

An état présent of Studies on Voltaire's  
Dictionnaire philosophique

In light of the large number of studies devoted to the works of Voltaire, literary criticism dealing specifically with the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif (1764) is relatively limited. This neglected area is especially puzzling when one takes into account the importance Voltaire attached to this dictionary, to his dictionary-type writing and to the genre itself. In a letter to Elie Bertrand in January of 1763, he explained the reasons underlying his great interest in dictionaries in the last part of his life.

Il faudra d'oresnavant tout mettre en dictionnaires. La vie est trop courte pour lire de suite tant de gros livres: malheur aux longues dissertations! Un dictionnaire vous met sous la main dans le moment, la chose dont vous avez besoin. Ils sont utiles surtout aux personnes déjà instruites, qui cherchent à se rappeler ce qu'ils ont sçu.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one explanation for the lack of critical interest in this work can be found in its rather complex history and unfortunate publishing fate.

Voltaire had long contemplated writing an alphabetically arranged compendium. He first mentioned writing articles for such a work during his stay in Potsdam at the court of Frederick II in 1752. However it was not until twelve years later that the work finally appeared. Always attuned to the spirit of the times, Voltaire published his Dictionnaire at the moment when public interest, excited by the scandal of Diderot's

Encyclopédie was at its height. He aided the success of the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif by his traditional authorship denial campaign. By 1767, five authorized and augmented editions and many pirated ones had been printed.<sup>2</sup>

In 1769 Voltaire published a last edition of what is today considered the Dictionnaire philosophique under the title La Raison par alphabet. After this date he concentrated his article efforts on a new work called Questions sur l'Encyclopédie.<sup>3</sup> Although some of its articles were taken from the earlier Dictionnaire, it was definitely a distinct work. This fact was not recognized by Beaumarchais and Decroix, editors of the posthumous Kehl edition of Voltaire's complete works. All Voltaire's alphabetical writings, plus other hard to classify materials,<sup>4</sup> were placed in one large, unmanageable collection erroneously entitled the Dictionnaire philosophique. This arrangement was followed by Moland in his edition of 1878. The original Dictionnaire philosophique portatif remained buried in this mass of similar but originally unrelated materials until the publication in 1936 of a new edition, comprised of 118 articles including variants and notes, by Raymond Naves and Julien Benda.

It is in the nature of polemical works such as the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif to arouse immediate reaction. Thus in 1765 A. Dubon published a study entitled Remarques sur un livre intitulé Dictionnaire philosophique portatif. By 1772, six long volumes had appeared whose main purpose was criticism, more correctly condemnation, of Voltaire's Dictionnaire. However, once the object of such polemics has been resolved or changed, interest wanes quietly and quickly. Such was the fate of the Dictionnaire philosophique after 1772. This normal decline in interest com-

bined with the unfortunate editorial arrangement of Voltaire's works is reflected in the scarcity of criticism of the Dictionnaire during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Yet it is wrong to judge this work as simply a philosophical war horse. In his book The Party of Humanity (New York, 1964), Peter Gay stresses the importance of this Dictionnaire, "With its errors and erudition, its dazzling variety of tactics and brilliant unity of style, the Dictionnaire philosophique is Voltaire's most characteristic work--as characteristic as its more famous companion piece Candide" (p. 7). In keeping with such an interpretation, the last forty years have seen a renewed interest in the Dictionnaire philosophique. It is dealt with no longer solely as a polemical writing but as a literary work, reflecting the genius of its author and important for the study of his art. This renewal, due no doubt in part to a general increase in literary criticism, reflects the importance of the work of Theodore Besterman and the Institut Voltaire of Geneva, as well as the new interest aroused by the publication of the Benda/Naves edition of the work.

Any attempt to classify what appears to be over two hundred years of criticism would seem artificial at best. However the nature of the work involved and the long historical gap in criticism facilitates a division into categories. Criticism of the Dictionnaire philosophique will be discussed as it deals with 1) the ideas, 2) the history, and 3) the style of the work. Several studies quite naturally overlap these divisions and will be treated in more than one section of this study.

As mentioned above the first critics set as their task the answering of the polemical attack of the Dictionnaire, in this case the various charges

against the Christian religion found in it. These critics were primarily interested in discrediting and refuting the theological and philosophical orientation of the author. Writers, such as the Abbé Laurent François, author of a long work called Observations sur la Philosophie de l'histoire et le Dictionnaire philosophique avec des réponses à plusieurs difficultés (Paris, 1770), showed considerable insight into the goals of Voltaire. They realized that he attempted to destroy the credibility of the Jewish race as the chosen people and thereby destroy the foundation of the Christian religion. In these studies, mentioned by Alfred J. Bingham in "The Earliest Criticism of Voltaire's Dictionnaire philosophique" (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. XLVII), the authors often attempted an article by article refutation of Voltaire's work. Nevertheless they did not ignore the ability of Voltaire the writer. François acknowledges his persuasive style, calling it "... amusant, varié, plein de sel, hardi et séducteur" (p. 3).

Fortunately the lack of an emotional reaction to the theological and philosophical ideas propounded by Voltaire in his Dictionnaire has not caused a lack of critical interest in them. Some of the more interesting studies of this work have been devoted to an analysis of these ideas. Peter Gay, in the study mentioned earlier and Robert S. Downs in a book entitled Moulders of the Modern Mind (New York, 1961), analyse the Dictionnaire philosophique as the key-stone of the "philosophical" structure Voltaire developed. As Gay indicates, for Voltaire philosophy was, "the mobilization of sound thinking for the sake of right living" (p. 42). Both writers mention briefly the various concerns of Eighteenth Century France and summarize Voltaire's opinions relative to them. René Pomeau in "Histoire d'une oeuvre de Voltaire: le Diction-

naire philosophique portatif" (Information Littéraire, mars/avril, 1955) presents the philosophical and theological stance of Voltaire at a particular point in time. Pomeau emphasizes Voltaire's up-to-date yet evolving position as expressed in this work rather than presenting it as his definitive statement as do Gay and Downs. In the same vein William C. Archie analyzes the evolution in Voltaire's ideas from the time of the final publication of his Dictionnaire in 1769 until the appearance of the Questions sur l'Encyclopédie in 1770. Citing historical influences and stylistic changes as contributing factors, Mr. Archie points out the bolder more unorthodox positions supported by Voltaire in his later work (Voltaire's Dictionnaire philosophique: Les Questions sur l'Encyclopédie, "Symposium, 1951).

Several critics have been concerned with particular ideas of Voltaire and his time as reflected in the Dictionnaire. Yves Florenne in an introduction to a new edition of Voltaire's work published in 1962<sup>6</sup> devoted considerable attention to Voltaire's anti-semitism. M. Florenne feels this anti-semitism should be viewed as, "inséparable du souci d'empoisonner le christianisme dans ses sources" (p. 43), and thus ties it in with Voltaire's penchant for Biblical criticism. His ideas on progress as exemplified in this Dictionnaire have been studied by André M. Rousseau ("L'Idée de progrès dans le 'Dictionnaire philosophique'"). Pointing to Voltaire's deeply felt conviction in the possibility of change and in the dignity of the human condition, M. Rousseau finds the directing force which brought about the writing and eventual publication of the work.

The question of Voltaire the philosopher receives a clear and provocative presentation in an article by Jean Cazeneuve ("La philosophie de

Voltaire d'après le Dictionnaire philosophique," Synthèses, juin/juillet, 1961). M. Cazeneuve argues that the Dictionnaire philosophique is directly responsible for the important although illusory image Voltaire has as a philosopher: "Il paraît admis aujourd'hui que ses idées valent plus par le style, par la vivacité du ton et la finesse de l'esprit que par la profondeur de la pensée" (p. 14). Among the ideas fundamental to the philosophy found in this Dictionnaire are those of progress, the possibility of man becoming better, tolerance and the subordination of metaphysics to action.

The most recent study devoted to a particular idea, in this case that of tolerance, provides an interesting analysis of the thought patterns and mental processes of Voltaire as revealed in the Dictionnaire philosophique. Unfortunately this chapter found in an Essai sur les catégories de l'histoire littéraire by Pierre A. Stucki (Neufchatel, 1969), suffers from its brevity and its integral relationship to the preceding and following chapters.

By far the largest number of critical writings published in the century can be classified as being historical in orientation. This general category can be further divided into, 1) works dealing with the composition and publication of the Dictionnaire philosophique, i.e., the history of the work; 2) studies on the various sources Voltaire used in the preparation of his Dictionnaire, i.e., biographical criticism; and 3) the importance and influence of the work itself, what might be called "sociological" criticism. This historical criticism received an added stimulus with the re-edition of Voltaire's correspondance by Theodore Besterman beginning in 1953. Many previously unpublished letters have been added to the already vast collection and have provided new information to help reconstruct the story of the work.

In The Dictionnaire philosophique and the Early French Deists (Brooklyn, 1934), Clifford M. Crist, using the then known letters of Voltaire, began the compilation of evidence that critics have continued to add to since this date. Statements by Voltaire concerning the authorship of certain inflammatory articles (Voltaire denied responsibility and indicated other contributors) were treated by Crist as the usual self-protection scheme. Ira Wade and Norman Torrey in an article on "Voltaire and Polier de Bottens" (Romantic Review, April, 1940) and Mina Watterman in "Voltaire and Fremin Abouzit" (Romantic Review, October, 1942), undertook the proof that Voltaire was here telling the truth. Using recently discovered manuscripts and letters, these authors showed that Bottens did contribute an article called "Messie" and Abouzit one on the "Apocalypse." However both studies conclude that the final results as found in the Dictionnaire were highly edited, almost completely re-written, products. These studies add indirectly to the knowledge of Voltaire's creative process, through a comparison of texts which indicate his selective choice of ideas and skill at manipulating language.

Two articles previously mentioned, those by William C. Archie and René Pomeau, have as their primary purpose an analysis of the development of the Dictionnaire philosophique. Mr. Archie studies how this work became the Questions sur l'Encyclopédie and the significance of this evolution. Pomeau undertakes a more intrinsic approach in his article which deals not only with the Dictionnaire of Voltaire but also with the dictionary genre in the Eighteenth century. As Pomeau stresses in an opening paragraph, "Faire l'histoire de son Dictionnaire philosophique, c'est aussi faire l'histoire de cette forme littéraire. . . ." (p. 44). Pomeau delves into the reasons behind Voltaire's desire and decision to write a dictionary. He

finds answers both in the spirit of the time and the spirit of the man. In addition he studies the change in character of the Dictionnaire philosophique that can be observed as it went through successive editions. Pomeau feels that by the last, with the addition of 22 articles--19 concerning the Bible or religious history, the portatif assumes a definitely anti-christian nature and reflects the state of Voltaire's troubled mind.

The preparation of a new edition of Voltaire's complete works occasioned a summation of the publication history of the Dictionnaire philosophique by Jérôme Vercruysse. In his article "Les oeuvres alphabétiques de Voltaire" (Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles, Vol. XXII) he explains the various considerations given to possible arrangements of Voltaire's dictionary-type writings. A comprehensive accumulation of documents and materials relating to the planning, writing and publication of the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif appeared in 1972. In this study, Voltaire and his portable dictionary (Frankfurt am Main), William Trapnell traces the history of this work from 1752 to 1767. In addition to an historical perspective, he analyzes Voltaire's motivation. Unlike Pomeau, Trapnell finds the answer in a psychological rather than a sociological interpretation. He sees the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif as Voltaire's attempt to prove that he was the leader of the philosophical movement and as capable a philosophe as Diderot who was then directing the Encyclopédie.

The sources of various articles in the Dictionnaire philosophique have been treated in several studies. The first study in this rather delicate area of criticism attempts to find possible sources for a false messiah named Barcochébas mentioned by Voltaire for the first time in the Dictionnaire philosophique. Clifford Crist turns to the men he



calls the early French deists as being such a source ("Voltaire, Barcochébas and the early French Deists," French Review, May, 1933). It seems evident that Voltaire was influenced by these writers, but Crist fails to indicate the importance this has for a study of Voltaire or his Dictionnaire. However in his book of the following year (The Dictionnaire philosophique and the Early French Deists), which he insists is not a source study, he resolves this problem. His main goal is to prove that the deism of Voltaire in 1764 follows in the direct line of a French tradition, i.e., is basically French in its origin: "We are not interested in direct influences, but in the method, general content, even the atmosphere which, set loose by the early French deists, still persisted in French deism after 1750" (p. 22).

The articles of Wade and Torrey on "Messie" and that of Watterman on "Apocalypse" have already been mentioned. Whereas these critics were concerned with questions of authorship, Frederick Jenkins in 1958 sought only possible first or second-hand documentation sources ("The Article 'Conciles': sources and presentation," French Review, February, 1958). He found these in works published earlier in the Eighteenth century. In "La Documentation de Voltaire dans le Dictionnaire philosophique" (Quaderni francesi, 1970) René Pomeau studies sources without reference to any particular article or author. His conclusions once again help to place Voltaire within the framework of both his personal development and that of his historical period. According to Pomeau much of Voltaire's erudition was second hand, which he usually "contaminated" by combining it with what he had gleaned from primary sources on his own. Voltaire emerges from this study as a vigorous spirit fortunate to have been born at a time when an individual could still form personal views in all branches of knowledge using

his own research capabilities. The amount of information he had at his ready disposal situates him in a tradition of protestant erudition that reached its height with Pierre Bayle and was declining when Voltaire wrote.

In The Party of Humanity Peter Gay's approach to the question of sources and influences found in the Dictionnaire philosophique stems from his consideration of this work as the expression of the sum total of Voltaire's experience. Therefore all the major events of his life are treated as relevant in a study of this work. He deals in particular with the pagan influence of his classical education, the England experience and his resultant Newtonianism, and the important role played by Madame du Châtelet in the development of Voltaire the philosophe. This general study, without assuming to illustrate direct influences, contributes to the biographical criticism of the author and his work.

The direct influence of one individual, Dom Calmet is the subject of an article by Elizabeth Nichols ("Dom Calmet, 'qui n'a raisonné jamais,'" French Review, February 1958). More specifically she treats the importance of Calmet in the formation of Voltaire's knowledge of the Bible and Voltaire's references to Calmet in the Dictionnaire. Although Voltaire criticized and vilified this scholarly priest, he used his many volumes of biblical commentary as his chief source of information. Less direct is the influence of Bayle on Voltaire as studied by H. T. Mason in Pierre Bayle and Voltaire (London, 1963). The relationship with Bayle is directly tied to Voltaire's attitude toward the sceptical and free-thinking tradition in France. No attempt at proving direct borrowings is made, but rather Mason analyzes several themes that appear in both Bayle's and Voltaire's Dictionnaire. The value of this treatment, like that of all his-

torical criticism dealing with sources documentation and influence is that it situates Voltaire in a certain time and place, showing him to be a creative thinker, choosing from his literary heritage in order to further his personal beliefs.

The third category of historical criticism, the influence of the Dictionnaire philosophique on its own times and subsequent generations, has produced few studies. Only one article exploring the contact of a later author of stature with this work has appeared. Colin Duckworth in "Flaubert and Voltaire's Dictionnaire philosophique" (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. XVIII, 1961) offers a sound analysis of a manuscript in Flaubert's handwriting which contains passages copied from the Dictionnaire. This article is fortunately not just a summary of what Flaubert copied, but a demonstration of how what he copied could have influenced him in his own Dictionnaire des idées reçues. Mr. Duckworth sees in this manuscript an additional indication of Flaubert's admiration for his literary predecessor.

Perhaps the most thorough study of the ramifications of Voltaire's philosophy and ideas as expressed in the Dictionnaire is found in an early article by Julien Benda entitled "En Marge d'un dictionnaire" (Revue de Paris, 1936). M. Benda places great emphasis on this work and its role in the moral and political history of the French nation. He sees Voltaire as the artisan of modern democracy. Although he willingly points out that most of the ideas found in the Dictionnaire were not original, he feels that Voltaire fulfilled the need to have them presented in a new, vivid way. Benda calls this Voltaire's journalistic style. Among the modern ideas that he studies as stemming from this work are patriotism, pacificism and the distrust of metaphysics in solving the world's

problems.

The study of style and technique has produced some of the more interesting recent criticism dealing with the Dictionnaire philosophique. If, as M. Benda believes, the majority of Voltaire's ideas were ones already popular among the intellectual circles of his time, it must be the manner they were presented that made the Dictionnaire philosophique such a powerful polemic tool. Benda feels that the journalistic style succeeded primarily because of Voltaire's ability to make abstract ideas alive through vivid images. Using a vivid image himself, he refers to Voltaire's stylistic machine gun (p. 28).

Yves Florenne has discussed at greater length than Benda this journalistic style ("Voltaire, ou de la raison et de la déraison par alphabet"). He places great emphasis on the length and manner of the articles, i.e. short, easy to read and popular in their approach to difficult and often touchy subjects. In the same vein, although he does not use the term journalistic, Peter Gay (The Party of Humanity) elaborates on what he feels to be the main, simple yet persuasive technique of Voltaire, irony. Mr. Gay analyzes the various ironic self-dramatized roles assumed by Voltaire as he wrote his articles. He outlines seven basic attitudes which enabled Voltaire to approach his subject matter under varied and enjoyable disguises.

A study of the technique of one particular article in the Dictionnaire philosophique is found in the article previously mentioned by Frederick Jenkins. He analyzes what he calls the three "basic faults" in Voltaire's presentation of the article "Conciles." They are: 1) carelessness, 2) misrepresentation and 3) ridicule directed at a given council. The value of this study is that it

successfully probes Voltaire's technique and shows component parts. Unfortunately Mr. Jenkins did not approach this article from the "ironic" viewpoint so evidently intended by Voltaire, but rather from the viewpoint of a modern writer of dictionary or encyclopedia articles. In no way can Voltaire's Dictionnaire philosophique be studied as a source book for factual information.

Two studies by Jeanne R. Monty, both of which appeared in 1966, analyze in turn the vocabulary and the polemical style of the Dictionnaire philosophique. In "Notes sur le vocabulaire du Dictionnaire philosophique" (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. XLI) Ms. Monty discussed Voltaire's choice of words as one of his most powerful weapons in the attempt to destroy confidence in the Bible. Her study takes into account the intended reading audience and illustrates Voltaire's ability to cause doubts through the choice of the wrong word at the right time. A more thorough study of Voltaire's vocabulary as well as an in-depth stylistic analysis of the Dictionnaire philosophique is found in "Etude sur le style polémique de Voltaire: le Dictionnaire philosophique" (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. XLIV). Ms. Monty considers the educational and linguistical background of Voltaire before she proceeds to discuss the particular techniques Voltaire used. The basis for her study is the belief, as proposed earlier by Benda and Cazeneuve, that the importance and success of Voltaire's work comes from the "manner" of saying rather than from the daring or originality of what was said. Such a thorough stylistic study gives new value to a classic work and writer and provides an invaluable tool for the modern student and critic of Eighteenth century French literature.

The main interest of this study has been with articles or works that deal primarily or at some length with the Dictionnaire philosophique. Of course many of the general studies devoted to Voltaire's writing treat this work either separately or taken as part of the entire production. In the first volume of the Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, M. René Pomeau published an article entitled "Un Etat présent des études voltairiennes." In this study he called for a biography of Voltaire which would deal less with the history of his social relationships and more with that of his works. Such a biography was provided by Theodore Besterman in 1969, entitled simply Voltaire. Mr. Besterman's work includes a well-written chapter on the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif. Mention must also be made of three general works, which although not dealing specifically with the Dictionnaire philosophique have contributed information valuable for the study of this work. In 1938 Raymond Naves in Voltaire et l'Encyclopédie provided a detailed study of the relationship between Voltaire, the Encyclopédie and its writers. René Pomeau in La Religion de Voltaire (Paris, 1956) studied a theme that is predominant in the Dictionnaire. More recently Bertram Eugene Schwarzbach has published a thorough analysis of Voltaire's Old Testament Criticism (Geneva, 1971).

Although the very nature of the work being considered presents certain critical limitations, it seems evident from the preceding analysis that the Dictionnaire philosophique has not been exhausted as a source of interesting studies.

Jean Cazeneuve and René Pomeau have provided the standard for studies devoted to the philosophy and ideas of Voltaire as expressed in the Dictionnaire. Additional studies, such as William C. Archie's, comparing this work's philosophical posi-

tion with that of earlier or later writings of the same nature, would be valuable. A comparative study of Candide and the Dictionnaire philosophique might provide even more insight into the techniques Voltaire used to convey serious ideas humorously. The theme of the Bible and Voltaire's attitude toward the Jewish nation and religion have received considerable attention. Some consideration might be given to the dearth of references to the New Testament in the biblical criticism contained in the Dictionnaire. A comparative study of such themes as progress and tolerance would seem justifiable.

Unless new letters and manuscript material are discovered the history of the work itself can be considered as written. It is not the least bit upsetting to consider the works of Pomeau and Trapnell as definitive in this area. If there is one area of historical criticism that calls for additional study it appears to be in the "sociological" area. Much mention is made of the enormous success of the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif upon its publication, yet little proof is ever furnished. One solid article providing statistical information about editions, copies printed and contemporary references to the work, would not only contribute a worthwhile document resolving troublesome nebulous statements but would undoubtedly provide some critic with a monumental job.

The study of the style, encouraged early by Benda and only recently approached by Ms. Monty, promises the most worthwhile area of study at the present time. The example and contributions of Jeanne Monty should encourage studies of the historical development of this unique style. Questions yet to be answered in this area relate to the influence of early writers on Voltaire's technique. Mason does not treat the possible similarity

in Bayle and Voltaire's "dictionary" style. Comments have been made about the journalistic nature of this writing, yet this term in relation to the Dictionnaire philosophique has not been clearly defined. Nor has attention been paid to the importance of dialoge in this work.

If the Dictionnaire philosophique portatif is Voltaire's most representative work, the coming years should see a continued critical interest in it. If this premise is contested or proven false the work itself still provides an interesting insight into the technique, beliefs and preoccupations of Voltaire at the time he wrote it. Many recent critics have contributed to a clearer understanding of this work. Hopefully future writers will continue to find it a worthwhile source of interesting study.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Letter number 10079, dated 9 January 1763, in Voltaire's Correspondence. Theodore Besterman, ed., (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1953-1965), 51:28-29.

<sup>2</sup>Six editions of the work appeared between June, 1764 and November 1765. Voltaire was personally responsible for only three of them. See Julien Benda, "En Marge d'un dictionnaire," Revue de Paris, 43 (1 mars 1936), 26, n. 2.

<sup>3</sup>Question sur l'Encyclopédie published in nine volumes between 1770 and 1772.

<sup>4</sup>Included in this "hard to classify" material were the Lettres philosophiques, articles for the Grand Dictionnaire de l'Académie and several article length essays that had never been published.

<sup>5</sup>The only publications listed in the biographical study of Mary-Margaret Barr (A Bibliography of Writings on Voltaire, 1825-1925, New York, 1929) are: Gabriel Feydel, Observations sur le Dictionnaire philosophique, Paris, 1820; Paul Tessonnière, La Religion de Voltaire d'après son Dictionnaire philosophique, Bruxelles, 192?

<sup>6</sup>First published by the Club Français du Livre as an introduction to a 1962 edition entitled the Dictionnaire philosophique suivi de quarante questions sur l'Encyclopédie, this article later appeared as: "Voltaire, ou de la raison et de la

déraison par alphabet," Europe, 40 (juin,1962),  
40-53.

