

MONTAIGNE ON LOVE (1967)

I hope that no-one will be shocked to-day; but, if you are, then may it do you some good.

The title of this is a misnomer — I have little to say on the subject of love in M, for the good reason that M has little to say on it. A reading of the Essais bears out what Gide says p24

l'amour ne semble pas avoir joué dans la vie de M un grand rôle; mais bien plutôt la volupté

There are of course references to love, opinions, sketchy reminiscences, scattered throughout the Essais but these do not add up to either an interesting or a coherent attitude on love.

There is also, of course, III iii De 3 commerces, one of which is love; and III v Sur des vers de Virgile the essay where M writes most freely on ^{those bodily functions} ~~subjects~~ which are usually considered either as matter for bawdy humour or for the euphemism of the scientific manual, where M expands at greatest length, if not on the subject of love then at least on sex. I shall draw upon that latter essay in this hour, but — in a suitably Montaigne-like manner — I shall give a class not so much on love as on two topics, both revealing about M and about his time, that the search for M's ideas on love has led me to

- 1 M's attitudes to women;
- 2 what Frame describes, regrettably, as M's "obscenity".

I say "regrettably" because obscene and obscenity are loaded words nowadays, usually derogatory words, which are likely to make ~~pe~~ the hackles of people's dearest prejudices rise at the first syllable and thus prevent any dispassionate appraisal of the issues raised by a serious writer in writing about what he considers important enough to write about. For this reason I shall avoid the words when talking of the effort that M was making, in defiance of the sensibilities of his contemporaries, to speak freely and naturally about his own experience and his own body, without excluding any part of either experience or body from his thought and verbal processes. It would be easy and comfortable to shirk this side of M; but our squeamishness was of such importance to M that he wrote about it. Would it not do him an injustice to ignore it? It would certainly be unfaithful to the spirit of his book to pretend that these parts of it did not exist, as it was against this very pretence in life that he was writing.

M's attitudes on women

Gide says pp24-5: J'ai relevé dans les Essais les passages où M parle d'elles; il n'en est pas un qui ne soit injurieux

This is not quite so; M does have a kind word to say for women now and again, but when he does he usually has another purpose in mind. As at I xiv 57-59, looking for examples of pain borne with courage and without complaint, he cites instances of women to whom the pangs of childbirth are insignificant, who have their babies as naturally and with as little fuss as ^{wild} animals or physiotherapists, wash them in a river and trot off again after their husbands. Or women who submit to all sorts of torture for the sake of their good looks — one in Paris who had herself skinned (so he says: se fit escorcher p 58) hoping thereby to improve her complexion, and he says that everyone has heard of her; some who have sound teeth extracted to improve their voice, swallow sand and cinders, straitjacket themselves so tightly into corsets that they die of it.

(This prompts ⁹ ~~the~~ reflexions in my mind:

¶ that this is a good example of how, on any subject, M fait feu de tout bois, be it death, religion, scepticism, miracles, laws, love etc, to support a major point he uses minor arguments of which, elsewhere, he expresses doubt, scorn, disbelief or suspicion; and that one should not assume that just because M uses a certain argument at a certain point that he gives it his full credence, or, in the case of women, that he looks on these antics with approval; it's just that at this point in this essay on impassive suffering of pain he needed a

few examples and these ones came to mind. A perplexing thing, this, about M but it has to be faced. As he himself says, to the desperation of those who want to fit him into a cosy intellectual category with a readily identifiable label:

I lloC Aussi en l'estude que je traite de noz meurs et mouvemens, les tesmoignages fabuleux, pourveu qu'ils soient possibles, y servent comme les vrays. Advenu ou non advenu, à Paris ou à Rome, à Jean ou à Pierre, c'est tousjours un tour de l'humaine capacité, duquel je suis utilement advisé par ce recit...

and so on, that whole page which is a sort of démenti of his attitude on miracles and credulity, but borne out by his scepticism, because remember that M had absorbed not only the ~~metaphysical~~ ideas of the Pyrrhonists through his reading of Sextus Empiricus but also their techniques of arguing, taking as he says elsewhere the opposite side just for practice, to avoid being dogmatic and certain about things that it was pointless to have an opinion about anyway.)

However, apart from that passage and one or two others, Gide's statement is accurate. So one should not, I think, assume that M really admired the contortions and absurdities that these women constrained themselves to. For we know that M's ideal was moderation, even in virtue; and that he had a healthy scorn for those who bother about appearances, fashion and the outlandish shapes and colours that it turns people into.

In general, M's opinion of women was a poor one; he seems to have considered them as slightly above the animals, although in that section of the Apologie in praise of animals, he even advises that women should adopt, in copulation, the position adopted by quadrupeds, this one being by far preferable as only then can the male seed do its job properly and fertilize her (I 518). Not only this but it is obvious that women should not really participate in copulation, much less enjoy it, but merely be used — any active part by women in the operation being dismissed as

nuisibles, indiscrets and insolents I 518

an attitude that ~~was~~ ~~have~~ had a pedigree back to Aristotle I 624, and was to have a quasi-scientific basis until the next century, for it was believed on Aristotle's authority I 624 that conception was solely a male function, the woman not contributing any seed herself to the new child but merely a cosy womb.

cf. Spanish Jesuit Sanchez, published in 1602 *De sancto matrimonii sacramento*, asking utrum virgo Maria semen emittit in copulatione cum Spiritu Sancto = "si la verge M a émis de la liqueur séminale dans sa copulation avec le SE" (in Voltaire, *Romans & contes*, Garnier pp. 311, 644).

Actually, women's participation in anything other than household chores, holding their tongues, being wet-nurses, having babies etc, seems to have been anathema to M

la plus utile et honorable science et occupation à une femme, c'est la science du ménage

III ix De la vanité = II 415

He is especially hard on educated women — if women must read and think then let it be some pious gent like R de S I 481, or a little poetry, a little profit from history and a dash of moral philosophy which will teach them to bear their lot with

*questioned by Galien

fortitude, to console them against the treachery of their husbands and lovers, to curb their own immoderate desires and to grow meekly old and wrinkled II 243 De trois commerces=III iii. But really women don't need books, they only need to be loved and honoured 242, to make eyes, and no books are needed to teach them that, it's in their blood 242 and in love all they need to know is how to play a man along, to draw out a courtship so that it will keep a man's interest as long as possible; but even in courtship they shouldn't participate very much — not that M believes it immodest, he has no such illusion about women as that they might be modest, but it's just not part of the rôle that Nature has given them

de vray, selon la loy que nature leur donne, ce n'est pas proprement à elles de vouloir et desirer; leur rôle est souffrir, obeir, consentir

III v 314

They are as important as the trout to the fisherman, but no more.

I mentioned a moment ago the immoderate desires of women, what M calls la témérité de leurs propres désirs 243. One wonders what unfortunate experience he had as a young man to feel such righteous horror and bitterness at women. ^{*}We know that his relations with his mother were not of the closest; we surmise that his relations with his wife were formal, but surely something other than the prevailing climate of opinion

* afterthought: not necessarily — M is in fact more lenient to the femmettes than Springer, Bodin & Co. All he had to do was absorb his attitude from people & books — his experienced women would ...

about women is responsible for M's indignation at their vicious nature. This healthily ^{lustful} man who ~~is~~ is so shocked at the story of the empress Messalina's 25 men in one night II 279, so suspicious about what he calls their perpétuelle capacité II 314, as though he had a grudge against them or against nature for having made them capable of greater sensuality than he was himself.

elles sont, sans comparaison, plus capables et ardentes
aux effets de l'amour que nous

II 278

Women, he believes, can be roused by the proximity of any man II 280; they know more about sexual enjoyment than men do, they're born with it, and all the books written about sex, all the dirty drawings children do in public places, the shape of men's clothing, all these things merely aggravate and enflame their lustful propensity and inordinate appetite. Not only this but worse, men overheat women's unbalanced imaginations with an education that is designed to equip solely for sex, poor things, and then forbid them to act on it, hedging them about with prohibitions and taboos which, when all is said and done, only abet immorality, the strictness of the inhibition making it all the more likely that it will be infringed, especially in marriage

car le mariage, que nous disons avoir la charge de les
empescher de bruler, leur apporte peu de rafraichissement
selon nos meurs

II 280

Despite this, and despite also the fact that he realized:

c'est donc folie d'essayer à brider aux femmes un
désir qui leur est si cuysant et si naturel

II 293

despite these,when it comes to marriage,M himself is all in
favour of inhibitions and infibulations (there's a fine word,
what's its meaning ,Miss X?)and his only suggestion about
how to prevent one's wife being unfaithful is to counsel à
moderation and say,oh well,cuckoldry is not an unbearable ill.
Much of III v is devoted to marriage and to the French's im-
moderate fear of cuckoldry; much of it could be called,in
modern terms,Marriage Guidance Counselling.

The central idea in M's blueprint for marriage is:

it has nothing to do with love,except that,given luck,
it might cure a lover of his love. Marriage is not for love
but for continuing a dynasty; it should be brought about not
by the desire of a man and a woman for one another but by
policy and convenience,and should preferably be arranged by
a third party II 273. Love in marriage is the surest way
to disaster; to love a wife as one would a mistress is a
sort of incest!(the word,I promise you,is M's 273; cf I 226);
the relationship in marriage should=friendship,not passion;
love for M = titillation and difficulty and imagination,
whereas marriage = usefulness,honour and what Shakespere
called "the fine point of seldom pleasure" blunted by over-
use (278,273).

(Also on marriage, in passing, M has a fair bit to say I xxi De la force de l'imagination 102-5 on how mumbo-jumbo and magic medals can cure impotence in a man, induced on his wedding-night by imagination — but that's beside the present point, so let's not be Montaignish but proceed with women).

We have said that, for M, women were afflicted with a sort of nymphomania. a) they have an unbridled sexual appetite and an inordinate ingenuity in satisfying it; b) he also says that marriage after the M manner cannot satisfy them: it is not surprising then that he dwells on cuckoldry and writes what might be called his apology for cuckoldry.

What point ~~is~~ there in worrying about one's honour and the chastity of one's wife? M's answer is that it is pointless, since no matter what the jealous husband does, the wife, wayward and cunning, will always find a way out of his prohibitions II296. If you suspect her of it, don't get to the bottom of it, you'll be better off in ignorance, since slighted honour is an ill for which the only cure amounts to aggravation. In any case, everyone talks about it these days, everyone makes someone or other cocu, it's almost a national custom 297, so cheer up, you're not alone. Chastity-mania among men is to M a mountain out of a molehill, the opposite of good sense, it is attaching undue importance to insignificance; there are many worse things, men and women are capable

of much worse than lust

inique estimation de vices! 286
 confessons le vray: il n'en est guere d'entre nous
 (...) qui n'aymast mieux estre voleur et sacrilege,
 et que sa femme fust meurtriere et heretique, que si
 elle n'estoit plus chaste que son mary

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an excellent touch, that last line, not only that she should
 be chaste, but that she should be chaste and that the husband
 should have some latitude for philandering.

Part II

M's unprintable frankness

It was these same topsy-turvy moral values that M was
 attempting to subvert by speaking of usually unmentionable
 things

je dis vray, non pas tout mon saoul, mais autant que
 je l'ose dire; et l'ose un peu plus en vieillissant

II 223 Du repentir

M's so-called "obscenity", as I say the word is Frame's, is
 striking; he meant it to be. As he says, as he grew older
 he spoke his mind a little freely than as a young man; and
 most of the passages which have at one time or another been
 objected to, especially in the XIXth expurgated editions,
 out of which we seem to have grown, are indeed c passages; and
 since the subject of III v is, loosely, sex, many of them are in
 that essay, but not all for, as we know, sex is not the only

natural function that men are shy of owning up to in public and which they only admit to be put into words as jokes or erudition.

I have already mentioned some of his comments on sex, impotence, etc; there are plenty more to choose from. M uses no four-letter words; now and then cul etc (loosely, arse, but like most French coarse words not as coarse to French ears as to English); often he cloaks his nudest remarks with the modesty of a Latin quotation. He speaks seriously and usually with propriety about his own body and its habits, about for example the meagre penis that Nature has endowed him with, II 317, saying that he cannot ignore it if he wants to give a true self-portrait in his Essays, that this is as much him as any other part of him. Elsewhere, I 106-7 De l'imagination, he writes a lengthy legal defence of this same penis, defending it as a lawyer, referring to it as "my client", against the charge that it is the most unruly part of his body, pointing out (among many other arguments) that hair stands on end without permission, that our skin gets goosefleshed without our permission, that he knows of a human behind that has been as he says farting uncontrollably for 40 years, and so on and so on, and that all of these parts of the body are more deplorable than his client who after all deserves some privileges over the other parts of the body, being

auteur du seul ouvrage immortel des mortels I 107c
(a nice pleasing term)

The question arises: why did M write about things that people usually try not even to think about? Why deliberately choose to write about scandalous topics? From a sheer desire to shock? Because he was/a dirty old man?
as they say

The fact is that he wrote about them precisely because people try not to think about them. Because these parts of the body and their functions are fundamental (I make no pun) parts of everyday human experience; because they contain the essence of what it is like to be alive. And it is this — mere consideration of basic life — that the social taboo censors, excluding it from serious attention. He wrote to try to cure his contemporaries of this taboo and of the illnesses that it is a symptom of; of the crazy moral code which says you can talk about killing, voire you can even kill II 307 but, though your body undoubtedly behaves as all other bodies do, human and animal, and though everybody knows as well as you do that this is how your body behaves, you must pretend in public that it doesn't and that you know no such thing:

Nous avons appris aux Dames de rougir oyant seulement nommer ce qu'elles ne craignent aucunement à faire; nous n'osons appeller à droict nos membres, et ne craignons pas de les employer à toute sorte de desbauche. La ceremonie nous defend d'exprimer par parolles les choses licites et naturelles, et nous l'en croyons; la raison nous defend de n'en faire d'illicites et mauvaises et personne ne l'en croit
II xvii, 31 De la praesumption

And this, to call a spade a spade, to write openly and without euphemism or bravado about what nobody dares to say, this is the central theme of that essay III v Sur des vers de Virgile, which may seem just a stringing together of spicy quotations from licentious Latins, and which used to move André Gide to tears when he re-read it (Journal, 138, mars ? 1904), this is why he writes about sex in that essay; not as idle pornography but to find out

Qu'a faict l'action genitale aux hommes, si naturelle, si necessaire et si juste, pour n'en oser parler sans ~~vergonne~~ et pour l'exclurre des propos serieux et reglez

III v 270 see rest of c passage 270-1

cf 306

sommes nous pas bien brutes de nommer brutale l'operation qui nous faict?

Man's only ingenuity is in making things difficult for himself 308; he has enough duties to nature without inventing others and imposing absurd customs on himself for his own discomfort 308 cf 317; there are faults in men worse than those of appearance, let them cure themselves of the inner ones before bothering about the outward appearances; men cannot disguise themselves, their sexual organs and their acts from God, so why bother hiding them from one another 318; to keep quiet about those parts and actions is not only to hide them from other men but, worse, to conceal them from oneself 268 and in fact the less you think about it the less healthy you are 268

M's purpose in raising these questions — and notice he does it with circumspection, with timidity at first and then with growing confidence: a caution to our idea of his age, Rabelaisian meaning to us ribaldry and bawdiness and unashamed coarse fun, but M's caution in writing about these things, his frequent apologies for his indecency and unconventionality must mean that our idea is inaccurate and that people were on the whole hidebound by modesty and sexual taboo in his day as in ours — that purpose is comparable to the purpose of DH Lawrence in another language 350 years later: to accustom men to the thought of their own body, to bring them back to real values, away from the pernicious chimeras of their own unnatural fancy, to free them from the playacting that such a schizophrenic attitude to themselves has on them

Dieu veuille que cet excès de ma licence attire nos hommes jusques à la liberté, par dessus ces vertus couardes (craven) et mineuses mineuses (= menaçantes, selon Grandsaignes ??) nées de nos imperfections; qu'aux despens de mon immoderation je les attire jusques au point de la raison

267-8

En fin qui desniaiseroit l'homme d'une si scrupuleuse superstition verbale n'apporterait pas grande perte au monde

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