Montaigne's Later Latin Borrowings

One of the delights for any student of Montaigne is to observe the many paradoxes in the compositions of the gentilhomme from Bordeaux. He speaks constantly of his poor memory, and then proceeds to quote at length from Greek, Roman, and Continental writers. He berates the reading of books, but managed to accumulate one of the finest private libraries of his day. He minimizes in his Essais the value of factual knowledge (the counting of the number of steps in the Santa Rotonda [I, xxvi], for example), but will himself give details on the life of an ancient general or recite the method by which Cicero got rid of his kidney stones (II, xxxvii).

Montaigne rather constantly opposed the program of instruction in the schools of his day, with its emphasis on Latin; yet he had gained under the system, supplemented by private tutoring, a profound knowledge of the Latin language and literature, all of which he made good use of in his writings. It is with Montaigne's later interest in Roman authors, toward the end of his career, that this paper is concerned.

Some of Montaigne's most pungent remarks were directed against the study of Latin and those who taught it. One of his most spirited attacks is found in the essay De la Praesumption
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(II, xvii), where he says: “Je retombe volontiers sur ce discours de l'ineptie de notre institution. Elle a eu pour sa fin de nous faire non bons et sages, mais sçavans: elle y est arrivée. Elle ne nous a pas apris de suivre et embrasser la vertu et la prudence, mais elle nous en a imprimé la derivation et l'etymologie. Nous sçavons decliner Vertu, si nous ne sçavons l'aymer. . . .” In the famous essay *De l'Institution des enfans* (I, xxvi), Montaigne has no patience with these *latineurs de collège*, youngsters who have spent too much time at the age of sixteen inside a schoolroom and had too little contact with life outside. In the essay *Du Pédantisme* (I, xxv), Montaigne says that he would much rather have an *écolier* spend his time playing *à la paume* than stuffing his head with Greek and Roman authorities; and he tells Diane de Foix (I, xxvi), Comtesse de Gurson, in discussing her son not yet born: “. . . Je ne veux pas qu'on emprisonne cet enfant dans un collège,” where he may learn some Greek and Latin but at a price that is *trop cher*.

One of the better known facts concerning Montaigne is his own statement that he learned Latin before he learned French, from a German tutor provided by his father, and he says (I, xxvi), “J'avois plus de six ans avant que j'entendisse plus de françois ou de perigordin que d'arabesque.” This process of instruction was, in Montaigne's opinion—an opinion about which there would be little argument—a painless and solid way to learn Latin. His grounding in the language was so thorough that he later impressed with his knowledge scholars like Georges Buchanan, the transported Scotsman, and Marc-Antoine Muret. In view of such basic training in the language of Rome, and of his playing the “premiers personnages” in Latin tragedies during his sojourn at the Collège de Guyenne,
it is one of Montaigne’s paradoxes that he advised so strongly against Latin as a part of the education of a young gentleman in sixteenth-century France. It is also something of a paradox to note the somewhat jaundiced view that Montaigne took of many of the writers of ancient Rome.

The most casual thumbing-through of any edition of Montaigne’s essays will reveal that a considerable number of pages contain quotations in Latin, although he claims that he had along the way “lost his Latin”—“mais en cecy perdois je mon latin” (I,xxv)—in order not to appear too much like a pedant. Also, it is Montaigne’s contention (I, xxvi) that, if he were to fill his own writings up with material from the ancients, “j’engenderois des monstres, comme font les escrivains indiscrets de nostre siecle, qui, parmi leurs ouvrages de neant, vont semant des lieux entiers des anciens auteurs pour se faire honneur de ce larrecin. . . . ” Writers in this category, as a result of their petty thievery from antiquity, end up by losing more than they gain. Their own opinions and sentiments come forth only as dull reflections of the Greek and Roman authors that are quoted. Montaigne gives sharp expression to this point of view in the essay, Du Pédantisme (I, xxv):

Nous sçavons dire: “Cicero dit ainsi, voilà l’opinion de Platon, ce sont les mots mesmes d’Aristote”; mais nous, que disons nous nous mesmes? qu’opinions nous? que jugeons nous? Autant en ferait bien un perroquet.

Nevertheless, as is most obvious, Montaigne’s own writings were liberally seasoned with the spices of ancient authorities, though he scarcely ended up by being a parrot of antique sources.
The last edition of Montaigne's essays brought out during his lifetime was that of 1588. He continued to make revisions in his compositions until his death in 1592, and the scribblings he made on the printed text of an example of the 1588 edition (the famous Bordeaux copy) formed the basis of changes in the posthumous 1595 edition of the *Essais*. The continued inclination on the part of Montaigne, between 1588 and 1592, to add to his essays Latin quotations and references from the ancient world show that he was not worried about any inconsistency of attitude.

Before looking at the final changes made by Montaigne in his commentaries on man and the world around him, it might be well to look at the great essayist's earlier concepts of the ancients. He was not always too greatly impressed by them, nor with those who based their own conclusions too quickly upon what some Greek or Roman writer may have said. He once knew, says Montaigne (I, xxvi), in Pisa "un honneste homme, mais si aristotelicien que le plus general de ses dogmes est: que la touche et la reigle de toutes imaginations solides et de toute verite, c'est la conformite à la doctrine d'Aristote. . . ." This point of view is wrong, to Montaigne's way of thinking, because it substitutes the authority of Aristotle's name for the basic truth of what he might have stated. In his own case, Montaigne says, he relied chiefly (II, x), "a renger mes humeurs et mes conditions," on Plutarch and Seneca from the ancients. Since he knew no Greek—"je n'entends rien au grec," he says in the essay *A demain les affaires*—he gained his knowledge of Plutarch from the French translation of Jacques Amyot, who lifted "nous autres ignorans" out of the mud of linguistic inadequacy (II, iv). In the matter of Latin poetry, Montaigne feels that Vergil, Lucretius, Catullus, and
Horace are of the first rank, and that (II, x) "les bons et anciens poètes ont évité l'affectation et la recherche" of more modern writers.

The gentilhomme from Bordeaux has a great deal to say about Cicero in the last of the editions of his essays brought out during his lifetime. His admiration for the great master of Latin prose is distinctly under control. In the essay Des Livres (II, x), the following rather scathing estimate is given of Cicero:

Montaigne comes back to Cicero in this same essay, with the conclusion that there is not "beaucoup d'excellence en luy," though much "lascheté" and "vanité." As for the poetry that Cicero wrote, he should never have had the audacity to bring it out into the light of day. After all this derogatory appraisal,
however, Montaigne makes another of his surprising reverses and concedes that in the matter of “eloquence,” Cicero is completely beyond comparison—and “je croy que jamais homme ne l’égalera.” Nevertheless, in the judgment of Montaigne, Caesar is much superior to Cicero (II, x).

Between 1588 and 1592, Montaigne, in his last days, returned to many things Roman, despite the disparaging remarks he had made earlier in his life about the Latin language and many Latin writers. The 1595 edition reflects this belated allegiance to his first “mother tongue.” One noticeable feature is that Montaigne replaced at this time a number of words in his essays with other words of a more distinctly Latin sound or origin. For example, in the essay Par divers moyens on arrive à pareille fin (I, i), the phrase “vers la miséricorde et le pardon” became in 1595 “vers la misericorde et mansuétude,” where mansuétude is a rather more formalized Latinism. In the same essay, with a slight change in the 1588 phrasing, the word pitié evolved into the more polysyllabic commisération in the 1595 edition. A similar replacement was made in 1595 when in the essay Nos affections s’emportent au delà de nous (I, iii), fille became pucelle. In like manner, in the 1595 edition, allongement became prolongation (I, xix), “le meilleur tître” (I, xxiii) became “le meilleur prétexte,” and “sous quel tître” (I, xxiii) became “sous quelle enseigne.” In Du Pédantisme (I, xxv), the combination “amende son premier estât imparfaict” was replaced in 1595 by the more Latinized “méliore son estat imparfaict.” In the essay Considération sur Cicéron (I, xl)—which paradoxically, has very little to say about Cicero—the 1595 edition has commission substituted for charge, and in the long essay Apologie de Raimond Sebond (II, xii), “de pareille
"façon" became "de pareille témérité." A final citation of a shift in the 1595 edition toward words of more complicated Latin derivation comes from the essay *Défense de Seneque et de Plutarque* (II, xxxii): "de malice et fauceté" was lengthened to "de prevarication et fauceté." These examples are in no sense a complete list of Montaigne's substitutions of a more Latinized vocabulary in the final correction of his essays during his lifetime. However, they do show that in his last years he turned back toward the speech he learned before the age of six.

The most striking feature of Montaigne's handwritten changes in the 1588 edition of his essays is the further addition of references to Greek and Roman authors and quotations from them. Among the Latin writers quoted—there is seldom any quotation in Greek because of Montaigne's admitted deficiency in that language—are, in the order of their appearance in the 1595 edition of the essays, Seneca, Ennius, Cicero, Pacuvius, Vergil, Livy, Sallust, Tertullian, Horace, Lucan, Quintilian, Martial, Lucretius, Ovid, Tacitus, Catullus, Propertius, Terence, Lucilius, and Perseus. From the Bible or the church fathers, excerpts are given (in Latin) from Saint Augustine, Saint Peter, Saint Paul, and Saint Jerome. It is mildly surprising, in view of statements made about him in the body of the *Essais*, to note the Roman most often mentioned and used by Montaigne in his last years: that writer is Cicero.

The works of Cicero are by far the most frequently quoted of any corpus of Latin material in the 1595 additions to and modifications of the *Essais*. In the altered version, done in Montaigne's own hand after 1588, added quotations from Cicero reach the rather amazing number of 131. This is, if
anything, a conservative counting because it does not include lines from Cicero quoted by some other Latin writer and then used by Montaigne. The next Latin author in favor with Montaigne toward the end of his life was the younger Seneca, who appears some fifty-five additional times in the 1595 edition. The third in order among the Latin authorities used by Montaigne in his last revisions was the historian Livy—an expected type of borrowing since Montaigne had said in his essay *Des Livres* that the chroniclers of history were really his gibier. Livy, in any case, is quoted in the 1595 edition some thirty-one additional times. The other writers listed above are quoted from one to, possibly, a half-dozen times.

Some examples might be noted of the type of ancient material Montaigne wanted to put into the last draft of his essays. In *Nos affections s'emportent au delà de nous* (I, iii), the point is made that funereal pomp is primarily for the living, not the deceased. Additional support for this idea was given by quotations in the 1595 edition from Cicero and Saint Augustine. From the *Tusculanae Disputationes*, I, 45, comes “Totus hic locus est contemnendus in nobis, non negligendus in nostris”; and from Saint Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*, I, 12, “curatio funeris, conditio sepulturae, pompa exequiarum, magis sunt vivorum solatia quam subsidia mortuorum,” an apt phrasing of the general theme.

In the essay *L'Heure des parlemens dangereuse* (I, vi), many Latin excerpts are added to the 1595 edition, including one from Cicero’s *De Officiis*, III, 17, to show that one person should not profit from another’s stupidity. Cicero is employed again in the 1595 edition in the discussion of oracles (I, ix) and of auguries (I, x), and to show that people are willing to die for their beliefs (I, xiv). In this same essay (I, xiv) is found
a good description of the brittleness of luck; in the 1595 edition a neat quotation from Sallust is added to the effect that man is the architect of his own fortune—"faber est suae quisque fortunae." Horace is brought in quite delightfully (I, xvii) in the 1595 edition to illustrate the fact that many persons like to be experts in lines other than their own: "optat ephippia bos piger, optat arare caballus"—Epistles, I, xiv, 43.

Some typical examples of the use of Seneca in the 1595 edition might also be indicated: in the essay Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir (I, xx), Seneca is quoted (Epistles, 91) on the fragility of human life; in the essay De la Coustume, et de changer aisément une loi receûue (I, xxiii), Seneca is used to prove that trust in an evil man only gives him an opportunity to do wrong (Oedipus, III, 686); in Du Pédantisme (I, xxv), Seneca is employed to show that our education is aimed at success in school rather than in the world (Epistles, 106); and in the famous essay De l'Institution des enfans (I, xxvi), Seneca is brought forth in opposition to a blind following of authority—"non sumus sub rege, sibi quisque se vindicet" (Epistles, 33); and in the same essay Seneca is adduced to support the idea that there is a great difference between not wishing to do evil and not knowing how to do evil (Epistles, 90).

The most extensive additions taken from Livy for the 1595 edition are to be found in the essay Des Destriers (I, xlviii), where some seven excerpts are included from the Latin historian on, among other matters, the ancients' use of horses, cavalry maneuvers, and reactions to certain types of wounds. Two of these excerpts are quite long, but they describe incidents rather than give expression to philosophical opinion.
Cicero is used in the 1595 edition as a support for a great variety of subjects. To his longest essay, *Apologie de Raimond Sebond* (II, xii), Montaigne adds in the 1595 edition several lines from Cicero on the inadvisability of giving wine to sick persons because of the possibility that they may become addicted to it (*De Natura Deorum*, III, 27). Cicero is quoted further along in the same essay, 1595 edition, on the nature of life's pleasures (*Tusculanae Disputationes*, II, 14); and still further on in *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, on the attributes of the gods (*De Natura Deorum*, II, 28) and the nature of man's soul (*Tusculanae Disputationes*, I, 28). In the good essay, *De la Gloire* (II, xvi), Montaigne regrets that Cicero's treatment of the subject of glory has been lost; and in the 1595 version of the essay, he adds five quotations from Cicero to bulwark his own concepts of personal honor and glory. In *Des Coches* (III, vi), Cicero is brought in in the last version to show the many centuries and spheres that man has yet to discover (*De Natura Deorum*, I, 20). Concluding citations from the vast number of Montaigne's later borrowings from Cicero might be taken from the essay *De la Vanité* (III, ix): "Hoc ipsum ita justum est quod recte fit, si est voluntarium" (*De Officiis*, I, 9); and "Est prudentis sustinere, ut cursum, sic impetum benevolentiae" (*De Amicitia*). Montaigne took out a French phrase in order to include in his last revision this final quotation from Cicero: "It is best to hold back, even as though you were running a race, too impetuous effusions of friendship."

Montaigne said along the way (II, xvii): "Quant au latin, qui m'a esté donné pour maternel, j'ay perdu par des-accoutumance la promptitude de m'en pouvoir servir à parler."
One is permitted to wonder whether, with his inclination toward minimizing and paradoxical shifts, Montaigne was telling the exact truth about his loss of Latin as a spoken language. There is no doubt, as his later borrowings show, that he continued to read it and remember it to the end of his life. Some authors, like Cicero, whom he maligned at an earlier moment, came back to him strongly at the end of his days. This change of attitude would not have worried him in the least, since consistency—as was the case with another great essayist—was something he did not bother about at all.

1. The edition that has been employed here is *Les Essais de Montaigne*, publiés d'après l'édition de 1588 avec les variantes de 1595 . . . , par. H. Motheau et D. Jouaust (7 vols.; Paris, s.d.). This edition has provided easy comparison of the 1588 and 1595 versions of the *Essais*. I have followed the text and spellings as they have appeared in this printing.