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Christopher Cave and Simon Davies, eds., *Les vies de Voltaire: discours et représentations biographiques, XVIIIe-XXIe siècles*. Oxford, UK: Voltaire Foundation, 2008. x + 478 pp, 1 ill. Notes, index. £75/€108/\$155. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7294-0929-2.

Reviewed by Geoffrey Turnovsky, University of Washington

As the pluralized title suggests, this recent SVEC volume offers, in the course of 28 essays by a impressive spectrum of scholars, an appropriately multi-faceted engagement with an elusive and complex topic. It suggests, first off, that representations of Voltaire's "lives" navigate between the endlessly recycled cliché – Voltaire as an "apôtre de la tolérance" or "en quête de la liberté" (p.50) – and the unverifiable, contested variant. Voltaire's early years are a fecund source of the latter, as Anne-Marie Mercier Faivre observes in an analysis of how biographers have turned the murkiness of this period to discrepant and contradictory polemical ends. Yet out of variety comes unanimity. Henri Duranton's chapter on the famous *bastonnade* administered to Voltaire by the *laquais* of the Chevalier de Rohan in 1725 shows how the very uncertainty of what actually transpired that night – manifest in the inconsistency across different accounts regarding key details (what Voltaire said; where the encounter took place) – has in the aggregate called for recourse to conventional, comedic tropes: while in truth no source definitively identifies Voltaire's aggressors, who else but his *laquais* would an outraged aristocrat have sent to put an impudent poet in his place?

The confusion around the *bastonnade* partly has its roots in Voltaire's complete silence on the episode. And Duranton usefully reminds us that biographico-literary conventions have dictated not only the core elements of the story but also our sense of its pivotal role in Voltaire's life, a view that is pointedly not reflected anywhere in Voltaire's own writing (in reality, he'd made arrangements to leave for England before the event; thus Duranton points out, the Rohan affair, "loin de hâter son départ, comme on l'avait cru, l'a retardé de plusieurs mois" (p.104)). More generally, though, if there is a lack of transparency, it is because Voltaire willfully muddied the waters; as a result, he is more than anyone responsible for establishing the pattern by which trope and myth have come to fill in the gaps. The essays in Cave and Davies' collection are divided into five sections. Section three presents a sequence of essays on "Autobiographies" that explore Voltaire's self-mythologization and its tremendous influence. Christian Mervaud gauges "l'emprise de l'optique voltairienne" on biographers through the ages in a chapter on the posthumous *Mémoires pour servir à la vie de Voltaire, écrits par lui-même*, focusing on Voltaire's telling of one of its central events, his detention at Frankfurt as he left Prussia in 1753. Béatrice Bomel-Rainelli develops an intriguing analysis of how Voltaire has managed to shape, stylistically and thematically, "biographies scolaires." In their emphasis on lessons learned by experience (eg. the *bastonnade* or the debacle at Potsdam), these pedagogical portraits replicate the structure of *romans philosophiques*: "Voltaire semble, à lire les manuels, avoir créé la forme même de sa biographie" (p.417).

*Les vies de Voltaire* certainly doesn't claim to discover this influence, but effectively explores how anxiety of it has deeply marked the biographical tradition. Muriel Cattoor recalls Grimm's description of Voltaire's characteristic restlessness before sculptors and painters – "il était pendant ce temps-là comme un enfant, ne pouvant se tenir tranquille un instant" (128) – which, citing Pomeau, she views as emblematic of his protean, "insaisissable" nature: "Constamment Voltaire tend à se dérober derrière ses

rôles et ses masques. Au biographe de découvrir sous les déguisements le visage vrai, ou du moins le visage le plus vrai" (125). The afterthought is the crux of the matter, for Voltaire biographers don't just define their task as an effort to capture the "true" Voltaire concealed behind the "roles and masks," but at the same time, in terms of the futility of the effort, and the impossibility of doing more, in the end, than capture a Voltaire who at best only appears to be the true one. In confronting this core dynamic of approximation, the volume offers Voltaire as a critical and distinct case-study.

Pomeau typifies a modern biographical vision that is not really the focus of the collection; the last section on "Vies de Voltaire au vingtième siècle" comprises only five chapters, of which two (by Denis Reynaud and Hervé Loichemol) address cinematic and theatrical representations notable more for their paucity than their richness. The volume instead highlights an earlier, rowdier and more polemical tradition against which the later one, in its will to scholarly precision and documentation, reacts. However, the essays suggest that there is more continuity than we might expect. For they show that even the most aggressively polemical portraits of Voltaire were hardly less driven by the goal of unveiling the "true face of Voltaire" than Pomeau would be. Olivier Ferret explores part of this logic in a chapter on Sabatier de Castres' hostile late 18<sup>th</sup>-century expositions of Voltaire's "vie polémique." In other words, shaped by bitter combat and quarrels, the "truth" of Voltaire's life simply *was* endless argument; his career was constructed in attacks and parries. Yet the essays also show just how polemical the notion of a "true" Voltaire has always been; not only because the impossibility of fully knowing Voltaire will cause any version to be biased in some way. But because the idea that there *is* a "true Voltaire" to unveil has, from the beginning, been inseparable from the polemics of the Enlightenment.

"J'écris pour agir," Voltaire wrote in an April 1767 letter to the Genevan pastor, Jacob Vernes, referring to his efforts on behalf Paul-Pierre Sirven, who, like Calas before him, stood accused on dubious religiously motivated grounds, of murdering his child. Voltaire articulated the centrality to at least his Enlightenment project of the convergence of thought and life, and thereby endowed Voltairean biography with a value that would sharply inflect its history. The "true Voltaire" – whether defender of the persecuted, self-serving courtier, or vicious polemicist – gained currency as a concept, and a legitimizing principle for a whole genre of printed texts and plays, inasmuch as it validated or discredited the philosophical movement of which Voltaire was the undisputed leader. Indeed, Voltaire's status as such is a universal given and a starting point for Voltairean biography. The "official" trend was towards validation – constructing the image of "Voltaire" as the ultimate ratification of the ideas and movement that he represented. Otto Selles, Rémy Landy, Huguette Krief and Yves Citton contribute essays on the "éloges" which appeared after Voltaire's death, as well as during the Revolution when a patriotic Voltaire, hero of all French people, was celebrated. The volume conveys forcefully how heavily this hagiographical tradition has weighed, forging and circulating many of the *lieux-communs* that would become standard fare in the writing of Voltaire's "lives."

Yet the volume also suggests that the *éloge* model was, in fact, what most biographers self-consciously worked against, including, as Charles Couttel argues, those like Condorcet who furnished "positive" accounts. Of course, the anti-hagiographical approach is most obvious in unfriendly portraits, which, given the collection's emphasis on the polemical period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> into the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, are amply covered here. Explored in a series of chapters by Raymond Trousson, Jean-Noël Pascal, and Valérie André on "Les grandes biographies," the texts from this period tend more systematically to conceive the "true" Voltaire as a markedly devalorized figure, either a hypocrite whose life sharply contradicted the values for which he advocated, or a depraved atheist incarnating the Enlightenment's irreligion and disrespect. Such accounts emphasize Voltaire's "private life" along with the anecdote, which, in contrast with the *éloge*, offers a glimpse backstage, at a non-performing, unmasked Voltaire as he "really was." Nicholas Cronk highlights "la tentation, voire la tyrannie de l'anecdote" (182), focusing on the Cirey years as observed, recorded, and published – for the first time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in Françoise de Graffigny's correspondence and in the *Mémoires* of Voltaire's *valet de chambre* Sébastien

Longchamp. Cronk and Dinah Ribard, in her chapter on Voltaire's secretaries, examine the authority within the biographical tradition of those who provided many of the anecdotes for posterity, that is, eye-witnesses. Both suggest that this authority was less clear-cut than we assume, for the credibility of the eye-witness did not inhere in the self-evident transparency of his or her testimony. Instead, it was constructed in a dynamic that advanced an agenda – Cronk points to Decroix's efforts to offer a more pious image of Voltaire to a Restoration-era public; Ribard highlights the efforts of the secretaries to promote their own careers as *gens de lettres* – by obfuscating it behind an image of “real life.”

If the Voltairean biographical tradition covered in the collection is deeply shaped by post-Enlightenment polemics (and with the ceaseless effort to downplay any polemical intent in the claim to truth-value), it is also significantly driven by commercial interests. In this respect, Decroix's Longchamp edition speaks to a fascinating paradox. The cultural reaction against Voltaire was, in part, fuelled by an explosion in demand for his works and for accounts of his life, especially in the 1820s, at the height of the Romantic backlash when the book trade was nonetheless flooded with new editions of the works of the great Enlightenment writers. Didier Masseur hints in his chapter on the Marquis de Luchet's *Histoire littéraire de M. de Voltaire*, published in 1780 in an effort to capitalize on the publicity surrounding Voltaire's death, that it was precisely the most commercialized accounts which were the most balanced. Luchet subordinated partisanship to the maximization of sales: “La volonté de conquérir un marché, en saisissant l'opportunité d'un moment culturel, conduit finalement Luchet a des positions d'équilibriste,” writes Masseur (334). Moreover, if Luchet was able to move away from the *éloge* model by incorporating Voltaire's private life into his portrait, it was less to advance a pro- or anti-Enlightenment crusade than to cater to the curiosity of a public willing to pay for the juicy details. Anne-Sophie Barrovecchio similarly explores the efforts of a minor *littérateur*, Jean-Henri Marchand, to enter this market for Voltaire with a series of satirical 1770s brochures written in the *philosophe's* voice (above all, his *Testament Politique de M. de V\*\*\*\**, published in Geneva). Marchand's engagement with Voltaire's life testifies to an experience of anonymity lived in the shadow of Voltaire's celebrity. Though, interestingly enough given recent attention paid to the topic, especially in studies on Rousseau [1], celebrity and “celebrity culture” seem, with a few exceptions (Barrovecchio, Citton), not to be an overly important optic in this volume, certainly when compared with the ever-present framework of Enlightenment polemics.

I wish it were possible to address more fully all 28 chapters in this rich and engaging volume, which will be of interest to Voltaire scholars and those interested in biography. Jean Sgard and Daniel Roche contribute essays in an opening section on “Problématiques.” Along with the chapters discussed above, *Les vies de Voltaire* offers insightful and innovative contributions by Christophe Cave on Voltaire's correspondence as autobiography, by Simon Davies on the autobiographical dimensions of *Histoire de Charles XII*, by Jean Goldzink on comedy and autobiography, by Graham Gargett on Oliver Goldsmith's 1759–60 *Mémoires de M. de Voltaire*, by Haydn Mason on Nancy Mitford, and, of course, by J. Patrick Lee, who presents a fascinating and surprising examination of appropriations of Voltaire's voice in 20<sup>th</sup>-century dialogues. Poignantly, the volume is dedicated to Lee's memory.

Christopher Cave, “Introduction”

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[1] See, for instance, Antoine Lilti, "The Writing of Paranoia: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Paradoxes of Celebrity," *Representations* 103, no. 1 (summer 08): 53-83, Ourida Mostefai. "The Author as Celebrity and Outcast: Authorship and Autobiography in Rousseau," in *Approaches to Teaching Rousseau's Confessions and Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, ed. John O'Neal and Ourida Mostefai (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003), 68-72; and Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," in *The Great Cat Massacre, and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 215-256.

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