ELOQUENCE AND REVOLUTIONARY NEWSPAPERS

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Part 1 - Nostalgia for an active word in the age of Enlightenment

LV: Hello Patrick Brasart, you have devoted your work to revolutionary eloquence. Can we say that public speaking, newspapers that are normally considered extra-literary, are essential to understanding intellectual and cultural life of the “turn of the century”?

PB: If we want to explain the importance of public speaking and political journalism emerging with the Revolution in the last decade of the century, we must first remember one fact. We often identify Literature with a big L with fiction; novel, theatre or poetics, whereas in the 18th century, the word "literature" refers to everything that is written, everything that is printed. Moreover, what we now call "literature" was then referred to as “eloquence” and “Belles Lettres”, so oratorical genres are an integral part of it.

First of all, the education received in the colleges is massively based on learning the literature of Greek and Roman Antiquity. In addition to epic, dramatic and lyrical poets, it studies political speakers such as Demosthenes, author of the *Philippics*, directed against King Philip of Macedonia, who threatened the freedom of Greek cities, or Cicero, author of the *Catiline Orations,* speeches against an attempted coup d'état. Logically, the 18th century therefore developed a nostalgia for a strong word that could influence the course of events.

Against harmless or frivolous, ornamental Belles Letters, the philosophers of the Enlightenment dream of being speakers, at least since Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on Science and the Arts* and his famous *Prosopopée de Fabricius*. The oratory praise of great men became a central genre of cultural life and Father Raynal's famous *Histoire philosophique des deux Indes* was dotted with harangues, the most famous of which was the apostrophe to the American insurgents, where eloquence was associated with freedom.

Thus, when political eloquence was finally reborn, in concrete terms, in 1789 with the opening of the Estates General, it was perceived as a political tool, certainly, but also in its aesthetic dimension. For all contemporaries, one can’t persuade without saying so well and the greater the stakes of speaking out, the more force and beauty the verb will have.

At the beginning of the Revolution, one of the most important literary critics of the time, La Harpe, who paradoxically later denounced the revolutionary language, thus presented Mirabeau, the oratory leader of the Constituent, as the Demosthenes or as the Cicero of France. He asks that a higher eloquence course be instituted where the best speeches of the National Assembly would be studied. And the latter, for a writer like Chamfort, is intended to replace the Académie française.

LV: Yes, but does the literary value attributed to a political discourse not simply hide the ideological preference of the critics?

PB: Of course, the political level of critical judgement often parasitizes the aesthetic level, sometimes completely stifling it. But our distance from the Revolution liberates us. As Burke, the theorist of the sublime, recalled, a cataclysm cannot be experienced aesthetically by those who are its direct victims, but at a distance it can be.

Thus, we can appreciate how a speaker will emerge in a given political camp, one who will best be able to take advantage of his situation in the field of ideological clashes. The revolutionaries themselves were the first to recognise the oratory skills of their opponents. Thus, at the Convention, the Montagnards, in fighting the Girondins, constantly denounce them as enchanters, fine talkers who would subjugate opinions by the magic of their verb and even more dangerous and all the more to fight because of this.

Part 2 - Some oratory figures to remember

LV: And who would you consider to be the main oratory figures to remember?

PB: We could mention dozens of names, but among the first-rate speakers are the Constituent Mirabeau and Barnave on the left side and, on the right side, Abbot Maury and Cazalès. Under the Legislative and the Convention, Vergniaud and Guadet for the Girondins, Danton, Robespierre and Saint-Just for the Montagnards. But if there was only one name to remember, it would be Saint-Just. Surrounded by a tragic aura of the Archangel of Terror, guillotined at the age of 26 with Robespierre, he established himself between 1792 and 1794 as a theorist and a practitioner of Laconism. Its incomparable height of your repudiation makes any compromise possible. "What constitutes a Republic is the total destruction of everything that is opposed to it," he wrote, lapidary.

However, they are first of all texts written to be spoken in public. It takes an effort to read to imagine this oral performance. They cannot be appreciated without knowing a context; the political situation, the balance of power, a context in constant change from 1789 to 1794. And the oratory language of the revolution made up of great turns of phrase is a thousand miles from the current language of the 21st century.

Part 3 - Newspapers that do "work"

LV: At the beginning of our interview, we mentioned the birth of political journalism. Have some newspapers taken on the same value as speeches? And if so, why?

PB: Political journalism, born with the Revolution, also claims judiciary exercise. A people's court placed between the people and their representatives, a mediator, the journalist competes with the Assembly's speakers, whose oratory stance he adopts, arrogant and exhorting the public of his readers and potentially the entire nation. Among the countless titles that emerged at that time, at least three eventually metamorphosed into works, those of Marat, Hébert and Desmoulins.

Marat, self-proclaimed " friend of the people", has a unique way both of identifying his life with his mission as a journalist and of maintaining a permanent dialogue with his addressee, the people, whom he blames and lectured tirelessly, reproaching them for their apathy and naivety, while increasingly organising his issues around the readers' letters. He also circulates alarmist news and increasingly calls for the punishment of traitors.

Hébert, on the other hand, borrows from his diary the burlesque identity of Father Duchesne, a man of the gruff people who is never lost for words, comes straight from the theatrical genre of the charade. He punctuates his speech with countless swearwords, scorn, shit primarily, and comical sketches to demand the physical liquidation of his opponents. A counter-revolutionary satirical journal, *Les Actes des Apôtres,* written by Rivarol, had paved the way for him.

Finally, Camille Desmoulins, greatest writer of the time in Michelet's eyes, edited two newspapers: *Les Révolutions de France et de Brabant* and then *Le Vieux cordelier,* under the Terror, to fight the accusations of the Exaggerated, the Hebertists against the Dantonists. He protested against the poison of fear and the support for the Terror, which for him was the antithesis of the utopian ideal of true justice, happiness and freedom of the Revolution.

LV: And to conclude, Patrick Brasart, what can we learn from this revolutionary literature?

CD: Undoubtedly, revolutionary eloquence, like journalism, embodies the dream long cherished by the man of letters, by the philosopher of the Enlightenment, to be the spokesman and/or guider of opinion. After being despised for a long time as pure rhetoric, this eloquence fascinates us because it testifies to a world of grandiose expectations, of formidable challenges where the sublime overwhelms speech, in contrast to the current political speech, often impoverished by communication advisors, and reduced to insipid elements of language.

LV: Thank you, Patrick Brasart.