

Koenig on Demanze (2015)

Demanze, Laurent. *Les Fictions encyclopédiques: de Gustave Flaubert à Pierre Senges*. Éditions Corti, 2015, pp. 348, ISBN 978-2-7143-1140-5

Raphael Koenig, Harvard University

Laurent Demanze's eclectic study of "encyclopedic fictions," taking Gustave Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as its point of departure, covers a broad range of works and authors, from modern classics like Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec to contemporary authors like Pierre Bergounioux or Annie Ernaux. The theoretical framework of the study impresses by its coherence and ambition: according to Demanze, studying "encyclopedic fictions" like Queneau's *Les Enfants du Limon*, Hubert Haddad's *L'Univers*, or Olivier Rolin's *L'Invention du monde* offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the relationship between literature and knowledge.

For Demanze, such works hold up a distorting mirror to the proclaimed objectivity of the so-called "hard sciences." The playfulness and whimsicality of often meandering narrations call attention to the inherently linguistic and historically determined nature of scientific discourses. Demanze's compelling analysis builds upon the claim, formulated by both Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco, that *Bouvard et Pécuchet* constitutes an epistemological shift within the broader history of the relationship between literature and knowledge. According to them, until the late eighteenth century, writers saw themselves as legitimate producers of knowledge, on par and in dialogue with mathematicians, botanists, and physicists. Literature was even perceived as being endowed with the unique ability to synthesize and circulate among these various discourses, as writers themselves often took more than a passing interest in natural sciences. Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert's monumental *Encyclopédie* would then constitute the highest achievement, but also, to a certain extent, the swan's song of such symbiotic relationships between literature and science. Demanze, still quoting Barthes and Eco, argues that in the course of the nineteenth century, the increased specialization of scientific discourses brought about the end of literature's exalted position; Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet* paradoxically allowed literature to regain its epistemological relevance by parodying and questioning the encyclopedic model. Instead of aiming at an impossible totalization of knowledge, Flaubert's autodidacts, in their frenzy of reading, learning, and experimenting, end up "un-completing" science (*inachever*), to use Demanze's elegant neologism.

Demanze's line of reasoning makes full use of the conceptual tools offered by recent French and American scholarship on the rich interplay among literary works, encyclopedias, and dictionaries (Tiphaine Samoyault, Nathalie Piégay-Gros), while also instigating a fruitful dialogue with philosophical works (Jean-François Lyotard, Pierre Macherey). Furthermore, his study never remains at a level of pure abstraction: while drawing the epistemological consequences of each writer's individual approach to knowledge, Demanze offers compelling insights into the formal qualities of these works. In his view, such qualities constitute idiosyncratic "methodologies" that stand in sharp contrast with the usual procedures governing the production of scientific knowledge: essayistic digressions and accumulative erudition as opposed to compact, linear reasoning, parataxis vs. analysis, *monstration* vs. *démonstration*, subjective and linguistic self-awareness vs. "objectivity." In other words, encyclopedic fictions are characterized by bold formal and stylistic innovations that push the boundaries of literary expression, while also suggesting alternative ways of producing knowledge.

The structure of Demanze's book itself puts these ideas into practice: adopting an essayistic tone, he describes his work as a mere "collection of readings." Moving seamlessly among a wide range of authors and periods, from Perec to Patrick Mauriès and from Flaubert to Bergounioux, Demanze successfully balances seemingly heterogeneous works, while never losing sight of the conceptual thread guiding his study.

The works discussed belong to two broadly defined categories: in Demanze's own words, a "genealogy" of canonical encyclopedic fictions from Flaubert to Queneau, and a "cartography" of the multifaceted resurgences of this category in contemporary French literature. But one could argue that comparing modern "classics" like Flaubert, Queneau, or Perec with relatively young French writers such as Camille Laurens or Olivier Rolin, whose works haven't yet stood the test of time, could be seen as an intellectual somersault, whose acrobatic boldness could have been more thoroughly addressed. One possible option would have been to further investigate the complex relationships between dictionaries and encyclopedias, on the one hand, and socio-political power structures on the other. In Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi*, for example, the elusive Cinoc, briefly evoked by Demanze (81), reminds us that including or excluding any given word, concept, or notion from a dictionary or encyclopedia is a momentous decision, enacting and reaffirming *auctoritas* as both authority and authorship. Including a large number of contemporary French writers into an ambitious study of encyclopedic fictions constitutes an

arguably comparable auctorial *coup de force* that could have been analyzed and problematized as such.

Another balancing act, however, is executed by Demanze with particular finesse: convincingly restituting the polyphonic, paratactic nature of “encyclopedic fictions,” the author never tries to minimize the tensions inherent to each work in order to make them fit into an overly narrow theoretical mold. Demanze privileges instead what Deleuze would have called a disjunctive synthesis or a “fold.” In his description, encyclopedic fictions tend to *simultaneously* reject and aspire towards, mock and admire, criticize and enact the utopian horizon of “total knowledge.” Constantly alluding to the etymological meaning of encyclopedia as a “circle of learning” that remains impossible to close, they seem to provide what modern-day “hard” sciences often seem to be lacking: a dramatization of knowledge.

Volume: 46.3-4

Year:

- 2018