

*Montaigne et les livres*. Floyd Gray.

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After his earlier studies, *Le Style de Montaigne* (1958), *La Balance de Montaigne* (1982), and *Montaigne bilingue: Le latin des "Essais"* (1991), Floyd Gray explores how Montaigne used his library to write his *Essais*. In his first chapter, Gray starts with a critical approach

familiar from Villey, suggesting that the *Essais* are the result of Montaigne's reading practice during his retirement: the essayist reads and writes to occupy himself, and, wanting to remain an active reader, he records his reactions to avoid any inattentive and lazy reading. Therefore, Montaigne's first *essais* grow out of his readings, realizing that "some smell a bit foreign" (51; *Essays*, trans. Frame, 810). Then, after his return from Italy, his essays become more personal, since he reads his own work more than he reads others. In any case, the driving force of Montaigne's book comes from reading, whether it be in his own work or his substantial library.

In his second chapter, Gray turns from Montaigne's books, "Les livres de Montaigne," to the *Essais*, "Le livre de Montaigne." He reminds us of Montaigne's "extravagant" undertaking, which is talking about others in order to better reveal himself. Montaigne's critical approach to the texts he reads discloses his own character, which is also better achieved with Seneca's syntax rather than Cicero's. He insists that Seneca's *brevitas* adheres better to his thoughts, hoping the reader will remember the matter more than the manner. Gray nicely construes that the subject of the *Essais* constitutes what Montaigne is: "Il ne trouve pas, comme Descartes, qu'il est *parce* qu'il pense, mais *par ce* qu'il pense" ("He does not find, like Descartes, that he is *because* he thinks, but because of *what* he thinks *about*" [101]). Therefore, the lack of order in his writing, like the fortuitous beginning and accidental end of his book, occasioned by the death of its author, reflects the contingent nature of man, always in flux, and does not represent the author's acts but his essence. His writing mirrors his thinking with the help of shorter sentences, which capture the spontaneity of his mind, represented in part by his misleading claim never to correct himself (*Essays*, 2.37). Ironically, the most original part of this book is the systematic study of a few of Montaigne's corrections, addressing a lacuna in Montaigne studies. But Gray declines to argue for a rhetorical strategy. He insists more on the accidental than the constructed form of the *Essays*, resulting in a "texte-marqueterie" (267).

Progressively, Gray invites us to think about the process of reading and writing like a Socratic method. Montaigne converses with books, and compares their illustrious women and men, recalling the parallel lives of Plutarch, who is also one of his most important influences. The third and last chapter, "Montaigne et Socrate," links the naïve and understudied style of the essays to Montaigne's will to depict his humanity, aiming, like Socrates, to humanize philosophy by denouncing man's presumption (198). Gray engages with one of Pascal's most important interpretations of the *Essays*, that man can only be wise if he knows his own limits, and thanks to this realization his misery can be transformed into a certain "grandeur" (237). Although, for the "Socrate français," greatness of man is absent, common simplicity and self-knowledge, which is to understand one's own limits, is the true philosophy (205, 242). Gray adds, paradoxically, that wisdom for Montaigne comes not from books but from experiencing life. So where does Montaigne stand when he says "Solitude of place, to tell the truth, rather makes me stretch and expand outward; I throw myself into affairs of state and into the world more readily when I am alone" (*Essays*, 758)?

In conclusion, through the process of reading and quoting books, dialoguing with authors, and comparing historical figures, Montaigne experiences the lives of others while reading and writing mostly alone. He does not directly portray himself, but connects to others' experiences, revealing and understanding himself, a self constructed through the lives of others, as we all bear "la forme entiere de l'humaine condition" ("the entire form of man's estate") (278; *Essays*, 740).

VALERIE M. DIONNE, *Colby College*