

# Montaigne's Gaiety

*Timothy Hampton*

"Gaiety transfiguring all that dread."  
Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli"

## Contagion and Community

Montaigne ends the *Essais* with a prayer and a recommendation. The prayer comes in the form of a quotation from Horace's *Odes*, in which Horace, in old age, prays to Apollo for a life not devoid of honor and filled with poetry. The recommendation involves how we might spend what is left of our lives. "La vieillesse a un peu besoin d'estre traictée plus tendrement," says Montaigne in the penultimate sentence in French (III, 13, 1096).<sup>1</sup> Then he concludes: "Recommandons la à ce Dieu, protecteur de santé et de sagesse, mais gaye et sociale" (1096-97). These, as it were, are Montaigne's last words. It is striking that this beautiful final sentence contains a qualifier, a "but," that sets Montaigne's wisdom apart from that of other types of "sagesse." Montaigne is interested in wisdom and health – two things sacred to Apollo. The second of these involves the great preoccupation of the Third Book of the *Essais*, his concern with his own health. The first covers his ongoing engagement with traditional moral philosophy and his investment in learning "wisdom" or "sagesse" from his own life – the ostensible theme of the final essay, "Of Experience," in which these words appear. But why must this wisdom be "gay and social?" Or, more precisely, what do these terms mean? Are they merely juxtaposed, or do they have something to do with each other?

To get at these key terms in Montaigne's "wisdom," I will focus in what follows primarily on the notion of gaiety, on "une sagesse gaie," before circling back to consider the question of sociability. Montaigne's accounts of the self owe much, of course, to the classical discourse of the passions.<sup>2</sup> However,

---

<sup>1</sup> All parenthetical citations of Montaigne will be from the Thibaudet/Rat edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> For useful discussions of Montaigne's sense of physiology see, *inter alia*, Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982); Michael Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

gaiety only tangentially fits within the mechanistic world of classical physiology and the study of the humors. We might rather locate it within a Renaissance network of non-ecstatic forms of positive self-construal. This is a network that includes the affects named by the Latin term *alacritas* (and its cognates), the English *merriment*, *blitheness*, and *cheerfulness*, the French, *gaieté*, and *hilarité*, as well as the short-lived term *alaignité*. These are ephemeral states of being that are both techniques and consequences of what Michel Foucault called the “technologies of the self” – the ways that we make ourselves into subjects.<sup>3</sup> These forms of self-construal are dispositions of the spirit that nevertheless manifest themselves through the body. And in the case of gaiety they mark the moment at which spiritual disposition comes under the control of the will. For although you cannot make yourself melancholy or choleric – to name two of the most-discussed classical passions – you *can* make yourself gay or cheerful.

In a somewhat wider context, we might locate these concerns in a larger narrative whereby, as Teresa Brennan has argued in her book *The Transmission of Affect*, a world of early modern affective forces that act upon and construct subject through forms of contagion begins to give way to the emergence of what modern theorists of the self will call emotions. In Brennan’s account this involves the displacement of affective power from the space *between* subjects into the space of the individual via a new emphasis on the sense of sight. Brennan’s originary moment in this history is the passage in Montaigne’s “De la force de l’imagination” in which the essayist recalls a scene in which it was suggested that his own youthful vitality might improve, via proximity, that of an older man of failing health, even as, Montaigne adds ironically, the older man might contaminate and harm him. In Brennan’s account, this model of contagion of affect disappears across the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its disappearance begins with Descartes and Pascal and is more or less complete by the middle of the eighteenth century in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

My own concern is somewhat different. I am interested in the ways in which gaiety, which as I will show, involves a form of power, is appropriated by and helps to shape different types of knowledge—political knowledge, economic knowledge, theological knowledge, and so on. If gaiety blends evanescence and power, how is that peculiar blending deployed by different forms of knowledge? How is gaiety used? By studying the uses of gaiety, moreover, I hope to be able to nuance Brennan’s somewhat teleological account of the importation of affect into the subject.

A word search of sixteenth-century uses of the terms “gai,” “gaye,” and

---

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 93-108.

<sup>4</sup> See Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 16. A broader consideration of early modern affective history may be found in Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Rosenwein’s account of the early modern period focuses on melancholy. I am arguing for an alternative history that tracks gaiety and cheerfulness from theological communities into modern modes of social identity.

“gayeté” reveals that the word is used most frequently to describe Nature. For Montaigne's French contemporaries and predecessors, it is most often landscapes and birds that evince gaiety. The link between nature and gaiety goes back to some of the earliest courtly poems in Europe. Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti presents himself “gaiament cantando” the roses of spring. And of course, the troubadours had referred to the art of poetry as a “gai saber.” Among Montaigne's predecessors in France, the Lyonnais Petrarchan poet Maurice Scève praises the “gaye verdure” of the landscape in his 1545 collection *Délie*. More famously, in the second book of his *Amours* (1555) in a poem memorized by generations of French schoolchildren, Ronsard urges his rustic love Marie to wake up and hear the song of “la gaye alouette.” The link of gaiety to the natural world forms part of the repertoire of Petrarchistic clichés in French.<sup>5</sup>

Rabelais, however, had used the term in more philosophically interesting ways. In the preface to his 1534 chronicle *Gargantua*, Rabelais sets forth the terms for reading and interpreting his writing. This is the section in which he introduces the famous image of the Silenus box, which is ugly on the outside but contains healing medicine. Such is his book, says Rabelais; its superficial ugliness masks salutary wisdom that lies within. In order to access this wisdom, however, the reader must be correctly disposed. Even when the literal sense of the text offers joyous material (“matieres assez joyeuses”) the reader must move beyond it to take the words of the author in a higher sense – those things which “you believe, by chance, to have been spoken with a gaiety of the heart” (“à plus hault sens interpreter ce que par adventure cuidiez dict en gayeté de cuer”).<sup>6</sup> This model of reading imputes a particular disposition to the author and relies upon a model of community. The gaiety of the author's intention is transferred to the language of the text which the reader in return takes in the best sense. As Rabelais says in the final sentences of that famous prologue, echoing what has just been cited, “Or esbaudissez vous, mes amours, et *guayement* lisez le reste” (“So, take pleasure, my loves, and *gaily* read the rest.” [my emphasis]).<sup>7</sup> Thus “gaiety” is the term that links the pleasure of reading with proper interpretation and with the bond of faith between reader and writer. It establishes community. It links the disposition of the author – his gaiety of heart – with the agency of the reader, who can read gaily, or not, depending on his belief in the good intentions of the author.

The same language is recalled in another key moment in Rabelais. In the prologue to the *Quart livre*, written some 15 years later, Rabelais again links reading to health and gaiety. Here he informs the reader that he is himself in

---

<sup>5</sup> See Gianfranco Contini, ed., *Poeti del Dolce Stil Novo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), 55; Maurice Scève, *Délie*, ed. Françoise Charpentier (Paris: NRF, 1984), #149, 134; Pierre de Ronsard, *Les Amours*, ed. Marc Bensimon (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), 166.

<sup>6</sup> François Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Pierre Jourda (Paris: Garnier, 1963), I, 7. All translations of texts in this essay are by me.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. The emphasis on a “gay” or charitable model of reading goes back to Saint Augustine's discussions of interpretation in *De doctrina christiana*.

fine health, thanks to a bit of “Pantagruelism,” which he defines as “certain gayerie d’esprit, conficte en mespris des choses fortuites” (“a certain gaiety of spirit, pickled in scorn for fortuitous things”).<sup>8</sup> Here the “gayerie de cuer” that inspires the writing of *Gargantua* gives way to a “gayerie d’esprit” that has evolved into a philosophical doctrine. The element of chance that structures the earlier relationship of reader and writer (“ce que *par aventure* cuidiez dict en gayerie de cuer”) has now given way to a scorn for chance. The gayness that sanctions health seems to have migrated from the moment of the encounter between reader, text, and author, and reside in a more general register of philosophical counsel. We might see this as a strategy that corresponds to the generally darker tone of the *Quart livre*, written as it is at a time of increasing political and religious disunity in Christian Europe. Reading may not help you, Rabelais seems to suggest; you have to help yourself by brushing aside the power of chance.

Thus for Rabelais the notion of gaiety, linked to the processes of writing and reading, implies a certain rejection of contingency, an ability to rise above the everyday. The transcendence of the contingent might, in the context of Rabelais, be linked to his engagement with the so-called “Evangelical” branch of humanist thought. This current of thinking, which included the work of Erasmus, More, and, in France, the King’s sister, Marguerite de Navarre, stressed the themes of New Testamental charity and the renovation of the Christian community. For Rabelais, we might posit, the good news of the Gospels makes possible the gay rejection of the traditional iconography of *Fortuna*, with her wheel (gestured toward here in the mention of “fortuitous things”).

The theological context for this particular form of gaiety is worth consideration. Central to the notions of charity and community put forth by Saint Paul in his Epistles is the sense that Christians must engage with each other gladly. In *Romans*, Chapter 12, Paul sets forth the famous doctrine of the Christian community as a body with “many members.” He stresses that participation in that community must be done willingly according to the “gift” given each of us by “grace.” Paul’s Greek word for how we should participate in community, “*ilaróteia*,” means, “in a happy fashion.” More important, for the overwhelmingly Latin culture of the Renaissance, the Latin of the Vulgate renders it as “*hilariter*.” This word evokes the Roman goddess of happiness Hilaritas, who is often depicted on coins. Paul repeats the same language two books later, in the *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, in which he sets for the doctrines of community and ministry for the new community: “Let every man give as he intends in his heart; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loves the one who gives happily” – *hilarem enim datorem diligit Deus*” (9.7).<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 12. I note in passing that the actual etymology of “gay” is unstable. While noting the Latin cognomen Gaius (from *gaudeo*, to take pleasure) most etymologists trace it to the Old High German *wahi*, meaning beautiful.

<sup>9</sup> See *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, ed. Alberto Colunga and Laurent Turrado (Madrid: Edica, 1977).

Anouillet's 1535 vernacular Bible would translate "hilarem" as "joyusement." However, Bèze, Calvin, Marot and later, Sebastian Honorat, in 1566, would use the phrase "Dieu aime celuy qui donne gayment."<sup>10</sup> The English language tradition conveys this gaiety as "cheerfulness" ("God loveth a cheerful giver," says the Authorized Version), and Luther's German says, "einen fröhlichen Geber hat Gott lieb," thereby introducing *Fröhlichkeit*, the key term in the title of Nietzsche's famous 1882 book that we know in English and French as *The Gay Science*, or *Le Gai savoir*.<sup>11</sup>

These linguistic connections between gaiety and Christian charity resonate across the emerging humanist culture of early modern Europe. In his periphrases on Paul's epistles, Desiderius Erasmus, the greatest northern Humanist, urges the practice of charity, "with happiness" ("hilariter"). He adds that one must not give so that the person receiving the gift feels unhappy about it. The happy giver erases the difference between himself and the receiver. He does this by presenting the gift as if what were being given – given as it is with "happiness" – already belonged to the other. To give with "hilaritas" doubles the gift – "hilaritate gratiam officii conduplicet," so that what we give comes both come from "inside" us ("ex animo") "outside" us ("ex alieno").<sup>12</sup>

### Willful Action

The humanist theological nuance to gaiety, which brings moral action into the context of the Christian community, is both recalled and transformed in Montaigne. The link between gaiety and the experience of reading and writing that we have already seen in Rabelais is stressed in the tenth chapter of the Second Book, the essay entitled "Des livres." There Montaigne describes his reading practice. He confesses that he has a mind that loves to jump about. And this makes sustained study a problem. If Montaigne picks up a book and finds it to be too difficult, instead of gnawing his nails over it, he sets it aside: "(a) Les difficultez, si j'en rencontre en lisant, je n'en ronge pas mes ongles; je

---

<sup>10</sup> See *La Bible en françoys. Sensuyt la Bible diligemment translatee de latin en françoys, au plus pres du vray texte, pour les gens qui nentendent latin, avec les sept Ages* (Lyon: O. Anouillet, 1531). Calvin's account of gaiety may be found in *Commentaires de M. Jehan Calvin sur toutes les Epistres de l'Apostre S. Paul* (Geneva: Badius, 1557), 135. This text may be found online through the www.-rara.ch initiative of the Library of Geneva. See also *La Sainte Bible contenant le Vieil & Nouveau Testament* (Lyon: Sebastian Honorat, 1566) as well as *La Bible, qui est toute la sainte Escriture du Vieil et du Nouveau Testament* (Geneva: Berjon, 1605). For a glimpse of how gaiety and cheer fit (imperfectly) into the traditional discourse of the passions and humors see Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy. Contayning the causes thereof, and reasons of the straunge effects it worketh in our minds and bodies* (London: John Windet, 1586), 38ff.

<sup>11</sup> Wycliffe's fourteenth-century Middle English Bible had used "gladness," which is displaced, beginning with Miles Coverdale's Biblical translations in the 1530s, by the English-language uses of "cheer" and "cheerfulness."

<sup>12</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *Paraphrases in Novum Testamentum* (Berlin, 1787), III, 495.

les laisse là” (II, 10, 389). Such is his formulation of how he reads in the initial version of the *Essais*, published in 1580. For the second edition of the same essay and the posthumously published definitive version, he expands on this image of reading: “[B] Ce que je ne voy de la premiere charge, je le voy moins en m’y obtenant. Je ne fais rien sans gayeté; et la continuation [C] et la contention trop ferme [B] esbloüit mon jugement, l’attriste et le lasse. [C] Ma veue s’y confond et s’y dissipe” (389).<sup>13</sup>

Two features of this account of reading call for comment. The first is the relationship that Montaigne sets up between his fatigue at reading and his certainty that he is missing something. Montaigne states that what he does not see at the first attempt he sees even less by lingering over a passage in a book. But if he cannot see it initially, how can he be sure that he sees it even less the more he reads, since he missed it the first time? Subjective experience, in the form of the fatigue of the body, reshapes objective knowledge. We can see here writ little the larger arc of Montaignian scepticism, whereby a consideration of the limits of the self leads to a projection of the immensity and variety of the world.

But no less striking is the way in which, as Montaigne revises his text, it becomes progressively gloomier. The more Montaigne writes about reading difficult books, the worse the experience becomes. His initial impatience, in the 1580 version, turns, in the 1588 edition, into an exhaustion and even saddening of judgement – a kind of melancholy – and then, in the final additions, into a physical disability (“ma veue s’y confond et s’y dissipe”), as he ends up unable even to focus clearly on what he’s looking at.

We see here a quite different model of reading from Rabelais’s famous account in the preface to *Gargantua*, where he describes the reader as a dog, gnawing a bone. Rabelais’s reader is persistent; Montaigne’s is fickle. Even more striking, what for Rabelais is a charitable act, binding reader and writer, becomes, for Montaigne, a scene of depression. For the more he tries to read, Montaigne suggests, the more his vision is overcome and his judgement is depressed and exhausted – it becomes “triste” and “las.”

Indeed, we might wonder about the causality set forth here, and ask whether Montaigne’s vision becomes exhausted because he can’t understand, or whether he can’t understand because his vision becomes exhausted. Yet it is here that we can also note the work done by Montaigne’s claim that he does nothing without “gaiety.” The assertion of gaiety breaks the continuum of action, rendering sustained concentration on a text meaningless. The counterbalance to an exhausted sense of judgement is the bright claim that what seems at first glance to be interpretive failure is in fact a positive attribute of

---

<sup>13</sup> For a nuanced view of Montaigne’s modernist distance from traditional discourses of the passions, see Emiliano Ferrari, *Montaigne: Une Anthropologie des passions* (Paris: Garnier, 2014), chap. 3. Ferrari offers a useful refinement of the arguments of earlier scholars of Montaigne, in particular Michael Screech and Jean Starobinski, who tend to rely excessively on the largely mechanistic humoral account of melancholy to develop a framework for reading the *Essais*.

the self. The celebration of a light sense of reading redeems and revalorizes Montaigne's limitations. What looks like exhaustion turns out to be gaiety. Montaigne's revisions of his description, his intensification of his gloom, also intensifies the disruptive power of the assertion of gaiety. And this quality of the self extends far beyond the situation described here; not, "je lis avec gayeté," but "je ne fais rien sans gayeté." The acceptance of the limits of the self turns out to be the mark of a gay disposition that in turn blasts open the sequence of actions defining conventional ways of reading. Moreover, gaiety is presented not as a positive entity but as a kind of affective shading that is present by the negation of its absence: not, "je pratique la gayeté," but "je ne fais riens sans gayeté." The link to mental processes is made even more clearly in the early essay "Du parler prompt ou tardif," where Montaigne stresses that labored or prepared language is lifeless. From experience he knows that the speech is most effective when spontaneous, and that if the mind cannot proceed gaily and freely ("gayement et librement" (I, 10, 41 A)), it can do nothing of value ("elle ne va rien qui vaille").

Thus gaiety emerges as that characteristic flavoring or modality that shapes, not what Montaigne does, but *how* he does it. Gaiety is the adverbial aspect of an action that redeems it from ineffectiveness, even – or perhaps especially – when it is otherwise ineffective. It thus appears as a form of ideological or superstructural gloss that retrospectively gives meaning to actions in the world. And, indeed, a slightly broader version of the same situation appears later, in the ninth essay of the Third Book, the essay on vanity, where Montaigne discusses his love of travel and his vexed relationship to the chateau he has inherited from his father. There he laments his inability to keep his father's house in good condition, while noting, at the very moment in the text where he turns to discuss the paternal castle, that he generally prefers being elsewhere: "[B] C'est pitié d'estre en lieu où tout ce que vous voyez vous embesongne et vous concerne. Et me semble jouyr plus gayement les plaisirs d'une maison estrangere, et y apporter le goust plus naïf" (III, 9, 928). Then he adds, for the C text, that Diogenes remarked that the best wine was wine that came from somewhere else, that was unfamiliar. If the act of reading implies a freedom from obligation to study, the gayest experience of domesticity is in someone else's house, where there are no obligations. Montaigne's formulation is particularly interesting here, since it suggests that an unmediated pleasure ("naïf" suggests "originary," or "pure," linked to birth – the Latin *nativus* and *nascor*) can only occur when it is mediated by gaiety.

The key ethical feature of gaiety for Montaigne would seem to be the freedom from obligation. But it also implies a kind of phenomenological break or rupture with constancy and continuity. The gay actor is the actor disengaged from sequences of actions, exercising his will without constraint. The theological shading that marked gaiety seen in Rabelais, where it was linked to community, has now faded. Somewhat surprisingly, perhaps, throughout the Third Book of the *Essais* Montaigne presents gaiety as a political virtue. As he notes later in "De la vanité" the best political service is that which comes through free choice, rather than through conventional obligation. I love the

private life, he says, not because I don't like the public life, but because I have freely chosen it, "c'est par mon choix que je l'ayme" (III, 9, 966 B). I chose it because of my "complexion," and my free judgement. Because of this freedom, I am able to serve my king gaily: "j'en sers plus gayement mon prince par ce que c'est par libre eslection de mon jugement et de ma raison" (966 B). This is expanded a few pages later, in "De menager sa volonté," where we learn, as Montaigne discusses his time as Mayor of Bordeaux, that he hates social and political commitments, which involve the self in passionate obligations. The best thing is to use one's own judgment, for this produces more flexibility: "Celuy qui n'y employe que son jugement et son adresse, il y procede plus gayement: il feinct, il ploye, il differe tout à son aise, selon le besoing des occasions [...] il marche toujours la bride a la main" (I, 10, 985 B). These are extraordinary formulations, as they displace the dynamics of political responsibility from an engagement with the public world (civic duty, submission to the monarch) to the realm of personal caprice. Institutional structures that might seem to guarantee consistency and continuity are blasted apart. What remains is the moment of gaiety. Yet here, again, as in the account of reading seen earlier, the appearance of gaiety seems to trouble the notion of causality. Does the actor choose to serve because he/she is gay, or is s/he gay because of service freely chosen? Is gaiety the result of free judgement, or the power behind it?<sup>14</sup>

This disruptive dimension of gaiety cuts across the spheres of ethics and politics. If gaiety inflects Montaigne's royal service and his uneasy relationship with institutional authority, it is also characteristic of one of the most defiant moments in the *Essais*. As the Brazilian cannibals prepare to be roasted and consumed by their enemies, we are told that they "portent une contenance gaye" (I, 31, 211 A). Gaiety becomes the defining trait of resistance. It functions as the crowning feature of the heroic victim. It is not the mark of his courage, but the mark of his difference from all other heroic figures in the essays.<sup>15</sup>

### Gay Bodies

The cannibal's gaiety reminds us that gaiety enjoys a complex relationship to the body. The cannibal expresses his gaiety through the body, yet that gaiety is also the sign of the cannibal's transcendence of his body, which is about to be consumed, literally, by his enemy. The corporeal origins of gaiety

---

<sup>14</sup> On the relationship between the experience of pleasure and literary causality see Ullrich Langer, *Penser les formes du plaisir littéraire à la Renaissance* (Paris: Garnier, 2009), chap. 3. I have studied the relationship between the passions and the question of political allegiance in Montaigne in "Difficult Engagements: Private Passion and Public Service in Montaigne's *Essays*," in *Politics and the Passions 1500-1800*, ed. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano and Daniela Coli (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 30-48.

<sup>15</sup> On the larger ideological implications of the cannibals' resistance see David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), chap. 3.

are explored further in the fifth essay of the Third Book, the essay on sex and language called "Sur des vers de Virgile." There Montaigne stresses the close link between body and soul. As he approaches death, he says, he tries to isolate his spirit, giving it wise advice, reminding it of the examples of Seneca and Catullus, yet to no avail. If the body is unhappy, he says, so is the spirit. And he goes on to assert the originary dominance of the body. Whereas philosophers often attribute the transports of the soul to divine visitations, or to wine, or to poetry, what they should do is pay attention to the body. For when one is young, and in good health, it is health itself, "une santé bouillante, vigoureuse" (III, 5, 821 C), that generates the "fire of gaiety," "ce feu de gayeté" and drives us into moments of enthusiasm when we seem to transcend our own selves.

This is a remarkable moment in the *Essais*. For Montaigne's well-known aversion to mysticism and to all forms of religious ecstasy – a characteristic we might trace to his impatience with both sides in the Wars of Religion – is here recast.<sup>16</sup> Enthusiasm and ecstasy come, not from divine presence, but from good health, from the fire of gaiety that overtakes us. Yet the advantage of such a model is that it can also be tempered. Whereas mystical transports that come from God originate beyond this world, the "fire of gaiety" that inspires us "beyond our natural capacity," as he puts it, can also be controlled by our relationships with those around us. Montaigne quotes a line from Horace that we should all banish old age before adding, "I love a gay and civil wisdom," "J'ayme une sagesse gaye et civile" (822 B). This is the phrase that is echoed and rewritten in the very last phrase of the *Essais*, with which I began, where calls for "une sagesse gaie et sociale."

The point here is that Montaigne projects an image of action that is dyed or inflected with gaiety. That gaiety powers an independence from convention and a freedom of judgement. The free subject is the gay subject; gaiety emerges as a *form of power* that makes possible a break with institutional constraints and continuity. It resides in the body and powers it to forms of enthusiasm that can eventually only be constrained by the civil society with which it is in uneasy contact. Action without gaiety is mere convention; gaiety without the constraints of civil society risks excess. As Montaigne concludes a moment later, gaiety is what makes virtue social and light – in contrast to the "austere" (822 B) virtue of traditional philosophy: "La vertu est qualité plaisante et gaye" (822 B).

The link between freedom of movement and sociability suggests why gaiety is linked to the face. In his early essay on the education of children, Montaigne stresses the ease and pleasure that should accompany the study of philosophy ("il n'est rien de plus gaye" (I, 26, 160 A)). He recalls an exchange between Demetrius the Grammarian and a group of philosophers in which Demetrius is told that only pedants struggle and wrinkle their brow ("rider le front" (160a)), whereas the sweetness of philosophy produces a "contenance

---

<sup>16</sup> On the relationship between Montaigne's moral imagination and his scepticism toward religious extremism, see Quint, *Quality of Mercy*, chap. 4.

[...] paisible et [...] gaye” (160 A) – a phrase we have already seen in the account of the cannibals of Brazil, cited above. Healthy philosophy, concludes Montaigne, should render the body healthy as well.<sup>17</sup>

Gaiety is thus both somatic and moral. Leake’s concordance to the *Essais* shows that the noun most frequently modified by “gaye” is “contenance.”<sup>18</sup> Given the amount of attention that has been paid to Montaigne’s depictions of the body and the face in recent critical accounts of his work, it is important to think for a moment about the implications of the fact that Montaigne chooses “contenance” rather than “visage” to denote the vehicle of gaiety. The two terms differ by how they imply the face. “Visage,” with its derivation from “videre” or “to see,” connotes a certain passivity. It is, literally, that part of you which is seen. By contrast, “Contenance,” like the English “countenance,” derives from the Latin “continere,” meaning “to hold together.” It implies an active self-presentation, a composition of the face as it is presented to others, such as when the cannibals defy their captors “de parole et de contenance” (211 A). These nuances are expanded in Renaissance uses of the term. Jean Nicot’s French/Latin Dictionary defines it as the general disposition and “maintien” of the body and face. In Latin: “vultus membrorumque corporis compositio, status.” Nicot goes on to link it to the Latin, “continentia,” or “constancy.” Randle Cotgrave’s French/English Dictionary expands the network of association further, indicating that the word means “posture” or “form,” and that it can denote a mirror that is worn from the belt and used to check one’s appearance.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Montaigne seems to understand “visage” and “countenance” quite differently, since in “Du démentir” he speaks at his pleasure of learning about “les meurs, le visage, la contenance, les paroles communes et les fortunes de mes ancestres” (II, 18, 647 A). Here “visage” and “contenance” seem to suggest different ways of presenting the self. The two terms are not, it would seem, synonyms, as they are often assumed to be. “Contenance” suggests habit, a volitional act of self-presentation.

Thus Montaigne’s “gaiety” is a characteristic of the self that implies a freedom from obligation, an ability to move without being forced to. It is a form of power. It disrupts time and constancy, fracturing continuity and institutional constraint. Montaigne’s deployment of the concept and term help

---

<sup>17</sup> Throughout his writings on the body and education, Erasmus stresses the importance of having a “serene” brow. See, for example, the adage “Frontem exporringere, frontem contrahere” (I, viii,48) in *Les Adages*, ed. Jean-Christophe Saladin (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2010), I. The same point will be made in the mid-seventeenth century by Cureau de La Chambre in his *Les Caractères des passions* (Paris, Dallin, 1663), 166.

<sup>18</sup> See David B. Leake and Alice Elder Leake, *Concordance des “Essais” de Montaigne* (Geneva: Droz, 1981), I.

<sup>19</sup> Jean Nicot, *Thresor de la langue françoise, tant ancienne que moderne* (Paris, 1606). Randle Cotgrave, *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611). On the importance of the face in Montaigne’s own self-presentation see Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), chap. 5, as well as Quint, *Quality of Mercy*, chap. 4, and Joshua Scodel, “The Affirmation of Paradox,” *Yale French Studies* 64 (1980): 209-37.

set the *Essais* apart from an earlier tradition of reading that roots interpretation in religious community. Yet Montaigne's account of gaiety also imposes a kind of limitation on the subject to the extent that it implies a subject who can "hold himself" (*con-tenere*) together. The "free" Montaignian subject would seem to be located at the point of intersection between a body that is quite properly composed or "held together" for the public world, and disposition of the soul that is free of obligation. Here lies the "gay wisdom" that Montaigne seeks in the last sentence of his book, and we should now be able to see why that wisdom must be both gay and social. In the process, Montaigne mediates the emergence of a sphere of civil society out of earlier models of religious community informed by an ethic of gaiety or good cheer.

### Gaiety and Society

We can gauge the impact of Montaigne's depiction of gaiety as a kind of power residing in the action of the individual subject by turning to the work of his successor, the great neurotic, Blaise Pascal. In the fragments on imagination in his *Pensées*, Pascal takes up the question of gaiety. He locates gaiety among those who are "habiles par imagination" (that is, misled by the deceptions of this world) and notes that the gaiety of the countenance stressed by Montaigne is a trap:

cette gaieté de visage donne souvent l'avantage dans l'opinion des écoutans, tant les sages imaginaires ont de faveur auprès des juges de même nature. Elle ne peut rendre sages les fous; mais elle les rend heureux, à l'envi de la raison, qui ne peut rendre ses amis que misérables, l'une les couvrant de gloire, l'autre de honte.<sup>20</sup>

Though Pascal does not mention Montaigne in this passage, we can surmise that he has in mind the allusions to gaiety in the self-portraiture of the *Essais*. Whereas for Montaigne gaiety functions as a power that frees the self from convention while releasing it into a social world that may temper it, for Pascal it is just another form of deception. In Pascal's account gaiety may make some people self-assured and happy, but it cannot make them reasonable. Reason, by contrast, makes them miserable. For Rabelais, we remember, it is the good news of the Gospels that underpins gay reading. For Pascal, it is the bad news of Reason that unmasks gaiety as mere artifice.

Yet what is striking about Montaigne's gaiety is precisely the intersection of the disruptive and the social. From within an affective vocabulary of theological obligation, as we have seen, Montaigne begins to sketch out a vision of social relations that is strikingly modern. The subsequent emergence of salon culture and a culture of conversation in France in the fifty years following Montaigne's death make him, retrospectively, a theorist of the emergence of modern sociability. Indeed, when David Hume, the great philosopher of

---

<sup>20</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées*, ed. Philippe Sellier (Paris: Garnier, 1991), #78, 174.

sociability and the passions, evokes the wisdom that might be gleaned from different moral philosophers, it is “the gaiety of Montaigne” that he adduces. Yet to set gaiety loose in a social context is to acknowledge it as an ambiguous quality. For the individual it may be liberating, as it seems to have been for Montaigne. For La Rochefoucauld, by contrast, gaiety is linked to “la raillerie,” which strengthens conversation, but can also destroy affective links.<sup>21</sup> The shifting link between the gay subject and the social world becomes a touchstone of much seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writing about social and, indeed, eventually, national identity. Thus, we might turn, in closing, to a 1761 pamphlet by the Italian aristocrat and journalist Giuseppe Cerutti on French national character.<sup>22</sup> In his letter/pamphlet, addressed to an unidentified friend, he calls gaiety “le caractere marqué de votre nation.” Other nations are weighed down by melancholy, but the French, he says, lighten everything up. He locates French gaiety in three factors. First is the climate of France, in contrast to Spain, which is too hot, and Germany, which is too cold. The second factor is government. You can only have gaiety in a monarchy. In a tyranny everyone is oppressed, and in a democracy the average man spends his time worrying about the common good. Whereas the Englishman sees all men as equal, and the Spaniard sees no one as equal to him, the Frenchman compares himself to everyone else all the time – and believes himself superior: “Il a sans cesse le plaisir de ce croire le vainqueur de ces égaux.” French gaiety is thus based on a form of self-delusion. But it is also based on social interaction, which is Cerutti’s third reason for French gaiety: “pour plaire à quelqu’un,” he says, “il faut s’humaniser, s’adoucir avec lui.”

The focus on social engagement and conversation relocates gaiety in social interaction. This is not the contagious vision of Montaigne’s essay on the imagination, evoked earlier, nor yet the willful disruption of context and continuity seen in the *Essais*. Here affect swirls about the subject, defining her or him in relationship to the Other, but nevertheless generating a kind of power that has the capacity both to shape social relations and structure the self. Indeed, Cerutti’s notion of a social gaiety is worked out again in the writing of Mme de Staël. Twenty years after Cerutti in *De l’Allemagne*, de Staël stresses the importance of conversation for the very emotional life of the subject. Because one is obliged in conversation to present oneself gaily to

---

<sup>21</sup> David Hume, note to “The Sceptic,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1993), 254. I am grateful to Christophe Litwin of the University of California, Irvine, for having pointed me toward the Hume reference. In a forthcoming book-length project on the history of cheerfulness and gaiety I write at more length about Hume’s version of the cheerful self. For La Rochefoucauld, see “Maximes non publiées” in #27, in *Moralistes du XVIIIe Siècle*, ed. Jean Lafond (Paris: Laffont, 1992), 190-91.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph-Antoine-Joachim Cerutti, *Discours sur la question proposée par l’Académie des Jeux floraux pour l’année 1761: La lumière des lettres n’a-t-elle pas plus fait contre la fureur des duels que l’autorités des lois* (Paris, 1761), 56. Cerutti was a friend of Mirabeau and the editor of *La Feuille Villageoise*, one of the newspapers during the Revolutionary years. The pamphlet on character comes early in his career.

others, she says, one becomes gay oneself:

Le désir de paraître aimable conseille de prendre une expression de gaieté, quelle que soit la disposition intérieure de l'âme; la physionomie influe par degrés sur ce qu'on éprouve, et ce qu'on fait pour plaire aux autres émousee bientôt en soi-même ce qu'on ressent.<sup>23</sup>

De Staël's formulation both draws upon and transforms the terms of gaiety set forth by Montaigne. Montaigne evokes gaiety as a strategy of empowerment that frees the subject from obligation, setting it loose in a set of willful actions tempered through civility and sociability. By contrast De Staël suggests that gaiety is generated out of sociability. She provides a teleology that Montaigne's disruptive vision of gaiety seemed to question. For De Staël, gaiety moves from the outside of the subject inward, inflecting the situation of the soul itself. This socially based economy of gaiety removes it from the theological world of obligation and community set forth by Rabelais, but reasserts its relationship to a kind of model of contagion—though now through conversation, rather than faith. De Staël's strikingly modern account of a gay psychology bears the imprint of Montaigne's extraction of gaiety from the discourses of theology and lyric poetry, even as it locates it in a world of social relations that Montaigne could only imagine.

University of California, Berkeley

---

<sup>23</sup> Madame de Staël, *De l'Allemagne*, ed. Simone Balayé (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), I, 103-4. I would like to thank Kathryn Crim and Rupinder Kaur for their research help and useful feedback on this work. Thanks as well to the "Transitions" group at the University of Paris, Sorbonne, for their thoughtful commentary on an early version.

Australian singer "Montaigne" presented a first listen of her Eurovision 2021 song "Technicolour" on Triple J radio. While Montaigne's Eurovision 2021 entry isn't due to be released until tomorrow, she has already given fans a first listen. Montaigne presented her song today on the Australian radio station Triple J. And she also confirmed that she will be able to make it to Rotterdam in May. "Technicolour" is an upbeat dance-pop song with fun and uplifting lyrics. [This account of the death of La Boetie begins imperfectly. It first appeared in a little volume of Miscellanies in 1571. See Hazlitt, ubi sup. p. 630.]--As to his last words, doubtless, if any man can give good account of them, it is I, both because, during the whole of his sickness he conversed as fully with me as with any one, and also because, in consequence of the singular and brotherly friendship which we had entertained for each other, I was perfectly acquainted with the intentions, opinions Michel Eyquem de Montaigne was a French philosopher who lived during the French Renaissance in the 16th century. He is counted among the most important philosophers of that era that witnessed far reaching developments in the field of philosophy. Montaigne was born in a wealthy family and was educated privately, before attending some of the premier educational institutions in France. He became a member of the legal system in Toulouse and eventually a nobleman for Charles IX Take Montaigne's philosophy of reading when approaching your next seminal work: I seek in books only to give myself pleasure by honest amusement; or if I study, I seek only the learning that treats of the knowledge of myself and instructs me in how to die well and live well. What I do not see at the first attack, I see less by persisting. I do nothing without gaiety; continuation and too strong contention dazes, depresses, and wearies my judgement.