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MONTAIGNE'S MAXIMS: THE RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Every reader of Montaigne has a favorite maxim from the *Essays*. "My opinion", for instance, "is that we must lend ourselves to others and give ourselves only to ourselves" (III, 10, 767 B), or again "All days travel towards death, the last one reaches it" (I, 20, 67 C). The choice is endless. Lablénie, who has made an anthology of Montaigne's aphorisms, lists between seven and eight hundred[1]. Already in the 16th century, the essayist was famous for his sententious style. Pasquier refers to his <<*belles sentences*>> and calls Montaigne the French Seneca[2]. Furthermore, our author appreciated the maxim in other writers. He admired the sententious manner of Tacitus[3], and we know that the walls of his tower were decorated with precepts culled from the Greeks, the Romans and the Bible. The maxim has of course an ancient pedigree. It was also commented on copiously by classical rhetoricians, and it seems of interest therefore to view Montaigne's use of it in rhetorical perspective. This is especially so since the essayist and all his readers were steeped in a long tradition of reading and writing rhetorically.

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[1]All quotations from Montaigne are taken from *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, translated by Donald M. Frame. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958.

[2]. Cited in *Les Essais de Montaigne*, ed. by Pierre Villey and V. L. Saulnier, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965, 2 vols., vol. II, p. 1208.

[3]. Referring to Tacitus' *History* Montaigne writes: "It is "not a book to read, it is a book to study and learn; it is so full of maxims that you find every sort, both right and wrong" (III, 8, 719 B).

When we check the maxim or sententia in Lausberg's compendium[4], we discover an exhaustive fund of lore. This lore was never, of course, contained in one head, nor ever so well organized as in Lausberg's study. Like all rhetorical teaching, it was handed down with varying emphases, much repetition and frequent fragmentation. In his book, Sententiousness and the Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Geoffrey Bennington powerfully isolates two main directions in the welter of theory: 1) a current of thought which emphasizes the maxim as persuader (the most important theoretician here is Aristotle); 2) another current, largely defined by Quintilian, which studies the maxim's place in extended discourse.

In Aristotle the maxim is a general truth about questions of practical conduct to be chosen or avoided. The maxim may be doxal or paradoxal, i.e. it may confirm received opinion or go against it. Whatever the content, the maxim gives the orator status. By using it, he appears as the man of the broad view, the virtuoso thinker who is morally enlightened and able to lay down general rules. In this regard, however, Aristotle warns of a possible problem if the audience refuses to agree with the speaker. For this reason, he says, maxims should only be formulated by elderly men. All of Aristotle's teaching is thus focussed on persuasive power and moral authority.

For Quintilian, writing at a stage when rhetoric was more concerned with elocutio, the place of the maxim in extended discourse becomes a central problem. Maxim mania was rampant in Quintilian's time. For many, he says, the maxim is "the chief, nay almost the sole adornment of oratory"[5]. As usual, Quintilian aims at naturalness. Maxims should not be overly brilliant or far-fetched. They should also be used sparingly in order to give them heightened effect. Quintilian has great respect for sententiae, or "the eyes of eloquence", as he calls them, but they must not take over the whole speech. "I should not like to see the whole body full of eyes", he writes, "for fear

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[4]. Lausberg, Heinrich. Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik. Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1960, 2 vols.

[5]. Quintilian. The Institutio oratoria. trs. H. E. Butler. London: Heinemann, 1921, 4 vols., vol. III, bk. VIII, IV, 29.

that it cripple the functions of the other members"[6]. In the wake of Quintilian, later theoreticians endorse what Bennington has aptly called "marginalization". They recommend the placing of the maxim either at the beginning of a discourse or at the end, as initial or concluding remarks. Generally, then, aestheticians of the maxim address its prominence. They wish to avoid a mannered style which would foreground sententious statements and encourage their proliferation.

That Montaigne's essays deal with questions of practical conduct in Aristotle's sense is plain to all his readers. Although modesty and hatred of dogmatism will not allow him to confess to an overly didactic intent, countless statements may be gleaned from the essays to support the view that reading and writing in Montaigne's eyes must lead to practical wisdom. Moreover, any doubt that the essayist was only a neutral observer has been eliminated by rhetorically inspired studies, such as that of Margaret McGowan, Montaigne's Deceits (London: University of London Press, 1974). However, no matter how rhetorical and audience-oriented Montaigne may be, his essays are not formal speeches. They may weigh pros and cons in a deliberative way; they may become demonstrative in their praise of worthy men and women; and occasionally they may turn judgemental, especially when condemning the arrogant claims of political and religious revolutionaries. They are not usually concerned, however, with a specific case as the rhetorical speech is. They deal in generalities, and this difference leads to a contrasting use of the maxim in each genre. In the oration it sheds general light on particular issues. It comes after as a comment and is largely accessory. In the essay it is essential and comes first. General ideas are framed as maxims and these are then given concrete meaning through personal, historical and fictional examples. The rhetorical grid applied to Montaigne will thus provide a partial fit only. It will enlighten, but the perspective will remain oblique.

If we examine first of all the question of authorial image as raised by Aristotle, it can hardly be denied that Montaigne's concern in this respect is vital. The essays, after all, are an avowed self-portrait. In considering Aristotle's remarks, however, we

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[6]. Ibid., bk. III, V, 34.

should remember that they bear on credibility and status with the audience rather than on the orator's intention. For instance, Montaigne considers himself to be old when he writes the essays. His judgements are the fruit of much introspection, wide reading, considerable travel and active and responsible involvement in the political life of his country. Whether he considers himself entitled to coin a few maxims on the strength of this experience is debatable. Readers, on the other hand, may well accept more easily the moralizing tendencies of a man with such a background. His rules are tried and true. Similarly, whether Montaigne intends to impress by his sententious skill will never really be clear. We do know, however, that readers have appreciated him precisely on this account. We have mentioned the name of Pasquier and we may add that of John Locke[7]. Montaigne is eminently quotable, and much of his popularity must depend on his brilliant mastery of the pithy saying.

When we apply Aristotle's doxal/paradoxal distinction to Montaigne's maxims, we must face an initial difficulty. We may assume that the Stagirite based his distinction on the homogeneous beliefs of a relatively small society. The doxa was recognizable. In Montaigne's own time, doxal positions were far from clear. Protestants, for example, were pitted against Catholics, and belief in Europe's ways was undermined by the discovery of a different and refined civilization in the Americas. In spite of these uncertainties, we may perhaps define doxal as a) conforming to common sense, "motherhood" views and b) conforming to the principles of the ruling classes. Many of Montaigne's maxims belong to the a) category and are offered without explanation. "Friendship feeds on communication" (III, 10, 767 B), "Life is an uneven, irregular and multiform movement" (III, 3, 621 B). Others which belong mainly to category b) and which often reveal Montaigne's most conservative positions, require a supplement to justify them. Even though the idea expressed may be politically acceptable, Montaigne seems to feel that generalization is not easy and must be presented with nuance. "We owe subjection and obedience equally to all kings, for that concerns their office", he writes for example in ultra-monarchist fashion, but he also adds "but we do not owe

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[7]. Cited in Les Essais de Montaigne, ed. by Pierre Villey and V.-L. Saulnier, vol. II, p. 1221.

esteem, any more than affection, except to their virtue" (I, 3, 9 B). Thus heart and head are separated, and Montaigne's conservatism shows considerable reservations. His political views are always, it seems, inspired by a cool disillusioned realism. He believes in an imperfect here and now for which no plausible betterment may be imagined. "We may regret better times", he writes in a late essay, "but not escape the present; we may wish different magistrates, but we must nevertheless obey those that are here" (III, 9, 760 B). Montaigne is not unreservedly happy with this solution, of course. In a political dilemma, he would rather flee, he says, or hide, but there is no escape. "As long as the image of the ancient and accepted laws of this monarchy shines in some corner, there will I be planted" (ibid.). Laws, imperfect as they are, must be obeyed. This is the classic conservative position of the sceptic who, because of his scepticism, cannot justify an alternative. Laws are chancy things and, while doxally recommending obedience to them, Montaigne does not fail to show their lack of rational justification. As he rereads his maxims on this subject, he emphasizes the law's irrationality more and more. "The most plausible advice that our reason gives us in this matter is generally for each man to obey the laws of his country" (II, 12, 436 A), he writes in 1580, but in 1588 he adds enigmatically, "which is the advice of Socrates, inspired, he says, by divine counsel". (II, 12, 436 B). Knowing Montaigne's suspicion of divine inspiration, even with Socrates, we may well wonder what sort of guarantee this rider adds. In 1588 Montaigne states baldly in his last essay, "Of experience", that laws are maintained, not because they are just, but because they are laws. This is their mystic foundation, and they have no other. The essayist's last addition to this passage shows the conservative magistrate and twice ex-mayor of Bordeaux, speaking from the depths of his disillusioned experience. This state of affairs is how it should be, he says, because "they (the laws) are often made by fools, more often by people who, in their hatred of equality, are wanting in equity; but always by men, vain and irresolute authors" (III, 13, 821 C).

That Montaigne's doxal maxims are well weighed and no mere automatic response is then evident from their context. Paradoxal maxims, as Aristotle remarked, require even greater care in presentation. This will become clear, as we examine some of the subjects where Montaigne may seem to adopt a controversial stance: in the public

domain, problems of the vice d'état, torture, religion and suicide, and in the private sphere, questions of family and intellectual life.

Whether politics was subject to ethical constraint was a question widely debated in the 16th century and made urgent of course by the impact of Machiavelli's Prince. The late Montaigne sees life as a harmony of contraries, as music is a mixture of pitches, high and low. Therefore he admits evil, in the political arena at least, and allows it even a fruitful role. Deceit can serve, he writes in "Of the useful and the honorable", the opening essay of his third book, and he adds sententiously, "There are lawful vices, as there are many other good or excusable actions that are unlawful" (III, 1, 604 B). In the same essay we find maxims supporting the most naked realpolitik : "in every government there are necessary offices which are not only abject but also vicious" (III, 1, 600 B) ; and even more specifically brutal: "The public welfare requires that a man betray and lie" (ibid.). In view perhaps of the continuing bloodshed of the religious wars, Montaigne later expanded this maxim and declared: "The public welfare requires that a man betray and lie and massacre" (ibid. C). Such words are certainly descriptive, but whether they are prescriptive in an absolute way is much less clear. Montaigne himself refuses to participate in these necessary evils. He opts out, keeps his own hands clean and concludes his maxim with a personal reservation, "let us resign this commission to more obedient and suppler people" (ibid. B). Montaigne is genuinely torn. He cannot condemn the <<raison d'état>>, but at the same time he cannot execute it personally. Politically ends may justify means. The ordinary citizen, in Montaigne's eyes, should simply play his part without question. This view gives rise to one of Montaigne's best-known and most disturbing maxims: "An honest man is not accountable for the vice or stupidity of his trade, and should not therefore refuse to practice it: it is the custom of his country, and there is profit in it" (III, 10, 774 B). Such a maxim is of the type invoked by war criminals in their defence. In Montaigne's work it occurs in a long development on social roles. The latter are necessary, he believes, but must not be confused with the private human being. Montaigne is therefore balancing inner moral independence and outward social conformity. In this way his

machiavellian maxim is situated in a subtle discussion which makes it seem much less sinister and even appears to justify it.

No matter how deeply attached to the status quo, Montaigne's hatred of cruelty and suffering is absolute. For this reason he protests against torture as a means of obtaining judicial confession or of inflicting religious punishment. These are not doxal positions in the 16th century and require support. In the case of judicial torture Montaigne writes: "Tortures are a dangerous invention, and seem to be a test of endurance rather than of truth" (II, 5, 266 A). Here the word "seem" already attenuates the affirmation, and Montaigne adds eleven lines of amplification to justify the positive thrust of his statement. Condemning torture and burning at the stake in the name of religion, Montaigne adopts another tack. In his celebrated comparison of the cruelty of Brazilian cannibals with that of European Christians, he uses humour and picturesque evocation to make a telling point: "There is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead; and in tearing by tortures and the rack a body still full of feeling, in roasting a man bit by bit... than in roasting and eating him after he is dead" (I, 31, 155 A).

Montaigne's religion has been the subject of much debate. His essays by and large did not incur the censure of church authorities until the 17th century. The essayist's own religious practice and certain passages of the essays were enough to testify to his orthodoxy. Yet striking maxims may be found in Montaigne's work to suggest that Christian truth is far from absolute. "We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans" (II, 12, 325 B), we read in the "Apology for Raymond Sebond". Religion is a mere accident of geography. Out of context this maxim seems aggressively demystifying. In context, however, we see that Montaigne is not discussing the truth of Christianity, but the way in which Christianity is believed. People are Christians because they are born in a Christian country. Montaigne's maxim is thus orthodoxly innocent, but only after a second glance.

Public acceptance of suicide was hardly a doxal position in Renaissance France. On the other hand, it is omnipresent in the writings of the classical Stoics who influenced Montaigne at the beginning of his career. Montaigne reproduces some of

Seneca's most striking maxims on this subject in his essay, "A custom of the island of Cea". He writes, for example : "The most voluntary death is the fairest. Life depends on the will of others; death, on our own" (II, 3, 252 A). Although one suspects Montaigne's sympathy for those pro-suicide opinions, he presents them in a classically coloured passage which suggests that they are the beliefs of a prestigious past rather than Montaigne's own. Moreover the whole discussion of suicide is prefaced by an introduction where the essayist emphasizes the tentative nature of his opinions and his complete submission to the Divine Will.

In the private sphere, Montaigne's paradoxal maxims on family relationships may appear paradoxal only to sentimental modern readers. The essayist likes to exaggerate humorously the cares of the family man. He writes therefore: "There is scarcely less trouble in governing a family than in governing an entire state" (I, 39, 175 A). Marriage is viewed unromantically as a necessary social institution, more durable than fleeting love. "A good marriage", we read, "if such there be, rejects the company and conditions of love" (III, 5, 647 B). Generally Montaigne affects a coolness in family relationships, a coolness which can become a frigid chill, as in the maxim, "We should have wife, children, goods, and above all health, if we can; but we must not bind ourselves to them so strongly that our happiness depends on them" (I, 39, 177 A). This maxim occurs near the beginning of "Of solitude" where Montaigne expounds the need for spiritual independence. Although forthright and breathtaking, the maxim does not shock the reader who has been well prepared for it by numerous classical examples, including that of Stilpon who escaped from the burning of his town but claimed that he had lost nothing of his own, even although his wife, children and worldly goods had all been consumed. With respect to children, Montaigne's preference for progeny of the mind over progeny of the flesh may not seem so paradoxal in today's world of careers first. "There are few men devoted to poetry", he writes, "who would not be prouder to be the father of the Aeneid than of the handsomest boy in Rome, and who would not more easily suffer the loss of the one than of the other" (II, 8, 293 A). This aphorism in favour of art over creature is embedded in justification. In the preceding lines we read that books, unlike a child, are our unique creation and in those following that

Epaminondas, Alexander and Caesar preferred their military victories to any mere monument of flesh and blood.

Montaigne's paradoxal views on the intellectual life are perhaps the best known of all. This immensely erudite man, who learned Latin as his mother tongue and who knew the classics by heart, constantly denounced the vanity of learning. He means of course learning which fills the mind rather than sharpens its powers. As usual Montaigne's paradoxal positions on this subject are engagingly presented. One example from "Of the education of children" will demonstrate how a maxim out of context may seem unacceptable, but how it works with persuasive force in its own milieu. Many readers are startled when they discover Montaigne's solution to the problem of the ungifted student. "I see no other remedy", he writes, "than for his tutor to strangle him early, if there are no witnesses, or apprentice him to a pastry cook in some good town, even though he were the son of a duke; in accordance with Plato's precept that children should be placed not according to the faculties of their father, but according to the faculties of their soul" (I, 26, 120 C). Tone and context make these words acceptable. We know that Montaigne is joking, and moreover philosophy, the main element of the child's education, has just been presented in such beguiling colours that all children will love it and none need fear the penalty of death or ignominious trade.

The paradoxal maxims, like the doxal, are thus delivered with great circumspection. The maxim, of necessity assertive, is always made palatable. Montaigne is the enemy of dogmatism. "Only the fools are certain and assured" (I, 26, 111 C), he writes, while at another point he announces his fondness for "those words which soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions: 'perhaps', 'to some extent', 'some', 'they say', I think', and the like" (III, 11, 788 B). We might note too that many of his maxims are couched as questions, as in the striking "When I play with my cat, who knows if I am not a pastime to her more than she is to me?" (II, 12, 331 C). Here Montaigne engages the reader, not by laying down the law, but by asking him to supply the answer himself.

Turning now to the aesthetic dimension, we recall that rhetorical teaching on the density and placing of maxims emphasized moderation, with the maxim being often

used as an epiphenomenon or conclusion, and sometimes in a liminal position as a shifter. Such usages may, of course, be observed in Montaigne. "On some verses of Virgil", the long essay on sex, ends with sententious affirmation of the equality of men and women: "It is much easier to accuse one sex than to excuse the other. It is the old saying: 'The pot calls the kettle black'" (III, 5, 685 B). A good example of the maxim as opener and closer, a typical rhetorical arrangement of the Middle Ages[8], can be found in a passage from the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" where Montaigne is demonstrating the common nature of all men, high and low. He begins with the maxim, "The souls of emperors and cobblers are cast in the same mold", goes on to develop this theme with specific examples and concludes sententiously, "Like appetites move a mite and an elephant" (II, 12, 350 A). Such rhetorically orthodox use of the maxim is, however, rather untypical of Montaigne. More usually, as Lablénie has pointed out, the maxims are piled up in a series. Rule upon rule, for instance, underlines the Stoic resolution of Montaigne in face of death: "He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint" (1, 20, 60 A). "There is nothing evil in life for the man who has thoroughly grasped the fact that to be deprived of life is not an evil" (ibid. C). These stiff-lipped precepts stand in sharp contrast to the epicurean maxims which serenely grace the last page of all the essays and which are piled up in similar fashion: "It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own, and go outside of ourselves because we do not know what it is like inside" (III, 13, 857 B). "Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting on our own rump" (ibid. C). At the aesthetic level, then, Montaigne's eloquence flouts every rhetorical rule. He writes artlessly, as he himself explains, by following his own natural rhythms of concentration and dilution: "As my fancies present themselves, I pile them up; now they come pressing in a crowd,

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[8]. Cf. Paul Zumthor <<L'épiphonème proverbiale>>, Revue des Sciences humaines, 163 (1976), pp. 313-28.

now dragging single file. I want people to see my natural and ordinary pace, however off the track it is" (II, 10, 297 A).

Art, artless. Rhetoric is an art, and Montaigne a seemingly artless personal philosopher. Is it not futile then to compare his style with a rule which he ignores? We can answer that Montaigne lived in a rhetorical age and that his education in reading and writing, like that of everyone else, was rhetorically oriented. Therefore, although he affects to distrust rhetoric, it is so ingrained in him that it becomes a second nature and he is rhetorical in spite of himself. A more satisfying answer is that rhetoric is simply a systematization of the most effective practices of nature. Montaigne is naturally gifted and hence effective and therefore rhetorical. This is especially evident in his treatment of the paradoxal maxim where all his skill is deployed in making a provocative statement acceptable by placing it in supporting context. Although Montaigne may not structure his thinking in this manner because of rhetorical doctrine, the reader may well receive it more knowingly because he has read the rhetorical classics. Here rhetoric functions less as an art of encoding than as one of decoding. More a tool of analysis than of genesis, it guides the reader rather than the writer.

A problem arises when we examine the aesthetic dimension of Montaigne's maxims. Rhetoric, we have claimed, codifies the effective practices of nature. It recommends moderate use of the maxim, yet Montaigne likes his maxims best when they appear in brilliant series. Is he then ineffective, or is there some fault in the teaching of rhetoric? Neither, of course. Our dilemma stems from the limited nature of the discursive field for which the rules of classical rhetoric were devised. Classical rhetoric, as we know, is primarily an art of legal disputation. In many cases, therefore, its precepts can apply only tangentially to a type of discourse as different as that of Montaigne's. If we wished to accommodate the essayist in a full rhetorical form, we should have to develop the restricted categories of the past. We should have to move from elocutio to dispositio. There we should have to ponder questions of tempo and then devise some compositional rule of rhythm which would cover Montaigne's "natural and ordinary pace". Such a study must await, however, another occasion. Meanwhile

we might note that it would probably exceed the bounds of an investigation as comprehensive even as the general rhetoric of the Groupe Mu.

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