Eighth-Annual Birthday Lecture:

From Erasmus to Montaigne
(and Beyond):
Writing as Presence*

by GÉRARD DEFAUX

"... tum Socrates ad puerum: Loquere igitur, inquit, adolescens, ut te videam; significans, ingenium hominis non tam in vultu relucere, quam in oratione, quod hoc sit certissimum minimeque mendax animi speculum."
Erasmus (Apophthegmata), LB 4:162D.

Erasmus and Montaigne: the topic is certainly not new, and it is today more than ever in the air. The time is gone when Raymond Lebègue could see in Rabelais "the last of the French Erasmians." Since then—let us say from the beginning of the 1960's—, many scholars have conclusively shown that, as far as French literature is concerned, Erasmus' influence extends far beyond the middle of the sixteenth century. I personally would not hesitate to say that the last and, perhaps, most authentic of all "French Erasmians" are Molière and Samuel Chappuzeau: Molière, who in writing his Misanthrope, his Would-be Gentleman, and his Imaginary Invalid, gave ample proof that he was an astute reader and a faithful disciple of Lady Stultitia; Samuel Chappuzeau, who in translating all of Erasmus' Colloquia for a French audience, allowed the very spirit of the "Philosophy of Christ" to survive in a century—the so-called "Grand Siècle"—when generally speaking people were more inclined to listen to Garasse's Jesuitical invectives and fulminations than to the gentle words of the Paraclesis. As for Montaigne

*Presented at the Folger Shakespeare Library on October 27, 1987.

himself, it has recently become almost impossible to study the *Essais*, their style or content, their order—or lack thereof—, without immediately and automatically referring to Erasmus. I would even venture to say that, today, the thoughtful comparison between the two writers, the fact of bringing them together, is something which goes without saying. The truth of the matter, its explanation, is most certainly to be found in our growing interest in classical rhetoric and what might be called the *problématique* of writing as such, in our enduring and quite extreme fascination for questions and speculations which, in more than one sense, constitute the very essence and *raison d'être* of our “post-structuralist” critical and philosophical debates: that is, language, truth, and interpretation. All those who have had a chance to read Terence Cave’s exemplary study, *The Cornucopian Text*, will understand what I mean. In his recent thesis, *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Erasme*, Jacques Chomarat establishes striking parallels between the two humanists. Marc Fumaroli does the same thing in his seminal and thought-provoking book on *L'Age de l'éloquence*, as well as in a few important articles, which I shall quote and use later. Géralde Nakam, in her well-documented *Montaigne et son temps*, and Jules Brody, in his brilliant *Lectures de Montaigne*, give us additional reasons—reasons both of a stylistic and historical nature—to believe that this affinity has now become firmly established, that it represents a critical assumption shared by a whole generation of scholars, a truth which still needs to be more deeply probed and which is altogether legitimate, fruitful, and unavoidable.

This critical consensus, visible and overwhelming as it presently is, deserves a lot of attention. In my opinion, its importance is extreme; it cannot be overestimated. We may learn many things from it. We can postulate, for example, once and for all, that it is totally impossible to understand critically

---


