POÈME SUR LE DÉSASTRE DE LISBONNE (POEM ABOUT THE LISBON DISASTER)

Voltaire

Analysis by Carlo Tirinanzi De Medici

Didactic Poem

Voltaire's didactic poem *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756) was an immediate philosophical and literary response to the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Voltaire's stance rejected both systematic optimism and paralysing pessimism by invoking a 'modest' hope in the face of suffering. The poem transforms a geological catastrophe into a philosophical watershed, opposing the irreducible discontinuity of human experience to metaphysical totality.

Year of Publication	1756
Publication Place	Geneva
Editor	N/A

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	November 1, 1755, 9:40 AM
Location	Lisbon Portugal
Coordinates	37.176168, -10.107297
Impacted Areas	Lisbon, Algarve, whole Portugal, Spain, Morocco, France, Switzerland
Seismic Fault	Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 (Great Lisbon Earthquake)
Magnitude	8.5-9 Richter (estimated)

Typology

Tectonic Earthquake

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Anthropization Level

Cities

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Towns

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Agriculture Areas

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Sea Coast

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

River Shores

Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Tsunami

Destruction Of Plants

Atmospheric Changes

Destruction Of Animal Species

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Soil Changes

The earthquake was followed by a tsunami and fires that devastated the city. Sources: Johnston 1996, Baptista et al. 1998b, Abe 1989

Social Impacts

Deaths

Death toll estimates vary widely. Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004) estimate 20,000 deaths overall. Chester (2008) notes approximately 7% mortality rate in Lisbon (10,000 out of 150,000 population).

Injuries

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Goods/Commodities

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Dwellings

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Facilities

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Social Disruption

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Trauma

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Poverty

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Diseases

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Depopulation Relocation

Recovery

Sources: Johnston (1996); Baptista et al. (1998); Abe (1989); Martínez Solares and López Arroyo (2004); Chester (2008)

Earthquake Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 (Great Lisbon Earthquake)

LITERARY EVENT

Time	1755
Location	Portugal
Impacted Areas	Lisbon
Seismic Risk Ref.	Referenced
Ecological Impacts	Physical Landscape Changes Atmospheric Changes
Social Impacts	Deaths Destruction Of Dwellings Destruction Of Public Buildings Social Disruption Trauma

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	The Poetic "i"
Reactions	Awareness, Distress, Scepticism

Name	The Philosophical Optimists
Reactions	Denial, Rationality, Fatalism

Reactions

Name	The Poetic "i"
Reactions	Empathy, Distress, Scepticism

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	The population
Reactions	Helplessness, Prayer, Despair

Name	Philosophers
Reactions	Rationality, Trust

Group Attitudes

Name	Philosophers
Reactions	Denial, Rationality, Faith In Risk Prediction Systems

Name	The population
Reactions	Prayer, Distress

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	Ruins, Ashes, Torn, Devoured, Blood, Burying, Tomb, Abyss, Swallowing, Ravage

Metaphors	"ce gouffre infernal" (line 43) 'this infernal gulf' "ce gouffre enflammé de soufre et de salpêtre" (line 60) 'this gulf with sulphur and with fire replete' "un chaos de malheurs" (line 198) 'a chaos of woes' "ce théâtre et d'orgueil et d'erreur" (line 206) 'this theater of pride and error'
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Apocalypse, Cruel Nature, The Downfall Of Society, Deities, Gods, Hell, Nemesis, Death, Ruins, The End Of The World
Syntax	Hypotaxis, Complex Verbal Phrases
Punctuation	Multiple Exl, High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives
Phonetics/Prosody	Relevance of language rhythm

1. INTRODUCTION

Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, 1756), a didactic poem in alexandrines, emerged as an immediate philosophical response to the November 1, 1755 earthquake that devastated Lisbon with "a tsunami and fires" (Chester 78), causing approximately "7% mortality (10,000 victims out of 150,000)" (78).

The disaster's impact was continental in scope: "The effects of the earthquake of November 1st were felt in northern Europe, northern Italy, Catalonia, southern France, Switzerland, Bohemia, the Azores...from Iceland to Morocco" (Quenet 129-130), creating "an unprecedented unification of European space" (132). The event's philosophical impact was amplified by exaggerated initial reports: "The enormous figure of 100,000 is the first that Voltaire had at his disposal and it is not for nothing in his revolt" (142). As Tate observes, "In 1755 Voltaire's faith in a benevolent providence was rudely shaken by the Lisbon earthquake" leading him to seriously question "the philosophy of optimism" (178).

Voltaire's poem, and its diffusion, earned a reply by Rousseau (*Lettre à Voltaire sur la Providence*, *Letter to Voltaire on the Providence*, 1756), which in turn was at the basis of Voltaire's idea of writing *Candide*.

2. STYLE AND RHETORICAL FEATURES

The poem is composed in alexandrines (twelve-syllable verses) with rhyming couplets (rimes plates/suivies: AABBCCDD...). The alexandrine meter confers solemnity to the composition, while the rhyming couplets – which are common in didactic poetry such as Boileau's "L'Art poétique" – create a sense of urgency appropriate to Voltaire's philosophical critique. Furthermore, with their very simple structure, they reflect a low-key, non-literary discourse, suggesting that in his work the content is more relevant than the form.

The poem manifests what Starobinski identifies as "the law of the double-barreled gun" (288), a systematic alternation between opposing registers. He observes: "The very particular structure that characterized the style of the first sentences is thus found at the level of composition" (288). This stylistic duality reflects a conceptual dualism: the pathetic register captures concrete human suffering – "Ces femmes, ces enfants l'un sur l'autre entassés, / Sous ces marbres rompus ces membres dispersés" 'Women and children heaped up mountain high, / Limbs crushed which under ponderous marble lie' (lines 9-10; Fleming 186) – while the sarcastic register attacks philosophical abstraction. As Starobinski notes: "The momentary tragic quality of certain propositions is undeniable, but this surge of sensitivity, limited to a brief instant, is immediately taken up and volatilized in free irony"

(282). This ironic distancing creates the critical space necessary for philosophical reflection without annulling genuine pathos.

This verse-prose duality extends beyond the poem itself. According to Boucher, "the prose notes with philosophical value [...] can submerge, even drown the poem" (504), creating "a real dialogue [...] between the verses and the prose of the notes which then form a sort of natural excrescence of the poem" (502). While verse accumulates tragic images, prose notes develop philosophical argumentation, establishing a counterpoint between emotional impact and rational analysis.

Voltaire himself recognized this importance: "Il a encore fallu des notes. J'ai tâché de fortifier toutes les avenues par lesquelles l'ennemi pouvait pénétrer" 'Notes were still necessary. I tried to fortify all the avenues through which the enemy could penetrate' (D 6821, cited in Boucher 501; my trans.).

As Seguin notes, "A text always has styles, successive and/or intertwined, and one must recognize them before claiming to reach the style" (5). In the *Poème,* Voltaire alternates between at least three distinct registers: the "emphatic-dramatic" style of disaster descriptions, the "didactic and technical" style of philosophical definitions, and the "narrative-speckled" style of concrete examples (7-8).

Sareil analyzes Voltaire's polemic method as operating through four strategic maneuvers. First, he selects the battlefield – "it is he who chooses the combat zone from the adversary" (346) – shifting from abstract theology to concrete suffering. The Preface makes this explicit: imagining philosophers consoling victims with optimistic arguments about "necessary causes" and "universal good," Voltaire declares "such a harangue would doubtless have been as cruel as the earthquake was fatal" (Fleming 185). The battlefield is empirical horror, not metaphysical speculation.

Second, Voltaire chooses his judge-audience – "the public charged with deciding the debate" (Sareil 347) – bypassing philosophical specialists for the general educated public who will judge through moral intuition rather than systematic reasoning. Third, he refuses gravity while treating life's most serious problems: "Like all great writers, Voltaire considers the most serious problems of existence. Only he refuses to treat them with gravity. For him life is a game, and funny are those who try to consider it solemnly" (349). This refusal manifests in bitter irony that makes optimism appear obscene rather than merely false.

Fourth, he deploys strategic clarity as weapon: "This is where the famous Voltairean clarity comes in: this whole system of allusions, references, true or false, this dislocation of the narrative through incongruities, changes in rhythm and tone, demands immediate understanding" (350). This clarity devastates through simplicity – any educated reader grasps the moral scandal without philosophical training.

The poem's rhetorical strategy centers on relentless interrogation that forces readers to confront theodicy's inadequacy. Questions cascade throughout: "Direz-vous, en voyant cet amas de victimes: / Dieu s'est vengé, leur mort est le prix de leurs crimes? / Quel crime, quelle faute ont commis ces enfants / Sur le sein maternel écrasés et sanglants?" 'Say, when you hear their piteous, half-formed cries, / Or from their ashes see the smoke arise, / Say, will you then eternal laws maintain, / Which God to cruelties like these constrain?' (lines 15-18; Fleming 186). Each question becomes more pointed, culminating in the unanswerable: what crime did infants commit to deserve being crushed on their mothers' breasts? These interrogations don't seek answers but expose the moral bankruptcy of systematic optimism when confronted with actual suffering.

3. REPRESENTATION OF THE DISASTER

Voltaire's representation of destruction accumulates macabre details: "Ces femmes, ces enfants l'un sur l'autre entassés, / Sous ces marbres rompus ces membres dispersés; / Cent mille infortunés que la terre dévore, / Qui, sanglants, déchirés, et palpitants encore, / Enterrés sous leurs toits, terminent sans secours" 'Women and children heaped up mountain high, / Limbs crushed which under ponderous marble lie; / Wretches unnumbered in the pangs of death, / Who mangled, torn, and panting for their breath, / Buried beneath their sinking roofs expire' (lines 9-13; Fleming 186).

The French original emphasizes the ongoing agony with the use of triplets: "Cent mille infortunés que la terre dévore, / Qui, sanglants, déchirés, et palpitants encore" 'A hundred thousand unfortunates that the earth devours, / Who, bloody, torn, and still palpitating' (lines 11-12). The scene is apocalyptic: the people "terminent sans secours / Dans l'horreur des tourments leurs lamentables jours / Aux cris demi-formés de leurs voix expirantes / Au spectacle effrayant de leurs cendres fumantes" 'end without help / In the horror of torments their lamentable days / To the half-formed cries of their expiring voices / To the frightful spectacle of their smoking ashes' (lines 13-16; Fleming 186).

The abundant adjectives highlight the horror of the destruction, aiming to empathically move the reader. Furthermore, the extended use of deictics and thus of the embrayage, alongside with the present tense, makes the destruction more vivid (this is also a way to oppose the abstractness of metaphysics to the physical concreteness of the earthquake).

The geographic scope extends "Des bords sanglants du Tage à la mer de Cadix" 'From dismal Tagus' ensanguined shore, / To where of Cadiz' sea the billows roar' (lines 179-180; Fleming 189), emotionally charged (dismal, ensanguined, the billows in Cadiz) while expanding the continental impact (Quenet 129-130). The moral scandal intensifies through contrast: "Lisbonne est abîmée, et l'on danse à Paris" 'Earth Lisbon swallows; the light sons of France / Protract the feast, or lead the sprightly dance' (lines 27-28; Fleming 186). The disaster is a "sanglant ravage" 'bloody ravage' (line 67; Fleming 187).

4. CRITIQUE OF OPTIMISM AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The poem's critique of optimism targets Pope and Leibniz while maintaining diplomatic distance. Voltaire clarifies: "The author...does not write against the illustrious Pope...he declares against the abuse of the new maxim, 'whatever is, is right'" (Fleming 185). He parodies consolatory arguments with bitter irony: "If...philosophers had cried out to the wretches...'all this is productive of general good; the heirs...will increase their fortune; masons will earn money...beasts will feed on the carcasses'...such a harangue would doubtless have been as cruel as the earthquake was fatal" (Fleming 185).

The apostrophe to philosophers – "Philosophes trompés qui criez: 'Tout est bien'" 'Deceived philosophers who cry: "All is well"' (line 4) – challenges them to contemplate actual ruins. The existential question strikes at theodicy's heart: "Quel crime, quelle faute ont commis ces enfants / Sur le sein maternel écrasés et sanglants?" 'What crime, what fault did these children commit / On the maternal breast crushed and bloody?' (lines 17-18). The formula "tout est bien" collapses: "L'univers vous dément, et votre propre cœur / Cent fois de votre esprit a réfuté l'erreur" 'The universe confutes your boasting vain, / Your heart retracts the error you maintain' (lines 160-161; Fleming 189).

Voltaire acknowledges epistemological limits: "Le livre du destin se ferme à notre vue. / L'homme, étranger à soi, de l'homme est ignoré. / Que suis-je, où suis-je, où vais-je, et d'où suis-je tiré?" 'Mysteries like these can no man penetrate, / Hid from his view remains the book of fate. / Man his own nature never yet could sound' (lines 213-215; Fleming 191). This admission provoked Rousseau's response: "On August 18, 1756...Rousseau sent to Voltaire a long letter in refutation of the latter's pessimistic Poème" (Havens 109), initiating a crucial Enlightenment debate about providence.

Voltaire seeks middle ground between optimism and pessimism: "Un jour tout sera bien, voilà notre espérance; / Tout est bien aujourd'hui, voilà l'illusion" 'All may be well; that hope can man sustain, / All now is well; 'tis an illusion vain' (lines 233-234; Fleming 191-192). His conclusion embraces humility: "Humble dans mes soupirs, soumis dans ma souffrance, / Je ne m'élève point contre la Providence" 'Humbly I sigh, submissive suffer pain, / Nor more the ways of Providence arraign' (lines 237-238; Fleming 192).

5. DISCONTINUITY

The poem's formal structure reflects its philosophical argument through what Grobe identifies as "the principle of discontinuity at every level of man's activity" (334). Against Leibnizian claims of total world order, Voltaire deploys stylistic discontinuity as philosophical critique. As Grobe notes, "The very textual appearance of the tense serves as a stylistic rejection of Pangloss's concept of total world

order" (337). This discontinuity manifests in multiple dimensions: the alternation between pathetic and sarcastic registers (Starobinski 282), the dialogue between verse and prose notes (Boucher 502), and the shifts between different stylistic modes that Seguin identifies as "styles, successive and/or intertwined" (Seguin 5).

The formal fragmentation mirrors experiential reality. As Grobe observes: "At the physiological level the organs of the body cease to function adequately because of injury, illness or old age. At the psychological level man is subjected to abrupt changes of emotion that throw him into perpetual oscillation between poles of tranquillity and agitation" (334). Each formal rupture – whether through ironic distancing, generic shifts, or the intrusion of prose commentary – challenges systematic philosophy's pretension to seamless explanation. The notes themselves become "the privileged place of Voltairean philosophical expression" (Boucher 504), a space where philosophical argumentation can develop beyond the constraints of verse.

The poem closes with the caliph's paradoxical prayer: "Un calife autrefois, à son heure dernière, / Au Dieu qu'il adorait dit pour toute prière: / 'Je t'apporte, ô seul roi, seul être illimité, / Tout ce que tu n'as pas dans ton immensité, / Les défauts, les regrets, les maux et l'ignorance.' / Mais il pouvait encore ajouter l'espérance" 'Being supreme, whose greatness knows no bound, / I bring thee all that can't in Thee be found; / Defects and sorrows, ignorance and woe.' / Hope he omitted, man's sole bliss below' (lines 245-248, Fleming 192). This final gesture encapsulates Voltaire's position: neither systematic optimism nor paralyzing pessimism, but modest hope despite suffering. As Quenet concludes, "Considering the Lisbon disaster as a natural catastrophe brings out numerous aspects passed over in silence by the debate on Providence" (143). The poem thus transforms geological catastrophe into philosophical watershed, opposing to metaphysical totality the irreducible discontinuity of human experience – a discontinuity embodied in the very fabric of the text through its alternating styles, its dialogue between verse and prose, and its systematic refusal of systematic explanation.

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