THE IDEA OF "A TURNING POINT" AND THE SPECIFIC FEATURES OF THE TIME

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Part 1 – Continuity and new openings

To finish off this course, let's dwell on the final decades of the 18th century. For a long time, it was seen as a waiting time between the Enlightenment struggles and the advent of romanticism. It was a time of change towards creative and, for a long while, misunderstood activity. Under the devaluing label "pre-romanticism", Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre would announce the arrival of a weaker version of a romanticism to come. For the last thirty years, we've preferred to talk of a turning point in the Enlightenment.

This image underlines both the continuity and the deep splits taking place. They did not boil down to revolutionary upheavals, even if they were often accelerated or brought to light by the sudden collapse of the Ancient Regime. All the philosophers were dead by 1789, Voltaire and Rousseau in 1778, Diderot in 1784, but the publication of their work continued and remained a reference for revolutionaries. Their successors carried on their work right up to the Empire by way of new intellectual institutions, the Institute being one of them.

Condillac's sensualism, or atheism among the more radical, is taken on by ideologists who, after Condorcet, took charge of the practical application of scientific methods in society. As such, they gathered anthropological and medical knowledge. They studied mental patients, the deaf, the mute, even uncivilised children so as to better understand brain function.

In literature, existing genres persisted, even if they were sometimes otherwise invested. The epistolary novel, therefore, came to recount the misfortunes of the day in a novel on the emigration of the nobility during the French Revolution, while bourgeois tragedy's aesthetics met theatrical emancipation, giving rise to melodrama, a highly successful genre at the turn of the 19th century. But the classical repertoire, including *Tartuffe,* was also the subject of revolutionary remakes.

Finally, like a study by Michel Delon shows us, the epistemology of the Enlightenment promoted experience over the notion of essence and largely prepared for the change in perception of time which was introduced by the revolutionary crisis. Morally, it made inaction obsolete in favour of action. It restored passions that the Revolution will liberate in an unexpected way. Incidentally, Germaine de Staël will feel the need to contemplate the influence of these passions on individuals and nations in 1794.

This passionate energy could be found as much in natural history as in the first English or German romantic works, circulated by popular translations. These bestsellers put the spotlight on the moving and melancholy but would also help theorists to affirm the role of imagination, originality, like the integration of art in society. This is notably what Mercier or Germaine de Staël will do in *De la littérature* and *Of Germany.* Outdated art, which had dominated until the middle of the century, ceded its place to a negative aesthetic and to the sublime. Edmund Burke discerned the sublime in the grandiose and overwhelming spectacle of nature in his essay from 1757.

Finally, another source of energy came from the rediscovery of the Antiquity upon the excavation of cities consumed by the eruption of Vesuvius; that's without talking about Plutarch being reread by Rousseau, and lots of others in his wake, as a model for republican energy. Neoclassicism, therefore, mixed with pre-romanticism. The second change was, of course, social and political and it was brought about by the fall of the Ancient Regime.

Part 2 – The birth of a new society

Incidentally, the image of a revival showed ambition which stirred revolutionaries into a quickly disillusioned enthusiasm. It was about creating a new man and a new society, separated from religion. This voluntarist impetus resulted in a cultural policy including fetes, ceremonies and a calendar established by the Convention in 1793, symbolising the dawn of a new era. Year I coincided with the abolition of the monarchy.

The form of order in society is marked by the end of privileges and noble titles, proclaimed on the 4th August 1789, and also through the suppression of monastic resolutions and orders. From then on, everyone's place and identity were no longer defined at birth, as is evidenced by the trajectory of Napoleon Bonaparte. However, the end of the monarchy, abolished by the Convention, was destabilising, even traumatising. The sentencing of Louis XVI is seen symbolically as a parricide.

From an institutional viewpoint, the proclamation of the republic was a step into the unknown, despite the American federal example still being rather new. The Abbot Sieyès imagined a representation allowing for the exercise of power in a large country which seemed impossible until now. But the constitution of Year I would not be applied and the fratricidal fight between federalist Girondins and Jacobins made way for men strongly in favour of revolutionary wars.

As such, the generation living through the Revolution experienced a definitive split despite the return of institutional and literary order which the Consulate then the Empire would execute. Storm, volcano, cataclysmic metaphors implied the feeling of incertitude among individuals facing history which altered the face of Europe.

And Chateaubriand retrospectively underlined this acceleration of time when he talked about writing his *Essai sur les révolutions: "*I started to write the essay in 1794 and it was published in 1797. Often, in the evenings, I'd have to erase the scene that I'd made a start on during the day. Events took place quicker than my pen could write about them. A revolution occurred which disproved all my similes. I wrote about a vessel during a storm and I meant to paint the fugitive sides as rooted objects which fell into disrepair". Mercier, who opposed Chateaubriand, joined him in his *Tableau de Paris.* But the Revolution also marked the end of the Republic of Letters as well as changes to production conditions.

Part 3 – From the Republic of Letters to literature

The elitist Republic of Letters was governed by norms of taste which perpetuated academies and salons. New literature became a market and a consumable object preyed on by fashions. Incidentally, the Revolution discredited the men of letters and the institutions of the Ancient Regime. Most importantly, freedom, heralded by the human rights declaration, gave a boost to production which was no longer censored and made available to everyone. A surge of pamphlets, discourse, newspapers would accompany and, on occasion, make history of the convening of generals at Thermidor.

Simultaneously, writers began to make a living from their pen and depended on a readership whose tastes mattered. As such, they exploited editorial tricks. Reading began to stand out, as evidenced by critical reception of *The New Héloïse* by Rousseau in 1761, but it was also rumour-mongering, reading rooms and diverse forms of collective reading which insured a wider circulation of new ideas. Some people, like the counter-revolutionary publicist Barruel, saw in this the source of the plot which gave rise to the Revolution.

In conclusion, from 1770 to 1880, changes produced by society rendered classical values obsolete. This translated into literature through a crisis of genres and the progressive diminution of forms. La Harpe, a hostile to the Revolution, lamented, in 1799, this type of fantastic world that the Revolution

produced. I quote: "New literature, which we know nothing about, which exists only for it, which is deserving only of it, and which, any minute now, should disappear." Of course, we'll see if his diagnosis was justified.