The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature

Where does so much mad agitation come from? From a crowd of minor clerks and lawyers, from unknown writers, starving scribblers, who go about rabblerousing in clubs and cafés. These are the hotbeds that have forged the weapons with which the masses are armed today.

—P. J. B. GERBIER, JUNE 1789

The nation’s rewards must be meted out to those who are worthy of them; and after having repulsed despotism’s vile courtiers, we must look for merit dwelling in basements and in seventh-story garrets . . . True genius is almost always sans-culotte.

—HENRI GREGOIRE, AUGUST 1793

THE SUMMIT VIEW OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY INTELLECTUAL HISTORY HAS BEEN DESCRIBED SO OFTEN AND SO WELL THAT IT MIGHT BE USEFUL TO STRIKE OUT IN A NEW DIRECTION, TO TRY TO GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT, AND EVEN TO PENETRATE INTO ITS UNDERWORLD, WHERE THE ENLIGHTENMENT MAY BE EXAMINED AS THE REVOLUTION HAS BEEN STUDIED RECENTLY—from below.

Digging downward in intellectual history calls for new methods and new materials, for grubbing in archives instead of contemplating philosophical treatises. As an example of the dirt that such digging can turn up, consider the following letter from a bookseller in Poitiers to his supplier in Switzerland: “Here is a short list of philosophical books that
I want. Please send the invoice in advance: *Venus in the Cloister or the Nun in a Nightgown, Christianity unveiled, Memoirs of Mme la marquise de Pompadour, Inquiry on the Origin of Oriental Despotism, The System of Nature, Theresa the Philosopher, Margot the Campfollower.*” Here, couched in the idiom of the eighteenth-century book trade, is a notion of the philosophical that was shared by men who made it their business to know what Frenchmen wanted to read. If one measures it against the view of the philosophic movement that has been passed on piously from textbook to textbook, one cannot avoid feeling uncomfortable: most of those titles are completely unfamiliar, and they suggest that a lot of trash somehow got mixed up in the eighteenth-century idea of philosophy. Perhaps the Enlightenment was a more down-to-earth affair than the rarefied climate of opinion described by textbook writers, and we should question the overly highbrow, overly metaphysical view of intellectual life in the eighteenth century. One way to bring the Enlightenment down to earth is to see it from the viewpoint of eighteenth-century authors. After all, they were men of flesh and blood, who wanted to fill their bellies, house their families, and make their way in the world. Of course, the study of authors does not solve all the problems connected with the study of ideas, but it does suggest the nature of their social context, and it can draw enough from conventional literary history for one to hazard a few hypotheses.²

A favorite hypothesis in histories of literature is the rise in the writer’s status throughout the eighteenth century. By the time of the High Enlightenment, during the last twenty-five years of the Old Regime, the prestige of French authors had risen to such an extent that a visiting Englishman described them exactly as Voltaire had described English men of letters during the early Enlighten-
ment: “Authors have a kind of nobility.”³ Voltaire’s own career testifies to the transformation of values among the upper orders of French society. The same milieux who had applauded the drubbing administered to him by Rohan’s toughs in 1726 cheered him like a god during his triumphal tour of Paris in 1778. Voltaire himself used his apotheosis to advance the cause of his “class”—the men of letters united by common values, interests, and enemies into a new career group or “estate.” The last twenty years of his correspondence read like a continuous campaign to proselytize for his “church,” as he called it, and to protect the “brothers” and the “faithful” composing it. How many youths in the late eighteenth century must have dreamt of joining the initiates, of lecturing monarchs, rescuing outraged innocence, and ruling the republic of letters from the Académie Française or a château like Ferney. To become a Voltaire or d’Alembert, that was the sort of glory to tempt young men on the make. But how did one make it as a philosophe?

Consider the career of Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard, a typical philosophe of the High Enlightenment. Others—Marmontel, Morellet, La Harpe, Thomas, Arnaud, Delille, Chamfort, Roucher, Garat, Target, Maury, Dorat, Cubières, Rulhière, Cailhava—might do just as well. The advantage of Suard’s case is that it was written up by his wife. A philosophe’s rise to the top is indeed revealing when seen from his wife’s viewpoint, and especially when, as in the case of Mme. Suard, the wife had an eye for domestic detail and the importance of balancing the family accounts.⁴

Suard left the provinces at the age of twenty and arrived in Paris just in time to participate in the excitement over the Encyclopédie in the 1750s. He had three assets: good looks, good manners, and a Parisian uncle, as well as letters of introduction to friends of friends. His contacts kept him
going for a few months while he learned enough English to support himself as a translator. Then he met and captivated the Abbé Raynal, who functioned as a sort of recruiting agent for the sociocultural elite known as le monde. Raynal got Suard jobs tutoring the well-born, encouraged him to write little essays on the heroes of the day—Voltaire, Montesquieu, Buffon—and guided him through the salons. Suard competed for the essay prizes offered by provincial academies. He published literary snippets in the Mercure; and having passed at Mme. Geoffrin’s, he began to make frequent appearances in le monde—a phrase that recurs with the regularity of a leitmotif in all descriptions of Suard. With doors opening for him in the salons of d’Holbach, Mme. d’Houdetot, Mlle. de Lespinasse, Mme. Necker, and Mme. Saurin, Suard walked into a job at the Gazette de France: lodging, heating, lighting, and 2,500 livres a year for putting polish on the materials provided every week by the ministry of foreign affairs.

At this point Suard took his first unorthodox step: he got married. Philosophes did not generally marry. The great figures of the early Enlightenment—Fontenelle, Duclos, Voltaire, d’Alembert—remained bachelors; or, if they fell into matrimony, as in the case of Diderot and Rousseau, it was with someone of their own station—shop girls and servants. But the elevated status of the philosophe in Suard’s time made marriage conceivable. Suard picked a girl of good bourgeois stock like himself; overcame the objections of her brother, the publisher Panckoucke, and of Mme. Geoffrin, who held old-fashioned ideas about the incompatibility of professional writing and family life; and set up house in the apartment that went with his job on the Gazette de France. Mme. Suard trimmed her wardrobe to fit their tight budget. Friends like the Prince de Beauvau and the Marquis de
Chastellux sent them game from the hunts every week. And princely patrons like Mme. de Marchais sent carriages to carry the couple off to dinners, where the bride marveled at “the rank and the merit of the guests.” This was something new: Madame Philosophe had not accompanied her husband on his forays into le monde before. Mme. Suard followed her husband everywhere and even began to form a salon of her own, at first a modest supper for literary friends. The friends and patrons responded so enthusiastically that something of a cult grew up around the petit ménage, as it was known from a poem celebrating it by Saurin. Formerly a fringe character picked up for amusement by the salons and readily turned out into the street for drubbings, begging, and embastillement, the philosophe was becoming respectable, domesticated, and assimilated into that most conservative of institutions, the family.

Having made it into le monde, Suard began to make money. By taking over the entire administration of the Gazette de France, he and his collaborator, the Abbé Arnaud, boosted their income from 2,500 to 10,000 livres apiece. They succeeded by appealing over the head of a bureaucrat in the ministry of foreign affairs, who was “astonished that men of letters shouldn’t consider themselves rich enough with 2,500 livres of revenue,” to the foreign minister, the Duc de Choiseul, whose sister, the Duchesse de Grammont, was an intimate of the Princesse de Beauvau, who was a friend of the Suards and of Mme. de Tessé, who was the protector of Arnaud. Such obliging noblesse was vulnerable to the vagaries of court politics, however, and when d’Aiguillon replaced Choiseul, the Suards were turned out of their Gazette apartment. Once again le monde rallied to the defense of its petit ménage. Suard received a compensatory pension of 2,500 livres from d’Aiguillon, who was per-
suaded by Mme. de Maurepas, who was moved by the Duc de Nivernais, who was touched by the sight of Mme. Suard weeping in the Académie Française and by the prodding of d’Alembert and La Harpe. Then a gift of 800 livres in rentes perpétuelles arrived from the Neckers. The Suards rented a house in the rue Louis-le-Grand. Suard managed to get the lucrative post of literary correspondent to the Margrave of Bayreuth. His friends arranged a pension for him of 1,200 livres on the income from the Almanach Royal. He sold his collection of English books to the Duc de Coigny for 12,000 livres and bought a country house. He became a royal censor. Election to the Académie Française came next, bringing an income of up to 900 livres in jetons (doubled in 1786) and far more in indirect benefits, such as a position as censor of all plays and spectacles, worth 2,400 livres and later 3,700 livres a year. When the Journal de Paris was suspended for printing an irreverent verse about a foreign princess, the keeper of the seals called in Suard, who agreed to purge all future copy and to share the profits: another 1,200 livres. “He took a cabriolet, which transported him after he fulfilled the duties of his posts, to the lovely house he had given to me,”10 Mme. Suard reminisced. They had reached the top, enjoying an income of 10,000, perhaps over 20,000, livres a year and all the delights of the Old Regime in its last days. The Suards had arrived.

The most striking aspect of the Suard success story is its dependence on “protection”—not the old court variety of patronage, but a new kind, which involved knowing the right people, pulling the right strings, and “cultivating,” as it was known in the eighteenth century. Older, established writers, wealthy bourgeois, and nobles all participated in this process of co-opting young men with the right style, the perfect pitch of bon ton, into the salons, academies, privi-
leged journals, and honorific posts. The missing element was the market: Suard lived on sinecures and pensions, not on sales of books. In fact, he wrote little and had little to say—nothing, it need hardly be added, that would offend the regime. He toed the party line of the philosophes and collected his reward.

But how many rewards of that kind were there, and how typical was Suard's *cas typique*? Part of the answer to those questions lies in a box in the Archives Nationales containing a list of 147 "Men of Letters Who Request Pensions" and ten dossiers crammed with material on writers and their sources of support. The list reads like a "Who's Who" of the literary world drawn up by officials in the Contrôle général to guide Calonne, who had decided in 1785 to increase and systematize the award of literary pensions, *gratifications*, and *traitements*. Calonne was also guided by a committee composed of Lenoir, the former lieutenant general of police, Vidaud de Latour, the director of the book trade, and two courtier-academicians, the Maréchal de Beauvau and the Duc de Nivernais. Hardly a revolutionary group. The pension list, with the recommendations of Calonne's officials and his own notes scrawled in the margins, gives a corresponding impression. It shows a strong bias in favor of established writers, especially academicians. Here Morellet appears with his 6,000 livres a year from the Caisse de Commerce; Marmontel with 3,000 livres as *historiographe de France* and 2,000 livres as perpetual secretary of the Académie Française. La Harpe complains of receiving a mere 600 livres from the *Mercure*, the Maréchal de Beauvau pushes to get him pensioned for 1,500, and the pension is granted, despite a subordinate official's observation that La Harpe also collects 3,000 livres for lecturing in the Lycée. And so the list goes, one figure of the High Enlightenment
succeeding another: Chamfort (granted 2,000 livres in addition to 1,200 on the maison du roi), Saint-Lambert (requested 1,053 livres, decision delayed), Bernardin de Saint-Pierre (1,000 livres), Cailhava (1,000 livres), Keralio, Garat, Piis, Cubières, Des Essarts, Aubert, and Lemierre.

Blin de Sainmore, a solid citizen in the republic of letters’ lesser ranks, exemplified the qualities required for getting a pension. He was a royal censor, historiographe de l’Ordre du Saint-Esprit, and protégé of the Princesse de Rochefort. “I will further add, Monseigneur, that I am the head of a family, that I was born without fortune, and that I have nothing for the support and education of my family except the post of historiographer of the king’s orders, whose income is barely sufficient for me alone to live in a decent style.” Thus the pensions went for charity as well as good works. Saurin’s widow applied because his death had left her destitute, since he had lived entirely from “the beneficence of the government.” And Mme. Saurin specified:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pension</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pension of the Académie Française</td>
<td>2,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pension on the General Farms</td>
<td>3,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>As the son of a converted [Protestant] minister</td>
<td>800</td>
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<tr>
<td>As a censor</td>
<td>400</td>
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<tr>
<td>On an office of trésorier du pavé de Paris</td>
<td>2,400</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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This beneficence generally went to serious, deserving writers but not to anyone unconnected with le monde. Academicians were first on the government’s list—to such an extent that one ministerial aide jotted in a margin, “There is some danger that the title of académicin might become a synonym for pensioner of the King.” Ducis demanded 1,000 livres a year for life on the grounds that “most of our confrères,
either of the Académie Française or the Académie des Inscriptions, have obtained pensions that have the character of a permanent grace.”¹⁵ This favoritism offended Caraccioli, who wrote testily,

I am pretentious enough to believe that you will have heard of my works, all of which have religion and sound morality as their object. I have been writing in this genre for thirty-five years; and despite the frivolity of the century, [my works] have spread everywhere and have been translated into various languages. Nevertheless, under ministers who preceded you and who made me the most beautiful promises, I never obtained anything, although living in a modest state that might well be called indigence. And I have seen gratifications as well as pensions pour down.¹⁶

As Caraccioli’s comments suggest, “sound” opinions were considered a necessary qualification for a pension. In some cases the government subsidized writers who had produced propaganda for it. It looked favorably on the Abbé Soulavie, because “he has submitted some manuscripts on financial matters to M. le Contrôleur Général.”¹⁷ Conversely, the government avoided making payments to anyone whose loyalties were in doubt. It turned down J.-C.-N. Dumont de Sainte-Croix, a minor author on jurisprudence, because, according to the marginal note next to his name, “All the new systems of this genre would merit some encouragement, if they were made only to be known by the government and not by the public, which is incited to rebel against the established laws instead of becoming enlightened as to the means of making them better.” Then, in another hand: “Nothing.”¹⁸ Rivarol also received nothing, but only because he already had a secret pension of 4,000 livres: “He is very clever, and an encouragement, which could be paid to him each year, if he remains faithful to sound principles, would be a way of preventing him from
following his inclination toward those which are dangerous.”

So several considerations determined the state’s patronage. As in the case of modern institutions like the French Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the monarchy supported serious savants, perhaps even with the intention of recruiting a fresh intellectual elite. It also dispensed charity. And it used its funds to encourage writing that would make the regime look good. In each instance, however, it restricted its subsidies to men with some standing in the world of letters. A few fringe characters like Delisle de Sales, Mercier, and Carra presumed to apply for the pensions; but they received nothing. Lenoir later revealed that he and his colleagues had turned down Carra, Gorsas, and Fabre d’Eglantine because “the academicians described them as the excrement of literature.” While the literary rabble held out its hands to the government, the government gave its handouts to writers situated safely within le monde.

It dispensed them on a large scale. A note by a subordinate official put the total payments at 256,300 livres per year, to which 83,153 livres were added in 1786. But that sum represented only the direct dole from the royal treasuries. Far more money flowed into the purses of “sound” writers from the appointments at the government’s disposal. Journals, for example, provided an important source of income for the privileged few in the literal sense of the word. Royal privileges reserved certain subjects for the quasi-official periodicals like the Mercure, Gazette de France, and Journal des savants, which exploited their monopolies without worrying about competitors (the government permitted some discreet foreign journals to circulate, provided they passed the censorship and paid compensation to a privi-
leged journal) and turned over part of the take to writers named by the government. In 1762 the Mercure paid out 30,400 livres to twenty subluminaries of the High Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{22} Then there were many sinecures. Not only did the king require an official historiographer, he also subsidized historiographes de la marine, des bâtiments royaux, des menus-plaisirs, and de l'Ordre du Saint-Esprit. The branches of the royal family were loaded with readers, secretaries, and librarians—more or less honorific posts that one had to work for but not at, that one acquired by waiting in antechambers, improvising eulogies, cultivating acquaintances in salons, and knowing the right people. Of course it always helped to be a member of the Académie Française.\textsuperscript{23}

The dozens of volumes about the history and petite histoire of the academy in the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{24} whether written in love or in hatred, reveal a dominant theme: the Enlightenment's successful campaign to win over the French elite. After the chasse aux Pompignans of 1760, the election of Marmontel in 1763, and d'Alembert's elevation to the perpetual secretaryship in 1772, the academy fell to the philosophers. It became a sort of clubhouse for them, an ideal forum for launching attacks against l'infâme, proclaiming the advent of reason, and co-opting new philosophers as fast as the old-guard academicians would die off. This last function, virtually a monopoly of the philosophic salons, assured that only party men would make it to the top. And so Voltaire's church was besieged by converts. The spectacle of a new generation taking up the torch warmed the old man's heart. When he congratulated Suard on his election, Voltaire exulted, "Voilà, God be thanked, a new career assured . . . At last I see the real fruits of philosophy, and I begin to believe that I shall die content."\textsuperscript{25} Thus Suard and his circle,
the high priests of the High Enlightenment, took over the summit of the literary world, while the mid-century philosophers declined and died. The new men included both writers like Thomas, Marmontel, Gaillard, La Harpe, Delille, Arnaud, Lemierre, Chamfort, and Rulhière, and philosophically minded grands, powerful courtiers and clergymen, like the Marquis de Chastellux; the Maréchal de Duras; Boisgelin, Archbishop of Aix; and Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Sens.

The fusion of gens de lettres and grands had been a favorite theme of philosophic writing since the mid-century. Duclos had proclaimed it triumphantly in his Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle (1750). Writing had become a new “profession,” which conferred a distinguished “estate” upon men of great talent but modest birth, he explained. Such writers became integrated into a society of courtiers and wealthy patrons, and everyone benefited from the process: the gens du monde gained amusement and instruction, and the gens de lettres acquired polish and standing. It went without saying that promotion into high society produced some commitment to the social hierarchy. Duclos had a keen eye for all the subtleties of status and rank; and although he took pride in the man of letter’s ability to rise by sheer talent, he showed equal respect for what made a man of le monde: “One is an homme du monde by birth and by position.”

Voltaire, the archapologist for le mondain, shared the same attitudes. His article entitled “Gens de lettres” in the Encyclopédie emphasized that in the eighteenth century “the spirit of the age made them [men of letters] for the most part as suitable for le monde as for the study. They were kept out of society until the time of Balzac and Voiture. Since
then they have become a necessary part of it.” And his article “Goût” in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* revealed the elitist bias in his conception of culture: “Taste is like philosophy. It belongs to a very small number of privileged souls... It is unknown in bourgeois families, where one is constantly occupied with the care of one’s fortune.” Voltaire—who incessantly cultivated courtiers, tried to become one himself, and at least managed to buy his way into the nobility—thought that the Enlightenment should begin with the *grands*: once it had captured society’s commanding heights, it could concern itself with the masses—but it should take care to prevent them from learning to read.

D’Alembert believed in essentially the same strategy, but he did not share his “master’s” taste for the court.27 His *Essai sur les gens de lettres et les grands* (1752), published two years before his election to the Académie Française, amounted to a declaration of independence for writers and writing as a proud new profession (not in the present sociological sense of the term, but as it was used by Duclos). Yet despite some strong language advocating a “democratic” republic of letters in contrast to the humiliating practices of patronage, d’Alembert stressed that society was and ought to be hierarchical and that the *grands* belonged on top.28 By the time he wrote his *Histoire des membres de l’Académie française* (1787), when he ruled the academy as Duclos’s successor in the perpetual secretaryship, d’Alembert reformulated Duclos’s theme in a conservative vein. He castigated the “horde of literary rebels” (*frondeurs littéraires*) for venting their frustrated ambitions in attacks on the academy. He defended the academy’s mixture of *grands seigneurs* and writers. And he emphasized the role of courtiers, as experts in the realm of taste and language, in a very elitist En-
lightenment—a process of gradual, downward diffusion of knowledge, in which the principle of social equality could play no part.

Is a great effort of philosophy necessary to understand that in society, and especially in a large state, it is indispensable to have rank defined by clear distinctions, that if virtue and talent alone have a claim to our true homage, the superiority of birth and position commands our deference and our respect . . . ? And how could men of letters envy or misconstrue the so legitimate prerogatives of other estates?²⁹

As spokesmen for the writer’s new estate (but not for the brand of philosophe represented by Diderot and d’Holbach), Duclos, Voltaire, and d’Alembert urged their “brethren” to profit from the mobility available to them in order to join the elite. Rather than challenge the social order, they offered a prop to it.

But what was the meaning of this process? Was the establishment becoming enlightened or the Enlightenment established? Probably both, although it might be best to avoid the overworked term “establishment”³⁰ and to fall back on the eighteenth-century expression already cited, le monde. After fighting for their principles in the mid-century and consolidating their victories during the last years of Louis XV’s reign, the great philosophes faced the problem that has plagued every victorious ideology: they needed to find acolytes worthy of the cause among the next generation. Admittedly, “generation” is a vague concept.³¹ Perhaps there are no real generations but only demographic “classes.” Still, the great philosophes form a fairly neat demographic unit: Montesquieu 1689-1755, Voltaire 1694-1778; and then Buffon 1707-1788, Mably 1709-1785,
Rousseau 1712-1778, Diderot 1713-1784, Condillac 1715-1780, and d’Alembert 1717-1783. Contemporaries were naturally struck by the deaths, not the births, of great men. Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Condillac, d’Alembert, and Mably all died between 1778 and 1785; and their deaths left important places to be filled by younger men, who were born, for the most part, in the 1720s and 1730s.

As age overcame them, the great philosophes made the rounds of the salons, searching for successors. They tried to find another d’Alembert—and came up with Marmontel, the champion of Gluckisme. They tried to persuade themselves that Thomas could thunder like Diderot and La Harpe bite like Voltaire. But it was no use. With the death of the old Bolsheviks, the Enlightenment passed into the hands of nonentities like Suard: it lost its fire and became a mere tranquil diffusion of light, a comfortable ascent toward progress. The transition from the heroic to the High Enlightenment domesticated the movement, integrating it with le monde and bathing it in the douceur de vivre of the Old Regime’s dying years. As Mme. Suard remarked after reporting the receipt of their last pension, “I have no more events to recount, other than the continuation of a soft and varied life, until that horrible and disastrous epoch [the Revolution].”32 Her husband, turned censor, refused to approve Beaumarchais’s not so very revolutionary play, Le Mariage de Figaro. And Beaumarchais put most of his energy into speculation, and ultimately into building the biggest townhouse in Paris—“a house that is talked about”—the arriviste’s dream.33

The establishment of the Enlightenment did not blunt its radical edge, however, because just as a generation gap separated the high philosophes from their predecessors, a gen-
eration split cut them off from the low-life of literature, from their contemporaries who failed to make it to the top and fell back into Grub Street.

Perhaps the literary world has always divided into a hierarchy whose extremes might be labeled a *monde* of mandarins on the one hand and Grub Street on the other. Such milieux existed in the seventeenth century and exist today. But the social and economic conditions of the High Enlightenment opened up an unusual gulf between the two groups during the last twenty-five years of the Old Regime, and this split, if examined in depth, ought to reveal something about one of the standard questions posed by the prerevolutionary era: what was the relation between the Enlightenment and the Revolution?

At first glance, it seems that the writer's lot should have improved substantially by the reign of Louis XVI. The relevant data, flimsy as they are, all point in the same direction: a considerable expansion in demand for the printed word. Literacy probably doubled in the course of the century, and the general upward swing of the economy, combined with improvements in the educational system, very likely produced a larger, wealthier, and more leisured reading public. Certainly book production soared, whether measured by demands for privileges and *permissions tacites* or indirectly by the number of censors, booksellers, and printers. But there is little evidence that writers benefited from any publishing boom. On the contrary, everything indicates that while the mandarins fattened themselves on pensions, most authors sank into a sort of literary proletariat.

Admittedly, information about the growth of Grub Street comes from anecdotal sources, not statistics. Mallet du Pan claimed that three hundred writers, including a heavy dose of hacks, applied for Calonne's pensions, and he
concluded, “Paris is full of young men who take a little fa-
cility to be talent, of clerks, accountants, lawyers, soldiers,
who make themselves into authors, die of hunger, even beg,
and turn out pamphlets.” Crébillon fils, who reportedly
gave out permissions de police for 40,000–50,000 verses of pam-
phlet poetry every year, was besieged by a “multitude of
versifiers and would-be authors” who flooded into Paris
from the provinces. Mercier found these “famished scrib-
blers,” “these poor hacks” (écrivailleurs affamés, ces pauvres
barbouilleurs) everywhere, and Voltaire constantly ham-
mered at the theme of the “ragged rabble” (peuple crotté)
crowding the bottom of the literary world. He placed “the
miserable species that writes for a living”—the “dregs of
humanity,” “the riff-raff of literature” (lie du genre humain,
canaille de la littérature)—at a social level below prosti-
tutes. Writing in the same spirit, Rivarol and Champcen-
etz published a mock census of the undiscovered Voltaires
and d’Alemberts crammed into the garrets and gutters of
Paris. They produced articles on well over five hundred of
these poor hacks, who scribbled for a while in obscurity,
and then vanished like their dreams of glory, except for a
few: Carra, Gorsas, Mercier, Restif de la Bretonne, Manuel,
Desmoulins, Collot d’Herbois, and Fabre d’Eglantine. The
names of those future revolutionaries look strange in Ri-
varol’s roll-call of “the five or six hundred poets” lost in the
legions of “la basse littérature,” but Rivarol put them
rightly in their place.

That place was Grub Street, and its population, combus-
tible at any time, was exploding during the last twenty-five
years of the Old Regime. Of course the interpretation may
be only a demographic fantasy based on subjective literary
sources, but the sources seem suggestive enough to warrant
giving the fantasy rein. They continually stress the theme of
the provincial lad who reads some Voltaire, burns with the ambition to become a philosophe, and leaves home only to smolder helplessly and expire down and out in Paris. Even Duclos worried about this corollary to his formula for success. And Voltaire, obsessed by the overpopulation of young writers in Paris (“Egypt of old had fewer locusts”), claimed that he attacked Grub Street in order to warn youth away from it. “The number of those who are lost as a result of this passion [for the “career of letters”] is prodigious. They render themselves incapable of any useful work... They live off rhymes and hopes and die in destitution.”

Voltaire’s attacks wounded Mercier, who rose to the defense of the “poor devils” in opposition to the pampered, pensioned darlings of the academies and salons. Mercier protested that the “poor” of the “low literature” (basse littérature) in the Faubourg Saint-Germain had more talent and integrity than the “rich” in the “high literature” (haute littérature) of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. But even he concluded pessimistically, “Ah! keep away from this career you who do not want to know poverty and humiliation.”

Linguet, another anti-voltairean, devoted a whole book to the same theme. A constant target of would-be authors in search of a protector, he had reason to lament that “secondary schools have become a seedbed of child authors, who hurriedly scribble tragedies, novels, histories, and works of all sorts” and then “spend the rest of their lives in destitution and despair.”

The provincials flocked to Paris in search of glory, money, and the improved estate that seemed promised to any writer with sufficient talent. They did not necessarily share the motivations of the early philosophes, who were often nobles and clergymen enjoying enough leisure to write when the spirit moved them and who wrote before the time when
“literature became a métier,” as Meister distastefully observed. J. J. Garnier, a writer with a highly developed sense of professionalism, noted that by 1764 many men of letters were moved by “the hope of gaining reputation, influence, wealth etc. The avenues of advancement having been closed to them because of their humble birth and modest fortunes, they observed that the career of letters, open to everyone, offered another outlet for their ambition.” Mercier agreed that the immigrant from the provinces could hope to shake off his humble origins and climb to the top in Paris. But the top of Paris, the tout Paris, had little room for ambitious young men on the make, perhaps because, as sociologists claim, rising status groups tend to become exclusive; perhaps because of a literary version of the Malthusian crush; perhaps because France suffered from a common ailment of developing countries: a surplus population of overeducated and underemployed littérateurs and lawyers. In any case, it seems that the attractiveness of the new career celebrated by Duclos and the new church proclaimed by Voltaire resulted in a record crop of potential philosophes, far more than could be absorbed under the archaic system of protections. Of course the lack of statistics and the confusion of social categories in prerevolutionary France (how does one define a “man of letters”?—someone with a literary reputation, someone who has published a book, or someone who lives by his pen?) make these hypotheses unverifiable. But there is no need for a complete census of eighteenth-century writers in order to make sense of the tension between the men of Grub Street and the men of le monde on the eve of the Revolution. The facts of literary life at that time speak for themselves.

The most salient fact is that the marketplace could not support many more writers than in the days when Prévost
and Le Sage proved that it was possible—barely possible—to live from the pen instead of pensions. Although publishers offered somewhat better terms than earlier in the century, authors were caught between the masters of the publishing-bookselling guilds, who paid little for manuscripts, and pirate publishers, who paid nothing at all.  

None of the great mid-century philosophes relied much on sales except for Diderot, who never fully extricated himself from Grub Street. Mercier claimed that in his day only thirty hard-core "professionals" supported themselves by writing. The open, "democratic" market that could feed large numbers of enterprising authors did not appear in France until well into the nineteenth century. Before the day of the steam press and the mass reading public, writers lived by the kind of scavenging along the road to riches that worked so well for Suard—or they dropped by the wayside, in the gutter.

Once he had fallen into Grub Street, the provincial youth who had dreamt of storming Parnassus never extricated himself. As Mercier put it, "He falls and weeps at the foot of an invincible barrier . . . Forced to renounce the glory for which he so long has sighed, he stops and shudders before the door that closes the career to him." The nephews and grandnephews of Rameau really faced a double barrier, both social and economic; for after Grub Street had left its mark on them, they could not penetrate into polite society where the plums were passed around. So they cursed the closed world of culture. They survived by doing the dirty work of society—spying for the police and peddling pornography; and they filled their writings with imprecations against the monde that humiliated and corrupted them. The prerevolutionary works of men like Marat, Brissot, and Carra do not express some vague, "anti-Establishment" feeling; they seethe with hatred of the literary "aristocrats" who had
taken over the egalitarian "republic of letters" and made it into a "despotism." It was in the depths of the intellectual underworld that these men became revolutionaries and that the Jacobinical determination to wipe out the aristocracy of the mind was born.

To explain why Grub Street had no exit and why its prisoners felt such hatred for the grands at the top it is necessary to say a word about the cultural modes of production during the late eighteenth century; and that word is the term one meets everywhere in the Old Regime: privilege. Books themselves bore privileges granted by the grace of the king. Privileged guilds, whose organization showed the hand of Colbert himself, monopolized the production and distribution of the printed word. Privileged journals exploited royally granted monopolies. The privileged Comédie Française, Académie Royale de Musique, and Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture legally monopolized the stage, opera, and the plastic arts. The Académie Française restricted literary immortality to forty privileged individuals, while privileged bodies like the Académie des Sciences and the Société Royale de Médecine dominated the world of science. And above all these corps rose the supremely privileged cultural elite who kept le monde all to themselves.

It may have been appropriate for a corporate society to organize its culture corporately, but such archaic organization constrained the expansive forces that might have opened up the cultural industries and supported more of the overpopulated underworld of letters. As it was, the bookdealers' guilds acted far more effectively than the police in suppressing unprivileged books, and underprivileged youths like Brissot were forced into destitution, not so much because their early works were radical as because the monopolies prevented them from reaching the market.
therefore fed their families either from the pensions and si-
neesures reserved for the members of *le monde* or from the
scrapstossed into Grub Street.

The corporate organization of culture was not simply an
economic matter, for it contradicted the basic premises
under which the young writers had flocked to Paris in the
1770s and 1780s. They had come with the conviction that
the republic of letters really existed as it had been described
in the works of the great philosophes—as the literary coun-
terpart to the “atomic” individualism of Physiocratic the-
ory, a society of independent but fraternal individuals, in
which the best men won but all derived dignity, as well as a
living, from service to the common cause. Experience
taught them that the real world of letters functioned like
everything else in the Old Regime: individuals got ahead as
best they could in a labyrinth of baroque institutions. To
have an article published in the *Mercure*, to get a play ac-
cepted by the Comédie Française, to steer a book through
the Direction de la Librairie, to win membership in an acade-
my, entry into a salon, or a sinecure in the bureaucracy re-
quired resorting to the old devices of privilege and protec-
tion, not merely the demonstration of talent.

Talent certainly carried some to the top. Maury was the
son of a poor cobbler in a village of the Venaissain, Mar-
montel of a poor tailor in the Limousin, Morellet of a
small-time paper merchant of Lyons, Rivarol (who called
himself a count) of an innkeeper in Languedoc; La Harpe
and Thomas were orphans. All rose through skill and scholar-
ships, and they were not the only examples of rapid up-
ward mobility. But as de Tocqueville observed, it was the er-
ratic opening up of mobility, not the absence of it, that
produced social tensions. Nowhere was this general phe-
nomenon more important than in the world of letters, be-
cause the attractiveness of writing as a new kind of career produced more writers than could be integrated into le monde or supported outside of it. To the outsiders, the whole process looked rotten, and they were not inclined to blame their failures on their own inability: on the contrary, they tended to see themselves as successors to Voltaire. They had knocked on the door of Voltaire’s church, and the door remained closed. Not only did their status fail to rise as fast as their expectations; it plummeted, dragging them down to a world of opposites and contradictions, a monde turned upside down, where estate could not be defined at all, and dignity dissolved in destitution. Seen from the perspective of Grub Street, the republic of letters was a lie.

If the institutional realities of the established literary world contradicted its principles, at least from the viewpoint of those who failed to reach the top, what were the realities of life for those at the bottom? Grub Street had no principles, and it had no institutions of a formal kind. It was a world of free-floating individuals—not Lockean gentlemen abiding by the rules of some implicit game, but Hobbesian brutes struggling to survive. It was as far removed from le monde as was the café from the salon.\textsuperscript{55}

Despite the democratic play of wit, the salon remained a rather formal institution. It did not allow any putting of elbows on the table or any admission to those without introductions. During the last decades of the Old Regime, the salon became increasingly a preserve for the high philosophes, who generally abandoned the cafés to the lower species of littérateur. The café functioned as the antithesis of the salon. It was open to everyone, just one step from the street, although there were degrees in its closeness to street life. While the great names gathered in the Procope or La Régence, lesser figures congregated in the notorious Caveau
of the Palais-Royal, and the humblest hacks frequented the cafés of the boulevards, blending into an underworld of "swindlers, recruiting agents, spies, and pickpockets; here one finds only pimps, buggers, and bardaches."\(^{56}\)

Grub Street may have lacked the corporate structure of the established culture, but it was not sheer anarchy. It had institutions of a sort. For example, the musées and lycées that sprang up in such numbers during the 1780s responded to the needs of obscure writers for a place to exhibit their wares, to declaim their works, and to make contacts. These clubhouses formalized the functions of the cafés. The musées of Court de Gébelin and P. C. de La Blancherie seem even to have served as counteracademies and antisalons for the multitude of philosophes who could not get a hearing elsewhere. La Blancherie published a journal, *Les Nouvelles de la République des lettres et des arts*, which vented some of the frustrations of the musée members both by sniping at academicians and by reviewing works that were beneath the notice of the *Journal de Paris* and the *Mercure*.\(^{57}\) But the most effective sniper and the most influential outsider of prerevolutionary France was Simon-Henri Linguet. While respecting the crown and the church, Linguet blasted at France's most prestigious institutions, especially the Parisian bar and the Académie Française. His polemical genius made his pamphlets, judicial mémoires, and journals best-sellers; and his tirades against aristocratic and despotic corporateness reverberated up and down Grub Street, setting the tone for some of the antielitist propaganda of the Revolution.\(^{58}\)

Grub Street therefore had a few organs and organizations to express itself. Perhaps it even had an inchoate stratification system of its own, for the underground contained several levels. Having cultivated an established philosophe or
got some verses published in the *Almanach des muses*, some writers lived just below *le monde*. Mirabeau maintained a mandarin style of life even when in prison and in debt. He kept a stable of pamphleteers (who referred to him simply as *le comte*) to produce the works published under his name. Lesser figures put together the encyclopedias, dictionaries, digests, and anthologies that circulated in such profusion in the last half of the eighteenth century. Even cruder hack work could be relatively respectable—writing for ministers, pamphleteering for the *baissiers* fighting the *haussiers* on the Bourse, and producing *nouvelles à la main*; or it could be demeaning—manufacturing smut, peddling prohibited works, and spying for the police. Many writers lived on the fringes of the law, calling themselves lawyers or law clerks and taking on the odd jobs available in the *basoche* of the Palais de Justice. Some, at the bottom of the literary underworld, sank into criminality. Charles Théveneau de Morande, one of Grub Street’s most violent and virulent pamphleteers, lived in a demimonde of prostitutes, pimps, blackmailers, pickpockets, swindlers, and murderers. He tried his hand at more than one of these professions and gathered material for his pamphlets by skimming the scum around him. As a result, his works smeared everything, good and bad alike, with a spirit of such total depravity and alienation that Voltaire cried out in horror, “There has just appeared one of those satanic works [Morande’s *Gazetier cuirassé*] where everyone from the monarch to the last citizen is insulted with furor; where the most atrocious and most absurd calumny spreads a horrible poison on everything one respects and loves.”

Grub Street stifled respect and love. Its grim struggle for survival brought out baser sentiments, as is suggested by the following excerpts from reports submitted to the Pari-
sian police by its legions of spies and secret agents, many of them underworld writers themselves with their own dossiers in the archives of the police.

GORSAS: proper for all kinds of vile jobs. Run out of Versailles and put in Bicêtre [a jail for especially disreputable criminals] by personal order of the king for having corrupted children whom he had taken in as lodgers, he has withdrawn to a fifth floor on the rue Tictone. Gorsas produces libelles. He has an arrangement with an apprentice printer of the Imprimerie Polytype, who has been fired from other printing shops. He [Gorsas] is suspected of having printed obscene works there. He peddles prohibited books.

AUDOUIN: calls himself a lawyer, writes nouvelles à la main, peddler of forbidden books; he is connected with Prudhomme, Manuel, and other disreputable authors and book peddlers. He does all kinds of work; he will be a spy when one wants.

DUPORT DU TERTRE: solicits a position in the offices of the police; is a lawyer who is not often employed in the Palais, although he is not without merit. He failed to get a position in the Domaines. He lives in a modest, fourth-story apartment; he hardly gives off an air of wealth [il ne respire pas l'opulence]. He is generally well spoken of; he has a good reputation in his neighborhood.

DELABROIX: lawyer, writer, expelled from the bar. He produces [judicial] mémoires for shady cases; and when he has no mémoires to write, he writes scurrilous works.

MERCIER: lawyer, a fierce, bizarre man; he neither pleads in court nor consults. He hasn’t been admitted to the bar, but he takes the title of lawyer. He has written the Tableau de Paris, in four volumes, and other works. Fearing the Bastille, he left the country, then returned and wants to become attached to the police.

MARAT: bold charlatan. M. Vicq d’Azir asks, in the name of the Société Royale de Médecine, that he be run out of Paris. He is from Neuchâtel in Switzerland. Many sick persons have died in
his hands, but he has a doctor’s degree, which was bought for him.

CHENIER: insolent and violent poet. He lives with Beauménil of the Opéra, who, in the decline of her charms, fell in love with him. He mistreats her and beats her—so much that her neighbors report that he would have killed her had they not come to her rescue. She accuses him of having taken her jewels; she describes him as a man capable of any crime and doesn’t hide her regrets at having let herself be bewitched by him.

FRÉRON: who has neither the wit nor the pen of his father, is generally despised. It is not he who writes the Année littéraire, although he has its privilege. He hires young unemployed lawyers. He’s an insolent coward, who has received his share of beatings—and doesn’t boast about it—most recently from the hand of the actor Desessarts, whom he had called a “ventriloquist” in one of his issues. He is connected with Mouvel, who was expelled from the Comédie for pederasty.

PANIS: young lawyer of the Palais, protected by M. le Président d’Ormesson because of Panis’s parents, who are his [d’Ormes- son’s] fermiers; is employed by Fréron on the Année littéraire. Panis has as a mistress a woman branded by the hand of the executioner.61

Life in Grub Street was hard, and it took a psychological toll, because “the excrement of literature” had to face not merely failure but degradation, and they had to face it alone. Failure breeds loneliness, and the conditions of Grub Street were peculiarly suited to isolate its inhabitants. Ironically, the basic unit of life in la basse littérature was the garret (stratification went more by story than by neighborhood in eighteenth-century Paris). In their fourth- and fifth-floor mansardes, before Balzac had romanticized their lot, the undiscovered philosophes learned that they were what Voltaire had called them: the canaille de la littérature. But how could they come to terms with such knowledge?
Fabre d’Eglantine is a case in point. A drifter and a déclassé who saw himself as the successor of Molière, he went down in the police dossiers as a “poor poet, who drags about in shame and destitution; he is despised everywhere; among men of letters he is considered an execrable subject” (poète médiocre qui traîne sa honte et sa misère; il est partout honté; il passe parmi les gens de lettres pour un exécrable sujet). Sometime before the Revolution, Fabre wrote a play that reads like an escapist fantasy of an author trapped in Grub Street. The hero, an unappreciated twenty-eight-year-old genius from the provinces, writes his heart out in a Parisian garret, mocked and exploited by the evil elite that dominates French literature: mercenary publishers, crass journal editors, and the perfidious beaux-esprits who monopolize the salons. He is about to succumb to disease and poverty when, by a stroke of good fortune, a virtuous bourgeois tycoon discovers him, appreciates his talent and superior morality, and carries him off to the provinces, where he writes masterpieces happily ever after. The play breathes hatred of the cultural elite and a fierce egalitarianism, which confirms La Harpe’s description of the prerevolutionary Fabre as an embittered failure, “envenomed with hatred, like all the persons of his sort, against everyone who called himself an homme du monde, against everything that had a rank in society—a rank that he did not have and should not have had.”

Others probably sought refuge in similar fantasies. Marat dreamed of being whisked away to preside over an academy of sciences in Madrid. Both he and Carra found solace in imagining that they had outstripped Newton, despite society’s failure to appreciate them. But no amount of fantasy could erase the contradictions between life at the top and the bottom of the world of letters and between what those
at the bottom were and what they wanted to be. The established writers enjoyed an estate; they derived honor and wealth from the established cultural institutions. But the literary proletariat had no social location. Its ragged pamphleteers could not call themselves men of letters; they were just _canaille_, condemned to gutters and garrets, working in isolation, poverty, and degradation, and therefore easy prey to the psychology of failure—a vicious combination of hatred of the system and hatred of the self.

The Grub Street mentality made itself heard with exceptional vehemence during the last years of the Old Regime. It spoke through the _libelle_, the hack writers' staff of life, their meat, their favorite genre and a genre that deserves to be rescued from the neglect of historians, because it communicates the Grub Street view of the world: a spectacle of knaves and fools buying and selling one another and forever falling victim to _les grands_. The _grand monde_ was the real target of the _libelles_. They slandered the court, the church, the aristocracy, the academies, the salons, everything elevated and respectable, including the monarchy itself, with a scurrility that is difficult to imagine today, although it has had a long career in underground literature. For pamphleteers had lived by libel since the time of Aretino. They had exploited all the great crises in French history, in the propaganda produced by the Catholic League during the religious wars, for example, and in the _Mazarinades_ of the Fronde. But the ultimate crisis of the Old Regime gave them an unusual opportunity, and they rose to the occasion with what seems to have been their greatest barrage of antisocial smut.  

Although a survey of _libelles_ published between 1770 and 1789 cannot be undertaken here, it should be possible to capture some of their flavor by explicating one of their
texts. Perhaps the most outspoken *libelle*—a pamphlet so sensational and so widely read that it became virtually a prototype of the genre—was the work that especially horrified Voltaire: *Le Gazetier cuirassé* by Charles Théveneau de Morande. Morande mixed specific calumny and general declamation in brief, punchy paragraphs, which anticipated the style of gossip columnists in the modern yellow press. He promised to reveal “behind-the-scenes secrets” (*secrets des coulisses*) in the tradition of the *chronique scandaleuse*. But he provided more than scandal:

The devout wife of a certain Maréchal de France (who suffers from an imaginary lung disease), finding a husband of that species too delicate, considers it her religious duty to spare him and so condemns herself to the crude caresses of her butler, who would still be a lackey if he hadn’t proven himself so robust.

This sexual sensationalism conveyed a social message: the aristocracy had degenerated to the point of being unable to reproduce itself; the great nobles were either impotent or deviant; their wives were forced to seek satisfaction from their servants, representatives of the more virile lower classes; and everywhere among *les grands* incest and venereal disease had extinguished the last sparks of humanity. Vivid detail communicated the message more effectively than abstractions; for although the reader might at first merely be shocked by a particular incident,

The Count of Noail—, having taken some scandalous liberties with one of his lackeys, this country bumpkin knocked over Monseigneur with a slap that kept his lordship in bed for eight days ... The lackey ... is a Picard of the first order who had not yet been instructed how to serve a Spanish grandee, Knight of the Royal Orders, Lieutenant General, Governor of Vers—, Prince of P—, Lord of Arpa—, Grand Cross of Malta,
Knight of the Golden Fleece, and secular member of the Society of Jesus, etc., etc., etc., etc.  

he would know what to conclude after he had recovered from the shock. Morande led the reader toward general conclusions by piling up anecdotes and slanting them in the same direction—against *le monde*. He showed that the summit of society had decayed beyond the point of recovery, both morally and physically:

The public is warned that an epidemic disease is raging among the girls of the Opera, that it has begun to reach the ladies of the court, and that it has even been communicated to their lackeys. This disease elongates the face, destroys the complexion, reduces the weight, and causes horrible ravages where it becomes situated. There are ladies without teeth, others without eyebrows, and some completely paralyzed.

Morande’s chronicle of cuckoldry, buggery, incest, and impotence in high places therefore reads as an indictment of the social order. And Morande did not merely leave the reader with a general impression of corruption. He associated the aristocracy’s decadence with its inability to fulfill its functions in the army, the church, and the state.

Of approximately two hundred colonels in the infantry, cavalry, and dragoons in France, one hundred and eighty know how to dance and to sing little songs; about the same number wear lace and red heels; at least half can read and sign their names; and in addition not four of them know the first elements of their craft.

As the king’s confessor was disgraced for having been discovered flirting with some pages, there is now open competition for that position, which will go to the prelate who will be easiest on the king’s conscience. The Archbishop of R—— has been proposed but rejected, because of the scandalous relations he has maintained for such a long time with one of his grand vicars. The car-
dinals of Gèv—and of Luy—were designated to serve by alternating semesters; but since the first doesn’t know how to read and the second hasn’t recovered from being slapped [a reference to a scandal involving homosexuality], one can’t be sure of His Majesty’s decision.75

Morande constantly stressed the connection between sexual and political corruption by news flashes like the following: “Having a pretty wife of whom he was very jealous, the unfortunate Baron of Vaxen was sent to prison by a lettre de cachet in order to learn the customs of le monde, while the duke [La Vrillière, one of Louis XV’s favorite ministers] sleeps with his wife.”76 The monarchy had degenerated into despotism, this message stood out on every page: the ministers have hired an extra team of secretaries just to sign lettres de cachet; the Bastille and Vincennes are so overcrowded that tents have been set up inside their walls to house the guards; a new elite police corps, modeled on Louis XIV’s dragonades, has been created to terrorize the provinces; the government is experimenting with a new machine that can hang ten men at a time; and the public executioner has resigned, not because he is worried about automation, but because the new Maupeou ministry offends his sense of justice. In case any reader could possibly miss the point, Morande stated it explicitly: “According to Chancellor Maupeou, a monarchical state is a state where the prince has the right of life and death over all his subjects, where he is proprietor of all the wealth in the kingdom, where honor and equity are founded on arbitrary principles, which must always conform with the interests of the sovereign.”77

What was the king’s place in this political system? “The chancellor and the Duke d’Aiguillon have come to dominate the king so much that they leave him only the liberty of sleeping with his mistress, petting his dogs, and signing
marriage contracts.” Deriding the idea of a divine origin to royal sovereignty, Morande reduced the king to the level of the ignorant, crassulous court. He made Louis XV look ridiculous, a trivial figure even in his despotism: “A notice has been published in the hopes of finding the scepter of one of the greatest kings of Europe. After a very long search, it was found in the toilette of a pretty woman called a countess, who uses it for playing with her cat.” The real rulers of France and the villains of the book were the Countess DuBarry and the ministerial triumvirate of Maupeou, Terray, and d’Aiguillon. Seizing on Mme. DuBarry as a symbol of the regime, Morande dwelt on every detail about her that he could fabricate or extract from café gossip: her supposedly illegitimate birth to a servant girl who had been seduced by a monk, her career as a common whore, her use of the king’s power to help her former colleagues by forbidding the police to set foot in brothels, her lesbianic relations with her maid, and so on. Similarly, Morande showed that the ministers used their authority to fatten their purses, procure mistresses, or simply enjoy villainy for its own sake.

Grotesque, inaccurate, and simplistic as it was, this version of political news should not be dismissed as merely mythical, because myth making and unmaking proved to be powerful forces in the last years of a regime, which, though absolutist in theory, had become increasingly vulnerable in practice to the vagaries of public opinion. To be sure, the eighteenth-century French “public” did not exist in any coherent form; and insofar as it did exist, it was excluded from direct participation in politics. But its exclusion produced a political naïveté that made it all the more vulnerable to Morande’s style of gazeteeering. For instead of discussing issues, the gazetier cuirassé defamed individuals. He buried Maupeou’s reforms—probably the regime’s last chance to
survive by destroying some of the vested interests that were devouring it—in a torrent of mudslinging. That the Maupeou program would have benefited the common people did not matter to Morande, because he and his fellow hacks had no interest in reform. They hated the system in itself; and they expressed their hatred by desanctifying its symbols, destroying the myths that gave it legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and perpetrating the countermyth of degenerate despotism.

Far from being limited to Morande’s works, these themes became increasingly important in *libelle* literature as the Old Regime approached its finale. *Le Gazetier cuirassé* merely set the tone for an outpouring of antigovernment pamphlets that extended from the “Maupeouana” of the early 1770s to the “Calonniana” of the late 1780s. The most prolific producer of the latter was Jean-Louis Carra, an outcast from the closed circles of established science, who stated frankly that his efforts to damn the ministry had been provoked by the refusal of one of Calonne’s pensions. Morande’s motives had not been nobler. He meant to make money, both by exploiting the market for sensationalism and by blackmailing the persons he libeled.

Did slander on such a scale, its crass motivation notwithstanding, amount to a call for revolution? Not really, because the *libelles* lacked a program. They not only failed to give the reader any idea of what sort of society should replace the Old Regime; they hardly contained any abstract ideas at all. In denouncing despotism, Morande cried out for liberty; and in fulminating against aristocratic decadence, he seemed to advocate bourgeois standards of decency, if only by contrast. But he did not defend any clear set of principles. He referred to himself as *le philosophe cynique* and slandered everything, even the philosophes.
same spirit animated most other libelles; it was a spirit of nihilism rather than of ideological commitment.

Yet the libelles showed a curious tendency to moralize, even in their pornography. The climax of one of Morande’s obscene pamphlets about courtiers and courtesans came in an indignant description of Mme. DuBarry:

passing directly from the brothel to the throne, toppling the most powerful and redoubtable minister, overthrowing the constitution of the monarchy, insulting the royal family, the presumptive heir to the throne, and his august consort by her incredible luxury, by her insolent talk, [and insulting] the entire nation, which is dying of hunger, by her vainglorious extravagance and by the well-known depredations of all the roués surrounding her, as she sees groveling at her feet not only the grands of the kingdom and the ministers, but the princes of the royal blood, foreign ambassadors, and the church itself, which canonizes her scandals and her debauchery.\(^{85}\)

This tone of moral outrage was typical of the libelles and seems to have been more than a rhetorical pose. It expressed a feeling of total contempt for a totally corrupt elite. So if the libelles lacked a coherent ideology, they communicated a revolutionary point of view: they showed that social rot was consuming French society, eating its way downward from the top. And their pornographic details got the point across to a public that could not assimilate the Social Contract and that soon would be reading Le Père Duchesne.

This gutter Rousseauism—a natural idiom for the Rousseau du ruisseau\(^{86}\)—may have been related to Rousseau’s rejection of the culture and morality of France’s upper classes. For the men of Grub Street saw Jean-Jacques as one of their own. In following his career, they could not only imagine the realization of their hopes but also find consolation for their failures. Débougeoisé like such typical libellistes as Bris-
sot and Manuel, Rousseau had risen from their ranks into *le monde*, seen it for what it was, exposed elitist culture itself as the very agent of social corruption, and returned with his semiliterate, working-class wife to a humble existence in the neighborhood of Grub Street, where he died pure and purged. The hacks respected him and despised Voltaire—Voltaire the *mondain*, who had stigmatized Rousseau as a “poor devil” and who died in the same year, in the bosom of *le monde*.87

Is it surprising then that the writers whom Voltaire scorned as *la canaille de la littérature* should have moralized in the manner of Rousseau in their politico-pornography? To them the Old Regime was obscene. In making them its spies and smut-peddlers, it had violated their moral core and desecrated their youthful visions of serving humanity honorably in Voltaire’s church. So they became rank atheists and poured out their souls in blasphemies about the society that had driven them down into an underworld of criminals and deviants. The scatology of their pamphlets—their frequent references, for example, to venereal disease passed on from the Cardinal de Rohan to the queen and all the great figures of the court during the Diamond Necklace Affair—communicates a sense of total opposition to an elite so corrupt as to deserve annihilation. No wonder that the government kept secret files on the *libellistes* and consigned the *libelles* to the bottom of its graduated scale of illegality, or that the very catalogues of them circulated secretly, in handwritten notes, like the list of “philosophical books” quoted above. The *libellistes* spoke for a subintelligentsia that was not merely unintegrated but beyond the pale and that wanted not to reform society in some polite, liberal, Voltairean way, but to overturn it.

There is a danger of using the word “revolutionary” too
liberally and of exaggerating the ideological distance between the top and the bottom of the literary world in the Old Regime. The first philosophes were revolutionary in their fashion: they articulated and propagated a value system, or an ideology, that undermined the traditional values Frenchmen inherited from their Catholic and royalist past. The men of Grub Street believed in the message of the philosophes; they wanted nothing more than to become philosophes themselves. It was their attempt to realize this ambition that made them see philosophie in a different light and to hold it up to the realities not only of society in general but also of the cultural world. The great philosophes had had a sharp eye for realities also, and their successors of the next generation may have been as realistic as the most hard-bitten hacks: nothing suggests that the view from the top is more distorted than the view from the bottom. But the difference in viewpoints was crucial—a difference of perspective not principle, of mentality not philosophy, a difference to be found less in the content of ideas than in their emotional coloring. The emotional thrust of Grub Street literature was revolutionary, although it had no coherent political program nor even any distinctive ideas of its own. Both the philosophes and the libellistes were seditious in their own way: in becoming established, the Enlightenment undercut the elite’s faith in the legitimacy of the social order; and in attacking the elite, the libelles spread disaffection deeper and more widely. Each of the opposing camps deserves its place among the intellectual origins of the Revolution.

Once the Revolution came, the opposition between the high- and low-life of literature had to be resolved. Grub Street rose, overthrew le monde, and requisitioned the positions of power and prestige. It was a cultural revolution,
which created a new elite and gave them new jobs. While Suard, Marmontel, and Morellet found themselves stripped of their income, Brissot, Carra, Gorsas, Manuel, Mercier, Desmoulin, Prudhomme, Loustalot, Louvet, Hébert, Maret, Marat, and many more of the old literary proletariat led new lives as journalists and bureaucrats. The Revolution turned the cultural world upside down. It destroyed the academies, scattered the salons, retracted the pensions, abolished the privileges, and obliterated the agencies and vested interests that had strangled the book trade before 1789. Newspapers and theaters sprang up at such a rate that one could even speak of an industrial revolution within the cultural revolution. And in destroying the old institutions, the new elite meted out a crude, revolutionary justice: Manuel took over the police department that had once hired him secretly for the suppression of libelles, and he published its archives in libelle from (carefully purging all references to his and Brissot’s careers as police spies); Marat, a victim of academic persecution before the Revolution, led the movement that eventually destroyed the academies; and Fabre and Collot, frustrated actor-playwrights in the Old Regime, struck down the monopoly of the comédiens du roi and very nearly struck off their heads. In a sequel to his prerevolutionary census, Rivarol interpreted the Revolution as the work of the status-hungry surplus population of men who had failed to make it in the old order.

Of course the cultural revolution did not fit perfectly into the pattern of Rivarol’s counterrevolutionary propaganda any more than it corresponded to Taine’s counterrevolutionary history. Many of the old elite, even academicians like Condorcet, Bailly, Chamfort, and La Harpe, did not oppose the destruction of the institutions in which they had prospered. The literary hacks scattered in a dozen directions,
supporting different factions in different phases of the conflict. Some of them, particularly during the Girondist period and the Directory, showed that they wanted nothing more than to participate in a revival of *le monde*. And at least during the years 1789-1791, the Revolution realized many of the ideas propagated by the High Enlightenment. But the Revolution at its most revolutionary expressed the antielitist passions of Grub Street. It would be wrong to interpret [tred] of mandarins. The Jacobin pamphleteers believed in their propaganda. They wanted to slough off their corrupt old selves and to become new men, newly integrated in a republic of virtue. As cultural revolutionaries, they wanted to destroy “the aristocracy of the mind” in order to create an egalitarian republic of letters in an egalitarian republic. In calling for the abolition of academies, Lanjuinais put their case perfectly: “The academies and all other literary corps must be free and not privileged; to authorize their formation under any kind of protection would be to make them into veritable guilds. Privileged academies are always seedbeds of a literary aristocracy.” From there it was but one step to Grégoire’s injunction: “We must look for merit dwelling impoverished in basements and in seventh-story garrets . . . True genius is almost always *sans-culotte*.” Perhaps the propagandists of the garrets functioned as the ideological carriers who injected the crude, Jacobinical version of Rousseauism into the Parisian *sans-culotterie*. Hébert certainly played that role—Hébert, who had rotted in obscurity before the Revolution and, at one point, had tried to persuade the Variétés to perform one of his plays only to get a job checking seat tickets in the *loges*.

It would seem to be necessary, therefore, in looking for the connection between the Enlightenment and the Revolution, to examine the structure of the cultural world under
the Old Regime, to descend from the heights of metaphysics and to enter Grub Street. At this low level of analysis, the High Enlightenment looks relatively tame. Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* may have exploded like a "bomb" in 1734, but by the time of Voltaire's apotheosis in 1778, France had absorbed the shock. There was nothing shocking at all in the works of his successors, for they had been absorbed, fully integrated into *le monde*. Of course one must allow for exceptions like Condorcet, but the Suard generation of philosophes had remarkably little to say. They argued over Gluck and Piccini, dabbled in pre-Romanticism, chanted the old litanies about legal reform and *l'insâme*, and collected their tithes. And while they grew fat in Voltaire's church, the revolutionary spirit passed to the lean and hungry men of Grub Street, to the cultural pariahs who, through poverty and humiliation, produced the Jacobinical version of Rousseauism. The crude pamphleteering of Grub Street was revolutionary in feeling as well as in message. It expressed the passion of men who hated the Old Regime in their guts, who ached with hatred of it. It was from such visceral hatred, not from the refined abstractions of the contented cultural elite, that the extreme Jacobin revolution found its authentic voice.