

Montaigne and Emerson: “What Do I Know?” and “How to Live?”

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Montaigne opens “Of Friendship”¹ with misdirection and closes with “woops!” for rather than introducing “Of Friendship,” he introduces La Boétie’s treatise, *Voluntary Servitude*,² which he originally inserted surrounding it with his own essays, “grotesques” whose only graces, he says, reside in their variety. The political climate incited Montaigne to remove the treatise, though, in customary style, he left the introduction, tacking reasons for removing it to his own essay’s end. With his introduction, Montaigne successfully misdirects Sullivan, for she asserts Montaigne positions “Of Friendship” as masterpiece among his other essays. Montaigne continues leading Sullivan astray throughout “Of Friendship” subsequently sending her off course when she uses Montaigne’s and Emerson’s essays on friendship to consider how teacher-student positionality influences individual judgment, hallmark of learners’ freedoms, freedoms she posits requires side-by-side rather than face-to-face teacher-student relationships. Once off course, Sullivan sets herself up for difficulties by defining judgment as holding a conviction even as she equates it with critical thinking; by seeming to equate what she calls face-to-face relationships with authoritarianism and those side-by-side with equality and freedom; and, without making friendship-pedagogy connections, by selecting essays on friendship to illuminate pedagogy rather than examining these essayists’ work on education.

First, when judging, one weighs one’s decisions to form sensible conclusions. Judging is not critical thinking but the result of the thinking process. Montaigne defines judgment similarly in “Of the Education of Children”³ where he draws from La Boétie’s treatise, *Voluntary Servitude*, to connect learning good judgment to freedom: “one will not learn good judgment when living under a king because one does not have...freedom to seek and select for oneself; one will not learn good judgment under authoritarian parents and tutors for the

same reason.”⁴ Learning to judge for oneself requires freedom to move and choose. A firmly held belief or opinion, conviction requires neither thinking nor the freedoms necessary for judgment.

Next, Sullivan considers the relation between inherited wisdom and experience when judging, positing that Montaigne favors experience though the essay-genre contradicts such favoring by inviting the reader to trust the writer’s authority, discount one’s experience, and remove one’s direct reference to reality. Here, Montaigne’s crafty creation, the essay-genre, misdirects Sullivan, for beyond its in-born ambiguities and skepticism-inducing powers, the essay’s epistolary roots influence its conversational style warming readers to intimacy. Although this style inspires trust, Sullivan leaps when concluding the genre “serves to silence the [reader’s] questioning voice” and causes Montaigne to “[avoid] rationally-justified assertions.” Sharing heartfelt emotions and trust does not preclude rational thought—doing so would snatch the rug from under Montaigne’s definition and his friendship with La Boétie. His book’s title, *Essais*,⁵ Montaigne’s elucidating the thinking process, and “Of Friendship” as extended definition demonstrate Montaigne neither abandons reason nor expects readers to accept his judgments without *essaying* them.

Considering further the relation between inherited wisdom and experience when judging, Sullivan claims that although one should look outward to form judgment, Montaigne asks his readers to look at him. Although Montaigne “embraces ... Renaissance enthusiasm for close personal observation as an avenue to truth” suffusing his essays “with the texture of everyday sensation,” also like educated, Renaissance men, Montaigne draws inspiration from classics, and, “ever the lawyer, leans on precedent when useful in making his case.”⁶ Indeed, in “Of Friendship,” Montaigne’s writing reflects essay’s dual meaning, to “attempt” or “explore” *and* to “test” or “proof”: as he explores friendship, he *essays* the ancients using personal experience and *essays* personal experience using these authorities. The distinction Sullivan makes is a false one, for both Montaigne and Emerson put inherited wisdom in dialogue with experience *essaying* each with the other, each writer’s essay illustrating the thinking process advancing toward individual judgment. In fact, Emerson practices what he

learns from Montaigne!

Still tackling Montaigne's valuing of judgment, Sullivan contends "it is not withholding judgment ... Montaigne values, but ... individual judgment ... when ... learner autonomously grasps something to be true not simply because ... she has been told, but because it ... accord[s] with her experience." The problem concerns definition. The thinker moves through steps toward drawing conclusions but "suspends" or "withholds" judgment until testing those conclusions using additional cases, experiences, and facts before arriving at judgment.⁷ Sullivan misjudges separating parts of the same process into different concepts and then again, when focusing on "Of Friendship," contending "Montaigne does not despise inherited wisdom, but ... trusts only his ... experience when forming judgments." Although Montaigne embraces the Renaissance fascination with experience, he would contradict his definition of judgment were he to focus solely on experience. In fact, Montaigne writes "Of Friendship," testament to the thinking process, as extended definition using three techniques through which he weights authorities' wisdom and his experiences proofing each before arriving at judgment: he draws from authorities; defines something through what it is not; and distinguishes among similar concepts.

Sullivan's premise that Montaigne bases judgment on experience alone and asks readers blindly to accept his words thereby discouraging readers from considering their experiences is false and, therefore, shadows Sullivan's reading of Emerson's essay. Montaigne establishes himself authority on himself alone exposing his life's intimate details leaving readers face-to-face with his humanity and theirs. Bakewell explains:

All philosophers can offer is that blow on the head; a useful technique, a thought experiment, or an experience—in Montaigne's case, the experience of reading the *Essays*. The subject he teaches is simply himself, an ordinary example of a living being. ... This is why readers return to him in a way they do ... few others⁸

Unlike Sullivan maintains, under the guiding question, "Que sais-je,"⁹ Montaigne

neither distrusts authorities more than he distrusts others nor asks readers to accept him as their authority. Thus, looking to Emerson to learn how to overcome the apparent contradiction does not wash because what Sullivan labels “contradiction” does not exist and what she falsely labels “contradiction” she equates with Montaigne’s pedagogy. Calling “Of Friendship” pedagogy is forced as is her next claim: overcoming non-existent contradictions through teacher-student “positionality.” Without clarifying their meaning, value, and ramifications, Sullivan names two kinds of “positionality.” She equates face-to-face positions with Emerson’s peering into Montaigne’s self-portrait, seeing Montaigne as authority, and therefore hierarchically positioning himself beneath Montaigne. Sullivan’s naming “face-to-face” relationships unequal is problematic, for face-to-face dialogues typically mean on-the-same-plane communications. Moreover, Montaigne reveals intimate, human details so when gazing into Montaigne’s portrait, one cannot but peer into oneself, scrutinize what it means to be human, and consider Montaigne’s ever-present question, “How to live?” Montaigne claims neither to teach nor preach; he does not purport authority. He writes himself.

Sullivan suggests Emerson moves from facing to standing beside Montaigne implying this side-by-side stance changes their relationship from hierarchical to equitable enabling Emerson to engage his experiences in dialogue with Montaigne’s authority. Although Sullivan continually asserts Montaigne discounts authorities and privileges experience, Montaigne instead *essays* both. Consequently, Emerson’s casting inherited wisdom in dialogue with experience aligns with rather than departs from Montaigne’s *essaying* process. Contending this side-by-side position invites Emerson to “look outward and grasp ... [friendship’s] reality,” Sullivan connects side-by-side with equity, looking outward to reality, and freedom leaving her readers in mist. How does looking outward concern grasping friendship and claiming freedom? Does not one gather data from the world, synthesize it with what one already knows to arrive at judgment, to make something new? Does not freedom to select lead to knowledge and good judgment’s freeing powers?

Juxtaposing Montaigne’s and Emerson’s concepts of friendship, Sullivan overlooks Montaigne’s distinguishing between kinds of friendship: “common,”

mere “acquaintances and familiarities” because “little intercourse betwixt . . . souls”¹⁰ exists, and “singular,” in which friends’ souls mix, their wills and affections concur, and their commitments remains particular to each other. Montaigne cautions readers to differentiate between kinds:

I have had as much experience of [common friendships] as another and of the most perfect of their kind: but I do not advise that any should confound the rules of . . . one and the other, for they would find themselves much deceived.¹¹

Montaigne posits that one enjoys many common friends who fulfill one’s needs for lively dinner companions and beauties in bed but embraces only one perfect friend, “perfect” because meeting the criteria for singular friendship. Although when applying Montaigne’s criteria, Emerson’s friendships are common, Emerson would likely position his experience somewhere between common and singular. While not considering his friends mere acquaintances, Emerson neither conceptualizes nor experiences friendship as uniting souls, wills, and affections though he acknowledges the possibility. Closing her examination of Montaigne’s and Emerson’s concepts of friendship, Sullivan seems to romanticize Emerson as learner, reflectively journeying toward some unknown truth. Montaigne journeys too—toward creating and understanding himself, for if truths exist, the truth of oneself effects understanding all others. Understanding himself comes partially from trying to understand friendship’s joys and sorrows and from learning how to live with loss and grief.

Last, I point Sullivan to Montaigne’s “Of the Education of Children” and Emerson’s education lectures for insight into both men’s ideas on pedagogy and education and for possible insights into her ideas concerning teacher-student positionality in new “genres” of learning.”¹² Montaigne’s ideal teacher-student relationship may surprise her, for he advocates guiding the child toward practicing good judgment and claiming his/her freedom toward creating the educated self.

1 Michel de Montaigne, “Chapter XXVII—Of Friendship,” in *The Essays of Montaigne, Complete* [EBook #3600], trans. Charles Cotton, ed. William Carew Hazlitt,

- prod. David Widger (Release Date: September 17, 2006; Last Updated: August 8, 2016), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#link2HCH0027>
- 2 Etienne de La Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude* (1576), in *Online Library of Liberty: A Collection of Scholarly Works about Individual Liberty and Free Markets*, trans. Harry Kurz (Liberty Fund, Inc., 2004–2019): <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/boetie-the-discourse-of-voluntary-servitude>.
- 3 Michel de Montaigne, “Chapter XXV—Of the Education of Children,” in *The Essays of Montaigne, Complete* [EBook #3600], trans. Charles Cotton, ed. William Carew Hazlitt, prod. David Widger (Release Date: September 17, 2006; Last Updated: August 8, 2016): <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#link2HCH0025>
- 4 Virginia Worley, “Painting with Impasto: Metaphors, Mirrors, and Reflective Regression in Montaigne’s ‘Of the Education of Children,’” *Educational Theory* 62, no. 3 (2012), 357.
- 5 Michel de Montaigne, *The Essays of Montaigne, Complete* [EBook #3600], trans. Charles Cotton, ed. William Carew Hazlitt, prod. David Widger (Release Date: September 17, 2006; Last Updated: August 8, 2016): <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm>.
- 6 Danny Heitman, “Our Contemporary, Montaigne: He Made Candor Literary,” *Humanities: The Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities* 36, no. 2 (2015), <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2015/marchapril/feature/our-contemporary-montaigne-he-pioneered-the-personal-essay-and-ma>.
- 7 John Dewey details this process in *How We Think* (New York: D.C. Heath & Co., 1910).
- 8 Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live: or A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (New York: Other Press, 2010), 327.
- 9 In the original, Middle French, “Que sçais-je,” meaning, “What do I know?”
- 10 Montaigne, “Chapter XXVII—Of Friendship.”
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Montaigne, “Chapter XXV—Of the Education of Children”; Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Lectures: Emerson on Education,” in *American Transcendentalism Web* (Richmond: Virginia Commonwealth University, 1999), 8, <http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/education.html>.