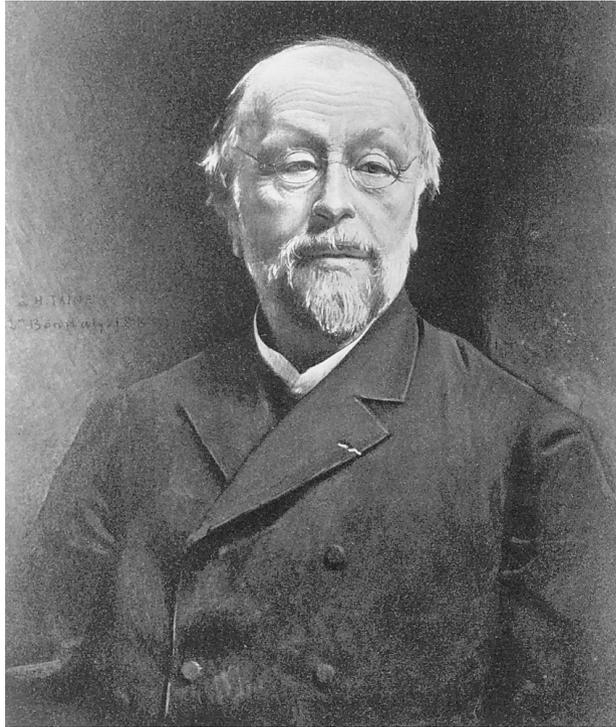


THE FRENCH
REVOLUTION





HIPPOLYTE TAINÉ

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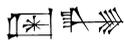
HIPPOLYTE TAINÉ



Translated by
John Durand

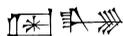
Introduction by
Mona Ozouf

VOLUME I



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❧ INTRODUCTION ❧

“MY BOOK,” Taine wrote Ernest Havet in 1878, “if I have enough strength and health to complete it, will be a medical consultation.”¹ Dr. Taine in effect sat himself down at the bedside of a country exhausted by the war and the Commune to write *Les origines*, the record of his examination of contemporary France. He never tired of comparing historical research to medical research, of demonstrating his scientific credentials, or of inventing metaphors for his profession: in his 1884 preface, introducing his study of the revolutionary government, he claims to have tracked the animal “when it lay in its lair, when it chewed, when it snatched, when it digested.” He said he cared less about writing the history of the Revolution than about its “pathology.” Contemporaries like Amiel thought they detected in the book the “odor of the laboratory.”² He insisted, moreover, that the purpose of the enterprise was therapeutic: to make a diagnosis, write a prescription, find a “social form” that the French people might take on. Like Jaurès’ history, which though quite different in its choices was also immense, purposeful, and militant, Taine’s *Origines* was shaped by a representation of the future. The word “militant” might seem surprising: yet Taine wrote

1. Letter to Ernest Havet, March 24, 1878, in *H. Taine: sa vie et sa correspondance*, Paris, 1902–1907, vol. IV. He adds (thereby providing evidence for the hypothesis of a “German crisis” in Taine’s thought): “two of the patient’s fingers, Alsace and Lorraine, have already fallen.”

2. This, moreover, is how Taine himself defined his life, as a “laboratory where one thought.”

Albert Sorel in 1870 that free minds would henceforth be obliged to mobilize for “instructive and disagreeable”³ lecture tours, so that by engaging in a vast, public self-critique the nation might avoid repeating its errors.

Because of its heavily didactic quality, Taine’s uncompleted work, thought spectacularly successful at first, fell into discredit soon after. It was easy to argue that it had been conceived and written out of a combination of political passion, fear, and resentment.⁴ For while Taine prided himself on approaching the history of the French Revolution in exactly the same spirit in which he would have treated the revolutions of Florence or Athens, his book was nevertheless intimately linked to two discoveries he had made a short while before: Germany, the fatherland of his intellect, now struck him (and also Renan and Fustel de Coulanges) as a brutal, despotic, and barbaric country;⁵ and France, the fatherland of his heart, had just witnessed the reawakening of its old revolutionary malady. Taine’s prognosis, shaped by these twin traumas, was one of disaster: the “gray” idea he had always had of France now turned decidedly blacker. This pessimism was precisely what made his book unacceptable; he wrote it in the years when the history of France was converging on a republican form, when Ferry gambled and won on rebuilding national unity around the principles of 1789. Squarely aimed at those principles, Taine’s history thus went against the grain.

3. H. Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, Preface, Paris, 1886. Taine adds that this social form is not “a matter of caprice, but determined by the character and past of the people who claim to enter it.”

4. Jacques Godechot interprets the *Origines* as the conventional product of the visceral fear of a landowner: “his social origins, the traditions of his family, his property, his kind of life, his milieu: all predisposed him to enter the ranks of the conservatives and to write a history violently hostile to the Revolution.” J. Godechot, “Taine, Historian of the French Revolution,” in *Romantisme*.

5. Letter of February 7, 1871, to Emile Planat, in *Correspondance*, op. cit., vol. IV: “The war,” wrote Taine, “brought to light the bad and nasty side of their character covered by a veneer of civilization. The German animal is, at bottom, brutal, hard, despotic, barbarian; and the German animal is, moreover, frugal and wastrel. All this just showed itself and caused horror.”

Nor was it fully assimilable by the Catholic and monarchist opposition. His portrayal of the Ancien Régime as responsible for the revolution, his arraignment of royalty on the charge of absolutism, and his anticlericalism (never far below the surface in this fervent Stendhalian) limited the extent to which his work could be taken up by the reactionaries.

Hard to classify politically (the image of Taine as an opponent of the Empire was still fresh in the minds of contemporaries), Taine's abundant output was also hard to classify philosophically—another reason for the public's incomprehension. It was apparently empiricist, because Taine revered facts and collected them with the zeal of the genre painter who fills his canvas with details. Yet he also insisted, and it was no small claim, that history obeyed fixed laws. His work was apparently idealist as well, since the causal principle of history was for him the spirit of the peoples and, for France, the classical spirit, but with the proviso that "this spirit is not distinct from the facts through which it expresses its character." And it was apparently positivist, because he believed that facts were related to one another; but positivists "relegated causes outside science," whereas Taine wanted science absolute and unbounded. His work was further influenced by materialism, which earned him the occasional sympathy of Mathiez;⁶ the materialist aspect became increasingly pronounced as the years went by and Taine's pessimism increased, to the point where he asserted that "man's masters are physical temperament, bodily needs, animal instinct, [and] hereditary prejudice."⁷ It is not hard to see why contemporaries hardly knew what to make of the massive meteorite that had somehow fallen among the flowerbeds of a history just beginning to hedge itself about with documents and preach the religion of neutrality.

The embarrassment caused by Taine's history soon turned into

6. See *Les Annales Révolutionnaires*, review essay of the work, April–June 1908.

7. H. Taine, *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, op. cit. "The Old Regime," Third Book, chap. IV: "Construction of the Future Society."

an indictment by the professionals. Official history charged him with having anointed himself historian without any knowledge of the historian's methods or techniques. It deplored the accumulation of anecdotes (catalogued by Aulard in an incredibly uninspired book⁸) with which Taine sought to "pressure the distracted and flighty reader, besiege him, overwhelm him with a surfeit of sensations and proofs."⁹ It rejected the tyranny of the race-milieu-time theory already widely celebrated in literary history and transported without change to history proper. Above all, it cast a critical eye on a historian who, though dependent on circumstances himself, set little store by them in the history he wrote. Taine neglected the resistance of the refractory clergy, the flight of the king, the court's entente with Austria, the Prussian invasion, and, more generally, the foreign peril. Hence it was hardly surprising, Aulard and Seignobos agreed, that he depicted the Jacobins as madmen;¹⁰ eliminating circumstances and doing away with partners and adversaries alike turned crucial actions into senseless gesticulations. At once prolix and superficial, anecdotal and didactic, vague and peremptory, Taine thus exhibited all the flaws of the bad historian: the great monument already lay half in ruins, to borrow Seignobos's lapidary description.¹¹

Was Taine's work really a product of circumstances? If, as Taine himself maintained, the history of the Revolution depended on the

8. A. Aulard, *Taine, historien de la Révolution française*, Paris, 1907.

9. Letter from the end of January, 1861, to Edouard de Suckau, *Correspondance*, op. cit., vol. III.

10. For Aulard (op. cit.), Taine shows the fury of the revolutionaries without explaining why they were furious, and this fury—thus unexplained—has the air of a folly, the folly of "reason reasoning, the folly of the classical spirit, the folly of the revolutionary spirit." Seignobos echoes the thought: "The violent measures of the Directory are presented without taking into account the royalist conspiracies and the threat of foreign invasion that motivated them. It is the portrait of a duel in which one of the two adversaries has been effaced, and which gives the other the look of a madman." Ch. Seignobos, "L'Histoire in Petit de Julleville," in *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature française*, Paris, 1899, vol. VIII.

11. Seignobos, op. cit.

definition of the French spirit, he had defined that spirit much earlier through comparison with England. In his *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, the monumental work that occupied him in the 1860s, by which time he was already obsessed with his discovery of a unique explanatory principle and anxious to characterize the English spirit, he believed that with the sense of liberty he had hit upon the way to do so. The great idea of the English “is the conviction that man, having conceived alone in his conscience and before God the rules of his conduct, is above all a free, moral person.”¹² Taine traced English liberty to two fundamental sources: Protestantism, a moral religion purged of all sensuality,¹³ and participation in public life. Civic activity was embodied first of all in “democratic aristocracy” that had had the intelligence not to cut itself off from the life of the county or parish and had thus retained not only its rank but also its purpose (Taine was a careful reader of Guizot and Macaulay).¹⁴ But such activity also extended well beyond the circle of notables: newspapers and meetings gave “Parliament the nation for its audience,” and public affairs were linked to the lives of individuals by a thousand local roots. From this web stemmed the “superabundance of political life”¹⁵ that Taine discovered in England.

From his knowledge of English writers Taine very early drew the conclusion that this precious political liberty was the fruit of accep-

12. H. Taine, *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, Paris, 1892, vol. IV, Conclusion: “The Past and the Present.”

13. Thanks to Protestantism, and “by the suppression of legends and practices,” man’s thought had been concentrated on a single object, moral improvement. *Ibid.*

14. Taine admired Guizot’s solidity (cf. *Essais de critique et d’histoire*, Paris, 1858). As for Macaulay, his admiration lasted through the years. Even in 1888, he wrote to the Viscount M. de Vogüé: “You are quite right to reread and to love Macaulay: he has the healthiest of heads and hearts; and as for his style, he has no equal in Europe.” *Correspondance*, op. cit., letter of October 20, 1888.

15. “One can say that by the newspapers and meetings, a great universal parliament and many smaller ones disseminated throughout the country, and prepare, control and bring to completion the work of the two Houses.” Cf. Taine, *Notes sur l’Angleterre*, Paris, 1876.

tance of inequality and toleration of disorder. The English Constitution was a complex, ancient, organic accumulation of privileges and “consecrated injustices.” In this confusing mass of contracts each person could identify his rights and carve out his own protected domain, certain that no one—neither king nor lord nor community—could interfere with it. The state refrained from intervening in this ancient and often-patched edifice, whose older parts were gradually reshaped and fitted to new uses. Government offered guarantees and protections but delegated to others functions that it was incapable of carrying out—commerce, agriculture, industry—and that could be filled more effectively by free individuals, notables, or associations.

For Taine, this conservative tradition, an amalgam of civic spirit, moral virtue, and practical sense, clearly explained why revolution was unthinkable for the English. Yet they had made two revolutions: the *Times*’s reviewer reminded him how much difficulty England had had in recovering from one of them, the “little Cromwellian revolution,” and Taine himself criticized Guizot for failing to convey its ferocity and energy. For him, however, the point was that these revolutions had not destroyed the monarchy. They had only forced it to adapt, thus revealing the English genius for improvisation. The English had reformed everything: “Bakewell their livestock, A. Young their industry, Adam Smith their economy, Bentham their penal code, Hutcheson, Ferguson, Joseph Butler, Reid, Stewart, and Price their psychology and their ethics.”¹⁶

Can it be said that it was through this encounter with the English temperament, at once practical and moral, that Taine discovered—by contrast—the “French spirit” that would become his central explanation of the revolutionary phenomenon? Or did an implicit definition of the French spirit guide the selection he made among the facts of English history? The second hypothesis is more plausible, for it is striking to see how he attenuates or sharpens characteristic

16. Cf. *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, op. cit., vol. III, Third Book: “The Revolution.”

features of the two countries in order to heighten the desired antithesis. If he glosses over the discontinuities in English history, if he is silent about English Catholicism, if he overstates the uncouth and rustic character of the English, it is because he desires contrast and is quietly comparing two alternative courses for European history. In the 1860s, in other words, Taine was fascinated by the idea of two peoples hurtling without their knowledge toward an inevitable clash, each heightening its own characteristic features—the one feral, Christian, inegalitarian, and conservative, the other sociable, free-thinking, egalitarian, and revolutionary. The first had not destroyed its national community even with its “revolutions,” while the second had demolished its national community well before the Revolution.¹⁷

In other words, the war and the Commune may have been responsible for the bitterness of *Les origines de la France contemporaine* but not for its philosophy. And Taine, much less difficult to classify and much less isolated than has been said, made use, not always with explicit acknowledgment, of the work of earlier historians, especially Burke and Tocqueville, who like him had recognized the exemplary value of English history.

From Burke, to whom he had devoted a laudatory passage in the *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, Taine borrowed a portrait, a sentiment, and an idea, which he left unchanged in substance but amplified by rhetorical skill. The portrait was of the French revolutionaries: insane with abstraction, persuaded that the bedrock of human life was the elementary (and not the complexity in which Burke saw men immersed from the beginning), obsessed with the geometric spirit (to the point of performing surgery, as Burke put it, on their own soil), cynically reductionist (reducing man to “naked nature” by stripping him, as the revolutionaries had done to the queen Marie Antoinette over whom Burke had wept, of the gracious

17. The comparison between France and England is conducted throughout his work. On this point, see Taine’s “M. de Troplong et M. de Montalembert,” in *Essais de critique et d’histoire*, op. cit.

or decent drapery of ornament), and stupid in their pretension to create a new constitution (“rushing in where angels fear to tread”). The sentiment was one of the extreme fragility of civilized society, the slow product of compromise and adjustment, which was viable only if built on custom, enveloped in the reverence due everything that has endured, supported by church and state, and shored up by a hereditary class of notables. It is noteworthy that Taine, who rarely quoted other writers, did make an exception for Burke’s statement that if a reformer laid hands on the defects of the state, he must do so as if touching “the wounds of a father, with pious veneration and a trembling hand.” And finally, the idea, which Taine the scientist long hesitated to accept but which he made his own in *Les origines*, was that reason had played a limited role in the evolution of humanity. Burke had written that it was far wiser to perpetuate prejudice, with the reason it contains, than to cast aside the shroud and retain only naked reason, because prejudice makes reason effective. Taine responded: “Reason is wrong to become indignant when prejudice guides human affairs, for in order to guide them it too must become a prejudice.”¹⁸

Taine’s debt to Burke was therefore immense. But Burke also bequeathed to Taine his perplexity at the incongruous spectacle of the French: where they might have scoured the storehouse of their history for useful remnants of their constitution, instead they had inexplicably preferred the bewilderment of a new constitution. Taine was a born explainer, however, who could not leave such strangeness alone. For him, deformity had to have a form. So where an astonished Burke saw the French ignoring a rich tradition in favor of the nudity of a clean slate, Taine responded that it all made sense if in fact the clean slate was itself a French tradition.

Thus we come to the heart of Taine’s history, the celebrated hypothesis of the classical spirit. In the beginning was a *racial* trait, a fixed form of intelligence given to rational and oratorical argument. This inclination found its ideal environment in the seventeenth-

18. Cf. *Les origines de la France contemporaine*, op. cit., “The Old Regime,” Third Book: “The Spirit and the Doctrine.”

century salon, and its *milieu*, the literary circle, in which an art of conversation was perfected based on ease and a stylized diction that invariably favored the general over the particular. The literary critic, familiar with English works that always informed the reader about their hero's profession, marital status, physical peculiarities, and fortune, could no longer abide a French literature filled with Damises and Cléantes (signifying employments, not individuals) and, later, with Iroquois and Persians as flat as playing cards and talking like books. Already well established in the seventeenth century, this abstract and simplifying vision was wedded in the following century, Taine argued, to the scientific spirit. This marriage might, for a scientist, have been a happy one. But French rationalism, because it was the offspring of an already mature classical spirit, had shunned the beneficial fertilization of experiment. Hence out of this wedlock came a monster: the idea of man in himself, liberated from all determinations, always and everywhere the same (physically, morally, and intellectually)—the source of all revolutionary aberrations.

Once this creature of reason entered the realm of history, the way was clear for all the philosophical offensives of the eighteenth century: that of Voltaire, directed against religion; that of the Encyclopedists and materialists, against custom; and the final efflorescence, that of Rousseau, against society. Here the philosophical nihilism of the eighteenth century found its true doctrine, and the Revolution, its true master; from then on, Taine maintained, it would do no more than fulfill the requisites of the Rousseauist vision, whose two sides were anarchy (since the form of government is subject at all times to the general will) and despotism (since individual rights are alienated in the community). This theory is the capstone of Taine's conceptual edifice: a racial trait, the classical spirit, which had long since found its milieu, in 1789 encountered its *moment*. In other words—and Taine never shrank from a striking formulation—Saint-Just and Robespierre were the direct heirs of Boileau.¹⁹ And far from being a rent in the fabric of the nation, the Revolution was

19. This idea is expressed with incomparable clarity in a July 31, 1874, letter to Boutmy: it is a question of showing that “Boileau, Descartes, Lemaistre de

in fact the expression of the national genius. And thus Taine discovered Tocqueville.

That discovery seems to have come rather late for the needs of his enormous book. A letter to his wife shows how much Taine admired Tocqueville's predictive powers: "What a distressing thing, to see all our ills so thoroughly understood, and yet that understanding still so little disseminated!"²⁰ He studied Tocqueville to the point where he hoped to treat the very subject that Tocqueville had singled out in a letter to Kergorlay—how the Empire was able to establish itself in the midst of the society created by the Revolution—and answer its central questions: "Where did this new race come from? What produced it?"²¹ He took from Tocqueville both his summary of the Revolution's effects and his arsenal of causes. Among the effects listed by Taine we find, as in Tocqueville, the establishment of equality (not simply abstract, theoretical equality but an equality almost achieved during the Empire, with all "great lives barred,"²² a host of petty employments, and not a single position worthy of ambition except perhaps—a Stendhalian stroke—that of bishop) and the completion of state centralization, leaving a provincial wasteland eroded by ennui. Establishment, completion: the very terminology suggests a terminal process; it attests to the deep roots that link the Revolution to the Ancien Régime. In exposing those roots Taine showed little originality. He took from Tocqueville both the material causes ("abuses," seigneurial oppression without compensating ser-

Sacy, Corneille, Racine, and Fléchier are the ancestors of Saint-Just and Robespierre." *Correspondance*, op. cit., vol. III.

20. Letter of August 28, 1871, to Madame Henri Taine, *Correspondance*, op. cit., vol. III.

21. The idea of a "new race"—somnolent until then and coming to life with the advent of democracy—runs throughout Taine's work. Cf. *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, op. cit., vol. IV: "The Modern Age."

22. *Les Carnets de voyage; notes sur la province 1863–1865*, published after Taine's death, (Paris, 1897), shows the aversion Taine felt towards provincial life under the Second Empire because of its parsimonious, skimpy, "rational" character.

vices, a useless nobility, an infuriatingly wealthy clergy, centralization and destruction by absolutism of natural groups, local life, and intermediary bodies, and fiscal irresponsibility) and the intellectual causes (the royalty of the humanities and the political radicalism of the philosophes). In the dark years while he was writing *Les origines* he was even prepared to add to this portrait the substitution of philosophy for religion, a change that deprived the popular classes of the firm mooring of faith.

These unoriginal materials were treated in a very original way, however. While Tocqueville sketched a whole host of causes and was content to lay special stress only on the *tabula rasa* created by the monarchy, a void that was quickly filled by public opinion, the true queen of kings, Taine tended to rest his entire architecture on a single pedestal, the intellectual cause. He had a far greater taste than Tocqueville for what he called the "productive element." For him, the essence of intellectual activity was to subordinate the effects of all particular causes to "the effect of a unique cause capable of accounting for the infinite complications of individuality."

This conception of causality, which dominates Taine's history, is worth exploring further. For him, the ideal type of science was deductive science. He never forgave Stuart Mill for limiting himself to inductive science by viewing causality as simply constancy of succession. He was equally hostile to Maine de Biran's concept of causality as an intimate force, a mysterious bond between cause and effect, as well as to Kant's synthetic a priori.²³ The only conceptual model of causality left was that of the relation between the whole

23. Taine's ideal is the establishment of a deductive chain without any discontinuities, constituting the essential thread of empirical reality, and the ultimate reduction of all facts and partial laws to a single law. The Kantian critique seemed empty to him: the human spirit knows reality in itself, and is capable of absolute knowledge without any limitation (see *De l'intelligence*, Paris, 1870, vol. II). As for Maine de Biran, Taine mocks the Birannian idea according to which the physicist, master of phenomena, does not grasp because all causes are immaterial (see *Les philosophes classiques au XIX^e siècle en France*, Paris, 1857, reprint, Geneva 1979).