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Síofra Pierse, *Voltaire historiographer: narrative paradigms*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2008. SVEC, 2008: 05. xiii + 283 pp. \$115.00 U.S. (pb); ISBN 978-0729409322.

Review by Reginald McGinnis, University of Arizona.

Voltaire historiographer by Síofra Pierse is presented as the first comprehensive study of Voltaire's historical and historiographical works. In contrast with previous studies concerning Voltaire's histories, the approach adopted by Pierse is literary, focusing particularly on narrative and on Voltaire's theories of writing history. Distinguishing between the historiographer and the historian, and emphasizing the literariness of Voltaire's historical narrative, Pierse seeks to open new perspectives on a topic that is both complex and problematic.

This book is divided into three parts ("Narrative," "Story," "Truth") comprising seven chapters ("The Historiographer," "The Author," "The Reader," "Digressions," "Heroics," "Fact and Fable," "Truth and Doubt"). A summary of Voltaire's historical and historiographical works is provided in an appendix.

In her first chapter, Pierse identifies six principles of Voltaire's historiography: expulsion of fiction from the historical narrative; the importance of distance and retrospective vision; the demand for accurate sources; working the disparities of historical subjects into a coherent narrative; the non-necessity of the historian's being a specialist in every field; the demand for brevity and analysis as opposed to compilation of facts. Discussing the subject-matter and the aims of uses of history, Pierse observes notably that "the historiographer aspires to teach other historians how to write through example, but also to teach the reader how to read" (p. 33).

Inspired by theories of Roland Barthes, E. D. Hirsch and Michel Foucault, the second chapter focuses on authorship, and particularly on the various instances of "je" in Voltaire's historical writings. Complementing the discussion of authorship, the third chapter is devoted to "The Reader." Whereas narrative style is previously said to be "just one of many aspects of the *philosophe's* approach to textual control and influencing the reader" (p. 63), Voltaire's methodology is said here "to draw the reader in ... by using tones of complicity and mutual agreement" (p. 77) in preparing "the reader's trajectory towards enlightenment" (p. 81).

Voltaire's usage of the thematic diatribe and the digressive anecdote are the focus of the following chapter, "Digressions," where Pierse considers a variety of themes, from Voltaire's pacifism to the progress of mankind, colonization and religion. The chapter on "Heroics" is devoted to Voltaire's theory of great men (*grands hommes*) in light of his opinions on warfare, with particular emphasis on Henri IV, Louis XIV and Peter the Great as well as on heroines such as Catherine II. The final two chapters, focusing on questions related to truth, include sections on ancient history, proof and sources, lies, and doubt.

Approaching historical narrative from a literary angle, Pierse's book is frequently insightful, and touches on some of the more compelling and unresolved questions in Voltaire's writings. His greatest innovation, for instance, is said to lay "not in any superlative or definitive historiographical theories, but

rather in the distinctive narrative paradigms that he devises in order to successfully transpose history into story” (p. 9). And while referring to modern discussions of “the author,” Pierse observes that “modern theorists rarely address the complexity of eighteenth-century questions of authorship, censorship, pseudonyms, cunning or anonymity” (p. 43). Though emphasizing the questions of Voltaire’s transposing history into story and of authorship—particularly with respect to his cunning and usage of pseudonyms—Pierse does not fully explore their relationship. Her observations in this area are often illuminating and could have been developed further.

While reassessing the boundaries of history, Pierse at times appears not to question the boundaries of literature. Perhaps it is because the question is a well-worn one that reference, for instance, to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* is made only in passing. If it were only references such as this that were left undeveloped, the consequences would not be so important. But questioning the historical narrative from a literary perspective is a fundamental part of Pierse’s approach, as in the introduction where she writes: “In the past, Voltaire’s historical and historiographical works have been more often subjected to an essentially historical criticism, rather than a reading of the historical narrative as a work of literature, which is how it would have been read in the eighteenth century” (p. 4). While part of what Pierse says here is true, the point she is making is not obvious, and it warrants further explanation. Whether one is reading literature as history or history as literature, it would seem important to clarify what is meant by “literature,” so as to avoid apparent contradictions, for instance, between the preceding statement, that Voltaire’s historical narrative would have been read as a work of literature in the eighteenth century, and the assertion on page 2 that his histories “were initially read as works of history.”

Similarly, the fourth chapter begins with a quotation from Voltaire—“La littérature est un terrain qui produit des poisons comme des plantes salutaires” (p. 95)—on which Pierse bases a series of observations concerning, firstly, works of literature, secondly, works of history and, thirdly, historical works that are read as fiction, without specifying what is at issue. If literature is synonymous with fiction, this is presumably only with respect to the form of the historical narrative, since expelling fiction—e.g., lies and fables—from history is a fundamental principle of Voltaire’s historiography. But in the quotation on which Pierse bases her discussion—referring to an edition of Voltaire’s *Siècle de Louis XIV* annotated by one of his critics, La Beaumelle—the word *littérature* is not used in a modern aesthetic sense, but rather in a broader eighteenth-century sense, as in the chevalier de Jaucourt’s encyclopedia article, *Littérature*, where literature is said to be a “terme général, qui désigne l’érudition, la connoissance des Belles-Lettres & des matieres qui y ont rapport,” and is related, for instance, to “la connoissance de la religion, de la politique, du gouvernement, des lois, des moeurs, des coutumes, des cérémonies, des jeux, des fêtes, des sacrifices & des spectacles de la Grece & de Rome.” Though Pierse is doubtless aware of such distinctions between modern and early-modern definitions of literature, her lack of specificity in certain passages is, at least to this reader, disconcerting. If literature were taken to include subjects such as religion, politics, government, laws, manners, customs, ceremonies and games, etc., that is, the sorts of things that Voltaire makes the focus of his historical writings, for instance in his *Essai sur les moeurs*, then literature could be viewed as broadly synonymous with history. But Pierse’s point is clearly not to collapse the distinction between history and literature, since her project of reading history as literature is dependent on their opposition.

Voltaire’s historical and historiographical corpus, as defined by Pierse, includes thirty-eight works of varying length, ranging from three pages (“Nouveau plan d’une histoire de l’esprit humain”) to over 1,600 pages (*Essai sur les moeurs*). The ease with which Pierse moves back and forth between these works, many of which, as she says, will be unfamiliar to most readers, is one of her strengths. Whether or not one is persuaded by Pierse’s theoretical arguments, this book provides a good synthesis of the works under consideration.

While the reasons for epic poems such as *La Henriade* and *La Pucelle d'Orléans* not being included in Pierse's selection of historical works are clear, one may wonder at the exclusion of other works where historiography takes on a distinctly literary character. Given Pierse's concern with questions of authorship, such as cunning and pseudonyms, and her insistence on Voltaire's usage of narrative paradigms in transposing history into story, it seems that *La Défense de mon oncle*, in particular, would have warranted, if not inclusion in the historical and historiographical corpus, at least some consideration. As John Leigh observes, "in works like *La Défense de mon oncle*, the pseudonym gives birth to a paratextual history, a game of hide-and-seek, seemingly at odds with the serious business of establishing the origins of history."^[1] Similarly, in *Voltaire historiographer*, Pierse points to a contradiction between the enquiry into the origins of history and patterns of deceit in Voltaire's narrative. His statement that "the historian's duty is to tell the truth" is contrasted, for instance, with the manipulation of documents and sources in his *Histoire du parlement de Paris* (p. 225). As noted by Pierse, Voltaire's theory of abolition of error is one that he often fails to respect in practice. And one is left to wonder whether Voltaire is not himself vulnerable to the accusation he directed at modern historians in *Remarques sur l'histoire*, that is, of intentionally deceiving his readers by including fictional details in his histories.

Given the publication of this book by the Voltaire Foundation, it is disappointing for the reader to discover so many typographical errors inside quotations as, for instance, from Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs*: "pour faire de mal" instead of "pour faire le mal" (p. 111); "*Le seul arme*" instead of "*La seule arme*" (p. 115); "nous en faisons pas" instead of "nous ne faisons pas" (p. 116); "*tout à tour*" instead of "*tour à tour*" (p. 190); or, from *La Henriade*, "au milieu du sang et de carnage" instead of "au milieu du sang et du carnage" (p. 143). More significantly, discussing what is referred to as Voltaire's "newly defined textual freedom," Pierse points to an analogy of history as a "self-service store," based on the following quotation: "C'est un grand magasin où vous prendrez ce qui est à votre usage" (p. 223). In the passage Pierse is quoting, Voltaire does not write: "c'est un grand magasin," but "c'est un vaste magasin," rendered in Nugent's 1759 translation into English as "it is like a great magazine," i.e., storehouse. In light of this distinction, comparison of Voltaire's "supermarket trolley" with Bossuet's "shopping trolley" appears unfounded. And, though in no way fundamentally affecting Pierse's arguments, such oversights prove distracting to the reader.

With a quotation from Roland Barthes' *Le Discours de l'histoire*—"Il y a un goût de toute notre civilisation pour l'effet de réel"—rendered by Pierse as "pour l'effet du réel" (p. 181), one has to wonder, though, whether this is not more than a mere oversight, and whether Barthes' theories have been fully assimilated.^[2] While relying on references to Barthes and other twentieth-century critics, Pierse is most persuasive when discussing Voltaire and speaking in her own voice. One senses overall that certain strengths of this book could have been highlighted, and some of its confusions avoided, through more careful editing.

NOTES

[1] John Leigh, *Voltaire: A Sense of History*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004, p. 71.

[2] According to Nancy Freeman Regalado, the confusion of "l'effet de réel" with "l'effet du réel" transforms "the reality effect" into the "impact of the real." "*Effet de réel, Effet du réel: Representation and Reference in Villon's Testament*," *Yale French Studies* 70 (1986):63-77.

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