Porcelain Wars and Solar Furnaces

The selections reviewed here represent only a portion of the planned thirteen-volume series of the complete works of Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651-1708), mathematician, scientific innovator and bureaucrat at the Saxon court in Dresden. They are designed primarily to provide a critical edition of Tschirnhaus’s writings for scholars already familiar with his work. This edition presents his words beautifully.

In the foreword to the Beiband, which contains papers given at the 2001 anniversary conference, Dagmar Hülsenberg calls Tschirnhaus the “most important universal scholar (Universalgelehrte) of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries next to Leibniz” (p. 7). She goes on to say that he has, for the most part, been forgotten since then and, while it comes under the heading of “do as I say, not as I do,” it must be confessed that, after exhausting the books in my office, I took to the Internet for some broader background on Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus than could be found in the spare biographical material provided in these volumes.

Tschirnhaus was a perfect example of the scientific and technical polymath, a creature virtually extinct in the contemporary world of narrow specialization; the conference papers included in the 2001 meeting make Tschirnhaus’s intellectual cosmopolitanism clear via inference, although they serve the lay reader only a little in terms of content. Tschirnhaus’s studies in pure mathematics in Leiden enabled him to make important contributions to the field of algebra (Beiband, p. 36). His study of light led to the development in 1686 of the spherical Brennspiegel, a means of concentrating and focusing solar energy that facilitated the development of the solar furnace (Beiband, pp. 17-28). Finally, Tschirnhaus is frequently named as the man who invented the porcelain industry in Saxony, although this honor is also given to Johann Friedrich Böttger (Beiband, pp. 7, 29-34). The debate over which man deserves the honor for this important development is ongoing and it is an interesting coincidence that the article about Tschirnhaus on Wikipedia: Die Freie Enzyklopädie, is flagged as contested. More over, the discussion about the article has been taking place over the last few months; the last entry was posted in mid-November. The issue of who deserves the laurels for “inventing” porcelain is one of the discussion threads.
Sadly, the volume of Tschirnhaus’s works dealing with his rival in the porcelain wars was not available for inclusion in this review.

Tschirnhaus’s works relating to education (Erziehung), collected as the fifth section of his written works, while previous volumes included his mathematical and scientific writings, deal as much with hints about running a household establishment as with matters of personal health. Tschirnhaus’s work demonstrates his conviction about the strong connection between matters of medical health and proper education and includes commentary on how to stay healthy and overcome illness quickly as well as other hints at retaining balance in one’s life. Also included here are instructions written in 1704 to a relative who was serving as the tutor and steward (Hofmeister) to Tschirnhaus’s son in Leiden.

His most important letters, such as those dealing with Böttger or Tschirnhaus’s debates with the Pastor Johann Wilhelm Kellner von Zinnendorf are not included in the sections related to his correspondence with the Saxon court, although they have been published in other volumes. Instead, the letters here deal with his capacities in the area of gemstones and glassware (Amtlicher Schriftverkehr, pp. X-XI). Despite unfortunate gaps, enough of the correspondence survives to give a clear vision of Tschirnhaus’s careful and exacting oversight of technical matters, which mirrored his care in his own scientific work.

In sum, these volumes are essential for anyone interested in reading Tschirnhaus’s own words. They are not, however, of enormous use for contextual background or biography and they were not intended to be. The Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften has done well to make the works of Tschirnhaus available to a larger public.

Notes


[2]. Wikipedia: Die Freie Enzyklopädie, s.v. “Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus,” http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ehrenfried\protect\unhbox\voidb@x\bgroup\def,{Walther}\let\futurelet@let@token\let\protect\relax\protect\edefn{it}\protect\xdef\EU1/LinuxLibertineO(0)/m/it/10\{EU1/LinuxLibertineO(0)/m/n/10\}\EU1/LinuxLibertineO(0)/m/it/10\size@update\enc@update\Walther\egroup\hlvbox\voidb@x[von_Tschirnhaus (accessed November 20, 2006).

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