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Hervé Baudry, *Le dos de ses livres: Descartes a-t-il lu Montaigne?* Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015. 393 pp. Appendices, bibliography, and index. 65 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-2891-5.

Review by Andrea Gadberry, New York University

The question posed at the outset of Hervé Baudry's book seems to be quite a simple one: Did Descartes read Montaigne? To twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers, the answer has mainly been obvious: *of course*. In many a textbook version of Western philosophy's greatest hits, Montaigne and Descartes appear in logical succession in a sequence where the passage of time and influence go together smoothly. Setting aside jostling for philosophical preeminence or for paternity rights to the subject or to modernity, it is usually an uncontroversial stance to suggest that Montaigne's thought affected Descartes. After all, their historical proximity and shared preoccupations (solitude, skepticism, passions, animals, and the list goes on) seem to be proof enough of intellectual kinship if not the basis for an enduring relationship. In his learned history of the reception of the "couple Montaigne-Descartes" from early modernity to present, Baudry shows how seldom the question of whether or not Descartes actually read or cared about Montaigne has been broached in earnest. The price of this omission, Baudry argues, has been more than a century of botched philosophical history as well as a kind of critical amnesia when it comes to complex reception histories that disrupt simpler and more familiar, patrilineal histories. Baudry's book, then, tells a welcome cautionary tale about the hazards of received ideas. Did Descartes really read Montaigne? Baudry's reply: a meticulously researched "probably not."

The first four chapters tell the story of the gradual and posthumous coupling of Montaigne and Descartes. Behind Baudry's explanation of the divergent fates of Montaigne and Descartes is his insistence that there were "two hundred years during which we find no trace of the slightest comparison between them" (p. 22). Instead, Baudry shows how the early afterlives of Montaigne and Descartes were contentious affairs, often involving tactical alliances (the early Jansenist embrace of Descartes and condemnation of the "libertine" Montaigne), distorted readings (a Montaigne who, in the eighteenth century, became increasingly "cartesianized"), and celebrity readers with outsized influence (Pascal, for instance, but also Rousseau, whose writings would make Montaigne "inseparable from [t]his most famous, and controversial, reader" (p. 35)). When Montaigne and Descartes do appear side-by-side in early modern accounts, the relationship is strictly temporal and neither correlated nor causal.

By the late nineteenth century, however, Montaigne and Descartes appear to have set aside their differences and given in to full coupledness. As soon as scholars began to characterize Montaigne as "precursor," Baudry suggests, the problems began to avalanche: the publication of Étienne Gilson's edition of the *Discourse*, and, most damning of all, Leon Brunschvicg's fatal error of "render[ing] the couple Montaigne-Descartes philosophically significant" (p. 78) created a domino effect Baudry's book is at pains to—at long last—reverse.[1] As fascinating as this history of criticism is the pair's "institutionalization" in school texts and more generally the story it tells about national identity and power. In the inter-war period, for instance, Baudry shows how the lineage of intellectual life in the pairing of Montaigne and Descartes acted as a bulwark for the country, with the two giving a sense of

“hope at the the darkest moment in the life of the nation” (p. 86). This seems to let Baudry modify his question of whether or not Descartes read Montaigne, if briefly, to a more fascinating question still: what really is the Montaigne-Descartes pairing good for?

The remaining seven chapters, the epilogue, and the appendices of this book address the other, larger ambition: a discourse on method, with the comparative approach of intertextuality and the problem of the “precursor” receiving the harshest critiques. Part historiography and part polemic against what Baudry characterizes as a sloppy intertextuality without historical conscience, these subsequent chapters follow the metahistory of the Montaigne-Descartes pair with what is effectively a systematic catalogue, organized primarily by theme and text, of the so-called resemblances other twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars have located as proof of the affinity between Montaigne and Descartes.

In the opening of his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes explains that “good sense [le bon sens], is the best distributed thing in the world.” In reading Baudry’s book, one wonders if Baudry may have received an especially large share. Each entry in this catalogue includes the quotations from both Montaigne and Descartes said to be evidence of their relationship, followed by Baudry’s response—usually a stark rebuttal but often enough a suggestion that the road from Montaigne to Descartes might trace itself through figures sometimes excluded from the limelight of the canon. Apparent textual affinities, Baudry explains, often have far more reasonable explanations behind them. Both Descartes and Montaigne were readers of classical antiquity, so allusions to Plutarch, for instance, say more about cultures of Renaissance humanism than about the likelihood Descartes snagged quotations from Montaigne. Though Baudry never claims to be exhaustive, by the nth example of mistaken rapprochements proving that Descartes did not “need” Montaigne, there is no question of Baudry’s will to break up the couple Montaigne-Descartes once and for all.

A central undercurrent in Baudry’s refutations, then, is the restoration to historical importance and intellectual history of authors who may have helped forge the lineage from Montaigne to Descartes, foremost among them Pierre Charron. If Descartes knew Montaigne, Baudry suggests, it is more likely that the Montaigne he knew was thoroughly *charronisé*. One of Baudry’s most important interventions is in showing not just where even the most eminent scholars have gone astray but also where now-more-minor characters (Charron) and still-not-minor-at-all characters (Pascal) ought to receive more critical attention in the story of the Montaigne-Descartes pair, not to mention more credit for the popularity they enjoyed in the seventeenth century. Following his systematic catalogue of claimed Montaigne-Descartes resemblances and his critique of influence studies and the idea of the “precursor,” Baudry includes a sequence of appendices with other supporting documents, among them, tables of textual resemblances, a history of printings of Montaigne’s *Essais* and Charron’s *Traicté de Sagesse*, and even excerpts from Descartes and Pascal.

All of this is consistent with the book’s distinctive commitment to something close to a literary-critical empiricism. A counterintuitive move, then, is the book’s closing reference to the only text (a 1646 letter to William Cavendish) in which Descartes refers directly to Montaigne. This structural decision seems out of place, reminiscent even of Montaigne’s characterization of the acquisition of wisdom quite late in life as “mustard after dinner.” Meanwhile, as much as this book rails against any form of prolepsis, the book’s organization (the blocks of discrete examples, the appendices containing indices of perceived resemblances, the choice to include extended excerpts of early modern texts) foreshadows how literary scholarship could find useful avenues into hypertext that would allow the reader to move more nimbly between examples and themes.

It is a felicitous coincidence that this book’s publication should appear only two years after the first translation into French of Harold Bloom’s famous *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>[2]</sup> Though Bloom is never cited directly in his book, Baudry, like Bloom before him, reminds his reader that influence is cognate with influenza, the former a condition to which many aspire and the latter the desire of only an object

few. While Baudry reviles the idea of Montaigne as “precursor” to Descartes, it is in a more-recent review of Pierre Bayard’s *Plagiat par anticipation* that Baudry issues his strongest venom against the concept and one of its standard bearers: the Bloomian notion of the strong poet who somehow anticipates poets to come is, he explains, the worst kind of “science fiction, while the very concept of the precursor threatens to induce a state of noxious saturnalia Baudry calls (with delicious contempt) a “Bloomian Halloween.”[3]

If Baudry positions his book as antidote or even a cure to the kind of contagion that has led scholars mistakenly to see resemblances, foreshadowing, and prolepsis where there is nothing but historical sequence and a decipherable history of plausible intervening texts and readers, he leaves behind the question of what to do now that the story we have told ourselves for so long has been discredited. If the couple Montaigne-Descartes did not exist, would it have to be invented? While intertextuality is presented as a dangerous and bad fad he is eager to strangle, Baudry seems at least to have a begrudging respect for similarities of “style.”[4] And Baudry likewise reminds the reader of the stylistic revolution Descartes himself signaled in this story in “evacuat[ing] citation from his text” (p. 264). Discussing his own observation of some “striking” similarities between Montaigne and Descartes, Baudry opens a space for comparative readings that he otherwise hastens to eliminate lest intertextuality allow the myth of the “precursor” to continue. One might wish, too, to hear more about the stakes of secondhand reading and the interpretive possibilities of the charronized Montaigne whom Descartes may have encountered.

Baudry’s mode, though, is usually not one of speculation, even though one might wish for more of it in a book that lays so rigorous a foundation. How should we understand the question of literary paternity more generally when the claims to paternity stop seeming so direct? Are there new ways to think about influence (with whatever is the moment’s appropriate level of anxiety), or how might we imagine a matrilineal line of influence that acknowledges both “the air of the time [and] the intellectual atmosphere” (p. 268) and the dangers of inhaling too deeply?

#### NOTES

[1] René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, ed. Étienne Gilson (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947) and Leon Brunschvicg, *Descartes et Pascal: lecteurs de Montaigne* (New York: Brentano’s, 1944).

[2] Harold Bloom, *L’angoisse de l’influence*, trans. Maxime Shelledy and Souad Degachi (Paris: Éditions Aux forges de Vulcain, 2013).

[3] Hervé Baudry, “L’angoisse prospective. Remarques sur *le Plagiat par anticipation* de Pierre Bayard” [http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Angoisse\\_prospective](http://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Angoisse_prospective) .

[4] In this regard, Baudry is not altogether unlike the Bloom who, these days, advocates aesthetic appreciation. For more on the shifting fates of influence studies, see Marjorie Garber, “Over the Influence,” *Critical Inquiry* 42.4 (2016): 731-759.

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