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The Early Modern Discovery of Self

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Robert Ellrodt, *Montaigne and Shakespeare: The Emergence of Modern Self-Consciousness*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. xii + 192pp.

In 1960 Robert Ellrodt published his magisterial doctoral thesis, *L'inspiration personelle et l'esprit du temps chez les poètes Metaphysiques Anglais*. Working on the metaphysical poets a decade later under the direction of Louis Martz, I dutifully perused these three imposing volumes, with effort but great admiration—my reading competence in French was at least adequate. Martz was also adamant that I read Arno Esch's *Englische Religiöse Lyrik des 17. Jahrhunderts*. ("It's an important book," Louis insisted; "I reviewed it.") This necessitated my stopping everything else in order to take a German reading course over the summer: that course has certainly enhanced my enjoyment of Schubert Lieder and Wagner's music dramas, so I can hardly regret it.

Over the years I spoke with at least three individuals who had plans to translate Ellrodt's work into English (I am acquainted with no similar plans for Esch), but nothing ever came of it. Eventually, Ellrodt did the job for us: *Seven Metaphysical Poets: A Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (Oxford 2000) represents both an abridgement and an updating of the 1960 study, although not a translation of the earlier work. Once again, in *Montaigne and Shakespeare*, he has offered his own English version of an earlier work first published in French, *Montaigne et Shakespeare* (José Corti, 2011). Although the new book is much closer in size, format, and date of publication to its French original than *Seven Metaphysical Poets*, it is still not strictly a translation, but rather an adaptation for English readers.

It is an important book (not because I am reviewing it!) for Donne scholars. Although Ellrodt has dealt with Donne's part in "the emergence of modern self-consciousness" at length in *L'inspiration personnelle* and *Seven Metaphysical Poets*, his treatment of the subject with respect to Montaigne and Shakespeare broadens the context for our understanding of this developing social and psychological phenomenon.

The extent to which Donne's place in it is independent of his two great contemporaries enhances their significance for our assessment of Donne. "Unlike Shakespeare," Ellrodt remarks, "Donne does not seem to have taken an interest in the *Essays*, although he briefly alludes to them in a letter" (63). Donne therefore offers a different perspective for grasping this crucial historical transition:

> I have dwelt on Donne because he illustrates even more distinctly than Shakespeare an evolution in our modes of consciousness which many critics have traced to *Hamlet*. This should not be taken as implying that the author of the *Songs and Sonnets* was influenced by Shakespeare in this respect, even though this "great frequenter of plays" may partly owe the dramatic vivacity of his style to the influence of the London stage. (64)

The implication of these observations is that the emergence of self-consciousness is not simply a matter of literary influence, but that literature is, rather, a source of evidence for an historical development in spiritual and social life. The study of individual writers thus impels us to take into account their contemporaries not just because they were reading and imitating one another, but also because all confronted the same social pressures to which they responded—and which they resisted—in diverse ways.

The central thesis of *Montaigne and Shakespeare* is articulated at the close of the first chapter, "New forms of self-consciousness in Montaigne": "What I hope to make evident is that the forms of self-consciousness observed in the *Essays* are absent or only dimly discernible in the literature of the Western world before Montaigne" (18). Ellrodt thus accords the author of the *Essais*—that is, of "proofs," "trials," "attempts," "experiments"—a pivotal role in the development of Western civilization:

> One may conclude, then, that the calling into question of the self by the author of the *Essays* opened the way to its modern dissolution—even if only the germ of this development is necessarily present in his writings. As the following pages will show, the acknowledgement of the instability of the self is counterbalanced by the recognition of its permanence. My purpose in this book is to bring to light an equipoise which preserved the "modernity" of Montaigne from the excesses of post-modernity. (8)

If the distinctive achievement of Western civilization is precisely *modernity*—that delicate balance between tradition and innovation, between individual autonomy and social solidarity—then Montaigne and kindred spirits (Ellrodt champions Donne and Shakespeare; Cervantes may certainly be added as well as others) embody the culmination of a unique culture. It remains an open question whether our current "post modernity" reflects the final dissolution of this culture and the civilization that nurtured it or is merely an episode in a continuing story.

The second chapter of *Montaigne and Shakespeare* traces "The progress of subjectivity from Antiquity to Montaigne"; unsurprisingly, Ellrodt identifies St. Augustine as the central figure in "a revolution in the history of self-consciousness" (38). It is Augustine's identification of soul with self that provides a basis for the integrity of that self and lays the groundwork for the novel intensity of Montaigne's introspection. (In an apparent effort to streamline the book for Anglophone readers, Ellrodt omits a paragraph on Maurice Scève in the French version, which few of these readers are likely to miss.)

The third chapter expounds "Shakespeare and the new aspects of subjectivity." Unlike Donne, Shakespeare was plainly reading the *Essays* with responsiveness apparent in his own works. Ellrodt's contribution to our understanding of the relation between Shakespeare and Montaigne is his argument that it is most important in the period from *Hamlet* to *Macbeth*: "The concentration of Montaigne's influence in a few years of Shakespeare's production is noteworthy; and this is the period when, among various echoes, one discovers parallels related to self-consciousness or self-knowledge" (92). Ellrodt is reluctant to overstate this influence of Montaigne: "It appears that Shakespeare, though he opened the way to modern

interior monologue in *Hamlet*, did not privilege introspection in a majority of his plays" (91). Although he is the preeminent scholar of early modern *inspiration personnelle*, Professor Ellrodt does not forget that Shakespeare was a working playwright compelled to please an audience.

The *Sonnets* are an obvious source of representations of self-consciousness and subjective self-awareness. Ellrodt makes especially insightful observations about the "dark lady" sonnets, including this acute remark on Sonnet 138 ("When my love swears"):

> The coexistence of a belief accepted though it is known to be false and of a clear realization of an illusion requires a simultaneous perception of an experience and of the experiencing subject. The "self" is observed by an overarching "I," a phenomenon observed in experiences recorded by Montaigne and Donne. (67)

It would be naïve to identify the "personal voice" of a poet with the poet himself in a simplistic sense: "When it is not a mere rhetorical exercise, a poem, whether autobiographical or not, reveals the author's personality" (66).

The experience and the inspiration are *personal*, but the actual, historical person in question—the man who wrote the work—is also a *persona*, an artistic mask or rôle, which emerges in the artistic process. By distinguishing, without separating (as Eliot would have us do) "the man who suffers and the mind which creates," Ellrodt offers a way between "the personal heresy" and "the dehumanization of art." He also rebuts the postmodernist challenge to artistic integrity: "Though some critics invite us to read Shakespeare's sonnets without seeking any coherence in them, the voice we hear in the poems is always as recognizable as a musical tone is recognizable" (66). The implication of this remark is clarified by a citation of Janine Chassenet-Smirgel's observation that a mere fragment of a work by a Rembrandt, a Mozart, a Proust is instantly identifiable as the work of that artist.

A further sense of Ellrodt's goal in this passage is furnished by the French text of *Montaigne et Shakespeare*, which specifies "some critics" as "déconstructionistes." What Ellrodt thus achieves, by linking Montaigne and Shakespeare—with Donne lurking in the background—as exemplars both of an enhanced awareness of the

fragility and instability of the self and also of its reality and permanence, is a more substantial defense of traditional views of artistic and personal integrity than mere reiteration. Montaigne is quite often regarded by conservative Christian commentators as the demon of dissolution who dismantles all religious and philosophical certainties, and Shakespeare, in recent decades has been deconstructed and historicized almost to the vanishing point. Ellrodt has, so to speak, made a foray into "enemy territory" and planted his standard. By maintaining that Montaigne and Shakespeare confront and overcome the forces of disintegration, Ellrodt does so as well.

The point is driven home in the fourth chapter, "Complexity and coherence of the Shakespearean characters." "Hamlet's constant self-criticism," Ellrodt writes, "may be intensified by his melancholy, but it proceeds from his self-consciousness and on the insistence on truthfulness he shares with Montaigne. In their self-examination they both find that 'the best of the goodness in me has some vicious stain'" (105). The difference, Ellrodt adds, is that while Montaigne reconciles himself to this condition, Hamlet is unable to do so. Hence the latter is the paradigmatic tragic protagonist of the early modern world, while the *Essays* are essentially a comic work. The "vicious stain" is plainly compatible with the doctrine of original sin, and it goes a good way towards explaining how Montaigne and Shakespeare embody the tension at the heart of Western civilization, which heightens the sense of individuality by stressing personal responsibility for the evil in which one is involved, while insisting that the proper response is humility and communal solidarity.

This chapter also takes up *Macbeth* and *King Lear* to good effect. Ellrodt maintains that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, notwithstanding their progressive dehumanization, manifest consistent identities. He recalls Aristotle, who argues that the characters of a tragedy must be consistent even in their inconsistency:

> Shakespearean characters have more facets than Jonsonian characters; their actions and reactions are less predictable; they may be "compact of jars"; they are affected by their experience and are apt to learn from experience; but their creator has endowed each of them with a note-worthy self-consistency. (110)

Ellrodt surveys all the main characters of *King Lear*, arguing that, despite their affinities with the allegorical figures of the morality play, long recognized as an influence on Elizabethan drama, they are fully imagined characters with indications, in varying degrees, of an interior life. This is obviously most notable in Lear himself, who exemplifies "the discovery of a true self through the destruction of a false self" (117).

In the two closing chapters, along with a very brief "Epilogue," Ellrodt draws out the implications of the similarities in the representation of self-consciousness that he has surveyed in Montaigne and Shakespeare. Chapter 5, "Subjective time in Montaigne and Shakespeare," stresses the intense preoccupation with the present moment characteristic of both authors. "Combining scepticism and fideism, [Montaigne] recommended a *docta ignorantia* concerning impenetrable mysteries. That is why, protected by his faith (probably more sincere than some critics admit), he took no interest in eternity, while enjoying the ordinary moments of life so intensely" (139).

The "world of [Shakespeare's] *Sonnets*" is similarly "wholly enclosed in time" (139). Ellrodt declines conjecture about the elusive faith of the English poet; nevertheless, he reminds us that, whatever Shakespeare's own beliefs may have been, his sympathetic imagination appeals to the broad experience of humankind: "Shakespeare's universality rests, I think, on his reliance on the most obvious impressions and the most natural emotions" (136). Perhaps more than any poet since Homer, Shakespeare is absorbed into his all-encompassing fiction, which presents his audience their own visage, rather than the artist's.

The final chapter, "Scepticism and stable humanistic values," undertakes to specify the moral configuration of the two authors and offers resolution of the apparent incompatibility between Shakespearean negative capability and Montaigne's exclusive preoccupation with himself. In contrast to postmodern thinkers—Ellrodt mentions Todorov—both Shakespeare and Montaigne are more inclined to stress not the "otherness of the other" so much as identification. Montaigne's exposition of his own distinct peculiarities, on this reading, is a means of approaching a common human nature. "Shakespeare," Ellrodt maintains, "was in harmony with this view. To

acknowledge the 'universality of the they' means you admit that an individual experience can be universalized, which will require coping with the problem of 'essence'" (145–46).

Hence the Shakespeare who disappears behind his characters—including the persona of the *Sonnets*—is not so different from Montaigne, who approaches the human situation by way of his own responses to experience. Ellrodt seems to suggest that Shakespeare's work offers a dramatization in plays and sonnets of the paradox embodied in the *Essays*:

> Just as he saw himself different at different moments, yet retained a sense of identity, Montaigne can examine the same object, the same problem, the same situation from different angles and each time perceive a different facet of a complex truth. This capacity also conduced to an attitude of impartiality. (149)

In the Epilogue, "The Wisdom of Montaigne and Shakespeare," Ellrodt affirms his sense that Montaigne and Shakespeare, as unique and innovative as they were, nonetheless had deep roots in the traditions of Western civilization; and he ascribes to them a quality that few critics would dare to mention in the postmodern age: "Wisdom characterized their practice of introspection, and the balance achieved between their attention to the inner self and their observation of the outer world" (173).

Montaigne and Shakespeare is a rich and challenging book that will hearten some readers and vex others, but anyone can learn from it and be prompted to reassess his view not only of Montaigne and Shakespeare, but of early modern literature in general. Ellrodt's judgments are generally traditional, but he has earned them by a thorough reconsideration of their power in the light of postmodern critiques of the humanist tradition of the West.

My only disappointment—a very minor one—is that he chose to omit the appendix included in the French original, "Shakespeare créa la jeune fille," because it deals only with Shakespeare and is only marginally related to the main theme. Still, it would have been useful to have this essay, published first in 1975, in an English version by the author.

I began this review with a, perhaps impertinent, personal anecdote. I close it on a sobering note. As I was finishing this review, I received word that Robert Ellrodt had passed away in Paris at the age of 93. As he informed me, when I last saw him in the spring of 2015, *Montaigne and Shakespeare* was to be his last scholarly book. It is a fitting conclusion to a long and illustrious career. Robert, who exemplified the wisdom and compassion that he attributed to Montaigne and Shakespeare, will be greatly missed.

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