

# THE LOVE AND HATE RELATIONSHIP OF AN AMERICAN ARISTOCRAT WITH THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: GOUVERNEUR MORRIS'S DIARY AND LETTERS

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« On the whole sir, we stand on a volcano. We feel it tremble, we hear it roar, but how and when it will burst and who may be destroyed by its eruption, it is beyond the ken of mortal foresight to discover » (Letter to Jefferson, June 17th, 1792) \*.

Hippolyte Taine, in his introduction to Mallet du Pan's « Collected Letters » wrote that: « Only four observers have, from the beginning, understood the true character and scope of the French Revolution; they were Rivarol, Malouet, Gouverneur Morris and Mallet du Pan ».

How far Gouverneur Morris understood the Revolution remains to be seen. But, in so far as we are prepared to accept the testimony of an American Aristocrat, the insight and intuitions of Gouverneur Morris, together with the position he occupied in France during the Revolution establish his Diary and letters as exceptional documents.

Gouverneur Morris was born in 1752, at Morrisania, the family estate a few miles from New York. At the age of twelve, on his father's death, he was sent out to study in New Rochelle, under the tutorship of a French gentleman, Mr Tetard, who taught him to speak French elegantly. He graduated from King's College (now Columbia) and became a lawyer.

Deeply conservative, he opposed the idea of breaking with Great Britain, but immediately sided with the « patriots ». In 1776-1777 he was elected to the New York legislature where he was a prominent orator in favor of religious liberty and the abolition of slavery. He was later elected to the Continental Congress, where he stood as one of Washington's staunchest supporters. Failing to be re-elected, he settled down in Philadelphia as a lawyer, and published essays on finance and various matters, sharply critical of the issue of paper money.

\* This and all other quotations from Morris are from *The Diary and Letters of Gouverneur Morris, Minister of the United States to France*, edited by Anne Cary Morris, Scribner, N.Y., 1888, 2 vols.

Between 1781 and 1785, he was Assistant to Robert Morris, Superintendent of Finance, for whom he prepared a report advising the adoption of a decimal currency, under the name of dollar and cents. He was later to write cogent letters from Paris to this life-long friend and associate, since they founded together the first American bank, the Bank of North America.

A member of the Convention of 1787, he was a driving force in the elaboration and drafting of the Constitution, though he failed to carry the other Founding Fathers to his side in his support of an almost monarchical republic, with a President elected for life-time, and endowed with the right to appoint senators for a similar term. Nor did he succeed in ending slavery which he called a « nefarious institution ».

A gifted orator, an active businessman and a man of letters, Gouverneur Morris also had a romantic touch, having had a leg amputated after an accident in 1780. To a friend who had exhorted him to patience and resignation, he wrote: « Sir, the loss is much less than you imagine. I shall doubtless be a steadier man with one leg than with two ». Twelve years later, while driving through the streets of Paris, he came near to being jostled by the crowd which hooted « An Aristocrat ». Morris then opened the door of his carriage, and showed his stump exclaiming: « An Aristocrat truly, who lost his leg in the cause of American liberty », thereby attracting loud applause and cheers from the crowd. The episode is quite symbolic of a man who was capable of high enthusiasm and deep distrust for democracy and who was never sure of the difference between « the people » and « the populace ». A true aristocrat, he nevertheless truly loved American liberty. But he can hardly be said to have jeopardized a leg or limb for Democracy.

The experiences and reflections of Gouverneur Morris in Paris were clearly shaped by his American experience. But the part he played in the first years of the French Revolution must have been more thrilling than his American involvement.

Morris arrived in Paris in February, 1789. He had come to negotiate the delivery of American wheat and tobacco, the reimbursement of the American debt to France and, subsidiarily, the sale of American lands. The letters of introduction he had from George Washington and the Marquis de Moustier, the French Minister to the United States, opened to him the best houses and salons in Paris: he thus met Necker and his ministers, Madame de Staël, the Bishop of Autun (Talleyrand) and frequented Lafayette and many other celebrities of the time as well as Jefferson and, to his great displeasure, Tom Paine. He was also introduced to the King and Queen after he was officially appointed Plenipotentiary Minister to France in 1792.

Of all the personalities he was acquainted with, Morris drew sharp and critical portraits. Necker, he described as one who had about him « the look and manner of the counting house » and « a very poor financier », when the crisis came to a head in 1791. Furthermore, Necker was, he said, a poor judge of human nature: « a cunning man, he understands man as a covetous creature, but does not understand mankind » (I, 283). In a word,

Necker was hardworking and honest, but entirely lacking in the genius which alone could have saved the French monarchy from its dire plight.

On the other hand, the king's ministers were mostly characterised by their mediocrity and petty intrigues, with a few exceptions, such as M. de Montmorin, who « means well.. but means it so feebly... »; and M. de St Priest, who was « ...the only man who has what they call "caractère", which answers most to our idea of firmness, joined to some activity » (Letter to George Washington, Jan 1790; I, 282).

Lafayette seems to have disappointed Morris greatly – all the more since Morris suspected him of acting out of vanity and ambition rather than for the love of freedom: « He means ill to no one, but he has a *besoin de briller*. He is much below the business he has undertaken, and if the sea runs high, he will be unable to hold the helm » (I, 158). In fact, Morris hated the anti-nobility stance Lafayette chose to adopt, and viewed his « democratic » actions as a sign that he sought to appear as « a generalissimo », and to establish « a kind of dictatorship ». And like Necker, Lafayette seemed to him too small a man to face the challenge of such a situation as the Revolution: « His mind is so elated by power already too great for the measure of his abilities that he looks into the clouds and grasps at the supreme » (Nov 18th, 1789; I, 232).

Gouverneur Morris does not seem to have held Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine, in great esteem either. Jefferson's popularity with the French, Morris attributes to a kind of exotism. « The French who pique themselves of possessing the graces, very readily excuse in others the want of them... Mr Jefferson lives well, keeps a good table, good wines which he distributes freely... » (I, 138, Letter to Robert Morris, July 22, 1789). But, his true opinion of Jefferson is put in the mouth of Madame de Flahaut, whom he holds in great esteem, and perhaps a little more. « She told me a few days ago, after seeing Mr Jefferson's countenance, "Cet homme est faux et emporté" » (I, 180). But it seems likely that Morris's coldness to Jefferson stemmed from deep political disagreement. When Jefferson despaired that anything good might be done by the Estates-General, Morris comments: « This comes from having too sanguine expectations of a downright republican form of government » (I, 96). Later, Morris observes clearly that he and Jefferson differed greatly in politics. Jefferson, he said,

...with all the leaders of liberty here, is desirous of annihilating distinctions of order. How far such views may be right, respecting mankind in general, is problematical; but with respect to this nation, I am sure it is wrong and cannot eventuate well (I, 100).

This was indeed one of Gouverneur Morris's major ideas – that there was no universal truth as far as political systems went, but that truth – that is good institutions – depended on the condition in which a country found itself; and that France was not ready for democracy or for republican government.

Morris hated Tom Paine a good deal. Partly because of Paine's intrigues against him (or what he calls intriguing); and partly because of what Paine published at the time. But, instead of entering into a polemic on Paine's ideas, Morris only stresses his ill manners and hard drinking habits. « ...at present, I am told, he is besotted from morning till night ».

Morris seems to have very rapidly won the hearts and the confidence of his prestigious hosts, who at times even expressed some reprobation of his conservative views. Madame de Lafayette tells him that she considers him as an aristocrat, and that his « ideas were too moderate for that company » (I, 36). Yet, his opinion and advice were sought from all sides: a member of the Estates-General begged him « to throw together some thoughts respecting the Constitution of this country » (July 24th, 1789). We find him repeatedly engaged in making plans for the finances of France with various personalities (Mme de Flahaut, Mr de Montmorin). He advises Lafayette first on the command of the Garde Nationale, then on personalities likely to form a government and, for instance, recommends Malessherbes as Keeper of the Seals, La Rochefoucauld as Minister of Paris etc... explaining that « the coalition I propose will drive away Necker, by the very populace which now support him » (I, 179). Madame de Chastellux tells him that: « she will make a *don patriotique* by presenting him to the King for one of his ministries » (Oct. 1789; I, 205) and a few days later, it is Madame de Ségur who asks him if he would accept a post as minister, if proposed. He replies « yes, if the King and the Queen promise to act by my advice ».

Morris goes as far as counselling Montmorin « to have a war as soon as possible... and seize the Low Countries and Holland ». At other times he suggests to Necker « ...the idea of raising the price of bread in Paris by making the difference fall on those who employ workmen. Also start to him the idea of asking the Assembly to appropriate a sum to the supply of Paris » (Oct. 16th, 1789; I, 185). A fortnight later, Morris notes that Necker « will not listen to the idea of importing pork and rice and giving it free to the poor ».

As time goes by, Morris seems to have become something more than an occasional wise councillor to the King and Queen. He takes part in (or sets up?) a plan to organize their flight from the Temple. The plan did not materialize, but a little later, on July 24th, 1792, Morris enters in his diary: « Monciel brings me the King's money, at his Majesty's request [adding]... that I had always given him good advice and he has the greatest confidence in me » (I, 556).

It is clear that Morris's deep involvement in the affairs of the monarchy was no petty intrigue or ambitious scheming. This appears clear in the letter he wrote to Carmichael, an old friend, who then represented the United States at Madrid.

I have here the strangest employment imaginable. A republican and, just as it were, emerged from that assembly which has formed one of the most republican

of all the republican constitutions, I preach incessantly respect for the Prince, attention to the rights of the nobility and moderation... All this you will say, is none of my business... But I consider France as the natural ally of my country, and of course, that we are interested in her prosperity. Besides, to say the truth, I love France, as I believe the King to be an honest and good man, I sincerely wish him well – and the more so as I am persuaded that he earnestly desires the felicity of his people (I, 27).

*I - From sympathetic forbearance to revulsion: the spirit of liberty.*

Upon his arrival in France, Gouverneur Morris was struck by the general atmosphere of enthusiasm and expectancy: change was almost palpable though nothing had yet been accomplished. This is what he writes to the Marquis de Moustier, the French Minister in the United States.

Your nobles, your clergy, your people are all in motion for the elections... such is the instinctive love of freedom which now boils in the bosom of your country... I find on this side of the Atlantic a strong resemblance to what I left on the other – a nation which exists in hopes, prospects and expectations (Feb. 1789; I, 21).

At this stage, Morris already senses the basic features of a revolution in the situation of France:

The reverence for the ancient establishment gone, existing forms shaken to the foundation and a new order of things about to take place in which perhaps even to the very names, all former institutions will be disregarded (I, 22).

More than any other real cause of dissatisfaction (which Morris analyses carefully), the propelling force of change appears to him to be a « spirit of freedom » that establishes a sort of kinship between America and France – a belief he imparts to General Morris, his brother:

You are right in your idea that our contest has given a confused notion of liberty to this country... It is highly probable that a constitution will be established as free as is consistent with their manners and situation (I, 39).

Furthermore, France and America have one hero in common: at this early stage of the French Revolution, Morris still nourishes warm feelings toward General Lafayette whom he declares « much beloved by the nation » and « one of the principal champions for her rights » (I, 67). Indeed, France could be viewed now as the little sister who learned her lesson from America:

I say that we have an interest in the liberty of France. The leaders here are our friends; many of them have imbibed their principles in America and have been fired by our example (Letter to George Washington, Ap. 29th, 1789; I, 68).

Liberty for Morris was inseparable from a strong system of government. He insists that, though « one generation at least will be required to render the practice familiar », France must start immediately to secure her liberty behind the strong walls of a good constitution. For, the enemies of liberty

would soon band together their forces, if unchecked: « The King and Princes have united together — Morris warned — to oppose the progress of liberty, the rapidity of which, has at length, given them serious alarm » (April 20th, 1789; I, 59). « A good Constitution » was therefore to be a major leitmotif and a criteria by which he would evaluate the progress and the achievements of the Revolution.

For some time, and in spite of the evidence of growing anarchy and « despotism » produced by the « revolutionists », Morris trusted in the virtues of liberty to effect potent changes:

In the midst however of all these confusions, what with the confiscating of church property, selling the domains, curtailing pensions, destroying offices, but especially by the great liquidator of public debt, a paper currency, this nation is working its way to a new state of active energy... The intervening confusion will probably call forth men of talent to form such government and to exert its powers (to G. Washington, Feb. 1791, I, 383).

It is clear that the decisions of the Assemblée Nationale, which he had first seen as endowed with « the sovereignty of this country », now stood in contradiction to the fundamental liberties secured by the newly ratified American Bill of Rights. To the businessman and the Founding Father, the assaults on the right to property must have loomed dark; and for one who did not think much of democracy at all, there was little left after such a betrayal of the basic principles of the American System of Government.

Liberty, nevertheless, must have sounded a different word to him as it was pronounced « à l'américaine » or « à la française ». In December 1791, Morris is deeply dissatisfied with the Assembly. He laments that it « commits everyday new follies, and if this country be not plunged anew into the horrors of despotism, it is not their fault ». The Assembly's latest folly being that it had decided to attack France's neighbors. « Those neighbors are members of the German Empire, and France threatens to carry into their country, not fire and sword, but "la liberté" » (to G. Washington, I, 492).

Thus employed by the Assemblée Nationale, « la liberté » sounded like bombast, a concept too big or too blunted for the pretentious braggarts that used it. Yet, this tone of irony would recede and even be turned into emphatic enthusiasm the next year. Thanking Lord Wycombe « for his kind congratulations on the success of the French arms », Morris develops the idea that the victories were not won by numbers alone, as the enemies of the Revolution would have it, but that, « the appearance of those numbers in the field, at their country's call is in itself a proof of the wonders which freedom performs ». And to those who hoped that famine and bankruptcy would break that victorious élan, Morris replies that « ...as man liveth not by bread alone, so the societies of men are not content with mere plenty, but must pursue luxuries, among which the greatest is... the luxury of being free ». For such a cause he added, the United States (meaning himself, probably) would always be found a « sure and certain ally ». « We will chase tyranny

and above all aristocracy, off the theatre of the Universe » (Nov. 22nd, 1892; II, 7).

The war had established other similarities with the American experience, reviving the sense of a deeply buried solidarity and kinship. Although the revolution had put Morris's love for France to a severe test, and he felt now, «full of sinister bodings » he still trusted that France would accomplish great things:

I wish much, very much the happiness of this inconstant people. I love them. I feel grateful for their efforts in our cause and I consider the establishment of a good constitution here as a principal means... of extending the blessings of freedom to the many millions of my fellow-men who groan in bondage on the Continent of Europe. (Letter to Thomas Pinckney, Dec. 3rd, 1792, II, 8).

Strangely enough, this optimistic tone and unflinching confidence in the capacity of the Revolution to extend the kingdom of liberty throughout Europe, was preceded by much darker comments, expressing the heartrending belief that France had missed her rendez-vous with History.

As early as November 1790, Morris is asked by the Keeper of the Seals to express himself fully on the Revolution:

I tell him that I consider the Revolution a project that has failed; that the evils of anarchy must restore authority to the sovereign... One thing seems tolerably ascertained, that the glorious opportunity is lost, and... (for this time at least), the Revolution has failed. (Nov. 18th 1790, I, 358, 360).

With the arrest of the King and the Queen and the uprisings related to the King's refusal to sanction the decrees against the clergy and the émigrés, the situation had become much more dramatic than before, and to Morris one moment may have constituted a sort of breaking point. His interest in the French Revolution was to be superseded by his attachment to the King who was now in the greatest danger. Yet, Morris expressed chiefly concern for the nation in the letter dated June 17th, 1792 he addressed to Jefferson.

The best picture I can give of the French nation is that of cattle before a thunder-storm... (I, 542)... I cannot go on with the picture, for my heart bleeds when I reflect that the finest opportunity which ever presented itself for establishing the rights of mankind throughout the civilized world is perhaps lost, and forever. (I, 545).

Thereafter, Morris was to be struck by the difference between the American and the French situations and experiences. In March, 1794, he muses:

How different was our situation in America. Everyone performed cheerfully his part; nor had we anything to apprehend but from the common enemy. Such is the immense difference between a country which has morals, and one which is corrupted. The former has everything to hope, and the latter everything to fear. (to Jefferson, March 1794, II, 60).

When finally Morris was recalled and able to leave France, he wrote a long and open letter to George Washington, and, no longer fearing censorship, passed the most severe judgement on the Convention:

you will see from what is now publicly known respecting those who administer the French despotism, how painful it must have been to represent a virtuous republic to such persons... I felt that I was useless and indeed that nobody could be useful until some permanent system should be established... and I felt myself degraded by the communications I was forced into with the worst of mankind. (Dec. 30th, 1794, II, 78).

The question remains whether the French Revolution could be evaluated by the sole criteria of « liberty », a term which Gouverneur Morris tended to equate with the political freedom dispensed by a constitution. As early as June, 1789, he had told Lafayette that he was « opposed to democracy from regard to liberty ». This was still an understatement of his feelings towards democracy. The French, he thought, were not yet reformed enough in their morals and their habits to form a democracy. (« They want an American Constitution — he writes to John Jay — with the exception of a King instead of a President, without reflecting that they have not American citizens to support that constitution » (July 1st, 1789, I, 114).

And, when Lafayette asks him in June, 1792, what he means by « a good constitution; whether it is an aristocratic one », he answers « Yes... that I presume he has lived long enough in the present style to see that a popular government is good for nothing in France » (I, 549).

What was at stake really? Liberty, or the survival of the French monarchy? Gouverneur Morris may have been right in his belief that France was not yet ready for a democracy at the time of the Revolution. Yet, nowhere do we find in his Diary and letters an explanation as to how liberty would have been better ensured by the existence of a monarch — and all the more by this very one. Nor does he clearly define what liberty consists of, although he constantly opposes the term to the violence and the « despotism » of the revolutionists. In fact, he keeps hammering out his preconceived belief that equality is the great deceit which has entrapped the French Revolution in its own destruction.

## II - *The diagnosis and the testimony*

Gouverneur Morris's Diary could, roughly be said to deal with three major themes: one third of it could be entitled « Paris is such a fête ». Morris seems to have spent exhausting days and evenings, visiting places and people, attending dinners and celebrations, and walking or driving to and fro. A second third explains why the Revolution was bound to take place, whereas another third deals with the reasons why and how the French Revolution had failed.

Throughout the years 1789 and 1790, Morris as a private traveler accumulates observations on all that has gone wrong in France. He is par-



ticularly aware of the critical situation of the French economy which is labouring under a double handicap: the approach of national bankruptcy; and widespread mismanagement at the hands of leaders who are ignorant or careless of the operation of agriculture, business or manufacture.

In August 1789, Morris writes that the Treasury is empty. He notes that the forthcoming expenditures would amount to seventy million francs whereas receipts for August and September would not exceed thirty seven thousand francs. On the 19th of November, he mentions that « Mr le Normand considers a public bankruptcy here as inevitable and a civil war as a necessary consequence ». Morris sounds extremely critical of the various plans that had been launched to solve the financial crisis: Montesquiou's proposal for « billets d'Etat » (the « assignats ») and Necker's attempt to transfer the « Caisse d'Ecompte » into a « National Bank » (a project that was dropped after 1790), he analysed as irrelevant and useless. He commented ironically on the national movement of idealism by which « ...great ladies sacrificed their jewels... » to fill the « Caisse Patriotique » in December 1790, and showed that by December 26th, the National Debt still amounted to 4,700,000,000 francs. And above all, Morris was struck by the general indifference to these matters. Visiting the Petit Trianon, he reflects that « ...the money applied in making it had been badly spent and would not be badly spared »; and as a number of representatives to the Estates-General are seen, walking about it, he adds: « Perhaps there is not one of them who thinks what ought to strike them all, that this expense and others like this have occasioned their meeting » (May 14th, 1789; I, 82). In another instance, Morris notes that, in the salon of Mr de Besenval, « the tone of the society seems to be that it is not worth while to call the States-General for such a trifle as the deficit amounts to » (May 31st, 1789; I, 95).

The businessman and the banker in Gouverneur Morris were upset by the carelessness and the inefficiency with which the economy seemed to be managed. Morris also at first found the methods of agriculture either backward or at least not modern (an impression he would greatly correct by 1894); but also, he considered industry unproductive and blamed it on the government:

The progress of this nation seems to be much greater in the fine arts than in the useful arts... this perhaps depends on a government oppressive to industry but favorable to genius.

Furthermore, all the men in power were more or less incompetent or corrupt, thereby allowing the State to go derelict. The ministers, Morris said, had « disgusted this city by the manner of convoking them to elect their representatives to the States... What with hunger and discontent, the least spark would set everything aflame » (April 18th, 1789, I, 58). The only thing they saw fit to do was to bring from 15,000 to 20,000 troops to Paris. The Court, he added, « is extremely feeble and their manners are so extremely corrupt... » (I, 59). As for the Noblesse,

they have opposed pride rather than arguments to their assailants. Hugging the privileges of centuries long elapsed, they have clamoured against the Court while their adversaries have possessed themselves fully of the public confidence everywhere. (I, 115).

In fact, the whole of society was dissolute... « pleasure is the great business » Morris comments, dwelling heavily on the « utter prostration of morals... the extreme rottenness of every member » ...who revealed a perfect indifference to the violation of all engagements... « consistency is the phenomenon... The great mass of the people have no religion but their priests, no law but their interests » (I, 69).

France was obviously a sick body with a weak head. For indeed, the reigning prince was a « small beer character » who stood no chance of regaining his lost prestige or authority. « What will you have », Morris writes to Washington in January 1790, « from a creature who, situated as he is, eats, drinks and sleeps well and laughs and is as merry a gig as lives » (I, 282). Hated, humbled and mortified, the Queen was of no great assistance, and Morris reports that the King's « entours » – saw to it that she should be provided with a sufficient supply of lovers and entertainment to keep her from intriguing too wildly. The monarchy was therefore endangered by the extreme feebleness of the king, though he was still loved by his people « ...but not with the sort of love which a monarch should inspire ».

And, while bread was wanting, while the economy went bankrupt and anger swelled up from the provinces and the streets of Paris together, while it was known that not a regiment would obey the king's command if requested to, yet, dinners, parties and balls were held as usual, and the opéra and the theatres thronged with larger audiences than before. « These are the modern Athenians – alone learned, alone wise, alone polite, the rest of mankind barbarians! » (I, 174).

To Gouverneur Morris, the « Revolution » was completed by the end of July 1789, in so far as « the authority of the king and of the nobility is completely subdued »... Yet, he feared that more trouble might be in store because the revolutionists could not be trusted to bring out a good constitution, on account of all the wrong ideas they had inherited from the « philosophers ».

It is anarchy beyond conception. Their literati whose heads are turned by romantic notions, picked up in books and who are too lofty to look down upon that kind of man which really exists and too wise to heed the dictates of common sense and experience... (Oct. 18th, 1789; I, 197).

There was little in the ideas of the French Revolution from which Gouverneur Morris did not shrink: the enlightenment ideas he called « romantic ideas of government ». The « droits de l'homme » he calls « new fangled doctrines » based on an inappropriate conception of equality before the law that was inconsistent with the great inequalities of status maintained

within the nation. And the ideas of the «*économistes*» he considered bookish and irrelevant to anything experience would teach.

The *Assemblée Nationale* appeared to him equally weakened by inherent defects of the character and the mind. In the Assembly, Morris distinguishes three groups: the Aristocrats; a «*group that has no names which consists of people who are true friends to a free government*»; and the *enragés*. Like many conservative authors, Morris will resort to ridicule or derision to analyse the behaviour of the radicals, presented as malcontents or as neurotics. He thus describes the *enragés* as «*that class which in America is known by the name of petty-fogging lawyers, together with a host of curates*»... as well as «*those who, in all revolutions, throng to the standards of change because they are not well*» (I, 277).

It is not surprising, then, to read that the Jacobins (the «*enragés*») have performed «*numerous reforms, some of them unnecessary, and all either harsh, precipitate or extreme...*» (Feb. 1st, 1791; I, 382).

Yet, on March 4th, 1790, while visiting Amsterdam, Morris enters in his diary that during the dinner given in his honor by Madame Bost, he had endeavored ...«*to show that the state of things was such as to necessitate a change of some sort, although they have as is natural, gone into an extreme*» (I, 303). There was some inconsistency in the fact that Gouverneur Morris altogether clearly knew and showed that France had gone so derelict as to make the Revolution unavoidable; and yet blamed those who tried to wipe out the structures and the men who had led her to where she was. The explanations for Morris's contradictions may lie in the exceptional frame of mind and in the Parisian life of this American witness to the French Revolution.

For indeed, Gouverneur Morris saw only one side of the Revolution, the side of the best houses in Paris. «*As I lodge at the Tuileries, at the Hotel du Roi... it is far from impossible that I shall have a battle under my windows*» — Morris writes on the 15th of July 1791 — an observation which could symbolize the whole of his attitudes to the Revolution itself.

It is worth while to outline the events and developments which Gouverneur Morris did witness or record.

In May 1789, Morris is still enthusiastic about the great change that is brewing and he manages to attend the opening of the Estates General which he describes earnestly. But very soon, his tone becomes ironical as he comments contemptuously that they have been doing nothing but talking, «*engaged in a dispute*». The next moment of particular attention comes on the 12th and 13th of July 1789 when he observes that «*the people are breaking up the armorers' shops*». Coquettishly, he notes, «*Go to the Louvres having previously ornamented my hat with a green bow in honor of the Tiers, for this is the fashion of the day*». Then there are rumors of the carrying of the Bastille which Morris finally, recognizes as «*among the most extraordinary things I have meth with*» (I, 125). On the 21st, Morris obtains

a special permission to visit the Bastille whose demolition has already started.

The first executions are related and commented rather tersely: « The body and head of Mr Foulon are introduced in triumph, the head on a pike, the body dragged naked on the earth. Gracious God, what a people! » (July 22nd; I, 138).

October is marked chiefly by the march of the women of Paris to Versailles, their invading the Château and the humiliations they inflict on the Queen. And, as the Royal family is brought back to Paris, Morris notes that the Queen trembles for their lives whereas the King seems little concerned.

In November, Morris mentions the seizure of Church property, and in December, a plot to assassinate Lafayette. On December 31st, he observes that « Many people were already looking toward America as offering more safety if not more comfort than any place nearer home », and he takes much pain and trouble to warn would-be emigrants against the traps of American colonization plans.

Gouverneur Morris also had private business to attend to. He left France on July 30th, to return on the 11th of September 1789; again, he went away to London through Antwerp, from February 21st to mid-June 1791. This was one of the rare occasions for him to take a slightly different view of the events:

Through France, I find that the decree of the Assembly respecting the monks are very much haphazard and is disagreeable to the people in general (I, 297).

And, for the early months of the year 1790, Morris enters only two events, the decision of the Assemblée Nationale to deny the king the power to make war and peace (May 22nd) and the riot by which « The populace have dispersed the Court of the Châtelet and hanged several persons confined for crimes... » (I, 334).

The abolition of the nobility is passed on rather rapidly; whereas, the « Fête de la Fédération » that celebrated the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille runs through several pages, in the mixed tone of one who is impressed by the size and the solemnity of the ceremony, (« 300,000 spectators assembled on the great amphitheatre in the Champ de Mars »), but who makes deep reservations as to what it is supposed to celebrate — that is — universal fraternity and faithfulness to the Nation, the King and the Constitution.

The early months of 1791 were marked chiefly by the death of Mirabeau. While Mirabeau was agonizing, the guards around his house stopped all carriages lest they should disturb his repose. « I am shocked at such an honour paid to such a wretch » Morris comments (I, 396). « During this day of mourning, amusements were forbidden... for eight days, all the départements were in mourning as for a national calamity ». Morris relates that one marquise who given a ball in those days, saw her house besieged by a furious crowd. Mirabeau's funeral was to be attended by a huge crowd of 100,000 persons, in deep silence. This whole episode leaves Morris irritated

as if it illustrated for him the fickleness and the lack of true discernment in the French.

In the following months, Morris is more concerned by the resignation of the «entours» of the King and Queen, and by that of Lafayette, than by anything else. But, on July 17th, the Assembly's decision to decree the inviolability of the King seems to have produced «an uproar», «a great disposition for riot in the people...». But Morris notes that the Garde Nationale had been called in, read for action. Then, on July 17th, dramatic events take place, which Morris relates with a vengeance, Hearing that the crowd had amassed at the Champ de Mars, he walks with Mme de Flahaut and Mme de Courcelles to the Heights of Chaillot to observe what passed below, in the Champ de Mars. And, later on, he is relieved to hear that «...the militia have at length fired on the mob and killed a few of them. They scampered away as fast as they could...». Morris who spent a great deal of words and pages, condemning the violence of the revolutionists, is here fully satisfied because the militia has fired on the crowd. «This affair will, I think, lay the foundation of tranquillity, although perhaps, a more serious affair is necessary to restrain this abominable populace» (I, 434).

Later in the year, Morris is busy trying to convince every one that, in spite of the enthusiasm mustered around the adoption of the Constitution, on September 18th, it is good for nothing and will not give peace and stability to the country, since a good constitution, should «ensure the rights of the nation under the government of a good king».

This morning, I dictate to Brémond a philippic against the Chefs des Républicains; employ myself in preparing a form of government for this country (Dec. 6th, 1791; I, 485).

By the end of September, Morris notes that the Counter-Revolution has picked up courage since the Prince de Condé called the nobles to arms from Coblenz. But he also believes that nothing of consequence will happen that year.

January 1792 sees Gouverneur Morris in London again. The news of his nomination as Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of France reached him shortly after his arrival there. Yet he remained in England until the beginning of May. His diary is chiefly concerned with the news of the death of the Emperor, and of the assassination of the King of Sweden. And then, the rumblings of war fill up his pages. The Austrians boast that they are going to spend the winter in Paris, and, late in July, the «Manifesto of Brunswick» from Coblenz threatens to restore the clergy and the King in their rights, and to exterminate the revolutionists whom it calls «insurgés». But, in the face of the mounting danger, the Assemblée Nationale had pronounced the Country in peril and enrolled volunteers.

Violence now was everywhere mounting. This is the time when Morris describes the French nation like «cattle before a thunderstorm». It suddenly seemed to him that portentous developments were taking place, that

foreboded further disasters – the sense of standing on a volcano that might erupt at any moment.

Through September and October, Morris's diary is chiefly filled with the massacres and executions on the one hand, and on the other hand, the rumors of the enemy's advance on Paris, together with news of surrenders and treasons in the provinces. Morris stresses the suppression of the liberties: « Another man is beheaded this evening for crime de lèse-nation. He published a newspaper against the Jacobins. This is severe, at least » (I, 578). Some of the people he knew well met an awful end; on September 10th, he writes an anguished letter to Jefferson:

one week of unchecked murders. It began with between two to three hundred clergy who would not take the oath prescribed by the law... Mme de Lamballe was the only woman killed and she was beheaded and disembowelled, the head and entrails paraded on pikes and the body dragged after them... the Duc de la Rochefoucauld... was taken out of his carriage and killed... Mr de Montmorin was among those slain at the Abbaye (I, 584).

But also, the aimless murders of priests and prisoners and the overthrow of the King left little hope for the monarch's life: « ...history informs us that the passage of dethroned monarchs is short from the prison to the grave » (letter to G. Washington, Sept. 22nd, 1792; I, 590).

After the trial and the execution of the King in January, 1793, the Terror spread. Morris consequently decided to interrupt his diary. His comments on the Revolution were henceforth contained in the letters he forwarded to Washington, Jefferson and Robert Morris.

In spite of all the horror and tragedy of this Third Act in the French Revolution, Morris still harps on the theme of the restoration of the monarchy. « I am told that there is a majority in the Convention who think a king necessary » (Ap. 19th, 1793; II, 43). On the other hand, he insists that the Convention members have « little more than parole energy » though they have managed to put the country under unrestrained tyranny and corruption. And with a sort of bitter satisfaction, Morris evokes a prophecy he had made eighteen months before, concerning the future of France: « ...guerre, famine et peste ».

Morris was convinced that the institutions laid down by the Convention only meant tyranny and arbitrary power, to which was added the dramatic perception of their fragility and vulnerability:

The present government is evidently a despotism both in principle and in practice. The Convention now consists only of part of those who were chosen to frame a Constitution. These, after putting under arrest their fellows, claim all power and have delegated the greater part of it to a Committee of Safety... the Revolutionary Tribunal gives unbounded scope to will. (to G.W., Oct. 18th, 1793, II, 53).

Of all the work accomplished by the Convention, Morris retained only

the dramatic test of force between contending parties struggling for power and meeting their fate from the very weapons they had themselves created. The Convention knew that it was threatened from all sides.

It is not the least of their misfortunes to be fully sensible of their situation, and it results therefrom that, as much time is consumed in providing for their defence against adverse factions and contingent events as in preparing for the general defence of the country; perhaps more. (to G.W., March 12th, 1794; II, 60).

Morris draws the portrait of the two great protagonists of the Convention by referring them to Shakespeare. Of Robespierre, Morris says that he was « the most consistent, if not the only consistent ». The moralist in Morris was drawn to the integrity of Robespierre, and he stresses that there was « no imputation against him for corruption... It is said that his idol is ambition, but I think that the establishment of the Republic... would be most suitable to him... He is one of whom Shakespeare's Caesar speaks to his frolicsome companion... » (II, 62).

Writing to his friend Robert Morris in April, 1794, Gouverneur Morris now assumes an almost airy tone: « Since my last, there have been abundant executions at Paris and the Guillotine goes on smartly ». This time it was to go for Danton, though, Morris says,

The victory depended on the first stroke. Danton, when condemned, or shortly before it, told his judges that he had observed in reading history that men perished by the instruments of destruction which they had themselves created. I created the Tribunal Révolutionnaire by which I am shortly to be destroyed. Shakespeare had made Macbeth pronounce the same dreadful sentence on the wickedly ambitious long ago. (II, 63).

Morris had gone a long way from his initial and passionate involvement in the affairs of France. Everything that occurred by 1794 was entirely alien to his understanding and his nature.

In August, 1794, the new Minister to France arrived, after seeing him installed, Morris shipped all his possessions home, to Morrisania, and set out for a long tour of Europe which was to detain him on this side of the Atlantic for another four years. Apparently he could not wrench himself away from the love and the hate he had nourished for France and the Revolution.

– But had he really understood what had happened through the Revolution?

What is clear from his diary is that he never went near enough to the side of the Tiers-Etat, let alone the people, to know how a popular government really worked. Of the « popular revolution » he chose to see only the violence and the anarchy, never studying the reforms effected by the Revolutionists. He knew intimately the nobles – some of them, but never approached the leaders of « the other side » of the Revolution, though he dedicated a few lines to Danton and Robespierre, they were the « lowest sort of mankind ».

In fact, Gouverneur Morris is an excellent standard by which we may understand how the nobles may have lived the situation. He translates for us the hopes, the idealism and the despair of those who may have been the most « enlightened » among them. But, Morris also shows how they could not survive the turning-point of 1792, when the process escaped from the hands of the nobles to fall into those of the Tiers Etat.

But even in that early period of the Revolution when Morris could still hope to see France follow a peaceful course similar to that of America, he already missed some of the meaning of what was going on because he insisted on judging the French by the moral and narrowly pragmatic standards of a moderate American revolutionist. Furthermore, in spite of his excellent understanding of French as a language, his sense of superiority as an American Revolutionist, deadened his understanding of what the French were craving for. He acted as if he knew better.

Only the word « Revolution » was in common for the two experiences. America had to free herself from a colonial past and to expel the « foreign » leaders of the country. But America only had four million people, islanded on a huge continent. Furthermore, she did not have to wrench out of her life and soul, centuries of governmental practices and customs. The word « the people » did not even apply to the same kind of reality in both countries: America had a rather homogeneous population — since she chose to consider as non-persons the Blacks and the Indians. Absolute monarchy in France had rejected some twenty million persons, leaving them in a form of political non-existence.

Morris failed to take in the very dimension and the extreme complexity of the crisis in France: hundreds of privileges of all kinds allowed the members of some 17,000 noble families (= about 100,000 persons) to live luxuriously on the toil of 20,000,000 peasants who were overwhelmed by six to ten different forms of taxations and obligations. The administration itself followed four different patterns, since the judiciary, the religious and the administrative constituencies overlapped each other.

Morris showed the greatest contempt for the work of the Assemblée Nationale, insisting that nothing good would ever be done by it. Yet, by the 11th February 1790, it could proclaim that

the Rights of Man which had been so thoroughly ignored are by now established... The Nation had lost the right to pass laws and to impose taxes; it has regained it. Countless privileges shaped our system of law; they are now removed. You wished to see the eradication of purchasable offices; this is done. Our finances required huge reforms; we worked at this ceaselessly. The Assembly has performed the new division of the kingdom that alone could wipe out the marks of former prejudices and substitute true love for the country to the former self-centered pride of our provinces. We shall end our work with a code of public education and instruction that will set the constitution under the protection of the coming generations. (A. Sorel, *L'Europe et la Révolution Française*, II, p. 6).



The right to feel concerned in the process of decision-making, the dream of involvement, the assertion of citizenship were the conquests of those years. Morris would not hear of that: to him the people should obey their betters, and when they rebelled, they became the « populace », the « hideous mob », the forces of anarchy on which responsible leaders had a right to shoot. This explains why his diary expresses such a deep sense of tragedy: the French Revolution appeared to him as a tragic episode of collective madness. Senselessness and absurdity had overpowered a whole nation.

In fact, Gouverneur Morris, because of his double bias, failed to understand the language of the French Revolution: trained in the literary language of the Court and the mandarins, he did not recognize the voice and the meanings of the other Revolution which he misunderstood for a great monster. But it is clear that up to a point he had been right: the French Revolution had failed to establish a constitutional monarchy and the kind of liberty it is usual to counterpose and proclaim to those who clamour for equality.