

*Récit et relation de soi au XVIIe siècle.* Judith Sribnai.

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Judith Sribnai is interested in the modalities of self-representation in the early modern period: in what authors do with the first person, and in what, if anything, they are sharing, showing, and telling us of themselves as they write. In *Récit et relation de soi*, the product of her doctoral thesis, she analyzes a selection of philosophical texts and novels and reads these alongside each other. Her acts of comparing and contrasting are always structured topically, around the twin themes of speaking out from a particular place or perspective and reaching out to a readership. She resists any temptation to divide her study up by author or genre: instead, she shows variously how these categories are themselves in continual flux in the period. The novels under discussion comprise some of the better-known seventeenth-century narratives: Théophile de Viau's *La Première journée*, Sorel's *Histoire comique de Francion*, Tristan L'Hermite's *Le Page disgracié*, Cyrano de Bergerac's *Les Etats et Empires de la Lune et du Soleil* — as well as works by the more obscure Claireville (*Le Gascon extravagant*), Préfontaine (*L'Orphelin infortuné*), Foigny (*La Terre australe connue*), and Dassoucy (*Les Aventures* and *Les Aventures d'Italie*). All these texts have in common “the blurring of the limit between fiction and autobiography” (19). This paves the way for Sribnai to leave aside historical novels that, she feels, do not pose sufficiently interesting problems of referentiality, and to introduce instead her three philosophers: Descartes (the *Discours* and *Méditations*), Gassendi (the *Disquisitio Metaphysica*), and Malebranche (the *Recherche de la vérité*).

Sribnai's corpus has the paradoxical characteristic of being at once exceptionally broad and too strictly delimited. Although this is a lengthy piece of work with an exceptional bibliography, one inevitably thinks of fragments of Pascal and Bossuet and other first-person discourses that exceed its parameters. Equally, one thinks of questions about identity formation and expression that evade the first-person pronoun. Sribnai does note

that the subjectivities constructed in these texts exist only in relation to the public, in all senses of the word. Without engaging head on with the “self-fashioning” of the New Historicist school, she nods to studies that make the first person the product — or analog, or reflection — of social practices. Her own aims are differently, and perhaps more positively, expressed: “to consider the subjectivity fashioned by these authors as the deliberate exposition of self” (24). James Helgeson’s brief article “Early Modernity without the Self: Notes on Anachronism and the First Person” (*Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 29 [2007]: 29–39) is cited as a particular inspiration, with its focus on intentionality in the broad sense, on “directedness” and “outwardness.” However, as Sribnai fully acknowledges, it is hard to make positive or overarching claims when bringing together such disparate texts on the grounds that what they have in common is an essential ambiguity. Descartes’s first-person poses, Gassendi’s experimentation, and Malebranche’s inquiries are all seen as comparable to the novelists’ fictions in that they are hostile to the univocal or uniform, not so much offering any kind of truth as staking out exploratory itineraries, moving in different ways from revelation to concealment and back again. Sribnai’s tone throughout seems hesitant, erring always on the side of abstraction. Her whole problematic is framed as an attempt to discover the extent to which her own approach is valid or justified. While this statement of intent represents a wise attempt to avoid stereotypical claims about the emergence of the modern subject, it also ushers in a level of generality that can seem unhelpful. Where they appear, Sribnai’s close readings are excellent, and give a clearer picture of this “constellation of different roles and faces” (46).

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