

François Béroalde de Verville. *Le Palais des curieux*.

Ed. Véronique Luzel. Textes Littéraires Français 617. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2012. 780 pp. ISBN: 978-2-600-00915-7.

This is a welcome and impressive critical edition of Verville's literary cabinet of curiosities, unedited since its original 1612 publication. A French Baroque polymath of encyclopedic knowledge, Béroalde divides the *Palais* into eighty chapters, called *Objects*, that announce a striking diversity of subjects: morning birds, beans, dreams, shadows, the calendar, Salic law, French grammar, the ancients' conservation of the ashes of the dead, why there are more feet than heads, why we put our burnt fingers in our mouth, and the duration of the world. Pursuing one's curiosity is the main enticement and arbiter of both writing and reading, and among the various meanings Béroalde gives to *curiosité* are wonder at the world, the secrets and enigmas of its being, and the understanding of forms that surpass in

importance the objects themselves. There is a dangerous curiosity that wishes to define and resolve and a beneficial one that in observing limits restricts itself to representing what we learn of the world through its effects. The character of representation can be inferred from Béroalde's masterful storytelling abilities such as his accounts of Pausanias and Athenodore where "histoire" is closely connected to "pourtraire" (265). As for the titles of the objects, an emblematic order is suggested by the naming, describing, and numbering of each object that teases the imagination to delve into the accompanying text that acts as a gloss. In their surface meaning, the *Objects* are the collection of things and words, but also, the other, our representation of the world through speaking images, what we become in a dream, or the reflexive doubling of the self in the *abyme* of continued debate.

The *Palais* is a miscellany in prose that itself is an offshoot of the encyclopedia, and its mélange of disciplines includes literature, comparative linguistics, physics, medicine, chemistry, botany, geology, metallurgy, religion, and history. Many of these are interpenetrated with biblical quotations, and without doubt, Paul is the predominant presence as seen in Béroalde's references to such verses as "Knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1) and "Let everyone be convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). Also pervasive is the subject of alchemy, which is not differentiated from chemistry, whose role is to bring matter to its form of perfection and maximum efficacy. Acting as a cypher for enigmas, secrets, and mysteries, and crucial for the practical arts such as medicine, it also spurs the quest for the philosopher's stone. Sixteenth-century encyclopedias were organized around the concept of a comprehensive circle of knowledge, such as Jean Bodin's *Universae naturae theatrum* (1596). However, the miscellany sought to stimulate curiosity and pleasure by offering readers and writers the freedom to pursue a variety of subjects according to their particular interests. The *Palais* is thus both objective and subjective, conflating fact and speculation with many kaleidoscopic variations that present beliefs as highly experimental, provisional, and conjectural. Despite the signs of formal coherence such as the search for order from God to nature, the valorization of proportion, and the highly prescriptive and classically inspired recommendations on literary style, the speaking "I" that generates discourse is himself (or itself) multiple objects deliberately assuming ever mutating personae, thereby making a miscellany of his own being. An authoritative voice that wants to persuade is maintained despite the speaker's willful "esprit de contradiction et non de science" (153).

In evaluating the quality of Luzel's critical edition I cannot think of any greater praise than saying that her immense erudition will inevitably stir readers to engage with Béroalde and stimulate them to work actively with the abundance of reference tools she offers in the service of this fertile field of inquiry. The critical apparatus consists of a clearly delineated chronology of the author's life followed by an extensive and informative introduction. Then we find a treasure store of 1,126 notes, a very helpful glossary, and an *Index Rerum et nominum* that possesses the added dimension of explaining the diverse meanings of key concepts that widen into anthropological significance. Béroalde, who had one of the largest vocabularies of his time, sees words

as objects and openings to the world, and Luzel fittingly gives an alphabetical list of the words and expressions that the author himself singles out for study. The bibliography of Béroalde's entire corpus is one of the very best to date in virtue of Luzel's annotations that trace the migrations of parts of the author's works through his total output. The study of that immense production, including some twenty attested works alone, is now in full swing, and thanks to scholarship like Luzel's excellent edition, Verville's achievement promises continued exploration, discovery, and appreciation.

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