

*Perpetual Lamps of the Ancients*

No. 379, of the Spectator, relates an anecdote of a person who had opened the sepulchre of the famous Rosicrucius. He discovered a lamp burning, which a statue of clock-work struck into pieces. Hence the disciples of this Visionary said, that he made use of this method to show “that he had re-invented the ever-burning lamps of the ancients.”

Many writers have made mention of these wonderful lamps; Marville appears to give a satisfactory account of the nature of these flames

It has happened frequently, that inquisitive men, examining with a flambeau ancient sepulchres which have been just opened, the fat and gross vapours, engendered by the corruption of dead bodies, kindled as the flambeau approached them, to the great astonishment of the spectators, who frequently cried out *a miracle!* This sudden inflammation, although very natural, has given room to believe that these flames proceeded from *perpetual lamps*, which some have thought were placed in the tombs of the ancients, and which, they said, were extinguished at the moment that these tombs opened, and were penetrated by the exterior air.

The accounts of the perpetual lamps which ancient writers give have occasioned several ingenious men to

search after their composition. Licetus, who possessed more erudition than love of truth, has given two receipts for making this eternal fire by a preparation of certain minerals; an opinion in vogue amongst those who are pleased with the wonderful, or who only examine things superficially. More credible writers maintain, that it is possible to make lamps perpetually burning, and an oil at once inflammable and inconsumable; but Boyle, assisted by several experiments made on the air-pump, found that these lights, which have been viewed in opening tombs, proceeded from the collision of fresh air. This reasonable observation conciliates all, and does not compel us to deny the accounts.

The story of the lamp of Rosicrucius, even if it ever had the slightest foundation, only owes its origin to the spirit of party, which at the time would have persuaded the world that Rosicrucius had at least discovered something; but there is nothing certain in this amusing invention.

The reason adduced by Marville is satisfactory for his day; and for the opening of sepulchres with flambeaux. But it was reserved for the modern discoveries made in natural philosophy, as well as those in chemistry, to prove that air was not only necessary for a medium to

the existence of the flame, which indeed the air-pump had already shown; but also as a constituent part of the inflammation, and without which a body, otherwise very inflammable in all its parts, cannot however burn but in its superficies, which alone is in contact with the ambient air.