

h-france review

Volume 8

2008

H-France Review Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 16

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission.

ISSN 1553-9172

H-France Review Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 16

Roger Pearson, *Voltaire Almighty: A Life in the Pursuit of Freedom*. London: Bloomsbury, 2005. xxxii + 424 pp. "Dramatis personae," chronology, note on sources, notes, select bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S.; £8.99 UK (cl). ISBN 9780747579571.

Review by Johnson Kent Wright, Arizona State University.

The decision to undertake a new biography of Voltaire cannot have been easy. Never mind the staggering scale of the primary sources involved — the works of poetry, drama, fiction, history, and much else besides, which fill fifty-two volumes in the Moland *Oeuvres complètes*; the 20,000 or so letters Voltaire left behind, together with a commensurate number from correspondents; and a gigantic undergrowth of contemporary description and commentary. But every biographer of Voltaire must also work in the shadow of an immense train of predecessors, on an equally daunting scale. This extends from the lives written by admirers from his own circle, Duvernet (1786) and Condorcet (1790), together with the memoirs of his secretaries, Longchamp, Collini, and Wagnière; to Gustave Desnoiresterres' major nineteenth-century biography that runs to eight volumes (1867-76); and then to the successors of Desnoiresterres, who updated his work punctually each generation down to a recent climax in the great collective enterprise directed by the late René Pomeau, *Voltaire et son temps* (1985-1995). Nor could any writer in English avoid the colorful figure of Theodore Besterman, founder of the Institut Voltaire and *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, to whose own biography (1969, revised in 1970 and 1976) one should add the able study by Haydn Mason (1981) as well as A. J. Ayer's interesting envoi (1986). Nor, for that matter, could any biographer do without an endless number of specialized works, many now classics themselves — Pomeau's own *La Religion de Voltaire* (1956, 1969) and Peter Gay's *Voltaire's Politics* (1959) spring instantly to mind.

This is a biographical library exceeded in size — perhaps — only by that devoted to Hugo. Surprisingly, however, English readers have for some time needed an up-to-date life of Voltaire, distilling the latest scholarship into a compact and accessible form. Roger Pearson's delightful *Voltaire Almighty* more than fits the bill. Pearson makes clear his debt to his predecessors, especially Pomeau and his colleagues. There is no question here of adding to the basic fund of empirical knowledge about Voltaire and his life. The achievement of *Voltaire Almighty* is instead a formal one, the result of Pearson's skill at constructing a compelling narrative out of a well-nigh overwhelming amount of biographical raw material. It is no accident that he comes to the task from the discipline of literary history — Pearson is a seasoned translator and editor and the author of the finest study of Voltaire's *contes philosophiques* in English.[1] For he has chosen to cast the life of his subject in the form of one of the latter, furnishing it with chapter titles à la *Candide* or *L'Ingénu* [chapter 4: "Back to the Bastille (1728-1726: *Wherein Arouet becomes Voltaire and is beaten up all the same*"); or chapter 12: "Death of a Lover (1748-1749): *What became of Emilie and her soul (if she had one)*"], and recounting its events in a prose that deliberately

mimics the rhythm, voice, and liveliness of Voltaire's own *contes*. Obviously, mimesis of this kind is neither possible nor desirable for every biographer of a writer. But it is a particularly happy choice for Voltaire, whose life, as everybody knows, was hardly less *rocambolésque* than those of many of his fictional heroes.

Pearson's take on that life is admirably captured in his title and subtitle. The former conveys the wonderful irony of Voltaire's triumph, turning the tables on the deity by achieving his own kind of omnipotence; the latter singles out what was doubtless the central subjective value for Voltaire, in the circular trajectory that took him from the Ile de la Cité, to the years of exile and wandering, then to the safe haven of Ferney, and from there to his final curtain call in Paris. What were the sources of Voltaire's liberating power? These were two, Pearson suggests, the result of his double patrimony: "His probable biological father was a versifier" — Pearson accepts, with Voltaire himself, the likely paternity of Guérin de Rochebrune — "and his official father a lawyer. His godfather taught him poetry, and his family lived in the middle of the Paris *parlement*. He would become the greatest French dramatist and epic poet of his century, and he would later be acclaimed as the first human-rights campaigner of the modern era. Literature and law were the systole and diastole of his vitality, the positive and negative of his seemingly limitless energy, as he strove in language and action to flout and reform the status quo" (p. 31). At first, these gifts pulled in different directions. Voltaire's precocious skill at verse ruined Arouet père's plans for a legal career, paving the way for the triumphs of *Oedipe* and *La Henriade*; the same talent, aimed at lesser targets, played a central role in Voltaire's two stints in the Bastille and exile from Paris. Pearson never loses sight of the centrality of Voltaire's identity as a poet and playwright, across the next six decades, while also supplying a fine account of the extension of his literary gifts to prose — the great historical works that started in the 1730s, the works of popular philosophy and science, and then the *contes philosophiques* themselves. The law, however, was never far behind — often just a few steps, in fact. But once Voltaire landed safely at Ferney and declared its independence, he could in effect then develop the other side of his paternal inheritance, turning the legal system of old regime France against itself. Starting with the Calas affair in 1762, Voltaire devoted a vast amount of intellectual energy and financial resources over the next two decades to seven cases of injustice at the hands of state and/or church. Pearson naturally gives shorter shrift to these than Ian Davidson was able to do in his wonderful study, published a year earlier.[2] But his account of these campaigns, which fused the powers of law and literature to tremendous effect, remains riveting.

Voltaire's success in this regard had a condition of possibility, of course: his considerable private wealth. One of the great merits, and pleasures, of Pearson's biography is the consistent attention he devotes to Voltaire's finances. There is a lot to work with here, much of it *entre coulisses*, and with good reason. This is a person, after all, who managed to saddle himself with a considerable debt — 500 *livres*, borrowed from a woman of dubious reputation — long before he got out of the Collège Louis-le-Grand. Episodes of that kind pitched Voltaire into a long and bitter battle with his father for his share of the family goods. By the time that he finally came into possession of his inheritance in 1730, however, Voltaire had made his own fortune. Having skirted with criminality in England — apparently barely escaping charges of embezzlement and forgery — Voltaire joined, on his return, in a scheme of spectacular grifting, rigging a royal lottery such that he came away with half a million *livres*, to which his father's estate added another 100,000 or so. This double "bonanza," as Pearson charmingly calls it, formed the kernel of a carefully superintended portfolio, which financed an opulent style of life thereafter, as well as

making possible the exercise of his two more public "powers." By the time he got to Les Délices and Ferney, Voltaire had begun the process of turning cash into lucrative lifetime annuities, chiefly by making loans to petty German princes.

As for the *other* great zone of private activity — here, too, Voltaire came in for more than his share of agony and ecstasy. In an affecting biographical reading of *Candide*, David Wootton has laid great stress on Voltaire's complaint — which famously enlivened a dinner party at Alexander Pope's — about having been sexually abused by his Jesuit teachers.[3] Pearson seems to hold this, as well as tales about a liaison with Frederick II, at arm's length. But he provides a moving account of a fantastic heterosexual love life, from the imbroglio with "Pimpette" in 1713 to rumors about Judith de Saussure some sixty years later. Naturally, pride of place goes to two relationships above all, both very successful in their different ways, despite their disorderly appearance. Pearson's recounting of the years with his "Pompon-Newton," as Voltaire apparently called Emilie du Châtelet, is in many ways the centerpiece of the book and skirts the edge of sentimentality — "They felt the earth move, and then they debated how best to measure its meridians" — without succumbing (p. 111). But his narrative of the ups and downs with Madame Denis, niece and "wife," is hardly less affecting, displaying the same combination of insight, tact, and sympathy.

Literature, law, money, and love: these topics form a kind of structural combinatory that dominates Pearson's analysis of Voltaire's life. But a dozen other topics come and go in the course of the narrative, covered with hardly less biographical panache. Pearson has a knack for refreshing even the most moth-eaten anecdotes about his subject. What reader could fail to be stirred by his description of Voltaire sitting in disguise at the Procope after the premiere of *Sémiramis*, listening for criticisms with an eye to revisions? Or, having fallen at the bottom of the stairs leading from Emilie's deathbed, accosting Saint-Lambert, who had stooped to help him up, with the teary words, "In God's name, what possessed you to give her a child?" Or attending Easter mass and even taking communion in the new church he had built for the inhabitants of Ferney? All of this is recounted with an energy and effervescence that add a generous measure of delight to the instruction. There are lapses here and there, when Pearson's informality shoots past anything one could imagine in Voltaire himself. In addition, a more aggressive editor might have eliminated with no great loss about half the sentence fragments for which he has a peculiar liking ["Though he endlessly complained of his health and frequently took to his bed, there was rarely anything seriously wrong with him. As his doctor kept telling him. Except for his digestive system. Diet was a constant problem..." (p. 387)]. But a foible of that kind is a small price to pay for a biography that manages so unerringly to reproduce the virtues of its object.

NOTES

[1] See Roger Pearson, *The Fables of Reason: A Study of Voltaire's "Contes philosophiques"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Pearson is also the author of a wonderful study of Stendhal's major novels, *Stendhal's Violin: A Novelist and his Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[2] Ian Davidson, *Voltaire in Exile: The Last Years, 1753-78* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

[3] See David Wootton, "Unhappy Voltaire, or 'I Shall Never Get Over It as Long as I Live,'" *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000): 141-59, as well as his "Introduction" to Voltaire, *Candide and Related Texts* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2000).

Johnson Kent Wright
Arizona State University
Kent.Wright@asu.edu