

## Voltaire by Leo Rosten

<sup>1</sup>WHICH OF US has not relished his epigrams? "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." ... "God is always on the side of the big battalions." ... "Marriage is the only adventure open to the cowardly." ... "The embarrassment of riches." ... "It is better to risk saving a guilty person than to condemn an innocent one." ... "I do not agree with a word you say—but will defend to the death your right to say it."

<sup>2</sup>He filled 99 volumes (!) with his plays, novels, essays, poetry, satires, histories, fables, sardonic encyclopedias. He wrote thousands of rollicking letters to philosophers and scientists and kings. He was more than a man: "He was an age," said Victor Hugo. "To name Voltaire is to characterize the entire eighteenth century." He was born Francois Marie Arouet in 1694, when even children were still being thrown into dungeons for "heresy." In some French cities, no Protestant was permitted to be a doctor, lawyer, printer, even grocer. He said, "I have no scepter, but I have a pen." He used that pen to mock dogma, taunt the aristocrats, lampoon the fanatics. His first play broke a record by running for 45 consecutive nights. All Paris repeated his repartee. When King Louis XV's regent sold half the horses in the royal stables, Voltaire remarked that he would be smarter to get rid of half the asses in the royal court.

<sup>3</sup>Voltaire championed knowledge against ignorance, reason against superstition, skepticism against theology ("There are no sects in geometry"). He used his erudition as a club and his intellect as a rapier. Dazzling in his wit, deadly in his sarcasm, matchless in his lucidity, he employed every weapon in the arsenal of the mind: logic, invective, irony, paradox.

<sup>4</sup>"My trade is to say what I think." Voltaire made men think—and made them wonder what freedom of thought could mean to mankind.

<sup>5</sup>Slight, fastidious, with piercing black eyes and a mocking smile, this joyous iconoclast infuriated the clerics and the noblemen. He "annihilated with laughter"—and was hustled into the Bastille before he was 23. But prison and, later, exile, only sharpened Voltaire's hatred of tyranny, whether in politics or religion. He showered a continent with aphorisms: "The Holy Roman Empire is neither holy, Roman nor an empire." ... "The first divine was the first rogue who met the first fool." ... "If triangles had a God, He would have three sides." After the French clergy explained the terrible earthquake in Lisbon (on All Saint's Day, when the churches were packed and 30,000 perished) as God's vengeance, Voltaire gave vent to his outrage in *Candide*, the masterpiece of satire he wrote in three days.

<sup>6</sup>He studied Newton (he had spent a three-year exile in Britain), conducted experiments in physics with his mistress, the Marquise du Châtelet, introduced Shakespeare to France, and presided over a salon renowned for the brilliance of his conversation.

<sup>7</sup>Twice imprisoned in France, twice exiled, Voltaire finally settled in Ferney, near the Swiss border. He wrote histories that mark the beginning of modern historical method, for they analyzed social forces, not battles. He dared treat proud France as only part of Europe, and Europe itself as part of Eurasia. He even described the religions of the Orient as if they deserved as much credence as Christianity (which "must be divine, since it has lasted 1,700 years, despite the fact that it is full of villainy and nonsense").

<sup>8</sup>Virtually everything he published was banned, burned or suppressed. His very name was anathema to the *ancien regime*, but Boswell, Gibbon, Benjamin Franklin came to pay him homage, and Frederick the Great, Catherine the Great, Christian VII of Denmark, Gustavus III of Sweden sought his approval and advice. He lived like a sovereign, famous throughout the world.

<sup>9</sup>And then, in 1761, a young man in Toulouse hanged himself. By law, a suicide's body had to be drawn through the streets naked, then hanged from a gibbet. The horrified father, Jean Calas, begged relatives to testify that the death had been of natural causes. Rumors spread that he had *murdered* his son, to prevent his conversion to Catholicism, so Calas was arrested, tortured in Church-approved fashion, and died.

<sup>10</sup>Voltaire, almost 70, dropped the elegant ironies he so loved and, in a hurricane of letters and pamphlets, in scathing diatribes and impassioned protests, poured the acids of his scorn upon a system capable of such savagery. In everything he wrote, he repeated the cry, "*Ecrasez l'infame!*" ("Crush the infamous thing!") He made Europe ring with his accusations. He fought bigotry with such brilliant reasoning, such blistering invective as to inspire the historian Tallentyre to write that "the most terrible of all intellectual weapons ever wielded by man [was] the mockery of Voltaire." And when the pious tortured a 16-year-old, cut off his head and flung the body into a bonfire (along with Voltaire's *Philosophic Dictionary*), Voltaire marshaled new anger to make the La Barre case another *cause celebre*.

<sup>11</sup>"Men...enriched by your sweat and misery...made you superstitious, not that you might fear God, but that you might fear them," he proclaimed. "Overwhelm the fanatics and the knaves...Do not let those who have sense he subjected to

those who have none; and the generation which is being born will owe to us its reason and its liberty."

<sup>12</sup>He was *not* an atheist ("Doubt is not a very agreeable state, but certainty is a ridiculous one"). He distinguished faith from theology, and religion from superstition—"the cruelest enemy of the pure worship due the supreme being." He reached new heights in his jeremiads against ignorance, prejudice, hypocrisy, war.

<sup>13</sup>His influence was greater than that of any literary figure in history. He was the fountainhead of the Enlightenment and (though he distrusted "the mob") the intellectual spearhead of the French Revolution. "Italy had a Renaissance," says Will Durant, "Germany had a Reformation, but France had Voltaire."

<sup>14</sup>In 1778, he returned to Paris in triumph. Crowds gave the old man—he was 83—a tumultuous welcome. And when he lay dying and a priest came to shrive him, announcing himself as "a messenger from God," Voltaire quipped, "Where are your credentials?" He wrote this last testament: "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies and detesting superstition."

<sup>15</sup>The Archbishop of Paris denied him Christian burial. His friends put the corpse in a carriage and raced out of the city at night to bury him in holy ground. Thirteen years later, Voltaire's remains were brought back. The state procession stretched for miles; half a million lined the streets. On his funeral carriage was this legend: "He prepared us for freedom."

—LEO ROSTEN

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