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H-France Review Vol. 15 (June 2015), No. 81

Rafal Krazek, *Montaigne et la philosophie du plaisir. Pour une lecture épicurienne des Essais*. Paris: Classiques Garniers, 2011. 279 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. 39€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-0361-3.

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In the abundant scholarly research surrounding the multi-faceted work, personality, political involvement, and influence of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1582), a major focal point has always been an attempt to assess his philosophical predilections within the spectrum of ancient philosophies available to late sixteenth-century French culture. These endeavors have shown us repeatedly that the gentleman from Bordeaux, who famously qualified his *Essais* as “the only book of its kind” (II, 8, 385), simply would not allow his singular, written self-portrait to suffer from a dogmatic, comfortable reduction to be squared away in an academic manual.[1] His book, he asserted, was exactly like himself, a living presence, and it resisted, with an energy that justifies its unending appeal as a classic of world literature, any desiccating interpretation. Through its author's rhetorical virtuosity, the familiar intonation of a good neighbor's voice eager for honest conversation resounded and, through his vivid utterances, he provided, perhaps for the first time in Western culture, a sort of self-reflexive consciousness that had not been expressible before.

In the first half of twentieth century, the problem of Montaigne's irreducibility to any dogmatic formulation was somewhat resolved by the articulation of a sort of diachronic, triangular biographical scenario regarding the manner in which his intellectual background evolved. In this interpretive scheme, the first phase corresponded to a rather rigid Stoicism emphasizing the toleration of pain, and the second to a “skeptical crisis” putting into question everything he knew. The third, which concerns us here, was marked by a concentration on ancient Greek and Roman philosophical practices that assisted the observant sage to achieve a pleasurable manner of living without the weight of anxiety. Such psychagogic teachings were clearly Epicurean, and reflected an emphasis on relieving the individual from the pains of the body and the fear of death in order for him to savor each instant of life. This pragmatic therapy had nothing to do with the severe precepts of the Christian faith, which exhorted believers to prepare their immortal souls for a supernatural world of hellish punishment. On the contrary, the “Garden”—an epithet qualifying the Epicureans' chosen verdant natural site for their discussions—maintained, as an essential principle, that soul and body are mortal and integrally belong to the physical make-up of an atomic universe. Could Montaigne also be an Epicurean “atheist” cultivating moderate pleasure and a devotion to Nature, a proposition that obviously challenged his claims that he was a faithful adherent to the Catholic Church? This is the fundamental and difficult question to which Krazek's monograph responds.

In the last few years, this latter, Epicurean phase of Montaigne's inclinations has drawn increased attention to the early modern reception of Lucretius, whose long and brilliant poem *De rerum natura*, *On the nature of things* (ca. 50 BCE) was a sort of “scientific epic” that embodied the teachings of Epicurus.[2] It was composed of powerful and esthetically outstanding Latin hexameters, through which we encounter the most complete expression of the Garden's views. Here is a rudimentary sketch of this philosophy: It argues that the universe is composed of elemental atoms falling endlessly in a limitless void. At one point, however, the parallel vertical paths of these minuscule elements are

subjected to a mysterious swerve, the *clinamen*, an ever so slight diversion in the itinerary of one atom. The *clinamen* thus provokes a crucial entanglement of atoms, and a universe is on its way to creation by a massive coalescence of indivisible particles. Such a world is our own, destined by cosmic time to an ineluctable dissolution into the perpetual downward will of atoms. On the human scale, such a disintegration also awaits us, since our souls and bodies are atomic aggregates.

In a timely manner, Krazek's monograph richly contributes to the current reassessment of Montaigne's Epicurean proclivities. It offers a well-researched overview specifying how these permeated Montaigne's life and writing. Krazek also expertly manages his thorough acquaintance with the literature regarding the strikingly modern conceptions of the principal philosophical schools of Antiquity. The first two chapters enumerate and briefly comment on the texts that provided access to the teachings of the Garden. In 1417, the great Humanist scholar Poggio Bracciolini unearthed a long forgotten medieval manuscript of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*. In 1431, the equally famous Lorenzo Valla published *De voluptate* (1431), (*On Pleasure*), a dialogue largely considered a defense of Lucretius, which undoubtedly shaped the Gallic response to his epic.[3] In France, its interpretation was solidified by Denys Lambin's vastly improved and philologically advanced edition of the text. Lambin's edition (1563), which Montaigne owned and diligently annotated, was an essential document attesting to the essayist's keen interest in these verses. Lambin's introduction also constructed a polemical, metaphorical "security zone" that any writer of that epoch had to prepare carefully in order to pacify the courts of the murderous Inquisition. For this reader, it would have been helpful if Krazek had fleshed out more fully both Valla's and Lambin's very significant arguments, for they unfolded the intellectual parameters necessary at that time for intellectual interactions with a self-contained materialism. Also, the semantic dimensions of *voluptas*, which Valla used in his title, correspond to a variety of terms used in the essays: "volupté," "joie," "jouissance," "plaisir," and an assessment of such semantic particularities could have made more precise the different brands of pleasure in question.

For quite a long time, diligent readers have recognized the particular insistence of the essays' commerce with Lucretius, especially in the immense and celebrated text "L'apologie de Raymon Sebon" (II,12). Montaigne's "apology" has traditionally been central to our grasp of his Pyrrhonism, a radical strand of skepticism. In this regard, most noteworthy are the vast passages of this veritable treatise attacking the infirmities of malleable human reason, a faculty incapable of reaching a stable decision on the nature of the soul and on whether it is mortal or immortal. In the third chapter of the book, "Montaigne et la religion," Krazek commits himself wholeheartedly to the thesis that Montaigne was a materialist and an atheist. This proposition leads the author to deny the gist of Febvre's groundbreaking studies, which proclaimed, in the 1940's, that arguing for the presence of atheism in sixteenth-century France betrays a pernicious anachronism that does not respect the ideological domination of Christian views at that time. Krazek's assertion to the contrary provides, in my opinion, insufficient theoretical considerations against Febvre's still dominant critique, although the latter has lately come into question.[4] Krazek also maintains that the essays, through a persistent rhetorical strategy of simultaneously veiling and unveiling, demonstrate that their author operated as an unbeliever who expected like-minded readers to appreciate his Epicurean atheism. In this view, Montaigne putatively becomes an early promoter of the *libertins érudits*, a dissident atheist movement that flourished in the seventeenth century. Furthermore, for Krazek, Montaigne already participates in the "rationalist spirit of the Enlightenment" (p. 104). He is even an early proponent of *laïcité*, that, in this context, seems to be an odd anachronism applying rather to the modern history of France's conceptions of its Republican ideals. These lines of thought are, for me, somewhat difficult to follow, and the hyperbolic confidence with which the author punctuates his assertions is a bit unsettling. This part of the book deserves to be expanded and clarified.

In the next chapter, "*Le naturalisme de Montaigne*," the book's persuasive clarity improves significantly. It develops with more specificity the analyses of "pleasure" and "naturalism" in the essays although, as I mentioned above, with little semantic precision. It convincingly posits that Montaigne was a lover of the natural in all its dimensions, and a devotee of a symbolic Venus, namely *alma Venus*, the tutelary Roman

goddess who incarnated the generative might of Nature. In the celebrated prologue (I, 1-68) of Lucretius' cosmogonic epic, she neutralizes Mars' bellicose outbursts with her divinely erotic and uncontrollable appeal, thereby fostering peace and abundance in the world.[5] The theme of the fertility of Nature, and of its copious diversity and metamorphic powers, was overwhelming in the Renaissance, and the essays reflected these cornucopian excesses in many ways. Krazek, in my opinion, does not satisfactorily establish the cultural aspects that validated the essayist's devotion to nature. Indeed, the essays totally reflect an often disquieting cornucopian exuberance through their ceaseless reincorporation and transformation of quotations, anecdotes and philosophical strands. Just as nature, they grow without any apparent closure and digress with puzzling effects. Close readings of such a labyrinthine and interpretively challenging text are mostly absent in Krazek's discussion. "Sur des vers de Virgile" (III,5) is a case in point, since it develops a pointed questioning of Venusian engendering and sexuality, in which it entertwines literary filiation, a topic that, in the Renaissance, had much to do with the creation and birth, in an almost literal sense, of new texts.[6] But perhaps this criticism is unfair and misses the point, since Krazek's approach is not philological, but rather seeks to extract univocal "messages" from a textual material that is often reticent and polyvalent.

In the essays, the outstanding site for this complex notion of an earthly, purely natural paradise is "*Des cannibales*" (I, 31), probably the most read and pedagogically useful essay today. Krazek discusses the visionary qualities of "On cannibals," a text that later became essential to Rousseau's seminal treatment of the innocence of primitive humans and of their subsequent corruption. Many contemporary readers regard Montaigne's reflections on these "primitives" as a proto-ethnological and anti-colonialist document introducing realizations on our treatment of "the other." In his incisive and polemical presentation of the culture, lifestyle and beliefs of the Brazilian "savages" whom Jean de Léry encountered in his expedition to this mostly unknown land, Montaigne praised these strange foreigners, products of a natural environment (*phusis*) which did not, however, prevent them from establishing a set of remarkable customs (*nomoi*). Simultaneously, as Krazek briefly examines, the mayor of Bordeaux virulently indicted the inhuman behavior that Protestants and Catholics displayed in their protracted war against each other, a war directly caused by religion, a famous Epicurean leitmotif. Krazek also discusses the importance for Montaigne of the basic ancient dichotomy *phusis/nomos*, nature's relationship to culture, a culture which, in its ceaseless transmission of behaviors and concepts, becomes a disturbing "second nature." Surprisingly, however, the chapter leaves out any reference to the outstanding articles by Panichi and Tournon, who present an erudite and thorough discussion of this opposition in the *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne* (2007).[7] Moreover, in my opinion, Lestringant's extensive and remarkable work on the notions of "cannibalism" in a proto-colonialist kingdom should have been referenced.[8]

The last part of the book, "Philosophy, a cure for the soul" and "Montaigne's use of pleasures," is truly worthy of high praise and appreciation. Here, Krazek investigates the essayist's notions concerning philosophical and pragmatic applications of the therapy leading to the "cure" the Epicureans and Lucretius insistently prescribed. The book demonstrates how their active quest for *eudaimonia*, the ultimate phase of the sage's devotion to nature's materialist teachings, clearly resounded in the essays. He insightfully discusses Montaigne's own practical injunctions to his readers for a way of life inhabited by temperance and *plaisir*. Famously, the Christian enemies of Epicurus vehemently deprecated this ancient sage's "hedonism" as a devotion to depraved animalistic tendencies.

On the contrary, as Krazek shows, the Garden firmly constructs the gratification of the physical senses on a rational basis that impressively incorporates doctrinal atomism. The true Epicurean must develop a sort of automatic internal computation—termed "metropathy"—that precisely locates the moment when acceptable pleasure turns to inevitably painful and morbid excess. In other words, the sage must internalize, as Socrates would say, both a somatic and a mental knowledge of personal limitations and a thorough respect for the adage "Nothing in Excess." These "psychosomatic" concerns have lately fascinated many readers, and Krazek provides, in Epicurean terms, a thorough analysis of this term as it

applied to Montaigne's late manner. Evidently, the last phase of human life, because of its many ills, stubbornly resists the attainment of pleasure. This state of often debilitating anxiety or *mélancolie* applies especially to the essayist, who suffered for many years from a morbid physical condition he shared with Epicurus, namely kidney stones or *gravelle*, the passing of concretions which provoked extreme pain in the urethra.

The book explores, in the context of "the use of pleasure," how health, "*la santé*," a term semantically associated with "sanity," became a crucial theme for Montaigne and led to his vibrant evocations of the recovery, if not rediscovery, of health. The term "flash of lightning" (*esclair*), in a passage the book examines, surfaced when Montaigne articulated his ineffable relief after an attack of the stone. In a complex manner, Krazek focuses on the relationship of pain to pleasure that the Epicureans acutely theorized with the help of a sophisticated conceptual vocabulary. This careful treatment, to my knowledge, is groundbreaking in Montaigne studies, and constitutes a serious and successful attempt to show the essays' most precise engagement of Epicurean thought. At this point, the book also attenuates the apparent neglect in the early chapters of the Skeptical and Stoic elements on the essayist's thought, and arrives at a harmonious equilibrium of the three ancient philosophies that dynamically nourished the essayist and his teachings. As Hadot, Foucault and Salem, whose influential investigations play a major role in the formational background of Krazek's work, have made clear, the dimension of philosophical practice or *askesis* has mostly met academic neglect.[9] However, Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans were all concerned with a very tangible and pragmatic goal: showing individuals how to reach *eudaimonia* when they are penetrated by the fear of death, often in a hostile cultural and political environment. The Stoics were especially rigid in their emphasis on the acceptance of pain, although in Seneca's *Letters to Lucilius*, Epicurean strands were obvious. On the other hand, as we can see through Krazek's erudite lens, the Garden probably developed most rational and clearly articulated methods which used pleasure as a well-defined tool, a medicine with serious potential to alleviate both physical and spiritual pain for any human beings willing to engage their *askesis*.

The author's book, in the final analysis, reaches many of the ambitious goals implied by its title. These achievements are substantiated by an impressive array of footnotes that constitute an advanced lesson in modern philosophical treatments of atomism, and also demonstrate the depth of his involvement in the field. Through a clarification of the challenging philosophical vocabulary of the Garden, Krazek clears the ground for more pointed discussions of the reception of the Epicureans. Most of all, he elucidates how Montaigne's philosophical stances were intricately folded within, for his epoch, an almost unique self-reflexive consciousness.

The readers of the Mayor of Bordeaux's *oeuvre* can now better conceive of the place he reserved in his labyrinthine discourse for a peaceful, human Garden of the Wise Muses we all could enter, if only we tried earnestly enough. Rafal Krazek's study will certainly become a keystone in the scholarly context in which it dwells so soundly.

## NOTES

[1] Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2004), p. 385.

[2] Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura, English and Latin*, trans., W.H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. Press, 1937). The number of current publications dealing with Epicureanism is daunting. Regarding the Renaissance, connecting with a wide public in the U.S. is Stephen Greenblatt's prize-winning *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), rapidly translated into French by Cécile Arnaud, with the title *Quattrocento* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013). For academic specialists, there is also, very importantly, *La renaissance de Lucrèce*, ed. Frank Lestringant (Paris:

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Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), a collection of essays to which Krazek refers on several instances.

[3] Lorenzo Valla, *On pleasure*, trans., A. Kent Hieatt, Maristella Panizza (New York: Abaris Books, 1977).

[4] Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans., Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[5] See note two above.

[6] The philology surrounding Lucretius and its textual and cultural implications is admirably explored by Gerard Passanante, *The Lucretian Renaissance. Philology and the Afterlife of tradition* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[7] *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne*, ed., Philippe Desan (Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007).

[8] Frank Lestringant, *Le cannibale. Grandeur et décadence* (Paris: Perrin, 1994). Also, Krazek surprisingly does not mention David Quinn's *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy. Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), fundamental to the study of the aristocratic ethos in Montaigne's France, and also a thorough study of ethically problematic *nomos* and its responses to the discovery of "savages."

[9] Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et la philosophie antique* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1987); Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vols. 2 and 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); and Jean Salem, *Tel un Dieu parmi les hommes. L'éthique d'Épicure* (Paris: Vrin, 1994) and *La Mort n'est rien pour nous. Lucrèce et l'éthique*, (Paris: Vrin, 1990).

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ISSN 1553-9172

