



PROJECT MUSE®

Locating the Early Modern

Terence Cave

Paragraph, Volume 29, Number 1, March 2006, pp. 12-26 (Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/198408>

Locating the Early Modern

Terence Cave

The phrase ‘early modern’ is nowadays so widely used that it is easy to take for granted that it denotes a real and in some sense *necessary* state of affairs: if the current phase of history is broadly ‘modern’ (with a recent outgrowth called ‘postmodern’), the one that precedes it must surely be ‘early modern’. Things are, however, not quite so simple. The rise to prominence of the phrase in the last fifty years — and indeed its taken-for-granted status — is a complex phenomenon fraught with implications for historiography in general; I shall therefore begin by giving a brief account of its emergence.¹

‘The early modern’ appears to be a specifically Anglophone coinage. The German equivalent, *die frühe Neuzeit*, began to be used after the English term became established, and there is still no analogous expression (or corresponding historiographical debate) in French scholarship.² It has a long prehistory, but a threshold seems to have been reached in the 1950s with C.F. Strong’s grammar-school textbook *The Early Modern World* (London, University of London Press, 1955) and George Clark’s *Early Modern Europe: from about 1450 to about 1720* (London, Oxford University Press, 1957). The expression was subsequently taken up in book-titles in the 1960s and 1970s,³ and by the 1980s it was in common use. Over this period, it progressively broadened its scope, creating new perspectives for various kinds of intellectual, cultural and social history. In the process, it helped to reduce the status of more localized period terms: those who still want to speak of the ‘Renaissance’ are nowadays obliged to admit that it is a construction of elite culture rather than a global historical phenomenon. This remains the case even if certain features that have commonly been attributed to the Renaissance — a broadening of literacy and educational opportunity, the development of critical and hermeneutic methods which reduce the reliance on ‘authority’, far-reaching shifts in the discourses of science, the emergence of the individual secular subject — have now been subsumed as hallmarks of the early modern.

The rise of the term thus corresponds to the rise of historical perspectives which may be considered as programmatically egalitarian:

social and cultural histories following in the aftermath of the work of E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams and others; and, in literature departments above all, the post-Marxist perspective of the new historicism. The notion of the early modern opens up a space that the new historicists and their successors in the field of cultural studies were easily able to colonize, given that their ideological agenda claims to be radically opposed to the elitism of the literary canon (whether they have succeeded in putting this agenda into practice is another question). It also suited them because, by connecting the period in question to modernity, it seemed to legitimize a modern reading, one that avows its own preoccupations and values. To investigate the early modern period is to enquire after the roots, the ostensible origins, of our own 'modernity', and thus to subject modern ideologies, via a historical loop, to a radical critique. If Rabelais or Shakespeare displays a gender bias, we must learn to read their texts otherwise in order to avoid using them to endorse gender bias in our own societies; if Montaigne's tolerance and liberalism can be shown to mask a profound suspicion of social change, a patronizing view of women and distinct traces of homophobia, the 'humanism' that is projected on to the *Essais* must be shown to be suspect.⁴

It should at once be acknowledged that practices of this kind are intended to avoid the problem of Whiggish historicism, the assumption that history manifests a triumphal progress towards the enlightened times of the present, much as the history of science has until recently been largely a story of how error and muddled thinking were overcome and the superior modern understanding of the world arrived at. The model implied by the expression 'early modern' is none the less intrinsically teleological and evolutionary, since there can be no 'early modern' unless it leads to the 'modern'. Yet, whatever else the people who lived in early modern times thought and knew, they cannot have thought that they were early modern. The threshold is not visible until one is unequivocally on the other side.⁵ Indeed, some early moderns called themselves 'Moderns', using the term in contradistinction this time to the 'Ancients' (who might be the writers and thinkers of Classical and Biblical Antiquity or their latterday successors who championed Antiquity as a timeless model).⁶ Although the notion of a general irreversible 'progress' of human culture and knowledge only emerged quite late, the Ancients-Moderns antithesis is none the less value-laden: being a Modern means not only believing that we can see more and further now than our forefathers did, but also that we see and think and feel *differently*.

The duality created by the use of the term early modern is radically different, however, from the Ancients–Moderns opposition. The recurrent rephrasings of that opposition by different cultures show that its polarities shift with the moment of perception: the late medieval theologians who called themselves *moderni* would hardly have been regarded as kindred spirits by Perrault, Fontenelle and other French *modernes* of the late seventeenth century. To put it in the simplest form, the temporal adjective ‘modern’ is deictic in character, like the temporal adverb ‘now’. A history that speaks of the early modern period, by contrast, posits the advent of a once-and-for-all modernity. That modernity is decisive not only because it is the historians’ own period but because it is considered to constitute a rupture or irreversible turn in the development of human civilization, brought about by industrialization, the triumph of capitalism, enormous population growth, democratization in one sphere after another, and the ever-accelerating speed of scientific and technological discovery. The agrarian societies and economies that still characterized vast areas of early modern Europe were more similar to those of medieval and ancient times than to those of the modern world; the ‘early modern’ is the sign of that future change before it reaches its critical turning-point towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Of course, we might imagine a future world so changed—say in 200 or 500 years—that *it* will be the ‘modern’, and what we call modernity will be called something else. But our generation has so thoroughly laid claim to the word (not least through its cognates ‘modernism’ and ‘postmodern’) that it would be difficult for future historians to deny that distinctive, self-conscious use and prise it away from us.

The essentialization of the modern is now deeply entrenched in our culture. Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Mallarmé, Joyce and their like are its prophetic heroes; Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and *their* like its high priests. One might even argue that the function of concepts such as imprisoning epistemes, the death of history and the postmodern condition is to satisfy the desire to think of modernity as intrinsically other, to make that way of thinking appear to arise from the nature of things and thus to assure its permanence. The catastrophes of the twentieth century have provided further and powerful arguments on the existential and ethical plane: Adorno’s famous dictum about the holocaust as bringing about an absolute

rupture in history, or the historical vision of Thomas Mann in *Doktor Faustus*, create a sombre rhetoric that it is hard to gainsay.

Similar processes, of course, affect literary culture: the *death* of the novel (death is perhaps the overriding metaphor of such conceptualizations) has become such a commonplace of modern critical thought, at least in France, that previously existing generic terms (*récit*, *nouvelle*) have to be recycled, reinvented even, to classify texts that might once have been called novels but can't be because everyone knows — don't they? — that the novel is dead.

This last example shows that what is assigned to the modern may itself shift according to one's perspective: considered in the longer term, the novel is taken to be an essentially modern genre for which antecedents can be traced to the early modern period (Cervantes, Defoe, Richardson, Sterne. . .); it replaces tragedy and comedy as the primary point of generic reference. Those that are only concerned with modernity and its recent antecedents, on the other hand, insist on a sharp opposition between the *roman classique* (identified as the nineteenth-century realist novel) and the modernist novel of which Joyce, Woolf, Calvino, Duras and others provide variants. It is as if that modern genre heralded by Cervantes and co. always bore within it the seeds of its own disintegration and death. What is never at issue is the notion of rupture, of an irreversible turn (as in 'the linguistic turn'), which constitutes 'our' culture as distinct in its very essence.

One major qualification needs to be made at this point. I have assumed up to now that the early modern is the early or preparatory phase of a modernity that we call 'ours' ('Western' or 'European'). Some historiographers, however, have proposed an early modern phase for other politico-cultural regions, or indeed a global early modern period in which the European early modern interacts with major developments in those other cultures.⁷ This perspective is self-evidently valid and enormously refreshing, promising a release from a certain Eurocentric claustrophobia. However, it seems clear that, for other cultures, it will never be known what kinds of eventual modernity might have arisen, since any such development was pre-empted by the rapid spread of modern 'Western' culture. Of course that doesn't prevent other parts of the world from developing a distinctive modernity by combining Western features with their own native traditions (something like that has clearly happened in Latin America), but the result is always already contaminated by those importations. In a certain sense — a Foucauldian sense, perhaps — 'the modern' is a Western invention.

Here, however, we may question the assumption that ‘the modern’ is a unique set of epistemes and cultural practices, a kind of identikit for the world we like to call ours. Might one not rather say that this assumption is itself the product of ‘theory’, taking that term as designating a set of systematizing and abstracting practices designed to eliminate fallacy, conceptual confusion and bad faith? It could be argued that, rather than showing us how shallow empirical histories are, how riddled with bad faith and masked anachronism, theory has constructed its own historical theatre, where the drama is no less lurid because enacted in epistemic constructions such as ‘madness’, ‘the child’, ‘sexuality’. Perhaps the only place where the modern resides is in theory, since whatever else theory has claimed to be in the last half-century, it has certainly claimed to be unwaveringly ‘modern’.

Those who have continued to use positivist empirical methods with little theoretical consciousness would indeed not recognize such constructions as anything other than the product of over-heated intellect (or worse, the over-heated rhetoric of ‘charlatans’). The reply, of course, is that there clearly was and still is bad faith and masked anachronism, and a kind of complacency uncomfortably close to Whiggishness. Theory (‘modern theory’) has made us look at all our practices again, question them closely, remember the untranslatable slogan ‘aller jusqu’au bout de sa pensée’. Without that, it would hardly be possible to give a coherent sense to the phrase ‘early modern’, let alone see where it might foreclose the very questions it raises.

★ ★ ★

What, then, between these two time-honoured adversarial positions, is the way forward? Perhaps it lies in a methodological consciousness that is informed about theoretical arguments without prematurely buying into them or using them as a teleology, one that remains close to critical practice and hence to the needs of the materials which are the presumed object of study.⁸

One might well argue that a change in this direction began to happen in the last decade of the twentieth century. When Stephen Greenblatt gave the Clarendon Lectures at Oxford in 1992 on topics connected with Columbus’s voyage,⁹ a party was given to which all the leading lights of the Oxford English Faculty (and some from remoter parts) were invited. According to a possibly mythical anecdote that used to be current in Oxford, when Greenblatt was introduced to Terry Eagleton and asked him what he thought of his theory, Eagleton simply replied, ‘What theory?’. At the time, this was still

regarded as a put-down for Greenblatt: thinking you had a theory and being found not to have one was the ultimate humiliation. But theory with a capital T was in fact already losing some of its *droits de seigneur* by then — more specifically, the kind of Marxist position held by Eagleton had received what looked like a terminal blow from the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe — and it now seems clear that Greenblatt would have done better not to refer to his brand of new historicism as a theory but rather as a set of working practices driven by a well-developed methodology. The subsequent success of that methodology is no doubt sufficient vindication for Greenblatt: whatever criticisms one might nowadays make of its procedures, it has proved to be immensely productive and flexible, adapting itself to all kinds of new materials and drawing in other methodologies such as history of the book.

In that sense, the study of the early modern has indeed been in the forefront of change by demanding a return to diachrony in one form or another. Theory, as it was conceived in the 1960s and 1970s, was programmatically synchronous and ahistorical: it was proclaimed as a new poetics, a new rhetoric, a new linguistics that claimed validity regardless of time's arrow. Texts of the past simply became further grist for the powerful mill-wheels of theory: people suddenly began to discover that medieval, Renaissance and neoclassical texts could also be reflexive like the *nouveau roman*, or could be induced, with a little pressure, to fit the categories of a modern poetics.

However, even when history began to come back, it came via theory and was made to submit to the underlying synchronicity of the theoretical programme. From that angle, the past is not a thing in itself but a textual effect, to be explored by our modern instruments and our modern ideologies, Foucauldian, post-Marxist, psychoanalytic and the like; the archive is not a place where history resides but a textual screen, one that occults the past rather than rendering it transparent to our gaze.¹⁰ In this sense, theorizing the early modern might mean persuading ourselves that it is only a mirage conjured out of our own episteme, our own preoccupations, desires and needs. This is largely true, I believe, of much of the work done on the early modern period in the aftermath of the new historicism.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to try to shift the argument back upstream, as it were, away from the acceptance of a subjectivist historiography. The argument that one can never really know the past as it was, never hear voices from the past except through the distorting medium of our own epistemic assumptions, and *therefore* that we are

free to use history for our own purposes, is as false as it would be to say that, because one's understanding of French or German or Greek or Arabic is imperfect, one should abandon any attempt to understand in their own right the cultures mediated by those languages. There are manifestly greater and lesser degrees of approximation: the question is how to fine-tune one's approximations, how to filter out as much 'noise' as possible. I shall avoid focusing here on the very stories that *are* contaminated by their futures—the construction of a supposedly modern 'self', the decline of religious belief, the rise of capitalism and so forth—and, as an opening move, *suspend* the term 'early modern', provisionally bracket it out. I shall use Montaigne's *Essais* as an example, partly because it is a well-known and accessible text, but partly also because it is usually regarded as an exemplary early modern text, which makes the business of moving upstream the more difficult (and interesting).

Among the many topics that Montaigne likes to read about and talk about, war is one of the most prominent: the ethics of war, personal conduct during battle, strategy, weapons and the like. This is no doubt not surprising for a late sixteenth-century nobleman,¹¹ but I suspect that most modern readers of the *Essais* either pass over most of this material rapidly, looking for interesting nuggets hidden in the middle, or move to the level of political ideology or ethics.¹² If they do try to focus imaginatively on such passages, they are likely to see the endless anecdotes about antique and contemporary males fighting one another as quaint but ultimately boring. It is almost impossible to read these often extended segments of the *Essais* as if Montaigne were describing a commonplace environment in which everything looked *normal*.

So, for someone setting out to read Montaigne for the first time, there is a case for beginning not with much-anthologized chapters on topics that interest us such as 'De l'institution des enfans' or 'Des cannibales' but with 'Des destries' (I.48), a short but not unduly short chapter (it runs to some ten pages) on war-horses. Somewhere in the middle there is a mildly digressive passage on the weapons that are to be preferred in battle:

Anything which we invite to share our great hazards with us must, as far as is feasible, remain under our control: so I would always advise anyone to choose the shortest weapons and those which we can be most answerable for. It is far more likely that we can rely on the sword we hold in our hand than on a bullet which is discharged from a pistol, since that pistol comprises several elements, the powder, the flint and the striker; if the least of them fails so does your fortune. . . But as for the pistol, I will speak of it more fully when I compare the arms of

former times with our own. Except for the deafening noise—and we have all been broken in to that—it is an ineffectual weapon and I hope we shall (c) one day (a) give up using it.¹³

For us, who know that within a relatively short period of time the world will acquire high-calibre rifles, machine-guns, ballistic missiles and all kinds of weapons of mass destruction, and that in Western Europe at least civilians don't normally know how to use weapons, let alone carry them, this last remark is merely an amusing curiosity. But if we can manage not to be merely amused, it may serve as the kind of small indicator that suddenly changes the angle and proportions of our historical vision.

What of the still-to-be-written chapter referred to here, on weapons ancient and modern? 'Des armes des Parthes' (II.9) might qualify, but that chapter contained in its earlier versions a passage in which Montaigne says that a lengthy discussion of the topic, already written up, had been stolen—together with some other materials—by a manservant.¹⁴ It seems certain, from a similar remark elsewhere,¹⁵ that the thief was a *valet* who was employed to write down the *Essais* as Montaigne dictated them. If that is so, then for that anonymous individual of the late sixteenth century this chapter seems to have stood out, among the hundreds of pages his strange and perhaps slightly crazy master had written, as a particularly saleable piece—one of the few items that might be worth stealing and thus risking his job for.¹⁶ Not much there, perhaps, for a history of the early modern self; even less for 'theory'; but a trace none the less of what was going on round the edges of the *Essais*, the commonplace murmur of ordinary life.

There are many such items in Montaigne's text that usually get brushed aside in the search for the beginnings of our own story. Another is his intense dislike of changing fashion, which in his day was again a normal view to hold rather than an unduly conservative one. To notice them is not to propose some new interpretation of the *Essais*—for example, one that made 'the everyday' the focus of attention—but rather to shift the centre of gravity however slightly, to avoid the drama of the self or of the unfolding of the liberal humanist consciousness, to in some sense *detoxify* Montaigne.

Only when that symbolic gesture has been performed can one revert to the critical question of context. By context, I mean first the coordinates that determine how a cultural artefact is positioned within the culture that produced it, what it is *doing* there. The number of possible coordinates for a given text is of course indefinite, and the problem

is compounded when one is dealing with a text as prominent and many-sided as Montaigne's. One also needs to remember that a high proportion of potential reference points will no longer be extant, and that others will themselves be complex artefacts that need to be situated by reference to yet other sets of coordinates (as, for example, when one considers the writings of Ambroise Paré or Jean Bodin as contextual coordinates for the *Essais*). The point of this metaphor, however, is that it is dynamic, allowing different clusters of reference points to emerge in ever-shifting patterns, and information deficiencies in one area to be compensated for by reference to other areas. Far from being once-and-for-all 'keys to interpretation', these shifting patterns also have a mutually controlling and correcting function: they prevent one from saturating a given text with one type of contextual information or thematic preoccupation. At the same time, they permit the assumption that one *can* progressively refine the contextual model, learn more accurately to trace the cultural intentions that traverse the text.¹⁷

This metaphor may be understood in a literally spatial sense: there is a geography and topography of culture which will need to be determined in synchronous terms. The virtual space of the court, or of an academic, monastic, legal or mercantile milieu, or (say) of Montaigne's tower, together with the movements of an individual life or text between these spaces, constitute just such a topographic nexus. Travel further afield is of course likely to bring about radical shifts in the coordinates.

It is critical, however, that this model also be considered in temporal terms. No one will dispute that, in general, the context for a text must precede its emergence: context is prior to text, it would seem, as cause is prior to effect. If one cites a set of intertexts for a Ronsard poem or a Shakespeare play, they will necessarily (if one preserves any notion of history at all) be ones that are extant and in some sense available at the time those texts were conceived and written. For us who come afterwards, however, time's arrow passes through the text and beyond. Already, in prefaces and other paratexts, a work may speak to future readers, imagine its own reception; in many instances, we have successive editions of a work printed during the writer's lifetime or within its trajectory, perhaps with different prefaces; dramatic works are usually published as written texts only after they have been already performed, and their printed prefaces thus represent the future of the performance as such. The first states of Ronsard's poems, constantly and often drastically modified, similarly have a future, as do the first printed versions of Montaigne's *Essais*. And beyond that, the reception

histories of which we have evidence may (with some qualifications, to which I shall return in a moment) be regarded as what one might call 'downstream context'.¹⁸

Such diachronic contexts—again to be considered as dynamic, shifting, never foreclosed, always capable of correction and closer approximation—constitute a kind of collective intentional structure. They supply clues to what the writer thought he or she was doing, what the text was meant to do or say, in the sense elucidated by Quentin Skinner, although no doubt pluralizing that sense somewhat: rather than being an inert receptacle of meaning, the text is the medium for an act of communication (a speech-act).¹⁹ One might also say that contexts considered in this way provide a rhetorical frame of reference, since rhetoric is a use of language arising from particular circumstances, targeting particular listeners or readers, and striving to make certain things happen. But of course, because the kinds of texts we are thinking of here outlive a single moment and purpose and move with the stream of time, there is also a downstream context that may be no less informative about what a text means or is capable of meaning.

It is necessary to make a distinction here, however, between reception history in general and what I have called downstream context. The distinction is easier to make in methodological than in theoretical terms, a point which may illustrate the ways in which theory may actually be unhelpful for practice by making demands that are in excess of what the situation requires. In this instance, theory would no doubt tell us that, once one begins to accept downstream context as a way of determining the potential meanings of a text, no limit can be placed: the meaning of *Hamlet* for Freud is no less valid than its meaning for Shakespeare's contemporaries; neither the anti-clerical Rabelais nor the agnostic Montaigne of post-Enlightenment readers may be regarded as ill-founded; or, putting the same point the other way round, theory would insist that any particular reading of a given work can only provide information about the moment of reading and *its* context, not about the work itself.²⁰

In a methodological perspective, however, one would readily acknowledge that the dynamic relation between a text and its history is not reducible to a linear model according to which every point on the line has the same value. The readings of the *Essais* in the quarter-century after Montaigne's death, the period during which they were edited and promoted by Marie de Gournay, may be regarded as a legitimate (though not of course absolute) guide to what and how they meant; those readings might have amused or irritated

Montaigne himself, if he had lived long enough, but they would not have seemed entirely alien or meaningless to him. A limit is reached, and probably overstepped, with Pascal's reading of the *Essais*. Montaigne would have been perfectly capable of understanding that reading, and might indeed have been flattered by it, but he could not possibly have foreseen it, since it presupposes the rise of *libertinage* in seventeenth-century France: the crucial Pascalian accusation of 'nonchalance du salut' (indifference to salvation) follows directly from that phenomenon. Such thresholds of mutation in a reception history can only be established on an individual basis and according to shifting sets of criteria.

It will be evident that, while this kind of distinction — the decision where in the trajectory of a text's passage through time to place a threshold — is a question for methodology in general, it is an over-riding question for methodologies of the early modern. Whatever senses that phrase may have had in the past, it is now fraught with the notion of a Foucauldian paradigm shift, of relatively stable epistemes that mutate dramatically, even though Foucault's succession of Renaissance, classical and modern epistemes is perhaps in anglophone historiography reduced to the oppositional and complementary pair early modern/modern. According to that model, what I have called 'thresholds' would tend to cluster and merge to provide the energy for the major turn which carries history into the modern.

What I am arguing for in its place is a much more open and flexible map. In such a map the modern itself would not be essentialized; the 'early' modern (traces of the modern before modernity) would thus become a less obsessive focus, or would at least be looked at in a less teleological perspective; and thresholds of interpretation, or of discursive or aesthetic modes, would be both more local and more mobile. Rather than being historiographical prison-houses within which texts can be supervised and punished at will, our constructions of the past ought to be delicate and deliberately fragile constructions, sensitive to the half-heard voices and needs discernable in those texts, fragments of a lost culture that have survived the ravages of time. For such a project, as I have already suggested, it may be more helpful to focus on methodologies and practices than on the theoretical, which promises rigour at the expense, too often, of narcissism.

★ ★ ★

One final cluster of points. I have spoken of context and its uses in defining the intentionality of a text, and it might easily seem — as many

contextual readings indeed seem to presuppose—that a knowledge of all the relevant contextual factors, both upstream and downstream, would be sufficient to provide such a definition, to exhaust the potential meaning of a text. Against that view, I would advance the axiom that a text always exceeds its context, *a fortiori* when it is not a purely functional text, playing a fixed and regulated role in the culture from which it emerged. What is in excess of the context is precisely that which makes a text like Montaigne's *Essais* a unique cultural artefact, and here the choice of an extreme and virtually self-evident example is what allows one to see that excess is a powerful and historically important factor: even if other texts have less of it, one can never assume that they have none. The added factor is likely to be the way in which the text connects up threads of its contemporary culture that remain separate in other kinds of evidence: it tells us more about the world it came from than any of the contextual materials available to us. The connections themselves and the multi-dimensional model that emerges from them allow us to see not only that certain thoughts or imaginative conceptions or types of argument or uses of syntax are possible and functional in a given culture, but also the ways in which they could be combined into larger cognitive structures. The dynamics of upstream and downstream context provides the means of locating and as it were positioning this complex bundle of significant threads, but conversely the text itself then appears as the lens through which the contextual flow reveals its wider historical intentionality.

A caution is perhaps needed here: the notion that a text such as Montaigne's *Essais* exceeds its context should not be taken to mean that all of its aspects should be submitted to intensive interpretative enquiry. When I spoke earlier of the need to 'detoxify' a text (Montaigne's in that case) and listen to what I called 'the commonplace murmur of everyday life', I was arguing against the preselection of hermeneutically exciting passages and in favour of a reading that includes apparent *remplissage* (padding). It is only through such a 'detoxified' reading that one can begin to see how a text exceeds its context in the amount and kind of information that it can deliver. The 'quiet' materials are a critical part of the overall balance precisely because of their quietness.

In some privileged cases, the added factor of which I have spoken here may also be the future itself. Montaigne may think that firearms have no future, but he tries to imagine one—fleeting though it may be—for the *Essais*.²¹ This groping forward towards something of which the shape is not yet apparent is not explicit in all canonic texts, far from it. Yet it might help us to understand the survival of such

texts, the way in which, while remaining stubbornly themselves, they display a Protean ability to adapt to contexts and cultures they could never have foreseen. The usual way of imagining their survival is to suppose that, leaving their own histories behind, they enter into a transhistorical realm where they are all equally accessible to us, to our needs and our interpretations. Another and perhaps more appropriate view would be that, by gathering together the threads of the particular (historical) context in which they are embedded and at the same time exceeding that context, they become paradigmatic cultural objects. As such, and precisely by offering a privileged mode of entry into the world to which they belonged, they are capable—like their siblings from ‘other’ cultures of our own time—of providing us with a unique resource as cognitive models: as texts to think with. Thus the *Essais*, or Shakespeare’s plays, are early modern not because they obediently anticipate aspects of our world, submitting meekly to our judgements and prejudices, but because, reflecting otherwise on analogous questions, they help us to imagine ways ahead for ourselves. Ways that might even perhaps lead out of the prison-house of the modern and its postmodern iterations.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Luke Clossey, John Elliott, Ian Maclean, Quentin Skinner and Keith Thomas for their helpful suggestions on this question. Luke Clossey has also made available to me his conference paper ‘The Beginnings and Ends of the “Early Modern World”’, presented at ‘Defining and Redefining Early Modern History: Old Paradigms and New Directions. A Symposium to Honor Thomas A. Brady, Jr.’ (University of California, Berkeley, 4 September 2004); an adapted version of this paper appears as the entry ‘Early Modern World’ in *The Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History*, edited by William Hardy McNeill and others (Berkshire Publishing Group, Great Barrington, MA, 2005), 592–98.
- 2 The word ‘pré-moderne’ is generally used to designate the whole of history up to the end of the Middle Ages; the ‘époque moderne’ thus begins with the ‘Renaissance’. This last term, together with ‘Réforme’, ‘Baroque’, ‘Époque classique’ and ‘Lumières’, continues to be in virtually undisputed use in France; however, Michel Jeanneret has proposed, as a rendering of ‘the early modern’, the expression ‘seuil(s) de la modernité’, now the title of a series of monographs on early modern culture edited by Jeanneret and published by Droz, Geneva. The notion of a threshold will be discussed later, but it is evident that this rendering suggests a line of demarcation which is lacking in ‘early modern’.

- 3 See for example *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of E.H. Harbison*, edited by Theodore K. Rabb and Jerrold E. Seigel (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1969); Eugene Rice, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460–1559* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, [1971]); *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe: Essays from Annales*, edited by Peter Burke (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
- 4 These examples are virtual ones, and do not necessarily correspond to the view of any one new historicist critic.
- 5 That those who lived in such periods were often conscious of change — even that they were crossing a threshold of some kind — is of course undeniable (the tearing down of the Berlin wall is a graphic symbol of such awareness); what they did not have access to is the historian's analepsis, the story as it subsequently unfolded. The question of how far 'disturbances' may be detected in contemporary consciousness around what we retrospectively regard as historical thresholds is central to my twin studies *Pré-histoires: Textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva, Droz, 1999) and *Pré-histoires II: Langues étrangères et troubles économiques* (Geneva, Droz, 2001). See also below, pp. 23–4, on texts that in some sense apprehend their own future.
- 6 The founding account of the origins of this opposition is provided by Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, translated by Willard R. Trask (London and Henley, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 251–5. See also my entry 'Ancients and Moderns' in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3, *The Renaissance*, edited by Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), 417–25.
- 7 See the article by Clossey referred to above, note 1.
- 8 My argument from this point onwards has been informed by papers and discussions in the interdisciplinary seminar entitled 'Connections' which I organized and chaired at Royal Holloway, University of London, in 2002, 2003 and 2004. I would like to express my gratitude to the speakers and other participants in these seminars; their work is partially acknowledged below with reference to particular points.
- 9 Subsequently published as *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991).
- 10 I am indebted here to Michael Sheringham's paper 'The Question of the Archive in Recent Writing and Theory', presented at the Royal Holloway seminar on Wednesday 9 October 2003, and to the discussion following it, for providing a critical map of this set of theoretical and methodological questions.
- 11 See James J. Supple, *Arms versus Letters: The Military and Literary Ideals in the 'Essais' of Montaigne* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984).
- 12 As in David Quint's excellent study *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the 'Essais'* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1998).

26 Paragraph

- 13 *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, translated by M. A. Screech (London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1991), I.48, 324.
- 14 *Essays*, 455.
- 15 See the opening of II.37 (*Essays*, 858).
- 16 It is evident from the two passages cited above, notes 14 and 15, that Montaigne himself assumed that the motive of the theft was profit.
- 17 I have attempted to apply this methodological model in *Pré-histoires* and *Pré-histoires II* (see above, note 5).
- 18 This phrase emerged in discussion after Marian Hobson's paper 'Rear-Mirror View, or Using What is in Front and in the Future to Understand What is Past', delivered at the Royal Holloway seminar on Wednesday 17 November 2004. The paper itself proposed a powerful model of an interpretative context for certain texts that is chronologically posterior to the composition of the text; Hobson specifically distinguished this context from a reception history.
- 19 This model of interpretation, based on speech-act theory, was elucidated in Quentin Skinner's paper 'Is It Still Possible To Interpret Texts?', presented in the Royal Holloway seminar on Wednesday 20 October 2004. See also his most recent published discussion of these issues in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Politics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), especially chapters 4–6.
- 20 This kind of theory is associated in its most extreme and paradoxical form with Stanley Fish, in particular his *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretative Communities* (Cambridge, MA, and London, Harvard University Press, [1980]). Another variant is provided by Borges's often-cited story 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*'.
- 21 See in particular *Essays*, 1111. There are also a number of passages where Montaigne gestures (usually by means of powerful metaphors) towards something that is beyond present apprehension; see for example 164, 629 (where the image in the original is of *shaking* the boundary-fence of knowledge; the translation here is reductively passive), 631–3, 1086.