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Stéphane Gerson, *Nostradamus: How an Obscure Renaissance Astrologer Became the Modern Prophet of Doom*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012. xix + 347 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.99 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-312-61368-6.

Review by David Allen Harvey, New College of Florida.

Stéphane Gerson's new book has two subjects, whom he strives to distinguish from one another: the Renaissance doctor and astrologer himself, whom Gerson consistently designates as Michel de Nostredame, and the legendary persona crafted around this figure during and especially after his life, for whom Gerson reserves the more familiar name of Nostradamus. While interested readers will find an informative and well-crafted biography of Michel de Nostredame in the book's first chapters, Gerson's primary concern is with the legend, and the greater part of the book covers the four and a half centuries since the first appearance of Nostradamus's prophecies, demonstrating convincingly that their ominous and compelling tone and their ambiguity of detail have allowed each subsequent age to find in "Nostradamus" a message for its time.

The historical Michel de Nostredame was born to a prominent family of Catholic converts from Judaism in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence in 1503, was educated at the prestigious medical faculty at the University of Montpellier, and traveled widely before settling down as a physician and astrologer in the sleepy town of Salon-de-Provence around 1547. Like his near-contemporary Paracelsus, Nostredame's medical practice blended classical learning, folk remedies, and esoteric influences such as astrology and alchemy. His dedicated work as a plague doctor in nearby Aix-en-Provence established his professional reputation, although its efficacy probably derived more from his focus on hygiene and quarantining of victims than from any curative properties of the herbal remedies he devised. Although he continued to practice medicine, Nostredame's reputation (and income) increasingly derived more from his astrological practice, as he cast detailed horoscopes for a growing clientele scattered across Europe and published his predictions in almanacs printed and distributed by the booksellers of Lyon. He achieved sufficient fame as an astrologer in his later years that the queen mother of France, Catherine de Medici, paid him a visit to inquire about the future of her sons and the ruling house of Valois.

The legend of Nostradamus, the Latinized pen-name of the doctor Nostredame, began to develop during his lifetime, and then as now, it centered on a massive body of prophetic poems, 942 in all, which were published in ten "centuries" of up to a hundred stanzas or "quatrains" each. This body of work, titled the *Prophecies*, was printed serially in Lyon during the final decade of Nostredame's life, and widely reprinted in a multitude of languages thereafter and down to the present. The tone and structure of the *Prophecies* has attracted, intrigued, and perplexed readers ever since. Filled throughout with sound and fury, what it is they signify is anything but clear. The quatrains do not appear to follow either chronological or conceptual order, contain relatively few dates, mention a number of specific places throughout France, Western Europe, and the Mediterranean world, and announce a frightful series of palace intrigues, wars, natural disasters, and convulsions. Gerson demonstrates that the vague, yet strangely compelling, language of the *Prophecies* has allowed readers from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first to find in them messages relevant to their own times.

Most readers and interpreters in Nostradamus's time and thereafter did not read the *Prophecies* in linear fashion from start to finish, but jumped from quatrain to quatrain, seizing upon predictions that named familiar places or seemed to parallel contemporary events, and constructing a narrative that invoked the authority of the Renaissance prophet to speak to contemporary events. Quatrain 1.35, which appeared to many readers to have predicted the accidental death of Henri II in a jousting tournament, helped to establish Nostradamus's reputation for predicting the future, while also establishing patterns of selection and interpretation that later readers would emulate (pp. 31-32). Gerson demonstrates how different readers, often in isolation, would seize upon the same passages to reach similar conclusions, noting, for example, that two different readers, unaware of one another, interpreted quatrain 1.53 to refer to John Law and the bursting of the "Mississippi bubble" in 1720 (p. 122). At the dawn of the nineteenth century, numerous readers seized upon several quatrains—"Near Italy an emperor shall be born" and "From simple soldier he shall race to power"—that seemed to predict the rise of Napoleon (pp. 167-8). More recently, the word "Hister" in quatrain 2.24, which Gerson persuasively argues is a reference to the Istria (an archaic name for the Danube River), has been taken as predicting the rise of Adolf Hitler (pp. 209-210), while references to a "great king of terror" and the destruction of a great city have been interpreted as predictions of the September 11, 2011 terror attacks. Other prophecies have been interpreted differently in different times. For example, a reference to three brothers in quatrain 8.97 appeared to sixteenth-century French readers to refer to the last rulers of the house of Valois, the sons of Henri II and Catherine de Médicis, while many in 1960s America associated it with the Kennedys (p. 232).

Because the meaning of Nostradamus's *Prophecies* is so elusive, a veritable Nostradamus industry has emerged over the years, which has put out new editions (sometimes with new quatrains written for their respective present times and falsely attributed to the Renaissance astrologer) along with interpretive guides to suggest how they are to be read and to argue for what they really mean. Perhaps the most original part of Gerson's book is its spelunking expedition into the depths of what he calls the "Nostradamian underworld." Gerson introduces the reader to a variety of Nostradamus's interpreters and popularizers, beginning with Jean-Aimé de Chavigny, who claimed (probably falsely, based on a coincidence of names) to have been the astrologer's disciple and personal secretary and published the first critical interpretation, *The First Face of the French Janus* in 1594. In the nineteenth century, an impecunious man of letters, Eugene Bareste, and an ultramontane cleric, the abbé Henri Torné-Chavigny, reprinted, interpreted, and popularized the Nostradamus prophecies for their contemporaries.

While the *Prophecies* are not, strictly speaking, apocalyptic literature in the traditional sense, they have often been interpreted through the Christian apocalyptic tradition, with readers seeking information regarding the coming of the Antichrist, the final battle between the forces of good and evil, and the rise of the new Jerusalem. Not surprisingly, therefore, interest in Nostradamus has tended to rise in moments of crisis, particularly in times of war or social unrest, and to decline during periods of relative peace and prosperity. Gerson observes that in the nineteenth century, as Thomas Kselman demonstrated a generation ago, political prophecy moved to the Legitimist Right. Partisans of the exiled Bourbons hailed their pretender, the Comte de Chambord, as the "great king" foretold in prophecy, who would defeat revolutionary republicanism and restore the divinely ordained order.[1] More recently, readers have assimilated Nostradamus-inspired predictions of a great cataclysm with the coming of the new millennium and with Mayan prophecies of the end of a cosmic cycle in the year 2012.

Gerson's research demonstrates, however, that not all readers of Nostradamus's *Prophecies* approached the text with fear and dread. He identifies a broad spectrum of readers whom he categorizes as "decoders, awed beholders, persons of leisure, and ambivalent readers"(p. 144). He notes that, for participants in the aristocratic salons of Old Regime France, reading and interpreting the quatrains became a sort of parlor game, approached with levity and irreverence rather than awe (pp. 158-9). Some readers briefly perused the enigmatic text out of idle curiosity, while others spent much of their lives

struggling to interpret its hidden meanings. Gerson's study of the multiple receptions of this single book thus offers interesting vistas into the history of reading over this broad span of time.

Perhaps building on his earlier research into sites of memory and the construction of local identities in modern France, Gerson also explores what the Nostradamus legend has meant for the astrologer's adopted hometown of Salon-de-Provence.<sup>[2]</sup> He notes that local boosters have identified the Nostradamus trade as a useful draw for tourism, converting the astrologer's home into a museum and hosting an annual Renaissance-themed pageant and procession. Nostradamus as tourist attraction provides an interesting point of contact between the local and the global, illustrated by an anecdote in which a Japanese film crew asked the local actor playing Nostradamus to predict the end of the world on camera (p. 263). Not surprisingly, in the secular and skeptical France of today, Gerson found that some residents of Salon are ambivalent about their town's unusual claim to fame.

This is not only a clearly written and compelling book, but also a surprisingly personal one. Gerson reports that the legendary Nostradamus crossed his path on several occasions in his life, from his adolescence in Belgium in the early 1980s, when the escalation of the Cold War fed apocalyptic fears of nuclear annihilation, to his personal witness of the devastation of 9/11 in lower Manhattan, to the loss of a child during a family vacation that brought home the cruel contingencies of life. This personal connection to the subject matter leads Gerson to approach Nostradamus and his readers in a manner that, while far from credulous, is never condescending. Gerson has produced a work of scholarship that will likely serve as the definitive study of the Nostradamus legend for years to come.

#### NOTES

[1] Thomas A. Kselman, *Miracles and Prophecies in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

[2] Stéphane Gerson, *The Pride of Place: Local Memories and Political Culture in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

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