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## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CULTURE

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# *Crisis and Passio*: Encyclopedists and the Creation of an Encyclopedic Work

### Abstract

In the article I discuss that in encyclopedic works, from the Roman beginnings of encyclopedic discourse, there are noticeable textual traces that refer to the experiences and affective conditions of their empirical authors, and that the *zoe* of the empirical encyclopedist sometimes shines through from behind the *bios theoretikos* of the encyclopedic self. Moreover, the author's decision to create an encyclopedic work is sometimes caused by a real or discursively assumed catastrophe as its justification.

### Keywords

encyclopedism, encyclopedia, empirical author, *zoe*, catastrophe, crisis

The self-expressive mode of writing as a socio-cultural practice does not only occur in literary and autobiographical genres. It can also be traced in the discursive space of encyclopedism. The extra-textual experiences of the authors are recorded in various epitexts (letters, memoirs, diaries) which form the *discours d'escorte* of a given encyclopedic work. But the traces of those experiences can also be found in the paratexts of the encyclopedic works themselves (prefaces, introductions, epilogues, subscription notes in the colophons of manuscripts) as textual spaces with a weaker codification of style and content, and even in their main text

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(in entries). Often written in an impersonal style, they unexpectedly contain signals of the personal position, experience and affective condition of the empirical encyclopedist. Often, they do not provide abundant (auto)biographical content, but offer the necessary minimum of material. However, if the *zoe* of the empirical encyclopedist shines through from behind the *bios theoretikos* of the encyclopedic self, then capturing and isolating such signals makes it possible to destabilise the image of encyclopedic works as impersonal archives of knowledge, compendia of information, and to look at them as a space in which traces of the extra-textual presence of the empirical author are negotiated. Encyclopedic works were created for a variety of reasons and resulted from various affective factors, such as curiosity, a desire for complete knowledge, or melancholy,<sup>1</sup> among which a particular reason is the fulfilment of a past, hypothetical or real impending catastrophe. The encyclopedist wishes to remedy the consequences of this catastrophe – this is the subject of the latter section of my article.<sup>2</sup>

Placed in the paratexts of encyclopedic works, signals of the authorial presence of an empirical author can be found in as early as Roman sources. Pliny the Elder, in his dedication to the Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasian, which opens *Natural History* (*Naturalis Historia*, 77–79 CE), noted the process of creating the encyclopedic work (reading some 2,000 volumes, 20,000 “noteworthy facts” included, not counting the information added by Pliny himself – all contained in 36 volumes), and wrote:

Nor do we doubt that there are many things that have escaped us also; for we are but human, and beset with duties, and we pursue this sort of interest in our spare moments, that is at night – lest any of your house should think that the night hours have been given to idleness. [...] to be alive means to be awake.<sup>3</sup>

“Profecto enim vita vigilia est” – indeed, the encyclopedist’s existence is a nocturnal vigil dedicated to the accumulation of all knowledge (in this case, mainly Greek and Roman),

<sup>1</sup> *Curiositas*, the desire for knowledge, and other affective factors have been mentioned as the sources of modern encyclopedic works by many authors. Compare Robert John Weston Evans and Alexander Marr (eds.), *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Routledge, 2016); Michał Paweł Markowski, *Anatomia ciekawości* (Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1999), 11–51; Joanna Partyka, *Między “scientia curiosa” a encyklopedią. Europejskie konteksty dla staropolskich kompendiów wiedzy* (Instytut Badań Literackich PAN Wydawnictwo, 2019), 15–39; Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux. Paris, Venise: XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Éditions Gallimard, 1987), 61–80.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Yeo, *Encyclopaedic Visions: Scientific Discourse and Enlightenment Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 83–86, 95–97.

<sup>3</sup> “[...] nec dubitamus multa esse quae et nos praeterierint; homines enim sumus et occupati officiis, subsicivisque temporibus ista curamus, id est nocturnis, ne quis vestrum putet his cessatum horis. [...] profecto enim vita vigilia est.” Pliny, *Natural History in Ten Volumes vol. I*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, 1967), praef. 18–19, 12–13.

a life dedicated to the impossible and infinite task of describing the entire world.<sup>4</sup> There is an awareness of the superhuman scale of the undertaking in this confession; there is also fatigue. Aulus Gellius, too, in his preface to *Attic Nights* (*Noctes Atticae*, c. 177 CE), emphasised that they were written during the long winter nights he spent in Attica – hence the title. Gellius, unlike Pliny, mentioned the rather playful nature of his activities (“*ludere ac facere exorsi sumus*”).<sup>5</sup>

Pliny’s “night vigil” and Gellius’s note-assembling activity undertaken “during the long winter nights” suggest the empirical encyclopedist’s split between the temptation to embrace all knowledge and that of private life. A caricatured image of the scholar escaping from everyday life into a sterile space devoted solely to scholarly activity can be found in Erasmus of Rotterdam’s dialogue *Ciceronianus* (1528). One of the characters, Nosoponus, tells us that he only works “at dead of night when profound quiet and deep silence reign over all.” He then locks himself in a room separated from the rest of the house by thick walls, doors and windows so that, even during the day, neither the sun’s rays nor the sounds of “workmen’s hammers” or “women’s quarrels” can enter, not even a fly can get in. He has decided not to marry because a wife and children disturb the peace, he eats lightly so as not to overburden his mind with too much matter, and he drinks no wine, sometimes eating raisins instead.<sup>6</sup>

Echoes of the nocturnal activities of Pliny and Gellius and the lifestyle of the humanist scholar described by Erasmus can be heard in the title of the encyclopedic work by the Flemish scholar, mathematician and astrologer Joachim Sterck van Ringelbergh, *Lucubrationes vel potius absolutissima kyklopaideia* [*Lucubrations, or Rather Absolute Cyclopaedia*] (1538), devoted mainly to trivium. The Latin word “*lucubrationes*” means laborious or intensive study, and at the same time connotes night-work by lamplight, nocturnal study, *lucubration*.<sup>7</sup> This is also how Johann Heinrich Alsted described his encyclopedic activities in the *Præfatio ad Lectorem benevolum* which opened *Encyclopædia Septem tomis distincta* [*Encyclopedia in Seven Distinct Volumes*] (1630): “For in this way I have always organized my reasons, that

<sup>4</sup> Pliny also wrote, “[...] there is not one person to be found among us who has made the same venture, nor yet the one among the Greeks who has tackled single-handed all departments of the subject” (“[...] *nemo apud nos qui idem temptaverit invenitur, nemo apud Graecos qui unus omnia ea tractaverit*”). Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. I, praef. 14, 8–11.

<sup>5</sup> Aulus Gellius, *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius*, trans. John C. Rolphe (Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, 1927), vol. I, XXVI-XXVII, 4 [and] XXVIII-XXXI, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Ciceronianus or A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking*, trans. Izora Scott (Teachers College, Columbia University, 1908), 28–30.

<sup>7</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews’ Edition of Freund’s Latin Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1969), 1082.

I might serve the interests of others, and magnify the glory of the one God. Hence were born to me various lucubrations: many of which saw the light at different times.”<sup>8</sup> [transl. by ŁW]

A common reference can be found in John Amos Comenius’s *Visible World: Or, a Nomenclature, and Pictures of All the Chief Things that Are in the World* (*Orbis sensualium pictus*, 1658). It is a textbook for learning Latin, and at the same time a universal encyclopedia in 150 chapters, presenting knowledge of the whole world for the purposes of a six-year-old pupil. As Adam Fijałkowski points out, Comenius’s extant working diary and precisely *Orbis pictus* allow us to assume that he worked mostly at night.<sup>9</sup> Chapter 99 of the textbook, entitled *Museum – The Study*, is significant in this context. Comenius writes: “The *Study* is a place where a Student, apart from Men, sitteth alone, addicted to his *Studies*, whilst he readeth *Books*.” It is a place where one works during the day and spends long hours at night. It is here that the student, the scholar, devotes himself to his lucubrations, the result of which may be, for example, an encyclopedic work in the genre modality of a school textbook. “Being to sit up late, he setteth a *Candle*, on a *Candlestick* [...], before the *Candle* he placeth a *Screen*, which is green, that it may not hurt his eye-sight.” He who works long after sunset must use “a *Lanthorn* or a *Torch*” when he finally decides to go outside.<sup>10</sup>

An encyclopedist who often works through the night rarely expresses strength, rather the lack of it, and certainly fatigue. The Polish encyclopedist and priest Benedykt Chmielowski made a dramatic confession at the beginning of *Nowe Ateny* [*The New Athens*] (1745). Writing of his work as his “lucubration,” he addressed the reader (*Do czytelnika*) with the following words: “[...] do not be the Censor of my sweat bloody and overexertive [...] There *nocte dieq* [at night – ŁW], *desudans* until I lost my eyesight, all my sweat dedicating to [the Holy – ŁW] Mary, *Immenso* to GOD and to you, Reader *ad usum*.”<sup>11</sup> [transl. by ŁW]

<sup>8</sup> “Sic enim semper institui rationes meas, ut aliorum commodis inservire, ac unius Dei gloriam amplificare possem. Hinc mihi natae sunt variae lucubrationes: e quibus multae diversis temporibus lucem aspexerunt.” Iohannes-Henricus Alstedius, *Encyclopædia Septem tomis distincta...* (Herbornæ Nassoviorum: [Georg Corvinus; Johann-Georg Muderispach], 1630), [lack of pagination].

<sup>9</sup> Adam Fijałkowski, *Tradycja i nowatorstwo w “Orbis sensualium pictus” Jana Amosa Komeńskiego* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012), 258–259. In the context of the “museum” described in the textbook, the author recalls Erasmus’s dialogue *Ciceronianus*.

<sup>10</sup> “*Museum* est locus ubi Studiosus, secretus ab Hominibus, sedet solus deditus *Studii*, dum lectitat *Libros* [...] Lucubraturus, elevat *Lychnum* (*Canelam*), in *Candelabra* [...] ante *Lynchum* collocat *Umbraculum*, quod viride est, ne hebetet oculorum aciem.” John Amos Comenius, *The Orbis Pictus*, trans. Charles Hoole (Syracuse, New York: C.W. Bardeen, 1887), 120–121.

<sup>11</sup> “[...] nie bądź krwawego potu mego y wiele kosztuiącego Censorem [...] Tam *nocte dieq*; aż do utraty wzroku *desudans*, wszystek pot moy *Mari Immenso* BOGU dedykuiąc, y Tobie *Czytelniku ad usum*.” Benedykt Chmielowski, *Nowe Ateny albo Akademia wszelkiey sciencyi pełna...* (Graf\_ika Usługi Wydawnicze Iwona Knechta; przy współpracy Gopher u.r.p. Andrzej Famielec, 2018), cz. I, b2 verso.

It is possible to regard the above complaints as typical realisations of the rhetorical figure of *excusatio propter infirmitatem*, i.e., the topos of excessive modesty, expressed in the gesture of acknowledgment and emphasis of one's own ignorance, incompetence, being overwhelmed by the scale of the undertaking,<sup>12</sup> but also to see here the traces of the empirical author's *passio*, the expression of genuine fatigue and torment of creation. Writing an encyclopedic work is a modality of scientific as well as social and existential practices. From the traces of their authors' experiences preserved in the encyclopedic works, it is clear that the encyclopedist's existence is one of working during the day and late into the night, probably at the expense of his personal life and health. It is not the disembodied subject of encyclopedic knowledge situated on the level of *bios theoretikos* who speaks here, but the empirical author who gives – from the dimension of his *zoe* – signals of exhaustion with work that exceeds the capacity of a single human being.

Are there other justifications for encyclopedic efforts besides didactic aims? There are encyclopedic works in which one finds the entanglement of what notions of “crisis” and “catastrophe” refer to, with signals referring, for example, to the motives that drove the empirical encyclopedists. There is a discernible resonance between life-writing practices (in both Greek senses of “life”: *zoe* and *bios theoretikos*), the writing strategy of (un)veiling the self, and real or potential, or discursively assumed catastrophe.

First of all, it is necessary to highlight the tension between what can be called a “catastrophe” and what the concept of “crisis” refers to. The encyclopedic works address the relationship between the past or future (inevitable or probable) catastrophe (its effect is the loss of knowledge) and the encyclopedic work as an archive of knowledge. Whether it has happened in the past, will happen in the near future or is simply considered possible, a catastrophe is a reason for creating encyclopedic works. In this way, the concept of “crisis” implied by the figure of the catastrophe regains its etymological meaning of something that separates, a turning point that forces a decision to be made and specific actions to be taken.<sup>13</sup> From the perspective of encyclopedic ideas, a catastrophe is the cause of a crisis that leads to the decision to archive knowledge. This is evident from the very beginning of the history of encyclopedism. In Plato's encyclopedic dialogue *Timaeus* (c. 360 BCE), one of the local priests tells Solon, who is visiting the city of Sais in the Nile Delta, about numerous natural disasters (earthquakes, fires, floods) from the past, as a result of which all the accumulated knowledge, skills and cultural identity of the Greeks were destroyed many times, but have been preserved in temple archives in Egypt, where such tragedies do not occur (21e–23b).

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, “L'ancienne rhétorique. Aide-mémoire,” *Communications* 16 (1970): 208.

<sup>13</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Clarendon Press, 1973), 997; Lewis and Short, 482.

Alsted, for his part, from a millenarian standpoint, placed his own encyclopedic work in the context of a near-future event, that is, the imminent end of the world. Three years before the publication of *Encyclopædia...*, he wrote a millenarian treatise, *Diatribē de Mille Annis Apocalypticis* (1627), in which he predicted the near Parousia and Last Judgment. The new millennium was to begin before the end of the century, in 1694 to be precise.<sup>14</sup> It is in the shadow of the predicted Apocalypse that Alsted's encyclopedic activity should be regarded. The accumulation of all available knowledge was to help humanity, struggling with the consequences of original sin, to improve its condition. The tool for this improvement was supposed to be the *Encyclopædia...*, with its title page connoting a millenarian web of meanings. At the bottom of the page the Last Judgment is depicted; the surrounding illustrations show that, from the fall resulting from the sin of the first people, the path to salvation leads along the paths of sciences and arts, whose representations form the frame for the title. In the lower left corner, the mechanical arts (*Mechanica*) are located; above there is the personification of Medicine. The field in the lower right corner (*Varia*) is filled with symbolic representations of the sciences included in the *quadrivium*; above, the personification of Philosophy can be found. The central panel with the title is surrounded by allegorical representations of piety (*Pietati*) and refinement or erudition (*Humanitati*). The culmination of the former is the Theology personified above, and the culmination of the latter is the allegory of the rule of law (*Iuris Prudentia*). Religious and secular paths lead to the Garden of Eden, shown centrally at the top of the page, which awaits the saved, above it are the sun and stars, and above all the Tetragrammaton representing God.

A 17th-century Polish encyclopedist and author of agricultural treatises, Jakub Kazimierz Haur, began one of his encyclopedic works *Skład abo Skarbiec Známomitych Sekretów Oekonomii Ziemińskiej* [*The Storage, or Treasury of Excellent Secrets of the Landed Gentry's Economy*] (1689, I refer here to the reprint of the third edition from 1693) with a woodcut depicting Noah's Ark with all the animals boarding. The caption under the illustration read:

The LORD GOD [...] during the General Flood over all the World, for the crimes of Humanity, [...] had decided to preserve Human Kind for posterity, and every living thing, in the Vessel: wherein, all the Economic order was kept, so let it be the fortunate beginning of the Summary, and this Book of Economy."<sup>15</sup> [transl. by ŁW]

<sup>14</sup> Howard Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted 1588–1638: Between Renaissance, Reformation, and Universal Reform* (Clarendon Press, 2000), 182–208.

<sup>15</sup> "Pan BOG [...] pod czás Generálnego ná cały Świát zá zbrodnie Ludzkie Potopu [...] Rodzay Ludzki ná potomne czásy y wszelką rzecz żyjącą raczył zachować w Korabiu: w którym, że wszystek Oekonomiczny znajdował się porządek, tedy niech będzie Summáryuszu, y tey Xsięgi Gospodárzeczy, szczęśliwym początkiem." Jakub

In this case, the real, situated within the framework of sacred history, God's punishment and the catastrophe of the fall of the human race, are both historical and discursive causes and allegorical factors of the knowledge compiled in the encyclopedia.

Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, in his *Preliminary Discourse* (*Discours préliminaire*, 1751), also placed the efforts of the French encyclopedists in the context of a catastrophe, not so much real as potential, taken as a conditional justification for the creation of the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisoné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (1751–1772):

May the Encyclopedia become a sanctuary, where the knowledge of man is protected from time and from revolutions. [...] Therefore, let us do for centuries to come what we regret that past centuries did not do for ours. We daresay that if the ancients had carried through that encyclopedia [...] and if that manuscript alone had escaped from the famous Library of Alexandria, it would have been capable of consoling us for the loss of the others.<sup>16</sup>

Denis Diderot also wrote in the entry *Encyclopedia* (*Encyclopédie*, 1755):

The most glorious moment for an opus of this nature would be that which immediately follows some great revolution which has suspended the progress of the sciences, interrupted the labours of the arts, and plunged a portion of our hemisphere back into darkness. What gratitude the next generation following such troubled times would feel for the men who had feared them from afar, and taken measures against their ravages by protecting the knowledge of centuries past! [...] The same voice that recalled these supporters would not forget to evoke as well the burdens the authors had to bear and the affronts to which they were subjected.<sup>17</sup>

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Kazimierz Haur, *Skład abo Skarbiec Znákomych Sekretow Oekonomiety Ziemiaskiety* (Graf\_ika Usługi Wydawnicze Iwona Knechta; przy współpracy Gopher u.r.p. Andrzej Famielec, 2015), a recto.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Richard N. Schwab and Walter E. Rex (Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2009), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.083>. "Que l'Encyclopédie devienne un sanctuaire où les connaissances des hommes soient à l'abri des temps et des révolutions. [...] Faisons donc pour les siècles à venir ce que nous regrettons que les siècles passés n'aient pas fait pour le nôtre. Nous osons dire que si les anciens eussent exécuté une Encyclopédie [...] et que ce manuscrit se fût échappé seul de la fameuse bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, il eût été capable de nous consoler de la perte des autres." Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Discours préliminaire*, in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisoné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers (articles choisis)*, vol. I, ed. Alain Pons (Flammarion, 1986), 176.

<sup>17</sup> Denis Diderot, *Encyclopedia*, in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot...*, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.004>. "Le moment le plus glorieux pour un ouvrage de cette nature, ce seroit celui qui succéderoit immédiatement à quelque grande révolution qui auroit suspendu les progrès des Sciences, interrompu les travaux des Arts, & replongé dans les ténèbres une portion de notre hémisphère. Quelle reconnaissance

The above examples reveal the internal dichotomy of the compiling of encyclopedic knowledge – the archive is inseparable from the fact or possibility of its loss. The cyclicity of natural disasters (Plato) and socio-political catastrophes (d’Alembert, Diderot), as well as the singularity of events in sacred history (Alsted, Haur), are balanced by the concept of knowledge accumulation (one must preserve the sum of knowledge of previous generations for oneself and for future generations). The practices related to the encyclopedic accumulation of knowledge arise from moments of cultural rupture and loss of continuity of knowledge experienced in the past, expected in the future or assumed as possible. The Egyptian temple (Plato), Noah’s Ark as an allegory for the archive of knowledge (Haur) and the *Encyclopaedia...* as sanctuary (d’Alembert) perform functions analogous to “time capsules” enabling the preservation and recovery of collective knowledge after a catastrophe, and thus the rebirth of the human world. Alsted, on the other hand, treats the Apocalypse and Last Judgment as temporal and imminent events, placing in them the reason for writing the *Encyclopaedia...* – not as an archive or sanctuary of knowledge, but as an instrument for the relative correction of the consequences of original sin and thus for the salvation of humanity. In each of the above cases, the concept of “crisis” regains its etymological meaning of a turning point.

A catastrophe, past, future or merely possible, whether natural, religious, socio-political or discursively assumed, generates a rupture or the risk of a rupture of any continuity in the world. As such it requires encyclopedic action, the creation of an archive of knowledge, but also consistency and conscientiousness in carrying out such an undertaking, even if the implementation of this task is beyond the power of a single person. Because the catastrophe itself remains one of the elements of the encyclopedic narrative, the encyclopedic whole and its loss remain intertwined and, in a sense, occur simultaneously, since the information about the catastrophe as a reason for creating an archive of knowledge is in the depository of that archive. The empirical author remains an element of this nexus. To be an encyclopedist is to be in a state of crisis caused by a specific catastrophe and, in order to remedy it, to create in solitude, at night, losing health and experiencing great fatigue.

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la génération, qui viendroit après ces tems de trouble, ne porteroit-elle pas aux hommes qui [...] qui en auroient prévenu le ravage, en mettant à l’abri les connoissances des siècles passés ? [...] La même voix qui rappelleroit ces secours n’oublieroit pas de parler aussi des peines que les auteurs auroient souffertes, & des disgrâces qu’ils auroient essayées.” Denis Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire...*, vol. II, 51.



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### **Crisis i passio. Encyklopedysta a tworzenie dzieła encyklopedycznego**

#### Streszczenie

W artykule wskazuję, że w dziełach encyklopedycznych, od rzymskich początków dyskursu encyklopedycznego, dostrzegalne są tekstowe ślady odsyłające do przeżyć, stanu afektywnego ich empirycznych autorów, że z za *bios theoretikos* podmiotu encyklopedycznego wyłania się czasem *dzoē* encyklopedysty. W dodatku autorska decyzja o tworzeniu dzieła encyklopedycznego bywa powodowana realną bądź dyskursywnie zakładaną katastrofą jako jej uzasadnieniem.

#### Słowa kluczowe

encyklopedyzm, encyklopedia, empiryczny autor, *dzoē*, katastrofa, kryzys

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