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Thomas M. Carr Jr.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, tcarr1@unl.edu

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Voltaire's Concept of Enlightened Eloquence

Thomas M. Carr, Jr.

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Near the beginning and end of his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734), his first major text promoting the principles of enlightenment, Voltaire gave examples of two very different kinds of eloquence. In the third letter on the Quakers, he pictured George Fox converting his jailers with his inspired preaching. In the last letter, he praised the eloquence of Pascal before he attempted a refutation of the *Pensées*, calling Pascal's projected apology for Christianity "un livre plein de paralogismes éloquents et de faussetés admirablement déduites" (XXII. 28).¹ Each is representative of a brand of eloquence Voltaire found objectionable. The first kind, appealing chiefly to the lower classes, thrives on enthusiasm—a contagious disease in Voltaire's eyes; it breeds fanaticism, factions, and sects. Pascal's eloquence, designed for a more sophisticated audience, makes use of formal argumentation and elegant style and is thus all the more insidious.

Both demanded a philosophic antidote. As Voltaire increasingly devoted his energy to the battle for enlightenment, he turned more and more to the eloquence for which he had long been acclaimed in his plays and poetry. Much of this propaganda is found in works cast in the established rhetorical genres of the day. In *discours* and legal briefs he championed reform of the law codes and defended victims of judicial error like the Calas family: he used sermons and homilies to attack *l'infâme*, undermining the foundations of Christianity while advocating deism and religious toleration. Depending on just how the boundaries of these genres are drawn, some forty to fifty works fit into this category.

The rationale behind Voltaire's decision to make eloquence an important instrument of his enlightened ideals has never been fully examined.² One reason for this neglect is that extended discussions of rhetoric and eloquence are rare in his writings. The two longest texts are his 1755 article, "Eloquence," for Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and the section on the *Rhetoric* of the article, "Aristote," published in 1770 in the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie*. These

texts, however, hardly exhaust his reflexions on the subject; there exist numerous references to eloquence throughout his correspondence and other works. A good number of these are found in the articles on literature he prepared in 1754–1756 for the *Encyclopédie*, while others are briefer comments on some writer or piece of eloquence that interested him at the moment. Although they were written over his long career in various circumstances and with many different audiences in mind, a consistent pattern emerges from them.

Voltaire's lifelong respect for eloquence is noteworthy in light of the hostility shown it by the philosophical tradition after Descartes. Henri Gouhier has described the Cartesian position as a quest for "une philosophie sans rhétorique."³ Descartes' search for absolute certainty with self-evidence as the criterion for truth led him to scorn any merely probable truths, the realm of eloquence since Aristotle. He maintained that in order to persuade others, the rules of rhetoric are of little use; clear and intelligible thinking is enough. This critique of eloquence was developed more extensively by Malebranche and his followers. They reduced the art to the use of stylistic devices calculated to excite the imagination and passions. For them, rather than fostering calm deliberation of issues, eloquence leads to hasty judgments that are as often as not in error.⁴

The influence of these views can be seen in two eighteenth-century attitudes that severely limited the scope of eloquence. The first was a tendency to restrict the use of reason to philosophy, leaving eloquence only emotion. D'Alambert's pronouncements in the *Encyclopédie* and in the Académie française reflect this view. He defined eloquence as "le talent de faire passer avec rapidité et d'imprimer avec force dans l'âme des autres le sentiment profond dont on est pénétré."⁵ Logic communicates ideas, while eloquence only communicates the deep conviction of the speaker. Yet to hold eloquence exclusively to the emotional mode of persuasion restricts its range and effectiveness. A truly enlightened eloquence would have to include a rational component as well.

A related tendency was to define eloquence chiefly in terms of style and thus to link it to poetry. From this perspective, eloquence is the art of combining figures of speech and thought in a way that sets it apart from ordinary language. Such a close relationship between the two arts during the second phase of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* was noted by Margaret Gilman. Poetry was considered merely a more striking form of eloquence to which it added meter, rhyme, and perhaps bolder imagery.⁶ But just as an enlightened eloquence required that Voltaire emphasize the role of reason as well as the emotions, he would also have to distinguish between eloquence and poetry in a way that stressed the persuasive rather than the decorative qualities of the art. Thus, after briefly treating Voltaire's relation to the past masters of eloquence, I will focus on these two problems. Since my subject is the rationale behind his practice, for the most part I will be examining his comments on the theory and criticism of eloquence.

Voltaire was formally introduced to eloquence in the Jesuit college of Louis-le-Grand, where his two teachers during his year of rhetoric in 1709–1710, Fathers LeJay and Porée, were both knowledgeable and later published Latin texts on the subject.⁷ Nevertheless, Voltaire was critical of both the theoretical and practical aspects of training in rhetoric in the schools, attacking the reliance on classroom exercises based on amplification (XVII. 184) and the memorization of rhetorical jargon. Amplification only trained the students to

become longwinded, he claimed, and the rules and precepts were a parody of true eloquence. "Que de puérilités pédantesques on entassait il n'y a pas longtemps dans la tête d'un jeune homme, pour lui donner en une année ou deux une très-fausse idée de l'éloquence, dont il aurait pu avoir une connaissance très-vraie en peu de mois, par la lecture de quelques bons livres" (VIII. 305). Thirty-five years after his formal schooling, Voltaire professed to have forgotten the rules of eloquence he had learned under the Jesuits (Best. D3348). In addition, his frequent use of such disparaging epithets as "déclamation de collège" (Best. D10469), "écolier de rhétorique" (Best. D18061), or "éloquence de collège" (Best. D14039) shows that scholastic eloquence, with its conscious devotion to the rules of formal rhetoric and pompous style, remained a negative model for him his whole life.

We can only speculate about the identity of the "quelques bons livres" referred to above whose study would provide a faithful picture of eloquence in a few short months. Given Voltaire's belief that the rules of rhetoric had not changed since the time of Cicero (XXV. 457), and his frequent laments over the sad state of contemporary French eloquence, he probably preferred the ancient authorities. He held out Demosthenes and Cicero as model practitioners of eloquence. In much the same way that he used "régent de rhétorique" as a term of derision, he addressed writers as "Cicéron" in order to flatter and encourage them to greater heights of eloquence.

Eighteenth-century critics of contemporary rhetorical training like D'Alembert usually stressed that eloquence was a talent acquired through exposure to the best models, rather than by the study of rules.⁸ Voltaire also pictured eloquence as a gift of nature, noting that the precepts of rhetoric were only codified after the art was born (XVIII. 514-515). Just the same, he showed a high regard for the classical theoreticians. Among them he had special praise for Aristotle, about whose *Rhetoric* he wrote, "Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait une seule finesse de l'art qui lui échappe" (XVII. 372). Voltaire also admired Cicero as a rhetorician as well as a speaker, all the while recognizing the Roman's debt to Aristotle (XVIII. 516).

The catalogue of Voltaire's Ferney library lists Latin editions of Cicero and Quintilian's rhetorical works.⁹ In addition, Voltaire praised the *abbé* Gédoin's translations of the *Institutio Oratoria* as well as François Cassandre's French version of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (XIV. 76; 49). Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify a specific debt to any writer on the basis of Voltaire's comments, or even to determine how thorough his knowledge of them was. His tendency was to use the authority of the classical authors to buttress his own preferences. Thus, although he gave a brief outline in the article "Eloquence" of the topics treated in the *Rhetoric*, the specific passages Voltaire referred to in the articles on literature for the *Encyclopédie* are chiefly from Book III, where Aristotle's recommendations about the use of appropriate metaphors appealed to Voltaire's sense of *convenance* (XVIII. 515; XIX. 10). In 1770 Voltaire again made use of these passages, this time to attack prose poetry, one of his *bêtes noires* (XVII. 373).

The attention Voltaire directed to Aristotle's comments on metaphor shows the close link in his mind between style and eloquence. In fact, he once defined eloquence to Frederick the Great in stylistic terms: "L'éloquence ne consiste t'elle pas a transporter les mots d'une espèce dans une autre, n'esce pas à elle d'animer tout"? (Best. D4001) On another occasion he assigned it a decorative function, calling it the "ornement de la vérité" (Best.

D 1660). But it becomes clear that Voltaire did not consider eloquence merely a matter of stylistic embellishment when we see how he distinguished poetry from eloquence.

On the one hand, because Voltaire saw poetry and eloquence as related arts, he frequently mentioned them in the same breath. Both are natural gifts which require a lifetime to perfect: "La connaissance approfondie de la poésie et de l'éloquence demande toute la vie d'un homme" (Best. D3914). Both are excellent guides to the spirit of a people (XXIV. 30). And since the truly eloquent man must also be a lover of poetry (XX. 562), it is not surprising that in certain genres of eloquence, especially the funeral oration, the elevated style of eloquence borrows heavily from poetic diction (XVII. 374; cf. XVIII. 517).

Yet in the final analysis, Voltaire saw poetry and eloquence as distinct. The ambiguity arises from the fact that both arts share many components, including thought and the use of arresting stylistic features. Both engage the emotions, intellect, and imagination. Both please as well as instruct. But because each art has its own goal, these elements are combined differently. Voltaire's description of the poet's objective—"attacher l'esprit en flattant l'imagination et l'oreille" (XXV. 202) points to two factors which separate poetry from eloquence: the imagination and musical qualities. Indeed, his belief that the poet has a special duty to please the ear was behind his lifelong defence of verse in poetry. A poem has a harmony prose lacks: "La bonne poésie est à la bonne prose ce que la danse est à une simple démarche noble, ce que la musique est au récit ordinaire" (XIV. 106). Likewise, the imagination plays a more dominant role in poetry than in eloquence: "le poète a pour base de son ouvrage la fiction: aussi l'imagination est l'essence de son art; elle n'est que l'accessoire dans l'orateur" (XIX. 433).

These differing goals are contrasted in Voltaire's discussion of the role of elegance in the two arts for the *Encyclopédie*. Stylistic polish alone is not enough to make a speech good since persuasion is its aim. "Un discours peut être élégant sans être un bon discours, l'élégance n'étant en effet que le mérite des paroles; mais un discours ne peut être absolument bon sans être élégant . . . Un orateur peut convaincre, émouvoir même sans élégance, sans pureté, sans nombre: un poème ne peut faire d'effet s'il n'est élégant" (XVIII. 510). A poem cannot succeed without stylistic merit, but style is subordinate to persuasion in eloquence since a speech can both convince and move without it. Immediate effectiveness is the first measure of the success of a work of eloquence; elegance is only necessary if it is to achieve literary immortality.

Poetry and eloquence are thus for Voltaire overlapping arts, with common components, but differing aims. In 1738 Voltaire gave Frederick perhaps his most balanced definition of eloquence: "cette auguste science / D'embellir la raison, de forcer les esprits" (Best. D1331). The second part of this definition, "forcer les esprits," underlines eloquence's goal. When poetry adorns the truth, it is primarily to please, for it is the music of the soul (XX. 232). Eloquence adorns the truth the better to persuade because eloquence is ultimately for Voltaire the "passe-porte" of reason (Best. D16390).

Why, one might ask, does reason need a passport? To be sure, reason is the key factor in persuasion in Voltaire's eyes. He called "les idées vraies et profondes" the hidden source of eloquence (Best. D15418). He insisted that "la dialectique est le fondement de l'art de persuader . . . être éloquent c'est savoir prouver" (XVIII. 515). It was because of the importance of reason in eloquence that he wrote to his old rhetoric mentor Father Porée in

1738 that the study of true eloquence leads naturally to the study of philosophy (Best. D1660).

Voltaire's views on truth and probability allow us to assess the scope of eloquence in his eyes. For Voltaire, whose *Philosophe ignorant* (1766) sums up his lifelong awareness of the limits of human intelligence, absolute certainty is impossible to achieve in many cases. The article "Foi II" of the *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* outlines three ways by which a proposition can be called true. "Rien ne peut paraître vrai que par l'une de ces trois manières, ou par l'intuition, le sentiment: *j' existe, je vois le soleil*; ou par des probabilités accumulées qui tiennent lieu de certitude: *il y a une ville nommée Constantinople*; ou par la voie de démonstration: *les triangles ayant même base et même hauteur sont égaux*" (XIX. 157).¹⁰ The first and third methods can be said to bypass persuasion and result in an *evidence*—that is, a proposition which cannot be contested once it is understood. Intuition involves a direct perception of a self-evident truth; a proof in geometry requires a more complicated exposition but produces a similar result. On the other hand, the second, the realm of the probable, has traditionally belonged to rhetoric, and Voltaire was aware that eloquence was usually reserved for just such cases where the truth is not evident. Writing, for instance, to Richelieu in 1775 about one of the duke's lawsuits, he remarked that "heureusement les preuves sont si fortes, qu'elles n'ont besoin d'aucune éloquence" (Best. D19342). In the *Plaidoyer de Ramponeau* (1760) the adage "là où la raison est évidente l'éloquence est inutile" is cited (XXIV. 118).

The range of topics he assigned to the realm of the probable, and thus where eloquence could be used effectively, is wide. At various times he included metaphysics, law, history, and even medicine.¹¹ These topics cover the major areas in which he displayed his enlightened eloquence. For example there is his defence of deism in the *Homélies prononcées à Londres* (1767), or the pleas to redress judicial error such as the *Avis au public sur les parricides imputés aux Calas et aux Sirven* (1766). The biblical criticism in the *Sermon des cinquante* (1749) makes use of historical principles, and on a more minor note, there is even his advocacy of vaccination against smallpox in the *Eloge funèbre de Louis XV* (1774). Of course, the fact that eloquence deals most often in probabilities does not reduce the usefulness of reason; rather reason is the indispensable tool for establishing the degree of probability men must be satisfied with where absolute certitude cannot be reached. Thus it is not unusual to find Voltaire arguing from probability, not only in works dealing with historical or legal evidence, but even in ones dealing with metaphysical questions such as the existence of God.

Voltaire emphasizes this distinction between mathematical certainty and probable truth in his discussion for the *Encyclopédie* of eloquence's power to compel assent, *force*, which is perhaps the most distinctive feature of eloquent style in his eyes. First he noted that *force* is not a factor in mathematical proof where the conclusion is inevitable. It does, however, play a role in argumentation over questions dealing with probabilities. In the realm of the problematic, special attention must be paid to the choice and arrangement of proofs, choosing ones that appeal to the audience at hand and arranging them to their best advantage (XIX. 172–173). In eloquence the *force* of the rational proofs is intensified by the addition of striking images and figures of speech; *force* here is presented as a skeleton of argumentation amplified by stylistic devices: "La force d'éloquence n'est pas seulement une suite de raisonnements justes et vigoureux, qui subsisteraient avec la sécheresse; cette force demande

de l'embonpoint, des images frappantes, des termes énergiques" (XIX. 173). It is this *force* that makes eloquence the passport of reason. It allows eloquence, even when dealing with the probable, to create an assurance which can rival the immediacy of intuition or the certainty of mathematics.

In poetry *force* is an incidental factor, while in philosophy rational proof alone should suffice. Eloquence has a third component, in addition to the impact of the argumentation and style. It appeals to the heart as well as to the head. Voltaire often stressed this emotional element when praising effective eloquence. He wrote to the author of a legal brief on behalf of the Calas family, "il me paraît impossible que vôtre mémoire ne porte pas la conviction dans les esprits des juges et l'attendrissement dans les cœurs" (Best. D12421). Of one in his own favor he declared, "Il doit toucher et convaincre" (Best. D1761). It is not surprising that Voltaire never questioned the legitimacy of the emotions as a means of persuasion given his analysis of them in the *Traité de métaphysique*. Unlike animals, men have a natural instinct of pity and *bienveillance* toward their fellows which disposes them to come to each other's aid, unless self-interest interferes. By making strong appeals to this innate compassion, eloquence can increase the likelihood that men will respond to their fellows' plight rather than to self-interest. Thus at various times Voltaire recommended the whole range of emotions that appealed to the eighteenth-century sensibility from the tender, tearful sentiments all the way to horror and indignation. To be sure, Voltaire's emphasis on the heart in persuasion is not in contradiction with the spirit of enlightenment.¹² He saw the emotions and the passions as complements of reason, as necessary and useful components of human nature which an eloquence aiming at practical reform could not afford to ignore. Their function is to incite man to action, for man "est pourvu de passions pour agir, et de raison pour gouverner ses actions" (XXII. 30).

This acceptance of emotional proofs is in direct contrast to the distrust of the emotions shown by seventeenth-century philosophers like Malebranche, who called them a major source of error.¹³ However, Voltaire did follow the Oratorian on a related issue: the contagious power of the imagination. But while Malebranche worried about the imagination's contribution to the success of heretical preachers, Voltaire pictured it as a cause of fanaticism among the ignorant. He noted that the *force* of eloquence, in its most vigorous form, produces an enthusiasm the speaker communicates to his listeners: "Tout est pour lui objet de comparaison rapide et de métaphore: sans qu'il y prenne garde, il anime tout, et fait passer dans ceux qui l'écoutent une partie de son enthousiasme" (XVIII. 514). The pinnacle of art for a poet or orator is to combine enthusiasm with reason, but unfortunately, this "enthousiasme raisonnable" is extremely rare (XVIII. 554). More often enthusiasm side-steps reason, appealing to the imagination, or more precisely to a faculty Voltaire, following Malebranche, called the passive imagination. "Cette faculté passive, indépendante de la réflexion, est la source de nos passions et de nos erreurs. . . . Cette espèce d'imagination servile, partage ordinaire du peuple ignorant, a été l'instrument dont l'imagination forte de certains hommes s'est servie pour dominer" (XIX. 430). The common people are particularly susceptible to this manipulation. Animated with the enthusiasm aroused by the eloquence of their leaders, they become fanatics ready to sacrifice themselves for their cause like the followers of George Fox, or worse, to spread their gospel with the sword like the disciples of Mahomet.

Voltaire preferred for his own eloquence a simpler, less elevated style than the charismatic one that swept away the converts of a Fox or a Mahomet. It is a style, free of the excesses of enthusiasm, that he felt was more appropriate for the audience he had in mind, composed of members of the privileged classes. He conceived of his philosophic propaganda as a kind of sermon addressed not to the priest-ridden masses but to the influential elite of France and the rest of Europe: "On ne peut pas assembler les hommes dans la plaine de Grenelle pour leur prêcher la raison; mais on éclaire par des livres de plus d'un genre les jeunes gens qui sont dignes d'être éclairés, et la lumière se propage d'un bout de l'Europe à l'autre. . . . J'entends les honnêtes gens, car pour les convulsionnaires, les bedeaux de paroisse et les porte-dieu, il ne faut pas s'embarrasser d'eux" (Best. D15907).

Robert Niklaus has summed up the thrust of the French Enlightenment in three points: "acceptance of nature, as opposed to asceticism; of reason, opposed to a naïve faith in superstition; and of tolerance opposed to religious persecution."¹⁴ Perhaps no *philosophe* illustrates this stance better than Voltaire, and enlightened eloquence as he conceived it provided an effective instrument for promoting these goals. His frank acceptance of the emotions as means of persuasion is indicative of his balanced view of human nature. He used reason both to attack prejudice and to defend the principles of natural religion. Even his battle for religious toleration was influenced by the rhetorical tradition. One of his favorite arguments for tolerance makes use of the rhetorical commonplace that persuasion is superior to violence: a religion, he maintained, should establish itself by the power of its truth, not by the power of force (XXVI. 113–114).

Eloquence was situated in Voltaire's eyes somewhere between two of his most cherished preoccupations, poetry and philosophy. He saw it not as embellishment but as the art of persuasion, a necessary art in a world in which many questions could be settled only in terms of probabilities. Eloquence at its best employs a triple attack: "plaire, convaincre et toucher à la fois" (XVIII. 515) is its method. That is, it combines rational proof and appeals to the emotions with the pleasure of fine style. Voltaire was undoubtedly attracted to this power, this *force*, that both poetry and philosophy lacked. Eloquence, which could be aimed at the head and the heart, suited his own artistic temperament as well as that of the public he hoped to reach. Thus, while Diderot abandoned oratorical forms in favor of dialogue to treat philosophical questions, Voltaire was quick to adapt many of the standard rhetorical genres to his use.¹⁵ He placed a description of his ideal of this enlightened eloquence in the mouth of philosophy herself in an allegorical passage of *L'Homme aux quarante écus* (1768): "La philosophie est enfin venue, elle a dit: 'Ne parlez en public que pour dire des vérités neuves et utiles, avec l'éloquence du sentiment et de la raison'" (XXI. 351).

Notes

1. All citations from Voltaire's correspondence are from the *Correspondence and Related Documents*, ed. Theodore Hesterman (Banbury, 1968–1977) and are identified by their number in this edition. All other citations of Voltaire are from the Moland edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* Paris, 1877–1885 and are identified by volume and page number.

2. Peter France omits Voltaire from his *Rhetoric and Truth in France* (New York, 1972) as "too vast a subject for my present undertaking" (p. 112). Raymond Naves in *Le Goût de Voltaire* (Paris, 1938) treats eloquence only in passing and primarily as a quality of elevated style which he identifies with "animation" (p. 260) and "enthousiasme" (p. 292). David Williams discusses it briefly as a function of genius in *Voltaire: Literary Critic*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. 48, Geneva, 1966, p. 150.
3. Henri Gouhier, *La Pensée Métaphysique de Descartes*, Paris, 1962, pp. 95–103.
4. For an excellent survey of this critique of rhetoric see Bernard Tocanne, *L'Idée de nature en France dans la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle*, Paris, 1978, pp. 436–446.
5. Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, "Discours a l'Academie française," *OEuvres complètes*, Paris, 1821, IV, 305.
6. See Margaret Gilman, *The idea of Poetry in France*, Cambridge, 1958, p. 42.
7. René Pomeau, "Voltaire au collège," *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, LII (1952), 5.
8. D'Alembert, I, 36.
9. George R. Havens and Norman L. Torrey, *Voltaire's Catalogue of his Library at Ferney*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, Vol. 9, Geneva, 1959, pp. 128; 219.
10. Compare this slightly different presentation in "Certain, Certitude" from the *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764): "La certitude physique de mon sentiment, et la certitude mathématique, sont donc de même valeur, quoiqu'elles soient d'un genre différent.
Il n'en est pas de même de la certitude fondée sur les apparences, ou sur les rapportst unanimes que nous font les hommes.
Mais quoi ! me dites-vous, n'êtes vous pas certain que Pékin existe? . . . Je réponds qu'il m'est extrêmement probable qu'il y avait alors une ville de Pékin; mais je ne voudrais point parier ma vie que cette ville existe; et je parierai quand on voudra ma vie que les trois angles d'un triangle sont égaux à deux droits" (XVIII. 120).
11. On metaphysics: "Nous ne raisonnons guère en metaphysique que sur des probabilités; nous nageons tous dans une mer dont nous n'avons jamais vu le rivage" (XVIII. 377). For a brief discussion of probability in the law courts see XVIII. 118–119. In historiography: "Toute certitude qui n'est pas démonstration mathématique n'est qu'une extrême probabilité: il n'y a pas d'autre certitude historique" (XIX. 358). In medicine: "Notre science n'est donc autre chose que la science des probabilités; et c'est ce qui fait que de plusieurs médecins appelés auprès d'un malade, celui qui fait le pronostic le plus avéré par l'événement est toujours réputé, avec justice, le plus savant dans son art" (XXIX. 330).
12. See R. S. Ridgway, *Voltaire and Sensibility*, Montreal, 1973, pp. 59–61.
13. Nicolas Malebranche, *De la recherche de la vérité*, ed. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, in *OEuvres complètes*, Paris, 1963, II, 178.
14. Robert Niklaus, "The Age of the Enlightenment," in *The Age of the Enlightenment*, ed. W. H. Barber et al., London, 1967, p. 407.
15. See Carol Sherman, *Diderot and the Art of Dialogue*, Geneva, 1976, pp. 46–48.