THE LEGACY OF MONTAIGNE

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Editor's Note—Professor Morphos joined the Department of French and Italian at Tulane in 1947. He retired from teaching in 1973 and now devotes his full time to research and writing. A founding member of the South-Central Renaissance Conference, he has contributed this article on Montaigne by special invitation. It is drawn from his research on the modern intellectual tradition in France, and is presented here to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Montaigne's Essays.

Montaigne occupies a pivotal position in the modern Western tradition. His Essays, which were started four hundred years ago, about 1572, and continued to be enlarged and revised until his death in 1592, represent the observations and reflections of a humanist who complements the achievements of his predecessors and gives a beginning to new methods of investigation in order to understand man and the world.

Montaigne both includes and expands the spirit of the Renaissance humanists. Their inquiry concerning the human problems of their time was based on reason and conscience, both illuminated by the study of the thinkers of Greek and Latin antiquity. Montaigne adds to this experience his novel observations based on a wider area of humanity: the newly discovered peoples, especially the primitives who lived under conditions and standards of behavior and attitudes that seemed to Europeans unusual and even savage. For Montaigne these very differences meant that the newly discovered peoples should be taken seriously into account as part of the whole of human experience.

At the same time, Montaigne turns his inquiry inward by applying his faculties of observation to himself and by developing the discipline of introspection, the first step to the discipline of psychology. He examines the workings of his own mind, his own impulses, emotional reactions and attitudes, in order to understand himself as well as other human beings. He discovers that he is far from simple and consistent, and this emphasizes for him the point that human beings and human society are equally complex, equally different in their modes of thinking, feeling and behaving, indivi-
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dually and collectively.

In this endeavor, he starts with the observation that in writing his Essays he tries to give an account of man, and this man is Michel de Montaigne himself, as he actually is. It is literally an essay which emerges out of a meticulous, constant and unending search. As he observes, "Certainly man is a marvelously illusive, diverse and wavering subject; it is hard to set a constant and uniform judgment concerning him." The essayist continues his inquiry for more than two decades with a mounting passion for analysis, increasingly complicated as he finds in the changing moods and troubled features of himself something more than himself, and that is the picture of humanity. "Each man carries in himself the whole form of the human condition." This view goes beyond the standard concept of "macrocosm" and "microcosm" with which the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were so familiar. There is nothing stable in either the whole or the miniature in Montaigne's formula. The standard concept implies two possible sets of moral interpretations: (a) the whole and the individual are good or evil absolutely; (b) the whole and the individual are at certain periods of time dominated by good, and at others by evil, as for example in the Manichean heresy. In Montaigne's pronouncement the individual man and mankind are a mixture of strong and weak and these are not constantly present but change without any ostensible order or cause.

As the author of the Essays advances in his inquiry on man and his institutions, he finds that what he examines and describes is the process of what he calls "the passing." He throws upon himself the beam of his continuous and keen observation, now from one angle, now from another, trying to catch the waverings and diversifications of his own mental and emotional self:

I paint not the being, I paint the passing, not the passing from one period of life to another, or as people say from seven to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute; I must accomodate my story to the demands of the hour; I may soon change not only through the whim of fortune, but intentionally. It is an account of diverse and changeable accidents and fancies, irresolute and on occasion contradictory, whether I am a different self or whether I grasp the subjects of my experience through different circumstances and considerations. So much so that I contradict myself at random, but as for the truth, as Demandes said, I do not contradict the truth at all.

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