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‘The Oxford chronological edition of the
Œuvres complètes de Voltaire (1969-2022):
Sub sole nihil novum?’

John Renwick

On two occasions William Barber, one of the Founding Fathers of the enterprise, insisted on the essential characteristic of the Oxford edition of the Œuvres complètes de Voltaire, which is now finally complete in 205 volumes. In 1986, he hailed its strictly chronological approach as a major innovation.¹ In 2002, in the Preface to volume 1A, he insisted once more on its striking novelty.² Nowhere, however, did he justify the claims. Hence a certain inescapable ambiguity: was he suggesting that the edition was novel in the general annals of scholarship, or was he simply meaning that it was remarkable in the precise context of the editorial history of Voltaire himself? History will help us to determine how we should contextualise his assertions.

In the Ancient World, the chronological ordering of Opera omnia and Correspondances, was rare. Changes were, however, to come and both domains were, in general, to see widely-accepted innovations from the middle of the 16th century onwards when the world of publishing was happy to adopt those essential neo-classical value-judgements which the Renaissance was making its own. Henceforth the order of publication, volume by volume, (which would reign supreme for centuries), is clearly determined by a descending order of perceived values. Hence, in the world of literature, for example, certain genres are unquestioningly accorded more intrinsic importance than others since it is here a matter of creativity judged as the ability to vanquish recalcitrant material (unsurprisingly epic poetry and tragedy outclass comedy and farce) while, in the world of philosophy, for example, we often seem to be dealing with rankings which are determined by an assessment of a thinker’s ability to contribute to the development of the human mind. Though chronological orderings are not always unknown in these domains, such a phenomenon is accentuated, however, when we start to examine the emergence of those ‘professional’ writers whose collective output covered numerous, ‘lesser’ literary accomplishments: here miscellanea of various sorts - still ordered, however, volume by volume, in descending order of perceived importance - will unerringly be presented, for various reasons, in the chronological order of their creation.

The same holds true of Voltaire’s views on publishing. Though often imposing orders of presentation that were variable (and which, on occasion, surprisingly turned their backs on neo-classical norms), he would be happy with a chronological approach in the different compartmentalised rubrics. The same is true of the approach adopted by Beaumarchais and Condorcet in the great, and voluminous, Kehl edition of his works (1784-1789).

¹ ‘On editing Voltaire’, SVEC 242 (1986), pp. 491-502. The initial justification of this approach is as follows: ‘A strictly chronological order invites the reader to see the author’s work in a biographical context, to consider the development of his preoccupations and creative talent from youth to maturity and beyond’ (p.493). This argument is repeated twice on p.499.

² ‘the decision to publish the entire body of Voltaire’s writings in a single chronological sequence is entirely novel’ (OCV 1A, p.vii). The intellectual justification of the initiative comes later : ‘The great advantage of this presentation of Voltaire’s writings in strict chronological order [...] is that it continually brings to the reader’s attention the unfailing multiplicity of Voltaire’s interests and enthusiasms, intellectual, moral, poetic and theatrical, throughout his long life’ (p.viii).

In other areas of human creativity, approaches had, for some time, however, been evolving in a direction that proponents of the Oxford edition (which follows the entirety of Voltaire's output from 1711 until 1778 in strictly chronological order) will find to be highly familiar. In 1751 there appeared Edme-François Gersaint's Catalogue raisonné de toutes les pièces qui forment l'œuvre de Rembrandt ; 1752 saw the first volume of the comte de Caylus' Recueil d'antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques et romaines; in 1764, Johann Joachim Winckelmann started to publish his Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums, while 1765 saw the beginnings of what is known as the Entwurf-Katalog which chronicles Joseph Haydn's musical compositions. The aim of all four is to follow the organic development, or evolution, of their subject matter. It was perhaps inevitable that literature should, one day, follow suit: between 1784 and 1795, for example, Jacques-André Naigeon composed his Vie de Denis Diderot in which he examined, in strictly chronological order, the latter's major contributions to philosophy. His edition of the Œuvres de Denis Diderot (an VI-1798, 15 volumes) will adopt the same approach.

A similar (though somewhat more timid) evolution is found in Voltaire's 1817-1820 Œuvres complètes where his editors, Lefèvre et Déterville, decided to inflect the practices of the Kehl edition in the domain of the theatre: gone is the old neo-classical classification according to genres which now becomes a purely chronological presentation of plays irrespective of their type. A similar, but much more bold innovation is introduced by Beuchot when the practices of the Kehl edition are once more rejected: what had there been separated into Mélanges historiques, Politique et Législation, Philosophie, Physique, Dialogues, Facéties, and Mélanges littéraires here become one single rubric entitled Mélanges, where everything is chronologically ordered. His justification for such novelty is lapidary: "La classification que j'ai adoptée fait suivre au lecteur la marche de l'esprit de Voltaire".³ In other words : the guiding thread is intellectual evolution.

A closer examination of the edition will reveal, however, that the chronological principle is much more present than would appear to the cursory eye: in his prefaces, commentaries and editorial notes (where the latter not only include variants that are chronologically ordered, but also provide cross-references to previous, scrupulously dated, Voltaire texts), Beuchot is presenting the reader with a dynamic reading that is biographical. A supplementary proof of this intention is to be found in the final volume of the edition where he publishes a useful (and revealing) 'Table chronologique des écrits de Voltaire'⁴ along with precise references to the volumes and pages concerned...which is another way of indicating that the reader is thereby empowered to reconstruct in detail the intellectual, chronological progress of the author.

If Beuchot made such enormous strides over his predecessors, why not therefore - in puzzlement - ask the same question as Nicolas Morel in 2020: "pourquoi ne renouvelle-t-il Kehl qu'à moitié, et ne pousse-t-il pas son geste jusqu'à tout classer d'après un ordre chronologique ?" To which he gave the following answer : 'sans doute le procédé est-il impossible à mettre en place pour des questions de temps, de moyens et d'habitudes des lecteurs.'⁵ Forty years later, the 'habitudes des lecteurs' had evolved so little that Beuchot's

³ Œuvres de Voltaire, Paris, 1829-1834, Lefèvre et Firmin Didot Frères, t.1, p.XXXI.

⁴ Ibid, t.70, pp.498-519.

⁵ Le Voltaire de Beuchot. Une édition savante sous la Restauration, Chêne-Bourg, Georg, 2020, 588 pages, pp.414-415.

general approach was so faithfully adopted by Louis Moland, in his updated edition of the latter, that I feel justified in qualifying him as a ‘Beuchot bis’.⁶

And yet, in parallel, in many other domains, editorial approaches were happy to completely adopt such synchronic and diachronic approaches. We have already seen, with Gersaint, Caylus, and Winckelmann how development or evolution in painting, engraving, and statuary art had already been attracting attention a century earlier, as was music with Haydn. The 19th century of Beuchot and Moland was, in turn, witnessing an explosion of similar interest with ever more numerous catalogues raisonnés devoted, for example, to Chinese porcelain or Delftware or statuary art; in music, the treatment given to Mozart in the Köchelverzeichnis was rapidly followed by similar ventures devoted to Berlioz, Schubert, Gluck, Beethoven etc. The chronological exegesis of literature and thought was, however, slow to follow suit. It was not until the 20th century that one can find examples of such a deliberate approach.⁷ French literature apparently managed to escape this tendency until the 1950s. In 1955 and 1959 respectively the ‘Club du meilleur livre’ published Baudelaire, and then Verlaine, in ‘chronological order’. When, moreover, we seek to situate the Oxford chronological edition of Voltaire (mooted in 1967, and which began to appear in 1969), we find it clearly preceded by the Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo edited by Jean Massin⁸, and then by the Œuvres complètes de Diderot edited by Roger Lewinter.⁹ Both editors had the same aim: to allow the reader to follow the evolution of the man holding the pen. That also was William Barber’s ambition.

The Oxford edition, duly contextualised in History, is therefore new only within the context of editions devoted to Voltaire. But its chronological approach, in terms of enhancing a better understanding of the author is so entirely new in its editorial apparatus that it is, above all, splendidly revolutionary.¹⁰

⁶ In an article, entitled ‘Enfin Moland vint ou comment reprendre le flambeau’, to appear in 2022 in (Ré)éditer Voltaire. Geste éditorial et herméneutique (Lyon, Presses de l’ENS, Collection Métamorphoses du livre), edited by Linda Gil and Nicolas Morel.

⁷ For example, one hundred years ago, Plotinus (204/5-270 A.D.), translated and edited by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, (4 volumes, Alpine, New Jersey, 1918), adopts the same chronological approach, a fact underlined in the anonymous review published in The Philosophical Review, vol. 28 (Jan, 1919), p.96-98 : ‘It was [...] necessary to unravel this tangle [concerning his evolution] by both doing the work of translation, and by printing the works in their chronological order’ (p.97).

⁸ Paris, Club français du livre, 1967-1985, 18 volumes.

⁹ Paris, Club français du livre, 1969-1973, 15 volumes.

¹⁰ My study explaining why, entitled ‘L’édition des Œuvres complètes de Voltaire (1969-2022) : non pas novatrice mais quand même révolutionnaire’, will appear during 2022.