



“The Style Is the Man” — Montaigne’s Essays Embodying His Philosophy

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Abstract

This essay examines how Michel de Montaigne’s Essays reflect his philosophical view of experience and reality through their unique literary form. Written during the turbulence of the 16th-century France, Montaigne’s informal, digressive, and conversational style enacts his skepticism toward abstract reasoning and universal truths. Emphasizing personal experience, the subjective self, and the diversity of human life, Montaigne challenges rigid legal, philosophical, and rhetorical systems. Drawing on one of his key chapters “On Experience,” this essay explores how Montaigne’s structure, tone, and method of composition mirror his belief that knowledge emerges through lived experience and reflective self-exploration. The paper situates Montaigne within his historical and intellectual context, and concludes that the Essays offer a radically humanistic model of knowledge grounded in everyday life.

Keywords: Montaigne, Essays, Experience, Reality, Literary Form.

INTRODUCTION

Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays* (1580–88) were composed amid the turmoil of 16th-century France—a period marked by the French Wars of Religion (1562–1598), fanaticism and civil dispute. Montaigne, a moderate Catholic deeply critical of the fanaticism of his age, turned inward and made himself the subject of his book in a skeptical search for truth during an era when “all possibility of truth seemed illusory and treacherous”. The form of Montaigne’s essays is a conversational, digressive, self-reflective mode of writing, which directly mirrors his philosophical view that experience is subjective, reality is ever-changing, and genuine understanding comes from honest exploration of the self. Montaigne refuses to impose artificial order on his thoughts, instead, the free-flowing, undogmatic structure of his essays embodies his belief that personal experience and lived reality are richer guides than abstract theory. In Montaigne’s hands, the essay form becomes an instrument for challenging systematic philosophy and grandiose certainties. His observational, anecdotal style turns its back on abstract reasoning and celebrates the diversity of human life, thereby emphasizing the lived, subjective self as the truest source of knowledge. This essay will explore how Montaigne’s informal form, tone, and spontaneity serve his views on experience and reality. It will incorporate historical

context from Montaigne’s 16th-century milieu and his own life—including his legal career and public service—while drawing on his essay “On Experience”. In doing so, we will see how Montaigne’s literary self-portrait forges a new humanistic philosophy grounded in experience, skepticism, and an honest appraisal of human nature.

THE CONVERSATIONAL FORM: SPONTANEITY AND THE FLOW OF THOUGHT

Readers of Montaigne are struck by the informality and spontaneity of his prose. The style is simple, direct and honest, often resembling a transcript of a conversation or a private journal. Indeed, Montaigne addresses the reader as a friend, in a tone at once frank and unforced. He cultivated an open, oral style precisely to engage the reader with content and ideas rather than call attention to literary form. Unlike an orator or a scholastic disputant, Montaigne does not seek to persuade by polished argument. He seeks to communicate and to discover truth along the way. The essay form, as Montaigne practices it, is exploratory and reflexive. He often starts with one idea, digresses to another, and circles back, modeling the way real thinking often unfolds in a chain of association. Hence his chapters often lack a predetermined outline or conclusion and they are famously meandering. Far from being a flaw, this wandering structure enacts Montaigne’s belief in intellectual freedom and sincerity. He

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refuses to “impose a false unity on the spontaneous workings of his thought” just as he refuses to “impose a false structure on his Essays” (Sankovitch). In Montaigne’s view, to force a strict order or symmetry onto one’s ideas is to falsify them. Reality is not neatly organized, nor is the human mind. Thus, by allowing his style to follow the natural curves of his thinking, Montaigne remains “faithful to the freshness and immediacy of living thought” (Sankovitch). The result is a text that feels alive—full of unexpected turns, personal anecdotes, self-corrections, and lively digressions.

Montaigne’s “On the Education of Children” provides insight into his stylistic ideal. He advocates teaching a child by fostering judgment and practical wisdom rather than rote book-learning. He even suggests that “wonderful brilliance may be gained for human judgment by getting to know men” in the real world rather than only studying books (Montaigne 140). Montaigne applies this same principle to his writing: he prefers a natural, non-scholastic form of reasoning. In practice, this means Montaigne writes as if he were chatting with the reader or with himself. Often, he pauses to address “Reader” directly or poses rhetorical questions to anticipate the reader’s thoughts. Montaigne does not set himself up as a didactic authority but rather as a companionable guide. Felicity Green observes that Montaigne’s conversational mode stems from a desire to break down the barriers of academic formality and speak honestly person to person (Green 150). This preference for plain language has a philosophical motive, and truth, he implies, is obscured by jargon and ornament. He criticizes his society’s professional élites—lawyers, courtiers, even scholars—for speaking in a convoluted, affected code that ordinary people cannot understand. He writes in French, the vernacular, rather than the Latin of the academy, and he draws many examples from peasant life, tavern anecdotes and his own habits. This grounded content matches his plain style. The overall effect is that Montaigne’s essays sound like everyday conversation—albeit conversation with a very erudite and thoughtful friend. This relaxed, improvisational form suits his goal of capturing experience as it is lived, in a flow, moment by moment.

EXPLORING FURTHER IN HIS “ON EXPERIENCE”

While reading Montaigne’s essays, the style of his writing would probably be the last thing to consider; in view of the fact that, the writing is so simple and free-flowing that as if Montaigne was directly speaking to you and sharing his thoughts through written words. It engages you with its content and ideas rather than making you wonder what form of writing you are confronted with. Especially in terms of the discussion about his views of experience and reality, Montaigne stands in a position of an explorer of his personal experience and social phenomena, and of his thoughts and what messages he can get from the both. Montaigne does not worry about the use of language as much as to pause and examine his words, and he speaks and writes merely what’s on his mind and how one idea occurs to him following

another, A loose discussion that he establishes provides him with space and freedom to add in whatever comes to his mind next. What Montaigne is presenting is an inner process of thought, which draws you into a spontaneous conversation that you pay the least attention to what is the direction this conversation is heading to; instead, you are simply following his flowing thought and looking forward to seeing where it leads you to. As Montaigne engages himself with the process of laying out opinions in front of the readers, not only does he have the conversation with the readers in word, but also seemingly talk among himself, given that he keeps coming up with more ideas followed by one another, and he has to relate his latter thoughts with the former ones. “I myself am the subject of my book”, Montaigne states, and that he and his book are “of one substance” with each other (Montaigne ix). Hence, Montaigne’s essays are more like a number of texts that build up a portrait of his inner self. He does not just emerge as an author, but more as an intellectual individual.

The chapter “On Experience” in Montaigne’s Essays is the last chapter, and in many ways it sums up his wisdom of regarding different aspects in life and society in the former chapters. Therefore, though his essays in this book are mostly openly discussions with no strictly formed structures or clear conclusions, this essay “On Experience” begins with the concern of the relationship between reason and experience, and that “there is no desire more natural than the desire for knowledge” (Montaigne 343). The implication is that all things are considered primarily with reason, experience, and eager for knowledge bearing in mind. The essay “On Experience” clearly gives the reader a sense of a closing chapter of the whole book. Through the idea that “reason has so many shapes that we do not know which to take hold of; experience has no fewer” (344), Montaigne puts reason and experience side by side and states that either is stable or reliable. People’s reasoning can be constantly changing, and when reason fails them, they usually refer to their experience when they encounter with the events that seem to be similar with the ones they have come across in the past. However, events are always unlike; they might have similarity at some degree, and at the same time, there is no doubt that there are always gaps between people’s existing knowledge (or experience) and the various unpredictable upcoming events that they have to face with in everyday life. To back up his points, Montaigne gives an example that people from different cultures have different ideas about the impressions of eggs. The Greeks, Romans and French see eggs as one of the symbols of the “perfect degree of similarity”, whereas there are men at Delphi that can tell the difference between eggs (344). It is certain that eggs identically look similar with each other at a high degree; it is people’s different experiences and knowledge that decide how they see things in real life. Besides, there is another example about distinguishing others’ cards during gambling, which is an assumed situation that it is possible that people can distinguish rivals’ cards just by looking at

the slightly different backs of the cards. In contrast to the former example, Montaigne suggests an imaginary event to support his view, yet in a reasonable way. This example seems to be coming out of nowhere, but as it has been said before, Montaigne’s writing is a process of thinking. One can only follow his mind and explore those ideas with him. Just like when people have speeches or express themselves, they can always come up with unexpected new ideas in the process, because of their interactions with listeners, or of the connections and sparkles between different ideas coming from themselves.

In the following, Montaigne smoothly comes down to his concern about laws from his remarks that “Resemblance does not make things as much alike as difference makes them dissimilar” (344). He concerns about the laws with this point of view that, one can hardly “curb the authority of his judges by a multitude of laws”, as there are so many possible interpretations of the laws as well as making them. Montaigne describes the situation that “those men who think they can lessen and check our disputes by referring us to the actual words of the Bible are deluding themselves”, as if he is revealing some facts about the series of religious and political conflicts ongoing in France during his period. People always have different opinions and especially, when they try to justify their actions and positions. Montaigne has been trained as a lawyer, and he has deep and profound approach to the functioning process of laws to the society.

The form of Montaigne’s essays is also like a self-portrait or a self-analysis, exploring within oneself; to lift it up to another level, he raises his individual thinking and questioning to social concern, upon the foundation of his legal involvement in dealing with the social issues. There is hardly any surviving evidence about Montaigne’s legal studies; however, no matter in what way did he achieve his formation, it is perhaps significant that Montaigne should have started his career as the member of an institution that “illustrated all that was dysfunctional and corrupt about French legal system” (Fontana 26). He took over the position of consultant from his uncle sometime between 1554 and 1557, at the *cour des aides* of Périgueux, a new fiscal court founded by Henry II (26). This new court was part of Henry II’s policy of building more and more judicial offices to sell for ready cash. From the very beginning, the primary purpose of setting up those judicial institutions was not serving the nation and citizens to defend their rights and interests, or maintaining the practice of justice and social order; instead, these organizations were aiming at profit. Later, Montaigne was admitted into the parliament of Bordeaux, which mainly dealt with private litigation, a rather “tedious and uninspiring” office (27). Working in an office like this, Montaigne certainly has acquired an intimate knowledge of the typical procedure of legal administration. He directly experienced the inadequacy of French legal system; while being part of this functioning system, Montaigne also looked into the system with a critical view as an observer.

Since we never know the exact details of the codes and legal traditions in France during that period, we can only be guided by Montaigne’s thoughts into them. Given that Montaigne was in one of the legal institutions, as a lawyer he has been trained to have the capability of delivering persuasive oral argument in a simple yet accurate style. Even for people that do not have much knowledge of legal administration, Montaigne’s simple way of presenting his insights is very effective and easy to follow, in view of the fact that Montaigne’s idea of writing an essay is focusing on the self. Though his thoughts are known to be more intellectual than many others, he uses the simple and direct language free from artifice of all kinds, the common language used by all ordinary people. Therefore, his essays can appeal to people with different levels of education. Furthermore, for those who never see things the way that Montaigne does, his essays give them different perspectives; people can imagine standing in Montaigne’s position to think about his ideas. Especially when it comes to how French legal system functioned at that time, of which people might not know much about, yet people’s life was influenced by the system on a daily basis, Montaigne’s essays reveal some important facts of the system which was part of the reality of citizenship.

As a matter of fact, Montaigne believes the number of laws they had in France was much higher than necessary (Montaigne 345); France had far so many laws as if the legislators determined to create a specific law for every particular case. Despite the fact that, while considering and dealing with abundant distinct cases and illegal deeds, judges may have a hundred thousand laws to refer to. Those cases caused by the infinity of people’s diverse and ever-changing actions can never be reduced to legal rules. The laws are relatively fixed and immutable, yet human actions are perpetually changing, not all of which can be judged by laws; this is also another form of relations between experience and reality. The established laws are written based on the existing knowledge of human actions, and former or imaginary cases can never meet the requirement for considering the multiple possible events in the future; this is all the more distance between experience and reality. From another point of view, when there were as many as a hundred thousand laws, contradictions between certain laws could not be avoided. This makes it more unlikely to decide a fair judgement, because the content of the virtue remained undetermined. Moreover, many of these laws were obsolete or redundant, and all were written in a “characteristically cryptic jargon” (Fontana 27), in a way that French language, which was ordinary and simple for any other use, became obscure and unintelligible in those official documents like contracts and wills.

Montaigne stresses the negative condition in his essay “On Experience” as well (Montaigne 346). While drafting a simple document like contracts or wills, the specialists like lawyers, courtiers and so on, tended to pay more attention to carefully selecting solemn words and expressions, than to clearly express themselves. The attention to the format

and the use of language outweighed that of the meaning of the statements. Entangling with those minor details of the distinction of expression would make the expression itself more confusing and lacking real meanings; gradually, this kind of obscure language subconsciously removed from the reality it originally tried to describe or pretend to describe. Those are also significant reasons that Montaigne was insistent in his ideal of style—simple, natural and truthful, and distanced himself from the cumbersome method of writing. Experience shows that twisted interpretations could dissipate the truths and reality, and even destroy it. As a result, normal citizens who had no relevant knowledge or experience, could not read or understand the legal codes, let alone referring to relevant laws when they have arguments or conflicts with each other regarding their rights and interests. They could only turn to specialists for help, or to be exact, for costly legal assistance. That is to say, law seemed to turn into a commodity available to those who were rich enough to pay for it to maintain impartial justice. There is also another example presented in Montaigne’s essay, which is about some peasants viewing a severely injured man yet fearing to help him, because they were afraid that they would be accused as suspects. At that time, they would not have the ability nor the money to defend themselves (Montaigne 351). An act of kindness and humanity could ruin their life. Montaigne’s experience reveals the cruel reality that, there should have been so many innocent people being punished for the crimes they had never committed because they had no power or money to refer to laws.

Linking with his own experience as a lawyer, Montaigne shows his strong requirement for justice; with his critical knowledge of laws and ongoing scepticism, he works out an indictment against jurisprudence that the legal system containing numerous laws is not able to put the virtue of justice into practice. The organizations that had the obligation to put laws into practice, yet they created laws in obscure expressions that were far beyond the understanding of the general public; besides, they charged much more than the normal citizens could accept. They did not think about equality or sincerely care for citizens’ rights in the first place; hence, there was no actual justice in society that was governed by these institutions. To Montaigne, the “fewest, simplest, and most general” laws are the most desirable; and that “nature always gives us happier laws than we give ourselves” (345). To explain his opinions, Montaigne gives an example of the Golden Age, that some of the nations have no judges, people’s arguments are decided by the first traveller that comes to them. The idea of being judged by a common individual implies that Montaigne believed that humble, ordinary and perhaps uneducated people were generally wiser in dealing with the events that happen in life, for the fact that they had a simpler, purer view of human condition and of people’s basic needs and moral values. Montaigne found that people were educated to increase their doubts and complicate things, which prevented them from recognizing the “natural infirmity of the mind” (346-347).

On the other hand, since the common uneducated people were merely learning from real life, experience and from society, their knowledge about life and people was more concrete. For them, there were fewer barriers to “following nature”, liberating the self from all “rational misconceptions and artificial constructions” (Fontana 138), to eventually reaching one’s primary and basic needs and motivations. To practice the virtue of justice, the customs and common obligation, and a space of freedom are more desirable; then, if people defined legal obligations by the basic ethical values, rules and prohibitions that correspond to them, they themselves could clearly work out what actions and events would transgress the moral base line, the base line placed under the surveillance of the judges and the police.

As Montaigne emphasizes much on nature and the expressions of the self, he lays out the subject of philosophy. The philosophers refer to the laws of nature, but present an over-beautified appearance of the nature to us, which is “painted in over-bright colours and too sophisticated” (Montaigne 354); while the wisdom of nature is simpler and less spectacular. Even though Montaigne came from a high education background, to him, the schoolmen and philosophers, for the sake of their pursuit of artifice, tended to transform experiences of real life into some descriptions or definitions that hardly contain expressions of actual feelings. He had been trained as a lawyer, and found that part of the job of a lawyer, was to spare no efforts to produce difficult, beautifully rounded phrases with definitions and incomprehensible terminologies, and to tell aphorism at the right moment, which was placed in a more important position than the search for the truths, investigation of the reality and fair judgement. Lawyers were taught to draw attention to their rhetorical skill, while the clients’ interests seemed less important. Therefore, there were many facts suggesting that during that time, in many respects, the education held the view that style was more important than the content, the matter. In terms of writing, the content and meanings should be more important than style and use of language, for that the main purpose of writing should be expressing oneself, instead of producing a beautifully rounded artistic form. In this case, the content can be seen as playing a crucial role in forming Montaigne’s ideal style. Montaigne was convinced that the schools “catered well for their professional clientele, but did nothing for the non-specialist. They taught you to talk, but not to communicate” (McGowan 23). Hence, Montaigne’s writing is not only a self-portrait or self-expression, but also an attempt to engage his readers in his process of thinking, a spontaneous and natural way of communication with the readers, based on daily experience, genuine feelings and thoughts. He felt so strongly about the distorting tendencies of the technical jargon, especially in legal codes and traditional laws, that he was insistent in his ideal style of writing, which is straightforward, honest and completely free from artifice of all kinds. In a way, Montaigne as a lawyer suggested a style of academic writing that was approachable to the general public—a style that could carry intellectual

ideas and thoughts with simple, unequivocal expressions, as well as a form that helped writers spread the ideas and values to different classes. His spoken style of writing is easy to read and understand, therefore, he earned readers from different classes, which is an essential reason why his essays became influential.

CONCLUSION

To discuss complicated thoughts and ideas about things, such as experience and reality, Montaigne sought the simplest and unpretentious language to avoid confusion. At the same time, though coming up with strong opinions and presenting them in a convincing manner, he does not try to teach people anything or impose his ideas on anyone. Everyone has his or her own experience and reality. Montaigne gathered thoughts and opinions from his, and managed to share them in the equal position with his readers. Thus people could get into his mind and come to know him directly as a normal person. Though not many people could have the experience of working as a lawyer as Montaigne did, the simple and straightforward expressions he used in telling his experience of approaching the legal system could get readers who came from a common background in his position to imagine what it would be like. While a typical autobiography tends to build up one’s personality, which could be much different than what the person is actually like, Montaigne’s self-portrait as well as self-analysis in the essays seems more natural and it gradually reveals the form of his mind. He was keen to project a natural image of himself, so he let his thoughts flowing freely along with his words, let the facts naturally reveal among the discussions, instead of structuring his argument carefully to end it up in a conclusion. It is as if we were listening to his words streaming from his head. The form of Montaigne’s essay gave him the freedom to adjust his language to each of his ideas, and freed him from the shaping process of his thoughts. What’s more, the relaxing tone that his essays are forming gives his readers the space to consider and decide whether to agree with him or not. Since Montaigne’s essays don’t have a tightly structured form, readers can stop at any point to think for a while before continuing to the following part, just like having a conversation with Montaigne sharing life experience and exchanging ideas. In this way, Montaigne brought his essays to life, as part of direct communication

with people, which made his experience true to life, and his thoughts solid and genuine.

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