The Literature of Elsewhere and the Strange

“...sans la faim des choses spirituelles, on s’en ennuie,” Pascale

We find that in the early modern period, strangeness and newness were a defining experience through which a sense of the self and the world was articulated. From the fifteenth through the eighteenth century, the notion of étrangeté denoted strangeness or foreignness and appeared in discourses as diverse as travel narratives, philosophical treatises, contes, natural philosophy, plays and ballets, and poetry.

This course investigates the category of the “strange” as that which is figuratively là-bas or ailleurs in the domain of experience, politics, religion, and the body, rather than as that which is literally or physically “far-away.” We analyze the ways in which philosophical fiction hinges upon rendering the familiar strange and examine the function of the stranger in relation to the self. For example, Montaigne practiced a radical philosophy of the ordinary, which took the subject back to what was most familiar and intimate to her and in this process uncovered the original diversity of the familiar. Pascal’s notions of boredom and hunger similarly insist on the newness of experience. A specific type of experience of étrangeté is pain as exemplified by Pascal’s spiritual hunger and by notions of cruelty and torture (“cruel” is another meaning of the word étrange in Middle French) as appears in the description of passion in baroque poetry.

Texts required for the Course:

Rabelais, Pantagruel, seuil, tr. Guy Demerson, 2020300338
Cyrano de Bergerac, Voyage dans la Lune, Flammarion, 1978, 978-2080702326
Molière, Le bourgeois gentilhomme, folio, 2013, 978-2070450008
Lettres portugaises, livre de poche, 2003, 978-2253193081
Pascale, Pensées, folio, 2004, 978-2070316250
La poésie baroque, anthologie, Gallimard (25 mars 2004), 978-2070313761

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