Order in Disorder

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"Every commentary," writes Yves Deleuge in Montaigne et la mauvaise foi, adding that his own is no exception, "is in the final analysis only a montage of quotations reassembled in a certain order. It takes apart the work under the pretext of making the 'truth' come out at last. The commentator's avowed wish . . . is to disappear once he has thus redealt the cards, as if all by themselves they could play the game of transparency" (10–11). Given the barrage of quotations from the Essays with which I have assaulted the reader, Deleuge's characterization seems especially apt. It has indeed been my hope that if I lined up side by side the passages in symmetrically related chapters where certain words and phrases repeated themselves, then it would become obvious that there is at least that element of structure in the Essays, that Montaigne planted those echoing words there on purpose, and that ever since 1580 he has been waiting for someone to realize that every symmetrical pair could be read as a single text. I would be glad to disappear once that truth has been unveiled and let the text speak for itself. I would only point out that the "certain order" in which I present these quotations is not mine but Montaigne's.

On different grounds, but with the reference to many of the same passages where we have seen Montaigne inviting the reader to complete his work, Michel Jeanneret argues that Montaigne doesn't want his work to die with him, but to continue coming into existence after his death with the assistance
of the “lecteur suffisant” [sufficient reader] to whom he appeals in I: 24. Such
a reader “descouvre souvant ès escritz d’autruy des perfections auttres que
celles que l’auteur y a mises & aperceües, & y preste des sens & des visages
plus riches” [often discovers in others’ writings perfections beyond those that
the author put in or perceived, and lends them richer meanings and aspects]
(I: 24, 127a; 93*). Given the wealth of parallels between the chapter where
this passage appears and I: 34, its symmetrical counterpart, where Montaigne
likewise writes of perfections emerging in a work of art independently of
its creator’s awareness, it is difficult to conceive of him being as unaware as
such a creator. According to Jeanneret, Montaigne wants to make the reader
“a partner” for whom he “created numerous occasions . . . to intervene”
and “deliberately made the reception, or rather diverse receptions that would
ensue an active posthumous destiny for the Essays, an integral part of the
book.” The reader “has to reconstruct missing articulations, put the disorder
in order.”¹ Jeanneret is not alluding to the overall structure of the Essays that
concerns us here, but rather to what he calls “intentional failings in the orga-
nization of the text” of individual chapters. Yet this does speak to the kind
of completion that I argue Montaigne has been waiting for, that of matching
each chapter to its other half.

Montaigne appeals for a sharp-eyed reader to take in the whole picture:
“Il est impossible de renger les pieces, à qui n’a une forme du tout en sa teste”
[A man who does not have in his head a picture of the whole cannot possibly
arrange the pieces] (II: 1, 337a, DM 9; 243*). “Dieu . . . voit en l’immensité
de son ouvrage l’infinité des formes qu’il y a comprimées; et est à croire que
cette figure qui nous estonne, se rapporte et tient à quelque autre figure de
mesme genre inconnu à l’homme. De sa toute sagesse il ne part rien que bon
et commun et reglé; mais nous n’en voyons pas l’assortiment et la relation”
[God . . . sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has
comprised in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is
related and linked to some other figure of the same kind unknown to man.
From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and com-
mon and regular; but we do not see their arrangement and relationship] (II:
30, 713c; 539*).

The Essays are a playful book, hiding their artfulness in some ways and
revealing it in others. André Tournon complains that Montaigne’s “express
declarations” deny the possibility of a hidden order (“Organisation des
Essais,” in Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne, 847). But François Rigolot

argues that Montaigne is part of a long tradition of concealing art with art: “From the ‘corps rappiecez’ to the ‘pieces décousues,’” in reading the Essays “we are always in the enchanting aporia of art without art. ‘Ars adeo latet arte sua’ [Thus art is hidden by its own art], as Ovid wrote in the Metamorphoses (X, 252).” Despite the concealment Montaigne keeps lifting the veil by making the very thing that repeats from one chapter to its symmetrical partner allude to the fact of its existence. For example, in I: 9, a chapter on lying (“Des menteurs”), he says that a liar better have a good memory, but that his is worse than anyone else’s; but in I: 49 he claims he can remember what no one else can, showing himself to be a bad liar with a bad memory. In both I: 24 and I: 34 chance “surpasses” the “science” of an artist, allowing him to better his work without intending to, as if it were by mere chance that chance would do its works so well in symmetrically related chapters. The motif of getting two for one appears in both I: 26 and I: 32, giving us one motif in two places (that are, I argue, one place since symmetrical chapters form a unit). II: 30 prophesies backward, “à reculons,” to the earlier appearance in II: 8 of that same expression. Fingers are intertwined in both II: 12 and II: 26, and in II: 12 they give the illusion of two for one. One’s “veue” [sight] is altered in both II: 13 and II: 25, though it would take the stereoscopic sight discussed in II: 25 to see it. The motif of restated words is itself restated in II: 14 and II: 24. Chapters II: 15 and II: 23 fight their own civil war by presenting opposing opinions on the desirability of civil war. The Essays are famously “consubstantial” with their author in II: 18, but the chapter in which that assertion appears is itself consubstantial with II: 20, where the only other consubstantiality in Book Two appears. III: 2 and III: 12 steal from each other the theme of hiding one’s theft by both speaking of “larrecins desrobés.” III: 6 and III: 8 borrow from each other the theme of borrowing, each alluding to being rich with a borrowed capacity, with what is not “le sien” [one’s own].

All this playful self-reference may mean that Montaigne does not always mean what he says. For the seriousness of many an assertion may be undercut—ironized—when its words crop up in a different and apparently unrelated context somewhere else, and when that somewhere else is a chapter that is not thematically or logically but structurally—which is to say, depending on one’s point of view, esthetically, or arbitrarily—connected to the one in which it was originally found. Of course this irony does not overwhelm everything in the Essays. While the symmetrical doubling reveals the hidden

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value of the otherwise puzzling short chapters, it does not always touch at the heart of the longer ones. For instance, what is shared by I: 32 and I: 26 has nothing to do with the education of children, the latter’s great theme. On the other hand, just about all of I: 32, one of the very brief chapters, finds its double in I: 26. Roughly the first half of II: 34 seems to be in conversation with the briefer II: 4, including what both say about Julius Caesar, but the entire second half, where Montaigne focuses on other aspects of the man, has no equivalent in the matching chapter. This makes one wonder if there might not be some other structural principle at work here connecting that second half to some other chapter; the most fruitful avenue of approach for finding it may well be the sequential approach championed by Sayce and Meijer.

Yet the “nothing” waiting to be discovered at the center of the first of the Essays’ three interconnecting centers—“qui n’entend rien qu’il oye” [who understands nothing that he hears] (Sonnet 15, line 3)—does hold out the teasing suggestion that the Essays are about (at least in a literal sense: built about) precisely that, nothing. At the same time, another tease suggests itself: that he who focuses so intently on this “rien” is not understanding the “rien” he hears. But like the liar paradox, this reads both ways. If it is a warning, it was nevertheless put there on purpose. As Montaigne once said of his cat (II: 12, 452c; 331), who knows if his text is playing with the reader or the reader with the text?