Voltaire and the Invention of the Intellectual

How a Writer
Became a Power

William de France

Clementinium Editions

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The century is not called "Voltaire's" because he was right,
but because he was the first to make the writer a power.

The book's idea

Prologue

On 11 July 1791, an immense crowd lines the streets of Paris. It has come to watch a procession such as the city has rarely seen: the bones of a writer dead thirteen years before are being carried to the Panthéon, the temple the Revolution has just consecrated to its great men, exhumed from the abbey of Scellières, in Champagne, where they had been buried in haste. The chariot is drawn by white horses; inscriptions cover it; academies, societies, whole sections of the city march behind. That day he is proclaimed "restorer of philosophy and of liberty." The man's name was François-Marie Arouet, called Voltaire.

The reversal must be measured. The city that escorts him today to the honors of the immortals is the same one that had banished him from its walls in his lifetime, and whose Church, at his death, had refused him a Parisian grave, so that his body had to be carried off and buried elsewhere, by stealth. Thirteen years separate the fugitive's grave from the national apotheosis. Between the two, nothing has changed in Voltaire's work, closed since 1778; everything has changed in the way men regard what he was.

And here is the question to which this book is the answer. What, exactly, is being carried to the Panthéon that day? Not a doctrine: Voltaire left no system, and boasted of it; a critic could call him "a chaos of clear ideas," and the century now opening will tear itself apart without end over his opinions, claimed by opposing camps. Not a single book either: which would one choose, of the tale, the history, the pamphlet, the treatise? Something else is being consecrated, harder to name, and which the crowd acclaims without always knowing how to say it.

What is carried to the Panthéon, and what this book will set out to describe, is neither a body of thought nor a body of work:

it is a place, a place that did not exist in French society before him. How it was made, what it made possible, what it cost, and why, two centuries later, we still live in the world where it exists: that is what all the following pages will try to say.

What is carried to the Panthéon that day is not a thought, but a power of a new kind, that no one yet quite knows how to name.

Part I

The Making of a Power

I

Arouet Learns That Glory Is Capital

I. Paris, early 1726: a beating

One evening in early 1726, before the townhouse of a great lord where he has just dined, one of the most prominent writers in Paris is thrashed with cudgels by liveried servants. The man who orders the correction, the Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot, watches the scene from his carriage; the line attributed to him has survived: "Do not strike the head; something good may yet come out of it." The affair had begun a few days earlier with a word. Rohan, crossing paths with Voltaire, had mocked his name: "Monsieur de Voltaire, Monsieur Arouet, what is your name, then?" And Voltaire had shot back that he was the first to bear his name where Rohan was the last to bear his. The thrust had gone the rounds of the salons. One does not mock with impunity a man whose wit is his weapon.

But the thrust, this time, does not protect. It calls forth in return not another thrust, but cudgels. And when Voltaire, bruised, goes back into the house to ask the master of it, the Duc de Sully, to accompany him in lodging a complaint, the duke refuses: one does not quarrel with the Rohans over an Arouet. The friends of the day before, those who laughed at his witticisms and seated him at their table, fall silent. The table was open to wit; it closes before the beaten man.

It is this silence, more than the blows, that must be remembered. Voltaire, at thirty-one, is rich, fêted, read across Europe. And he

discovers, in a single evening, that none of this covers him. His glory has brought him into the world of the great; it has not made him their equal. At the first conflict, he becomes again what he was at birth: the son of a notary, a commoner whom one corrects and for whom one need not answer.

II. What is beaten, that evening

To gauge the humiliation, one must know who the man being beaten is. He has long since ceased to be little Arouet.

François-Marie Arouet was born in Paris in 1694, into a family of the high legal bourgeoisie: a father who was a counselor to the king, serious connections, a future mapped out in law or administration. The Jesuits of the Collège Louis-le-Grand give him the soundest education in the kingdom and put him in contact, on the same benches, with the cream of aristocratic youth. He comes out with two things that never leave him: a rare mastery of the language, and a network of well-born comrades who hold him for a charming wit without ever holding him for one of their own.

Against the will of his father, who wanted him a man of law, he chooses a path that then had neither status nor security: to live by his pen, between the theater, patronage, and pensions. He frequents the libertines of the Société du Temple, writes verse, pleases. Very early he also learns the cost of speech: satirical verses aimed at the Regent, attributed to him, earn him eleven months in the Bastille in 1717. He works there instead of rotting, and comes out with a tragedy ready. In November 1718, *Œdipe* triumphs on the stage of the Comédie-Française. The success is immense. It is on this occasion that he abandons his father's name to forge one for himself: Arouet becomes Voltaire. The gesture is more than an affectation: a man who names himself declares himself the author of his own existence, and refuses to inherit a condition.

In 1726, then, Voltaire is the poet and dramatist of France. He is quoted, performed, sought after. The great compete for

him, for the brilliance he throws over their suppers. He has the renown of a prince of letters. What he does not have, and what the Rohan evening throws in his face, is the one good this society truly respects: birth.

III. The two pillars: glory and money

Voltaire has nonetheless already begun, without yet quite knowing it, to build himself an independence of a kind rare in a man of letters. It rests on two pillars.

The first is glory itself, but understood otherwise than by his predecessors. The writers of the Grand Siècle lived by patronage: a king's pension, an office, a patron's favor. Their renown was a grace granted to them. Voltaire imperceptibly reverses the relation: his renown becomes a force he brings, and that the great solicit. The nuance seems slight; it is decisive. The protégé depends; the man who is courted negotiates.

The second pillar is money, and here Voltaire invents something. At his father's death, in 1722, he inherits; but above all, he invests. Where the classical poet died poor, Voltaire speculates, lends, sets up ventures, goes into partnership with tax-farmers, invests in maritime trade and, by an irony to be noted without belaboring it, in army supply: the man who will become one of the fiercest denouncers of war builds part of his fortune on gunpowder and the provisioning of armies. He gains by it, to a degree rare in a writer, not ease but independence. A rich man need not please in order to eat.

These two pillars, glory converted into force and money converted into liberty, are the first materials of what this essay calls the function. Voltaire does not theorize it. He acts as a man who wants, by instinct, to depend on no one. But the keystone is still missing from this edifice, and the Rohan evening reveals, by its absence, the necessity of it.

IV. The lesson of the Bastille

The sequel to the affair is instructive down to its injustice. Voltaire does not resign himself to the beating. He wants redress, and since the redress of gentlemen passes by the sword, he takes fencing masters and challenges Rohan to a duel. It is exactly what an offended nobleman would have done, and precisely what a commoner has no right to do. That the Arouet boy should presume to cross blades with a Rohan: there is the real scandal, far more than the blows. The Rohan family obtains a *lettre de cachet* without difficulty. And one sees again, in the spring of 1726, the same movement as in 1717: it is not the aggressor who is locked up, it is the offended party. Voltaire returns to the Bastille. He comes out at the end of a fortnight, on one condition: to leave the kingdom. He is exiled to England.

Let us draw the lesson, for it is the lesson that governs the whole book. The Rohan affair invents nothing: it brings to light, at a stroke, a condition Voltaire already knew (the Bastille of 1717, his commoner's birth had taught it to him), but which it now makes intolerable to him. Voltaire has felt, in a few weeks, that neither talent, nor glory, nor money, nor even the law protects in France the man of letters who is not born to rank. Talent makes for envy; glory opens doors that close again; money buys comfort, not dignity; and the law, when invoked, sides with the great name. The society of orders has no knowledge of the place Voltaire already occupies in fact: that of a man whose word weighs on the opinion of Europe. It has no slot for him. Where there is no slot, there are cudgels.

Out of this absence of a slot, Voltaire will make a life. All that follows, the England where men of letters are honored, the fortune further increased, the knowledge amassed at Cirey, the estate of Ferney set astride a border, is only the patient construction, piece by piece, of a power that will owe nothing to birth and that the state will one day be forced to reckon with. He leaves for London with a grudge and a question. The grudge will pass. The question

will occupy him for forty years: how can a single man, without title or office, make himself not untouchable (he never will be), but impossible to bypass.

You have just read the prologue and the first chapter.

The complete book contains a prologue, nine chapters in three parts, and an epilogue.

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