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*Voltaire's rhetoric:
the use of written evidence in the
alphabetical works*

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One of the mainstays of rhetorical discourse, recognized and discussed by all ancient rhetoricians, is the use of well-chosen examples, either historical or fictitious, to illustrate and/or prove the validity of an orator's observations and theses. Throughout the ages, however, it has tended to be overshadowed by rhetoric's 'technical' factor, the verbal elements of speech which, having become synonymous with style, and even with purely formal elements entirely divorced from thought, have led to the discredit in which that art is often held. Yet the precepts of Aristotle, Quintillian, Cicero, have never been entirely forgotten. In the 17th and 18th centuries, religious and political controversies kept alive that part of rhetoric which is the art of persuasion through the use of appropriate examples. Today the essayist, the journalist, the politician, often have recourse to it, though not always, perhaps, with an awareness of the technical source of their art.

It is an art, in fact, which shines most brilliantly where it is most hidden; it persuades while pretending merely to state facts; it tells part of the truth and convinces the reader he has seen the whole truth; it provides seemingly unimpeachable evidence while subtly fashioning that evidence to suit its needs. Because of its nature, it often goes unrecognized; and its best practitioners have been virtually immune from examination. Voltaire, one of the greatest rhetoricians of his time, and perhaps of all time, is still barely known as such. His thought has been often and well studied and analyzed; his practice in the fields of the theatre, history, the

conte and novel, is constantly being scrutinized. We know of his wars against evils of all kinds; we know the major targets of his wit. But the means he employed to transfer to the reader his contempt and hatred of the *infâme* and his hopes for a future built on reason and philosophy are still to a large extent ignored or taken for granted.

Of particular interest here is the use made by Voltaire of his written sources in a rhetorical context. Devices will necessarily vary from genre to genre. The articles in two alphabetical works¹, the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (DP) and the *Questions sur l'encyclopédie* (QE), have been selected as representative of his later essays. These two collections, written in a serious mode—different from the tone of the *facéties* of the same period—not only cover a wide range of topics but also draw upon a large variety of sources. They can thus provide ample testimony to their author's handling of written evidence for demonstrative purposes, of which three facets will be examined here: the concealment of sources used, the selection of certain authorities over others, and the method of transcription of quoted texts.

i. Concealment of sources

In a rhetorical presentation of facts, the use of past authorities and written records does not necessarily imply a need to provide accurate testimony of historical events or precise copies of older documents². Their primary function is to act as independent confirmation of the essayist's opinions and theses, to attest, by their accumulation, to his erudition, and thereby to enhance the reader's confidence in his authority. Reliability of source material cited, or rather the appearance of such reliability, is thus a prime consideration. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the rules of evidence

¹ I have omitted a third alphabetical work, the *Opinion en alphabet* (OA) for a large proportion of the articles included are mere reworkings of other writers' texts and cannot be said to be

Voltaire's own. See my 'Voltaire's debt to the *Encyclopédie* in the *Opinion en alphabet*' in the forthcoming *Literature and history in the age of ideas: essays presented to George R. Havens*.

pertaining to historical documents were widely discussed, and their limits defined. By the 1760s, the distinction in value between original and derivative sources had become the common patrimony not only of historians but also of the educated public³. Voltaire himself was eminent in his insistence on accuracy, in his criticism of doubtful records, in his praise of those who, like Scipion Duplex, took care to indicate their sources clearly and completely. In the alphabetical works themselves, he often points out the almost inevitable distortions caused by intermediate editors of originally truthful accounts, and urges the wary always to return to the certainty of primary testimony.

In these circumstances, it would seem that in his essays Voltaire would take more than the ordinary degree of care in identifying his sources correctly and in evaluating the limits of their significance. This, however, is not often the case. Indeed, in view of the wide range of topics covered in the DP and the QE, it is inevitable that, with the exception of contemporary or near-contemporary events, the majority of Voltaire's sources should be of a derivative nature. In those cases, says Brumfitt, 'He is reduced to the published works of earlier historians. For he has neither the desire nor the technical skill to undertake a personal investigation into original documents'³. If such material is used in his articles, it must be disguised, in the interest of greater persuasiveness, and presented as the result of his own readings and research. As a result, his frequent large-scale borrowings are seldom revealed: the reader is encouraged to trust the erudite Voltaire at the same time that he is deterred from entertaining any doubts as to the certainty of the facts presented or the reliability of the witnesses to those facts.

Voltaire's treatment of the various hypotheses concerning the identity of the *homme au masque de fer* in 'Ana', QE, exemplifies his use of secondary sources to enhance his authority over the reader. After having noted that he was the first to reveal the story

² Arnaldo Momigliano, 'Ancient history and the antiquarian', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* (1950),

xiii.286.

³ J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire historian* (London 1958), p.132.

to the public 'dans une histoire avérée', he lists the hypotheses suggested by other writers, points out their lack of merit, and then hints that he knows the truth of the matter but will not disclose it. The reader is justified in concluding that Voltaire has indeed given much time and thought to the problem, that he is familiar with all past writings on the subject, and that his statements must then carry more weight than any other's. But that would be a false conclusion: there is no indication that Voltaire had read the material cited. He did, however, know Henri Griffet's *Traité des différentes sortes de preuves qui servent à établir la vérité de l'histoire*, whose text is summarized in his article⁴. His information is secondhand; his seeming erudition, which is the main basis of the reader's subsequent endorsement of his claim of superior and secret knowledge of the facts, has little value save a rhetorical one.

There is a similar situation in 'Franc', QE, where Voltaire refers to the opinions of Leibniz and the 'géographe de Ravenne' on the origins of the Franks. There is no evidence that he had read Leibniz's *De origine Francorum disquisitio* (Hanoveræ 1715), or any edition of the work first published by Placide Porcheron under the title *Anonymi Ravennatis qui circa sæculum VII vixit De geographia libri quinque* (Parisiis 1688). He did, however, know and frequently cite Joseph Barre's *Histoire générale d'Allemagne* (Paris 1748), which contains, in an appendix to volume i, a 'Dissertation sur l'origine de quelques anciens peuples de Germanie', where both Leibniz and the *anonyme de Ravenne* are cited (p.7). It is highly probable that Barre is Voltaire's true source of information. But his name is not mentioned. The rhetorician must seem to have immediate access to the original documents.

In the meantime, the reader has no inkling of the errors and distortions of meaning which often result from successive renditions of a particular text. When Voltaire writes, in 'Inquisition', DP, 'Louis de Paramo . . . raconte', 'Louis de Paramo remarque', 'Il raconte', the reader has little cause to suspect the general

⁴ (Liège 1769), pp.300-327. Voltaire had requested a copy of this book from Argental in January 1770 for use in 'Ana', QE (Best.15085).

accuracy of the paraphrase, seemingly taken directly from Luis de Páramo's *De origine et progressu officii sanctæ inquisitionis* (Madrid 1589). In fact Voltaire never read that work, but only excerpts made by André Morellet in his *Manuel des inquisiteurs à l'usage des inquisitions d'Espagne et de Portugal* (Lisbonne [Paris] 1762)⁵. His reading notes, which are a mixture of *verbatim* quotations and resums of Morellet's excerpts⁶, were then abridged anew before being included in 'Inquisition', DP. Páramo's text having thus been edited three times, by two different authors, it is hardly surprising that the final paraphrase is less faithful to the original than one would at first believe. But these facts, and their implications, are not made known to the reader.

There are times, also, when Voltaire has been led into error by an intermediate source. When lauding the character and virtues of the *comtesse* de Montfort in 'Amazones', QE, for example, he believes, and states, that he is quoting directly from Argentré's *Histoire de Bretagne* when he is in fact copying Villaret's resumé of Argentré's portrait of the countess⁷. In 'Christianisme', DP, and 'Eglise', QE, where his discussion of the quarrel between the apostles Peter and Paul, and of some early Christians' belief in the coming millennium, follow, both in order of presentation and in the examples provided, Middleton's 'Some cursory reflections on the dispute or dissension which happened at Antioch between the apostles Peter and Paul' and his 'Inquiry into the miraculous powers which are supposed to have subsisted in the Christian church from the earliest ages throughout several successive centuries'⁸, he errs as a result of having misread Middleton and reversed his footnotes, and thus ascribes to saint Jerome saint John Chrysostomus's *First homily*, and to Justinus saint Jerome's *Commentary on Isaias*. This last case is all the more significant in that Voltaire had in his library

⁵ Best.D10284, D10290, D10291, D10305. Claude Villaret, *Histoire de France* (Paris 1760), viii.400-402.

⁶ they were published by the Kehl editors as part of the OA. See my 'Voltaire's debt'.

⁷ Bertrand d'Argentré, *Histoire de Bretagne* (Paris 1588), pp.279-286;

⁸ Conyers Middleton, *Miscellaneous works* (London 1752), ii.1-20, i.26-30. See Norman L. Torrey, *Voltaire and the English deists* (New Haven 1930), pp.164-166.

the complete works of the fathers of the church. Obviously neither he nor his secretary verified the data obtained from Middleton. Which perhaps would indicate Voltaire's general lack of concern with accuracy and precision in references supplied, and explain why the reader is so often left in ignorance as to the actual sources of his statements and quotes. For Voltaire the polemist, the rhetorician, all these are secondary matters. Written evidence is used to illustrate or confirm a thesis rather than to provide indisputable proof of facts. Even in trivial circumstances, the self-serving appearance of scholarship takes precedence over the exact transmission of the records of the past.

Voltaire's silence may also have another aim: it can alter the significance of a given testimony by concealing a prejudiced source, and even by making it appear that there are two or more witnesses to the same fact or event when, in actuality, there is only one. This occurs in 'Auguste Octave', QE, where statements attributed to Sextus Pompey, Lucius Cæsar, and Mark Antony ('Nous avons encore une lettre d'Antoine à Auguste') are given as proof of Augustus's moral depravity. In fact the three texts quoted are to be found only in Suetonius⁹, who must be considered the sole source for the evidence cited. But he is not named. The reader will believe that he can count on three independent declarations from Augustus's contemporaries; he will instead be basing his judgement on one historian's statement, written a hundred years after the event; and of course he will be unable to take into consideration, in his evaluation of the evidence, Suetonius's well known bias against Augustus, which Voltaire himself acknowledges in 'Histoire', QE.

In these and similar cases, the reader is kept uninformed of the possibilities of error inherent in the use of derivative material. Voltaire himself is unconcerned with the provenance of his information and seldom takes steps to verify its accuracy even when

⁹ *Life of Augustus*, ii.68-70. Voltaire even attempts to strengthen his reader's faith by stating, prior to these sentences: 'On ne peut connaître les mœurs que

par les faits, et il faut que les faits soient incontestables'. One would believe that Suetonius's word was for Voltaire an absolute guarantee of truth!

he has the original sources at his disposal. References to a large number of past authorities and documents fulfil primarily a rhetorical aim, that of building confidence in his knowledge and credibility. All else is of secondary importance. And even when the evidence adduced has been transcribed correctly, the concealment of an intermediate editor may still obscure the issue of independent versus inter-related testimony.

Another common Voltairean procedure is the general reference to unidentified sources. Statements are introduced by vague appeals to the reader's common knowledge or even erudition: 'On sait que'; 'On connaît'¹⁰; 'Rien n'est plus certain que'; 'Les savants disent que'; 'Les critiques croient que'; 'Les théologiens admettent que'; etc. Voltaire's word must then be taken on trust; even to question it would seem to be an admission of crass ignorance. In the meantime, a statement ostensibly backed by popular opinion, common sense, or even by weighty scholarship, is in fact unsupported by any kind of proof. The occasional variation, 'Tous les vrais savants conviennent' ('Christianisme', DP), 'Ce qu'on entend tous les jours dans la bouche des personnes instruites' ('Eglise', QE), while allowing for individual dissent, immediately invalidates that dissent by ascribing it to faulty knowledge or false reasoning. A simple assertion replaces proof.

The burden of verification is then transferred from the author to the reader, who can rarely be sure that he has in fact uncovered all the possible authorities alluded to. In consequence, greater emphasis is placed on the number rather than on the quality and reliability of past records; disagreements among scholars may be hidden or forgotten; a minority opinion may well be given as a general consensus.

Voltaire's eulogies of China provide many instances of his refusal to acknowledge contradictory evidence. Indeed, says

¹⁰ on the use of the pronoun 'on' to generalize a personal thought or conviction, see my *Etude sur le style polémique de Voltaire: le Dictionnaire philosophique* (Studies on Voltaire,

xliv: 1966), pp.38-39. Ira O. Wade has also noted this feature of Voltaire's rhetoric in the *Bible enfin expliquée* in his *Voltaire and madame Du Châtelet* (Princeton 1941), p.180.

Rowbotham, 'The sinomania of Voltaire furnishes us interesting light on his treatment of evidence in the polemic works. The most remarkable aspect of his cult of the country of Ch'ien Lung is his uncritical acceptance of practically all the Jesuit panegyric of the Empire'¹¹. The Jesuits' point of view dominates his picture of Chinese civilization; there is little indication, in the alphabetical works, that contrary opinion even exists. Again, says Rowbotham, 'Obviously Voltaire was not ignorant of this contradictory evidence. He was forced however to ignore it—as he was constantly ignoring evidence in other fields—to preserve the unity of his conception of a Chinese utopia'¹². Among several interesting cases is his defense of Chinese chronology, based on astronomical calculations. For when he states that the solar eclipse observed in China in 2155 B. C. is 'reconnue véritable par tous nos astronomes' ('Histoire', QE), he grandly dismisses as non-existent the many doubts and observations expressed at the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres by several scholars, notably Fréret, ever since the publication in 1732 of Antoine Gaubil's *Traité de l'astronomie chinoise*¹³.

On other occasions, a single statement is said to represent majority opinion. Those who disagree, it is implied, are motivated by prejudice or ignorance, and need not be considered. Such is the

¹¹ Arnold Rowbotham, 'Voltaire sinophile', *Publications of the Modern language association of America* (1932), xlvii.1060.

¹² Rowbotham, p.1063. Numerous examples of Voltaire's disregard of evidence derogatory to the Chinese are provided pp.1060-5.

¹³ see, among others, Nicolas Fréret's 'De l'antiquité et de la certitude de la chronologie chinoise', *Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (1736), x.377-402; 'Eclaircissements sur le mémoire lu au mois de novembre 1733 touchant l'antiquité et la certitude de la chronologie chinoise', *Mémoires* (1743), xv.495-564; 'Suite du

traité touchant la certitude et l'antiquité de la chronologie chinoise', *Mémoires* (1753), xviii.178-295. In 1767 Joseph de Guignes again touched on the subject in his 'Examen critique des annales chinoises, ou Mémoire sur l'incertitude des douze premiers siècles de ces annales et de la chronologie chinoise', *Mémoires* (1774), xxxvi.164-238. Voltaire's support of Gaubil's position becomes even more problematic when it is noted that he did not know the Jesuit's work directly but only through other Jesuit publications; Basil Guy, *The French image of China before and after Voltaire* (Studies on Voltaire, xxi: 1963), pp.254-258.

case of the emperor Theodosius: 'On sait assez quelle fut la douceur de ce saint dans le massacre de quinze mille de ses sujets à Thessalonique. Ses panégyristes réduisent le nombre des assassinés à sept ou huit mille' ('Théodose', QE). Only one author has been found who mentions 15,000 victims: Louis Moréri in the article 'Théodose' of his *Dictionnaire historique*. And he gives no reference. All other biographers of Theodosius, from the early Theodoretus to the moderns Fléchier and Fleury¹⁴, refer to 7000-8000 victims. In spite of the 'On sait', Voltaire's statement does not represent majority opinion. But few readers would be apt to question what is presented in such categorical form.

If Voltaire at times creates a non-existent consensus by the use of general, unidentified sources, he can also, by the same means, create non-existent sources for his sayings. Such an occurrence is rare. Yet it represents an extreme in a common Voltairean device, and as such must be noted. In 'Auguste Octave', QE, one finds: 'Presque tous les auteurs latins qui ont parlé d'Ovide prétendent qu'Auguste n'eut l'insolence d'exiler ce chevalier romain, qui était beaucoup plus honnête homme que lui, que parce qu'il avait été surpris par lui dans un inceste avec sa propre fille Julia'. Only the fact that the reasons which led to Ovid's bannishment have remained a mystery to this day, and have, as such, attracted the attention of many scholars throughout the ages, allows us to affirm that, on the contrary, no Latin author of the age of Augustus ever mentioned the cause of the poet's exile. The *Tristia* themselves are most vague on that point. The first hint of a sexual transgression in this connection surfaced only in the fifth century, when Sidonius Apollinarius alluded to a possible adultery committed by Ovid with a woman of the emperor's household¹⁵. The question of incest, first raised in the 16th century, was soon dismissed when it was noted that Julia's bannishment in 2 B. C. preceded Ovid's by ten years, and that it was unlikely that Augustus would have waited so

¹⁴ Theodoretus, *Ecclesiastical history*, v.xvii; Valentin Esprit Fléchier, *Histoire de Théodose le grand*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris 1827), vi.305-07;

Claude Fleury, *Histoire ecclésiastique* (Paris 1695), iv.576.

¹⁵ *Poèmes* (Paris 1960), i.150 (xxiii. 158-161).

long to silence a witness to his alleged crime¹⁶. But Voltaire wished to denigrate Augustus, and stated explicitly in a letter of 1766 referring to this passage: 'Je veux couler à fond la réputation d'Auguste: j'ai une dent contre lui depuis longtemps pour avoir eu l'insolence d'exiler Ovide qui valait mieux que lui' (Best.D13325). He then not only revives the previously discredited incest motive but also creates authorities out of thin air.

A third kind of authority used to support Voltairean philosophy or polemics is Voltaire himself, referred to as 'un auteur connu' ('Athéisme', DP), 'un auteur inconnu' ('Epigrammes', QE; 'Epopée', QE), or as the author of 'un petit livre qu'on peut n'avoir pas sous la main' ('Arius', QE), 'un livre nouveau souvent réimprimé' ('Apostat', QE), 'un livre connu' ('Identité', QE). Obviously such a device is more persuasive than references to works or articles openly acknowledged to be his. In the latter case, the reader is aware of the repetitious or circular nature of the argument. By remaining anonymous, Voltaire presents himself as an independent witness to his own testimony, without, of course, enlightening the reader as to the real nature of the 'proof' cited. That such is his intent is made clear in 'Justice', QE, where one kind of injustice is characterized by a lack of proportion between crime and punishment. And then, adds Voltaire, 'Nous ne pouvons mieux démontrer cette vérité [my italics] que par la lettre qu'un célèbre avocat du conseil écrivit, en 1766, à m. le marquis de Beccaria, l'un des plus célèbres professeurs de jurisprudence qui soient en Europe'. The 'célèbre avocat' is Voltaire himself, and the letter, his *Relation de la mort du chevalier de La Barre*.

The mode of presentation of Voltaire's supporting evidence thus carries with it rhetorical implications at variance with the principles of historical and textual criticism enunciated elsewhere in his works. It directs the reader's attention to certain types of evidence to the prejudice of others; it stifles any question that

¹⁶ for a discussion of the various theories concerning Ovid's exile which have been proposed throughout the ages, see John C. Thibault, *The Mystery of Ovid's exile* (Berkeley 1964).

would normally be asked about the credibility of unnamed sources; it may present as proof what is repetitious assertion. Above all and always it serves to enhance the author's control over his reader through the creation of an image of dependable erudition.

ii. Selection of sources

When several documents bearing on the same fact or person are available, the essayist as well as the historian must choose among them those that are most pertinent to his aims. The latter will seek the correct or more credible witness; the former, the one most adaptable to his present thesis. As a historian and critic of past historians, Voltaire often discussed the criteria which allow one to discriminate among the records of the past¹⁷. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that those same criteria are applied in his polemical works, where written documents function in support of a rhetorical demonstration. To compare Voltaire's theories with his practice in the DP and the QE would be an endless task. As a measure of the variations encountered, three characteristic procedures will be examined in terms of their demonstrative goals: his refusal to select, among several accounts of an event, that which is the most accurate or plausible, his failure to take into consideration the possible or even probable bias of original sources, and the inconsistency of his judgements on individual authors and their works.

Although in theory Voltaire has many criteria—mainly negative—by which to judge the validity of written documents, in practice he applies no consistent set of rules which would allow him to identify positively those reports to which one could give credence. Individual works are rejected on the basis of improbability, naïveté, internal contradictions, ignorance, prejudice, etc. Those which are retained are deemed acceptable, with few exceptions, not by virtue of any positive merits but because they do not

¹⁷ see Brumfitt, pp.98-101, 136-142
Furio Diaz, *Voltaire storico* (Torino; 1958), pp.282-310.

evince the negative traits which would bar them from consideration. On that basis it becomes extremely difficult for the historian Voltaire to select the most reliable version among several plausible ones. As an essayist he rarely attempts to do so. And those few occasions where he does state a preference, a blunt assertion forbids discussion. In the matter of the Irish rebellion of 1641-1642, for example, Voltaire says merely that the preferred authority 'paraît très instruit' ('Conspirations', QE)¹⁸. No reason is given to sustain that impression.

Stated conflicts of opinion are more often left unresolved and taken as proof of the writers' incompetence or of the impossibility of ever knowing the truth of the past. That is the main point of Voltaire's refusal to investigate the relative merits of the biographies of Cyrus the elder given by Herodotus, Ctesias, Xenophon, Diodorus Siculus, and Justinus ('Cyrus', QE), or the divergent reports of Callisthenes's death as cited in Plutarch ('Alexandre' QE). In the latter case, the differences between the historian and the rhetorician emerge clearly. The historian Rollin, faced with the same facts as Voltaire, attempted to find the truth among the conflicting stories and concluded, on the basis of the common denominator in them all, that Callisthenes was tortured to death, but that the exact nature of the torture used was open to question¹⁹. Voltaire, on the other hand, makes no effort to ascertain even part of the truth; it is sufficient for his purpose to illustrate with this example the uncertainty of past history.

Another lesson to be drawn is that of the vanity of human ambition. 'On ne sait où mourut ce célèbre surindendant', says Voltaire of Nicolas Fouquet. Which proves 'combien la considération qu'on recherche avec tant de soins est peu de chose; qu'heureux sont ceux qui veulent vivre et mourir inconnus' ('Ana', QE). Voltaire looks no further. Yet the problem is far from being as murky as he seems, or wants, to believe. In spite of the 'On ne sait', all contemporary documents and memoirs, with the sole

¹⁸ for a discussion of Voltaire's sources, see pp.60-61 below.

¹⁹ Charles Rollin, *Histoire ancienne* (Paris 1734), vi.545.

exception of Gourville's²⁰, place Fouquet's death at Pignerol shortly before 23 March 1680. But Voltaire is less interested in finding the facts of the matter than in pointing out the conflict of opinion, however narrow, which will help to illustrate his thesis.

More commonly, however, the reader is not allowed to glimpse the disputes of scholars or historians. Voltaire proceeds on the assumption that his authorities have never been controverted, that all are in agreement. We have seen that the vague, unidentified source is often used in that connection. Conflicts are also hidden when details from varying reports are fused into a single narration. Such is the case when Voltaire mocks the credulity of the early Roman historians and includes, among a series of miraculous events reported by Livy, the story that, on the arrival in Rome of the statue of Cybele, 'une vestale [a] tiré à terre un vaisseau avec sa ceinture' ('Histoire', QE). The confusion between Claudia Quinta, the heroine of the occasion according to Livy (*Roman history*, xxix. xiv.12-13), and Claudia Vestalis, daughter of Appius Claudius Pulcher, as well as the indication that the boat carrying the statue of the goddess was brought to shore by means of the vestal's sash are to be found only in Julian the apostate²¹. By keeping silent about the source of the anecdote, Voltaire can then add to the evidence against Livy and his contemporaries while shielding the emperor Julian, one of his great heroes, from charges of superstition and credulity.

Similarly, when Voltaire wishes to denigrate Cyrus the younger, he does not hesitate to insert, in a resumé of Xenophon's history of the king, Plutarch's assertion (*Artaxerxes*, iii) that Cyrus had attempted to murder his brother Artaxerxes ('Xenophon', QE). Xenophon in fact denies that rumour in his *Anabasis* (1. i.3). But this disagreement is ignored by Voltaire: by introducing Plutarch's statement in Xenophon's narration, he can make the charge of

²⁰ Jean Hérault, sieur de Gourville, *Mémoires* (Paris 1724), ii.181. See Georges Mongrédien, *L'Affaire Fouquet* (Paris 1956), pp.241-242.

²¹ 'Discours sur la mère des dieux', ii, in *Œuvres complètes de Julien*, ed. J. Bidez (Paris 1963), ii^a.1105.

attempted murder against Cyrus all the more credible that it seems to come from one of his allies and admirers.

Voltaire's acceptance of Plutarch's version of the incident over Xenophon's also exemplifies his inconsistency in applying the principle that contemporary authors are to be given precedence over later historians. In theory, the further removed in time a writer is from the events narrated, the less trustworthy he becomes: 'De génération en génération le doute augmente, et la probabilité diminue; et bientôt la probabilité est réduite à zéro' ('Vérité', QE). That is why Polybius is to be preferred to Livy on the story of Porsenna: he predates Livy by 200 years ('Histoire', QE), and why, within an author's work, the degree of credibility may vary: 'A mesure qu'Hérodote dans son histoire se rapproche de son temps, il est mieux instruit et plus vrai' ('Histoire', QE).

Yet this rule is hardly applied consistently. In 'Histoire', QE, Suetonius's reports on the debaucheries of Tiberius and the cruelty of Caligula are unbelievable: 'Croirai-je sur le rapport d'un seul homme qui vivait longtemps après Tibère'. However in that same article and in 'Auguste Octave', QE, Suetonius's testimony against Augustus, even further removed in time from him than Tiberius or Caligula, is deemed perfectly acceptable. On the matter of the Irish rebellion, Voltaire also prefers, over the testimony of 'des historiens contemporains, tels que le chancelier Clarendon et un chevalier Jean Temple' ('Conspirations', QE), that of Henry Brooke's 18th century work, *The Tryal of the cause of the Roman catholics* (Dublin 1762)²². Voltaire's rule may be quite clear; its application tends to be erratic. The reader is often allowed, or persuaded, to forget it.

A second facet of Voltaire's lack of discrimination among written records is his failure to question and/or take into account the obvious bias of his sources. Again the rule stated in 'Histoire', QE, is clear: 'Il n'y a peut-être qu'une règle sûre, c'est de croire le bien qu'un historien de parti ose dire des héros de la faction con-

²² at least he says he does; but see pp.60-61 below.

traire, et le mal qu'il ose dire des chefs de la sienne, dont il n'aura pas à se plaindre'. Yet the logical corollary, that one should not accept too readily the good an author says about his friends nor the evil he speaks about his enemies, is seldom applied. As a rhetorician Voltaire is only too happy to make use of any material at his disposition, whatever its provenance. The reader, on the other hand, unaware of the true origin of the statements made, is in no position to question their authenticity or significance. In some cases, no references are given at all. In 'Cyrus', QE, for example, Voltaire speaks, as a matter of established fact, of 'le mépris que saint Jérôme montre pour l'aventure de Suzanne, pour celle du dragon de Bélus, et pour les trois enfants de la fournaise'. His source can only be Rufinus' *Apologia against Jerome*, II. xxxv, whose very title points to an adversary relationship and a probably biased rendering of Jerome's thought. But by omitting any mention of Rufinus, of the work of saint Jerome which is under attack (the *Preface* to Daniel), or of saint Jerome's defense against Rufinus's charges (*Apologia against Rufinus*, II. xxxv), Voltaire can present as certain what is indeed a much controverted issue, and ward off any attempt on the reader's part to control the accuracy of the information given.

The same is true in 'Arc', QE, where English and Burgundian historians of the hundred-years war, who can hardly be expected to be free of animosity against Joan of Arc, are used almost exclusively. Yet they are not named. Only one reference is given in the entire article, to an apparently innocuous source, tome i of the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France et de Bourgogne*. The reader has no reason to question the good faith of the information concerning Joan of Arc's relationship with the infamous frère Richard included in these *Mémoires* edited by Des Salles (Paris 1729). He may not know that tome i contains the *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris sous le règne de Charles VII*. But that is again an apparently innocuous source. What is more significant is that he will not know that the passage referred to does not represent the diarist's own opinion or knowledge but is a summary of a sermon

preached against Joan of Arc in July 1431 by the inquisitor-general Jean Graverent, one of the most determined of her enemies before and after her death²³. He is hardly an unprejudiced witness. It may be that Voltaire himself was unaware of the true nature of his source. His information as well as his reference to the *Mémoires* are taken from Claude Villaret's *Histoire de France*²⁴. In any event, in view of his knowing use elsewhere of biased testimony, it is not at all certain that, had he known the origin of the story, he would have forbore from using what could cast doubt on Joan of Arc's innocence. It seems clear that when he has ideological reasons for wishing to accept or reject a given piece of information he does so regardless of any or all of the criteria which, as a historian, he identifies as instruments of truth. The result, however, is quite consistent with his rhetorical aim: once again the reader has been prevented from seeing any further than Voltaire intended him to.

There can be little surprise then that certain documents, accepted as reliable in one instance, are rejected as valueless in another. Thus it is that the *Bible* is alternately an accurate record of the crimes, ignorance, fanaticism, etc. of the Jewish people, and a historically useless series of self-serving fantasies which no one but ignorant, superstitious Christians could believe to be true. Thus it is that the apocryphal writings can be scorned as worthless forgeries, testifying to the bad faith of their authors and to the simple-mindedness of those who accepted them, while the material they contain can still be used against certain adversaries, against saint Paul, for example whose grotesque physical portrait in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is often, and gleefully, publicized ('Christianisme', DP; 'Apôtres', QE; 'Eglise', QE). As for modern commentators of Church history, Voltaire's use and abuse of dom Calmet is well documented²⁵.

²³ *Journal*, in *Nouvelle collection des mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France*, ed. Michaud et Poujoulat (Paris 1837), iii.265.

²⁴ (Paris 1763), xiv.258.

²⁵ Wade, pp.108-115; Elizabeth Nichols, 'Dom Calmet, "qui n'a rai-

sonné jamais. . ."; *French review* (1957-1958), xxxi.296-299; Arnold Ages, 'Voltaire and dom Calmet', *Revue de l'université d'Ottawa* (1964), xxxiv.380-385; Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment* (New York 1967), i.362-364.

Nor is this practice limited to religious writers. 'Le faiseur d'anecdotes Suétone' ('Histoire', QE) is alternately cited as a reliable witness and rejected for his bias; Ammianus Marcellinus, 'auteur païen et non suspect' ('Apostat', QE) when applauding the virtues of the emperor Julian, becomes unbelievable and superstitious when he confirms the story of the fire which prevented the rebuilding of the temple of Jerusalem during Julian's reign; 'l'exagérateur Josèphe' ('Christianisme', QE), untrustworthy when confirming biblical history ('Aristée', QE; 'Christianisme' QE; 'Cyrus', QE; etc.) is yet the final authority, as 'le meilleur historien qu'aient jamais eu les Juifs, le seul estimé des Romains et des Grecs' ('Christianisme', DP), when his silence about the life of Christ becomes significant. The list of authors treated in such a way would be endless. It has already been noted by J. H. Brumfit (pp.26-27) that the basis for Voltaire's evaluation of humanist historians varied throughout his career, so that 'In his last years, it is often their attitude towards religion which influences him most'. In the alphabetical works, written during the Ferney period, polemics, whether of a religious, literary, or even personal nature, dictate the degree of credibility ascribed at any one time to a particular source. His selection of authorities as confirmation or proof of his sayings, inconsistent with the criteria required by serious historical research, even in the 18th century, is based above all on rhetorical factors and polemical needs.

iii. Transcription of texts

A third facet of Voltaire's rhetorical use of written evidence is the manner in which texts are transcribed in his works. Granted that 18th century standards of scholarship were relatively lax, especially in books aimed at the general public, Voltaire's practice merits consideration in view of the common assumption, fostered by his theoretical writings, of his carefulness and reliability in this matter. To be noted particularly are his frequent misreadings, due to a combination of carelessness and ideological slanting of the material

cited; the deliberate distortion of texts, notably in tendentious paraphrases; the use of quotes out of context, either the textual or the historical context; and the addition or deletion of significant details from passages quoted.

Alexis Pierron²⁶ pointed out many years ago several of Voltaire's often surprising errors of fact and mistranslations. His refusal to amend his text when such errors were exposed may be an indication both of pride of authorship and also of a certain indifference, in a rhetorical situation, to precision and factuality. It is true that Voltaire reads too much too fast always to be very accurate. Nor does he seem to care to be consistent or to try to reconcile discrepancies between his works or even within a single work. The truth of events, as stated by him, varies as much as the reliability of historians who recorded those events

Carelessness is no doubt responsible for many misstatements based on misreadings. These include, among many other instances:

false etymologies: 'La fameuse fête des lupercales était établie en l'honneur de la louve qui allaita Romulus et Remus' ('Histoire', QE). Ovid, to whose *Fasti* Voltaire refers in the context, states quite clearly that the lupercalia honoured the god Pan or Faunus. The temple however was built at the site where the she-wolf was said to have nursed Romulus and Remus (*Fasti*, ii.267-424)—whence, probably, Voltaire's mistake.

confusion between participants in a single event: 'Jéhud, en Phénicie, fut l'inventeur des sacrifices humains en immolant son fils' ('Antiquité', QE). The source of this statement, according to the *Notebooks*²⁷, is Antoine Banier's *La Mythologie et les fables expliquées par l'histoire* (Paris 1739), i.240-242, where Sanchoniatho's story, as quoted in Eusebius's *Præparatio evangelica*, I. x, is reported: Jehud was not the 'inventor' of human sacrifices; he was the first human victim, immolated by his father Hillu or Cronos.

²⁶ *Voltaire et ses maîtres* (Paris 1886); see especially pp.263-332.

²⁷ ed. Besterman (Voltaire 82: 1968), ii.588.

misreading of dates: the *homme au masque de fer* was buried 3 March 1703 says Voltaire in 'Ana', QE, in correction to the previous date of 1704 given in chapter 25 of the *Siècle de Louis XIV*. His new authority, he states, is 'le père Griffet, jésuite [qui] a communiqué au public le journal de la Bastille, qui fait foi des dates'. But while making one correction, Voltaire overlooks other errors: according to Griffet (p.297), the burial was on 20 November 1703.

faulty arithmetic: Nicolas Lenglet-Dufresnoy supposedly says in the *Tablettes chronologiques de l'histoire universelle* (Paris 1763) that Jupiter began to reign at the age of 62, six years after the death of Sarah, wife of Abraham ('Chronologie', QE). Lenglet-Dufresnoy states rather (i. viii-ix) that Sarah died in 1964 B. C., that Jupiter was born in 1904 B. C., *i. e.* 60 years after her death, and that his reign began in 1850 B. C. *i. e.* at the age of 54.

the combining of two related facts into one: 'L'abbaye d'Ainey à Lyon était un beau temple d'Auguste' ('Auguste Octave', QE). Voltaire's source here is probably François Eudes de Mézeray's *Abrégé chronologique de l'histoire de France* (Amsterdam 1755), i.106-107, which states more precisely, in accord with all other 18th century historians consulted, that the abbey was built on the site of the old temple dedicated to Augustus in 12 B. C. and described by Strabo in his *Geographia* (iv. iii.2). The identification of temple and abbey is Voltaire's own contribution.

transformation of a limited statement into a general one: according to the *Apostolic constitutions*, iv. vi, says Voltaire, 'Il n'était pas permis à un cabaretier de donner son offrande. Il est dit qu'on les regardait comme des fripons' ('Christianisme', QE). The *Apostolic constitutions* do not exclude from the Christian community all tavern keepers as such but only dishonest wine merchants, included in a long list of unworthy subjects such as adulterers, fornicators, corrupt judges, etc.

These examples, bearing mainly on very minor points, should be sufficient to indicate the range of Voltaire's misreadings, due

no doubt to the speed with which he wrote, and also to a certain degree of carelessness in reading. They lead to error, but do not contribute significantly to the furtherance of his theses. One even finds that some misreadings actually interfere with his stated intent or weaken his argument. Such is obviously the case when he fails to take full advantage of the potential provided by saint Athanasius's account²⁸, based on the eye-witness Macarius's report, of the prayers said by Alexander of Alexandria to prevent Arius's return to the orthodox communion of the church. For he substitutes the presbyter Macarius for the bishop Alexander as author of those prayers ('Christianisme', DP; 'Arianisme', QE). There is no doubt that, as an example of intolerance among the early Christian leaders, actions attributed to a bishop would be more telling than those of a mere presbyter.

Similarly, when Voltaire lauds the happiness and wealth achieved by the Quakers in Pennsylvania, basing his conclusions on statistics given by Jacques Philibert Rousselot de Surgy in his *Histoire naturelle et politique de la Pennsylvanie* (Paris 1768), it would be to his advantage to emphasize rather than to minimize the numbers given by Rousselot de Surgy. Yet when that author describes seven Pennsylvania towns, while actually naming ten (pp.197-198), Voltaire only sees and mentions seven ('Eglise', QE).

In view of the errors made by Voltaire on a number of innocuous subjects, and even against his own best interests, it is at times most difficult to decide the cause of some misreadings which at first glance have a polemical objective. It seems however that his vacillations in his treatment of the Irish rebellion and of the number of deaths it occasioned are due at least as much to a deliberate effort to magnify the evil resulting from religious intolerance as to carelessness in reading and transcribing his sources. In the 1756 and subsequent editions of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, he states that the dead numbered 'plus de 40,000'; in 1767, there are *no more than*

²⁸ 'De morte Aarii ad Serapionem', *græca* (Paris 1857), xv.685-687. ii-iii, in Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia*

40,000 victims; in 1768 90,000 is the probable figure; in 1770 there are again no more than 40,000 deaths; and finally, sometime before 1778, that number is raised to 150,000²⁹. One would think that Voltaire is guessing. He did nevertheless reveal his sources in the 1770 article 'Conspirations', QE: 'Des historiens anglais contemporains, tels que le chancelier Clarendon et un chevalier Jean Temple, assurent qu'il y eut cent cinquante mille hommes de massacrés. Le parlement d'Angleterre, dans sa déclaration du 25 juillet 1643, en compte quatre-vingt mille; mais M. Brooke, qui paraît très instruit, crie à l'injustice dans un petit livre que j'ai entre les mains. Il dit qu'on se plaint à tort; et il semble prouver assez bien qu'il n'y eut que quarante mille citoyens d'immolés à la religion, en y comprenant les femmes et les enfants'.

Voltaire has again misread and misunderstood his authorities. Clarendon mentions, not 150,000 deaths, but from 40,000 to 50,000³⁰, a number correctly reproduced by Brooke³¹. John Temple cites many witnesses reporting on various phases of the war. The two figures closest to Voltaire's are the 105,000 victims counted between 23 October 1641 and 1 April 1642, and the 154,000 killed in Ulster alone³². Henry Brooke, however, attributes the number 150,000 to Temple (p.17), and that is probably the real source of Voltaire's statement. I do not know where he found that parliament had counted 80,000 dead. It comes neither from Temple nor from Brooke, who simply refers (p.17) to Temple's report.

As for Henry Brooke, 'qui paraît très instruit', he does not believe, as stated by Voltaire, that 'il n'y eut que quarante mille citoyens d'immolés à la religion'. On the contrary he strives to prove that the figure given by Clarendon is too high, and that a tenth of that number would be closer to the truth (p.85). Indeed Voltaire has missed the whole point of Brooke's argument. That

²⁹ *Essai sur les mœurs*, chap. 180; 'Des conspirations contre les peuples' (1767); Best.D15195; 'Conspirations', QE; 'Hérésies', OA.

³⁰ Edward Hyde, earl of Clarendon, *History of the rebellion and civil wars in*

England (Oxford 1731), i.299.

³¹ Henry Brooke, *The Trial of the cause of the Roman catholics* (Dublin 1762), p.16.

³² John Temple, *The Irish rebellion* (London 1646), pp.99, 116.

may be due to carelessness. But it is certainly notable that in all cases his misreadings have maximized the number of deaths which the English writers estimated to have occurred in what he calls 'une fidèle imitation de la Saint-Barthélemy' ('Conspirations', QE) and which must always be held in horror as a product of the *infâme*.

Nor is this the only instance where Voltaire's misreadings further his arguments. His numerous efforts to damn Augustus and his use of Suetonius to that effect are well known. Even the usually malicious Suetonius, however, is sometimes too restrained for Voltaire: when he is openly sceptical of Caligula's claim that he was born of an incest between Augustus and his daughter Julia and suggests that, in his ambition, the new emperor was ready to circulate any untruth to justify his accession to power (*Life of Caligula*, iv. xxiii), Voltaire silently casts aside his doubts and cites him as an authority for the fact of Augustus's incest ('Auguste Octave', QE).

The larger number of Voltaire's polemical misreadings, or knowing distortions of his sources, pertain, not too surprisingly, to religious matters, either in favour of ancient deism or against Christianity and its adherents. He transforms, for example, Warburton's suggestion, in *The Divine legation of Moses*, that the Orphic verses may have been sung in the mysteries of Eleusina into an affirmation of the fact ('Idole', DP; 'Idole', QE), while ignoring completely Warburton's protests at this misrepresentation of his views³³. Against the early Christians, he makes several accusations seemingly supported by their own words or those of their leaders. He cites saint Cyprian as a witness to the corruption and immorality of his coreligionists ('Eglise', QE) without noting, or taking into account, the fact that those chastised in chapter vi of *De lapsis* are the lapsed Christians, or apostates. On another occasion, he uses Lactantius's report in chapter li of *De mortibus persecutorum* of the deaths of Diocletian's wife and daughter.

³³ William Warburton, *The Divine legation of Moses* (London 1765), i.234n. See J. H. Brumfit, 'Voltaire and

Warburton', *Studies on Voltaire* (1961), xviii.49-50.

Lactantius states that they were killed in Thessalonica on Licinius's orders. By omitting the reference to Licinius, Voltaire can then attribute these deaths to the Christians and include the episode among several meant to illustrate the atrocities committed by the vengeful Christians under the emperor Constantine ('Christianisme', DP; 'Eglise', QE).

In the same way, the bishops' early pursuit of power and their tyranny over the lower orders of the church's hierarchy are attested by one of their own, in his history of the council of Nicea. 'Le patriarche auteur de la *Chronique d'Alexandrie*, conservée à Oxford, assure qu'il y avait deux mille prêtres qui soutenaient le parti qu'Arius embrassa' ('Arianisme', QE)³⁴. Yet Arius was condemned: 'On voit par cet exemple combien les évêques l'emportaient sur les simples prêtres' ('Christianisme', DP). This conclusion however is based on a serious misreading of the *Eutychiei patriarchæ Alexandrini annales*, translated from the arab by John Selden (Oxonæ 1656): 'Convenirent bis mille quadragenta octo episcopi, sententiis et religionibus inter se discrepantes' (i.440). Eutychius goes on to explain the views held by the various groups, all disagreeing one with the other (i.441-443). Arius's faction is only one among many, and Voltaire's division of the council into two groups, one composed of arian priests, and the other of anti-arian bishops, cannot be upheld by the passage cited.

Among the moderns, Voltaire's opponents are particularly apt to be the victims of tendentious paraphrases which distort their sayings through over-simplification. It is they, rather than the facts they report or the theories they propound, who are the ultimate targets of his attack. We are close here to personal polemics, but the means used to discredit them involves their writings and as such must be noted here. Rousseau's educational theories are certainly not to be taken seriously: 'L'éducation que donne Jean-Jacques à un gentilhomme consiste à manier le rabot' and 'Il se borne à en faire un garçon menuisier' ('Assassin', QE). Larcher's attempt to

³⁴ in 'Christianisme', DP, Voltaire uses the same passage but ascribes it to 'deux patriarches d'Alexandrie qui ont

écrit la chronique d'Alexandrie en arabe"—an almost incomprehensible mistranslation of the Latin title!

defend the plausibility of Herodotus's description of Babylonian customs on the grounds that what is unacceptable in one age and civilization is not necessarily so in another³⁵, leaves him open to the comment that 'Il semble inviter toutes les belles dames de Paris à venir coucher pour de l'argent dans l'église Notre-Dame, avec tous les rouliers et tous les bateliers, et cela par dévotion' ('Quisquis', QE). And few readers would be tempted to give much weight to Buffon's *théorie de la terre* after reading this simplistic summary: 'Tout le globe a été brûlé autrefois, dit un homme versé dans l'histoire ancienne et moderne; car j'ai lu dans un journal qu'on a trouvé en Allemagne des charbons tout noirs, à cent pieds de profondeur, entre des montagnes couvertes de bois. Et on soupçonne même qu'il y avait des charbonniers en cet endroit. L'aventure de Phaeton fait assez voir que tout a bouilli jusqu'au fond de la mer. Le souffre du mont Vésuve prouve invinciblement que les bords du Rhin, du Danube, du Gange, du Nil et du grand fleuve Jaune ne sont que du souffre, du nitre et de l'huile de gaïac, qui n'attendent que le moment de l'explosion pour réduire la terre en cendres, comme elle l'a déjà été. Le sable sur lequel nous marchons est une preuve évidente que l'univers a été vitrifié et que notre globe n'est réellement qu'une boule de verre, ainsi que nos idées' ('Antiquité', QE). Here we have passed from misreadings to deliberate misrepresentations of a writer's thought.

But Voltaire's forte is undoubtedly the careful editing of his sources, either by quoting out of context, by omitting significant details or critical distinctions made in the original, or again by adding to the text quoted details which tend to alter its meaning or significance. Two distinct sets of aims are thus achieved. On the personal level, opponents are discredited while Voltaire maintains his position of authority over the reader. On the ideological level, facts based on written evidence are presented in such a way as to confirm Voltaire's view of the past and to strengthen his philosophical arguments.

³⁵ Pierre Henri Larcher, *Supplément à la Philosophie de l'histoire de feu m. l'abbé Bazin* (Amsterdam 1767), pp.87-97.

By quoting out of context, Voltaire is quite skillful in making almost any author say almost anything, even contrary to that author's basic thesis. He is made to appear naïve, or prejudiced, or ignorant, or self-contradictory, and his statements as to the facts *per se* as well as his later interpretation of those facts are discredited even before Voltaire begins to outline his own views.

Rollin (vi.306-309) is naïve when he alleges that 'Alexandre ne prit la fameuse ville de Tyr qu'en faveur des Juifs qui n'aimaient pas les Tyriens' ('Alexandre', QE). Voltaire can easily point out that military reasons alone are sufficient to account for Alexander's decision. But his disparagement of Rollin is based on an incomplete, and thereby false, summary of that historian's narration. Rollin does indeed note that the fall of Tyre fulfilled Jewish prophecies, but he also goes on to enumerate and discuss the political and military considerations which led to the attack. The two writers are in agreement; Voltaire's comments may even be based on Rollin's. But by presenting only one part of Rollin's text and making it appear that the motive cited is the only one mentioned, he can both discredit his predecessor and pass himself off as a profound thinker capable of weighing judiciously all aspects of a given situation.

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's defense of Spanish policy towards the Indians of Latin America is so narrow-minded and prejudiced as to be worthless: in his debates with Bartolomé de Las Casas, Sepúlveda 's'attacha seulement à prouver que tous ces Indiens méritaient la mort parce qu'ils étaient coupables du péché contre nature, et qu'ils étaient anthropophages' ('Conspirations', QE). On the contrary these two arguments, given here in their most elementary form, are minor ones in Sepúlveda's *Tratado sobre las justas causas de la guerra contra los Indios*³⁶. They are far from being the only basis for his opinion. The device is similar to that discussed above. But this time, as an admirer of Las Casas, Voltaire spares himself the necessity of refuting Sepúlveda's ten other arguments.

³⁶ in *Tratados de fray Bartolomé de Las Casas*, ed. Manuel Giménez Fernández (México 1965), i.287-329.

The *abbé Velly* is ignorant when he reports 'sans aucune discussion, sans aucun examen' ('Assassin', QE), the story of the two assassins sent by the *vieux de la montagne* in 1236 to kill Louis IX. Velly does indeed report without editorial comment the incident first related by Guillaume de Nangis³⁷. He then concludes his narration by stating that 'Ce fait . . . commence à être un peu décrédité', and by referring the reader to two critical dissertations on the subject in the *Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* of 1751³⁸.

Herodotus is self-contradictory when speaking of the Lydians. 'Ce peuple qu'Hérodote nous peint plus riche en or que les Péruviens' is forced to fast every other day during a twenty-eight year famine³⁹, instead of simply buying food abroad—the simple and obvious solution believes Voltaire in 'Diodore', QE. He has omitted however to mention two pertinent facts. There is, according to Herodotus, a gap of several centuries between the time of the first mythical king of Lydia, Atys, during whose reign the famine took place, and the time of Croesus, who brought his treasures to Delphi (I. 1-liv). There is also a significant difference in Herodotus's presentation of the facts: he has seen Croesus's gold and can attest to its existence, but the story of the famine is reported merely as a legend of the Lydians. The contradiction noted by Voltaire to cast doubt on Herodotus' reliability as a historian hangs only on his own incomplete rendering of that author's text.

In these cases the distortion of a writer's thought is directed against him rather than against his subject. In order to exalt himself Voltaire must seem to discredit his opponents. Less frequently, the reverse is true: the reporter is deemed to be accurate, but the

³⁷ 'Vie de saint Louis', in *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, ed. Martin Bouquet (nouvelle éd. Paris 1840), xx.324-325.

³⁸ Paul François Velly, *Histoire de France* (Paris 1756), iv.192. Velly's references are to an abstract of Lévésque de La Ravalière's 'Eclaircissements sur quelques circonstances de l'histoire du

Vieux de la montagne, prince des Assassins', *Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (1751), xvi.155-165, and to Falconet's 'Dissertation sur les Assassins, peuple d'Asie', *Mémoires* (1751), xvii.127-270.

³⁹ Herodotus says 18 years (*History*, I.xciv).

facts transcribed are distorted through lack of appropriate background information. Such is the case with Voltaire's frequent references to Julian the apostate's epistle LII, cited as an expression of tolerance which Christians would do well to imitate: 'On a osé flétrir Julien de l'infâme nom d'intolérant et de persécuteur. Relisez sa lettre cinquante-deuxième, et respectez sa mémoire' ('Apostat', QE). 'Voltaire n'a pas bien choisi son exemple', comments the editor of Julian's *Œuvres complètes*. For not only was the letter itself written to urge the inhabitants of Bostra to exile their bishop—not a notably tolerant deed—but also, 'Au moment où Julien composa ce morceau, la réaction qu'il avait provoquée l'emportait déjà dans un déchaînement de fanatisme, elle l'amenait à renier ses premières déclarations et à prendre des mesures de persécution et de contrainte'⁴⁰. Both the general circumstances of Julian's life and the intent of this particular letter belie the meaning Voltaire attaches to it.

On a lower level, Voltaire also uses a translation from Shakespeare's *As you like it*, III. ii: 'A toute force on peut être poli sans avoir été à la cour de France' to prove that even in the 16th century foreigners envied the polished manners of the French ('Franc', QE). Unknown to most French readers, probably, is the fact that this sentence is taken from a speech of the clown Touchstone in a burlesque argument with the shepherd Corin and can hardly have value as a serious representation of English opinion of the French.

Even a writer's silence can be made to appear significant. Polybius's failure to speak about the siege of Rome by Porsenna and of Atilius Regulus's death by torture in Carthage is taken to prove that those two events never took place ('Histoire', QE). Again, background information would be useful: the *Histories* begin in 220 B. C. while the siege of Rome by Porsenna dates back to 507 B. C. and Regulus's death to 250 B. C. Polybius's silence is

⁴⁰ *Œuvres complètes de Julien*, ed. J. Bidez (Paris 1960), I^b. 126. See also, by the same editor, *Vie de Julien* (Paris 1930), p.295.

easily explained, and can in no way be used as an argument against the factuality of the stories of Porsenna and Regulus.

Voltaire makes a similarly false deduction when he affirms, in a series of proofs that Joan of Arc was not divinely inspired: 'Ni Robert Gaguin, ni Paul Emile, ni Polydore Virgile, ni Genebrard, ni Philippe de Bergame, ni Papire Masson, ni même Mariana ne disent qu'elle était envoyée de Dieu' ('Arc', QE). All of which is literally correct, and nevertheless misleading in the implication that these authors deny or at least voice some doubts about her divine inspiration. Such is not the case: they either ignore the subject, or they report her claim without commenting on its truth⁴¹. Mariana, for example, devotes only five lines of his *Historia general de España* to Joan of Arc's military career and to her role in the restoration of Charles VII to the throne of France. He does not discuss her motivation. Robert Gaguin's narration is perhaps more typical of the authors named: he reports Joan of Arc's claim of divine inspiration, but without becoming involved in the question of its authenticity. She went to Chinon, he writes, 'ut Carolum in regnum restituat: Deum ita decreuisse'. The indirect statement expressed in the infinitive clause cannot grammatically, or legally, be ascribed to Gaguin. And in this narrow sense Voltaire's remark is true: Gaguin does not support her claim. In the larger context of proof against the fact of Joan of Arc's divine inspiration, however, Voltaire has again attributed to an author's silence a meaning much more extensive than that warranted by the text in question.

By omitting significant passages from a text quoted, Voltaire can also create difficulties where none exist, make a show of superior knowledge or wisdom, and cast doubt upon the authenticity of an entire work. This happens in his discussion of the salic

⁴¹ Robert Gaguin, *Compendium super Francorum gestis* (Parisiis 1504), x.117; Paul Emile, *De Rebus gestis Francorum* (Badius Ascensius 1517), x; Polydore Virgile, *Anglica historia* (Basileæ 1570), pp.470-477; Gilbert Genebrard, *Chro-*

nographia (Lovanii 1570); Philippe de Bergame, *De claris electisque mulieribus* (Ferrare 1497), chap. 257; Jean Papire Masson, *Annales latines*, 1678; Juan de Mariana, *Historia general de España* (Madrid 1734), ii.271-272.

law, which he is trying to prove is 'une des plus absurdes chimères dont on nous ait jamais bercés' ('Franc', QE). Among other things, the text of the law is ridiculously corrupt, and evinces an ignorance of the facts of which the alleged authors would not have been guilty. And he quotes from it: 'Lorsque la nation illustre des Francs était encore réputée barbare, les premiers de cette nation dictèrent la loi salique. On choisit parmi eux quatre des principaux, Visogast, Bodogast, Salogast et Windogast, etc.' Voltaire ends his quotation here, cites, from La Fontaine's *Le Singe et le dauphin*, the lines: 'Notre magot prit pour ce coup/ Le nom d'un port pour un nom d'homme', and then sneers: 'Ces noms sont ceux de quelques cantons francs dans le pays de Worms'. Obviously, then, the salic law, confusing as it does people and places, must be a fraud. Here however is the complete second sentence of the law, found in the *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France* (iv.122), which Voltaire possessed and which was presumably used by him: 'Sunt autem electi de pluribus viri quatuor his nominibus, Wisogast, Bodogast, Salogast et Windogast, in locis quibus nomen Salagheve, Bodogheve et Windogheve'. Voltaire's translation, as far as it goes, is technically correct. But his failure to quote the entire second sentence and his use of the concealed passage to deny the authenticity of the entire document are highly and deliberately misleading: it is a commonplace of 18th century commentators of the salic law to note the use of the suffix 'gast' to indicate the chief of a tribe⁴².

Nor is this an isolated example. The same technique is employed to challenge the narrations of several ancient historians, among others Xenophon, whose account of the Greek's retreat in the *Anabasis* is said to be incoherent and even irrational ('Xenophon', QE). Or perhaps, suggests Voltaire, the Greeks and their leaders did not really know what they were doing: the *maréchal* de Belle-Isle's retreat from Prague in 1742 is much more to be admired. In fact Voltaire's objections to the Greeks' itinerary and his

⁴² François Eudes de Mézeray, Joseph Barre, *Histoire générale d'Allemagne* (Paris 1748), i.464. *Abbrégé chronologique de l'histoire de France* (Amsterdam 1755), ii.260-261;

suggestions as to possible alternatives are drawn from the *Anabasis* itself, where Xenophon also explains the reasons for the final choice made⁴³.

The same is true of Voltaire's objections, on the basis of verisimilitude, to Tacitus's relation of Nero's attempt to drown Agrippina ('Histoire', QE): most of his questions can be answered by a simple recourse to the *Annals*, XIV. iii-v. Or again, when he denies that Joan of Arc ever wrote a letter to Henry VI of England, on the grounds that she could neither read nor write ('Arc', QE), one needs only to refer to Joan of Arc's statement that the letter was written under her dictation by one of the clerics of her entourage⁴⁴.

The omission of significant passages from a text quoted enables Voltaire to do battle on his own terms. He can neglect certain arguments presented and then refute only those of his own choosing. His victory over his opponent is more apparent than real, as in the case of Sepúlveda mentioned above. Or when he questions Bury's stand concerning the *maréchal d'Ancre* and his wife: 'Mais je ne sais pourquoi l'historien s'exprime en ces mots: 'Si ces deux misérables n'étaient pas complices de la mort du roi, ils méritaient du moins les plus rigoureux châtiments. Il est certain que du vivant même du roi Concini et sa femme avaient avec l'Espagne des liaisons contraires aux desseins du roi'' ('Ana', QE). It would appear that Bury believes that the Concinis deserved punishment because of their relations with Spain. Voltaire then needs only to show the improbability that such relations existed in order to destroy Bury's argument. In the meantime, an important segment of that author's remarks has gone unnoticed: '... ils méritaient du moins les plus rigoureux châtiments pour avoir, comme nous l'avons dit, rempli d'amertumes et de chagrins la vie de ce prince par les rapports infidèles qu'ils faisaient à la reine, et par les interprétations malignes qu'ils donnaient à toutes les actions de Henri,

⁴³ *Anabasis*, III. v.13-17. See Paul Masqueray's note in his edition of the *Anabase* (Paris 1964), i.176-177.

⁴⁴ Pierre Champion, *Procès de condamnation de Jeanne d'Arc* (Paris 1921), ii.147.

même les plus innocentes, pour exciter la jalousie de cette princesse, qui ne se livrait que trop à leurs impulsions. D'ailleurs il est certain que...'⁴⁵. The Concinis' political activity is of secondary import to Bury, who would condemn them rather for having contributed to the personal unhappiness of the king and queen and to the estrangement between them. Voltaire proves nothing against Bury: he is fighting shadows, if only the reader is aware of Bury's actual stand. Otherwise Voltaire emerges again as the only trustworthy and rational guide to truth.

On another occasion an anecdote based on Pierre de L'Estoile's diary⁴⁶ is told about Henry IV who, having become separated from his escort one day near Paris, entered an inn where several bourgeois were dining. As Voltaire tells it, Henry IV, remaining incognito, asked to share their meal, or at least to be allowed to buy some of the food that had been prepared for them. They refused: they had private business to transact. The king then had them whipped for their lack of courtesy towards gentlemen. Voltaire refuses to take this story seriously on several grounds: it is impossible that Henry IV should not have been recognized; L'Estoile's hear-say evidence is inadmissible; and finally Henry IV who still needed, in 1602, to conciliate his subjects, would not, in simple prudence, have treated so severely 'des citoyens assemblés pour traiter d'affaires, qui certainement n'avaient commis aucune faute en refusant de partager leur dîner avec un inconnu très indiscret, qui pouvait fort aisément trouver à manger dans le même cabaret' ('Ana', QE). The first two objections are certainly debatable; the third involves the concealment of important additional information given by L'Estoile: the inn was a poor one, and the only food

⁴⁵ Richard de Bury, *Histoire de la vie de Henri IV, roi de France et de Navarre* (Paris 1766), iv.215; there is no indication, in the editions of the QE published during Voltaire's lifetime, that a passage has been omitted. Points of suspension were added however by Beuchot, and copied by Moland.

⁴⁶ *Journal pour le règne de Henri IV*, ed. A. Martin (Paris 1958), ii.88. Voltaire's immediate source is Bury, who reproduces L'Estoile's text faithfully (iv.247-249). Bury is attacked, in 'Ana', QE, as one of the 'auteurs qui... copient L'Estoile sans examen'.

available was that being prepared for the Parisians⁴⁷. Henry IV's request, and the bourgeois' refusal, are not the simple matters Voltaire would have the reader believe. If others do not accept his judgement on the episode, that, if true, it would be 'l'action la plus ridicule, la plus lâche, la plus tyrannique, et la plus imprudente', it is perhaps because they are more ready than he is to take all circumstances into consideration.

When, in addition to presenting only a fraction of the available evidence, Voltaire also conceals his sources, as we have seen above, he can then make use of the very authors he is following in order to deny, without adding any new facts, the conclusions reached by those authors. This is particularly evident in the brief 'Histoire de Pennsylvanie' in 'Eglise', QE. All factual data and historical references as well as all quotations from the laws of Penn are taken from Jacques-Philibert Rousselot de Surgy's *Histoire naturelle et politique de la Pennsylvanie* (Paris 1768). Voltaire adds nothing on his own. Yet by deleting much of what is most stressed and most significant in Rousselot de Surgy's work, for example the relation of the Indian massacres against the colonists (pp.289-294) and the denunciation of the Quakers as exceptionable citizens, whose religious fanaticism and avaricious egotism were directly responsible for the colony's weakness during the French-Indian war (pp. 300-317), he manages to transform a work meant to 'dissiper les belles illusions' of his contemporaries concerning the peace and happiness to be found in Pennsylvania and to enjoin them from adding to 'une multitude d'infortunés . . . qui gémissent en Pennsylvanie d'avoir abandonné leur patrie' (pp.4-5) into one extolling the government of the Quakers in America.

Another form of editing consists of adding to the original text a small detail, either factual or stylistic, which alters the meaning of that text. Voltaire's friends and allies are praised, and his enemies damned, beyond the limits of the evidence cited. While Ammianus Marcellinus says, and all other biographers of Julian the apostate,

⁴⁷ the concealment of this evidence would seem to be deliberate; Voltaire's detailed comments on the story are proof that he had read it carefully.

including La Bléterie⁴⁸, repeat, that the emperor forgave a conspiracy of ten soldiers against his life, Voltaire adds the detail that these soldiers were Christians ('Julien le philosophe', DP; 'Apostat', QE). Julian's clemency in a civil matter is transformed into an example of religious tolerance; the pagan's moderation is opposed to the blood-thirstiness of the Christians.

The same contrast is made, in 'Christianisme', QE, between the Roman emperors' forbearance and the intransigence of the Christians. Voltaire quotes from the records of a Roman proconsul in Egypt during the reign of Valerian, preserved by Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical history*, VII. xi.6-10. The two versions must be compared. Although relatively little has been added or deleted, the few changes made are significant in that they alter, in the direction of Voltaire's thesis, the tenor of the entire passage.

Eusebius

When Dionysius and Faustus and Maximus and Marcellus and Chaeremon were brought into court, Æmilianus, the deputy-prefect said, 'And verbally I discoursed with you

concerning the kindness our lords have displayed on your behalf.

For they gave you the opportunity of safety

Voltaire

Denys, Fauste, Maxime, Marcel et Chérémon ayant été introduits à l'audience, le préfet Emilien leur a dit: 'Vous avez pu connaître par les entretiens que j'ai eus avec vous et par tout ce que je vous en ai écrit

combien nos princes ont témoigné de bonté à votre égard.

Je veux bien vous le redire: ils font dépendre votre conservation et votre salut de vous-mêmes, et votre destinée est entre vos mains;

⁴⁸ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, XXII. IX.10; Jean Philippe René de La

Bléterie, *Vie de l'empereur Julien* (Paris 1746), p.311.

if ye were willing to turn to
that which is according to
nature and
worship the gods which
preserve their empire, and
forget those gods
which are contrary to nature.

.....

ils ne demandent de vous
qu'une seule chose,
que la raison exige de toute per-
sonne raisonnable, c'est que
vous adoriez les dieux pro-
tecteurs de leur empire, et que
vous abandonniez cet autre
culte si contraire à la nature et
au bon sens.

Dionysius replied: 'Not all
men worship all gods
but each one certain whom
he regards as such.
We therefore both worship and
adore the one god and maker of
all things, who also committed
the empire to the Augusti,
most highly favoured of god,
Valerian and Gallienus; and
to him we unceasingly pray for
their empire, that it may
remain unshaken'.
Æmilianus, the deputy prefect,
said to them. . .

Denys a répondu: 'Chacun
n'a pas les mêmes dieux,
et chacun adore ceux
qu'il croit l'être véritablement'.

Le préfet Emilien
a repris. . .

The generosity of the emperors and of the prefect is enhanced in Voltaire's text in several ways. He emphasizes the number of contacts between the Christians and the prefect: he has both spoken and written to them in the past, and now his patience is marked in the 'Je veux bien vous le redire'. Eusebius records only past conversations. Voltaire also transfers the responsibility for future events from the emperors to the Christians. No longer do the emperors 'give' them the opportunity to be saved; this opportunity rests on them alone ('dépendre . . . de vous-mêmes'; 'votre

destinée est entre vos mains'). The conditions for safety are then minimized in advance by the expression, absent in Eusebius, 'Ils ne demandent de vous qu'une seule chose'. Its refusal, which would be contrary to nature, according to Eusebius's transcription, becomes in Voltaire's text something which no sane person could contemplate.

The first part of the emperors' condition, that the Christians worship the gods of the empire, is accurately transcribed. The second, however, has been altered. The original record would have the Christians abandon their god. Voltaire refers merely to 'culte', a much less sensitive point, at least on the surface. Finally Christianity, which is termed contrary to nature in Eusebius, is, in Voltaire, contrary to both nature and common sense. Again there is emphasis on the pejorative traits of the Christians, while the demands of the emperors are made to appear much milder than in the original version.

The first sentence only of Dionysius's reply is given by Voltaire. The second, which denies the distinction implied above between worship and adoration (between cult and belief), and refers to the Christians' loyalty and to the prayers they offer for the empire, is deleted. The bluntness of Dionysius's statement, as reported by Voltaire, can only accentuate the image of stubbornness, intransigence, and refusal to discuss one's position which the entire text was to illustrate. The emperors, through the prefect Æmilianus, have shown patience, moderation, rationality, and common sense. The reader's conclusion is now almost automatic; his choice between the representatives of Christianity and of pagan worship, seemingly based on an authentic recreation of the past, is in fact determined by a tendentious rendering of Eusebius's report.

The examples cited above of Voltairian distortions of the written word fall in two categories: those which can almost surely be ascribed to carelessness in reading or copying, and those which seem to be intentional in that they contribute to the progress of the author's thesis. In a rhetorical context, however, the difference between the two is slight: in both cases Voltaire's practice points to

his lack of primary concern with the exact transmission of evidence as such. Examples are needed to support his arguments; they must appear to be incontrovertible; they must uphold and strengthen his authority over the reader. That is their main value and purpose. To that end, the common editorial practices described above all contribute most effectively.

An effort has here been made to seek diversification in the nature and sources of the illustrations used, and to keep references to religious subjects and authors to a minimum. The treatment accorded them does not differ significantly from that used in other connections. If church history is often rewritten with a special slant, the same is true of pre-history, of Greek and Roman history of medieval and modern European history, of colonial history even. No age, no civilization, no subject-matter is immune. Voltaire's concerns range from mythical Lydia to 18th century Pennsylvania, from old Chinese astronomy to the origins of the Franks, from human sacrifices in Phoenicia to the *homme au masque de fer* in the Bastille. Documents of all kinds are employed: poems, plays, published letters and diaries, memoirs, trial records and public debates as well as annals, compilations of ancient and medieval writings, historical monographs, literary and scholarly essays. Ancient historians such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Plutarch, Polybius, Josephus, Livy, Tacitus, Suetonius, Ammianus Marcellinus, fare no better than the moderns. Mézeray, Rollin, Velly, Villaret, Lenglet-Dufresnoy, Bury, Brooke, Rousselot de Surgy, etc. The works of scholars and scientists, of Banier, Leibniz, Middleton, Warburton, Fréret, Buffon, may be abused as much as those of Voltaire's personal adversaries Rousseau and Larcher. Julian the apostate's words may be misrepresented as much as those of saint Jerome or saint Cyprian.

There is no doubt that the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Questions sur l'encyclopédie* were conceived as instruments of persuasion, of conversion to philosophic principles. The correspondence abounds with references to Voltaire's aims, especially in regard to the *infâme*. His use of written evidence in support of his

points of view, his selection of the documents to be cited, his mode of presentation of his sources, his editorial practices, all testify to the rhetorical design of his essays. If that is so, questions of accuracy, of comprehensiveness, of authenticity of information, which can properly be raised in a study of the *Essai sur les mœurs*, for example, are of minor import here. And that is perhaps why the criticisms aimed at Voltaire by his 18th century detractors, notably Larcher and Guénée, while often right, yet seem irrelevant. What is significant, and deserves more investigation from literary scholars, is the art through which Voltaire conveys his thoughts and convictions.

Only one facet of that art has been presented here. No mention has been made of fictitious illustrations, the Aristotelean fables and parables, of which the numerous dialogues in the *Dictionnaire philosophique* are but one example. In another category are current events, those commonly known through journals such as the *Mercure de France* as well as those known to Voltaire through his extensive correspondence, where he might at times be assumed to have obtained details hidden from the general public.

But not all his arguments depend on precedents for their confirmation. Many essays develop in part or *in toto* on the base of logical propositions and syllogisms. And there again the influence of Aristotle, in his discussion particularly of seeming, or false, enthymemes, would appear to be great. The internal as well as the external structure of the articles in the alphabetical works, their style, all this is also part of rhetoric. To treat the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Questions sur l'encyclopédie* in terms of straight philosophical discourse is to distort their significance by denying the art which envelops thought and gives added meaning to the written word. Much needs to be done before Voltaire the rhetorician can emerge from the shadows of Voltaire the thinker and *philosophe*.