

Putting Experience First

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IN AN ESSAY ENTITLED “Putting Cruelty First,” from her book *Ordinary Vices*, the philosopher Judith Shklar asks what the consequences are for moral action if we take cruelty, as Montaigne does in his essay on cruelty, as the worst of all vices.¹ I borrow from her title for my own comments on a different text by Montaigne, his final essay, “Of Experience.” Like Shklar, I want to shift slightly the itinerary of Montaigne’s *Essays* (with their expressed project of “self-portraiture”) to ask what it means to put experience first, as Montaigne claims to do in the last chapter of his book. My approach will differ from that of Shklar, for whom moral issues are largely divorced from the problematics of writing. The disciplines of literary history and literary criticism that shape my approach take as their concern precisely the relationship between the themes and ideas put forth in the essay (those elements that attract the attention of philosophers and intellectual historians) and the dynamics of writing—the use of citation, the manipulation of form, the flowers of rhetoric, and so on. Indeed, a literary reading presumes that theme and argument take their shape at the intersection of the author’s own reading experience (evidenced in allusion and citation) and his or her writing practice. Through a look at “Of Experience” I want to consider what it means, in the late sixteenth century, not simply to write about one’s “experiences,” but to write about “experience” more generally. I will offer comments, both general and specific, regarding the kinds of pressures the choice to write about experience places on the structure of the essay and on its use of literary genre, textual allusion, and rhetorical trope.

One of the striking features of Montaigne’s book is the way in which the *Essays* function as a kind of machine for producing commonplaces. Many of the essays, especially some of the earliest essays, take as their topic a subject that had been treated many times before by historians or moral philosophers. We might think, for instance, of the essay on sadness, of the essay on friend-

¹ See Judith Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1985), chap. 1.



ship, or of the essay on old age. While it is true that Montaigne often begins these essays by indicating that his approach to the topic is exactly contrary to that taken by earlier writers, his very evocation of these topics places his work in a tradition of writing about familiar themes. Yet at the same time, chapters on these well-worn subjects are often intermingled with essays on topics that had never before been written about at any length. We think first, of course, of the essay on cannibals, but we might also evoke such startling titles as “Of the Battle of Dreux,” “Of Riding Post,” or, one of my own favorites, “Of Thumbs.” One of the consequences of this intermingling of traditional *topoi* with new material is to lend the new material some of the classical authority accorded more conventional topics. The process of juxtaposition, central to the essay as a form, is thus also at work in the interplay between chapters.² This means that precisely because it has appeared in the same text with, for example, the essay on the hoary topic of moderation, the essay on thumbs makes thumbs into a new kind of commonplace. And just as Montaigne is able to follow, say, Seneca and Erasmus, in treating the topic of education, so are we now enjoined to contribute our own essays, commentaries, or, perhaps, YouTube posts on the subject of thumbs.

This process of using the essay form to produce new topics for philosophical reflection both reaches its extreme and turns back to question its own procedures in the essay on experience. “Experience” (*experientia*) is a loaded term. Lewis and Short’s *Latin Dictionary* tells us that the word *experientia* underwent an evolution in classical literature, shifting semantic nuances as one moves from early Latin texts to post-Augustinian writing. Stemming from the verb *experior*—denoting “to try,” “to prove,” “to attempt,” or “to put to the test” (that is, something like “to essay”)—the word *experientia* suggests in early Latin writing a trial or a proof. (This, by the way, might be one reason why Montaigne begins the essay on experience with a discussion of the law.) However, in later Latin writing, according to Lewis and Short, the word comes to include not only the act of trying something out, but also the knowledge derived from that trial. It shifts from the sense of a present impression (what the Germans call *erlebnis*) to include the content of past experiences, data, matter that can be recalled and drawn upon (*erfahrung*). This slippage between experience as “going through something” and experience as “what one can take from having gone through something” shadows around the definition offered by Montaigne’s near contemporary, Randle Cotgrave, who defines the term in his 1611 *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* as “cunning, skill, knowledge, wisdom, gotten by much practise, and many trialls.” Whether “cunning” and “wisdom” are exactly the same thing is a question of much concern to Montaigne’s century, from the time of Machiavelli on. This ambiguity means that Montaigne’s usual approach in the essays, which involves telling us what he knows or does not know about a particular topic, is slightly skewed when it comes to talking about experience. For now he takes as his main subject a term that embraces both “cunning” and “wisdom,” *erlebnis* and *erfahrung*. And this gesture is not without importance for a writer who constantly stresses the improvisational nature of his own project. At the least, it requires a careful positioning of the essay with regard to its literary and philosophical forebears.

Montaigne engages these issues in two ways. The first is to turn a reflection on experience into a reflection on the limits of those discourses that would presume to control experience. These are, in the opening passages, law and medicine, and, in the closing pages, theologies of transcendence. Against these Montaigne sets his own frailty, illness, and praise of the human. The second strategy he uses is to split himself against himself. That is, rather than setting himself

² In my interest in juxtaposition as crucial to the form of the essay, I follow Theodor Adorno’s discussion in “The Essay as Form,” in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

off against some received opinion—say, the necessity of cruelty in the punishment of criminals (this in “Of Cruelty,” II.11)—he sets the body off against the soul, turning to a consideration of how the soul and body enjoy different types of health, and how the one can learn from the other.

This theme of self-education, which takes him beyond his discussions of education in the chapter on that subject (I.26), brings us to the second striking feature of the essay. This involves the notion of “experience” as content, data, collected information. Montaigne begins the *Essays* by stating, in his preface to the reader, that what he is offering is a portrait, a picture of himself that is as honest and natural as he can make it, within the limits of the conventions of civil society. The book is about him, or to be more precise, the book *is* him: “I myself am the matter of my book” [Je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre].³ And throughout the essays he moves between citations from classical sources, references to contemporary political events in France, and local observations on his own likes and dislikes. In the essay on experience, however, he becomes, quite strikingly it seems to me, a teacher, a sage advisor who makes recommendations about how to live. Montaigne is often suspicious of axiomatic formulations of wisdom, and the very movement of his text seems to undercut any attempt to abridge or abbreviate his work. Yet “Of Experience” bristles with axiomatic formulae: “It is shameful for a man to keep from doing what he sees his companions do, because he cannot or dare not” (830) [Il y a de la honte de laisser à faire par impuissance ou de n’oser ce qu’on voit faire à ses compagnons (1061)]; “We should conform to the best rules, but not enslave ourselves to them” (831) [On se doit adonner aux meilleures regles, mais non pas s’y asservir (1063)]; “Experience has further taught me this, that we ruin ourselves by impatience” (834) [L’experience m’a encores appris cecy, que nous nous perdons d’impatience (1066)]; “Let the mind arouse and quicken the heaviness of the body, and the body check and make fast the lightness of the mind” (855) [Que l’esprit esveille et vivifie la pesanteur du corps, le corps arreste la legereté de l’esprit et la fixe (1095)]; “Let us manage our time” (856) [Mesnageons le temps (1096)], and so on. These admonitory statements, which I have taken more or less at random from the final pages of the chapter, are interwoven with Montaigne’s more famous observations about his kidney stones, his eating habits, and his love of conversation. But they give the final passages of “Of Experience” an undeniable pedagogical tonality that echoes earlier forms of “counsel” in such writers as Erasmus and prefigures the maxims of La Rochefoucauld.

One way to understand this emphasis on advice is to consider the structure of the essay. It is built out of four pieces arranged in a loose symmetry, as follows. It begins with an attack on claims to absolute knowledge by two professions—law and medicine. This is followed by the first of two moments of transition—a kind of changing of gears—that begins with his turn to his own writing:

In fine, all this fricassee that I am scribbling here is nothing but a record of the essays of my life, which, for spiritual health, is exemplary enough if you take its instruction in reverse. But as for bodily health no one can furnish more useful experience than I, who present it pure, not at all corrupted or altered by art or theorizing. Experience is really on its own dunghill in the subject of medicine, where reason yields it the whole field. (826)

³ All references are to Donald Frame’s translation, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968). I here quote page 2. All further page numbers are included in the text. The French passages, here from page 9, are taken from the edition of Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1962).

[En fin, toute cette fricassée que je barbouille icy n'est qu'un registre des essais de ma vie, qui est, pour l'interne santé, exemplaire assez, à prendre l'instruction à contrepoil. Mais quant à la santé corporelle, personne ne peut fournir d'expérience plus utile que moy, qui la presente pure, nullement corrompue et alterée par art et par opination. L'expérience est proprement sur son fumier au subject de la medecine, où la raison luy quite toute la place. (1056)]

This passage marks the transition from the problem of the authority of knowledge to the question of Montaigne's own experience. I will speak with authority, not because I know anything that is useful, but because I know myself. The beautiful irony about this passage is that Montaigne defines his exemplarity in reverse, as it were. He presents himself as a negative exemplar of spiritual health. Yet he goes on to spend twenty pages describing how he has learned to adjust his spirit to his body, and how he has gained what could only be called spiritual health out of the contemplation of his physical decay. Thus what is presented as negative exemplarity turns out to be positive exemplarity. In the same passage he presents himself as a positive exemplar of physical health because he knows himself best in the body. Yet what he knows is the collapse of the body—the experience that leads to an education of the spirit.

This passage, moreover, revises two earlier moments in the essays. When Montaigne asserts a few paragraphs earlier that his body “plays its game apart” (823) [il fait son jeu a part (1052)] from the soul, he echoes the claim in the essay “The Useful and the Honorable” that his “actions” “play their own game” against his self (601). Now, however, the self is divided into body and soul, and action is out of the picture. Similarly, he is echoing the essay, “On the Force of the Imagination,” in which the absolute link between body and soul is affirmed. The shift just noted in “Of Experience,” where he suddenly privileges his own experience as exemplary (or not), thus breaks with the formulations put forth in the rest of the book. It then leads to discussion of two topics, the habits of the body and his kidney stones. These form what we might call the second movement of the chapter. Then there comes another break, where he again turns to himself, this time to reflect on his face and his mirror, and then to remark, “I have no cause to complain of my imagination” (842) [Je n'ay point à me plaindre de mon imagination (1077)]. The shift to the imagination takes us away from the discussion of the kidney stones to two slightly different but related topics. These are social experience—conversation, familiarity with peasants—and the rituals of eating. These two topics are, however, closely allied since the consumption of food is a social ritual. Indeed, the topic of the meal brings together the themes of sociability, the imagination—since food can affect our dreams—and the question of the body. The essay ends with an attack on claims to absolute knowledge by those who would seek authority in the other world. Montaigne stresses that human experience is itself sacred and needs no transcendence. He goes on to assert that nothing is so hard for him to digest in the life of Socrates as his demon, his claim to inspiration from the other world. This is part of a larger argument that praises the human and the terrestrial, and, in a local context, might be understood as a critique of certain of his contemporaries, fanatical Protestants and fanatical Catholics, who would kill and be killed on the authority of heaven.

Thus “Of Experience” moves from an attack on the authority of professional knowledge, to a discussion of the body, to a discussion of social relations, to an attack on claims to extraterrestrial authority. There is a loosely articulated framing device in which the attack on those who would manipulate the body in the early pages is matched by the attack on those who would exploit the movements of the soul in the final pages. We are led from the rejection of bad doctors to an acceptance of our own decrepitude, to a celebration of that decrepitude and a praise of old

age. Having rejected discourses of power over the body, Montaigne sets up a dialogue between the body and the spirit, using the body as a source of knowledge against which he can measure his own progress, but which, precisely because it is individual and not universal, makes possible the discourse of advice that emerges toward the end of the essay.

This, then, is the first general feature of the essay to which I want to call our attention. Its overall structure engages, in its movement, the problem of what constitutes experience. But there is another distinctive feature that is also connected to the topic of experience. This involves the effect of its composition. As you know, Montaigne continually rewrote the essays, which were published in various editions. Modern editors have conventionally used the letters *a*, *b*, and *c* to refer respectively to material published in the first edition in 1580, material added for the second edition in 1588, and material published after 1588. This essay was first published in the second edition, at the time the third book of essays was added. Thus it features only two levels of writing. The point I want to make about composition is quite simple, and it involves the question of priority in Montaigne's relationship to classical sources and examples. In the earliest essays in the book—and indeed, through much of the first two books—Montaigne has a tendency to offer material from classical literature or contemporary history in the first version of the book, adding much more extensive reflections on his own situation and character as he rewrites the work. Thus the essay on liars, for example, features a brief account of a well-known incident in diplomatic history in the first version, with Montaigne's conclusion that one needs a good memory to be a liar. When he rewrites the essay, however, in 1588, he includes extensive digressions on his own bad memory and on the consequences of it for several aspects of his life. Or, to take another example, the *Essays* open with two examples from political history, one of victims behaving stoically as a way of escaping massacre and one of them begging for mercy. When Montaigne rewrites the essay, he inserts his famous first reference to himself, "Either of these would easily win me, for I am wonderfully lax in the direction of mercy and gentleness" (4) [L'un et l'autre de ces deux moyens m'emporteroit aysement. Car j'ay une merveilleuse lascheté vers la misericorde et la mansuetude (12)]. Thus in most of the early essays, the point of departure is some other material into which Montaigne inserts himself as a kind of commentator, or supplementary agent. In the essay on experience, by contrast—and by virtue of the very topic at hand—Montaigne becomes the "ground," if you will, out of which all subsequent commentary is generated. This means that the figures from antiquity mentioned in "Of Experience"—Augustus, who sits down to dinner after the others; the Cyrenaic philosophers who hold that bodily pleasures are more powerful than the pleasures of the soul; Chrysippus, who jiggled his legs at table; Cranaus, king of the Athenians, who invented the habit of mixing wine with water; and so on—necessarily become mere glosses or doubles of Montaigne. They act as witnesses, so to speak, to his habits, which now take center stage. Many of these illustrative classical figures, like many of the one-sentence quotations from Seneca, appear in the text as brief asides and afterthoughts in the material added after 1588. Even those that are in the original version—Scipio, Brutus, and so on—have the effect of seeming secondary. They are no longer the primary material against which Montaigne tests his judgment. The possible exception to this rule might be the figure of Socrates, who appears at some length in the essay, but even he is a double of Montaigne, and, significantly, much of the discourse around him involves the question of whether he was born virtuous or made himself virtuous—the very question of how the present moment overcomes past constraints that, I am arguing, is implicated by the gesture of putting experience first. Once experience becomes the center of attention, the experience of others is reduced to illustration, or worse, mere erudition—and this reduction may be the most powerful accomplishment of the essay.

The theme of putting experience first, and therefore of effacing the power of tradition and time over the present moment, is reflected as well at the level of textual citations. The first long citation in the essay is in French. The fact that Montaigne very rarely quotes in French, and almost never cites his contemporaries, suggests that this turn to the modern vernacular marks a moment of rupture with the Latin past. The citation is from a poem by Montaigne's dead friend Etienne de la Boétie. It appears to be a celebration of change. It asserts that everything varies, like the babbling brook. However, the poem from which it comes is the dedicatory preface to La Boétie's translation of a section from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, offered as a gift to La Boétie's fiancée. La Boétie's argument in that poem is that it is acceptable to translate earlier texts, even though by so doing one is repeating the work of earlier poets. The reason it is acceptable, says La Boétie, is that whoever follows the pathway of your translation will find it to be a new poem. The footprints of those you are translating will be effaced by your translation: "If [the translator] passes by a spot after several others have been there / By his passing he erases the mark of their footprint" [Si en un lieu après plusieurs il passe / En y passant il efface la trace].⁴ This erasure of the past, which La Boétie says happens in translation, is what I have been arguing Montaigne does by placing experience at the center of the essay.

It is not insignificant that the passage from La Boétie celebrates the value of the present by praising acts of writing and reading. For, as Montaigne knows, the moment he inscribes his own experience in a printed text, that text becomes open to later readings and rereadings. And it may produce surprising conjunctions. I would like to conclude by looking at another moment in the essay, one that links Montaigne's practice of citation to his place in the history of philosophy. One of the more ethnographically open-minded sections in the essay is when Montaigne recounts a discussion in Augsburg with a German who criticized French fireplaces with the same arguments the French use to attack German stoves. However, Montaigne says he likes German stoves since you can take refuge in them and they put out an "even heat, constant and universal" (828) [cette chaleur eguale, constante et universelle (1058)]. This description of the heat of the German stove echoes exactly the language Montaigne used to describe his friendship with La Boétie in the essay on friendship. Sexual passion is too hot, he says in that essay, but friendship produces a heat that is "a general and universal warmth, moderate and even" (137) [une chaleur generale et universelle, temperée au demeurant et égale, une chaleur constante et rassise (184)]. So, in place of La Boétie's friendship—in place of a friendship that recalls the friendship of the ancients—we get Montaigne alone, sitting in a stove in Germany. I need hardly point out that, by a beautiful textual coincidence, the stage has literally been prepared for Descartes, who will undertake the project of the cogito in just such a stove. But the depiction of the stove also takes us back to the subject, mentioned earlier, of Montaigne's own ability to create new literary topoi. Through Montaigne's own process of auto-citation, his text effects a movement from his "experience" of the well-worn topos of friendship (however unique might have been his attachment to La Boétie) to the "experience" of the stove. Indeed, in this case the "topos" is overdetermined. It is quite literally a "place;" that is, a stove in which to sit. But it is also an emotionally charged textual place or topos that Montaigne hereby makes available for later writers to explore and enjoy. Between the vanished classical friendship of La Boétie and Descartes's redefinition of the value of experience for philosophy, we get Montaigne and the stove. [A]

⁴ Etienne de la Boétie, "A Marguerite de Carle, sur la traduction des plaintes de Bradamante," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Bonnefon (Paris: Rouam, 1892), 251 (my translation).