SECTION III.—POLITICAL MOVEMENTS.

American Revolution—French Revolution—Individual Rights—Individual Will—Schemes of Universal Society—Education—Power of the State.

I have had occasion to speak of the theological temper of the United States of North America, as illustrating one stage in the history of Protestantism, and as indicating a desire for something that Protestantism does not supply. But the political change which took place in these states, when they revolted from the mother country, is, in the same point of view, even more important.

Among the leading characteristics of the Reformation, I noticed an anxiety to assert the rights of national Sovereigns, and, as involved in them, the distinct position of each nation. This feeling, I said, was closely intertwined with that feeling of personal distinctness in each man which is the main spring of Protestantism. But when the Protestant systems had developed themselves, these inseparable twins began to manifest great impatience of each other's company. The monarchs of one stage in the history of Protestantism, and as individual's right to act and think for himself trenched very inconveniently upon their authority, and tended in no degree to the consistency and unity of the nations which they governed. They observed that whenever the religious feeling was strong, it treated all things as subordinate to itself; therefore, unless it could be made to conspire with the objects of their government, it must thwart them. There seemed to be but two expedients; to force the religious feeling into the agreement, or as much as possible to weaken it. The first policy was tried, and failed; afterwards the latter was adopted for a time with better success. The dispositions on the other side of course corresponded to these. The religious bodies became more and more jealous of the sovereign's interference with them; in times of strong excitement they resisted it; but as such times made their terms of communion more strict, these

bodies became less and less identical with the nation; therefore it was not difficult to believe, when peace returned, that they had nothing to do with national affairs, that it was their business to be wholly religious, and the business of the monarchs to be wholly secular. This opinion, however, was very slowly adopted by any class of Reformers. The Lutherans thought, and still think, a State tyranny less intolerable than the abandonment of the Reformation principles. The Calvinists, in their palmy days, resolved, that if the State could not be religious with a sovereign, it should be religious without one. The Scotch Covenant affirmed the State to be essentially theocratic; the whole effort of our civil wars was to establish the same principle, and in one strange interlude between the acts of that tragedy, the Scotch tried to create a Presbyterian theocracy in the person of Charles the Second. It was only upon the disappointment of these schemes, that the modern doctrine under its different modifications began to prevail. And in the meantime an experiment was to be made whether religious men, if they could not exercise an influence over the old societies of Europe, might not frame societies for themselves in another world.

The legislation and government of the Puritan colonies bore every mark of their origin. They were, in fact, if the solecism may be pardoned, sect-commonwealths, connected by their religious peculiarities more than by the bonds of a common language, of a common origin, or of subjection to a distant sovereign. Before the time arrived when the last-mentioned of these ties was to be snapt asunder, the colonies had acquired an important position as trading communities. The religious feeling of the early settlers had lost much of its strength, but had left behind it industrious habits, clearness of understanding in common matters, indifference to refinements either physical or intellectual, and a useful pertinacity of character. Of such elements the heroes of the revolution were composed, men who, being exceedingly like the Puritans in these qualities, differed from them in this, that their notions of government and society were unconnected with a spiritual

principle, and referred wholly to the condition and circumstances of this world. This change was evident from the Declaration of Independence—a document in which the old Protestant feeling, that each man is a distinct being possessing distinct privileges and rights, is curiously blended with a vague notion of a general fellowship which was beginning to gain currency in Europe, and which was rather a reaction against Protestantism than the natural result of it. And of this declaration the ultimate consequence was that union of the different independent states, respecting which future history will determine whether it have taken effect by a process of natural fusion, or merely by the decrees and contrivances of legislators.

These events were undoubtedly indications that a strife of principles was at hand, though the scene of it was not to be laid in the land of Franklin and Washington. It was in a country of the old world, a country in which the Protestant doctrine had been stifled two centuries before, a country in which society had been everything and human beings almost nothing, that the most vehement declaration of men's individual rights was to be made, and that the death-struggle between those impulses which lead each person to maintain such rights, and those which lead him to seek communion with his fellows, was to begin.

It has been truly and profoundly observed that the French Revolution could not have been brought about merely by the scepticism of the philosophers, merely by the sins of the civil and ecclesiastical rulers, merely by the starvation of the people, nor by all these combined, if there had not been a certain element of *faith* to mix with and contradict the scepticism—to create a kind of moral indignation against the sin—and to convert the sense of hunger from a dead anguish into a living passion.

The Parisian philosophy of the eighteenth century was little more than the expression by men cleverer and bolder than their contemporaries, of that feeling which pervaded the whole of society. All the teachers did was to make their disciples conscious of the un-

belief which already had possession of them; their wit was irresistible, because it brought to light contradictions which existed in the persons they were addressing. So long as such contradictions are painful, so long as the conscience is at all awake to say, "This which you are not you are meant to be"—wit of this kind is most torturing. The mind may feel a kind of awful delight in it, as in a just penance which it deserves to undergo, but no grave admonition is half so bitter. But when the conscience is not awake at all, or is only so far awake as to perceive that hypocrisy is an evil and dishonourable thing, this wit will be very differently received. The mere time-killer—the lounger of the upper classes—who is convinced that everything must go on as it has always gone on, that words can do no harm, and that his position is society gives him a title to see further than a clown or a shop-keeper, listens gladly, and entertains a doctrine which both is so consistent with his practice, and which enables him to cast away as absurd any lingering sense of responsibility. The active, intelligent, aspiring member of the middle class, who thinks that he is unfairly depressed, who sees that the habits of society are false, who knows that it derives a support from certain feelings of reverence and awe which are connected with the acknowledgment of invisible principles, eagerly welcomes the discovery that no such principles exist; for then a system which, at least in all its outward appearances, is hollow and deceitful, and which certainly is a hindrance to his ambition, may gradually fall to pieces. But though this philosophy had, for these opposite reasons, a hold upon both the *soirées* of Paris, and upon the enterprising lawyer of the provincial town, there was nothing in it which could possibly appeal to the sympathies of poor men—of those who were actually suffering. It is true that many of the philosophers were economists, and could descant upon the circumstances which made bread dear, and might make industry more profitable; but hungry men, hating all abstractions, hate those most which refer to their hunger, and do not relieve it. Again, in many districts,

the doctrines which the wise men derided, even if we may not believe that they commended themselves as realities to those who had no home or portion on earth, were at least connected with the friendly faces of curés who had sympathised and suffered with their flocks, and with actual gifts of bread at the convent doors.

Doubtless such relics of religious association and sympathy must have been much more thinly scattered among the mechanics of the capital: the habits of the classes above them will have descended upon them, and the quicker wit of the citizen will have more quickly detected the falsehood and hypocrisy—being much more glaring—which he saw among his instructors. Still, even to this class, what was there in the teaching of such a man as Helvetius, for instance, which could have given the least pleasure? Sir James Mackintosh speaks of the Helvetian philosophy as the philosophy of the pot-house. But the frequenter of the pot-house would scarcely have cared to be told that a man, apart from the influences of society, deprived of the help which he receives from legislators, *soirées,* and tailors, is good for nothing, even though it were added, that legislators, *soirées,* and tailors, through the influence of priestly imposture, had managed their affairs badly, that they needed to be reformed by philosophy, and that when so reformed many persons now proscribed might be brought within the charmed circle of civilisation. The poor man must have felt that, whatever good chance might befal him hereafter, he was, at all events for the present, not within the horizon of the philosopher's telescope.

But how different was the case when a voice was heard from Switzerland, proclaiming that each man has in himself, apart from all social institutions and social civilisation, rights and power; that he may claim those rights, and put this power forth; that he must do so if he would break the bonds which legislators, tailors, and *soirées* have been fastening around him, and if he would form a society in accordance with nature and truth. This was an appeal which went straight to the hearts of those who had nothing that they could call their own

except their human limbs and countenance, and whatever there was, known or unknown, which gave motion to their limbs and life to their countenance. It appealed to the sense of strength, of wrong, of suffering, which is extinct in none; it called that forth into energy and action which the philosophical systematisers, for the most part, either denied the existence of, or would have been willing should not exist; it mixed itself with all those notions about the frauds and tyrannies of priests and lawyers which the unsentimental school had propagated; it turned to its own use all the materialist notions of the age respecting the origin of governments in compacts and conventions: finally, it compelled the sages to acknowledge that the government of reason must begin in outbreaks of popular fury, and to join with the people in laying the foundation of society in a declaration of individual rights.

The allies soon became enemies: it was found that the philosophers could do nothing with their theories; then the poorer men tried what they could do with other weapons. The lookers-on were terrified; they began to ask themselves whether the notions which they had adopted, as the highest discoveries of the enlightened intellect, must not have been falsely deduced. Could law and government have had their birth in the way that the teachers of the eighteenth century supposed? Must not they have had some higher source? Was it not necessary to believe that some mysterious power upheld them? These thoughts stirred in the minds of men, especially in the Protestant nations, and prepared them to listen to Burke when he told them, as one who knew, that law rests upon deep invisible principles, not upon philosophical maxims or generalisations; that it is to be feared and reverenced as something above us, not to be dealt with as our creature and servant; that if its existence and awful derivation be trifled with or denied, it will prove its power and have its revenge. This teaching, so unlike any to which the last age had been accustomed, was received by many wondering nobles and ecclesiastics as if it were the revelation of a new truth, especially

given for the defence of their houses and lands; by others it was welcomed with a more genial and thankful feeling, as the application to new circumstances of a doctrine which had been familiar to all great thinkers, and which had been delivered with peculiar power and solemnity by the noblest writers of the English nation. How much Burke, an adventurer, an Irishman, a philosopher, was the instrument of restoring the tone of English feeling, both amongst the men of action and of meditation, both in the upper and middling class, many are now ready to confess. Nor was his influence confined to this country. The deep historical researches of Niebuhr and the jurisprudential wisdom of Savigny, if they were not called forth by his writings, at least received their direction, in a great measure, from him; they would not have found readers to understand or appreciate them, if the soil had not been at first prepared by our statesman and orator.

The French revolution, then, has led many thoughtful persons, and many who are not thoughtful, to the conviction, that the doctrine upon which the declaration of rights rests is essentially false; that a man choosing to stand upon his independence—choosing to be an individual—choosing the state of *nature*—can have no claims on his neighbour; that to build up a fellowship upon this principle of independence is a monstrous contradiction, which proves itself to be so the moment it is brought to a practical experiment; finally, that law, being the appointed corrector of and judge of man, must be derived from, and rest upon, sanctions which men regard as superhuman. But, on the other hand, there are not a few who, without directly opposing these doctrines, nay, perhaps assenting to them in so far forth as they are answers to Rousseau, are inclined to draw inferences from the same facts which are most unlike these—one might fancy almost incompatible with them. "Whatever may be talked about the majesty and transcendent character of law," say these persons, "it is manifest that men did set themselves above law during the Revolution, and did show that they could defy it. The popular *will* proved that all the terrors of

law, affirmed and made more fearful by religion, were not sufficient to bind it; and when at last it succumbed, it was not to this power, but to the *will* of a man, who showed that there was that in him which all the units of the nation together could not resist. Afterwards, it is true, the political machine seemed to run into its old ruts; tradition and custom apparently resumed their sway. But again the same truth was established; all such influences have been found ineffectual; a will, a despotical will, is wanted somewhere; to this alone will men really bow down. Whether there be a right in individual men or not, there is—(I borrow the favourite phrase of a writer who has exhibited this position with the greatest clearness, and who has converted the whole history of the Revolution from an abstraction into a living reality)—'a might,' and this might will make itself felt, either in a whole nation, or in some single person who compels the whole nation to acknowledge that he is meant to govern it."

One might fancy, when the opinion is put into this form, that Hobbes was again speaking in the nineteenth century. But whatever resemblance there may be in the words, the feeling which finds utterance in them is the most opposite possible to that of the hard materialist; it is a feeling of reverence for *spiritual* force. The triumphant despot is not the man to whom men submit, because they find it more convenient to abstain from fighting, or because they find the government of one less perplexing than that of many; no, he is the man to whom they do homage, because he has the highest title, the most perfect ordination, because he was in truth created to be their king. And therefore this is only another, and I fancy a more advanced and reasonable, form of that reverence for WILL, as superior to the forms of government and society, which has led many to look upon the notions of rule and subjection as hateful inventions of priests and monarchs. The writer of "Prometheus Unbound," and the "Revolt of Islam," preached the freedom of man from all outward forms and restraints: those who say that subjection is a necessity of man's being, that he *longs* to be governed,

are yet equally certain that he can only submit to the dominion of a man; that he can never bow to the authority of an outward rule. And both alike differ from the sentimental teachers of the last age, who exhorted men to follow their natures—to give their good feelings and impulses fair play, &c. Both acknowledge that a man must *not* yield to inclination, that he must win a victory over his nature—that otherwise he can neither be free himself, nor obtain lordship over his fellows.

Meantime these notions, which in this form might be passed by as the dreams of idle men, are forcing themselves in another form upon the reflection of all practical politicians. Not only in quiet chambers, but by fierce mobs, is the doctrine proclaimed that Will is superior to Law—that it ought to be superior—that to it belongs the power of unmaking and re-making that which pretends to hold it down. Anyone who attends carefully to the phrases which are current among us now, will perceive, I think, that they are very far more tremendous than those which were heard at the beginning of the French Revolution. "We have a right," is a phrase which betokens the acknowledgment of some antecedent principle; but in our day this language, if we chance to hear it, translates itself immediately into "We WILL." This is the ground of the right; it aspires to be the ground of all things.

"And why has it not yet attained its aspiration, and what can hinder it from doing so?" asks the terrified statesman. He finds that when such a question is started, politics must have become an awful science; a science which can scarcely be pursued successfully by one who determines that he will confine himself to official rules or precedents, and that he will admit nothing as concerning him which involves transcendent considerations. However he may be inclined to laugh at metaphysics and scorn theology, he finds that he must discuss a subject which touches upon all the deepest principles of both; that he must ascertain by what means the existence of law may be reconciled with the existence of the human will. The debate between the

disciple of Rousseau and the disciple of Burke brought out the old controversy—"Is the nature of man a good thing, a thing to be trusted, as Rousseau affirms that it is? Or is it an evil thing, as the Reformers said it was, which is to be kept down, and which every good man is to triumph over?" And this controversy, after the experiment of the French Revolution, was decided by politicians in favour of the ancient opinion, and against the new one. But here is another old scholastic controversy brought to the like practical issue, and submitted to the same adjudication: "Is *Man*, as the successors of the Reformers have affirmed, to be *identified* with that nature which is attached to him; or is he, when he sinks under the dominion of that nature, to be considered as abandoning his proper state, as subjecting himself to that over which he was meant to rule?" If this controversy be decided in favour of the first notion, the notion of modern Calvinism, the politician must invent what charms he can to lull that will to sleep, "*which hath oftentimes been bound with fetters and chains, and the chains have been plucked asunder by it, and the fetters broken in pieces, neither hath any man tamed it. But in the mountains and the tombs has it been continually—crying and cutting itself with stones.*" If on the other hand he admit the existence of a will or spirit in man, and that this will is only safe and free when it has found some other will to govern it, and that in the vain effort for independence it constantly becomes the slave of its own natural inclinations, it can be no contradiction on the one hand to suppose that law is meant to overawe these inclinations; on the other hand, that there is some spiritual government, in which the man himself has a claim of citizenship, and in which he may find his rightful king.

2. But this hint leads us to another aspect of the French Revolution, that which may be called its properly political aspect. It began with a declaration of individual rights, but upon that declaration it professed to build a society; and this society was to be *universal.* It is true that the character of the revolu-

tionary proceedings, from first to last, was eminently French. It is true that a strong burst of French patriotism was called forth by the invasion of the Allies, and that a desire of French predominance may be traced in the different counsels of the nation, from the commencement of the war to the abdication of Napoleon. But the principle of the Revolution—I mean not its nominal principles, as they were expressed in parchment documents or in pompous phrases, but the real principle which governed the minds of those who acted in it, and which alone rescued their documents and phrases from the charge of utter unmeaningness—was the substitution of a universal polity for national polities. Every monstrous absurdity which marked the speakers, writers, and actors who figured in it savoured of this feeling, and proved its existence; all its achievements, both when it was acting as a republic and when it was concentrated in one man, tended to this result. Even the constitutions which were propounded one after another for France itself had no more reference to France than to Kamschatka; they were all constructed upon universal principles, all meant for mankind.

These illustrations of the worth and preciousness of particular governments, when they are framed in conformity with general maxims, awakened the thoughtful men of Europe to a study of national history, and of that internal life in nations whereby they have been able to preserve their identity for generations amidst all changes of external circumstances. And these profound investigations received light and strength from the national feelings which the propagandism of France and the tyranny of the universal empire called forth. A spirit was roused which made it impossible that men should look upon the histories of Voltaire, of Hume, and of Robertson, as representing the feelings and mind of past generations; a spirit which led the children to feel that there was a bond between them and their fathers, that they were inheritors of the same soil, and that names, and memorials, and institutions, more permanent than the oaks which grew upon it, had been bequeathed to them to keep.