Voltaire: A History That Never Moved Essay, Research Paper

Voltaire: A history that never moved

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Why should history move? Consider it a frozen tableau, an unchanging picture. There are only emotions rather than causation. Even if there is historical causation, Voltaire (Francois Marie Arouet) (1694-1778) wrote in his works History of Charles XII, History of Louis XIV and his Essai sur les Moeurs et l’Esprit des Nations against its usefulness. This is largely because Voltaire, through his desire to write a history freed from a chronology, merely reshaped it by means of adventure rather than exegesis. Rather than explaining causes, he merged them in forms that could not be said to be true causes of change. Voltaire’s history so contended is not a view of progress, but in its method of stillness in history, the inevitable stasis of change that was no change.

It is true that Voltaire used movements, ideas, individuals and nations to develop history. He tried to define allegorically the chronological morass of history, by looking at the motivation behind history. But by attempting to do so, Voltaire wrote of a sequestered history disunited by the exploits of unique individuals and unique historical phenomena. Evolution is not linked but disparate. Trapped by a France that produced Descartes, a figure disinterested of history, and Melebrance’s ahistorical stance, Voltaire is reduced to a teller of fables. Along with that it is a France that loves history as fiction rather than history as fact. “The fear of the Bastille and a hope for government pensions had a dismal effect on the historian’s taste for truth and objectivity.”

Well and good ? the fable teller was out and ready to produce. But did the fables reveal a teleological purpose? Voltaire must have reasoned that progress was possible ? there must have been progress from a maleficent God who destroyed Lisbon to a disinterested God who had deferred his authority to destroy to an amoral nature. Without some definitive progress the pleasantries of the present age would not have been possible. There would be no Turgot, no Condorcet, no Diderot.

What is being submitted is that it was never clear how that resulted. Was it Idea? Was it Spirit? Not free will, since free will is constrained. Not God who lies too high in the sky. Voltaire mentions the figures from the past, Suleiman the Magnificent for instance or Charles XII, he mentions the Oriental perspectives brilliantly, but he does not link them definitively. Like Umberto Eco?s William of Baskerville, he sees signs without a connection. He displays a delight for exoticism. He is far too interested in his present, where modernity is undertaking a dynamic revolution through literature.

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Voltaire’s history begins where Gibbons account of it ends. Thus Voltaire’s history is a modern history made by modern men. For Voltaire truth resides in the spontaneous brilliance of men, manners of nations, spirits of endeavour. It is a world brilliantly illuminated by such geniuses as Newton, a world that Voltaire nourishes to an extreme. This is one paradox of the intellectual thought of Voltaire. Suddenly the universe seems full of men who shaped history. To this end his history does assume some structural definition ? history cannot be still as great men are never quiet. He writes of Louis XIV as if he shaped Europe.

But Voltaire?s galaxy is one of non-related phenomena, almost in the version of Hume’s self-scepticism. There is minimal causation. “I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception,” wrote Hume. Thus this history is a perspective isolated which can never observe anything but itself. Louis XIV with the Bourbons is by itself. But once one is dead that is the end of the matter. No thought, no perception, no love, no pleasure, and no history. The world is merely one of confused phenomena. “Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time”. These impressions exist independently, and can exist separately from each other. There is no whole, no organic definition of the world, no true totality. This is essential Voltaire, phrased through Hume’s comprehension of mind itself with regards to his history. Hume’s analysis makes mind irrelevant. Voltaire’s reasoning made history impossibly confused, though brilliantly illuminated.

Here Voltaire has to reason with an extraordinary paradigm -the notion of causation in a world that runs in accordance with divine dictates. Whilst anti-clerical, Voltaire cannot help but revere the Newtonian religious adoration of the physical laws of the universe that he is a part. At work here was an iconoclasm against the causal God. Voltaire’s Elements partly worshipped the divinity of Space and the enormity of God. In this scheme of the Universe, time is eternal, space only relevant in filling time. There is ultimately no problem for Voltaire if what he was illustrating was the distance of God from the acts of history and the acts that influenced human life and human creation. By emphasising the enormity of infinite space and time, one emphasises the untouched distance to the highest pillars of divinity. God is simply one with the Universe, a natural phenomenon of nature itself. Thus history cannot be explained in the Augustinian sense of God revealing himself, nor can it even be explained as the Hegelian self-revealing of the Absolute. God is quite simply an incoherent part of history that began with him but also ceased with his creation. In effect history never existed and God never intervened after creation.

Voltaire’s agnostic tendency renders his history inquisitive but distant, factual, but inconclusive. It was as if history, like matter has its own secrets, almost impossibly impenetrable, a case he exhibited, imitating Hesiod, in his Philosophical Dictionary: “O man! God has given thee understanding to guide thee aright, and not to penetrate into the essence of things He has created”.

Voltaire reduces history, a hidden element, the living unknown, to an anecdotal picture of folly, lunacy and criminality. But history is not after all merely a “tableau of crimes and misfortunes”. There must be some other basis of reason. He uses the beauty of theatrical writing to symbolically portray his intellectual insights, through mind, and perhaps through the heart itself. Reading Voltaire is reading the expression of emotion itself, but an emotion that is guided by the versatile mind of the author. Such a theme could be found in the Siecle de Louis XIV. But the Voltairean emotion is the desire to see no single nation glorified in zealous patriotic idolatry, no nation seen as exceptional. History, whilst confused, is nonetheless a canvass which every nation has left its mark upon positively. The task for Voltaire, is a task to reason history not in terms of the vulgarity of human misfortune, but in terms of some equitable inquiry:

I would like to discover what human society was like, how people lived in the intimacy of the family, and what arts were cultivated, rather than repeat the story of so many misfortunes and military combats – the dreary subject matter of history and the common currency of human perversity.

The history that results from this method is one typical of the Enlightenment. But rather than confronting the institutions of the day, as he did in his other letters and publications, Voltaire explored history as a sociological phenomenon that cultivates within itself – spirits, manners and institutions. He was depressed by history as perversity and therefore focused on its cultural variations that lead to creation rather than destruction. Thus, by featuring a medium as art, we focus on a medium that is difficult to reason in terms of progress. Art changes, but this does not confer upon it the mobility of progress. Likewise with manners and mores. Whilst Monstesquieu can say that some ages were crude and rude, whilst others were civil and humane, Voltaire whether consciously or not used a changing medium without the discernible mark of progress: manners.

Despite his refusal to expressly recognise some teleological method, he inadvertently classifies ages as rude and crude in their outlook and their mores. He thus merges a teleological perspective with a non-teleological method. Thus Voltaire the historian becomes the figure we know best, Voltaire the idealist. Historical change does not become external, but idealised by mind – the intellectual conditions of mind that are affected by the external phenomena of life. By his reasoning, there must be some moral basis to life, some means of spurring the lives and minds of men. Thus there are some grounds for reason and some prospect for its progress, a progress that would alleviate the onerous tendencies of man to be destructive rather than creative, dogmatic rather than rational.

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How are we to ascertain what is important in history? By a method of selection, one has to eliminate the relevant from the needless. A monarch’s every detail is hardly enjoyable. “Everything which one reports must be true but I believe that one must suppress many useless and odious details”. Annalists should keep records available at shortest notice for the historian to find. But one is free to import some subjective inferences in the material of presentation. Thus a tableau had to be gentle to sensibilities and sensible to the conscience. Oppressive turgidity was inexcusable, whilst extensive anecdotes were far more favourable. But never reveal all to the reader ? even progress. History should be seductive, delivered in the manner of a seductress. “The way to be a bore is to say everything”.

Yet the method does not render history a coherent whole. Voltaire does not labour the point of a progressive essence behind history, other than to realise that the age he lives in is a remarkable age that must have derived from progression. This is the seminal paradox. Yet his history remains a chronology, not a progression. By no means could one assert that there are no forces that move history in Voltaire’s eyes. They might lie in masses, though he does not trust revolution since revolution done in the name of reason is often executed by those least learned in reason itself. But because Voltaire relies on such media as the arts and manners, the question of a movement in history becomes difficult. Ambition and cruelty, heroism and neroism underscore progress. So the question is, do manners evolve, and once that is determined, Voltaire’s history is a progressive one. Otherwise it lies like a beautiful still picture of the march of man’s mind, but the march of man’s mind on the same canvass.

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Voltaire’s greatest demonstration of historical adventure is found in the Essai sur les Moeurs et l’Esprit des Nations (1756). Its greatness is not based on the complete rigidity of empirical findings, but breathtaking insight and a touch of the storyteller. But most importantly, it is the first truly monumental step in the history of the West in compiling a work that was truly universal in its outlook, universal not because it was universally European, but universally global. Two chapters are devoted to China, two to India, one to Persia, two to the Arabs, and a token mentioning of the Jews. Further more history assumes some form of the scientific. A historian is only as good as his materials. It was within these sources that Voltaire sought to enliven the mind, not because he necessarily refuted an empirical method, but because he refuted a distinct interpretation of history from without. He was the historian from within, the writer of an organic work depicting inorganic phenomena.

The concept of Voltaire’s peculiarly static basis of history partly lies in the institution of laws itself along with arts, manners and movements. Governments make laws so they limit freedom to shape our own histories. And there is religion itself. “True conquerors are those who know how to make laws. Their power is stable; others are torrents which pass,” he declares. The significance of this is that Voltairean history is a history delighted by the exploits of individuals, but also by the exploits of dynasties. The Chinese Empire, by being so pervasive for centuries, outshone the virtues of Carolingian France. His history is egalitarian. Yet the individual’s action is never coherent in a teleological sense, in the sense that there is some deterministic setting that his actions occur in. The Voltairean emphasis on the colossal magnitude of empire and time seeks merely to entrench the notion of a history that is not linked, or enjoined by a purpose other than the purpose of existence itself. “Until the Catholic and Romantic reaction of the nineteenth century, it was Voltaire who furnished cultivated minds with their concept of the march of civilisation”. Space marches, but civilization merely moves.

Ultimately the motivations for change in history have to occur by some human attitude. But Voltaire relies on virtue and vice as denominators of change. All men have honour for instance. This does not ever change. But virtue is rare amongst governments. Then Voltaire, as he did in his History of Louis XIV, emphasises the credentials of an individual in an age, only to revert to an emphasis on aggregate movements in the spirits of the age in his Essai sur les moeurs. But Voltaire’s history is not a hero’s history. Voltaire’s iconoclasm was too advanced for that. Yet he makes a concession that individuals do have their place, just as nations have their place. In fact everything has a place in the Voltaire’s paradise. And they all remain basking in a glorious inertia.

Arguably his greatest work Candide where the adventures of Candid and Professor Pangloss take centre stage, history’s futile adventures are as futile as the exploits of Candide. When the anticlimactic conclusion arrives in its humble form, the master and student engage in a conversation that perfects the model of Voltairean history:

Pangloss sometimes said to Candide: There is a concatenation of events in this best of all possible worlds: for if you had not been kicked out of a magnificent castle; … if you had not been out into the Inquisition; if you had not walked over America; … if you had not lost all your gold; … you would not be here eating preserved citrons and pistachio-nuts.”

“All that is very well,” answers Candide; “but let us cultivate our garden.”

This world is the world of events, a world of achievement and ill luck, yet a world seemingly mobile and yet need not have moved at all. Drama, discussion and finally a quiet life of gardening. The history of the journey seems futile. Candide need never have moved. There is no discernible movement with an aim. There is no progression, and one might even say, no modernity except in the present. The events happened, one the sine qua non of the other, but that is the nature of all life, of all events. A link exists but no more. Life returns to a humble agrarian existence in a garden, an idiosyncratic conclusion to a tumultuous history. And it is Voltaire who is smiling at the end of the journey, somewhat sardonically, to those who hoped to find a pattern when there was none to find. But this journey must realise one thing: “All is for the best in the best of possible worlds”.

Voltaire’s accounts might as well be stories of kingdoms, not entirely insular, but enough to assume a separateness that never unites. Voltaire’s history laughs. There are events in history. But there is no movement in the causal sense enough to make progress. All events happen as a scheme, but it is a futile scheme, a needless one. Man will always be restricted but he will always need to be happy. His freewill will always be burdened but it occurs for the purpose of happiness. The events will happen and will persist in happening. People have honour but events will occur in their folly as fits of lunacy if people will not change. But all men have virtue or comprehension of it. This tendency of Voltaire to contextualise history in the form of human behaviour and universal virtues entrenches the immobile or ‘needless’ composition of history as teleological. We need good government, we do not need theocracies and we need good climates. Ultimately the movements between the collective and mind and individual endeavour are too sporadic to form a historical fabric of progression.

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As a historian Voltaire is not considered seriously by contemporary standards. But his use of history as a rhetorical device, a polemical tool has had followers. A final verdict is out: he was no historian. By mobilising intellect against intelligence as Roland Barthes put it, he grounded the paradox of confrontation against that of conciliation. History could thus never move. Even in his age, when he decried the crude slavishness that the documenting of history had become, he was criticised by some of his contemporaries, sometimes in envy, that his breadth of intellect was too capricious to detail a proper history, too fickle to render order to a chaotic world. “Voltaire will never write a good history,” wrote a sceptical Baron Montesquieu, “He is like the monks who care little about the subject they are treating, but only about the glory of their order. Voltaire writes only for the monastery”.

He had condemned his age for revering fantasies and fictions in history, but his polemical pen only knew the dream. His love of humanity gave the first history of the world that was generous in its recognition of men as equals. But the only true progress for Voltaire lay in the present, whether it was the English parliamentary system, or the virtues of the Prussian King Frederick the Great. He never defined clearly how history had moved to attain that end. History just happened to dictate these terms by the rule of nature. And arts and manners, since they are themselves indefinable as historical causes, were used to define movement. Voltaire thus surveyed the canvass, creating travel through space – events merely sufficed to fill that space. But the events never seemed to be commensurate with direction. They just happened for the sake of happiness.

Since honour, love, humanity and every virtue under the stars has a place in the Voltairean universe, history likewise assumes a place. Till Voltaire enlivened it, history was cruel. Till he wrote it, history was murderous. When he finished, history was the picture of perfection, a picture of the smiling philosopher himself. “The great and only concern one should have is to live happily”. The smile that never changed, and a history that never moved. Voltaire’s history was merely a history that happened.

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