

# VOLTAIRE'S ARMPIT,

AN UNKNOWN VOYAGE, AN EXOTIC DESTINY

“What is the mechanism which momentarily increases the strength of my members, as far as the prescribed boundaries? I am ignorant of it; and those who have passed their whole lives in the research, know no more than myself. (II)”

“Why does my arm obey my will? We are so accustomed to this incomprehensible phenomenon, that very few pay attention to it; and when we want to trace the cause of so common an effect, we find that there is an infinity between our will and the obedience of our limb, no reason, no apparent cause, and we feel that we might think to eternity, without being able to discover the least glimpse of probability. (X)”

*The Ignorant Philosopher*, Voltaire 1766

Voltaire's remarks remind us of old Tarciso—an alcoholic who often spoke of his lost lovers. This was years ago. At the time, he could barely reason. We met him every morning over the course of a week, and it was as if each day was the first time he had ever seen us. If a stranger at first, Tarciso would then become friendlier, and eventually appear to recognize us, but as we invited him for more spirits, his condition would quickly worsen. He enjoyed recounting sexual episodes, but the more he drank the deeper his resentment grew over everything he'd lost. Finally, when he was too drunk to speak, we'd bode him farewell until the next day, when we were sure to hear the same stories over drinks.

Tarciso agreed to do some acting. He was, by nature of his alcoholism, what we might call unaware of the camera, so it was quite easy for him to perform naturally. Yet one thing was quite impossible for Tarciso—he couldn't raise his right arm.

Some time before, he had fallen on his right shoulder while taking a shower after a party. A bathtub misfortune. He would never extend it again. We can imagine a similar occurrence when reading chapter X in Voltaire's *Ignorant Philosopher*. (And here stops the storytelling and starts the analogy). It seems that Voltaire had stumbled in the cortical region at the onset of amnesia. By

virtue of an immobilizing thought and the concentration of vapors (distilled philosophical syntheses), motion ceased in Voltaire's limbs. Some forget "how to" move their arms, Tarciso could not, while Voltaire wondered if it would again be possible. And for both Tarciso and Voltaire, the problem is thus replaced by the prostheses: "Mine is the stranger's arm", the unwilling limb.

We thus ventured on both physiological and psychological constraints to rediscover once more the core of such mental paralysis, whose trauma affected not only Voltaire, but many different patients post and prior. Freudian theory calls it the "glove anesthesia" and it is produced by the symptomatic return of a repressed affection through conversion. Anna O.—Josef Breuer's initial patient who imposed on herself and the analyst "the talking cure" (discovering the groundbreaking therapeutically technique of psychoanalysis)—had suffered from this disorder since her father died in 1880. And while Breuer's cathartic method was working for O., when the doctor finally declared her healed, she entered into despair, became convinced she was in labor, and that was birthing Breuer's child from her womb that instant. This frightened Breuer, of course, who immediately discharged O. into the care of his fellow physician. What becomes evident under analysis is the fact that there is an etiology of the symptom—a cause. Though in psychological disorders this cause is mental, in most cases its effect becomes physical. Breuer's child existed—born out of the episode that became known as Anna O.'s hysterical pregnancy.

Voltaire's case is peculiar. His paralysis was neither entirely physical, like Tarciso's, nor originating psychologically, like O.'s; he is only thinking about it. Lets say he has stopped to consider why his arm obeys him, but then, for a fraction of a second, his arm doesn't move. It is finally just a thought experiment and not a real immobilization. But on the other hand we can't contradict the virtual nature of imagination. If Voltaire is fantasizing, his skeptical intellectual testimony calls for a pathogenic relation between the Id and the Ego. As soon as a thought breaks loose of the unconscious we expect some somatic level of appearance. There is no doubt that the persistence of a specific thought formula leads directly to motionless states, loss of libido, and surfacing of the death instinct—it is what's called obsessive thought. In Voltaire's particularly argumentative book of things forever deemed unknown, a repetition ensures that which defies the reality principle: when all which we now take for granted (e. g. raising the arm) subsumes no apparent cause, then somehow everything else that, by the same reasoning, has been assured as a truth no longer stands to the same value. In a word, truth becomes trivial; this denaturing of cause and effect profoundly contradicts facticity. Skepticism and rationalism have a strange connection to the death instinct—the recurrence seems to undervalue the meaning of life in a subtle misanthropic way.

That brings us back to anatomy. We therefore insist that the arm stretches out from a framework conveniently described by the usage of too many corners, convexities and concavities—angles not needed at all, but here placed by our creator with the excuse of mirroring. That is, a transcendental resemblance to Himself. This argument, of course, is not useful for our naturalist research. We are more concerned with a biological comparison: we haven't seen in the animal world such a degree of arm movement as the one we find in the human race. Hence we must conclude that a proper anatomical study could enlighten us about this oddity. But being our surgical skills so deficient, all we can accomplish would be a simple, nonetheless useful, description of a human arm. And that would be: "an arm is that which accomplishes the most simplest movements towards our mildest satisfactions". Here lies our deepest concern regarding the philosopher's mental state and lack of willingness. For Voltaire, there is no longer a utilitarian cause attributed to the main limb. We see how the simplest comparison between the chimpanzee and man concludes that the highest accomplishment for both primates relates to the full extension of the arm and fingers—symbolically inherent as a proto-tool—to acquire and use something one wants. For Voltaire, desire no longer embodies action. We recall again Tarciso's abandonment. When asked if he could still have an erection and eventually pursue his memories not as fading dreams but vivid images of new sexual encounters, his answer was always disappointment. He couldn't even look at a woman in this sense nowadays. His thirst for booze was overwhelming, appalling. That was all he strived for today. If we insisted on the subject he got back to his childhood memories and how his neighbor, a kid a bit older than him, lost his virginity with farm animals. It was quite common, he assured us, but his friend's specific taste was nonetheless extremely bizarre; he enjoyed raping chickens. This behavior was later exposed by one of his relatives after one of the chickens was killed during a teenage bacchanalia in the henhouse. Recounting the story, Tarciso would laugh out loud at this point and could hardly arrive at an explanation of just how the chicken was murdered, but the story made it clear for us that we shouldn't venture further in this direction. No more lovers for Tarciso.

Now, what is particularly surprising in anatomical observation is the shoulder joint... Not in and of itself, because in no special way is it distinguished from the common elbow—that is, and this is our point, in the convex angle of its articulation (the concavities are much more interesting). Where they diverge is difficult to say, but the topological distribution of skin hair has something to do with it. We are here thus confronted by the following hypotheses: the most singular aspect of a human arm is the armpit. Nothing compares to such peculiarity in the animal world—farm animals included. Such singularity doesn't necessarily count as an explanation, but a wise man once concluded

that “where there is smoke there is fire” and, conversely, could it work the other way around, “where there is fire there is smoke”? Could it be that the mysterious cause and effect Voltaire is so eagerly trying to evade lies somewhere in his armpit? Geometrically speaking, the armpit is the crux of the Vitruvian triangle defined furthermore by the middle finger and the hip line. And in meteorological terms, it is moist and dense, being the most involuntary corner where the body touches itself without being aware of such contact. Is this finally the solution to Voltaire’s question, which now can be rephrased like this:

“Why does my arm obey my will? ...and when we want to trace the cause of so common effect, we find that there IS AN ARMPIT IN between, no reason, no apparent cause, BUT AN ARMPIT and we feel that we might think to eternity ON PITS AND ARMS, without being able to discover the least glimpse of IT. (O)”

Why the armpit bears such a resemblance to the crotch is still another issue...

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