

Pierre Bayle: Several Lives but just one Death

Structures, Arrangements and Rhetorics in Lexicography



There is hardly any description of Pierre Bayle which would not portray his «Dictionnaire Historique et Critique» as a momentous milestone in the history of books. The usual explanation for this assessment is that the mentioned work anticipated several important values of the Enlightenment and played a significant role for the dissemination of these.

The question is why the quite specific contents as well as the rather unusual form of this dictionary could develop such a wide-ranging effect. Whereas the readers of the first edition were primarily learned réfugiés,¹ already around 1740, almost the whole learned world of Europe knew about Pierre Bayle. Quite a lot of scholars even had a copy of his dictionary standing in their library. Thus, it seems to be a promising attempt to search for the cultural and sociopolitical reasons for the amazing fact that the reasonings of the dictionary, originally not expected to interest the reading public at large, could popularize to such an impressive extent.²

Taking into account that the recent historiography is emphasizing the significance between science and culture,³ Bayle's encyclopaedia seems to be a suitable publication to illustrate the closeness of this relation. That's why I'd like to discuss a concrete form of this relationship by focusing on the instances and mechanisms of censorship in places where the «Dictionnaire» had been printed. This look upon supervision and examination of book-printing makes it possible to indicate governmental handling as well as social conflicts in the field of knowledge-transfer. From this point of view, encyclopedias and dictionaries are a remarkable type of writings that has its general importance for the history of science. In the particular case of Bayle's dictionary I would even say that this work led to the secularization of the distribution of knowledge as well as of the way of thinking and arguing.

I therefore try to show some characteristics of the specific form of imparting and disseminating knowledge in the «Dictionnaire Historique et Critique», aiming to make plausible why an effective censoring of this work – and of encyclopedias in general – is much more difficult than it would be with other types of literature. By presenting the purpose of rhetorical figures used in the «Dictionnaire» on the one hand and by showing the far-reaching consequences of structures, arrangements and ordering-principles of an encyclopedia on the other hand, I'd like to point out the author's opportunities to play with the mechanisms of censorship.

Thanks to his knowing about the possibility of books being scrutinized, a clever writer could develop preceding strategies serving to take the wind out of the censor's sails, and I'm convinced that the choice of writing a huge dictionary with complex rhetorics and lots of cross-references can be seen as one of these.



¹ See LABROUSSE, ELISABETH, *Pierre Bayle; Bd. 2: Hétérodoxie et rigorisme*, La Haye 1964, p. 599 (Archives internationales d'histoire des idées, Bd. 6).

² The readers aimed-at within the republic of letters were of course only a neglectable percentage compared with the illiterate population at the beginning of the 18th century and one certainly cannot say that Bayle intended a sort of democratization of knowledge for he wrote on a much too erudite and elaborated level, see MORI, GIANLUCA, «Interpréter la philosophie de Bayle», in: *Pierre Bayle, citoyen du monde; De l'enfant du Carla à l'auteur du Dictionnaire*, ed. HUBERT BOST UND PHILIPPE DE ROBERT, Paris 1999, S. 303-324, here p. 306f. (Actes du Colloque du Carla-Bayle, 13-15 septembre 1996). But without any doubt, accessibility of information was nevertheless one of the most primary goals of the «Dictionnaire», see BAYLE, PIERRE, *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*, Cinquième Édition, revue, corrigée et augmentée, 4 tomes, Amsterdam / Leide / La Haye / Utrecht 1740, «Préface de la première édition, §3».

³ See e. g. BÖDECKER, HANS ERICH ET AL. (Ed.), *Wissenschaft als kulturelle Praxis; 1750-1900*, Göttingen 1999, p. 11-15.