

The Essay as Self-Knowledge: Montaigne's Philosophical Appropriation of History and Poetry

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As Ernst Cassirer reminds us in his *Essay on Man*, philosophy takes a radical and decisive turn in the philosophical practice of Socrates. In Socrates, the problems of Greek natural philosophy and metaphysics are “referred to a new intellectual center” and are “eclipsed by a new question:” What is man?¹ The expression of the meaning of this Socratic turn is found in an especially clear form in the *Phaedrus*. When Phaedrus asks Socrates to comment on the truth or falsehood of a mythical speech, Socrates declines to debunk Gorgons and Pegasuses and other bizarre curiosities of nature: “I do not at all have leisure for these things; and the cause of it, my friend, is this. I am not yet able, according to the Delphic inscription, to know myself; it appears to me laughable indeed for one who is still ignorant of this to examine alien things” (229e–230a). Soon after, Socrates elaborates to Phaedrus on the way he pursues self-knowledge: “The country places and the trees are not willing to teach me anything, but the human beings in town are” (230d). The form of the dialogue, in which Plato chooses to present the being and the activity of Socrates, is the proper form for the mode of philosophy that requires the setting of the city and its immersion in opinion.

The Socratic tradition of philosophy as self-knowledge pursued in conversation with other men is taken up and, in a sense, transformed in the Renaissance by Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne literally invents the essay as a form of philosophy: the essay form is radically new, yet it remains within the Socratic-Platonic tradition of

the dialogue. A new art form that has enduring meaning and that, in turn, begins to form thought, must itself be the necessary expression of thought that cannot be expressed in the available forms. As Jules Brody puts it: "Montaigne's unsettling, unorthodox, cavalier, etc. way of writing is not a problem waiting to be solved, it is, rather, the solution to problems that he as a thinker and writer perceived and that, in publishing his *Essais*, he invited his eventual readers to confront with him and through him."² So Montaigne invents the essay, not as a mere novelty, but as the perfect form of his philosophy. What, then, is this thought that cannot be contained within the customary forms? Why does Montaigne invent the essay?

THE MEANING OF 'ESSAY'

We can begin to answer this by considering the meaning of Montaigne's title, 'Essays,' and some of the characterizations of the essay form that follow from the meaning of 'essay.' Erich Auerbach maintains that the meaning of the title "Essays," is rendered as "Tests upon One's Self," or "Self-Try-Outs." The word 'essay' comes from 'essayer,' which means to try or to attempt. Joseph Epstein notes that "in bringing up this etymology most people wish to understand the tentativeness of the form," but as Epstein points out, "such modesty does not at all apply to Montaigne." He prefers to take 'essay' in M. A. Screech's sense of 'assay': the essays are assays "of himself by himself." Marcel Conche's interpretation emphasizes not the tentativeness but the boldness of the form: 's'essayer' means "to try to think by oneself."³

The characterization of the essay that seems to me to best describe it as a philosophical form is the one proposed by Michael Oakeshott. In his Preface to *On Human Conduct*, Oakeshott refers to the essay as the most appropriate expression of philosophical reflection understood in a certain way, i.e., as "the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms *what he already understands* and in which the understanding sought . . . is a disclosure of the conditions of the understanding enjoyed and not a substitute for it."⁴

Oakeshott's characterization captures the circular mode of Montaigne's thought, a movement in which we begin with what is already understood and "ascend" to an understanding in other terms, an understanding that nevertheless actually returns to the first

understanding and acknowledges its authority. This first understanding is opinion, and opinion is the oracular beginning of the essay. Perhaps this is what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he says that for Montaigne we find “the fixed point we need . . . in the [sheer] fact that there is opinion, the appearance of the good and true.”⁵

The essay form articulates the being of man, but it does so in a way that is radically different from the traditional modes of philosophy. Montaigne says that “the sciences treat things too subtly, in a mode too artificial and different from the common and natural one. My page makes love and understands it. Read him Leon Hebreo and Ficino: they talk about him, his thoughts and his actions, and yet he does not understand a thing in it. I do not recognize in Aristotle most of my ordinary actions: they have been covered and dressed up in another robe for the use of the school. God grant these men may be doing the right thing! If I were of the trade, I would naturalize art as much as they artify nature” (VS874; F666).⁶ The great Pascal can recognize himself in the *Essays*—“It is not in Montaigne but in myself that I find everything I see there”⁷—but so too can the page, the shop-boy, and the shepherd.

This attempt to articulate “that which is” accounts, in some measure, for the language of the *Essays*. There is no jargon of the Schools, no specialized vocabulary: “I follow common usage in language” (VS796; F604). His style is a way of speaking that is “a formless and undisciplined way of talking, a popular jargon” (VS637; F483). He frequently uses obscenities, and in one such place (after reporting that the Romans wiped their ass with a sponge and that is why *spongia* is an obscene word in Latin), he says that “we must leave that vain squeamishness about words to women” (VS298; F217).

Montaigne wrote the *Essays* in French, not in his fluent Latin, and he wrote them at home, “in a backward region” (VS875; F666), where the people around him understood only the Latin of their Pater-noster. When he is criticized for the language of the *Essays*, he responds that he avoids none of the terms and phrases in use in the streets of France: “those who would combat usage with grammar make fools of themselves” (VS875; F667). In “Of the education of children,” he attributes to childish and pedantic ambition the search for novel phrases and little-known words: “Would that I might use only those that are used in the markets of Paris!” (VS172; F127). And in “Of the art of discussion,” he refers to conversation as the

way of seeking “that which is” (*ce qui est*), and he mocks the professional logicians who have learning but not understanding: “Do we witness more of a jumble in the chatter of fishwives than in the public disputations of the professional logicians? I would rather have my son learn to speak in the taverns than in the schools of talk” (VS926–27; F707). Montaigne’s use of the vulgar language is not simply a rhetorical move, but an ontological necessity: truth is more manifest in the chatter of fishwives than in the disputations of professional logicians.

MONTAIGNE’S AUDIENCE

In “A consideration upon Cicero,” Montaigne tells us that he would have willingly adopted the form of the letter to publish his thoughts if only he still had his friend, LaBoétie, to address them to. “I would have been more attentive and confident, with a strong friend to address, than I am now, when I consider the various tastes of a *whole public*” (VS252; F186; emphasis added).⁸ On the one hand, then, the *Essays* are addressed indiscriminately to an entire public. There are also instances in the *Essays* where he addresses directly a particular individual, always a woman. But there are at least two places where he identifies a certain kind of individual as his primary addressee. In “Of vain subtleties,” he says that the *Essays* “might get by in the middle region [of men].” Elsewhere in that same essay, the middle region is identified as the place of error, but error from which and through which it is possible to arrive at “the extreme limit of Christian intelligence” (VS313; F227). In “Of presumption,” he asks: “And then, for whom do you write?” The learned value only science, erudition, and art. The common souls cannot appreciate the grace of an elevated and fine discourse. “Now, these two types fill the world. The third class into whose hands you come, that of minds regulated and strong in themselves, is so rare that for this very reason it has neither name nor rank among us; it is time half wasted to aspire and strive to please this group” (VS657; F498).

Montaigne’s primary addressees are those who are prone to error on account of reason and who, at the same time, are not incurably learned, learned in the purely conventional sense. They are independent and capable of self-rule. These are the individuals who are susceptible to reformation, who “will not fail to come back to themselves and

very discreetly let themselves be managed by the common faith and examples" (VS446; F325).

David Hume, in his essay "Of Essay-Writing," distinguishes between the "learned" and the "conversible," the learned who labor in solitude and the conversible who are sociable and enjoy conversation. Hume claims that the separation of the learned from the conversible world is a great defect: when learning is shut up in colleges and monks' cells, *belles-lettres* become barbarous and enslaved. "Even Philosophy went to Wrack by this moaping recluse Method of Study," for experience is to be found only "in common life and conversation."⁹ The essay form is intended to bring the learned and the conversible into conversation with each other, to the benefit of both. Pascal also describes Montaigne's style as "totally composed of thoughts born out of the ordinary conversations of life."¹⁰ And Auerbach claims that Montaigne was the first author who wrote for the non-specialized but educated reader: "by the success of the *Essays* the educated public first revealed its existence."¹¹

Montaigne's address to this "middle region" is not for the sake of elevating them to the level of the merely and incurably "learned." Rather, he places before them an example of what the outcome of education ought to be. In the words of Michael Oakeshott, the outcome is participation in "the conversation of mankind." Oakeshott says that "this conversation is not only the greatest but also the most hardly sustained of all the accomplishments of mankind. Men have never been wanting who have had this understanding of human activity and intercourse, but few have embraced it without reserve and without misgiving, and on this account it is proper to mention the most notable of those who have done so: Michel de Montaigne."¹²

How precisely does Montaigne enter into the conversation of mankind? I will examine two related ways in which the essay engages the tradition of Western culture. Montaigne appropriates history and poetry and incorporates them into his philosophical practice of self-knowledge.

THE SKELETON OF PHILOSOPHY

In "On the education of children," Montaigne refers to history as "the skeleton (*l'anatomie*) of philosophy, in which the most abstruse parts of our nature are penetrated" (VS156; F115). History allows us

to associate with the great souls of the past.¹³ The education that Montaigne proposes is one in which the judgment is formed, not simply the memory. History gives us the *mœurs* of such men as Hannibal and Scipio: “That, in my opinion, is of all matters the one to which we apply our minds in the most varying degree” (VS156; F115). And in “Of books,” he again makes clear why he values the histories so highly: “The historians come right to hand. They are pleasant and easy; and at the same time, man in general, the knowledge of whom I seek, appears in them more alive and entire than in any other place—the diversity and truth of his inner qualities in the mass and in detail, the variety of the ways he is put together, and the accidents that threaten him. Now those who write biographies, since they spend more time on plans than on events, more on what comes from within than on what happens without, are more suited to me” (VS416; F303).

Most of Montaigne’s examples are from the ancient historians, and almost all of his examples are based on testimony. They are, as he puts it, “borrowed truth” (VS106; F76). Montaigne refers to examples as “the quarry for weak-backed people like myself” (VS58; F39). He gives the appeal to examples a lowly and weak status because the ascent to universals is, at least by conventional standards, a higher use of the mind. Examples keep us at the level of particulars, resisting the upward pull towards universals. And it is only through attention to examples that the unfamiliar can strike us, that we can be open to the possible, and then return to the familiar to find the strange in the familiar. Examples are the mirror in which we can see ourselves.

Also, examples are, for him, at the level of experience and again, by conventional standards, experience is “lower” than reason (see VS105; F75). There is, of course, a difficulty at the level of examples. How do we appropriate examples; how do we learn from them without the mediation of the universal, without subsuming both ourselves and the example under the common universal? As Montaigne says, “Example is a hazy mirror, reflecting all things in all ways” (VS1088; F834). It seems that examples are useful only “by accident,” just as he says that he publishes the story of his near-fatal fall because it might, by accident, be useful to someone else. Examples have only accidental authority.

Histories are written by all sorts of people and it is necessary to judge the historians themselves. Montaigne prefers those who are either very simple or very intelligent. The simple do not mix in anything of their own: they record everything faithfully and leave the judgment to the reader. The excellent historians select what is worth reporting and rightly assume the authority to judge. Those who fall between these extremes presume to judge for us. They slant their stories and thus often conceal a private word or action that would be most useful for our instruction. And they “omit as incredible things they do not understand” (VS417; F304).

Montaigne certainly does not accept everything that every historian writes: he does not subject his judgment easily. For example, he does not believe the testimony of Dion concerning the character of Seneca, in part because of Dion’s inconsistencies (VS722; F545). But he trusts Plutarch, even with respect to such reports as the nest of the halcyon. And he says of Socrates: “It happened fortunately that the man most worthy to be known and to be presented to the world as an example should be the one of whom we have the most certain knowledge. We have light on him from the most clear-sighted men who ever lived; the witnesses we have of him are wonderful in fidelity and competence” (VS1038; F793).

In “It is folly to measure the true and false by our own capacity,” he defends certain histories against the presumption of the learned. Froissart and Bouchet are witnesses whose rank perhaps does not give them authority over our belief, but are we to say that Plutarch, Caesar, Pliny, and St. Augustine are simple people deceived just like the vulgar, that they are not so clear-sighted as we are? Shall we accuse them of ignorance and simplicity or of malice and imposture? He dismisses Bouchet’s stories about all the miracles done by the relics of St. Hilary, “but to condemn wholesale all similar stories seems to me a singular impudence” (VS181; F134). And at the end of a long discussion of Tacitus, he writes, concerning a seemingly fantastic story, “I have been accustomed in such things to bend under the authority of such great witnesses” (VS942; [F720] sentence omitted in F).

It is noteworthy that Montaigne is interested not only in the actions and habits of great men but also in the rumors that were spread during the times the historians write about. When he distinguishes among the three kinds of historians, he praises the simple ones, like

Froissart, “who presents to us even the diversity of the rumors that were current and the different reports that were made to him. This is the material of history, naked and unformed” (VS417; F304). And he says of all good historians that “they keep a record of important events; among public incidents are also popular rumors and opinions. It is their part to relate common beliefs, not to regulate them. That part concerns the theologians and philosophers, directors of consciences” (VS942; F720). So, although Tacitus was writing at a time when the belief in prodigies had begun to wane, “he says he does not want for all that to fail to insert them in his *Annals*, and give a footing to things accepted by so many good people with such reverence for antiquity. That is very well said. Let them deliver history to us more as they receive it than as they see fit” (VS943; F720). For Montaigne, the very fact that something is accepted by many good people has some weight and cannot be simply dismissed. That something is or has been believed reveals the nature of the human capacity for belief.

Although Montaigne refuses to simply dismiss reports of fantastic occurrences, he does not easily believe them, either. This is especially true with respect to accusations of sorcery. “To kill men, we should have sharp and luminous evidence; and our life is too real and essential to vouch for these supernatural and fantastic accidents” (VS1031; F789). In the matter of such accusations, a man ought to be believed about what is human, but only God can authorize a supernatural effect. Someone is accused of being a sorcerer because witnesses say that one day he was in the east, the next day in the west. “Truly, I would not believe my own self about this. How much more natural and likely it seems to me that two men are lying than that one man should pass with the winds in twelve hours from the east to the west! How much more natural that our understanding should be carried away from its base by the volatility of our untracked mind than that one of us, in flesh and bone, should be wafted up a chimney on a broomstick by a strange spirit! . . . It seems to me that we may be pardoned for disbelieving a marvel, at least as long as we can turn aside and avoid the supernatural explanation by non-marvelous means” (VS1032; F789).

The distinction that he makes between physical powers (where it is easier to know our limits) and the possibilities of the human soul (where it is very difficult to assign limits) is the distinction that allows him to defend Plutarch against the scepticism of Bodin, and it would

seem relevant to the way he evaluates such testimony. In the “Defense of Seneca and Plutarch,” Montaigne addresses the accusation that Bodin makes in his *Method of History* that Plutarch wrote incredible and fabulous things. Bodin finds incredible the story of the Spartan boy who let his stomach be torn up by a fox he had stolen and concealed under his robe rather than be discovered in his theft. Montaigne says that Bodin’s example is badly chosen because “it is very hard to assign bounds to the achievements of the faculties of the soul, whereas we have more chance to assign limits to physical powers and to know them” (VS723; F546). For Montaigne, the story of the Spartan boy is entirely credible and consistent with so many other stories of Spartan endurance. History opens Montaigne to the possible and allows him to overcome the pervasive human tendency to identify the unfamiliar as impossible.

Hume makes a similar point in his discussion of the varying degrees of understanding that men achieve. One reason for these inequalities is the enlargement of experience that comes to some men through books and conversation, an expansion that requires “a confidence in human testimony.”¹⁴ Montaigne’s appropriation of history as “the skeleton of philosophy” is based on this enlargement of experience.

POETIC INVENTION

In his presentation of examples, Montaigne sometimes alters, adds to, or omits details from the historical accounts. For instance, he adapts and adds details to the stories he takes from Plutarch.¹⁵ He adds to the Biblical story of the Jew Rasiyas that he pulled out his entrails. He invents the cannibal’s song which is not found in his source. In the story of the man who could recognize individual eggs, told at the beginning of “Of experience,” Montaigne says that the man was from Delphi, whereas Cicero had written that the man was from Delos.¹⁶

The story of Alexander’s treatment of Betis, recounted in essay I.1, is taken from Quintus Curtius. Montaigne changes the account of the way in which Betis was bound to the chariot: Quintus Curtius says that he was bound with thongs whereas Montaigne says that his heels were pierced. Montaigne simply omits the observation of Quintus Curtius that Alexander was “exulting with insolent joy” over his conquest of Betis (IV.vi.26) and focuses entirely on his anger. Montaigne also omits the final detail of Quintus Curtius’s report,

i.e., that while Betis was being dragged around the city of Gaza, Alexander “boasted that in taking vengeance on an enemy he had imitated Achilles, from whom he derived his race” (IV.vi.29).

This last omission is especially striking since even among the several possible causes of Alexander’s rage that Montaigne offers, he does not include the one that the historian regards as foremost and that he attributes to the mouth of Alexander himself. In omitting this detail, Montaigne is deliberately silent about the power of poetry to affect human action, although he does mention in “Of the most outstanding men” that Alexander regarded Homer as his best counselor in military matters (VS753; F570). The omission is so striking because Montaigne’s transformations of the stories that he borrows are themselves poetic. This is especially significant in the case of Epaminondas, the man who, along with Homer and Alexander, is presented as a most outstanding man. My suggestion is that, just as Homer is the poet of Achilles (the exemplar for Alexander), Montaigne is the poet of Epaminondas (the exemplar that Montaigne places before his prince for imitation). In his *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy*, David Quint notes that Montaigne’s picture of Epaminondas turning away from his Spartan friend in the heat of his most glorious battle is almost entirely invented by Montaigne. No such detail is reported in the ancient sources. So also, there is no direct textual evidence for Montaigne’s assertion that Epaminondas spared the lives of all those whom he vanquished.¹⁷ In “Of the most outstanding men” Montaigne goes so far as to rank Epaminondas as the greatest of all the men he has ever known, placing him above Alexander, Cato, and even Socrates. Yet it seems that the character of Epaminondas is largely his own invention.

Montaigne’s essay form incorporates a poetic dimension, a dimension that must be taken into account when we try to understand how the essay is the form of his practice of philosophy.¹⁸ At the end of “Of the power of the imagination,” he presents us with two different notions of truth. The first is what might be called poetic truth: “So in the study that I am making of our *mœurs* and motions of the soul, fabulous testimonies, provided they are possible, serve like true ones. Whether they have happened or no, in Paris or Rome, to John or Peter, they exemplify, at all events, some human potentiality. . . . There are authors whose end is to tell what has happened. Mine, if I could attain it, would be to talk about what can happen.” The second

notion of truth might be called historical truth. In this regard, Montaigne says of himself: "I surpass all historical fidelity, being scrupulous to the point of superstition. In the examples that I bring in here of what I have heard, done, or said, I have forbidden myself to dare to alter even the slightest and most inconsequential circumstances. My conscience does not falsify one iota; my knowledge, I don't know." Here he contrasts himself with the theologians and philosophers who cannot accept the testimony of unknown and ordinary witnesses and who would refuse to testify themselves concerning what happens before their own eyes (VS105–6; F75–6).

Montaigne's standard of truth is different from the standard of the theologians and philosophers. They will neither accept borrowed truth nor trust that truth is being revealed in their presence. Montaigne connects the two notions of truth. His openness to testimony, to borrowed truth, and to possibility allows him to see the truth that reveals itself to his own eyes. Through this dialectic of poetic truth and historical truth, Montaigne incorporates both poetry and history into his mode of self-knowledge.

This discussion of poetry and history in relation to philosophy recalls Aristotle's discussion in the *Poetics* (1451a35–1151b20): "The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between the historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse . . . ; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry. . . ." Although Aristotle regards poetry as more philosophical than history, he does not incorporate the poetic or the historical into philosophy: the universal that philosophy arrives at is "above" the particulars and abstracted from images. Montaigne, on the other hand, does incorporate poetry and history. History is borrowed truth and it is only through his openness to borrowed truth that he can possess the truth for himself. Poetry is the truth of the possible and it is only on condition of his openness to the possible that the actual can reveal itself to him in its true being.

POETIC ORDER

Montaigne's appropriation of poetic invention is perhaps most manifest in the order of his thought. One of the most puzzling aspects of the essay form is the aspect of order, for the initial impression is that there is no order. Montaigne seems to begin just anywhere, to often wander off the topic, to sometimes hardly even get to the topic.¹⁹ One of the terms that Montaigne uses most frequently to describe his order is 'accidental.' In "Of books," shortly after advising the reader to pay more attention to the form than to the matter of the essays, Montaigne writes: "I have no other marshal but fortune to arrange my bits. As my fancies present themselves, I pile them up; now they come pressing in a crowd, now dragging single file. I want people to see my natural and ordinary pace, however off the track it is" (VS409; F297). At the beginning of "Of friendship," he asks: "What are these [essays] of mine, in truth, but grotesques and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental?" (VS183; F135).

There is, of course, a numerical ordering of the *Essays*, but, for the most part, that too seems accidental. The only hint of design that I detect in the numerical ordering is in essay I.29, "The twenty-nine sonnets of Etienne de la Boétie," where the number of the essay matches the number in the title. There are instances in which one essay is clearly related to another as is the case with II.16, "Of glory," and II.17, "Of presumption": the link is made explicit in Montaigne's introductory remarks to II.17.²⁰ But there are many places in the essays where an accidental, apparently non-substantive link can be made. Essay I.40 ends with a reference to inscriptions on the title pages of printed books; at the beginning of essay I.41, he cites Cicero on the fact that the very authors who write against the concern for glory make sure that their names appear in the front of their books. Essay I.3 ends with a reference to salted meats, and essay I.4 begins with the story of the man who cursed salted meats for his attacks of the gout. The thumbs of essay II.26 had already appeared in the "thumbs down" of the Roman gladiatorial combats in essay II.23. These are trivial connections, but that is the point. The order is accidental, as if some non-essential remark in one essay leads him into the next. Now there is something artful about this since Montaigne does not place his essays in strictly chronological order, i.e., we are

not really being presented with a “stream of consciousness.” Nevertheless, Montaigne clearly intends to emphasize a certain accidental quality in the way his mind works.

When we look at the chapter titles what we see are apparently random topics without any deliberate order. Pascal refers to this as “Montaigne’s muddle” and explains that Montaigne “certainly felt the lack of a rigid method,” and “avoided it by jumping from one subject to another.”²¹ Montaigne begins from the first thoughts that come to his mind. Sometimes these thoughts are prompted by his reading, but they can come from anywhere and often there is no indication of how he came to take up a particular topic. What he says of conversation is also true of his writing: “all subjects are alike to me” (VS824; F625).

The accidental order of the *Essays* conveys a lack of design and an absence of premeditation. He says something similar about his reading: “I leaf through now one book, now another, without order and without plan, by disconnected fragments” (VS828; F 629). The order of the essays is not determined by an end that is known in advance, that is put forward as the purpose of the book, and that therefore necessitates a structure and sequence that leads inevitably to that end.

In “Of vanity,” Montaigne digresses to comment on a digression: “This stuffing is a little out of my subject. I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My fantasies follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance.” Then he elaborates on his style by comparing it with Plato and Plutarch and ultimately placing it within the context of the daemonic: “I have run my eyes over a certain dialogue of Plato [the *Phaedrus*], a fantastic motley in two parts, the beginning part about love, all the rest about rhetoric. The ancients do not fear these changes, and with wonderful grace they let themselves be tossed in the wind, or seem to. The titles of my chapters do not always embrace their matter; often they only denote it by some sign. . . . I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, flighty, daemonic. There are works of Plutarch’s in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in foreign matter. See his movements in ‘The Daemon of Socrates.’ Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more nonchalant and

accidental they seem.” The poetic order is daemonic. The poetic author (including philosophers like Plato and Plutarch) often seems to forget his own topic. But it is precisely here that Montaigne says that “it is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I.” Beneath this appearance of digression upon digression there is an underlying subject. These poetic authors *seem* to be tossed in the wind, their sallies *seem* nonchalant and accidental: “My style and my mind alike go roaming. ‘A man must be a little mad if he does not want to be even more stupid’ say the precepts of our masters, and even more so their examples” (VS994; F761). There is an underlying oracular and daemonic quality that appears in the poetic sallies of Plato and Plutarch, and in the roaming of the *Essays*.²²

What sense, then, can we make of the order of the essays? Montaigne’s order is based on the nature of the human mind and on the order of thought itself.²³ In the “Apology for Sebond,” Montaigne goes through a long discussion of the animals, showing how we are not so superior to them as we might think. There are, of course, numerous stories about dogs and, after recounting one such dog story from Plutarch, Montaigne turns from dogs to stories of oxen, elephants, and birds. Then he writes: “I do not want to omit citing also this other example of a dog that the same Plutarch says he saw (for as for the order, I fully realize that I am disturbing it; but I observe none in arranging these examples any more than in the rest of my work)” (VS465; F341). He then goes on to tell another story of a dog that Plutarch claims to have observed. On one level and according to one meaning of ‘order,’ he has disturbed the order by suddenly going back to dogs after having finished with them to turn to oxen, elephants, and birds: this is the order of “things” that he has interrupted. But the other level of order that he has not really interrupted is the order of testimony and of witnesses, for the story of the magpie that precedes the intrusive dog story is also from Plutarch. Montaigne’s mind is following not the order of things and kinds, but rather the order of human testimony and of conversation. This is the order of the human mind, not the order of the divine intellect of the ancient philosophers.

What order there is in the *Essays* seems to be an attempt to bring under the mind’s control the wild flow of chimeras and monsters that the mind gives rise to all on its own. “In order to train my fancy even to dream with some order and purpose, and in order to keep it from losing its way and roving with the wind, there is nothing like

embodying and registering all the little thoughts that come to it" (VS665; F504). Montaigne thus stays close to the ordinary undisciplined flow of thought. As Merleau-Ponty says of Montaigne, "beneath clear ideas and thoughts he finds a spontaneity abounding in opinions, feelings, and unjustifiable acts."²⁴

So, it does not really matter where he begins, for he is concerned not with "things" but with thought itself. He is always beginning "within" thought. And thoughts present themselves in a very undisciplined and accidental way: "I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me" (VS302; F219). Why are they equally good? In a passage that Montaigne removed in his last revision of the *Essays*, he says that he would have chosen richer and fuller topics, "if I had some other end proposed than the one I have: any action is suitable for making ourselves known" (VS302n4). Whatever the topic, the subject is himself; something of his being is revealed in his thought, something that would be obscured by what Pascal calls "a rigid method."

At the beginning of "Of the affection of fathers for their children," he gives an account of the impetus for his writing that echoes the one given in "Of idleness": "It was a melancholy humor, and consequently a humor very hostile to my natural disposition, produced by the gloom of the solitude into which I had cast myself some years ago, that first put into my head this daydream of meddling with writing. And then, finding myself entirely destitute and void of any other subject matter, I presented myself to myself for argument and subject" (VS385; F278). He turns to books not in order to arouse and exercise his mind, but rather to rest it because his mind tends to become completely absorbed and tense when engaged within itself. Idleness becomes painful for him because "the principal and most laborious study" of his mind is "studying itself" (VS819; F621).

MONTAIGNE'S METAPHYSICS AND PHYSICS

Montaigne's primary concern in the *Essays* is self-knowledge. He tells us that "I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics, that is my physics" (VS1072; F821). We can go even further and say that this is his sole concern: "I dare not only to speak of myself, but to speak only of myself; I go astray when I write of anything else, and get away from my subject" (VS942; F720).

Montaigne is always leading the reader back to himself, back to his own strangeness. It is man himself, the most familiar, that is most strange. Essay II.8, "Of the affection of fathers for their children," is addressed to Madame d'Estissac: "Madame, if strangeness and novelty, which customarily give value to things, do not save me, I shall never get out of this stupid enterprise with honor; but it is so fantastic and appears so remote from common usage that that may enable it to pass. . . . Finding myself entirely destitute and void of any other matter, I presented myself to myself for argument and subject. It is the only book in the world of its kind, a book with a wild and eccentric plan. And so there is nothing in this job worth noting but its bizarreness; for a subject so vain and mean could not have been fashioned by the best workman in the world into something worthy of notice" (VS385; F278).

The wild and eccentric plan of the *Essays* is due to the fact that Montaigne always comes upon himself by accident: "This also happens to me: that I do not find myself in the place where I look; and I find myself more by chance encounter than by searching my judgment."²⁵ Sometimes he cannot understand what he himself has written because he forgets what he meant, whereas a stranger will discover his meaning. But at other times, "chance will show me the light clearer than noonday and make me astonished at my hesitation" (VS40; F26-27). In "Of some verses of Virgil" he writes: "but I am displeased with my soul for ordinarily producing its most profound and maddest fancies, and those I like the best, unexpectedly and when I am least looking for them" (VS 876; F668).

The order, or rather the apparent disorder, of the essays is meant to be contrasted with the "rigid method" that, according to Pascal, Montaigne regarded as inadequate to his purpose. Specifically, the essay must be contrasted with the way of deduction carried out in the syllogism, with the mode of disputation practiced in the schools, and with the form of the treatise.²⁶ Montaigne finds more truth in the chatter of fishwives and more order in the arguments of shop-boys and shepherds than in the disputations of the logicians. "It is not so much strength and subtlety that I ask for as order; the order that we see everyday in the altercations of shepherds and shop boys, never among us. If they get off the track, it is by way of incivility; so indeed do we. But their turbulence and impatience never sidetrack them from their theme; their argument follows its course. If they get ahead

of one another, if they do not wait for one another, at least they understand one another" (VS925; F706).

The syllogism, the disputation, and the treatise all constrain thought within the limits of a rigid method that requires precise definitions of one's terms, that assumes the truth of one's premisses, and that aims at a predetermined conclusion. The essay, on the contrary, embraces the full range and depth of meaning of its terms and thus allows a deeper meaning, a "second sense," to emerge. The essay begins in opinion but does not treat that opinion as a premise, i.e., opinion is taken as revealing truth but only after it is examined as if it were untrue. In Oakeshott's words, we begin with something assumed to be known but, at the same time, we assume it not to be known. The essay does not aim at a predetermined conclusion. It is rather a way of discovery that allows the accidental an authoritative role.

Socrates's speech in the *Phaedrus* (that he does not yet know himself and that he, therefore, has no leisure to examine alien things) is echoed and its meaning deepened in Montaigne's wonder at himself: "I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We become accustomed to anything strange by custom and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself" (VS1029; F787). What comes to light in the essay's movement of thought is the surprising character of thought itself and of the being who thinks.

NOTES

1. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), 19.

2. Jules Brody, "From Teeth to Text in *De l'expérience*: A Philological Reading," *L'Esprit Créateur* 20 (1980): 20.

3. Erich Auerbach "L'Humaine Condition," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), see 292. Joseph Epstein, "Reading Montaigne," *Commentary* (March 1993): 36. Andreas Blinkenberg, "Quel sens Montaigne a-t-il voulu donner au mot *Essais* dans le titre de son œuvre?" in *Mélanges de linguistique et de littérature Romanes, offerts à Mario Roques* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1974) 1:12, claims that Montaigne chose as his title a word that is imprecise and large enough to contain latent meanings.

Among its possible meanings are: *mise à l'épreuve*, and trial, conveying a sense of danger (4, 5, 9). E. V. Telle, "A propos du mot 'essai' chez Montaigne," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 30 (1968), also specifies the meaning of essay as test (229). In Latin, he says, '*essai*' is *periculum*, i.e., danger (231). See also Donald M. Frame, *Montaigne's Essais: A Study* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969), 34, and Alan M. Boase, "The Early History of the *Essai* Title in France and Britain," in *Studies in French Literature, Presented to H. W. Lawton*, ed. J. C. Ireson, I. D. McFarlane, and Garnet Rees (New York: Manchester University Press, Barnes and Noble, 1968), esp. 69 and 71. George Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 9, writes of the title *Essays*: "the simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy. The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate. . . . But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness—the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life—and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty." Joseph Epstein, "The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery," in *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, ed. Joseph Epstein (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), 15, describes the personal essay as a "form of discovery," i.e., one starts out with something one does not understand, without a precise definition; then one discovers where one stands and learns what one really thinks.

4. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975; reprint, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), vii.

5. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Reading Montaigne," in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 206. See Jules Brody, "'Du repentir' (III:2): A Philological Reading," *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 252, on the philological circularity of Montaigne's writing. R. Lane Kauffmann, "The Skewed Path: Essaying as Un-methodical Method," *Diogenes* 143 (Fall 1988), 90: says that in the essay the familiar is regarded as unknown. He also describes the essay as a "critique of instrumental reason" (72).

6. References to the French text of the *Essais* are to the edition by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, 3 vols., Presses Universitaires de France, 2d ed., "Quadrige," 1992. The English translation is that of Donald Frame, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, Stanford University Press, 1943. In some instances, I have emended Frame's translation. The citation (VS874; F666) refers to p. 874 of the Villey-Saulnier edition and to p. 666 of the Frame translation.

7. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées et opuscules*, ed. Léon Brunschvicg (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1946), revised edition, *pensée* no. 64.

8. François Rigolot, "Montaigne's Purloined Letters," *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 145–66, claims that the essays try to approximate as closely as possible the idealized epistolary style.

9. David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Classics, 1985), 534.

10. Pascal, *Pensées*, Br. no. 18.

11. Auerbach, "L'Humaine Condition," 308.

12. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1962; reprint, Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 491. Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 38: "only in the incorporation of what is foreign into what is one's own does knowledge by memory . . . ripen into education." Richard A. Sayce, *The Essays of Montaigne: A Critical Exploration* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 28, points to Montaigne as an example of the real purpose of books, i.e., the enhancement and enlargement of experience. Dudley M. Marchi, *Montaigne Among the Moderns: Receptions of the Essais* (Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books, 1994), 280, notes the fact that Montaigne had a library of over one thousand printed volumes. "Montaigne would have perhaps understood Eliot's desperate claim in 'The Waste Land' that our inability to live in an organic relationship with our cultural traditions can only lead to an imperfect ordering of its contents, one that nevertheless helps to avoid psychic disintegration: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruin.'" For Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne in Motion*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 12, Montaigne's "turning inward" has as its purpose "the discovery of a conversational mirror within oneself." Floyd Gray, *Le Style de Montaigne* (Paris: Librairie A. G. Nizet, 1958), 244, sees the *Essays* as a perpetual dialogue between Montaigne and himself, Montaigne and his book, Montaigne and antiquity. Patrick Henry, *Montaigne in Dialogue* (Stanford, Calif.: ANMA Libri and Co., 1987), 120, suggests that Montaigne introduces various voices from the ancients.

13. Steven Rendall, "Of History," *Montaigne Studies* 6, no. 1–2 (Oct. 1994): 4, claims that the specific role of the historian is "to expand the scope of the possible." Cathleen M. Bauschatz, "Montaigne's Conception of Reading in the Context of Renaissance Poetics and Modern Criticism," in *The Reader in the Text*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 278: reading history is a kind of experience.

14. David Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1977), 71.

15. See Gray, *Le Style*, 244: each time Montaigne takes a story from Plutarch, he gives it a form superior to the original. Randolph Runyon, "Trumpet Variations on an Original Air: Self-Referential Allusion in Montaigne's 'Apology,'" *Romanic Review* 77 (1986): 195–208, discusses the animal stories in the "Apology." Montaigne adds details that are not found in Plutarch.

16. On the story of Rasia, see Michael O'Loughlin, *The Garlands of Repose: The Literary Celebration of Civic and Retired Leisure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 249. On the cannibal's song, see David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 84. Michael Wood,

“Montaigne and the Mirror of Example,” *Philosophy and Literature* 13 (1989): 5, cites the change Montaigne makes in the story about the man from Delos.

17. See Quint, *Quality of Mercy*, 40. In connection with Epaminondas see Marcel Gutwirth, “‘By Diverse Means . . .’ (I: 1),” *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 182, 186.

18. Patrick Henry, “The Rise of the Essay: Montaigne and the Novel,” *Montaigne Studies* 6 (1994): 124–25: the *Essais* are neither history nor fiction but share attributes of both.

19. On the necessity of Montaigne’s disorder, see Jean-Yves Pouilloux, *Montaigne l’éveil de la pensée* (Paris: Editions Champion, 1995), esp. 53, 56, 96; Jules Brody, “Les Oreilles de Montaigne,” *Romanic Review* 74 (1983): 124; Margaret McGowan, “The Art of Transition in the *Essais*,” in *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, ed. I. D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 37.

20. See Marianne S. Meijer, “De l’honnête, de l’utile et du repentir,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 12, no. 2 (1982): 259–74, for a discussion the unity of essays III.1, 2, and 3.

21. Pascal, *Pensées*, Br. no. 62.

22. Edouard Ruel, *Du Sentiment artistique dans la morale de Montaigne* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1901), 38, contrasts Montaigne’s poetic order with scientific order. Gray, *Le Style*, refers to Montaigne’s “interior order” (206); he places himself at the interior of a poetic or philosophic image (210–11). Richard M. Chadbourne, “Michel de Montaigne,” in Tracy Chevalier, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Essay* (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 570, claims that Montaigne “intended his own prose to be moved by a similar ‘demon’ [to Plato’s].” Philippe Desan, *Naissance de la Méthode* (Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1987), 127, also refers to Montaigne’s “internal order.” Montaigne’s method is “une pratique du quotidien,” and the “everyday” has a logic that is not obvious.

23. Richard L. Regosin, “Sources and Resources: The ‘Pretexts’ of Originality in Montaigne’s *Essais*,” *Sub-Stance* 21 (1978): 110, claims that the *Essays* “undermine notions of external origin.” For Lukacs, *Soul and Form*, 11: “the essay has to create from within itself all the preconditions for the effectiveness and validity of its vision.” O. B. Hardison, “Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay,” in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, ed. Alexander J. Butrym (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 26, characterizes the essay as “thought thinking about itself.” Peter Burke, *Montaigne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 62, refers to “the author’s attempt to catch himself in the act of thinking.” Sayce, *Critical Exploration*, 104, describes the order of the essays as the order of “spontaneous thought.” What emerges is a sense of mystery, a “labyrinth” (322–23). Gustave Lanson, *Les Essais de Montaigne* (Paris: Librairie Mellottee [1947?]), 316–17, also notes the spontaneity of the form. Montaigne rejects

the modes of composition of the philosophers of his time, i.e., a logical order with its path traced out in advance. He abandons himself to the natural course of thought, which follows the detours of spontaneous association of ideas. Gray, *Le Style*, 188, contrasts the immobile with the dynamic way of composition. The immobile way is a plan, ruled in advance by reason. That is an “exterior order.” Montaigne’s way is dynamic, i.e., the images that come to mind modify the flow of thought. Caroline Locher, “Primary and Secondary Themes in Montaigne’s ‘Des cannibales’ (I, 31),” *French Forum* 1 (1976): 120, claims that “Des cannibales” is really “an inquiry into the nature and power of reason.”

24. Merleau-Ponty, “Reading Montaigne,” 200.

25. Frame, *Montaigne’s Essais*, 73: “No methodical order could probe the self without distorting it.” Carol E. Clark, “Talking About Souls: Montaigne on Human Psychology,” in *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, ed. I. D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 65, says that to know oneself, one has to catch oneself unawares. Henry E. Genz, “Compositional Form in Montaigne’s *Essais* and the Self-Portrait,” *Kentucky Foreign Language Quarterly* 10 (1963): 135, refers to Montaigne’s self-portrait as “oblique” because Montaigne is aware of the limitations of a direct approach. “An indirect view may . . . cast light on those areas of the mind inevitably darkened by the shadow of the mind turning back upon itself.” S. John Holyoake, “Montaigne’s Attitude to Memory,” *French Studies* 25 (1971): 269, notes Montaigne’s “awareness that a chance occurrence, an unexpected detail, an apparently irrelevant digression, might involuntarily lead him to a valuable discovery about himself.” Epstein, “Reading Montaigne,” 36, says that Montaigne finds himself by accident.

26. Ian Maclean, “‘Le païs au delà’: Montaigne and Philosophical Speculation,” in *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, 104, says that the order of shop-boys and shepherds is being contrasted by Montaigne with the syllogism. Montaigne’s “particular target” is Aristotle (102). Tzvetan Todorov, “L’Etre et l’autre: Montaigne,” *Yale French Studies* 64 (1983): 142–43: the essay is a genre opposed to the treatise. See also Michael L. Hall, “The Emergence of the Essay and the Idea of Discovery,” in *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre*, 80.

