

VOLUME

1

**MONTAIGNE'S
MESSAGE
AND METHOD**

Edited with introductions by

DIKKA BERVEN

Oakland University

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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 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.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

(A) It is just as this verse says: "Wide is the range of words on one side and the other" [Homer], there is much to be said on all matters, both for and against. (I, 47, 205)

The pages of the *Essais* are filled with hundreds of apparently contradictory opinions on as many different topics, reflecting Montaigne's unflagging interest in and enthusiasm for the diversity he sees as a fundamental principle of human life and the world. His method is open-ended and essaying, a way of trying out his natural faculty of reason and his powers of judgment on whatever subjects his fancy seizes at the moment. His topics derive from anywhere and everywhere, and all things human interest him; his interests, to name but a few, range from politics to religion, to books, to war, to witchcraft, to sex, to old age, to custom, to language, to education, to his observations on mankind in general, to his study and observations of one man in particular, himself, Michel de Montaigne.

Montaigne's contention that he is consubstantial with his book, together with his ability to find similarities in seemingly dissimilar examples, his questioning method and a notable, sometimes humorous, absence of any desire or claim to conclude, resulted in the *Essais* being read and interpreted in many different ways over the four hundred years since they were written. To some of his readers, Montaigne has seemed elusive, to others confused, purposeless, disorganized, dilettantish, insincere, untruthful. Other readers, encountering his self-portrayal, find themselves there. When one compares the Montaignes described in various studies over the centuries, a strangely incoherent picture may emerge. Herbert Luthy put it this way in 1953:

There have been almost as many Montaignes as there have been readers of him. For the pious, he was a man of piety, and for the free-thinker, a free-thinker; for the pagan, a pagan, and for Christians, a Christian. For the descendants of Stoa, he was a Stoic moralist, for Epicureans of the higher or lower order, he was an Epicurean of their variety; the men of the Enlightenment quoted his judgments on witchcraft and miracles with tireless enthusiasm, their adversar-

ies pointed just as enthusiastically to the long essay called "Apology for Raymond Sebond" and its dethronement of reason. Conservatives found in him a defender of tradition and the inherited order; the advocates of natural rights saw him as a critic of positive law and of the conventions and veneers of civilization. The list could be extended endlessly, and just as long a list might be drawn up of what his opponents found to reproach him with.¹

Montaigne himself appears to warn his readers not to search for what the *Essais* do not profess to contain. He does not want his readers to come looking for The Truth:

(A) However that may be, I mean to say, and whatever these absurdities may be, I have had no intention of concealing them, any more than I would a bald and graying portrait of myself, in which the painter had drawn not a perfect face, but mine. For likewise, these are my humors and opinions; I offer them as what I believe, not what is to be believed. I aim here only at revealing myself, who will perhaps be different tomorrow, if I learn something new which changes me. I have no authority to be believed, nor do I want it, feeling myself too ill-instructed to instruct others. (I, 26, 108–109)

Readers looking for certainty and resolution should look elsewhere; Montaigne claims only to be portraying himself on the pages of his book, a subject that flees and changes from moment to moment.

Montaigne's insistence that he himself is the subject matter, indeed the substance, of his book has certainly prompted the associations scholars have made, traditionally, between his life and work. In the domain of self-revelation, Montaigne appears purposeful, sincere, truthful, even well-instructed, if fluctuating, and the *Essais* have been appreciated as one of the most personal books in world literature. Yet, so strongly is Montaigne's presence felt throughout that it has not been easy for recent criticism to establish criteria according to which the text may be read without confusing and contradictory inferences about the author. Abraham Keller, in his 1957 article on optimism in the *Essais*, considering the often puzzling explanations Montaigne's writing has inspired, remarks upon the difficulty of deciphering differing (and especially bad) interpretations; he uses as a possible criterion the reader's very knowledge and understanding of Montaigne coming from the *Essais*. It is difficult to escape this circle, so overwhelming is the sense of Montaigne's presence on the pages of his book. Keller says:

But, the reader may say, if there are many explanations of Montaigne's ideas, how can we distinguish the good explanations from the poor ones? The answer, undoubtedly, is

that if an attempt to explain or reconcile makes Montaigne unrecognizable, it is unsatisfactory. When a critic makes Montaigne out to be a soldier and a devout Christian theologian who accepted dogma unquestioningly, that interpretation is faulty, not because Montaigne did not say the things which the critic attributes to him, but because those feudalistic and religious ideas did not occupy the important place in Montaigne's thought that the critic implies. On the other hand, if—as of course I hope—the emphasis which has been placed in this paper on his belief in optimism does not distort Montaigne and does not cause a reader of the *Essais* to exclaim “Is this Montaigne?” then there may be some merit to the interpretation.²

Montaigne himself provokes the question; pondering the inevitability of mistaken interpretations and misunderstandings, he seems to expect his reader to know him well enough to be the fair judge of what he says:

(B) However, when the thought is not up to my strength, a fair-minded man should reject it as not mine. Anyone who knows how little I like to work, how much I am formed in my own way, will easily believe that I would rather write as many more essays again than subject myself to going over these again for such childish correction. (III, 9, 737)

Doubtless, the personal nature of the *Essais* explains in large part its wide appeal to readers from many backgrounds, readers both ordinary and scholarly, and explains as well the widely divergent readings given this work over time. The *Essais* have the admirable ability to reflect the interests and tastes of different readers from different historical ages. One of Montaigne's most famous early readers, the seventeenth-century French writer Blaise Pascal, found the *Essais* to be at once inspirational and chilling, deeply disturbing in the emphasis on the personal, yet attractive in its revelations, and finally a resource for his *Pensées*. On the other hand, the twentieth-century biological scientist-essayist Lewis Thomas finds consolation in the *Essais*, and his contemporary, the Montaigne scholar Donald Frame, agrees:

Lewis Thomas recently summed up one of the greatest debts that many of us, especially in the last two centuries, have felt toward Montaigne, when he reviewed the many achievements of mankind in its relatively brief history and followed a tribute to his beloved Bach with the statement, “. . . for our times of guilt, we have Montaigne to turn to. . . .” From Emerson, Saint-Beuve, and Flaubert a century and a half ago to Gide, Virginia Woolf, and Aldous Huxley in our day, many readers have indeed turned to Montaigne for relief from inner turmoil.³

Montaigne's observations about the process of his own physical aging in his *Essais*, including details about his kidney stones and failing eyesight, have elicited speculation and even analyses from the medical establishment. His untiring commentary on his own inner motivations and his observations of the idiosyncratic but infinitely interesting behavior of others give his text psychological interest. Sociologists and social historians find in Montaigne a vast array of comments on the variety and diversity of customs and cultures. Montaigne's special attraction to history and poetry ["(A) History is more my quarry, or poetry, which I love with particular affection" (I, 16, 107)] and his approach to the reading and use of historians and poets have attracted the attention of historians and poets, including probably Shakespeare. Although Montaigne claims point blank, "I am no philosopher"—and critics do not disagree—philosophers and theologians are drawn to him. As the Montaigne scholar W.G. Moore observes, Montaigne is first an artist: his argument never goes along in a straight line.⁴ Other scholars disagree. David Schafer in a 1975 article describes Montaigne as "one of the foremost political thinkers of modernity,"⁵ and sees the *Essais* as a work of political philosophy with a reasoned set of conclusions about the nature of the best political order and relevant to current political concerns.

And, of course, Montaigne's *Essais* have generated conversation among literary scholars and critics for generations. The articles in this volume are gathered in order to provide Montaigne's primarily English-speaking readers with some of the literary scholarship and criticism on Montaigne's *Essais*, but other perspectives have also yielded interesting results, to which literary critics have often responded. Jean Starobinski's article "To Preserve and Continue," for example, replies to those who suggest that Montaigne entirely misunderstands and misuses history. Starobinski says:

Montaigne was aware neither of History nor of progress: they had not yet been invented. When he uses 'history' in the singular, it is either to designate the study of the past or in reference to a history relative to a particular individual. Otherwise he speaks of histories, in the plural, which by definition exclude the idea of a unique and providential meaning which would organise all past events and whose later development would be entrusted to the present generation. The past offered Montaigne the spectacle of diversity, of difference; in comparison, we seem different, exposed to a perilous newness, but in no way superior, in no way better or more knowing.⁶

Robert Collins recently took issue with a contention in a work on the formations of modern political thought that says Montaigne subscribes to the doctrine of "reason of state" developed in the course of the sixteenth century. Collins shows that Montaigne's procedures in the essay "Of the Useful and the Honourable" in fact show him breaking apart the grounds for justifications of reason of state generally put forth by humanists in his time. Collins examines Montaigne's rhetoric to explain how his discussion actually runs counter to "reason of state" arguments, although Montaigne employs the self-same examples as those whose arguments he counters:

Montaigne has carefully used examples taken from works that are normally used to support reason of state arguments, and has demonstrated the 'inutile' rather than the 'utile' that one would normally expect . . . It is significant that Montaigne seems to use examples that offer their own indication of his thought, while his first person statements tend not to do so; this is uncommon in an age when examples were deployed and utilized like heavy artillery to hammer home the thoughts of writers, which were put forward dogmatically to fill the breach in the reader's mind that the examples were meant to open. Montaigne is far too subtle and complex to use obvious means, and he expects the reader to follow him without having to resort to such dogmatic statements. This leaves him open to the many forms of interpretation that have made his work so rich and rewarding.⁷

Collins' study observes that Montaigne ingeniously uses the same source material and even the same words as his perceived opponents but to prove the opposite point.

Recent criticism, focusing on the mechanisms operating within the several layers of discourse interacting in the text of the *Essais*, has succeeded in finding ways of understanding the role and function in the text of aspects of Montaigne's work that were often perceived in the past as confusing riddles or that were even ignored as superfluous or inexplicable. Montaigne himself, while encouraging readers to create their own essays deriving from their different and ingenious reading of his book, claims that his own goal in writing is ultimately to know and understand himself better—in the process of which he has much of interest to say, and to many generations of readers. And while he apparently does not worry if, in the process of being published, his work is misspelled or misspelled, he hopes that nothing will happen that will twist his meaning so that his reader misunderstands him:

(B) There is no place where faults of workmanship are so apparent as in material which has nothing in itself to recommend it. Do not blame me, reader, for those that slip in here through the caprice or inadvertency of others: each hand, each workman, contributes his own. I do not concern myself with spelling, and simply order them to follow the old style; or with punctuation; I am inexpert in both. When they wholly shatter the sense, I am not much troubled about it, for at least they relieve me of responsibility; but when they substitute a false meaning, as they do so often, and twist me to their view, they ruin me. (III, 9, 737)

Critical studies of Montaigne's text have shown how mutually dependent are Montaigne's message and his essaying, unresolving method. Behind the seemingly contradictory opinions on the hundreds of topics on which he presses his faculty of judgment, readers find the portrayal of a man who, always changing, is always himself and who is known to his readers, finally, as the remarkably coherent and eminently recognizable human being, the essayist Michel de Montaigne.

NOTES

1. Herbert Luthy, "Montaigne or the Art of Being Truthful," *Encounter* 1 (November 1953), p. 34.
2. Abraham Keller, "Optimism in the Essays of Montaigne," *Studies in Philology*, 54 (1957), p. 428.
3. Donald Frame, "Montaigne's Rejection of Inner Conflict and his Chapter "De la cruauté" (II, 11)," in *Mélanges sur la littérature de la Renaissance à la mémoire de V.-L. Saulnier* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), p. 481.
4. W.G. Moore, "Montaigne's Notion of Experience," in *The French Mind: Studies in Honour of Gustave Rudler*, Ed. Will Moore, Rhoda Sutherland, Enid Starkie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), p. 49. See in the volume on Word Study.
5. David Schafer, "Montaigne's Intention and his Rhetoric," *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 5 (1975/76), p. 57.
6. Jean Starobinski, "'To Preserve and Continue': Remarks on Montaigne's Conservatism," *Diogenes*, 118 (1982), p. 104.
7. Robert Collins, "Montaigne's Rejection of Reason of State in 'De l'utile et de l'honneste,'" *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23, no.11 (1992), pp. 86-87.

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DID MONTAIGNE BETRAY SEBOND?

IN THE perennial debate over Montaigne's Christianity the main issue has long been his treatment of Raymond Sebond. This question has all too often been judged *en gros* and in the light of previous assumptions about his religion as a whole. Yet it offers a quantity of factual evidence that points to certain conclusions when judged with only one assumption: that Montaigne, as revealed elsewhere in his life and work, is not a deliberate and confirmed liar. This assumption may, I think, safely be made.

To be sure, some readers feel that his ideas about immortality and the good life are incompatible with the Christian belief he professed; but the Church in his time, even the Papal examiners, did not think so. Some consider his Christianity less a conviction than an expedient for peace and order; but they do not explain the mass of evidence that points to sincere conviction. Some see ironic lip-service in his statements that only Divine Grace leads to perfect goodness and truth, since he accepts his lack of Grace with such passive contentment; but his irony everywhere else is perfectly clear, and here no irony is clear.

Still other readers feel that he may be just a trifle ironical or insincere about religion. But to my mind a man as concerned with sincerity and religion as he was cannot be halfway in earnest. Since he chose to defend Christianity as perfect and true, to be insincere at all about it he must be wilfully insincere; and since he constantly proclaimed his sincerity, to be wilfully insincere he must be a confirmed liar. Whether his treatment of Sebond proves him so is what I propose to examine here. My only crucial assumption will be that the rest of his life and work does not.

I. THE PROBLEM

Over twenty years ago one of the leading students of Montaigne's religion, Joseph Coppin, wrote that the long battle over the sincerity of the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" had been won: "On a renoncé à voir, dans cette *Apologie*, une feinte habile, par laquelle Montaigne aurait entrepris de ruiner la religion, en se donnant l'air de la défendre."¹ This judgment, already foreshadowed by Grace Norton,² has been echoed by such scholars as A. Forest in 1929,³ Jean Plattard in 1935,⁴ Marcel Raymond and Albert Thibaudet in 1937.⁵

1. *Montaigne, traducteur de Raymond Sebon*, Lille, Morel, 1925, p. 141.

2. *Studies in Montaigne*, New York and London, Macmillan, 1904, p. 6.

3. "Montaigne humaniste et théologien," *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, XVIII (1929), 61.

4. *Etat présent des études sur Montaigne*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1935, p. 64.

5. Raymond in his review of Dréano, *La Pensée religieuse de Montaigne*, and Citoleux, *Le Vrai Montaigne, théologien et soldat*, in *Humanisme et Renaissance*, IV (1937), 346. Thibaudet in Montaigne, *Essais*, Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, N. R. F., 1937, p. 1095.