The Rhetoric of Self-Deprecation in Montaigne's Essais

Although it may seem far-fetched to draw comparisons between Michel de Montaigne's Essais and the twentieth-century French nouveau roman, the two do have certain elements in common if one considers the question of form and the role of the reader. In the nouveau roman, for example, virtually all the structural principles which traditionally determine the shape of the novel are undermined, thus creating the illusion of an unfinished product that the reader is induced to complete. The writer's purpose in part is to engage the reader in the creative process; should he fail to do so, the novel would not "work." Confusion and uneasiness seem to be the inevitable consequences of the reader's active role in bridging the gaps left by the novelist.

Likewise, the essay provides a dynamic framework within which both the writer and his reader can interact freely. Frederick Rider, author of Psychological Development in the Essays of Michel de Montaigne, characterizes it as an "easy" form requiring "no sustained effort" on the part of the writer, thereby "allowing him to choose his own time, topic, and approach"; it is "informal, or could easily be made to seem so . . . ."[1] Anyone who has read even a few of the essays will recognize that Montaigne is as interested in examining himself as he is the topics indicated by his titles. His essays appear to exude a certain nonchalance; they give us the impression of an aimless wandering of his thoughts as he scrutinizes himself, his own opinions and those "qui sont en usage"[2] (which are usually the target of much of his criticism), as well as philosophical, political and social questions, from every possible angle. He expands only

to contract, obscures only to elucidate, and all the while constrains the reader to do the same.

Montaigne's choice of the essay as his genre was undoubtedly a reaction to the "sec dogmatisme"[3] of his predecessors against which he protests so frequently. By constantly digressing and changing perspective he is able to break out of that rigid mold and foster interaction with his reader. Ian Winter, in Montaigne's Self-Portrait and its Influence in France, 1580-1630, contends that "Montaigne is, by his own admission, indirect and devious when it comes to the overall structure of the essay," suggesting that Montaigne's digressiveness is "highly supportive of spontaneity in self-portraiture."[4] Although Montaigne constantly insists that "je n'ai pas corrigé . . . par force de la raison mes complexions naturelles, et n'ai aucunement troublé par art mon inclination. Je me laisse aller, comme je suis venu . . ." (III, 12, 426), most critics agree that his essays were reworked and corrected as well as expanded. Rider states that "In his efforts to better express the truth, Montaigne does not shun either careful revisions or stylistic flourishes" (Rider, 103). But by understating his skill as an artist, he remains at the "human" level and consequently becomes more creditable.

The true challenge for the reader lies in dealing with the fragmentation of the self-portrait and of the subjects being treated, and in reconciling the many Montaignes within each individual essay. Wolfgang Iser describes the relationship between writer and reader in his book The Implied Reader, explaining that the writer must "activate the reader's imagination in order to involve him and realize the intentions of his text,"[5] and furthermore, that "one of the most potent weapons in the writer's armory is illusion" (Iser, 284). While such comments may seem more applicable to modern works of fiction that lend themselves to reader-response criticism, the concept also works for

Montaigne, for deception plays a major role in the Essais. The persona presented in the essays is regularly undercut by another self that Montaigne is striving to reveal. If there is some "activation" of the reader's imagination, then its source must be found in this opposition.

Such is the literary paradox in Montaigne's work: the "personal, egotistical element is strong in the self-portrait, yet intensive efforts are made to gain, or to appear to gain, objectivity" (Winter, 15). The principal method by which Montaigne attempts to achieve this unbiased demeanor is self-deprecation. It is difficult not to notice its presence, especially in light of its heavy concentration in the first few paragraphs of many of the essays. An initial reading of these essays certainly will reveal one of the faces of Montaigne: the honest, overly-sensitive down-to-earth Montaigne whose self-esteem seems uncommonly low and who apparently has absolutely nothing to flaunt. A closer reading, however, should divulge another side of the persona: the intelligent, self-conscious, analytical Montaigne who is confident that in admitting his weaknesses, he will reveal his strength of character. By appearing to be unbiased he he hopes to gain the reader's trust and cooperation; by continually frustrating our image of him, he immerses us in the relentless analysis of himself and of mankind. He camouflages the persona of strength and firm belief with a veil of modesty and weakness. By examining the preface and the beginnings of two essays, "Des Menteurs" and "De l'Institution des enfants," we will see how the interaction between the "faces" of Montaigne ultimately disturbs the reader's perception of the writer and of the intent of his book.[6]

Montaigne's first sentence in his preface, "C'est ici un livre de bonne foi, lecteur" (20) in effect exemplifies his attitude toward his reader, for among his aims is that of convincing us that what he writes is the truth, that what we will

see portrayed is the real, natural Montaigne, "tout entier, et tout nu" (20). Rider comments that "the motive force of his style is precisely the desire to be believed" (Rider, 97). It follows, then, that if Montaigne seeks to paint a true-to-life portrait, he must incorporate both his weaknesses and his strengths. He apparently feels that in order to be believed, he must underscore his flaws, his "humanness," for if he painted an immaculate portrait, his work would lose verisimilitude, which would in turn reduce his power to influence the reader. In the preface he insists almost immediately that "je ne m'y suis proposé aucune fin que domestique et privée. Je n'y ai eu nulle considération de ton service, ni de ma gloire" (20), and that his book is destined only for those relatives and friends who might wish to remember "aucuns traits de mes conditions et humeurs" (20). He would like us to believe that a "public" neither exists nor concerns him, swearing that his powers "ne sont pas capables d'un tel dessein" (20), affirming that "Si c'eût été pour rechercher la faveur du monde, je me fusse mieux paré et me présenterais en une marche étudiée" (20). Instead of stating what he really wants to say, "je ne recherche pas la faveur du monde," he uses the pluperfect subjunctive and the si clause construction to suggest that the situation is contrary to fact. We are supposed to take Montaigne's word that nothing about his character will be disguised; moreover, his defects "s'y liront au vif" (20). This technique of self-reduction tightens the bond between Montaigne and his reader. The Essais represent not an autobiography dedicated to posterity, but a conscious, though subtle, "essay" to establish his value by lauding his imperfections.

Henri Peyre, in Literature and Sincerity, discusses Montaigne's awareness of the dialectical process of thought, stating that Montaigne

> realized that some passiveness was required from him who claimed to study himself in his becoming, or else too much activity, too conscious a use of will power would transform and deform the object observed by the subject. At the same time, Montaigne understood that a searching self-analysis is a corroding agent, whittling away many illusions and delusions. He strove for some equilibrium, and he justified his desire for sincerity through his purpose as a moralist. The dilemma was for him whether to stress all that in him was mediocre or base, so as to be easily content with his own, and man's, imperfections, or to depict himself as somewhat nobler than he was, so as to attempt aiming higher and thus to improve others.[7]

The advantage of Montaigne's decision to highlight his mediocrity is this: we, as readers, can identify with imperfection much more easily than with flawlessness. Montaigne resolves the dilemma described by Peyre by relying on reverse psychology; by attempting to prove how ignoble he is, he will ultimately prove his nobility. What appears to be excessive modesty is merely a ploy which a close examination of his style will betray. As Alfred Clauser puts it in Montaigne Paradoxal, "Ses modesties affectées sont des modesties créatrices. Le doute sur soi-même prend corps et renverse le doute."[8] If Montaigne were being honest about his intentions concerning the Essais, if he really did want to leave an explanation of his character to his friends and family, then a closing statement

like "Ce n'est pas raison que tu emploies ton loisir en un sujet si frivole et si vain" (20) would be unnecessary. Such an unobtrusive statement put so well only challenges the attentive reader to forge ahead, not to toss the book aside. If he believes that claim, then he probably also believes Montaigne when he claims to be "sans contention et artifice" (20). The separation of truth from illusion is by far the most complex and intriguing aspect of the reading process.

Wayne Booth quotes François Mauriac's statement that "an author who assures you that he writes for himself alone and that he does not care whether he is heard or not is a boaster and is deceiving either himself or you."[9] In truth Montaigne does have something he considers significant to declare to the world.[10] Structurally speaking, self-deprecation at the beginning of the essay enables Montaigne to establish an easygoing, congenial rapport with his reader, so that his expression of moral judgments, which intensifies as the essay progresses, often goes unnoticed by the unsuspecting reader. In terms of style, we will see that Montaigne is almost constantly contradicting himself, so that the reader has difficulty knowing what to believe about the writer's knowledge and reliability. Barbara Bowen discusses these characteristics of the essays at length, assuring us that Montaigne's

> constant self-denigration . . . has a sound moral pretext--if we are led to sympathize with him, we shall be more likely to accept his moral outlook. Ambiguity arises only when we fail to distinguish between his attitude to the problem discussed, which is invariably quite straightforward, and his attitude to the reader, which is often falsely

> humble and self-deprecating. He often, in fact, deliberately deceives the reader rather than merely disconcerts him.[11]

Thus the reader is left to wander in a labyrinth, never sure whether to trust or to doubt.

The technique of affected modesty is hardly one of Montaigne's inventions. According to Ernst Robert Curtius, author of European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, it was frequently used by Roman orators in their exordia to put their listeners in a "favorable, attentive, and tractable state of mind."[12] Such modesty formulae were later adopted during pagan and Christian Late Antiquity and appear in medieval Latin and vernacular literature (Curtius, 83). The use of a mask enables the writer to manipulate the reaction of the reader.[13] Montaigne, too, strives for his reader's acceptance by building a protective wall of self-deprecation around himself; he even admits in a later essay that "La confession généreuse et libre énerve le reproche et désarme l'injure" (III, 9, 395). It is also an invaluable rhetorical device. Once Montaigne has submerged the reader in his subjectivity, he can then slip easily into a more objective mode and express his ideas on a particular subject.

Numerous critics have elaborated upon Montaigne's unpretentious attitude, and some have even labeled it false. But few have examined the text of a specific essay closely enough to speculate as to what makes it deceptive. In opening "Des Menteurs," for example, Montaigne sets out to prove that he is unique by demonstrating harsh self-criticism: "Il n'est homme à qui il sièse si mal de se mêler de parler de mémoire. Car je n'en reconnais quasi trace en moi, et ne pense qu'il y en ait au monde une autre si monstrueuse en défaillance" (30). The accumulation of negations and the adjective "monstrueuse" enable him to destroy any confidence we may have had

in Montaigne's ability to remember. Yet it also makes us realize that this is a man who knows himself well and who is daring enough to show his reader the negative side of his personality. Our acknowledgement of that fact somehow brightens the dark portrait he has ostensibly begun to paint. By stating that "je n'en reconnais quasi trace en moi" he is also affirming his cognizant capabilities; he is able to recognize that he does not recognize, as it were. Likewise, strategically placed at the end of the opening paragraph we find "Mais en cette-là je pense être singulier et très rare, et digne de gagner par là nom et réputation" (30). Thus, though he is "monstrous" in terms of his memory, he is at the same time superior and rare, worthy of our consideration rather than our repudiation. By denouncing himself, he manages to indirectly praise himself, or, as Glauser puts it, "S'il admet un manque, il affirme en même temps une vertu, celle qui consiste à avouer ce manque" (Glauser, 39). Peyre likens Montaigne's point of view to that of Rousseau, explaining that

> almost as much as Rousseau, albeit with keener humor, he considered himself as unique and took pride in it. Unweariedly he recurred to the strangeness that he detected in himself and to the puzzle that, to others as well as to himself, he was bound to constitute. Stressing that strange uniqueness, however, can come perilously close to boastfulness . . . (Peyre, 39).

Only by reverting to self-deprecation can Montaigne prevent himself from breaking the equilibrium that he must maintain.

The second paragraph begins by reiterating the the idea of a suffering Montaigne, whose "inconvénient naturel" (30) is out of his control. Soon thereafter, we see the other side of the coin, the knowledgeable

Montaigne, who feels capable of judging Plato ("Plato a raison . . .") as well as the notion that he who lacks in sense must likewise lack in memory. The juxtaposition of this appraisal and the preceding criticism of his memory would logically lead the reader to conclude that Montaigne, must, therefore, have no sense. He subsequently disproves this, however, blaming them (those unnamed others) for misreading him. He uses "comme si" with the imperfect to strike down any doubt about his judgmental capabilities ("comme si je m'accusais d'être insensé . . .") (30). For Montaigne there is a clear distinction between "mémoire et entendement," but not for those whom he accuses; it is they who "me font tort," for "il se voit par expérience"--he must be a wise and experienced man--"que les mémoires excellentes se joignent volontiers aux jugements débiles" (30). It is up to the reader to fill in the gaps and conclude that Montaigne's judgment must be excellent, given what he has told us about his memory.

The defensive tone continues throughout this paragraph, as Montaigne attempts to clarify his position with respect to his enemies. He reveals their presumed perception of him by visualizing himself through their eyes, referring to himself repeatedly in the third person. By repeating the subject pronoun "il" at the beginning of a series of choppy sentences, he is able both to mock and to defy their unfounded accusations: "Il a oublié, dit-on, cette prière ou cette promesse. Il ne se souvient point de ses amis. Il ne s'est point souvenu de dire, ou faire, ou taire cela pour l'amour de moi" (30). The echo of the conjunction "ou" also emphasizes the scope of their insinuations. Montaigne proffers a stylistic display of power here that seems quite foreign to the lamenting passivity that dominated the first few sentences of the essay. He has abandoned self-criticism in order to blame someone else.

Montaigne increasingly tells us what he is not; he is not, for example, blinded by ambition, "un mal pire qui se fût facilement produit en moi" (30), but

which was not produced in him, for he is unique. While nature has neglected to refine his memory, she has strengthened other faculties. Montaigne reverses the criticism of his memory by stating that if he had been able to remember the ideas of others, his judgment might have waned, following "couchant et alanguissant . . . sur les traces d'autrui, comme fait le monde." He has thus elevated himself above "le monde" while affirming that a feeble memory is not at all a negative quality. His speech is "plus court, car le magasin de la mémoire est volontiers plus fourni de matière que n'est celui de l'invention; si elle m'eût tenu bon, j'eusse assourdi tous mes amis de babil" (30). Once again we find that criticizing other men's memories which are burdened by superfluous details permits Montaigne to praise himself, and we almost forget our initial perception of his monstrosity. What we must extract from this image-laden passage is that since Montaigne's memory is not good, he does not deafen his friends "de babil." It is they, rather, who misuse their memories and "reculent si arrière leur narration et la chargent de vaines circonstances que si le conte est bon ils en étouffent la bonté" (30). It is ironic to note, too, that in condoning brevity and directness of speech, Montaigne creates one of the most lyrical, dynamic (considering the abundance of active verbs) passages in the entire essay. The resurgence of Montaigne the poet once again widens the gap between theory and practice.

This particular passage also marks a turning point in the movement of the essay; henceforth it becomes more and more didactic in tone. A moralizing Montaigne emerges and gradually supplants the introspective, self-critical Montaigne who dominated the beginning of the essay. Now he sets himself up as an expert on the subject of lying, emphasizing his broad experience in interpreting the actions of mankind, and stating on several occasions, for example "De quoi j'ai souvent vu l'expérience . . ." (31), and "J'ai vu plusieurs de mon temps . . ." (31), and

"Je trouve qu'on s'amuse ordinairement à châtier aux enfants . . ." (31) as well as making bold philosophical judgments which seem to reflect general truths about life and human behavior: "En vérité, le mentir est un maudit vice. Nous ne sommes hommes, et ne nous tenons les uns les autres que par la parole" (31) and "La menterie seule, et, un peu au-dessous, l'opiniâtreté, me semble être celles desquelles on devrait à toute instance combattre la naissance et le progrès" (31). Montaigne and all mindful readers should arm themselves to defend truth--a noble but ironic attitude in light of Montaigne's own paradoxical style.

The accumulation of so many absolute academic statements in the latter part of the essay will surely convince the reader of Montaigne's hatred of lying, and thus increase his credibility (Winter, 16), by implying that anyone who spurns prevarication to such a degree could by no means be misrepresenting himself. At least some of the tension that existed in the beginning has been released, as Montaigne forswears self-deprecation in order to elaborate upon examples illustrating his ideas about liars. The final impression we have of Montaigne is that of an almost superhuman person who could never bring himself to tell a lie, even in order to protect himself from danger: "Certes, je ne m'assure pas que je pusse venir à bout de moi à garantir un danger évident et extrême par un effronté et solennel mensonge" (31). Ironically, in creating the illusion of modesty, and subsequently reversing it, Montaigne has done precisely what he has been accusing others of doing--being hypocritical.

Although written seven or eight years after "Des Menteurs," the essay entitled "De l'Institution des enfants" manifests a remarkably similar process. Again the reader is bombarded at the beginning of the essay by self-deprecation, which is really the mask of a self-confident writer. Montaigne moves immediately from a generalization at the very beginning to a presumably modest, self-critical comment: "ce ne sont ici que rêveries d'homme qui

n'a goûté des sciences que la croûte première en son enfance, et n'en a retenu qu'un général et informe visage: un peu de chaque chose, et rien du tout, à la française" (72). The accumulation of negations and carefully chosen words expressing vagueness evokes an image of a dull, shallow mind which has retained virtually nothing from his education. However, the fact that this comment is preceded by "je vois, mieux que tout autre" neutralizes to a certain extent the negativity of the assessment, just as "en cette-là je pense être singulier et très rare" did in "Des Menteurs." The same sort of opposition may be identified in the following sentence, in which Montaigne begins with an affirmative "je sais qu'il y a . . ." and identifies specific examples of what he knows, but then adds, almost as if it were an afterthought, "et grossièrement à quoi elles visent" (72). The fact that the sentence concludes with "à l'aventure encore sais-je . . ." (72) increases the ambiguity, because Montaigne is once again expressing "je sais"; however, the "à l'aventure" that is tacked on weakens the affirmation and implies that what he knows, he knows only by chance. The element of chance plays an important role in this essay, functioning somewhat as nature did in "Des Menteurs" ("l'inconvénient naturel," "un défaut naturel"); both are convenient scapegoats for a writer who is not entirely serious about belittling himself. The rest of the paragraph pursues the development of the image of an ignorant, weak Montaigne, who is less knowledgeable than an "enfant des classes moyennes" (72) and who is "contraint assez ineptement de . . . tirer quelque matière de propos universel" (72) from his lessons. The addition of "si l'on m'y force" implies that he would not do it unless he were forced, and even when forced he does not do it well, but "ineptement." Montaigne's consistent use of indefinite expressions such as "quelque" and "quoi" throughout the paragraph reinforces his claim that his knowledge is both vague and worthless. He has successfully exploited all that he does not know, but has left untouched

exactly what he knows, holding his cards rather than playing them.

The second paragraph begins with "Je ne" as did the first, and perseveres in sketching a negative self-portrait. As we have seen before, he flits back and forth from self-negation to self-affirmation. His comment "Je n'ai dressé commerce avec aucun livre solide," is reversed by "sinon Plutarque et Séneque," and finally overturned again, forming a circular motion, with "où je puise comme les Danaïdes, remplissant et versant sans cesse" (72). Though he may put some of this down on paper, he retains none of it himself. Montaigne depicts himself here as a rather selfless, passive vehicle for the transmission of knowledge, a man whose work may benefit others but not himself. It goes almost without saying that this essay, as well as nearly all the others, confirms that Montaigne is as well-versed in the writers of Antiquity as any other sixteenth-century humanist. His contention that he has retained nothing is blatantly disproved by his adeptness at presenting the ideas of the great philosophers as self-consciously and judiciously as he does.

The other Montaigne, the proud one, who constantly strives to reveal himself, becomes more overt at this point, breaking into the self-criticism in order to explain why he likes poetry "d'une particulière inclination" (72). In his comparison of poetry to sound in a trumpet, Montaigne reveals both that he can be profoundly moved by literary language and that he himself is capable of translating his feelings into a powerful image. We are allowed to escape from Montaigne's subjective reality only momentarily, though, because he almost immediately returns to it, criticizing his own judgment, which "ne marche qu'à tâtons, chancelant, bronchant et chopant . . ." (72). The use of the present participle in this passage diffuses the image of faltering over time, and thus reinforces the idea of vagueness that Montaigne has so consistently attempted to establish. The same blurriness is

evoked in the description of Montaigne's visual acuity; he sees, "mais d'une vue trouble et en nuage, que je ne puis démêler" (72). He would like us to believe here that his life is spent groping about in a dense fog which obscures his perception. Montaigne must have realized that emphasizing his own ineptitude would also shield him from outside criticism.

The reader cannot help but ask himself at some point why he should pay attention to someone so lacking in self-esteem. After all, this is only Montaigne's "fantaisie" (73), and his text is witness to his changeability. But it is precisely this perpetual weaving about between self-diminution and self-praise that keeps the reader on his guard. Montaigne's position is rarely so unambiguous that the reader would simply lose interest; there is always the sneaking suspicion that this writer, who creates illusions only to break them, does know what he is talking about, and that truth is being warped somewhat in the name of rhetoric. Iser discusses the play of understatement and hyperbole in fiction, explaining how

> elements of the repertoire are continually backgrounded or foregrounded with a resultant strategic overmagnification, trivialization, or even annihilation of the allusion,

and how this affects the reader: "This defamiliarization of what the reader thought he recognized is bound to create a tension that will intensify his expectations and his distrust of those expectations" (Iser, 282). Though Montaigne may want us initially to see him as an obtuse individual, he makes sure that as the essay unfolds we are exposed to other facets of his character. The essays thrive on toying with our expectations.

Montaigne is obviously proud, for example, that

he has treated subjects that have already been treated by the Ancients; it happens "souvent" (elevation), but "il m'advient . . . de fortune" (lowering), and in comparison to them he is "si faible et si chétif, si pesant et si endormi" (73). The repetition of "si" reinforces his case against himself. On the other hand, he may lag behind them, but at least, he adds, he is heading in their direction. We must admire that, and also the fact that he has "cela, que chacun n'a pas, de connaître l'extrême différence d'entre eux et moi" (73), an observation that we have already seen in this essay and in "Des Menteurs." And while his ideas may be "faibles et basses"--which at this point is hard to believe--he does have the courage to write them down "comme je les ai produites, sans en replâtrer et recoudre les défauts que cette comparaison m'y a découverts" (73). He may deny hiding his faults, but he cannot deny the fact that he is proud of his humility. His rather ostentatious concluding sentence, "Il faut avoir les reins bien fermes pour entreprendre de marcher front à front avec ces gens-là" (73) may at first seem to be an honest assessment of how far removed from his idols he sees himself, but the way it is stated and the context in which it is found leaves open the possibility that he is attempting to walk abreast of them, if not indeed to surpass them.

The third paragraph contains another example of Montaigne's expertise in creating images. After a lengthy criticism of "les écrivains indiscrets de notre siècle" who stuff their "ouvrages de néant" with passages from the Ancients, Montaigne changes key without warning and describes how he happened upon--he would not want us to think that he were intelligent enough to have sought--a moving passage,

> au bout d'un long et ennuyeux chemin, . . . une pièce haute, riche et élevée jusques aux nues . . . c'était un précipice si droit et si coupé que . . . je m'envolais en l'autre monde; de là

> je découvris la fondrière d'où je venais, si basse et si profonde que je n'eus onques plus le coeur de m'y ravaler. (73)

The image is expanded so much and so poetically that the reader nearly forgets that Montaigne had been reprimanding indiscreet borrowing. Unlike the image of the trumpet at the beginning of this essay, which clarified his idea, this highly developed image manages only to "l'envelopper, l'embrouiller, lui donner des dimensions de rêve."[14] In a sense we, too, are elevated into "l'autre monde"; it is only once we are disengaged that we discover how tortuous the movement of the essay had become and how refined Montaigne's rhetoric can be, just as he suddenly discovers the depths to which the "paroles françaises . . . vides de matière et de sens" had led him. His "paroles françaises" here are as filled with emotion as the passage that he stumbled upon must have been. Here it is hard not to be impressed by the scope and plasticity of Montaigne's style.

Perhaps unfortunately, Montaigne plunges us abruptly back into his subject. When he states that "Si j'étoffais l'un de mes discours de ces riches dépouilles, il éclairerait par trop la bêtise des autres" (73), he is at once implying that he does not "stuff" his works (because of the si clause construction with the imperfect) and that they are foolish in the first place. It is almost ludicrous to think that the writer of such a lyrical passage in the preceding paragraph could label his work "bêtise." The juxtaposition of the poet and the "deprecator" renders the criticism even less convincing. As Peyre suggests, Montaigne "amorously polished his own statue after having appeared to hammer all its pieces asunder" (Peyre, 37).

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Montaigne's work is his adeptness at exploiting to the fullest extent the linguistic resources available to him. Language assists him on occasion in subtly

casting off the blame while appearing to blame himself. In stating "reprendre en autrui mes propres fautes ne me semble non plus incompatible que de reprendre, comme je fais souvent, celles d'autrui en moi" (73) he insulates himself from the faults; in the first clause he mentions "mes propres fautes," but they are "en autrui," not in himself. Likewise, in the second clause, it is the faults of "autrui" which are in him: they are not intrinsically his. In any case, he cautions that "il les faut accuser partout, et leur ôter tout lieu de franchise" (73). Personifying the faults allows him to be dogmatic without seeming to be; "il est dogmatique, mais paradoxalement, car il l'est avec lyrisme" (Glauser, "L'Education," p. 378). Statements using "il faut" and "que" with the subjunctive become more and more frequent as the essay progresses and as Montaigne situates himself more firmly on his authoritative pedestal. Now he says that he attempts "audacieusement," not occasionally, but "à tous coups" to "m'égaler à mes larcins, d'aller pair à pair quant et eux" (73), a much different stance from that taken earlier when he staggered behind them. He also expresses a timid desire to "tromper les yeux des juges à les discerner . . ." (73), which contradicts his previous statement disavowing any disguise that might highlight the difference between his "inventions . . . faibles et basses" and those of his paragon, the Ancients.

Montaigne's consistent reversals seem to obliterate his portrait rather than elucidate it. In the same sentence he tears down the positive image that he has just created by adding "mais c'est autant par le bénéfice de mon application que par le bénéfice de mon invention et de ma force" (73). He now seems powerless and lethargic; his sentences overflow with negations: "je ne lutte point en gros . . .", "je ne m'y aheurte pas; je ne fais que les tâter; et ne vais point tant comme je marchande d'aller" (73). Glauser's conclusion that

> le sujet n'est pas tant alors Montaigne que le personnage qu'il est en train de jouer: l'écrivain qui fait ses essais de 'honte.' Un moyen d'entrer dans l'oeuvre est de s'y présenter sous un jour défavorable qui engendre un jeu de contrastes" (40)

seems especially appropriate here. By the end of the paragraph, Montaigne has returned to his modest façade, implying that he is not an "honnête homme," nor can he "leur . . . tenir palot" (73). It is ironic that Montaigne's theory of education prescribes the formation of an "honnête homme," yet he claims not to be one himself. We must wonder about his expertise, as Glauser has: "Il nie le progrès, insiste sur l'ignorance, l'ineptie, la vanité de l'homme. C'est donc là le Montaigne qui va nous parler de pédagogie?" (Glauser, "L'Education," 376).

The accusatory tone which was noted in "Des Menteurs" also comes to the surface in this essay. Near the conclusion of this self-deprecatory introduction, Montaigne once again returns to the subject of "les écrivains indiscrets" which he suspended earlier, indicting those whom he has discovered attempting to "se couvrir des armes d'autrui jusques à ne montrer pas seulement le bout de ses doigts . . ." (73), calling it "injustice et lacheté" and charging them with trying to "se présenter par une valeur étrangère." We should include Montaigne in this category as well, since his entire self-portrait revolves around presenting himself by "valeurs étrangères."

At the end of the paragraph Montaigne will clearly distinguish himself from the "commun" group of undiscriminating borrowers, stating, quite bluntly: "De ma part, il n'est rien que ne veuille moins faire" (73). By stuffing the sentence with negations he forces the reader really to think about what the meaning is; a straightforward "Je ne le fais pas" would not "engage" us. The following

sentence could also be misleading; it begins with "je ne dis les autres," but continues with "sinon pour d'autant plus me dire." In other words, he borrows the ideas of the Ancients only in order to clarify his own position, which is undoubtedly much more important. His final comments in this paragraph about "centons" seem irrelevant and pretentious, and they demolish once and for all his earlier claim that he does not know books--now he takes pride in having seen "de très ingénieux en mon temps" (73).

On the verge of a transition, Montaigne leans once again toward the attitude of his preface, diminishing his artistic and judgmental capabilities and drowning his reader in a sea of inconclusiveness. However, he prefaces the defensive statement "je n'ai pas délibéré de les cacher" with "Quoi qu'il en soit . . . et quelles que soient ses inepties," making us wonder why, if his defects are as serious as he has led us to believe, he cannot seem to specify them now. The aim of this paragraph seems to be to revive the image of the honest, straightforward, imperfect Montaigne. Perhaps surprisingly, there are very few paradoxical statements here, probably due to the fact that he is about to embark upon the actual theory. This is, then, his final opportunity to denigrate himself before his dogmatic side comes to the fore. Now he insists, as he did in the preface, that "ce sont ici mes humeurs et opinions; je les donne pour ce qui est en ma créance, non pour ce qui est à croire . . ." (73). His seemingly modest mission to "découvrir moi-même" even has a double-edged meaning; he does indeed wish to "discover" and understand himself, but he also wants to "uncover" his character before his public. He would not want us to think that he aimed to display his pedagogical knowledge, however; instead, he suggests in very vague terms that someone else persuaded him to do it: "Quelqu'un donc, . . me disait chez moi, l'autre jour, que je me devais être un peu étendu sur le discours de l'institution des enfants," (emphasis mine), even though he has no authority

to do so: " . . . si j'avais quelque suffisance en ce sujet . . ." (73). His ulterior motive is masked by what appears to be a generous, unselfish gesture toward "ce petit homme qui . . . menace de faire tantôt une belle sortie . . ." (73). Montaigne then digresses into several personal comments addressed to Madame Diane de Foix, the mother of the "petit homme" to whom the essay is dedicated, all of which may have been appropriate, had she been the only reader he had in mind, but which seem irrelevant and even bothersome to anyone else. While it may have been a serious attempt on Montaigne's part to ingratiate himself with Mme de Foix, it also seems possible that he is digressing in order to minimize the discrepancy between the self-deprecation at the beginning of the paragraph and the audacious postulate at the conclusion: "la plus grande difficulté et importante de l'humaine science semble être en cet endroit où il se traite de la nourriture et institution des enfants" (73). Should we believe him when he says "Je n'ai point l'autorité d'être cru"? He knows, and we will find out as we continue to read, that what he has to say is not only meaningful in terms of the development of pedagogical theory, but perceptive as well. By now we should realize, on the other hand, that we cannot believe him, so in a rather twisted sense, he is being truthful.

Now that he has emphasized the difficulty of the undertaking, he will proceed to systematically expose how he envisions the instruction of children, and perhaps of mankind in general as well, proposing solutions to the problems of preceptors, books, exercise, retention, and many others, and definitions for such delicate philosophical subjects as knowledge, judgment, and virtue. It is interesting that this is the part of "De l'Institution des enfants" that is most often remembered and cited, perhaps because Montaigne's self-deprecation has mesmerized us.

These are not, as we have said, the only essays that manifest heavy doses of self-deprecation. The structure as well as the content of the essay

entitled "Des Livres" bears an almost uncanny resemblance to those of "De l'Institution des enfants," for example. Montaigne fills the first eight paragraphs with such statements as "Je ne fais point de doute qu'il ne m'advienne souvent de parler de choses qui sont mieux traitées chez les maîtres du métier et plus véritablement" (171), "ce sont ici mes fantaisies, par lesquelles je ne tâche point à donner à connaître les choses, mais moi" (171), and "il faut musser ma faiblesse sous ces grands crédits" (171). As a matter of fact, up to the point at which Montaigne begins reviewing books, the essay is little more than a recapitulation of the beginnings of the other two essays. A different technique is used in a later essay, "De la Présomption," in that self-deprecation is scattered throughout the text rather than concentrated at the beginning. This may be due to the fact that Montaigne has obviously focused on himself as the subject of the essay; in fact, it seems to be the first essay that deals overtly with self-portraiture.[15] And finally, even "L'Apologie de Raimond Sebond" expresses the idea that Montaigne puts into practice in writing his essays: man must recognize "qu'il est infiniment loin de la sagesse de Dieu, il doit être humble, et c'est précisément en s'humiliant qu'il s'élève."[16]

Many writers, both before and after Montaigne, have tried to convince their reader that what they write is the truth and nothing but. At the beginning of Le Père Goriot, for example, the Balzacian narrator insists that "ce drame n'est ni une fiction ni un roman. All is true, il est si véritable, que chacun peut en reconnaître les éléments chez soi, dans son coeur peut-être."[17] Montaigne is no different. Both writers are striving to reach the reader, to communicate with him, to touch his most sensitive nerve, and above all, to gain his trust.

Montaigne desperately needs an audience; in fact, his work is dependent upon it to function. On the surface, the technique seems simple: Montaigne lowers himself in the eyes of the reader, the reader

is lulled into believing and will consequently accept the ideas and opinions that are about to be presented. If the reader delves below the surface, however, he will find that the method is much more complex. A close analysis of the self-deprecation in the essays treated in this study reveals the constant vacillation in Montaigne's point of view, in his self-concept, and in his attitude toward his reader. This can only generate question after question about where Montaigne stands and what he actually believes. Superficially we may feel that we can trust him, and we may be impressed by his ideas and think that we know him, but at a more profound level Montaigne slips through our fingers. If it is true that Montaigne tends to "prendre la contrepartie d'une question" (Glauser, "L'Education, 377), then perhaps we cannot even take him seriously when the self-deprecation has dwindled and the approach seems straightforward. If we let ourselves be entrapped then perhaps his self-deprecation has been successful. And even if we investigate the text enough to suspect it, we still are left with nothing but fragments of a shattered self which Montaigne himself may have been unable to fit together.

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Notes

[1] Frederick Joy Rider, Psychological Development in the Essays of Michel de Montaigne (Santa Cruz: University of California Press, 1971), p. 26.

[2] Michel de Montaigne, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Robert Barral, en collaboration avec Pierre Michel (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), p. 78. All

references to the Essais will be from this edition.

[3] Paul Porteau, Montaigne et la vie pédagogique de son temps (Paris: E. Droz, 1935). p. 299.

[4] Ian J. Winter, Montaigne's Self-Portrait and its Influence in France, 1580-1630 (Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum Publishers, 1976), p. 84.

[5] Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 282.

[6] Although the essays seem to defy categorization, there are a few, found primarily in Books I and II, that manifest this technique. "Des Menteurs" and "De l'Institution des enfants" have been chosen for close analysis because their concision and clarity of structure illustrate my thesis more easily than could be done using longer and more convoluted essays.

[7] Henri Peyre, Literature and Sincerity (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 38-9.

[8] Alfred Glauser, Montaigne Paradoxal (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1972), p. 36.

[9] Wayne C. Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 89.

[10] Glauser comments that Montaigne

> prétend écrire pour que ses proches aient de lui un portrait fidèle . . . Il sait qu'il n'écrit pas pour quelques lecteurs seulement, même s'il ne se donne pas pour exemple à suivre, mais plutôt pour exemple à éviter . . . L'ami lecteur qu'il imagine, c'est un lecteur qui participe à une vie inventée . . . Sa confession est d'ailleurs encouragée par ce public anonyme qui lui

donne toutes les audaces (36).

[11] Barbara C. Bowen, The Age of Bluff: Paradox and Ambiguity in Rabelais and Montaigne (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 106.

[12] Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p. 83.

[13] Hugo Friedrich also mentions the tradition of "la folie, 'locura'," which Spanish novelists "aiment prêter à l'un de leurs personnages pour lui faire dire les vérités les plus dangereuses sans qu'il soit possible de les attaquer, puisque c'est un fou qui parle." See Hugo Friedrich, Montaigne, trans. Robert Rovini (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 27.

[14] Alfred Glauser, "Montaigne et l'éducation paradoxale," Kentucky Romance Quarterly, 16, no. 4 (1969): p. 376.

[15] Donald M. Frame, ed., Montaigne's Essays and Selected Writings (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), p. xiv.

[16] Marie-José Southworth, "Les Remarques dépréciatives de Montaigne au sujet de son livre," Bulletin de la société des amis de Montaigne, 4e série, no. 27 (1971): p. 22.

[17] Honoré de Balzac, Le Père Goriot (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), p. 26.