

Interpretation

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Manent's *Montaigne* or the Invention of the Untied Individual

Pierre Manent, *Montaigne: Life without Law*. Translated by Paul Seaton. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, 280 pp., \$42.00 (hardcover).

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In this dense work written with a sense of urgency, Pierre Manent continues his exploration of the genesis of the modern individual by tackling what he holds to be one of its great initiators, if not its principal initiator: Montaigne. He engages in a genuine and vigorous *Auseinandersetzung* with the author of the *Essays*, one that carries with it a merciless critique of contemporary individualism and its alleged father. Unfortunately, we will not be able to dwell on this aspect of the work, which makes it so topical and which has made its reception difficult among contemporary readers not inclined to practice self-examination. We will limit ourselves here to the analysis that Manent offers of the birth of the individual unbound by the law in Montaigne's *Essays*, without even seeking to test the truth of this daring interpretation. Our aim is more modest here: to provide a possible reading of this work—a work that presents a deceptively smooth surface.

To understand the Montaignian figure of the individual, we must examine Montaigne's break with both ancient philosophy and Christianity. According to Manent, Montaigne is one of the great Reformers at the dawn of the modern age, and he is even more radical in his desire for Reformation than is Calvin or Machiavelli. The latter two would indeed have remained attached by a thousand ties to what they rejected, whereas Montaigne has

established a completely different relationship to truth and life, arising from a more complete rejection of ancient authorities (17, 134, 147–48, 126–28, 153–54). This is why Manent settles without hesitation the classic question whether Montaigne was a defender of the ancients or a precursor of the moderns, or even a subtle mixture of the two: he is without a shadow of a doubt a modern, even the first of the moderns.

Montaigne is, first of all, a modern, for he provided a very personal version of the moderns' rallying cry: "Relief of our wretched human condition!" Of course, he does not at all propose making man master and possessor of nature to relieve our condition, as Bacon or Descartes would subsequently do, but rather making himself master of his soul (23–24). Even if such a proposition seems to be in conformity with what the ancient sages have always said, it nevertheless takes a totally different shape under the pen of Montaigne. This mastery of the soul does not appear in him, as it did for the ancients, as a constant effort to order one's soul to a higher external good. Nor is it a question of opening one's soul to divine grace in order to let oneself be healed and guided by it. Both of these attitudes are rejected, because they always risk making the soul lose its "seat," as Montaigne would say. The main fault of ancient philosophy and of the Christian religion was therefore to stretch the soul too much by making it aim at goals that were too high for it. Montaigne agrees on this point with Machiavelli, but he will draw from it a different conclusion: Montaigne's enterprise will consist not in disposing the soul to the conquest of fortune and nature, but rather in bringing it back to itself by relaxing its spring and by curing it of the imaginations which make it overflow out of itself (91–92).

We can see from this that the "mastery of the soul" desired by Montaigne in no way overlaps with what is traditionally understood by this term. As Manent says: "This mastery of the soul does not derive, as in Greek philosophy, from a power of ordering. Rather, it is a power of transforming, or of transforming itself, a metamorphic power, a poetic power. It is not a matter of rediscovering and actualizing an underlying order, but of giving form to something that does not have form or can take on a thousand forms: '*Of the many thousands of attitudes at its disposal, let us give it one conducive to our repose and preservation*'" (24; see also 87–89, 102–3). Montaigne thus wants to bring us back to ourselves in order to make us find rest in ourselves. Now, if we have a thousand ways, a thousand forms at our disposal, what does it mean to find oneself at home in oneself? For Montaigne, one must find one's

own “master form” if one is to find oneself at home. But how can one find his master form among all the forms and metamorphoses of the self?

Manent describes with great subtlety this Montaignian dialectic of the master form and the thousand forms that the self and the life can take. Any reader who dives into the *Essays* and loses himself in them cannot but ratify at first the observation of Montaigne that “truly man is a marvelously vain, diverse, and undulating object” (*Essays* 1.1, quoted at Manent, 14). He will often come out of his reading with the conviction that nothing solid can be said about man or the world, because everything is delivered to the power of change and becoming. Montaigne seizes the being not in its rest, but in fugitive moments of passage from one state to another. Perhaps no philosopher before Montaigne insisted as much as he did on the mobility, the fluidity, the infinite plasticity of the human self. Nothing is thus fixed in man, if it is not the continuous movement of his self (154–57).

If it is indeed the case, wouldn't the principle—“to loyally enjoy his being”—proposed as a goal of life by Montaigne be entirely summed up in the passive contemplation, in the “*nonchaloir*,” in front of what the chances of life have made of us (27–30, 67–68)? Yes, in part; but Manent notes that this immersion in the flow of the fleeting selves that constitute us does not prevent Montaigne, as we indicated above, from searching for his “master form”: “There is no one who, if he listens to himself, does not discover in himself a form all his own, a master form, which struggles against education and against the tempest of the passions that oppose it. For my part, I do not feel much sudden agitation; I am nearly always in place, like heavy and inert bodies” (*Essays* 3.2, quoted at Manent, 55). Each of us thus carries in himself a master form that defines him and that constitutes a solid rock on which the self is built. This master form cannot be assimilated to a nature which would be common to all human beings: it is rather what specifies us most deeply as individuals. Each of us carries a unique formula that defines him. This is why our greatest duty would be to obey this master form and our greatest mistake would be to believe that we can reform it by adjusting ourselves to models outside of it (112). In short, we always lose ourselves by trying to be more than ourselves and it is pointless to repent for our past sins (61–63).¹

¹ Manent's critique of Montaigne is similar in many respects to Pascal's critique of the philosopher. As in several of Manent's works, it is difficult to know whether this Pascalian-inspired critique, therefore one of Christian origin, is more decisive and stronger than the critique from the point of view of ancient political philosophy that one can find at key moments in the work.

This condemnation of repentance and penitence fits very well into the overall Montaignian strategy, revealed by Manent, to relax the soul's tension revealed by Manent. It would be vain to want to find a law or a rule to our conduct since the individual is at the same time too changeable and too fixed in its master form (161–62). Moreover, the effort to aim too high in conforming to a rule external to us is doomed to failure, because it will come up against the indistinguishable mixture of fluidity and solidity proper to one's self. No single formula can suit the moral conduct of human beings; each must determine for himself the formula that is appropriate to him (155–57). One can certainly admire the great actions and the human beings who have been modeled from a pattern higher than ourselves, but it is useless, even perilous, to try to imitate them.

Here we arrive at the heart of Manent's interpretation: Montaigne invites us to find our own form, or to give ourselves a form in the absence of any predetermined form. It is only in loyalty to oneself and, by extension, to life that Montaigne's desired true wisdom can be found. The ultimate goal of this wisdom is the withdrawal of the soul in a kind of passive nonchalance. In Manent's terms, Montaigne turns the individual from an active agent, capable of conforming himself to an external rule, into a passive subject who takes pleasure in contemplating himself as he is without thinking of reforming himself. And Manent concludes, visibly annoyed by this "becoming *subject*" of the Montaignian individual: "Thus, while the acting human is this intermediate being between the animal and God, who cannot exist except by acting, the subject is this animal-divine which seeks repose in *a sentiment of itself* which delivers it from the burden of action, from the burden of humanity" (113; see also 92, 117–18).

At this point, one will understand better the mysterious subtitle of Manent's work: *Life without Law*. According to Manent, Montaigne was the most radical reformer of nascent modernity because he proposed the possibility of a life removed from law. The wars of religion and the discovery of the New World confirmed his skepticism concerning the possibility of defining a unique and objective human Good. Since it is futile and dangerous to aspire to a single law, it is preferable to convince human beings to embrace a spirit of tolerance and to defuse in them the imaginations that drive them to fanaticism (127–28). The best way to achieve this result is to show that there is no such thing as a Good above human beings, and that each person can find in himself the rule of his conduct. Life without law will then appear far

preferable to the endless struggles that human beings have always engaged in for the monopoly of the definition of the good and of the law.

Manent implies that Montaigne's project of freeing the individual was a *conditio sine qua non* for the advent of political modernity constituted by the modern state and human rights (175–77). Montaigne did not imagine the modern state or explicitly formulate the idea of human rights, but he did give birth to the individual who would live within this political form or, more precisely, who would see in it the instrument that would allow him to live his life as he wished. In fact, the modern state in its liberal form is ultimately at the service of the untied individual, to whom it even guarantees a right to live an apolitical existence if he so desires. However, this modern liberal formula can be fully implemented only if individuals are intimately convinced that the essence of human life cannot be defined by an external order, be it natural or divine, but can be found in their own master forms.

If this is the case, the modern liberal regime presupposes the existence of Montaignian individuals, that is to say, untied individuals who aspire to live without law or who recognize as the only law what would guarantee their aspiration to accomplish their “master forms” (178). This is why the apolitical figure of the Montaignian individual is in fact the most political of all: it is an essential part of the modern liberal order that succeeded in creating a political community from the unbinding of individuals. However, one can ask with Manent if this order does not rest on a precarious equilibrium and if it does not risk disintegrating in favor of a more and more radical untying of the individuals. Or, in other words, does not Montaigne's “living according to nature,” that is, “according to our own nature,” threaten the Law necessary to any genuine human political community?