

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Urban Poetics in the French Renaissance

Review Number:

772

Publish date:

Tuesday, 30 June, 2009

Author:

Elisabeth Hodges

ISBN:

9780754662068

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

162pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

Hugh Roberts

This work of literary criticism is inevitably aimed more at people working in French departments than at social or intellectual historians. Despite the interdisciplinary potential of the subject-matter, there is little here of direct interest to the latter, hence this review is addressed primarily to the former.

The brief introduction defines 'urban poetics', as 'the way the city functioned in early modern texts as a new aesthetic subject, as a means by which authors expressed the self as a phenomenon related to location' (pp. 2-3). In other words, the point is not to investigate representations of one or more cities but to look at how the city served as an idea through which writers imagined the self. In fact, the book has ambitions beyond this, namely to investigate the link between self and place in French Renaissance writing: 'The primary task of [*Urban Poetics*] is to study instances in which the relationship the self derives from the city and engages with a broader reflection about the nature of self and the sites it occupies in the world and in language' (p. 3). Unfortunately, this key sentence is ungrammatical, indeed incoherent, making the argument hard, if not impossible, to follow. This is by no means unusual, for the book contains a very large number of errors of this kind, as well as numerous infelicities of style, including frequent Gallicisms, pleonasms, and unexplained repetitions (e.g. a lengthy passage from Montaigne is quoted on both p. 98 and p. 114). The author has been badly let down by her publisher who, although they have produced an attractive cover and illustrations, should have done much more to ensure adequate copy-editing; all too often errors of

grammar and inadequacies of style obscure the book's argument.

The apparent aim of *Urban Poetics* is very broad, for to study the relations between self, place and language over a period of almost two-and-a-half centuries is no small thing. Such a wide-ranging endeavour makes it that much harder methodologically to maintain focus.

The book's four chapters propose readings of Villon's *Testament* (c.1461) and the *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris* (1405-49) (chapter 1), Corrozet's *Antiquitez de Paris* (1532) (chapter 2), Scève's *Saulsaye* (1547) (chapter 3) and Montaigne's *Essais* (1580-92) (chapter 4), before an epilogue that looks briefly at a short section of Descartes's *Discours* (1637). A clearer justification as to why these texts were chosen would have been helpful. Are they particularly representative of 'urban poetics' and, if so, are other, contemporary texts less representative? Why are some major French authors of the period, who have a good deal to say about the city in one way or another, barely mentioned (e.g. Christin de Pisan, Rabelais, Du Bellay)? What, if anything, about 'urban poetics' is unique to the French Renaissance and not shared, for example, with Italian city-states or the cities of antiquity? Why this period of history at all?

The attempt to answer the latter question by reference to the European conquest of the Americas and to the invention of printing (pp. 2, 10) does not help greatly, not least because one of the five main texts cited, the *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, predates both. Nor is the issue of periodisation entirely resolved by arguing that the 'modern' individual was invented during this period (p. 2), because this raises the danger of anachronism. Here and elsewhere, Terence Cave's work on the 'pre-history' of the self in *Pré-Histoires: textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (1) would have been of methodological help, especially to avoid the impression of a teleological approach that reads back onto early modern texts the modern notions they could not have known about. In fairness, the author states her wish to avoid 'conscripting the early modern subject into a teleological narrative that privileges modern notions of subjectivity' (p. 4), but for this wish to come true the reader should have been given a clearer indication of how Renaissance models of selfhood differ from modern ones.

Chapter one starts by analysing one of the most urban of poets, namely François Villon. The *Testament* serves as a more secure repository for the poet's self than his body which, he tells us, is failing. Interestingly, then, Villon locates his self in writing and not, therefore, in any particular location. Hodges argues that the *Testament* moves from the abstract or mythological in its first half to poems that are more grounded in specific places in its second half, thereby counteracting the sense of loss famously evoked in 'La Ballade des femmes du temps jadis'. She concentrates on two poems, 'Contreditz de Franc Gontier', which contrasts city and country life, and 'La Ballade des femmes de Paris', which praises (perhaps ironically, given their infamous reputation?) Parisian fishwives for their gift of the gab. The latter poem in particular conjures up images of 15th-century Paris, of women being educated in the ways of urban living, even if 'their existence is entirely emptied out' (p. 25), thereby suggesting that, here at least, the link between personal identity and the city involves the loss of the former.

In an unexplained reversal of chronological order, the second half of chapter 1 concentrates on the early 15th-century *Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris*, focusing on, first, its treatment of Joan of Arc and, second, its descriptions of death in the city through public executions and plague. Joan's voice is reported in the *Journal* in spite of its author's political opposition to her, but there is no sense of her subjectivity in the text (p. 32). This conclusion does not seem very surprising, because it would be odd if her subjectivity had emerged in a text by someone who was not her and presumably had never met her. Again, the self is not prominent here, either for Joan of Arc or for the author, since 'absent from the text are any narratives that explicitly reveal the bourgeois' self-reflection' (p. 33). It is therefore something of a leap to conclude that these 15th-century texts 'celebrate the emergence of the self' (p. 40), since so much of the chapter's argument points to an opposite finding.

Chapter two examines Gilles Corrozet's guidebooks, in which 'place functions as a way of understanding and negotiating relations between history, the self, and space at a moment when the book, like the map, functioned as a material signifier for the exploration and the representation of the self and the world' (p. 42;

the claim is repeated almost word-for-word on p. 72). Beyond such tricky philosophical questions as to how place helps us understand our relations with space, or indeed how maps represent the self, the view that books explore self and world seems at best vague and at worst a truism. However, a potential answer to this objection comes in the form of the contribution guidebooks make to a growing sense of civic and national identity in Renaissance France. For Corrozet's works also take the form of memorials, using 'print as a form of permanence that charts the intrinsic symbolic meaning of place' (p. 52). This is a promising line of analysis, further enhanced by the key historical point that François I made Paris the official seat of the monarchy in 1528 (p. 59). History, politics and print culture thereby join forces in these works: 'The centrality of Paris in the ongoing ideological program to advance the political and artistic superiority of France aligned cultural politics with the urban imagination' (p. 60). Literary or rhetorical analysis is well placed to show how this urban imagination is constructed through writing about cities and their history. *Urban Poetics* is at its most insightful when it is grounded in such close reading that here is also informed by social history and the history of the book.

The analysis of Scève's *Saulsaye* (chapter 3) also features close reading, which is now focused more on individual rather than collective historical identities, partly as a result of the change in genre from guidebook to eclogue. The poem takes the form of a debate between two shepherds, namely the melancholic and solitary Philerme, who has taken up residence just beyond Lyon's city walls so as to avoid the uncooperative object of his affections, and his friend, Antire, who seeks to persuade him to return to urban life (thereby raising the intriguing figure of the urban shepherd). Scève uses the eclogue in an innovative way, moving the confrontation between urban and rural ways of life from some undefined *locus amoenus* to a specific place, i.e. the willow-grove of the title, in-between city and countryside (p. 86), and illustrated by an engraving within the printed text. Philerme's move suggests, as Hodges points out, the formation of personal identity precisely in contradistinction to the city (p. 101). Ultimately, though, the poem suspends judgement on the different models of selfhood upheld by the two shepherds, hence it 'stages ... a critique as a way of talking about the interrelated categories of place and identity', thereby pointing to the idea that both identity and place are cultural constructs (p. 102). This conclusion fits neatly with the argument of chapter two, which viewed the guidebook as a means of contributing to the construction of collective identities.

Scève was not the first author to take imaginative advantage of places on the outskirts of cities, because there are key examples in Rabelais. Hodges mentions in passing Panurge's proposition, in chapter 15 of *Pantagruel* (1532), to build the walls of Paris out of female genitalia (p. 26), but the passage surely deserved more attention from the perspective of 'urban poetics'. The same is also true of Panurge's subsequent escapades in Paris and indeed Gargantua's experiences in the same city in *Gargantua* (1534). Similarly, the prologue to the *Tiers Livre* (1546) famously features Diogenes rolling his barrel up-and-down a hill just *outside* Corinth, a performance Rabelais links explicitly to his own writing and his own self, in what was of course the first book in the sequence signed with his own name. In other words, Rabelais's 'je' appears to be defined, like that of Diogenes, in opposition to the city. Obviously, it is not possible to do everything and a great deal has already been written on these episodes in Rabelais's works, but not to mention them at all is very odd, because they are far from being the most obscure examples of how self, place and the city come together in French Renaissance literature.

The final chapter, on Montaigne, takes as its starting point that the essayist is interested in the notion of place, not least as a location for the self; indeed, he is haunted by it, given La Boétie's last words about whether he still had a place (pp. 104-5). The chapter combines discussion of the *Journal de voyage* with the *Essais* to argue that Montaigne uses 'a series of landscapes and city views that reiterate the conjunction between discursive and spatial forms, between place and self-representation' (p. 124). In saying, in 'De la vanité' (III, 9), that his love of Paris makes him French, it seems to me that Montaigne participates in a similar process of the formation of civic and national identity as that of Corrozet. It is indeed intriguing that, in spite of this claim, Montaigne also 'claims to be the citizen of no where [sic]' (p. 129), an observation that should invite discussion of cosmopolitanism in the light of 'urban poetics', not least because one of the strongest exemplars of selfhood in the *Essais*, namely Socrates, famously claimed not to be a citizen of Athens, but of the world (quoted by Montaigne in I, 26).

Anyone writing on Montaigne is faced with the difficulty of finding something new to say. It will come as a surprise to no-one that Montaigne's revisions of his text over time show 'the textual genesis of [his] being' (p. 123). It is more surprising that Hodges does not give any indication, in her quotations from Montaigne, of which passage belongs to which edition (i.e. the [A], [B] and [C] texts that it is standard to cite).

Some of the argument of the chapter on Montaigne in particular is frankly baffling. For instance, the sentence 'If place were to take place and to acquire the status of an event equivalent to that of being, it would be discerned in passage, as Stéphane Mallarmé reminds us in his enigmatic poem, 'Un coup des dés'' (p. 106) raises more questions than it answers: what does it mean for place to take place? How is 'being' an event? Similarly, Montaigne's discomfort 'allows him a way into material being' (p. 128), thereby implying he did not have a material being before feeling discomfort, which is plainly absurd. The proposition that 'the presence of time imposes an order and value on thought' (p. 122) is perfectly clear but equally mystifying (how does time give value to thought?). Following or indeed assessing the argument is made more difficult by what appear to be truisms alongside these enigmas: for example, 'change [is] a concept associated with time' (p. 122) and 'memory [is] an activity associated with the processes of time and history' (p. 128).

The epilogue looks briefly at Descartes's metaphor of the city at the beginning of part two of the *Discours de la méthode*. Descartes is a paradoxical place to end a book that investigates the link between self and place because, famously, for the philosopher the mind has no place, because it is unextended, or immaterial. More could be said about Descartes's use of the metaphor of the city, but the primary meaning of the *Discours*, and indeed this metaphor, is very clear, namely that the Cartesian method consists in proceeding from the foundations upwards, thereby going *in the opposite direction* to works, like those of Montaigne, that 'in Cartesian terms, at least' piece together pre-existing, doubtful ideas (it is tempting to think Descartes has Montaigne in mind when he comments disparagingly on those who use 'vieilles murailles qui avaient été bâties à d'autres fins?'). In other words, Hodges's conclusion goes against the grain because, for Descartes, there is no way that his metaphor amounts to 'the ideal image of the rational mind' nor that he sees the mind as 'a form of being in movement' (p. 133), precisely because the rational mind is not physical, as Hodges herself mentions (p. 134). It might be possible to deconstruct Descartes and argue that he undermines his own argument through his use of this metaphor, but more work needs to be done to make that point and, as things stand, the case is not made.

In conclusion, then, *Urban Poetics* is a frustrating read. Given the major problems of argument, grammar and style outlined above, I would not encourage any undergraduate to look at this book, and any postgraduate student should be told to handle it with care. I do not however want to suggest that the book is of no interest, and the chapters on Corrozet and Scève in particular contain insights from which others working in the field will benefit. It seems to me though that the project was more or less doomed from the outset, because the proposed aim was simply much too vast and the loss of focus and inexcusable omissions that result were inevitable. Given the positive features of the book, I hope the author will return to these questions in a more focused way, because there is much here to build on.

Notes

1. Terence Cave, *Pré-histoires: textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

muse1

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login> [2]

muse2

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login> [3]

oxford journals

<http://fs.oxfordjournals.org/content/64/1/81.full> [4]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/772>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3750>

[2]

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/lesprit_createur/v049/49.3.peters.html

[3]

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/french_studies_a_quarterly_review/v064

[4] <http://fs.oxfordjournals.org/content/64/1/81.full>