

The Bayle correspondence

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THE Huguenot writer Pierre Bayle (1647-1702) needs little in the way of introduction. Author of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, defender of toleration in his *Commentaire philosophique*, and indefatigable critic of superstitions of all kinds, Bayle's influence as a man of letters and an unquiet intellectual is substantial and well-documented. His letters, beginning in his early twenties, reveal that he was ever anxious to establish what was then called a 'commerce de lettres' with anyone, but particularly learned men (the prejudice of the time made learned women a rarity) who could furnish him with news: news of battles during Louis XIV's European wars; news of the latest books; news concerning the nobility, the court and the petty nobility of all the regions of France, but notably of his own comté de Foix. As he became well known, his ambition to have a network of correspondents throughout the then known world became more of a reality, finally blossoming into an enviable 'commerce de lettres' when he became editor and principal author of the *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* from 1683 to 1687. When he gave up this project, as a result of ill health, his correspondence diminished slightly, only to take off again in the 1690s when he began work on his *Dictionnaire*. Then, as when he was writing the *Nouvelles*, Bayle wrote begging information and books from anyone willing to supply his avid and tireless curiosity.

Of this life-long devotion to scholarly exchange 1644 letters are extant, as far as we know (although we would be delighted to be corrected by new finds by other scholars). Of these, 927 are from Bayle to others and 717 are addressed to Bayle by his correspondents. Through the centuries some 944 letters were published, although in some cases they contain errors of transcription or

attribution, and the eighteenth-century editors – particularly the Jesuits – tailored the letters to suit a certain image they already had of Bayle. While it must be admitted that most of the interesting or, more properly, controversial letters have already been published, there has as yet been no complete edition of the extant correspondence.

In our view, there is good reason to attempt the ambitious project of publishing a critical edition of the extant letters. Firstly, our edition will enable us, we hope, to correct the errors of transcription and attribution which have been introduced voluntarily or involuntarily into the published letters over the years. Secondly, and more importantly, the publication of the complete extant correspondence will not only give scholars unlimited access to the letters which are scattered throughout the world, it will also help to create a more accurate portrait of the man who wrote them. Although Bayle's correspondence, like any published correspondence, has its tedious and insignificant aspects, it nonetheless provides us with an image of what it was like to be a scholar in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Reading Bayle through his letters will reveal his sources of information, his curiosities, his reading, the genesis of some of his ideas, which appear in embryo form in some of the early letters, his griefs and joys, his family ties and intellectual friendships. Thus we will be able to recapture a deeper impression of his past, his own time and his intellectual development.

To this end, a team of scholars has been constituted: Elisabeth Labrousse (Paris), the guiding hand, Ruth Whelan (Dublin), as co-ordinating editor, Edward James (Cambridge), Antony McKenna (St-Etienne), Cristina Pitassi (Geneva) as indefatigable contributors to the daunting task of tracking down the sources of Bayle's information, annotating the intellectual controversies in which he is involved, or of which he is a curious and not always well-informed observer, identifying the exact titles of books he alludes to – particularly in his young days – in an off-hand and inaccurate fashion, and finally identifying the source of and translating all the Latin and Greek quotations with which, as a good humanist, he ornaments his letters.

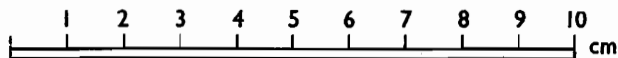
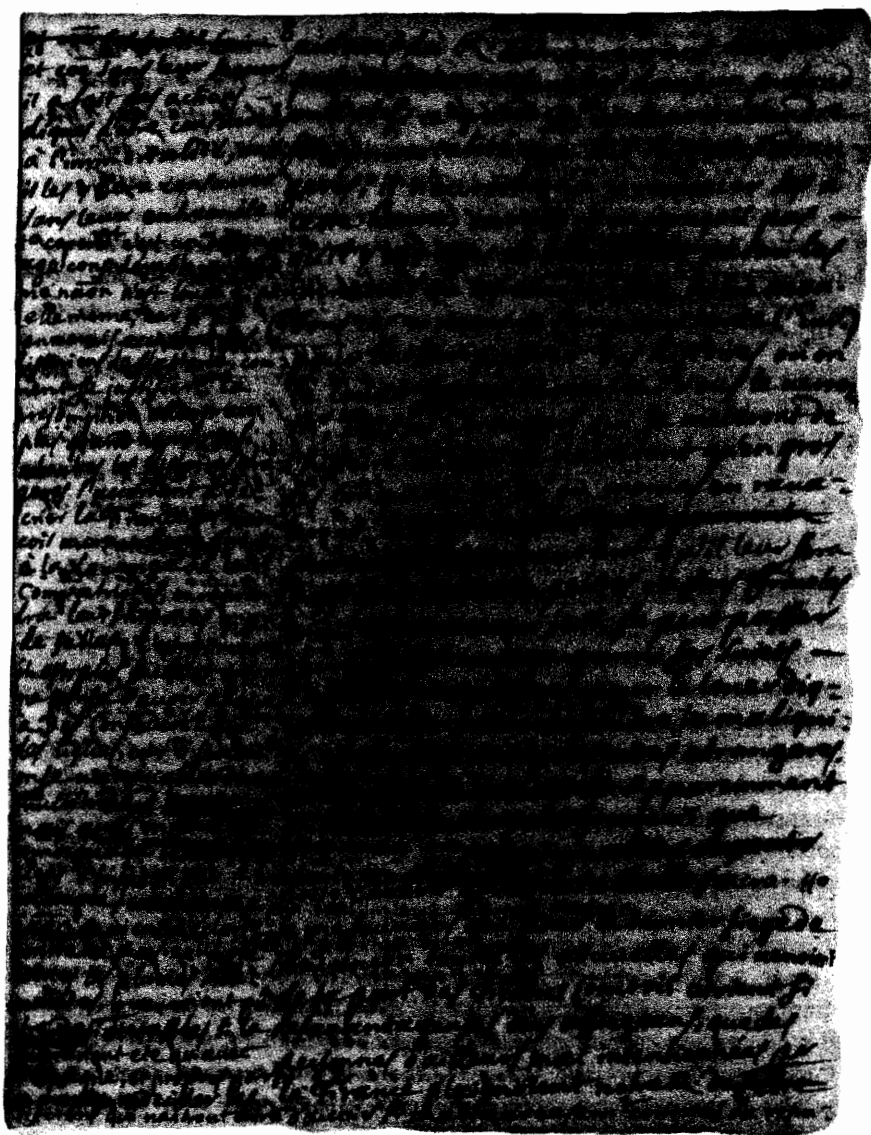
The task is a mammoth one but we have now all but completed the task for the first volume. Thanks to the generous assistance of the Fonds national suisse de la recherche scientifique, we will have a research assistant for two years working under supervision to establish the text of as many letters as possible within that period. The annotation is terrifying in its demand for encyclopedic knowledge of Bayle's time. We are extremely fortunate to have Elisabeth Labrousse who has invested her extraordinary knowledge and energy in the project; without her expertise the first volume would not be so near completion as it now is. We expect the first volume to be ready for publication

in the course of 1992, and we are already planning in our December meeting of 1991 (the team meets twice a year) to begin discussion of volume two.

Although so many of the letters have already been published, a critical edition of Bayle's correspondence still has much to teach us about the author of the letters. Here are a few examples from the first volumes which includes the letters written by Bayle before he took up his position at the Academy of Sedan in 1675. In the first place, all those who read Bayle professionally and for pleasure will know that he is marvellously entertaining but that he is no stylist, in the classical sense of the word. On the rare occasions when we have drafts, rather than finished letters (for example, his letter to Vincent Minutoli, 27 September to 13 November 1674), it becomes clear that Bayle writes more thoughtfully than it might at first seem. He corrects his style, chooses his words carefully, adds quotations for ornament and, in the case of this, the longest letter in the volume (80 pages in the original, with vast and often almost illegible marginal annotations) he comes back to the draft of the letter years later, adding to, correcting and polishing his writing.

Secondly, the first volume reveals that the young Bayle was eagerly seeking an intellectual style. The undeniable tedium of the early letters suggests that it is the pedestrian Cottiby rather than the florid Balzac or the witty Voiture who serves as his model of epistolary style. But style there is, although it may be of a peculiar nature. This pursuit of a literary style is matched by Bayle's pursuit of an intellectual style through the medium of his letters. We see Bayle actively cultivating a group of friends, Minutoli and Basnage and others from his students days, who form a kind of intellectual coterie or *cénacle*, meeting once a week to give lectures to each other, while still in Geneva, and striving through their correspondence to maintain that intellectual exchange and intimacy. That is to say, for Bayle letter-writing is a 'conversation par lettres' (to Minutoli, 17 June 1672), based on a shared sense of humour and a shared culture. The letters reveal in genesis, then, one of the most striking aspects of Bayle's published work, the desire to create in writing the atmosphere of the literary or learned *salon*, with its freedom of exchange, its mutual trust and reciprocal scholarly services.

In the third place, our readers will be amused to note the presence of 'obscenity' in these letters, quite often in the form of quotations from Horace. This is particularly the case of the longest letter in the volume, which was severely censored by its nineteenth-century editor Gigas. I mention this as significant, since obscenity was one of the charges made against the *Dictionnaire*, as a proof of its alleged irreligion. The letters reveal that Bayle's later defence of the obscenities in the 1702 edition of the *Dictionnaire* may be less tongue-in-cheek than has often been thought. The young Bayle seems unaware that



A page from Bayle's draft of a letter to Vincent Minutoli, written between 25 September and 13 November. The draft was never sent; it comprises some 80 pages in the manuscript and is one of the more difficult texts to decipher because of the marginal annotations.

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the obscene passages which delight him might offend his friends Vincent Minutoli (elected to the chair of Belles Lettres in the Academy of Geneva) and Jacques Basnage, the sober defender of the Huguenots and pastor of the Reformed church in Rouen from 1675. The obscenities, then, are hardly to be read as an index of free thought or *libertinage* but must rather be seen as an aspect of an intellectual style, which has more in common with Rabelais and Montaigne or La Mothe Le Vayer than it does with the literary purists of Bayle's own time.

Fourthly, as early as 1961, Elisabeth Labrousse drew our attention to the severe censorship exercised by Bayle's eighteenth-century Jesuit editors.¹ Their concern to make Bayle's style more elegant and more attractive to eighteenth-century readers induced them to correct not only his unrefined literary expressions but also what they deemed his inappropriate religious concerns and allusions. Our edition will restore and identify these Biblical allusions and pious expressions, while documenting Bayle's ineradicable concern with the fate of the persecuted Huguenots in Louis XIV's France. As a result, our readers will have a clearer perception of Bayle's undoubted allegiance – in his early years – to his Calvinist convictions. The publication of these documents cannot hope to decide for ever the question of Bayle's scepticism or belief, but it might help to shed more light on a debate which has heretofore been hampered by the relative unavailability or inaccuracy of these early texts.

Finally, the correspondence reveals a more human side to the public figure which Bayle was to become in the 1680s. The most touching of all the letters are those written by Bayle to his mother, Jeanne de Bruguiere, who died towards the end of March 1675. Bayle's attachment is genuine and is communicated to the reader by the tender tone unique to these letters. His affection for her provides the most poignant letter in the volume. Some time in 1673 his mother had asked Bayle to send her a portrait of himself without realising the financial outlay it would involve for her son. On 16 April 1675 he wrote a letter to accompany the portrait, which he had finally been able to pay for. What he did not know was that his mother had died three weeks earlier. Moreover, his letters to his brothers and father, when he finally did learn the news, are models of sustained grief, written, we think, in imitation of the contemporary epistolary canons for letters of condolence. The attempt to distance himself from his grief while consoling his family led him to make one of his strongest efforts to write letters appropriate in tone and content.

What then will we learn from this complete edition of the known letters? We will learn more about Bayle the man, Bayle the man of letters and more about the ordinary intellectual life of the scholars of the day. The publication of these original documents will, we hope, stimulate new research into this

Tables rondes: 6. Les grandes éditions en cours

fascinating early modern Huguenot and his world. In conclusion, let me express our sincere thanks to the Voltaire Foundation for undertaking to publish this ambitious project and to Andrew Brown for his understanding, wisdom and generous support through all the ups and downs of the last few years.

1. *Inventaire critique de la correspondance de Pierre Bayle* (Paris 1961), p.27-28.