

**THE 'JE-NE-SAIS-QUOI':
THE WORD AND ITS PRE-HISTORY,
1580-1680**

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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Oxford**

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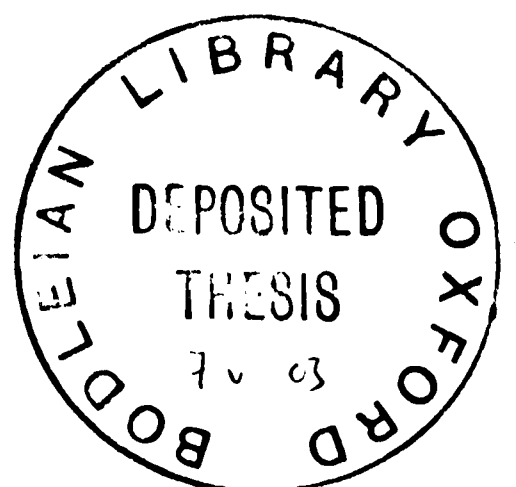


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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through its history and its pre-history. When we are moved by something we cannot identify, but whose effects we cannot fail to recognize, how should we try and come to terms with our experience? The *je-ne-sais-quoi* rises to prominence as a keyword in such discussions during the period studied. This thesis offers the first full-length study of the word and its significance to literary and philosophical writing of that period. It traces its precursors, its rise as a noun in mid-seventeenth-century France and England, and its fall from grace. Previous historical work has generally restricted the word's application to aesthetics; this study examines its significance in the philosophy of nature and the passions as well as culture. It combines historical method and philosophical enquiry to inform the close analysis of examples. The aim is to consider what the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is and how it finds expression in writing.

A fourfold thesis is proposed. (i) The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its core meaning, refers to an inexplicable force with sudden and vital effects. (ii) This force remains ever on the move by unsettling sedimented words, passing through current ones, and abandoning these as they too undergo sedimentation. (iii) The word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* encapsulates this movement. The term is first used to unsettle its semantic precursors (by Descartes and others), becomes current in writing of the mid-seventeenth century (that of Corneille and Pascal in particular), but soon settles into the sediment of polite culture (as Méré, Bouhours, and English Restoration comedy show). (iv) Returning the word to the mobile non-substantial forms of its pre-history in Montaigne, to whom a chapter-length study is devoted, uncovers a form of writing that captures the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* better than the settled word itself. The task of literature is to lend form to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by naming it in its inexplicable reality and by describing how it falls, like a disaster, into our experience.

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Long Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through its history and pre-history. When we are moved by something we cannot identify but whose effects we cannot fail to recognize, or when such an event occurs in nature, how should we try and come to terms with our experience? The *je-ne-sais-quoi* rises to prominence as a keyword in such discussions between approximately 1580 and 1680. This thesis offers the first full-length study of the word and its significance in literary and philosophical writing of the period. I have attempted this because I consider that to think and write about that which falls into experience, but outside the mind, is the vital task of philosophy and literature; that early modern writers such as Montaigne and Pascal make this task their own; and that the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its rise and fall, offers a controlled means of tracing and analysing their attempts to come to terms with the experience of the inexplicable.

Existing work on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* reflects its position on the borderline between literature and philosophy. Studies have fallen into two kinds, those that examine the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a word with a literary history, and those that treat it as

a topic of general philosophy. The philosophical approach has yielded the only monograph yet to have been devoted to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (first published in 1957). Jankélévitch defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a subtle 'almost-nothing' that changes everything and a vital principle that keeps philosophy in movement by remaining ever beyond its grasp. He develops a general philosophical concept of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* without seeking to examine the history of the word. The historical approach to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has yielded numerous articles or chapter-length studies. Most of these follow Croce (1902) in treating the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a word with a predominantly literary or æsthetic history. Some, like Borgerhoff (1950), argue that it reveals an irrationalist tendency in the complex æsthetic movement of French classicism. Others, notably Marin (1986, 1989), place the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the genealogy of the Romantic sublime. A third group, most recently Moriarty (1999), argues that the word is significant as an æsthetic or cultural effect of wider ideological issues.

My aim is to reflect upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by tracing a comprehensive history of the word and then by returning it to its pre-history. I treat the *je-ne-sais-quoi* neither solely as a word with a literary history nor as a general philosophical topic. My study draws upon both approaches in an attempt to establish a critical dialogue between texts of the past and twenty-first-century preoccupations. General philosophical questions about the topic – what is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and how can it be put into words? – run throughout the thesis. The value of a historical approach is that it requires us to seek out and make sense of the ways in which others in the past have addressed such questions. Their thinking often differs from our own, and when this is the case, the comparison leaves our habits of mind unsettled and enriched. The thesis uses historical method and philosophical enquiry, then, as contrary pressures

with which to structure and inform the close literary analysis of particular examples. I adopt successively three approaches to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: the first is to examine its word history, the second its critical history, and the third its pre-history. I offer a full-length history of the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* that, rather than reducing it to one field (the æsthetic), displays its range of reference across different regions of experience. I use the general philosophical questions, at the same time, to pursue a critical argument about the word and its history. This proposes, first, that the word has no sooner entered the history of the language than it loses the force required to trace the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and second, that the best way of recovering that force is to apprehend the word in its pre-history.

The subject of chapter one is the early modern word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The word's European precursors from *nescio quid* onwards, its various lexical forms and semantic operations in late sixteenth-century French, and the subsequent rise of its substantival form in France and England are examined (1.i). Lexicographical texts are used here to locate key lexical occurrences, from a range of authors, which are analysed in the succeeding chapters. I then propose a definition of the seventeenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its core meaning or 'ideal type'. The ideal type, a historical method elaborated by Max Weber, offers a measure of prediction and synthesis on the basis of historical evidence but remains resolutely provisional and non-reductive. The ideal type of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, I argue, refers to the experience of an inexplicable force of sympathy or antipathy (1.ii). It defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in other words, as a unit of sense or 'seme'. I maintain the distinction between seme and lexeme while generally according primacy to the former. The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* I use, then, as a controlled tracer of a semantic ideal type that moves through an open-ended field of terms, phrases, and figures. I then locate the

four regions of experience in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* most commonly appears: theology, nature, the passions, and culture. The first surviving treatment of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a polite literary topic, by Bouhours in 1671, constitutes the single strongest piece of evidence for this fourfold topography. For Bouhours maps these regions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* once the word has entered history (1.iii).

I use Bouhours's map to direct my pursuit of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through the critical histories of chapters two, three, and four. The word's theological uses are discussed in chapter one (1.iii.2). The following chapters are each devoted to one of the three regions of experience in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears. I use lexical occurrences of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to direct and control my sample of what is, in each case, a large and complex area. But the method used is *critical* in that it pursues throughout the general philosophical questions, 'what is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and how can it be put into words?', and judges whether the lexical occurrences discovered fit its semantic ideal type. This method necessarily excludes terms and concepts that may bear a significant semantic relation to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* but happen not to appear next to it in a specific lexical occurrence. I accept this as a practically necessary omission for which I attempt to compensate by drawing on studies of related terms. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as it appears in different regions of experience, is subject to a critical, historical, and generic analysis. I argue that the word, in its rise to prominence, allows seventeenth-century writers one forceful way of saying that some event has brought their habitual ways of thinking and speaking to a moment of crisis. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* refers to a 'fault-line' that experience of the world exposes within what many assume to be the stable bedrock of traditional explanation. It is a vital force that frustrates all attempts to define its identity and establish its causes even as it invites them.

Chapter two is concerned with the appearance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature and the conflicting attempts by natural philosophers to come to terms with it. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* refers to our common experience of the insensible forces – such as magnetic attraction – that act in nature (2.i.1). Three explanations are reviewed: the first, that of the scholastic tradition, places the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in material substance as its ‘occult quality’, ‘substantial form’, or animating ‘spirit’ (2.i.2); the second, associated with Descartes and others, attacks this as a refuge of ignorance and proposes a new mechanical explanation by atoms or corpuscles (2.ii.2 and 2.iii.1); the third makes of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* an insensible force whose nature is the subject of heated debate between Leibniz and Newton (2.iii.3). The use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a fashionable keyword in such debates is part of an attempt to bring natural philosophy out of scholastic Latin and into vernacular literature (2.ii.1). Not only does the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* serve to articulate these debates but they, in turn, offer access to the same of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature. The search to explain its causes, I argue, is the symptom of a crisis in natural philosophy that is never fully resolved. I adopt the concept of *force*, not as an explanation, but as an ‘objective correlative’ (a chain of events that evokes the experience) of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature (2.iii.3).

Chapter three examines the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, not in its action upon parts of matter, but when it falls between two people. The word names my experience of a sudden and inexplicable sympathy (or antipathy), or what one might call a ‘stroke of passion’, for another (3.i.1). I treat the stroke of passion not so much as an idea with a history, but rather, as a particular experience that releases different kinds of writing. The texts analysed in this chapter are drawn, accordingly, from the mixed vernacular genres that reveal the rise of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: these include treatises of the passions (including those of Camus, Descartes, and Malebranche), polite

philosophical and *moraliste* writing (Bouhours, La Rochefoucauld, and Pascal), and drama (notably Corneille). I identify three tendencies towards the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in this mixed field. The first is to accommodate it within a systematic science of the passions (3.i.2-3.i.3); the word appears here in two commonplaces about the indefinability of love and sympathy (3.ii.1). The second tendency – which I place at the heart of the chapter – is simply to name the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its real inexplicability and its inexplicable reality. This forceful nomination, I argue, is the art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its period of lexical currency. The chapter offers close readings of two notable practitioners of this art, Corneille and Pascal, and examines their use of objective correlatives to evoke the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a stroke of passion (3.ii.2-3.ii.3). The third tendency, which I associate with Bouhours in particular, is to cultivate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an agent of pathos. The word, once established as a fashionable way of referring to a stroke of passion, comes to be used by some as an instrument with which to win friends and influence people in social circles (3.iii.2).

Chapter four develops this suggestion by analysing the place of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in æsthetic and social discourse. The word rises to prominence in seventeenth-century literary conversations, and in particular, those of Bouhours and his contemporary Méré. They, accordingly, receive the most sustained critical attention. I argue that the polite circle in French society cultivates artificial ways of distinguishing itself and its æsthetic productions from those that it excludes. The ludic fabrication of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* encapsulates this process (4.i). I then offer a survey of the dominant signs in the period 1630-1680: *honnêteté*, *urbanité*, *galanterie*, and *bel esprit*. Each contains non-substantial forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and can be said meaningfully to anticipate the sedimentation of the noun in that the same cultural elite produces them (4.ii). Each sign, I argue with reference to Méré and Bouhours, serves

the double function of confirming the members of the circle in their sense of belonging (those who have *it*, whatever ‘it’ is) and in damning the outsiders (4.iii.1-4.iii.2). This makes it essential for the circle to renew its signs of quality as they spread beyond the circle. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, for that reason, can escape its fate no more than any other sign of quality. Its seventeenth-century history ends in its fall from grace (4.iii.3). The semantic force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, weakened by its use as a polite artifact, collapses as satirists make a laughing-stock of the word. The vital force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is to be found, not in its late seventeenth-century cultural history, I argue at the end of the chapter, but in its late sixteenth-century pre-history.

The pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the subject of the fifth and final chapter. Montaigne, my single example, writes about those very regions of experience in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* rises and he uses its various non-substantival forms without having the settled noun at his disposal (5.i.1). Historians as a result place him in the word’s genealogy. I suggest, on the contrary, that one best apprehends the particular movement of Montaigne’s writing by seeking, not the origins of the settled *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but its scattered ‘pre-history’ (5.i.2). The pre-historical method allows one to move backwards, from the rise of a subsequent historical phenomenon, into the disparate traces that appear to anticipate this development. The pre-historian rescues these traces from their later history by analysing them in the absolute present-tense moment of their composition. I return to the subjects of the previous three chapters by examining whether, and how, Montaigne writes about the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature (5.ii.1), culture (5.ii.2), and the passions (5.iii.2). He cannot be said to anticipate the polite sedimentation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a noun, I argue, because his writing remains ever on the move (5.ii.2). He employs a mobile set of lexical forms, rhetorical and conceptual figures, and objective correlatives – the supple art of

the *essai* (5.iii.1) – to lend form to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as it falls into experience. The traditional example of the blind man becomes, for Montaigne, a conceptual figure through which he reflects upon this experience (5.ii.1). In describing the vital force of friendship that fell upon La Boétie and him like an inexplicable disaster, Montaigne, I suggest (5.iii.2), writes the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

I offer, in conclusion, a thesis about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that can be stated in four points. (i) The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, a word that first rises to prominence in seventeenth-century France, refers to a vital force of sympathy or antipathy that I experience in its sudden and inexplicable effects. (ii) The force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* falls in different regions of early modern experience and, in each, brings settled forms of explanation to a crisis. It moves through its semantic field by unsettling sedimented words, passing forcefully through current ones, and abandoning these as they too undergo sedimentation. (iii) The word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* traces this movement in the early modern period. The word unsettles its precursors in its rise to prominence, carries intense semantic force in philosophical and literary writing of the mid-seventeenth century, but, by the end of the century, it too has settled into the sediment of polite culture. (iv) The very process by which the word acquires its history divorces it from the inexplicable force that it served to trace. Returning the word to the supple non-substantial forms of its pre-history, in the writing of Montaigne, serves to recover the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as it falls into experience. It does so with the inexplicable and revolutionary effects of a disaster.

I end my Conclusion by suggesting, as an avenue of future research, that the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* might be developed into a critical theory turned towards the close analysis of texts. I offer, as one example, a close reading of

Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bottom's dream of love, which encapsulates the play itself, is, I suggest, a bottomless comic *je-ne-sais-quoi*. A critical theory of this kind would serve to draw multiple instances from different linguistic, literary, and philosophical traditions into one provisional space. It would move the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into a space outside its history while remaining faithful to the experience itself.

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Notes on references and abbreviations

I refer to all titles by the author-date system. The only exceptions are those abbreviated forms listed below and those standard texts (such as the works of Aristotle) for which it is more appropriate to follow the conventional mode of reference. Direct short references to one text are usually indicated in parentheses within the text; all others are placed in footnotes. When a multi-volume series was published over a number of years, I give only the initial publication date in my reference. Dates placed after the titles of books in the main text refer to their first publication in printed form, except in the case of plays, where I list first performances.

I quote all primary sources in their original language except those in ancient Greek, which I quote in a standard English translation. Translations of quotations from languages other than French are given in a separate note (pp. 335-36 below). I have used the same spelling conventions as the editions used, except that when quoting early modern texts, I distinguish between ‘i’ and ‘j’, ‘u’ and ‘v’, and resolve abbreviations. Any suggested emendation of spelling and punctuation I place in square brackets.

I use the following abbreviated forms:

CHRP	<i>The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy</i> (Schmitt 1988)
CHSP	<i>The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy</i> (Garber and Ayers 1998)
Montaigne	I refer to the Villey and Saulnier edition of the <i>Essais</i> (Montaigne 1992a). References list book, chapter, and page numbers and then the

period of composition. For the latter, I follow the scheme developed by Villey: *a* refers to the editions of 1580 and 1582, *b* to that of 1588; *c* to additions made after 1588

OED *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989)

Pascal I refer to both the Lafuma (Pascal 1962) and Sellier (Pascal 1991) numberings of the *Pensées* (e.g. ‘Pascal: Laf. 413; Sell. 32’)

Shakespeare I refer to act, verse, and line numbers as listed in the Clarendon Press *Complete Works* (Shakespeare 1988)

My cross-references are to both numbered sections and page numbers, except where I wish to refer to the argument of a particular section in its entirety, when I give only the number of the section.

INTRODUCTION

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is upon us before we know it. When an imperceptible quality or force suddenly moves us towards a person or a thing, or repulses us, we experience something that we cannot identify, and whose causes we do not understand, but whose sudden and vital effects we cannot fail to recognize. The experience is a common one. It happens each time that we feel drawn towards a stranger, friend, or lover; that we are moved by a work of art; that we experience the effects of a drug, and in countless other situations. It may happen too, in a less immediate manner, when we observe the attraction between magnet and iron. Can such experiences be explained, and how are they best put into words? Attempting to reflect upon and describe that which falls into experience, but outside the mind, is the vital task of literature and philosophy alike. The early modern period sees the rise of a word that seems peculiarly suited to the task: the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by tracing its history and pre-history in vernacular literary and philosophical writing between approximately 1580 and 1680. It is during this period that the word first rises to prominence. Its non-substantival forms are already current in late sixteenth-century French, but in the course of the following century, the word becomes fashionable as a noun. Dominique Bouhours makes ‘Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy’ the title of a polite philosophical conversation first published in 1671. The word, by now a keyword of French culture, spreads to England where, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, speakers can also call upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to name their experience of

an inexplicable force. The same remains true to this day. The French company Renault ran an advertising campaign in England for their new ‘Clio’ car in the summer of 2002. The television advertisement features a French footballer employed by an English club, Thierry Henry, who announces (in English) that the ‘Clio’ possesses what he calls *va va voom*. But what is *va va voom*? Is it the *joie-de-vivre*, he wonders, or is it the *je-ne-sais-quoi*?¹ Drivers are invited to answer the question by experiencing the car’s qualities for themselves. Saying of something today that it has ‘a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*’ strikes a note of mannered elegance in French and English alike. In the early modern period, however, the word had a vital force all its own.

Existing work on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* reflects its position on the borderline between literature and philosophy. Studies have tended to fall into two kinds, those that examine the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a word with a literary history, and those that treat it as a topic of general philosophy. The latter approach has yielded the only book-length study yet to have been devoted to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, Vladimir Jankélévitch’s *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*, which he first published in 1957 and then revised heavily for republication (in three volumes) in 1980. Jankélévitch defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as the principle of life, a something so inexplicable and insubstantial that it appears to be almost nothing, but which is in fact the object of philosophy. This something he describes in the book’s opening page:

il y a quelque chose d’inévident et d’indémontrable à quoi tient le côté inexhaustible, atmosphérique des totalités spirituelles, quelque chose dont l’invisible présence nous comble, dont l’absence inexplicable nous laisse curieusement inquiets, quelque chose qui n’existe pas et qui pourtant est la chose la plus importante entre toutes les choses importantes, la seule qui vaille la peine d’être dite et la seule justement qu’on ne puisse dire!²

¹ See the website devoted to the advertising campaign at www.vavavoom.co.uk.

² Jankélévitch 1980: I, 11; see also I, 43. I refer throughout to this revised edition.

This fleeting something Jankélévitch calls, not *va va voom*, but the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He traces the apparitions of this subtle principle as it sets time, charm, and freedom into movement; considers recognition as the sole means by which it can be apprehended (and *le malentendu*, conversely, as its misapprehension); and ends by discovering and celebrating the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as the inexplicable vital impulse of the human will. Jankélévitch chose the *je-ne-sais-quoi* above all, perhaps, for the word's resolutely French character. *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*, which Jankélévitch first wrote in the years following the end of the Second World War, includes frequent examples drawn from the Nazi occupation of France; references to German thought, meanwhile, are notable by their absence – and this in the work of a philosopher who wrote his thesis on Schelling.³ ‘Cette propriété *pas-comme-les-autres*,’ Jankélévitch says of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, ‘c’est, pour parler avec Bergson, “l’imprévisible rien qui fait tout”’ (1980: I, 104). The book finds a place in the twentieth-century French tradition that stretches from Bergson, through Jankélévitch, to Derrida, Deleuze, and beyond. Jankélévitch typifies this tradition in his preference for the creation of philosophical concepts rather than the adoption of a historical perspective. He draws recurrently upon seventeenth-century writing about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, for example, only as and when this enables him rigorously to pursue his own concept.⁴ This need not, of course, prevent his *je-ne-sais-quoi* from coinciding with that described by seventeenth-century writers; but when this occurs, it must, given Jankélévitch’s approach, be precisely that – a coincidence. No remark in fact encapsulates his philosophy better than that of Pascal: ‘ce *Je ne sais quoi*, si peu de chose qu’on ne peut le reconnaître,

³ See Jankélévitch 1980: I, 99, 102; II, 16, 29; Jankélévitch 1998: 5 (Preface).

⁴ Other examples of this approach to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* are less successful because they lack the conceptual rigour of Jankélévitch: Cerny (1961), for example, writes at length about the ‘concept’ of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* without ever defining what this may be.

remue toute la terre, les princes, les armées, le monde entier.’⁵ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is that subtle almost-nothing that changes everything.

Most studies of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* offer, by contrast with Jankélévitch, a predominantly literary history of the word. Literary critics and historians have long placed the *je-ne-sais-quoi* at the origins of their own discipline. Benedetto Croce includes a brief discussion of the word in the historical section of his influential *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione* (1902). He encounters the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in his project to establish aesthetics as a form of knowledge that is concerned with the particular, not the universal, and that is theoretical but not rational.⁶ Croce identifies the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and other keywords of the seventeenth century – *taste*, *imagination*, and so on – as part of an early attempt to articulate aesthetic knowledge (1953: 191-207). The attempt was unsuccessful, he argues, but words such as the *je-ne-sais-quoi* are historically significant as ‘apprehensions of ground still to be conquered’ (1953: 197). Joel Spingarn proves more generous in the single paragraph that he devotes to the topic in the introduction to his *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (1908). His remarks set the pattern for much later work. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, he asserts, ‘illustrates the process by which the seventeenth century [...] formulated the terminology of modern criticism’; he notes the word’s Italian and Spanish precursors as well as its success in England, and places Montaigne and other late sixteenth-century writers at the origin of its development (Spingarn 1957: I, c-ci). E. B. O. Borgerhoff, following Spingarn’s lead, describes his own attempt to trace the history of ‘a relatively innocent term’ – the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – as the initial impetus to his study of *The Freedom of French Classicism* (1950: ix). Borgerhoff, in the end, devotes just one section to the word (1950: 186-200). He follows Spingarn in

⁵ Pascal: Laf. 413; Sell. 32; on this fragment, see 3.ii.3 below.

⁶ Croce 1953: 155; Bulatkin 1955.

considering the term as an æsthetic concept, although he concedes that it referred to other regions of experience (1950: 187-90). Like Spingarn, and like Jankélévitch indeed, he conceives of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a means of resisting reductive explanations of certain vital phenomena. Where Spingarn places the word at the origins of modern critical language, however, Borgerhoff seeks to complicate the rationalism commonly attributed to French seventeenth-century classicism. The literature of this period had its freedoms too, he argues, citing the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a word that served to crystallize a salutary ‘suspicion of the pat formula and the easy explanation’ (1950: 200). The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in this case, belongs to the classical history of the inexplicable, and in the other, to the moment when the inexplicable first started to find its modern formulation.

Historians of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* have generally pursued one of these two lines of argument in their treatment of the topic. Some have followed Borgerhoff, and Henri Busson (1982: 356-63) before him, in using the word to oppose or complicate the historical commonplace that associates classicism with Cartesian rationalism. They include Pierre-Henri Simon (1959), Suzanne Guellouz (1971: 9), and Claude Chantalat (1992: 47-49). None of them, however, actually analyses Descartes’s use of the word. Emmanuelle de Gaudemar, who has done so in a recent *maîtrise* on the topic, argues that, far from proving irreducible to Cartesian explanation, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is its very object: ‘le rationalisme cartésien se donne un objet naturel qui lui est étranger, pour pouvoir ensuite [...] en produire l’analyse’ (1998: 86). Gaudemar simply inverts the terms of a familiar opposition here. Most historians have placed the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, after Croce and Spingarn, in the genealogy of literary criticism or æsthetics. Ernst Cassirer, in his work on the philosophy of the Enlightenment (1932), associates the word with the growing ‘trend towards subjectivism’ in æsthetic

judgements (1951: 297-312). Samuel Holt Monk (1944) mentions it in his account of the long pan-European history of ‘grace’ as a critical term before Pope used it in his *Essay on Criticism* (1711). Paul Zumthor and Hubert Sommer, in their study of genius, relate this concept to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (1950: 193-95). Eleanor Webster Bulatkin (1955) includes it in a study, heavily influenced by Croce, of the word *nuance*. Two German historians, also writing in the 1950s, trace its *Begriffsgeschichte* in a similar vein. Erich Köhler, after displaying the word’s wide range of reference, argues that it plays a vital role in the pre-romantic conception of selfhood (1953: 58); Erich Haase sees the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (in Leibniz’s adoption of the word from Bouhours) as being at the foundation of modern æsthetics (1956: 58). Annie Becq, like Haase and many others, places the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (along with *grace*) at what she calls the *Genèse de l’esthétique française moderne*.⁷

The æsthetic concept with which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is most commonly associated is that of the sublime. Borgerhoff, once again, sets the pattern in suggesting that ‘the sublime might be described [...] as the “je ne sais quoi” considered on a higher plane’ (1950: 200). Those who have pursued the same line of thought include Théodore Litman (1971: ch. 1), Nicholas Cronk (1990: 136-43), Claude Chantalat once more (1992: 49-51), and, in two remarkable articles, Louis Marin (1986, 1989). Marin is typical of this group in noting that Bouhours’s treatment of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a topic, in 1671, predates by a mere three years Boileau’s French translation of Longinus’s *Peri Hypsos* (*Traité du sublime*). Marin, like Croce, characterizes seventeenth-century notions, such as the sublime and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as confused apprehensions of ground as yet unconquered. The conquering hero is to be Kant.⁸ Marin, in one article, describes the ‘je ne sais quoi sublime de la distinction de

⁷ Becq 1984: 70 and 97-115.

⁸ See also Cassirer 1951: 276-78; Becq 1984: 5, 70-71.

l'esprit' as the 'ouverture [...] d'un champ socio-historique dont il appartiendra à Kant, dans le crépuscule des Lumières, de proposer l'impossible théorisation philosophique' (1986: 200). The classical 'sublime', coupled with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, anticipates its later elaboration (as *das Erhabene*) by Kant in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). Marin, in a second article, defines Pascal's treatment of the infinite as the moment of transition between the classical and Kantian notions of the sublime (1989: 344-45). Pascal, he concludes, 'provided the Romantics with an æsthetic model [...] for sublime writing'.⁹ Marin's account makes clearer than any other why he and other historians of the early modern *je-ne-sais-quoi* choose to label the word as 'pre-romantic'.¹⁰ Romantic writing takes as its object the inexplicable sublime; this is a concept to which Kant first gave full philosophical expression; early and confused attempts to articulate this concept, however, can be traced back to the classical sublime and its immediate predecessor, the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The suffix *pre-* in 'pre-romantic' is genealogical in character: it indicates the position of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* high in the family tree of the Romantic sublime. The word appears, in studies of this kind, at the very origins of æsthetic language.

My aim is to reflect critically upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by tracing its history and then by moving backwards into its pre-history. I treat it neither solely as a word with a literary history nor as a general philosophical or theoretical topic. This study draws upon both of these approaches while remaining eclectic and interdisciplinary in an attempt to establish a critical dialogue between texts of the living past and twenty-first-century preoccupations. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is used as a key lexical tracer in early modern writing about an experience that is, I believe, equally ours. I adopt successively three different approaches to the topic: the first is that of a word history,

⁹ Marin 1989: 345; Marin 1986: 199-200.

¹⁰ See also, among others, Natali 1951; Köhler 1953; Adriaenssens 1970: 107.

the second a critical history, and the third a pre-history. These methodological shifts reflect the progression of my argument about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and so, rather than dealing with them once and for all here, I reflect on them in detail as and when they occur.¹¹

What I can state here is my guiding conviction that the methods of historical and philosophical work (or ‘theory’), far from being mutually exclusive, should coexist as contrary pressures within a single analysis. My approach, for that reason, is both historical *and* philosophical.¹² Jankélévitch and the tradition of general philosophy are important to my work because they maintain the pressure upon one, simply, to think for oneself. The philosophical question, ‘what is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and how can it be put into words?’, runs throughout the thesis. I share the view, which is implicit in the work of Jankélévitch, that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is able to draw readers and writers of the early modern period together with their counterparts today into what might be called a ‘community of experience’. The claim here is not that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a universal fact of human existence but, more modestly, that when an early modern writer such as Montaigne or Pascal describes what it is to feel an imperceptible force such as love, sympathy, or friendship, we twenty-first-century readers may recognize in this something of our own particular experience. We make a connection. This is not to say that we possess the same ways of coming to terms with that experience as our predecessors or, for that matter, our contemporaries. Communities of experience do and must accommodate differences of view. Reading a text from the past means, more often than not, being confronted with ways of thinking and writing whose sophistication and difference enrich and unsettle our own habits of mind. This is the value of a historical approach to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: it requires us to

¹¹ See 1.iii.3, 4.iii.3, 5.i.2, and my Conclusion, p. 326.

¹² Marin also takes this approach to the subject (1986: 193).

seek out, and make sense of, such confrontations. My reservation about a purely general philosophy of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is that it tends, at times, to avoid doing so. Texts from the past find themselves displayed as passive instances of the new theory without enjoying the right of reply. I take the view that one thinks ‘for oneself’ about a problem or experience better for actively considering how others have come to terms with it. The methods of history and philosophy, in other words, are most productive when they operate, within a single analysis, as pressure and counter-pressure. My study uses both methods in this way to structure and inform the close literary analysis of particular examples to which, increasingly, I turn.

There exists no full-length history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, of the kind that I attempt to provide here, despite the work done in this area. Historians from Croce to Borgerhoff and beyond have tended, as I described earlier, to portray the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a predominantly literary or æsthetic concept. I aim to show that this widespread view is reductive of the early modern *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which has a much broader range of reference. This view has arisen because historians have used *analepsis*, or ‘hindsight’, teleologically to project the genesis of modern concepts back into the past.¹³ Their aim, typically, is to establish the genealogy of the Kantian sublime (say), its Romantic successor, or the origins of modern æsthetics; they note (quite correctly in so far as it goes) that the seventeenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* is used to name an apprehension of subtle qualities in a work of art; but they then limit the history of the word to their discovery of it as a point of origin for this development. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, they conclude, is a ‘pre-romantic’ concept. Historians of recent decades have become more wary of the teleological inferences – such as this one – that hindsight makes possible. A major figure in this development,

¹³ On this tendency, see Cave 1999: 17.

Michel Foucault, powerfully criticizes conventional history of ideas for projecting the object and conditions of modern knowledge back into the past.¹⁴ There may be no clearer case of this than the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which modern literary history transforms into a fledgling version of itself. Some historians, in the wake of Foucault and Bourdieu (1979), have argued – correctly, in my view – against the idea that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* emerges within some new autonomous æsthetic domain called ‘classicism’. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, they suggest, like other cultural keywords of the same period, is one site of a wider social and ideological conflict of which literary debate is merely one expression.¹⁵ They note that the word covers a much wider field of experience than the æsthetic alone, but they tend to make this observation merely in passing, as their central preoccupations lie elsewhere. I attempt to develop this observation into a comprehensive history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

This history comes in two parts, the first lexical in focus, the second critical. The subject of chapter one is the early modern word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: its rise to prominence, its core meaning, and its range of reference. The word’s precursors in Latin and Romance languages are noted; its various lexical forms and semantic operations in late sixteenth-century French are set out; and the subsequent rise of its substantival form, in France and England, is narrated. I know of no study, since Spingarn devoted a few sentences to the subject in 1908, that examines the English reception of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the seventeenth century. This reception is an intrinsic part of the word’s history and I integrate it as such. My decision to follow the particular fortunes of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in this study obliges me, however, to deal only briefly with its cognates in other languages (such as the native form ‘I-know-not-what’ in English). Lexicographical texts, both early modern and contemporary, are the

¹⁴ Foucault 1966: 86; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 18.

¹⁵ See Dens 1981: 38-59; Becq 1984: 220; Viala 1997b: 73-74; 1999: 187; Moriarty 1999.

main sources of information used in this chapter. They display a series of key lexical occurrences, drawn from authors writing in different genres, which are successively analysed in the rest of the thesis. I draw upon lexicographical sources in order to propose a definition of the seventeenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its core meaning or ‘ideal type’. The ideal type, a historical method elaborated by Max Weber, produces descriptions that are deduced from empirical evidence but that also necessarily reflect the values and perspectives of the investigator. It is a method, in other words, that allows me to accommodate the contrary pressures of historical work (to establish past thought) and philosophical analysis (to think for oneself). The ideal type offers a measure of prediction and synthesis: it predicts the character of specific instances and establishes patterns of similarity among them. But it remains resolutely provisional and non-reductive since, by marking the differences between the ideal type and any historical instance, one allows the latter’s particularity to emerge.¹⁶ The ideal type of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as I have already suggested, is the experience of an inexplicable force of sympathy or antipathy. This defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in other words, as a unit of sense or ‘seme’. I maintain the distinction between seme and lexeme and generally accord primacy to the former over the latter. The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* I use as a controlled ‘tracer’ of a semantic ideal type that moves through an open-ended field of terms, phrases, and figures. I then locate the four regions of experience in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* most commonly appears: theology, nature, the passions, and culture. The first surviving treatment of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a polite literary topic, by Bouhours in 1671, constitutes the single strongest piece of evidence for this fourfold topography. For Bouhours, a writer who prefers to consecrate usage rather

¹⁶ See Weber 1949; Maclean 1998b.

than challenge it, maps these regions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* once the word has entered history.

I use Bouhours's map to direct my pursuit of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through the critical histories of chapters two, three, and four. Theological issues relating to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* are evoked briefly, in chapter one, as part of its word history. Each of the next three chapters follows the semantic ideal type of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into one of the remaining regions of experience. I use occurrences of the word to direct and control my sample of what is, in each case, a large and complex area. I analyse synonymous terms, then, only as and when specific passages in early modern writing display them in close proximity to my chosen lexical tracer. This choice necessarily excludes terms and concepts that may bear a significant semantic relation to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* but happen not to appear next to it. I accept this as a practically necessary omission for which I attempt to compensate by drawing on studies of related terms. I attempt at the same time to establish a poetics for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in other words, to describe the generic contexts in which the term finds a place and to what end: this issue I consider in each chapter as a new genre is encountered.¹⁷ Chapter two is concerned with the appearance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature and the conflicting attempts by natural philosophers to come to terms with it. Chapter three examines the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a stroke of passion and compares accounts of this phenomenon in texts from different genres, philosophical and literary, within the field of vernacular writing. Chapter four turns to the realm of culture and analyses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a sign of quality in æsthetic and social discourse. The method used in this triptych of chapters is *critical*: it pursues throughout the general philosophical question, 'what is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*?', and judges whether the lexical occurrences discovered fit its

¹⁷ See 1.iii.1, 2.ii.1, 3.i.1, 4.i.2, and 5.iii.1 below.

ideal type. The aim, in each case, is to describe what problem of experience the *je-ne-sais-quoi* serves to articulate and to judge whether the word's use helps resolve the problem or merely exacerbates it. Is what has happened a truly inexplicable *je-ne-sais-quoi* or merely an unexplained *je-ne-sais-encore-quoi*? The term may provide a refuge for unjustifiable ignorance by concealing itself as an explanation. Is the *je-ne-sais-quoi* not a failure on my part rather than a real quality or force? The term may serve illegitimately to project subjective perceptions into objects. Is it not the case that others can perfectly explain that which I experience as a *je-ne-sais-quoi*? The term may be no more than an empty sign of quality that the members of a circle secretly cultivate, or what might be called, a *certain-savent-bien-quoi*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its rise to prominence, is the subject of a complex analysis that I place under the sign of a lexical and critical history.

I stress that such a history, while it attempts to be comprehensive in scope, can only be provisional in its findings. Attempting to deal with such a vast and rich field of writing, while tracing the fortunes within it of a single word, raises formidable problems of selection and contextualization. I can claim to offer an exhaustive survey neither of all significant lexical occurrences of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* nor of the literary and philosophical realms in which the word appears. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, given its very nature, resists the mastery of a sufficient definition or explanation. I offer a Weberian ideal type precisely because it remains provisional and open to further correction. There is a danger that my selection of passages will appear arbitrary or tendentious and that the treatment of each will pay insufficient attention to its historical, intellectual, and generic contexts. I owe, in my attempts to resist this danger, a great deal to existing work on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which I have used to direct and inform my own reading, and to detailed studies of those authors,

institutions, and ideas on which my work touches. I often rely upon the work of specialists to sketch the precise contexts in which a passage appears: these debts are recorded in footnotes, of course, but I wish to acknowledge the fact more generally here. One consequence of the abundance of detailed scholarship in early modern studies is, and should be, that it encourages and enriches the kind of interdisciplinary and comparative research that is needed to trace a comprehensive history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Such a history, for all that, must necessarily remain provisional.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* enjoys a period of semantic force during its seventeenth-century history. It offers people one way of saying – in a single word – that some event has befallen them that they can neither define nor explain. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, during this period, refers to an inexplicable ‘fault-line’ that experience of the world exposes within what many assume to be the stable bedrock of traditional explanation. They find the ground suddenly moving beneath their feet. I use geological metaphors to distinguish my work from that of Michel Foucault, whose *épistèmè*, his bold attempt to map the bedrock itself, provides a useful point of comparison here. The *épistèmè* is the method that Foucault uses, in his early historical writings, to study the lateral set of discursive relations that makes different forms of knowledge, in a given period, possible.¹⁸ This set of relations the archæologist attempts to recover in its multiplicity and difference from modern thought. Doing so requires one to become a specialist, not of any single contemporary discipline, but of what Georges Canguilhem calls ‘interregionality’.¹⁹ Foucault’s archæological work, with its interregional scope, its mistrust of history as genealogy, and its interest in the shapes of knowledge, has helped create the conditions in which one can conceive of similar work on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. That said, however, my approach differs in certain significant respects from

¹⁸ I am thinking of Foucault 1961, 1966, and 1969; on the *épistèmè*, see Foucault 1969: 250.

¹⁹ Canguilhem 1994: 81-82; Foucault 1969: 273.

that of Foucault. The *épistèmè* of a given period, Foucault stresses, is inaccessible to those whose thinking it determines.²⁰ When one epistemic period gives way to another, it does so in a violent break that Foucault finds difficult to describe, since he denies past thinkers the ability to think outside the limits of the *épistèmè*.²¹ None is capable of making the break. In *Les Mots et les choses* (1966), again, he claims that there occurred ‘une rupture essentielle dans le monde occidental’ between what he calls the ‘Renaissance’ and ‘classical’ periods.²² I offer the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which rises to prominence in this same shadowy transitional period, as a corrective to the remote inaccessibility of the *épistèmè*. I accept Foucault’s insight that individuals are *conditioned* by the bedrock of explanation but do not believe that this precludes them from thinking and writing their way towards the limits. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which he never mentions, is one sign that individuals are able, at times, to recognize that something has happened to bring habitual ways of thinking and speaking to a moment of crisis. The word names this event in its brute inexplicability. To characterize those moments, at which individuals register the shock of experience and the movement of ideas, I prefer the metaphors of crisis and of geological dislocation to the inaccessible and inflexible grid of the *épistèmè*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, during its brief period of semantic force, describes the movement of the ground of knowledge under the speaker’s feet, so to speak, or a fault-line that experience exposes within the bedrock of traditional explanation.²³ It is a vital force that frustrates all attempts to define its identity and establish its causes even as it invites them. Where Foucault proposes an archæology of the forms of knowledge, one might say, I undertake a geology of the movements of inexplicable experience.

²⁰ Foucault 1966: 90; on this, see Canguilhem 1994: 82-83.

²¹ See Maclean 1998b.

²² Foucault 1966: 64; see also Foucault 1972: 58; Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 5.

²³ On the metaphor of the ‘fault-line’, see Sinfield 1992; Cave 1999: 15.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as I said before, emerges between around 1580 and 1680. The dates that I have chosen to limit the period are intended to offer no more than an approximate indication. I have largely avoided the use of moribund tags, such as ‘Renaissance’, ‘baroque’, and ‘classicism’, because they obscure the movement that I wish to trace rather than help clarify it. I use the term ‘early modern’, in a neutral sense, to refer to the broad historical period that falls between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. My chosen dates each have a symbolic significance. 1580 marks the first publication of Montaigne’s *Essais*, the text, I argue, that defines the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*; in 1680, Richelet’s monolingual dictionary, by devoting an entry to the word in its settled substantival form, consecrates its entry into history. The writers to which I devote most space – Montaigne, Bacon, Camus, Descartes, Corneille, Pascal, Méré, and Bouhours – fall between these two dates. I stray outside this chronological limit, on either side, where the argument requires me to sketch previous or subsequent developments. The most important cases of this are Boaistuau and Du Bellay in the mid-sixteenth century and Leibniz and Newton at the beginning of the eighteenth. But these authors are included here only inasmuch as they cast light on the rise and fall of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which takes place between approximately 1580 and 1680. My choice of period excludes significant discussions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by eighteenth-century French writers. Three deserve particular mention: Louis de Boissy, whose comedy *Le Je Ne Sçai Quoi* was first performed in 1731;²⁴ Marivaux, who includes an allegory of beauty and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the *deuxième feuille* of *Le Cabinet du philosophe* (1734);²⁵ and Montesquieu, who devotes a short section of his *Essai sur le goût* (1757) to the topic.²⁶ One critic, noting that the texts of Marivaux and Montesquieu were both written around 1730, comments that ‘le *je-ne-sais-quoi*

²⁴ Boissy 1731; on this, see Thormann 1958.

²⁵ Marivaux 1969: 346-51; on this, see Köhler 1953: 49-50.

²⁶ Montesquieu 1964: 849; on this, see Jankélévitch 1980: 1, 92; Becq 1984: 346-48.

fait alors un retour en force' (Ehrard 1996: 227). Its eighteenth-century revival, which has already been studied,²⁷ falls outside the chronological scope of this thesis.

Having traced its seventeenth-century history, I return the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to its pre-history. Chapter four argues that the word loses semantic force by settling down in the language of the polite circle as a mere affectation of ignorance. The very process by which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* acquires a history causes it to lose the mobile force that it possesses in late sixteenth-century writing. One rich and complex case-study of such writing, Montaigne, is the subject of my fifth and final chapter. I consider how he attempts to lend literary form to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* without having the seventeenth-century noun at his disposal. The method shifts here from that of a broad historical analysis to the study of one author: this means that more space can be devoted to a close analysis of particular examples in their intellectual, lexical, and generic contexts. Historians tend to place Montaigne in the genealogy of the seventeenth-century substantival *je-ne-sais-quoi*; I argue that his proper place is not in its genealogy but, rather, in its 'pre-history'.

This term, and the method that it describes, require careful definition. I adopt the method from the recent work of Terence Cave in two books, *Pré-histoires* (1999), and *Pré-histoires II* (2001).²⁸ The pre-historical method, as Cave elaborates it, allows one to move backwards, from the rise to prominence of a familiar historical phenomenon, into the disparate traces that appear to anticipate this development. But by moving against the flow of history, the pre-historian suspends the inference of hindsight – which awards these traces the status of origins – and apprehends them, instead, in their unsettling difference. Montaigne's writing is full of 'pre-historical'

²⁷ See the secondary works listed in the preceding three notes; Köhler 1955; Adriaenssens 1970; Ehrard 1996.

²⁸ See Cave 1999: 11-19; 2001: 12-16 (for his elaboration of this approach).

traces. The suffix *pre-* here refers not to a genealogical line but, rather, to what was there before history began. I owe the idea of a backwards-moving pre-history to Cave, but my use of the method differs from his, not least because of the particular object that I have chosen to study. Cave uses pre-history to apprehend a series of early modern phenomena: in *Pré-histoires* (1999), for example, this means pyrrhonian thought, the self, and the notion of suspense. He consciously avoids studying the general history of any one phenomenon (1999: 17-18). His use of the pre-historical approach is motivated, above all, by a methodological concern to recover multiple testimonies of past experience in their difference from the order of modern thought.²⁹ It should be apparent by now that I share this concern (see pp. 25-26 above). But my use of the pre-historical approach is rather different.

Pre-history appears in my study as a critical space that one reaches by thinking first through, and then against the grain of, history. Unlike Cave, I take as my object a single phenomenon and reflect on the general questions that it raises – of what the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is, and how it can best be put into words – through its early modern history. I seek, as Cave does, to recover the early uses of a particular word without making them a point of origin for the word's subsequent development. This attempt certainly reflects what is, for me, a general methodological concern. But the attempt also, and more importantly, serves my principal thesis about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This thesis proposes, briefly, that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the experience of a vital force of inexplicable sympathy or antipathy, and that as usage causes the word to settle in the language, it loses the force required to trace that experience. The move backwards into its pre-history serves, in other words, to rescue the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from its seventeenth-century history. Not only can one situate Montaigne historically as an

²⁹ Cave 1999: 19; 2001: 14-15.

important early practitioner of my chosen word, but also and crucially, he describes the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* better, in my judgement, than the word itself is ever able to do once it has settled into the language. Rather than taking refuge in a polite affectation of ignorance, Montaigne employs a series of devices – a mobile set of lexical forms around the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, rhetorical and conceptual figures, and objective correlatives – to lend form to his experience of inexplicable qualities and forces in the realms of nature, culture, and the passions. Features of my own writing, such as the invention of new words, the defamiliarization of settled ones, and so on, are intended to lend rhetorical emphasis to my argument that the attempt to write one's way closer to the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* requires unsettling one's habits of mind and revolutionizing one's lexicon. Montaigne, whose *Essais* make that very attempt, writes the word's pre-history.

Pre-history, as I use it in my fifth and final chapter, can only exist in the shadow of the word and its seventeenth-century history. In conclusion, however, I go one step further by suggesting various ways in which a pre-historical study of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* could be developed into a critical theory turned towards the close analysis of literary and philosophical texts. I take, as one example, the case of Shakespeare (see Conclusion below, pp. 326-34). This development, with which I end the thesis, remains no more than a suggestion for future research. But the suggestion is made in order to pursue the fleeting intuition that animates this study.

What, then, does this intuition say? Above all, perhaps, it says three things: that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is an inexplicable and disastrous force that overtakes us before we know it; that it constantly invites attempts to define what it is, and to explain how it happens, while remaining untamed by them; and that the task of literature is to lend

form to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by naming it in its inexplicable reality and by describing how – and with what effects – it falls into our experience.

1. WORD HISTORY

JE-NE-SAIS-QUOI n. m. inv. — de je, ne, l. savoir et quoi.
Chose qu'on ne peut définir, bien qu'on en sente nettement
l'existence ou les effets.

— LE NOUVEAU PETIT ROBERT

i. 'A modish Name'

1. A new topic

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* rises to prominence as a word in the period between Montaigne's *Essais* and the *Pensées* of Pascal. A word that shrouds an inexplicable mystery irresistibly invites explanation. Writers since the seventeenth century have traced the word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as I shall do, in an attempt to establish whence it comes, what it may mean, and to what regions of experience it refers. Such attempts themselves help establish the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, by the third quarter of the seventeenth century, as a topic for the discussion of those inexplicable forces that fall between people or things and yet cannot be explained. The word enters history.

By the early 1670s, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* was sufficiently prominent to be recognized, in France and England alike, as a word in vogue.¹ A vogue is at the best of times a transient phenomenon; but when the vogue in question is for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, the attempt to describe it seems doubly uncertain, like grasping at the

¹ Bouhours 1962 (conv. 5); Sorel 1974: 338-39; 1.i.4 below.

impalpable in its very evanescence. How does a word come to achieve prominence and of what does this ‘prominence’ consist? The word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, like all such histories,² can only be narrated provisionally. Since written records alone survive, oral uses remain inaccessible to word historians, leaving gaps in the story that cannot be filled. Three stages, however, can be distinguished in the rise to prominence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a noun: its substantivization, currency, and sedimentation. In the earliest phase of its existence, I shall suggest (1.i.3 below), the phrase has many lexical forms and carries multiple meanings. Its suppleness places it at the disposal of language users in different situations. The phrase, as a result, ceases to be simply an instrument of expression and becomes the subject of sentences. It acquires a determiner and the (optional) connecting hyphens that spell it as one word, ‘the *je-ne-sais-quoi*’. The substantival form comes into being. This form owes its success partly to its Latin ancestor and Romance cousins, which, as we shall see (1.i.2 below), appear in seventeenth-century French as fashionable imports. Different language users spread the new word by pressing it into service. The substantival *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in becoming current,³ reaches a defining moment as people consider and discuss what kind of ‘thing’ the *je-ne-sais-quoi* may be. The word acquires core meanings and referents (see 1.ii below). This is an intermediary moment before the substantival *je-ne-sais-quoi* reaches the stage at which it ‘settles’ into the language and at which, as Merleau-Ponty says, ‘il y a sédimentation’.⁴ Its sedimentation confirms the cultural prominence of a word in vogue.

One sign that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has achieved sedimentation is its treatment as an organizing topic. Dominique Bouhours provides the first surviving example of this

² Kenny 1998: 33; Starobinski 1999: 10-11.

³ I define my use of the terms *current* and *currency* in 1.i.4 below, pp. 57-58.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty 1960: 86. Merleau-Ponty inherits the metaphor from Husserl (Maclean 1998b: 171).

when, among *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671), he devotes one conversation to 'Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy'.⁵ This is in fact the second occasion on which the term assumes the dignity of a title; the first, as we shall see (1.i.4 below, pp. 58-59), dates from the first half of the century. Bouhours's title provides a topic within which he includes a set of arguments.⁶ Its author is remembered as a Jesuit learned wit and the authority on the French language whom Racine asked to read one of his tragedies, probably *Phèdre*, and correct the style.⁷ Bouhours is well placed to ennoble the *je-ne-sais-quoi* because he embodies elegant usage in late seventeenth-century France.⁸ The publication of his conversation is a pivotal moment in the word's history: it looks backwards to the origins of the term and forwards to its appearance in the great monolingual dictionaries of the late seventeenth century.

Bouhours's Ariste and Eugène chance upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* when Ariste uses the phrase and Eugène, intrigued, asks him to explain what he means (1962: 140). The word 'comes up', as it were, in conversation. It confirms the observation that Bouhours's chief spokesman, Ariste, makes earlier in the *Entretiens* when he says: 'c'est dans la conversation que naissent d'ordinaire les termes nouveaux' (1962: 55). The currency of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes itself a topic of conversation. Ariste emphasizes its rise to prominence in France as well as its history, telling Eugène: 'le je ne sçay quoy a beaucoup de vogue parmi nous' (1962: 145). Bouhours supports this claim by quoting widely-read writers such as Voiture and the following passage from Corneille:

Il est des nœuds secrets, il est des sympathies,
Dont par le doux rapport les ames assorties

⁵ I distinguish between the genres of the 'conversation' and the 'dialogue' in 4.i.2 below, p. 216.

⁶ For a further use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a topic, see 3.iii.1 below, p. 205.

⁷ The standard monograph on Bouhours remains Doncieux 1886; see also Matoré 1968: 74-75; Viala 1985, 34-40; Cronk 1990: 109-13.

⁸ See Sorel 1974: 338-39.

S'attachent l'une à l'autre, et se laissent picquer
Par ces je ne sçay quoy qu'on ne peut expliquer.⁹

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* here refers, in a single word, to the experience of an inexplicable attractive force. Bouhours is not alone in offering Corneille's use as exemplary. The papers found after Pascal's death in 1662 contain a fragment in which he also quotes Corneille on the inexplicable cause of love: 'la cause en est un *Je ne sais quoi*. Corneille.'¹⁰ The playwright is also, as we shall see (1.ii.2 below, p. 68), quoted in the major monolingual dictionaries of the late seventeenth century. Other writers press the word into memorable service: Bossuet describes the body after death as 'un je ne sais quoi qui n'a plus de nom dans aucune langue';¹¹ Retz offers the disparaging judgement that 'il y a toujours eu du je ne sais quoi en tout M. de la Rochefoucauld'.¹² Such occurrences serve to spread the new term. Ariste reflects on its novelty: 'le je ne sçay quoy est peut-estre la seule matiere sur laquelle on n'a point fait de livres, et que les doctes n'ont pas pris la peine d'éclaircir' (Bouhours 1962: 150). In the course of their conversation, the two friends have uncovered what may be the only topic still awaiting learned clarification and explanation. Whether such explanation is possible remains to be seen: the *je-ne-sais-quoi* may in fact prove to be the one thing that no learned explanation can ever quite capture. Ariste and Eugène, in discussing the problem in these terms, chance upon a word whose history remains to be written.

⁹ Bouhours 1962: 141; quoting Corneille 1971: II (*Rodogune*, 359-62).

¹⁰ Pascal: Laf. 413; Sell. 32; I reproduce Sellier's italics. Richelet also quotes this passage (1728: 'quoi').

¹¹ Bossuet 1914: IV, 268; this is a loose translation of a passage from Tertullian (*De resurrectione mortuorum*, 4), which Bossuet quotes in the text.

¹² Retz 1870: II, 180. On Retz's description, see Marin 1986: 192-93.

2. *Nescio quid* and its descendants

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the French member of a European family of terms descended from the Latin *nescio quid*. It owes its initial success partly to its Romance precursors but, unlike them, quickly becomes sedimented as a modish noun. Modern philology confirms the suggestion, made by Bouhours in the marginal notes to his text, that the Latin *nescio quid* is at the lexical origins of the French word. The verb *nescire* in Latin is combined with various indefinite pronouns and adverbs to form expressions of nescience (*nescio quis*, *nescio quid*, *nescio quomodo*, and so on). *Nescire*, in these expressions, can function as the main verb of a clause, an indefinite adverb, adjective, or pronoun. Montaigne and Bacon both quote Virgil's use of the adjectival *nescio quid* to demonstrate the power of the imagination: 'nescio quis teneros oculus mihi fascinat agnos.'¹³ Bouhours quotes passages from Persius, Martial, Cicero, and Augustine that reveal the various functions of the Latin phrase.¹⁴ A major difference between *nescio quid* and its Romance descendants is that the substantival form in Latin, *ille nescio quid*, remains rare. Lewis and Short list several instances in Cicero but the form is not (to the best of my knowledge) systematically exploited and never acquires the status of a topic.¹⁵ *Nescio quid* continues to be used in medieval and Renaissance Latin while, in Romance languages of the Middle Ages, the form *non sapio quid* evolves as *sapere* assumes the functions of *scire*. Word historians have located numerous variants in a wide range of Romance languages and dialects.¹⁶ Some have suggested that the spread of *non sapio quid* through Romance languages was

¹³ Virgil (*Eclogues*, III, 103); quoted in Montaigne: i.20, 105a; Bacon 1996: II, 642 (*Sylva Sylvarum*, §.901).

¹⁴ Bouhours 1671: 237-57; 1682: 245-64; some examples are quoted in 1.iii.2 below, pp. 88-89. See also Haase 1956: 47-48; Lewis and Short 1955: 'nescio'.

¹⁵ Lewis and Short 1955: 'nescio'; Gaudemar 1998: 8-9.

¹⁶ Wartburg 1960; Haase 1956: 49.

predominantly learned in character.¹⁷ Bouhours's quotations of classical Latin authors are intended to support this view. But there is ample evidence that, in Romance languages of the Middle Ages, *non sapio quid* also flourished in colloquial forms and expressions.¹⁸ In all probability, the phrase owes its spread to coexisting written and oral traditions.

Non sapio quid evolves, in its variant forms, with the development of Romance languages. What distinguishes these variants from the classical Latin *nescio quid* is that all become current, at some stage, in substantival form. This process does not occur simultaneously in Romance languages as the examples of Italian, Spanish, and French indicate. *Non sapio quid* seems instead to have spread successively through Europe in the manner of a contagion.

Italian is the first Romance language to develop its variant form of *non sapio quid* into a noun phrase. But the *non so che*, despite its currency in sixteenth-century Italian, never achieves sedimentation.¹⁹ Historians of the *non so che* cite an early substantival occurrence in Agnolo Firenzuola's treatise *Della Bellezza delle Donne* (1541). Firenzuola uses the noun to name the inexplicable quality of feminine grace:

siam forzati a credere che questo splendore nasca da una occulta proporzione, e da una misura che non è ne' nostri libri, la quale noi non conosciamo, anzi non pure immaginiamo, ed è, come si dice delle cose che non sappiamo esprimere, un 'non so che'.²⁰

Firenzuola uses the *non so che* with the lexical self-consciousness reserved for terms enjoying a new currency. The *non so che* offers the new colloquial way of referring to that grace in women that we experience yet cannot explain. *Esprimere* is used here –

¹⁷ Haase 1956: 48-49; Monk 1944: 146.

¹⁸ See the occurrences listed by Wartburg 1960.

¹⁹ On the *non so che*, see Natali 1951, 1958.

²⁰ Quoted in Monk 1944: 138-39; see Natali 1951: 45-46.

as *exprimer* often is in seventeenth-century French – to mean less ‘express’ than ‘explain’, a cognitive act rather than an utterance.²¹

Firenzuola is not the only writer to advertise the inexplicability of the new *non so che*. The art theorist Ludovico Dolce does so in his dialogue on painting, *L’Aretino* (1557), when he describes in what way Michelangelo’s laboured designs (as he sees them) are inferior to the painting of Raphael. Raphael, Dolce asserts, is the master of a careless ‘grace’:

e questa è la venustà, che è quel non so che, che tanto suole aggradire, così ne’ pittori, ne’ poeti, in guisa che empie l’animo altrui d’infinito diletto, non sapendo da qual parte che a noi tanto piace.²²

Dolce applies here to Raphael a topos found in Pliny the Elder and Quintilian about the painter Apelles. Pliny, searching for the right word to name his careless ‘grace’, translates *charis* in Greek as *venustas* in Latin; Quintilian offers *gratia* as a synonym.²³ Dolce, modifying the topos as he repeats it in Italian, introduces the *non so che* as the inexplicable pleasure caused by *venustà* (‘grace’). The semantic connection between grace and the *non so che* will remain equally forceful when the latter term passes into French. For *grace*, like the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, refers to that subtle quality which remains irreducible to systems of determination while setting them into movement.²⁴ The two words also share a similar range of reference in that they name this quality from the realm of theology to the worlds of sexual desire and social relations.²⁵ That said, *grace* is a much more stable term in general than the volatile *je-ne-sais-quoi* and particularly so in theology, where, as we shall see (1.iii.2 below), the

²¹ *The Cambridge Italian Dictionary* lists this sense of the verb (1962: I, ‘esprimere’); I consider its French equivalent in 1.ii.1 below, p. 63.

²² Quoted in Monk 1944: 141; see Natali 1958: 13.

²³ Monk 1944: 133 (quoting Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, bk. XXXV, 36, 79; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, bk. XII, 10, 6).

²⁴ Jankélévitch makes the same point (1980: I, 42).

²⁵ See Borgerhoff 1950: 197-99; Stanton 1980: 210-11; Becq 1984: 97-115. I have explored this issue elsewhere (Scholar 2002b: 321-24, 326-27); see also 3.iii.1 below, pp. 205-06.

latter word remains too heavily associated with the world of physical experience for the comfort of many seventeenth-century theologians. Dolce here uses the semantic connection with ‘grace’ (*venustà*) to establish the *non so che* in current usage. He goes further than Firenzuola towards sedimenting the *non so che* by making it the subject of the sentence.

The process of sedimentation, however, remains incomplete. The term remains current in both prose and poetry: Tasso, above all, systematically exploits the *non so che* in his heroic epic poem *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581). Bouhours quotes Tasso on five occasions, commenting: ‘les Italiens qui font mystere de tout, employent en toutes rencontres leur, *non sò che*: on ne voit rien de plus commun dans leurs Poëtes’.²⁶ The French word appears as a conscious adoption of an Italian vogue. But, unlike Bouhours and others, Italian sixteenth-century writers never (as far as I know) subject the substantival *non so che* to sustained definition nor make of it an organizing topic. It remains widely current, but unsedimented, in the early modern period.

The *non sapio quid* spreads next to Spain. Bouhours observes: ‘les Espagnols ont aussi leur, *no se que*, qu’ils meslent à tout, et dont ils usent à toute heure’ (1962: 145). Comprehensive studies of the Spanish *no sé qué* have emphasized its importance to the mystical tradition and to Golden Age literature, listing occurrences in Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross as well as Cervantes.²⁷ The Spanish form is more strongly associated with mystical experience than its French counterpart. The most significant early occurrences are found in two works by St. John of the Cross.²⁸ St. John, in his *Cántico espiritual* and prose commentary (c. 1584), describes an

²⁶ Bouhours 1962: 144-45; on Tasso, see Natali 1951: 46-47.

²⁷ See Köhler 1955; Porqueras Mayo 1965, 1966; Jam 1995.

²⁸ See Jankélévitch 1980: I, 109-10.

indescribable longing for divine revelation that only the *no sé que* can name.²⁹ In another poem, ‘Glosa a lo divino’, the poet expresses the hope that he will be touched by a *no sé qué* of divine grace:

Por toda la hermosura
nunca yo me perderé
sino por un no sé qué
que se alcanza por ventura.³⁰

The term figures in the poem as a devotional refrain. In both these works, St. John places the *no sé qué* in the realm of the divine. He does so without ever giving the word the status of a topic.

The Spanish *no sé qué* remains in this intermediary position, between currency and sedimentation, until the mid-eighteenth century. Historians of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* often claim that the seventeenth-century Jesuit Baltasar Gracián was the first writer to theorize the *no sé qué*.³¹ His contribution, however, is no more than indirect. Gracián’s first book *El héroe* (1637), a guide to the art of social distinction, includes a chapter on a quality that he calls *el despejo*. This Gracián describes as an assiduously cultivated imperceptible charm without ever using the word *no sé qué* itself.³² The two Spanish terms remain semantically close but lexically distinct. Late seventeenth-century French readers of Gracián, however, confuse the two by incorporating *despejo* within the sedimented *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Bouhours, the first French author explicitly to reveal a debt to Gracián, quotes his fellow Jesuit in ‘Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy’ where he juxtaposes *no sé qué*, *brio*, and *despejo* in the same sentence. Amelot de la Houssaye, in his 1684 translation of Gracián, follows Bouhours in rendering *despejo* as *je-ne-*

²⁹ San Juan de la Cruz 1979: 159-63 (stanza 7); see Jam 1995: 518-19.

³⁰ San Juan de la Cruz 1979: 344-46; quoted in Gaudemar 1988: 102.

³¹ Jacoubet 1935: 59; Jankélévitch 1980: I, 42; Jam 1995: 519.

³² Gracián 1944: 18 (ch. 13). On Gracián and *despejo*, see Hafter 1966: 130-36 and 4.ii.I below, p. 226.

sais-quoi.³³ Gracián's place is in the word history of the French *je-ne-sais-quoi*, then, not in that of its Spanish cousin. The *no sé qué*, unlike the Italian form, does finally achieve sedimentation in the early modern period; but it does so only in the eighteenth century, when Benito Feijóo includes a discourse on the *no sé qué* in his nine-volume survey of vulgar errors, *Teatro Critico Universal* (1726-41).³⁴ By this time, the French *je-ne-sais-quoi* was long since established as a topic.

Once active in Italy and Spain, the *non sapio quid* moves northwards into France.³⁵ Those who use the new substantival *je-ne-sais-quoi* often mention its Latin ancestor and modern European cousins. Bouhours does so, as we have seen, to ennoble the term and justify his use of it as a topic. He is merely repeating a commonplace gesture. In his *Apologie pour Monsieur de Balzac* (1627), François Ogier celebrates his subject's style by claiming that it possesses 'ceste Grace, et ceste Venus qu'Apelles inspiroit en ces tableaux, et que les Italiens nomment le *je ne sçay quoy*' (1977: 121). Apelles's careless grace, celebrated first by Pliny and then by Dolce, appears once more here. Pliny offers a Latin translation of the Greek term, Dolce moves the Latin term into Italian, and Ogier in turn translates the Italian *non so che* into French. The visible act of translation is itself part of the topos: the allusion to a term that is foreign to a particular language emphasizes the position of its referent, the elusive *je-ne-sais-quoi* of Apelles, outside all language. Voiture goes one step further, in a letter dated 1642, by simply letting the foreign word stand, in its very strangeness, as though translation were in this case an impossible task. Voiture names the imperceptible movements of grace by evoking not the Italian term but, rather, 'ce

³³ Bouhours 1962: 145; Gracián 1728: 155-59; Jacoubet 1935. On the French reception of Gracián, see Delft 1976.

³⁴ Feijóo 1989; on this text, see Köhler 1955; Porqueras Mayo 1965; Adriaenssens 1970.

³⁵ Guellouz is unsure about whether the form spread from France to Spain or vice versa (1971: 3).

que les Espagnols appellent *el no sé qué*'.³⁶ Germanic languages do the same, later in the century, when they incorporate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its gallic form (see 1.i.4 below). *Non sapio quid*, by this time, has spread throughout the countries of seventeenth-century Europe.

3. Forms and operations of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

The French *je-ne-sais-quoi*, like its Latin ancestor and Romance cognates, has multiple lexical forms and semantic operations. Its substantival form, which becomes dominant in the seventeenth century, is just one member of a family of terms and phrases. This family has members spread throughout the different parts of speech, and beyond that, in speech itself. These continue to perform various semantic operations today as they did in the late sixteenth century. *Nescio quid* is the model here. It does not just provide Bouhours and others with a classical literary pedigree for the topic of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*; it also conditions the forms and operations of the phrase.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* excites the attention of lexicographers only once it has become current as a noun substantive. Erich Haase's survey shows that multilingual dictionaries of the vernacular languages do not systematically include the term until the middle decades of the seventeenth century.³⁷ But, by then, lexicographers have long been using its non-substantival forms. *Nescio quis* and *nescio quid*, and their vernacular equivalents, figure in French-Latin dictionaries of the previous century.³⁸ Estienne's *Dictionnaire françois-latin* (1539), the first and most significant of these,

³⁶ Voiture 1650: 398 (letter CXXVII).

³⁷ Haase 1956: 50-51. I have located earlier entries for the *non so che* in bilingual dictionaries (Florio 1611: 'non'; Canal 1626: 'non'). These support the hypothesis that the Italian term becomes current earlier than its cognates.

³⁸ Haase 1956: 50.

offers an extended inventory of sixteenth-century French.³⁹ Estienne gives two entries for *nescio quid*:

Je ne scay quoy, Nescio quid.
*Tu has je ne scay quoy, Habes nescio quid.*⁴⁰

No semantic context for the term is sketched here. Estienne clearly does not conceive of it as a full noun substantive since it is preceded by no determining article. *Nescio quid* and *je ne scay quoy* seem to function instead here as indefinite pronouns akin to *aliquid*, *quelque chose*, or ‘something’.⁴¹ The substantival forms of the word (*un* or *le je-ne-sais-quoi*) may appear to us to be just one step away. But it is a step that Estienne does not take and, in this respect, he is typical of sixteenth-century language users. The substantival form of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has not yet risen to prominence. The term is simply one of the many that combine the negative first-person singular form of *savoir* with indefinite pronouns and adjectives: the others are *je-ne-sais-qui*, *je-ne-sais-où*, *je-ne-sais-quand*, and *je-ne-sais-comment*. Commonly used, but apparently banal, this family of phrases – which I group metonymically under the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – is noted by Estienne without further comment. French speakers continue to use each member today as they did in the sixteenth century.⁴²

To observe the family of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in use, we need to look to later dictionaries and to samples of textual practice. Lexical sampling of this kind remains an inexact science. It has always involved consulting secondary literature, dictionaries, concordances, and other lexicological sources in order to direct one’s reading. Information technology has made sampling more efficient and representative in recent years by making an ever-increasing number of texts available for advanced

³⁹ Quemada 1967: 46.

⁴⁰ Estienne 1549: ‘scavoir’.

⁴¹ On the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an indefinite pronoun, see 1.i.3 below, pp. 50-51.

⁴² See Robert 1993: ‘savoir’, b. 4.

word-searching on CD-ROM and the Internet.⁴³ If anything, sampling has become deceptively easy: it still cannot claim to be exhaustive, despite recent developments, and each occurrence needs to be the object of careful contextual evaluation. The word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, I stress once more, can only be narrated provisionally. But some hypotheses are possible. In what follows I shall often refer to Montaigne's *Essais* for examples of late sixteenth-century writing. I shall offer an analysis of the text in chapter five; for now I use it as a control on the provisional classifications that I offer of the forms, uses, and semantic functions of the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the late sixteenth century.

Two classifications are given here, one grammatical, and the other semantic. Six grammatical forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* are listed: (I) the indefinite pronoun *je ne sais quoi*; (II) the pronominal form *je ne sais quoi de* plus adjective; (III) the adjectival phrase *je ne sais quel*. (IV) the substantival form *un, le, or ce je-ne-sais-quoi*; (V) the indefinite personal pronoun *je-ne-sais-qui*; (VI) the adverbial phrase *je-ne-sais comment*. The fourth of these, the substantival form of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, only occurs in the sixteenth century in isolated cases as a grammatical development of the previous three forms. My classification is borrowed and extrapolated from the brief remarks that Grévisse devotes to the family of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.⁴⁴ Other classifications, of course, are possible; mine is intended to provide a means of distinguishing the different meanings to which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* gives linguistic expression according to its grammatical form. The sentences 'elle a je ne sais quoi' and 'elle a un certain je-ne-sais-quoi', for example, are close enough in meaning to require both comparison and contrast. From now on, when my argument demands

⁴³ The sample that Dumonceaux uses to dismiss the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a lexical phenomenon now appears far too restrictive (1975: 424-36).

⁴⁴ See Grévisse 1980: §§.958, 1268, 2254.

grammatical precision, I will refer to (I) as ‘the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.]’, to (II) as ‘the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.]’, to (III) as ‘the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.]’, and to (IV) as ‘the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]’. I offer, at the same time, a semantic classification of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its core semantic operations. These, as we shall see, are three in number: (a) affirmative, (b) neutral, and (c) negative.

(I) The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] is found in sentences such as the one just mentioned: ‘elle a je ne sais quoi’. One could no doubt argue that *quoi* is the pronoun and the direct object of the adjectival phrase ‘je ne sais’; Grévisse, however, prefers to classify *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *je-ne-sais-qui* along with *n’importe quoi* and *quelque chose* as indefinite pronouns (1980: §.1266-68). The pronominal form is widely used in the sixteenth century and beyond.⁴⁵ That it should occur just once in the *Essais* is surprising, then, although Montaigne, as we shall see (in (II) below), makes more frequent use of the closely related *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.]. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] is used with varying degrees of consciousness: this can be determined only by considering the specific context of the occurrence. At one end of the scale, the four words ‘je ne sais quoi’ appear within a simple string of syntax or what Marian Hobson calls a ‘micrology’ (1998: 3). Syntactical strings can be stretched until they lose what she calls the ‘lexical membrane’ separating them from the ocean of surrounding speech (1998: 3). This is the primal soup from which the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its substantival form, emerges. The syntactical string of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, while more difficult to identify than its other forms, nevertheless performs the same semantic operations as they do. One could, for example, rephrase Estienne’s entry ‘tu has je ne scay quoy’ in the syntactical string ‘je ne scay ce que tu as’, or ‘il m’a dit je ne sais quoi’ as ‘je ne sais ce qu’il m’a dit’, without substantially altering the sense. I

⁴⁵ For other examples, see Wartburg 1960; Haase 1956: 52-53.

retain syntactical strings within my classification for that reason. At the other end of the scale, the pronominal form is quasi-substantival in its function: Du Bellay's sentence, listed in (a) below, offers one example. Grévisse says about *quelque chose* that it has the function of a noun when preceded by an article or demonstrative adjective ('un quelque chose', 'ce quelque chose'). This is the crucial development in the seventeenth-century word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that gives the term, not just the function, but the very status of a noun.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] performs, in general, one of the three semantic operations listed above. So equally do the term's other forms, but it will be sufficient to illustrate the fact in respect of the pronominal form alone.

(a) In its affirmative operation, the phrase refers to something immediately experienced that can neither be identified nor explained. Du Bellay exemplifies this operation in *La Deffence et illustration de la langue francoyse* (1549), by asserting: 'chacune Langue a je ne scay quoy propre seulement à elle' (Du Bellay 1966: 36). The negative syntax of the phrase serves an affirmative end here: to name a thing or event that remains, beyond all explanation or understanding, in the realm of being. For many in the period, God is a transcendent example of this kind of being, although, as we shall see (1.iii.2 below), they tend to avoid applying the word *je-ne-sais-quoi* to him. One might say – to risk a neologism – that the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its affirmative operation, names an experience of irreducible 'nescioquiddity'.

(b) In its negative operation, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* refers not to an inexplicable something but, rather, to a specious non-entity. It has the debunking force of the Latin *nihil*. La Boétie offers one example of this operation in his political treatise *De la servitude volontaire* (1574-77), the text that Montaigne intended to accommodate in

his first book of *Essais* (see 5.iii.2 below, p. 297). La Boétie there criticizes heads of state for being ‘flatté par je ne scay quoy, qu’on appelle la grandeur’.⁴⁶ He reduces *grandeur* to a *flatus vocis*, a mere word signifying nothing, by placing it in apposition here with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.]. Ronsard makes sustained use of this operation when, in 1567, he imagines the prize greyhound of Charles IX dreaming that he is chasing deer:

Mais il les court et les prend comme en songe,
Quand le sommeil d’une douce mensonge
Devant les yeux nous fait jouer, la nuit,
Je ne scay quoy qui nous fuit et nous suit,
Qui pres et loing de nostre teste volle,
N’estant pas corps, mais une vaine idolle.⁴⁷

The negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] unmaskes an apparently real phenomenon as ‘une vaine idolle’ or an airy nothing given a name.

(c) The third operation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] falls between its extremes of nescioquiddity and nothingness. Ronsard offers an example in his poem ‘Le Gay’ (1556):

Va t’en donc tes petis couver,
Ou bien afin de leur trouver
Je ne sçay quoy pour leur bechée.⁴⁸

The neutral *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] here refers with neutral indefinition to a simple *aliquid* or ‘something-or-other’. It often tends towards either its negative or its affirmative operations; these, after all, are not watertight categories but parts of a semantic spectrum.⁴⁹ The neutral operation occupies the shifting middle ground between the affirmation of full inexplicable being and the black holes of negation and non-being.

⁴⁶ La Boétie 1991: I, 76.

⁴⁷ Ronsard 1914: XIV, 119 (‘Prosopopée de Beaumont’).

⁴⁸ Ronsard 1914: VII, 293.

⁴⁹ For an *aliquid* with a negative tendency, see Montaigne: iii.8, 942*b*; for one with a positive tendency, see i.31, 208*a*.

(II) The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] adds a supplementary quality of inexplicability to the adjective with which it forms a unit of sense. Supplements are ambivalent phenomena, appearing marginal at times and central at others.⁵⁰ Montaigne's assertion, 'il y a des vices qui ont je ne sçay quoy de genereux, s'il le faut ainsi dire' (ii.2, 340a), is one of five occurrences in the *Essais*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] in this sentence names a supplement (nobility) that remains marginal to the whole (vice). In the form's affirmative operation, the supplement moves to the centre. When dedicating to Madame de Grammont twenty-nine sonnets by La Boétie, Montaigne compares them to his friend's already published poems, commenting: 'certes ceux-cy ont je ne sçay quoy de plus vif et de plus bouillant, comme il les fit en sa plus verte jeunesse, et eschauffé d'une belle et noble ardeur que je vous diray, Madame, un jour à l'oreille' (i.29, 196a). Beyond the manifest qualities observed in all of La Boétie's poems, the sonnets possess an inexplicable force all their own. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] intensifies this force by adding more to the adjectives *vif* and *bouillant* than, say, its synonym *quelque chose de* could. The occult nature of this force is then maintained when Montaigne, by gallantly promising to reveal its source to Madame de Grammont some day in an intimate aside, effectively withholds his explanation. The supplement here is not peripheral to the whole (the collection of sonnets) but its very quintessence.⁵¹

(III) The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] forms a unit of sense with the noun that it describes. It is by far the most frequent form in the *Essais* (occurring twenty-six times) as well as the most semantically active. The key synonym for the affirmative operation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] in the *Essais* is *natural* (in its ontological sense of 'part of being'). Montaigne juxtaposes the two adjectives within the same unit of

⁵⁰ See Kenny 1998: 141.

⁵¹ For a similar operation, see 4.iii.1 below, pp. 244-45.

sense in the chapter ‘De la gloire’, when he says of the desire for renown: ‘il y a je ne sçay quelle douceur naturelle à se sentir louer, mais nous luy prestons trop de beaucoup’ (ii.26, 625*b*). The two adjectives combine to describe the perception of *douceur* as something that is inexplicably the case.⁵² The key synonym for the negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] is *imaginaire* (in its ontological sense of ‘part of non-being’). The adjectival form serves here to unsettle the sedimented noun to which it is attached. The chapter ‘De l’expérience’ contains a key example of this operation. Montaigne, arguing that the mind’s search for truth is doomed to failure, describes it in the following manner: ‘il [l’esprit] pense remarquer de loing *je ne sçay quelle apparence de clarté et verité imaginaire*; mais, pendant qu’il y court, tant de difficultez luy traversent la voye, d’empeschemens et de nouvelles questes, qu’elles l’esgarent et l’enyvrent’ (iii.13, 1068*b*; my italics). The extended noun phrase, juxtaposing *imaginaire* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.], unmask the mind’s impression of clarity as a mere nothing. In two instances Montaigne even uses the negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] to unsettle *natural*, its affirmative synonym, in this way.⁵³ The adjective uncovers an active fault-line within the settled semantic masses that are nouns.

(IV) The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] occurs in a handful of isolated cases during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is best described as an occasional grammatical mutation of the forms discussed above, particularly the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.], rather than as an autonomous form. It is no surprise then that the *Essais*, whose three volumes run to well over a thousand pages in most modern editions, should contain no occurrence of the substantival form. The few writers who do introduce the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] place it in apposition with settled synonyms. Larivey

⁵² For a second example, see Montaigne: ii.17, 632-33*a*.

⁵³ Montaigne: i.57, 326*a*; ii.12, 455*a*.

and Louveau, the translators of Straparola's *Facétieuses nuits* (1560), do so in the riddle of Ariane:

Je suis difforme, rond, grand, contrefaict et gros,
Mais, bien que je sois tel, si ay-je quelque grace,
Quelque je ne sçay quoy, qui fait qu'en toute place
La dame me chérit et flatte à tous propos.⁵⁴

Larivey and Louveau use the substantival form here in a bawdy quibble: Ariane's companions exclaim of this *je-ne-sais-quoi* that they very well know what it is! Du Bellay, in his sonnet sequence *Les Regrets* (1558), adopts an altogether higher register. He repeats the semantic connection between grace and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* established by Italian uses of the *non so che*.⁵⁵ Du Bellay tells Marguerite de France that she distinguishes herself not by her royalty but by her intrinsic grace:

Ce qui vous fait ainsi admirer d'un chacun,
C'est ce qui est tout vostre, et qu'avec vous commun
N'ont tous ceulx-la qui ont couronnes sur leurs testes:
Ceste grace, et douceur, et ce je ne sçay quoy,
Que quand vous ne seriez fille, ni sœur de Roy,
Si vous jugeroit-on estre ce que vous estes.⁵⁶

Marguerite's specific quality ('ce qui est tout vostre') recalls Du Bellay's insistence, nine years earlier, that 'chacune Langue a je ne sçay quoy propre seulement à elle'. The difference between the pronominal and substantival forms, a simple consequence of their grammatical contexts, is negligible here – as often.⁵⁷ Du Bellay uses anaphora and *varietas* to place in apposition a series of synonymous phrases (starting with the determiners *ce* and *ceste*) that ends with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].⁵⁸ Sedimented terms like *grace* and *douceur* not only gloss the substantival term in advance but seem, by their very presence, to lend it lexical substance. Since this happens in a mere handful of isolated cases, however, the noun remains an accidental form. Du Bellay and

⁵⁴ Larivey and Louveau 1857: II, 241 (bk. X, 2); quoted in Huguet 1965: 'savoir'.

⁵⁵ See 1.i.2 above, p. 46; Köhler 1953: 23.

⁵⁶ Du Bellay 1908: I, 191-92 (sonnet 175).

⁵⁷ Dumonceaux 1975: 429.

⁵⁸ On *varietas*, see Cave 1979: 22-23.

Larivey offer what are rare sightings.⁵⁹ It would be tempting to place such occurrences at the origins of the noun's subsequent sedimentation. But, as I shall argue in chapter five with reference to Montaigne, late sixteenth-century texts such as his do not form the genesis of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] but, rather, its pre-history.

(V-VI) My classification would not be complete without a brief mention of two related forms: the indefinite personal pronoun *je-ne-sais-qui* and the adverbial phrase *je-ne-sais-comment*. The former is found once in the *Essais*, and the latter, on seven occasions. *Je-ne-sais-qui*, which can be used substantivally, performs neutral and negative but never affirmative semantic operations. Estienne, like Montaigne, uses the term neutrally: '*trois je ne scay qui, Tres aliqui*'.⁶⁰ Other dictionaries attest negative, not to say misogynistic, uses.⁶¹ The adverbial phrase *je-ne-sais-comment* adds nescioquiddity to the verb that it qualifies. In 'Des coches' (iii.6), Montaigne uses the phrase in this manner to describe the inexplicable sensation of sea-sickness.⁶² It serves to describe, in other words, a form of experience. Along with *je-ne-sais-comment* and *je-ne-sais-qui*, one would need to include *je-ne-sais-où* and all other rare members of the species to produce a full botanical classification. The undertaking might, in this case, smack of pedantry. I offer instead a final example from the 'Isle des ferrements' episode in Rabelais's *Cinquiemesme livre* (1564). After paying a short visit to an island on which iron fitments grow, Pantagruel, Panurge, and their companions make to leave. The narrator, in describing what they then saw, exhausts the bawdy possibilities of the neutral *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Since he also indicates the full lexical richness of the species he should have the last word on the subject:

⁵⁹ For a third example see Boaistuau 1981: 251; discussed in 3.ii.1 below, pp. 171-72.

⁶⁰ Estienne 1549: 'scavoir'; Montaigne: i.20, 87a.

⁶¹ Furetière 1690: 'sçavoir'; Richelet 1681: 'je'; Le Roux 1718: 'savoir'.

⁶² Montaigne: iii.6, 901b; I quote and discuss this passage in 5.i.1 below, p. 261.

Nous retournans à nos navires, je vis derrière je ne scay quel buisson je ne scay quelles gens, faisans je ne scay quoy, et je ne scay comment, aguisans je ne scay quels ferremens, qu'ils avoient je ne scay où, et ne scay en quelle manière.⁶³

4. The rise of the noun

Je-ne-sca-y-quoi, *four French words, contracted as it were into one, and signifies* I know not what.

— THOMAS BLOUNT, *Glossographia* (1656)

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], as it slowly distinguishes itself from the rest of its extended family, rises to prominence in the first half of the seventeenth century. Precisely when and how this happens is difficult to determine. The development is a complex one, requiring the participation of individuals and communities within different discursive regions. I shall attempt to trace this development in more detail in the next three chapters. The rise to prominence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] can be divided, as I suggested earlier (1.i.1 above), into three stages: substantivization, currency, and sedimentation. Substantivization occurs fitfully in the sixteenth century, as we have seen (1.i.3 (IV) above, pp. 54-56), but the noun is not yet current. Since lexicographers do not register the term until the end of the seventeenth century (see 1.ii.2 below, pp. 67-68), and since they are notoriously slow in reflecting changes of usage,⁶⁴ it is likely that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] became part of current usage a considerable time before then – most probably in the period 1590-1630. Different metaphors can be used to describe this process: Guez de Balzac says that usage causes neologisms to ‘ripen’; Sorel imagines them being ‘in credit’; Kenny, like Sorel, talks in monetary terms of an ‘inflation in the economy of signs’.⁶⁵ I use the term *current* because it

⁶³ Rabelais 1994: 747 (bk. 5, ch. 9).

⁶⁴ Starobinski 1999: 99; Matoré 1988: 15.

⁶⁵ See Balzac 1995: 81; Sorel 1974: 363; Kenny 1998: 162.

keeps two metaphors, monetary and electrical, in play. A word gains greater currency, in the monetary sense, as language users share it as an item of lexical exchange.⁶⁶ This causes a stronger semantic current, in the electrical sense, to pass through it as language users come to define it. Modern authorities on the French language, from Brunot onwards, attest the noun phrase as current in vernacular prose of the 1620s.⁶⁷ Brunot quotes, as one example, Ogier's conscious translation of the term from Italian in 1627 (see 1.i.2 above, p. 46). The substantival form of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its affirmative operation starts to obscure the word's other forms and operations despite their continuing existence. The rise of the noun is under way.

We know that, by the mid-1630s, the currency of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] was sufficiently strong for it to assume the status of a topic. On 12 March 1635, the poet Jean-Ogier de Gombauld delivered to fellow members of the new Académie Française the sixth in a series of formal speeches. Pellisson, the seventeenth-century historian of the Académie, records Gombauld's chosen title as '*sur le je ne sçai quoi*'.⁶⁸ The title alone survives. That this first treatment of the topic is lost to us has become, since Bouhours, a topos in its own right.⁶⁹ Gombauld's biographer, among others, hazards the guess that his speech was 'original, mais systématiquement obscur'.⁷⁰ On what grounds she does so, however, is equally obscure. Speculation is, it seems, irresistible: I suggest, for my part, that Gombauld's use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] twice in a short poem on the theme of uncertainty may provide one clue to his treatment of the topic.⁷¹ The loss of his speech allows Bouhours to claim novelty for his use of the

⁶⁶ See Kenny 1998: 161-63.

⁶⁷ Brunot 1966: III, 66-67; *Trésor de la langue française* 1971: 'je-ne-sais-quoi'; Robert 1985: 'je-ne-sais-quoi'.

⁶⁸ Pellisson 1671: 69.

⁶⁹ Bouhours 1962: 150.

⁷⁰ Morel 1910: 68; see also Haase 1956: 57.

⁷¹ See Gombauld 1667: 139 (bk. III, no. 30).

topic. For us it should perhaps stand, rather, as history's very own *je-ne-sais-quoi*, a dark area in the life of the word on which no history can shed light. We do not know what Gombauld told the Académie Française about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but to conjecture that his title referred in some way to his topic seems reasonable. It is one sign that the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* is starting to become sedimented. Between Gombauld's speech and Bouhours's treatment of the topic in the early 1670s, as we have already seen, these signs multiply.

One sign of its sedimentation is that, from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is ready for export. It moves above all to England where wits sport it as a linguistic fashion item. Germanic languages have their own native cognates of the term in its pronominal and adjectival forms but they tend to leave the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in French. Where, earlier in the cycle, *non sapio quid* was translated as it spread from Italy and through Spain to France (see 1.i.2 above), it appears in Germanic languages as quintessentially French.⁷² Thereafter, the native and imported terms jostle for position. Erich Haase's survey shows that, while some dictionaries simply offer translations of the term into the host language, others also retain the French form.⁷³ Thomas Blount includes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in his *Glossographia* (1656), a dictionary of foreign words used in English. This is the earliest known appearance of the term in English: Cotgrave's French-English dictionary (1611), for example, does not list the term.⁷⁴ Blount uses the term idiosyncratically:

⁷² For a similar pattern in the word history of 'curiosity', see Kenny 1998: 41-43.

⁷³ Haase 1956: 51-52.

⁷⁴ Haase lists other English and German bilingual dictionaries of the same period from which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is absent (1956: 50-51).

Je-ne-sçay-quoi, four French words, contracted as it were into one, and signifies *I know not what*, we use to say they are troubled with the *Je-ne-sçay-quoy*, that feign themselves sick out of niceness but know not where their own grief lies, or what ails them.⁷⁵

Those who use the word do so to name what they claim to be an apparently inexplicable grief or melancholic affliction whose existence Blount seems to doubt. His remark, that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a string of words ‘contracted as it were into one’, indicates the currency of the French noun in the middle of the century.⁷⁶ Boyer’s French-English *Dictionnaire royal* (1702) gives ‘Le je ne sçai quoi, S. (Certaine chose qu’on ne peut exprimer) *the French je ne sçai quoy, or I know not what, an unexpressible quality*’.⁷⁷ German and Flemish dictionaries similarly translate the term (as ‘etwas gewisses’, ‘ein gewisses Etwas’, or ‘etwas weiß nicht was’ in German) while stressing its Gallic origins.⁷⁸ One reason for the success of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is that its very foreignness in Germanic languages imitates the position of its referent outside all language. Another may be more simply that, to seventeenth-century ears as much as to our own, the native English and German equivalents sounded more cumbersome. From the middle of the seventeenth century, in any case, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] appears in both languages as a French export.

Literary texts of the late seventeenth century in England duly import the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The term seems to owe its particular currency in Restoration England to the vogue for French elegance among Charles II and his courtiers, who spent the Interregnum in France.⁷⁹ Dryden’s play *Marriage A-la-Mode* (1673) reflects the vogue for gallicisms in its very title.⁸⁰ So does the Prologue to Roger Boyle’s play *Tryphon*,

⁷⁵ Blount 1670: ‘je-ne-sçay-quoy’; quoted in *OED*: ‘je ne sais quoi’.

⁷⁶ See also Miede 1679: ‘savoir’.

⁷⁷ Boyer 1702: ‘quoy’.

⁷⁸ Haase 1956: 51-52; Richelet 1739: ‘quoy’.

⁷⁹ On the pro-French, Catholic sympathies of Charles II, see Holmes 1993: 93-105.

⁸⁰ Dryden 1991 (this play includes no occurrence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*).

which was performed in December 1668 and published the following year.⁸¹ This date is significant for it indicates that Bouhours, in 1671, exploits rather than initiates the currency of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The word appears in Boyle's Prologue when its two characters, Nokes and Angell, attempt to define the fashionable epithet *wit*:

Angell. What's that?
 Nokes. A wit is in one word – I know not what.
 Angell. Of that kind Title give your Poet Joy.
 A wit is then in French, A *je ne scay quoi*.
 A modish Name.
 Nokes. Yes, Sir, that Name to gain,
 How many of our Writers crack their brain?⁸²

Boyle displays the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a linguistic fashion item in Restoration London. So does Thomas Shadwell in his satire on members of the Royal Society, *The Virtuoso* (1676), in which the coquettish Lady Gimcrack seduces a young man with the modish confession: 'the sight of you did stir in me a strange *Je ne sçai quoi* towards you'.⁸³ In England, the term still retains a certain currency in the eighteenth century. Shaftesbury's work of moral philosophy, *Characteristics* (1713), evokes with irony that '*je ne sais quoi* of wit, and all those graces of mind which these virtuoso-lovers delight to celebrate'.⁸⁴ A *beau* in John Gay's tragi-comical farce *The Mohocks* (1712) explains his use of the term to his vulgar interlocutor, saying: '*Je ne scay quoi* is a French phrase much in vogue at the Court end of the Town' (Gay 1712: 12). Aphra Behn, writing in 1688, complains that we English 'chop and change our Language, as we do our Cloths, at the Pleasure of every French Tailor'.⁸⁵ Some fifty years after the French *je-ne-sais-quoi* was first exported to England as 'a modish Name', it remains – among certain English *beaux* at least – all the vogue.

⁸¹ See Roger Boyle 1994.

⁸² Roger Boyle 1672: fol. A2^r.

⁸³ Shadwell 1676: 42; on the term *Virtuoso*, see Houghton 1942.

⁸⁴ Shaftesbury 1999: 63; also 148, 326.

⁸⁵ Behn 1688: 'The Translator's Preface', pages unnumbered.

ii. Defining moments

1. Bouhours and the lexicographers

What does it mean to say of something that it is, or has, a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*? As the noun becomes current, the pressure to answer this question increases, and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* reaches a ‘defining moment’. This process is invariably a complex one.⁸⁶ The word arrives in fact at, not one, but a series of defining moments towards the end of the century. Core meanings and referents, as a result, cluster around it. I shall identify a largely coordinated attempt, among lexicographers of the late seventeenth-century from Bouhours onwards, to define the meaning of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Here a broad consensus is apparent: the word refers most commonly to an inexplicable thing, quality, force, or event that falls within the experience of the perceiving subject. Having reviewed seventeenth-century attempts at a semantic definition of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, I shall draw upon them to offer my own. My word history, as a result, reaches its own defining moment.

The pressure on writers to define the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] begins to tell as soon as the noun gains currency in the language.⁸⁷ Their reaction is to add to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* a descriptive relative clause. This seems, in each case, to carry a definition of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in embryo. Ogier, writing in the late 1620s, glosses the substantival form as he translates it from the Italian (see 1.i.2 above, p. 46). Corneille, in *Médée*

⁸⁶ For other examples, see Moriarty 1988: ch. 2; Kenny 1998: ch. 4; Cave 1999: 111-120.

⁸⁷ Haase 1956: 57-58.

(1635), qualifies the pronominal form ('je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut exprimer') and, in the much-quoted passage from *Rodogune* (1647), refers to 'ces je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut expliquer'.⁸⁸ Voiture, in 1654, describes a collection of gallant letters as having 'un je ne sçay quoy semblable à celuy des beautez, que tout le monde sent et que personne ne peut exprimer'; and in his *Dictionnaire des précieuses* (1661), Somaize portrays mutual esteem and love in similar terms: 'c'est un certain mouvement [...] qui fait que nous y sentons un certain je ne sçay quoy, à l'aspect de ceux qui le font naistre, qui ne se peut expliquer'.⁸⁹ These examples show striking similarities. All use one of two verbs, *exprimer* and *expliquer*, to describe the act that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* frustrates. These two verbs appear to be used much more interchangeably than in modern French: Furetière glosses *exprimer* as 'expliquer ses pensées'; Robert attests an archaic sense synonymous with *expliquer*.⁹⁰ The sense in which writers use *exprimer* of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is much closer to our 'explain'.⁹¹ They use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to describe something that I perceive as, or believe (by experience) to be, inexplicable: the verb *sentir*, which recurs here, may refer either to the sense perception itself or the resulting belief. As writers add a descriptive relative clause to the word, an image of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – if not a definition – emerges.

For definitions we need to turn to late seventeenth-century French lexicography. Its most famous achievements are the monolingual dictionaries of Pierre Richelet (1680), Antoine Furetière (1690), the Académie Française (1694), and Thomas Corneille (1695). The works of major lexicographers in the period such as

⁸⁸ Corneille 1971: I (*Medée*, 635); II (*Rodogune*, 359-62). The latter is quoted in Bouhours 1962: 141; Furetière 1701: 'quoy'; Richelet 1728: 'quoi'.

⁸⁹ Voiture 1654: 399 (letter 34); quoted in Magendie 1970: 420; Somaize 1856: I, 124.

⁹⁰ Furetière 1690: 'exprimer'; Robert 1993: 'exprimer', 2.

⁹¹ Two exemplary uses of *exprimer* in this sense are Du Bosc 1634: 425-26 (quoted in 3.ii.1 (III) below, p. 179); Montaigne: i.28, 188a (quoted and discussed in 5.iii.2 above, p. 303).

Vaugelas, Ménage, and Bouhours should be included among these.⁹² Historians of the lexicographical movement have shown that it was riven by bitter professional rivalries.⁹³ One can identify two opposing tendencies among lexicographers of the period, the first to privilege ‘correct usage’ (*bon usage*), and the second, ‘elegant usage’ (*bel usage*). Where Ménage and Furetière exhibit the former tendency, Vaugelas, Bouhours, Richelet, and the Académie Française dictionary share the latter. It is true that partisans of elegant usage, from Vaugelas onwards, collapse the distinction by assuming that correct usage is defined by its elegance and vice versa. At the same time they display their allegiance to the language of the polite circle. Vaugelas claims to have drawn his lexicographical observations from ‘la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour, conformément à la façon d’écrire des meilleurs Auteurs’.⁹⁴ The dictionaries of Richelet and the Académie Française contain more detailed information about the fashionably vague terms of elegant usage (*air*, *galant*, *honnête*, and so on) than the purist Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (1690), which, conversely, is a richer source of technical terms from the arts and sciences.⁹⁵ It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate these differences of emphasis. The monolingual dictionaries are all broadly aimed not at learned readers, who can continue to refer to traditional Latin-French dictionaries, but at a polite middlebrow readership of *honnêtes gens* interested in the language and literature of the vernacular.⁹⁶ Given the antagonisms between late seventeenth-century lexicographers, we can be confident that they agree only on objects of wide consensus among their polite readers.⁹⁷ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] is one such object.

⁹² See Vaugelas 1880; Matoré 1968: 73; Viala 1985: 37.

⁹³ What follows is based on Quemada 1967: 205-18; Matoré 1968: 70-87; Viala 1985: 34-40.

⁹⁴ Vaugelas 1880: I, 13 (Preface); see Matoré 1968: 87.

⁹⁵ Matoré 1968: 78-79.

⁹⁶ Matoré 1968: 87; Viala 1985: 148.

⁹⁷ Viala 1997b: 63.

2. Uses and definitions

The lexicographers offer evidence both of the word's various forms and uses and of attempts to define its core meaning. Despite their differences of emphasis, the monolingual dictionaries of Richelet, Furetière, and the Académie Française show a broad consensus about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The first place in which to seek such information, obviously enough, are the entries that all three dictionaries devote to the word. These include definitions and examples of contemporary usage designed to illustrate or supplement the defined meanings.⁹⁸ Recent technological developments have made a second group of data about a given term easily accessible. Interactive transcripts of these dictionaries allow the word historian, at the touch of a button, to locate occurrences in entries devoted to apparently unrelated terms. These two groups of data need of course to be distinguished, since the first is a set of meanings deliberately presented to the reader, whereas the second contains the lexicographer's accidental uses of the term. They offer the means for a comparison between the use of a word and the ways in which it is defined. The latter reveal a deliberate attempt, after Bouhours, to ennoble and substantiate the affirmative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].

Dictionary entries devoted to the term offer limited information about the forms and semantic operations of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. More is to be found in its accidental uses. These show that the phrase continues to take the various forms and perform the semantic operations set out above (in 1.i.3). The adjectival form is a case in point. Accidental uses are frequent in all dictionaries. But only one, that of the Académie Française, so much as mentions the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] in an entry

⁹⁸ The Académie Française and Furetière create their own examples; Richelet borrows his from literary sources.

devoted to the term. There it is used merely to explain the pronominal form: ‘*il y a dans cette affaire je ne sçay quoy que je n’entends pas [...], pour dire, Il y a je ne sçay quelle chose que je n’entends pas*’ (1694: ‘quoy’). The Académie Française here asserts the semantic equivalence of the adjectival and pronominal forms. The pronominal form, as we shall see, appears more frequently in entries as a semantic equivalent of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. The Académie Française example of the adjectival and pronominal forms displays only their neutral semantic operations. But accidental uses also reveal their negative and affirmative operations. The Académie Française uses the negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] in its example of the pejorative verb *jargonner*: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’ils jargonnent? Ils jargonnoient je ne sçay quoy’. Richelet quotes Molière in the same vein: ‘il barbote je ne sai quoi entre ses dens’ (1681: ‘barboter’). The negative operation reveals a *flatus vocis* that refers to nothing.⁹⁹ Furetière lists negative (misogynistic) uses as proverbial:

On dit aussi, Je ne sçay ce que c’est, pour faire une dénégation. On ne sçait qui meurt, ni qui vit. On dit en termes de mépris, une je ne sçay qui, pour dire, une femme de mauvaise vie; et, un je ne sçay quoy, des choses dont on ne peut pas trouver la vraie expression.¹⁰⁰

The list includes a simple string of syntax (‘je ne sçay ce que c’est’) and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself in its neutral semantic operation. The other dictionaries use the word in the same sense. The Académie Française does so in its entry on the term, as we have just seen, and elsewhere too: ‘*il sent je ne sçay quoy qui le picque*’ (1694: ‘sentir’). Richelet defines *lumineux*, in similar fashion, as ‘certain je ne sai quoi par le moien duquel la flamme, ou le Soleil font naître en nous le sentiment de la lumière.’ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* here refers to a neutral *aliquid*. The lexicographers, as we shall

⁹⁹ See also Académie Française 1694: ‘machiner’.

¹⁰⁰ Furetière 1690: ‘sçavoir’.

see, also use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its affirmative operation. They offer an unwitting survey of the word in its various lexical forms and semantic operations.

The situation is different in dictionary entries devoted to the word itself. There, the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* – the substantival form in its affirmative operation – obscures its other forms and operations. Dictionary definitions are of a noun referring to an irreducible nescioquiddity. That Richelet and the Académie Française use the noun more than Furetière does suggests its elegant currency. Furetière's perspective is different, especially in the 1701 revised edition of the dictionary, which displays definitions of the term and the questions these raise. I reproduce below, in chronological order, the relevant dictionary entries.

Richelet (1681):

JE [...] *Je ne sai quoi*. Certaine chose. (Elle a un *je ne sai quoi* qui l'a fait aimer.)

QUOI [...] *Le je ne sai quoi*. C'est une influence des astres et une impression secrète de l'ascendant sous lequel nous sommes nez. C'est le panchant et l'instinct du cœur pour un objet qui touche. (Il avoit une grace un *je ne sai quoi* qui surpasse de l'amour les plus doux apas. *Voi[ture] poë[sie]*.)

Furetière (1690):

SÇAVOIR [...] On dit en termes de mépris, une je ne sçay qui, pour dire, une femme de mauvaise vie; et, un je ne sçay quoy, des choses on ne peut pas trouver la vraie expression.

QUOY [...] Il est aussi substantif [...] On dit, le je ne sçay quoy, d'un certain agrément qu'on ne sçauroit exprimer, dont le Père Bouhours a fait un beau traité dans ses Œuvres.

Académie Française (1694):

QUOY [...] On dit aussi, [...] il y a dans cette affaire je ne sçay quoy que je n'entends pas. Il y a dans ce discours je ne sçay quoy qui me semble, etc. pour dire, Il y a je ne sçay quelle chose que je n'entends pas, etc.

On dit aussi substantivement. Un je ne sçay quoy, pour dire, Certaine chose qu'on ne peut exprimer. Il y a dans la beauté un je ne sçay quoy qui picque plus que la beauté mesme.

Furetière (1701):

QUOY [...] On dit, le je ne sçay quoy, d'un certain agrément qu'on ne sçauroit bien exprimer, dont le Père Bouhours a fait la matière de l'un de ses Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène. Il dit que c'est sa nature d'estre incompréhensible, et inexplicable. Ces instincts, ces panchans, ces sentiments secrets, sont des

termes qui n'expriment qu'imparfaitement, ce *je ne sçai quoy* que le cœur sent. C'est un agrément qui anime toutes les actions, et qui entre jusque dans le moindre geste de la personne qui plaît. Au contraire il y a un *je ne sçai quoy* choquant qui enpoisonne quelquefois, et gâte tout le mérite des personnes. Ce n'est point un caprice, ou un prétexte pour haïr; c'est une raison cachée, et que la nature seule nous suggère. Ce sont de premiers mouvements qui préviennent la réflexion, et la liberté. ID. Ce qu'on entend par le *je ne sçai quoy*, consiste en de petites choses qui ne s'aperçoivent pas aisément. LE CH.[EVALIER] DE M[ÉRÉ]. L'amour comme l'amitié a son agréable *je ne sçai quoy*. ST EV[REMOND]. Le *je ne sçai quoy* de l'amitié a plus de lumière que celui de l'amour, parce qu'il agit avec plus de calme. ID.

Les ames assorties
S'attachant l'un à l'autre, et se laissent picquer,
Par un *je ne sçai quoy* qu'on ne peut expliquer. CORN[EILLE].¹⁰¹

These definitions reveal an orchestrated attempt to ennoble and substantiate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in its affirmative operation. All three dictionaries set the substantive apart from the phrase's other forms and operations, either by distinguishing them within the same entry (Académie Française), or by placing the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in a separate entry (Richelet and Furetière). The attempt is not merely to settle the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] as a word, however, but also to place it outside language as an irreducible referent or (as Richelet calls it) 'certaine chose'. Language and experience are not always co-extensive: language can and often does lay down a sign that displays its own confessed inadequacy while pointing to the world outside. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a case of this. The lexicographers all tend in fact to treat it not as a sign but to lend it the character of a thing. The word's substantivization seems to encourage the process whereby its referent takes on a substantial form of its own.

Behind all of the entries listed above, and their orchestrated definitions, stands another lexicographer – Bouhours. He published influential works on the French language including *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671) and, three years later, a set of 'remarks' on the language designed to prolong the elegant tradition started by Vaugelas. Richelet's dictionary includes contributions by Bouhours, whose hand is also evident in the dictionary of the Académie Française. Those dictionaries to which

¹⁰¹ Furetière silently amends the quotation to keep the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the singular.

Bouhours contributed simply incorporate passages from his conversation ‘Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy’. Richelet lifts his two definitions, the one astrological and the other physiological, from an exchange between Ariste and Eugène and the Académie Française paraphrases their discussion of beauty (in the entries quoted pp. 67-68 above). Only Furetière explicitly refers to his rival Bouhours and his 1690 entry makes no further mention of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. That Furetière recognizes his rival’s authority on the topic indicates the widespread and lasting success of *Les Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène* in polite circles.¹⁰² Basnage’s revision of Furetière’s dictionary (1701), which includes many deletions, significantly expands the entry on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by including passages from Saint-Évremond and Méré as well as Corneille (quoted on p. 68 above).¹⁰³ I shall return to each of the passages that Furetière quotes in the course of my analysis.¹⁰⁴ Bouhours remains the initial authority but references to other writers, from Corneille onwards, indicate the term’s general literary currency. Bouhours himself, as we saw earlier, introduces the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] to his polite readership by quoting the same passage from Corneille (see 1.i.1 above, pp. 39-40). The author of ‘Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy’ stands behind even the lexicographical gesture that disputes his monopoly of the topic.

Bouhours’s definition both synthesizes earlier uses of the term and conditions its subsequent appearance in the three major monolingual dictionaries. His characters discuss the meaning of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* early in their conversation. Eugène’s suggestion, that Ariste knows this *je-ne-sais-quoi* through its effects, draws this reply from his friend: ‘il est bien plus aisé de le sentir que de le connoistre [...] sa nature est d’estre incomprehensible, et inexplicable’ (1962: 140). This core definition, which

¹⁰² See Beugnot 1990.

¹⁰³ Matoré 1968: 79.

¹⁰⁴ See here pp. 69-70 (on Bouhours); 3.i.1, p. 154 (on Saint-Evremond); 3.ii.2, p. 188 (on Corneille); 4.iii.1, p. 247 (on Méré).

reappears in the 1701 Furetière (quoted on p. 67 above), asserts the irreducible nescioquiddity of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* frustrates all our attempted explanations even as we experience it at first hand. The thing is, simply, because it is inexplicable. The rational Eugene, unwilling to cede to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, counters by proposing an astrological explanation of insensible phenomena ('c'est une influence des astres'). This Ariste accepts, but by offering a contradictory physiological explanation as equally valid, he implicitly disqualifies both. This is the exchange that Richelet repeats in his entry (quoted on p. 67 above). Ariste restates his case:

mais en disant tout cela et mille autres choses encore, on ne dit rien. Ces impressions, ces penchans, ces instincts, ces sentimens, ces sympathies, ces parentez sont de beaux mots que les sçavans ont inventez pour flatter leur ignorance, et pour tromper les autres, après s'estre trompez eux-mesmes. Un de nos Poëtes en a mieux parlé que tous les Philosophes, il decide la chose en un mot.¹⁰⁵

In listing all those terms (*instincts*, *sympathies*, and so on) by which scholars conceal their ignorance, Ariste sketches a 'semantic field' around the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.¹⁰⁶ What distinguishes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from its semantic neighbours, however, is its pithy assertion that the experience cannot be explained. Furetière and the Académie Française, using *exprimer* in its archaic sense of 'explain', confirm Ariste's assertion that the distinctive trait of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is its inexplicability. Ariste finishes by quoting the celebrated passage from *Rodogune* that reappears subsequently in Furetière's 1701 entry. Corneille's pithy reference, to 'ces je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut expliquer', settles the matter in a word.

To what kinds of thing is the *je-ne-sais-quoi* taken to refer? Taken out of context, Bouhours's core definition – 'sa nature est d'estre incomprehensible, et

¹⁰⁵ Bouhours 1962: 140-41.

¹⁰⁶ Kittay and Lehrer define a semantic field as 'a set of lexemes which cover a certain conceptual domain and which bear certain specifiable semantic relations to one other' (1981: 32).

inexplicable' – leaves the vast field of the inexplicable entirely open. Ariste and Eugène do offer examples that extend the term's field of reference as far as hope, faith, and fevers (1962: 147-49). But they devote most of their discussion, as they start it, to a set of phenomena that they draw together under the sub-headings of *sympathie* and *antipathie*. Both friends contribute to this synthesis in the course of the conversation. Eugène starts by summarizing Ariste's examples: 'il s'ensuit de là [...] que c'est un agrément qui anime la beauté et les autres perfections naturelles; qui corrigent la laideur et les autres défauts naturels' (1962: 141). Later Ariste returns the compliment: 'mais outre ce je ne sçay quoy qui repare, comme nous avons dit, et qui tient lieu quelquefois de beauté [...] il y en a un autre qui fait un effet tout contraire' (1962: 145-46). He clinches the synthesis of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, declaring: 'c'est le fondement de ce qu'on appelle sympathie ou antipathie' (1962: 146). The examples given by Richelet, Furetière, and the Académie Française follow the pattern set by Bouhours. Inexplicable phenomena of sympathy or antipathy cluster within the topic of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

These phenomena can be provisionally classified according to the position they occupy within a grid of reference.¹⁰⁷ Two axes divide this grid into four zones. The vertical axis stretches from *self* (a perceiving subject) to *other* (that which excites perception in a subject), and the horizontal one, from *substance* (a stable entity underlying movement) to *event* (the movement itself). The particular form, semantic operation, and context of any occurrence determines its reference. Ariste and Eugène place referents of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* at the extremes of both axes: in the self ('[le] je ne sçay quoi qu'on a pour les gens') and the other ('le je ne sçay quoi fait son effet'); as an event ('ce sont de premiers mouvements qui previennent la reflexion') and as a

¹⁰⁷ Kenny gives a similar analysis of referents of 'curiosity' (1998: 22-23).

substance ('cette matiere estant de la nature de celles qui ont un fond impenetrable').¹⁰⁸ Most referents of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* can be placed somewhere between self and other and/or substance and event. They fall somewhere in the middle.

Bouhours's defining contribution, repeated in the dictionaries, is to transform the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into a substance. This he does, at a lexical level, by systematically exploiting the substantival *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Earlier in the *Entretiens*, Bouhours uses the word in all its various lexical forms.¹⁰⁹ In the course of the fifth conversation, however, he increasingly turns to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], and what is more, he tends to place the word's referents between *other* (in the vertical axis) and *substance* (in the horizontal axis) on the zone of reference. He makes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* both substantival and substantial. In so doing, he reveals the substantialist tendency that Bouhours's contemporary, Jacques Rohault, describes as 'l'accoûtumance [...] de penser que tout nom substantif signifie quelque sorte de substance'.¹¹⁰ Ariste refers to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as 'une chose, qui ne subsiste que parce qu'on ne peut dire ce que c'est'.¹¹¹ Bouhours, by ennobling its substantival form, transforms the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from a movement into a substance.¹¹² In so doing he reifies an inexplicable experience as yet another thing.

Bouhours's reification of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is visible in the monolingual dictionaries. Richelet and the Académie Française silently incorporate it as a matter of fact. They show, even in their accidental use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], that they

¹⁰⁸ Bouhours 1962: 141, 143, 147, 149.

¹⁰⁹ See for example Bouhours 1962: 82 (for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.]); 130 [pron. adj]; 136 [adj.]; 139 (*je ne sais comment*).

¹¹⁰ Rohault 1978: 114.

¹¹¹ Bouhours 1962: 150; see 2.i.2 below, p. 108.

¹¹² Haase 1956: 60; Marin 1986: 192.

conceive of it as an inexplicable quality that inheres in substances (see 2.i.2 below, pp. 107-08). The case of Furetière is rather different. By quoting Bouhours's text, rather than silently incorporating it, Furetière presents it as one locus of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to which, in 1701, he adds others (see pp. 67-68 above). The 1701 entry gives a complex image of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by accommodating both the substantialist definition and two fundamental objections to it. The quotation from Méré, who defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a thing merely difficult to perceive, casts doubt on its supposed inexplicability. Is the *je-ne-sais-quoi* not a super-subtle phenomenon rather than an irreducible nescioquiddity? The long quotation from Bouhours evokes a second objection in rejecting it: 'ce n'est point un caprice [...]; c'est une raison cachée, et que la nature seule nous suggère'. Is the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in fact no more than a mind-forged artifice? Furetière casts this doubt upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* even as he quotes Bouhours insisting that it has substantial being. His 1701 entry does not contradict the other dictionaries in their briefer entries on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. But it does reveal that, far from being simple statements of universal consensus, these are the result of a concerted attempt among lexicographers from Bouhours onwards to lend substance to the affirmative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. By displaying this attempt, and the questions that this raises, Furetière leaves room for other definitions.

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3. Coming to terms

All writing about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* attempts to come to terms with its meaning, and in so doing, reaches its defining moment. To use the word, after all, is to invite demands for further definition and explanation. Eugène makes this very point to his friend: 'de la maniere dont vous parlez,' he tells Ariste, 'vous avez la mine de

connoître aussi bien la nature de ce je ne sçay quoy, que vous en ressentez les effets’ (1962: 140). What then is this *je-ne-sais-quoi* with which you seem so well acquainted? Any reply encounters the immediate obstacle that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself announces an inevitable failure of definition. Ariste points this out in his initial response to Eugène’s question: ‘ce ne seroit plus un je ne sçay quoy, si l’on sçavoit ce que c’est’ (Bouhours 1962: 140). The pat logic of this reply suggests a refusal to define rather than an inevitable failure. Though I may be unable to explain *what* the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is, after all, I do know – crucially – *that* it has happened to me. I imply the latter even as I state the former. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* can be defined at the very least, then, as an indubitable *aliquid* of experience. This definition is, however, insufficient. One need only evoke synonyms for this neutral *aliquid*, such as *fact* or simply *something*, to see that none asserts its nescioquiddity. One can hint at this assertion by adding ‘a certain’ to such terms, which determines their meaning as indeterminate. Any semantic definition must come to terms both with the inexplicable quality of the thing described and the brute fact of its fall into experience. No word does this better than the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

I offer below a short dictionary-style definition. This definition is intended as an ‘ideal type’ of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in other words, a heuristic device designed to find and describe its specific, concrete appearances (see Introduction above, p. 27).

Here it is:

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is some thing, quality, event, or force that falls within the experience of the perceiving subject and cannot be explained. It invites attempts to define what it is, and to explain how it happens, but brings all such attempts to a crisis. The subject apprehends the *je-ne-sais-quoi* only in his or her experience of its effects. These effects, which can be described, are most frequently compared to a vital force of sympathy (or antipathy) drawing the subject towards (or away from) another person, thing, idea, etc. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, when its force is most intense, falls upon the subject with the sudden and revolutionary effects of a disaster.

Comparing my definition with those of the lexicographers reveals the play of similarity and difference. I borrow terms, concepts, and metaphors from Bouhours and the dictionaries. My ideal-typical definition makes it possible to display a wide range of their uses of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* on the grid of reference that I sketched earlier (see 1.ii.2 above, pp. 71-72). It counters the substantialist tendency by keeping the referent deliberately indeterminate. It does specify, however, that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* both falls within the experience of a subject and remains irreducible to explanation. This dual character remains largely implicit in seventeenth-century dictionaries. The emphasis upon immanent human experience tends to minimize the transcendental *je-ne-sais-quoi* of mystical writers such as St. John of the Cross (see 1.i.2 above, pp. 44-45). I shall argue later (in 1.iii.2 below) that the word's theological application is equally limited. I also emphasize the importance of explanation – and its failure – to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. I noted earlier that Richelet simply borrows from Bouhours two contradictory explanations, one astrological and the other physiological, of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (see 1.ii.2 above, p. 67). His implication is that contradiction is inevitable since no explanation is possible; I spell this out. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a disaster that I experience in its effects but cannot explain.

My definition of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* uses three key terms (*experience*, *explanation*, and *disaster*). Each requires a definition of its own. I use *experience* to mean 'a subject's passive reception of events'. Events merely happen, but when they happen to me, they are the stuff of my experience. *Experience* is to be distinguished here from *experiment*, which is an actively conceived means of observing the external world or of testing one's own faculties. The French word *expérience* covers both

English words.¹¹³ Experience is common (an observation shared by many) or particular (my observation of an event), singular or repeated.¹¹⁴ Repeated experience allows the unconscious assimilation of signs (see 4.ii.1 below, pp. 225-26). Common experience is the basis of explanation in traditional natural philosophy (see 2.i.2 below, p. 100). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* emphasizes, in its very syntax, the particular experience of an 'I'. *Explanation* is used here to translate the predominant sense of *savoir* in the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. *Savoir* is distinct from *connaître* in the early modern period as causal scientific knowledge. *Scire est rem per causas cognoscere* is the standard definition offered; the speaker at the Bureau d'Adresse offers a typical French translation: 'sçavoir est connoistre la cause par laquelle la chose est, [...] en prenant le mot de cause pour principe'.¹¹⁵ To know something is to explain what causes it, why, and how: this is *scientia* in the traditional Aristotelian sense and the predominant meaning of *science* or *savoir* in early modern French. Certain knowledge produces necessary causal explanations and sufficient definitions, in other words, those that are fully convertible with the thing being defined.¹¹⁶ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is precisely that which frustrates *savoir*. Writers such as Corneille make the semantic connection between *savoir* and *expliquer*, as we have seen, when they talk of 'ces je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut expliquer' (1.ii.1 above, p. 63). Verbs such as *connaître* and *sentir* describe the experience of a thing in its effects (*sentir* can also be a form of belief based on experience). Art (experiential knowledge) produces, not explanations and definitions, but descriptions: these name the thing experienced and describe its effects. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* refers to an event that irrupts suddenly into experience. Its effects are revolutionary when they bring some profound alteration to the situation or,

¹¹³ See Furetière 1690: 'expérience'; Académie Française 1694: 'expérience': Montaigne: ii.6, 372a (for *expérience* in the sense of 'experience'); ii.37, 781a (for *expérience* in the sense of 'experiment').

¹¹⁴ Richelet 1681: 'expérience'.

¹¹⁵ Maclean 2002: 146; Renaudot 1638-55: III, 314 (conf. 84).

¹¹⁶ CHSP: 513-47 (on explanation); Maclean 1992: 106-07 (on definition).

indeed, to the very identity of the perceiving subject.¹¹⁷ I draw upon Richelet's deliberately insufficient astrological explanation ('c'est une influence *des astres*') for the metaphor of the disaster. This serves to define the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its relation to experience and explanation. The experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has the form of a sudden disaster that both invites and frustrates all explanation.

The ideal type of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a 'seme', in other words, a unit of sense. This seme appears in my earlier classification as the affirmative semantic operation (or nescioquiddity) of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in all its lexical forms (see 1.i.3 above, p. 51). Nescioquiddity passes primarily through the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] once the noun becomes current. This development does not, however, produce an ideal marriage between lexeme and seme. Their relationship is marked rather by reciprocal infidelities. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] remains capable of receiving semata other than its core one. Conversely, the seme passes through non-substantival forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and beyond that, through an open-ended field of terms and phrases. We are left with two definitions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, one lexical and the other semantic, which do not necessarily coincide with one another. The ideal type seems only to have brought confusion to the word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

To resolve this confusion would require abandoning either lexeme or seme. One radical post-structuralist solution would be to note the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs and hence of all sense and reference: 'concepts are purely linguistic effects of the relational play of differences between signs'.¹¹⁸ The distinction between lexeme and seme would disappear as an illusion; a 'pure' word history of the lexeme *je-ne-sais-quoi* would become possible. Such an undertaking would soon run into the

¹¹⁷ OED: 'revolution', III. 6; see 5.iii.2 below, pp. 307-08 (for one example).

¹¹⁸ Kenny 1998: 25; Foucault 1966: 7-16; 1969: 66.

formidable objection that language users rely on their shared ability to understand different words as referring to the same meaning or thing.¹¹⁹ Neil Kenny, one of the purer word historians, concedes that ‘readers make sense of a sentence by reading its words [...] against a range of alternatives that the writer has not used’ (1998: 117). An example is close at hand in dictionaries, which, as we can see in their entries on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, can only define a given term by producing synonymous sentences from which the term itself is absent. This is the principle behind semantic fields. A radically purist word historian, who had entirely abandoned the field of sense, would be left with the train-spotter’s task of merely recording occurrences. The second solution to the confusion of lexeme and seme would be, conversely, to allow the lexical strand to disappear altogether. One would be free to follow the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into a field of other terms and phrases. This would raise a formidable practical problem by removing any means of sampling what is an open-ended semantic field. Each term and phrase would in turn produce further synonyms and the study would balloon out of control. The decision to start the search from a particular term would then appear arbitrary and so, in solving one problem, one would have lost the specificity of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Both radical solutions end in Pyrrhic victories over confusion.

My intention is rather to retain the confusion between words and meanings as methodologically fruitful. That linguistic signs are arbitrary need not deprive them of sense and reference.¹²⁰ Early modern thinkers take the position that words are not merely self-contained lexical phenomena, but carry meanings and refers to things outside language.¹²¹ I do too and so, like them, can consider the *je-ne-sais-quoi* either

¹¹⁹ See 3.iii.1 above, pp. 203-05 (for one example in relation to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*).

¹²⁰ Nuttall 1983: 21; Compagnon 1998: 145.

¹²¹ Kenny 1998: 22; see also Maclean 1992: 95-104; Montaigne 1992: ii.16, 618a.

as a word (lexeme), or as a unit of sense (seme), or – increasingly as the noun achieves sedimentation – the thing to which language refers (referent).¹²² I shall retain the distinction between seme and lexeme and generally accord primacy to the former over the latter.¹²³ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* I primarily use, then, as a lexical ‘tracer’ of its ideal-typical meaning as this moves through an open-ended field of terms, figures, and syntactical strings.¹²⁴ This approach I call a ‘critical history’ to distinguish it from pure ‘word history’. I choose the *je-ne-sais-quoi* over its semantic neighbours because it rises to prominence, during the period in question, as a keyword. At certain moments conflicting discourses exploit the keyword when discussing problems of explanation. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes a lexical site of conflict: one man’s nescioquiddity is another’s non-entity. Such moments require the focus of study to shift from seme to lexeme; since both are in place, the shift remains possible. In general, however, I use the lexeme as means to control my sample of the semantic field. Neighbouring terms and phrases are examined as and when early modern writers place them in apposition to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. My choice of approach has two particular consequences. First, my lexical control omits appearances of the seme, some of them no doubt important, from which the word happens to be absent. This I accept as a practically necessary omission; I attempt to compensate for it by drawing on secondary studies of related terms. Second, and more radically, my semantic emphasis commits me to judging that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is absent from sentences in which the word appears and, conversely, that it appears in sentences from which the word is absent.¹²⁵ I do not just accept this as a methodological consequence; I offer it

¹²² I adopt Frege’s now commonplace distinction between ‘sense’ (a meaning or signified) and ‘reference’ (that to which language refers): see Kenny 1998: 21-22; Compagnon 1998: 99.

¹²³ Kenny also retains both but, conversely, accords primacy to the lexicon of ‘curiosity’ over its meanings (1998: chs.1 and 5).

¹²⁴ Starobinski takes this approach in his study of the couple action and reaction (1999: 14).

¹²⁵ I offer a complex example of this in 4.i.2 above, pp. 219-20.

as my thesis about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The experience simultaneously invites explanation and frustrates it by remaining impossible to pin down in any settled term. It remains ever on the move. Writing is able to name and describe the experience in its very nescioquiddity only by revolutionizing its lexicon. Terms suitable to the task regularly appear. But each of these then comes into currency, settles as a substance, and petrifies the experience into yet another explicable thing. This is the early modern history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It suggests that, with the experience itself, one can never fully come to terms.

iii. A topic of conversation

1. The topography of Bouhours

In what regions of experience does the *je-ne-sais-quoi* appear? Bouhours's conversation 'Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy', as I argued earlier, marks the moment at which the term settles into the sediment of language and thought (see 1.i.1 above, pp. 38-40). It does so by becoming a topic of conversation, in other words, a commonplace within which to unite and discuss different subjects. Bouhours's characters show their wit and learning by mapping the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the realms of nature, the passions, culture, and theology. Bouhours, in this way, establishes a topography of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The tone of his conversation suggests that its content is *commonplace* in the sense that it is an area of consensus. But the commonplace of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is rather a stretch of disputed territory, a no man's land, between conflicting discourses.¹²⁶

Ariste and Eugène explore the realms of nature, passions, culture, and religion in their conversation about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. At times they extend the term's reference to include anything inexplicable in heaven and earth; the core cases they cite, however, are of inexplicable movements of sympathy or antipathy, attraction or repulsion (see 1.ii.2 above, pp. 70-71). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* belongs, first, to the realm of the passions. It draws two particular people – whether they be strangers, lovers, or

¹²⁶ Moriarty 1999: 526-27.

friends – into a particular relation at first sight and is, as Ariste puts it, ‘le fondement de ce qu’on appelle sympathie ou antipathie’ (1962: 146). It is in reflecting on their particular friendship, indeed, that Ariste and Eugène chance upon the topic. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears, second, in the realm of culture. Here the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is not a particular relation, but instead, a universal quality: ‘il y a des je ne sçay quoy universels, dont tout le monde est touché également’ (1962: 146). A culture collectively recognizes a distinguishing quality in certain of its individual members or works of art (1962: 147-48). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* belongs, third, to the realm of nature. Inexplicable movements of attraction and repulsion regularly occur there, Ariste suggests, between the magnet and iron, the tides’ ebb and flow, the human body and the diseases that it suffers:

ces accès si reglez, ces frissons et ces chaleurs, ces intervalles dans un mal qui dure des années entieres, ne sont-ce pas autant de je ne sçay quoy? Et n’en est-ce pas un aussi que le flux et le reflux de la mer; que la vertu de l’aiman, que toutes les qualitez occultes des Philosophes?¹²⁷

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* makes movements between natural bodies that the philosophers cannot explain. In its natural, interpersonal, and cultural realms, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* remains sealed within the created world. Ariste and Eugène finish their conversation by suggesting that it may also belong, fourth and finally, to the transcendental relationship between humans and their divine maker. Ariste describes hope for salvation, and indeed salvation itself, as ‘je ne sçay quoy d’un autre ordre’. The conversation then reaches its devout apogee:

Ainsi donc, interrompit Eugene, le je ne sçay quoy est de la grace aussi bien que de la nature et de l’art. – [Puis], repartit Ariste, la grace elle-mesme, cette divine grace, qui a fait tant de bruit dans les écoles, et qui fait des effets si admirables dans les ames; cette grace si forte et si douce tout ensemble, qui triomphe de la dureté du cœur, sans blesser la liberté du franc arbitre; qui s’assujétit la nature en s’y accommodant; qui se rend maistresse de la volonté, en la laissant maistresse d’elle-mesme; cette grace,

¹²⁷ Bouhours 1962: 147.

dis-je, qu'est-ce autre chose qu'un je ne sçay quoy surnaturel, qu'on ne peut expliquer, ni comprendre?¹²⁸

Ariste here speculatively raises the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into the realm of theology. He attempts to give to the word the elastic semantic movement that the word *grace* makes between the realms of erotic and religious experience (see 1.i.2 above, pp. 43-44). Ariste and Eugène subject the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to a natural, passionate, cultural, and even a divine topography.

Bouhours's topography of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is in fact discreetly systematic. The Jesuits are noted for their adherence to the traditional curriculum of the Schools in the face of the new philosophies.¹²⁹ Bouhours proves no exception.¹³⁰ Franciscus Toletus lists the different kinds of philosophy in his *Commentaria una cum quaestionibus in VIII libros De physica auscultatione* (1574). His classification is typical of the European university curriculum until the end of the seventeenth century.¹³¹ Toletus divides philosophy into three branches: 'speculative', 'practical', and 'factive'. Factive philosophy, which includes necessary arts such as agriculture and useful ones such as navigation, receives little or no attention in the university curriculum. Practical philosophy includes ethics (personal life), œconomics (home and family), and politics (the city and the republic). The first corresponds to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the passions, and the third, to the realm of culture. Speculative philosophy is made up of metaphysics (the study of being *qua* being), mathematics, and natural philosophy (the study of things that fall under the senses). The first of these corresponds for Bouhours to the supernatural realm of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and the

¹²⁸ Bouhours 1962: 149.

¹²⁹ Brockliss 1987: 352; on the conflict between traditional and new philosophies, see chapter two below.

¹³⁰ Beugnot 1994: 153-54.

¹³¹ The following is based on CHRP: 210-213; see also Brockliss 1987: 337-50.

third, to the natural realm. Bouhours's polite topography of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* covers traditional topics in practical and speculative philosophy.

The learning of the *bel esprit* is not just discreetly systematic: it is also systematically discreet. Ariste and Eugène allow their topography of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* simply to emerge, as if quite naturally, in the flow of conversation. They reveal themselves in this respect to be true *beaux esprits*, go-betweens who connect the worlds of learning and wit. Bouhours presents them as such at the very beginning of the *Entretiens*:

c'est-là [on the coast of Flanders] qu'Ariste et Eugène eurent quelque temps de ces conversations libres, qu'ont les honnestes gens, quand ils sont amis; et qui ne laissent pas d'estre spirituelles, et mesme sçavantes, quoy-qu'on ne songe point à y avoir de l'esprit, et que l'étude n'y ait point de part.¹³²

Ariste and Eugène, within the fiction, perform the role of pious *beaux esprits* that their author and his fellow Jesuit, René Rapin, assumed in late seventeenth-century Parisian society.¹³³ One supporter praises Bouhours because he not only treats learned questions with wit and polish himself but also teaches the young *honnêtes gens* to do likewise. He has accomplished his educational mission as a Jesuit:

Dieu et son Eglise ont confié à cette Compagnie l'éducation des jeunes gens. Ils sont obligez à leur apprendre à parler et à vivre [...] en Cavaliers, s'ils sont destinez à l'estre; en Courtisans, en gens du monde. Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugene sont le modele des entretiens de ces sortes de personnes; ils parlent de tout ce dont les honnestes gens ont accoustumé de parler, et de la maniere qu'il faut qu'ils en parlent.¹³⁴

Reading Jesuit *beaux esprits* like Bouhours teaches the young *honnêtes gens* not only what to say about the topic of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but crucially, how to say it. The key is to reveal one's learning by wearing it lightly. Their lightness of touch allows Ariste and Eugène to take controversial positions while passing them off as commonplace.

¹³² Bouhours 1962: 5-6 (conv. 1).

¹³³ Bourdieu 1979: 80-81; Jam 1995: 519; Ribard 2000: 30-32.

¹³⁴ Montfaucon de Villars 1671: 34-35; see also Sorel 1974: 339.

They suggest that occult qualities are forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature and that divine grace is its supernatural form. Both propositions are, in different ways, highly controversial. By phrasing them as questions or suggestions, however, the *beaux esprits* appear to offer no more than polite contributions to learned disputes. They take positions on a range of disputes without opening themselves to the charge of pedantry. These disputes relate not just to speculative philosophy but also to topics in practical philosophy such as the role of reason in the passions and the status of cultural distinction. The *bel esprit*, by mapping them with systematic discretion, is able to present such sites of conflict as no more than polite commonplaces.

2. The scandal of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

A further sign that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has become sedimented in late seventeenth-century French culture is that it becomes the object of a quarrel. Bouhours places all four realms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (natural, passionate, cultural, and theological) on one map. This I shall use, in the following three chapters, to set out my own interregional study of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. I make one critical change to Bouhours's topography, however, by examining his fourth and final realm first. Bouhours's suggestion, that divine grace may be another form of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, is as discreet as his interventions in natural and practical philosophy. But unlike them it provokes a quarrel whose main object is not semantic but the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself. This quarrel divides Jesuits and Jansenists along familiar lines. The latter condemn the Jesuits' use of the word as a *scandal* in the theological sense, that is, a stumbling-block to faith.

The publication of *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671) fed the long-running conflict between the Jesuits and Jansenists and the associates of both sides. It was not Bouhours's first contribution to the Jesuit cause: his *Lettre à un seigneur de la Cour* (1668) attacks the Port-Royal translation of the New Testament and criticizes Pascal's support of the Jansenists in *Les Provinciales* (1656-57).¹³⁵ In 1671, Bouhours returned to the attack. He commends salon writers such as La Rochefoucauld and Méré in the second of his *Entretiens* ('De la langue française') while criticizing the style of Port-Royal writers for hyperbole and incoherence. The salon writers possess a social polish, his characters agree, that the reclusive members of Port-Royal lack. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears as an expression of antipathy towards Bouhours's enemies and one of sympathy for his polite allies: where Eugène appreciates 'je ne sçay quelle finesse' in La Rochefoucauld, Ariste finds, in the Port-Royal *Imitation de Jesus-Christ* (1662), 'je ne sçay quoy qui me choque' (1962: 80-82). The reply from the Jansenist side was swift. Barbier d'Aucour's *Sentiments de Cleanthe sur les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* were also published in 1671 and Antoine de Courtin includes criticisms of Bouhours's *Entretiens* in the second edition of his *Nouveau traité de la civilité qui se pratique en France parmi les honnêtes gens* (1672). The Jesuit counter-attack includes Charles Sorel's *De la connaissance des bons livres*, Montfaucon de Villars's *De la délicatesse*, and Bouhours's revisions to the *Entretiens*, all of which were first published in 1671. Montfaucon de Villars defends Bouhours's *Entretiens* against Barbier D'Aucour while critically reviewing the Port-Royal edition of Pascal's *Pensées* (1670). Bouhours's reply to Courtin comes in his *Remarques nouvelles de la langue française* (1675).¹³⁶ Bouhours silently answers Barbier d'Aucour by modifying the text of *Les Entretiens* from its second edition onwards; his

¹³⁵ Bouhours 1668: 21.

¹³⁶ See Bouhours 1973: 46, 272; Courtin 1998: 15 (Introduction).

opponent replies to these modifications in subsequent editions of his *Sentiments de Cleanthe*. That these texts continued to be published late into the eighteenth century testifies to the historical importance of this long neglected quarrel. Modern critical editions of some of these texts have started to revive interest, but much work remains to be done on the long and conflictual reception of Bouhours's *Entretiens*.¹³⁷

The most heated area of conflict is that of grace but the issue, here, is primarily one of style.¹³⁸ Bouhours's opponents condemn his divine use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a scandal. They hope to undermine his lexicographical authority and his censure of Port-Royal texts at one stroke. Barbier d'Aucour objects to Bouhours's censure before turning it against him (1776: 58-71). His is not a semantic argument about grace itself. Defining grace in its relation to free will is an issue that Jesuits, Jansenists, and other confessional groups hotly debate in this period.¹³⁹ Bouhours, who stresses that free will alone is sufficient to activate the divine grace given to all, clearly shares the Jesuit conception of 'sufficient grace' criticized by Pascal.¹⁴⁰ But Barbier d'Aucour does not repeat Pascal's criticisms. While agreeing with Bouhours that grace is incomprehensible, he accuses him of the illegitimate application of a profane word – the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – to a sacred topic: 'cette adorable incompréhensibilité de Dieu, et de sa grace, ne devoit pas être marquée par un mot, qui est même trop bas pour marquer entre les choses humaines celles à qui l'on doit du respect'.¹⁴¹ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* says the right thing in the wrong way. Bouhours's critics accuse him of an act of *humiliatio*, in other words, debasing a noble subject

¹³⁷ Examples are Sorel 1974; Montfaucon de Villars 1980; Courtin 1998. No critical edition of Bouhours's *Entretiens* yet exists despite the preparatory work of Beugnot 1990.

¹³⁸ On this conflict, see Busson 1982: 361-63.

¹³⁹ See Brémond 1916: IV, 428-42; Duchêne 1985; Parish 1989.

¹⁴⁰ Pascal 1987: 51-62 (letter 2); see 188 (letter 12) for Pascal's use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] to ridicule the Jesuits.

¹⁴¹ Barbier d'Aucour 1776: 127, 269.

with a scandalously ignoble word.¹⁴² In extending the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from profane passions to divine grace, Barbier d'Aucour says, Bouhours has mixed 'les choses les plus saintes avec les plus profanes' (1776: 125). Antoine de Courtin repeats the accusation in order to undermine Bouhours's status as an authority on *honnêteté*. He condemns the passage on grace in Bouhours's 'Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy' as an example of inappropriate humour or 'raillerie'.¹⁴³ He juxtaposes the Bouhours passage with Rabelais's bawdy variations on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the *Cinquiemesme livre* to illustrate the term's disreputable character.¹⁴⁴ Barbier d'Aucour's theologian clinches the Jansenists' point by exploiting the pejorative *je-ne-sais-qui*: 'l'Auteur qui parle en ces termes, et de la grace de Dieu, et de Dieu même, et qui les appelle des *Je ne sçay quoy*; il faut encore un coup qu'il soit un... un je ne sçai qui' (1776: 128). The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, even at the height of its vogue among polite circles, retains a whiff of scandal.

Bouhours and his supporters, in reply, seek to justify the divine use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Like Guez de Balzac in the previous generation, Bouhours claims that using the term is an expression of humility rather than an act of humiliation.¹⁴⁵ Attempts to dispel the scandal of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* only betray its persistence. Charles Sorel defends Bouhours against Barbier d'Aucour by simply asserting that the former is 'trop sçavant dans nostre Langue pour employer des mots et des façons de parler qui ne soient point déjà bien receus'. Bouhours's quality, Sorel claims, is to write 'à la mode de ce Siecle' (1974: 341-43). Bouhours's reply to his critics is to make a series of additions to the passage in which Ariste asks: 'cette grace, dis-je, qu'est-ce qu'autre chose qu'un je ne sçay quoy surnaturel, qu'on ne peut expliquer, ni

¹⁴² On *humiliatio*, see Sonnino 1968: 104.

¹⁴³ Courtin 1998: 195; Bouhours, in 1675, replies in kind: see 4.ii.1 below, p. 224.

¹⁴⁴ Courtin 1998: 197; the Rabelais passage is quoted in 1.i.3 above, p. 57.

¹⁴⁵ Borgerhoff 1950: 26-27.

comprendre?’ (1662: 149). In the second edition (also 1671), Bouhours adds a justificatory marginal reference to Augustine’s commentary on Psalm 90, which he loosely paraphrases in the text:

cette grace, dis-je, qu’est-ce qu’autre chose qu’un je ne sçay quoy surnaturel, qu’on ne peut ni expliquer, ni comprendre, non plus que la gloire qui en est le fruit.

[Marginal note: *Nescio quid magnum est quod visuri sumus quando tota merces nostra visio est. S. Aug. in Psalm. 90.*]¹⁴⁶

In the fourth edition (1673), Bouhours strengthens his defence by adding an entire paragraph after the sentence in which Ariste suggests that grace is ‘un je ne sçay quoy [...] qui ne se peut exprimer, et dont on feroit bien de se taire’ (1673: 306). It contains a second reference to Augustine paraphrased in the text:

Mais n’est-ce point parler de la grace indignement, répondit Eugene, que de l’appeller je ne sçay quoy? Dites, repartit Ariste, je ne sçay quoy de divin et de surnaturel. C’est ainsi que Saint Augustin luy-mesme en parle dans un endroit de ses Confessions, qui m’est demeuré dans l’esprit. Mon Dieu, dit-il, vous me faites quelquefois entrer dans des sentimens extraordinaires, où la nature n’a point de part, et gouter je ne sçay quelle douceur celeste, qui passe toutes les délices de la terre, quand elle remplit l’ame parfaitement, et qui est *je ne sçay quoy* au dessus des connoissances et des biens de cette vie.

[Marginal note: *Aliquando intromittis me in affectum nullum inusitatum introrsus, et nescio quam dulcedinem, quae si perficiatur in me, nescio quid erit, quod vi[ta] [i]sta non erit. Confess. lib. 10. c. 40.*]¹⁴⁷

Bouhours evokes the charge of *humiliatio* here in order to refute it. He justifies his use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by placing Augustine in the term’s genealogy. His refutation is lexically evasive, however, since he answers attacks on his use of the full *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] by sanctioning the pronominal form and the pronominal form plus adjective (‘dites [...] je ne sçay quoy de divin et de surnaturel’). He also ignores the crucial generic difference between Augustine’s Biblical commentary, which happens to use the *nescio quid*, and a polite conversation on profane topics that strays into the realm of theology. Montfaucon de Villars’s reply to Barbier d’Aucour is similarly evasive:

¹⁴⁶ Bouhours 1682: 263; Augustine 1954: X, 1277; see Jankélévitch 1980: I, 109-10.

¹⁴⁷ Bouhours 1673: 306; Augustine 1954: I, 191.

enfin Cleanthe ne veut pas qu'on applique le je ne sçay quoy à Dieu et à la Grace, parce qu'on n'oserait l'appliquer à la Majesté Royale dans un discours sérieux. Mais pourquoy ne diroit-on pas au Roy, Vostre Majesté, Sire, a je ne sçay quoy de divin qui attire le respect et l'amour. Au reste, Cleanthe [...] finit honnestement ce discours en nous faisant sçavoir que le P[ère] B[ouhours] est un je ne sçay qui.¹⁴⁸

Montfaucon de Villars answers the charge of *humiliatio* no more satisfactorily than Bouhours. He seizes instead on Barbier d'Aucour's *je-ne-sais-qui* gibe to imply that he, like Pascal, lacks the *honnêteté* and *délicatesse* of the Jesuit.¹⁴⁹ Montfaucon de Villars clearly decides instead that counter-attack is the best form of defence just as the Jansenist side had done by simply turning Bouhours's stylistic censure back against him. The two sides sustain their conflict by sharing polemical strategies. But the evasive replies of Bouhours and his supporters suggest that the Jansenists, in condemning the term as an impious scandal, have scored a palpable hit.

Bouhours incurs the charge of impiety by using the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to cross the border between the profane and the sacred. Using the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in a theological treatise is not in itself an error; Pierre Nicole incurs no censure when, in his *Traité de la grâce générale* (1715), he borrows Bouhours's lexical connection between grace and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and his reference to Augustine.¹⁵⁰ Nicole's text remains within the territory of theology. The dual position of Jesuits like Bouhours and Rapin, within French polite circles and the Roman Catholic clergy, is more dangerous.¹⁵¹ Supporters construe Bouhours's position as that of the ideal go-between; Montfaucon de Villars, as we saw earlier, offers this view (see 1.iii.1 above, p. 84). Opponents, however, denounce him as a double agent who sells sacred secrets to the profane world. Barbier d'Aucour and Courtin do just that; their case is strengthened by the general consensus, in early modern France, that writers of profane texts should avoid theological

¹⁴⁸ Montfaucon de Villars 1671: 229-30.

¹⁴⁹ On Pascal, see Montfaucon de Villars 1671: 364.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Brémond 1916: IV, 436.

¹⁵¹ See Fumaroli's remarks in Binet 1987: 26-39.

controversies. This was one of the ground rules of the debates held at the Bureau d'Adresse: 'de peur d'irriter les esprits aisez à échauffer sur le fait de la Religion, on envoie en Sorbonne tout ce qui la concerne' (Renaudot 1638-55: I, 4). Other profane writers show the same prudence. The *honnêtes gens* should leave theology where it belongs in the Schools; those who do decide to pursue theological controversies from without risk censure.¹⁵² Bouhours's abrupt phrase of transition, 'mais pour parler chretiennement du je ne sçay quoy [...]' (1962: 149), only supports the perception that he is straying into theology from an erstwhile profane topic. The lexicographers, even those sympathetic to Bouhours, confirm this view. The dictionary of Richelet makes room for the Jansenists' censure in its 1728 edition: 'le P[ère] Bouhours a écrit sur le *je ne sçai quoi*, et c'est dans cet ouvrage où ridiculement il apelle la grace un *je ne sçai quoi* (Critique des Entret. d'Ariste.)'.¹⁵³ The Jesuits' scandalous impiety, rather than their pedagogical mediations, is now the topic of polite conversation. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, by settling into the language as a commonplace, has become a lexical site of conflict.

The Jansenists widen their attack, beyond the divine realm, to the significance and coherence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself. They raise problems that are inherent to any discussion of the topic. The term refers either to something really inexplicable, or to something not yet explained, or to nothing whatsoever. Barbier d'Aucour attacks it on each count. In the first case, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is superfluous: 'si au contraire il entend un *Je ne sçay quoy* en general, séparé de tout sujet, la pensée se detruit elle-même [...] car [...] *sa nature est d'être incomprehensible et inexplicable*'.¹⁵⁴ Barbier d'Aucour's objection to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* finds a more sophisticated twentieth-

¹⁵² See also Rohault 1978: 133; Montaigne: i.56, 323c; and Johns (1998: 236-39) on the exemplary publishing history of Digby's *Two Treatises* (1644).

¹⁵³ Richelet 1728: 'quoi'; see also 'savoir'.

¹⁵⁴ Barbier d'Aucour 1776: 118; quoting Bouhours 1962: 140.

century formulation at the end of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): 'wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.'¹⁵⁵ In the second case, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* serves to postpone the explanation of a phenomenon. Barbier d'Aucour claims that, on the contrary, all observable phenomena have already been explained (1776: 123-24). He attempts polemically to consign the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to silence here by reducing the world to a set of *je-sais-bien-quoi*. Natural philosophers and scientists tend, however, to identify some phenomena as requiring future explanation. But the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, even then, risks cancelling explanations that it claims merely to postpone – or masquerading as a false explanation. In the third case, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* refers to nothing: it remains a mere *flatus vocis* without sense or reference. Barbier d'Aucour attacks in this way the coherence of the topic. It is worth remembering the basic distinction in linguistics between the *extension* of a word or topic (the number of things that it can accommodate) and its *comprehensiveness* (the number of elements included within the idea that it expresses). The greater the extension of a topic, the less comprehensive it is, and vice versa.¹⁵⁶ Barbier d'Aucour claims that Bouhours has extended the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to the point of zero comprehensiveness: 'comme un Regent en Je ne sçay quoy, il le conduit par tous les genres, les nombres, et les cas. Mais apres tout ce n'est là que de mettre des mots les uns aupres des autres' (1776: 119-20). The attempt here is to consign the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to silence, error, and non-being. For its opponents, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself is a scandal.

¹⁵⁵ Wittgenstein 1961: 150-51 (§.7).

¹⁵⁶ Grévisse 1980: §.384; see 4.iii.2 below.

3. Towards a critical history

The quarrel over the *je-ne-sais-quoi* raises problems inherent in the topic. The heated polemical context of the quarrel tends, however, to exaggerate the claims made by both sides. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* should certainly not be made to embrace all things in heaven and earth but neither should it be reduced out of existence. It falls somewhere in the middle. The strongest objections to Bouhours's treatment of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* relate to his complacent extension of the topic. Bouhours not only invites the charge of impiety by adding a divine realm to his topography; he also threatens the semantic coherence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, which generally describes movements of sympathy (or antipathy) between elements in the sublunary world alone. Barbier d'Aucour, in opposing Bouhours's complacent extension of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, offers an unsustainably reductive view of experience. The quarrel is heated but sterile. The strong pressure that it puts on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* may help to explain why, from the 1670s onwards, the term shows signs that its semantic current is weakening (see 4.iii below). The quarrel between Jesuits and Jansenists serves to identify conceptual problems inherent in the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its semantic field; it resolves none.

Bouhours's conversation is important for setting out questions of experience and explanation. He is no philosopher or artist of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He is rather the word's lexicographer-in-chief, who displays and promotes its new currency, and the topographer who maps the presence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in four different realms of experience. Bouhours serves as a preliminary guide to them all. Having examined its divine realm, and the lexical quarrel that this provokes, I shall now explore in turn the three sublunary regions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: nature, the passions, and the cultural world. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in each case, invites explanation even as it hinders it. It

raises the same critical questions: what is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and how can it be put into words?¹⁵⁷ The experience, I shall argue, constantly disrupts the lexicon designed to contain it.¹⁵⁸ In each case, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* provokes a *crisis* in the etymological sense of the word: an act of judgement about the nature of that experience. The next three chapters adopt, accordingly, a critical approach to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The term, as it rises to prominence, appears in these three regions of early modern experience as a lexical tracer of its ideal-typical meaning and the crisis that it provokes. A critical history judges between mere lexical occurrences and those significant occasions when some couples with lexeme. The aim is to describe why, in each area, a crisis arises; what explanations are offered to come to terms with it; and whether the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its various forms and operations, resolves or deepens the crisis. Special attention is paid to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] as it becomes current and then settles into the bedrock of language and thought. It is this process, as we have seen, that makes a word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* possible. But the same process causes the term finally to lose the semantic current that, for a while at least, runs through it. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, by acquiring a history, loses the vital force that characterizes its pre-history. It moves most freely along the shadow-line between experience and explanation before it becomes a modish name.

¹⁵⁷ See Introduction above, p. 24.

¹⁵⁸ See Marin 1986: 195 (for a similar view).

2. NATURE

i. Nature's hidden qualities

*O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.*

— SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*

1. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* flits ghostlike through the realm of nature. Bouhours's *beaux esprits* experience it while strolling along the sea-front in the first of their *Entretiens* ('La Mer'). The natural backcloth quickly becomes the topic of their conversation as Ariste invites Eugène to behold the 'admirable spectacle' of the sea. Ariste explains why:

cette immense étendue d'eaux; ce flux et ce reflux; le bruit, la couleur, les figures différentes de ces flots qui se poussent régulièrement les uns des autres, ont je ne sçay quoy de si surprenant et de si étrange, que je ne sçache rien qui en approche.¹

Ariste uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* here to describe the sea's rich strangeness. His *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] carries two adjectives in a syntactical ebb and flow that imitates the regular movement of the tides. The two friends discuss the different passions that such experiences provoke: aversion, curiosity, and wonder. Eugène's is initially a complex reaction: 'tout cela inspire je ne sçay quelle horreur accompagnée de plaisir' (1962: 7). Ariste suggests that curiosity is a more appropriate reaction:

¹ Bouhours 1962: 6.

peut-on voir ces flots retourner au terme d'où ils sont venus, répondit Ariste, sans songer à la cause d'un si admirable mouvement? Mais c'est en vain que j'y songe, ajouta-t-il, comme je ne suis point Philosophe, je n'y comprends rien.²

Behind Ariste's suggestion lies Aristotle's celebrated remark that philosophy begins in wonder.³ Forces move natural bodies (such as the sea) in ways that common experience cannot explain. The tides are one example among countless others. How should we make sense of this and other insensible forces? Philosophers are those who experience the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature and then seek its causes.

This chapter offers a critical history of this search in seventeenth-century vernacular natural philosophy. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* brings a persistent problem in the philosophy of nature to a moment of crisis. An exhaustive history of this crisis lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Much scholarly work has traced the place of insensible qualities, forms, and forces in early modern natural philosophy; I draw upon this work to contextualize my own analysis. I use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a lexical tracer of conflicting attempts to explain insensible forces in nature. Its use as a modish name in natural philosophical writing reveals an attempt to bring the discussion of such problems out of scholastic Latin and into the vernacular. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes a site of lexical conflict between conflicting explanations. It is a symptom of the crisis that besets both the form and content of traditional natural philosophy in the seventeenth century. Not only does the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* articulate the debate about insensible phenomena, but in turn, the debate offers access to the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself. The two are placed here in a chiasmus of interaction. The appearance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature invites explanations of its own nature. It produces in particular three judgements: the first places the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in material

² Bouhours 1962: 10-11.

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (a.2, 982b); Montaigne: iii.11, 1030c.

substance as its animating spirit; the second reduces such spirits to the status of a mind-forged illusion; the third ascribes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to an insensible force that is wholly contained neither in mind nor in matter. The first of these judgements is associated with the tradition that dominates the teaching of natural philosophy throughout the early modern period; the second, with the new mechanical philosophy that challenges this pedagogical tradition from outside; and the third, with a succeeding generation of natural philosophers. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears as a current term in its three semantic operations (see 1.i.3 above, pp. 51-52). These serve to articulate the same three judgements: that insensible force is a substantial nescioquiddity, an illusory nothing, or an irreducible *aliquid*.

My story is neither one of smooth transition from one judgement to the next, nor of sudden epistemic breaks, but rather of a crisis that develops without ever being fully resolved. Two tendencies persist through the development of this crisis. The first emphasizes the role of experience: the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, whether explicable or not, can be put to use and so known, at least, in practical terms. The second emphasizes the importance of explanation: the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, an experience that threatens to create a vacuum in knowledge, must be fully explained. Bacon and Descartes each embody one of these tendencies in the first half of the seventeenth century; Newton and Leibniz show that these same tendencies remain in conflict a century later. The appearance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature, I shall argue, frustrates judgements about its nature even as it invites explanatory talk of occult qualities, substantial forms, quintessences, atoms, corpuscles, and forces. The search for a wholly adequate explanation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in natural philosophy is the symptom of a crisis that can never be resolved.

2. Forms, qualities, quintessences

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in the context of the long-running conflict between traditionalists and innovators in natural philosophy over insensible forces. Natural philosophy (otherwise known as physics or *physiologia*) is broadly defined until the eighteenth century as the search for the causes of change in natural things. It is dominated by philosophers who give Christian interpretations of Aristotle in Latin from within universities (the ‘schools’). Aristotle remains so central to the philosophical tradition in this period that he is known simply as ‘the Philosopher’.⁴ Late scholastic philosophers develop and disseminate the work of Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, and other medieval thinkers. The self-appointed ‘new’ philosophers pose an increasing threat to this tradition from outside the schools. Their challenge to the scholastic tradition concerns the place of experience in natural philosophy, what counts as a sufficient explanation, and the ontological principles underlying change. Innovators accuse traditionalists of using technical terms to conceal their ignorance of insensible phenomena as an explanation; traditionalists attack new explanations for being insufficient and seek to clarify their own. Both judge what place, if any, insensible forces occupy in the order of being. The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears, in various guises, on both sides of this long-running conflict.

Natural philosophers of all persuasions daily encounter examples of insensible forces. Learned treatises and philosophical textbooks include these as standard topics. They appear too in the growing corpus of middlebrow literature in vernacular languages: Montaigne discusses paradigm cases in his *Essais*, debates are devoted to

⁴ Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992: 5.

them in the new institutions of learning, and they become the topic of polite conversational literature such as Bouhours's *Entretiens*. Some events have physical causes that do not fall in the realm of common sensory experience. We all observe that a piece of iron moves towards a nearby magnet, but experience can determine neither what is responsible for this attraction nor how it takes place. Other paradigm cases include the fall of heavy bodies, the vacuum, and the tides whose motion so puzzles Ariste and Eugène.⁵ Motions of attraction or repulsion do not just occur between inanimate substances. They are observed throughout nature: between inanimate substances and animate beings (the quintessences of drugs such as opium, specific remedies and poisons, and the weapon salve);⁶ between animals (the antipathy between wolves and lambs, the fascination exerted by cats, and the instinct for generation);⁷ between animals and humans (the bite of the tarantula, the remora fish, and human affinities with domestic animals);⁸ and between humans (the power of the imagination, love and hatred, sympathy and antipathy).⁹ Boyle and others describe these phenomena as *preternatural* because they somehow 'thwart' nature's ordinary course from within nature.¹⁰ Philosophers must either confess their ignorance or explain strange preternatural cases. These cases are legion. Montaigne, having offered examples, concludes with a rhetorical question: 'combien trouvons nous de proprieté oc[c]ultes et de quint'essences?' (ii.12, 526a). His interrogative syntax leaves room for preternatural cases to multiply infinitely.

⁵ Renaudot 1638-55: II, 323-29 (conf. 51 on magnetism); II, 220-27 (conf. 46 on the vacuum); I, 353-60 (conf. 19 on the tides).

⁶ Montaigne: ii.37, 781-82a (on quintessences); Renaudot 1638-55: II, 275-86 (conf. 49 on specific remedies); Bacon 1996: II, 645; Fludd 1631; Foster 1631 (on weapon salve).

⁷ Montaigne: ii.12, 590a (on animal antipathies), i.21, 105a (on cats); Cureau de la Chambre 1667 (on animal sympathy and antipathy).

⁸ Ross 1651: 140 (on the tarantula); Montaigne: ii.12, 468-69a (on the remora).

⁹ Montaigne: ii.12, 471a; Renaudot 1638-55: I, 588-98 (conf. 32); Scholar 2002a (on the power of the imagination); ch. 3 below.

¹⁰ Boyle 1996: 40; Daston and Park 1998: 121; I too use the word in this sense (which is to be rigorously distinguished from its later synonymy with 'supernatural').

Preternatural phenomena frustrate traditional explanations because their physical causes do not fall within common sensory experience. Aristotle defines the object of physics to be the knowledge of how, what, from what, and why things in nature must be as they self-evidently are. That knowledge starts in the true perceptions of the senses is an Aristotelian axiom.¹¹ A person lacking a sense can have no knowledge of the corresponding phenomena. Aristotle takes the example of a man blind from birth, arguing that were he to reason about colour, he would necessarily be using words without any corresponding thought.¹² Common experience – repeated sense perceptions held in the memory – serves as the basis for causal explanations.¹³ Aristotle establishes four causes: the *efficient* (the force or instrument by which something is produced); the *material* (the matter from which it is produced); the *formal* (its form or essence); and the *final* (the purpose for which it is produced).¹⁴ The Philosopher moves in both directions between sensory experience and causal explanation. He climbs by induction from repeated sense perceptions to the causes underlying change; he then descends, using syllogism and deduction, from the underlying causes to the sense perceptions from which he began.¹⁵ Montaigne alludes to this when he says: ‘toute cognoissance s’achemine en nous par les sens: [...] la science commence par eux et se resout en eux’ (ii.12, 587a). Nothing comes into the mind that did not start in the senses. Problems arise when effects are commonly experienced whose material and efficient causes remain insensible. Philosophers in possession of all their senses find themselves, like Aristotle’s blind man, deprived of the experience necessary to construct a full causal explanation of such phenomena.

¹¹ Maclean 2002: 117.

¹² Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* (i.18); *Physics* (ii.1, 193a). Aristotle’s blind man appears as a ‘conceptual figure’ in Montaigne (see 5.ii.1 below) and also in Locke (1975: 424-36 (iii.4)).

¹³ Harvey 1653: 4^r (Preface); Schmitt 1969: 105; Dear 2001: 5-7.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Physics* (ii.3, 194b); *Metaphysics* (a.3, 983b); Daston and Park 1998: 431.

¹⁵ Stanley 1655: 48; Maclean 2002: 114-28.

These join the lawless no man's land of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* within the territory of natural philosophy.

Natural philosophers, in an attempt to colonize this no man's land, produce a bewildering diversity of terms and concepts. They use terms like *occult quality*, *sympathy*, and *quintessence* interchangeably and each has a set of further synonyms. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in this semantic field. Its dense population indicates the widely recognized importance of the problem and the diversity of available explanations. A further complication is that all these terms can name either the event requiring explanation (the *explicandum*) or an element of the explanation itself (the *explicans*). So it is possible to explain the occult quality of the magnet by its sympathy for iron or vice versa. The task in each occurrence must be to recover the conceptual bedrock underlying the explanation. Traditional philosophers tend to explain insensible forces by ascribing their effects to some kind of spiritual principle. They locate this principle in one of three realms: the universal, the supernatural, or the natural. I offer below brief descriptions of each explanation, the tradition with which it is associated, and its lexicon. Traditional explanations, as we shall see, make the *je-ne-sais-quoi* a spiritual principle within matter.

(I) Those who invoke a universal cause see the universe as a vital unity whose parts are linked by sympathies and antipathies. This theory is variously associated with Plato, the Neoplatonist tradition, and natural magicians such as Paracelsus.¹⁶ Universal sympathy can describe relations within this world or relations between it and the heavens. It considers that all such relations exist, not between discrete entities, but between parts of one living organism. For that reason, as Bacon observes,

¹⁶ Starobinski 1998: 29-30; Dear 2001: 24-26; 2.i.3 below.

universal vitalists avoid having to talk of action at distance.¹⁷ But they tend to assume that all life forms (plants and stones as well as humans) have the same capacities to feel sympathy. Sympathy is seen as an immaterial spirit that vitalizes all parts of the universe: ‘par cet esprit [universel] on entend parler d’une chose qui donne la vie, le branle, et le mouvement à tout’.¹⁸ Universal vitalists posit one immaterial life-force.

(II) Those who invoke supernatural causes posit their distant influence upon sublunary entities. This theory is variously associated with the Aristotelian, Christian, and astrological traditions. It presupposes action at distance, then, but is better able to account for different forms of life than universal vitalist explanations. Aristotelians distinguish between the four elements (fire, water, air, and earth) that make up the corruptible substances of the sublunary world, and a ‘fifth substance’, or *quintessence*. Quintessence, which alone composes the incorruptible heavens, is latent in all things.¹⁹ Particles of the divine are found deep within plants and minerals; alchemy seeks to extract them and medicine to prescribe them as remedies.²⁰ The Jesuit Étienne Binet ascribes the magnet’s power of attraction at distance to even more remote heavenly influence in his *Essay des merveilles de nature* (1621). Binet consciously popularizes traditional philosophical ideas about precious stones and other marvels in a manner designed to improve the eloquence of vernacular orators. He describes his own text, indeed, as a precious stone in itself.²¹ Binet applies his eloquence to magnetic attraction, explaining: ‘le fer (matiere si rebelle, et hardie) plie le gantelet, et se laisse emporter, à un je ne sçay quoy espars par le vuide de l’air, et s’en va

¹⁷ Bacon 1996: II, 640 (*Sylvara Sylvarum*, §.900).

¹⁸ Renaudot 1638-55: I, 114 (conf. 6); Camus 1612: IX, 128-29; 3.i.2 below, p. 156.

¹⁹ Renaudot 1638-55: II, 480-81 (conf. 60); Rochon 1672: 156; Bouhours 1962: 143.

²⁰ Montaigne, i.37, 781-82a; Furetière 1690: ‘quinte-essence’.

²¹ Binet 1987: 54; Genette 1976.

espouser l'Aimant.'²² The source of Binet's *je-ne-sais-quoi* may be the sixteenth-century poet Rémy Belleau, whose poem on the magnet uses the pronominal form in the same context.²³ Binet's chosen term, the rare new *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], matches its precious object.

Christian and astrological forms of thought are clearly present in supernatural explanations. *God* may refer to an intelligent universal spirit, or to nature itself, or (as is often the case) to a remote supernatural force acting in earthly substances.²⁴ We have seen the scandal that Bouhours's use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* provokes in the context of supernatural grace (in 1.iii.2 above). One of his colleagues, Michel Boutauld, imitates Bouhours in his conversational work, *Le Théologien dans les conversations avec les sages et les grands du monde* (1683). Boutauld's theologian explains to his polite interlocutors how a transcendent quintessence in earthly substances causes them to move in mysterious ways. He chooses the controversial example of animal souls to define this quintessence:

il me semble, ajouta-t-il, que nous ne pouvons le mieux définir que par le mot qui est aujourd'huy fort ordinaire en de semblables occasions, en disant que c'est un *je ne sçay quoy*, une je ne sçay quelle lumière naturelle, ou quelle particule de sagesse et de raison qui est enfermée dans une ame materielle et brutale.²⁵

A God-given spark of 'natural light' illuminates an animal's inner dark core.²⁶ Boutauld stresses the currency of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in this natural theological context: the word, he asserts, 'ordinarily' names the presence of God as a spiritual principle in earthly substances. This, as we have seen (1.iii.2 above), is a polemical

²² Binet 1987: 228 (ch. 21).

²³ Schmidt 1953: 583 ('La Pierre d'aymant').

²⁴ Renaudot 1638-55: 1, 114 (conf. 6); Boutauld 1683: 9; Maclean 2002: 238-39.

²⁵ Boutauld 1683: 6, 23-24; 2.iii.2 below (on the animal soul).

²⁶ Maclean 2002: 199-200 (on *lumen naturae*).

exaggeration designed to support Bouhours in his defence of the word's theological use against the Jansenists.

Most philosophers restrict the devil's room for manoeuvre by denying him the use of supernatural causes.²⁷ Astrological explanations are strongly associated with the neoplatonist tradition and natural magic. They ascribe particular insensible effects to the influence of the moon or stars.²⁸ Physical astrology explains particular terrestrial events by lunar or astral influence; judicial astrology claims on the same basis to predict future events. Those who practise the latter are widely condemned for their impostures.²⁹ Physical astrology, however, provides a traditionalist like Alexander Ross with an explanation of epidemics: 'the aire is infected with the impression of malignant and occult qualities from the influence of the starres.'³⁰ French writers use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] to name the stars' imperceptible influence on human destiny. Ronsard, in his 'Préface sur *La Franciade* touchant le poëme héroïque' (1572), is one: 'tout homme dès le naistre reçoit en l'âme je ne sçay quelles fatales impressions, qui le contraignent suivre plustost son Destin que sa volonté.'³¹ The adjective emphasizes here that this influence is *disastrous* in both conventional senses of the word, that is, born of a remote star and ruinous in its effects. Bouhours and Richelet also make a lexical connection between the astral influence and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] (see 1.ii.2 above, p. 69). Supernatural causes, like their occasionalist counterparts in mechanical philosophy, tend to be too general and remote to provide sufficient explanations of particular phenomena.

²⁷ Clark 1997: 233; Daston and Park 1998: 128.

²⁸ Renaudot 1638-55: VI, 248-57 (conf. 239); Ceriziers 1651: I, 149-50; Blum 1992: 51-52.

²⁹ Montaigne: i.32; Ferrand 1623: 120-24; Garin 1990: 1-2.

³⁰ Ross 1651: 131; Henry 1997: 28 (on William Harvey's astrological ideas about blood).

³¹ Ronsard 1914: XVI, 333; quoted in Köhler 1953: 25.

(III) Those who invoke natural causes explain insensible effects by ascribing them to nature's hidden qualities. Traditional explanations of this kind – perhaps the most widespread in the period – combine Aristotelian and neoplatonist elements. Scholastic philosophers, doctors, and natural magicians are all associated with their use (see 2.i.3 below). Of 'the vulgarly received notion of nature', Robert Boyle says, 'the schools have been the chief propagators' (1996: 31). Schools philosophers deny that the material world is a mere bundle of accidents and seek a substantial principle underlying movement and change. They place this in nature in an attempt to reduce the role of universal and supernatural causes.³² *Nature* can mean either a general principle in the material world or the particular form of an individual.³³ The former is the subject of numerous scholastic axioms such as *natura nihil facit* [or *agit*] *frustra* ('nature does nothing in vain') and *natura vacuum abhorret* ('nature abhors a vacuum').³⁴ These axioms describe an autonomous being possessed of qualities, intentions, and even (in respect of the vacuum) inclinations. That nature does nothing in vain means that scholastics can attribute to it the final cause of any phenomenon.³⁵ General nature is the secret agent that plans and performs all operations in the material world.

The particular nature of an individual substance is the internal principle of its motions. Late scholastics remain committed to their version of Aristotle's trio of hylomorphic principles.³⁶ An individual substance comes into being, they explain, when 'prime matter' (*materia prima* in scholastic Latin) receives 'substantial form' (*forma substantialis*); 'privation', the third principle, is the go-between that motivates

³² Hutchison 1991: 247; Daston and Park 1998: 129.

³³ Du Roure 1654: 4-5 (§.10); Boyle 1996: 22-23, 36-37; Maclean 2002: 236-48.

³⁴ Boyle 1996: 31 (listing ten axioms); Montaigne: iii.1, 790*b*.

³⁵ CHSP: 529.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Physics* (i.7, 190*b*); CHSP: 429-31 (on the medieval tradition); Des Chene 1996: 53-80 (on late scholastic theories in Jesuit writers).

matter to desire form. Individual beings emerge, in this manner, from the primal soup. Each individual thereafter retains its substantial form as a metaphysical substratum whose sole purpose is to support the individual's qualities.³⁷ The function of these qualities, or 'accidental' forms, is to cause the individual substance to suffer and perform its characteristic physical effects.³⁸ Scholastics describe those qualities (heat, coldness, moisture, and dryness) that fall under the senses as *manifest*, and those that do not, as *occult*. Occult qualities vex a philosophy that takes common sensory experience as the basis for causal explanation. Piccolomini offers examples of occult qualities, but no explanation for them, in his standard scholastic reference book *De rerum definitionibus* (1600): 'similiter numerant qualitates, quas occultas virtutes appellant, per quas ambra paleas, lapis Herculeus ferrum trahit' (1600: 346). A late scholastic, Chauvin, offers a fuller definition in his *Lexicus philosophicus* (1692):

qualitas occulta est potentia abscondita vel latens, qua res naturales aliquid agunt, vel patiuntur, cujus vero ratio a priori reddi nequit, utpote a forma substantiale immediate emanans. Vel dicitur: potentia sensibus haud exposita, quaeque effectibus tantum deprehenditur, ideoque proprio nomine designari nequit.³⁹

The magnet feels cold to the touch because it has the quality of coldness; it falls to earth because it possesses heaviness. Why then does it attract iron? Adherents such as Chauvin are left with a critical choice between experience and explanation. Those who attempt an explanation must name a cause that cannot be deduced from experience: the attractive quality, they say, must emanate immediately from the substantial form. Those who choose to emphasize experience ultimately concede that they can find no adequate term or concept to explain preternatural phenomena. Chauvin offers both choices (in that order); his *vel dicitur* marks a critical hesitation

³⁷ See Le Gallois 1674: I, 20-101 (on substantial form).

³⁸ Ross 1645a: 59; CHSP: 516-18.

³⁹ Quoted in Gilson 1979: 335; see Hutchison 1982, 1991; Blum 1992 (on the ancient and medieval background).

between them. One speaker to a debate about the tides' motion in the Bureau d'Adresse, however, is in no doubt:

Comme il seroit donc inutile de demander [quelle] est la cause du mouvement d'un cheval, veu que les plus ignorans reconnoissent qu'il vient de son ame, qui est sa forme: ainsi y a-il plus d'apparence d'attribuer ce mouvement à sa forme qu'à aucune autre chose [...] c'est une forme intelligente et assistante de la mer, et qui luy a esté donnée de Dieu dès le commencement, pour la mouvoir.⁴⁰

This speaker explains the sea's motion by lending it an intelligent spirit, substantial form, or (as he says) a soul.⁴¹ A soul or spirit is the principle whereby a particular thing or event acquires a discrete identity: to distribute souls, then, is to divide the world into a series of discrete entities (whatever they may be). Explanations that involve souls privilege, in Aristotelian terms, formal and final causes over efficient and material ones. Scholastic natural philosophers, like their anonymous representative at the Bureau d'Adresse, tend to choose explanation over experience. They transform insensible forces into nature's hidden qualities.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its various lexical forms, serves to name the particular nature of a substance all the way from its imperceptible physical qualities to its underlying spiritual principle. Its very grammar enacts this movement from the margins to the core. The Académie Française notes that opium, a drug whose dormitive virtue is famous, has damaging side-effects: 'il y a je ne sçay quoy de malin en cette-plante-là, [...] elle a une vertu, une qualité maligne.'⁴² I noted earlier that the pronominal form *je ne sais quoi de* [plus adj.] adds a supplement of inexplicability, at times marginal and at others central, to its adjective (see 1.i.3 above, pp. 53-54). The pronoun's operation is as marginal here as the philosophical status of occult qualities.

⁴⁰ Renaudot 1638-55: I, 359-60 (conf. 19). An error in the pagination means that the first page is marked '459'.

⁴¹ Des Chene 1996: 75; Roux 1996: 64-66.

⁴² Académie Française 1694: 'malin'; we return to the so-called 'dormitive virtue' of opium in 2.ii.2 below, pp. 128-29.

But writers draw occult qualities towards the centre when they place them in substances. François de Belleforest describes the prodigious natural history of basil in these terms: ‘les anciens [...] ont trouvé je ne sçay quoy de prodigieux en la plante que nous appelons vulgairement Basilic.’⁴³ Richelet uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] when glossing *pointe*: ‘ce mot se dit du vin et veut dire qu’il y a un je ne sai quoi dans le vin, qui plait et qui chatouille.’⁴⁴ The noun serves to attribute the occult qualities of wine to its spiritual substance. Writers like Richelet use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to explain the meaning of technical terms in philosophy to polite middlebrow readers – the *honnêtes gens* – in a language that they can understand. Bouhours does likewise but inverts the relation between explicandum and explicans. He makes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* the substantial form that supports the magnet’s virtue, the tides’ ebb and flow, and all the occult qualities of philosophers.⁴⁵ Substantial form is a metaphysical substratum about which one can say only two things, namely, what physical qualities it supports and the brute fact of its existence.⁴⁶ These are the two defining elements of Bouhours’s *je-ne-sais-quoi*: ‘il est bien plus aisé de le sentir que de le connoistre’; ‘[c’est] une chose, qui ne subsiste que parce qu’on ne peut dire ce que c’est’.⁴⁷ The tone of Bouhours’s conversation is, as we shall see (2.iii.2 below, pp. 142-43), one of Augustinian wonder. But the scholastic tradition provides his polite conversations with what might be called their philosophical substratum, or to pursue a geological metaphor, their bedrock. In this bedrock Bouhours allows the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to settle. His use of the word follows scholastic explanations in their progression from nature’s hidden physical qualities to its inner spiritual core. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, for him, is the God-given substantial form or soul of nature.

⁴³ Belleforest 1597: 94, 54; Céard 1977: 317-36.

⁴⁴ Richelet 1681: ‘pointe’; Corneille 1695: ‘saveur’.

⁴⁵ Bouhours 1962: 147; see 1.ii.2 above, pp. 72-73.

⁴⁶ Des Chene 1996: 75.

⁴⁷ Bouhours 1962: 140, 150.

3. Science and the practical arts

Philosophers seek causal knowledge of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* while doctors and magicians put it to practical use.⁴⁸ What then is the relation between the science of the former and the practical arts of the latter? Seventeenth-century critics of occult qualities and substantial forms commonly associate their use with philosophers, doctors, and natural magicians alike. The Cartesian Jacques du Roure, to give one typical example, tars them all with the same brush: ‘presque tous les Chimistes parlent d’un Archée inconnu [...] Tous les Medecins ensemble et les Philosophes recourent à certaines Proprietez Specifiques, pour rendre raison des effets dont ils ignorent la cause.’⁴⁹ Traditional scientists and practitioners all conceal their ignorance beneath the same obscure notions. This implication is that new philosophers initiate rational science by dispelling the obscurities of magic and theology.⁵⁰

This version of events long conditioned the historiography of the period known as the ‘Scientific Revolution’. Michel Foucault, for example, states in his early historical studies that the period between Montaigne and Descartes witnesses ‘une rupture essentielle dans le monde occidental’.⁵¹ Foucault, who introduces Bacon and Descartes at this point, gives their polemical claim to have radically broken with traditional knowledge the character of a historical event.⁵² Historians now argue that this view obscures the forces for innovation within medicine and natural magic as well as within the Aristotelian tradition. Innovative sixteenth-century figures have

⁴⁸ Natural magicians, like well-meaning doctors, put occult qualities to legitimate use; demonic magicians exploit them on behalf of the devil (Clark 1997: 233).

⁴⁹ Du Roure 1654: 57-58 (§.73); see also Pascal: Laf. 44-45; Sell. 78; Boyle 1979: 120-23; Leibniz 1990: 52.

⁵⁰ Dear 2001: 28-29.

⁵¹ Foucault 1966: 64; Foucault 1972: 58.

⁵² Descartes 1964: VI, 4-5 (*Discours de la méthode*, i); Merlin and Ribard 1998.

been revived: they include Girolamo Fracastoro, who reinterprets spiritual sympathies as quasi-atomistic material seeds bearing contagion; Paracelsus, who recasts astral, alchemical, and scholastic concepts in an iatrochemical doctrine of universal correspondences;⁵³ Girolamo Cardano, who classifies phenomena at the very limits of human perception and understanding as forms of ‘subtlety’; and their seventeenth-century successor Daniel Sennert, who attempts to place occult qualities at the centre of a reformed Aristotelian physics by subjecting them to a taxonomy.⁵⁴ Reviving such figures helps to counter the exaggerated claims of the new philosophers and their subsequent advocates.⁵⁵ Some historians argue that the role of medical and magical practices in the making of modern science needs to be reassessed; others seek to demonstrate the continuing vitality of seventeenth-century Aristotelian philosophies.⁵⁶ Traditional philosophers, doctors, and natural magicians all have their advocates in the historiographical debate.

A detailed contribution to this debate is not my present purpose. It tends to privilege the ideas of the learned few whereas my chosen term appears in middlebrow vernacular texts.⁵⁷ My readings in this corpus of texts corroborate the view that traditional philosophers, doctors, and magicians all share certain presuppositions. Medicine and magic are strongly affiliated, in institutional and epistemological terms, to the natural philosophy of the schools.⁵⁸ Doctors and magicians draw directly on scholastic principles (hylomorphic metaphysics, substantial form, elements, qualities, and so on) when accounting for their practice.⁵⁹ One traditional writer on medicine,

⁵³ Nutton 1990 (on Fracastoro); Dear 2001: 49-52; Webster 1982 (on Paracelsus).

⁵⁴ Céard 1977: 338-50; Maclean 1983, 1984 (on Cardano); Hutchison 1982 (on Sennert).

⁵⁵ Dear 2001: 28-29.

⁵⁶ Henry 1997: 46-55; Clark 1997 (on forms of magic); Maclean 2002: 333-39 (on medicine); Mercer 1993 (on Aristotelianisms).

⁵⁷ Céard (1977) and Eamon (1994) also chiefly examine middlebrow vernacular texts.

⁵⁸ Clark 1997: 228-32; Maclean 2002: 80-82.

⁵⁹ CHSP: 456; Maclean 2002: 236-38.

Alexander Ross, observes that patients urinate blood after the Spanish fly (*cantharis*) has been applied to their extremities. He explains that the fly's manifest qualities would work only on the parts that it touched; 'therefore this action [of the bladder] must be performed by an occult quality, or the specifical forme of the Fly' (1651: 129). Ross is one of the many doctors and natural magicians who use scholastic principles to explain their use of insensible phenomena.⁶⁰ The scholastic framework acts as no all-constraining Foucauldian *épistémè*: some practitioners and thinkers are able to criticize certain of its principles or adjust them to suit their practice.⁶¹ But a doctor like Ross is often tempted, if only for practical reasons, to conclude that 'the safest way is to acknowledge an occult quality' (1651: 206). The continuing apparent stability of the scholastic tradition makes the temptation all too difficult to resist. Traditional doctors and natural magicians, in this respect, share the fortunes of the schools philosophers whose hidden qualities they acknowledge and upon whose bedrock of explanation they rely.

⁶⁰ Ross 1651: 206; Bono 1995: 124; CHRP: 264-300; Millen 1985.

⁶¹ Maclean 1998a.

ii. Philosophy in crisis

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

— SHAKESPEARE, *Hamlet*

1. A place for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

Vernacular writers create a place for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the borderland between philosophy and literature. The study of nature experienced a prolonged crisis in the early modern period as the schools tradition suffered a slow decline and multiple alternatives attempted to supplant it.⁶² The chief legacy of Montaigne and his contemporaries to early seventeenth-century philosophy was perhaps their very desire to see out the old and bring in the new. Natural philosophers from all over Europe – Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes the best known among them – all define their (very different) work by its novelty.⁶³ All were united in their opposition to schools philosophy. Preternatural phenomena provide the key weapon for their attack on the content of scholastic knowledge; to this I shall turn in the next section (2.ii.2). I want for now to analyse the changes that the innovators as a whole brought, not to the content of philosophy, but to its form. For they succeeded, over the course of the seventeenth century, in creating new places – social, linguistic, and literary – in which philosophy can be practised. It is in these that the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears.

⁶² Copenhaver and Schmitt 1992: 62-76.

⁶³ CHSP: 35-74.

Innovators in the seventeenth century created new physical places in which to practise philosophy. Their aim was to displace the discipline from its institutional setting, the schools, in which relatively few of them held posts.⁶⁴ Royal courts, libraries, private homes, and botanical gardens all provided homes for new philosophical institutions.⁶⁵ Two of these institutions, whose development in the first half of the seventeenth century has been well charted, are the academic society and the salon.⁶⁶ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in the written records of both. The academic society and the salon both sought to undermine the schools tradition by attracting members of both sexes from the intellectual and social elite; both promoted the elaboration and discussion of ideas by mixing the *science du monde* with the *science du cabinet*, and pleasure, with profit. Salon culture, which was organized by women, tended to favour the social elite, the discussion of ideas, the *science du monde*, and the pleasure principle; academic societies, dominated by men, privileged the other half of each couple. The difference between them, however, was merely one of degree. Madame de Rambouillet, at one end of the spectrum, established her salon as the fashionable place for literary figures to mingle with the *honnêtes gens* (especially women); the Cabinet Du Puy, at the other end, brought a select group of male scholars together in the more learned setting of a library. Many academic societies and salons fell between these two extremes. Théophraste Renaudot presents his Bureau d'Adresse as a forum for individuals to exchange items of all kinds, and above all, learning and ideas. Two *conférences* ('debates') were held each week in the Bureau d'Adresse from August 1633 until September 1642.⁶⁷ The printed proceedings of these debates, which consist of a simple enumeration of anonymous opinions, provide

⁶⁴ CHSP: 13-14; Ribard 2000: 11-13.

⁶⁵ Dear 2001: 101-30.

⁶⁶ Viala 1985: 15-51, 132-37; Harth 1992: 15-64.

⁶⁷ Solomon 1972: 60-100; Mazauric 1994.

rich information both about the spectrum of explanations available as well as the form in which they are articulated. The Cartesian physicist Jacques Rohault, a friend of Molière, delivered weekly lectures in his own house during the 1650s and 1660s; the audience is said to have included people of all ages and professions, and in particular, society ladies.⁶⁸ Rohault was also a member of the Bourdelot Academy, which met to discuss the natural sciences during the second half of the century. Its historian Le Gallois declares proudly of the academy that ‘on n’y épouse aucun parti’ and that ‘tout le monde est bien venu dans l’Académie’.⁶⁹ Renaudot, Rohault, Bourdelot, and others brought philosophy to a wider and more mixed audience than it ever enjoyed as a university discipline. They and other innovators claimed at such moments to have established not just a new place for philosophy but, also, one that was common to all.

The idea that academies and salons were all-inclusive is a utopian exaggeration. Evidence suggests that salons were socially heterogeneous only in that they mixed the old and new nobility with the newly powerful professional classes. These were groups united by their possession of wealth, which gave them a community of interest, and by their need to cultivate signs of quality if they were to be recognized as part of the elite.⁷⁰ Academies and salons were the place, then, in which two interests coincided: those of the polite elite, which could there acquire the culture that it needed in order to maintain its distinctive quality; and those of new philosophers, who sought the favour and protection of that elite. Erica Harth, in her study of Cartesian women, warns against the temptation to celebrate salon culture as a liberation for women since they remained second-class citizens in the largely male

⁶⁸ Rohault 1978: 42-48; Gouhier 1978: 71.

⁶⁹ Le Gallois 1675: 38-49, 62, 74.

⁷⁰ Moriarty 1988: 41-52 (quoting Lougee 1976); I return to this issue in ch. 4 below.

seventeenth-century republic of letters.⁷¹ One might add that salon culture itself excluded many more women than it ever included since its criterion of selection reflected the interests of a dominant class more strongly than those of an oppressed gender. The social configuration of academies and salons tended particularly to marginalize two groups: professional teachers (all male) and labourers (of both sexes).⁷² New philosophers regularly distinguish themselves from their counterparts in the schools by ascribing to them the vices of arrogance, lack of taste, and ignorance: in a word, ‘pedantry’. They commonly insult the first marginalized group (‘pedants’), as we shall see, by comparing them to the second (‘peasants’). This gibe suggests that both groups suffered a common exclusion from the new institutions of learning and conversation. Seventeenth-century new philosophy deliberately seeks to include itself within the polite world of its intended readers. The concept of a ‘republic of letters’ tends to obscure the social codes that its members were required to manipulate.⁷³ These codes become increasingly visible in the new institutions of learning as these grow in popularity and influence. Renaudot’s academy, although initially open to all, seems to have become increasingly elitist over time in its membership; the Académie Bourdelot admits ‘pedants’ but only to treat them as objects of ridicule; English experimental philosophers, Steven Shapin has argued, also shared the codes and prejudices of polite culture.⁷⁴ The claim should not be overstated. Shapin’s tendency to place polite culture at the ‘origins’ of experimental philosophy, for example, confuses a social history of persuasion with one of truth. The weaker claim carries

⁷¹ Harth 1992: 24, 55.

⁷² Moriarty 1988: 24-38, 96-100.

⁷³ I cannot agree for this reason with the utopian distinction drawn by two historians of the republic of letters: ‘les savants ne jouirent guère de la considération des mondains [...] De toute autre nature fut la critique qui s’éleva de la République des Lettres [...] Elle se fondait sur des critères non plus d’ordre social, mais propres au monde de l’esprit’ (Bots and Waquet 1997: 114).

⁷⁴ Renaudot 1638-55: I, fol. A3^r (‘Avis au lecteur’); Mazauric 1994; Le Gallois 1675: 74-75; Shapin 1994.

greater force here. Innovators exploited the polite codes of the elite to establish a new physical place for philosophy beyond the institutional setting of the schools.

Innovators created new textual places for philosophy as well as physical ones. This is an important development since the circulation of books among the literate makes them immediately less exclusive than the restricted social space of a salon or society. New philosophical publications use their external and internal features to attract a new wider readership beyond the schools.⁷⁵ Publishers primarily associated with literary texts printed their books and they did so in pocket-book formats or journals rather than in the larger format of university textbooks. New philosophical texts also differ in their internal features: they tend to use vernacular languages more often than Latin and are written not as systematic treatises or *quaestiones* but in literary genres that mix profit with pleasure. New philosophical writing requires both a social history, then, and a poetics. It uses a variety of genres – including letters, maxims, *conférences*, dialogues, *entretiens*, vernacular treatises, and essays – in what might be called a poetics of polite conversation.⁷⁶ Renaudot places the Bureau d'Adresse debates under the sign of *honnêteté*, claiming: 'tous y rencontrent un divertissement honneste' (1638-55: I, 4). Le Gallois characterizes the ideal conversations of the Académie Bourdelot in more explicit terms: 'j'entends la conversation avec des hommes doctes et polis, qui ne sçavent pas moins la science du monde que celle du cabinet' (1675: 6-7). Philosophical dialogue and polite conversations offer literary pleasure as well as profitable intellectual exercise and can serve where necessary to postpone controversial questions.⁷⁷ They allow new philosophers to show their allegiance to polite culture by employing its modes of

⁷⁵ Ribard 2000: 13-24.

⁷⁶ I offer a generic distinction between philosophical dialogues and polite conversations in 4.i.2 below, p. 216.

⁷⁷ Le Gallois 1675: 5-6; Rohault 1978: 107; Beugnot 1994: 159; Cox 1992: 7.

pleasure in their written works. The dialogue generally places a new philosopher in conversation with an inquisitive but unlearned member (male or female) of polite society.⁷⁸ A third figure, that of the traditionalist, appears as a foil to the innovator in some contributions to the genre (notably those of Galileo and Descartes).⁷⁹ The new philosopher, equally at home in the salon and the library, invariably plays the role of go-between for his polite interlocutor. Descartes makes the point succinctly: ‘un honnête homme n’est pas plus obligé de savoir le grec ou le latin que le suisse ou le bas-breton.’⁸⁰ There is no need since the new philosopher is at hand to translate learned terms from scholastic Latin into a polite vernacular.⁸¹ The new philosopher in this way shows the *honnêtes gens* that he speaks their language; they repay the compliment by supporting the line of argument that his polite translation puts forward. Each group sees its pre-eminence confirmed by the other. Fontenelle gives a definitive statement of this double purpose in his *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686): ‘j’ai voulu traiter la philosophie d’une manière qui ne fût point philosophique; j’ai tâché de l’amener à un point où elle ne fût ni trop sèche pour les gens du monde, ni trop badine pour les savants’ (1998: 50). Writing at the end of the century, Fontenelle continues to insist that he is changing the traditional genre of philosophical writing. Innovators constantly renew their alliance with polite culture against their vulgar and pedantic opponents.

Montaigne is frequently invoked as their precursor in forging this alliance. Some innovators cite the chapter ‘De l’art de conférer’ (iii.8) in which Montaigne advocates the art of conversation between friends as an alternative to scholastic disputation. Montaigne, with aristocratic disdain, there strips schools philosophers of

⁷⁸ Rohault 1978; Fontenelle 1998.

⁷⁹ Galilei 1953; Descartes 1997.

⁸⁰ Descartes 1997: 11, 19.

⁸¹ Pascal’s *Lettres provinciales* (1987) is a further key example of this strategy.

their institutional trappings, their recourse to the authority of Aristotle, and their use of scholastic Latin in order to unmask their learning as ignorance:

j'aymeroy mieux que mon fils apprint aux tavernes à parler, qu'aux escholes de la parlerie. Ayez un maistre és arts, conferez avec luy [...] Qu'il oste son chapperon, sa robe et son latin; qu'il ne batte pas nos oreilles d'Aristote tout pur et tout cru, vous le prendrez pour l'un d'entre nous, ou pis.⁸²

Free conversation rather than institutional disputation sharpens the mind: 'le plus fructueux et naturel exercice de notre esprit, c'est à mon gré la conférence' (iii.8, 922*b*). Montaigne's decision to displace philosophy from its traditional setting, by writing in the vernacular and a conversational genre, reflects this conviction. Renaudot is said to have acted on the proposal made by Montaigne, in the chapter 'D'un défaut de nos polices' (i.35), when he founded the Bureau d'Adresse.⁸³ Renaudot, echoing Montaigne, says that 'la conference des esprits' is 'la plus excellente communication, voire la plus necessaire qui soit au monde'; Le Gallois says that 'rien au monde n'est capable d'instruire et de bien former l'esprit, comme la conference'; Grenaille describes Montaigne as the 'grand ennemi du Pedantisme'; and Pascal refers to 'l'incomparable auteur de *L'Art de conférer*'.⁸⁴ Other innovators imitate his essay form: Boyle, like Bacon, Descartes, and Leibniz, adopts 'that form of writing, which (in imitation of the French) we call essays'.⁸⁵ Seventeenth-century innovators, in their attempt to move philosophy from the dust-ridden schools into the salons of polite society, claim the *Essais* as their generic precursor.

These innovations proved so successful that they forced traditionalists to adopt them in turn. Alexander Ross, Antoine Rochon, and Jean-Baptiste de la Grange all

⁸² Montaigne: iii.8, 927*b*; see also i.25; i.26, 159*c*-161*c*.

⁸³ Solomon 1972: 38-39.

⁸⁴ Renaudot 1638-55: I, 1 (Preface); Le Gallois 1675: 6-7; Grenaille 1642: 9; Pascal 1964: III, 423 (*De l'Esprit géométrique*, pt. 2). I complement these references in 4.ii.3 below, pp. 241-42.

⁸⁵ Boyle 1965: 303; on the genre, see De Obaldia 1995.

published defences of traditional philosophy in the second half of the century.⁸⁶ Ross, a Protestant, resists attempts by English Catholics such as Kenelm Digby to reform natural philosophy; Rochon (a Jesuit) and La Grange (a member of the Oratory) defend Catholic theology and schools philosophy against the likes of Gassendi, Descartes, and Rohault. All three choose to write in the vernacular, adopt innovative literary genres, and have their texts printed in neat pocket-size formats. La Grange's title, *Les Principes de la Philosophie, contre les nouveaux Philosophes* (1675), recalls one of Descartes's most celebrated texts; Ross uses a poetics of conversation; and Rochon frames his entire text as the *Lettre d'un philosophe à un Cartésien de ses amis* (1672).⁸⁷ La Grange describes how he started to compose his defence of traditional philosophy in Latin before changing his mind :

la plupart des Livres de nos nouveaux Philosophes sont François [...] Je ne sçay comment il est arrivé que maintenant les plus sçavants mesme ayment mieux les Livres François que les Latins; il semble qu'on neglige le Latin, parce qu'il est trop vieux, et que cette Langue doit courir la mesme fortune que la Philosophie ordinaire, dont l'antiquité paroist desagreable.⁸⁸

La Grange, like his opponents, connects the waning fortunes of Latin with those of the schools. Traditionalists have allowed twenty years to pass without answering Descartes's criticisms of their substantial forms (1675: 41). La Grange and his colleagues must adopt their opponents' formal innovations if their rearguard action is to be effective.⁸⁹ They transform the vices of which they are accused into virtues, and the virtues that the innovators claim to possess, into vices. The longevity of the schools tradition, they argue, proves its superiority to new-fangled alternatives.⁹⁰ Traditionalists attack their opponents' image as go-betweens. La Grange dismisses

⁸⁶ Ross 1645a, 1645b, 1651; Rochon 1672; La Grange 1675.

⁸⁷ Ross 1645a; Rochon 1672.

⁸⁸ La Grange 1675: 44.

⁸⁹ The vernacular expositions of traditional learning that I quote in this chapter, by La Grange and others, are a reply to new philosophical attacks. This explains why the former postdate the latter.

⁹⁰ La Grange 1675: Av^v-Avi^r (Preface); Ross 1651: A3^{r-v} (Preface).

Digby's position in the learned world: 'il raisonne en Chevalier, et non pas en Philosophe'.⁹¹ Rochon contests the new philosophers' position in polite circles. Their treatment of tradition, he argues, shows that they are anything but *honnêtes hommes* (1672: 129-30). The new mechanical philosophy of Descartes is fit only for mechanics; polite society should look instead to Aristotle.⁹² Jesuits like Bouhours, Rapin, and Boutauld incorporate the formal innovations that Ross, Rochon, and La Grange simply turn against their opponents. They distance themselves from the schools and cultivate the image of *beaux esprits* as the ideal mixture of learning and polite wit (see 1.iii.1 above). The publishing strategy of Bouhours's *Entretiens* is designed to promote this mixed profile: the text appears both in a prestigious quarto printing and pocket-book format during the same year.⁹³ Bouhours uses the conversation form, and the act of translation that it implies, to revive rather than eliminate the old explanations (see 2.iii.2 below, pp. 142-43). The form in which he and others defend traditional philosophy is a measure of their attempt to change with the times and of the innovators' success in transforming the language and poetics of philosophy.

It is in the new literary places of French philosophical writing that the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as a modish name, appears. Their English counterparts use its cognates in exactly the same context. Seventeenth-century philosophers in England and France maintain relations so close that many historians simply treat them as belonging to a common movement. My reading suggests that a full analysis of Anglo-French relations in this field – which is beyond the scope of this study – would yield a

⁹¹ La Grange 1675: 306; see also Ross 1645a: 1-2.

⁹² Rochon 1672: 182-83, 188-89, 162-65; see also Fontenelle 1998: 64.

⁹³ Beugnot 1990: 172; Barbier d'Aucour complains that Bouhours has added unnecessary appendices merely to fill a quarto (1776: 169-70).

complex narrative of reception, exchange, and cultural difference.⁹⁴ Traces of Montaigne's *Essais*, which were translated by John Florio into a richly vernacular version (1603), can be found in the work of English literary writers (Shakespeare and Jonson) and philosophers (Bacon, Burton, and Boyle) alike.⁹⁵ Royalist natural philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and Kenelm Digby took an active part in French intellectual life while in exile during the Civil War; Le Gallois expresses admiration for the Royal Society in his polite conversation about the new places of learning.⁹⁶

The case of the Bureau d'Adresse suggests that the reforming movements in English and French philosophy are most similar in their moments of apparent divergence. The educational reformer Samuel Hartlib sought permission from Parliament in 1647 to establish an Office of Address on Renaudot's model; George Havers later published English translations of all the Bureau's proceedings.⁹⁷ Havers, like Hartlib, replaces Renaudot's reference to Montaigne with an English genealogy of the new philosophy: 'I shall not undertake to determine whether the restitution of Philosophical Liberty began first by the French, or by some great Personages of our own, particularly the renowned Lord *Bacon*'.⁹⁸ Although Renaudot awards the paternity of the new philosophy to Montaigne, and his English counterparts claim it for Bacon, the gesture in both cases is the same. Literary innovations to the form of philosophical writing in England and France alike establish nature's hidden qualities as a topic of vernacular conversation between philosophers and their polite interlocutors. This topic produces conflicting responses from traditionalists and their

⁹⁴ This would supplement Henry (1997: 61-67) and Richmond 1981.

⁹⁵ See Yates 1934: 213-46.

⁹⁶ Henry 1982: 228-29 (on Digby in France); Le Gallois 1675: 2-3, 31-32.

⁹⁷ Havers 1664; Havers and Davies 1665.

⁹⁸ Havers 1664: fol. 3^{r-v}; Hartlib 1647: 51; Wright 1604: A3^v (Dedicatory Epistle).

opponents. The place that natural philosophy creates for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the lexical site of this conflict.

2. A refuge of ignorance

New philosophers use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a weapon to attack traditional explanations in natural philosophy as a ‘refuge of ignorance’.⁹⁹ New philosophers, from Bacon and Descartes onwards, point out the problems inherent in the scholastic attempt to include insensible phenomena within their explanations. Many, using the strategy of hostile translation, deploy the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its negative operation to consign traditional forms, qualities, and quintessences to the realm of error and nothingness. The lexeme, in their hands, uncovers a deep fault-line of ignorance within the bedrock of traditional explanation.

Traditional explanations, as I suggested earlier (in 2.i.2 above), ascribe preternatural phenomena to spiritual principles in the natural, supernatural, or universal realms. All three come under attack. Bacon dismisses theories that assume the universe to be one vital organism as ‘vast and bottomless follies’ (1996: II, 641). Many thinkers accept the existence of remote and general supernatural causes while disputing their use to explain particular phenomena.¹⁰⁰ A speaker at the Bureau d’Adresse is reported as objecting that ‘ceux qui rapportoient presque tout à des proprieté occultes, estoient semblables au païsan, qui ne voyant pas les ressorts d’une horloge croid qu’elle se remüe par une vertu occulte: ou bien, qui estant interrogé

⁹⁹ On this phrase, see below, p. 127.

¹⁰⁰ Browne 1981: 365; Ross 1651: 135.

pourquoi il tonne, respond simplement: parce qu'il plaist à Dieu.'¹⁰¹ The speaker reduces the knowledge of pedants to the ignorance of peasants. This polemical analogy and the example of the clock are, as we shall see, commonplace. It serves here to dismiss supernatural and natural principles alike as refuges of ignorance. Scholastic explanations that invoke a spiritual principle in nature come under the most sustained fire. New philosophers and their allies deploy the negative operation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a powerful weapon in their artillery. They offer three main objections against traditional explanations: (I) that they are superfluous; (II) that they fail to explain the phenomena while claiming to do so; (III) that they confuse body and soul.¹⁰² I offer brief descriptions of each objection below. Each uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to uncover a refuge of ignorance within scholastic knowledge.

(I) The first objection is that the natural principles invoked are either too particular or too general to have any explanatory force. Critics apply the celebrated nominalist principle of elegance, known as Ockham's razor, according to which entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity ('il ne faut point sans nécessité multiplier les estres').¹⁰³ They attack scholastic terms as superfluous and merely notional entities, *flatus vocis*, without referents. Boyle notes the profusion of terms used to refer to nature's hidden qualities. He criticizes the schoolmen for confusing a 'diversity of *names*' with a 'diversity of *physical entities*': they entertain, he says, 'I know not how many qualities'.¹⁰⁴ New philosophers take Ockham's razor to the open-ended multiplication of occult qualities in particular natures. When the maxim writer D'Ailly attacks 'ces mots de simpatie, de je ne sçay quoy, de qualitez occultes, et mille autres de cette nature', he is echoing Descartes's nominalist stroke against 'tout

¹⁰¹ Renaudot 1638-55: I, 596 (conf. 32); Montaigne: i.26, 157a; Daston and Park 1998: 130-31.

¹⁰² I am indebted to Roux 1996: 57-80.

¹⁰³ Renaudot 1638-55: I, 66 (conf. 4); Le Gallois 1674: I, 99; Compagnon 1980: 23; Roux 1996: 57-58.

¹⁰⁴ Boyle 1979: 22; 77, 122 (on alchemists); Digby 1644: 2; Rohault 1978: 114.

ce grand attirail de qualitez'.¹⁰⁵ New philosophers also take Ockham's razor to nature as a general principle. They complain that scholastics illegitimately apply Aristotle's metaphysical concepts to particular physical phenomena.¹⁰⁶ Boyle suggests that nature is nothing but a mind-forged 'semi-deity' that hovers between what he calls 'the cosmical mechanism' and God.¹⁰⁷ Boyle uses the English *je-ne-sais-quoi* to assert that nature, in this sense of the word, is fit for Ockham's razor: 'I think it my duty to pay my gratitude, not to *I know not what*, but to that deity whose wisdom and goodness [...] contrived the world'.¹⁰⁸ The elimination of nature as an explanatory principle leaves a mechanical universe of physical mechanisms and their divine first cause (see 2.iii.1 below, p. 139). The negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a sharp seventeenth-century blade, fitted in Ockham's razor, which critics take to the concept of nature.

(II) The second objection made against traditional explanations is that they confuse body with soul and matter with spirit. The very term *substantial form* is redolent of such confusion. This objection covers two distinct arguments. The first is that schools philosophers, by projecting into matter their own sensory experience, mistake what belongs to their soul for a material body. This Descartes establishes, in his *Principes de la Philosophie* (1647), by considering the example of a sensible quality such as colour. That we all see a lemon (say) as yellow cannot be explained, he argues, by saying that the lemon possesses the corresponding quality of yellowness. This explanation involves an illegitimate projection of our experience into the body of the lemon. To condemn this, he draws upon the pronominal form of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*:

¹⁰⁵ On D'Ailly, see 4.iii.3 below, p. 251. Descartes 1964: IX (*Principes*, iv.201); Browne 1981: 158-59.

¹⁰⁶ Boyle 1979: 8-9; Du Roure 1645b: e^{r-v}; Roux 1996: 53.

¹⁰⁷ Boyle 1996: 10, 37; Galilei 1953: 234-35; Descartes 1964: XI (*Le Monde*, vii).

¹⁰⁸ Boyle 1996: 10 (my italics).

il est donc évident, lors que nous disons à *quelqu'un* que nous appercevons des couleurs dans les objets, qu'il en est de même que si nous luy disions que nous appercevions en ces objets je ne sçay quoy dont nous ignorons la nature, mais qui cause pourtant en nous un certain sentiment, fort clair et manifeste, qu'on nomme le sentiment des couleurs.¹⁰⁹

Descartes uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] here to reduce those qualities, which scholastics place in bodies, to no more than airy nothings or hypostasized fictions of the mind. That the pronoun is constituted by a first-person singular verb allows him to emphasize that a scholastic quality is merely a subjective experience. He glosses the pronoun's semantic operation ('je ne sçay quoy dont nous ignorons la nature') to stress that these qualities, which are more obscure than the experience they purport to explain, merely provide a refuge of ignorance. He sums up his criticism in the next sentence: those who assert that colour is a real quality say no more than that 'il y a je ne sçay quoy dans les objets'. Descartes uses the negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its adjectival and pronominal forms on two further occasions in the *Principes*.¹¹⁰ He establishes the word's use, in the literature of the new philosophy, as a weapon with which to attack scholastic explanations. His readers in the following generation (Du Roure, Rohault, and Boyle) then develop this weapon by exploiting it as a modish noun.

The second argument is that traditional philosophers explain parts of matter as if they, like humans, possessed an animating spirit or soul. Hobbes attributes this anthropomorphic error to traditional natural philosophers who explain the fall of heavy things 'as if stones and metals had a desire, or could discern the place they would be at, as man does' (1996: 451). Pascal, in the 'Disproportion de l'homme' fragment of the *Pensées* (1670), opposes traditional explanations on the same grounds. He argues that humankind remains caught in the midst of nature, out of all

¹⁰⁹ Descartes 1964: IX (*Principes*, i.70).

¹¹⁰ Descartes 1964: IX (*Principes*, ii.7, iv.201).

proportion to it, but ever hungry to establish its explanation. Mistakenly assuming that we are the measure of all things, we project our complex mixture of matter and spirit into simple material things: ‘nous les teignons de nos qualités, et empreignons [de] notre être composé toutes les choses simples que nous contemplons.’¹¹¹ This common error traditional philosophers transform into explanations by sympathy.

De là vient que presque tous les philosophes confondent les idées des choses et parlent des choses corporelles spirituellement et des spirituelles corporellement. Car ils disent hardiment que les corps tendent en bas, qu’ils aspirent à leur centre, qu’ils fuient leur destruction, qu’ils craignent le vide, qu’ils ont des inclinations, des sympathies, des antipathies, qui sont toutes choses qui n’appartiennent qu’aux esprits. Et en parlant des esprits, ils les considèrent comme en un lieu, et leur attribuent le mouvement d’une place à une autre, qui sont choses qui n’appartiennent qu’aux corps.¹¹²

Traditional philosophers are caught in a chiasmus of confusion: they treat bodies as if these possessed spirits and spirits as if they, in turn, possessed bodies.¹¹³ This confusion accounts for ‘presque tous les philosophes’, Pascal says, making an exception for Descartes whose criticism he is here repeating.¹¹⁴ Pascal radicalizes his objection to such explanations in a fragment related to his unfinished *Traité du vide*. This fragment is best understood, in formal terms, as an extended hostile translation of the *horror vacui* axiom:

qu’y a-t-il de plus absurde que de dire que des corps inanimés ont des passions, des craintes, des horreurs que des corps insensibles, sans vie, et même incapables de vie, aient des passions, qui présupposent une âme au moins sensitive pour les recevoir? De plus, que l’objet de cette horreur fût le vide? Qu’y a-t-il dans le vide qui leur puisse faire peur? Qu’y a-t-il de plus bas et de plus ridicule?

Ce n’est pas tout. [On prétend] qu’ils aient en eux-mêmes un principe de mouvement pour éviter le vide. Ont-ils des bras, des jambes, des muscles, des nerfs?¹¹⁵

Pascal here performs a polemical *reductio ad absurdum* of the scholastic axiom. To say that nature abhors a vacuum need not imply that it possesses arms and legs. But it does imply that nature has ‘a kind of soul’, as Boyle puts it, which is capable of

¹¹¹ Pascal Laf. 199; Sell. 230; see also Bacon 1996: IV, 54.

¹¹² Pascal: Laf. 199; Sell. 230; I follow Sellier here. See also Le Gallois 1674: I, 35-36.

¹¹³ Carraud 1992: 272-86.

¹¹⁴ Carraud 1992: 279-81.

¹¹⁵ Pascal: Laf. 958; Sell. 795; I follow Sellier here.

feeling passions like horror.¹¹⁶ Traditionalists lapse into anthropomorphic thinking such as this precisely because they assume that material bodies possess the same faculties as humans.¹¹⁷ Pascal, who has used Descartes to ridicule schools philosophers, then dismisses his claim to understand the union of body and soul, stating: ‘c’est néanmoins la chose qu’on comprend le moins.’¹¹⁸ Pascal undermines the new certainties as well as the old. He enacts, in this way, the stated aim of his dialogue with humankind – to contradict its pretensions ‘jusqu’à ce qu’il comprenne | Qu’il est un monstre incompréhensible’ (Laf. 130; Sell. 163). All human experience, in a world without God, is an incomprehensible and disastrous *je-ne-sais-quoi*.¹¹⁹

(III) The third and most widespread objection to schools philosophers is that, by claiming illegitimately to explain the phenomena, they offer no more than pseudo-learned ‘refuges of ignorance’. These the *je-ne-sais-quoi* serves to reveal. The sixteenth-century Aristotelian Julius Caesar Scaliger first records the phrase *inscitiae asylum* (‘refuge of ignorance’) when defending occult qualities against Cardano and other innovators. He describes the phrase as their chief term of abuse: ‘recentiores, qui detestantur occultas proprietates: easque inscitiae asylum contumeliosis verbis vocant.’¹²⁰ New philosophers make the *inscitiae asylum* a vernacular commonplace. Bacon dismisses those who invoke ‘a hidden property, a specific virtue, and a fourth quality, and the like shifts of ignorance’; Hobbes complains that scholastics ‘put for cause of natural events, their own ignorance; but disguised in other words’; Pascal asserts that their ‘causes chimériques [...] ne servent qu’à couvrir l’ignorance de ce

¹¹⁶ Boyle 1979: 38; Pascal 1964: II, 678.

¹¹⁷ See Des Chene 2000: 76-81 (for a neo-scholastic reply to this objection).

¹¹⁸ Pascal: Laf. 199; Sell. 230; Carraud 1992: 283-85.

¹¹⁹ See 3.ii.3 below, p. 192 (for Pascal’s use of the term in this context).

¹²⁰ Scaliger 1557: exerc. 344, dist. 8; quoted in Blum 1992: 58. See Maclean 1984 (on Scaliger vs. Cardano).

qui les inventent, et nourrir celle de leurs sectateurs'.¹²¹ The Cartesian Jacques du Roure compares Aristotle with Descartes to the latter's advantage in *La Physique expliquée suivant le sentiment des anciens et des nouveaux Philosophes* (1654). He draws the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] into this topos:

à quel propos donq (si ce n'est peut-être que nous voulions cacher notre ignorance sous des termes inconnus) à quel propos recevrons-nous dans l'explication des choses naturelles ces secrets instincts, ces qualitez ocultes et ces formes je ne sçay-quelles qui remplissent aujourd'huy la Philosophie?¹²²

Du Roure uses the adjective to spell out in plain language the ignorance that terms such as 'qualitez ocultes' conceal. Innovators practice time and again this strategy of hostile translation by bringing terms of explanation in scholastic Latin into the vernacular. The negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* serves to reveal such terms as no more than a refuge of ignorance.

Schools philosophers are accused of four errors of reasoning: assigning the wrong cause, begging the question, contradiction, and unintelligibility. The 'refuge of ignorance' topos covers all four. Sir Thomas Browne and the Port-Royal logicians Arnauld and Nicole list sympathy and *horror vacui* as instances of the wrong cause.¹²³ Specific occult qualities and gravity provide the most celebrated cases of question-begging. Such terms can be used legitimately to name the explicandum; the paralogism occurs when they are transformed into the explanation itself. To say that the magnet attracts iron because it possesses an attractive quality is to repeat the explicandum in the explicans. Molière famously pokes fun at this explanation in his satire on doctors, *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673). A po-faced young student, asked by his learned professors why opium induces sleep, gives the centuries-old answer:

¹²¹ Bacon 1996: II, 355; Hobbes 1996: 451; Pascal 1964: II, 688-89. See also Digby 1973: 15-16; Malebranche 1979: I, 948.

¹²² Du Roure 1654: 12-13 (§.18).

¹²³ Browne 1981: 25-26; Arnauld and Nicole 1965: 243-50.

Mihi a docto Doctore
Domandatur causam et rationem quare
Opium facit dormire:
A quo respondeo,
Quia est in eo
Virtus dormitiva,
Cujus est natura
Sensus assoupire.¹²⁴

Opium induces sleep, the aspiring doctor explains, because it has a *virtus dormitiva*, in other words, the power to induce sleep. ‘Bene, bene, bene, bene respondere’, his learned superiors intone, and the young man duly joins their ranks. Molière’s joke, like Pascal’s fragment on the vacuum, performs a *reductio ad absurdum* of scholastic explanations through a hostile translation. But where Pascal moves *horror vacui* into the vernacular, Molière puts doctors speaking macaronic Latin into a vernacular social setting. Molière’s joke, like D’Ailly’s maxim, confirms that the innovators’ attack on occult qualities had successfully spread to literary circles by the 1670s. The use of gravity as an *explicans* comes in for similar treatment from Hobbes, who after Galileo, argues that this amounts to saying that ‘bodies descend, or ascend, because they do’.¹²⁵ The charge of question-begging spreads from occult qualities to scholastic qualities and forms in general. The atomist Pierre Gassendi and his English follower Walter Charleton claim accordingly that all scholastic qualities are occult.¹²⁶ They silently alter the meaning of *occult* from ‘insensible’ to ‘inexplicable’.¹²⁷ Their polemical alteration is a valid stroke against those scholastics who use substantial form as an explanation of insensible phenomena (see 2.i.2 above, pp. 106-07). For occult qualities, when used in this way, fail to explain the phenomena because they beg the question and assign the wrong cause. They provide no more than a refuge of ignorance within the bedrock of scholastic explanation.

¹²⁴ Molière 1971: II, 1173.

¹²⁵ Hobbes 1996: 450; Galilei 1953: 234-35.

¹²⁶ CHSP: 469-71; Charleton 1654: 341-42; Glanvill 1970: 171 (1661 version).

¹²⁷ Hutchison 1982.

Critics identify two further logical fallacies in the explanatory use of natural principles: that they fall into contradiction and that they are unintelligible. Boyle observes that schools philosophers award qualities a being distinct from the individual substances in which they inhere. This implies a contradiction: ‘they make them accidents in name, but represent them under such a notion as belongs only to substances.’¹²⁸ Real qualities are akin to the smile of the Cheshire cat that Alice sees in Wonderland and which remains even after the cat has vanished. Scholastic explanations that ascribe insensible phenomena to a substantial form necessarily privilege formal and final causes (see 2.i.2 above, p. 107). They fall foul of the new philosophers’ preference for efficient and material causes in physical explanations. Scholastics are accused of unintelligibility: they can only explain an unknown phenomenon by means of something equally, or still more, unknown. ‘To explain any effect by a substantial form’, Boyle argues, ‘must be to declare (as they speak) *ignotum per ignotius*, or at least *per æque ignotum*’ (1979: 67). Boyle uses the logic of the schools here against its own natural philosophers while quoting their Latin to hint at its obscurity. Critics use the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a hostile vernacular translation that reveals the unintelligibility of substantial form. Boyle describes it as his chief aim to convince his gentle reader ‘that almost all sorts of qualities, most of which have been by the Schools either left unexplicated, or generally referred to I know not what incomprehensible substantial forms, *may* be produced mechanically’ (1979: 17). Du Roure, like Boyle, taxes substantial forms with superfluity and unintelligibility. He says of substantial form: ‘il faut pourtant avouer que la cause des ef[f]ets propres à chaque corps et que les Peripateticiens suposent leur est si inconnuë, qu’ils ne la

¹²⁸ Boyle 1979: 22; Le Gallois 1674: I, 35-36.

sauroient expliquer que par un je ne sçay quoy.’¹²⁹ Du Roure’s restrictive syntax implies that the scholastic *je-ne-sais-quoi* can only be a refuge of ignorance.

The current *je-ne-sais-quoi* is used in this manner to attack not just substantial forms but their entire metaphysics of form, matter, and privation. Bacon, like Montaigne, attacks these principles with characteristic directness: ‘as for the pretty assertion that matter is like a common strumpet that desireth all forms, it is but a wandering notion.’¹³⁰ Jacques Rohault sets about the same task with more circumspection in his *Entretiens sur la philosophie* (1671).¹³¹ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] appears, as we have seen, in Descartes’s criticism of scholastic qualities; Rohault, writing in the 1670s, systematically exploits it as a modish name. He offers his polite readership a defence of Cartesian physics and its theological implications against the traditionalists’ counterattack (see 2.iii.2 below, pp. 141-42). Rohault, writing at a time when it was dangerous to take Descartes’s side against the neo-Aristotelian orthodoxy of the schools, skilfully presents him as a descendant of Aristotle who merely provides particular physical explanations of the latter’s general metaphysical concepts (1978: 105). This is necessary if the Philosopher’s legacy is to spur explanations of particular physical phenomena rather than provide a refuge of ignorance. Rohault’s *Traité de physique* (1670) presents this argument in a systematic form; the *Entretiens* make it a topic of polite conversation. M. N., Rohault’s interlocutor, wants to know whether his friend truly agrees with Aristotle. Rohault claims to follow Aristotle’s hylomorphic principles while arguing that Descartes alone makes these principles intelligible. He starts with matter, which he defines in the Cartesian way as bodily extension, claiming:

¹²⁹ Du Roure 1654: 30 (§.38).

¹³⁰ Bacon 1996: II, 601 (*Sylva sylvarum*, §.800); see also 5.ii.1 below, pp. 272-74 (on Montaigne).

¹³¹ See Rohault 1978: 31-60 (Introduction).

je ne puis vous dire nettement ce qu'en a pensé Aristote. Il fait assés comprendre dans ses huit livres de physique, que par le mot ὕλη, qu'on a traduit *Matiere*, il entend un je ne sçai quoy, qui est commun à tous les Estres, et qui le sujet de toutes les formes; ce qui convient fort bien à la notion que j'ai de la *Matiere*; Mais comme il n'a pas expliqué en quoy consiste ce je ne sçay quoy, qui est commun à tous les Estres, on disputera toujours s'il n'a point entendu autre chose que ce que je viens de dire.¹³²

Rohault plays here the role of the translator: he brings Aristotle's concept of matter through Latin into the vernacular, revealing it as an underdetermined *je-ne-sais-quoi* whose definition Descartes alone can complete. Aristotle's concept of form receives the same treatment:

il fait assez comprendre qu'il entend par ces mots un je ne sçai quoy, qui donne l'Estre à la chose [...]; mais il n'explique en nulle part, la nature de ce je ne sçay quoy: De sorte que si pour suppléer à ce qu'Aristote n'a pas crû devoir faire, on veut tascher d'expliquer en quoy consiste une chose si importante, on ne pourra jamais prouver à un opinionastre, que ce qu'on luy dit est le sentiment de ce Philosophe.¹³³

Rohault's polite interlocutor, M. N., agrees that form is nothing but a mere *je-ne-sais-quoi* requiring further explanation.

autrement je ne vois pas qu'en cecy les lumieres d'un Philosophe soyent plus grandes que celles d'une simple Paysanne, si ce n'est que l'un sçait un mot que l'autre ne sçait pas. En effet, quand une Paysanne voit éclore un poulet sous une poule, elle comprend aussi bien que le plus habile Philosophe du monde, qu'il est survenu à l'œuf, un je ne sçai quoy qui lui fait perdre l'estre d'œuf, et qui luy donne l'estre de poulet; et elle n'est pas moins sçavante que le Philosophe, qu'en ce qu'elle ignore que ce je ne sçay quoy s'appelle la Forme du poulet.¹³⁴

To answer that what came first was neither the chicken nor the egg, but its substantial form, is clearly no longer the done thing. M. N. here repeats the analogy that excludes pedants and peasants from the polite circles of the new philosophy (see 2.ii.1 above, p. 115). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* serves to unmask the empty metaphysical pretension of those traditional philosophers who talk in general of form and matter. Rohault also employs the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to this end – and with considerable success – in his *Traité*

¹³² Rohault 1978: 112.

¹³³ Rohault 1978: 114-15.

¹³⁴ Rohault 1978: 115.

de physique (1671).¹³⁵ Laudatory reviews of Rohault's treatise appeared in the new learned journals of both France and England. The Royal Society, in its *Philosophical Transactions*, commends Rohault for showing that the hylomorphic principles of the scholastics are a refuge of ignorance in physics: 'Matter [...] is, according to them, a something I know not what, and Form [...] such another I know not what; as if giving a meer Name to a thing not known, were enough to make it known'.¹³⁶ That both Rohault's English reviewer and his polite interlocutor, M. N., adopt his use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] indicates the term's currency.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, by the 1670s, has become a lexical commonplace in natural philosophy. It encapsulates the crisis that has beset the discipline. Traditional philosophers can only explain their experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by placing it in things as their spiritual principle. Their adoption of the affirmative substantival term reflects, at a lexical level, their transformation of an insensible movement into a substantial form. New philosophers unite to attack this explanation as a superfluous and anthropomorphic refuge of ignorance. They use the negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a lexical weapon to eliminate scholastic qualities and forms. The new place that natural philosophy in the seventeenth century creates for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a 'commonplace' in that it is a lexical site of conflict. The year 1671 is the turning-point.¹³⁷ It sees the publication of two polite philosophical conversations, Rohault's *Entretiens sur la philosophie* and Bouhours's *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in both but it carries, in each case, the equal and opposite semantic current. Rohault and other innovators are correct in pointing out that those, like Bouhours, who make the *je-ne-sais-quoi* a substantial form or spirit do not spur

¹³⁵ Rohault 1672: I, 46 (i.6).

¹³⁶ Royal Society 1671; Rohault 1978: 63 (on the *Journal des Savants* review).

¹³⁷ I sketch the historical context for this turning-point in 2.iii.2 below, pp. 142-43.

philosophical explanation so much as freeze it. This is one way in which the term loses the vital mobility that characterizes its pre-history, and by the late 1670s, the substantialist *je-ne-sais-quoi* has become a laughing-stock in polite circles (see 4.iii.3 below). No substantial form, hidden quality, or quintessence can explain the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

iii. Ghostly apparitions

Dans la mesure où l'inexistant-apparaissant est par excellence la chose de la philosophie, ne peut-on regarder la philosophie comme le savoir acrobatique du je-ne-sais-quoi?

— JANKÉLÉVITCH

1. In with the new: Bacon and Descartes

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* brings natural philosophy to a crisis by appearing ghostlike in the realm of nature. How, if not by occult qualities and the like, can we explain those strange movements whose physical causes do not fall in the realm of common sensory experience? New philosophers produce different and often contradictory answers whose proliferation, and the heated conflicts that each provokes, indicate a residual unease about the question. I shall indicate the diversity of these alternatives by briefly examining representative figures at either end of the seventeenth century, starting with Bacon and Descartes, and ending with Newton and Leibniz. Those who claim that natural philosophy witnesses a clean epistemic break in this period, as Michel Foucault does, ignore the persistent crisis on which it thrives. I use the metaphors of crisis and geological movement to emphasize that the changes to natural philosophy in this period are uneven, often profound, and invariably provoke radical unease. It is easier to see out the old certainties than to bring in the new. Bouhours, at one point in his treatment of the topic, compares the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to a ghost, alluding to the commonplace story in which the spirit of a murdered person returns to haunt the

culprits at the scene of the crime (1962: 146). The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* makes ghostly apparitions of just this kind in new explanations. The lexeme reappears in those places where mechanical explanations are haunted by the return of substantial forms or where the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* cannot be ignored.

Bacon and Descartes offer contrasting approaches to the problem of how to replace occult qualities and substantial forms. Preternatural phenomena confront traditional philosophers with the choice between offering a metaphysical explanation that cannot be deduced from experience or conceding that their experience cannot be explained. Bacon and Descartes each transform one of these alternatives. Bacon's major innovation is to draw preternatural phenomena into a new natural history of experience. This he conceives as a spur to a reformed natural philosophy guided by a new method. Bacon, like the scholastics, continues to stress the importance of experience. But he alters their definition of experience as repeated sense perceptions, held in the memory, whose truth cannot be questioned. Bacon conceives of *experience* as a process more akin to that which we call 'experimentation', in other words, an actively conceived means of testing the external world and the senses.¹³⁸ Experience, he insists, should not be taken at face value: it 'must be broken and grinded, and not whole, or as it groweth' (1996: II, 336). It should include preternatural particulars or 'the effects of yet unknown properties', which may serve to supplement the deficiency of our sense perceptions, for 'the subtlety of nature is greater many times over than the subtlety of the senses and understanding'.¹³⁹ The purpose of Baconian experience is to spur explanations in natural philosophy and practical inventions in technology alike. The two are interdependent for Bacon, who like many in the natural magic

¹³⁸ Schmitt 1969.

¹³⁹ Bacon 1996: III, 330; IV, 48.

tradition, argues that one knows what a thing is if one knows how to make it.¹⁴⁰ Bacon proposes a new method of induction to arrive at universal axioms built on experiential particulars. Natural history, the meticulous description of such particulars, must precede and inform the axioms of natural philosophy.¹⁴¹

Bacon announces his intention, in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), to move instances of ‘nature erring or varying’ to the centre of his reformed natural history (1996: III, 330). Instances of insensible forces (between material bodies and living creatures alike) occupy the final section of his natural history, *Sylva sylvarum* (1627), which William Rawley published after Bacon’s death. Rawley presents this work as the raw materials with which Bacon, before his untimely demise, planned to construct a new edifice of inductive explanation (1996: II, 336). Bacon’s ambitious plans indicate why his natural history contains no expressions of nescioquiddity. *Sylva sylvarum*, composed as a list of desiderata, illustrates the productive hesitations that characterize Bacon’s reformed natural history. This includes common as well as personal experiences drawn from both written and anecdotal sources. Bacon has been criticized for relying on the same common experience whose use he attacks in scholastic natural philosophy.¹⁴² This is unfair since, rather than fasten such experience to necessary causal explanations as scholastics tend to do, Bacon prefers instead to ‘set down particulars untried’. He considers that such particulars, as he puts it, ‘level point-blank at the inventing of causes and axioms’.¹⁴³ Experiential particulars operate in Baconian natural history as a heuristic spur to progress in explanation. These include Bacon’s first-person experience as his list of ‘experiments in consort touching the secret virtue of sympathy and antipathy’ reveals:

¹⁴⁰ Henry 1997: 47; Dear 2001: 58.

¹⁴¹ Bacon 1996: IV, 50; Jardine 1974: 96.

¹⁴² Dear 2001: 138-39.

¹⁴³ Bacon 1996: II, 508 (*Sylva sylvarum*, §.525).

the relations touching the force of imagination and the secret instincts of nature, are so uncertain, as they require a great deal of examination ere we conclude upon them. I would have it first thoroughly inquired, whether there be any secret passages of sympathy between persons of near blood; as parents, children, brothers, sisters, nurse-children, husbands, wives, etc. There be many reports in history, that upon the death of persons of such nearness, men have had an inward feeling of it. I myself remember, that being in Paris, and my father dying in London, two or three days before my father's death I had a dream, which I told to divers English gentlemen, that my father's house in the country was plastered all over with black mortar.¹⁴⁴

Bacon treats *sympathy* here as an explicandum and not, as scholastics might, an explicans. He cites his first-person experience of 'an inward feeling' at his father's death to support historical reports of similar cases. Bacon the lawyer knows, however, that personal testimony constitutes fragile evidence without corroboration: this the 'divers English gentlemen' provide, at least in rhetorical terms, although they remain anonymous. Such problems of testimony and authority dog experimental philosophy throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁴⁵ So too does the problem of what nature's 'secret instincts' may in fact be. Bacon, despite his insistence that experiential particulars level point-blank at causes, supplies none to explain the present strange case. He merely repeats his criticism of traditional philosophers by way of conclusion, while looking to the 'experience and probation' of practitioners as one means of filling the explanatory vacuum.¹⁴⁶ *Sylva sylvarum* is designed to gather precisely this kind of experience. Bacon describes occult qualities, sympathies, and quintessences in his new natural history as so many experiences in search of an explanation.

Descartes's major innovation in natural philosophy is to offer a new mechanical explanation of all physical phenomena. He shares with scholastics a commitment to a science of complete and necessary causes but eliminates their occult qualities and substantial forms (see 2.ii.2 above, pp. 124-25). He abhors the explanatory vacuum that this elimination creates. Eudoxe, Descartes's spokesman in

¹⁴⁴ Bacon 1996: II, 666-67 (§.986).

¹⁴⁵ Licoppe 1996: 53-84.

¹⁴⁶ Bacon 1996: II, 671-72 (§.999).

his polite philosophical dialogue *La Recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle* (not published until 1701), promises to fill the vacuum with a new philosophy of nature:

je viendrai [aux œuvres] de la nature, et vous ayant fait voir la cause de tous les changements, la diversité de ses qualités, et comment l'âme des plantes et des animaux diffère de la nôtre, je vous ferai considérer l'architecture des choses sensibles.¹⁴⁷

Descartes uses two principles, matter and motion, to explain all physical changes and qualities.¹⁴⁸ He studies the physical world not as an animate being but, rather, as a machine in movement. The mechanical philosophy includes two groups. Corpuscularians like Descartes and Boyle define matter as unique extension, allow it to be infinitely divisible into corpuscles, and deny the existence of the vacuum. Atomists like Gassendi and Digby define matter as composed of multiple atoms, which are indivisible, and which whirl around in empty spaces. Corpuscularians and atomists, despite their different conception of matter, share the conviction that all phenomena can be explained by its movement alone. They compare the physical universe to a clock that God, the first cause, designed and then wound into motion.¹⁴⁹ Descartes and others set out to replace the scholastic trio of matter, form, and privation with a new mechanical philosophy of nature.

Descartes attempts to bring insensible phenomena within the province of the mechanical philosophy instead of relegating them to the no man's land of occult qualities. His explanation relies upon a physical analogy: matter is composed of insensibly subtle particles identical to those that fall under the senses; both, therefore, can be explained by the mathematical laws of material movement.¹⁵⁰ These laws,

¹⁴⁷ Descartes 1997: 23.

¹⁴⁸ Descartes 1964: XI, 31-48 (*Le Monde*, vi-vii); CHSP: 519-25.

¹⁴⁹ Henry 1997: 56-85; Roux 1996: 97-126; Roux 1998: 233-34.

¹⁵⁰ Dear 2001: 86-90.

Descartes declares in the *Principes de la philosophie*, should replace once and for all the scholastics' mind-forged fictions. He dismisses these at the same time with another negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] for good measure:

il n'y a, ce me semble, personne, pourveu qu'il veuille user de raison, qui ne doive avoüer que c'est beaucoup mieux philosopher de juger, de ce qui arrive en ces petits corps, que leur seule petitesse nous empêche de pouvoir sentir, par l'exemple de ce que nous voyons arriver en ceux... que nous sentons, et de rendre raison, par ce moyen, de tout ce qui est en la nature, ainsi que j'ay tasché de faire en ce traité, que, pour rendre raison des mêmes choses, en inventer *je ne sais quelles autres qui n'ont aucun rapport avec celles que nous sentons*, comme sont la matière première, les formes substantielles, et tout ce grand attirail de qualitez que plusieurs ont coustume de supposer, chacune desquelles peut plus difficilement estre connuë que toutes les choses qu'on pretend expliquer par leur moyen.¹⁵¹

Descartes derives rhetorical energy from his antagonistic comparison of scholastic principles with his own. He is more reticent about the problems that he shares with his opponents. Descartes's analogy between sensible bodies and subtle particles can no more be experimentally proven than the scholastics' hylomorphic doctrine. The mechanical philosophy, despite Descartes's occasional claims to produce a certain science, would seem able to deliver only hypotheses about insensible phenomena.¹⁵² This is one of the objections that traditionalists offer as, from the late 1660s onwards, Cartesian physicists start winning support for the mechanist alternative in polite society and even in the schools. Rohault, Huygens, and Régis all stress the hypothetical nature of mechanical explanations in reply to this objection.¹⁵³ Other objections, we shall see, prove more forceful. By this time, however, no one can ignore Descartes's mechanical contribution to natural philosophy. Fontenelle's Marquise asks: 'à ce compte, [...] la philosophie est devenue bien mécanique?'¹⁵⁴ Her interlocutor politely confirms her intuition. The new philosophy attempts to reduce the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to a machine set in motion.

¹⁵¹ Descartes 1964: IX (*Principes*, iv.201); my italics. See also Rohault 1978: 125-26.

¹⁵² CHSP: 525-26; Roux 1998.

¹⁵³ Brockliss 1987: 345; Dear 2001: 149-58.

¹⁵⁴ Fontenelle 1998: 64.

2. Forceful objections

Objections to the mechanical philosophy relate to its theological implications as well as to the content of its physical explanations. Transsubstantiation, critics argue, obliges Descartes and his followers to retain substantial forms. This, the most forceful contemporary objection to Cartesian philosophy, justifies its official censure in the 1670s. That such a measure should have been deemed necessary indicates the growing popularity of the mechanical hypothesis in this period. Critics offer two objections to the content of its physical explanations: that mechanical principles cannot sufficiently explain generation and sensation in animals; and that they fail to account for the dynamic behaviour of material bodies. Mechanical philosophers lack, in both cases, a sufficient concept of dynamic force.

Theology provides a powerful weapon with which to attack mechanical principles. The guardians of the schools tradition, in particular the Jesuits, argue that Cartesian philosophy cannot accommodate the orthodox doctrine of the Eucharist. Seventeenth-century orthodox Catholics, endorsed by the Council of Trent, believe that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are really transformed into the substance of Christ's body and blood while retaining their original accidents. Transsubstantiation means that the bread, like the smile of the Cheshire cat, exists as a real quality without a substance. Cartesians, their critics say, scandalously threaten the sacred mysteries of faith for they can neither explain how the accidents of the bread remain nor how the body of Christ is really present.¹⁵⁵ Rohault meets both objections in the first half of his

¹⁵⁵ La Grange 1675: 110-35; Hutchison 1991: 253-54; Des Chene 1996: 98-99. Threatening Catholic mysteries is of course the explicit project of an English mechanical philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, who condemns them as pure nonsense and, for that very reason, politically seditious; see Hobbes 1996: 448.

Entretiens sur la philosophie (1671) by rehearsing Descartes's answers. He argues, first, that God is able to maintain the accidents of the bread by miracle, and second, that Cartesians follow the Council of Trent in declaring the manner of Christ's presence to be a miracle.¹⁵⁶ Descartes and Rohault attempt to conceal the heterodoxy of their physics behind the convention that profane writers should steer clear of theological controversy (see 1.iii.2 above, pp. 90-91). The attempt ends in failure.

The year 1671 marks the moment of crisis.¹⁵⁷ Secular and ecclesiastical authorities in that year banned the teaching of all new philosophy in French universities. Traditionalists, such as Bouhours (1671), Rochon (1672), and La Grange (1675), support and exploit this ban, as we saw earlier (2.ii.1 above, pp. 118-20), by attacking the new philosophy and discreetly reviving the old. They incorporate some of the innovators' criticisms of scholastic explanations and turn them to their own advantage. The hostile commonplace that occult qualities and substantial forms are refuges of ignorance, for example, Bouhours turns into an Augustinian expression of wonder at God's inexplicable presence in the natural world.¹⁵⁸ Eugene says at the end of their fifth conversation:

je conclus de tout cela [...] que le je ne sçay quoy est l'asyle de l'ignorance [...] cette matiere estant de la nature de celles qui ont un fond impenetrable, et qu'on ne peut expliquer que par l'admiration et par le silence. – Je suis bien aise, dit Ariste en riant, que vous preniez enfin le bon parti, et que vous vous contentiez d'admirer ce que d'abord vous vouliez comprendre. Si vous me croyez, ajoûta-t-il, nous en demeurerons là, et nous ne dirons plus rien d'une chose, qui ne subsiste que parce qu'on ne peut dire ce que c'est.¹⁵⁹

Bouhours transforms the refuge of ignorance into the house of God. The tone here is one of Augustinian wonder; its metaphysical bedrock is Aristotelian. Ariste discreetly revives substantial form, in the final sentence, as a pious nescioquiddity. Traditional

¹⁵⁶ Rohault 1978: 118, 133; Gouhier 1978: 71-79; Clarke 1989: 23-27.

¹⁵⁷ Gouhier 1978: 81-89.

¹⁵⁸ Daston and Park 1998: 39-48 (on Augustinian wonder).

¹⁵⁹ Bouhours 1962: 150.

natural philosophy, say its defenders, explains that there is a hidden quality in the magnet, that this inheres in its substantial form, and that this is explanation enough for us mortals. Those still curious should look, not to the innovators' scandalous mechanical fictions, but to the incomprehensible power of God alone.¹⁶⁰ Bouhours combines Augustinian piety and Aristotelian metaphysics to explain the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an inexplicable substance. The ban on the new philosophy, and the revival of the schools tradition, produce in turn a concerted wave of counter-attacks from innovators that includes Boileau's *Arrêt burlesque* (1671) and Molière's *virtus dormitiva* joke in *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673).¹⁶¹ The new philosophy emerges from this theological conflict bloodied but unbowed. Some Catholic professors, by the first decade of the eighteenth century, agree with Descartes that there is no need for substantial form to reconcile mechanical physics with the mystery of transsubstantiation. 1671 marks a crisis for the mechanical philosophy that it eventually overcomes.

A more forceful internal objection to mechanical explanations is that they fail sufficiently to explain generation and perception in animals. Cartesians study animals as though they were machines while, at the same time, retaining the rational human soul as the unique substantial form.¹⁶² La Grange objects that Cartesians are forced to deny common experience, which shows that animals too have vital perceptions.¹⁶³ Fontenelle, who is generally an ally, nevertheless points out that two watches cannot couple to produce a third watch – whereas two dogs can and do.¹⁶⁴ Unease about the status of the human soul provokes the heated debate about the Cartesian *bête-*

¹⁶⁰ Bouhours 1962: 18; Rochon 1672: 184-86; Boutauld 1683: 23-24.

¹⁶¹ Boileau 1966: 327-330; Mesnard 1992: 97-110; the *virtus dormitiva* joke is discussed in 2.ii.2 above, pp. 128-29.

¹⁶² Henry 1997: 68-70, 79-80.

¹⁶³ La Grange 1675: 339-50.

¹⁶⁴ CHSP: 536.

machine: if animals are mere machines, critics ask, then why is the same not true of humans? Rohault discusses these arguments, and the objections with which they meet, in the second half of his *Entretiens sur la philosophie*.¹⁶⁵ He replies that, in the very act of thinking about such questions, we discover that we possess a rational soul (1978: 150). Rohault risks falling into the error of which he accuses his scholastic opponents, that is, of using common experience as the basis of a metaphysical explanation.¹⁶⁶ Sensory experience falls in the gap between body and rational soul. If the mind is an immaterial substance, then mechanical principles cannot explain the very experience of perception (attraction, repulsion, hunger, fear, and so on) nor the connection between a particular bodily motion and the sensation that this produces.¹⁶⁷ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in the Cartesian no man's land between mechanical explanation and sensory experience.¹⁶⁸ The vegetative and sensitive souls are among the substantial forms banished by the mechanical philosophy. Critics argue that mechanists need to revive them if they are to account for the vital principles of generation and perception in animals.¹⁶⁹

Mechanical principles fail to account not only for the vital principle of living creatures but, also, for the dynamic force of material bodies. The example of elasticity offers a brief illustration.¹⁷⁰ A material body which has been folded springs back into place. Mechanical principles demand that the motion of the body be caused by that of a second body (for example, the air). To explain its motion, a third body (subtle matter, say) must be found, then a fourth, and so on. Infinite regression necessarily follows unless some self-moving substance is found to prevent it; but this substance

¹⁶⁵ Rohault 1978: 138-50; Clarke 1989: 27-28.

¹⁶⁶ Roux 1996: 94-96; Henry 1997: 79.

¹⁶⁷ Rochon 1672: 206-07; La Grange 1675: 77; CHSP: 531-33.

¹⁶⁸ Descartes 1964: IX, 60 (*Méditations métaphysiques*, vi); Rohault 1978: 119-23.

¹⁶⁹ Des Chene 2000: 155-69; 3.i.2 below, pp. 164-64.

¹⁷⁰ See Roux 1996: 259-60 (from whom I borrow this example); Henry 1997: 74-78; Hatfield 1979.

must necessarily remain irreducible to mechanical principles. Most mechanical philosophers presuppose just such a substance, whether this be subtle matter (in the case of corpuscularians), or atoms (in that of atomists).¹⁷¹ The attempt to explain the dynamic properties of bodies – their elasticity, impenetrability, inertia, and momentum – necessarily leads mechanical philosophers to their own refuge of ignorance. Traditionalists here turn their opponents’ weapons against them. Ross, for example, tells Digby: ‘atomes are your *sanctuary*, to which you flie upon all occasions’.¹⁷² Digby’s French exile has left him prey to Gassendist influences, Ross asserts, and so his *Two Treatises* (1644) ‘entertaines us with a French dinner of his owne dressing, or with an airie feast of *Philosophicall quelque[s] choses*’ (1645: Preface, pages unnumbered). Ross’s *quelques choses* is semantically equivalent to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its negative operation. La Grange claims that the Cartesians can explain neither momentum nor gravity (1675: 165). Gilles Deleuze, in his work on Leibniz, pursues the objection: ‘les lois mécaniques [...] expliquent tout sauf l’*unité* d’un mouvement concret, si variable et irrégulier soit-il. L’*unité* de mouvement est toujours l’affaire d’une âme’ (1988: 18). A soul, as we saw earlier (2.i.2 above, p. 107), confers identity upon a particular movement: it is its life-force. The work of subsequent philosophers can be read in part as an attempt to resolve this forceful objection within a mechanical framework. Occasionalists such as Malebranche introduce God as the motive force that sets and maintains material bodies in motion. A physical event, such as a collision, provides no more than an ‘occasion’ for God to move the colliding bodies in accordance with mechanical laws.¹⁷³ Occasionalist explanations are open to the same objection as traditional supernatural causes, namely, that they make particular physical events depend on a perpetual divine

¹⁷¹ See Montaigne: ii.12, 544a (for his criticism of atoms).

¹⁷² Ross 1645a: 24-26, 48.

¹⁷³ CHSP: 536-42; Clarke 1989: 111-19.

miracle.¹⁷⁴ Dynamic force is not only the ghost in the *bête-machine* but also the ghost that acts upon machines. Mechanical principles cannot explain the dynamic force of material bodies and living creatures that traditional terms like *substantial form* and *soul* name. These terms, however, provide no explanation but a mere refuge of ignorance. The only appropriate name for the imperceptible force that sets people and things into movement is perhaps the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

3. The nature of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

Can the concept of *force*, then, explain the nature of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*? It certainly provides an image for its effects within the realm of nature. The mechanical philosophy, we have seen, fails satisfactorily to replace scholastic explanations by forms, qualities, and quintessences. It does so, above all, because it lacks a sufficient concept of force. This Newton and Leibniz both attempt, in their different ways, to supply. They exemplify the conflicting tendencies that persist through changes in knowledge: one emphasizes the need for a precise description of experience, and the other, the need for necessary causal explanation. In their conflict, as in previous stages, the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* makes a series of ghostly apparitions. The conflict between Newton and Leibniz leaves the nature of force critically unresolved at the turn of the eighteenth century. Force, I shall argue, provides no ontological bedrock for the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* but, rather, an ‘objective correlative’.

Leibniz unfolds a new metaphysical explanation of force. Deleuze (1988) characterizes Leibniz’s contribution to philosophy through the multiple image of the ‘fold’ (*le pli*), which hides within terms such as *explicate* and, indeed, *multiple*.

¹⁷⁴ La Grange 1675: 211, 337; Leibniz 1996: 210-211.

Leibniz does not claim to break once and for all with the errors of the past, as Descartes does, but rather to explicate the obscure doctrines of all his predecessors within a clear new system. Théophile, Leibniz's spokesman in his dialogue with Locke, the *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain* (written around 1703 but not published until 1765), describes his conversion to this system.

J'ai été frappé d'un nouveau système [...]; et depuis je crois voir une nouvelle face des choses. Ce système paraît allier Platon avec Démocrite, Aristote avec Descartes, les scolastiques avec les modernes, la théologie et la morale avec la raison [...] Je trouve les vrais principes des choses dans les unités de substance que ce système introduit, et dans leur harmonie préétablie par la substance primitive.¹⁷⁵

Leibniz reconciles traditionalists and innovators, spiritual and mechanical principles, by bringing them into the light of pre-established harmony. His is a chiaroscuro philosophy that unfolds dark confusion (whether that of previous doctrines or of insensible phenomena) in the clear light of explanation.¹⁷⁶

Previous attempts to explain insensible forces have only shed darkness upon something that was itself already obscure. Those philosophers and doctors that call on occult qualities, Leibniz asserts, belong to the dark ages (1990: 52). They reveal their barbarism by multiplying refuges of ignorance and by placing in bodies unintelligible quasi-spiritual principles that obscure the divine design.¹⁷⁷ He is equally critical, however, of their mechanical opponents' inability to explain the vital perceptions of living creatures and the dynamic force of material bodies.¹⁷⁸ Locke, in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), dismisses the scholastics' idea of substance for being 'but a supposed, I know not what'.¹⁷⁹ Leibniz offers a partial defence of the substantial *je-ne-sais-quoi*, arguing: 'il en naît plusieurs conséquences

¹⁷⁵ Leibniz 1990: 56 (i.1).

¹⁷⁶ Deleuze 1988: 44-46.

¹⁷⁷ Leibniz-Thomasius 1993: 57; quoted in Roux 1996: 93.

¹⁷⁸ Leibniz 1996: 225-26 (*Principes de la nature et de la grâce*, §.4); Deleuze 1988: 16-17.

¹⁷⁹ Locke 1975: 305, 296 (ii.23).

des plus importantes de la philosophie et qui sont capables de lui donner une nouvelle face.¹⁸⁰ He reconciles spiritual and mechanical explanations by insisting that each has a place in the order of being: ‘tout se peut expliquer mécaniquement dans les choses matérielles, excepté les principes mêmes du mécanisme, qui ne sauraient être tirés de la seule considération de la matière.’¹⁸¹ Force is the missing principle. Bodies contain two distinct natures folded within them: one is passive matter, which moves in accordance with strictly mechanical laws; the other is dynamic force (*dunamis*), which provides the unity of its movement. Leibniz distinguishes his concept of active force from scholastic metaphysics by giving it precise mathematical expression (as mv^2).¹⁸² He uses the term *monad* (as well as *soul* and *vital principle*) to describe this force as a metaphysical entity.¹⁸³ God distributes purpose and active force in different degrees throughout his creation: ‘chaque Monade est un miroir vivant, ou doué d’action interne, représentatif de l’univers, suivant son point de vue’ (1996: 224). Spiritual monads and the material universe remain distinct and yet perfectly coincide; this, the fold that passes between them, is the work of divinely pre-established harmony. Leibniz explicates the concept of force by enfolding it within material bodies as their inner active principle; the clarity of mechanics returns to the dark metaphysical core of the monad whence it first comes. Leibniz unites in a single explanation the active force in material bodies and, we shall see (3.ii.3 below, 197-98), self-movement and perception in living creatures. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in his thought as a dark fold of sensory experience that the philosopher unfolds in the light of metaphysical explanation.

¹⁸⁰ Leibniz 1990: 170 (ii.23).

¹⁸¹ Leibniz 1996: 208.

¹⁸² See Gueroult 1967: 47.

¹⁸³ Leibniz 1996: 225-26 (*Principes de la nature et de la grâce*, §.4); Deleuze 1988: 33.

Newton asserts the existence of insensible force while refusing to offer any hypotheses about its nature. He agrees with Leibniz that mechanical principles are insufficient and introduces attraction, repulsion, gravity, and other insensible forces. His *Principia Mathematica* (1687) sets out three laws of motion that describe the action of force upon a body.¹⁸⁴ Newton claims simply to discover the mathematical laws governing the operations of such forces.¹⁸⁵ He eschews any explanation that is not derived from experience of these operations. When pressed for such an explanation, he offers contradictory ones that leave the matter unresolved.¹⁸⁶ Rather than establish the nature of gravitational force, he suspends the question:

I have not as yet been able to discover from phenomena the reason of those properties of gravity, and I feign no hypotheses. For whatever is not deduced from the phenomena must be called a hypothesis, and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, or based on occult qualities, or mechanical, have no place in experimental philosophy.¹⁸⁷

Newton belongs to the Baconian tradition of natural history: he prefers precise descriptions of experience to hypothetical explanations. In a letter to the churchman Richard Bentley, one of the first popularizers of his natural philosophy, he spells his position out in a language that everyone can understand. Newton sets out to disabuse Bentley of the notion that he considers gravitational force, as scholastics do their occult qualities, to be inherent in matter. Newton produces, not a substantival *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but a syntactical string: ‘pray do not ascribe that notion to me; for the Cause of Gravity is *what I do not pretend to know*.’¹⁸⁸ Newton distinguishes himself from the scholastic tradition, which transforms the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into a nescioquiddity within substances, and from the mechanical alternative, which explains it away as an illusory nothing. He suspends the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a real aliquid, one whose existence cannot

¹⁸⁴ Newton 1999: 416-17; Starobinski 1999: 33-39.

¹⁸⁵ CHSP: 543; Dear 2001: 162.

¹⁸⁶ CHSP: 494-95.

¹⁸⁷ Newton 1999: 943 (General Scholium).

¹⁸⁸ Newton 1978: 298 (letter of 17 January 1692-93); my italics.

be doubted, but whose cause he cannot be expected to explain. He ends the *Principia* in these terms: 'it is enough that gravity really exists and acts according to the laws that we have set forth.'¹⁸⁹ Newton suspends all judgement about the nature of insensible force while subjecting our experience of its effects to a mathematical description.

Leibniz and Newton each exhibit one of the two tendencies that divide early modern natural philosophers in their approach to the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Leibniz inherits from the schools tradition the ambition to enfold the universe in a single explanation. This leaves him vulnerable to objections frequently made against scholastic natural philosophy. The first is that his explanation, by placing dynamic purpose and force in material bodies, proves residually anthropomorphic.¹⁹⁰ The second is offered by Newton's disciple and editor, Roger Cotes, when he accuses Leibniz and the Cartesians of producing unverifiable explanations, or as he puts it, 'patching up a most absurd figment of their imagination'.¹⁹¹ Leibniz enfolds the experience of *je-ne-sais-quoi* in a dream of metaphysical explanation. Newton, however, refuses to judge the nature of such experiences. This leaves him vulnerable to the objection that he is providing a mere description without philosophical validity.¹⁹² Leibniz objects that Newton's gravitational force is 'inexplicable, unintelligible, precarious, groundless and unexampled, [...] a chimerical thing, a scholastic occult quality'.¹⁹³ The charge is that Newton, by refusing to explain force, freezes it as an inexplicable quality in the object. The heated conflict that Leibniz fights with Newton's followers over the concept of dynamic force in the early

¹⁸⁹ Newton 1999: 943 (General Scholium).

¹⁹⁰ See Pigeard de Gurbert 2000: 393-411.

¹⁹¹ Newton 1999: 393; quoted in Dear 2001: 165.

¹⁹² Dear 2001: 164.

¹⁹³ Alexander 1956: 94; quoted in CHSP: 503.

eighteenth century shows that the natural philosophical crisis provoked by the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* remains unresolved.

Force provides no ontological bedrock for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Still less do the occult qualities, substantial forms, quintessences, atoms, and corpuscles whose critical history I have traced in this chapter. The experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the realm of nature, we have seen, invites philosophical explanations of its nature only to frustrate them. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, by settling into the language as a noun substantive, becomes identified as a substantial principle hidden within things. It becomes ‘thingy’. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is no such ‘thing’ at all, however, but the vital movement of experience instead. Force provides at best what T. S. Eliot calls an ‘objective correlative’ for this experience in the realm of nature. Eliot defines the ‘objective correlative’ of an emotion in art as ‘a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts [...] are given, the emotion is immediately evoked’ (1932: 145). Force, in causing movements of attraction and repulsion between bodies, performs the chain of events that evokes the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Nothing is more common than such experiences: one has only to observe the cat chasing birds, feel the effects of a drug, or watch the tide drawing up and down the beach. But this force, whose existence cannot be doubted, remains impervious to explanation. The appearance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature is the real experience of some inexplicable force. Eliot defines a successful work of art as one that achieves the ‘complete adequacy’ of objective correlative to its experience. *Hamlet*, he argues, is a failure because its hero is overcome by some experience or emotion that can find no adequate correlative (1932: 145). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* fails, according to Eliot’s measure, as a concept in natural philosophy for precisely the same reason. But its ‘failure’ – like that of *Hamlet*

– is more vital than lesser successes. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* finds no adequate objective correlative or ontological bedrock: its nature is inexplicable. That is both its philosophical failure and its life-force. In the next chapter I shall describe the effects of this force upon passionate relations between individual people. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, we shall see, falls like a force upon lovers and friends as it does upon material bodies in the realm of nature.

3. THE PASSIONS

Qui voudra connaître à plein la vanité de l'homme n'a qu'à considérer les causes et les effets de l'amour. La cause en est un Je ne sais quoi. Corneille. Et les effets en sont effroyables.

— PASCAL

i. Lessons in love

1. A strange sympathy

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* falls upon each of us as the very stroke of passion. The opening of Bouhours's 'Le Je Ne Sçay Quoy' finds the two friends, Ariste and Eugène, wondering at the unwearied pleasure that both derive from their conversations. Theirs is a friendship so intense, Ariste suggests, that it bears comparison to a chaste love: 'toute vertueuse qu'elle est, elle [notre amitié] fait dans nous ce que l'amour fait dans les autres.' Eugène agrees: 'c'est à dire [...] qu'il faut que nous soyons faits l'un pour l'autre, et qu'il y ait une étrange sympathie entre nos esprits' (1962: 140). *Sympathie* is the strange force of attraction that draws lovers, friends, and strangers into an intimate relation. Ariste frames his reply to Eugène by describing his own experience of this sympathy:

L'ennuy qui me prend dès que nous sommes separez, la joye que me donnent nos plus longues conversations, le peu de cas que je fais des connoissances nouvelles, et le peu de soin que j'ay de cultiver mes anciennes habitudes, sont apparemment des effets d'une grande sympathie, et de ces

inclinations secrètes qui nous font sentir pour une personne je ne sçay quoy, que nous ne sentons point pour un autre.¹

This is the first occurrence of the word to which the two friends are to devote the rest of their conversation. It appears as a pronominal phrase upon which Ariste stumbles in an effort to describe what he means by *sympathie*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] works two semantic effects here. It asserts, first, that the strange sympathy between people – unlike that which we all commonly observe between the magnet and iron – is the stuff of particular experience alone. It emphasizes, second, the irreducible nescioquiddity that lies concealed within all apparently explanatory nouns like *sympathie*, *inclination*, *amitié*, and so on. Ariste dismisses the entire field of terms on which philosophers draw to explain such things as a refuge of ignorance (1962: 140). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a term born of my experience of inexplicable sympathy for a friend or lover. Saint-Evremond agrees: ‘l’Amitié a, comme l’Amour, son agréable je ne sai quoi.’² Ariste quotes Corneille’s line about ‘ces je ne sçay quoy qu’on ne peut expliquer’, asserting: ‘un de nos Poëtes en a mieux parlé que tous les Philosophes, il decide la chose en un mot.’³ He looks to poetry rather than philosophy for a pithy description of the strange sympathy acting upon him.⁴ This description, he claims later, applies equally well to the inexplicable movement of antipathy that one feels for a particular person. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is, in fact, ‘l’objet de la plupart de nos passions’. It strikes without warning against reason and will: ‘on aime, et on hait d’abord, sans que l’esprit s’en apperçoive, et si je l’ose dire, sans mesme que le cœur sçache’ (1962: 149). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* falls as the very stroke of passion.

¹ Bouhours 1962: 140.

² Saint-Evremond 1966: 533; Furetière 1701: ‘quoy’ (quoted 1.ii.2 above, p. 68).

³ Bouhours 1962: 141; quoting Corneille 1971: II (*Rodogune*, 359-62).

⁴ He also quotes Voiture, *Stances sur sa maîtresse*, vii (Bouhours 1962: 142); on this, see Génétiot 1997: 494.

The previous chapter took as its object the preternatural forces that act upon material bodies and offered a critical history of conflicting attempts, in vernacular natural philosophy, to explain them. The focus of this chapter shifts to the strange attraction exerted not by parts of matter but by individual humans. How can such attractions — between strangers, friends, or lovers — be explained or described? Why am I drawn to one particular person and not to so many others? I define the sense of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* here as the particular experience of passion that excites such questions. My readings are drawn from the wide field of vernacular writing — including philosophical treatises, polite conversations, *moraliste* writing, and drama — in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* finds a place in its period of lexical currency. The movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* across genres, which I trace here, dictates the mixed composition of this field: authors of systematic treatises explicitly attribute the term, as we shall see (3.ii.1 below), to the poets. I shall identify three tendencies towards the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in writing about the passions. The first is to accommodate it within a systematic science of the passions; the second — which I place at the heart of the chapter — is to describe its inexplicable onset, in particular situations, as a stroke of pure passion; the third is to cultivate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an agent of pathos. These tendencies correspond to the lexical development of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: the first, to its early substantivization, the second, to the noun's period of currency, and the third, to its sedimentation. The word's occurrences in writing about the passions confirm the shape of its history. But my argument in this chapter is not so much about history as about genre. I treat the stroke of passion not as an idea with a history but, rather, as a particular experience that releases different kinds of writing. I take the view that early modern writers such as Pascal give literary form to an experience that we twenty-first-century readers can recognize as something like our

own (see Introduction above, p. 24). They suffer a strange sympathy that is the result of no rational choice but of an inexplicable mutual passion. This falls upon the affected subject as a sudden stroke or, as the poets say, a *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

2. Vernacular treatises

The force of sympathy and antipathy between people, like that which acts upon material bodies, invites a diversity of explanations. The vernacular treatise exists to accommodate this diversity. Authors of treatises on love and the passions include information about their nature, causes, and practical treatments of their effects. They mix what we would now recognize as physiological approaches with psychological and ethical ones in a systematic science of the passions. This they frame as a survey of existing definitions. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as we shall see (3.ii.1 below), appears among these as a moment of hesitation and indefinition about the very possibility of a systematic science. Treatise writers, faced with diverse explanations of strange sympathies and antipathies, suggest that none adequately delivers their causes.

Some vernacular treatise writers treat love in isolation from among the other passions. They identify it as an affliction of the body and soul. Pierre Boaistuau does so in his popular and widely read *Le Théâtre du Monde* (1558), to which I shall return (3.ii.1 below, pp. 171-72). Medical authors examine lovesickness as a form of melancholy.⁵ André du Laurens suggests in his *Discours des maladies melancoliques* (1597) that lovers should be treated as true melancholics.⁶ Two medical authors develop his suggestion: Jean de Veyries, who frames his *Généalogie de l'amour*

⁵ See Dandrey 1998: 457-575 (for a full examination of erotic melancholy).

⁶ Du Laurens 1598: 324.

(1609) as a polite conversation; and Jacques Ferrand, whose study of lovesickness appears in its second form under the title *De la maladie d'amour* (1623).⁷ Ferrand seeks to engage his readers by offering a variety of sources while also instructing them about lovesickness in the manner of a scholastic medical treatise.⁸ The work of Ferrand and his predecessors was translated and widely read in England.⁹ The English reception of French texts on melancholy may explain why the lexicographer Blount suggests, in 1656, that those 'troubled with the *Je-ne-sçay-quoy*', as he puts it, claim to be suffering from some unknown melancholic affliction (quoted in 1.i.4 above, p. 60). Medical writers offer their work as an antidote to lovesickness.¹⁰

Other vernacular writers accommodate love within a systematic philosophical treatise of all the passions. The genre enjoys a European-wide vogue from the late sixteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth.¹¹ My use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a lexical tracer means that I will concentrate on French texts while making occasional forays into their English counterparts. The first full-length version of the genre published in France is the work of the bishop and prose writer Jean-Pierre Camus.¹² Camus's vast work *Les Diversitez* (1609) includes an entire book, 'Traittant des Passions de l'Ame', in its ninth volume. Like Camus, the Dominican bishop Nicolas Coëffeteau, in his *Tableau des passions humaines* (1620), offers practical precepts about how to employ the passions to virtuous ends; so, in turn, does the Oratorian Jean-François Senault in his *De l'usage des passions* (1641).¹³ The learned physician and society figure Marin Cureau de la Chambre offers a physiognomical approach in

⁷ Veyries 1610: fol. i^r ('Au Lecteur'); Beecher and Ciavolella 1990: 26-39.

⁸ Beecher and Ciavolella 1990: 22-23.

⁹ Beecher and Ciavolella 1990: 14-16.

¹⁰ Ferrand 1623: A4^r; Veyries 1610: 110.

¹¹ Fumaroli 1980: 389; French examples of the genre are the subject of Levi 1964. English examples include Wright 1604; Greenwood 1657; Charleton 1674; these are the subject of Müller 1999.

¹² On Camus, see Robic de Baecque 1999.

¹³ Camus 1612: IX, 693; Coëffeteau 1620; Levi 1964: 142-52, 214-18.

Les Caracteres des passions (1640).¹⁴ Descartes's *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649) is the most famous example of the treatise genre initiated by Camus and, as we shall see (3.i.3 below), the most distinctive.

Camus's self-appointed role as a trustworthy mediator of learned debates to the unlearned, his syncretic approach, and his reliance on the scholastic bedrock make his treatise typical of the vernacular treatise genre before Descartes. The genre belongs to the literature of the new philosophy: it aims to translate learned work on the passions into a form that a mixed, vernacular readership can enjoy and understand. Montaigne is once again the father figure here, and his *Essais*, a generic precursor of Camus's *Diversitez*.¹⁵ Montaigne, in his chapter on love ('Sur des vers de Virgile'), criticizes the neoplatonist and scholastic traditions alike for their scientific abstraction about the most intimate of experiences.

[b] Les sciences traictent les choses trop finement [...] Mon page faict l'amour et l'entend. Lisez luy Leon Hébreu et Ficin: on parle de luy, de ses pensées et de ses actions, et si il n'y entend rien. Je ne recognois pas chez Aristote la plus part de mes mouvemens ordinaires: on les a couverts et revestus d'une autre robbe pour l'usage de l'eschole. Dieu leur doint bien faire! Si j'estois du mestier, je [c] naturaliserois l'art comme ils artialisent la nature.¹⁶

Montaigne imagines stripping away the scholastic trappings of learned discourse to reveal his page or himself in the most natural of 'movements'. At such moments, he sweeps others' learned explanations to one side and turns to the poets in order to recapture his own experience of love (see 5.iii.1 below, p. 295). Camus's main concern is that his treatise should prove useful to 'les simples, pour qui je besongne' (1612: IX, 119). He and other treatise writers agree that love is a complex experience, affecting body and soul alike, and that theologians, doctors, lawyers, philosophers,

¹⁴ Doranlo 1939: 13-35; Levi 1964: 248-49; Maclean 2002: 315-19 (on physiognomy).

¹⁵ Camus 1612: VIII, bk. 29, 409-60; Boase 1935: 114-35.

¹⁶ Montaigne: iii.5, 874.

and poets all have different lessons to offer.¹⁷ Treatise writers draw these lessons into a syncretic survey for their readers. Medical writers quote the Galenic tag, *optimus medicus philosophicus* ('the best doctor is a philosopher'), to justify their use of philosophical sources as well as those drawn from their own discipline.¹⁸ Camus fulfils the promise of his title by offering his readers a 'diversity' of approaches to the passions that affect them. He and his successors produce a critical survey of diverse lessons in love.

Treatise writers agree that love is the most powerful of all the passions: 'c'est l'Amour qui arme toutes les autres Passions.'¹⁹ Camus, typically, accommodates the diversity of philosophical doctrines about love within a scholastic framework. He treats love first of all by examining its nature and division, then its causes, its effects, properties, and its object. This provokes the pious reflection that the only true object of love is God. Two concluding chapters describe the love between God and humankind although Camus proposes to deal exclusively with this subject in a separate work (1612: IX, 239). He and other treatise writers, as we shall see (3.ii.1 below), initially suggest that love frustrates definition. But they go on to set out a systematic science of the passion. They ascribe the causes of love to one of the same three realms – universal, superlunary, and natural – as philosophers do the causes of insensible forces in nature.²⁰

(I) Universal vitalist explanations by sympathy are widespread in the field of the passions. Aristophanes, in Plato's *Symposium*, talks of a 'something else' (*allo ti*) for which two lovers search, 'a something to which they can neither of them put a

¹⁷ Camus 1612: IX, fol. i^v; Veyries 1610: fol. i^r; Cureau de la Chambre 1658: I, 12^v-13^r.

¹⁸ Ferrand 1623: 151; Maclean 2002: 81; Dandrey 1998: 541-43.

¹⁹ Ceriziers 1651: III, 197; Chalesme 1671: 66; Rodis-Lewis 1995: 311-12.

²⁰ The following survey corresponds to that set out in 2.i.2 above.

name, and which they can only give an inkling of in cryptic sayings and prophetic riddles' (Plato 1961: *Symposium*, 192c-d). The *allo ti* sought by Aristophanes's lovers is the other half of the primal unity from which each was divided before birth.²¹ Treatise writers refer to this myth of a cosmic *je-ne-sais-quoi* of love.²² Their division of love bears visible traces of the theory that Marsilio Ficino elaborates in his late fifteenth-century commentary on the *Symposium*.²³ Camus and others repeat Ficino's distinction between the five sorts of love: divine, angelic, rational, sensitive (or animal), and natural (or inanimate).²⁴ Natural love is the universal principle that unites all things: it is 'cette qualité occulte, et ce Principe secrettement infus, et diffus que vulgairement on nomme Nature' (Camus 1612: IX, 127). *Nature*, *sympathy*, *love*, and *God*, Coëffeteau says, are so many names for the same universal occult quality (1620: 80). So too is *amitié* ('friendship'), a term ill-served by its modern English translation, because it may refer to the metaphysical relation between form and matter, or the physical one between magnet and iron, as well as different relations between two people.²⁵ Ficino's theory explains love in physiological terms as a fascination transmitted through tiny blood particles from the eyes of the beloved to those of the lover.²⁶ Camus devotes an entire chapter to *sympathie* because it is, he asserts, 'le ressort à mon advis le plus energic, et efficace pour la conjuncture d'amour' (1612: IX, 131). The inclination of inanimate bodies, the coupling of dumb beasts, and the choices of rational beings are diverse effects of the universal cause.

²¹ Plato 1961: *Symposium*, 191d-e; Jankélévitch 1980: I, 12.

²² Camus 1612: IX, 134; Du Bosc 1635: 426.

²³ Dandrey 1998: 511-21; Allen 1995.

²⁴ Camus 1612: IX, 126; Coëffeteau 1620: 80-82, Levi 1964: 149.

²⁵ See Renaudot 1638-55: II, 83-91 (conf. 38); Langer 1994: 71 and 118-20.

²⁶ Boaistuau 1981: 214-15; Montaigne: i.21, 105a; Ferrand 1623: 55-56; Bacon 1996: II, 653 (*Sylva Sylvarum*, §.944).

(II) Astrology commonly offers a remote superlunary cause for the onset of love. This explanation is as controversial in the realm of the passions as in natural philosophy (see 2.i.2 above, p. 104). Astrology says that love is the conformity of two souls born under the same star.²⁷ Honoré d'Urfé, writing in the same decade as Camus, makes astrological explanations popular in his pastoral romance *L'Astrée* (1607-19).²⁸ Camus evaluates them when discussing strange cases of instant sympathy and antipathy:

l'on voyt, disent les speculatifs, que de deux hommes, qui ne seront esgalement incogneus le prim'abord me conviera d'aymer cettuy-cy et m'alienera de celuy-là, que toutes les actions de l'un me plaisent, de l'autre me desagréent. Si ce sont Astrologues, ils tiendront cela aux aspects des planettes, faisants ployer, et bransler les cieux sous nos inclinations: si ce sont Theologiens, aux mœurs des personnes: si Naturalistes, aux temperamens, mais tous aboutissent en fin à la sympathie, ou dispathie.²⁹

Camus is visibly sceptical about the astrological explanation. He uses causative verbal constructions ('faisants ployer') to invert the hierarchy between the upper and lower worlds so that the astrologers themselves are seen placing their amorous inclinations on a star.

(III) Treatise writers commonly ascribe the onset of love to two natural causes, one in the body, and the other in the soul. Doctors rely on the Galenic theory that the substantial form of each individual possesses four humours (sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, or choleric) in varying degrees.³⁰ The interaction of their humoral temperaments determines the relations between individuals. Boaistuau encapsulates this view: 'les physiciens disent que ceste furie d'amour [...] procede de la

²⁷ Boaistuau 1981: 214; Du Bosc 1635: 427; Nadal 1948: 88-89.

²⁸ Urfé 1925: III, 263-64; quoted and analysed in Cuenin 1987: 91-93.

²⁹ Camus 1612: IX, 136.

³⁰ Harvey 1975: 4-5.

correspondante qualité du sang, et que la complection engendre ce mutuel amour' (1981: 214). *Sympathie* here means the happy conjunction of two humoral natures.³¹

Where doctors place the natural cause of love in the body, philosophers in the scholastic tradition ascribe it to the soul. They reproduce Aquinas's tripartite division and definition of the soul and its passions.³² Aquinas, after Aristotle, gives a comprehensive definition of the powers that all animate bodies, from plants to humans, possess. These are five in number: nutrition (growth and generation), appetite, sensation, movement, and reason (intellect and will). Plants have only the first of these powers: this belongs to the 'vegetative' part of the soul. Animals possess this as well as the next three powers (located in the 'sensitive' soul). The human soul has, in addition to the vegetative and sensitive, a third 'rational' part.³³ Appetite in the sensitive soul is the faculty by which humans first experience the eleven passions (love and hatred, desire and aversion, joy and sadness, hope and despair, audacity and fear, and anger, which has no opposite). Camus's definition of passion is traditional: 'la Passion est un mouvement de l'Ame qui se fait en l'appetit sensitif, pour la suite d'un bien ou la suite d'un mal, vray ou apparent'.³⁴ Passion starts in the lower sensitive part of the soul, where the wild things are, but can move up into the higher part where it takes on a rational character. Love is an example of this. It lurks in the sensitive appetite as the animal inclination that we share with the beasts of the field: 'cette Passion est bien souvent aveugle, importune, obstinée, et insolente.'³⁵ Reasonable love, which requires prior knowledge and an act of the will, takes place in the human part of the soul. Camus calls this *amour d'amitié* as though rational love

³¹ Académie Française 1694: 'sympathie'; Furetière 1690: 'sympathie'.

³² Camus 1612: IX, 96; Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (Ia IIae, 22-48); Rodis-Lewis 1955: 21-28.

³³ Camus 1612: IX, 70-74; Harvey 1975: 33; Des Chene 2000: 155-69.

³⁴ Camus 1612: IX, 70; Cureau de la Chambre 1658: I, 7^v.

³⁵ Coëffeteau 1620: 94; Camus 1612: IX, 126.

were closer to friendship than animal inclination.³⁶ Bouhours alludes to this rational definition of love in his conversation on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: ‘les Philosophes [...] ont soutenu de tout temps que la connoissance precede l’amour; que la volonté n’aime rien qui ne soit connu de l’entendement’ (1962: 142). The higher rational soul directs the passions, from above, towards right and wrong actions. Love is the primary example: ‘le Philosophe tient qu’aymer n’est autre chose que vouloir du bien.’³⁷ Human love, in this tradition, is the tendency of the rational soul towards what is good. The vernacular treatises accommodate both this form of love and its sensual counterpart within their science of the passions. They stress, however, that human love needs to move upwards in the tripartite soul from a bestial inclination to become an act of reason.

Treatise writers show the same rationalist tendency as they construe the power of the soul to experience love. Philosophers specify a specific faculty, or ‘power of estimation’ (*vis estimativa*), by which animals and humans experience the insensible forces of sympathy and antipathy: ‘l’estimative connoist ce qui ne tombe pas sous les sens, comme la haine et l’amour’ (Ceriziers 1651: II, 211). Estimation is one of the five internal powers of the sensitive appetite, lodged between the memory and the imagination, with which it is sometimes confused. The lamb that feels an instinctive antipathy for the wolf, and the newborn baby who somehow knows how to suck at the mother’s breast, do so by estimation.³⁸ It is a hidden perception and instinct confirmed by reiterated experience. Philosophers are divided over the status of estimation in humans. Avicenna attributes the same power to animals and humans alike. In both, estimation is the instinctive bodily perception of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Aquinas, who

³⁶ Camus 1612: IX, 129; Coëffeteau 1620: 97-113.

³⁷ Camus 1612: IX, 86; Senault 1987: 162; Levi 1964: 33.

³⁸ Binet 1987: 553-54; Renaudot 1638-55: II, 557-559 (conf. 54); Harvey 1975: 41-45.

insists that free will distinguishes humans from animals, rationalizes the power of estimation in humans as a deliberate act of ‘cogitation’.³⁹ Treatise writers follow him: Binet, for example, talks of ‘cette puissance qu’és bestes se dit estimative, és hommes cogitative’ (1987: 553). Humans, like animals, can experience love as a bodily inclination; what makes them human, however, is their ability to know and choose their object of love. Treatise writers insist that both forms of love exist; their tendency to move from one to the other, however, is unmistakeable.

How do passions climb from their initial place, near the body in the sensitive part of the soul, to its higher rational part? Treatise writers tend to avoid giving a precise answer to questions, such as this one, that require a full account of the relationship between body and soul. They name a series of intermediary principles: passions (for philosophers) and humours, spirits, and wits (for doctors) are invoked as nature’s subtle go-betweens in the relationship that keeps body and soul together.⁴⁰ Their existence is said to be as self-evident as their location, and mode of operation, is obscure. The *vis estimativa*, for example, has no discrete chamber in the brain: the faculty of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, it appears, is hidden *je-ne-sais-où*. Doctors tend to leave such problems to the philosophers while treating symptoms in the body.⁴¹ Philosophers, when pressed for an explanation, retreat into the now familiar refuge of ignorance: it is simply in the nature of the soul, they say, to have such hidden qualities. The soul appears at such moments as an intrinsic *je-ne-sais-quoi* by another name. Camus says: ‘l’ame humaine est un gouffre abyssal, un secret si obscur et abstrus [...] que je ne pourrais m’y plonger pour si peu, sans allonger

³⁹ Harvey 1975: 45-46, 55.

⁴⁰ Dandrey 1998: 464; Harvey 1975: 40.

⁴¹ Harvey 1975: 23-24.

merveilleusement ce chapitre'.⁴² He and others stop short of asserting the terminal nescioquiddity of the human soul and its passions; they claim instead that all they lack is the necessary space for a full explanation and continue their survey of learned doctrines. The momentary recognition that the sciences of passion cannot fully explain the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is one more of the lessons in love that treatise writers, before Descartes, offer their readers.

3. Descartes in love

Descartes eliminates the word *je-ne-sais-quoi* from his account of the passions, but he is haunted by the experience. *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649), like earlier treatises, attempts to bring love within a systematic science. It accomplishes the study of the passions that Descartes announced in his *Principes* and committed to paper at the request of Princess Elisabeth.⁴³ Descartes rejects his predecessors in this tradition both for reviewing previous doctrines and for retaining the tripartite soul of the scholastics.⁴⁴ Earlier treatise writers, as we have seen (3.i.2 above, pp. 164-65), describe the relation between body and soul as obscure. Descartes, in his attempt to explain this relation, examines the passions as modes of interaction between the immaterial mind and the material body.⁴⁵ He argues, as his title (*Les Passions de l'âme*) suggests, that the mind 'suffers' the action of the body before in turn reacting.⁴⁶ He analyses the passions according to their distinct functions in the mind and body.

⁴² Camus 1612: IX, 71; Cureau de la Chambre 1658: 12^v.

⁴³ Descartes 1964: IX (*Principes*, iv.189-90); Rodis-Lewis 1995: 305.

⁴⁴ Descartes 1964: XI (*Les Passions de l'âme*, §§.1 and 47).

⁴⁵ Descartes 1964: IX, 326; Rodis-Lewis 1995: 305; Gaukroger 1995: 400.

⁴⁶ Rodis-Lewis 1995: 306.

This mode of analysis is apparent in Descartes's correspondence on the topic of love with Christina of Sweden, who put a series of questions to him through the French Resident in Stockholm, Chanut, between December 1646 and May 1647. Chanut asks Descartes, first, to define the nature of love.⁴⁷ Descartes, in reply, distinguishes between sensual love (the body's action on the mind) and rational love (the reaction of the mind). The two, he argues with reference to his *Principes*, exist independently of one another but in constant interaction. Sensual love is a confused thought by which the mind is disposed to produce the clear thought of rational love.⁴⁸ Descartes draws upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] to characterize the 'pensée confuse' of love:

comme en la soif le sentiment qu'on a de la secheresse du gosier, est une pensée confuse qui dispose au desir de boire, mais qui n'est pas ce desir mesme; ainsi en l'amour on sent je ne sçay quelle chaleur autour du cœur, et une grande abondance de sang dans le poumon, qui fait qu'on ouvre mesme les bras comme pour embrasser quelque chose, et cela rend l'ame encline à joindre à soy de volonté l'objet qui se presente.⁴⁹

I first experience love, which is ultimately a clear act of the rational will, as no more than a confused feeling of heat. Descartes emphasizes the subjective nature of this confusion by using the first-person *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] to describe *chaleur*. What, though, initially causes this feeling? He suggests that, from the moment that it is first joined to the body, the mind experiences love and other passions as sensations. The principle of association means that the same sensations, from childhood onwards, tend to accompany the same rational acts of the mind (1964: IV, 604). These sensations remain confused and confusing for the subject (1964: IV, 606). But the task of the philosopher is to dispel this confusion by distinguishing between mere sensations and the rational act of love.

⁴⁷ Chanut's question survives in Descartes's reply (1964: IV, 601).

⁴⁸ Descartes 1964: IV, 602-03; IX (*Principes*, iv.189-90).

⁴⁹ Descartes 1964: IV, 603.

The account of interpersonal attraction that Descartes offers in the *Passions de l'âme* reproduces the distinctions made in the letter to Chanut.⁵⁰ He seeks to eliminate the confused thought of love. Descartes's terminology alters so that the term *amour* comes exclusively to designate the clear thought of rational love: 'l'Amour est une emotion de l'ame, causée par le mouvement des esprits, qui l'incite à se joindre de volonté aux objets qui paroissent luy estre convenables'.⁵¹ The confused initial sensation of sensual desire he describes henceforth as 'Agréement', and its counterpart, as 'horreur'.⁵² Desire occurs when one individual is attracted to another:

lorsqu'on remarque quelque chose en une [personne], qui agréé davantage que ce qu'on remarque au mesme temps dans les autres, cela determine l'ame à sentir pour celle là seule toute l'inclination que la Nature luy donne à rechercher le bien, qu'elle luy represente comme le plus grand qu'on puisse posseder. Et cette inclination ou ce Desir qui naist ainsi de l'Agréement, est appellé du nom d'Amour, plus ordinairement que la passion d'Amour qui a cy dessus esté descrite. Aussi a-t[-]il de plus estranges effects, et c'est luy qui sert de principale matiere aux faiseurs de Romans et aux Poëtes.⁵³

Sensual desire – what most of us (Descartes says) call 'love' – is a confused inclination for a person who is felt to possess a unique 'something' (*quelque chose*). Descartes's indefinite *quelque chose*, a less ostentatious locution than the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, is in fact semantically equivalent to it. He seeks to lend it a rational air by relating desire to the mind's search for goodness. He does not explain the nature of this relation, however, and it is difficult to see why, if sensual desire is indeed rationally determined, he should wish to distinguish it from the clear thought of love. Ockham's razor could simply eliminate desire as a superfluous concept. But Descartes retains the distinction. The implication is that desire is truly distinct from love because its effects are felt without being understood: 'aussi a-t-il de plus estranges effects'. It is the very strangeness of this thing called *desire* that makes it the stuff of literature:

⁵⁰ Levi 1964: 276-79.

⁵¹ Descartes 1964: XI (*Les Passions de l'âme*, §.79).

⁵² Descartes 1964: XI (*Les Passions de l'âme*, §§.85, 89-90).

⁵³ Descartes 1964: XI (*Passions de l'âme*, §.90).

‘c’est luy qui sert de principale matiere aux faiseurs de Romans et aux Poëtes’. Descartes seeks to eliminate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from his science of the passions. But the *quelque chose* which prompts desire is none other than a concealed *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

This critical reaction to Descartes’s *Passions de l’âme* may appear to adopt an aggressively modern perspective. A contemporary reader of Descartes, Chanut, offers in fact the same objection. Descartes, he suggests, has not satisfactorily answered Christina of Sweden’s question about the nature of love. In a further letter to him, Chanut tries again: ‘la question étoit de sçavoir clairement quelle est cette impulsion secrète qui nous porte dans l’amitié d’une personne plutôt que d’une autre, avant même que d’en connoître le mérite?’ (Descartes 1964: v, 21). Chanut’s talk of an *impulsion secrète*, and his emphasis on the fact that its action precedes reason, are semantically equivalent to Bouhours’s characterization of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a force that strikes without warning against reason and will.⁵⁴ Chanut and Bouhours both suggest that desire is an instinctive movement, which the subject experiences, but which remains inaccessible to any act of cognition: that it is, in modern terms, unconscious.⁵⁵

Descartes’s reply to this suggestion is evasive to say the least. Secret impulses, he replies, have distinct causes in the mind and body. He refuses to discuss the former, since it raises fundamental questions about the nature of the soul that he is unwilling to pursue (1964: v, 56). The latter he attempts to explain by the principle of association:

⁵⁴ Bouhours 1962: 147; see 3.i.1 above, pp. 153-54.

⁵⁵ On Descartes and the problem of the unconscious, see Rodis-Lewis 1950.

ainsi, lors que nous sommes portez à aimer quelqu'un, sans que nous en sçachions la cause, nous pouvons croire que cela vient de ce qu'il y a quelque chose en luy de semblable à ce qui a esté dans un autre objet que nous avons aimé auparavant, encore que nous ne sçachions pas ce que c'est.⁵⁶

Descartes defines the *quelque chose* of *Les Passions de l'âme* here as an unconscious reminiscence of a previous love.⁵⁷ He illustrates his argument by telling a story drawn from his own experience. As a child, he recalls, he loved a girl with a wandering eye ('j'aimois une fille de mon âge, qui estoit un peu louche'); thereafter, he found himself strangely attracted to people who squinted until he recognized the cause of his predilection (1964: v, 57). An unwitting association, he says, explains the so-called 'inclinations secretes' that he felt towards others with the same condition as that first girl (1964: v, 58). The principle of association clearly deals with these subsequent passions. But it fails to explain *what it was* in that first squinting girl that drew the young Descartes to fall into love. All that is mentioned is the simple fact that he loved her: 'j'aimois une fille de mon âge'. One could envisage explanations of Descartes's love, but none is offered.⁵⁸ His anecdote subverts its explanatory function and leaves the stroke of passion unexplained. Nothing in the letter indicates that this effect is intentional. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* that he chases from *Les Passions de l'âme* returns, like a ghost, to haunt Descartes in love.

⁵⁶ Descartes 1964: v, 57.

⁵⁷ See Rodis-Lewis 1995: 322.

⁵⁸ One would be to argue that some prior association caused the onset of love for the girl; this risks an infinite regression (see 2.iii.2 above, pp. 144-45). Another would be to invoke a hidden quality of the soul, a quasi-scholastic solution which Descartes avoids.

ii. The stroke of passion

*Celuy qui disoit [de l'amour] que c'estoit un je ne sçay quoy,
qui venoit de je ne sçay où, et qui s'en alloit je ne sçay
comment, n'est pas un de ceux qui a le plus mal rencontré.*

— CUREAU DE LA CHAMBRE

1. 'Deffinitions indefinies': two commonplaces

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* undermines the rational sciences of explanation by falling as a sudden and inexplicable stroke of passion. Most vernacular treatise writers, in attempting to define love, betray the uncertainty that Descartes seeks unsuccessfully to banish. They include two commonplaces about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to suggest that love can only ever be subject to what Camus calls 'deffinitions indefinies' (1612: IX, 315).

The passions, as I mentioned earlier (1.i.3 (IV) above, pp. 54-56), excite two early occurrences of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* published in the same year (1558). Du Bellay, in an 'Elegie d'amour', uses the pronominal form when describing the sudden onset of love between strangers:

D'où vient souvent qu'on ayme à l'aventure
Un incogneu, et ne sçait on pourquoy,
Fors que l'on trouve en luy je ne sçay quoy,
Qui à l'aymer par force nous incite,
Comme le fer, qui suyt la calamite.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Du Bellay 1908: v, 80.

Du Bellay frames his question as a story in which a common subject (*on*) experiences an attractive something in a stranger without being able to explain either what this is or what causes it. The syntactical string ‘et ne sçait on pourquoy’ and the quasi-substantival ‘je ne sçay quoy’ rhyme semantically as well as phonetically. At the end of the last chapter (2.iii.3 above, pp. 151-52), I proposed the insensible force that draws the iron towards the magnet as an objective correlative for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature. Du Bellay draws this force into his poem as a simile for the stroke of passion that falls, suddenly and as if by chance (‘souvent’, ‘à l’aventure’), upon the amorous subject.

Pierre Boaistuau’s *Le Théâtre du Monde* (1558), published in the same year as Du Bellay’s poem, contains the second occurrence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the field of the passions. Boaistuau presents his text as a vast theatre of human misery in which love is an ever-active force. His discussion of love draws patristic, medical, philosophical, and literary sources into an encyclopedic mixture that makes *Le Théâtre du Monde* a generic precursor of the vernacular treatise. But where treatise writers offer their work as an antidote to passion, or a guide to its proper regulation, Boaistuau can only warn that love is a disastrous affliction.⁶⁰ He proves this to his readers by providing a critical review of medical, astrological, and philosophical attempts to explain the onset of love.⁶¹ Such attempts, he concludes, end in failure:

les autres après avoir fantastiqué tout ce qu’ils ont peu, et ne pouvans au vray concevoir la source et origine d’un si furieux mal, ont dict qu’amour estoit un je ne sçay quoy, qui venoit je ne sçay comment, et s’enflammoit je ne sçay comment, chose certaine et veritable: car qui voudra considerer les gestes, façons de faire, eclipses de ces pauvres passionnez, il confessera qu’il ne veit oncques une metamorphose plus estrange ou spectacle plus ridicule.⁶²

⁶⁰ Boaistuau 1981: 221, 218.

⁶¹ Boaistuau 1981: 214.

⁶² Boaistuau 1981: 215.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] here describes love as an affliction, whose effects are all too manifest, while its cause remains inexplicable ('qui venoit je ne sçay comment'). Boaistuau repeats forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in a stammer of nescioquiddity. He presents this, not as his own invention, but as a popular saying.⁶³ It is a fact about love ('chose certaine et veritable'), he suggests, that the rest of us understand but that has escaped the over-subtle philosophers. Boaistuau and Du Bellay, writing in the mid-sixteenth century, both present the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of love as a commonplace stroke against the sciences of passion.

Camus's attempted definition of love is marked by the uncertainty typical of vernacular treatises. A sufficient definition, we saw earlier (1.ii.3 above, p. 76), is fully convertible with the thing being defined. Camus, who knows this, starts his review of previous definitions with a warning: 'toute definition [...] est perilleuse: mais principalement en ceste matiere d'Amour: Chacun en parle, peu cognoissent ceste passion, tous la pensent voir, mesmes la ressentir: mais au definir il y a toujours quelque encloüere' (1612: IX, 119). Attempts to define love, while legion, invariably end in failure. Camus lists those of the most important figures, from Socrates through the Church Fathers to Leone Ebreo (1612: IX, 119-124). He briefly entertains Leone's definition but does not, as Anthony Levi suggests, espouse it.⁶⁴ It too is insufficient: 'il y auroit prou à regratter à qui voudroit sejourner icy' (1612: IX, 123). He ends by according the most reluctant support possible to Aristotle's notion that love is an act by which the rational part of the soul seeks the good:

⁶³ I have been able to trace no textual source for this commonplace. A collection of contemporary proverbs offers no convincing lead (Flandrin 1975: 89-91). Neither does the secondary literature on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The source may be one of the many Latin or Italian humanist texts from which Boaistuau draws many of his examples.

⁶⁴ Levi 1964: 128. Levi's rationalist persuasion leads him to ignore the uncertainties that are rife in vernacular treatises.

le Philosophe tient qu'aymer n'est autre chose que vouloir du bien. Bref autant de testes, autant de sentences, d'en avancer aucune de mon cœur, je n'ay garde en une matiere si obscure: je me contenteray de dire qu'emmy cette multitude, je donnerois plutost ma voix à la derniere, estimant avec le Genie de la nature, l'Amour n'estre autre chose qu'une bien-veillance, et aymer vouloir du bien.⁶⁵

Camus couches his acceptance of the scholastic definition in nothing more than a conditional syntax ('je donnerois plutost ma voix'). He proves reluctant to dignify Aristotle's doctrine with the status of a definition. Love, he insists, has received 'nulles definitions, prou de descriptions' and can only be described through its effects.⁶⁶ Love, Camus suggests later, is subject only to 'deffinitions indefinies'.⁶⁷

But Camus, rather than pursuing this indefinition into a radical nescioquiddity, settles his treatment of the topic into the scholastic explanatory framework. He includes both commonplaces in his moment of indefinition. Du Bellay's story of sudden sympathy between strangers reappears (quoted on pp. 170-71 above). Camus uses Socrates's description, the first that he reviews, to assert love's intrinsic nescioquiddity. He returns to the commonplace found earlier in Boaistuau:

l'Amour, faict-il, est je ne sçay quoy qui blesse, je ne sçay comment, et brusle d'une maniere je ne sçay quelle; et puis allez traçant des definitions apres ce grand esprit, le premier et plus cher mignon de la Philosophie; il y a bien pensé, et apres avoir profondé ce ressort, il nous paye de son ordinaire refrain, *Je ne sçay*.⁶⁸

Socrates's assertion, as Camus reports it, is saturated with forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in an anaphora of negation. The nature of love and its efficient cause cannot be known. Only its effects are manifest: it injures and burns the sufferer. Camus proves ambivalent about this description of love. He initially criticizes Socrates for having taken a refuge of ignorance ('il nous paye de son ordinaire refrain'). Later in the paragraph, however, Camus implies that this refuge is in fact a true aporia because

⁶⁵ Camus 1612: IX, 123-24.

⁶⁶ Camus 1612: IX, 119, 125; Ferrand 1623: 24; 1.ii.3 above, p. 76 (on definition and description).

⁶⁷ Camus 1612: IX, 315; Senault 1987: 160.

⁶⁸ Camus 1612: IX 119-20.

love is by nature I-know-not-what (1612: IX, 120). The philosopher can only shed further darkness on love's dark core: 'bref il en fait [...] un *Je ne scay quoy*' (1612: IX, 120). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] names love as an inexplicable force that acts upon the subject. Camus expresses a certain hesitant unease about the radical irrationalism of this image of love, as he does subsequently about its rational definitions. The unease is fully exorcized in neither case. Within the diversity of love lurks the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

Camus, like Boaistuau, presents the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of love as a quotation from another source. But where Boaistuau uses it to deliver a stroke against philosophy from without, Camus attributes the assertion to a major philosophical figure. There is no clear source for his attribution, which seems to conflate two distinct loci. Plato and Xenophon each wrote a *Symposium* in which Socrates discusses the subject of love with friends and fellow philosophers. Both texts contain candidates for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Camus. One, as we have already seen (3.i.2 above, pp. 159-60), is Aristophanes's cosmic myth of primal unity in Plato's *Symposium*. Camus introduces the Socratic assertion that love is 'je ne scay quoy qui blesse', however, within a different narrative context:

il [Socrate] lisoit dans un livre, Alcibiade, pour lire quand et luy, s'appuye sur son espaulle: je sentis, dit-il, de ce toucher, comme une picqueure qui me coula du bras dans le cœur, c'estoit une pointure d'Amour (laissons l'abomination Grecque) qu'il décrit comme cela simplement.⁶⁹

This anecdote, as Geneviève Rodis-Lewis has pointed out (1995: 318), is a confused reminiscence of a passage in the *Symposium* of Xenophon. Socrates is reminded there of the occasion on which he and the beautiful young Critobulus (Camus substitutes Alcibiades) sat reading with their naked shoulders touching. Socrates exclaims: 'so

⁶⁹ Camus 1612: IX 120.

that is what affected me like the bite of a wild animal! And for over five days my shoulder smarted and I felt as if I had something like a sting in my heart.’⁷⁰ The *something*, which Socrates remembers stinging him, Camus vividly renders in the assertion ‘l’Amour [...] est je ne sçay quoy qui blesse, je ne sçay comment, et brusle d’une maniere je ne sçay quelle’. Socrates’s anecdote recounts the sudden onset of physical desire between men or what Camus, like Montaigne (i.28, 187a), apologetically calls the ‘Greek abomination’. Love is not the expression of primal unity, or of astral conjunction: it is like being bitten by a wild animal. Camus reproduces the content of Socrates’s anecdote in Xenophon here; but he does so in a form more akin to the spirit of definition that governs Aristophanes’s speech in Plato. An intertext between the *Symposium* of Xenophon (iv.28) and that of Plato (191d-e) allows Camus to transform Socrates’s anecdote about Critobulus’s shoulder into a commonplace indefinition of love.

The two commonplaces reappear at moments of indefinition in later vernacular treatises. Some writers place Du Bellay’s case of sudden sympathy between strangers within a pre-existing explanatory framework.⁷¹ Others refer to it as a strange case awaiting explanation. In some versions, such as that given at the Bureau d’Adresse, the story is slightly different from that told by Du Bellay: ‘lors que voyant deux hommes inconnus jouër à la paulme d’aussi bonne grace l’un que l’autre; je suis neantmoins bien aise que l’un gagne et l’autre perde’.⁷² *Sympathie* takes the form of my instinctive support for one unknown tennis player over the other. The Bureau d’Adresse speaker displaces his exposition of a philosophical problem – the causes of sympathy between strangers – into a narrative of subjective perception. The

⁷⁰ Xenophon 1968: iv.28.

⁷¹ See for example Coëffeteau 1620: 82.

⁷² Renaudot 1638-55: I, 592; see also Wright 1604: 220.

same example reappears in a subsequent debate on the subject between members of the Académie Bourdelot.⁷³ Malebranche makes it an example of the sedimented *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in *De la recherche de la vérité* (1674). Malebranche includes it among passions that are largely absent from Descartes's treatise because they are the least accessible to knowledge. The coupled passions of sympathy and antipathy make their return after their temporary Cartesian exile.⁷⁴ They are the most acute of passions, Malebranche asserts, because they are purely irrational sense perceptions:

on voit dans une compagnie une personne dont l'air et les manières ont de secrètes alliances avec la disposition présente de nos corps; sa vue nous touche et nous pénètre. Nous sommes portés, sans réflexion, à l'aimer et à lui vouloir du bien. C'est le je ne sais quoi qui nous agite, car la raison n'y a point de part. Il arrive le contraire à l'égard de ceux dont l'air et les manières, répandent, pour ainsi dire, le dégoût et l'horreur. Ils ont je ne sais quoi, de fade qui repousse et qui effraie; mais l'esprit n'y connaît rien, car il n'y a que les sens qui jugent bien de la beauté et de la laideur sensible, lesquelles sont l'objet de ces sortes de passions.⁷⁵

Malebranche here warns his readers against those irrational passions of sympathy and antipathy. But, unlike Descartes, he willingly acknowledges their existence. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, the most dangerous of all, is the secret agent of sympathy and antipathy. It reveals a fault-line running through the rational structures within which, in Malebranche's view, we need to contain our everyday lives. It shakes us into the errors of the sensual: 'c'est le je ne sais quoi qui nous agite'.

The commonplace, that love is a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*, appears in a sequence of vernacular texts starting with Boaistuau. I offer five further examples below. Three features of this commonplace persist through its successive alterations: the assertion that both the nature of love and its causes are inexplicable, its attribution to an anonymous source, and its inflationary repetition of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in all its forms. But treatise writers, unlike Boaistuau, use the sentence merely to mark a

⁷³ See Le Gallois 1675: 50.

⁷⁴ Malebranche 1979: I, 587 (*De la recherche de la vérité*, v.12).

⁷⁵ Malebranche 1979: I, 588 (v.12).

preliminary moment of indefinition. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* remains subordinate to a rational discourse.

(I) Marie de Gournay introduces the commonplace in the middle of *Le Promenoir de Monsieur de Montaigne* (1594). Her place in the chronological sequence comes between Boaistuau and Camus. She presents her text as the written version of a story that she used to tell her father figure, Montaigne, during their walks together.⁷⁶ Princess Alinda, whose father has reluctantly offered her to his conqueror in battle, falls suddenly in love with a young man that she meets by chance on the way to her future home (Gournay 1996: 55-69). The narrator pauses to consider the causes of this event and ascribes it, not to the young man's physical beauty, but to his imperceptible natural grace. She asks:

semble-t'il point d'ailleurs, que l'amour qui est, dit-on, je ne sçay quoy, doibt sourdre aussi, de je ne sçay quoy? et combien plus sont je ne sçay quoy, la grace et les attraiets, que la beauté? Qui plus est, Seneque escrivant; Qu'en la vraye et parfaite beauté, la merveille des parties doibt estre effacée par celle du total: il s'accorde, selon mon advis, à la loger en un je ne sçay quoy: puis que ce total n'est rien qu'une certaine harmonie et une cadence du concert et du concours universel des parties. Et pour argument que l'extreme beauté consiste en je ne sçay quoy, qu'en autre chose, on estime, qu'elle ne peut estre peincte en perfection.⁷⁷

Gournay retains the major features of the commonplace. She increases the semantic saturation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by adding synonyms of the adjectival form in its affirmative operation ('une certaine harmonie'). In the final sentence she introduces *adynaton*, 'the figure by which we admit that our message is beyond the power of words to convey', to the poetics of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.⁷⁸ Gournay adduces *adynaton* as an argument about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of love without putting the figure into practice. She marks the discursive character of this passage through her use of

⁷⁶ Gournay 1996: 47; it is in fact her version of a story found in Claude de Taillemont, *Discours des Champs faëz* (1553); see Gournay 1996: 1 (Introduction).

⁷⁷ Gournay 1996: 70-71.

⁷⁸ This, Melanchthon's definition, is quoted in Sonnino 1968: 191; I return to *adynaton* below in 3.ii.2, p. 211, 4.ii.3, p. 234, and Conclusion, p. 333.

connectives ('qui plus est', 'selon mon advis') and her reference to authorities (such as Seneca). She includes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a discursive digression in her narrative of sudden love.

(II) The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears on the threshold of Jacques Ferrand's medical treatise on lovesickness, *De la maladie d'amour* (1623). An Epistle signed by the publisher (Denis Moreau) commends the work for its mixture of pleasure and profit. It offers practical suggestions to the doctors of the future about how to prevent or cure lovesickness in themselves and others.⁷⁹ But it quotes philosophers, theologians, and poets as well as doctors, the publisher emphasizes, 'pour vous plaire par cette variété' (1623: fol. A5^v). The Epistle contains a virtuoso example of variation when it critically reviews the various discourses of love on which the text will draw. Moreau, in an immensely long sentence (only a fraction of which is quoted below), quotes a long list of definitions from Hesiod to Ficino. He declares all of them insufficient:

je sçay que ce sujet a occupé toute l'Antiquité, et a donné de la peine à tous ceux qui ont voulu s'embarquer sur cet Ocean de merveilles: car [...] apres que les Theologiens l'ont nommé charité et dilection, les Philosophes passion et mouvement de l'ame, les Medecins concupiscence, maladie d'esprit, melancholie, furie, rage: Apres qu'on luy a donné des titres d'honneur, et d'infamie [...], encore se plaint-on de n'avoir pas assez dit, et de n'avoir pas penetré assez avant en la cognoissance de sa nature et de son pouvoir. Celuy avoit meilleure grace, qui pour s'exempter de toutes ces difficultez a librement confessé que l'Amour estoit je ne sçay quoy, qui vient de je ne sçay où, envoyé de je ne sçay qui, par une façon je ne sçay quelle, nay je ne sçay comment, vivant je ne sçay combien, croissant je ne sçay comment, diminuant et mourant je ne sçay quand, ny de quelle maladie; qui peut deviner encore ce que [c]e peut estre?⁸⁰

Moreau here repeats the major features of the commonplace. Where Boaistuau and Gournay award the saying to a nameless many, Moreau awards it to one, who, when pressed for an explanation, graciously confesses love's nescioquiddity. He hyperbolically inflates forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in a gesture that both celebrates and ironizes the topos. This now sums up love's entire biography from its birth, 'je ne

⁷⁹ Ferrand 1623: fol. A4^{r-v}.

⁸⁰ Ferrand 1623: fols. A2^v-A3^v.

sçay comment', to its final demise, 'je ne sçay quand, ny de quelle maladie'. The commonplace marks a moment of indefinition on the threshold of a treatise that sets out a traditional science of the passion.⁸¹

(III) Jacques Du Bosc dismisses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an error of self-love in his treatise *L'Honneste femme* (1632). Du Bosc presents his treatise as a companion to Faret's social manual *L'Honneste homme* (1630). But where Faret teaches the aspiring courtier the art of raising his position within polite society, Du Bosc teaches his wife to 'know' her place by restricting her behaviour and education.⁸² He is particularly keen to subdue the danger that sensual inclination poses to feminine *bienséance*. It is, he warns his women readers, no sufficient basis for a lasting commitment between two people: 'si nous disons que nous suivons nostre Inclination, pour aymer quelqu'un, ne peut il pas dire, qu'il suit la sienne en ne nous aymant point?' (1634: 417). Du Bosc deploys the commonplace in a negative semantic operation:

apres tout, cette Inclination n'est bien souvent qu'un Phantosme, les plus sçavans ont de la peine, à en exprimer la cause et la nature: Elle est tellement occulte, que plusieurs ne pouvant comprendre l'Amour qu'elle fait naistre, disent que c'est *un je ne sçay quoy, qui se forme je ne sçay comment, et qui nous enchante par je ne sçay quels charmes*.⁸³

He alters the commonplace to suggest that sensual inclination is no more than a ghostly nothing with dangerous magical effects. He later concludes that it is in fact an expression of 'l'Amour de nous-mesme' (1634: 428). Inclination is no inexplicable force; it is the mirror in which we adore the image of our own perfections. Du Bosc instructs women who would be modest to regulate their inclinations within a love based on rational choice (1634: 430-35). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* he attacks as a snare and a delusion.

⁸¹ Beecher and Ciavolella 1990: 22-23.

⁸² For a comprehensive analysis of this issue, see Le Dœuff 1998.

⁸³ Du Bosc 1634: 425-26.

(IV) Cureau de la Chambre makes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* the dark zone in his chiaroscuro study of the passions. The project of his *Characteres des passions* (1640) is an ambitious one: to explain the effects that the passions produce in the body and soul by fusing the insights of physiognomy, medicine, and moral philosophy (1658: I, 12^v-13^r, 2-5). Cureau, like Leibniz (see 2.iii.3 above, pp. 146-48), seeks to draw dark phenomena into the clear light of explanation. The effect, however, is the opposite, since where Leibniz finds a metaphysical clarity, Cureau is unable to dispel the darkness of love. He describes this darkness by drawing on the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]:

une des plus grandes merveilles qui se rencontre dans l'Amour, est que cette Passion estant si commune et si generale, et dont on peut dire que tous les sçavans hommes ont esté touchez; il ne s'en est point encore trouvé qui ait bien clairement descouvert sa nature et son origine. Car apres avoir veu tout ce qu'ils en ont escrit, on peut asseurer que l'Amour des Philosophes est aussi bien aveugle que celui des Poëtes; Et que celui qui disoit que c'estoit un je ne sçay quoy, qui venoit de je ne sçay où, et qui s'en alloit je ne sçay comment, n'est pas un de ceux qui a le plus mal rencontré.⁸⁴

His version of the commonplace recounts the mini-biography of a love affair with its sudden onset and inexplicable demise. Cureau's most significant alteration is that he associates the commonplace with a specifically *poetic* conception of love. Its internal structure, anaphora, and repeated rhythms make the association seem natural. No philosopher, Cureau claims, has ever cast light upon ('clairement descouvert') the obscure nescioquiddity of love. The poets show that, in this respect, we are all in the position of the blind man (see 2.i.2 above, p. 100). Cureau places this assertion of nescioquiddity, once again, at the beginning of a traditional pathology. He later adopts the scholastic definition of love as 'un mouvement de l'appétit par lequel l'ame s'unit

⁸⁴ Cureau de la Chambre 1658: I, 26.

à ce qu'il luy semble bon' (1658: I, 29). But the *je-ne-sais-quoi* remains the dark zone that his science of the passions fails to dispel.⁸⁵

(v) Chalesme, after Cureau, confirms that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the lesson in love that philosophy should learn from poetry. His treatise, *L'Homme de qualité* (1671), prepares for the standard moment of indefinition about love in a syntactical string of nescioquiddity: 'ce qu'il y a de surprenant dans cette Passion, est, qu'une infinité de monde la sent, sans que personne ne sçache bien précisément ce qu'elle est' (1671: 67). He attributes this lesson to Cureau before quoting the commonplace about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* exactly as it appears in *Les Caracteres des passions* (Chalesme 1671: 67-68). So too does Walter Charleton, albeit silently, in *The Ephesian Matron* (1655), his imitation of Petronius's satirical story 'The Widow of Ephesus'.⁸⁶ Like the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself, the commonplace about love in which it appears crosses the Channel in the mid-seventeenth century. Chalesme makes an original contribution to the commonplace sequence that we are tracing, for where Cureau refers to an anonymous poetic source, he names the poet of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*:

Monsieur de Corneille dit aussi en quelque endroit de ses beaux ouvrages.

Il est des nœuds secrets, il est des sympathies,
Dont par le doux rapport les ames assorties
S'attachent l'une à l'autre, et se laissent picquer
Par ces je ne sçay quoy qu'on ne peut expliquer.⁸⁷

Chalesme, like Bouhours (see 3.i.1 above, p. 154), looks to the poetry of Corneille rather than to philosophy for a pithy statement about love. But this, as ever, remains nothing more than a preliminary glimpse of uncertainty within the rational tendency

⁸⁵ Cureau de la Chambre 1658: I, fol. 12^v; I, 5 (for a related *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]).

⁸⁶ I quote Charleton's version of the topos in my Conclusion below, p. 330. On Charleton's text, see Müller 1999: 220.

⁸⁷ Chalesme 1671: 68.

of the treatise. Chalesme soon adopts, from Cureau once more, the standard scholastic definition of love as the soul's rational tendency towards what is good (1671: 72). Vernacular treatise writers register no more than a tremor in the traditional bedrock that underlies their systematic science. If we are to see the experience of sympathy open an unbridgeable fault-line within philosophical explanation, then we must – like Chalesme and the treatise writers – turn to the poets.

2. The art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]: Corneille

Literary writers use the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its period of semantic energy as a noun, to name the stroke of passion in its sheer unsettling inexplicability. The previous section traced the development within vernacular treatises of the commonplace idea that love, in its sudden onset and inexplicable demise, is a *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Treatise writers make of this idea no more than a preliminary hesitation within their traditional science of the passions; literary writers such as Corneille and Pascal, however, show its dramatic force. They propose no discursive lesson, but instead, impose a particular image of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The transition from vernacular treatises to literary texts is not so much historical as generic: it marks a different way of coming to terms with an experience. Corneille and Pascal (after him) portray particular narrative situations in which a force, with no history, acts upon a powerless and unwitting subject. To sketch this image here requires allowing a general historical proposition to be fragmented into close textual analyses. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, at the moment of its greatest currency, is the lexical site of this fragmentation. It is the word that literary writers use to name my experience of a strange sympathy.

A stroke of passion is the result of an inexplicable force of sympathy (or antipathy) acting upon the subject. Sympathy is the force that falls between two individuals. The lexicographer Thomas Corneille (1695) notes in his entry on *sympathie* that its Greek etymology adds to the idea of ‘suffering’ or ‘passion’ (*pathos*) the conjunctive prefix *sym-* (‘together’). Sympathy is, as Cotgrave puts it, a ‘mutuall passion’ (1673: ‘sympathie’). It can be wholly attributed neither to a hidden objective quality in the beloved nor to the subjective perception of the lover. It is, instead, an event that befalls them both and forces them into a living symbiosis.⁸⁸ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* describes the event of sympathy as one of them – whose testimony is implicit in the word’s constitutive elements – experiences its force.

Dynamic force, I have suggested (in 2.iii.3 above, pp. 151-52), is the objective correlative of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature. Political force best describes the chain of events that evokes the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the realm of passion. Force is central to the baroque theory of political action proposed by Louis Marin (1988) in his work on Gabriel Naudé’s *Considérations politiques sur les coups d’État* (1639). The *coup d’état*, Marin argues, is the quintessential political act of the baroque period. The term there refers, not to a revolutionary uprising against the state, but to a decisive act that the state performs in its own interest (Marin 1988: 19). The preparation of this act is carefully concealed as a *secret d’état* (Marin 1988: 22). When it strikes, it does so as a sudden and extreme manifestation of pre-existing political force: ‘le coup d’État [...] n’est autre que l’éclat, la violence, le choc de l’absolu de la force’ (Marin 1988: 20). Marin’s theory of political action provides, in the *coup d’état*, an objective correlative of the individual experience of passion. The force of sympathy falls upon the unwitting subject from a concealed point of origin as

⁸⁸ Jankélévitch 1980: I, 98; Deleuze and Parnet 1996: 65-66.

a sudden, violent ‘stroke’ (*coup*) of passion. This stroke the subject can neither avoid, nor resist, but only suffer as a vital inclination towards the other. This image overturns the scholastic definition of love in two ways: first, it portrays the ‘suffering’ (*passion*) of an irrational force by the subject rather than an action of the rational soul; and second, it disqualifies the very idea that a ‘sufficient definition’ of love is possible. I cannot define or explain the force of sympathy; I can only lend form to the experience by naming it in its real inexplicability and inexplicable reality and by describing its effects. The art of doing so in writing I call, in a normative sense, ‘literature’.⁸⁹ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], while current, serves above all as a forceful nomination of the stroke of passion in its inexplicable force. The term refers to the present participle that is my particular experience of ‘falling’ into love, friendship, or sympathy. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is, in this sense, not so much one passion among others as the very suffering of all passion. Marin says similarly of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: ‘ce n’est pas *une* passion mais le *pathos* de toutes les passions; ce n’est pas *une* émotion, mais la *motion* de toutes les émotions’ (1986: 188). It is the imperceptible force that unleashes the stroke of passion.

The experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has the form of a disaster in its sudden incidence and revolutionary effects upon the subject. These are not necessarily *disastrous* in the tragic sense of ‘calamitous’ since they can also be benevolent – the beginning of a new and better life with another. The *OED* notes in its entry on ‘disaster’ that Provençal has twin terms, *malastre* and *benastre*, which distinguish between destructive and creative effects. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* does not discriminate between these two kinds, which one might adopt into English on the Provençal model

⁸⁹ I return to this in Conclusion below, pp. 319-20.

as ‘malasters’ and ‘benasters’.⁹⁰ The force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* can no more be explained by the ethical character of its effects than it can by its causes.⁹¹ The political *coup d'état* proves an inadequate objective correlative in this respect, for it enacts a project, whereas the *je-ne-sais-quoi* irrupts into the world free of any intention. It has revolutionary effects in the political world, as we shall see, but their political or ethical character is merely accidental. It simply falls as a disastrous stroke of passion upon the unwitting subject.

Pierre Corneille is the seventeenth-century poet of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. Pascal, Bouhours, and Chalesme all quote him as the poet who ruins philosophical explanation by asserting the terminal nescioquiddity of sympathy. Bouhours's comment about him is typical: ‘un de nos Poètes en a mieux parlé que tous les Philosophes, il decide la chose en un mot.’⁹² My purpose here is not to place the *je-ne-sais-quoi* within a general treatment of love in the works of Corneille, as others have done.⁹³ It is to follow the movement of the vernacular treatises into his descriptions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the realm of the passions. This requires close analyses of short passages from two plays (*Médée* and *Rodogune*) in their dramatic context. Corneille shows the *je-ne-sais-quoi* falling as a stroke of passion upon characters in particular dramatic situations.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears on stage in the tragedy *Médée* (1635) as the ‘malastrous’ love that draws Créuse and Jason to their mutual destruction. Both claim that their passion coincides with their calculated interest. Jason explains to his confidant that he stands to rid himself of Médée, his wife and murderous accomplice,

⁹⁰ I return to this distinction in 5.iii.2 below, p. 298.

⁹¹ I suggest ethical problems raised by the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Conclusion below, pp. 323-24.

⁹² Bouhours 1962: 140-41; 3.ii.1 above, p. 181 (on Chalesme); 3.ii.3 below, p. 192 (on Pascal).

⁹³ Pinatel 1944; Nadal 1948: 31-47, 87-94; Le Gall 1997: 80-82.

and gain the throne of Corinth where he must remain in exile.⁹⁴ Créuse argues that marrying Jason, rather than her royal suitor Ægée, will allow her to remain in Corinth near to her own people and her ageing father (ll. 655-74). Jason and Créuse do not, despite their claims to the contrary, act purely out of self-interest. Corneille complicates their motives by showing both under the stroke of a mutual passion. Jason expresses this in a soliloquy (173-76); Créuse explains to Ægée her preference for his rival on the same grounds. That Jason is of lower rank than Ægée, she insists, serves only to prove the strength of her love for him:

Mais si vous connaissez l'amour et ses ardeurs,
Jamais pour son objet il ne prend les grandeurs:
Avouez que son feu n'en veut qu'à la personne
Et qu'en moi vous n'aimiez rien moins que ma couronne.
Souvent je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut exprimer
Nous surprend, nous emporte, et nous force d'aimer
Et souvent, sans raison, les objets de nos flammes
Frappent nos yeux ensemble et saisissent nos âmes.⁹⁵

Créuse justifies her inclination for Jason by making it analogous with that of Ægée for herself. If Ægée loves her, then it must be by a disinterested stroke of passion, and this is equally what draws Créuse into the arms of his rival. Corneille here dramatizes Du Bosc's argument against marriage based on irrational sympathy, namely, that it equally justifies rejection on the grounds of antipathy.⁹⁶ What makes Créuse's speech discomfiting is that, even as she turns this argument to her advantage, she describes her passion for Jason. She is the victim of an inexplicable force, 'je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut exprimer', against which she can offer no resistance. None of us, she says, can resist the stroke of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Créuse renders our passivity by making her all-inclusive *nous* the object of violently active verbs in the final quatrain. She draws on

⁹⁴ Corneille 1971: 1 (*Médée*, 41-45).

⁹⁵ Corneille 1971: 1 (*Médée*, 632-38).

⁹⁶ See 3.ii.1 above, p. 179; see also Dryden 1991: ii.1, 296-302.

the commonplace metaphor of fire to describe the effects of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.⁹⁷ The dramatist then actualizes this metaphor as the real fire that engulfs Créuse at the end of the play. She covets not only Médée's man but also her favourite dress, which Médée duly yields to her, but only after filling the dress with an occult inflammable virtue designed to burn her rival (ll. 1045-54). No sooner has Créuse put on the dress than, as Theudas reports, 'un feu subtil s'allume' (l. 1307). A fire that none of us can see burns Créuse and her father alive on stage. We hear her cry: 'Ah! je brûle, je meurs, je ne suis plus que flamme; | De grâce, hâtez-vous de recevoir mon âme' (ll. 1417-18). That she repeats here the rhyme words that she used earlier to describe her passion (ll. 637-38) indicates the horrific truth: Médée has transformed Créuse's burning *je-ne-sais-quoi* for Jason into the subtle fire that engulfs her rival. The objective correlative of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is, once again, a dynamic force free of any elemental substance. It is a malaster that leaves two people dead. Corneille, in his 'Examen' (1660) of the play, says of this scene: 'j'ai feint que les feux que produit la robe de Médée et qui font périr Créon et Créuse étaient invisibles, parce que j'ai mis leurs personnes sur la scène dans la catastrophe' (1971: I, 566). The disaster of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* coincides here with the poetics of *catastrophe* or 'dénouement'. Corneille attempts to show his spectators the experience of suffering even as it takes place. He puts the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of passion on stage in *Médée*, and by releasing its vital narrative movement, makes a catastrophe out of a disaster.

Corneille's tragedy *Rodogune* (1644) stages the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its very imperceptibility. In this play, as in the earlier *Médée*, the stroke of passion falls into a complex political situation. Cléopâtre (the Queen of Syria) holds Rodogune, sister to the king of Parthia, prisoner of war. Cléopâtre is set to reveal which of her twin sons,

⁹⁷ Compare Socrates's remark in Camus: 'l'Amour [...] est je ne sçay quoy qui [...] brusle d'une maniere je ne sçay quelle'; quoted in 3.ii.1 above, p. 173.

Séleucus and Antiochus, is the older: he is promised the throne of Syria and the hand of Rodogune as a means of sealing peace between the warring nations.⁹⁸ The marriage, while a political settlement, provokes contradictory passions in Rodogune. The twins are both in love with her and their appearance is identical (a fact that any production of the play should emphasize). The captive princess, nevertheless, suffers a violent attraction towards one twin that is matched only by her inexplicable aversion to the other. Both forces are irreducibly particular to her experience. Corneille contrasts the divided inclinations of Rodogune with the equal admiration in which the Syrian people holds the twins: ‘L’un et l’autre fait voir un mérite si rare | Que le souhait confus entre les deux s’égare’ (ll. 431-32). Rodogune recognizes the merit of both twins even as she confesses to Laonice that one of the two has her heart:

Mais il est malaisé, dans cette égalité,
 Qu’un esprit combattu ne penche d’un côté.
 Il est des nœuds secrets, il est des sympathies,
 Dont par le doux rapport des âmes assorties
 S’attachent l’une à l’autre, et se laissent piquer
 Par ces je ne sais quoi qu’on ne peut expliquer.
 C’est par là que l’un d’eux obtient la préférence;
 Je crois voir l’autre encore avec indifférence,
 Mais cette indifférence est une aversion,
 Lorsque je la compare avec ma passion.
 Etrange effet d’amour! Incroyable chimère!
 Je voudrais être à lui si je n’aimais son frère,
 Et le plus grand des maux toutefois que je crains,
 C’est que mon triste sort me livre entre ses mains.⁹⁹

Rodogune names the real and inexplicable forces of sympathy and antipathy that act upon her. To do so, she turns the lexicon of astrological explanation towards the brute nescioquiddity of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. Her speech is reminiscent of the explanation that Isabelle – also using the word – offers to her father Géronte, in *L’Illusion comique* (c. 1635), as to why she is neglecting her suitorAdraste:

Mais si votre bonté me permet en ma cause,
 Pour me justifier, de dire quelque chose,

⁹⁸ Corneille 1971: II (*Rodogune*, 3-4).

⁹⁹ Corneille 1971: II (*Rodogune*, 357-70).

Par un secret instinct que je ne puis nommer,
 J'en fais beaucoup d'état, et ne le puis aimer.
 Souvent je ne sais quoi que le ciel nous inspire
 Soulève tout le cœur contre ce qu'on désire,
 Et ne nous laisse pas en état d'obéir
 Quand on choisit pour nous ce qu'il nous faut haïr.
 Il attache ici-bas avec des sympathies
 Les âmes que son ordre a là-haut assorties:
 On n'en saurait unir sans ses avis secrets;
 Et cette chaîne manque où manquent ses décrets.¹⁰⁰

The two texts move in contrary directions between the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and the bedrock of astrological explanation. Isabelle explains her 'secret instinct' as an astral *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.]; her father is indignant: 'Insolente, est-ce ainsi que l'on se justifie? | Quel maître vous apprend cette philosophie?' (653-54). Rodogune invokes astral sympathy too. But the term *sympathie* provides her, not with a ready-made explanation, but with a means of naming the inexplicable forces that attract and repel her as 'ces je ne sais quoi qu'on ne peut expliquer'. Bouhours and others recall this line because it reveals, at one stroke, a deep fault-line of particular experience running through the bedrock of astrological explanation. Something has fallen between Rodogune and each twin, but what it is, she cannot tell. Neither, incidentally, can we. The dramatist, in the third act of the play, places Rodogune alone on stage until she sees the twins approach. She exclaims:

Amour, qui me confonds, cache du moins tes feux,
 Et, content de mon cœur dont je te fais le maître,
 Dans mes regards surpris garde-toi de paraître.¹⁰¹

The dramatist creates a strange situation for his spectators as the two identical twins appear on stage: we know that some force draws Rodogune towards one and away from the other without being able to see what it is. This situation creates for the spectator what one might call, by adapting Barthes's phrase, *un effet de je-ne-sais-*

¹⁰⁰ Corneille 1971: I (*L'Illusion comique*, 639-48). Editions before 1660 give at line 641: 'De certains mouvements que le ciel nous inspire.' Corneille adds the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] in 1660.

¹⁰¹ Corneille 1971: II (*Rodogune*, 894-96).

quoi.¹⁰² Corneille puts the *je-ne-sais-quoi* on stage by making us perceive its very imperceptibility. He is, as Pascal and other seventeenth-century readers recognize, the artist of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].

3. Pascal's imperceptible point

Pascal's *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a single imperceptible point within the stroke of passion. He uses the noun, with specific reference to Corneille, in a single fragment of his *Pensées* (1670). I place this fragment at the centre of this chapter because it encapsulates the ideal-typical meaning of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* at the height of the word's currency.

Pascal writes on religion, history, philosophy, the passions, and other realms of human experience in a series of fragments found among his papers after his death. Some are notes intended to persuade the *honnêtes gens* of the need for Christian salvation in a language that they can understand. Many fragments relate to other projects, however, and Pascal never completed his apology. Readers are left having to make sense of a series of largely discontinuous fragments surrounded by empty textual spaces. The text, as I have already suggested (2.ii.2 (II) above, p. 125-27), argues powerfully that humankind is powerless to explain its experience of the infinite universe. Critics like Lucien Goldmann have suggested that the fragmentary form in which we read the *Pensées* reflects our tragic powerlessness: the text is aesthetically complete in its radical incompleteness.¹⁰³ Other critics, notably Jean Mesnard, have argued that the form of the text is no more than an accidental consequence of Pascal's

¹⁰² Barthes's phrase is 'L'effet de réel' (1993: II, 479-84).

¹⁰³ Goldmann 1959: 220.

untimely death and that his fragments each contain a dynamic relation to the (unfinished) whole.¹⁰⁴ It is no more my intention to propose a general hypothesis of the *Pensées* than it was to read for one in Corneille. I want instead to trace the movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from one to the other and describe how it appears in Pascal's fragment. I shall adopt Mesnard's historical argument as a methodological principle and sketch a provisional context for the fragment by suggesting its relations with others. My analysis, however, leads me to a limited version of the Goldmann thesis in relation to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.¹⁰⁵ For Pascal's use of the word reflects the character of the experience to which it refers. Whether by accident or design, he lends written form to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by letting it irrupt into his text at a single point.

The point of irruption, fragment thirty-two in Sellier's numbering, both invites and ultimately resists intertextual connections with the rest of the *Pensées*. The second of the two original manuscript Copies of Pascal's papers includes the fragment in its first *liasse*.¹⁰⁶ This *liasse* contains notes towards an order of the apology as Pascal was planning it in June 1658.¹⁰⁷ The apologist's intention is, it seems, to show that the grandeur of humankind and its vanity are inseparable contraries. Pascal suggests in a nearby fragment that we cannot reconcile reason and the passions since these are perpetually at war within us (Laf. 410; Sell. 29). Fragment thirty-two, which mentions vanity in its first sentence, marks the place reserved for the topic in the planned apology. The Second Copy's third *liasse*, entitled 'Vanité', asserts the existence of vanity in the fallen world as an inescapable fact: 'qui ne voit pas la vanité du monde est bien vain lui-même' (Pascal: Laf. 36; Sell. 70). Pascal designs this sentence in such a way that it makes any dissenter to the law that it proposes appear as an

¹⁰⁴ Mesnard 1992: 363-71.

¹⁰⁵ See Marin 1997b: 51-70 (for a similar approach).

¹⁰⁶ Lafuma (1962) bases his edition on the first copy; Sellier (1991) bases his on the second.

¹⁰⁷ See Sellier 1962: 155.

illustration of the law itself. The third *liasse* asserts the existence of vanity in this manner while listing an open series of discrete examples. The forces that defeat reason include what Pascal, in a marginal note (Pascal: Laf. 45; Sell. 78), calls humankind's internal 'puissances trompeuses': the senses, the imagination, custom, and curiosity. The series also includes accidental forces in the outside world. Flies are one such: 'la puissance des mouches: elles gagnent des batailles, empêchent notre âme d'agir, mangent notre corps' (Pascal: Laf. 22; Sell. 56). The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, whose constituent elements spell out the defeat of reason, is another. A brief note indicates that fragment thirty-two is to be included within this series:

Vanité.
La cause et les effets de l'amour.
Cléopâtre.¹⁰⁸

Pascal refers to fragment thirty-two on a second occasion in the *liasse* marked 'Transition' (Laf. 197; Sell. 228). On three occasions, then, he refers to the same assertion: that human love shows the vanity of the fallen world with a singular and inexplicable force. That Pascal's description itself remains singular and unassimilable reflects, at a formal level, the character of this force. A provisional context for fragment thirty-two, such as the one that I have just sketched, is heuristically useful only if one then reads the text in its irreducible particularity.

The fragment reads as follows:

Qui voudra connaître à plein la vanité de l'homme n'a qu'à considérer les causes et les effets de l'amour. La cause en est un *Je ne sais quoi*. Corneille. Et les effets en sont effroyables. Ce *Je ne sais quoi*, si peu de chose qu'on ne peut le reconnaître, remue toute la terre, les princes, les armées, le monde entier.

Le nez de Cléopâtre s'il eût été plus court toute la face de la terre aurait changé.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Pascal: Laf. 46; Sell. 79; Mesnard 1992: 388.

¹⁰⁹ Pascal: Laf. 413; Sell. 32; I follow Sellier here.

All is vanity in a world without God. Anyone seeking proof need look no further than love, which visits disaster upon the world, but whose cause is an imperceptible trifle, the length of a nose, an almost-nothing, a *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

The Pascalian *je-ne-sais-quoi* is best conceived in its difference from that of other seventeenth-century writers. Bouhours places the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in a substance that reappears throughout the natural world (see 1.ii.2 above, p. 72). Pascal, like Descartes, dismisses this traditional idea as a refuge of ignorance in natural philosophy (see 2.ii.2 above, p. 126). Descartes attempts equally to attack the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a mere mental delusion in the passions. Pascal, however, admits its real existence in this particular realm of experience. His *je-ne-sais-quoi* is neither a substantial thing, in other words, nor a mere nothing: it falls between the two in an imperceptible point. What, however, is the ontological status – the nature – of this point? We may look to a philosophical exchange between Pascal and Méré for clarification. Méré, a writer on polite culture to whom we shall return in the following chapter, explains in a letter to Pascal his wish to avoid the inexplicable vertigo of infinite material division: ‘je vous apprens que dès qu’il entre tant soit-peu d’infini dans une question elle devient inexplicable, parce que l’esprit se trouble et se confond.’¹¹⁰ Méré solves the problem to his own satisfaction by positing the existence of indivisible atoms (1692: II, 67). He offers, as proof of their necessary existence, the example of the still point at the centre of a revolving globe. He asks Pascal:

est-ce quelque chose que ce centre, ou rien du tout? Si ce n’est rien vos demonstrations se fondent sur une Chimere, et vous n’y devez pas avoir beaucoup de foy. Que si c’est je ne sçay quoy à sa mode, je n’ay pas plus de peine à me représenter ce je ne sçay-quoy rempli que vuide; et neanmoins il faut que je me le figure indivisible, si je veux qu’il soit fixe et sans mouvement quand le Cercle tourne sur son point de milieu.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Méré 1692: II, 62 (letter 19).

¹¹¹ Méré 1692: II, 62.

Méré is a complacent atomist: he uses an indivisibly ‘thingy’ *je-ne-sais-quoi* to mark the limits of philosophical speculation. He seems to be replying here to the ‘Disproportion de l’homme’ fragment of the *Pensées* (Laf. 199; Sell. 230) in which Pascal appears as an uneasy corpuscularian as he attempts to picture the infinite division of matter. Pascal takes the smallest material particle available to human perception (the blood vapours of a mite). Many commonly assume this, the point at which human perception stops, to be an indivisible something: ‘il [l’homme] pensera peut-être que c’est là l’extrême petitesse de la nature’. But this point is in fact no more than ‘celui au-delà duquel nos sens n’aperçoivent plus rien, quoique divisible infiniment et par sa nature’ (Laf. 199; Sell. 230). We should see in such a point, not an indivisible thing, but an infinity of ever-unfolding universes.¹¹² Fragment thirty-two recalls this vertiginous description. Pascal’s *je-ne-sais-quoi*, ‘si peu de chose qu’on ne le peut reconnaître’, is infinitely smaller than the apparently indivisible point at the centre of a revolving globe. Yet, like the latter, it shakes the world itself. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is nothing when compared with everything, something when compared with nothing, an almost-nothing that makes all the difference, an entity best described as an ‘imperceptible point’.¹¹³

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the imperceptible point at the centre of a disaster. The disproportion between the cause of love and its effects is radical. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* overturns – whether for good or ill – the political order observed by princes and armies. Pascal, like Corneille, shows the *je-ne-sais-quoi* falling in a particular narrative situation. Fragment thirty-two refers to the political upheavals that the Roman empire suffered when first Cæsar, and then Mark Antony, fell in love with the Queen of Egypt. The story is often told in ancient and early modern literature:

¹¹² Descotes 1993: 205.

¹¹³ I borrow the phrase from a different context in the *Pensées* (Laf. 695; Sell. 574).

Plutarch gives an influential description of Cleopatra's charm in his life of Antony.¹¹⁴ Camus quotes Plutarch when he recounts the death of Antony, describing Cleopatra as 'l'unique cause de sa desroutte'.¹¹⁵ Pascal introduces a singular new element by ascribing the cause of Antony's passion for Cleopatra to her unusually long nose: 'le nez de Cléopâtre s'il eût été plus court toute la face de la terre aurait changé.' Jean Mesnard and others observe that coins distributed during her reign show Cleopatra with a long Ptolemaic nose.¹¹⁶ But this receives no comment in any written source known to them, or to me, before Pascal. Corneille, to whom Pascal refers earlier in the fragment, celebrates the enslaving power of Cleopatra's eyes in his political tragedy *Pompée* (1643), but nowhere mentions her nose.¹¹⁷ Pascal seems, in characteristic fashion, to have observed a detail, in visual representations of Cleopatra, which he then develops to serve his particular purpose. His brief history of the English civil war shows the same eye for detail: 'Cromwell allait ravager toute la chrétienté; la famille royale était perdue, et la sienne à jamais puissante, sans un petit grain de sable qui se mit dans son uretère' (Laf. 750; Sell. 622). No one should ignore the disproportion between the derisory causes of events and their cataclysmic effects in history. A grain of sand in one man's bladder determined the fate of Christendom, and a woman's nose, the course of ancient history.

What is the power hidden within Cleopatra's nose? Mesnard assumes that Pascal's Cleopatra is a woman of perfect beauty, that her beauty is the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that determines Antony's fate, and that Pascal imagines a shorter nose as a flaw in her beauty that might have prevented the onset of passion.¹¹⁸ This reading, although

¹¹⁴ Ménager 1996.

¹¹⁵ Camus 1612: IX, 180; see also Veyries 1609: 17-37.

¹¹⁶ Mesnard 1992: 389; Hamer 1993: 3-11; Foss 1997: 80-81.

¹¹⁷ Corneille 1971: I (*Pompée*, 393-396, 1276-80).

¹¹⁸ Mesnard 1992: 389-90, 392.

internally plausible, is reductive of fragment thirty-two. The note (Laf. 46; Sell. 79) that marks its place in the ‘Vanité’ *liasse* follows the long fragment devoted to the imagination (Laf. 44-45; Sell. 78). There Pascal establishes the imagination, ‘cette maîtresse d’erreur et de fausseté’, as one of the most powerful forces of unreason that humankind possesses. The imagination is responsible for creating, among other things, beauty: ‘c’est elle’, Pascal says, ‘qui fait la beauté.’ Mesnard’s reading, by attributing the cause of love to beauty, closes the gap separating the fragments on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and the imagination by reducing the former to one more illustration of the latter. Gérard Ferreyrolles, in his work on the imagination in Pascal, performs the same reduction.¹¹⁹ The power of the imagination, according to this view, explains the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of love.

Fragment thirty-two, I suggest, should not be confused with Pascal’s analysis of the imagination. Mesnard’s reading faces two objections. It fails, first, to explain why Pascal, on three occasions, conceives of fragment thirty-two as distinct and self-sufficient. Second, its assumption that Cleopatra embodies perfect beauty is at odds with her historical characterization. She is famous for being a woman whose physical beauty is not incomparable, but whose charm (or *bonne grâce* as Amyot’s Plutarch puts it), certainly is.¹²⁰ Pascal’s Cleopatra, like that of Plutarch, provokes love, not because she conforms to the canon of beauty, but precisely because something about her exceeds the canon. Pascal finds an objective correlative for that inexplicable *something* in visual representations of Cleopatra’s nose.¹²¹ This exceeds the standard length requirement that the imagination imposes upon noses by the imperceptible length of – a *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It appears to be a flaw in her beauty rather than its

¹¹⁹ Ferreyrolles 1995: 169-70; 2002: 143-44.

¹²⁰ Plutarch 1818: VIII, 312-13 (‘Antonius’, §.32); Ménager 1996: 51.

¹²¹ See 2.iii.3 above, p. 151 (on the objective correlative).

perfection. Pascal uses this flaw as a positive image of the disproportion that exists between rational explanations of human love, such as beauty or the imagination, and its real unassimilable cause. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is none other than what it says it is: a radically inexplicable something. ‘Plaisante raison qu’un vent manie et à tout sens!’, Pascal exclaims when surveying the power of the imagination; ‘je rapporterais presque toutes les actions des hommes, qui ne branlent presque que par ses secousses’ (Laf. 44; Sell. 78). Note that the qualifier *presque* allows for other winds, beside that of the imagination, to buffet reason. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is one such. Cleopatra’s nose is an objective correlative for the imperceptible point that unleashes the stroke of passion.

How does the subject experience this point? Leibniz provides a useful point of comparison with Pascal here.¹²² His monads enfold the force of material bodies and the perceptions of living creatures in one infinite explanation (see 2.iii.3 above, pp. 146-48). Leibniz’s theory of perception brings rational clarity to the scholastic idea that the animal soul contains a perceptive faculty, called *vis estimativa*, through which it feels the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (see 3.i.2 above, pp. 163-64). He explains that I, or any living creature, constantly experience an infinite number of tiny perceptions. Each is so small as to be insensible; it can be the object of no rational activity on my part; it leaves me in a state of animal ‘unease’ (*inquiétude*). Multiple mini-perceptions, however, combine to form a single clear apprehension. One such is my apprehension of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*:

ces petites perceptions sont [...] de plus grande efficace qu’on ne pense. Ce sont elles qui forment ce je ne sais quoi, ces goûts, ces images des qualités des sens, claires dans l’assemblage, mais confuses dans

¹²² Jankélévitch 1980: I, 49.

les parties, ces impressions que les corps font sur nous, et qui enveloppent l'infini, cette liaison que chaque être a avec le reste de l'univers.¹²³

Mini-perceptions are to living creatures what forces are to material bodies: they are the rational (but insensible) causes of their vital movements.¹²⁴ The uneasy perceptions that I constantly have, whether awake or sleeping, contain the traces of the past and the seeds of the future: 'on peut même dire qu'en conséquence des petites perceptions le présent est plein de l'avenir et chargé du passé' (Leibniz 1990: 42). Leibniz places the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a dynamic present-tense apprehension that envelops past and future.¹²⁵ It exists too in the middle of a dynamic epistemological continuum that stretches from animal unease, through confused apprehension, to distinct explanation. Leibniz distinguishes, in the *Discours de métaphysique*, between the initial apprehension of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its explanation:

quand je puis reconnaître une chose parmi les autres, sans pouvoir dire en quoi consistent ses différences ou propriétés, la connaissance est *confuse*. C'est ainsi que nous connaissons quelquefois *clairement*, sans être en doute en aucune façon, si un poème ou bien un tableau est bien ou mal fait, parce qu'il y a un *je ne sais quoi* qui nous satisfait ou qui nous choque. Mais lorsque je puis expliquer les marques que j'ai, la connaissance s'appelle *distincte*.¹²⁶

Leibniz defines the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as my confused apprehension of sympathy or antipathy towards a poem, and distinct knowledge, as my ability to explain this apprehension. He unfolds the *je-ne-sais-quoi* within a progressive continuum of infinite explicability. This is at the cost of the experience itself.

Pascal, rather than unfolding the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through time, shows it falling upon the subject at one disastrous stroke. How is it then that the Pascalian subject experiences the *je-ne-sais-quoi*? One remark in the *Pensées* suggests a tangential connection between Pascal's notion of the *esprit de finesse*, the knowledge of the

¹²³ Leibniz 1990: 42.

¹²⁴ Leibniz 1990: 41-43 (Preface); Deleuze 1988: 114-15.

¹²⁵ See Pigéard de Gurbert 2001: 55 (on temporal *dunamis*).

¹²⁶ Leibniz 1957: 62 (§.24).

heart, and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge: the *esprit de géométrie*, which develops manifest principles in a rational demonstration, and the *esprit de finesse*, which correctly senses certain subtle principles without being able to demonstrate them (Laf. 511-13; Sell. 669-71). Two fragments repeat this distinction in other terms, with *raison* or *esprit* corresponding to the *esprit de géométrie*, and *cœur* to the *esprit de finesse*. The first fragment appears in the *liasse* marked 'Grandeur' (Laf. 110; Sell. 142), and the second, in the *liasse* marked 'Preuves de Jésus-Christ':

L'ordre – Contre l'objection que l'Ecriture n'a pas d'ordre.

Le cœur a son ordre, l'esprit a le sien, qui est par principe et démonstration. Le cœur en a un autre. On ne prouve pas qu'on doit être aimé en exposant d'ordre les causes de l'amour, cela serait ridicule.¹²⁷

Pascal, in order to illustrate his assertion that the heart alone can sense the order of the holy Scriptures, mentions the cause of love as an analogous case. This suggests a tangential connection with fragment thirty-two in which he says that the cause of love is a *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It is possible, as a result, to discern the *je-ne-sais-quoi* among what Pascal calls 'les choses de finesse'.¹²⁸ We experience such things, he says, only by catching a sudden glimpse of them: 'il faut tout d'un coup voir la chose d'un seul regard, et non pas par progrès de raisonnement, au moins jusqu'à un certain degré' (Laf. 512; Sell. 670). Leibniz places the apprehension of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in a progressive present that unfolds the past into the future; but nothing prepares one for a stroke of passion that comes, as the saying goes, *je ne sais d'où*. The subject senses the Pascalian *je-ne-sais-quoi* precisely as it falls in experience, that is, at one sudden stroke in the absolute present.

¹²⁷ Pascal: Laf. 298; Sell. 329.

¹²⁸ Borgerhoff 1950: 128-29; Dens 1981: 54-55; Lichtenstein 1989: 26.

How does one name the stroke of passion? Pascal imitates from Corneille the art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. His writing, which addresses the polite circle, uses the conversational poetics and modish language that characterize new philosophical texts (see 2.ii.1 above). Like many others, he looks to Montaigne as one precursor of his own conversational poetics:

la manière d'écrire d'Epictète, de Montaigne et de Salomon de Tultie, est la plus d'usage, qui s'insinue le mieux, qui demeure plus dans la mémoire et qui se fait le plus citer, parce qu'elle est toute composée de pensées nées sur les entretiens ordinaires de la vie.¹²⁹

Fragment thirty-two, which is one such *pensée*, incorporates Corneille and his *je-ne-sais-quoi* within this poetics. The fragment holds a provisional place, between Cureau de la Chambre and Chalesme, in the sequence that Boaistuau initiates by using the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to place love in the vast theatre of human misery (see 3.ii.1 above). Fragment thirty-two remains distinct from the rest of the sequence, however, since where treatise writers accommodate the commonplace as a preliminary indefinition within a general science, Pascal lets the *je-ne-sais-quoi* fall as a singular stroke of passion. His text is the first in the sequence to name Corneille as the poetic source of the commonplace. The Jansenists single out Corneille, the most successful playwright of the mid-seventeenth century, for condemnation in their attacks on the theatre.¹³⁰ Fragment thirty-two bears out Nicholas Hammond's argument that Pascal does not condemn the theatre so much as use it to analyse human experience.¹³¹ He quotes Corneille because his *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] successfully describes the stroke of passion in a single word. It is, at the moment of its greatest currency, the *mot juste*. The appearance of the word in the *Pensées*, in a single fragment, reflects the image of

¹²⁹ Pascal: Laf. 745; Sell. 618; 'Salomon de Tultie' is an anagram of Pascal's pseudonym 'Louis de Montalte'.

¹³⁰ Thirouin 1997: 84-85.

¹³¹ Hammond 1993: 280.

human passion as a force that falls in one sudden stroke. Pascal, in naming this force, lends an imperceptible point to the art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].

iii. An agent of pathos

1. The lexicon of love

Des coups de foudre. *Il faudrait changer ce mot ridicule; cependant la chose existe.*

– STENDHAL

The previous section set out to show how literary writers, in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, use the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] to name the stroke of passion. The narrative force of the word and its associated commonplace is most strongly felt in particular narrative situations. These require a close literary analysis that necessarily fragments a general historical perspective. My intention was to use the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a lexical site of fragmentation and not to suggest that the term provides the sole means of naming the stroke of passion. The seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* passes in fact through the entire seventeenth-century lexicon of love.

The case of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] indicates the lexicon's semantic fragility. The noun describes my experience of a sudden and inexplicable stroke of passion. It successfully carries, in isolated cases such as those of Corneille and Pascal, the full semantic force of the event that it describes. No sooner does it become current, however, than it starts to lose this force. Usage soon makes of it an all too settled term for a radically unsettling event. It remains possible – but much more difficult – for a writer to invest the sedimented term with the same semantic force. The seme, never entirely faithful to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], couples with more current terms; these in

turn settle into the lexical landmass; the seme moves on. Stendhal's observation about the *coup de foudre* applies to the sedimented *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], *grâce*, or any other word used to describe the stroke of passion. None is adequate to the task, each comes in time to seem more hackneyed than the last, and yet the thing exists. All literature can do is to keep the lexicon of love on the move. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] plays a significant supporting role here, for while its subordinate position within noun phrases reduces the risk of sedimentation, it continues to uncover the active fault-line of nescioquiddity within settled terms (see 1.i.3 (III) above, pp. 53-54). It achieves in this way the effect that Shklovsky and other Russian formalists call 'defamiliarization' (*ostranenie*): it refreshes our perceptions of just how strange a force love is.¹³² Literary texts of the late seventeenth century carry into particular narrative situations the semantic force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its associated commonplace. I am going briefly to examine a few instances of the many in which the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* sets the lexicon of love into movement. I indicate these instances as avenues for further reading and exploration. In some, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] is implicit; in others, non-substantival forms play a crucial supporting role.

There are other ways than the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] of saying the same thing even at the height of its currency. Two readers of La Rochefoucauld, in the years following the first publication of his *Maximes* (1665), make an explicit connection between the word and its semantic neighbours. Maxims, like vernacular treatises, attempt to define the passions.¹³³ But, where treatises offer a survey of existing doctrines, maxims simply lay down the law in a set of self-sufficient definitions.¹³⁴ The sympathy that draws individuals together appears in La Rochefoucauld's writing

¹³² Shklovsky 1988: 20.

¹³³ See Beaujot 1984.

¹³⁴ See Bennington 1985: 1-61.

as one force that can be defined only in its impervious resistance to definition. One maxim spells this out in its opening sentence: ‘il est difficile de définir l’amour’.¹³⁵ Another is more discreet.

On peut dire de l’agrément, séparé de la beauté, que c’est une symétrie dont on ne sait point les règles, et un rapport secret des traits ensemble, et des traits avec les couleurs et avec l’air de la personne.¹³⁶

The maxim distinguishes between beauty and *agrément*, the term that Descartes uses to name the cause of desire (see 3.i.3 above, p. 167). All that can be said about *agrément*, the maxim asserts, is that it is an inexplicable fact of physiognomy. Two phrases, ‘une symétrie dont on ne sait point les règles’ and ‘un rapport secret’, support this assertion of nescioquiddity.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the entire maxim brings to mind a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This may appear to be no more than the effect of thinking too long and hard about a single word, a kind of literary critical *idée fixe*; but, if this is so, then it is an *idée fixe* that at least two seventeenth-century readers share. Modern editors reproduce the marginal annotations of Christina of Sweden and an anonymous commentator on the *Maximes*.¹³⁷ Christina, whose correspondence with Descartes on love I have already described (in 3.i.3 above), is said to have written her remarks on the *Maximes* around 1671.¹³⁸ This is, of course, the year in which Bouhours’s treatment of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a topic was first published. Christina’s marginal comment on maxim 240 reads: ‘c’est un je ne sais quoi qui se voit et se sent, et qui ne se peut exprimer par les paroles’ (La Rochefoucauld 1967: 615). The maxim receives a similar comment from the anonymous reader: ‘bonne définition, qui revient au *je ne*

¹³⁵ La Rochefoucauld 1967: no. 68; see also nos. 69 and 77.

¹³⁶ La Rochefoucauld 1967: no. 240.

¹³⁷ See La Rochefoucauld 1967: iii-iv (Avant-propos).

¹³⁸ La Rochefoucauld 1967: 599.

sais quoi.¹³⁹ Both readers make the semantic connection between inexplicable *agrément* and the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. The anonymous reader's formulation indicates that, like Bouhours, he or she conceives of the noun as a topic within which to subsume other terms and phrases. This is a further indication that the word has achieved sedimentation as a topic by the 1670s. One can only speculate as to why La Rochefoucauld chose not to use the modish word that was, it seems, most likely to come to his readers' minds. This may of course be his very reason for avoiding the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. Evoking the sense, without mentioning the word, would permit a form of defamiliarization and recharge the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as it were, with nescioquiddity. Whatever the author's intention, two contemporary readers, at least, applaud La Rochefoucauld for having found a different way of evoking the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

Seventeenth-century dramatists exploit the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and its narrative force, while keeping the lexicon of love on the move. Molière and Racine – in very different ways, of course – both dramatize the idea that love is a *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The stroke of passion falls as a peripeteia in Racine's Biblical tragedy *Esther* (1689). Racine's Esther resembles another oriental queen, Cleopatra, whose inexplicable charm Pascal describes as having triggered a revolution (see 3.ii.3 above, pp. 192-93). Esther, wife of the Persian king Assuérus, risks death by entering the king's presence without prior invitation to beg mercy for her Jewish people. Assuérus, initially angered by her transgression, is overcome by his wife's appearance. Esther overturns the despotic order of the Persian empire, and the fate of the Jewish people, at one stroke. The king, smitten by her grace, tells her:

Je ne trouve qu'en vous je ne sais quelle grâce,

¹³⁹ La Rochefoucauld 1967: 62 n. 3; see Borgerhoff 1950: 108.

Qui me charme toujours, et jamais ne me lasse.
De l'aimable vertu doux et puissants attraits!
Tout respire en Esther l'innocence et la paix.¹⁴⁰

The term *grâce*, I have argued elsewhere, encapsulates the dramatic interactions between the sacred and profane forces at work in *Esther*.¹⁴¹ The Académie Française dictionary definition (1694) displays the term's semantic ambivalence: '*Grace, signifie plus estreitement l'aide et le secours que Dieu donne aux hommes pour faire leur salut [...] Grace, signifie encore, Agrément, ce qui plaist [...] Cette femme est belle, mais elle n'a aucune grace.*' La Piété uses the former sense in the Prologue (Racine 1999: 949); the profane despot Assuérus, however, falls upon the latter sense. A force that beggars explanation and acts within everyday experience draws him to his wife. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] renders the intimate nescioquiddity of Esther's grace.

This revelation, as the subsequent lines make clear, is one that Assuérus has suffered many times before. This repetition does not make of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* a Leibnizian dynamic force that enfolds past and future within a progressive present (see 3.ii.3 above, pp. 197-98). No dynamic force conserves the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of the passions through time. It strikes into time, and when it does, it leaves no tense other than the present. This does not mean that it strikes only once – although it may – but that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* always falls as the first stroke. Assuérus emphasizes this, insisting that Esther has a grace 'Qui me charme toujours et jamais ne me lasse'. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* that overcomes Assuérus is the stroke of lightning that strikes twice, or three times, or indeed every day in the same place. Jankélévitch identifies this strange repetition as an everyday experience: 'à tout moment le déjà-vu nous apparaît comme un jamais-encore-vu dans sa jeune et inédite nouveauté' (1980: II, 159). One can

¹⁴⁰ Racine 1999: (*Esther*, 669-72).

¹⁴¹ Scholar 2002b.

incessantly fall in love, as Assuérus does, with the same person. Racine shows the one stroke of passion, among the many that he has suffered for Esther, that overturns his political force. Each falls in an absolute present.

Can one be sure that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* of passion is a real force? Molière shows passionate relations taking place in a social context that always risks inflecting them. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, when it comes to be a linguistic fashion item, casts doubt over the real inexplicability of the attraction professed. Its use may be determined by conditions – a cold attempt at seduction, for example, or the desire to include oneself within fashionable social circles – other than a simple stroke of passion. Molière dramatizes this unsettling thought. *L'Ecole des Femmes* (1662) uses forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to trace the mutual passion that the young lovers, Agnès and Horace, experience for one another. When Horace arrives in town, he is greeted by Arnolphe, an old friend of his father. Arnolphe is keen to welcome the young gentleman within his social circle. He boasts that the town's womenfolk have plenty to offer young gallants, or 'ceux que du nom de galans on baptise', in search of amorous intrigue.¹⁴² Horace assures Arnolphe that he has already found this out for himself. He has just met a bewitching young woman and, what is more, she is in a predicament: her jealous protector keeps her locked away from the world. Arnolphe is of course the very same jealous protector who intends the young woman – Agnès – for his wife. Horace describes to Arnolphe what he sees in Agnès: 'Un air tout engageant, je ne sais quoi de tendre, | Dont il n'est point de cœur qui se puisse défendre.'¹⁴³ He uses a fashionable gallant phrase, involving the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.], to describe his new passion to an older man in his social circle. The conversation between Horace and Arnolphe is uncomfortable for those spectators who wish to see Agnès free to

¹⁴² Molière 1971: I, 560 (*L'Ecole des Femmes*, i.4); see 4.ii.3 (II) below, pp. 236-39 (on *galanterie*).

¹⁴³ Molière 1971: I, 561 (i.4).

love where she chooses. For her so-called liberation appears to involve a mere substitution of husbands within the same social order. Molière eases this discomfort by making Agnès and Horace speak the same language of passion. Agnès, like her lover, uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] when describing her new-found feelings to Arnolphe. Horace, she says with visible confusion, tells her:

Des choses que jamais rien ne peut égaler,
Et dont, toutes les fois que je l'entends parler,
La douceur me chatouille et là dedans remue
Certain je ne sais quoi dont je suis toute émue.¹⁴⁴

Agnès falls upon the phrase in her untutored attempt to put into words the physical attraction that draws her to Horace.¹⁴⁵ This experience, as strange to her as it is irresistible, is a *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the word's ideal-typical meaning. Agnès repeats the same thought in her letter to Horace. She uses no gallant trope but a simple string of syntax: 'en vérité je ne sais ce que vous m'avez fait; mais je sens [...] que je serais bien aise d'être à vous.'¹⁴⁶ Molière places forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the mouths of the two lovers in *L'Ecole des Femmes* to suggest that, despite their different social positions and schooling, both have fallen victim to the same stroke of passion. The play, through its use of the word, first provokes and then dispels the uncomfortable thought that love may simply sugar the pill of social determination.¹⁴⁷

The tone darkens in *Le Misanthrope* (1666). The relationship between the misanthropic Alceste and the socialite Célimène strikes their friends as so inexplicable that it must be a shared delusion. Eliante, with a glance at the sciences of passion reviewed earlier, remarks of the pair:

Cela fait assez voir que l'amour, dans les cœurs,
N'est pas toujours produit par un rapport d'humeurs:

¹⁴⁴ Molière 1971: I, 572 (ii.5).

¹⁴⁵ See Johnson 1982: 172.

¹⁴⁶ Molière 1971: I, 589 (iii.4).

¹⁴⁷ See Johnson 1982: 175 (for an alternative view).

Et toutes ces raisons de douces sympathies
Dans cet exemple-ci se trouvent démenties.¹⁴⁸

This speech parodies Corneille's use of an astrological lexicon of love in *L'Illusion comique* (see 3.ii.2 above, pp. 188-89). It also denies the pertinence of physiological causes to this particular case of strange sympathy (see 3.i.2 (III) above, pp. 161-62). Eliante's rejection of available explanations might appear to suggest the positive nescioquiddity of the relation between Alceste and Célimène. This relation tends rather, however, towards negation and nothingness. Eliante cannot be sure whether Célimène in fact loves Alceste: 'comment pouvoir juger s'il est vrai qu'elle l'aime?' (1971: II, 192). The play ends in their rupture, with Célimène resolved to remain within the social circle, and Alceste threatening to abandon it (1971: II, 217-18). Molière stages here the third phase of love as described by its commonplace biography. This strange force, after its inexplicable onset, departs in a manner no easier to understand: 'et celui qui disoit que c'estoit un je ne sçay quoy, qui venoit de je ne sçay où, et qui s'en alloit je ne sçay comment, n'est pas un de ceux qui a le plus mal rencontré' (Cureau de la Chambre 1658: I, 26). Molière, like Racine, puts the fleeting *je-ne-sais-quoi* of passion on stage.

2. Cultivating the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

The experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* produces three contrasting attitudes in writing about the passions. The first is to accommodate the experience within a rational science; the second is to name it as a stroke of pure passion; the third attitude, to which I now turn, is to cultivate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an agent of pathos.¹⁴⁹ This third

¹⁴⁸ Molière 1971: II, 192 (*Le Misanthrope*, iv.1).

¹⁴⁹ I mean, by *pathos*, the power of stirring emotion in others.

attitude coexists, in historical terms, with the first two. The lexical tracer of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* registers it only, however, as the word achieves sedimentation. The noun becomes reified as an object capable of serving different uses: it is no longer the mark of passion but, instead, an instrument of deliberate charm.¹⁵⁰ There develops a *culture* of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in which people add the modish word to the conventional language of pathos. Two examples drawn from the realm of the passions serve here to indicate a development that I shall analyse in the next chapter.

The commonplace of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* makes a late appearance in Regnard's comedy *Démocrite Amoureux* (1700).¹⁵¹ The philosopher Démocrite, a latter-day Alceste with a pedantic turn of mind, lives with his gallant disciple Strabon in a desert retreat. The lovely Criséis, who has been brought up as a country girl, comes across them there. Démocrite, smitten, exclaims with characteristic abstraction: 'Je sens, en la voyant, la raison et l'amour, | L'homme et le philosophe agités tour à tour'.¹⁵² The play satirizes the pretension of philosophers who claim to reflect upon the very passions that subvert their reason. Démocrite attempts to seduce the simple Criséis by giving her a lesson in love. In his agitation, however, he can only stammer a pedantic definition of love: it is, he tells the confused young woman, a hidden instinct for reproduction in each individual. Strabon cuts him short, saying: 'Pour un homme d'esprit vous parlez mal tendresse.' He proceeds to court Criséis, not as a pedant, but with a well-worn gallant commonplace:

L'amour, ne vous en déplaît, est un je ne sais quoi,
 Qui vous prend, je ne sais ni par où, ni pourquoi;
 Qui va je ne sais où; qui fait naître en notre âme
 Je ne sais quelle ardeur que l'on sent pour une femme:
 Et ce je ne sais quoi, qui paraît si charmant,

¹⁵⁰ Jankélévitch 1980: I, 24.

¹⁵¹ On this play, see Owen 1982: 80-82; Calame 1960: 301-04.

¹⁵² Regnard 1876: I, 247 (*Démocrite*, i.5).

Strabon's set-piece is a disenchanted belated version of a commonplace that no longer marks a stroke of passion. It is instead a conventional instrument of pathos or, in plain English, a chat-up line. It fails to work on Criséis, who replies to the pedantic Démocrite and the gallant Strabon alike: 'Vous me parlez tous deux une langue étrangère; | Et moins qu'auparavant je connais ce mystère' (1876: I, 248). The seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* has moved elsewhere.

I return for my second and final example to Bouhours, with whom I opened this chapter. His conversation on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* draws together many of its features as a stroke of passion. He distances himself (with characteristic caution) from the scholastic tradition when he defines the cause of love, in the manner of the polite circle, as radically inexplicable.¹⁵⁴ He repeats both of the commonplaces associated with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.¹⁵⁵ He traces a generic movement from philosophy to poetry, in particular that of Corneille, in order to name the stroke of passion in a single word (see 3.i.1 above, pp. 153-54). His writing on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* includes, not just occurrences of the word itself, but also the insistence of *adynaton*: 'le pinceau et la langue ne peuvent exprimer le je ne sçay quoy qui fait tout.'¹⁵⁶ He describes a force that falls with a sudden violence, and in an absolute present, upon an unwitting subject: 'c'est le trait qui blesse le cœur; et le plus court de tous les moments, si j'ose parler ainsi, c'est celui dans lequel le je ne sçay quoy fait son effet' (1962: 143). Bouhours uses the word to name the stroke of passion.

¹⁵³ Regnard 1876: I, 248 (i.5); quoted in Littré 1965: 'savoir'.

¹⁵⁴ Ariste avoids a direct disagreement with the scholastics, who insist that knowledge precedes love, by silently redefining what they mean by 'knowledge' to suit his own definition: 'on connoist toujours la personne qu'on aime; on connoist qu'elle est aimable, mais on ne connoist pas toujours ce qui la fait aimer' (1962: 142).

¹⁵⁵ Bouhours 1962: 140, 143, 147; 3.i.1 above, pp. 153-54.

¹⁵⁶ Bouhours 1962: 145; 3.ii.1 above, p. 177 (on *adynaton*).

The conversation between Ariste and Eugène is one place in which all these features of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* cluster. They prove inseparable, however, from the social context that determines the friends' conversation. The text, from the outset, defines Ariste and Eugène as members of the polite circle: they enjoy 'ces conversations libres et familières, qu'ont les honnêtes gens, quand ils sont amis' (1962: 5). The circle determines both with whom one can feel a strange sympathy and in what way one can express this. It closes around the friendship of Ariste and Eugène. Their conversation on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* slips accordingly from the realm of particular passions to that of general social relations. Some people, Ariste and Eugène agree, simply have it (whatever this *it* may be): 'les personnes de condition ont pour l'ordinaire sur le visage je ne sçay quoy de noble et de grand, qui leur attire du respect, et qui les fait reconnoître dans la foule' (1962: 147). Ariste and Eugène refrain from actually saying that they share an inexplicable something called social quality – to do so, after all, would be to betray their lack of it – but the tone of their conversation suggests that they are on more than nodding acquaintance with it. The friends use the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, a modish name within the polite circle, in such a way as to show one another, discreetly but unmistakably, that this circle is where they belong. They claim to suffer the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a stroke of passion in order to cultivate the word as an agent of pathos.

4. CULTURE

JE-NE-SAIS-QUOI [...] Quelque chose qu'on ne peut ou qu'on feint de ne pouvoir préciser, définir ou exprimer nettement.

— TRÉSOR DE LA LANGUE FRANÇAISE

i. The polite circle

1. A subtle artifice

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* enters history as a sign of quality. Ariste extends his friend's suggestion, that nature is full of hidden qualities, to the realm of art: 'le je ne sçay quoy appartient à l'art, aussi bien qu'à la nature' (1962: 148). Artists of all kinds seek to give their work a subtle charm that is irreducible to its underlying rules. The great masters realize that the most pleasing art hides its art.¹ The more carefree one's intended effect, the greater the care needed to polish it into shape. Ariste draws his example from the literary arts, asserting:

les pieces delicates en prose et en vers ont je ne sçay quoy de poli et d'honneste qui en fait presque tout le prix, et qui consiste dans cet air du monde, dans cette teinture d'*urbanité* que Cicéron ne sçait comment definir.²

Ariste, in describing art, draws on terms (*poli*, *honneste*, *air du monde*, *urbanité*) that are residually social. Art for him is a form of conversation, and conversation, a form

¹ On this idea, see 4.ii.2 below, p. 229.

² Bouhours 1962: 148; on Cicero and *urbanité*, see 4.ii.3 (i) below, pp. 233-34.

of art: both are expressions of one and the same culture. Bouhours writes for a circle of readers with shared interests and tastes, in short, a wider reading 'public'.³ Literature, for him, may speak of the tides' ebb and flow, or of a world that passion turns upside down, but it must above all embody the subtle quality of polite culture. What precisely this quality is, Ariste cannot say, although his first-person *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] discreetly suggests a certain familiarity with it. Ariste, like Méré and other polite writers, finds a subtle quality in some individual people and works of art that distinguishes them from the rest. The previous chapter examined the experience of sympathy and antipathy in passionate relations between individuals. It followed the movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in certain texts from the realm of the passions to that of polite culture.

I now turn to the appearance and significance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the realm of polite culture. The word rises to prominence in seventeenth-century literary conversations, those of Bouhours and his contemporary the Chevalier de Méré in particular. They, accordingly, receive the most sustained attention since my purpose is to evaluate texts that offer access to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself. This chapter is organized around a critical question: is the subtle quality of distinction a real *je-ne-sais-quoi*, or is it one that certain people 'feign' (in the words of *Le Trésor de la langue française*) for their own purposes? I shall argue that the polite society of Louis XIV cultivates ever subtler ways of distinguishing itself from those that it excludes. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] encapsulates this process. It settles in late seventeenth-century culture, neither as a force of nature nor a stroke of passion, but as an artificially indefinable sign of quality. Members of the polite circle, far from *suffering* the *je-ne-*

³ See Merlin 1994: 35-57 (on the seventeenth-century constitution of 'the public').

sais-quoi, in fact produce it. This subtle artifice is what I describe as the ‘culture’ of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The word is visible, not only as one modish name among others in the seventeenth-century lexicon of social quality, but also in the cultural bedrock that produces this entire lexicon. I start by analysing the discreet fabrication of indefinable signs of quality in polite cultural productions. I then offer a survey of the dominant signs in the mid-century. Each of these contains non-substantival forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*; these can be said meaningfully to anticipate the sedimentation of the noun in that the same culture produces them. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] enters history as a fashionable sign of quality and the same process makes its history possible. But the term no sooner acquires its history than it loses the life-force of its pre-history.

2. The game of nescioquiddity

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] is more than just a sign of polite culture’s indefinable quality: it encapsulates the production of all such signs. Alain Viala and others have defined third quarter of the seventeenth century as the age of *galanterie*. A circle of minor nobles and influential bourgeois uses *galanterie* to cultivate a cultural distinction within the social elite in the years following the Fronde.⁴ Writers such as Méré and Bouhours portray its conversational ideal by embodying it. Viala argues (quite correctly in my view) that *galanterie* better describes the literary forms and trends dominant in the two decades between 1653 and 1673 than the consecrated term *classicism* (1997a: 109). This is of course the period in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] undergoes sedimentation. But it is not my intention to impose on *galanterie* the same fate as *classicism* by suggesting that we should talk of the ‘age of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*’.

⁴ See Viala 1989, 1994, 1997a; Scudéry 1998; 4.ii.3 below, pp. 236-37.

There is no need: *galanterie* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] both belong to the same polite lexicon, and in quantitative terms, the former term is more prominent than the latter. My suggestion is qualitative: it is that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* defines the culture underlying all signs in the lexicon of indefinable quality.

The game of nescioquiddity encapsulates this culture. The game takes place in a salon conversation between members of the polite circle. New philosophical dialogues of the period, as we saw earlier (2.ii.1 above, pp. 115-117), are also set in the salon. But philosophical dialogues and polite conversations, because they share the same setting, need to be distinguished. The difference is simply that, where the former uses the manner of the polite circle to articulate a particular philosophical position, the latter makes the manner itself the topic of conversation. The game of nescioquiddity, which is the stuff of polite conversation rather than dialogue, always follows the same pattern. One member of the polite circle starts the game by wondering out loud what it is that lends some people an air of ‘quality’. The initial name for this quality, as we shall see (4.ii.1 below), tends to be *honnêteté*. The interlocutors all variously offer attempts to define this elusive quality. The attempt to define the quality generates a series of adjacent names for it; these are used to describe its perceived effects; the attempted definition, however, duly ends in an admission of failure. Each speaker moves the lexicon on to a new term while making the same discovery: that social quality is easier to perceive, and describe in its effects, than it is to define or explain. Participants win the game of definition as a group by politely agreeing that no sufficient definition or explanation can be found for the quality that all nevertheless perceive. Nescioquiddity, the semantic operation of the affirmative *je-ne-sais-quoi*, is the object of the game.

Jean Starobinski, in his article ‘La Rochefoucauld et les morales substitutives’ (1966), calls this game of nescioquiddity ‘le système du *je-ne-sais-quoi*’. Starobinski’s reading of La Rochefoucauld has been the object of some controversy.⁵ His description of the ‘system’ of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, however, is fundamental to a critical analysis of indefinable social quality. Starobinski proceeds by contrasting the polite culture of La Rochefoucauld and his circle with the (roughly contemporary) political philosophy of Hobbes. La Rochefoucauld and Hobbes, Starobinski argues, share the pessimistic view that the natural state of humankind is one of mutually assured destruction. Both see in language the chance for survival. Language, for Hobbes, permits humanity to establish a commonwealth governed by universal conventions; La Rochefoucauld and others use it, however, to fix and maintain the limits of a small elite circle (1966: 214-15). Starobinski uses the figures of Hobbes and La Rochefoucauld to distinguish between two mutually exclusive forms of social existence, one founded upon a collective political ethics, and the other governed by an exclusive polite aesthetics.⁶ In the second, which La Rochefoucauld and his circle cultivate, ‘la seule règle consiste à chercher en commun la fuyante définition de l’agréable’ (1966: 216). The fact that no definition is possible preserves the exclusivity of the group concerned. For one either has that indefinable *it* or not:

une sorte de grâce élit les rares personnes qui, soucieuses de plaire, parviennent à leurs fins. Il n’est pas nécessaire qu’elles sachent élucider elles-mêmes la raison d’un pareil effet. On n’en finit donc jamais de définir agréablement les conditions de l’agrément: le *je ne sais quoi* constitue une sorte de résidu mystérieux qui se refuse à l’analyse. Le système du *je ne sais quoi*, en insistant sur le caractère irrationnel, indéfinissable et rare du vrai mérite, apporte à la bonne compagnie l’assurance qu’elle demande: elle demeurera toujours un cercle exigu; le royaume de la qualité, qui veut avoir d’étroites frontières, trouve de quoi les garantir.⁷

⁵ See James 1967; Defaux 1980: 86-87; Lafond 1998: 26-30.

⁶ A similar distinction is offered by Langer (1999: 29-30) within a sixteenth-century context.

⁷ Starobinski 1966: 216.

Starobinski refers here to the underlying system of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. His use of the term *system* reflects his greater attention to the semantic operations of polite discourse than to its cultural conditions of production. When I wish to transfer the emphasis I talk here of the *culture* of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. I use the word in its absolute sense to refer to the refinement of mind, tastes, and manners as it understood and practised collectively by a group of people (in this case the seventeenth-century social elite in France).⁸ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* defines the way in which this culture preserves and sustains its sense of distinction. It is in that sense the antithesis of the brute *je-ne-sais-quoi* of attractions and repulsions, desires and aversions, which exist in nature and the passions. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in the realm of the passions, is suffered by an individual; here it is cultivated by a group of people.⁹ It no longer defines a stroke of passion but instead the way in which signs of quality are produced.

The polite circle must constantly renew its lexicon if its borders are to be maintained. Members need to keep the outsiders out while electing themselves insiders. The first imperative concerns relations between the circle and the rest of society, and the second, relations within the circle. Norbert Elias has argued that, through their necessary contacts with rich bourgeois social strata, the seventeenth-century courtly aristocracy could not prevent ‘the *spreading* of their manners, their customs, their tastes and their language to other classes’ (1982: 257). Members keep the circle intact by renewing its indefinable signs of quality as and when these become fashionable beyond the circle. They do so by playing the game of nescioquiddity.

⁸ See *OED*: ‘culture’, 5. a-b.

⁹ Moriarty argues similarly that the individualism of taste is conditioned by collective modes of perception (1988: 86).

Vaugelas provides an early instance of this game in his *Remarques sur la langue française* (1647). The lexicographer, I mentioned earlier (in 1.ii.1 above, pp. 63-64), describes the elegant usage of the polite circle from within. The historian of the Académie Française, Pellisson, confirms Vaugelas's position by showering him with signs of quality: there is in his *Remarques*, Pellisson says, 'je ne sais quoi d'honnête homme [...] on ne saurait presque s'empêcher d'en aimer l'auteur'.¹⁰ Vaugelas's entry on the word *galant* was silently paraphrased by Furetière in his *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) and hailed by the Académie Française in its *Observations sur les remarques de M. de Vaugelas* (1704).¹¹ Vaugelas frames his entry as a reported conversation between *galants* as they play the game of nescioquiddity.

On demande ce que c'est qu'un homme galant, ou une femme galante de cette sorte, qui fait et qui dit les choses d'un air galant, et d'une façon galante. J'ay veu autrefois agiter la Cour et les plus galans de l'une et de l'autre sexe qui avoient bien de la peine à le definir. Les uns soutenoient que c'est *ce je ne sçay quoy*, qui differe peu de la bonne grace; les autres que ce n'estoit pas assez du *je ne sçay quoy*, ny de la bonne grace, qui sont des choses purement naturelles, mais qu'il falloit que l'un et l'autre fust accompagné d'un certain air, qu'on prend à la Cour, et qui ne s'acquiert qu'à force de hanter les Grands et les Dames. D'autres disoient que ces choses exterieures ne suffisoient pas, et que ce mot de *galant*, avoit bien une plus grande estenduë, dans laquelle il embrassoit plusieurs qualitez ensemble, qu'en un mot c'estoit un composé où il entroit du *ie ne sçay quoy*, ou de la bonne grace, de l'air de la Cour, de l'esprit, du jugement, de la civilité, de la courtoisie et de la gayeté, le tout sans affectation, et sans vice. Avec cela il y a dequoy faire un honneste homme à la mode de la Cour. Ce sentiment fut suivy comme le plus approchant de la verité, mais on ne laissoit pas de dire que cette définition estoit encore imparfaite, et qu'il y avoit quelque chose de plus dans la signification de ce mot, qu'on ne pouvait exprimer.¹²

The most gallant members of either sex, as Vaugelas puts it, set out here to define what it is that they all share. They come up with a whole semantic field of signs of quality to which we shall return (in 4.ii below). Vaugelas reports four contributions to the discussion. The first group proposes a positive definition of *galant*, which includes the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], but which the second rejects as insufficient. The final

¹⁰ Quoted in Magendie 1970: 806.

¹¹ Furetière 1690: 'galant'; Stanton 1980: 52.

¹² Vaugelas 1880: II, 209.

contributions repeat the pattern. The entire sequence witnesses an open-ended proliferation of nuances that place any definition out of reach. The third attempted definition grows to a complex syntactical string including no less than eight synonyms qualified by a string of negations ('le tout sans contrainte, [etc.]') – and this, its authors' claim, defines *galant* 'en un mot'! But even this definition is not good enough to gain general consensus. It is generally agreed to be the best available, but still fundamentally imperfect, for there is beyond all that can be said about *galanterie* a quintessential *something* that can never be explained: 'on ne laissoit pas de dire [...] qu'il y avoit quelque chose de plus dans la signification de ce mot, qu'on ne pouvoit exprimer.' The seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is finally produced here. This happens only after the speakers' lexical resources – including the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself – have been exhausted. Vaugelas's remark (published in the late 1640s) rejects the word on the grounds that it refers to purely natural qualities; later in its existence, as we shall see, it comes to appear excessively artificial. That the word and its core meaning fail to coincide in this context is anything but accidental. The rejection of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] and all other signs is ultimately inevitable, in fact, since the aim of the game is to place cultural quality, exquisitely but relentlessly, beyond any settled term or definition. By so doing, of course, the *galants* maintain their possession of the title. Vaugelas, who repeats their game of nescioquiddity, silently places himself within their circle.

ii. Signs of quality

– *Wast ever in court, shepherd? – No, truly. – Then thou art damned.*

— SHAKESPEARE, *As You Like It*

1. *Honnêteté*: a rough guide

Polite culture transmits its indefinable quality through a series of lexical signs. Four are current during the period in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] rises to prominence: *honnêteté*, *urbanité*, *galanterie*, and *bel esprit*. Each, as we shall see, enjoys a period of vogue and is thereafter replaced. *Honnêteté*, the dominant term, raises controversial questions about the nature and origins of social quality that apply to the entire semantic field. Members of the polite circle use *honnêteté* and other words as signs to their fellow-elect, and to those beyond the circle, that they possess a real but indefinable quality. Opposition to this process shows, once again, the conflict between different groups over apparently commonplace words and notions (see 1.iii.1 above, p. 81). The critical question, of what kind of ‘thing’ signs of quality are, cannot be ignored. I shall argue that they are cultural artifacts designed to be both socially palpable (so that the insiders will know who they are) and indefinable (in order to keep the circle intact). Underlying all signs of quality is the culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

Honnêteté is the most widely used seventeenth-century sign of quality. I offer a rough guide to its smooth art. Bouhours notes that ‘*honneur, honnesteté, honnestetez, honneste* [...] regnent fort dans le langage d’aujourd’huy’ (1962: 55). Literary historians, from Maurice Magendie (1925) onwards, have established its rise to prominence.¹³ Magendie distinguishes between the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘aristocratic’ conceptions of *honnêteté*. The former offers ethical guidance to those wishing to acquire the quality; the latter celebrates those who already possess it.¹⁴ The consensus among historians is that the aristocratic conception of *honnêteté* becomes prominent in the course of the 1660s and that this development is related to the rise of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].¹⁵ Nicolas Faret makes the adjective *honnête* popular in his practical guide to social advancement, *L’Honneste homme ou l’art de plaire à la cour* (1630).¹⁶ He tells would-be courtiers: ‘le comble de ces choses consiste en une certaine grace naturelle [...] qui se voit en tous ceux qui sont nays pour plaire dans le monde’ (1925: 18-19). Those that do not possess this innate grace by birthright, he insists (1925: 19), can cultivate it. He offers a practical tip: ‘c’est [...] d’user par tout d’une certaine negligence qui cache l’artifice, et tesmoigne que l’on ne fait rien que comme sans y penser, et sans aucune sorte de peine’ (1925: 20). Faret’s ‘negligence’ silently translates the neologism, *sprezzatura*, that Castiglione introduces in his treatise on courtly civility *Il Cortegiano* (1528). *Sprezzatura* names that indefinable air of nonchalance that the courtisan must cultivate in order to appear unaffectedly natural.¹⁷ Concealing the art of pleasing the court elite is the art itself.¹⁸

¹³ Magendie 1970: 467-75, 892-901, Maclean 1977: 119-155, Stanton 1980: 14-30, Moriarty 1988: 46-52.

¹⁴ Magendie 1970: xxxix-xl; Stanton 1980: 11; Dens 1981: 12-15.

¹⁵ Bourdieu 1979: 77, Stanton 1980: 207; Elias 1982: 360; Moriarty 1999: 526; Viala 1999: 187.

¹⁶ The text was reprinted eleven times before 1681 (Stanton 1980: 20).

¹⁷ Castiglione 1991: i.26; Montandon 1995: 847-55.

¹⁸ On this tag, see 4.ii.2 below, p. 229.

Faret, like Méré in the following generation, sees that an indefinable air of distinction is essential at court. But, unlike Méré, he offers a practical guide to those outsiders hoping to gain an entrance. Faret's successors, Du Bosc (1634, 1635) and Grenaille (1642), imitate his treatise in the decade following its publication.¹⁹ All three assert that *honnêtes gens* must conform to the ethical codes that polite society deems 'fitting' (*bienséant*).²⁰ Those who observe the *bienséances* can claim to possess true *honnêteté*. Méré returns to this topic from a different perspective in his discourse 'De la vraie honnêteté'.²¹ *Bienséance* remains essential to those with *honnêteté*: 'si quelqu'un me demandoit en quoi consiste l'honnêteté, je dirois que ce n'est autre chose que d'exceller en tout ce qui regarde les agrémens et les bienséances de la vie' (1930: III, 70). But the collocation of *agrémens* with *bienséances* here reflects the latter's semantic drift from ethics towards aesthetics. Méré establishes, as the fundamental requirement of *bienséance*, the need to please the polite circle.

The struggle between competing discourses over *honnêteté* is particularly intense in the years around 1670. That Méré needs to distinguish his aesthetic version as the 'true' *honnêteté* suggests that this has its discontents. One of these, Antoine de Courtin, attacks the circle of Méré and Bouhours in 1671 and, as we have seen (1.iii.2 above, pp. 86-87), takes arms with the Jansenists against Bouhours and his 'scandalous' *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The *ad hominem* implication is that Bouhours is to be ignored since he is clearly no *honnête homme*. Courtin adopts Nicole's definition of civility as an ethical duty (1998: 46). Rather than emitting signs of quality, as Méré

¹⁹ See Maclean 1977: 123-26.

²⁰ Maclean 1977: 129.

²¹ This text was first published posthumously in 1700; Dens offers 1677 as the date of its composition (1981: 12).

and Bouhours do, Courtin lays down the ‘rules of civility’.²² He dismisses the subtle charms of aristocratic *honnêteté* as ‘une pure libéralité de la nature’ about which nothing can be said (1998: 49). Méré and Bouhours, despite Courtin’s polemical suggestion, do in fact award the polite circle more qualities than a simply natural charm. They and others agree with Pascal that the *honnête homme* should possess a universal *savoir-faire*;²³ this he should exercise with generosity, restraint and modesty.²⁴ But Méré recommends modesty and other virtues – and here Courtin’s objection becomes forceful – solely because it pleases the *honnêtes gens*. He condemns injustice, envy, and spite for being, not wrong, but ‘disagreeable’ (1930: II, 19). Méré, the Machiavelli of the polite world, reduces ethical questions to the sole criterion of charm. Bouhours, similarly, observes that there are some people of whom one can only say: ‘il est bien fait, il a bonne mine, il a de l’esprit, mais il a je ne sçay quoy qui me déplaist’ (1962: 146). Exclusion from the circle, like inclusion, hangs on an immaterial quality that no one can learn as a rule of civility, a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This, Bouhours assures us when attacking one of his opponent’s rules, is precisely what Courtin lacks: ‘s’il avoit consulté les honnestes gens qui sçavent vivre; s’il sçavoit vivre, ou s’il parloit poliment luy-mesme, il ne se seroit jamais avisé d’instruire de la sorte ceux qui approchent les personnes de qualité’ (1973: 45). Bouhours, in repeating his opponent’s personal slur, reveals the struggle between their two groups over *honnêteté*.

If the subtle charm of *honnêteté* is the only thing that cannot be learnt, as Bouhours says, then one wonders whence it may come. Méré’s interlocutors raise the

²² This is Courtin’s title in its English translation (1671); see Courtin 1998: 20.

²³ See Pascal: Laf. 195, Sell. 228; Laf. 647, Sell. 532; Saint-Evremond 1966: 86-91; Bouhours 1962: 127. Pascal has in mind Montaigne’s remark in ‘Du repentir’ (iii.2, 805c).

²⁴ See Méré 1930: I, 76; III, 157; Bouhours 1962: 122.

same question: ‘mais croyez-vous que cet esprit se puisse acquérir?’²⁵ Such qualities, they reflect, may be gifts of divine grace, or innate properties of some individuals, or cultivated in society. These different explanations are anything but abstract: they serve to designate, in each case, the insiders and the outsiders. *Honnêteté* and its semantic neighbours tend to receive definitions that are differential in character: an *honnête homme* is said to be the opposite of a pedant, true *galanterie* all that is not precious or affected, and so on. This is because such qualities have the function of distinguishing one particular circle *within* the ruling class in general (Bourdieu 1979: 74). The various competing groups generally agree on at least one thing, namely, that *honnêteté* must be cultivated to achieve its perfect state. Who may attempt its cultivation, and in what ways, remain the principal points of conflict. Faret, as we have seen, takes the ‘bourgeois’ or meritocratic view that the aspiring courtier need not be born noble to cultivate *sprezzatura*.²⁶ His view exposes the contradiction that the word *meritocracy* implies: courtiers are rewarded on *merit* for sustaining the codes of the *aristocracy*. Contemporaries of Méré, such as Pellisson and Furetière, maintain Faret’s meritocratic position in relation to the new sign, *galanterie*.²⁷ The Chevalier de Méré (as he aristocratically styles himself) seeks to distinguish himself from predecessors and rivals alike. Where Faret answers the question, ‘how do I get into the circle?’, Méré answers a different one: ‘how do I show everyone that I am, and have always been, part of the circle?’ He makes noble birth a necessary but not sufficient condition of quality.²⁸ He restricts the social *je-ne-sais-quoi* to a happy few within the nobility, not by claiming that it is in their blood, but by granting to the nobility alone the means of cultivating signs of quality. This restriction is a concerted

²⁵ Méré 1930: I, 55; Bouhours 1962: 123-26.

²⁶ See also Du Bosc 1635: 339; Maclean 1977: 126.

²⁷ Viala 1994.

²⁸ Méré 1930: III, 70; Viala 1997b: 68-69.

attempt on the part of the old aristocracy to prevent the circle of polite society from widening in the years following the Fronde (Viala 1997b: 69). It allows Méré thereafter to confirm his own prophecy that only the noble few are capable of *honnêteté*.

Méré's *honnêtes gens* are all of noble birth, then, but all those of noble birth are not *honnêtes gens*. For quality is the perfect marriage of natural disposition and subtle artifice. Méré says as much of true *honnêteté*: 'je croi, que pour l'acquérir en perfection, il est nécessaire que la nature y contribuë, et que l'art, comme par-tout ailleurs, acheve ce qu'elle a commencé.'²⁹ The marriage between art and nature is invariably described as something made or highly wrought. This is the sense of 'perfection' (*per-facere*) in the previous quotation. Signs of quality are made in the polite circle; they are, as Domna Stanton puts it, ideal 'artifacts'.³⁰ This metaphor of artifice works through *ouvrage*, *chef d'œuvre*, and similar terms. Jacques de Caillières says in his treatise *La Fortune des gens de qualité* (1658): 'ce qu'on appelle un fort honneste Gentilhomme, est un des plus accomplis ouvrages de la Nature et de l'Art.'³¹ Gracián, the Spanish Jesuit whom Bouhours quotes in his conversation on the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, says of his sign of quality (*despejo*) that art must perfect what nature has begun.³² *Despejo* is craftily designed to 'dazzle and mystify the public' (Hafter 1966: 135). Signs of quality are the workings of a subtle artifice.

How does one learn to make signs of quality? By mixing with the circle that creates and sustains them. Two alternative methods are proposed: education (the conscious absorption of a body of knowledge) or repeated social experience (the

²⁹ Méré 1930: III, 70; see also II, 32 and III, 144.

³⁰ Stanton 1980: 176-84; Méré 1930: II, 38, 52; III, 144.

³¹ Caillières 1664: 299; Méré 1930: I, 111; III, 157.

³² Gracián 1944: 18-20; on his *despejo* and Bouhours's *je-ne-sais-quoi*, see 1.i.2 above, pp. 45-46.

unconscious assimilation of a way of behaving).³³ Those who define *honnêteté* as a set of ethical principles stress the importance of education.³⁴ The proponents of *honnêteté* as æsthetic sociability, on the other hand, consider experience of the world to be primordial. Méré and Bouhours, who explicitly distinguish between education and social experience, give their preference to the latter. Aspirants acquire the quality of *honnêteté* not in the Schools but in the finishing-school of the salons.³⁵ This Bouhours confirms in his conversation on the French language: ‘en fréquentant les personnes polies, on prend insensiblement je ne sçay quelle teinture de politesse, que les livres ne donnent point’ (1962: 78). Bouhours uses the language of insensible spirits and occult qualities here, in conjunction with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.], to describe signs of quality. These signs fill the rarefied air of the salon as with a subtle fragrance that the young absorb and, with repeated exposure, start to emit. The analogy between occult qualities in nature and signs of quality only goes so far. The critical difference between them – which Bouhours and others do not mention – is that signs of quality only exist within the circle of polite culture. Méré insists that *honnêteté* is a real and universally recognized quality (1930: III, 93). But it is difficult to see why, if that is the case, one can only acquire *honnêteté* by mixing with the polite circle.

The more natural a sign of quality appears, the more highly wrought it proves to be. This fabrication is necessarily a collective task. Individuals exist only in relation to the circle to which they belong. They use its signs to distinguish themselves from outsiders, and in so doing, preserve and sustain the existence of the circle. Polite opinion – what the circle judges to be true or pleasing – is, as Elias puts it, ‘the

³³ See Bourdieu 1979: 71.

³⁴ See Guyon 1604: 192-202; Courtin 1998: 63, 66.

³⁵ Méré 1930: II, 109; III, 72-75; Bouhours 1962: 125-26; Fumaroli 1992: 706 (with reference to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*).

foundation of existence'.³⁶ Nothing is but what is *bienséant*. Polite culture makes signs of quality designed to appear natural. That *honnêteté* is repeatedly compared to works of art, and social quality to æsthetic, lays bare its underlying artifice. The culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is at its most highly wrought, or *perfect*, when it makes *honnêteté* appear natural.

2. A cultural poetics

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] was not, as many of its historians have assumed it was, born into some autonomous æsthetic domain (see Introduction, pp. 22-23). A particular culture makes of it a modish name and a settled topic. Understanding signs of quality requires a *cultural* poetics, in other words, an analysis of the sign's poetic function within its socio-cultural context. The need for such an analysis is all the more important when the text in question appears to discuss matters purely æsthetic.

Méré and Bouhours use examples drawn from social intercourse and æsthetics as if they were one and the same thing. Within polite culture, at least, they are.³⁷ Méré aims to produce a text that embodies the very quality that it describes. His editor uses the author's social credentials to explain the rare qualities of his writing: 'ce sont des idées et des sentimens, dont la délicatesse échappe, si l'usage d'un certain monde n'en a point préparé l'intelligence' (Méré 1930: III, 66). The coercive implication is clear: failure to find hidden beauties in Méré's text summarily excludes the reader from the elite circle from which the text emanates.³⁸ The appreciative reader, on the other hand,

³⁶ Elias 1983: 95; Starobinski 1966: 224.

³⁷ Dens 1981: 7, 21; Viala 1997b: 68.

³⁸ For a similarly coercive form of argumentation in Pascal, see 3.ii.3. above, pp. 191-92.

has the chance to become a walking work of polite art by absorbing the text's qualities (1930: I, 6). The implication is clear: you too, gentle reader, can learn to exude a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* by recognizing that my book possesses it.

Méré repeatedly uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to describe the charms of a nonchalant style (*negligence*) in conversation, prose style, and painting alike. It is not absolute mastery but cultivated negligence, 'ce je ne sçay quoy de maistre qui paroist si libre et si peu contraint', that makes perfect *honnêteté*.³⁹ Méré, after Ogier (see 1.i.2 above, p. 46), discerns a negligent *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] in the paintings of Apelles.⁴⁰ This air of natural ease, Méré reveals to his reader, hides a subtle artifice:

en tous les exercices [...] on connoist les excellens maistres du mestier à je ne sçay quoy de libre et d'aisé qui plaist toujours, mais *qu'on ne peut guere acquerir sans une grande pratique* [...] Les agrémens animent la justesse en tout ce que je viens de dire; mais *d'une façon si naïve, qu'elle donne à penser que c'est un present de la nature*. Cela se trouve encore vray dans les exercices de l'Esprit comme dans la Conversation; où il faut avoir cette liberté pour s'y rendre agreable.⁴¹

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* of polite conversation is so well made that it tricks others – such as Courtin – into thinking that it is a gift of nature. Méré, the polite Machiavelli, makes the point repeatedly.⁴² Bouhours spells this out in relation to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself: 'les grands maistres [...] ont tasché toûjours de donner de l'agrément à leurs ouvrages, en cachant leur art avec beaucoup de soin, et d'artifice' (1962: 148). The *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Bouhours is a cultural practice that masquerades as a natural property. Its art lies in concealing the art. The tag *ars est celare artem*, found in the rhetorical works of Aristotle, Longinus, and Cicero, here describes an entire culture.⁴³

³⁹ Méré 1930: II, 32; and III, 78-79; see also La Rochefoucauld 1998: 186 (*Réflexions*, IV). On *negligence* and its links with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, see Nies 1972: 19-31.

⁴⁰ Méré 1930: II, 14-15; see also III, 192.

⁴¹ Méré 1930: II, 121 (my italics).

⁴² See Méré 1930: III, 132-33; Méré 1692: II, 343-44.

⁴³ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (iii.2, 1404b); Longinus, *On the Sublime* (xxii.1); Cicero, *Ad C. Herennium: De ratione dicendi* (iv.7.10); Toccanne 1978: 239-40.

The insensible social charm of the *honnêtes gens* is one product of this culture. This charm is analogous, Domna Stanton suggests, to Boileau's contemporary æsthetic notion of the sublime (1980: 120). Boileau himself offers a similar analogy between social and æsthetic quality in the Preface to his French translation of Longinus's *Peri hupsous* (*Traité du sublime*) in 1674. He commends Longinus to his reading public of *honnêtes gens* as one of their number: 'le caractère d'honneste homme y paroist par tout; et ses sentiments ont je ne sçais quoi qui marque non-seulement un esprit sublime, mais une ame fort élevée au-dessus du commun' (1966: 336). Longinus, in writing about the sublime, displays a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Should we conclude from this that *honnêteté*, the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, and the sublime are all one and the same 'thing'? We need to proceed here with caution. Michael Moriarty, in his work on the ideology of taste, warns against a totalizing perspective:

there is a tendency [...] to lump together the *je ne sais quoi*, the *esprit de finesse*, *goût*, *sentiment*, and the rest into a great jumble of perceptions all dealing with some mysterious realm of the ineffable. I agree that this polymorphous proliferation of discursive elements is in itself a fact of great importance, but each of these terms has its own determinate applications within discourses which should not be blurred by the application of a single totalizing perspective.⁴⁴

Moriarty's warning is salutary as the significance of each and every term does indeed vary according to its precise discursive context. In the present case, it seems to me, Boileau puts *honnêteté*, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.] and *sublime* together because he does want to produce what Moriarty calls a 'polymorphous proliferation of discursive elements'. These elements, as indefinable as they are socially palpable, serve to place Longinus above the populace ('au-dessus du commun'). This particular passage, I suggest, typifies the culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

⁴⁴ Moriarty 1988: 61.

This suggestion – to make a brief methodological digression – implies neither that *all* occurrences of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Boileau’s work exemplify this culture, nor that the sublime is always reducible to it.⁴⁵ The first page of the 1701 preface to Boileau’s collected works contains a much-quoted occurrence of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: ‘que si on me demande ce que c’est que cet agrément et ce sel, Je répondray que c’est un je ne sçay quoy qu’on peut beaucoup mieux sentir, que dire’ (Boileau 1966: 4). Claude Chantalat is one among many critics who quote this passage to support the view that ‘les écrivains [...] font intervenir le je ne sais quoi pour souligner le vague de leur conception’ (1992: 49). There is nothing vague about Boileau’s use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* other than when it is read out of context. Boileau, immediately after this sentence, explains that æsthetic pleasure is caused by the first expression of a thought that everyone has had (1966: 4). The origin of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is neither vague nor irrational, in this case, but universally acknowledged truth. Boileau’s position, Moriarty concludes, is distinct here from that occupied by Méré, Bouhours, and La Rochefoucauld: ‘Boileau has displaced the aristocratic values of a minority good taste by the universal values of a “public” culture’ (1988: 180). The occurrence of a particular sign, such as the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, should not obscure the specificity of an author’s position.⁴⁶

But nor, conversely, should the project to elaborate an author’s ‘position’ obscure occurrences that do not fit it. Boileau tends to distinguish himself from aristocratic *honnêteté*. But he is perfectly capable of adopting this cultural pose in what appears to be a purely æsthetic context when this suits his purposes. One example occurs in his *Dissertation sur Joconde* (1669), a polemical comparison of

⁴⁵ On the sublime, see Brody 1958; Zuber 1997: 225-39; Marin 1986, 1989 (on its links with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*); Cronk 1990.

⁴⁶ Moriarty 1988: 171.

two translations of Orioste's tale *Joconde*, in which Boileau takes the side of La Fontaine against Boüillon. The text takes the form of a letter written by Boileau to a friend of Boüillon's principal defender. Boileau uses the language of social quality to dismiss Boüillon the translator as 'un Valet timide' whereas La Fontaine is a 'galant homme' (1966: 310, 320). Boileau admires above all in La Fontaine, he says, 'une certaine Naïveté de Langage, que peu de gens connoissent, et qui fait pourtant tout l'agrément du discours' (1966: 315). He refrains from defining this quality by summoning the modish *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]:

ces sortes de beauté sont de celles qu'il faut sentir, et qui ne se prouvent point. C'est ce je ne sai quoi qui nous charme, et sans lequel la beauté même n'auroit ni grace ni beauté. Mais après tout, c'est un je ne sai quoi; et si vôtre ami est aveugle, je ne m'engage pas à lui faire voir clair; et c'est aussi pourquoi vous me dispenserez, s'il vous plaît, de répondre à toutes les vaines objections qu'il vous a faites.⁴⁷

The reader should not be fooled by the depreciative tone of the third sentence. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* may appear as a mere trifle, but it happens to distinguish the tasteful few from the tasteless many and the sighted from the blind. The blind man appears in the realm of culture as someone who cannot see that all-important yet indefinable something that he does not have. The occurrences of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the *Dissertation sur Joconde* and the 1701 Preface, despite their apparent similarity, are in fact radically different. The Preface is no doubt representative of the late Boileau's distance from the culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The *Dissertation sur Joconde*, however, shows his willingness to exploit its signs during their heyday.

An analysis such as mine, which offers an ideal-typical definition of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, has the critical task of judging which of its various occurrences 'fits'. While one occurrence of the term does not fit the culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as I have

⁴⁷ Boileau 1966: 316.

defined it, the other is a typical example. It exemplifies both the circular arguments of the polite circle and the fact that, within this culture, social and æsthetic judgements are indistinguishable. The operations of this culture are, as we shall see, visible in a whole field of terms adjacent to *honnêteté* and the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The methodological pressure to establish the specificity of each of these terms should be counterbalanced by the pressure to analyse the culture that produces them all.

3. *Urbanité, galanterie, bel esprit*

Honnêteté has lost semantic value to its neighbouring terms by the 1680s.⁴⁸ *Urbanité* rises to prominence in the 1640s, and *galanterie*, in the 1660s. *Bel esprit* is the word in which Bouhours attempts to repack the aristocratic ideal of *honnêteté* in the 1670s. Members of the polite circle, rather than defining their terms, continue subtly to emit them as signs of quality. The successful emission of any sign, as we have seen (4.i.2 above, p. 216), depends upon the speaker ultimately asserting the nescioquiddity of the quality itself. Each sign we shall find, as a result, placed in a relation of synonymy to forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Polite culture, in this way, fashions the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] as its new sign of quality.

(1) *Urbanité* belongs to the culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Guez de Balzac introduces the term in French as a Latin neologism in his polite conversation ‘De la conversation des Romains’ (1644); by the end of the century, the term has been naturalized (Lafond 1996). Writers use its Latinate etymology to imply that the precursor for French elite society under Louis XIV is Augustan Rome. Roman

⁴⁸ See Dens 1981: 36.

urbanitas, for Cicero and Quintillian, is a set of values that one acquires by living in close proximity with others in the city. Seventeenth-century writers tend to replace the Ciceronian ethical ideal of a useful citizen with a polite culture of æsthetic quality.⁴⁹ They define *urbanité* differentially as all that is neither pedantic nor rustic.⁵⁰ Pedants and peasants are not welcome to join the club of *urbanité* because they lack that all-important air of nonchalance.⁵¹

What is *urbanité*? Balzac and other writers sustain long games of nescioquiddity by employing indefinite adjectives, the discourse of occult qualities, and non-substantival forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. *Urbanité*, he says, is ‘une adresse à toucher l’esprit par je ne sais quoi de piquant, mais dont la piqure est agréable à celui qui la reçoit’ (Balzac 1995: 82). It is in the very act of heaping one insufficient definition upon another that Guez de Balzac places the quintessence of *urbanité* beyond definition. Pellisson plays the same game when he borrows the term *urbanité* from Balzac in his *Discours sur les Œuvres de M. Sarasin* (1656). The conversations of Sarasin are neither didactic nor frivolous, Pellisson argues, but fall perfectly between the two. They share with Cicero’s dialogue *De Oratore* what Pellisson calls ‘cette *urbanité* que les mots de *civilité*, de *galanterie* et de *politesse* n’expliquent qu’imparfaitement, et à qui notre langue n’a point encore trouvé de nom assez propre’ (Viala 1989: 56). Pellisson, like Guez de Balzac, uses the figure of *adynaton* to assert that nothing can adequately name this quality. Both, in this way, cultivate the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It comes as no surprise then that, at a lexical level, writers also exploit the word. Méré, a correspondent and admirer of Balzac, adopts his coinage of

⁴⁹ Stanton 1980: 14-19; Dens 1981: 13.

⁵⁰ Lafond 1996: 36; Balzac 1995: 82.

⁵¹ Balzac 1995: 82; Faudemay 1992: 410.

the term *urbanité*.⁵² Méré rejects the restricted application of the term to the verbal art of *raillerie* ('repartee'), arguing that the primary function of *urbanité* is to distinguish the elite from the populace: 'il me semble que cette urbanité n'est point ce qu'on appelle de bons mots, et qu'elle consiste en je ne sais quoi de civil et de poli.'⁵³ His definition of *urbanité* draws on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] to describe a polish that one acquires in 'polite' circles. *Urbanité* is used to cultivate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in Méré and the first remark of Bouhours that I quoted in this chapter (4.i.1 above, p. 213 n. 1). Bouhours, by citing Cicero's assertion of the nescioquiddity of *urbanitas*, subsumes the word under the topic of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He then offers a practical example of how to distinguish true literary *urbanité*. The example is far from innocent: it is Voiture, he says, and not Balzac who really has it (1962: 148). Bouhours turns Balzac's own weapon of indefinable quality against him.

The idea that there is in urbanity a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* has a long afterlife.⁵⁴ Pierre Bezuhov, one of the heroes of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-69), remains in Moscow during the French occupation. At a social gathering, he meets a captain in the occupying army. They talk in French, a language that is second nature to Pierre, as it is to all polite society in Moscow. That this is so reflects a major theme of Tolstoy's novel: the fascination that much of the ruling class in Russia feels for the culture of its invaders. Pierre later reveals his nationality to the French captain. Pierre's urbane manner charms the captain into paying Pierre what is, for a Frenchman, the highest compliment: 'eh bien, si vous ne m'aviez pas dit que vous êtes Russe, j'aurais parié que vous êtes Parisien. Vous avez ce je ne sais quoi, ce...'⁵⁵ The captain's aposiopesis

⁵² Méré 1692: II, letter 10 (to Guez de Balzac); Méré 1930: III, 121.

⁵³ Quoted in Dens 1981: 13.

⁵⁴ See Chantalat 1992: 164-65 (for late seventeenth-century examples).

⁵⁵ Tolstoy 1960: VI, 414 (*War and Peace*, bk. III, pt. 3, ch. 29).

expresses his surprise that a Russian should possess the Parisian quality *par excellence*. The urbane elite of nineteenth-century France evidently continues to emit a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

(II) *Galant* and its substantival form, *galanterie*, replace *honnêteté* as the dominant sign of quality during the third quarter of the seventeenth century.⁵⁶ *Honnêteté*, by now sedimented in the lexicon of social quality, is no longer enough: one needs to have it plus that extra indefinable something more (Viala 1997b: 65-67). Definitions of *galanterie*, such as those offered by Madeleine de Scudéry in her *Conversations* (1684), sustain the game of nescioquiddity:

ce je ne sais quoi de galant qui est répandu en toute la personne qui le possède, en son esprit, en ses paroles, en ses actions, est ce qui achève les honnêtes gens, ce qui les rend aimables et ce qui les fait aimer.⁵⁷

Galanterie is the indefinable perfection of *honnêteté*. It lends an erotic charge to sociability by portraying the *art de plaire* as an art of seduction. Richelet identifies these connotations of the term: 'GALANT se dit [...] d'un homme [...] qui tâche à plaire, et particulièrement au beau sexe' (1681: 'galant'). *Galanterie* presses women into playing a supporting role to men. He who wishes to acquire the title of *galant* within his circle must first practise the art of seduction on one or more of its female members. Faret advises his aspiring courtier to insinuate himself into the good graces of the ladies. The calculation is that they will then win favours for him from the powerful men of their entourage.⁵⁸ Faret's successors repeat his advice: the *conversation des femmes* is essential to the aspiring *honnête homme*.⁵⁹ This is because polite ladies emit certain airs and graces (Méré 1930: I, 75). *Grace* means here a kind

⁵⁶ See Pelous 1971; Montandon 1995: 417-25.

⁵⁷ Scudéry 1998: 53; Magendie 1970: 672.

⁵⁸ Faret 1925: 90; see Moriarty 1988: 47-48.

⁵⁹ Vaugelas 1880: II, 209; Caillières 1664: 286-87; Méré 1930: III, 75; Maclean 1977: 143-48.

of second nature, which others experience as a natural property, but which is in fact a social artifact.⁶⁰ The gallant man, by imitating the grace of his lady companions, acquires a subtle charm in all his relations (Méré 1930: III, 75). All the world is a stage for the *galant-homme*.⁶¹ He must learn to control his passions, according to the demands of polite culture, in order to work on those of others.⁶² *Galanterie* is a weapon of seduction: ‘car enfin c’est de l’amour, que naissent la plupart des vrais agréments’ (Méré 1930: III, 75). The act of seduction, in this case, involves cultivating a sign of quality (*galanterie*) in such a way that it ‘feels like’ a stroke of passion.⁶³

Galanterie brings those who distinguish between strokes of passion and signs of quality to a moment of crisis by erasing their difference. Some critics suggest that the crisis is a false one, since the experience of passion is itself merely a social practice, and nothing is more ideological than the notion of ‘personal experience’.⁶⁴ Ockham’s razor is used to reduce individual passion to an entity constituted by nothing other than social power relations. This seems to me excessively reductive. Words such as the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] do, it is true, tend to move from individual expressions of passion towards the codified lexicon of an entire group: this reflects, perhaps, the social element in which the spread of language necessarily occurs. It then becomes very difficult to establish whether the use of a particular word composes a social formula or an individual utterance. But the difficulty lies in the very continuing existence of these two modes of communication. It is precisely at the moment of their apparent convergence in the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in other words, that strokes of passion

⁶⁰ Méré 1930: I, 18; Moriarty 1988: 100.

⁶¹ Méré 1930: III, 157; Grubbs 1932: 56; Stanton 1980: 184-92.

⁶² Faret 1925: 96; Starobinski 1966: 225; Elias 1983: 110-16; Stanton 1980: 137.

⁶³ We return here to the subject of 3.iii.2 above.

⁶⁴ See Bourdieu 1979: 81-85; Moriarty 1988: 22.

and signs of quality need to be rigorously distinguished.⁶⁵ On the one hand is an inexplicable, mutual passion suffered by two individuals and, on the other, an act of seduction by which an individual achieves distinction within a social circle. That the latter masquerades as the former requires individuals to judge between them.

Such critical moments are the stuff of prose fiction. A male member of a gallant circle claims to be in love with one of his female counterparts. She suffers a stroke of passion for him. But she also knows that a love affair within the circle is any member's shortest route to distinction. Is her lover's declared passion not in fact a subtly concealed sign of quality? This, in short, is the heroine's dilemma in Madame de Lafayette's 'histoire galante', *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678).⁶⁶ The narrator, in her very first sentence, places the court's culture under the sign of *galanterie* (Lafayette 1966: 35). Erotic relations and social advancement are placed within a chiasmus of mutual determination: 'l'ambition et la galanterie étoient l'âme de cette cour [...] il y avoit tant d'intérêts et tant de cabales différentes, et les dames y avoient tant de part que l'Amour estoit toujours meslé aux affaires et les affaires à l'Amour.'⁶⁷ Madame de Clèves, a new member of this circle, finds herself struck with passion for M. de Nemours. She says: 'je suis vaincue et surmontée par une inclination qui m'entraîne malgré moi' (1966: 119). She is only too aware of the court culture of quality, however, and tells Nemours: 'rien ne me peut empêcher de connaître que vous êtes né avec toutes les dispositions de la galanterie et toutes les qualités qui sont propres à y donner des succès heureux' (1966: 174). That he may exploit their love-affair as a sign of quality is the constant anxiety of Madame de Clèves. She wonders whether to yield to her passion, asking: 'veux-je m'engager dans une galanterie?' (1966: 119).

⁶⁵ See Jankélévitch 1980: I, 20.

⁶⁶ This is one of the descriptive terms for the text used by early critics (Viala 1997c: 11).

⁶⁷ Lafayette 1966: 44-45; quoted and discussed in Langer 1994: 179-80.

The way in which she phrases this question effectively answers it for her. Her refusal to yield becomes, ultimately, the means by which she achieves a distinction of her own. Seventeenth-century fictions such as *La Princesse de Clèves* dramatize the intimate confusion of particular sympathy and social quality as well as the critical need, that people face in their lives, to distinguish between the two. Such crises are a constant theme of nineteenth-century fiction. Natacha's infatuation for Anatole Kuragin in *War and Peace* (bk. II, pt. 5, chs. 8-20) is one example. Another is the subtle charm that Strether finds in Madame de Vionnet in Henry James's Parisian novel *The Ambassadors* (1903). Is this not merely an effect of her old-fashioned aristocratic training? Strether feels that there is something more to her charm, but what this something is, he cannot say.⁶⁸ The crisis will not go away.

(III) *Bel esprit* is the term by which Bouhours repackages aristocratic *honnêteté*.⁶⁹ He describes Ariste and Eugène as 'honnestes gens' at the beginning of *Les Entretiens* (Bouhours 1962: 5-6). The second conversation contains an explicit reference to Bouhours's most recent precursor in this field, the Chevalier de Méré: 'l'auteur des *Conversations*, qui parurent l'an passé [écrit] d'une manière fort judicieuse, et fort délicate' (1962: 81). Bouhours's reference, given the success of Méré's text,⁷⁰ has obvious publicity value. Readers of last year's *Conversations* will find much to enjoy in the new *Entretiens*. Bouhours alters the name given to this ideal figure from *honnête homme* to *bel esprit*, but this very alteration indicates his familiarity with the evolving lexicon of the polite circle.

⁶⁸ Strether, James's narrator reports, feels inwardly that 'little Jeanne was a case, an exquisite case of education; whereas the Countess, whom it so amused him to think of by that denomination, was a case, also exquisite, of – well, he didn't know what' (James 1995: 185 (bk. VI)).

⁶⁹ See Viala 1985: 147-50.

⁷⁰ Editions of the *Conversations* appeared in 1668, 1669, and 1671 (Méré 1930: I, 115-18).

The fourth conversation, on 'Le Bel Esprit', establishes this word as the new quintessence of *honnêteté*. Ariste and Eugène distinguish true *beaux esprits* from crude-minded peasants, obtuse pedants, and – above all – the super-subtle poetasters who have usurped their title in recent years (1962: 114-15). The *beaux esprits* form a quasi-aristocratic elite that Ariste and Eugène's intervention serves to protect and sustain. The very fact that such an intervention is deemed necessary suggests that the identity and constitution of this elite is in fact an object of ideological and social conflict. When Ariste and Eugène come to define the true *bel esprit*, they play what is by now a familiar game. Ariste's definition of the *bel esprit*, 'le bon sens qui brille', is strategically incomplete (1962: 115). He describes the principal effects of a *bel esprit* as the ability to persuade others at will and a unique 'correctness' of thought and expression (1962: 115). But the only judge of whether or not a proposition is correct is none other than the *bel esprit*. The argument never leaves its charmed circle. Ariste and Eugène see no reason, indeed, why it ever should. They make it clear time and again that the distinctive quality of the true *bel esprit* is both indefinable and self-evident. The metaphor of light, which surfaces in Ariste's definition of the *bel esprit* ('le bon sens *qui brille*'), is fundamental. The quality of the *bel esprit* is indefinable in all its brilliance but you would have to be blind to miss the signs.⁷¹ Above all the definable qualities of the *bel esprit* there is something else: 'il faut encore y avoir une certaine clarté que tous les grands génies n'ont pas' (1962: 120). The indefinite adjective ('une certaine') adds nescioquiddity here just as Eugène does when he asserts that the *bel esprit* must possess 'je ne sçay quel agrément' (1962: 126). The quintessence of *honnêteté* is the *bel esprit*, certainly, but what is the quintessence of the *bel esprit*? It is a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

⁷¹ See 4.ii.2 above, p. 232; Faudemay 2001: 22-23 (for further examples of this metaphor).

Ariste and Eugène discuss supernatural, natural, and cultural explanations for the quality of *bel esprit*.⁷² They agree that, in order to embody this quality, one needs above all to cultivate one's natural disposition. Eugène uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] to describe this process:

il est certain que la nature ne fait pas toute seule un bel esprit. La plus heureuse naissance a besoin d'une bonne éducation, et de cet usage du monde qui raffine l'intelligence, et qui subtilise le bon sens. De là vient que les sçavans de profession ne sont pas d'ordinaire de beaux esprits: comme ils sont toujours ensevelis dans l'étude, et qu'ils ont peu de commerce avec les honnestes gens, ils n'ont pas dans l'esprit une certaine politesse, et je ne sçay quel agrément qu'il y faut avoir.⁷³

Education and social experience ('l'usage du monde') reappear here as the two processes required to bring an individual to perfection (see 4.ii.1 above, pp. 226-27). Pedants – who have education alone – are therefore excluded. Social experience lends brilliance and subtlety to *bon sens* and creates, as Eugène puts it, 'je ne sçay quel agrément qu'il faut y avoir'. The subtle charm of the *bel esprit* is no natural state of affairs but, rather, the collective artifice of the polite circle.

The *bel esprit*, embodied by Bouhours and his fellow Jesuit Rapin, is a new synthesis of learning and worldly experience from the mid-1660s (see 1.iii.1 above, p. 84). The English translator of the Bureau d'Adresse debates in Paris refers to their participants at this time as *beaux esprits*.⁷⁴ This synthesis is thought essential to any writer wishing to appeal to the new wider reading public. To complete his portrait, Bouhours claims a writer well known to the wider public – Montaigne – as a precursor of the *bel esprit*: 'le bon sens dont je parle, est d'une espece toute differente: il est gay, vif, plein de feu, comme celui qui paroist dans les Essais de Montaigne' (1962: 115). Bouhours projects back on to Montaigne the origins of the *bel esprit*. The

⁷² Bouhours 1962: 123, 135; Viala 1997b: 70-73 examines physiological explanations of *galanterie*.

⁷³ Bouhours 1962: 125-26.

⁷⁴ See the full titles of Havers 1664; Havers and Davies 1665.

gesture is commonplace in the literature of *honnêteté*.⁷⁵ Méré echoes Madame de Sablé's praise of Montaigne and Voiture as 'deux excellens genies'; Pascal, in 'De l'esprit géométrique', refers to Montaigne as 'l'incomparable auteur de *L'Art de conférer*'.⁷⁶ Grenaille, like many others, repeats the Cardinal du Perron's description of the *Essais* as 'le Bréviaire des Honnêtes-gens'.⁷⁷ Modern critics have commonly followed suit, retrospectively placing Montaigne at the origin of seventeenth-century *honnêteté*.⁷⁸ But the idea that the *Essais* are the breviary of the polite circle has more to do with contemporary conflicts than with Montaigne's image of his ideal reader (see 5.ii.2 below). Readers of Montaigne connected with Port-Royal, including Pascal, condemn him for precisely the same reason: Montaigne's religious indifference, they argue, explains his interest in the pleasures of conversation, in himself, and in other worldly matters.⁷⁹ Montaigne, like the *honnêteté* he is said to have fathered, becomes yet another territorial commonplace in the conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists in the second half of the seventeenth century (see 1.iii.2 above).

Ariste and Eugène can certainly never lay claim to the title of *bel esprit* if they are to embody it. They must instead play the game of nescioquiddity with the appropriate modesty. But they know that doing so will allow them to embody the very quality that they declare inexplicable. To reveal this strategy at work is to subject signs of quality, and the underlying culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, to a critical assessment. The enduring power of this culture is felt in the choice that it continues to force upon us today. For we may choose to identify ourselves with the polite circle

⁷⁵ The following references complement those discussed in 2.ii.1 above, p. 118.

⁷⁶ Méré 1692: II, 327; Pascal 1964: III, 423.

⁷⁷ Faret 1925: 80; Villey 1935: 308-42; Camus 1612: VIII, 409; Grenaille 1642: unpaginated 'Avertissement'; Boase 1935: 116; Millet 1995: 163, 94.

⁷⁸ Magendie 1970: 387-400; Boase 1935: 307-21; Villey 1935: 341; Stanton 1980: 25; Fumaroli 1992: 690-91; Bury 1996: 48.

⁷⁹ See Pascal: Laf. 680; Sell. 559; Scholar 2002a.

and therefore celebrate its cultural values as the origin of our own;⁸⁰ or we may resist ‘this comfortable sense of belonging’, as Moriarty calls it (1988: 2), and consider what these cultural values mean, how they function, and whom they exclude. Perhaps the most productive position is neither that of the insider, nor of the discontent, but that of the traveller who looks into the polite circle, from outside, with a mixture of curiosity and mistrust. That is in any case the position that I occupy in this chapter and from which I judge the status of the seventeenth-century social *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

The critical question examined here was whether the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a sign of quality is the real thing or a subtle artifact. Does it in other words correspond to the term’s core meaning as an inexplicable force of sympathy or antipathy? Signs of quality, I suggest, fail to meet the criterion of inexplicability. The polite circle suggests that its subtle charm, like magnetic attraction, is a real occult quality. But whereas peasants, pedants, and *honnêtes gens* alike observe the effects of the magnet, the polite circle alone perceives and cultivates its own subtle charm. It is all too explicable as an instrument designed to protect and further the interests of a particular group. This is no *je-ne-sais-quoi*, then, but what might be called instead a *certain-savent-bien-quoi*. The frequent use of the noun in this context, moreover, irredeemably weakens its semantic force. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], as soon as it acquires its history, starts to fall from grace.

⁸⁰ This is the position taken, for example, by Marc Fumaroli (1992: 738-39).

iii. The fall of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

1. Méré: it takes one to know one

The cultural conditions in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* settles prove its downfall. The polite circle uses forms of the phrase to lead the dominant signs of quality (*honnêteté*, *urbanité*, *galanterie*, and *bel esprit*) into strategic nescioquiddity. It thereby cultivates the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself. The word rises to prominence in Méré and in Bouhours as the new sign of quality and soon spreads beyond the circle. Signs, once they have spread, become the object of attacks by the discontents of polite culture. They find no defenders within the circle, either, for this is busily renewing its signs in order to keep itself intact. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] can escape its fate no more than any other sign of quality: its seventeenth-century history ends in its fall from grace. The word's semantic force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, already weakened by its use as a polite artifact, collapses as satirists make it a laughing-stock (see 4.iii.3 below, pp. 250-54). To recover that force, I shall argue, requires rescuing the word from its late seventeenth-century cultural history and returning it instead to its pre-history.

The work of Méré exemplifies polite writers' cultivation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] as a sign of quality. Non-substantival forms appear there in synonymy with other signs in order to keep cultural quality beyond explanation. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.], a stylistic tic in Méré's writing, serves this end. The Chevalier and the Mareschal, in his *Conversations*, discuss how best to define *honnêteté* (1930: 1,

74). True *honnêteté*, although it appears in many forms, can be instantly recognized by its principal effect: ‘sous quelque forme qu’elle se montre, elle plaist toûjours, et c’est à cela principalement qu’on peut la reconnoistre’ (1930: I, 75). But recognizing the effects of *honnêteté* is one thing, and defining the quality itself, another. The Chevalier ends a long speech by repeating a previous conversation on the topic with a lady who combines beauty with a turn of mind that her peers find irresistibly pleasing. She embodies the very quality that she asks him to define.

Après tout, une Dame parfaitement belle et d’un esprit si aimable, que mesme les plus belles ne pouvoient s’empêcher de l’aimer, me demandoit ce que c’estoit qu’un honneste homme, et une honneste femme, car l’un revient à l’autre: et quand j’eus dit ce que j’en croyois, et qu’elle en eut parlé de fort bon sens, elle avoüa bien que tout cela luy sembloit nécessaire pour estre ce qu’elle demandoit, mais qu’il y avoit encore quelque chose d’inexplicable, qui se connoist mieux à le voir pratiquer qu’à le dire. Ce qu’elle s’imaginoit consiste en je ne sçai quoi de noble qui releve toutes les bonnes qualitez, et qui ne vient que du cœur et de l’esprit; le reste n’en est que la suite et l’équipage.⁸¹

There is, beyond all that can be explained about *honnêteté*, an indefinably noble *something more* whose position is reproduced here by the phrase ‘je ne sçai quoi de noble’. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] marks the supplementary element of *honnêteté* that brings it to perfection (on this operation see 1.i.3 above, p. 53). This supplement Méré often describes as a *quintessence*.⁸² This subtle but unmistakable principle is what remains after the Chevalier has distinguished true from false *honnêteté*. He evokes the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by discreetly cultivating the word.

That the Chevalier and his lady interlocutor fail to define the quintessential charm of *honnêteté* implies their place within the circle. The Mareschal raises an ethical objection to the idea that charm is a sufficient proof of *honnêteté*. There are after all bad means, as well as good, of charming others (1930: I, 77). How does one distinguish between them? The Chevalier sweeps away this objection: ‘à cela [...] on

⁸¹ Méré 1930: I, 77.

⁸² Méré 1930: III, 71; Defaux 1980: 85; Viala 1997b: 66-67.

peut répondre en deux mots, qu'il y a des personnes qui connoissent le vrai mérite, et que c'est un bon signe quand on leur plaist' (1930: I, 78). The Chevalier's answer lays down the law. 'Some of us just know whether or not someone has *it*. Rest assured that this lady does. Anyone who thinks otherwise is clearly not one of us.' *Honnêteté* in other words means having both a certain quality and the infallible ability to judge it in others: 'l'honnêteté juge toujours bien' (1930: I, 76). That ability depends upon a faculty of intuition that Méré and his contemporaries call *bon goût*.⁸³ What is it to have 'good' taste? It is, the Chevalier answers, 'juger bien de tout ce qui se présente, par je ne sçay quel sentiment qui va plus vite, et quelquefois plus droit que les réflexions'.⁸⁴ Taste is yet another counter, then, in the game of nescioquiddity.⁸⁵ How can good taste judgements be distinguished from bad ones? The answer completes the circle: those who fail to judge the true quality of people prove their lack of taste – and vice versa.⁸⁶ The Chevalier clearly has good taste since he judges that his lady interlocutor possesses quality; she clearly has this indefinable something since the Chevalier – who has good taste – judges that she does. The argument, by remaining within a polite circle, allows both members to retain their places.⁸⁷

Membership of the polite circle works on the principle, then, that it takes one to know one. Méré, in explaining this fact to an outsider, draws upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. This is (to my knowledge) its sole occurrence in his writing on quality. It comes in a letter addressed to a certain Monsieur de Luns, in which Méré reviews a

⁸³ See Moriarty 1988: 83-105.

⁸⁴ Méré 1930: I, 55; see also II, 128.

⁸⁵ Moriarty 1988: 68.

⁸⁶ Méré 1930: II, 129; see also I, 76-78.

⁸⁷ The same circularity appears in Pascal's fragment about the nature of *agrément* (Laf. 585; Sell. 486). The nature of *agrément* slips from being relative ('un certain rapport') to being an objective property pleasing to those who have good taste ('le goût bon').

book sent to him by his correspondent. He suggests that the book lacks that essential ingredient.

On fait bien de travailler quand on le peut, et mesme encore plus que cet Auteur, pourveu que la peine qu'on se donne à bien écrire, tende principalement à rencontrer toujours le bon air. Sans cela tout le reste est peu considerable. Sur quoy j'ay à vous dire en finissant ce billet que dans les manieres de l'esprit, et mesmes dans les expressions, ce qu'on entend par le je ne sçay quoy, consiste en de petites choses qui ne s'apperçoivent pas aisément. Et neanmoins ce n'est pas le je ne sçay quoy pour tout le monde. Quelques-uns en connoissent la cause, et savent d'où cela vient. Cette cause secrette, et qui n'aime à se montrer qu'à peu de personnes produit de grands effets, et tout ce qui tient le plus au cœur.⁸⁸

Méré uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] here to distinguish those who have it – himself included – from those who do not.⁸⁹ Méré clearly puts Luns in the latter category. He advises his correspondent, eager to be included within the circle, to adopt his brand of polite Machiavellianism: 'il ne faut avoir pour principal but que de plaire aux honnestes gens' (1689: 371-73). The secret of this art is the culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Méré's description reads like an explicit refutation of Pascal's fragment on the same topic (see 3.ii.3 above, p. 192). It repeats Pascal's language of cause and effect and his emphasis on their disproportionate relation. But where Pascal's stroke of passion is a real *je-ne-sais-quoi*, Méré reveals his sign of quality to be a polite artifact, for the happy few understand its cause and can manipulate its effects. Méré confirms the critical argument of this chapter, namely, that the quality of the polite circle is not so much a *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a *certain-savent-bien-quoi*: 'ce n'est pas le je ne sçay quoy pour tout le monde.' Only those who already have it can judge either what this *it* is or who can be said to emit its signs. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] appears in Méré as the fashionable sign by which the polite circle shuts out the hapless M. de Luns. The outsiders, like the insiders, know who they are. It takes one, after all, to know one.

⁸⁸ Méré 1689: 567-68; part of this passage is quoted in Furetière 1701: 'quoy' (see 1.i.2 above, p. 68).

⁸⁹ See Borgerhoff 1950: 95 (on this same point).

2. Bouhours and phatic communion

Méré happens upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] just once; Bouhours, after him, makes of it a topic of conversation. His Jansenist critics, as we saw earlier (1.iii.2 above, pp. 91-92), attack Bouhours for extending this topic to the point of zero comprehensiveness. The charge, that Bouhours says nothing about everything, is valid but trivial. It is true that Pascal, in restricting its force to the single realm of human passion, says much more about the *je-ne-sais-quoi* than Bouhours. But the charge is trivial: the Jesuit's object is not to give a comprehensive account of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*; it is to use a modish name to talk his *beaux esprits* into the polite circle.

Ariste and Eugène extend the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as they use it to play the game of nescioquiddity. Some people, they agree, exude a quality so notoriously indefinable that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the only appropriate name for it. But what is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*? The object of the game is by now familiar: 'si l'on vient à examiner tout cela, on ne sçait plus où l'on en est, et il en faut toujours revenir au je ne sçay quoy' (1962: 142). What is new here is that the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, unlike its semantic precursors, actively spells out its own nescioquiddity. Ariste and Eugène, nevertheless, refuse to allow this fact to bring a premature end to their game. They invoke the usual suspects – divine grace, nature, and culture – as mutually exclusive origins for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Ariste insists that, far from offering a false pretext to those wishing to preserve their exclusive social circle intact, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the state of things in nature (1962: 146). Nature distinguishes the courtly elite from the populace. It is God,

however, who distinguishes the king from his court.⁹⁰ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is first a natural quality, then a gift of grace, and still more than that: ‘mais sçavez-vous bien [...] que le je ne sçay quoy se trouve presque par tout’ (1962: 147). Ariste extends the topic to include cultural artifice as well as the nature of things. The art lies in concealing the art, he assures Eugène, referring to signs of quality such as *honnêteté* and *urbanité* (see 4.i.1 above, p. 213). Bouhours, by extending the origins of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to three different realms, pushes his topic into deliberate incoherence. He does so not to capture the incoherence of the world itself but so that Ariste and Eugène can politely prolong their conversation: ‘le je ne sçay quoy raccommode tout’ (1962: 141). Bouhours shares the same view of polite conversation as that which Méré advocates: ‘j’aime dans la conversation, que l’on cherche une agréable diversité.’⁹¹ The object of polite conversation is not to create concepts but, rather, to confirm one’s inclusion within the circle. The manner in which the conversation leads into an elegant expression of nescioquiddity matters a great deal more than its ostensible topic: it is in that sense a ‘phatic communion’.⁹² Ariste and Eugène could have chosen no more appropriate term for such a communion than the topic of their fifth conversation. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the perfect blank counter with which to play the game of nescioquiddity.⁹³

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], in this way, settles into the seventeenth-century polite lexicon and acquires its history. The word and its underlying culture become indistinguishable. Ariste’s observation, ‘il [...] faut toujours revenir au je ne sçay

⁹⁰ Bouhours 1962: 147-48. Pascal reduces the so-called ‘natural’ distinction of royalty to a mere effect of custom (Laf. 25; Sell. 59).

⁹¹ Méré 1930: I, 67; Bouhours 1962: 5-6.

⁹² See Jefferson and Robey 1982: 44-45.

⁹³ Marin gives a complementary, though less critical, analysis of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its function in conversation (1997a: 26-34); see also Moriarty 1999: 526.

quoy' (1962: 142), is an imperative for polite culture. This imperative determines the conditions within which the term, as it is used and used again, rises to prominence and spreads beyond the elite. Saying that something has a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* becomes empty of any other meaning than of one's desire to be included within the circle.⁹⁴ The spreading of the term soon makes of it a trite affectation. The rise of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in such a context makes its fall from grace inevitable.

3. Towards pre-history

The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, from the 1670s onwards, shows signs of a loss in its semantic force. Some words, such as *curiosity* and *reaction*, have been shown to remain in their prime for well over a hundred years.⁹⁵ The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, however, flits in and out of history with fitting evanescence. Writers keen to make a laughing-stock of polite culture soon seize on its new sign of quality. Molière cultivates the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a parodic turn of speech. The word, we saw earlier (3.iii.1 above, pp. 207-08), marks the stroke of passion in *L'Ecole des Femmes*. But in *La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* (1663), his theatrical riposte to his polite critics, Molière uses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] to poke fun at their affectation. Climène, a *précieuse ridicule* who claims to have felt ill after seeing *L'Ecole des Femmes*, insists that she says so without affectation.⁹⁶ She has clearly absorbed the polite principle that one must at all times cultivate an air of nonchalance, *sprezzatura*, or *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Elise, in reply, parodies such subtle affectations: 'on le voit bien, Madame, et que tout est naturel en vous. Vos paroles, le ton de votre voix, vos regards, vos pas, votre action et votre

⁹⁴ This is the criticism made by Cramer in his hostile review of the *Entretiens* (1694: 25-26).

⁹⁵ Starobinski 1999:13; Kenny 1998: 13.

⁹⁶ Molière 1971: I, 647, 650.

ajustement, ont je ne sais quel air de qualité, qui enchante les gens' (1971: I, 650). She mimicks, in a single sentence, the polite game of nescioquiddity. Molière repeats his parody of female salon culture in *Les Femmes Savantes* (1672). Trissotin, 'bel esprit' as the dramatis personæ describes him (1971: II, 984), reads his ill-formed sonnet to Philaminte and Bélise. It sends the ladies, who are dedicated followers of lexical fashion, into the ecstasies of the day. Philaminte reaches for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron.], exclaiming: 'On se sent à ces vers, jusques au fond de l'âme, | Couler je ne sais quoi qui fait que l'on se pâme.'⁹⁷ She swoons into nescioquiddity.

Writers, from around the publication of Bouhours's conversation on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (1671) onwards, lampoon the word as a modish affectation signifying nothing. One attack on the *je-ne-sais-quoi* comes from a writer of maxims, the Abbé d'Ailly, who published his *Pensées diverses* alongside the *Maximes* of Madame de Sablé in 1678. Both texts were included thereafter in editions of La Rochefoucauld's *Réflexions* (1705). The Abbé d'Ailly dismisses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in these terms:

ces mots de simpatie, de je ne sçay quoy, de qualitez occultes, et mille autres de cette nature, ne signifient rien: on se trompe, quand on pense en estre mieux instruit; on les a inventez, pour dire quelque chose quand on manque de raisons, et qu'on ne sçait plus que dire.⁹⁸

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its semantic neighbours are derided here as modish refuges of ignorance. D'Ailly's maxim closely echoes Bouhours's attack on those precursors of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, such as *sympathie*, which are used to conceal ignorance (quoted in 1.ii.2 above, p. 70). But where Bouhours makes an exception of his keyword, which he offers as a new and forceful way of naming a radical nescioquiddity, the Abbé

⁹⁷ Molière 1971: II, 1023 (*Les Femmes Savantes*, iii.2).

⁹⁸ Sablé 1678: 62-63 (no. 39).

d'Ailly dismisses this too as a misleading refuge of ignorance. His maxim offers one indication that, by the late 1670s, the word is already beginning to fall from grace.

The term's decadence is particularly apparent in England, where it is always more liable to seem affected than in France because of its foreign provenance. English writers have the native form 'I-know-not-what' at their disposal.⁹⁹ But they satirize the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as a gallicism. Baker and Miller's translation of *La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* (1739) is a case in point. They translate Molière's *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] (discussed above) simply by turning the French adjective into the modish noun. Their Eliza tells Climene: 'everything is natural in you. Your words, [...] your looks, your gait, your action and your dress, have a *je ne sçay quoy* of quality in 'em that enchants people' (Molière 1929: I, 301). The word, by this time, has long fallen out of fashion. English comedies, from the late 1660s onwards, satirize it as the affectation of those who would pass for having 'wit'.¹⁰⁰ But one man's wit is another man's foppery. Congreve's *The Double Dealer* (1694) includes an English *précieuse ridicule*, Lady Froth, listed in the *dramatis personæ* as 'a great Cocquet; pretender to Poetry, Wit, and Learning' (Congreve 1967: 126). Lady Froth senses that Cynthia's unaffected lover Mellefont lacks what she calls 'a Manner'. Cynthia does not know what this is:

Lady Froth. Some distinguishing Quality, as for example, the *Belle-air* or *Brillant* of Mr. *Brisk*; the Solemnity, yet Complaisance of my Lord, or something of his own, that should look a little *Je-ne-sçay-quoysh*; he is too much of a Mediocrity, in my mind.

Cynthia. He does not indeed affect either pertness, or formality; for which I like him.¹⁰¹

Young men wishing to please the likes of Lady Froth should cultivate a certain gallic something. Her addition of the approximative suffix '-ish' to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*

⁹⁹ Hume (1961: 267) offers a particularly rich example of a semantically affirmative 'I-know-not-what' when describing personal merit.

¹⁰⁰ See 1.i.4 above, p. 61; Lewis 1960: 101-04 (on this sense of 'wit').

¹⁰¹ Congreve 1967: ii.2, 45-54.

reveals how irremediably English the vogue for French signs of quality is within the circles of London society.¹⁰² Cynthia, in reply, contrasts the affectation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* with the natural quality that truly distinguishes Mellefont. How far the word has come in the half-century since Vaugelas, as we saw earlier (4.i.2 above, pp. 219-20), dismissed it as a synonym for *galant* because it referred to something ‘purely natural’! The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is now firmly settled as the subtle artifice by which one cultivates a natural manner.¹⁰³ Henry Fielding marks the word’s English nadir in his picaresque novel *Tom Jones* (1749). The narrator, undertaking a description of his heroine Sophia Western in the ‘sublime’ style, deploys the figure of *adynaton* familiar to readers of Méré and Bouhours. But where these two writers use the figure to cultivate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], Fielding’s narrator takes care to distinguish Sophia’s natural qualities from the polite artifact. His description ends:

Sophia was perfectly well bred, though perhaps she wanted a little of that ease in her behaviour which is to be acquired only by habit and living within what is called the polite circle. But this, to say the truth, is often too dearly purchased; and though it hath charms so inexpressible that the French, perhaps, among other qualities, mean to express this when they declare *they know not what it is*, yet its absence is well compensated by innocence, nor can good sense and a natural gentility ever stand in need of it.¹⁰⁴

The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in mid-eighteenth-century England, remains associated with the culture of ‘the polite circle’. But, by this stage, the word has spread so far beyond the circle that an allusive string of English syntax evokes it. Fielding’s syntactical string has at the same time the character of a hostile translation. By reminding his readers of the word’s ideal meaning, Fielding’s narrator denounces the artifices of the polite circle. They are anything but the real I-know-not-what that Sophia possesses and that

¹⁰² Lady Upstart, in William Taverner’s comedy *The Artful Husband* (1716), enthuses: ‘Ah, *Mademoiselle*, what are we *English Ladies* indebted to the Politeness of the *French*! [...] You bring us the Life, the Spirit, the Belle Ayre, the *Jen’sçay quoi*’ (Taverner 1716: 20).

¹⁰³ Reveller, in the opening lines of Benjamin Griffin’s comedy *The Masquerade* (1717), requires his nephew to ‘appear Alamode’ in ‘an embroider’d Suit, a smart Cock, an agreeable Air, with a *Je n’sçay quoy* of *Negligence* in your Behaviour’ (Griffin 1996: 4).

¹⁰⁴ Fielding 1963: 131 (my italics).

can be described by *adynaton* alone (1963: 130). English satire reveals with particular clarity what polite culture makes of the term on both sides of the Channel: the fashion item of the polite circle.

Cartier de Saint Philip marks the nadir of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in French writing by choosing to call his literary miscellanea *Le Je ne sçai quoi* (1724).¹⁰⁵ He explains in a preface that he could find no definite title for his collection and, when an acquaintance asked him what it was to be called, answered to this effect. ‘Ma réponse,’ the author continues, ‘qui excita à ce Bel Esprit l’idée du *Je ne sçai quoi*, le porta à me répliquer; Hé bien, intitulez vôtre Livre le *Je ne sçai quoi*’ (Cartier de Saint Philip 1724: ii). The *bel esprit* merely finds an elegant expression of the author’s mental indolence. The latter shares his blasé view of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, defining it on the same page as ‘[une] expression qu’on met par maniere de dire à toutes sortes de sauces, et qui ne marque en effet que l’entiere ignorance de ceux qui s’en servent’. Cartier de Saint Philip marks the point at which the fall of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into meaningless affectation is complete.

The seventeenth-century culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* exposes a rift between the word and its semantic ideal type. The same, a vital movement of inexplicable sympathy, uncovers an active fault-line of nescioquiddity running through the bedrock of traditional explanation. It brings the work of explanation to a moment of crisis. We have seen how it undermines the substantial occult qualities upon which natural philosophers traditionally rely to explain insensible forces (see 2.ii.2 above). It brings the same disruption to rational explanations of sympathies and antipathies between individuals (see 3.ii.2 above, pp. 163-65). No sedimented noun can give linguistic

¹⁰⁵ A revival in the semantic charge of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* occurs shortly afterwards, as I mentioned in my Introduction above, pp. 32-33.

form to the vital force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* because all nouns tend to petrify this force as yet another explicable thing. The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* carries the seme by reactivating the nescioquiddity hidden with sedimented nouns. It reveals *occult quality* as no more than a nominal refuge of ignorance, and *sympathy*, as one of ‘ces je ne sais quoi qu’on ne peut expliquer’ (Corneille). The seme passes through lexical forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – for a while at least – with more force than through any other word. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* seems best suited to this task in the period, before its sedimentation as a noun, when it is current in all its various lexical forms and semantic operations (see 1.i.3 above). Then it remains forcefully supple, able to draw a sentence into a final assertion of nescioquiddity (as in Corneille’s line), or to attach itself as an adjective to a sedimented noun phrase. Later, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself, in settling as a modish name into the bedrock of polite usage, proves no more able than its precursors were to lend written form to its seme. It ultimately serves only to deepen still further the crises of explanation that the latter provokes. The word’s semantic force weakens as its currency spreads. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], a victim of its own success, causes the word and its core meaning to drift apart.

The word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* ends in decadence. The very same chain of events, by which the word acquires its history, lessens its ability to describe the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This is true of each and every sedimented noun in the field. What best describes the experience is not then, I suggest, its cultural history as a word but, rather, the stammer of its pre-history. To this I shall turn in the next and final chapter. The pre-historical approach requires abandoning the forwards-moving history of the first four chapters. It moves backwards, from the moment at which the word enters history, into the terms and phrases that render the semantic

force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* but that cannot call upon the facile elegance of the sedimented word. These occurrences include various non-substantival forms, figures, and strings of syntax that hindsight alone can gather under the sign of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. I examine, as one rich instance of this pre-history, the *Essais* of Montaigne. Montaigne covers (among others) the same regions of experience as the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] and he does so in such a way that readers, with hindsight, often place him at the source of seventeenth-century developments. But my aim is not to suggest that the *Essais* prepare or prefigure the seventeenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. It is to argue that Montaigne, by writing its pre-history, describes the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* better than the word itself.

5. PRE-HISTORY: MONTAIGNE

Il y a, au delà de tout mon discours, et de ce que j'en puis dire particulièrement, ne sçay quelle force inexplicable et fatale, mediatrice de cette union.

— MONTAIGNE

i. Like father, like son?

1. 'Le vent des accidents'

The 'wind of accidents' blows in the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Accidents, Montaigne insists in the last chapter of his first book of *Essais* ('De l'aage'), are commonly the death of us. The notion that human lives have some natural span draws from him criticism in the form of the negative *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.]. Those who expect death to come only at the end of 'je ne sçay quel cours, qu'ils nomment naturel', he observes, simply ignore 'un si grand nombre d'accidents auxquels chacun de nous est en butte par une naturelle subjection'. No death is less 'natural' than the one that ends a long life:

nous l'appellons seule naturelle, comme si c'estoit contre nature de voir un homme se rompre le col d'une cheute, s'estouffer d'un naufrage, se laisser surprendre à la peste ou à une pleuresie, et comme si nostre condition ordinaire ne nous presentoit à tous ces inconvénients.¹

Really natural are the 'accidents' to which we are all prey: a fall, a shipwreck, or a sudden contagion. The word *accident*, upon which Montaigne (as often) calls, implies

¹ Montaigne: i.57, 326a. All further references in this chapter are to this text unless otherwise stated.

in its Latin etymology (from *cadere*, ‘to fall’) an event that suddenly befalls a passive subject: ‘le vent des accidens me remue selon son inclination.’² This wind blows me through through my travels abroad, my experiences of pain and illness, and my intimate relations. Accidents, disasters, and other experiences that we cannot explain are the element in which we find death and also live our lives. This is the wind that blows in the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

Montaigne’s pre-historical writing of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* starts in experience. When we are moved by sudden outer forces or inner inclinations, or observe these in other things or people, we experience the effects of something that we cannot explain. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* unites these particular accidents within a single succinct formulation. But this formulation is and must always remain under threat since it is simply a synthesis, made in hindsight, of various particular accidents. Each accident requires the telling of a different story. Montaigne, in the final chapter of his second book (‘De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres’), looks back over the seven-year period that has elapsed since he started writing the *Essais*. One event, the onset of kidney stones, cannot be overlooked: ‘je suis aus prises avec la pire de toutes maladies, la plus soudaine, la plus douloureuse, la plus mortelle et la plus irremediable’ (ii.37, 760a). The illness has the character of an accident: Montaigne ‘falls’ ill just as suddenly as he falls from his horse.³ After the event, however, kidney stones appear to have been a habitual accident in the Montaigne family: ‘il est à croire que je dois à mon pere cette qualité pierreuse, car il mourut merueilleusement affligé d’une grosse pierre qu’il avoit en la vessie’.⁴ The likenesses between father and son do

² ii.1, 335b; see also i.2, 12a; ii.37, 761a; iii.2, 805b; iii.13, 1097b.

³ iii.13, 1090b; ii.6.

⁴ ii.37, 763a. As Montaigne’s father was called Pierre, there may be a paternal pun here on the adjective ‘pierreuse’; see Compagnon 1980: 188.

not end there. Michel has inherited from his forefathers not only a physical predisposition to kidney stones, but also, a residual mental antipathy towards the doctors who claim to understand and treat the condition. He names that antipathy too by drawing upon the doctors' own lexicon of occult qualities: 'mes ancestres avoient la medecine à contrecœur par *quelque inclination occulte et naturelle*: car la veuë mesme des drogues faisoit horreur à mon pere'.⁵ This 'inclination' recurs in various synonyms throughout the chapter, as an 'antipathie [...] hereditaire', a 'dispathie naturelle', or a 'propension naturelle contre les drogues et pratique de nostre medicine' (ii.37, 764-65*a* and 785*a*). This last phrase yokes a physical antipathy (to the taking of drugs) to a mental one (to medicine). Montaigne refers to an unsettling something, which he feels within, but that he can neither define nor explain. *What is it?* The insistent question recurs:

quel monstre est-ce, que cette goutte de semence dequoy nous sommes produits, porte en soy les impressions, non de la forme corporelle seulement, mais des pensemens et des inclinations de nos peres? Cette goutte d'eau, où loge elle ce nombre infiny de formes?⁶

The seed of the father, like Pascal's imperceptible point, contains ever-unfolding forms (see 3.ii.3 above, pp. 193-94). Its monstrous force affects the father's children, throughout their lives, in mind and body alike.⁷ Montaigne's reflections on occult forms and qualities start with the sharp pain that he, like his father before him, suddenly felt in the bladder. His writing of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* starts in his intimate experience.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is a disastrous accident because its force operates insensibly upon the subject before he or she can reach any judgement about it. The

⁵ ii.37, 764*a*; on this lexicon, see 2.i.2 below.

⁶ ii.37, 763*a*.

⁷ On the interdependence of mind and body, see iii.12, 1057*b*; i.21, 104*a*; and iii.13, 1114*b*.

‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’ (ii.12), a chapter best known for its presentation of sceptical arguments,⁸ is the one in which the topic of insensible forces most insistently appears. One might be tempted to make Montaigne’s Pyrrhonian motto ‘Que sçay-je?’ (ii.12, 527*b*), with its first-person interrogative form of *savoir*, the defining term in his pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. While clearly related, however, the two are semantically distinct. The ‘Que sçay-je?’ motto characterizes an interrogative state of mind in which the subject suspends judgement (*epoche*) in the search for peace of mind or *ataraxia* (ii.12, 503*a*). The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, however, describes an event that happens to the subject and remains disconcertingly inexplicable. The very search for *ataraxia* in Pyrrhonian thinking implies of course an initial experience of unease.⁹ Montaigne’s motto may be an attempt to approach the unsettling accidents that fill the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* with peace of mind. The *essai*, I shall argue (5.iii.1 below), offers a different apprehension of such events: one that seeks not peace of mind but simply to lend form to the disastrous manner in which they fall into experience.

Montaigne draws upon lexical forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to describe such experiences. He records with meticulous care the pain that kidney stones caused him and his search for a cure in Germany, Switzerland, and Italy in 1580-81 in his *Journal de Voyage* (first published in 1774).¹⁰ The text is divided into four parts.¹¹ His secretary composed what amounts to almost the first half of the *Journal*; Montaigne then wrote two parts in French; between these, and for about a quarter of the entire text, he tries out his written Italian, announcing: ‘assagiamo di parlar un poco questa

⁸ See Maclean 1996: 48-51; Brahami 1997 (on Montaigne and scepticism).

⁹ Cave 1999: 140-41.

¹⁰ Friedrich 1968: 266-70; Cave 1999: 168-74.

¹¹ Montaigne 1992*b*: XII-XIX (Introduction).

altra lingua.’¹² *Non so che*, the Italian cousin of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, appears here on no less than six occasions.¹³ All but one serves to describe the strange effects upon his body of his condition and the treatments.¹⁴ Montaigne’s entries during his second trip to Bains de la Villa are typical. On 18 August, he spends two hours in the same bath, noting: ‘sentii non so che gravezza di reni’; he finds, on the following day, that his urine has turned cloudy once again and comments: ‘scorgeva altresì non so che movimenti ai reni’ (1992b: 198). Montaigne draws repeatedly on the current Italian form of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] in his *Journal de Voyage* to trace the strange movements of his bodily experience.¹⁵ He turns to a related form, the adverbial phrase *je-ne-sais-comment*, for the same purpose in a late chapter of the *Essais* (‘Des coches’).¹⁶ The opening pages of ‘Des coches’ (iii.6) describe the nausea that Montaigne feels when travelling by coach, litter, or boat. The sensation comes upon him not during a storm, he points out, but only in the ebb and flow of a calm sea. This movement to and fro, whose causes provoke pious wonder in Bouhours’s Ariste and Eugène (see 2.i.1 above, p. 95), makes Montaigne’s stomach turn: ‘par cette legere secousse que les avirons donnent, desrobant le vaisseau sous nous, je me sens brouiller, je ne sçay comment, la teste et l’estomac, comme je ne puis souffrir sous moy un siege tremblant’ (iii.6, 901b). *Je-ne-sais-comment* refers to the sensation of seasickness, one which he meticulously describes, but whose efficient cause he does not know. The three relative clauses, with *je-ne-sais-comment* in the middle, follow a syncopated rhythm (of five syllables, five again, and then six) that renders the boat’s fitful movement to and fro: ‘c’est un remuement interrompu qui m’offence, et plus

¹² Montaigne 1992b: 167; see also iii.5, 546b.

¹³ Natali records just three (1958: 14); on the *non so che*, see 1.i.2 above, pp. 42-44.

¹⁴ The exception is a description of a wine tasting (Montaigne 1992b: 216).

¹⁵ Montaigne 1992b: 175, 176, and 197.

¹⁶ On *je-ne-sais-comment*, see 1.i.3 above, p. 56.

quand il est languissant. Je ne sçaurois autrement peindre sa forme' (iii.6, 901*b*). Forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* help lend form to the queasy movements of experience.

Such experiences leave Montaigne all at sea, buffeted by the wind of accidents, and searching for firm land. His writing moves from experience, towards explanation, and back again with the movement to and fro of a boat upon the water. This ternary movement, similar to that which Jean Starobinski has traced (1982: 169-223), takes place either at sentence level or within an entire chapter. It starts in the inchoate experience of some unknown accident or force. This accident, sudden in its incidence and often violent in its effects, awakens an instinctive philosophical curiosity in Montaigne. No sooner has he described a strange sensation in his kidneys, after his Italian bath, than he embarks upon a search for its causes. The second diary entry that I quoted earlier reads more fully: 'scorgeva altresì non so che movimenti ai reni. E s'io dirittamente sento, questi bagni possono molto intorno a questo particolare' (Montaigne 1992*b*: 198). The movement towards explanation is immediate here.

Montaigne tends to conduct his search for causes by reviewing discourses of knowledge (such as law, medicine, and philosophy) in the light of his own experience. His criticism of medical explanations, as we have seen, is one example of this. Another is his review, in 'Des coches', of attempts to explain seasickness. There he rejects Plutarch's explanation (that the condition is caused by fear), asserting: 'moy qui y suis fort sujet, sçay bien que cette cause ne me touche pas, et le sçay non par argument, mais par nécessaire experience' (iii.6, 899*b*). Montaigne draws on his own experience, not merely to refute a particular explanation, but to attack in general those that ignore or misapply experience in their causal speculations (iii.13, 1075-76*b*).

Forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* appear here in its negative operation. The impulse to move from lived experience to explanation is frustrated again and again as Montaigne compiles a list of possible explanations (iii.6, 901c). He enacts the process described at the beginning of the chapter:

nous ne pouvons nous assurer de la maistresse cause; nous en entassons plusieurs, voir si par rencontre elle se trouvera en ce nombre, *namque unam dicere causam | Non satis est, verum plures, unde una tamen sit.*¹⁷

Montaigne turns Lucretius's axiom, that multiple possible causes must be proposed, into a blind search for 'la maistresse cause'. The frustrations of such a search release a counter-movement that draws the essayist back from explanation towards the initial experience.¹⁸

Montaigne returns to the experience from an altered perspective. He now seeks, not scientific knowledge (*savoir*), but an empty-handed apprehension that he calls *inscience*.¹⁹ This return may not be definitive, for his philosophical curiosity is never far away: he has, in this respect, 'le cul entre deux selles' (i.56, 313c). *Inscience* encourages the phenomenological attempt to capture on the page a fragment of life in its irreducible particularity, or 'peindre sa forme', as he says in 'Des coches'.²⁰ To do so, Montaigne retains terms of explanation from his earlier compilation of possible causes. But he uses them to describe what now appear as the inexplicabilia of experience. Forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* appear here in its affirmative operation. With no firm land in sight, he moves back towards open sea in an attempt to capture the wind of accidents.

¹⁷ iii.6, 899b; the Latin quotation is from Lucretius (VI, 703).

¹⁸ Further examples include: the *manie* of soldiers and poets (ii.1, 347-48a-c); Montaigne's antipathy to certain vices (ii.11, 427-28a-b-c); and the effect of his physiognomy on the bandits (iii.12, 1062b-c).

¹⁹ Starobinski 1982: 188; De Obaldia 1995: 73.

²⁰ iii.6, 901b; see also ii.37, 785a (for a similar search for *forme*).

2. Montaigne's ghost

I place Montaigne's writing in the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* for two reasons. The first is that, as I showed earlier (in 1.i.3 above), he uses current lexical forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* without once using the noun. The *Essais*, published some fifty years before the sedimentation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], are – in chronological terms – part of its pre-history. So too of course, on these terms alone, is any number of other texts published before the word acquires its seventeenth-century history. But Montaigne deserves the first place in its pre-history for a further reason. He examines those very regions (of nature, the passions, and culture) in which, during the previous three chapters, we traced the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This falls in the *Essais* as the disastrous event that cannot be explained. Montaigne lends written form to the experience better than the sedimented *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] ever could because he allows it to move through its supple non-substantival forms and syntactical strings.²¹ He writes, in this sense, the word's pre-history.

Why bring to the *Essais* a synthetic term that only enters history after the text was written? The question is fundamental to the problem of how we are to read his text today.²² Montaigne himself, in 'De la vanité' (iii.9) and elsewhere, places his readers in a critical dilemma. He describes the *Essais* as a dense, oblique, and open-ended description of thoughts and inclinations that are ever on the move (iii.9, 983*b* and 994*b-c*). He presents the freedom of the text, at certain moments, to skilled readers by inviting them to appropriate and transform elements to produce an infinite

²¹ Sayce 1971 notes similar features of Montaigne's style in general; I pursue one particular example.

²² For more ample discussions, see Pouilloux 1969; Cave 1982; McKinley 2001.

number of other *essais*.²³ But he is equally capable, at other moments, of asserting that his text is semantically self-sufficient: ‘en ces memoires, si on y regarde, on trouvera que j’ay tout dict, ou tout designé’. He warns his readers against deforming him (as a metonymy for the *Essais*) with a ghostly threat: ‘je reviendrois volontiers de l’autre monde pour démentir celuy qui me formeroit autre que je n’estois, fut ce pour m’honorer’ (iii.9, 983*b*). Montaigne promises to haunt any reader guilty of such a deformation without explaining how he distinguishes between this and the ‘legitimate’ transformations of his text that he elsewhere invites.²⁴ He leaves his readers uncomfortably perched on the horns of this dilemma, and subject to its contrary pressures, as they seek to trace movements within his text. These must all, in Montaigne’s view of reading, fall between the author’s intended meaning and the preoccupations of the reader since, as he says, ‘la parole est moitié à celuy qui parle, moitié à celuy qui l’escoute’ (iii.13, 1088*b*). Readers must combine generosity and good judgement with a supple freedom of approach. Only then will they be able to understand Montaigne’s words in their own way without at the same time deforming them. Starobinski, who attempts to read the *Essais* in this manner, offers ‘[un] mouvement de la lecture interrogative’ in which he throws light on his own preoccupations by recovering, in its very particularity, a text from the living past (1982: 8-9). I take the same approach to the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as my Introduction (see p. 24 above), I hope, made clear. The topic offers a means of tracing a movement of experience in the middle region between author and reader. My choice of word seems appropriate, then, not despite but because its history starts in a period that comes after the *Essais* and predates our own. It too falls in the middle region.

²³ See i.40, 251*c*; Cave 1982: 160-62.

²⁴ Cave 1982: 163.

The word traces a seme that moves through Montaigne's text without ever undergoing sedimentation. This is its critical function. The danger of applying a sedimented term to the *Essais* is that it will, on the contrary, serve only to petrify the movement of the seme. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], in that case, becomes another topic or theme on which the author is said (in one way or another) to have made a number of statements; the first job of the critic is to select and anthologize the relevant passages. That Montaigne uses related forms and phrases of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, but never actually draws upon the settled noun, is met in this case with one of two reactions. The first is embarrassed silence. The second is to note the word's historical imminence and to place Montaigne, not in the pre-history of the seventeenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], but at its genesis. Word historians include, along with early substantival examples, Montaigne's use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] to celebrate the occult energy of La Boétie's sonnets (quoted in 1.i.3 (II) above, p. 53). They make Montaigne one of the founding fathers of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].²⁵ Genealogies of this kind tend to suppress the particularity that belongs to past forms of thought and expression.²⁶ Histories of a familiar object cast back, into the time before its birth, and find a series of discrete phenomena that look rather like their unborn object. The tendency is to place these in its genealogical line: earlier forms are seen as no more than the later familiar thing *in embryo*, imperfect but already *there*. Readers who place Montaigne at the genesis of the modern 'self' (*le moi* [n.]), Cave argues (1999: 111-14), risk petrifying his mobile lexicon of personal identity. Further examples can be found in the regions of experience that directly concern us. One such, we have seen (4.ii.3 above, pp. 241-42), is the place ascribed to Montaigne at the genesis of

²⁵ See for example Spingarn 1957: c; Simon 1959: 104; Köhler 1953: 22-25; Haase 1956: 49-50. Guellouz (1971: 4-6) is an exception.

²⁶ Cave identifies this as one methodological problem to which pre-histories offer a partial solution (1999: 17).

seventeenth-century *honnêteté*. This too is a sedimented term that lies, for the author, in the unimagined afterlife of his text.²⁷ His attack on the occult qualities, forms, and quintessences of traditional philosophy provides a final example.²⁸ Such attacks are commonplace in the Scientific Revolution and historians tend to place the *Essais* at the beginning of this grand narrative of modern intellectual history.²⁹ Even the neutral classification that I use of late sixteenth-century writers like Shakespeare and Montaigne, as ‘early modern’, discreetly assigns them a position in the genealogy of modernity. These are writers that seem with hindsight to occupy the dawn of our age, to have made it possible, to be our ancestors.³⁰ This is none other than a historiographical version of Montaigne’s own ‘like father, like son’ story. His seventeenth-century readers, who place him at the origins of the new philosophy and polite *honnêteté*, tell a similar story. They risk petrifying the specific movements of the text, and in the act, raising Montaigne’s ghost.

We twenty-first-century readers cannot excise hindsight from our vision of the early modern past; but we can choose to resist its teleological inferences. The *Essais*, I argue in this chapter, are not the source of the seventeenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. They form, instead, its pre-history. The pre-historical approach first exploits and then resists the inferences of hindsight.³¹ It draws upon the history of a word, whether the *moi* [n.] or the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], to develop a lexical tracer in a semantic field. The pre-historian does so by moving backwards, from the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] (in this case), into the earlier lexical forms and syntactical strings that seem,

²⁷ On Montaigne’s implied readership, see 5.ii.2 below.

²⁸ This attack is the subject of 5.ii.1 below.

²⁹ Starobinski 1982: 183; Hutchison 1982: 235, 249.

³⁰ Harold Bloom, for example, considers Shakespeare to have ‘invented the human’ (1999); on the case of Montaigne, see Cave 1999: 18.

³¹ See Introduction above, pp. 33-34.

with hindsight, to anticipate the word's sedimentation. But rather than awarding to these instances the status of origins, as genealogical historians tend to do, the pre-historian finds them in the absolute present of their writing. The prefix 'pre-' marks here, not the very beginning of history, but a series of discrete instances that remain outside its flow. These instances the *je-ne-sais-quoi* gathers into a whole that remains provisional and open-ended. My intention is not to cut out passages from the *Essais* and display them as subordinate examples within a new organizing topic. It is, instead, to make the *je-ne-sais-quoi* the site of its own dispersal into the field of terms, phrases, and figures found in the *Essais*.

Such an approach has its difficulties. It becomes meaningful to talk about the instances gathered in this way as 'pre-historical' only after one has placed them in the shadow of a forwards-moving history. So the pre-historian spends much of his or her time following the flow of history and admitting future inferences in order to move backwards. The advantages of the pre-historical approach to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* are twofold. First, it forces one to acknowledge that a particular object of study is chosen because it speaks to one's own preoccupations. Such choices, which I believe are inevitable, should be actively considered and not concealed. The pre-historian, by admitting the choice, can better resist the temptation to place texts of the past at the origins of subsequent ways of thinking and writing. Second, the work of Montaigne, Shakespeare, and Bacon is no longer seen as a site of origin when it is the final destination of a pre-history. The approach restores to a particular text the strangeness of its internal movements. It allows one to trace the meaning of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the *Essais*, for example, without losing its mobile force. Montaigne does not seek out the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], or any other settled term, to petrify the experience. He allows

it to move through non-substantival forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, syntactical strings, conceptual figures, and objective correlatives. These pre-historical instances of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* are not the same kind of thing, even *in embryo*, as the sedimented word; they do not appear indeed as any kind of ‘thing’ at all but, rather, as the literary capture of disaster. The experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears at its most vital in Montaigne’s pre-history of the word.

ii. 'Plaisants causeurs'

1. The blind man

A man may see how this world goes with no eyes.

— SHAKESPEARE, *King Lear*

Montaigne uses *occult quality*, *substantial form*, and *quintessence*, not as terms of explanation, but to lend written form to our blind experience of the world. Pain, bereavement, and friendship are the experiences that prompt the search for explanation. Montaigne's kidney stones, and the illnesses of friends and family, have brought him into frequent contact with the medical profession. Experiences of medical failure and personal bereavement become, in written form, a critical review of medical practice and theory (ii.37).³² A blind gentleman whom Montaigne knows well provokes reflections upon preternatural forces, the senses, and the limits of philosophical speculation (ii.12). Montaigne's search for explanations of preternatural forces ends not in the explanations of traditional philosophers but provokes, instead, a radical assault upon the selfsame explanations. Forms and syntactical strings of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in its negative semantic operation, reveal philosophers' talk of causes to be nothing but an anthropomorphic refuge of ignorance. Montaigne moves back from *science* towards a declaration of *inscience*. Philosophical examples no longer illustrate causal explanations: they yield conceptual figures and narratives of particular experience. One of these is the story of the blind man. Terms like *occult quality* and

³² Starobinski 1982: 180-90.

quintessence find themselves drawn into a-causal syntactical strings that evoke the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Montaigne, as he reflects on the preternatural, imagines what it must be like to experience the world without sight.

Montaigne's search for causes provokes a critique of humankind's very ability to find them. The most sustained critique, the 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' (ii.12), is framed as a reply that Montaigne offers to detractors of Sebond's natural theology in which he uses Pyrrhonian arguments to undermine the rationalist bedrock underlying their criticisms.³³ In a *c*-passage, Montaigne compares his method to that of St. Augustine, who adduces, for the same purpose, 'certaines experiences connues et indubitables ausquelles l'homme confesse rien ne veoir' (ii.12, 449*c*). Where Augustine draws on far-flung examples, Montaigne insists that the most common events prove the blindness and presumption of human reason.³⁴ One example, the superiority of animals' natural powers to our own, sets the tone for the chapter. Humankind has placed itself above its fellow-creatures in the order of being thanks to the scholastic invention of the tripartite soul (see 3.i.2 above, pp. 162-63). This allows us to enjoy the so-called 'divine intelligence' of our rational souls while remaining safe in the certainty that animals, who possess sensitive souls alone, are moved by 'mere' natural inclinations. This distribution of capabilities, which the evidence in no way supports, proves nothing other than the inherent presumption of humankind (ii.12, 452*a*). Montaigne proposes to compare the behaviour of humans and other animals according to the principle that, as he puts it, 'nous devons conclurre de pareils effects pareilles facultez' (ii.12, 460*a*). Some experiences that seem essentially human

³³ See Starobinski 1982: 160-61; Tournon 1983: 228-57; Cave 1999: 39-50 (on the complex structure of this chapter). Simonin suggests that Montaigne invents Sebond's detractors for dramatic effect (1990: 113-16).

³⁴ Céard 1977: 430.

we share, in fact, with our fellow-creatures. Inexplicable movements of sympathy are one: ‘il y a certaines inclinations d’affection qui naissent quelque fois en nous sans le conseil de la raison, qui viennent d’une temerité fortuite que d’autres nomment sympathie: les bestes en sont capables comme nous’. Friendship (*amitié*) is another: ‘quant à l’amitié, elles [les bestes] l’ont, sans comparaison, plus vive et plus constante que n’ont pas les hommes’ (ii.12, 471*a*). Montaigne lists numerous examples of animals regularly performing actions that humans are unable to explain or imitate.³⁵ He uses these, along with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.], to launch his main attack on the rational pretensions of humankind:

nous reconnoissons assez, en la pluspart de nos ouvrages, combien les animaux ont d’excellence au dessus de nous et combien nostre art est foible à les imiter. Nous voyons toutesfois aux nostres, plus grossiers, les facultez que nous y employons, et que nostre ame s’y sert de toutes ses forces; pourquoy n’en estimons nous autant d’eux? pourquoy attribuons nous à *je ne sçay quelle inclination naturelle et servile* les ouvrages qui surpassent tout ce que nous pouvons par nature et par art?³⁶

Montaigne attaches the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.], in its negative semantic operation, to the noun phrase ‘inclination naturelle’. The adjective reveals an anthropomorphic refuge of ignorance within traditional explanations of the sensitive soul and its hidden qualities. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* here traces the major movement, which Montaigne makes in this middle section of the ‘Apologie’, against the ability of human reason to establish causal explanations.

Montaigne pursues his case against the champions of reason by reviewing the natural principles on which they claim to offer causal explanations. The loose congregation of traditional natural philosophers, doctors, lawyers, logicians, and magicians, which claims knowledge of causes, forms his main target. He attempts to reveal the entire neo-Aristotelian corpus of the schools, on which this group relies, as

³⁵ See for example ii.12, 453-55 and 468-70.

³⁶ ii.12, 455*a* (my italics).

nothing more than a refuge of doubt and ignorance (ii.12, 507a). The scholastic philosophy of nature comes under particular pressure; in this respect, the *Essais* typify the hostile reception of Aristotle's *Physics* in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (see 2.ii above). Traditional natural philosophers take self-evident sensory experiences as the bedrock upon which to build necessary causal explanations. Montaigne, taking them at their word, insists that they should be able to demonstrate their knowledge of causes in each and every case. The Cannibals, who live their lives 'sans les preceptes d'Aristote, et sans la connoissance du nom de la physique', need not doubt their self-evident sense perceptions (that fire is hot, snow white, and so on). But traditional natural philosophers claim to know their underlying causes.

Il ne faut pas qu'ils me dient: il est vray, car vous le voyez et sentez ainsin; il faut qu'ils me dient si, ce que je pense sentir, je le sens pourtant en effect; et, si je le sens, qu'ils me dient apres pourquoy je le sens, et comment, et quoy; qu'ils me dient le nom, l'origine, les tenans et aboutissans de la chaleur, du froid, les qualitez de celuy qui agit et de celuy qui souffre; ou qu'ils me quittent leur profession, qui est de ne recevoir ny approuver rien que par la voye de la raison: c'est leur touche à toutes sortes d'essais; mais certes c'est une touche pleine de fauceté, d'erreur, de foiblesse et defaillance.³⁷

Montaigne's request for causal explanations frames a general attack on their underlying principles.³⁸ He insists, first, on a scientific demonstration of the Aristotelian assumption that sense perceptions are self-evidently true. He then evokes the four causes in his demand for the *pourquoy*, *comment*, and *quoy* of a sense perception (apparently conflating the formal and material causes in *quoy*). The four primary qualities appear – Montaigne mentions just two (heat and cold) – as well as active and passive powers.³⁹ Traditional explanations, as I showed earlier (2.i.2 above, p. 105), are built upon the supposed hylomorphic bedrock of matter, form, and privation. This, along with the principles of other philosophical theories, Montaigne

³⁷ ii.12, 541a.

³⁸ I set out these principles in 2.i.2 above.

³⁹ See Starobinski 1999: 22.

has undermined in the preceding pages. Privation receives the most biting sarcasm: ‘qu’est-il plus vain que de faire l’inanité mesme cause de la production des choses?’⁴⁰ Montaigne, like the new philosophers of the seventeenth century, dismisses hylomorphic principles as an unintelligible and superfluous exercise in metaphysics rather than the fabric underlying physical change. Montaigne chooses the bedrock of traditional natural philosophy as the target of his attack on ‘la voye de la raison’. He polemically overturns the old certainties underlying causal explanations to reveal a refuge of error and ignorance.

Preternatural cases reveal with particular clarity how traditional thinkers misuse their experience to produce causal explanations. Insensible forces are seen as the work of some hidden spiritual principle known as an *occult quality*, *substantial form*, or *quintessence* (see 2.i.2 above). Montaigne unmasks these so-called principles as mere privations of knowledge, gaps in the fabric of explanation, that philodoxical thinkers illegitimately transform into real causes. This criticism appears in the systematic review of medicine undertaken in ‘De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres’ (ii.37). This review, as Starobinski has shown, considers physiology, hygiene, pathology, therapeutics, and semiology in turn.⁴¹ Montaigne is particularly scathing about doctors’ use of drugs in therapeutics and their underlying explanatory bedrock of occult properties and quintessences. Nothing in medicine is less believable, he declares, than their claim that each of a drug’s ingredients travels right through the patient’s body, keeping its specific powers intact, before finally penetrating ‘jusques au lieu au service duquel il est destiné par sa propriété occulte’ (ii.37, 774a). Montaigne dismisses this claim, not simply for its implausibility, but because he is

⁴⁰ ii.12, 540a; Tournon 2001.

⁴¹ ii.37, 773-4a; Starobinski 1982: 180-86.

opposed to doctors using induction to move from their experience of a drug's effects to explanations of its final causes. Experience of this kind is particular, accidental, and contingent. That it is common to three doctors in no way makes it a stable platform for explanation: 'quoy, si un autre ou cent autres ont faict des experiences contraires?'⁴² Preternatural effects, whose material and efficient causes do not fall under the senses, mark active fault-lines of ignorance running through the scholastic bedrock of explanation.

Montaigne uncovers these fault-lines by offering, as his final example, a hostile translation of the traditional term *quintessence*. His remark, coming as it does right at the end of his review of medicine, has the character of an irresistible afterthought. It uses not the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] but a syntactical string:

je ne me puis deffendre de ce papier, que je n'en die encore ce mot sur ce qu'ils nous donnent pour respondant de la certitude de leurs drogues l'experience qu'ils ont faite. La plus part, et, ce croy-je, plus des deux tiers des vertus medecinales, consistent en la quinte essence ou propriété occulte des simples, de laquelle nous ne pouvons avoir autre instruction que l'usage, car quinte essence n'est autre chose qu'*une qualité de laquelle par nostre raison nous ne sçavons trouver la cause*.⁴³

Doctors, in the search for remedies, grope their blind way through a world of plants and minerals whose causes, for the most part, remain impervious to explanation. That doctors can put simples to therapeutic use, without understanding them, offers Montaigne no comforting lesson in humankind's empirical arts. It causes him deep-seated anxiety. The medical use of *quintessences* leaves us at the mercy of doctors who simply cannot know what they are doing. The consequences are, at times, disastrous. Montaigne mourns once more, in a *c*-addition to his text, the death of his friend Etienne de la Boétie at their hands: 'ils me tuèrent un ami qui valait mieux que tous' (ii.37, 774c). Doctors, most dangerously of all, transform their blind experience

⁴² ii.37, 783a; iii.13, 1088b.

⁴³ ii.37, 781-82a; my italics.

of a preternatural effect into a certain explanation of its cause (see 2.i.3 above, pp. 110-11). They do so, in linguistic terms, by transforming a first-person-plural admission of explanatory failure ('une qualité de laquelle [...] nous ne sçavons trouver la cause') into a substantival explicans (*quintessence*). Montaigne reverses the process, dissolving the noun into a string of syntax. This string performs the same negative semantic operation as the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] in the 'Apologie'. The act of placing we-know-not-what 'quintessences' in simples, and the attribution of 'je ne sais quelle inclination naturelle et servile' to the substantial form of animals, suffer the same criticism. Montaigne's use of a syntactical string, in ii.37, simply makes the dissolution of *quintessence* more complete. It reveals with particular clarity how traditional thinkers illegitimately reify their blind experience as causal explanations.

Montaigne's criticism of causal knowledge, *la science*, draws him back towards a declaration of *inscience*. This return uses the same foundation – experience – as that on which medicine allows its explanations to rest: 'la medecine se forme par exemples et experience; aussi fait mon opinion' (ii.37, 764a). But the world of experience, for Montaigne, contains within it dark voids that no explanation can fill. He sets out his case in the opening pages of 'Des boyteux' (iii.11).

[b] Je vois ordinairement que les hommes, aux faicts qu'on leur propose, s'amuse[n]t plus volontiers à en chercher la raison qu'à en chercher la verité: ils laissent là les choses, et s'amuse[n]t à traiter les causes. [c] Plaisants causeurs. La cognoissance des causes appartient seulement à celui qui a la conduite des choses, non à nous qui n'en avons que la souffrance, et qui en avons l'usage parfaitement plein, selon nostre nature, sans en penetrer l'origine et l'essence.⁴⁴

Montaigne's rhyme (*choses* / *causes*) puns here on the Latin term *causa*, which means 'thing' (or 'case' in law) as well as 'cause', in order to undo their assumed connection. We should aim to establish the things (*choses*) that have happened rather

⁴⁴ iii.11, 1026.

than speculating on their causes (*causes*). Causes are beyond us. By punning on the French verb *causer*, meaning ‘to chat’ as well as ‘to cause’, Montaigne accuses those who claim to explain causes of being ‘*plaisants causeurs*’, people who play with words, words, words. In this particular chapter, he makes demonological explanations the object of the satire.⁴⁵ But demonologists merely exemplify the causal illusions into which humankind as a whole ordinarily falls.⁴⁶ Curiosity, our natural condition, is a cause-producing factory in perpetual production.⁴⁷ The search for causes is as ineluctable a part of our experience as our subsequent recognition of its failure. This does not mean, as the *c*-text makes clear, that causes themselves are mere mental fictions. Material and final causes, along with insensible forces and qualities, occupy a dark zone of being that is inaccessible to our senses and also, therefore, to the speculations of *science*.⁴⁸ We ‘suffer’ causes, without perceiving what they are, capable only of describing the form of our suffering. To recognize this is to reach *inscience*.⁴⁹ Montaigne uses the term *ignorance* in ‘Des vaines subtilitez’ (i.56) to describe the coincidence of two antithetical extremes, the ‘ignorance abecedaire’ of the unlettered, and the ‘ignorance doctorale’ of the learned.⁵⁰ One reaches learned ignorance only by recognizing that the search for causes has left the phenomenon unexplained. Montaigne expands upon this idea in the *c*-text of the *Essais*. After criticizing the *plaisants causeurs* in ‘Des boyteux’, he – like Bouhours’s Ariste – recalls Aristotle’s remark that philosophy begins in wonder (see 2.i.1 above, p. 96). But, where Aristotle conceives of wonder as the impulse to seek the knowledge of causes, Montaigne makes it the first in a series of movements that end in a learned

⁴⁵ See Demonet 1995: 108 (on the use of insensible marks on the body in demonological explanations).

⁴⁶ Doctors are a common target: see ii.25, 689*a*; ii.30, 712*a*; ii.37, 764*a*.

⁴⁷ On ‘la forçénée curiosité de nostre nature’, see i.11, 41*a*; i.31, 203*a*; iii.13, 1073*c*; Kenny 1998.

⁴⁸ See also ii.12, 589-90*a-c*.

⁴⁹ See Baraz 1968: 89-143; Céard 1977: 404-08 (on *inscience*).

⁵⁰ See i.56*c*; iii.10, 1020*b*; iii.12, 1052*b-c*.

ignorance, '[une] ignorance pour laquelle concevoir il n'y a pas moins de science que pour concevoir la science'.⁵¹ He introduces the term *inscience* in a *c*-addition to the following chapter ('De la phisionomie'), declaring:

[b] je dis pompeusement et opulemment l'ignorance, et dys la science megrement et piteusement; [c] accessoirement cette-cy et accidentalement, celle là expressément et principalement. Et ne traicte à point nommé de rien que du rien, ny d'aucune science que de l'inscience.⁵²

Montaigne, in opposition to the Philosopher, treats *science* merely as a means to reach the *inscience* of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. His object is nothing other than nothing itself, the inexplicable dark zones of knowledge, those things that lie within experience but in a vacuum of the mind. He looks into the vacuum, instead of abhorring it, to offer a rich description of *inscience*.

Montaigne writes the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] by turning the language and figures of causal science towards the a-causal descriptions of *inscience*. His coinage *inscience* is itself an example of this turn. Montaigne applies sedimented explicantia to name the very phenomena that these words cannot explain.⁵³ To spell out their nescioquiddity he employs, as we have already seen, forms and syntactical strings of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Philosophical examples subvert their function and grow into anecdotes of experience. A rich instance of this, Montaigne's story of his blind acquaintance, comes towards the end of the 'Apologie' (ii.12). He there introduces the topic of the senses and their limits to clinch his case about our ineradicable 'ignorance' of everyday events (ii.12, 587a). He recalls at this point Aristotle's axiom, discussed earlier (see 2.i.2 above, p. 100), that all knowledge starts in the senses. Aristotle, starting from this axiom, explains why the things that we perceive must be

⁵¹ iii.11, 1030c; see also iii.13, 1075b.

⁵² iii.12, 1057.

⁵³ See for example i.26, 166a; ii.11, 433a; ii.12, 526a, 590a-c; 5.iii.2 below, pp. 305-06.

as they appear; Montaigne, however, turns the axiom towards the thought that the world may in fact be full of things that we can neither perceive nor explain. He agrees that the senses mark the boundaries of our apprehension: ‘c’est le privilege des sens d’estre l’extreme borne de nostre aperceance’ (ii.12, 588a). But he suggests that they are incomplete: ‘je mets en doubte que l’homme soit prouueu de tous sens naturels’ (ii.12, 588a). The two propositions leave room for a world to exist all around us and, at the same time, beyond the threshold of sense and thought. Montaigne consistently thinks about these things in liminal metaphors.⁵⁴ These echo his earlier description of the New World, its discovery, and his suggestion that more lands may yet be discovered out there (ii.12, 571-72a-b-c). Occult qualities and causes may mark the existence of another New World. This one is unsettlingly different from *terra incognita* across the seas, however, because it is the dark realm *within* our familiar world that must remain *forever* unknowable. The very apple we hold may be full of qualities for which we have no senses (ii.12, 590a). The problem, of course, is that we simply cannot know what we lack the senses to experience: the mind reaches its limit. Occult qualities offer a means to cast one’s mind beyond that limit:

les proprietiez que nous apellons occultes, comme à l’aimant d’attirer le fer, n’est-il pas vraysemblable qu’il y a des facultez sensitives en nature, propres à les juger et à les appercevoir, et que le defect de telles facultez nous apporte l’ignorance de la vraye essence de telles choses?⁵⁵

We glimpse, around the effects of magnetic attraction, the dark zone. Those qualities that we merely call *occult* – the nominalist gesture here unsettles the sedimented phrase – may indicate the existence of real forces, beyond the mind and senses, which move us. Montaigne crosses the preternatural realm of traditional science in his attempt to conceive the *inscience* of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

⁵⁴ See Maclean 1982.

⁵⁵ ii.12, 590a; see also ii.17, 632-33a; ii.37, 763a.

Montaigne lends written form to this mind-breaking thought by tracing the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through a complex string of syntax. He recalls Aristotle's example of the man, blind from birth, who lacks the necessary sensory experience to know what colours are.⁵⁶ Those of us with the faculty of sight need only open our eyes to perceive things that those born blind cannot conceive. But we are 'blind' in our own way to those insensible forces in the world – call them occult qualities, quintessences, or *je-ne-sais-quoi* – whose effects we feel but which none of us can conceptualize.⁵⁷ The sighted are, in a sense, more blind than the blind themselves: they believe their senses to be complete and so fail to acknowledge their blindness to the dark zone of occult qualities. But those born blind, Montaigne says in a syntactical string of *je-ne-sais-quoi*, have learnt to recognize their *inscience*:

[a] les aveugles nais [...] ont appris de nous qu'ils ont à dire quelque chose, qu'ils ont quelque chose à désirer, qui est en nous, [c] la quelle ils nomment bien, et ses effects et consequences; [a] mais ils ne savent pourtant pas [ce] que c'est, ny ne l'aprehendent ny pres ny loin.⁵⁸

Something happens in the world, to which the blind give a name and whose effects they describe, but which in itself they can neither conceive nor explain. The clause 'ils ne savent [...] pas [ce] que c'est', an indirect question using a negative form of the verb *savoir*, is a direct semantic relation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Montaigne lends form to the seme by tracing the movement of blind experience from the apprehension of a missing *quelque chose*, through its naming and description, to a declaration of its nescioquiddity. The crucial *c*-addition, like those that bear on *inscience*, spells out the

⁵⁶ ii.12, 589a; Aristotle, *Physics* (ii.1, 193a), quoted in 2.i.2 above, p. 100.

⁵⁷ Martin Milligan, a blind philosopher, makes the same suggestion in his reflections on blindness (Magee and Milligan 1995: 173).

⁵⁸ ii.12, 589.

naming of what cannot be known. Montaigne's syntactical string, which releases the movement of the seme, is a complex pre-historical instance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.⁵⁹

Montaigne writes this episode in the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through the conceptual figure of the blind man. The latter appears here as part of the same topic as his ancestor in Aristotle, it is true, but the similarities between them end there. The blind man, for the Philosopher, remains a generalized type confined within the narrow space of an example. Montaigne, however, writes about a particular acquaintance: 'j'ay veu un gentil-homme de bonne maison, aveugle nay, aumoins aveugle de tel aage qu'il ne sçait que c'est que veuë.' He notes that his blind acquaintance talks the language of sight in his own particular way ('d'une mode toute sienne et particuliere'). He describes the man's love of hunting, shooting, and tennis; his pleasure when his companions (the author among them) tell him that he has taken a hare; his fond words for his godson: 'mon Dieu, dict-il, le bel enfant! qu'il le fait beau voir! qu'il a le visage guay!' (ii.12, 589a). The blind man expresses the pleasure that any godfather feels when he beholds his handsome young godson, the apple of his eye. But he does so sightlessly. Montaigne's example visibly exceeds its topical function here. Nominalist philosophers repeat the austere injunction, known as Ockham's razor (see 2.ii.2 (I) above, p. 123), that entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity. Montaigne, like Shakespeare, can be said to obey the opposite principle in his writing. He deliberately multiplies experiential particulars. There is no need for us to know, for example, that the blind man picks up tennis balls in his *left* hand. Here, as in his 'piling up' of multiple inoperative causes (see 5.i.1 above,

⁵⁹ Two proximate instances in the 'Apologie' (ii.12) are: 'nostre estat accommodant les choses à soy et les transformant selon soy, *nous ne sçavons plus quelles sont les choses en verité*' (600a, my italics); 'et par consequent se trompent et mentent les sens de nature, prenans ce qui apparoit pour ce qui est, à *faute de bien sçavoir que c'est qui est*' (603a, my italics again).

p. 263), Montaigne's beard blunts Ockham's razor.⁶⁰ His example, by exceeding its topical function, leaves the reader wondering whether Montaigne may in fact have introduced the topic of the senses in order to tell the blind man's story. The latter appears not as a mere example, or a personification, but as a living person whose particular situation speaks to Montaigne and haunts his thinking. He is best described for this reason as one of the 'conceptual figures' (*personnages conceptuels*) that, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, stimulate the creation of philosophical concepts (1991: 60-71). Philosophers work, Deleuze and Guattari argue, by thinking through the situations of the conceptual figures that haunt them: 'le personnage conceptuel n'est pas le représentant du philosophe, c'est même l'inverse [...] c'est le destin du philosophe de devenir son ou ses personnages conceptuels' (1991: 62). Plato has Socrates, Descartes has the Idiot, and Nietzsche, Dionysus (1991: 63). Each philosopher has his conceptual figures.

Montaigne, who is missing from this list, thinks through (among others) the conceptual figure of the Blind Man. He suggests that we may all be in his situation: 'que sçait-on si le genre humain faict une sottise pareille, à faute de quelque sens, et que par ce defect la plus part du visage des choses nous soit caché?' (ii.12, 589a). The blind man returns in other chapters: 'encore les aveugles demandent un guide, nous nous fourvoions de nous mesmes' (ii.25, 689a). Those of us with apparently unimpaired senses nevertheless stumble across the things surrounding us: 'considerons au travers de quels nuages et comment à tastons on nous meine à la connaissance de la pluspart des choses qui nous sont entre mains' (i.27, 179a). Accidents, events, and disasters leave us all feeling our way around the world in the

⁶⁰ See Nuttall 1983: 173-81 (from whose account of Shakespeare I borrow this idea).

dark. To write is to become the blind man groping, ‘à tastons’ once more (iii.13, 1076c), for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that has befallen him. Montaigne, in telling the story of his sightless acquaintance, turns the sedimented lexicon of causal explanation into an open field of a-causal terms, syntactical strings, and conceptual figures. He becomes the blind man writing the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].

2. The middle region

The polite circle and its signs of quality find no place in Montaigne’s pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The search for causes, we have seen, provokes a critical review of traditional explanations in natural philosophy. Montaigne attacks the form in which such explanations are made as well as their content. His review embodies an anti-pedantic model of free conversation that writer and reader conduct in friendship.⁶¹ Writers of the seventeenth century, who attempt to add philosophy to the reading tastes of a wider public, turn to Montaigne as a precursor. The social constitution of their readership becomes an object of conflict between competing groups as a polite culture of indefinable social quality emerges in the course of the century. Bouhours addresses, from within, a circle of readers with a shared set of ideas and aspirations. He and others claim that the *Essais* anticipate their polite culture of conversation. This genealogy, I shall argue, is one of those that raise Montaigne’s ghost. For the author imagines his ideal reader above all as a single privileged interlocutor. His writing on social distinction does not reveal forms or syntactical strings of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* because Montaigne’s pre-history of the word cultivates no such signs of quality.

⁶¹ This is discussed in 2.ii.1 above, pp. 117-18.

Montaigne places the implied readership of his *Essais*, not within a polite circle, but in the middle region. The composition of this region, as we shall see, evolves with the text throughout its complex publishing history.⁶² Montaigne offers the metaphor of the ‘moyenne region’ for his implied readership when, in ‘Des vaines subtilitez’ (i.56), he describes a parlour game that he and his household have just been playing. The aim is to find words that link two antithetical extremes together while excluding the middle.⁶³ *Ignorance*, as we have seen (5.ii.1 above, pp. 277-78), is used here to connect learned *inscience* with the pure absence of all learning: in the excluded middle are those, like Montaigne, who move fitfully to and fro in the search for knowledge. He considers, as his final example of this game, the *Essais* themselves:

si ces essays estoyent dignes qu’on en jugeat, il en pourroit advenir, à mon advis, qu’ils ne plairoient guiere aux esprits communs et vulgaires, ny guiere aux singuliers et excellens: ceux-là n’y entendroient pas assez, ceux-cy entendroient trop; ils pourroient vivoter en la moyenne region.⁶⁴

Montaigne unites two antithetical groups of potential readers in their dislike of his text. The middle region, which his subtle game has previously excluded, appears here as the natural place for the *Essais*. But the rules of the game mean that this must remain defined only by the groups of readers that it does *not* contain. The middle region is left undescribed. Montaigne offers a positive description of it in a *c*-addition to the chapter ‘De la præsumption’ (ii.17). There he engages a conversation with himself about his intended readership:

et puis, pour qui escrivez vous? Les sçavans à qui touche la jurisdiction livresque, ne connoissent autre prix que de la doctrine [...] Qui ignore Aristote, selon eux s’ignore quand et quand soymesme. Les ames communes et populaires ne voyent pas la grace et le pois d’un discours hautain et deslié. Or, ces deux especes occupent le monde. La tierce, à qui vous tombez en partage, des ames réglées et fortes

⁶² On the evolution of the middle region, see Friedrich 1968: 345-48; Cave 1982: 153-56.

⁶³ See Maclean 1983.

⁶⁴ i.56, 313a.

d'elles-mesmes, est si rare que justement elle n'a ny nom, ny rang entre nous: c'est à demy temps perdu, d'aspirer et de s'efforcer à luy plaire.⁶⁵

Montaigne claims to write neither for bookish pedants, nor for simple peasants, but a third group of readers who think actively for themselves. So 'rare' are its members, however, that this group enjoys little renown or standing in French society (see also iii.8, 824*b*). Montaigne, rather than addressing a pre-existing social circle, worries about the futility of writing for a middle region that appears, at times, all but empty.

The author does find individual interlocutors in the middle region. Most prominent among these are the various noble ladies whom he addresses during the first two books. He includes, on three occasions, a prefatory dedication to a lady whom he also apostrophizes in the chapter.⁶⁶ The implication is that Montaigne's general reflections on a topic, such as the education of children, contribute to an imagined conversation between himself and his dedicatee (see for example i.26, 148-49*a*). His apostrophe to a lady appears in the middle of a chapter, unannounced, on two occasions. The 'Apologie de Raimond Sebond' (ii.12) offers a complex case, for not only is the apostrophe made to an anonymous Princess, but its relation to the rest of the chapter is problematic.⁶⁷ The second apostrophe of this kind, to Madame de Duras towards the end of 'De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres' (ii.37), offers Montaigne the conversational setting of the middle region in which to lend form to his criticisms of medical knowledge.⁶⁸ His attack on *quintessence*, as we have seen (in 5.ii.1 above, p. 275), takes the form of a translation into the vernacular language of conversation. Montaigne claims that his abrupt apostrophe to Madame de Duras

⁶⁵ ii.17, 657*c*.

⁶⁶ 'De l'institution des enfans' (i.26) is dedicated to Madame Diane de Foix, 'Vingt et neuf sonnets d'Estienne de la Boetie' (i.29) to Madame de Grammont, and 'De l'affection des pères aux enfans' (ii.8) to Madame d'Estissac.

⁶⁷ See ii.12, 557-60; Tournon 1983: 241-43; Cave 1999: 39-40.

⁶⁸ ii.37, 783-85; Tournon 1983: 262-63.

reproduces the pleasurable interruption to his writing that her surprise visit afforded him. Medicine, he remarks, is an art by which (he knows) she sets great store (784*a*). Montaigne's intimation to this effect allows him to frame his chapter as a contribution to their ongoing discussions about medicine. He is bound, as a result, to justify what must strike her as an unduly harsh account of medicine. This he does just after his apostrophe by saying:

j'ay pris la peine de plaider cette cause, que j'entens assez mal, pour appuyer un peu et conforter la propension naturelle contre les drogues et pratique de nostre medicine, qui s'est dérivée en moy par mes ancestres, afin que ce ne fust pas seulement une inclination stupide et temeraire, et qu'elle eust un peu plus de forme.⁶⁹

Montaigne seeks to lend form to his volatile inclinations and antipathies, or as he says to Madame de Duras, 'former ma vie' (ii.37, 784*a*). Writing serves this purpose by placing him in quasi-conversational situations, either with the authors he reads, or with a friend such as Madame de Duras. He seeks to reproduce the style of these informal conversations in his book: 'je ne veux tirer de ces escrits sinon qu'ils me representent à votre memoire au naturel.'⁷⁰ He cultivates conversations with friends in the middle region.

Friendship provides the ideal conditions for good conversation. Montaigne hopes that his chapter will preserve the spirit of friendship that has presided over his conversations with Madame de Duras: 'je desire que vous continuez en moy la faveur de vostre amitié, par ces mesmes qualitez par le moyen desquelles elle a esté produite' (ii.37, 783*a*). His chapter on the topic (iii.8) likens conversation to friendship and sex by declaring that all three types of relation require vigorous, combative exchange:

⁶⁹ ii.37, 785*a*.

⁷⁰ ii.37, 783*a*; see also iii.2, 806*b*.

il nous faut fortifier l'ouïe et la durcir contre cette tandreur du son ceremonieux des paroles. J'ayme une société et familiarité forte et virile, une amitié qui se flatte en l'aspreté et vigueur de son commerce, comme l'amour, és morsures et esgratigneures sanglantes.⁷¹

Montaigne adds an intense erotic charge here: good conversation, like friendship and sex, is at its biting best when it takes place between equal and intimate partners. The empty niceties of the polite circle he views, here and elsewhere, with suspicion. A *c*-addition to the short chapter 'Ceremonie de l'entrevue des Roys' commends polite civility if – and only if – it allows strangers to share freely their experiences with one another (i.13, 49c). His emphasis remains, however, on the exceptional rarity of his interlocutors: 'j'ayme à contester et à discourir, mais c'est avec peu d'hommes et pour moy' (iii.8, 923b). The middle region is and must needs be sparsely populated. Friendship is the model here, for the more perfect it is, the rarer it must be. The remark that Montaigne attributes to Aristotle, 'O mes amis, il n'y a nul amy' (i.28, 190c), pushes this thought to its melancholy extreme.⁷² Montaigne's perfect interlocutor, the person with whom he shared absolute mutual understanding, was his lost friend La Boétie (see 5.iii.2 below). The project of the *Essais* has been read, indeed, as Montaigne's attempt to sustain an imaginary one-sided conversation with the dead La Boétie.⁷³ What is clear is that he continues to search for a single reader who will understand his book as La Boétie once did its author.

This search persists throughout the book's long and complex publishing history, whose outlines are well known.⁷⁴ Two books of *Essais* first appeared in 1580; Montaigne revised these and added a third book in 1588; finally, in 1595, Marie de Gournay and Pierre Brach published a new edition including some of the manuscript

⁷¹ iii.8, 924b.

⁷² See Langer 1994: 16-20 (on the fortunes of this phrase).

⁷³ Starobinski 1982: 52-71; Defaux, in setting out a similar view (2001: 277-313), refers to the many critics who point out contradictions and changes in Montaigne's attitude towards his friend.

⁷⁴ See Blum 1997 (for a summary of this history).

revisions and additions that Montaigne had made to the Bordeaux Copy between 1588 and his death in 1592. By 1588, Montaigne knew that earlier editions of his book had proved a success.⁷⁵ His reaction to his success moves between pleasure ('je suis affamé de me faire connoistre') and unease ('je crains mortellement d'estre pris en eschange') even, as here, within the same sentence.⁷⁶ The knowledge that his book is reaching a wide public serves only to nourish Montaigne's hope that he will be read in intimacy. He says as much of 'Sur des vers de Virgile', a chapter about intimate pleasures: 'je m'ennuie que mes essais servent les dames de meuble commun seulement, et de meuble de sale. Ce chapitre me fera du cabinet. Le publique est sans faveur et sans saveur' (iii.5, 847*b*). He hopes his female readers will find a place for his book, not in their salons, but in their private rooms. The imagined reading becomes all the more intimate for taking place away from public life. Montaigne expresses the same wish about his male readers. In 'De la vanité', he renews his (utopian) invitation to anyone, among his growing anonymous readership, who may prove to be a friend: '[j'espere] que, s'il advient que mes humeurs plaisent et accordent à quelque honneste homme avant que je meure, il recherchera de nous joindre' (iii.9, 981*b*). This invitation to an ideal imaginary reader – come and join me in the middle region – makes the author's isolation seem all the greater because it is phrased indirectly. No such person may exist, but if one does, the *Essais* will offer him the same head start that Montaigne himself gained by reading the work of La Boétie long before their first meeting (i.28, 184*a*). The invitation is in part, as we saw earlier (5.i.2 above, p. 265), a challenge: only the reader who brings good judgement,

⁷⁵ See iii.9, 965*b*; Cave 1982: 154-56.

⁷⁶ iii.5, 847*b*; see also i.40, 252*b-c*.

generosity, and a supple freedom to the text is welcome. Montaigne looks, among the nameless many that are increasingly reading his book, for one friendly face.

Can the middle region, in which Montaigne places author and reader, be said to anticipate the polite circles of seventeenth-century *honnêteté*? Lexical elements of the latter certainly seem with hindsight to be present in the *Essais*. One example is the last passage quoted (with its reference to ‘quelque honneste homme’). Another, in the chapter ‘De trois commerces’, sees Montaigne explain: ‘les hommes de la société et familiarité desquels je suis en quête, sont ceux qu’on appelle honnestes et habiles hommes’ (iii.3, 824*b*). His emphasis here on the currency of the adjectival nomination (‘ceux qu’on appelle honnestes...’), coupled with a hesitant use of synonyms (‘honnestes et habiles hommes’), seems to prepare the seventeenth-century sedimentation of the noun *honnêteté*.⁷⁷ So too does the conversational poetics that he uses to translate traditional terms into a hostile vernacular form (see 2.ii.1 above, pp. 117-18). The rare qualities that Montaigne imagines in his ideal interlocutor are, again, largely similar to those the polite circle lends its members (see 4.ii.1 above, p. 224). Writers like Bouhours, wishing to establish a genealogy for polite culture, claim Montaigne as a founding father (see 4.ii.3 above, pp. 241-22). Their genealogical claim seems legitimate precisely because of the similar attitudes that Montaigne’s writing and seventeenth-century writers on aristocratic *honnêteté* appear to share.

But reading Montaigne pre-historically, as a final destination rather than a point of origin, reveals critical differences beneath these apparent similarities. The polite circle is a collective entity that determines a culture of individual distinction in

⁷⁷ Montaigne in fact uses the noun on one occasion. He defines it, in an ethical sense, as ‘n’oser faire à découvert ce qui nous est honneste de faire à couvert’ (ii.12, 584*c*).

order to sustain its own existence. The middle region, in which Montaigne hopes to meet his readers, is anything but a collective entity. So fragile is its constitution that it appears at times largely empty and any member is, by definition, a singular individual. The author retains a residual suspicion of politeness itself. One negative indication of the difference between him and polite seventeenth-century writers is that Montaigne never plays the game of nescioquiddity when defining the qualities of the perfect interlocutor (see 4.i.2 above). Forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* do not appear in conjunction with the discourse of social quality in the *Essais*. The apparent similarities between the middle region and the polite circle mask these critical differences.⁷⁸ The ghost of Montaigne returns to reject his paternity of the seventeenth-century culture of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

⁷⁸ Friedrich 1968: 347-48.

iii. The art of disaster

Le désastre, nous le connaissons peut-être sous d'autres mots peut-être joyeux, déclinant tous les mots, comme s'il pouvait y avoir pour les mots un tout.

— MAURICE BLANCHOT, *L'Écriture du désastre*

1. A wall without stones

Montaigne lends form to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by allowing the disastrous experience to write itself on the page. The supple writing that makes this possible – the *essai* – is as a source of preoccupation to its author. How do I write, and why is it in this strange fashion? The question permits a preoccupation of another kind, the strategy named by the rhetorical figure *preoccupatio*, whereby the author raises and answers objections in advance.⁷⁹ Montaigne uses this strategy at the opening of his chapter on friendship, ‘De l’amitié’ (i.28), to which I shall shortly turn (in 5.iii.2 below). Another occurs at the beginning of ‘Du repentir’ (iii.2). Montaigne there describes himself as having done no more than reproduce, in written form, ‘des effets de nature crus et simples’. He continues by asking: ‘est-ce pas faire une muraille sans pierre, ou chose semblable, que de bastir des livres sans science et sans art?’ (iii.2, 805*b*). He accuses his book of eschewing, not only the explanations of science, but also the structures of art. This objection could equally be applied to my suggestion that Montaigne captures the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* while never drawing upon the noun itself. The object of study

⁷⁹ See Sonnino 1968: 29-30.

seems to have disappeared into formlessness. Making a book, whose sole form appears to be its continual alteration in form, appears in Montaigne's *preoccupatio* as a vain undertaking – like trying to make a wall without using stones. He answers this objection by turning it into a positive description of the translucent art of the *essai*. It is this that lends form to the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

The *essai* is both a kind of experience and the written form that this takes. The word, like the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], is one that requires a pre-historical understanding. The two cases are not exactly parallel since Montaigne, of course, draws upon the word *essai*. He is indeed the first author to make it his title. His use of the word is pre-historical in that its meaning is different from that which it later acquires by becoming a settled (literary) category. The sedimentation of the 'essay' remains, for Montaigne, part of the unimaginable afterlife of his text. This word and its various lexical forms, Friedrich has shown, cover a wide semantic field in the period: 'en France au XVI^e siècle, *essai* signifie: exercice, prélude, épreuve, tentative, tentation, échantillon de nourriture, et *essayer*: tâter, vérifier, goûter, éprouver, induire en tentation, entreprendre, s'exposer au danger, courir un risque, peser, supputer, prendre son élan' (1968: 354). Montaigne draws on the core meanings of noun and verb. He uses these forms of *essai*, as he does the word *expérience*, to describe both his particular observation of events and a testing of his inclinations, thoughts, and faculties: 'toute cette fricassée que je barbouille icy n'est qu'un registre des essais de ma vie.'⁸⁰ But *essai*, unlike *expérience*, comes also to refer to the book in which he writes about all his various experiences and experiments.⁸¹ The word, in this sense, appears only in a few late passages (see for example i.40, 251c). The *essai*, for Montaigne, is not a

⁸⁰ iii.13, 1079b; Friedrich 1968: 355; Tournon 1983: 257-86; Mathieu-Castellani 1988: 5-22.

⁸¹ Friedrich 1968: 354.

settled literary form or structure. It can be likened, rather, to a porous membrane through which a particular experience of the world passes into written form.

The *essai* is Montaigne's unrepentant attempt to capture the wind of accidents that blows through the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The attempt, as the word *essai* implies, is fraught with peril. The frustrated search for causes leads Montaigne to take his own philosophical risk and undo the settled language of scientific explanation so as to describe, in its formless mobility, the experience of *inscience* (see 5.ii.1 above). This is a risk that he runs without ever having chosen. For he is prey not only to the wind of external accidents but, equally, to his inner movements: 'non seulement le vent des accidents me remue selon son inclination, mais en outre je me remue et trouble moy mesme par l'instabilité de ma posture' (iii.2, 335*b*). The reflexive verbs here divide the subject of the action from its passive object as though one individual were moving another ('je me remue'). Disaster falls upon me from within – the waves of my instability – as well as from the sky. In either case, it falls, leaving me to feel my way around in the dark. The *essai* is the running of this necessary risk in life and literature. By the time that Montaigne has accused himself of trying to make a wall without using stones, in 'Du repentir', he has already answered the objection:

Il faut accommoder mon histoire à l'heure. Je pourray tantost changer, non de fortune seulement, mais aussi d'intention. C'est un contrerolle de divers et muables accidens et imaginations irresolües et, quand il y eschet, contraires: soit que je sois autre moy-mesme, soit que je saisisse les subjects par autres circonstances et considerations. Tant y a que je me contredits bien à l'adventure, mais la vérité, je ne la contredy point. Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois: elle est toujours en apprentissage et en espreuve.⁸²

Montaigne here maintains the balance between an external principle of movement (*fortune*) and an internal one (*intention*). Both initial terms describe a single, unitary

⁸² iii.2, 805*b*.

principle that then becomes a formless multiplicity of ‘divers et muables accidens et imaginations irresolües’. His is an ontology not of substantial things but, rather, of events through which all things become inexplicably other. ‘Je ne peints pas l’estre’, he says here: ‘je peints le passage’ (iii.2, 805*b*). For that, simply, is what there is: a multiple series of accidental movements that carry substantial forms into formlessness. The *self* (or what Montaigne here calls ‘mon ame’) is not a substantial form but, rather, that-which-is-always-becoming-other (‘soit que je sois autre moy-mesme...’). So too is the world, which Montaigne has just described as being ever on the move: ‘le monde n’est qu’une branloire perenne’ (iii.2, 804*b*). The *essai*, which describes my manner of being in the world, is equally a fluid process rather than a fixed thing. It finds appropriate expression here in a string of syntax. Since he cannot hold a firm footing, Montaigne must continue essaying in the wind of accidents, freely and without repentance.

This perpetual movement Montaigne attempts to capture in the written form of the *essai*. It is by definition something that he cannot fix: ‘je ne puis asseurer mon object’ (iii.2, 805*b*). Unlike poetry, with its structured forms, the *essai* tends to formlessness: ‘je peins principalement mes cogitations, subject informe, qui ne peut tomber en production ouvrager’ (ii.6, 379*c*). The pejorative tone of this remark allows Montaigne to distinguish the supple and receptive art of the *essai* from that of poetry. The *essai* is the porous membrane in which Montaigne attempts to capture the multiple accidents of the world in their fall.⁸³ Such an attempt requires a passivity alien to the poets. Montaigne advocates delicately allowing oneself to receive the movement of the world: ‘il faut un peu legierement et superficiellement couler ce

⁸³ See Jenny 1997: 19-55 (on Montaigne’s experience of falling).

monde' (iii.10, 1005*b*). This passivity Starobinski describes as 'supple' because it involves my consent to receive the movements and accidents that befall me.⁸⁴ When Montaigne describes the intention behind his writing, in 'De la Vanité', it is as a supple receptivity: 'mon dessein est de représenter en parlant une profonde nonchalance et des mouvemens fortuites et impremeditez, comme naissans des occasions presentes' (iii.9, 963*b*). Describing the contingent present-tense movements of experience in the manner of their happening becomes the aim of the written *essai*.

Montaigne apprehends these movements as they unsettle and renew settled linguistic forms. He celebrates writing of this kind, in 'Sur des vers de Virgile' (iii.5), when arguing for the superiority of the Latin poets:

le maniement et emploie des beaux esprits donne pris à la langue, non pas l'innovant tant comme la remplissant de plus vigoureux et divers services, l'estirant et ployant. Ils n'y apportent point de mots, mais ils enrichissent les leurs, appesantissent et enfoncent leur signification et leur usage, luy aprenent des mouvemens inaccoustumés, mais prudemment et ingenieusement. Et combien peu cela soit donné à tous, il se voit par tant d'escrivains françois de ce siècle.⁸⁵

The strongest poets add to the language, not by creating new words, but by ingeniously stretching and folding the forms and operations of existing words in unfamiliar ways. These 'mouvemens inaccoustumés' of the lexicon are valuable in that, as he remarks in the same passage, they directly reflect strange new semantic movements: 'quand je voy ces braves formes de s'expliquer, si vifves, si profondes, je ne dicts pas que c'est bien dire, je dicts que c'est bien penser' (873*b*). Montaigne himself does just that to the forms and operations of the current *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He refuses to extend this compliment to most of his French contemporaries. But he does – cautiously – compare his own writing to that of the poets.⁸⁶ He remembers how, when

⁸⁴ Starobinski 1982: 267-86; see also Jenny 1997: 50-53.

⁸⁵ iii.5, 873*b*.

⁸⁶ Mathieu-Castellani 1988: 90-115.

speaking Italian, he felt at ease only when saying the simplest things: ‘mais, aus propos roides, je n’eusse osé me fier à un Idiome que je ne pouvois plier ny contourner outre son alleure commune.’⁸⁷ He only trusts languages that he feels able to turn away from their settled structures. Montaigne reveals his ambition to write like the poets all the more clearly for belittling his efforts in comparison to theirs.⁸⁸ The alterations that the poets bring to language and thought are those to which Montaigne lends supple form in the *essai*. The means, he claims, are different: poetry makes things happen whereas he merely receives them from the world of experience in his book. He shapes, that is, the porous membrane of the *essai*-form – a wall without stones – in order to contain, without petrifying, the mobile process of becoming other. The means are different, then, but the ends of poetry and the *essai* are the same: to render an experience with more force than the mind, with its propensity to establish causes, can ever apprehend.

The love poetry of Virgil, Montaigne reveals earlier in the same chapter, has precisely this force to exceed the thing it ostensibly represents:

mais de ce que je m’y entends, les forces et valeur de ce Dieu [d’amour] se trouvent plus vives et plus animées en la peinture de la poesie qu’en leur propre essence, *Et versus digitos habet*. Elle represente je ne sçay quel air plus amoureux que l’amour mesme.⁸⁹

The love poetry of Virgil acts upon Montaigne in a manner that he cannot explain: he can point to its inexplicable force only by falling upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.]. That he later suggests a comparison between his writing and that of the poets suggests that this description might be applied to Montaigne’s own supple art. *Essai* writing frees the movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* from its history of sedimentation. Montaigne’s

⁸⁷ iii.5, 873*b*; on Montaigne’s use of Italian, see 5.i.1 above, pp. 260-61.

⁸⁸ Friedrich 1968: 350-53.

⁸⁹ iii.5, 849*b*; the Latin quotation is adapted from Juvenal (VI, 196). On the force of poetry in Montaigne, see also i.37, 231-32*c*; Magnien 1995.

pre-history of the word, as it appears in the *Essais* and particularly in the chapter on friendship, lends to experience a *je-ne-sais-quoi* that is all its own.

2. A disastrous friendship

Friendship is the disaster that changed Montaigne utterly. The rest of his life, he says in the closing pages of 'De l'amitié', is mere smoke compared to the four years that he and La Boétie spent together (i.28, 193*a*). Their friendship appears as an objective correlative for the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in its pre-history.⁹⁰ Montaigne encapsulates the semantic ideal type of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in describing the friendship. He draws upon non-substantival forms of the word with unprecedented insistence but without once using the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself. He writes, in this way, the word's pre-history. His account is irreducible, however, to a mere illustration or instance of the ideal type. Montaigne portrays a disaster more revolutionary in its effects upon the perceiving subject than previously imagined, one that not only eludes his every attempt to pin it down in an explanation, but that leaves him unable to say 'I'. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is the disastrous force that inexplicably fell between Montaigne and La Boétie and left them one indivisible whole. The essayist attempts to lend form to this disaster by letting it irrupt into the conventional language, topics, and explanations of friendship.⁹¹ He dismisses the result, in the chapter's opening *preoccupatio*, as no more than the grotesque rubble left by a distortion of forms: 'que sont-ce icy [...] que crottesques et corps monstrueux, rappiepez de divers membres, sans certaine figure,

⁹⁰ On this notion, see 2.iii.3 above, p. 151. I identify Cleopatra's nose as an objective correlative for the current *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in 3.ii.3 above, p. 196.

⁹¹ For a review of early modern commonplaces of friendship, see Langer 1994: 14-23.

n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuité?'⁹² But one need only invert the depreciative tone used here to find, in Montaigne's supple writing about friendship, the art of disaster.

The friendship between Montaigne and La Boétie is the scene of a double disaster. Their first encounter falls upon them as a vital 'benaster', and the sudden death of La Boétie, as a destructive 'malaster'.⁹³ Montaigne describes the latter event first, in 'De l'amitié', when justifying his attempts to house the writings of La Boétie in his first book of *Essais*. Montaigne, it seems, intended initially to make his friend's political treatise *De la servitude volontaire* the centrepiece that his 'grotesques' would ornament (i.28); he then substituted, in place of the treatise, twenty-nine sonnets by La Boétie that had been sent to him in the meantime (i.29); and decided finally to remove the sonnets in the Bordeaux Copy (the *c*-text). His changing intentions have been the object of much critical scrutiny.⁹⁴ Montaigne, writing by accumulation, leaves traces in both chapters of his discarded editorial intentions. We find, despite their disappearance, an appreciation of La Boétie's sonnets (i.29) in which he draws upon two forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* (the pronominal form plus adjective and the adjectival form) in as many sentences.⁹⁵ A *c*-addition early in 'De l'amitié' spells out the reason for Montaigne's long-running editorial activities with his friend's writings. The addition is made to an *a*-sentence that refers to *De la servitude volontaire*:

[*a*] c'est tout ce que j'ay peu recouvrer de ses reliques, [*c*] moy qu'il laissa, d'une si amoureuse recommandation, la mort entre les dents, par son testament, héritier de sa bibliothèque et de ses papiers, [*a*] outre le livret de ses œuvres que j'ay fait mettre en lumière.⁹⁶

⁹² i.28, 183*a*. Montaigne here repeats the gesture discussed in 5.iii.1 above, p. 291; on his reference to grotesque art, see Friedrich 1968: 349.

⁹³ On this pair of terms, see 3.ii.2 above, p. 185.

⁹⁴ See Starobinski 1982: 52-71; Defaux 2001: 277-313.

⁹⁵ See i.29, 196*a*; the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [pron. adj.] is quoted and discussed in 1.i.3 (II) above, p. 53.

⁹⁶ i.28, 184.

La Boétie makes his first appearance in the chapter here, with death already upon him, as he leaves his friend with his papers and a loving farewell. The second and terminal disaster falls first in Montaigne's chapter on friendship.

A version of this 'malaster' occurs in Montaigne's writings long before the last passage quoted. The edition of La Boétie's *Œuvres* (1570), to which he refers in the passage, contains as a postface the letter of 1563 in which Montaigne describes the death of La Boétie to his father.⁹⁷ This letter includes an attempt to describe, in meticulous detail, the sudden and inexplicable onset of his friend's illness, its gradual course, and the scene of death.⁹⁸ He draws twice upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] in his account to mark the sudden irruption of disaster, the fact that, by the time its effects fall in experience, the thing has always already happened. The first occurrence of the adjective in the story comes just before La Boétie's illness, and the second on the following evening, when Montaigne is summoned to his friend's bedside along with a doctor and an apothecary. When Montaigne makes to leave, La Boétie begs his friend to remain, finding support from his wife: 'je m'en allois', he reports, 'quand Mademoiselle de La Boétie, qui pressentoit déjà je ne sçay quel malheur, me pria les larmes à l'œil, que je ne bougeasse pour ce soir. Ainsi elle m'arresta, dequoy il se resjouit avecques moy' (Montaigne 1962: 1349). He portrays Mademoiselle de La Boétie as feeling, at this moment, an inexplicable presentiment of some 'malaster' yet to come. It has in fact already struck. This is suggested by the earlier instance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.], which describes Montaigne catching sight of his friend on the evening before his illness. He recounts how he visited La Boétie at home, instead of

⁹⁷ 'Fragment d'une lettre que Monsieur le Conseiller de Montaigne escrit à Monseigneur de Montaigne son père, concernant quelques particularitez qu'il remarqua en la maladie et mort de feu Monsieur de la Boetie', in Montaigne 1962: 1347-60.

⁹⁸ See Friedrich 1968: 23-24; Rigolot 1988: 61-79.

having him to dinner as planned, for his friend had declared himself to be feeling out of sorts:

je l'allay trouver bien tost apres disner: il estoit couché vestu, et monstroït déjà je ne sçay quel changement en son visage. Il me dit que c'estoit un flux de ventre avec des tranchees, [...] et que le froit luy avoit souvent fait sentir semblables accidents.⁹⁹

Montaigne senses, despite his friend's assurance that similar mishaps have befallen him in the past, that this is something altogether different. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] adds the element of disaster to what La Boétie calls a mere accident. Montaigne instantly recognizes its malevolent effect, a radical alteration (*changement*) in his friend's features, while remaining unable to explain what has caused it. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] marks the inexplicable malaster that, by the time the two friends meet that evening, has already divided La Boétie from Montaigne.

The 'benaster' that first brought them together falls in the middle of 'De l'amitié'. It is the chapter's centrepiece and the vital experience of revolutionary change with which Montaigne – and many of his readers in turn – seek to come to terms.¹⁰⁰ The movement to and fro that takes his writing from an experience towards its possible causes, and back again, takes place here throughout the course of the chapter. Montaigne reviews other practices, definitions, and explanations of friendship in ancient literature and the contemporary world in the light of his experience. His review picks up a set of terms and examples that he then turns to an a-causal description of the friendship. He subjects a commonplace definition of friendship, as 'la convenance des volonte' (186*a*), to a subtle transformation. This definition, which Montaigne associates with the common practice of friendship,

⁹⁹ Montaigne 1962: 1348.

¹⁰⁰ I refer to many readings of this passage in what follows; for a full bibliography, see Defaux 2001: 348-54.

dissatisfies him because it merely places in harmony two wills that remain essentially distinct. But, he points out later, ‘en l’amitié dequoy je parle, elles [nos ames] se meslent et confondent l’une en l’autre, d’un meslange si universel, qu’elles effacent et ne retrouvent plus la couture qui les a jointes’ (188a). Two friends can no longer be said to agree with one another once they have become one and the same. Montaigne draws his description of two souls fusing together (*confondre*) into a noun phrase when he talks of ‘cette confusion si pleine de nos volonteiz’ (190a). He recalls his initial definition (‘la convenance des volonteiz’) as he alters it. He does the same, shortly afterwards, with reference to Aristotle:

tout estant par effect commun entre eux, volonteiz, pensemens, jugemens, biens, femmes, enfans, honneur et vie, [c] et leur convenance n’estant qu’une ame en deux corps selon la trespropre definition d’Aristote, [a] ils ne se peuvent ny prester ny donner rien.¹⁰¹

Montaigne retains *convenance* here while pushing it to the limits of sense, for the word requires two subjects, where in friendship he finds only one subject in two bodies. Quoting Aristotle allows him to bring this alteration to his initial definition. That he does so in the *c*-text shows the continuing importance to him of others’ accounts of friendship. Even his declaration that the experience exceeds its ancient representations includes a quotation from Horace to that effect (193a). Montaigne never issues a definitive rejection of other accounts of friendship. But they leave him unable to come to terms with his experience of its vital force.

His experience remains the test for all propositions about friendship. He insists upon this with an emphatic deictic gesture: ‘somme, ce sont effects inimaginables à qui n’en a gousté’ (192a; see also 189a-c). Deixis evokes a world of experience outside the text: it says that only those who have tasted its fruits can understand

¹⁰¹ i.28, 190a.

something of friendship. A man caught clowning around with his children by another man, Montaigne reports, asked him to say nothing until he himself had become a father. For no one, he believed, could judge his behaviour without first-hand experience of what it is to have a child (192a). Montaigne applies the story to his own situation: 'je souhaiterois aussi parler à des gens qui eussent essayé ce que je que dis' (192a). He warns himself that, given the extreme rarity of friendships like the one that he has known, he is bound to find scant understanding among his readers. The remark expresses a now familiar challenge to each and every reader: prove yourself different from the rest, see my experience for what it was, and join me in the middle region.

The inescapable fact that any such reader must recognize is that his friendship with La Boétie beggars description in any terms other than its own: 'cette [amitié] cy n'a point d'autre idée que d'elle mesme, et ne se peut rapporter qu'à soy' (189c). The usual rules simply do not apply. Montaigne lists the four species into which ethical philosophy divides friendship: that which exists within families, between members of the same society, between host and guest, and between lovers. All fail, both severally and jointly, to capture the essence of friendship because their causes are extrinsic to the relation: 'elles sont d'autant moins amitez, qu'elles meslent autre cause et but et fruit en l'amitié, qu'elle mesme' (184c). Perfect friendship – for Montaigne – is an indivisible thing in and for itself, irreducibly singular, and alien to any extrinsic cause.¹⁰² He finds, in each of the existing accounts, an element that fails to fit or that underdetermines friendship as he has known it. His review obeys an underlying syntax of negation that says: 'our friendship was not that, or that, or that again.' Negation serves here simply to allow something too positive for the usual words to

¹⁰² i.28, 191a; Langer 1994: 167-69.

pass into written form. This is no transcendent negative theology: Montaigne is describing a something that fell in his experience. This was a benaster that no philosophical explanation or definition can contain: ‘en ce poinct, les effects surpassent les preceptes mesmes de la philosophie’ (192*a*). The ultimate and inevitable test for all propositions about friendship is experience.

Montaigne points to the friendship, from within his text, as to something that is and must forever remain outside its limits. The *essai*, it seems, like poetry, has fingers (see 5.iii.1 above, p. 296). Montaigne, in the chapter’s most celebrated instance of deixis, imagines a conversation in which someone pushes him to explain why he loved La Boétie: ‘[*a*] si on me presse de dire pourquoy je l’aymois, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer, [*c*] qu’en respondant: Par ce que c’estoit luy; par ce que c’estoit moy.’¹⁰³ The movement to and fro that characterizes the chapter as a whole – from experience, towards explanation, and back again – occurs here within a single sentence. The anonymous interlocutor presses Montaigne to explain his friendship by giving its final cause. He frames his reply as an attempted explanation: the verb *exprimer* should be understood here, as I suggested earlier (1.ii.1 above, p. 63), in its archaic sense of ‘to explain’. But Montaigne’s reply offers no explanation. He begs the question, as traditional philosophers do when they invoke an occult quality, by simply repeating elements of the explicandum as the explicans (see 2.ii.2 (III) above, pp. 127-29). But, unlike traditional philosophers, he explicitly turns to this error of reasoning for a positive assertion that his experience of friendship can bē explained in no other way. His alexandrine, ‘Par ce que c’estoit luy; par ce que c’estoit moy’, is, as Ullrich Langer says, ‘a perfect incarnation of the singularity, and the a-teleological

¹⁰³ i.28, 188; see Langer 1994: 169-73 (for a close reading of this sentence).

nature, of his friendship with La Boétie' (1994: 170). The sentence, by keeping the line's twin hemistichs on either side of a marked *cæsura*, puts one soul in two bodies. It points to each of the two friends in their inapprehensible lost union.

This risks, as Langer points out (1994: 170-71), leading Montaigne's text into semantic poverty. It would be a poor text, after all, in which the author could say nothing more about his friendship than that it was inexplicably real to those concerned and really inexplicable to those of us who were not there. The return to experience, in that case, would become a refuge in incommunicability. Montaigne is compelled to run that risk in his attempt to describe a singular friendship. But, it seems to me, he tries to say much more about the experience – to take other risks – in the passage that follows his alexandrine. The movement back towards experience releases two positive elements in his writing. The first is the assertion of *nescioquiddity*: friendship with La Boétie was a disastrous force that no one – not even they – could explain. The second is a positive 'description', as he calls his chapter at this point (188c), of this force, the manner of its irruption, and its effects upon the two friends. The substantial additions to the Bordeaux Copy here reveal a continuing attempt to come to terms with the friendship. *Deixis* is just one figure among the several to which he turns; *anaphora*, *negation*, and *tautology* are others; so too, as we shall see, is the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.]. The phrase, in its two appearances, is an agent of movement from the assertion of *nescioquiddity* to its description. It lends form to the disaster.

This passage, with which I am going to end, directly follows the reply that Montaigne offers when pressed to give the final cause of the friendship ('par ce que c'estoit luy; par ce que c'estoit moy'). I quote it in full:

[a] il y a, au delà de tout mon discours, et de ce que j'en puis dire particulièrement, ne sçay quelle force inexplicable et fatale, mediatrice de cette union. [c] Nous nous cherchions avant que de nous estre veus, et par des rapports que nous oyions l'un de l'autre, qui faisoient en notre affection plus d'effort que ne porte la raison des rapports, je croy par quelque ordonnance du ciel: nous nous embrassions par noz noms. Et à nostre premiere rencontre, qui fut par hazard en une grande feste et compagnie de ville, nous nous trouvasmes si prins, si cognus, si obligez entre nous, que rien des lors ne nous fut si proche que l'un à l'autre. Il escrivit une Satyre Latine excellente, qui est publiée, par laquelle il excuse et explique la precipitation de nostre intelligence, si promptement parvenue à sa perfection. Ayant si peu à durer, et ayant si tard commencé, car nous estions tous deux homes faicts, et luy de plus de quelque année, elle n'avoit point à perdre temps, et à se regler au patron des amities molles et regulieres, ausquelles il faut tant de precautions de longue et preallable conversation. Cette cy n'a point d'autre idée que d'elle mesme, et ne se peut rapporter qu'à soy. [a] Ce n'est pas une speciale consideration, ny deux, ny trois, ny quatre, ny mille: c'est je ne sçay quelle quinte essence de tout ce meslange, qui, ayant saisi toute ma volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la sienne; [c] qui, ayant saisi toute sa volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la mienne, d'une faim, d'une concurrence pareille. [a] Je dis perdre, à la verité, ne nous reservant rien qui nous fut propre, ny qui fut ou sien ou mien.¹⁰⁴

This passage alone has sufficient force to draw from its readers, as Montaigne hopes that his book will (i.40, 251c), an infinity of other essays.

All that I can do here is to try and show the place that it holds in the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The first meeting between Montaigne and La Boétie proves also to have been their shared encounter with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. For each of the pair is 'taken' by a vital movement of sympathy towards the other, one whose sudden and revolutionary effects are instantly recognized, but whose causes remain forever inexplicable. Montaigne encapsulates the ideal typical seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that I sketched earlier (in 1.ii.3 above, p. 74). When naming the seme, he draws upon *force* and *quintessence*, two sedimented terms in the same semantic field as the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He offers his readers familiar words, that is, which he then reveals to be wholly ill-suited to the task of explaining this strange and extraordinary friendship. The seme disrupts the language of explanation. This is not the only occasion on which Montaigne unsettles *quintessence* in this way: in his chapter on medicine, as we have seen, he defines it as no more than 'une qualité de laquelle par notre raison nous ne sçavons trouver la cause' (5.ii.1 above, p. 275). Here, however, Montaigne attaches

¹⁰⁴ i.28, 188-89.

the same agent of disruption to both *quintessence* and *force*, namely, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.]. The adjective uncovers an active fault-line of nescioquiddity within both words and transforms them into a-causal names for the something that cannot be explained. Montaigne strengthens his sentence by placing *inexplicable* after *force* and by preparing the disruption of *quintessence* through an anaphora of negation: ‘ce n’est pas une speciale consideration, ny deux, ny trois, ny quatre, ny mille.’ *Quintessence* and *force* both belong to a history of sedimentation that ends in a loss of semantic force. Montaigne does not put the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in their place, condemning the new word to the same historical cycle. His adjectival phrase is no modish name waiting to happen but, rather, the stammer of a writer trying to put an inexplicable disaster into words. Montaigne describes the seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by charging its non-substantival forms with a semantic force that the settled noun rarely possesses and is destined to lose. He can be said, in this sense, to restore the word to its pre-history.

Montaigne’s encounter with the *je-ne-sais-quoi* does not produce an assertion of terminal nescioquiddity. It releases instead a positive attempt to capture this force in the exact manner of its falling and in its effects. This attempt can best be traced through the changes that Montaigne wrote in the margins of the Bordeaux Copy (the *c*-text). The two instances of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] fall in successive sentences of the *a*-text. But Montaigne inserts a long addition after the first instance, and completes the sentence in which the second instance falls, as if he were trying to write his way closer to the disaster. He makes two changes to the first instance in the *c*-text. The first is to replace the adjective after *force*, which is the transcendent *divine* in the *a*-text, with the more terrestrial *inexplicable*. The nescioquiddity of ‘ne sçay quelle force

inexplicable et fatale', thus reinforced, provokes unease in the writing. *Am I sure that no one could explain this force?* In his second change, the long *c*-addition starting 'nous nous cherchions', Montaigne returns to the precise circumstances in which the friendship started in order apparently to test his assertion of its nescioquiddity. The search for causes flickers back into life when he wonders whether the friendship was not, after all, *disastrous* in the word's astrological sense of 'influenced by the stars' ('quelque ordonnance du ciel'). Friendship seems to have fallen upon the two men with the same unseemly haste as La Boétie's illness. Montaigne alludes to the imminence of the final malaster ('ayant si peu à durer') and suggests, in retrospect, that it may account for the precipitate speed of the initial benaster: 'elle n'avoit point à perdre temps.' The act of revisiting their friendship serves only to convince Montaigne of its inexplicable singularity: 'cette [amitié] cy [...] ne se peut rapporter qu'à soy.' The *c*-addition postpones the second instance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] before releasing it with renewed force. Here again, the *seme* takes the writing beyond the stasis of terminal nescioquiddity. Montaigne now attempts to describe, not the manner in which his friendship with La Boétie started, but the effect that it wrought upon them. Friendship proves to have been a revolutionary force here because it changed the very identity of the subject(s) (see 1.ii.3 above, pp. 76-77). It fell upon them as two and made them one. Montaigne returns to this idea in the relative clause that describes the noun phrase containing the second *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.]:

[a] c'est je ne sçay quelle quinte essence de tout ce meslange, qui, ayant saisi toute ma volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la sienne; [c] qui, ayant saisi toute sa volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la mienne, d'une faim, d'une concurrence pareille.

The friendship fused two individuals – their wills, their belongings, their ‘selves’ – in a commingling so perfect as to be seamless.¹⁰⁵ Montaigne and La Boétie are drawn into one living thing. The change to their identities is revolutionary in an entirely creative way. Their friendship is, in this precise sense, a ‘benaster’.

Montaigne’s experience of friendship is difficult to accept, for some, and harder still to conceive. He admits, even declares proudly, that this unmediated fusion is nothing like the friendships that others have had or will want to have. Many of his readers are keen to confirm his prediction by offering other views of friendship.¹⁰⁶ Maurice Blanchot, in *L’Amitié* (1971), defines his friendship with Georges Bataille in its difference from that of Montaigne: ‘l’amitié, ce rapport sans dépendance, [...] passe par la reconnaissance de l’étrangeté commune’, he says, defining friendship as ‘cette séparation fondamentale à partir de laquelle ce qui sépare devient rapport’.¹⁰⁷ Blanchot’s text reveals, by contrast, the very strangeness of the thing that Montaigne attempts to describe. There was no room for him and his friend to recognize each other’s difference because, quite simply, there was no difference. No gifts, no obligations, no thanks can exist between that which is one. There is no relation, no more *between*. To construct a civic ethics out of such a friendship, he concedes in a *c*-addition, seems out of the question.¹⁰⁸ For it is hard to imagine how it could embrace a third person, let alone a polity: ‘et qui presupposera que de deux j’en aime autant l’un que l’autre, et qu’ils-s’entr’aiment et m’aiment autant que je les aime, il multiplie en confrairie la chose la plus une et unie’ (191c). Montaigne strains here, as he does in

¹⁰⁵ Defaux 2001: 26.

¹⁰⁶ Others oppose it in different ways: Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani (to give one recent example) argues that, in this passage, Montaigne is silently reading Augustine’s fervent description of friendship (2000: 120-24).

¹⁰⁷ Blanchot 1971: 328; see Defaux 2001: 290 (on the intertext between Blanchot and Montaigne).

¹⁰⁸ See Derrida 1994: 203-15 (on this question).

his second use of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.], to render the sheer full and unmediated oneness of the friendship. He does so negatively by describing what was lost in its creation, namely, the two identities of the friends. The *a*-text describes Montaigne's will plunging and disappearing into that of his friend: this would suggest, in isolation, that La Boétie has merely expanded his own self by absorbing his friend. The *c*-addition, however, repeats the relative clause while inverting the relative positions of the pair: this would suggest, in turn, that Montaigne has absorbed La Boétie. But this sentence, like the alexandrine 'Par ce que c'estoit luy; par ce que c'estoit moy', is misunderstood if either half is isolated from the whole. Its meaning emerges in the chiasmus of enriching mutual loss ('ma [volonté]' | 'la sienne', 'sa [volonté]' | 'la mienne') whose meaning Montaigne spells out in the next sentence: 'je dis perdre, à la verité, ne nous reservant rien qui nous fut propre, ny qui fut ou sien ou mien.' The personal pronouns *ma* and *sa*, *sien* and *mien*, appear in the intense proximity of a rhyme just as their meaning disappears.¹⁰⁹ The question of whether Montaigne is describing his absorption *by* the other (his friend), or his absolute absorption *of* the other, also vanishes. For both alternatives adopt the perspective of a self that simply no longer exists. There is no more *he and I*; or, since these words cannot be avoided, the *and* must mark the seal of an absolute fusion.

Friendship, as Montaigne describes it, is an impersonal force that leaves me unable to say 'I'.¹¹⁰ This has obvious consequences for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, whose very utterance requires the subject that tends here to disappear. A textual alteration to the first instance of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [adj.] in this passage offers a striking analogy for

¹⁰⁹ See Cave 1999: 120-23.

¹¹⁰ This friendship shares the force of desire in Deleuze's description: 'loin de tendre vers un objet, le désir ne peut être atteint qu'au point où quelqu'un est dessaisi du pouvoir de dire Je' (Deleuze and Parnet 1996: 108).

the rich transmutation of the subject in friendship or love. The first printed edition of the *Essais* (1580) reads ‘je ne sçay quelle force’, but from the 1582 edition onwards, the *je* disappears.¹¹¹ The construction *ne sçay quel*, close in form to the Latin *nescio quid*, is current in sixteenth-century writing. Montaigne, however, always includes *je* when using the phrase elsewhere in the *Essais*. One might speculate that he makes the change simply for reasons of rhythm. In this singular context, however, there appears a more tempting speculation: that the disappearance of *je* replicates, at a lexical level, the loss of self in friendship. Following the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] into its pre-history must end in the phrase’s own undoing under the shock of experience. The description of loss, the syntax of negation, and the dissolution of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, however, all serve the same affirmative function. They lend form, for the author and his readers, to an experience that is entirely positive in its inexplicable strangeness: the benaster of friendship. Montaigne continues, in the margins of the Bordeaux Copy, to write his way closer to the disastrous force through which the indivisible *it* of friendship came into being. Disaster, whether it brings death or releases new life, falls through the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] on to the page. Its artist is Montaigne.

¹¹¹ André Tournon records this change in his edition of the *Essais* (Montaigne 1998: I, 318).

CONCLUSION

What is it that draws me to one face among an unknown crowd? Montaigne takes physiognomy as his topic in the penultimate chapter of his third book of *Essais* ('De la phisionomie'). He treats this topic, as he does every other, by testing his experience against his reading and his reading against his experience. He looks back, in particular, to the civil disturbances of 1585 in which his own face seems, on two occasions, to have saved him. The second of these encounters took place, he recounts, on a journey through uncertain country that he made after deciding to place his trust in 'je ne sçay quelle treve qui venoit d'estre publiée en nos armées' (iii.12, 1061*b*). He found himself caught in the 'wind of accidents'. Twenty or so masked men ambushed him in a thick forest, seized his money, and demanded ransom. Montaigne maintained his right to be treated according to the conditions of the truce. The men quarrelled over whether to kill him. Then, all of a sudden, some three hours after the ambush, things changed: 'voicy une soudaine et tres-inopinée mutation qui leur print' (1062*b*). The leader approached Montaigne to offer him his freedom and even his money. Then and now, even as he writes, Montaigne is unable to explain how and why this change took place: 'la vraye cause d'un changement si nouveau et de ce ravissement, sans aucune impulsion apparente, et d'un repentir si miraculeux, en tel temps, en une entreprise pourpensée et deliberée, et devenue juste par l'usage [...], certes je ne sçay pas bien encores quelle elle est' (iii.12, 1062*b*). One ambusher, he recounts, removed his mask, introduced himself to Montaigne, and told him that he owed his deliverance to his physiognomy. The ambusher's words revisit the haunting scene: a single face, a crowd of masks, and some inexplicable sympathy passing from one to the other.

Montaigne, at this moment in 'De la phisionomie', encapsulates the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Something happened to draw us into a strange sympathy; what this something was, or how it happened, I do not know; all I can say is that it fell as if from nowhere and so suddenly that, by the time I felt its effects, the shape of my life was already changed. The previous sentence is one version of the ideal type of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that I have followed throughout this study. The present case is peculiar in that, whereas the subject tends to suffer a movement of sympathy towards somebody or something else, Montaigne himself seems on this occasion to possess the *je-ne-sais-quoi* that works on others. This does not mean, however, that he can understand or control its force. He is its willing victim: 'je me laisse aller, comme je suis venu, je ne combats rien' (iii.12, 1059*b*); but he is a victim nonetheless. Another peculiarity of the present case is that he introduces a temporal marker (*encore*) to emphasize that explanation remains possible in an indeterminate future. The case proves irreducible, then, to the ideal type – and is, in this very respect, representative of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* itself. The ideal type is a heuristic fiction: the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is always a shock to the system, a moment of crisis, a disaster. It invariably affects systems of explanation as a problem. But to define it solely as a 'problem', idea or topic, would be to take refuge in a reassuring abstraction. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* first appears as the experience of a disastrous force. The person affected seeks words, ideas, and explanations for the experience; only then can this be said to furnish an idea or to constitute a problem. This is equally true, I suggest, of occult qualities, substantial forms, grace, distinction, or any other manifestation of what is sometimes called 'the inexplicable'. The history of such ideas – indeed, of all ideas – is meaningless if it fails its first task, which is to recover the particular experiences, situations, or events without which the idea would not have

come into being. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* starts life in any number of situations: as a pain in the bladder, a chance meeting at a coffee-machine, or a confrontation with assailants in uncertain country. In the beginning was the experience.

The word *je-ne-sais-quoi* offers different ways of articulating this experience. It is most difficult to identify when it exists as four discrete words held in a syntactical string. Montaigne's phrase, 'la vraie cause de [ce] changement [...], je ne sçay pas bien encores quelle elle est', is a case in point. Syntactical strings, unprotected by any lexical membrane, mark the point at which the word merges formlessly with the ocean of speech surrounding it. But they remain part of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* family, not only because they are composed of the same words, but also because they repeat the same semantic operations (neutral, affirmative, and negative). The word also exists as an adjective that attaches itself to nouns (as when Montaigne talks of 'je ne sçay quelle treve' above); as an indefinite pronoun that appears alone or in the company of an adjective; and as a noun substantive, four words contracted into one. It is this latter form that rises to prominence in the first half of the seventeenth century. The rise of the noun and the continuing suppleness of its other forms make the *je-ne-sais-quoi* a sensitive lexical tracer of the seme.

This study has followed the shared life and adventures of the word and its meaning – lexeme and seme – in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I have paid particular attention to the rise and fall of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]; my analysis of its meaning takes place in the shadow of the word's history. The latter bears comparison with the plot of a nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*. The promise shown by one young member of a large family of ancient stock, the diverse energies, both destructive and creative, of the early years, and a series of formative liaisons; the

move to Paris, entry into a wider society than the provinces could afford, bringing in its wake brilliant successes, recognition, and – in a moment of sudden disaster – a violent stroke of passion; then – to coincide with the end of the affair – a rekindled social ambition, aided by the now familiar techniques of seduction, which wins membership of the Parisian polite circle and fashionable journeys abroad, but which brings with it, as invariably it seems to, a loss of vital movement, decline, and a fall into affectation: this plot, familiar to readers of nineteenth-century fiction, sums up the seventeenth-century word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. It suggests a mistrustful – some might say a hostile – analysis of the conditions determining the spread of language in this period. The word studied here enjoys a brief period of semantic force when language users find that it best articulates their experience. But the word soon loses its force when a dominant group, within that culture, starts to exploit the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in order to further the group's interests. The rise of the word, in these conditions, inexorably determines its fall. Language, whose final cause is communication, must spread within a society; the elite circles of mid-seventeenth-century French society control the means of communication; the manner in which words spread can only, therefore, reflect the interests of those circles. The cultural conditions in which the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] rises to prominence help bring about the rupture between lexeme and seme. The former settles down as a substantial and all too explicable thing while the latter remains vitally on the move. The history of the word ends in disappointment.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], in its rise and fall, traces the movement of its seme through an open-ended field of terms. The seme invites attempts to contain it, define it, explain how it happens and what it is for. But these all end in failure: the seme

moves through the words designed for such purposes, unsettling each in turn. This movement can be shown to occur synchronically, in the particular apprehension of one subject, and diachronically, in the general word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. It can be divided schematically into four moments; the word, in the diverse forms and operations of its current period, is unique in being able to trace each. The first moment, which I have just described through the example of Montaigne, is the falling of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* into experience. This is often articulated in a pronominal form or a stammered string of syntax. The second is the moment of philosophical explanation. The experience stimulates the search for a definition of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its causes: this throws up a field of settled terms and reveals, beneath each, an underlying philosophical bedrock. Montaigne weighs up his experience by considering the causes of physiognomy, the art of reading its signs, and its use in making predictions. The experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, however, does not submit to explanation. It reveals gaps, dark zones, and fault-lines running through the bedrock of explanation, whose settled lexicon seems suddenly insufficient. The lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its negative operation articulates this by unsettling the noun to which it attaches itself. Montaigne and Descartes use adjectival and pronominal forms to revolutionize the explanatory lexicon of forms, qualities, inclinations, and quintessences; Descartes's successors use the noun in its negative operation.¹ The third moment is the recognition that one can attempt to capture the vital force of the same only by revolutionizing one's lexicon. How writers express this force depends, of course, upon the linguistic resources available to them and their style of writing. Montaigne, writing before the rise of the noun, uses pronominal, adjectival, and

¹ See 5.ii.1 above (on Montaigne); 2.ii.2 above (on Descartes and his successors Du Roure, Boyle, and Rohault).

adverbial forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as well as strings of syntax to capture the seme. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], when current, spells out the inapprehensible force of the seme – its brute nescioquiddity – in a single word. The fourth movement of the seme, to which we shall return, takes it away from the noun once this has become sedimented. The seme falls into experience, revolutionizes the settled lexicon, and finds written form – for a while at least – in the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.].

The seme of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* appears in nature, the passions, and culture. The word, while current, traces these apparitions in different philosophical and literary vocabularies. Each region of experience has its distinctive features, poses specific problems, and releases different kinds of writing. But none is an island. All are, so to speak, parts of one land mass; all share borders with one another. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* crosses these borders: it appears as an insensible force acting upon a body in nature, as a stroke of passion that falls between two individuals, and as a sign of quality that the polite circle uses to distinguish itself in the realm of culture. That this is so should come as no surprise. Our experience, after all, is not limited to any one region: we live our lives, as Montaigne's example confirms, in the world, with our intimates, and in society, carrying our ways of talking and thinking with us as we go from one to the other. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is not alone in moving through these different regions: the same, I have indicated, is true of semantic neighbours such as *sympathy*, *quality*, *force*, and *quintessence*. It has not been my aim, however, to imply that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* crosses from nature, through the passions, and into culture as a fixed and unchanging thing. It has been to suggest, on the contrary, that it runs within each region of experience, in its underlying conceptual bedrock, as a discontinuous fault-line. In some cases, the bedrock is the same: most commonly of all, it is that of

the neo-Aristotelian scholastic tradition. Where the experiences and concepts differ from region to region, however, so does the character of the problems raised. One has to have mapped the region of experience, in each case, before one can find the blank spaces, dark zones, and active fault-lines on the map. Montaigne makes the point vividly: 'il [...] faut pousser à une porte pour savoir qu'elle nous est close' (iii.13, 1075b).

I have sought therefore, while following the lexical tracer of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through different philosophical and literary traditions, to avoid reducing these to one totalizing perspective. The aim has been, rather, to exploit the differences between these traditions in order to ask different questions of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. For each tradition apprehends this inexplicable something in a specific manner and attempts to capture or dispel it in different forms of writing. The word runs along the border between philosophy and literature. It designates an obstacle to knowledge, as its more technical semantic neighbours do, but it does so in a manner redolent of the free exploration for which vernacular literary writing allows. Writers fall upon the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as they bring rigorous philosophical reflection to the literature of the period and a freer literary sensibility to its philosophy. Following the movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* required adopting a similarly interdisciplinary and eclectic approach to that of early modern thinkers. It also meant tracing the circulation of words and ideas between national traditions, since as we have seen, nescioquiddity is a European movement. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] itself is by no means a purely French phenomenon: its reception in seventeenth-century England is part of its history. The word's discursive mobility betokens the mental sophistication and agility of those early modern people who thought, talked, and wrote with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This

means writers: Montaigne, Descartes, Corneille, Pascal, Boyle, and Bouhours. But it also means their readers: friends of Montaigne like Madame de Duras, Christina of Sweden, the theatre audiences of the period, and the anonymous men and women who followed the debates of the Bureau d'Adresse on both sides of the Channel. All are capable of moving between different modes, philosophical and literary, when attempting to come to terms with the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

What differences, then, does the *je-ne-sais-quoi* reveal between philosophy and literature? The relations between the two are difficult enough to establish in general and the task is made all the harder when a third term, whose signature is its mobile particularity, is introduced. Philosophy and literature are neither institutions nor bodies of knowledge, I venture, but different ways of attempting to come to terms with the disastrous experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. They are best conceived, not as distinct categories, but as two of the 'moments' that I identified earlier in the movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through language (see above, pp. 314-16). The philosophical moment is the second, and the literary moment, the third. Those writers who move from one to the other have most interested me. Montaigne in 'De la phisionomie', for example, heaps up possible causes of his deliverance, such as divine intervention and the hidden qualities of his particular nature while lending form to his own particular experience (iii.12, 1062*b*). His writing zigzags between philosophical explanation and literary description.

Philosophy of the early modern period asks the question, 'what is the nature of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*?' The question is the symptom of a crisis among philosophers. This they attempt to resolve, once and for all, by explaining that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is either a substantial something, an empty illusion forged in the mind, or a dynamic fold

hidden deep within the fabric of things. They succeed only in deepening the crisis of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in their attempts to resolve it. The problem is that they freeze a particular movement into a state of general stasis, which, whether it is one of being, non-being, or dynamism, amounts to one and the same thing. Sedimentation comes to the *je-ne-sais-quoi* not only through its seventeenth-century history, then, but also through its philosophy. Once frozen into a static thing, and given a settled name, the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] can join any system of explanation. The thing itself, meanwhile, keeps falling as an absolute present-tense disaster.

Literature attempts to lend written form to the disaster of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It asks the question, ‘how does the *je-ne-sais-quoi* fall into experience, and what are its effects?’ It emphasizes movement over stasis, the irreducible particular over the general, and experience over explanation. It attempts to describe each of what Hamlet calls ‘the thousand natural shocks | That flesh is heir to’.² These are the shocks of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Montaigne’s kidney stones, his friendship with La Boétie, Medea’s dress in Corneille’s play, and Cleopatra’s nose in Pascal’s fragment are some of those cases that I have analysed in the literature of the period.³ They satisfied my criterion of inclusion, namely, the occurrence of the lexical *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Each proved also to contain an objective correlative for the *je-ne-sais-quoi*: in each case, something happens that the writing tries to describe, fails heroically, and then fails again. Literature, by means of this failure, apprehends the disastrous force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in its fall into experience. The literary examples that I included exceeded their initial criterion of selection and irresistibly carried the critical analysis beyond its limits. The critic of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* experiences at such moments, as an effect of

² Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 3.i.64-65.

³ See 5.i.1, pp. 258-59, 5.iii.2, p. 297, 3.ii.2, p. 187, and 3.ii.3, p. 196 above.

reading, the very object of the study. The literature of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in other words, has a *je-ne-sais-quoi* of its own.

The fourth and final moment of the seme comes when it abandons the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. One can understand the rupture between seme and lexeme from either party's point of view. It marks, for the word, the disappointing end to its seventeenth-century history that I described earlier. The noun settles, like its precursors, into the sediment of polite culture. The seme, meanwhile, retains the vital force that unsettled those precursors before passing into the noun. It stays on the move as before, disrupting sedimented words and seeking out current ones in its journey through the lexicon of nescioquiddity. I could have made the breach between the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] and its seme the end-point of my study. A moribund end seemed inappropriate, however, to a study describing the experience of a vital force.

I chose instead to return the word to its pre-history. This meant in effect rereading late sixteenth-century writing from an altered perspective. I had first searched texts of this period for traces of the word at this early phase of its history and found it to be current in its various non-substantival forms (see 1.i.3 above). I had next examined late sixteenth-century writing, particularly Montaigne's *Essais*, for semantic traces of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and found them in the regions of nature, the passions, and culture (see 2.i.2 and 2.ii.1 above). The seme was there, then, and so were the supple forms of the non-substantival phrase. My initial survey of both had taken place, however, within a historical narrative that traced the seventeenth-century rise of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] in its semantic ideal type. This committed me to an initial account of the late sixteenth century that was, at least implicitly, teleological. The non-substantival lexical forms of the period appeared 'pre-substantival' and it

seemed too that, if history were only allowed to take its course, the coupling of the seme with the noun – and their eventual breach – were bound to occur. Undertaking a pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.] was an attempt to rescue the word from the teleological flow of its history (see 5.i.2 above). I took as my field of exploration Montaigne's *Essais*, a text in which non-substantival lexical forms coincide with appearances of the seme, and which has been seen as an origin for the seventeenth-century word. Pre-history allowed me to move backwards from the word's sedimentation, not to its origins, but to a series of rich 'pre-echoes' in the *Essais*. I was able initially to find these disparate instances only because they appeared, with the benefit of hindsight, to anticipate the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. But, once found, each particular instance could be analysed as a prospectless present-tense moment in pre-history. I brought the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to Montaigne, in other words, to discover how Montaigne writes about the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. I found in his text no sign of an attempt to freeze the movements of the seme in any current noun. Discovering such signs would be necessary if one wished to argue that he prepares or anticipates the sedimentation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. This view appears, then, to be a teleological illusion. What I did find in the *Essais*, however, was a supple art of writing that twists settled nouns, topics, and examples out of their usual functions, develops conceptual figures and objective correlatives, and deploys the word's various non-substantival forms to capture the experience of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in all its disastrous force. The word, in its current non-substantival forms, appears ideally suited to the task, which Montaigne sets himself, of capturing the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as it irrupts into my experience, invites and frustrates explanation, and releases a description of its sudden and revolutionary effects upon me. Its grammatical suppleness allows the pre-historical artist to inflect the word into the various parts of speech, and beyond, into

speech itself. It was by returning the seventeenth-century word to its pre-history in Montaigne that I was able to discover his supple art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

What is the *je-ne-sais-quoi*? It is time to draw these concluding remarks together. My thesis can be stated in four points.

(i) The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, a word that first rises to prominence in seventeenth-century France, refers to a force of sympathy (or antipathy) that I experience in its sudden and inexplicable effects. The word traces my experience of this force.

(ii) The *je-ne-sais-quoi* falls in different regions of early modern experience and, in each, brings settled forms of explanation to a crisis. It moves through its semantic field by unsettling sedimented words, passing forcefully through current ones, and abandoning these as they too undergo sedimentation.

(iii) The word history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* traces this movement in the early modern period. The word unsettles its precursors in its rise to prominence, carries intense semantic force in philosophical and literary writing of the mid-seventeenth century and, by the end of the century, has settled into the sediment of polite culture.

(iv) The process, by which the word acquires its history, divorces it from the inexplicable force that it served to trace. Returning the word to the supple non-substantial forms and syntactical strings of its pre-history, in the writing of Montaigne, serves to recover the force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as it falls into experience. It does so with the sudden and revolutionary effects of a disaster.

My thesis, summarized in this way, will inevitably seem schematic and tendentious. It is intended to offer a provisional overview of the various paths

followed by this study and to open up areas for further exploration. Central to the very notion of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is its ability to provoke crisis in the lexical and conceptual formulæ designed to apprehend and study it, revealing active fault-lines, dark zones, and refuges of ignorance within them. Crisis has periodically threatened this study too: my reaction has been to admit the threat, rather than ignore it, in the attempt to put it to critical use. The *je-ne-sais-quoi*, even as it provokes a crisis, invites one to come to terms with it by breaking the formula, writing an ‘essay’, and risking a leap in the dark. Crisis and risk are both part of its adventure.

The *je-ne-sais-quoi* is one chapter in the long history of the Inexplicable in literary and philosophical writing. Other chapters include the figure of Socrates, the tradition of sceptical thought and writing (strong in the period studied here), and developments in twentieth-century French philosophy (through thinkers such as Bergson, Blanchot, Jankélévitch, and Deleuze). I have drawn on all these chapters where they served my purposes. The early modern history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* touches on broader issues whose full examination lies beyond the scope of this study. Some – the history of Anglo-French cultural relations in the seventeenth century, for example, and a comparative theory of philosophy and literature – have already been raised;⁴ other issues have come into view only at this late stage. One important knot of issues concerns the ethical implications of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* raises problems in human relations for which it has no solutions to offer. Its force as a stroke of passion is absolute: it leaves the subject a passive victim of all its transformative effects. Is there no way of reacting to a stroke of passion by moderating or directing its effects to morally good ends? Critics such as Du Bosc, as I

⁴ See 2.ii.1 above, pp. 120-21 (on the former); I discuss the latter earlier in this Conclusion, pp. 318-20.

mentioned in passing, suggest that there ought to be (see 3.ii.1 (III) above, p. 179). The word's late-seventeenth-century sedimentation marks the moment at which it ceases to refer to a real force of sympathy between particular individuals and becomes instead an artificial means whereby polite culture preserves its elite circle. This seems to imply that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is only a real quality or force as a particular relation between individuals; that its expression by a group is always determined by that group's interests; and that therefore no collective ethics of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* is possible. Is this always true? The word's cultural history in the period studied suggests that it is indeed the case, but once again, the question opens up avenues of ethical reflection that lie beyond the limits set here.

This study pursues the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, beyond its seventeenth-century history, by turning to its pre-history. Its afterlife, however, remains to be studied. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* experiences a small revival of its fortunes in eighteenth-century France: writers like Marivaux, Boissy, and Montesquieu exploit the word and reflect on its significance, it seems, with a glance back to Bouhours and the seventeenth century. Hume, whose French connections are well known, uses the English noun 'I-know-not-what' in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) to describe not the experience of particular sympathy for another but, rather, an inexplicable agreeable quality that some individuals are acknowledged *universally* to possess (1961: 267). The eighteenth-century *je-ne-sais-quoi* would offer a way of pursuing the ethical questions that I have just raised. So too would the afterlife of the word in nineteenth-century fiction. Balzac, Tolstoy, and Henry James are among the novelists who, as I have already indicated of the latter two, use complex forms of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* to portray social qualities, particular passions, and the ambiguous shadowline between

the two.⁵ Nineteenth-century fiction does not restrict the word's afterlife to human relations. Victor Hugo, in *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), describes an encounter with an octopus that encapsulates the *je-ne-sais-quoi* at its most repellently antipathetic.⁶ So impersonally real and monstrously unknowable is the vital force of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in nature that, in order to describe it, Hugo subjects the word to its own mutation when describing the denizens of the sea: 'des morceaux d'ombre [...] subissent des polarisations inconnues, prennent vie, se composent on ne sait quelle forme et on ne sait quelle âme avec le miasme, et s'en vont, larves, à travers la vitalité.'⁷ The *je-ne-sais-quoi* couples with the sea here to engender the *on-ne-sait-quoi* [adj.]. The word lives on in its many-tentacled nineteenth-century afterlife.

I chose to examine not the afterlife but the pre-history. Pursuing this further would perhaps offer the *je-ne-sais-quoi* its richest prospect. Its pre-history has so far fallen in the shadow of its history. The move backwards derived its initial impulse, in other words, from a felt critical need to resist the historical tendency of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Montaigne proved an exemplary case in this respect because, although he appears in hindsight to prepare the formation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.], he is better understood as a writer who twists the word's forms out of shape in an attempt to let the experience of disaster speak. The pre-historical approach allowed instances in the *Essais* to be analysed, first, by using history to help formulate the problem of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and its lexicon, and second, by suspending its history to encounter the writing in the absolute present tense of its appearance on the page.

⁵ On Balzac, see Stanton 1980: 209; on Tolstoy and James, see 4.ii.3 above, pp. 239.

⁶ So does Mr Hyde, who provokes a 'hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear' in those unfortunate enough to encounter him (Stevenson 1987: 19).

⁷ Hugo 1980: 440; Pigéard de Gurbert 2001: 60-63 (on Hugo's art of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*).

It would take a third step to move the pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* beyond the shadow of its history and into the space of a critical theory. This theory, whose outlines I can only sketch conditionally here, would be applied to an ideal-typical experience, namely, that of a sudden, inexplicable, and revolutionary force (whether of sympathy or antipathy, attraction or repulsion, love or hatred). It would offer a hypothesis, namely, that this force unsettles terms and topics of explanation by attracting and then resisting them, that it can only be named in its positive nescioquiddity, and that it can only be described in its effects. The theory would develop a series of instruments – lexical elements, rhetorical and conceptual figures, and objective correlatives – in order to capture, display, and analyse the ideal type and its accompanying hypothesis in literary and philosophical writing. The most powerful of its lexical instruments would be the various forms – substantival, pronominal, adjectival, adverbial, and syntactical – of the phrase *nescio quid* in its Romance descendants, Germanic cognates, and indeed in any other language with a similar family of words. These are the main elements of my proposed critical theory of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Its ideal type would remain non-reductive, its hypothesis provisional, and its instruments insufficient in themselves since they could come to work on a particular instance only once it had been shown to fit the hypothesis. The theory would serve to draw multiple instances from different linguistic, literary, and philosophical traditions into one provisional space. Within this space, various kinds of comparative analysis would become possible, whether between different genres of writing, national traditions, or historical periods. The questions that the theory faced would remain critical: is the thing described not merely a refuge of ignorance or self-interest rather than a real *je-ne-sais-quoi*? If it is indeed the latter, then how precisely does the writer name it and lend form to its movement? These questions pursue the

topic beyond its history and into the new space of a critical theory. This theory would necessarily stay open, given its object, to the possible alteration of its own lexical and conceptual formulæ under the shock of some new *je-ne-sais-quoi*. It would be, above all, a heuristic device designed to find concrete instances in specific texts and describe each in its particular movement. The life of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, as a critical theory, would be in the practice.

An entire study of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in practice could be devoted to Shakespeare's plays. They dramatize its essential themes (the ghostly apparition of an insensible force in nature, the disastrous stroke of passion, and the artifice of super-subtle signs of quality); they show characters undergoing such experiences attempting (with extraordinary sophistication) to come to terms with them; and, at such moments, forms of the English phrase 'I-know-not-what' tend to appear. Shakespeare's place in this study has remained marginal since my criterion of inclusion was that a writer should occupy at least a potential place in the rise and fall of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* [n.]. Montaigne was admitted not least because numerous seventeenth-century literary and philosophical writers look back to him as a paternal figure. But Shakespeare is father to no one in the early modern history traced here. He stands apart from it, occupying a place accessible only to a theoretical pre-history of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, while casually demonstrating his mastery of its themes, problems, and lexicon. He gives the impression, in fact – as he so often does with critical approaches and theories – of having dreamt up the *je-ne-sais-quoi*.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (c. 1595) exemplifies Shakespeare's practice of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. A strange force of sympathy falls between individuals in this play and the characters discuss its nature obsessively: some attempt to dispel, explain, and

control it; others sense that it is really inexplicable, and inexplicably real, and grasp at forms of the phrase 'I-know-not-what' to name and describe it. The four young Athenian lovers suffer the ebb and flow of this force at home and in the dark wood, beyond the city, into which they stray. The night they spend there is full of strange happenings, with the women suffering a breach in their friendship and the men falling in and out of love. At the same time, Titania, Queen of the Fairies, suffers a sudden magical stroke of passion for Bottom, the Athenian mechanical who has been 'translated' into an ass. The same force falls upon her and the Athenians with revolutionary effects. Malaster threatens at every turn. The night's events are a living illustration of Lysander's claim, that 'the course of true love never did run smooth', for even 'if there were a sympathy in choice', he explains 'war, death, or sickness did lay siege to it'. So it is, he concludes, that 'quick bright things come to confusion' (1.i.132-49). The women prove more constant than the men. Throughout, Hermia loves Lysander, and Helena, Demetrius; both men, however, are drawn irresistibly first to Hermia and then, under the effect of Puck's love-juice, to Helena. Puck stage-manages a benaster by reuniting Lysander with Hermia and leaving Demetrius magically smitten with Hermia. He turns the confusions of a darkened pastoral towards the brightness of a comic resolution.

But the force that brought the lovers into confusion remains to be explained. What happened to them in the wood? Theseus and Hippolyta, at the beginning of act five, provide a retrospective commentary on events as the lovers have described them. Theseus, speaking in the clear light of reason and a calm Athenian morning, dismisses the entire phenomenon. Its cause is to be found not in the spirit of the wood, he says,

but merely in the power of the imagination, which is all too strong in lunatics, lovers, and poets:

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.⁸

We saw earlier that Ronsard describes the dream-deer chased by the greyhound of Charles IX, and that Descartes dismisses the forms and qualities of the schools, as mere nothings forged and named in the mind.⁹ Theseus awards the same ontological status to the magic forces of the wood: he dismisses the *je-ne-sais-quoi* as an airy nothing. Hippolyta, however, saves the phenomenon. She protests:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigur'd so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images,
And grows to something of great constancy;
But howsoever, strange and admirable.¹⁰

Hippolyta reverses the ontological status that Theseus gave to the events described by the lovers. That they all told the same story, she insists, and the manner in which they did so suggests only one thing: that the story contains more than an intersubjective mental illusion. The event to which they all refer is not merely real *qua* dream, but more than that, it 'grows to something of great constancy'. It is real *qua something*. What this coherent something may be, Hippolyta cannot say, other than that it is 'strange and admirable'. She encapsulates the affirmative semantic operation of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* by describing a nescioquiddity that is both real and inexplicable. Her discussion with Theseus comes to an abrupt end with the arrival of the young lovers themselves. But by then the two have raised the critical question about the nature of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* – is it an airy nothing or a real force, and can it be explained, or

⁸ 5.i.14-17.

⁹ See (on Ronsard) 1.i.3 above, p. 52, and (on Descartes) 2.ii.2 above, pp. 124-25.

¹⁰ 5.i.23-27.

not? – to the level of conscious reflection in the play. The playwright shows that this reflective process is itself one effect produced by the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. His title, in referring to a dream, raises the same critical question about the play's own ontological status.

This question, when Theseus and Hippolyta come belatedly to discuss it, has in fact already been resolved within the play. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stages the law of love that Walter Charleton first brings across the Channel into English in the mid-seventeenth century:

I will not undertake to explain the mysterious nature of this Passion, which all are subject to, and none clearly understand; and think it as well defined by him, who said, *It is I know not what, which came in I know not whence, and went away I know not how*; as by Socrates, [...] or, even by St. Thomas himself.¹¹

Love, the stuff of life, is I-know-not-what that appears and vanishes like a dream. Demetrius says as much to Theseus, in the wood, when he attempts to account for his change of affections:

But my good lord, I wot not by what power –
But by some power it is – my love to Hermia,
Melted as the snow, seems to me now
As the remembrance of an idle gaud
Which in my childhood I did dote upon;
And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,
The object and pleasure of mine eye,
Is only Helena.¹²

Demetrius speaks of a power that has drawn him away from Hermia and towards Helena. His initial parenthetical remark, 'I wot not by what power – | But by some power it is', spells out the double semantic movement that the affirmative *je-ne-sais-quoi* makes between the inexplicable nature of the force and the sheer fact of its operation. The archaic form *wot*, instead of *know*, admits a triple internal rhyme ('wot

¹¹ Charleton 1975: 42; on this text, see 3.ii.1 above, p. 181.

¹² 4.i.163-70.

not by what') within Demetrius's adjectival string of syntax. The rhyme emphasizes the inexplicable *whatness* of the power and mimics phonetically the stammering of his mind under the shock of the experience. Theseus's reply shows him characteristically keen to avoid entertaining the thought: 'Of this discourse', he says hurriedly, 'we more will hear anon' (4.i.177). But Demetrius is not alone in referring to the operation of some insensible power or force. Titania tells Bottom: 'thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me | On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee' (3.i.133-34). *Virtue* we are to understand here, not in its ethical sense, but in the old Latinate sense of 'power' or 'force'. Titania's speech is saturated with the absolute force of love. There is no room here to doubt its existence.

Love is, of course, not the sole force in operation here: magic is another. A rationalist of Theseus's persuasion might wish to object that the *je-ne-sais-quoi* in the play is 'merely' magical. The play does not flinch from this objection, indeed, it gives it radical expression. We are reminded, each time that we see Puck squeezing juice from the flower, love-in-idleness, on the eyelids of those asleep in the wood, that magic is at work. Such is its power, indeed, that magic actually transforms Bottom into an ass – while he and his friends in amateur dramatics can merely search for the means 'to signify wall' (3.i.64) – and then draws Titania into loving the beast. The existence of magic can be doubted no more than that of love. There is in fact no need for a nominalist excision of either since the two coexist. Puck says of his flower that it has a magical 'force in stirring love' (2.ii.75). Love was already there; magic is its efficient cause. Love proves to be the prime force at work in the wood and the Athenian court alike. It determines Oberon, in his jealousy, to punish his beloved Titania by magical means (2.i) and gives the play its opening. Hermia's father appears

before Theseus, in the play's first scene, to threaten his daughter with Athenian law if she fails to approve his choice of son-in-law (Demetrius) against her own desire (for Lysander). Hermia, pressed by Theseus to submit, replies:

I do entreat your Grace to pardon me.
I know not by what power I am made bold,
Nor how it may concern my modesty
In such a presence here to plead my thoughts,
But I beseech your Grace that I may know
The worst that may befall me in this case,
If I refuse to wed Demetrius.¹³

Her love for Lysander is the strange power that Hermia describes through an adjectival string of 'I-know-not-what'. It is the effect of no other magical force than that of love. Invoking such a power both allows Hermia to justify her decision to oppose the will of her father and the Duke and to name the inexplicable impulse that maintains her opposition. Theseus, in reply, threatens her with death or a nunnery – and Hermia decides to take refuge with Lysander in the wood. The inexplicable I-know-not-what of love is the prime force moving the very plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Bottom, the mechanical who finds himself transformed into an ass, understands what this force is as well as anyone. He effectively refutes Theseus two short scenes before the Duke offers his obtusely rational explanation of the night's adventures. Bottom, having fallen asleep in Titania's arms as an ass, awakes alone and human once more. The events that befell him during his transformation return in the confused form of a dream, which he tries to put into words:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was – and methought I had – but man is a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to

¹³ 1.i.58-64.

write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called 'Bottom's Dream', because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke.¹⁴

Bottom's Dream is a bottomless comic *je-ne-sais-quoi*. He traces the semantic movement of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*, in the second sentence quoted, as he attempts to define what his dream was before declaring that it passes the 'wit of man'. The cognitive charge of *wit* is important: it is not that Bottom refuses to say what the dream was out of some sense of sublime secrecy; he cannot say what it was because, simply, it was inexplicable. He sums this up with peculiar accuracy when he so spectacularly confuses his various senses: his tongue is indeed unable to conceive what his dream was. Bottom's sentence, like the scriptural text that it so aptly misquotes, is built around *adynaton*, a common rhetorical figure of nescioquiddity.¹⁵ The four sentences, of which this is the last, each offer a variation of 'I-know-not-what' in a syntactical string. Each is more distant from the word than the forms used by Hermia and (earlier in this scene) by Demetrius. But the pre-historical trace is there. Bottom varies his verbs ('tell', 'say', 'report', verbs of sensory perception, and 'conceive') and emphasizes that his dream so beggars conception as to be a *nobody-knows-what*. The comic effect is in the strenuous variations with which the stammering Bottom moves towards to the same expression of nescioquiddity. Never has anyone been so volubly at a loss for words or his wits.

Bottom's experience encapsulates the entire midsummer night. 'It shall be called "Bottom's Dream",' he declares, 'because it hath no bottom.' The joke raises the critical question of his dream's place in the realm of being. It may have no bottom either because it is a thing of no substance or because it has the bottomless profundity

¹⁴ 4.i.202-14.

¹⁵ The biblical text is from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, ii. 9: 'the eye hath not seen, and the ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man those things God has prepared.' On *adynaton*, see 3.ii.1 above, p. 177.

of the world itself. One can predict that Theseus, were Bottom indeed to sing his dream as a ballad, would dismiss it as just that, a ‘mere’ dream, the credulous ravings of a mechanical. Yet we know that Bottom is in fact remembering what befell him – not a dream, but the real accidents of his experience. The playwright emphasizes this by placing the word *dream* in Oberon’s instruction to Puck: Bottom and the others, he says, should ‘think no more of this night’s accidents | But as the fierce vexation of a dream’ (4.i.67-68). That is why Bottom calls his mental traces of the previous night his Dream. Yet he refers to its contents, time and again, as though he had experienced them in the waking world. This hints at a confused sense in Bottom that his ‘dream’ was something more than that. What this something is, however, he will not and cannot say. His confusion is the only appropriate response to such an event: it proves that Bottom is no ass after all. He tells his friends when they are reunited: ‘Masters, I am to discourse wonders: but ask me not what’ (4.ii.26). *Wonders* hints at something more than a dream – but about which Bottom, once again, remains volubly silent. We spectators and readers have, of course, witnessed the very wonders that he leaves undescribed. We are invited to fill in the spaces of experience that his aposiopesis (‘methought I was – and methought I had –’) leaves blank. He was indeed, as he dreamt he was, an ass, tender in disposition and ‘marvellous hairy about the face’ (4.i.24). He had indeed, as he dreamt he did, the love of a woman who wound him in her arms, saying, as they found sleep together:

So doth the woodbine the sweet honeysuckle
Gently entwist; the female ivy so
Enrings the barky fingers of the elm.
O how I love thee! How I dote on thee!¹⁶

¹⁶ 4.i.41-44.

The events that he places in his Dream we know to have fallen inexplicably into the real world.

Shakespeare invites us to recognize as much of his play. Puck, in the Epilogue, suggests that those in the audience who disliked it think of the play, Theseus-style, as ‘No more yielding than a dream’ (Epilogue, l. 5). Those who enjoyed it, he implies, will understand that the play is something more than that. Shakespeare here demonstrates his theatrical mastery of the *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Writers tend to describe its force, as we have seen, by moving from an initial declaration of its nescioquiddity to a description of its effects. Shakespeare reverses the usual order. He starts by showing his spectators the night in the wood – its strange accidents and inexplicable forces – so that, when Bottom declares their nescioquiddity, we have already seen these forces at work. We are presented with a *je-ne-sais-quoi* that has fallen into our experience and whose revolutionary effects have already moved us. The playwright, in this manner, compels our assent to the thought expressed by Hippolyta. The play itself, we feel, is no mere fiction: it is itself ‘something of great constancy | But howsoever, strange and admirable’ – or, in a word, a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Hippolyta, who makes her remark only after the night has come to an end, merely confirms a thought that had already grown on the spectators. For they, unlike her, were invited to follow Bottom as he led the *je-ne-sais-quoi* through its midsummer adventure.

Translations from languages other than French

All translations are mine unless otherwise specified. I have not rendered quotations inserted in a context that renders their general sense. Passages are identified by their *incipit* and page number in my text.

Nescio quis (p. 41): I know not what eye is bewitching my tender lambs.

Siam forzati (p. 42): we are forced to believe that this splendour is born of some unknown proportion and a measure that can be found in none of our books, which we neither know nor can imagine, and which is, as we say of things that we cannot explain, a *non so che*.

E questa (p. 43): this is the grace that makes that *non so che*, which often is so pleasing in the works of painters and of poets alike, because it fills our souls with an infinite delight without our knowing whence arises the thing that so pleases us.

Por toda (p. 45): for all the beauty / I shall never lose my way, / Except for a *no sé qué*, / Which is met by chance.

Nescio quid (p. 89): we shall behold I know not what greatness when seeing will be all our reward.

Aliquando intromittis (p. 89): sometimes you fill me with an unexpected, intimate feeling and I know not what charm, which if it ever grew to full strength in me, would be I know not what that had nothing to do with this life.

Wovon man (p. 91): what we cannot speak about we must consign to silence [trans. in Wittgenstein 1961].

Similiter numerant (p. 106): they also count as qualities those things, which they call ‘occult virtues’, whereby amber attracts straw, and the magnet, iron.

Qualitas occulta (p. 106): an occult quality is a secret or hidden power, by means of which natural things work or suffer some effect whose true cause or relationship [*ratio*] cannot be deduced since it emanates immediately from a substantial form. Or, to express this differently, it is a power, scarcely accessible to the senses, which can

be apprehended in its effects alone, and this is why no adequate word can be found for it.

Recentiores, qui (p. 127): the innovators, who despise occult qualities, call them with contumely a refuge of ignorance.

Assagiamo di (pp. 260-61): let us try and speak this other language a little.

Sentii non (p. 261): I felt I know not what weight in my kidney.

Scorgeva altresì (quoted on p. 261 and more fully on p. 262): I became aware of I know not what movements in my kidneys and, if I am not mistaken, this is a property peculiar to these baths.

Namque unam (p. 263): indicating a single cause is not enough; several are needed, even though only one of them may be the right one.

Et versus (p. 296): poetry has fingers.

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BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
Bod.	The Bodleian Library, Oxford
BL	The British Library
Tay.	The Library of the Taylor Institution, Oxford
<i>FS</i>	<i>French Studies</i>
<i>JHI</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association</i>
<i>YFS</i>	<i>Yale French Studies</i>

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