

Seth Rudy, *Literature and Encyclopedism in Enlightenment Britain: The Pursuit of Complete Knowledge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 253. £55. ISBN9781137411532.

In a world where the algorithms of Google and the trillions of megabytes of facts and data contained within the pages of Wikipedia can instantaneously supply (or even oversupply) the curious with whatever information they need, it is timely to revisit and investigate the geneses of this phenomenon and the seemingly irresistible, yet vexed desire humanity has displayed over the centuries to collate and systematise knowledge. Seth Rudy traces precisely these origins and their literary manifestations through a detailed and erudite survey of encyclopedic impulses from the comprehensive knowledge and ‘more-than-human capacities’ (2) of epic writers such as Homer and Virgil through to the compendia of dictionaries and encyclopedias of the eighteenth century and their implications for our understanding of today’s richly competitive online knowledge arena. Rudy also surveys an impressive assortment of canonical writers and texts such as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Pope’s *The Dunciad*, Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, which are interspersed by way of illustrating the influence of the period’s vogue for encyclopedism and the interconnectedness of such impulses across print culture and ‘high’ literature more widely.

Rudy’s starting point is Bacon’s insistence that ‘nothing parcel of the world is denied to man’s enquiry and invention’, and that human knowledge ‘may comprehend all the universal nature of things’ (19). Such aspirations are returned to throughout the book, but Rudy weaves a course through, and aims to ‘tell the story of’, the intrinsic and often competing implications and problems associated with such aims, most notably in relation to the inherently challenging and seemingly contradictory drives towards encyclopedism, ‘completeness’ and universality. These terms, as Rudy ably explains, are in themselves contentious and hard to define, let alone compatible (despite becoming important motifs throughout Enlightenment Britain) and, as such, the core argument and recurring theme of the book is ‘the persistent failure’ of ambitions to unite them, their ‘collapse in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, and the subsequent redefinition of completeness in modern literary and disciplinary terms’ (1). This is an enormously ambitious task, but Rudy explains them by surveying a range of genres such as encyclopedias, essays, novels, histories, periodicals and poetry whilst consistently returning to the core tenets and ambitions articulated and to some extent exemplified within the epic.

Rudy’s impressive and judiciously selected range of material certainly addresses the parameters of ‘literature’ and ‘encyclopedism’ outlined in the title and gives us perceptive insights into what Rudy calls ‘the productive indeterminacy of completeness as a literary feature (31). But given such a broad scope, readers might be left wondering whether justice was done to encyclopedias themselves, or indeed the intriguing and slippery complexities of the intersections between encyclopedism and ‘high’ and ‘low’ literature, the ‘ephemeral and eternal’, and the ‘useful and useless’ promised by the title and the synopsis. Indeed, although Rudy’s frame of reference is compelling and highly pertinent, in attempting to tell the ‘story’ of encyclopedism the book suffers from the same inherent problems associated with ‘completeness’, coherence, totality, collation and synthesis as those texts under examination – a ‘paradox’ and process of inescapable duplication that Rudy himself ably acknowledges (10). The ‘story’ of course, is not ‘complete’ in the sense that the leap from the ‘third quarter’ of eighteenth-century Britain to today’s necessarily global phenomenon of Google is left largely unexplained; the range of encyclopedias themselves is decidedly incomplete and of course the ‘stories’ of their composition, with their myriad of associated implications relating to genre, authorship, originality, funding, collaboration, organisation, plagiarism and their underlying ideologies, nationalism and notions of man’s ‘perfectibility’, are not examined

(and perhaps rightly so given the length of the book). Encyclopedias, as Rudy rightly points out, 'did not exist in a vacuum' (137), yet these facets are largely relegated to what he calls 'background noise', despite being of considerable interest given recent accounts of eighteenth-century pedagogy and didacticism, genre (Curran, Wolfson and Duff), Romantic-era annotation / marginalia (Watson), sociability / association (Clark and Mee) and established theoretical frameworks associated with lists (Eco), heterogeneity (Bakhtin), the public sphere (Habermas) and even the highly pertinent issues raised in Philipp Blom's *Encyclopédie: The Triumph of Reason in an Unreasonable Age* (2004).

Much remains to be done in respect of future research into British encyclopedias, their fascinating and distinctive contribution to eighteenth-century intellectual history, and their influence upon the highly competitive and burgeoning arena of print culture, but in exploring 'encyclopedism', Rudy offers us an insightful and diligently examined 'story' of how such impulses fed into the literature of the period. Rudy thus offers an invaluable, if not foundational contribution to research in this area and his readers will be richly rewarded by the book's considerable originality and perceptiveness.

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