



Article scientifique

Article

1998

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

The vagaries of exemplarity : distorsion or dismissal?

Jeanneret, Michel

How to cite

JEANNERET, Michel. The vagaries of exemplarity : distorsion or dismissal? In: Journal of the history of ideas, 1998, vol. 59, n° 4, p. 565–579. doi: 10.1353/jhi.1998.0038

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:29216>

Publication DOI: [10.1353/jhi.1998.0038](https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.1998.0038)

The Vagaries of Exemplarity: Distortion or Dismissal?

Michel Jeanneret

Example is an uncertain looking-glass, all
embracing, turning all ways.

Montaigne¹

Ancients and Moderns: Negotiating Coexistence

Do the Ancients provide the Renaissance with a repertoire of infallible examples? Do they have such absolute authority that their models, whether ethical or aesthetic, retain their relevance in every circumstance? The question is part and parcel of that thinking, which is fundamental to the sixteenth century, on the status of Greco-Roman paradigms in the management of public and private life, or in the methods of science and the arts. Before analyzing two particular responses to classical exemplarity—by Erasmus and Montaigne—we shall set the problem in its general context.

Whether lobbying for intense faithfulness to the models or recognizing the need for divergence, whether insisting on continuity or the need for change, on the possibility or impossibility of equaling the masters, everyone in the sixteenth century measured art, knowledge, and moral reflection according to the Greek and Roman norm. Scholars and artists together entered into this exchange on a daily basis and everybody, whatever the extent of their dependence, knew that their work could not be conceived or perceived as anything other than the more or less free modification of a particular vestige of classical heritage. To escape tradition was unthinkable, but to accept it resignedly was absurd. All room for maneuver was therefore in the shifting difference between

¹ Montaigne, *Essays* III, 13, 1236, 1088. References to the *Essays* include book, chapter, pages in M. A. Screech's English translation (London, 1991), and pages from the French edition by P. Villey (Paris, 1965). The translation is M. A. Screech's, with a few alterations of my own.

old and new, and in the extent of its transformation.² It is then predictable, given these conditions, that the transmission of classical examples should be subject to turbulence without, however, undergoing any violent break.

The question was even more relevant given that the sense of history, the consciousness of time past being irrevocably lost took on a new resonance now. Recognizing and acknowledging the phenomenon of irreversible development—whether good or bad—counts as one of the most important intellectual acquisitions of the Renaissance.³ The Middle Ages had been able to maintain the illusion of continuity and, by dressing Antiquity up in the manners and colors of feudal chivalry, had seen itself reflected in it as in a mirror. With the influx of new documents and the perfecting of more rigorous methods of interpretation—the techniques of philology—intellectuals had to acknowledge evident change. The past could no longer be modeled on the present; all imitation would henceforth be witness to the impossibility of any perfect match. At the same time as the classical world was coming to light, it was also getting further away, getting lost. This bereavement sometimes sparked off enough regressive nostalgia to provide matter for many an antiquarian project. In reaction to this loss, most humanists were motivated into salvaging the salvageable by injecting a dose of novelty into the rift created by their awareness of history. The intellectuals of the Renaissance would often have felt as if they were reenacting the famous encounter of the Romans and the Greeks; like the Romans they wanted to be both conquering and conquered, free and faithful, differing and deferring. For them also the antique model will be an ideal simultaneously present and lost, necessary and foreign.

Two opposing solutions to this dilemma seemed to offer themselves: on the one hand an unconditional return to the sources minimizing the effects of history, and on the other an exploitation of the eclipses of the past, giving the present a chance to fight it out with the Ancients. We shall sketch out each of these two strategies: both the methods of respectful transmission and those of transformative intervention.

Fine-tuned by the humanists, philology was closely linked to the advent of historical consciousness. Since classical civilization had definitively come to an end, the philologist devoted himself to reconstituting and preserving it, in all its original specificity. He removed the layers of interference accumulated over the centuries, reestablished the texts in their authentic versions, maybe even providing commentary on the meaning of the work within its context. Theoretically his intervention stopped there. Acknowledging the difference and

² See especially Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy. Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven, 1982).

³ See Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *La Conception de l'histoire en France au XVI^e siècle (1560-1610)* (Paris, 1977).

superiority of past authors, he did not touch their works except to restore them to their pristine selves. Soon he would be canonizing them, putting them for safety into the mausoleum of great classics. Thus the academic approach was developed, where original is scrupulously distinguished from commentary and literature from criticism, where the past is dissociated from the present, and anachronism considered the greatest mistake. The distancing in time here determines two principles: that of stabilization of the text and that of effacement of the reader.

The opposite approach does not focus on the origin of a work but on its future. It is less concerned with restoring the text to its purity and difference than with exploiting its value *hic et nunc*. With a new situation comes a new reading. To actualize the masterpieces of olden times, to discover their relevance to the contemporary setting, is not to betray them but to acknowledge their power to challenge and their capacity to generate anew. Such a reading does not bother with objectivity and history; it is engaged, dialogic, and creative. It serves the cause of the classics by moving them into an unfamiliar environment, regenerating them as it transforms them.

The quarrel over Ciceronianism illustrates the two factions very clearly. On the one hand the purists (Bembo, Longueil, Dolet, Scaliger) claimed to write a Latin which was absolutely identical to the language and style of Cicero. The perfection attained by the orator once and for all defined a necessary and untouchable canon, transcending the variations of history. Rational aesthetics, founded on principles reputedly both universal and permanent—the quintessence of classicism—here led scholars to neglect the consequences of the text's journey, to the advantage of an ideal which would be the same for everyone, regardless of time and place. The anti-Ciceronians (Poliziano, Gianfrancesco Pico, Erasmus), without giving up Latin or the models of the classical period, adopted a more contingent and eclectic position. They knew that their language, issuing from differing cultural, religious and political conditions, could not reproduce fifteen-hundred-year-old Latin. They claimed the right both to choose between and to combine different yardsticks. They took anachronism on board as a guarantee of liberty, as a space for creation and self-affirmation.

However, extreme solutions—with the son devoting himself to the worship of the father at one end, and cultural parricide at the other—were few and far between, while the compromising level-headed approach preponderated. Absolute submission leads to purism, to infantile or parrot-like imitation, with the risk of paralysis at the end of it. Total emancipation is an abstraction given that it is impossible to erase tradition and that, even were it possible, it would be suicidal deliberately to give up the resources of the past. Between the two theoretical options, a transaction had to take place whereby each participant was guaranteed a role of varying importance in the production of an object which should be both old and new at the same time. Now, exemplarity is one

chapter in the practice of imitation and must therefore also seek a balance midway between these two poles. I would like to give two illustrations of this negotiation. My first case is located within the field of rhetoric; it is confined to a discreet intervention, a mere recycling without violence. My second entails personal engagement, a more radical appropriation and calling into question of authority.

Erasmus: Protean Examples

Men of letters engaged in the task of writing would, prior to any act of personal creation, have to prepare for use the data provided by tradition. Direct access to the original texts in their entirety was obviously the best solution. These works were however often long, difficult (particularly for beginners), and sometimes unobtainable. The method of collecting commonplaces, going back to Antiquity and popular in the Middle Ages, made it possible to get around these obstacles. In order to make students' home-work easier, scholars cut the classical texts into flexible and recyclable units, ready for new contexts. The classics were broken up as if into spare parts, the fragments then put back together in anthologies, where they were categorized for easy access. The criteria of selection varied: one could compile samples of fine writing or compose a volume of moralistic aphorisms, or one could put together a set of quotations illustrating one theme or another. In this way, reserves of commonplaces were made available. Lists of *exempla* could either be included in this sort of compilation or go to make up separate collections.

The catalogues of quotations might come with commentaries designed to make them user-friendly. Instructions on how to employ and diversify the basic material were also given, showing how to get new formulas out of a classical paradigm. These techniques, often accompanied by practical exercises, helped the student bring the riches sleeping in books back into circulation. The fact remains that the objective of these manuals was above all quantitative and could be formulated in economic terms. It was a question of managing the capital left by the ancients as well as possible by putting it at the disposal of a literate public. The linguistic and semantic assets were divided into shares, distributed in handy, ready-made units, and in this manageable format relaunched onto the market. The classical text was treated as a data-base—data which in order to obtain their greatest yield would have to be loaded with new values. The transaction was characteristic of the relationship with the ancients, insofar as it betrayed both great dependence on them, given that theirs was the material used, and also great nonchalance in the way this same material was moved about, actualized, and recontextualized.

Erasmus demonstrates these techniques at great length in his treaty *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum*,⁴ a school textbook designed to provide the nascent orator or writer with a multitude of means of expression (Book 1) and semantic reserves (Book 2), from which to choose, so that when he came to write or speak he would have access to the richest and widest resources possible. Book 2, which concerns us here, exhibits some of the traditional methods of *imitatio* rhetoric. How should one treat a given topic? How should one break it down so as to expatiate on each part, so as to reveal and make use of its underlying contents? Erasmus enumerates at great length the means most appropriate to the development of an initial idea, showing how to get from its kernel to a fuller, more detailed speech. For example, one might elaborate on the causes or consequences of the event in question, give a detailed description of a person, a place, an act; one could advance a proof or introduce digressions; in short, one should expand and embellish the text by all the methods that traditional rhetoric makes available to its users.

From within this catalogue of the means of *amplificatio* Erasmus gives a special place to the *exempla*. "In the development of *copia*, then, illustrations [*exempla*] play a leading role."⁵ Their role is to act as the vehicle for comparison; they can fulfil all the normal functions of analogy, and beyond: "Any illustrative example you choose may be variously incorporated by means of a simile, contrary, comparison, hyperbole, epithet, likeness, metaphor, or allegory."⁶ In one or another of these functions the abnegation of Regulus for instance would, depending on its similarity to the character in question or not, both allow the formation of a specific judgment and also provide an ideal model. Erasmus thus utilizes the *exemplum* in the two senses of the term: on the one hand as an element similar or comparable to that being discussed and on the other as a notable point of reference, worthy of imitation. Sometimes the example serves to identify and to illustrate while elsewhere it establishes a norm, taking on moral value. This dual function may well promote exemplarity since, by establishing the relevance of the paradigm, the analogical link legitimizes the power of the example to exhort the reader to action.

If the examples are a means of amplification, they can also themselves be amplified. Tradition has preserved them in a dense elliptical form—a maxim, a narrative core—that the orator or writer is encouraged to develop. He may

⁴ Erasmus started work on this treatise in the 1490s; it was first published in 1512, and several revised, corrected, and enlarged versions were printed before 1534. I quote from Betty I. Knott's translation: "*Copia*": *Foundations of the Abundant Style*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto, 1978), XXIV, *Literary and Educational Writings*, II.

⁵ *Copia*, 607.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 635.

relate a particular exemplary story to which he adds detail or he may fill in a precept with personal remarks. Erasmus yet again gives many different pieces of advice on how to realize the effects of *copia*, fullness of speech. But if the *exemplum* itself can change appearance—take on length, focus, color—it would seem that the idea does not change, as if, while the signifier varies, the signified remained constant. The second book of *De copia* appears to adopt this linguistically doubtful idea—that shape of the utterance might change while its content remains the same—until Erasmus suddenly switches viewpoint, focusing on how the transformation of a particular example or of a narrative cell is liable to take on various different meanings. Consequently the interpretation of the examples, seemingly immobilized by the perpetuation of invariable values, becomes problematic.

Ironically and perhaps not by accident, the demonstration focuses on, among other things, the joint motifs of inconstancy and inconsistency. How can examples to illustrate and evaluate a versatile character or a changing mood be found? All branches of knowledge and all literary genres should be stripped for the purpose. The poets should lend descriptions of the polymorphous gods, such as the many-faced Mercury, or the corporally unstable Proteus and Morpheus, or the metamorphic Jupiter.... Natural philosophy will provide emblems of the moon, of the sky, of the sea, a whole range of chameleon animals and unstable objects.... History, drama, and fable will also offer cases of unpredictable characters. All these comparisons will feed and reinforce the condemnation of inconstant minds—unless, adds Erasmus, they contribute to the opposing view, for “one can even twist material to serve the opposite purpose.”⁷ Is the reed really an image of weakness of character? But flexibility can be a quality. Conversely, steadfastness merits praise, although it can also be a mark of stupidity and obstinacy. The same paradigm can therefore take on, according to the whim of the user, positive or negative value; it is ambivalent. Clever mirror tricks: the examples of mutability are themselves mutable. They change meaning as they change environment. They are mobile multi-purpose units, commonplaces in search of a meaning.

The method which had seemed devoted to the preservation and conservation of unvarying data thus ends up by demonstrating their instability. This versatility is more pronounced at the point when, the material having been extracted from the classics, it is distributed among the different thematic chapters of the anthology. Some examples contain such semantic richness that they have to be copied out under many headings. For instance, Erasmus writes, “what a wealth of parallels can be derived from ships and sailing!”⁸ From the choice of the helmsman to the manipulation of the sails, from the struggle with the storm to the distribution of tasks among the crew, the same example of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 647.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 641.

sailing may illustrate myriad political, moral or social messages. Thus, "all this makes it quite plain, I think, how many purposes the same illustrative example can serve."⁹

Erasmus illustrates the self-evidence of this with a further *exemplum*, the death of Socrates, one of the most traditional and apparently most clichéd paradigms; when analyzed, however, it unleashes such polysemy that multiple illustrative purposes become available.¹⁰ Different meanings multiply: one must not fear death; virtue is not safe from the wicked; the philosopher must not be above the law. One could continue to enumerate possible values by looking at each part of the tale in turn: the identity of the accusers, the unfolding of the trial, his friends visiting the prison, the people's response to learning of his death.... For every episode, one or more new applications emerge. Moreover, notes Erasmus, one's assessment varies: should you praise Socrates for his indifference to death, blame him for being unaware of the pain of his intimates, or criticize him for withdrawing his service from the city? Socrates's death was a magnificent and edifying scene, and a classical example if ever there was one. It seemed to have come through the ages unharmed, as inert as the statue of the sage on his pedestal. But fables are cleverer than moral tales; they create unexpected meanings, defying the overarching truths that exemplarity seemed to promote.

The collection of the *Adages* makes the same point on a much larger scale.¹¹ The Greek and Latin maxims collected and analyzed by Erasmus, variously proverbs, aphorisms, and figures of speech, are, thanks to their laconic expression, more or less enigmatic. They demonstrate the same interest in pithy formulation as *De Copia*. The desire to provide the cultured classes with a battery of stylistic ornamentation, the better to render a moral truth, or to highlight a particular aspect of antique civilization, also recurs. Are the *Adages* therefore, as one is tempted to believe, a stock of universal precepts, an echo of the ancient lore of nations, a profane version of those axioms, perennially true, which run through history?

Such would not seem to be the case. Erasmus treats the maxims less as proverbs in terms of their supposed permanent value, than as authorial quotations and as historical documents. He takes great pains to establish the circumstances of their emergence, explaining their initial meaning and, where relevant, documenting their semantic evolution by detailing the new values which have been grafted onto the old ones. Like the *exempla* in *De copia*, the adages are therefore treated as units of meaning which, even if their shape remains fixed, lend themselves to different uses and take on unexpected inflections.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 641.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 639-41.

¹¹ Erasmus published ever increasing editions of his *Adagia* between 1500 (818 entries) and 1546 (4,151 entries).

They are both the particularly venerable vestiges of the classical culture which fertilizes the present and witnesses of the vicissitudes of meaning throughout history. Erasmus is remarkably scrupulous in bringing their origin to light, displaying superb philological flare, but his research finally culminates in a relativization of classical authority and in a demonstration that forms, however resistant they may seem, only survive by changing.

Henri Estienne, a learned grammarian like Erasmus, was also interested in proverbs; paradoxically he also attaches great weight to proving and using their flexibility and variability. *Les Premices, ou le Livre des Proverbes epigramatizez, ou, des Epigrammes proverbializez*¹² is a little handbook, which, claiming to be both an edifying project and an exercise in style, presents a series of amplifications based on French proverbs. Ordered under six "commonplace" headings—God, man, life, youth, age, death—the aphorisms are first quoted and then developed into poems of varying length which Estienne dubs "epigrams." The principle is similar to that shown in the *Adages*: condensed in form and often elliptical or allusive, the proverb is treated as a seed which is waiting to grow. Estienne notes for example that "si jeunesse scavoit, si vieillesse pouvoit" (If only youth knew—if only age could) is grammatically incomplete and requires an object, "letting the listener or reader complete the meaning."¹³ Once the dense, closed core of the maxim has been prised open, each element can freely develop its potential.

If the output of the proverbs in the latter parts of the book is limited to one or two epigrams, those in the first chapter spawn on the contrary a whole host of offspring, as if to suggest that, coming from God as it does, wisdom can never be exhausted. "En peu d'heure Dieu labeure" (God works swiftly) produces thirty-two French epigrams, extending from the quatrain to about twenty lines of verse, and eight one-lined gnomic Latin interpretations. "L'homme propose et Dieu dispose" (Man proposes and God disposes) is transformed into fifty French variants, increasingly free and more wide-reaching. Whether moral or spiritual, the truths to be extracted from divine law seem to be endless. Estienne's technique is related here to other religious genres—the paraphrase, the meditation, the sermon—which all amplify the Word, aiming, through reiteration and reformulation, to extract its substance. From the proverb and its unfurled versions moreover, one slips seamlessly at some points into a literary or moral commentary: so fertile are the texts, that they beget first one form and then another, carried along in the wake of an expansive force which nothing, theoretically, can halt.

¹² Geneva, 1594; repr. Geneva, 1968.

¹³ *Les Premices*, 174.

Montaigne: Criticism and Appropriation

Collections of "foreign and text-book exemplars" (III,13,1227, 1081),¹⁴ "those meat-pies stuffed with commonplaces by which so many eke out their studies on the cheap" (III,12,1197,1056) were well known to Montaigne. Everyone, whether learned or not, drew from these compilations, and thanks to them, could fill their works with quotations without ever having bothered to read the original authors. "There are men who quote Plato and Homer without ever setting eyes on them" (III,12,1196,1056). And Montaigne admits that he could not escape this practice. "I too have often taken my quotations not from the originals" (*Ibid.*). Whatever the provenance of the material, he had to agree that his *Essays* were stuffed with traditional examples and erudite references. So might the public not respond to his work as to just another of those numerous anthologies flooding the market? "Some may say ... that I have merely gathered here a big bunch of other men's flowers, having furnished nothing of my own but the string to hold them together" (III,12,1196,1055). Tired out and redundant, the *Essays* would only be able to carry what had been lifted from other books a little bit further.

Montaigne owed it to himself to dispell this misunderstanding, for he considered the method of collecting commonplaces to be a scourge and virulently criticized it. It generated works which were impersonal collages, products of memory, merely scholarly and conventional. "That is not writing a book but purchasing one, borrowing one" (III,12,1197,1056). Unlike those craftsmen who produce the genuine article "those who patch together" (III,12, 1196,1056) commonplaces resemble unproductive salesmen; they sell other people's produce without paying any attention to the quality of the merchandise; they simply obey the laws of profit and the mercantile code of quantity.¹⁵ One wonders why Montaigne did not accept the consequences of this condemnation and, as far as possible, stop trading in commonplaces, why he did not refuse to take the easy and conformist way out, that of the *exempla*. This would be the tough but logical path for a writer who wished to offer a genuine image of the self above all else. The mimetic project of the *Essays* required that the intermediaries be kept to a minimum, such learned mediations distorting the accuracy and singularity of the self portrait. "If I had had confidence to do what I really wanted, I would have spoken utterly alone" (III,12, 1196,1055).

¹⁴ See note 1.

¹⁵ Recent works on Renaissance commonplaces include Francis Goyet, *Le Sublime du "lieu commun": L'invention rhétorique dans l'Antiquité et à la Renaissance* (Paris, 1996); and Ann Moss, *Printed Common-Place Books and the Structure of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford, 1996); also François Rigolot's review article in *Modern Language Notes*, 112 (1997), 710-14.

But the fantasy of virginity and the dream of the *tabula rasa* are merely snares, as Montaigne well knows. Because, whether he likes it or not, he has a share in the surrounding culture and its methods; because he would not be able to sentence memory to oblivion, because he has to make concessions to his public and for thousands of other reasons that he is the first to recognize, he cannot dismiss traditional models nor claim to think or write without reference to the inheritance of classical *exempla*. Contest them, yes, but ignore them, no. Examples may threaten to obscure thought, they may make it sclerotic, but they are an integral part of our intellectual equipment and, as such, are unavoidable. This tension is central to Montaigne's enterprise and runs throughout the *Essays*. To illustrate this we will limit ourselves to one case, already seen above in Erasmus: the *exemplum* of Socrates, as treated in the third book of the *Essays* and more particularly in the chapter "On Physiognomy" (III,12).¹⁶

Montaigne drew copiously from the legend of Socrates, invoking his noteworthy sayings and doings, as much from his life as from his death. The further he got in the introspective process, the more the Socratic model impressed itself on him as a relevant point of reference, a beacon from which he took his bearings. There is nothing historical in his interest, which is resolutely subjective and reflexive. Montaigne weighed each of the episodes he picked out, and in the light of the judgment he made he was led to improve both his self-knowledge and others' knowledge of him. He found a great deal not only to admire but also to criticize. Everything that in Socrates's exemplary behavior seems to him too elevated or exceptional—the sublime, the sacred, and the heroic—he reproves. Did the sage communicate with the supernatural? "For me nothing in the life of Socrates is so awkward to digest as his ecstasies and his daemonizings" (III,13,1268,1115). On the battle-field he would brave his enemies, and in the courtroom he would rather be sentenced to death than sent into exile? "Many such examples surpass my power of action, but some surpass even my power of judgement" (III,9,1101,973). In other words, Montaigne could say, such virtuous behavior has nothing to do with me; some of it defies imitation, while the rest surpasses understanding.

This attitude does nothing less than question the very basis of exemplarity. The *exemplum* is dispossessed of its universal validity; not only is it not necessarily relevant, but its edificatory value is no longer always applicable. A reputedly exemplary deed becomes nothing more than one individual case on a par with another conflicting individual case, both being valid relatively. Montaigne even gets to the point where he can formulate the famous quip: "Not because Socrates said it but because it truly corresponds to my humour...: I reckon all

¹⁶ Pierre Villey points out that the references to Socrates get more frequent as Montaigne advances in his work: fourteen times in 1580; twenty in 1588; and fifty-nine after 1588 (1036, see note 1).

men my fellow-citizens" (III,9,1100,973). From our agreement on this, it is not to be concluded that I conform to his example, but that he helps, at most, to confirm my own position. The traditional relationship between the two partners has been reversed: it is not the example as a valid *a priori* which provides the self with a norm, it is the self which evaluates the example and can, at will, legitimize, approve, or dismiss it.

In the blithe choices that he makes from the classical models, Montaigne still holds on to one other criterion: its practical value, its applicability in the management of everyday life. Most of the *exempla*, ratified by book culture and its secluded scholars, and hailing from a far-off past, are cut off from real life. It would be better, suggests Montaigne, to lift them from the most ordinary and familiar experiences: "In my opinion the most ordinary things, the most commonplace and best-known can constitute ... the most amazing of examples" (III,13,1227-8,1081). This is not an innocent idea: to forge new models amounts to withdrawing the superior or exclusive authority that age-hallowed tradition had in moral matters.

Disqualify the claim of universality, throw suspicion on the sublime, debate the individual's submission to accepted and conventional wisdom, contest the reputation of the ancients: the criticism of exemplarity is radical. Was Montaigne the first and only person to demonstrate such independence of mind? No. A pioneer had already blazed the trail, and this guide was Socrates himself. Socrates teaches us to remain close to everyday reality, to model our behavior on an ideal of simplicity and to accept the limits of human nature. He encourages us to free ourselves of stereotypical ideas and dogmatic principles, to debate pretended certainties and not to accept the apparently obvious without examination. He exhorts us to search for truth and moral law within ourselves, without letting ourselves be intimidated by any authority whatsoever. So if anybody undermined the foundations of exemplarity, it was Socrates. He whom tradition set up as the example *par excellence* invites us to reject the very principles on which his authority is founded.

But exemplarity cannot be so easily dispensed with. Pushed out of the window, it comes back in through the door. Socrates had the extraordinary merit of demystifying set structural abuses in thought, morality, and speech. Anticipating his future hagiographers, he invited them not to consider him as a saint without prior examination. He showed Montaigne the value of the critical mind, the vital need for introspection, and consequently legitimized the suspicion he is subject to in advance. Such precedents are, without doubt, admirable and worthy of imitation. So Montaigne is therefore faced with a paradox: the enemy of examples is himself exemplary. His criticism of authoritative models is itself a model.

It now becomes easier to understand why Montaigne places a mass of positive data next to episodes he disapproves of. Thus one finds Socrates, "the

perfect exemplar of all the great qualities" (III,12,1198,1057), playing his usual canonical role. Much as we have seen Montaigne keep his distance from models, he also (and perhaps because of this) multiplies his hyperboles. Because he "brought human wisdom back from the heavens where she was wasting her time and returned her to mankind, in whom lies her most proper and most demanding task as well as her most useful one" (III,12, 1174-5,1038), because he placed the highest philosophy within the reach of the lowest, Socrates is worthy of being celebrated as "the man most worthy of being known and of being set before the world as an example" (III,12,1174,1038). Such marks of loyalty are legion.

The Socrates case ultimately leads to a simple and generalizable conclusion. Our task, says Montaigne, is to choose from the mass of examples peddled by tradition. There are good examples which help the observer to think accurately and which guide his actions. There are also bad examples, whether disputable or just out of date, whose validity is diminished or zero. It remains however that all of them, the bad ones just as much as the good ones, help me to know myself and to build up my morality. Whether I agree or not, whether I feel I am concerned or not, they work as an indispensable reference that helps me to establish my thought. The dialogue—or the struggle—with models is an essential ingredient in the life of the mind. We cannot avoid exemplarity.

Montaigne's ambivalent relationship with *exempla*, with the unstable, disputable, but nevertheless necessary elements of discourse, provides a good summary of the *Essays*' more general and central discussion of the status and relative value of classical models in thought and writing. It is important to read a great deal. But reading is a critical and extremely subjective act. It sifts and assesses; indifferent to matters philological, it regenerates texts by actualizing them, by absorbing them into personal space. Whether accepting or rejecting the lessons of the Ancients, whether citing, paraphrasing, or altering them, bringing a thought, fact, or stylistic model back into circulation, Montaigne is the example, par excellence, of an amateur who venerates but mistreats the classics. This mistreatment nevertheless brings them back to life and they become the living stones of his edifice. The classical heritage is so fertile and flexible that the *Essays* which it underpins are both parasitic and without precedent.

Montaigne makes this ideal of dynamic and irreverential reading a reigning principle of his pedagogy.¹⁷ There is no question that the student should submit to the great writers or that he should stuff his head with quotations. He will retain what interests him and reject the rest. He should not hesitate to manipulate what he borrows and appropriate it for himself. There is no point

¹⁷ For Montaigne's ideas on education and his dislike for schoolmasters, see *Essays* I, 25-26.

quoting sources; the minute the classical text inspires you, it can be forgotten. Its object is to be reborn inside you. The best proof of interest you could show to Plato or Seneca is to assimilate, pirate, and metamorphose their message into new utterance.

To bring the child—and the good reader—round to this non-conformism, it is important to remove them from the pernicious influence of the “pedants”: those schoolmasters who, instead of feeding their disciples, stuff their heads with indigestible information. They do not transform knowledge, they are simply content to transport it profitlessly from the past into the present, and from one book to another. Instead of subjecting texts to a critical and rejuvenating reading, they deposit them in their memory bank which, of all the faculties, is the most respectful and impersonal.

Montaigne likes to emphasize that he personally has an appalling memory. He says he can hardly remember the books he reads, and he forgets where and in what shape he found such and such an idea or piece of information. For somebody who quotes and invokes so many authors, such a claim of amnesia seems suspect. It is no doubt an exaggeration, but nevertheless logical from someone who was unwilling to depend on books unless given a free rein to do what he wanted with them. Remembering too faithfully is running the risk of copying in parrot fashion. On the contrary, “I do not study books, I dip into them: as for anything I do retain from them, I am no longer aware that it belongs to somebody else: it is quite simply the material from which my judgement has profited and the arguments and ideas in which it has been steeped: I straightway forget the author, the source, the wording and other particulars” (II,17,740,651).

Anything can happen to texts treated in such an offhand way, and that have been so profoundly interiorized. If Montaigne insists that works which came within his orbit have been altered, then that is because the very essence of the *Essays* is at stake. A bit further down the same track and the whole enterprise, saturated by foreign matter, taken over by commonplaces and *exempla*, would have turned into a compilation. Or it would have been reduced to so much commentary in the margin of the classics—the pedants’ method. The originality of the book, so forcefully announced, depends on the contrary on the double requirement of assimilating sources and transforming them. Montaigne prides himself on having been able to inverse the scholarly hierarchy: instead of his working for the great authors, they will work for him, even if they are thereby profoundly modified: “Among my many borrowings I take delight in being able to conceal the occasional one, masking and distorting it to serve a new purpose” (III,12, 1197,1056). And he adds, a propos of the authors he quotes, such a violent and incongruous comparison, that he later suppressed it: “Like those who disguise horses I stain their mane and their tail, and sometimes I poke out an eye” (*ibid.*). Montaigne presents himself here in the guise of a thief

or a crooked horse-dealer; if he does not disfigure his prey, disguising and mutilating it, then he will be the one who will be caught, and, petrified and vampirized, he will run the risk of being wiped out.

It remains important, however, to stress the distinction between an alienating and bad reading and a regenerating and good one. The reader may, in dialogue with someone else, be positively transformed. Instead of other writers dispossessing and threatening his identity, they may on the contrary, help him find and embrace his natural trend. Alternatively, they may encourage him without disturbance or self-rejection to integrate new perspectives, absorb the difference and from it create new personal wealth. Models are therefore no longer seen as possessions, as purveyors of cultural products, or as writing props, but as forces powerful enough to affect the self and change life. Such a reading, the only valid one in Montaigne's eyes, becomes an existential experience. It forms and transforms, addresses the subject, stirring it so profoundly as to change it forever. When an *exemplum* attains this degree of necessity and intimacy, it no longer has anything to do with literary technique but involves the entire personality. And it is here that it appears to best advantage.

Crisis, What Crisis?

Preserved, catalogued, and diffused in all sorts of anthologies and compilations, classical *exempla* permeate sixteenth-century literature. But the transferral brings turbulence with it. Lifted out of their historical environment and out of context, these semantic blocks are only superficially unchanging. Erasmus may well give himself the task of easing the students' work-load by giving them theoretically ready-made paradigms along with simple techniques to deal with them, he nevertheless has to recognize that certain units had many possible meanings. The examples authorized by tradition are still usable, but their symbolic radiance and tendency to generate new values cannot be restrained. Montaigne's approach is to dialogue with the examples, submitting them to criticism; the models meant to be used as norms are themselves evaluated and absorbed into his personal sphere. Many humanists would subscribe to this end result: examples are precious supports for thought and writing, but they are neither stable nor constraining.

Is the notion of *crisis* adequate then in the circumstances? I think not. The humanists in their thinking on the transmission of culture, theorized the effects of evolution, and willingly used the idea of *vicissitude*.¹⁸ The data peddled by tradition no doubt guarantee continuity from one age to another but their normal fate is to change. As in nature things evolve or vary. More precisely, they are transformed: a thread of identity persists, enough to sew together the present

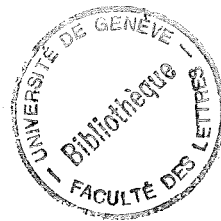
¹⁸ See Louis Le Roy, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers* (Paris, 1575).

and the past, but it welcomes difference and alteration, thus making room for novelty. This process entails surprises and deviations, but neither rupture nor rejection.

But is not manhandling the models, putting them to the test with unfamiliar demands, tantamount to paying them homage? If I come back to them despite the distance separating us, I am recognizing that they are firmly implanted in my cultural horizon, and that they provide thought and art in the making with an indispensable asset. By encouraging classical heritage to be reborn in a new shape, I am allowing it to display its power and productivity. The *Iliad* is fulfilled when it generates the *Aeneid*, and the *Aeneid* is similarly realised through the poems which imitate, modernize, or disguise it. The legend of Socrates realizes its potential in the same way when it gives rise to innovative interpretations. The transferral of cultural goods works thus: tradition proposes an ensemble of latent resources waiting to be actualised, an empowering writer breathes a transitory form into them, and this is in turn readapted, and so on and so forth. From Plato to Erasmus, from Socrates to Montaigne, metamorphosis and recycling are part and parcel of the classical oeuvre.¹⁹ Why talk about crisis? *Habent sua fata libelli!*

Université de Genève.

(Translated by Caroline Warman)



¹⁹ On transformation in sixteenth-century thought, art, and literature, see my *Perpetuum mobile. Métamorphoses des corps et des oeuvres de Vinci à Montaigne* (Paris, 1997).