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ULLRICH LANGER

1 Introduction

"I am no philosopher" (III.9, *F*725, *V*950). Michel de Montaigne is no philosopher, on several counts, and proudly says so. Montaigne understands "philosopher" as someone indifferent to pain and pleasure, inhumanly (and sometimes comically) persistent in his convictions,[1] just like Pyrrho who finished saying what he had to say even when his interlocutors had left the room (II.29, *F*533, *V*705). In a different context, Montaigne imagines a philosopher suspended from the towers of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, in a cage made of thin wire: although his reason tells him he will not fall, the philosopher will not be able to keep himself from being terrified by the sight of the space below him (II.12, *F*449, *V*594). Not only does Montaigne criticize philosophers for their inattentiveness to their own humanity, but he intentionally fashions his own writings to be unlike philosophy. Indeed, a reader who samples almost any one of the chapters of his *Essays* will be struck by several unsettling features of Montaigne's thought and writing:

1. Montaigne distrusts universal statements, and seems enamored of the exception, of the particular case ("but there are some who . . ."). We move from a general rule to an exception, then to an exception to the exception, until we seem to be left hanging. The impression of open-endedness that many chapters of the *Essays* convey[2] is linked to the author's willingness to indulge any sort of particular case.
2. Montaigne is also noted for his attention to the influence of the human body, and what we like to call the "human" element, on behavior and thought. The suspended philosopher can't avoid being terrified by the sight below his feet.

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Montaigne's kidney stones figure prominently in his portrait of himself. The body has its beneficial ways, too. The emperor Otho resolves to kill himself one night: having made arrangements for the distribution of his wealth, having sharpened his sword, waiting for all his servants to go to bed he falls asleep, and sleeps so soundly that his servants are awakened by his snoring (1.44, *F*198, *V*271; the essay is aptly called "Of Sleep").

3. Finally, Montaigne "himself" is always present, also: rules, statements, observations undergo a sort of personal vetting. "As for me," Montaigne will write, and what is right for himself, he readily concedes, is not necessarily right for anyone else (although it could be . . .). The *Essays* are definitely the recordings of the thoughts of a particular man living a particular life, and Montaigne is rather cocky in insisting on just that.

Given these features of his writing, Montaigne is certainly *not* a philosopher in the way in which the sixteenth century understood the practice of contemporary philosophy. His *Essays* are not written in the form of a treatise: that is, there is no attempt at systematic coverage of a topic, according to the questions or categories inherited from the tradition. The closest we come to this is the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," but this chapter is set in the context of chapters quite evidently not systematic at all. He has not written a commentary, say, on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nor has he engaged in a scholastic dispute, defending his conclusions on questions set up in the schools, such as the relationship between God's will and creation. Nor has he written a dialogue, another form practiced in the sixteenth century in rather inaccurate imitation of Plato's dialogues. The philosophical writing he comes closest to is Plutarch's *Moralia*, essays (or what we call essays today) on different topics loosely organized, and not always covering what today we would call strictly ethical questions. What distinguishes Montaigne, though, is his persistently personal perspective, the "study" of himself as the goal of his enterprise. Yet the *Essays* are not an autobiography, in the sense of a chronological account of his experiences, and he does not give his writings an encompassing providential perspective: Montaigne is not the Christian wayfarer, and he is not the former sinner set

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on the right path. Montaigne practices "inwardness," an unabashed attentiveness to one's self, but without any obvious sense of exemplarity, refusing explicitly to be a lesson to anyone else. This often disarming, unsystematic revealing of Montaigne's own judgments, tastes, bodily functions constitutes the ground of what can be called the modern "self," the recentering of esthetic, epistemological, and social reflection in the subject.[3]

Although it has become customary to refer to the individual chapters of the *Essays* as "essays," Montaigne himself never refers to a single chapter as an "essay." He does refer to the entire book as his "essays," and he does speak of his "essays" in a non-specific way. That is because the term *essai* in sixteenth-century French does not refer to a delineated segment of text, but instead retains the senses of "attempt," "trying-out," "test," "practice," "assay" that are still present in the French verb *essayer* (to try, to attempt, to taste) today. His book is full of all sorts of "attempts." He tries out all sorts of judgments, of observations, of reflections, and of arguments. But these judgments, observations, reflections, arguments are all as it were suspended: they are not meant to be the final word on the matter. They are usually juxtaposed – sometimes directly, sometimes at a certain remove – with statements saying the contrary. In most cases Montaigne does not claim universal validity for his statements; he insists on the fact that they are the product of his own judgment, and that another might judge differently. This skeptical meaning underlies Montaigne's use of the word "essay." Each individual chapter might contain, then, several "essays," several instances in which Montaigne "tries out" his judgment. Although arguably this skeptical tenor of the essay connects to ancient skepticism, in particular the philosophy of Pyrrho as transmitted by Sextus Empiricus,[4] Montaigne distinguishes himself above all from the sort of philosophy practiced during his lifetime. From this perspective, too, he is not a "philosopher."

Yet Montaigne was a philosopher, in a way, and several chapters in this volume are meant to bring out the philosophical elements of Montaigne's writings, whether they arise from the skeptical tradition, from Epicurean concerns, or from the Greek and Roman moral tradition. Others place Montaigne into an intellectual context that is his own, a context which inflects the philosophical arguments and ideas that form the main body of his philosophical thought.

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Montaigne's legal training and thought, his (or the Renaissance's) conception of authorship, his position as a "modern" vis-à-vis the classical tradition as a whole, and his reaction to the New World all influence the philosophical thought we would like to glean from the *Essays*. For more so than any other philosopher before him, this philosophical writer is inseparably, indelibly linked as a particular person with his "message."

That particular person was part of a society that experienced at times catastrophic changes. The initial chapter is meant to convey an understanding of the social, political, and religious context in which Montaigne lived and wrote his essays.

Warren Boutcher's chapter analyzes the meaning that writing, owning, and giving a book had in the aristocratic culture of the sixteenth century. The book was largely composed and used for social purposes that had no necessary link to the author's own existential relationship to his text. Montaigne's innovation consists in a freedom of judgment judiciously displayed, a sense of personal attention if not adherence to what he composes, making the book less a transmitter of social and cultural authority than a record of self-knowledge. This opens the way for a new kind of philosophizing, where a Descartes, for example, will feel free to test and reject philosophical tradition.

John O'Brien tackles a feature of Montaigne's writing that strikes any modern reader: the omnipresence of classical antiquity in the *Essays*. Classical allusions, examples, quotations, and themes abound. O'Brien focuses on three questions within this area: the use of quotations, the choice of a philosophy, and the choice of models of conduct. Montaigne often reaches to antiquity to illustrate a point he is making, and it is worthwhile checking the quotation in its original context, for the Renaissance writer as often distorts the meaning as not. This is a productive distortion, shedding light on Montaigne's deeper concerns. Pyrrhonism is for Montaigne a rather attractive philosophy, but not only because of its propositions (or lack thereof), but also because it relates to the type of writing that the *Essays* represent. Finally, O'Brien indicates an ethical use of antiquity, as Montaigne chooses models of conduct among the numerous lives of famous men that the Renaissance so eagerly read.

Montaigne's *Essays* are one of the first documents in European culture to weigh the cultural and epistemological consequences of the discovery and exploration of the New World. There are several

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travel accounts available to the European reader before Montaigne, and there is an ardent defense of the Indians, coupled with an indictment of the Spanish, before Montaigne as well.[5] But the essayist is the first to explore with sensitivity and sophistication the challenge of the New World to Europe's sense of itself. Tom Conley's chapter investigates the two main discussions of the New World in the *Essays*, "Of Cannibals" and "Of Coaches," relating them to the themes of Otherness and friendship, both of which are fundamental to the *Essays* as a whole.

One of the salient themes of the *Essays* is the condemnation of laws, lawyers, and legal thinking. In spite of his avowed conservatism and resistance to social and theological reforms, Montaigne persistently attacked the French legal system. Montaigne himself received a legal education and had an essentially legal career in Périgueux and as counselor to the *Parlement* of Bordeaux. André Tournon argues that this legal experience is essential to understanding both Montaigne's rejection of dogmatism and the sort of philosophical writing that the essay represents. In concluding Tournon demonstrates the ultimate importance of subjective judgment, and thus of the self, for the conception in the *Essays* of what is just.

In a rather different perspective, one that goes beyond the Pyrrhonism present in the *Essays*, Francis Goyet argues that the *Essays* are the record of judgments, and specifically judgments of someone who styles himself as a "prudent" man, someone who, like Machiavelli, has an understanding of the art of statecraft and what is necessary to practice it. The classical notion of prudence is the key to this understanding. This means that Montaigne, on Goyet's count, is indeed fashioning a product, a book that is meant to have an "ethical" impact on the prince or on the noble elite in whose circle Montaigne moved. In this Goyet demonstrates that, in contrast to some current views, the *Essays* do not undermine any attempt at action in the world through their self-destructive skepticism and subjectivism.

Ian Maclean situates Montaigne's philosophical thought within the logic and epistemology of his time. Whereas his writing is notoriously unsystematic and hardly conforms to the formats through which philosophical argumentation was conducted, Montaigne does consider – and usually critiques – the language, criteria, and definitions of university philosophy. His skepticism towards "the

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epistemological virtues of objectivity, certainty and universality" is withering, but in the end the essayist is more pragmatic, more focused on action within the contingent and highly diverse world than his skepticism seems to entail. This is particularly true of his use of something like the notion of equity, of his praise (and apparently practice) of discussion, and true of his self-presentation in all its diverse details.

Although Montaigne does not call himself a "skeptic," he does call himself a "naturalist." George Hoffmann examines this term within the empirical investigation of nature as it was practiced in the sixteenth century. A naturalist is someone interested in natural causes, not divine ones, and for Montaigne this meant the study of cause and effects, as opposed to the analysis of means and ends. However, Montaigne submits such a study to skeptical examination, and according to Hoffmann found instead inspiration in Lucretius' *De rerum natura* which he annotated and whose physics of "accident" and "fortune" he used to explain natural *mental* phenomena, such as the process of judgment and even the meeting of Montaigne and his idealized friend Etienne de La Boétie.

Ann Hartle examines Montaigne's skepticism. Hartle surveys classical skepticism and summarizes the skeptical arguments in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond," undoubtedly the most traditionally philosophical of Montaigne's chapters. But Hartle also details several ways in which Montaigne cannot be understood to be a skeptic: his credulity, the fact that indeed he advances judgments, his project of self-knowledge, his rejection of the ideal of imperturbability, and his insistence on his Catholic faith. These features of his thought are an element in the dialectic characteristic of Montaigne's "accidental" philosophy, according to Hartle, a dialectic that is open to the accidental and the strange, that finds the unfamiliar in the familiar, then returns better to grasp the familiar.

The important subject of Montaigne's moral philosophy is treated by Jerome B. Schneewind. The models that Montaigne was dealing with were Raymond Sebond's natural theology and the different moral philosophies of antiquity, most notably Senecan Stoicism. Montaigne rejects the confident derivation of moral laws from humans' place in the hierarchy of beings that characterizes Sebond, as he demonstrates how similar we are to creatures inferior to us in that hierarchy. Montaigne also insists that we practice a moral life,

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not simply theorize it. He rejects the Senecan, and generally classical, proposing of rules or ideals so difficult to attain that few human beings can live a moral life. Schneewind sees Montaigne as sketching out an alternative, an acknowledgment that desires and their satisfaction are limitlessly diverse, but that each human being can arrive at a critical judgment of what is good, within him or herself. This points the way to more modern, and especially Kantian notions of morality. It also ties in with the conclusion of Tournon's chapter, and illuminates a fundamental aspect of Montaigne's composition of the "self."

Whether we focus on Montaigne's skepticism, on his notions of the good life, of the virtues of justice and prudence, on his concept of authorship, or on his empirical curiosity, we are struck by the charm, the seductiveness of his inquiries and of his self-presentation. In part, this charm derives from the reader's *impression*, justified or not, that in most chapters of the *Essays* Montaigne is not writing in order to convince us of a particular thesis, that he is not trying to put forth an argument. He is not the school-master type. This very style of philosophizing endeared him to many, philosophers and non-philosophers alike, such that Nietzsche could say: "That such a human being has written, truly increases one's desire to live on this earth."[6]

NOTES

1. He goes on to say: "Evils [*maux*] crush me according to their weight, and their weight depends on their form as much as on their matter, and often more." Unlike the Stoics and the Epicureans, not only can he not claim to have attained a true tranquility of the soul, impervious to pain and (excessive) pleasure, but he also isn't sure that this tranquility is worth attaining for himself.
2. In fact, Montaigne was a highly careful writer who edited his own writings extensively and was even involved in details such as punctuation (which for much of the sixteenth century was often haphazard).
3. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), and his pages on Montaigne, pp. 177–84.
4. See the work of Emmanuel Naya, in particular *"La loy de pure obeïssance": le pyrrhonisme à l'essai chez Montaigne* (Paris: Champion, 2004).

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5. See Bartolomé de Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, trans. Stafford Poole, C. M. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992).
6. Nietzsche is comparing Montaigne to Schopenhauer (in "Schopenhauer als Erzieher," *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* [1874], in *Werke in sechs Bände*, ed. K. Schlechta, Munich, Carl Hanser, 1980, vol. 1, p. 296).

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2 Montaigne's political and religious context

Montaigne was born in 1533, during the reign of François I (1515–47), but he did not begin writing his *Essays* until after his "retirement" to his estate in 1571, as a mature man. France seemed then a country very different from the heady days of François I. For much of the second half of the sixteenth century, and especially so in the southwest, it was a "disturbed and sick state," as Montaigne himself remarked (III.8, *F*719, *V*941).[1] Many factors contributed to this experience and to this perception, most obviously the wars of religion (1562–98), which were fought intermittently, with varying intensity and with varying geographical extension.[2] However, the religious conflict between Huguenots and Catholics was only one of the factors inducing a sense of fragility and contingency in French society. The sixteenth century witnessed a remarkable set of political and religious changes, fuelled by an early economic expansion which produced exceptional social mobility at the upper levels (from which Montaigne's own family benefited). On the political level, the religious conflict enabled a critique and a corresponding defence of the monarchy which in theory at least became a guarantor of order in a troubled society. Montaigne's political functions as magistrate, mayor of Bordeaux for two successive terms (1581–5), and administrator of his domain,[3] and his involvement in mediation attempts between the warring factions and in diplomatic missions at the highest level,[4] exposed him both to the local consequences of conflict and to the issues relevant to the direction of the ship of state.

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THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND ITS POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS

The wars of religion in France had roots in the religious reform movement that spread across Europe in the early sixteenth century.[5] The French version originally encouraged reform (rather than rejection) of the Catholic Church by emphasizing the unadulterated teachings of the New Testament, and by proclaiming salvation by faith as opposed to good works channelled through church-sponsored practices. The impetus of this reform movement was provided by the new availability of a French translation of the New Testament (by Jacques Lefèvre d'Etaples, 1523), by preaching and lay Bible study, by the sympathy, initially at least, of the king François I, and by the enduring support of his sister, Marguerite de Navarre. However, Luther's virulent writings against the Roman Catholic Church were available in France from 1519 onwards, and in 1521 they were condemned by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris. The imprudent actions of reformist preachers (most notably during the "Affaire des placards" [1534], an attempt to spread anti-Catholic teachings through public posters in French cities), hardened royal policy towards the early reform movement. Their leaders within the Church, such as the bishop of Meaux, Guillaume Briçonnet, had in fact rejoined the fold earlier. However the seeds had been sown. In the following years the combination of a more radical spirit of reform, fostered by the publications of John Calvin (1509–1564), especially his *Institution de la religion chrétienne*,[6] and aided politically by the support of some of the French nobility to the reform movement, made it clear that the reformers were unwilling simply to ameliorate this or that practice of the Catholic Church. Their doctrinal positions, in any event, were drastically opposed to ecclesiastical tradition: they believed in the absolute priority of God's grace over human good works, predestination of the elect and even reprobation of the damned, universal priesthood (all Christians have equal status in the view of God in relation to the practice of their faith), and the modification of the Catholic view of the Eucharist, whereby the bread is transformed into the spiritual – not the physical – body of Christ not by the formula of consecration but by the sole grace of God at the moment of communion with the faithful. Calvin, mostly from his outpost in Geneva, was also able to organize a political party which operated in France and provided

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