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THE CONCEPT
OF
JUDGMENT IN MONTAIGNE



MARTINUS NIJHOFF / THE HAGUE

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by

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needlessly and nefariously impedes the orderly progress of judgment. Knowledge must be organic, a second nature, as it were: "il ne faut pas attacher le sçavoir à l'ame, il l'y faut incorporer; il ne l'en faut pas arrouser, il l'en faut teindre" (I, 25, 139). Memory is a shell, an envelope, a façade; it reacts to knowledge, to experience, as does a tablet of wax to a knife; a record is made, an imprint is left, but neither the memory nor the wax is fundamentally altered. That which undergoes change, that which must change, is judgment, the faculty which not only stores experience, but also digests it: "Qu'il ne luy demande pas seulement compte des mots de sa leçon, mais du sens et de la substance" (I, 26, 149).

Judgment is the inner part of man and the most important of his faculties. Memory is an adjunct, a factitious exterior; it parrots while judgment assimilates: "Il ne dira pas tant sa leçon, comme il la fera" (I, 26, 167). As Thibaudet has remarked, "contraste entre intérieur et extérieur – contraste entre vivant et mécanique – une idée constante de Montaigne."¹

Montaigne insists on penetrating all surface and artificial appearances. When he looks at a man, when he studies a literary work in order to find the man, not the author, behind the work, he is indulging in his favorite pastime: the search for reality. The true meaning of all beings and things lies within their palpable bounds, and knowledge depends upon the removal of the incrustations. Montaigne thinks in terms of exposing these fabricated extensions of self with which the individual and society surround themselves.

Memory accumulates trash and creates obstacles for judgment. Judgment thrives upon motion and change, and memory stands in its path by being a heavy, clumsy, and unwieldy instrument. Memory is an impediment to the study of man. In conversation, it tends to take the lead to the detriment of judgment. Montaigne has witnessed such occurrences even among his best and most private friends, and Montaigne does not choose his friends carelessly:

à mesure que la memoire leur fournit la chose entiere et presente, ils reculent si arriere leur narration, et la chargent de vaines circonstances, que si le conte est bon, ils en estouffent la bonté; s'il ne l'est pas, vous estes à maudire ou l'heur de leur memoire, ou le malheur de leur jugement (I, 9, 35-36).

Humorously, Montaigne points out one of the activities in which memory must be engaged: "Ce n'est pas sans raison qu'on dit que qui

¹ Albert Thibaudet, *Montaigne*, ed. Floyd Gray (Paris, 1963), p. 444.

ne se sent point assez ferme de memoire, ne se doit pas mesler d'estre menteur" (I, 9, 36). Falsehood and memory need each other; such a suture not only deprecates memory, but also underlines further the exterior aspect, the "falsehood" of memory. Memory is attacked at every turn and often insidiously.

Science tends to assert its supposed superiority and authority over the proper exercise of judgment. Man regiments the search for knowledge. Experts everywhere demand to be believed, and, consequently, science, an imperfect and doubtful instrument at best, is called upon to aid man in his pursuit of that wisdom which should enable him to rise above his condition. As a result, judgment is rendered powerless, and man is perhaps farther from the truth than ever before:

Le dialecticien se rapporte au grammairien de la signification des mots; le rhetoricien emprunte du dialecticien les lieux des arguments; le poëte, du musicien les mesures; le geometrien, de l'arithmeticien les proportions; les metaphysiciens prennent pour fondement les conjectures de la physique. Car chasque science a ses principes presupposez par où le jugement humain est bridé de toutes parts (II, 12, 522).

Since memory and science represent knowledge, judgment, their opposite, must connote the absence of knowledge or, at least, the absence of a certain kind of knowledge. Whenever Montaigne speaks of the faculty of judgment, he implies a sort of general ignorance. One of Montaigne's basic assumptions is that ignorance forms a part of judgment. Judgment cannot function propitiously unless it ignores certain facts:

Je m'aide à perdre ce que je serre particulièrement. . . . Je sçay en general le nom des arts et ce dequoy elles traictent, mais rien au delà. Je feuillette les livres, je ne les estude pas: ce qui m'en demeure, c'est chose que je ne reconnois plus estre d'autrui; c'est cela seulement dequoy mon jugement a faict son profit, les discours et les imaginations dequoy il s'est imbu; l'autheur, le lieu, les mots et autres circonstances, je les oublie incontinent (II, 17, 634-635).

However, to ignore is to neglect something willfully, and ignorance, for Montaigne, is somewhat more generic and automatic. The relationship of judgment and the proper attainment of knowledge is delineated further in the contrast which he draws between the verbs *savoir* and *juger*. When one says "je sais," one speaks of information, of some sort of acquisition. There is a finality about *savoir*. *Juger*, on the other hand, deals with intangibles that are not readily verifiable. There is an openness to *juger*, an awareness of shades and grades, that is based upon the acceptance of the idea that facts are not all and that perhaps behind them there lies a truer and fuller meaning. One approaches and benefits

from experience by means of ignorance, a state of mind untrammelled by dead weight, that is by memory and *science*.

By ignorance, Montaigne may mean the failure to know a specific fact. However, he more often assigns to ignorance the meaning of a permanent condition of the judgment in which things are neither fixed nor dogmatic. In a certain sense, judgment is or should be a blank. It should approach matters as a free agent, as an agent whose capabilities are not hampered by personal interest, prejudices, passions, or *science*. Judgment does not exist in and of itself, as do many of the other faculties. Judgment brings itself into being, creates itself, by utilizing what natural gifts it finds at hand and by anchoring itself in experience. Judgment exists by means of its interaction with phenomena, and it must be able to analyze and interpret lucidly what it encounters. Because it is such a vital faculty for the development and moral progress of the individual, judgment must act from the position of strength which only ignorance can afford it.

Judgment is born of ignorance; ignorance, or *inscience* as Poulet calls it,¹ is the pedestal of judgment. The effective operation of judgment depends upon the interaction of ignorance and experience; ignorance engenders the desire of inquiry while experience controls the event and makes it its own.

Montaigne undertakes the *essai* of life and of himself, secure in the knowledge that judgment will bear fruit, see him through, and enable him to continue his tests or trials. In Montaigne's mind, the primary faculty is judgment; if this faculty did not also imply ignorance, perhaps *s'essayer* would not be as important to him as *se réaliser*. One of judgment's primary functions is to perpetuate the *essai*, and it can do so only through a willingness on the part of man to submit himself to its scrutiny. Judgment can function only if true knowledge is its object, for the pursuit of knowledge fosters the withdrawal of ignorance.

Judgment seeks knowledge, but the former is by far the more important of the two:

La science et la verité peuvent loger chez nous sans jugement, et le jugement y peut aussi estre sans elles (II, 10, 388).

et encore que ces deux pieces soyent necessaires et qu'il faille qu'elles s'y trouvent toutes deux, si est-ce qu'à la verité celle du sçavoir est moins prisable que celle du jugement (I, 25, 139).

Even when Montaigne is somewhat conciliatory where "science" is

¹ Poulet, p. 13.

concerned, an ingrained dislike of "science" is evident in his choice of words: *loger* contrasts with *estre*. Nevertheless, "c'est une bonne drogue que la science; mais nulle drogue n'est assez forte pour se preserver sans alteration et corruption, selon le vice du vase qui l'estuye" (I, 25, 140). "Science" can be good only if it is so incorporated and assimilated by the judgment that it is no longer recognizable as a separate entity. Otherwise, judgment is considerably better off when left to its own devices.

Few people seem to be able to combine successfully judgment and knowledge, as the phrase "les personnes rares et excellentes en jugement et en sçavoir" (I, 25, 132) indicates. In fact, Montaigne thinks that only one person has consistently demonstrated to a high degree the effective amalgamation of both: *Plutarch*, "qui est de tous les auteurs que je cognoisse celuy qui a mieux meslé l'art à la nature et le jugement à la science" (III, 6, 876). No doubt, *art* and particularly *nature* are problematic words when wielded by Montaigne.¹ *Nature* has many acceptations; however, since Montaigne is saying in effect that *science* is to *art* as *judgement* is to *nature*, one can see in these parallels the continuation of the exterior-interior theme. Art and science cover and hide, usually unfortunately, seldom happily, the inner being, both *nature* and *judgement*. Ignorance, an important part of judgment, is intimately connected to *nature*, *naturel*; that which is *ignorant* and *naturel* is simple, ingenuous, unsophisticated, naïve. Hence, because of its ignorance, judgment resembles nature; both are spontaneous, instinctive, and flexible. Montaigne often refers to judgment as "naturel" because judgment is a most precious faculty and "naturel" implies approval: "Quant aux facultez naturelles qui sont en moy, dequoy c'est icy l'essay, je les sens flechir sous la charge. Mes conceptions et mon jugement ne marche qu'à tastons" (I, 26, 145). "Naturel" is that which is best and of the highest good for the individual.² Ignorance, in the positive sense of the term, like nature, is man's watchdog, which points out to him the contours of his "humanness": "L'ignorance qui se sçait, qui se juge et qui se condamne, ce n'est pas une entiere ignorance: pour l'estre, il faut qu'elle s'ignore soy-mesme" (II, 12, 482).

Montaigne distinguishes judgment from information. The individual

¹ Neal Dow, *The Concept and Term "Nature" in Montaigne's Essays* (Philadelphia, 1940), has shown the complexities and pitfalls involved in the study of this concept. Although many critics have dealt with *nature*, sixteenth-century studies still lack an appreciation of the term *art*.

² Dow, p. 63, remarks that "by attaching the word 'natural' to a sensation, a phenomenon, an institution, Montaigne affixes his approval to it."

can obtain particular knowledge through "science" and memory, but the powers of discernment and general knowledge are an inherent part of man: "si l'on m'y force, je suis contraint, assez ineptement, d'en tirer quelque matiere de propos universel, sur quoy j'examine son jugement naturel" (I, 26, 144); the individual's "judgement naturel" need only be exercised for attainment of its full potential.

Memory is a receptacle of theory, whereas judgment is experience, that which has come to life, that which is still alive. For Montaigne, the material experience, not knowledge *per se*, is of the utmost importance. The faculties of the soul, and especially judgment, grow stronger and improve in proportion to the weakening of memory. Judgment, personal inventiveness, and self-reliance are deadened and stunted by memory: "[j'] irois facilement couchant et allanguissant mon esprit et mon jugement sur les traces d'autrui . . . si les inventions et opinions estrangieres m'estoient presentes par le benefice de la memoire" (I, 9, 35). Judgment must be constantly on the alert. When it falters, when it slumbers, as it often does, man falls prey to the baser, irrational, emotional side of his nature, and misery inevitably ensues.

Judgment is man's power of reflection. When one reflects, surveys, judges, one is involved in the process of conception. Hence, judgment or the exercise of judgment creates ideas; these ideas, these personal creations are what Montaigne presents in the *Essais*. Montaigne seeks to penetrate, to unearth everything which comes within his purview, for knowledge is reflection:

Le mediter est un puissant estude et plein, à qui sçait se taster et employer vigoureusement: j'aime mieux forger mon ame que la meubler. Il n'est point d'occupation ny plus foible, ny plus forte, que celle d'entretenir ses pensées selon l'ame que c'est. Les plus grandes en font leur vacation. . . . Aussi l'a nature favorisée de ce privilege qu'il n'y a rien que nous puissions faire si long temps, ny action à la quelle nous nous addonnons plus ordinairement et facilement . . . La lecture me sert specialement à esveiller par divers objects mon discours, à embesongner mon jugement, non ma memoire (III, 3, 797).

The opposition of judgment and memory recurs throughout the *Essais*. Montaigne is proud of his faculty of judgment, and he seldom feels that he suffers from a lack of it: the phrase "ce peu de jugement que j'ay"¹ contains an unusual admission, which is readily explained by the nature of its context. On the other hand, he constantly berates memory, and he is wont to point out, whenever he can, that little or no

¹ In Montaigne's "Advertissement au lecteur" written in 1570 for the publication of La Boétie's translation of *La Mesnagerie de Xénophon*. The entire "Advertissement au lecteur" is reproduced in the Thibaudet-Rat edition, p. 1719.

psychological and moral identity. The operation of judgment in general has already been noted.¹ The purpose of this section is to study the operation of judgment in its analysis and construction of personality and to examine some of the things Montaigne reveals about himself in relation to judgment. Montaigne judges and reflects the collective body of men and in turn he is judged by them and reflected in them.

In the study of self, the function of the faculty of judgment is to record (*enrôler*) the result of its probes of the psyche. *Enrôler* implies the existence of a *rôle* or the formation of a *rôle* upon which new information can be inscribed. Moreover, the result is dependent upon an active and incessant engagement of judgment. The faculty of judgment can no longer disengage itself at will, for it is both the object and the instrument of scrutiny. In a review article on Hugo Friedrich's *Montaigne* (Bern, 1949), M. De Man speaks of Montaigne's inability to completely transcend himself in his quest for self. Although Montaigne transcends himself in order to study himself, thereby creating a duality of being, Montaigne-observed constantly obstructs the view of Montaigne the observer: "Le premier demeure objet pour la réflexion du second; il impose sa loi à cette réflexion, jusque dans ses moindres détails; il lui enlève toute force de constance et de vérité absolue, mais non pas son caractère réfléchissant." ²

As has been noted,³ the solid and heavy psychological, physical, and emotional mass which constitutes man impedes the reflective analysis of judgment. Yet whatever the outcome, the "moi" of being must be discovered by the "je" ("nous sommes, je ne sçay comment, doubles en nous memes," II, 16, 603) before it can be studied and formulated. Self-discovery precedes self-study. Self-study leads to "connaissance de soi"; however, *savoir*, in the sense of possession, of experience of self, antedates the notion of *connaître*, and hence of *juger*. But, *juger*, in terms of self-knowledge, precedes *connaître*. Hence, *juger* and *savoir* are more closely connected than one might first expect.

There is a very important physical dimension to the reflective character of self-discovery. In discussing his study of self, Montaigne customarily speaks in physical terms. The concrete notion to which he most frequently returns is that of touch. Montaigne reaches out or rather within and literally touches his being, fashioning it, as a sculptor

¹ Chapter I, pp. 31-41.

² Paul De Man, "Montaigne et la transcendance," *Critique*, IX (1953), 1017.

³ Chapter II, "The Emotional Nature of Man," pp. 54-61 and "Deficiency: A Practical Guide," pp. 62-67.

molds clay. Montaigne accepts the material aspect of being, for he senses that he grasps his "moi" sensorially.

It is interesting to note that the etymology of *savoir* is Classical Latin *sapere*, that is "avoir de la saveur."¹ One experiences and knows (*savoir*) oneself by judging oneself, that is by taking oneself in, by breathing oneself in, for one's inner being releases savors that are felt, smelled, and even tasted.

The faculty of judgment explores and essays (*se tâter*) the "moi." The idea of *goûter* frequently associated with the verb *tâter* in Old French is usually maintained by Montaigne.² Indeed, Montaigne is often highly explicit in his contention that he savors and tastes slowly, with attention and pleasure, every facet of his being as it unfolds gratuitously before his judgment or emerges because of its active inquisition:

Le monde regarde tousjours vis à vis; moy, je replie ma veuë au dedans, je la plante, je l'amuse là. Chacun regarde devant soy; moy, je regarde dedans moy: je n'ay affaire qu'à moy, je me considere sans cesse, je me contrerolle, je me gouste. Les autres vont tousjours ailleurs, s'ils y pensent bien; ils vont tousjours avanf . . . moy je me roule en moy mesme (II, 17, 641).

Montaigne's reflections in "De l'exercitation" upon his mounting awareness of himself, as he slowly recovers from unconsciousness after his fall from a horse, constitute an outstanding example of self-discovery. In a very detached manner, Montaigne thrills to the vibration of his existence; he feels himself physically and figuratively, and his reactions are his indices. His solitary conscious examination of himself, of his mind and of his body in their relationship with one another, demonstrates the physical exposure of his consciousness or "conscience de soi." Lalande describes it as an "intuition (plus ou moins complète, plus ou moins claire) qu'a l'esprit de ses états et de ses actes."³ Littré defines it as the "sentiment de soi-même ou mode de la sensibilité générale qui nous permet de juger de notre existence: c'est ce que les métaphysiciens nomment la conscience du moi."⁴

Montaigne used to concern himself with literary and psychological facts which he found outside of himself. As he studied and analyzed these facts, he attached to them or rather detached from them some of his personality; exterior manifestations elicited his thought. As an

¹ Bloch and von Wartburg, p. 568.

² *Ibid.*, p. 618: Thibaudet and Rat, ed. *Œuvres complètes de Montaigne*, p. 1768.

³ André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie* (Paris, 1960), p. 173.

⁴ Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris, 1882), I, 744-745.

to assume that for Montaigne and his contemporaries there exists an underlying antithesis between understanding and reason.¹ While both faculties share equally in the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge, *entendement* is a form of direct knowledge or intuition as opposed to reason, the faculty which enables one to know discursively. For Montaigne, *entendement* always means intelligence² or intellect and particularly the sound and masterly use of intellect. In "De l'inconstance de nos actions," Montaigne remarks that "ce n'est pas tour de rassis entendement de nous juger simplement par nos actions de dehors" (II, 1, 321). Montaigne implies that it is unintelligent and unwise to judge a book by its cover; to abandon the interior for the surface is the accomplishment of a poor intellect.

Throughout the *Essais*, Montaigne repeatedly uses the term *entendement* as a qualifying epithet. Whenever he wants to bestow praise or show his admiration for a man's thought and deeds, he speaks of an "homme d'entendement," of a "seigneur de bon entendement," or of "gens d'entendement." For Montaigne, the appellation "homme d'entendement" describes the highest quality that can be attributed to a man. Because of his utilization of the term in these constructions, *entendement* is as much a quality as it is a faculty. It is no longer basic intelligence, but rather applied intelligence which is employed and channelled in a manner which appeals to Montaigne. As a quality, *entendement* is usually interchangeable with *jugement*, the cultivated ability of discerning the truth or falsehood of new appearances. However, the moral aspect frequently associated with *jugement* is not always an intrinsic part of *entendement*, as the treatment of conscience will tend to demonstrate.

Montaigne seldom attaches pejorative signification to *entendement*; there are no more than a dozen such occurrences. His sarcasm and irony toward *entendement* never attain the withering effectiveness which is unleashed on *raison*, *discours*, and frequently *jugement*. When *entendement* appears by itself as a faculty and when it is used as a qualifier, Montaigne's intent is a benevolent one; the faculty of *entendement* should be a highly esteemed possession. It is only when he adds *humain*,

Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, published 20 years later in 1694, is frequently referred to as a substantially accurate compendium of late sixteenth-century terminology.

¹ A distinction between the understanding as *ratio* and the understanding as *intellectus* is drawn by the Middle Ages. See Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York, 1952), pp. 11-12 and Henri Vernay, *Les Divers Sens du mot raison autour de l'œuvre de Marguerite d'Angoulême Reine de Navarre (1492-1549)* (Heidelberg), 1962, p. 93.


² Villey in *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Fortunat Strowski et al. (Bordeaux, 1906-1933), V, 251.

75: faulle

76: fe me goue h

113: ra tio - intellectus

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