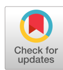

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ARTICLE

The Bullet That Ended Chivalry: Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles Xii* As A Celebration Of The Implausible

Caio Moraes Ferreira*

French Department, Columbia University
*Corresponding author. E-mail: cmf2174@columbia.edu

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*Voltaire's first historical work (*History of Charles XII*, 1731) is frequently read as a piece of literary satire designed to ridicule the tradition of military heroes and warmongering monarchs. I offer a contrasting perspective and make the case that the book grapples with a problem both epistemic and poetic: how to narrate and make sense of an implausible or unbelievable past. In shedding light on this issue, this article questions widely held assumptions about the relationship between truth, plausibility, and history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It pushes back against the notion that Voltaire, like other neoclassical historians, had a rigid and naive understanding of the implausible as "fabulous" or "unhistorical." Instead, I make the case that the implausible to Voltaire often pointed to a necessary and meaningful aspect of histories as narratives of the grand, the extraordinary, and the grotesque.*

> La vérité, la vérité!
> La vérité, me direz-vous, est souvent froide, commune et plate …
> Diderot, *Jacques le Fataliste*

Introduction: Voltaire and the problem of historical plausibility

Despite the variety of contemporary interests in the work of neoclassical and Enlightenment historians, it is widely accepted today that one of their key questions—perhaps even their central intellectual concern—had to do with the very possibility of historical knowledge. One could formulate the problem in the following manner: how can historians—qua historians—account for what seems to be, by definition, *antihistorical*? More specifically, how can they speak on those types of event and fact that, while part of their cultural landscape, seemingly belonged to the realm of the fabulous, the mythical, or the implausible?

No eighteenth-century historian was more attached to this problem—or has been more associated with it—than Voltaire. Indeed, the questions above could be seen as the animating force behind the opening lines of his famous article "History," written for Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* ("HISTORY is the

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narrative of facts given as true; as opposed to the fable, which is the narrative of facts given as false").[1] And yet the problem of separating "history" from "fable"—and of mapping that separation onto a distinction between "truth" and "falsehood"—certainly did not start with the Enlightenment, much less with Voltaire. As many have shown, it emanated from the work of seventeenth-century antiquarians, who sought to establish a new epistemic basis for historical analysis founded on a radical distinction between "original" and "derivative" sources, on a reinvigorated interest in material remains, and on a redefinition of historiography itself as the *collection* (rather than the *interpretation*) of facts.

As Arnaldo Momigliano (and, afterwards, Blandine Barret-Kriegel and Anthony Grafton) have demonstrated, the practices of seventeenth-century antiquarians were broadly discontinuous with the kind of grand historical narratives practiced from antiquity throughout the Renaissance, the very same practices that neoclassical writers of the eighteenth century would later seek to preserve and emulate.[2] Still, this reinvigorated preoccupation with the difference between histories and fables would become a crucial element of how Enlightenment historians presented and even advertised their craft.[3] In fact, it would act as the lynchpin for their own refurbishing of historiography such as it was practiced from Thucydides onwards.

To neoclassical authors like Voltaire, the ancients had already understood a few crucial things about the writing of histories. For one, they had already underscored the importance of *dignity* and laid out the rhetorical principles later used to separate historiography from the comparatively less prestigious genres of the comedy, the memoir, and the novel. In short, they understood (if somewhat instinctively) that proper histories, like epics and tragedies, stuck to "grand" matters of public interest and stately affairs, and conversely rejected anything related to the purely private, mundane, or trivial. Likewise, the ancients—with the exception of Herodotus—had also grasped the importance of a well-constructed and digression-free *narrative*. They had already laid out the poetic foundations that would separate great historical works from the drier, less engaging, and less intuitive genres of the annal, the compilation of anecdotes, and the historical dictionary.[4] What ancient historiography *lacked* (and what neoclassical writers sought to bring into the genre) was a more robust commitment to the truth and a more sober detachment from the

[1]Voltaire, "Histoire," in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc., eds.*, ed., ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (University of Chicago, 2017), at http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu, my translation. Original text: "HISTOIRE, s. f. c'est le récit des faits donnés pour vrais; au contraire de la fable, qui est le récit des faits donnés pour faux."

[2]See Arnaldo Momigliano, "Ancient History and the Antiquarian," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 13/3–4 (1950), 285–315, at 286; Blandine Barret-Kriegel, *La défaite de l'érudition* (Paris, 1988), 291–5; Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007), 189.

[3]As Anton Matytsin argued in a recent work, the advent of modern antiquarianism and historiography was itself a response to the rise of skeptical attitudes towards historical knowledge as a whole. It was the charge against the idea of "historical certainty" (leveled first by Descartes and then by Malebranche and Pierre Bayle, in the seventeenth century) that led historians and antiquarians to largely redefine the methodological basis of their respective disciplines. See Anton M. Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment* (Baltimore, 2016), 235.

[4]See Elena Russo, *Styles of Enlightenment: Taste, Politics and Authorship in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore, 2007), 169.

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marvelous, the "*romanesque*" and the fantastic.[5] Indeed, one could potentially articulate the "mission statement" of neoclassical historiography in the following terms: to reproduce and emulate the *gravitas* of ancient political histories, while banishing from the historical text anything that did not stand up to careful factual scrutiny, that did not meet steep standards of plausibility, or that seemed overall too undignified or banal to be intellectually useful.[6]

Twentieth-century critics of neoclassicism have, by and large, come together in defining this particular attitude towards the past as flawed. Some exceptions notwithstanding, they generally agree that it would only be at the tail end of the Enlightenment (with Herder) and later still, with the rise of Romantic historiography, that proper modes of accounting—historically—for the fabulous, trivial, and seemingly unlikely moments of the past would be developed. Such is the narrative we find in classical works by Ernst Cassirer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and R. G. Collingwood, as well as more recent works by Suzanne Gearhart and Hayden White.[7] While these critics do not fully agree on the motivations behind the Enlightenment's desire to separate history from both the fabulous and the ordinary, they do agree that this attempted separation led neoclassical writers to at least two grave mistakes.

The first was a cultivated disdain towards entire ages of the past (and entire cultures) deemed too steeped in irrationality and superstition to allow a distinction between the historically "plausible" (and the historically "useful") and its opposite(s).[8] The second, and more serious, was nothing more than an extension of the first, namely a growing distrust towards history's own ability to produce any reliable or useful knowledge of the world. To borrow White's language, the historical thought of the Enlightenment was condemned to wallow in a kind of bitter and self-destructive irony, as its concerns with truth, "realism," and plausibility led it to banish most of "the past" from history's own sphere of concern, towards the domain of poetry, religious belief (if not fanaticism), or general folly.[9]

This problem was compounded by the complicated relationship between two of the pillars that allegedly sustained neoclassical and Enlightenment history, namely "truth" and "plausibility." Even as modern scholars started moving towards a more nuanced understanding of neoclassicism, they still held eighteenth-century historians responsible for transforming plausibility (previously a "pragmatic middle

[5]On the critique of "ancient fables" by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century historians see Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment*, 240.

[6]See Philip Stephen Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture: From Clarendon to Hume* (New York, 1996), 210–11.

[7]Suzanne Gearhart, for one, maintained that in Voltaire's work "the fabulous" presented itself as a mode of perceiving the world entirely opposite to the very concept of "the rational," which would be both "the condition of historical knowledge" and "the principle of continuity uniting, through its progress, the origin and the end of history." Suzanne Gearhart, *The Open Boundary of History and Fiction: A Critical Approach to the French Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1984), 32–5.

[8]For somewhat dated examples of this particular critique see R. G. Collingwood and T. M. Knox, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1962), 76–7; and Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951), 221–2.

[9]White's preferred example here is not Voltaire (whose enthusiasm, in White's own explanatory model, prevented him from reaching this crisis until somewhat late in his career), but David Hume. See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, 1973), 54–5.

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ground between complete certainty and extreme Pyrrhonism") into something of an obsession.[10] Here, Voltaire does indeed emerge as the main culprit. In the 1980s, Suzanne Gearhart argued that, to the *philosophe*, "historical plausibility" was elevated to such an extreme degree of importance that the concept took over the very idea of truth itself: "The 'vraisemblable' is the ultimate standard of historiography, so much so that it takes precedence over the 'vrai,' the factually true. It is conceivable for Voltaire that an event that is not 'vraisemblable' could have taken place, but it would not be a proper object for history simply because it was true."[11] In her article on the *philosophe*'s historical work, Síofra Pierse essentially repeats this point and identifies a rejection of the implausible as the first rule of thumb of Voltaire's entire methodology and critical thinking: "First, history must reject fiction and fantasy from the text and deal only with serious fact. Modern history must be accurate and vraisemblable."[12]

In a sense, Voltaire seems to willingly open himself to this type of analysis. As many have shown, his commentary on historical writing (if not his own historiographical output) is permeated by what appears to be an intense and even paranoid dismissal of anything that resembles the "improbable." In the same "History" article, Voltaire pushes back against another *Encyclopédie* essay, namely the anonymous "Certitude" entry, precisely on the relationship between knowledge, truth, and *vraisemblance*. The essay on "Certitude" posited that two historical events of radically distinct degrees of plausibility—a dead man coming back to life and France's victory at the Battle of Fontenoy—should be seen as equally "certain" provided they had been related by witnesses of the same number and reliability. The claim prickled Voltaire, likely due to the rather extreme difference between the two examples used. As a result, he was forced to remind his colleague (whoever they were) of the difference between "probable" and "improbable" facts, and to underline the importance of common sense in the composition of proper historiography.[13]

[10]Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment*, 235.

[11]Gearhart, *The Open Boundary of History and Fiction*, 35. Before Gearhart, historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, in a lecture from 1963, had already underlined Voltaire's alleged fixation on *vraisemblance* at the expense of textual evidence: "Mere literary evidence, though contemporary, is devalued if it lacks what Voltaire called *vraisemblance*, that is, as Hume and Gibbon applied the concept, if it is incompatible not only with *bon sens*, but with the necessary consequences of economic and social facts." Hugh Trevor-Roper, *History and the Enlightenment* (New Haven, 2010), 8.

[12]Síofra Pierse, "Voltaire: Polemical Possibilities of History," in Sophie Bourgault and Robert Sparling, eds., *A Companion to Enlightenment Historiography* (Leiden and Boston, 2013), 152–87, at 157.

[13]"What is repugnant to the ordinary course of nature must not be believed, unless it is related by men inspired by the divine spirit. That is why, in the article CERTITUDE of this Dictionary, it is a great paradox to say that one should believe all of Paris when it affirms that it has seen a man rise from the dead, just as one believes all of Paris when it says that the battle of Fontenoy was won. It seems obvious that the testimony of all of Paris on an improbable thing cannot be equal to the testimony of all of Paris on a probable thing. These are the first notions of a sound metaphysics. This Dictionary is devoted to truth; one article must correct the other, and if there is any error here, it must be pointed out by a more enlightened man." Voltaire, "Histoire," my translation. Original text: "Ce qui répugne au cours ordinaire de la nature ne doit point être cru, à moins qu'il ne soit attesté par des hommes animés de l'esprit divin. Voilà pourquoi à l'article CERTITUDE de ce Dictionnaire, c'est un grand paradoxe de dire qu'on devroit croire aussi bien tout Paris qui affirmeroit avoir vû résusciter un mort, qu'on croit tout Paris quand il dit qu'on a gagné la bataille de Fontenoy. Il paroît évident que le témoignage de tout Paris sur une chose improbable, ne sauroit être égal au témoignage de tout Paris sur une chose probable. Ce sont là les premieres notions de la saine

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Much later in his career, in his famous essay on historical skepticism ("Le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire" (The Pyrrhonism of History), 1768), Voltaire would develop this position further and warn his readers, from the outset, of the distinction between the "main facts" and the (often sketchier) "details" that made up most historical narratives. To him, histories could be true in their broadest strokes but filled with falsehoods in their minutiae.[14] In fact, this is what seemingly characterized the entire edifice of ancient and religious historiography in the *philosophe*'s eyes: an outer skeleton of superficial truths concealing nothing but the spirit of myth and superstition. From Herodotus to Bossuet, history found its recurring downfall in the constant resorting to *embellishments* that turned general (but believable) facts into detailed (but hopelessly implausible) literary narratives.[15] Thus, if in "History" Voltaire underscored the dangers of a kind of metaphysical tomfoolery (not acknowledging the obvious difference between the probable and the improbable), here he took a more aesthetic approach. Following in the footsteps of his skeptic influence (Pierre Bayle), the *philosophe* saw the "implausible" and the "fabulous" as originating in man's often childlike desire for wonders, which the ancients, to him, seemingly never managed to master or overcome.[16]

As some have argued already, the sentiments laid out in "Le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire" can appear deceptively banal, leading us into a simplistic view of Voltaire's historical imagination.[17] And indeed, in this article I will take us a step further and show how they are challenged by Voltaire's own historiographical work. To the *philosophe*'s critics, however, these were damning opinions that conveyed, if not a certain impatience towards what Vico called a "poetic" understanding of the world, then a type of ideological bias masquerading as "skeptic impartiality." Perhaps the biggest example of this critique is to be found in John Pocock's multivolume study of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (*Barbarism and Religion*, 1999–2015), a work that features an extensive commentary on Voltaire (particularly in volume 2, from the year 2000) as one of Gibbon's most important models.

Pocock's treatment of Voltaire is long, but his thesis is relatively straightforward. Simply put, the *philosophe* was a somewhat problematic influence over Gibbon, something of an "exasperating predecessor." On the one hand, Voltaire was the first to introduce the possibility of a "history of *manners* [*moeurs*]" and thus to introduce "manners" themselves as a historical-philosophical concept that could stand in for the "totality of ways of living." In that sense, Voltaire could plausibly

Métaphysique. Ce Dictionnaire est consacré à la vérité; un article doit corriger l'autre; & s'il se trouve ici quelque erreur, elle doit être relevée par un homme plus éclairé."

[14]See Matytsin, *The Specter of Skepticism in the Age of Enlightenment*, 258.

[15]See Voltaire, "Le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire" (1768), in *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 27 (Paris, 1879), 235–7.

[16]See Marc Crépon, "La double philosophie de l'histoire de Voltaire," in Bertrand Binoche and Franck Tinland, eds., *Sens du devenir et pensée de l'histoire au temps des lumières* (Seyssel, 2000), 76–84, at 79.

[17]On that note, Pierre Force has made a compelling case that the *philosophe*'s concerns with historical truth, far from ontological (that is, founded on a coherent idea of a "historical reality"), were in fact rhetorical. In other words, Force demonstrates that the distinction between "history" and "fable," to Voltaire, was not a distinction between different *things*, but primarily a distinction between *things said*, between "ways of speaking," and between two equally legitimate *styles* of representing past phenomena. See Pierre Force, *Croire ou ne pas croire Voltaire et le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire* (Paris, 2014), 57–70.

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be seen as the precursor of what we today call "cultural" or "social" history.[18] Likewise, the *philosophe* was the first to try and *execute* this expanded historical framework *poetically*, to actually produce histories that escaped the traditional models of kingly, military, or ecclesiastical narratives laid out by the historians of antiquity and the Renaissance.

And yet Voltaire was also a questionable historian who failed to properly divulge his sources and, more incriminatingly still, displayed a general inability to accept as "historical" any fact that conflicted with his personal ideology or agenda.[19] It is in this particular point that Gibbon (and, indeed, Pocock himself) folds Voltaire's work back into the critical discourse we have been tracing here.[20] To Gibbon and Pocock, Voltaire's skeptical attitude (his alleged desire for common sense and for plausibility) was nothing more than a transparent preference for the facts and narratives that fit his own vision of a secular and cosmopolitan world besieged by Christian dogmatism and propaganda.[21] In failing to exercise any kind of restraint or self-awareness towards his own biases, Voltaire often committed the opposite of (and, to Gibbon, something far worse than) an embellishment: he quickly dismissed as "implausible" events that, upon careful examination, were well corroborated by both witnesses and textual sources.[22] His pyrrhonism (unlike Gibbon's) was not tempered by a contrasting spirit of erudition which would have allowed him to set aside his own sense of the historically "probable" (or "desirable") and look at his evidence thoroughly.[23]

Before Pocock, others had already made similar cases about Voltaire, the biggest example being Blandine Barret-Kriegel. In her own work on the arts of erudites (bombastically titled *La défaite de l'érudition*, 1988) Barret-Kriegel presents the generalizing histories of the eighteenth century as the spear that shattered the source-based epistemology of antiquarianism, with Voltaire himself as the very tip. To her, Voltaire's desire to recast historiography as a narrative both elegant and *broad* (to refashion the history of princes as the "history of peoples," and the history of states as the "history of nations") was tantamount to altering the very nature of "historical truth."[24] Much like in Pocock's work, the connection between Voltaire's widened range of interests and his skepticism is left somewhat implicit by Barret-Kriegel, but it is very much essential to her understanding of the *philosophe*'s historical project. In the sweeping sketches of human civilizations that made up Voltaire's most famous historical works (especially his long *Essai sur*

[18]See John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, *Narratives of Civil Goverment* (New York, 2000), 72–3.

[19]To Pocock, "Gibbon knew what it was to see a beautiful hypothesis killed by a fact," but Voltaire, presumably, did not. See ibid., 157.

[20]As Pierre Force suggests in his own analysis of this debate: "In Pocock's treatment of Voltaire, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between Gibbon's judgment and Pocock's own judgment." Pierre Force, "The 'Exasperating Predecessor': Pocock on Gibbon and Voltaire," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77/1 (2016), 129–45, at 131.

[21]Here, too, Trevor-Roper had, before Pocock, reached a similar conclusion about the relationship between Voltaire and Gibbon. See Trevor-Roper, "The Historical Philosophy of the Enlightenment," 9–10.

[22]The presence of Christian missionaries in China remains, to this day, the most famous example of this tension between Gibbon and Voltaire. See Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, 113–19.

[23]See Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 2, 158–9.

[24]See Barret-Kriegel, *La Défaite de l'érudition*, 291–5.

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les moeurs (Essay on Manners), 1756), "truth" could only ever be a general and vague phenomenon, a byproduct of *vraisemblance*, which was *itself* shaped by nothing more than Voltaire's own expectations as a writer, as a master of public opinion, and as a "worldly man."[25] This mode of historical truth, to Barret-Kriegel, disregarded not only the specificity and factual precision coveted by antiquarian methods, but also the broader ethical attitude underlining them (that is, the assumption that the historian's point of view, his or her sense of the truth, must always and primarily be framed by the sources).[26] In that sense, Voltaire's skepticism was not just a critique of fables, fantasies, and religious propaganda. It was, as Gearhart had already argued, a radical adoption of "la vraisemblance" as "the only criterion of reality."[27]

Finally, the recognition of Voltaire's militant skepticism subsists even in more recent studies that have sought to spotlight the philosophical breadth of his historical vision. Marc Crépon, in an article from the year 2000, makes the case that separating fables from history was necessary for Voltaire to properly trace the progress of human civilizations in time. In trying to frame the *philosophe* as a precursor to Kant (and to the Kantian interest in teleology and "historical expectations"), Crépon hyperbolizes Voltaire's desire for a new historiography entirely removed from the outlandish or dissimulative narratives of ancient and religious authors.[28] To properly explain how human cultures developed over time (and how they ought to *keep developing*), Voltaire, Crépon suggests, believed that history had to reinvent itself as a (self-)critical discipline capable of denouncing the "fable" as a force of ignorance and superstition in the world.[29] In other words, History could only act as an engine of enlightenment if it was, itself, "enlightened"; that is, if it sought to restore truth by excluding that which seemingly went against the order of nature (namely the supernatural and the miraculous) and the order of "human affairs" (*choses humaines*) (namely the implausible, or anything that would contradict a certain constancy of human nature and manners).[30]

In his own work on Voltaire's philosophy of history, Bertrand Binoche moves in the opposite direction, only to arrive at a similar place. Unlike Crépon, Binoche effectively rejects any notion of Voltaire as a teleologist, let alone a "historian of progress."[31] In his mind, the philosophical thrust of Voltaire's historical vision lay precisely in its ability to *delegitimize* grand narratives of providential redemption (such as Bossuet's) or, alternatively, generalizing systems of anthropology

[25]See ibid., 295.

[26]In his own preface to the *Essai sur les moeurs*, John Robertson tries to mitigate this critique, but his efforts backfire somewhat in recognizing that the project's philosophical reach walked hand-in-hand with its lack of rigor: "Voltaire may have displayed some of the vices of a 'philosophic historian' in his lack of exactness, but he also exemplified the virtues in the vast range of his curiosity and the astonishing breadth of his intellectual vision." John Robertson, "Preface," in Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs* (Oxford, 2009), xxxvii–xliii, esp. xliii.

[27]And indeed, in a thoroughly Gibbon-like move, Barret-Kriegel, *La défaite de l'érudition*, 295, accuses Voltaire of misjudging the veracity of the battle of Fréteval by refusing to take his sources seriously.

[28]Before Crépon, Barret-Kriegel herself had already sketched out this portrait of Voltaire paving the way to Kant's idea of Enlightenment. See ibid., 291.

[29]Crépon, "La double philosophie de l'histoire de Voltaire," 80.

[30]Ibid., 82–3.

[31]See Bertrand Binoche, *Les trois sources des philosophies de l'histoire (1764–1798)* (Québec, 2008), 32.

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(such as Rousseau's). In that sense, Voltaire's philosophy of history was intentionally "negative" and destructive: it mobilized facts as a way to throw doubts on any attempt to fully understand the world and human nature.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Binoche finds, at the root of this project, the same toxic pyrrhonism we have been tracing here. Not unlike Hayden White before him, he argues that Voltaire's obsession with using facts as critical tools came at the expense of his ability to see history *itself* as a type of theoretical discourse, one that relied on speculation to transform disconnected events into a rational, meaningful, and *believable* plot.[32] In other words, the more history started to extrapolate from individual facts and to move towards generalizations, the more it started to resemble the abstract systems and chimeric narratives it sought to combat in the first place. Thus Binoche sees Voltaire's philosophy of history as paradoxical and poisoned by its own skepticism: the arguments it deploys to discredit its enemies can be used against the historian's own desire to create his or her own explanations for worldly phenomena. Taking this particular understanding of Voltaire's system to its logical extreme, the very notion of a "historical explanation" would become essentially contiguous with the notion of "fable."[33] Before Binoche, Roland Barthes had already reached a similar conclusion: "Voltaire wrote historical works expressly to say that he did not believe in history."[34]

In all fairness, the analyses discussed in the last few paragraphs do not have the same kind of critical and even discrediting intentions that one sees in the analyses published from the 1930s to the 1980s. If anything, they all underscore different reasons why Voltaire's historical project was, despite everything, ambitious, compelling, and innovative. Nevertheless, they are based on a shared notion that Voltaire's historical imagination (if not his broader philosophical concerns) was founded on an anxious fixation with doubt, and on a self-appointed mission to safeguard the historical world from the encroaching threat of the implausible, the fabulous, and the unreasonable.

This article presents a contrasting view on the matter. Here, I will argue that, while understanding the difference between "history" and "fable" (in both epistemic and poetic terms) was very much a theoretical concern of Voltaire's, he was in practice deeply cognizant of the contiguity between the "historical" and the "nonhistorical." Indeed, this contiguity was to him both an inescapable problem and, occasionally, a source of wonder for the historian. To make my point, I will offer a study of a text that has been somewhat neglected as a piece of Enlightenment historiography: Voltaire's first historical essay, *Histoire de Charles XII* (*History of Charles XII*), first published in 1731. Aside from being generally under-studied, Voltaire's *Charles XII* largely destabilizes the neat image of the *philosophe* as a blunt and unimaginative pyrrhonist hiding behind his sharp and witty pen. It is, in other words, a book that compels Voltaire to negotiate between his need for a

[32]As Trevor-Roper reminds us, Gibbon himself complained that Voltaire's histories seemed to stubbornly avoid making connections between facts, refusing to accept them even when they were obvious and necessary. Trevor-Roper, "The Historical Philosophy of the Enlightenment," 7.

[33]See Binoche, *Les trois sources des philosophies de l'histoire*, 31.

[34]Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* (1964) (Evanston, 1981), 86.

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"believable past" and his awareness of history as the space of the awe-inspiring, the extraordinary, and even the grotesque.

What follows will be a focused analysis of the work centered around a particularly dramatic moment: the shocking death of the titular hero at the very end of the narrative. Through a close reading of this episode, I will make the case that, while Voltaire's first kingly biography has been both praised and maligned as a type of "historical satire" (that is, as a subversion of history's "seriousness" founded on a figure both ridiculous and unbelievable), the book should instead be seen as a study and a celebration of a *romanesque* and "mythical" past. Looking at Voltaire's first history in such a way allows us to get a different (and, in my mind, more holistic) idea of his historical imagination. Indeed, it shows that Voltaire's interests in historiography emerged not from a philosophical desire to separate plausible truths from the quagmire of useless lies and dangerous propaganda, but from a poetic (and even poignant) effort to *challenge* one's desire for historical plausibility itself.

"The play is ended": the strange death of Charles XII

In theory, readers should not have been too surprised to encounter the violent death of Charles XII at the end of Voltaire's historical narrative. The *philosophe* himself prepared his audience for what was to come at different points of the work. In fact, as early as the second edition of the book (published just one year after the first) readers would have been informed, in the very Preface, that Voltaire's plot would not be leading them to a happy or redemptive ending. More specifically, they would have been greeted with a rather ominous warning from the author:

> No king, surely, can be so incorrigible as, when he reads the history of Charles XII, not to be cured of the vain ambition of making conquests. Where is the prince that can say, "I have more courage, more virtues, more resolution, greater strength of body, greater skill in war, or better troops, than Charles XII?" And yet, if, with all these advantages, and after so many victories, Charles was so unfortunate, what fate may other princes expect, who, with less capacity and fewer resources, shall entertain the same ambitious views?[35]

The message here seems clear to the point of heavy-handedness. In fact, it seems borrowed wholesale from "mirrors of princes" made popular by Renaissance humanists: what we are reading is not exactly a heroic epic or an inspiring account of military and political success, but a cautionary tale heavily permeated by irony. While Charles XII does achieve the status of an exemplary figure by the strength of his virtues and military skill, these merits ultimately mean nothing in the face of his undue ambition and, more importantly still, of History's own chaotic and uncaring nature. Voltaire was, of course, not the first to look to the past to bring this point across (Machiavelli had done so before him, and Polybius before Machiavelli), but the message is still carried out with particular bite in the passage

[35]Voltaire, *History of Charles XII* (1731) (New York, 1859), 185.

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above: all the strength in the world will not protect you from the vicissitudes of Fortune, and no man was ever mighty enough to safely tempt fate. Thus, while *Histoire de Charles XII* sets out to meet the pedagogical demands of neoclassical and late humanist historiography, death, failure, and misfortune seem to be always lurking around the corner.

And yet, the demise of the hero still manages to emerge in the work as something of a sudden and even shocking event. Part of the reason has to do with its anticlimactic nature. True enough, by the time they reach the final book of the narrative, readers are likely to be aware of Voltaire's seemingly ironic take on Charles and on military histories as a whole. While the *philosophe*'s account of the Swedish king begins in the trappings of a quasi-epic tale of underdog heroics (a prodigious young warrior leading a small kingdom against the imperialistic ambitions of the mighty Russian Empire of Peter the Great), this plot structure does not hold. By the halfway point—after Charles's disastrous defeat at the Battle of Poltava, meticulously narrated by Voltaire in Book IV—the king's time as a revived Alexander the Great (a title Charles gave himself, Voltaire makes it a point to mention) seems to be up. It has been cut short by a near-death experience, a disgraceful exile in the Ottoman Empire, and an all-but-lost kingdom. But even this rather extraordinary "plot twist" fails to prepare the reader for the quickness with which the hero meets his end in Book VIII. After a long narrative filled with histrionic, hyperbolic, and often absurd moments of heroism (as I will very soon demonstrate), Charles XII dies unceremoniously: shot in the head by an anonymous sniper while trying to besiege a minor fortress in Norway, itself a somewhat desperate attempt to reignite his failed campaign against Peter. And indeed, in bringing this moment to his reader, Voltaire seems to relish in its absurdity and abruptness:

> The king stood with almost the half of his body exposed to a battery of cannon pointed directly against the angle where he was. He was attended by two Frenchmen only; one of whom was M. Siquier, his aide-de-camp, a man of courage and conduct, who had entered into his service in Turkey, and was particularly attached to the Prince of Hesse; the other was this engineer [*ingénieur* Mégret, a Frenchman that Charles XII had hired to conduct his last siege]. The cannon fired upon them with grape shot, to which the king, as he stood behind them, was most exposed … While Schwerin was giving orders to Count Posse, a captain of the guards, and to one Kaulbar, his aide-de-camp, Siquier and Mégret saw the king fall upon the parapet, with a deep sigh. They ran to him; but he was already dead. A ball of half a pound had struck him on the right temple, and made a hole sufficient to receive three fingers at once. His head reclined upon the parapet; his left eye was beaten in, and the right one entirely beaten out of its socket. Though he expired the moment he received the wound, yet by a kind of instinctive motion, he had grasped the hilt of his sword in his hand, and still lay in that posture. At the sight of this shocking spectacle, Mégret, a man of a singular turn of mind, and of great indifference of temper, said, "Come, gentlemen, the play is ended, let us now go to supper."[36]

[36]Ibid., 447.

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As previously mentioned, this article will spend some time breaking down some of the poetic elements of this moment. Before that, however, it is important to situate it, and the book as a whole, in a broader context.

The complicated readership of *Histoire de Charles XII*

Despite not receiving much attention from readers old and new, the death of Charles XII in Voltaire's narrative seems designed to strengthen the book's reputation as a work of satire that, if not deliberately slanderous, was at least guilty of using the past for the purposes of entertaining, rather than educating, an audience.[37] This reputation is as old as *Histoire de Charles XII* itself. In fact, it first emerged from the king's own court: Joran Nordberg (Charles's chaplain and official historian) would offer the ironic compliment of praising the "vivacity of style" with which Voltaire maligned his hero, describing the *philosophe* like Voltaire himself described historian Antoine Varillas: as a skilled *liar*.[38] Others soon followed suit with similar attacks. Diplomat Aubry de la Montraye, who also knew the king personally and was present for some of the events narrated in *Histoire de Charles XII*, offered a series of critical remarks on the work which outlined more than fifty instances of mistake and willful misinformation on the part of Voltaire. The remarks were, ultimately, a rather roundabout way to make a simple point, namely that Voltaire was no historian, but rather a sort of base novelist who sacrificed erudition, factual exactitude, and a sense of rhetorical sobriety (in other words, history itself) at the altar of invention and gawdy stylistic showmanship.[39]

A few years after its publication, the Abbé Desfontaines would double down on these sentiments by calling *Histoire de Charles XII* a "bad novel" (*mauvais roman*), the work of an "[i]gnorant buffoon, written in the banter-like style of a bourgeois gossip [*une Cailette bourgeoise*] that weaves together adventures."[40] This sentiment was echoed in the personal notebooks of an even bigger heavyweight of the time, Montesquieu.[41] Even Condorcet, arguably Voltaire's most enthusiastic supporter in the late Enlightenment, in attempting to redeem *Histoire de Charles XII*, could not help but emphasize the *philosophe*'s "novelistic" ability to elicit his reader's interest over his substance and legitimacy as a historian.[42] By the turn of the

[37]Unsurprisingly, Voltaire himself encourages this reading of the book. In the Avant-Propos of his dedicated history of Peter the Great, he would describe his biography of Charles with enigmatic flippancy, as "more amusing than instructive." See Voltaire, "Histoire de l'empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand" (1759), in *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 16 (Paris, 1878), 371–639, at 394.

[38]See Jöran Anderson Nordberg, *Histoire de Charles XII, roi de Suede*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1742), 1: xii.

[39]"Everyone agrees that your book is very well written. This would suffice, one could say, in a novel, where invention dominates; but it is not enough for a history, where truth must rule without question, where one needs strength and nerves more so than grace and flourishes." La Montraye, quoted in Voltaire, "Notes sur les remarques de la Montraye," in Voltaire, *Oeuvres historiques* (Paris, 1957), 355–68, at 355–6, my translation. Original text: "Tout le monde convient que votre livre est très-bien écrit: cela suffirait, dit-on, pour un roman où l'invention domine; mais ce n'est pas assez pour une histoire où la vérité doit régner absolument, où il faut des nerfs et de la force plutôt que des grâces et des fleurs."

[40]Pierre-François Guyot Desfontaines, *La voltairomanie* (1738) (Exeter, 1983), 6, my translation.

[41]See Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *Pensées divers*, ed. Édouard Laboulaye, in *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1879), 149–81, at 162.

[42]See Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis of Condorcet, *Vie de Voltaire* (1789), in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1833), 189–292, at 217.

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nineteenth century, *Histoire de Charles XII* was seemingly caught in a widespread characterization of Voltaire as a well-intentioned amateur at best, or a perverse dilletante at worst. This was particularly the case in Germany, where proponents of the emerging Göttingen school elected the *philosophe* the antithesis of a trustworthy historian: too concerned with his own readership to be detail-oriented and faithful to the facts.[43]

The critical edge of these readings would, as we now know, eventually lose its sharpness. Indeed, the decades and centuries that followed Enlightenment poetics would see the generic tension that structured early critiques of *Histoire de Charles XII*—that is, the tension between histories and novels, between writing meant to "educate" and writing meant to "entertain"—begin to crumble, especially under the weight of the structuralist, post-structuralist, and narratological interventions of Paul Ricoeur, Roland Barthes, and, here too, Hayden White. We now accept, without making much of a fuss, that history can often (and unproblematically) assume the form of a "verbal invention" that relies on narratological techniques not unlike those employed by novelists and narrative poets.[44] Even more importantly, we know that neoclassical and Enlightenment writers already had that figured out: François Fénelon (to speak of an important influence in Voltaire's literary education), as early as 1712, already spoke of the importance of narrative cohesion and "poetic unity" in histories. Going even further, he already emphasized the fact that, in order for histories to be both understood and enjoyed, they should resemble not so much a compendium of random facts (relevant or irrelevant) displayed in chronological order – as Aristotle had suggested – but rather an epic poem, itself centered around a specific action or problem explained in terms of causes and consequences.[45]

Moreover, the very notion of a "historical satire" would cease to have any inherently negative connotations. At least since Nietzsche's essay "Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben" (On the Use and Abuse of History for Life) (1874), we have a conceptual framework with which to take seriously writings meant to rob the past of its grandiosity and overbearing exemplarity. To many contemporary readers of the Enlightenment, Nietzsche's idea of "critical history" is

[43]Here, famous German historian August Schlözer offers perhaps the most scathing critique of Voltaire's work: "The painter before he takes up his brush to paint history must not only know it already but ought to be familiar with it. As we are talking about history and not poetry or fiction, he must not draw any line that would not be true and could not be demonstrated to be true by other evidence. Let the painter of history by all means go about his business with fortitude, resolution, refinement, etc. If he does not, above all, paint truthfully, he has no place among the historians. Livy is a charming painter of Rome's first five centuries, but—as can be proved and has already been proved in Paris—he tells us things he could not possibly have known and, therefore, did not know. *Il m'importe beaucoup d'être lu, mais il m'importe peu d'être cru*, thought Livy, and Voltaire." August Ludwig Schlözer, "On Historiography" (1783), *History and Theory* 18/1 (1979), 41–51, at 44.

[44]White, of course, does remind us that narrative should not be understood as a kind of "ideal" or "natural" state of historical knowledge, and that plenty of important historians chose to abandon narrative modes of writing when the subject of their interests called for it. Still, narrative has remained, since antiquity, a common and often privileged way to produce and preserve knowledge of the past. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), 2.

[45]See François Fénelon, *Lettre à l'Académie* (1714) (Paris, 1864), 63.

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useful precisely as a means to legitimize works of historical irony as efforts in a "philosophical emancipation" from any tradition that had become a burden to modern freedom, spontaneity, and innovation. Simply put, ever since the mid-nineteenth century, it was no longer taboo—or even that original—to laugh at the past's remoteness, primitiveness, and outdatedness. White himself, who otherwise believed that Voltaire's distinction between "history" and "fable" was at best naive, did concede that this had very little to do with the potentially satirical aspects of his work.[46]

If, however, history's proximity to satires, epics, and novels lost some of its problematic or controversial aura from the nineteenth century onward, *Histoire de Charles XII* was still recognized as nothing other than a satirical history of a political figure, and an overtly "literary" one at that. The book's reputation had ceased to be negative, surely enough, but it did not otherwise change. Indeed, skipping ahead a few decades, we find this reputation reinstated in one of the most thorough and still, to this day, authoritative readings of the text: Lionel Gossman's essay "Voltaire's Charles XII: History into Art" (1963).

Unlike his predecessors (and even some of his successors), Gossman is not overtly invested in Voltaire's triumphs or failures as a historian in a strict sense. His argument is primarily formalistic: the strength and the narrative appeal of Voltaire's first history lie in its particular usage of a theatrical structure to distill a complex historical period into an antithesis between two dramatis personae, not unlike a morality play.[47] On one corner, we have Charles XII himself as the representative of decadent medieval militarism and chivalric excesses: a warrior king whose earnest devotion to his kingdom's independence is only matched by his hunger for glory in the battlefield. On the other corner, we see Charles's somber double: Peter the Great, who not only displays an incipient form of Enlightenment cosmopolitanism, but whose studious disposition and subtle preference for intellectual over military activity allow him, paradoxically enough, to build an empire to rival those of antiquity. Thus, if Charles thought of himself as Alexander the Great reincarnated, Voltaire presents Peter the Great, much like he would Louis XIV, as something altogether new: a sign of the emerging future of "philosopher kings" whose hopes Frederick the Great, decades later, would come to carry. It is this structure, in Gossman's mind, that allows Voltaire to fundamentally present the events of his first history as part of a "picaresque mock-epic" in which the chivalric hero of ancient histories resists, obliviously, his own outmodedness, only to be met with a disgraceful death at the end. In short, if *Histoire de Charles XII* is to Gossman a play (and a masterfully written one at that), the spectacle is *still* satirical and, ultimately, cautionary.[48] In White's own interpretation of Gossman's analysis, he brings this point out by calling *Histoire de Charles XII* a "near-tragedy, a tragedy

[46]See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 135–6.

[47]As recently as 2005, Anne Coudreuse would repeat (in much more schematic fashion) this position of Voltaire as a kind of *historien dramaturge*. See Anne Coudreuse, *Pathétique et pédagogie: La leçon de l'Histoire de Charles XII de Voltaire* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2005), 99, www.cairn.info/le-bonheur-de-la-litterature--9782130523031-page-99.htm.

[48]See Lionel Gossman, "Voltaire's Charles XII: History into Art," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 25 (1963), 691–720, at 691.

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which misfired because of the essential 'folly' of the aims that motivated the protagonist."[49]

Given Gossman's reliance on the notions of theater, theatricality, and tragicomedy, it is quite puzzling that he did not pay any close attention to the king's death scene in his article, seemingly the moment where Voltaire's text fully embraced its role as a kind of comedic play: "Come, gentlemen, the play is ended, let us now go to supper." Still, it is worth looking at the scene more closely here and unpacking some of the moments that can, indeed, facilitate a satirical reading of the work.

To begin with, one must consider that particular element of Voltairean prose that Italo Calvino would identify as the defining feature of works like *Candide*, namely the speed and the brio with which events take place.[50] More specifically, it is important to note that Charles XII dies without much warning, with an abruptness that is itself quite comedic. As we can see, the passage quoted previously is marked by a sudden and ambiguous shift from the imperfect past ("the king was [standing] exposed"/"le roi était exposé") to the pluperfect ("he had already died"/"il était déjà mort"), a transition that, in the broader sense of Voltaire's history, is almost anticlimactic: this mighty warrior whose exploits the reader digested through eight books of dense historical narrative dies without much pathos (or much of a fight). There are no last words, no dramatic suffering, and no struggle for survival. If we are to be entirely accurate, the actual "event" of death is omitted by Voltaire there. What we have is closer to a forensic reconstruction of said event from the remains of the royal body, like an autopsy. In short, Charles goes from king to corpse in a flash, too fast for us to actually see it happening.

The corpse itself, in fact, counts as a second satirical element in the scene. Brief as it is, the vivid depiction of the king's destroyed visage—his head grotesquely pierced and turned around, left eye caved into the skull, right eye dangling outside it—can be ranked as one of the most morbid (and crudest) in Voltaire's early corpus. For most readers of his work, this image produces a subversion of expectations typical of satirical plots: at the end of his military history, Voltaire gives us a warrior's death that, in open defiance to classical aesthetic values, refuses to also be a "beautiful death." As if to underline the strangeness of the moment, the author also has us witness it through the eyes of a man "singulier et indifférent," a man who stumbled into the drama only a few sentences prior to the hero's death. Bizarrely enough, this stranger (both to the reader and to the king) is given the privilege of announcing Charles's passing, which he delivers in comedically detached fashion, *as* a stranger. One can see a good degree of self-insertion here: not only is Mégret French (Voltaire makes it a point to mention), but also he, like the *philosophe*, cultivates a healthy sense of clarity and disinterest over "le spectacle" in front of him, announcing the "end of the play" in the same breath as he announces his dinner plans. To put it simply, the engineer is, at the very least, a dubiously convenient narrative device: the right witness, with the right amount of wit, placed at the ideal moment to craft a punchline that, from its very presence in a historical work, infuses it with a slightly irreverent attitude.

[49]White, *Metahistory*, 50.
[50]See Italo Calvino, *Why Read the Classics?* (New York, 1999).

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It seems, then, that we are firmly placed in the realm of the satirical, with this moment serving as an explicit confirmation of Voltaire's warnings on the dangers of "la folie de conquêtes." More than that, it appears that this ending also reinforces Gossman's perception of the work as a "mock-epic" in which the traditional hero of ancient military narratives is broken, humiliated, and ridiculed. And yet, the question whether or not the work is a "satire" or a "mock-epic" bypasses a much more prominent discussion. In fact, it obfuscates a more basic—and thus more central—poetic and intellectual challenge buried deep within *Histoire de Charles XII*, namely the challenge of how to write about chivalric heroes "historically," and how to integrate them into the domain of modern military histories. To put a finer point on it, Voltaire's first kingly biography is grappling with a fundamental epistemic question of how to make sense of Charles XII as a historical and literary figure, and how to properly recognize his existence through the medium of historiography. In order for us to get a better viewing angle on this particular issue, it is useful to consider the very instrument of Charles's demise—that is, the bullet *itself*—and how it enters into Voltaire's narrative.

The bullet that ended chivalry …

Bullets and firearms are, curiously enough, something of a motif in *Histoire de Charles XII*. From a broader intellectual perspective, it is not hard to understand why: Voltaire—whose incipient attention to the history of industrial and scientific development earned him the respect of Isaiah Berlin—is quite interested in the way firearms signaled the end of traditional military affairs such as they had existed since antiquity. More, in fact: *Histoire de Charles XII* is filled with observations about the impact of modern artillery in the social, economic, and political development of European kingdoms. This is particularly visible in Voltaire's analysis of Peter the Great, who, unlike Charles, integrated the development of modern artillery in an ambitious project of modernization both of the Russian Army and of Russia itself (a project that also included a renewal of the navy, the founding of St Petersburg, and a large-scale moral reeducation of Russian soldiers).

More importantly still, as a poet and storyteller, Voltaire is attentive to the way the existence of firearms interferes with the structure, tropes, and poetic sensibilities of traditional military narratives. Bluntly put, the question of how to write about heroism in a world riddled with bullets is central to the composition of *Histoire de Charles XII*. This question emerges as early as Book II, when the king—by then well into his first campaign against Russia, Denmark, and Poland—has his first encounter with muskets on the battlefield:

> The king, who had never in his life before heard a discharge of muskets loaded with balls, asked Major Stuart, who stood next to him, what meant that whistling which he heard. "It is the noise of the musket balls—which they fire upon you," replied the major. "Very well," said the king, "henceforward that shall be my music." At that instant the major received a shot in his shoulder, and a lieutenant on the other side of him fell dead at his feet.[51]

[51]Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 228–9.

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It is hard, especially for modern audiences, not to read this passage as humorous, and, knowing what is to come, as a kind of anticipation of Charles's own death much later in the narrative. Indeed, the same kind of sudden spurt of violence punctuates this moment, offering readers an early reminder that the rules of engagement have changed and that bullets may not obey the conventional pacing of traditional military encounters. As with the king's death scene, Voltaire demonstrates here, too, an interest in bullets as tools of poetic *interruption*, as a way to subvert and cut short readers' expectations of a dramatic denouement.

And yet, this moment also signals Charles's own astonishing incompatibility with the world he lives in. In fact, if the king's response to the sound of flying bullets may appear as a moment of comical bravado, it also proves to be true within the poetic logic of Voltaire's narrative: bullets and canons would, indeed, provide a kind of bombastic, glorious fanfare to Charles's military adventures. The king himself is shot at a few different times in the early books of *Histoire de Charles XII*, somehow managing to get by unscathed.[52] In Book II, Voltaire gives us a particularly *Candide*-like episode, where one of the king's generals is killed by cannon fire while standing inches away from the king himself, and shortly after Charles tries to warn the man of the dangers of enemy cannonades. At this moment in the narrative, Voltaire cannot help but point out the effect of this extraordinary episode in Charles's own theatrical self-fashioning, remarking that

> the death of this man, killed exactly in his stead, and because he [Charles] had endeavored to save him, contributed not a little to confirm him in the opinion, which he always entertained, of absolute predestination; and made him believe that his fate, which had preserved him in such a singular manner, reserved him for the execution of greater undertakings.[53]

Finally, in Book VIII, we reach something of an absurd apotheosis of this motif, with the king refusing to stop dictating his letters to Sweden even as his camp is being torn apart by the enemy's cannons.[54] In short, if bullets make music in the world of *Histoire de Charles XII*, it is music that Charles himself is able to dance to with unnatural skill; until, of course, he no longer is.

Given all of this dramatic buildup to Charles XII's seemingly bulletproof body, the death scene appears to indeed function as a kind of ironic resolution: an unexpected chord to end the book's poetic cadence. After so many brushes with death and so much disregard for the destructive power of firearms, it seems the times finally catch up with Charles XII's arrogance in definitive and brutal fashion, as one single shot, by a single anonymous sniper, is able to bring a sudden and unceremonious end to his saga. And yet, looking at the motif of bullets from the very start allows us to visualize Voltaire's first history from a significantly different angle. More specifically,

[52]The following passage conveys particularly well Voltaire's usage of *romanesque* elements in his first historical narrative: "At the first discharge of the enemy's muskets, he received a shot in his neck; but as it was a spent ball, it lodged in the folds of his black neckcloth, and did him no harm. His horse was killed under him. M. de Sparr told me that the king mounted another horse with great agility, saying "These fellows make me go through my exercises." Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 235.

[53]Ibid., 261–2.

[54]Ibid., 425.

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it allows us to see that the fundamental poetic and epistemological problem permeating the first books of *Histoire de Charles XII* (and the later ones too) is not the problem of satire or mockery, but rather a more complicated question of how to preserve a history (and a "modern history" at that) turned "unbelievable." This is true even as the book seemingly arrives at its satirical high point.

Voltaire's Thermopylae: Charles at Bender

As previously mentioned, readers of *Charles XII* have often pointed to Books V and VI as the moment when the veil of dignity is lifted and Voltaire's history reveals itself as a satire, as a piece of slander, or as a mock-heroic work. This is, in many ways, quite understandable. The evidence for these assumptions seems overwhelming at this point, with Charles, now a defeated and wounded warrior, quickly becoming a diplomatic problem for his Ottoman hosts. Issues begin when he attempts to turn said hosts into war allies and reignite his campaign against Russia and Poland, and from there they escalate into a crescendo of increasingly extravagant demands on the Swedish side and an increasingly heated relationship with local authorities at Bender. We reach something of a climax at the halfway point of Book VI, with the Ottoman pasha—under orders from the Sultan himself—laying siege to Charles's estate, after the king has refused to peacefully leave the empire and return to his kingdom (a trip that the Sultan, desperate not to break with rules of hospitality, was ready to pay for himself). One could even look at the more anecdotal elements of the narrative—a particularly vibrant one being Charles's utter ineptitude at his newly acquired hobby, chess—as indications that Voltaire's interests in his story have gone through a subtle but meaningful change.[55]

However, these debasing circumstances are but the backdrop to something altogether more important to Voltaire: the simple fact that the king, alongside an entourage of three hundred men (mostly composed of servants) was able to barricade himself in his own house and block the advances of the Ottoman pasha and two thousand Tartars and janissaries at his command. The number—and its literary genealogy—is likely not lost on Voltaire. Indeed, if Book VI can be considered a burlesque rendition of Herodotus' narration of the "Battle of Thermopylae," the comedy is itself less important than the reality that something so ludicrous happened in the recent past (as opposed to the nebulous and quasi-mythical world of Herodotean antiquity). Simply put, the episode at Bender forced the historian to confront—and more radically still, *inhabit*—the wild imagination of living witnesses who saw the implausible firsthand. Voltaire was not oblivious to this challenge:

> If only two or three historians had written about the adventure of King Charles XII—who insisted on staying unwelcomed in the estates of his benefactor the Sultan, and who fought alongside his servants [*ses domestiques*] against an army of janissaries and Tartars—I would have suspended my judgment.

[55]Indeed, Voltaire cannot help but to add some color to this moment: "By way of amusement, he sometimes played at chess; and, as the characters of men are often discovered by the most trifling incidents, it may not be improper to observe, that he always advanced the king first at that game, and made greater use of him than of any of the other men, by which he was always a loser." Ibid., 333.

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> However, having spoken to many eyewitnesses and having never heard this adventure questioned, it became necessary to believe in it; after all, if they are neither wise nor ordinary, these actions also do not contradict the laws of nature or the character of the hero. The story of the man in the iron mask [*le masque de fer*] would have seemed to me a *roman* had I only heard it from the son-in-law of the surgeon who took care of this man in his last illness. But the officer who guarded him at the time also confirmed the story to me, alongside the sons of the ministers of state (who are still alive and have been keeping this secret) and all of those who must have been aware of it. As such, I have granted this story a great degree of probability, but a degree nonetheless inferior to that of the affair at Bender, because that adventure had even more witnesses than the story of the man in the iron mask.[56]

It is important to acknowledge where this passage comes from: the very same article "History" which is frequently quoted as evidence of Voltaire's "lack of patience" towards the "incredible"—or worse still, lack of a refined historical imagination.

I would argue, however, that the words above show the opposite, namely a willingness to recognize the potential for the *romanesque* and the grotesque embedded into "historical truth." In a sense, it is not surprising that Voltaire brings up the events at Bender alongside the famous story of the *masque de fer*, which Alexandre Dumas, roughly a century later, would make the subject of one of his most popular serialized novels. Both tales inhabited that liminal space between "the possible" and "the likely" that, to most neoclassical writers (and especially to *encyclopédistes* like Jaucourt and d'Alembert) gave life to most *romans*.[57] Nevertheless, both tales were *also* inescapably "historical" inasmuch as they were witnessed and relayed by multiple individuals. Thus, rather than playing the role of harsh "historical pyrrhonist," quickly labeling as "poetic nonsense" anything that did not appear to him as plausible, we see Voltaire here as a resigned skeptic, willing to lay down his own suspicions and defenses in the face of eyewitnesses and of a well corroborated narrative ("il a bien fallu la croire").[58]

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[56]Voltaire, "Histoire." Original text: "Si deux ou trois historiens seulement avoient écrit l'avanture du roi Charles XII, qui s'obstinant à rester dans les états du sultan son bienfaiteur, malgré lui, se battit avec ses domestiques contre une armée de janissaires & de Tartares, j'aurois suspend mon jugement; mais ayant parlé à plusieurs témoins oculaires, & n'ayant jamais entendu révoquer cette action en doute, il a bien fallu la croire, parce qu'après tout, si elle n'est ni sage, ni ordinaire, elle n'est contraire ni aux loix de la nature, ni au caractere du héros. L'histoire de l'homme au masque de fer auroit passé dans mon esprit pour un roman, si je ne la tenois que du gendre du chirurgien, qui eut soin de cet homme dans sa derniere maladie. Mais l'officier qui le gardoit alors, m'ayant aussi attesté le fait, & tous ceux qui devoient en être instruits me l'ayant confirmé, & les enfans des ministres d'état, dépositaires de ce secret, qui vivent encore, en étant instruits comme moi, j'ai donné à cette histoire un grand dégré de probabilité, dégré pourtant audessous de celui qui fait croire l'affaire de Bender, parce que l'avanture de Bender a eu plus de témoins que celle de l'homme au masque de fer."

[57]See Jaucourt, "Roman," in Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu; Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "Conte, Fable, Roman," in Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie*, http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu.

[58]I am, of course, not the first to make this claim. In 2006, Gareth Gollrad had already argued that Voltaire's reliance on eyewitnesses in *Histoire de Charles XII* was a calculated move to disarm accusations of implausibility. More than that, Gollrad reminds us that the modern attacks against Voltaire's trust in

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The question of truth, then, seems to be resolved at an epistemic level. Poetically, however, Book VI still poses problems, for it also *challenges* one's willingness to surrender suspicion by piling up, in rapid succession, a series of events so extravagant that they muddle the distinction between the plausible and the implausible, as well as the distinction between the dignified and the farcical. Here we see Charles calmly playing chess with his captain after barricading his own house, seemingly unconcerned by the army outside. We see the king's servants (including, Voltaire makes it a point to mention, clerks, cooks, priests, and secretaries) being forced to take up defensive posts, "for with him [Charles] everyone was a soldier."[59] We see the king promoting a servant to captain on the spot, after the man suggests that the entourage move to a neighboring house to escape a fire that has broken out. We watch as the unprepared group of Swedes hold their ground for a whole day and manage to kill two hundred enemy soldiers. And, perhaps most impactfully, we see yet again Charles being shot at point blank during the skirmishes, but only losing a small piece of his ear (with the bullet going on to wound the man behind him much more severely).

These are just a few of many examples of events that, while not impossible to believe, do raise—perhaps playfully—a very real question of history's relationship with the implausible. As Anne Coudreuse suggests, Voltaire's definition of "historical truth" in *Histoire de Charles XII* is bound by a concern—at once ethical and aesthetic—with the hero's "character."[60] But she fails to acknowledge the complexities of the statement given that the actions of the character in question were, themselves, "well beyond the plausible" ("bien loin au delà du vraisemblable").[61] Voltaire, however, was eminently aware of such complexities. One could even make the case that he sought to *celebrate* them here. As the burlesque adventures in Bender unfold, it is easy to forget the rather obvious fact that the same history could have been written without including any *romanesque* extravagance whatsoever. This is, in fact, the path other historians took when narrating the same events. As the editorial notes added to the 1878 edition of the text very helpfully state, "M. Norberg, who was not present at this adventure, has, in this particular part of his history, only copied the account of Voltaire; but he has mangled it. He has suppressed some interesting circumstances, and has not been able to justify the

such eyewitnesses are, in fact, anachronistic. To claim that Voltaire lacked "historical objectivity" because he failed to account for the biases of his testimonials is to forget that the very notion of "objectivity" was somewhat alien to him. Likewise, to claim that Voltaire did not account for the influence of discourse (*récit*) (and how it might shape his testimonial's idea of the truth) is to forget that, to him, the historian's work was always (and precisely) constrained by the perspective of others. Much like a judge, the historian could only get a partial view of things based on his witnesses' testimonials and had to form a cohesive and complete picture of historical affairs using his or her own imagination and common sense. See Gareth Gollrad, "Le siècle de Louis XIV: Tableau et témoignage," in *Voltaire et le grand Siècle* 2006/10 (2006), 39–61, at 44–5.

[59]Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 381.

[60]Coudreuse, *Pathétique et pédagogie*, 100.

[61]Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII* (1731), in *Oeuvres complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 16 (Paris, 1878), 13–368, at 351. I have chosen to do my own translation of the original text here to remain close to Voltaire's vocabulary. The English translation of *Histoire de Charles XII* that I have been using throughout this article, while overall excellent, takes a few too many liberties with this line and translates "bien au delà du vraisemblable" as "border(ing) on the marvellous."

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temerity of Charles XII."[62] This assessment, if harsh (and perhaps a bit biased), is not altogether incorrect. While Book XIV of Nordberg's own history of Charles XII goes into great detail on the king's stay at Bender, his focus lies mostly on the diplomatic tensions that led to the siege, covering the battle itself in but a few pages and including none of the extravagant behavior that Voltaire's version of Charles XII displays.[63]

One certainly could, following Desfontaines and other critics of *Histoire de Charles XII*, assume that Voltaire's inclusion of such *romanesque* extravagances was part of a conscious effort to degrade the seriousness of a historical narrative and transform it into a silly adventure that could only cater to the lesser intellects of the bourgeois masses. And in fairness, it is not obvious, from reading his kingly biography, how Voltaire would think to defend himself from such accusations. In fact, his ending to Book VI is quite vague on what one may take away from the affair at Bender: "It was on the 12th of February, 1713, that this strange event happened—an event that was followed by very remarkable consequences."[64]

Still, one could find an alternative (and more redemptive) explanation for Book VI in the simple fact that, to Voltaire, an encounter with "strangeness" was a common feature of history as a narrative of the great and the extraordinary. This encounter was, of course, not inevitable: Louis XIV's magnanimous reign, to touch on the *philosophe*'s preferred example of "grandeur" in modern history, remained firmly planted in the realm of historical plausibility, even as it emerged as a thoroughly rare and extraordinary occurrence in the tapestry of world events.[65] Still, grandeur, to Voltaire, was a complicated category that, while necessary for historical accounts to achieve their poetic identity, also pushed history itself away from the familiar waters of the dignified and the easily believable. With that in mind, I can move into some concluding remarks.

Conclusion: "cet Achille à trouvé son Homère."

In his analysis of Enlightenment modernity, Dan Edelstein makes the case that one of the biggest innovations of eighteenth-century historians was the adoption of a newly redefined concept of "society" as the gravitational center of all historical analysis. To Enlightenment philosophers, any modern history that hoped to be taken seriously needed to be a "social history"—a history not of individuals, but of the development of human collectives in all of their different aspects (art, sciences, philosophy, culture, modes of government, and so on).[66] In Edelstein's analysis,

[62]Editorial note in Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 388. Original text: "M. Nordberg, qui n'était pas présent à cet événement, n'a fait que suivre ici dans son histoire celle de M. de Voltaire; mais il l'a tronquée, il en a supprimé les circonstances intéressantes, et n'a pu justifier la témérité de Charles XII." Voltaire, "Histoire de Charles XII," 302.

[63]See Nordberg, *Histoire de Charles XII*, 3: 63–7.

[64]Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 388.

[65]Here I am referring to the often-quoted introduction to "Le siècle de Louis XIV," where Voltaire states that the Sun King's reign was so unique that only three other "ages" in mankind's history (Alexander's Greece, Augustus' Rome, and the European Renaissance) ever came close to matching its contributions to culture. See Voltaire, "Le siècle de Louis XIV" (1751), in Voltaire, *Oeuvres historiques*, 605–1274, at 616.

[66]See Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago, 2010), 31–6.

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the adoption of this model was a response to certain demands that dominated the philosophical and cultural conversation around history in the eighteenth century. The most prominent was likely a demand for a "socially useful" historiography that would introduce "the yardstick with which progress, utility, and greatness would henceforth be measured."[67] But this newly developed social history also responded to a parallel demand for what Edelstein calls a "modest epistemology": a new critical method that would reject abstract historical explanations in favor of more humble, but more empirically observable, claims.[68] In other words, the Enlightenment, to Edelstein, sought to free historical analysis from the fantasies of Scholastic philosophy and, better still, from the cult of heroes and gods (or God) that connected the European literary tradition from Virgil's *Aeneid* to Bossuet's *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*.

It is no surprise to find that Edelstein places Voltaire among the emerging "social historians" of the eighteenth century. As I myself stated here, around the time when *Charles XII* was being written, the *philosophe* already displayed a marked interest in questions of social, cultural, and industrial development.[69] Still, in making the case for the emergence of social history in the eighteenth century, Edelstein is inevitably drawn to Voltaire's "Le siècle de Louis XIV" (The Age of Louis XIV) (1751), a work that seemingly (and perhaps playfully) presents itself as a type of kingly biography, only to shed that disguise in the very opening lines of the introduction and announce much loftier and innovative goals.[70]

If, however, the Voltaire of "Le siècle de Louis XIV" can be considered a type of social historian, the Voltaire of *Charles XII* does not fit this mold so easily. More importantly still, he shows that the transition *away* from a heroic/mythical model of historical writing was itself a complicated process that was met with different types of resistance from the past itself. This is where I hope to contribute to the conversation surrounding both Voltaire and the historical thought of the Enlightenment.

In this article, I have sought to show that, throughout *Histoire de Charles XII*, Voltaire is grappling with a specific problem (at once poetic and epistemic) posed by the emergence of an implausible figure in modern history, or better yet, by a "mythical" and fabulous character that insisted on presenting himself "historically." This problem has, in my view, been insufficiently explored by readers of the work, and its complexity has been visibly underestimated. Labeling *Histoire de Charles XII* as a kind of "mock-heroic play," or as a model for crude "satirical histories" meant only to expose the "folly" of past times, is to ignore Voltaire's awareness of history's own ambivalence as simultaneously grandiose and decadent, and as inherently contiguous with the domain of poetry. True enough, this awareness can be lost on readers who see the *philosophe*'s biography of Charles XII as a

[67]Ibid., 36.

[68]See ibid., 33.

[69]Nicholas Cronk has effectively argued that these interests emerge as early as Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* (in the late 1720s), themselves a prototype for the "cultural histories" that the Enlightenment—and Voltaire himself—would popularize. See Nicholas Cronk, "Introduction," in Voltaire, *Lettres sur les anglais* (Voltaire Foundation, *Les Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, vol. 6A(I)) (Oxford, 2022), 78–85.

[70]As the famous lines go: "Ce n'est pas seulement la vie de Louis XIV qu'on prétend écrire; on se propose un plus grand objet. On veut essayer de peindre à la postérité, non les actions d'un seul homme, mais l'esprit des hommes dans le siècle le plus éclairé qui fut jamais." Voltaire, "Le siècle de Louis XIV," 616.

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prelude to his future works on Peter the Great and Louis XIV. As Voltaire's own intellectual interests move ever closer to the study of modern kings, the problem of the implausible and the *romanesque* begins to fade from his historical accounts (although I would make the case that it never fully disappears from his horizon of concerns). Quite simply, after Charles, Voltaire himself—perhaps deliberately—moves into less poetically ambivalent histories.

This, however, does not erase the fact that historical narratives, to the *philosophe*, always carried within themselves the potential for poetic and epistemic opacity. In that sense, Voltaire's constant allusions to Charles XII as some kind of reincarnated Alexander the Great (allusions that, far from satirical, often emerged from a place of quasi-belief) are meaningful.[71] In the *philosophe*'s narrative, Charles indeed functions as a remnant (or perhaps an "echo") of a time when it was only possible to speak of the past "poetically"; that is, with a language capable of accommodating its shocking and implausible grandiosity.[72] Historian Auguste Geffroy, writing about *Histoire de Charles XII* for the *Revue de deux mondes* in 1869 (and anticipating many of Gossman's insights about the work), captured this spirit well when he argued that the greatest contribution of Voltaire's book was precisely its language and its ability to account for Charles's extraordinary character. This, much more than the endless erudition of Swedish historians, saved Charles XII from an undeserved fate as an obscure monarch with a short and inconsequential reign. The verdict was clear: under Voltaire's pen, "that Achilles found his Homer" ("cet Achille a trouvé son Homère").[73]

The notion of Homer as a historian may appear entirely antithetical to Voltaire's imagination, especially if one sees him as the staunch pyrrhonist of the Enlightenment. This, however, is exactly how he saw Homeric poems, if not as histories in a strict sense, then as adequate registers of a heroic past understood as "historical" by Homer's audience. Even more importantly, the same spirit seemed to animate

[71]The following passage (from Book III) places Voltaire very far from any satirical spirit: "It is hard to say how far this young conqueror might have carried his resentment and his arms, had fortune favored his designs. At that time nothing appeared impossible to him. He had even sent several officers privately into Asia and Egypt, to take plans of the towns, and to examine into the strength of those countries. Certain it is, that if ever a prince was able to overturn the empire of the Turks and Persians, and from thence pass into Italy, it was Charles XII. He was as young as Alexander, as brave, as enterprising, more indefatigable, more robust, and more temperate; and the Swedes, perhaps, were better soldiers than the Macedonians. But such projects, which are called divine when they succeed, are regarded only as chimeras when they prove abortive." Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 298–9.

[72]Here I am explicitly following Pierre Force's general theory about Voltairean history. As he has demonstrated, Voltaire's distinction between "ancient" and "modern" history was neither qualitative (that is, a distinction between a "bad" and a "good" history) nor merely chronological (that is, a distinction between "epochs"). Rather, it was a rhetorical, poetic, and imaginative distinction between two different ways of interpreting and representing the world. To the *philosophe*, the recent past was the only period in which it was possible to speak of historical phenomena without slipping into the conventions of myth and the language of epic poetry. The further one walked backwards in time, the harder it was to keep the two apart. In this article, I have sought to bolster this position by adding one bit of nuance to it, namely that Charles XII seems to sit *precisely* at the cusp of that transition and that his history largely underscores the transition itself. See Pierre Force, "Voltaire and the Necessity of Modern History," *Modern Intellectual History* 6/3 (2009), 457–84.

[73]Auguste Geffroy, "Le Charles XII de Voltaire et le Charles XII de l'histoire," *Revue des deux mondes* 84 (1869), 360–90, at 361.

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the birth of historiography itself at the hands of Herodotus. While Voltaire was quick to denounce Herodotus' overreliance on secondhand accounts as material for his own narratives, he also recognized that the so-called "Father of History" earned that title at the precise moment when he described "Xerxes' prodigious preparations to subjugate Greece and then Europe as a whole." It was under the sign of this singularly extraordinary feat—so extraordinary, in fact, that it left readers in a state of shock, much like Charles XII's own—that Herodotus, in Voltaire's eyes, became "the model of historians" ("le modele des historiens").[74] Yet he also became something else altogether, namely a double of Homer, who offered "an admirable spectacle" that would, like Homer's narrative of the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, become the model to which every modern military history should, from then on, be compared.[75]

Thus the problem of how to do justice to the extraordinary and the implausible was not antithetical to historical writing in Voltaire's mind. Quite the opposite: it lay at the very foundations of historiography as a literary genre. While Voltaire's later incursions in the history of the recent past may have kept him away from such a problem, Charles XII signaled precisely an intrusion of "the ancient" into both the world of contemporary politics *and* the historian's own text. This intrusion posed problems for both, as Voltaire himself would recognize in his poignant eulogy to the Swedish hero in Book VIII. Regarding the former, it created a quixotic incompatibility between the hero's virtues and the world he was meant to inhabit: "His great qualities, any one of which would have been sufficient to immortalize another prince, proved pernicious to his country."[76] In that sense, it is unsurprising that, in Voltaire's *La pucelle d'Orléans* (The Maid of Orleans), Charles XII is referred to as "le Quichotte du nord." Regarding the latter, however, the intrusion of the ancient left the historian with the arduous task of representing a figure that, far from burlesque, was virtuous to both a destructive and a *self-destructive* degree: "He carried all the virtues of the hero to such an excess as rendered them no less dangerous than the opposite vices."[77]

In a sense, then, *Histoire de Charles XII* stands as a thoroughly unique, paradoxical, and even grotesque example of a historical narrative: an "ancient history of the recent past." This paradox was certainly not compatible with the hermeneutics and the literary taste of Voltaire's own time, and so it was that the book was seen in the same way many Enlightenment readers saw ancient histories themselves: as novels both exciting and, sometimes for that very reason, dangerous to an unprepared mind. And yet, Voltaire himself, without ever having to state it, makes the case for the impossibility of writing about Charles XII in any other fashion. As he enters the theater of modern military histories, the Swedish Quixote challenges—at times, seemingly intentionally—the historian's ability to represent him as a modern historical figure.

[74]In using the word "shock," I am of course gesturing towards Larry Norman's famous study of Enlightenment historical aesthetics. As he suggests there, the literary experience of antiquity in the eighteenth century was very much defined by its ability to produce shock in audiences. More specifically, Norman understands "shock" itself as the effect of gazing upon a world rendered remote (if not unrecognizable) by the passage of time, an effect that can be modulated either negatively (in which case "shock" becomes "revulsion") or positively (in which case "shock" becomes "awe" or "longing"). See Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago, 2011).

[75]See Voltaire, "Histoire," my translations.

[76]Voltaire, *History of Charles XII*, 448.

[77]Ibid., 448.

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This challenge, I would argue, lies at the foundation of the "play" that M Mégret—a modern man *par excellence*—is called to close; a "play" that was the comedy not so much of a naive king unaware of his own arrogance and weakness, but of a decadent culture (of antiquity itself) deliberately staging its own end and its own memory. On that note, it is perhaps appropriate to underline an element of poignant heroism embedded in the brutality of Charles's final moment: his hand placed at the hilt of his sword. Even after being shot in the head, Voltaire's Swedish Quixote still manages to strike the pose of a warrior, to display his political, moral, and aesthetic stature. This detail (both small and of dubious plausibility) seems to push us into a distinctively ambiguous territory. In other words, if *Histoire de Charles XII* is a spectacle, it is a spectacle both funny and sad, that elicits both empathy and laughter, and that, above all else, remains a kind of "quixotic history" of Europe in the wake of its own violent modernity.

As mentioned, there is a genuine temptation to label Voltaire's first history an "early effort" in the genre, one that would carry the lingering limitations of inexperience (and whose strengths would only really blossom in future endeavors). This image of the work has been implicitly adopted by many of its readers, who either have had little to say about it, or who (like Pocock) tried to integrate it into a master narrative of Voltaire's steady, continuous growth as a "philosophical historian." But there are dangers in this assumption: it can lead us to the mistake of reading the history of Voltairean (and neoclassical) historiography as a teleology, as if the skeptical anxieties and concerns with plausibility displayed in "Le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire" and the *Essai sur les moeurs* were always meant to germinate from Voltaire's writings. In looking at the extravagant and theatrical elements that go into the *philosophe*'s depiction of Charles XII, however, we can reach a different conclusion. We can see that Voltaire's historical imagination began not, as it were, with the separation of "history" from "fable," but with a study of their complex, intricate, and even inevitable intersections.

If, as many have pointed out (including Voltaire himself), *Histoire de Charles XII* sought primarily to amuse, it did not do so by framing its hero (transgressive as he was) as a satirical figure about whom no serious history could ever be produced. Rather, the book sought to offer a type of philosophical delight associated with the possibility of gazing upon a (dying) world simultaneously mythical and historical. In that sense, instead of framing Voltaire as a febrile skeptic, doggedly pursuing a "plausible past" from which "proper lessons" could be learned, the biography of Charles allows us to see him as a proto-romantic and somewhat melancholic historian who understood (like Diderot eventually would) that no form of progress and no genre of truth could be achieved without some kind of poetic sacrifice.

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