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## **Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* and their textual temperament**

[Abstract] Michel de Montaigne's first person writing in the *Essays* constitutes a double faceted probing. He seeks self-knowledge by describing as well as reflecting upon his own self. This dual perspective is conducive to a discourse characterized by sudden changes, contrasting claims, underminings of assertions and apparent inconsistencies. In this paper this characteristic feature of Montaigne's writing is considered in the context of the medical textbooks of Ambroise Paré, whose complete works were represented in Montaigne's library. A key to Paré's outlook is that everyone is born with a mixture of four bodily fluids each representing a certain temperament. How these fluids are tempered is decisive when it comes to which temperament a person belongs to. Temperament is however also influenced by factors such as diet, environment, and feelings. Consequently to be in good health is a question of balancing one's natural disposition. It is my claim that such a procedure takes place in the *Essays* as well. Thus body, mind and writing are deeply intertwined in Montaigne's first person writing.

My paper builds on two earlier projects of mine. Firstly, it is based on my PhD thesis which is a study of how the topos of melancholy works in theoretical texts such as Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and Julia Kristeva's *Black Sun*. To operationalise the notion of melancholy I studied how it was used in seminal texts from Antiquity and the Renaissance. In all of those texts melancholy is explained from a medical point of view; melancholy is regarded as a temperament resulting from an excess of black bile. My probing brought about an interest in how an anthropology deduced from medical texts, representing a kind of natural philosophy, manifested itself in modes of writing, even so long after the notion of melancholy as caused by an excess of black bile was abandoned. The idea of a close connection between the temperament of melancholy and being a genius when it comes to art, literature, politics or philosophy is operative in Benjamin's as well as Kristeva's texts and in our everyday use of the term as well.

Secondly, my paper is based on my postdoctoral project on the writings of Michel de Montaigne, in which my interest in early modern medicine was developed further. I argued that the at the time widely held idea of good health as a never ending exercise in balancing the four humours or bodily fluids – namely black and yellow bile, blood and phlegm – was transferred into Montaigne's characteristic mode of writing. Such an explanation of good health can also be found in the writings of Ambroise Paré who is one of the heroes in the history of surgery. He and Montaigne were contemporaries, and his collected works were probably to be found in Montaigne's library. The key principle in Paré's work on medicine is

antiperistasis which means that any illness can be cured by adding the opposite of what causes it.<sup>1</sup> Thus an imbalance in the bodily fluids can be treated e. g. by harmonious music, since harmonious music is the very notion of well-balanced elements, according to him. Each of the four humours is connected to a particular season, element, organ and quality.

| <b>Humour</b> | <b>Season</b> | <b>Element</b> | <b>Organ</b> | <b>Qualities</b> | <b>Temperament</b> |
|---------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Blood         | Spring        | Air            | Liver        | Warm & moist     | Sanguine           |
| Yellow bile   | Summer        | Fire           | Gall bladder | Warm & dry       | Choleric           |
| Black bile    | Autumn        | Earth          | Spleen       | Cold & dry       | Melancholic        |
| Phlegm        | Winter        | Water          | Brain/lungs  | Cold & moist     | Phlegmatic         |

The melancholic temperament is thus linked to autumn, earth, spleen and the qualities cold & dry. To give an idea of the Renaissance notion of the workings of the bodily fluids: Since Saturn is a cold and dry planet, its influence increases the melancholic humour, which is also cold and dry. Saturn is the scholar's planet. Therefore the melancholy man is considered more intelligent and contemplative than others. A well balanced black bile makes the scholar a genius. But he walks the tightrope. Cold weather or too much thinking dries up the brain, throws him into spleen and depression (that is, presses him towards the earth). When the harmony is threatened by an unbalancing force – that is the cold – this force must be neutralised by its opposite in order to maintain the black bile in optimal state. Antiperistasis is the therapeutical principle which keeps the bodily fluids in balance.

The balancing gesture in Montaigne's *Essays* makes itself felt when Montaigne takes himself as an object of study and considers how his "conditions et humeurs" vary according to social and other influences. Feelings and emotions, food and drink, climate and weather make him warm or cold, dry or moist accordingly. More importantly, the balancing act influences his mode of writing. The instability and inconstancy he describes as a feature of himself is salient in his writing as well. Montaigne's discourse is characterized by sudden changes, contrasting claims and underminings of assertions. The apparent inconsistencies can be considered as a kind of antiperistasis, as a therapeutic gesture towards his own self. I will now give you an example from one of the most renowned chapters in Montaigne's *Essays*, "On the cannibals" (I, 31).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Terence Cave (1999), *Pré-histoires. Textes troublés au seuil de la modernité*. Genève: Droz, pp. 35–50.

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Montaigne, "On the Cannibals". *The Complete Essays*. Trans. by Michael A. Screech. London: Penguin, pp. 228–241.

In what follows I will suggest that “On the cannibals” demonstrates a kind of moral thinking which manifests itself in a weighing process where varying kinds of emotions and cognitions are confronted with each other and thereby increase, reduce or balance each other. The process makes an imprint on the composition of the text. It describes the very heart of what an essay is. In 16<sup>th</sup> century French *essai* means ‘test’ or ‘trial’. It was not used to designate an established genre.

Throughout the text Montaigne presents varying notions of what bravery is like. The beliefs are orchestrated in a way that makes the reader respond to them at the same time cognitively and emotionally. The moral thinking in the text can therefore neither be pinned down in a certain paragraph nor be said to unfold gradually through a narrative development towards a conclusion. The moral thinking in “On the cannibals” is best described as the reciprocity and exchange between a certain configuration in the text and the reader’s dynamic responses to the configuration.

“On the cannibals” starts with anecdotes from warfare during Antiquity where Greek as well as Roman commanders had to realise that their enemies whom they called barbarians were anything but barbaric. After the discovery of the new world, beliefs held by Plato and Aristotle lost their reliability. When the authorities were wrong, whom could one rely on? Either a very trustworthy man or a simple one is Montaigne’s answer to that, since they do not change stories to be more persuasive or make their own views triumph. And he prefers the description of the cannibals he got from a simple and uneducated man who had been in Brazil to the descriptions made by cosmographers. Just as the military commanders had to revise their opinions of their enemies and conclude that they were not barbaric, Montaigne says that there is nothing barbaric or wild about the cannibals. They follow the rules of nature and are not corrupted by laws like ours. The land they live in is a land of plenty, a land of Cockaigne. Words like ‘lie’ or ‘betrayal’ do not exist in their vocabulary. The cannibals are what Montaigne calls tempered, that is, in a healthy balance. Their ethos is crystallised into two virtues: bravery before their enemies and love for their wives. But despite their ideal culture, they do perform gruesome actions. Enemies are eaten to have revenge. Cannibalism is something abhorrent to the French. But, Montaigne asks, isn’t it worse to torture a neighbour of yours who is alive, as the French did during the wars of religion in Montaigne’s lifetime, than to eat a dead enemy. So he has to reconsider the cannibals’ as well as his fellow

countrymen's ideals. He draws no conclusions. Instead he ends the chapter with an anecdote. When a couple of cannibals came to Rouen, Montaigne had the opportunity to have a long paper with one of them. This man was a king. When Montaigne asked him what advantage he got from his high rank, he told him it was to lead his troops into battle. But what were the privileges when the war was over, Montaigne continued. The king answered that it was the privilege of having paths cut for him through the thickets in their forests, so that he could easily walk through them when he visited villages under his sway. The irony is obvious: when there was peace, his privileges were insignificant, when there was war he was probably the first to get killed. The ideal of bravery held by the cannibals as well as by Montaigne's fellow countrymen is thus flawed.

Crudely put, Montaigne presents three different moral points of view which he plays out against each other.

First, he presents an **ethnocentric perspective**. That is to say that his ideas about the cannibals and their virtue can be regarded as projections of military ideals and values in 16<sup>th</sup> century France, such as glory, honour and bravery. His strong appreciation of the cannibals for their nobility and generosity and their kindness towards women, is also an ethnocentric bias but with opposite signs. They remind us of Ovid's account of the people living in the Golden Age and of Tacitus' Germans. Montaigne explains the cannibals' way of life as a consequence of the friendly climate they enjoy. The one-dimensionality is so striking that it seems like a parody. My claim is that the exaggeratedly positive picture he draws of the cannibals is an antiphrasis or a balancing device neutralizing the negative view about cannibals as barbaric.

Second, Montaigne presents a **relativistic perspective**. We have no other norms for truth and reason than the web of beliefs and habits in the land where we live, he writes. But if we look more closely, we can see that people living in an environment we would consider barbaric, are wild only in the sense that they are closer to Nature, whereas it is the artificially perverted we ought to call savage, he writes. This is because we are judging through our own cultural glasses. By closer scrutiny we can see that we are all part of the same nature even though varying customs and habits make us seem unlike. The difference between the French and the cannibals becomes a difference relating to habit, not nature.

Third, Montaigne presents an **objectivistic perspective**. It implies that if only we would use reason and describe what we see as unbiased as we can, it would be possible to give an adequate description of the other's morality. Montaigne gives three examples showing how people have had to change their mind about others, and sums it up by saying that we should be wary of accepting common opinions and that it is necessary to judge by the ways of reason and not by popular vote (p. 228). Then he goes on to tell about a man who had been living in Brazil for several years, who stayed with him for a while. The man was simple and uneducated. According to Montaigne's attitude towards simpleminded people which I referred to earlier, this man's testimony should be trustworthy and reliable whereas the descriptions made by cosmographers should be exactly the opposite. Intelligent people make false constructions, according to Montaigne; they change the story to make their own interpretation of it consistent and persuasive. It is well known, however, that Montaigne had read and used cosmographical books such as André Thevet's and Jean Léry's about Brazil. Why is he lying about his sources? And even more confusing, why is he contradicting himself at the end of the chapter? When he tells about how he had the opportunity to paper with a cannibal in Rouen, but that much didn't come of it since the interpreter was so stupid that he failed to grasp Montaigne's meaning and didn't understand his ideas. That is, this time simplicity is described as a hindrance to the objective understanding of the case, where as earlier on simplicity was what could secure objectivity.

The way I see it, what is at stake here is not the question of referential truth in the simple man's narration about the cannibals. What are at stake are the judgments, the weighings and the assessments generated by Montaigne's text. None of his three perspectives – the ethnocentric, the relativistic or the objectivistic – are presented as his own point of view. Instead they are presented to the reader as an invitation to weigh and assess his or her own judgement. Herein lies the ethical value of essayer/essaying. When meeting a foreign culture like the cannibals' such a judging process is an active way of relating to differences and an instrument of creating possibilities for understanding across cultural divides – just as antiperistasis is a process that creates possibilities for a well-balanced temper, good health and deliberate judgements.

Finally, to put my account of "On the cannibals" into a bigger framework, here are some main points:

- Medicine is among other things a discourse seeking to describe what is human. The idea of humanity that it represents influences and is influenced by other discourses.
- Such an anthropology can manifest itself at different levels: in the depiction of humanity as an object for scrutiny, on a meta-level as reflection on what humanity might be and in the mode of writing, style or aesthetics of the texts under consideration.
- The concept of humanity unfolded in a text has ethical implications. This is to say that ethics and aesthetics are intertwined.