

“A Spectator-Critic in the Early 18th Century French - *Le Nouveau Spectateur français*”

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An explosion of journalistic activity in England and on the continent at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries was invigorated by what Paul Hazard has termed the “Crise de la Conscience Européenne.” [European Crisis of Conscience] This critical spirit was perhaps best expressed in the new medium of the age, journalism, in works such as Pierre Bayle’s *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (1684-87), and it later found a voice in the English *Spectator* (1711-12, 1714) as journalism continued to evolve in form and content. One important aspect of the “spectatorial” genre was its interest in social and literary criticism; the “Spectator” and his emulators would also examine the nature of criticism and the role of the writer, specifically the journalist, as critic. Just two months after the English *Spectator* debuted, the first French “Spectator,” *Le Misanthrope* (1711-12), appeared in Holland and was written by one of the most active journalists of the times, the Dutchman Justus van Effen. This Anglicist and Francophile wrote a variety of journals in French, including three “Spectators,” during the 2nd and 3rd decades of the 18th century; he also wrote the classic Dutch “Spectator,” *De Hollandsche Spectator* (1731-35). This paper will explore the role of the journalist-critic in the early 18th century as seen through the perspective of Van Effen’s journalistic endeavors, specifically his *Nouveau Spectateur français*, in which he applies his ideas of literary criticism to the works of three contemporary writers: Marivaux, the “*Spectateur Français*,” the young epic poet, Arouet de Voltaire, and one of the best known French poets of the times, Houdar de La Motte.

Without giving a detailed history of the development of Van Effen's critical approach, I would like to summarize some of the major points in his works leading up to *Le Nouveau Spectateur français*.

1) Criticism based on REASON, not AUTHORITY: Equitable literary criticism based on reason seems to be a driving force in Van Effen's writings, and the literary debate of his day was the question of the pre-eminence of the Ancients versus the Moderns. Van Effen's "Dissertation" or "Parallèle sur Homère et sur Chapelain," probably written in 1707, inspired one of the most popular works in French in the first half of the eighteenth century, *Le Chef d'Oeuvre d'un Inconnu* (1714).¹ His closing couplet characterizes this satirical look at literary criticism in general, and especially literary criticism not based on a rational method:

“Que l'excellence d'un auteur/ Dépend de son commentateur”

[The excellence of an author (often) depends on his commentator]

Criticism based on REASON, not AUTHORITY, is already evident in all of Van Effen's earlier writings.

2) Wit and Humor (and “sociabilité”) – Van Effen's first published work was a translation in 1710 of Shaftesbury's *Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour* as the *Essai sur l'usage de la raillerie*, and wit and humor are certainly important ingredients in any spectatorial journal. Van Effen adopts Shaftesbury's defense of the use of wit and humor in moral and literary criticism, just as he follows Shaftesbury, not Hobbes, and his thoughts on sociability (“**sociabilité**”), which informs his own critical approach. Shaftesbury was an

¹ *Le Chef d'Oeuvre d'un Inconnu* enjoyed numerous editions during the 18th century. The most recent edition by Henri Duranton (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1991) includes only contributions from the principal author Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe, friend and colleague of Van Effen.

important influence throughout Van Effen's life and works, just as he was for Diderot and other *philosophes*.

3) IMPARTIALITY: Van Effen and a group of friends from The Hague ushered in an era of **objective** literary criticism with *Le Journal littéraire* (1713-18),² probably best summarized in another of his collaborative efforts, *L'Histoire littéraire de l'Europe* (1726-27); he writes: "... les journaux doivent ressembler à une histoire, dont il faut que l'Auteur écrive, comme s'il n'avait ni Religion, ni Patrie..." (*Préface*, p. vii) [Journals should be like history, written by an author as if he had no political party or religious affiliation....] Or "agenda," I might add.

4) Public Usefulness – "l'utilité publique": Van Effen also brought together some of the main journalistic trends of his time in yet another kind of journal, the *Journal historique, politique, critique et gallant* (1719), which endeavored to be truly cosmopolitan in scope and interest a wide variety of readers, as the title suggests. Here as elsewhere, he makes the case that criticism should be valued for its public usefulness.

And **5) The Spectator-Critic:** True to the "spectatorial" genre, *Le Misanthrope*, *La Bagatelle*, and *Le Nouveau Spectateur français* include short works in prose and poetry and comments on literary works, authors' styles, and different genres. However, it is especially in his three Spectators in French and one in Dutch that Van Effen elaborates his theories and practice of literary and social criticism. While this is not an exhaustive history

² He pursued the same interests in *L'Europe savante* (1718-20) and *L'Histoire littéraire de l'Europe* (1726-27); he further experimented with periodical forms in the hybrid journal *Le Courier politique et galant* (1719-23), which was written primarily by Jean-François Potin. Leonid Belozubov's study on *L'Europe savante* indicates a small role for Van Effen in that journal. Although the primary author of *L'Histoire littéraire de l'Europe*, Van Effen was probably only an occasional contributor to *Le Courier politique et galant*.

of the genre or even his own spectators, Van Effen did continue to be engaged in literary battles throughout his career.

By the 3rd decade of the 18th century, there was a new “Spectator” who already had some journalist experience through the *Mercure de France*; Marivaux launched his *Spectateur français* for an eager French reading public in 1721. But Marivaux was a reluctant Spectator, and his journal soon fell prey to attacks by François Camusat, who also attacked the genre in general, including Van Effen’s *Misanthrope* and *Bagatelle*, as well as the works of one of the most prominent French writer of the period, Houdar de la Motte, in his *Bibliothèque française*. These battles came to a head in 1723, resulting from rather virulent and often personal attacks in the press by Camusat, attacks that can be characterized as anything but the “fair and equitable” method recommended by Van Effen. Camusat labels *Le Misanthrope* an “petit esprit” and an “écrivain à la douzaine.”³ [Small-minded, hack writer] Van Effen responded with a pamphlet in 1723, “Lettre à l’auteur de la Bibliothèque française . . .,” in which he discusses fair and equitable methods of literary criticism, as well as the intrinsic value of the works attacked by Camusat, but his pamphlet was met with a more virulent response by Camusat, to which Van Effen answered with another pamphlet in 1724: “Réplique à l’auteur de la *Bibliothèque française*” and also his third Spectator, *Le Nouveau Spectateur français* (1723-25). In this periodical, he brings together his thoughts on literary criticism and the debate of the day.

In Number 2 of *Le Nouveau Spectateur français*, Van Effen discusses the nature of literary controversies in an effort to illustrate the proper way to conduct literary

³ Van Effen examines this case in No. 3 of *Le Nouveau Spectateur français*.

criticism. Although he argues that a worthy work of literature should be able to withstand examination by such critics, he continues to insist on a fair and equitable, rational approach. During this period of the “Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns,” he had seen the tyranny of certain factions who distorted the arguments of their adversaries and who turned away from the real literary discussion to matters of party politics. The right of the author to defend himself, should, he concludes, be permitted in all cases. As a critic, Van Effen consistently defends the right to criticize literature in all of his journals and notes the beneficial effect on writer and public alike. He observes with regret, however, that some journalists are biased in their approaches to criticism. A common problem for Van Effen (as well as for us) was the critic who did not consider both sides of a given work, but rather preferred to attack its shortcomings and to ignore its positive aspects. Van Effen notes that this is especially true of journalists, in whose profession criticism plays a major role. By the very nature of their profession, journalists should be of great service to their reading public, but often they abuse their privileged position. Moreover, some pretend to faithfully voice the judgment of the public at large, but frequently this is only a public of one. The *Nouveau Spectateur français* promises his readers to follow his own guidelines for just and equitable criticism, and he expresses the hope that his work will always serve as a defense against the kind of arbitrary decision that is the enemy of rational literary and moral criticism. It is with this serious attention to an equitable critical method that he examines the works of Marivaux, Voltaire, and La Motte.

In many ways, Marivaux as the “reluctant French Spectator,” was the motivation for Van Effen’s thoughts on the theory and practice of literary criticism in the *Nouveau*

Spectateur français. When Marivaux undertook the *Spectateur français* in 1721 the genre was already very well developed by Van Effen and others. Camusat's attacks on Marivaux and the spectatorial genre prompted Van Effen to look critically at the English and French *Spectators* in the first number. Of course, Marivaux's journals have been studied in depth by Deloffre and Gilot, and most recently, by Alexis Lévrier, who considers Spectators in French from 1711-34, including all three spectators by Van Effen, in his *Journaux de Marivaux et le monde des 'spectateurs.'*⁴ All seem to agree on Van Effen's positive influence on Marivaux and the genre, but it should also be noted that Van Effen did not hesitate to profit from his Parisian colleague as well: *Le Nouveau Spectateur français* uses entire numbers of Marivaux *Spectateur français* to illustrate his points of criticism, as well as to fill out his own journal.⁵ Furthermore, the "Histoire de la Dame Âgée"⁶ also inspired Van Effen's autobiographical fiction in Numbers 25 through 28, "Lettre d'un homme d'âge."⁷

Van Effen was already familiar with Monsieur Arouet de Voltaire when the latter returned to Holland in 1722 with a draft of his epic poem, *La Ligue*. Van Effen had published one of the earliest poetic works of this now famous Parisian "belle esprit," his "Lettre de Mr. Arouet de Voltaire à Mr. de la F," in his *Journal historique, politique, critique et galant*,⁸ and he undertook an extensive review of Voltaire's first major

⁴ Alexis Lévrier, *Les Journaux de Marivaux et le monde des 'spectateurs,'* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007).

⁵ See Numbers 3, 6, 8, and 9.

⁶ See Numbers 12, 13, 14, and 15.

⁷ Jean Sgard has identified this early example of autobiographical fiction by Van Effen which was reprinted in 1729 as *Réflexions de T * * * sur les égarements de sa jeunesse*; see his new edition, ed J. Sgard (Paris: Desjonquières, 2001).

⁸ See my article, "A Voltaire Letter in the *Journal historique, politique, critique et galant.*" *Studies on Voltaire and the eighteenth century*, 185, 21-25.

play, *Oedipe*, in that same review.⁹ My study of this review, “An early critic of Voltaire's *Oedipe*” shows it to be a model of objective literary criticism, so it would be no surprise to learn that Voltaire sought out an evaluation of his epic poem by the Dutch journalist. As I point out in my article “*La Henriade* Revisited,”¹⁰ Van Effen analyzes the first nine extant cantos in Numbers 18 and 19 of *Le Nouveau Spectateur français*. It would difficult to gauge accurately the influence of this particular review on the final version of Voltaire's epic poem, but Van Effen's observations certainly must have helped the transition from nine cantos of *La Ligue* to the finished version of *La Henriade*, which established Voltaire as the major epic French poet during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Van Effen promised his readers a comprehensive analysis of Antoine Houdard de La Motte and his works. During the first three decades of the eighteenth century, La Motte was perhaps the most discussed French literary figure. Along with Fontenelle, he was one of the illustrious supporters of the Moderns, and criticism of his works tended to form along party lines: his partisans proclaimed him to be the most accomplished French writer, while his adversaries considered him well below the meanest poet. With his own modern version of the *Iliade* and a “Discours sur Homère” in 1714, La Motte entered the heated battle of the “Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns” and was attacked by the relentless Madame Dacier, among others. Van Effen participated in this literary quarrel with his “Parallèle” and his journals, and he often came to La Motte's defense, for example in response to François Gacon's attack in *La Bagatelle* (16 mai 1718). To these “jugements extrêmes” he proposes a neutral, calm evaluation, and I think it safe to say, a

⁹ See my article, “An early critic of Voltaire's *Oedipe*.” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 302, 7-22. Van Effen considered another of Voltaire's plays, *Mariamne*, in Number 12 of his *Nouveau Spectateur français*.

¹⁰ See my article, “*La Henriade* Revisited,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 56 [1988], 1-20.

more rational critique. Van Effen begins his extensive review in Numbers 21 through 24 by first discussing critical method, thereby laying the foundation to evaluate La Motte's literary reputation as well as the practice of literary criticism in general. He then proceeds methodically through La Motte's prose works, his tragedies (he considers *Les Macabées* to be La Motte's most moving play), and his various poetry, including his fables, and finally his odes, which Van Effen preferred over his other poetic works.

Clearly Van Effen's efforts did not definitively win the battle for equitable, rational criticism – certainly given today's ATTACK JOURNALISM – but it is also clear that Van Effen's arguments do touch a nerve, and it is especially telling when we consider La Motte's reaction. Later in his career, La Motte writes in his “Discours à l'occasion de la tragédie de *Romulus*,”¹¹ “Je dois cependant rendre ici justice à un de mes censeurs.... Je n'ai pas voulu perdre cette occasion de remercier sincèrement mon critique et de lui apprendre que, depuis ses réflexions sur mes ouvrages, il a un nouvel ami dont il ne se doutait peut-être pas.” [I must, however, give justice to one of my critics. I saw in the French Spectator published a few years ago in Holland, a critique of all of my works, the author of which seems to be as equitable as he is enlightened, and his modesty cannot be doubted since he hides his identity, although the public heartily accepts his judgment. [...] I did not want to miss this opportunity to sincerely thank my reviewer and to let him know that, from his reflections on my works, he has made a new friend, perhaps unbeknownst to him.] La Motte's generous reaction should not be surprising; actually, he and Van Effen had much in common: both were rationalists in matters of literary criticism and in their own works. [And, if La Motte was “le poète des

¹¹ *Œuvres complètes* (1754) p. 139-41.

philosophes et le philosophe des poètes” as Paul Dupont insists,¹² surely Van Effen was “le littérateur des philosophes” et “le philosophe des literatures” for the same period.]

While the debate on “fair and equitable” criticism continued, and continues today, Van Effen also continued to defend his position: flysheets of his *Nouveau Spectateur français* were published in volume in 1725-26, and a new edition of his popular *Misanthrope* appeared in 1726. He was once again drawn into a very public literary controversy in 1730 with La Chapelle, to whom he responded with the “Essai sur la manière de traiter la Controverse, en forme de Lettre adressée à Monsieur De La Chapelle” and the “Suite de l’essai sur la manière de traiter la controverse.” In 1731, he rose to the defense of Doctor Pingré with his “Lettre de M. G. M. à un de ses amis de Paris sur les écrits publiés contre M. le Docteur Pingré” in the *Bibliothèque française*. This was his final work in French; Van Effen spent the last five years of his life writing his Dutch Spectator, *De Hollandsche Spectator* (1731-35), considered a masterpiece of Dutch prose.

And, as for equitable literary criticism, the debate continues....

¹² See Dupont’s study, *Un Poète-Philosophe au commencement du dix-huitième siècle: Houdar de la Motte (1672-1731)*.

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Literary controversies:

a. Camusat (1723-24).

“Lettre à l’auteur [Camusat] de la *Bibliothèque française* sur l’extrait qu’il a donné du *Je ne sais quoi*, p. 246, et., du Tome II de sa Bibliothèque,” (Pamphlet 1723; reprinted 1741).

“Réplique à l’auteur de la *Bibliothèque française*” (Pamphlet 1724; reprinted 1741).

b. La Chapelle (1730)

“Essai sur la manière de traiter la controverse, en forme de lettre adressée à Monsieur De La Chapelle.” Visch (Utrecht) 1730

“Suite de l’essai sur la manière de traiter la controverse, en forme de lettre à Monsieur De La Chapelle.” Visch (Utrecht) 1730; reprinted Van Duren (La Haie) 1737 and 1744.

c. Pingré (1731)

“Lettre de M. G. M. à un de ses amis de Paris sur les écrits publiés contre M. le Docteur Pingré” (in the *Bibliothèque française*, tome XV, 2^e partie, article VI, 312-49, Sauzet (Amsterdam) 1731.