

“TO PRESERVE AND TO CONTINUE”
REMARKS ON MONTAIGNE’S
CONSERVATISM

“I had no care but to preserve and continue, which are deafe and insensible effects. Innovation is of great lustre: But interdicted in times when we are most urged, and have to defend ourselves but from novelties.”¹

This is how Montaigne explains the principles which he followed in his role as mayor, a statement whose very expression casts all the light needed on the nature of what has been called Montaigne’s *conservatism*. In Montaigne’s political language, to *conserve* is defined by its opposition to *innovate*. *Conservation* receives its lexical “value” from its contrasting relation with *innovation* and with “novelties.” This semantic pair, common in sixteenth-century French and in most European languages, is profoundly different from the present system. In today’s language, the concept of *conservatism* (itself of recent formation) is defined principally in terms of the notion of *progress* or (because of the

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symmetry of the suffixes) of progressionism, in the sense which it had taken on during the 18th century, but the antonym *innovation* has not ceased contributing to the "value" of *conservation*. Today's semantic system cannot avoid attributing to "conservatism" an essentially antithetic function in reference to historic "progress," or to theories of progress in which innovation is generally seen in a favorable light.

A *modern* interpretation of Montaigne and his era certainly has the right to attempt to determine, at its own risk and peril, what, at the end of the 16th century, was the "path of progress," the "factors" of progress, etc. But it does not have the right to judge the men of this period as if they were consciously determined by an idea which did not yet belong to their intellectual repertory. In this case it would not only be an anachronism, an offense against the basic rules of historical method, but it would above all be an incorrect interpretation with no reference to what it supposedly explained. To regret that Montaigne proclaimed his attachment to a notion which is contrary to that of progress (even if only by calling it, like Horkheimer, "active humanism") is a paralogism or a pious wish which is easy to formulate at a distance of four centuries, from the height of the full consciousness which the modern intellectual has gained from the conviction that he knows the "dialectic of history." Curiously specialists in History are often the first to forget that the modern notion of history as the *collective* becoming of peoples or of humanity was formed in the 18th century at the same time as the modern idea of progress and, so to speak, as a complement to it. Montaigne was aware neither of History nor of progress: they had not yet been *invented*. When he uses *history* in the singular, it is either to designate the study of the past ("the learning of History"), or in reference to *a* history relative to a particular individual (an example of this can be seen in the title, of Essay II, xxxiii, "The History of Spurina"). Otherwise he speaks of *histories*, in the plural, which by definition exclude the idea of a unique and providential meaning which would organise all past events and whose later development would be entrusted to the present generation. The past offered Montaigne the spectacle of diversity, of difference; in comparison we seem different, exposed to a perilous newness, but in no way superior, in no way better or more knowing. Moreover, our knowledge

of the past is incomplete and lacunose; books and documents have retained only hints of what happened.

Even in those vanities, wee may plainly perceive how fertile and happy those former ages were of other manner of wittes, then ours are. It hapneth of this kinde of fertilitie as of all other productions if nature. Wee may not say what nature employed then the utmost of hir power. We goe not, but rather creepe and stagger here and there: we goe our pace. I imagine our knowledge to bee weake in all senses: *wee neither discerne far-forward, nor see much back-ward.* It embraceth little, and liveth not long: It is short both in extension of time, and in amplenesse of matter... If whatsoever hath come unto us by report of what is past were true, and knowne of any body, it would be lesse then nothing, in respect of that which is unknowne. And even of this image of the world, which whilest we live therein, glideth and passeth away, how wretched, weake and how short is the knowledge of the most curious? Not onely of the particular events, which fortune often maketh exemplar and of consequence: but of the state of mighty common-wealths, large Monarkies and renowned nations, there escapeth our knowledge a hundred times more, then commeth unto our notice.²

What we call human history is, for Montaigne, a collection of “particular events” or vicissitudes which cause, with much “staggering,” the coming to be of those collective bodies called “commonwealths and nations.” However, their existence and their changes take place within the *world* and are subject to laws of nature and of fortune. The empires and kingdoms, which history describes to us, are a part of the greater world whose causes the savants seek in vain to discover, and whose “changes” and “movements” form human destiny. Our ignorance of the totality of historic events is similar to our ignorance of the totality of physical reality. A similar kind of ignorance enveloped the courageous heroes who lived before Agamemnon and the unknown lands where presently flourish civilisations, religions and political organisations—splendid or frugal—about which we have not the slightest idea, no more than we can imagine creatures which nature has produced elsewhere. The infinite diversity of human events is but one aspect of the infinite diversity of natural production whose richness escapes us.

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But nature, in its fertile ubiquity, remains the same throughout its metamorphoses. Montaigne often speaks of the *ordinary progress* of nature, by which he means both that power which, from generation to generation, guides beings from birth to maturity and then on to decrepitude and destruction, and the variable influence exercised on individuals by places and "ages". The subordination of events and behaviors to natural causes which vary throughout the centuries places historians and philosophers alike in an identical position. If we re-read the page of the *Apo-logia* in which Montaigne implicitly develops a complete theory of the physical determinism (celestial, climatic) of history, we can see the conclusions which he at once drew: what we say and what we think we know has no more validity than what men in other places and other ages said and thought.

If Nature enclose within the limits of her ordinary progresse, as all other things, so the beliefes, the judgements and the opinions of men; if they have their revolutions, their seasons, their birth, and their death, even as Cabiches: If heaven doth move, agitate and rowle them at his pleasure, what powerfull and permanent authority doe we ascribe unto them? If by uncontroled experience we palpably touch, that the forme of our being depends of the aire, of the climate, and of the soile, wherin we are borne, and not onely the hew, the stature, the complexion and the countenance, but also the soules faculties... In such manner that as fruits and beasts doe spring up diverse and different: so men are borne, either more or lesse warlike, martiall, just, temperate and docile: here subject to wine, there to theft, and whoredome; here inclined to superstition, addicted to mis-believing, here given to liberty, there to ser-vitude; capable of some one art or science; grosswitted or ingenious: either obedient or rebellious; good or bad, accord-ing as the inclination of the place beareth, where they are seated; and being removed from one soile to another (as plants are)... If sometime wee see one art to flourish, or a believe, and sometimes another by some heavenly influence; some ages to produce this or that nature, and so to encline mankind to this or that biase: mens spirits one while flourishing, another while barren, even as fields are scene to be; what become of all those goodly prerogatives, wherewith we still flatter our selves? *Since a wise man may mistake himselfe*; yea many men, and whole nations: and as wee say, mans nature either in

one thing or other, hath for many ages together mistaken her selfe. What assurance have we that at any time she leaveth her mistaking, and that she continueth not even at this day, in her error?³

The vegetable and animal similes which punctuate this passage (“even as Cabiches,” “as fruits and beasts,” “as plants are,” “even as fields”) show to what degree the “progresse of Nature” as conceived by Montaigne differs from “historical progress” as understood in modern thought. The result is that, apart from the evident productive power of nature, no “opinion” can claim to have *authoritative* value (and in the page we just read, Christianity is not explicitly exempted from natural causality). The result is also that for Montaigne, as for a great many Renaissance thinkers, the course of history is swept up in the movement of the cosmos and remains dependent on the path of the stars, and there is no possibility of submitting it to calculation or foretelling as astrologists boast. We can only note the development and the decline of empires and “beliefes” just as we note that trees and fruits prosper or decline according to the years and “climates.” The question of history for Montaigne leads to the observation of the dependent and limited existence of individuals or of *historical* collectivities, an observation whose corollaries are that historical knowledge is shortsighted, fragmented and irremediably lacunose; and that the human will which attempts to divert the course of things is doomed to fail. How do we know, first of all, which turn of events is desirable?

Me thinkes amongst other testimonies of our imbecilities, this one ought not to be forgotten, that by wishing it selfe, man cannot yet finde out what he wanteth; that not by enjoying or possession, but by imagination and full wishing, we cannot all agree in one, that we most stand in need of, and would best content us... And the publike and private prayer of the Lacedemonians, did meerely implie, that good and faire things might be granted them, remitting the election and choise of them to the discretion of the highest power... And the Christian beseecheth God, that his will may be done, least he should fall into that inconvenience, which Poets faine of King Midas...⁴

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As we see, Montaigne's *fideism* extends not only to the object of belief, but also to the object of desire and of the will, i.e. to those ends proposed by human action. Man has no control over his own destiny, and when he obtains what he desires, he discovers, like Midas, that he is "overwhelmed in the injoying of his desire, and... enrich't with an intolerable commoditie."⁵ The innovation which men think best corresponds to their need is similar to the desire of Midas. It is better to leave the initiative to God.

We can understand, then, that in order to develop arguments for his conservatism, Montaigne almost always uses traditional organic metaphors which compare States to great living bodies, troubled eras to diseases and political reforms or decisions to therapeutic measures. This metaphorical framework allows him to characterise without any illusion the situation which prevailed before the wars of religion. Evil was already in place.

The infirmities and conditions of our bodies, are likewise seene in states and governments: *Kingdomes and Commonwealthes as well as we, are borne, flourish, and fade through age.* We are subject unto a repleatnesse of humours, hurtfull and unprofitable...⁶

And that the health whence we felt was such, that her selfe solaceth the regret we should have for her. It was health, mary but in comparison of the contagion, which hath followed the same. Wee are not falen very high. The corruption and the brigandage, which now is in office and dignity, seems to me the least tolerable. Wee are lesse injuriously robbed in the midst of a wood, then a place of security. It was an universall coherency of membres spoiled avie one another; and most of them, with old-ranked ulcers, which neither admitted nor demanded recovery.⁷

Ruin and destruction would inevitably prevail if diseases, themselves conceived of as natural beings, were not limited in time and doomed to die.

Evils have their life, their limits: their diseases and their health. The constitution of diseases is framed by the patterne of the constitution of living creatures. They have their fortune limited even at their birth, and their dayes allotted them. He that shall imperiously goe about, or by compulsion (contrary

to their courses) to abridge them, doth lengthen and multiply them; and instead of appeasing, doth harsell and wring them.⁸

It is better then to allow disease to evolve toward its natural end which corresponds to deliverance and healing of the suffering individual. Medicine is wrong not to recognise this tested fact when it insists upon administering inappropriate remedies. For in bodily ills, most remedies are worse than the disease. And it is the same for ailments afflicting societies, particularly when the remedy implies the use of violence or the sacrifice of fundamental rules of morality.

But, is there any malady in a Common-weale, that deserveth to be combated by so mortall drugges? No saide *Favonius*, not so much as the usurpation of the tyranicall possession of a Common-wealth. *Plato* likewise is not willing one should offer violence to the quiet repose of his Countrey, no not to reforme or cure the same; and alloweth not that reformation, which disturbeth or hazardeth the whole estate; and which is purchased with the blood and ruine of the Citizens. Establishing the office of an honest man, in these causes, to leave all there: But onely to pray God, to lend his extraordinary assisting hand unto it. ... Oh what impiety is it, to expect from God no succour simply his, and without our cooperation. I often doubt, whether amongst so many men, that meddle with such a matter, any hath beene found of so weake an understanding, that hath earnestly beene perswaded, he proceeded toward reformation, by the utmost of deformations; that he drew toward his salvation, by the most expresse causes, that we have of undoubted damnation.⁹

We know that Montaigne frequently declared himself in favor of the *status quo* because a present and stabilised evil was still the lesser evil in light of the general movement of corruption. The future, in his eyes, can only bring devastation.

Our manners are exceedingly corrupted, and with a marvelous inclination bend toward worse and worse; Of our lawes and customes many are barbarous, and divers monstrous; notwithstanding, by reason of the difficultie to reduce us to better estate, and of the danger of this subversion, if I could fixe a pegge into our wheele, and stay it where it now is, I would willingly doe it. ... Instabilitie is the worst I find in our state,

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and that our lawes, no more then our garments, can take no settled forme. *It is an easie matter to accuse a state of imperfection, since all mortall things are full of it.* As easie is it to beget in a people a contempt of his ancient obseruances: No man ever undertooke it, but came to an end: But to establish a better state in place of that which is condemned and rased out, diuers who have attempted it, have shronk under the burthen. Touching my conduct, my wisdom hath small share therein. I am very easily to be directed by the world publike order. Oh happy people, that doth what is commanded, better than they which command, without vexing themselves about causes; which suffer themselves gently to be rowled on, according to the heaven rowling. Obedience is never pure and quiet in him, who talketh, pleadeth and contendeth.¹⁰

Two spatial images (which perhaps are only one) here define the course of human affairs: *inclination* (“toward worse and worse”) and the circular movement of the *wheel*, “rowling.” However, on the one hand Montaigne would like to halt the catastrophic development of corruption and abolish time for fear of imminent disaster; and on the other, since this desire is manifestly impossible, he settles for obedience (“I am very easily to be directed”) which, through submission to “They which command,” consents to the great revolutions of the heavenly bodies and the great cosmic cycles. Let time stop! Or one should “suffer oneself gently to be rowled on, according to the heaven’s rowling,” in a sort of human cycle repeating on our scale the cycle of the stars. These are the two ways of opting for the pure *present*—one in paradoxical immobilising of the circular movement which carries with it all worlds, the other in the mobility of an infinite series of instants. To continue is to perpetuate the present.

Here a critic would not lack arguments if he were to claim to demask Montaigne and to point out the “ideological” nature of his discourse. But in fact Montaigne hides nothing. He openly favors submission to “They which command,” not because “the world’s publike order” is harmonious, but because it includes, in earthly affairs at least, an inevitable share of disorder which we are unable to remedy simply by engaging in a solitary rebellion. Montaigne’s skepticism, by casting doubt on the hierarchical model of a geocentric cosmos and a circular, closed

world, does not allow him to seek in the image of the world a justification for social hierarchy and necessary relations of obedience (as Ulysses does in a famous tirade of the first act of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*). Resigned submission, for Montaigne, can also be considered as the consequence of and the counterpart to the merciless analysis of the mechanisms of tyranny which La Boétie proposed in *Contr' Un*. An imperfect monarchy is better than a perfect tyranny. For Montaigne has no illusions in this respect. Submission is preferable only because it recognises a *present* authority; and no other source of authority, past or future, can have greater control over his mind. Those who disrupt the State in the name of religious *reformation* and changes in mores fall back completely on Scripture, i.e. a revelation given to man fifteen centuries earlier and since that time obscured by a series of abuses and usurpations, such as papal primacy, which, it seems to them, must be denounced as so many "novelties." The healing which they propose consists in rediscovering in its purity an *anterior* authority whose validity for them remains total, and from which the world should not have turned away over the ages. Even when Montaigne declares that he is ready to bow before revelation, he still cannot help remarking that this revelation only becomes commandment and rule of life through an *interpretation* which actualises it,¹¹ and that all the weakness and all the arbitrary qualities of the human spirit have been given free reign here. And so at best the Christian faith can be respected for the custom which it has become, for lack of any better certitude. For it is not possible to return to its original expression; even less credible are the personal "fantasies" of those who claim to have understood the original evangelical message better than has the tradition of the Church.

As for the terrestrial future, no one at the time of Montaigne proposed other motives for action than those presented in the essay "How One Ought to Govern His Will" (III, x): *avarice*, that is the desire to acquire, to enrich oneself, to increase one's goods and one's territory; and *ambition*, that is the desire to impose one's name—one's race and fame—on future generations. In no case, as we have seen, does a lasting improvement in the lot of man appear as an appeal which, coming from the future and nourished by hope, would guide and justify present action.

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The wars of religion certainly had their political features: at stake was the distribution of power and the share in it claimed by the pope, the king, the religious orders, the princes, the nobles and individual consciences. But the change in human institutions was motivated only by the need for organising the earthly city in such a way as to permit men better to pursue their *eternal* salvation. Even Utopiae, in this period, were not talked of in the future. They imagined the ways and customs of a separate world, apart from our own, and frequently even temporarily set back from our own. The standard formula in courtly poetry for describing a marriage or a birth is to announce the return of the golden age. Montaigne is hardly inclined to this dream. He speaks, of course, of American societies, after descriptions which he had read of these, painting them in the idyllic colors of the golden age (in "Of the Cannibales") or in tones of extraordinary sumptuousness (in "Of Coaches"). But these are "children's worlds" whose attraction can only be one of nostalgia; they are presented to us behind and, as it were, laterally, to our present. Moreover, these are worlds which the barbarism of the European conquerors has already made disappear.

Since men have no control over their future (which is decided by the heavenly bodies in their "rowing"), no authority can base itself on the image of a better "commonwealth," of a politico-social order which *will be* and demand that our actions be subject to it. Montaigne's expressed reserve to the "Bad Meanes Employed to a Good End" (title of Essay II, xxiii), or to the injustices committed in the name of the state (III, i) shows how little disposed he is to pay heed to an immediate ethical need in the name of a collective benefit yet to come. The future is accessible neither to our knowledge nor to our will. God, or fate, controls it. Except for the Last Judgment where the acts and feelings of our every second will be weighed (and we must say that Montaigne is hardly concerned by this prospect), or the renown which will remain attached to the memories of a few exceptional men (among whom Montaigne does not include himself), it is perfectly ridiculous for us to look into the distant future. Our "everyday" actions merit only to be forgotten.

Ambition is no vice for petty companions, and for such endeavours as ours. ... *Alexander* ... would not have enjoyed the

worlds Empire securely and quietly. ... This infirmity is happily excusable, in so strong and full a minde. When these petty wretched soules, are therewith enveagled; and thinke to publish their fame, because they have judged a cause rightly, or continued the order in guarding of a Citie's gates; by how much more they hoped to raise their head, so much more doe they shew their simplicity. This petty well-doing, hath neither body nor life. It vanisheth in the first moneth; and walkes but from one corner of a street to another. ... Fame doth not so basely prostitute it selfe, nor so cheape. Rare and exemplar actions, to which it duly belongeth, could not brooke the company of this innumerable multitude of vulgar petty actions. *Well may a piece of marble raise your titles as high as you list, because you have repaired a piece of an olde Wall or cleansed a common ditch, but men of judgement wil never doe it.*¹³

Actions of little influence and whose echo will be but brief. When Montaigne examines man's actions, he begins by noting the futility of the *causes* which serve as pretext to action. A paragraph in the already-cited essay ("How One Ought to Govern His Will," III, x) lists examples or ridiculous motives which determine and cause great events. Charles the Bold risked ruin "for the quarrell of a cart-load of sheepskinnes."¹⁴ The medal struck by Sulla of Rome was "the chiefe cause of the most horrible breach and topsie-turvy, that ever this world's-frame endured."¹⁵

And I have seene in my time, the wisest heads of this realme assembled with great ceremony and publike charge, about treaties and agreements, the true deciding whereof depended in the meane while absolutely and soveraignely of the will and consultations held in some Ladies pate or cabinet; and of the inclination of some silly woman. Poets have most judiciously look't into this, who but for an apple have set all *Greece* and *Asia* on fire and sword. See why that man doth hazzard both his honour and life on the fortune of his rapier and dagger; let him tell you whence the cause of that contention ariseth; he can not without blushing: so vaine and so frivolous is the occasion.¹⁶

Remarkable events have not been lacking in the course of time. Empires have crumbled, entire peoples have been annihilated.

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But were these events desired in the manner in which they occurred? Did they follow a precise outline which can be attributed to a few extraordinary persons? Naturally there were Alexander the Great and Caesar. But recent experience teaches Montaigne that considerable "effects" were produced by frivolous whims and petty rages. No one, apparently, has seen occur what he had expressly desired and foreseen. For the action we undertake risks escaping us during its execution. This is stressed in the rest of the passage we are reading, which recommends abstention for lack of exceptional resources.

To embarke him, there needes but little advisement, but being once-in all parts doe worke; Then are greater provisions required, more difficult and important. How farre more easie is it not to enter, than to get forth?¹⁷

Once more Montaigne has recourse to a vegetable comparison which he uses to describe the rhythm of the action: ardently begun, it is not long in slowing down.

We must proceed contrary to the brier, which produceth a long and straight stalke at the first springing; but after, as tired and out of breath, it makes many and thicke knots, as if they were pawses, shewing to have no more that vigor and constancy. Wee should rather begin gently and leasurely; and keepe our strength and breath for the perfection of the worke. We direct affaires in the beginning, and hold them at our mercy, but being once undertaken, they guide and transport us, and we must follow them. ... I finde some, that inconsiderately and furiously thrust themselves into the lists, and grow slacke in the course. ... He that enters lightly into a quarrel, is subject to leave it as lightly. The same difficulty which keepes me from embracing the same, should encite me, being once mooved and therein engaged, to continue resolute. It is an ill custome. Being once embarked, one must either goe on or sinke. ... *Attempt coldly* (sayed Byas) *but pursue hotly*.¹⁸

Clear-sighted perseverance is rare. In a basic antithesis, Montaigne sees action ("We direct affaires") turn into passivity ("they guide and transport us"). But he foresees a favorable exception, ruled by another antithesis: to engage oneself *coldly* in affairs in such a way as to retain sufficient energy, that is

beat, to bring them to their term. The precious vital warmth must not be wasted. A discipline of action is thus not unthinkable, and it would be false to believe that skeptical ignorance and lack of curiosity had inaction as their obligatory corollary. In his very nonchalance Montaigne is too moved by a feeling of responsibility to resign himself to remaining inactive. In his office of mayor, he tells us that he renounced ostentatious actions, but not those which seemed to him necessary.

I was prepared to labour somewhat more earnestly, if there had beene great neede. For it lyes in my power, to doe something more than I make shew-of, and than I love to doe. To my knowledge, I have not omitted any motion that duty required earnestly at my hands.¹⁹

Except that Montaigne declares himself unfit for long-term undertakings. If he begins something, it is always in view of a hasty conclusion.

I have a most nimble motion, where my will doth carry me. But this point is an enemy unto perseverance. Whosoever will make use of me, according to my selfe, let him employ me in affaires, that require vigor and liberty: that have a short, a straight, and there withall a hazardous course: I may peradventure somewhat prevaile therein. Whereas if it be tedious, crafty, laborious, artificiall and intricate, they shall doe better to addresse themselves to some other man.²⁰

He is thus not at all against action, despite his “naturall slacknesse,” as long as it does not involve lengthy calculations and operations. He becomes involved “with difficulty,” but he does get involved under certain conditions. Montaigne is everywhere pleased to take into account only the *immediate future*.²¹ And if he so often cites his age, his disease, his death which will not be long in coming, it is perhaps because he finds in this the appropriate justification of his preference for the temporal category of the present and for activities which do not oblige him to go beyond it. For here we may adopt two opposing propositions simultaneously. Montaigne cites his approaching death because he has opted for the present. Montaigne opts for present possessions because the little time left for him to live obliges him to make do with present experience.

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I am no more upon termes of any great alteration nor to thruste my selfe into a new and un-usuall course, no not toward augmentation. ... I who am ready to depart this World, could easily be induced, to resigne the share of wisdome I have learn't concerning the Worlds commerce, to any other man new-come into the world. *It is even as good as Mustard after dinner. What neede have I of that good, which I cannot enjoy? ... The end findes it selfe in the finishing of every worke.* My world is at an end, my forme is expired. I am wholly of the time past. And am bound to authorize the same, and thereto conforme my issue. ... Time forsakes me; without which nothing is enjoyed. ... To conclude, I am ready to finish this man, not to make another.²²

He who has only a narrow future before him is all the more easily resigned to this if he feels he is in harmony with the destiny of his country. Collective existence too has only a short future ahead of it.

He that (as I doe) shall wish his countries well-fare, without fretting or pining himselfe, shall be grieved, but not swoune, to see it threatning, either his owne downfall, or a continuance no lesse ruinous. Oh seely-weake barke, whom both waves, windes and Pilot, hull and tosse to so contrary desseignes...²³

And if public action can enjoy only a limited influence, then what of the book to which Montaigne is giving a form, in which he is inscribing his "fantasies," his changes. Does he assign this a better fate? Will it have a different future, more solid than that of institutions? Certainly it will survive its author. But for how long? Here again (and no doubt with a touch of pride in his humility); Montaigne counts only on a short future. Moreover, he knows that the French language is undergoing a total transformation.

I write my booke to few men, and to few yeares. Had it beene a matter of lasting continuance, it should have beene compiled in a better and more polished language: According to the continuall variation, that hitherto hath followed our French tongue, who may hope, that its present forme shall be in use fifty yeares hence? It dayly changeth and slips our hands: and since I could speake the same, it is much alfred and wellnigh halfe varied.²⁴

In the realm of political action, the narrow temporal margin which we have coincides ultimately with the circumscribed space which moral wisdom forbids us to overstep. Complete inaction is incompatible with the very project of "him who liveth to himself."²⁵ For "to engage and vehemently insinuate themselves,"²⁶ as do the heroes of antiquity who "opinionate themselves resolutely to behold, and without perturbation to be spectators of their Countries ruine, which wilome possessed and commaunded their full will": such is no longer possible in the contemporary world. "As for our vulgar mindes, therein is too much effort and roughnesse."²⁷

There remains, as we have seen several times, the action which returns to the subject of the action, the action where the subject leaves himself in order to find himself. And Montaigne, to make this clear to us, uses the image of a reflection, bending it so that it coincides with that of circularity.

The carriere of our desires must be circumscribed, and tied to strict bounds of neerest and contiguous commodities. Moreover, their course should be managed, not in a straight line, having another end, but round, whose two points hold together, and end in our selves with a short compasse. The actions governed without this reflection, I meane a neere and essentiall reflection, as those of the covetous, of the ambitious and so many others, that runne directly point-blانcke, the course of which carrieth them away before them, are erroneous and crazed actions.²⁸

Alongside the circular movement which consists in allowing oneself to be rolled by the "heavens rowling," there is also a voluntary circular movement of limited radius which limits itself to a "short compasse" and which in no way aims at changing the world. It is tempting to see in the circle of reflected action, in accordance with the Renaissance spirit, an imitation on the human scale of movement which animates "the heavens," a tiny perfect revolution which corresponds in this lower world to that which causes the spheres of the macrocosm to turn. Nevertheless, we must not insist too much on this relation, even if occasionally Montaigne places the harmony of the world alongside that which should control our existences. If there is a resemblance between the world and man, it is in their common diversity, in

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concordia discors, and not in the regularity of movements.

Montaigne accuses science of having created identical fictions for describing the world and for explaining the human body. The objective correspondence can be reduced to a similarity in interpretative schemes, everywhere subject to caution. The "short compasse" of the reflection has nothing in common with the circles traced by our knowledge in the heavens or in our body.

Learning... in lieu of currant payment and presupposition, delivereth us those things, which she her selfe teacheth us to be meere inventions: For, these *Epicycles*, *Excentriques*, and *Concentriques*, which Astrology useth to direct the state and motions of her Starres, she giveth them unto us, as the best she could ever invent, to fit and sute unto this subject. ... It is not to heaven alone, that she sendeth her cordages, her engines, and her wheeles: Let us but somewhat consider, what she saith of our selves, and of our contexture. There is no more retrogradation, trepidation, augmentation, recoylng, and violence in the Starres and celestiall bodies, than they have fained and devised in this poore seely little body of man. Verily they have thence had reason to name it, *Microcosmos*, or little world, so many severall parts and visages have they imploied to fashion and frame the same.²⁹

We know nothing of the world, except that nature and fate rule completely, bringing into it the infinite out of the possible, beyond our control. The circularity of human reflection is not *guaranteed* by the rotation of orbiting planets. It results, to the contrary, from this lack of guarantee. Man with his sensations, his needs, his consciousness, knows only that he is part of nature, but that at any moment, particularly when he runs "point-blancke," "forward," "in a straight line," then he runs the risk of being unfaithful to nature and of paying for this infidelity with his unhappiness. And the recollection of this is what historians must preserve.

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NOTES

References to Montaigne are, first of all, to the translation by John Florio, *The Essayes of Montaigne*, published by the Modern Library, New York. The second part of these references, denoted by a "TR", refers to the original French text, *Les Oeuvres complètes de Montaigne*, edited by Thibaudet-Rat and published in 1962 by La Pléiade (Gallimard).

¹ III, x, p. 927; TR, p. 1001.

² III, vi, pp. 819, 820; TR, pp. 885-6.

³ II, xii, 519-20; TR, p. 559. This "theory of the climates," which can be traced back to Hippocrates (*Concerning Water and Places*), also includes the idea of the influence of the planets and heavenly bodies on changing opinions (read religions). For a discussion of astral determinism of religious eras, cf. F. Boll, C. Bezold, W. Gundel, *Sternglaube und Sterndeutung* (1931), repr. Darmstadt, 1961, p. 200-205. This notion could not but awaken the suspicions of the Church.

⁴ II, xii, p. 520-1; TR, p. 560.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ II, xxiii, pp. 614-15; TR, pp. 662-3.

⁷ III, xii, p. 947; TR, pp. 1023-24.

⁸ III, xiii, pp. 985-6; TR, p. 1066.

⁹ III, xii, pp. 943-5; TR, pp. 1019-20.

¹⁰ II, xvii, p. 594; TR, pp. 639-40. For a history of the concept of decline, the best treatment can be found in the series of studies published by Reinhart Koselleck and Paul Widmer, *Niedergang: Studien zu einem geschichtlichen Thema*. Klett-Cotta, 1980.

¹¹ See particularly his criticism of interpretation at the beginning of Essay III, xiii, "Of Experience."

¹² The close association, on a verbal plane, of *avarice* and *ambition* is extremely frequent in Montaigne. Of the passions, these are the ones whose evil consists, more than for all the other vices, in removing us from ourselves, making us "think elsewhere," misleading us with their deceitful promise of future benefits. Whatever might be gained can never make up for the loss of self-presence. Even on a material level, Montaigne still belongs to an age where agricultural revenues are paid annually, and where commercial exchanges are made only on a short-term basis. Although he wisely was able to increase his land holdings, we rarely hear him mention, let alone approve of, long-term investments or work which will bear fruit only in the distant future. This is not simply the wisdom of an old man living "one day at a time."

¹³ III, x, p. 926; TR, pp. 1000-01.

¹⁴ III, x, p. 922; TR, p. 995.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.* The futility of causes with which we are familiar has its corollary the similar futility of seeking unknown causes. Nothing is more simple than to find "reasons" in all kinds of "dreams" (III, xi, p. 936; TR, p. 1012).

¹⁷ III, x, p. 922; TR, p. 996.

¹⁸ III, x, pp. 922-3; TR, pp. 996-7.

¹⁹ III, x, p. 925; TR, p. 999.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ We know that this is quite different for Rousseau, for whom the future is important as a time of future *rehabilitation*. A long time is necessary for him to wipe out the calumny which he feels incapable of refuting in the present circumstances. The idea of reparation requires a future.

²² III, x, pp. 915-6; TR, pp. 987-88.

Remarks on Montaigne's Conservatism

²³ III, x, p. 920; TR, p. 994.

²⁴ III, ix, p. 889; TR, pp. 960-1. There is the same affirmation in a note to Madame de Duras: "The very same conditions and faculties, I will place and reduce (but without alteration and change) into a solide body, which may happily continue some dayes and yeares after mee." (II, xxxvii, p. 703; TR, p. 763).

²⁵ III, x, p. 912; TR, p. 984.

²⁶ III, x, p. 919; TR, p. 993.

²⁷ III, x, p. 920; TR, p. 993.

²⁸ III, x, p. 916; TR, pp. 988-89.

²⁹ II, xii, p. 482; TR, pp. 518-19. On the image of the circle and circular movement in the Renaissance, see Georges Poulet, *Des Métamorphoses du Cercle*, Paris, 1979, pp. 25-69; and Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*, Baltimore, 1957.