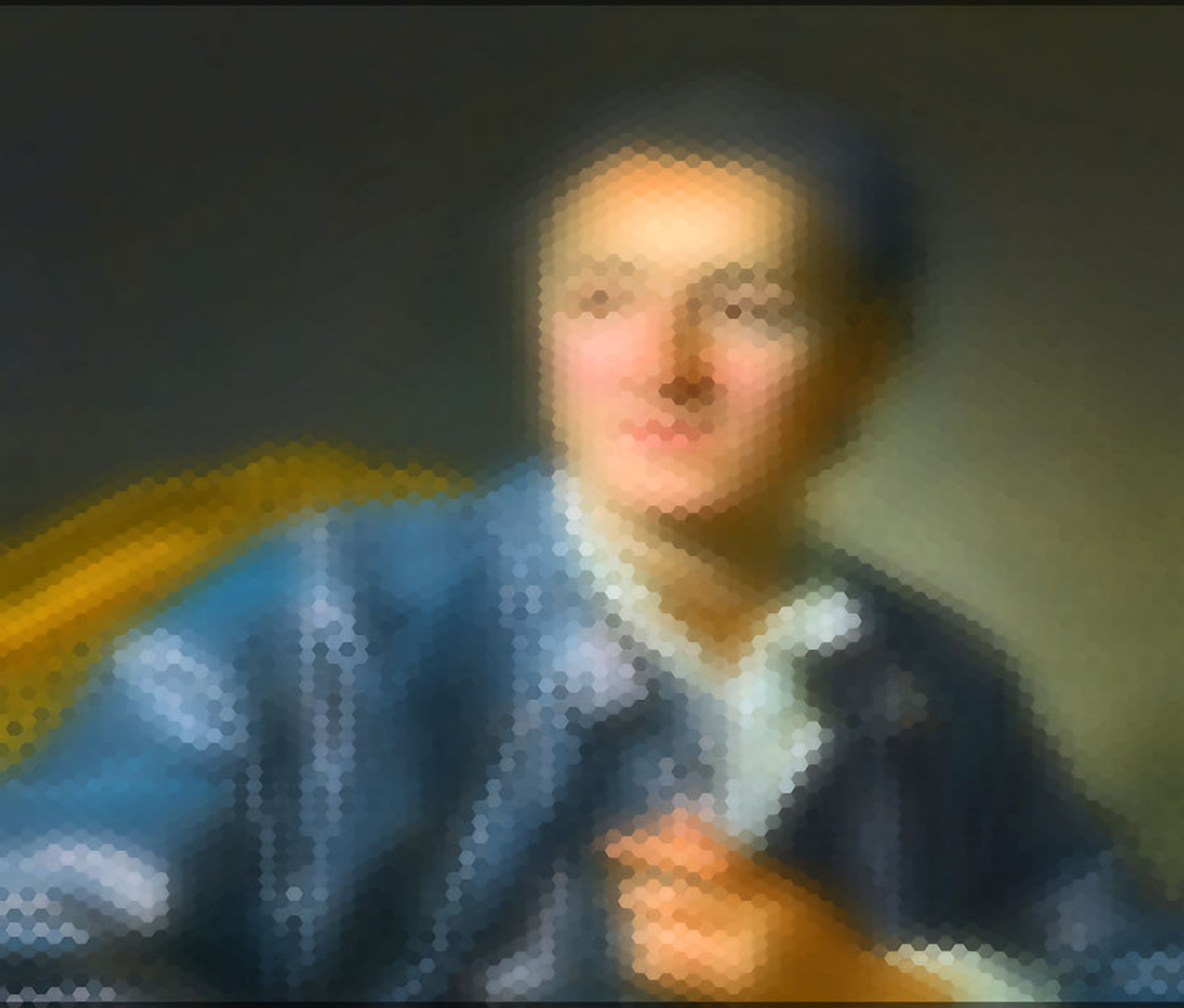
JOHN MORLEY



DIDEROT AND THE ENCYCLOPAEDISTS

VOL. 1 & 2

John Morley

Diderot and the Encyclopaedists
(Vol. 1&2)

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PREFACE.

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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 emphasised 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.

NOTE.

Since the following pages were printed, an American correspondent writes to me with reference to the dialogue between Franklin and Raynal, mentioned on page 218, Vol. II.:—"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.

DIDEROT.

CHAPTER I.
PRELIMINARY.

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There was a moment in the last 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 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 procured 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 great 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 organisation 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 organisation, 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 encyclopedic 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 organisation 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 exigencies 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 appraisement" (*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 improvableness 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.

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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."[1] 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."[2] 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."[3]

Diderot, like so many others of the eighteenth-century reformers, 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 Collége 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.[4]

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 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 organisation? 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."[5]

But there are ages of criticism when discipline is impossible, and the evils of isolation are less than the evils of rash and premature organisation. 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 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."[6] And the real interest 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 furthest removed of any one 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. Any one 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."[7]

We may be sure of a stoutness of native stuff in any stock where so much tenacity united with such fine confidence on one side, and such generous love on the other. It is a 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."[8] 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. 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."[9]

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.[10]

Marmontel assures us that never was Diderot seen to such advantage as when an author consulted him about a work. "You should have seen him," he says, "take hold of the