

John Renwick¹

Jeroom Vercruyse’s recent blog post concerning the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire*, with its brief mention of editorial policy, acknowledges the fact that the original *maîtres d’œuvre* very quickly realised that a project that promised to be monumental (*vide* the sheer bulky volume of the Moland edition, which was in no way a critical one) brought with it an inescapable prediction: ‘il fallait recourir à d’autres dix-huitiémistes afin d’assurer la préparation et la publication de textes si divers’.² Still engaged, in the late 1960s, in the lengthy process of attempting to rehabilitate Marmontel, I little realised that my name would quickly appear on their radar. It so happened, however, that – because of our close involvement, since 1966, with the author of *Bélisaire* – Jean Ehrard, one of the original ‘Founding Fathers’, was to be instrumental in my recruitment. He spoke in 1970 to Theodore Besterman about ‘his ‘jeune collègue de Cambridge’, who was conversant with certain aspects of Voltaire’s production. Almost immediately, the ‘jeune collègue’ received, from 68 Pall Mall, London, a letter of typically Bestermanesque terseness, suggesting that he ‘make what [he could] of the various texts devoted to the Affaire de Bélisaire’. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history ...except that the implied invitation that such a comment seems to transmit (i.e. take whatever came afterwards as either read or self-evident or not worth rehearsing) would not do justice to a story that needs to be told.

What I was to go on and witness, over the next fifty years of uninterrupted collaboration, was the remarkable evolution that the edition was to experience from its earliest volumes (1969-1970) down to the most recent one to appear (vol.34, *Œuvres alphabétiques: ajouts posthumes*), which makes that latter – depending on the method of calculation involved – the 120th volume to see the light of day, an eventuality that in the period 1975-1985 would have struck many of us as being more than problematic.

I began thinking more precisely about that extraordinary evolution because Jeroom chooses also to remember that one of the earliest, most pressing questions that the embryonic *Conseil scientifique* asked itself was: ‘Quelle ligne de conduite serait suivie pour préparer les textes?’ My familiarity with much of the past history of the edition made me think immediately of the period actually preceding 1967, when William Barber and Owen Taylor had, for such an edition, objectives that were singularly limited.

Originally – as William Barber explained in 1986 – the project in the mid-1960s was relatively modest. What was envisaged was a new edition, to replace Moland, ‘which would at least offer scholars a reliable and complete set of texts without any elaborate

¹ John Renwick has been a member of the *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* team since 1970, and of its *Conseil scientifique* since 1997. Within *OCV*, he has edited over fifty individual texts, from *Amulius et Numitor* (1711) to the *Fragments sur l’histoire générale* and the *Fragments sur l’Inde* (1773). He signed the edition of twenty-eight articles in the *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie* and forty-five chapters of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, and more than sixty entries for the forthcoming volume 9 of the *Corpus des notes marginales*.

² See <https://voltairefoundation.wordpress.com/2016/09/01/a-propos-des-oeuvres-completes-ou-comment-tout-a-commence/>.

critical apparatus or introductory material'.³ Understandably, faced with the serried rows of stout volumes that are now the monument to scholarship that we possess, we may have some trouble in contextualising such strictly limited objectives ... although I did, some twenty years ago, attempt to rationalise such a stance by judging it against the standards applicable to current scholarly expectations and requirements.⁴ Theodore Besterman, however, certainly found it difficult to accept such a limited vision, and – in 1967 – it was agreed that he would publish an edition of the *Complete works* on condition that it 'took the more ambitious form of a full scholarly critical edition'.⁵

Several years later, having seen the original volumes through the press (*La Philosophie de l'histoire*, 1969; *La Henriade*, 1970; *La Pucelle*, 1970; the *Commentaires sur Corneille*, 1974-1975), the *Conseil scientifique* – though faced with volumes that were already, in their different ways, impressive works of erudition – came to the conclusion that they were cumulatively beginning to betray inconsistencies in approach. In short, the original editorial principles, even in their revised form of May 1968, had not been sufficiently complete to obviate differences in presentation. Here therefore are to be situated the first important modifications in approach: it was apparent that the directives to editors would have to be substantially revised and expanded (December 1975); just as importantly it was decreed that editions submitted for publication were to be entrusted to referees drawn from the membership of the Executive and the Advisory committees of the edition (respectively seven and twenty members). José-Michel Moureaux's particularly thorough edition of *La Défense de mon oncle* (1984) – with its elucidation of unclear, cryptic or generally unfamiliar material – is the visible confirmation that editors and copy-editors now had a much firmer grasp of editorial objectives.

When, in 1994, Haydn Mason invited me to examine the progress that the edition had made (it now totalled nineteen volumes), I decided – because that seemed to be the essential task in hand, given the insistence with which people had for some time been talking of this *chronological* edition – to concentrate on answering the question: was the *OCV* (as never before) now facilitating a better synchronic/diachronic understanding of Voltaire's concerns? I found, in practice, more than I had been expecting. The fact that some of the extant volumes provided dense coverage of two precise periods in his life (1749, in volumes 31A and 31B, and – albeit more loosely – 1766-1767: volumes 62, 63A and 64) meant that the spectator was already in a privileged position: henceforth he had a much heightened awareness of the presence of a complex, protean Voltaire and, above all, of the challenges that the latter posed to all those who would understand him better as he went through the intricate processes of formulating and disseminating his views.

Let me illustrate that contention. In 1994, if the scholarly introductions had helped me to make a number of discoveries, it was the chronological edition as such (and particularly the collectaneous volumes) that made me aware that we were now being required, not just to read, but to perceive Voltaire somewhat differently. No longer

³ 'On editing Voltaire', *SVEC* 242, p.491-502 (p.498).

⁴ See John Renwick, 'The *Complete works of Voltaire*: a review of the first twenty-five years' in *Pour encourager les autres. Studies for the tercentenary of Voltaire's birth 1694-1994*, *SVEC* 320, p.165-207 (p.165).

⁵ Barber, 'On editing Voltaire', p.498.

approaching him according to the old rigidly defined and rigidly ordered generic categories, but reading him in the light of his own overlapping intellectual concerns within any given year, we were escaping the habit of dealing uniquely with the well-defined dramatist or *conteur*, etc., and were beginning to adopt a perspective from which we could not ignore the obligation to place more emphasis on content than on purely literary form, on inter-dependence rather than individual textual specificity. In a word, we were constantly reminded, as never before, that we should take greater cognisance, not only of works with similar intentions that had been written at different periods (such as *Le Philosophe ignorant* and the *Traité de métaphysique*), as the edition of the *Dictionnaire philosophique* was to do later in 1994, but of those apparently dissimilar works which were being elaborated in close or semi-close, but not necessarily obvious parallel. That is the reason why the volumes covering the years 1766-1767 proved to be so useful. It was the combination of, for example, *André Destouches à Siam*, the *Homélies prononcées à Londres*, the *Anecdotes sur Bélisaire* and the *Dîner du comte de Boulainwilliers* that helped us to adopt an approach whose conclusions, in the past, had not always been obvious. A combined synchronic/diachronic approach betrayed the fact – as would be constantly confirmed over the coming years – that Voltaire's writings had had an extraordinarily osmotic existence. The ramifications between one work and the next – be it *conte*, tragedy, poem or serious philosophical treatise – are complex. Even more significantly, the reader was now starting to become aware of the fact that the movement from one to the other (sometimes accomplished within the space of mere days) could lead to a delicate modulation of Voltaire's stance without, paradoxically, betraying its inner coherence: the elements remain the same, but are arranged in patterns that look 'different'.

Volumes 62, 63A and 64 also persuaded us to give even more prominence to certain aspects of Voltaire's character that have a certain biographical interest. The works of 1766-1767 – which must always be associated with the culmination of the philosophical campaign and which are remarkable for their weight and number – are an unmistakable invitation to see Voltaire demonstrating all the qualities and the instincts of the great actor, of the indefatigable mimic, which allowed him to adopt attitudes, assume poses or counterfeit an impressive range of tones and registers. If we take this view – in conjunction with the lessons of the correspondence – we are also invited to identify a closely allied mobility of character (to which his contemporaries were sensitive) which, in turn, allowed him to oscillate – sometimes from one moment to the next – between high seriousness (even pathos) and the most impertinent burlesque.

Those were the essential lessons learned in 1994. Twenty-two years later, and with an exponentially expanded body of texts to hand, it is evident – however – that the essential question should now be: how could it transpire that such an already complex Voltaire could become even more protean? The answer, in short, is: the exponentially expanding body of texts itself which had brought about an editorial approach that was notable for its increasingly elastic and sophisticated parameters. It was unavoidable that the more texts we came to possess, and the more 'problèmes ponctuels' that the latter brought with them, the more had it become necessary to identify the appropriate editorial responses and to add them to the data bank for the sake of future reference. In two important areas, it was the very nature of the texts themselves that brought about such inflexions in approach. Those texts – for the sake of illustration – were of two sorts. There were those (I am thinking in particular of the *Dictionnaire*

philosophique and the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*) where it was evident that Voltaire was engaged in a redefinition or a rehandling of socio-political or philosophical ideas that he had already expressed. A better understanding of his own current position(s) could be attained only by having recourse to the genetics of both text and thought as they had been announced or adumbrated in earlier works. That necessarily brought about the editorial habit of going way beyond the temporal bounds of any given work, and providing an assessment, by way of comparison and contrast (usually in the editorial notes) of the reasons for the shifts or the modifications of whatever sort. That explains why, for example, the *Notebooks* themselves (which had never been particularly visible in the early editions) figured more and more frequently in the apparatus of successive volumes, as their intrinsic value was taken more and more as both granted and non-negotiable. That also goes a long way towards explaining why the online searchable resource 'Tout Voltaire', and the *Corpus des notes marginales* (vol.1-8, 1979-2012), were also seen with increasing favour.

Indeed, the greater the number of edited texts, with their varying strategies of elucidation, the greater already was the possibility of identifying which selection of those strategies best suited the treatment of virgin territory.

The second sort of texts that were to play a considerable role in the slow redefinition of editorial strategies were those that betrayed Voltaire's fascination with history. As we progressed from *La Henriade* (1970), to the *Histoire de Charles XII* (1996), and from there – even more particularly – to the *Histoire du parlement de Paris* (2005), to the *Essai sur les mœurs* (2009-) and the *Siècle de Louis XIV* (2015-), the more evident was it to become that much useful information could be gleaned about Voltaire from the various ways in which he exploited his sources. What could be called 'Voltaire au travail' became therefore one of the guiding principles of our editorial requirements... with, in parallel, a concomitantly more frequent recourse to the *Corpus des notes marginales* and its invaluable clues. It was self-evident that a man who assiduously exploited the hundreds of history books in his own private library (sometimes carefully, sometimes not so carefully, and sometimes, alas! with little regard for honesty) was in the process of providing the vigilant observer with further dimensions of understanding. That is why the eight volumes of the *Essai sur mœurs* literally bristle with the siglum *CN* and the associated assessment of the significance of the passages that Voltaire himself had singled out as being noteworthy.

Such an aid to elucidation has been invaluable in two precise ways. Not only has it further contributed to a better understanding of Voltaire's relationship to the requirements of responsible historiography, but it has also helped us to corroborate numerous dimensions of Voltaire's own protean personality. All of Voltaire's biographers know that he was capable of the very best and the very worst. Close attention to the *Essai sur les mœurs* will give the observer little choice to conclude otherwise: here, as elsewhere, and just as frequently, the reader finds a man of great complexity, capable of much hatred, readily dismissive of those who dared to hold opinions different from his and to question their integrity (often with considerable injustice). *A contrario* we find (and I prefer to find) a friend of humanity guided by compassion and a strong sense of justice, a great and constantly alert critical mind that was remarkably open and perceptive, capable of intuitions of great finesse and endowed with a remarkable gift for synthesis.

Let us reserve, however, our last word for that *Corpus* we have just mentioned, because its own history conveniently serves to epitomise the evolving nature of the whole vast enterprise that we have collectively been bringing to completion. Open the first volume (1979) and look at its complexion. The crude statistics are revealing: the presentation of 283 works (from *A nosseigneurs du parlement en la Grand'chambre assemblée* down to Buzonnière) fills p.59-631; the 488 notes to which they give rise (p.633-59) account, however, for only 27 pages, i.e. a mere 4.7% of the total. If, moreover, the elucidation that these notes afford is valuable, the ground that they cover is cautious: editorial comment, purely factual, is reserved for an equally limited number of topics. When, in 1994, the edition had reached its fifth volume (La Barre-Muyart de Vouglans), it is clear that the over-arching editorial principles had evolved quite significantly: not only did the notes now account for 11.4% of the total, but they were also much more ambitious and helpful in scope and coverage. Though these facts had not escaped certain editors, it is evident that their sheer value had not been universally recognised. When Raymond Trousson and Jeroom Vercruyssen (vastly expanding the content of their original *Dictionnaire de Voltaire* of 1994) came to commission the *Dictionnaire général de Voltaire* (2003), which built magnificently on published volumes of the *OCV* and decades of scholarly attention as evidenced in *SVEC* (now *Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment*), they did not judge it necessary to devote an article to *Corpus des notes marginales*. That omission is all the more surprising in that the correspondence, to which Frédéric Deloffre had originally devoted a certain number of pages (p.43-46), henceforth (and quite correctly) doubled in length (p.251-56).

The troubles besetting the former DDR brought about a hiatus in the publication of the *Corpus*, and it was only in 2006, 2008 and 2012 that the work could begin appearing again, under the imprint of the Voltaire Foundation. What, however, is specifically noteworthy is the fact that the volumes in question, very particularly vol.8 (2012), betray exactly the same expansions in commentary as do the *Complete works*. The cumulatively extensive editorial insights that had been built into the latter were now an increasingly intrinsic part of the *Corpus*: an astonishing 36% of the complete contents of vol.8 are devoted to a critical elucidation of a nature and type that was nowhere apparent in the early volumes.

As is clear, fifty years' familiarity with the *Complete works* have conspired to make me agree with Voltaire, who – surveying the general field of human activity – constantly opined: *tout change*. Fortunately, it does. Looking back over editions for which I personally have been responsible, I sometimes find myself wishing – with the benefit of hindsight – that, in the early stages, I had been more aware (as I am now) of a multiplicity of critical approaches. It is not that a particular edition is bad. It is quite simply not as helpful (or plainly multi-dimensional) as it could have been. The consolation is that I, like many others, can have regrets only because, in a second phase of consolidation and redefinition, cumulative experience within the *Conseil scientifique* or among *maîtres d'œuvre* – who had been dealing with texts of greater and greater complexity – was being refined and pooled for wider implementation.

But on the other hand, not everything changes. In remembering the early days of the collaborative, collective endeavour, Jeroom Vercruyssen writes: 'Une fois les textes attribués, le Comité dut, au fur et à mesure de l'arrivée des copies, procéder à des relectures, formuler des critiques et des suggestions souvent délicates, recourir à de nouvelles compétences. Des milliers de pages passèrent de mains en mains. Tout cela

se passa dans une entente parfaite, jamais un mot plus vif que d'autres ne fut prononcé.' In turn, and in the same discreet shorthand, I also can repeat that it was (and it remains) the ability of the *Conseil scientifique*, of the young in-house copy-editors, and of the individual editors themselves to cooperate so constructively behind the scenes that is one of the great unsung virtues of the edition. The sheer quality of the monument that they have helped to construct is a silent but powerful and fitting testimonial to their efforts.