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Book Reviews

A Masterful Psychobiography of Voltaire

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Review Essay of Alexander J. Nemeth, Voltaire's Tormented Soul: A Psychobiographic Inquiry (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2008), ISBN-13: 978-0-934223-92-8, 359 pages, \$80.

Early in this skillful study, Nemeth quotes a scholar of Voltaire, René Pomeau, who comments that, although “[f]ew writers expressed themselves so copiously,” “Voltaire eludes us.” “We have at our disposal vast inventories on the man, but we do not know him. Extroverted, obstreperous, blabber-mouthed though he was, his unceasing agitation conceals his true self” (18). Nemeth sets himself the task of discovering the inner world of Voltaire, the underlying patterns, hidden from Voltaire himself, that give unity to his life. Nemeth convincingly accomplishes his task.

There are two chief forms of psychobiography, both valid but differing sharply from each other. One emphasizes the psychological, the other the biographical. In the second form, the author provides an absorbing narrative, informed by an unobtrusive psychological perspective, of the individual's life. Examples are *The Life of Henry James* by Leon Edel and *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Nemeth practices the first form; he provides a careful, detailed psychological assessment of Voltaire. Nemeth never presents the story of his

life but rather examines a set of psychological topics, such as Voltaire's self-esteem, his conflict with his father, his relationships in adulthood, and along the way he recounts various episodes that shed light on these topics.

The shortcoming of Nemeth's approach is that we never have a chance to become involved in what was one of the most fascinating, varied, and dramatic lives of any figure in intellectual history. The central theme of Voltaire's career was his battle against what he called *l'infâme*, which refers to the infamy of oppression (by authoritarian government and the church) against liberty, free speech, and choice of religion. For this battle, Voltaire developed his unique contentious style. “In truth, of all the intellectual weapons which have ever been wielded by man,” wrote Thomas Babington Macaulay, “the most terrible was the mockery of Voltaire. Bigots and tyrants, who had never been moved by the wailing and cursing of millions, turned pale at his name” (“Frederic the Great,” in *Critical and Historical Essays*, 1883, p.68). Well they might have, for they were soon to be skewered. Voltaire's life makes for a gripping story, as he moved from being the child of an undistinguished family, to his early forays that ended in imprisonment and exile, then to his years as the central intellectual figure in France, and finally to his position as a revered patriarch who ruled unofficially over his “kingdom” in Ferney in the French Alps.

The benefit of Nemeth's approach is that it enables him to provide such a convincing portrait of the inner, concealed Voltaire. Nemeth's book may be described as a psychological case report written at the highest level of competence. Nemeth systematically and comprehensively analyzes Voltaire's complicated personality, and at every step he carefully provides us with the evidence on which his conclusions are based. The main lines of his analysis are persuasive. Two crushing experiences from Voltaire's early years had an influence that helped determine the course of his life. First, he lost his mother when he was just seven years of age. She had a glittering circle of free-thinking intellectuals who surrounded her, and she enjoyed showing off the precocious little boy whose mental accomplishments at a young age delighted her and her friends. Second, he had

a pedestrian, religiously pious father who had no truck for his son's poetic, artistic flair and who heavy-handedly tried to force him to become a lawyer. Although Nemeth explains Voltaire's later patterns with subtlety, his conclusions can be fairly summarized in the following way.

Voltaire identified with what he saw, or imagined, as his lost mother's love of poetry and free-thinking. He also hated controlling authorities, in the image of his father, authorities who undermined freedom. His life-long struggle against *l'infâme* resulted. Nemeth is also perceptive in explaining the structure of Voltaire's personality. He brings out the way in which Voltaire managed consistently to avoid his volatile inner world, which included the depressive tendency associated with his sadness over his early loss of his mother. Voltaire, drawing on his hypomanic tendency, would lose himself in work, discussion, writing, and traveling so that he could escape from looking into himself. He also got enough expression of his inner demons through his writing, particularly his plays and his attacks on enemies, so that the pressure within did not build up and overwhelm him.

A piece of analysis from the book serves both as an illustration of this last point and as an example of Nemeth's skillful use of evidence. Nemeth notes that Voltaire suffered throughout his life from intestinal disturbances that seem to have been fueled by his inner tensions. The philosopher, he points out, once commented, "I have the colic, I suffer much; but when I attack *l'infâme*, my pain is relieved" (87).

My only substantial criticism is a quality of the book that stems from Nemeth's plan of approaching Voltaire as if writing a psychological assessment. Nemeth applies to Voltaire what seems to me to be a rigid, judgmental scheme for assessing Voltaire's conscience. Nemeth takes the position that Voltaire, because he can be shown to have lied and to have behaved in ways that are apparently in opposition to his beliefs, has "an underdeveloped, shifty conscience" (279) and hence a "flawed aspect of character" (278). Nemeth treats conscience as if it is a category of personality on which one can be given a rating; he rates Voltaire poorly.

One of his chief examples is Voltaire's attitude toward the church late in his life when he

was the patriarch of the town of Ferney. Voltaire established houses of worship for Catholics and Protestants and participated at church, talking to the citizens during a religious service and taking communion. While a believer in the God of Deism, Voltaire was a life-long, outspoken critic of the church's oppression and what he saw as its superstitious practices. Voltaire apparently believed that it was in the best interest of the townspeople to have houses of worship. So he did what he could to encourage these institutions and to be involved with them. He took communion, even though he did not believe in the rite and never had; he would have seen his behavior as part of his larger plan to serve the well-being of the townspeople. The local bishop became horrified and charged that Voltaire, as a man who had opposed the church, had no right to talk to the people during Mass or to take communion. Voltaire found a way of replying; he said simply that he did not see how the church could attack someone who was doing just what it wanted, that is, observing a church ritual and encouraging others to participate in church. It seems that Voltaire acted entirely in keeping with his clearly worked out values. He believed that the church often acted oppressively and encouraged superstition and he had a right to use the church in constructive ways. Furthermore he believed he did not owe it to the church officials to act in the ways that they prescribed.

Nemeth takes a preformed category, applies it to Voltaire, and concludes that his "moral values" (279) are faulty. I would claim, instead, that Voltaire was devoted to values that he developed during his lifetime and that many others shared with him (in part because he championed them so successfully) and he showed ingenuity and flexibility—and often courage—in acting in accord with those values.

I also must comment on Nemeth's note, entitled, "Psychobiography Today," at the end of the book (324-325). He argues, and I would agree, that effective psychobiography draws on a variety of approaches developed by different psychodynamic thinkers and that the psychobiographer must be careful to stay close to the evidence and not to force theoretical generalizations onto the subject. But in this note he draws on no work more recent than 1983, exactly a quarter century

before the book's publication date. In characterizing "Psychobiography Today," he would have done well to pay attention instead to contemporary work, such as 2005's *Handbook of Psychobiography*, edited by William Todd Schultz and published by Oxford University Press.

Putting aside minor reservations, I must express my deep admiration for Nemeth's scholarship. It is not an exaggeration to say that Nemeth has taken this towering figure, Voltaire, who has been a puzzle to centuries of biographers, and has made him finally understandable. The book, in my view, joins the list of most outstanding psychobiographies.

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Reflections of an Organizational Consultant

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Review of Howard F. Stein, Insight and Imagination: a Study in Knowing and Not-Knowing in Organizational Life (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2007), ISBN: 13: 978-0-7618-3744-2, xxi, 196 pages, paperback \$33.00, hardcover \$49.95.

Howard Stein is a trained anthropologist who has long been a productive psychohistorian. In addition to his principal career as an organizational consultant, he is Professor of Family Medicine at the University of Oklahoma and the author of more than twenty books and numerous articles in social science journals. His talents are such that he was recently nominated as Oklahoma Poet Laureate. Stein's book is organized into thirteen chap-

ters with extraordinarily diverse text, though no tables or graphs are included. A large portion of the volume consists of anecdotes about the author's career as a consultant for organizations, especially hospitals.

Chapter 1 introduces the advantages of countertransference and of "not-knowing." Chapter 2 discusses the value of poems by the consultant. Chapters 3-6 are on hidden agendas, red herrings to mislead people, anthropological perspectives, and reactions to disasters. Chapters 7-8 are on change, loss, and grief, describing the author's involvement as consultant for a hospital (Chapter 7) and for a Conservative American Jewish synagogue (Chapter 8). Chapter 9 is on a misdiagnosis that contributed to death of an infant in a hospital. Chapters 10 and 11 are on the arts, especially poetry.

The anecdotes about consulting repeatedly state the merits of countertransference, which refers to the consultant's feelings in response to the perceived feelings of the employees in the organization. An additional emphasis is placed on the value of not-knowing because preconceptions or too much knowledge about the organization can interfere with enlightened countertransference and thereby can prevent adaptive responses to the problems.

Most of the anecdotes reflect the depression and discouragement of those Stein services: people in generally unpleasant and pathological situations, such as the anxiety and demoralization of employees after some of their coworkers are terminated in a "downsizing" or "reduction in force." The consultant applies countertransference to recognize and share their distress but his descriptions lack reports on the beneficial effects of the consultant.

Chapter 9 includes a brief description of a happy outcome that does not appear to involve a consultant; a manufacturing firm, beset by financial troubles, recovered without firing anyone because the chief executive officer refrained from scapegoating his managers and employees. Instead, he shared the common predicament with them and asked them for novel solutions.

Chapter 12, is a reprinted 1985 article by Stein in which he summarizes the career and emo-