



# WICKED COMPANY







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FREETHINKERS *and* FRIENDSHIP  
*in* PRE-REVOLUTIONARY PARIS

Philipp Blom

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*After a seminar I gave in 2007 in Bogotá, Colombia,  
I was approached by a boy of fourteen or fifteen years of age who  
wanted to know, then and there, everything about Diderot,  
Holbach, Rousseau, and the radical Enlightenment.  
I was not able then to give him the reply he was looking for,  
but this book is partly an attempt to answer him now.*

*I dedicate this book to him and to all those of his age  
who are curious enough to question who we are and  
courageous enough to imagine who we might become.*

O you whom the itch to write torments like a demon and who would give all the mines of Peru for a grain of reputation: abandon that vile herd of vulgar authors who run after the others or who root in the dust of erudition, abandon the fastidious savants whose works are like endless plains without flowers and without end. Either don't write at all, or take another way: be great in your writings, as in your actions, show the world a soul that is lofty, independent.

JULIEN OFFRAY DE LA METTRIE,  
*Discourse on Happiness*

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## INTRODUCTION

You can lose for all sorts of reasons—because you are not determined enough or because you are too fanatical, not flexible enough or too indifferent, not sufficiently strong, simply unlucky, too immersed in the details or too ignorant of them, too far behind your time or too far ahead of it. You can be a coward in victory and a true hero in defeat.

What is true for the living also holds for the dead. There is something like a stock market for reputations, which is watched anxiously by big investors in the prevailing version of history and with amusement by gamblers taking a punt on an obscure poet or a forgotten musician or philosopher trying to reestablish or tarnish his or her reputation. The workings of this marketplace are important to our present, because those whose stocks are highest, those with the most powerful and most numerous investors behind them, determine the ways we think about ourselves, the stories we tell about our world, the repertoire of our ideas. If Plato's stock is riding above that of Aristotle and completely obliterating the value of Epicurus, then we are more likely to translate Plato's thinking into our language, to tell our own stories along the lines he marked out for us.

On a sweltering summer's day in Paris I went looking for two men who had triumphed in a historic battle but lost their very last. Once they had held in their hands the keys to a society that might have been freer and more just, less repressed and happier. They fought for this vision courageously and at great risk to themselves, but their ideas fell from grace, were deluged by the roaring tide of the French Revolution, and were eventually all but written out of history. They had lived magnificently, but after their death more than two



hundred years ago, they had lost the battle for posterity, for the memory of future generations.

Today one of these men, Baron Paul Thiry d'Holbach (1723–1789), is forgotten by all but a few specialized scholars, while the other, Denis Diderot (1713–1784), is known mainly as the editor of the great *Encyclopédie* and the author of a handful of innovative works of fiction. And yet Holbach was not only host to some of the most brilliant minds of the century but also an important philosophical writer in his own right, author of the first uncompromisingly atheist books published since antiquity. His work is ignored, while Diderot has been reduced to the role he most despised: that of collator of other people's articles and ideas. His own philosophy—so fresh, so humane, so liberating—does not even appear in many histories of philosophy. His message was too disquieting, too anarchic, too dangerous to be released into the world at large.

Walking through the streets of Paris, I wanted to visit the places they had known, the houses in which they had lived, and especially the house at which Holbach had held his then-legendary salon. The circle of friends around Baron d'Holbach and his close friend and collaborator Diderot remains a kind of phantom ship in the history of philosophy to which rumors and legends have attached themselves like barnacles. Its members were part of a vast conspiracy that planned the French Revolution under the guise of debating questions of economics, some said; they were operating a factory for illegal books, which were written, revised, and disseminated by the thousands to bring down the monarchy, others believed. Most of their contemporaries agreed that Holbach and his cohorts were vile atheists who should be burned at the stake.

Sometimes historical reality is more rewarding and more exciting than even legend. Baron d'Holbach's salon and its principal protagonists did foment revolutionary ideas, but it was more than a mere political revolution they were thinking about; they did write and publish subversive books, but they wanted to bring down something infinitely more vast than the monarchy or even the Catholic Church. The vision they discussed around the baron's dinner table was one in which women and men would no longer be oppressed by the fear and ignorance instilled by religion but could instead live their lives to the full. Instead of sacrificing their desires to the vain hope of reward in the afterlife, they would be able to walk freely, to understand their place in the universe as



intelligent machines of flesh and blood and pour their energies into building individual lives and communities based on their inheritance of desire, empathy, and reason. Desire, erotic and otherwise, would make their world beautiful and rich; empathy would make it kind and livable; reason would allow an understanding of the world's immutable laws.

Before this paradisiacal and remote vision could be reached, the enemies of reason and of desire had to be defeated. The church condemned desire as lust and reason as pride—mortal sins both—and perverted empathy into the practice of making people suffer now so that they could reap rewards after their death. The Enlightenment radicals saw it as their duty to convince their contemporaries that there is no life after death, no God and no Providence, no divine plan, but only a physical world of life and death and the struggle to survive—a world of ignorant necessity and without higher meaning, into which kindness and lust can inject a fleeting beauty. During the eighteenth century, when such thoughts were regarded as heretical and punishable by death, defending these ideas was a truly herculean challenge.

Back in modern-day Paris, I faced a challenge of my own. Finding Holbach's town house proved more difficult than I had anticipated. I knew that it was in what was once the rue Royale Saint-Roch (pronounced "rock"), but the modern map diverges from the eighteenth-century city. The modern rue Saint-Roch is not identical with the previous one, which was renamed. The whole layout of the city had been changed during the nineteenth century, when Baron Hausmann realized his plans for a new Paris and demolished thousands of buildings and streets to create wide avenues (ideal for using artillery to crush the revolutions and popular uprisings for which the city was so famous) and spectacular visual axes throughout the city.

"If you want to know which street used to be the rue Royale Saint-Roch you need to ask the parish priest," someone had told me. "He knows everything about the history of the *quartier*." The priest was easy to find: a very elegant, elderly gentleman, white hair combed back, wearing an ecclesiastical collar under a fine suit, sitting on a small café terrace directly beside his church, the *église* Saint-Roch. With exquisite politeness he explained to me that yes, he had heard about a Baron d'Holbach living in this part of town during the eighteenth century, but no, he had no idea where the street I was looking for

was, and no, he could not tell me anything else about the baron. “*Au revoir, Monsieur,*” he said to me, leaving no doubt that he had no desire whatsoever to see me again.

Not willing to give up so easily, I continued my research in the area. After several false starts, I found the street and, indeed, the house in which Holbach had lived and received his guests. The street is now called rue des Moulins, and his house is not even five hundred meters from the terrace on which I met the priest. Obviously, the baron’s atheism was not yet forgotten. Then I discovered something else: Both Holbach and Diderot had been interred in the very church of Saint-Roch, whose knowledgeable parish priest knew nothing about their whereabouts. They are resting in unmarked graves, under the well-worn stone slabs in front of the main altar.

On a later visit to Paris, I took the opportunity to visit the *église* Saint-Roch once again, this time with the objective of locating the exact graves of Diderot and Holbach. The priest I had met previously had since retired, and I introduced myself to his successor, a man with a finely drawn face and also an enthusiast for the history of his church. Of course he knew where Diderot lay buried, he said. There was an ossuary underneath the altar. Unfortunately it had been desecrated twice, he added, once during the Revolution and a second time in 1871, during the Paris Commune. Bones and skulls of the people buried there were now strewn randomly on the floor, “and nobody knows what’s whose,” he added, with a tinge of amusement. He regretted that it would be impossible to visit the room. It awaited restoration, which was a matter for the state. “But Diderot is not alone down there,” he informed me cordially. “Many important artists were buried in this church. André le Notre is there, too, and Pierre Corneille, and the great *salonnière* Madame Geoffrin . . .” “And the Baron d’Holbach,” I added. The priest looked surprised. “Who did you say?” I repeated his name, this time in full: Baron Paul Thiry d’Holbach. “Now, I’m not sure about that,” he replied, in a cool and official voice. “A lot of people had masses read here but were never interred in these walls.”

I did not insist, but the priest’s reaction is a good indication why Diderot and Holbach lost the battle for posterity: They have still not been forgiven for their unpalatably radical ideas. Both men believed that there is nothing in the world but atoms organized in countless and complex ways, no inherent meaning, no higher purpose than life itself. While more moderate Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire believed that there must be a God, a supreme

watchmaker who had created the mechanism of the world, the friends at Holbach's salon (or most of them) were already convinced that the world had not been created but had evolved through chance and natural selection, without any guiding intelligence, any higher being.

Their philosophy provoked strong reactions from the very first. In the ancien régime, before the French Revolution, it was dangerous to speak one's mind. Those opposed to the teachings of the church were threatened with prison and even public execution. It was important to know whom one could trust and in front of whom you could speak freely. Holbach's salon, open to like minds every Thursday and Sunday, offered ideal conditions for the Enlightenment radicals. He was wealthy and employed an excellent chef; his cellar and his library were equally well stocked.

In these congenial surroundings in which everybody knew everybody else, Holbach's friends could test their ideas, debate philosophical and scientific questions, read and criticize new work. Diderot, one of the greatest conversationalists of the century, was at the center of every discussion—to the admiration and occasionally also the acute frustration of the other guests. The ultimate goal of these discussions was not personal enjoyment but philosophical and political influence. The thinkers of the radical Enlightenment wanted to change the general way of thinking, and to do this they had to intervene in the public discussion. This they did indirectly through Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, a twenty-eight-volume Trojan horse, carrying a cargo of subversive ideas into the homes of unsuspecting readers, and directly through a stream of books and pamphlets they had to publish clandestinely and anonymously. They were printed abroad, then smuggled back into the country and sold in strict secrecy.

The friends' evolutionist conception of nature and of humanity had momentous consequences. Without a Creator who had revealed his will to his creatures through the Bible, ideas of good and evil had to be rethought. In the brave new world envisaged by Diderot, Holbach, and their like-minded friends, there was suddenly no sin anymore and no reward or punishment in the afterlife; instead, there was only the search for pleasure and the fear of pain. Diderot and friends went further than traditional philosophy, which considered human beings as inherently rational and reason, being the closest approximation of the divine accessible to humans, the supreme faculty. Therefore, other Enlightenment philosophers replicated the Christian disdain for

the passions and based their ideas about a better future for humanity on an exclusively rationalist utopia in which there was little space for irrational impulses such as passion, instinct, or the yearning for beauty.

The radicals argued that human nature was exactly the opposite. Nature expressed itself through individuals in the form of strong and blind passions, the real driving forces of existence. They could be directed by reason much as the sails of a ship may allow sailors to navigate the storms, the waves and currents of a mighty ocean. Nevertheless, reason is always secondary, always weaker than the basic reality of passion.

Religious critics threw up their hands in horror. All this was nothing but a license for wickedness and debauchery, they wrote. Without God's law, there was no goodness in the world; without divine reason, there was no reason to exist. But the Enlightenment radicals had a clear answer to these charges. Their morality was not one of wild orgies, unrestrained greed, and heedless indulgence, but of a society based on mutual respect, without masters and slaves, without oppressors and oppressed.

While in a godless universe there is no transcendental yardstick of an absolute, revealed Truth and Goodness, it is perfectly easy to see what is beneficial and what is harmful to people here and now. This insight alone should be the principle of all morality. It was a dangerous idea, because a moral code based on the pursuit of happiness in this life had truly revolutionary implications. Without a God who has set some people above others, everybody—regardless of social station, sex, race, and creed—has an equal right to seek pleasure and, ultimately, happiness. A duchess has no higher claim to happiness than the humblest peasant, and a society in which happiness is possible not just for the privileged few can be achieved only through solidarity and cooperation. There was no place in this vision for an aristocracy, for birthright, or for social hierarchy. In ancien régime France, an absolute monarchy, this was tantamount to treason, but it also attracted an array of exceptional and courageous people to Holbach's salon.

Even today, this vision has lost none of its persuasiveness and appeal.

During their lifetime, Holbach and Diderot were equally feted and reviled, fixed stars in the intellectual universe even of those who wanted to see them burned at the stake (and there were many). Today, however, if you consult any Paris tour guide or ask any educated person where to visit the graves of two

important eighteenth-century philosophers whose work changed the world, you will not be sent to the *église* Saint-Roch but to the Panthéon, close to the Jardins du Luxembourg. There, in the crypt, you will find the sarcophagi of Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, two of the first famous dead to be accorded the honor of having their remains transferred here. With revolutionary pomp and ceremony, Voltaire was reinterred in the crypt of the Panthéon in 1791, Rousseau in 1794. Upstairs, in the nave of the building, there is a monument dedicated to Diderot, installed, as an afterthought, in 1925.

The Panthéon is official history cut in stone. There is something deceptively plausible about this version. You have to make an effort to remember that the fabric of the present has not grown as it had to grow, simply and organically, but is the result of countless decisions and acts of violence, forcing each present moment to conform to the dreams and nightmares of those in power. So why is it that Voltaire and Rousseau are lying in state in the central, secular sanctuary of the French Republic, dedicated to the *grands hommes* of France (Marie Curie, the first *grande femme*, was allowed in only in 1995), while their contemporaries Diderot and Holbach are in unknown graves in a church whose priest disclaims all knowledge of them to a casual visitor?

One answer might be, of course, that Voltaire and Rousseau simply were better, more original philosophers who were more deserving of this special honor. Voltaire was, after all, the great champion of human rights and Enlightenment ideas, the very embodiment of the battle between reason and superstition. Rousseau is still revered as the voice of human freedom and radical personal honesty, a wise friend leading societies to freedom, a pioneer of the unconscious, and a tireless investigator of the emotional dimension of life.

Without a doubt Voltaire was the most influential and best-known figure of the Enlightenment, but his philosophical contribution does not go much beyond solid common sense liberally sprinkled with ironic wit. His political activities reveal him to be a shrewd operator interested mainly in his own reputation and his financial fortune. As for Rousseau, he is altogether more original and important as a thinker, but also in possession of a far more sinister, self-serving, and self-consuming mind. Moreover, he was a compulsive liar, which makes for compelling biography but not for great philosophy.

Rousseau and Diderot had been close personal friends once, but they fell out very publicly and very spectacularly. Their friendship ended not only because of Rousseau's paranoia, but more significantly because he came to hate

the Enlightenment Diderot stood for, a life free from fear of the unknown and from self-disgust, a clear-eyed and serene acceptance of our place in the world as highly intelligent, morally conscious apes.

Profoundly disgusted with himself as well as fearful of his own desires, Jean-Jacques Rousseau became the avowed enemy of those he had previously loved. In the nineteenth century, the art historian John Ruskin coined the term “pathetic fallacy” for the error of imputing intentions to inanimate objects—leaves that dance, books waiting to be read, nature being alternately kind and cruel. Rousseau’s pathetic fallacy was to believe the entire world was united to ruin him. Out of this fear he formulated a philosophy suggesting at first glance a defense of freedom and human dignity, while actually laying the foundation for a deeply oppressive, intensely pessimistic view of life. The ideal society he advocated was based on ideological manipulation, political repression, and violence, and on a philosophy of guilt and paranoia that turned out to be ideally suited to justifying totalitarian regimes of all stripes. It is no accident that Rousseau was the philosophical idol of Maximilien Robespierre, the most terrifying of all leaders of the French Revolution, whose favorite political instrument was the guillotine.

What makes the thinking of the radical Enlightenment so essential today is its power, its simplicity, and its moral courage. What makes it more important than ever is the fact that it is Rousseau, not Diderot, who has won the battle for posterity, and his influence is continuing to cloud our debates and our societies. Rousseau rediscovered religion for himself, though not a religion of the institutional kind. He believed in an afterlife, he wrote, because this life was simply too awful to be all he could hope for—a classic case of the wish being father of the thought. He was an intensely religious man at war with the world at large and with himself, and his philosophy reflected his situation by taking Christian concepts out of their religious context and making them accessible in a not explicitly religious, philosophical context. During the nineteenth century, in a world still smarting from the decline of religion, this offer was gratefully accepted. Rousseau showed how it was possible to incorporate originally Christian feelings and beliefs into a modern worldview without having to speak the language of theology.

Even today, the public discussion about moral and political issues is no longer framed in an explicitly religious context, but the change in terminology



only conceals the all-pervasive influence of the unexamined theological ideas underlying it. Our vocabulary has changed, of course: We no longer speak about the soul but about the psyche; we have exchanged original sin for inherited, psychological guilt. But the cultural soil on which these ideas flourish has remained the same, and all too often our worldview is inherently religious without our even realizing it.

When we look into the future, we instinctively fear the Apocalypse and fully expect either paradise or purgatory. Next to the beatific vision of a perfect market, a science-fiction future without wars and energy problems, a perfect Socialist society, or whatever other dreams we happen to subscribe to is the looming prospect of an overheating planet, a nuclear World War Three, collapsing ecosystems, wars about water and other natural resources, destructive asteroids on a collision course with Earth—an ultimate, murderous clash of civilizations. The possibility of humanity's simply muddling through for millennia to come (the most likely scenario by far), avoiding some catastrophes while suffering others (some of them self-inflicted), is simply less instinctive to our theologically conditioned brains than the thought of salvation or damnation, of heaven or hell.

So deeply ingrained are these cultural instincts that Rousseau's totalitarian utopia can seem more natural and sensible than Holbach's utilitarian tinkering. Utopians are always religious at heart, and it comes as little surprise that Rousseau was a direct inspiration not only for Robespierre but also for Lenin and Pol Pot. The latter studied Rousseau's works in Paris during the 1950s, before his murderous campaign forced Cambodia back into the Iron Age, under the guise of creating a society of virtuous peasants isolated from the corrupting influences of higher civilization.

Not only are our utopias theological in nature, but our relation to desire and passion bears the same religious imprint, as the map of every city will show. The red light districts in our cities bear witness to a very Christian revulsion toward physical pleasure. They are situated on the periphery (though nowadays cities have often sprawled around them, putting them close to the center of a seemingly endless conurbation) and in less desirable areas; they are seedy and depressing, vulgar and cheap. They serve a shameful desire, guiltily satisfied in dim and grubby corners or by the lurid light of neon signs.

Sex itself is dirty, and women willing to sleep with men are often still referred to as "sluts," "whores," or worse. Not for us the celebration of physical

beauty of antiquity or the joyful erotic ornaments and amulets adorning everyday life in ancient Rome or decorating Indian temples. We are still ashamed of ourselves, and we have internalized this shame in our popular culture: In the Hollywood blockbusters washing across our movie screens, a glimpse of a naked body is deemed offensive and obscene, but the gratuitous and pornographically detailed depiction of extreme violence is not.

There is a direct line from this seemingly ultra-secular world of seamy seduction to Puritan preachers invoking hellfire against lust and to self-hating hermits. One could be forgiven for thinking that the endless images of beautiful people being young, slim, rich, and irrepressibly happy owe more to Epicurus than to Ecclesia, but in fact their unachievable perfection makes them essentially religious.

Believers in the Western gospel of earthly bliss must detest their bodies and their actual lives just like the nuns and monks of old. Pious Christians used to chastise themselves by fasting, by denying themselves everyday pleasures, by stifling their desires and crushing their self-respect, by starving their bodies and their desires to gain the life eternal. Their modern, secular opposites no longer fast to save their immortal souls, but they diet, curbing their desires, forever chasing after a youthful body that will never again be theirs, forever feeling guilty about being too old, too flabby, insufficiently fit. The icons of our day may be fashion models instead of saints, but they still function by making us suffer. They instill guilt, humiliate us, and spur us to emulate an impossible ideal, as we vainly hope for a better afterlife, a remote vision of being wealthy, tanned, and cool that has replaced the beatitudes of the church.

Christianity is the religion of the suffering God. Christ was made flesh and had to die, to be tortured to death, thus allowing God the Creator to forgive humanity for its wickedness. Holbach and Diderot wrote all there is to be written about the perversity of this argument, but even the most irreligious of Westerners still believe in the positive, transformative value of suffering. We have all internalized the Romantic stereotype of the solitary, suffering genius (a figure almost single-handedly invented by Rousseau in his *Confessions*). We love stories in which people triumph over adversity, in which they are almost crushed by wickedness or misfortune, only to emerge again, to be resurrected. This kind of story is found in many cultures, but not in all. The ancient Greeks attached no moral value to suffering: After journeying around the

Mediterranean for twenty years and surviving many dangers, Homer's Odysseus is older—but not a wiser or a better man.

For the many who opt out of this very religious game of guilt and suffering, of responsibility and striving for a better afterlife (and, possibly, of hope), there is nothing left but a void to be filled by entertainment and indulgence, an endless presence punctuated by gadgets, accessories, and conspicuous consumption. The Enlightenment radicals were adamant that society and individuals must build on education and solidarity. Those in our society who feel they cannot or do not want to aspire to the secular ideals of our church of brand-name canonization have made a choice: Instead of chasing after an unattainable ideal, they have let go of all aspirations and replaced all hope of a better tomorrow with a supersized helping of instant satisfaction.

A religious matrix—theology in secular clothes—permeates our lives, and theological preconceptions continue to confuse many of the debates that will shape our future. Arguments put forward in the ongoing debate about genetic research and its possibilities show how much we still regard ourselves as beings endowed with a soul and a destiny by a Creator. Cloning of animals is controversial, the mere thought of human cloning makes us deeply uneasy, stem cell research causes virulent debate, and the only reason to oppose abortion in the very early stages of pregnancy must be the idea that even a cluster of as yet unspecialized cells already has a human soul attached to it, that it is already a full person in the eyes of God.

The legacy of nineteenth-century Idealism and Romanticism has created our intellectual world, ruled not by the secularized, scientific mind many historians have written about but, on the contrary, by a fundamentally Christian worldview that has merely been stripped of its outward signs and rituals. This is why the work of the radical authors who came together in Holbach's salon has lost very little of its freshness, its capacity to shock, and its ability to inspire constructive reflections about our own cultural, scientific, and political landscape. We are still grappling with many of the questions Diderot, Holbach, and their friends wrote about, and we still have not learned their lesson that any philosophical or moral debate must start from the scientific facts.

Beginning with the idea, so brilliantly exposed by Holbach, that it is simply narcissistic to believe that there must be a Providence, a higher intelligence,



because otherwise life would be meaningless, the thinkers of the rue Royale believed we must accept the meaninglessness of the existence of *Homo sapiens*. Only then can each individual's quest to seek pleasure and flee pain become the beginning of a common story. The realization that no one is completely autonomous, coupled with our strong feeling of empathy, leads directly to a morality of mutual solidarity, to social meaning.

Diderot and Holbach may appear to have lost the battle for posterity, but they have not yet lost the war, still raging, for our civilization and its dreams, which could be so much more generous, more lucid, and more humane than they are now. Their works still richly repay rereading, and their careers can serve as both an inspiration and a warning to us. They demonstrate both what we have gained since their day and what we are in danger of losing once again, as we are faced not only by threats from the outside but also by our own laziness, indifference, and muddled thinking.



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# FATHERS AND SONS

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## CHAPTER I

## CITY OF LIGHTS

Paris is a metropolis to which the bright and ambitious have been drawn for centuries. The lives of the protagonists of this story unfolded on its streets—in its parks, cafés, salons, and bedrooms (and, occasionally, in the country estates dotted around the capital or on a voyage abroad to England, Italy, or even Russia). But far-reaching as they are, the events and ideas that made up this great moment in the history of Western thought have a very clear center, a definitive address, a house number: in the center of the City of Lights, at 10, rue des Moulins, just a stone's throw from the Louvre and the beautiful colonnades of the Jardin Royal. There stands a handsome seventeenth-century house that was once inhabited by Paul Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, and his wife, and that was for a time the epicenter of intellectual life in Europe. Some of the most exciting minds of the Western world came to Holbach's salon to partake of sumptuous dinners and discuss dangerous ideas far from the public eye. It is hard to imagine another room that has seen so many brilliant people, heard so many spirited exchanges.

The building breathes quiet confidence and comfort without being demonstratively ornate or flashy. The staircase is still exactly as it was during the eighteenth century: wooden steps framed by elegant, cast-iron railings with gilt flower decor, leading to landings with black-and-white tiles and to the salon on the first floor, a generous room overlooking the street. Here, guests were received and dinners held. The room is in no way ostentatious but spacious enough to accommodate a good dozen people around a large dining

table and still leave space for servants to pass behind the diners. The wooden floors are of the period, the ceiling high, and the large bay windows flood the room with light, giving it a gracious, elegant air.

“Elegance” was a watchword in this part of town even two and a half centuries ago, when the adjoining street to the south, the rue Saint-Honoré—with its innumerable tailors and couturiers and the wig makers, coiffeurs, shoemakers, glovers, and others who went with them—was the mecca of the fashion-conscious throughout the Western world. Luxury merchants had been drawn to the area by the huge, looming, eternally unfinished Louvre, the royal palace at the heart of the capital, directly by the banks of the Seine. Courtiers needed to be presentable, and they constantly needed to show off new clothes, setting the tone for the rest of the country and for Europe. But the palace had been practically empty ever since the beginning of Louis XIV’s personal rule in 1661, when the young Sun King, suspicious of the subversive undercurrent of city life, had displaced his court out of the city and eventually to the palace of Versailles. A monstrous construction project in the swamps, its drainage and conversion into the world’s most spectacular park had cost hundreds of workers’ lives, swallowed endless millions, and eventually ruined the kingdom. The Louvre was deserted by the court for most of the year: empty ceremonial halls echoing with the footfall of occasional servants; exquisitely carved furniture covered up, its delicate fabrics (often made from last season’s silk court robes) hidden from view; chandeliers tinkling softly in the breeze as the rooms were aired and cleaned periodically. Only the countless workshops of tradesmen and craftsmen on the ground floor and in the courtyards filled the site with life.

The rue Saint-Honoré, however, continued to do brisk business. As far as fashion was concerned, it was the only place to go. But Holbach had not chosen this part of Paris for its fashionable or royal associations. He was not very interested in his appearance and was an instinctive republican. But the house was convenient, right in the middle of things yet quietly situated in a side street, within easy reach of all amenities. For this part of town was a center not only of fashion but also of intellectual life. Several of his wealthier friends and other salon hosts lived around the corner, and there were bookshops and art dealers. The enclosed universe of the leafy Jardin Royal nearby (lovingly described in Diderot’s novel *Rameau’s Nephew*) tempted with cafés and chess



tables as well as gambling and altogether more carnal pleasures in the shape of gaudily made-up prostitutes in low-cut dresses sauntering past gentlemen in powdered wigs—a theatre of vanities that the baron, by all accounts a model husband, was content to observe from a distance.

Less than a mile farther east, past the graceful, circular Place de Victoires dominated by a statue of Louis XIV, the world became even more carnal. Heaving with countless porters, grocers, butcher boys, flower sellers, fishmongers, spice dealers, and sausage sellers; ringing with their market cries and warning shouts from dawn to dusk; and reeking to high heaven during the summer months, the Les Halles markets were the stomach of Paris, the source for the ingredients of the baron's famous twice-weekly dinners.

The area's other landmark, the magnificent Place Vendôme, originally a speculation scheme that had almost broken the back of its investors and had stood like a huge theatre set as an assembly of empty facades for years, was one of the capital's preeminent addresses, a place that smelled of money as much as Les Halles did of pickled herring on a warm August day. Ostentatious to the point of vulgarity, it could be reached on foot from the baron's house within a few minutes, and yet it was a different universe. The stars of Holbach's intellectual salon were not financiers but writers, scientists, and philosophers.

Several great salons vied for the attention and the presence of the city's brightest and most fashionable intellectuals. Each of these houses had a distinctive character and orientation, both artistically and politically. Just around the corner in the rue Sainte-Anne, the baron's friend Claude-Adrien Helvétius regularly welcomed progressive philosophers and writers, but even if Holbach and Helvétius were famous for their hospitality, they were exceptional in a salon landscape dominated by distinguished ladies. Indeed, keeping a salon was the only way for a woman to make her mark on the still overwhelmingly male literary world. At the rue Saint-Honoré, no more than a few minutes from Holbach's doorstep, the sexually voracious novelist Claudine Guérin de Tencin had welcomed some of the nation's most powerful and witty men into her salon—and frequently her bed. “One can see that God is a man by the way he treats us women,” she famously sighed, but even divine negligence did not deter her from enjoying life to the full. In 1717 she had given birth to an illegitimate son, whom she had promptly laid on the steps of the Church of

Jean-le-Rond. He would grow up to become Jean d'Alembert, one of this century's most eminent mathematicians and coeditor, with Diderot, of the great *Encyclopédie*.

After Madame de Tencin's death in 1749, Marie-Thérèse de Geoffrin (1699–1777), reputedly the greatest hostess of all, held court at the rue Saint-Honoré. No one could dream of making a literary career without her approval, and an invitation to read at her house from a manuscript was not only a mark of recognition but practically a guarantee of success. Voltaire had been a regular here before his exile; government ministers, scientists, poets, and wits mingled here and could speak with a freedom impossible at court or in public. Here, introductions could be made, alliances forged, literary destinies determined. Among the many whose path to later glory led through Madame de Geoffrin's salon was the young Diderot, who made the acquaintance of a number of writers who would later contribute to his *Encyclopédie*.

As the example of Madame de Geoffrin indicates, salons fulfilled an important function in eighteenth-century Paris. The usual networking was and still is such an important feature in literary circles—replete with young hopefuls, freshly arrived in the city and eager to make themselves known, and the old, established names wanting to shine and enjoy their growing reputation. But the salons served as much more than just a vehicle for vanity. In an intellectual environment controlled by harsh censorship laws, it was not easy to find places allowing a free exchange of ideas. In eighteenth-century France, no work could legally appear in print without a royal privilege indicating that it had gone through the hands of church censors and been approved. The penalties for contravening these laws were stiff and applied strictly at the discretion of the authorities, such as the chief censor and the mighty Paris *parlement*, though powerful courtiers were also known to use their influence against books and their authors. Punishments ranged from a symbolic tearing and burning of the book by the hangman of Paris to a few weeks in the Bastille to backbreaking forced labor on the galleys of the French navy (a virtual death sentence) or outright public torture and execution.

Ideas depend on gregariousness and exchange to flourish, but public places, the parks, the many cafés and taverns were too insecure to meet in. The person at the next table could be a police spy, and the merest accusation could suffice to ruin one's career or force the accused into exile. Even the great Voltaire had

found that his considerable wealth did not protect him from prosecution; in 1728, having made one disrespectful quip too many, he had been obliged to leave Paris and eventually France, retiring to a pretty country estate at Ferney, near Geneva and close to the French border.

Salon hostesses had a very specific and strictly circumscribed function. The writer and salon regular Jean-François Marmontel praised their “grace of the mind, the mobility of their imagination, the ease and natural flexibility of their ideas and their language” and described their conversation as necessary training for writers: “He who wants to write only with precision, energy and vigor must live only with men; but whoever wants style with suppleness, ease, connectedness and a certain *je ne sais quoi* which is called charm would do well, I believe, to live with women.”<sup>1</sup>

There was no thought, however, of the women themselves appearing as authors or as philosophers. The natural flexibility and delicacy with which their male contemporaries believed them to be endowed rendered them inspired mediators and facilitators, but little more than that. While the limitations of their role were no doubt intensely frustrating for many of the women concerned, playing hostess was nevertheless the only way open to them of participating in literary society, and it allowed them to influence intellectual life by promoting some authors and artists more than others.

Every salon had its own temperament, its own cast of characters, and its own philosophical or even political orientation. But the salons all shared the invaluable function of giving visitors an opportunity to speak, to listen, to read their works to an appreciative and critical audience, to forge alliances, to find a powerful patron, and just to escape the drudgery and boredom of their working days. Those who were lucky enough to be received at all the great houses could count their weekdays in salons: Mme Geoffrin on Monday, then on Tuesday the home of the philosopher Helvétius, the next day Mme Geoffrin again, then Holbach, and finally the home of Mme Necker. For Saturdays, there were minor salons, but on Sundays several great houses threw open their doors, including Holbach’s, of course.

The glittering world of the salons was nothing but a distant dream for the adolescent Denis Diderot when he set foot in Paris for the first time in 1728, at age fifteen, a pious provincial boy admitted to one of the city’s great schools

in preparation for becoming a priest. His father, a master cutler, had accompanied him to oversee his first days in the capital, a dazzling spectacle very far from the quiet surroundings of their home.

Diderot had been baptized on October 6, 1713, in the small town of Langres, in northern Champagne. Eleven months earlier his mother had given birth to another boy, only to lose him days after his birth. She was thirty-four when she married, uncommonly old for the time. The couple would have three more surviving children, whose lives illustrate the family's devout background. A second son, Didier, would become a thorny priest and forever quarrel with his notorious atheist brother; Angélique, the older sister, became an Ursuline nun against the wishes of her family and apparently died from overwork in the convent at the age of twenty-eight. Only the youngest sister, Denise, would remain a lifelong friend and confidante for her brother.

The Diderots were a prosperous family. The father's workshop occupied the ground floor of their handsome house, while the family's living quarters on the higher floors overlooked the cathedral square of the proud town of Langres. Their oldest son was baptized Denis after the sainted missionary beheaded in Paris around the year 250 (but unwittingly also after Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and ecstasy). He quickly grew into a bright, personable child, fast-witted and outgoing. The father decided that Denis would continue the family tradition and become a priest, so he sent the child to the local school, where he excelled not only at the basics but also at Latin.

But Denis was no bookish boy. When he was about ten years old, he enthusiastically participated in a protracted and at times bloody war between two rival gangs of children, during which two armies of up to a hundred boys squared off with sticks and stones. A childhood memory (described, as so often with Diderot, in dialogue form, and this time directed at a boy from a richer family) paints a no doubt tendentious but highly revealing portrait of the young warrior, as well as of the man he would become. The mature author remembers himself as a Spartan, fierce and proud, and superior in his simplicity to the effeminate Athenian manners of his rival: "You recoil at the sight of the disheveled hair and torn clothes. Yet I was that way when I was young and I was pleasing—pleasing to even the women and girls in my home town in the provinces. They preferred me, without hat and with my chest uncovered, sometimes without shoes, in a jacket and with the feet bare, me, son of a

worker at a forge, to that little well-dressed monsieur all curled and powdered and dressed to the nines, the son of the presiding judge.”<sup>2</sup> A portrait of the artist as a young man and as a writer: his rebellious spirit, his entertaining vanity, and his—at times exasperating—stylization as a man of the people. Even in later life he would not wear a wig, and portraits show the mature man with short hair and simple clothes, an honest worker like his father, not some grandee dressed after the latest fashion.

When the boy entered his teenage years, he sought out the most intellectual branch of the church. Young Diderot wanted to become a Jesuit, but his father would not hear of it, especially as Denis’ uncle had already indicated that the position of canon at Langres Cathedral would be open to Denis once his education was completed. Much better to have a decent sinecure at home than to enter an order where one might be sent anywhere and lead an uncertain life.

When it became clear that the Langres schoolmasters had little left to teach young Denis, his parents decided to invest in his future and send him to Paris, where he could study at one of the great colleges—a sure first step for a career in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In 1728 the boy and his father boarded a slow coach for an uncertain but exciting future in the capital. Before setting off, the fifteen-year-old, intellectually restless boy formally entered the church. Having been tonsured by the bishop, he now had to be addressed not by his first name but as *abbé* Diderot.

Around the time when the lanky *abbé* Diderot was on the road to the capital, the much younger Holbach also arrived there. He had been born in the little town of Edesheim in the German Palatinate in 1723; his father was a well-to-do wine grower. Young Dietrich spent his first years in a handsome manor among vineyards and wood-framed houses. He might have become a wine grower himself, but his future was transformed by a recently ennobled uncle, Baron Franz Adam d’Holbach. The uncle had emigrated and made his fortune in Paris. He had even bought the title of baron from the imperial court in Vienna. Now, in 1728, he decided to adopt his lively nephew, take him to the greatest of all cities, and give him the best education money could buy. Renamed Thiry d’Holbach, the boy proved a voracious reader, fascinated by the sciences, by experiments and the natural world. We know little about his

early years beyond this outline. Holbach never appears to have been sufficiently interested in himself to talk about his youth at length, and his home schooling means that no documents about his education survive in school archives.

Ten years separated Diderot and Holbach, a huge gulf during their early years, which they spent in the capital. Other things also differentiated them. The schoolboy Thiry lived in a grand house with servants and was schooled at home, by tutors. Denis, now in his late teens, would have lived in a garret or a frugal lodger's room, and received only a meager allowance from home—too meager, in any case, to live comfortably. Most of his time outside of class was spent immersing himself in literature: Roman authors as well as some Greek, which he never read as fluently. He attended an ecclesiastical school, most likely the famous Jesuit college Louis-le-Grand, where Molière, Cyrano de Bergerac, and Voltaire had been pupils before him.

We know next to nothing about what the schoolboy Denis was thinking apart from the fact that he had already acquired a strong taste for the authors of Roman and Greek antiquity, so much freer in their ideas than later European authors, and that he liked to play tricks on his teachers by uttering apparently outrageous thoughts and then innocently demonstrating that he had only quoted from the works of great Roman authors. But if this seems little to go on, it is possible to draw inferences about his intellectual world by looking at the country during the 1720s and 1730s, its culture, and its preoccupations.

Diderot attended the Collège Louis-le-Grand, named, of course, after Louis XIV, who had died two years after Diderot's birth, in 1715. At the height of his fifty-four-year reign, the glorious Sun King had created a courtly culture that was the envy of the world. But eventually time had turned against him, and as an old man, the king had grown jealous of his own former greatness. Two hugely expensive wars (one on the northeastern border in the Netherlands from 1772 to 1778; the other, the 1701–1714 War of the Spanish Succession, fought practically everywhere but in Spain) had all but bankrupted the state. The erstwhile splendid style of the court appeared rigid and old-fashioned to a new generation of artists. Even Versailles, situated miles away from the capital and still a ruinously expensive building site after so many years, had lost much of its luster and appeal in an intellectual and cultural cli-

mate slowly moving away from the celebration of absolute monarchs and towards a more Enlightened model of rule and a more urban culture.

The royal ballet was a good example of the changes taking place. An accomplished dancer in his youth, Louis himself had starred in many court productions, written for him by his court composer, the brilliant and irrepressible Jean-Baptiste Lully. In accordance with the king's taste, most of the works (excepting dance interludes for the comedies of Molière) featured classical gods and mythical heroes, choirs singing effusive praise to absolute rule, and spectacular music to support stage effects such as maritime battles with model ships on moving seas and gods apparently floating through the air. It was all very splendid, very formal, and very festive, much like the giant park extending behind the palace. But after Lully's disgrace in 1685 on account of his same-sex love affairs carried on too flagrantly even for Versailles (the king's brother was a cross-dresser), there was nobody to continue this tradition. Lully died two years later from an infection sustained when he accidentally pierced his foot with his conductor's baton. The fashion was changing. Younger composers such as Jean-Philippe Rameau and Marain Marais sought a more emotional, more internal style and often turned to chamber music, reflecting a stronger call for music to be performed and listened to at home by the rising bourgeoisie.

When the king died in 1715, Philippe, Duke of Orléans, son of the king's cross-dressing brother and the wonderfully candid German princess Liselotte, became regent of France and promptly moved the court back to Paris. Philippe was an avowed atheist who had the works of the scandalous François Rabelais bound into his Bible so that he could read them privately during Mass. He was a cultured and progressive man who attempted to move the impoverished country towards a modern, constitutional monarchy by giving more power to the local *parlements*, but his liberal style of ruling (to say nothing of his decidedly liberal private life) did little more than confuse a country used to the most rigid, absolutist government. Amidst the squabbling of rival political parties, the country effectively ground to a standstill. In retrospect, the luckless Philippe would have done better as a benevolent dictator.

In one area at least, the liberal regent did have some success. With a great sigh of relief, the metropolis rediscovered its literary and intellectual life. Philippe had loosened censorship and encouraged intellectuals. One man in

particular made this new, more modern, and freer tone his own: François-Marie Arouet, born in 1694, was a young, well-to-do man about town. He soon attracted attention, and trouble, with his sharp pen, writing satirical verses about some of the grandest grandes in the land, aristocrats who did not appreciate such an uncommon lack of respect. Arouet was banned from Paris in 1716 after making fun of the regent's supposed incestuous relationship with his daughter, then allowed back, only to publish a second satire on the duke, who by this time had had enough. In 1717, he had the impertinent scribbler imprisoned in the Bastille, where the young man began writing for the stage. After almost a year Arouet was freed and, after the performance of his tragedy *Oedipe*, famous. He frequented the most aristocratic salons and could have settled down nicely, were it not for his spirit of mockery.

Upon his release from prison, the fledgling star dramatist began calling himself "Voltaire" (an anagram of Arouet Le Jeune, treating *u* and *v* and *j* and *i* as interchangeable, as they are in Latin). An aging and childless aristocrat challenged him on his name change, and the town wit could not resist the jibe "*Je commence mon nom, monsieur, vous finissez le vôtre*" (I am the first of my name, monsieur, you are the last of yours), whereupon the nobleman had him beaten by his servants and thrown into the Bastille a second time. Now the condition of his release was that he would leave the country, and so he did, heading for London, the capital of pragmatic reason and free enterprise. There he immersed himself, among other things, in the writings of Newton and Locke.

By 1728, he was back in France but banned from Paris in perpetuity. Voltaire nonetheless made himself the voice of the most progressive tendencies in society. When the great actress Adrienne Lecouvreur died in 1730, her body was refused a Christian burial on account of her decidedly impious lifestyle and had to be interred in the swampland outside Paris (today the Champ-de-Mars). Voltaire wrote a bitter poem on the matter, asking himself, or rather God, why his country was the home no longer of talent and glory but of bigotry. The urbane wit was becoming an important and acerbic critic of the influence of religion on politics and of cruelty in the name of Christianity.

Voltaire was hardly a born revolutionary, however. He simply wanted people to be reasonable, not to topple the existing order. He limited his criticism of religion to exposing superstition and narrow-mindedness, and his



jibes against the powerful became markedly more moderate as the years progressed. No doubt his reticence was due in part to his financial and professional position. He had become a very wealthy man after he had realized, in 1728, that the first prize of the state lottery was many times the sum of the price of all tickets combined. Together with some friends he formed a syndicate that had bought up all the tickets, shared the huge winnings, and allowed Voltaire to live wealthily ever after, multiplying his money by lending large sums to European princes, who used them to finance their autocratic rule. Effectively the banker of several absolute monarchs, he was simply not in a position to attack religion or absolute rule, the foundations of their authority.

Voltaire and other Enlightened authors, such as the wonderfully urbane Charles de Montesquieu, represented one side of the new flowering of intellectual life during the regency. But this strand of Enlightenment was limited to high culture, to the few people actively interested in these debates. Another, more popular strand of intellectual life took place within the context of the church. Louis XIV had left his country a poisonous legacy. Increasingly concerned about his undying soul and the possibility of eternal damnation, the formerly voracious bon vivant and serial seducer had by the 1680s turned pious. He had tried to please the Lord by banning the frivolous entertainments he had loved as a young man; marrying his main mistress, Madame de Maintenon; and persecuting Protestants, the largest religious minority in the country, by revoking the Edict of Nantes, which had effectively granted French Protestants freedom of conscience and religious toleration. His cruel policy caused an exodus of some 400,000 men, women, and children, many highly skilled laborers—silk weavers, engineers, tradesmen, and merchants—to the great detriment of France but to the considerable benefit of more tolerant destinations such as the Netherlands, Britain, and Prussia.

France had become a less liberal, more restrictive country in this process. The power behind the throne lay in the hands of the church, and its direction depended on which of the two dominant factions inside Catholicism could secure the most important posts. The church was internally divided between two warring parties, one buoyed by the Counter-Reformation, spearheaded by the Jesuits and influential at court, while the other side, the Jansenists, relied more strongly on the values of the urban bourgeoisie. Jansenism drew its theological inspiration from a Dutch cleric, Cornelis Jansen (1585–1638),

and defended a theological view that shared key aspects with Protestant thought. Instead of emphasizing the authority of the pope and the role of the priest and the holy sacraments in the salvation of the soul, Jansenist thought stressed the idea of human depravity and the reliance on divine grace, without which, Jansen had argued, there was no redemption, not even through repentance and good works. Effectively, those who were damned already by divine Providence could not redeem themselves through piety, while those who lived in divine grace needed no pope to tell them what to do. Jansenism took control and power out of the hands of the church and made each individual's conscience the ultimate authority.

While these theological issues may appear arcane, the ensuing political and very worldly power struggles were all too real, particularly as the Jansenists were in control of the *parlement* of Paris, an ancient administrative body that was part high court and part lawgiving assembly, a mixture of competences that set it on a collision course with the royal claim to absolute power. In this context it is also significant that according to some sources the young *abbé* Diderot changed colleges halfway through his schooling from the Jesuit college Louis-le-Grand to the Jansenist college Harcourt, indicating that his sympathies and convictions might have been beginning to shift away already from the scholastic subtleties of Jesuit thinking and towards a more ethics-based approach.

Whether or not Diderot changed colleges, his religious ideas were certainly affected by another phenomenon, a popular religious frenzy that soon grew into a serious threat to public order. Centered on the cemetery of the city parish of Saint-Médard, only a mile or so from the colleges, the clamor reached its height during Diderot's school days. A quiet cult had developed at the grave of a former parish priest, François de Pâris, who had lived a life of pious deeds and charity and had died in 1727. Accounts of mysterious healings at his graveside had been making the rounds for some years, but in 1731 the stories about miraculous incidents appeared to intensify, often backed up by signed affidavits. Huddled hopefuls and quiet prayers by the graveside were replaced by the astonishing spectacle of trancelike convulsions followed by healing, and soon the graveyard drew spectators, who loved miracles not for spiritual reasons but for their entertainment value. Ever larger crowds had been attracted and were soon jostling in the surrounding streets to get a place

close to the grave and witness the excited faithful—particularly attractive young women—fall into mysterious and ecstatic convulsions before getting up, apparently healed of all afflictions. The police viewed the goings-on with increasing suspicion. “What is most scandalous,” wrote one informer, “is to see pretty young girls in the arms of men, who, while holding them, could be aroused to certain passions, because [the girls show themselves for] two or three hours, neck and breasts uncovered, skirts low, and arms in the air.”<sup>3</sup>

The real scandal, however, was not in the supposed immorality of the often raucous miracle healings, but in their popular appeal. The dead priest on whose grave the miracles were said to be taking place had been a Jansenist himself and had therefore believed that miracles were one of the ways God chose to indicate his grace to the uncertain faithful, who pursued these miracles enthusiastically. Gripped by religious ecstasy, some of the cult’s most zealous women would have themselves beaten with clubs or even literally nailed to a wooden cross as proof of their limitless devotion. A popular site of pilgrimage to a Jansenist sanctuary or even the chance of a Jansenist on his way to canonization—ideas such as these presented a real and potentially politically divisive threat to the power of Rome and of the king. Only eighteen years earlier, in 1709, the royal party had hit their opponents in the capital by forcing the closure of the convent Port-Royal, which had become an intellectual center of Jansenist thought. A miracle-working saint belonging to the other party would not be tolerated, and on January 27, 1732, the cemetery was closed by royal order, effectively putting an end to the healings at the priest’s graveside and to the crowds.

As a young student, the curious Denis witnessed these orgiastic goings-on in the name of religion, and he was revolted by the spectacle, which he would later describe as hysteria. But while the bloody and superstitious excesses of popular miracle cults nauseated the young man, he found his spiritual peace troubled by his very own sensual disorder, which severely tested his desire to spend his life contemplating divine truths. The City of Lights intruded with its worldly temptations, both intellectual and sensual—too sensual for a young mind focused on divine commandments. Conscientiously, the young *abbé* took up the fight against the stirrings of his unruly body by using the arsenal his faith put at his disposal: praying, wearing hair shirts, fasting, and sleeping on straw to ward off the evil powers. Later in life, he

saw his fervor with the detached irony of a psychologist. At some point, he wrote, almost every growing girl or boy was likely to fall into melancholy, seek solitude, and be attracted by the peaceful calm of religious surroundings: "They mistake the first manifestations of a developing sexual nature for the voice of God calling them to Himself; and it is precisely when nature is inciting them that they embrace a fashion of life contrary to nature's wish."<sup>4</sup>

Despite his initial best efforts, nature's wish prevailed, and Diderot, who would even towards the end of his life confess to feeling moved to tears by the pomp and circumstance of a religious procession, felt irresistibly drawn to another kind of spectacular ritual: the theatre. To the mature man it would later seem that not only his own imagination had been set aflame during these performances: "People had come with ardour, they left in a state of intoxication: some went to visit the girls, others scattered themselves in society."<sup>5</sup>

Like a new gospel, the voice of literature was resonating in the young mind, sense and sensibility mingling in its echoes. On long, solitary walks he read and recited his favorite plays over and over, crying at the sad scenes and declaiming the great monologues as he went along. From the cheapest seats, high up in the gods, he would watch performances of his favorite plays, blocking his ears and reciting the text quietly to himself—only allowing himself to hear the actors' voices when their mouth movements and gestures diverged from the lines he had memorized.

The youthful fascination rapidly became something more like a vocation: "What did I have in mind? to be applauded? Perhaps. To live on familiar terms with the women of the theatre whom I found infinitely lovable and whom I knew to be a very easy virtue? Assuredly."<sup>6</sup> No profession seemed more wonderful to him than that of a playwright, and before long he was head over heels in love not only with the pretty actresses but with the words they spoke, the sentiments they embodied, and the ideas they brought to the stage. The world of Voltaire began to exert its steady pull on the pious boy from the provinces.