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Lawrence D. Kritzman, *The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne's Essays*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. x + 227 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-231-11992-4.

Review by Hassan Melehy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

There is an inherent interest in a book such as this one that, by announcing a psychoanalytic and more broadly theoretical approach, presents a challenge to the current dominance of various historicist methodologies in literary studies. According to the insistence of many scholars these days, literary texts may only be understood through detailed reconstruction of historical circumstances and do not speak to the present except through this armature; a major casualty of this insistence has been close reading. Lawrence D. Kritzman's procedure of detailed textual commentary is a reminder that the now somewhat discredited era of poststructuralist theory was very much about *reading* literature and formulating critical contexts in which texts from the past could make effective contact with the present. This is especially the case for an author such as Michel de Montaigne, whose astounding textual dexterity and aphoristic energy become fully evident only through careful attention to his text.

As a scholar deeply informed by poststructuralism, Kritzman has for several decades been highly influential in French Renaissance studies. Most chapters of *The Fabulous Imagination* are reworked versions of articles that date back to 1992 and hence precede the dominance of historicist methodology. The main drawback of this fact is that, although Kritzman responds to the objection that psychoanalysis produces ahistorical readings, he does not engage some of the important lessons of historicism. The notion that psychoanalysis needs to recognize the historicity of both its object and procedures is one to which in my view he does not accord sufficient attention. He is of course interested in how Montaigne explores and disrupts the Western concept of the subject, but he tends to draw this concept from psychoanalysis without considering the vast transformations that the subject has undergone between the sixteenth century and the present. He regularly signals Montaigne's anticipations of Freud and Lacan, but these observations are often made on the basis of hindsight rather than through an engagement with how Montaigne comes to the concept of the subject and what this concept does in subsequent history.

In the introduction, following a quotation from Harold Bloom on the ways that Montaigne's analyses of the self anticipate not only Freud but also Emerson and Nietzsche, Kritzman provides the following summary of the book's aim: "The present study examines how Montaigne, the inventor of the modern essay, signals the emergence of the Western concept of the self by exploring how human desires and fears are represented in writing" (p. 22). Of course, the idea that desire and fear are constitutive of the self is basic to psychoanalysis, but the generality of this formulation makes the specific connection that Kritzman claims to make with psychoanalysis rather tenuous. Moreover, again, at least in the introduction, he does not account for the historical specificity of the relationship between the self, on the one hand, and its desires and fears, on the other.

At the same time, the looseness of this phrasing reveals one of the strengths of Kritzman's methodology: he is not dogmatic in his commitment to psychoanalysis and thereby incorporates a flexibility of concepts in response to the challenges of Montaigne's text. His main object of interest, as the book's

title indicates, is the imagination, which in Montaigne's writing becomes a therapeutic device. "In the *Essays* the imagination acts as the generative core of an internal universe that influences both the body and mind and reveals itself as essential to human experience. At times Montaigne's text actually performs a healing function that results from the playful work of the imagination." (p. 22). With regard to this project, his investigations are themselves frequently quite imaginative and playful, and as a result engagingly insightful.

However, problems arise when Kritzman doesn't reflect extensively on his concepts. In chapter five, whose title "The Anxiety of Death" is the most blatantly psychoanalytic in the book, Kritzman examines Montaigne's "De la diversion" ("Of Diversion," *Essays*, III.4), associating the author's notion of diversion with the psychoanalytic concept of displacement (p. 105). Kritzman identifies a threefold theoretical concern in his treatment: "to investigate the relationship of the topos of diversion to self-portraiture; to explore how the figuration of subjectivity theorizes desire and anticipates what are today considered psychoanalytic concerns; and to study how the preoccupation with death functions as the condition of narrative in its digressive movements or detours" (p. 105). The second of these seems to be the central one, since he follows up in the next few sentences with a statement on "how the essay anticipates the preoccupations of psychoanalytic theory by speaking of itself in the language of literature" (pp. 105-106). He spends the ensuing pages on Montaigne's explorations of the mind's capacity to redirect its own thoughts in order to avoid suffering. Kritzman thereby comes to the following observation: "The human subject, characterized as naturally drawn to diversion, inevitably becomes a subject without a center (a 'vuide') whose desire is incapable of reaching a fixed point" (p. 111). This is an entirely convincing reading of Montaigne's treatment of the subject. Kritzman then returns to his stated purpose: "Montaigne's text depicts the way in which the differing symptoms of death-related anxiety are embedded in literary and cultural representations. The collective impact of these representations demonstrates how the various categories of diversion anticipate the Lacanian revision of psychoanalytic theory by rejecting the concept of a self-contained subject and instead proposing one that forever exceeds itself" (p. 111).

This is another effective reading of Montaigne, and it is demonstrably true that Montaigne shares a critique of the subject with Lacanian psychoanalysis. However, Kritzman does not ask certain questions that this observation invites, namely those concerning the historical configuration of the subject Montaigne faced and the responses to the essayist's discoveries. Chief among the latter is, of course, Descartes's radical recentering of the subject, aimed quite precisely at Montaigne. Lacan's own explicitness about the necessity of continuing to struggle with the Cartesian cogito suggests that something historically cataclysmic occurred following Montaigne, a consideration of which would enhance the understanding of both Montaigne's notions of subjectivity and the historically conditioned stakes of psychoanalysis. Kritzman covers much, but not all, of the important literature on Montaigne and subjectivity. At least one of Kritzman's bibliographical omissions addresses these questions in ways quite pertinent to his otherwise adept reading.

At the end of chapter five, Kritzman returns to his announced purpose, stating that "De la diversion...suggests interesting comparisons with Freud's theory of repression" (p. 119). Kritzman explains that they both have to do with keeping something at a distance from the conscious mind, but he underscores an important difference. "In the case of repression, the individual expends the greatest mental effort to erase a painful memory. The purpose of diversion, however, is to project an illusion that allows one to cope with the infelicitous nature of death. Unlike repression, diversion involves the imagination's power to reconstitute what is originally perceived as a frightening image into a more

pleasant one” (pp. 119-120).

This is an important and worthy comparison of Montaigne’s and Freud’s ideas, and indeed catalogues an anticipation of the latter by the former. But Kritzman offers no reasons for this similarity nor, more importantly, for this difference. He misses an opportunity to consider Freud’s own observations on the historical transformation of the subject. This omission is unfortunate, especially since in one of his most famous statements on the question Freud cites precisely repression as marking this transformation. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* he makes an astounding comparison between *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*, noting that the former “has its roots in the same soil as [the latter]. But the changed treatment of the same material reveals the whole difference in the mental life of these two widely separated epochs of civilisation: the secular advance of repression in the emotional life of mankind. In the *Oedipus* the child’s wishful phantasy that underlies it is brought into the open and realised as it would be in a dream. In *Hamlet* it remains repressed; and—just as in the case of a neurosis—we only learn of its existence from its inhibiting consequences.”[1] If there can be such a major transformation in the mechanism of repression over two thousand years of Western history, it is also quite likely that something happens to the subject over the next four or five hundred, particularly in light of the vast changes since the Renaissance in just about every appetitive custom and habit in the West.

Several times Kritzman acknowledges the charges of ahistoricism in psychoanalytic literary interpretation. In chapter two, he provides an insightful and convincing explanation of Montaigne’s “Des boyteux” (“Of Cripples,” *Essays* III.11), its use of the Martin Guerre story, and this story itself as it comes to us mainly from Jean de Coras and Natalie Zemon Davis. Toward the end of the chapter, he addresses Stephen Greenblatt’s concerns with psychoanalytic understandings of the Renaissance. Characterizing Greenblatt’s position, Kritzman writes: “He views this critical approach...to be overdetermined in its need to discover a ‘principle of unalienable self-possession’ and a ‘unitary position,’ and thereby producing an anachronistic reading of the text” (p. 68).[2] Kritzman responds, “On the contrary, the exploration of gender in this essay yields a hybrid human subject whose agency is shaped by the tensions it encountered in a patriarchal culture and the subject’s resistance to what was accepted as a socially consecrated norm within sixteenth-century culture” (p. 68).

Although Kritzman gives an accurate account of Montaigne’s challenge to the unitary subject by way of the Martin Guerre story, he misses Greenblatt’s point and consequently the occasion to reflect on methodology. Greenblatt’s objection has less to do with anachronism than with the characterization, in classical psychoanalysis, of the subject as a self-contained system that is, even if not present to its own consciousness, analyzable as an autonomous unit. According to Greenblatt, it becomes clear that the identities connected to the Martin Guerre story in legal and literary documents from the time are produced in and inseparable from elaborate social networks. He argues that modern notions of individuality are actually the historical result of the development of social formations that coalesce in the Renaissance. Contrary to Kritzman’s characterization, Greenblatt writes: “If psychoanalysis was, in effect, made possible by (among other things) the legal and literary proceedings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, then its interpretive practice *is not irrelevant to those proceedings, nor is it an anachronism*” (my emphasis).[3]

Greenblatt is interested in historicizing psychoanalysis by accounting for the relations between present and past configurations of subjectivity: “I do not propose that we abandon the attempts at psychologically deep readings of Renaissance texts; rather, in the company of literary criticism and history, psychoanalysis can redeem its belatedness only when it historicizes its own procedures.”[4]

Indeed, he praises Lacanian theory for such historicization. Kritzman's misunderstanding of this objection points to the central flaw in his methodology. Although several times he notes differences between present and past conceptions of the subject—such as here, where he elaborates the imbrication of the subject in the tensions and norms of sixteenth-century patriarchal culture—he stops short of examining the processes of historical transformation that his analysis signals and therefore of genuinely bringing the Montaignian subject into contact with the present day.

But Kritzman's lapse in methodological rigor is mainly a function of his interest in being undogmatic in his approach, which he acknowledges in chapter five by saying that his analysis of diversion "does not derive from the application of specific psychoanalytic models per se" (p. 105). To return to a point I made above, this interest results in chapter after chapter of engaging readings that capture the rhetorical complexity of Montaigne's text and the details of the essayist's examination of the imagination. In chapter five, Kritzman succeeds at showing how Montaigne not only describes the process of turning the mind in multiple directions but also effects such a disruption of the subject through the incorporation of rhetorical digression. In chapter two, Kritzman observes that Montaigne indirectly refers to the title of the essay in question ("Of Cripples"), and also anticipates its end, by relating how the one-legged, impotent Martin Guerre takes down the claims of his sexually successful impostor. It turns out that the "de-phallicized and imperfect male body" is ironically responsible for repairing the breach in the phallic order of truth that enabled his impostor's success (p. 64). Kritzman finishes the chapter by examining Montaigne's digression on the excessive sexual energy of lame women, which has puzzled many scholars, demonstrating that the essayist transforms lameness from phallic absence into "something to be desired" and hence further resists the patriarchal order (p. 67).

Kritzman is quite capable in all his treatments of gender. In chapter six, he considers the relationship between Montaigne and his *filie d'alliance* and editor, Marie de Gournay. Kritzman extensively examines the literal and allegorical dimensions of the father-daughter relationship in which Gournay finds herself in presenting Montaigne's work. (Another reviewer has already signaled the editing lapse in this chapter, most of whose French quotations are not followed by translations.) And in chapter one, Kritzman demonstrates how Montaigne's staging of gender in conjunction with monstrosity in a number of essays, most notably "De l'oisiveté" ("Of Idleness" *Essays* I.8) and "De la force de l'imagination" ("Of the Power of the Imagination," *Essays* I.21), challenges the hierarchical ordering of gender in the production of thought and in the social order by viewing it in conjunction with the destabilizations of monstrosity.

The strength of these analyses is also the strength of *The Fabulous Imagination*. The book offers a summary of the work of a major scholar of French Renaissance studies, and hence a showcase of the reading practices that marked the era in which this work first became prominent. Its best parts are testimony to the value of those practices and, as such, a noteworthy counterpoint to a certain currently prevailing wisdom.

## NOTES

[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4, trans. James M. Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1953, 1958), p. 264.

[2] Kritzman's quotations are from Stephen Greenblatt, "Limping Examples: Exemplarity, New

Historicism, and Psychoanalysis,” in David Quint et al eds., *Creative Imitation: New Essays on Renaissance Culture in Honor of Thomas M. Greene* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), pp. 281-295.

[3] Greenblatt, p. 292.

[4] Greenblatt, p. 292.

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