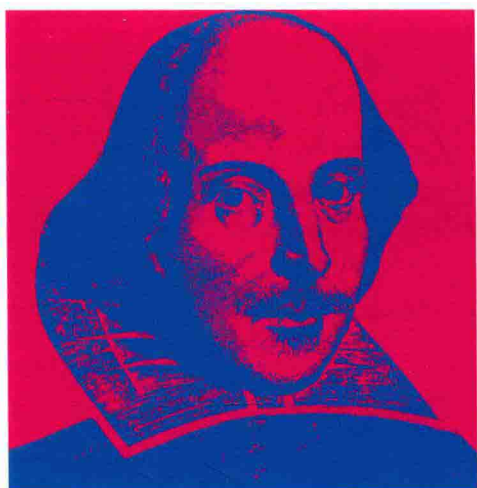


MONTAIGNE AND SHAKESPEARE

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS



ROBERT ELLRODT

Montaigne and Shakespeare

The emergence of modern self-consciousness

Robert Ellrodt

Manchester University Press

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Preface

This book is at once a rewriting, a revisiting and a revision of my *Montaigne et Shakespeare* (2011). It has been adapted to Anglophone readers by changes in the quotations and references. Where some notes have been suppressed, others have been extended, and the bibliography includes more recent publications.

The original subtitle has had to be modified. 'L'émergence de la conscience moderne' played on the ambiguity of the French word 'conscience', which can be deployed for both consciousness and moral conscience. The modernity of Montaigne and Shakespeare can be viewed from both perspectives, but chapter 6 alone illustrates the modernity of some of their depictions and readings of moral values. This aside, my main concern throughout is with the historical evolution and illustration of self-consciousness.

The original's 'annexe', 'Et Shakespeare créa la jeune fille', has been left out, for two reasons. Firstly, it concerned only Shakespeare. While Montaigne often speaks of women and sex in a modern way, he displays no particular interest in 'la jeune fille' and thus there is no obvious parallel. Secondly, while diverting, it was rather loosely related to the main theme – the emergence of modern self-consciousness. While I included it in the French book as another illustration of Shakespeare's modernity, and believe it provided a further opportunity of tracing, though much more briefly, an evolution from Antiquity to the Renaissance, I have excluded it here for those reasons.

A brief account of a long journey

To see in Montaigne and Shakespeare the fountainhead of an evolution beginning in early modern times and culminating in our own age is not surprising given the canon of extant literary and philosophical studies

that have viewed their works from a post-modern or post-structuralist perspective. However, the situation was different in 1952, when I published an essay on the genesis and dilemma of 'la conscience moderne'. Perhaps prematurely given the prevailing theoretical preoccupations of the time, it juxtaposed the two possible meanings of the word 'conscience' in French: 'consciousness' and 'moral conscience'. While researching the English Metaphysical poets for a French doctorate, I had noticed in John Donne's writings the presence of a phenomenon earlier illustrated in Montaigne's *Essays* that might be characterized as a calling into question of the self. I thought one could discern in such self-scrutiny a foreshadowing of the doubts concerning the existence or accessibility of the self later expressed by Henri Frédéric Amiel and modern authors, notably Paul Valéry and Jean-Paul Sartre. My essay thus attempted to suggest an outline of the evolution of subjectivity from Antiquity to the present age. As I was writing in a moment of existentialist excitement, it was maybe inevitable that I sought an explanation for this apparent paradox in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), describing a trajectory towards an intense self-consciousness that resulted in a dissolution of the self.

In my *L'inspiration personnelle et l'esprit du temps chez les poètes Métaphysiques anglais* (1960), I focused attention on the individual structures of thought, imagination and sensibility present in each author. Implying a stable self despite obvious evolutions or 'conversions', I detected various forms of self-consciousness, apparently unprecedented in the history of literature, and alluded to similarities between Montaigne and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A later essay, 'Self-consciousness in Montaigne and Shakespeare', published in *Shakespeare Survey* (1975), further explored convergences between the Elizabethan dramatist and the author of the *Essays*. I returned to these themes in *Seven Metaphysical Poets: A Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (2000), and in several lectures and articles, some of which have been included in volumes often inaccessible nowadays. This work builds on these foundations. Yet it also presents a profound expansion of the presentations and conclusions of my earlier research. Based on a historical approach, it includes fresh material, opens new perspectives on the thematic concerns highlighted above and seeks a mediation between theses that I recognized as related but perhaps antagonistic in my earlier interventions in the field.

Chapter 1 calls attention to a special kind of self-consciousness displayed by Montaigne: its instantaneity in the very moment of experience. It suggests that it may account for his doubts concerning the stability or the very existence of the self, thus anticipating Hume's analysis and

the later interrogations of modern and post-modern writers. However, it also proposes that a fuller examination of the *Essays* reveals that their author was aware of the coherence and continuity of his own self from youth to old age: his conception of his 'essential form' is clarified. This view of the self can be read from the psychological perspectives of Cornelius Castoriadis or the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur rather than post-modern theory.

Chapter 2 traces the evolution of subjectivity from Greek and Roman Antiquity to the Renaissance in literary, philosophical and religious works. Against a prevailing objectivity, growing attention to the self and its conflicts can be seen in the Roman elegists and satirists as well as in the Stoics, something which culminates in the *Confessions* of Augustine. By contrast, the allegorization of the inner life in literature and its purely objective description in scholastic treatises blurs any sense of progress in this regard in the Middle Ages. While Petrarch's introspection can be viewed as reviving Augustinian interrogations, later Renaissance poets on the Continent display a marked tendency to indulge in expressions of sentiment rather than intense self-analysis. Viewed from this cultural-historical perspective, Montaigne's mode of self-scrutiny is thus unprecedented.

Chapter 3 is divided into five distinct yet interrelated sections. Reacting and responding to the trajectory and contexts established in the preceding chapters, sections 1 and 2 turn attention to the English predecessors and contemporaries of Shakespeare, scrutinizing their evolution from a moral insistence on self-knowledge to an emphasis on self-assertion, but discovering only in Donne the kind of self-consciousness displayed by Montaigne. Section 3 explores the various forms of subjectivity and self-consciousness manifested in the *Sonnets* of Shakespeare, traceable even though their autobiographical significance is doubtful. Section 4 traces the slow growth of subjectivity from the medieval dramatic monologue to the Shakespearean soliloquy, positioning the character of Hamlet as a turning point in this evolution. Finally, section 5 assesses the extent of the influence of Montaigne on Shakespeare.

Chapter 4 offers a study of three tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Lear*. The analysis demonstrates that the complexity of Shakespeare's characters and their occasional evolution does not impair the essential coherence of their individual selves, often denied nowadays.

Disclosing the kind of evolution from objectivity to subjectivity discerned in the modes of self-consciousness traced earlier, chapter 5 explores changes in the perception and conception of time from Antiquity to the Renaissance, notably emphasizing the personal and distinctive

apprehension of time revealed by the analysis of Montaigne's *Essays* and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

Chapter 6 qualifies the scepticism and moral relativism nowadays generally ascribed to Montaigne and Shakespeare. Their adherence to universal humanistic values is demonstrated; its emotional and religious bases are investigated and its modernity acknowledged. Their quest for truth can thus be viewed as inseparable from a belief in essence, and the originality of their aesthetic intuitions of transcendence is highlighted.

Finally, as each chapter has its own conclusion, the Epilogue serves only to restate their findings, reminding us that, unlike many of our contemporaries, both Montaigne and Shakespeare 'saw life steadily and saw it whole' (Matthew Arnold, 'To a friend', 1849).

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Éditions Corti have authorized this translation of my book *Montaigne et Shakespeare: l'émergence de la conscience moderne* (Paris, 2011).

Several publishers had given their agreement to the reproduction of passages borrowed from my earlier publications, more or less modified and inserted into a new whole:

- Oxford University Press for a few pages in chapters 16 and 17 of my *Seven Metaphysical Poets: A Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (2000);
- University of Delaware Press for part of my International Shakespeare Association lecture 'Self-consistency in Montaigne and Shakespeare', in *Shakespeare and the Mediterranean* (2004);
- Éditions Gallimard (Pléiade) for part of my 'Notice' on 'Le Roi Lear' in *Shakespeare: Tragédies II* (Pléiade, 2002) and Cambridge Scholars Publishing for the use of a translation of this 'Notice' in 'And That's True Too': *New Essays on King Lear* (eds François Laroque, Pierre Iselin and Sophie Alatorre, 2007);
- Éditions Actes Sud for the use of parts of my 'Présentation' in my edition of *William Shakespeare: Sonnets* (2007);
- Publications de l'Université de Saint Etienne for part of my article 'La perception du temps dans les Sonnets de Shakespeare', in *Le char ailé du temps* (ed. Louis Roux, 2003);
- Société française Shakespeare for the use of my article (much augmented) in *Shakespeare et Montaigne: vers un nouvel humanisme* (2003).

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Chapter 1

New forms of self-consciousness in Montaigne

An acute and original attention to the self is noticeable in the writings of several authors by the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the seventeenth. Most intensely manifested by Michel de Montaigne in France, it was mirrored by William Shakespeare's and John Donne's engagements with the same concepts in England. This development may be aligned to our own views of the modern and modernity, not just because it occurred in a period called the 'early modern' by historians, philosophers, linguists and literary critical commentators alike, but also because it announces an engagement with the question of personal identity, whose character the same observers have largely ascribed to our modern and post-modern age. When I suggest such contiguities, of course, it is with the awareness that there are nonetheless fundamental differences. In proposing these confluences, I do not have in mind the emergence of the individualism which Jacob Burckhardt, in his epoch-making *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860), considered to be a distinctive feature of the Renaissance. This is not to wholly reject Burckhardt's position, but to suggest that assumptions surrounding the nature of individualism and its relationship to the individual self must be tempered. As such, I intend to call attention to a phenomenon of self-consciousness manifested in particular moments of self-observation: that which is characterized by doubts concerning the nature and at times the very existence of a self, which cannot be defined, or even discerned.

1. Calling the self into question

Our discussion can take as its starting point Montaigne's description of his own character in the essay 'Of the inconstancy of our actions':

Every sort of contradiction can be found in me, depending upon some twist or attribute: timid, insolent; chaste, lecherous; talkative, taciturn; tough, sickly;

clever, dull; brooding, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; generous, miserly and then prodigal – I can see something of all that in myself, depending on how I gyrate, and anyone who studies himself attentively finds in himself and in his very judgement this whirring about and this dissonancy. There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole simply and completely, without intermingling and admixture.¹

In essaying a dialogue of self-description, Montaigne was not the first to discern this changeableness, of course. It had been observed by the Roman moralists, satirists and elegists, but they pointed out this instability only in the succession of our actions and emotions. In Montaigne's *Essays*, the contradictory aspects also appear at times in succession, as in the claim that 'I now and I then are certainly twain' (III, ix: 1091 C; VS 964). But in the passage quoted above the different aspects of the self are embraced in a single glance, as if the motions of the soul were so many possibilities rising to consciousness at the same moment, 'depending on how I gyrate'. Indeed, in the same paragraph Montaigne begins by noting that he is not moved by the wind of chance: 'I also shake and disturb myself by the instability of my stance'.

In 1952 I proposed that Montaigne's *Essays* contained an intuition of an absolute freedom which would confer on our individual consciousness a Sartrean 'for-self', a possibility of choosing itself at all moments, albeit in a nascent, imperfect form.² While this early engagement with the author, the text and these ideas perhaps went too far in its assertion of this, I still think it certain that although he achieved self-formation through the very process of writing, Montaigne went through an initial phase approximating a dissolution of the self under the observant gaze of his protracted attention to himself. I have not only in mind the kind of difficulty we meet when 'swept on downstream' we 'struggle back towards our self against the current [...]; thus does the sea, when driven against itself, swirl back in confusion' (III, ix: 1132 B; VS 1000). As he noted earlier, 'it is a thorny undertaking – more than it looks – to follow so roaming a course as that of our mind's, to penetrate its dark depths and its inner recesses' (II, vi: 424 C; VS 378). This descent into 'dark depths' had not been unknown to St Augustine, in whose *Confessions* a forethought of the unconscious may be discerned.³ Yet when Montaigne at other times writes 'every moment it seems to me that I am running away from myself' (I, xx: 97 A; VS 88) he might be only stating his impression of drifting towards the ultimate dissolution of his conscious being. However, the tone is intensely personal and the Heraclitean vision it presents is invested with a new meaning when the inner landscape is described in this way:

This is a register of varied and changing occurrences, of ideas which are unresolved and, when needs be, contradictory, either because I myself have become different or because I grasp hold of different attributes or aspects of my subject. [...] If my soul could only find a footing I would not be assaying myself but resolving myself. But my soul is ever in its apprenticeship and being tested. (III, ii: 908 B; VS 805)

This description gives us more than the various meanings ascribed by critics to the term 'essay' chosen by Montaigne: it reveals that the author himself is 'essaying', trying out his own virtualities in order to achieve a self-revelation in this 'account of the essays of [his] life' (III, xiii: 1224 B; VS 1079).⁴ Yet, at least in a first stage, he apparently could not achieve fixity, nor give himself a foundation: 'the more I haunt myself and know myself, the more my misshapeness amazes me and the less I understand myself' (III, xi: 1164 B; VS 1029). He found he kept escaping from himself: 'I drip and drain away from myself' (III, xiii: 1251 B; VS 1101).⁵ To define himself was the constantly repeated effort of the essayist, ever resumed since it was always frustrated. His perplexity deepened in the attempt at analysis and his very clear-sightedness blurred his vision.

Montaigne intended to persist in his quest for an uncertain or elusive self to the very last moments of his life, as if he hoped to discover his identity in the experience of death. According to Hugo Friedrich, it is impossible to have a clear and distinct idea of his conception of death, since he himself failed to realize it.⁶ Yet whether we choose to consider him as a fundamental sceptic or a convinced Christian, one trait is obvious: Montaigne wished to experience his death as an ultimate assertion of his identity. He wanted to remain conscious in his very last moments, for 'it is to go far beyond having no fear of death actually to want to taste it, to savour it' (II, xiii: 689A; VS 609). Death, in his eyes, was a part of life. He spoke of wanting to 'cajole it' and 'concentrate' on it, for 'death forms a big chunk of [life]' (III, ix: 1112 B; VS 983). He also viewed it as a moment of self-revelation, as the individual confronts it alone: 'This event is not one of our social engagements: it is a scene with one character' (III, ix: 1107 B; VS 979). And Montaigne could face this final event without anxiety because his attention was not focused on the dissolution of his being but on the expectation of 'a death which will withdraw into itself, a calm and lonely one, entirely my own' (*ibid.*). Friedrich noted that 'my own' is a possessive pronoun: 'death is absorbed in myself; confused with myself'.⁷ One may go further: to a self so often perceived as fragmented and mutable, death for Montaigne can be seen as imparting a final consistency and wholeness at the very moment when it will be dissolved. Thus perfect self-possession will be achieved only on that 'Master-day' (I,

xix: 87 A; VS 80), in the miraculous instant the essayist elsewhere defines as a leap 'from a wretched existence to non-existence' (I, xx: 101B; VS 91). For him, indeed, the rest is silence.

An ability to detach himself from himself at the very moment of experience, which I shall call instantaneous self-reflexivity, characterizes Montaigne's self-consciousness, and I suggest that it inaugurates a notion of subjectivity more readily associated with the modern and modernity. It is not limited to the critical detachment required for self-examination practised by the Stoics or recommended by Christian moralists, even when it turns into a dissection or anatomization of oneself, as John Donne characterized it, an image itself anticipated by Montaigne in his description of his self-portrait: 'a SKELETOS on which at a glance you can see the veins, the muscles, [and] the tendons' (II, vi: 426 C; VS 379). I have in mind more the deliberate effort of self-examination practised by the essayist when he writes 'I turn my gaze inwards' (II, xvii: 747 A; VS 657).

In my previous writings I have made it clear that I commonly use the term 'self-consciousness' to characterize an ability to think and feel while setting oneself simultaneously at a distance from oneself.⁸ The following passage bears testimony to this reading. Montaigne denies that our experience when 'lying with women' so 'transports us' that 'we are entirely transfixed and enraptured by the pleasure', arguing:

I know it can go otherwise and that, if we have the will, we can sometimes manage, *at that very instant*, to bring our soul back to other thoughts. But we must vigilantly ensure that our soul is taut and erect. (II, xi: 481 A; VS 429–30; my italics)

This control of one's emotions makes a concomitance of feeling and irony possible: hence the appearance of humour, to which I shall return when speaking of Shakespeare.⁹ This distancing also leads to the kind of irresolution confessed by Montaigne as well as by Hamlet.¹⁰ Its constant presence in the *Essays* accounts for his ability to 'bridle' even his 'pressing desires' (II, xi: 478 A; VS 427) and 'violent emotions' (I, ii: 10 B; VS 14), and for his effort 'to extend by reason and reflection this privileged lack of emotion which is by nature well advanced in me' (III, x: 1134 B; VS 1003).

In explaining this distancing, Montaigne states 'I cannot get so deeply and totally involved' (III, x: 1144 B; VS 1012). 'Involved' is Michael Screech's translation of 'engagé'. To take both the statement and the possibilities suggested by this translation of the word as anticipating the rejection of 'engagement' by Jean-Paul Sartre's Hugo in *Les mains sales* (1948) would be to anticipate too far. Yet, as I have consistently suggested from my early engagements with Montaigne, the *Essays* offered a foretaste

of a modern phenomenon: both a sense of pure gratuitousness and entire 'disponibilité' in the Gidian sense, as well as the Sartrian claim that our convictions and affections are never rooted in us deeply enough at any moment to prevent us from discarding them and embracing different or even opposite convictions and affections.¹¹ Montaigne had already noted that 'within ourselves we are, I know not how, double, with the result that what we believe we do not believe' (II, xvi: 704 A; VS 619).¹² For the author of *Being and Nothingness* we never believe enough in what we believe in, since at the very moment when I become aware of it, my belief is no longer my belief: I am detached from it by the very act which allows me to become conscious of it.¹³ In this context, I admit that Montaigne usually presents as successive sincerities what later thinkers will experience as a perpetual, ontological insincerity. But I do not intend to ascribe to a Renaissance author a philosophy and a conception of man inconceivable in his own age. I claim only that similar modes of consciousness may be discovered in different individuals living in distant ages and affect in the same way their expression of different ideas and beliefs.¹⁴

When Montaigne notes that his mind gives birth to 'so many chimeras and fantastic monstrosities, one after another, without order and fitness' (I, viii: 31 A; VS 33), he seems to anticipate the description of mental activity presented by Hume. The author of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) writes:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different times, whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity.

The consequence is that the self is an illusion:

Self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions or ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot therefore be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea.¹⁵

From a philosophical point of view, this negation of identity had become inevitable after Locke's reduction of it to the continuity of individual consciousness.¹⁶ Once this is assumed, 'personal identity can only be defined

in terms of appearance – of consciousness – not in terms of essence'.¹⁷ Locke thought he had found in memory a guarantee of continuity which Hume's analysis showed to be an illusion. Though free from any deep anxiety, he confessed that his meditation on the problem of identity bred in him melancholy, until he discovered a solution: the imagination can fill the blanks of memory and impart to the self some sort of identity and permanence.¹⁸

Was the imagination responsible for the pre-eminence the Romantics granted to self-consciousness, raising it to a degree of acuity best represented by the young Browning's assertion 'I am made up of an intensest life / Of a most clear idea of consciousness / Of self' (1833)? In its manifold aspects, however, Romantic egocentrism must be seen as paving the way for 'the deconstruction of the subject which Nietzsche and psychoanalysis effected and which is now a component of modernity', as Bernard Brugière insists when discerning 'a quasi impossibility of coinciding with himself' in the melancholy hero of Sénancourt.¹⁹ This possibility, as I have pointed out, was already latent in Montaigne, as in John Donne.²⁰ I am inclined to ascribe Jacques Lacan's and Jacques Derrida's negation of the self to a similar exacerbation of their own self-consciousness. An anticipation of this negation may be traced not only in Nietzsche but in many nineteenth-century writers, albeit for different reasons and in different ways.²¹

Henri-Frédéric Amiel's diary was supposed to consecrate 'the triumph of the self'.²² Yet this self always evades the grasp of the diarist:

My former states, my outlines and metamorphoses, evade me as transitory accidents. They have become foreign to me, objects of curiosity, contemplation or study; they do not affect my inner substance; I do not experience them as belonging to me, as being in me; they are not me. Consequently I am not a will in continuous operation, an ever enlarging activity, a consciousness in process of enrichment; I am a flexibility which becomes more flexible, an accelerating mutation, a negation of a negation, and a reflection which is reflected like two mirrors placed in front of each other.²³

To this flexibility, already noticed by Montaigne and Hume, Amiel adds the metaphor of the reflection of the same image in two mirrors facing each other, a metaphor Paul Valéry and Sartre also used in their conception of self-reflexivity. The diarist therefore perceives himself 'as an angle of vision and perception, as an impersonal person, as a subject without a determined individuality'.²⁴ This absorption of all phenomena in the substance of the self and the vanishing of the self into a void leads to a conclusion that we would not be surprised to see adopted by Valéry: 'A