CONCLUSION: THE ENLIGHTENMENT AFTER THE COUP

Laurence VANOFLEN, Lecturer in Literature and Philosophy, Paris Nanterre University

---

Part 1 - An "unnamed" period

Taking stock of the turning point of the Enlightenment raises two questions. One concerns the links between the Enlightenment and the Revolution and is immediately raised when the 18th century comes to an end. The other is what the period has left us as a legacy. Beyond a process of the Enlightenment that took as its pretext the unleashing of the violence of Terror supposed to be its effect, we will therefore wonder what the Enlightenment still has to pass on to us.

But first of all, it is necessary to underline the extraordinary complexity of a period that rejects simplifications and clear-cut oppositions. Indeed, the 19th century opened with a society that had experienced an unprecedented clean slate, but which did not yet know where it was going. Revolutionary ups and downs favour sinuous individual trajectories, even without mentioning the opportunist politicians who have crossed all regimes, such as Talleyrand or Fouché. Satirists have had a field day out of these reversals, inventing the pejorative term "weathervane" to describe the phenomenon. The critic La Harpe thus moves from the philosophers' party to that of his determined opponents.

The young Chateaubriand, a Rousseauist and incredulous, from the *Essais sur les révolutions* in 1797, became in 1802 the banner bearer of a resurrected Christian faith. It must feed a renewal of literature that the nascent Empire is calling for. And the same authors can be claimed by all sides. This is the case of Rousseau, the object of an unprecedented cult in the 80s and of numerous pilgrimages to Ermenonville, invoked alternately or simultaneously by aristocrats, Girondins and Jacobins.

But ideological divisions are also often less clear-cut than one might think. Historicalized patterns of thought are spreading in this way. And even a conservative like Senac de Meilhan admits the necessity of the Revolution. Conversely, the triumphant reason ebbs and the need for the spiritual also affects the heirs of the Enlightenment. And for a counter-revolutionary and monarchist theorist like Bonald in 1802 or Madame de Staël, I quote: "Literature is the expression of society". The best proof of the complexity of the period lies in the ambivalence of these key notions such as melancholy or the return to the ancient.

Part 2 - A period between energy and nostalgia, momentum and loss

Both a negative and positive force for writers such as Staël and Chateaubriand, melancholy signals existential vertigo in the face of time and historicity. But it also allows us to surpass ourselves and opens up to a form of transcendence. The call of the spiritual is expressed in both of them, whether it takes the form of Catholicism or not. Similarly, the neoclassicism that triumphed in Chénier or in painting by David, as by writers, expresses the tensions of the end of the century, caught between energy and nostalgia, a call to the future and a sense of loss. We met them in the ruins' motif.

The return to the ancient is indeed a process of re-foundation and not a simple frozen academism, as underlined by this appeal launched by Germaine de Staël in 1800: "Comparing our wealth with that of antiquity, far from being discouraged by the sterile admiration of the past, let us be revived by the fruitful enthusiasm of hope; let us unite our efforts, let us deliver our sails to the fast wind that leads us towards the future".

But in the end, this call of the spiritual leads to the recognition of the powers of literature. It sometimes leads to incompleteness or to modern forms of writing such as the fragment. However, literary history has simplified and rewritten this uncertain period after the event, which itself felt the need to forge its own myths.

Thus, Chateaubriand himself rewrites history in the *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave,* by posing himself, several decades later, as the founder of the emerging romanticism. I quote: "In me, with the so-called romantic school, a revolution in French literature began." The author of the *Genius of Christianity* thus became, for posterity, the founder of a new, romantic literature, unfairly relegating Madame de Staël and *De la littérature* written two years earlier to the background.

It remains to be seen how the process opened to the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century. Is the responsibility for the revolutionary violence attributed to the Enlightenment part of those myths that the time felt the need to forge to master a vertiginous history?

Part 3 - The Revolution, achievement or betrayal of the Enlightenment?

Indeed, at the end of the 18th century, counter-revolutionary theorists, in Burke's wake, opened a trial of philosophy, held responsible for the great shaking of the Ancient Regime. This trial, as summarised in the refrain of the Gavroche's song in *Les Misérables*: "'Tis the fault of Voltaire, 'tis the fault of Rousseau", has left its mark on the collective memory.

However, the Revolution is not the mere implementation of a pre-existing programme since, as we have seen, the Enlightenment is not itself a doctrine and none of its representatives, including Rousseau, advocates overthrowing the established government. In addition, the Revolution is multifactorial. It is due as much to social developments, the emergence of public opinion as to the failure of the reforms attempted to adapt the administration, particularly the tax administration, of the Ancient Regime, or to circumstantial facts such as subsistence crises that may have served as a trigger.

At most, philosophical literature has prepared it in public opinion by legitimising its claims and providing these actors with intellectual tools. Concepts such as social contract, natural law.

Certainly, its dark side is undeniable. On the political level, the desire to base a more just social order on reason leads to the violence of Terror and the revolutionary courts, or to the authoritarianism of the Empire. The question of equality, raised, will wait a long time for its answers; 1848 for the abolition of slavery, 1944 for women's right to vote. The desire to spread the values of freedom, equality, fraternity, and the ideal of happiness of peoples also leads to wars and sister republics in Europe, and even new kingdoms in Italy.

Finally, on the social level, the concern to establish property and wealth, whether good or bad, takes precedence over the implementation of public education projects, which will await the Third Republic, not to mention a social justice called by the most audacious as Condorcet. The Stendhalian and Balzacian novel highlights the speculations and enrichments allowed by revolutionary wars - think of *Father Goriot* or the assignats - and welcomes the entry into what Stendhal calls the 19th century plateau. Beyond the revolutionary decade, would the Enlightenment still have to be forgotten?

Conclusion - The Enlightenment Today: A Current Debate

On the literary level, first of all, the raging verdict of La Harpe, which considered new literature monstrous, was invalidated by history. From autobiography to urban chronicles by Mercier or Restif, or even newspapers, the genres that emerged in the last decades of the 18th century are central to the modern cultural landscape. The press, the writing of the intimate including autofiction, or the visionary forms of poetry of the surrealists - think of the *Paysans de Paris* by Aragon - bear witness to this. Similarly, the struggle of the Enlightenment has remained relevant in the 21st century; religious tolerance, freedom of opinion, human rights, the right to education, regularly appear in the most burning news of our decade in all corners of the globe.

In an era of scientific misdeeds, fake news and all-powerful communication, the need for critical debate, mistrust of authority and the awareness that knowledge has a history, are still useful watchwords. As is the motto of the Enlightenment: "Dare to think for yourself. *Sapere aude.*"