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Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, vols. 22 of *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*. Edited by Henri Duranton with the assistance of Janet Godden. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2009. lii + 574 pp. Preface, illustrations, notes, chapter chronology, bibliography, and index. £24.24 (hb). ISBN 978-0-7294-0874-5.

Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations*, vols. 23 of *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*. Edited by Nicholas Cronk with the assistance of Janet Godden. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010. lxiv+ 610 pp. Preface, illustrations, notes, chapter chronology, bibliography, and index. £24.99 (hb). ISBN 978-0-7294-0946-9.

Review by Saul Anton, The New School

Voltaire has long been considered a founding figure of modern history, a crucial stepping stone from the Christian universal history of Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History* (1681) to the era of modern history that began in earnest in the nineteenth century with Jules Michelet and Otto von Ranke.[1] In spite of this, history has not been kind to the patriarch of Ferney. His conception of history was contested from nearly the beginning, and not only by adversaries such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the heyday of the French Revolution, his own epigone and biographer, the marquis de Condorcet, denounced his old mentor's vision of history as royalist.[2] Twentieth century scholars such as Ira O. Wade and Norman L. Torrey reclaimed him as a figure of modern secular liberal culture, but Voltaire's status as a historian remained contested. In his 1951 *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Ernst Cassirer recognized Voltaire for setting up "the program followed by all historians of the epoch of Enlightenment," but he credited J. G. Herder as the first thinker to realize the full autonomy and historicity of human culture.[3]

Voltaire's conception of history, Cassirer saw correctly, was caught between a static metaphysical conception of human nature rooted in the latter's deism and a modern, evolutionary vision of human culture.[4] Even René Pomeau, the editor of the 1963 edition of Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* did not think very highly of Voltaire's historical work: "Voltaire does not have a sense of history. He is not given to this attraction for past ages that nineteenth-century historians cultivate" (De fait, Voltaire n'a pas le sens historique. Il n'est pas enclin à cette complaisance pour les âges révolus qui cultivent les historiens du dix-neuvième siècle).[5]

In short, Voltaire possessed a vision of history lacking an adequate theory of *historicity*. Paradoxically—and perhaps precisely for this reason—Voltaire has remained a touchstone for historiographical theory. With the linguistic turn, moreover, his "ironic" conception of history, to use Hayden White's term, came to be seen as displaying—and even flaunting—the literary and narratological foundations and limits of historical discourse.[6] Recently, Pierre Force has argued that Voltaire's ironic judgments and "presentism," that is, his unabashed willingness to make subjective comments and pass judgments that highlight the difference between the

narrative and discursive dimensions of historical discourse, represents its true modernity and reflects its continued relevance as a model of cultural history and hermeneutics.[7]

The publication of volumes two and three of the four-volume *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* as part of the ongoing 150-volume *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* thus comes at an opportune time. Readers will now be able to consider the knotty historiographical and theoretical issues that emerge with Voltaire alongside a far clearer and more concrete picture of the evolution of his style and his historical ideas in the numerous editions of the *Essai* published during his lifetime. Although this new edition breaks little new bibliographical ground—the text has been more or less stable since the 1755 edition—the large editorial group headed by Bruno Bernard, John Renwick, Olivier Ferret and Catherine Volpilhac-Augier have developed a rich and layered editorial apparatus that allows readers to map the evolution of the work in successive editions beginning with the first excerpts published in the *Mercure de France* in 1745. Like many authors of his time, Voltaire was not shy about amending and extending his work with every successive edition. Taking the 1775 *édition encadrée* as their basic text (the last to be published during Voltaire's lifetime and under his supervision), the editors have delineated successive strata of the text, making it easy to follow the evolution of individual chapters and passages. Chapter thirteen, to take a stark example, is devoted to the “Origin of the Power of the Popes” and clearly evolves substantially over the course of three distinct versions between 1753 and 1761. The editors have usefully noted, in this instance, just how much Voltaire appropriated from Claude Fleury's *Histoire ecclésiastique*, the abbé de Vertot's *Origine de la grandeur de la cour de Rome*, and Dom Calmet's *Commentaire littéral*, and how he grew increasingly confident about Fleury's views on the perpetual transformation of the world and a proto-Hegelian master-slave dialectic that brings down the powerful and elevates those in positions of servitude and degradation over the course of the development of this chapter.

Wonderfully, for the reader, the editors themselves make this observation and hundreds of others in brief annotations that precede each chapter and offer a succinct account of its composition and evolution. They include substantial information about Voltaire's sources and the contemporary debates in which he was engaged or chose to ignore, as well as his many factual errors and their sources. All in all, they have constructed, in the guise of an editorial apparatus, a truly impressive and richly genetic account of the *Essai* and of Voltaire's working method as a historian who thoroughly and profoundly engaged with the historical and philosophical discourse of his time that will provide scholars a great deal of food for thought. They have given Voltaire readers, who have for so long had to do their own bibliographical work across a publication and editorial history that may very well be the definition of unwieldy, the ability and opportunity to evaluate relatively easily subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in Voltaire's understanding of particular issues and historical moments. As a result, readers can now understand more clearly the *Essai*'s relation to the work of other important authors such as Montesquieu. They can also consider the role of lesser-known historians who were nevertheless widely read and important in the period. Voltaire's complex relation with Dom Calmet, for instance, comes into relief. At times he relied on Calmet's work, but he was also happy to oppose him when necessary.

This edition of the *Essai* thus represents a serious and substantial scholarly achievement for the editorial team that has put it together, and it will unquestionably become the edition of reference for scholars and more general readers alike for the foreseeable future.

And yet, neither the rich scholarly resources of this edition nor the continuing historiographical interest of the *Essai* ought to obscure what is perhaps the most obvious reason for re-reading it. Along with the *Siècle de Louis XIV*, it is a masterpiece of prose that pioneered many of the foundations of modern historical study and a style of historical discourse that placed the reader's

experience at the center. The *Essai* also represents Voltaire's most sustained attempt to develop a secular world history and a theory of cultural modernity that combine traditional "circular" visions of history with more modern "linear" ones. Given the enormous interest today in global studies, the emergence of modernity in the Enlightenment and its relation to the history of European colonialism, the *Essai* is thus an indispensable case study in the emergence and development of the modern conception of France and Europe as avatars of history itself.

Significantly, what immediately stands out for first-time readers of this text is the crucial role played in this vision of cultural modernity by non-Western societies. Voltaire's theory of culture, it should be recalled, built his conception of "civilization"—and of France in its classical age in particular, as its highest achievement—largely on his conception of China. He saw China as the oldest continuous civilization (at least until he discovered that India was, in fact, an older culture), one dominated by scholars such as himself, the "lettrés," ultimately rested not on the political position of the sovereign, a standard position even today, but rather on its 4000-year old archive and language. In the article "Histoire," he wrote:

What places the Chinese above all other peoples of the world is that neither their laws nor their manners, nor the language that their men of letters speak has changed for four thousand years. (*Ce qui met les Chinois au-dessus de tous les peuples de la terre, c'est que ni leurs lois ni leurs mœurs, ni la langue que parlent chez eux les lettrés, n'ont pas changé depuis environ quatre mille ans.*)^[8]

Unsurprisingly, Voltaire never went to China and derived his understanding exclusively from what was by his time a rich and substantial travel literature about that country. Chinese scholars affirmed a deist philosophy largely compatible with Voltaire's own: "The religion of the men of letters (*lettrés*), once more, is admirable. No superstitions, no absurd legends, no dogmas that insult reason and nature...." (*La religion des lettrés encore une fois est admirable. Point de superstitions, point de légendes absurdes, point de ces dogmes qui insultent à la raison et à la nature...*).^[9]

In other words, Voltaire saw China as a culture in which sovereignty lay ultimately with the caste of philosophers and scholars. This was, in effect, a historian's version of Leibniz's vision of Chinese as the ideal language of philosophy that offered, because it was pictographic, the theoretical possibility of a completely transparent discourse comparable to the universal language of mathematics and the infinitesimal calculus. Obviously, this represented a highly idealized vision of China, yet it is evident that it clearly reflected the concerns of an eighteenth-century French dramatist worried that French classical culture had seen its finest days and was in decline. It reveals to what extent the *Essai* and the ideal of culture that it projected were rooted in the specific historical situation of culture in France in the eighteenth-century. Indeed, the explicit identification of historical rise and fall with linguistic perfection—a comparison that also governed Voltaire's conception of Islamic civilization and, in particular, the perfection of Islamic poetry—is one of the most fascinating critical threads to follow in reading the *Essai*, and one that is far from being exhausted. When foreigners are baffled by the French Academy's insistence on regulating the French language with an iron fist, they should consider that, whether or not it knows it, the Academy is following a script dictated in large part by Voltaire's dream that France would become a millennial culture comparable to China.

The *Essai* thus remains a rich and rewarding work that requires a subtle and stereoscopic approach, one that considers its historical claims alongside its methodological innovations. Its projection of a secular world history, however static, is still today the basis of our own twenty-first century cosmopolitanism. This rich, learned edition promises to become the foundation and

impetus for a renewed exploration of both its distance and its proximity to our own shifting conceptions of cultural history.

NOTES

[1] On the one hand, his historical work has been described as the first to synthesize successfully and transcend the four modes of historical thought that dominated the previous century: the sceptical pyrrhonism that emerged with the development of modern Cartesian rationalism and was perhaps best exemplified by Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire critique et historique* (1697); Bossuet's universal history; the historical fiction represented most successfully, for Voltaire, by the writings of Saint-Réal; and, finally, national histories that remain bound to the tradition of historical compilation written by authors such as P. Daniel, Mézeray, and Paul-Daniel Huet. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), pp. 59-69. For an overview of eighteenth-century historiographical innovation, see Chantal Grell, *Histoire entre érudition et philosophie: essai sur la connaissance historique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993). See also George H. Nadel in "The Philosophy of History Before Historicism," in *History and Theory*, Vol. 3. No. 3 (1964): 291-315; Paul Sakmann, "The Problems of Historical Method and of Philosophy of History in Voltaire," *History and Theory*, 11, (1971): 24-59.

[2] See Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, *Mémoires sur l'instruction publique*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. M. F. Arago, vol. 7. (Paris: 1847-1849), pp. 417-419.

[3] Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 221. See also George H. Nadel in "The Philosophy of History Before Historicism," in *History and Theory*, Vol 3. No. 3 (1964): 291-315; Paul Sakmann, "The Problems of Historical Method and of Philosophy of History in Voltaire," *History and Theory*, 11, (1971): 24-59.

[4] Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 218. Hayden White makes the same point: "It [Herder's thought] is *consciously* [sic] directed to the recovery of the individuality of the event in its particularity, uniqueness, and concreteness in discrete sets of Metaphorical identifications," See *Metahistory*, *op. cit.*, 69-79. This contradiction, moreover, has also been underlined by Michèle Duchet, who has shown that however progressive politically and culturally Voltaire might have been, he espoused a polygenism, that is, a philosophical anthropology that comprehended the diversity of human races and natural world—which he knew from the increasingly numerous and popular colonial accounts of the East and the New World—from the perspective of an underlying metaphysical conception of man and a natural teleology fundamentally incompatible with a truly modern understanding of human historicity. Duchet shows that although there had been a large number of accounts of the Far East and the New World ever since the Renaissance, the early eighteenth century sees the development of a number of important works that are comprehensive in nature, as well as the emergence of compilations of this travel literature that brings it to the attention of philosophers at a moment when empiricism is asserting its rights. Yet Voltaire remains firmly committed to a humanism that ultimately justifies inequality in spite of the critical spirit of his historical work. Michèle Duchet, *Anthropologie et histoire au siècle des lumières*, 283-285. See also Michèle Duchet, *Le Partage des savoirs: discours historique, discours ethnologique*, (Paris: La Découverte, 1985), pp. 53-63.

[5] René Pomeau, "Introduction," *Essai sur les mœurs*, (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1963). p. lviii.

[6] White argues that these limits are rediscovered by Benedetto Croce at the end of the nineteenth century. (*Metahistory*, 426-434) Lionel Gossman, for his part, has convincingly argued that Voltaire's historiographical "irony" holds apart the difference between story and discourse that realist history seeks to bring together, and, in this manner, explicitly presents the subjective dimension and limitations of history as such. See his *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 234-240. For a useful overview of the critical discussion of narrative in theory of history and hermeneutics, see Andrew P. Norman, "Telling it like it was: Historical Narratives on their own Terms," in *History and Theory*, 30 (1991):119-135; Elizabeth Ann Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). Needless to say, this is an enormous subject that I cannot begin to do justice to here.

[7] Pierre Force, "Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History," in *Modern Intellectual History*, 6, 3 (2009): 457-484.

[8] *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, eds. Theodore Besterman, W. H. Barber, Ulla Kölving, Haydn T. Mason, Nicholas Cronk, vol. 33 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-), p. 167.

[9] *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, eds. Theodore Besterman, W. H. Barber, Ulla Kölving, Haydn T. Mason, Nicholas Cronk, vol. 35 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1968-), p. 543.

Saul Anton
Eugene Lang College, The New School
antons@newschool.edu

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