

The metaphorical collecting of curiosities in early modern France and Germany

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Especially from the early seventeenth century onwards, within a group of largely secular institutions in Europe – some relatively formal, official and regulated (academies, learned societies, publishing houses), others looser and more informal (networks of savants, naturalists, collectors, travellers and antiquarians) – there developed various worldly discourses of curiosity¹ that were attacked by churches and, to a certain extent, universities. The two relatively newest and most distinctive semantic features of these worldly discourses were, first, their tendency to make curiosity, on the whole, something more good than bad and, secondly, their enthusiasm for curiosities – that is, they were responsible for the rapid proliferation of object-oriented usages of this family of terms ('a curious shell'), alongside the continuing subject-oriented ones ('a curious collector'). The tendency within this culture of curiosities² to call objects 'curious' often entailed shaping matter or discourse into a collection of fragments. In other words, when several material or discursive objects were described as 'curious' or as 'curiosities', it was stated or implied that they were fragments belonging to a literal or metaphorical collection. This tendency did not characterise all early modern discourse on curiosity, but rather the culture of curiosities in particular. It was sometimes couched in terms other than the language of curiosity; but it was very often grounded in the object-oriented semantic thread of the 'curiosity' family of terms. In cases where it was, I am labelling it the curiosity-collecting tendency (or thread, strand or metaphor). In cases where it was not, I am simply labelling it the collecting tendency.

¹ 'Curiosity' is used throughout as shorthand for the family of terms comprising *curiositas*, *curiosus*, *curiosité*, *curieux*, *Curiosität*, *curiös*, and so on. The present essay is a distillation of some elements of Section 3 of N. Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (Oxford, 2004).

² I am modifying Krzysztof Pomian's famous phrase 'the culture of curiosity': *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux: Paris, Venise, XVIe–XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1987), 61–80.

However, this was only one of two discursive tendencies which often accompanied any given occurrence of the 'curiosity' family of terms. Secondly, in other instances, especially when 'curiosity' was used in a subject-oriented sense, the surrounding text stated or implied not a collection of objects but rather a narrative, a story. Phrases like 'my curiosity' or 'she was curious' often denoted one stage in a narrative which then led to a happy end ('my curiosity led me to learn nature's secrets') or, more unusually, an unhappy one ('being curious, she was punished'). The narrative could be fictional or true; it could last a sentence or a whole volume. Again, in cases where this narrating tendency was grounded in the 'curiosity' family of terms, I am labelling it the curiosity-narrating tendency (or thread or strand). In cases where it was not, I am simply labelling it the narrating tendency.

Curiosity, then, usually entailed either collecting or narrating, in the senses outlined. In the culture of curiosities, it entailed especially collecting. On the other hand, in other institutions and discourses – university, church, moralising fiction and theatre – the older curiosity-narrating strand was dominant.³

The curiosity-collecting tendency was obviously prominent in the discourse of those who collected material objects, whether in cabinets, museums or libraries. But it also spread to a wide range of other discourses and genres, especially outside universities – how-to books, miscellanies, newspapers and other periodicals, as well as some books on nature and art, luxury and fashion, collecting, antiquarianism, travel, history, occult sciences – even when the only objects being collected were discursive rather than material ones. In other words, the collecting of material objects was perhaps the literal term of a metaphor that spread to other discourses. However, the shape of discursive collections may have influenced that of material ones, as well as vice-versa. Indeed, even my distinction between material and discursive objects is in fact tenuous, since the discursive objects – facts, recipes, anecdotes, and so on – that were collected in books and periodicals were also partly material, in that they consisted partly of print and paper. So, instead of seeing collecting 'proper' as necessarily being the authoritative and originary literal term which then spread figuratively, as a metaphor, to other secondary discourses, I suspend judgment about the origins of this metaphor; thus I differ from those who argue that the 'privileged sites' of curiosity were the eclectic cabinet and the *Wunderkammer*⁴ or that the 'privileged image' of the early modern *curieux* was the collector;⁵ there were other important sites and images of curiosity, not

³ See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity*, Sections 4–5.

⁴ G. Olmi, *L'inventario del mondo: Catalogazione della natura e luoghi del sapere nella prima età moderna* (Bologna, 1992), 191 ('i luoghi d'elezione').

⁵ N. Jacques-Chaquin, 'La curiosité, ou les espaces du savoir' in N. Jacques-Chaquin and S. Houdard (eds), *Curiosité et 'libido sciendi' de la Renaissance aux Lumières*, 2 vols (Fontenay-aux-Roses, 1998), i, 13–32 at 14 ('l'image privilégiée').

only in other institutions (university and church) but also elsewhere, even within the culture of curiosities itself.

The collecting and narrating strands of curiosity were not entirely separate. They were often intertwined, cooperating or competing with each other within a single text: for example, some travelogues were driven forwards by the subject-oriented curiosity of the traveller that led him from one place to the next, but they also came to long halts when a place's object-rooted curiosities and curious features were listed, turning narration into collection.

The relation between the two strands was often agonistic. In 1665 the mechanical philosopher Robert Boyle eloquently privileged narrating over collecting: he associated narrating with subject-oriented curiosity (but did not, in this instance, associate collecting with curiosities). If you have been reading Aesop's fables, he says,

or some other *collection* of apologues of differing sorts, and independent one upon another; you may leave off when you please, and go away with the pleasure of understanding those you have perused, without being solicited by any troublesome itch of *curiosity* to look after the rest, as those, which are needful to the better understanding of those you have already gone over, or that will be explicated by them, and scarce without them. But in the book of nature, *as in a well-contrived romance*, the parts have such a connection and relation to one another, and the things we could discover are so darkly or incompletely knowable by those, that precede them, that the mind is never *satisfied* until it comes to the end of the book; till when all that is discovered in the *progress*, is unable to keep the mind from being molested with impatience, to find that yet concealed, which will not be known, till one does at least make a further *progress*. And yet the full discovery of nature's mysteries is so unlikely to fall to any man's share in this life, that the case of the pursuers of them is at least like theirs, that light upon some excellent romance, of which they shall never see the latter parts. [my italics]

Even 'the pleasure of making physical discoveries' is always accompanied by 'both anxious doubts, and a disquieting curiosity'.⁶ Thus, natural philosophy is not a collection (of discontinuous fables) but rather a linear narrative, whose *telos* is deferred beyond the life of any single philosopher-reader. Just as the 'connection' between 'the parts' of the romance is only partially perceived, so the experimental search for causal understanding is necessarily provisional and conditional.⁷ Still more cautious than the Royal Society founding member Boyle was Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle in his 1702 preface to the first volume of the official history of its French counterpart, the Académie des Sciences. Without resorting to the vocabulary of curiosity, he *embraces* rather than rejects the collecting tendency, at least as a first step:

⁶ R. Boyle, *Works*, 5 vols (London, 1744), iii, 428. The passage occurs in *The Excellency of Theology, Compared with Natural Philosophy*, probably written in 1665.

⁷ On Boyle's epistemology, see S. Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago and London, 1996), 101–6.

Hitherto the Académie des Sciences has grasped Nature only in *small chunks*. There is no general *system* ... Today one fact is established, tomorrow an entirely *unconnected* one. Conjectures about causes continue to be hazarded, but they are just conjectures. So the annual *collections* which the Académie presents to the public are composed only of *detached pieces*, independent of each other.

The possible second step and *telos* will be not the long-awaited dénouement of a romance but rather the integration of everything collected: Fontenelle imagines this by projecting a narrative structure onto collecting, imagining a future progress towards integration, and thereby blissfully fusing the collecting with the narrating tendency: 'Perhaps the time will come when we will join together these scattered members into a regular body; and if they are as we wish them to be, then they will somehow assemble themselves of their own accord.'⁸ This is, after all, only the first volume of the history of the Académie, on a par with the first volumes of Boyle's imagined romance.

Thus, the collecting and narrating tendencies of curiosity often had an epistemological or cognitive dimension, not only in naturalist discourse but also in others, such as the relatively young discipline that came to be known as 'the history of learning' (*historia litteraria* or *histoire littéraire*).⁹ That discipline, at least in its current state, was sometimes explicitly described as a metaphorical collection of curiosities, for example by this mid-eighteenth-century pedagogical manual:

Let's constantly amass items of knowledge – one curiosity at a time – which combine real usefulness with much pleasure ... But our writers have divided up their task: they have given us *histoire littéraire* piece by piece, instead of giving it in its entirety and full scope. While we wait for some skilful hand to take the trouble to collect together those scattered materials, in the meantime I am presenting to young people ... a short introduction to that history.¹⁰

⁸ 'Jusqu'à présent l'Académie des Sciences ne prend la Nature que par petites parcelles. Nul Système général ... Aujourd'hui on s'assure d'un fait, demain d'un autre qui n'y a nul rapport. On ne laisse pas de hasarder des conjectures sur les causes, mais ce sont des conjectures. Ainsi les Recueils que l'Académie présente tous les ans au Public, ne sont composés que de morceaux détachés, et indépendants les uns des autres ... Le temps viendra peut-être que l'on joindra en un corps régulier ces membres épars; et s'ils sont tels qu'on les souhaite, ils s'assembleront en quelque sorte d'eux-mêmes.' B. Fontenelle, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. A. Niderst (Paris, 1989-), vi, 49–50. On this passage in the context of the Académie's predilection for strange facts, see L. Daston and K. Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York, 1998), 246.

⁹ On *historia litteraria*, see P. Nelles, 'Private Teaching and Professorial Collections at the University of Kiel: Morhof and *historia litteraria*' in F. Waquet (ed.), *Mapping the World of Learning: The 'Polyhistor' of Daniel Georg Morhof* (Wiesbaden, 2000), 31–56; P. Nelles, '*Historia litteraria* at Helmstedt: Books, Professors and Students in the Early Enlightenment University' in H. Zedelmaier and M. Mulsow (eds), *Die Praktiken der Gelehrsamkeit in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen, 2001), 147–76; H. Zedelmaier, *Bibliotheca universalis und bibliotheca selecta: Das Problem der Ordnung des gelehrten Wissens in der frühen Neuzeit* (Cologne, 1992), ch. 4.

¹⁰ 'Curiosité pour curiosité, amassons toujours des connoissances qui à une utilité réelle joignent beaucoup d'agrément ... Mais nos Ecrivains se sont partagé leur tâche: ils ont donné l'Histoire Littéraire pièce à pièce, au lieu de la donner en entier et dans toute son étendue. En

A little later still, he speaks of 'the various pieces of *histoire littéraire* which we possess'.¹¹ The discourse is remarkably similar to that with which the academicians Boyle and Fontenelle described the current state of naturalist and experimental knowledge: as with Fontenelle, this pedagogue's description of spatial fragmentation is leavened by a glimpse of a future narrative in which the scattered pieces will eventually be integrated into a whole by a skilful hand.

Beyond *historia litteraria*, other kinds of historiography also shaped the past as a collection of curiosities. But certainly not all did. For example, the mode of historiography that was politically dominant in Louis XIV's France did not do so: history-writing that transmitted moral and political messages (often in favour of the King) via a strong narrative thread, subordinating the role of erudition and documentation, indeed hiding their traces beneath a smooth, uniform rhetorical surface, uninterrupted by heavy citation of sources. This was the kind that the leading prelates Fénelon and Bossuet favoured. They denounced its main rival, which had affinities with antiquarian discourse and *did* often shape the past as a collection of curiosities: history-writing that cited its sources and documents directly, giving far more detail about past events and persons, not subordinating the detail to overarching moral schemata, striving less for eloquence than for erudition, and including many brief, discontinuous or fragmentary narratives but not any single, over-arching one.¹²

In a letter of 1714 (published in 1716) Fénelon tried to persuade the Académie française to promote the eloquent over the antiquarian kind of historiography:

He who is more a scholar than a historian and has more erudition than true genius does not spare his reader a single date, a single superfluous circumstance, a single dry and discrete fact. He follows his own taste without paying heed to the public's. He wants everyone to be as curious as he is about the minutia at which he directs his insatiable curiosity. By contrast, a sober and discerning historian omits these tiny facts, which do not lead the reader to any important goal. Cut out those facts and you remove nothing from the history. They only interrupt, prolong, and make history that is, so to speak, chopped up into little bits, lacking any living narrative thread. That superstitious precision ought to be left to compilers. What matters most is to introduce the reader to the fundamental things, to make him discover the connections between them, and to waste no time in getting him to the dénouement.¹³

attendant qu'une main habile veuille bien se donner la peine de ramasser ces matériaux épars, je présente aux jeunes gens ... une courte Introduction à cette Histoire.' F. Juvenel de Carleucas, *Essais sur l'histoire des belles lettres, des sciences et des arts*, 4 vols (Lyon, 1749; 1st edn 1740–44), i, viii–xii.

¹¹ 'les différens morceaux que nous avons de l'Histoire Littéraire' (at xv).

¹² For an overview of the early modern – and modern – tension between documentary and narrative historiography, see A. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London, 1997).

¹³ 'L'homme qui est plus savant qu'il n'est historien, et qui a plus de critique, que de vrai génie, n'épargne à son lecteur aucune date, aucune circonstance superflue, aucun fait sec et détaché. Il suit son goût, sans consulter celui du public. Il veut que tout le monde soit aussi curieux que lui des minuties vers lesquelles il tourne son insatiable curiosité. Au contraire, un historien sobre et

The curiosity of the pedantic antiquarian scholar takes the form of collecting minutiae – that is, fragments that will never be integrated into a polished whole. However, Fénelon is not here condemning all curiosity, but only curiosity *qua* collecting;¹⁴ by contrast, he celebrates curiosity *qua* narrating. A little further on, he adds that good history-writing should have a strong *dispositio* or linear structure, like that of an epic poem, since Homer's chosen 'order constantly excites the reader's curiosity'.¹⁵ Fénelon is determined that curiosity should be the motor of a narrative rather than the collecting of particulars. To some extent, this historiographical dispute took the form of a battle between the narrating and collecting tendencies of curiosity.

The terms used by Fénelon suggest that the role played by curiosity in shaping and sifting knowledge in this historiographical context was broadly similar to that which it played in some naturalist discourses. His condemnation of the curiosity-collecting tendency of the Académie française closely echoes the celebration of that tendency by Fontenelle, twelve years earlier, on behalf of that institution's naturalist counterpart, the Académie des Sciences: whereas Fénelon rejects chopping history into 'petits morceaux', into 'fait[s] sec[s] et détaché[s]', Fontenelle had enthused that the Académie des Sciences offered naturalist knowledge as 'morceaux détachés'; whereas Fénelon advocates narrative history which makes 'liaisons' between events, Fontenelle had accepted that there was 'nul rapport' between the discrete pieces but that they might one day be joined together ('l'on joindra'). To some extent, these two famous voices were reflecting epistemological differences between discourses on nature and history in early eighteenth-century France: on the whole, it seemed more possible to write a narrative about history (complete with 'dénouement') than to write the 'well-contrived romance' of nature which Boyle tentatively imagined. Nonetheless both discursive tendencies – collecting and narrating – were present in writing about both history and nature.

They were also both present in some writing about travel. One manual which was designed to provide French aristocrats with material for travel-talk – whether or not they had actually left Paris – used travel as a metaphorical framework for the collection of unsystematic learning (philosophical and

discret laisse tomber les menus faits qui ne mènent le lecteur à aucun but important. Retranchez ces faits, vous n'ôtez rien à l'histoire. Ils ne font qu'interrompre, qu'allonger, que faire une histoire pour ainsi dire hachée en petits morceaux, et sans aucun fil de vive narration. Il faut laisser cette superstitieuse exactitude aux compilateurs. Le grand point est de mettre d'abord le lecteur dans le fond des choses, de lui en découvrir les liaisons, et de se hâter de le faire arriver au dénouement.' F. De Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon, *Œuvres*, ed. J. Le Brun, 2 vols (Paris, 1983–97), ii, 1178–9.

¹⁴ Here I differ from the excellent account of these historiographical disputes given in relation to Pierre Bayle by Élisabeth Labrousse, 'Le paradoxe de l'érudit cartésien Pierre Bayle' in *Religion, érudition et critique à la fin du XVIIe siècle et au début du XVIIIe* (Paris, 1968), 53–70 (62–70). She associates 'curiosité' wholly with mindless compilation, opposing it to critical historical analysis.

¹⁵ 'un ordre qui excite sans cesse la curiosité du lecteur' (1196).

historical as well as cosmographical) of the kind that was widely fostered within the culture of curiosities. The author spells out explicitly that his title – *The Curious Traveller* – is designed to give this material the same shape and epistemological status as that possessed by some historiography of an antiquarian kind:

I hope that, among the material given below, where I have *collected* all that is most curious and agreeable in nature, the reader will find not only subjects that are capable of satisfying his curiosity or of giving him some new knowledge, but also something that will help him converse and speak soundly on the most necessary and important truths.

But before proceeding I must advise my reader to reflect on the title of this work and to note the difference between the raw material for a conversation and, on the other hand, a finished conversation or speech. For example, Monsieur Du Chesne composed in many volumes various '*Collected* pieces and memoirs' which can aid the history of France,¹⁶ but he did not write a history of France. Similarly, in order to aid conversation, I have *collected* together in philosophical French, as I found it and without changing the language, much material written by various authors; but I have not written finished speeches, carefully structured and phrased.¹⁷

This travel manual is divided into sections entitled '*Le Voyageur curieux*', '*Philosophie curieuse*' and '*Histoire curieuse*'. '*Curious*' thus shapes knowledge as a collection of discrete items which is kept in a raw, discontinuous state primarily so that it can be more easily recycled by conversationalists, but also so that it does not make illusory claims to systematic truth. Making knowledge into curious fragments here has both pragmatic and epistemological purposes.

Although this work is supposedly about travel, through its use of the curiosity-collecting metaphor to shape knowledge it resembles several other contemporary discourses and genres, not only certain kinds of naturalism and historiography but also, for example, what Gotthardt Frühsorge has shown to be the burgeoning German market of vernacular publications offering knowledge that was *politisch*, that is, of practical use to territorial rulers,

¹⁶ A. Du Chesne, *Les Antiquitez et recherches des villes, chasteaux, et places plus remarquables de toute la France* (Paris, 1609).

¹⁷ 'J'espere que dans les Matieres suivantes où j'ay recueilly tout ce qu'il y a de plus curieux et de plus agreable dans la Nature, le Lecteur trouvera non seulement des sujets capables de satisfaire sa curiosité, ou de luy donner quelque nouvelle connoissance: mais encor dequoy former des entretiens et des discours solides sur les veritez les plus necessaires et les plus importantes.

'Mais avant de passer outre, il faut que j'advertisse mon Lecteur, de faire reflexion sur le Tiltre de cet Ouvrage, et de remarquer qu'il y a difference entre la Matiere d'un Entretien, et un Entretien ou Discours composé[. P]ar exemple Monsieur du Chesne a fait Imprimer en plusieurs Volumes diverses Pieces ramassées et Memoires, qui peuvent servir à l'Histoire de France; mais il n'a pas fait l'Histoire de France. De mesme j'ay ramassé en François de Philosophe et en mesmes termes plusieurs Matieres de divers Auteurs, telles que je les ay trouvées pour servir à la conversation et à l'entretien; mais je n'ay pas fait des Discours composez et estudiez pour la liaison, ou pour le langage.' *Le Voyageur curieux qui fait le tour du monde. Avec ses matieres d'entretien qui composent l'histoire curieuse*. Par le Sr le B., 2 vols (Paris, 1664).

to scholar-courtiers, to *bürgerlich* (or even aristocratic) bureaucrats in the court administrations of the developing absolutist states, as well as to non-functionary urban burghers, enabling them to act prudently in the public or private sphere. So-called *galant* theorists such as Christian Thomasius and Christian Weise contrasted such *politisch* knowledge with pedantry, by which they largely meant scholastic, metaphysics-based systems of knowledge which were taught in Latin in traditional universities.¹⁸ Frühsorge has demonstrated that this *politisch* knowledge was often called *curieus*, and that it was sometimes broken up into alphabetically ordered fragments, for example in lexicons. The preface to one very successful *Lexicon of the Curious and Real* – which contained entries on many disciplines and skills, such as physics, medicine, mechanics, building, navigation – set out its epistemological premises clearly. A discipline can be presented using two methods:

With the systematic method the material hangs together; its pieces are presented in such an order that they follow on from each other.

By contrast, with the alphabetical method nothing hangs together; instead, all the knowledge is ripped up into small pieces and presented, without connections, in a sequence determined by the twenty-four letters of the alphabet.¹⁹

Here are remarkable echoes, once again, of the vision of fragmented knowledge sketched in the different context of natural philosophy by Boyle and Fontenelle. Yet whereas those two academicians envisaged at least the future possibility of the 'pieces' becoming a whole, here the whole is being enthusiastically dismantled in the service of immediate, practical actions of many kinds. The readership of this lexicon is *die curieuse Welt*: 'we would like to investigate ... how the curious world came by this alphabetical method.'²⁰ Two explanations are given: first, the amount of knowledge available has proliferated, especially in the vernacular; secondly, 'the current age has such curiosity, that each person wants to know everything or, at least, something about everything.'²¹ This subject-oriented curiosity has produced curious objects of knowledge in the image of its own desire, that is, as selective bits rather than as a whole. Opponents of the culture of curiosities likewise associated curiosity with this kind of fragmentation: one argued that the

¹⁸ See Frühsorge, *Der politische Körper: Zum Begriff des Politischen im 17. Jahrhundert und in den Romanen Christian Weisens* (Stuttgart, 1974) (largely on the private sphere); W. Kühlmann, *Gelehrten-Republik und Fürstenstaat: Entwicklung und Kritik deutschen Späthumanismus in der Literatur des Barockzeitalters* (Tübingen, 1982) (largely on the public, civic sphere).

¹⁹ [Paul Jakob Marperger], *Curieuses und reales Natur- Kunst- Gewerck- und Handlungs-Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1727), preface by Johann Hübner,) (2^r; first published in 1712; original German quoted in Frühsorge, *Der politische Körper*, 203 (see also 202–5).

²⁰ 'wir wollen ... nachforschen, wie denn die curieuse Welt auf diese Alphabetische Methode gekommen sey?' ()(3^r).

²¹ 'endlich führet das jetzige Seculum eine solche Curiosität bey sich, daß ein iedweder alles, oder doch zum wenigsten von allem etwas wissen will', ()(3^v; quoted in Frühsorge, *Der politische Körper*, 203.

relatively new genre of the periodical fostered superficial, unsystematic knowledge that he called 'ungrounded curiosity'.²²

As these examples show, the curiosity-collecting metaphor often had an epistemological, social or political dimension; in other cases it had a moral one. But it was not necessarily tied to any such dimension or programme, which is why I am calling it a discursive tendency or a semantic thread rather than, say, an epistemological paradigm. The examination of the relations between some of the discourses in this culture of curiosities is already underway, thanks to Barbara Benedict, Lorraine Daston and others.²³ But many connections between the discourses listed above still remain to be investigated. And those connections have not usually been studied through exclusive focus on the language of curiosity, in all of its richness, contestedness and contradictoriness.²⁴ If the two most influential modern histories of early modern curiosity tell such different stories – Hans Blumenberg's, in which the legitimization of curiosity ushered in modernity, and then Pomian's, in which the reign of theology was succeeded first by that of curiosity (especially among collectors) and then by the reign of science – that is partly because each privileges just one of the two discursive tendencies that I have outlined. For Blumenberg, curiosity mainly involves narrating (since it was a vice or virtue that was thought to be followed by good or bad consequences), whereas for Pomian it mainly involves collecting.²⁵ Such grand narratives, however

²² 'Doch ich zweiffle fast, ob diese Beweiß-Gründe bey der itzigen Zeit, da man solche ungegründete Curiosité für einen Character eines hohen tugenhafften Gemüthes hält, durchdringen werden': [Marcus Paul Huhold], *Curieuse Nachricht von denen heute zu Tage grand mode gewordenen [journal]- Quartal- und Annual-Schriften* ([Jena], 1716; 1st edn 1715 or earlier), 12.

²³ B. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (Chicago and London, 2001); B. Beugnot, 'La curiosité dans l'anthropologie classique' in U. Döring, A. Lyroudias and R. Zaiser (eds), *Ouverture et dialogue: Mélanges offerts à Wolfgang Leiner* (Tübingen, 1988), 17–30; L. Daston, 'Neugierde als Empfindung und Epistemologie in der frühmodernen Wissenschaft' in A. Grote (ed.), *Macrocosmos in Microcosmo: Die Welt in der Stube. Zur Geschichte des Sammelns 1450 bis 1800* (Opladen, 1994), 35–59; L. Daston, 'The Moral Economy of Science', *Osiris*, 10 (1995), 2–24; Daston and Park, *Wonders*, esp. 231 and ch. 8; Frühsorge, *Der politische Körper*, 193–205; H. Merlin, 'Curiosité et espace particulier au XVIIe siècle' in Jacques-Chaquin and Houdard, *Curiosité et 'libido sciendi'*, i, 109–35; K. Whitaker, 'The Culture of Curiosity' in N. Jardine, J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (eds), *Cultures of Natural History* (Cambridge, 1996), esp. 75.

²⁴ This is attempted in Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity*, Section 3. On the early modern semantic shifts in the 'curiosity' family of terms, see N. Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe: Word Histories* (Wiesbaden, 1998); however, that study does not aim to contextualise them in terms of the period's discourses and institutions. For a language-based study of the meanings of 'curiosity' in one text from the culture of curiosities – Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) – see A. Blair, 'Curieux, curieusement, curiosité', *Littératures Classiques*, 47 (2003), 101–7. Several studies have distinguished between the subject- and object-oriented senses of 'curiosity', but only sporadically: see Benedict, *Curiosity*; Beugnot, 'La curiosité', 21; Daston, 'Neugierde', esp. 35–6; Daston, 'The Moral Economy', 18; W. Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, 1994), 314–18.

²⁵ Blumenberg, *Der Prozeß der theoretischen Neugierde* (4th edn; Frankfurt-Main, 1988); Pomian, *Collectionneurs*.

fruitful, cannot take account of the complexity of ordinary language. They have to ignore or play down those semantic strands which do not suit them. For example, Christoph Daxelmüller's study of curiosity in early modern German universities and learned societies seeks to interpret those institutions in the light of Blumenberg's narrative, but can only do so by denigrating some of the 'curiosity' family's connotations (such as 'odd', 'sensational') as degenerate offspring of its supposedly 'true' connotations (such as 'rational', 'empirical', 'experimental'), thereby privileging those meanings that are conducive to the narrating tendency (an impetus leading to progress), as opposed to the collecting tendency (a non-progressive accumulation of sensational facts).²⁶ While the division of curiosity into 'true' and 'degenerate' meanings is here particularly explicit, it is also the implicit precondition of all grand narratives of curiosity. Blumenberg has to sideline more early modern meanings of curiosity than does Pomian, which itself indicates how prominent was the curiosity-collecting thread in the period.²⁷ Blumenberg's 'theoretical curiosity' and Pomian's 'culture of curiosity' can certainly both be grounded in the early modern terminology of curiosity, but Blumenberg has to look among, say, members of the Académie des Sciences – such as Fontenelle or Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis²⁸ – while Pomian has to look mainly among collectors. Yet these two critical constructions become less helpful when they are understood – as they have often been – as describing not specific discourses (of academicians or of collectors, for example) but rather the whole of early modern discourse. Even the 'culture of curiosity', as described by Pomian, was, as he is aware, certainly not ubiquitous within early modern discourse, nor even within discourse on curiosity.

If, on the other hand, one studies the ordinary language of curiosity in all of its messiness, instead of trying to define anything such as an early modern 'concept' of curiosity, then the 'curiosity' family of terms is revealed to be a crucial medium within which anxieties about the shape of knowledge were played out, for example through the tension between the discursive tendencies of collecting and narrating. Perhaps no other family of terms mediated more between those two tendencies, by encapsulating them both, than 'curiosity'. ('Rarity', for example, was exclusively on the side of objects: it was not a motor of narratives).

Daxelmüller's decontestation of certain meanings of *curiositas* is intended to clarify what the term meant in one early German academy devoted to

²⁶ 'Curiositas meint in erster Linie den menschlichen Wissens- und Forschungsimpetus; spätere Degenerationen des Begriffs erweisen sich als sekundäres Missverständnis', C. Daxelmüller, *Disputationes curiosae: Zum 'volkskundlichen' Polyhistorismus an den Universitäten des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg, 1979), 155.

²⁷ See the persuasive critique of Blumenberg in Pomian, 'Curiosity and Modern Science' in *Nouvelles curiosités/New Curiosities* (Digne-les-Bains, 2003), 6–26 (14–15).

²⁸ Blumenberg, *Der Prozeß*, 219–330 at 303 n. 307.

the study of nature. Let me return to that same academy as the first of a few selected examples that will enable me to investigate, for the remainder of this essay, how one of the discourses within the culture of curiosities – the non-university study of nature – was often shaped as a metaphorical collecting of curiosities, but also how that shaping was subject to constant revision and contestation, as becomes most apparent if one focuses on its ordinary language rather than trying to tidy it up into a ‘concept’.

The ‘Academy of those curious about nature’ (*Academia naturæ curiosorum*) was one of several new learned societies to shape nature (and art) into curiosities and investigators into curious people. Founded in Schweinfurt in 1652, it was initially for physicians only, aiming to advance medicine and ancillary subjects, not by holding meetings but by encouraging and vetting the production of monographs.²⁹ Its ‘curious’ label sent out the signal that the academy’s aims (the advancement – or collection – of knowledge) were those of *curiosi* elsewhere in Europe rather than being primarily national, imperial or confessional. The main vehicle for its international profile was its journal, the *Miscellanea curiosa* (launched in 1670), the first learned journal in Germany (Fig. 3.1). What did *curiosa* mean in this title? One member gave his answer in a letter urging the editors to verify

whether [prospective articles] are curious cases; otherwise these *Ephemerides* would be a heap of medical cases which were already sufficiently known here and there. If there was nothing rare, then the *Ephemerides* would vegetate: they must contain and make public something curious and new about all the topics which they treat ...³⁰

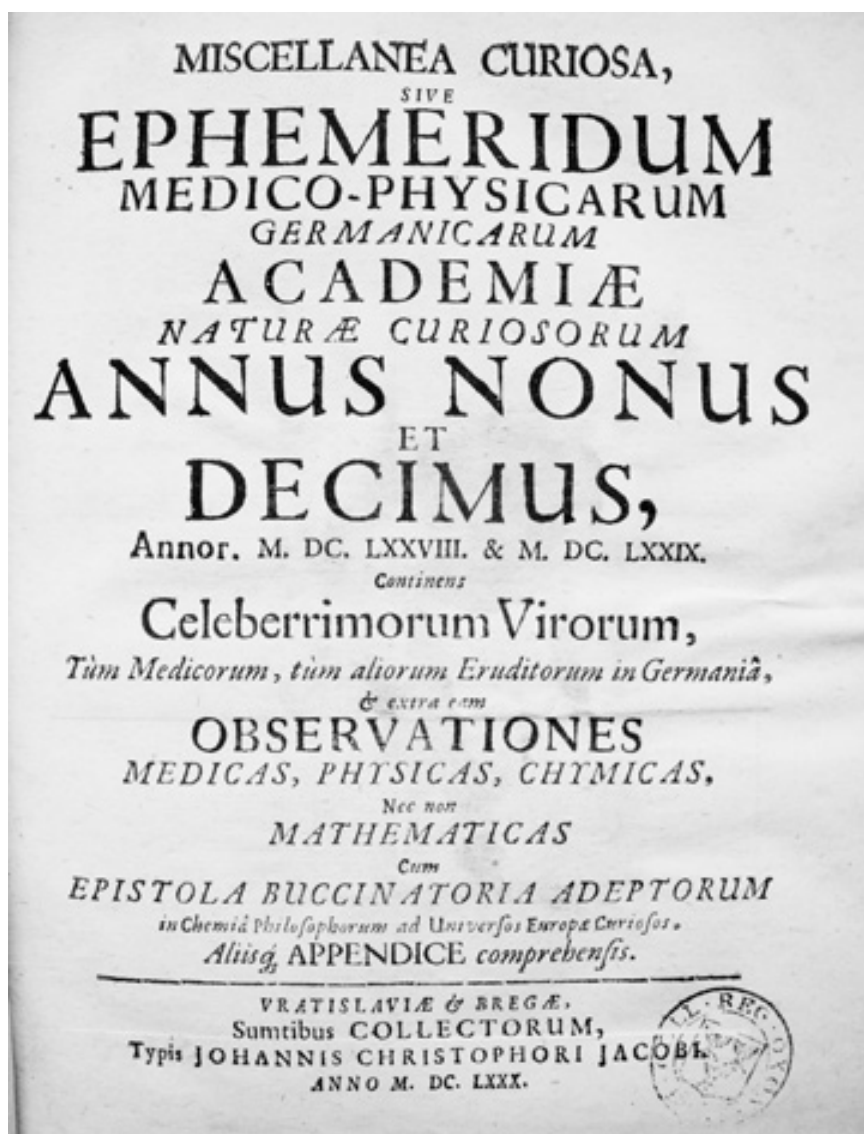
This alignment of the ‘curious’ with the ‘rare’ and the ‘new’ is confirmed by the periodical itself, which was full of monstrous, marvellous, strange medical cases and natural objects.³¹ *Miscellanea curiosa* denotes a collection, a ‘heap’ (here preferably a dynamic one renewed by novelty) of ‘curious cases’ or (according to the periodical’s first title-page) ‘observations’, each of which was typographically distinct from the rest and, for the most part, between one and five sides long. As Daston and Park have shown, in *early* academician circles such ‘curious cases’ could circulate all the more easily because they did not have to be attached to universals and fundamentals.³²

²⁹ On this academy, see Daxelmüller, *Disputationes curiosæ*; R. J. W. Evans, ‘Learned Societies in Germany in the Seventeenth Century’, *European Studies Review*, 7 (1977), 129–51 (135–9); K. Müller, ‘Zur Entstehung und Wirkung der Wissenschaftlichen Akademien und Gelehrten Gesellschaften des 17. Jahrhunderts’ in H. Rössler and G. Franz (eds), *Universität und Gelehrtenstand 1400–1800* (Limburg-Lahn, 1970), 127–44 (138–9); R. Winau, ‘Zur Frühgeschichte der Academia Naturæ Curiosorum’ in F. Hartmann and R. Vierhaus (eds), *Der Akademiegedanke im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Bremen and Wolfenbüttel, 1977), 117–37.

³⁰ Christian Mentzel, original German quoted in Winau, ‘Zur Frühgeschichte’, 129.

³¹ See Evans, ‘Learned Societies’, 137.

³² Daston and Park, *Wonders*, ch. 6.



3.1 Title-page of Academia naturæ curiosorum *Miscellanea curiosa* (1680).
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However, 'curious' was all the more resonant a label for the German institution because it did not connote *only* 'a collection of short, free-floating fragments'. The academy gave it several meanings, whose links were alogical or even contradictory. The term shaped some discursive objects as 'short',

others as 'long'. For, in accordance with the term's still influential etymon (*cura*), *curiosi* were 'diligent', as was emphasised by the academy's motto ('Nunquam otiosus',³³ 'Never idle', presumably a dig at the self-styled 'Otiosi' of Della Porta's earlier *Academia curiosorum hominum* in Naples) (Fig. 3.2).³⁴ One discursive implementation of that 'diligence' was not just the collecting of 'curious cases' in the *Miscellanea curiosa* but also, by contrast, the painstaking, *systematic* description of a single natural object in academy monographs, such as *Cynographia curiosa* (on the dog), *Lagographia curiosa* (on the hare), *Lilium curiosum* (on the lily) or *Oologia curiosa* (on the egg), usually two hundred to three hundred pages long.³⁵ The liminaries spelled out that 'curious' here denoted, echoing *cura*, the monograph's 'thoroughness' and 'accuracy'³⁶ – the object-oriented equivalents of the subject-oriented 'diligent' sense. Not *any* old 'thoroughness' was denoted, but specifically those modes of 'thoroughness' imposed by the academy's constitution, for monographs had to describe an object's names and synonyms, its manner of generation, its natural location, its species, the effects of remedies derived from it, and so on.³⁷ Entitled *curiosa* or not, monographs were usually advertised as conforming to this *norma* or 'pattern': for example, the author of one on scurvygrass declared 'I am calling that [scurvygrass] "curious", not because it is curiously polished, but because it is being described according to the PATTERN AND RULE LAID DOWN BY THE ACADEMY OF THOSE CURIOUS ABOUT NATURE.'³⁸ However, these institutional roots of 'curious' could easily wither from view if such scurvygrass was transplanted abroad. An English translation of this monograph retained the *cura* sense: 'it is both a learned and accurate work, so that it may deservedly be called *Cochlearia curiosa*.'³⁹ Yet there is no longer any mention of the German academy, so for this translation's readers, this work was *not* 'curious' in the sense that it followed the rules of a particular institution. So, even when 'curious' stayed within a single discourse – here naturalist – it could never be apprehended in purely 'typical' form, but was always partly embedded in local conditions.

If this academy's 'curious' writing about nature could be either 'long' or 'short', it could also be either 'useful' or 'useless', depending on who you

³³ See Müller, 'Zur Entstehung', 138.

³⁴ On that academy, see M. Ornstein, *The Rôle of Scientific Societies in the Seventeenth Century* (Hamden and London, 1963), 74.

³⁵ C. F. Paullini, *Cynographia curiosa seu Canis descriptio* (Nuremberg, 1685) and *Lagographia curiosa, seu Leporis descriptio* (Augsburg, 1691); M. Tiling, *Lilium curiosum, seu Accurata lilii albi descriptio* (Frankfurt-Main, 1683); C. F. Garmann, *Oologia curiosa* (Zwickau, [1691]).

³⁶ Cf. Tiling's sub-title.

³⁷ Winau, 'Zur Frühgeschichte', 118.

³⁸ 'CURIOSAM voco illam, non quòd curiosè expolita sit, sed quia ad NORMAM ET FORMAM ACADEMIÆ NATURÆ CURIOSORUM est tractata.' V. A. Moellenbrock, *Cochlearia curiosa* (Leipzig, 1674), :(3^v).

³⁹ Moellenbrock, *Cochlearia curiosa: or the Curiosities of Scurvygrass*, trans. T. Sherley (London, 1676), A3^v.



3.2 Fold-out frontispiece of *Academia naturæ curiosorum Miscellanea curiosa* (1680). Reproduced by kind permission of the Provost, Fellows and Scholars of The Queen's College, Oxford.

asked. The first volume of the *Miscellanea curiosa* described the academy's three goals as 'the virtuous, the curious, the useful',⁴⁰ thereby claiming if

⁴⁰ 'Honestum, Curiosum, Utile': *Miscellanea curiosa medico-physica academæ naturæ curiosorum sive Ephemeridum medico-physicarum germanicarum curiosarum annus primus* (Leipzig, 1670), 8.

not synonymy then at least compatibility between these three, overturning (like much naturalist discourse of the period) the centuries-old *antagonism* between curiosity and utility. However, that antagonism could always be easily reinstated, as when Leibniz attacked this academy's monographs for being 'of curiosity rather than of practical applicability' and for 'following a method which was better suited to establishing a repository than to providing openings'.⁴¹ He was thereby rejecting the academy's 'curious' *norma* because it was stuck in a collecting tendency ('repository') rather than a narrating one (creating 'openings' leading to future new knowledge). By contrast, Leibniz's own Prussian Academy (founded in 1700), which was to include focus on agriculture, manufacture, commerce, and so on, would avoid 'useless curiosities' and 'mere curiosity'.⁴² This is one small example of the constant, agonised debates about the 'usefulness' or 'uselessness' of 'curious' objects of naturalist (and indeed other) discourse.

The naturalist metaphorical collecting of curiosities changed even more when it spread to the more popular end of the book market. Many compilations aimed to popularise the findings of academies. In France, l'abbé Bougeant initiated a sequence of volumes of *Curious Observations on All Parts of Physics, Extracted and Collected from the Best Mémoires*. His preface explained that the *Philosophical Transactions*, the *Acta eruditorum*, the publications of the Académie des Sciences, and so on are

full of curious observations on physics. However, these excellent works can barely be found except in libraries, being very long and expensive. And, because the most curious observations which they contain are necessarily mixed in with other material, less interesting or too advanced for most readers, few people read them. That is what made me think of giving the public a collection of the most curious observations, which I had initially extracted from these Memoirs for my own private use.⁴³

Thus, as 'curious' moves outside learned societies, it means not only 'new', 'rare', 'empirical', sometimes 'experimental', and 'collected' but also 'selected'.⁴⁴ While this meaning is added, others are subtracted: ditching the standard 'beautiful' connotation of 'curious', Bougeant admits that his 'curious observations'

⁴¹ Original French quoted in Winau, 'Zur Frühgeschichte', 129.

⁴² 'bloße Curiosität', 'unnützer Curiositäten' (quoted in Winau, 'Zur Frühgeschichte', 129). See Ornstein, *Rôle*, 177–97.

⁴³ 'remplis d'observations curieuses sur la Physique. Cependant ces excellens ouvrages ne se trouvent gueres que dans les Bibliothèques; parce qu'ils sont fort longs, et qu'ils coutent cher; et comme les observations les plus curieuses y sont necessairement mêlées avec d'autres matieres moins interessantes, ou qui passent la portée de la plupart des Lecteurs, ils ne sont lûs que de peu de personnes. C'est cette consideration qui m'a fait naître la pensée de donner au Public un Recueil des plus curieuses observations, que j'avois d'abord tirées de ces Memoires pour mon utilité particuliere.' [Guillaume-Hyacinthe Bougeant], *Observations curieuses sur toutes les parties de la physique, extraites et recueillies des meilleurs Mémoires*, 3 vols (Paris, 1730–37), i, aiii^{r-v}. Appeared from 1719 onwards. Probably continued by Nicolas Grozelier.

⁴⁴ On the 'selected' connotation of curiosity, see Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, 140.

are not the most 'beautiful' available, since the latter are also often the most difficult (i, [aiii^v]-[aiv^v]). Further cutting the 'curious' to the cloth of his digest genre, Bougeant rejects the 'long' for the 'short' connotation of 'curious': he has abbreviated articles taken from learned journals to make them accessible 'to people whose occupations or particular taste prevents them from knowing physics in depth and yet who are delighted not to be entirely ignorant of it and to know at least, so to speak, the news of what's going on in the Republic of Sciences.'⁴⁵ More 'ungrounded curiosity', in other words. Bougeant sees his sources as constituting primarily not a linear *narrative* (such as that which will retrospectively be made into the 'Scientific Revolution') but rather a spatial landscape from which he can *collect* endlessly, since 'the land of observations is vast and fertile enough to supply material to satisfy [my reader's] curiosity.'⁴⁶ This fantasy of a gratifying symmetry between the 'curiousness' of discursive objects ('observations') and the 'curiosity' of reading subjects is characteristic of the 'culture of curiosities', not just in naturalist discourse but also among, say, antiquaries, who described themselves as satisfying *their* 'curiosity' in the similarly spatialised 'vast and curious land of antiquity'.⁴⁷

Bougeant's 'curious observations' – like those in many digests and even learned journals – were contested, attacked as incoherent and superficial. His 'collection' ('Recueil') often omits causal explanations for the 'observations', even where they were given by his sources. To justify this, he even quotes the sceptical words of Fontenelle with which I began (iii, [aii^v]-[aiv^v]). Yet his 'curious' fragments were allowed to float free of causal explanations for commercial as well as epistemological reasons, since they could be enjoyed by far more people when not attached to a demanding philosophical system.

Exactly what was meant by presenting naturalist knowledge as a collection of curiosities varied not only from context to context but also within a single work, since the polysemy of 'curious' enabled writers and publishers tacitly to exploit on a title-page, for publicity purposes, connotations of the term which were not always philosophically justifiable or respectable (such as 'new', 'odd', 'rare', 'polished'), before then disavowing them in the preface. Hence the numerous prefaces which explained, often with this bad faith, what the term 'curious' in the work's title did and did not mean. We have encountered some examples among the monographs of the 'Academy of those curious about nature', such as the scurvygrass treatise and its English translation. Beyond

⁴⁵ 'aux personnes à qui leurs occupations ou leur goût particulier, ne permet pas de sçavoir la Physique à fond, et qui sont cependant bien aises de ne la pas ignorer tout-à-fait, et de savoir du moins, pour ainsi dire, les nouvelles de ce qui se passe dans la Republique des Sciences' (i, [aiii^v]).

⁴⁶ 'le Pays des Observations est assez vaste et assez fertile pour fournir de quoi satisfaire à sa curiosité' (ii, aiii^v).

⁴⁷ 'dans le pays vaste et curieux de l'Antiquité.' J. Spon, *Recherches curieuses d'antiquité* (Lyon, 1683), [a4^v]; see also 1.

that institution, another example is the *Physica curiosa* of the Jesuit Kaspar Schott (1662), who blatantly exploited the 'rarity' connotation of 'curious' on the title-page ('rara, arcana, curiosaque') before then undermining that very connotation in the preface, which claimed that readers would find, to their surprise, that these 'wondrous and curious things [*mira ... curiosa*]' – angels, demons, monstres, spectres, meteors, and so on – were in fact 'common [*Trita*]' in nature.⁴⁸

Belatedly coming clean about curiosity in this way became a *topos*: many a preface picked its way tortuously through wanted and unwanted connotations, endlessly reshaping curiosity. Marton Szentivanyi, another of the numerous Jesuits to package naturalist knowledge as 'curious' (he taught at the college in Tirnau, Hungary), periodically published, under the running title *Very Curious and Select Miscellany of Various Sciences*, volumes of his 'dissertations' on physics, mathematics, astronomy, and so on. He explained to his dedicatee that his contents were indeed

curious, very curious, yet neither playful nor vain; curious because they are rare, because they are far removed from common knowledge, not because they are collected all at one go, but rather because they are selected one by one from the most select authors; not, admittedly, because they are wholly new or unheard-of, but because they have been arranged and collected with great labour from a huge number of extremely rare books in distinguished, famous libraries.⁴⁹

Szentivanyi first – even at this late date – feels obliged to repudiate the centuries-old *vana curiositas* connotation, and then feels obliged in all honesty to drop any claims to the 'new' and 'unheard-of' connotation, before finally settling for 'selective' (which is here, as ever – and as he spells out – the deluxe version of the 'collecting' connotation).

Although the culture of curiosities had a powerful presence in non-university discourses on nature and art, even in its heyday it was never ubiquitous in those discourses. By the 1730s its presence in them was much weaker. Not that curiosity had disappeared from them. Rather, its role in them was changing: subject-oriented curiosity was now reasserting itself over the decades-long hegemony of curiosities. For example, in 1739 an anonymous prospectus, *Fruitful Curiosity*, was printed in Paris to raise finances for a projected series of experimental demonstrations involving aerostats – vessels which might fly, having been emptied by a vacuum pump or other means.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ K. Schott, *Physica curiosa, sive Mirabilia naturæ et artis* (Würzburg, 1667; 1st edn 1662), i, d3^r.

⁴⁹ 'curiosa, curiosiora, non tamen aut ludicra, aut vana; verum ex eò curiosa, quia rara; quia à vulgi notitia abstrusa, et remota, nec obiter collecta, sed ex selectissimis Authoribus singulariter selecta; et licet nec nova omnino, nec inaudita, tamen non parvo labore, nec nonnisi ex ingenti librorum rarissimorum copia, præcipuisque ac nominatissimis Bibliothecis concinnata, et accumulata.' M. Szentivanyi, *Curiosiora et selectiora variarum scientiarum miscellanea*, 4 vols (Tirnau, 1689–1709), i, dedication.

⁵⁰ *La Curiosité fructueuse* (Paris, 1739), [1].

The prospectus was addressed not to experts but to potential backers, the 'interested curious [*curieux intéressés*]', who, having purchased it for 24 *sols*, would enjoy up to six free entries to the eventual demonstrations (should they materialise: I do not know if they did); they would also have first place in the queue to join the royal-supported fundraising company which the author hoped to found to produce the machines (38–40). Not until a note at the end of this prospectus, following its 41-page sales pitch, is the reader told that the proposed experiments concern aerostatics: even then, the precise technique proposed remains under wraps.

That long sales pitch is entirely on the two motives for the experiments: interest and curiosity. Yet three related factors now differentiate it from the culture of curiosities. First, far from celebrating curiosity unequivocally, the prospectus *reintroduces* the centuries-old moral qualms about it. (So much for the general drift of Blumenberg's narrative.) Secondly, the prospectus ignores the object-oriented senses of 'curiosity' (which would surely have been prominent if it had been written thirty years earlier), just as the *Encyclopédie*, a few years later, tried to exclude them from proper philosophical curiosity.⁵¹ Thirdly, the curiosity-collecting tendency is displaced by the curiosity-narrating tendency.

Curiosity is here primarily the motor of two potential narratives, one happy, the other unhappy. The difference between the two lies in whether curiosity is harnessed to interest (understood as the commercial and utilitarian self-interest of society as a whole). If curiosity is *not* harnessed to interest, then our projects get snarled up in unhappy narratives ('Histoires'), as the fate of Pandora and others shows (8–9). On the other hand, if we are curious because it is in our interest to be so, then we will be protagonists in a happy narrative stretching into the future:

the curiosity of the physicist, the mechanist, the architect, and of even the least craftsman is usually aimed at perfecting their art by perfecting themselves; this produces universal benefit which is all the more perpetual because, far from diminishing, it can only go on increasing, for the good of posterity.

Such are the *Curiosities* which can rightly be called *Fruitful* ...⁵²

On the other hand, the collecting of curiosities is implicitly condemned. Concerning the curious traveller, the author asks: 'What? Would he really have wanted to impose upon himself all that travel and risk if it was merely

⁵¹ On curiosity in the *Encyclopédie*, see Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, 74–81; Pomian, *Collectionneurs*, 155–62.

⁵² 'la Curiosité du Phisicien, du Mécanicien, de l'Architecte, et jusqu'à celle du moindre Artisan n'a d'ordinaire pour but, que la perfection de leurs Arts, en cherchant à se perfectionner eux mêmes, d'où il résulte un avantage universel, et d'autant plus perpétuel, que loin de diminuer, il ne pourra jamais aller qu'en augmentant au profit de la postérité. Telles sont les *Curiosités* qu'on peut nomer à juste titre *Fructueuses* ...' (22).

to satisfy his eyes through the diversity of objects offered up to them by the various climates in which he might find himself?⁵³ Many travel writers within the culture of 'curiosities' would surely have answered 'yes': they would have been satisfied with a landscape full of immediate 'curiosities', rather than with subsequent 'utility', as the reward for their 'curiosity'.

In similar vein, one can speculate that, if preceding proponents of aerostatic experimentation – who are listed at the end of the prospectus (43–4) – had been asked why they wanted to conduct such an experiment, some might have answered 'because it is curious', implying a match between their curiosity and the 'curiousness' of its object, characteristic of the culture of curiosities. (The list includes some who *did* often call their experiments 'curious', such as Johann Christoph Sturm and Pierre Le Lorrain de Valmont.) But the author of this prospectus inhabits a changed discourse: he never describes such experiments as 'curious', nor even as 'curious and useful', but as 'useful'.⁵⁴ While this confirms Christian Licoppe's argument about the shift towards 'utility' in early eighteenth-century technological discourse in France,⁵⁵ it certainly does not confirm any replacement of curiosity by utility. After all, even to describe as 'fruitful' the role of curiosity in happy narratives is still to invert a longstanding association between curiosity and fruitlessness.⁵⁶ Rather, what has disappeared here is the capacity of curiosity to encompass, in a cosy loop of gratification, both desire for objects of knowledge and yet also the objects themselves. The newly prominent partner in the terminological dance surrounding good knowledge of nature – alongside old partners such as 'utility' or more recent ones such as 'curiosity' – is 'interest', which in this prospectus, as in many other texts of the 1730s, is entirely good, just as curiosity had often been in secular discourse from the early seventeenth century onwards.⁵⁷ And just as curiosity had often seemed to be *the* dominant passion in the culture of curiosities – and even sometimes in university discourse – here it is 'interest' that is explicitly granted that status (4).

But, despite its changed shape and status, curiosity still plays a crucial role here in shaping knowledge, now not as a collection but as a narrative, an unfolding one in which the exploitation of nature through technology meets with ever-increasing success. Although the culture of curiosities and

⁵³ 'Quoi donc ne voudroit-il se donner tous ces mouvemens, et courir tous ces risques, que pour satisfaire ses yeux par la variété des objets que leur offrent les divers Climats où il peut se trouver?' (17).

⁵⁴ For example, title-page, [43].

⁵⁵ C. Licoppe, *La Formation de la pratique scientifique: Le Discours de l'expérience en France et en Angleterre (1630–1820)* (Paris, 1996), ch. 3.

⁵⁶ For example, a follower of Francis Bacon felt obliged to deny that his master's 'Experiments' were 'Curious and Fruitlesse'. W. Rawles, in F. Bacon, *Sylva sylvarum: or A Natural Historie* (London, 1626), A[11].

⁵⁷ On the relation between curiosity and interest, see Frühsorge, *Der politische Körper*, 197–9; Kenny, *Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, 143–55.

its collecting metaphor are loosening their grip on non-university naturalist discourse, curiosity retains its power to bind together a remarkable range of discourses and practices which are described here as being so many 'species of curiosity [*especies de Curiosités*]' (21), that is, manifestations of a single passion. Certainly, these discourses and practices are no longer bound together by dint of the similarities of shape between their curious *objects*; moreover, some discourses and practices that were previously familiar in contemporary summaries of the culture of curiosities – newspapers, book-collecting, antiquarianism – are now dropped. But the new version of the list is still long: it includes astronomy, geodesy, travel, ethnography, natural history, chemistry, botany, anatomy, physics, mechanics, architecture, crafts (11–22). Curiosity has changed shape, but it is still so rhetorically powerful that the prospectus's author believes that the best way of raising funds is to write about how curiosity operates in other disciplines, rather than to describe the actual experiments proposed.

Without disappearing entirely, the culture of curiosities and its collecting metaphor declined at different times and rates in different discourses. They gradually lost their capacity to bind together such a cluster of more or less mainstream discourses on knowledge. It could be argued that the kinds of curiosity discussed above were quite distinct from the vice that preachers and moralists continued to condemn as *curiositas*. However, while some in the early modern period agreed with that argument, others disagreed. What exactly curiosity was, what relations existed between its species or else between the meanings of the 'curiosity' family of terms, were highly contested questions at the time. To describe early modern curiosity as a 'concept' would risk ossifying those unresolved contestations, which were battles over the very shape of knowledge.