

The Curious Monsieur Veyne

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Thanks to his work on Greco-Roman antiquity, his intellectual curiosity, his pronounced taste for interdisciplinarity, his sense of humor, and the freedom that informs all his research, Paul Veyne is a twentieth-century historian whose work cannot be avoided. A loose cannon at the heart of the academic establishment, a deep thinker and a dilettante, Veyne invites us, through his work, to a festival of thought.

Paul Veyne occupies a unique place in the French intellectual landscape. This specialist of Roman history and professor at the Collège de France is the author of a number of major works (such as *Bread and Circuses* and *Writing History*) that are unsurpassed in his field. Erudite but light, imposing yet funny, bearing the lasting mark of his friendship with Michel Foucault, Veyne follows no model and resembles only himself.

From Aix to Rome

Veyne was born in 1930 in Aix, which was once known as *Aquae Sextiae*. He thus saw the light of day in an ancient land; perhaps this is all one needs to become an historian.¹ A teenager during the Second World War, he chose as his “shelter” (or first intellectual sanctuary) the archeological museum of Nimes, with its vast collection of Roman steles and reliefs. To amuse himself, he would decode Latin inscriptions, a singular pastime that presaged his future: he had already developed a taste for social and economic history. As he was only ten when De Gaulle made his “appeal” of June 18, 1940, he was too young to join the Resistance. The fact that his family was *pétainiste* at the time would remain for him a source of endless torment. The consequence was a precocious investment in communism.

Before this could happen, however, Veyne had first to travel to Paris, where he was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure in 1951. Four years later, he took the competitive state examination in grammar, the most technical test for students of literature. To pass this difficult exam, one had to translate a large number of passages into Greek. Such a task leaves little room for chance or hot air. Throughout his scholarly career, Veyne has readily confessed that he is more comfortable reading Greek than Latin, a fact that is only—for once—semi-paradoxical for a man of such eccentric proclivities.

After the competitive state exam, he took off for another school. What made its curriculum unusual was that it had no curriculum. The École française de Rome—the school in question—was a *scholè* in the original sense of the term: a moment of leisure. Nevertheless, it sought to introduce students to archaeology and fieldwork first by taking them on strolls through Italy and then, after crossing the Mediterranean, acquainting them with North Africa’s ruins. Veyne was dazzled by Italy’s museums. He traveled to the Campagna and visited a Neapolitan *casino* (which was very different from “casinos” in France).² He was

¹ Camille Jullian and Henri-Irénée Marrou were also Provençals who studied ancient history. Georges Ville and William Seston, who are both mentioned in this article, were also from France’s south.

² In Italian, *casino* means “brothel.”

involved in a dig at Utica, near Carthage. It was here that he realized that, for him, the pickaxe was destined to be little more than a gardening tool.

Despite his frequent denials, he never abandoned erudition (that is, erudition properly understood—not the kind that becomes suffocating when it is all one knows). Consider, to begin with, his study of “The Table of the Ligures Baebiani and Trajan’s Alimentary Institution,” which appeared in 1957 in the journal of the *École française de Rome* (*Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire*). The core of this essay is a commentary on a long Latin inscription. Agrarian and demographic matters are addressed with great precision, though not without ulterior motives: the history that Veyne practiced (without admitting it) was that of the *Annales* School, which at the time was a minority current in the French academy. It was even more rare among scholars of antiquity, who tend to be ill-disposed to methodological innovation.

During his Roman years, Veyne confirmed his great proclivity for friendship. Even before, he had made his escapades to the Nimes museum in the company of a “true friend.”³ This trait was also on display throughout Italy. He affirmed his closeness to George Ville (1928-1967), a fellow *normalien* who was finishing up his studies at the *École de Rome*. Veyne would remain forever loyal to him. In 1981, he even went so far as to publish posthumously Ville’s dissertation on gladiators in the West. Similarly, Veyne could never say enough in praise of his friend Michel Foucault.⁴ This deep sense of friendship makes one regret that he never worked on the ancient notion of *amicitia*.⁵

In addition to being a faithful friend, he was also an unrepentant charmer. His life was punctuated by love stories that plunged him into the most ecstatic of experiences. Never did his face, which was deformed by a rare disease, stand in the way of his capacity for seduction. He even married three times—“like Cicero, Caesar, and Ovid”!⁶

Erudition and Pleasure

The dissertation that germinated in Rome was entitled: “The Gift System in Roman Municipal Life.” His advisor was William Seston, an austere scholar of late antiquity. His secondary dissertation examined, for its part, “social roles in Roman funeral arts.” Veyne sought to understand the importance of gifts in imperial Rome, specifically the widespread practice known as *euergetism*: the great expenses made by the emperor or local nobles to acquire, justify, or reacquire their social position. Epigraphic sources have proved the most useful traces of this often extravagant liberality.

Veyne thus returned to his passion for epigraphy, blending in sociology and ethnology, as this study owes much to Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift*. The topic of his secondary dissertation testifies to an ongoing interest in the history of art, which is confirmed by a list of his works.⁷

³ Paul Veyne, *Le quotidien et l’intéressant. Entretiens avec Catherine Darbo-Peschanski*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1995, p. 5-6.

⁴ Veyne, *Foucault, sa pensée, sa personne*, Paris, Librairie générale, 2010; *Foucault: His Thought, His Character*, Cambridge UK and Malden, USA, 2010.

⁵ *Amiticia* was not, however, exactly what one might want it to be, at least until the appearance of Christianity, a religion with which Veyne did not feel comfortable: he had, for instance, wanted to form, with a group of friends, a “Friendly Society for the Enemies of Saint Paul.” See Veyne, *Le quotidien et l’intéressant*, p. 84.

⁶ Veyne, *Et dans l’éternité, je ne m’ennuierai pas. Souvenirs*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2014, p. 9.

⁷ We will confine ourselves to mentioning his studies “Personnification de la Dacie tenant l’enseigne de la légion XIII Gemina,” which appeared in *Cahiers de Byrsa* (1958-1959, p. 87-96) and “Monument des Suovétauriles de Beaujeu” in *Gallia* (1959, p. 410-412).

In addition to his prosaic interpretation of the frescos of the Villa of the Mysteries,⁸ he also recently offered us an “imaginary museum” (*Musée imaginaire*, 2012), in homage to the pictorial discoveries of his youthful sojourn in Italy.

As a junior professor at the Sorbonne, he persevered in an approach to history that was consistent with the *Annales* school, in whose journal he published, in 1961, an essay entitled “The Life on Trimalchio,”⁹ inspired by one of the key figures in Petronius’ *Satyricon*. This life was split into two parts: “A Roman businessman [who] died, [and] would be resurrected as an imaginary aristocrat.” In this way, Petronius was read from the standpoint of the *Digest* and certain late imperial inscriptions. One already finds, in this essay, all the charm of Veyne’s work: his freedom in tone, his anthropological immersion in a very unfamiliar Roman world, and comparisons that are as surprising as they are instructive, as when he writes that “for the Romans, like the contemporary Japanese, love belonged to the realm of minor satisfactions and the material for jokes, and was kept at a distance from serious matters, including conjugal and familial relationships.”

Veyne has, as we can see, his own immense talent for analogy, a propensity to draw illuminating historical parallels: “Westerners, at least those among us who are not bacteriologists, believe in germs and increase the sanitary precautions we take for the same reason that the Azande believe in witches and multiply their magical precautions against them: their belief is based on trust.” Veyne uses this comparison to show, for example, why ancient mythology did not have to be rational to be true.¹⁰

This comic way of pitting epochs and civilizations against each other, in which Chiron could meet Henri IV, ensures that the reader’s curiosity will always be alert. Unquestionably, Veyne has a taste for the curious—specifically, for the astonishment one often experiences when studying the past. To Pascal, who said that one is better off never leaving one’s room, Veyne replies: “We are not reasonable; we are curious about everything.”¹¹

Veyne has thus taken his research in various directions for his own pleasure and his readers’ profit. His work is a festival of ideas, a wandering art, in which he lets his pen flow freely, creating a rare sensation of intellectual freedom. It is Veyne’s wont not to stick to his intellectual program—or, preferably, to go beyond it. This is a trait for which few would be inclined to reproach him. Reading his books is like receiving a distinguished guest whose eloquence one greatly appreciates.

Rome: The Empire of Baksheesh

Thus his epistemological book, *Comment on écrit l’histoire* (1971; published in English in 1984 as *Writing History*), which was initially the introduction to his dissertation, became a stand-alone essay. Its ideas have flourished, and even their author could not rein them in. They have become one of three or four statements on the historian’s craft that have counted in twentieth-century French historiography. Veyne’s argument is untimely: shorn of its scientific pretensions, history, he contends, is a “work of art.” This demystifying claim extends, moreover, to the other social sciences, notably sociology: the book concludes, significantly, by evoking the name of Max Weber.

⁸ Veyne, F. Lissarrague, F. Frontisi-Ducroux, *Les mystères du gynécée*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

⁹ Veyne, “Vie de Trimalcion,” *Annales. Économies, sociétés, civilisations*, 16, 1961, p. 213-247.

¹⁰ Veyne, *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes ?*, Paris, Seuil, 1983; *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, trans. Paul Wissing, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

¹¹ Veyne, *Le quotidien et l’intéressant*, p. 67.

As a result of his familiarity with sociological texts, the young scholar, who at the times was teaching at the University of Aix, was discovered by Raymond Aron. Thanks to him, Veyne became a professor at the Collège de France in 1975. The title of the chair he was offered (“Roman History”) was deliberately tame, perhaps to avoid frightening the Collège’s faculty, accustomed to scholars of antiquity who were orderly and reserved. But it was not long before he broke with Aron—indeed, it occurred with his inaugural lecture, which was too irreverent and, in any case, too un-“Aronian.” Veyne even forgot to thank Aron...

His dissertation on euergetism, *Le Pain et le Cirque* (published in English in 1992 as *Bread and Circuses*), appeared the following year. In this work, Veyne offered a broad portrait of Roman society, which no doubt predestined him to write, in 1985, the chapter on Rome in Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby’s *Histoire de la vie privée* (published in English in 1992 as *History of Private Life*). Studying euergetism was a roundabout way of considering Roman history as a whole. Roman specialists are usually obsessed with military adventures, peace treaties, and soldiery of all kinds. Yet Veyne has never dwelt on the reasons for “Rome’s strength,” which has been admired throughout history. To the contrary, he has preferred to lift the veil off of this empire imposed by the force of arms: “To see the Roman Empire as a feat of organizational skill, the rule of law, and order ... is to misunderstand it. This was an empire of baksheesh and clientage.”

Sushi with Foucault

In the late seventies, Veyne attended Foucault’s “salon,” the occasion for “Nietzscheanly humanistic soirées.” Around this time, *Le Monde* published an op-ed by Veyne entitled “The Truth of my Ascent of Fujiyama,”¹² in which the public learned that, during the summer of 1978, this respectable professor, who had a genuine passion for mountain climbing, had not traveled to Japan. He had, however, seen the film *In the Realm of the Senses* five times and talked Foucault into eating sushi.

Beneath his troublemaking facade, Veyne inevitably returned to his primary endeavor: making the Greco-Roman world comprehensible. For all his ambition, he was susceptible to doubt. Though he was never convinced that he had penetrated the mysteries of the ancient world, he had the great merit of putting his approach on full display. Thus in his essay *L’élégie érotique romaine* (1983; published in English in 1988 as *Roman Erotic Elegy*), he confided: “Somewhere Propertius writes: ‘Elegy, that deceptive work’—*fallax opus*. One would pay dearly to know exactly what hid behind these words.” Veyne never forces his solutions, nor does he claim to have resolved, once and for all, the enigmas historians encounter. In this way, he stands opposed to Jérôme Carcopino, who seized upon the supposed “secrets” of History (Sulla’s abdication, Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue*, the Roman basilica at the Porta Maggiore), elucidating them with stretched arguments.

Thus Veyne’s heuristic method resembles a pleasant if dangerous conversation (as often occurs in diplomacy). He lets the ancients speak, engages them in conversation, introduces them to his readers, and seeks to minimize any misunderstandings between them. As a middleman torn between two worlds, Veyne took the kinds of risks that he regretted not taking in the struggles of the twentieth century. But let us be reassured: not only is Veyne a courageous historian, he epitomizes the gay science.

¹² *Le Monde*, 10-11 September 1978.

Further Reading:

For a more complete (if non-exhaustive) bibliography: <http://www.college-de-france.fr/site/paul-marie-veyne>

Veyne on Foucault: <http://www.ina.fr/video/I07291589>

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