

H-France Review Vol. 21 (October 2021), No. 188

Andrea Gadberry, *Cartesian Poetics: The Art of Thinking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 197 pp. Notes and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780226722979; \$27.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780226723020.

Review by Emma Claussen, University of Cambridge.

In this brilliant book, Andrea Gadberry thinks about the poetic forms that shape Descartes's thinking. Her close attention to form has perhaps led her to give similar consideration to the forms of academic writing, and the result is exemplary within that genre: the book is a pleasure to read. Throughout, Gadberry conducts a conversation with many of the thinkers and scholars who have thought with and against Descartes. The engagement with twentieth-century thinkers—Jean-Luc Marion, Hannah Arendt, Rudolf Carnap, and Samuel Beckett are a few salient names—is a rewarding aspect of the conversation, and one that could be expanded in future work. As it is, this book is surely for modernists as well as early modernists, and Descartes specialists—in both philosophy and literature departments. There is something for everyone among a diverse cohort of readers here, whether you love Descartes, you hate him, you hold him in suspicion, or even if you are as yet uninterested by his work and its turbulent reception. The epilogue concludes with a brief, suggestive reflection on Mallarmé's comment that “nous n'avons pas compris Descartes.” *Cartesian Poetics* offers a compelling new way of understanding an author whose claims—and style—remain provocative today.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes invented an “evil genius” whose machinations the meditator must resist, but in much modern thought it is Descartes who has been the enemy to work against. Flattening characterisations of Descartes as architect of entirely inhumane—and dominant—approaches to dualism and rationalism have been being challenged for some time.[1] Gadberry makes her own contributions to the key issue of the mind-body relationship, but her starting point is another charge against the philosopher that allegedly came from a contemporary, Boileau: namely, that he “cut poetry's throat” (pp. 4–5). Gadberry shows that in fact, Descartes assimilated poetry. Indeed, as Gadberry points out, he confesses in the *Discours* that he was once “in love” with poetry.[2] Having escaped its seductions, Descartes did not write verse, and he may not have intended to absorb poetic forms, but there is *poesis* in his prose.

It is remarkable, and exciting for our field, that two books dealing with Descartes and poetics have recently been published: *Cartesian Poetics* comes a year or so after Emma Gilby's *Descartes's Fictions: Reading Philosophy with Poetics*. [3] Despite some shared vocabulary in the titles, and their common project of revealing how much Descartes was influenced by poetics, the two books are quite different. The difference is largely one of method. Gilby takes a more historicist

approach, situating Descartes within contemporary debates, citing other primary material more extensively, and seeking a “pre-Cartesian Descartes, outside of the general process of the cultural absorption of Cartesian thinking,” whereas—as I have already indicated, the “cultural absorption of Cartesian thinking” provides Gadberry with some of the material for her reading of Descartes.[4] Gilby and Gadberry also emphasise different aspects of poetics at various junctures—tragic theatre is more central for Gilby, whereas Gadberry engages more briefly, although with characteristic clarity, with that genre. In this, and many other ways, their works complement one other well.

Gadberry’s method is clearly outlined in the introduction: “at once sensitive to historically specific, recognizable early modern forms and committed to literary criticism’s powers of interpretation” (p. 2). Contexts are subtly evoked—and Renaissance literary habits are a recurring theme. Gadberry is persuasive in her demonstration of their influence on Descartes. On occasion the reader may be left wishing for a little more contextual explanation, such as when Gadberry tells us that her subtitle is taken from Arnauld and Nicole’s *La Logique, ou l’art de penser* (1662). We are also left wondering about what relationship, if any, Gadberry imagines between Descartes and Port Royal, or between their texts. Close reading is the core of Gadberry’s approach, and she also shows how it is a useful tool for Descartes, inherited from the Jesuit education that he claimed to have cast off, along with poetry. Each chapter could be considered an extended close reading of a moment, or even a particular sentence, in Descartes, but would be better understood as a multi-layered sequence of close readings centred on a crucial form: the riddle (chapter one); the Petrarchan sonnet (chapter two); the elegy (chapter three); the anagram (chapter four). Sometimes it can feel as though the field of vision is a little narrow—the reader may start wanting to telescope out from, say, the riddle to the maxim or aphorism, and further—but Gadberry makes a clear case for the importance of these particular forms in the contemporary context, and her readings are revelatory.

Chapter one considers the “solved riddle” at the opening of the *Discours de la méthode*: “What is it that everyone has in equal amounts that no one would want more of (including the most picky person)? Common sense” (p. 27). This observation opens onto discussions of the riddle as a form, and provides a means of considering common sense as well as envy, a passion that Descartes is attempting to repress by solving the riddle and destroying its pleasures: “when dealt with successfully, envy is displaced by democracy, on the one hand, and a kind of bittersweet resignation, on the other” (p. 48). The suggestion of a democratic Descartes, albeit that democracy is easily displaced later in the *Discours*, is very thought-provoking, as is the vision of Descartes struggling with and strategizing against envy. Also striking is the way that Gadberry connects the discussion of envy to the broader issue of desire as Descartes treats it in the *Discours* and the *Meditations*.

This leads into the discussion of chapter two, which considers the *cogito* as formed in response to desire. Here Gadberry argues for the pervading influence of love lyric in Descartes—he who seemingly turned his back on his love for poetry—and especially of Petrarchan forms in the relationship between the meditator and the evil genius in the *Meditations*. Specifically, Gadberry argues that the meditator adopts a Petrarchan strategy when faced with the evil genius’s attempted seduction. This strategy is “auto-blazoning”: “the meditator undoes the usual metonymy of the blazon and of the body in favour of a metonymy through subtraction, disposing of parts for the sake of a remnant part that denies its partiality, that not only stands for the ‘whole’ but becomes its essence: the ‘ego’” (p. 63). The evocation of the Petrarchan body is a fascinating

intervention on the much-commented issues of the *cogito* and the mind-body relation in the *Meditations*. Gadberry furthermore shows the *cogito* as part of a more layered representation of thinking in language, connecting this poetic transformation of the self to the multiple verbs of thinking employed to effect this process. Not only *cogito*, but also *puto* and *considero*—her reflections on the etymology and particularity of “consider” (“with the constellations,” p. 22) demonstrate just what a considerate book this is.

The focal point of chapter three is Descartes’s sequence of statements in the Fourth Meditation that he won’t complain, despite there being much to complain about in human life. Gadberry reads this as a variation on elegy, an “elegaic denial of elegy” within the *praeterito* (p. 93). This is an especially affecting chapter in a book that is, on the whole, quite moving—here, we encounter a surprisingly wistful and regretful Descartes, or at least a Descartes just about holding off emotions. Gadberry evokes the “teeming and sometimes bewildering world outside—just on the edges of the meditator’s experience” (p. 89), the attempts to avoid tragedy, and the re-staging of a battle between elegy and tragedy that Descartes would have absorbed from the Renaissance literary context.

Where chapter three is about limits and limitations, and implicitly those limitations placed on the subject by death, chapter four addresses that issue more explicitly in its consideration of anagrams. Descartes inserts an anagram of his own name into the *Discours* and discusses anagram-solving in the *Regulae*—Gadberry reads these in light of the considerable literature on anagrams in and beyond Descartes (Saussure is a key interlocutor) and argues that this form offers a way of showing how thinking “takes time and survives its ravages” (p. 113). Anagrams invite a “poetic time” (p. 124) that is a kind of ever-shifting present. Gadberry suggests that if read this way, anagrams offer a way of seeing the poetics in “Wahl’s reading that Descartes is not so much an idealist as an ‘actualist’” (p. 125). It is intriguing that, just as Gadberry has Descartes offering an easily solved riddle to his readers in the *Discours*, he also makes the anagram easy, in a way that “makes hope justifiable rather than the special province of the anxious reader” (p. 131). Is this another vision of a democratic Descartes?

These chapters combine to articulate Gadberry’s overarching point that “poetry and poetics provided an accidental environment for Descartes’s philosophy that exposes the compromises in feeling and form that thought needs to take” (p. 142). And feeling is certainly important here. Gadberry rightly acknowledges the revitalising effect that a fuller appreciation of Descartes’s treatise on the passions has had on Descartes criticism, but she also shows passions as they emerge in works that have perhaps been read as dispassionate. Gadberry makes it clear that apparently dispassionate thinking takes effort—writerly, poetic effort—and that feelings like envy, longing, regret, and hope are all at play (or held at bay) throughout Descartes’s oeuvre.

On the first page, Gadberry tells us that the book is loosely structured as a *Bildungsroman* or a “new biography of the Cartesian subject.” This is much more than an elegant way to further tie the chapters together. Chapter one evokes Descartes’s sensitivity to the “indignity of being born” (p. 46) and suggests the “cartesian infant” as an anxiety-provoking “gap in Cartesian democracy.” Chapter two is more about “adolescent stirrings” (p. 58) and reads the dismissal of parents in the *Discours* in light of the technique of *dispositio*, excavating the stakes of that declaration of independence. Gadberry leaves it a little more to the reader to decide which life stage is dealt with in chapter three, evoking Descartes’s gesture to “the rest of life” at the end of the sixth meditation, and outlining the capacity of life to disappoint; a “firm limit of bitterness that we will

carry for the rest of our lives" (p. 111). Thank goodness Gadberry introduces hope in chapter four, hope of a literary or textual kind, and an afterlife for the Cartesian (or any) subject who writes. This structure is part of an invigorating analysis of temporality that tracks throughout *Cartesian Poetics*, and offers a fresh way of thinking about Descartes's approach to life itself.

Gadberry's prose is precise and stylish. The book is also an appealing object, like all paperbacks from the University of Chicago Press. The cover image should not be overlooked either. It is an etching by twentieth-century artist Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt), one of her "Reticularéa" nets. These are described by curator Tanya Carson as "destabilised geometry." [5] Such a phrase might also describe the structure of Gadberry's book. The choice is strikingly apt for a book on Descartes, who was famously concerned with geometry and so often is represented as a rigid, even excessively linear thinker. Gego's "Reticularéa" on the cover is suggestive of the possibilities for reconsidering the web of Cartesian thinking that extends from the seventeenth century to the present, many of which are presented so thoughtfully by Andrea Gadberry in *Cartesian Poetics*.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Michael Moriarty, "Introduction," in René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, tr. by Michael Moriarty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. ix-xl, esp. p. xxxvii, and Christopher Braider, *The Matter of Mind: Reason and Experience in the Age of Descartes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

[2] René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, ed. by Laurence Renault (Paris: Flammarion, 2016), p. 36.

[3] *Cartesian Poetics*; Emma Gilby, *Descartes's Fictions: Reading Philosophy with Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[4] Gilby, *Descartes's Fictions*, p. 22.

[5] Tanya Carson, 'Gego: Summary', May 2015. Source: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gego-reticularéa-t15285>, accessed 30.07.2021.

Emma Claussen
University of Cambridge
ec496@cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

