Christopher Simpson

Professor Little

Modeling the Environment

September 14, 2012

Assessment of Montaigne

 Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, a writer and philosopher of the 16th century, did many remarkable things during his time on Earth. He coined the essay, a major literary style that is still heavily used today, and his ways of thinking were most certainly revolutionary for his time. He embraced the spirit of skepticism, the idea that nothing is ever known for sure, an idea that I personally agree with on most levels. The human race has opinions on how the universe was started, with the big bang theory being the primary one. There is much evidence behind this theory, and I personally believe it because it makes the most sense. However, I am willing to listen to new theories because nobody can actually prove what happened 17 billion years ago. This idea of questioning everything will definitely help us incoming freshmen develop from merely accepting what our teachers in high school told us as true, to the point of questioning what we learn at Holy Cross and giving our own personal thoughts on the matter. Montaigne’s process of questioning everything around him is why I personally think this choice of summer reading is a good one.

 The approach to life proposed by Montaigne and Bakewell in the book that speaks to me the most is definitely “Question everything”, but other than that, the one that has the most relevance to me is “Give up control”, primarily because the two questions are very relevant to each other. In this section of the book, Bakewell talks about Montaigne’s adopted daughter Marie de Gournay, whom he met in Paris in 1588. The two grew close over the next four years, and in one of her writings she claims: “In truth, if someone is surprised that, although we are not father and daughter except in title, the good will that allies us nevertheless surpasses that of real fathers and children” (Bakewell, p. 295). Additionally, Montaigne himself says, “She is the only person I still think about in the world. If youthful promise means anything, her soul will some day be capable of the finest things” (ibid, p.296). While this shows that the relationship between the two of them is very strong, it also shows that Gournay is motivated to write and get her ideas out into the world as much as Montaigne is, even if he is much older and more experienced than Gournay. Also, after he dies, she is the one to compile all of his essays and put them together after he has died, and adding a preface of her own creation. There is much skepticism about whether or not any of the differing information in Gournay’s collection is reputable, due to the fact that some ideas were only published in her versions of his essays, along with the fact that she is a woman living in a time period dominated by males. This is symbolic for the idea of giving up control.

‘Control freak’ is a term used to describe someone who feels it is necessary to know the ins and outs of everything that is going on in their life because it gives them the feeling of security. Oftentimes these people are much more stressed than those who do not try to control everything. Giving up control allows for a person to focus their mind on different options because there is a whole section not focused on every little thing that goes on in daily life, which is what I think Montaigne figured out. Montaigne realized that he should stop focusing on the little things in life and look at the big picture in order to discover true meaning from the world around him, showing that giving up control can open a person to a world of possibilities.

Montaigne flourished in a time where Christianity had a much bigger influence, and untrue generalizations about the unknown, such as about the New World, were running rampant throughout Europe. In one of his essays, “On the Cannibals”, Montaigne refers to Aristotle’s account of how “Carthaginians struck out across the Atlantic beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, sailed for a long time and finally discovered a large fertile island” (Montaigne, p.230), then proceeds with “But that account in Aristotle cannot apply to these new lands” (ibid, p.231). The purpose of this tactic is to try and convince the reader not to have any preconceptions about Brazil, the land Montaigne elaborates on in his essay. Montaigne was an artist at dropping all preconceptions he has about a given topic, and then looking at the topic through a critical lens. What this does is allows for his essays to be his own work, and not the same generic ideas that many writers have had before him due to living in a time period where questioning the norms of society would oftentimes be illegal and thought of as heresy.

However, Montaigne was not a humanitarian. Just because Montaigne felt it was necessary to give the unknown a fighting chance, he did not think that all humans in the world were the same. For example, Sarah Bakewell said that Montaigne “treasured…his conversation with the Tupinambá” which was one of the ethnic groups that lived in Brazil prior to French and Portuguese occupation, and he “also read everything he could get hold of on the subject” (Bakewell, p.184). This shows that Montaigne would rather have direct, authentic information from a native Brazilian rather than listening to or reading someone else’s 100 year old speculation of the area. On the flip side, Bakewell claims “He described [the Tupinambá] with a list of desirable negatives: This is a nation…in which there is no sort of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name for a magistrate of political superiority, no custom of servitude, no riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupations but leisure ones, no care for any but common kinship, no clothes, no agriculture, no metal, no use of wine or wheat” (ibid, p.186). Exclaiming that this native society has none of these ideals or resources is seen as a detriment to their society. According to this passage, they are not as advanced as Europeans, and are therefore inferior. However, Bakewell then proceeds to explain that “Montaigne understood the appeal of the fantasy, and shared it. Like wild fruit, he wrote, wild people retain their full natural flavor. This was why they were capable of such bravery, for their behavior in war was untainted by greed” (ibid, p.187). This shows that Montaigne by no means advocates the idea that everyone is equal, but rather wants to obtain the clearest, most genuine understanding of the world as is possible. This is a quality that separates him from the stereotypical condescending attitude of Renaissance-era Europe.

 Nowadays, freedom of speech gives anyone that lives in the free world the right to believe what they want and the government cannot interfere, so it is easier and more effective than ever to publish anything that we feel strongly about. The invention and subsequent revolution of the internet combined with the principle of freedom of speech, strongly opinionated essays of all kinds on any subject imaginable are floating around in cyber space. This is why it is more important than ever to look at situations through a critical eye with the fewest preconceptions at possible in order to reduce the amount of stereotypes and preconceptions that are present in our society today. This book by Sarah Bakewell deals with issues that are only somewhat applicable to the issues of today, but the overall message that she produces with the recollection of Montaigne is one that can be applicable to any time period. I believe that this is what college is for; not only to gain the knowledge that will be necessary to secure jobs after college, but to progress past the point of simply accepting someone else’s thesis, and begin developing originals and having the ability to defend them.