

VOLUME

5

# READING MONTAIGNE

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Edited with introductions by

DIKKA BERVEN

*Oakland University*

**GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC.**

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1995

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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

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(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)<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 attempts 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.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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*.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup>

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

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(B) On the subject of letter writing, I want to say this: that it is a kind of work in which my friends think I have some ability. (C) And I would have preferred to adopt this form to publish my sallies, if I had had someone to talk to. I needed what I once had, a certain relationship to lead me on, sustain me, and raise me up. For to talk to the winds, as others do, is beyond me except in dreams; nor could I fabricate fictitious names to talk with on a serious matter, being a sworn enemy of any falsification. 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. And if I am not mistaken, I would have been more successful. (I, 41, 185–186)

Montaigne's inclusion of the reader in the text of the *Essais* has resulted in generations of readers who, it is not going too far to say, feel as if Montaigne is a personal friend. Not coincidentally, friendship is one of the great themes of the work. Relatedly, from the first pages, the reader of the *Essais* finds himself in a relationship based upon communication in which the reader's own experience, judgment and participation will play an important role in the text. Speaking of the dynamics of the relationship between the reader and the text of the *Essais*, Richard Regosin says:

The reader of the essays enters into the reassuring experience of dialogue, into the realm of shared power and benevolent interaction where neither the reader nor the text has domination or privilege, and meaning originates in their partnership.<sup>1</sup>

Montaigne admits that he is tempted, as a reader, to understand the minds of the authors of the texts he reads. He says,

(A) For I have a singular curiosity, as I have said elsewhere, to know the soul and the natural judgments of my authors. We must indeed judge their capacity, but not their character nor themselves, by that display of their writings that they expose on the stage of the world. (II, 10, 302)

His rhetorical maneuverings oblige his reader to participate in reading the *Essais* in such a way that the reader comes to understand the soul and natural judgments of the author of the

*Essais*. Montaigne hopes that the reader will share with him the responsibility of giving meaning to the text, at times by finding hidden connections, or by bringing words out of corners, or by keeping track of what Montaigne is doing or where he is going—even if Montaigne himself seems to put things together in a piecemeal fashion:

(B) I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance. (III, 9, 761)

He finds similarities in examples where others may see differences and this may make his text appear disordered, as he often claims it is; yet he does not mind if his order seems accidental. In fact, he admires this very quality in some of his favorite authors. He says of Plutarch, for instance:

(B) I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. (C) 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 casual and accidental they seem. (III, 9, 761)

An inattentive reader may lose Montaigne's thread in this seemingly casual text, but the curious reader envisioned by Montaigne will find enough clues to lead him to his subject: "(C) It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner" (III, 9, 761). Montaigne knows he is not alone, as a writer, in hoping that his reader will be an alert partner. He says, "(B) Who is there that would not rather not be read sleepily or in passing?" (III, 9, 761).

Montaigne's reader will sense his presence on every page of the *Essais*. He says to his reader on the first page of the work, and throughout the text, that it is himself that he portrays: "Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book" ("To the Reader," p. 2). Traditional scholarship has focused attention on the reconstruction of Montaigne's life and thought, inspired by such words as these, and there is a large body of scholarly work exploring, describing and explaining Montaigne himself and his ideas—but not without conflicting conclusions that have, in turn, inspired new and different approaches to the text.

Montaigne claims that he and his book actually share each other's substance, but he is also able to say, "(A) The preachings are one thing and the preacher another" (II, 10, 301). In addition,

he himself is an actively commenting reader and re-reader of his own text, voicing his own reactions to what he sees in his own writing as he reads.

Recent criticism, with its particular interest in the role of the reader in the text, has attended to the mechanisms of the subtle interconnections among the reader, writer and text of the *Essais*, and studies show that questions Montaigne poses in the pages of the *Essais* reveal an interest in the relationship between reading and writing that seem surprisingly modern. On this subject, Richard Regosin says the following:

In the remarkable coincidence of linguistic and literary interests of contemporary and sixteenth century French writers and critics, we find similar concerns about reading and writing, and nowhere, perhaps, more centrally than in Montaigne's *Essais*. . . . What is at stake in Montaigne's essays are issues of origins (of meaning), of dominance and freedom (of text and reader) and of subjectivity (of writer and reader). These must be addressed if we are to pretend to an understanding of the *Essais* or our role relative to it and if we are to confront the problematical places of the reader as a problem inscribed in all written discourse.<sup>2</sup>

New approaches to reading have led to new approaches to reading Montaigne's text, and to considerations of questions posed by Montaigne himself regarding the role of the reader in the text.

Technological advances in sixteenth-century publishing created an increasing availability of books, so that reading was to become a more prominent activity for a growing reading public in that time. Terence Cave, exploring the role or experience of the reader in the context of the sixteenth century's shifting views on this subject, depicts the reader as a more active figure, no longer dominated by the authoritative text.<sup>3</sup> Cave discusses an important paradigm of reading in that age, a newer "generative" mode different from the more traditional mimetic mode featuring the reader as a passive recipient of the authoritative text's message; the newer mode stresses the role of the individual reader who can bring meaning to the text through his own understanding and use of it. The text is no longer a "substitute memory," a holder of the Truth, but rather a means by which the individual judgment is formed.<sup>4</sup> Montaigne's reading habits, as articles in this and the volume on sources reveal, show him to be a new kind of reader; relatedly, his writing reveals him to be a new kind of writer who needs for his *Essais* a kind of reader who, as Cave says, falls into no preexisting category. The *Essais* are "a text in search of exactly the right reader,"<sup>5</sup> the identity and role of whom have been the focus of critical activity. Who is the reader envisioned by Montaigne?

He does not picture himself talking to the wind, and the reader's place in the text affects the form his *Essais* will take.

Many critics agree on the initial importance of the role of Etienne de la Boétie, the friend whose death is recognized by many as one of the reasons for Montaigne's decision to write his essays. Hope Glidden, for one, suggests that in the loss of this beloved friend, Montaigne regretted "the loss not simply of a fond companion, but a reader competent to receive his words."<sup>6</sup> Analyzing Montaigne's profound sense of deprivation following the death of La Boétie, François Rigolot describes Montaigne's decision to start recording his thoughts on paper as an attempt in part to recover himself; Montaigne has a strong sense of having lost part of his own self, so much did he and his friend share. The result of the death is, as Rigolot puts it, "a deep sense of being reduced to one half of one's original being. . . . This is why the insecure self must turn to other ways to alleviate his solitude and counterbalance his loss."<sup>7</sup> After the loss of his beloved and trustworthy friend, Montaigne makes the decision to write down his thoughts for himself, "to the one who is not another man: he is myself."<sup>8</sup>

With La Boétie, Montaigne appears to have enjoyed what he describes as a perfect and entire communication such as he suspects may have never existed before. He says in his chapter on friendship,

(A) This friendship which together we fostered, as long as God willed, so entire and so perfect that certainly you will hardly read of the like, and among men of today you see no trace of it in practice. So many coincidences are needed to build up such a friendship that it is a lot if fortune can do it once in three centuries. (I, 28, 136)

Montaigne recognizes the possibility and challenge of developing the theme in the *Essais* as it has never been developed in literature, and seems to do so in both the form and content of his work.

But whether Montaigne's actual friendship with La Boétie is at the root of his relationship with his reader, or whether his experience of friendship is from the less personal but equally involving friends he found in the books on his bookshelves as Floyd Gray, for instance, argues,<sup>9</sup> Montaigne does express the desire to speak in the *Essais* as with a friend. Cathleen Bauschatz observes that Montaigne does not cast himself in the superior role of master to disciple or teacher to pupil, but establishes a relationship with his reader based in part on his own experience and understanding of friendship, a relationship reflecting Montaigne's break with traditional notions of the reader's role in the text. Bauschatz says,

Montaigne again takes a step beyond earlier sixteenth-century theorists in thus describing the relationship between reader and writer. Although many earlier writers (for example Rabelais) perceived the author's relationship to the reader to be one of rivalry or even hostility—typical of the competitive aspect of the tennis game—Montaigne views that interaction as a more creative or productive one, when he sees the possibility of the reader's applying the techniques of self-knowledge to himself. Montaigne believes that the ultimate goal in his relationship with his reader is communication—keeping the ball moving—not accumulation of points on either side.<sup>10</sup>

For Bauschatz, Montaigne's concept of consubstantiality with his book has a profound impact on the experience of reading the text of the *Essais*:

In analyzing the equivalence between "livre" and "auteur" in the *Essais*, one must retain at once the idea that the book is like the man, and that reading is thus another form of experience; as well as the reverse—in this case that living is like reading, or that the self is like a book.<sup>11</sup>

And, in the process of reading this book of the self, the reader's interaction with the many faceted text will provide him the means to form his own individual judgment and ultimately to have a better sense of his own self.

In his remarks to the reader that precede the first chapter of Book I of the *Essais*, Montaigne looks ahead to the loss, and recovery from loss, that others will experience at his own death. Here he suggests that the book is dedicated to the use of relatives and friends, for the purpose that "(A) when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive" ("To the Reader," p. 1). He knew, of course, that the book would not literally fall into the hands of relatives and friends, as it obviously did not. He knew, as well, that there would be nobody to do for him what he had tried to do for his friend La Boétie, namely, set the record straight when, after La Boétie's death, his writing was misunderstood and misinterpreted by some readers. He tries as best he can, therefore, to set the record straight himself ahead of time, and create a reader to whom he would like to talk. Richard Regosin points to the importance of the fact that the *Essais* come to us "already read." Montaigne, his own first reader, is a guide who

precedes and accompanies us as we read, who articulates perspectives on his own writing and on the reading of all

other texts, who comments on his activity and interprets its significance, and who judges himself and the text.<sup>12</sup>

This characteristic of the *Essais*, Regosin sees, assures a reading of the text in which the reader has to play Montaigne's game, a game where the unity of reader and writer is necessary.

In reading the *Essais* as Montaigne would have us do, we find ourselves no stranger to the soul and natural judgments of their author. The reader becomes, at Montaigne's beckoning, essayist of his own natural faculties and friend to Montaigne, just as Montaigne emerges as a friend to his reader. This would not be possible without the shared responsibilities deriving from Montaigne's vision of the partnership between reader and writer, in this text where the reader senses that he has been heard and included.

## NOTES

1. Richard Regosin, "Conceptions of the Text and the Generations of Meaning: Montaigne's *Essais* and the Place(s) of the Reader," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 15 no. 1 (1985), p. 105.
2. Regosin, p. 102.
3. 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. 152.
4. Cave, p. 159.
5. Cave, p. 157.
6. Hope Glidden, "Recouping the Text: The Theory and Practice of Reading," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 21 no. 2 (1981 Summer), p. 30.
7. François Rigolot, "Montaigne's Purloined Letters," *Yale French Studies*, 64 (1983), p. 149.
8. Rigolot, p. 148.
9. Floyd Gray, "Montaigne's Friends," *French Studies*, 15 no. 3 (July 1961), p. 205.
10. Cathleen Bauschatz, "Montaigne's Concept 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 Press, 1980), p. 282.

11. Bauschatz, p. 287.
12. Regosin, "Conceptions of the Text and the Generations of Meaning," p. 108.

## FURTHER READING

The following articles could not be included due to the high cost of reprinting.

Nilles, Camilla. "Montaigne's 'De l'amitie' and the Problem of Communication," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Assoc.* 19 (1989), pp. 75–86.

Stone, Donald, "Montaigne Reads Montaigne (II, 11)," *Modern Language Review*, 80 no. 4 (1985), pp. 802–809.

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