

Cultural Daily


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Voltaire, Narcissism & the NFL

Jerry Kavanagh · Thursday, January 5th, 2012

In his short satirical tale *Zadig*, Voltaire describes the fictitious great lord Irax as “not bad at bottom but ... corrupted by vanity and voluptuousness [who] breathed in nothing but false glory and false pleasures.” Zadig, the prime minister of the kingdom, undertakes to rectify the bad behavior. He does this with the cooperation of a vast entourage of the court’s sycophants and via such an uninterrupted litany of fulsome praise for Irax, “expressly for all the good qualities he lacked,” that after five days, Irax, exhausted and chastened, begged for it to stop.

I was reminded of *Zadig* after watching the latest National Football League player corrupted by vanity and voluptuousness: the Buffalo Bills’ Stevie Johnson. His over-the-top touchdown catch-and-dance on a recent Sunday afternoon mocked the New York Jets and New York City and resulted in an unsportsmanlike penalty that led to an immediate answering score. Late in that game, Johnson dropped what would have been a game-winning pass. It was hard to tell if he was exhausted or chastened.

 Oh, for the gift of Voltaire to satirize the absurdity of such rampant narcissism! There are two trains of thought on the ubiquitous personal celebrations that accompany virtually every play in an NFL game. One holds that penalizing the celebrants is for party poopers who rail humorlessly against the joyful exuberance of self-expression.

The other point of view was first memorably voiced years ago by former USC coach John McKay. When one of his own players staged an elaborate bit of choreography in the end zone after a touchdown, McKay dryly told him, “Act like you’ve been there before.”

NBC’s Bob Costas was more vehement in his denunciation of Johnson. He criticized the “mindless exhibitionism” and “obnoxious self-indulgence” and “pure selfishness and unprofessionalism [of players] detrimental to [their] team.”

Perhaps the better way to curb the gratuitous personal self-expression in sports is not to vilify it, but to encourage even more manifestations of and attention to it. As *Zadig* understood, the remedy calls for overkill, or death by excess: more gyrations, more finger-pointing, more in-your-face taunting after every play.

We’re almost there now. After all, we see defensive tackles cavorting and flexing after stopping a ball carrier for no gain, sometimes with their team behind by two or three touchdowns. We see receivers with short memories and oversized egos flaunting a harmless catch while allowing a more meaningful pass to slip through their fingers.

Bring in additional spotlights to shine and television cameras to focus on every player demanding, “Look at me!” Because when everyone is screaming for attention, no one will be heard. If that begins to quiet the din, the NFL could thank Voltaire for bringing some humility back into its game.

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