

Voltaire. A perfect case for comparison

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My theoretical approach in this paper consists in showing that in Voltaire's case comparison is a crucial issue in every sense of the word and on all fronts. More precisely, my questions are: in which way can comparison be useful in the treatment of Voltaire's case and to what extent? How does it play a crucial part in our way of perceiving the French philosopher?

In order to answer these questions, I shall start by considering two points. At first, a certain number of texts by Voltaire like *Candide* are usually called in French « contes » (a word which can be translated into English by « tales ») or « contes philosophiques ». Next, in general, Voltaire is still *not* considered as a true thinker or a real philosopher. With regard to the way of describing some of Voltaire's texts, most scholars invite us to evacuate the problem of the distinctions of genre. They insist on the fact that in Voltaire's time the difference between what was used to be called in French « roman » and « conte » did not exist or was not so important. Therefore, they claim to have adopted the word « conte » only by tradition and for convenience. But other scholars have different views on both points. Here, it seems relevant to make a first comparison: it is a simple question of comparing different scholars' judgments. Concerning the description of Voltaire's tales, Sylvain Menant retains like many others the word « contes » (1992: xviii), but he does not deny the distinction between *contes* and *romans* for the eighteenth century. Jean Goldzink, for whom it is eventually useless, and even counterproductive, to discuss about genres, prefers the word « récit », more general (1994: 53), which can be translated by « narrative ». Scholars are also divided about Voltaire's relevance as an authentic philosopher. Some specialists like André Magnan or Jean Dagen deem Voltaire to be a thinker. But many other scholars don't share their views. Davide Beeson and Nicholas Cronk give an example of those contrasted judgments:

For one historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, Voltaire is « the central figure of the Enlightenment »; while for another, John Gray, « Voltaire's writings on philosophical questions are unoriginal to the last degree... Few of the entries in his *Philosophical Dictionary* are concerned with philosophical questions. » (Beeson & Cronk, 2009: 47)

So, in both cases, we can talk about the heuristic value of comparison. Comparison draws attention to the very existence of some problems: I mean it brings them to light. Furthermore, it highlights them because it reveals significant *hesitations* and even *contradictions* among critics. That already shows how crucial comparison is.

It is all the more crucial that we can observe the same phenomenon by studying the reception of other aspects of the figure of Voltaire. Let us make another comparison. Most of

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the critics seem to be rather skeptical about Voltaire's qualities or reluctant to consider him as an historian, a dramatist, a poet and so on... Nevertheless, a closer scrutiny of the different critical views shows once again that criticism is more divided than it appears to be at first sight. And if we extend the comparison to other fields of knowledge and try to find, for instance, what historians or philosophers – and not only eighteenth century specialists – think about Voltaire as an historian or a philosopher, we shall obtain a similar result : a global indifference, with some notable exceptions. In France, Jean-Raoul Carré (1938) published a book about the « consistency » of Voltaire as a philosopher. As for Paul Edwards (1989) whose book (*Voltaire. Selections*) has been published in U.S. his aim was to show that Voltaire was also a *bona fide* philosopher. Colette Michael, Professor of French but also founder of the *Journal of French Philosophy*, made a review about that book where she expresses some reservations about Voltaire while recalling us that Edwards is a « brilliant philosopher » (1991 : 134).

The question why the judgments about Voltaire are so contrasted is puzzling (even though the favorable ones seem to be rare). But we shall be more puzzled by comparing Voltaire's reception in his time with his reception in our time. The contrast between both receptions is impressive. Nowadays, Voltaire generally is famous *only* for one of his works, namely *Candide*, whereas most of his contemporaries considered him as the most illustrious representative of literature, theater, poetry, epic, and, of course, philosophy. It is the reason why the eighteenth century is often called Voltaire's Century or the Age of Voltaire. So the question is to clear up that puzzling problem of Voltaire's value and to argue about the relevance or at least the eventuality of distinguishing genres or not. Here appears the epistemological property of comparison. First, comparison helps to assess the rationality of the choices made by critics and specialists. As a matter of fact, denying any relevance to the distinctions of genre in works of fiction by arguing that this distinction was pertinent only in Voltaire's time is irrelevant, as a mere comparison with the treatment of other literary figures contemporaneous or even previous to Voltaire shows. For instance, why do scholars define without any hesitation some texts like *Don Quichote* (by Cervantes) as novels (*romans* in French), while denying any relevance to the distinction between tales and novels (*contes* et *romans* in French) in Voltaire's case ? Such was my question in a paper published in *Doct-Us* where I made a comparison between *Don Quichote* and *Candide* (Messaoudi, 2011a). That suggests that if *Don Quichote* may be called a *roman* and *Candide*, a *conte*, it is not so much because *Candide* is a *short* story as because the word *conte* is associated with fantasy, whereas the word *roman* is rather associated with realism – which makes sense and gives the distinction between both works an interpretative value. Here, the hesitation about *Candide*, which is also a realistic work of fiction and, in that sense, closer to the novel than to the fairy tale, is understandable. And, of course, Cervantes' novel is fanciful as well as realistic. It is the reason why *Candide* and *Don Quichote* have certain features in common with one another, and by the way, both render their generic definition problematic (and why it is difficult, for example, to define precisely the genre of *Candide*). So, comparing them is not only possible but interesting – all the more interesting that the epistemological property of comparison consists not only of examining critically others' assertions but also helping to explore new ways of thinking and try to resolve some problems.

Of course, the epistemological property of comparison will enable me to think about Voltaire's value as a thinker, but, at first, I am going to consider comparison more specifically as an object, I mean I shall think about the use of comparison in assertions about Voltaire, which may be treacherous. As a matter of fact, there are many ways to distort Voltaire's image and to present him as a bad thinker. One of them is to repeat that Voltaire is not a thinker as good as other *philosophes* like Rousseau, Diderot or Montesquieu or that he is not a

true philosopher like Kant or Hegel. It amounts to saying that Voltaire cannot stand comparison with these key figures and that it is impossible to make a comparison between him and them. In other words, Voltaire is *not* comparable. As we can see, the problem with that kind of assertions is that they avoid in fact true comparisons, I mean thorough and developed comparisons. A Kant specialist, Jean Ferrari, who wrote about Voltaire *and* Kant, did not make any comparison between them. His mere aim was to assess Voltaire's presence in Kant's thought (to simply delimit Voltaire's place in Kant's work). What he wanted to do, he explains in the foreword of his book devoted to « French Sources of Kant's Philosophy », was not compare both philosophers but bring to the fore the dialogue engaged by Kant with Voltaire and other philosophers. Let it be said incidentally that his foreword points out how difficult the question of identifying a source of Kant generally is (Jean Ferrari 1979 : 11 & 12). Nevertheless, he concludes that Kant despised Voltaire and did not number him among philosophers, suggesting in that way Voltaire has almost nothing to do with Kant and, therefore, with philosophy. Most of Voltaire specialists have followed him in that way. Now, let's choose a relevant topic, for instance the definition of Enlightenment – a question I have dealt with (Messaoudi, 2011b) –, and see if it is possible to compare Kant and Voltaire from this peculiar point of view. Perhaps it is the best way to check the strategic value of comparison, which would permit us to consider Voltaire as a philosopher. For managing to compare Voltaire and Kant would imply that Voltaire is comparable to the major canonical figures of philosophy, in other terms, that he stands comparison with the classical philosophers. Here, I am broaching onto a capital question : by which criteria a thinker is he called a philosopher ? Voltaire is usually said to be a writer rather than a philosopher because of his literary style. Some critics point out the fact he did not write any philosophical *treatise* worthy of the name. For others, he was too politically committed to be considered as a disinterested seeker of truth. In fact, most people think that philosophy only consists in reading and commenting philosophical texts. According to another prevailing idea, philosophers, especially modern ones, are nothing else but scholars who are not committed to life and not able to write anything else but philosophical books – preferably, treatises – and always in an academic style. In others terms, philosophers are supposed to write only difficult and obscure books which can be exclusively read by other philosophers. A mere comparison between the way of dealing with the canonical philosophic figures and the one of dealing with Voltaire shows the inconsistency of these criteria when applied to Voltaire to dishonor him as a philosopher. Socrates, who is often called the father of philosophy, wrote nothing, talked to everybody in the street and was so committed to the public life of his time that he was sentenced to death. Plato, another canonical figure for current philosophy, wrote dialogues and myths. These latter writings, although highly philosophical, are written in a literary style and correspond to a choice of the literary genre. Even Kant, who is considered as the introducer of the prevailing conception of modern philosophy, wrote texts of a nature very different from the three *Critics*, in particular many short texts about history. His famous text about the question : « What is Enlightenment ? » (1784) clearly shows his concern for and his commitment to public diffusion of philosophical ideas.

Voltaire's ambiguous case invites us to carry on with our comparisons. Let's take, for instance, the question of the academic subjects, of which the definition varies according to eras as well as to countries. At first, we may wonder why some thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, etc. are generally studied in Literary Departments and not in Philosophy Departments as the others. It is worth deepening that question, for the boundaries between literature and philosophy were not so strict in Voltaire's time, and the genres become often confused in practice. Moreover, if the prevailing model of philosophy is currently the Germanic one (in a simplified version), it differs from the French one among others. For

French Philosophy is characterized by its peculiar links to literature. The famous French philosophers of the end of the twentieth century, Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault, were great stylists and took an interest in literary works. And according to a strong French tradition, the intellectuals, among them the philosophers, are often politically committed. Another famous example is Sartre. Here, comparison can make us aware of the differences between the philosophical styles peculiar to each nation and, therefore, demolish some arguments supposed to be decisive against Voltaire. It is the same for comparisons between different academic traditions. As a matter of fact, if Voltaire is often studied in Literature Departments, it may not be the case in other countries. The comparison between cultural and national conceptions reminds us of the heuristic property of comparison, notably when considering that reality is not cut up the same way depending to the different languages. My aim in making all these remarks is to insist on the connections between a certain perception of Voltaire and a certain epistemological background. To defend and illustrate this idea, I am going to make a comparison between our new epistemological *moment* and the situation which still is prevailing these days (though to a lesser extent than before).

What's new is that Voltaire is more and more held in high regard, which leads to a renewal in the Voltairian studies and, therefore, to a more positive view of the French philosopher. What I would like to demonstrate right now is the great part played by comparison in that renewal.

To underline the role of comparison here, I would like to mention at first Russell Goulbourne's book : *Voltaire comic dramatist* (2006). Let's focus on his introduction, of which the first section is entitled « Voltaire, comedy and criticism ». In this section, he compares different critical views of Voltaire's comedies. If most of them are very contemptuous, as Russell Goulbourne shows, there are « two notable exceptions » that he opposes to this almost unanimous « critical trend » : they are Jack Yashinsky and Martial Poirson's opinions. Both of them speak in favor of « a more sympathetic appraisal of Voltaire's comedies » (Goulbourne, 2006 : 3). Then, Goulbourne seems to suggest, by mentioning at the same page critics « focusing primarily on questions of sources » (« and composition »), that the studies on Voltaire's comedies suffer from a lack of comparison and that the critics should compare the modern codes of reading with the codes of reading in Voltaire's time, the different phases of the comic genre, which is supposed to evolve, and at last, the different comedies by Voltaire. What is interesting here is that Goulbourne explicitly imputes the lack of interest in Voltaire's comedies to a lack of « comparison between Voltaire's plays and those of his contemporaries ». Here is the paragraph I have just alluded to:

The traditional attitudes to Voltaire's comedies are unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. Critics continually fall into the trap of projecting onto the past modern codes of reading; they base their conclusions on a vague notion of what is and what is not « comic » ; they do not take account of Voltaire's ideas on comedy and of the evolution of the comic genre in the eighteenth century ; *they make little or not detailed comparison between Voltaire's plays and those of his contemporaries*, and thereby underestimate the extent of his originality and experimentation ; and their interpretations are based on a reading of only three or four comedies, leading to an oversimplification of Voltaire's *œuvre* and implying that his comedies form a homogeneous group. But his comedies are a substantial, complex and vital part of his literary career. To reject them simply as defective is to reach a defective judgement of Voltaire as a whole. It is time for a thorough reassessment of Voltaire the comic dramatist. (Goulbourne, 2006 : 4 ; lines emphasized by me) :

The last section of Goulbourne's introduction is entitled « Comedy in context » (*Ibidem*, p.15-17). Right from the beginning, we are confirmed that comparison is a central issue in the reassessment of Voltaire's comedies : « Finally and fundamentally, underpinning

the whole of this book is an essentially comparative approach : an analysis of Voltaire's comedies in their various contexts. »

In his review of Goulbourne's book, Pierre Frantz, another scholar, expresses his enthusiasm about the reassessment of Voltaire's comedies by means of comparison. According to him, « the comparisons are illuminating » ; they « illuminate Voltaire's huge intertext ». At the same time, he states that Goulbourne makes you think about the critical status of comparison : « The heuristic effect is sure, writes Pierre Frantz about Goulbourne's book, but the heterogeneousness of these comparisons, which provides their value, gives also rise to questionings. Source, intertext, context, revival, pastiche, variation, allusion : one may remain puzzled. » (2009 : 365-366 ; we translate from French).

Comparison is not only at stake in Voltaire's theater or Voltaire's comedies. As a review made by Henri Duranton about a recent book by Síofra Piëse : *Voltaire historiographer : narrative paradigms* (2008) suggests, the study of Voltaire as an historian may also requires comparison. According to Duranton, the book fulfills its promise by defining accurately « what exactly Voltaire thinks about history and historiography ». But what Duranton reproaches on Síofra Piëse's book is a lack of comparison. For Duranton, the main question is to make comparisons between what Voltaire says and what he does or between him and other historians of his time and so, to replace him in his context, which allows us to reassess the French philosopher as historian (Duranton, 2009 :723-24 ; we translate from French) and, in a way, to rediscover him. Sometimes, comparison happens to become a reality like in *Narratives of Enlightenment. Cosmopolitan history from Voltaire to Gibbon* (O'Brien, 1997). In this book, Karen O'Brien makes a comparison between Voltaire (chapter 2), Hume, Robertson, Ramsay and Gibbon. I can also give some examples in other fields of knowledge than history. For instance, with « *Candide* and *Don Quichote* », which is also the title of the fourth part of the chapter 6 in a literature book by Mercè Boixareu published in Spain (2006). A scholar has made a review of this book in the most famous specialized French review about the Eighteenth Century, *Dix-huitième siècle* (Carles Besa, 2007). He takes a very favorable view about comparativism used as a method in the whole book. Another book, extracted from Guillaume Métayer's thesis and published in Paris at the beginning of the year 2011, is built on a comparison between Voltaire and another famous philosopher : it focuses on « Voltaire and Nietzsche ». It's interesting to note that this thesis has been written in a Comparative Literature department.

These different points invite us to shift the emphasis about Voltaire's value. In other terms, they suggest this question is linked with an intellectual and epistemological context which values mostly comparison. A comparison between our time and Voltaire's time might confirm this hypothesis. In fact, during the Enlightenment, comparing was an important thing for the *philosophes*, whose aim was the reform of society. There were for instance many comparisons between Antiquity or China and European society. Voltaire is a textbook case, a classic example. He makes many of comparisons in order to promote tolerance, deism, and to attack the Church and Catholicism. Like English deists, he compares different religions in his tale called *Zadig* to promote his idea of deism. In his English Letters (the *Letters concerning the English Nation*, 1733 and their famous counterparts in French the *Lettres philosophiques* - « Philosophical Letters », 1734), he compares England and France to promote a more liberal society. In his *Essai sur les mœurs* (« essay » on « mores » or « customs »), he compares civilizations across the countries and the centuries. He even invites us to compare this universal history with the famous *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (« Discourse on Universal History ») by Bossuet. He also said that his aim in writing the play entitled *Zaïre* was to oppose Turkish customs to Christian ones.

In conclusion, by showing the great relevance of comparison as a fruitful methodology, a way to carry out thorough research and a critical problem, Voltaire's case appears to be exemplary. Moreover, it highlights the renewed interest in comparison today. It is because that our times are ontologically characterized by that particularly once again especially crucial topic.

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