



College of Europe
Collège d'Europe



Natolin

Prof. Dr. Dr. Jörg Monar
Rector of the College of Europe

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ALLOCUTION PROMOTION VOLTAIRE

Parler de Voltaire c'est parler d'un personnage à la fois mondialement connu et inclassable : « Philosophe », « esprit libertin », « défenseur des droits de l'homme », « critique de l'église », « romancier », « poète », « dramaturge », « critique littéraire », « historien », « journaliste »...la liste pourrait être prolongée, et chaque facette ne couvrirait qu'une infime partie du profil intellectuel de notre personnage.

Voltaire était tout cela – et beaucoup plus encore. L'immense diversité de ses activités intellectuelles en donnerait le vertige : des centaines de tracts littéraires, philosophiques et politiques, des dizaines de contes et de romans, des centaines de poèmes, plus d'une cinquantaine de pièces de théâtres et une correspondance épistolaire incommensurable.

On imagine mal l'étendue de cette œuvre tenir cette vie pourtant déjà longue, qui l'a amené jusqu'à l'âge de 84 ans et s'est étendue de l'apogée du règne de Louis XIV (1694) à l'époque de la guerre d'Indépendance américaine et des signes annonciateurs de la Révolution française (1778). Mais il y a plus :

Voltaire s'était créé un réseau européen de connaissances et d'amis, entretenu par de longues voyages, une activité épistolaire journalière et une grande générosité à recevoir des hôtes dans son château de Ferney proche de Genève. Cette dernière lui a valu dans les années 1760 la réputation d'être « l'aubergiste de l'Europe » puisqu'il y recevait des Européens de tous les pays, du plus jeune et humble adepte de littérature aux plus hauts représentants de la noblesse ; tous voulant bénéficier de la chance d'avoir une expérience personnelle avec celui qui était largement considéré comme l'esprit le plus brillant de son époque.

Malgré la prédominance du français en Europe à son époque Voltaire a aussi fait l'effort d'apprendre, de converser et/ou d'écrire en anglais, italien et latin : il aurait sans doute apprécié notre double régime linguistique au Collège !

Et pourtant il lui restait l'énergie et le temps de devenir – ce qui est moins connu – un homme d'affaires prodigieux qui à travers des investissements dans le commerce maritime, les fournitures des armées et les créances de plusieurs princes français et allemands a amassé une véritable fortune assurant son indépendance des faveurs royales.

Les biographes ont souvent retenu l'image d'un Voltaire au milieu des cercles des gens cultivés de son temps, déployant la vivacité de son esprit critique, de sa conversation brillante et de son sens de l'ironie mordant dans des hôtels particuliers et des châteaux d'une grande élégance, qui plus est n'étant personnellement pas du tout hostile aux plaisirs des tables raffinées.

Mais notre patron n'a pas toujours eu la vie facile, loin de là :

Son père ne lui pardonna pas d'avoir renoncé à une brillante carrière d'avocat, de haut fonctionnaire ou de diplomate au profit de celle - de pauvre réputation - d'un littéraire en quête de liberté au-delà des carcans d'une vie plus « respectable ». Le jeune Voltaire a dû se définir largement contre sa famille – un aspect de sa personnalité rendu très clair par le choix du pseudonyme « Voltaire » (probablement un anagramme) en remplacement de son nom de famille « Arouet ».

Très tôt déjà les autorités d'Etat et d'Eglise n'apprécièrent guère son esprit critique, ce qui le conduit à être enfermé à deux reprises et pour un total de presque un an dans la fameuse prison : la Bastille. A plus d'une reprise son irrévérence intellectuelle lui valut des humiliations – la plus blessante probablement en 1726 quand le chevalier de Rohan-Chabot le fit bastonner en pleine rue par ses laquais sans que Voltaire, du haut de ses 32 ans puisse se faire rendre justice.

Ses longs voyages et séjours, surtout en Angleterre, en Allemagne et en Suisse n'étaient parfois pas vraiment volontaires puisque à cause de ses écrits, il fuyait le royaume de France ou autres territoires pour éviter l'emprisonnement – ou même pire, à une époque où on pourrait encore être roué ou brûlé pour blasphème. Presque toute sa vie cet homme qui – il est vrai – a toujours cherché la reconnaissance de ses lecteurs, de ses amis et des princes éclairés ne pouvait pas publier bon nombre de ses ouvrages sous son propre nom, devant choisir l'anonymat, les pseudonymes et la publication à l'étranger, et ceci avec tous les risques d'altérations non-autorisées, de plagiat et d'éditions pirates qui en résultaient.

Plus encore, c'était aussi un homme dont l'étonnante énergie était perpétuellement en lutte avec d'innombrables maladies, dont certaines étaient sans doute d'origine psychosomatique dans cette vie vécue dans une tension permanente.

Tout effort de décrire une vie aussi intense, multiforme et riche en quelques minutes reste nécessairement futile. Je préfère donc me tourner vers les raisons pour lesquelles on a choisi Voltaire en tant que patron de cette promotion 2013-14.

Un patron de promotion au Collège d'Europe doit remplir essentiellement deux conditions :

(1) sa vie et son œuvre doivent avoir eu une importance et rayonnement pan-européens, et

(2) il doit aussi avoir montré des qualités à titre personnel qui malgré le temps passé peuvent encore servir de modèles à vous, étudiants du Collège...

...vous, qui nourrissez des ambitions pour votre futur, ce dont nous nous sommes assurés au cours du processus de sélection.

Voltaire est parfaitement à la hauteur de ces deux conditions, et ceci d'une manière unique et avec une combinaison très spéciale d'éléments d'importance européenne et de qualités personnelles :

Let's first look at Voltaire's European importance and impact :

(1) Voltaire stands out – and will stand out forever – as one of the greatest defenders of the individual against religious intolerance, arbitrary acts of state and religious authorities and perverted justice which Europe has known – and this at a time when this was not only dangerous but also often enough appeared completely hopeless.

After having taken position against religious fanaticism, intolerance and perverted justice for years already through his philosophical, critical and satirical writing Voltaire started from 1761 onwards to actively try to help individual victims of intolerance and denial of justice. Even if he could often not any longer help those victims who had their bones broken, their tongues cut out, their hands burned and their heads cut off he waged for the first time real public campaigns through his writings, letters and the mobilisation of influential friends inside and outside France to have those victims at least posthumously rehabilitated, their families saved and the injustice often inspired by a religious hatred fuelled by a church anxious to affirm its control over the society fully exposed. His action in legal affairs such as those of Calas, Sirven, La Barre, Lally-Tollendal, Martin and Montbailli read today like an everlasting roll of honour of the defence of the individual against the arbitrary powers of state and religious authorities.

(2) This first reason is closely related to the second : with his action in favour of victims of the powers and beliefs in place – one can add here to the aforementioned cases his efforts in having the "main-mortables" peasants of the Abbey of Sainte-Claude (Mont-Jura) freed from their near slave-like status – Voltaire became the first European publicly committed intellectual ("intellectuel engagé") crossing the borderline between written ideas and action by waging public campaigns against injustices of state and society. In doing so he arguably created for the first time something like a public opinion, not only in France but also across borders in Europe, which emerged as a counterweight to the powers of church and state and eventually played a major role in ensuring that in at least some of the aforementioned cases justice was eventually restored. It is not by chance that many later politically engaged intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, felt to some

extent as inheritors of a Voltairian model of an intellectual who not only contemplates and writes but acts in line with his insights and convictions.

The fact that Voltaire became the model for a new type of engaged European intellectual is significant enough – but at least as striking is that this was already recognised as such during his lifetime. When in 1770 a public subscription for a statue by the sculptor Jean-Baptiste Pigalle was opened to honour Voltaire in this way still in his lifetime – in itself a unique initiative – subscriptions poured in from all over Europe, including from several crowned heads and British ministers, and even from some of Voltaire's intellectual enemies like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. When he returned to Paris in 1778 after years of exile thousands turned up in the streets to see and applaud him as a writer who through his public commitments had become a public presence almost rivalling with that of the French king (which made some qualify him as "le roi Voltaire").

- (3) Last but not least, Voltaire has come to be regarded as the most universal representative of the spirit of enlightenment, while it is true that his dramatic work did not reach the depth of, for instance, a Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, his political writings not the lasting influence of a Montesquieu or Rousseau and his philosophy not the systematic heights of an Immanuel Kant no other writer of the enlightenment moved with such an ease of style, so many sentences of penetrating incisiveness and a unique capacity to make a synthetic use of the knowledge of his time between philosophical and political tracts, novels, dramatic works, poetry, historical works and letter writing as an art. If the European age of enlightenment stands still today for trying to free the human spirit from the bonds of prejudice and religious dogma and to make it benefit from all human knowledge across all boundaries to arrive at a universal understanding of the human condition no one has embodied this effort in a single mind and life more than Voltaire.

This does not mean, of course, that Voltaire was infallible : this is particularly true in the domain of contemporary politics where he placed a somewhat naive trust in certain "enlightened" rulers of the day, such as Frederic II and Catherine II, whose exchange of philosophical ideas with him made Voltaire overlook their fundamentally authoritarian orientation and unrestrained instincts of power politics. As a result he failed, for instance, to appreciate the aspirations of freedom of the 18th Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and initially welcomed the intervention of Prussia and Russia and the first partition of the Commonwealth in 1772 as a chance for overcoming what he regarded as the rule of a retrogressive and church dominated gentry.

Yet even in the case of this misjudgement – which he admitted in a letter to Frederic II of 15 February 1775 – Voltaire was motivated by his hope to see a rational and equitable organisation of human affairs spreading across Europe, even if in this case it meant the intervention of foreign power.

But let us now move to Voltaire's qualities as a person – which can offer you – the students of his promotion – some messages across the distance of now nearly two and half centuries :

- (1) All his life Voltaire never ceased to question existing knowledge, apparently established truths and what was held to be good or bad by the powers of the day. Up to the very last weeks of his long life – when he was subject to the excruciating pain of prostate cancer which was incurable in his time – he persisted in making up his own mind, using all available means of information and testing the borderlines of the existing knowledge. Nothing was ever just taken as “given” by him, everything was open to further questioning, revision and different and wider forms of understanding. It is this quality of a fundamentally inquisitive mind with its this constant questioning which made him one of the great protagonists of the European age of enlightenment –and made him reach a rare degree of intellectual freedom.

A first message which you the students can take from Voltaire is therefore : never cease to question things and to try to move beyond what is considered simply as “given” – as this is the royal way to freedom and deeper understanding.

- (2) Voltaire’s constant questioning, critical thoughts and public engagement required – it has already been said – a lot of courage at his time when he faced serious personal risks. But his courage was not limited to his struggles with the authorities of church and state:

For 16 years (1733-1749) he had a relationship with one of the few female writers and scientists of his day, the Marquise Emilie du Châtelet, a married woman 12 years younger than him. Although a complacent husband allowed him and Emilie to live for several years almost like a married couple it was an often stormy relationship with betrayals and various crises. But – and here was the courage – Voltaire repeatedly and publicly made clear that he considered Emilie in every respect as his intellectual equal and treated her as such, this in an age in which women could be treated with utmost politeness and most exquisite manners but were still generally held to be unable to properly “reason”. Not only did Voltaire – at a time when many considered him already as one of the greatest writers of his time – admit Emilie’s influence on him, for instance as regards the reception of the ideas of Newton, but when she became pregnant by another lover and eventually died in childbirth in 1749 he stayed with Emilie right to the end in circumstances which were somewhat embarrassing and exposed him to potential ridicule. This, surely, required a courage of a different sort.

So here is a second message you the students can take from your patron : if you believe in someone stand by her or him, if you believe in something stand by it – it will give a different truth and meaning to your life.

- (3) And finally Voltaire was also a man of deep compassion, a compassion which seemed to increase with his years and successes in the world: When campaigning for the Calas, Sirven, Lally-Tollendal and all the others he fought for it is compassion, a real feeling for those who are denied justice, who are tortured and are the victims of prejudices and hatred emanated from every line he wrote. It was out of a deep compassion for the victims of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake also that he questioned in his famous “Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne” (1756) the

presumed fundamental goodness of the divine order. And it was compassion for the poor living conditions of the peasants on his lands in the Pays de Gex which made him to put a lot of his time, efforts and money in the 1760s and 1770s in better housing conditions and roads, the construction of a school and hospital as well as the creation of more economic opportunities, including even an attempt to build-up a local watch-making industry.

The third, final message you the students may take from your patron is therefore that whatever heights of career and success you may reach never forget about those who are in one way or another the victims of our world, remain conscientious of the plight and the needs of those in the darker zones of our existence.

Toutes ces considérations nous font penser, chers étudiants, que Voltaire est bien digne d'être votre patron de promotion. Il sera pour vous –pas seulement durant cet année d'études au Collège mais aussi dans vos vies et carrières futures – de prouver que vous êtes dignes d'appartenir à cette promotion Voltaire, d'être des vrais "Voltairiens".
