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Tom Conley, *An Errant Eye: Poetry and Topography in Early Modern France*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. vii + 248 pp. Maps, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8166-6965-3.

Review by Deborah Lesko Baker, Georgetown University.

In his now classic book, *Ways of Seeing*, English art critic John Berger sets forth the primacy of vision and image in our sensorial perception of the world: "It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it." [1] Berger's title and the multiple vectors of the visual act it suggests provide a particularly fertile point of entry into the arresting new volume by eminent Harvard sixteenth-century and visual studies specialist, Tom Conley, *An Errant Eye: Poetry and Topography in Early Modern France*. For what Conley proposes, in a series of masterful readings of verbal and visual texts spanning the period from the first accounts of the New World discovery to Montaigne's 1580 publication of "Des cannibales," is precisely a new way of seeing and experiencing the confluence of words and images on the written page.

This new way of seeing, brought to bear within a wealth of literary investigations accompanied by forty-one spatial figures and consistently sparkling erudition, derives from a rich concatenation of visual and tactile impulses reflecting the perceiver's will to invest him or herself fully in the physical space and place--that is, the topography--of the ambient world, whether that be the world of geographical territory, of cosmographic mapping, of emblematic engraving, or of poetic materiality. Indeed, for Conley, the poet (broadly viewed as the fashioner of either prose or verse) shares much with the topographer "who sees, discerns, and orders the world in consort with the art of illustration," as well with the cartographer "insofar as it is his or her task to describe the world by mixing images, visual design, and both aural and optical traits of language" (p. 3).

The introductory chapter immediately draws in the reader with the striking presentation of the central image embodying Conley's notion of tactile vision, that is, the snail. In a commentary of a key passage from Francesco Colonna's *Songe de Poliphile* (the 1546 French translation of the original Latin text of 1499), he recounts how the novel's hero, when confined in a dark labyrinth where his eyes are useless, moves forward by advancing his arms in fits and starts through the maze, likening himself to the snail that "goes about feeling its way" with his tentacles, alternately proceeding and retreating through his environs. Indeed, Conley states the aim of his work as "retrieving the snail's sense," which entails, for himself, for the poet, and by extension, for the reader, a slowing down of observation and movement and a focalization on details of physical and textual space through the combined resources of ocular and tactile perception (p.2). Thus the nature of the eye, of both writer and reader, becomes, per the work's title, *errant*, finding its way around by moving about in all directions to grasp the full sense of its place. And although Conley does not allude to it specifically, one is tempted to see in that adjective its etymological relationship not only to wandering, but also to error or divagation. One can "see" most completely and most deeply only when the eye is seconded by the other senses and is in "touch" (both literally and figuratively) with its external and internal worlds.

It is therefore through the extraordinarily patient and perceptive tactile vision of the author that the

reader is invited to “become snail” in the examination of elements of poetic and visual topographies ranging from Rabelais’s geographical novels, to the emblematic works of Pieter Apian and Gilles Corrozet, to the lyric, pastoral, and political verse of Maurice Scève and Pierre de Ronsard, to the essays of Montaigne. The centerpiece of the chapter on Rabelais is a topographical re-reading of the thirty-third chapter of *Pantagruel* so famously glossed by Erich Auerbach in his famous chapter in *Mimesis*, “The World in Pantagruel’s Mouth.” Introducing this episode with an analysis of a map of the pre-Columbian world inserted by Geoffroy Tory in his 1512 edition of Antonini Augusti’s *Itinerarium provinciarum*, Conley draws an analogy between the map’s curious juxtaposition of the global expanse of lands and waters and its surrounding frame’s “local” depiction of a pleasant interior space on the one hand, and Rabelais’ inscription of the vast evolving boundaries of the world within the depiction of regional and anatomical place on the other.

Indeed, in the narrator’s astonished entry into the “other” universe of the giant’s mouth, his description of the geography is surprisingly familiar (bringing to mind the terrains and urban spaces of France), and his encounter with the cabbage planter takes place in the heart of the local *terroir*. In Conley’s reading, the landscape of rows of planted cabbages in itself takes on a strong topographical charge, first as it implicitly hints at the multiple taste buds of the tongue (the anatomical space through which the narrator has traveled into the giant’s mouth). Yet even more striking is the indirect linkage that he sees suggested (via the planter’s amusing rejoinder concerning his sexual prowess: “Ha, monsieur, not everyone can have balls heavy as a mortar shell”) between cabbages, testicles, mortar shells, and terrestrial or celestial globe. The metaphor of the globe makes the perfect segue to the narrator’s then famous exclamation: “Jesus (dis je) il y a icy un nouveau monde” (Jesus [I said] here there is a new world). And Conley’s insistence on the repeated reverberation of the locational adverb “où” in the diction of the exchange (“trouvay,” “choudx,” “couillons”, etc.) points to the shifting, ambiguous boundaries between the “here” and the “there,” between the familiar and the “other.”

The following two chapters trace the rise of emblematic art in sixteenth-century France, first through the cosmological manual of the German humanist Pieter Apian (*Cosmographia*, 1524) and then through two early French vernacular emblem books by French printer Gilles Corrozet: *Hécatomgraphie* (1541) and *Simulachres & histories face de la mort* (1538), the latter of which features woodcut images by Hans Holbein. In a series of stunningly intricate analyses of the images and verbal accompaniments to more than two dozen diagrams, maps, and emblems by these two authors, Conley uncovers the keen cartographic and topographical awareness that infuses the spatial and textual arrangement of their designs, engaging its readers “to take cognizance of the world by asking where their bodies (or any of its parts) are located in respect to other places” (p. 56), “to wonder how and where they are situated in the world and how it inspire[s] admiration and disquiet” (p. 82). In this vast array of visual representations, perhaps the two most privileged—established even in the introduction as two guiding points of reference before being revisited at numerous moments throughout the book—are that of Corrozet’s emblem 20 of the snail in *Hécatomgraphie* and Apian’s detail of a floating city, eye, and ear from the *Cosmographia*. Noting the resemblance of the snail’s shell to an eye and, by extension, its particular likeness to the isolated Apian eye, Conley evokes the central juxtaposition between the “crawling” tactile eye of Corrozet’s snail that feels its way across its topography and the “floating” Apian eye that seems an object unto itself, but yet simultaneously mirrors, in part, the form of the topography it faces (p. 15).

The rich topographical background of Apian’s and Corrozet’s designs anticipates the full flowering of the spatial impulse in chapters on two of Renaissance France’s most renowned poets, Maurice Scève and Pierre de Ronsard. The acknowledged lyric star of Lyon’s accession to impressive literary and cultural visibility in the first half of the sixteenth century, Scève rode the wave of emblem popularity by fashioning his 449 *dizain* masterpiece, *Délie*, around the insertion of fifty woodcuts and accompanying mottos, in addition to a compelling opening image of wind-blown rocks rising from a stormy sea that suggests from the beginning a “topography of travel” (p. 119). Via his combined analyses of the complex visual and textual materiality challenging the reader’s eye—from the central emblem images to their shapes, borders,

and adornments and the mottos literally wrapping around them, to the blocks of verse text with their anagrammatic and paronomastic plays within and between words in often intensely topographical scenes—Conley has provided perhaps the most powerful and sophisticated delineation of Scève's architecture and landscape in recent critical discourse. One need only look at examples of his glosses of poems such as D. 129, with its contamination of aural and visual impulses going between the hare's sheltered abode (*giste*) and the cosmological expanse of the shadows of Egypt (*tenebres d'Egypte*), or D. 77, with its assimilation of the far-away alterity of Mount Caucasus as the site of poet's suffering, to appreciate the moving interplay between external geography, whether local, biblical or mythological, and the vast internal geography of the poet's psyche. Indeed if, in *Délie*, Conley likewise follows the local spatial contours of Lyon's rivers and its Mont Fourvière in relationship to the poet's private itinerary, these images are developed even more provocatively in his detailed discussion of Scève's relatively little-studied 1547 eclogue, *Saulsaye*, which he reads in close graphic conjunction with the two woodcuts crafted by sixteenth-century Lyonnais artist, Bernard Salomon.

The case of Ronsard owes its particular fascination to the "territory of his own signature" (p. 149) that the poet locates across a long career marked by diverse poetic forms and ceaseless revisions; yet a body of production marked in its entirety by an acute attention to the topographies of the changing locales he engages. Conley insightfully explores three stages of Ronsard's topographical itinerary: those embedded in the *Amours* of 1552, the *Continuation des Amours* of 1555, and the assorted circumstantial poems of 1559 reflecting a period of uncertainty and dismay leading finally to the polemical *Discours* of the 1560s, where the poet's engagement with a broader alterity is reflected in part in his warnings against European disruption of the topographies of the indigenous peoples of South America. For this reader, the selections from the celebrated *Amours* of 1552 demonstrate the author's analytic virtuosity at its best: his initial focus on the woodcut frontispiece featuring Cassandre and the poet facing each other in profile catalyzes what he calls Ronsard's "graven style" (p. 152), that is, his proclivity, as in the dedicatory sonnet, "V OE V", to insert engraved inscriptions (carrying versions of his own name) in his texts, along with assorted plays with the graphical disposition of words, such that variations of typography itself create a rich visual and tactile topography.

At the same time, natural topography, whether in mythological or local worlds, is precious to Ronsard. Indeed, Conley's careful review of the mythic geography of "V OE V" (the Euroteus river, Mount Parnassus, and the Hippocrene fountain) is followed by a brilliant re-reading of the poet's extended emotional appeal to all the natural elements of his native Loire region in the well-known sonnet that begins "Ciel, air, & ventz, plains, & montz descouvers." Typically viewed as a conventional lyric of complaint engaging the pathetic fallacy to bid farewell to the Beloved through a seemingly endless enumeration of topographical elements, the poem under Conley's pen becomes not a fragmented, but a totalized landscape filtering downward from the "cosmographic horizon" (p. 160), one that the eye first takes in rapidly, pushed ahead by the forward-bending italics and the shorthand effect of the repeated ampersands. Within this swirling forward movement, Conley pinpoints the pregnant lexical formulation of the "coustaux vineus," which in its double sense of "hillsides" and "cutting instruments" suggests the numerous splits and bifurcations that abound not only in the geographical images but also in the material rhymes of the poem (p. 160). In a related move, he situates, both in the sonnet's spatial patterning and in its subtending lyric drama, the interplay between division and re-integration, wherein the unification of the all the topological components in the final tercet may figure a concomitant "working through" by the poet of his psychic distress.

By way of transition to the final chapter on Montaigne, it bears mentioning that in both his introductory chapter and in his conclusion, Conley refers to an emblem featuring the historiated initial P enclosing what seems to be a facsimile of Ronsard's portrait contained in the frontispiece of the *Amours* first designed by the composer Antoine de Bertrand for his 1585 edition of the poet's verse set to music, and later transposed to the head of the first sentence of volume three of the Abel Langelier's 1595 edition of Montaigne's *Essais*. Among the various intriguing possibilities entertained by Conley for the presence of

this curious transfer is “that the printed book is establishing a poetic space within the realm of its prose, and that the visual citation of Ronsard at the outset tells the reader to discern the writing in view of the deft complexities of the bard who wove together an incipient autobiography, fashioned for himself an enduring *place* in negotiating poetry and matters of state, and who left a legacy of inquiry into the world through an interminable drive to write” (p. 22).

Within the context of these overarching attributes shared by the two dominating figures of the sixteenth-century literary stage, Conley chooses to paint Montaigne the topographer in the expansive--and sometimes frightening--landscape of his longest essay, the “Apologie de Raimond Sebond.” The chapter is framed by the recall of Montaigne’s famous inversion of Sebond’s hierarchy of creation, in such a way that in the essayist’s vision, humans, despite their inexhaustible presumption, are cast down to the lowest level of life form and into the isolated and vertiginous position of having no communication with being: “Nous n’avons aucune communication a l’estre.” In order to negotiate the paradoxical crisis set in motion by this human plight—one that simultaneously perceives the impotence of the cosmographic impulse in face of “infinite space and duration” (p. 181) and yet sets about to demarcate the limits of the finite world lying within that incomprehensible *dehors*, Conley turns to Montaigne’s musings on the animal world, specifically on the swallows who return to nest each year under his eaves. In a close reading of the essayist’s pondering of how these birds annually choose, construct, and protect the space of their habitat, he develops a prime illustration of how these creatures seem in much greater harmony with their environs than their human counterparts, and how, for Montaigne, in contrast to early ornithologists of the period, any speculation on their migratory whereabouts is superseded by a fascination with their local *habitus*. Conley goes on to note the four-time recurrence of the avian image, the last of which invokes the legendary ancient halcyon who during the winter solstice resourcefully constructs a nest for its young on the open sea—a nest both protected by and from the surrounding expanse of water. Via this image, also figured in an emblem in Corrozet’s *Hécatomgraphie*, Conley at once underlines Montaigne’s topographical preoccupation in the “Apology” with “lived and local space” and his vision of man “as isolated in an infinite space of the world” (p. 191).

If apprehending the multifaceted vistas of space and place of this remarkable work requires the acceptance of the reader to “become snail,” the enormous benefits for so doing can perhaps be best evoked in a brief return to a passage from Montaigne’s “De l’exercitation” glossed in the introductory chapter of the book (pp. 5-6) where the essayist declares, following a personal brush with death, that “to train ourselves for death....We need only put ourselves in its proximity. Thus, as Pliny says, each is to oneself a very keen discipline.” In illuminating Montaigne’s pun in the original French of “comme dit Pline” and “discipline,” Conley suggests that the self-discipline of deliberate reading with an eye at once errant and tactile yields the reward of training us to attend to the unexpected sensory mapping of these proximate words on the space of the page—a process that in itself constitutes an emblem of our access to all the exuberant topographical mappings to come.

NOTE

[1] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1977).

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