Encyclopedism and Its Conscience:
Evolution and Revolution
Morning light from the Seine filters up the street to form almost a limned picture of the Arsenal, presently in part La Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. A kind of fortress it has been in history and is to this day, though now rather one of ideas, of history that might seem to float interminably about the quarter. Its walls had formerly housed arms magazines and apartments both military and elegant (when Sully resided there) of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—a temporary residence of Richelieu, of M. le maréchal et Madame la maréchale de Meilleraye, then of the marquis d'Argenson through the Revolutionary period and into the early nineteenth century, to become a Nodier salon and increasingly a famous library and museum. The odd-shaped structure holds a fascination for us today. For those cultivating le dix-huitième, its confines harbor a dream equal to any songe or dialogue of the period. One lives out a Utopia within these walls, within the countless, often massive tomes. Looking up from a volume of Diderot, Buffon, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Marmontel, Rousseau, Mercier, one may evoke a usual recent scene also of revered moderns who have sat working here—of Professor Daniel Mornet entering, laying down a folio in businesslike fashion, and immersing himself in a century; of Professors Bellessort, Ascoli, Chinard, Morize, Havens, and many others who have penetrated "un siècle illuminé."
The eighteenth century for France witnessed a complex sequence of movement and thought, from an opening resolution and plea for liberalism and enlightenment into a heavy burden of guilt-ridden conscience, into the gory maelstrom of actual revolution, and finally into a surprisingly gradual emergence of a most green and gracious time. Inspiration from the striking pages of *L'Encyclopédie* and from the distilled vitriol of Voltaireian *pâtés* had indeed remained throughout the years, but in retrospect the inspiration bespoke an admirable variety, for enjoyment rather than for immediacy or necessity.

Evolution and revolution had merged, and France had seen its relative Utopia in many shadings. Though man would be, forever and admittedly, insignificant and incapable of fulfilling his own ideals, there would be no concessions with regard to his thought and his endeavor. High adventure would become rash and daring in those realms, but cool moderation would tend to anneal the metal.

One may readily observe that Europe, rather as a whole, had early in the century declared its intention to think, to cast off certain shackles of a binding tradition, whether political or individual. It would intensify its feelings and assert its mental independence. Not only would France dare to pry relentlessly into human affairs and actions, but it would concoct practical methods by which such inquiry could prove relatively safe under the eyes of royalty or censors. Individuals and institutions alike could and must be attacked with guile. The attitude in the phrase *sous guise de* was to become a watchword for authors in almost any genre. Temerity allowed them tremendous scope in subjects; they proceeded to do battle with a valiant mixture of thought, sentiment, meditation, and craft. An essentially serious purpose of inquiry and reform underwent the guile of now fantasy, now realism, enhanced and rendered palatable under guise of pleasantry and often brilliance.

In a period of glaring social inequity, even cruelty, the purpose of most writing remained consistently and almost inevi-
tably criticism, varying in tone, amusing, pungent, mordant, caustic, vitriolic, corrosive, virulent, or venomous, as the century approached its own Revolution. If we might formulate, from Diderot's definition of a *philosophe* included within *L'Encyclopédie*, the two terms "philosophism" and "Encyclopedism," we might approach cautiously this basic attitude of an enlightening era. It was reason at its best, applied to conditions at their worst.

Intriguing features mark the long, complex emergence of the philosophic ideal. Possibly today its intangibility challenges us most forcefully. Even the eighteenth century was familiar with a venerable doctrine of man's perfectibility, by which he might endlessly glimpse a goal in his world but never quite reach it. As the century progressed on French soil, the *philosophe* gradually became rather well defined as that being who could persistently bear his ideal in mind, then proceed to seize, analyze, and convey to others any new aspects that he might have gleaned. Experience must therefore evolve conscience.

The impertinent century was bound to know, and obliged to give. Its French prototype, the *philosophe*, must assume the burden of curiosity so implicit in his being, yet he must project knowledge and experience with a sparkle that would save "Encyclopedism" from dullness. The nervously impatient period must conceal its meanings, not only cautiously, but wittily, to save itself both physically and mentally. *L'Encyclopédie* was ever so successfully teaching its own scheme of clever cross-references that couched tremendous force beneath innocuous headings. On pages in every genre and subdivision of genre, authors of drama, novel, and tale were conveying their personages as artfully naïve yet delightfully suspicious of their entire world—as *naïfs* that were never naïve.

One observes French conscience evolving gradually, yet vehemently, for this was an age of slow and painful process encased within passionate vehicles of impudence and action.
Much of Europe had committed itself to the eager but difficult task of thinking, not alone for the ideas, but for their implementation, for the prime goal of amelioration, physical, mental, moral. France was early in the century becoming conscious of her individual responsibilities toward physical misery. In the wake of a Molière, a La Bruyère, a rather newly socialized literature was eagerly propelling ideals of improvement toward a public increasingly able to read and to ponder them. One is even prompted to observe that for much of the western continent an actual littérature engagée was taking firm hold. In the earlier courageous hands of a Bayle, Montesquieu, Diderot, d'Alembert, or Lesage rested much of the force that was later to become sternly and relentlessly applicable. On the part of authors the task required commitment far beyond a conscience, with clairvoyant glimpses into lettres de cachet, burning of volumes, exile, imprisonment, and death. But before them, too, lay the invitingly open field of liberalism, to teach all, to create an educable mass, to democratize all learning. And they in turn followed a growing ideal of curiosity, impertinence, and compassion. Salons were to be no longer a world apart; they would endure and suffer with the best and the worst of conditions. They would, in the best of utilitarian tradition, harbor new and daring ideas within their walls, even propagate entire doctrines to an eagerly reading public. Until their closing there would emanate from them a tremendous variety of types represented under the labels of treatise, dialogue, tale, dream, tableau, portrait, travel, and countless more. A serious conscience would prescribe for all authors, and in turn for all readers, combined tones of approach: there would be throughout the century the cruel, shameless laughter at man's folly, all the way from a Lesage to a Voltaire or a Beaumarchais; and there would be just as sympathetic and fully as shameless weeping over his plight, from a Rousseau to a Restif de la Bretonne. This Encyclopedic age must lash out for immediacy, as did Voltaire, or it could persuade and dissuade as did many before and after
him. Satire, irony, and nuances within them all produced their pungent effect,

Expressive of the idea of man's need for God, as also of God's need for man, certain eras of time have seemed to prove a consummate courage in the face of both opportunity and obstacle. One might find this true of the Age of Reason not only for France but for the entire Western world. As a period it sparkles among the constellations. One cannot fail to note similarities in the two centuries, the eighteenth and the twentieth. Though hesitantly, we might well dare to place our present period also among the stars. In both, mankind has witnessed evolution and revolution. Though under differing circumstances, he has insisted upon knowing, rather more daringly than respectfully; he has persisted in knowledge for all of a teachable and reachable world; he has deplored circumstances of his planet, tried to check its frequent madness and to alleviate its wounds. In both, he has emerged a most complex being, spectacularly happy and profoundly sad. In both, he has developed almost a mania of social conscienteness.

The Age of Ideas insisted, most of all, upon analysis. Authors would continue to point the way toward man's motives, but especially must they examine the springs of his action in order to suggest effects upon himself, upon society, upon government. The Encyclopedic ideal tended to evolve such practicality. Practicality in turn exacted a certain objectivity. But since man was the subject, not simply his surroundings or just his circumstances, objectivity alone could never suffice. Being, thinking, and writing, alike, must inflict vicarious suffering or unbearable joy, the better to suggest a duality that could encompass such ugliness allied with such beauty.

With the usual human propensity for reaction, the opening century seemed to glory in its disorder. It was desperately bound for a freedom that it could scarcely define. Literary genres reflected the disorder. But scientific approach and relativity had long passed the stages of Descartes and Pascal. One senses, as early as the twenties, a willing reconciliation.
with regularity and plan. Historical treatises, narrative forms, drama, verse, all tended to reflect the furies of a dissatisfied society that either stormed or wept; but there, clearly and constantly on the page, under guise or not, were the reasons and motives for the fury.

It was a justifiable commotion for freedom’s sake, and the natural human counterpart was concern. We may wonder whether administrators, authors, and public could possibly have foreseen the expansion of their own humanitarianism that would forever mark the century. Certainly commitment was an order of the day; suggestions must be implemented; determination would pursue every goal. By turn sensitive, sensible, and sentimental, the period made scarcely any claim to perfection. It did envisage, by exhortation or harshness or bitterness, necessary physical changes; it did dare to hope for a more generous society. One could, and must, become “philosophized.” In turn, said de Tréogate, youth could be “brought back to Truth through Sentiment and Reason.” A true philosophe would have profited and suffered under both auspices. “Cultivating gardens” was to become a preoccupation, in any one of many interpretations.

We are constantly reminded that this was a far from naïve century. It would concern itself, physically, with necessary environmental change, but also with an aspiration toward self-mastery. Mentally, it would whet its wit relentlessly upon social change. Morally, it must understand its soul. In many a volume of the period one senses all three aspects running and leaping confusedly and confusingly. One cannot fail to note, however, the aim and a seriousness of concern, often an intense remorse. From sensitivity, into sensuality, into licentiousness, then into reverse order, one interprets a cycle—le cœur, le corps, l’esprit, le cœur.

Subjects, then, had run throughout the era on both the analytical and the psychological sides, as well as on the sociological. Rage against the general condition of man pervaded a century of reason and progress. Pity and anger strode through
the years. Mesalliance in marriage, rehabilitation of the cour­ttesan, the status of the natural child—such subjects had re­ceived a “harsh compassion,” but prejudice, as well as igno­rance, could be combatted. Modern forms of psychological and sociological understanding might recognize and concur in many aspects. But especially was the self, the “moi,” to re­tain its essential dignity, its consciousness of a conscience.

As the embattled years wore on, this “philosophism” or “Encyclopedism” contributed to untold but useful confusion. One finds, especially in treatises and in tales, countless Uto­pia. Traced with either positive or negative pen, they fre­quently raise the question of whether they were pose or ac­tuality; no matter, they exhorted physical, mental, or moral improvement. A Rousseauistic conception of pastoral themes tended to attract those who would see in a calmness of na­ture some of the much desired amelioration. Education, al­ready ensconced in a certain amount of practicality, could advocate systems and procedures. Through an expanding journalism came a desire for reportage, for external detail as a means of teaching and of exerting reform. Because of con­science the “search for happiness” theme was evolving into reality. As proofs of reality, themes were even moving into laboratory techniques. One may half glimpse a coming Nat­uralism. Impertinence, impudence, and temerity constituted their own benefits, based upon reason.

France was extremely busy with her undertakings. Well­considered utopias of human qualities must precede or ac­company those of a reformed society. As in any restlessly dis­contented ambiance, individual and institutional features must fulfill an ideal. L’Encyclopédie had indeed sought to im­prove the human being upon whom its knowledge might descend. Freedom was therefore to be construed not only as a liberation toward certain ideal aspects of one’s living, such as improved institutions, but just as importantly as a libera­tion from the vanity or lack of moderation that would inevi­tably deter implementation of them.
Since understanding still remains for us often elusive, it is interesting to note the persistence of the theme in every genre of the eighteenth century. Persons languished in prison while an issue was being decided; matters of peace among nations awaited minute details of wording. We know that calumny was one of the sharpest thorns of a period in which even caustic writers flayed its detestable power. Ill-content for its own sake was capable of crushing all endeavor, but contentment that rested upon class alone would be equally reprehensible. Abuses were apparent, and conscience must hold its place.

These reasonable beings of the period were eminently fulfilling both roles within their improving years: they were painters of the ideal and sculptors of its forms. In both they appeared at times almost unbelievably clairvoyant. For their corner of a universe they claimed relatively little but expected much, and whether on promenades or at the workbench they proved determined and indefatigable. One evokes the picture of a nervously intense, often erratic Diderot pursuing his goal despite all discouragement or danger. His was one determination among many in a vigorous, soaring and volatile age.

Again placing the two centuries together, one notes that both have demonstrated a contrasting admiration, on the one hand, for a decidedly mechanistic progress reaching into ordinary living as well as into institutions, and on the other, for aspects of a completely ephemeral intangibility. Both have inordinately loved man, yet have shockingly mistreated him. Naturally, in viewing any historic section of our planet, one must concede the possibility that many of the later recognized discernments may have been accidental. Yet the eighteenth was a precocious century and far from timid. One cannot refrain from labeling certain phases of those years as "psychological," "sociological." Even many of the intricacies that we tend to call modern are very surely on the page. Novels and tales divide the "introspective," "extraspective," and
The human processes, it is true, may have been ancient, but still we note with interest the amount of space here allotted to them. Moderation in all sorts of fields, of action or of thinking, would exact the "delayed reactions," the "subconscious retreat," "living substitution," "escapism," of which we speak today.

Nor were these discerning moments exclusively of mental projection. A century that so actively knew fear could scarcely help conveying it physically. Again journalism offered effective means; caricatures often became venomous beneath their ingratiating lines. A reading public had been taught to read between cross-references; now it could apply itself to drawings. An ancient idea of frequent connection between moral good or evil and physical ease or suffering found interesting application in a "roving reporter," Restif de la Bretonne. His graphic sketches, running from pungency to horror, made the public increasingly conscious of correlated squalor and delinquency. As must be so, if an era were to envisage implementation of its ideals, the Age of Reason placed due stress upon its youth. Though in the thousands of pages of its literature, the century would endlessly, often tediously, admonish its youth or warn against dangers, yet it worshiped the same tumultuous curiosity that could allow advancing years to retain their glow. It would profitably export into the following century a Rousseauistic idea that learning seemed good only when it was being conveyed. Above all, it saw an educational evangel in induction. Some few keenly perceptive members even espoused the cause of coeducation, as a means of rendering the sexes more understanding toward each other. Important as were facts, with regard to change and progress, they could be overemphasized. One is amused to read of Dorat's enjoining upon his public not to live with the facts alone or one will surely emerge "un peu plus bête le lendemain."

The confusion, rage, and grief that had accompanied the
emission of an *Encyclopédie* evolved both a philosophic and an actional ideal. The century recognized that in order to cope with life, it must attack abuses with determination, but also with laughing disrespect, and especially with a will to practicality. Utilitarianism would be by no means just a doctrine; “Encyclopedism” could never remain simply “philosophism.” Twilight years were to witness a diminishing need for the virulence of opposition, the acerbity of tone that had so actively produced their effect. As with countless heroes and heroines of its drama or novel, the era was to accede to a maturity, a graciousness of being. Quiet conviction would supplant the perturbed agitation of its beginning and middle years. Immediacy was to be of lesser importance than permanence. And again, as in an eternal cycle, the self would be of utmost concern. But whether it might be for environment or for self-analysis, one transcendent difference would be evident—the individual would forever work upon his group knowledge. Nothing indeed could be more difficult than coping with this, or any other existence, but he found himself encouraged to imagine and to enforce his visions. A period of immoderation had profoundly coveted moderation.

Together with an ambitious ideal, reasonableness could next proceed to certain subtleties of refinement. A century that had somewhat doubtfully viewed asceticism would naturally incline toward an extroverted future, in which the constructive forces so ardently pursued might become actualities. It may even occur to us that this ideal of never living unto one’s self alone, of groups assuming entities in and of themselves, has lived a rather fascinating existence during the years. A term of Unanimism has evolved within our time.

The evening of a century is drawing to a close. At the Arsenal desk huge tomes and series of the small volumes side by side bespeak a Utopia developed through social conscience. And now it is a fading but softly penetrating light coming up from the Seine.