

Montaigne: Week 2

The early essays

1. Ravisius Textor: Officina (chap. "Mortui gaudio et risu")
2. Dits memorables; Propos memorables; Apophthegmes
3. Coelius Rhodiginus: Leçons antiques (1516)
4. Pietro Crinito: Honnête discipline (1500)
5. Pedro de Mexia: Forest de diverses leçons (1542)
6. Pierre Breslay: Anthologie (1574)
7. Guillaume Bouchet: Les Sérées (1584)
8. Antonio de Guevara: Lettres dorées
9. leçons
10. "Et eusse prins plus volontiers ceste forme à publier mes verves, si j'eusse eu à qui parler..." (I, xl, p. 304)
11. Jacques Amyot
12. Pierre Villey
13. un plus notable tesmoignage de l'imbecillité humaine (I, 45-46)
14. "Certes, c'est un subject merveilleusement vain, divers et ondoyant, que l'homme. Il est malaisé d'y fonder jugement constant et uniforme" (I, 41).
15. Justus Lipsius: De amphiteatro
16. Gomara: Historia general de las Indias
17. "de mes premiers essays, aucuns puent un peu à l'estranger..." (III, v, p. 90)

FRENCH STUDIES B

MONTAIGNE

week 2

The Early Essais

reading to include: (a text especially):

I,vi L'heure des parlemens dangereuse  
vii Que l'intention juge nos actions  
ix Des menteurs  
xvi De la punition de la couardise  
xxi De la force de l'imagination  
xxxiv La fortune se rencontre souvent au train de la raison  
xxxvii Du jeune Caton  
l De Democritus & Heraclitus  
II,iii Coustume de l'Isle de Cea

also look at

I,xxvii C'est folie de rapporter le vray & le faux à nostre  
suffisance  
xxxii Qu'il faut sobrement se mesleretc...  
and  
I I,xiv,xx,xxxix

plus

Villey: Les sources & l'évolution des "Essais", vol II pp 3-86(= 1st 3  
chaps)

Frame: Montaigne, a biography, chap ix, pp 142-161

+ Friedrich, chap. VIII

+ Sayce, chap. III pp. 25-49

+ R.C. La Charte, in R.R., 1971, #62, pp. 5-15)

## The Early 'Essais'

Not many artists can claim to have invented, all by themselves, a totally new and unheard-of art-form. Yet Montaigne can claim that. Montaigne is actually one of the most original writers Europe has ever produced, being one of the 3 really internationally great writers ever <sup>to have written in French</sup> ~~produced by France~~ (the other 2 being Rabelais and Rousseau). Montaigne's originality is apparent in more than one way: his use of French instead of Latin to treat serious subjects; his concentration on himself as his favourite subject (a queer and improper thing to many of his contemporaries); his humane views on cruelty, torture, witchcraft, religious tolerance, to name some of his views considered unChristian by the Inquisition. But in nothing is Montaigne more original than in the fact that he created a new literary form. And that form, as one might expect, is the essay. Not only did he invent the catchy title which so pleased his first readers and which in our language has come to lose the original meaning which he gave to it: "tests, trials, attempts, experiments, tries;" but of course the whole genre which we think of as the loose exposition of personal unspecialist viewpoints (when we talk of an essay) did not exist before Montaigne wrote, and did exist after he had written. He not only created the essay, but he perfected it in one go, too. In England later, people like Bacon, Hazlitt, Lamb etc were to make their own contributions to the development of the form, of course, but they were using a form made for them in France by Michel Eyquem.

Now, of course, Montaigne did not set out to create a new literary form, did not sit down, saying to himself "I have something new to say, therefore the existing forms of literary expression (letter, verse, philosophical discourse etc) will be inadequate to my purpose and I must forge something new". New art forms do develop out of dissatisfaction with old ones, <sup>inadequate</sup> but are often the result of a blind haphazard hit-and-miss trial-and-error process. And the essay-form which Montaigne hit on is no exception to

this rule . It grew, in the hands of Montaigne, and under the influence of his own personality, it grew out of previous forms. And these previous forms Montaigne had in fact been attracted to, had even tried his hand at in his early days as a dilettante amateur writer up in his tower in the early 1570s, and they eventually, before long, simply proved incompetent to the task of containing what he wanted to say, and more especially HOW he wanted to say it. So he had to enlarge, adapt and eventually as he wrote unrecognisably transform an existing genre into what we know today under the name of an 'essay'.

These earlier forms were the work of compilers, of pedestrian hacks for the most part, half-plagiarists, half-vulgarizers of learning. The books they wrote consisted of a compilations of cognate anecdotes about famous people and events in classical antiquity and also in more recent history, classified under, ~~groups~~ grouped together under headings which told the reader quite plainly what sort of anecdotes, on what sort of subject he would find in each section. For example, it was known that certain famous men had died in the lavatory, while sitting on the pot; and so a list of their names, the circumstances of each death etc would be drawn up and a title appended to the whole little chapter: "Of men who died at stool". Or it might be feats of military prowess and valour, and as many as possible memorable achievements of the same sort would be gathered together, from hearsay, from modern historians about the French wars, say, in Italy, from vulgarized ~~collections~~ editions of Greek & Latin classical authors, all set down together and entitled "of military valour" or whatever. Or of the sexual behaviour of ancient queens.

The work of the compiler of this sort of work was of a clerical nature, at ~~most~~ its most original it was the work of something like a research assistant. The compiler did not even have to comment on the anecdotes which he set down, except to link them minimally together, possibly with a few moral exhortations or exclamatory blurb. These compilations were all the rage in the XVIth century, in all European languages. Translations

*\* (or of Rabelais, I suspect, of 47 ~~men~~ men who died of laughing - Rabelais' text - (chap. called "Mortui gaudis" etc.)*

from one vernacular to another were rife, new editions kept appearing, one copying the ~~tother~~. This work required not even erudition and the research ability was not very great that was demanded either, since the compilers often did not need to know Greek or Latin, as the work of translation and compilation had been done so often before that one merely had to plunder someone else's book to write <sup>one's</sup> his own.

b other sorts of compilations, see (1), called Dits memorables, or Propos memorables, or Apophthegmes. These were similarly collected & categorized and plundered sayings by famous men, usually characters from Greek or Roman history or mythology, and usually divided by subject or theme of the sayings. What the reader thus had in any one of the chapters which made up the work would be a compendium, an anthology of everything of note that had ever been said on a certain topic by anyone of note. ~~THESE~~ They were like say, the Oxford Book of Quotations, only much more voluminous and all inclusive.

c also there were collections of sentences, ie of moral maxims on all sorts of aspects of human behaviour, greatly nourished, of course, by the plundering of translations of Greek & Roman classics. And bearing titles like the labels on drawers, under which would be grouped wise, pithy truths on similar themes.

So, most of the works of this sort were produced by unoriginal men, it was <sup>for the most</sup> uncreative servile writing, derivative to the nth degree, really anthologies they were more than anything else, compiled with a minimum of effort and no thought or imagination, no personal influence on the contents, aiming simply at dissemination of encapsulated and predigested packets of <sup>fragmented</sup> anecdotal knowledge about aspects of life, politics, history, literature, morals, and so on. In English, this sort of compilation literature (17<sup>th</sup> cent) came to be called commonplace books.

Some names & titles:

- (3) (2) Coelius Rhodigimus: Leçons antiques (1516), leçon meaning of course readings. In Latin. <sup>originally</sup> In 30 books.
- (4) (3) Pétrus CRINITO: Honnête discipline (1500). In 25 books. Translated from the Italian(?).

(5)

Pedro de MEXIA (Messie, frenched): Forest de diverses leçons (1542).

A Spanish best-seller who had a great vogue in England as well as in France.

(6)

Pierre BRESLAY: Anthologie (1574), a home grown French production.

(7)

Guillaume BOUCHET: Les Sérées (1584), one of the most widely

read towards the end of century.

(8)

Antonio de GUEVARA: Epistolas doradas (date? muerto en 1545?)

another Spanish best-seller, great sale all over Europe.

One finds mention of all these and others in the ESSAIS: allusions to them, admiration of them, borrowings from them (usually unacknowledged), as well as from many others who are even more forgotten nowadays than these gentlemen. Even in the very latest ESSAIS, written, or added to, towards the end of Montaigne's life, one finds evidence of his debt to this sort of reading. Among the 1000 books he mentions, a fair few must have been of this sort. Those later ESSAIS are of course very different from these compilations as well as very different from Montaigne's early ESSAIS. And the earliest essays show great similarities to the genre of the leçons (=lectures, ie readings (9)), those slavish collections of famous feats and sayings and of moral maxims borrowed from the ancients. Similarities which are so great, in fact, that one is forced to the conclusion that when, in 1571-72, Montaigne took up his quill and first put words on paper for his own satisfaction, he was aiming at producing a very different sort of work to the one that his book eventually became — <sup>probably</sup> aiming at the production of yet another anthology of borrowed and collated anecdotes and sayings and maxims such as those which he could read in the works mentioned a moment ago, and to which his ESSAIS show he had such a liking: that he was aiming in fact at producing at compiling in the long run his own collection of diverses leçons. He almost chose the letter-form to couch his compilations. However, as he tells us (I, 304 G-F = I, 283-4 Class Garnier): (= I, XL) :

Et eusse prins plus volontiers ceste forme à publier mes <sup>(8)</sup> (10) verbes, si j'eusse eu à qui parler...

but having nobody, since the death of La Boétie, to whom he could write a letter, or even imagine himself writing a <sup>imaginary</sup> letter to, he chose the form of the leçon.

from the dates, one would say the work was really begun in France just at the time Montaigne was to write.

This is not an odd phenomenon, after all, is it. When an amateur fancies himself at writing, (and writers, unlike musicians or sculptors, are usually <sup>amateurs</sup> self-taught), he will often fancy himself writing in the style of his own favourite writer; and as we know Montaigne did read this sort of compilation and find great interest in it. And great interest there must have been in them for one, who like Montaigne found fascination in learning about the wierder vagaries of human behaviour. For one needs to read very little of Montaigne before realizing that one of his most abiding and deepest-rooted interests is a sort of what we could call nowadays anthropological curiosity. The word anthropology was ~~not~~ coined in Montaigne's time, not for 300 years after his time, but much of his work is of a sort of amateur anthropology or primitive sociology. The study of man in his multifarious manifestations, the study of the different oddities of behaviour seen as conditioned by different forces (climatic, social, geographical, historical, etc), the relativity of forms of human society, of norms of conduct, this was to become one of Montaigne's <sup>greatest</sup> themes in the Essais. But <sup>in 1571-72</sup> the Essais were still years in front of him. None the less this interest of his, though <sup>unexpressed</sup> by Montaigne in his early years, <sup>before writing anything</sup> did not go unsatisfied in him: for he could read, in these codified compilations of oddities, all sorts of facts about men's behaviour at other times & in other places. AND read them he did. And when he came to start jotting his own notes, it is not really surprising that he should have found himself copying the sort of book he enjoyed so much as a reader. For (though he was to come to love Plutarch better than any other author) at this time, in the early 1570s, he has not read Plutarch, whom J Amyot <sup>(11)</sup> <sup>(9)</sup> did not translate from the Greek until 1574 (?). And so he started his writing life as a sort of hack.

As I say, I think most writers do this. Certainly Flaubert did it, in his teens, and others that one can think of. Unlike Flaubert or Montaigne they usually take good care to destroy their earliest attempts at self-expression so as not to have them to blush for 20 years later. But not Montaigne. For though he added constantly to them over the years, many of his earliest attempts

at writing are preserved in books I & II, fossilized as it were below the later additions, ~~almost~~ <sup>early Essays</sup> and some of them have received so little touching up from Montaigne later on in life that they are almost as he jotted them together in 1572-3, jig-sawing them together from fragments which he had filched from his reading of other authors or sometimes thought of himself from among his personal knowledge or hearsay about recent history. And if one reads only the first layer of text in these earliest *Essais*, that is the a layer, the / layer, one can see that many of them are very slight pieces of work indeed, resembling much more the compilation-anthology sort of piece than they do the later *Essais* of Montaigne. (Remember that the order in which the *ESSAIS* are printed in the volume nowadays is not the order in which they were written; older editions of Montaigne sometimes printed them in a different order again; they are not chronological in their sequence. Essay I, i, for example, is probably 5 or 6 years later in composition than the others at the beginning of Book I. The dating of the *ESSAIS*' composition, by the way, was done by the gentleman at (10): the great blind Montaigne scholar Pierre Villey; he did it a long time ago;

there have been other more recent attempts, by people like Frame & Brush, but Villey's work still stands, theirs more or less confirming his. So, M. stated his *Essays* as though it were to be a commonplace book - see Erasmus, *De copia* (hand out) to schoolboys.

Let us look at one or two of those earliest *Essais*, to see what species of animal they are; say, take I, ii *De la tristesse* (p 43 GF; p 7 Class G) dating from about 1572-74. → take photocopy of 1580 text - p. 6-12!!

In its present form it begins like Montaigne of the best maturest vintage: it opens with a bald statement about himself, followed by opinion, comment & judgment based on Montaigne's own likes and dislikes. But notice that line 1 is b, //, and from *et ne l'ayme* down to the end of the 1st paragraph is all c, ///, ie none of this first para was there in the essay's original form in 1572 (for remember b, // = 1st published in 1588 and c, /// = posthumous edition.) No, in 1572, the essay began as you can see at a, / with *le conte dit*, with one para (the <sup>present</sup> 2nd) on that anecdote (NB he doesn't tell us which conte tells us this, but we know that he culled it either from the

= the story goes -

class ended here

original Herodotus' Histories, where it first appears, or, more likely, from one of the collections of divers *leçons* which he was so fond of reading. So <sup>present (was originally opening para)</sup> para 2 on that episode. Then para 3 goes to a <sup>different but</sup> similar episode, this one from recent history (about the Guise family) showing expression of grief for apparently trivial reasons (and deriving possibly from Montaigne's personal memory or hearsay?). Then to para 4, where he ~~links~~ links this idea to something from ancient history: l'invention de cet ancien peintre. Then to para 5, still a,/, which marks a new aspect of the expression of grief, viz the effect of shock and delayed expression of grief, which Montaigne compares (p 9 <sup>CG, G-F</sup> 45 <sup>CG</sup>) to being smitten with love (by free association of ideas): possibly indicative of the way Montaigne will ramble from one subject to another in more confident mature essays; here already he seems to have trouble sticking to the point); then from love-idea to impotence from extremity of desire. Then to the last para (p 10 <sup>CG</sup> 45 bas <sup>CG</sup> 6) which is just a

higgledy-piggledy bundling together of unconnected episodes and examples of people who actually died from shock, shock of good as well as bad tidings.

And that, in 1572-80 (ie before the b & c additions) is all there was to an essay of Montaigne: a <sup>med 5 paras</sup> pell-mell ragbag gathering of oddities on a cognate theme (and not all that cognate either, for what have love and good tidings to do with la tristesse, which the title tells us is the subject? \*

Montaigne already showing signs of the ~~inability~~ tendency to follow free associations of ideas away from the stated topics of his essays which will lead eventually to one like Des coches III, vi, which its title says is about coaches and which is really an indictment of European Christian colonization of the New World!). And most of these oddities are culled from Montaigne's reading, or even plagiarized from his reading at that time. IS that all?

Well, perhaps not exactly all. There are 3 small points worth noting from that a,/, text, apart from the tendency to ramble already noted, <sup>which would make a proper</sup> title be: The effects of strong emotion & the odd

1 see para 5 (p8 bas GF; 44 Cl G) beginning De vray.... This one is not a 2nd hand example borrowed from someone else: it is a brief reflexion of Montaigne's . Not very acute, not very personal, or autobiographical, nor

ways it sometimes has of expressing itself. This, rather than Tristesse, is the connecting link

particularly well expressed — but it IS his own. It comes not from any bookish source, but is apparently a small ounce of wisdom that he has derived from his own experience of life and himself, and is therefore one of the first glimpses we have of him in his natural habit in the *Essais*. So, even at this very early stage, he was not content to rely on other sources, but had his own word to say on his subject.

2 a second small point of interest from the a, / layer of text is in that ~~line~~ last a para, p11CI G; pp45-46 G-F, see (11): (12), (13)

un plus notable témoignage de l'imbécillité humaine

Montaigne is not just interested in noting these examples out of openmouthed admiration of great men, but that word *imbécillité* tells us something of what he is after in collecting his examples: examples of *imbécillité humaine*. Not that we should interpret this as meaning *imbecility*, but rather as *human frailty*.

And even in this earliest of essays, Montaigne shows here the first symptom of one of his most abiding preoccupations: with the weakness of the human ~~mind~~ <sup>frailty, fallibility, unreliability &</sup> mind and its incompetence to deal with tasks that it sets itself; what

Montaigne saw as the pretentious aspirations of the human intellect & the inappropriateness of the tasks it sees fit to undertake. This is to become one of the richest themes of Montaigne's sceptical essays (more of which, <sup>in later class</sup> ~~no~~ doubt, from *Miss W*) and especially of his *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, the (II, xii) longest of them. For it is one of the odd paradoxes of Montaigne that, though he is famed for what Michelet called his discovery of man, much of his earlier and especially sceptical consideration of man and his place in the world, man & his role, and his abilities, much of this earlier consideration is derogatory and critical and belittling. There is hardly a good word that Montaigne has to say for his fellowmen, ~~unlike~~ unless it be some ancient giant of a man, like the younger Cato; but his contemporaries he thought poorly of in many ways.

3 a third feature of Montaigne's lasting interest is apparent in this I, ii De la tristesse: his psychological bent; Montaigne the moraliste, showing great fascination with oddities of <sup>motive & behaviour</sup> feeling and their expression. Often in <sub>life.</sub>

these early essays, he demonstrates and interprets apparent illogicalities of emotion, eg in this essay where he ~~talks of~~ points out the incongruity in people's way of expressing their grief, the unexpectedness of their reaction to shock. The <sup>(fascinating)</sup> paradoxes of experience are what fascinate him.

And when he alleges a certain example to show one facet of human behaviour, <sup>often</sup> he usually follows this with another example to show a different, possibly

contradictory facet of human behaviour in a similar situation. The changeableness of human behaviour is something which strikes him early on.

By the time he comes to write I, 1 (written 1578-80, ie about 6 years after he began writing), by that time he had developed a theme, concretely expressed and explicit, out of this: (see (12) (14))

Certes, c'est un subject merueilleusement vain, divers & ondoyant, que l'homme. Il est malaisé d'y fonder jugement constant & uniforme

(=I, 5 ClG; p 41 GF)

And this diversity & unpredictability of men is also to become a major theme of Montaigne, especially again in those sceptical essays I mentioned.

One can see it already showing itself in this earliest one, as in another early

one, II, 1 which tells you by its very title that this same observation is to be found in it: De l'inconstance de nos actions. In this essay II, 1, one

can see interesting fossilized, stratified evidence of a profound development that Montaigne went through, dated for us by the different layers of

added text. The earliest layer of text a, / shows his dissatisfaction with this fickleness & changeability in men's natures. But the b & c additions

tend to show that in later years he had mellowed away from moralizing and criticism of this fickleness, towards a more mature acceptance of it. See

especially that list of <sup>contradictory</sup> adjectives, added at b & c, of self-description, at (page

370 Cl G, p II, 9 GF), in which one senses little self-criticism, but merely

tolerance and description of an aspect of Montaigne's character which he believes is important enough to define and suggest is common to all men.

In the earliest layer of text, however, the criticism of & dissatisfaction

with the moral fickleness of men is manifest and this attitude, this critical

dissatisfaction with men as they are, found expression in another group of *Jan 2: 1981*  
 early essays: the essays of stoical inspiration. We shall hear more of them  
 next week <sup>Soon</sup> [while on the subject of Death]. But let us pause a moment with one  
 of them II, iii Coustume de l'Isle de Cea. This essay is interesting, of  
 course, by virtue of its subject: suicide; and by Montaigne's attitude to  
 suicide: on the whole approving, ie not very Christian. The whole question  
 that Hamlet put as To be or not to be was a neo-Stoical one: whether it is  
 nobler to bear the slings & arrows etc. For Stoicism, or the neo-Stoic revival  
 of pessimistic stamp of the 16th century was an answer to, a moral philosophy/for those who/  
 needed support against pain, misfortune & death. And of course suicide  
 was a possible solution to the problem of the unpleasantness of experience.  
 But what is even more interesting in this essay, from the point of view of its being  
 one of the earliest written by Montaigne, is not just that it shows Montaigne's  
 attraction <sup>Something of</sup> ~~attraction~~ to Stoicism, but its method of composition. For, in parts it is  
 hardly original to Montaigne at all. Eg pp 384/Garnier = pp 21-22 GF from  
 C'est ce qu'on dit, que le sage vit tant qu'il doit (5 lines up GF)  
 down to ... nous voilà guéris tout à fait (more than half way down p 22 GF)  
 that whole piece of a text is translation, more or less free (and at times  
 not all that free) of <sup>different</sup> bits and pieces taken from the Epistles of  
 Seneca. Seneca was Montaigne's favourite author at the time and for a long  
 time afterwards, to vie only with Plutarch as his all-time favourite. *p.w.l.*  
 See also I xxxvii Du jeune Caton. *attest*  
 So, not only did Montaigne in the early Essais string together  
 quotations from Latin authors (see eg I xxxvii Du jeune Caton, where the a  
 text is little more than a collection of what 5 Latin poets had to say of Cato  
 Jnr) not only did Montaigne string together these culled quotes in this  
 dictionary-of-quotations way, but he also exercised his considerable trans-  
 lator's talents on compiling patchworks of sentences in French which were  
 lifted in their entirety, and sometimes without acknowledgement, from ancient  
 authors.

Nowadays, this strikes us as the grossest of plagiarisms. But not so  
 the XVIth century. Montaigne did come later on in life to admit that some

of his earliest pieces were unoriginal and drew heavily on other people's thoughts and work. Years later he was able to look back and say

de mes premiers essays, aucuns puent un peu à l'estranger (17)  
(GF III, 90; Cl Garnier II, 303)

Also, stylistically, it is understandable that Montaigne should have modelled himself on Latin masters: it had been drummed into him at school that this was the language of elegance, intelligence, wit, taste, the <sup>only</sup> language in which anything important could properly be said. Also, it was, remember, almost his own native language, after all. There were no other models. There was no existing ~~French~~ French prose style for a serious beginning writer who wanted to write in French. He was almost constrained by the ~~literary~~ literary atmosphere which he breathed, to emulation, to imitation, of Classical masters. And the line between imitation and copying is never very clear, or easy to define (as anybody who has had to write a literary essay knows).

Not only was it understandable that Montaigne should model himself in style on a Latin prose-writer. It was also to be of extreme importance for the development of French prose after Montaigne. Montaigne, who himself had no vernacular model to define himself by reference to, to imitate, to develop from, was to establish that very thing: a standard of French prose that was to serve for later generations of writers as the vernacular excellence in style which he himself had lacked as a beginner. Montaigne's liking for the curt, compact, concise, lapidary, striking, economical and ironical turn of phrase was to impress later French prose writers of the 17th century: Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère were all to be in Montaigne's debt as users of language. They refined his processes, they like <sup>may have</sup> (Pascal) reacted away from his ideas, but again as in other things) it is Montaigne who is the founder, the creator of a tradition which later authors will amend but which will remain discernible as Montaigne's through their alterations. As Villey has said, Montaigne did in this way for French prose what Du Bellay had done 20 years before for French verse (by adapting, translating, appropriating bits & pieces of Horace's odes). At once founding a French tradition, and rooting it firmly in its LATIN & Greek

heritage.

lecture I  
ended here  
1979

As for the content of these early Seneca & Stoical-inspired essays,  
we shall hear more of them next week on DEATH (especially I,xiv,xx,&xxxix)

Let us take a brief look at another sort of very early essay.

Look at some of the titles:

I,v Si le chef d'une place assiégée doit sortir pour parlementer  
vi L'heure des parlemens dangereuse  
xv On est puny pour s'opiniastres à une place sans raison  
xlv De la bataille de Dreux  
xlvi Des destries (destrie, phon)

It is obvious that, at this time, Montaigne, and no doubt later too, fancied

himself as a soldier, or even as a military strategist and tactician, or theorizer. For these slight productions collect together anecdotes of military doings, military errors, and they draw morals for the benefit of military men from these happenings. Once again, in their a, / versions, ie as first written, they are thin & fragmentary, little more than haphazard collections of a few episodes culled from Montaigne's reading. Even when expanded with the b & c additions, these essays still amount to only a very few pages, and contain hardly any of the Montaigne who is so readable and witty and wise in his later stages. Thier very brevity and thinness is an indication of how superficial and misguided was Montaigne's interest in this sort of matter. In view of his later development as a moralist & autobiographer, it is not surprising that even in later years he could find very little to add that was of interest to him or to us to these pieces.

The same goes for the group of diplomatic essays, those in which he collects examples of diplomats' behaviour, of negotiations, of royal counselling:

I ix Des menteurs  
xiii Ceremonie de l'entrevue des roys  
xvii Un traict de quelques ambassadeurs

The only one of these which is expanded at b & c and which becomes more personal is as one might <sup>perhaps</sup> expect Des menteurs, ie the only one which has to do with private morality instead of ceremony, instead of professional counselling.

Besides this superficial sort of collection of inter-related trivia, of which Montaigne did a fair bit in his early days (eg Des senteurs, I, lv in its a form amounts to a grand total of about 15 lines) and could even go on doing in 1578-80 eg Des pouces, II, xxvi, of about the same length and pointlessness, besides that sort of triviality, there is another sort of little essay in which the real Montaigne flashes suddenly through and is for a moment recognizable as the Montaigne one enjoys reading and the writer he was to become: see

I. xxvii C'est folie de rapporter le vray & le faux à nostre suffisance

& xxxii Qu'il faut sobrement se mesler de juger des ordonnances divines

In essays like these ones, for all their brevity, one sees Montaigne himself.

No compilation, no cribbing, no brainless collections of anecdotes, but abold grappling with real social questions, with polemical topics of real relevance to the society in which he lived. This is political and religious and socio-

logical matter that he is expressing himself on, not some second-hand culling or collations of other people's knowledge. He is making judgments on belief

and on his contemporay society. He is saying something that he feels he must say on the subject of what should be believed. *He is here taking a position on the broad religious question of change against conservatism.* The essays are still

extremely brief, and also no doubt written upon the stimulus of something he has read. But they are also extremely interesting because of the accent of a genuine *personal* concern that one detects in the writing of them. Also because of that

theme which I mentioned a moment ago: what should be believed? This in general terms is how one can define the great preoccupation which is in Montaigne's mind all through what is known as his sceptical period: what are the matters on

which one can arrive at a tenable belief; and what are the standards that one should properly apply to opinions before according them any belief? Montaigne in these little heated expressions of values, is formulating basic attitudes which will remain constant in him, attitudes to scepticism, religious and political conservatism. These little pieces read already like nothing so much as pages displaced from the Apologie de Raimond Sebond, in which Montaigne's scepticism was to find its fullest and most long-winded expression. Yet the so-called

"sceptical crisis" is supposed to date from about 1576, yet here he is already in 1572-3 in full bloom as a fluent and conservative sceptic.

So, one can conclude that in the earliest essays, for the most part, Montaigne has not yet found himself. He is writing in a mode which he has been attracted to by his reading. He writes very little about himself, because it was as I have said extremely unseemly to do that in the XVIth century, especially if one was not great or famous. He follows the <sup>(learned at school)</sup> vogue for little collections of snippets of fact <sup>& commonplaces</sup> and information on cognate subjects, anthologies of episodes, anecdotes and maxims, culled or cribbed from other writers, and embellished by oft quotation of, and allusion to, ~~other~~ classical authorities.

At the same time, there ~~is~~ is evidence of the mature Montaigne even in these earliest pieces. In I xxvii & xxxii for example, which read already like fragments of the *Apologie* one can see him in full-blown sceptical mood, expressing bold opinions in vigorous personal manner on moral & religious topics, no longer content merely to compile, but being inventive and personal, as well as giving evidence to those who contest Villey's use of the word crisis to describe Montaigne's sceptical set of essays.

Also, there is already the expression, largely under the influence of Montaigne's liking for Seneca, in several large and important essays (especially I xiv, xx, & xxxix) of the Stoical outlook, which used to be seen as typical of the first of the three supposed stages of Montaigne's intellectual development: Stoical, Sceptical & Epicurean. And, of that Stoicism, we shall no doubt hear more next week.

For next week, please read especially those 3 essays

|      |                   |
|------|-------------------|
|      | I xiv, xx, xxxix; |
| also | II, vi, xxxvii    |
| and  | III, xii          |