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Michael Moriarty

Ciel! Que lui vais-je dire! Et par où commencer?
Heaven! What am I going to tell her! And where to begin?
Racine, *Phèdre*, I.3.247

1

Pleasure is simply a dance of the blood through the brain. Space is infinite and eternally silent: the music of the spheres has gone dead. It has no message to utter. The heavens do not declare the glory of God, nor does the earth show forth his handiwork: at least, not to those who do not already believe in him. Human beings are regulated only by the malleable and temporary arrangements of the communities they live in: it is impossible to discover any natural moral law that binds them simply in virtue of their rational nature. What rational nature? They are driven by a desire for happiness that can have anything, literally anything, as its object, that bears no discernible relation to any 'supreme good' for human beings that can be inferred from their nature, rational or otherwise. No more than the actions of human beings do the movements of bodies obey any inbuilt tendency or inclination: they are the result of mechanical laws, and to discover these laws is the goal of the physical sciences. As for human behaviour, that needs a different kind of explanation, in terms of a story. The Biblical stories, Jewish and Christian, weave the randomness and contingency of universal history into a plan. But rival stories are created to achieve the same purpose without reference to divine agency: stories of the exit of mankind from a state of nature into a state of society, of the origin of inequality, of the progressive self-appropriation of reason, of the dialectic of modes of production, the genealogy of morals, the primal horde and the primal parricide.

The above is also a story, thus part of the history it appears to expound. It begins, indeed, in non-narrative mode with a panorama: a construction of a particular perception of man and the universe,

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a 'structure of feeling' as Raymond Williams would have called it, that those so disposed might recognize as modern. If they recognize it is modern, then the trick is turned: for the materials are from the seventeenth century, and therefore the seventeenth century, in some of its aspects at any rate, is modern. (The presence — 'residual', one might call it, using another term of Williams's — of religious revelation specifies its 'earliness'). But, moreover, the point of the synchronic panorama is to justify a move into diachrony, narrative. Because people, it is suggested, saw things like this, they responded to that perception by acting (in this case, by reaffirming old stories or inventing new ones), and our own situation is in part the outcome of these successive waves of narrative.

That is a potted or perhaps a pottery history, put together mostly from some fragments of an irreducibly fragmentary work, of some aspects of modernity.¹ 'Theory' is, arguably, part of that history. It may not formulate the kind of vision of our condition sketched out in the opening paragraph: but it does not need to, since it presupposes it. It registers the divorce of the human from the physical sciences. It treats meaning not in terms of an order of reason embodied in the universe as a whole, and in ourselves as part of the universe.² It treats meaning as a purely human construct, since it is suspicious of transcendental revelation. It annotates or rewrites some of the stories just alluded to, or it attempts to interweave them with one another. But it sometimes questions the authority of storytelling itself, or pronounces the end of big stories, grand narratives. Then it moves into postmodernity. But its ultimate origins, one could say, lie in those initial perceptions just quoted, which go back to early modernity: to the emergence of new scientific and philosophical paradigms, the fading of concepts and habits of thought consecrated by antiquity. If 'theory', as a matter of history, does owe something to the early modern (and of course the foregoing is simply a brief and partial genealogical sketch, rather than a comprehensive family tree), it seems worth asking whether this alleged relation has any relevance to the contemporary practice of theory: whether theory has or should have any specific relation to materials from the so-called early modern period.

Various of the contributors discuss the label 'early modern': I shall say more of this below. It is generally taken, from a chronological viewpoint, to cover the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³ It is not quite a movement, as the Renaissance or the Enlightenment are conceived as being. They were to some extent self-conscious developments: but the unity attributed to the early modern is more

a function of retrospective analysis. The expression 'l'âge classique' (the Classical age) is used in France to cover part of the period, say from 1630 to 1690: it was ratified in the title of Foucault's first major work, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* but it has proved impossible to import: the English translation is *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*.⁴ On the other hand, Jean Rohou's recent account of the transformations of what an English-language author would doubtless have called the 'early modern' prefers the plain chronological label 'the seventeenth century', though the analysis reaches back to the sixteenth and forward to the eighteenth.⁵

2

To approach the question from the opposite direction, is the 'modern critical theory' in relationship to which *Paragraph* defines itself a theory of the modern, or a modern theory, a body of concepts, knowledges, and methods, like, say, archaeology, applicable to all periods? Plainly, many of its founding fathers and mothers developed their thinking through the encounter with the twentieth-century avant-garde, in which some earlier, but not very much earlier, authors were granted honorary membership: Flaubert, say, or Mallarmé. Barthes on Bataille, Foucault on Klossowski, Derrida on Artaud, Cixous on Joyce: the relationship between theory and avant-garde practice is too close to be accidental.

On the other hand, theory has proved fruitful in its application to texts prior to any modernity, early or late, and served to legitimate their claim to our interest. When Barthes and Foucault sought to question the assumptions of authorship pervading our culture, they did so partly by pointing to earlier cultures in which the status of the author was radically different. Medievalists thus had the satisfaction of seeing theory endorsing what they had not needed Barthes or Foucault to tell them. Again, the theoretical discrediting of 'realism' as a concept and a value helped to erode the superiority complacently imputed to the modern realist novel over texts that never aspired to the faithful rendering of ordinary life. In particular, the dissolution of character-centred psychological realism, explained as a combination of semic and cultural codes, held no threat to a literature where 'realistic' portrayal of character was not a prime aesthetic objective.⁶ On the contrary, medieval versions of 'subjectivity' have proved fertile territory for exploration by psychoanalytic or feminist theory.⁷

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Early modern literature, though, might seem more resistant to theoretical treatment. I shall try to suggest why by another potted history, intended simply to point to some of the factors that, as I take it, shaped writing in France over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in ways that inhibit or complicate our response to that writing.

At first, early modern texts exhibit significant continuities with certain aspects of medieval literature. Take Rabelais: the exploitation of fantasy, the deliberate mingling of 'high' and 'low' cultural elements, the prominence of the 'grotesque body', the engagement, albeit allegorical and ambiguous, with political and religious issues. But a gradual tightening of State and ecclesiastical influence on culture produced new personality-types and new cultural forms: the courtier, and later the *honnête homme* (more or less equivalent to 'gentleman' in English) were to purge themselves of all speech and behaviour that did not mark their distinction from the common herd. The importation of models from antiquity helped to produce a literature for these new social types. The literature that emerged in the seventeenth century had got rid of many medieval features. It had to be strictly redistributed into genres, comic or serious. If serious, it had to be plausible (*vraisemblable*), and this was largely a matter of conformity to received ideas, to 'cultural codes', in Barthes's term. All this can lead to a negative perception of the literature of the period, as already tainted by the curse of 'realism': it had abandoned the imaginary worlds in which medieval and even early Renaissance writers could conceive of something other than the everyday, and set itself to a representation of people as they are, not as they ought to be, or might imagine themselves to be. Except that, unlike its nineteenth-century counterpart, seventeenth-century 'realism' (the critique goes on) is oblivious of social and historical determinations. The characters are wrapped in the supposedly transparent garments of an eternal human nature, conceived in essentially psychological terms as a system of passions and personality-traits.⁸ Early modern literature, at least that form of it known in France as 'classical', might thus appear a very repressed affair. But not only repressed, but repressive.

Take another example, although this time from the philosophy of the period, from what some might call, if they were looking for 'foundations' a foundational text of (early) modernity, Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. In *Histoire de la Folie*, Foucault produced a scandalous reading of the First Meditation, in which he argues that Descartes uses the concept of madness as an instrument in the

discovery of knowledge. To label a supposition 'mad' was now, apparently, enough to eliminate it. Not very long before Descartes, Rabelais or Shakespeare could still call in question the distinction between madness and wisdom. Now Descartes can simply refuse to recognize madness—a gesture complicit with the new social policy of imprisoning mad people alongside other marginal social categories such as beggars. As a reading of Descartes, this is certainly questionable, and Derrida pertinently questioned it.⁹ But the suspicion remains that the early modern period involves the construction of a new instrumental and objectifying subjectivity. Even Montaigne, whose *Essais* can perfectly accredit the idea that subjectivity is not a substance, but a process, one of incessant construction and reconstruction in language, of self-alienation and self-loss in the text that constantly threatens to become other to its supposed author—even he can be taken to be saying something very different, that there is a solid core of self, a 'mistress form', difficult to capture in language but more available to ourselves than to anyone else; and that the good life consists in fidelity to this form.

Theoretical readings of early modern literature have generally had to work against the grain: they have had to subdue resistant material. For Marxism, the chief interpretative problem was that historians have commonly been reluctant to interpret the *ancien régime* in terms of social class in the Marxist sense. Certainly, contemporaries did not: they thought of themselves, at least officially, as occupying a rank, belonging to an 'estate', differentiated, in theory, by its social function (prayer, fighting, or work), rather than by its place in the system of production relations. The Marxist critic had to argue for the pertinence of an objective category of class, to which social consciousness failed to correspond. Psychoanalytic criticism comes up against the prevalence of ego in the texts. That is to say, in a theatre where speech is the dominant form of action (violent physical acts being banished from the stage) characters are constantly defining themselves in their speech. They seek to identify themselves with their place in a system of values. When the identification fails, they blame their passions, psychological states apparently alien to them, in which they fail to recognize themselves. Feminist scholarship has unearthed and interpreted many fine texts written by women in the early modern period and forgotten, no doubt, partly on account of the authors' gender: but the texts themselves do not, on the whole, vouchsafe us the spectacle of an assertion of female identity consciously setting itself against the rule of male authority and male discourse. This

is not, of course, to say that theoretical readings cannot work: simply that the discrepancy between the theorist's world-view and that of the author, characters, and original readers takes a particular form. It is not that they have nothing to do with one another, on the contrary, they overlap, but only so far. The text seems to be about to deliver exactly the kind of theoretical insight that might support the theoretical critic's world-view (for theory is no more ideologically innocent than the discourses it challenges), and then refrains, invoking, perhaps, some religious or moral consideration that sets the theorist's teeth on edge. The experience may be frustrating: it is probably a salutary obstacle to the pursuit of our own image in the texts of the past.

I cannot of course here hope to summarize the different theoretical approaches that have been adopted with regard to early modern literature, merely to situate the work presented in this number.¹⁰

3

As Alain Viala argues, the seventeenth century witnesses the emergence of a relatively autonomous literary field. But the key word here is 'emergence': the existence of such a field is not a given of the period. This is an important differentiation between early modern culture and that of the nineteenth or twentieth centuries (it is too early to speak of the twenty-first). Of course, nineteenth- and twentieth-century researchers have always had the option of reading literary works in connection with intellectual and cultural history, and one can work on early modern theatre or prose fiction in isolation from other kinds of texts. But so many of the canonical early modern figures (Rabelais, Montaigne, Pascal) refuse to be confined to a pre-existing literary genre (the essay as a genre was largely created by Montaigne's *Essais* ('experiments', 'attempts', 'soundings', 'tests')) that the early modern specialist is virtually obliged to come to terms with broader intellectual and cultural histories. Because this brings him or her within the sphere of influence of intellectual paradigms developed in non-literary fields of interpretation, it will tend to complicate his or her relationship to 'theory'. In particular, 'theoretical' interpretations generally presuppose that their object is to disclose what the author did not see and could not say. Suppose, for argument's sake, we find Barthes's *Sur Racine* illuminating, this is not because we imagine that Racine conceived his characters as a primal horde subject to a tyrannical father-figure: on the contrary, we find it illuminating because Racine could not have conceived them in this way. The witness of Racine's

texts to psychoanalytical theory is thus all the more powerful (in this way of thinking) for the author's necessary ignorance of it. Foucault's theory of the episteme was likewise designed to exhibit constraints and limits on thought that exceeded the possible awareness of individual authors. Now in the field of early modern intellectual history, the immensely influential work of Quentin Skinner is based on a methodology that rejects interpretations structured around categories historically unavailable to the author. It is probably fair to suggest that the influence of the Skinnerian injunction to reconstruct what authors were doing when they wrote rather than deciding what the text can be made to mean for us has complicated the application of theoretical methodologies to early modern texts, literary or not.¹¹ As for Foucault's model of intellectual history, it has been challenged by Ian Maclean's detailed demonstrations of the ways in which writers who remain within a certain dominant way of thinking can, none the less, to a certain extent think beyond it.¹² Whatever one thinks of Foucault's specific analyses, however, he certainly encouraged theoretically-minded researchers in early modern literature to link their interpretations to historical configurations of power and discourse. The New Historicists (influenced also by Althusser's theory of ideology) certainly absorbed this lesson to good effect. In general, the essays in this number bear out the general point that critics of early modern literature, even when they mobilize theoretical categories, seek to keep theory and history on speaking terms. A good example is Liz Guild's advocacy of psychoanalytic reading's capacity to elicit 'what was not *directly* known, knowable or representable in early modern texts', in this case Montaigne's *Essais* and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*. As she reminds us, anamorphosis, the model of the kind of reading she proposes, was already a source of fascination in the Renaissance; and the readings she proposes open up questions for historical analysis. Richard Scholar argues for a mode of reading he calls 'free-thinking', less generalizing than theory and going beyond the strictly historicist approach: but this too, he contends, has early modern precedents, in Montaigne's own reading practice and in the concept of *libertas philosophandi*.

4

Some contributors have taken a body of theory and tested it against early modern material. Thus Alain Viala examines the historical account that goes with Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the

nineteenth-century literary field, an account that in principle seems to make the concept of 'field' inapplicable to the seventeenth century. On the contrary, Viala shows how it can be applied: the logic of the field is already at work in Boileau's *L'Art Poétique*. Joseph Harris's reading of seventeenth-century poems of cross-dressing does justice to the impact of Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance, but equally exposes ambiguities in the theory. Can the disturbance of gender identity by cross-dressing be read *both* as erotically arousing *and* as subversive of gender categories? The poems seem to display a more complex understanding than the theory of the relation between the two: they are more capable than the theory of accommodating the role of the spectator as one who does not simply respond to the transgression of gender codes, but who actively interprets and reinterprets it. Liz Guild's essay has been already mentioned.

Other contributors question the very epochal categories of modern, early modern, postmodern, and by extension the kinds of analysis that they have tended to generate. Terence Cave and Wes Williams both acknowledge that part of the point of talking about the early modern is to forestall the Whig-history approach to the past, in which folly and error are gradually displaced by the enlightenment we ourselves enjoy. But Cave in particular stresses the irreducibly teleological nature of the term 'early modern', and penetratingly analyses the ideological investments that have encouraged but also conditioned a certain interpretive stance in relation to materials from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He puts forward alternative reading strategies by which we may resist the temptation of teleology.¹³ Williams, likewise, does justice to the urge to construct narratives of origins, yet argues for suspicion of such narratives, of the quest to trace our identity in the 'early modern'.

As is noted by Cave, the term 'Modern' itself belongs within 'early modernity', as the label for one of the parties in the Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, between writers who held that antiquity provided timeless models of excellence that we should imitate and those who argued that we had superior cultural resources on which to draw. John Lyons investigates the Ancients' attitude to their ancient predecessors as a form of nostalgia — the term, he notes, was actually coined in the late seventeenth century, at the time of the Quarrel, to denote homesickness. A certain combination of irony and nostalgia has been held to be characteristic of the postmodern: Lyons observes it in the late-seventeenth-century Ancients, and stresses its polemical force in the conflict with the Moderns. Again, the

periodizations by which we distance ourselves from the past turn out to be unsettled.

5

Phèdre, in the passage quoted in the epigraph, cannot begin to tell her confidante Cnone what is the matter with her because what she has to reveal, her incestuous passion for her stepson Hippolyte, is so monstrous. She begins by a series of references to her origins and ties: to the terrible fates of her mother and her sister. She finally blurts out her love and the identity of its object, though she cannot herself name him, and then tells the story of how she fell in love with him, as if, by putting it into a narrative framework, she could somehow normalize or exorcise the trauma. But what the story reveals is that all her previous attempts at normalization and exorcism have been in vain: nor does the story itself bring any liberation. We may tell stories about the early modern in order to come to terms with the monstrous within ourselves: see, we say, what we (or others) might have been, if that terrible repression or exploitation had not taken place, as it were, proleptically in our name, since we are the heirs of it. Or, on the contrary, we may seek a different relationship with it, in which the question of our origins is less prominent. The essays in this volume are all explorations of distance and difference, in which, however, moments of similarities can be recognized or traced. Historical methodologies are essential to our thinking about how to search for or to handle such relationships. But theory too may play its part.

NOTES

- 1 The materials of the foregoing are from Pascal, *Penses*: see fragments 565, 233, 38, 94, 181, 795 (Sellier numbering)/686, 201, 3, 60, 148, 958 (Lafuma numbering). The Sellier numbering is used in various editions, such as *Les Provinciales, Penses et Opuscules diverses*, edited by Philippe Sellier and Grard Ferreyrolles, Classiques Modernes, La Pochothque: Le Livre de Poche/Classiques Garnier (Paris, Garnier and Librairie Gnrale Franaise, 2004) and in some translations, such as *Penses and Other Writings*, edited by Anthony Levi, translated by Honor Levi, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999) and *Penses*, edited and translated by Roger Ariw (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett, 2005). The older Lafuma numbering is found in *uvres compltes*, edited by L. Lafuma, Collection L'Intgrale (Paris, Seuil, 1963) and *Penses*, translated by A.J. Krailsheimer

(Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1995). Future references to the *Pensées* in this volume are given by Sellier and Lafuma numbers (abbreviated to S and L respectively). I used the word 'construction' of this picture, and that is what it is, a device to set the discussion going, rather than an analysis I myself endorse (in particular, I would have doubts about any analysis reducing religion to a residue). In itself it raises all kinds of methodological problems. Pascal is being called as an isolated witness to modernity, as if the world-picture he paints supplies the necessary perspective in which the actions and writings of his contemporaries and successors should be seen, but was not in fact seen by them. (True, some aspects of this worldview could be paralleled in Hobbes, say, or Spinoza.) But only some of these perceptions can be attributed to Pascal personally. Others are, or could be, part of his construction of how the world would look to an unbeliever. They can't be taken as documenting how any of his contemporaries actually perceived the world. Nor can we assume that those who read the posthumously published *Pensées* could have made the connections between the fragments that a modern reader can make. The famous fragment on the silence of space is not even in the original (Port-Royal) edition of 1670.

- 2 This is a key theme in Charles Taylor's account of the development of the modern self (*Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989)), which contains substantial discussion of 'early modern' authors such as Montaigne, Descartes, and Locke.
- 3 Sometimes the eighteenth century is assigned to the early modern. It is true that a historiography focused on Enlightenment and Revolution has tended to underestimate continuities between the eighteenth century and its predecessors. However, to consider the eighteenth century in the present context would have necessitated an engagement with the problematic of the Enlightenment, the result of which would have been to broaden the number's focus excessively. We have therefore kept to the narrower definition.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972, first published 1961) (*Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated by Richard Howard (London, Routledge, 2001, first published 1967)).
- 5 Jean Rohou, *Le XVII^e siècle: une révolution de la condition humaine* (Paris, Seuil, 2002).
- 6 In any such sketch, there is a risk of simplification and caricature: how could one lump all medieval literature together? Of course medieval literature is rich in elements that can be called 'realistic': everyday details of speech or costume, especially in comic writing, and, especially in serious writing, acute psychological insights and vivid portrayal of individual states of feeling and character traits (think of Chaucer in both contexts). The point is simply that readers schooled to appreciate only accurate depictions of feelings, relationships, and behaviour such as we might ourselves have encountered, if

we had lived in the same time and place as the work was written in, would find much medieval literature puzzling or unrewarding. But one of the effects of theory has been to point to the limitations of this kind of appreciation, and thus, as I suggest, to make it easier to appreciate other kinds of literature.

- 7 See, for instance, Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: the Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001) and Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).
- 8 This kind of image of seventeenth-century French literature may be found in Sartre or Barthes: it is examined in my *Fallen Nature, Fallen Selves: Early Modern French Thought II* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- 9 Foucault, *Histoire de la folie*, 56–9; Jacques Derrida, ‘Cogito et histoire de la folie’, in *L’Ecriture et la différence* (Paris, Seuil, 1967), 51–97.
- 10 But see John O’Brien, ‘The Time of Theory’, in *Distant Voices Still Heard: Contemporary Readings of French Renaissance Literature*, edited by John O’Brien and Malcolm Quanton (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2000), 1–52, for a wide-ranging and searching account of theoretical approaches to sixteenth-century literature.
- 11 Skinner’s work is discussed in Richard Scholar’s piece below. It is important to point out, for those unfamiliar with it, (a) that Skinner’s work was not at the outset directed against ‘theoretical’ interpretations but against the rather different tendency in conventional history of ideas to read texts from the past against a supposedly timeless set of categories derived in fact from more recent or contemporary thought; (b) that he is talking of intentions he argues to be embedded in texts by the moves they make in relation to other texts, not of thoughts in the author’s head supposed to be distinct from yet producing the works themselves; (c) that he does not rule out all interpretative comment that draws on subsequent historical or conceptual developments, but denies such comment precedence over historically-grounded interpretations. See his *Visions of Politics*, 3 vols (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), vol. I, *Regarding Method*, for an exposition of his methodology.
- 12 See Ian Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning in the Renaissance: The Case of Law* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992); *Logic, Signs, and Nature in the Renaissance: The Case of Learned Medicine* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002); also ‘Foucault’s Renaissance Episteme Reassessed: An Aristotelian Counterblast’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 59 (1998), 149–66.
- 13 See Terence Cave, *Pré-Histoires: Textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva, Droz, 1999) and *Pré-Histoires II: Langues étrangères et troubles économiques au XVIe siècle* (Geneva, Droz, 2001) for a further exposition and further examples of his approach to the problems of relating texts to history.