

Amyot and Montaigne

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By way of introduction, let me read to you a few lines from a recent article by Pierre Assouline in the section La Vie Littéraire of Le Monde. It is entitled: “De Montaigne à Twitter, l’art du recyclage”!

C’est aussi désespérant que rassurant: on n’invente jamais rien. Ou si peu. En prendre conscience permet de garder la tête froide et de relativiser notre génie.

Sober advice, without a doubt; but, Assouline goes on to expose the strange truth that Montaigne’s sudden and extraordinary current popularity in the United States is because a new dimension of readers, users of Facebook, who have adopted the Essais, see the essayist’s style as prefiguring the personal shards of blogging! It is all explained by Sarah Bakewell who gave this title to her book of 400 pages: How to Live or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts of an Answer, (London, 2010). In this context, recycling might be an adequate term to describe Montaigne’s relationship to Amyot, I would prefer re-inventing, as will be clear in what follows.

Montaigne’s debt to and admiration for Plutarch, for his Parallel Lives and his Moralia, are very well established, thoroughly documented since Isabelle Konstantinovic’s thesis, Montaigne et Plutarque, published by

Droz in 1989.⁽¹⁾ Like Pierre Villey, long before her, she identified 89 named references to Plutarch in the Essais and 500 borrowings from his writings. Today, I do not intend to go over that ground, but rather to focus on Montaigne's reading and interpreting of Jacques Amyot's French versions of Plutarch, and especially of the Oeuvres morales, and to explore how they helped to supplement his thinking, and – in particular – to modify his style..

This is what Montaigne had to say about Amyot in an extensive encomium which opens his essay A Demain les Affaires (II.iv.363):

Je donne avec raison, ce me semble, la palme à Jacques Amiot sur tous nos escrivains François, non seulement pour la naïveté et pureté du langage, en quoy il surpasse tous autres, ny pour la constance d'un si long travail, ny pour la profondeur de son sçavoir, ayant peu développer si heureusement un auteur si espineux et ferré (car on m'en dira ce qu'on voudra: je n'entens rien au Grec, mais je voy un sens si beau, si bien joint et entretenu partout en sa traduction que, ou il a certainement entendu l'imagination vraye de l'auteur, ou, ayant par longue conversation planté vivement dans son ame une generale Idée de celle de Plutarque, il ne luy a au moins rien presté qui le desmente ou qui le desdie); mais sur tout je lui sçay bon gré

d'avoir sçeu trier et choisir un livre si digne et si à propos, pour en faire present à son pays.

Here, Montaigne highlights the qualities of Amyot's language; the extent of his commitment and depth of his knowledge. He marvels at the way Amyot has rendered an inordinately difficult text, inspiring every reader with confidence and gratitude. He himself takes for granted that Amyot has innate affinities with Plutarch and, although he has no Greek himself, he feels that the French text is an authentic interpretation of Plutarch's original work.

In any event, when Montaigne engaged with ancient writing in a language he had not mastered, he did not always distinguish the translator from the original author; on the contrary, he stressed on several occasions that his interest lay in the manner rather than the matter of their writing: "Je m'amusa à lire en des auteurs, sans soin de leur science, y cherchant leur façon" (De l'art de conferer, III,viii,928). The result of such attention was, as we know, the mosaic character of the Essais. It is important, however, to remember that the "marqueterie" or "rhapsodies" (as Montaigne termed it), was not unique to the Essais in sixteenth-century writing. Antoine Muret, for instance, characterized Erasmus' Apothegmes, "cette poétique de l'addition" as "rapsodies ou marqueterie". Apothegmes were, of course, by their very nature a fragmented collection of sayings, but which

tended to distance the writer from his material.⁽²⁾ While Montaigne himself recognized that the “gaillardes escapades” which he admired in the Oeuvres morales had found their way into his own work. Such common structures of the aparently haphazard were deceptive and reflected common approaches to writing and revision. Jacques Amyot in his annotations of the Greek text in its 1542 edition,⁽³⁾ Pierre de Ronsard in the many re-editions of his poems, and Montaigne in the Essais (to cite but three famous examples) were constant revisers of their own writing, self interpreters who modified their texts on each reading. Although Montaigne claimed that he never corrected his ideas: “je ne corrige pas mes premieres imaginations” (Des plus excellens hommes, II,xxxvii,758), he did alter them, adding a word here and there, and – as we know – sometimes whole sections. As André Tournon has argued,⁽⁴⁾ once the text is there, written and printed, it changes its status and becomes a document ready to be interpreted, by Montaigne himself and by the reader who is invited to extend the meaning.

Montaigne knew Amyot personally, and – as we saw – admired the beauty and purity of his language; and he operated on his printed text with the same constructive reflexion that he used for his own Essais. Reading brought Montaigne new creative freedom and it has implications for our own reading habits as well as for Montaigne’s anticipation of them. He expects to be read critically; he posits a diligent, intelligent reader, capable

of recognizing citations and of interpreting the full meaning of the borrowings he re-inscribes. He looks for someone keen to participate, to take a share in his thinking, to supply links in the argument and to carry it further: "pour rehausser et secourir son invention", as he writes in Des Livres (II,x,408). He is himself this kind of reader of the Oeuvres morales.

Thus, any study of Montaigne's use of Amyot needs to go further than simply identifying a source of an idea or expression. I shall try to examine now how Montaigne used that text and often transformed it. Even in his shortest essay, Le profit de l'un est dommage de l'autre (I,xxii,107), Montaigne revealed how his method of reading involved critical attention to detail and to context: "Ce que considérant", he writes about the text he is reading, "il m'est venu en fantaisie",...demonstrating the urge to incorporate foreign materials and make them his own. He freely admitted that such incorporation involved distortion, and even disguise. In a late addition to De la Physionomie (III,xii,1056), for instance, he declared – almost with pride – his art of manipulating citations, "les desguisant et difformant à nouveau service". Inevitably, such changes have a digressive effect and which, in itself, invites the alert reader to follow the labyrinth, to recognize the beginnings of a new theme and to go beyond to the thoughts that Montaigne suggests but does not spell out: "Elles [my citations] portent souvent, hors de mon propos, la semence d'une matiere plus riche et plus hardie" (Considération sur Cicéron, I,xl,251).⁽⁵⁾ This expansive

tendency in Montaigne's writing seems to spring naturally; he admitted that his pen runs on "à l'aventure" (De l'art de conferer, III.viii,943), that he is prone to exaggeration, "je grossis volontiers" (De la Vanité, III,iii,919), and "s'emporte volontiers à l'hyperbole" (Des Boyteux, III,xi,1028). And yet, by contrast, he is keen to stress the space he leaves for the reader to fill, in which to make his own discoveries. Spelling things out – according to Montaigne – closes the mind; like Plutarch, he prefers to leave the idea incomplete and simply point the way to go – a point he developed most strongly in De l'Institution des enfans (I,xxvi,156-7).

Let us now turn specifically to Amyot. Embarking on his demonstration of the abject nature of man (Apologie, II,xii,452), Montaigne remembers Homer's words as cited by Amyot, namely that, of all living things, man was the most miserable. Amyot's translation develops the idea, declaring man "le plus calamiteux de tous les autres animaux" (Amyot, I,388). All my examples from Amyot come from the 1575 edition of the Oeuvres morales. For his own purposes, Montaigne picks up the adjective "calamiteux", adds "fraile" for further emphasis, and then tacks on a thought from Pliny which was inscribed upon one of the beams of his Library: "homine nil miserius aut superbius" which serves to give the argument added force since man is now not only the most miserable – "calamiteux" – but that misery is reinforced by pride: "La plus

calamiteuse et fraile de toutes les creatures, c'est l'homme, et quant et quant la plus orgueilleuse". Amyot was the starting point, but his characterization of human misery was, apparently, not strong enough for Montaigne.

Such extension of the original text occurs again in this example: towards the beginning of the first treatise on The Fortune or Virtue of Alexander (Amyot, I,838), Amyot has Alexander speak to elaborate upon the extraordinary nature of his military campaigns. In one great sweep, the hero evokes tempests, extreme heat, deep caverns, towering mountains, and beasts of monstrous size to convey the incredible speed and immensity of his triumphs. In his version, Montaigne retains the notions of speed and destruction but transforms the great sweep into a single metaphor – an impetuous torrent “qui choque et attaque sans discretion”; moreover, he increases the power of the image by interiorizing it, shifting the burden from the commander’s physical activity to dwell on the uncontrolled state of Alexander’s temperament, and reinforcing its effect by a further comparison, that of a raging bull, this time taken from one of Horace’s Odes (Observations sur les moyens de faire la guerre de Julius Caesar, II,xxxiv,739). In another place, De la Vanité (III,ix,989), Montaigne appropriates Amyot’s text, generalising it greatly. Amyot was arguing that young improvers should ignore the style of a speech in favour of its content, and he illustrates the point in Comment il faut ouir by a metaphor

– that of an engraved drinking glass. The image then concerns advice about only appreciating the wrappings of a thought once the inside has been absorbed, and Amyot’s text goes like this: “ceulx qui boivent après qu’ils ont estanché leur soif, alors ils tournent leurs coupes tout à l’entour, pour considerer et regarder l’ouvrage qui est dessus”. In the Essais, this glass becomes an illustration for us of Montaigne’s similar contention that we should only pay attention to the style of an utterance once we have digested its import: “Comme après avoir avalé le bon vin d’une belle coupe nous en considérons les graveures et l’ouvrage”. Such comparisons and images, which are abundant in Amyot’s translation, had a particular attraction for Montaigne. There is the famous image of birds feeding their young from the tip of their beaks, found in Amyot as a way of criticising charlatans who pass on useless, superficial information; the image is used in Du Pedantisme (I,xxv,136) to expose the fatuity of passing on bits and pieces of ill-digested knowledge: “Tout ainsi que les oyseaux vont quelquefois à la queste du grain, et le portent au bec sans le taster, pour en faire bechée à leurs petits, ainsi nos pedantes vont pillotant la science dans les livres, et ne la logent qu’au bout de leurs lèvres, pour la dégorger seulement et se mettre au vent”. While Amyot stressed the flimsy aspects of the mother birds/charlatans, Montaigne develops the useless inanity of superficial transmission.

When Montaigne chose to expatiate on his strong feelings of dislike for those who dwell upon and relish misfortune, regarding pleasant things as of nought, he collapses two passages from Amyot into one. Such people are, he writes, “comme les mouches qui ne peuvent tenir contre un corps bien poly et bien lissé, et s’arrachent et reposent aux lieux scabreus et raboteux” (Sur des vers de Virgile, III,v,845). Here Montaigne is reporting Amyot’s text almost word for word: “Comme les mouches qui ne se peuvent tenir contre un corps bien poly et bien lissé, et s’attachent et reposent aux lieux scabreus et raboteux” (Amyot, I,197, De la tranquillité de l’ame et repos de l’esprit), to this borrowing Montaigne adds, “et comme les vantouses que ne hument et appetent que le mauvais sang”; this is an image which Amyot had cited earlier in his treatise (I,189), but which Montaigne employs here to strike home the disgusting and stubborn unpleasantness of prophets of doom.⁽⁶⁾

Such accuracy in reporting Amyot’s very words is not unusual. Consider the story of the halcyon, the bird, its habits and its nest which Montaigne evokes in the Apologie (II.xii,480-1) along with many other anecdotes drawn from Quels animaux sont les plus avisez (Amyot, II,512-4). Repeating Amyot’s words exactly and in the same order, Montaigne first describes the sea: “toute la mer fort arrestée, affermie et applanie, sans vague, sans vent et sans pluye”; then comes reference to the affectionate support of the female bird which Amyot too had stressed before Montaigne

brings in his pièce de résistance – the making of the nest. It might seem that he is giving excessive weight to this intricate structure, yet he is merely transferring Amyot’s description of it to his essay. Montaigne repeats the words which describes its shape: “la proportion et figure et la concavité du dedans...elle est impenetrable, close et fermée”; he rehearses the bird’s testing of the nest in the water to make sure there are no leaks; and he reports Plutarch’s view (Plutarch who had seen and handled such objects) on what went into its making – the bones of fishes interlaced together. In Amyot, the halcyon had provided the climax to his discussion; in Montaigne, it also acquires special significance. Although the story occurs in a series of narrative proofs about the superiority of animals over man, Montaigne gives this tale particular emphasis, partly because he specifically calls on the authority of Plutarch – “voilà une description bien claire de ce bastiment [that is, the nest] et empruntée de bon lieu [that is, from Plutarch]”, and the emphasis also derives partly from his own interpolations. The story is introduced by the assertion that it surpasses human understanding: “surpasse toute humaine cogitation”; and despite the detailed re-creation of the nest – “cette merveilleuse fabrique” – the miracle of its making still escapes us: “toutefois il me semble qu’elle ne nous esclaicit pas encor suffisamment la difficulté de cette architecture”. Note the dignity and the placing of the word chosen to remind us of the nest – “cette architecture”. A grandiose term which Amyot did not use,

but designed, in Montaigne, to recall a thought which had passed through Amyot's mind as he prepared his set piece on the making of the nest, introducing it "comme un maistre charpentier bastissant une navire".

In other borrowings, by changing the context Montaigne modifies the sense. He cites a most serious example of flattery to greatness, that of Mithridates' servants who offered their bodies to their king so that he might exercise his medical prowess, an act which represented a form of flattery that goes beyond words – Amyot's text, "le flatter de faict et non pas de parole" (Amyot, I,120, Comment discerner le flatteur de l'amy), but Montaigne transfers the example to a new context. He locates it within the picture which he is painting of the ills of religious strife: "la desloyauté, les blasphèmes, la cruauté; comme l'hérésie, comme la superstition, l'irréligion, la mollesse". While those who sucked up to Mithridates suffered physical distress – "inciser et cautheriser leurs membres", (Amyot's words were "inciser et brusler avec les cautères"), Montaigne's victims suffered mental mutilation, a much worse fate underlined by Montaigne's explanation: "car ces autres (that is, his contemporaries) souffrent cauteriser leur ame, partie plus delicate et plus noble" (III,vii,919-20). So, in thinking about the implications of Amyot's story, Montaigne leaves far behind the inconveniences of greatness – the original title of his

own essay, De l'incommodité de la Grandeur, to highlight the atrocities which religious disagreements had brought in their train

Such manipulations of Amyot's language are not rare. Pyrrho's pig - the centrepiece of Amyot's argument about man's innate weakness - who, you will remember, in contrast to his frightened human companions, tolerated the storm eating in quiet tranquillity, this pig offered Montaigne the opportunity to expatiate on the frailty of man's reasoning faculty, actually taking the focus away from the pig. Again, in another example, this time from De la colere (II,xxxi,715), he simply reverses Amyot's words, Amyot lingered on the image while Montaigne stressed the propensities of anger to forge exaggerated notions of things. Here is Montaigne comparing the distortions brought by an angry mind to forms seen through a mist: "Au travers d'elle [la colère] les fautes nous apparoissent plus grandes, comme les corps au travers d'un brouillas"; as I indicated, Amyot's original text concentrated not on the passion but on the image created by it: "comme les corps à travers un brouillas apparoissent plus grands, ainsi sont les fautes à travers la cholère" (Amyot, I,160). Or, another instance: from De l'Experience (III,xiii,1068), where Montaigne picks upon Amyot's triple nouns - "ambiguité, obliquité et obscurité - which occur in La prophetisse Pythie (Amyot, II, 874), and are used to describe the Sybil's oracles, Montaigne picks up Amyot's words and extends them vastly, turning nouns into imposing adverbs, "doublement,

obscurément et obliquement”, moving the focus from oracle to human utterance and understanding, playing with the notions of ceaseless mental activity, conjuring up a mind eager, engaged and relishing its explorations. Here is how he describes it, in a famous passage: the mind, “C’est un mouvement irrégulier, perpétuel, sans patron et sans but. Ses inventions s’eschauffent, se suyvent, et s’entreproduisent l’une l’autre”.⁽⁷⁾

So it is that both texts are malleable: in Montaigne’s attentive reading of Amyot, in his meditation upon his own printed essays, phrases are stretched and loosened, ready to move into new, just discovered directions.

Given this close reading, it is not surprising that the Oeuvres morales and the Essais exhibit many of the same stylistic features. They shared a love of symmetry where both parts of a sentence echo each other syntactically; any page of the Essais present structures such as : “on nous dresse à l’emprunt et à la quête” (De la Physionomie, III,xii,1038); or conversely, in Amyot (I,336): “car l’opinion rend une mesme chose à l’un utile, comme bonne monnoye qui a cours, à l’autre inutile”. They both tended to reinforce their ideas with repetitions, doubling up, and invariably stringing triple adjectives together; listen to Montaigne’s objections as to how philosophy is usually presented to children: “d’un visage renfroigné, sourcilleux et terrible...marquée de ce faux visage, pasle et hideux”. The prose is rhythmically harmonious; their phrases well-balanced, supported by assonance and alliterations which both authors favoured. Here is

Amyot in his Epistre du Roy on wisdom: “qui enlumine, sublime et affine le discours de la raison”; or Montaigne on death, “c’est le bout et non pourtant le but de la vie” (De la Physionomie, III,xii,1051). And yet, notwithstanding such evident attention to sentence structure and sound, both writers allowed their pen to wander freely, uninhibited by formal niceties: “A propos, ou hors de propos, n’importe”, as Montaigne quipped in Des Boyteux (III,xi,1033). Both writers sought to extend the expansive power of French, to create an expressive tool from which new things could be said, an expansion of the language explicitly stated by Amyot at the end of his preface addressed to the king: “si j’ay par cette traduction mienne aucunement enrichy ou poly votre langue.”

Much more could be said on the affinities between Amyot and Montaigne, and some of these were addressed in a recent colloquium whose findings were edited by Olivier Guerrier in 2008, Moralia et Oeuvres morales à la Renaissance. In conclusion, however, I should like to stress how the Oeuvres morales provided Montaigne with a kind of anchor temporarily stabilising the “alleure vagabonde de son esprit” (as he put it in De l’exercitation, II,vi,378).⁽⁸⁾ The virile style which Montaigne admired in the Plutarch he read in Amyot’s version was a constant comfort for there he recognized the dependable mind which “nous informe, establit et conforte constamment” (De la Physionomie, III,xii,1040). Perhaps a typical, and certainly the most eloquent, inspiration occurs at the end of De

la Vanité (III,ix,1000-1) which reproduced the conclusion to the first book of the Oeuvres morales, the essay entitled Que signifioit ce mot Ei? (I, 975-6). There, Amyot finished his lesson on “Cognoy-toy, toy-mesme”, with this succinct and resounding statement; in his view, the oracle represented: “un advertissement et un records à l’homme mortel de l’imbecillité et débilité de sa nature”. In Montaigne’s own powerful reproach to his fellow men, he remembers Amyot’s words which serve as a powerful stimulant, Montaigne transports them, and infinitely extends their significance. For him, looking into oneself involves dissolution, dissipation and even disappearance: “Regardez dans vous...vous vous escoulez...on vous trahit, on vous dissipe, on vous desrobe à vous”. Turn your gaze the other way, away from the self, onto the world instead and receive this damning judgement by Montaigne in part, inspired by the Elder Pliny: “tu es le scrutateur sans connoissance, le magistrat sans jurisdiction et apres tout le badin de la farce”. Uncompromising and unequivocal, Amyot’s warnings on man’s imbecillity are taken here to their extreme – an extreme which Pierre Charron, in De la Sagesse, was to turn into a commonplace of christian morality: I quote from the first book of Charron’s work⁽⁹⁾

Tu es la plus vuide et necessiteuse, la plus vaine et miserable de toutes...tu te trahis et te desrobbe à toy mesme...rameine-toy,

examine toy...Par la cognoissance de soy l'homme monte et
arrive plustost et mieux à la cognoissance de Dieu (Bk. I, p.3)

With this shift in logic and the intrusion of belief, we are a long way from Amyot and from Montaigne. Yet, Pierre Charron's incomprehension and distortions of Montaigne's text –“mis à nouveau service” – were only the beginning of traditions of misreadings in succeeding generations.

By 1672, as reported in the Journal des Sçavans, critics in search of coherent structures and overall symmetry found Amyot's translations old-fashioned, obscure and perplexing:

À cause de ses Periodes qui sont si longues et si obscures,
qu'elles recommencent souvent par de nouveaux membres,
lorsqu'on croit qu'elles vont finir, et qu'elles contiennent
quelquefois deux ou trois matieres différentes qui devaient estre
separées.

These complaints attack those very features – the haphazard intermingling of themes and ideas - which Montaigne cherished in Amyot's text and had imitated in his own. It is not surprising, therefore, that the same Journal des Sçavans, five years later in 1677, castigated the author of the Essais for the same stylistic sins: “les longues digressions, avec les raisonnemens trop étendus et les citations latines trop frequentes”. On this evidence alone, the affinities between Amyot and Montaigne were, indeed, close.⁽¹⁰⁾

NOTES

1. In addition to this thesis, Robert Aulotte's Amyot et Plutarque. La tradition des Moralia au XVIe siècle, Droz, 1965, is still useful.
2. On aphorisms in Montaigne, Alain Le Gros, Essais sur poutres. Peintres et Inscriptions chez Montaigne, Paris, Klincksieck, 2000.
3. For these annotations, Raymond Esclapez, "Le Dieu Apollon: des dialogues pythiques de Plutarque aux Essais de Montaigne", pp. 253-74 in Olivier Guerrier, ed., Moralia et Oeuvres morales à la Renaissance, Paris, Champion, 2008.
4. André Tournon, "Route par ailleurs". Le nouveau langage des "Essais", Paris, Champion, 2008.
5. I first studied this expansive tendency in Montaigne's writing in 1974, Montaigne's Deceits, University of London Press; for more recent work, Raymond Esclapez, "L'oiseveté créatrice dans les Essais: Persistance et Epanouissement d'un thème", pp. 25-39 in Montaigne et "Les Essais", 1588-1988, Actes du congrès de Paris, Jan. 1988, réunis par Claude Blum, Paris, Champion, 1990.

6. Montaigne's ability to visualize his thought has been well examined by Géralde Nakam, especially in Montaigne. La manière et la matière, Paris, Klincksieck, 1991.
7. On the use of repetitions by Montaigne, see chapter VIII in Marie-Luce Demonet's A Plaisir. Sémiotique et scepticisme chez Montaigne, Orléans, 2002.
8. The tentative consequences of such wandering are examined in Kirsti Sellevold, "J'aime ces mots": expressions linguistiques du doute dans les "Essais" de Montaigne, Paris, Champion, 2004; and Marie-Luce Demonet & Alain Le gros (eds.), L'écriture du scepticisme chez Montaigne, Droz, 2004.
9. Pierre Charron, De la Sagesse, Paris, 1604.
10. For the influence of other ancient writers on the Essais where Amyot is excluded, Montaigne Studies. An Interdisciplinary Forum, vol. XVII, Number 1-2, Montaigne et les Anciens, 2005, and where essays on Homer, Xenophon, Catullus, Horace, Persius, Lucan, Martial and Juvenal can be found.