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Mihi quidem nulli satis eruditi videntur, quibus nostra
ignota sunt. CICERO *de finibus.*

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By Charles Brockden Brown

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ARTICLE VII.

The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution. Translated from the German of Gents, by an American Gentleman. 8vo. pp. 73. Philadelphia. Dickins. 1800.

THE comparison of historical events is the chief source of the instruction which history is qualified to give. Curiosity is aroused and gratified, and wisdom is gathered, by marking their resemblances and differences. Hence the uniformity of human nature, and the variations introduced by local and casual circumstances, are collected. Two events, so near to each other, and which are imagined, by some, to be in some degree connected with each other as cause and effect, as the American and French revolutions, could not fail to excite much of this *comparing* curiosity.

All revolutions are alike in many circumstances. There are many, necessarily, in which they differ. Equity and injustice are mixed up in every *human* transaction, but they are inevitably mixed in different proportions. The same quantity and kind of cruelty and suffering perpetrated and endured, cannot be exactly similar in any two cases; for no two, either of individuals or of nations, were ever precisely alike in their situation or their motives; so that, in such comparisons, if the imagination is struck with the likeness between two events, that discernment must, indeed, be dull, that cannot point out some contraries between them.

This writer is influenced not by the ordinary motives of the disinterested historian, but by the formal purpose of proving, not only that the two revolutions differ, but that the American was a lawful and equitable procedure, while the French revolution was invariably wicked and detestable. Having heard it affirmed, by some, that both transactions were similar, and that what was *lawful* in America, at one time, must, ten years after, be proper in Europe—it is this inference which he endeavours to elude, by disproving the premises that sustain it, namely, the similitude between the two events.

It is evident, that this is merely an argument *ad homines*. It is addressed only to those who praise the one event, merely on account of its resemblance to another, or who endeavour to fix the charge of inconsistency on their opponents, by showing, that they judge contrarily in like cases. Gentz is one of these opponents; and the present publication was made to repel and confute the charge: to demonstrate, that the advocate of *our* revolution must not necessarily be the champion of the French, since the origin and principles of both transactions are unlike each other. Though much pains are taken to prove this contrariety, we cannot allow that the author's aim is accomplished.

It is true there are some obvious differences between them. One related to three, and the other to twenty-five millions of men. One was the insurrection of a distant portion of the empire against the authority of the remainder; and ended in the separation and independence of a few provinces in relation to the whole. The other was the effort of the whole nation against the reigning prince, and the established form of government. One introduced no change in the customary distinctions and relations of the citizens, and had no hierarchy or nobility to overturn. The other extended to an enormous and complicated system of ancient abuses in religion and property, and hence occasioned more vehement struggles and signal changes. One reminds us of Venice shaking off the supremacy of the Greek princes—Florence and Milan withstanding the claims of the German Empire—Switzerland spurning the tyranny of the house of Austria—the Netherlands breaking the yoke of Spain. The other is a vivid copy of the internal or domestic changes which incessantly occurred in the Greek and Italian republics of former times; the rancour of whose factions, the ferocity of whose revenges, the suddenness and terrifying havock of whose *re-actions*, were faithful counterparts of the modern French revolution, from which they differ only as the theatre of France is larger than that of Venice, Milan, or Florence, of Ephesus or Rhodes; as the *actors* are more numerous; and, consequently, that though, in each, murder, imprisonment, or banishment, are equally the agents, yet *more* are banished or murdered in one case than in the other.

These are not the differences which this writer exhibits. His aim is, to show that the American revolution was *lawful*—an epithet wholly inapplicable to the French.

The term *lawful* is a very ambiguous one. It seems, how-

ever, to mean, in this place, that the resistance of the colonies sprung from adherence to certain fundamental maxims of government, which they believed to have been consecrated by the consent and practice of their ancestors, and of the mother country. Their claims were founded on the construction of the constitution under which their oppressors lived, and the terms of which were urged by these oppressors themselves, to justify their conduct.

This writer seems to be aware that there was actually a *revolution* in America; that, at the conclusion of the war, things were not merely replaced upon their old foundations, and that the successful party were not contented with merely repelling encroachments and aggressions, and restricting the power that had spurned restraint to its ancient metes and boundaries; that those who were formerly subjects have now become sovereigns, and that subordination which had, for a whole age, been expressly acknowledged to be lawful and constitutional, was finally disowned and annihilated.

Till the declaration of independence, the resistance might, in a certain sense, be termed *lawful*. In the American remonstrances, prior to that event, loyalty was solemnly avowed, and the terms of laws, statutes and charters, were modestly pleaded; but *after* that period, surely, there was a total alteration in their style. The *rights of man*; the origin of government in the will of the people; the right of the people to consult and decide, in all possible cases, for their common happiness; the absolute *nihility* of all noble and royal pretensions to the government of mankind, were then the only popular topics; and these were not merely insisted on by a few silly individuals, or in a few obscure pamphlets, but were echoed to and fro among senates and armies; were placed, in the most cogent and explicit terms, at the head of proclamations and laws; were urged as the sole foundation of the conduct of the American leaders; and are actually the only basis on which the old confederation, the constitutions of all the States, and the federal constitution, have been built. These were not speculative notions, but practical maxims. To deny *their existence*, is to deny that we have, at this moment, any governments, any constitutions, at all. There are persons who question the equity and *truth* of these principles, but none can question that on *these* are actually reared the fabrics of *our* state and general governments; for by whom were some of them drawn up and ratified but by the immediate representatives of the people? and by whose consent and

acquiescence do others (that, for instance, of Connecticut) exist?

It was only by proclaiming independence that a *revolution* was effected. Had not the *rights of man*, the pure sovereignty of the people, superseded the fantastic and groundless claims of the *mother country*, of king and parliament, America would have furnished no object of comparison to this writer.

This total and essential change in the reasons of the contest was very well understood at the time. Every one knows the opposition made to it by those whose conscience forbade them to resist *lawful*, though they were strenuous in opposing *unlawful* authority. Something was due to their king, and though he demanded more than his due, they did not think themselves warranted in refusing what was due. Hence almost all the internal and intestine divisions which fettered the triumphant party in the American war. Those who continued to regard kings and charters as sacred, exclaimed, but ineffectually, against those who urged the natural and indefeasible right of mankind to choose their own form of government, and to consult, without restraint or controul from musty charters and hereditary claims, for their own good. The supremacy and prerogative of the king, and the commercial power of the British legislature, were maintained by the dissidents from independence, as they were originally admitted by *all* the opponents of the parliamentary pretensions.

The progress of the American revolution resembled the progress of the French, and of every change in the political condition of nations, in all essential particulars. There are always some mutual stipulations between sovereigns and subjects, either express or implied. Time and habit consecrate these boundaries, and a *right* is created, in the imaginations of men, to maintain them inviolate. These limits are overstepped by the selfishness of one of the parties, and being in themselves ambiguous, intricate, and liable to different constructions, an endless controversy ensues; each maintains the justice of his cause; opposition enrages; by denying what is due, the refuser is imagined to forfeit all claims whatever; injuries are conceived to justify revenge; in a short time the position of both parties is changed, and they are hurried to extremities by the ardour of their passions, of which, at the opening of the scene, neither of them had any conception.

It was thus that the Swiss were gradually led, from revenge for violated privileges, to assert their absolute independence; that the severities of Philip II. by way of punishing those who

had refused him his due, led the Netherlanders to an utter renunciation of his government; that the English opposition to the over-strained prerogatives of the Stuarts ended in the total abolition of monarchy; and such has been the progress of things in America and France.

Those who should undertake to weigh the justice of the parties in these several transactions; who should pre-suppose that either party was perfectly equitable and consistent in their claims and reasonings; that errors of judgment, ambitious purposes and exasperated passions, must necessarily belong to *one side only*, would show a very pitiable ignorance of human nature and of history.

We mean not to enter into any discussion of the merits of the revolutionists of any age. We will admit that, to a certain period, the contest, both in France and America, was of a *lawful* nature—that is, that the popular claims and reasonings were founded on the terms and meanings of written or traditionary laws or maxims of government; but we must also maintain, that, in both cases, the grounds of dispute very *speedily* became totally changed; that popular opposition, from being founded on the verbal concessions of charters and diplomas, proceeded to be built on the natural and original principles of equity—on the right supposed to belong to every community, to choose their own form of policy, and elect those for Governors who should appear most eligible to the majority of citizens.

To prove this in relation to America, we need only appeal to our *existence* as independent states, to the *manner* in which our constitutions were actually formed, and to the solemn declaration of the inherent rights, or, in other words, the infeasible sovereignty of the people, contained and assumed as sacred and fundamental, in the constitutions themselves. After this appeal, it would be idle to debate the matter with any one who chooses to deny it.

The following passage of our author, relative to paper money, contains such a view of the similarities between the two revolutions, as will occur to most impartial observers.

‘In no one point is the analogy between the conduct of the revolutionary leaders in America and in France, so striking as in this; yet it must not be forgotten, that the Americans failed partly from inexperience and partly from real necessity; whereas in France they knew very well what they were about, and opened and widened the precipice with design.

‘The history of the American assignats is almost word

for word, only upon a smaller scale, and not attended with circumstances of such shocking cruelty, as the history of the French ones. The sudden start from two millions to two hundred millions of dollars; the credulity with which the first assignats were received, the undeserved credit which they for a time enjoyed, their subsequent rapid fall, so that in the year 1777, they already stood with specie in the proportion of 1 to 3; in 1778, of 1 to 6; in 1779, of 1 to 28; in the beginning of 1780, of 1 to 60; fell immediately afterwards to that of 1 to 150, and finally would pass for nothing at all; the attempt to substitute a new emission of assignats, instead of those which were worn out, continued until, at last, it became necessary to establish a formal depreciation; the harsh laws made to support the value of the paper; the regulation of the price of provisions (the maximum) and the requisitions, which they occasioned; the general devastation of property, and disturbance of all civil intercourse; the wretchedness and immorality which ensued upon them—all this goes to compose a picture, which the French revolutionary leaders seem to have taken for a model. It is remarkable, that they closely copied the Americans only in two points, of which one was the idlest, and the other the most objectionable of any throughout their revolution; in the declaration of the rights of man, and in paper money.

The concluding sentence of this passage is remarkable, as it contains an acknowledgment of that very fact which this pamphlet seems to have been written to disprove—‘The French,’ says he, ‘closely copied the Americans in the declaration of the rights of man.’ After this confession, which, in truth, could not be withheld, all dispute as to the similarity of *principles* in the two revolutions must surely be at an end. This imitation may appear to the German politician *very objectionable*; the imprescriptible rights of the people and the original compact may be stigmatized as *revolutionary cant*; but it cannot be denied, and is in the foregoing passages acknowledged, that this was actually the *cant* of both Americans and Frenchmen.

We will further quote the following passage: ‘What was here and there occasionally said by single writers, must carefully be distinguished from the principles and way of thinking of those Americans who were acknowledged and revered as examples and authorities, but especially from those who took an active part in the new government. There certainly was in America a Thomas Paine; and I will not

deny but that his celebrated work had influence among certain classes of people, and so far contributed to promote the revolution. But to judge of the spirit and principles of the American revolution by this work, would be as unjust as to confound the efficaciously active heads in the English revolution of 1688, with the authors of some popular lampoons against the house of Stuart; or the opposition of Lord Chatham with that of Mr. Wilkes. When Paine's work appeared, in the year 1776, the American revolution had long since assumed its whole form and consistence, and the principles which will forever characterize it stood firm. In no public resolve, in no public debate, in no state paper of congress, is the most distant expression to be found, which discovers either a formal or a tacit approbation of a systematical revolutionary policy. And what a contrast between the wild, extravagant, rhapsodical declamation of a Paine, and the mild, moderate, and considerate tone in the speeches and letters of a Washington!

‘The general opinion, and the unanimous testimony of all the known writers upon American affairs, leave scarce room for a doubt of this fact, though, for the honour of the Americans, I would most willingly call it in question. His “*Common Sense*” is a pamphlet just as contemptible, almost throughout just as remote from sound human sense, as all the others by which, in later times, he has made himself a name. To appreciate the character and tendency of this work, which, perhaps, has never been judged as it deserves, and to obtain a full conviction that it was solely calculated to make an impression upon the mass of the people, and especially upon certain religious sects, very extensively spread in America, the reader has only to remark the spirit of the author's favourite arguments, which are all drawn from the *Old Testament*, and the absurd reasoning with which he attacks, not the king of England, but monarchy in general, which he treats as an *ungodly* invention. If *such a work* could have produced the American revolution, it would have been best for reasonable men to concern themselves no longer with that event. But it was certainly, at all times, by the wiser and better men, considered, endured, and perhaps encouraged, only as an instrument to gain over weaker minds to the common cause.

‘The difference between this writer and the great authorities of the American revolution, such as Dickenson, John Adams, Jay, Franklin, &c. will be still more apparent, if we remark a similar difference between the two parties in England,

which, accidentally concurring in the same object, but differing infinitely from each other in the choice of means and arguments, declared themselves there in favour of that revolution. Whoever compares, for example, the writings of Dr. Price (who, notwithstanding his numerous errors, deserves not, however, to be put in the same class with Paine), with the speeches and writings of Burke during the American war, will, sometimes, be scarcely able to convince himself, that both were contending for one and the same thing. And, indeed, it was only nominally, and not substantially, one and the same thing for which they argued.

‘Another indirect, but not unimportant, proof of the accuracy and necessity of the distinction here pointed out, lies in the unquestionable aversion of most of the great statesmen in America to the French revolution, and to all what, since 1789, have been called revolutionary principles. A remarkable anecdote occurs, testified by a witness unobjectionable upon this point, by Brissot, a man afterwards but too famous; an anecdote which proves how early this aversion had taken place. In a conversation which, shortly before the breaking out of the French revolution, he had with Mr. John Adams, now President of the United States, this gentleman assured him he was firmly convinced, that France, by the approaching revolution, would not even attain the degree of political liberty enjoyed by England; and what is most important, he denied, in perfect consistency with his pure and rigorous principles, that the French had a *right* to effect such a revolution as they intended. Brissot attempted in vain, by appeals to the *original compact*, to the imprescriptibility of the rights of the people, and the like revolutionary rant, to combat him.—P. Nouveau Voyage dans les Etats Unis de l’Amérique, par Brissot, vol. i. p. 147.’

Those whose judgment is founded upon actual observation, are well acquainted with the popularity of Paine’s writings. It is a mistake to imagine that this popularity arose from the truth or agency of his reasonings and positions. It sprung entirely from their accidentally *coinciding* with the *prepossessions* and opinions of the whole body of the people. The universal avidity, and even transport, with which they were received in cities, villages, and camps, are well remembered. Men were delighted to find a champion of a cause they had already made their own; to be furnished with popular and plausible arguments in favour of doctrines they had already adopted. The experience of all ages shows that this is the sole foundation of

the popularity of political writings; they do no more than countenance and strengthen the prevailing opinion.

The arguments which our author quotes from 'Common Sense,' to show the absurdity of that performance, are strong proofs of the dexterity of Paine, in taking advantage of the reigning prejudices, to combat, not the prerogatives of parliament, but the monarchy itself. It was not *such a work* that produced the American revolution, but only the principles and reasonings of that work previously existing in the mass of the people, and which that work contributed to diffuse still more by clothing them in a popular and intelligible garb.

Our author imagines a great difference between Paine's eloquence and that of the *great authorities* of the times, Adams, Jay, Dickenson, &c. These great authorities reasoned like *lawyers* only before the Declaration of Independence (July, 1776), that is, only before the revolution. How greatly is this writer mistaken in imagining that, after that event, they continued to reason, not like Doctors Price, Tucker, and Priestley, but like the partizans in the House of Commons! How they reasoned may be easily seen in all their proclamations and constitutional instruments, drawn up in defence of an absolute revolution.

The inference he draws from the *unquestionable aversion* of most of the great statesmen of America to the French revolution, is a very fallacious inference, even if the premises were granted; but the premises are unfortunately untrue. A politician of Berlin may be excused for being ignorant of the prevailing opinions in America, at the opening of the French revolution; and for not knowing that, notwithstanding all the evils that have accompanied it, it has always been approved and exulted in by two (among many others) of the most eminent American revolutionists—the author of the Farmer's Letters, and the writer of the Declaration of Independence.

In fine, we are obliged to conclude that the *origin* of the two revolutions was *different*, but not *opposite*, and that the *principles* of both were *similar*. It is plain enough, however, that to effectuate their principles, the Americans, from peculiar circumstances, were necessitated to make *fewer* changes; to contend with a less formidable internal and external opposition; and incurred calamities of less extent and duration than the French. What proportion this difference bears to the respective numbers of the two nations, and the probable issue of the struggle of the latter, are curious subjects of investigation, but too important and arduous for us to undertake.

Our readers will observe that we have avoided all discussion of the justice or expediency of revolutions in general, and particularly of those of France and America; whether we gave *too much*, or *just enough*, for the benefits of independence; whether our legal pleas, at one time, and our metaphysical ones, at another, were valid or nugatory; whether the catastrophe of the French drama will not leave them in as bad, or in a worse condition than kings, nobles, parliaments, and bishops had formerly placed them, are not our present concern; our only purpose is to state, in their true light, the origin and principles of two great and recent events.

We cannot much applaud the perspicuity or elegance of the translation.

ARTICLE VIII.

The Hypocrite unmasked; a Comedy in five Acts. By W. Winstanley. 8vo. pp. 94. New-York: Hopkins. 1801.

IN a country where literature is yet in its infancy, it may be deemed proper that those labours which are meant to contribute towards its support and improvement, should not only be exempted from the severity of criticism, but should be received with kindness and encouragement.

This sentiment, however, must be confined to such productions as discover unequivocal marks of a mind worthy of cultivation, and should by no means be extended into a general license to every trifling retailer of puns and witticisms to arrogate to himself the rights of authorship. Whilst, therefore, we are careful not to exercise a fastidious nicety over the first offerings of merit, and thus discourage the future efforts of genius, we cannot too soon examine and expose the pretensions of those who vainly aspire to rank themselves among the writers of the age. Whatever allowance ought justly to be made in favour of the inexperience of our countrymen, yet, unless this discrimination be strictly observed, public taste is in great danger of becoming utterly depraved. If every thing that is American is, on that account, to be screened from censure, one of the most powerful inducements to human exertion is, in a great measure, destroyed; for emulation must