

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 115

Olivier Ferret, *La Fureur de nuire: échanges pamphlétaires entre philosophes et antiphilosophes (1750–1770)*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007. xxii + 487 pp. Notes, figures, annexes, bibliography, and index. €121,33 (pb); ISBN 978-729408912.

Review by Darrin M. McMahon, Florida State University.

Students of the French Enlightenment have long recognized the middle of the eighteenth century as a critical moment, witnessing the launch of the *Encyclopédie* and the emergence of the *parti philosophique* as a self-conscious and identifiable group. Yet for all its acknowledged importance, this period—above all, the crucial decade of the 1750s—remains understudied and far more opaque than it should be, especially with regard to those not inconsiderable forces which opposed the century's new lights. Given this opacity, Olivier Ferret's *La Fureur de nuire*, based on a doctoral dissertation completed in 1998, is a welcome addition, even if the book may leave historians and students of political culture (as opposed to literary scholars) somewhat disappointed.

Ferret, a *maître des conférences* in the faculty of *Littérature, idéologies, et représentations* at Lyon II who has previously published an edited version of Charles Palissot's satirical play *Les Philosophes*, is interested in what Linguet described as the “art de calomnier avec fruit,” an art cultivated in great volume, if none-too-subtly, in the many *querelles* that pitted *philosophes* against anti-*philosophes* in the period of Ferret's concern.^[1] Bounded on one end by the publication of the prospectus of the *Encyclopédie* in 1750 and on the other by the release of Palissot's *Le Satirique ou l'Homme dangereux* in 1770, the period was instrumental in Ferret's view in the coalescence of the genre of the literary “pamphlet,” a term that he uses broadly to encompass a range of various *textes pamphlétaires*, including *brochures*, *libelles*, *critiques*, *satires*, *réfutations*, and *facéties* (Beaumarchais's term for Voltaire's writings of the sort). Collectively these forms served as what Ferret describes as “une arme sans nom,” gradually inflecting the meaning of *pamphlet* itself, a word that, although used during this period, only gained ascendancy in the last decades of the eighteenth century.

By whatever name, *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes* alike put these “arms” to good use, waging war on their adversaries with the intent to ridicule, wound, and harm, often in deeply personal ways. Hence, Ferret's title: *la fureur de nuire*. The abbé Morellet, a master of such invective, was not above suggesting that his nemesis, the Jansenist polemicist Abraham Chaumeix, was the son of a widowed Quaker and a bastard Jew, a vinegar-maker who had perfected his trade by placing a cadaver in the bottom of the fermentation barrel. Le jeune Abraham, it seems, was thus “élévé, et pour ainsi dire né dans les vapeurs du vinaigre le plus violent” (p. 267). Voltaire could be even crueler, accusing Palissot on one occasion of prostituting his wife and then locking her up “lorsqu'elle n'a plus été lucrative” (p. 270). The anti-*philosophes*, for their part, could hit back every bit as hard.

It is with reason, then, that both sides frequently resorted to martial metaphors to describe their “battles” and their “perpetual war,” countering “offensives” and parrying “attacks” like two “armies,” face to face. So common were such skirmishes in this period, that one author, the abbé Irailh, could imagine them as a universal feature of literary life, attempting to demonstrate as much in *Les Querelles littéraires, ou Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des révolutions de la république des lettres depuis Homère jusqu'à nos jours*, first published in 1761.

Ferret draws attention to the literary salvos launched around a number of the more celebrated of these quarrels as they took shape from 1750 to 1770, discussing, for example, the *bataille encyclopédique*, the furor set off by the publication of Helvetius's *De l'Esprit*, the reaction to Jean-Jacques Le Franc de Pompignan's incendiary acceptance speech at the Académie française in 1760, and the heated response to Marmontel's *Bélistaire* of 1767, among others. Yet his interest lies less in the battles themselves—or even in their ideological content—than in the “arms” that were employed to wage them, the *textes pamphlétaires* marshaled by the soldiers on the front lines. These are undoubtedly of interest, and they were certainly so to contemporaries. It is worth recalling in this connection, as Ferret reminds us, that not only Linguet, but Pierre Bayle and Frederick the Great published treatises on *libelles* and their place in an enlightened republic of letters (or not). In two long sections of the book devoted to “Tactiques éditoriales” and “Stratégies d'écriture,” Ferret attests further to the centrality and importance of such texts, analyzing their “manoeuvres langagières” (p. 255), their rhetorical strategies and tropes, their formal devices and shared features, above all as these were employed by Voltaire, their acknowledged master, to whom Ferret devotes the most sustained energy and attention. Informed, as well, by the *histoire du livre et de l'édition*, with its emphasis on circuits and networks of production and reception, Ferret attends to the materiality of his writings alongside their formal qualities, attempting (if with only minimal success) to investigate their publishers and audience and the *colporteurs* who brought them to market, a notoriously difficult enterprise given the clandestine and ephemeral nature of many of these writings.

But overall Ferret says very little about the personalities involved—the men (for they were all men) of flesh and blood behind the pamphlets. If his archival research is not vast, he has done more than many literary scholars, dutifully consulting the manuscripts of the *Librairie* and the files of the police inspector Joseph d'Hémery, among other important holdings. He has also certainly combed through French libraries and the footnotes of classic works by the likes of René Pomeau and Gustave Desnoiresterres with great care, compiling a thorough list of contemporary writings by those engaged in the *échanges pamphlétaires* between *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes*. Specialists will find particularly useful the two concluding appendices that enumerate in chronological order the corpus of relevant polemical texts and offer the expansive list of pamphlets attributed to Voltaire, which were gradually incorporated into successive editions of his collected works from the eighteenth century forward.

That is all serviceable scholarship, carefully conducted, and fine and well as it goes. But those more interested in what these texts actually said (as opposed to *how* they functioned and were assembled), and how that in turn might help us to more fully understand the culture of the Enlightenment and the old regime may well find this book slightly frustrating. I confess that I did, though I'm prepared to acknowledge that this may be in part an issue of the different disciplinary predilections and concerns shared by students of history, on the one hand, and students of literature, on the other. I should also add, in the interests of full disclosure, that I have published on subjects very closely related to those that Ferret addresses—works, among others in English and German, of which he is apparently unaware, a fact that I inevitably found *un tout petit peu regrettable*. [2]

That said, it strikes me that a good deal of Ferret's painstaking analysis yields rather minimal results. For example, it is not exactly a surprise to be shown in extensive sections that these pamphlets attempted to ridicule the style of their opponents (pp. 244–50), or to have demonstrated their contradictions (pp. 251–55), their odious principles (255–60), or the personal shortcomings of their respective authors in *ad hominem* attacks (pp. 260–71). Ferret is surely right to remind us, elsewhere, in a discussion of diffusion, that “Au terme de cette analyse des circuits de diffusion des pamphlets, il importe de ne pas céder à une illusion d'optique. Il faut souligner que tous les pamphlets ne bénéficient pas de la même diffusion” (p. 205). Such statements of the comparatively obvious and demonstrations of what common sense or basic familiarity with the period would already suggest are all-too-common in a book that errs on the side of excessive caution. As Ferret observes revealingly in one instance, “Il convient une nouvelle fois de ne risquer qu'avec prudence des généralisations, ces quelques exemples ne

pouvant que jusqu'à un certain point être considérés comme représentatifs" (p. 182). One wishes that he had taken more risks and drawn more connections.

In the end, the reader is left to wonder how precisely to situate these *échanges pamphlétaires* and why exactly they matter. Ferret takes pains to emphasize their unique literary character, noting that "dans la diversité des querelles qui agitent la république des lettres, il convient en outre d'opérer une distinction entre celles dont l'objet est littéraire et celles qui portent sur des questions religieuses et politiques" (p. 427). That is fair enough, but as Tocqueville famously observed in the celebrated ch.1 of Part 3 of the *L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*, literature served the French as a means to talk about politics, all the more so given that, as Ferret himself points out, the authorities of the book trade tended to look more indulgently on literary productions than they did, say, on the pamphlet literature surrounding the war between the Jansenists and the Jesuits or that emanating from disgruntled *parlementaires* and their supporters incensed by the usurpations of royal power. Many of the *philosophes* and their adversaries themselves, of course, engaged in the latter and other such overtly political and theological disputes. And though it is understandable that Ferret should want to limit the scope of his inquiry to keep it manageable, by choosing to read the pamphlet literature investigated here in isolation from the political and religious debates that wracked France from 1750–1770 (to say nothing of those before or since), he excises much of what renders his material broadly interesting.[3]

For in truth the disputes between *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes* were political and ideological from the very beginning, turning on issues of conspiracy and defense of the *patrie*, tolerance and the place of reason in civil society, the state of public morality, the sanctity of the family, and fidelity to throne, altar, tradition, and God. Ferret, to be sure, is not unaware of this fact. He could hardly fail to be, given the prominence of these themes in the literature, and he does devote some space to the pragmatic stakes (*les enjeux pragmatiques*) raised by the literary quarrels under investigation, as well as a short chapter to the politics of Voltaire (one that regrettably fails to take account of Peter Gay's classic book on the same subject, *Voltaire's Politics*). Still, the treatment is cursory and is conducted without recourse to a number of works that would have helped the author move his study beyond its self-imposed limits. He might have consulted, for example, Amos Hoffman's pioneering work on the origins of anti-*philosophie* conspiracy theory. Or there is the (admittedly dated but still useful) study by Kurt Wais, *Das antiphilosophische Weltbild des französischen Sturm und Drang 1760–1789* (Berlin, 1934). There is Furio Diaz's *Filosofia et politica nel Settecento francese* (Torino, 1962), and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Rolf Reichardt's volume on *Philosophie, Philosophie* in that that marvel of scholarship, the *Handbuch politische-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820*. Finally, one wishes that Ferret had made a greater effort to attempt to account for how the experience of the literary battles he has studied—so steeped, as they are, in metaphors of violent conflict and war—helped to shape the broader contours of the Enlightenment and indeed the Revolution, which is scarcely mentioned here at all. One need not succumb to the teleological fallacy, reading the whole of the eighteenth century backward through the lens of the Revolution that followed, to wonder how what Tocqueville called (fairly or not) the "abstract literary politics" of this period shaped the broader political milieu, or how, *pace* Reinhart Koselleck, the extraordinarily vicious personal attacks of the *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes'* literary critique may have engendered a crisis in the republic of letters, and the Old Regime.[4]

Ferret does not take up such questions, which is unfortunate, for as both senior scholars of the stature of Jonathan Israel and younger students like Jeffrey D. Burson have argued of late, the scandals and controversies of the 1740s and 50s in France exerted a major influence on the subsequent development of the Enlightenment and European politics more broadly.[4] The early battles between *philosophes* and anti-*philosophes* are a central part of that story. In helping to refocus attention on them, and in highlighting the richness of the source base, Ferret has rendered historians an important service, for which we should be grateful. But important work remains to be done.

NOTES

[1] Simon Nicolas-Henri Linguet, *Théorie du Libelle, ou l'Art de calomnier avec fruit: dialogue philosophique, pour servir de supplément à la 'Théorie du paradoxe'* (Amsterdam, 1775).

[2] Darrin M. McMahon, "The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Past & Present* 159 (1998): 77–112, and McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). To his credit, Ferret has consulted, by contrast, Didier Masseau's *Les Ennemis des philosophes: L'Antiphilosophie au temps des lumières* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000).

[3] See Ferret's qualification: "Si les querelles politiques et religieuses peuvent occasionnellement avoir des incidences sur la situation des deux camps en présence, elles ne sauraient cependant être prises en compte dans cette étude dès lors que les philosophes n'y participent pas directement.... Plus généralement, on exclura les pamphlets, notamment voltairiens, qui prennent pour cible les textes sacrés..." (p. 177).

[4] Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1998).

[5] See Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), esp. Part VI, and Jeffrey D. Burson, "Theological Enlightenment and the Scandal of abbé Jean-Martin de Prades," (Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University, 2006).

Darrin M. McMahon
Florida State University
dmcMahon@fsu.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172