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ESSAY 8: FRANCE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY \*\*\*

**CRITICAL  
MISCELLANIES**

**BY**

**JOHN MORLEY**

**VOL. III.**

**Essay 8: France in the Eighteenth Century**

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# FRANCE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.<sup>[1]</sup>

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The announcement that one of the most ingenious and accomplished men of letters in Europe was engaged upon a history of the French Revolution, raised some doubts among those who have thought most about the qualifications proper to the historian. M. Taine has the quality of the best type of a man of letters; he has the fine critical aptitude for seizing the secret of an author's or an artist's manner, for penetrating to dominant and central ideas, for marking the abstract and general under accidental forms in which they are concealed, for connecting the achievements of literature and art with facts of society and impulses of human character and life. He is the master of a style which, if it seems to lack the breadth, the firmness, the sustained and level strength of great writing, is yet always energetic, and fresh, and alive with that spontaneous reality and independence of interest which distinguishes the genuine writer from the mere weaver of sentences and the servile mechanic of the pen. The matter and form alike of M. Taine's best work—and we say best, for his work is by no means without degrees and inequalities of worth—prove that he has not shrunk from the toil and austerity of the student, from that scorn of delight and living of laborious days, by which only can men either get command of the art of just and finished expression, or gather to themselves much knowledge.

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[1] *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine*. Tom. i. *L'Ancien Régime*. Par H. Taine. Paris: Hachette. 1876.

But with all its attractiveness and high uses of its own, the genius for literature in its proper sense is distinct from the genius for political history. The discipline is different, because the matter is different. To criticise Rousseau's Social Contract requires one set of attainments, and to judge the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly or the Convention requires a set of quite different attainments. A man may have the keenest sense of the filiation of ideas, of their scope and purport, and yet have a very dull or uninterested eye for the play of material forces, the wayward tides of great gatherings of men, the rude and awkward methods that sometimes go to the attainment of wise political ends.

It would perhaps not be too bold to lay down this proposition; that no good social history has ever been written by a man who has not either himself taken a more or less active part in public affairs, or else been an habitual intimate of persons who were taking such a part on a considerable scale. Everybody knows what Gibbon said about the advantage to the historian of the Roman Empire of having been a member of the English parliament and a captain in the Hampshire grenadiers. Thucydides commanded an Athenian squadron, and Tacitus filled the offices of prætor and consul. Xenophon, Polybius, and Sallust, were all men of affairs and public adventure. Guicciardini was an ambassador, a ruler, and the counsellor of rulers; and Machiavel was all these things and more. Voltaire was the keen-eyed friend of the greatest princes and statesmen of his time, and was more than once engaged in diplomatic transactions. Robertson was a powerful party chief in the Assembly of the Scotch Church. Grote and Macaulay were active members of parliament, and Hallam and Milman were confidential members of circles where affairs of State were the staple of daily discussion among the men who were responsible for conducting them to successful issues. Guizot was a prime minister, Finlay was a farmer of the Greek revenue. The most learned of contemporary English historians a few years ago contested a county, and is habitually inspired in his researches into the past by his interest in the politics of the present. The German historians, whose gifts in reconstructing the past are so valuable and so singular, have for the most part been as actively interested in the public movements of to-day, as in those of any century before or since the Christian era. Niebuhr held more than one political post of dignity and importance; and of historical writers in our time, one has sat in several Prussian parliaments; another, once the tutor of a Prussian prince, has lived in the atmosphere of high politics; while all the best of them have taken their share in the preparation of the political spirit and ideas that have restored Germany to all the fulness and exaltation of national life.

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It is hardly necessary to extend the list. It is indeed plain on the least reflection that close contact with political business, however modest in its pretensions, is the best possible element in the training of any one who aspires to understand and reproduce political history. Political preparation is as necessary as literary preparation. There is no necessity that the business should be on any majestic and imperial scale. To be a guardian of the poor in an East-End parish, to be behind the scenes of some great strike of labour, to be an active member of the parliamentary committee of a Trades Council or of the executive committee of a Union or a League, may be quite as instructive discipline as participation in mightier scenes. Those who write concrete history, without ever having taken part in practical politics, are, one might say, in the position of those ancients who wrote about the human body without ever having effectively explored it by dissection. Mr. Carlyle, it is true, by force of penetrating imaginative genius, has reproduced in stirring and resplendent dithyrambs the fire and passion, the rage and tears, the many-tinted dawn and the blood-red sunset of the French Revolution; and the more a man learns about the details of the Revolution, the greater is his admiration for Mr. Carlyle's magnificent performance. But it is dramatic presentation, not social analysis; a masterpiece of literature, not a scientific investigation; a prodigy of poetic insight, not a sane and quantitative exploration of the complex processes, the deep-lying economical, fiscal, and political conditions, that prepared so immense an explosion.

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We have to remember, it is true, that M. Taine is not professing to write a history in the ordinary sense. His book lies, if we may use two very pompous but indispensable words, partly in the region of historiography, but much more in the region of sociology. The study of the French Revolution cannot yet be a history of the past, for the French still walk *per ignes suppositos*, and the Revolution is still some way from being fully accomplished. It was the disputes between the Roman and the Reformed churches which inspired historical research in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; it is the disputes among French parties that now inspire what professes to be historiography, but what is really a sort of experimental investigation in the science of society. They little know how long and weary a journey lies before them, said Burke, who undertake to bring great masses of men into the political unity of a nation. The process is still going on, and a man of M. Taine's lively intellectual sensibility can no more escape its influences than he can escape the ingredients of the air he breathes. We may add that if his work had been really historic, he must inevitably have gone further back than the eighteenth century for the 'Origins' of contemporary France. The very slight, vague, and unsubstantial chapter with which he opens his work cannot be accepted as a substitute for what the subject really demanded—a serious summary, however condensed and rapid, of the various forces, accidents, deliberate lines of policy, which, from the breaking up of the great fiefs down to the death of Lewis the Fourteenth, had prepared the distractions of the monarchy under Lewis's descendants.

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Full of interest as it is, M. Taine's book can hardly be described as containing much that is new or strikingly significant. He develops one idea, indeed, which we have never before seen stated in its present form, but which, if it implies more than has been often advanced by previous writers in other forms, cannot be accepted as true. This is perhaps a point better worth discussing than any other which his book raises. The rest is a very elaborate and thorough description of the structure of society, of its physiognomy in manners and characteristics, the privileges, the burdens, the daily walk and conversation of the various classes which made up the French people between the Regency and the Revolution. M. Taine's method of description does not strike one as altogether happy. It is a common complaint against French historians that they are too lax about their authorities, and too heedless about giving us chapter and verse for their assertions. M. Taine goes to the contrary extreme, and pours his note-books into his text with a steady-handed profusion that is excessively fatiguing, and makes the result far less effective than it would have been if all this industrious reading had been thoroughly fused and recast into a homogeneous whole. It is an ungenerous trick of criticism to disparage good work by comparing it with better; but the reader can scarcely help contrasting M. Taine's overcrowded pages with the perfect assimilation, the pithy fulness, the pregnant meditation, of De Tocqueville's book on the same subject. When we attempt to reduce M. Taine's chapters to a body of propositions standing out in definite relief from one another, yet conveying a certain unity of interpretation, we soon feel how possible it is for an author to have literary clearness along with historic obscurity.

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In another respect we are inclined to question the felicity of M. Taine's method. It does not convey the impression of movement. The steps and changes in the conflict among the organs of the old society are not marked in their order and succession. The reader is not kept alive to the gradual progress of the break-up of old institutions and ideas. The sense of an active and ceaseless struggle, extending in various stages across the century, is effaced by an exclusive attention to the social details of a given phase. We need the story. You cannot effectively reproduce the true sense and significance of such an epoch as the eighteenth century in France, without telling us, however barely, the tale, for example, of the long battle of the ecclesiastical factions, and the yet more important series of battles between the judiciary and the crown. If M. Taine's book were a piece of abstract social analysis, the above remark would not be true. But it is a study of the concrete facts of French life and society, and to make such a study effective, the element of the chronicle, as in Lacretelle or Jobez, cannot rightly be dispensed with.

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Let us proceed to the chief thesis of the book. The new formula in which M. Taine describes the source of all the mischiefs of the revolutionary doctrine is this. 'When we see a man,' he says, 'who is rather weak in constitution, but apparently sound and of peaceful habits, drink eagerly of a new liquor, then suddenly fall to the ground, foaming at the mouth, delirious and convulsed, we have no hesitation in supposing that in the pleasant draught there was some dangerous ingredient; but we need a delicate analysis in order to decompose and isolate the poison. There is one in the philosophy of the eighteenth century, as curious as it was potent: for not only is it the product of a long historic elaboration, the final and condensed extract in which the whole thought of the century ends; but more than that, its two principal elements are peculiar in this, and when separated they are each of them salutary, yet in combination they produce a poisonous compound.' These two ingredients are, first, the great and important acquisitions of the eighteenth century in the domain of physical science; second, the fixed classic form of the French intelligence. 'It is the classic spirit which, being applied to the scientific acquisitions of the time, produced the philosophy of the century and the doctrines of the Revolution.' This classic spirit has in its literary form one or two well-known marks. It leads, for instance, to the fastidious exclusion of particulars, whether in phrases, objects, or traits of character, and substitutes for them the general, the vague, the typical. Systematic arrangement orders the whole structure and composition from the period to the paragraph, from the paragraph to the structural series of paragraphs; it dictates the style as it has fixed the syntax. Its great note is the absolute. Again, 'two principal operations make up the work of the human intelligence: placed in face of things, it receives the impression of them more or less exactly, completely, and profoundly; next, leaving

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the things, it decomposes its impression, and classifies, distributes, and expresses more or less skilfully the ideas that it draws from that impression. In the second of these processes the classic is superior.' Classicism is only the organ of a certain reason, the *raison raisonnante*; that which insists upon thinking with as little preparation and as much ease as possible; which is contented with what it has acquired, and takes no thought about augmenting or renewing it; which either cannot or will not embrace the plenitude and the complexity of things as they are.

As an analysis of the classic spirit in French literature, nothing can be more ingenious and happy than these pages (p. 241, etc.) But, after all, classic is only the literary form preferred by a certain turn of intelligence; and we shall do well to call that turn of intelligence by a general name, that shall comprehend not only its literary form but its operations in every other field. And accordingly at the end of this very chapter we find M. Taine driven straightway to change classic for mathematic in describing the method of the new learning. And the latter description is much better, for it goes beneath the surface of literary expression, important as that is, down to the methods of reasoning. It leads us to the root of the matter, to the deductive habits of the French thinkers. The mischief of the later speculation of the eighteenth century in France was that men argued about the complex, conditional, and relative propositions of society, as if they had been theorems and problems of Euclid. And M. Taine himself is, as we say, compelled to change his term when he comes to the actual facts and personages of the revolutionary epoch. It was the geometric, rather than the classic, quality of political reasoning, which introduced so much that we now know to have been untrue and mischievous.

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Even in literary history it is surely nearer the truth to say of the latter half of the century that the revolutionary movement began with the break-up of classic form and the gradual dissolution of the classic spirit. Indeed this is such a commonplace of criticism, that we can only treat M. Taine's inversion of it as a not very happy paradox. It was in literature that this genius of innovation, which afterwards extended over the whole social structure, showed itself first of all. Rousseau, not merely in the judgment of a foreigner like myself, but in that of the very highest of all native authorities, Sainte Beuve, effected the greatest revolution that the French tongue had undergone since Pascal. And this revolution was more remarkable for nothing than for its repudiation of nearly all the notes of classicism that are enumerated by M. Taine. Diderot, again, in every page of his work, whether he is discussing painting, manners, science, the drama, poetry, or philosophy, abounds and overabounds in those details, particularities, and special marks of the individual, which are, as M. Taine rightly says, alien to the classic genius. Both Rousseau and Diderot, considered as men of letters, were conscious literary revolutionists, before they were used as half-conscious social revolutionists. They deliberately put away from them the entire classic tradition as to the dignity of personage proper to art, and the symmetry and fixed method proper to artistic style. This was why Voltaire, who was a son of the seventeenth century before he was the patriarchal sire of the eighteenth, could never thoroughly understand the author of the *New Heloisa*, or the author of the *Père de Famille* and *Jacques le Fataliste*. Such work was to him for the most part a detestable compound of vulgarity and rodomontade. 'There is nothing living in the eighteenth century,' M. Taine says, 'but the little sketches that are stitched in by the way and as if they were contraband, by Voltaire, and five or six portraits like Turcaret, Gil Blas, Marianne, Manon Lescaut, Rameau's Nephew, Figaro, two or three hasty sketches of Crebillon the younger and Collé' (p. 258). Nothing living but this! But this is much and very much. We do not pretend to compare the authors of these admirable delineations with Molière and La Bruyère in profundity of insight or in grasp and ethical mastery, but they are certainly altogether in a new vein even from those two great writers, when we speak of the familiar, the real, and the particular, as distinguished from old classic generality. And, we may add in passing, that the social life of France from the death of Lewis XIV. downwards was emancipated all round from the formality and precision of the classic time. As M. Taine himself shows in many amusing pages, life was singularly gay, free, sociable, and varied. The literature of the time was sure to reflect, and does reflect, this universal rejection of the restraints of the past age when the classic spirit had been supreme.

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Apart from this kind of objection to its exact expression, let us look at the substance of M. Taine's dictum. 'It was the classic spirit, which, when applied to the scientific acquisitions of the time, produced the philosophy of the century and the doctrines of the Revolution.' Even if we substitute geometric or deductive spirit for classic spirit, the proposition remains nearly as unsatisfactory. What were the doctrines of the Revolution? The sovereignty of the people, rights of man, liberty, equality, fraternity, progress and perfectibility of the species—these were the main articles of the new creed. M. Taine, like too many French writers, writes as if these ideas had never been heard of before '89. Yet the most important and decisive of them were at least as old as the Reformation, were not peculiarly French in any sense, and were no more the special products of the classic spirit mixing with scientific acquisitions than they were the products of Manicheanism. It is extraordinary that a writer who attributes so much importance to Rousseau, and who gives us so ample an account of his political ideas, should not have traced these ideas to their source, nor even told us that they had a source wholly outside of France. Rousseau was a Protestant; he was a native of the very capital and mother city of Protestantism, militant and democratic; and he was penetrated to his heart's core by the political ideas which had arisen in Europe at the Reformation. There is not a single principle in the Social Contract which may not be found either in Hobbes, or in Locke, or in Althusen, any more than there is a single proposition of his deism which was not in the air of Geneva when he wrote his *Savoyard Vicar*. If this be the case, what becomes of the position that the revolutionary philosophy was worked out by the *raison raisonnante*, which is the special faculty of a country saturated with the classic spirit? If we must have a formula, it would be nearer the truth to say that the doctrines of the Revolution

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were the product, not of the classic spirit applied to scientific acquisitions, but, first, of the democratic ideas of the Protestant Reformation, and then of the fictions of the lawyers, both of them allied with certain urgent social and political necessities.

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So much, then, for the political side of the 'philosophy of the century,' if we are to use this too comprehensive expression for all the products of a very complex and many-sided outburst of speculative energy. Apart from its political side, we find M. Taine's formula no less unsatisfactory for its other phases. He seems to us not to go back nearly far enough in his search for the intellectual origins, any more than for the political origins, of his contemporary France. He has taken no account of the progress of the spirit of Scepticism from Montaigne's time, nor of the decisive influence of Montaigne on the revolutionary thinkers. Yet the extraordinary excitement aroused in France by Bayle's Dictionary was a proof of the extent to which the sceptical spirit had spread before the Encyclopædists were born. The great influence of Fontenelle was wholly in the same sceptical direction. There was a strong sceptical element in French Materialism, even when materialism was fully developed and seemed most dogmatic.<sup>[2]</sup> Indeed, it may sometimes occur to the student of such a man as Diderot to wonder how far materialism in France was only seized upon as a means of making scepticism both serious and philosophic. For its turn for scepticism is at least as much a distinction of the French intelligence as its turn for classicism. And, once more, if we must have a formula, it would be best to say that the philosophy of the century was the product, first of scepticism applied to old beliefs which were no longer easily tenable, and then of scepticism, extended to old institutions that were no longer practically habitable.

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[2] See Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus*, i. 298.

And this brings us to the cardinal reason for demurring to M. Taine's neatly rounded proposition. His appreciation of the speculative precursors of the Revolution seems to us to miss the decisive truth about them. He falls precisely into those errors of the *raison raisonnante*, about which, in his description of the intellectual preparation of the great overthrow, he has said so many just and acute things. Nothing can be more really admirable than M. Taine's criticism upon Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, as great masters of language (pp. 339-361). All this is marked by an amplitude of handling, a variety of approach, a subtlety of perception, a fulness of comprehension, which give a very different notion of M. Taine's critical soundness and power from any that one could have got from his account elsewhere of our English writers. Some of the remarks are open to criticism, as might be expected. It is hard to accept the saying (p. 278) that Montesquieu's 'celebrity was not an influence.' It was Montesquieu, after all, who first introduced among the Encyclopædic band a rationalistic and experiential conception of the various legal and other conditions of the social union, as distinguished from the old theological explanation of them. The correspondence of Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, D'Alembert, is sufficient to show how immediately, as well as how powerfully, they were influenced by Montesquieu's memorable book. Again, it is surely going too far to say that Montesquieu's Persian Letters contained every important idea of the century. Does it, for instance, contain that thrice fruitful idea which Turgot developed in 1750, of all the ages being linked together by an ordered succession of causes and effects? These and other objections, however, hardly affect the brilliance and substantial excellence of all this part of the book. It is when he proceeds to estimate these great men, not as writers but as social forces, not as stylists but as apostles, that M. Taine discloses the characteristic weaknesses of the bookman in dealing with the facts of concrete sociology. He shows none of this weakness in what he says of the remote past. On the contrary, he blames, as we have all blamed, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the rest of the group, for their failure to recognise that the founders of religions satisfied a profound need in those who accepted them, and that this acceptance was the spontaneous admission of its relative fitness. It would be impossible to state this important truth better than M. Taine has done in the following passage:—

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'At certain critical moments in history,' he says, 'men have come out from the narrow and confined track of their daily life and seized in one wide vision the infinite universe; the august face of eternal nature is suddenly unveiled before them; in the sublimity of their emotion they seem to perceive the very principle of its being; and at least they did discern some of its features. By an admirable stroke of circumstance, these features were precisely the only ones that their age, their race, a group of races, a fraction of humanity, happened to be in a condition to understand. Their point of view was the only one under which the multitudes beneath could place themselves. For millions of men, for hundreds of generations, the only one access to divine things was along their path. They pronounced the unique word, heroic or tender, enthusiastic or tranquillising; the only word that, around them and after them, the heart and the intelligence would consent to hearken to; the only one adapted to the deep-growing wants, the long-gathered aspirations, the hereditary faculties, a whole moral and mental structure,—here to that of the Hindu or the Mongol, there to that of the Semite or the European, in our Europe to that of the German, the Latin, or the Slav; in such a way that its very contradictions, instead of condemning it, were exactly what justified it, since its diversity produced its adaptation, and its adaptation produced its benefits' (p. 272).

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It is extraordinary that a thinker who could so clearly discern the secret of the great spiritual movements of human history, should fail to perceive that the same law governs and explains all the minor movements in which wide communities have been suddenly agitated by the word of a teacher. It is well—as no one would be more likely to contend than myself, who have attempted the task—to demonstrate the contradictions, the superficiality, the inadequateness, of the teaching of Rousseau, Voltaire, or Diderot. But it is well also, and in a historical student it is not only well, but the very pith and marrow of criticism, to search for that 'adaptation,' to use M.

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Taine's very proper expression, which gave to the word of these teachers its mighty power and far-spreading acceptance. Is it not as true of Rousseau and Voltaire, acting in a small society, as it is of Buddha or Mahomet acting on vast groups of races, that 'leur point de vue était le seul auquel les multitudes échelonnées au dessous d'eux pouvaient se mettre?' Did not they too seize, 'by a happy stroke of circumstance,' exactly those traits in the social union, in the resources of human nature, in its deep-seated aspirations, which their generation was in a condition to comprehend,—liberty, equality, fraternity, progress, justice, tolerance?

M. Taine shows, as so many others have shown before him, that the Social Contract, when held up in the light of true political science, is very poor stuff. Undoubtedly it is so. And Quintilian—an accomplished and ingenious Taine of the first century—would have thought the Gospels and Epistles, and Augustine and Jerome and Chrysostom, very poor stuff, compared with the—

Mellifluous streams that watered all the schools  
Of Academics old and new, with those  
Surnamed Peripatetics, and the Sect  
Epicurean, and the Stoic severe.

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And in some ways, from a literary or logical point of view, the early Christian writers could ill bear this comparison. But great bodies of men, in ages of trouble and confusion, have an instinctive feeling for the fragment of truth which they happen to need at the hour. They have a spontaneous apprehension of the formula which is at once the expression of their miseries and the mirror of their hope. The guiding force in the great changes of the world has not been the formal logic of the schools or of literature, but the practical logic of social convenience. Men take as much of a teacher's doctrine as meets their real wants: the rest they leave. The Jacobins accepted Rousseau's ideas about the sovereignty of the people, but they seasonably forgot his glorification of the state of nature and his denunciations of civilisation and progress. The American revolutionists cheerfully borrowed the doctrine that all men are born free and equal, but they kept their slaves.

It was for no lack of competition that the ideas of the Social Contract, of Raynal's History of the two Indies, of the System of Nature, of the Philosophical Dictionary, made such astounding and triumphant way in men's minds. There was Montesquieu with a sort of historic method. There was Turgot, and the school of the economists. There were seventy thousand of the secular clergy, and sixty thousand of the regular clergy, ever proclaiming by life or exhortation ideas of peace, submission, and a kingdom not of this world. Why did men turn their backs on these and all else, and betake themselves to revolutionary ideas? How came those ideas to rise up and fill the whole air? The answer is that, with all their contradiction, shallowness, and danger, such ideas fitted the crisis. They were seized by virtue of an instinct of national self-preservation. The evil elements in them worked themselves out in infinite mischief. The true elements in them saved France, by firing men with social hope and patriotic faith.

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How was it, M. Taine rightly asks, that the philosophy of the eighteenth century, which was born in England and thence sent its shoots to France, dried up in the one country, and grew to overshadow the earth in the other? Because, he answers, the new seed fell upon ground that was suited to it, the home of the classic spirit, the country of *raison raisonnée*. Compare with this merely literary solution the answer given to the same question by De Tocqueville:—'It was no accident that the philosophers of the eighteenth century generally conceived notions so opposed to those which still served as the base of the society of their time; *these ideas had actually been suggested to them by the very sight of that society, which they had ever before their eyes*' (*Ancien Régime*, 206). This is the exact truth and the whole truth. The greatest enterprise achieved by the men of letters in the period of intellectual preparation was the Encyclopædia; and I have elsewhere tried to present what seemed to be ample evidence that the spirit and aim of that great undertaking were social, and that its conductors, while delivering their testimony in favour of the experiential conception of life in all its aspects, and while reproducing triumphantly the most recent acquisitions of science, had still the keenest and most direct eye for the abuses and injustice, the waste and disorder, of the social institutions around them. The answer, then, which we should venture to give to M. Taine's question would be much simpler than his. The philosophy of the eighteenth century fared differently in England and in France, because its ideas did not fit in with the economic and political conditions of the one, while, on the contrary, they were actively warmed and fostered by those of the other. It was not a literary aptitude in the nation for *raison raisonnée*, which developed the political theories of Rousseau, the moral and psychological theories of Diderot, the anti-ecclesiastical theories of Voltaire and Holbach. It was the profound disorganisation of institutions that suggested and stimulated the speculative agitation. 'The nation,' wrote the wise and far-seeing Turgot, 'has no constitution; it is a society composed of different orders ill assorted, and of a people whose members have few social bonds with one another; where consequently scarcely any one is occupied with anything beyond his private interest exclusively,' and so forth (*Œuv.* ii. 504). Any student, uncommitted to a theory, who examines in close detail the wise aims and just and conservative methods of Turgot, and the circumstances of his utter rout after a short experiment of twenty months of power, will rise from that deplorable episode with the conviction that a pacific renovation of France, an orderly readjustment of her institutions, was hopelessly impossible. '*Si on avait été sage!*' those cry who consider the Revolution as a futile mutiny. If people had only been prudent, all would have been accomplished that has been accomplished since, and without the sanguinary memories, the constant interpolations of despotism, the waste of generous lives and noble purpose. And this is true. But then prudence itself was impossible. The court and the courtiers were smitten through

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the working of long tradition by judicial blindness. If Lewis XVI. had been a Frederick, or Marie Antoinette had been a Catherine of Russia, or the nobles had even been stout-hearted gentlemen like our Cavaliers, the great transformation might then have been gradually effected without disorder. But they were none of these, and it was their characters that made the fate and doom of the situation. As for the court, Vergennes used an expression which suggests the very keyword of the situation. He had been ambassador in Turkey, and was fond of declaring that he had learnt in the seraglio how to brave the storms of Versailles. Versailles was like Stamboul or Teheran, oriental in etiquette, oriental in destruction of wealth and capital, oriental in antipathy to a reforming grand vizier. It was the Queen, as we now know by incontestable evidence, who persuaded the King to dismiss Turgot, merely to satisfy some contemptible personal resentments of herself and her creatures.<sup>[3]</sup> And it was not in Turgot's case only that this ineptitude wrought mischief. In June 1789 Necker was overruled in the wisest elements of his policy and sent into exile by the violent intervention of the same court faction, headed by the same Queen, who had procured the dismissal of Turgot thirteen years earlier. And it was one long tale throughout, from the first hour of the reign down to those last hours at the Tuileries in August 1792; one long tale of intrigue, perversity, and wilful incorrigible infatuation.

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[3] *Cor. entre Marie Thérèse et le Comte Mercy-Argenteau*, vol. iii.

Nor was the Queen only to blame. Turgot, says an impartial eye-witness—Creutz, the Swedish ambassador—is a mark for the most formidable league possible, composed of all the great people in the kingdom, all the parliaments, all the finance, all the women of the court, and all the bigots. It was morally impossible that the reforms of any Turgot could have been acquiesced in by that emasculated caste, who showed their quality a few years after his dismissal by flying across the frontier at the first breath of personal danger. 'When the gentlemen rejoiced so boisterously over the fall of Turgot, their applause was blind; on that day they threw away, and in a manner that was irreparable, the opportunity that was offered them of being born again to political life, and changing the state-candlestick of the royal household for the influence of a preponderant class. The nobility, defeated on the field of feudal privilege, would have risen again by the influence of an assembly where they would have taken the foremost place; by defending the interests of all, by becoming in their turn the ally of the third estate, which had hitherto fought on the side of the kings, they would have repaired the unbroken succession of defeats that had been inflicted on them since Lewis the Fat.'<sup>[4]</sup> It would be easy to name half a dozen patricians like the Duke d'Ayen, of exceptional public spirit and capacity, but a proud order cannot at the first exigency of a crisis change its traditional front, and abandon the maxims of centuries in a day. As has been said more than once, the oriental policy of the crown towards the nobles had the inevitable effect of cutting them off from all opportunity of acquiring in experience those habits of political wisdom which have saved the territorial aristocracy of our own country. The English nobles in the eighteenth century had become, what they mostly are now, men of business; agriculturists at least as much as politicians; land agents of a very dignified kind, with very large incomes. Sully designed to raise a working agricultural aristocracy, and Colbert to raise a working commercial aristocracy. But the statesman cannot create or mould a social order at will. Perhaps one reason why the English aristocracy became a truly agricultural body in the eighteenth century was the circumstance that many of the great landowning magnates were Tories, and remained sulking on their estates rather than go to the court of the first two kings of the Hanoverian line; just as the dependence of these two sovereigns of revolutionary title upon the revolution families is one reason why English liberties had time to root themselves thoroughly before the monarchical reaction, under George III. In France, for reasons which we have no room to expatiate upon, the experiments both of Sully and of Colbert failed. The result may be read with graphic effect in the pages of Arthur Young, both before the Revolution broke out and again after Burke's superb rhetoric had biassed English opinion against it.

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[4] *Turgot, Philosophe et Economiste*. Par A. Batbie, p. 380.

M. Léonce de Lavergne, it is true, in his most interesting book upon the Provincial Assemblies under Lewis XVI., has endeavoured to show that in the great work of administrative reform all classes between 1778 and 1787 had shown themselves full of a liberal and practical spirit. But even in his pages we see enough of apprehensions and dissensions to perceive how deep was the intestine disorganisation; and the attitude of the nobles in 1789 demonstrated how incurable it was by any merely constitutional modifications. Sir Philip Francis, to whom Burke submitted the proof-sheets of the Reflections, at once with his usual rapid penetration discerned the weakness of the anti-revolutionary position. 'The French of this day,' he told Burke, 'could not act as we did in 1688. They had no constitution as we had to recur to. They had no foundation to build upon. They had no walls to repair. Much less had they "*the elements of a constitution very nearly as good as could be wished.*" A proposition so extraordinary as this last ought to have been made out *in limine*, since the most important deductions are drawn from it.'<sup>[5]</sup> But, though Burke insisted on drawing his deductions from it with sweeping impetuosity, neither he nor any one else has yet succeeded in establishing that all-important proposition.

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[5] *Burke's Correspondence*, iii. 157.

What we desire to say, then, comes, in short, to this, that M. Taine has given an exaggerated importance to the literary and speculative activity of the last half century of the old monarchy. In measuring the force of the various antecedents of the Revolution, he has assigned to books and philosophical ideas a place in the scale of dissolvent conditions that belongs more rightly to decayed institutions, to incompetent and incorrigible castes, to economic incongruities that could only be dealt with trenchantly. Books and ideas acquired a certain importance after other things

had finally broken up the crumbling system. They supplied a formula for the accomplished fact. 'It was after the Revolution had fairly begun,' as a contemporary says, 'that they sought in Mably and Rousseau for arms to sustain the system towards which the effervescence of some hardy spirits was dragging affairs. It was not the above-named authors who set people's heads aflame. M. Necker alone produced this effect, and determined the explosion.'<sup>[6]</sup>

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[6] Sénac de Meilhan, *Du Gouvernement en France*, 129, etc. (1795).

The predominance of a historic, instead of an abstract, school of political thought could have saved nothing. It could have saved nothing, because the historic or conservative organs and elements of society were incompetent to realise those progressive ideas which were quite as essential to social continuity as the historic ideas. The historic method in political action is only practicable on condition that some, at any rate, of the great established bodies have the sap of life in their members. In France not even the judiciary, usually the last to part from its ancient roots, was sound and quick. 'The administration of justice,' says Arthur Young, 'was partial, venal, infamous. The conduct of the parliament was profligate and atrocious. The bigotry, ignorance, false principles, and tyranny of these bodies were generally conspicuous.'<sup>[7]</sup> We know what the court was, we know what the noblesse was, and this is what the third great leading order in the realm was. We repeat, then, that the historic doctrine could get no fulcrum or leverage, and that only the revolutionary doctrine, which the eighteenth century had got ready for the crisis, was adequate to the task of social renovation.

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[7] *Travels in France*, i. 603.

Again, we venture to put to M. Taine the following question. If the convulsions of 1789-1794 were due to the revolutionary doctrine, if that doctrine was the poison of the movement, how would he explain the firm, manly, steadfast, unhysterical quality of the American Revolution thirteen years before? It was theoretically based on exactly the same doctrine. Jefferson and Franklin were as well disciplined in the French philosophy of the eighteenth century as Mirabeau or Robespierre. The Declaration of Independence recites the same abstract and unhistoric propositions as the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Why are we to describe the draught which Rousseau and the others had brewed, as a harmless or wholesome prescription for the Americans, and as maddening poison to the French? The answer must be that the quality of the drug is relative to the condition of the patient, and that the vital question for the student of the old *régime* and the circumstances of its fall is what other drug, what better process, could have extricated France on more tranquil terms from her desperate case? The American colonists, in spite of the over-wide formulæ of their Declaration, really never broke with their past in any of its fundamental elements. They had a historic basis of laws and institutions which was still sound and whole, and the political severance from England made no breach in social continuity. If a different result followed in France, it was not because France was the land of the classic spirit, but because her institutions were inadequate, and her ruling classes incompetent to transform them.

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M. Taine's figure of the man who drains the poisonous draught, as having been previously 'a little weak in constitution, but still sound and of peaceful habits,' is entirely delusive. The whole evidence shows that France was not sound, but the very reverse of sound, and no inconsiderable portion of that evidence is to be found in the facts which M. Taine has so industriously collected in his own book. The description of France as a little weak in constitution, but still sound and of peaceful habits, is the more surprising to us because M. Taine himself had in an earlier page (p. 109), when summing up the results of *Privilege*, ended with these emphatic words: 'Déjà avant l'écroulement final, la France est dissoute, et elle est dissoute parce que les privilégiés ont oublié leur caractère d'hommes publics.' But then is not this rather more than being only a little weak in constitution, and still sound?

## TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

Page 269: Corrected "paragrah" to "paragraph."

Page 281: Removed duplicate *and* from the sentence: "'The nation,' wrote the wise and far-seeing ... and and so forth (*Æuv.* ii. 504)."

Page 287: Standardized punctuation in footnote 6.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CRITICAL MISCELLANIES (VOL. 3 OF 3),  
ESSAY 8: FRANCE IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY \*\*\*

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