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Montaigne and Poetry

Montaigne's copious employment of ancient poetry in his essays is readily evident as a ploy to infer his ideals and principles by identifying the people whom he most admired. Though Montaigne's favorites were Virgil and Lucretius, of the Roman poet Lucan he writes "I love him for his worth and the truth of his opinions and judgments," reflecting Montaigne's belief that poetry, like philosophy, should instruct, that is, be useful (Hutcheon 32). Recognizable quickly is that the method most favored by Montaigne to convey thoughts too dangerous for direct expression is quotation—especially of poetry. We find support of this in his expression of his world view: "to make it appear in public a little more decently, I set myself to support it with reasons and examples" from early philosophers and poets. Montaigne's allegiance to prudence is evident with his admission of this technique:

By profession they do not present their opinion openly and apparently; they have hidden it now in the fabulous shades of poetry, now under some other masks...For raw meat is not always for our stomach; it must be altered...they do the same; they sometimes obscure their natural opinions and judgments and falsify them to accommodate the public usage (Hutcheon 32).

Likewise, Cicero and Virgil are used extensively to express and defend his opinions that may be deemed risky, most notably in *On some lines of Virgil*, which deals with sexuality, an essay which comes later than *On Books*, wherein Montaigne, perhaps prematurely, claims that he has grown too old to appreciate Ovid. Harold Bloom notes that Montaigne, “no romantic, gives you no moonlight, since his view of sex is so pragmatic, but he certainly does not believe that to know what he is really like, you must know the worst of him” (*Genius* 44). Perhaps a non-romantic and pragmatist, but Montaigne does share his thought that “poetry can show us with an air more loving than Love itself. Venus is never as beautiful stark naked, quick and panting, as she is...in Virgil: (III:5).

Montaigne’s writings are filled with the verses of ancient Greece and Rome. In all three books, there are 130 selections from Lucretius (in whom we find admiration for Epicurus, in particular “On the Nature of Things”) and about a third as many from Lucan. Montaigne admits that he frequently omits the names of those whom he quotes

so as to rein in the temerity of those hasty criticisms which leap to attack writing of every kind, especially writing by men still alive and in our vulgar tongue which allow anyone to talk about them and which seem to convict both their conception and design of being just as vulgar. I want them to flick Plutarch’s nose in mistake for mine and to scald themselves by insulting the Seneca in me. (II: 10)

Elsewhere from *On Books*, Montaigne provides much of his attitude toward poetry: “it has always seemed to me that in poetry Virgil, Lucretius, Catullus and Horace rank highest by far—especially Virgil in his *Georgics*,” which Montaigne ranks as the

“most perfect achievement in poetry” (II:10). This is understandable, as Montaigne makes it clear that though he reads for pleasure, his real pursuit is in discovering that which is useful to know. The *Georgics*’ subject is ostensibly rural life and farming, certainly relevant to Montaigne’s life. It is also a didactic poem, emphasizing instruction and information. Montaigne expresses his preference to Terence over his predecessor Plautus perhaps because of the former’s conversational Latin and convincing adaptations of Greek plays. One famous quote by Terence which Montaigne might have found appealing, given that he himself was his subject, reads: "*Homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto,*" or "I am human, nothing that is human is alien to me." Even the reformer Martin Luther quoted Terence frequently to tap into his insights into all things human and also recommended his comedies for the instruction of children in school. Plautus’ adherence to stock characters and obvious wordplay likely did not appeal to Montaigne any more than did acrostics.

Perhaps not too surprisingly, the well read gentleman dares suggest that *The Aeneid*, though its fifth book is perfect, could benefit from a “touch of the comb” (II:10). Though Montaigne does not explain why the fifth book is his ideal, it may be that the descriptions of the funereal games for Aeneas’ father strike him as richly physical and naturalistically expressed. Virgil breaks somewhat from formal, epic style, expressing the comic frustration of the losers, the triumphant gloating of the winners, the fervent displays of masculinity, and the irreverent enthusiasm of the spectators. The games matter little to the plot as a whole, but they show a more lighthearted facet of Virgil’s artistry—one that is welcome after Dido’s suicide, one of the epic’s darkest passages. Montaigne’s modesty is well known and seems to be sincere. His ability to write

poetically, however, he underestimates. Regarding his preference for the *Aeneid* to *Orlando furioso*, he employs a perfectly clear and lovely metaphor:

We can see the *Aeneid* winging aloft with a firm and soaring flight, always pursuing its goal: the *Orlando furioso* we see hopping and fluttering from tale to tale from branch to branch, never trusting its wings except to cross a short distance, seeking to alight on every hedge lest its wind or strength should give out. (II: 10)

From *On presumption* Montaigne, in discussing his taste “which is discriminating and hard to please, especially where [he himself is] concerned,” admits that nothing he himself possesses satisfies his judgment, especially regarding poetry:

I have most clearly assayed that in the case of poetry. I have a boundless love for it; I know my way well through other men’s works; but when I set my own hand to it I am truly like a child: I find myself unbearable. You may play the fool anywhere else but not in poetry. (II: 17)

As he so often does, Montaigne punctuates his thought from one of the ancients, Horace: “Poets are never allowed to be mediocre by the gods, by men, or by publishers.” Finally, Montaigne expresses his wish that publisher’s workshops would adopt the following to forbid so many untalented “versifiers” from getting in: “Truly nothing is more self-assured than a bad poet” (II:17).

In “*On vain cunning devices*,” Montaigne quickly identifies poets who write acrostics as frivolous and “testimony of the weakness of man’s judgment that things which are neither good nor useful it values on account of their rarity, novelty and, even more, their difficulty” (I:54). Poetry of this type, like the “middling vigor and middling

capacity” of some Christians, is too affected to be appreciated as poetry any longer, having passed the limits of artificiality.

Popular and purely natural poetry has its naïve charms and graces by which it can stand comparison with that chief of beauties we find in artistically perfect poetry. That can be seen from our Gascony villanelles and from those songs which have been reported from nations which have no knowledge of any science nor even of writing. But that middling poetry which remains between the two is despised and is without honour or prices (I:54). Montaigne places his essays somewhere in the middle: “They will hardly please common vulgar minds nor unique and outstanding ones: (I:54).

Courtly poetry, says Montaigne, may display artificial simplicity to such a degree that it resembles popular poetry (“Practicing Reform in Montaigne’s *Essais*” 153).

From *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays*, by M.A. Screech, we have but one short chapter devoted to Montaigne’s attitude regarding poetry: “Poetic Ecstasy,” which describes the Platonic notion that “true poets were believed to enjoy revelations of truth through inspiration” (59). Such poets were akin to those who received divine revelation, but these true poets their works in beauty and disguised them, ‘veiled’ them, in order to save them from being profane. Thus, while anyone could read and enjoy the poem, only a “privileged few could lift the veil and uncover the divine yet hidden truth” allowing them to be “astonished and enraptured” (59). Montaigne, ever the pragmatist, did not accept that poetry or poets were equivalent to Biblical, and even Plato’s teachings, which had been virtually deified by some, were open to discussion.

As Screech explains, for Montaigne, “poetic ecstasy is not even remotely in the same category as the rapture of Paul or of Christian contemplatives” (61). Montaigne may have believed in being enraptured by the beauty of poetry, but he does not accept that even “the classical poets were truly inspired, nor that they were God’s mouthpieces for revealed truths, nor that they were privileged interpreters of God” (61). Though it is only one logical step to make the same conclusion regarding members of the clergy, both present and past, Montaigne does not deign to, clearly suggesting that religion is greater than poetry in providing for humanity. Clearly, Montaigne deemed it prudent, regarding religion, to go along to get along. He was loyal to his faith, and believed that faith was distinct from learning, but he is never moved to divine *furor*. In his vast readings, he might have been, regarding this notion of ecstasy, either poetic or religious, impressed with this quatrain (rubaii) of Omar Khayyam:

And do you not think that unto such as you
 A maggot-minded, starved, fanatic crew
 God gave a secret, and denied it me?
 Well, well—what matters it? Believe that too!

—The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

Like the Persian poet, Montaigne appreciated the beauty of poetry and did not accept that man “can ever cross over to the divine” (Screech 62). Like Cicero, such a man will be eventually smashed to the ground.

"Que sais-je"

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Dr. Dupuigrenet,

I could not locate the source of these paragraphs, so could not use them. I'm sure you recognize their location in the sea of essays. Thank you for the lending of your *Essays*.

For reading, history is my delight or else poetry—for which I confess I have a particular fondness and esteem. For, as Cleanthes said, just as the voice forced through the narrow passage of a trumpet comes out more forcible and shrill, so, I think, a sentence couched in the harmony of verse darts more briskly upon the understanding, and strikes both my ear and apprehension with a smarter and more pleasing power. As to the natural abilities I have, of which these essays are a specimen, I find they bow under their burden. My imagination and judgment do but grope in the dark, tripping and stumbling in their way; and when I have gone as far as I can, I am in no degree satisfied, for I discover still a new and greater extent of land before me, wrapped up in clouds, that with troubled and imperfect sight, I am not able to penetrate. I take it upon myself to write impartially about whatever comes into my head—and therein making use of nothing but my own proper and natural means. If, as often happens, I accidentally meet in any good author the same subjects and opinions upon which I have attempted to write (as I did lately in Plutarch's discourse on the power of the imagination), I see myself so weak and miserable, so heavy and sleepy, in comparison with those better writers, I at once pity and despise myself.

Here is something to be wondered at. We have more poets than judges and interpreters of poetry. It is easier to write an indifferent poem than to understand a good one. There is, indeed, a certain low and moderate sort of poetry that a man may well enough judge by certain rules of art; but the true, supreme, and divine poetry is above all the rules of reason. Whoever discerns the beauty of it, with the most assured and steady sight, sees no more than the quick reflection of a flash of lightning. This is the sort of poetry that does not test our judgment but ravishes and overwhelms it. The elation that possesses him who is able to penetrate into this poetry is also aroused in a third man who hears him repeat it. It is like a magnetic stone that not only attracts a needle, but also infuses into it the virtue to attract others.

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