CHAPTER TWO

VOLTAIRE: SETTING THE ROLE OF PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

On Vigilance

My first in-depth case study is of the life, times and works of the 18th century French historian-philosopher who published under the name of Voltaire. He generated radical criticism, aimed at the core institutions of his age: hereditary monarchy, elite nobility, an archaic righteous religion, and abused, exploited and neglected masses of under-classes. Before getting to him in detail, I will summarize my approach to his work, thereby exemplifying the general strategy used with all six case studies.

With special attention to his methods of procedure, I will attend not just to his writings and biography, but to the historical dynamics that set the stage for his work. Since my substantive concern is with issues related to domination, alienation and liberation from necessity, I will mostly attend to the political and economic tensions at the time he worked, focusing on how he dealt with what he judged to be the seriously misaligned determinants of the organization of society and what he proposed in terms of reform or revolutionary change.

With Voltaire, as with the others, I will show how history is woven into criticism by virtue of the critic who practices it, how subjective individuality mediates the expression of history, rendering manifest the dialectic tension between conservatism and change. This will shed light on the ambiguities of critical method, its vitality, necessity and contradictions in application.

Critical Judgment

Critical practice is the expression of judgment: situations and events are evaluated this way or that, not by a committee or impersonal government, but by a given individual. The evaluation is drawn from some sense of community as politics, rendering generalizable a judgment that might otherwise be only subjective. Political life in a modern community requires that everyone of good standing devote some energy to this sort of critical activity. However, most ordinary individuals are too involved in
daily problems to be greatly concerned, content to defer to the guidance of others, those considered leaders or specialists of one sort or another.

For mysterious reasons, every age produces a few precocious and well-read individuals, who, with special access to marker-experiences, transform the common capacity for critical judgment into an intellectual specialty of a spectacular nature. Working more like artists than technicians, they gain notoriety in the role of public intellectual, presenting their judgments and recommendations on cultural conditions as if speaking for the general well-being.

Like the other five major figures in these in-depth case studies, Voltaire demonstrated one variation of this special way of life. However, unlike the others, because he worked before this role was consciously considered as it today, he helped establish its contours.

Beyond issues of timing and style, historical moment and willingness, and fortuitous access to revelation and information, cultural criticism depends on a sense of good judgment against which current practices are qualitatively evaluated. In this regard, Voltaire was outstanding. Intellectually curious and personally disciplined, he was a trend-setter for an outrageous form of intellectual work, displaying the power of surprise based on an acute intuition about social forces, processes and events, linked with an exceptional capacity to describe what he saw in a poem, a story, essay or theater piece.

Although Voltaire worked in an exceptionally individualized fashion, and while remaining formally undefined, the evaluative criterion that guided his work is remarkably similar to that which was operative with the other five cases in this study: as if oriented by a postulated standard of humanity, violation of which is inexcusable because it would cause oppression or alienation, and on that basis, merited rectification. This unstated humanist principle is linked to the western enlightenment as cultural movement, concerning individual freedom and equality as progress on the one hand, and collective organization and stability on the other. Since those two hands of enlightenment are related but different in their expression, the result is dialectic. Critical practice addresses that dialectic, accounting at once for its opacity and importance.

Critical practice depends on not just viewing social dynamics from a lay-moral perspective, but the additional requirement of willingness to recommend negation, intervention, reform, even revolution when that standard is violated. This requires an extreme political engagement, straining, as we will see, toward the dangerous and desperate, if not the courageous and heroic. Yet, exercise of moral judgment is always as