

Reverie and Ambush: On the Influence of Montaigne

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MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, THE INVENTOR OF THE MODERN PERSONAL ESSAY and the writer to whom modern essayists endlessly return, is renowned for his tendency to go off topic. His chapter “Des coches” (“Of Vehicles” or “Of Coaches”), for example, begins with remarks about authors, goes on to sneezing and fear, then touches quite briefly on the subject of coaches before proceeding to kings, gifts, amphitheaters, the impossibility of knowledge, and the civilizations of the New World. It ends with a story about the king of Peru, whose soldiers carry him into battle against the Spanish invaders on a chair of gold mounted on golden shafts. His men are killed, one by one, but each time a bearer falls, another leaps to replace him, keeping the king aloft on his perilously wobbling seat, until at last he is dragged down and taken prisoner. A gold litter—we belatedly realize—could be classified as a vehicle, so Montaigne *has* come back to his subject after all. But by this time we are so disoriented, and have traveled such a long distance, that we are as off-balance as the king and scarcely know where we are.¹

¹ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Coaches” (III:3), in *Essays*, in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (London: Everyman’s Library/Stanford University Press, 2003), 831–49. Unless otherwise specified, all Montaigne quotations are from this edition.



It has never been clear to what extent Montaigne intended his destabilizing effects: whether he planned his roundabout itineraries or merely wandered off the point. I suspect there was a bit of both. Finding himself wandering, he made a virtue of it, until it became the very essence of his style. In doing so, he founded a genre which was passed on intact for over four hundred years and is still flourishing today: the digressive, exploratory, quirky personal essay.

Rather than plumbing the enigma of Montaigne's intentions, I am intrigued by this question of imitation or inheritance. Why has this offbeat, rule-breaking author inspired so many writers to try to write like him, over the four hundred years since the *Essays*' first publication in 1580? In his day, imitation was a standard form of writer's apprenticeship: one polished one's style by copying the styles of respected authors until one had absorbed their virtues. (Montaigne may have started with a similar idea: "apprentice piece" was one of the earlier meanings of the word *essai*.) But Montaigne himself does not seem well suited to the role of paragon; he is too jagged and idiosyncratic. So what drives people to imitate the inimitable? What do they get from him; what sort of an influence is he?

Perhaps we need a more subtle sense of how one "follows" or "imitates" an author in general. A lot can happen between the absorbing of an influence and the composing of something original and new.

Here is one small example I came across recently. It is an unclassifiable fragment written by a rather unclassifiable poet and essayist in the not-very-free "Free Zone" of Vichy France, at an unclassifiable time of night: somewhere around midnight, between two dates. Francis Ponge is reading Montaigne.



It is between October 1 and 2, 1941: Francis Ponge is in a hushed house, surrounded by his sleeping family. They are living in the town of Roanne, on the Loire; Ponge has a job in an insurance office in the French Free Zone here, but over the coming months and years he will use this innocuous position as cover for work in the Resistance. Working all day, he writes his poetry and odd fragments by night. His prose poems are densely packed, microscopically attentive miniatures describing such everyday objects as oranges, snails, cigarettes, crates, moss, bread, and pebbles. They have not yet made him famous, though he has passionate admirers. But now he is looking for a new form of writing.

On this particular evening, although his eyes are sore and his head heavy from lack of sleep, he has settled down with pen and paper, having no idea yet what to write. This is unusual: normally he starts with the flash of a pure idea. This time, he wants to write by free association, planning nothing, never pausing once under way. So he starts with what happens to be by his side or on his mind: a set of Montaigne's *Essays*, given to him by his friend Michel Pontremoli. He writes: "Je lis Montaigne, que je n'avais pas lu" (I am reading Montaigne, whom I have not read).² Yet after this, Ponge's three-page text barely returns to Montaigne again. He writes about Montaigne in a way that suggests Montaigne's influence: by digressing from him as quickly as possible and apparently never returning.

² Francis Ponge, "Je lis Montaigne," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. B. Beugnot et al., 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1999–2002), 2:1172–75. The text was originally published in *Revue de la Bibliothèque nationale*, no. 12 (1984): 3–5; and then in Francis Ponge, *Nouveau nouveau recueil*, ed. J. Thibaudeau, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 1:188–93. See also Lionel Cuilé, "Ponge—en lisant, en écrivant Montaigne," *Bulletin de la Société des amis de Montaigne*, 8th ser., nos. 5–6 (January–June 1997): 9–33. Translations are mine.

He does observe, in a line or two, that Montaigne had an easier time of it than he did, being rich and able to retire to a private space to write whenever he liked. Instead, he, Ponge, must write in moments grabbed from exhaustion, while fending off the assaults of sleep. He has to forge on, as if going into battle against a cloud of thoughts.

He describes these thoughts: they are not really like clouds but are like water, which flows on and disappears without result or profit for anyone. Nor is it a smooth flow. Each thought has its own trajectory, like the drops of water that splash upward when a waterfall hits an exposed rock. A droplet leaps high and immediately falls, to be replaced by others, a relay of splashes, forming a stable but renewing bouquet, like a spray of flowers. You could bind this bouquet neatly into a narrative or freeze it in a photograph. Instead, Ponge trains the beam of his attention on the movement. It is as if a projector throws light on to these flowers, picking out their sparkling colors and casting their surroundings into shadow.

Ponge now proposes a “method”—a sort of writing lesson for himself. First, he says, prepare a style, by reading “some good author,” as a sort of training or sharpening (*affûtage*) of faculties. Second, take up a position of ambush, a lying-in-wait (*affût*). Third—but just as he writes this, he finds that the word *affût* has thrown up a new image, that of a hunter lying in ambush, and in place of the bouquet of water-flowers, he now thinks of a *bouquet* or flock of wild ducks, rising up from the ground, not to be shot down, but to be photographed before they fly too far from view.

He returns to the method. In the third and final step, then, put yourself into a somnolent state, even one close to actual sleep, so that the bouquet of thoughts becomes thicker, richer, stronger, and so that the surrounding shadows also take on weight. (I would add to Ponge’s advice here that one should not fall asleep. As Gaston Bachelard pointed out in *The Poetics of Reverie*, “It is a poor reverie that invites a nap.”³) Just as Ponge is writing about these thickening shadows, another image crosses his mind: that of a breakneck horse ride through the woods, with a sudden halt at a crossing and with the horse, frothing at the mouth, chewing its bit, exhausted. *Here*, at last, is the subject he wants to write about. But at this point, it seems, he makes the fatal mistake of rereading what he has written so far. It breaks his momentum, and he slows down. The piece peters out. Ponge must have liked it and returned to it with fresh interest, though, for he revised it and typed it up seven years later.

To what extent is this strange piece of work—part essay, part prose poem, part limbering-up exercise, part creative-writing tutorial—an imitation or following of Montaigne? Ponge has left Montaigne behind in the first few lines, yet Montaigne secretly accompanies him to the end. The piece is filled with images that are also found in the *Essays*: the galloping horse, the flowers, the light, the hunt, the flowing waters of thought. Ponge is Montaignean in his way of observing the movement of thoughts, at once dancing and still. It is also highly Montaignean of him to propose a three-step method and then get distracted between steps 2 and 3—and that, no doubt, is the real method. It is his discipline of distraction.

When Ponge wrote this piece, his own writing was about to change. He would soon begin writing works that were less precise than his earlier poems, more discursive, more relaxed, more self-referential, more extended. He wanted to get away from neatly closed texts, he said later, and move toward a kind of ongoing “journal” of the way he grasped ideas and objects.⁴ The following year, 1942, he would publish a retrospective collection of his older pieces, *Le parti pris des choses*

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, trans. D. Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 10.

⁴ *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers* (Paris: Gallimard / Seuil, 1970), 74.

(Siding with Things), but he would also start a work called *Le savon* (Soap). This began as a close study of a bar of soap (a rarity in wartime, when there were only ersatz imitations that did not lather properly). It is the sort of everyday object that would have given him a few polished lines in *Le parti pris des choses*. Instead, *Soap* reeled out into great loops of repetition and self-reference, as Ponge took his own images apart and remixed them in different combinations, different forms. He came back to the piece year after year, tried it as a play, then as a disquisition; he even included a letter from Albert Camus deploring it. *Soap* put forth tendrils, rather like an actual bar of soap left submerged in water, which, in Ponge's image, loosens and changes from a neatly rounded pebble into "a Chinese fish, with its veils, its kimonos and wide sleeves."⁵ Ponge added to *Soap* for twenty-three years, writing the last appendixes in 1965 and publishing them as a book in 1967—which makes it even longer in the writing than Montaigne's vast *Essays*.

Soap could almost be a miniaturized and modernized *Essays*: a glimpse into what Montaigne might have become if, like Ponge, he had been influenced by twentieth-century surrealism, communism, and a touch of existentialism. Having speculated on how Montaigne influenced Ponge, it is hard to resist speculating on how Ponge might have influenced Montaigne. Perhaps the best cases of literary influence have this hint of imagined reciprocity—a kind of generosity, in defiance of time.



Which parts of Montaigne might Ponge have been reading that night? One chapter that suggests itself is "De l'oisiveté" ("Of Idleness").⁶ It is short and came fairly early among Montaigne's essays, probably between 1572 and 1574, not long after he started writing. It is also a rare example of a chapter that he mostly left alone afterward, adding only a couple of classical quotations (from Virgil and Martial) when he revisited it for the 1588 edition. It dates from before his own process of relaxation into the veils and kimono sleeves of his later work. Despite its taut, compact quality, however, it is one of his richest and most personal early essays.

In it, Montaigne describes the overly imaginative state of mind he found himself in after he retired from his job as magistrate in Bordeaux in 1571. It had been a busy thirteen years, preoccupied with legal and political duties; during this time he had also traveled for his job, married, and inherited responsibility for running the family wine-growing estate after his father's death in 1568. As yet he had written nothing of note, but he did not seem to have literary ambitions. He wanted only to read and reflect and step off the wheel of constant activity. So he gave up the magistracy and devoted himself to life on the estate, reading in the library in his tower at one corner of the château courtyard, riding in the nearby countryside, and trying to become wise.

What happened was unexpected. Instead of acquiring sagacity and tranquillity, he found his mind racing off like a runaway horse—a "skittish and loose-broken jade," as his first English translator, John Florio, colorfully put it, though the French is plainer: *cheval eschappé*.⁷ This escaped mind gave birth to "chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose." Thus he described it in "Of Idleness," which runs through a whole sequence of such analogies. An idle mind is like a fallow field, which puts forth weeds instead of a good crop, or like a

⁵ Francis Ponge, *Soap*, trans. Lane Dunlop (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 71. On this work, see also Nathalie Rachlin, "Francis Ponge, *Le savon*, and the Occupation," trans. Rosemarie Scullion, *SubStance* 87 (1998): 85–106.

⁶ Montaigne, "Of Idleness" (I:8), in *Essays*, 24–25.

⁷ Montaigne, "Of Idleness" (I:8), in *Essays*, trans. John Florio (New York: Modern Library, 1933), 24; Montaigne, "De l'oisiveté" (I:8), in *Les essais*, ed. Jean Balsamo, Michel Magnien, and Catherine Magnien-Simonin (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 55.

woman left unfertilized, who (according to the contemporary notion) gives birth to “shapeless masses and lumps of flesh” instead of babies. He added more images in the later edition, including a beautiful one from Virgil: wild thoughts resemble the reflections cast across a ceiling when sunlight dances on the surface of a bowl of water. Calm water produces a steady reflection, but when there is turbulence, one sees lurching, gyrating tiger-stripes of light, jumping hither and thither overhead, with no sense to their movements. In the same way, an unoccupied mind gyrates and throws out *rêveries*—a word that had a more negative connotation then than now.⁸

To tame these reveries, Montaigne decided to write them down, not to suppress them but, he says, “to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my pleasure” and thus “to make my mind ashamed of itself.”⁹ It was not that he wanted to *stop* the thoughts; rather, he wanted to prevent them from flying endlessly away without “purpose” or, as Ponge would have said, without “result or profit.” In another essay, he said that he started writing “to train my fancy even to dream with some order and purpose.”¹⁰ He made his reveries *work* for him by binding them into the *Essays*. Since there are 107 of them and they run to over a thousand pages in modern editions, it was a lot of work he made them do.

“Of Idleness” feels compressed, its images gathered into a Ponge-esque bouquet, each one presenting the same idea from a different angle. But there is also movement. The metaphors succeed each other with a bubbling momentum that may owe something to one of Montaigne’s favorite authors, Ovid—another case of literary influence. Reading Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as a boy gave Montaigne a fund of good stories, but as François Rigolot has argued, it could also have inspired him to follow its rhythm of continuous flow and succession; as in the *Essays*, each of Ovid’s stories takes the place of another almost before the first one is over, bouncing the reader along without pause but with constant surprises and changes of direction.¹¹ One has the sense that in writing this chapter, Montaigne was acting out the very phenomena he was exploring—the light show, the wild profusion. He was also finding his way toward his essayistic method, which he elsewhere described thus:

I take the first subject that chance offers. They are all equally good to me. And I never plan to develop them completely. For I do not see the whole of anything. . . . Of a hundred members and faces that each thing has, I take one, sometimes only to lick it, sometimes to brush the surface, sometimes to pinch it to the bone. I give it a stab, not as wide but as deep as I know how. And most often I like to take them from some unaccustomed point of view.¹²

If this sounds predatory, it undoubtedly is, but his main prey is himself. He wanted to hunt down every part of himself, especially those fragments of experience that are most elusive, being deeply sunk in semiconsciousness or oblivion. Most people enjoyed sexual pleasures without thinking much about them, for example, but he wanted to experience them to their very depths, to sound them thoroughly.¹³ He also hoped to remember his dreams (real, sleeping ones, not reveries) and so would set his memory into ambush mode before going to bed—but by morning the dreams

⁸ All these images are from Montaigne, “Of Idleness” (I:8), in *Essays*, 24–25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁰ Montaigne, “Of Giving the Lie” (II:18), in *Essays*, 613.

¹¹ François Rigolot, *Les métamorphoses de Montaigne* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1988), 224–26.

¹² Montaigne, “Of Democritus and Heraclitus” (I:50), in *Essays*, 266.

¹³ Montaigne, “Of Experience” (III:13), in *Essays*, 1040.

had gone, as usual. They left just enough of themselves, he wrote, “to make me rack my brains and fret in quest of them to no purpose.”¹⁴ He even had someone, presumably a long-suffering servant, wake him abruptly in the middle of the night in the hope of catching sleep itself by the heel as it left him. That did not work either.¹⁵

By the time he was writing his third volume, in 1588, he no longer pretended that his real interest was in taming or ridding himself of his reveries; rather, he wished to take hold of them. “I am displeased with my mind for ordinarily producing its most profound and maddest fancies, and those I like the best, unexpectedly and when I am least looking for them; which suddenly vanish, having nothing to attach themselves to on the spot: on horseback, at table, in bed, but mostly on horseback, where my thoughts range most widely.”¹⁶ His problem now is not that his mind throws out fancies but that it does so at awkward moments and not on tap; instead, he has to lie in wait for them. He has to be on horseback, in the open, and in movement, letting his mind run freely, and at the same time lying still, watching for the wild ducks as they take to flight.

Ponge’s runaway horse may have ridden in from “Of Idleness,” but another bolting horse appears in Montaigne’s “De l’exercitation” (“Of Practice”)—and there he has more success in capturing his fugitive fancy. Over several pages, he relates how he nearly died after being thrown from his mount on a forest path, sometime around 1568 or 1569. One of his companions had spurred on his own horse behind him, perhaps trying to get ahead and show off, but instead, he collided with Montaigne and sent him flying. Montaigne was knocked out cold and badly bruised. The others carried him home; he remained semiconscious for a while, then slowly came to, throwing up blood, tearing at his clothing (as he later learned), yet feeling nothing of all of this but a voluptuous, floating bliss. In his essay, he relived the sensation:

It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, but in truth not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling that people have who let themselves slide into sleep.¹⁷

He was aware of people talking around him, and even gave answers, but none of this touched him. His own thoughts were outside himself; he could watch them float past.¹⁸ Only when he revived fully a few hours later did he recover his memory of what had happened, as well as the pain of his bruises. Much later still—four or five years later—he set himself the task of re-creating it in writing for the *Essays*. He traced it moment by moment, from the initial impact through the floating stage, then the gradual return to consciousness, to the returning shock of full awareness. What he produced was a unique text for his time: a detailed account, from the inside, of the progress of a mental state, and one that for much of the time had drifted out of reach, being close to sleep, or even to death.

He had various purposes in doing this, one being to demonstrate to himself and others that there was no need to fear dying, since loss of consciousness was so light and easy. But it was also

¹⁴ Montaigne, “On Some Verses of Virgil” (III:5), in *Essays*, 811.

¹⁵ Montaigne, “Of Experience” (III:13), in *Essays*, 1040.

¹⁶ Montaigne, “On Some Verses of Virgil” (III:5), in *Essays*, 811.

¹⁷ Montaigne, “Of Practice” (II:6), in *Essays*, 327.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 329.

a writing exercise of the most demanding sort—not a neatly turned anecdote but a phenomenologically precise description of unfolding experience itself. No wonder Montaigne was proud of what he had done:

It is a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilize the innumerable flutterings that agitate it.¹⁹

In the description of Montaigne’s method by Francis Ponge’s contemporary, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Montaigne set off on a “an inquiry without discovery, a hunt without a kill.”²⁰ There was no end to it, no resting place. Even if he seized one folding, fluttering thing, there would always be others—at least until the writer lays down the pen, or dies.



Was Montaigne a good influence on Ponge? Would Ponge have been a good influence on Montaigne? Was Ovid a good influence on either? Are any of them a good influence on us? Are we a good retrospective influence on them? Let’s just say that we all slip constantly forward and backward, in and out of each other’s minds.

We know that Ponge continued reading Montaigne. Having discovered him (assuming that we can believe his remark that he had not read the *Essays* earlier in life), he returned to him again and again, especially through the 1970s, where Montaigne’s name appears regularly on lists of Ponge’s reading.²¹ It is harder to know whether he continued to *write* from Montaigne, as he did in “Je lis Montaigne” and, I am convinced, in *Soap*. But influences, once they have found their way in, do not always go away so easily.

Such relationships between writers and readers—or at least between writers and writers—perhaps leave their traces most of all in the relay-lines of metaphors strung through their work. So Ponge and Montaigne share the flowing waters, the light show, the breakneck horse rides, the hunts and ambushes, the sleep and wakefulness, and even the way the king’s fragile vehicle is held steady and aloft, just as a waterfall holds its splashes steady and a mind holds up its thoughts.

Montaigne sometimes sounds concerned about the bouquets of influences that adorn his book: “someone might say of me that I have here only made a bunch of other people’s flowers, having furnished nothing of my own but the thread to tie them.”²² But, as he wrote elsewhere, borrowing the image of course from another author, Seneca:

The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs.²³

In the end, it *all* belongs to us. A

¹⁹ Ibid., 331.

²⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Reading Montaigne,” in *Signs*, trans. and ed. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 198–210 (quotation from 202).

²¹ He is listed as reading Montaigne in 1971, 1975, 1976, and 1978, in Bernard Beugnot, Armande Ponge, and Bernard Veck, “Chronologie,” in Ponge, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:xlvi, lii, lv, lvii.

²² Montaigne, “Of Physiognomy” (III:12), in *Essays*, 984.

²³ Montaigne, “Of the Education of Children” (I:26), in *Essays*, 135. Cf. Seneca, *Epistles*, 84. On the honeybee metaphor’s origins, see Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, trans. D. Eng, ed. P. Desan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 37.