Richard Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early-Modern France: Encounters with A Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 352 pp. $99.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 0-1992-74401.

Review by TEMS, University of Minnesota.

The following book review is the product of an experiment in collective, collaborative book reviewing conducted by the Theorizing Early Modern Studies (TEMS) research collaborative at the University of Minnesota http://www.tems.umn.edu. On October 4, 2007 the TEMS group met to discuss Richard Scholar's The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early-Modern France: Encounters with A Certain Something *(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Present were faculty members Juliette Cherbuliez (Associate Professor of French and Italian, University of Minnesota, and a co-coordinator of TEMS), Michael Gaudio (Assistant Professor of Art History, University of Minnesota, and a co-coordinator of TEMS), Stuart McLean (Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Minnesota), Marcela Kostihová, Assistant Professor of English, Hamline University), J. B. Shank (Associate Professor of History, University of Minnesota, and a co-coordinator of TEMS) and graduate students Melanie Bowman (French and Italian), Luke Brekke (History), Lauren Fichtel (French and Italian), and Jacob Steere-Williams (History of Medicine). After our initial review, we further invited Richard Scholar to come to the University of Minnesota to discuss his book with our group. This conversation occurred on November 1, 2007. Subsequently, we prepared the final review collectively using online "wiki" technology to collaboratively write and edit the text. The review published here is the end result of these efforts and it thus represents a jointly produced collective assessment of the book.*

If it is hard to specify the precise topic of Richard Scholar's *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early-Modern France: Encounters with A Certain Something*, it is no criticism of the book or its author. Rather, to expose this difficulty is to isolate one of the crucial insights of Scholar's thoughtful and erudite work. To state that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is beyond precise definition may at first appear like a trivial tautology. But as Scholar endeavors to historicize the concept and to offer us a reason to peer more closely at its contours, he convincingly shows why a book-length analysis of a "something that is experienced but cannot be explained" (p. 34) is not only a fruitful project in and of itself, but also an important gambit to what should be an ongoing discussion about the development of more interdisciplinary methodologies for the study of early modern ideas and culture.

Indeed, as Scholar's book traces the fortunes of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through the early modern period, its analysis proves to be as much about methodology as it is about the concept itself. Scholar's efforts to historicize the emergence and then insistent presence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in early modern European culture ultimately poses a particular early modern problem that in turn suggests a distinctively early modern complex of methodological questions. This is true even, or especially, when the book falls short of its aspirations or potential.

The structure of Scholar's book derives from the multi-perspectival and reflexive way that he defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The first of three sections, entitled "Word History," focuses on a lexicographical account of the beginnings and initial deployment of this "modish name" as Scholar calls it, using Dominique Bouhours's *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671) to give this origination a linguistic, philosophical, and historical frame. In this section, we are introduced to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a word and as a particular historical phenomenon. The second section, called "Critical Histories," continues this historical work by tracing the trajectory of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in seventeenth-century French discourse. This section also

adds a multi-disciplinary dimension to this historical discussion by exploring how the word and the concept were used by natural philosophers, writers, dramatists, and theologians. Here the historical emergence and development of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is examined through its activity in a range of different texts and contexts. This section concludes by returning to Bouhours in order to show the completion of this historical trajectory through the "sedimentation" or semantic stabilization and increasing routinization of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into a fixed and settled label. In the third and final section, entitled "Pre-History," Scholar changes frames by exploring the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through readings of Montaigne and Shakespeare (the latter as a gesture toward the comparative potential of the concept outside of French discourse). If the previous two sections interpreted the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in early modern Europe through the lens of a traditional diachronic historical framework, this final section self-consciously destabilizes this reading by "rescuing the topic from its early modern history of sedimentation" (p. 225) so as to emphasize its vitality as a living concept detached from its death within a particular historical and lexicographic dynamic. Here, following Terence Cave, whom Scholar cites throughout this section, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is reclaimed as an early feature of a still present modernity.[1]

So what does this complex architecture ultimately produce? The first section's lexicographical accounting of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* rejects a poststructuralist model of language where meaning would simply be a play of semantic difference within language itself. Instead, Scholar adopts what he calls a "mentalist" (we could also call it "realist") model in which meanings really exist as historical entities, independent of words. This allows him to trace the history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by mapping the textual appearances of words onto a history of meaning. Calling it "mapping," however, may make this method appear too straightforward, since Scholar certainly recognizes that tracing a history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is an embattled affair. Defining a concept that is present precisely at the moment when language structures fail is tricky business. Is that "certain something" which the word "je-ne-sais-quoi" denotes a real void in language itself? Or is it a concept or notion, or a kind of gestalt noting the limits of epistemological inquiry? Do neologisms, such as "nescioquiddity" which Scholar deploys, help us to define these limits, and thus to stabilize the relations between words and things, and between language and meaning? Or do we struggle futilely with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* such that our repeated rehearsals of this battle to know are forever thwarted and our deployment of this category as a solution just one more way to renounce our ability (and desire?) to understand?

Scholar is at his best when he rigorously documents and describes these lexicographic conundrums, and the result is certainly nothing less than a stunning scholarly achievement (the pun is unavoidable). Yet once established, the empirical facticity of this intensely unstable lexicographic-hermeneutic field begs an account of it in something other than the empirical, descriptive terms that the book provides. One reason for the absence of this more dynamic approach seems to be Scholar's urge to keep critical lexicography (or word history) separate from phenomenology. The critical word histories offered are very insightful in their descriptions, yet we felt that they would have acquired even more force had they been embedded more fully into a phenomenological account of the historical factors that produced this precise discursive field at this precise time. Scholar notes that there have been phenomenological treatments of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* before, and one reason for his decision to take a different approach, he states, was a worry about redundancy. Yet would it not have been possible to join the thorough accounting of the deployment of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* offered here with a more thorough phenomenological treatment of the concept as historical agent and actor?

In one of Scholar's many brushes with these other agendas, he treats the correspondence between René Descartes and Queen Christina of Sweden in terms of the epistemological conundrums with which it wrestled. Descartes' philosophy is presented by Scholar as a failed attempt to eradicate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from rational understanding, and he likens the inevitable return of the concept, despite Descartes' best efforts to erase it, as a form of "haunting." Christina, meanwhile, is shown to have been an astute observer of these inadequacies, and a conjurer of sorts who continually insisted on returning the ghosts to Descartes' philosophy. Failed exchanges and haunted dialogues of this sort were the norm in the

seventeenth century, yet this is one of the few examples of this sort offered in the book. Scholar's critical history of the *je-ne-sais-quo* might have been enriched, therefore, had it thus been framed in less clean, linear, and successful terms. The historical treatment also would have been more potent had the interests, motivations, and anxieties that led the actors in the book into the positions they took been included as a category of analysis. In short, the critical word histories offered here are very insightful in their empirical and structural descriptions, but they would acquire even more force were they to be embedded more fully into a phenomenological account of the historical factors that produced this precise discourse at this precise time. For isn't this very task—how to consider the historical agency of a concept—the very essence of our interest in the *je-ne-sais-quoi*?

The second section, "Critical Histories," continues in this vein by taking on a broad range of texts, and then using them to show, so to speak, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in historical action. The inquiry ranges in subject matter from the history of science (natural philosophers) to theology (natural philosophers and thinkers such as Pascal) to drama, poetry, and the worldly literature of politeness. In all these seventeenth-century spaces, Scholar aptly demonstrates, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* flourishes, offering itself as something of a marker of the anxieties and uncertainties of this era of political, religious, and social upheaval, countered with renewed urges toward certainty and confessional rigidity. The temporal trajectory of the rise and "sedimentation" of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as Scholar documents it conforms remarkably well, in fact, with other well-established moments of transformation in early modern European history. The Scientific Revolution is one obvious parallel to cite, but the "general crisis" of the seventeenth-century as theorized by historians and social scientists, along with other more particular "crises" like those associated with the Baroque or skepticism or religious and political authority also relate in fascinating ways to the history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.[2] To see the history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in conjunction with these other shifts is to illuminate the ways that seventeenth-century Europe was caught in one of those transversal moments that, via a linguistic and epistemological crisis, allowed certain humans to encounter and attempt to articulate the limitations of our understanding. Scholar shows in detail how this category burst onto the scene at precisely this moment, and that it did so should appear as deeply significant to students of this period in European history. Moreover, while Scholar chooses not to explore these synchronic coincidences because of his focus on the rise and then sedimentation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a linguistic object, the book points to these other possibilities and makes them available as avenues of inquiry for other researchers.

Scholar's historical work in the first two sections ends with an account of the sedimentation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* within polite society in the late seventeenth century. At this juncture, the word loses its dynamic character becoming instead a stable "sign of quality." Framed this way, Scholar's history echoes a familiar narrative about modernity, which is to say that his is a story about the "disenchantment of the word" as it travels from a vital early history where it powerfully intervenes in debates over the nature and value of human experience toward its inevitable sedimentation as a marker of bounded qualities (chapter four). He also offers a socio-political argument to explain this final transformation, namely the increasing assimilation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to a particular language game characteristic of an elite segment of French society. Here Scholar opens the possibility of linking this linguistic phenomenon with the socioeconomic delineation of power in society, a door that was not opened in the earlier historical chapters. If the *je-ne-sais-quoi* helps to delineate the boundaries of the comprehensible—it is intrinsically connected to contemporary methods of inquiry and understanding— how does it simultaneously outline the hierarchy of status as acquired by particular kinds of knowledge? Said another way, how does knowledge translate into power among and for those who agree on a certain delineation of the very boundaries of knowledge marked by the "certain something" that can be felt but not fully articulated by those "in the know," and how does the same translation exclude those who do not, or refuse to participate in such linguistic games? Scholar shows how this worked during the historical twilight of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but this analysis begs for extension to the moments of origination and development as well. This is especially true since the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a concept exists in a troubling liminal space between the familiarly categorized and the unfamiliar, and therefore has

broader implications outside the early modern period for understanding the fraught relationship between order and disorder, center and margin, in our own period and in many others.

The bulk of Scholar's book is devoted to the construction of the complex historical analysis of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* described above. But in a fascinating counter move, one that the readers in our group found to be among the book's best features, Scholar seemingly undermines this earlier work with a focus on what he calls, following Terrence Cave, the "Pre-History" of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The chapter on Montaigne that opens this section is particularly rich, for here Scholar proposes that we see Montaigne as a writer caught between a dynamic of experience and explanation that can never be resolved. Montaigne is not the origin of the human subject for Scholar, or of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* word usage, but rather a writer "de bonne foi" in his attitude toward what he cannot fully comprehend. This dynamic defines Montaigne's encounter and relationship with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and since the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is not situated here within an over-arching and culturally specific historical narrative, this reading will be useful for early modernists in general and for students focused on these problems outside of this precise time and space as well.

The final section of Scholar's book thus creates a sense of a deconstructed historical narrative. In its resistance to the evolution of an Enlightenment modernity as rehearsed by the previous sections, the Montaigne chapter unravels much that comes before. As such, the Montaigne material seems to reach beyond a mere "pre-history" of *je-ne-sais-quoi* to pose a challenge to the narrative of modernity constructed in the first part of the book. Scholar's use of Foucault's work is especially intriguing in this respect. Following in the footsteps of the archaeological Foucault of *Les Mots et les Choses*, Scholar offers the dynamics of the *je-ne-sais-quo* in its origination and development as a challenge to the supposedly static nature of the Foucualtian episteme.[3] While this undoubtedly makes for compelling arguments, we wondered whether the later genealogical Foucault would not have provided a valuable methodological resource, since the conceptions of power and discourse that Foucault develops in his later work provide rich possibilities for thinking through a genealogical account of the rise of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Especially powerful is the way that this methodology would situate language more fully in relationship to institutions and other sites of power in seventeenth-century Europe. The Cave/Scholar conception of "pre-history" also seeks, in a manner not at all unlike Foucault's thought in the essay "Nietzche, Genealogy, History," to break free of the frameworks of historical teleology and genesis altogether. Why, therefore, this particular dual approach with "Critical history" followed by "Pre-History" instead of one or the other exclusively? And why the particular arrangement of the two? Overall, the book succeeds wonderfully in performing a very interesting set of historical gymnastics, and the final result, despite its complexities, is anything but incoherent. Yet the precise architecture does create an unsatisfied longing for a more systematic engagement with the historiographical problems that it poses.

In the end, *The Je-ne-sais-quoi in Early Modern Europe* accomplishes much by bringing this inherently ineffable topic into clear view with an eye toward the fascinating reasons why and how it burst into European discourse when and where it did. Scholar accomplishes this work with an admirable self-consciousness about disciplinarity and a refreshing willingness to think self-reflexively about it. For, above all, Scholar's book shows how our drive to delineate the boundaries of the comprehensible must remain intrinsically connected to contemporary methods of inquiry and understanding, and why the early modern period is one of the most fruitful areas of inquiry for making this connection.

NOTES

[1] Terence Cave, Pré-histoires: Textes troublés au seuil de la modernité (Geneva: Droz, 1999) and Pré-histoires II: Langues étrangères et troubles économiques au XVIe siècle (Geneva: Droz, 2001).

[2] Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Theodore K. Rabb, *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); A. R. Hall, *The Revolution in Science 1500-1800* 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Addison Wesley, 1983); Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[3] Scholar mentions Foucault's notion of the episteme explicitly on pp. 14-15, citing Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); idem., *L'Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

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