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Language and Nation in 16th-Century France:  
The *Arts poétiques*  

The sixteenth-century *Arts poétiques* of Sébillet and Du Bellay situate the modern French nation in relation to its cultural past and articulate a vision of national identity. They represent the competing faces of nationalizing ideology and competing versions of the history of the nation and of the status of the national community. The concerns of Renaissance France to develop and enrich the expressive capabilities of the language and to promote and “illustrate” it through the creation of a high literary culture engage French poetic theory in an encounter with “beginnings,” with the beginnings of the nation and with the present as the beginning of modernity, an encounter that has profound and complex implications for the identity of a French “people” and for France itself.

The concept of “beginnings” appears in retrospect to be particularly appropriate in speaking of sixteenth-century France. One can argue that France in this period begins its national life as the territorial configuration that modern times will christen “the hexagon” (with its attendant ideological implications); it begins its religious life as the battleground of reform and as a nation divided spiritually and politically against itself; it officially institutes the French language as its political and judicial idiom; and it claims for itself the beginnings of an intellectual and artistic renewal that changes the face of French culture. At the same time, French writers and intellectuals of the period reveal a national obsession with their own beginnings, most significantly with the ancestry of the French as a “people” or what we might even call a “race,” descended in complex,
confused and often competing lineage from the Hebrews and the Gauls and/or from the Trojans and the Franks (Dubois). These genealogical concerns about what it means in the sixteenth century to speak of “France” or of the “French” accompany equally passionate inquiry into the roots of French culture, the origins of the French language, and the very beginnings of language itself.

In the current post-structuralist climate in which we work, we have become increasingly aware of the problematical status of beginnings, aware not only of the elusive and receding nature of beginnings that can never be mastered, beginnings that in a sense have always already begun, but also of their imaginary status as well, as products of ideology. At least since Michelet and Burckhardt, scholars have both formulated and perpetuated this image of the sixteenth century as a privileged locus of beginnings, and they have been eager champions of the period’s own claims of innovation and originality. How assiduously have the assertions of Du Bellay and Ronsard that they represent the beginning of a new cultural and literary era been supported, for example, and how often has the brigade of the Pléiade been used as a trope for early modernity itself (Chamard). This “history” of Renaissance France has become a dominant cultural paradigm both forming and informing the consciousness and the identity of modern France. I raise the issue to underscore the constructed nature of our image of the past, and of this past in particular, as a myth of origins and of continuity with the present, and to underscore that the imaginary plays a constitutive and integral role in the formation of the social community or nation. Let me quote Etienne Balibar on this point as he speaks about the creation of the Nation-State in a passage in “La forme nation: histoire et idéologie,” under the heading of “Produire le peuple”: “Toute communauté sociale, reproduite par le fonctionnement d’institutions, est imaginaire, c’est-à-dire qu’elle repose sur la projection de l’existence individuelle dans la trame d’un récit collectif, sur la reconnaissance d’un nom commun, et sur les traditions vécues comme trace d’un passé immémorial (même lorsqu’elles ont été fabriquées et inculquées dans des circonstances récentes). Mais cela revient à poser que seules des communautés imaginaires sont réelles, dans certaines conditions” (127).

I want to turn to the sixteenth century’s own encounter with the past, with its conception of its own beginnings and its assertion of itself as a beginning, and to the implications of these beginnings for the identity of a French “people” and for “France” itself. I have bracketed “France” and