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Agnès Lachaume, *Le Langage du désir chez Bossuet: chercher quelque ombre d'infinité*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2017. 730 pp. €118.50. (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-3176-2; (eb). e-ISBN 978-2-7453-3176-2.

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Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet is often seen, even among early modernists, as a somewhat niche author. What relevance might a rigorous, unflinching theologian and preacher have to a modern readership that is likely to be either sceptical of religious dogmatism or open to a gentler belief system? As a preliminary answer, I would urge anybody simply to read, or even better, listen to some of his sermons or funeral orations; it is hard not to be affected by the visceral excitement and energy of the language. A recording exists (part of which is available on the internet) of the film director Eugène Green delivering (in what is thought to be something close to original pronunciation) Bossuet's "Sermon sur la Mort" in a seventeenth-century church. I have to admit that Bossuet is still the only writer who manages to make me weak at the knees. Not only does an idea of the orator's forceful voice ringing in one's ears come to the fore, but there lingers a strong sense of a bodily presence, someone who points out his acoustic and physical surroundings in order to reinforce the import of his words.

Many of these features shine through in this book on Bossuet by Agnès Lachaume. It is heartening to see Bossuet studies flourishing in France, with younger scholars like Lachaume and Anne Régent-Susini (to whose work Lachaume pays appropriate tribute) leading the way. Anglophone scholarship on Bossuet has traditionally been buoyant, but the excellent work of people like Peter Bayley, Richard Parish, and Richard Lockwood deserves now to be succeeded by a newer generation of academics. Any doctoral students or advisers looking for a subject would do well to take note.

While Lachaume's book in many ways fits the French doctoral thesis prototype in its great length (730 pages) and intricate textual detail, it also departs from the norm by remaining refreshingly open to more modern voices. The discussion of responses to Bossuet by twentieth-century Catholic readers like Paul Claudel, Julien Green, Marie Noël, and François Mauriac, while interesting, could have been predicted, but to find that Serge Gainsbourg referred to Bossuet in a song ("Un poison violent c'est ça l'amour") came as a complete surprise. Moreover, in evoking Bossuet's use of the term *plaisir*, Lachaume gives a fascinating reading of the obscenity trial surrounding the publication of *Madame Bovary*. Bossuet, we are told, played an essential part in the case for the defense by Flaubert's lawyer, Sénard, who asked the court, "Quel est le livre que

M. Flaubert feuillette jour et nuit, et dont il s'est inspiré dans les passages qu'incrimine M. l'Avocat imperial? C'est Bossuet!" (quoted on p. 87).

Lachaume launches her study by acknowledging that the word *désir* might seem an unlikely term to be associated with a writer like Bossuet, but she then brilliantly proceeds to demonstrate both its complexity and centrality to his oeuvre. The book is divided into three main parts, the first devoted to the lexicon of earthly and spiritual desire, the second to what she calls "l'Imaginaire au service du désir spirituel," and the third to Bossuet's sound world ("Résonances du Désir").

The first part, focused as it is on the vocabulary used by Bossuet, relates most directly to the book's title. Its significance as a term is signaled by the statistic that 87 percent of Bossuet's completed oratorical texts contain some form of the word *désir*. Distinguishing between singular and plural forms of the word, Lachaume also considers the adjectives that most often accompany the noun, before moving to an examination of related terms such as *souhails*, *affections*, *passions*, and *espérance*. If inevitably the choice of words with cognate meanings is somewhat arbitrary, many interesting insights are still revealed. For someone as erudite as Bossuet, it is remarkable to learn that, usually in his role as preacher, he avoids technical or theological terms, drawing his vocabulary from the secular world. For example, rather than using the term *concupiscence*, he is shown to speak much more frequently of *l'amour des plaisirs*. At all times, he is mindful of those listening to or reading his words, often preferring direct discourse to displays of erudition. Lachaume even devotes a small section to early English translations of Bossuet, identifying the translator's sensitivity to the primacy of the word *désir*.

The one text where Bossuet gives a definition of desire, *De la connaissance de Dieu et de soi-même*, is shown by Lachaume not only to draw upon the influences of Thomas Aquinas and Augustine but also to display clear traces that he had read Descartes. Unlike in most of his other texts where, as Lachaume puts it, "le désir semble pris entre exaltation et condamnation," here "la vision du désir [...] entend avant tout être descriptive" (p. 75). The remainder of the first part is concerned precisely with the shifting condemnation and exaltation of desire and pleasure in those other works, a contrast that is brought out particularly in an extract from Bossuet's "Fragment d'un sermon pour la fête de la circoncision": "De ce mépris des plaisirs et des joies mondaines naîtra un autre plaisir, plaisir sublime, qui naît, non du trouble de l'âme, etc." (quoted p. 110).

Part two deals first with the ways in which the imaginary allows spiritual desire to be aroused, moving to the representation of desire in Bossuet's writings. If, at times, the field of enquiry in this section overlaps with much of what Régent-Susini has done on the rhetoric of authority (to which Lachaume defers on many occasions), Lachaume's forensic tracing of images (such as exile, journeying, and fire) as they evolve over the decades of Bossuet's career is at all times illuminating. Researchers will find the detailed appendix of the major images in Bossuet's works particularly useful.

Part three, with its emphasis on music, listening and word/silence, brings the preacher's voice to resonant life: "En termes bossuétistes, la parole du prédicateur *excite* le désir de Dieu" (p. 454). Here the analysis of rhythms, sonorities and what Lachaume calls *souffle* is nothing short of virtuosic. Her comparison of the six sermons either in Bossuet's hand or sanctioned by him for publication with those copies made by listeners who were present when the sermons were delivered makes a convincing case for Bossuet's increasing awareness of the sound of his words when moving from page to pulpit. The beauty of Bossuet's language is equated by Lachaume to

that of sacred music. In a final chapter, the question of prayer and its connection to word and silence is also addressed. As Lachaume asks, “Le désir de Dieu a-t-il besoin d’être un langage?” (p. 585). One might have expected the quietist dispute between Bossuet and Fénelon and Mme Guyon, which focused so much on prayer, to take more of a central role than it does here. But one can perhaps regard that as a mercy, given the overly arcane terms of the debate.

It is good to find Agnès Lachaume placing Bossuet’s writing into a wider context over the course of the book, covering ancient influences (Augustine, Aquinas, Aristotle, Cicero, St John of the Cross, Tertullian, Plato) and his contemporaries (such as Pascal, Bourdaloue, and François de Sales). But the greatest triumph of this study is the way in which through the language of desire, Bossuet’s voice is able to be heard in all its resonance and depth.

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