

Montaigne

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An Unrepentant Naturalist

Montaigne. By André Gide. Translated by Stephen H. Guest and Trevor E. Blewitt. Horace Liveright. Autographed Limited Edition. \$5.

I FIND the style and structure of this volume irritating. The reaction in France against the grace and fluency of Anatole France and his school has gone in some instances to absurd lengths, and leading French writers seem now to be seeking a reputation for depth and subtlety by the process of endlessly qualifying their sentences, ripping them open and stuffing them full of involved parentheses. I offer a brief example from M. Gide's present essay:

One of the most surprising passages in Montaigne is that wherein, after having defended himself against the accusation of obscurity (an accusation doubtless leveled in his day against any writer who broke with conventional sentiment by attempting a stricter sincerity) and protested against the insupportable confounding of obscurity with depth that already certain "precious" writers were delighting in ("they will conclude the mystery and depth of my sense by the obscuritie" III, 245), he declares: "which" (obscurity) "I hate" (subsequently he added "extremely") "and would shun if I could disguise myself" (later on he substituted "avoide myself").

M. Gide is not satisfied with wedging these qualifications and parentheses into nearly all his sentences; he sprinkles them with asterisks that refer us to notes in the back, and the notes are frequently further modifications. He is capable of writing, for example, that Goethe is superior to Montaigne by virtue of his "interior demon," then of referring us to a note in the appendix in which he finds that "on maturer consideration, this remark about Goethe no longer seems to me quite justified"—and so on. I hope I am not too naive in asking why, in that case, he did not alter his original remark.

The irritation produced by all this is aggravated by several other factors. The book puts forward no clear single thesis, moves in no particular direction, and has no continuity or flow. It is simply a series of footnotes, often not more than a page or two in length, on various passages from Montaigne. The notes are separated by blank lines, and strung along apparently in random fashion. The general effect

is almost as if M. Gide had once planned a substantial book on Montaigne, had begun taking notes on it, and then, despairing of ever being able to weave them into an integral whole, had simply sent them off to the printer as they were.

Add further that the translators, in transcribing the passages from Montaigne, have used the Florio translation. Now Florio has a salty Elizabethan flavor of his own, but he is not very accurate (he made such elementary blunders, for example, as translating *poisson* into poison), and it is often with difficulty that one finds one's way through his antiquated syntax and diction. The result is that many of the quotations as they stand are unintelligible, particularly as they are torn out of their explanatory context; and one is forced to turn either directly to the Florio or to the admirable modern translation of Trechmann to squeeze the meaning out of them.

I need hardly say that as a result of all this M. Gide's book lacks the independent charm that first-rate criticism ought to have; one cannot enjoy it for its own sake in the way that one can the essays on Montaigne by Emerson and Sainte-Beuve. M. Gide thinks that Montaigne would forgive him "for treating him in the desultory fashion that is his own," but there is a vast difference between the desultoriness of Montaigne and that of his critic. Montaigne's writing, indeed, has the informality of conversation, but few writers carry you along so swiftly and easily as he does; his transitions and digressions, too, are as natural as those of fine talk. In M. Gide's present volume there are no transitions; the reader is simply bumped abruptly from one idea to the next.

Taken separately, however, M. Gide's observations are remarkably just and shrewd, and, in the end, rather thorough. Few comments are happier than that in which Gide regrets Montaigne's death a few years before the appearance of "Don Quixote": "The book was written for him. . . . It was at the expense of Don Quixote that, little by little, Sancho Panza came to great stature in him." And the concluding section of Part I is so admirable that I cannot forbear quoting it at length:

To those who may accuse me of presenting Montaigne's ideas edge foremost I would reply that too many of his commentators have busied themselves with supplying buttons for his foils. . . . The chief preoccupation of the pundits, in the face of daring authors who nevertheless have become classics, is to make them inoffensive. The mere passage of time works also, admirably, and quite naturally, toward this end. After a brief interval it is as if the blade of new thought had become blunt; familiarity allows us to handle it without fear of being wounded.

One more point, which M. Gide merely hints at in passing, but which, in view of the present vogue of humanism, is worth explicit statement. Montaigne, a century and a half before Rousseau came into the world, and when even Francis Bacon was no more than an infant, was already a confirmed "naturalist." The passages in which he reveals this are too numerous for quotation. I confine myself to three:

Philosophy appears to me very childish when she rides the high horse, and preaches to us that it is a barbarous alliance to marry the divine with the earthly . . . that sensual pleasure is a brutish thing, unworthy to be enjoyed by the sage. . . .

Nature has, with motherly care, observed this rule, that the actions she has laid upon us for our need should give us pleasure; and she invites us to them, not only through our reason, but through our desire. It is wrong to infringe her rules.

As I have said elsewhere, I have for my part adopted, very simply and crudely, this ancient rule, "that we cannot go wrong if we follow Nature," and that the sovereign precept is "to conform to her."