

H-France Review Vol. 10 (January 2010), No. 8

Alexander J. Nemeth, *Voltaire's Tormented Soul: A Psychobiographical Inquiry*. Bethlehem, Penn.: Lehigh University Press, 2008. 359 pp. Appendices, bibliography, notes and index. \$80.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-934223-92-8.

Review by Patrick H. Hutton, University of Vermont.

Alexander Nemeth has written a well-developed profile of the personality of the famous *philosophe*, François-Marie Arouet, better known by his pen name Voltaire. Nemeth is a clinical psychologist with a long-standing interest in Voltaire's life and work. He brings the keen eye of an experienced practitioner to his reading on this topic, and he has produced a discerning psychological study.

It takes some scholarly courage to revisit a philosopher as much studied as Voltaire. In his own day, he was the most lionized *philosophe* of the European Enlightenment, and sustained interest in his writings continues to this day. His short novel *Candide* (1759) has been a staple of French literature and humanities courses in American universities throughout the twentieth century. One might argue, however, that research on the meaning of Voltaire's life work quickened during the late 1950s, when Peter Gay advanced the provocative thesis that Voltaire was a hard-headed realist, earnest about his reformist projects but modest in his expectations about what might be accomplished in light of the problems of his day. Gay was taking issue with the highly influential interpretation proposed a generation before by Carl Becker, who had argued that Voltaire and his fellow *philosophes*, while repudiating St. Augustine's *City of God*, unwittingly and naively reconstructed it in an earthly design.[1] In challenging Becker's notion that the Enlightenment was a grand eschatological project, Gay introduced an element of controversy about Voltaire's stance on prospects for progress in the late eighteenth century.[2] Drawing forth a more conflicted Voltaire, troubled by the daunting problems of his age, Gay's revisionism was a sign of his own times in light of the shipwreck of the idea of progress in the world wars of the first half of the twentieth century. During the 1960s, a lively debate ensued about the meaning of Voltaire's *Candide*, with scholars irreconcilably divided over optimistic and pessimistic readings of the novel.[3]

Since the 1960s, scholarly interest in Voltaire has waned, perhaps because the reformist projects that mattered so much to him in the late eighteenth century no longer speak in a pressing way to the problems of our contemporary age. Then, too, so much good scholarship had been published on him that would-be Voltaire scholars may sense that there is little more to say about him. Definitive critical editions of Voltaire's writings, together with a companion collection of commentary initially published by the Institut et Musée Voltaire in Geneva, surpass 400 volumes.[4] Such codification is a sure sign of the marginalization of a topic's research interest, most interpretive issues having already been canvassed in excruciating detail.

Nemeth nonetheless believes that he can offer a fresh perspective on Voltaire's life and work. He notes that he was drawn to the study of Voltaire precisely because of the tensions in his behavior and their apparent contradictions. As a psychologist, he wondered whether he might resolve them in a coherent psychoanalytic interpretation. From a psychological vantage point, Voltaire displayed a mercurial temperament, suggesting that he was beset by inner demons that he was never able to quell and that

handicapped his experience of life. Nemeth presents the extremes to which his behavior ran. He was a brilliant rationalist, but also highly emotional. Ordinarily well-mannered, he could fly into a rage when his ideas were challenged. He took up some celebrated cases of legal injustice in the name of the conscience of humanity. But his friendships were few, his love relationships far from satisfactory, and his personal behavior often erratic. He could be kind and charming, but at other times peevish, even gratuitously cruel. Despite all that has been written about him, Nemeth proposes, his personality remains an enigma. Voltaire is a puzzle waiting to be solved, and Nemeth has undertaken this biography in hope of shedding new light on Voltaire's psychological makeup.

Nemeth builds his narrative through a comprehensive analysis of Voltaire's most significant personal relationships over the course of his life—with his parents, school teachers, friends, lovers, and patrons. Through his commentary on these personal interactions, Nemeth highlights the most poignant traumatic episodes in Voltaire's inner life history, directing the reader's attention to clues about the unconscious motivations that underlay the decisions he made along the way.

Nemeth's study might be characterized as a late example of the kind of popular psychobiography pioneered by Erik Erikson during the 1960s. Erikson's method was grounded in the ego-psychology of life-long personal growth. He concentrated on the psychology of adult life passages: for example, Martin Luther resolved an adolescent identity crisis in the courageous stand of his young adulthood; Mohandas Gandhi traversed the difficult passage of mid-life en route to becoming a leader of remarkable personal power. By comparison, Nemeth's biography to me seems closer to Freud than to Erikson, indeed to Freud's study of the psyche of Leonardo da Vinci, for he shares with Freud the belief that childhood trauma scores the psychic pathways an individual travels for the rest of his life. [5] Voltaire's problems, Nemeth argues, stemmed from his unsatisfactory relationship with his parents. He had a loving mother who doted on him, and showed off his precocious intellect in her salon while he was only a child. But she died when he was only seven. Voltaire was left with a father who was conventional, morally rigid, boorish, and most importantly, emotionally distant from his son. All his life, Nemeth explains, Voltaire yearned for the love denied him in his primary family relationships. Like Leonardo, therefore, Voltaire took his childlike self as the object of his affections and became a lifelong narcissist fending off conscious awareness of his unfulfilled need for intimacy in his personal relationships. His restless, ceaseless activity as traveler, writer, and reformer was a defense mechanism against coming to terms with unresolved issues that troubled his soul. Voltaire may have been a genius, Nemeth allows, but he had no capacity for self analysis and so sought substitute satisfactions in an active public life.

The indifference of the father to his son's need for affection, Nemeth explains, incited his rebellion on many fronts. The young Voltaire spurned his father's plan that he pursue a conventional career and pointedly turned his energies toward creative endeavor that could give expression to those qualities of mind his mother had recognized in him early on. He became a free-thinking, lavish-living libertine as a challenge to the Jansenist piety of his father. His celebrated status notwithstanding, the absence of love in his primary relationships left him with stunted emotional development that crippled him all his life. Nemeth argues that there was as well a social dimension to Voltaire's inner conflicts. His mother was an elegant aristocrat, moving in refined circles of learning and the arts. His father was a dour bourgeois, commonplace in his tastes, trivial in his interests, and vulgar in his modes of self-expression.

Nemeth further contends that Voltaire's unresolved conflicts over his relationship with his parents explain his inability to establish satisfactory love relationships, even with his longtime mistress, Emilie du Châtelet, with whom he lived in a rural idyll in the middle of his life. Wanting more from their intimate relationship, she married someone else in the end. Voltaire, Nemeth argues, was incapable of loving another human being deeply. His most significant erotic adventure was an incestuous relationship with his niece Marie-Louis Denis, who had little to recommend her in terms of beauty, talent, or intellectual interests, and who in the end stole and sold some of his writings. Nemeth suggests that he overlooked all of her foibles in a fantasy about who he wanted her to be.

Voltaire's relationships with male companions, Nemeth continues, were equally bizarre, again suggesting his diminished capacity for emotional connections. For the most part, he shunned close friendships, preferring pen pals. Where he did enter into personal friendships, he chose men who, like his female lovers, were not even remotely his equal. As a narcissist, he needed to play the father figure for those who were weak and in need of protection.

Particularly perceptive is Nemeth's account of Voltaire's relationship with his patron Frederick the Great of Prussia, who invited him to take up residence as court philosopher in Potsdam. Nemeth attributes the mutual attraction to some shared personality traits. Emotionally they led parallel lives. Frederick, too, had a harsh father, who ridiculed his son's love of literature. Frederick was thus torn between his duties as a tough-minded military leader and his tender-minded aesthetic sensibilities. He courted Voltaire by flattering him in their correspondence. Voltaire, the vain narcissist, was easily taken in and accepted Frederick's offer. Voltaire had wanted to see in Frederick a philosopher-king but was soon uncomfortable in the role of courtier. Their mutual admiration quickly dissolved, since Voltaire was obliged to share the limelight with other illustrious intellectuals that Frederick had called to take up residence in his palace. Voltaire could not tolerate any situation in which he did not shine, and left after only a few months. He took revenge on Frederick by publicly ridiculing the scientific ideas of Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis, his rival for Frederick's intellectual affections.

Nemeth points out that, as one so uncritically self-involved, Voltaire could be opportunistic in his quest for fame and fortune. Even his praiseworthy public crusades in the name of justice for Jean Calas, the Sirven family, and the Chevalier de La Barre, were in some measure self-serving in his need for public adulation. Success in the defense of these individuals brought him little personal satisfaction and suggests why he moved from one righteous cause to another. Voltaire may have been enormously effective as social critic, Nemeth concludes. But he was never a happy man.

Nemeth's psychobiography of a historical figure evinces the differences in perspective that psychologists and historians are likely to bring to bear on their subject matter. The role of clinical psychologists is therapeutic, and their need is to find solutions to the problems that trouble their patients. Historians, by contrast, may be more attuned to accepting the vagaries of human experience and to building interpretations that draw out their complexities. While appreciative of the insights gained from the many biographies of Voltaire that he has read, Nemeth believes that in scientific terms he has moved beyond them in his capacity to decode the conflicted elements in Voltaire's unconscious mind and so to solve the problem of the nature of Voltaire's personality. In musing on this proposition, however, one has to ask whether the pathology of Voltaire's "tormented soul" is the essential foundation of our search for the meaning of his work. One wonders whether Voltaire would have written so creatively, prolifically, and with such intense energy had he suffered from fewer inner conflicts.

Nemeth's claim that he offers an alternative to all the scholarship that has gone before is certainly credible. Different disciplines may rely on different methods, interpret evidence differently, and reach different interpretative conclusions. His psychoanalytic study gives us a fresh perspective on Voltaire's personality. But in closing he leads us into an intellectual stratosphere that goes beyond this claim. He follows up his study with two appendices in which he extrapolates from his specific findings on Voltaire to speculate generally about the way the cognitive sciences are taking scholarship to a level of interpretative understanding exceeding anything the humanities have accomplished. He refers to what he characterizes as the "splendid isolation of the humanities." Whereas scientists have broken down disciplinary barriers in mutually beneficial ways, he contends, humanists cling to discipline-specific methods, respecting long-standing barriers to interdisciplinary scholarly exchange. Humanists can offer insight into psychological problems, he maintains, but never resolution. He then offers a litany of the great writers of the Western tradition, from Plutarch to Camus, who merit our respect for their

aesthetic accomplishments, but whose intuitions about the human personality cannot measure up to the standards of modern science.

For researchers in French history, Nemeth's "splendid isolation" observation is likely to be received as startling news. He seems unaware of the impact of *Annales* scholarship in opening history to interdisciplinary perspectives, or the turn of French historians from political to social and cultural topics since the 1960s. More to the point, they have promoted a keen interest in historical psychology. The history of collective mentalities, the venue for so much cutting edge research in French historiography over the past half century, deals directly with habits of mind and conventions of thought on the boundary between biological and psychological responses to life experience.[6]

Historians, too, are likely to have reservations about Nemeth's use of source material. He offers no references to Voltaire's actual writings, though he does present quotations from them lifted from the biographical studies he has examined. From the standpoint of documentation, his study is constructed exclusively out of a survey of secondary sources dealing with Voltaire's life history. Given his objective of providing a profile of personality, there is nothing wrong with this. His reading of the biographies of Voltaire is careful and comprehensive. But he cites them in his documentation without any evaluation of their bias or reliability as sources. One would expect that in interpreting a figure as much studied as Voltaire that a biographer would review and assess the main interpretive approaches in the secondary sources on which he relies. Instead, Nemeth references his sources without critical comment on their merit, as if they were of equivalent evidentiary value. Accordingly, Will and Ariel Durant get as much play as Peter Gay. Nor does he pay much attention to general studies of the culture of the times that might have provided a fuller context for his interpretation. The result is a biography that is clearly written and well-organized, but not all that original. His interpretation confirms what we already know about Voltaire rather than breaking new ground.

Accordingly, Nemeth's study comes to us as if out of the time warp in which psychobiography emerged during the 1960s. In his clarity and detail, his narrative is better than the prototypes written by Erikson and certainly Freud. It nonetheless suffers from the reductionism implicit in the genre as practiced during that era. The historians' interest in psychology remains lively, a perspective that is here to stay. But the most original historians interested in this approach have long since moved into new territory, notably to consider issues of collective psychology in a broader historical context. This was true of Gay, who shared Nemeth's interest in psychoanalytic technique and whose early work was devoted to Voltaire's place in the Enlightenment. But Gay used his study of Voltaire as a springboard to his multi-volume investigation of the collective psychology of the bourgeoisie during the nineteenth century, producing a work of literary elegance and original findings based on extensive reading of primary sources from the era.[7] Others have pioneered new directions in non-psychoanalytic historical psychology.[8]

My quarrel is not with psychoanalysis as historical method, for it need not be reductionist in interpretation. Nemeth's study brought to mind a comparison with Lynn Hunt's "family romance" of the French Revolution. Hunt canvassed late-eighteenth century French novels for insight into the psychodynamics of family relationships. Interestingly, she notes a recurrent theme in the family life of the old regime not unlike that attributed by Nemeth to Voltaire's family: families diminished by the absence of caring fathers. It would take the French Revolution, Hunt argues, to restore psychological harmony to the emerging modern family in which fathers would be expected to play a guiding role in the upbringing of their children.[9] Hunt's interpretation leads one to ask: was the cultural imperative to play the role of "sensitive" father figure an invention of the revolutionary era? Hunt might allow that her interpretation is speculative. But it is enormously stimulating in opening an original perspective on family relationships at the end of the eighteenth century and the cultural consequences brought on by the political upheaval of the French Revolution.

As for Nemeth's argument that the cognitive sciences are now solving problems long unresolved in humanistic research, the issue is whether the scholars' quest for truth favors certainty or wisdom. The two may be of different orders of understanding. The authors of the Western canon to whom Nemeth alludes in his concluding appendix pose questions that do not lend themselves to definitive answers, and historians are wont to revisit them in the exegetical task of drawing forth new meanings in light of changing issues that perplex their present circumstances. We read them as much for the questions they raise as for the answers they provide. This is true of Voltaire's *Candide*, which poses in a demanding way the question of how to account for the unmerited suffering that plagues the human condition. Nemeth's fine psychobiography of Voltaire's character notwithstanding, controversies over the meaning of his life and work may yet present themselves in surprising ways.

NOTES

[1] Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1932).

[2] Peter Gay, "Carl Becker's Heavenly City," in *Carl Becker's Heavenly City Revisited*, ed. by Raymond O. Rockwood (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), 27-51; idem, *The Party of Humanity* (1959; rpt. New York: Norton, 1971), 3-54, 114-32; idem, *Voltaire's Politics* (1959; rpt. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), ix-xvi, 3-32.

[3] Patrick Hutton, "Companionship in Voltaire's *Candide*," in *Novels for Students E-Notes*, ed. David Galens (1973; rpt. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson/Gale, 2006).

[4] Theodore Besterman, ed., *The Complete Works of Voltaire*, 89 vols. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1969-); idem, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 381 + vols. (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1956 -).

[5] Patrick Hutton, "The Psychohistory of Erik Erikson from the Perspective of Collective Mentalities," *Psychohistory Review* 12 (1983), 18-25.

[6] Saul Friedländer, *History and Psychoanalysis; An Inquiry into the Possibilities and Limits of Psychohistory*, trans. Susan Suleiman (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 112-19.

[7] Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984-1998).

[8] Exemplary in this genre are the studies by Alain Corbin on the anxieties of the nineteenth-century French bourgeoisie, "Backstage," in *A History of Private Life*, ed. Michelle Perrot (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 4: 451-667, and by Peter Fritzsche on memory and nostalgia in nineteenth-century German culture, *Stranded in the Present; Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[9] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 17-52.

Patrick H. Hutton
University of Vermont
phutton@uvm.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172