

Nostradamus: a Healer of Souls in the Renaissance

Review Number: 2237

Publish date: Thursday, 3 May, 2018

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ISBN: 9781509507696

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £55.00

Pages: 392pp.

Publisher: Polity Press

Publisher url: <https://www.wiley.com/en-gb/Nostradamus%3A+A+Healer+of+Souls+in+the+Renaissance-p-9781509507696>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Jan Machielsen

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 prophecies. 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.

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