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Antony McKenna, *Études sur Pierre Bayle*. Paris : Honoré Champion, coll. « Vie de Huguenots », 2015. 384 pp. € 60.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-2843-4.

Review by Mara van der Lugt, Lichtenberg Kolleg--the Göttingen Institute for Advanced Study.

In a 1969 review of a book by Karl Sandberg, Richard Popkin sketched the contemporary landscape of Bayle studies by dividing it into two categories: that of the traditional reading of Bayle as an irreligious freethinker and that of the 'revisionists', who, in the wake of ground-breaking studies by authors such as Walter Rex and especially Elisabeth Labrousse, tended to read Bayle as a Calvinist and fideist, or Christian sceptic.[1]

The decades thereafter have seen a powerful intensification of Bayle studies, as can be seen from the valuable bibliography maintained by Jean Bernier,[2] and yet it is still possible to describe the current state of Bayle scholarship in roughly the same terms; though perhaps introducing the term "counter-revisionist" to designate those scholars more willing to read Bayle's ambiguous religious expressions as some kind of dissimulation. Curiously, an alternative way of categorising the various positions--namely, by language in which the work is written--leads to a very similar outcome. The most prominent recent Anglophone studies [3] have tended to place more value on Bayle's religious expressions, which leading authors in the Francophone literature continue to call into question.[4]

A major moment in this debate was the publication in 1999 of Gianluca Mori's *Bayle philosophe*, which challenged the revisionist interpretation by proposing a neo-Straussian reading of Bayle's philosophical oeuvre, paying special attention to some of his earliest and latest works, and arguing that, even if it is impossible to reveal what Bayle's ultimate intention was, the philosopher of Rotterdam developed a more cogent case for atheism than has hitherto been perceived.[5] It is in this, mainly Francophone, "counter-revisionist" tradition that we may place this new volume by Antony McKenna.

Professor McKenna's name is widely known in Bayle circles, not only for his many publications on Bayle's life and works, but also for his editorship-in-chief of Bayle's *Correspondance*, a massive fourteen-volume project of which the twelfth tome appeared last year.[6] His expertise in Bayle studies and seventeenth-century philosophy more broadly is without comparison--and so the appearance of this volume can only be applauded with the greatest enthusiasm, since it makes an impressive number of his articles (both old and new) available to a wider public, and will help the reader to draw fascinating links between various parts of McKenna's oeuvre. Since the book is a collection, rather than a monograph--hence the title, *Études sur Pierre Bayle*--it makes for a very rich and varied content, but it also harbours an important recurrent argument, to which I will return shortly. The work is divided into fifteen chapters, which can be read individually, but which at times also overlap thematically.

The first two chapters introduce Bayle's correspondence. Chapter one discusses how Bayle developed his correspondence network or "communautés virtuelles" and practised his style by means of his letters; chapter two zooms in on some of Bayle's expressions on religion in the correspondence and reflects on

how to interpret them. The next few chapters (three to six) can broadly be grouped together around the topics of writing and communication. The charming third chapter traces the young Bayle's first steps in his development from "pauvre diable" to man of letters; chapter four then analyses Bayle's style and especially his strategies in various (mostly early) works. Chapter five offers a solid historical-political introduction into the heated debate between Bayle and his formidable opponent, the theologian Pierre Jurieu, which ran parallel to Bayle's preparation of his magnum opus, the *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* (first published late in 1696). Chapter six consists of two parts, the first of which demonstrates how Bayle sourced information from his correspondence networks throughout the elaboration of the *Dictionnaire*, while the second, importantly, analyses Bayle's concept of historiography and his historical-critical methodology, adding to this a very valuable bibliography.

(A note in passing: McKenna characterises the *Dictionnaire* as a communal project of the Republic of Letters; and Bayle's role as the "secrétaire anonyme de la communauté d'érudits et de savants" [p. 148, also p. 167]. This depiction, however, sits uneasily with the extremely Baylean quality of the *Dictionnaire* as a whole, in terms of its curious selection of articles, provocative philosophical discussions, inclusion of the so-called "obscenities," as well as Bayle's use of the first-person pronoun throughout the work. There certainly is a collaborative thrust behind the *Dictionnaire*, but the end-result is still very much the work of one stubborn author and editor, who did not shy away from personal intrusions into this already highly idiosyncratic text.)

If the first part of the book (chapters one to six) can be represented as roughly historical-literary, the middle part (chapters seven to ten and perhaps eleven) is more philosophical in character, focussing on various aspects of Bayle's thought on religion, ethics, and the status of reason in theology as well as philosophy. It is here that McKenna presents a major theme of the book as a whole and what can be said to be its central argument.

Chapter seven argues that Bayle's Pyrrhonist scepticism should be seen as a "red herring," that is, a ploy to distract the hostile reader from what is essential in Bayle's texts. McKenna suggests that paying heed to chronology can reveal this essence. In Bayle's earliest writings--his philosophy course written in Sedan in the 1670s, the *Pensées Diverses*, and especially the *Commentaire Philosophique*--he espouses a moral rationalism: his famous theory of toleration is grounded in the assumption that reason gives us access to moral truths. That Bayle, in this early period (and especially in the *Commentaire* of 1686), seems more optimistic about the possibility of a rationalist theology than in his later writings, can perhaps be explained by his connection to his Arminian patron, Adriaen Paets, whose own theory of toleration closely resembles that of Bayle. While Paets lived, McKenna argues, "Bayle évite de heurter le rationalisme arminien de son patron et met en avant l'accord entre la raison et la foi sur le plan de la morale" (p. 190).

According to McKenna, this rationalist strand in Bayle's early writings is cut off abruptly by a series of events in the late 1680s and early 1690s: the death of Paets in 1686, which released Bayle from his obligations to rationalist theology; the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688, which supposedly made Bayle despair of Christian morality in general; and the quarrel with Jurieu, which led to Bayle losing his position at the Rotterdam *École Illustrée* in 1693. Theologically, politically, and philosophically isolated within the Refuge, Bayle began to write furiously against rationalist theology, while claiming, à la Jurieu, that religion can only be founded on blind faith, not on reason. (Hence his discussion of the problem of evil, which no rational argument is able to solve; only faith can cut the Gordian knot). Accordingly, Bayle's espousal of Jurieuite fideism in the *Dictionnaire* is interpreted as a purely defensive mechanism. In fact, argues McKenna, Bayle drops this sceptical posture in his later writings, where he returns to a moral rationalism *tout court*.

From this the author concludes that Bayle's scepticism is a defensive strategy or diversionary tactic: a "red herring," indeed. Bayle's "real position" is thus supposed to be one of moral rationalism, and more

than this: the rationalist rejection of Christian theology. Could we speak of atheism? McKenna leaves it to the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Connected to this, chapter eight examines Bayle's doctrine of toleration, his defence of freedom of thought and of conscience, and argues that these are grounded, not in Pyrrhonist scepticism, but in moral rationalism. Again it is argued that it is chronology "qui donne une cohérence aux positions successives de Bayle;" and that Bayle's scepticism in the *Dictionnaire* should be read as a defensive strategy. After Bayle has successfully "désarmé" Jurieu by espousing his enemy's theology, Bayle uses the ensuing calm to publish "ses oeuvres philosophiques les plus fortes et les plus audacieuses," namely the *Continuation des Pensées Diverses* and the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial* (p. 222).

(But we might ask, in passing, if these works were truly more audacious than the *Dictionnaire*, why was it the *Dictionnaire* that spurred the most controversy? If Bayle were so deeply concerned about self-preservation, why did he not refrain from adding articles such as "David," which scandalised and fascinated a generation; and what of the obscenities? We may well agree that there exists a Bayle *secret* at the time of the *Dictionnaire*; but what of Bayle *provocateur*?)

Chapter nine, in turn, analyses Bayle's moral anthropology, placing it firmly in the Augustinian-Jansenist tradition in terms of Bayle's descriptions of human nature (his pessimism with regard to human action and motivation), but arguing that Bayle resists the traditional explanation for man's corruption. The Fall of man cannot explain man's depravity, since there is no way of building up a rationally satisfying narrative of the Fall that does not make God in some way complicit in the origins of sin. Therefore, only the blunt fact of man's nature can explain the nature of man: "les hommes sont tels parce qu'ils sont hommes" (p. 247).

Chapter ten compares Bayle's analysis of two contrary religious attitudes: superstition, or irrational belief, and Socinianism, that hyper-rationalist theology admitting only those religious doctrines that are compatible with reason. Bayle, in what may be called his second phase (that of the *Dictionnaire*), strongly resists the common distinction between *above reason* and *against reason*, in order to argue that reason and faith cannot be reconciled. McKenna argues that, through his criticism of Socinianism, Bayle is attempting to demonstrate both the failure of rationalist theology and the absurdity of superstitious faith (p. 260).

Following these four chapters, which together build up the case for a specific chronological-philosophical reading of Bayle, the intriguing eleventh chapter attempts to strengthen this hermeneutical move by focussing on Bayle's "ironie méthodologique" (p. 265). It is argued that Bayle's writing is "une écriture privée, très codée, secrète" (p. 268); only the most careful of readers can decipher "sa véritable pensée" (p. 266). Again, I will come back to this below.

Finally, the last four chapters discuss the eighteenth-century reception of Bayle's works. Chapter twelve gives us a glimpse into the early English reception of the *Dictionnaire* through Bayle's correspondence with Michel Le Vassor, Protestant refugee in England. Chapter thirteen provides an interesting and convincing argument for the influence of Malebranche and Bayle (as well as Pascal) on the Abbé Prévost, especially in his novel *Manon Lescaut*. Chapter fourteen illustrates the eighteenth-century reception of Bayle by way of Jean-Pierre de Crousaz; and chapter fifteen offers some thought-provoking insights into the appropriation of the more irreligious fragments of Bayle's works in clandestine philosophical literature. Two appendices are included which present two such texts, of which the first (*De la conduite qu'un honnête homme doit garder pendant sa vie*) is the more striking, laden as it is with bits and pieces from Bayle's writings, as the footnotes aptly illustrate.

At this point, the red thread and recurrent argument of the book will have become clear. To the vexed question of how to read Bayle, the author responds with what is ultimately a Straussian hermeneutics,

but one in which chronology is crucial. The result is a very coherent philosophical reading of Bayle, which is broadly consistent with Gianluca Mori's earlier attempts to systematise Bayle's philosophical positions while deprioritising his fideist expressions. Since McKenna pays more attention to the historical-political context (especially Bayle's conflicted relationship to Jurieu), and is also more accessible than Mori, his overall argument will prove to be an influential intervention in the interpretative debate.

However, if McKenna's chronological approach raises some crucial concerns with regard to Bayle's consecutive *prises de position*, it may be asked whether the resulting framework fully does justice to the complexity of Bayle's many subtle argumentative shifts and moves in a wide variety of debates. This may seem an unfair objection since the value of McKenna's approach is precisely that it clarifies a series of very complex and muddled textual developments. But there are some concerns. For one thing, Bayle's works overlap more than seems to be suggested. For instance, to some extent the *Dictionnaire*, too, can be said to inherit the moral rationalism from the *Commentaire*, since Bayle's toleration theory is neither disputed nor refuted; the dictionary's fideism applies to faith, but not as straightforwardly to morality. For another, Bayle's "fideist" position ("il faut captiver l'entendement sous l'obéissance de la foi") already appears in the first edition of the *Dictionnaire*, not just the second, and it is, in different formulations, carried over into each of Bayle's later works: not just the *Entretiens de Maxime et Thémiſte*, but also the *Réponse aux Questions d'un Provincial*, and even (though much more subtly) in the *Continuations des Pensées Diverses*.

Questions might be asked, too, about the level of interpretative caution throughout this volume. Even the first chapter, on Bayle's correspondence, includes a section in which certain expressions in a text from 1684 are explained by means of a letter in 1698, which supposedly holds the key, *la clef*, to deciphering Bayle's irony, his "intention cachée," "une écriture codée" (pp. 44-8). We must read Bayle between the lines, "il faut le lire entre les lignes: tout le monde est d'accord sur ce point" (p. 53).

It is not that this way of reading Bayle is invalid, or unjustifiable. The textual and contextual evidence for suspecting Bayle of some kind of dissimulation is strong and extremely suggestive, especially in the second edition of the *Dictionnaire*.^[7] Revisionists are sometimes too willing to overlook Bayle's many hints and suggestions on this score. It is, then, valid to question certain expressions, especially when reading Bayle, who often suggests that we do exactly this when reading other authors, similarly pressured by church, state or society, and Mori and McKenna are right to point this out.

The absence of a methodological article in this volume, however, may limit the thrust of its central argument, especially for readers from the Anglophone context, where the principal risks of any (neo-)Straussian hermeneutics have all but become proverbial. The consequence is that this work will probably cater especially to one side of the debate, and not, or not as convincingly, to the other. For this reason, it would have been productive if the author had engaged more with recent "revisionist" literature. This is a pattern in Bayle studies more widely: actual and constructive encounters between both sides are rare.^[8] Perhaps I am allowed to express my hope that Professor McKenna will engage with this counter-literature, as well as with these hermeneutical concerns, in the future, thereby to break open the somewhat clogged debate between these two parallel traditions.^[9]

It remains for me to note that these concerns do not detract in any way from the overall value of this eloquent and impeccably researched collection of scholarship, which will make important parts of McKenna's work available to scholars on both sides of the divide, and to those who, less spectacularly but no less justifiably, float somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea.

NOTES

[1] Richard Popkin, review of K. Sandberg, *At the Crossroads of Faith and Reason*, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 7.1 (1969): 93-4. Popkin classed himself among the “revisionists.”

[2] “Bibliographie des travaux critiques sur Pierre Bayle,” 1900-2015, ed., Gianluca Mori, F. Vial-Bonacci and Jean Bernier. Online at:
http://bayle-correspondance.univ-st-etienne.fr/spip.php?page=galerie&g2_itemId=769&lang=fr

[3] E.g.: Thomas Lennon, Michael Hickson, Todd Ryan, Kristen Irwin. A major (and controversial) exception is of course Jonathan Israel.

[4] Especially: Gianluca Mori, Antony McKenna.

[5] Gianluca Mori, *Bayle philosophe* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999).

[6] Labrousse É. (†) and A. McKenna, eds., *Correspondance de Pierre Bayle*, with the collaboration of L. Bergon, H. Bost, W. van Bunge, E. D. James, A. Leroux, M.-C. Pitassi, C. Verdier, F. Vial-Bonacci, R. Whelan, E.-O. Lochard and D. Taurisson (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, Vol. I-XII: 1999-2015), [14 volumes expected.]

[7] In this context it is a shame that McKenna’s article on “Pierre Bayle et le bouclier de Charron” (in H. Bost and A. McKenna, eds., *Les « Éclaircissements » de Bayle* [Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010], 299-319) is absent from this edition; and that he does not always distinguish between the various editions of the *Dictionnaire*: for instance, it is not mentioned that a certain fragment from the article “Socin” was added in the second edition (p. 256).

[8] A noteworthy exception is the debate carried out in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* between Gianluca Mori and Thomas Lennon, about how to interpret Bayle’s citation of Saint-Evremond in Bayle’s third *Éclaircissement*. See Lennon, “Did Bayle Read Saint-Evremond?”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63.2 (2002): 225-37; “A Rejoinder to Mori,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65.2 (2004): 335-41; and Mori, “Bayle, Saint-Evremond, and Fideism: A Reply to Thomas M. Lennon,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65.2 (2004): 323-334, and “A Short Reply,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65.2 (2005): 343-344.

[9] It should be noted that in a different (English) version of the article on Bayle and the red herring, published recently in a volume on Leo Strauss, McKenna does briefly interrogate some counter-interpretations (e.g., Labrousse, Hubert Bost): see McKenna, “Pierre Bayle and the Red Herring,” in Winfried Schröder, ed., *Reading between the lines--Leo Strauss and the history of early modern philosophy* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), pp. 193-220.

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Mara van der Lugt

Lichtenberg Kolleg—the Göttingen Institute for Advanced Study

mvander@gwdg.de

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