

## ERASMUS AND VOLTAIRE: A REVIEW

Gerald Gillespie

Stanford University

- 90 Quinones, Ricardo J. *Erasmus and Voltaire: Why They Still Matter*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2010. xix+222 pp. ISBN 978-1-4426-4054-2.

This book is a crowning achievement in several senses. It provides an answer to a complicated major question in cultural history (succinctly suggested in the subtitle), and the answer serves as a defining marker for the intellectual situation of the today larger Eurocentric world at the recent boundary where modernism and postmodernism rub shoulders. As a companion volume, *Erasmus and Voltaire* also offers a brilliant demonstration of the complex methodology that Quinones's earlier breakthrough work *Dualisms: The Agons of the Modern World* (2007) laid out in pursuing a series of case studies of contemporaries over a developmental track from the Renaissance to the present. Moreover, it demonstrates how Quinones, who could have rested very comfortably on the laurels earned by his accomplishments in medieval, Renaissance, and modern studies, instead has built upon his own impressive repertory of diachronic and synchronic cross-referentiality and reached for a higher synthesis. Thus his two last books, *Erasmus and Voltaire* following *Dualisms*, together pose a remarkable challenge to the notion of a collapse of grand narratives widespread in recent decades. Quinones has arrived at this juncture by way of such major latitudinal and longitudinal monographs as *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (1972), *Dante Alighieri* (1979), *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (1985), *The Changes of Cain* (1991), and *Foundation Sacrifice in Dante's "Commedia"* (1994). *Erasmus and Voltaire* firmly asserts several themes of the great conversation over the ages—a conversation his work reinstates as a reality. It tallies a huge range of evidence bearing on the processes whereby canons grow and metamorphose longer

term, and both world-historical figures and key works dialogue with predecessors and find their way to us.

Not surprisingly, Quinones feels a special kinship with James Joyce and Thomas Mann as exponents of an enriched twentieth-century consciousness that recognizes the recurrence of basic human types and themes in deeper-lying rhythms over the centuries. Together, *Dualisms* and *Erasmus and Voltaire* can lend new life to such approaches as reception aesthetics, intellectual history, imagology, mentalities, psychohistory, and literary sociology. It is no exaggeration to say that these two books exceed the “merely” literary sphere and are useful in the human sciences broadly defined, bearing analogy to attempts from the social history side such as the ambitious *Generations: The History of America’s Future 1584 to 2069* (1991) by William Strauss and Neil Howe. Indeed, in *Erasmus and Voltaire*, Quinones proposes there is predictability to the extent that we can and should expect the return of certain lead figures in newer guises and contexts and a fluctuation in dominance by particular discursive modes. He illustrates this principle in the fascinating part three of the volume where he treats the cases of the twinned antipodes Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger. One of his explicit aims is to anticipate a righting of the balance after many recent lopsided decades in which phenomena associated with Heidegger have predominated. The pattern is familiar from prior cultural episodes. Cassirer, champion and renewer of Enlightenment values, and heir to the lineage of Erasmus and Voltaire, becomes the natural opponent and debate partner to Heidegger as darkness creeps into European thought and life of the early twentieth century. While early allies like the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers broke with Heidegger after the woodland sage’s perverse turn toward the Nazis, the latter’s influence nonetheless pervaded the rest of the century in a variety of manifestations. Quinones acknowledges that the pair Cassirer-Heidegger started as and remained opponents reading the world differently, whereas the four main pairs in *Dualisms* (including Erasmus-Luther and Voltaire-Rousseau) were involved in a more elaborate “itinerary of encounter, a longer run of development, the besetting entanglements of thought and belief and personality,” and exhibited “prior affinities...joined beliefs that when transgressed by collisions of temperaments and events resulted in nuclear explosions” (EV 190-91).

In elaborating the spiritual line from Erasmus over Voltaire down to modernism, Quinones employs the approach seen in his earlier *Dualisms*, but enormously enhances the evidence of the interconnectedness of factors in individual lives and cultural history. The result is a finely nuanced picture of a living flow in which successive generations of creative personalities feel ineluctably drawn to struggle with certain contemporaries and discover their relation to forebears as an intrinsic part of their own identity and role. Everything comes into play: family origins, education, temperament, fateful accidents on life’s pathway, problematics of the age, the in retrospect seemingly virtual necessity of encounter with key antagonists. At any nodular point represented in the life of Erasmus and Voltaire, Quinones spins multiple

threads that attach to the wealth of social types, economic realities, political forces, and ideas in a surrounding diachronic field. Thus we gain a more deeply informed sense of a polysemous system of related European cultures that participate in a larger civilization. For those readers today who recognize themselves to be imbricated in this enormous story, Quinones's account of the distinct, yet interrelated grand figures of the Renaissance and Enlightenment possesses all the vibrancy of high drama. Curious non-Eurocentric readers, too, will hardly fail to experience the excitement inherent in Quinones's searching investigation into real lives that are at the same time exemplary of crucial understandings which have animated the larger European and Eurocentric world in the past half of a millennium. In fulfilling their individual destinies, the pairs Erasmus-Luther and Voltaire-Rousseau take on the character of "world-historical" figures in a kind of modified, undogmatic Hegelian framework. There is no ruling zeitgeist presumed to be at work, just an actual heritage that emerged out of the Middle Ages, and no doctrine of historical progress is proclaimed;

92 yet a multi-stranded cultural dialectic seems to weave itself, constantly reproducing a "both-and" rather than an "either-or" configuration of factors.

The book *Erasmus and Voltaire* possesses a further engaging quality that is difficult to define and can best be appreciated in the course of reading. Quinones's findings are grounded in a laborious consideration of documents of all kinds from the times of these protagonist figures, and he thoughtfully passes these findings through many filters constituted by a variety of critical commentary on the figures and their times over several centuries down to the present. He remains remarkably open-minded and fair in testing and evaluating the responses to Erasmus and Voltaire, as well as their own responses to persons, points of view, and happenings. The unpleasant aspects of their lives and deeds, the foibles, the prejudices are not screened out. Like a mountain top resting on an enormous base of erudition, this judicious fairness breathes a positive, benevolent spirit that is refreshingly constructive. The book *Erasmus and Voltaire* affirms the core of values that the societies in the civilization struggle over perennially. Hence ultimately Quinones cannot resist taking sides, more or less like an avatar of Hans Castorp who must sit with Settembrini rather than Naphtha when riding out toward the duel near the close of *The Magic Mountain*. Years of meditation have obviously gone into Quinones's carefully crafted updating of "why they still matter," and his answer empowers each of us to expand upon who else ought to be counted constituents in the future "they" class. The command of complex materials and arguments and the unpretentious, natural eloquence of his writing are impressive. This is a work of masterly synthesis that allows us to flow into the ancestral worlds of the key figures and their destined rivals, and to slip back into our own moment, retrieving significant knowledge and a very powerful stimulus.