</sup> Why should he differ from the poet, the painter, the orator, the musician ? It is not in the fury of the first impulse that characteristic strokes occur to any of these men ; it is in moments when they are tranquil and cool, and such strokes come by an unexpected inspiration.<sup>2</sup> It is

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mdlle. Jodin, xix. 387.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson one day said to John Kemble : "Are you, sir, one of those enthusiasts who believe yourself transformed into the very character you represent ?" Kemble answered that he had never felt so strong a persuasion himself.—*Boswell*, ch. 77.

for coolness to temper the delirium of enthusiasm. It is not the violent man who is beside himself, that disposes of us; that is an advantage reserved for the man who possesses himself. The great poets, the great actors, and perhaps generally all the great imitators of nature, whatever they may be, are gifted with a fine imagination, a great judgment, a subtle tact, a sure taste, but they are creatures of the smallest sensibility. They are equally well fitted for too many things; they are too busy in looking, in recognising, and in imitating, to be violently affected within themselves. Sensibility is hardly the quality of a great genius. He will have justice; but he will practise it without reaping all the sweetness of it. It is not his heart, but his head, that does it all. Well, then, what I insist upon, says Diderot, is that it is extreme sensibility that makes mediocre actors; it is mediocre sensibility that makes bad actors; and it is the absolute want of sensibility that prepares actors who shall be sublime.<sup>1</sup>

This is worked out with great clearness and decision, and some of the illustrations to which he resorts to lighten the dialogue are amusing enough. Perhaps the most interesting to us English is his account of Garrick, whose acquaintance he made towards the year 1765. He says that he saw Garrick pass his head between two folding doors, and in the space of a few seconds, his face went successively from mad joy to moderate joy, from that to tranquillity, from tranquillity to surprise, from surprise to astonishment, from astonishment to gloom, from gloom to utter dejection, from dejection to fear, from fear to horror, from horror to despair, and then reascend from this lowest degree to the point whence he had started.<sup>2</sup> Of course his soul felt none of these emotions. "If you

<sup>1</sup> Lessing makes this a starting-point of his criticism of the art of acting, though he uses it less absolutely than Diderot would do. *Hamburg. Dramaturgie*, § 3, vol. vi. 19.

<sup>2</sup> In Lichtenberg's *Briefe aus England* (1776) there is a criticism of the most admirably intelligent kind on Garrick. Lord Lytton gave an account of it to English readers in the *Fortnightly Review* (February, 1871). The following passage confirms what Diderot says above:

"You have doubtless heard much of his extraordinary power of change of face. Here is one example of it. When he played the part of Sir John Brute, I was close to the stage, and could observe him narrowly. He entered with the corners of his mouth so turned down, as to give to his whole countenance the expression of habitual sottishness and debauchery. And this artificial form

asked this famous man, who by himself was as well worth a journey to England to see, as all the wonders of Rome are worth a journey to Italy, if you asked him, I say, for the scene of *The Little Baker's Boy*, he played it; if you asked him the next minute for the scene from *Hamlet*, he played that too for you, equally ready to sob over the fall of his pies, and to follow the path of the dagger in the air."<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the central proposition, Diderot makes a number of excellent observations which show his critical faculty at its best. As, for example, in answering the question, what is the truth of the stage? Is it to show things exactly as they are in nature? V By no means. The true in that sense would only be the common. The really true is the conformity of action, speech, countenance, voice, movement, gesture, with an ideal model imagined by the poet, and often exaggerated by the player. And the marvel is that this model influences not only the tone, but the whole carriage and gait.) Again, what is the aim of multiplied rehearsals? To establish a balance among the different talents of the actors. The supreme excellence of one actor does not recompense you for the mediocrity of the others, which is brought by that very superiority into disagreeable prominence. Again, accent is easier to imitate than movement, but movements are what strike us most violently. Hence a law to which there is no exception, namely, under pain of being cold, to make your dénouement an action and not a narrative.<sup>2</sup>

One of the strongest satires on the reigning dramatic style, Diderot found in the need that the actor had of the mirror. The fewer gestures, he said, the better; frequent gesticulation impairs energy and destroys nobleness. It is the countenance, the eyes,

of the mouth he retained, unaltered, from the beginning to the end of the play, with the exception only that, as the play went on, the lips gaped and hung more and more in proportion to the gradually increasing drunkenness of the character represented. This made-up face was not produced by stage-paint, but solely by muscular contraction; and it must be so identified by Garrick with his idea of Sir John Brute as to be spontaneously assumed by him whenever he plays that part; otherwise, his retention of such a mask, without even once dropping it either from fatigue or surprise, even in the most boisterous action of his part, would be quite inexplicable."

<sup>1</sup> viii. 382.

<sup>2</sup> viii. 373, 376, &c.

it is the whole body that ought to move, and not the arms.<sup>1</sup> There is no maxim more forgotten by poets than that which says that great passions are mute. It depends on the player to produce a greater effect by silence, than the poet can produce by all his fine speeches.<sup>2</sup> Above all, the player is to study tranquil scenes, for it is these that are the most truly difficult. He commends a young actress to play every morning, by way of orisons, the scene of Athalie with Joas; to say for evensong some scenes of Agrippina with Nero; and for Benedicite the first scene of Phædra with her confidante. Especially there is to be little emphasis—a warning grievously needed by ninety-nine English speakers out of a hundred—for emphasis is hardly ever natural; it is only a forced imitation of nature.<sup>3</sup>

Diderot had perceived very early that the complacency with which his countrymen regarded the national theatre was extravagant. He would not allow a comparison between the conventional classic of the French stage, and the works of the Greek stage. He insisted in the case of the Greeks that their subjects are noble, well chosen, and interesting; that the action seems to develop itself spontaneously; that their dialogue is simple and very close to what is natural; that the dénouements are not forced; that the interest is not divided nor the action overloaded with episodes. In the French classic he found none of these merits. He found none of that truth which is the only secret of pleasing and touching us; none of that simple and natural movement which is the only path to perfect and unbroken illusion. The dialogue is all emphasis, wit, glitter; all a thousand leagues away from nature. Instead of artificially giving to their characters *esprit* at every point, poets ought to place them in such situations as will give it to them. Where in the world did men and women ever speak as we declaim?

<sup>1</sup> As Hamlet to his players: "Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand thus; but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and (as I may say) the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness."

<sup>2</sup> To Jodin, xix. 382. "Point de hoquets, point de cris, de la dignité vraie, un jeu ferme, sensé, raisonné, juste, mâle; la plus grande sobriété de gestes. C'est de la contenance, c'est du maintien, qu'il faut déclamer les trois quarts du temps."—Page 390.

<sup>3</sup> Page 395.

Why should princes and kings walk differently from any man who walks well? Did they then gesticulate like raving madmen? Do princesses when they speak utter sharp hissings? People believe us to have brought tragedy to a high degree of perfection. It is not so. Of all kinds of literature it is the most imperfect.<sup>1</sup>

The ideas which appeared thus incongruously in the tales of 1748, reappeared in the direct essays on the drama in 1757 and 1758. We have left nothing undone, he said, to corrupt dramatic style. We have preserved from the ancients that emphasis of versification which was so well fitted to languages of strong quantity and marked accent, to vast theatres, to a declamation that had an instrumental accompaniment; and then we have given up simplicity of plot and dialogue, and all truth of situation.\* La Motte nearly fifty years before had attacked the pseudo-classic drama. He had inveighed against the unities, against long monologues, against the device of confidants, and against verse. His assault, in which he had the powerful aid of Fontenelle, was part of that battle between Moderns and Ancients with which the literary activity of the century had opened. The brilliant success of the tragedies of Voltaire had restored the lustre of the conventional drama, though Voltaire infused an element of the romantic under the severity of the old forms. But the drama had become even less like Sophocles and Euripides in *Zaire* than in *Phèdre* or *Iphigénie*. Voltaire intended to constitute the French drama into an independent form. He expected to be told that he was not like Sophocles, and he did not abstain from some singularly free railing against Euripides. The Greek pieces often smacked too much of the tone of the fair to satisfy him; they were too familiar and colloquial for a taste that had been made fastidious by the court-pieces of Lewis XIV. Diderot was kept free from such deplorable criticism as this, by feeling that the Greek drama was true to the sentiment of the age that gave it birth, and that the French drama, if not in the hands of Racine, still even in the hands of Voltaire, and much more in the hands of such men as Lagrange-Chancel and the elder Crébillon, was true to no senti-

<sup>1</sup> *Bijoux Indiscrets*, ch. xxxviii.

\* vii. 121. Lessing makes a powerful addition to this. *Hamburg. Dram.* vi. 261.

ment save one purely literary, artificial, and barren. He insists on the hopelessness of the stage, unless men prepared themselves at every part for a grand return to nature. We have seen what is his counsel to the actor. He preaches in the same key to the scene-painter and the maker of costumes. Scene-painting ought to be more rigorously true than any other kind of picture. Let there be no distraction, no extraneous suggestion, to interfere with the impression intended by the poet. Have you a salon to represent? Let it be that of a man of taste and no more: no ostentation and no gilding, unless the situation expressly demands the contrary.

In the dresses the same rule holds good. Under robes that are overladen with gold lace, I only see a rich man; what I want to see is a man. Pretty and simple draperies of severe tints are what we need, not a mass of tinsel and embroidery. "A courageous actress has just got rid of her panier, and nobody has found her any the worse for it. Ah, if she only dared one day to show herself on the stage with all the nobility and simplicity of adjustment that her characters demand; nay, in the disorder into which she would be thrown by an event so terrible as the death of a husband, the loss of a son, and the other catastrophes of the tragic stage, what would become, round her dishevelled figure, of all those powdered, curled, frizzled, tricked-out creatures? Sooner or later they must put themselves in unison. O nature, nature! We can never resist her."<sup>1</sup>

From all this we turn, for a few moments only, and not too cheerfully, to the Serbonian bog of dramatic rules and the metaphysics of the theatre. There is no subject in literature, not even the interpretation of the Apocalypse, which has given birth to such pedantic, dismal, and futile discussion. The immense controversy, carried on in books, pamphlets, sheets and flying articles, mostly German, as to what it was that Aristotle really meant by the famous words in the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*, about tragedy accomplishing the purification of our moods of pity and sympathetic fear, is one of the disgraces of human intelligence, a grotesque monument of sterility. The great tap-root of fallacy has been and remains the incessant imputation of ethical or social

<sup>1</sup> *Poésie Dramatique*, §§ 20, 21.

purpose to the dramatist, and the demand of direct and combined ethical or social effect from the drama. There is no critic, from the great Aristotle downwards, who has steered quite clear of these evil shallows; Diderot, as we have seen, least of all. But Diderot disarms the impatience which narrower critics kindle, by this magnificent concession, coming at the close of all: "Especially remember that *there is no general principle*; I do not know a single one of those that I have indicated, which a man of genius cannot infringe with success."<sup>1</sup> Here we listen to the voice of the genuine Diderot; and if this be granted, we need not give more than a passing attention to the rules that have gone before—about the danger of borrowing in the same composition the shades both of the comic and of the tragic styles; about movement being injurious to dignity, and of the importance therefore of not making the principal personage the *machinist* of the piece; about the inexpediency of episodic personages—and so forth. The only remark worth making on these propositions is that, whatever their value may be, Diderot at any rate, like a true philosopher, generalised from the facts of nature and art. He did not follow the too common critical method of reading one's own ideas into a work of art, and then taking them back again in the more imposing form of inevitable deductions from the work itself.

What Diderot conceived himself really to have done, was to have sketched and constituted a new species in the great dramatic kingdom. Every one knows, he said, that there is tragedy and that there is comedy, but we have to learn that there is room in nature and the art of the stage for a third division, namely, the *genre sérieux*, a kind of comedy that has for its object virtue and the duties of man. Why should the writer of comedy confine his work to what is vicious or ridiculous in men? Why should not the duties of men furnish the dramatist with as ample material as their vices? Surely in the *genre honnête et sérieux* the subject is as important as in gay comedy. The characters are as varied and as original. The passions are all the more energetic as the interest will be greater. The style will be graver, loftier, more forcible, more susceptible of what we call sentiment, a quality without which no style ever yet spoke to the heart. The ridiculous will

<sup>1</sup> 3<sup>me</sup> Entretien, vii. 138.

not be absent, for the madness of actions and speeches, when they are suggested by the misunderstanding of interests or by the transport of passion, is the truly ridiculous thing in men and in life.<sup>1</sup>

Besides his own two pieces, Diderot would probably have pointed to Terence as the author coming nearest to the *genre sérieux*. If Goethe's bad play of *Stella* had retained the close as he originally wrote it, with the bigamous Fernando in the last scene rejoicing over the devoted agreement of the two ladies and his daughter to live with him in happy unity, that would perhaps have been a comedy of the *genre sérieux*, with the duties of man gracefully adapted to circumstances.

The theory of the *genre sérieux* has not led to the formation of any school of writers adopting it and working it out, or to the production of any masterpiece that has held its ground, as has happened in tragedy, comedy, and farce. Beaumarchais, who at last achieved such a dazzling and portentous success by one dramatic masterpiece, began his career as a playwright by following the vein of *The Father of the Family*; but *The Marriage of Figaro*, though not without strong traces of Diderotian sentiment in pungent application, yet is in its structure and composition less French than Spanish. It is quite true, as Rosenkranz says, that the prevailing taste on the French stage in our own times favours above all else bourgeois romantic comedy, written in prose.<sup>2</sup> But the strength of the romantic element in them would have been as little satisfactory to Diderot's love of realistic moralising, as the conventional tragedy of the court of Lewis XIV. The Fable of most of them turns on adultery, and this is not within the method of the *genre sérieux* as expounded by Diderot. Perhaps half-a-dozen comedies, such for instance as *The Ideas of Madame Aubray*, by M. Dumas, are of the *genre sérieux*, but certainly there are not enough of such comedies to constitute a genuine Diderotian school in France. There is no need therefore to say more about the theory than this, namely, that though the drama is an imitative art, yet besides imitation its effects demand illusion. What, cries Diderot, you do not conceive the effect that would be produced on you by a real scene, with real dresses, with speech in true

<sup>1</sup> *Poés. Dram.* § 2. The Poetics of the Genre Sérieux are to be found, vii, 137-8.

<sup>2</sup> I. 316.



proportion to the action, with the actions themselves simple, with the very dangers that have made you tremble for your parents, for your friends, for yourselves? No, we answer : reproduction of reality does not move us as a powerful work of imagination moves us. "We may as well urge," said Burke, "that stones, sand, clay, and metals lie in a certain manner in the earth, as a reason for building with these materials and in that manner, as for writing according to the accidental disposition of characters in Nature."<sup>1</sup> Common dangers do not excite us ; it is the presentation of danger in some uncommon form, in some new combination, in some fresh play of motive and passion, that quickens that sympathetic fear and pity which it is the end of a play to produce. And if this be so, there is another thing to be said. If we are to be deliberately steeped in the atmosphere of Duty, illusion is out of place. The constant presence of that severe and overpowering figure, "Stern Daughter of the Voice of God," checks the native wildness of imagination, restricts the exuberance of fancy, and sets a rigorous limit to invention. Diderot used to admit that the *genre sérieux* could never take its right place, until it had been handled by a man of high dramatic genius. The cause why this condition has never come to pass, is simply that its whole structure and its regulations repel the faculties of dramatic genius.

Besides the perfection of the *genre sérieux*, Diderot insisted that the following tasks were also to be achieved before the stage could be said to have attained the full glory of the other arts. First, a domestic or bourgeois tragedy must be created. Second, the conditions of men, their callings and situations, the types of classes, in short, must be substituted for mere individual characters. Third, a real tragedy must be introduced upon the lyric theatre. Finally, the dance must be brought within the forms of a true poem.

The only remark to be made upon this scheme touches the second article of it. To urge the substitution of types of classes for individual character was the very surest means that could have been devised for bringing back the conventional forms of the pseudo-classic drama. The very mark of that drama was that it introduced types instead of vigorously stamped personalities.

<sup>1</sup> *Hints for an Essay on the Drama*, p. 155.

What would be gained by driving the typical king off the stage, only to make room for the generalization of a shopkeeper? This was not the path that led to romanticism, to André Chenier, to De Vigny, to Lamartine, to Victor Hugo. Théophile Gautier has told us that the fiery chiefs of the romantic school who suddenly conquered France at the close of the Restoration, divided the whole world into *flamboyant* and *drab*. In the literature of the past, they counted Voltaire one of the Drab, and Diderot a Flamboyant.<sup>1</sup> If it be not too presumptuous in a foreigner to dissent, we cannot but think that they were mistaken. Nothing could be further removed at every part from Diderot's dramatic scheme, than *Faust* or *Götz von Berlichingen* or *Hernani*.

The truth is that it was impossible for an effective antagonism to the classic school to rise in the mind of an Encyclopædist, for the reason that the Encyclopædist hated and ignored what they called the Dark Ages. Yet it was exactly the Dark Ages from which the great romantic revival drew its very life-breath. "In the eighteenth century," it has been said, "it was really the reminiscence of the classic spirit which was awakened in the newer life of Europe, and made prominent."<sup>2</sup> This is true in a certain historic sense of Rousseau's politics, and perhaps of Voltaire's rationalism. In spite of the vein of mysticism which occasionally shows in him, it is true in some degree of Diderot himself, if by classicism we mean the tendency to make man the centre of the universe. Classicism treats man as worthy and great, living his life among cold and neutral forces. This is the very opposite of the sinfulness, imperfection and nothingness habitually imputed to man, and the hourly presence of a whole hierarchy of busy supernatural agents placed about man by the Middle Ages. Yet we cannot but see that Diderot was feeling for dramatic forms and subjects, that would have been as little classic as romantic. He failed in the search. There is one play and only one of his epoch, that is not classic, and is not romantic, but speaks independently the truest and best mind of the eighteenth century itself, in its own form and language. That play is *Nathan the Wise*.

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. du Romantisme*, p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> *Der Gegensatz des Classischen und des Romantischen, etc.* By Conrad Hermann, p. 66.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### RAMEAU'S NEPHEW.

IN hypochondriacal moments, it has been said, the world, viewed from the æsthetic side, appears to many a one a cabinet of caricatures ; from the intellectual side, a mad-house ; and from the moral side, a harbouring place for rascals.<sup>1</sup> We might perhaps extend this saying beyond the accidents of hypochondriasis, and urge that the few wide, profound, and real observers of human life have all known, and known often, this fantastic consciousness of living in a strange distorted universe of lunatics, knaves, grotesques. It is an inevitable mood to any who dare to shake the kaleidoscopic fragments out of their conventional and accepted combination. Who does not remember deep traces of such a mood in Plato, Shakespeare, Pascal, Goethe ? And Diderot, who went near to having something of the deep quality of those sovereign spirits, did not escape, any more than they, the visitation of the misanthropic spectre. The distinction of the greater minds is that they have no temptation to give the spectre a permanent home with them, as is done by theologians in order to prove the necessity of grace and another world, or by cynics in order to prove the wisdom of selfishness in this world. The greater minds accept the worse facts of character for what they are worth, and bring them into a right perspective with the better facts. They have no expectation of escaping all perplexities, nor of hitting on answers to all the moral riddles of the world. Yet are they ever drawn by an

<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer, *Ethik*, 199.

invincible fascination to the feet of the mighty Sphinx of society. She bewilders them with questions that are never overheard by common ears, and torments them with a mockery that is unobserved by common eyes. The energetic—a Socrates, a Diderot—cannot content themselves with merely recording her everlasting puzzles; still less with merely writing over again the already recorded answers. They insist on scrutinising the moral world afresh; they resolve the magniloquent vocabulary of abstract ethics into the small realities from which it has come; they break the complacent repose of opinion and usage by a graphic irony. “The definitions of moral beings,” said Diderot, “are always made from what such beings ought to be, and never from what they are. People incessantly confound duty with the thing as it is.”<sup>1</sup> We shall proceed to give a short account of one or two dialogues in which he endeavours to keep clear of this confusion.

By far the most important of these is *Rameau's Nephew*. The fortunes of this singular production are probably unique in literary history. In the year 1804 Schiller handed to Goethe the manuscript of a piece by Diderot, with the wish that he might find himself able to translate it into German. “As I had long,” says Goethe, “cherished a great regard for this author, I cheerfully undertook the task, after looking through the original. People can see, I hope, that I threw my whole soul into it.”<sup>2</sup> When he had done his work, he returned the manuscript to Schiller. Schiller died almost immediately (May, 1805), and the mysterious manuscript disappeared. Goethe could never learn either whence it had come, or whither it went. He always suspected that the autograph original had been sent to the Empress Catherine at St. Petersburg, and that Schiller's manuscript was a copy from that. Though Goethe had executed his translation, as he says, “not merely with readiness but even with passion,” the violent and only too just hatred then prevailing in Germany for France and for all that belonged to France, hindered any vogue which *Rameau's Nephew* might otherwise have had. On the eve of Austerlitz and of Jena there might well be little humour for a satire from the French.

Thirteen years afterwards an edition of Diderot's works

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, iv. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *Werke*, xxv. 291.

appeared in Paris (Belin's edition of 1818), but the editors were obliged to content themselves, for *Rameau's Nephew*, with an analysis of Goethe's translation. In 1821 a lively sensation was produced by the publication of what professed to be the original text of the missing dialogue. It was really a re-translation into French from Goethe. The fraud was not discovered for some time, until in 1823 Brière announced for his edition of Diderot's works, a reprint from a genuine original. This original he had procured from Madame de Vandeul, Diderot's daughter, who still survived. She described it as a copy made in 1760 under the author's own eyes, and this may have been the case, though, if so, it must, from some of the references, have been revised after 1773. The two young men who had tried to palm off their re-translation from Goethe as Diderot's own text, at once had the effrontery to accuse Brière and Diderot's daughter of repeating their own fraud. A vivacious dispute followed between the indignant publisher and his impudent detractors. At length Brière appealed to the great Jove of Weimar. Goethe expressed his conviction that Brière's text was the genuine text of the original, and this was held to settle the question. Yet Goethe's voucher for its correspondence with the copy handed to him by Schiller was not really decisive evidence. He admits that he executed the translation very rapidly, and had no time to compare it closely with the French. An identification nearly twenty years afterwards of verbal resemblances and minute references, in a work that had been only a short time in his hands, cannot be counted testimony of the highest kind. We have thus the extraordinary circumstance that for a great number of years, down almost to the present decade, the text of the one masterpiece of a famous man who died so recently as 1784, rested on a single manuscript, and that a manuscript of disputed authenticity.<sup>1</sup>

Critics differ extremely in their answers to the question of the

<sup>1</sup> The original of the text, published in the Assézat edition of Diderot's works, was a manuscript found, with other waifs and strays of the eighteenth century, in a chest that had belonged to Messrs. Würtel and Treutz, the publishers at Strasburg. Its authenticity is corroborated by the fact that in the places where Goethe has marked an omission, we find stories or expressions from which we understand only too well why Goethe forbore to reproduce them.

subject or object of Diderot's singular "farce-tragedy." One declares it to be merely a satirical picture of contemporary manners. Another insists that it is meant to be an ironical *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory of self-interest, by exhibiting a concrete example of its working in all its grossness. A third holds that it was composed by way of rejoinder to Palissot's comedy (*Les Philosophes*), 1760, which had brought the chiefs of the rationalistic school upon the stage, and presented them as enemies of the human race. A fourth suspects that the personal and dramatic portions are no more than a setting for the discussion of the comparative merits of the French and Italian schools of music. The true answer is that the dialogue is all of these things, because it is none of them. It is neither more nor less than the living picture and account of an original, drawn by a man of genius who was accustomed to observe human nature and society with a free unblinking vision, and to meditate upon them deeply and searchingly. / Diderot goes to work with Rameau in some sort and to a certain extent as Shakespeare went to work with Falstaff. He is the artist, reproducing with the variety and perfection of art a whimsical figure that struck his fancy and stirred the creative impulse. Ethics, æsthetics, manners, satire, are all indeed to be found in the dialogue, but they are only there as incident to the central figure of the sketch, the prodigy of parasites. Diderot had no special fondness for these originals. Yet he had a keen and just sense of their interest. "Their character stands out from the rest of the world, it breaks that tiresome uniformity which our bringing up, our social conventions, and our arbitrary fashions have introduced. If one of them makes his appearance in a company, he is like leaven, fermenting and restoring to each person present a portion of his natural individuality. He stirs people up, moves them, provokes to praise or blame: he is a means of bringing out reality; gives honest people a chance of showing what they are made of, and unmasking the rogues."<sup>1</sup>

Hearing that the subject of Diderot's dialogue is the Parasite, the scholar will naturally think of that savage satire in which Juvenal rehearses the thousand humiliations that Virro inflicts on Trebius: how the wretched follower has to drink fiery stuff from

<sup>1</sup> v. 389.

broken crockery, while the patron quaffs of the costliest from splendid cups of amber and precious stones; how the host has fine oil of Venafrum, while the guest munches cabbage that has been steeped in rancid lamp-oil; one plays daintily with mullet and lamprey, while the other has his stomach turned by an eel as long as a snake, and bloated in the foul torrent of the sewers; Virro has apples that might have come from the gardens of the Hesperides, while Trebius gnaws such musty things as are tossed to a performing monkey on the town wall. But the distance is immeasurable between Juvenal's scorching truculence, and Diderot's half-ironical, half-serious sufferance. Juvenal knows that Trebius is a base and abject being; he tells him what he is; and in the process blasts him. Diderot knows that Rameau too is base and abject, but he is so little willing to rest in the fat and easy paradise of conventions, that he seems to be all the time vaguely wondering in his own mind, how far this genius of grossness and paradox and bestial sophism is a pattern of the many, with the mask thrown off. He seems to be inwardly musing whether it can after all be true, that if one draws aside a fold of the gracious outer robe of conformity, there is no comeliness of life shining underneath, but only this horror of the skeleton and the worm. He restrains exasperation at the brilliant effrontery of his man, precisely as an anatomist would suppress disgust at a pathological monstrosity, or an astonishing variation in which he hoped to surprise some vital secret. Rameau is not crudely analysed as a vile type: he is searched as exemplifying on a prodigious scale elements of character that lie furtively in the depths of characters that are not vile. It seems as if Diderot unconsciously anticipated that terrible, that woful, that desolating saying,—*There is in every man and woman something which, if you knew it, would make you hate them.* Rameau is not all parasite. He is your brother and mine, a product from the same rudimentary factors of mental composition, a figure cast equally with ourselves in one of the countless moulds of the huge social foundry.

Such is the scientific attitude of mind towards character. It is not philanthropic nor pitiful: the fact that base characters exist and are of intelligible origin, is no reason why we should not do our best to shun and to extirpate them. This assumption of the

scientific point of view, this change from mere praise and blame to scrutiny, this comprehension that mere execration is not the last word, is a mark of the modern spirit. Besides Juvenal, another writer of genius has shown us the parasite of an ancient society. Lucian, whose fertility, wit, invention, mockery, freshness of spirit, and honest hatred of false gods, make him the Voltaire of the second century, has painted with all his native liveliness more than one picture of the parasite. The great man's creature at Rome endures exactly the same long train of affronts and humiliations, as the great man's creature at Paris sixteen centuries later, beginning with the anguish of the mortified stomach, as savoury morsels of venison or boar are given to more important guests, and ending with the anguish of the mortified spirit, as he sees himself supplanted by a rival of shapelier person, a more ingenious versifier, a cleverer mountebank. The dialogue in which Lucian ironically proves that Parasitic, or the honourable craft of Spunging, has as many of the marks of a genuine art as Rhetoric, Gymnastic, or Music, is a spirited parody of Socratic catechising and Platonic mannerisms. Simo shows to Tychiades, as ingeniously as Rameau shows to Diderot, that the Spunger has a far better life of it, and is a far more rational and consistent person than the orator and the philosopher.<sup>2</sup> Lucian's satire is vivid, brilliant, and diverting. Yet everyone feels that Diderot's performance, while equally vivid, is marked by greater depth of spirit; comes from a soil that has been more freely broken up, and has been enriched by a more copious experience. The ancient turned upon these masterpieces of depravation the flash of intellectual scorn; the modern eyes them with a certain moral patience, and something of that curious kind of interest, looking half like sympathy, which a hunter has for the object of his chase.

The Rameau of the dialogue was a real personage, and there is a dispute whether Diderot has not calumniated him. Evidence enough remains that he was at least a person of singular character and irregular disastrous life. Diderot's general veracity of temperament would make us believe that his picture is authentic, but the interest of the dialogue is exactly the same in either case. Juvenal's fifth satire

<sup>2</sup> *Lucian, Περὶ Παρασίτου, and Περὶ τῶν ἐπὶ μίσθῳ συνόντων.*



would be worth neither more nor less, however much were found out about Trebius.

“Rameau is one of the most eccentric figures in the country, where God has not made them lacking. He is a mixture of elevation and lowness, of good sense and madness; the notions of good and bad must be mixed up together in strange confusion in his head, for he shows the good qualities that nature has bestowed on him without any ostentation, and the bad ones without the smallest shame. For the rest, he is endowed with a vigorous frame, a particular warmth of imagination, and an uncommon strength of lungs. If you ever meet him, unless you happen to be arrested by his originality, you will either stuff your fingers into your ears, or else take to your heels. Heavens, what a monstrous pipe! Nothing is so little like him as himself. One time he is lean and wan, like a patient in the last stage of consumption; you could count his teeth through his cheeks; you would say he must have passed some days without tasting a morsel, or that he is fresh from La Trappe. A month after, he is stout and sleek as if he had been sitting all the time at the board of a financier, or had been shut up in a Bernardine monastery. To-day in dirty linen, his clothes torn and patched, with barely a shoe to his foot, he steals along with a bent head; one is tempted to hail him and toss him a shilling. To-morrow, all powdered, curled, in a good coat, he marches about with head erect and open mien, and you would almost take him for a decent worthy creature. He lives from day to day, from hand to mouth, downcast or sad, just as things may go. His first care of a morning when he gets up is to know where he will dine; after dinner, he begins to think where he may pick up a supper. Night brings disquiets of its own. Either he climbs to a shabby garret he has, unless the landlady, weary of waiting for her rent, has taken the key away from him; or else he shrinks to some tavern on the outskirts of the town, where he waits for daybreak over a crust of bread and a mug of beer. When he has not three-pence in his pocket, as sometimes happens, he has recourse either to a hackney-carriage belonging to a friend, or to a coachman of some man of quality, who gives him a bed on the straw beside the horses. In the morning, he still has bits of the mattress in his hair. If the weather is mild, he measures the Champs Elysées all night long. With the day he re-appears in the town, dressed over night for the morrow, and from the morrow sometimes dressed for the rest of the week.”

Diderot is accosted by this curious being one afternoon on a bench in front of the Café de la Régence in the Palais Royal. They proceed in the thoroughly natural and easy manner of interlocutors in a Platonic dialogue. It is not too much to say that *Rameau's Nephew* is the most effective and masterly use of that form of discussion since Plato. Diderot's vein of realism is doubtless in strong contrast with Plato's poetic and idealising touch. Yet imaginative strokes are not wanting to soften the repulsive theme, and to bring the sordid and the foul within the

sphere of art. For an example. "Time has passed," says Rameau, "and that is always so much gained."

"*I.*—So much lost, you mean.

"*He.*—No, no ; gained. People grow rich every moment ; a day less to live, or a crown piece to the good, 'tis all one. When the last moment comes, one is as rich as another. Samuel Bernard, who by pillaging and stealing and playing bankrupt, leaves seven-and-twenty million francs in gold, is no better than Rameau, who leaves not a penny, and will be indebted to charity for a shroud to wrap about him. The dead man hears not the tolling of the bell ; 'tis in vain that a hundred priests bawl dirges for him, in vain that a long file of blazing torches go before. His soul walks not by the side of the master of the funeral ceremonies. To moulder under marble, or to moulder under clay, 'tis still to moulder. To have around one's bier children in red and children in blue, or to have not a creature, what matters it ?"

These are the gleams of the *mens divinior*, that relieve the perplexing moral squalor of the portrait. Even here we have the painful innuendo that a thought which is solemnising and holy to the noble, serves equally well to point a trait of cynical defiance in the ignoble.

Again, there is an indirectly imaginative element in the sort of terror which the thoroughness of the presentation inspires. For indeed it is an emotion hardly short of terror that seizes us, as we listen to the stringent unflinching paradox of this heterogeneous figure. Rameau is the squalid and tattered Satan of the eighteenth century. He is a Mephistopheles out at elbows, a Lucifer in low water ; yet always diabolic, with the bright flash of the pit in his eye. Disgust is transformed into horror and affright by the trenchant confidence of his spirit, the daring thoroughness and consistency of his dialectic, the lurid sarcasm, the vile penetration. He discusses a horrible action, or execrable crime, as a virtuoso examines a statue or a painting. He has that rarest fortitude of the vicious, not to shrink from calling his character and conduct by their names. He is one of Swift's Yahoos, with the courage of its opinions. He seems to give one reason for hating and dreading oneself. The effect is of mixed fear and fascination, as of a magician whose miraculous crystal is to show us what and how we shall be twenty years from now ; or as when a surgeon tells the tale of some ghastly disorder, that may at the very moment be stealthily preparing for us a doom of anguish.

Hence our dialogue is assuredly no "meat for little people nor for fools." Some of it is revolting in its brutal indecency. Even Goethe's self-possession cannot make it endurable to him. But it is a study to be omitted by no one who judges the corruption of the old society in France an important historic subject. The picture is very like the corruption of the old society in Rome. We see the rotten material which the purifying flame of Jacobinism was soon to consume out of the land with fiery swiftness. We watch the very classes from which, as we have been so often told, the regeneration of France would have come, if only demagogues and rabble had not violently interposed. There is no gaiety in the style; none of that laughter which makes such a delineation of the manners of the time as we find in Collé's play of *Truth in Wine*, naïf, true to nature, and almost exhilarating. In *Rameau* we are afflicted by the odour of deadly taint. \*

As the dialogue is not in every hand—nor could anyone wish that it should be—I have thought it worth while to print an English rendering of a considerable part of it in an appendix. Mr. Carlyle told us long ago that it must be translated into English, and although such a piece of work is less simple than it may seem, it appears right to give the reader an opportunity of judging for himself of the flavour of the most characteristic of all Diderot's performances. Only let no reader turn to it who has any invincible repugnance to that curious turn for *wildbret*, which Goethe has described as the secret of some arts.

Dixeris hæc inter varicosos centuriones,  
Continuo crassum ridet Pulsenius ingens  
Et centum Græcos curto centusse licebit.

As I have already said, it must be judged as something more than a literary diversion. "You do not suspect, Sir Philosopher," says Rameau, "that at this moment I represent the most important part of the town and the court." As the painter of the picture says, Rameau confessed the vices that he had, and that most of the people about us have; but he was no hypocrite. He was neither more nor less abominable than they; he was only more frank and systematic and profound in his depravity. This is the social significance of the dialogue. This is what, apart from other considerations, makes *Rameau's Nephew* so much more

valuable a guide to the moral sentiment of the time, than merely licentious compositions like those of Louvet or La Clos. Its instructiveness is immense to those who examine the conditions that prepared the Revolution. Rameau is not the ἀκόλαστος of Aristotle, nor the creature of ἀποροία described by Theophrastus—the castaway by individual idiosyncrasy, the reprobate by accident. The men whom he represented, the courtiers, the financiers, the merchants, the shopkeepers, were immoral by formula and depraved on principle. Vice was a doctrine to them, and wretchedness of unclean living was reduced to a system of philosophy. Anyone, I venture to repeat, who realises the extent to which this had corroded the ruling powers in France, will perceive that the furious flood of social energy which the Jacobins poured over the country was not less indispensable to France, than the flood of the barbarians was indispensable for the transformation of the Roman Empire.

Scattered among the more serious fragments of the dialogue is some excellent bye-play of sarcasm upon Palissot, and one or two of the other assailants of the new liberal school. Palissot, is an old story. The Palissots are an eternal species. The family never dies out, and it thrives in every climate. All societies know the literary dangler in great houses, and the purveyor to fashionable prejudices. Not that he is always servile. The reader, I dare say, remembers that La Bruyère described a curious being in Troilus, the despotic parasite. Palissot, eighteenth century or nineteenth century, is often like Troilus, parasite and tyrant at the same time. He usually happens to have begun life with laudable aspirations and sincere interests of his own; and when, alas, the mediocrity of his gifts proves too weak to bear the burden of his ambitions, the recollection of a generous youth only serves to sour old age.

Bel esprit abhorré de tous les bons esprits,  
 Il pense par la haine échapper au mépris.  
 A force d'attentats il se croit illustré ;  
 Et s'il n'était méchant, il serait ignoré.

Palissot began with a tragedy. He proceeded to an angry pamphlet against the Encyclopædists and the fury for innovation.

Then he achieved immense vogue among fine ladies, bishops, and the lighter heads of the town, by the comedy in which he held Diderot, D'Alembert, and the others, up to hatred and ridicule. Finally, after coming to look upon himself as a serious personage, he disappeared into the mire of half-oblivious contempt and disgust that happily awaits all the poor Palissots and all their works. His name only survives in connection with the men whom he maligned. He lived to be old, as, oddly enough, Spite so often does. In the Terror he had a narrow escape, for he was brought before Chaumette. Chaumette apostrophized the assailant of Rousseau and Diderot with rude energy, but did not send him to the guillotine. In this the practical disciple only imitated the magnanimity of his theoretical masters. Rousseau had declined an opportunity of punishing Palissot's impertinences, and Diderot took no worse vengeance upon him than by making an occasional reference of contempt to him in a dialogue which he perhaps never intended to publish.

Another subject is handled in *Rameau's Nephew*, which is interesting in connection with the mental activity of Paris in the eighteenth century. Music was the field of as much passionate controversy as theology and philosophy. The Bull Unigenitus itself did not lead to livelier disputes, or more violent cabals, than the conflict between the partisans of French music and the partisans of Italian music. The horror of a Jansenist for a Molinist did not surpass that of a Lullist for a Dunist, or afterwards of a Gluckist for a Piccinist.<sup>1</sup> Lulli and Rameau (the uncle of our parasite) had undisputed possession of Paris until the arrival, in 1752, of a company of Italian singers. The great quarrel at once broke out as to the true method and destination of musical composition. Is music an independent art, appealing directly to a special sense, or is it to be made an instrument for expressing affections of the mind in a certain deeper way? The Italians asked only for delicious harmonies and exquisite melodies. The French insisted that these should be subordinate to the work of the poet. The former were content with delight, the latter pressed for significance. The one declared that Italian music was no better than a silly tickling of the ears; the other that the

<sup>1</sup> Grimm, ix. 349.

overture to a French opera was like a prelude to a Miserere in plain-song. In 1772-73 the illustrious Gluck came to Paris. His art was believed to reconcile the two schools, to have more melody than the old French style, and more severity and meaning than the purely Italian style. French dignity was saved. But soon the old battle, which had been going on for twenty years, began to rage with greater violence than ever. Piccini was brought to Paris by the Neapolitan ambassador. The old cries were heard in a shriller key than before. Pamphlets, broadsheets, sarcasms flew over Paris from every side. Was music only to flatter the ear, or was it to paint the passions in all their energy, to harrow the soul, to raise men's courage, to form citizens and heroes? The coffee-houses were thrown into dire confusion, and literary societies were rent by fatal discord. Even dinner-parties breathed only constraint and mistrust, and the intimacies of a lifetime came to cruel end. *Rameau's Nephew* was composed in the midst of the first part of this long campaign of a quarter of a century, and it seems to have been revised by its author in the midst of the second great episode. Diderot declares against the school of Rameau and Lulli. That he should do so was a part of his general reaction in favour of what he called the natural, against artifice and affectation. Goethe has pointed out the inconsistency between Diderot's sympathy for the less expressive kind of music, and his usual vehement passion for the expressive in art. He truly observes that Diderot's sympathy went in this way, because the novelty and agitation seemed likely to break up the old, stiff, and abhorred fashion, and to clear the ground afresh for other efforts.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Anmerkungen, Rameau's Neffe; Werke*, xxv. 268.

## CHAPTER IX.

### OTHER DIALOGUES.

WE may now pass to performances that are nearer to the accepted surface of things. A short but charming example of Diderot's taste for putting questions of morals in an interesting way, is found in the *Conversation of a Father with his Children* (published in 1773). This little dialogue is perfect in the simple realism of its form. Its subject is the peril of setting one's own judgment of some special set of circumstances above the law of the land. Diderot's venerable and well-loved father is sitting in his arm-chair before the fire. He begins the discussion by telling his two sons and his daughter, who are tending him with pious care, how very near he had once been to destroying their inheritance. An old priest had died leaving a considerable fortune. There was believed to be no will, and the next of kin were a number of poor people whom the inheritance would have rescued from indigence for the rest of their days. They appointed the elder Diderot to guard their interests and divide the property. He finds at the bottom of a disused box of ancient letters, receipts, and other waste-paper, a will made long years ago, and bequeathing all the fortune to a very rich bookseller in Paris. There was every reason to suppose that the old priest had forgotten the existence of the will, and it involved a revolting injustice. Would not Diderot be fulfilling the dead man's real wishes by throwing the unwelcome document into the flames?

At this point in the dialogue, the doctor enters the room, and

interrupts the tale. It appears that he is fresh from the bedside of a criminal who is destined to the gallows. Diderot the younger reproaches him for labouring to keep in the world an offender whom it were best to send out of it with all dispatch. The duty of the physician is to say to so execrable a patient—"I will not busy myself in restoring to life a creature whom it is enjoined upon me by natural equity, the good of society, the well-being of my fellow-creatures, to give up. Die, and let it never be said that through my skill there exists a monster the more on earth!" The doctor parries these energetic declamations with sufficient skill. "My business is to cure, not to judge; I shall cure him, because that is my trade; then the judge will have him hung, because that is his trade." This episodic discussion ended, the story of the will is resumed. The father when on the point of destroying it, was seized with a scruple of conscience, and hastened to a curé well versed in casuistry. As in England the agents of the law itself not seldom play the part of arbitrary benevolence, which the old Diderot would fain have played against the law, the scene may perhaps be worth transcribing:

"Nothing is more praiseworthy, sir, than the sentiment of compassion that touches you for these unfortunate people. Suppress the testament and succour them—good; but on condition of restoring to the rightful legatee the exact sum of which you deprive him, neither more nor less. Who authorised you to give a sanction to documents, or to take it away? Who authorised you to interpret the intentions of the dead?"

'But then, father Bouin, the old box?'

'Who authorised you to decide whether the will was thrown away on purpose, or mislaid by accident? Has it never happened to you to do such a thing, and to find at the bottom of a chest some valuable paper that you had tossed there inadvertently?'

'But, father Bouin, the far-off date of the paper, and its injustice?'

'Who authorised you to pronounce on the justice or injustice of the document, and to regard the bequest as an unlawful gift, rather than as a restitution or any other lawful act which you may choose to imagine?'

'But, these poor kinsfolk here on the spot, and that mere collateral, distant and wealthy?'

'Who authorised you to weigh in your balance what the dead man owed to his distant relations, whom you don't know?'

'But, father Bouin, that pile of letters from the legatee, which the departed never even took the trouble to open?'

'There is neither old box, nor date, nor letters, nor father Bouin, nor if, nor but, in the case. No one has any right to infringe the laws, to enter into



the intention of the dead, or to dispose of other people's property. If providence has resolved to chastise either the heir or the legatee or the testator—we cannot tell which—by the accidental preservation of the will, the will must remain.”<sup>1</sup>

Diderot the younger declaims against all this with his usual vehemence, while his brother, the abbé, defends the supremacy of the law on the proper ground, that to evade or defy it in any given case is to open the door to the sophistries of all the knaves in the universe. At this point a journeyman of the neighbourhood comes in with a new case of conscience. His wife has died after twenty years of sickness; in these twenty years the cost of her illness has consumed all that he would otherwise have saved for the end of his days. But, as it happens, the marriage portion that she brought him has lain untouched. By law this ought to go to her family. Equity, however, seems to justify him in keeping what he might have spent if he had chosen. He consults the party round the fire. One bids him keep the money; another forbids him; a third thinks it fair for him to repay himself the cost of his wife's illness. Diderot's father cries out, that since on his own confession the detention of the inheritance has brought him no comfort, he had better surrender it as speedily as possible, and eat, drink, sleep, work, and make himself happy so.

“‘Not I,’ cried the journeyman abruptly, ‘I shall be off to Geneva.’

‘And dost thou think to leave remorse behind?’

‘I can't tell, but to Geneva I go.’

‘Go where thou wilt, there wilt thou find thy conscience.’

The latter went away; his odd answer became the subject of our talk. We agreed that perhaps distance of place and time had the effect of weakening all the feelings more or less, and stifling the voice of conscience even in cases of downright crime. The assassin transported to the shores of China is too far off to perceive the corpse that he has left bleeding on the banks of the Seine.

Remorse springs perhaps less from horror of self than from fear of others; less from shame for the deed, than from the blame and punishment that would attend its discovery. And what clandestine criminal is tranquil enough in his obscurity not to dread the treachery of some unforeseen circumstance, or the indiscretion of some thoughtless word? What certainty can he have that he will not disclose his secret in the delirium of fever, or in dreams? People will understand him if they are on the scene of the action, but those about him in China will have no key to his words.”<sup>2</sup>

Two other cases come up. Does the husband or wife who is the first to break the marriage vow, restore liberty to the other? Diderot answered affirmatively. The second case arose from a story that the abbé had been reading. A certain honest cobbler of Messina saw his country overrun by lawlessness. Each day was marked by a crime. Notorious assassins braved the public exasperation. Parents saw their daughters violated; the industrious saw the fruits of their toil ravished from them by the monopolist or the fraudulent tax-gatherer. The judges were bribed, the innocent were afflicted, the guilty escaped unharmed. The cobbler meditating on these enormities devised a plan of vengeance. He established a secret court of justice in his shop; he heard the evidence, gave a verdict, pronounced sentence, and went out into the street with his gun under his cloak to execute it. Justice done, he regained his stall, rejoicing as though he had slain a rabid dog. When some fifty criminals had thus met their doom, the viceroy offered a reward of two thousand crowns for information of the slayer, and swore on the altar that he should have full pardon if he gave himself up. The cobbler presented himself, and spoke thus: "I have done what was your duty. 'Tis I who condemned and put to death the miscreants that you ought to have punished. Behold the proofs of their crimes. There you will see the judicial process which I observed. I was tempted to begin with yourself; but I respected in your person the august master whom you represent. My life is in your hands: dispose of it as you think right." Well, cried the abbé, the cobbler, in spite of all his fine zeal for justice, was simply a murderer. Diderot protested. His father decided that the abbé was right, and that the cobbler was an assassin.

Nothing short of a transcript of the whole would convey a right idea of the dramatic ease of this delightful dialogue—its variety of illustration with unity of topic, the naturalness of movement, the pleasant lightness of touch. At its close the old man calls for his nightcap; Diderot embraces him, and in bidding him good-night whispers in his ear, "Strictly speaking, father, there are no laws for the sage. All being open to exception, 'tis for him to judge the cases in which we ought to submit to them, or to throw them over." "I should not be sorry," his father

answers, "if there were in the town one or two citizens like thee ; but nothing would induce me to live there, if they all thought in that way." The conclusion is just, and Diderot might have verified it by the state of the higher society of his country at that very moment. One cause of the moral corruption of France in the closing years of the old régime was undoubtedly the lax and shifting interpretations, by which the Jesuit directors had softened the rigour of general moral principles. Many generations must necessarily elapse before a habit of loosely superseding principles in individual cases produces widespread demoralization, but the result is inevitable, sooner or later ; and this, just in proportion as the principles are sound. The casuists practically constructed a system for making the observance alike of the positive law, and of the accepted ethical maxims, flexible and conditional. The Diderot of the present dialogue takes the same attitude, but has the grace to leave the demonstration of its impropriety to his wise and benevolent sire.

II. We shall presently see that Diderot did not shrink from applying a vigorous doubt to some of the most solidly established principles of modern society. Let us meanwhile in passing notice that short piece of plangent irony, which did not appear until many years after his death (1798), and which he or some one else entitled, *On the inconsistency of the Public Judgment on our Private Actions*. This too is in the form of dialogue, but the argument of the story is in its pith as follows. Desroches, first an abbé, then a lawyer, lastly a soldier, persuades a rich and handsome widow to marry him. She is aware of his previous gallantries, and warns him in very dramatic style before a solemn gathering of friends, that if he once wounds her by an infidelity, she will shut herself up and speedily die of grief. He makes such vows as most men would make under such circumstances ; he presses her hands ardently to his lips, bedews them with his tears, and moves the whole company to sympathy with his own agitation. The scene is absurd enough, or seems so to us dull people of phlegmatic habit. Yet Diderot, even for us, redeems it by the fine remark : "'Tis the effect of what is good and virtuous to leave a large assembly with only one thought and one soul. How all

respect one another, love one another in such moments! For instance, how beautiful humanity is at the play! Ah, why must we part so quickly? Men are so good, so happy, when what is worthy unites all their suffrages, melts them, makes them one.”<sup>1</sup> For some time all went well, and our pair were the happiest of men and women. Then various assaults were made on the faithfulness of Desroches. He resisted them, until in endeavouring to serve a friend he was forced to sue for the good will of a lady with whom in his unregenerate days he had had passages of gallantry. The old intrigue was renewed. Letters of damning proof fell by ill hazard into his wife’s hands. She re-assembled her friends, denounced the culprit, and forthwith carried away her child to seek shelter with her aged mother. Desroches’s fervent remorse was unheeded, his letters were sent back unopened, he was denied the door. Presently, the aged mother died. Then the infant. Lastly, the wife herself. Now, says Diderot to his interlocutor, I pray you to turn your eyes to the public—that imbecile crowd that pronounces judgment on us, that disposes of our honour, that lifts us to the clouds or trails us through the mud. Opinion passed through every phase about Desroches. The shifting event is ever their one measure of praise and blame. A fault which nobody thought more than venial, became gradually aggravated in their eyes by a succession of incidents which it was impossible for Desroches either to foresee or to prevent. At first opinion was on his side, and his wife was thought to have carried things with too high a hand. Then, after she had fallen ill, and her child had died, and her aged mother had passed away in the fulness of years, he began to be held answerable for all this sea of troubles. Why had not Desroches written to his wife, beset her doors, waylaid her as she went to church? He had, as matter of fact, done all these things, but the public did not know it. The important thing is, not to know, but to talk. Then, as it befell, his wife’s brother took Desroches’s place in his regiment; there he was killed. More exclamations as to the misfortune of being connected with such a man. How was Desroches responsible for the death of his mother-in-law, already well stricken in years? How could he foresee that a hostile ball would pierce his brother-

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, v. 342.

in-law in his first campaign? But his wife? He must be a barbarian, a monster, who had gradually pressed a poniard into the bosom of a divine woman, his wife, his benefactress, and then left her to die, without showing the least sign of interest or feeling. And all this, cries Diderot, for not knowing what was concealed from him, and what was unknown and unsuspected even by those who were daily about her? What presumption, what bad logic, what incoherence, what unjustified veering and vacillation in all these public verdicts from beginning to end!

Yet we feel that Diderot's impetuous taunts fail to press to the root of the matter. Diderot excels in opening a subject; he places it in a new light; he furnishes telling concrete illustrations; he thoroughly disturbs and unsettles the medium of conventional association in which it has become fixed. But he does not leave the question readjusted. His mind was not of that quality which is slow to complain where it cannot explain; which does not quit a discussion without a calm and orderly review of the conditions that underlie the latest exhibition of human folly, shortsightedness, or injustice. The public condemnation of Desroches for consequences that were entirely strange to his one offence, was indefensible on grounds of strict logic. But then men have imagination as well as reason. Imagination is stronger than reason with most of them. Their imagination was touched by the series of disasters that followed Madame Desroches's abandonment of her husband. They admit no plea of remoteness of damage, such as law courts allow. In a way that was loose and unreasonable, but still easily intelligible, the husband became associated with a sequel for which he was not really answerable. If the world's conduct in such cases were accurately expressed, it would perhaps be found that people have really no intention to pronounce a judicial sentence; they only mean that an individual's associations have become disagreeable and doubtful to them. They may think proper to justify the grievously meagre definition of *homo* as *animal rationale*, by varnishing their distaste with reasons; the true reason is that the presence of a Desroches disturbs their comfort, by recalling questionable and disorderly circumstances. That this selfish and rough method many a time inflicts horrible cruelty is too certain, and those to whom the idea

of conduct is serious and deep-reaching will not fall into it. A sensible man is aware of the difficulty of pronouncing wisely upon the conduct of others, especially where it turns upon the intricate and unknowable relations between a man and a woman. He will not, however, on that account break down the permanent safeguards, for the sake of leniency in a given case. *A great enemy to indifference, a great friend to indulgence*, said Turgot of himself; and perhaps it is what we should all do well to be able to say of ourselves.

Again, though these ironical exposures of the fatuity and recklessness and inconsistency of popular verdicts are wholesome enough in their degree in all societies, yet it has been, and still remains, a defect of some of the greatest French writers to expect a fruit from such performances which they can never bear. In the long run a great body of men and women is improved less by general outcry against its collective characteristics, than by the inculcation of broader views, higher motives, and sounder habits of judgment, in such a form as touches each man and woman individually. It is better to awaken in the individual a sense of responsibility for his own character, than to do anything, either by magnificent dithyrambs or penetrating satire, to dispose him to lay the blame on Society. Society is after all only a name for other people. An instructive contrast might be drawn between the method of French writers of genius, from Diderot down to that mighty master of our own day, Victor Hugo, in pouring fulminant denunciations upon Society, and the other method of our best English writers, from Milton down to Mill, in impressing new ideas on the Individual, and exacting a vigorous personal answer to the moral or spiritual call.

One other remark may be worth making. It is characteristic of the immense sociability of the eighteenth century, that when he saw Desroches sitting alone in the public room, receiving no answers to his questions, never addressed by any of those around him, avoided, coldly eyed, and morally proscribed, Diderot never thought of applying the artificial consolation of the stoic. He never dreamed of urging that expulsion from the society of friends was not a hardship, a true punishment, and a genuine evil. No one knew better than Diderot that a man should train himself to

face the disapprobation of the world with steadfast brow and unflinching gaze ; but he knew also that this is only done at great cost, and is only worth doing for clear and far-reaching objects. Life was real to Diderot, not in the modern canting sense of earnestness and making a hundred thousand pounds ; but in the sense of being an agitated scene of living passion, interest, sympathy, struggle, delight, and woe, in which the graceful ascetic commonplaces of the writer and the preacher barely touch the actual conditions of human experience, or go near to softening the smart of chagrin, failure, mistake, and sense of wrong, any more than the sweet music of the birds poised in air over a field of battle can still the rage and horror of the plain beneath. As was said by a good man, who certainly did not fail to try the experiment,—“*Speciosa quidem ista sunt, oblitaque rhetoricæ et musicæ melle dulcedinis ; tum tantum cum audiuntur oblectant. Sed miseris malorum altior sensus est. Itaque quum hæc auribus insonare desierint, insitus animum moeror prægravat.*”<sup>1</sup>

III. We may close this chapter with a short account of the *Supplement to Bougainville's Travels*, which was composed in 1772, and published twenty-four years later. The second title is, *A dialogue on the disadvantage of attaching moral ideas to certain physical actions which do not really comport with them*. Those who believe that the ruling system of notions about marriage represents the last word that is to be said as to the relations between men and women, will turn away from Diderot's dialogue with some impatience. Those, on the contrary, who hold that the present system is no more immovably fixed in ultimate laws of human nature, no more final, no more unimprovable, no more sacred, and no more indisputably successful, than any other set of social arrangements and the corresponding moral ideas, will find something to interest them, though, as it seems to the present writer, very little to instruct. Bougainville was the first Frenchman who sailed round the world. He did in 1766-69 what Captain Cook did about the same time. The narrative of his expedition appeared in 1771, and the picture of life among the primitive people of the Southern Seas touched Diderot almost as deeply as

<sup>1</sup> Boethius.

if he had been Rousseau. As one says so often in this history of the intellectual preparation for the Revolution, the corruption and artificiality of Parisian society had the effect of colouring the world of primitive society with the very hues of paradise. Diderot was more free from this besetting weakness than any of his contemporaries. 'He never fell into Voltaire's fancy that China is a land of philosophers.'<sup>1</sup> But he did not look very critically into the real conditions of life in the more rudimentary stages of development, and for the moment he committed the sociological anachronism of making the poor people of Otaheite into wise and benevolent patriots and sound reasoners. The literary merit of the dialogue is at least as striking as in any of the pieces of which we have already spoken. The realism of the scenes between the ship-chaplain and his friendly savage, with too kindly wife, and daughters as kindly as either, is full of sweetness, simplicity, and a sort of pathos. A subject which easily takes on an air of grossness, and which Diderot sometimes handled very grossly indeed, is introduced with an idyllic grace that to the pure will hardly be other than pure. We have of course always to remember that Diderot is an author for grown-up people, as are the authors of the Bible or any other book that deals with more than the surface of human experience. Our English practice of excluding from literature subjects and references that are unfit for boys and girls, has something to recommend it, but it undeniably leads to a certain narrowness and thinness, and to some most nauseous hypocrisy. All subjects are evidently not to be discussed by all; and one result in our case is that some of the most important subjects in the world receive no discussion whatever.

The position which Diderot takes up in the present dialogue may be inferred from the following extract. The ship-chaplain has been explaining to the astonished Otaheitan the European usage of strict monogamy, as the arrangement enjoined upon man by the Creator of the universe, and vigilantly guarded by the priest and the magistrate. To which, Orou thus :

"These singular precepts I find opposed to nature and contrary to reason. They are contrary to nature because they suppose that a being who thinks,

<sup>1</sup> See, however, above, p. 180.



feels, and is free, can be the property of a creature like itself. Dost thou not see that in thy land they have confounded the thing that has neither sensibility, nor thought, nor desire, nor will ; that one leaves, one takes, one keeps, one exchanges, without its suffering or complaining—with a thing that is neither exchanged nor acquired, that has freedom, will, desire, that may give or may refuse itself for the moment ; that complains and suffers ; and that cannot become a mere article of commerce, unless you forget its character and do violence to nature ? And they are contrary to the general law of things. Can anything seem more senseless to thee, than a precept which proscribes the law of change that is within us, and which commands a constancy that is impossible, and that violates the liberty of the male and the female, by chaining them together in perpetuity ;—anything more senseless than are oaths of immutability, taken by two creatures of flesh, in the face of a sky that is not an instant the same, under vaults that threaten ruin, at the base of a rock crumbling to dust, at the foot of a tree that is splitting asunder ? . . . You may command what is opposed to nature, but you will not be obeyed. You will multiply evil-doers and the unhappy by fear, by punishment, and by remorse ; you will deprave men's consciences ; you will corrupt their minds ; they will have lost the polar star of their pathway." (225.)

After this declamation he proceeds to put some practical questions to the embarrassed chaplain. Are young men in France always continent, and wives always true, and husbands never libertines ? The chaplain's answers disclose the truth to the keen-eyed Orou :

"What a monstrous tissue is this that thou art unfolding to me ! And even now thou dost not tell me all ; for as soon as men allow themselves to dispose at their own will of the ideas of what is just and unjust, to take away, or to impose an arbitrary character on things ; to unite to actions or to separate from them the good and the evil, with no counsellor save caprice—then come blame, accusation, suspicion, tyranny, envy, jealousy, deception, chagrin, concealment, dissimulation, espionage, surprise, lies ; daughters deceive their parents, wives their husbands, husbands their wives ; young women, I don't doubt, will smother their children ; suspicious fathers will despise and neglect their children ; mothers will leave them to the mercy of accident ; and crime and debauchery will show themselves in every guise. I know all that, as if I had lived among you. It is so, because it must be so ; and that society of thine, in spite of thy chief who vaunts its fine order, is nothing but a collection of hypocrites, who secretly trample the laws under foot ; or of unfortunate wretches who make themselves the instrument of their own punishment, by submitting to these laws ; or of imbeciles, in whom prejudice has absolutely stifled the voice of nature." (227.)

The chaplain has the presence of mind to fall back upon the radical difficulty of all such solutions of the problem of family

union as were practised in Otaheite, or were urged by philosophers in Paris, or are timidly suggested in our own times in the droll-sounding form of marriages for terms of years with option of renewal. That difficulty is the disposal of the children which are the fruit of such unions. Orou rejoins to this argument by a very eloquent account how valuable, how sought after, how prized, is the woman who has her quiver full of them. His contempt for the condition of Europe grows more intense, as he learns that the birth of a child among the bulk of the people of the west is rather a sorrow, a perplexity, a hardship, than a delight and ground of congratulation.

The reader sees by this time that in the present dialogue Diderot is really criticising the most fundamental and complex arrangement of our actual western society, from the point of view of an arbitrary and entirely fanciful naturalism. Rousseau never wrote anything more picturesque, nor anything more dangerous, nor more anarchic and superficially considered. It is true that Diderot at the close of the discussion, is careful to assert that while we denounce senseless laws, it is our duty to obey them until we have procured their reform. "He who of his own private authority infringes a bad law, authorises every one else to infringe good laws. There are fewer inconveniences in being mad with the mad, than in being wise by oneself. Let us say to ourselves, let us never cease to cry aloud, that people attach shame, chastisement, and infamy to acts that in themselves are innocent; but let us abstain from committing them, because shame, punishment, and infamy are the greatest of evils." And we hear Diderot's sincerest accents when he says, "Above all, one must be honest, and true to a scruple, with the fragile beings who cannot yield to our pleasures without renouncing the most precious advantages of society."<sup>1</sup>

This, however, does not make the philosophical quality of the discussion any more satisfactory. Whatever changes may ultimately come about in the relations between men and women, we may at least be sure that such changes will be in a direction even still farther away than the present conditions of marriage, from anything like the naturalism of Diderot and the eighteenth-century

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, ii. 249.

school. Even if—what does not at present seem at all likely to happen—the idea of the family and the associated idea of private property should eventually be replaced by that form of communism which is to be seen at Oneida Creek, still the discipline of the appetites and affections of sex will necessarily on such a system be not less, but far more, rigorous to nature than it is under prevailing western institutions.<sup>2</sup> Orou would have been a thousand times more unhappy among the Perfectionists under Mr. Noyes, than in Paris or London. We cannot pretend here to discuss the large group of momentous questions involved, but we may make a short remark or two. One reason why the movement, if progressive, must be in the direction of greater subordination of appetite, is that all experience proves the position and moral worth of women, taking society as a whole, to be in proportion to the self-control of their male companions. Nobody doubts that man is instinctively polygamous. But the dignity and self-respect, and consequently the whole moral cultivation of women, depends on the suppression of this vagrant instinct. And there is no more important chapter in the history of civilization than the record of the steps by which its violence has been gradually reduced.

There is another side, we admit. The home, of which sentimental philosophers love to talk, is too often a ghastly failure. The conjugal union, so tender and elevating in its ideal, is in more cases than we usually care to recognise, the cruellest of bonds to the woman, the most harassing, deadening, spirit-breaking of all possible influences to the man. The purity of the family, so lovely and dear as it is, has still only been secured hitherto by retaining a vast and dolorous host of female outcasts. When Catholicism is praised for the additions which it has made to the dignity of womanhood and the family, we have to set against that gain the frightful growth of this caste of poor creatures, upon whose heads, as upon the scapegoat of the Hebrew ordinance, we put all the iniquities of the children of the house, and all their transgressions in all their sins, and then banish

<sup>2</sup> See Nordhoff's *Communitistic Societies of the United States* (London: Murray, 1875), pp. 259-93. This grave and most instructive book shows how modifiable are some of those facts of existing human character, which are vulgarly deemed to be ultimate and ineradicable.

them with maledictions into the foul outer wilderness and the land not inhabited.

On this side there is much wholesome truth to be told, in the midst of the complacent social cant with which we are flooded. But Diderot does not help us. Nothing can possibly be gained by reducing the attraction of the sexes to its purely physical elements, and stripping it of all the moral associations which have gradually clustered round it, and acquired such force as in many cases among the highest types of mankind to reduce the physical factor to a secondary place. Such a return to the nakedness of the brute must be retrograde. And Diderot, as it happened, was the writer who, before all others, habitually exalted the delightful and consolatory sentiment of the family. Nobody felt more strongly the worth of domestic ties, when faithfully cherished. It can only have been in a moment of elated paradox that he made one of the interlocutors in the dialogue on Bougainville pronounce Constancy, "The poor vanity of two children who do not know themselves, and who are blinded by the intoxication of a moment to the instability of all that surrounds them:" and Fidelity, "The obstinacy and the punishment of a good man and a good woman:" and Jealousy, "The passion of a miser; the unjust sentiment of man; the consequence of our false manners, and of a right of property extending over a feeling, willing, thinking, free creature."<sup>1</sup>

It is a curious example of the blindness which reaction against excess of ascetic doctrine bred in the eighteenth century, that Diderot should have failed to see that such sophisms as these are wholly destructive of that order and domestic piety, to whose beauty he was always so keenly alive. It is curious, too, that he should have failed to recognise that the erection of constancy into a virtue would have been impossible, if it had not answered first, to some inner want of human character at its best, and second, to some condition of fitness in society at its best.

How is it, says one of the interlocutors, that the strongest, the sweetest, the most innocent of pleasures is become the most fruitful source of depravation and misfortune? This is indeed a question well worth asking. And it is comforting after the

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, ii. 243.

anarchy of the earlier part of the dialogue to find so comparatively sensible a line of argument taken in answer, as the following. This evil result has been brought about, he says, by the tyranny of man, who has converted the possession of woman into a property ; by manners and usages that have overburdened the conjugal union with superfluous conditions ; by the civil laws that have subjected marriage to an infinity of formalities ; by religious institutions, that have attached the name of vices and virtues to actions that are not susceptible of morality. If this means that human happiness will be increased by making the condition of the wife more independent in respect of property ; by treating in public opinion separation between husband and wife as a transaction in itself perfectly natural and blameless, and often not only laudable, but a duty ; and by abolishing that barbarous iniquity and abomination called restitution of conjugal rights, then the speaker points to what has been justly described as the next great step in the improvement of society. If it means that we do wrong to invest with the most marked, serious, and unmistakable formality an act that brings human beings into existence, with uncounted results both to such beings themselves and to others who are equally irresponsible for their appearance in the world, then the position is recklessly immoral, and it is, moreover, wholly repugnant to Diderot's own better mind.

## CHAPTER X.

### ROMANCE.

THE President de Brosses on a visit to Paris in 1754, was anxious to make the acquaintance of that "furious metaphysical head," as he styled Diderot. Buffon introduced him. "He is a good fellow," said the President, "very pleasant, very amiable, a great philosopher, a strong reasoner, but given to perpetual digressions. He made twenty-five digressions yesterday in my room, between nine o'clock and one o'clock." And so it is that a critic who has undertaken to give an account of Diderot, finds himself advancing from digression to digression, through a chain of all the subjects that are under the sun. The same Diderot, however, is present amid them all, and behind each of them; the same fresh enthusiasm, the same expansive sympathy, the same large hospitality of spirit. Always, too, the same habitual reference of ideas, systems, artistic forms, to the complex realities of life, and to these realities as they figured to sympathetic emotions.

It was inevitable that Diderot should make an idol of the author of *Clarissa Harlowe*. The spirit of reaction against the artificiality of the pseudo-classic drama, which drove him to feel the way to a drama of real life in the middle class, made him exult in the romance of ordinary private life which was invented by Richardson. It was no mere accident that the modern novel had its origin in England, but the result of general social causes. The modern novel essentially depends on the interest of the private life of ordinary men and women. But this interest was

only possible on condition that the feudal and aristocratic spirit had received its death-blow, and it was only in England that such a revolution had taken place even partially. It was only in England as yet that the middle class had conquered a position of consideration, equality, and independence. Only in England, as has been said, had every man the power of making the best of his own personality, and arranging his own destiny according to his private goodwill and pleasure.<sup>1</sup> The greatest of Richardson's successors in the history of English fiction adds to this explanation. "Those," says Sir Walter Scott, "who with patience had studied rant and bombast in the folios of Scuderi, could not readily tire of nature, sense, and genius in the octavos of Richardson." The old French romances in which Europe had found a dreary amusement, were stories of princes and princesses. It was to be expected that the first country where princes and princesses were shorn of divinity and made creatures of an Act of Parliament, would also be the country where imagination would be most likely to seek for serious passion, realistic interest, and all the material for pathos and tragedy in the private lives of common individuals. It is true that Marivaux, the author of *Marianne*, was of the school of Richardson before Richardson wrote a word. But this was an almost isolated appearance, and not the beginning of a movement. Richardson's popularity stamped the opening of a new epoch. It was the landmark of a great social, no less than a great literary transition, when all England went mad with enthusiasm over the trials, the virtue, the triumph of a rustic ladies'-maid.

In the literary circles of France the enthusiasm for Richardson was quite as great as it was in England. There it was one of the signs of the certain approach of that transformation which had already taken place in England; the transformation from feudalism to industrial democracy. It may sound a paradox to say that a passion for Richardson was a symbol that a man was truly possessed by the spirit of political revolution. Yet it is true. Voltaire was a revolter against superstition and the tyranny of the church, but he never threw off the monarchic traditions of his younger days; he was always a friend of great nobles; he had no eye and

<sup>1</sup> Hettner's *Literaturgeschichte*, i. 462.

no inclination for social overthrow. And this is what Voltaire said of *Clarissa Harlowe*: "It is cruel for a man like me to read nine whole volumes in which you find nothing at all. I said— Even if all these people were my relations and friends, I could take no interest in them. I can see nothing in the writer but a clever man who knows the curiosity of the human race, and is always promising something from volume to volume, in order to go on selling them." In the same way, and for exactly the same reasons, he could never understand the enthusiasm for the *New Heloisa*, the greatest of the romances that were directly modelled on Richardson. He had no vision for the strange social aspirations that were silently haunting the inner mind of his contemporaries. Of these aspirations, in all their depth and significance, Diderot was the half-conscious oracle and unaccepted prophet. It was not deliberate philosophical calculation that made him so, but the spontaneous impulse of his own genius and temperament. He was no conscious political destroyer, but his soul was open to all those voices of sentiment, to all those ideals of domestic life, to those primary forces of natural affection, which were so urgently pressing asunder the old feudal bonds, and so swiftly ripening a vast social crisis. Thus his enthusiasm for Richardson was, at its root, another side of that love of the life of peaceful industry, which gave one of its noblest characteristics to the *Encyclopædia*.

To this enthusiasm Diderot gave voice in half-a-dozen pages which are counted among his masterpieces. Richardson died in 1761, and Diderot flung off a commemorative piece, which is without any order and connection; but this makes it more an echo, as he called it, of the tumult of his own heart. Here, indeed, he merits Gautier's laudatory phrase, and is as "flamboyant" as one could desire. To understand the march of feeling in French literature, and to measure the growth and expansion in criticism, we need only compare Diderot's éloge on Richardson with Fontenelle's éloge on Dangeau or Leibnitz. The exaggerations of phrase, the violences of feeling, the broken apostrophes, give to Diderot's éloge an unpleasant tone of declamation. Some of us may still prefer the moderation, the subtlety, the nice discrimination, of the critics of another school. Still it would be a sign of narrowness and short-sight not to discern the sincerity, the



movement, the real meaning, underneath all that profusion of glaring colour.

“O Richardson, Richardson, unique among men in my eyes, thou shalt be my favourite all my life long ! If I am hard driven by pressing need, if my friend is overtaken by want, if the mediocrity of my fortune is not enough to give my children what is necessary for their education, I will sell my books ; but thou shalt remain to me, thou shalt remain on the same shelf with Moses, Homer, Euripides, Sophocles !

“O Richardson, I make bold to say that the truest history is full of falsehoods, and that your romance is full of truths. History paints a few individuals ; you paint the human race. History sets down to its few individuals what they have neither said nor done ; whatever you set down to man, he has both said and done. . . . No ; I say that history is often a bad novel ; and the novel, as you have handled it, is good history. O painter of nature, 'tis you who are never false !

“You accuse Richardson of being long ! You must have forgotten how much trouble, pains, busy movement, it costs to bring the smallest undertaking to a good issue,—to end a suit, to settle a marriage, to bring about a reconciliation. Think of these details what you please, but for me they will be full of interest if they are only true, if they bring out the passions, if they display character. They are common, you say ; it is all what one sees every day. You are mistaken ; 'tis what passes every day before your eyes, and what you never see.”

In Richardson's work, he says, as in the world, men are divided into two classes, those who enjoy and those who suffer, and it is always to the latter that he draws the mind of the reader. It is due to Richardson, he cries, “if I have loved my fellow-creatures better, and loved my duties better ; if I have never felt anything but pity for the bad ; if I have conceived a deeper compassion for the unfortunate, more veneration for the good, more circumspection in the use of present things, more indifference about future things, more contempt for life, more love for virtue.” The works of Richardson are his touchstone ; those who do not love them, stand judged and condemned in his eyes. Yet in the midst of this tumult of admiration Diderot admits that the number of readers who will feel all their value can never be great ; it requires too severe a taste, and then the variety of events is such, relations are so multiplied, the management of them is so complicated, there are so many things arranged, so many personages ! “O Richardson ; if thou hast not enjoyed in thy lifetime all the reputation of thy

deserts, how great wilt thou be to our grandchildren when they see thee from the distance at which we now view Homer! Then who will there be with daring enough to strike out a line of thy sublime work?"<sup>1</sup> Yet of the very moderate number of living persons who have ever read *Clarissa Harlowe*, it would be safe to say that the large majority have read it in a certain abridgment in three volumes which appeared some years ago.

Doctor Johnson made the answer of true criticism to someone who complained to him that Richardson is tedious. "Why, sir," he said, "if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be so much frightened that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story only as giving occasion to the sentiment." And this is just what Diderot and the Paris of the middle of the eighteenth century were eager to do. It was the sentiment that touched and delighted them in *Clarissa*, just as it was the sentiment that made the fortune of the great romance in their own tongue, which was inspired by *Clarissa*, and yet was so different from *Clarissa*. Rousseau threw into the *New Heloïsa* a glow of passion of which the London printer was incapable, and he added a beauty of external landscape and a strong feeling for the objects and movement of wild natural scenery, that are very different indeed from the atmosphere of the cedar-parlour and the Flask Walk at Hampstead. But the sentiment, the adoration of the *belle âme*, is the same, and it was the *belle âme* that fascinated that curious society, where rude logic and a stern anti-religious dialectic went hand-in-hand with the most tender and exalted sensibility.<sup>2</sup> It is singular that Diderot says nothing about Rousseau's famous romance, and we can only suppose that his silence arose from his contempt for the private perversity and seeming insincerity of the author.

Diderot made one attempt of his own, in which we may notice the influence of the minute realism and the tearful pathos

<sup>1</sup> The *Eloge de Richardson* is in Diderot's Works, v. 212-227.

<sup>2</sup> The *belle âme* was the origin of the *schöne Seele* that has played such a part in German literature and life. The reader will find a history of the expression in an appendix to Dr. Erich Schmidt's study, *Richardson, Rousseau, und Goethe* (Jena, 1875).

of Richardson. *The Nun* was not given to the world until 1796, when its author had been twelve years in his grave. Since then it has been reproduced in countless editions in France and Belgium, and has been translated into English, Spanish, and German. It fell in with certain passionate movements of the popular mind against some anti-social practices of the Catholic Church. Perhaps it is not unjust to suppose that the horrible picture of the depraved abbess has had some share in attracting a public.

It is thoroughly characteristic of Diderot's dreamy, heedless humour, and of the sincerity both of his interest in his work for its own sake, and of his indifference to the popular voice, that he should have allowed this, like so many other pieces, to lie in his drawer, or at most to circulate clandestinely among three or four of his more intimate friends. It was written about 1760, and ingenious historians have made of it a signal for the great crusade against the Church. In truth, as we have seen, it was a strictly private performance, and could be no signal for a public movement. *La Religieuse* was undoubtedly an expression of the strong feeling of the Encyclopædic school about celibacy, renunciation of the world, and the burial of men and women alive in the cloister.

The circumstances under which the story was written are worthy of a word or two. Among the friends of Madame d'Epinay, Grimm, and Diderot, was a certain Marquis de Croismare. He had deserted the circle, and retired to his estates in Normandy. It occurred to one of them that it would be a pleasant stratagem for recalling him to Paris, to invent a personage who should be shut up in a convent against her will, and then to make this personage appeal to the well-known courage and generosity of the Marquis de Croismare to rescue her. A previous adventure of the Marquis suggested the fiction, and made its success the more probable. Diderot composed the letters of the imaginary nun, and the conspirators had the satisfaction of making merry at supper over the letters which the loyal and unsuspecting Marquis sent in reply. At length the Marquis's interest became so eager, that they resolved that the best way of ending his torment was to make the nun die. When the Marquis de Croismare returned to Paris, the plot was confessed, the victim of the mysti-

fiction laughed at the joke, and the friendship of the party seemed to be strengthened by their common sorrow for the woes of the dead sister. But Diderot had been taken in his own trap. His imagination, which he had set to work in jest, was caught by the figure and the situation. One day while he was busy about the tale, a friend paid him a visit, and found him plunged in grief and his face bathed in tears. "What in the world can be the matter with you?" cried the friend. "What the matter?" answered Diderot in a broken voice; "I am filled with misery by a story that I am writing!" This capacity of thinking of imaginary personages as if they were friends living in the next street, had been stirred by Richardson. His acquaintances would sometimes notice anxiety and consternation on his countenance, and would ask him if anything had befallen his health, his friends, his family, his fortune. "O my friends," he would reply, "Pamela, Clarissa, Grandison . . . !" It was in their world, not in the Rue Taranne, that he really lived when these brooding moods overtook him. And while he was writing *The Nun*, Sister Susan and Sister Theresa, the lady superior of Longchamp, and the libertine superior of Saint Eutropius, were as alive to him as Clarissa was alive to the score of correspondents who begged Richardson to spare her honour, not to let her die, to make Lovelace marry her, or by no means to allow Lovelace to marry her.

*The Nun* professes to be the story of a young lady whose family have thrust her into a convent, and her narrative, with an energy and reality that Diderot hardly ever surpassed, presents the odious sides of monastic life, and the various types of superstition, tyranny, and corruption that monastic life engenders. Yet Diderot had far too much genius to be tempted into the exaggerations of more vulgar assailants of monkeries and nunneries. He may have begun his work with the purpose of attacking a mischievous and superstitious system that mutilates human life, but he certainly continued it because he became interested in his creations. Diderot was a social destroyer by accident, but in intention he was a truly scientific moralist, penetrated by the spirit of observation and experiment; he shrunk from no excess in dissection, and found nothing in human pathology too repulsive for examination. Yet *The Nun* has none of the artificial violences of

the modern French school, which loves moral disease for its own sake. The action is all very possible, and the types are all sufficiently human and probable. The close realistic touches which flowed from the intensity of the writer's illusion, naturally convey a certain degree of the same illusion to the mind of the reader.

Existence as it goes on in these strange hives is caught with what one knows to be true fidelity ; its dulness, its littleness, its goings and comings, its spite, its reduction of the spiritual to the most purely mechanical.

"The first moments passed in mutual praises, in questions about the house that I had quitted, in experiments as to my character, my inclinations, my tastes, my understanding. They feel you all over ; there is a number of little snares that they set for you, and from which they draw the most just conclusions. For example, they throw out some word of scandal, and then they look at you ; they begin a story, and then wait to see whether you will ask for the end or will leave it there ; if you make the most ordinary remark, they declare that it is charming, though they know well enough that it is nothing ; they praise or they blame you with a purpose ; they try to worm out your most hidden thoughts ; they question you as to what you read ; they offer you religious books and profane, and carefully notice your choice ; they invite you to some slight infractions of the rule ; they tell you little confidences, and throw out hints about the foibles of the Lady Superior. All is carefully gathered up and told over again. They leave you, they take you up again ; they try to sound your sentiments about manners, about piety, about the world, about religion, about the monastic life, about everything. The result of all these repeated experiments is an epithet that stamps your character, and is always added by way of surname to the name that you already bear. I was called Sister Susan the Reserved."<sup>1</sup>

The portraits we feel to be to the life. The strongest of them all is undoubtedly the most disagreeable, the most atrocious ; it is, if you will, the most infamous. We can only endure it as we endure to traverse the ward for epileptics in a hospital for the insane. It is appalling, it fills you with horror, it haunts you for days and nights, it leaves a kind of stain on the memory. It is a possibility of character of which the healthy, the pure, the unthinking have never dreamed. Such a portrait is not art, that is true ; but it is science, and that delivers the critic from the necessity of searching his vocabulary for the cheap superlatives of moral censure. Whether it be art or science, however, men cannot but

<sup>1</sup> *La Religieuse*. Œuv. v. 110.

ask themselves how Diderot came to think it worth while to execute so painful a study. The only answer is that the irregularities of human nature—those more shameful parts of it, which in some characters survive the generations of social pressure that have crushed them down in civilized communities—had an irresistible attraction for the curiosity of his genius. The whole story is full of power; it abounds in phrases that have the stamp of genius; and suppressed vehemence lends to it strength. But it is fatally wanting in the elements of tenderness, beauty, and sympathy. If we chance to take it up for a second or for a tenth time, it infallibly holds us; but nobody seeks to return to it of his own will, and it holds us under protest.

If Richardson created one school in France, Sterne created another. The author of *Tristram Shandy* was himself only a follower of one of the greatest of French originals, and a follower at a long distance. Even those who have the keenest relish for our "good-humoured, civil, nonsensical, Shandean kind of a book," ought to admit how far it falls behind Rabelais in exuberance, force, richness of extravagance, breadth of colour, fulness of blood. They may claim, however, for Sterne what, in comparison with these great elements, are the minor qualities of simplicity, tenderness, precision, and finesse. These are the qualities that delighted the French taste. In 1762 Sterne visited Paris, and found *Tristram Shandy* almost as well known there as in London, and he instantly had dinners and suppers for a fortnight on his hands. Among them were dinners and suppers at Holbach's, where he made the acquaintance of Diderot, and where perhaps he made the discovery that "notwithstanding the French make such a pother about the word *sentiment*, they have no precise idea attached to it."† The *Sentimental Journey* appeared in 1768, and was instantly pronounced by the critics in both countries to be inimitable. It is no wonder that a performance of such delicacy of literary expression, united with so much good-nature, such easy, humane, amiable feeling, went to the hearts of the French of the eighteenth century. "My design in it," said Sterne, "was to teach us to love the world and our fellow-creatures better than we do, so it runs most upon those gentle passions and affections

† Sterne's Letters, May 23, 1765.

which aid so much to it."¹ This exactly fell in with the reigning Parisian modes, and with such sentiment as that of Diderot most of all. There were several French imitations of the *Sentimental Journey*,² but the only one that has survived in popular esteem, if indeed this can be said to have survived, is Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*.

It seems to have been composed about the time (1773) of Diderot's journey to Holland and St. Petersburg, of which we shall have more to say in a later chapter. Its history is almost as singular as the history of *Rameau's Nephew*. A contemporary speaks of a score of copies as existing in different parts of Germany, and we may conjecture that they found their way there from friends whom Diderot made in Holland, and some of them were no doubt sent by Grimm to his subscribers. The first fragment of it that saw the light in print was in a translation that Schiller made of its most striking episode, in the year 1785. This is another illustration of the eagerness of the best minds of Germany to possess and diffuse the most original products of French intelligence and hardihood. Diderot, as we have said, stands in the front rank along with Rousseau, along also with Richardson, Sterne, and Goldsmith, among those who in Germany kindled the glow of sentimentalism, both in its good and its bad forms. It was in Germany that the first complete version of the whole of *Jacques le Fataliste* appeared, in 1792. Not until four years later did the French obtain an original transcript. This they owed to the generosity of Prince Henri of Prussia, the brother of Frederick the Great; he presented it to the Institute.

"There is going about here," wrote Goethe in 1780, while Diderot was still alive, "a manuscript of Diderot's, called *Jacques le Fataliste et son Maître*, and it is really first-rate—a very fine and exquisite meal, prepared and dished up with great skill, as if for the palate of some singular idol. I set myself in the place of this Bel, and in six uninterrupted hours swallowed all the courses in the order, and according to the intentions, of this excellent cook and *maître d'hôtel*."³ He goes on to say that when other people

¹ Nov. 12, 1767.

² E.g. *Le Voyageur Sentimental* of Vernes (Grimm, *Corr. Lit.* xiii. 227).

³ Quoted in Rosenkranz, ii. 326.

came to read it, some preferred one story, and some another. On the whole, one is strongly inclined to judge that few modern readers will equal Goethe's unsparing appetite. The reader sighs in thinking of the brilliant and unflagging wit, the verve, the wicked graces of *Candide*, and we long for the ease and simplicity and light stroke of the *Sentimental Journey*. Diderot has the German heaviness. Perhaps this is because he had too much conscience, and laboured too deeply under the burdensome problems of the world. He could not emancipate himself sufficiently from the tumult of his own sympathies. At many a page both of *Jacques le Fataliste*, and of others of his pieces, we involuntarily recall the writer's own contention that excess of sensibility makes a mediocre actor. The same law is emphatically true of the artist. Diderot never writes as if his spirit were quite free—and perhaps it never was free. If we are to enjoy these reckless outbursts of all that is bizarre and grotesque, these defiances of all that is sane, coherent, and rational, we must never feel conscious of a limitation, or a possibility of stint or check. The draught must seem to come from an exhaustless fountain of boisterous laughter, irony, and caprice. Perfect fooling is so rare an art, that not half-a-dozen men in literature have really possessed it; perhaps only Aristophanes, Rabelais, Shakespeare. *Candide*, wonderful as it is, has many a stroke of malice, and *Tristram Shandy*, wonderful as that is too, is not without tinges of self-consciousness; and neither malice nor self-consciousness belongs to the greater gods of buffoonery. Cervantes and Molière, those great geniuses of finest temper, still have none of the reckless buffoonery of such scenes as that between Prince Henry and the drawer, or the mad extravagances of the *Merry Wives*; still less of the wild topsy-turvy of the *Birds* or the *Peace*. They have not the note of true Pantagruelism. Most critics, again, would find in Swift a truculence, sometimes latent and sometimes flagrant, that would deprive him, too, of his place among these great masters of free and exuberant farce. Diderot, at any rate, must rank in the second class among those who have attempted to tread a measure among the whimsical zigzags of unreason. The sincere sentimentalist makes a poor reveller.

We have spoken, as many others have done before us, of



Diderot as imitating our two English celebrities, and in one sense that is a perfectly true description. In *Jacques le Fataliste* whole sentences are transcribed in letter and word from *Tristram Shandy*. Yet imitation is hardly the right word for the process by which Diderot showed that an author had seized and affected him. *La Religieuse* would not have been written if there had been no Richardson, nor *Jacques le Fataliste* if there had been no Sterne; yet Diderot's work is not really like the work of either of his celebrated contemporaries. They gave him the suggestion of a method and a sentiment to start from, and he mused and brooded over it until, from among the clouds of his imagination, there began to loom figures of his own, moving along a path which was also his own. This was the history of his adaptation of *The Natural Son* from Goldoni. We can only be sure that nothing became blithe in its passage through his mind. He was too much of a preacher to be an effective humourist.

There is in *Jacques le Fataliste* none of that gift of true creation which produced such figures as Trim, and my Uncle Toby, and Mr. Shandy. Jacques's master is a mere lay figure, and Jacques himself, with his monotonous catchword, "*Il était écrit là-haut,*" has no real personality; he has none of the naturalness that wins us to Corporal Trim, still less has he any touch of the profound humour of the immortal Sancho. The book is a series of stories, rather than Sterne's subtle amalgam of pathos, gentle irony, and frank buffoonery; and the stories themselves are for the most part either insipid or obscene. There is perhaps one exception. The longest and the most elaborate of them, that which Schiller translated, is more like one of the modern French novels of a certain kind, than any other production of the eighteenth century. The adventure of Madame de Pommeraye and the Marquis d'Arcis is a crude foreshadowing of a style that has been perfected by M. Feydeau and M. Flaubert. The Marquis has been the lover of Madame de Pommeraye; he grows weary of her, and in time the lady discovers the bitter truth. Resignation is not among her virtues, and in her rage and anguish she devises an elaborate plan of revenge, which she carries out with the utmost tenacity and resolution. It consists in leading him on, by skilful incitements, to marry a woman whom he supposes to be an angel of purity, but

whom Madame de Pommeraye triumphantly reveals to him on the morning after his marriage as a creature whose past history has been one of notorious depravity. This disagreeable story, of which Balzac would have made a masterpiece, is told in an interesting way, and the humoristic machinery by which the narrative is managed, is less tiresome than usual. It is at least a story with meaning, purpose, and character. It is neither a jumble without savour or point, nor is it rank and gross like half the pages in the book. "Your *Jacques*," Diderot supposes someone to say to him, "is only a tasteless rhapsody of facts, some real, others imaginary, written without grace, and distributed without order. How can a man of sense and conduct, who prides himself on his philosophy, find amusement in spinning out tales so obscene as these?"<sup>1</sup> And this is exactly what the modern critic is bound to ask. In Rabelais there is at least puissant laughter; in Montaigne, when he dwells on such matters, there is naïveté. In Diderot we do not even feel that he is having any enjoyment in his grossnesses; they have not even the bad excuse of seeming spontaneous and coming from the fulness of his heart. "Reader," he says, "I amuse myself in writing the follies that you commit; your follies make me laugh; and my book puts you out of humour. To speak frankly to you, I find that the more wicked of us two is not myself." Unhappily, he does not convey the impression of amusement to his readers; it has no infection in it, and if his book puts us out of humour, it is not by its satire on mankind, but by its essential want of point and want of meaning, either moral or æsthetic. The few masters of this style have known how to bind the heterogeneous elements together, if not by some deep-lying purpose, at least by some pervading mood of rich and mellow feeling. In *Jacques le Fataliste* is neither.

That men of the stamp of Goethe and Schiller should have found such a book of delicious feast, naturally makes the disparaging critic pause. In truth, we can easily see how it was. Like all the rest of Diderot's work, it breaks roughly in upon that starved formalism, which had for long lain so heavily both on art and life. Its hardihood, its very licence, its contempt of conventions, its presentation of common people and coarse passions

<sup>1</sup> vi. 221-2.

and rough lives, all made it a dissolvent of the thin, dry, and frigid rules which tyrannized over the world, and interposed between the artist or the thinker and the real existence of man on the earth. When we think of what European literature was, it ceases to be wonderful that Goethe should have been unable for six whole hours to tear himself away from a book that so few men to-day, save under some compulsion, could persuade themselves to read through. On great wholesome minds the grossness left no stain, and the interest of Diderot's singularities worked as a stimulus to a happier originality in men of more disciplined endowments. And let us add, of more poetic endowments. It is the lack of poetry in *Jacques* that makes its irony so heavy to us. We only willingly suffer those to take us down into the depths, who can also raise us on the wings of a beautiful fancy. Even Rabelais has his poetic moments, as in the picture of Cupid self-disarmed before the industrious serenity of the Muses. A single lovely image, like Sterne's figure of the recording angel, reconciles us to many a miry page. But in *Jacques le Fataliste*, Diderot never raises his eye for an instant to the blue æther, his ear catches no harmony of awe, of hope, nor even of a noble despair. With a kind of clumsy jubilancy he holds us fast in the ways and language of thick and clogged sense. The *fatrasie* of old France has its place in literature, but it can never be restored in ages when a host of moral anxieties have laid siege to men's souls. The uncommon is always welcome to the lover of art, but it must justify itself. *Jacques* has the quality of the uncommon; it is a curiously prepared dish, as Goethe said; but it lacks the pinch of salt and the handful of herbs with sharp diffusive flavour.

## CHAPTER XI.

### ART.

IN 1759 Diderot wrote for Grimm the first of his criticisms on the exhibition of paintings in the Salon. At the beginning of the reign of Lewis xv. these exhibitions took place every year, as they take place now. But from 1751 onwards, they were only held once in two years. Diderot has left his notes on every salon from 1759 to 1781, with the exception of that of 1773, when he was travelling in Holland and Russia.

We have already seen how Grimm made Diderot work for him. The nine *Salons* are one of the results of this willing bondage, and they are perhaps the only part of Diderot's works that has enjoyed a certain measure of general popularity. Mr. Carlyle describes them with emphatic enthusiasm: "What with their unrivalled clearness, painting the picture over again for us, so that we too *see* it, and can judge it; what with their sunny fervour, inventiveness, real artistic genius, which wants nothing but a *hand*, they are with some few exceptions in the German tongue, the only Pictorial Criticisms we know of worth reading."<sup>1</sup> I only love painting in poetry, Madame Necker said to Diderot, and it is into poetry that you have found out the secret of rendering the works of our modern painters, even the commonest of them. It would be a truly imperial luxury, wrote A. W. Schlegel, to get a collection of pictures described for oneself by Diderot.

There is a freshness, a vivacity, a zeal, a sincerity, a brightness

<sup>1</sup> *Essays*, iv. 303. (Ed. 1869.)

of interest in his subject, which are perhaps unique in the whole history of criticism. He flings himself into the task with the perfection of natural abandonment to a joyous and delightful subject. His whole personality is engaged in a work that has all the air of being overflowing pleasure, and his pleasure is contagious. His criticism awakens the imagination of the reader. Not only do we see the picture ; we hear Diderot's own voice in ecstasies of praise and storms of boisterous wrath. There is such mass in his criticism ; so little of the mincing and niggling of the small virtuoso. In facility of expression, in animation, in fecundity of mood, in fine improvisation, these pieces are truly incomparable. (There is such an *impetus animi et quædam artis libido*.) Some of the charm and freedom may be due to the important circumstance that he was not writing for the public. He was not exposed to the reaction of a large unknown audience upon style ; hence the absence of all the stiffness of literary pose. But the positive conditions of such success lay in the resources of Diderot's own character.

The sceptic, the dogmatist, the dialectician, and the other personages of a heterogeneous philosophy who existed in Diderot's head, all disappear or fall back into a secondary place, and he surrenders himself with a curious freedom to such imaginative beauty as contemporary art provided for him. Diderot was perhaps the one writer of the time who was capable on occasion of rising above the strong prevailing spirit of the time ; capable of forgetting for a season the passion of the great philosophical and ecclesiastical battle. No one save Diderot could have been moved by sight of a picture to such an avowal as this :

" Absurd rigorists do not know the effect of external ceremonies on the people ; they can never have seen the enthusiasm of the multitude at the procession of the *Fête Dieu*, an enthusiasm that sometimes gains even me. I have never seen that long file of priests in their vestments ; those young acolytes clad in their white robes, with broad blue sashes engirdling their waists, and casting flowers on the ground before the Holy Sacrament ; the crowd as it goes before and follows after them, hushed in religious silence, and so many with their faces bent reverently to the ground ; I have never heard that grave and pathetic chant, as it is led by the priests and fervently responded to by an infinity of voices of men, of women, of girls, of little children, without my inmost heart being stirred, and tears coming into my eyes. There is in it something, I know not what, that is grand, solemn, sombre, and mournful."

Thus to find the material of religious reaction in the author of *Jacques le Fataliste* and the centre of the atheistic group, completes the circle of Diderot's immense and deep-lying versatility. And in his account of such a mood, we see how he came to be so great and poetical a critic; we see the sincerity, the alertness, the profound mobility, with which he was open to impressions of colour, of sound, of the pathos of human aspiration, of the solemn concourses of men.

France has long been sovereign in criticism in its literary sense. In that department she has simply never had, and has not now, any serious rival. In the profounder historic criticism, Germany exhibits her one great, peculiar, and original gift. In the criticism of art Germany has at least three memorable names; but save where history is concerned, most modern German æsthetics are so clouded with metaphysical speculation as to leave the obscurity of a very difficult subject as thick as it was before. In France the beginnings of art-criticism were literary rather than philosophic, and with the exception of Cousin's worthless eloquence, and of the writers whose philosophy Cousin dictated, and of M. Taine's ingenious paradoxes, Diderot is the only writer who has deliberately brought a vivid spirit and a philosophic judgment to the discussion of the forms of Beauty, as things worthy of real elucidation. As far back as the time of the English Restoration, Dufresnoy had written in bad Latin a poem on the art of Painting, which had the signal honour of being translated into good English by no less illustrious a master of English than Dryden, and it was again translated by Mason, the friend of Reynolds and of Gray. Imitations, applied to the pictorial art, of the immortal Epistle to the Pisos, came thick in France in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> But these effusions are merely literary, and they are very bad literature indeed. The abbé Dubos published in 1719 a volume of *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, including observations also on the relations of those arts to Music. Lessing is known to have made use of this work in his *Laocöon*, and Diderot gave it a place among the books which he recommended in his *Plan of a*

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Watelet's poem, *Sur l'Art de Peindre*, 1760;—Le Mierre's *Sur la Peinture*, 1769;—Marsy's *Pictura Carmen*, 1736. See Diderot's works, xiii. 17, etc.

University.<sup>1</sup> This, as it is the earliest, seems to have been the best contribution to æsthetic thought before Lessing and Diderot. Daniel Webb, the English friend of Raphael Mengs, published an Enquiry into the Beauties of Painting (1760), and Diderot wrote a notice of it,<sup>2</sup> but it appears to have made no mark on his mind. André, a Jesuit father, wrote an Essay on the Beautiful (1741), which distributed the kinds of art with precision, but omitted to say in what the Beautiful consists. The abbé Batteux wrote a volume reducing the fine arts to a single principle, and another volume attempting a systematic classification of them. The first of these was the occasion of Diderot's Letter on Deaf Mutes, and Diderot described their author as a good man of letters, but without taste, without criticism, and without philosophy; *à ces bagatelles près, le plus joli garçon du monde.*<sup>3</sup>

Travellers to the land where criticism of art has been so slight, and where production has been so noble, so bounteous, so superb, published the story of what Italy had shown to them. Madame de Pompadour designed to make her brother the Superintendent of fine arts, and she dispatched Cochin, the great engraver of the day, to accompany him in a studious tour through the holy land of the arts. Cochin was away nearly two years, and on his return produced three little volumes (1758), in which he deals such blows to some vaunted immortalities as made the idolators by convention not a little angry. The abbé Richard (1766) published six very stupid volumes on Italy, and such criticism on art as they contain is not worthy of serious remark. The President de Brosses spent a year in Italy (1739-40), and wrote letters to his friends at home, which may be read to-day with interest and pleasure for their

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, iii. 486. Guhrauer, ii. 15. Also Blümner's admirable edition of the *Laocöon*, p. 173.

<sup>2</sup> xiii. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Grimm, *Corr. Lit.* iv. 136. In another place in the same work, either Grimm or Diderot makes a remark about Batteux, which is worth remembering in our own age of official vindications of orthodoxy. The abbé had written a book about first causes. "I venture to observe moreover to M. l'abbé Batteux that when in this world a man has put on the dress of any sort of harlequin, red or black, with a pair of bands or a frill, he ought to give up once for all every kind of philosophic discussion, because it is impossible for him to speak according to his faith and his conscience; and a writer of bad faith is all the more odious, as nothing compelled him to break silence." *Ibid.* vi. 120.

graphic picture of Italian society ; but the criticisms which they contain on the great works of art are those of a well-informed man of the world, taking many things for granted, rather than of a philosophical critic industriously using his own mind. His book recalls to us how true the eighteenth century was to itself in its hatred of Gothic architecture, that symbol and associate of mysticism, and of the age which the eighteenth century blindly abhorred as the source of all the tyrannical laws and cruel superstitions that still weighed so heavily on mankind. " You know the palace of Saint Mark at Venice," says De Brosses : "*c'est un vilain monsieur, s'il eu fut jamais, massif, sombre, et gothique, du plus méchant goût !*"<sup>1</sup>

Dupaty, like De Brosses, an eminent lawyer, an acquaintance of Diderot and an early friend of a conspicuous figure of a later time, the ill-starred Vergniaud, travelled in Italy almost immediately before the Revolution (1785), and his letters, when read with those of De Brosses, are a curious illustration of the change that had come over the spirit of men in the interval. He leaves the pictures of the Pitti collection at Florence, and plunges into meditation in the famous gardens behind the palace, rejoicing with much expansion in the glories of light and air, in greenery and the notes of birds, and finally sums all up in one rapturous exclamation of the vast superiority of nature over art.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible in reading how deeply Diderot was affected by fifth-rate paintings and sculpture, not to count it among the great losses of literature that he saw few masterpieces. He never made the great pilgrimage. He was never at Venice, Florence, Parma, Rome. A journey to Italy was once planned, in which Grimm and Rousseau were to have been his travelling com-

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres Familiales*, i. 174. (Ed. 1869.)

<sup>2</sup> Dupaty's *Lettres sur l'Italie*, No. 40. In talking of Rome, he complains in a very Diderotian spirit of the want of *le beau moral*. " On ne trouve ici dans les mœurs ni des hommes privés ni des hommes publics, cette moralité, cette bienséance, dont les mœurs françoises sont pleines. *Le beau moral est absolument inconnu*. Or, c'est pour atteindre à ce beau moral dans tous les genres que la sensibilité est la plus tourmentée ; qu'elle est en proie aux contentions de l'esprit, aux émulations de l'âme . . . qu'elle pare avec tant de raffinement et de peine, les écrits, les discours, les passions, enfin toute la vie publique et privée."



panions ;<sup>1</sup> the project was not realised, and the strongest critic of art that his country produced, never saw the greatest glories of art. If Diderot had visited Florence and Rome, even the mighty painter of the Last Judgment and the creator of those sublime figures in the New Sacristy at San Lorenzo, would have found an interpreter worthy of him. But it was not to be. "It is rare," he once wrote, "for an artist to excel without having seen Italy, just as a man seldom becomes a great writer or a man of great taste without having given severe study to the ancients."<sup>2</sup> Diderot at least knew what he lost.

French art was then, as art usually is, the mirror of its time, reproducing such imaginative feeling as society could muster. When the Republic and the Empire came, and twenty years of battle and siege, then the art of the previous generation fell into a degree of contempt for which there is hardly a parallel. Pictures that had been the delight of the town and had brought fortunes to their painters, rotted on the quays or were sold for a few pence at low auctions. Fragonard, who had been the darling of his age, died in neglect and beggary. David and his hideous art of the Empire utterly effaced what had thrown the contemporaries of Diderot into rapture.<sup>3</sup> Everyone knows all that can be said against the French paintings of Diderot's time. They are executed hastily and at random ; they abound in technical defects of colour, of drawing, of composition ; their feeling is light and shallow. Watteau died in 1721—at the same premature age as Raphael,—but he remained as the dominating spirit of French art through the eighteenth century. Of course the artists went to Rome, but they changed sky and not spirit. The pupils of the academy came back with their portfolios filled with sketches in which we see nothing of the "lone mother of dead empires," nothing of the vast ruins and the great sombre desolate Campagna, but only Rome turned into a decoration for the scenes of a theatre or the panels of a boudoir. The Olympus of Homer and of Virgil, as has been well said, becomes the Olympus of Ovid. Strength, sublimity, even stateliness disappeared, unless we admit some of the first two qualities in the landscapes of Vernet. Not only is beauty replaced by prettiness, but by prettiness in season and out

<sup>1</sup> x. 514, n.<sup>2</sup> xi. 241.<sup>3</sup> Goncourt's *L'Art au 18ème Siècle*, i.

of season. The common incongruity of introducing a spirit of elegance and literature into the simplicities of the true pastoral, was condemned by Diderot as a mixture of Fontenelle with Theocritus. We do not know what name he would have given to that still more curious incongruity of taste, which made a publisher adorn a treatise on Differential and Integral Calculus with amusing plates by Cochin, and introduce dainty little vignettes into a Demonstration of the Properties of the Cycloid.

There is one true story that curiously illustrates the spirit of French art in those equivocal days. When Madame de Pompadour made up her mind to play pander to the jaded appetites of the king, she had a famous female model of the day introduced into a *Holy Family*, which was destined for the private chapel of the queen. The portrait answered its purpose; it provoked the curiosity and desire of the king, and the model was invited to the Parc-aux-Cerfs.<sup>1</sup> This was typical of the service that painting was expected to render to the society that adored it and paid for it. "All is daintiness, delicate caressing for delicate senses, even down to the external decoration of life, down to the sinuous lines, the wanton apparel, the refined commodity of rooms and furniture. In such a place and in such company, it is enough to be together to feel at ease. Their idleness does not weigh upon them; life is their plaything."<sup>2</sup>

Only let us not, while reserving our serious admiration for Titian, Rembrandt, Raphael, and the rest of the gods and demigods, refuse at least a measure of historic tolerance to these light and graceful creations. Boucher, whose dreams of rose and blue were the delight of his age, came away from Rome saying: "Raphael is a woman, Michael Angelo is a monster; one is paradise, the other is hell; they are painters of another world; it is a dead language that nobody speaks in our day. We others are the painters of our own age: we have not common sense, but we are charming." This account of them was not untrue. They filled up the space between the grandiose pomp of Le Brun and the sombre pseudo-antique of David, just as the incomparable

<sup>1</sup> Goncourt's *Art au 18ème Siècle*, i. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Taine's *Ancien Régime*, p. 186.

grace and sparkle of Voltaire's lighter verse filled up the space in literature between Racine and Chénier. They have a poetry of their own; they are cheerful, sportive, full of fancy, and like everything else of that day, intensely sociable. They are, at any rate, even the most sportive of them, far less unwholesome and degrading than the acres of martyrdoms, emaciations, bad crucifixions, bad pietas, that make some galleries more disgusting than a lazar-house.<sup>1</sup>

For Watteau himself, the deity of the century, Diderot cared very little. "I would give ten Watteaus," he said, "for one Teniers." This was as much to be expected, as it was characteristic in Lewis XIV., when some of Teniers's pictures were submitted to him, imperiously to command "*ces magots là*" to be taken out of his sight.

Greuze (b. 1725—d. 1805) of all the painters of the time was Diderot's chief favourite. Diderot was not at all blind to Greuze's faults, to his repetitions, his frequent want of size and amplitude, the excess of grey and of violet in his colouring. But all these were forgotten in transports of sympathy for the sentiment. As we glance at a list of Greuze's subjects, we perceive that we are in the very heart of the region of the domestic, the moral, "*l'honnête*," the homely pathos of the common people. The Death of a father of a family, regretted by his children; The Death of an unnatural father, abandoned by his children; The beloved mother caressed by her little ones; A child weeping over its dead bird; A Paralytic tended by his family, or the Fruit of a Good Education:—Diderot was ravished by such themes. The last picture he describes as a proof that compositions of that kind are capable of doing honour to the gifts and the sentiments of the artist.<sup>2</sup> The *Girl bewailing her dead bird* throws him into raptures. "O, the pretty elegy!" he begins, "the charming poem! the lovely idyll!" and so forth, until at length he breaks into a burst of lyric condolence addressed to the weeping child, that would fill four or five of these pages.<sup>3</sup>

No picture of the eighteenth century was greeted with more

<sup>1</sup> "Si tous les tableaux de martyrs que nos grands peintres ont si sublimement peints, passaient à une postérité reculée, pour qui nous prendrait-elle? Pour des bêtes féroces ou des anthropophages."—Diderot's *Pensées sur la Peinture*.

<sup>2</sup> x. 143.

<sup>3</sup> x. 343.

enthusiasm than Greuze's *Accordée de Village*, which was exhibited in 1761. It seems to tell a story, and therefore even to-day, in spite of its dulled pink and lustreless blue, it arrests the visitor to one of the less frequented halls of the Louvre.<sup>1</sup> Paris, weary of mythology and sated with pretty indecencies, was fascinated by the simplicity of Greuze's village tale. "*On se sent gagner d'une émotion douce en le regardant,*" said Diderot, and this gentle emotion was dear to the cultivated classes in France at that moment of the century. It was the year of the *New Heloïsa*.

The subject is of the simplest: a peasant paying the dowry-money of his daughter. "The father"—it is prudent of us to borrow Diderot's description—"is seated in the great chair of the house. Before him his son-in-law standing, and holding in his left hand the bag that contains the money. The betrothed, standing also, with one arm gently passed under the arm of her lover, the other grasped by her mother, who is seated. Between the mother and the bride, a younger sister standing, leaning on the bride and with an arm thrown round her shoulders. Behind this group, a child standing on tip-toes to see what is going on. To the extreme left in the background, and at a distance from the scene, two women-servants who are looking on. To the right a cupboard with its usual contents—all scrupulously clean . . . A wooden staircase leading to the upper floor. In the foreground near the feet of the mother, a hen leading her young ones, to whom a little girl throws crumbs of bread; a basin full of water, and on the edge of it, one of the small chickens with its beak up in the air so as to let the water go down." Diderot then proceeds to criticise the details, telling us the very words that he hears the father addressing to the bridegroom, and as a touch of observation of nature, that while one of the old man's hands, of which we see the back, is tanned and brown, the other, of which we see the palm, is white. "To the bride the painter has given a face full of charm, of seemliness, of reserve. She is dressed to perfection. That apron of white stuff could not be better; there is a trifle of luxury in her ornament; but then it is a wedding-day. You should note how true are the folds and creases in her dress, and in those of the rest. The charming girl is not quite straight; but there is a

<sup>1</sup> No. 260 of the French School.

light and gentle inflexion in all her figure and her limbs, that fills her with grace and truth. Indeed she is pretty and very pretty. If she had leaned more towards her lover, it would have been unbecoming; more to her mother and her father, and she would have been false. She has her arm half passed under that of her future husband, and the tips of her fingers rest softly on his hand; that is the only mark of tenderness that she gives him, and perhaps without knowing it herself: it is a delicate idea in the painter."<sup>1</sup>

"Courage, my good Greuze," he cries, "*fais de la morale en peinture*. What, has not the pencil been long enough and too long consecrated to debauchery and vice? Ought we not to be delighted at seeing it at last unite with dramatic poetry in instructing us, correcting us, inviting us to virtue?"<sup>2</sup> It has been sometimes said that Diderot would have exulted in the paintings of Hogarth, and we may admit that he would have sympathised with the spirit of such moralities as the Idle and the Industrious Apprentice, the Rake's Progress, and *Mariage à la Mode*. The intensity and power of that terrible genius would have had their attraction, but the minute ferocities of Hogarth's ruthless irony would certainly have revolted him. Such a scene as Lord Squanderfield's visit to the quack doctor, or as the Rake's debauch, would have filled him with inextinguishable horror. He could never have forgiven an artist who, in the ghastly pathos of a little child straining from the arms of its nurse towards the mother, as she lies in the very article of death, could still find in his heart to paint on it the dark patches of foul disease. He would have fled with shrieks from those appalling scenes of murder, torture, madness, bestial drunkenness, rapacity, fury—from that delirium of scrofula, palsy, entrails, the winding-sheet, and the grave-worm. Diderot's method was to improve men, not by making their blood curdle, but by warming and softening the domestic affections.

↑ Diderot, as a critic, seems always to have remembered a pleasant remonstrance once addressed at the Salon by the worthy Chardin to himself and Grimm: "Gently, good sirs, gently! Out of all the pictures that are here, seek the very worst; and know

<sup>1</sup> x. 151-6. Dr. Waagen pronounces this picture to be as truly an expression of *das Nationalfranzösische* as Wilkie's paintings are of *das Englische*. See his *Kunstwerke und Künstler in Paris*, p. 675. <sup>2</sup> x. 208.

that two thousand unhappy wretches have bitten their brushes in two with their teeth, in despair of ever doing even as badly. Parrocel, whom you call a dauber, and who for that matter is a dauber, if you compare him to Vernet, is still a man of rare talent relatively to the multitude of those who have flung up the career in which they started with him." And then the artist recounts the immense labours, the exhausting years, the boundless patience, attention, tenacity, that are the conditions even of a mediocre degree of mastery. We are reminded of the scene in a famous work of art in our own day, where Herr Klesmer begs Miss Gwendolen Harleth to reflect, how merely to stand or to move on the stage is an art that requires long practice. "*O le triste et plat métier que celui de critique!*" Diderot cries on one occasion: "*Il est si difficile de produire une chose même médiocre; il est si facile de sentir la médiocrité.*"<sup>1</sup> No doubt, as experience and responsibility gather upon us, we learn how hard in every line is even moderate skill. The wise are perhaps content to find what a man can do, without making it a reproach to him that there is something else which he cannot do.

But Diderot knew well enough that Chardin's kindly principle might easily be carried too far. In general, he said, criticism displeases me; it supposes so little talent. "What a foolish occupation, that of incessantly hindering ourselves from taking pleasure, or else making ourselves blush for the pleasure that we have taken! And that is the occupation of criticism!"<sup>2</sup> Yet in one case he writes a score of pages of critical dialogue, in which the chief interlocutor is a painter who avenges his own failure by stringent attacks on the work of happier rivals of the year. And speaking in his own proper person, Diderot knows how to dismiss incompetence with the right word, sometimes of scorn, more often of good-natured remonstrance. Bad painters, a Parrocel, a Brenet, fare as ill at his hands as they deserved to do. He remarks incidentally that the condition of the bad painter and the bad actor is worse than that of the bad man of letters: the painter hears with his own ears the expressions of contempt for his talent, and the hisses of the audience go straight to the ears of the actor, whereas the author has the comfort of going to his grave without a suspicion

<sup>1</sup> x. 177.

<sup>2</sup> xii. 8, 79.

that you have cried out at every page: "*The fool, the animal, the jackass!*" and have at length flung his book into a corner. There is nothing to prevent the worst author, as he sits alone in his library, and reads himself over and over again, from congratulating himself on being the originator of a host of rare and felicitous ideas.<sup>1</sup>

The one painter whom Diderot never spares is Boucher, who was an idol of the time, and made an income of fifty thousand livres a year out of his popularity. He laughs at him as a mere painter of fans, an artist with no colours on his palette save white and red. He admits the fecundity, the *fougue*, the ease of Boucher, just as Sir Joshua Reynolds admits his grace and beauty and good skill in composition.<sup>2</sup> Boucher, says Diderot, is in painting what Ariosto is in poetry, and he who admires the one is inconsistent if he is not mad for the other. What is wanting is disciplined taste, more variety, more severity. Yet he cannot refuse to concede about one of Boucher's pictures that after all he would be glad to possess it. Every time you saw it, he says, you would find fault with it, yet you would go on looking at it.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps what the severest modern amateur, as he strolls carelessly through the French school at his leisure, would not in his heart care to deny.

Fragonard, whose picture of Coresus and Callirrhoë made a great sensation in its day, and still attracts some small share of attention in the French school, was not a favourite with Diderot. The Callirrhoë inspired an elaborate but not very felicitous criticism. Then the painter changed his style in the direction of Boucher, and as far away as possible from *l'honnête* and *le beau moral*, and Diderot turned away from him; at last describing an oval picture representing groups of children in heaven as "*une belle et grande omelette d'enfants,*" heads, legs, thighs, arms, bodies, all interlaced together among yellowish clouds—" *bien omelette, bien douillette, bien jaune, et bien brûlée.*"<sup>4</sup>

On the whole, we cannot wonder either that painters hold literary talk about their difficult and complex art so cheap, or that the lay public prizes it so much above its intrinsic worth. It helps

<sup>1</sup> xi. 149.

<sup>2</sup> See Reynolds's Twelfth Discourse, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> x. 102.

<sup>4</sup> xi. 296. For the Callirrhoë, see x. 397.

the sluggish imagination and dull sight of the one, while it is apt to pass ignorantly over both the true difficulties and the true successes of the other. (Diderot, unlike most of those who have come after him, had carefully studied the conditions prescribed to the painter by the material in which he works. Although he was a master of the literary criticism of art, he had artists among his intimate companions, and was too eager for knowledge not to wring from them the secrets of technique, just as he extorted from weavers and dyers the secrets of their processes and instruments. He makes no ostentatious display of this special knowledge, yet it is present, giving a firmness and accuracy to what would otherwise be too like mere arbitrary lyrics suggested by a painting, and not really dealing with it. His special gift was the transformation of scientific criticism into something with the charm of literature. Take, for instance, a picture by Vien :

*“Psyche approaching with her lamp to surprise Love in his sleep.—The two figures are of flesh and blood, but they have neither the elegance, nor the grace, nor the delicacy that the subject required. Love seems to me to be making a grimace. Psyche is not like a woman who comes trembling on tiptoe. I do not see on her face that mixture of surprise, fear, love, desire, and admiration, which ought all to be there. It is not enough to show in Psyche a curiosity to see Love ; I must also perceive in her the fear of awakening him. She ought to have her mouth half open, and to be afraid of drawing her breath. ’Tis her lover that she sees—that she sees for the first time, at the risk of losing him for ever. What joy to look upon him, and to find him so fair ! Oh, what little intelligence in our painters, how little they understand nature ! The head of Psyche ought to be inclined towards Love ; the rest of her body drawn back, as it is when you advance towards a spot where you fear to enter, and from which you are ready to flee back ; one foot planted on the ground and the other barely touching it. And the lamp ; ought she to let the light fall on the eyes of Love ? Ought she not to hold it apart, and to shield it with her hand to deaden its brightness ? Moreover, that would have lighted the picture in a striking way. These good people do not know that the eyelids have a kind of transparency ; they have never seen a mother coming in the night to look at her child in the cradle, with a lamp in her hand, and fearful of awakening it.”*<sup>1</sup>

There have been many attempts to imitate this manner since Diderot. No less a person than M. Thiers tried it, when it fell to him as a young writer for the newspapers to describe the Salon of 1822. One brilliant poet, novelist, traveller, critic, has succeeded,

<sup>1</sup> x. 121.



and Diderot's art-criticism is at least equalled in Théophile Gautier's pages on Titian's *Assunta* and Bellini's *Madonna* at Venice, or Murillo's *Saint Anthony of Padua* at Seville.<sup>1</sup>

Just as in his articles in the *Encyclopædia*, here too Diderot is always ready to turn from his subject for a moral aside. Even the modern reader will forgive the discursive apostrophe addressed to the judges of the unfortunate Calas, the almost lyric denunciation of an atrocity that struck such deep dismay into the hearts of all the brethren of the *Encyclopædia*.<sup>2</sup> But Diderot's asides are usually in less tragic matter. A picture of Michael Van Loo's reminds him that Van Loo had once a friend in Spain. This friend took it into his head to equip a vessel for a trading expedition, and Van Loo invested all his fortune in his friend's vessel. The vessel was wrecked, the fortune was lost, and the master was drowned. When Van Loo heard of the disaster, the first word that came to his mouth was—*I have lost a good friend*. And on this, Diderot sails off into a digression on the grounds of praise and blame.

Here are one or two illustrations of the same moralising :

“The effect of our sadness on others is very singular. Have you not sometimes noticed in the country the sudden stillness of the birds, if it happens that on a fine day a cloud comes and lingers over the spot that was resounding with their music? A suit of deep mourning in company is the cloud that, as it passes, causes the momentary silence of the birds. It goes, and the song is resumed.”

“We should divide a nation into three classes : the bulk of the nation, which forms the national taste and manners ; those who rise above these, are called madmen, originals, oddities ; those who fall below, are noodles. The progress of the human mind causes the level to shift, and a man often lives too long for his reputation. . . . He who is too far in front of his generation, who rises above the general level of the common manners, must expect few votes ; he ought to be thankful for the oblivion that rescues him from persecution. Those who raise themselves to a great distance above the common level are not perceived ; they die forgotten and tranquil, either like everybody else, or far away from everybody else. That is my motto.”<sup>3</sup>

“But Vernet will never be more than Vernet, a mere man. No, and for that very reason all the more astonishing, and his work all the more worthy of

<sup>1</sup> *Voyage en Italie*, 230. *Voyage en Espagne*, 330. See the same critic's *Abécédaire du Salon de 1861*.

<sup>2</sup> xi. 309.

<sup>3</sup> xi. 294.

admiration. It is, no doubt, a great thing, is this universe ; but when I compare it with the energy of the productive cause, if I had to wonder at aught, it would be that its work is not still finer and still more perfect. It is just the reverse when I think of the weakness of man, of his poor means, of the embarrassments and of the short duration of his life, and then of certain things that he has undertaken and carried out." <sup>1</sup>

These digressions are one source of the charm of Diderot's criticism. They impart ease and naturalness to it, because they evidently reproduce the free movement of his mind as it really was, and not as the supposed dignity of authorship might require him to pretend. There is no stiffness nor sense, as we have said, of literary strain, and yet there is no disturbing excess of what is random, broken, *décousu*. The digression flows with lively continuity from the main stream and back again into it, leaving some cheerful impression or curious suggestion behind it. Something, we cannot tell what, draws him off to wonder whether there is not as much verve in the first scene of Terence and in the Antinoüs, as in any scene of Molière or any work of Michael Angelo? "I once answered this question, but rather too lightly. Every moment I am apt to make a mistake, because language does not furnish me with the right expression for the truth at the moment. I abandon a thesis for lack of words that shall supply my reasons. I have one thing in the bottom of my heart, and I find myself saying another. There is the advantage of living in retirement and solitude. There a man speaks, asks himself questions, listens to himself, and listens in silence. His secret sensation developes itself little by little." Then when he is about to speak of one of Greuze's pictures, he bethinks himself of Greuze's vanity, and this leads him to a vein of reflection which it is good for all critics, whether public or private, to hold fast in their minds. "If you take away Greuze's vanity, you will take away his verve, you will extinguish his fire, his genius will undergo an eclipse. *Nos qualités tiennent de près à nos défauts.*" And of this important truth, the base of wise tolerance, there follow a dozen graphic examples.<sup>2</sup>

Grétry, the composer, more than once consulted Diderot in moments of perplexity. It was not always safe, he says, to listen

<sup>1</sup> xi. 102.

<sup>2</sup> x. 342. He says elsewhere of Greuze (xviii. 247), that he is *un excellent artiste, mais une bien mauvaise tête.*

to the glowing man when he allowed his imagination to run away with him, but the first burst was of inspiration divine.<sup>1</sup> Painters found his suggestions as potent and as hopeful as the musician found them. He delighted in being able to tell an artist how he might change his bad picture into a good one.\* “Chardin, La Grenée, Greuze, and others,” says Diderot, “have assured me (and artists are not given to flattering men of letters) that I was about the only one whose images could pass at once to canvas, almost exactly as they came into my head.” And he gives illustrations, how he instantly furnished to La Grenée a subject for a picture of Peace; to Greuze, a design introducing a nude figure without wounding the modesty of the spectator; to a third, a historical subject.<sup>3</sup> The first of the three is a curious example of the difficulty which even a strong genius like Diderot had in freeing himself from artificial traditions. For Peace, he cried to La Grenée, show me Mars with his breastplate, his sword girded on, his head noble and firm. Place standing by his side a Venus, full, divine, voluptuous, smiling on him with an enchanting smile; let her point to his casque, in which her doves have made their nest. Is it not singular that even Diderot sometimes failed to remember that Mars and Venus are dead, that they can never be the source of a fresh and natural inspiration, and that neither artist nor spectator can be moved by cold and vapid allegories in an extinct dialect? If Diderot could have seen such a treatment of La Grenée’s subject as Landseer’s *Peace*, with its children playing at the mouth of the slumbering gun, he would have been the first to cry out how much nearer this came to the spirit of his own æsthetic methods, than all the pride of Mars and all the beauty of Venus. He is truer to himself in the subject with which he met Greuze’s perplexity in the second of his two illustrations. He bade Greuze paint the Honest Model; a girl sitting to an artist for the first time, her poor garments on the ground beside her; her head resting on one of her hands, and a tear rolling down each cheek. The mother, whose dress betrays the extremity of indigence, is by her side, and with her own hands and one of the hands of her daughter covers her face. The painter, witness of

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Diderot’s *Œuvres*, v. 460, n.

\* E.g., *Œuvres*, xi. 258.

<sup>3</sup> xi. 74.

the scene, softened and touched, lets his palette or his brush fall from his hand. Greuze at once exclaimed that he saw his subject; and we may at least admit that this pretty bit of commonplace sentimentalism is more in Diderot's vein than pagan gods and goddesses.

Diderot is never more truly himself than when he takes the subject of a picture that is before him, and shows how it might have been more effectively handled. Thus :

"The Flight into Egypt is treated in a fresh and piquant manner. But the painter has not known how to make the best of his idea. The Virgin passes in the background of the picture, bearing the infant Jesus in her arms. She is followed by Joseph and the ass carrying the baggage. In the foreground are the shepherds prostrating themselves, their hands upturned towards her, and wishing her a happy journey. Ah, what a fine painting, if the artist had known how to make mountains at the foot of which the Virgin had passed; if he had known how to make the mountains very steep, escarped, majestic; if he had covered them with moss and wild shrubs; if he had given to the Virgin simplicity, beauty, grandeur, nobleness; if the road that she follows had led into the paths of some forest, lonely and remote; if he had taken his moment at the rise of day, or at its fall!"<sup>1</sup>

The picture of Saint Benedict by Deshayes—whom at one moment Diderot pronounces to be the first painter in the nation—stirs the same spirit of emendation. Diderot thinks that in spite of the pallor of the dying saint's visage, one would be inclined to give him some years yet to live.

"I ask whether it would not have been better that his legs should have sunk under him; that he should have been supported by two or three monks; that he should have had the arms extended, the head thrown back, with death on his lips and ecstasy on his brow. If the painter had given this strong expression to his Saint Benedict, consider, my friend, how it would have reflected itself on all the rest of the picture. That slight change in the principal figure would have influenced all the others. The celebrant, instead of being upright, would in his compassion have leaned more forward; distress and anguish would have been more strongly depicted in all the bystanders. There is a piece from which you could teach young students that, by altering one single circumstance, you alter all others, or else the truth disappears. You could make out of it an excellent chapter on the *force of unity*: you would have to preserve the same arrangement, the same figures, and to invite them to execute the picture according to the different changes that were made in the figure of the communicant."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> x. 115.

<sup>2</sup> x. 125.

The admirable Salons were not Diderot's only contributions to æsthetic criticism. He could not content himself with reproductions, in eloquent language upon paper, of the combinations of colour and form upon canvas. No one was further removed from vague or indolent expansion. He returns again and again to examine with keenness and severity the principles, the methods, the distinctions of the fine arts, and though he is often a sentimentalist and a declaimer, he can also, when the time comes, transform himself into an accurate scrutiniser of ideas and phrases, a seeker after causes and differences, a discoverer of kinds and classes in art, and of the conditions proper to success in each of them. In short, the fact of being an eloquent and enthusiastic critic of pictures, did not prevent him from being a truly philosophical thinker about the abstract laws of art, with the thinker's genius for analysis, comparison, classification. Who that has read them, can ever forget the dialogues that are set among the landscapes of Vernet in the Salons of 1767?¹ The critic supposes himself unable to visit the Salon of the year, and to be staying in a gay country-house amid some fine landscapes on the sea-coast. He describes his walks among these admirable scenes, and the strange and varying effects of light and colour, and all the movements of the sky and ocean; and into the descriptions he weaves a series of dialogues with an abbé, a tutor of the children of the house, upon art and landscape and the processes of the universe. Nothing can be more excellent and life-like; it is not until the end, that he lets the secret slip, that the whole fabric has been a flight of fancy, inspired by no real landscape, but by the sea-pieces sent to the exhibition by Vernet.

This is an illustration of the variety of approach which makes Diderot so interesting, so refreshing a critic. He never sinks into what is mechanical, and the evidence of this is that his mind, while intent on the qualities of a given picture, yet moves freely to the outside of the picture, and is ever cordially open to the most general thoughts and moods, while attending with workman-like fidelity to what is particular in the object before him.²

In the light of modern speculation upon the philosophy of the fine arts, Diderot makes no commanding figure, because he is so

¹ xi. 98-149.

² E.g. xi. 223.

egregiously unsystematic. But as Goethe said, in a piece where he was withstanding Diderot to the face, *die höchste Wirkung des Geistes ist, den Geist hervorzurufen*—the highest influence of mind is to call out mind. This stimulating provocation of the intelligence was the master faculty in Diderot. For the sake of that, men are ready to pardon all excesses, and to overlook many offences against the law of Measure. From such a point of view, Goethe's treatment of Diderot's Essay on Painting (written in 1765, but not given to the world until 1796) is an instructive lesson. "Diderot's essay," he wrote to Schiller, "is a magnificent work, and it speaks even more usefully to the poet than to the painter, though for the painter, too, it is a torch of powerful illumination." Yet Diderot's critical principle in the essay was exactly opposite to Goethe's; and when Goethe translated some portions of it, he was forced to add a commentary of stringent protest. Diderot, as usual, energetically extols nature, as the one source and fountain of true artistic inspiration. Even in what looks to us like defect and monstrosity, she is never incorrect. If she inflicts on the individual some unusual feature, she never fails to draw other parts of the system into co-ordination and a sort of harmony with the abnormal element. We say of a man who passes in the street that he is ill-shapen. Yes, according to our poor rules; but according to nature, it is another matter. We say of a statue that it is of fine proportions. Yes, according to our poor rules; but according to nature? <sup>1</sup>

In the same vein, he breaks out against the practice of drawing from the academic model. All these academic positions, affected, constrained, artificial, as they are; all these actions coldly and awkwardly expressed by some poor devil, and always the same poor devil, hired to come three times a week, to undress himself, and to play the puppet in the hands of the professor—what have these in common with the positions and actions of nature? What is there in common between the man who draws water from the well in your courtyard, and the man who pretends to imitate him on the platform of the drawing-school? If Diderot thought the seven years passed in drawing the model no better than wasted, he was not any more indulgent to the practice of studying the

<sup>1</sup> x. 461-2.

minutiæ of the anatomy of the human frame. He saw the risk of the artist becoming vain of his scientific acquirement, of his eye being corrupted, of his seeking to represent what is under the surface, of his forgetting that he has only the exterior to show. A practice that is intended to make the student look at nature, most commonly tends to make him see nature other than she really is. To sum up, mannerism would disappear from drawing and from colour, if people would only scrupulously imitate nature. Mannerism comes from the masters, from the academy, from the school, and even from the antique.<sup>1</sup>

We may easily believe how many fallacies were discerned in such lessons as these by the author of *Iphigénie*, and the passionate admirer of the ancient marbles. Diderot's fundamental error, said Goethe, is to confound nature and art, completely to amalgamate nature with art. "Now Nature organizes a living, an indifferent being, the Artist something dead, but full of significance; Nature something real, the Artist something apparent. In the works of Nature the spectator must import significance, thought, effect, reality; in a work of Art he will and must find this already there. A perfect imitation of Nature is in no sense possible; the Artist is only called to the representation of the surface of an appearance. The outside of the vessel, the living whole that speaks to all our faculties of mind and sense, that stirs our desire, elevates our intelligence—that whose possession makes us happy, the vivid, potent, finished Beautiful—for all this is the Artist appointed." In other words, art has its own laws, as it has its own aims, and these are not the laws and aims of nature. To mock at rules, is to overthrow the conditions that make a painting or a statue possible. To send the pupil away from the model to the life of the street, the gaol, the church, is to send him forth without teaching him for what to look. To make light of the study of anatomy in art, is like allowing the composer to forget thorough bass in his enthusiasm, or the poet in his enthusiasm to forget the number of syllables in his verse. Again, though art may profit by a free and broad method, yet all artistic significance depends on the More and the Less. Beauty is a narrow circle in

<sup>1</sup> x. 467. For a more respectful view of the antique, and of Winckelmann's position, see *Salon de 1765*, x. 418.

which one may only move in modest measure. And of this modest measure the academy, the school, the master, above all the antique, are the guardians and the teachers.<sup>1</sup>

It is unnecessary to labour the opposition between the two great masters of criticism. Goethe, as usual, must be pronounced to have the last word of reason and wisdom, the word which comprehends most of the truth of the matter. And it is delivered in that generous and loyal spirit which nobody would have appreciated more than the free-hearted Diderot himself. The drift of Goethe's contention is, in fact, the thesis of Diderot's Paradox on the Comedian. But the state of painting in France—and Goethe admits it—may have called for a line of criticism which was an exaggeration of what Diderot, if he had been in Goethe's neutral position, would have found in his better mind.<sup>2</sup>

There is a passage in one of the Salons which sheds a striking side-light on the difference between these two great types of genius. The difference between the mere virtuoso and the deep critic is that, in the latter, behind views on art we discern far-reaching thoughts on life. And in Diderot, no less than in Goethe, art is ever seen in its associations with character, aspiration, happiness, and conduct.

"The sun, which was on the edge of the horizon, disappeared ; over the sea there came all at once an aspect more sombre and solemn. Twilight, which is at first neither day nor night—an image of our feeble thoughts, and an image that warns the philosopher to stay in his speculations—warns the traveller too to turn his steps towards home. So I turned back, and as I continued the thread of my thoughts, I began to reflect that if there is a particular morality belonging to each species, so perhaps in the same species there is a different morality for different individuals, or at least for different kinds and collections of individuals. And in order not to scandalize you by too serious an example, it came into my head that there is perhaps a morality peculiar to artists or to

<sup>1</sup> Diderot's *Versuch über die Malerei*. Goethe's *Werke*, xxv. 309, etc.

<sup>2</sup> And of course on occasion did actually find. See xi. 101. Sir Joshua Reynolds, who was too sincere a lover of his art not to be above mere patriotic prejudice, describes the condition of things. "I have heard painters acknowledge that they could do better without nature than with her, or, as they expressed themselves, it only put them out. Our neighbours, the French, are much in this practice of extempore invention, and their dexterity is such as even to excite admiration, if not envy ; but how rarely can this praise be given to their finished pictures !" Twelfth Discourse, p. 105.



art, and that this morality might well be the very reverse of the common morality. Yes, my friend, I am much afraid that man marches straight to misery by the very path that leads the imitator of nature to the sublime. To plunge into extremes—that is the rule for poets. To keep in all things the just mean—there is the rule for happiness. One must not make poetry in real life. The heroes, the romantic lovers, the great patriots, the inflexible magistrates, the apostles of religion, the philosophers *à toute outrance*—all these rare and divine insensates make poetry in their life, and that is their bane. It is they who after death provide material for great pictures. They are excellent to paint. Experience shows that nature condemns to misery the man to whom she has allotted genius, and whom she has endowed with beauty; it is they who are the figures of poetry. Then within myself I lauded the mediocrity that shelters one alike from praise and blame; and yet why, I asked myself, would no one choose to let his sensibility go, and to become mediocre? O vanity of man!"<sup>1</sup>

Goethe's *Tasso*, a work so full of finished poetry and of charm, is the idealised and pathetic version of the figure that Diderot has thus conceived for genius. The dialogues between the hapless poet and Antonio, the man of the world, are a skilful, lofty, and impressive statement of the problem that often vexed Diderot. Goethe sympathised with Antonio's point of view; he had in his nature so much of the spirit of conduct, of saneness, of the common reason of the world. And in art he was a lover of calm ideals. In Diderot, as our readers by this time know, these things were otherwise.

The essay on Beauty in the *Encyclopædia* is less fertile than most of Diderot's contributions to the subject.<sup>2</sup> It contains a careful account of two or three other theories, especially that of Hutcheson. The object is to explain the source of Beauty. Diderot's own conclusion is that this is to be found in "relations." Our words for the different shades of the beautiful are expressive of notions (acquired by experience through the senses) of order, proportion, symmetry, unity, and so forth. But, after all, the real question remains unanswered—what makes some relations beautiful, and others not so; and the same objects beautiful to me, and indifferent to you; and the same object beautiful to me to-day, and indifferent or disgusting to me to-morrow? Diderot does, it is true, enumerate twelve sources of such diversity of judgment, in different races, ages, individuals,

<sup>1</sup> x. 124-5.<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres*, x.

moods, but their force depends upon the importation into the conception of beauty of some more definite element than the bare idea of relation. Some sentences show that he came very near to the famous theory of Alison, that beauty is only attributed to sounds and sights, where, and because, they recall what is pleasing, sublime, pathetic, and set our ideas and emotions flowing in one of these channels. But he does not get fairly on the track of either Alison's, or any other decisive and marking adjective, with which to qualify his *rappor*ts. He wastes some time, moreover, in trying to bring within the four corners of his definition some uses of the terms of beauty, which are really only applied to objects by way of analogy, and are not meant to predicate the beautiful in any literal or scientific sense.

There is no more interesting department of æsthetic inquiry than the relations of the arts to one another, and the nature of the delimitations of the provinces of poetry, painting, sculpture, music. Diderot, from the very beginning of his career, had turned his thoughts to this intricate subject. In his letter on Deaf Mutes (1751) he had stated the problem—to collect the common beauties of poetry, painting, and music; to show their analogies; to explain how the poet, the painter, and the musician render the same image; to seize the fugitive emblems of their expression. Why should a situation that is admirable in a poem become ridiculous in a painting? For instance, what is it that prevents a painter from reproducing the moment when Neptune raises his head above the tossing waters, as he is represented in Virgil:

Interea magno misceri murmure pontum,  
Emissamque hiemem sensit Neptunus, et imis  
Stagna refusa vadis; graviter commotus, et alto  
Prospiciens, summâ placidum caput extulit undâ.

Diderot's answer to the question is an anticipation of the main position of the famous little book which appeared fifteen years afterwards, and which has been well described as the Organum of

<sup>2</sup> It is to be observed also that he shows true perspicacity in connecting the difficulty of transforming a poetic into a pictorial description, with the kindred difficulty of translating a finished poem in one language into another language. See also xi. 107.

æsthetic cultivation. In *Laocoön* Lessing contends against Spence, the author of *Polymetis*, against Caylus, and others of his contemporaries, that poetry and painting are divided from one another in aim, in effects, in reach, by the limits set upon each by the nature of its own material.<sup>1</sup> So Diderot says that the painter could not seize the Virgilian moment, because a body that is partially immersed in water is disfigured by an effect of refraction, which a faithful painter would be bound to reproduce ; because the image of the body could not be seen transparently through the stormy waters, and therefore the god would have the appearance of being decapitated ; because it is indispensable, if you would avoid the impression of a surgical amputation, that some visible portion of hidden limbs should be there to inform us of the existence of the rest.<sup>2</sup> He takes another instance, where a description that is admirable in poetry, would be insupportable in painting. Who, he asks, could bear upon canvas the sight of Polyphemus grinding between his teeth the bones of one of the companions of Ulysses ? Who could see without horror a giant holding a man in his enormous mouth, with blood dripping over his head and breast ?

Among the many passages in which Diderot touches on the differences between poetry and painting, none is more just and true than that in which he implores the poet not to attempt description of details : " True taste fastens on one or two characteristics, and leaves the rest to imagination. 'Tis when Armida advances with noble mien in the midst of the ranks of the army of Godfrey, and when the generals begin to look at one another with jealous eyes, that Armida is beautiful to us. It is when Helen passes before the old men of Troy, and they all cry out—it is then that Helen is beautiful. And it is when Ariosto describes Alcina from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, that notwithstanding the grace, the facility, the soft elegance of his verse, Alcina is not beautiful. He shows me everything ; he leaves me nothing to do ; he makes me wearied and impatient. If a figure walks, describe to me its carriage and its lightness ; I will undertake the rest. If it is stooping, speak to me only of

<sup>1</sup> Lessing appears to have been directly led to this by Aristotle. See Gotschlich's *Lessing's Aristotelische Studien*, p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres*, i. 382, 403.

arms and shoulders; I will take all else on myself. If you do more, you confuse the kinds of work; you cease to be a poet, and become a painter or sculptor. One single trait, a great trait; leave the rest to my imagination. That is true taste, great taste." <sup>1</sup> And then he quotes with admiration Ovid's line of the goddess of the seas:

Nec brachia longo  
Margine terrarum porrexerat Amphitrite.

Quel image! Quels bras! Quel prodigieux mouvement! Quelle figure! and so forth, after Diderot's manner.

Nobody will compare these detached and fragmentary deliverances with the full and easy mastery which Lessing, in *Laocoön* and its unfinished supplements, exhibits over the many ramifications of his central idea. We can only notice that Diderot had a foot on the track, along which Lessing afterwards made such signal progress. The reader who cares to measure the advantage of Lessing's more serious and concentrated attention to his subject, may compare the twelfth chapter of *Laocoön* with Diderot's criticism on Doyen's painting of the Battle between Diomedes and Aeneas.<sup>2</sup> As we see how near Diderot came to the real and decisive truths of all these matters, and yet how far he remains from the full perception of what a little consecutive study must have revealed to his superior genius, we can only think painfully of his avowal—"I have not the consciousness of having employed the half of my strength: *jusqu'à présent je n'ai que baguenaudé.*"

On the great art of music Diderot has said little that is worth attending to. Bemetzrieder, a German musician, who taught Diderot's daughter to play on the clavecin, wrote an elementary book called *Lessons on the Clavecin and Principles of Harmony*. This is pronounced by the modern teachers to be not less than contemptible. Diderot, however, with his usual boundless good nature, took the trouble to set the book in a series of dialogues, in which teacher, pupil, and a philosopher deal in all kinds of elaborate amenities, and pay one another many compliments. It reminds one of the old Hebrew grammar which is couched in the form of *Conversations with a Duchess*—"Your Grace having

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xi. 328.

<sup>2</sup> *Salon de 1761*; *Œuvres*, v. 140.

kindly condescended to approve of the plan that I have sketched. All this your Grace probably knows already, but your Grace has probably never attempted," and so forth.

The unwise things that men of letters have written from a good-natured wish to help their friends, are not so numerous that we need be afraid of extending to them a good-natured pardon. The beauty of Diderot's *Salons* is remarkable enough to cover a multitude of sins in other arts. There are few other compositions in European literature which show so well how criticism of art itself may become a fine art.

## CHAPTER XII.

### ST. PETERSBURG AND THE HAGUE.

“WHAT would you say of the owner of an immense palace, who should spend all his life in going up from the cellars to the attics, and going down from attics to cellar, instead of sitting quietly in the midst of his family? That is the image of the traveller.” Yet Diderot, whose words these are, resolved at the age of sixty to undertake no less formidable a journey than to the remote capital on the shores of the Neva. It had come into his head, or perhaps others had put it into his head, that he owed a visit to his imperial benefactress whose bounty had rendered life easier to him. He had recently made the acquaintance of two Russian personages of consideration. One of them was the Princess Dashkow, who was believed to have taken a prominent part in that confused conspiracy of 1762, which ended in the murder of Peter III. by Alexis Orloff, and the elevation of Catherine II. to the throne. Her services at that critical moment had not prevented her disgrace, if indeed they were not its cause, and in 1770 the Princess set out on her travels. Horace Walpole has described the curiosity of the London world to see the Muscovite Alecto, the accomplice of the northern Athaliah, the amazon who had taken part in a revolution when she was only nineteen. In England she made a pleasant impression, in spite of eyes of “a very Catiline fierceness.” She was equally delighted with England, and when she went on from London to Paris, she took very little trouble to make friends in the capital of the rival nation. Diderot seems to

have been her only intimate. The Princess (1770) called nearly every afternoon at his door, carried him off to dinner, and kept him talking and declaiming until the early hours of the next morning. The "hurricanes of his enthusiastic nature" delighted her, and she remembered for years afterwards how on one occasion she excited him to such a pitch that he sprang from his chair as if by machinery, strode rapidly up and down the room, and spat upon the floor with passion.<sup>1</sup>

The Prince Galitzin was a Russian friend of greater importance. Prince Galitzin was one of those foreigners, like Holbach, Grimm, Galiani, who found themselves more at home in Paris than anywhere else in the world. Living mostly among artists and men of letters, he became an established favourite. With Diderot's assistance (1767) he acquired for the Empress many of the pictures that adorn the great gallery at St. Petersburg, and Diderot praises his knowledge of the fine arts, the reason being that he has that great principle of true taste, the *belle âme*.<sup>2</sup> He wrote eclogues in French, and he attempted the more useful but more difficult task of writing in the half-formed tongue of his own country an account of the great painters of Italy and Holland.<sup>3</sup> Diderot makes the pointed remark about him, that he believed in equality of ranks by instinct, which is better than believing in it by reflection.<sup>4</sup> It was through the medium of this friendly and intelligent man that the Empress had acted in the purchase of Diderot's library. In 1769 he was appointed Russian minister at the Hague, and his chief ground for delight at the appointment was that it brought him within reach of his friends in Paris.

Diderot set out on his expedition some time in the summer of 1773—the date also of Johnson's memorable tour to the Hebrides—and his first halt was at the Dutch capital, then at the distance of a four days' journey from Paris. Here he remained for many weeks, in some doubt whether or not to persist in the project of a more immense journey. He passed most of his time with the Prince and Princess Galitzin, as between a good brother and a

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Princess Dashkoff* (vol. ii.). By Mrs. Bradford, an English companion and friend of the Princess. (London, 1840.) See Diderot's account of her, *Œuvres*, xvii. 487. Compare Horace Walpole's *Letters*, v. 266.

<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres*, xviii. 239.

<sup>3</sup> Grimm, *Cor. Lit.* xv. 18. Diderot, xviii. 251.

<sup>4</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 250.

good sister. Their house, he notices, had once been the residence of Barneveldt. Men like Diderot are the last persons to think of their own historic position, else we might have expected to find him musing on the saving shelter which this land of freedom and tolerance had given to more than one of his great precursors in the literature of emancipation. Descartes had found twenty years of priceless freedom (1629-1649) among the Dutch burghers. The ruling ideas of the *Encyclopædia* came in direct line from Bayle (d. 1706) and Locke (d. 1704), and both Bayle and Locke, though in different measures, owed their security to the stout valour with which the Dutch defended their own land, and taught the English how to defend theirs, against the destructive pretensions of Catholic absolutism. Of these memories Diderot probably thought no more than Descartes thought about the learning of Grotius or the art of Rembrandt. It was not the age, nor was his the mind, for historic sentimentalism. "The more I see of this country," he wrote to his good friends in Paris, "the more I feel at home in it. The soles, fresh herrings, turbot, perch, are all the best people in the world. The walks are charming; I do not know whether the women are all very sage, but with their great straw hats, their eyes fixed on the ground, and the enormous fichus spread over their bosoms, they have the air of coming back from prayers or going to confession." Diderot did not fail to notice more serious things than this. His remarks on the means of travelling with most profit are full of sense, and the account which he wrote of Holland shows him to have been as widely reflective and observant as we should have expected him to be.<sup>1</sup> It will be more convenient to say something on this, in connection with the stay which he again made at the Hague on his return from his pilgrimage to Russia.

After many hesitations the die was cast. Nariskin, a court chamberlain, took charge of the philosopher, and escorted him in an excellent carriage along the dreary road that ended in the capital reared by Peter the Great among the northern fogs. It is worth while to digress for a few moments, to mark shortly the difference in social and intellectual conditions between the philosopher's own city and the city for which he was bound, and to

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xviii. 365, 471.



touch on the significance of his journey. We can only in this way understand the position of the Encyclopædists in Europe, and see why it is interesting to the student of the history of Western civilization to know something about them. It is impossible to have a clear idea of the scope of the revolutionary philosophy, as well as of the singular pre-eminence of Paris over the western world, until we have placed ourselves, not only at Ferney and Grandval, and in the parlours of Madame Geoffrin and Mademoiselle Lespinasse, but also in palaces at Florence, Berlin, Vienna, and St. Petersburg.

From Holland with its free institutions, its peaceful industry, its husbanded wealth, its rich and original art, its great political and literary tradition, to go to Russia was to measure an arc of Western progress, and to retrace the steps of the genius of civilization. The political capital of Russia represented a forced and artificial union between old and new conditions. In St. Petersburg, says an on-looker, were united the age of barbarism and the age of civilization, the tenth century and the eighteenth, the manners of Asia and the manners of Europe, the rudest Scythians and the most polished Europeans, a brilliant and proud aristocracy and a people sunk in servitude. On one side were elegant fashions, magnificent dresses, sumptuous repasts, splendid feasts, theatres like those which gave grace and animation to the select circles of London or Paris: on the other side, shopkeepers in Asiatic dress, coachmen, servants, and peasants clad in sheepskins, wearing long beards, fur caps, and long fingerless gloves of skin, with short axes hanging from their leathern girdles. The thick woollen bands round their feet and legs resembled a rude cothurnus, and the sight of these uncouth figures reminded one who had seen the bas-reliefs on Trajan's column at Rome, of the Scythians, the Dacians, the Goths, the Roxolani, who had been the terror of the Empire.<sup>1</sup> Literary cultivation was confined to almost the smallest possible area. Oriental as Russia was in many respects, it was the opposite of oriental in one: women were then, as they are still sometimes said to be in Russia, more cultivated and advanced than men. Many of them could speak half-a-dozen languages, could play on several instruments, and were familiar

<sup>1</sup> Ségur's *Mém.* ii. 230.

with the works of the famous poets of France, Italy, and England. Among the men, on the contrary, outside of a few exceptional families about the court, the vast majority were strangers to all that was passing beyond the limits of their own country. The few who had travelled and were on an intellectual level with their century, were as far removed from the rest of their countrymen as Englishmen are removed from Iroquois.

To paint the court of Catherine in its true colours, it has been said that one ought to have the pen of Procopius. It was a hot-bed of corruption, intrigue, jealousy, violence, hatred. One day, surrounded by twenty-seven of her courtiers, Catherine said : " If I were to believe what you all say about one another, there is not one of you who does not richly deserve to have his head cut off." A certain princess was notorious for her inhuman barbarity. One day she discovered that one of her attendants was with child ; in a frenzy she pursued the hapless Callisto from chamber to chamber, came up with her, dashed in her skull with a heavy weapon, and finally in a delirium of passion ripped up her body. When two nobles had a quarrel, they fell upon one another then and there like drunken navvies, and Potemkin had an eye gouged out in a court brawl. Such horrors give us a measure of the superior humanity of Versailles, and enable us also in passing to see how duelling could be a sign of a higher civilization. The reigning passions were love of money and the gratification of a coarse vanity. Friendship, virtue, manners, delicacy, probity, said one witness, are here merely words, void of all meaning. The tone in public affairs was as low as in those of private conduct. I might as well, says Sir G. Macartney, quote Clarke and Tillotson at the divan of Constantinople, as invoke the authority of Puffendorf and Grotius here.

The character of the Empress herself has been more disputed than that of the society in which she was the one imposing personage. She stands in history with Elizabeth of England, with Catherine de' Medici, with Maria Theresa, among the women who have been like great men. Of her place in the record of the creation of that vast empire which begins with Prussia and ends with China, we have not here to speak. The materials for knowing her and judging her are only in our own time becoming

accessible.<sup>1</sup> As usual, the mythic elements that surrounded her like a white fog from the northern seas out of which she loomed like a portent, are rapidly disappearing, and are replaced by the outlines of ordinary humanity, with more than the ordinary human measure of firmness, resolution, and energetic grasp of the facts of her position in the world.

We must go from the philosophers to the men of affairs for a true picture. These tell us that she offered an unprecedented mixture of courage and weakness, of knowledge and incompetence, of firmness and irresolution ; passing in turn from the most opposite extremes, she presented a thousand diverse surfaces, until at last the observer had to content himself with putting her down as a consummate comedian. She had no ready apprehension. Too refined a pleasantry was thrown away upon her, and there was always a chance of her reversing its drift. No playful reference to the finances, or the military force, or even to the climate of her empire, was ever taken in good part.<sup>2</sup> The political part was the serious part of her nature. Catherine had the literary tastes, but not the literary skill, of Frederick. She is believed, on good evidence, to have written for the use of her grandsons not only an Abridgment of Russian History, but a volume of Moral Tales.<sup>3</sup> The composition of moral tales was entirely independent of morality. Just as Lewis xv. had a long series of Châteauroux, Pompadours, Dubarrys, so Catherine had her Orloffs and Potemkins, and a countless host of obscure and miscellaneous Wassilt-

<sup>1</sup> The Imperial Historical Society are publishing a *Recueil Général* of documents, many of which shed an interesting light on Catherine's intercourse with the men of letters. In the Archives of the House of Woronzow (especially vol. xii.), amid much of what for our purpose is chaff, are a few grains of what is interesting. M. Rambaud, the author of the learned work on the Greek Empire in the Tenth Century, gave interesting selections from these sources in two articles in the *Revue des deux Mondes* for February and April, 1877. Besides what is to be gathered from such well-known authorities as William Tooke, Ségur, Dashkoff, there are many interesting pages in the memoirs of that attractive and interesting person, the Prince de Ligne. The passages from English and French despatches I have taken from an anonymous but authentic work published at Berlin in 1858, *La Cour de la Russie il y a cent ans : 1725-83 : extraits des dépêches des Ambassadeurs anglais et français*. Catherine's own Memoirs, published in London in 1859 by Alexander Herzen, are perhaps too doubtful.

<sup>2</sup> *Mém. du Prince de Ligne*, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ségur, 219.

chikows, Zavadowskys, Zoriczes, Korsaks. On the serious side, Lewis XIV. was her great pattern and idol. She resented criticism on that renowned memory, as something personal to herself. To her business as sovereign—*mon petit ménage*, as she called the control of her huge formless empire—she devoted as much indefatigable industry as Lewis himself had done in his best days. Notwithstanding all her efforts to improve her country, she was not popular, and never won the affection of her subjects; but she probably cared less for the opinion and sentiment of Russia than for the applause of Europe. Tragedy displeases her, writes the French minister, and comedy wearies her; she does not like music; her table is without any sort of exquisiteness; in a garden she cares only for roses; her only taste is to build and to drill her court, for the taste that she has for reigning, and for making a great figure in the universe, is really not so much taste as a downright absorbing passion.

Gunning, the English chargé d'affaires, insists that the motive of all her patriotic labours was not benevolence, but an insatiable and unbounded thirst for fame. "If it were not so, we must charge her with an inconsistency amounting to madness, for undertaking so many immense works of public utility, such as the foundation of colleges and academies on a most extensive plan and at an enormous outlay, and then leaving them incomplete, not even finishing the buildings for them." They had served the purpose of making foreigners laud the glory of the Semiramis of the north, and that was enough. The arts and sciences, said the French minister, have plenty of academies here, but the academies have few subjects and fewer pupils. How could there be pupils in a country where there is nobody who is not either a courtier, a soldier, or a slave? The Princess Sophie of Anhalt, long before she dreamed of becoming the Czarina Catherine II., had been brought up by a French governess, and the tastes that her governess had implanted grew into a passion for French literature, which can only be compared to the same passion in Frederick the Great. Catherine only continued a movement that had already in the reign of her predecessor gone to a considerable length. The social reaction against German political predominance had been accompanied by a leaning to France. French

professors in art and literature had been tempted to Moscow, the nobles sent to Paris for their clothes and their furniture, and a French theatre was set up in St. Petersburg, where the nobles were forced to attend the performances under pain of a fine. Absentees and loiterers were hurried to their boxes by horse-patrols.

Catherine was more serious and intelligent than this in her pursuit of French culture. She had begun with the books in which most of the salt of old France was to be found, with Rabelais, Scarron, Montaigne; she cherished Molière and Corneille; and of the writers of the eighteenth century, apart from Voltaire, the author of *Gil Blas* was her favourite. Such a list tells its own tale of a mind turned to what is masculine, racy, pungent, and thoroughly *spid*. "I am a Gauloise of the north," she said, "I only understand the old French; I do not understand the new. I made up my mind to get something out of your gentry, the learned men in *ist*: I have tried them; I made some of them come here; I occasionally wrote to them; they wearied me to death, and never understood me; there was only my good protector, Voltaire. Do you know it was Voltaire who made me the fashion?"<sup>1</sup> This was a confidential revelation, made long after most of the philosophers were dead. We might have penetrated the secret of her friendship for such a man as Diderot, even with less direct evidence than this. It was the vogue of the philosophers, and not their philosophy that made Catherine their friend. They were the great interest of Europe at this time, just as Greek scholars had been its interest in one century, painters in another, great masters of religious controversy in a third. "What makes the great merit of France," said Voltaire, "what makes its unique superiority, is a small number of sublime or delightful men of genius, who cause French to be spoken at Vienna, at Stockholm, and at Moscow. Your ministers, your intendants, your chief secretaries have no part in all this glory." This vogue of the philosophers brought the whole literature of their country into universal repute. In the depths of the Crimea a khan of the Tartars took a delight in having Tartufe and the Bourgeois Gentilhomme read aloud to him.<sup>2</sup>

As soon as Catherine came into power (1762), she at once

<sup>1</sup> To the Prince de Ligne.

<sup>2</sup> Rambaud, p. 573.

applied herself to make friends in this powerful region. It was a matter of course that she should begin with the omnipotent pontiff at Ferney. Graceful verses from Voltaire were as indispensable an ornament to a crowned head as a diadem, and Catherine answered with compliments that were perhaps more sincere than his verses. She wonders how she can repay him for a bundle of books that he had sent to her, and at last bethinks herself that nothing will please the lover of mankind so much as the introduction of inoculation into the great empire ; so she sends for Dr. Dimsdale from England, and submits to the unfamiliar rite in her own sacred person. Presents of furs are sent to the hermit of the Alps, and he is told how fortunate the imperial messenger counts himself in being despatched to Ferney. What flattered Voltaire more than furs, was Catherine's promptitude and exactness in keeping him informed of her military and political movements against Turkey. It made him a centre of European intelligence in more senses than one, and helped him in his lifelong battle to pose, in his letters at least, as the equal of his friend, the King of Prussia. For D'Alembert the Empress professed an admiration only less than she felt for Voltaire. She was eager that he should come to Russia to superintend the instruction of the young Grand-Duke. But D'Alembert was too prudent to go to St. Petersburg, as he was too prudent to go to Berlin. Montesquieu had died five years before her accession, but his influence remained. She habitually called the Spirit of Laws the breviary of kings, and when she drew up her Instruction for a new code, she acknowledged how much she had pillaged from Montesquieu. "I hope," she said, "that if from the other world he sees me at work, he will forgive my plagiarism for the sake of the twenty millions of men who will benefit by it." In truth the twenty millions of men got very little benefit indeed by the code. Montesquieu's own method might have taught her that not even absolute power can force the civil system of free labour into a society resting on serfdom. But it is not surprising that Catherine was no wiser than more democratic reformers who had drunk from the French springs. Or probably she had a lower estimate in her own heart of the value of her code for practical purposes, than it suited her to disclose to a Parisian philosopher.

Catherine did not forget that, though the French at this time were pre-eminent in the literature of new ideas, yet there were meritorious and useful men in other countries. One of her correspondents was Zimmermann of Hanover, whose essay on Solitude the shelves of no second-hand bookseller's shop is ever without. She had tried hard to bribe Beccaria to leave Florence for St. Petersburg. She succeeded in persuading Euler to return to a capital whither he had been invited many years before by the first Catherine, and where he now remained.

Both Catherine's position and her temperament made the society of her own sex of little use or interest to her. "I don't know whether it is custom or inclination," she wrote, "but somehow I can never carry on conversation except with men. There are only two women in the world with whom I can talk for half-an-hour at once." Yet among her most intimate correspondents was one woman well known in the Encyclopædic circle. She kept up an active exchange of letters with Madame Geoffrin—that interesting personage, who though belonging to the bourgeoisie, and possessing not a trace of literary genius, yet was respectfully courted not only by Catherine, but by Stanislas, Gustavus, and Joseph II.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole then we must regard Catherine's European correspondence as at least in some measure the result of political calculation. Its purposes, as has been said, were partly those to which in our own times some governments devote a Reptile-fund. There is a letter from the Duchesse de Choiseul to Madame du Deffand, her intimate friend, and the friend of so many of the literary circle, in which the secret of the relations between Catherine and the men of letters is very plainly told. "All that," she writes—protection of arts and sciences—"is mere luxury and a caprice of fashion in our age. All such pompous jargon is the product of vanity, not of principles or of reflection. . . . The Empress of Russia has another object in protecting literature; she has had sense enough to feel that she had need of the protection of the men of letters. She has flattered herself that their base praises would cover with an impenetrable veil in the eyes of her contemporaries and of posterity, the crimes with which she has astonished the universe and revolted humanity. . . . The men of letters, on

<sup>1</sup> See M. Mouy's Introduction to her Correspondence with Stanislas.

the other hand, flattered, cajoled, caressed by her, are vain of the protection that they are able to throw over her, and dupes of the coquetries that she lavishes on them. These people who say and believe that they are the instructors of the masters of the world, sink so low as actually to take a pride in the protection that this monster seems in her turn to accord to them, simply because she sits on a throne."<sup>1</sup>

In short, the monarchs of the north understood and used the new forces of the men of letters, whom their own sovereign only recognised to oppress. The contrast between the liberalism of the northern sovereigns, and the obscurantism of the court of France, was never lost from sight. Marmontel's *Belisarius* was condemned by the Sorbonne, and burnt at the foot of the great staircase of the Palace of Justice; in Russia a group of courtiers hastened to translate it, and the Empress herself undertook one chapter of the work. Diderot, who was not allowed to enter the French Academy, was an honoured guest at the Russian palace. For all this Catherine was handsomely repaid. When Diderot visited St. Petersburg, Voltaire congratulated the Empress on seeing that unique man; but Diderot is not, he added, "the only Frenchman who is an enthusiast for your glory. We are lay missionaries who preach the religion of Saint Catherine, and we can boast that our church is tolerably universal."<sup>2</sup> We have already seen Catherine's generosity in buying Diderot's books, and paying him for guarding them as her librarian. "I should never have expected," she says, "that the purchase of a library would bring me so many fine compliments; all the world is bepraising me about M. Diderot's library. But now confess, you to whom humanity is indebted for the strong support that you have given to innocence and virtue in the person of Calas, that it would have been cruel and unjust to separate a student from his books."<sup>3</sup> "Ah, madam," replies the most graceful of all courtiers, "let your imperial majesty forgive me; no, you are not the aurora borealis; you are assuredly the most brilliant star of the north, and never was there one so beneficent as you. Andromeda, Perseus, Callisto, are not your equals. All these stars would have left Diderot to

<sup>1</sup> *Corresp. Complète de Mme. du Deffand*, i. 115. (Ed. 1877.) June, 1767.

<sup>2</sup> November 1, 1773.

<sup>3</sup> November, 1766.



die of starvation. He was persecuted in his own country, and your benefactions came thither to seek him! Lewis XIV. was less munificent than your majesty: he rewarded merit in foreign countries, but other people pointed it out to him, whereas you, madame, go in search of it and find it for yourself. Your generous pains to establish freedom of conscience in Poland, are a piece of beneficence that the human race must ever celebrate.”<sup>2</sup>

When the first Partition of Poland took place seven years later, Catherine found that she had not cultivated the friendship of the French philosophers to no purpose. The action of the dominant party in Poland enabled Catherine to take up a line which touched the French philosophers in their tenderest part. The Polish oligarchy was Catholic, and imposed crushing disabilities on the non-Catholic part of the population. “At the slightest attempt in favour of the non-Catholics,” King Stanislas writes to Madame Geoffrin, of the Diet of 1764, “there arose such a cry of fanaticism! The difficulty as to the naturalization of foreigners, the contempt for *roturiers* and the oppression of them, and Catholic intolerance, are the three strongest national prejudices that I have to fight against in my countrymen; they are at bottom good folk, but their education and ignorance render them excessively stubborn on these three heads.” Poland in short reproduced in an aggravated and more barbaric form those evils of Catholic feudalism, in which the philosophers saw the arch-curse of their own country. Catherine took the side of the Dissidents, and figured as the champion of religious toleration. Toleration was chief among the philosophic watchwords, and seeing that great device on her banners, the Encyclopædic party asked no further questions. So, with the significant exception of Rousseau, they all abstained from the cant about the Partition which has so often been heard from European liberals in later days. And so with reference to more questionable transactions of an earlier date, no one could guess from the writings of the philosophers that Catherine had ever been suspected of uniting with her husband in a plot to poison the Empress Elizabeth, and then uniting with her lover in a plot to strangle her husband. “I am quite aware,” said Voltaire, “that she is reproached with some bagatelles in the matter of her

<sup>2</sup> December 22, 1766.

<sup>2</sup> *Corresp.* pp. 135, 144, &c.

husband, but these are family affairs with which I cannot possibly think of meddling."

One curious instance of Catherine's sensibility to European opinion is connected with her relations to Diderot. Rulhière, afterwards well known in literature as a historian, began life as secretary to Breteuil, in the French embassy at St. Petersburg. An eyewitness of the tragedy which seated Catherine on the throne, he wrote an account of the events of the revolution of 1762. This piquant narrative, composed by a young man who had read Tacitus and Sallust, was circulated in manuscript among the salons of Paris (1768). Diderot had warned Rulhière that it was infinitely dangerous to speak about princes, that not everything that is true is fit to be told, that he could not be too careful of the feelings of a great sovereign who was the admiration and delight of her people. Catherine pretended that a mere secretary of an embassy could know very little about the real springs and motives of the conspiracy. Diderot had described the manuscript as painting her in a commanding and imperious attitude. "There was nothing of that sort," she said; "it was only a question of perishing with a madman, or saving oneself with the multitude who insisted on coming to the rescue." What she saw was that the manuscript must be bought, and she did her best first to buy the author, and then, when this failed, to have him locked up in the Bastille. She succeeded in neither. The French government were not sorry to have a scourge to their hands. All that Diderot could procure from Rulhière was a promise that the work should not be published during the Empress's lifetime. It was actually given to the world in 1797. When Diderot was at St. Petersburg, the Empress was importunate to know the contents of the manuscript, which he had seen, but of which she was unable to procure a copy. "As far as you are concerned," he said, "if you attach great importance, Madame, to the decencies and virtues, the worn-out rags of your sex, this work is a satire against you; but if large views and masculine and patriotic designs concern you more, the author depicts you as a great princess." The Empress answered that this only increased her desire to read the book. Diderot himself truly enough described it as a historic romance, containing a mixed tissue of lies and truths that posterity would compare to

a chapter of Tacitus.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the only piece of it that posterity will really value is the page in which the writer describes Catherine's personal appearance; her broad and open brow, her large and slightly double chin, her hair of resplendent chestnut, her eyes of a brilliant brown into which the reflections of the light brought shades of blue. "Pride," he says, "is the true characteristic of her physiognomy. The amiability and grace which are there too, only seem to penetrating eyes to be the effect of an extreme desire to please, and these seductive expressions somehow let the design of seducing be rather too clearly seen."

The first Frenchman whom Catherine welcomed in person to her court was Falconet, of whose controversy with the philosopher we shall have a few words to say in a later chapter. This introduction to her was due to Diderot. She had entreated him to find for her a sculptor who would undertake a colossal statue of Peter the Great. Falconet was at the height of his reputation in his own country; in leaving it he seems to have been actuated by no other motive than the desire of an opportunity of erecting an immense monument of his art, though Diderot's eloquence was not wanting. Falconet had the proverbial temperament of artistic genius. Diderot called him the Jean Jacques of sculpture. He had none of the rapacity for money which has distinguished so many artists in their dealings with foreign princes, but he was irritable, turbulent, restless, intractable. He was a chivalrous defender of poorer brethren in art, and he was never a respecter of persons. His feuds with Betzki, the Empress's faithful factotum, were as acrid as the feuds between Voltaire and Maupertuis. Betzki had his own ideas about the statue that was to do honour to the founder of the Empire, and he insisted that the famous equestrian figure of Marcus Aurelius should be the model. Falconet was a man of genius, and he retorted that what might be good for Marcus Aurelius would not be good for Peter the Great. The courtly battle does not concern us, though some of its episodes offer tempting illustrations of biting French malice. Falconet had his own way, and after the labour of many years, a colossus of bronze bestrode a charger rearing on a monstrous mass of unhewn granite. Catherine took the liveliest interest in

<sup>2</sup> *Satire I. sur les caractères, etc. Œuvres, vi. 313.*

her artist's work, frequently visiting his studio, and keeping up a busy correspondence. With him, as with the others, she insisted that he should stand on no ceremony, and should not spin out his lines with epithets on which she set not the smallest value. She may be said to have encouraged him to pester her with a host of his obscure countrymen in search of a living, and a little colony of Frenchmen whose names tell us nothing, hung about the Russian capital. Diderot's account of this group of his countrymen at St. Petersburg recalls the picture of a corresponding group at Berlin. "Most of the French who are here rend and hate one another, and bring contempt both on themselves and their nation: 'tis the most unworthy set of rascals that you can imagine."<sup>1</sup>

Diderot reached St. Petersburg towards the end of 1773, and he remained some five months, until the beginning of March, 1774. His impulsive nature was shocked by a chilly welcome from Falconet, but at the palace his reception was most cordial, as his arrival had been eagerly anticipated. The Empress always professed to detest ceremony and state. In a letter to Madame Geoffrin she insists, as we have already seen her doing with Falconet, on being treated to no oriental prostrations, as if she were at the court of Persia. "There is nothing in the world so ugly and detestable as greatness. When I go into a room, you would say that I am the head of Medusa: everybody turns to stone. I constantly scream like an eagle against such ways; yet the more I scream, the less are they at their ease. . . . If you came into my room, I should say to you,—Madame, be seated; let us chatter at our ease. You would have a chair in front of me; there would be a table between us. *Et puis des bâtons rompus, tant et plus, c'est mon fort.*"

This is an exact description of her real behaviour to Diderot. On most days he was in her society from three in the afternoon until five or six. Etiquette was banished. Diderot's simplicity and vehemence were as conspicuous and as unrestrained at Tsarskoe-selo as at Grandval or the Rue Taranne. If for a moment the torrent of his improvisation was checked by the thought that he was talking to a great lady, Catherine encouraged him to go on. "Allons," she cried, "*entre hommes tout est permis.*"

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xx. 58.

L The philosopher in the heat of exposition brought his hands down upon the imperial knees with such force and iteration, that Catherine complained that he made them black and blue. She was sometimes glad to seek shelter from such zealous enforcement of truth, behind a strong table. Watchful diplomatists could not doubt that such interviews must have reference to politics. Cathcart, the English ambassador, writes to his government that M. Diderot is still with the Empress at Tsarskoe-selo, "pursuing his political intrigues." And, amazing as it may seem, the French minister and the French ambassador both of them believed that they had found in this dreaming rhapsodical genius a useful diplomatic instrument. "The interviews between Catherine and Diderot follow one another incessantly, and go on from day to day. He told me, and I have reasons for believing that he is speaking the truth, that he has painted the danger of the alliance of Russia with the King of Prussia, and the advantage of an alliance with us. The Empress, far from blaming this freedom, encouraged him by word and gesture. 'You are not fond of that prince,' she said to Diderot. 'No,' he replied, 'he is a great man, but a bad king, and a dealer in counterfeit coin.' 'Oh,' said she laughing, 'I have had my share of his coin.'"

The first Partition of Poland had been finally consummated in the Polish Diet in the autumn of 1773, a few weeks before Diderot's arrival at St. Petersburg. Lewis xv., now drawing very near to his end, and D'Aiguillon, his minister, had some uneasiness at this opening of the great era of territorial revolution, and looked about in a shiftless way for an ally against Russia and Prussia. England sensibly refused to stir. Then France, as we see, was only anxious to detach Catherine from Frederick. All was shiftless and feeble, and the French government can have known little of the Empress, if they thought that Diderot was the man to affect her strong and positive mind. She told Ségur in later years what success Diderot had with her as a politician.

"I talked much and frequently with him," said Catherine, "but with more curiosity than profit. If I had believed him, everything would have been turned upside down in my kingdom; legislation, administration, finances—all to be turned topsy-turvy to make room for impracticable theories. Yet as I listened more

than I talked, any witness who happened to be present, would have taken him for a severe pedagogue, and me for his humble scholar. Probably he thought so himself, for after some time, seeing that none of these great innovations were made which he had recommended, he showed surprise and a haughty kind of dissatisfaction. Then speaking openly, I said to him : *Mr. Diderot, I have listened with the greatest pleasure to all that your brilliant intelligence has inspired ; and with all your great principles, which I understand very well, one would make fine books, but very bad business. You forget in all your plans of reform the difference in our positions ; you only work on paper, which endures all things ; it opposes no obstacle either to your imagination or to your pen. But I, poor Empress as I am, work on the human skin, which is irritable and ticklish to a very different degree.* I am persuaded that from this moment he pitied me as a narrow and vulgar spirit. For the future he only talked about literature, and politics vanished from our conversation.”<sup>1</sup>

Catherine was mistaken, as we shall see, in supposing that Diderot ever thought her less than the greatest of men. Cathcart, the English ambassador, writes in a sour strain : “ All his letters are filled with panegyrics of the Empress, whom he depicts as above humanity. His flatteries of the Grand Duke have been no less gross, but be it said to the young prince’s honour, he has shown as much contempt for such flatteries as for the mischievous principles of this pretended philosopher.”

Frederick tells D’Alembert that though the Empress overwhelms Diderot with favours, people at St. Petersburg find him tiresome and disputatious, and “ talking the same rigmarole over and over again.” In her letters to Voltaire, Catherine lets nothing of this be seen. She finds Diderot’s imagination inexhaustible, and ranks him among the most extraordinary men that have ever lived ; she delights in his conversation, and his visits have given her the most uncommon pleasure. All this was perhaps true enough. Catherine probably rated the philosopher at his true worth as a great talker and a singular and original genius, but this did not prevent her, any more than it need prevent us, from seeing the limits and measure. She was not one of the weaker heads who

<sup>1</sup> Ségur, iii. 34.

can never be content without either wholesale enthusiasm or wholesale disparagement.

Diderot had a companion who pleased her better than Diderot himself. Grimm came to St. Petersburg at this time to pay his first visit, and had a great success. "The Empress," wrote Madame Geoffrin to King Stanislas, "lavished all her graces on Grimm. And he has everything that is needed to make him worthy of them. Diderot has neither the fineness of perception, nor the delicate tact that Grimm has, and so he has not had the success of Grimm. Diderot is always in himself, and sees nothing in other people that has not some reference to himself. He is a man of a great deal of understanding, but his nature and turn of mind make him good for nothing, and, more than that, would make him a very dangerous person in any employment. Grimm is quite the contrary."<sup>1</sup>

In truth, as we have said before, Grimm was one of the shrewdest heads in the Encyclopædic party; he had much knowledge, a judgment both solid and acute, and a certain easy fashion of social commerce, free from raptures and full of good sense. Yet he was as devoted and ecstatic in his feelings about the Empress as his more impetuous friend. "Here," he says, "was no conversation of leaps and bounds, in which idleness traverses a whole gallery of ideas that have no connection with one another, and weariness draws you away from one object to skim a dozen others. They were talks in which all was bound together, often by imperceptible threads, but all the more naturally, as not a word of what was to be said had been led up to or prepared beforehand." Grimm cannot find words to describe her verve, her stream of brilliant sallies, her dashing traits, her eagle's coup d'œil. No wonder that he used to quit her presence so electrified as to pass half the night in marching up and down his room, beset and pursued by all the fine and marvellous things that had been said. How much of all this is true, and how much of it is the voice of the bewildered courtier, it might be hard to decide. But the rays of the imperial sun did not so far blind his prudence, as to make him accept a pressing invitation to remain permanently in Catherine's service. When Diderot quitted

<sup>1</sup> Mouy's *Corresp. du roi Stanislas*, p. 501.

St. Petersburg, Grimm went to Italy. After an interlude there, he returned to Russia and was at once restored to high favour. When the time came for him to leave her, the Empress gave him a yearly pension of two thousand roubles, or about ten thousand livres, and with a minute considerateness that is said not to be common among the great, she presently ordered that it should be paid in such a form that he should not lose on the exchange between France and Russia. Whether she had a special object in keeping Grimm in good humour, we hardly know. What is certain is that from 1776 until the fall of the French monarchy she kept up a voluminous correspondence with him, and that he acted as an unofficial intermediary between her and the ministers at Versailles. Every day she wrote down what she wished to say to Grimm, and at the end of every three months these daily sheets were made into a bulky packet and despatched to Paris by a special courier, who returned with a similar packet from Grimm. This intercourse went on until the very height of the Revolution, when Grimm at last, in February, 1792, fled from Paris. The Empress's helpful friendship continued to the end of her life (1796).<sup>1</sup>

Diderot arrived at the Hague on his return from Russia in the first week of April (1774), after making a rapid journey of seven hundred leagues in three weeks and a day. D'Alembert had been anxious that Frederick of Prussia should invite Diderot to visit him at Berlin. Frederick had told him that, intrepid reader as he was, he could not endure to read Diderot's books. "There reigns in them a tone of self-sufficiency and an arrogance which revolt the instinct of my freedom. It was not in such a style that Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Gassendi, Bayle, and Newton wrote." D'Alembert replied that the king would judge more favourably of the philosopher's person than of his works; that he would find in Diderot, along with much fecundity, imagination, and knowledge, a gentle heat and a great deal of amenity.<sup>2</sup> Frederick, however, did not send the invitation, and Diderot willingly enough went homeward by the northern route by which he had come. He passed Königsberg, where, if he had known

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoire Historique*, printed in vol. i. of the new edition (1877) of the Correspondence of Grimm and Diderot, by M. Maurice Tourneux.

<sup>2</sup> D'Alembert au Roi de Prusse. Feb. 14, 1774.



it, Kant was then meditating the Critic of Pure Reason. It is hardly probable that Diderot met the famous worthy who was destined to deal so heavy a blow to the Encyclopædic way of thinking, and to leave a name not less illustrious than Frederick or Catherine. A court official was sent in charge of the philosopher. The troubles of posting by the sea-road between Königsberg and Memel had moved him to the composition of some very bad verses on his first journey; and the horror of crossing the Dwina inspired others that were no better on his return. The weather was hard; four carriages were broken in the journey. He expected to be drowned as the ice creaked under his horses' feet at Riga, and he thought that he had broken an arm and a shoulder as he crossed the ferry at Mittau. But all ended well, and he found himself once more under the roof of Prince Galitzin at the Hague. Hence he wrote to his wife and his other friends in Paris, that it must be a great consolation to them to know that he was only separated from them by a journey of four days. That journey was not taken, however, for nearly four months. Diderot had promised the Empress that he would publish a set of the regulations for the various institutions which she had founded for the improvement of her realm. This could only be done, or could best be done, in Holland. His life there was spent as usual in the slavery of proof-sheets, tempered by daily bursts of conversation, rhapsody, discussion, and dreamy contemplation. He made the acquaintance of a certain Björnsthål, a professor of oriental languages at the university of Lund in Sweden, and a few pages in this obscure writer's obscure book contain the only glimpse that we have of the philosopher on his travels.<sup>1</sup> Diderot was as ecstatic in conversation, as we know him to have been in his correspondence, in praise of the august friend whom he had left. The least of his compliments was that she united the charms of Cleopatra to the soul of Cæsar, or sometimes it was, to the soul of Brutus.

"At the Hague," says Björnsthål, "we go about every day with M. Diderot. He has views extending over an incredibly wide field, possesses a vivacity that I cannot describe, is pleasant and friendly in intercourse, and has new and unusual observations to make on

<sup>1</sup> *Briefe aus seinen ausländischen Reisen*, iii. 217-233. (Leipzig, 1780—a German translation from the Swedish.)

every subject. . . . Who could fail to prize him? He is so bright, so full of instruction, has so many new thoughts and suggestions, that nobody can help admiring him. But willingly as he talks when one goes to him, he shows to little advantage in large companies, and that is why he did not please everybody at St. Petersburg. You will easily see the reason why this incomparable man in such companies, where people talk of fashion, of clothes, of frippery, and all other sorts of triviality, neither gives pleasure to others nor finds pleasure himself." And the friendly Swede rises to the height of generalization in the quaint maxim, Where an empty head shines, there a thoroughly cultivated man comes too short.

Björnstähl quotes a saying of Voltaire, that Diderot would have been a poet if he had not wished to be a philosopher—a remark that was rather due perhaps to Voltaire's habitual complaisance, than to any serious consideration of Diderot's qualities. But if he could not be a poet himself, at least he knew Pindar and Homer by heart, and at the Hague he never stirred out without a Horace in his pocket. And though no poet, he was full of poetic sentiment. Scheveningen, the little bathing-place a short distance from the Hague, was Diderot's favourite spot. "It was there," he writes, "that I used to see the horizon dark, the sea covered with white haze, the waves rolling and tumbling, and far out the poor fishermen in their great clumsy boats; on the shore a multitude of women frozen with cold or apprehension, trying to warm themselves in the sun. When the work was at an end and the boats had landed, the beach was covered with fish of every kind. These good people have the simplicity, the openness, the filial and fraternal piety of old time. As the men come down from their boats, their wives throw themselves into their arms, they embrace their fathers and their little ones; each loads himself with fish; the son tosses his father a codfish or a salmon, which the old man carries off in triumph to his cottage, thanking heaven that it has given him so industrious and worthy a son. When he has gone indoors, the sight of the fish rejoices the old man's mate; it is quickly cut in pieces, the less lucky neighbours invited, it is speedily eaten, and the room resounds with thanks to God, and cheerful songs." 1

<sup>1</sup> xvii. 449.

These scenes, with their sea-background, their animation, their broad strokes of the simple, tender, and real in life, may well have been after Diderot's own heart. He often told me, says Björnstähl, that he never found the hours pass slowly in the company of a peasant, or a cobbler, or any handicraftsman, but that he had many a time found them pass slowly enough in the society of a courtier. "For of the one," he said, "one can always ask about useful and necessary things, but the other is mostly, so far as anything useful is concerned, empty and void."

The characteristics of the European capitals a century ago were believed to be hit off in the saying, that each of them would furnish the proper cure for a given defect of character. The over-elegant were to go to London, savages to Paris, bigots to Berlin, rebels to St. Petersburg, people who were too sincere to Rome, the over-learned to Brussels, and people who were too lively to the Hague. Yet the dulness thus charged against the Hague was not universally admitted. Impartial travellers assigned to the talk of cultivated circles there a rank not below that of similar circles in France and England. Some went even further, and declared Holland to have a distinct advantage, because people were never embarrassed either by the levity and sparkling wit of France on the one hand, nor by the depressing reserve and taciturnity of England on the other.<sup>1</sup> Yet Holland was fully within the sphere of the great intellectual commonwealth of the west, and was as directly accessible to the literary influences of the time as it had ever been. If Diderot had inquired into the vernacular productions of the country, he would have found that here also the wave of reaction against French conventions, the tide of English simplicity and domestic sentimentalism, had passed into literature. The *Spectator* and *Clarissa Harlowe* inspired the writers of Holland, as they had inspired Diderot himself.<sup>2</sup>

In erudition, it was still what, even after the death of Scaliger, it had remained through the seventeenth century, the most learned state of Europe; and the elder Hemsterhuys, with such pupils as Ruhnken and Valckenaer, kept up as well as he could the scholarly tradition of Gronovius and Grævius. But the eighteenth

<sup>1</sup> George Forster's *Ansichten vom Niederrhein*, &c. ii. 396 (1790).

<sup>2</sup> Jonckbloet's *Gesch. d. Nederland. Lit.* (German trans.) ii. 502, &c.

century was not the century of erudition. Scholarship had given way to speculation.

Among the interesting persons whom Diderot saw at the Hague, the most interesting is the amiable and learned son of the elder Hemsterhuys, himself by the way not Dutch, but the son of a Frenchman. Hemsterhuys had been greatly interested in what he had heard of Diderot's character,<sup>1</sup> though we have no record of the impression that was made by personal acquaintance. If Diderot was playfully styled the French Socrates, the younger Hemsterhuys won from his friends the name of the Dutch Plàto. The Hollanders pointed to this meditative figure, to his great attainments in the knowledge of ancient literature and art, to his mellowed philosophizing, to his gracious and well-bred style, as a proof that their country was capable of developing both the strength and the sensibility of human nature to their highest point.\* And he has a place in the history of modern speculation. As we think of him and Diderot discussing, we feel ourselves to be placed at a point that seems to command the diverging streams and eddying currents of the time. In this pair, two great tides of thought meet for a moment, and then flow on in their deep appointed courses. For Hemsterhuys, born a Platonist to the core, became a leader of the reaction against the French philosophy of illumination—of sensation, of experience, of the verifiable. He contributed a marked current to the mysticism and pietism which crept over Germany before the French revolution, and to that religious philosophy which became a point of patriotic honour both in Germany and at the Russian Court, after the revolutionary war had seemed to identify the rival philosophy of the Encyclopædists with the victorious fury of the national enemy. Jacobi, a chief of the mystic tribe, had begun the attack on the French with weapons avowedly borrowed from the sentimentalism of Rousseau, but by-and-by he found in Hemsterhuys more genuinely intellectual arguments for his vindication of feeling and the heart against the Encyclopædist claim for the supremacy of the understanding.

Diderot's hostess at the Hague is a conspicuous figure in the

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv. Phil. de Fr. Hemsterhuys*, iii. 141. (Ed. Meyboom.)

<sup>2</sup> Forster, ii. 398. Galiani, *Corresp.* ii. 189.

history of this movement. Prince Galitzin had married the daughter of Frederick's field-marshal, Schmettau. Goethe, who saw her (1797) many years after Diderot was dead, describes her as one of those whom one cannot understand without seeing; as a person not rightly judged unless considered not only in connection, but in conflict, with her time. If she was remarkable to Goethe when fifty years had set their mark upon her, she was even more so to the impetuous Diderot in all the flush and intellectual excitement of her youth. It was to the brilliance and versatility of the Princess Galitzin that her husband's house owed its consideration and its charm. "She is very lively," said Diderot, "very gay, very intelligent; more than young enough, instructed and full of talents; she has read; she knows several languages, as Germans usually do; she plays on the clavecin, and sings like an angel; she is full of expressions that are at once ingenuous and piquant; she is exceedingly kind-hearted."<sup>1</sup> But he could not persuade her to take his philosophy on trust. Diderot is said, by the Princess's biographer, to have been a fervid proselytizer, eager to make people believe "his poems about eternally revolving atoms, through whose accidental encounter the present ordering of the world was developed." The Princess met his brilliant eloquence with a demand for proof. Her ever-repeated *Why?* and *How?* are said to have shown "the hero of atheism his complete emptiness and weakness."<sup>2</sup> In the long run Diderot was completely routed in favour of the rival philosophy. Hemsterhuys became bound to the Princess by the closest friendship, and his letters to her are as striking an illustration as any in literature of the peculiar devotion and admiration which a clever and sympathetic woman may arouse in philosophic minds of a certain calibre—in a Condillac, a Joubert, a D'Alembert, a Mill. Though Hemsterhuys himself never advanced from a philosophy of religion to the active region of dogmatic professions, his disciple could not find contentment on his austere heights. In the very year of Diderot's death (1784) the Princess Galitzin became a catholic, and her son became

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xix. 342.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Katerkamp's *Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem Leben der Fürstinn Amalie von Gallitzin*, p. 45.

not only a catholic, but a zealous missionary of the faith in America.

This, however, was not yet. The patriotic Björnstähl was very anxious that Diderot should go to Stockholm, to see for himself that the Holstein blood was as noble in Sweden as it was in Russia. Diderot replied that he would greatly have liked to see on the throne the sovereign (Gustavus III.) who was so nearly coming to pay him a visit on his own fourth storey in Paris. But he confessed that he was growing homesick, and Stockholm must remain unvisited. In September (1774) Diderot set his face homewards. "I shall gain my fireside," he wrote on the eve of his journey, "never to quit it again for the rest of my life. The time that we count by the year has gone, and the time that we must count by the day comes in its stead. The less one's income, the more important to use it well. I have perhaps half a score of years at the bottom of my wallet. In these ten years, fluxions, rheumatisms, and the other members of that troublesome family will take two or three of them; let us try to economise the seven that are left, for the repose and the small happinesses that a man may promise himself on the wrong side of sixty." The guess was a good one. Diderot lived ten years more, and although his own work in the world was done, they were years of great moment both to France and the world. They witnessed the establishment of a republic in the American colonies, and they witnessed the final stage in the decay of the old monarchy in France. Turgot had been made controller-general in the months before Diderot's return, and Turgot's ministry was the last serious experiment in the direction of orderly reform. The crash that followed resounded almost as loudly at St. Petersburg and in Holland as in France itself, and Catherine, in 1792, ordered all the busts of Voltaire that had adorned the saloons and corridors of her palace, to be thrust ignominiously down into the cellars.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### HELVÉTIUS.

BEFORE proceeding to the closing chapter of Diderot's life, I propose to give a short account of three remarkable books, of all of which he was commonly regarded as the inspirer, which were all certainly the direct and natural work of the Encyclopædic school, and which all play a striking part in the intellectual commotions of the century.

The great attack on the Encyclopædia was made, as we have already seen, in 1758, after the publication of the seventh volume. The same prosecution levelled an angrier blow at Helvétius's famous treatise, *L'Esprit*. It is not too much to say, that of all the proscribed books of the century, that excited the keenest resentment. This arose partly because it came earliest in the literature of attack. It was an audacious surprise. The censor who had allowed it to pass the ordeal of official approval was cashiered, and the author was dismissed from an honorary post in the Queen's household.<sup>1</sup> The indictment described the book as "the code of the most hateful and infamous passions," as a collection into one cover of everything that impiety could imagine, calculated to engender hatred against Christianity and Catholicism. The court condemned the book to be burnt, and, as if to show that the motive was not mere discontent with Helvétius's paradoxes, the same fire consumed Voltaire's fine poem on Natural Religion. Less prejudiced authorities thought nearly as ill of the book, as

<sup>1</sup> Barbier, vii. 137.

the lawyers of the parliament and the doctors of the Sorbonne had thought. Rousseau pronounced it detestable, wrote notes in refutation of its principles, and was inspired by hatred of its doctrine to compose some of the most fervid pages in the Savoyard Vicar's glowing Profession of Faith.<sup>1</sup> Even Diderot, though his friendly feeling for the writer and his general leaning to speculative hardihood warped his judgment so far as to make him rank *L'Esprit* along with Montesquieu's *Spirit of Laws*, and Buffon's *Natural History*, among the great books of the century, still perceived and showed that the whole fabric rested on a foundation of paradox, and that, though there might be many truths of detail in the book, very many of its general principles are false.<sup>2</sup> Turgot described it as a book of philosophy without logic, literature without taste, and morality without goodness.<sup>3</sup>

In the same weighty piece of criticism, which contains in two or three pages so much permanently valuable truth, Turgot proceeds :—"When people wish to attack intolerance and injustice, it is essential in the first place to rest upon just ideas, for inquisitors have an interest in being intolerant, and viziers and subviziers have an interest in maintaining all the abuses of the government. As they are the strongest, you only give them a good excuse by sounding the tocsin against them right and left. I hate despotism as much as most people ; but it is not by declamations that despotism ought to be attacked. And even in despotism there are degrees ; there is a multitude of abuses in despotism, in which the princes themselves have no interest ; there are others which they only allow themselves to practise, because public opinion is not yet fixed as to their injustice, and their mischievous consequences. People deserve far better from a nation for attacking these abuses with clearness, with courage, and above all by interesting the sentiment of humanity, than for any amount of eloquent reproach. Where there is no insult, there is seldom any offence. . . . There is no form of government without certain drawbacks, which the governments themselves would fain have it in their power to remedy, or without abuses which they nearly all intend to repress at least at some future day. We may therefore serve them all by treating questions of the public good in a calm

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xii. 301.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 267-274.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 795.



and solid style ; not coldly, still less with extravagance, but with that interesting warmth which springs from a profound feeling for justice and love of order.”<sup>1</sup>

Of course it is a question whether even in 1758, a generation before the convulsion, it was possible for the French monarchy spontaneously to work out the long list of indispensable improvements ; still, at that date, Turgot might be excused for thinking that the progress which he desired might be attained without the violence to which Helvétius's diatribes so unmistakably pointed. His words, in any case, are worth quoting for their own grave and universal sense, and because they place us exactly at the point of view for regarding *L'Esprit* rightly. He seizes on its political aspect, its assault on government, and the social ordering of the time, as containing the book's real drift. In this, as in the rest of the destructive literature of the first sixty years of the century, the church was no doubt that part of the social foundations against which the assault was most direct and most vindictive, and it was the church, in the case of Helvétius's book, that first took alarm. Indeed, we may say that, from the very nature of things, in whatever direction the revolutionary host moved, they were sure to find themselves confronted by the church. It lay across the track of light at every point. Voltaire pierced its dogma. Rousseau shamed its irreligious temper. Diderot brought into relief the vicious absoluteness of its philosophy. Then came Helvétius and Holbach, not merely with criticism, but with substitutes. Holbach brought a new dogma of the universe, matter and motion, and fortuitous shapes. Helvétius brought a theory of human character, and a new analysis of morals—interest the basis of justice, pleasure the true interpretation of interest, and character the creature of education and laws.

To press such positions as these, was to recast the whole body of opinions on which society rested. As the church was the organ of the old opinions, Helvétius's book was instantly seized by the ecclesiastical authorities in accordance with a perfectly right instinct, and was made the occasion for the first violent raid upon a wholesale scale. When, however, we look beyond the smoke of the ecclesiastical battle, and weigh *L'Esprit* itself on its

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, ii. 795-8.

own merits, we see quite plainly that Helvétius was thinking less of the theological disputes of the day, than of bringing the philosophy of sensation, the philosophy of Locke and Condillac, into the political field, and of deriving from it new standards and new forces for social reconstruction. And in spite of its shallowness and paradoxes, his book did contain the one principle on which, if it had been generally accepted, the inevitable transition might have taken place without a Reign of Terror.

It was commonly said, by his enemies and by his alarmed friends, that vanity and a restless overweening desire for notoriety was the inspiring motive of Helvétius. He came from a German stock. His great-grandfather settled in Holland, where he cured his patients by cunning elixirs, by the powder of ground stag's horn, and the subtle virtues of crocodiles' teeth. His grandfather went to push his fortunes in Paris, where he persuaded the public to accept the healing properties of ipecacuanha, and Lewis XIV. (1689) gave him a short patent for that drug.<sup>1</sup> The medical tradition of the family was maintained in a third generation, for Helvétius's father was one of the physicians of the Queen, and on one occasion performed the doubtful service to humanity of saving the life of Lewis xv. Helvétius, who was born in 1715, turned aside from the calling of his ancestors, and by means of the favour which his father enjoyed at court, obtained a position as farmer-general. This at once made him a wealthy man, but wealth was not enough to satisfy him without fame. He made attempts in various directions, in each case following the current of popularity for the hour. Maupertuis was the hero of a day, and Helvétius accordingly applied himself to become a geometer. Voltaire's brilliant success brought poetry into fashion, and so Helvétius wrote half-a-dozen long cantos on Happiness. Montesquieu caught and held the ear of the town by *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), and Helvétius was acute enough to perceive that speculation upon society would be the great durable interest of his

<sup>1</sup> See Jal's *Dict. Crit.*, p. 676. There is a comparison in *L'Esprit*, which we may assume to have been due to family reminiscence: "Like those Physicians who, in their jealousy of the discovery of the emetic, abused the credulity of a few prelates, to excommunicate a remedy of which the service is so prompt and so salutary," &c.—ii. 23.

time.<sup>1</sup> He at once set to work, and this time he set to work without hurry. In 1751 he threw up his place as farmer-general, and with it an income of between two or three thousand pounds a year,<sup>2</sup> and he then devoted himself for the next seven years to the concoction of a work that was designed to bring him immortal glory. "Helvétius sweated a long time to write a single chapter," if we may believe one of his intimates. He would compose and recompose a passage a score of times. More facile writers looked at him with amazement in his country-house, ruminating for whole mornings on a single page, and pacing his room for hours to kindle his ideas, or to strike out some curious form of expression.<sup>3</sup> The circle of his friends in Paris amused themselves in watching his attempts to force the conversation into the channel of the question that happened to occupy him for the moment. They gave him the satisfaction of discussion, and then they drew him to express his own views. "Then," says Marmontel, "he threw himself into the subject with warmth—as simple, as natural, as sincere as he is systematic and sophistic in his works. Nothing is less like the ingenuousness of his character and ordinary life, than the artificial and premeditated simplicity of his works. Helvétius was the very opposite in his character, of what he professes to believe; he was liberal, generous, unostentatious, and benevolent."<sup>4</sup>

As it happens, there is a very different picture in one of Diderot's writings. While Diderot was on a journey he fell in with a lady who knew Helvétius's country. "She told us that the philosopher at his country seat was the unhappiest of men. He is surrounded by peasants and by neighbours who hate him. They break the windows of his mansion; they ravage his property at night; they cut his trees, and break down his fences. He dares not sally out to shoot a rabbit without an escort. You will ask me why all this? It comes of an unbridled jealousy about his game. His predecessors kept the estate in order with a couple of men and a couple of guns. Helvétius has four-and-

<sup>1</sup> Hume, however, tells a story to the effect that Helvétius tried to dissuade Montesquieu from publishing his great book, as being altogether unworthy of his previous reputation.

<sup>2</sup> Barbier, v. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Morellet, i. 71.

<sup>4</sup> Marmontel, ii. 116.

twenty, and yet he cannot guard his property. The men have a small premium for every poacher that they catch, and they resort to every possible vexation in order to multiply their sorry profit. They are, for that matter, no better than so many poachers who draw wages. The border of his woods was peopled with the unfortunate wretches who had been driven from their homes into pitiful hovels. It is these repeated acts of tyranny that have raised up against him enemies of every kind, and all the more insolent, as Madame N. said, for having found out that the good philosopher is a trifle pusillanimous. I cannot see what he has gained by such a way of managing his property; he is alone on it, he is hated, he is in a constant state of fright. Ah, how much wiser our good Madame Geoffrin, when she said of a trial that tormented her: 'Finish my case. They want my money? I have some; give them money. And what can I do better with money than buy tranquillity with it?' In Helvétius's place, I should have said: 'They kill a few hares, or a few rabbits; let them kill. The poor creatures have no shelter save my woods, let them remain there.'"<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, there are well-attested stories of Helvétius's munificence. There is one remarkable testimony to his wide renown for good-nature. After the younger Pretender had been driven out of France, he had special reasons on some occasion for visiting Paris. He wrote to Helvétius that he had heard of him as a man of the greatest probity and honour in France, and that to Helvétius, therefore, he would trust himself. Helvétius did not refuse the dangerous compliment, and he concealed the prince for two years in his house.<sup>2</sup> He was as benevolent, where his vanity was less pleasantly flattered. More than one man of letters, including Marivaux, was indebted to him for a yearly pension, and his house was as open to the philosophic tribe as Holbach's. Morellet has told us that the conversation was not so good and so consecutive as it was at the Baron's. "The mistress of the house, drawing to her side the people who pleased her best, and not choosing the worst of the company, rather broke the party up. She was no fonder of philosophy than Madame Holbach

<sup>1</sup> Voyage à Bourbonne. *Œuv.*, xvii. 344.    <sup>2</sup> Burton's *Hume*, ii. 464.

was fond of it; but the latter, by remaining in a corner without saying a word, or else chatting in a low voice with her friends, was in nobody's way; whereas Madame Helvétius, with her beauty, her originality, and her piquant turn of nature, threw out anything like philosophic discussion. Helvétius had not the art of sustaining or animating it. He used to take one of us to a window, open some question that he had in hand, and try to draw out either some argument for his own view or some objection to it, for he was always composing his book in society. Or more frequently still, he would go out shortly after dinner to the opera or elsewhere, leaving his wife to do the honours of the house." <sup>1</sup> In spite of all this, Helvétius's social popularity became considerable. This, however, followed his attainment of celebrity, for when *L'Esprit* was published, Diderot scarcely met him twice in a year, and D'Alembert's acquaintance with him was of the slightest. And there must, we should suppose, have been some difficulty in cordially admitting even a penitent member of the abhorred class of farmers-general, among the esoteric group of the philosophic opposition. There was much point in Turgot's contemptuous question, why he should be thankful to a declaimer like Helvétius, who showers vehement insults and biting sarcasms on governments in general, and then makes it his business to send to Frederick the Great a whole colony of revenue clerks. It was the stringent proceedings against his book that brought to Helvétius both vogue with the public, and sympathy from the Encyclopædic circle.

To us it is interesting to know that Helvétius had a great admiration for England. Holbach, as we have already seen (above, p. 178), did not share this, and he explained his friend's enthusiasm by the assumption that what Helvétius really saw in our free land was the persecution that his book had drawn upon him in France.\* Horace Walpole, in one of his letters, announced to Sir Horace Mann that Helvétius was coming to England, bringing two Miss Helvétiuses with fifty thousand pounds a-piece, to bestow on two

<sup>1</sup> Morellet, i. 141. A peculiarly graphic account of Madame Helvétius in her later years is to be found in Mrs. Adam's *Letters*, quoted in Parton's *Life of Franklin*, ii. 429.

\* *Œuvres*, xix. 187

immaculate members of our most august and incorruptible senate, if he could find two in this virtuous age who would condescend to accept his money. "Well," he adds, in a spirit of sensible protest against these unprofitable international comparisons, "we may be dupes to French follies, but they are ten times greater fools to be the dupes of our virtues."<sup>1</sup> Gibbon met Helvétius (1763), and found him a sensible man, an agreeable companion, and the worthiest creature in the world, besides the merits of having a pretty wife and a hundred thousand livres a year. Warburton was invited to dine with him at Lord Mansfield's, but he could not bring himself to countenance a professed patron of atheism, a rascal, and a scoundrel.<sup>2</sup>

Let us turn to the book which had the honour of bringing all this censure upon its author. Whether vanity was or was not Helvétius's motive, the vanity of an author has never accounted for the interest of his public, and we may be sure that neither those who approved, nor those who abhorred, would have been so deeply and so universally stirred, unless they had felt that he touched great questions at the very quick. And, first, let a word be said as to the form of his book.

Grimm was certainly right in saying that a man must be without taste or sense to find either the morality or the colouring of Diderot in *L'Esprit*. It is tolerably clear that Helvétius had the example of Fontenelle before his eyes—Fontenelle, who had taught astronomical systems in the forms of elegant literature, and of whom it was said that *il nous enjôle à la vérité*, he coaxes us to the truth. *L'Esprit* is perhaps the most readable book upon morals that ever was written, for persons who do not care that what they read shall be scientifically true. Hume, who, by the way, had been invited by Helvétius to translate the book into English, wrote to Adam Smith that it was worth reading, not for its philosophy, which he did not highly value, but for its agreeable composition.<sup>3</sup> Helvétius intended that it should be this, and accordingly he stuffed it with stories and anecdotes. Many of them are very poor, many are inapposite, some are not very decent, others are spoiled in telling, but still stories and anecdotes they remain, and they carry a light-minded reader more or less easily from page to

<sup>1</sup> *Corresp.*, iv. 119.<sup>2</sup> *Walpole's Corresp.*, iv. 217.<sup>3</sup> *Burton*, ii. 57.

page and chapter to chapter. But an ingenuous student of ethics who should take Helvétius seriously, could hardly be reconciled by lively anecdotes to what, in his particular formula, seems a most depressing doctrine. Madame Roland read the celebrated book in her romantic girlhood, and her impression may be taken for that of most generous natures. "Helvétius made me wretched: he annihilated the most ravishing illusions; he showed me everywhere repulsive self-interest. Yet what sagacity!" she continues. "I persuaded myself that Helvétius painted men such as they had become in the corruption of society: I judged that it was good to feed one's self on such an author, in order to be able to frequent what is called the world, without being its dupe. But I took good care not to adopt his principles, merely in order to know man properly so-called. I felt myself capable of a generosity which he never recognises. With what delight I confronted his theories with the great traits in history, and the virtues of the heroes that history has immortalised."<sup>1</sup>

We have ventured to say that *L'Esprit* contained the one principle capable of supplying such a system of thinking about society, as would have taught the French of that time in what direction to look for reforms. There is probably no instance in literature of a writer coming so close to a decisive body of salutary truth, and then losing himself in the by-ways of the most repulsive paradox that a perverse ingenuity could devise. We are able to measure how grievous was this miscarriage, by reflecting that the same instrument which Helvétius actually held in his hand, but did not know how to use, was taken from him by a man of genius in another country, and made to produce reforms that saved England from a convulsion. Nobody pretends that Helvétius discovered Utilitarianism. Hume's name, for instance, occurs too often in his pages, for even the author himself to have dreamed that his principle of utility was a new invention of his own. It would, as Mill has said, imply ignorance of the history of philosophy and of general literature, not to be aware that in all ages of philosophy one of its schools has been utilitarian, not only from the time of Epicurus, but long before. But what is certain, and what would of itself be enough to entitle Helvétius to considera-

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres de Madame. Roland*, i. 108.

tion, is that from Helvétius the idea of general utility as the foundation of morality was derived by that strong and powerful English thinker, who made utilitarianism the great reforming force of legislation and the foundation of jurisprudence. Bentham himself distinctly avowed the source of his inspiration.<sup>1</sup>

A fatal discredit fastened upon a book which yet had in it so much of the root of the matter, from the unfortunate circumstance that Helvétius tacked the principle of utility on to the very crudest farrago to be found in the literature of psychology. What happened, then, was that Rousseau swept into the field with a hollow version of a philosophy of reform, so eloquently, loftily, and powerfully enforced, as to carry all before it. The democracy of sentimentalism took the place that ought to have been filled in the literature of revolutionary preparation by the democracy of utility. Rousseau's fiction of the Sovereignty of the People was an arbitrary and intrinsically sterile rendering of the real truth in Helvétius's ill-starred book.

To establish the proper dependence of laws upon one another, says Helvétius, "it is indispensable to be able to refer them all to a single principle, such as that of *the Utility of the Public, that is to say, of the greatest number of men submitted to the same form of government: a principle of which no one realises the whole extent and fertility; a principle that contains all Morality and Legislation.*"<sup>2</sup>

A man is just when all his actions tend to the public good. "To be virtuous, it is necessary to unite nobleness of soul with an enlightened understanding. Whoever combines these gifts, conducts himself by *the compass of public utility*. This utility is the principle of all human virtues, and the foundation of all legislations. It ought to inspire the legislator, and to force the nations to submit to his laws."<sup>3</sup>

The principle of public utility is invariable, though it is pliable in its application to all the different positions in which, in their succession, a nation may find itself.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "To that book [*L'Esprit*], Mr. Bentham has often been heard to say, he stood indebted for no small portion of the zeal and ardour with which he advocated his happiness-producing theory. It was from thence he took encouragement, . . . it was there he learned to persevere," &c. &c.—*Deontology*, i. 296.

<sup>2</sup> *Disc.* ii. chap. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 17.



The public interest is that of the greatest number, and this is the foundation on which the principles of sound morality ought invariably to rest.<sup>1</sup>

These extracts, and extracts in the same sense might easily be multiplied, show us the basis on which Helvétius believed himself to be building. Why did Bentham raise upon it a fabric of such value to mankind, while Helvétius covered it with useless paradox? The answer is that Bentham approached the subject from the side of a practical lawyer, and proceeded to map out the motives and the actions of men in a systematic and objective classification, to which the principle of utility gave him the key. Helvétius, on the other hand, instead of working out the principle, that actions are good or bad according as they do or do not serve the public interest of the greatest number, contented himself with reiterating in as many ways as possible the proposition that self-love fixes our measure of virtue. The next thing to do, after settling utility as the standard of virtue, and defining interest as a term applied to whatever can procure us pleasures and deliver us from pains,<sup>2</sup> was clearly to do what Bentham did,—to marshal pleasures and pains in logical array. Instead of this, Helvétius, starting from the proposition that “to judge is to feel,” launched out into a complete theory of human character, which laboured under at least two fatal defects. First, it had no root in a contemplation of the march of collective humanity, and second, it considered only the purely egoistic impulses, to the exclusion of the opposite half of human tendencies. Apart from these radical deficiencies, Helvétius fell headlong into a fallacy which has been common enough among the assailants of the principle of utility; namely, of confounding the standard of conduct with its motive, and insisting that because utility is the test of virtue, therefore the prospect of self-gratification is the only inducement that makes men prefer virtue to vice.

This was what Madame du Deffand called telling everybody's secret. We approve conduct in proportion as it conduces to our interest. Friendship, esprit-de-corps, patriotism, humanity, are names for qualities that we prize more or less highly, in proportion as they come more or less close to our own happiness; and the

<sup>1</sup> *Disc.* ii. chap. 23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 1, note (δ).

scale of our preferences is in the inverse ratio of the number of those who benefit by the given act. If it affects the whole of humanity or of our country, our approval is less warmly stirred than if it were an act specially devoted to our own exclusive advantage. If you want therefore to reach men, and to shape their conduct for the public good, you must affect them through their pleasures and pains.

To this position, which roused a universal indignation that amazed the author, there is no doubt a true side. It is worth remembering, for instance, that all penal legislation, in so far as deterrent and not merely vindictive, assumes in all who come whether actually or potentially within its sphere, the very doctrine that covered Helvétius with odium. And there is more to be said than this. As M. Charles Comte has expressed it:—If the strength with which we resent injury were not in the ratio of the personal risk that we run, we should hardly have the means of self-preservation; and if the acts which injure the whole of humanity gave us pain equal to that of acts that injure us directly, we should be of all beings the most miserable, for we should be incessantly tormented by conduct that we should be powerless to turn aside. And again, if the benefits of which we are personally the object, did not inspire in us a more lively gratitude than those which we spread over all mankind, we should probably experience few preferences, and extend few preferences to others, and in that case egoism would grow to its most overwhelming proportions.<sup>1</sup>

This aspect of Helvétius's doctrine, however, is one of those truths which is only valid when taken in connection with a whole group of different truths, and it was exactly that way of asserting a position, in itself neither indefensible nor unmeaning, which left the position open to irresistible attack. Helvétius's errors had various roots, and may be set forth in as many ways. The most general account of it is that even if he had insisted on making Self-love the strongest ingredient in our judgment of conduct, he ought at least to have given some place to Sympathy. For, though it is possible to contend that sympathy is only an indirect kind of self-love, or a shadow cast by self-love, still it is self-love so trans-

<sup>1</sup> *Traité de Législation*, i. 243.

formed as to imply a wholly different set of convictions, and to require a different name.

*L'Esprit* is one of the most striking instances in literature of the importance of care in choosing the right way of presenting a theory to the world. It seems as if Helvétius had taken pains to surround his doctrine with everything that was most likely to warn men away from it. For example, he begins a chapter of cardinal importance with the proposition that personal interest is the only motive that could impel a man to generous actions. "It is as impossible for him to love good for good's sake, as evil for the sake of evil." The rest of the chapter consists of illustrations of this; and what does the reader suppose that they are? The first is Brutus, of all the people in the world. He sacrificed his son for the salvation of Rome, because his passion for his country was stronger than his passion as a father; and this passion for his country, "enlightening him as to the public interest," made him see what a service his rigorous example would be to the state. The other instances of the chapter point the same moral, that true virtue consists in suppressing inducements to gratify domestic or friendly feeling, when that gratification is hostile to the common weal.<sup>1</sup>

It may be true that the ultimate step in a strictly logical analysis reduces the devotion of the hero or the martyr to a deliberate preference for the course least painful to himself, because religion or patriotism or inborn magnanimity have made self-sacrifice the least painful course to him. But to call this heroic mood by the name of self-love, is to single out what is absolutely the most unimportant element in the transaction, and to insist on thrusting it under the onlooker's eye as the vital part of the matter. And it involves the most perverse kind of distortion. For the whole issue and difference between the virtuous man and the vicious man turns, not at all upon the fact that each behaves in the way that habit has made least painful to him, but upon the fact that habit has made selfishness painful to the first, and self-sacrifice painful to the second; that self-love has become in the first case transformed into an overwhelming interest in the good of others, and in the second not so. Was there ever a

<sup>1</sup> *Disc.* ii. 5.

greater perversity than to talk of self-interest, when you mean beneficence, or than to insist that because beneficence has become bound up with a man's self-love, therefore beneficence is nothing but self-love in disguise? As if the fruit or the flower not only depends on a root as one of the conditions among others of its development, but is itself actually the root! Apart from the error in logic, what an error in rhetoric, to single out the formula best calculated to fill a doctrine with odious associations, and then to make that formula the most prominent feature in the exposition. Without any gain in clearness or definiteness or firmness, the reader is deliberately misled towards a form that is exactly the opposite of that which Helvétius desired him to accept.

In other ways Helvétius takes trouble to wound the generous sensibility, and affront the sense, of his public. Nothing can be at once more scandalously cynical and more crude than a passage intended to show that, if we examine the conduct of women of disorderly life from the political point of view, they are in some respects extremely useful to the public. That desire to please, which makes such a woman go to the draper, the milliner, and the dressmaker, draws an infinite number of workmen from indigence. The virtuous women, by giving alms to mendicants and criminals, are far less wisely advised by their religious directors, than the other women by their desire to please; the latter nourish useful citizens, while the former, who at the best are useless, are often even downright enemies to the nation.<sup>1</sup> All this is only a wordy transcript of Mandeville's coarse sentences about "the sensual courtier that sets no limits to his luxury, and the fickle strumpet that invents new fashions every week." We cannot wonder that all people who were capable either of generous feeling or comprehensive thinking turned aside even from truth, when it was mixed in this amalgam of destructive sophistry and cynical illustration.

We can believe how the magnanimous youth of Madame Roland and others was discouraged by pages sown with mean anecdote. Helvétius tells us, with genuine zest, of Parmenio saying to Philotas at the court of Alexander the Great—"My son, make thyself small before Alexander; contrive for him now

<sup>1</sup> *Disc.* ii. 15.

and again the pleasure of setting thee right ; and remember that it is only to thy seeming inferiority that thou wilt owe his friendship." The King of Portugal charged a certain courtier to draw up a despatch on an affair with which he had himself dealt. Comparing the two despatches, the King found the courtier's much the better of the two, the courtier makes a profound reverence, and hastens to take leave of his friends : "*It is all over with me,*" he said, "*the King has found out that I have more brains than he has.*"<sup>1</sup> Only mediocrity succeeds in the world. "Sir," said a father to his son, "you are getting on in the world, and you suppose you must be a person of great merit. To lower your pride, know to what qualities you owe this success : you were born without vices, without virtues, without character ; your knowledge is scanty, your intelligence is narrow. Ah, what claims you have, my son, to the good-will of the world."<sup>2</sup>

It lies beyond the limits of our task to enter into a discussion of Helvétius's transgressions in the region of speculative ethics, from any dogmatic point of view. Their nature is tolerably clear. Helvétius looked at man individually, as if each of us came into the world naked of all antecedent predispositions, and independent of the medium around us. Next, he did not see that virtue, justice, and the other great words of moral science, denote qualities that are directly related to the fundamental constitution of human character. As Diderot said,<sup>3</sup> he never perceived it to be possible to find in our natural requirements, in our existence, in our organization, in our sensibility, a fixed base for the idea of what is just and unjust, virtuous and vicious. He clung to the facts that showed the thousand different shapes in which justice and injustice clothed themselves ; but he closed his eyes on the nature of man, in which he would have recognised their character and origin. Again, although his book was expressly written to show that only good laws can form virtuous men, and that all the art of the legislator consists in forcing men, through the sentiment of self-love, to be just to one another,<sup>4</sup> yet Helvétius does not perceive the difficulty of assuming in the moralising legislator a suppression of self-love which he will not concede to the rest

<sup>1</sup> See Diderot's truer version, *Œuvres*, ii. 482.

<sup>2</sup> *Disc.* iv. 13, &c.

<sup>3</sup> *Œuvres*, ii. 270.

<sup>4</sup> *Disc.* ii. 24.

of mankind. The crucial problem of political constitutions is to counteract the selfishness of a governing class. Helvétius vaulted over this difficulty by imputing to a legislator that very quality of disinterestedness, whose absence in the bulk of the human race he made the fulcrum of his whole moral system.<sup>1</sup>

Into this field of criticism it is not, I repeat, our present business minutely to enter. The only question for us, attempting to study the history of opinion, is what Helvétius meant by his paradoxes, and how they came into his mind. No serious writer, least of all a Frenchman in the eighteenth century, ever sets out with anything but such an intention for good, as is capable of respectable expression. And we ask ourselves what good end Helvétius proposed to himself. Of what was he thinking, when he perpetrated so singular a misconstruction of his own meaning, as that inversion of beneficence into self-love of which we have spoken? We can only explain it in one way. In saying that it is impossible to love good for good's sake, Helvétius was thinking of the theologians. Their doctrine that man is predisposed to love evil for evil's sake, removes conduct from the sphere of rational motive, as evinced in the ordinary course of human experience. Helvétius met this by contending that both in good and bad conduct men are influenced by their interest and not by mystic and innate predisposition either to good or to evil. He sought to bring morals and human conduct out of the region of arbitrary and superstitious assumption, into the sphere of observation. He thought he was pursuing a scientific, as opposed to a theological spirit, by placing interest at the foundation of conduct, both as matter of fact and of what ought to be the fact, instead of placing there the love of God, or the action of grace, or the authority of the Church.

We may even say that Helvétius shows a positive side, which

<sup>1</sup> As Mr. Henry Sidgwick has put this:—"Even the indefatigable patience and inexhaustible ingenuity of Bentham will hardly succeed in defeating the sinister conspiracy of self-preferences. In fact, unless a little more sociality is allowed to an average human being, the problem of combining these egoists into an organization for promoting their common happiness, is like the old task of making ropes of sand. The difficulty that Hobbes vainly tried to settle summarily by absolute despotism, is hardly to be overcome by the democratic artifices of his more inventive successor."

is wanting in the more imposing names of the century. Here, for instance, is a passage which in spite of its inadequateness of expression, contains an unmistakable germ of true historical appreciation :—"However stupid we may suppose the Peoples to be, it is certain that, being enlightened by their interests, it was not without motives that they adopted the customs that we find established among some of them. The bizarre nature of these customs is connected, then, with the diversity of interests among these Peoples. In fact, if they have always understood, in a confused way, by the name of virtue the desire of public happiness ; if they have in consequence given the name of good to actions that are useful to the country ; and if the idea of utility has always been privately associated with the idea of virtue, then we may be sure that their most ridiculous, and even their most cruel, customs have always had for their foundation the real or seeming utility of the public good."<sup>2</sup>

If we contrast this with the universal fashion among Helvétius's friends, of denouncing the greater portion of the past history of the race, we cannot but see that, crude as is the language of such a passage, it contains the all-important doctrine which Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot alike ignored, that the phenomena of the conduct of mankind, even in its most barbarous phases, are capable of an intelligible explanation, in terms of motive that shall be related to their intellectual forms, exactly as the motives of the most polished society are related to the intellectual forms of such a society. There are not many passages in all the scores of volumes written in France in the eighteenth century on the origin of society, where there is such an approach as this to the modern view.

Helvétius's position was that of a man searching for a new basis for morals. It was hardly possible for anyone in that century to look to religion for such a base, and least of all was it possible to Helvétius. "It is fanaticism," he says in an elaborately wrought passage, "that puts arms into the hands of Christian princes ; it orders Catholics to massacre heretics ; it brings out upon the earth again those tortures that were invented by such monsters as Phalaris, as Busiris, as Nero ; in Spain it piles and lights up the fires of the Inquisition, while the pious Spaniards leave their ports

<sup>2</sup> *Disc.* ii. 13.

and sail across distant seas, to plant the Cross and spread desolation in America. Turn your eyes to north or south, to east or west; on every side you see the consecrated knife of Religion raised against the breasts of women, of children, of old men, and the earth all smoking with the blood of victims immolated to false gods or to the Supreme Being, and presenting one vast, sickening, horrible charnel-house of intolerance. Now what virtuous man, what Christian, if his tender soul is filled with the divine unction that exhales from the maxims of the Gospel, if he is sensible of the cries of the unhappy and the outcast, and has sometimes wiped away their tears—what man could fail at such a sight to be touched with compassion for humanity, and would not use all his endeavour to found probity, not on principles so worthy of respect as those of religion, but on principles less easily abused, such as those of personal interest would be?"<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is the point best worth seizing in a criticism of Helvétius. The direction of morality by religion had proved a failure. Helvétius, as the organ of reaction against asceticism and against mysticism, appealed to positive experience, and to men's innate tendency to seek what is pleasurable and to avoid what is painful. The scientific imperfection of his attempt is plain; but that, at any rate, is what the attempt signified in his own mind.

The same feeling for social reform inspired the second great paradox of *L'Esprit*. This is to the effect that of all the sources of intellectual difference between one man and another, organization is the least influential. Intellectual differences are due to diversity of circumstance and to variety in education. It is not felicity of organization that makes a great man. There is nobody, in whom passion, interest, education, and favourable chance, could not have surmounted all the obstacles of an unpromising nature; and there is no great man who, in the absence of passion, interest, education, and certain chances, would not have been a blockhead, in spite of his happier organization. It is only in the moral region that we ought to seek the true cause of inequality of intellect. Genius is no singular gift of nature. Genius is common; it is only the circumstances proper to develop it, that are rare. The man of genius is simply the product of the circumstances in which

<sup>1</sup> *Disc.* ii. 24.



he is placed. The inequality in intelligence (*esprit*) that we observe among men, depends on the government under which they live, on the times in which their destiny has fallen, on the education that they have received, on the strength of their desire to achieve distinction, and finally on the greatness and fecundity of the ideas which they happen to make the object of their meditations.<sup>1</sup>

Here again it would be easy to show how many qualifications are needed to rectify this egregious over-statement of propositions that in themselves contain the germ of a wholesome doctrine. Diderot pointed out some of the principal causes of Helvétius's errors, summing them up thus: "The whole of this third discourse seems to imply a false calculation, into which the author has failed to introduce all the elements that have a right to be there, and to estimate the elements that are there at their right value. He has not seen the insurmountable barrier that separates a man destined by nature for a given function, from a man who only brings to that function industry, interest, and attention."<sup>2</sup> In a work published after his death (1774), and entitled *De l'Homme*, Helvétius re-stated at greater length, and with a variety of new illustrations, this exaggerated position. Diderot wrote an elaborate series of minute notes in refutation of it, taking each chapter point by point, and his notes are full of acute and vigorous criticism.<sup>3</sup> Every reader will perceive the kind of answers to which the proposition that character is independent of organization lies open. Yet here, as in his paradox about self-love, Helvétius was looking, and looking, moreover, in the right direction, for a rational principle of moral judgment, moral education, and moral improvement. Of the two propositions, though equally erroneous in theory, it was certainly less mischievous in practice to pronounce education and institutions to be stronger than original predisposition, than to pronounce organization to be stronger than education and institutions. It was all-important at that moment in France to draw people's attention to the influence of institutions on character; to do that was both to give one of the best reasons for a reform in French institutions, and also to point to the spirit in which such a reform should be undertaken. If Helvétius had

<sup>1</sup> *Disc.* iii.<sup>2</sup> *Œuvres*, ii. 271.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, ii. 275-456.

contented himself with saying that, whatever may be the force of organization in exceptional natures, yet in persons of average organization these predispositions are capable of being indefinitely modified by education, by laws, and by institutions, then he would not only have said what could not be disproved, but he would have said as much as his own object required. William Godwin drew one of the most important chapters of his once famous treatise on *Political Justice* from Helvétius, but what Helvétius exaggerated into a paradox which nobody in his senses could seriously accept, Godwin expressed as a rational half-truth, without which no reformer in education or institutions could fairly think it worth while to set to work.<sup>1</sup>

The reader of Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, that sombre little study of a miserable passion, may sometimes be reminded of Helvétius. It begins with the dry surprise of youth at the opening world, for we need time, he says, to accustom ourselves to the human race, such as affectation, vanity, cowardice, interest have made it. Then we soon learn only to be surprised at our old surprise; we find ourselves very well off in our new conditions, just as we come to breathe freely in a crowded theatre, though on entering it we were almost stifled. Yet the author of this parching sketch of the distractions of an egoism that just fell short of being complete, suddenly flashes on us the unexpected but penetrating and radiant moral, *La grande question dans la vie, c'est la douleur que l'on cause*—the great question in life is the pain that we strike into the lives of others. We are not seldom refreshed, when in the midst of Hévetius's narrowest grooves, by some similar breath from the wider air. Among the host of sayings, true, false, trivial, profound, which are scattered over the pages of Helvétius, is one subtle and far-reaching sentence, which made a strong impression upon Bentham. "*In order to love mankind,*" he writes, "*we must expect little from them.*" This might, on the lips of a cynic, serve for a formula of that kind of misanthropy which is not more unamiable than it is unscientific. But in the mouth of Helvétius it was a plea for considerateness, for indulgence, and, above all, it was meant for an inducement to patience

<sup>1</sup> *Political Justice*, Bk. I. chap. iv.—"*The characters of men originate in their external circumstances.*"

and sustained endeavour in all dealings with masses of men in society. "Every man," he says, "so long as his passions do not obscure his reason, will always be the more indulgent in proportion as he is enlightened." He knows that men are what they must be, that all hatred against them is unjust, that a fool produces follies, just as a wild shrub produces sour berries, that to insult him is to reproach the oak for bearing acorns instead of olives.\* All this is as wise and humane as words can be so, and it really represents the aim and temper of Helvétius's teaching. Unfortunately for him and for his generation, his grasp was feeble and unsteady. He had not the gift of accurate thinking, and his book is in consequence that which, of all the books of the eighteenth century, unites most of wholesome truth with most of repellent error.

\* *Disc. ii. 10.*

## CHAPTER XIV.

### HOLBACH'S SYSTEM OF NATURE.

THE *System of Nature* was published in 1770, eight years before the death of Voltaire and of Rousseau, and it gathered up all the scattered explosives of the criticism of the century into one thundering engine of revolt and destruction. It professed to be the posthumous work of Mirabaud, who had been secretary to the Academy. This was one of the common literary frauds of the time. Its real author was Holbach. It is too systematic and coherently compacted to be the design of more than one man, and it is too systematic also for that one man to have been Diderot, as has been so often assumed. At the same time there are good reasons for believing that not only much of its thought, but some of the pages, were the direct work of Diderot. The latest editor of the heedless philosopher has certainly done right in placing among his miscellanea, the declamatory apostrophe which sums up the teachings of this remorseless book. The rumour imputing the authorship to Diderot was so common, and Diderot himself was so disquieted by it, that he actually hastened away from Paris to his native Langres and to the Baths of Bourbonne, in order to be ready to cross the frontier at the first hint of a warrant being out against him.<sup>1</sup> Diderot has recorded his admiration of his friend's work. "I am disgusted," he said, "with the modern fashion of mixing up incredulity and superstition. What I like is a philosophy that is clear, definite,

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres*, xvii. 329.

and frank, such as you have in the *System of Nature*. The author is not an atheist in one page, and a deist in another. His philosophy is all of one piece."\*

( No book has ever produced a more widespread shock. Everybody insisted on reading it, and almost everybody was terrified. It suddenly revealed to men, like the blaze of lightning to one faring through darkness, the formidable shapes, the unfamiliar sky, the sinister landscape, into which the wanderings of the last fifty years had brought them unsuspecting. They had had half a century of such sharp intellectual delight as had not been known throughout any great society in Europe since the death of Michael Angelo, and had perhaps north of the Alps never been known at all. And now it seemed to many of them, as they turned over the pages of Holbach's book, as if they stood face to face with the devil of the mediæval legend, come to claim their souls. Satire of Job and David, banter about Joshua's massacres and Solomon's concubines, invective against blind pastors of blinder flocks, zeal to place Newton on the throne of Descartes and Locke upon the pedestal of Malebranche, wishes that the last Jansenist might be strangled in the bowels of the last Jesuit—all this had given zest and savour to life. In the midst of their high feast, Holbach pointed to the finger of their own divinity, Reason, writing on the wall the appalling judgments that there is no God; that the universe is only matter in spontaneous movement; and, most grievous word of all, that what men call their souls die with the death of the body, as music dies when the strings are broken.

Galiani, the witty Neapolitan, who had so many good friends in the philosophic circle, anticipated the well-known phrase of a writer of our own day. "The author of the *System of Nature*," he said, "is the Abbé Terrai of metaphysics: he makes deductions, suspensions of payment, and causes the very Bankruptcy of knowledge, of pleasure, and of the human mind. But you will tell me that, after all, there were too many rotten securities; that the account was too heavily overdrawn; that there was too much worthless paper on the market. That is true, too, and that is why the crisis has come."<sup>2</sup> Goethe, then a student at Strasburg, has told us what horror and alarm the *System of Nature* brought

\* *Œuvres*, ii. 398.

<sup>2</sup> *Corresp. de Galiani*, i. 142.

into the circle there. "But we could not conceive," he says, "how such a book could be dangerous. It came to us so gray, so Cimmerian, so corpse-like, that we could hardly endure its presence; we shuddered before it as if it had been a spectre. It struck us as the very quintessence of musty age, savourless, repugnant."<sup>1</sup>

If this was the light in which the book appeared to the young man who was soon to be the centre of German literature, the brilliant veteran who had for two generations been the centre of the literature of France, was both shocked by the audacity of the new treatise, and alarmed at the peril in which it involved the whole Encyclopædic brotherhood, with the Patriarch at their head. Voltaire had no sooner read the *System of Nature*, than he at once snatched up his ever-ready pen and plunged into refutation.<sup>2</sup> At the same time he took care that the right persons should hear what he had done. He wrote to his old patron and friend Richelieu, that it would be a great kindness if he would let the King know that the abused Voltaire had written an answer to the book that all the world was talking about. I think, he says, that it is always a good thing to uphold the doctrine of the existence of a God who punishes and rewards; society has need of such an opinion. There is a curious disinterestedness in the notion of Lewis the Fifteenth and Richelieu, two of the wickedest men of their time, being anxious for the demonstration of a *Dieu vengeur*. Voltaire at least had a very keen sense of the meaning of a court that rewarded and punished. The author of the *System of Nature*, he wrote to Grimm, ought to have felt that he was undoing his friends, and making them hateful in the eyes of the king and the court.<sup>3</sup> This came true in the case of the great philosopher-king himself. Frederick of Prussia was offended by a book which spared political superstitions as little as theological dogma, and treated kings as boldly as it treated priests. Though keenly occupied in watching the war then waging between Russia and Turkey, and already revolving the partition of Poland, he found time to compose a defence of theism. 'Tis a good sign, Voltaire said to

<sup>1</sup> *Wahrheit und Dichtung*, Bk. xi.

<sup>2</sup> See the article *Dieu* in the *Dict. Philosophique*.

<sup>3</sup> Voltaire's *Corr.*, Nov. 1, 1770.

him, when a king and a plain man think alike : their interests are often so hostile, that when their ideas do agree, they must certainly be right.<sup>1</sup>

The philosophic meaning of Holbach's propositions was never really seized by Voltaire. He is, as has been justly said, the representative of ordinary common sense which, with all its declamations and its appeals to the feelings, is wholly without weight or significance as against a philosophic way of considering things, however humble the philosophy may be.<sup>2</sup> He hardly took more pains to understand Holbach than Johnson took to understand Berkeley. In truth it was a characteristic of Voltaire always to take the social, rather than the philosophic view, of the great issues of the theistic controversy. One day, when present at a discussion as to the existence of a deity, in which the negative was being defended with much vivacity, he astonished the company by ordering the servants to leave the room, and then proceeding to lock the door. "Gentlemen," he explained, "I do not wish my valet to cut my throat to-morrow morning." It was not the truth of the theistic belief in itself that Voltaire prized, but its supposed utility as an assistant to the police. D'Alembert, on the other hand, viewed the dispute as a matter of disinterested speculation. "As for the existence of a supreme intelligence," he wrote to Frederick the Great, "I think that those who deny it advance far more than they can prove, and scepticism is the only reasonable course." He goes on to say, however, that experience invincibly proves both the materiality of the soul, and a material deity—like that which Mr. Mill did not repudiate—of limited powers, and dependent on fixed conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Let us now turn to the book itself. And first, as to its author. The reader of the *New Heloise* will remember that the heroine, after her repentance and her marriage, has only one chagrin in the world ; that is the blank disbelief of her husband in the two great mysteries of a Supreme Being and another world. Wolmar, the

<sup>1</sup> July 27, 1770.

<sup>2</sup> Lange's *Gesch. d. Materialismus*, i. 369 ; where the author shows how entirely Voltaire failed to touch Holbach's position as to the meaning of Order in the universe.

<sup>3</sup> *Œuvres*, v. 296, 303, &c.

husband, has always been supposed to stand for Rousseau's version of Holbach, and Holbach would hardly have complained of the portrait. The Wolmar of the novel is benevolent, active, patient, tranquil, friendly, and trustful. The nicely combined conjunction of the play of circumstance with the action of men pleases him, just as the fine symmetry of a statue or the skilful contrivance of dramatic effects would please him. If he has any dominant passion, it is a passion for observation ; he delights in reading the hearts of men.<sup>1</sup>

All this seems to have been as true of the real Holbach as of the imaginary Wolmar. We have already seen him as the intimate friend and constant host of Diderot. He was one of the best-informed men of his time (1723-89). He had an excellent library, a collection of pictures, and a valuable cabinet of natural history ; and his poorer friends were as freely welcome to the use of all of them as the richest. His manners were cheerful, courteous, and easy ; he was a model of simplicity, and kindness was written on every feature. His hospitality won him the well-known nickname of the *maître d'hôtel* of philosophy, and his house was jestingly called the *Café de l'Europe*. On Sundays and Thursdays, without prejudice to other days, from ten to a score of men of letters and eminent foreign visitors, including Hume, Wilkes, Shelburne, Garrick, Franklin, Priestley, used to gather round his good dishes and excellent wine. It was noted, as a mark of the attractiveness of the company, that the guests, who came at two in the afternoon, constantly remained until as late as seven and eight in the evening. To one of those guests, who afterwards became the powerful enemy of the Encyclopædic group, the gaiety, the irreverence, the hardihood of speculation and audacity of discourse, were all as gall and wormwood. Rousseau found their atheistic sallies offensive beyond endurance. Their hard rationalism was odious to the great emotional dreamer, and after he had quarrelled with them all, he transformed his own impressions of the dreariness of atheism into the passionate complaint of Julie. "Conceive the torment of living in retirement with the man who shares our existence, and yet cannot share the hope that makes existence dear : of never being able with him either to bless the

<sup>1</sup> *Nouvelle Héloïse*, IV. xii.



works of God, or to speak of the happy future that is promised us by the goodness of God ; of seeing him, while doing good on every side, still insensible to everything that makes the delight of doing good ; of watching him, by the most bizarre of contradictions, think with the impious, and yet live like a Christian. Think of Julie walking with her husband ; the one admiring in the rich and splendid robe of the earth, the handiwork and the bounteous gifts of the author of the universe ; the other seeing nothing in it all save a fortuitous combination, the product of blind force ! Alas ! she cries, the great spectacle of nature, for us so glorious, so animated, is dead in the eyes of the unhappy Wolmar, and in that great harmony of being where all speaks of God in accents so mild and so persuasive, he only perceives eternal silence.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet it is fair to the author of this most eloquent *Ignoratio Elenchi*, to notice that he honestly fulfilled the object with which he professed to set out—namely, to show to both the religious and philosophical parties that their adversaries were capable of leading upright, useful, and magnanimous lives. Whether he would have painted the imaginary Wolmar so favourably, if he could have foreseen what kind of book the real Holbach had in his desk, is perhaps doubtful. For Holbach's opinions looked more formidable and sombre in the cold deliberateness of print, than they had sounded amid the interruptions of lively discourse.

It is needless to say, to begin with, that the writer has the most marked of the philosophic defects of the school of the century. Perhaps we might put it more broadly, and call the disregard of historic opinion the natural defect of all materialistic speculation from Epicurus downwards.\* Like all others of his school, Holbach has no perception nor sense of the necessity of an explanation how the mental world came to be what it is, nor how men came to think and believe what they do think and believe. He gives them what he deems unanswerable reasons for changing their convictions, but he never dreams of asking himself in what elements of human character the older convictions had their root, and from what fitness for the conduct of life they drew the current of their sap. Yet unless this aspect of things had

<sup>1</sup> *Nouvelle Héloïse*, V. v.

<sup>2</sup> See Lange, i. 85.

been well considered, his unanswerable reasons were sure to fall wide of the mark. Opinions, as men began to remember, after social movement had thrown the logical century into discredit, have a history as well as a logic. They are bound up with a hundred transmitted prepossessions, and they have become identified with a hundred social customs that are the most dearly cherished parts of men's lives. Nature had as much to do with the darkness of yesterday as with the light of to-day; she is as much the accomplice of superstition as she is the oracle of reason. It was because they forgot all this, that Holbach's school now seem so shallow and superficial. The whole past was one long working of the mystery of iniquity. "The sum of the woes of the human race was not diminished—on the contrary, it was increased by its religions, by its governments, by its opinions, in a word, by all the institutions that *it was led to adopt* on the plea of ameliorating its lot." *On lui fit adopter!* But who were the *on*, and how did they work? With what instruments and what fulcrum? Never was the convenience of this famous abstract substantive more fatally abused. And if religion, government, and opinion had all aggravated the miseries of the human race, what had lessened them? For the Encyclopædic school never attempted, as Rousseau did, to deny that the world had, as a matter of fact, advanced towards happiness. It was because the Holbachians looked on mankind as slaves held in an unaccountable bondage, which they must necessarily be eager to throw off, that their movement, after doing at the Revolution a certain amount of good in a bad way, led at last to a mischievous reaction in favour of Catholicism.

Far more immediately significant than the philosophy of the *System of Nature* were the violence, directness, and pertinacity of its assault upon political government. Voltaire, as has so often been noticed, had always abstained from meddling with either the theory or the practical abuses of the national administration. All his shafts had been levelled at ecclesiastical superstition. Rousseau, indeed, had begun the most famous of his political speculations by crying that man, who was born free, is now everywhere in chains. But Rousseau was vague, abstract, and senti-

\* *Syst. de la Nat.*, I. xvi.

mental. In the *System of Nature* we have a clear presage of the trenchant and imperious invective which, twenty years after its publication, rang in all men's ears from the gardens of the Palais Royal and the benches of the Jacobins' Hall. The writer has plainly made up his mind that the time has at last come for dropping all the discreet machinery of apologue and parable, and giving to his words the edge of a sharpened sword. The vague disguises of political speculation, and the mannered reservations of a Utopia or New Atlantis, are exchanged for a passionate, biting, and loudly practical indictment. All over the world men are under the yoke of masters who neglect the instruction of their people, or only seek to cheat and deceive them. The sovereigns in every part of the globe are unjust, incapable, made effeminate by luxury, corrupted by flattery, depraved by licence and impunity, destitute of talent, manners, or virtue. Indifferent to their duties, which they usually know nothing about, they are scarcely concerned for a single moment of the day with the well-being of their people; their whole attention is absorbed by useless wars, or by the desire to find at each instant new means of gratifying their insatiable rapacity. The state of society is a state of war between the sovereign and all the rest of its members. In every country alike the morality of the people is wholly neglected, and the one care of the government is to render them timorous and wretched. The common man desires no more than bread; he wins it by the sweat of his brow; joyfully would he eat it, if the injustice of the government did not make it bitter in his mouth. By the insanity of governments, those who are swimming in plenty, without being any the happier for it, yet wring from the tiller of the soil the very fruits that his arms have won from it. Injustice, by reducing indigence to despair, drives it to seek in crime resources against the woes of life. An iniquitous government breeds despair in men's souls; its vexations depopulate the land, the fields remain untilled, famine, contagion, and pestilence stalk over the earth. Then, embittered by misery, men's minds begin to ferment and effervesce, and what inevitably follows is the overthrow of a realm.<sup>1</sup>

If France had been prosperous, all this would have passed for

<sup>1</sup> *Syst. de la Nat.* I. xiv. xvi. &c. &c.

the empty declamation of an excited man of letters. As it was, such declamation only described, in language as accurate as it was violent and stinging, the real position of the country. In the urgency of a present material distress, men were not over-careful that the basis of the indictment should be laid in the principles of a sound historical philosophy of society. We can hardly wonder at it. What is interesting, and what we do not notice earlier in the century, is that in the *System of Nature* the revolt against the impotence of society, and the revolt against the omnipotence of God, made a firm coalition. That coalition came to a bloody end for the time, four-and-twenty years after Holbach's book proclaimed it, when the Committee of Public Safety despatched Hébert, and better men than Hébert, to the guillotine for being atheists. Atheism, as Robespierre assured them, was aristocratic.

Holbach's work may be said to spring from the doctrine that the social deliverance of man depends on his intellectual deliverance, and that the key to his intellectual deliverance is only to be found in the substitution of Naturalism for Theism. What he means by Naturalism, we shall proceed shortly to explain. The style, we may remark, notwithstanding the energy and coherence of the thought, is often diffuse and declamatory. Some one said of the *System of Nature*, that it contained at least four times too many words. Yet Voltaire, while professing extreme dislike of its doctrine, admitted that the writer had somehow caught the ear of the learned, of the ignorant, and of women. "He is often clear," said Voltaire, "and sometimes eloquent, yet he may justly be reproached with declamation, with repeating himself, and with contradicting himself, like all the rest of them." Galiani made an over-subtle criticism on it, when he complained of the want of coolness and self-possession in the style, and then said that it looked as if the writer were pressed less to persuade other people, than to persuade himself. This was a crude impression. Nobody can have any doubt of the writer's profound sincerity, or of his earnest desire to make proselytes. He knows his own mind, and hammers his doctrines out with a hard and iterative stroke that hits its mark. Yet his literary tone, in spite of its declamatory pitch, not seldom sinks into a drone. Holbach's

<sup>1</sup> *Dict. Phil.*, s. v. Dieu, § iv.

contemporaries were in too fierce contact with the tusks and hooked claws of the Church, to have any mind for the rhythm of a champion's sentences or the turn of his periods. (But now that the efforts of the heterodox have taught the Churches to be better Christians than they were a hundred years ago, we can afford to admit that Holbach is hardly more captivating in style, and not always more edifying in temper, than some of the Christian Fathers themselves.

What then is the system of Nature, and what is that Naturalism which is to replace the current faith in the deities outside of observable nature? The writer makes no pretence of feeling a tentative way towards an answer. From the very outset his spirit is that of dogmatic confidence. He is less a seeker than an expounder; less a philosopher than a preacher; and he boldly dismisses proof in favour of exhortation.

"Let man cease to search outside the world in which he dwells for beings who may procure him a happiness that nature refuses to grant; let him study that nature, let him learn her laws, and contemplate the energy and the unchanging fixity with which she acts; let him apply his discoveries to his own felicity, and submit in silence to laws from which nothing can withdraw him; let him consent to ignore the causes, surrounded as they are for him by an impenetrable veil; let him undergo without a murmur the decrees of universal force."

*Science derived from experience is the source of all wise action.* It is physical science (*la physique*), and experience, that man ought to consult in religion, morals, legislature, as well as in knowledge and the arts. It is by our senses that we are bound to universal nature; it is by our senses that we discover her secrets. The moment that we first experience them, we fall into a void where our imagination leads us endlessly astray.

*Movement is what establishes relations between our organs and external objects.* Every object has laws of movement that are peculiar to itself. Everything in the universe is in movement; no part of nature is really at rest.<sup>1</sup>

*Whence does nature receive this movement?* From herself, since

<sup>1</sup> Holbach confesses his obligation on this head to Toland's *Letters to Serena* (1704).

she is the great whole, outside of which consequently nothing can exist. Motion is a fashion of being which flows necessarily from the essence of matter ; matter moves by its own energy ; its motion is due to forces inherent in it ; the variety of its movements, and of the phenomena resulting from them, comes from variation of the properties, the qualities, the combinations, originally found in the different primitive matters of which nature is the assemblage.

*Whence came matter ?* Matter has existed from all eternity, and as motion is one of the inherent and constitutive qualities of matter, motion also has existed from eternity.

*The abstract idea of matter must be decomposed.* Instead of regarding matter as a unique existence, rude, passive, incapable of moving itself, of combining itself, we ought to look upon it as a Kind of existence, of which the various individual members comprising the Kind, in spite of their having some common properties, such as extension, divisibility, figure, etc., still ought not to be ranged in a single class, nor comprised in a single denomination.

*What is nature's process ? Continual movement.* From the stone which is formed in the bowels of the earth by the intimate combination, as they approach one another, of analogous and similar molecules, up to the sun, that vast reservoir of heated particles that gives light to the firmament ; from the numb oyster up to man—we observe an uninterrupted progression, a perpetual chain of combination and movements, from which there result beings that only differ among one another by the variety of their elementary matters, and of the combination and proportion of these elements. From this variety springs an infinite diversity of ways of existing and acting. In generation, nutrition, preservation, we can see nothing but different sorts of matter differently combined, each of them endowed with its own movements, each of them regulated by fixed laws that cause them to undergo the necessary changes.

Let us notice here three of the author's definitions. (1.) *Motion is an effort, by which a body changes or tends to change its place.* (2.) Of the ultimate composition of Matter, Holbach says nothing definite, though he assumes molecular movement as its first law. He contents himself, properly enough perhaps in view of the destination of his treatise, with a definition "relatively to us."

Relatively to us, then, *Matter in general is all that affects our senses in any fashion whatever ; and the qualities that we attribute to different kinds of matter, are founded on the different impressions that they produce on us.* (3.) "When I say that Nature produces an effect, I do not mean to personify this Nature, which is an abstraction ; I mean that the effect of which I am speaking is the necessary result of the properties of some one of those beings that compose the great whole under our eyes. Thus, when I say that Nature intends man to work for his own happiness, I mean by this that it is of the essence of a being who feels, thinks, wills, and acts, to work for his own happiness. By Essence I mean that which constitutes a being what it is, the sum of its properties, or the qualities according to which it exists and acts as it does."

*All phenomena are necessary.* No creature in the universe, in its circumstances and according to its given property, can act otherwise than as it does act. Fire necessarily burns whatever combustible matter comes within the sphere of its action. Man necessarily desires what either is, or seems to be, conducive to his comfort and well-being. There is no independent energy, no isolated cause, no detached activity, in a universe where all beings are incessantly acting on one another, and which is itself only one eternal round of movement, imparted and undergone, according to necessary laws. In a storm of dust raised by a whirlwind, in the most violent tempest that agitates the ocean, not a single molecule of dust or of water finds its place by *chance* ; or is without an adequate cause for occupying the precise point where it is found. So, again, in the terrible convulsions that sometimes overthrow empires, there is not a single action, word, thought, volition, or passion in a single agent of such a revolution, whether he be a Jestroyer or a victim, which is not necessary, which does not act precisely as it must act, and which does not infallibly produce the effects that it is bound to produce, conformably to the place occupied by the given agent in the moral whirlwind.<sup>1</sup>

*Order and disorder are abstract terms, and can have no existence in a Nature, where all is necessary and follows constant laws.* Order is nothing more than necessity viewed relatively to the succession

<sup>1</sup> Almost the very words of this passage are to be found in Diderot. See above, p. 156.

of actions. Disorder in the case of any being is nothing more than its passage to a new order ; to a succession of movements and actions of a different sort from those of which the given being was previously susceptible. Hence there can never be either monsters or prodigies, either marvels or miracles, in nature. By the same reasoning, we have no right to divide the workings of nature into those of Intelligence and those of Chance. Where all is necessary, Chance can mean nothing save the limitation of man's knowledge.

The writer next has a group of chapters (vi.-x.) on Man, his composition, relations, and destiny. The chief propositions are in rigorous accord with the general conceptions that have already been set forth. All that man does, and all that passes in him, are effects of the energy that is common to him with the other beings known to us. But, before a true and comprehensive idea of the unity of nature was possible to him, he was so seized by the variety and complication of his organism and its movements, that it never came into his mind to realise that they existed in a chain of material necessity, binding him fast to all other forces and modes of being. Men think that they remedy their ignorance of things by inventing words ; so they explained the working of matter, in man's case, by associating with matter a hypothetical substance, which is in truth much less intelligible than matter itself. They regarded themselves as double ; a compound of matter and something else miraculously united with it, to which they give the name of *mind*, or *soul*, and then they proudly looked on themselves as beings apart from the rest of creation. In plain truth, Mind is only an *occult force*, invented to explain occult qualities and actions, and really explaining nothing. By Mind they mean no more than the unknown cause of phenomena that they cannot explain naturally, just as the Red Indians believed that it was spirits who produced the terrible effects of gunpowder, and just as the ignorant of our own day believe in angels and demons. How can we figure to ourselves a form of being, which, though not matter, still acts on matter, without having points of contact or analogy with it ; and on the other hand itself receives the impulsions of matter, through the material organs that warn it of the presence of external objects ? How can we conceive the union of body and soul, and how can this material body enclose, bind, constrain, determine a fugitive



form of being, that escapes every sense? To resolve these difficulties by calling them mysteries, and to set them down as the effects of the omnipotence of a Being still more inconceivable than the human Soul itself, is merely a confession of absolute ignorance.

It is worth noticing that with the characteristic readiness of the French materialist school to turn metaphysical and psychological discussion to practical uses, Holbach discerned the immense new field which the materialist account of mind opened to the physician. "If people consulted experience instead of prejudice, medicine would furnish morality with the key of the human heart; and in curing the body, it would be often assured of curing the mind too. . . . The dogma of the spirituality of the soul has turned morality into a conjectural science, which does not in the least help us to understand the true way of acting on men's motives. . . . Man will always be a mystery for those who insist on regarding him with the prejudiced eyes of theology, and on attributing his actions to a principle of which they can never have any clear ideas."—(Ch. ix.) It is certainly true as a historical fact that the rational treatment of insane persons, and the rational view of certain kinds of crime, were due to men like Pinel, trained in the materialistic school of the eighteenth century. And it was clearly impossible that the great and humane reforms in this field could have taken place before the decisive decay of theology. Theology assumes perversity as the natural condition of the human heart, and could only regard insanity as an intolerable exaggeration of this perversity. Secondly, the absolute independence of mind and body which theology brought into such overwhelming relief naturally excluded the notion that, by dealing with the body, you might be doing something to heal the mind. Perhaps we are now in some danger of overlooking the potency of the converse illustration of what Holbach says: namely, the efficacy of mental remedies or preventives in the case of bodily disease.

If you complain—to resume our exposition—that the mechanism is not sufficient to explain the principle of the movements and faculties of the soul, the answer is, that it is in the same case with all the bodies in nature. In them the simplest movements, the most ordinary phenomena, the commonest actions, are inexplicable

mysteries, whose first principles are for ever sealed to us. How shall we flatter ourselves that we know the first principle of gravity, by virtue of which a stone falls? What do we know of the mechanism that produces the attraction of some substances, and the repulsion of others? But surely the incomprehensibility of natural effects is no reason for assigning to them a cause, that is still more incomprehensible than any of those within our cognisance.

It is not given to man to know everything; it is not given to him to know his own origin, nor to penetrate into the essence of things, nor to mount up to the first principle of things. What is given to him is to have reason, to have good faith, to concede frankly that he is ignorant of what he cannot know, and not to supplement his lack of certainty by words that are unintelligible, and suppositions that are absurd.

Suns go out and planets perish; new suns are kindled, and new planets revolve in new paths; and man—infinately small portion of a globe that is itself only a small point in immensity—dreams that it is for him that the universe has been made, imagines that he must be the confidant of nature, and proudly flatters himself that he must be eternal! O man, wilt thou never conceive that thou art but an insect of a day? All changes in the universe; nature contains not a form that is constant; and yet thou wouldst claim that thy species can never disappear, and must be excepted from the great universal law of incessant change!

We may pause for a moment to notice how, in their deliberate humiliation of the alleged pride of man, the orthodox theologian and the atheistic Holbach use precisely the same language. But the rebuke of the latter was sincere; it was indispensable in order to prepare men's minds for the conception of the universe as a whole. With the theologian the rebuke has now become little more than a hollow shift, in order to insinuate the miracle of Grace. The preacher of Naturalism replaces a futile vanity in being the end and object of the creation, by a fruitful reverence for the supremacy of human reason, and a right sense of the value of its discreet and disciplined use. The theologian restores this absurd and misleading egoism of the race, by representing the Creator as above all else concerned to work miracles for the salvation of a

creature whose understanding is at once pitifully weak and odiously perverse, and whose heart is from the beginning wicked, corrupt, and given over to reprobation. The difference is plainly enormous. The theologian discourages men ; they are to wait for the miracle of conversion, inert or desperate. The naturalist arouses them ; he supplies them with the most powerful of motives for the energetic use of the most powerful of their endowments. "Men would always have Grace," says Holbach, with excellent sense, "if they were well educated and well governed." And he exclaims on the strange morality of those who attribute all moral evil to Original Sin, and all the good that we do to Grace. "No wonder," he says, "that a morality founded on hypotheses so ridiculous should prove to be of no efficacy."<sup>1</sup>

This brings us to Holbach's treatment of Morals. The moment had come to France, which was reached at an earlier period in English speculation, when the negative course of thought in metaphysics drove men to consider the basis of ethics. How were right and wrong to hold their own against the new mechanical conception of the Universe? The same question is again urgent in men's minds, because the Darwinian hypothesis, and the mass of evidence for it, have again given a tremendous shake to theological conceptions, and startled men into a sense of the precariousness of the official foundations of virtue and duty.

Holbach begins by a most unflinching exposure of the inconsistency with all that we know of nature, of the mysterious theory of Free Will. This remains one of the most effective parts of the book, and perhaps the work has never been done with a firmer hand. The conclusion is expressed with a decisiveness that almost seems crude. There is declared to be no difference between a man who throws himself out of the window, and the man whom I throw out, except this, that the impulse acting on the second comes from without, and that the impulse determining the fall of the first comes from within his own mechanism. You have only to get down to the motive, and you will invariably find that the motive is beyond the actor's own power or reach. The inexorable logic with which the author presses the Free-Willer

<sup>1</sup> Ch. xi.

from one retreat to another, and from shift to shift, leaves his adversary at last exactly as naked and defenceless before Holbach's vigorous and thoroughly realised Naturalism, as the same adversary must always be before Jonathan Edwards's vigorous theism. "The system of man's liberty," Holbach says (II. ii.), with some pun-gency, "seems only to have been invented in order to put him in a position to offend his God, and so to justify God in all the evil that he inflicted on man, for having used the freedom which was so disastrously conferred upon him."

If man be not free, what right have we to punish those who cannot help committing bad actions, or to reward others who cannot help committing good actions? Holbach gives to this and the various other ways of describing fatalism as dangerous to society, the proper and perfectly adequate answer. He turns to the quality of the action, and connects with that the social attitude of praise and blame. Merit and demerit are associated with conduct, according as it is thought to affect the common welfare advantageously or the reverse. My indignation and my approval are as necessary as the acts that excite these sentiments. My feelings are neither more nor less spontaneous, than the deciding motives of the actor. Whatever be the necessitating cause of our actions, I have a right to do my best by praise and blame, by reward and punishment, to strengthen or to weaken, to prolong or to divert, the motives that are the antecedents of the action; exactly as I have a right to dam up a stream, or to divert its course, or otherwise deal with it to suit my own convenience. Penal laws, for instance, are ways of offering to men strong motives, to weigh in the scale against the temptation of an immediate personal gratification. Holbach does not make it quite distinct that the object of penal legislation is in some cases to give the offender, as well as other people, a strong reason for thinking twice before he repeats the offence; yet in other cases, where the punishment is capital, the legislation does not aim at influencing the mind of the offender at all, but the minds of other people only. This is only a side illustration of a common weakness in most arguments on this subject. A thorough vindication of the penal laws, on the principles of a systematic fatalism, can only be

successful, if we think less of the wrongdoer in any given case, than of affecting general motives, and building up a right habit of avoiding or accepting certain classes of action.

The writer then justly connects his scientific necessarianism in philosophy, with humanity in punishment. He protests against excessive cruelty in the infliction of legal penalties, and especially against the use of torture, on two grounds ; first, that experience demonstrates the uselessness of these superfluous rigours ; and, second, that the habit of witnessing atrocious punishments familiarises both criminals and others with the idea of cruelty. The acquiescence of Paris for a few months in the cruelties of the Terror, was no doubt due, on Holbach's perfectly sound principle, to the far worse cruelties with which the laws had daily made Paris familiar down to the last years of the monarchy. And Holbach was justified in expecting a greater degree of charitable and considerate judgment, from the establishment in men's minds of a Necessarian theory. We are no longer vindictive against the individual doer ; we wax energetic against the defective training and the institutions, which allowed wrong motives to weigh more heavily with him than right ones. Punishment on the theory of necessity ought always to go with prevention, and is valued just because it is a force in prevention, and not merely an element in retribution.

Holbach answers effectively enough the common objection that his fatalism would plunge men's souls into apathy. If all is necessary, why shall I not let things go, and myself remain quiet ? As if we *could* stay our hands from action, if our feelings were trained to proper sensibility and sympathy. As if it were possible for a man of tender disposition not to interest himself keenly in all that concerns the lot of his fellow-creatures. How does our knowledge that death is necessary, prevent us from deploring the loss of a beloved one ? How does my consciousness that it is the inevitable property of fire to burn, prevent me from using all my efforts to avert a conflagration ?

Finally, when people urge that the doctrine of necessity degrades man by reducing him to a machine, and likening him to some growth of abject vegetation, they are merely using a kind of language that was invented in ignorance of what constitutes the

true dignity of man. What is nature itself but a vast machine, in which our human species is no more than one weak spring? The good man is a machine whose springs are adapted so to fulfil their functions, as to produce beneficent results for his fellows. How could such an instrument not be an object of respect and affection and gratitude?

In closing this part of Holbach's book, while not dissenting from his conclusions, we will only remark how little conscious he seems of the degree to which he empties the notions of praise and blame of the very essence of their old contents. It is not a modification, but the substitution of a new meaning under the old names. Praise in its new sense of admiration for useful and pleasure-giving conduct or motive, is as powerful a force and as adequate an incentive to good conduct and good motives, as praise in the old sense of admiration for a deliberate and voluntary exercise of a free-acting will. But the two senses are different. The old ethical association is transformed into something which usage and the requirements of social self-preservation must make equally potent, but which is not the same. If Holbach and others who hold necessarian opinions were to perceive this more frankly, and to work it out fully, they would prevent a confusion that is very unfavourable to them in the minds of most of those whom they wish to persuade. It is easy to see that the work next to be done in the region of morals, is the readjustment of the ethical phraseology of the volitional stage, to fit the ideas proper to the stage in which man has become as definitely the object of science, as any of the other phenomena of the universe.

The chapter (xiii.) on the Immortality of the Soul examines this memorable growth of human belief with great vigour, and a most destructive penetration. As we have seen, the author repudiates the theory of a double energy in man, one material and the other spiritual, just as he afterwards repudiates the analogous hypothesis of a double energy in nature, one of the two being due to a spiritual mover outside of the external phenomena of the universe. Consistently with this renunciation of a separate spiritual energy in man, Holbach will listen to no talk of a spiritual energy surviving the destruction of the mechanical framework. To say that the soul will feel, think, enjoy, suffer,

after the death of the body, is to pretend that a clock broken into a thousand pieces can continue to strike or to mark the hours. And having emphatically proclaimed his own refusal to share the common belief, he proceeds with good success to carry the war into the country of those who profess that belief, and defend it as the safeguard of society. We need not go through his positions. They are substantially those which are familiar to everybody who has read the Third Book of Lucretius's poem, and remembers those magnificent passages which are not more admirable in their philosophy, than they are noble and moving in their poetic expression :—

Nam veluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis  
 In tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus  
 Interdum, nilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam  
 Quae pueri in tenebris pavitant finguntque futura.  
 Hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessesit  
 Non radii solis neque lucida tela diei  
 Discutiant, sed naturae species ratioque.

And so forth, down to the exquisite lines—

“Jam jam non domus accipiet te laeta, neque uxor  
 Optima nec dulces occurrent oscula nati  
 Praeripere, et tacita pectus dulcedine tangent.  
 Non poteris factis florentibus esse, tuisque  
 Praesidium. Misero misere,” aiunt, “omnia ademit  
 Una dies infesta tibi tot praemia vitae.”  
 Illud in his rebus non addunt, “nec tibi earum  
 Jam desiderium rerum super insidet una.”  
 Quod bene si videant animo dictisque sequantur,  
 Dissolvant animi magno se angore metuque.  
 “Tu quidem ut es leto sopitus, sic eris aevi  
 Quod superest cunctis privatu' doloribus aegris ;  
 At nos horrifico cinefactum te prope busto  
 Insatiabiliter deflevimus, aeternumque  
 Nulla dies nobis maerorem e pectore demet.”  
 Illud ab hoc igitur quaerendum est, quid sit amari  
 Tanto opere, ad somnum si res redit atque quietem,  
 Cur quisquam aeterno possit tabescere luctu.

We may regret that Holbach, in dealing with these solemn and touching things, should have been so devoid of historic spirit as to buffet David, Mahomet, Chrysostom, and other holy personages,

as superstitious brigands. And we may believe that he has certainly been too sweeping in denying any deterrent efficacy whatever to the fires of hell. But where Holbach found one person in 1770, he would find a thousand in 1880, to agree with him, that it is possible to think of commendations and inducements to virtue, that shall be at least as efficacious as the fiction of eternal torment, without being as cruel, as wicked, as infamous to the gods, and as degrading to men.

From his attack on Immortality, Holbach naturally turns with new energy, as do all who have passed beyond that belief, to the improvement of the education, the laws, the institutions, which are to strengthen and implant the true motives for turning men away from wrong and inspiring them to right. He draws a stern and prolonged indictment against the kings of the earth, in words that we have already quoted above, as unjust, incapable, depraved by licence and impunity. One passage in this chapter is the scripture of a terrible prophecy, the very handwriting on the wall, which was to be so accurately fulfilled almost in the lifetime of the writer :—"The state of society is now a state of war of the Sovereign against all, and of each of its members against the other. Man is bad, not because he was born bad, but because he is made so ; the great and the powerful crush with impunity the needy and the unfortunate, and these in turn seek to repay all the ill that has been done to them. They openly or privily attack a native land that is a cruel stepmother to them ; she gives all to some of her children, while others she strips of all. Sorely they punish her for her partiality ; they show her that the motives borrowed from another life are powerless against the passions and the bitter wrath engendered by a corrupt administration in the life here ; and that all the terror of the punishments of this world is impotent against necessity, against criminal habits, against a dangerous organization that no education has ever been applied to correct." (Ch. xiv.) In another place :—"A society enjoys all the happiness of which it is susceptible, so soon as the greater number of its members are fed, clothed, housed ; are able, in a word, without an excessive toil, to satisfy the wants that nature has made necessities to them. Their imagination is content, so soon as they have the assurance that no force can ravish from them the fruits of their industry, and that they



labour for themselves. By a sequence of human madness, whole nations are forced to labour, to sweat, to water the earth with their tears, merely to keep up the luxury, the fancies, the corruption of a handful of insensates, a few useless creatures. So have religious and political errors changed the universe into a valley of tears." This is an incessant refrain that sounds with hoarse ground-tone under all the ethics and the metaphysics of the book. There are scores of pages in which the same idea is worked out with a sombre vehemence, that makes us feel as if Robespierre were already haranguing in the National Assembly, Camille Desmoulins declaiming in the gardens of the Palais Royal, and Danton thundering at the Club of the Cordeliers. We already watch the smoke of the flaming châteaux, going up like a savoury and righteous sacrifice to the heavens.

From this point to the end of the first part of the book, it is not so much philosophy, as the literature of a political revolution. There is a curious parenthesis in vindication not only of a contempt for death, but even of suicide; the writer pointing out with some malice that Samson, Eleazar, and other worthies caused their own death, and that Jesus Christ himself, if really the Son of God, dying of his own free grace, was a suicide, to say nothing of the various ascetic penitents who have killed themselves by inches.<sup>1</sup> "The fear of death, after all," he says, summing up his case, "will only make cowards; the fear of its alleged consequences will only make fanatics or melancholy pietists, as useless to themselves as to others. Death is a resource that we do ill to take away from oppressed virtue, reduced, as many a time it is, by the injustice of men to desperation." This was the doctrine in which the revolutionary generation were brought up, and the readiness with which men in those days inflicted death on themselves and

<sup>1</sup> This is not original in Holbach. Diderot's article on Suicide in the Encyclopædia (*Œuv.* xvii. 235) contains the usual arguments of the Church against suicide, with some casuistic illustrations, but it also contains an account of Dr. Donne's vindication of Suicide, called *Bia-thanatos*; 1651, in which these remarks of Holbach occur verbatim. Hallam found Donne's book so dull and pedantic, that he declares no one would be induced to kill himself by reading such a book, unless he were threatened with another volume.

## HOLBACH'S SYSTEM OF NATURE.



on others, showed how profoundly it had entered their souls.<sup>1</sup> We think, as we read, of Vergniaud and Condorcet carrying their doses of poison, of Barbaroux with his pistol, and Valazé with his knife, of Roland walking forth from Rouen among the trees on the Paris road, and there driving a cane-sword into his breast, as calmly as if he had been throwing off a useless vesture.

Holbach has been accused of reducing virtue to a far-sighted egoism,<sup>2</sup> and detached and crude propositions may be quoted, that perhaps give a literal warrant for the charge. Nominally he bases morality on happiness, but his real base is the happiness of the greatest number. To borrow Mr. Sidgwick's classification, Holbach is a universalistic, and not an egoistic Hedonist. The spirit of what he says is, in fact, not individualist but social. "The good man is he to whom true ideas have shown his own interest or his own happiness to lie in such a way of acting, that others are forced to love and approve for their own interest. . . . It is man who is most necessary to the well-being of man. . . . Merit and virtue are founded on the nature of man, on his needs . . . It is by virtue that we are able to earn the good-will, the confidence, the esteem, of all those with whom we have relations; in a word, no man can be happy alone. . . . To be virtuous is to place one's interest in what accords with the interest of others; it is to enjoy the benefits and the delights that one is the means of diffusing among them. . . . The sentiments of self-love become a hundred times more delicious, when we see them shared by all those with whom our destiny binds us. The habit of virtue excites wants within us that only virtue can satisfy; thus it is that virtue is ever its own recompense, and pays itself with the blessings that it procures for others."—(Ch. xv.)

Surely it is a childish or pedantic misinterpretation, to represent

<sup>1</sup> Hume's suppressed Essay on Suicide (see the edition by Mr. Green and Mr. Grose, 1875, vol. ii. 405) is a much more exhaustive argument than Holbach's, though the language of the two pieces is sometimes curiously alike. Rousseau in this, as in so many other moralities—marriage, for instance—was on the side of the Church, only allowing suicide where a man happens to be stricken by a painful and incurable disease. See the two famous letters in the *New Heloïsa*, Pt. iii. 21–22.

<sup>2</sup> Taine's *Ancien Régime*, p. 287.

this as egoism, whether armed or not with keen sight ; and still worse to talk of it as overthrowing the barriers that keep in the throng of selfish appetites. "Every citizen should be made to feel that the section of which he is a member is a Whole, that cannot subsist and be happy without virtue ; experience should teach him at every moment that the well-being of the members can only result from that of the whole body."—(Ch. xv.) To say of such a doctrine as this, that it is to invite every individual to make himself happy after his own will and fashion, and to pull down the barriers of the selfish appetites, is the very absurdity of philosophic prejudice. It is for us to look at Holbach's ethical doctrine in its widest practical application, and if we place ourselves at a social point of view, we cannot but perceive that the principle laid down in the words that we have just quoted, was the indispensable weapon against the anti-social selfishness of the oppressive privileged class. These words represent the ethical side of every popular and democratic movement. You may class Holbach's morality as the morality of self-interest, if you please ; but its true base lay in social sympathy. To proclaim happiness as the test of virtue was to develop the doctrine of naturalism ; for happiness is the outcome of a conformity to the natural condition of things. On the other hand, to insist that virtue lies in promoting the happiness of the body social as a whole, was to preach the most sovereign of all truths, in a state of things where the body social as a whole was kept distracted and miserable by the selfishness of a scanty few of its members. The Church, nominally built upon the morality of the Golden Rule, was perverted into being the great organ of sinister self-interest. The Atheists, apparently formulating the morality of the Epicureans, were in effect the teachers of public spirit and beneficence. And, taught in such circumstances, public spirit could only mean revolution. We may doubt whether Holbach had thought out the very different questions that may be fused under the easy phrase of a basis for morals. What are the sanctions of moral precepts ? Why ought each to seek the happiness of all ? What is the mark of the difference between right and wrong ? What is the foundation of Conscience, or that habit of mind which makes right as such seem preferable to wrong ? Clearly these are

all entirely separate topics. Yet Holbach, it is obvious, had not divided them in his own mind, and he seems to think that one and the same answer will serve for what he mistook for one and the same question. He found it enough to say that every individual wishes to be happy, and that he cannot be happy unless he is on good terms with his neighbours ; this reciprocity of needs and services he called the basis of morals. For a rough and common-sense view of the matter, such as Holbach sought to impress on his readers, this perhaps will do very well ; but it is not the product of accurate and scientific thinking.

It is not necessary, again, to point out how Holbach, while expounding the System of Nature, left out of sight the great natural process by which the moral acquisition of one generation becomes the starting-point of further acquisitions in the next. He forgot the stages. He talks of Man, as if all the races and eras of man were alike, and also as if each individual deliberately worked out sums in happiness on his own account. It would not only have been more true, according to modern opinions, but more in accordance with Holbach's own view of necessity, and of the irremovable chain that binds a man's conduct fast to a series of conditions that existed before he was born, if he had recognised conscience, moral preferences, interest in the public good, and all that he called the basis of morals, as coming to a man with the rest of the apparatus that the past imposes on the present, and not as due to any process of personal calculation.

Holbach had not clearly thought out the growth, the changes, varieties, and transformations among moral ideals. He was, of course, far too much in the full current of the eighteenth century not to feel that exultation in life and its most exuberant manifestations, which the conventional moralists of the theological schools had set down and proscribed as worldliness and fleshliness. "*Action*," he says in this very chapter ; "*action is the true element of the human mind* ; no sooner does man cease to act, than he falls into pain and weariness of spirit." No doubt this is too absolutely stated, if we are to take some millions of orientals into our account of the human mind, but it has been true of the nations of the west. Yet the recognition of this law did not prevent the writer from occasionally

falling into some of the old canting commonplaces about people being happiest who have fewest wants. As if, on the contrary, that action which he describes as the true element of man, were not directly connected with the incessant multiplication of wants. We may take this, however, as a casual lapse into the common form of moralists of ascetic ages. In substance, the *System of Nature* is essentially a protest against ascetic and quietist ideals.

The second half of the *System of Nature* treats of the Deity ; the proofs of his existence ; his attributes ; the manner in which he influences the happiness of men. What is remarkable is that here we have an onslaught, not merely on the Church with its overgrowth of abuses, nor on Christianity with its overgrowth of superstitions, but on that great conception which is enthroned on unseen heights far above any Church and any form of Christianity. It is theism, in its purest as in its impurest shape, that the writer condemns. No more elaborate, trenchant, and unflinching attack on the very fundamental propositions of theology, natural or revealed, is to be found in literature. Pure rationalism has nothing to add to this destructive onslaught. The tone is not truly philosophic, because the writer habitually regards the notion of a God as an abnormal and morbid excrescence, and not as a natural growth in human development. He takes no trouble, and it would have been an incredible departure from the mental fashion of the time if he had taken any trouble, to explain theology, or to penetrate behind its forms to those needs, aspirations, and qualities of human constitution in which theology had its best justification, if not its earliest source. He regards it as an enemy to be mercilessly routed, not as a force with which he has to make his account. Still, as a piece of rough and remorseless polemic, the second part of the *System of Nature* remains full of remarkable energy and power. The most eager Nescient or Denier to be found in the ranks of the assailants of theology in our own day, is timorous and moderate, compared with this direct and on-pressing swordsman. And the attack, on its own purely rationalistic ground, is thoroughly comprehensive. It is not made on an outwork here, or an outwork there ; it

encircles the whole compass of the defence. The conception of God is examined and resisted from every possible side—cosmological, ethical, metaphysical. To say that the argument is one-sided, is only to say that it is an attack. But the fact that the writer omits the contributions made under the temporary shelter of theology to morality and civilisation, does not alter the other fact that he states with unsurpassed vigour all that can be said against the intellectual absurdities and moral obliquities that theology has nourished and approved, and only too firmly planted.

Of the elaborate examination of the proofs of the existence of a God adduced by Descartes, Samuel Clarke, Malebranche, and Newton (ch. iv. and v.), we need only say that its whole force might have been summed up in the single proposition that the author once for all repudiates any *à priori* basis for any beliefs whatever. It would have been sufficient for philosophic purposes if he had contented himself with justifying and establishing that position. The fabric of orthodox demonstration would have fallen to the ground after the destruction of its foundations. Holbach rejected the whole *à priori* system; it was a matter of course therefore that he rejected each one of the twelve propositions which Clarke had invented by the *à priori* method. Holbach held that experience is the source and limit of knowledge, reasoning, and belief, and rejected as a fantastic impertinence of dreamy metaphysicians the assumption that our conceptions measure the necessities of objective existence. From that point of view, merely to state was to empty of all demonstrating quality such assertions as that something has existed from all eternity; an independent and immutable Being has existed from all eternity; this immutable and independent Being exists by himself, and is incomprehensible; the Being existing necessarily is necessarily single and unique—and so forth. Even if we accept this *à priori* method, and accept the first assumption that something must have existed from all eternity, it was open to Holbach to say, as Locke said on setting himself to examine Descartes' proof of a God: "I found that, by it, senseless matter might be the first eternal being and cause of all things, as well as an immaterial intelligent spirit." But what we feel is that the whole

controversy is being conducted between two disputants on two different planes of thought, between two creatures dwelling in different elements. To apply to Clarke's propositions, or to the slightly different propositions of Malebranche, the test of experience, to measure them by the principle of relativity, must be fatal in the minds of such persons as already accept experience as the only right test in such a matter. It is exactly as if the action of an Italian opera should be criticised in the light of the conditions of real life : the whole performance must in an instant figure as an absurdity. No partisan of the lyric drama would consent to have it so judged, and the philosophic partisans of theology would perhaps have been wiser to keep clear of pretensions to *prove* their master thesis. They might have been content to keep it as an emotional creation, an imaginative hypothesis, a noble simplification of the chimeras of the primitive consciousness of the race.

At it was, neither side could be convinced by the other, for they had no common criterion. They had hardly even a common language. The only effect of Holbach's blows was to persuade the bystanders who thronged round the lists in that eager time, that the so-called proofs with which the high philosophic names were associated, were only proofs to those who accepted a way of thinking which it was the very characteristic of that age decisively to reject. The controversial force of this part of the attack simply lay in the piercing thoroughness with which the irreconcilable discrepancies between the seventeenth century notion of demonstration, and that notion in the eighteenth, were forced upon the reader's attention.

One other remark may be made. Whatever we may think of the success of the author's assault on the theistic hypothesis of the universe, it is impossible to deny that he at least succeeds in repelling the various assaults levelled on what is vulgarly termed atheism. He rightly urges the unreasonableness of taxing those who have formed to themselves intelligible notions of the moving power of the universe, with denying the existence of such a power ; the absurdity of charging the very men who found everything that comes to pass in the world on fixed and constant laws, with attributing everything to chance. If by

Atheist, he says, you mean a man who would deny the existence of a force inherent in matter, and without which you cannot conceive nature, and if to this moving force you give the name of God, then an Atheist would be a madman. Holbach then describes the sense in which Atheists both exist and, as he thinks, may well justify their existence. Their qualities are as follows: To be guided only by experience and the testimony of their senses, and to perceive nothing in nature except matter, essentially active and mobile and capable of producing all the beings that we see; to forego all search for a chimerical cause, and not to mistake for better knowledge of the moving force of the universe, merely a separate attribution of it to a Being placed outside of the great whole; to confess in good faith that their mind can neither conceive nor reconcile the negative attributes and theological abstractions with the human and moral qualities that are ascribed to the Divinity.

The chapter (ix.) on the superiority of Naturalism over Theism as a basis for the most wholesome kind of Morality, is still worth reading by men in search of weapons against the presumptuous commonplaces of the pulpit. In this sphere Holbach is as earnest and severe as the most rigorous moralist that ever wrote. People who talk of the moral levity of the destructive literature of the eighteenth century, would be astonished, if they could bring themselves to read the books about which they talk, by the elevation of the *System of Nature*. The writer points out the necessarily evil influence upon morals of a Book popularly taken to be inspired, in which the Divinity is represented as now prescribing virtue, but now again prescribing crime and absurdity; who is sometimes the friend, and sometimes the enemy, of the human race; who is sometimes pictured as reasonable, just, and beneficent, and at other times as insensate: unjust, capricious, and despotic. Such divinities, and the priests of such divinities, are incapable of being the models, types, and arbiters of virtue and righteousness. No; we must seek a base for morality in the necessity of things. Whatever the Cause that placed man in the abode in which he dwells, and endowed him with his faculties—whether we regard the human species as the work of Nature, or of some intelligent Being



distinct from Nature—the existence of man, such as we see him to be, is a fact. We see in him a being who feels, thinks, has intelligence, has self-love, who strives to make life agreeable to himself, and who lives in society with beings like himself; beings whom by his conduct he may make his friends or his enemies. It is on these universal sentiments that you ought to base morality, which is nothing more nor less than the science of the duties of man living in society. The moment you attempt to find a base for morals outside of human nature, you go wrong; no other is solid and sure. The aid of the so-called sanctions of theology is not only needless, but mischievous. The alliance of the realities of duty with theological phantoms, exposes duty to the same ruin which daylight brings to the superstition that has been associated with duty. It sets up the arbitrary demands of a varying something, named Piety, in place of the plain requirements of Right. As for saying that without God man cannot have moral sentiments, or, in other words, cannot distinguish between vice and virtue, it is as if one said that, without the idea of God, man would not feel the necessity of eating and drinking.

The writer then breaks out into a long and sustained contrast, from which we may make a short extract to illustrate the heat to which the battle had now come:

“Nature invites man to love himself, incessantly to augment the sum of his happiness: Religion orders him to love only a formidable God who is worthy of hatred; to detest and despise himself, and to sacrifice to his terrible idol the sweetest and most lawful pleasures. Nature bids man consult his reason, and take it for his guide: Religion teaches him that this reason is corrupted, that it is a faithless, truthless guide, implanted by a treacherous God, to mislead his creatures. Nature tells man to seek light, to search for the truth: Religion enjoins upon him to examine nothing, to remain in ignorance. Nature says to man: ‘Cherish glory, labour to win esteem, be active, courageous, industrious:’ Religion says to him: ‘Be humble, abject, pusillanimous, live in retreat, busy thyself in prayer, meditation, devout rites; be useless to thyself, and do nothing for others.’ Nature proposes for her model, men endowed with noble, energetic, beneficent souls, who have usefully served their fellow-citizens: Religion makes a show

and a boast of the abject spirits, the pious enthusiasts, the phrenetic penitents, the vile fanatics, who for their ridiculous opinions have troubled empires. . . . Nature tells children to honour, to love, to hearken to their parents, to be the stay and support of their old age : Religion bids them prefer the oracle of their God, and to trample father and mother under foot, when divine interests are concerned. Nature commands the perverse man to blush for his vices, for his shameless desires, his crimes : Religion says to the most corrupt : ' Fear to kindle the wrath of a God whom thou knowest not : but if against his laws thou hast committed crime, remember that he is easy to appease and of great mercy : go to his temple, humble thyself at the feet of his ministers, expiate thy misdeeds by sacrifices, offerings, prayers ; these will wash away thy stain in the eyes of the Eternal.' "

Of course, philosophical criticism would have much to say about this glowing mass of furious propositions ; for the first voice of Nature hardly whispers into the ear of the primitive man all these high and generous promptings. But if by Nature we here understand the Encyclopædists, and by Religion the Catholic Church in France at that moment, then Holbach's fiery antitheses are a tolerably fair account of the matter. And the political side of the indictment was hardly less just, though its hardihood appalled men like Voltaire.

" Nature says to man, ' Thou art free, and no power on earth can lawfully strip thee of thy rights : ' Religion cries to him that he is a slave condemned by God to groan under the rod of God's representatives. Nature bids man to love the country that gave him birth, to serve it with all loyalty, to bind his interests to hers against every hand that might be raised upon her : Religion commands him to obey without a murmur the tyrants that oppress his country, to take their part against her, to chain his fellow-citizens under their lawless caprices. Yet if the Sovereign be not devoted enough to his priests, Religion instantly changes her tone ; she incites the subjects to rebellion, she makes resistance a duty, she cries aloud that we must obey God rather than man. . . . If the nature of man were consulted on Politics, which supernatural ideas have so shamefully depraved, it would contribute far more than all the religion in the world to make communities happy,

powerful, and prosperous under reasonable authority. . . . This nature would teach princes that they are men and not gods ; that they are citizens charged by their fellow citizens with watching over the safety of all. . . . Instead of attributing to the divine vengeance all the wars, the famines, the plagues that lay nations low, would it not have been more useful to show them that such calamities are due to the passions, the indolence, the tyranny of their princes, who sacrifice the nations to their hideous delirium ? Natural evils demand natural remedies ; ought not experience, therefore, long ago to have undeceived mortals as to those supernatural remedies, those expiations, prayers, sacrifices, fastings, processions, that all the peoples of the earth have so vainly opposed to the woes that overwhelmed them ? . . . Let us recognise the plain truth, then, that it is these supernatural ideas that have obscured morality, corrupted politics, hindered the advance of the sciences, and extinguished happiness and peace even in the very heart of man."

Holbach was a vigorous propagandist. Two years after the appearance of his master-work, he drew up its chief propositions in a short and popular volume, called *Good sense ; or Natural Ideas opposed to Supernatural*. His zeal led him to write and circulate a vast number of other tractates and short volumes, the bare list of which would fill several of these pages, all inciting their readers to an intellectual revolt against the reigning system in Church and State. He lived to get a glimpse of the very edge and sharp bend of the great cataract. He died in the spring of 1789. If he had only lived five years longer, he would have seen the great church of Notre Dame solemnly consecrated by legislative decree to the worship of Reason, bishops publicly trampling on crosier and ring amid universal applause, and vast crowds exulting in processions whose hero was an ass crowned with a mitre.

## CHAPTER XV.

### RAYNAL'S HISTORY OF THE INDIES.

"SINCE Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois*," says Grimm in his chronicle, "our literature has perhaps produced no monument that is worthier to pass to the remotest posterity, and to consecrate the progress of our enlightenment and diligence for ever, than Raynal's *Philosophical and Political History of European settlements and commerce in the two Indies*." Yet it is perhaps safe to say that not one hundred persons now living have ever read two chapters of the book for which this immortal future was predicted.

When the revolutionary floods gradually subsided, some of the monuments of the previous age began to show themselves above the surface of the falling waters. They had lost amid the stormy agitation of the deluge the shining splendour of their first days; still men found something to attract them after the revolution, as their grandfathers had done before it, in the pages of the *Spirit of Laws*, of the *New Heloïsa*, and the endless satires, romances, and poems of the great Voltaire. Raynal's book was not among these dead glories that came to life again. It disappeared utterly. Nor can it be said that it deserved a kinder fate. Its only interest now is for those who care to know the humour of men's minds in those præ-revolutionary days, when they could devour a long political and commercial history as if it had been a novel or a play, and when the turn of men's interests made of such a book "the Bible of two worlds for nearly twenty years."

Raynal is no commanding figure. Born in 1711, he came to Paris from southern France, and joined the troop of needy priests who swarmed in the great city, hopefully looking out for the prizes of the Church. Raynal is the hero of an anecdote which is told of more than one abbé of the time; whether literally true or not, it is probably a correct illustration of the evil pass to which ecclesiastical manners had come. He had, it was said, nothing to live upon save the product of a few masses. \*The Abbé Prévost received twenty sous for saying a mass; he paid the Abbé Laporte fifteen sous to be his deputy; the Abbé Laporte paid eight sous to Raynal to say it in his stead. But the adventurer was not destined to remain in this abject case, parasite humbly feeding on parasite. He turned bookmaker, and wrote a history of the Stadtholderate, a volume about the English Parliament, and, of all curious subjects for a man of letters of that date, an account of the divorce of King Henry the Eighth of England. He visited this country more than once, and had the honour in 1754 of being chosen a fellow of the Royal Society of London.<sup>1</sup> We have some difficulty in understanding how he came by such fame, just as we cannot tell how the man who had been glad to earn a few pence by saying masses, came shortly to be rich and independent. He is believed to have engaged in some colonial ventures, and to have had good luck. His enemies spread the dark report that he had made money in the slave trade, but in those days of incensed party-spirit there was no limit to virulent invention. It is at least undeniable that Raynal put his money to generous uses. Among other things, he had the current fancy of the time, that the world could be made better by the copious writing of essays, and he delighted in founding prizes for them at the provincial academies. It was at Lyons that he proposed the famous thesis, not unworthy of consideration even at this day: *Has the discovery of America been useful or injurious to the human race?*

<sup>1</sup> The *Biographie Universelle*, followed by the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, tells a story of Raynal visiting the House of Commons; the Speaker, says the writer, learning that he was in the gallery, "suspended the discussion until a distinguished place had been found for the French philosopher." This must be set down as a myth. The journals have been searched, and there is no official confirmation of the statement, improbable enough on the face of it.

Raynal was one of the most assiduous of the guests at the philosophic meals of Baron Holbach and Helvétius; he was very good humoured, easy to live with, and free from that irritable self-consciousness and self-love which is too commonly the curse of the successful writer, as of other successful persons. He did not go into company merely to make the hours fly. With him, as with Helvétius, society was a workshop. He pressed every one with questions as to all matters, great or small, with which the interlocutor was likely to be familiar.<sup>2</sup> Horace Walpole met him at "dull Holbach's," and the abbé at once began to tease him across the table as to the English colonies. Walpole knew as little about them as he knew about Coptic, so he made signs to his tormentor that he was deaf. On another occasion Raynal dined at Strawberry Hill, and mortified the vanity of his host by looking at none of its wonders himself, and keeping up such a fire of talk and cross-examination as to prevent anybody else from looking at them. "There never was such an impertinent and tiresome old gossip," cried our own gossip.<sup>3</sup>

Raynal failed to give better men than Horace Walpole the sense of power. When his greatest work took the public by storm, nobody would believe that he had written it. Just as in the case of the *System of Nature*, so people set down the *History of the Indies* to Diderot, and even the most moderate critics insisted that he had at any rate written not less than one-third of it. Many less conspicuous scribes were believed to have been Raynal's drudges. We can have no difficulty in supposing that so bulky a work engaged many hands. There is no unity of composition, no equal scale, no regularity of proportion; on the contrary, rhapsody and sober description, history and moral disquisition, commerce, law, physics, and metaphysics are all poured in, almost as if by hazard. We seem to watch half-a-dozen writers, each dealing with matters according to his own individual taste and his own peculiar kind of knowledge.

Indeed, it is a curious and most interesting feature in the literary activity of France in the eighteenth century, that the egoism and vanity of authorship were reduced by the conditions

<sup>2</sup> Morellet, i. 221.

<sup>3</sup> Walpole's *Corresp.* vi. 147 and 445.

of the time to a lower degree than in any other generation since letters were invented. The suppression of self by the Jesuits was hardly more complete than the suppression of self by the most brilliant and effective of the insurgents against Jesuitry. Such intimate association as exists in our day between a given book and a given personality, was then thoroughly shaken by the constant necessity for secrecy. As we have seen, people hardly knew who set up that momentous landmark, the *System of Nature*. Voltaire habitually and vehemently denied every one of his most characteristic pieces, and though in the buzz of Parisian gossip the right name was surely hit upon for such unique performances as Voltaire's, yet the fame was far too broken and uncertain to reward his vanity, if the better part of himself had not been fully and sincerely engaged in public objects in which vanity had no part. Rousseau was an exception, but then Rousseau was in truth a reactionist, and not a loyal member of the great company of reformers. As for Diderot, he valued the author's laurel so cheaply, as we have seen, that with a gigantic heedlessness and Saturnian weariness of the plaudits or hisses of the audience, while supremely interested in the deeper movements of the tragi-comic drama of the world, he left some of his masterpieces lying unknown in forgotten chests. Again, in the case of the *Encyclopædia*, as we have also seen, Turgot as well as less eminent men bargained that their names should not be made public. Wherever a telling blow was to be dealt with the sword, or a new stone to be laid with the trowel, men were always found ready to spend themselves and be spent, without taking thought whether their share in the work should be nicely measured and publicly identified, or absorbed and lost in the whole of which it was a part.

Whatever may have been the secret of the authorship of Raynal's book, and whether or no even the general conception of such a performance was due to Raynal, it is at least certain that the original author, whoever he may have been, divined a remarkable literary opportunity. This divination is in authorship what felicity of experiment is to the scientific discoverer. The book came into immediate vogue. It was published in 1772; a second edition was demanded within a couple of years, and it is

computed that more than twenty editions, as well as countless pirated versions, were exhausted before the universal curiosity and interest were satisfied. As the subject took the writer over the whole world, so he found readers in every part of the habitable globe. And among them were men for whom destiny had lofty parts in store. Zeal carried one young reader so far that he collected all the boldest passages into a single volume, and published it as *L'Esprit de Raynal*; an achievement for which, as he was a member of a religious congregation, he afterwards got into some trouble.<sup>1</sup> Franklin read and admired the book in London. Black Toussaint Louverture in his slave-cabin at Hayti laboriously spelled his way through its pages, and found in their story of the wrongs of his race and their passionate appeal against slavery, the first definite expression of thoughts which had already been dimly stirred in his generous spirit by the brutalities that were every day enacted under his eyes. Gibbon solemnly immortalised Raynal by describing him, in one of the great chapters of the *Decline and Fall*, as a writer who "with a just confidence had prefixed to his own history the honourable epithets of political and philosophical."<sup>2</sup> Robertson, whose excellent *History of America*, covering part of Raynal's ground, was not published until 1777, complimented Raynal on his ingenuity and eloquence, and reproduced some of Raynal's historical speculations.<sup>3</sup>

Frederick the Great began to read it, and for some days spoke enthusiastically to his French satellites at dinner of its eloquence and reason. All at once he became silent, and he never spoke a word about the book again. He had suddenly come across half-a-dozen pages of vigorous rhapsodising, delivered for his own good :

"Oh Frederick, Frederick ! thou wast gifted by nature with a bold and lively imagination, a curiosity that knew no bounds, a passion for industry. Humanity, everywhere in chains, everywhere cast down, wiped away her tears at the sight of thy earliest labours, and seemed to find a solace for all her woes in the hope of finding in thee her avenger. On the dread theatre of war thy swiftness, skill, and order amazed all nations. Thou wast regarded

<sup>1</sup> Hédouin by name.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xxi.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, xii. 189 (Edition of 1822).



as the model of warrior-kings. There exists a still more glorious name; the name of citizen-king. . . . Once more open thy heart to the noble and virtuous sentiments that were the delight of thy young days." He then rebukes Frederick for keeping money locked up in his military chest, instead of throwing it into circulation, for his violent and arbitrary administration, and for the excessive imposts under which his people groaned. "Dare still more; give rest to the earth. Let the authority of thy mediation, and the power of thy arms, force peace on the restless nations. The universe is the only country of a great man, and the only theatre for thy genius; become then the benefactor of nations."<sup>1</sup>

In after days, when Raynal visited Berlin, overflowing with vanity and self-importance, he succeeded with some difficulty in procuring an interview with the King, and then Frederick took his revenge. He told Raynal that years ago he had read the history of the Stadtholderate, and of the English Parliament. Raynal modestly interposed that since those days he had written more important works. "*I don't know them,*" said the king, in a tone that closed the subject.<sup>2</sup>

More disinterested persons than Frederick set as low a value on Raynal's performance. One writer even compares the book to a quack mounted on a waggon, retailing to the gaping crowd a number of commonplaces against despotism and religion, without a single curious thing about them except their hardihood.<sup>3</sup> But the instinct of the gaping crowd was sound. Measured by the standard and requirements of modern science, Raynal's history is no high achievement. It may perhaps be successfully contended that the true conception of history has on the whole gone back, rather than advanced, within the last hundred years. There have been many signs in our own day of its becoming narrow, pedantic, and trivial. It threatens to degenerate from a broad survey of great periods and movements of human societies, into vast and

<sup>1</sup> Book v. § 31.

<sup>2</sup> *Thiébault*, iii. 172; where there is a long and most disparaging account of Raynal, by no means incredible, though we must remember that a competent judge has pronounced Thiébault to be "stupid, incorrect, and the prey of stupidities."

<sup>3</sup> Sénac de Meilhan, 123.

countless accumulations of insignificant facts, sterile knowledge, and frivolous antiquarianism, in which the spirit of epochs is lost, and the direction, meaning, and summary of the various courses of human history all disappear. Voltaire's *Essai sur les Mœurs* shows a perfectly true notion of what kind of history is worth either writing or reading. Robertson's *View of the Progress of Society in Europe from the Fall of the Roman Empire to the Sixteenth Century* is—with all its imperfectious—admirably just, sensible, and historic in its whole scope and treatment. Raynal himself, though far below such writers as Voltaire and Robertson in judgment and temper, yet is not without a luminous breadth of outlook, and does not forget the superior importance of the effect of events on European development, over any possible number of minute particularities in the events themselves. He does not forget, for instance, in describing the Portuguese conquests in the East Indies, to point out that the most remarkable and momentous thing about them was the check that they inflicted on the growth of the Ottoman Power, at a moment in European history when the Christian states were least able to resist, and least likely to combine against the designs of Solymán.<sup>1</sup> This is really the observation best worth making about the Portuguese conquests, and it illustrates Raynal's habit, and the habit of the good minds of that century, of incessantly measuring events by their consequences to western enlightenment and freedom, and of dropping out of sight all irrelevancies of detail.

This signal merit need not blind us to Raynal's shortcomings in the other direction. There are very few dates. The total absence of references and authorities was condemned by Gibbon as "the unpardonable blemish of what is otherwise a most entertaining book." There is no criticism. As Raynal was a mere literary compiler, it was not to be expected that he should rise above the common deficiencies in the thought and methods of his time. It was not to be expected that he should deal with the various groups of phenomena among primitive races, in the scientific spirit of modern anthropology. It is true that he was contemporary with De Brosses, who ranks among the founders of

<sup>1</sup> Book i. § 7. Robertson works out this reflection in his *Historical Dissertation concerning Ancient India*, iv. § 8.

the study of the origins of human culture. One sentence of De Brosses would have warned Raynal against a vicious method, which made nearly all that was written about primitive men by him and everybody else of the same school, utterly false, worthless, and deluding. "It is not in possibilities," said De Brosses, "it is in man himself that we must study man: it is not for us to imagine what man might have done, or ought to have done, but to observe what he did." Of the origin and growth of a myth, for example, Raynal had no rational idea. When he found a myth, what he did was to reduce it to the terms of human action, and then coolly to describe it as historical. The ancient Peruvian legend that laws and arts had been brought to their land by two divine children of the Sun, Manco-Capac and his sister-wife Manca-Oello, is transformed into a grave and prosaic narrative, in which Manco-Capac's achievements are minutely described with as much assurance as if that sage had been Frederick the Great, or Pombal, or any statesman living before the eyes of the writer. Endless illustrations, some of them amusing enough, might be given of this Euhemeristic fashion of dealing with the primitive legends of human infancy.

On the other hand, if Raynal turns myth into history, he constantly resorts to the opposite method, and turns the hard prose of real life into doubtful poetry. If he reduces the demi-gods to men, he delights also in surrounding savage men with the joyous conditions of the pastoral demi-gods. He can never resist an opportunity of introducing an idyll. It was the fashion of the time, begun by Rousseau and perfected by the author of *Paul and Virginia*. The taste for idylls of savage life had at least one merit; it was a way of teaching people that the life of savages is something normal, systematic, coherent, and not mere chaos, formless, and void, unrelated to the life of civilisation. A recent traveller had given an account of an annual ceremony in China, which Raynal borrowed without acknowledgement.<sup>2</sup> M. Poivré had described how the Emperor once every year went

<sup>2</sup> *Voyage d'un Philosophe, etc.*; a work published in 1768, and in great vogue for some time, partly because it furnished material for the speculations of Raynal, Helvétius, and the rest. See *De l'Homme*, II. xiii., &c. Grimm, v. 450.

forth into the fields, and there with his own hand guided the plough as it traced the long furrows. Raynal elaborated this formality into a characteristic rhapsody on peace, simplicity, plenty, and the father of his people. As a caustic critic of M. Poivré remarked, if a Chinese traveller had arrived at Versailles on the morning of Holy Thursday, he would have found the King of France humbly washing the feet of twelve poor and aged men, yet, as Frenchmen knew, this would be no occasion for rapturous exultation over the lowliness and humanity of the French court.

In the same spirit Raynal made no scruple in filling his pages with the sentimental declamations, in which the reaction of that day against the burden of a decaying system of social artifice found such invariable relief and satisfaction. None of these imaginary pieces of high sentiment was more popular than the episode of Polly Baker. It occurs in the chapters which describe the foundation of New England.<sup>1</sup> The fanaticism and intolerance of the Puritan Fathers of that famous land are set forth with the holy rage that always moved the reformers of the eighteenth century against the reformers of the seventeenth. Religion is boldly spoken of as a dreadful malady, whose severity extended even to the most indifferent objects. It may be admitted that the cruel persecution of the Quakers, and the grotesque horrors of witch-finding in New Salem, gave Raynal at least as good a text against Protestantism as he had found against Catholicism in the infernal doings in the West Indian Islands or in Peru. Even after this bloody fever had abated, says Raynal, the inhabitants still preserved a kind of rigorism that savours of the sombre days in which the Puritan colonies had their rise. He illustrates this by the case of a young woman who was brought before the authorities for the offence of having given birth to a child out of wedlock. It was her fifth transgression. Raynal, conceiving history after the manner of the author of the immortal speeches of Pericles, put into the mouth of the unfortunate sinner a long and eloquent apology. At the risk of her life, she cries, she has brought five children into existence. "I have devoted myself with all the courage of a mother's solicitude to the painful toil demanded by

<sup>1</sup> Book xvii.

their weakness and their tender years. I have formed them to virtue, which is only another name for reason. Already they love their country, as I love it. . . . Is it a crime, then, to be fruitful, as the earth is fruitful, the common mother of us all? . . . And how am I not to cry out against the injustice of my lot, when I see that he who seduced and ruined me, after being the cause of my destruction, enjoys honour and power, and is actually seated in the tribunal where they punish my misfortune with rods and with infamy? Who was that barbarous lawgiver who, deciding between the two sexes, kept all his wrath for the weaker; for that luckless sex which pays for a single pleasure by a thousand dangers,"—and so forth. It need hardly be said that this is far too much in the vein, and almost in the words of Diderot, to have any authenticity. And as it happens, there is a piece of external evidence on the matter, which illustrates Raynal's curious lightheartedness as to historic veracity. Franklin and Silas Deane were one day talking together about the many blunders in Raynal's book, when the author himself happened to step in. They told him of what they had been speaking. "Nay," says Raynal, "I took the greatest care not to insert a single fact for which I had not the most unquestionable authority." Deane then fell on the story of Polly Baker, and declared of his own certain knowledge that there had never been a law against bastardy in Massachusetts. Raynal persisted that he must have had the whole case from some source of indisputable trustworthiness, until Franklin broke in upon him with a loud laugh, and explained that when he was a printer of a newspaper, they were sometimes short of news, and to amuse his customers he invented fictions that were as welcome to them as facts. One of these fictions was the legend of Raynal's heroine. The abbé was not in the least disconcerted. "Very well, Doctor," he replied, "I would rather relate your stories, than other men's truths."<sup>1</sup>

When all has been said that need be said about the glaring shortcomings of the *History of the Indies*, its popularity still remains to be accounted for. If we ask for the causes of this striking success, they are perhaps not very far to seek. For one thing, the book is remarkable both for its variety and its animation.

<sup>1</sup> Jefferson, quoted in Parton's *Life of Franklin*, ii. 418.

Horace Walpole wrote about it to Lady Aylesbury in terms that do not at all overstate its liveliness: "It tells one everything in the world;—how to make conquests, invasions, blunders, settlements, bankruptcies, fortunes, etc.; tells you the natural and historical history of all nations; talks commerce, navigation, tea, coffee, china, mines, salt, spices; of the Portuguese, English, French, Dutch, Danes, Spaniards, Arabs, caravans, Persians, Indians, of Louis XIV. and the King of Prussia, of La Bourdonnais, Dupleix, and Admiral Saunders; of rice, and women that dance naked; of camels, gingham, and muslin; of millions of millions of lires, pounds, rupees, and cowries; of iron cables and Circassian women; of Law and the Mississippi; and against all governments and religions."<sup>1</sup>

All this is really not too highly coloured. And Raynal's cosmorama exactly hit the tastes of the hour. The readers of that day were full of a new curiosity about the world outside of France, and the less known families of the human stock. It was no doubt more like the curiosity of keen-witted children, than the curiosity of science. Montesquieu first stirred this interest in the unfamiliar forms of custom, institution, creed, motive, and daily manners. But while Montesquieu treated such matters fragmentarily, and in connection with a more or less abstract discussion on polity, Raynal made them the objects of a vivid and concrete picture, and presented them in the easier shape of a systematic history. Again, if the reading class in France were intelligently curious, it must be added, we fear, that they were not without a certain lubricity of imagination, which was pleasantly tickled by sensuous descriptions of the ways of life that were strange to the iron restraints of civilisation. Finally, the public of that day always chose to veil and confuse the furtive voluptuousness of the time by moral disquisition, and a light and busy meddling with the insoluble perplexities of philosophy. Here too the dexterous Raynal knew how to please the fancies of his patrons, and whether Diderot was or was not the writer of those pages of moral sophism and paradox, there is something in them which incessantly reminds us of his *Supplement to Bougainville's Voyages*.

<sup>1</sup> *Walpole's Letters*, v. 421.

Among the superficial causes of the popularity of Raynal's *History*, we cannot leave out the circumstance that it was composed after a very interesting and critical moment in the colonial relations of France. The Seven Years' War ended in the expulsion of the French from Canada and from their possessions in the East Indies. When the peace of 1763 was made, this was counted the most disastrous part of that final record and sealing of misfortune. When we see with what attachment the ordinary Frenchman of to-day regards what is as yet the thankless possession of Algeria, we might easily have guessed, even if the correspondence of the time had set it forth less distinctly than it does, with what deep concern and mortification the French of that day saw the white flag and its lilies driven for ever from the banks of the St. Lawrence in the west, and the coast of Coromandel in the east. Raynal himself tells us with what zealous impatience the government attempted to make the nation forget its calamities, by stirring the hope of a better fortune in the region to which they gave the magnificent name of Equinoctial France. The establishment of a free and national population among the scented forests and teeming swamps of Guiana, was to bring rich compensation for the icy tracts of Canada. This utopia of a brilliant settlement in Guiana has steadily infested the minds of French statesmen from Choiseul down to Louis Napoleon, and its history is a striking monument of perversity and folly. But from 1763 to 1770, while Raynal was writing his book, men's minds were full of the heroic design, and this augmented their interest in the general themes which Raynal handled—colonisation, commerce, and the overthrow and settlement of new worlds by the old.

However much all these things may have quickened the popularity of Raynal's *History*, yet the true source of it lay deeper; lay in the fuel which the book supplied to the two master emotions of the hour—the hatred and contempt for religion, and the passion for justice and freedom. The subject easily lent itself to these two strong currents. Or we may say that hatred of religion, and passion for justice and freedom, were in fact the subjects, and that the commercial establishments and political relations of the new worlds in the east and west were only the setting and framework. Raynal was perhaps the first person to

see that the surest way of discrediting Catholicism was to write some chapters of its history. Gibbon resorted to the same device shortly afterwards, and found in the contemptuous analysis of heresies, and the selfish and violent motives of councils and prelates, as good an occasion of piercing the Church, as Raynal found in painting the abominable fraud and cruelty that made the presence of Christians so dire a curse to the helpless inhabitants of the new lands. And the same reproachful background which Gibbon so artistically introduced, in the humane, intelligent, and happy epoch of the pagan Antonines, Raynal invented for the same purpose of making Christianity seem uglier, in the imaginary simplicity, and unbroken gladness of the native races whose blood was shed by Christian aggressors as if it had been water.

It would perhaps have been singular at a moment when men were looking round on every side for such weapons as might come to their hand, if they had missed the horrible action of Catholicism when brought into contact with the lower races of mankind. There is no more deplorable chapter in the annals of the race, and there is none which the historian of Christianity should be less willing to pass over lightly. The ruthless cruelty of the Spanish conquerors in the new world is a profoundly instructive illustration of the essential narrowness of the papal Christianity, its pitiful exclusiveness, its low and bad morality, and, above all, its incurable unfitness for dealing with the spirit and motives of men in face of the violent temptations with which the wealth of the new world now assailed and corrupted them. Catholicism had held triumphant possession of the conscience of Europe for a dozen centuries and more. The stories of the American Archipelago, of Mexico, of Peru, even if told by calmer historians than Raynal, show how little power, amid all this triumph of the ecclesiastical letter, had been won by the Christian spirit over the rapacity, the lust, the bloody violence, of the natural man. They show what a superficial thing the professed religion of the ages of faith had been, how enormous a task remained, and how much the most arduous part of this task was to make Catholicism itself civilised and moral. For it is hardly denied that Christianity had done worse than merely fail to provide an effective curb on the cruel passions of men. The



Spanish conquerors showed that it had nursed a still more cruel passion than the rude interests of material selfishness had ever engendered, by making the extermination or enslavement of these hapless people a duty to the Catholic Church, and a savoury sacrifice in the nostrils of the Most High.

It is true that a philosophic historian will have to take into account the important consideration that the reckless massacres perpetrated by the subjects of the Most Catholic King were less horrible and less permanently depraving than the daily offering of the bleeding hearts of human victims in the temples of Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipuk. He would have to remember, as even Raynal does, that if the slave-drivers and murderers were Catholics, so also was Las Casas, the apostle of justice and mercy. Still the fact remains, that the doctrine of moral obligations towards the lower races had not yet taken its place in Europe, any more than the doctrine of our obligation to the lower animals, our ministers and companions, has yet taken its place among Italians and Spaniards. The fact remains, that the old Christianity in the sixteenth century was unable to deal effectively with the new conditions in which the world found itself. As Catholicism now in France in the eighteenth century proved itself unable to harmonise the new moral aspirations and new social necessities of the time with the ancient tradition, Raynal was right in telling over again the afflicting story of her earlier failure, and in identifying the creed that murdered Calas and La Barre before their own eyes, with the creed that had blasted the future of the fairest portion of the new world two centuries before.

The mere circumstance, however, that the book was one long and powerful innuendo against the Church, would not have been enough to secure its vast popularity. Attacks on the Church had become cheap by this time. The eighteenth century, as it is one of the chief aims of these studies to show, had a positive side of at least equal importance and equal strength with its negative side. As we have so often said, its writers were inspired by zeal for political justice, for humanity, for better and more equal laws, for the amelioration of the common lot,—a zeal which in energy, sincerity, and disinterestedness, has never been surpassed. Raynal's work was perhaps, on the whole, the most vigorous and sustained of all

the literary expressions that were given to the great social ideas of the century. It wholly lacked the strange and concentrated glow that burned in the pages of the Social Contract ; on the other hand, it was more full of movement, of reality, of vivid and picturesque incident. It was popular, and it was concrete. Raynal's story went straight to the hearts of many people, to whom Rousseau's arguments were only half intelligible and wholly dreary. It was that book of the eighteenth century which brought the lower races finally within the pale of right and duty in the common opinion of France. The engravings that face the title-page in each of the seven volumes give the key-note to the effect that the seven volumes produced. In one we see a philosopher writing on a column those old words of dolorous pregnancy, *Auri sacra fames*, while in the distance Spanish and Portuguese ships ride at anchor, and on the shore white men massacre blacks. In another we see a fair woman, typifying bounteous Nature, giving her nourishment to a white infant at one breast, and to a black infant at the other, while she turns a pitiful eye to a scene in the background, where a gang of negro-slaves work among the sugar-canes, under the scourge and the goad of ruthless masters. A third frontispiece gives us the story of Inkle and Yarico, which Raynal sets down to some English poet, but as no English poet is known to have touched that moving tale until the younger Colman dramatized it in 1787, we may suspect that Raynal had remembered it from Steele's paper in the *Spectator*. The last of these pieces represents a cultivated landscape, adorned with villages, and its ports thronged with shipping ; in the foreground are two Quakers, one of them benignly embracing some young Indians, the other casting indignantly away from him a bow and its arrows, the symbols of division and war.

The most effective chapters in the book were, in truth, eloquent sermons on these simple and pathetic texts. They brought Negroes and Indians within the relations of human brotherhood. They preached a higher morality towards these poor children of bondage, they inspired a new pity, they moved more generous sympathies, and they did this in such a way as not merely to affect men's feelings about Indians and Negroes, slave-labour, and the yet more hateful slave-trade, but at the same time

to develop and strengthen a general feeling for justice, equality, and beneficence in all the arrangements and relations of the social union all over the world. The same movement which brought the suffering blacks of the new world within the sphere of moral duty, and invested them with rights, intensified the same notion of rights and duties in association with the suffering people of France. This was the sentiment that reigned during the boyhood and youth of those who were destined, some twenty years after Raynal's book was first placed in their hands, to carry that sentiment out into a fiery and victorious reality.

Montesquieu had opened the various questions connected with slavery. We can have no better measure of the increased heat in France between 1750 and 1770, than the difference in tone between two authors so equal in popularity, if so unequal in merit, as Raynal and Montesquieu. The latter, without justifying the abuses or even the usage of slavery in any shape, had still sought to give a rational account of its growth as an institution.<sup>1</sup> Raynal could not read this with patience. He typifies all the passion of the revolt against the historic method. "Montesquieu," he says, "could not make up his mind to treat the question of slavery seriously. In fact, it is a degradation of reason to employ it, I will not say in defending, but even in combating an abuse so contrary to all reason. Whoever justifies so odious a system, deserves from the philosopher the deepest contempt, and from the negro a dagger-stroke. 'If you put a finger on me, I will kill myself,' said Clarissa to Lovelace. And I would say to the man that should assail my freedom: If you come near me, I poniard you. . . . Will any one tell me that he who seeks to make me a slave, is only using his rights? Where are they, these rights? Who has stamped on them a mark sacred enough to silence mine? If thou thinkest thyself authorised to oppress me, because thou art stronger and craftier than I—then do not complain when my strong arms shall tear thy breast open to find thy heart; do not complain when in thy spasm-riven bowels thou feelest the deadly doom which I have passed into them with thy food. Be thou a victim in thy turn, and expiate the crime of the oppressor."<sup>2</sup>

Raynal then asks the political question, how we can hope to

<sup>1</sup> Book xv. of the *Esprit des Lois*.

<sup>2</sup> Book xi. § 30.

throw down an edifice that is propped up by universal passion, by established laws, by the rivalries of powerful nations, and by the force of prejudices more powerful still. To what tribunal, he cries, shall we carry the sacred appeal? He can find no better answer than that of Turgot and the Economists. It is to Kings that we must look for the redress of these monstrous abominations. It is for Kings to carry fire and sword among the oppressors. "Your armies," he cries, anticipating the famous expression of a writer of our own day, "will be filled with the holy enthusiasm of humanity." In a more practical vein, Raynal then warns his public of the terrible reckoning which awaits the whites, if the blacks ever rise to avenge their wrongs. The Negroes only need a chief courageous enough to lead them to vengeance and carnage. "Where is he, that great man, whom Nature owes to the honour of the human race? Where is he, that new Spartacus who will find no Crassus? Then the Black Code will vanish; how terrible will the White Code be!" We may easily realise the effect which vehement words like these had upon Toussaint, and upon those for whom Toussaint reproduced them.

Men have constantly been asking themselves what the great literary precursors of the Revolution would have thought, and how they would have acted, if they could have survived to the days of the Terror. What would Voltaire have said of Robespierre? How would Rousseau have borne himself at the Jacobin Club? Would Diderot have followed the procession of the Goddess of Reason? To ask whether these famous men would have sanctioned the Terror, is to insult great memories; but there is no reason to suppose that their strong spirits would have faltered. One or two of the younger generation of the famous philosophic party did actually see the break-up of the old order. Condorcet faced the storm with a heroism of spirit that has never been surpassed: disgust at the violent excesses of bad men could never make him unfaithful to the beneficence of the movement which their frenzy distorted.

Raynal was of weaker mould, and showed that there had been a stratum of cant and borrowed formulas in his eloquence. He lived into the very darkest days, and watched the succession of events with a keen eye. His heart began to quail very early. Long before the bloodier times of the internecine war between the

factions, and on the eve of the attempted flight of the king, he addressed a letter to the National Assembly (May 31, 1791). The letter is not wanting in firm and courageous phrases. "I have long dared," he began, "to tell kings of their duties. Let me to-day tell the people of its errors, and the representatives of the people of the perils that menace us all." He then proceeded to inveigh in his old manner, but with a new purpose and a changed destination. This time it was not kings and priests whom he denounced, but a government enslaved by popular tyranny, soldiers without discipline, chiefs without authority, ministers without resources, the rudest and most ignorant of men daring to settle the most difficult political questions. How comes it, he asks, that after declaring the dogma of the liberty of religious opinions, you allow priests to be overwhelmed by persecution and outrage because they do not follow your religious opinions? In the same energetic vein he protests against the failure of the Constituent Assembly to found a stable and vigorous government, and to put an end to the vengeance, the seditions, the outbreaks, that filled the air with confusion and menace. It was in short a vigorous pamphlet, written in the interest of Malouet and the constitutional royalists. The Assembly listened, but not without some rude interruptions. Robespierre hastened to the tribune. After condemning the tone of Raynal's letter, he disclaimed any intention of calling down the severity either of the Assembly or of public opinion upon a man who still preserved a great name; he thought that a sufficient excuse for the writer's apostasy might be found in his advanced age. The Assembly agreed with Robespierre, and passed to the order of the day.<sup>1</sup>

Raynal lived to see his predictions fulfilled with a terrible bitterness of fulfilment. In spite of the anger which he had roused in the breasts of powerful personages, the aged man was not guillotined; he was not even imprisoned. All his property was taken from him, and he died in abject poverty in the spring of 1796. Let us hope that the misery of his end was assuaged by the recollection, that he had once been a powerful pleader for noble causes.

<sup>1</sup> Hamel's *Robespierre*, i. 456-8.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### DIDEROT'S CLOSING YEARS.

AT the end of a long series of notes and questions on points in anatomy and physiology, which he had been collecting for many years, Diderot wound up with a strange outburst :

“ I shall not know until the end what I have lost or gained in this vast gaming-house, where I shall have passed some threescore years, dice-box in hand, *tesseræ agitans*.

“ What do I perceive ? Forms. And what besides ? Forms. Of the substance I know nothing. We walk among shadows, ourselves shadows to ourselves and to others.

“ If I look at a rainbow traced on a cloud, I can perceive it ; for him who looks at it from another angle, there is nothing.

“ A fancy common enough among the living is to dream that they are dead, that they stand by the side of their own corpse, and follow their own funeral. It is like a swimmer watching his garments stretched out on the shore.

“ Philosophy, that habitual and profound meditation which takes us away from all that surrounds us, which annihilates our own personality, is another apprenticeship for death.”<sup>1</sup>

This was now to be seen. Diderot, as we have said, came back from his expedition to Russia in the autumn of 1744, tranquilly counting on half-a-score more years to make up the tale of his days. He remained in temper and habit through this long evening of his life what he had been in its morning and noontide

<sup>1</sup> *Elémens de Physiologie, Œuv.*, ix. 428.

—friendly, industrious, cheerful, exuberant in conversation, keenly interested in the march of liberal and progressive ideas. On his return his wife and daughter found him thin and altered. A few months of absence so often suffice to reveal that our friend has grown old, and that time is casting long shadows. Age seems to have come in a day, like sudden winter. He was as gay and as kindly as ever. Some of his friends had declared that he would never bethink himself of returning at all. "Time and space in his eyes," said Galiani, "are as in the eyes of the Almighty; he thinks that he is everywhere, and that he is eternal."<sup>1</sup> They had predicted for Diderot at St. Petersburg the fate of Descartes at the court of Queen Christina. But the philosopher triumphantly vindicated his character. "My good wife," said he, when he had reached the old familiar fourth floor, "prithee, count my things; thou wilt find no reason for scolding; I have not lost a single handkerchief."<sup>2</sup>

This cheerfulness, however, did not hide from his friends that he was subject to a languor which had been unknown before his journey to Russia. It was not the peevish fatigue that often brings life to an unworthy close. He remained true to the healthy temper of his prime, and found himself across the threshold of old age without repining. As the veteran Cephalus said to Socrates, regrets and complaints are not in a man's age, but in his temper; and he who is of a happy nature, will scarcely feel the burden of the years.

In 1762 Diderot had written to Mdlle. Voland a page of affecting musings on the great pathetic theme :

"You ask me why, the more our life is filled up and busy, the less are we attached to it? If that is true, it is because a busy life is for the most part an innocent life. We think less about Death, and so we fear it less. Without perceiving it, we resign ourselves to the common lot of all the beings that we watch around us, dying and being born again in an incessant, ever renewing circle. After having for a season fulfilled the tasks that nature year by year imposes on us, we grow weary of them, and release ourselves. Energies fade, we become feebler, we crave the close of life, as after working hard we crave the close of the day. Living in harmony with nature, we learn not to rebel against the orders that we see in necessary and universal execution. . . . There

<sup>1</sup> *Corresp.*, ii. 180.

<sup>2</sup> *Œuv.*, i. liv.

is nobody among us who, having worn himself out in toil, has not seen the hour of rest approach with supreme delight. Life for some of us is only one long day of weariness, and death a long slumber, and the coffin a bed of rest, and the earth only a pillow where it is sweet, when all is done, to lay one's head, never to raise it again. I confess to you that, when looked at in this way, and after the long endless crosses that I have had, death is the most agreeable of prospects. I am bent on teaching myself more and more to see it so."<sup>1</sup>

Again, we are reminded by Diderot's words on this last gentle epilogue to a harassing performance, of Plato's picture of aged Cephalus sitting in a cushioned chair, with the garland round his brows. "I was in the country almost alone, free from cares and disquiet, letting the hours flow on, with no other object than to find myself by the evening as sometimes one finds one's self in the morning, after a night that has been busy with a pleasant dream. The years had left me none of the passions that are our torment, none of the weariness that follows them; I had lost my taste for all the frivolities that are made so important by our hope that we shall enjoy them long. I said to myself: If the little that I have done, and the little that is left for me to do, should perish with me, what would the human race be the loser? What should I be the loser myself?"<sup>2</sup>

This was the mood in which Diderot wrote his singular apology for the life and character of Seneca. Rosenkranz makes the excellent reflection that though Diderot attained to a more free comprehension of Greek art, and especially of Homer, than most of his contemporaries, yet even with him the Roman element was dominant. It was Horace, Terence, Lucretius, Tacitus, Seneca, who to the very end came closer to him than any of the Greeks. The moralising reflection, the satirical tendency, the declamatory form of the Romans, all had an irresistible attraction for him.<sup>3</sup> Both Roger Bacon and Francis Bacon had preceded him in admiration for Seneca, and Montaigne found Cicero tiresome and unprofitable compared with the author of the Epistles to Lucilius. "When there comes any misfortune to a European,"

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mdlle. Voland, Sept. 23, 1762. xix. 136-7.

<sup>2</sup> The dedication of the *Règles de Claude et de Néron* to Naigeon, iii. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Diderot's Leben*, ii. 357.



says the imaginary oriental of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, "his only resource is the reading of a philosopher called Seneca."<sup>1</sup>

But Diderot was not a man to admire by halves, and to literary praise of Seneca's writings he added a thorough-going vindication of his career. In his early days he had referred disparagingly to Seneca,<sup>2</sup> but reflection or accident had made him change his mind. The cheap severity of abstract ethics has always abounded against Seneca, and this severity was what Diderot had all his life found insupportable. Holbach had induced Lagrange, a young man of letters whom he had rescued from want, to undertake the translation of Seneca, and when Lagrange died, Holbach prevailed on Naigeon, Diderot's fervid disciple, to complete and revise the work, which still remains the best of the French versions. That done, then both Holbach and Naigeon urged Diderot to write an account of the philosopher.

The *Essay on the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*<sup>3</sup> is marked by as much vehemence, as much sincerity of enthusiasm, as if Seneca had been Diderot's personal friend. There is a flame, a passion, about it, an ingenuous air of conviction, which are not common in historical apologies. It is inevitable, as the composition is Diderot's, that it should have many a rambling and declamatory page. His paraphrases of Tacitus are the most curious case in literature of the expansion of a style of sombre poetic concentration into the style of exuberant rhetoric. Both Grimm and a Russian princess of the blood urged him even to translate the whole of Tacitus's works, but it is certain that nobody in the world had ever less of Tacitean quality. Still the history is alive. "*I do not compose,*" Diderot said in the dedication. "*I am no author; I read or I converse; I ask questions and I give answers.*" The writer throws himself into the historic situation with the vivid freshness of a contemporary, and if the criticism is sophistical, at least the picture is admirably dramatic.

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. Brewer's preface to Roger Bacon, p. 73.—Montaigne's chapter *Des Livres*, and the *Defense de Sénèque et de Plutarque*.—*Let. Pers.*, 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Essai sur le Mérite et la Vertu*. *Œuv.*, i. 118, note.

<sup>3</sup> The first edition (1778) was entitled *Essai sur la Vie de Sénèque le philosophe, sur ses écrits, et sur le règne de Claude et de Néron*. In the second edition (1782) this was changed into *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron, et sur la vie et les écrits de Sénèque*.

Seneca's position as the minister of Nero seemed exactly one of those cases which always excited Diderot's deepest interest—a case, we mean, in which the general rules of morality condemn, but common sense acquits.

Diderot, as we have already pointed out,<sup>1</sup> was always very near to the position that there is no such thing as an absolute rule of right and wrong, defining classes of acts unconditionally, but each act must be judged on its merits with reference to all the circumstances of the given case. Seneca's career tests this way of looking at things very severely. His connivance with the minor sensualities of Nero's youth, as a means of restraining him from downright crime, and of keeping a measure of order in the government, will perhaps be pardoned by most of those who realise the awful perils of the Empire. As Diderot says, nobody blames Fénelon or Bossuet for remaining at the court of Lewis XIV. in its days of licence. But connivance with a king's amours, however degrading it may be from a certain point of view, is a very different thing from acquiescence in a king's murder of his mother. Even here Diderot's impetuosity carries him in two or three bounds over every obstacle. The various courses open to the minister, after the murder of Agrippina, are discussed and dismissed. What, after Nero had slain his mother, was there nothing left to be done by a firm, just, and enlightened man, with an immense burden of affairs on his back, and capable by his courage and benevolence, of bearing succour, repairing misfortunes, hindering depredations, removing the incompetent, and giving power to men of virtue, knowledge, and ability? If he had only saved the honour of a single good woman, or the life or fortune of a single good citizen; if he could bring a day of tranquillity to the provinces, or cross for a week the designs of the miscreants by whom the emperor was surrounded, then Seneca would have been blamed, and would have deserved blame, if he had either retired from court or put an end to his life.<sup>2</sup> This is all true enough, and if Seneca had been only a statesman, the world would probably have applauded him for clinging to the helm at all cost. Unhappily, he was not only a statesman, but a moralist. The two characters are always hard to reconcile, as

<sup>1</sup> Above, chap. ix.

<sup>2</sup> iii. 110-11.

perhaps any parliamentary candidate might tell us. The contrast between lofty writing and slippery policy has been too violent for Seneca's good fame, as it was for Francis Bacon's. It is ever at his own proper risk and peril that a man dares to present high ideals to the world.

One of the strangest of the many strange digressions in which the Essay on Claudius and Nero abounds, brings us within the glare of the great literary quarrel of the century. Soon after Rousseau settled in Paris for the last time, on his return from England and the subsequent vagabondage, it was known that he had written the *Confessions*, dealing at least as freely with the lives of others as with his own. He had even in 1770 and 1771 given readings of certain passages from them, until Madame D'Épinay, and perhaps also the Maréchale de Luxemburg, prevailed on the authorities to interfere. No one was angrier than Diderot, and in the first edition of the Essay, published in the year of Rousseau's death (1778), he incongruously placed in the midst of his disquisitions on the philosopher of the first century, a long and acrimonious note upon the perversities of the reactionary philosopher of the eighteenth. He was believed by those who talked to him to be in dread of the appearance of the *Confessions*, and we may accept this readily enough, without assuming that Diderot was conscious of hidden enormities which he was afraid of seeing publicly uncovered. Rousseau, as Diderot well knew, was so wayward, so strangely oblique both in vision and judgment, that innocence was no security against malice and misrepresentation.

Rousseau's name has never lacked fanatical partisans down to our own day, and Diderot was attacked by some of the earliest of them for his note of disparagement. The first part of the *Confessions*—all that Diderot ever saw—appeared in 1782, and in the same year Diderot published a second edition of the Essay on Claudius and Nero, so augmented by replies, inserted in season and out of season, to the diatribes of the party of Rousseau, that as it now stands the reader may well doubt whether the substance and foundation of the book is an apology for Seneca, or a vindication of Denis Diderot. As Grimm said, we have to make up our minds to see the author suddenly pass from the palace of

the Cæsars to the garret of MM. Royou, Grosier, and company ; from Paris to Rome, and from Rome back again to Paris ; from the reign of Claudius to the reign of Lewis xv. ; from the college of the Sorbonne to the college of the augurs ; to turn now to the masters of the world, and now to the yelping curs of literature ; to see him in his dramatic enthusiasm making the one speak and the others answer ; apostrophising himself and apostrophising his readers, and leaving them often enough in perplexity as to the personage who is speaking and the personage whom he addresses.<sup>1</sup> We may agree with Grimm that this gives an air of originality to the performance, but such originality is of a kind to displease the serious student, without really attracting the few readers who have a taste for rebelling against the pedantries of literary form. We become confused by the long strain of uncertainty whether we are reading about the Roman Emperor or the French King ; about Seneca, Burrhus, and Thræsea, or Turgot, Malesherbes, and Necker.

Diderot's candour, simplicity, happy bonhommie, and sincerity in real interests raised him habitually above the pettiness, the bustling malice, the vain self-consciousness, the personalities that infest all literary and social cliques. It is surprising at first that Diderot, who had all his life borne the sting of the gnats of Grub Street with decent composure, should have been so moved by Rousseau, or by meaner assailants, whom Rousseau himself would have rudely disclaimed. The explanation seems to lie in this fact of human character, that a man of Diderot's temperament, while entirely heedless of criticism directed against his opinions or his public position, is specially sensitive to innuendoes against his private benevolence and loyalty. An insult to the force of his understanding was indifferent to him, but an affront to one's *belle âme* is beyond pardon. It was hard that a man who had prodigally thrown away the forces of his life for others, should be charged with malignity of heart and an incapacity for friendship. This was the harder, because it was the moral fashion of that day to place friendliness, amiability, the desire to please and to serve, at the very head of all the virtues. The whole correspondence of the time is penetrated to an incomparable degree by a caressing

spirit ; it is sometimes too elaborate and far-fetched in expression, but it marks a vivid sociability, and even a true humanity, that softens and harmonises the sharpness of men's egotism.

Again, though Diderot himself is not ungenerously handled in the *Confessions*, there are passages about Madame d'Epinay and Madame d'Houdetot which not only stamp Rousseau with ingratitude towards two women who had treated him kindly, but which were calculated to make practical mischief among people still living. All this was atrocious in itself, and the atrocity seemed more black to Diderot than to others, because he had for some years known Madame d'Epinay as a friendly creature, and, above all, because Grimm was her lover. Perhaps we may add among the reasons that stirred him to pen these diatribes, a consciousness of the harm that Rousseau's sentimentalism had done to sound and positive thinking. But this, we may be sure, would be infinitely less potent than the motives that sprang from Diderot's own sentimentalism. The quarrel, for all save a few foolish partisans, is now dead, and we may leave the dust once more to settle thick upon it. Diderot's own way of reading history is not unworthy of imitation, and it is capable of application in spirit to private conduct no less than to the history of great public events. "Does the narrative present me with some fact that dishonours humanity? Then I examine it with the most rigorous severity; whatever sagacity I may be able to command, I employ in detecting contradictions that throw suspicion on the story. It is not so when an action is beautiful, lofty, noble. Then I never think of arguing against the pleasure that I feel in sharing the name of man with one who has done such an action. I will say more; it is to my heart, and perhaps too it is only conformable to justice, to hazard an opinion that tends to whiten an illustrious personage, in the face of authorities that seem to contradict the tenour of his life, of his doctrine, and of his general repute."<sup>1</sup>

The elaborate outbreak against Rousseau is perhaps Diderot's only breach of what ought thus to be a rule for all magnanimous men. Diderot, or his shade, paid the penalty. La Harpe retaliated for some slight wound to pitiful literary vanity, by a

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.*, iii. 57.

lecture on Seneca in which he raked up all the old accusations against Seneca's champion. La Harpe, for various reasons into which we need not now more particularly enter, got the ear of the European public in the years of reaction, after he had himself deserted his old philosophic friends, and gone over to the conservative camp. He found the world eager to listen to all that could be said against men who were believed to have corrupted their age; and his bitter misrepresentations, not seldom invigorated by lies, were the origin of much of the vulgar prejudice that has only begun to melt away in our own generation.

Rousseau died in 1778. The more versatile literary genius of the century had died a couple of months earlier in the same year. It was not until the occasion of Voltaire's triumphant visit to Paris, after an absence of seven-and-twenty years, that he and Diderot at length met. Their correspondence had been less constant and less cordial than was common where Voltaire was concerned; but though their sympathy was imperfect, there was no lack of mutual good-will and admiration. The poet is said to have done his best to push Diderot into the Academy, but the king was incurably hostile, and Diderot was not anxious for an empty distinction. He had none of that vanity nor eagerness for recognition—pardonable enough, for that matter—which such distinctions gratify. And he perhaps agreed with Voltaire himself, who said of academies and parliaments that, when men come together, their ears instantly become elongated. After Diderot's return from Russia, Voltaire wrote to him: "I am eighty-three years of age, and I repeat that I am inconsolable at the thought of dying without ever having seen you. I have tried to collect around me as many of your children as possible, but I am a long way from having the whole family. . . . We are not so far apart, at bottom, and it only needs a conversation to bring us to an understanding."<sup>1</sup>

Of such conversations we have almost nothing to tell. No sacred bard has commemorated the salutation of the heroes. We only know that at the end of their first interview Diderot's facility of discourse had been so copious that, after he had taken his leave, Voltaire said: "The man is clever, assuredly; but he lacks

<sup>1</sup> Dec. 8, 1776.

one talent, and an essential talent—that of dialogue.” Diderot’s remark about Voltaire was more picturesque. “He is like one of those old haunted castles, which are falling into ruins in every part; but you easily perceive that it is inhabited by some ancient sorcerer.”<sup>1</sup> They had a dispute as to the merits of Shakespeare, and Diderot displeased the patriarch by repeating the expression that we have already quoted (p. 217) about Shakespeare being like the statue of St. Christopher at Notre Dame, unshapely and rude, but such a giant that ordinary men could pass between his legs without touching him.<sup>2</sup>

There was one man who might have told us a thousand interesting things both about Diderot’s conversations with Voltaire, and his relations with other men. This man was Naigeon, to whom Diderot gave most of his papers, and who always professed, down to his death in 1814, to be Diderot’s closest adherent and most authoritative expounder. Diderot was, as he always knew and said, less an author than a talker; not a talker like Johnson, but like Coleridge. If Naigeon could only have contented himself with playing reporter, and could have been blessed by nature with the rare art of Boswell. “We wanted,” as Carlyle says, “to see and know how it stood with the bodily man, the working and warfaring Denis Diderot; how he looked and lived, what he did, what he said.” Instead of which, nothing but “a dull, sulky, snuffing, droning, interminable lecture on Atheistic Philosophy,” delivered with the vehemence of some pulpit-drumming Gowk-thrapple, or “precious Mr. Jabesh Rentowel.” Naigeon belonged to the too numerous class of men and women overabundantly endowed with unwise intellect. He was acute, diligent, and tenacious; fond of books, especially when they had handsome margins and fine bindings; above all things, he was the most fanatical atheist, and the most indefatigable propagandist and eager proselytiser which that form of religion can boast. We do not know the date of his first acquaintance with Diderot;<sup>3</sup> we only know that at the

<sup>1</sup> Métra’s *Corresp. Secrète*, vi. 292.

<sup>2</sup> See Diderot’s *Œuv.*, xix. 465, note.

<sup>3</sup> The *Biographie Universelle*, after giving 1738 as the date of Naigeon’s birth, absurdly attributes to him the article on *Âme* in the Encyclopædia, which was published in 1752, when Naigeon was fourteen years old.

end of Diderot's days he had no busier or more fervent disciple than Naigeon. To us, at all events, whatever it may have been to Diderot, the acquaintance and discipleship have proved good for very little.

Our last authentic glimpse of Diderot is from the pen of a humane and enlightened Englishman, whose memory must be held in perpetual honour among us. Samuel Romilly, then a young man of four-and-twenty, visited Paris in 1781. He made the acquaintance of the namesake who had written the articles on watchmaking in the Encyclopædia, and whose son had written the more famous articles on Toleration and Virtue. By this honest man Romilly was introduced to D'Alembert and Diderot. The former was in weak health and said very little. Diderot, on the contrary, was all warmth and eagerness, and talked to his visitor with as little reserve as if he had been long and intimately acquainted with him. He spoke on politics, religion, and philosophy. He praised the English for having led the way to sound philosophy, but the adventurous genius of the French, he said, had pushed them on before their guides. "You others," he continued, "mix up theology with your philosophy; that is to spoil everything, it is to mix up lies with truth; *il faut sabrer la théologie*—we must put theology to the sword." He was ostentatious, Romilly says, of a total disbelief in the existence of a God. He quoted Plato, "the author of all the good theology that ever existed in the world, as saying that there is a vast curtain drawn over the heavens, and that men must content themselves with what passes beneath that curtain, without ever attempting to raise it; and in order to complete my conversion from my unhappy errors, he read me all through a little work of his own"—of which we shall presently speak. On politics he talked very eagerly, "and inveighed with great warmth against the tyranny of the French government. He told me that he had long meditated a work upon the death of Charles the First; that he had studied the trial of that prince; and that his intention was to have tried him over again, and to have sent him to the scaffold if he had found him guilty, but that he had at last relinquished the design. In England he would have executed it, but he had not the courage to do so in France. D'Alembert, as I have observed



was more cautious ; he contented himself with observing what an effect philosophy had in his own time produced on the minds of the people. The birth of the Dauphin (known afterwards as Lewis xvii., the unhappy prisoner of the Temple) afforded him an example. He was old enough, he said, to remember when such an event had made the whole nation drunk with joy (1729), but now they regarded with great indifference the birth of another master."<sup>1</sup>

It was thus clear to the two veterans of the Encyclopædia that the change for which they had worked was at hand. The press literally teemed with pamphlets, treatises, poems, histories, all shouting from the house-tops open destruction to beliefs which fifty years before were actively protected against so much as a whisper in the closet. Every form of literary art was seized and turned into an instrument in the remorseless attack on *L'Infâme*. The conservative or religious opposition showed a weakness that is hardly paralleled in the long history of the mighty controversy. Ability, adroitness, vigour, and character were for once all on one side. Palissot was perhaps, after all, the best of the writers on the conservative side.<sup>2</sup> With all his faults, he had the literary sense. Some of what he said was true, and some of the third-rate people whom he assailed deserved the assault. His criticism on Diderot's drama, *The Natural Son*, was not a whit more severe than that bad play demanded.<sup>3</sup> Not seldom in the course of this work we have wished with Palissot that the excellent Diderot were less addicted to prophetic and apocalyptic turns of speech, that there were less of chaos round his points of burning and shining light, and that he had less title to the hostile name of the Lycophron of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> But the comedy of *The Philosophers* was a scandalous misrepresentation, introducing Diderot personally on the stage, and putting into his mouth a mixture of folly and knavery that was as foreign to Diderot as to anyone else in the world. In 1782 the satirist again attacked his enemy, now grown old and weary. In *Le Satyrique*, Valère, a spiteful and hypocritical poetaster, is intended partially at least for Diderot. A

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Sir Samuel Romilly*, i. 63, 179, etc.   <sup>2</sup> See above, p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> *Petites Lettres sur de Grands Philosophes*, ii.

<sup>4</sup> *Œuv. de Palissot*, i. 445, iv. 244.

colporteur, not ill-named as M. Pamphlet, comes to urge payment of his bill.

Daignez avoir égard à mes vives instances.  
 Je suis humilié d'y mettre tant de feu :  
 Mais les temps sont si durs ! le comptoir rend si peu !  
 Imprimeur, Colporteur, Relieur, et Libraire,  
 Avec tous ces métiers, je suis dans la misère :  
 Mais j'ai toujours grand soin, malgré ma pauvreté,  
 De ne peser mon gain qu'au poids de l'équité.  
 Vous en allez juger par le susdit mémoire.

[Il prend ses lunettes comme pour lire.]

VALÈRE. (*Avec humeur.*) Eh, monsieur, finissez.

M. PAMPHLET. C'est trahir votre gloire

Que de vouloir cacher les immortels écrits

[Il lit.]

Dont vous êtes l'auteur. *Les Boudoirs de Paris,*  
*Ou Journal des Abbés. L'Espion des Coulisses,*  
 Ouvrage assez piquant sur les mœurs des actrices.

And the intention of the pleasantry is pointed by a malicious foot-note, to the effect that people who might be surprised that a serious man like Valère should have written works of this licentious and frivolous kind, will conceive that in a moment of leisure a philosopher should write *Les Bijoux Indiscrêts*, for instance, and the next day follow it by a treatise on morality,<sup>1</sup>—as Diderot unhappily had done.

Palissot was not so good as Molière, Boileau, and Pope, as he was fatuous enough to suppose ; but he was certainly better than the scribbler who asked—

Mais enfin de quoi se glorifie  
 Ce siècle de mollesse et de Philosophie ?  
 Dites-moi : le Français a-t-il un cœur plus franc  
 Plus prodigue à l'état de son généreux sang,  
 Plus ardent à venger la plaintive innocence  
 Contre l'iniquité que soutient la puissance ?  
 Le Français philosophe est-il plus respecté  
 Pour la foi, la candeur, l'exacte probité ?  
 Où sont-ils ces Héros, ces vertueux modèles  
 Que l'Encyclopédie a couvé sous ses ailes ?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Le Satyrique*, iii. p. 84, note.

<sup>2</sup> Métra, vi. 128.

Tiresome doggrel of this kind was the strongest retort that the party of obscurantism could muster against the vigour, grace, and sparkle of Voltaire.

The great official champions of the old system were not much wiser than their hacks in the press. The churchmen were given over to a blind mind. The great edition of Voltaire's works which Beaumarchais was printing over the frontier at Kehl, excited their anger to a furious pitch. The infamous Cardinal de Rohan, archbishop of Strasburg (1781), denounced the publication as sacrilege. The archbishop of Paris (1785) thundered against the monument of scandal and the work of darkness. The archbishop of Vienne forbade the faithful of his diocese to subscribe to it under pain of mortal sin. In the general assembly of the clergy which opened in the summer of 1780, the bishops, in memorials to the king, deplored the homage paid to the famous writer who was "less known for the beauty of his genius and the superiority of his talents, than for the persevering and implacable war which for sixty years he had waged against the Lord and his Christ." They cursed in solemn phrase the "revolting blasphemies" of Raynal's *History of the Indies*, and declared that the publication of a new edition of that celebrated book with the name and the portrait of its author, showed that the most elementary notions of shame and decency lay in profound sleep.

In the midst of these prolonged cries of distress, we have no word of recognition that the only remedy for a moral disease is a moral remedy. The single resource that occurred to their debilitated souls was the familiar armoury of suppression, menace, violence, and tyranny. "Sire," they cried, "it is time to put a term to this deplorable lethargy." They reminded the king of the declaration of 1757, which inflicted on all persons who printed or circulated writings hostile to religion, the punishment of death. But "their paternal bowels shuddered at the sight of these severe enactments;" all that they sought was plenty of rigorous imprisonment, ruinous fining, and diligent espionage.<sup>1</sup> If the reader is revolted by the rashness of Diderot's expectation

<sup>1</sup> See for abundant matter of the same kind, M. Rocquain's *L'Esprit Révolutionnaire avant la Révolution*, bk. x. pp. 382, 390, &c.

of the speedy decay of the belief in a God,<sup>1</sup> he may well be equally revolted by the obstinate infatuation of the men who expected to preserve the belief in a God by the spies of the department of police. Much had no doubt been done for the church in past times by cruelty and oppression, but the folly of the French bishops, after the reign of Voltaire and the apostolate of the Encyclopædia, lay exactly in their blindness to the fact that the old methods were henceforth impossible in France, and impossible forever. How can we wonder at the hatred and contempt felt by men of the social intelligence of Diderot and D'Alembert for this desperate union of impotence and malignity?

The band of the precursors was rapidly disappearing. Grimm and Holbach, Catherine and Frederick, still survived.<sup>2</sup> D'Alembert, tended to the last hour by Condorcet with the lovable reverence of a son, died at the end of October, 1783. Turgot, gazing with eyes of astonished sternness on a society hurrying incorrigibly with joyful speed along the path of destruction, had passed away two years before (1781). Voltaire, the great intellectual director of Europe for fifty years, and Rousseau, the great emotional reactionist, had both, as we know, died in 1778. The little companies in which, from Adrienne Lecouvreur, the Marquise de Lambert, and Madame de Tencin, in the first half of the century, groups of intelligent men and women had succeeded in founding informal schools of disinterested opinion, and in finally removing the centre of criticism and intellectual activity from Versailles to Paris, had now nearly all come to an end. Madame du Deffand died in 1780, Madame Geoffrin in 1779, and in 1776 Mdlle. Lespinasse, whose letters will long survive her, as giving a burning literary note to the vagueness of suffering and pain of soul. One of Diderot's favourite companions in older days, Galiani, the antiquary, the scholar, the politician, the incomparable mimic, the shrewdest, wittiest, and gayest of men after Voltaire, was feeling the dull grasp of approaching death under his native sky at

<sup>1</sup> Montesquieu more sensibly had given the Church not more than five hundred years to live. *Let. Pers.*, 117. One hundred and fifty of them have already passed.

<sup>2</sup> Grimm died in 1807, Holbach in 1789, Catherine in 1796, and Frederick in 1786.

Naples. Galiani's *Dialogues on the Trade in Grain* (1769-70) contained, under that most unpromising title, a piece of literature which for its verve, rapidity, wit, dialectical subtlety, and real strength of thought, has hardly been surpassed by masterpieces of a wider recognition. Voltaire vowed that Plato and Molière must have combined to produce a book that was as amusing as the best of romances, and as instructive as the best of serious books. Diderot, who had a hand in retouching the *Dialogues* for the press,<sup>2</sup> went so far as to pronounce them worthy of a place along with the *Provincial Letters* of Pascal, and declared that, like those immortal pieces, Galiani's dialogues would remain as a model of perfection in their own kind, long after both the subject and the personages concerned had lost their interest.<sup>3</sup> The prophecy has not come quite true, for the world is busy, and heedless, and much the prey of accident and capricious tradition in the books that it reads. Yet even now, although Galiani was probably wrong on the special issue between himself and the economists, it would be well if people would turn to his demolition, as wise as witty, of the doctrine of absolute truths in political economy. Galiani's constant correspondent was Madame d'Épinay, the kindly benefactress of Rousseau a quarter of a century earlier, the friend of Diderot, the more than friend of Grimm. In 1783 she died, and either in that year or the next, Mademoiselle Volland, who had filled so great a space in the life of Diderot. The ghosts and memories of his friends became the majority, and he consoled himself that he should not long survive.

The days of intellectual excitement and philanthropic hope seemed at their very height, but in fact they were over. "Nobody," said Talleyrand, "who has not lived before 1789, knows how sweet life can be." The old world had its last laugh over the *Marriage of Figaro* (April, 1784), but in the laugh of Figaro there is a strange ring. Under all its gaiety, its liveliness, its admirable naïveté, was something sombre. It was pregnant with menace. Its fooling was the ironical enforcement of Raynal's trenchant declaration that "the law is nothing, if it be not a sword gliding

<sup>2</sup> See *Œuv.*, xix. 317, 326.

<sup>3</sup> *Œuv.*, vi. 442, where Diderot gives a sketch of this interesting man.

indistinctly over the heads of all, and striking down whatever rises above the horizontal plane along which it moves.

Diderot himself is commonly accused of having fomented an atrocious spirit by the horrible couplet—

Et ses mains ourdiraient les entrailles du prêtre,  
Au défaut d'un cordon pour étrangler les rois.<sup>2</sup>

That the verses could have actually excited the spirit of the Terrorists is impossible, for they were not given to the world until 1795. And in the second place, so far as Diderot's intention is concerned, anyone who reads the piece from which the lines are taken, will perceive that the whole performance is in a vein of playful phantasy, and that the particular verses are placed dramatically in the mouth of a proclaimed Eleutheromane, or maniac for liberty.<sup>3</sup> Diderot was not likely to foresee that what he designed for an illustration of the frenzy of the Pindaric dithyramb, would so soon be mistaken for a short formula of practical politics.<sup>3</sup>

In 1780, his townsmen of Langres paid him a compliment, which showed that the sage was not without honour in his own country. They besought him to sit for his portrait, to be placed among the worthies in the town hall. Diderot replied by sending them Houdon's bronze bust, which was received with all distinction and honour. Nageon hints that in the last years of his life Diderot paid more attention to money than he had ever done

<sup>2</sup> "Is it not possible that the virtuous and moderate proposal to strangle the last Jesuit in the bowels of the last Jansenist might do something towards reconciling matters?"—Voltaire to Helvétius, May 11, 1761.

<sup>3</sup> *Les Eleutheromanes, ou les Furieux de la Liberté.* Œuv., ix. 16.

<sup>3</sup> It is a curious illustration of the carelessness with which the so-called negative school have been treated, that so conscientious a writer as M. Henri Martin (*Hist. de France*, xvi. 146) should have taxed Diderot, among other sinister maxims, with this, that "the public punishment of a king changes the spirit of a nation for ever." Now the words occur in a collection of observations on government, which Diderot wrote on the margin of his copy of Tacitus, and which are entitled *Principes de Politique des Souverains* (1775). Some of the most pungent maxims are obviously intended for irony on the military and Machiavellian policy of Frederick the Great, while others on the policy of the Roman emperors are shrewd and sagacious. The maxim from which M. Martin quotes is the 147th, and in it the sombre words of his quotation follow this:—"Let the people never see royal blood flow for any cause whatever. The public punishment of a king," &c. ! See Œuv., ii. 486.

before ;<sup>2</sup> not that he became a miser, but because, like many other persons, he had not found out until the close of a life's experience that care of money really means care of the instrument that procures some of the best ends in life. For a moment we may regret that he was too much occupied in attending to his affairs, to take the unwise Nageon's wise counsel, that he should devote himself to a careful revision of all that he had written. Perhaps Diderot's instinct was right. Among the distractions of old age, he had turned back to his Letter on the Blind, and read it over again without partiality. He found, as was natural, some defects in a piece that was written three-and-thirty years before, but he abstained from attempting to remove them, for fear that the page of the young man should be made the worse by the re-touching of the old man. "There comes a time," he reflects, "when taste gives counsels whose justice you recognise, but which you have no longer strength to follow. It is the pusillanimity that springs from consciousness of weakness, or else it is the idleness that is one of the results of weakness and pusillanimity, which disgusts me with a task that would be more likely to hurt than to improve my work.

Solve senescentem mature sanus equum, ne  
Peccet ad extremum ridendus et ilia ducat."

And so he contented himself with some rough notes of phenomena that were corroborative of the speculation of his youth.<sup>3</sup>

In the early spring of 1784, Diderot had an attack which he knew to be the presage of the end. Dropsy set in, and he lingered until the summer. The priest of Saint Sulpice, the centre of the philosophic quarter, came to visit him two or three times a week, hoping to achieve at least the semblance of a conversion. Diderot did not encourage conversation on theology, but when pressed he did not refuse it. One day when they found, as two men of sense will always find, that they had ample common ground in matters of morality and good works, the priest ventured to hint that an exposition of such excellent maxims, accompanied by a slight retraction of Diderot's previous works, would have a good effect on the world. "I dare say it would,

<sup>2</sup> *Mém. sur la Vie et les Ouvrages de Diderot*, p. 412.

<sup>3</sup> Grimm, *Corr. Lit.*, xi. 120.

monsieur le curé, but confess that I should be acting an impudent lie." And no word of retraction was ever made. As the end came suddenly, the priest escaped from the necessity of denying the funeral rites of the Church.

For thirty years Diderot had been steadfast to his quarters on an upper floor in the Rue Taranne, and even now, when the physicians told him that to climb such length of staircase was death to him, he still could not be induced to stir. It would have been easier, his daughter says, to effect a removal from Versailles itself. Grimm at length asked the Empress of Russia to provide a house for her librarian, and when the request was conceded, Diderot, who could never be ungracious, allowed himself to be taken from his garret to palatial rooms in the Rue de Richelieu. He enjoyed them less than a fortnight. Though visibly growing weaker every day, he did all that he could to cheer the people around him, and amused himself and them by arranging his pictures and his books. In the evening, to the last, he found strength to converse on science and philosophy to the friends who were eager as ever for the last gleanings of his prolific intellect. In the last conversation that his daughter heard him carry on, his last words were the pregnant aphorism that *the first step towards philosophy is incredulity*.

On the evening of the thirtieth of July, 1784, he sat down to table, and at the end of the meal took an apricot. His wife, with kindly solicitude, remonstrated. *Mais quel diable de mal veux-tu que cela me fasse?* he said, and ate the apricot. Then he rested his elbow on the table, trifling with some sweetmeats. His wife asked him a question; on receiving no answer, she looked up and saw that he was dead. He had died as the Greek poet says that men died in the golden age—*θνῆσκον δ' ὡς ὕπνῳ δεδμήμενοι*, *they passed away as if mastered by sleep*. It had always been his opinion that an examination of the organs after death is a useful practice, and his wish that the operation should take place in his own case was respected. Nothing interesting or remarkable was revealed, and his remains were laid in the vaults of the church of Saint Roche.

So the curtain fell upon this strange tragi-comedy of a man of letters. There is no better epilogue than words of his own:—



“We fix our gaze on the ruins of a triumphal arch, of a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we return upon ourselves. All is annihilated, perishes, passes away. It is only the world that remains ; only time that endures. I walk between two eternities. To whatever side I turn my eyes, the objects that surround me tell of an end, and teach me resignation to my own end. What is my ephemeral existence in comparison with that of the crumbling rock and the decaying forest? I see the marble of the tomb falling to dust, and yet I cannot bear to die ! Am I to grudge a feeble tissue of fibres and flesh to a general law, that executes itself inexorably even on very bronze !”

## CHAPTER XVII.

### CONCLUSION.

A FEW more pages must be given to one or two of Diderot's writings which have not hitherto been mentioned. An exhaustive survey of his works is out of the question, nor would anyone be repaid for the labour of criticism. A mere list of the topics that he handled would fill a long chapter. A redaction of a long treatise on harmony, a vast sheaf of notes on the elements of physiology, a collection of miscellanea on the drama, a still more copious collection of miscellanea on a hundred points in literature and art, a fragment on the exercise of young Russians, an elaborate plan of studies for a proposed Russian University,—no less panurgic and less encyclopædic a critic than Diderot himself could undertake to sweep with ever so light a wing over this vast area. Everybody can find something to say about the collection of tales, in which Diderot thought that he was satirising the manners of his time, after the fashion of Rabelais, Montaigne, La Mothe-le-Vayer, and Swift. But not everybody is competent to deal, for instance, with the five memoirs on different subjects in mathematics (1748), with which Diderot hoped to efface the scandal of his previous performance.

#### I.

Decidedly the most important of the pieces of which we have not yet spoken, must be counted the *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature* (1754). His study of Bacon and the composition

of the introductory prospectus of the Encyclopædia had naturally filled Diderot's mind with ideas about the universe as a whole. The great problem of man's knowledge of this universe,—the limits, the instruments, the meaning of such knowledge, came before him with a force that he could not evade. Maupertuis had in 1751, under the assumed name of Baumann, an imaginary doctor of Erlangen, published a dissertation on the *Universal System of Nature*, in which he seems to have maintained that the mechanism of the universe is one and the same throughout, modifying itself, or being modified by some vital element within, in an infinity of diverse ways.<sup>1</sup> Leibnitz's famous idea, of making nature invariably work with the minimum of action, was seized by Maupertuis, expressed as the Law of Thrift, and made the starting-point of speculations that led directly to Holbach and the *System of Nature*.<sup>2</sup> The *Loi d'Épargne* evidently tended to make unity of all the forces of the universe the key-note or the goal of philosophical inquiry. At this time of his life, Diderot resisted Maupertuis's theory of the unity of vital force in the universe, or perhaps we should rather say that he saw how open it was to criticism. His resistance has none of his usual air of vehement conviction. However that may be, the theory excited his interest, and fitted in with the train of meditation which his thoughts about the Encyclopædia had already set in motion, and of which the *Pensées Philosophiques* of 1746 were the cruder prelude.

The *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature* are, in form as in title, imitated from those famous *Aphorismi de Interpretatione Naturæ et Regni Hominis*, which are more shortly known to all men as Bacon's *Novum Organum*.<sup>3</sup> The connection between the aphorisms is very loosely held. Diderot began by premising that he would let his thoughts follow one another under his pen, in the order in which the subjects came up in his mind; and he kept his word. Their general scope, so far as it is capable of

<sup>1</sup> As to the precise drift of Maupertuis's theme, see Lange, *Gesch. d. Materialismus*, i. 413, n. 37. Also Rosenkranz, i. 134.

<sup>2</sup> In 1765, Grimm describes the principle of Leibnitz and Maupertuis as "gaining on us on every side."—*Corr. Lit.*, iv. 186.

<sup>3</sup> Palissot, in the *Philosophers*, concocted some very strained satire on the too pompous opening of the *Interpretation of Nature*. Act ii. sc. ii.

condensed expression, may be described as a reconciliation between the two great classes into which Diderot found thinkers upon Nature to be divided; those who have many instruments and few ideas, and those who have few instruments and many ideas,—in other words, between men of science without philosophy, and philosophers without knowledge of experimental science.

In the region of science itself, again, Diderot foresees as great a change as in the relations between science and philosophy. "We touch the moment of a great revolution in the sciences. From the strong inclination of men's minds towards morals, literature, the history of nature and experimental physics, I would almost venture to assert that before the next hundred years are over, there will not be three great geometers to be counted in Europe. This science will stop short where the Bernouillis, the Eulers, the Maupertuis, the Clairauts, the Fontaines, the D'Alemberts, the Lagranges have left it. They will have fixed the Pillars of Hercules. People will go no further." Those who have read Comte's angry denunciations of the perversions of geometry by means of algebra, and of the waste of intellectual force in modern analysis,<sup>1</sup> will at least understand how such a view as Diderot's was possible. And no one will be likely to deny that, whether or not the pillars of the geometrical Hercules were finally set a hundred years ago, the great discoveries of the hundred years since Diderot have been, as he predicted, in the higher sciences. The great misfortune of France was that the supremacy of geometry coincided with the opening of the great era of political discussion. The definitions of Montesquieu's famous book, which opened the political movement in literature, have been shown to be less those of a juriconsult than of a geometer.<sup>2</sup> Social truths, with all their profound complexity, were handled like propositions in Euclid, and logical deductions from arbitrary premises were treated as accurate representations of real circumstance. The repulse of geometry to its proper rank came too late.

Comte always liberally recognised Diderot's genius, and any reader of Comte's views on the necessities of subjective synthesis

<sup>1</sup> Comte's *System of Positive Polity*, i. 380, etc. English translation, 1875.

<sup>2</sup> By F. Sclopis, quoted in M. Vian's *Hist. de Montesquieu*, p. 51.

will discern the germ of that doctrine in the following remarkable section :

“When we compare the infinite multitude of the phenomena of nature with the limits of our understandings and the weakness of our organs, can we ever expect anything else from the slowness of our work, from the long and frequent interruptions, and from the rarity of creative genius, than a few broken and separated pieces of the great chain that binds all things together? Experimental philosophy might work for centuries of centuries, and the materials that it had heaped up, finally reaching in their number beyond all combination, would still be far removed from an exact enumeration. How many volumes would it not need to contain the mere terms by which we should designate the distinct collections of phenomena, if the phenomena were known? When will the philosophic language be complete? If it were complete, who among men would be able to know it? If the Eternal, to manifest his power still more plainly than by the marvels of nature, had deigned to develop the universal mechanism on pages traced by his own hand, do you suppose that this great book would be more comprehensible to us than the universe itself? How many pages of it all would have been intelligible to the philosopher who, with all the force of head that had been conferred upon him, was not sure of having grasped all the conclusions by which an old geometer determined the relation of the sphere to the cylinder? We should have in such pages a fairly good measure of the reach of men’s minds, and a still more pungent satire on our vanity. We should say, Fermat went to such a page, Archimedes went a few pages further.

“What then is our end? The execution of a work that can never be achieved, and which would be far beyond human intelligence if it were achieved. Are we not more insensate than the first inhabitants of the plain of Shinar? We know the immeasurable distance between the earth and the heavens, and still we insist on rearing our tower.

“But can we presume that there will not come a time when our pride will abandon the work in discouragement? What appearance is there that, narrowly lodged and ill at its ease here below, our pride should obstinately persist in constructing an uninhabitable palace beyond the earth’s atmosphere? Even if it should so insist, would it not be arrested by the confusion of tongues, which is already only too perceptible and too inconvenient in natural history? Besides, it is utility that circumscribes all. It will be utility that in a few centuries will set bounds to experimental physics, as it is on the eve of setting bounds to geometry. I grant centuries to this study, because the sphere of its utility is infinitely more extensive than that of any abstract science, and it is without contradiction the base of our real knowledge.”<sup>1</sup>

We cannot wonder that when Comte drew up his list of the hundred and fifty volumes that should form the good Positivist’s

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.*, ii. 12, 13, § 6. See the same idea in the *Encyclopædia*, above, pp. 149-50.

library in the nineteenth century, he should have placed Diderot's *Interpretation of Nature* on one side of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, with Bacon's *Novum Organum* on the other.

The same spirit finds even stronger and more distinct expression in a later aphorism :—"Since the reason cannot understand everything, imagination foresee everything, sense observe everything, nor memory retain everything ; since great men are born at such remote intervals, and the progress of science is so interrupted by revolution, that whole ages of study are passed in recovering the knowledge of the centuries that are gone,—to observe everything in nature without distinction is to fail in duty to the human race. Men who are beyond the common run in their talents, ought to respect themselves and posterity in the employment of their time. What would posterity think of us, if we had nothing to transmit to it save a complete insectology, an immense history of microscopic animals? No—to the great geniuses great objects, little objects to the little geniuses" (§ 54).

Diderot, while thus warning inquirers against danger on one side, was alive to the advantages of stubborn and unlimited experiment on the other. "When you have formed in your mind," he says, "one of those systems which require to be verified by experience, you ought neither to cling to it obstinately, nor abandon it lightly. People sometimes think their conjectures false, when they have not taken the proper measures to find them true. Obstinacy, even, has fewer drawbacks than the opposite excess. By multiplying experiments, if you do not find what you want, it may happen that you will come on something better. *Never is time employed in interrogating nature entirely lost*" (§ 42). The reader will not fail to observe that this maxim is limited by the condition of verifiableness. Of any system that could not be verified by experience, Diderot would have disdained to speak in connection with the interpretation of nature.

This, of course, did not prevent him from hypothesis and prophecy which he himself had not the means of justifying. For example, he said that just as in mathematics, by examining all properties of a curve we find that they are one and the same property presented under different faces, so in nature when experimental physics are more advanced, people will recognise that all the phenomena,

whether of weight, or elasticity, or magnetism or electricity, are only different sides of the same affection (§ 44). But he was content to leave it to posterity, and to build no fabric on unproved propositions.

In the same scientific spirit he penetrated the hollowness of every system dealing with Final Causes :

“The physicist, whose profession is to instruct and not to edify, will abandon the *Why*, and will busy himself only with the *How*. . . . How many absurd ideas, false suppositions, chimerical notions in those hymns which some rash defenders of final causes have dared to compose in honour of the Creator? Instead of sharing the transports of admiration of the prophet, and crying out at the sight of the unnumbered stars that light up the midnight sky, *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament sheweth his handiwork*, they have given themselves up to the superstition of their conjectures. Instead of adoring the All-Powerful in the creation of nature, they have prostrated themselves before the phantoms of their imagination. If anyone doubts the justice of my reproach, I invite him to compare Galen's treatise on the use of parts of the human body, with the physiology of Boerhaave, and the physiology of Boerhaave with that of Haller; I invite posterity to compare the systematic or passing views of Haller with what will be the physiology of future times. Man praises the Eternal for his own poor views; and the Eternal who hears from the elevation of his throne, and who knows his own design, accepts the silly praise and smiles at man's vanity” (§ 56).

The world has advanced rapidly along this path since Diderot's day, and has opened out many new and unsuspected meanings by the way. Perhaps the advance has been less satisfactory in working out, in a scientific way, the philosophy that is implied in the following adaptation of the Leibnizian and Maupertuisian suggestion of the law of economy in natural forces:—“Astonishment often comes from our supposing several marvels, where in truth there is only one; from our imagining in nature as many particular acts as we can count phenomena, whilst *nature has perhaps in reality never produced more than one single act*. It seems even that, if nature had been under the necessity of producing several acts, the different results of such acts would be isolated; that there would be collections of phenomena independent of one another, and that the general chain of which philosophy assumes the continuity, would break in many places. *The absolute independence of a single fact is incompatible with the idea of an All; and without the idea of a Whole, there can be no Philosophy*” (§ 11).

At length Diderot concludes by a series of questions which he thinks that philosophers may perhaps count worthy of discussion. What is the difference, for example, between living matter and dead? Does the energy of a living molecule vary by itself, or according to the quantity, the quality, the forms of the dead or living matter with which it is united? We need not continue the enumeration, because Diderot himself suddenly brings them to an end with a truly admirable expression of his sense how unworthy they are of the attention of serious men, who are able to measure the difference between a wise and beneficent use of intelligence, and a foolish and wasteful misuse of it. "When I turn my eyes," he says, "to the works of men, and see the cities that are built on every side, all the elements yoked to our service, languages fixed, nations civilised, harbours constructed, lands and skies measured—then the world seems to me very old. When I find man uncertain as to the first principles of medicine and agriculture, as to the properties of the commonest substances, as to knowledge of the maladies that afflict him, as to the pruning of trees, as to the best form for the plough, then it seems as if the earth had only been inhabited yesterday. And if men were wise, they would at last give themselves up to such inquiries as bear on their well-being, and would not take the trouble to answer my futile questions for a thousand years at the very soonest; or perhaps, even, considering the very scanty extent that they occupy in space and time, they would never deign to answer them at all."

## II.

In 1769 Diderot composed three dialogues, of which he said that with a certain mathematical memoir, they were the only writings of his own with which he was contented. The first is a dialogue between himself and D'Alembert; the second is D'Alembert's Dream, in which D'Alembert in his sleep continues the discussion, while Mdle. Lespinasse, who is watching by his bedside, takes down the dreamer's words; in the third, Mdle. Lespinasse and the famous physician, Bordeu, conclude the matter.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible, Diderot said to Mdle. Voland, to be

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.*, ii.



more profound and more mad : it is at once a supreme extravagance, and the most deep-reaching philosophy. He congratulated himself on the cleverness of placing his ideas in the mouth of a man who dreams, on the ground that we must often give to wisdom the air of madness, in order to secure admittance. Mdlle. Lespinasse was not so complacent. She made D'Alembert insist that the dialogue should be destroyed, and Diderot believed that he had burned the only existing copy. As a matter of fact, the manuscript was not published until 1830, when all the people concerned had long been reduced to dust. There are five or six pages, Diderot said to Mdlle. Voland, which would make your sister's hair stand on end. A man may be much less squeamish than Mdlle. Voland's sister, and still pronounce the imaginative invention of D'Alembert's Dream, and the sequel, to be as odious as anything since the freaks of filthy Diogenes in his tub. Two remarks may be made on this strange production. First, Diderot never intended the dialogues for the public eye. He would have been as shocked as the Archbishop of Paris himself, if he had supposed that they would become accessible to everybody who knows how to read. Second, though they are in form the most ugly and disgusting piece in the literature of philosophy, they testify in their own way to Diderot's sincerity of interest in his subject. Science is essentially unsparing and unblushing, and D'Alembert's Dream plunged exactly into those parts of physiology which are least fit to be handled in literature. The attempt to give an air of polite comedy to functions and secretions must be pronounced detestable, in spite of the dialectical acuteness and force with which Diderot pressed his point.

It would be impossible, in a book not exclusively designed for a public of professors, to give a full account of these three dialogues. It is indispensable to describe their drift, because it is here that Diderot figures definitely as a materialist. Diderot was in no sense the originator of the French materialism of the eighteenth century. He was preceded by Maupertuis, by Robinet, and by La Mettrie ; and we have already seen that when he composed the Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature (1754), he did not fully accept Maupertuis's materialistic thesis. Lange has shown that at a very early period in the movement the most

consistent materialism was ready and developed, while such leaders of the movement as Voltaire and Diderot still leaned either on deism, or on a mixture of deism and scepticism.<sup>1</sup> The philosophy of D'Alembert's Dream is definite enough, and far enough removed alike from deism and scepticism.

"The thinking man is like a musical instrument. Suppose a clavecin to have sensibility and memory, and then say whether it would not repeat of itself the airs that you have played on its keys. We are instruments endowed with sensibility and memory. Our senses are so many keys, pressed by the nature that surrounds them, and they often press one another; and this, according to my judgment, is all that passes in a clavecin organized as you and I are organized.

"There is only one substance in the world. The marble of the statue makes the flesh of the man, and conversely. Reduce a block of marble to impalpable powder; mix this powder with humus, or vegetable earth; knead them well together; water the mixture; let it rot for a year, two years—time does not count. In this you sow the plant, the plant nourishes the man, and hence the passage from marble to tissue.

"Do you see this egg? With that you overturn all the schools of theology and all the temples of the earth. It is an insensible mass before the germ is introduced into it; and, after the germ is introduced, there is still an insensible mass, for the germ itself is only an inert fluid. How does this mass pass to another organization, to life, to sensibility? By heat. What will produce heat? Movement. What will be the successive effects of movement? First, an oscillating point, a thread that extends, the flesh, the beak, and so forth."

Then follows the application of the same ideas to the reproduction of man—a region whither it is not convenient to follow the physiological inquirer. The result as to the formation of the organic substance in man is as unflinching as the materialism of Büchner.

But doctor, cries Mdlle. Lespinasse, what becomes of vice and virtue? Virtue, that word so holy in all languages, that idea so sacred among all nations?

<sup>1</sup> *Gesch. d. Materialismus*, i. 309-10, etc.

BORDEU. We must transform it into beneficence, and its opposite into the idea of maleficence. A man is happily or unhappily born ; people are irresistibly drawn on by the general torrent that conducts one to glory, the other to ignominy.

MDLLE. LESPINASSE. And self-esteem, and shame, and remorse?

BORDEU. Proclivities, founded on the ignorance or the vanity of a being who imputes to himself the merit or the demerit of a necessary instant.

MDLLE. LESPINASSE. And rewards and punishments?

BORDEU. Means of correcting the modifiable being that we call bad, and encouraging the other that we call good.<sup>1</sup>

The third dialogue we must leave. The fact that German books are written for a public of specialists allows Dr. Rosenkranz to criticise these dialogues with a freedom equal to Diderot's own, and his criticism is as full as usual of candour, patience, and weight. An English writer must be content to pass on, and his contentment may well be considerable, for the subject is perhaps that on which, above all others, it is most difficult to say any wise word.

### III.

The Plan of a University for the Government of Russia was the work of Diderot's last years, but no copy of it was given to the public before 1813-14, when M. Guizot published extracts from an autograph manuscript confided to him by Suard. Diderot, with a characteristic respect for competence, with which no egotism can ever interfere in minds of such strength and veracity as his, began by urging the Empress to consult Ernesti of Leipzig, the famous editor of Cicero, and no less famous in his day (1707-1781) for the changes that he introduced into the system of teaching in the German universities. Of Oxford and Cambridge, Diderot spoke more kindly than they then deserved.

The one strongly marked idea of the plan is what might have been expected from the editor of the Encyclopædia, namely, the elevation of what the Germans call real or technological instruction, and the banishment of pure literature as a subject of study from the first to the last place in the course. In the faculty of arts the earliest course begins with arithmetic, algebra, the calcula-

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.*, ii. 176.

tion of probabilities, and geometry. Next follow physics and mechanics. Then astronomy. Fourthly, natural history and experimental physics. In the fifth class, chemistry and anatomy. In the sixth, logic and grammar. In the seventh, the language of the country. And it was not until the eighth, that Greek and Latin, eloquence and poetry, took their place among the objects or instruments of education. Parallel with this course, the student was to follow the first principles of metaphysics, of universal morality, and of natural and revealed religion. Here, too, history and geography had a place. In a third parallel, perspective and drawing accompanied the science of the first, and the philosophy and history of the second.

In the thorny field of religious instruction, Diderot expresses no opinion of his own, beyond saying that it is natural for the Empress's subjects to conform to her way of thinking. As her majesty thinks that the fear of pains to come has much influence on men's actions, and is persuaded that the total of small daily advantages produced by belief outweighs the total of evils wrought by sectarianism and intolerance, therefore students ought to be instructed in the mystery of the distinction of the two substances, in the immortality of the soul, and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

There is a story that one evening at St. Petersburg, Diderot was declaiming with stormy eloquence against the baseness of those who flatter kings; for such, he said, there ought to be a deeper and a fiercer hell. "Tell me, Diderot," said the Empress by-and-by, "what they say in Paris about the death of my husband." Instead of telling her the plain truth that everybody said that Peter had been murdered by her orders, the philosopher poured out a stream of the smoothest things. "Come now," said Catherine suddenly, "confess, if you are not walking along the path that leads to your deep hell, you are certainly coming very close to purgatory." Diderot's elaborate concessions to her majesty's political religion, would, it is to be feared, have brought him still further in the same sulphureous track.

As we have often had to bewail Diderot's diffuseness, it is as well to remark that a long passage in the sketch of which we are speaking, shows how close and concentrated he could be upon

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.*, iii. 490.

occasion. The two pages in which he demolishes the incorrigible superstition about Latin and Greek,<sup>1</sup> contain a thoroughly exhaustive summary of all the arguments and the answers. In the immense discussion about Latin and Greek that has taken place in the hundred years since Diderot's time, it is tolerably safe to say that not a single point has been brought forward which Diderot did not in these most pithy and conclusive pages attempt to deal with. He winds up with the position that, even for the man of letters, the present system of teaching Latin and Greek is essentially sterile. I am perfectly sure, he says, that Voltaire, who is not exactly a mediocrity as a man of letters, knows extremely little Greek, and that he is not twentieth nor even hundredth among the Latinists of the day.<sup>2</sup>

Following this sketch is printed a letter to the Countess of Forbach on the education of children. It is full of rich wisdom on its special subject. Nobody can read it without feeling that quality in Diderot, which made his friends love him. And we see how, when he was called to practical counsel, he banished into their own sphere the explosive paradoxes with which he delighted to amuse his hours of speculative dreaming.

## IV.

Romilly has told us that Diderot was bent on converting him from the error of his religious ways, and with that intention read to him a Conversation with the Maréchale de \* \* \*.<sup>3</sup> It is believed to be an idealised version of a real conversation with Madame de Broglie, and was first printed, almost as soon as written (1777), in the correspondence in which Métra, in imitation of Grimm, informed a circle of foreign subscribers what was going on in Paris. The admirers of Diderot profess to look on this Conversation as one of the most precious pearls in his philosophic casket. It turns upon the conditions of belief and unbelief, represented by the two interlocutors respectively, and is a terse and graphic summary of the rationalistic objections to the creed of the church. The most conspicuous literary passage in it is a parable which has been attributed to Rousseau, but with which Rousseau

<sup>1</sup> *Œuv.*, iii. 469-71.<sup>2</sup> *Id.* 473.<sup>3</sup> *Œuv.*, vol. ii. 505-528.

had really nothing to do, beyond reproducing the spirit of its argument in the ever famous creed of the Savoyard Vicar.

A young Mexican, tired of his work, was sauntering one day on the sea-shore. He spied a plank, with one end resting on the land, and the other dipping into the water. He sat down on the plank, and there gazing over the vast space that lay spread out before him, he said to himself :—" It is certain that my old grandmother is talking nonsense, with her history of I know not what inhabitants, who, at I know not what time, landed here from I know not where, from some country far beyond our seas. It is against common sense : do I not see the ocean touch the line of the sky? And can I believe, against the evidence of my senses, an old fable of which nobody knows the date, which everybody arranges according to his fancy, and which is only a tissue of absurdities, about which people are ready to tear out one another's eyes." As he was reasoning in this way, the waters rocked him gently on his plank, and he fell asleep. As he slept, the wind rose, the waves carried away the plank on which he was stretched out, and behold our youthful reasoner embarked on a voyage.

*La Maréchale.*—Alas, that is the image of all of us ; we are each on our plank ; the wind blows, and the flood carries us away.

C.—He was already far from the mainland when he awoke. No one was ever so surprised as our young Mexican, to find himself out on the open sea, and he was mightily surprised, too, when having lost from sight the shore on which he had been idly walking only an instant before, he saw the sea touching the line of the sky on every side. Then he began to suspect that he might have been mistaken, and that, if the wind remained in the same quarter, perhaps he would be borne to that very shore and among those dwellers on it, about whom his grandmother had so often told him.

*La Maréchale.*—And of his anxiety, you say nothing.

C.—He had none. He said to himself : "What does it matter, provided that I find land? I have reasoned like a giddy-pate, granted ; but I have been sincere with myself, and that is all that can be required of me. If it is no virtue to have understanding, at any rate it is no crime to be without it." Meanwhile the wind continued, the man and the plank floated on, and the unknown shore came into sight. He touched it, and behold him again on land.

*La Maréchale.*—Ah, we shall all of us see one another there, one of these days.

C.—I hope so, madam ; wherever it may be, I shall always be very proud to pay you my homage. Hardly had he quitted his plank, and put his foot on the sand, when he perceived a venerable old man standing by his side. He asked him where he was, and to whom he had the honour of speaking. "I am the sovereign of the country," replied the old man ; "you have denied my existence?"—"Yes, it is true."—"And that of my empire?"—"It is true!"—"I forgive you, because I am he who sees the bottom of all hearts, and I have read at the bottom of yours that you are of good faith ; but the rest of your thoughts and your actions are not equally innocent." Then the

old man, who held him by the ear, recalled to him all the errors of his life ; and as each was mentioned, the young Mexican bowed himself upon the ground, beat his breast, and besought forgiveness.

## V.

Of Falconet,<sup>1</sup> we have already spoken, as a sculptor of genius, and as one of Diderot's most intimate friends. Writing to Sophie Voland (Nov. 21, 1765), Diderot informs her that some pleasantries of Falconet's have induced him to undertake very seriously the defence of the sentiment of immortality and respect for posterity.\* This apology was carried on in an energetic correspondence which lasted from the end of 1765 to 1767. Falconet's letters were burned by his grand-daughter for reasons unknown, and we have only such passages from them as are more specially referred to by Diderot himself. Falconet flattered himself that he had the best of the argument, and was eager that they should be published, but Diderot was sluggish or busy. The correspondence was imparted to Catherine of Russia, who took a lively interest in it, and to some others, but it was not given to the public—and then only partially—until 1830.

Diderot's position in these twelve letters may be described in general terms as being that the sentiment of immortality and respect for posterity move the heart and elevate the soul ; they are two germs of great things, two promises as solid as any other, and two delights as real as most of the delights of life, but more noble, more profitable, and more virtuous. What Diderot means by immortality is not the religious dogma, that the individual personality will be objectively preserved and prolonged in some other mode of existence. On the contrary, it was his disbelief in this dogma of the churches that gave a certain keenness to his pleading for that other kind of immortality, which prolongs our personality only in the grateful and admiring memories of other people who come after us. He intended by the sentiment of immortality "the desire to surround one's name with lustre among posterity ; to be the admiration and the talk of centuries to come ; to obtain after death the same honours as we pay to those who have gone before us ; to furnish a fine line to the his-

<sup>1</sup> Above, ch. xii. p. 122.

<sup>\*</sup> xix. 200.

torian ; to inscribe one's own name by the side of those which we never pronounce without shedding a tear, heaving a sigh, or being touched by regret ; to secure for ourselves the blessings that we have such a thrill in bestowing on Sully, Henry iv., and all the other benefactors of the human race." \* The sphere that surrounds us, and in which the world admires us, the time in which we exist and listen to praise, the number of those who directly address to us the eulogy that we have deserved of them—all this is too small for the capacity of our ambitious souls. By the side of those whom we see prostrated before us, we place those who are not yet in the world. It is only this uncounted throng of adorers that can satisfy a mind whose impulses are ever towards the infinite. At night it is sweet to hear a distant concert, of which only snatches reach the ear, all to be bound into a melodious whole by the imagination, which is all the more charmed as the work is in the main its own. Even if all this were but the sweetness of a lovely dream, is then the sweetness of a dream as nothing? And am I to count for nothing a sweet dream that lasts as long as my life, and holds me in perpetual intoxication?

Falconet's answer was hard and positive. Contemporary glory suffices. What is fame, if I am not there to enjoy? The fear of contempt and disgrace is as strong a motive as you need, to incite men to great work. Glory after death is chimerical and uncertain. Think of all the great names that are clean forgotten, of all the great workers whose achievements are lost or effaced, of all the others whose works are attributed to those who did not execute them! Your posterity is no better than a lottery.

No, cries Diderot, with redoubled eloquence, rising to his noblest height, "the present is an indivisible point that cuts in two the length of an infinite line. It is impossible to rest on this point and to glide gently along with it, never looking on in front, and never turning the head to gaze behind. The more man ascends through the past, and the more he launches into the future—the greater he will be. . . . And all these philosophers, and ministers, and truth-telling men, who have fallen victims to the stupidity of nations, the atrocities of priests, the fury of tyrants, what consolation was left for

\* xviii. 94.

\* xviii. pp. 113 and 100.



them in death? This, that prejudice would pass, and that posterity would pour out the vial of ignominy upon their enemies. O posterity, holy and sacred! Stay of the unhappy and the oppressed, thou who art just, thou who art incorruptible, who avengest the good man, who unmaskest the hypocrite, who draggest down the tyrant, may thy sure faith, thy consoling faith, never, never abandon me! Posterity is for the philosopher what the other world is for the devout!"

## APPENDIX.

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### *RAMEAU'S NEPHEW: A TRANSLATION.*

[See page 228.]

[I HAVE omitted such pages in the following translation as refer simply to personages who have lost all possibility of interest for our generation ; nor did any object seem to be served by reproducing the technical points of the musical discussion. Enough is given, and given as faithfully as I know how, to show the reader what *Rameau's Nephew* is.]

In all weathers, wet or fine, it is my practice to go, towards five o'clock in the evening, to take a turn in the Palais Royal. I am he whom you may see any afternoon sitting by himself and musing in D'Argenson's seat. I keep up talk with myself about politics, love, taste, or philosophy ; I leave my mind to play the libertine unchecked ; and it is welcome to run after the first idea that offers, sage or gay, just as you see our young beaux in the Foy passage following the steps of some gay nymph, with her saucy mien, face all smiles, eyes all fire, and nose a trifle turned up ; then quitting her for another, attacking them all, but attaching themselves to none. My thoughts,—these are the wantons for me. If the weather be too cold or too wet, I take shelter in the Regency coffee-house. There I amuse myself by looking on while they play chess. Nowhere in the world do they play chess so skilfully as in Paris, and nowhere in Paris as they do at this coffee-house ; 'tis here you see Légal the profound, Philidor the subtle, Mayot the solid ; here you see the most astounding moves, and listen to the sorriest talk, for if a man

may be at once a wit and a great chess-player, like *Légal*, you may also be a great chess-player and a sad simpleton, like *Joubert* and *Mayot*.

One day I was there after dinner, watching intently, saying little, and hearing the very least possible, when there approached me one of the most eccentric figures in the country, where God has not made them lacking. He is a mixture of elevation and lowness, of good sense and madness; the notions of good and bad must be mixed up together in strange confusion in his head, for he shows the good qualities that nature has bestowed on him without any ostentation, and the bad ones without the smallest shame. For the rest, he is endowed with a vigorous frame, a particular warmth of imagination, and an astonishing strength of lungs. If you ever meet him, and if you are not arrested by his originality, you will either stuff your fingers into your ears, or else take to your heels. Heavens, what a monstrous pipe! Nothing is so little like him as himself. One time he is lean and wan, like a patient in the last stage of consumption; you could count his teeth through his cheeks; you would say he must have passed several days without tasting a morsel, or that he is fresh from *La Trappe*. A month after, he is stout and sleek, as if he had been sitting all the time at the board of a financier, or had been shut up in a *Bernardine* monastery. To-day in dirty linen, his clothes torn or patched, with barely a shoe to his foot, he steals along with a bent head; you are tempted to hail him and fling him a shilling. To-morrow all powdered, curled, in a fine coat, he marches past with head erect and open mien, and you would almost take him for a decent worthy creature. He lives from day to day, from hand to mouth, downcast or sad, just as things may go. His first care in a morning, when he gets up, is to know where he will dine; and after dinner, he begins to think where he may pick up a supper. Night brings disquiets of its own. Either he climbs to a shabby garret that he has, unless the landlady, weary of waiting for her rent, has taken the key away from him; or else he slinks to some tavern on the outskirts of the town, where he waits for daybreak over a piece of bread and a mug of beer. When he has not threepence in his pocket, as sometimes happens, he has recourse either to a hackney carriage belonging to a friend, or to the coachman of some man of quality, who gives him a bed on the straw beside the horses. In the morning, he still has bits of his mattress in his hair. If the weather is mild, he measures the *Champs Elysées* all night long. With the day he reappears in the town, dressed over night for the morrow, and from the morrow sometimes dressed for the rest of the week.

I do not rate these originals very highly. Other people make familiar acquaintances, and even friends, of them. They detain me perhaps once in a twelvemonth, if I happen to fall in with them.

Their character stands out from the rest of the world, and breaks that wearisome uniformity which our bringing-up, our social conventions, and our arbitrary fashions have introduced. If one of them makes his appearance in a company, he is a piece of leaven which ferments and restores to each a portion of his natural individuality. He stirs people up, moves them, invites to praise or blame; he is the means of bringing out the truth, he gives honest people a chance of showing themselves, he unmasks the rogues; this is the time when a man of sense listens, and distinguishes his company.

I had known my present man long ago. He used to frequent a house to which his clever parts had opened the door. There was an only daughter. He swore to the father and mother that he would marry their daughter. They shrugged their shoulders, laughed in his face, told him he was out of his senses, and I saw in an instant that his business was done. He wanted to borrow a few crowns from me, which I gave him. He worked his way, I cannot tell how, into some houses where he had his plate laid for him, but on condition that he should never open his lips without leave. He held his tongue and ate away in a towering rage: it was excellent to watch him in this state of constraint. If he could not resist breaking the treaty, and ever began to open his mouth, at the first word all the guests called out *Rameau!* Then fury sparkled in his eyes, and he turned to his plate in a worse passion than ever. You were curious to know the man's name, and now you know it: 'tis Rameau, pupil of the famous man who delivered us from the plain-song that we had been used to chant for over a hundred years; who wrote so many unintelligible visions and apocalyptic truths on the theory of music, of which neither he nor anybody else understood a word; and from whom we have a certain number of operas that are not without harmony, refrains, random notions, uproar, triumphs, glories, murmurs, breathless victories, and dance-tunes that will last to all eternity; and who, after burying Lulli, the Florentine, will be himself buried by the Italian virtuosi,—a fate that he had a presentiment of, which made him gloomy and chagrined; for nobody is in such ill-humour, not even a pretty woman who awakes with a pimple on her nose, as an author threatened with loss of his reputation.

He comes up to me. Ah, ah! here you are, my philosopher! And what are you doing among this pack of idlers? Can it be possible that you too waste your time in pushing the wood? . . .

*I.*—No, but when I have nothing better to do, I amuse myself by watching people who push it well.

*He.*—In that case you are amusing yourself with a vengeance. Except Philidor and Légal, there is not one of them who knows anything about it.

*I.*—What of M. de Bussy?

*He.*—He is as a chessplayer what Mademoiselle Clairon is as an actress ; they know of their playing, one and the other, as much as anybody can learn.

*I.*—You are hard to please, and I see you can forgive nothing short of the sublilities.

*He.*—True, in chess, women, poetry, eloquence, music, and all such fiddle-faddle. What is the use of mediocrity in these matters ?

*I.*—Little enough, I agree. But the thing is that there must be a great number of men at work, for us to make sure of the man of genius : he is one out of a multitude. But let that pass. 'Tis an age since I have seen you. Though I do not often think about you when you are out of sight, yet it is always a pleasure to me to meet you. What have you been about ?

*He.*—What you, I, and everybody else are about—some good, some bad, and nothing at all. Then, I have been hungry, and I have eaten when opportunity offered ; after eating, I have been thirsty, and now and then have had something to drink. Besides that, my beard grew, and as it grew I had it shaved.

*I.*—There you were wrong ; it is the only thing wanting to make a sage of you.

*He.*—Aye, aye ; I have a wide and furrowed brow, a glowing eye, a firm nose, broad cheeks, a black and bushy eyebrow, a clean cut mouth, a square jaw. Cover this enormous chin with amplitude of beard, and I warrant you it would look vastly well in marble or in bronze.

*I.*—By the side of a Cæsar, a Marcus Aurelius, a Socrates.

*He.*—Nay, I should be better between Diogenes, Laïs, and Phryne. I am brazenfaced as the one, and I am happy to pay a visit to the others.

*I.*—Are you always well ?

*He.*—Yes, commonly ; but I am no great wonders to-day.

*I.*—Why, you have a paunch like Silenus, and a face like . . .

*He.*—A face you might take for I don't know what. The ill humour that dries up my dear master, seems to fatten his dear pupil.

*I.*—And this dear master, do you ever see him now ?

*He.*—Yes, passing along the street.

*I.*—Does he do nothing for you ?

*He.*—If he has done anything for anybody, it is without knowing it. He is a philosopher after his fashion. He thinks of nobody but himself. His wife and his daughter may die as soon as they please ; provided the church bells that toll for them continue to sound the *twelfth* and the *seventeenth*, all will be well. It is lucky for him, and that is what I especially prize in your men of genius. They are only good for one thing ; outside of that, nothing. They do not know what it is to be citizens, fathers, mothers, kinsfolk, friends. Between

ourselves, it is no bad thing to be like them at every point, but we should not wish the grain to become common. We must have men ; but men of genius, no ; no, on my word ; of them we need none. 'Tis they who change the face of the globe ; and in the smallest things folly is so common and so almighty, that you cannot mend it without an infinite disturbance. Part of what they have dreamt comes to pass, and part remains as it was ; hence two gospels, the dress of a harlequin. The wisdom of Rabelais's moral is the true wisdom both for his own repose and that of other people : to do one's duty so so, always to speak well of the prior, and to let the world go as it lists. It must go well, for most people are content with it. If I knew history enough, I should prove to you that evil has always come about here below through a few men of genius, but I do not know history, no more than I know anything else. The deuce take me, if I have learnt anything, or if I find myself a pin the worse for not having learnt anything. I was one day at the table of the minister of the King of——, who has brains enough for four, and he showed as plain as one and one make two, that nothing was more useful to people than falsehood, nothing more mischievous than truth. I don't remember his proofs very clearly, but it evidently followed from them that men of genius are detestable, and that if a child at its birth bore on its brow the mark of that dangerous gift of nature, it ought to be smothered or else thrown to the ducks.

*I.*—Yet such people, foes as they are to genius, all lay claim to it.

*He.*—I daresay they think so in their own minds, but I doubt if they would venture to admit it.

*I.*—Ah, that is their modesty. So you conceived from that a frightful antipathy to genius.

*He.*—One that I shall never get over.

*I.*—Yet I have seen the time when you were in despair at the thought of being only a common man. You will never be happy if the pro and the con distress you alike. You should take your side, and keep to it. Though people will agree with you that men of genius are usually singular, or as the proverb says, *there are no great wits without a grain of madness*, yet they will always look down on ages that have produced no men of genius. They will pay honour to the nations among whom they have existed ; sooner or later, they rear statues to them, and regard them as the benefactors of the human race. With all deference to the sublime minister whom you have cited, I still believe that if falsehood may sometimes be useful for a moment, it is surely hurtful in the long-run ; and so, on the other hand, truth is surely useful in the long-run, though it may sometimes chance to be inconvenient for the moment. Whence I should be tempted to conclude that the man of genius who cries down a general error, or wins credit for a great truth, is always a creature that deserves our veneration.

tion. It may happen that such an one falls a victim to prejudice and the laws ; but there are two sorts of laws, the one of an equity and generality that is absolute, the other of an incongruous kind, which owe all their sanction to the blindness or exigency of circumstance. The latter only cover the culprit who infringes them with passing ignominy, an ignominy that time pours back on the judges and the nations, there to remain for ever. Whether is Socrates, or the authority that bade him drink the hemlock, in the worse dishonour in our day ?

*He.*—Not so fast. Was he any the less for that condemned ? Or any the less put to death ? Or any the less a bad citizen ? By his contempt for a bad law, did he any the less encourage blockheads to despise good ones ? Or was he any the less an audacious eccentric ? You were close there upon an admission that would have done little for men of genius.

*I.*—But listen to me, my good man. A society ought not to have bad laws, and if it had only good ones, it would never find itself persecuting a man of genius. I never said to you that genius was inseparably bound up with wickedness, any more than wickedness is with genius. A fool is many a time far worse than a man of parts. Even supposing a man of genius to be usually of a harsh carriage, awkward, prickly, unbearable ; even if he be thoroughly bad, what conclusion do you draw ?

*He.*—That he ought to be drowned.

*I.*—Gently, good man. Now I will not take your uncle Rameau for an instance ; he is harsh, he is brutal, he has no humanity, he is a miser, he is a bad father, bad husband, bad uncle ; but it has never been settled that he is particularly clever, that he has advanced his art, or that there will be any talk of his works ten years hence. But Racine, now ? He at any rate had genius, and did not pass for too good a man. And Voltaire ?

*He.*—Beware of pressing me, for I am not one to shrink from conclusions.

*I.*—Which of the two would you prefer ; that he should have been a worthy soul, identified with his till, like Briasson, or with his yard measure, like Barbier, each year producing a lawful babe, good husband, good father, good uncle, good neighbour, decent trader, but nothing more ; or that he should have been treacherous, ambitious, envious, spiteful, but the author of *Andromaque*, *Britannicus*, *Iphigenie*, *Phèdre*, *Athalie* ?

*He.*—For his own sake, on my word, perhaps of the two men it would have been a great deal better that he should have been the first.

*I.*—That is even infinitely more true than you think.

*He.*—Ah, there you are, you others ! If we say anything good and

to the purpose, 'tis like madmen or creatures inspired, by a hazard ; it is only you wise people who know what you mean. Yes, my philosopher, I know what I mean as well as you do.

*I.*—Let us see. Now why did you say that of him ?

*He.*—Because all the fine things he did never brought him twenty thousand francs, and if he had been a silk merchant in the rue Saint Denis or Saint Honoré, a good wholesale grocer, an apothecary with plenty of customers, he would have amassed an immense fortune, and in amassing it, he could have enjoyed every pleasure in life ; he would have thrown a pistole from time to time to a poor devil of a droll like me ; we should have had good dinners at his house, played high play, drunk first-rate wines, first-rate liqueurs, first-rate coffee, had glorious excursions into the country. Now you see I know what I meant. You laugh ? But let me go on. It would have been better for everybody about him.

*I.*—No doubt it would, provided that he had not put to unworthy use what gain he had made in lawful commerce, and had banished from his house all those gamesters, all those parasites, all those idle flatterers, all those depraved ne'er-do-wells, and had bidden his shop-boys give a sound beating to the officious creature who offers to play pander.

*He.*—A beating, sir, a beating ! No one is beaten in any well-governed town. It is a decent enough trade ; plenty of people with fine titles meddle with it. And what the deuce would you have him do with his money, if he is not to have a good table, good company, good wines, handsome women, pleasures of every colour, diversion of every sort ? I would as lief be a beggar, as possess a mighty fortune without any of these enjoyments. But go back to Racine. He was only good for people who did not know him, and for a time when he had ceased to exist.

*I.*—Granted, but weigh the good and bad. A thousand years from now he will draw tears, he will be the admiration of men in all the countries of the earth ; he will inspire compassion, tenderness, pity. They will ask who he was, and to what land he belonged, and France will be envied. He brought suffering on one or two people who are dead, and in whom we take hardly any interest ; we have nothing to fear from his vices or his foibles. It would have been better, no doubt, that he should have received from nature the virtues of a good man, instead of the talents of a great one. He is a tree which made a few other trees planted near him wither up, and which smothered the plants that grew at his feet ; but he reared his height to the clouds, and his branches spread far ; he lends his shadow to all who came, or come now, or ever shall come, to repose by his majestic trunk ; he brought forth fruits of exquisite savour which are renewed again and again without ceasing.

We might wish that Voltaire had the mildness of Duclos, the



ingenuousness of the Abbé Trublet, the rectitude of the Abbé d'Olivet. But as that cannot be, let us look at the thing on the side of it that is really interesting ; let us forget for an instant the point we occupy in space and time, and let us extend our vision over centuries to come, and peoples yet unborn, and distant lands yet unvisited. Let us think of the good of our race : if we are not generous enough, at least let us forgive nature for being wiser than ourselves. If you throw cold water on Greuze's head, very likely you will extinguish his talent along with his vanity. If you make Voltaire less sensitive to criticism, he will lose the art that took him to the inmost depths of the soul of Merope, and will never stir a single emotion in you more.

*He.*—But if nature be as powerful as she is wise, why did she not make them as good as she made them great ?

*I.*—Do you not see how such reasoning as that overturns the general order, and that if all were excellent here below, then there would be nothing excellent.

*He.*—You are right. The important point is that you and I should be here ; provided only that you and I are you and I, then let all besides go as it can. The best order of things, in my notion, is that in which I was to have a place, and a plague on the most perfect of worlds, if I don't belong to it ! I would rather exist, and even be a bad hand at reasoning, than not exist at all.

*I.*—There is nobody but thinks as you do, and whoever brings his indictment against the order of things, forgets that he is renouncing his own existence.

*He.*—That is true.

*I.*—So let us accept things as they are ; let us see how much they cost us and how much they give us, and leave the whole as it is, for we do not know it well enough either to praise or blame it ; and perhaps after all it is neither good nor ill, if it is necessary, as so many good folk suppose.

*He.*—Now you are going beyond me. What you say seems like philosophy, and I warn you that I never meddle with that. All that I know is that I should be very well pleased to be somebody else, on the chance of being a genius and a great man ; yes, I must agree, I have something here that tells me so. I never in my life heard a man praised, that his eulogy did not fill me with secret fury. I am full of envy. If I hear something about their private life that is a discredit to them, I listen with pleasure : it brings us nearer to a level ; I bear my mediocrity more comfortably. I say to myself : Ah, thou couldst never have done *Mahomet*, nor the eulogy on *Maupeou*. So I have always been, and I always shall be, mortified at my own mediocrity. Yes, I tell you I am mediocre, and it provokes me. I never heard the overture to the *Indes galantes* performed, nor the *Profonds abîmes de*

*Ténare, Nuit, éternelle nuit*, sung without saying to myself : That is what thou wilt never do. So I was jealous of my uncle.

*I.*—If that is the only thing that chagrins you, it is hardly worth the trouble.

*He.*—'Tis nothing, only a passing humour. [Then he set himself to hum the overture and the air he had spoken of, and went on:]

The something which is here and speaks to me says : Rameau, thou wouldst fain have written those two pieces : if thou hadst done those two pieces, thou wouldst soon do two others ; and after thou hadst done a certain number, they would play thee and sing thee everywhere. In walking, thou wouldst hold thy head erect, thy conscience would testify within thy bosom to thy own merit ; the others would point thee out, There goes the man who wrote the pretty gavottes [and he hummed the gavottes. Then with the air of a man bathed in delight and his eyes shining with it, he went on, rubbing his hands :] Thou shalt have a fine house [he marked out its size with his arms], a famous bed [he stretched himself luxuriously upon it], capital wines [he sipped them in imagination, smacking his lips], a handsome equipage [he raised his foot as if to mount], a hundred varlets who will come to offer thee fresh incense every day [and he fancied he saw them all around him, Palissot, Poinsinet, the two Frérons, Laporte, he heard them, approved of them, smiled at them, contemptuously repulsed them, drove them away, called them back ; then he continued:] And it is thus they would tell thee on getting up in a morning that thou art a great man ; thou wouldst read in the *Histoire des Trois Siècles* that thou art a great man, thou wouldst be convinced of an evening that thou art a great man, and the great man Rameau would fall asleep to the soft murmur of the eulogy that would ring in his ears ; even as he slept, he would have a complacent air ; his chest would expand, and rise, and fall with comfort ; he would move like a great man . . . [and as he talked he let himself sink softly on a bench, he closed his eyes, and imitated the blissful sleep that his mind was picturing. After relishing the sweetness of this repose for a few instants, he awoke, stretched his arms, yawned, rubbed his eyes, and looked about him for his pack of vapid flatterers].

*I.*—You think, then, the happy mortal has his sleep ?

*He.*—Think so ! A sorry wretch like me ! At night when I get back to my garret, and burrow in my truckle-bed, I shrink up under my blanket, my chest is all compressed, and I can hardly breathe ; it seems like a moan that you can barely hear. Now a banker makes the room ring and astonishes a whole street. But what afflicts me to-day, is not that I snore and sleep meanly and shabbily, like a paltry outcast.

*I.*—Yet that is a sorry thing enough.

*He.*—What has befallen me is still more so.

*I.*—What is that?

*He.*—You have always taken some interest in me, because I am a *bon diable*, whom you rather despise at bottom, but who diverts you.

*I.*—Well, that is the plain truth.

*He.*—I will tell you. [Before beginning he heaved a profound sigh, and clasped his brow with his two hands. Then he recovers his tranquillity, and says :]

You know that I am an ignoramus, a fool, a madman, an impatient, a sluggard, a glutton . . . .

*I.*—What a panegyric!

*He.*—'Tis true to the letter, there is not a word to take away; prithee, no debate on that. No one knows me better. I know myself and I do not tell the whole.

*I.*—I have no wish to cross you, and I will agree to anything.

*He.*—Well, I used to live with people, who took a liking for me, plainly because I was gifted with all these qualities to such a rare degree.

*I.*—That is curious. Until now I always thought that people hid these things even from themselves, or else that they granted themselves pardon, while they despised them in others.

*He.*—Hide them from themselves! Can men do that? You may be sure that when Palissot is all alone and returns upon himself, he tells a very different tale; you may be sure that when he talks quietly with his colleague, they candidly admit that they are only a pair of mighty rogues. Despise such things in others! My people were far more equitable, and they took my character for a perfect nonesuch; I was in clover; they feasted me, they did not lose me from their sight for a single instant without sighing for my return. I was their excellent Rameau, their dear Rameau, their Rameau the mad, the impertinent, the lazy, the greedy, the merry-man, the lout. There was not one of these epithets which did not bring me a smile, a caress, a tap on the shoulder, a cuff, a kick; at table, a titbit tossed on to my plate; away from the table, a freedom that I took without consequences, for, do you see, I am a man without consequence. They do with me and before me and at me whatever they like, without my standing on any ceremony. And the little presents that showered on me! The great hound that I am, I have lost all! I have lost all for having had common sense once, one single time in my life. Ah! if that ever chances again!

*I.*—What was the matter, then?

*He.*—Rameau, Rameau, did they ever take you for that? The folly of having had a little taste, a trifle of wit, a spice of reason; Rameau, my friend, that will teach you the difference between what God made you, and what your protectors wanted you to be. So they

took you by the shoulder, they led you to the door, and cried: "Be off, rascal; never appear more. He would fain have sense, reason, wit, I declare! Off with you; we have all these qualities and to spare!" You went away biting your thumb; it was your infernal tongue, that you ought to have bitten before all this. For not bethinking you of that, here you are in the gutter without a farthing, or a place to lay your head. You were well housed, and now you will be lucky if you get your garret again; you had a good bed, and now a truss of straw awaits you between M. de Soubise's coachman and friend Robbe. Instead of the gentle quiet slumber that you had, you will have the neighing and stamping of horses all night long—you wretch, idiot, possessed by a million devils!

*I.*—But is there no way of setting things straight? Is the fault you committed so unpardonable? If I were you, I should go find my people again. You are more indispensable to them than you suppose.

*He.*—Oh, as for that, I know that now they have me no longer to make fun for them, they are dull as ditch-water.

*I.*—Then I should go back: I would not give them time enough to learn how to get on without me, or to turn to some more decent amusement. For who knows what may happen?

*He.*—That is not what I am afraid of: that will never come to pass.

*I.*—But sublime as you may be, someone else may replace you.

*He.*—Hardly.

*I.*—Hardly, it is true. Still I would go with that lacklustre face, those haggard eyes, that open breast, that tumbled hair, in that downright tragic state in which you are now. I would throw myself at the feet of the divinity, and without rising I would say with a low and sobbing voice: "Forgive me, madam! Forgive me! I am the vilest of creatures. It was only one unfortunate moment, for you know I am not subject to common sense, and I promise you, I will never have it again so long as I live."

[The diverting part of it was that, while I discoursed to him in this way, he executed it pantomimically, and threw himself on the ground; with his eyes fixed on the earth, he seemed to hold between his two hands the tip of a slipper, he wept, he sobbed, he cried: "Yes, my queen, yes, I promise, I never will, so long as I live, so long as ever I live. . . ." Then recovering himself abruptly, he went on in a serious and deliberate tone:]

*He.*—Yes, you are right; I see it is the best. Yet to go and humiliate one's self before a hussy, cry for mercy at the feet of a little actress with the hisses of the pit for ever in her ears! I, Rameau, son of Rameau, the apothecary of Dijon, who is a good man and never yet bent his knee to a creature in the world! I, Rameau, who have composed pieces for the piano that nobody plays, but which will

perhaps be the only pieces ever to reach posterity, and posterity will play them—I, I, must go! Stay, sir, it cannot be [and striking his right hand on his breast, he went on:] I feel here something that rises and tells me: Never, Rameau, never. There must be a certain dignity attached to human nature that nothing can stifle; it awakes *à propos des bottes*; you cannot explain it; for there are other days when it would cost me not a pang to be as vile as you like, and for a halfpenny there is nothing too dirty for me to do.

*I.*—Then if the expedient I have suggested to you is not to your taste, have courage enough to remain a beggar.

*He.*—'Tis hard being a beggar, while there are so many rich fools at whose expense one can live. And the contempt for one's self, it is insupportable.

*I.*—Do you know that sentiment?

*He.*—Know it! How many times have I said to myself: What, Rameau, there are ten thousand good tables in Paris, with fifteen or twenty covers apiece, and of these covers not one for thee! There are purses full of gold which is poured out right and left, and not a crown of it falls to thee! A thousand wifings without parts and without worth, a thousand paltry creatures without a charm, a thousand scurvy intriguers, are all well clad, while thou must go bare! Canst thou be such a nincompoop as all this? Couldst thou not flatter as well as anybody else? Couldst thou not find out how to lie, swear, forswear, promise, keep or break, like anybody else? Couldst thou not favour the intrigue of my lady, and carry the love-letter of my lord, like anybody else? Couldst thou not find out the trick of making some shopkeeper's daughter understand how shabbily dressed she is, how two fine earrings, a touch of rouge, some lace, and a Polish gown would make her ravishing; that those little feet were not made for trudging through the mud; that there is a handsome gentleman, young, rich, in a coat covered with lace, with a superb carriage and six fine lackeys, who once saw her as he passed, who thought her charming and wonderful, and that ever since that day he has taken neither bite nor sup, cannot sleep at nights, and will surely die of it? . . . He comes, he pleases, the little maid vanishes, and I pocket my two thousand crowns. What, thou hast a talent like this, and yet in want of bread? Shame on thee, wretch! I recalled a crowd of scoundrels who were not a patch upon me, and yet were rolling in money. There was I in serge, and they in velvet; they leaned on gold-headed canes, and had fine rings on their fingers. And what were they? Wretched bungling strummers, and now they are a kind of fine gentlemen. At such times I felt full of courage, my soul inflamed and elevated, my wits alert and subtle, and capable of anything in the world. But this happy turn did not last, it would seem, for so far I have not been able to make much way. However

that may be, there is the text of my frequent soliloquies, which you may paraphrase as you choose, provided you are sure that I know what self-contempt is, and that torture of conscience which comes of the usefulness of the gifts that heaven has bestowed on us ; that is the cruellest stroke of all. A man might almost as well never have been born.

[I had listened to him all the time, and as he enacted the scene with the poor girl, with my heart moved by two conflicting emotions, I did not know whether to give myself up to the longing I had to laugh, or to a transport of indignation. I was distressingly perplexed between two humours ; twenty times an uncontrollable burst of laughter kept my anger back, and twenty times the anger that was rising from the bottom of my soul suddenly ended in a burst of laughter. I was confounded by so much shrewdness and so much vileness, by ideas now so just and then so false, by such general perversity of sentiments, such complete turpitude, and such marvelously uncommon frankness. He perceived the struggle going on within me :] What ails you ? said he.

*I.*—Nothing.

*He.*—You seem to be disturbed.

*I.*—And I am.

*He.*—But now, after all, what do you advise me to do ?

*I.*—To change your way of talking. You unfortunate soul, to what abject state have you fallen !

*He.*—I admit it. And yet, do not let my state touch you too deeply ; I had no intention, in opening my mind to you, to give you pain. I managed to scrape up a few savings when I was with the people. Remember that I wanted nothing, not a thing, and they made me a certain allowance for pocket money.

[He again began to tap his brow with one of his fists, to bite his lips, and to roll his eyes towards the ceiling, going on to say :]

But 'tis all over ; I have put something aside ; time has passed, and that is always so much gained.

*I.*—So much lost, you mean.

*He.*—No, no ; gained. People grow rich every moment ; a day less to live, or a crown to the good, 'tis all one. When the last moment comes, one is as rich as another ; Samuel Bernard, who by pillaging and stealing and playing bankrupt, leaves seven and twenty million francs in gold, is just like Rameau, who leaves not a penny, and will be indebted to charity for a shroud to wrap round him. The dead man hears not the tolling of the bell ; 'tis in vain that a hundred priests bawl dirges for him, and that a long file of blazing torches go before ; his soul walks not by the side of the master of the ceremonies. To moulder under marble, or to moulder under clay, 'tis still to moulder. To have around one's

bier children in red and children in blue, or to have not a creature, what matters it? And then, look at this wrist, it was stiff as the devil; the ten fingers, they were so many sticks fastened into a metacarpus made of wood; and these muscles were like old strings of catgut, drier, stiffer, harder to bend than if that they had been used for a turner's wheel; but I have so twisted and broken and bent them. What, thou wilt not go? And I say that thou shalt. . . .

[And at this, with his right hand he seized the fingers and wrist of his left hand, and turned them first up and then down. The extremity of the fingers touched the arm, till the joints cracked again. I was afraid every instant that the bones would remain dislocated.]

*I.*—Take care, you will do yourself a mischief.

*He.*—Don't be afraid, they are used to it. For ten years I have given it them in a very different style. They had to accustom themselves to it, however they liked it, and to learn to find their place on the keys and to leap over the strings. So now they go where they must.

[At the same moment he threw himself into the attitude of a violin-player; he hummed an allegro of Locatelli's; his right arm imitated the movement of the bow; his left hand and his fingers seemed to be feeling along the handle. If he makes a false note, he stops, tightens or slackens his string, and strikes it with his nail, to make sure of its being in tune, and then takes up the piece where he left off. He beats time with his foot, moves his head, his feet, his hands, his arms, his body, as you may have seen Ferrari or Chiabran, or some other virtuoso in the same convulsions, presenting the image of the same torture, and giving me nearly as much pain; for is it not a painful thing to watch the torture of a man who is busy painting pleasure for my benefit? Draw a curtain to hide the man from me, if he must show me the spectacle of a victim on the rack. In the midst of all these agitations and cries, if there occurred one of those harmonious passages where the bow moves slowly over several of the strings at once, his face put on an air of ecstasy, his voice softened, he listened to himself with perfect rapture; it is undoubted that the chorus sounded both in his ears and mine. Then replacing his imaginary instrument under his left arm with the same hand by which he held it, and letting his right hand drop with the bow in it, said:]

Well, what do you think of it?

*I.*—Wonderful!

*He.*—Not bad, I fancy; it sounds pretty much like the others. . . .

[And then he stooped down, like a musician placing himself at the piano.]

*I.*—Nay, I beg you to be merciful both to me and to yourself.

*He.*—No, no; now that I have got you, you shall hear me. **L**

will have no vote that is given without your knowing why. You will say a good word for me with more confidence, and that will be worth a new pupil to me.

*I.*—But I am so little in the world, and you will tire yourself all to no purpose.

*He.*—I am never tired.

[As I saw that it was useless to have pity on my man, for the sonata on the violin had bathed him in perspiration, I resolved to let him do as he would. So behold him seated at the piano, his legs bent, his head thrown back towards the ceiling, where you would have thought he saw a score written up, humming, preluding, dashing off a piece of Alberti's or Galuppi's, I forget which. His voice went like the wind, and his fingers leapt over the imaginary keys. The various passions succeeded one another on his face; you observed on it tenderness, anger, pleasure, sorrow; you felt the piano notes, the forte notes, and I am sure that a more skilful musician than myself would have recognised the piece by the movement and the character, by his gestures, and by a few notes of airs which escaped from him now and again. But the absurd thing was to see him from time to time hesitate and take himself up, as if he had gone wrong.]

Now, you perceive, said he, rising and wiping away the drops of sweat which rolled down his cheeks, that we know how to place our third, our superfluous fifth, and that we know all about our dominants. Those enharmonic passages, about which the dear uncle makes such fuss, they are not like having the sea to swallow; we can manage them well enough.

*I.*—You have given yourself a great deal of trouble to show me that you are uncommonly clever; but I would have taken your word for it.

*He.*—Uncommonly clever; oh no! For my trade, I know it decently, and that is more than one wants; for in this country is one obliged to know all that one shows?

*I.*—No more than to know all that one teaches.

*He.*—That is true, most thoroughly true. Now, sir philosopher, your hand on your conscience, speak the truth: there was a time when you were not a man of such substance as you are to-day.

*I.*—I am not so very substantial even now.

*He.*—But you would not go now to the Luxembourg in summer-time. . . . You remember?

*I.*—No more of that. Yes, I do remember.

*He.*—In an overcoat of gray shag?

*I.*—Ay, ay.

*He.*—Terribly worn at one side, with one of the sleeves torn; and black woollen stockings mended at the back with white thread.

*I.*—Yes—anything you like.



*He.*—What were you doing in the alley of Sighs?

*I.*—Cutting a shabby figure enough, I daresay.

*He.*—You used to give lessons in mathematics?

*I.*—Without knowing a word about them. Is not that what you want to come to?

*He.*—Exactly so.

*I.*—I learnt by teaching others, and I turned out some good pupils.

*He.*—That may be; but music is not like algebra or geometry. Now that you are a substantial personage . . . .

*I.*—Not so substantial, I tell you.

*He.*—And have a good lining to your purse . . . .

*I.*—Not so good.

*He.*—Let your daughter have masters.

*I.*—Not yet; it is her mother who looks to her education, for one must have peace in one's house.

*He.*—Peace in one's house? You have only that, when you are either master or servant, and it should be master. I had a wife—may heaven bless her soul—but when it happened sometimes that she played malapert, I used to mount the high horse, and bring out my thunder. I used to say like the Creator: Let there be light, and there was light. So for four years we had not ten times in all one word higher than another. How old is your child?

*I.*—That has nothing to do with the matter.

*He.*—How old is your child, I say?

*I.*—The devil take you, leave my child and her age alone, and return to the master she is to have.

*He.*—I know nothing so pig-headed as a philosopher. In all humility and supplication, might one not know from his highness the philosopher, about what age her ladyship, his daughter, may be?

*I.*—I suppose she is eight.

*He.*—Eight! Then four years ago she ought to have had her fingers on the keys. •

*I.*—But perhaps I have no fancy for including in the scheme of her education, a study that takes so much time and is good for so little.

*He.*—And what will you teach her, if you please?

*I.*—To reason justly, if I can; a thing so uncommon among men, and more uncommon still among women.

*He.*—Oh, let her reason as ill as she chooses, if she is only pretty, amusing, and coquettish.

*I.*—As nature has been unkind enough to give her a delicate organization with a very sensitive soul, and to expose her to the same troubles in life as if she had a strong organization and a heart of bronze, I will teach her, if I can, to bear them courageously.

*He.*—Let her weep and give herself airs, and have nerves all on

edge like the rest, if only she is pretty, amusing, and coquettish. What, is she to learn no dancing nor deportment?

*I.*—Yes, just enough to make a curtsy, to have a good carriage, to enter a room gracefully, and to know how to walk.

*He.*—No singing?

*I.*—Just enough to pronounce her words well.

*He.*—No music?

*I.*—If there were a good teacher of harmony, I would gladly entrust her to him two hours a day for two or three years, not any more.

*He.*—And instead of the essential things that you are going to suppress? . . .

*I.*—I place grammar, fables, history, geography, a little drawing, and a great deal of morality.

*He.*—How easy it would be for me to prove to you the uselessness of all such knowledge in a world like ours? Uselessness, do I say? Perhaps even the danger! But I will for the moment ask you a single question, will she not require one or two masters?

*I.*—No doubt.

*He.*—And you hope that these masters will know the grammar, the fables, the history, the geography, the morality, in which they will give her lessons? Moonshine, my dear mentor, sheer moonshine! If they knew these things well enough to teach them to other people, they never would teach them?

*I.*—And why?

*He.*—Because they would have spent all their lives in studying them. It is necessary to be profound in art and science, to know its elements thoroughly. Classical books can only be well done by those who have grown gray in harness; it is the middle and the end which light up the darkness of the beginning. Ask your friend D'Alembert, the coryphæus of mathematics, if he thinks himself too good to write about the elements. It was not till after thirty or forty years of practice, that my uncle got a glimpse of the profundities and the first rays of light in musical theory.

*I.*—O madman, arch-madman, I cried, how comes it that in thine evil head such just ideas go pell-mell with such a mass of extravagances?

*He.*—Who on earth can find that out? 'Tis chance that flings them to you, and they remain. If you do not know the whole of a thing, you know none of it well; you do not know whither one thing leads, nor whence another has come, where this and that should be placed, which ought to pass the first, and where the second would be best. Can you teach well without method? And method, whence comes that? I vow to you, my dear philosopher, I have a notion that physics will always be a poor science, a drop of water raised by a

needle-point from the vast ocean, a grain loosened from an Alpine chain. And then, seeking the reasons of phenomena! In truth, one might every whit as well be ignorant, as know so little and know it so ill; and that was exactly my doctrine when I gave myself out for a music-master. What are you musing over?

*I.*—I am thinking that all you have told me is more specious than solid. But that is no matter. You taught, you say, accompaniment and composition.

*He.*—Yes.

*I.*—And you knew nothing about either.

*He.*—No, i' faith; and that is why there were worse than I was, namely those who fancied they knew something. At any rate, I did not spoil either the child's taste or its hands. When they passed from me to a good master, if they had learnt nothing, at all events they had nothing to unlearn, and that was always so much time and so much money saved.

*I.*—What did you do?

*He.*—What they all do! I got there, I threw myself into a chair. "What shocking weather! How tiring the streets are!" Then some gossip: "Mademoiselle Lemierre was to have taken the part of Vestal in the new opera, but she is in an interesting condition for the second time, and they do not know who will take her place. Mademoiselle Arnould has just left her little Count: they say she is negotiating with Bertin. . . . That poor Dumesnil no longer knows either what he is saying, or what he is doing. . . . Now, Miss, take your book." While miss, who is in no hurry, is looking for her book, which is lost, while they call the housemaid and scold and make a great stir, I continue—"The Clairon is really incomprehensible. They talk of a marriage which is outrageously absurd: 'tis that of Miss . . . what is her name? a little creature that used to live with so and so, etcetera, etcetera:—Come, Rameau, you are talking nonsense; it is impossible.—I don't talk nonsense at all; they even say it is done. There is a rumour that Voltaire is dead, and so much the better.—And pray, why so much the better?—Because he must be going to give us something more laughable than usual; it is always his custom to die a fortnight before." What more shall I tell you? I used to tell certain naughtinesses that I brought from houses where I had been, for we are all of us great fetchers and carriers. I played the madman, they listened to me, they laughed, they called out: How charming he is! Meanwhile missy's book had been found under the sofa, where it had been pulled about, gnawed, torn by a puppy or a kitten. She sat down to the piano. At first she made a noise on it by herself; then I went towards her, after giving her mother a sign of approbation. The mother: "That is not bad; people have only to be in earnest, but they are not in earnest; they would rather waste

their time in chattering, in disarranging things, in gadding hither and thither, and I know not what besides. Your back is no sooner turned, M. Rameau, than the book is shut up, not to be opened until your next visit ; still you never scold her." Then, as something had to be done, I took hold of her hands and placed them differently ; I got out of temper, I called out "*Sol, Sol, Sol, Miss, it is a Sol.*" The mother : "Have you no ear? I am not at the piano, and I can't see your book, yet I know it ought to be a *Sol*. You are most troublesome to your teacher ; I can't tell how he is so patient ; you do not remember a word of what he says to you ; you make no progress. . . ." Then I would lower my tone rather, and throwing my head on one side, would say : "Pardon me, madam, all would go very well if the young lady liked, if she only studied a little more ; but it is not bad." The mother : "If I were you, I should keep her at one piece for a whole year." "Oh, as for that, she shall not leave it before she has mastered every difficulty, and that will not be as long as you may think." "Monsieur Rameau, you flatter her, you are too good. That is the only part of the lesson which she will keep in mind, and she will take care to repeat it to me upon occasion. . . ." And so the time got over ; my pupil presented me my little fee, with the curtesy she had learnt from the dancing master. I put it into my pocket while the mother said : "Very well done, mademoiselle ; if Favillier were here, he would applaud you." I chattered a moment or two for politeness' sake, and behold, that was what they call a music lesson.

*I.*—Well, and now it is quite another thing ?

*He.*—Another thing ! I should think so, indeed. I get there. I am deadly grave ; I take off my cuffs hastily, I open the piano, I run my fingers over the keys, I am always in a desperate hurry. If they keep me waiting a moment, I cry out as if they were robbing me of a crown piece : in an hour from now I must be so and so ; in two hours, with the duchess of so and so ; I am expected to dine with a handsome marchioness, and then, on leaving her, there is a concert at the baron's. . . .

*I.*—And all the time nobody is expecting you anywhere at all ?

*He.*—No.

*I.*—What vile arts ! //

*He.*—Vile, forsooth ! Why vile ? They are customary among people like me ; I don't lower myself in doing like everybody else. I was not the inventor of them, and it would be most absurd and stupid in me not to conform to them. Of course, I know very well that if you go to certain principles of some morality or other, which all the world have in their mouths, and which none of them practise, you will find black is white, and white will become black. . But, my philosopher, there is a general conscience, just as there is a general

grammar ; and then the exceptions in each language that you learned people call—what is it you call them ?

*I.*—Idioms.

*He.*—Ah, exactly ; well, each condition of life has its exceptions to the general conscience, to which I should like to give the title of idioms of vocation.

*I.*—I understand. Fontenelle speaks well, writes well, though his style swarms with French *idioms*.

*He.*—And the sovereign, the minister, the banker, the magistrate, the soldier, the man of letters, the lawyer, the merchant, the artisan, the singing master, the dancing master, are all most worthy folk, though their practice strays in some points from the general conscience, and abounds in moral idioms. The older the institution, the more the idioms ; the worse the times, the more do idioms multiply. The man is worth so much, his trade is worth the same ; and reciprocally. At last, the trade counts for so much, the man for the same. So people take care to make the trade go for as much as they can.

*I.*—All that I gather clearly from this twisted stuff is, that there are very few callings honestly carried on, and very few honest men in their callings.

*He.*—Good, there are none at all ; but in revenge, there are few rogues out of their own shops ; and all would go excellently but for a certain number of persons who are called assiduous, exact, fulfilling their strict duty most rigorously, or, what comes to the same thing, for ever in their shops, and carrying on their trade from morning until night, and doing nothing else in the world. So they are the only people who grow rich and are esteemed.

*I.*—By force of idioms.

*He.*—That is it ; I see you understand me. Now, an idiom that belongs to nearly all conditions—for there are some that are common to all countries and all times, just as there are follies that are universal—a common idiom, is to procure for one's self as many customers as one possibly can ; a common folly is to believe that he is cleverest who has most of them. There are two exceptions to the general conscience, with which you must comply. There is a kind of credit ; it is nothing in itself, but it is made worth something by opinion. They say, *good character is better than golden girdle* : yet the man who has a good character has not a golden girdle, and I see nowadays that the golden girdle hardly stands in much need of character. One ought, if possible, to have both girdle and character, and that is my object when I give myself importance by what you describe as vile arts, and poor unworthy tricks. I give my lesson and I give it well ; behold the general rule. I make them

think I have more lessons to give than the day has hours ; behold the idiom.

*I.*—And the lesson ; you do give it well ?

*He.*—Yes, not ill ; passably. The thorough bass of the dear master has simplified all that. In old days I used to steal my pupil's money. Yes, I stole it, that is certain ; now I earn it, at least like my neighbours.

*I.*—And did you steal it without remorse ?

*He.*—Oh, without remorse. They say that if one thief pilfers from another, the devil laughs. The parents were bursting with a fortune, which had been got the Lord knows how. They were people about the court, financiers, great merchants, bankers. I helped to make them disgorge, I and the rest of the people they employed. In nature, all species devour one another ; so all ranks devour one another in society. We do justice on one another, without any meddling from the law. The other day it was Deschamps, now it is Guimard, who avenges the prince of the financier ; and it is the milliner, the jeweller, the upholsterer, the hosier, the draper, the lady's-maid, the cook, the saddler, who avenge the financier of Deschamps. In the midst of it all, there is only the imbecile or the sloth who suffers injury without inflicting it. Whence you see that these exceptions to the general conscience, or these moral idioms about which they make such a stir, are nothing, after all, and that you only need to take a clear survey of the whole.

*I.*—I admire yours.

*He.*—And then misery ! The voice of conscience and of honour is terribly weak, when the stomach calls out. Enough to say that if ever I grow rich I shall be bound to restore, and I have made up my mind to restore in every possible fashion, by eating, drinking, gambling, and whatever else you please.

*I.*—I have some fears about your ever growing rich.

*He.*—I have suspicions myself.

*I.*—But if things should fall so, what then ?

*He.*—I would do like all other beggars set on horseback : I would be the most insolent ruffler that has ever been seen. Then I should recall all that they have made me go through, and should pay them back with good interest all the advances that they have been good enough to make me. I am fond of command, and I will command. I am fond of praise, and I will make them praise me. I will have in my pay the whole troop of flatterers, parasites, and buffoons, and I'll say to them, as has been said to me : " Come, knaves, let me be amused," and amused I shall be ; " Pull me some honest folk to pieces," and so they will be, if honest folk can be found. We will be jolly over our cups, we will have all sorts of vices and whimsies ; it will be delicious. We will prove that Voltaire has no genius ; that Buffon, everlastingly

perched upon his stilts, is only a turgid declaimer ; that Montesquieu is nothing more than a man with a touch of ingenuity ; we will send D'Alembert packing to his fusty mathematics. We will welcome before and behind all the pigmy Catos like you, whose modesty is the prop of pride, and whose sobriety is a fine name for not being able to help yourselves.

*I.*—From the worthy use to which you would put your riches, I perceive what a pity it is that you are a beggar. You would live thus in a manner that would be eminently honourable to the human race, eminently useful to your countrymen, and eminently glorious for yourself.

*He.*—You are mocking me, sir philosopher. But you do not know whom you are laughing at. You do not suspect that at this moment I represent the most important part of the town and the court. Our millionaires in all ranks have, or have not, said to themselves exactly the same things as I have just confided to you ; but the fact is, the life that I should lead is precisely their life. What a notion you people have ; you think that the same sort of happiness is made for all the world. What a strange vision ! Yours supposes a certain romantic spirit that we know nothing of, a singular character, a peculiar taste. You adorn this incongruous mixture with the name of philosophy ; but now, are virtue and philosophy made for all the world ? He has them who can get them, and he keeps them who can. Imagine the universe sage and philosophical ; agree that it would be a most diabolically gloomy spot. Come, long live philosophy ! The wisdom of Solomon forever ! To drink good wines, to cram one's self with dainty dishes, to rest in beds of down : except that, all, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

*I.*—What, to defend one's native land ?

*He.*—Vanity ; there is native land no more ; I see nought from pole to pole but tyrants and slaves.

*I.*—To help one's friends ?

*He.*—Vanity ; has one any friends ? If one had, ought we to turn them into ingrates ? Look well, and you will see that this is all you get by doing services. Gratitude is a burden, and every burden is made to be shaken off.

*I.*—To have a position in society and fulfil its duties ?

*He.*—Vanity ; what matters it whether you have a position or not, provided you are rich, since you only seek a position to become rich ? To fulfil one's duties, what does that lead to ? To jealousy, trouble, persecution. Is that the way to get on ? Nay indeed : to see the great, to court them, study their taste, bow to their fancies, serve their vices, praise their injustice—there is the secret.

*I.*—To watch the education of one's children ?

*He.*—Vanity ; that is a tutor's business.

*I.*—But if this tutor, having picked up his principles from you, happens to neglect his duties, who will pay the penalty?

*He.*—Not I, at any rate, but most likely the husband of my daughter, or the wife of my son.

*I.*—But suppose that they both plunge into vice and debauchery?

*He.*—That belongs to their position.

*I.*—Suppose they bring themselves into dishonour?

*He.*—You never come into dishonour, if you are rich, whatever you do.

*I.*—Suppose they ruin themselves?

*He.*—So much the worse for them.

*I.*—You will not pay much heed to your wife?

*He.*—None whatever, if you please. The best compliment, I think, that a man can pay his dearer half, is to do what pleases himself. In your opinion, would not society be mightily amusing, if everybody in it was always attending to his duties?

*I.*—Why not? The evening is never so fair to me, as when I am satisfied with my morning.

*He.*—And to me also.

*I.*—What makes the men of the world so dainty in their amusements, is their profound idleness.

*He.*—Pray do not think that; they are full of trouble.

*I.*—As they never tire themselves, they are never refreshed.

*He.*—Don't suppose that, either. They are incessantly worn out.

*I.*—Pleasure is always a business for them, never the satisfaction of a necessity.

*He.*—So much the better; necessity is always a trouble.

*I.*—They wear everything out. Their soul gets blunted, weariness seizes them. A man who should take their life in the midst of all their crushing abundance, would do them a kindness. The only part of happiness that they know is the part that loses its edge. I do not despise the pleasures of the senses: I have a palate, too, and it is tickled by a well-seasoned dish or a fine wine; I have a heart and eyes, and I like to see a handsome woman. Sometimes with my friends, a gay party, even if it waxes somewhat tumultuous, does not displease me. But I will not dissemble from you that it is infinitely pleasanter to me to have succoured the unfortunate, to have ended some thorny business, to have given wholesome counsel, done some pleasant reading, taken a walk with some man or woman dear to me, passed instructive hours with my children, written a good page, fulfilled the duties of my position, said to the woman that I love, a few soft things that bring her arm round my neck. I know actions which I would give all that I possess, to have done. *Mahomet* is a sublime work; I would a hundred times rather have got justice for the memory of the Calas. A person of my acquaintance fled to Carthage; he was the younger son in a country where custom transfers all the



property to the eldest. There he learns that his eldest brother, a petted son, after having despoiled his father and mother of all that they possessed, had driven them out of the castle, and that the poor old souls were languishing in indigence in some small country town. What does he do—this younger son who in consequence of the harsh treatment he had received at the hand of his parents had gone to seek his fortune far away? He sends them help; he makes haste to set his affairs in order, he returns with his riches, he restores his father and mother to their home, and finds husbands for his sisters. Ah, my dear Rameau, that man looked upon this period as the happiest in his life; he had tears in his eyes when he spoke to me of it, and even as I tell you the story, I feel my heart beat faster, and my tongue falter for sympathy.

*He.*—Singular beings, you are!

*I.*—'Tis you who are beings much to be pitied, if you cannot imagine that one rises above one's lot, and that it is impossible to be ~~unhappy under the shelter of good actions.~~

*He.*—That is a kind of felicity with which I should find it hard to familiarise myself, for we do not often come across it. But, then, according to you, we should be good.

*I.*—To be happy, assuredly.

*He.*—Yet I see an infinity of honest people who are not happy, and an infinity of people who are happy without being honest.

*I.*—You think so.

*He.*—And is it not for having had common sense and frankness for a moment, that I don't know where to go for a supper to-night?

*I.*—Nay, it is for not having had it always; it is because you did not perceive in good time that one ought first and foremost to provide a resource independent of servitude.

*He.*—Independent or not, the resource I had provided is at any rate the most comfortable.

*I.*—And the least sure and least decent.

*He.*—But the most conformable to my character of sloth, madman, and good-for-nought.

*I.*—Just so.

*He.*—And since I can secure my happiness by vices which are natural to me, which I have acquired without labour, which I preserve without effort, which go well with the manners of my nation, which are to the taste of those who protect me, and are more in harmony with their small private necessities, than virtues which would weary them by being a standing accusation against them from morning to night, why, it would be very singular for me to go and torment myself like a lost spirit, for the sake of making myself into somebody other than I am, to put on a character foreign to my own, and qualities which I will admit to be highly estimable, in order to avoid discussion, but which it would cost me a great deal to acquire, and a

great deal to practise, and would lead to nothing, or possibly to worse than nothing, through the continual satire of the rich among whom beggars like me have to seek their subsistence. We praise virtue, but we hate it, and shun it, and know very well that it freezes the marrow of our bones—and in this world one must have one's feet warm. And then all that would infallibly fill me with ill-humour; for why do we so constantly see religious people so harsh, so querulous, so unsociable? 'Tis because they have imposed a task upon themselves which is not natural to them. They suffer, and when people suffer, they make others suffer too. That is not my game, nor that of my protectors either; I have to be gay, supple, amusing, comical. Virtue makes itself respected, and respect is inconvenient; virtue insists on being admired, and admiration is not amusing. I have to do with people who are bored, and I must make them laugh. Now it is absurdity and madness which make people laugh, so mad and absurd I must be; and even if nature had not made me so, the simplest plan would still be to feign it. Happily, I have no need to play hypocrite; there are so many already of all colours, without reckoning those who play hypocrite with themselves. . . . If your friend Rameau were to apply himself to show his contempt for fortune, and women, and good cheer, and idleness, and to begin to Catonize, what would he be but a hypocrite? Rameau must be what he is—a lucky rascal among rascals swollen with riches, and not a mighty paragon of virtue, or even a virtuous man, eating his dry crust of bread, either alone, or by the side of a pack of beggars. And, to cut it short, I do not get on with your felicity, or with the happiness of a few visionaries like yourself.

*I.*—I see, my friend, that you do not even know what it is, and that you are not even made to understand it.

*He.*—So much the better, I declare; so much the better. It would make me burst with hunger and weariness, and maybe, with remorse.

*I.*—Very well, then, the only advice I have to give you, is to find your way back as quickly as you can into the house from which your impudence drove you out.

*He.*—And to do what you do not disapprove absolutely, and yet is a little repugnant to me relatively?

*I.*—What a singularity!

*He.*—Nothing singular in it at all; I wish to be abject, but I wish to be so without constraint. I do not object to descend from my dignity. . . . You laugh?

*I.*—Yes, your dignity makes me laugh.

*He.*—Everybody has his own dignity. I do not object to come down from mine, but it must be in my own way, and not at the bidding of others. Must they be able to say to me, Crawl—and behold me, forced to crawl? That is the worm's way, and it is mine; we both of us follow it—the worm and I—when they leave us alone, but we turn

when they tread on our tails. They have trodden on my tail, and I mean to turn. And then you have no idea of the creature we are talking about. Imagine a sour and melancholy person, eaten up by vapours, wrapped twice or thrice round in his dressing-gown, discontented with himself, and discontented with everyone else ; out of whom you hardly wring a smile, if you put your body and soul out of joint in a hundred different ways ; who examines with a cold considering eye the droll grimaces of my face, and those of my mind, which are droller still. I may torment myself to attain the highest sublime of the lunatic asylum, nothing comes of it. Will he laugh, or will he not ? That is what I am obliged to keep saying to myself in the midst of my contortions ; and you may judge how damaging this uncertainty is to one's talent. My hypochondriac, with his head buried in a night-cap that covers his eyes, has the air of an immovable pagod, with a string tied to its chin, and going down under his chair. You wait for the string to be pulled, and it is not pulled ; or if by chance the jaws open, it is only to articulate some word that shows he has not seen you, and that all your drolleries have been thrown away. This word is the answer to some question which you put to him four days before ; the word spoken, the mastoid muscle contracts, and the jaw sticks.

[Then he set himself to imitate his man. He placed himself on a chair, his head fixed, his hat coming over his eyebrows, his eyes half-shut, his arms hanging down, moving his jaw up and down like an automaton :] Gloomy, obscure, oracular as destiny itself—such is our patron.

At the other side of the room is a prude who plays at importance, to whom one could bring one's self to say that she is pretty, because she is pretty, though she has a blemish or two upon her face. *Item*, she is more spiteful, more conceited, and more silly than a goose. *Item*, she insists on having wit. *Item*, you have to persuade her that you believe she has more of it than anybody else in the world. *Item*, she knows nothing, and she has a turn for settling everything out of hand. *Item*, you must applaud her decisions with feet and hands, jump for joy, and scream with admiration :—"How fine that is, how delicate, well said, subtly seen, singularly felt ! Where do women get that ? Without study, by mere force of instinct, and pure light of nature ! That is really like a miracle ! And then they want us to believe that experience, study, reflection, education, have anything to do with the matter ! . . ." And other fooleries to match, and tears and tears of joy ; ten times a day to kneel down, one knee bent in front of the other, the other leg drawn back, the arms extended towards the goddess, to seek one's desire in her eyes, to hang on her lips, to wait for her command, and then start off like a flash of lightning. Where is the man who would subject himself to play such a part, if it is not the wretch who finds there two or three times a week the wherewithal to still the tribulation of his inner parts ?

*I.*—I should never have thought you were so fastidious.

*He.*—I am not. In the beginning I watched the others, and I did as they did, even rather better, because I am more frankly impudent, a better comedian, hungrier, and better off for lungs. I descend apparently in a direct line from the famous Stentor. . . .

[And to give me a just idea of the force of his organ, he set off laughing, with violence enough to break the windows of the coffee-house, and to interrupt the chess-players.]

*I.*—But what is the good of this talent?

*He.*—You cannot guess?

*I.*—No; I am rather slow.

*He.*—Suppose the debate opened, and victory uncertain; I get up, and, displaying my thunder, I say: "That is as mademoiselle asserts. . . . That is worth calling a judgment. There is genius in the expression." But one must not always approve in the same manner; one would be monotonous, and seem insincere, and become insipid. You only escape that by judgment and resource; you must know how to prepare and place your major and most peremptory tones, to seize the occasion and the moment. When, for instance, there is a difference in feeling, and the debate has risen to its last degree of violence, and you have ceased to listen to one another, and all speak at the same time, you ought to have your place at the corner of the room which is farthest removed from the field of battle, to have prepared the way for your explosion by a long silence, and then suddenly to fall like a thunder-clap over the very midst of the combatants. Nobody possesses this art as I do. But where I am truly surprising is in the opposite way—I have low tones that I accompany with a smile, and an infinite variety of approving tricks of face; nose, lips, brow, eyes, all make play; I have a suppleness of reins, a manner of twisting the spine, of shrugging the shoulders, extending the fingers, inclining the head, closing the eyes, and throwing myself into a state of stupefaction, as if I had heard a divine angelic voice come down from heaven; that is what flatters. I do not know whether you seize rightly all the energy of that last attitude. I did not invent it, but nobody has ever surpassed me in its execution. Behold, behold!

*I.*—Truly, it is unique.

*He.*—Think you there is a woman's brain that could stand that?

*I.*—It must be admitted that you have carried the talent of playing the madman, and of self-debasement, as far as it can possibly be carried.

*He.*—Try as hard as they will, they will never touch me—not the best of them. Palissot, for instance, will never be more than a good learner. But if this part is amusing at first, and if you have some relish in inwardly mocking at the folly of the people whom you are intoxicating, in the long run that ceases to be exciting, and then after a certain number of discoveries one is obliged to repeat one's self. Wit

and art have their limits. 'Tis only God Almighty and some rare geniuses, for whom the career widens as they advance.

*I.*—With this precious enthusiasm for fine things, and this facility of genius of yours, is it possible that you have invented nothing?

*He.*—Pardon me; for instance, that admiring attitude of the back, of which I spoke to you; I regard it as my own, though envy may contest my claim. I daresay it has been employed before: but who has felt how convenient it was for laughing in one's sleeve at the ass for whom one was dying of admiration! I have more than a hundred ways of opening fire on a girl under the very eyes of her mother, without the latter suspecting a jot of it; yes, and even of making her an accomplice. I had hardly begun my career before I disdained all the vulgar fashions of slipping a *billet-doux*; I have ten ways of having them taken from me, and out of the number I venture to flatter myself there are some that are new. I possess in an especial degree the gift of encouraging a timid young man; I have secured success for some who had neither wit nor good looks. If all that was written down, I fancy people would concede me some genius.

*I.*—And would do you singular honour.

*He.*—I don't doubt it.

*I.*—In your place, I would put those famous methods on paper. It would be a pity for them to be lost.

*He.*—It is true; but you could never suppose how little I think of method and precepts. He who needs a protocol, will never go far. Your genius reads little, experiments much, and teaches himself. Look at Cæsar, Turenne, Vauban, the Marquise de Tencin, her brother the cardinal, and the cardinal's secretary, the Abbé Trublet, and Bouret! Who is it that has given lessons to Bouret? Nobody; 'tis nature that forms these rare men.

*I.*—Well, but you might do this in your lost hours, when the anguish of your empty stomach, or the weariness of your stomach overloaded, banishes slumber.

*He.*—I'll think of it. It is better to write great things than to execute small ones. Then the soul rises on wings, the imagination is kindled; whereas it shrivels in amazement at the applause which the absurd public lavishes so perversely on that mincing creature of a Dangeville, who plays so flatly, who walks the stage nearly bent double, who stares affectedly and incessantly into the eyes of everyone she talks to, and who takes her grimaces for finesse, and her little strut for grace; or on that emphatic Clairon, who becomes more studied, more pretentious, more elaborately heavy, than I can tell you. That imbecile of a pit claps hands to the echo, and never sees that we are a mere worsted-ball of daintinesses ('Tis true the ball grows a trifle big, but what does it matter?), that we have the finest skin, the finest eyes, the prettiest bill; little feeling inside, in truth; a step that is not exactly light, but which for all that is not as awkward as they say. As

for sentiment, on the other hand, there is not one of these stage dames whom we cannot cap.

*I.*—What do you mean by all that? Is it irony or truth?

*He.*—The worst of it is that this deuced sentiment is all internal, and not a glimpse of it appears outside; but I who am now talking to you, I know, and know well, that she has it. If it is not that, you should see, if a fit of ill-humour comes on, how we treat the valets, how the waiting-maids are cuffed and trounced, what kicks await our good friend, if he fails in an atom of that respect which is our due. 'Tis a little demon, I tell you, full of sentiment and dignity. Ah, you don't quite know where you are, eh?

*I.*—I confess I can hardly make out whether you are speaking in good faith or in malice. I am a plain man. Be kind enough to be a little more outspoken, and to leave your art behind for once. . . .

*He.*—What is it? why it is what we retail before our little patroness about the Dangeville or the Clairon, mixed up here and there with a word or two to put you on the scent. I will allow you to take me for a good-for-nothing, but not for a fool; and 'tis only a fool, or a man eaten up with conceit, who could say such a parcel of impertinences seriously.

*I.*—But how do people ever bring themselves to say them?

*He.*—It is not done all at once, but little by little you come to it. *Ingenii largitor venter.*

*I.*—Then hunger must press you very hard.

*He.*—That may be; yet strong as you may think them, be sure that those to whom they are addressed are much more accustomed to listen to them than we are to hazard them.

*I.*—Is there anybody who has courage to be of your opinion?

*He.*—What do you mean by anybody? It is the sentiment and language of the whole of society.

*I.*—Those of you who are not great rascals, must be great fools.

*He.*—Fools! I assure you there is only one, and that is he who feasts us to cheat him.

*I.*—But how can people allow themselves to be cheated in such gross fashion? For surely the superiority of the Dangeville and the Clairon is a settled thing.

*He.*—We swallow until we are full to the throat any lie that flatters us, and take drop by drop a truth that is bitter to us. And then we have the air of being so profoundly penetrated, so true.

*I.*—Yet you must once, at any rate, have sinned against the principles of art, and let slip, by an oversight, some of those bitter truths that wound; for, in spite of the wretched, abject, vile, abominable part you play, I believe you have at bottom some delicacy of soul.

*He.*—I! not the least in the world. Deuce take me if I know what I am! In a general way, I have a mind as round as a ball, and

a character fresh as a water-willow. Never false, little interest as I have in being true ; never true, little interest as I have in being false. I say things just as they come into my head ; sensible things, then so much the better ; impertinent things, then people take no notice. I let my natural frankness have full play. I never in all my life gave a thought, either beforehand, what to say, or while I was saying it, or after I had said it. And so I offend nobody.

*I.*—Still that did happen with the worthy people among whom you used to live, and who were so kind to you.

*He.*—What would you have ? It is a mishap, an unlucky moment, such as there always are in life ; there is no such thing as unbroken bliss : I was too well off, it could not last. We have, as you know, the most numerous and the best chosen company. It is a school of humanity, the renewal of hospitality after the antique. All the poets who fall, we pick them up ; all decried musicians, all the authors who are never read, all the actresses who are hissed, a parcel of beggarly, disgraced, stupid, parasitical souls, and at the head of them all I have the honour of being the brave chief of a timorous flock. It is I who exhort them to eat the first time they come, and I who ask for drink for them—they are so shy. A few young men in rags who do not know where to lay their heads, but who have good looks ; a few scoundrels who bamboozle the master of the house, and put him to sleep, for the sake of gleaning after him in the fields of the mistress of the house. We seem gay, but at bottom we are devoured by spleen and a raging appetite. Wolves are not more famishing, nor tigers more cruel. Like wolves when the ground has been long covered with snow, we raven over our food, and whatever succeeds we rend like tigers. Never was seen such a collection of soured, malignant, venomous beasts. You hear nothing but the names of Buffon, Duclos, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, D'Alembert, Diderot ; and God knows the epithets that bear them company ! Nobody can have any parts, if he is not as stupid as ourselves. That is the plan on which Palissot's play of *The Philosophers* has been conceived. And you are not spared in it, any more than your neighbours.

*I.*—So much the better. Perhaps they do me more honour than I deserve. I should be humiliated if those who speak ill of so many clever and worthy people, took it into their heads to speak well of me.

*He.*—Everybody must pay his scot. After sacrificing the greater animals, then we immolate the others.

*I.*—Insulting science and virtue for a living, that is dearly-earned bread !

*He.*—I have already told you, we are without any consistency ; we insult all the world, and afflict nobody. We have sometimes the heavy Abbé d'Olivet, the big Abbé Le Blanc, the hypocrite Batteux. The big abbé is only spiteful before he has had his dinner ; his coffee

taken, he throws himself into an arm-chair, his feet against the ledge of the fireplace, and sleeps like an old parrot on its perch. If the noise becomes violent, he yawns, stretches his arms, rubs his eyes, and says: "Well, well, what is it?" "It is whether Piron has more wit than Voltaire." "Let us understand; is it wit that you are talking about, or is it taste? For as to taste, your Piron has not a suspicion of it." "Not a suspicion of it?" "No." And there we are, embarked in a dissertation upon taste. Then the patron makes a sign with his hand for people to listen to him, for if he piques himself upon one thing more than another, it is taste. "Taste," he says, "taste is a thing. . . ." But, on my soul, I don't know what thing he said that it was, nor does he.

Then sometimes we have friend Robbé. He regales us with his equivocal stories, with the miracles of the convulsionnaires which he has seen with his own eyes, and with some cantos of a poem on a subject that he knows thoroughly. His verses I detest, but I love to hear him recite them—he has the air of an energumen. They all cry out around him: "There is a poet worth calling a poet! . . ."

Then there comes to us also a certain noodle with a dull and stupid air, but who has the keenness of a demon, and is more mischievous than an old monkey. He is one of those figures that provoke pleasantries and sarcasms, and that God made for the chastisement of those who judge by appearances, and who ought to have learnt from the mirror that it is as easy to be a wit with the air of a fool, as to hide a fool under the air of a wit. 'Tis a very common piece of cowardice to immolate a good man to the amusement of the others; people never fail to turn to this man; he is a snare that we set for the new comers, and I have scarcely known one of them who was not caught. . . . //

[I was sometimes amazed at the justice of my madman's observations on men and characters, and I showed him my surprise.] That is, he answered, because one derives good out of bad company, as one does out of libertinism. You are recompensed for the loss of your innocence by that of your prejudices; in the society of the bad, where vice shows itself without a mask, you learn to understand them. And then I have read a little.

*I.*—What have you read?

*He.*—I have read, and I read, and I read over and over again Theophrastus and La Bruyère and Molière.

*I.*—Excellent works, all of them.

*He.*—They are far better than people suppose; but who is there who knows how to read them?

*I.*—Everybody does, according to the measure of his intelligence.

*He.*—No; hardly anybody. Could you tell me what people look for in them?

*I.*—Amusement and instruction.



*He.*—But what instruction, for that is the point?

*I.*—The knowledge of one's duties, the love of virtue, the hatred of vice.

*He.*—For my part, I gather from them all that one ought to do, and all that one ought not to say. Thus, when I read the *Avare*, I say to myself: "Be a miser if thou wilt, but beware of talking like the miser." When I read *Tartufe*, I say: "Be a hypocrite if thou wilt, but do not talk like a hypocrite. Keep the vices that are useful to thee, but avoid their tone and the appearances that would make thee laughable." To preserve thyself from such a tone and such appearances, it is necessary to know what they are. Now these authors have drawn excellent pictures of them. I am myself, and I remain what I am, but I act and I speak as becomes the character. I am not one of those who despise moralists; there is a great deal of profit to be got from them, especially with those who have applied morality to action. Vice only hurts men from time to time; the characteristics of vice hurt them from morning to night. Perhaps it would be better to be insolent than to have an insolent expression. One who is insolent in character, only insults people now and again; one who is insolent in expression, insults them incessantly. And do not imagine that I am the only reader of my kind. I have no other merit in this respect than having done on system, from a natural integrity of understanding, and with true and reasonable vision, what most others do by instinct. And so their readings make them no better than I am, and they remain ridiculous in spite of themselves, while I am only so when I choose, and always leave them a vast distance behind me; for the same art which teaches me how to escape ridicule on certain occasions, teaches me also on certain others how to incur it happily. Then I recall to myself all that the others said, and all that I read, and I add all that issues from my own originality, which is in this kind wondrous fertile.

*I.*—You have done well to reveal these mysteries to me, for otherwise I should have thought you self-contradictory.

*He.*—I am not so in the least, for against a single time when one has to avoid ridicule, happily there are a hundred when one has to provoke it. There is no better part among the great people than that of fool. For a long time there was the king's fool; at no time was there ever the king's sage, officially so styled. Now I am the fool of Bertin and many others, perhaps yours at the present moment, or perhaps you are mine. A man who meant to be a sage would have no fool, so he who has a fool is no sage; if he is not a sage he is a fool, and perhaps, even were he the king himself, the fool of his fool. For the rest, remember that in a matter so variable as manners, there is nothing absolutely, essentially, and universally true or false; if not that one must be what interest would have us be, good or bad, wise or mad, decent or ridiculous, honest or vicious. If virtue had happened

to be the way to fortune, then I should either have been virtuous, or I should have pretended virtue, like other persons. As it was, they wanted me to be ridiculous, and I made myself so; as for being vicious, nature alone had taken all the trouble that was needed in that. When I use the term vicious, it is for the sake of talking your language; for, if we came to explanations, it might happen that you called vice what I call virtue, and virtue what I call vice.

Then we have the authors of the Opéra Comique, their actors and their actresses, and oftener still their managers, all people of resource and superior merit. And I forget the whole clique of scribblers in the gazettes, the *Avant Courreur*, the *Petites Affiches*, the *Année littéraire*, the *Observateur littéraire*.

I.—The *Année littéraire*, the *Observateur littéraire*! But they detest one another.

He.—Quite true, but all beggars are reconciled at the porringer. That cursed *Observateur littéraire*, I wish the devil had had both him and his sheet! It was that dog of a miserly priest who caused my disaster. He appeared on our horizon for the first time; he arrived at the hour that drives us all out of our dens, the hour for dinner. When it is bad weather, lucky the man among us who has a shilling in his pocket to pay for a hackney-coach! He is free to laugh at a comrade for coming besplashed up to his eyes and wet to the skin, though at night he goes to his own home in just the same plight. There was one of them some months ago who had a violent brawl with the Savoyard at the door. They had a running account; the creditor insisted on being paid, and the debtor was not in funds, and yet he could not go upstairs without passing through the hands of the other.

Dinner is served; they do the honours of the table to the abbé—they place him at the upper end. I come in and see this. "What, abbé, you preside? That is all very well for to-day, but to-morrow you will come down, if you please, by one plate; the day after by another plate, and so on from plate to plate, now to right and now to left, until from the place that I occupied one time before you, Fréron once after me, Dorat once after Fréron, Palissot once after Dorat, you become stationary beside me, poor rascal as you are—*che siedo sempre come*"—[an Italian proverb not to be decently reproduced].

The abbé, who is a good fellow, and takes everything in good part, bursts out laughing; Mademoiselle, struck by my observation and by the aptness of my comparison, bursts out laughing; everybody to right and left burst out laughing, except the master of the house, who flies into a huff, and uses language that would have meant nothing, if we had been by ourselves—

"Rameau, you are an impertinent."

"I know I am, and it is on that condition that I was received here."

"You are a scoundrel."

"Like anybody else."

"A beggar."

"Should I be here, if I were not?"

"I will have you turned out of doors."

"After dinner I will go of my own will."

"I recommend you to go."

We dined : I did not lose a single toothful. After eating well and drinking amply, for after all Messer Gaster is a person with whom I have never sulked, I made up my mind what to do, and I prepared to go ; I had pledged my word in presence of so many people, that I was bound to keep it. For a considerable time I hunted up and down the room for my hat and cane in every corner where they were not likely to be, reckoning all the time that the master of the house would break out into a new torrent of injuries, that somebody would interpose, and that we should at last make friends by sheer dint of altercation. I turned on this side and that, for I had nothing on my heart ; but the master, more sombre and dark-browed than Homer's Apollo as he lets his arrows fly among the Greeks, with his cap plucked further over his head than usual, marched backwards and forwards up and down the room. Mademoiselle approaches me : "But, mademoiselle," say I, "what has happened beyond what happens every day? Have I been different from what I am on other days?"

"I insist on his leaving the house."—"I am leaving. . . . But I have given no ground of offence."—"Pardon me ; we invite the abbé and . . . ." It was he who was wrong to invite the abbé, while at the same time he was receiving me, and with me so many other creatures of my sort.—"Come, friend Rameau, you must beg the abbé's pardon."—"I shall not know what to do with his pardon."—"Come, come, all will be right."—They take me by the hand, and drag me towards the abbé's chair ; I look at him with a kind of admiring wonder, for who before ever asked pardon of the abbé? "All this is very absurd, abbé ; confess, is it not?" And then I laugh, and the abbé laughs too. So that is my forgiveness on that side ; but I had next to approach the other, and that was a very different thing. I forget exactly how it was that I framed my apology.—"Sir, here is the madman . . . ."—"He has made me suffer too long ; I wish to hear no more about him."—"He is sorry."—"Yes, I am very sorry."—"It shall not happen again."—"Until the first rascal . . . ."—I do not know whether he was in one of those days of ill-humour when mademoiselle herself dreads to go near him, or whether he misunderstood what I said, or whether I said something wrong : things were worse than before. Good heavens, does he not know me? Does he not know that I am like children, and that there are some circumstances in which I let anything and everything escape me? And then, God help me, am I not to have a moment of relief? Why, it would wear out a

puppet made of steel, to keep pulling the string from night to morning, and from morning to night ! I must amuse them, of course, that is the condition ; but I must now and then amuse myself. In the midst of these distractions there came into my head a fatal idea, an idea that gave me confidence, that inspired me with pride and insolence : it was that they could not do without me, and that I was indispensable.

*I.*—Yes, I daresay that you are very useful to them, but that they are still more useful to you. You will not find as good a house every day ; but they, for one madman who falls short, will find a hundred to take his place.

*He.*—A hundred madmen like me, sir philosopher ; they are not so common, I can tell you ! Flat fools—yes. People are harder to please in folly, than in talent or virtue. I am a rarity in my own kind, a great rarity. Now that they have me no longer, what are they doing ? They find time as heavy as if they were dogs. I am an inexhaustible bagful of impertinences. Every minute I had some fantastic notion that made them laugh till they cried ; I was a whole Bedlam in myself.

*I.*—Well, at any rate you had bed and board, coat and breeches, shoes, and a pistole a month.

*He.*—That is the profit side of the account ; you say not a word of the cost of it all. First, if there was a whisper of a new piece (no matter how bad the weather), one had to ransack all the garrets in Paris, until one had found the author ; then to get a reading of the play, and adroitly to insinuate that there was a part in it which would be rendered in a superior manner by a certain person of my acquaintance.—“And by whom, if you please ?”—“By whom ? a pretty question ! There are graces, finesse, elegance.”—“Ah, you mean Mademoiselle Dangeville ? Perhaps you know her ?”—“Yes, a little ; but 'tis not she.”—“Who is it, then ?”—I whispered the name very low. “She ?”—“Yes, she,” I repeated with some shame, for sometimes I do feel a touch of shame ; and at this name you should have seen how long the poet's face grew, if indeed he did not burst out laughing in my face. Still, whether he would or not, I was bound to take my man to dine ; and he, being naturally afraid of pledging himself, drew back, and tried to say “No, thank you.” You should have seen how I was treated, if I did not succeed in my negotiation ! I was a blockhead, a fool, a rascal ; I was not good for a single thing ; I was not worth the glass of water which they gave me to drink. It was still worse at their performance, when I had to go intrepidly amid the cries of a public that has a good judgment of its own, whatever may be said about it, and make my solitary clap of the hand audible, draw every eye to me, and sometimes save the actress from hisses, and hear people murmur around me—“He is one of the valets in disguise belonging to the man who . . . Will that knave be quiet ?” They do not know what brings a man to that ; they think it is stupidity, but there is one motive that excuses anything.

*I.*—Even the infraction of the civil laws.

*He.*—At length, however, I became known, and people used to say: “Oh, it is Rameau!” My resource was to throw out some words of irony to save my solitary applause from ridicule, by making them interpret it in an opposite sense.

Now agree that one must have a mighty interest to make one thus brave the assembled public, and that each of these pieces of hard labour was worth more than a paltry crown? And then at home there was a pack of dogs to tend, and cats for which I was responsible. I was only too happy if Micou favoured me with a stroke of his claw that tore my cuff or my wrist. Criquette is liable to colic; 'tis I who have to rub her. In old days mademoiselle used to have the vapours; to-day, it is her nerves. She is beginning to grow a little stout; you should hear the fine tales they make out of this.

*I.*—You do not belong to people of this sort, at any rate?

*He.*—Why not?

*I.*—Because it is indecent to throw ridicule on one's benefactors.

*He.*—But is it not worse still to take advantage of one's benefits to degrade the receiver of them?

*I.*—But if the receiver of them were not vile in himself, nothing would give the benefactor the chance.

*He.*—But if the personages were not ridiculous in themselves, they would not make subjects for good tales. And then, is it my fault if they mix with rascaldom? Is it my fault if, after mixing themselves up with rascaldom, they are betrayed and made fools of? When people resolve to live with people like us, if they have common sense, there is an infinite quantity of blackness for which they must make up their minds. When they take us, do they not know us for what we are, for the most interested, vile, and perfidious of souls. Then if they know us, all is well. There is a tacit compact that they shall treat us well, and that sooner or later we shall treat them ill in return for the good that they have done us. Does not such an agreement subsist between a man and his monkey or his parrot? . . . If you take a young provincial to the menagerie at Versailles, and he takes it into his head for a freak to push his hands between the bars of the cage of the tiger or the panther, whose fault is it? It is all written in the silent compact, and so much the worse for the man who forgets or ignores it. How I could justify by this universal and sacred compact the people whom you accuse of wickedness, whereas it is in truth yourselves whom you ought to accuse of folly. . . . But while we execute the just decrees of Providence on folly, you who paint us as we are, you execute its just decrees on us. What would you think of us, if we claimed, with our shameless manners, to enjoy public consideration? That we are out of our senses. And those who look for decent behaviour from people who are born vicious and with vile and bad characters—are they in their senses? Everything has its true wages in this world. There are

two Public Prosecutors, one at your door, chastising offences against society ; nature is the other. Nature knows all the vices that escape the laws. Give yourself up to debauchery, and you will end with dropsy ; if you are crapulous, your lungs will find you out ; if you open your door to ragamuffins, and live in their company, you will be betrayed, laughed at, despised. The shortest way is to resign one's self to the equity of these judgments, and to say to one's self : That is as it should be ; to shake one's ears and turn over a new leaf, or else to remain what one is, but on the conditions aforesaid. . . .

*I.*—You cannot doubt what judgment I pass on such a character as yours ?

*He.*—Not at all ; I am in your eyes an abject and most despicable creature ; and I am sometimes the same in my own eyes, though not often : I more frequently congratulate myself on my vices than blame myself for them ; you are more constant in your contempt.

*I.*—True ; but why show me all your turpitude ?

*He.*—First, because you already know a good deal of it, and I saw that there was more to gain than to lose, by confessing the rest.

*I.*—How so, if you please ?

*He.*—It is important in some lines of business to reach sublimity ; it is especially so in evil. People spit upon a small rogue, but they cannot refuse a kind of consideration to a great criminal ; his courage amazes you, his atrocity makes you shudder. In all things, what people prize is unity of character.

*I.*—But this estimable unity of character you have not quite got : I find you from time to time vacillating in your principles ; it is uncertain whether you get your wickedness from nature or study, and whether study has brought you as far as possible.

*He.*—I agree with you, but I have done my best. Have I not had the modesty to recognise persons more perfect in my own line than myself. Have I not spoken to you of Bouret with the deepest admiration ? Bouret is the first person in the world for me.

*I.*—But after Bouret you come.

*He.*—No.

*I.*—Palissot, then ?

*He.*—Palissot, but not Palissot alone.

*I.*—And who is worthy to share the second rank with him ?

*He.*—The Renegade of Avignon.

*I.*—I never heard of the Renegade of Avignon, but he must be an astonishing man.

*He.*—He is so, indeed.

*I.*—The history of great personages has always interested me.

*He.*—I can well believe it. This hero lived in the house of a good and worthy descendant of Abraham, promised to the father of the faithful in number equal to the stars in the heavens.

*I.*—In the house of a Jew ?

*He.*—In the house of a Jew. He had at first surprised pity, then good-will, then entire confidence, for that is how it always happens : we count so strongly on our kindness, that we seldom hide our secrets from anybody on whom we have heaped benefits. How should there not be ingrates in the world, when we expose this man to the temptation of being ungrateful with impunity? That is a just reflection which our Jew failed to make. He confided to the renegade that he could not conscientiously eat pork. You will see the advantage that a fertile wit knew how to get from such a confession. Some months passed, during which our renegade redoubled his attentions ; when he believed his Jew thoroughly touched, thoroughly captivated, thoroughly convinced that he had no better friend among all the tribes of Israel . . . now admire the circumspection of the man ! He is in no hurry ; he lets the pear ripen before he shakes the branch ; too much haste might have ruined his design. It is because greatness of character usually results from the natural balance between several opposite qualities.

*I.*—Pray leave your reflections, and go straight on with your story.

*He.*—That is impossible. There are days when I cannot help reflecting ; 'tis a malady that must be allowed to run its course. Where was I ?

*I.*—At the intimacy that had been established between the Jew and the renegade.

*He.*—Then the pear was ripe. . . . But you are not listening ; what are you dreaming about ?

*I.*—I am thinking of the curious inequality in your tone, now so high, now so low.

*He.*—How can a man made of vices be one and the same ? . . . . He reaches his friend's house one night, with an air of violent perturbation, with broken accents, a face as pale as death, and trembling in every limb. "What is the matter with you?"—"We are ruined."—"Ruined, how?"—"Ruined, I tell you, beyond all help."—"Explain."—"One moment, until I have recovered from my fright."—"Come, then, recover yourself," says the Jew . . . . "A traitor has informed against us before the Holy Inquisition, you as a Jew, me as a renegade, an infamous renegade . . . ." Mark how the traitor does not blush to use the most odious expressions. It needs more courage than you may suppose to call one's self by one's right name ; you do not know what an effort it costs to come to that.

*I.*—No, I daresay not. But "the infamous renegade"—

*He.*—He is false, but his falsity is adroit enough. The Jew takes fright, tears his beard, rolls on the ground, sees the officers at his door, sees himself clad in the *Sanbenito*, sees his *auto-da-fè* all made ready. "My friend," he cries, "my good, tender friend, my only friend, what is to be done?"

"What is to be done? Why show ourselves, affect the greatest

security, go about our business just as we usually do. The procedure of the tribunal is secret but slow; we must take advantage of its delays to sell all you have. I will hire a boat, or I will have it hired by a third person—that will be best; in it we will deposit your fortune, for it is your fortune that they are most anxious to get at; and then we will go, you and I, and seek under another sky the freedom of serving our God, and following in security the law of Abraham and our own consciences. The important point in our present dangerous situation is to do nothing imprudent.”

No sooner said than done. The vessel is hired, victualled, and manned, the Jew's fortune put on board; on the morrow, at dawn, they are to sail, they are free to sup gaily and to sleep in all security; on the morrow they escape their prosecutors. In the night, the renegade gets up, despoils the Jews of his portfolio, his purse, his jewels, goes on board, and sails away. And you think that this is all? Good: you are not awake to it. Now when they told me the story, I divined at once what I have not told you, in order to try your sagacity. You were quite right to be an honest man; you would never have made more than a fifth-rate scoundrel. Up to this point the renegade is only that; he is a contemptible rascal whom nobody would consent to resemble. The sublimity of his wickedness is this, that he was himself the informer against his good friend the Israelite, of whom the Inquisition took hold when he awoke the next morning, and of whom a few days later they made a famous bonfire. And it was in this way that the renegade became the tranquil possessor of the fortune of the accursed descendant of those who crucified our Lord.

*I.*—I do not know which of the two is most horrible to me—the vileness of your renegade, or the tone in which you speak of it.

*He.*—And that is what I said: the atrocity of the action carries you beyond contempt, and hence my sincerity. I wished you to know to what a degree I excelled in my art, to extort from you the admission that I was at least original in my abasement, to rank me in your mind on the line of the great good-for-nothings, and to hail me henceforth—*Vivat Mascarillus, fourbum imperator!*

[Here the discussion is turned aside, by Rameau's pantomimic performance of a fugue, to various topics in music.<sup>1</sup>]

*I.*—How does it happen that with such fine tact, such great sensibility for the beauties of the musical art, you are so blind to the fine things of morality, so insensible to the charms of virtue?

*He.*—It must be because there is for the one a sense that I have not got, a fibre that has not been given to me, a slack string that you may play upon as much as you please, but it never vibrates. Or it may be because I have always lived with those who were good musi-

<sup>1</sup> Vol. v. pp. 457-468.



cians but bad men, whence it has come to pass that my ear has grown very fine, and my heart has grown very deaf. And then there is something in race. The blood of my father and the blood of my uncle is the same blood; my blood is the same as that of my father; the paternal molecule was hard and obtuse, and that accursed first molecule has assimilated to itself all the rest.

*I.*—Do you love your child?

*He.*—Do I love it, the little savage! I dote on it.

*I.*—Will you not then seriously set to work to arrest in it the consequences of the accursed paternal molecule?

*He.*—I shall labour in vain, I fancy. If he is destined to grow into a good man, I shall not hurt him; but if the molecule meant him for a ne'er-do-well like his father, then all the pains that I might have taken to make a decent man of him would only be very hurtful to him. Education incessantly crossing the inclination of the molecule, he would be drawn as it were by two contrary forces, and would walk in zigzags along the path of life, as I see an infinity of other people doing, equally awkward in good and evil. These are what we call *espèces*, of all epithets the most to be dreaded, because it marks mediocrity and the very lowest degree of contempt. A great scoundrel is a great scoundrel, but he is not an *espèce*. Before the paternal molecule had got the upper hand, and had brought him to the perfect abjection at which I have arrived, it would take endless time, and he would lose his best years. I do not meddle at present; I let him come on. I examine him; he is already greedy, cunning, idle, lying, and a cheat; I'm much afraid that he is a chip of the old block.

*I.*—And you will make him a musician, so that the likeness may be exact?

*He.*—A musician! Sometimes I look at him and grind my teeth, saying: If thou wert ever to know a note of music, I believe I would wring thy neck.

*I.*—And why so, if you please?

*He.*—Music leads to nothing.

*I.*—It leads to everything.

*He.*—Yes, when people are first-rate. But who can promise himself that his child shall be first-rate. The odds are ten thousand to one that he will never be anything but a wretched scraper of catgut. Are you aware that it would perhaps be easier to find a child fit to govern a realm, fit to be a great king, than one fit for a great violin player.

*I.*—It seems to me that agreeable talents, even if they are mediocre, among a people who are without morals, and are lost in debauchery and luxury, get a man rapidly on in the path of fortune.

*He.*—No doubt, gold and gold; gold is everything, and all the rest without gold is nothing. So instead of cramming his head with fine maxims which he would have to forget, on pain of remaining a

beggar all the days of his life, what I do is this : when I have a louis, which does not happen to me often, I plant myself in front of him, I pull the louis out of my pocket, I show it to him with signs of admiration, I raise my eyes to heaven, I kiss the louis before him, and to make him understand still better the importance of the sacred coin, I point to him with my finger all that he can get with it, a fine frock, a pretty cap, a rich cake ; then I thrust the louis into my pocket, I walk proudly up and down, I raise the lappet of my waistcoat, I strike my fob ; and in that way I make him see that it is the louis in it that gives me all this assurance.

*I.*—Nothing could be better. But suppose it were to come to pass that, being so profoundly penetrated by the value of the louis, he were one day . . . .

*He.*—I understand you. One must close one's eyes to that ; there is no moral principle without its own inconvenience. At the worst 'tis a bad quarter of an hour, and then all is over.

*I.*—Even after hearing views so wise and so bold, I persist in thinking that it would be good to make a musician of him. I know no other means of getting so rapidly near great people, of serving their vices better, or turning your own to more advantage.

*He.*—That is true ; but I have plans for a speedier and surer success. Ah, if it were only a girl ! But as we cannot do all that we should like, we must take what comes, and make the best of it, and not be such idiots as most fathers, who could literally do nothing worse, supposing them to have deliberately planned the misery of their children—namely, give the education of Lacedæmon to a child who is destined to live in Paris. If the education is bad, the morals of my country are to blame for that, not I. Answer for it who may ; I wish my son to be happy, or what is the same thing, rich, honoured, and powerful. I know something about the easiest ways of reaching this end, and I will teach them to him betimes. If you blame me, you sages, the multitude and success will acquit me. He will put money in his purse, I can tell you. If he has plenty of that, he will lack nothing else, not even your esteem and respect.

*I.*—You may be mistaken.

*He.*—Then perhaps he will do very well without it, like many other people.

[There was in all this a good deal of what passes through many people's minds, and much of the principle according to which they shape their own conduct ; but they never talk about it. There, in short, is the most marked difference between my man and most of those about us. He avowed the vices that he had, and that others have ; but he was no hypocrite. He was neither more nor less abominable than they ; he was only more frank, and more consistent, and sometimes he was profound in the midst of his depravity. I

trembled to think what his child might become under such a master. It is certain that after ideas of bringing-up, so strictly traced on the pattern of our manners, he must go far, unless prematurely stopped on the road.]

*He.*—Oh, fear nothing. The important point, the difficult point, to which a good father ought to attend before everything else, is not to give to his child vices that enrich, or comical tricks such as make him valuable to people of quality—all the world does that, if not on system as I do, at least by example and precept. The important thing is to impress on him the just proportion, the art of keeping out of disgrace and the arm of the law. There are certain discords in the social harmony that you must know exactly how to place, to prepare, and to hold. Nothing so tame as a succession of perfect chords; there needs something that stimulates, that resolves the beam, and scatters its rays.

*I.*—Quite so; by your image you bring me back from morals to music, and I am very glad, for, to be quite frank with you, I like you better as musician than as moralist.

*He.*—Yet, I am a mere subaltern in music, and a really superior figure in morals.

*I.*—I doubt that; but even if it were so, I am an honest man, and your principles are not mine.

*He.*—So much the worse for you. Ah, if I only had your talents!

*I.*—Never mind my talents; let us return to yours.

*He.*—If I could only express myself like you! But I have an infernally absurd jargon—half the language of men of the world and of letters, half of Billingsgate.

*I.*—Nay, I am a poor talker enough. I only know how to speak the truth, and that does not always answer, as you know.

*He.*—But it is not for speaking the truth—on the contrary, it is for skillful lying that I covet your gift. If I knew how to write, to cook up a book, to turn a dedicatory epistle, to intoxicate a fool as to his own merits, to insinuate myself into the good graces of women!

*I.*—And you do know all that a thousand times better than I. I should not be worthy to be so much as your pupil.

*He.*—How many great qualities lost, of which you do not know the price.

*I.*—I get the price that I ask.

*He.*—If that were true, you would not be wearing that common suit, that rough waistcoat, those worsted stockings, those thick shoes, that ancient wig.

*I.*—I grant that; a man must be very maladroit not to be rich, if he sticks at nothing in order to become rich. But the odd thing is that there are people like me who do not look on riches as the most precious thing in the world; bizarre people, you know.

*He.*—Bizarre enough. A man is not born with such a twist as

that. He takes the trouble to give it to himself, for it is not in nature.

*I.*—In the nature of man?

*He.*—No; for everything that lives, without exception, seeks its own well-being at the expense of any prey that is proper to its purpose; and I am perfectly sure that if I let my little savage grow up without saying a word to him on the matter, he would wish to be richly clad, sumptuously fed, cherished by men, loved by women, and to heap upon himself all the happiness of life.

*I.*—If your little savage were left to himself, let him only preserve all his imbecility, and add to the scanty reason of the child in the cradle the violent passions of a man of thirty—why he would strangle his father and dishonour his own mother.

*He.*—That proves the necessity of a good education, and who denies it? And what is a good education but one that leads to all sorts of enjoyments without danger and without inconvenience?

*I.*—I am not so far from your opinion, only let us keep clear of explanations.

*He.*—Why?

*I.*—Because I am afraid that we only agree in appearance, and that if we once begin to discuss what are the dangers and the inconveniences to avoid, we should cease to understand one another.

*He.*—What of that?

*I.*—Let us leave all this, I tell you; what I know about it I shall never get you to learn, and you will more easily teach me what I do not know, and you do know, in music. Let us talk about music, dear Rameau, and tell me how it has come about that with the faculty for feeling, retaining, and rendering the finest passages in the great masters, with the enthusiasm that they inspire in you, and that you transmit to others, you have done nothing that is worth . . . .

Instead of answering me, he shrugged his shoulders, and pointing to the sky with his finger, he cried: The star! the star! When Nature made Leo, Vinci, Pergolese, Duni, she smiled. She put on a grave and imposing air in shaping my dear uncle Rameau, who for half-a-score years they will have called the great Rameau, and of whom very soon nobody will say a word. When she tricked up his nephew, she made a grimace, and a grimace, and again a grimace. [And as he said this, he put on all sorts of odd expressions: contempt, disdain, irony; and he seemed to be kneading between his fingers a piece of paste, and to be smiling at the ridiculous shapes that he gave it; that done, he flung the incongruous pagod<sup>1</sup> away from him, and said:] It was thus she made me, and flung me by the side of the other pagods, some with huge wrinkled paunches, and short necks, and great eyes projecting out of their heads, stamped with apoplexy; others with

<sup>1</sup> These little china images of gods, with nodding heads, were then a fashionable toy in Paris.

wry necks ; some again with wizened faces, keen eyes, hooked noses. All were ready to split with laughing when they espied me, and I put my hands to my sides and split with laughter when I espied them, for fools and madmen tickle one another ; they seek and attract one another. If when I got among them, I had not found ready-made the proverb about *the money of fools being the patrimony of people with wits*, they would have been indebted to me for it. I felt that nature had put my lawful inheritance into the purses of the pagods, and I devised a thousand means of recovering my rights.

*I.*—Yes, I know all about your thousand means ; you have told me of them, and I have admired them vastly. But with so many resources, why not have tried that of a fine work ? . . .

*He.*—When I am alone I take up my pen and intend to write ; I bite my nails and rub my brow ; your humble servant, good-bye, the god is absent. I had convinced myself that I had genius ; at the end of the time I discover that I am a fool, a fool, and nothing but a fool. But how is one to feel, to think, to rise to heights, to paint in strong colours, while haunting with such creatures as those whom one must see if one is to live ; in the midst of such talk as one has to make and to hear, and such idle gossip : “How charming the boulevard was to-day !” “Have you heard the little Marmotte ? Her playing is ravishing.” “Mr. So-and-so had the handsomest pair of grays in his carriage that you can possibly imagine.” “The beautiful Mrs. So-and-so is beginning to fade ; who at the age of five-and-forty would wear a head-dress like that ?” “Young Such-and-such is covered with diamonds, and she gets them cheap.”

“You mean she gets them dear.”

“No, I do not.”

“Where did you see her ?”

“At the play.”

“The scene of despair was played as it had never been played before.” “The Polichinelle of the Fair has a voice, but no delicacy, no soul.” (“Madame So-and-so has produced two at a birth ; each father will have his own child.” . . . And yet you suppose that this kind of thing, said and said again, and listened to every day of the week, sets the soul aglow and leads to mighty things.

*I.*—Nay, it were better to turn the key of one’s garret, drink cold water, eat dry bread, and seek one’s true self.

*He.*—May be, but I have not the courage. And then the idea of sacrificing one’s happiness for the sake of a success that is doubtful ! And the name that I bear ? Rameau ! It is not with talents as it is with nobility ; nobility transmits itself, and increases in lustre by passing from grandfather to father, and from father to son, and from son to grandson, without the ancestor impressing a spark of merit on his descendant ; the old stock ramifies into an enormous crop of fools ; but what matter ? It is not so with talents. Merely to obtain the

renown of your father, you must be cleverer than he was ; you must have inherited his fibre. The fibre has failed me, but the wrist is nimble, the fiddle-bow scrapes away, and the pot boils ; if there is not glory, there is broth.

*I.*—If I were in your place, I would not take it for granted ; I would try. . . . Whatever it be that a man applies himself to, nature meant him for it.

*He.*—She makes mighty blunders. For my part, I do not look down from heights, whence all seems confused and blurred,—the man who prunes a tree with his knife, all one with the caterpillar who devours its leaf ; a couple of insects, each at his proper task. Do you, if you choose, perch yourself on the epicycle of the planet Mercury, and thence distribute creation, in imitation of Réaumur ; he, the classes of flies into seamstresses, surveyors, reapers ; you, the human species into joiners, dancers, singers, tilers. That is your affair, and I will not meddle with it. I am in this world, and in this world I rest. But if it is in nature to have an appetite—for it is always to appetite that I come back, and to the sensation that is ever present to me—then I find that it is by no means consistent with good order not to have always something to eat. What a precious economy of things ! Men who are over-crammed with everything under the sun, while others, who have a stomach just as importunate as they, a hunger that recurs as regularly as theirs, have not a bite. The worst is the constrained posture to which want pins us down. The needy man does not walk like anybody else ; he jumps, he crawls, he wriggles, he limps, he passes his whole life in taking and executing artificial postures.

*I.*—What are postures ?

*He.*—Ask Noverre.<sup>1</sup> The world offers far more of them than his art can imitate.

*I.*—Ah, there are you too—to use your expression or Montaigne's, —perched on the epicycle of Mercury, and eyeing the various pantomimes of the human race.

*He.*—No, no, I tell you ; I'm too heavy to raise myself so high. No sojourn in the fogs for me. I look about me, and I assume my postures, or I amuse myself with the postures that I see others taking. I am an excellent pantomime as you shall judge.

[Then he set himself to smile, to imitate the admirer, the suppliant, the fawning complaisant ; he expects a command, receives it, starts off like an arrow, returns, the order is executed, he reports what he has done ; he is attentive to everything ; he picks up something that has fallen ; he places a pillow or a footstool ; he holds a saucer ; he brings a chair, opens a door, closes a window, draws the curtains, gazes on

<sup>1</sup> A famous dancing-master of the time.

the master and mistress ; he stands immovable, his arms hanging by his side, his legs exactly straight ; he listens, he seeks to read their faces, and then he adds :—That is my pantomime, very much the same as that of all flatterers, courtiers, valets, and beggars.

The buffooneries of this man, the stories of the abbé Galiani, the extravagances of Rabelais, have sometimes thrown me into profound reveries. They are three stores whence I have provided myself with ridiculous masks that I place on the faces of the gravest personages, and I see Pantaloon in a prelate, a satyr in a president, a pig in a monk, an ostrich in a minister, a goose in his first clerk.]

*I.*—But according to your account, I said to my man, there are plenty of beggars in the world, and yet I know nobody who is not acquainted with some of the steps of your dance.

*He.*—You are right. In a whole kingdom there is only one man who walks, and that is the sovereign.

*I.*—The sovereign ? There is something to be said on that. For do you suppose that one may not from time to time find even by the side of him, a dainty foot, a pretty neck, a bewitching nose, that makes him execute his pantomime. Whoever has need of another is indigent, and assumes a posture. The king postures before his mistress, and before God he treads his pantomimic measure. The minister dances the step of courtier, flatterer, valet, and beggar before his king. The crowd of the ambitious cut a hundred capers, each viler than the rest, before the minister. The abbé, with his bands and long cloak, postures at least once a week before the patron of livings. On my word, what you call the pantomime of beggars is only the whole huge bustle of the earth. . . .

*He.*—But let us bethink ourselves what o'clock it is, for I must go to the opera.

*I.*—What is going on ?

*He.*—Dauvergne's *Troqueurs*. There are some tolerable things in the music ; the only pity is that he has not been the first to say them. Among those dead, there are always some to dismay the living. What would you have ? *Quisque suos patimur manes*. But it is half-past five, I hear the bell ringing my vespers. Good-day, my philosopher ; always the same, am I not ?

*I.*—Alas, you are ; worse luck.

*He.*—Only let me have that bad luck for forty years to come ! Who laughs last, has the best of the laugh.

THE END.









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