

## Reviews

***Les Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire, 1775–1776. Vol. 77B.* Edited by Nicholas Cronk. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Ltd., 2014. ISBN 978-0-7294-1133-2. Xvi+333 pp. with Works Cited and Index.**

Volume 77B of the complete works of Voltaire afford readers with a fascinating and pluralistic array of the occasional pieces and literary experimentations in which the aging François-Marie Arouët engaged during what ultimately proved to be the final three years of his life. After the exhausting summer of 1775 in which he “suffered an ‘espèce d’apoplexie” as Haydn Mason notes in his brief but stirring preface to this volume, Voltaire anticipated a positive and perhaps less hectic year, especially since his close associate, Turgot – a man of the Enlightenment in his own right – was safely ensconced at the summit of royal favor under the new king Louis XVI (p. xv). However, as the ensemble of writings featured in this volume of Voltaire’s complete works collectively reveals, 1775–1776 proved surprisingly eventful for the grand old man of the *siècle des lumières*, especially in light of the sudden collapse of Turgot’s support at court. In part for these political reasons, Voltaire’s output for these two years was considerable and diverse. What stands out most strikingly from this disparate assemblage of Voltaire’s publications is not only the critical acumen of their individual editors, but two overarching characteristics of Voltaire’s activity at this late stage of his life. First is the extent of Voltaire’s ongoing literary engagement with social and political crises that ensued as a result of Turgot’s meteoric rise and equally shocking dismissal between 1774 and 1776. Indeed, this volume underscores the great respect and loyalty Voltaire evinces toward Turgot (both before and after his fall), and his persistent engagement with the too often abortive attempts to end servile peasantry and other lingering vestiges of serfdom in France before the Revolution. Second, and perhaps most striking is the aging Voltaire’s masterful ability to improvise and eclectically push the boundaries of eighteenth-century genre conventions. As Haydn White notes, the major work in the volume, his *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares* defies many conventions of eighteenth-century history, epistolary novels, or travel narratives. Overall, the character of this volume reveals how Voltaire’s works after 1775, arguably with greater maturity than his earlier compositions, reveal “[t]he author’s playfulness” and the “protean diversity” of tone, style, genre, and pur-

pose Voltaire was able to creatively and consistently marshal throughout his long career, even into the last years of his life (p. xvi).

The tone for Voltaire's engagement with Turgot and the political affairs that emerged from the latter's brief but critical tenure as controller-general of finance is set by the very first work, a "poetic impromptu" in honor of Turgot entitled *Le Temps présent* (pp. 1-17), originally published under the pseudonym, Joseph Laffichard (p. 3). As Ralph A. Nablow, the editor of this poem, notes, the poem *Le Temps présent* is an example of a "poème engagé" dramatizing the misery of the French peasantry and the historical and socio-political causes for such misery. The dramatic climax of the poem is the abolition of the *corvée* by a "sage" – Voltaire's scarcely subtle reference to Turgot (pp. 4-5). Voltaire's veneration for Turgot extended well beyond the minister's fall. As Helga Bergmann's critical edition of the royal edicts of Louis XVI during the ministry of Turgot reveals, Voltaire considered Turgot's brief but fraught ministry to be a defining moment in French History, as well as a great missed opportunity for further reform and refinement in the early years of the reign of Louis XVI (pp. 273-287).

Voltaire's interest in Turgot transcended any desire he may have had to ingratiate himself with at court, for his writings throughout the volume consistently reveal the philosopher's diligence in attempting to intervene in local affairs in order to protect the peasants against entrenched interests hoping to undermine Turgot's reforms to political economy that would have modernized peasant agriculture, freed up the grain trade, and ended forced labor obligations (*corvée*). Clearly, as evinced by Voltaire's three interventions in the affair of serfs in Mont-Jura between 1770 and 1771 mentioned by Robert Granderoute in his preface to the 1775 *Requête au roi pour les serfs de Saint-Claude, etc.*, his concern for the alleviation of peasant hardship long predated Turgot's ministry (p. 21). But with the ascent of Turgot in 1774, Voltaire strived to pave the way for a general abolition of the *corvée* against the objections of the Parlement of Besançon (pp. 33-41). Though the 1775 *Requête* on behalf of the peasantry of Saint-Claude may not have been sent because of Turgot's declining star after Spring 1776 (pp. 24-30), Arouët, so Robert Granderoute notes, continued to pursue agrarian reform in the form of a general abolition of the custom of mortmain (pp. 211-217) – a project animating Voltaire's *Extrait d'un mémoire pour l'abolition de la servitude* (pp. 219-230).

James Hanrahan provides a lengthy critical edition of Voltaire's various literary interventions on behalf of the Estates of Gex who were then attempting to break the privileges of the *Fermiers généraux* over the salt trade. This ensemble of texts demonstrates acumen in undertaking his own pet reform projects parallel

to the reforms of Minister Turgot, in ways that might advance Turgot's policies or drive them forward (pp. 231-271). At times, nonetheless, Voltaire's assistance could be a liability for Turgot since the latter did not always support Voltaire's suggestions (such as, for example, Voltaire's suggestion that the *Fermiers généraux* be indemnified for the loss of their salt monopoly over Gex by a more generalized tax that would lessen the burden on Gessien landowners, including of course Voltaire himself) (pp. 235-236). Overall, as Hanrahan deftly summarizes, "Voltaire's writings on the pays de Gex salt indemnity show his skill tying his local, private interests to national ones (in the *Mémoire à Monsieur Turgot* and the *Remonstrances du pays de Gex au roi*), and using his friends in the royal administration to benefit his private interests at the local level, while at the same time using the credit he had from such influence to encourage local authorities to share his vision" (p. 243). What one perceives in Voltaire's last years is a relative mastery, not just of the politics of the republic of letters, but of the political finesse best suited to leveraging that mastery into adroit manipulation of Old Regime politics. Gone is the youthful impetuosity that had landed Voltaire in the Bastille in 1726, had compelled his exile from France after *Lettres anglaises*, and had provoked his banishment from Prussia and flight to Geneva by 1755.

In addition to the many occasional pieces of more direct political impact during the ministry of Turgot is the centerpiece of this installment of Voltaire's complete works: *Lettres chinoises, indiennes et tartares* which builds upon Voltaire's, by 1776, nearly forty-year-old fascination with the ancient empire of China. In an extensive and admirably well contextualized preface, Marie-Hélène Cotoni, Basil Guy, and Alice Breathe, situate Voltaire's 1776 work within the tradition of Voltaire's earlier publications concerning China, including passages in *Remarques sur les Pensées de Pascal*, *De la gloire, ou entretien avec un Chinois*, the eleventh of Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*, the article on China in *Dictionnaire philosophique*, the eighteenth chapter of *La philosophie de l'histoire*, and perhaps most famously, the first two chapters of *Essai sur les mœurs*. Like these earlier works, Voltaire relies upon Jesuit sources [most notably Du Halde's *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l'empire de la Chine, et de la Tartarie Chinoise* (1735), and the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (1707-1776)] (pp. 67-207). Also like these earlier works, Voltaire's *Lettres* remains replete with high praise for the Chinese empire's tradition of stable and enlightened rule, as well as a system of natural law and civic religion dating back to before Moses (pp. 69-70). In this instance, however, Voltaire's *Lettres chinoises, indiennes, et tartarie* reaffirms and repackages many of the philosophe's own convictions about China at the occasion of

Cornelius de Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Egyptiens et les Chinois* (1773) published as a rebuttal to Joseph de Guigne's work purporting to demonstrate that China derived from a lost colony of Ancient Egypt (pp. 70ff). As Guy, Cotoni, and Breathe show, however, *Lettres chinoises* was no mere hackneyed compendium drawn just from Voltaire's earlier work. Voltaire augmented his observations on China with erudite reflections on India culled from translations of ancient Vedic literature, alongside other contemporary works about India, including the bibliography of extant Indian books by Baron d'Herbelot, and other accounts by E. Renaudot, and John Holwell (pp. 72f).

The final product (published for the Canon of Breslau who had been responsible for de Pauw's work) ultimately defies characterization (pp. 72-83). The work lacks the requisite *gravitas* of an eighteenth-century universal history, but outwardly conforms to the conventions of an epistolary collection like Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* or the Marquis d'Argens' own *Lettres chinoises*. Yet, Voltaire uses the shell of the epistolary genre to experiment with other literary modes (pp. 84f), and all with the distinct purpose of "redoubling his critique of religious fanaticism by means of coming and going across space and time" (p. 87). The *Lettres Chinoises, indiennes, et tartares* demonstrate what may be the most cohesive *leitmotif* in Voltaire's later work: a "polyphonic" composition designed to exploit "a diversity of genres" in order to "engender a diversity of registers" with the express purpose of "creating for the reader a great number of emotional and intellectual effects" (p. 91). Such "polyphony", the editors suggest, was deliberately intended to portray the Voltaire's oft-repeated assertion, most elegantly summarized in his essay "On Contradiction" in *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*, that "the world subsists only of contradictions" (p. 99).

Voltaire's taste for experimentation and relative comfort with unresolved paradox is no less evident in what would prove to be one of his last, most philosophical poems: *Le Songe-creux* (pp. 307-310), most likely written between 1775 and the end of his life, but posthumously published only in 1784. This poem, as Ralph A. Nablou nicely explains, dramatically depicts the descent of the speaker (very likely representing Voltaire himself) to Tartarus, the depth of the Greek underworld, in order to plead for mercy with the gods (pp. 291-294). Although the poem emerges from Voltaire's immersion in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, it is also a brief philosophical odyssey into the great philosophe's notions of the afterlife, which is to say, Voltaire's philosophical negation of the soul's immortality in an afterlife. In the third section of the poem, "Le Néant" (Nothingness) is personified, revealing Voltaire's belief that the existence of God does not imply the individual immortality of humankind, and therefore perhaps

the final act of courage, for the aged poet as well as for every individual, is the sublime recognition that “life leads to nothingness” (pp. 297-302).

The great care and precision of this latest edition of the works of Voltaire is exactly what one might expect from the Voltaire Foundation and such a well-respected international array of patrons, contributors, and editors. The volume commences with a helpful list of abbreviations, and a critical apparatus (p. xi) applied consistently throughout the volume. The latter usefully explains the device employed in the notes which accompany each of the works published in this volume. These notes usefully refer the reader to the line number in various manuscripts, as well as to variations among existing manuscript and printed editions of the texts in question. Throughout the volume, and within each critical edition itself, the editors have carefully provided a list of all existing manuscript versions of Voltaire’s works published in this volume. In addition, each text is preceded by a transparent explanation of which versions furnished the basis of the critical edition here published, as well as how and for what reason these new critical editions adapted alternate manuscript or printed copies. Finally, the reader is afforded very useful guides designed to clarify how and for what reasons the orthography was updated to facilitate ease of study by present-day scholars. The individual editors of each text, and the editors of these new critical editions in general, are to be commended for their superb labors in producing a handsome, elegant, and indispensable tool for scholars and students interested in such a towering figure of the French Enlightenment and his place in the vibrant culture of the eighteenth century.

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