
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Voltaireanism.

By the Rev. I. GREGORY SMITH, M.A., Hon. LL.D. (*Edin.*).

FRANÇOIS MARIE AROUET, known, far and wide, by the surname, which he invented for himself, by transposing the letters of his father's name, was essentially *esprit moqueur*. Is there not more than a little of the same habit of looking at things in England now?

We seem to forget that, though everything in life has a comic side, life, after all, is not a thing to be trifled with. One misses too often, as Gladstone missed in Goethe, the sense of "duty and dutifulness."

Beyond question, Voltaire was in many ways the most conspicuous figure in Europe during part of the eighteenth century. Of course the accident (so to speak) of his intimacy with a King, the foremost statesman and soldier of his age, and with other notable people in his own country and throughout Europe, must be taken into account. Still, after discounting all this, two things stand out to explain Voltaire's fame or (must we say?) notoriety. His personality, for it is on personality, after all, that the verdict must always turn, and his lifelong attitude towards the environment of his period. The latter must be considered first if we would gauge truly the character of the man.

Voltaire was the petrel of the storm which was to burst over France and Europe, within almost a decade of his death. "The young will see fine things," he said, as he lay dying. Not that he was against the governments of his day, for he was—and such contradictions are not without parallel—courtier as well as iconoclast, and the "fleshpots of Egypt," the flatteries of Versailles or Reinsberg, were very palatable to him. Like Rousseau, but in a quite different way (for he was destructive, Jean Jacques constructive), he prepared the way for the coming

cataclysm. In France, as on the Continent generally, Church and State were closely linked together, and in his savage onslaught on a degenerate hierarchy and on a creed, which he perversely identified with the social evils around him, Voltaire was undermining the political fabric and loosening the restraints which might have been of some avail to guide the paroxysm of democratic frenzy. To his contemporaries Voltaire was a portent. Without realizing fully what a modern panegyrist has called "Voltaire's righteous social protest against a system socially pestilent,"[1] they saw in him the daring precursor of a new era. Strange, truly, are the instruments which subserve the evolution for ever going on. The cynicism of a Friederich, the unscrupulous, devouring ambition of a Napoleon or a Bismarck, the smart repartees of Voltaire, map out Europe afresh, or, what is of greater moment, inaugurate a new tone of thought. Indirectly Voltaire was a lifelong leveller of the old, dynastic feudalism of the Middle Ages.

Voltaire was simply and solely a destroyer; he was no builder, no idealist. The "biting acid," as it has been well expressed, of his sneers and sarcasms, was a more powerful solvent than the sledge-hammer of a Luther. Ridicule is a negative force; it cannot create. Voltaire could help to pull down, to analyze, to disintegrate. To reconstruct, to synthesize, this was not in his *métier*. Keen to spy out (someone has said) the holes in the garment, it was beyond him either to mend it or to replace it. Throughout his career the old name asserts itself. Voltaire (or De Voltaire) is still Arouet, with the *avocat's* quickness to detect any flaw, any weak place, in his opponent's plea. The literal fact, unimportant it may be in itself, is more to him than what it may signify; what a thing seems to be, what it looks on the surface, rather than what it is really.

Intellectually measured, anyone who attempts to appraise Voltaire fairly is in danger of overpraising. One is dazzled by

[1] "Voltaire," by John Morley. Macmillan, 1886. I am largely indebted to this masterly presentment of Voltaire. Even those who differ from the author on many points must admit that Lord Morley's book is rich in ethical and political suggestiveness.

his brilliant versatility, by the wide and varied range of his attainments, by his airy touch, his flashes of wit, his purity, if not of thought, at least of language, by the exquisite ease and grace of a style, which even in France is without rival for *netteté*. The charm of his conversation was magnetic. He chanced in one of his journeyings to stay in a monastery, and there he fascinated his hosts, who little dreamed who it was that they were entertaining so hospitably. And yet, even intellectually, much is wanting. There is "the piercing, metallic light of electricity, rather than the glowing beam of the sun."[1] And he was "no systematic thinker."[2] One looks in vain for depth or originality. A contemporary said of Voltaire, what may be said with equal truth of the late Professor Jowett, "He is the very first man in the world at writing down what other people have thought." A very useful faculty this, to translate into current coin the great thoughts of greater thinkers. But it is not genius.

That Voltaire was ignorant of things unknown to his day, such as Comparative Mythology, or even that his psychology was foolish, as when he identifies the self with memory, one of the most mechanical functions of the brain, is slight disparagement. It is a graver indictment that his philosophy is "vague" and "shallow,"[3] and that, with all his alertness of apprehension, "he had no ear for the finer vibrations of the spiritual voice."[4] To have "stimulated thought," to have "opened the mind of France," to have "let the air into the musty chambers,"[5] is an achievement. But it is a confusion of wisdom with knowledge to call him a "sage." The same "insufficient depth of nature"[6] which mars his philosophy mars his attempts in verse. His "Henriade" is frigid and artificial. He should have kept to "Vers de Société."

Intellectual capacity is only a part, and a small part, of personality. Be it more or less, his cleverness is not the man's self; it is merely his equipment for the battle of life, like his strength of muscle, his keenness of eye, his manual dexterity; it is

[1–6] *Vide supra.*

scarcely nearer to the real self than the clothing which he wears. "You cannot know anyone," it is said, "till you have dealings with him." The character is the man;[1] and a man's conduct is the index of the relation of the will to the various conflicting impulses, continually striving for mastery. Does the will, the man's very self, keep them in order, or is he drifting hither, thither, at their bidding? Does he try to live the life of self-sacrifice for God and for his fellows, or is he living to please himself? Is he just, pure, kind? Weighed in these scales, what must be the answer about Voltaire? In his case more than ever laxity and condonation are inadmissible. For the leader, the reformer of abuses, must be the first to show the way in himself. The poet of life and character[2] says—

> "He who the sword of Heaven will bear,
> Must be as holy as severe."

Is it not written, "Physician, heal thyself"?

"De l'audace, de l'audace et toujours de l'audace" was Danton's war cry as he led the "trente voix de la Montagne" in the Assemblée Nationale. It was Voltaire's. In later life, as champion of Calas and La Barra, and many others, for he was cosmopolite in his sympathies, Voltaire was as fearless as when, sitting, young and obscure, among grandees at a supper party in Paris, he roused the wrath of the Duc de Rohan by his free speaking. There was always in Voltaire, from first to last, something of the cock-sparrow, of the mischievous, impertinent "gamin"; but it is impossible to deny that there was also in him a fierce indignation against oppression and cruelty, whenever he came across them, "a passion for justice,"[3] and one cannot but admire the cheerfulness and vivacity which never failed him in a very chequered career. But this ardour for what is just and true, these far-reaching susceptibilities, are altogether out of keeping with the trickeries of his affair with the Jew, Herschel, quite inconsistent with the meanness of his

[1] "Our identity does not consist in a historic continuity of tissues, but in an organic moral coherence of relation" (p. 151).

[2] Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure.*

[3] *Vide supra*, p. 151.

miserable squabbles with the King of Prussia and President Maupertuis. Even the eulogist is too honest to refrain from censuring strongly the "petulance," the "spleen," the "shrill fury," the downright "dishonesty," the "deliberate lies"[1] of the philosopher under provocation. It would be preposterous to class Voltaire with the heroes and saints who have sacrificed themselves in essaying to liberate mankind. He began life an undutiful son, an unloving brother, and he was to the end a vain voluptuary. He cringed right and left to gain admission into the Academy. His was a life of self-seeking and self-indulgence. By example, as by his pen, he was on the side of an ignoble libertinism.

The surroundings in which Voltaire's lot was cast were, it is true, very evil. The atmosphere which he breathed at Court —Can it be that someone is endeavouring to whitewash Louis XV.?—was poisonous. The false glitter of Versailles was, in the eloquent words of Lord Morley, "a foul glare, like the iridescence of putrefaction." Still, though circumstances tell on character, a man, especially a leader of men, is not the mere product and creature of his epoch, and in trying on this score to extenuate Voltaire's faults, one has to remember that the influence for good of Pascal, Fénelon, and the Portroyalists, of whom Lecky has said that they were "the finest intellects and purest characters of any age in the Church," was still at work, leavening the France within their reach. But Voltaire had an eye only for what was bad in the Church of his day. It was losing its savour; instead of overcoming the world, it succumbed to the sordid ways of it; the fine gold was dim. Like Condorcet and others of the "camaraderie," Voltaire made the mistake, old as Lucretius, of mixing up religion with superstition, of confounding morality with sanctimoniousness and hypocrisy, self-discipline with self-torture. To them Christianity, instead of being freedom and joy, wore the mask of gloom, intolerance, persecution. It was to them as the Car of Juggernaut, crushing the life out of prostrate victims as it rolled relentless

[1] *Vide supra.*

along. Is there no misunderstanding of the same sort nowadays?

In some respects Voltaireanism is indeed as out of date as the arguments of the English Deists in the eighteenth century. A merely negative criticism cannot satisfy the longings of those who are seekers in earnest for truth; a shallow flippant scoff is altogether alien to those, who, like Arthur Clough and Hartley Coleridge, are painfully aware of their own limitations, and who would be thankful to believe, if only they could. One cannot imagine Voltaire saying—

> "Why did I ever one brief moment's space
> But parley with the filthy Belial!"

And yet in many ways the spirit of Voltaire is rife in England now.

There is the same shrinking from pain, the same love of ease, the same idolatry of cleverness and of superficial refinement, the same abhorrence, not of sin, but of punishment, the same revolt against the self-discipline, which is the only road to perfection.

The *esprit moqueur* is in the air, which denies and derides without affirming, and faces the realities of existence with the smirk of supercilious self-complacency.