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 **Reviews**
in History

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Ask a historian of demonology to review a biography of an astrologer. It seemed like a good idea when the invitation arrived, and I happily consented. What could possibly go wrong? The subject seemed interesting. Michel de Nostredame (1503–66), better known as Nostradamus, is most familiar in the English-speaking world for his alleged prediction of 9/11, but beyond his (clearly overstated) role as an adviser to Catherine de' Medici he was a cipher to me. Similarly, I had long been aware of the work of Denis Crouzet, the towering figure of early modern French history, and I once even heard him speak, but as someone who is not a historian of the French Wars of Religion, I have never had to engage with his sizable corpus first-hand. (The forbidding length of his famous two-volume, ca. 1,500-page *Les guerriers de Dieu* (1990) was another factor.) Reading Denis Crouzet's study of Nostradamus, however, made me wonder whether both he and I had begun to resemble our respective subjects of study perhaps rather too much. Crouzet's book made me question whether I have become as intolerant as my demonologists. Witchcraft theorists, in addition to their many other vices, were also simple folk, allergic to allegorical or hermetic interpretations of nature, and quick to identify the devil as lurking behind anything they did not understand. Struggling with Crouzet's study made me wonder whether this review would, at last, publicly expose my own demonology-inspired simplicity. Yet, I was also struck by the similarities between Crouzet and Nostradamus. If the self-described 'astrophile' set himself up as a mystic and a prophet who wrapped a relatively simple message in lyrical but impenetrable prose, then he found in Crouzet a student in more ways than one. The translator – one of Britain's most eminent and eloquent French historians – issued a health warning in his preface, describing Crouzet's approach as 'unconventional' and his writing style as 'idiosyncratic' (p. viii). By all accounts, he has done an admirable job translating and interpreting Crouzet's prose. Nevertheless, however appropriate Crouzet's writing style is to the subject at hand, this historian of demonology struggled to find much in the way of sympathy for it.

Let us begin, then, with the book's structure, which is set out as a personal quest for knowledge on Crouzet's part. The author clearly experienced many dark nights of the soul: 'I began to wonder ... if I was truly engaged in a work of history,' he reflected in the introduction, 'or whether I too was being led astray into enigmas or puzzles' (p. 3). An early chapter opened with Crouzet musing about the ironies of wanderings: 'After months of reflection, in which there were days spent juggling between things making sense, and making no sense at all, how unsettling it was to arrive at the conclusion that the text was trying to tell the reader that he was meant not to ponder it, not to understand it' (p. 29). Later, Crouzet encourages himself and the reader 'not [to] rest on our laurels' (p. 165) but continue the quest. At the end of the book, the question 'Why [study] Nostradamus?' still haunts him (p. 240). To some extent, the subject matter makes this personal tone inevitable, as Crouzet believes that he has unlocked the mysteries of Nostradamus (in the way that Nostradamus unlocked God's).

The difficulty of discerning Nostradamus's ultimate aims also shapes Crouzet's writing style. The analysis of the doom-laden prophecies necessitates caveats, 'maybes' and a great many modal verbs. At times, it feels as if the rhetorical question is Crouzet's main mode of writing (see *e.g.* the extended list on p. 199). Yet, Crouzet also, at times, rivals his research subject in dressing up fairly straightforward ideas in a language of poetic obscurity. Nostradamus, we are told, provides 'a key to a language of outcomes that relies on unsequentiality, on a deconstruction of the inductive and deductive rationality of knowledge that seems, nevertheless, to function on the basis of an interchangeable register of factual postulates' (p. 15). What Crouzet refers to here – I think! I may be revealing my simple demonological roots — is Nostradamus's fideism. Nostradamus's faith in God moves beyond the possibility or certainty of knowledge. His purposely scrambled and incomprehensible, yet certainly apocalyptic prophecies were not intended to be decoded rationally but intended to disorientate the reader and prompt them to put themselves in God's hands.

This basic premise — that Nostradamus's fundamental aim was to confront his readers with an apocalyptic yet unknowable future that prompted them to turn inward, and hence towards God — is credible. The point is compellingly made in the opening chapter, but the structure of the book means that Crouzet returns to it with exceeding regularity as he explores other parts of his habitat before returning to the watering hole of Nostradamus's intentional obscurity. Many readers may reflect on the law of diminishing returns as they follow Crouzet on this walkabout. If Nostradamus repeated his message 'over and over again' (p. 136), then Crouzet does too. At times his foraging expeditions pay off. The later chapters on the prophet's biblical allusions and use of prodigious signs are good examples of this, as is the chapter on Nostradamus's understated evangelical but confessionally unaffiliated religious beliefs (which Crouzet, annoyingly, insists on describing as Erasmian seemingly because the prophet cannot be otherwise pigeonholed). Crouzet's erudition allows him to pick up scents of classical texts and contemporary authors that would have passed other scholars by. Other ramblings, however, bring in considerably less. The contrast with Rabelais (whose response to the same spiritual anguish was to provoke laughter) is fascinating, but some of the comparisons with other Great Men (and Marguerite of Navarre) feel forced and resemble exercises in free association (*e.g.* the references to Julius Caesar Scaliger on p. 148 and Dante on p. 184).

If this method of exploration feels intensely personal, it is also worth pointing out that this circular and circuitous way of writing allows Crouzet to anticipate possible objections to his argument. It is only in chapter four that Crouzet turns from the prophecies to the annual almanacs, which must fit his prophetic reading less well given that these predictions are, by definition, tied to specific dates and places. In the same chapter, Crouzet also tackles his prophet's fortuitous prediction of Henri II's death and his rather unfortunate prediction of a long life for Charles IX. By this time, Crouzet has already offered plausible evidence

for Nostradamus's religious objectives and pointed to the signals used by the astrophile in his prefaces and elsewhere to indicate such a reading. Still, this chapter constitutes Crouzet's only attempt to address the issue of Nostradamus's audience. The fact that some contemporaries objected that the astrophile's predictions of the future encroached on God's sovereignty - in other words, they claimed that Nostradamus was doing precisely what Crouzet says he was *not* doing, making specific predictions of the future - suggests that the objective which Crouzet unlocked was by no means apparent to all. It is very well possible that Nostradamus was only targeting the select (and, as yet, not properly identified) few. Yet, the significance of Crouzet's reading for our understanding of the period more widely is considerably weakened if Nostradamus was an early modern Cassandra whose warnings were never heeded. No wonder that Crouzet even expresses his frustration at the contemporaries who 'hijack[ed]' what he deemed to be 'Nostradamus' underlying purpose' (126-7).

These circular trips back and forth to the well of the prophet's secret evangelical motivations also usefully disorient the reader. By the time that we have come to chapter 12 on Nostradamus's medical writings we have passed 'Go' and collected our \$200 so many times that Crouzet's attempt to press these seemingly very different writings into conformity could almost pass without notice. Yet, the lengthy spiritual reading of Nostradamus's recipe on 'How to preserve lemon peel' really does feel overly laboured. Rather than a religious metaphor, the prophet may just as plausibly (if not more so) be doing what many others did when life gave them lemons. Similarly, the physician's practical advice on the beautification of the face - that is, on using cosmetics to *preserve* external appearances, rather than penetrate the surface for underlying secrets - can be reconciled with his religious objectives in some tortuous *ad hoc* way, but it is by no means the most straightforward reading: namely that Nostradamus was trying to achieve something different in his medical writings than in his prophesies. Crouzet's structure simply does not allow for the possibility of plenitude and we are all the poorer for it. Nor does this repetitive structure allow for change over time, although the author concedes that Nostradamus's thought may have progressed during the 1550s and 1560s (pp. 187-8). Crouzet expresses deep dissatisfaction about the standard linear modes of biographical writing but he might wish to ponder the extent to which his way of writing in which the subject is 'a sort of active paradigm' reduces a living individual to the embodiment of a single principle.

These comments are not meant to challenge Crouzet's reading of Nostradamus as a devout prophet of doom, responding to the anxieties which engulfed the period, but they are intended to signal my (narrow-minded demonological?) frustrations with Crouzet's approach to his research topic, which leaves vital areas of research (which might well support his case) virtually untouched and which seems created to tune out discordant notes. Of course, one has to accept the difficulties of decoding an enigma. Crouzet himself acknowledges that 'it is sometimes necessary to indulge in the besetting sin of over-interpretation' (p. 116)

and it is difficult to know when to stop digging when trying to make sense of inscrutable writings. Yet, we should neither forget Occam's razor - that the simplest solution is often the best one - nor overlook the possibility that human beings are complex and might be motivated by more than one interest or guiding principle, even at the same time. Still, perhaps all this is to say that a British-trained historian would never have approached Nostradamus in this fashion. Such a hypothetical historian may well have missed some of valuable Crouzet's discoveries. Indeed, they may never have arrived at his primary insight about Nostradamus's religious message. Denis Crouzet certainly deserves to be read more widely in the English-speaking world. The fact that this translation provides a bridge between anglophone and francophone scholarship at this particular moment in time certainly must be acknowledged. We should be grateful to the translator for building it.

Author's Response

Mark Greengrass

A Translator's Entreaty

A translated work stands or falls on its own merits. The translator is a silent witness, a discreet mediator. He is the work's interpreter, not its defender. That is, unless the merits of the translation are called into question, and Jan Machielsen has not done so. This is therefore an entreaty rather than a rejoinder to his review. The reviewer tells us a great deal about himself, about his difficulties with the review, and about why he has problems with the book. He says much less about what the text itself is trying to say, and why the author chose to write it in the way that he did. This is an opportunity to restore the balance and correct what I regard as some misapprehensions and misleading impressions from the review.

Denis Crouzet certainly does not believe, as Machielsen puts it, that 'he has unlocked the mysteries of Nostradamus (in the way that Nostradamus unlocked God's)'. Crouzet explicitly distances himself from the long interpretative strand of Nostradamian mytho-historiography, which imagines that there is a secret 'key' which will somehow reveal a hidden Nostradamus and make plain his ambiguous and barely intelligible prophecies. As Crouzet puts it early on (p. 3): '... to understand his [Nostradamus'] enigmatic world, and grasp his intentions, we must not allow ourselves to become obsessed by the need to interpret him'. He is dismissive of the 'dyed in the wool fundamentalists and augury merchants from temples of divination of every hue' (p. 2) whose claims rest on having found such a key. He repeatedly insists that his 'reading' of the Nostradamian corpus is a contingent one, 'one version of the various possible readings of the interiority of someone from the past, a rationalized interpretation of it' (p. 59). That reading will be historically convincing to the extent that it is coherent with all that Nostradamus chooses to tell us, and to the degree that we can interpret that utterance within our understanding of the mental world from which it arose, and

which it illuminates. Jan Machielsen would find it hard to justify from Nostradamus's writing that the astrophile claimed to have unlocked God's mysteries. That would have given his contemporary critics precisely the ammunition they sought to justify the charge of blasphemy against him.

It is never a good sign when a critic wants an author to write a different book from the one that they actually have. Jan Machielsen wants this to be a very different book, a plain and straightforward biography about the astrologer that he came to this book thinking Nostradamus was. That is, perhaps, the book that 'a British-trained historian' would have written. But Crouzet patiently explains - indeed it is the starting-point for his book - that the historical evidence is not sufficient to write such a work. What we know about Nostradamus' life can be summarized in a few pages (which is what Crouzet does in an appendix), and it raises more questions than it answers. So, Crouzet offers us (though Jan Machielsen's review hardly conveys the point) a 'non-biography', an attempt to understand the intellectual and spiritual world that he inhabited, and (through that) to grasp why we should not try to unravel Nostradamus' enigmatic pronouncements, but to understand why enigma played such a central role in his thinking.

Jan Machielsen likes his history to be straightforward: Occam's razor should prevail, and (when faced with two explanations) one should always favour the simplest. In that case, Nostradamus is emphatically not the subject for him. When Crouzet writes that the Nostradamian *Centuries* offers 'a key to a language of outcomes that relies on unsequentiality, on a deconstruction of the inductive and deductive rationality of knowledge that seems, nevertheless to function on the basis of an interchangeable register of factual postulates' (p. 15), the key in question is ontological. It has nothing to do with 'fideism', which is a term that Crouzet employed sparingly in his text as a way of delineating the kind of non-confessional Christianity that was increasingly challenged by the currents of the Protestant Reformation. Crouzet does, however, seek to align Nostradamus' writings with the characteristic registers of French evangelist expression of the period. This is one of the major contributions of the book - worth highlighting because we badly need an authoritative study of early French evangelism in English. It was a movement caught in the ambiguities of its own attempts at religious reform from within, in a potentially hostile environment, forced to express itself in ambiguous utterances that could mean different things to different people. Calling that 'Erasmian' is not to Jan Machielsen's taste, and the term is one that we can take or leave, as we please. But it is worth emphasising that Crouzet finds very specific echoes of Erasmus' writings in the Nostradamus corpus, ones that have been overlooked by previous interpreters, and which help us to appreciate that much better his 'mental world'.

The reviewer is impatient with Crouzet's approach to Nostradamus' 'medical' writings. From the review there is no hint that Crouzet places Nostradamus within the traditions of Hippocratic medicine that were propounded at Montpellier, where he trained (albeit leaving a

controversial trail behind him). What Jan Machielsen describes as the Nostradamian 'medical writings' are, in reality, two short published treatises offering practical 'recipes' that could readily be adopted within a household environment. Jan Machielsen thinks that they have been over-interpreted by Crouzet, and that this is a symptom of a text for which the reconstruction of a 'mental world' is a passport to making everything fit into an artificial framework. For Crouzet, both texts are about how Nostradamus sought to persuade his readers to pay attention to what is within, as well as what is on the surface, lessons in how nature gives us hermetic clues to what God has planted in it by way of signs to our own health and rejuvenation. The reviewer prefers a more simple explanation which is (presumably) that these are texts about a recipe (for making candied fruit) and a remedy (cream to rejuvenate the face), from whose publication Nostradamus sought to profit. That, however, is pure speculation. We simply do not know why he chose to publish these texts, just as we do not know why he chose to translate that obscure work about ancient hieroglyphs, the *Horus Apollon* (though Crouzet has some important suggestions to make on that subject). Crouzet prefers to work in and through the texts. Far from making us 'the poorer', he illuminates them for us, giving us pointers as to why Nostradamus' reputation developed in the way that it did.

Jan Machielsen is unimpressed with the book's reading of the surviving Nostradamus annual prognostications 'which must fit his (Crouzet's) prophetic reading less well given that these predictions are, by definition, tied to specific dates and places'. That, however, is to imagine that the predictions are as concrete as he (the reviewer) makes out. But, as Crouzet is careful to point out, they were not. Nostradamus' foretelling of the death of Henri II was only understood in retrospect, read by contemporaries into one of the quatrains of the *Centuries* (1:35) only after the tragedy had occurred - as they were in the highly ambiguous utterances on the subject in the almanacs of 1557 and 1559.

Nostradamus' *Prefaces* are elaborate exercises in fashioning a distinction between being an 'astrophile' (a star-gazer, who believes that nature and the stars contain a semiotics of knowledge about God) and an 'astrologer'. Far from this being the only chapter where Crouzet addresses 'the issue of Nostradamus' audience' the text is centrally located around identifying a closet audience, one that could hear and receive the 'physick for the soul' that his works offered.

Jan Machielsen is correct, however, to see this as a work that bears the imprint of the French historiographical traditions to which it relates, and which the last chapter of the book illuminates. In the 1930s, Lucien Febvre (co-founder of the *Annales* and post-war architect of the influential Sixth Section of the *École des Hautes Études*) began to explore how to deploy the insights of psychology to understand *l'imaginaire*, a kind of collective unconscious, in its historical dimensions. He pioneered a way of doing so through literary works - through the novelistic imagination of Rabelais, and then through the novelistic and poetic imagination of Marguerite de Navarre. Crouzet's work takes up and refashions that agenda in a pioneering way, in respect of

Nostradamus. It took a very long time for the significance of Lucien Febvre's work to be recognised in the anglophone world. Jan Machielsen's review suggests that such recognition still has some way to go. Fortunately the reader has the opportunity of sampling for themselves the insights to be gained from the exploration of the mental world of someone as complex as Nostradamus through this translation.