DOROTHEA B. HEITSCH

Nietzsche and Montaigne: Concepts of Style

Abstract: Nietzsche was an enthusiastic reader of Montaigne and loved the humanist's intellectual and physiological disposition which was similar to his own. The nature of this literary relationship is difficult to determine, because the traits that might make Montaigne a prominent figure in Nietzsche's text are exactly the ones that Nietzsche either internalizes completely or overdraws the most. One element which can be discussed in a contrastive analysis of both writers is that of style. My article shows that Nietzsche's style is formed by Montaigne's writing "en chair et en os", by the imperceptibly subversive turns of his sentences as well as by the slyly ironic tone that prevails in many essays. This style goes hand in hand with an open form that has been influenced by the essay.

his paper intends to serve two purposes: for one, it would like to take up David Molner's recent article which contrasts the stentorian tones of Nietzsche's polemics with the low hum of Montaigne's candor, Nietzsche's thunderously heroic attitude with Montaigne's soft assurance, and Nietzsche's raucously subversive style with Montaigne's felicitously skeptical one. Molner's distinctions are appropriate especially with regard to Nietzsche's late works, beginning with the Antichrist. The contrasts can even be intensified by setting Heidegger's notion of Nietzsche's "grand

1 D. Molner, "Montaigne's Influence on Nietzsche: A 'Raison d'Etre' in the Sun", Nietzsche Studien 22 (1993) pp. 80-93 (p. 91). Molner mentions three aspects of the Essais that establish Nietzsche as Montaigne's heir: his rendering intellectual relationships in physiological terms, his style, and his authentic self-representation which ultimately prefigures the Nietzschean ideal of the Ubermensch.

© The International Society for the History of Rhetoric, Rhetorica, Volume XVIII, Number 4 (Autumn 1999)
RHETORICA

412

style” against Floyd Gray’s description of Montaigne’s “searching style”. In my article, however, I would also like to point out those stylistic traits which the two writers have in common, such as the physiological basis of their styles, their concept of style as a multiplicity of styles, and their preference for linguistic innovations as well as for a kind of writing that traces and imitates specific manners of thinking. These traits necessarily entail open forms of writing, that of the essay for Montaigne and that of the aphorism for Nietzsche. One could maintain that the correspondences which I discuss in the following pages also furnish one more argument in favor of Montaigne’s formative role in the development of Nietzsche as a writer.

Montaigne and Nietzsche

My pairing of Montaigne and Nietzsche, which at a first glance may seem paradoxical, is based on Nietzsche’s being a historical reader of the Essais as well as one of Montaigne’s most enthusiastic admirers in literary history. Nietzsche’s first acquaintance with Montaigne that we know of dates from Christmas 1870, when he was given a German translation of the complete Essais by Cosima and Richard Wagner. In unpublished notes from Nietzsche’s early time in Basel Montaigne is later mentioned as having a salutary effect on him, a judgment which will be repeated in notes from 1876. In a letter from 20 September 1884, Nietzsche asks his sister for the first of three volumes of his German translation of Montaigne to be sent. In a letter to Peter

---

6 “[S]teht im Kabinett unter den guten Büchern, ein alter Schmocker”, Friedrich
Gast from Nizza he writes on 27 October 1887 that he was reading Montaigne in order to improve his mood. Finally, Nietzsche is reading Montaigne’s *Essais* again in November and December 1887. From the written proof that we possess it can be inferred that Montaigne is not only a formative influence in the early seventies, as has been maintained often, but that he is also important for Nietzsche during a transition period at the end of the seventies and even beyond the composition of *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*.

It is surprising to see how the few pages that have been written on the relationship between Nietzsche and Montaigne revolve around two points, that is, skepticism and *joie de vivre*.


‘‘Lieber Freund, eben langt ihr Brief an; ich las Montaigne, um mich aus einer grüllig düsteren und gereizten Stimmung zu ziehen—Ihr Brief half mir gründlicher noch davon.”


Most scholars omit to see other points of convergence between the two authors, such as the conversational or dialogical nature of the essay and of the aphorism, the use of metaphor as a pedagogical means, the notion of individualism in humanistic and Romantic writings, the relationship between skepticism and fideism, and the writing of history as autobiography. One topic that is equally cherished by both writers is the importance of rhetoric. Both Montaigne and Nietzsche regard physiological writing as the kind of writing that is expressive of an individual's character as well as of itself as an imitation of its own original turns. Both authors display an appreciation of linguistic innovations. They prefer long periods that develop one single thought in aphoristic form. Montaigne's style, which I would describe as approaching a slow, spoken style, is certainly one of Nietzsche's stylistic ideals, because it combines nimble elegance with the overall impression of a quiet amble.

Montaigne and Nietzsche are anti-Platonists with a strikingly similar relation to the notion of truth. They dismantle scholastic rhetoric with a view to forming their own. Montaigne's critique of the humanistic attitude toward knowledge and the universities illustrated in my close reading below might be compared to Nietzsche's criticism in the unfashionable observation on Schopenhauer, where he contrasts the traditional teaching of science (Wissenschaft) with an innovative teaching of culture. The kinship of essay and aphorism is not only attributable to the same classical models for both of the open forms, but in the context of this comparison it can be proven that the aphorism is developed out of an encounter with the essay. While David Molner maintains that Montaigne "is a quiet version of everything that Nietzsche admired, of everything that he valorized", I would argue that Montaigne represents an influence that accompanies Nietzsche throughout his career, similar to the lifelong discussion which he led with Wagner and Wagner's ideas, yet not as strongly controversial. Although Montaigne's influence, like Wagner's later, is a formative influence by contrast, I hope to give some arguments in favor of the view that Montaigne remains


16 Molner, “Montaigne’s Influence on Nietzsche”, p. 92.
interesting as a literary companion, because Nietzsche will be
tempted throughout his career to bring out the elements of
nonconformity, which are found in Montaigne's texts, by
overdrawing them in his own.

Nietzsche's aesthetics are analyzed by Martin Heidegger in
_Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst_. Nobility (distinction), logic and,
beauty are its basic features as well as the grand style. The grand
style is the effect of a grand passion and represents a unity of two
opposing forces: that is, of intoxication and beauty, of creativity
and form. The grand style is a classical style, because it embodies
calm, simplification, abbreviation, and concentration of power.
Power is a person's ability to sustain the great antitheses of
human existence. Referred to the domain of art, power is a
counter-movement to nihilism and an object of physiological
aesthetics. According to Heidegger, Nietzsche emphasizes
mastery as a prerequisite to calm: consequently, the grand style
expresses a unity of chaos and law, a yoking of extreme opposites,
as well as man's free disposition over this yoke that is ever
recreating the law, a law which in itself is always about to
become. The grand style is the fundamental unit of art as well as
its essence, and therefore it is the essence of existence. Real
grandness, according to Heidegger, not only submits to its
extreme opposite, but transforms it into itself; it appropriates this
opposite in such a way that it does not disappear, but makes it
unfold its intrinsic nature. Grand style in consequence represents
the active will to Being, in which this will resolves Becoming in
itself. Thus the highest feeling of power is the simplicity of a state
of calm; in this state, opposites are saved in the unity of the yoke
that is itself transfigured in the act. Nietzsche describes this state
in _Götzen-Dämmerung_. According to Heidegger, style performs
an act of transformation.

---

11 Let us for a moment disregard the transformation of Heidegger's "grand
style" into the colossal architectural structures of the Hitler regime. The notion of
the grand style as such refers to the rhetorical means of paradox. With regard to
Montaigne, A. Glauser (Montaigne paradoxal (Paris: Nizet, 1972)) and M. McGowan
(Montaigne's Deceits (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974) have dealt with
this feature of style.
Physiology in Nietzsche and Montaigne

Two aphorisms on Montaigne's style in Nietzsche's *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* mention some characteristic traits of this author's writing. One of them is garrulousness that is due to a delight in ever new twists of the same thing (97); in the other, "L'ordre du jour pour le roi" (22), the king will be told about the arrival of Montaigne, who always jokes so agreeably about his illness. This remark alludes to the salutary effect which Nietzsche sensed in Montaigne's writing or which he imagined in his conversation. This effect is due partly to an ability to turn physical problems into witty items of discussion. Style is thus the expression of an author's physiology, and his physiology, then again, becomes a source of poetic inspiration. Nietzsche is convinced of this fact and adapts it to his own use and temperament in the vivid aphorism 93 of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* ("Aber warum schreibst denn du?"). In this dialogue a figure A describes himself as different from the large group of writers who, pen in hand, begin to think instead of beginning to write. A also distinguishes himself from the group of writers whose imagination dries up as soon as they are faced with an open ink-bottle. For A, writing comes naturally and is so much part of his being that he is ashamed of it; writing is like going to the bathroom, and even talking about it in a parable disgusts him. That writing must be regarded, at a certain age, as the excrements of an old mind is the opinion of Montaigne, who decries his text as "les herbes sauvages et inutiles, songes, fantaisies", or as "chimeres et monstres fantasques", to name only a few metaphors. In a certain sense, the *Essais* are the products of a misformed mind, an intellectual monster.

Montaigne's preoccupation with the relationship between body and soul and the effect of this relationship on the writer can be found throughout the *Essais*. In "De la praesumption" (II 17), for example, we find a passage on the softening effect of beauty that is followed by a remark on the considerable and legitimate role which the body plays in life. The physiological knowledge

---

12 "Ceux qui veulent desprendre nos deux pieces principales et les sequestrer l'une de l'autre, ils ont tort. Au rebours, il les faut r'accoupler et rejoindre. Il faut
on which such Renaissance preferences are based is summarized by Jean Fernel, the most influential physician in France during the second half of the sixteenth century, who in 1542 published *De naturali parte medicinae* and in 1554 *Medicina*. The former systematizes all the facts about the *artes naturales* that were known at the time and separates medicine into five parts of which physiology assumes first rank. According to Fernel, within the human system, that consists of body and soul, the soul legitimizes the existence of the body. All vital functions and physical activities are engendered by the soul. The link between body and soul is established by animating principles (*spiritus*). According to Fernel’s concept, the body is a perfectly organized system that is intended by the creator to function as vehicle and salvation for the soul.

Nietzsche’s use of physiological knowledge is partly influenced by Montaigne, who attempts to put color into popular expressions, to test the innovative force of language, and to learn to devise movements that are unusual in a sentence. Nietzsche maintains that style must be innovative above all: “Man weiss vor mir nicht, was man mit der deutschen Sprache kann,—was man überhaupt mit der Sprache kann”; “es hat nie Jemand mehr von neuen, von unerhörten, von wirklich erst dazu geschaffnen Kunstmitteln zu verschwenden gehabt”; “die vielfachste Kunst des Stils überhaupt, über die je ein Mensch verfügt hat” (*KSA* 6, p. 727).

ordonner à l’ame non de se tirer à quartier, de s’entretenir à part, de mespriser et abandonner le corps (aussi ne le sçauroit elle faire que par quelque singerie contrefaicté), mais de se r’aller à luy, de l’embrasser, le cherir, luy assister, le contreroller, le conseiller, le redresser et ramener quand il fourvoye, l’espouser en somme et luy servir de mary; à ce que leurs effects ne paroissent pas divers et contraires, ains accordans et uniformes”, Michel de Montaigne, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962) p. 622 A. “Those who wish to take our two principal pieces apart and to sequester one from the other are wrong. We must on the contrary couple and join them closely together. We must command the soul not to withdraw to its quarters, not to entertain itself apart, not to despise and abandon the body (something which it cannot do anyway except by some monkey-like counterfeit) but to rally to it, take it in its arms and cherish it, help it, look after it, counsel it, and when it strays set it to rights and bring it back home again. It should in short marry the body and serve as its husband, so that what they do should not appear opposed and divergent but harmonious and uniform”, Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993) p. 727.
This high-handed self-criticism defines style as an art that is independently innovative and that seduces by its sheer variety. Style serves to convey a state or an inner tension of pathos by means of signs, including the tempo of these signs. The writer’s art consists in deliberately choosing the signs, the rhythm, the punctuation (gestures), according to his own personal preference and according to the degree to which he deems his audience worthy of confidence. What is more, style is the art of the great rhythm, "der große Stil der Periodik zum Ausdruck eines ungeheuren Auf und Nieder von sublimer, von übermenschlicher, Leidenschaft" (KSA 6, p. 304). Prose style must be like poetry.

The tempo of a language’s style is linked to the character of its speakers, that is, to the average tempo of a people’s metabolism, maintains Nietzsche in Jenseits von Gut und Böse (28). German style is slow and heavy on principle, incapable of the presto or allegro, even in Goethe’s texts. Among the German writers, Lessing is the only exception because he is a born actor (Schauspieler-Natur) whose love for acting permits him to imitate French grace. Yet the unattainable masters of style, according to Nietzsche, are Machiavelli, Petronius, and Aristophanes. In the preface to Morgenröthe (5), Nietzsche claims the lento to be indicative of his recently acquired stylistic maturity. The slow tempo of the written text demands a thorough reader who is a connoisseur of philology.

13 "Before me, it was not known what could be done with the German language—what could be done with language in general"; "nobody ever was in a position to squander more new, unheard-of artistic devices that had actually been created only for this purpose"; "the most multifarious art of style that has ever been at the disposal of one man", Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) p. 265.


15 "[I]ene ehrwürdige Kunst, welche von ihrem Verehrer vor Allem Eins heischt, bei Seite gehn, sich Zeit lassen, still werden, langsam werden—, als eine Goldschmiedekunst und kennischaft des W or t e s, die lauter feine vorsichtige Arbeit abzuthun hat und Nichts erreicht, wenn sie es nicht lento erreicht" (KSA 3, p. 17); "[t]hat venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it lento", Nietzsche, Daybreak, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) p. 5.
Nietzsche’s concept of style is based on the physiological knowledge regarding the union of passion and intellect. This union is one important point in the teaching of Zarathustra. The grand style that is so much admired by Nietzsche is, according to his own words, a heritage from classical antiquity:

Dies Mosaik von Worten, wo jedes als Klang, als Ort, als Begriff, nach rechts und links und über das Ganze hin seine Kraft ausströmt, dies minimum in Umfang und Zahl der Zeichen, dies damit erzielte maximum in der Energie der Zeichen—das Alles ist römisch und, wenn man mir glauben will, von ehrepar excellence. Der ganze Rest von Poesie wird dagegen etwas zu Populäres,—eine blosse Gefühls-Geschwätzigkeit (KSA 6, p. 155).”

The best example of such style in Nietzsche’s work are the prose compositions in Also sprach Zarathustra. Let us consider a passage entitled “Die sieben Siegel (Oder: das Ja- und Amen-Lied)”. The title, which alludes to Revelation 5, 1, presents a book which is incomprehensible to most and which can be looked at and opened only by the few deigned worthy, whereas the subtitle “Yes and Amen Song” points to acceptance and affirmation of life or of existence, that is, to Nietzsche’s art of living. This is a typical contradiction, and it represents in a nutshell Nietzsche’s constant and authoritative changes of attitude toward one subject-matter. What follows is a song in seven stanzas, each of which is succeeded by the same refrain, and each of which presents the

---

16 “‘Leib bin ich und Seele’—so redet das Kind. Und warum sollte man nicht wie die Kinder reden? Aber der Erwachte, der Wissende sagt: Leib bin ich ganz und gar, und Nichts ausserdem; und Seele ist nur ein Wort für ein Etwas am Leibe” (KSA 4, p. 39). “‘Body am I, and soul’—thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children? But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body.” W. Kaufmann ed. and trans., The Portable Nietzsche (New York: Penguin, 1982) p. 146.

17 “This mosaic of words in which every word, as sound, as locus, as concept, pours forth its power to left and right and over the whole, this minimum in the range and number of signs which achieves a maximum of energy of these signs—all this is Roman and, if one will believe me, noble par excellence. All other poetry becomes by comparison somewhat too popular—a mere emotional garrulousness.” Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990) p. 115.

18 For a presentation of this art of living see A. Nehamas, Nietzsche: Life as Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
poetic self, that is, the text “Nietzsche” in different variations or guises. In the first stanza, the self is gewitterschwanger and blitzschwanger, that is, big with thunder or lightning or, to make the transition to abstract thought, full of great ideas. In the refrain the prophetic self appears in the shape of thunder or as pregnant, and it uses Nietzschean stock images, those of the ring and recurrence, of woman and eternity. The second stanza stages the self as a Mosaic defiler of graves whose wrath is renewed, whereas the third stanza conjures up a pagan atmosphere with the world as a gambling table. In the fourth stanza we find the elements of fire and earth mixed in a jug, as in a cornucopia which nourishes a giant force. The fifth and sixth stanzas present the self as a seafarer and as a dancer respectively, while the seventh stanza finally treats of bird and song, that is, birdsong. It is worth mentioning that the hypothesis of the first stanza is presented with a disregard for consecutio temporum; Nietzsche uses the present tense instead of the past. This, as well as the three epithets that he adds, contributes to the prolongation of the sentence, and thus to extensive temporisation, which causes the reader to read slowly and carefully and to take in the many poetic elements, such as climactic adjective enumerations, metaphors, and proverbs.

Montaigne’s Style

Montaigne’s style rejects the rules of contemporary style manuals, which advocate Ciceronianism, in order to create a human complexion by means of a verbal texture grounded in Montaigne’s physical aspects. Thus emerges the author’s skepticism which leads to his impersonation of Socrates. In order to illustrate this, I have chosen the example of a digression on the value of erudition (science) from Montaigne’s essay “De l’art de conferer” (III 8, p. 905 B). In the paragraph immediately preceding, the author engages in a criticism of empty rhetoric as it is taught in the “schools of speakery”; therefore science in this digression means first of all rhetoric, and only secondly describes

---

19 H. Staten, in chapters 6 and 9 of Nietzsche’s Voice (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), explains these images in the context of Nietzsche’s work.
skill or knowledge in general. "J'ayme et honore le sçavoir autant que ceux qui l'ont" (p. 905).  

20 The author begins the digression with a statement of preference, which he then elaborates in a second declaration. This declaration, smoothly added by the conjunction et ("et, en son vray usage, c'est le plus noble et puissant acquest des hommes")  

21 qualifies his preference and expresses a reservation.

Mais en ceux là (et il en est un nombre infty de ce genre) qui en établissent leur fondamentale suffisance et valeur, qui se rapportent de leur entendement à leur memoire, "sub aliena umbra latentes" et ne peuvent rien que par livre, je le hay, si je l'ose dire, un peu plus que la bestise (p. 905 B).  

The paragraph develops a conceit, first in a statement, then in an analysis through antithetical pairs and antithetical sentence structure. This critique is placed in its historical context. The conceit is then pursued to the extreme of symbolizing the worlds of king and fool respectively. The digression ends in an Erasmian closure.  

22 This is mimetic rewriting of a literary model and mimetic presentation of Montaigne's personal way of thinking, where ideas are shown in the process of their formation. In addition, the development of such a chain of thoughts in a short episode makes Montaigne's writing approach the aphoristic style that is used by Nietzsche.

A good example is aphorism 113 of Die Frohliche Wissenschaft, entitled "Zur Lehre von den Giften". This is an aphorism concerning scientific thought, which, according to Nietzsche, requires the harmonious and balanced combination of many

20 "I like and honour erudition as much as those who have it" (trans. Screech, p. 1050).
21 "When used properly it is the most noble and powerful acquisition of Man" (trans. Screech, p. 1050).
22 "But in the kind of men (and their number is infinite) who make it the base and foundation of their worth and achievement, who quit their understanding for their memory, 'sub aliena umbra latentes,' [hiding behind other men's shadows] and can do nothing except by book, I loathe it (dare I say it?) a little more than I loathe stupidity" (trans. Screech, p. 1050).
23 P. Schon, Vorformen des Essays in Antike und Humanismus (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1954) pp. 86: "revenons à nos moutons", similarly we find in the Essais "retombons à nos coches", "revenons a nos bouteilles".
forces. The aphorism may be regarded as an "active interpretation" of those opinions which Montaigne proffers in the above-mentioned citation from Essais III 8. If we trace Nietzsche's chain of arguments, beginning with the aphorism's title which suggests a negation, we note that, in a Darwinin move, he first maintains that scientific thinking is the highest achievement and a result of personal progress as well as a trait of some particularly endowed individuals from the nineteenth century. It is the effect of diverse forces (doubting, negating, deconstructing) which, if they are not balanced, degenerate into destructive drives and even into poisons. The creation of individuals who master this scientific thinking is a century-long development that is not finished yet, because most people are too specialized and only slowly accept an all-encompassing point of view or way of life. Nietzsche advocates the formation of the "higher organic system" compared to which any specialist would be a paltry ruin. Despite its authoritative and exclamatory tone the passage uses long sentences that create a discourse which keeps its tension from beginning to end; this is achieved by intercalating each move with the preceding in taking up one of its elements. Nietzsche's comparison of scientific thinking that is carried out in too specialized and narrow bounds to poison can be explained by pointing to his view of his own personality, one in which all the impulses of an individual coexist and come into action always according to need. This approach can be compared to Montaigne's, which displays the same tenor, but is expressed by means of more measured expressions.

Throughout his essay "De l'art de conférer", Montaigne uses parallel as well as chiastic constructions. Frequently, these constructions are subdivided or broken up into smaller units by the additions from the posthumous edition. This creates a slowly flowing style and makes for the colloquial character of the text. Montaigne's frequent and cumulative use of adverbs effects the ambling style typical of the Essais, which is again intensified by

---

24 See Staten, Nietzsche's Voice, cit. in n. 19, chapter 1.
25 "Tout homme peut dire véritablement; mais dire ordonnairement, prudemment et suffisamment, peu d'hommes le peuvent" (Montaigne, Oeuvres Complètes, p. 906). "Any man may speak truly: few men can speak ordinately, wisely, adequately" (trans. Screech, p. 1051).
the author’s use of the moralist’s present tense and the prevalent present participle. The conversational aspect of this particular essay is emphasized by the reader-directed statements at the beginning of numerous paragraphs, the objections to an imagined interlocutor, and Montaigne’s answers to possible questions. Thus we find not only exclamations, asides, interruptions, interjections, requests, invitations, challenges, and provocations, but above all the interrogations. The essay itself, that is, the act of assaying, is a dissimulated question. In the age of the ever-threatening Inquisition, Montaigne anticipates and disarms possible interrogators by asking and answering his own questions in his own way, softening the aggressiveness of the problems raised by the Reformers and lending them a persuasive tone by the use of personal examples.26

With regard to imagery, the most important metaphor is that of conversation as a chase or hunt, and that of the chase as life. Other important images are taken from the world of the sportive contest.27 These metaphors permit Montaigne to give style to his character and to see character as an artistic plan. Nietzsche’s notion of style as moral psychology in aphorism 290 of Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft ("Eins ist Noth"), which expresses the relationship between self-control and writing, can also be discovered in Montaigne’s text. "Or je me pare sans cesse, car je me descris sans cesse" (p. 358 C) is just one example of many.28 The creation of a “persona” by means of self-fashioning happens in a metaphorical transfer from orality to poetry, and from poetry to clothing.29 The author facilitates the creation of a complexion through style that creates an independent being, or even a multiplicity of beings in a histrionic gesture, for we know that the highest perfection, according to Montaigne, is “jouyr loiallement

27 See, for example, J. Brody’s list in “Of the Art of Discussion: A Philological Reading”, in P. Henry ed., Approaches to Teaching Montaigne’s Essays (New York: MLA, 1994) pp. 159-65.
28 Screech’s translation here does not quite match Montaigne’s verb “parer”: “I am therefore ceaselessly making myself ready since I am ceaselessly describing myself” (p. 424). I propose “adorning”.
de son estre" (p. 1096 B), that is, to adapt one's personality to circumstance.

Montaigne's and Nietzsche's Style

I would like to engage in a comparative discussion of some passages from Montaigne's essay, "De l'art de conférer", and some passages from Nietzsche's Ecce Homo, two texts whose similarly conversational nature is evident. One needs to underline the fact that both writers regard literature as an exchange, that of the individual with the author of the text and that of the author with the reader(s). In Montaigne's essay on conversation, the numerous images of weighing and balancing which refer to the title of his work (essai/exagium), are enriched by those from the domain of sports; yet images of commercial exchanges are also present here (p. 900: "le...commerce...avec les esprits bas et maladifs"; p. 901: "Je sçay par assez d'experience combien en vaut l'aune"; p. 902: "vigueur de son commerce"), further illustrating the dialogical moves which Montaigne recommends and which he refines to what one might call a conversational pedagogy (p. 900: "l'horreur de la cruauté me rejette"; "amender à reculons"). Nietzsche's preface to Ecce Homo begins by demanding of his readers to hear him and not to mistake him for someone else. In the same aphorism we also find a metaphor from the realm of trade: "to live on one's own credit" here refers to Nietzsche's being his own best witness for his existence, because recognition has been denied him by many of his colleagues.

One must also see the love of etymology that is characteristic of both Nietzsche and Montaigne. The art of conférer, for example, in the course of Montaigne's essay becomes a distaste for unison. Nietzsche engages in a similar play on words in his preface to Ecce

---

Homo, a play on the notion of Gegensatz-Natur that enables him not only to distance himself from the common notion of the virtuous man but also describes Nietzsche as a split personality. The diverse shapes that are contained in one individual personality is also one of Montaigne’s favorite topics, and he turns it into an asset (p. 319: “Si je parle diversement de moy, c’est que je me regarde diversement”; “Distingo est le plus universel membre de ma logique”). In the essay III 8 Montaigne varies this motif by emphasizing his love of being judged in whatever form he happens to be at the moment (p. 902: “Je prens si grand plaisir d’estre jugé et cogneu qu’il m’est comme indifferent en quelle des deux formes je le soys”). Nietzsche quite bluntly exposes himself as both a decadent, as his opposite, and as Dionysos in “Warum ich so weise bin” (2).

Meandering between the different parts of Montaigne’s form, the text of the Essais remains permanently unresolved; so does Nietzsche’s work, which toward the end of his literary career becomes to an increasing degree fed by his posing in different guises, as Christ, Antichrist, Socrates, professor, or moralist. Nietzsche’s poses are much more extreme than Montaigne’s. Therefore the latter’s characteristic indifference and nonchalance become almost unrecognizable in Nietzsche’s text. Yet both writers depart from the same premise: “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” (p. 321).32

Since both Nietzsche and Montaigne are moralists, they like to incorporate maxims in their texts; both the essay and the aphorism lend themselves to this preference. Often, a passage from the Essais or an aphorism end in a maxim which is being prepared by the rhetorical means of temporisation, which both writers master equally well. A good example is found in the beginning sentences of Essais III 8 (p. 137), where a paragraph concerning criminal law gradually introduces the reader to the topic of the essay. Nietzsche maintains in his preface to Ecce Homo

32 “We are entirely made up of bits and pieces, woven together so diversely and so shapelessly that each one of them pulls its own way at every moment. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and other people” (trans. Screech, p. 380).
that the tempo of Zarathustra’s speeches is a tender adagio; I have shown above the stylistical features by means of which this is achieved. The maxims or witticisms at the end of many Nietzschean paragraphs or aphorisms thus provide a carefully prepared yet surprising climax, such as in “Warum ich so weise bin” (2), which ends in a self-presentation that in its sly and circular argument could have been directly borrowed from Montaigne.

Hyperbole is yet another rhetorical means employed by Nietzsche as well as Montaigne. The latter describes his style as moving along “à sauts et à gambades” and frequently comments on the self-engendering and self-sufficient nature of his text that will continue, he affirms, as long as there is ink and paper in the world. Nietzsche’s hyperboles often occur in the form of exclamations or questions, such as, for example, in the rhetorical questions that entitle the different parts of Ecce Homo, but sometimes in personal statements which we only now begin to unmask as ironic: “Ich muss ein Halbjahr zurückrechnen, dass ich mich mit einem Buch in der Hand ertappe” (“Warum ich so klug bin” (3)), has been of particular interest to some readers of Nietzsche. That this kind of hyperbole borders on irony and represents a use of masks is now evident and can be explained by Nietzsche’s treatment of style, on which he comments in “Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe” (4). One of the author’s many masks is that of solitude (Ecce Homo, preface, 3 and 8), which is a sentiment that is also cherished by Montaigne and that is expressed, among many places, in the essay on conversation (p. 899: “me faire éviter”; p. 901: “J’ayme à contester et à discourir, mais c’est avec peu d’hommes et pour moy”).

Essay and Aphorism

Montaigne himself is of the opinion that he cannot write anything but short texts. His style is meant to appear anti-rhetorical, disjointed and completely unlearned, unlike, for example, that of the rhetoricians. Montaigne's curt style is informal and aiming at an imitation of the genus humile. He uses short periods and deliberate asymmetry between the parts of a sentence according to the model of the Senecan amble. This style is part of the anti-Ciceronian movement of the second half of the sixteenth century.

In "De la praesumption", we find an extended self-criticism that displays Montaigne's stylistic likes and dislikes, while at the same time giving prominence to his good judgment: he uses unpolished and disdainful language and intentionally offends against the rules of disposition. Since he wants to avoid affectation and to favor brevity, he sometimes falls into the other extreme and becomes obscure. He tries to imitate the spoken style of Seneca, but really would like to equal his ideal, Plutarch. Montaigne favors stylistic ease and naturalness. Style, according to the author, is not the order in which an author arranges his thoughts, but a mode of writing that is guided by Montaigne's

34 "Qu'Il n'est rien si contraire à mon style qu'une narration estendue: je me recoupper si souvent à faute d'haleine, je n'ay ny composition, ny explication qui vaille, ignorant au-delà d'un enfant des frases et vocables qui servent aux choses plus communes" (Montaigne, Oeuvres Complètes, p. 105 C). "That nothing is so foreign to my mode of writing than extended narration. I have to break off so often from shortness of wind that neither the structure of my works nor their development is worth anything at all; and I have a more-than-childish ignorance of the words and phrases used in the most ordinary affairs" (trans. Screech, p. 120).

35 "J'ay naturellement un style comique et privé, mais c'est d'une forme mienne, inépte aux negotiations publiques, comme en toutes façons est mon langage: trop serré, désordonné, coupé, particulier" (Montaigne, Oeuvres Complètes, p. 246 B). "My natural style is that of comedy, but one whose form is personal to me, a private style unsuited to public business—as is my language in all its aspects, being too compact, ill-disciplined, disjointed and individual" (trans. Screech, p. 283).

way of talking or conversing. Style is natural and original in that it totally conforms to the nature of its subject and his thinking. Slyly modest, Montaigne presents his studiously informal style as simply following the impulse of an average human being; at the same time, he is fully conscious of the fact that anti-Ciceronianism, pursued with ever-increasing skill, creates a style that in the end almost neutralizes its intention.

C'est l'indiligent lecteur qui perit mon subject, non pas moy; il s'en trouvera toujours en un coing quelque mot qui ne laisse pas d'estre bastant, quoiqu'il soit serré. Je vais au change, indiscrettement et tumultuairement. Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes (p. 973 C).37

This refers to the author's preference for circuitous writing, that is, for an operation of return to the beginning of a period, of turning around the text, or returning to it as if to a mirror.38 At the same time, Montaigne continues to emphasize the point that he attaches no importance to elocution or disposition. According to him, elocution is the result of a by-product of the creative literary act which intends to catch the movement of thought in its first conception.

Nietzsche's aphorisms describe tentative thinking, that is, assaying and weighing. They demand to be rewritten and re-interpreted in an act of self-criticism, such as, for example, Nietzsche's autobiographical book-reviews of Ecce Homo. The challenge, task, and seduction of exegesis extends to the reader, who continually discusses and interprets the text. Montaigne's essay develops a similar hermeneutics. The essay "De l'art de conferer" is exemplary in that it refers to the source of this hermeneutics, that is, conversation and dialogue. According to

37 "It is the undiligent reader who loses my subject, not I. In a corner somewhere you can always find a word or two on my topic, adequate despite being squeezed in tight. I change subject violently and chaotically. My pen and my mind go both a-roaming" (trans. Screech, p. 1125).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, we must consider language as the medium of the hermeneutic experience. It is language that facilitates the fusion of two horizons in the process of understanding. A new discourse is developed between the interlocutors, because in talking they both come under the truth of the particular matter they are discussing (le gage). The conversation brings about a metamorphosis of both partners into a common interest, a common ground, or mutuality, in the course of which they do not remain what they were. In the case of Montaigne’s essay “De l’art de conferer” we consider a written text as a hermeneutic discourse. The text is an imitation of an oral model and as such represents an alienation from orality, which is overcome in the act of reading. This act manifests the highest task of understanding. The characteristic trait of the genre of the essay is the author’s display of modesty; this goes hand in hand with an extreme importance placed on his personality, because the genre presents the moves or movements of a person’s mind or the temperament of the author himself. The topic of the essay is the search for truth. This search is not only defined as a problem, but the method of searching is enacted in addition. Thus the essay, being the imitation of conversation or dialogue, is the ideal method of finding the truth and of extending the limits of human knowledge.

At the same time, Montaigne’s notion of dialogue signifies an art of living, which makes the essay part of the literature of ideas, if not quite of philosophy. Montaigne’s texts convey moralistic ideas, but transform them by means of an immoral approach that allows the author to write from the position of a delinquent, a shop-assistant, or even a dolt. One favorite source is Plutarch, who furnishes the author with a fragmentary way of writing and with an art of interpretation appropriate for the new genre. Writing and interpretation go together and demand the active involvement of the reader in a constant weighing of the author’s opinion. Consequently, another important source, namely Plato, provides with his dialogues another inspiration for the new genre: it hovers between oral and written communication, presents a hermeneutics of its own, and also reveals Montaigne’s notion of dialogue as an extremely efficient diplomatic means.

The importance of the sources for an analysis of the essay shows another characteristic trait of the genre: it rewrites or reforms well-known subject-matters in trying out an original way of thinking. What is important is the manner of presentation: knowledge is masked rather than shown in technical terms, also because it is knowledge that is problematized. Montaigne's use of jousting images or other competitive sports thus rightly turns the essay into an arena of intellectual experience.

This intellectual experience is illustrated by Nietzsche in his preface to _Menschliches, Allzumenschliches_, where he demonstrates what is meant by Montaigne's maxim of _vivre à propos_. The physical experiences of falling ill and convalescence, of death and resurrection, of ice age, and spring weather, of distance and proximity, being at home and travelling, being within oneself and beside oneself, are turned into a chemistry of concepts and sensations in the section "Von den ersten und letzten Dingen". This new way of writing is based on fusion, alchemy, flux, movement, and the combination of science and art. In the second part of the book, Nietzsche turns to aphoristic writing, because, as he claims, he is dissatisfied with the essay as a genre. This is due to a change of constitution, a mental make-up described by him as a recovery from illness in the aphorism 408, similar to a return from Hades. Nietzsche's turn to aphorism reflects his awakening to or becoming conscious of the spirit of the age: the dawning age of indiscretion, that is, the age in which reign the traveller, mass communication, and democracy extended to every sphere of daily life, renders impossible the play between public and private life, which is the most important trait of the essay.

To write a (personal) essay requires a strategic move: the essayist resolves to establish and maintain a calculated distance between the public persona and the inner self. His identity as the author of this specific genre depends upon the existence of a private retreat that has been consciously constructed. For Montaigne, this is his tower with library, his private property, or that which he calls _arrière-boutique_ (his innermost thoughts or his _Travel Journal_). For Nietzsche it would be the mountains. This meditative withdrawal or informal confession works with a

---

dialectic of engagement and detachment and permits the author always to imagine yet another unexpressed judgment or unspoken criticism. Nietzsche's *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, for example, presents serious topics in a pleasing form. The remedy to contemporary philistinism, arrogance, racism, and nationalism, which are all denounced in these essays, is an extreme individualism expressing itself in a writing of intimacy. In Nietzsche's *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*, the essay is replaced by the aphorism. At its best, however, in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, the essay combines science with art.