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SOURCES OF MONTAIGNE'S THOUGHT

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

> (A) I have no doubt that I often happen to speak of things that are better treated by the masters of the craft, and more truthfully. This is purely the essay of my natural faculties, and not at all of the acquired ones; and whoever shall catch me in ignorance will do nothing against me, for I should hardly be answerable for my ideas to others, I who am not answerable for them to myself, or satisfied with them. Whoever is in search of knowledge, let him fish for it where it dwells; there is nothing I profess less. These are my fancies, by which I try to give knowledge not of things, but of myself. (II, 10, 296)[1]

Throughout the four centuries since he wrote them, the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) have attracted and inspired readers from a wide variety of nationalities, backgrounds and disciplines. The work has lent itself to both the private concerns and academic interests of many generations and as a consequence has been given divergent readings reflecting the changing emphases and concerns of the succeeding decades. His interpreters have presented numerous differing public images of Montaigne, a phenomenon that, in the introduction to his translation of the *Essais*, Donald Frame attributes to the fact that in the self-portrait of the *Essais*, Montaigne's readers always seem to see themselves. Frame says,

> One of the mysteries of the *Essays* is how the portrait of Michel de Montaigne seems to become that of every man and thus of the reader. No one has explained this. Emerson expressed it when he wrote of his first reading of Montaigne: "It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience." Pascal's comment is intriguing: "It is not in Montaigne, but in myself, that I find all that I see in him." A writer with whom we identify ourselves is naturally seen in as many lights as he has readers.[2]

Montaigne states frequently that his text guarantees no certainty, unless it be "(A) to make known to what point, at this moment, extends the knowledge that I have of myself" (II, 10,

296). The self-portrait, changing as it must from moment to moment to adapt itself to the changing man, continues to be a source of inspiration for modern readers in its mysterious capacity to adapt to changing times, changing tastes, changing concerns.

One of the most influential results of Montaigne scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century is the theory of evolution developed by the French scholar Pierre Villey (1879–1933). In *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, Villey atempts to correct what he perceives as the most serious error in Montaigne scholarship, which is that earlier studies had considered the *Essais* in their sum total rather than as a series of successive additions written over time.[3]

Villey believes that his evolutionary theory resolves the often perplexing problem of Montaigne's contradictory ideas. He first dates the composition of the individual chapters of the *Essais,* and then identifies three different stages in Montaigne's thought: first a stoical stage, followed by the so-called skeptical crisis, followed by the naturalism of his later work. Montaigne's method of composition and publication suggests such a theory; today many editions of the *Essais* use the letters A, B and C to date the layers of Montaigne's text that grew, over time, from the inside out. This system helps a reader to observe Montaigne's habit of writing, re-reading, then adding to what he had written—now a word, sometimes a phrase, sometimes a sentence, and sometimes entire chapters, in a process that ended only at his death and that otherwise would have continued, Montaigne said, as long as there were paper and ink in the world.

But eventually, while recognizing an enormous debt to the scholarship of Villey and his successors, twentieth-century literary critics began to have serious doubts about certain aspects of Villey's legacy, especially his attempt to organize and classify Montaigne's thought. Something unclassifiable lies at the heart of Montaigne's self-portrait in the *Essais*, a desire to question everything, to affect no wish to resolve and conclude, and this extraordinary fluidity resists the rigidity of Villey's formal categories. Montaigne's discernment of complexity, diversity, irresolution, inconsistency and fluctuation inform his self-portrait just as they permeate man's world and all that exists in it. In 1973 Marcel Tetel, in considering why so many readers oppose the conception of a linear chronology of Montaigne's thought, wrote, "The concept of evolution is endemic to the *Essais*; only the type of evolution may be questioned."[4] Not first a stoic, then a skeptic and finally a naturalist, Montaigne was, if anything, "all three at the same time and refused to mold himself into a school of thought."[5] Many

agree that evolution exists within the *Essais* but that it exists in the changing nature of the essay itself rather than in Montaigne's thought.

Today most critics prefer to approach the study of the *Essais* as a work that need not be too closely identified with its author's life. Steven Rendall, in a discussion of the broadly different ways the *Essais* have been read in the twentieth century, describes a separation between what he calls the goal of traditional scholarship of "reading Montaigne" versus the more recent goal of reading the text itself, that is, between the more traditional tendency to interpret the *Essais* as the record of Montaigne's thoughts and opinions of this or that topic and the more recent interest in studying the mechanisms of Montaigne's rhetoric and the layers of discourse in the *Essais*.[6] Critics have come to see the language of Montaigne's essaying method in a new light, and problematical aspects of Montaigne's work (such as the rhetorical role of the contradictory opinions expressed throughout the *Essais*), once seen as confusing and difficult to explain, are newly understood.

In a review of trends in Montaigne scholarship, Richard Regosin has observed that traditional scholarship, relying on a mimetic approach to reading, seeks out the writer as an objective reality outside the written work. He reminds us how much complicity Montaigne offers to such an approach, for Montaigne tells the reader that it is himself, his essence, that he writes down on the pages of his book, and that he is consubstantial with his *Essais*. Montaigne says that, as a reader himself, he has a natural curiosity to understand the soul and natural judgments of the authors he reads; and, in turn, generations of readers and scholars over four hundred years have wished to understand Montaigne's soul, and they have provided their own portraits of Montaigne. As Regosin says, according to this approach,

> the evolving mind of Montaigne, the figure of biographical reconstruction, the genius and man of ideas are all treated as primary, causal truths which determine and produce the essays and whose recovery is the essential function of reading.[7]

Recent general interest in the role of the reader in the text has had great impact on current interpretations of meaning in Montaigne's text. Regosin says that there is

> no longer a general consensus about meaning. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that there have always been disagreements about meaning, but there has been no controversy over the conviction that Montaigne did indeed "mean" and that what he meant was "Himself."[8]

This, the personal nature of the self-portrait of the *Essais*, continues to be, as it has always been, responsible for the enduring attraction of the *Essais* to diverse readers in all their multiple approaches and perspectives.

I have organized these volumes into five categories (message and method, sources, rhetoric, word study and reading). With one or two exceptions, articles do not come from other special collections on Montaigne. But even as Montaigne defies classification and systematization, so too, to some degree, does scholarly work on the *Essais*. Some of these articles may fit as well under one volume's title as another's, and readers are encouraged to keep this in mind while perusing this collection for articles matching their own interests. An article in the volume on sources naturally deals with Montaigne's rhetoric; in the volume on word study, articles reveal much about Montaigne's method; articles in the volume on the role of Montaigne's reader reflect many of the same interests as those in the volume on sources; articles from all the volumes are concerned with aspects of the rhetoric of Montaigne's self-portraiture, and so on. Ultimately, my hope is that readers will gain valuable insights into the *Essais* from this glimpse into the open-ended, evolving continuum of critical activity inspired through many years by the perpetually provocative creator of his own literary genre, the essayist Michel de Montaigne.

Notes

1. These introductions use translations from Donald Frame's *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958).
2. Donald Frame, tr., *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. vii.
3. For an overview of Villey's contribution to Montaigne studies, see Donald Frame's "Pierre Villey (1879–1933): An Assessment," *Oeuvres & Critiques*, 8 no. 1–2 (1983), pp. 29–43. See volume on Sources.
4. Marcel Tetel, "Montaigne: Evolution or Convolution?" in *Authors and Their Centuries* (University of South Carolina, 1973), p.25. See volume on Message and Method.
5. Tetel, p. 25.
6. Steven Rendall, "Reading the Essais Differently," *Modern Language Notes*, 100 no. 5 (1985), p. 1083. See volume on Message and Method.

7. Richard Regosin, "Recent Trends in Montaigne Scholarship: A Post-Structuralist Perspective," *Renaissance Quarterly* 37 no. 1 (1984 Spring), pp. 34–35. See volume on Message and Method.
8. Regosin, p. 53.

INTRODUCTION

> (C) And how many stories have I spread around which say nothing of themselves, but from which anyone who troubles to pluck them with a little ingenuity will produce numberless essays. Neither these stories nor my quotations serve always simply for example, authority, or ornament. I do not esteem them solely for the use I derive from them. They often bear, outside of my subject, the seeds of a richer and bolder material, and sound obliquely a subtler note, both for myself, who do not wish to express anything more, and for those who get my drift. (I, 40, 185)

Evidence of Montaigne's wide reading background begins to reveal itself from the first pages of the *Essais*. In fact, Montaigne incorporates material from the ancient world, and less prevalently from more recent sources, from the beginning of Book I to the end of Book III. The 1580 edition includes more than 300 borrowings; the final edition increases that number to over 1,300. Not, we should observe, that Montaigne seems to have had much desire to total them up: "(C)I do not count my borrowings, I weigh them. And if I had wanted to have them valued by their number, I should have loaded myself with twice as many" (II, 10, 296).

Most modern editions of the *Essais* include information pertaining to the origin of cited material. Montaigne himself, however, does not always provide the name of the work or the author of the words he borrows for inclusion in the text of the *Essais*. For more than several generations of readers, part of their challenge was to recognize the sources of this material scattered throughout the pages of the *Essais*.

But eventually, an interest developed in identifying and situating Montaigne's sources. Among the scholars working on Montaigne in the early part of the twentieth century, Pierre Villey, a blind French scholar, stands out as one whose prodigious contribution, *Les Sources et l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, lays the groundwork for future study of Montaigne's habits as a reader and writer. In his article "Pierre Villey (1879–1933): An Assessment," Donald Frame provides an appreciative overview of the monu-

mental achievements of Villey, outlining exactly what Villey had to do for his project of identifying Montaigne's sources, namely:

> to read everything that might have interested Montaigne, whose curiosity was insatiable; which meant reading everything that by Montaigne's time had been published in Latin, French and Italian literature as well as most work translated from Greek. Since few of those were available in braille, he had to have them read to him. For works of literary merit, this method has two drawbacks: it is hard, if not impossible, to know (as a sighted reader could tell at a glance) where one might safely skip . . . and it is equally hard when a page has been read and the hearer wants to return to consider at leisure a word or a passage, to locate it on the page, as a sighted reader can easily do.[1]

Villey persevered in his enormous task, eventually publishing his results on Montaigne, of which the work on sources, as well as the dating of individual essays, has been and continues to be most valuable.

Villey was primarily a historian, however, and had no premonition, as Frame points out, of the various approaches (whether anthropological, psychoanalytic, semiotic, sociological, structural or stylistic) that were to occupy literary scholars and critics in the future. Villey's work was received enthusiastically at first but in time would find many critics, due in large part to the fact that the dating of the chapters resulted in Villey's attempt—based upon his observations of a certain chronology in Montaigne's reading—to classify several distinct stages in Montaigne's thought, namely, a first stoical stage, followed by the skeptical crisis, culminating in the naturalism of the later chapters of the *Essais*. For various important reasons, critics eventually began to doubt this evolutionary theory of Villey's—as Villey himself may even have done had he not been killed in a train accident (Floyd Gray observes that Villey modified his position in the preface to a later edition of the *Essais*).[2]

Floyd Gray is among those for whom the identification of the three stages in Montaigne's thought represents an oversimplification and a wrong direction when considering the diversity of opinions Montaigne expresses throughout the three books of the *Essais*. He says, in 1961:

> The more Montaigne has been studied, the less complex he has been made to seem. Confronted by his multiplicity, scholars of the last half century or so have attempted to organize, to classify, to simplify him. Their main objective has been twofold: to establish a chronology of the *Essais*,

> and subsequently to retrace the evolution of Montaigne's thought.[3]

Gray objects that to classify Montaigne goes against one of Montaigne's basic interests, namely "to reproduce in the *Essais* the diversity he remarks in himself, the multiplicity which he considers man's most universal quality,"[4] and ultimately falsifies the self-portrait.

Critics, re-evaluating certain conclusions following from the source studies of Villey and others, disagreed with the tendency to see a progression throughout the *Essais* from impersonal to personal and then to lump the earliest essays into a category deemed anecdotal, more or less dominated by borrowed material and rather separate from and less interesting than the later chapters of the *Essais,* where the personal elements of Montaigne's self-portrayal are more clearly evident. Raymond La Charité, for one, objected to the overemphasis of earlier source studies on Montaigne's borrowed material if they overlook the personal elements already visible in the early chapters of the *Essais*. La Charité says:

> Less emphasis on sources and their relationship to the dating game and more interest in the edition of 1580 *per se* would have brought us much farther along in our understanding of Montaigne's revelation of his person in even the earliest essays.[5]

Evidence of the rhetoric of self-portrayal in the earliest essays was increasingly attended by critics.

This change in critical focus went hand in hand with changes in the approach to source study. In a general discussion of the changing role of the literary historian, for whom the identification of sources is traditionally of particular interest, Donald Stone made the following observations:

> The identification of a source constitutes only the beginning of a process that must also embrace a comparison of the text and model to see in what spirit the source has been "taken up," where exactly overlap occurs, and where, despite considerable borrowing, the original has undergone change.[6]

Studies analyzing the use in Montaigne's text of sources from which he draws his borrowed material have led to an understanding of one of the most interesting mechanisms of his writing style, and one of the many paradoxes of the *Essais*: Montaigne frees himself from his sources even as he uses them; personal elements exist from the beginning—but even as the use of source material increases, so does the writing become ever more personal. Montaigne's knowledge and inclusion of the ancient texts do not reveal a

Montaigne who feels dominated by them. On the contrary, he usually finds a way to make their words serve his purposes in some skillful way. Of his beloved Socrates, for instance, Montaigne says,

> (B) Not because Socrates said it, but because it really is my feeling, and perhaps excessively so, I consider all men my compatriots, and embrace a Pole as a Frenchman, setting this national bond after the universal and common one. (III, 9, 743)

Floyd Gray observes Montaigne's sense of independence from the authors he reads, and the freedom he seems to feel in their presence, even in his admiration and awe of both the style and content of his favorite ones:

> Montaigne was not attempting to become someone else—only himself—and his Que scay-je? could easily be interpreted as meaning Qui suis-je? In a word, there is an essential Montaigne before whose eyes Seneca, Sextus, Plato, pass, but who, for all that, never loses his own identity. Though this may not necessarily have been his original intention, the *Essais* are also a quest for self-identification, self-definition, and the answers Montaigne sought he found in himself, through his readings, but not in them. In the presence of the Ancients, he could have said, as Pascal did in the presence of the *Essais*, that it is not in them but in himself that he finds all he sees there.[7]

Renaissance texts are particularly rich in material for source studies because literary and linguistic theories of the time were promoting new ways of looking at the ancient Greek and Latin texts. Such theories had an important impact on poets and writers aspiring to write in the vernaculars, and inevitably influenced Montaigne's writing as well. Renaissance literary theorists, encouraging the self-conscious cultivation of the vernaculars, developed "imitation" theories whereby the ancient sources were to be opened up and plundered for inspiration. Critics have lately shed considerable light on the connection between Renaissance reading habits and Montaigne's own habits as reader and writer, and user of source material. In one of her studies on the subject of Renaissance poetics, Cathleen Bauschatz uses an analogy of Montaigne's to illustrate one facet of his original and creative approach to borrowed material in his text: If readers do not make what they read into something of their own, then they are like the man who, "needing fire, should go and fetch some at his neighbor's house, and having found a big fire, should stop there and warm himself, forgetting to carry any back" (I, 25, 101). The source should fuel a new, independent fire, which need not be

engulfed by the original source. Bauschatz says of Montaigne's reasoning with regard to the inspiration coming from a source he reads:

> Montaigne clearly realizes that unless he takes the practical step of making this inspiration his own—of separating it from its original source—it will have only a very temporary effect on him. He will remain in a subordinate position with respect to the neighbor or source of the fire of inspiration: that is, as a reader, to the authority of writer. One could say that Montaigne has chosen a "reader-centered" rather than an "author-centered" or "text-centered" definition of reading here.[8]

Montaigne observes that, in the authors whom he reads, there is a full range of possibilities in their use of borrowed material and a full range of effects achieved. Thinking of two extreme examples, he says:

> (C) There were two contrasting fancies. The philosopher Chrysippus mixed into his books, not merely passages, but entire works of other authors, and in one the *Medea* of Euripedes; and Apollodorus said that if you cut out of them all the foreign matter, the paper he used would be left blank. Epicurus, on the contrary, in three hundred volumes that he left, put in not a single borrowed quotation. (I, 26, 107–108)

He notices that not infrequently, when reading, he comes across a quotation that suddenly seems to lift the text off into another, better and more sublime world than the one in which the original text may have been floundering. The difference in both style and context between the original and the borrowed material can be altogether shocking, and something of which he is well aware when he decides to put borrowed words next to his own. He is able to achieve a variety of effects in his awareness of the shifting meanings that the same words may have in shifting contexts—and he is optimistic enough to hope that the reader will find his words to stand up well enough when seen next to those he pilfered from his readings, as he says:

> (A) If I stuffed one of my chapters with these rich spoils, it would show up too clearly the stupidity of the others . . . (C) Still, I well know how audaciously I always attempt to match the level of my pilferings, to keep pace with them, not without a rash hope that I may deceive the eyes of the judges who try to discover them. But this is as much by virtue of my use of them as by virtue of my inventiveness or my power. (I, 26, 108)

In discussing the influence of Montaigne's habits as a reader on his practices as a writer in the context of the century in which

Montaigne lived, Terence Cave discusses how diverse and ingenious are Montaigne's methods of quoting:

> Montaigne does, as I suggested earlier, retain the notion of an original, intended meaning, and attacks glossing as a deviation. But what he objects to is perhaps that the gloss, instead of recognizing that it is a deviation, claims perfectly to represent the master text. In virtually all of Montaigne's accounts of reading, deviation is in fact accepted and recognized as potentially productive. The appropriation of alien texts adumbrated in the imitation theory of Erasmus and Du Bellay is systematically put into practice in the *Essais*. Montaigne misquotes, disguises his quotations, quotes without identifying the text, provides a radically new context for his quotations, and in addition makes all these operations explicit.[9]

Cave observes how Montaigne's original methods of using source material reflect a new idea of the very nature of the text itself, based on new considerations of the nature of language—its limitations as well as its multiplicity of meanings.

At times, however, allusions, borrowings or paraphrasings that would have stimulated immediate recognition (or at least struck a chord) in the mind of Montaigne's early readers may be difficult for modern readers to appreciate in the absence of a classical reading background. Montaigne admits that sometimes he figures the literary background of his reader will naturally cause him to know the voice Montaigne echoes in his text. He says: "(C) They are all, or very nearly all, from such famous and ancient names that they seem to identify themselves enough without me" (II, 10, 296). But at times he plays a game to dupe his reader, and then, one can sense the almost diabolical glee he feels knowing that a reader who condemns Montaigne is unknowingly condemning some great authority:

> (C) In the reasonings and inventions that I transplant into my soil and confound with my own, I have sometimes deliberately not indicated the author, in order to hold in check the temerity of those hasty condemnations that are tossed at all sorts of writings, notably recent writings of men still living, and in the vulgar tongue, which invites everyone to talk about them and seems to convict the conception and design of being likewise vulgar. I want them to give Plutarch a fillip on my nose and get burned insulting Seneca in me. (II, 10, 296)

It is not just what the reader finds in the text while reading—it is what he brings to it that counts as well.

Richard Regosin explains well the paradox that Montaigne's work is both borrowed but highly original and discusses the significance of the fact that Montaigne sends his readers back to the original text—which has the effect of emphasizing the new meaning in his text of what he has taken. Regosin says:

> Acknowledging the dialectic in which he is engaged, where the source is both recognizable and imperceptible, present and absent, Montaigne admits that he purposely conceals references to challenge his readers to sort out what belongs to him and what does not . . . His point is not to pass off someone else's work as his own but to stress how much in what he has written is in truth his own, how little, in fact, he owes to others. . . . Montaigne's strategy . . . is to undermine the weight of those sources by admitting them, humbly to acknowledge his own weakness so as to shift the focus from his borrowing. By sending his readers back to the original texts he emphasizes the transposition and transformation of what he has taken, the new way in which it functions in his text. In the process, the question of sources is reduced to a game between author and reader and itself becomes the raw material of literary invention.[10]

Regosin describes the process whereby Montaigne's habits as a reader, and re-reader of his own text as well as others, eventually make Montaigne his own source; his own text becoming, as Regosin says, a source to be commented on and thus a generator of further writing.[11]

Recent work on Montaigne's sources acknowledges the debt to, and appreciation of, scholarly work earlier in this century, even as it reveals a change in focus. Articles in this volume (as well as in the volume on Reading) represent a variety of approaches to the critical study of the function and role of the sources Montaigne uses throughout the pages of his *Essais*, and then testify to Montaigne's appreciation of both the style and content of his favorite authors. Studies of the rhetorical effects achieved through the use of quotations, alterations, adaptations, mutations, transformations and transpositions of borrowed material, along with his frequent self-referential commentary, whether within a phrase, a sentence or a longer passage, provide a panoramic impression of the complexity of the function of reading in Montaigne's writing, as well as point to one of his greatest literary originalities.

Notes

1. Donald M. Frame, "Pierre Villey (1879–1933): An Assessment," *Oeuvres & Critiques*, 8, no.1–2 (1983), p. 33.
2. Floyd Gray, "The Unity of Montaigne in the *Essais*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 22 (1961), p. 80.
3. Gray, p. 79.
4. Gray, p. 80.
5. Raymond La Charité, "Montaigne's Early Personal Essays," *Romanic Review*, 62 (1971), p. 15. See volume on Rhetoric.
6. Donald Stone, "The Role of Literary History," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 15 (1985), p. 116.
7. Gray, "The Unity of Montaigne in the *Essais*," p. 81.
8. Cathleen Bauschatz, "Montaigne's Conception of Reading in the Context of Renaissance Poetics and Modern Criticism," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, Ed. Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1980), p. 270. See volume on Reading.
9. Terence Cave, "The Mimesis of Reading in the Renaissance," in *Mimesis: From Mirror to Method, Augustine to Descartes*, Ed. John D. Lyons and Stephen Nichols (Hanover: UP of New England for Dartmouth College, 1982), p. 157. See volume on Reading.
10. Richard Regosin, "Sources and Resources: the "Pretexts" of Originality in Montaigne's *Essais*," *Substance*, 21 (1978), p. 108.
11. Regosin, p. 113.

Further Reading

The following could not be included due either to the high cost of reprinting, or as in the case of articles from *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, because it was not possible to obtain permission to reprint.

Clark, Carol, "Seneca's Letters to Lucilius as a Source of Montaigne's Imagery," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 30 (1968), pp. 249–266.

Coleman, Dorothy Gabe, "Montaigne and Longinus," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 47 no. 2 (1985), pp. 278–289.

Heath, Michael J., "Montaigne, Lucinge, and the Tesoro Politico," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 45 (1983), pp. 131–135.

Hendrick, Philip, "Lucretius in the Apologie de Raimond Sebond," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 37 (1975), pp. 457–466.

Henry, Patrick, "The Dialectic of Suicide in Montaigne's 'Costume de l'Isle de Cea,'" *Modern Language Review*, 79 no. 2 (1984), pp. 465–477.

Limbrick, Elaine, "Was Montaigne Really a Pyrrhonian?," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 38 (1977), pp. 67–80.