

## «DU REPENTIR» (III, 2): SCEPTICISM AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN MONTAIGNE

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to offer a new interpretation of the famous introductory passage to «Du repentir» (Essais III, 2) more in keeping with its philosophical scepticism. I mainly purport that, in spite of the originality of Montaigne's project of self-portrayal, it can consistently be seen as being founded upon a sceptical negative argument about knowledge in general (and knowledge of the self in particular). First, I will argue that the usual claim that Montaigne is relying on a Heraclitean picture of the world is misguided insofar as his text can be more precisely related with the Pyrrhonian for practical life (as it is presented by Sextus Empiricus), namely the *phainómenon*. I subsequently consider Montaigne's remark on how each man bears the whole form of the human condition. I suggest that it should be construed as an example of how he fails to obtain self-knowledge, rather than as indicating how to achieve it. Finally I speculate on why he does not see his search for self-knowledge as being pointless, and how this introduction ties in with the main theme of «Du repentir».

**KEY WORDS:** Montaigne, *repentir*, scepticism, self-knowledge, Auerbach.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo tiene como objetivo ofrecer una nueva interpretación del famoso texto introductorio del «Du repentir» (Essais III, 2) que se encuentra en mayor coherencia con su escepticismo filosófico. Mi tesis principal sostiene que el proyecto montaigneano de retratarse a sí mismo, a pesar de su originalidad, puede considerarse estructurado sobre un argumento escéptico negativo respecto al conocimiento en general (y al conocimiento del yo en particular). En primer lugar, sostendré que la concepción usual de que Montaigne se apoya en una imagen heracliteana del mundo es errónea, en la medida en que su texto puede ser relacionado de manera más precisa con observaciones escépticas pirrónicas respecto a su criterio, el *phainómenon*. Posteriormente, consideraré la célebre observación montaigneana de que todo hombre carga con la forma entera de la condición humana: en lugar de indicar cómo lograr el conocimiento de sí mismo, sugiero que ella debe ser entendida como una muestra de su fracaso en dicho intento. Finalmente, mostraré por qué Montaigne no considera su búsqueda del autoconocimiento como un sinsentido y cómo esta introducción está conectada con el tema principal del «Du repentir».

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Montaigne, *repentir*, escepticismo, autoconocimiento, Auerbach.

In his remarkable *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach presents Montaigne's *Essais* as a pioneering attempt to depict the human condition in Western literature by examining his own self.<sup>1</sup> Bringing to light many of the resources employed by Montaigne to achieve his «portrait du moi», Auerbach focuses on the famous introductory pages of the chapter «Du repentir» (III, 2)<sup>2</sup> to show how they reveal Montaigne's method, in an almost syllogistic way: I describe myself; I am a creature subject to constant change; *ergo* the description of myself must also constantly change. According to Auerbach, the rambling and fanciful way Montaigne writes is, in reality, the result of following an experimental method, observing the incidental movements of his life and tracking his continuously changing self as precisely as he can. And even if his style «breaks through the limits of a purely theoretical disquisition», we could, Auerbach suggests, here recognize a properly epistemological enterprise, by which Montaigne aims to know himself as a way to gain more general knowledge about the human condition.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, Montaigne's self-description, insofar as he is continuously aware of the coherence of his personality, leads him to a «spontaneous apprehension of the unity of his person emerging from the multiplicity of his observations. In the end there is unity and truth; [...] it is his essential being which emerges from his portrayal of the changing».<sup>4</sup>

Another accepted way of reading the opening lines of «Du repentir» stresses not the epistemological, but the ontological dimension of Montaigne's reflections –namely, his Heraclitean picture of the world, produced by his adoption of a view according to which «everything is in movement»:<sup>5</sup> «Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne : Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse, la terre, les rochers du Caucase, les pyramides d'Égypte : et du branle public, et du leur. La constance mesme n'est autre chose qu'un branle plus languissant...». Accordingly, his own self is only part of a more general continuous flow of Nature in which, like in Heraclitus' river, we cannot be twice the same. As remarked upon by Henry, this does not actually correspond to a more accurate interpretation of Heraclitean philosophy (which stresses change and permanence equally), this is to be explained by the fact that the main sources available to him (Estienne's *Poesis Philosophica* and Plutarch's *Moralia* translated by Amyot) do not offer evidence for this modern interpretation of Heraclitus.<sup>6</sup> Montaigne would owe Plutarch's Heraclitus, according to this reading, the «experience of mobility».

Still, even though we have here two different standard ways of understanding Montaigne's work, it seems not to be difficult to reconcile them. Auerbach takes for granted that movements of the self follow from its natural condition, and if he identifies a paradox between change and stability, it is rather as a figure of style.<sup>7</sup> But there seems to be no obstacle to reading the *Essays* as a picture that closely tracks Montaigne's

<sup>1</sup> AUERBACH (2003), pp. 285-311.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Essais*, III, 2, 804-806 BC, Auerbach (2003), 285-288. The references to *Les Essais* will indicate, in this order, the number of the book, the chapter, the page and the lay of the text according to the different editions as considered by Villey's edition.

<sup>3</sup> See AUERBACH (2003), 290, 301

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup> See, among others, SCREECH, M. A. (1992); JOUKOVSKY, F (1991), HENRY, P. (1992).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. JOUKOVSKY (1991), apud HENRY (1992), pp. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> See AUERBACH (2003), p. 289.

changing self, which moves as he forms part of a changing reality. Yet these two interpretations seem to be equally at odds with (or at least point out some limitation of) another usual reading of Montaigne, which emphasizes his scepticism. Particularly, Auerbach acknowledges that other texts in Montaigne comments on his method are connected with his praise of «ignorance» goes beyond any factual knowledge, but only as a way of clearing a path to the kind of knowledge in which he is truly interested, namely self-knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Reading Montaigne's *Essais* as a product of scepticism is no new development, though some recent scholarship has demonstrated a renewed interest in it, especially in the wake of Popkin's *History of Scepticism*.<sup>9</sup> This work has called modern readers' attention to how Montaigne's *Apology of Raimond Sebond* is constructed along the lines of ancient Pyrrhonian arguments to such an extent that it became a key work through which this philosophy entered into modern debates. As Popkin shows, many Early Modern philosophers have acknowledged it, and at least one of them –Pascal– viewed Montaigne's reflections, in its whole, as a product of his own scepticism.<sup>10</sup> But can the statement that «each man bears the whole form of the human condition» be understood in a sceptical vein?

In this paper, I aim to provide some evidence for an interpretation of «Du repentir» along more sceptical lines. I think that Auerbach is clearly right in saying that nothing resembles Montaigne's project and its achievement before him. I will argue, however, that in spite of its originality, this project can be consistently taken, in its main lines, as structured upon a sceptical negative argument concerning knowledge in general (and knowledge of the self in particular). By the same token, Montaigne's self-description may be taken, to a large extent, as placed in the sphere of what the Pyrrhonians called the *phainómenon* –the mere appearance of the world in our ordinary experience, which they took as a practical criterion, not to be taken for a criterion of knowledge. I will start by accounting for why Montaigne's admittedly subjective approach can be taken as a result of his scepticism. In the next steps, I will follow the main divisions of the text placed in the beginning of «Du repentir» as examined by Auerbach. As the first lines of this text provide the basis for the Heraclitean interpretation of Montaigne, they will also offer an occasion for showing why I think this is a misguided interpretation, as well as the opportunity to notice a problematic aspect of them apparently unnoticed by Auerbach. This will provide me a first element for a sceptical framework to Montaigne's portrait, which allows me to move to his remark on the whole form of the human condition: instead of helping to achieve knowledge of the self, it should be taken, I suggest, as exhibiting how he *fails to gain self-knowledge*. Finally I will consider briefly why Montaigne does not see his search, in spite of that failure to achieve knowledge, as pointless, and how this could be connected with the main theme of his chapter.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 293-294. The passages he comments on are *Les Essais* I, 50, 301-302AC and III, 11, 1030B.

<sup>9</sup> POPKIN (2003). See, among others, BRUSH (1996), SCHIFFMANN (1984), BRAHAMI (2001), GIOCANTI (2001), EVA (2007), FLORIDI (2010).

<sup>10</sup> PASCAL (1981) I, 160.

The first thing to notice concerning scepticism and self-examination in Montaigne, is that many essays are equally relevant for both themes, even if it is hard to see how they are connected. In the *Apology*, after considering the fanciful nature of our presumed knowledge about the external world, Montaigne asks if would we not be better acquainted with Man, an object we have close at hand. However, the situation here is the same:

...[Les philosophes] font [de l'homme] une chose publique imaginaire. C'est un subject qu'ils tiennent et qu'ils manient: on leur laisse toute puissance de le descoudre, renger, rassembler et estoffer, chacun à sa fantasie; et si [pourtant] ils ne le possèdent... Notre condition porte que la cognoissance de ce que nous avons entre mains est aussi esloigné de nous et aussi bien au dessus des nuages que celle des astres...<sup>11</sup>

Certainly his self-description aims to provide a better picture than that, one that every man could find on closely considering himself; but when Montaigne comes to this topic he finds in himself only «vanity and weakness», leaving room for some suspicion about whether or not what he grasps can properly be called knowledge.<sup>12</sup> In the chapter «On presumption», Montaigne returns to the topic: his disappointment with those who presume to know «Mercury's epicycle» is justified by the difficulties he finds in his own studies about man.<sup>13</sup> And in the beginning of the chapter «On Democritus and Heraclitus», the variations of his judgments, by which he describes himself in his *Essays* are presented as subordinate to «doubte et incertitude, et à ma maitresse forme, qui est l'ignorance».<sup>14</sup>

In «Du repentir» both themes are present again. Montaigne informs us that he «parle enquerant et ignorant, me rapportant de la resolution, purement et simplement, aux creances communes et legitimes; Je n'enseigne point, je raconte».<sup>15</sup> Montaigne not only connects «ignorance», but also «inquisition» with scepticism: in the *Apology*, the Academic sceptics are represented as those who unearthed human ignorance in a philosophical way, and the Pyrrhonian sceptics as those who remain indefinitely searching, because the most complete ignorance refuses even the claim that we do not know nothing, as we read at the beginning of Sextus Empiricus' *Hypotiposes*<sup>16</sup> (which Montaigne read in Estienne's Latin translation, and extensively employed as a source in the *Essays*, though they are never directly quoted.) In his text, the Greek Pyrrhonian author goes on explain how his book is to be understood: it does not intend to offer does not intend to offer any truth (that the sceptics, after all, claim to be unavailable), but only an account of what seems to the sceptic to be the case, in the same way historians do: «By way of preface let us say that in none of the matters to be discussed do we affirm that things certainly are just as we say they are: rather, we report descriptively (*historikós apangélomen*) on each item according to how it appears to us at the time».<sup>17</sup> A few lines

<sup>11</sup> II, 12, 538AC.

<sup>12</sup> II, 12, 565-566AB.

<sup>13</sup> II, 17, 634AC.

<sup>14</sup> I, 50, 301-302AC.

<sup>15</sup> III, 2, 806B.

<sup>16</sup> *Les Essais*, II, 12, 502A.

<sup>17</sup> *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (HP), I, 4.

below, Sextus qualifies his report as a description of merely personal, subjective impressions, as opposed to descriptions of external reality.<sup>18</sup>

Now, even if Montaigne's particular project of self examination is different from anything we may find in Sextus, he describes his own text as a «recit» that aims only to depict «passing» as opposed to «being», and his *Essays* as presenting nothing more than his «humeurs et opinions»:

[...] Ce sont ici mes humeurs et opinions; je les donne pour ce qui en est de ma creance, non pour ce qui est à croire. Je ne icy qu'à descouvrir moy mesmes, qui seray par adventure autre demain, si nouvel aprentissage me change. Je n'ay point l'autorité d'estre creu, ny ne le desire, me sentant trop mal instruit pour instruire autre.<sup>19</sup>

Montaigne's aim of portraying his own self certainly requires us to go beyond simply taking his text as only offering a description of his personal impressions, but the parallel between these texts shows (aside from many other pieces of evidence establishing Montaigne's interest in scepticism) that his project arguably assumes, on a more basic level, a sceptical perspective about the use of language comparable to the one offered by Sextus. This does not require that both share the same general view of language anymore; the point here concerns only tracking down what plausibly appears to be Montaigne's source, so that we can more clearly account for his intention.

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But does Montaigne's new project drive him beyond the bounds of a sceptical kind of reflection? If he is describing man's ontology as one of an essentially «moving being» this would be the case. Heraclitus' philosophy is only one among many about which the sceptic suspends his own judgment, opposing it to others (for instance, that of Parmenides, who takes the Being to be incompatible with movement) that are in conflict with it and that he takes to be equally supported by rational arguments.

As was noted, Montaigne's references to Heraclitus are sparse and do not provide evidence for a greater familiarity with his philosophy.<sup>20</sup> Besides the beginning of «Du repentir», the only text that suggests a closer contact with Heraclitus is a long quotation from Plutarch's «The E at Delphi» placed at the end of the *Apology*.<sup>21</sup> Let us notice, however, that even if Heraclitus is remembered in this key passage, he is not the only philosophical authority invoked; Plato and Pythagoras are also called in support (the first as taking the moving world as an illusion); Montaigne employs a quotation from Lucretius as well. Moreover, as in III, 2, Montaigne describes the pervasive movement of Nature to maintain that «nous n'avons aucune communication à l'estre». Here, still more clearly, this remark is offered by way of the conclusion of a long chapter almost entirely built on sceptical arguments, and just after its more radical development, in

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<sup>18</sup> As Sextus puts it when explaining the meaning of Pyrrhonian philosophical slogans: «But the main point is this: in uttering these phrases they say what is apparent to themselves and report their own feelings without holding opinions...» HP, I, 15.

<sup>19</sup> I, 26, 148A.

<sup>20</sup> HENRY (1992), 7-8.

<sup>21</sup> II, 12, 601-603A.

which Sextus' Pyrrhonian Modes of argumentation are systematically employed to undermine our faculties of knowledge. How we can combine these different philosophical references?

One tempting possibility would be to read it as a kind of reconsideration of an older theme. Aenesidemus, a dissident from the later Academy was probably the main instigator of the revival of Pyrrhonism that took place around the first century B.C. According to Sextus, «Aenesidemus and his followers used to say that the Sceptical persuasion is a path to the philosophy of Heraclitus».<sup>22</sup> Is that not what seems happen here? However, a closer examination of Sextus' chapter on the differences between Scepticism and the philosophy of Heraclitus can falsify this hypothesis. As Sextus puts it, providing a rationale for Aenesidemus' saying, «the idea that contraries appear to hold of the same thing leads to the idea that contraries actually do hold of the same thing; and while the Sceptics says that the contraries appear to hold of the same thing, the Heracliteans go on from there to the idea that they actually hold of the same thing».<sup>23</sup>

Sextus, in his turn, refuses any association between Pyrrhonism and Heracliteanism. While Heraclitus maintains many dogmas –such as the *ecpyrosis* and the view that the same thing is the subject of opposite realities– the Pyrrhoneans take them as examples of a dogmatist's rashness and refuse to assent to them.<sup>24</sup> More important, that the contraries appear to hold of the same thing is not an experience of the sceptics but of everyone, including the dogmatic philosophers; it is, as Sextus puts it, a «preconception common to all men», «a common material» of experience. If, then, Heraclitus begins with something available to everybody, there is no reason to claim that the sceptical philosophy (rather than any other) is particularly a path to Heraclitean philosophy.<sup>25</sup> Briefly, from a sceptical viewpoint, the fact that experience shows us conflicting perspectives of the same thing is only part of the *phainómenon*, the common experience according to which the sceptic, like anyone else, follows practical life. What is particular to Heraclitus is the production of an ontology out of this experience, taking it as indicative of how reality is in itself.

We can now see not only that the sources Montaigne could rely upon for Heraclitus' philosophy are not limited to Estienne and Plutarch, but also that his description of a pervasive movement in Nature can be philosophically coherent with his scepticism. Montaigne tackles the problem of Heraclitus' ontological thesis, as presented by Sextus, only in passing. In the *Apology*, he compares different positions on this topic and explicitly rejects, among others, the statement according to which the being is the subject of contradictory predicates: «[if] everything is in all things, then nothing is in any thing, since nothing is where everything is».<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, Sextus' text makes Montaigne's remark about painting, not the being, but only the passing, unexpectedly clear. This is also presented as a way of accepting, not a philosophical position on the matter, but the

<sup>22</sup> HP I, 210.

<sup>23</sup> *Id. ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> HP I, 211.

<sup>25</sup> HP I, 210-211. About the relations between Heraclitus' philosophy and scepticism see Polito (2004), Perez-Juan (2005).

<sup>26</sup> *Les Essais*, II, 12, 585A.

«common and legitimate beliefs»: «Que je parle enquerant et ignorant, me rapportant de la resolution, purement et simplement, aux creances communes et legitimes. Je n'enseigne point, je raconte».<sup>27</sup> Certainly Montaigne may have relied upon the image of Heraclitus' river, as well as the Renaissance interpretation of Hericlitean philosophy, but, as with many of his sources, he uses it to his own particular purposes. In any case, he is clear enough about the philosophical meaning with which he endows it. What we should learn instead from this parallel is how rich Montaigne's interpretation of the Pyrrhonian notion of the *phainómenon* –what appears to us simply as a matter of fact, which can be experienced by everyone– can be.

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Nonetheless, could scepticism provide a different approach for Montaigne's project as it is depicted in the beginning of «Du repentir?» From the start, this chapter is concerned with an opposition between particularity and universality: «Les autres forment l'homme, je le recite: et en represente un particulier, bien mal formé: et lequel si j'avoy à façonner de nouveau, je ferois vrayement bien autre qu'il n'est: mes-huy c'est fait...».<sup>28</sup> Here Montaigne sets up a double contrast between himself and «the others»: they aim to form men, and to do so they have to rely on some universal model of what Man is. This is the perspective of normative moral philosophy, as it is traditionally understood. Montaigne, on the other hand, aims to describe only his particular self, and not with the purpose of re-forming it.

According to Auerbach, Montaigne's method is the only one that can adequately track its object to attain knowledge of what it truly is. This could be inferred, more precisely, from the way he presents two of its aspects: «les traits de ma peinture ne fourvoyent pas, quoy tant qu'ils se changent et diversifient...» – and, just below: «Tant y a que je me contredis bien à l'avanture, mais la verité, comme disoit Demades, je ne la contredy point». However, Montaigne's allusion to Demades is baffling. The Athenian ambassador was reputed to be a talented improvisational orator, but also a politician who switched his political positions because of bribes.<sup>29</sup> As becomes clear later in Montaigne's chapter, he believes that the only guideline he requires in his work is to have «fidelity» (presumably to his own changing opinions), but Demades' example should make us wary of taking fidelity to his opinions as a method for providing truth.

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<sup>27</sup> Would not Montaigne's commitment to «common beliefs» be an even stronger reason to set him apart from scepticism? This is a much more complicated topic that I do not intend to discuss here. To put it briefly, there has been a lively debate in the scholarship about ancient scepticism's refusal of beliefs, but it is not as evident as it would seem that the sceptical philosopher would abandon all his beliefs. This is certainly not true for Academic scepticism, and even the Pyrrhonists claim to accept some sort of *dogmata*, at least in Sextus' account. (See HP I, 13-15) Montaigne himself, as I have argued elsewhere, is quite aware of such controversies, and he recognizes that at least some forms of scepticism are plainly compatible with accepting beliefs. (For more details, see EVA 2007).

<sup>28</sup> III, 2, 805B.

<sup>29</sup> See DIODORUS OF SICILY *Biblioteca Historica*, XVII, 15. According to Villey, Montaigne owned Amyot's translation of this work, printed in 1559. (See *Les Essais*, I, xlvi)



In any case, Montaigne is not claiming that his traits do not err *because* they do change and vary, but that they do *though* (*quoy que*) they vary.<sup>30</sup> And as a result, he says, «Je ne peux assurer [fixer] mon objet». Is this to be accounted for as the grasp of his object or just the opposite? It is a commonplace that Baroque painting was obsessed with the representation of movement, but Montaigne does not go so far as to say that his object is well represented in spite of how it moves. Moreover, not only the object is in movement, but the whole Nature, and each thing moves in a double way, one public and one particular: «Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse... et du branle public, et du leur.» The final effect seems to be more aptly described as one in which Montaigne lacks a fixed point, and so is unable to finish his picture: «Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois : elle est tousjours en apprentissage, et en espreuve.»

As we have seen, the Pyrrhonian sceptics search indefinitely because they are unable to recognize any truth or to establish that we cannot find the truth (as the Academic philosophers did, according to Sextus). But could «movement» count as a reason for that inability? Among the Modes that Sextus presents as means to achieve the suspension of judgment, the Fifth of those attributed to Aenesidemus opposes different positions, intervals, opposes different positions and intervals. These differences produce different perceptions, which conflict with one another in such a way that we cannot tell which of them should be chosen as representing what is true of things in themselves.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Sextus says, «[t]he same boat appears from a distance small and stationary, but from close at hand large and in motion».<sup>32</sup> As we know, Montaigne takes part in the criticism of Aristotelian cosmology that would soon lead to new theories of movement and intense philosophical debate about the problem of the existence of absolute space. In addition, Sextus explains that ancient Pyrrhonians organized their Modes of argument to obtain *epokhé* in three major groups: those deriving from the subject judging; those derived from the object judged; and those derived from their combination (condensed in the «relativity mode»<sup>33</sup>). Montaigne does not refer to «movement» as meaning only local movement, but as also including change in a more general way – including the change of circumstances that the Fourth Mode takes as a reason for suspending judgment.<sup>34</sup> Still, as we have seen, Montaigne maintains that a double movement, one internal and one external, affects everything.

My suggestion, then, is that Montaigne simply means here that the way in which different changes overlap leaves us without benchmarks by which to determine what is true. But the more relevant aspect of this doubt does not lie in the consequences of knowledge of external objects, already targeted by ancient scepticism. I think we are

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<sup>30</sup> Auerbach writes: «The word *quoique*, here sharply employed as a precise syntactic vinculum, brings the problem out of in bold relief...» (AUERBACH, *op.cit.* p. 289) This vinculum, however, is not one of causation, but rather of allowance, and so assumes an opposition, even if it a slight one.

<sup>31</sup> HP I, 118.

<sup>32</sup> *id. ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> HP I, 38-39.

<sup>34</sup> See HP I, 100-117: things appear differently according to our age, to our state of health (or sickness), to our state of soberness (or drunkenness) etc., and we are not able to tell which of them truly corresponds to how the object is in itself. In Sextus' classification this is a Mode related only to the subject.



here faced with a new and maybe more radical form of scepticism, derived specifically from how Montaigne understands himself as object of investigation. In other words, insofar as we cannot tell if our changes are properly changes of what we are ourselves, or changes due to exterior causes, we cannot take these changes as representing knowledge of the self. As we read in «Du repentir» about *Les Essais*: «C'est un contrerolle de divers et muables accidens, et d'imaginacions irresoluës, et quand il y eschet, contraires: soit que je sois autre moy-mesme, soit que je saisisse les subjects, par autres circonstances, et considerations».<sup>35</sup> Montaigne is not stating that he is changing, but that the way he experiences change may be a product of a change in his own self or of different circumstances of perception, and that he is not able to tell which of these two possibilities is correct. So as he says that his painting does not err, instead of taking his picture as providing knowledge of himself, we would do better to take it as, at best, providing a truthful account of Montaigne's subjective experience of himself: «divers et muables accidens et d'imaginacions irresolues et, quand il eschet, contraires».<sup>36</sup> But this is only a report of the «passing», of how he appears to himself as a changing subject, a description of the *phaenomena* not to be unduly taken for knowledge of what the self is.

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Surprisingly, the next paragraph of the text seems to take a different path. «Je propose une vie basse, et sans lustre: C'est tout un, On attache aussi bien toute la philosophie morale à une vie populaire et privee qu'à une vie de plus riche estoffe: Chaque homme porte la forme entiere de l'humaine condition».<sup>37</sup> After having indicated the particularity of his own philosophical enterprise, he now seems to point to how it could collaborate in a more traditional venture. If Montaigne's project of examining himself could provide better knowledge of what Man is, even if he is not directly interested in reforming himself, he could at least provide a reliable picture for those who are. But to move from his particular portrait to a more general knowledge of what man is («c'est tout un») he seems to need a major premise for the implicit argument here, which could be provided by this law-like statement: «each man bears the whole form of the human condition».

How should we understand this particular assertion, keeping in mind the way Montaigne stresses that the lessons he learns from experience are only valid for his own use?<sup>38</sup> Could this be taken to mean that his personal experience could be generalized, on some level, for anyone, because he bears the whole form of the human condition? In this case, this statement amounts to saying that Montaigne already has, at least on this level, some definite knowledge of what Man is (in general), and this seems to be at odds with his original intention (to describe a particular man) and, more generally, with the sort of research he aims to do. On the other hand, we may remember here that Montaigne says later in the chapter that anyone who listens carefully to himself can discern some

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<sup>35</sup> III, 2, 805B.

<sup>36</sup> *id. ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *id. ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See *e.g.* II, 10, 408C; II, 12, 561A.

«leading form» particular to himself.<sup>39</sup> Even so, how could that particularity be discerned from a form of human condition that is, in opposition, general and equally borne by everyone?

To face these problems, it may be important to bear in mind that «form» is a central concept in Aristotle's *Physics*, and that we more than once find Montaigne employing scholastic vocabulary with an ironic twist, in order to contrast it with traditional philosophy. He writes, for instance, in the same vein: «Je m'estudie plus qu'autre subject. Je suis ma physique et ma metaphysique... En ceste université, je me laisse ignoramment et negligemment manier à la loy generale du monde. Je la sçauray assez quand je la sentiray».<sup>40</sup> For Aristotle's *Physics* (to put it quite generally) to have knowledge of something by its form is to know what makes it essentially what it is, by means of predicates which belong to it in an essential, non-accidental way.<sup>41</sup> This concept may still be found, to some extent, in Descartes. Regardless of how he goes beyond the bounds of the traditional *Physics*, Descartes identifies the «form» of man as «reason» insofar as this is what is specific to man in opposition to other beings, and believes himself to be thus far entirely in agreement so far with the scholastic picture of what man is.<sup>42</sup> I invoke Descartes here only in the hope of clarifying Montaigne's meaning, even if by contrast. The point is that if we say that «each man bears the whole form of the human condition» in this traditional sense, then current in philosophical debate, we should then be assuming that each man bears the whole set of predicates belonging to the human condition.

We could perhaps assume that there is some metaphysical way to understand «bearing» in order to give a plausible meaning to this statement, at least insofar it is taken as a general statement about Man. But it appears to be much more difficult to conciliate it with having knowledge of what a *particular self is*. For we should expect that Montaigne's gaining knowledge of himself, in this precise sense, would imply that he could sort out the predicates that belong essentially to his own self from those that do not. But when he says that each man bears the *whole form* of the human condition, he is stating precisely the opposite of this, and then this law-like statement surprisingly becomes something that only hinders him from telling what he essentially is as a particular self. And this paradoxical outcome becomes still more clear when we take into account the following remark later added by Montaigne: «Les auteurs se communiquent au peuple par quelque marque speciale et estrangere: moy le premier, par mon estre universel: comme, Michel de Montaigne: non comme Grammairien ou Poëte, ou Jurisconsulte».<sup>43</sup> Montaigne's «universal being» is not identified here as what he shares with other human beings (as in Descartes' idea of reason as the form of Man), but as what is essential to his being Montaigne (as opposed to any incidental properties, such as his being a writer). This would be, however, not just something intrinsic to Montaigne, something that he possesses in some hidden recess of his personality, but

<sup>39</sup> III, 2, 811B.

<sup>40</sup> III, 13, 1072-1073BC. See also I, 26, 146A, where Montaigne opposes his own study to that of students of traditional philosophy in the Universities.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, *Physics* 198a36. I do not presume, however, that Montaigne has in view Aristotle's text itself.

<sup>42</sup> See particularly the beginning of Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*.

<sup>43</sup> III, 2, 805C.

something connected with how he communicates himself to others. But what could this «universal being» be if he is proposing the opposite – namely, that he perceives himself as capable of varying within a larger range of possibilities than men usually think they can, as for instance in the text below?

Non seulement le vent des accidens me remue selon son inclination, mais en outre je me remue et trouble moy mesme par l'instabilité de ma posture; et qui y regarde primement, ne se trouve guere deux fois en mesme estat. Je donne à mon ame tantost un visage, tantost un autre, selon le costé où je la couche. Si je parle diversement de moy, c'est que je me regarde diversement. Toutes les contrarietez s'y trouvent selon quelque tour et en quelque façon. Honteux, insolent; chaste, luxurieux; bavard, taciturne; laborieux, delicat; ingenieux, hebeté; chagrin, debonaire; menteur, veritable; sçavant, ignorant, et liberal, et avare, et prodigue, tout cela, je le vois en moy aucunement, selon que je me vire; et quiconque s'estudie bien attentivement trouve en soy, voire et en son jugement mesme, cette volubilité et discordance. Je n'ay rien à dire de moy, entierement, simplement, et solidement, sans confusion et sans meslange, ny en un mot. Distingo est le plus universel membre de ma Logique.<sup>44</sup>

In short, my suggestion is that the «universal being of Michel de Montaigne» (as well as the «whole form of the human condition» which is present in each man) is not the concept by which we should expect to achieve knowledge through his peculiar research; it is rather a formulation of a paradox he (and each man) is faced with when searching for knowledge of himself as an individual –and presumably in a deliberate way (if we assume the meaning these concepts have in the traditional philosophical view he is pointing to from the start). This does not mean at all that Montaigne could not seriously proceed to an examination of himself leading to important discoveries. The point is that this paradox should move us to another approach to the text: Montaigne would be thereby preventing us from taking what he finds as *knowledge* of his self – as a capacity to sort out which predicates define him essentially as Michel de Montaigne. This would be just another way of leading the reader to have an appropriate assessment of his work: everything that he can grasp through this kind of examination is the «passing» –the features that he can recognize as appearing to be his own predicates in a certain moment– and not the «being» –what he essentially and permanently is.

According to this reading, Montaigne's reflections would operate here with a more precise (Aristotelian) concept of knowledge than it is usually acknowledged. This is not implausible, either from a historical or a contextual perspective. It might be instructive to compare them with what we read in other contemporary sceptical texts, such as Francisco Sanchez's *Quod Nihil Scitur*, published in 1581 and possibly quoted by Montaigne before the last redaction of the *Essais*. Sanchez's conclusion that «nothing is known» is presented as a consequence of the Aristotelian conception of knowledge. Even if this conception, according with which knowledge is a perfect apprehension of

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<sup>44</sup> II, 1, 335AC, see also 337A: «...Nous sommes tous de lopins, et d'une contexture si informe et diverse, que chaque piece, chaque momant, faict son jeu. Et se trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de nous à autruy...»

things (*scientia perfecta rei cognitio est*), is the most adequate we can find, we can have no actual knowledge which could correspond to it.<sup>45</sup> As does Montaigne, Sanchez argues that this applies not only to knowledge of external things, but also to knowledge of oneself: «Poor man, miserable and imperfect, how can he know anything else if he does not know himself neither what is in him and with him?»<sup>46</sup> However, as Sanchez explicitly aims to acquire true knowledge of Nature by means of an experimental method and direct observation, he outlines an alternative epistemological theory based in an imperfect notion of apprehension, which is more familiar to us and allows for variations in clarity, scope and degree. Comparing, then, the apprehension we can have of external objects and what is internal to us, he takes the external senses to be better able to distinguish the form of objects than what happens with internal apprehension, but that, on the other hand, the latter is capable of attaining a higher degree of certainty.<sup>47</sup>

But Montaigne does not seem to have shared this most optimistic dimension of Sanchez's epistemology. While Sanchez remarks on the certainty of the acquaintance of an individual with his internal perceptions come close to Descartes' analysis of the self (which transforms his remarks into an argument against scepticism), Montaigne's reflections about self-knowledge would be rather closer to Pascal's sharp criticism of Descartes's metaphysical reflections about the self. Even though Pascal complained about Montaigne's concern with himself, he read the *Essais* mainly a sceptical work, and among the many aspects in which he improved Montaigne's sceptical arguments we should perhaps include his reflections about the knowledge we can have of the self:

Qu'est-ce que le *moi*? Un homme se met à la fenêtre pour voir les passants, si je passe par là, puis-je dire qu'il s'est mis là pour me voir? Non; car il ne pense pas à moi en particulier; mais quelq'un qui aime quelqu'un autre à cause de sa beauté, l'aime-t-il? Non: car la petite vérole, qui tuera la beauté sans tuer la personne, fera qu'il ne l'aimera plus. Et si on m'aime par mon jugement, par ma mémoire, m'aime-t-on, *moi*? Non, car je puis perdre ses qualités sans me perdre moi-même. Ou est donc ce moi, s'il n'est ni dans le corps, ni dans l'ame?<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, the sceptical dimension of Montaigne's reflection about the self was almost completely outweighed by the prevailing tendency to take his portrait as offering knowledge of what the self is. Naturally, this has implications for how to access other dimensions of Montaigne's reflections, particularly concerning the kind of research he is doing, and we cannot conclude without considering some of them, even if very briefly.

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Montaigne raises the question of the utility of his book in the next paragraph of «Du repentir», in the following terms:

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<sup>45</sup> SANCHEZ (1988), 22 ss.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 54.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>48</sup> PASCAL, *Pensées*, 688-323, in PASCAL (1981).

Mais est-ce raison, que si particulier en usage, je pretende me rendre public en cognoissance? Est-il aussi raison, que je produise au monde, où la façon et l'art ont tant de credit et de commandement, des effects de nature et crus et simples, et d'une nature encore bien foiblette ? Est-ce pas faire une muraille sans pierre, ou chose semblable, que de bastir des livres sans science ? Les fantasies de la musique, sont conduits par art, les miennes par sort...<sup>49</sup>

If his book does not provide «*science*» (or knowledge), as this text seems to confirm<sup>50</sup>, he explains that he relies on a method to write it: «Pour la parfaire [i.e., his work], je n'ay besoing d'y apporter que la *fidelité*: celle-là y est, la plus sincere et pure qui se trouve...» Consequently he and his book are so closely tied that it displays its author in a way that no other book does: the result is somewhat similar to what art produces, insofar as no one has more closely examined his object than he did.<sup>51</sup> We could well suspect that his second remark bears some irony (insofar as Montaigne is his own object), but, as Auerbach has rightly noticed, many texts indicate clearly enough that he is seriously concerned with an examination of the self that has practical consequences. As he puts in «De l'exercitacion», his study is a very unusual one, only tried by a few men whose names we barely know: «Il n'est description pareille en difficulté à la description de soy-mesme, ny certes en utilité...»<sup>52</sup>

Now, if Montaigne seriously tries to describe his experience of himself, where precisely is the difference between the approach that I am outlining here and Auerbach's? Is it a simple matter of redefining the notion of knowledge, or does the picture change when placed in a sceptical framework? I do not intend to fully answer this question here, but I am inclined to say that Auerbach's rich analysis remains in many ways compatible with the reading I am putting forth here.<sup>53</sup> He has specific concerns with the History of Western Literature and Montaigne's analysis is only a small part of a larger project. Yet, insofar as it implicitly embeds an important philosophical assumption that I am questioning here, I think that there is room for a different appraisal of, among other topics, the sort of research Montaigne understands himself to be doing, and the acknowledged utility of his work. In particular, while Auerbach claims that Montaigne knows himself because he is always conscious of the unity of his own personality, I think that Montaigne's scepticism makes him aware, instead, that any particular impression he has of himself can be taken as properly offering knowledge, *precisely because* each impression can contradict another in a different moment: «Moy à cette heure et moy tantost somme bien deux; mais quand meilleur, je n'en puis rien

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<sup>49</sup> III, 2, 805B.

<sup>50</sup> As Aristotles writes, in his Physics (197a16-24): «Thus to say that chance is unaccountable is correct. For an account is of what holds always or for the most part, whereas chance belongs to a third type of event. Hence, since causes of this kind are indefinite, chance too is indefinite.»

<sup>51</sup> III, 2, 805C.

<sup>52</sup> II, 6, 366C; Even if he refers to his study as a «*science*» in comparison to others', he also writes: «Comme dict Pline, chacun est à soy-mesmes une très bonne discipline, pourveu qu'il y ait la suffisance de s'espier de près. Ce n'est pas ici ma doctrine, c'est mon estude; et n'est pas la leçon d'autrui, c'est la mienne...».

<sup>53</sup> I think it is particularly true in what refers to Auerbach's remarks on the deceptions caused by the usual methods for examining himself. See Auerbach (2003), p. 298-299.

dire... C'est un mouvement d'yvroigne, titubant, informe, ou des joncs que l'air manie casuellement selon soy...»<sup>54</sup>

Montaigne refers more than once to the paradoxical dimension of the human search for truth, a pursuit we cannot refuse even if we are unable to reach the end.<sup>55</sup> In «On Experience», he presents this idea by means of a fable by Aesop, according to which some dogs, eager to reach prey they seemed to see at a distance in the ocean, started to drink water to dry the path to it, but finally drowned.<sup>56</sup> This may suggest that the activity of portraying himself may not be quite clearly separable from the quest for self-knowledge. In this case, the problem is even deeper, and concerns the meaning that could be attached to research that does not really expect to find the object of its investigation – a problem that may be raised, more generally, about how to understand the kind of research that the Pyrrhonian sceptic claims to be doing.

Interestingly, however, both Montaigne and the ancient Pyrrhonians claim that, at least in some sense (that is different for both) they reach their goal by chance. Sextus explains that the sceptics searched for tranquility with the expectation that they could reach it by the possession of the truth but that, even though they could not find it, tranquility followed as if by chance.<sup>57</sup> In Montaigne's case, chance is what composes his own «fantasies»: «Je sens ce proffit inespéré de la publication de mes meurs qu'elle me sert aucunement de reigle... Cette publique declaration m'oblige de me tenir en ma route, et à ne desmentir l'image de mes conditions».<sup>58</sup> Here, instead of following from what he knows of himself, the utility of Montaigne's work appears as it offers the occasion for a practical decision inciting him to follow a more stable line of action. As he writes, in «De la gloire»: «... Me peignant pour autrui, je me suis peint en moy de couleurs plus nettes qui n'estoyent les miennes premières. Je n'ay pas plus fait mon livre que mon livre m'a fait, livre consubstantiel à son auteur».<sup>59</sup> Here again we find Montaigne discussing the utility of his book, opposing those who consider themselves only «par fantasie» in one given moment to those who actually study themselves, as he does, to make a «registre» of this study across time and in good faith.<sup>60</sup> Now, if Montaigne claims here that his portrait can allow him to change, it is not because of its truthfulness, but because it gives him occasion to transform the model along the process of representation; or, as he puts it, by how the act of looking to himself made him change his own colors, instead of those of the painting. Again, we have here a practical decision reached because of something he discovered during the process of the painting.

In all of these examples, the effects of Montaigne's study seem to depend upon his habit of reviewing the way he tried to depict himself in another moment. And this is the case with another important remark he makes in «Du Repentir», about how anyone could find some «leading form» of his own: «il n'est personne, s'il s'escoute, qui ne descouvre en soy une forme sienne, une forme maîtresse, qui luicte contre l'institution et contre la tempeste des passions qui lui sont contraires».<sup>61</sup> It should be clear by now that this «forme

<sup>54</sup> III, 9, 964C. Cf. II, 12, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. III, 9, 1000-1001B; III, 13, 1065-1066, 1068, 1073BC.

<sup>56</sup> III, 13, 1068B.

<sup>57</sup> HP I, 25 ss.

<sup>58</sup> III, 9, 980B.

<sup>59</sup> II, 18, 665C.

<sup>60</sup> *Id. ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> III, 2, 811B, see also II, 12, 565-566.

maitresse» can only be manifest in how we perceive our variations through experience (and does not commit Montaigne to any metaphysical thesis). Further, it seems to require the same sort of distancing one must acquire from his present impressions by means of an extended register. More precisely, I take Montaigne here to be suggesting that, even if we cannot properly attain knowledge about our individual selves (in the sense explained above), we may still discern some regular patterns in our actions and feelings, as opposed to those who claim to know themselves, but only in an unreflective way. We cannot be sure that they will not change or be overcome by study or passions. Even so, it is better to rely on them as practical guides than simply to act on momentary impressions.

But maybe the more important consequence of taking into account the sceptical dimension of Montaigne's reflections here lies in its connection with repentance itself. As he says, his aim in this chapter is to justify his usual statement about how seldom he repents, and this is to be done on the level of «common and legitimate beliefs»: «Je parle enquerant et ignorant... Je n'enseigne point, je raconte...». To make it clear, he offers a critical analysis of this passion, as well as an account of the conditions under which one can be free of it. There are different kinds of repentance, according to Montaigne, but the one with which he is particularly concerned here is presented as a vice produced by reason.<sup>62</sup> More precisely, the vice depends upon the belief that true repentance (that is, repentance stemming from deep inside ourselves) can transform us and provide a better way to get along in the world. But to encourage this belief in the transformative capacity of our consciousness as a way of perfecting ourselves is to lose sight of our limited capacity to make decisions. And this belief is not only unhelpful but also harmful, as it can lead mainly to cruelty toward oneself. If we abandon it, we are left to less harmful kinds of repentance, more suited to a human consciousness which is neither that of an angel nor that of an animal. Montaigne's remark about the whole form of the human condition may here reveal another meaning: we cannot acquire knowledge of our own essence in a way that we can consciously trust (and thus avoid repentance). But we can exclude imaginary beliefs that are not truly compatible with our human condition – that is, with what our experience can tell us about our life under a more rigorous examination. Our moral judgments should be controlled by our common human condition, can be assessed by our common ordinary life suitably examined, and do not require any angelic perspective reached by religious or moral precepts such as the one he is discussing in this particular case.

As we try to look at ourselves at some distance from our present situation, we can discern better how differently we proceed and accordingly better regulate our expectations. This is no more than the use of personal experience for leading a practical life in a more convenient way, insofar as we can have judgment better suited to our limits as we act: «Je fay coustumierement entier ce que je fay, et marche tout d'une piece; je n'ay guiere de mouvement qui se cache et si desrobe à ma raison, et qui ne se conduise à peu pres par le consetement de toutes mes parties, sans division, sans sedition intestine».<sup>63</sup> Instead of a product of his capacity for the knowledge of his own essence, the main quality that Montaigne finds in his own judgment is, in the end, the acknowledgment of its own weakness.

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<sup>62</sup> See III, 2, 806B.

<sup>63</sup> III, 2, 812B.



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