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TERENCE CAVE'S *PRÉ-HISTOIRES, TEXTES TROUBLÉS*
AU SEUIL DE LA MODERNITÉ
A REVIEW ARTICLE

by Loli Tsan

Shrouded in a veil, the concealed figure resists identification. In Natale Conti's *Mythologiae*¹ it is assumed to be Diana, a mystical representation of an untouchable and camouflaged deity. Used out of context on the cover of Terence Cave's last book, *Pré-histoires*,² the troubling image seems to be an embodiment of the hidden and inaccessible aspect of history, literature, and ideas—a certain “trouble,” the problematic perception of surreptitious but momentous “accidents” in early modern texts. In this major reinterpretation of literary and paraliterary objects in sixteenth-century France and their historicity, beginning with the episode about Pyrrhonian philosopher Trouillogean in Rabelais's *Tiers Livre* and ending with Montaigne's *Du repentir*, *Pré-histoires* scrutinizes the historical and anthropological values that have been assigned to these objects.

As does Michael Riffaterre in *La Production du texte*,³ Cave contends that the textual object is *suffisant*. Riffaterre, however, claims that each text contains the complete basis for its interpretation, while Cave resorts to a poetics oriented in history. Literary objects are read as the fragmented forms of lost experience, infinitely remote echoes of the voices that were present at the time of their making. On several occasions Cave uses the metaphor of the *archipel* found in Rabelais's *Quart Livre* to describe the *taches obscures* by means of which history appears through the literary object.

Although mindful of the fact that a certain amount of historical memory is inherently attached to cultural production, Cave argues that there is an intrinsic obscurity to history. Whereas traditional practice of the discipline (“the history of ideas”) tends to construct *a posteriori* grand designs and dramatic epistemological mutations, he chooses to

¹Natale Conti, *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae sive explicationis fabularum libri decem* (Padova 1616).

²Geneva: Droz 1999, 200 pp. Considered one of the foremost scholars in sixteenth-century French literature, Terence Cave is professor of French literature at the University of Oxford and a fellow of Saint John's College. He is known for his works on baroque poetry (*Devotional Poetry in France, 1570–1613* [London 1969]), on Ronsard (*Ronsard the Poet* [London 1973]), and his influential essays on poetics, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford 1979) and *Recognitions, A Study in Poetics* (Oxford 1987).

³Michael Riffaterre, *La Production du texte* (Paris 1979).

look closely at small, distinct and disquieting cues within texts—indications that something is shifting—but warily avoids generalizing from them. “Chaque texte littéraire est un *hapax*” (p. 12), he asserts, a singular event that points to its difference, its *altérité*, even if inserted in a tradition or a set of rigorous conventions. The subtitle, *Textes troublés*, refers to the perturbation that any literary object reflects.

For the author, such “accidents” are often language phenomena, philological in nature, and frequently appear as aporia through a moment of illogicality or “agrammaticalité.” Delving into over sixty years of works by Rabelais, Ronsard, and Montaigne, Cave points to the various rhetorical and poetic devices of different paradigms, relating them to each other by means of direct reference, carefully controlled analogy, and historical contiguity.

Inasmuch as the essays contained in *Pré-histoires* can be read independently, they support the author’s vision of history as an “archipelago” and his avoidance of a “totalizing” vision. The heuristic value of the method consists in uncovering the unsuspected connections among phenomena apparently scattered, allowing a configuration of sixteenth-century knowledge to unfold. These instances develop in early modern time around a few focal points, such as skepticism and the emergence of a laic *moi* (self), as well as the advent of new narrative techniques. The author also gives critical significance to figures drawn from the language and imagination of the period, such as Pyrrhonism, heterodoxy, witchcraft, or the death in 1543 of Guillaume Du Bellay,⁴ using their recurrence in different contexts.

In an approach that could be characterized as epistemological *epochè* (suspension of judgment), Cave carefully considers his position as an observer of history, always mindful of the contingent distortion (censure, presupposition, etc.) and suspicious of the constructs manufactured by the particular type of “history” which is eager to offer a generalized apprehension of cultural objects, as opposed to a perception of them as discrete, isolated phenomena. His “upstream” vision effectively scrutinizes these cultural objects in their absolute singularity, viewing historical knowledge as fragmentary and uncertain evidence. But under the apparent and conventional text lies a hidden tale whose outcome remains suspended. These “pré-histoires” are not offered as origins, but rather as pre-significant and ambiguous traces before history and continuity.

Cave begins with the issue of epistemological suspense and of belief and skepticism. While discussing the traditional account of the emer-

⁴According to Cave, even though these moments of *trouble* are psychological responses to historical phenomena, they cannot be reduced to psychoanalytical constructs.

gence of a Pyrrhonist theory in the sixteenth century, he cautions the reader against retrospectively projecting any construct onto the past. Citing the Apelles's horse anecdote in Sextus Empiricus's *Hypostoses* as a paradigm for *epochè*, possibly at the origins of Pyrrhonism, Cave describes the "waves" triggered by the rediscovery of skeptical argument in the sixteenth century as an epistemological reverberation registered by a Pyrrhonist audience, rather than pointing to the apologetic function of Pyrrhonism agreed upon by most historians. He makes atypical use of sixteenth-century narratives—for example, the episode of the *Tiers Livre* in which Panurge consults the Pyrrhonian philosopher Trouillogan—portraying them as Pyrrhonian "paratexts" instead of resorting to philosophical conceptualization (such as a reflection on Pyrrhonian doubt). Other Pyrrhonian "paratexts"⁵ provide different ways to read the reception of Pyrrhonism in the sixteenth century and reveal the psychological and epistemological confusion triggered by its emergence.

As a corollary to suspense, Cave has as a central figure in his analysis the concept of *antiperistasis*, a recurrent figure laden with unresolved tension and relatively prevalent in the sixteenth century.⁶ In a reading of Montaigne's *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, the author shows that the figure of *antiperistasis*, used as a paraphrase of the skeptical Pyrrhonian argument, is represented rhetorically through a paradoxical discourse.⁷ The representation of rhetorical devices is a procedure that Cave uses himself, in that he incorporates into his own argument words and figures employed in sixteenth-century texts. For instance, instead of the questionable concept of historical "progression," let alone of rupture, he uses the metaphor of the "*clôture*" borrowed from Montaigne, a restricted space within which a sixteenth-century belief system (or any system) is enclosed and from which "excursions" into other spaces are possible. He also uses the rhetorical concept of a *zone medi-*

⁵They include Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola's preface to the third book of his *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis Christianae disciplinae* and Henry Estienne's translation of Sextus's *Hypotyposes* in which the author demonstrates an unexpected connection between fever and Pyrrhonism.

⁶As we learn, the figure was introduced by Henry Estienne in an epistle to Henri de Mesmes (in *Sexti philosophi Pyrrhonianum hypotyposeon libri III* [Geneva 1562]) and was used as a rhetorical device (cf. Maurice Scève's *Délie*, in which it is offered as a version of the Petrarchian topos of the lover who freezes and burns simultaneously).

⁷Initially Montaigne opposes Pyrrhonism, judging it to be an extravagant and brash posture and terming it a "licence effrénée," one that he had the desire to circumscribe with a "*clôture*" (boundary fence); unexpectedly he authorizes it at the end of the *préface*. Cave's depiction of Montaigne, through the figure of *antiperistasis*, as a humanist resorting to an anti-scholastic topos to counter the official reprimand of an authoritarian culture and favoring a freedom of judgment beyond the *doxa*, provides an answer to the question of his frequent characterization as a "Christian skeptic."

ane borrowed from sixteenth-century cosmological schemes to describe a bordering area, delimited by the paradigm of the circle of the moon, in which ambiguous (demonic?) beings pullulate. This image appears as a striking illustration of his argument that no philosophical or intellectual system (be it Christian Neoplatonism or Pyrrhonism) is able to give a full description of how an individual constructs his mode of thinking.⁸

Addressing the question of belief in the sixteenth century, Cave considers such a complex discourse diacritically, examining the dynamic of various points within a given system of belief, rather than seeking to establish the essence of belief. Anthologizing the lexicon of the period considered and expounding upon its “syntax,” (for example, in the use of the first-person singular and of the conditional in Ronsard’s *Remontrance au peuple de France*), he scrutinizes the nature of the primarily subjective utterance that has voiced a belief rhetorically conceived as a language.⁹ From these various accounts, Cave admits only to an exacerbated uncertainty in his characterization of the intellectual habits of the period. In this way, the complexity of the transmission of Pyrrhonism during the sixteenth century thwarts any attempt to ascribe fixed content to a system of belief, he states.

The issue of skepticism is then tied together with the notion of a secularization of the self, as the author investigates the emergence of

⁸However coherent such a system is, it never can constitute a reliable hermeneutic criterion. On the contrary, the imprecision of the *zone* inevitably generates anxiety and incertitude. The concept of *zone médiane* allows a rhetorical argument, since it appears also as a locus in which both ethical and rhetorical categories seem to coalesce. It refers here to a discourse undertaken in Aristotelian terms, one that points to a fundamental asymmetry within the soul and to the lack of *metron* or *meson* (median point), as stated in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The problematic reappears in conjunction with a debate on passions among Roman rhetoricians on the issue of ethical “redescription” of similar or “neighboring” terms, designated as *paradiastolè* in Greek or *distinctio* by Quintilian. In humanist thematic, as Cave demonstrates, the issue is translated in terms of the uncertainty of moral categories, evident in Machiavellian theory (as well as numerous other instances such as Marguerite de Navarre’s *Heptaméron*) and culminating in Erasmus’ folly.

⁹For instance, Cave compares the various positions of Ronsard, Montaigne, or Bodin toward pagan cults. In *Remontrance au peuple de France* (published in 1563), referring to the *nouveau monde*, Ronsard pictures himself as a pagan worshiper of the sun. But Cave notes that his account is expressed in the conditional, as well as in the first-person singular; thus he is able to hypothesize, because of the use of such a rhetorical device, that Ronsard is prudently venturing into a heterodox belief. Cave describes a very similar argument by Montaigne in the *Apologie* (1576), in which Ronsard’s *Remontrance* is quoted, as more tolerant and less polemical and, he adds, perhaps more political. He also questions the traditional opposition between an intransigent Bodin and his violent diatribe against sorcery and a “modern,” “liberal” Wier, whose project of exculpating witches appears flawed by a discourse on the devil’s maneuvers and his belief in a diabolical causality.

the term “*moi*” (which designates the self in French)¹⁰ through the transmutation of a disjunctive pronoun into a substantive. This is an argument that ingeniously discards any excessively systematic tool, evidently of little use when grappling with the earliest appearance of the phenomenon, surfacing in fluctuating and precarious ways. The emergence of the modern *moi* in Montaigne is regarded from upstream, not as a dramatized origin, as in, for instance, Freudian or Hegelian readings. In a bold gesture, the author dares to look at these early instances as isolated phenomena. Montaigne’s case, on the other hand, is associated with even more fragmentary instances, hints of the same without any historical coherence, such as the Rabelaisian “*je*,” Pascal’s fragment 688 of the *Pensées*, or a pre-*cogito* Cartesian occurrence in the *Discours de la Méthode*. When scrutinizing the substantive *moi* as substitute for the disjunctive pronoun, Cave points to an increased grammatical reflexivity and focuses on the mental significance of the linguistic transformation. As he observes, when combined with the theme of friendship in Montaigne’s famous chapter about La Boétie, *De l’amitié*, an intense display of pronominal concentration (“Par ce que c’estoit luy; par ce que c’estoit moy”) amplifies the Neoplatonic myth of resemblance and identification as it founds a distant and implicit language of auto-representation. Furthermore, because the concept of a secular autobiographic narrative, as opposed to the prevalent “confession” in the Augustinian sense, is not yet established in the sixteenth century, the pronominal syntax, as Cave points out, seems to stimulate an amplified narrative syntax. As for Rabelais, his first-person-singular grammar is perceived as a melodic fragment that sounds familiar, but intermittently faint. The motif of phonic and thematic resemblance, as it evolves from Montaigne to Pascal, is viewed as a configuration rather than a system. It develops around the emergence of a reflexive pronominal subject and supports the argument of the appearance of a laic self, as the founding gesture of Montaigne’s *Essais*, echoed in an Augustinian perspective in Pascal’s *Pensées*.

The concept of suspense with which Cave opens his argument is re-examined in Girolamo Vida’s *Ars poetica*, a sort of commentary on the theory of *dispositio* described in the Horatian discussion of an opening “*in medias res*,” as presented in his *Poetics*. The tormenting technique of maximizing suspense or “*ambages*” (digression) leads Vida to the Horatian *locus*, allowing the poet to defer indefinitely the denouement of his plot. Reading, Cave explains, becomes a “*plaisir masochiste*”

¹⁰As Cave points out, such a transmutation of a disjunctive pronoun into a substantive occurs both in Sanskrit and in Aristotle (*heteros autos*) and Cicero (*alter ego* or *alter idem*).

(131), developed in the narrative metaphors of hunting and journeying. Vida's theory of proleptic suspense is epitomized by a translation by Jacques Amyot in 1547 of Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, whose extraordinary *dispositio in medias res* triggers a "grand esbahissement" (great amazement). The popular device, an exemplary instance of *ordo artificialis* (as opposed to the *ordo naturalis*) copied by Honoré d'Urfé in the *Astrée*, leads the author to examine some social and cultural transformations in the reading practices of the sixteenth century. As Cave points out, the popularity of suspense coincides with a decline of the traditional allegorical narrative, still persistent in the sixteenth century. While contending that the two readings are not incompatible, he points out a subtle alteration in pre-modern narratives, traditionally founded on a Christian teleological ideal, and, therefore, a sense of secularization of the novel, opposing the spiritual ("vertical") signification of allegory to the profane ("horizontal") value of a plot founded on suspense.

Cave's discussion on suspension culminates in his two last studies on Montaigne. He compares Montaigne's guiltless narrative ("*récit sans repentir*") in his chapter *Du repentir* with the Augustinian model of the confessional autobiography and its teleological structure, resolved by a foreseen *conversio*. Cave points to a suspended (although not revoked) repentance for which Montaigne explicitly apologizes. The guiltless thief of *Du repentir* reveals the problematic developed by Rousseau of a *mauvaise conscience* that holds repentance in suspense. Finally, the chapter *De la vanité* refers to traveling as a blameworthy activity, designating Rome, as well as death, as a paradigm of a suspended *telos*, the ultimate emblem of vanity. In regarding Rome as an empty or fake *telos*, Cave reads "vagabondage" as a metaphor of the narrative digression, pointing to the "roman picaresque" as a fragmented and prolix narrative, source of an endlessly sustained pleasure, as an ironical paradigm of the novel.

Because of its scrupulous scholarship and critical approach, *Pré-histoires* will no doubt be an indispensable reference tool. To French Renaissance scholars in particular it offers a meticulous and resourceful analysis that revises misconceptions of skepticism and epistemological issues in early modern times. On a broad level, since *Pré-histoires*'s purpose is primarily methodological, it serves as a brilliant lesson on linking critical and imaginative reading of literary objects with a precise historical focus. This volume is more anthropological and historical than Cave's previous books, more engaged in dialogue with the new historicism. What is perhaps most impressive is Cave's clarity and explicitness. Countering clichés founded on historical anthropology or cultural history, the author attends to the topical contexts of individual

literary objects, renouncing the temptation to regard the past analeptically. He gives a new significance to the incompleteness and inarticulateness of history, eschewing the confusion between “our” values and those held in the past, considering the hermeneutic meaning of the literary object without giving it a teleological purpose. The author nonetheless deliberately avoids resorting to the concept of “ambiguity,” believing that these texts can be precisely defined and still retain their mobility and inconsistency, as well as their propensity to *antiperistasis*. Cave’s book reconciles precision and the uncertainty principle that governs literary texts. His original view of historical knowledge as fragmentary and mobile is presented in remarkably lucid detail and with methodological rigor.

This is the first book that Terence Cave has published in French following his translation of The Cornucopian Text in 1997. Its antecedents include seminal articles in French and in English, as well as materials presented at Paris VII and lectures given at the College de France. When asked why he wrote the book in French, Professor Cave answered that he wanted to offer this essay as part of a dialogue with French colleagues, whereas The Cornucopian Text was oriented in a more transatlantic direction. He also explained that he wanted to avoid the ideological debates which have been overly prevalent in North American and British literary studies recently, those on topics such as post-colonialism, gender studies, etc. While finding such issues interesting, he did not necessarily wish to write about them. According to Cave, the French are much less engaged in those particular topics. On the other hand, he felt he could offer to a French-speaking public an approach which had absorbed a good deal from the Anglo-American scene of the last ten years and which is significantly different from the prevailing methodology in France.

Presently, Terence Cave is writing a sequel to Pré-histoires (Pré-histoires II?), which should feature Rabelais more centrally, although Montaigne and others will appear. As far as the author can tell at this point, the sequel will discuss the issue of Rabelais and language—primarily the practical acquisition of modern language—as well as the issue of Rabelais and money.

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