

**The Great Chain of Being: Life and Literature in Paul Contant's
*Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique***

by

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La collection...peut nous servir de modèle: c'est là où triomphe cette
entreprise passionnée de possession, là où la prose quotidienne des objets
devient poésie, discours inconscient et triomphal.

Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets*

Introduction and background

Paul Contant's *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique*, (1609) is a little-known but significant work in marking the intersection between scientific inquiry, literary expression, and religious discourse in early modern France.¹ Considered one of the first "museum books," Contant's work can initially be seen as an illustrated and descriptive catalog of the flora and fauna that the author, who was also a botanist and an apothecary, either accumulated during his numerous travels or purchased in transactions with traders and other collectors. Despite having a register-like quality, the book carries a distinctly interpretive dimension. In this vein, the text becomes a social and religious document to accompany the *cabinet de curiosité* that is the inventory of plant and animal specimens on display at the poet's home in Poitiers. Near the end of his work, Contant includes a florid but poignant tribute to one of his patrons, a prominent Poitevin known as the Sieur Lignerou Mauclerc that summarizes many of the key themes, perspectives, and questions raised in the text:

Tu as tousjours vacqué de toute ta puissance
De chercher les thresors, qui dans l'Inde ont naissance,
Pour en ton Cabinet monstrer en un moment
Tout ce qui naist et meurt en ce bas element :
Dont ta grande bonté et ton amour loyalle
M'a daigné departir d'une main liberale :

¹ The original edition was published by Antoine Mesnier in Poitiers. Images appearing in this essay are taken from this initial printing. Textual citations, however, come from Myriam Marrache-Gouraud and Pierre Martin's 2004 critical edition. All of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century original editions mentioned in this essay can be found online via Google Books.

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Entre autres les Tatoüs, et l'Uletif poisson,
 Maincts fruicts, maints animaux, maint rare Limaçon,
 Et maints autres presens dont je te remercie
 Que chers je garderay tout le temps de ma vie.
 (235–37)²

Specifically, the homage raises the issue of wealth as a means to explore the natural world and to assemble items of intellectual and perhaps monetary value. Such objects are often of a rare and alien—if not monstrous—quality. But once retrieved and displayed within the confines of a *cabinet*, they become accessible to an increasingly inquisitive public. In addition, the power ascribed to a person of worth such as Lignerion carries with it, from a rhetorical perspective, a flattering, near-divine quality that aligns with Contant's aim of poetically celebrating his *cabinet* not simply as a curiosity but as a personal expression of eternity (“Que chers je garderay tout le temps de ma vie”).

The originality of the text lies in its ambition not only to encapsulate but to marry natural and literary creation within the confines of a mini-epic. On one level, the world is rendered intelligible first by taking the reader through the sequence of plant, animal, human, and divine being, and then on another by suffusing those orders with literary meaning. Plants are celebrated for their mythological as well as their medicinal functions. Animals—especially the most bizarre and monstrous varieties—seemingly strike a more vivid presence than plants, not simply because they are biologically more complex, but because they convey to humans the notion that God is in charge of originating, altering, and destroying life as he sees fit. The celebration of nature, poetry, and God is clearly modeled on Guillaume Du Bartas's *Sepmaine* (1578) and, to a certain extent, on other examples of the devotional lyric during the baroque era.³ At the same time, Contant's work differs and distinguishes itself from that of Du Bartas in multiple ways. Du Bartas models his work on Scripture, and in particular the Old Testament, to interpret the creation of the world. Like Contant, he gives detailed representations of natural phenomena (adding descriptions of stars and planets), but does so in the

² The poem does not have verse numbers. Consequently, I refer to page numbers in the Marrache-Gouraud and Martin edition.

³ Du Bartas's text is a devotional epic chronicling the seven-day creation of the world. With its emphasis on humanity's relationship to nature, works such as the *Sepmaine* are sometimes categorized as “scientific,” “didactic,” or “encyclopedic” poetry. See also Marrache-Gouraud and Martin 45–46.

form of biblical exegesis. In the manner of many religious poets of the baroque era, the tone and content of Du Bartas's work are meant to create a meditative experience in the reader, who internalizes examples of God's natural wonders in order to better apprehend divine presence on earth. Contant is not nearly so focused on devotional exercise. Rather than elevate the reader through various stages of spiritual consciousness, Contant prefers a more concentrated focus on material objects as tangible examples of God's accessibility to humanity. But where Du Bartas, as a poet, is an interpreter of natural science, Contant is also a practitioner of it. The organic is not only conceptual, but tactile and readily available, thus enabling it to mingle intimately with the spiritual in order to become enduring.

Contant lived between 1570 and 1632 and, like his father Jacques, was a prominent member of the Calvinist community in Poitiers. Both father and son shared a talent for business and botany, with Paul publishing their combined *Oeuvres* in 1628.⁴ Significant among the *Oeuvres* is a text entitled *Les Commentaires sur Dioscoride* that demonstrates the scholarly interest both men shared with regard to pharmacology and the study of herbal and other medicinal substances. While neither *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique* nor the *Oeuvres* asserts Calvinist doctrine, it bears noting that many of those who, during the early modern period, launched sustained inquiry in what we would now call "natural history" were of Protestant faith. Relatively free from the doctrine and the censorship of the Catholic Church, Reformist collectors were able to pursue their work more openly than some of their Catholic counterparts. Along these lines, it is no coincidence that Contant received many of his specimens via La Rochelle, the port nearest Poitiers and still a Protestant enclave at the time. In addition, one does detect an affirmation of the individual both in Contant's biography and in his text. Throughout *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique*, Contant protests that he is not wealthy. Yet, as was the case with many who held similar collections, he benefitted both financially and scientifically from mercantile exploration and exchange, amassing an impressive personal fortune that spoke to his entrepreneurial initiative and sparked envy in his detractors. Contant's adversaries published pamphlets denouncing him for swindling patrons and for coming by his possessions in an unscrupulous

⁴ This work was published by A. Mesnier in Poitiers. It should be noted that *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique* was reprinted as the fifth book in the *Oeuvres*. The others, in order, are as follows: *Les Commentaires sur Dioscoride*, *Le Second Eden*, *Exagoge Mirabilium naturae à Gazophylacio*, et *Synopsis Plantarum cum Ethymologiis*.

manner.⁵ Rightly or wrongly, Contant felt threatened by rivals. A rather shameless self-promoter, Contant did himself no favors by repeating his *devise*, “Du don de Dieu Je suis Contant,” throughout *Le Jardin et Cabinet Poétique*. As far as presumably other Protestant undercurrents in the text are concerned, the presence of the individual subject/poet is apparent from the beginning of the work, with the “Je” engaging in a direct relationship with nature, and consequently, with God. Contant’s apostrophes to his plant and animal specimens, as well as to God, reinforce the idea that the speaker communicates with objects of veneration on his authority alone. There is no mention of a Church, and allusions to Christ are indirect at best, but intermediaries for Contant do come in the form of the biblical, mythological, and literary antecedents that help the reader understand the rich significance of the plant and animal holdings in the garden and the *cabinet*. Faith and grace originate from God and find their keenest expression in the appreciation of nature’s splendor and fecundity.

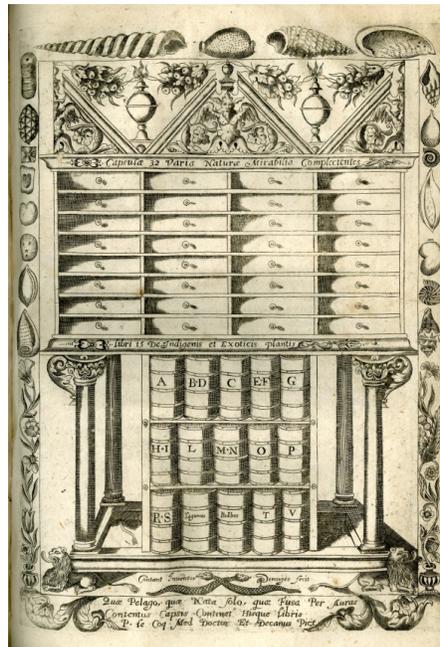


Figure 1. P. Desmoges. *Cabinet of mirabilia* from the *Oeuvres* of Jacques and Paul Contant, 1628. Botany Libraries of the Harvard University Hebraria.

⁵ See 26–28 of the Introduction to Marrache-Gouraud’s and Martin’s critical edition. The chief controversy involved Contant’s change in allegiance to patrons from the aforementioned Sieur Lignerion to the Duc de Sully, Henri IV’s Superintendent of Finances, and overall right-hand man.

The Curiosity of the *Cabinet* and the *Jardin*

Precursors to museums, the *cabinet de curiosité* appeared throughout Europe during the Renaissance and baroque periods and consisted of private collections that housed unfamiliar objects from the physical world. The collections, often displayed in glass cases, or on large tables, were meant to demonstrate a taste for learning and sophistication as well as material comfort and success. The word *cabinet* comes most directly from the sets of drawers in which the samples were stored (See Fig. 1).⁶ In addition to referring to a bureau or armoire, the term connotes a room or a group that harbors secrets, therefore adding to the sense of mystery and, to a certain extent, inscrutability surrounding these fascinatingly peculiar objects. The problem associated with these collections stemmed from the fact that the items displayed often represented multifarious and bizarre compilations of animal, vegetable, and mineral material that ranged from the fake to the marvelously authentic. As Oliver Impey and Arthur Macgregor point out, terms such as “‘cabinet of curiosities,’ ‘closet or rarities,’ and the *Wunderkammer* all have an endearingly whimsical ring to them” (1). However, these somewhat dismissive attitudes are displaced, they contend, because “those very traits of diversity and miscellaneity... [actually reveal] a serious intent... in a programme whose aim was nothing less than universality” (1–2). Accordingly, from a cultural perspective, the growth of such *cabinets* represented what Paula Findlen describes as “new attitudes toward nature as a collectible entity” (1). Moreover, Findlen argues that collections, and later museums, became an effective way to “manage [the] empirical explosion of materials that wider dissemination of ancient texts, increased travel, voyages of discovery, and more systematic forms of communication had produced” (3). In terms of the development of collections in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it should be noted that Italy, the Hapsburg Empire, the Netherlands, and eventually Britain had far surpassed France in both the size and number of *cabinets* founded by either the nobility or by prosperous bourgeois. During the Renaissance, France boasted its share of naturalists, such as Guillaume Rondelet (1507–1566), Pierre Belon (1517–1564), and Charles de l’Ecluse (*Carolus Clusius*, 1526–1609), but had relatively few collectors. Because France did not possess collections rivaling those of

⁶ The engraving represented in Figure 1 is by the Poitevin artist Pierre Demoges and is from the 1628 edition. We note that while the engravings were executed by local artisans, Contant made the original drawings and kept the plates in his possession for future editions. See Marrache-Gouraud and Martin’s edition, 15–16 and 22–23.

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Ulisse Aldrovani in Bologna, Gustavus Adolphus in Sweden, or Rudolf II in Prague, Contant's *jardin* and his *cabinet* become especially relevant. Much smaller in scale than those found elsewhere in Europe, Contant's holdings were still among the most noted in France, and served as a precursor to more sophisticated attempts in the eighteenth century—most notably those of Réaumur in France and eventually Linnæus in Sweden—to collect and organize natural phenomena according to a defined system of scientific classification.⁷

Contant's efforts, though rudimentary by some standards, were considerable in France for the time. His own *cabinet* contained thousands of objects, among them:

3500 bronze statuettes (about which little is known)

3000 dried, pressed plants

100 flasks and vials containing oils and perfumes

150 items considered fossils (bones and other fragments embedded in rocks)

100 animals (43 of which are mentioned in the poem)

1 large canoe (18 feet)

The collection piqued significant interest, and the once heir presumptive to the throne, Henri de Condé, visited in 1628. Three years later, Abraham Gölnitz, a noted travel writer from Danzig, stopped in Poitiers and gave an account of Contant's work in his volume *Ulysse Belgico-Gallicus*. As the title suggests, the book (which appeared in 1655), gave reports on similar collections in Belgium and France.⁸ Because Contant's inventories often lacked concept or design, with his attempts at cataloguing and nomenclature often falling short, Gölnitz's contribution is important not simply because it added to the international renown of Contant's work, but because it simplified classification of the samples in terms of 1) plants, 2) fossils (minerals and rocks), 3) animals (land species first, then water), and 4) objects which were divided into *naturalia* and *praeternaturalia*. This last designation calls explicit attention to the extraordinary, if not inexplicable

⁷ The botanist and mathematician René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (1683–1757) assembled the largest *cabinet* in France at the time. Under Louis XV, his collections were integrated into the *Cabinet du Roi*. Carl Linnæus (Carl von Linné, 1707–1778), of course, was the founder of modern taxonomy.

⁸ The dedicatory notice to Gölnitz's volume is dated 1631, the same year as his visit to Contant.

character of certain specimens. In labeling certain parts of Contant's inventory preternatural,⁹ Gölnitz—whether by accident or by design—publicizes the very quality in the collection that Contant seeks to promote. Similarly, Gölnitz adds a final category named *artificialia* which includes items that are partially or wholly fabricated.



Figure 2. Liminary engraving of plants described in *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique*. Botany Libraries of the Harvard University Hebraria.

The garden, while intrinsically natural in its essence and its existence, is nonetheless a collection in and of itself, planned and cultivated to emphasize the spectacular and the rare. It represents what Susan Stewart would later call “Nature...in a synthetic, acculturated sense” (151). Although the public could not, of course, walk through the actual grounds, Contant’s botanical sanctuary was situated in the city center so as to accentuate its visibility in Poitiers. In many respects, the garden foreshadowed much larger projects at Vaux and Versailles to illustrate what Claire Goldstein describes as “marvelous dislocations: of seasons, terrain, cli-

⁹ “Preternatural” in this case refers to what is considered outside the normal or the natural but has not attained the status of the supernatural.

mate, and locality” (209) to underscore humanity’s ability to assemble and subdue nature for its own purposes. Contant intended the preserve, which contained 59 specimens from around the globe, to evoke a sense of wonder in those who both viewed the garden from the outside, and those fortunate enough to enter it. In its liminary image, *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique* elicits awe in the reader by illustrating what Myriam Marrache-Gouraud and Pierre Martin call an “impossible bouquet” (47) of flowers, trees, bushes, and other assorted plants, all of which were purportedly found in Contant’s garden. In a sense, nature becomes artificial because an arrangement of the kind represented in the image could never be realized. The engraving, of which Contant supposedly sketched the original drawing, is meant to simulate the experience a spectator would undergo when visiting the garden itself. What bursts forth is a floral abundance meant to overwhelm with its breadth, depth, and exoticism (see Fig. 2). Barely visible on the page are numbers accompanying each plant. The numerals are cross-referenced in the poem itself, as each specimen carries a description that elaborates its significance. By establishing a kind of verbal “key” to the liminary engraving, Contant makes a quasi-scientific effort to categorize the contents of his garden and bring more specificity to its nomenclature. Nonetheless, the attempt to count and classify the inventory is overtaken by the fertility of the vegetation on display. Nature’s bounty far outstrips the man-made container at the base of the print. Not only does the fecundity overflow the boundaries imposed by humanity, it dwarfs the animal life that ostensibly supports the vessel. From a symbolic standpoint, nature asserts its superiority over any human (or animal) attempt to control it. The garden itself becomes a *curiosité* in part because of its seemingly limitless growth and variety.

Botanic Verses

The numbering in Contant’s poem is far from perfect, as occasionally some numerals are out of sequence or are missing altogether. Likewise, the lyric itself is not of stellar quality in that the persona of the poet is sometimes without contour, the rhymed couplets often seem stilted, and the language and imagery sometimes border on the prosaic.¹⁰ Similarly, Contant’s self-described “mini-epic” features no real plot or characters in the conventional sense. In addition, the descriptive nature of the work can become digressive to the point where readers have difficulty charting the

¹⁰ According to Marrache-Gouraud et Martin, Contant enlisted the help of the Poitevin poet Bernier de la Brousse to touch up his verse. See 32.

progression of the text. The artistic problems of the poem notwithstanding, Contant's ambition is clear from the opening verses, where he outlines the goals of the project and his particular role in obtaining them. His declaration, "Je chante les beautez de la terre nouvelle..." is a direct imitation of Virgil's *Arma virumque cano*, while the reference four lines later "Que l'Aube au teint vermeil enfante de ses pleurs;..." (the precise allusion is to the tears of dawn on flower petals) immediately signals Homer's *Illiad*. Having situated himself among the luminaries of Classical Antiquity, Contant, with no small amount of self-congratulation, then exalts his collection as transcending all others assembled to date:

J'en fais un Cabinet qui passe la nature.
 Cabinet que voyant l'on ne peut exprimer,
 Cabinet qu'exprimant l'on ne peult estimer;
 Tant la recherche est grande, et qui en son enfance
 Aujourdhuy se fait voir un nouveau monde en France!
 Qui façonné par moy de recueilz tous divers
 Descouvre les tresors de ce grand univers. (69–71)

While the initial line certainly contains some degree of exaggeration, Contant suggests that his *cabinet* surpasses anything that nature itself has produced. Seeing the repository, the spectator is readily aware of its ineffable, "inestimable" quality, which seemingly implies that this particular *cabinet* is superior to those collections Contant viewed as competition with his. Extolling his "recherche" as extensive and profound, Contant contends that his inquiry is only in its earliest stages and intimates that the best is yet to come. His declaration that a "nouveau monde" now appears in France alludes not only to samples from the Americas that embellish his corpus, but to the idea that the *jardin* and the *cabinet* represent new worlds that he, as poet, collector, and apothecary, has assembled and created. With respect to his own role, the image Contant conveys is that of a demiurge. In this case, the term connotes a powerful creative force or personality, or, as the last two verses imply, a near deity who organizes and shapes the material world, presumably out of disorder. Later in the poem, Contant does ascribe substantial credit to God and to nature for the splendor around him. All the same, he does not merely see himself as reflecting this majesty in his text. By touting his own lyric and intellectual agency, Contant reveals not simply the natural world, but, more importantly, his part in shaping it.

Glory, while the purview of nature and of God, also extends to Contant himself. The trajectory of the entire poem is such that it starts in the garden, moves inside to the *cabinet*, and then returns to the garden as the

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work concludes. At all points, but especially at the beginning, the emphasis is on grandeur. The first numbered reference (we remember that the numeric designations in the text correspond to those in the liminary image), is to the cedar of Lebanon, to which Contant directs an apostrophe:

Toy des arbres le chef! dont le tres-riche tronc
 Du coupeau Syrien jadis dedans Solime
 Fut conduit à grand frais dans le temple sublime
 Du grand Dieu d'Israel: Je te salüe aussi... (73)

It is highly improbable that Contant's garden contained a mature cedar of Lebanon since the trees are normally quite large (40 meters in height, 3 meters in diameter) and grow at a very slow pace. More than likely, Contant possessed a smaller-sized version of the famed conifer. For Contant and for his readers, what matters most are the associations the cedar elicits, namely, the building of the Temple of Israel and the recognition that the cedar of Lebanon is the most magnificent of all trees, if not of all vegetation. Following the cedar are the pines from Savoy which, Contant reminds us, were reputedly used to build the Trojan horse. From the standpoint of syncretism, what occurs is that Contant's garden and his poem become the loci where the highest forms of biblical, literary, and natural history not only converge, but find their most meaningful collective expression. As mentioned, the garden itself becomes a *cabinet* in that it becomes a privileged space for the exotic, the luxurious, and the empyreal. The uniqueness of Contant's work resides in his ability to illustrate the linkages between these modes and manifestations of greatness and to translate their significance to the reader.

Throughout the text, Contant's view of nature is peaceful, beneficent, and gentle. While there are brief allusions to illness and death in the narrative, the overall image is that of healing and regeneration. Nature in Contant's world is a re-creation of Eden, and, if compared to interpretations of nature held in the following century, exhibits a proto-Rousseauvian quality.¹¹ However, Contant's assessment of humanity differs widely from Rousseau's. While nature tries to work in harmony with humankind, it does not have a willing partner. For Contant, humanity is as corrupt as it has ever been:

Homme indigne des biens que ta grande bonté
 A voulu departir, à son humanité;

¹¹ Indeed, we are reminded that the second book of the *Oeuvres* is entitled *Le Second Eden*.

Ingrate humanité, car sa mescognoissance
 Ne meritoit d'avoir un tel bien jouissance... (87)

Humanity continues neither to see nor to appreciate the earthly paradise in which it lives. Consequently, humankind is unworthy of the beauty around it, and insufficiently venerates God's majesty. The possessive adjective "ta" in the first line of the citation refers to the bounty of both Nature and God. Contant's theology is one that equates natural and divine transcendence. As noted, he was very much a Protestant, but compared to other Calvinist poets of the day, there is very little, if any, Reformist message in Contant's lyric. Similarly, most of the biblical references in the narrative are to the Old Testament, and Christ is mentioned but once in the text, and only then referred to as "le Redempteur" (159). Where Christ is seemingly present is in the author's generally benevolent portrait of God, and then, the term used to evoke the divine is "Dieu." Although there exist, especially in the section on the cabinet, manifestations of God's angry power, Contant's God provides for his people and cares for them by continuously beautifying and replenishing the Earth itself. To know nature, then, is to know God and his love. In Contant's view, the key existential problem for humanity is to find a way to gain sufficient knowledge of nature not so much as to gain salvation (a topic he does not deal with) but so as to properly worship and comprehend God. The best means of solving this quandary is to collect and organize what is wondrous, strange, and unnerving in nature and make it intelligible to at least some segments of humanity. The humanistic dimension to Contant's work comes in the form of an invitation to the public to study not just Contant's personal museum, but all similar collections in order to extend and deepen humanity's knowledge of nature, God, and itself.

From the Garden to the *Cabinet* : God(s) and Monsters

From a narrative point of view, there is very little transition from the garden to the *cabinet*. Absent are any structural indicators such as books, chapters, or other markers delineating separation in the text. What Contant does include is a few verses thanking one of his friends and donors, a pharmacist from La Rochelle named "Moriceau," for helping him add substantially to the collection.¹² In expressing his gratitude, Contant underscores the exotic nature of Moriceau's donations:

¹² The friend and donor in question is Paul Moriceau, although "Morisseau" is regarded as the more common spelling.

Dedans mon Cabinet plein de choses nouvelles;
 Que l'Inde, le Peru, que le Nil, que le Nord,
 Ont jetté par faveur sur le bigarré bord... (169)



Figure 3. The bat, canoe, and other exotic items from the *cabinet*. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

While the rather hasty shift could serve as a reminder of Contant's limited poetic skills, it could also signal that Contant perceives little distinction between the garden and the *cabinet*, and that both his exterior and interior spaces become fused into a natural, global whole. Forty-three specimens are pictured in the engravings, and although some samples are readily recognizable, most are alien to France and are meant to strike the reader as unusual if not somewhat glamorous. Immediately drawing our attention are the supposed "monsters" which are intended to represent the rarest and most astonishing forms of animal life known at the time (see Fig. 3). As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park suggest, response to the genetic variations and anomalies of what were termed "monsters" and "prodigies"¹³ underwent numerous transformations during the early modern period:

¹³ While definitions of "monster" and "prodigy" often intersect, Ambroise Paré perhaps gives the best distinction when he states that monsters appear "outré le cours de Nature

[...] attitudes toward monsters [evolved] in linear terms: originally part of the prodigy canon, with its ominous religious resonances, monsters shifted over the course of the Sixteenth Century to become natural wonders—sources of delight and pleasure—and then to become objects of scientific inquiry...[.] These reactions overlapped and coexisted over much of the early modern period. (176)

Contant's work illustrates this type of ambiguity. At this same time the poet indicates that physical aberrations are a sign of divine displeasure and might, he is no doubt fascinated by such abnormalities and knows that his audience is as well. The development and dissemination of print culture enables the allure of the unfamiliar to spread rapidly. As Wes Williams states, "The history of science, the history of the book, and the relation of both...are also histories of encounter, of conflict, and of imagination, as the texts and images . . . make plain" (39). From a promotional standpoint, without monsters featured prominently in the work, *Le Jardin, et Cabinet Poétique*, as both a text and an actual collection, would not have attracted as much attention from dignitaries and the literate public. From a scientific perspective, however, by effectively assigning the label of "specimen" to such examples, Contant mitigates the horror his public may initially experience, and, in some readers at least, engenders a certain intellectual detachment that empowers them with a sense of their own capability to understand and hold sway over nature.

Among Contant's most prized monstrous curiosities is an object denoted as a "dragon." In all likelihood, the "dragon" was originally some sort of lizard, or had been reconstructed from small dinosaur fossils. Whatever the case, the image in the engraving is embellished, and no such creature actually existed. As a result, grouping it under Gölnitz's classification of *artificialia* would be more than appropriate. Nonetheless, for Contant's purposes, the dragon is important not simply for its shock value, but for the mythological and biblical significance it carries. Specifically, Contant appropriates the dragon for the purposes of depicting humanity's continued fall from grace. In the poem, the dragon replaces the serpent in Eden whose evil persists in cursing humankind:

Et le subtil Dragon l'ennemy de Nature,
Qui sans cesse et sans fin l'humaine creature

comme un enfant qui naist avec un seul bras, un autre avec deux testes" whereas prodigies are "choses qui viennent du tout contre Nature, comme une femme qui enfantera un serpent, ou un chien..." (*Des Monstres et Prodiges* 3).

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Tasche de renverser par mille efforts divers
 Soit de jour soit de nuict ce vaste Univers.
 Qui tascha d'acabler celuy que la puissance
 Divine, avoit logé dans l'Eden d'innocence... (175)

The dragon in Contant's collection may be artificial, but the danger it symbolizes and still poses is real. Humanity remains an outcast from its earthly paradise and its sinful nature stands in marked contrast to physical and divine nature as represented in Eden and in Contant's poem. For the reader, Contant's garden represents both what is lost and what could be regained if humankind were, finally, to embrace and apprehend the divine character of the bounty surrounding it. The fact that Contant himself has, for all intents and purposes, seized and confined the beast, should provide hope that sin and evil can be overcome.

If humanity is to rediscover the link to Nature's wonders, part of the process would involve enhanced connections to the animal world. The dragon may represent an artificial specimen in Contant's collection, but many presumably real animals serve to demonstrate how humanity benefits from associations with this component of nature's and God's kingdom. Perhaps the most palpable example of such bonding occurs in Contant's mention of an episode taken from Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage faict en la terre du Brésil* (1578).¹⁴ As Contant tells it, a monk's servant is overtaken with pleurisy. Efforts to bleed him are futile to the point where his Confessor is called to administer last rites. At that moment, a rare but beneficent bat swoops down and bites the servant on the heel, whereupon the purgative bleeding begins and the man is cured. Symbiosis occurs in that the bat receives the blood it needs to survive. As if to suggest this interdependence, the bat (see Fig. 3) is portrayed as highly anthropomorphic. Many of the bat's features are humanoid,

including its smiling face and well-defined muscles. While this pictorial exaggeration might seem naive and even silly, the point is to underscore the reciprocity, if not harmony, between the human and animal worlds. Overseeing the unifying process is God, whom Contant praises in the final two lines of the section: "Voilà comment celuy qui toutes choses donne / Contre l'espoir humain la santé nous redonne" (195). Two inferences readily drawn from this distich are that God has absolute power to heal,

¹⁴ Léry was part of a group of French Protestants who went to the Huguenot colony, France Antarctique, in the Bay of Rio Di Janeiro during the mid-sixteenth century, only to leave the settlement for the Brazilian mainland after a dispute with the colony's founder, Nicolas Durant de Villegaignon.

while exercising complete control over the elements of his creation. It is this last assumption that bears most closely on the role of “monsters” in Contant’s repository.

In many respects, the most notably freakish samples in Contant’s collection were the prized possessions of the *cabinet*. Specifically, he lists five specimens, designated as:

Enfant monstrueux (conjoined twins)
 Aigneau monocule
 Pigeon à deux testes
 Chien à huit pieds
 Chat à huit pieds

These items are examples of what is now called teratology, or the study of deformities.¹⁵ In the case of the conjoined twins, the display consisted of a skeleton, while the animals were stuffed and made to look verisimilar (to the extent possible) through the skills of a taxidermist (see Fig. 4). Contant vaunts such anomalies not simply to jolt the reader, but to advance his assertions concerning divine supremacy over the universe. To prove his contention, Contant criticizes the theories of natural philosophers and physicians from Classical Antiquity such as Galen, Aristotle, Pliny the Elder, as well as his near-contemporary Jean Fernel (1497–1558), who stated that such irregularities occurred as accidents of nature and carried no further significance. In effect, Contant echoes the surgeon Ambroise Paré (1510–1590) who, forty years earlier, stated that the first two “causes” of monsters were 1) “la gloire de Dieu,” and 2) “son ire”(4).¹⁶ Referring to the abnormalities on exhibit in his *cabinet*, Contant states:

Car tous ces grands deffauts ou du trop ou du peu
 Sont signes quelques-fois que Dieu nostre grand Dieu
 Veut par là faire voir,...

¹⁵ It is highly likely that Contant, like most French writers of his era, was familiar with two major sixteenth-century medical texts that deal in part with abnormalities: Ambroise Paré’s *Monstres et prodiges* (*Œuvres* 1575), and Laurent Joubert’s *Erreurs populaires* (1578).

¹⁶ See *Des Monstres et Prodiges*, with “glory” indicating God’s curative powers, and “ire,” of course, suggesting punishment. On the whole, Paré’s examples of the monstrous—taken from second-hand accounts rather than actual observations—are more fantastical than Contant’s. Paré’s descriptions and illustrations of grotesque creatures with human heads and animal bodies read more like a medieval bestiary than a scientific treatise and belie somewhat his extensive medical corpus, which is normally grounded in rigorous investigation and precise technical explanation.

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...Que seul lui a sur nous le pouvoir actuel:
Qu'il faict tout, [et] qu'il peut tout ... (209)

Aberrations, then, indicate God's omnipotence and reinforce the authority of heaven and nature over humanity. What emerges near the end of Contant's text is a somewhat mixed portrait of God. Throughout most of the poem, God is seen as a benevolent creator who provides for the universe through nature's plenitude. His authority is affirmed by the expanse, depth, and regeneration of this bounty, while his goodness is confirmed by the constant provision of this wonder and abundance despite



Figure 4. “Monsters” both human and animal, included in the *cabinet*. Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library.

humankind's ingratitude. Nonetheless, God's will is such that he must occasionally demonstrate his awesome presence (“...nostre grand Dieu / Veut par là faire voir...”) by producing startling—if not at times frightening—examples of his power. On occasion, God maintains his hold on humanity by creating monsters, but does this mean that God himself is monstrous? For Contant, the answer to this question is no. Contant's God is capable of subverting his own norms to keep humanity in line, but by and large, the portrayal is not that of an angry, punitive Deity as seen in the Old Testament. What Contant does is to give the reader versions of the same God that reflect his vision of nature: generally charitable and restorative, but at times unpredictable and daunting.

A Return to the Garden and the Meaning of Life

Contant ends the poem with a shift back to the garden as if to suggest that while the internal, reserved space of the *cabinet* is valuable, it pales in comparison to the splendor of Nature. As with the move from the garden to the *cabinet*, there is virtually no transition in that the numbered sequencing of the plants, which had been interrupted with the inventory for the *cabinet*, simply restarts from where it had stopped. The final description is of an unnamed plant, but specialists believe it is most accurately identified as the *helianthus tuberosus*, known as the “poire de terre” in French, and the “Jerusalem artichoke” in English. Originally from the plains of North America, the *helianthus tuberosus* is a sunflower that propagates quickly and produces a tasty root vegetable. Contant portrays the plant as resilient to the forces that menace it:

Mais comme un haut sapin que l’Aquilon agite
 Or deçà or de là, de son flair tourne-vite,
 Sans bransler tant soit peu resiste courageux
 A ses efforts soufflants d’un esprit orageux... (235)

Clearly, these resistant qualities served as inspiration to a poet who saw himself as beleaguered and vulnerable. For Contant, meaning is derived not simply from his life’s work in the garden, but from nature’s guarantee of renewal. On its highest level, the poet sees this regeneration as a promise of immortality. It is perhaps not a coincidence that in almost the exact middle of the poem, Contant gives the strongest defense of his project while stating his ultimate aim:

Je ne veux point qu’on die, haissant ce qu’on peut;
 Contant a de grands biens; car cela ne m’esmeut:
 Et ma profession honneste ne me donne
 Les moyens terriens, mais la riche Couronne
 De l’immortalité: Et le bien ne faict pas
 L’homme heureux, mais ouy bien, les oeuvres du
 trespas. (173)

Placing himself above the pettiness of his critics, Contant suggests that the meaning of his existence, as defined by his “profession honneste” of poetry and collecting, is to enrich and combine his understanding of literature, nature, and God so as to attain everlasting life. By identifying and strengthening these links in the chain of being, Contant transcends the earth by creating art from it.

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