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Project for a Critical Dictionary

[In 1692 Bayle composed an essay to support his project for a critical encyclopaedia. It would aim, he said, to rectify the mistakes he had found in Moréri's dictionary. He addressed his proposal to Jacques du Rondel, a former colleague at Sedan, who had become professor of belles lettres at the university of Maestricht. The 'Project' shows that the idea of a dictionary of errors arises from Bayle's approach to scientific discovery; and from his perception that an accurate historical fact could serve to negate a false conjecture. For the scholar – whether historian or natural scientist – by being alert to evidence of mistakes in received thinking could often get nearer to the truth. Perhaps the essay inspired Mill's thoughts on poetry and pushpin: Bayle – citing the poet Malherbe's ironic rebuke – asks if the good poet should be thought less useful to the state than the good player at ninepins (p. 8).]

Dissertation

Which was printed as a foreword to some essays or fragments of this work in the year MDCXCII, under the title: **Project for a Critical Dictionary to M. du Rondel, professor of *belles lettres* at Maestricht.**

Sir,

You will doubtless be surprised at the resolution I have recently made. I have had the notion of compiling the largest collection that I can of the errors that are met with in Dictionaries and, so as not to limit myself to this project alone, vast as it is, I shall make

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digressions upon authors of every sort whenever the opportunity arises . . .

But there are some objections to dispose of which may take some time. . . .

[Sections I–V expand on this theme with reference to a wide range of the printed literature of Catholic and Reformed scholarship of the age of Renaissance and Reformation.]

vi Reply to certain difficulties
 The first difficulty: that the work might make
 enemies

Firstly, Sir, the liberty I have taken to collect together the mistakes I have found dispersed throughout many books may be thought of as a sign of imprudence. Is it not to create without good cause a vast number of enemies? For, when we attack the Ancients we bring to the fray their numerous partisans among the Moderns; and when we censure the Moderns we expose ourselves to their personal resentment if they are living, and to that of their family if they are dead. Now the rancour of these authors is no small matter. They are, reputedly, exceedingly sensitive, short-tempered and vindictive; and it is said that after their death, their heirs think themselves bound to perpetuate their love for their kinsman's creations. As for the interest taken by many Moderns in the reputation of the Ancients, I cannot better represent it than in the passage I cite, in which La Mothe le Vayer fulminates against Balzac because he had criticised an argument from Pompey.^{a+t}

In answer to this difficulty, Sir, I say that I do not envisage my enterprise as being at all hazardous in that respect. It may happen then that I am described in the following way,

^{a+t} 'In truth I confess that such unjust treatment of antiquity as a whole elicits in my soul such indignation that I prefer you, or someone other than myself skilled at this sort of candour, to give it the name it deserves.' 'Exclamet Melicerta periisse / frontem de rebus': Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 1.5. ['Melicerta would exclaim that shame had vanished from the earth.']. . . . [La Mothe le Vayer,] *Hexaméron rustique*, pp. 142, 143.

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Periculosae plenum opus aleae
 Tractas, et incedis per ignes
 Suppositos cineri doloso.^{b=u}

without rightly speaking being called reckless. I do not see authors in quite the way they are characterised by malignant pens. I imagine they are too reasonable to take it amiss if, in the interest of the public good, I show that they have not always got things right. I declare that in doing this I have no intention of lessening the glory they have acquired, and that I shall carefully abstain, above all wherever honesty requires it, from any uncivil expressions concerning their personal character or the *corpus* of their work. Certain small errors scattered here and there in a book do not determine its destiny; nor do they diminish its just price or rob the author of due praise. The injustice and malice of the human species, great as they are, have not yet grown to such a point that they hinder most readers from praising a good book, notwithstanding the faults that may be in it. This fine maxim of a poet from the court of Augustus will always be relevant:

Ubi plura nitent in carmine, non ego paucis
 Offendar maculis, quas aut incuria fudit
 Aut humana parum cavit natura.^{c=w}

Above all, they will pardon the faults, though numerous, of those who compile large dictionaries; and this maxim is particularly to be urged on their behalf,

Opere in longo fas est obrepere somnum,^{d=x}

and it is because of this confidence that I shall have so few scruples about criticising them, for I should be profoundly grieved to lessen any of the respect that they are owed. The public is infinitely obliged for all the instruction that is produced by the sweat of their

^{b=u} ['You conduct a task fraught with hazardous risks and walk across flames concealed under deceptive ashes.'] Horace, *Odes*, 2.1.6–8.

^{c=w} ['When the qualities which radiate from a poem are many, I am not bothered by the few blots which either carelessness has spilt, or human nature has been unable to avoid.'] Horace, *Ars poetica* [The Art of Poetry], 351–3.

^{d=x} ['Drowsiness may prevail when a work is long and dreary.'] *Ibid.*, 360.

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brow . . . You see, sir, where my excuses are leading: it is not my intention to undermine the worth of authors, nor to depart from the rules of civility towards them: and I have so good an opinion of their modesty and of their zeal for the instruction of the public that I do not believe that they will resent the liberty I shall take to show the places where they have made mistakes.

Generally speaking I shall not myself reveal their faults: I shall merely report what others have said. I make it a religion never to appropriate to myself what I borrow from others. So the reader may be completely assured that where I indicate a fault without citing a source I am unaware that it has ever before been made public. That is, I do not think I am required to show a greater indulgence to my neighbour than to myself, and it will be seen that I do not spare myself. Finally, one must suppose that the interest of the public must take precedence over that of private persons, so that an author who improperly prefers to have his own faults concealed than to see the public disabused^{ey} deserves no indulgence. . . . If these replies are inadequate, I add, on the one hand, that the public's instruction is worth self-sacrifice to the ill-humour of a few individuals; and on the other, that I am only too willing to yield the floor to the retaliation of authors whom I criticise. I consent willingly to have them point out my errors whether on their own account or as descendants of others. They will gratify me if they correct and enlighten me, and I urge any reader to do so. I shall try to make no mistakes though I am very certain that I shall commit only too many. No one will be able to charge me with the complaint made against those censors who print nothing for fear of reprisals (C).

vii The second difficulty: that it will censure very trivial faults.

In the second place it will be found very odd if I spend my time quibbling over nits or censuring trivialities . . . I have decided nevertheless

^{ey} 'Nimis perverse se ipsum amat . . .' ['A man has an excessively unhealthy self-love if he is willing to lead others into error in order to conceal his own. For it is far better and more beneficial, when he has himself made a mistake, that others do not make the same mistake, since upon their advice he might be disabused. But if he does not wish this, at least let him avoid having companions in error.'] Augustine, *Letters*, 7.

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that I should ignore such mockery, and comment on even small errors. For the more one uses reason to criticise things, the more one can show how hard it is to be perfectly exact. Moreover, by taking the idea of perfect exactitude to the utmost degree, we oblige authors to be more guarded and to examine everything with maximum care. Man is only too accustomed to being on the wrong side of the rules set before him.^[cc] So if he is to get as close as possible to the point of perfection we must require him to deviate from it as little as he can. Moreover, as this work can be of service to those who want a historical dictionary of utmost accuracy, towards which it is exceedingly important to aim, I have had to go into detail with a particular sort of precision, and even make digressions. It is not out of inclination that I deal in quibbles, but from choice and I ought to be thanked for it, since it is a way of sacrificing oneself to the good of one's neighbour.^[dd] This is not a path to glory; it is done to bring others to a factual exactitude and that is a great sacrifice, is it not? There are not many who are willing to do likewise: I can cite Quintilian.^{f=cc} I shall say something below which elaborates my discussion of this second difficulty.

VIII The third difficulty: that it will contain useless discussions

In the third place, I may be reproached for having given myself useless trouble. For some will say, why do we need to know if this Cassius Longinus has been confused with another, or whether he was capitally punished or merely banished? Does the public lose sleep over such things? What does it matter if Scaliger was or was not incensed against Erasmus when he considered him as a mere soldier; and so on? . . .

I say, however, that this objection which would perhaps be very sound, absolutely speaking and without reference to time and place, is worth nothing when one relates it to the present century and to this part of the world in which we live. For were man perfectly rational he would concern himself only with his eternal salvation,

^{f=cc} 'Sive contemnentes tanquam . . .' ['Either they despise as trivial what we learn early, or, what is nearest to the truth, they expect no reward for ability in those subjects which, although necessary, are, however, far removed from showy display.'] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* [The Education of an Orator], I, 1, proemium.

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as the Lord told Martha: ‘But one thing is needful.’^{g=ff} Who does not also know the maxim: *de peu de biens nature se contente* [nature is content with very little]? Who will doubt that were we to contain ourselves within the limits of basic need we would have to abolish as superfluous nearly all the arts? But man can no longer be treated upon that basis. Since time immemorial it has been natural for him to seek the agreeable things of life and all sorts of comforts and pleasures. Among other non-necessary things which it has pleased Europeans to acquire are the Greek and Latin languages, or rather we seek to understand what is in the books that have been handed down to us in these two languages. Nor are our scholars content to know vaguely, but they have sought to examine if everything they found was indubitably true, and if new light emerged when one author contradicted another. Then, when it proved possible to resolve these difficulties and those in many other sorts of history, they felt a very intense pleasure. They have greatly entertained their readers and they have been bathed in glory notwithstanding that this enlightenment was of no use at all for diminishing the cost of living, nor for providing protection against the heat and the cold, or the rain and the hail. One should not, then, impute to me the impertinent audacity of wanting to reveal as a merchandise of great price a thing universally rejected as supposedly useless. For in this I am merely following a taste long established. Whether men are justified in feeling satisfied that they are not mistaken upon a point of geography, or chronology, or history, is not the issue; I am no way answerable for that. It is enough for me that the public^{h=gg} wants to know in detail about all the errors in circulation, and to take account of these discoveries.^{i=hh}

Let it not be said that our century, disabused and cured of the critical spirit of the preceding age, now looks upon the writings of those who correct factual error – whether concerning the specific

^{g=ff} Luke, 10:42.

^{h=gg} In using this word [the public] I do not mean to say that everyone . . . is interested in the same refutations; but only that some are interested in one sort, and others interested in another.

^{i=hh} If it matters little for one not to know these things, it matters little also for one to know them . . . Lipsius wanted to know the truth of every small detail: ‘Admirabilis Lipsius . . .’ [‘The admirable Lipsius says somewhere that he likes to know the truth even in the most minute matters.’] *Epistola Hoffmanni ad Reinesium* [Letter from Hoffmann to Reinesius], p. 100.

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lives of great men, or the names of cities, or of anything else whatsoever – as mere pedantry. For it is certain, all things considered, that men were never more devoted than they are today to this sort of illumination. For every experimental physicist and for every mathematician, you will find five who study history and its related fields. And never was the science of antiquities – by which I mean the study of medallions, inscriptions, *bas relief* etc. – as cultivated as it is today. Now where does this lead? To pin-pointing ever more accurately the time at which certain events took place, or to preventing a particular town or a particular individual from being confused with another; or to testing conjectures upon certain rites of the ancients; and to establishing a hundred other matters of curiosity, in which the public is allegedly uninterested, according to the disdainful maxims which make up the topic of this third difficulty. Such maxims have not however discouraged one eminent man,^{k=ii} as consummate in the study of humane learning as he is in affairs of state, from publishing a distinguished book upon the excellence and usefulness of medallions.

You, Sir, are better persuaded than anyone that such maxims are irrelevant. For if they lead anywhere it is to the destruction of all the *beaux-arts* and nearly all the sciences which civilise and exalt the mind.^{l=ji} For should these fine precepts be followed there would remain only the use of the mechanical arts and as little geometry as is necessary for accurate navigation, carriages, agriculture and fortifications. Amongst all our professors we should have scarcely anyone but engineers bent on inventing new ways of destroying mankind. It must, of course, be allowed that the public has a clear interest in having such things [mechanical arts] since through them we may make abundance reign in our towns, and pursue offensive or defensive wars. But it must on the other hand be agreed, despite Cicero,^{m=kk} that all the beauties of painting, sculpture and architecture serve to please only particular eyes and can elicit admiration

^{k=ii} M. de Spanheim.

^{l=ji} See *Nouvelles de la république des lettres*, September 1684, article 4 [OD 1, pp. 123–5, p. 125].

^{m=kk} In the Third Book of the Orator he tries to prove this thesis: ‘In plerisque rebus . . .’ [‘In most matters, nature has designed things in a marvellous way, so that what possesses the greatest utility has the most worth and often beauty too.’]

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only from *connoisseurs*. The coarse productions of all these arts can supply man's needs: we can be housed safely and comfortably without the help of Corinthian or composite order, without friezes, cornices and architraves. Much less for life's amenities is it necessary to know everything that is taught about the [mathematical] incommensurability of the asymptotes, or about magical squares, or about the duplication of the cube etc. . . .

So that if one were disposed to despise a work as soon as it ceased to address *de pane lucrando* [bread winning] or to have any practical use . . . or, in short, when popular taste can do without it, there would be few books whatsoever that would not be paltry. They would deserve the rebuke which you have doubtless seen in the *Life* of the poet Malherbe. When M. de Méziriac presented the poet with his commentary on Diophantus, in the company of several parties who had 'praised this book exorbitantly' as being 'exceedingly useful to the public, Malherbe's comment was to ask if it would bring down the price of bread?' On another occasion he defended the award of stipends to those who served the King in his armies and his affairs; but said that 'a good poet was no more useful to the state than a good player at ninepins [*quilles*]'.

You must therefore grant me, despite what is said, that there are countless creations of the human mind which are esteemed not because we need them, but because they please us. And is it not right to contest the statements of authors who say the contrary, given that there are so many people who delight in knowing the truth, even in things where their fortune is not in the least concerned?

Certainly a shoemaker, a miller, or a gardener are infinitely more necessary to a state than the ablest painters or sculptors: than a Michelangelo or a Bernini. Certainly the most humble mason is more indispensable to a town than the most gifted chronologist or astronomer: than a Joseph Scaliger, or a Copernicus. It is possible, nevertheless, to make an infinitely stronger case for these great minds, whose work one could well do without, than for the absolutely essential work of these artisans.^{n=mm}

^{n=mm} 'Plus interfuit reipublicae . . .' ['The Republic attained more benefit from the capture of a Ligurian stronghold than from the defence of a law-suit by Manius Curius. Quite so, but the Athenians benefited more from having strong roofs on their homes than a beautiful ivory statue of Minerva. I would, however,

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For there are some things whose price can be determined only with reference to an honest pleasure or to a simple adornment of the soul.

ix The same arguments which demonstrate the usefulness of other sciences demonstrate the usefulness of critical research

In this section, Sir, you will not fail to foresee that the enemies of *belles lettres* will concoct a hundred exceptions. Not being able to deny that their maxims tend to revive barbarism in all its aspects, they will draw our attention to the basic necessities which result from particular sciences. But the argument will get them nowhere, for as soon as they place in the class of basic necessities the learning from which useful things arise, whether by *résultance* [invented effect] or whether by *émanation* [inevitable effect] (permit me to use this old Scholastic vocabulary since it encompasses so well the two kinds of accessory utilities^{o=nn} which are relevant here), they will realise that they are obliged to include in this utilitarian category both the humanities and critical learning. I can thus use all their own observations to oppose them. And herewith is a small example of what I mean.

If they tell me that the most abstract theorems of algebra are highly useful in life because they make the human mind more capable of perfecting certain skills, I will reply that scrupulous enquiry into historical fact is likewise capable of producing very great benefits. I am confident enough to assert that the perverse obstinacy of the first critics who dwelt upon trifles – for example upon the question of whether one ought to say *Virgil* or *Vergil* – has accidentally been quite useful. For such critics thereby inspired a strong veneration for antiquity; they disposed minds towards careful enquiry into behaviour in ancient Greece and ancient Rome. They thus created the condition that could benefit from these great examples. What effect do you suppose, Sir, that a grave and majestic passage

rather be Pheidias than the best of carpenters. Therefore, we must estimate the extent not of each man's usefulness, but of his value, especially since few can paint or sculpt outstandingly, but workmen or labourers are hardly in short supply.'] Cicero, in *Brutus*, 73.256–7.

^{o=nn} More comprehension is given to this distinction here, than in Scholasticism.

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taken from Livy or Tacitus and uttered as having formerly inclined the Roman senate to a certain resolution might have upon an audience so pre-disposed?

I could say that it is capable of saving a state, and perhaps has saved more than one. The president of an assembly pronounces these Latin words with a certain emphasis. He makes an impression on minds by virtue of the respect they have for the name of Roman. Each one goes home converted, and inspires in his locality a sense of loyalty, and thus you see a civil war stifled in its cradle. Malherbe grasped nothing of this when he said that a poet is no more useful to a state than a good player at ninepins. For without displaying here all the good that a poet can do,^{P=PP} do you think, sir, that none of those men who are called parish worthy [*coq de paroisse*] has ever quelled the mischief of a factious troublemaker with a stanza of Pibrac, gravely uttered? And in the home, do you think that those golden phrases, whose reading^{Q=QQ} Molière recommended, are always without effect? I would suppose that though very often they are, it is not always so; and that Horace, in the lines that I cite in the note, spoke of nothing other than the edification that comes from an idea.^{R=RR}

It will be said, perhaps, that what seems most dry and abstract in mathematics brings us at least this advantage: that it leads us to indubitably true propositions; whereas historical discussion and investigation into human facts always leave us in some doubt, and always generate the seeds of new disputes. But there is little prudence in harping upon this string! Historical facts, I maintain, may be carried to a degree of certainty more indubitable than the degree of certainty which can be arrived at in the case of geometrical propositions; provided of course that we consider these two sorts of proposition according to the degree of certainty that is appropriate to each. Allow me to explain myself. In factual disputes that arise among historians, on knowing whether one prince has reigned

^{P=PP} Horace, *Epistles*, 2.1.

^{Q=QQ} 'Lisez-moi comme il faut, au lieu de ses sornettes, / Les quatrains de Pibrac, et les doctes tablettes / Du conseiller Matthieu, ouvrage de valeur, / Et plein de beaux dictons à réciter par cœur.' Molière, *Comédie du cocu imaginaire*.

^{R=RR} 'Os tenerum pueri . . .' ['In representing the young, innocent speech of a boy, the poet diverts the ear from ugly utterances. Presently, he shapes the heart with his benevolent tutelage, preaching against harshness, jealousy and anger.'] Horace, *Epistles*, 2.1.126–9.