

MONTAIGNE ON FRIENDSHIP (1967)

It may be best, most meaningful and coherent, to relate what M has to say on friendship, which is not much, to

- a love;
- b solitude;
- c self-dependence.

But, first, what M has to say on La Boétie in I xxviii de l'amitié, an OK topic of the time since Aristotle and Cicero and others had written about it.

M's friendship with La B lasted only about four years, 1558-63, cut off by La B's death in which the apprentice Stoic M found as much to admire as in his friend's life. Perhaps because it lasted only four and a bit years, it remained perfect for M and assumed in his memory the status of a touchstone against which he could judge the value of any human relationship from then on. It must be remembered however that most of what he tells us, if not all, about this relationship was written years after La B's death, ten to 15 years after it; which may account for the almost supernatural quality he lends to it. But all the same, if only a part of what M says about him is unexaggerated then he must ~~have~~ indeed have been a remarkable man, an incomparably * gifted man I 198, their friendship of a sort unheard of among contemporaries 199, only once in 300 years sort 199, better than the récits of the

* but can I be sure that such an expression was not a mere eroded cliché?

ancients cf II 63 for another eulogy; elsewhere le plus grand homme de nostre siecle in Appendice? On the other hand all of these portraits and comments may well be vitiated by flattery, for they are in dedications and formal language, perhaps no more true than the eulogies of nonentities (politicians, popes, millionaires) that we read in obituary columns in newspapers nowadays.

It was by chance that M and La B met the first time I 204 , at a municipal function in Bordeaux where they both held posts in the Parlement. They were looking for one another before they met, says M, prejudiced in one another's favour by reports from mutual friends, by La B's publications which M had read, and when they met M gives the impression of love at first sight, despite the fact that La B's ugliness must have seemed to M at least momentarily the expression of an ugly soul and therefore to be avoided (III xii 509 for description of La B's uncomeliness). It was not the sort of acquaintance that circumstance throws us into, that usually goes by the name of friendship I 203 but a fusion of minds and souls so complete that the join between the two souls is no longer apparent 203-4, so complete that whatever the friend might do, and whatever colour the friend's acts may be given by somebody else, M would never be in doubt but would always be able to see through the act and its colouring to its real meaning and motive 205.

When he tries to analyse whatever it was that they were

lacking and found in each other, M finds that rational explanation is impossible and can only suggest that they were impelled together by something incomprehensible, some destiny 204 that had made up its mind that they should meet and take to one another in this sudden manner, becoming so totally one another's conscience that M would have confided, he says, more readily in La B about himself than in himself 205. And all M can say by way of explanation of this inexplicable attraction is the celebrated understatement, striking in its simplicity among so much euphuism, so often quoted that it's almost a French proverb and is perhaps looked on by some as anon

par ce que c'estoit luy; par ce que c'estoit moy

I 204

For M the devoted neo-Classical apprentice of Cicero, this relationship gave him the opportunity to see himself and interpret himself in a Roman light; friendship of this sort is a more valuable experience than love. This unique relationship, described in such holy terms by M, bringing out all that is noblest in a man : devotion, disinterest, abnegation, offering spiritual communion and intellectual fodder, this perfect marriage of true minds, could only be equalled by love if, to the delights of the flesh could be added these finer delights of the mind. But, alas, women by their fickle nature are unable to be constant long enough, too feeble-minded to have anything to contribute to such a relationship, and the ancients, who re-

corded never an example of it,are right to exclude women from friendship 202; and as for the Greek sort of love between man and boy which might have met these requirements of mingled sexual and intellectual joys,it is excluded by M as being
 a abhorred by our meurs (and rightly so)and;

b inappropriate to the sentiment he's describing because of the disparity in age I 202

Another reason for the superiority of friendship over love is that love,being always motivated by self-interest of some sort,is ~~xx~~ inferior to friendship by the amount of self-profit that it seeks to gain from the relationship; the sole aim of friendship is friendship itself I 199 or as he says elsewhere l'exercice des ames,sans autre fruit II 244=III iii

Another reason for the superiority of friendship over love is that love's emotions range wider and change more abruptly than those of which friendship is made. Love's feelings are stronger,more irresistible,but are also less reliable ,less satisfying,one is more at the mercy of one's emotions and of things outside one,but friendship is not momentary,not changing, no ups and downs

c'est une chaleur generale et universelle,tempérée
 au demeurant et égale,une chaleur constante et rassise,
 toute douceur et polissure,qui n'a rien d'aspre et de
 poignant

I 201

For these reasons M will always favour friendship of this perfect kind over love of any kind

ainsi ces deux passions sont entrées chez moy en
connaissance l'une de l'autre; mais en comparaison
jamais: la premiere maintenant sa route d'un vol
hautain (=haut) et superbe, et regardant desdaigneuse-
ment cette cy passer ses pointes (=avancer) bien
loing au dessoubs d'elle

I 201 cf II 244-5 something similar

Later in life, in De trois commerces III iii M was to deal
again with love and friendship, although at no great length; he
largely repeats what he has already said. But the last few
pages of III iii are on the third of the three intercourses
of the title: reading

ces deux commerces sont fortuites et despendans d'autrui.
L'un est ennuyeux par sa rareté; l'autre se ~~fle~~lestrit
avec l'aage; ainsin ils n'eussent assez prouueu au
besoing de ma vie. Celuy des livres, qui est le troisieme,
est bien plus seur et plus à nous. Il cede aux premiers
les autres avantages, mais il a pour sa part la con-
stance et facilité de son service

II 247

The trouble with both friendship and love, then, was that
they both leave one, as M says, dependan d'autrui ie one's
emotions are not necessarily within one's own control; ~~one~~
the contrary, one's peace of mind may well be at the mercy of
these emotions. And for M, there is a possibility of danger
in a relationship of which one is not the master — fear,
covetousness, ambition I 269 Solitude and such extreme passions
were the emotional upsets provoked by others that the early
M of the Stoical aspirations was trying to avoid by disciplin-
ing himself and by cultivating a detachment from others, an

independence that would safeguard equanimity. Our happiness, says M, should grow out of ourselves, nourished by our own resources, and not depend for emotional sustenance on unreliable changeable relationships with other people. In the early years M actually advocates physical isolation; one should sever links with others, with business, with public life, be self-sufficient, retire into a hermit-like existence, living only on oneself

puisque nous entreprenons de vivre seuls et de nous passer de compagnie, faisons que nostre contentement despende de nous; desprenons nous de toutes les liaisons qui nous attachent à autrui, gagnons sur nous de pouvoir à bon escient (=vraiment) vivre seuls et y vivre à nostr'aise

I xxxix Solitude 270

And even though one must have some contact with the outside world eg wife and family, one should not be so attached to them that one's happiness be affected by them, by their loss, (cf the class on Stoic morality and death) (and if a child is deformed it is God's work and therefore it is permissible to love it less II 407.)

il se faut reserver une arriere boutique toute nostre, toute franche (=libre), en laquelle nous établissons nostre vraye liberté et principale retraicte et solitude

I 271 this boutique au figuré of course

The greatest virtue is to be responsible totally and only to oneself, to confondre en soy les offices de l'amitié et de la

compagnie I 273, to actually belong to oneself

la plus grande chose du monde, c'est de sçavoir estre
à soy

I 273

As M grows older, there is little change in this attitude.
He becomes

a more realistic, in advocating no physical isolation now,
but a definite emotional and intellectual insulation of self
from the outside and from others;

b more thoroughgoing, in that he is stricter in advocating
this sort of insulation.

And this is not, surely, part of the Stoic posture but welling
out of some secret springs in M's self; this expresses some
deep need of his own genuine personality.

A similarity of sentiment in the two periods, and one of
expression too

a I 272 Solitude:

il faut (...) meshuy aymer ce-cy et cela, mais n'espouser
rien que soy;

cf years later in III x De mesnager sa volonté (on the control
of one's own feelings?)

mon opinion est qu'il se faut prester à autrui et ne se
donner qu'à soy-mesme

II 447 (< Seneca)

These essays I xxxix Solitude and III x Mesnager sa volonté
as well as III ix Vanité, give advice about how to avoid too

deep an involvement in personal and public relationships, what both essays call mortgaging one's feelings (s'hypothéquer II 447, II 405); they stress the importance of self-~~e~~ontainment, self-responsibility and self-nourishment; and more and more the later essay stresses the absurdity of men's unwillingness or congenital inability to live for themselves, of their need to fill up their empty selves with hot air and importance and busyness, to expend themselves in a futile manner for things which are less important than their own life itself, but they don't alas know it.

This is obviously consonant with those conclusions about himself that grew in M's mind out of what Villey terms the sceptical crisis: namely the sole importance of the self as the only knowable; in order to gain practical useful knowledge the wise man merely has to block his ears, not only to the parrot-knowledge of the jargoneers and scholastics, but also should turn his attention away from the pointless fuss and agitation of his fellows, all of them misled into believing that the value of a man's life is to be measured by his public persona, his social achievements, his worries and honours and the number of his acquaintances, all of which are just so many ways of dissipating one's precious volonté, of mortgaging oneself

en nos actions accoustumées, de mille il n'en est pas
une qui nous regarde

I 272 Solitude

or

c'est assez vescu pour autrui, vivons pour nous au moins
ce bout de vie

I 273

cf les hommes se donnent à louage (=hire,rent,let themselves
out), leurs facultez ne sont pas pour eux, elles sont
pour ceux à qui ils s'asservissent; leurs locataires
sont chez eux, ce ne sont pas eux

III x, 448

this last a most accurate sketch of us all, of the businessman
~~who~~ or clerk who is eaten away by his job, his worry, his motor-
mower, his status, his boss's desire that he should work unpaid
on Saturdays and wear a white shirt, who fills up the emptiness
television and opinions on the civil war in Chinese East Africa
inside himself with these substitutes for life and meaning.

This habit of men, to forget their person in favour of their
function, to forget to live so as to be better able to work,
this was to become a constant theme of the French moralists,
Montaigne in this as in other ways being the founder of a trad-
ition, the currency of his vocabulary fausse monnaie, masques,
personnage, farce etc, to be reminted by La Rochefoucauld, by
Gide, by Sartre, this very point (to take oneself for what one
is, not who) is discussed by M in III x=II 456-7 and is the
same folly as Sartre ~~x~~ calls mauvaise foi; both Sartre and M
condemn the habit, Sartre says to avoid it like the plague, as
Gide said, to give oneself for what one is at all times, while
M differs: play the game of being a what, but never forget it's
just a game, don't take yourself for what you are, remember al-
ways that la plus part de nos vacations sont farcesques 456;

play the game but don't play the bishop, don't lord it when you go to the lavatory II 457. This habit of men, to take themselves for what and not who they are, for bigwigs and professors and prelates and Prime Monsters instead of ^{mere} human beings like everyone else, was for M one of the most chronic maladies of men, as bad as the pointless urge to acquire knowledge for which he had castigated them in the Apologie de R de S.

Or rather, both of these things — the inordinate, impertinent impious desire to find out the nature of things, AND the passion to be so busy as to forget who one is and what sweet life is for — both these are rather symptoms of the same disease in men: their pernicious inability to be content with their lot, to find happiness in what they've got and in who they are. Again on this M was constant in the early period a

je ne laisse pas, en pleines jouyssance, de supplier
Dieu pour ma souveraine requeste, qu'il me rende content
de moy-mesme et des biens qui naissent de moy
I Solitude 274-5

and also in the later years

les sages nous ont dit que selon (nature) personne
n'est indigent et que chacun l'est selon l'opinion
(...) La pauvreté des biens est aisée à guerir; la
pauvreté de l'ame, impossible

III x 454 De mesnager sa volonté