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Sharing Grief/Initiating Consolation: Voltaire's Letters of Condolence

THOMAS M. CARR, JR.

The letter of condolence has generally been neglected by students of epistolary discourse¹ in spite of being located at the intersection of a number of recent critical concerns. Interest among historians of death is shifting from the *ars moriendi* that prepared the dying for a holy death to the grief of those who mourn the deceased.² Second, letters of condolence raise the problem of the representation of grief and the adequacy of language to convey it.³ Finally, a rhetoric of consolation is implicit in the topoi of condolence selected by the letter writer, and while the consolatory discourse of antiquity has been the subject of much study, only recently has consolation in the early modern period attracted attention.⁴ Voltaire's extensive correspondence not only offers varied examples of letters of condolence, but consolation is a theme to which he repeatedly returned both in his letters and in the *contes*.⁵

Of course, while consolation and condolence are related, they are not synonymous. The *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* defines *condolérance* as the "témoignage qu'on rend à quelqu'un du déplaisir qu'on a de la perte qu'il a faite" while *consolation* is a "discours qui sert à adoucir la douleur d'un affligé; soulagement, adoucissement que l'on apporte au déplaisir, à l'affliction de quelqu'un." Condolences are a first step in the consolatory process. They are an expression of sympathy for the grief someone else experiences due to a loss; they may or may not be followed by an effort to ease the sorrow and

relieve the grief. Such consolation itself usually involves offering arguments designed to urge mourners to reframe their loss in a new perspective or to show them how some replacement can compensate for it.

Three areas are under investigation here: condolences as a social and epistolary practice; the problem of representing one's sympathy in such a way that the condolences appear to be more than gestures required by civility; and the consolatory commonplaces Voltaire found most congenial to condolences.

I

In the Ancien Régime the *bienséances* dictated clear expectations concerning the expression of condolences. In his recent survey of the manuals of letter writing that codify these conventions, Maurice Daumas notes that such letters are a sign of polite society's increasing concern for civility and points to the growing importance of condolences for a death within the larger category of letters of consolation during the period 1630 to 1725:

Le genre fort ancien de la *lettre de consolation* représente tout au long de la période étudiée environ 8% des lettres. La consolation, qui peut concerner la captivité, l'emprisonnement, la maladie, est centrée de plus en plus sur le décès. Les modèles de lettres familiales se multiplient et se diversifient (jusqu'aux consolations entre frères et soeurs.) Enfin, les lettres d'avis de décès et les réponses prennent peu à peu la plus grande place.⁶

The manuals offered advice on writing such letters, samples written by epistolary masters like Malherbe, and model letters devised by the authors of these handbooks for all manner of circumstances.⁷ Voltaire himself avoided the oratorical brand of formal consolation exemplified by Malherbe, and for imitations in his correspondence of the invented model letters furnished by the manuals, one must turn, not to letters he wrote himself, but to two stiffly formal ones written in 1767 by officials of the court of the duchess of Saxe-Gotha informing Voltaire of her death (D14501, D14557).⁸

Voltaire's correspondence, nonetheless, offers an impressive range of condolences: carefully composed *compliments de condoléance* when etiquette required the most formal respect; short, rapidly written *billets* that conveyed Voltaire's immediate reaction to the initial news of a death; longer letters in which Voltaire uses what Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac calls the "art allusif" of transition to pass from the condolences that occupy the first paragraph to a discussion of other matters of the day;⁹ requests that friends convey his condolences when, for one reason or another, it was not opportune for him to write directly.¹⁰

Condolences, of course, are expressed directly when circumstances allow, but when letters are involved an epistolary pact of three steps is established. An initial letter comes from someone near to the deceased announcing the death; the expectation is that a letter of condolence will follow, for which a letter of acknowledgment must be sent.¹¹ In Voltaire's correspondence, it is rare to find all three letters extant. One example might be his announcement of Mme du Châtelet's death to Frederick the Great (D4039), the king's not too gracious condolences (D4047), and Voltaire's response (D4059). So great was the social pressure to write that friends reminded Voltaire of his duty to send a *compliment de condoléance* when they felt he was neglecting his obligations.¹² One suspects in some cases friends like d'Argental feared that Voltaire's failure to write would be taken as a sign that they themselves had failed in their duty to notify him of the death.¹³ Likewise, given the burden that acknowledging a great number of expressions of sympathy placed on the bereaved, Voltaire at times included a statement in the condolences that no response was expected, as he did when the daughter-in-law of his old friend Fyot de la Marche died in 1765 (D12293).

As the premier poet of his day, Voltaire's obligation went further than a simple letter. After thanking Voltaire for his expression of sympathy on the death of her former lover and long time friend Formont, Mme du Deffand continued, "Mais, monsieur, pourquoi refusez-vous à mon ami un mot d'éloge? . . . Quatre lignes de vous soit en vers soit en prose honorerait sa mémoire et seraient pour moi une vraie consolation" (D8032). One hopes she experienced twice the consolation she expected when she received his reply which contained not four but eight lines of verse praising their mutual friend (D8040). However, Frederick was not so easily satisfied. In December 1758 Voltaire replied to the king's thank-you letter to the poet's condolences on the occasion of the death of Frederick's sister Wilhelmina with a thirty-four line poem (D7979). The king rebuked Voltaire testily, "J'ai reçu les vers que vous avez faits; apparemment que je ne me suis pas bien expliqué. Je désire quelque chose de plus éclatant et de public. Il faut que toute l'Europe pleure avec moi une vertu trop peu connue" (D8062). Voltaire obeyed the royal directive by writing an entirely new poem, the "Ode sur la perte que l'Allemagne a faite de Sa Altesse Royale Mme la Margrave de Bareith" that was duly published in spring 1759. However, the poet did not always accede to such requests; for example, Voltaire does not seem to have obliged the marquise d'Argens's suggestion to "faire parler votre douleur, votre muse" in honor of her husband (D17598).

Voltaire, of course, made the letters or poems of condolence required by etiquette and fame serve his larger purposes. Perhaps the most fundamental function of condolences is to reaffirm the tie between the bereaved and the

letter writer, and Voltaire uses the occasion provided by the social obligation to send condolences to strengthen this relationship, or even orient it according to his agenda of the moment. For example, the condolences sent upon Formont's death in 1758 allowed Voltaire to reestablish his languishing correspondence with Mme du Deffand whose salon attracted the elite of Parisian society and who counted among her intimates the wife of the de facto prime minister and Voltaire's patron, Choiseul. Similarly, during a period in 1757 when Voltaire and Frederick were only exchanging messages through the king's sister, Voltaire took the occasion of the death of Frederick's mother to write the monarch directly (D7315). His letter to his niece Mme Denis on the death of her husband in April 1744 offers an example of the use of condolences to affirm a more intimate bond. Besterman tells us that uncle and niece had already become occasional lovers by 1744,¹⁴ thus transforming Voltaire's otherwise rather conventional use of the topos of the consolation of friendship into an amorous invitation: "Vivez pour vos amis et pour moi qui vous aime tendrement" (D2958).¹⁵

Thus, letters of condolence invariably prove most interesting when read as part of an intricate network of on-going personal exchange. Even when a letter seems to be an isolated tribute sent out of regard for the formalities of civility, a subtext almost always accompanies the expression of sympathy.

II

Voltaire found little need to resort to the well-worn topos of the difficulty of writing such letters; if he had to be reminded to write, it was more likely because of an oversight or disinclination, than for inability to find words. Nonetheless, his letters illustrate the paradox concerning the language of grief. On the one hand, the sorrow over the loss may be beyond language, the mourner's grief so deep that words cannot convey it. One might thus postulate, as does Vincent Kaufmann, that "les grandes condoléances sont muettes, comme les grandes douleurs auxquelles elles s'efforcent de ressembler et de s'associer" (138). On the other hand, social obligation does not allow for silence: not sending condolences is more likely to be taken as a lack of sympathy than as the silence of unspeakable grief. As Roger Duchêne has put it, often "ces lettres ne prenaient d'importance que si on ne les avait pas écrites."¹⁶ Ironically, these two apparent opposites sometimes converge in cliché since conventional formulae can both mask an absence of feeling or be the refuge of profound grief.

The emotional charge of the condolences depends on a tripartite relationship that can be visualized as a triangle, with the deceased at the apex and the angles of the base occupied by the letter writer and the recipient. The

intensity of the sympathy that is at the heart of any condolences is a function of the intimacy between the letter writer and the letter's recipient. The bond between the deceased and the recipient determines the intensity of the recipient's grief for which the letter writer is expressing sympathy; finally, the degree of closeness between the deceased and the letter writer determines whether the letter writer experiences a personal grief that overlays sympathy for the recipient's grief.

One might predict that the level of emotional involvement would be the weakest in cases in which the letter writer did not know the deceased, and the recipient was only an acquaintance whose own ties with the deceased were rather weak. At the other extreme, when both letter writer and recipient were closely attached to the deceased as well as strongly bonded to each other, one would predict the most intense condolences.

The difficulty of gauging the intensity of each line of force in this triangular relationship complicates the task of writing (or reading) condolences. In fact, writers of condolences can only be sure of their own feelings toward the deceased and to the bereaved. They may have a fairly reliable impression of the bereaved's own feeling toward them, but measuring the bereaved's grief is much more problematic. As one of the characters in Mlle de Scudéry's *Clélie* suggests, the *bienséances* often require that one mourn a spouse one is delighted to be rid of, or display sorrow when one's secret emotion is joy over an inheritance.¹⁷ This question is not inconsequential since, in general, one owes a letter of condolence to someone whose grief is greater than one's own. If determining these relations is difficult for the bereaved and consoler, it is all the more troublesome for readers outside the triangle. For example, in Voltaire's own case, after the death of Mme du Châtelet, was he the inconsolable mourner of the letters to d'Argental ("[J]e reviens pleurer entre vos bras le reste de ma malheureuse vie" [D4014]) and to Voisenon ("[J]e viendrai bientôt verser dans votre sein des larmes qui ne tariront jamais" [D4018]), or, as he appears in a letter to Mme Denis, a man whose sorrow was tempered by knowing exactly where he would find his "unique consolation" (D4015), that is, in the arms of his niece.

Furthermore, Ancien Régime etiquette required that the writer's expression of condolences pass through the filter of social rank. Even given an equal intensity of feeling, condolences to superiors, equals, or inferiors would be cast in different registers.

In their purest form, condolences are an acknowledgement of the sufferings of another, a grieving for another's grief. When the attachment between the bereaved and the letter writer is weak, the actual content of the letter can be largely formulaic since, as Maurice Daumas has pointed out (532), the act of sending the condolences itself is its message. However, when the rela-

tions are strong, the content itself is thrown into relief, and conventional formulae risk being read as empty clichés. Thus, the rhetorical problem becomes persuading the bereaved that one's obligatory profession of suffering for their suffering is not merely perfunctory. The most effective strategy in this regard is to individualize the condolences with personal details that allude to various aspects of the relationships that form the triangle between the deceased, the bereaved, and the letter writer. A second major strategy is to use stylistic features that draw attention to the intensity of the emotions evoked.

To illustrate how Voltaire handles this problem, I will discuss a series of examples, beginning with ones in which Voltaire's attachment is the least intense, and thus where his condolences might be expected to be the most conventional. An example of rather weak attachment to both the deceased and the bereaved is found in Voltaire's condolences to the Russian ambassador in Berlin, Hermann Karl von Keyserlingk, whom Voltaire had just begun to use as an intermediary for information for his history of Russia. Voltaire seems not to have known either the ambassador or his deceased wife:

Je suis sensiblement touché de votre perte et de votre affliction; je ne savais pas lorsque je vous souhaitais toutes les félicités dont vous êtes si digne que vous eussiez essuyé un si grand malheur; je n'ai l'honneur de vous connaître que de réputation, on m'a dit combien vous êtes aimable, et plus vous avez été aimé de Madame votre femme, plus la sensibilité de votre coeur vous rend à plaindre. . . . Ce coeur s'intéresse véritablement à tout ce qui vous regarde, et je voudrais pouvoir vous en donner des preuves. (D7992)

In spite of its protestations of attachment, emphasized by adverbs like *sensiblement* and *véritablement*, the letter is most successful in evoking an emotional response on the part of Voltaire only when he mentions his embarrassment for the pain he might have caused the ambassador by sending a previous letter he had written before being informed of the death.¹⁸ This apology contains praises ("les félicités dont vous êtes si dignes") that serve as pretext for more extended ones of the ambassador's character and his wife's love, even if they are somewhat weakened by the fact that their source is hearsay. The letter remains largely formulaic and expresses a polite concern that most likely would not be put to the test, but this is in keeping with the ambassador's rank and Voltaire's previous lack of relations with him.

The death of infants provides another variant of relatively weak emotional involvement. In most cases, Voltaire had no relationship to the dead child to invoke, and in an era when one child in four died before reaching the age of one, such deaths were often accepted, even by parents, with resigna-

tion.¹⁹ His brief condolences to the journalist and prolific author Samuel Formey upon the death of an infant child seem somewhat callous, the more so since they appear midway in a letter that treats many other topics on a light tone: "Je vous assure que je suis très sensible à la perte que vous avez faite; mais s'il vous reste autant d'enfants que vous avez fait de livres, vous devez avoir une famille de patriarche" (D8245). But since Voltaire is replying to a letter sent by Formey, one can assume that he is merely conforming to the tone set by the father of the lost child. The opening of his condolences in 1755 to Clavel de Brenles, with whom he was on more intimate terms, upon the death of a newborn son devalue the dead infant similarly by referring to the parents' ability to compensate for their loss: "Je partage votre douleur, après avoir partagé votre joie; mais heureux ceux qui peuvent comme vous réparer leurs pertes au plus vite" (D6350).²⁰ However, in this case, Voltaire does not stop with this implicit tribute to the parents' vigor but goes on to express his sympathy and evoke both parents' grief in a more personal vein.

His condolences in 1766 when his secretary Wagnière lost his father offer the case of strong ties between Voltaire and a bereaved person whose grief for the deceased was deep. His letter in this case is as formulaic as the one sent von Keyserlingk; in a sense it is less personal since it does not even contain the praise of the mourner or of the deceased found in the letter to the ambassador. Only the reference to the incompetence of doctors individualizes the condolences: "Mon cher Wagnière, je partage votre douleur. Vous voyez trop combien ce petit livret des médecins est inutile. Nos jours sont comptés et les erreurs des médecins aussi. Il faut se résigner, c'est notre seul partage. Dites, je vous en prie, à toute votre famille combien je m'intéresse à elle. Puisse mon amitié être une de vos consolations" (D13186). However, even though this *billet* adds commonplaces on the inevitability of death to the conventional formulae found in the letter to the ambassador, its telegraphic style conveys a sense of urgency. The letter to his devoted secretary gains in directness and simplicity by omitting the protestations of respect, the reinforcing adverbs, and the polite transitions due a social superior.

Finally, Voltaire's letters to his niece on the occasion of the death of her father in 1737 and of her husband in 1744 illustrate his condolences in a situation in which the bonds between him and the bereaved are the strongest. Instead of individualizing his condolences by dwelling on either his own or his niece's relation with the deceased, Voltaire chooses to stress his concern for the emotional and practical disarray caused by her loss. In both letters, the inevitable conventional phraseology becomes personalized as it is incorporated into a *mise en scène* of Voltaire's participation in her sorrow.

According to Voltaire's account, his niece's letter announcing her father's death provoked his tears and desire to be with her. The letter stands as the witness to this desire; ironically, it is simultaneously a substitute for his presence and an apology for his absence: "Votre lettre m'a fait pleurer ma chère nièce. Je reçois en même temps celle de mon neveu. Je partage votre douleur, je voudrais pouvoir sur le champ partir pour venir mêler mes larmes aux vôtres, et vous offrir mes services" (D1379). His second letter repeats much the same scenario, but this time the tears, a physical sign of a grief beyond language, become more tangible since they stain the paper he writes on: "Ma chère nièce je vous écris en mouillant le papier de mes larmes; si ma déplorable santé le permettait, et si je pouvais partir en poste, je viendrais assurément pleurer avec vous" (D2958). Both letters further dramatize his own participation in her affliction by alluding to the consolation *she* can furnish *him*. In the first instance, Voltaire finds relief in knowing that her father's death will at least bind the three surviving children together more tightly: "Ce qui me console c'est que vous serez tous unis" (D1379). When her husband dies, Voltaire insists that Mme Denis write concerning her plans, "donnez ce soulagement à votre affliction et à la mienne" (D2958).

In this last letter, an accumulation of exclamations, questions, and imperatives highlights Voltaire's frantic, if not completely disinterested, concern for her future: "[Q]ue je partage toutes vos douleurs, et que je crains pour votre santé! Ecrivez-moi, je vous en conjure, ce que vous devenez, et quel parti vous prenez. Votre beau-frère est-il auprès de vous? Quittez au plutôt Lille. Qu'y feriez-vous que de vous consumer de douleur? Allez vivre à Paris où je compte vous embrasser au mois d'octobre." In a letter such as this one that is less motivated by the formal requirements of the *bienséances* than by his intimate feelings such disjointed composition conveys the intensity of his concern.

Voltaire's request that his niece provide him consolations points to the difficulty of giving priority to the intensity of the bereaved's grief while still displaying a personal involvement in the mourning. The risk is that the letter writer's own interests and experiences will intrude into the mourner's grief. Two examples illustrate the difficulty of maintaining this balance.

Voltaire's tendency to use the expression of sympathy for his correspondent's personal tragedy as a springboard to evoke some other loss that preoccupied Voltaire himself at the moment brought him at times close to devaluing the grief of the bereaved. For example, after a paragraph of condolences to d'Alembert on the death of Julie de Lespinasse Voltaire added this reference to the dismissal of Turgot: "Je ne vous parle point dans votre perte particulière de la perte générale que nous avons faite d'un ministre digne de vous aimer, et qui n'était pas assez connu chez les Welches de

Paris. Ce sont à la fois deux grands malheurs auxquels j'espère que vous résisterez" (D20162). In this case, only the *praeteritio* adds an element of tact to his equation of d'Alembert's personal loss with the public one that obsessed Voltaire at that time.

Voltaire's hypochondria represented a constant temptation to substitute his preoccupation with his own health for the grief of the bereaved. Given that his pose of being just one step from the grave is found in the letters of his youth just as in those of *le vieux malade de Ferney*, it is not surprising that he frequently alludes to his ailments in his condolences.²¹ This 1775 letter to Lekain upon the death of his wife shows how Voltaire elides two very different kinds of suffering, the actor's grief and his own physical infirmities: "Votre lettre. . . mon cher ami, m'apprend la perte irréparable que vous avez faite. Je partage votre douleur, elle augmente celles que la nature me fait souffrir dans ma décrépitude. Mon cœur est aussi sensible que mon corps est faible et languissant" (D19709). He succeeds to the extent that his maladies permit him to pose as a fellow sufferer and thus all the more able to empathize with the pain of the bereaved. The risk, however, is that instead of intensifying his identification with his correspondent's sorrow, he will dwell too long on himself.

III

Since all but the briefest condolences include some effort to console the bereaved, Voltaire's letters offer insight into the consolatory themes he found most powerful. In general, the puzzling aspects of Voltaire's use of the commonplaces of consolation stem from the tension between the need to acknowledge, even to flatter, the bereaved's grief, while coaxing him or her away from it. On the one hand, condolences generally are seen as contributing to the mourner's consolation and thus alleviating the grief; yet a common recommendation found in consolatory literature is to humor the grief of the bereaved, to enter into it, lest it be increased.²² To cite the formulation made popular by La Fontaine's fable "Les Obsèques de la lionne," which Voltaire cites twice, the condolences should not excite a "surcroît d'affliction" (D8662, D12293). Thus, he avoids some themes in the letters of condolence that elsewhere he invests with considerable consolatory power.

The most prominent is first found in an early essay that Beuchot placed in the correspondence under the title "Lettre de consolation," but which both Besterman and Pomeau rightly insist is not a letter.²³ This brief essay begins by insisting on the impossibility of calming such a violent passion as grief through words alone. In fact, would-be consolers risk reopening the wound: "d'autres veulent consoler, et ne font qu'exciter de nouvelles larmes"

(M.33.183). The essay presents time as the paramount consoler: “le temps guérit à la fin” (M.33.183). This theme is echoed in *L'Ingénu*, where we are told “le temps adoucit tout” (347), and in *Les Deux Consolés*, which concludes with the dedication of a statue to Time with the inscription, “A CELUI QUI CONSOLE” (144). The usefulness of philosophy is another site of tension. In some letters Voltaire recommends philosophy as a consoler, while in others, he goes to lengths to present it as impotent in the face of grief. These problematic cases become less puzzling when we see that Voltaire is using two groups of topoi that to some extent overlap. A first obligatory series flatters the mourner’s “justes larmes” (D4832) with assurances that they are well founded. The second optional series hints that some consolation may eventually be possible.

The first group includes the frequent allusions to the fragility of life, shame at surviving the deceased, and anger at doctors who could not prevent, if they did not cause, the death. “Life is but a dream full of starts of folly” (D303), “Quel songe que la vie” (D4636), “ce fantôme de la vie” (D6891), “Tout finit et finit bien vite” (D9696) all express this first theme. He comments on his surprise and even shame at outliving the deceased from his earliest letters when he mourns the deaths of youthful companions like Maisons (D431 and D432) or his sister (D302), all the way to the deaths of his aged contemporaries like d’Argental’s brother Pont de Veyle (D19116). Finally, he more than once expresses frustration, if not anger, with the doctors of his day (D432, D13186). All these topoi serve to validate the bereaved’s own grief.

If topoi that suggest that consolation is possible are used in condolences, they should avoid calling into question the legitimacy of the mourner’s grief. It is probably for this reason that Voltaire avoids mention of the consolation of time alluded to in the *contes* and the “Lettre de consolation.” Malherbe’s reproach to Du Périer, “Ta douleur, Du Périer, sera donc éternelle” might well be out of place in a letter of condolence written at the beginning of a bereavement. Time may eventually indeed relieve grief, but to remind the mourner of this fact too early calls into question the mourner’s present sorrow.

Depending on the circumstances Voltaire recommends the *consolatio philosophiae* or points to its impotence in the face of grief. Utterly ineffective are the false consolations proposed by the optimists whose slogans Voltaire mocks in condolences written in the years preceding *Candide*. Their doctrines claimed to offer consolation, but were in fact, in Voltaire’s eyes, only an invitation to despair (cp. D6738), and utterly contradicted by the suffering of the Seven Years War. As he wrote to George Keith, “Let the happy madmen who say that all what is, is well, be confounded. T’is not so indeed

with twenty provinces exhausted and with three hundred thousand men murdered” (D7931, cp. D6907).

When he wants to stress the legitimacy of the bereaved’s grief he suggests that even philosophy of the enlightened sort is useless, or at best only partially consoling. Thus, he writes to d’Argental and Keith upon the deaths of their brothers: “Toutes les réflexions sont vaines, tous les raisonnements sur la nécessité et sur la misère humaine ne sont que des paroles perdues” (D19116). “All your philosophy cannot remove your grief. Philosophy assuages the wound, and leaves the heart wounded” (D7931).

Yet Voltaire does on occasion extol philosophy; he closes his letter to Mme Denis when her husband died with this admonition: “Adieu, du courage, de la philosophie” (D2958). In 1776, writing on the occasion of the death of Julie de Lespinasse, Voltaire suggests that philosophy offered at least some help to d’Alembert: “[L]a philosophie vous a été bien nécessaire. . . Le courage sert à combattre, mais il ne sert pas toujours à rendre heureux” (D20162).

The link in Voltaire’s mind between courage and philosophy becomes clearer in a 1764 letter he wrote to Mme du Deffand summing up how philosophy can aid one to face death: “[L]e courage, la résignation aux lois de la nature, le profond mépris pour toutes les superstitions, le plaisir noble de se sentir d’une autre nature que les sots, l’exercice de la faculté de penser sont des consolations véritables” (D11883). The consoling resignation of philosophy is an acknowledgment that human suffering and death are inevitable parts of Nature’s laws, not a passive acquiescence to the human stupidity and vice that compound this pain. This lucidity generates a sense of superiority that allows the philosophe to face death, or by extension grief, with a courage that is compounded when accompanied by an enlightened scorn for the purported consolations offered by the Church (“les superstitions”). Significantly, this invocation of the power of philosophy in the face of death is not found in a letter of condolences to the marquise, but in one of consolation addressed to her more generalized melancholy, her *malheur d’être né*. Like time, philosophy is not so much completely impotent, as ill placed at the beginning of what has been known since Freud as grief work.

Voltaire often suggests that consolation is close at hand by including some practical advice that serves as a reminder that life can continue. Mme Denis’s financial situation is discussed when both her father (D1379) and husband die. “Songez à vos affaires, songez à vivre,” Voltaire tells her (D2958). When the father, to whom he had recommended repairing the loss of a child with another, lost the next infant, he suggests, “I do not know if Mme de Brenles is as good a nurse as she is an honest woman, or if she has enough milk to nourish a Swiss. I advise her to try to find a robust peasant woman for the

next infant" (D6907). He advises that d'Alembert leave the lodgings he had shared with Julie de Lespinasse (D20162).

Praise of the bereaved is often linked to such recommendations to bear up in the face of affliction. Praise of the deceased, of course, is a conventional component of letters of consolation that Voltaire does not entirely neglect, but he frequently is even more forthcoming in pointing to admirable qualities of the mourner. The marquise d'Argens is praised for her literary talent (D17581); the duchess of Saxe-Gotha for her sensibility (D7212); Frederick as a warrior, poet, and potential peacemaker (D7772).²⁴ In addition to strengthening his ties to the bereaved, Voltaire suggests by such praise that the mourner has the strength of character and resources to survive the loss.

Friendship is the topos to which he returns the most frequently and attributes the most power. In a sense, the reaffirmation of this bond is the core of the expression of sympathy that underlies all condolences. Thus, when his old classmate Fyot de la Marche died in 1768, Voltaire requests that the ties of friendship be passed from father to son: "je vous demande la continuation des bontés de monsieur votre père" (D15100). In the Voltairean universe, the deity is as remote as the sultan in the last chapter of *Candide* who is indifferent to the fate of the mice in the vessel he sends to Egypt. Instead of waiting for divine intervention, humans must depend on each other. "Heureuses les machines qui peuvent s'aider mutuellement!" (D11883) he writes in a letter of consolation to Mme du Deffand. The praise he pays to the duchess of Saxe-Gotha in a letter to Juliana Franziska von Buchwald is also a tribute to the consolatory force of friendship: "Mais la plus grande [consolation] que vous puissiez recevoir est dans le cœur et dans les attentions charmantes de l'auguste princesse, auprès de qui vous vivez. Il n'y a point avec elle de douleur qu'on ne supporte. Elle adoucit toutes les amertumes de la vie" (D11794). For all but the most cool-headed, philosophy can offer the mourner little immediate consolation; only with time can the perspective that it provides reframe the bereaved's loss. On the other hand, even if surviving friends can never completely replace the lost loved one, they can at least relieve some of the pain when it is most intense and later compensate in some measure for the absence.

In conclusion, Vincent Kaufmann's designation of Proust as "un spécialiste de la lettre des condoléances" (137) suggests an interesting contrast with Voltaire. According to Kaufmann, Proust liked little better than writing condolences. In fact, Kaufmann proposes that *A la recherche du temps perdu* be read as a sort of extension of Proust's effort to unite himself to the mourning

of others ("s'associer au deuil d'un autre" [139]) that is most visible in his numerous letters of condolence. "Pourquoi en effet ne pas lire toute la *Recherche* comme une tentative de se représenter ce que les lettres n'arrivent jamais à retenir suffisamment, de se réapproprier une douleur dans ce qu'elle a de fugitif" (147)?

Even if Voltaire did not write letters of condolence with quite the gusto that Kaufmann attributes to Proust, Voltaire seldom found them difficult. By belief and by temperament, an essential component of condolence—sympathy—resonated particularly deeply with him. Like many philosophers of his age, Voltaire saw the capacity to empathize with the sufferings of others as a uniquely human trait, as a form of the *bienveillance* that makes society possible. In the *Traité de métaphysique* he points to the impulse to alleviate the suffering of one's fellows as a factor that distinguishes humans from animals (M.22.222). The rhetorical form this empathy takes is Voltaire's ability to project himself into the grief of the bereaved, not in order to make it his own, as is the case with Proust, but to persuade the mourner of his sympathy. The fundamental reassurance conveyed by condolences is that, despite the fact that the mourner is in some sense diminished by loss, the bond between the bereaved and the letter writer remains unshaken. Voltaire's rhetorical achievement is to transform a gesture of civility into a convincing expression of concern that could on occasion serve a larger purpose.

While Voltaire's condolences exemplify his rhetorical skill, I would not suggest that they underlie his entire *oeuvre*, as Kaufmann does concerning Proust. If anything, I would propose that consolation plays that role for Voltaire. In some sense, the whole corpus of his writings is a consolatory antidote for the suffering caused by evil. Consolation meant resilience, not resignation for him; in fact, Voltaire denounces the *tout est bien* of Pope as a false consolation that leads to fatalism and submission.²⁵ Rather, Voltairean consolation implies a belief that even if evil is inevitable, it is not overwhelming. As Jean Starobinski put it in his essay, "Le fusil à deux coups de Voltaire:" "Il n'y a pas de bien sans mal, ni de mal sans bien, et cela dans des propositions inégales."²⁶ By searching out and cultivating the good that coexists with evil, suffering can at least be alleviated. Condolences and consolation are difficult, fragile enterprises, as the hermit in *Zadig*, Gordon in *L'Ingénu*, or Mambress in *Le Taureau blanc* recognize, but the exhilaration that Voltaire found in struggling against evil made it natural for him to urge others to find courage in philosophy and to seek the compensations of friendship that make losses bearable.

NOTES

1. One of the few studies of the genre is the section on Proust's letters in Vincent Kaufmann, *L'Equivoque épistolaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1990), 137–47.
2. An excellent example of the latter is Jill Anne Kowalik, "The Demise of the Funeral Sermon in Eighteenth-Century Germany: Disturbed Mourning and the Enlightenment's Flight from the Body," in *Impure Reason: Dialectic of Enlightenment in Germany*, ed. W. Daniel Wilson and Robert C. Holub (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), 407–24.
3. This theme has particularly attracted the attention of commentators on the elegy. See for example, Richard Stamelman, *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
4. For example, see the series of recent articles by Raymond Baustert on various themes found in a corpus of letters of consolation dating from 1600 to 1650. One of the latest is "Raison et avant-passion dans les lettres de consolation de 1600 à 1650," *Studi francesi* 34 (1992): 217–37.
5. Any number of characters in the tales profess to be agents of consolation: the Hermit in *Zadig* as well as *Zadig* himself; both Pangloss and Martin in *Candide*, and Gordon in *L'Ingénu*, to cite only the most important. Frédéric Deloffre and Jacques Van den Heuvel in their edition of the *Romans et contes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979) grouped the contes written between 1753 and 1763 under the heading "Déchirement et consolations: les contes de l'exil et du jardin" (lvi–lxi), and Roger Pearson's study of the contes, *The Fables of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), includes a chapter entitled "Small Consolations" (102–109). For a study of Voltaire's letters of consolation to Frederick see Christiane Mervaud, *Voltaire et Frédéric II: une dramaturgie des lumières 1736–1778, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 232 (1985): 278–84. Quotations from the contes are from the Deloffre edition; quotations from the correspondence are from Theodore Besterman's edition in the *Complete Works of Voltaire*, 51 vols. (Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 1968–77); all other quotations from Voltaire's works are from Louis Moland's edition, *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols. (Paris, 1877–85).
6. Maurice Daumas, "Manuels épistolaires et identité sociale (XVIe–XVIIIe siècles)," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 40 (1993): 539.
7. Geneviève Haroche-Bouzinac summarizes the advice found in the manuals concerning letters of consolation and condolence, in *Voltaire dans ses lettres de jeunesse 1711–1733* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992), 108–109.
8. On Voltaire's correspondence with the duchess, see Deidre Dawson, "In Search of the Real Pangloss: the Correspondence of Voltaire with the duchess of Saxe-Gotha," *Yale French Studies* 71 (1986): 93–112.
9. Haroche-Bouzinac, 199. See her repertory of Voltaire's techniques of transition (199–202).
10. For example, D1003 which instructs Thieriot to convey his condolences to d'Argental and Pont de Veyle on the occasion of the death of their mother. Other

examples include D16844 to Henri Rieu on the death of the wife of Paul Gaussen; D13861 to Gabriel Cramer on the death of a relative of Du Pan, and D10020 on the death of Du Pan's son.

11. Special mourning paper is sometimes used on these occasions. See, for example, Juliana Franziska von Buchwald's letter thanking Voltaire for his condolences for the duchess of Saxe-Gotha (D14557).
12. The duchess of Saxe-Gotha repeats her announcement of the death of her daughter's governess when Voltaire doesn't acknowledge with condolences her first mention of the loss (see D7170, D7195, and his excuses and condolences in D7212). Hénault seems to have expected that Voltaire write concerning the death of the comte d'Argenson (D12159).
13. An example might be d'Argental's request for condolences on the occasion of the death of a sister of their mutual friend Thibouville (D20127), a sister whose existence Voltaire professed to be ignorant of (D20146).
14. Theodore Besterman, *Voltaire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 269.
15. For an analysis of this letter see Hugues Micha, *Voltaire d'après sa correspondance avec Madame Denis* (Paris: Nizet, 1972), 15–17. Deidre Dawson identifies the verb *vivre* as the leitmotif of this letter in her study of what she calls Voltaire's epistolary fictions, *Voltaire's Correspondence: An Epistolary Novel* (New York, Lang: 1994), 68.
16. Roger Duchêne, *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d'amour* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1992), 27.
17. Madeleine de Scudéry, *Clélie*, suite de la seconde partie, livre 3 (1662; Geneva: Slatkine, 1973), 4: 1130–31.
18. Due to Voltaire's absence from Paris and the inevitable delays of the mail, such apologies were often necessary, as in D14613.
19. François Lebrun, *Les Hommes et la mort en Anjou* (Paris: Mouton, 1971), 422.
20. Voltaire treated the death of older children with full sympathy; see for example the touching note he wrote to Jacob Vernes on the death of his five year old daughter (D18369). In fact, elsewhere he uses the theme of parents' other children replacing the deceased one in terms of consolation, as when he writes the duchess of Saxe-Gotha on the death of her twenty-one year old son, "Vous voyez madame votre consolation devant vos yeux en voyant votre perte" (D6905).
21. See Haroche-Bouzinac's chapter "La stratégie d'un malade" for an extensive analysis of this theme in the correspondence, 299–319.
22. Haroche-Bouzinac, 108. Roger Chartier also discusses very briefly consolatory topoi in Puget de La Serre's widely used manuel in his article "Des secrétaires pour le peuple?" in *La Correspondance*, ed. Roger Chartier (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 179–80.
23. Best.D.app.17; René Pomeau, *La Religion de Voltaire* (Paris: Nizet, 1969), 123.
24. Of the three known letters of condolence Voltaire wrote to Frederick, this one, written on the occasion of the death of the king's brother August Wilhelm, is the only one extant.

25. His objection to Pope's optimism was precisely that it preached resignation in the name of consolation, leading to fatalism and submission instead of action. To Bertrand he wrote, "L'optimisme est désespérant. C'est une philosophie cruelle sous un nom consolant" (D6738).

26. Jean Starobinski, "Le Fusil à deux coups de Voltaire," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 71 (1966): 290.