The Renaissance and its Ancients: dismembering and devouring

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The Renaissance and Its Ancients: Dismembering and Devouring

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Negotiation

My Essais, acknowledges Montaigne, are full of quotations from the Ancients. But the greater the dependence, the more important it is to claim one’s freedom, one’s infidelity: “I, among so many borrowings of mine, am very glad to be able to hide one now and then, disguising and altering it for a new service” (III, 12; 809).⁠¹ In a sentence which, it is true, was crossed out later, he goes as far as to make a strange comparison concerning the authors he quotes: “Like those who steal horses, I paint their mane and tail, and sometimes blind them in one eye” (ibid.).

The Ancients, who are so encroaching that one must disguise and mutilate them, are, for Montaigne, much more than a myth. They are omnipresent, they saturate his intellectual space. Their books fill up his library; their mottoes are engraved on the beams of the ceiling; their examples haunt his memory and, when he sets himself to write, their words, their ideas flow from his pen.

For all the humanists, the Ancients are the unavoidable partners. Whether observing the closest fidelity to the models or acknowledging the necessity of a deviation, whether insisting on the continuity or the change, on the possibility or the impossibility of equaling the masters,

¹ For the quotations from Montaigne’s Essais, I have used Donald M. Frame’s translation: Montaigne, The Complete Essays (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1958). A reference is given to the book and to the number of the chapter, followed by the pagination in Frame’s edition.

nobody can escape siting art and knowledge in relation to the Greek and Latin standard. The scholars as well as the artists experience this encounter daily and all of them, whatever their degree of dependence, know that their work can only be conceived and perceived as a variation, more or less free, on one of the classical paradigms. The physicians are advanced enough to risk dissection, but their treatises are limited, in general, to commentaries in the margin of the works of Hippocrates or Galen. The moralists take a stand on current events, but they obsessively call upon Epictetus’s or Seneca’s lessons. The architects feel bound to Vitruvius’ precepts, Ronsard imitates the Pindaric odes to the point of being ridiculous, and so forth. The humanists are not necessarily antiquarians, but they accept the principle according to which one must go through the mediation of the Ancients to be able to speak and to talk about the world. To grasp the meaning of an experience, one must have a mental structure; to speak, one must have a language; it is impossible therefore to try to do without a cultural memory. Only such a memory can give form and meaning to things. A representation can only be a retrospective act of representation, of return to a model that has already been tested.

To various degrees, the humanists had good reasons then to fear the shutting down of their horizons, that it might be irremediably turned towards the past. The heritage that they have acquired has reached such a degree of perfection that it might well inhibit their creativity and make museum keepers out of them. If some can make do with it, others get worried. The quarrel about Ciceronianism shows us these two tendencies. On one side, the purists (Bembo, Longueil, Dolet, Scaliger) claim to write a Latin absolutely identical to Cicero’s language and style, as if time had never gone by. Opposed to this regressive fixation, the anticeronianists (Poliziano, Gianfrancesco Pico, Erasmus), even if they continue to write in Latin, endorse a requirement for personal invention and the demand that one adapts one’s language to new cultural conditions. Now the heat of this controversy, especially in Erasmus’s *Anticiceronianus*, can be explained precisely because to give oneself up to the fascination of the Ancients means to succumb to paralysis. The Ciceronianists are treated as if they were parrots or monkeys;² their mimicking is denounced as an act of selflessness or worse, of alienation.

We understand better, in this context, Montaigne’s violence. Full

of classical reminiscences, the *Essais* run the risk of being another anthology, a pasting together of vestiges piously collected in the classical repertory. It is because he must avoid the ancients' vampirism that Montaigne reacts with so much passion. If he wants to reach adulthood, he must integrate the father figure, he must proclaim his independence.

The question Montaigne asks himself, the one asked by all his contemporaries who want to be something other than monkeys, is the following: how to be a modern? It is out of the question, for them, to do without the Ancients. The idea of a *tabula rasa*, the claim of originality are totally foreign to them. The point is not to reject tradition, but to work within it. So a dialogue with the authorities must be conducted; their power must be recognized and at the same time sidestepped. The relation to the Ancients is a subtle negotiation in which both parties should be able to defend their rights. Every solution calls for a search for equipoise between love and hate, between enslavement and rejection.

With this common end in view, the strategies are manifold and the balancing, variable. Every branch of knowledge, every circle, every artist adopts a specific solution. One should also distinguish between different moments through the long period, from 1350 until 1600, which constitutes the "Renaissance." It would be interesting, for example, to observe the evolution of the concept of *imitatio*. Out of devotion for the Ancients, the humanists of the first Renaissance, especially in Italy, rank philology, that is the understanding and the faithful imitation of the great texts, at the top of their activities. To imitate, for Petrarch, for Poliziano, for Dolet, means to converse with the great authors, to revive words, rhythms, traces of writings. Therefore an operation internal to literature. Now a turning point, in the course of the sixteenth century, reverses these priorities, at least in the theoretical declarations. The philological scruple, the cult of good writing and of purity of style give way to the preoccupation with a more direct restitution of the things of life: nature, the self, current events. . . . The literary mimicking, *imitatio*, then loses a part of its credit in favor of *mimesis*: the creation of the impression of reality, the production of the verisimilar. From then on, the humanists will be less interested in exhibiting their fidelity to the authors, than in claiming an adequation between their speech and experience: literary imitation is no longer an end in itself, it is becoming a means.3

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3 On the problems of literary imitation in the Renaissance, see Greene, *The Light in Troy*. 
Since I must choose between many, I will give two other examples of this negotiation, two other strategies which should allow one to live with the Ancients without being pirated.

Dismembering

The first method I will describe is not particular to the Renaissance; it goes back to Antiquity and continues through the Middle Ages, but still supplies humanists with widely used instruments. It is the technique of the topic. To give easier access to the ancient heritage, the texts are cut up into mobile units, that can be recycled, ready to appear in unprecedented contexts. The classics are dismembered into spare parts, the pieces are recollected in anthologies where they are classified to make their access easier. The criteria of selection vary: here samples of good style are collected, elsewhere a volume of moral sentences is composed, or quotations, organized by themes, are gathered. It is the principle of the collection of commonplace, which has a practical and quantitative aim: it is a question of managing for the best the capital left behind by the Ancients by placing it at everyone's disposal. The linguistic and semantic goods which repose in books are divided in shares, they are distributed in ready-for-use modules, and, in this handy form, they are back on the market. The internal coherence of the original work, the fragment's meaning in its first context and in its historical milieu, all of this is neglected. The ancient text is treated as a data bank—data, which have to be given new values to reach their full usefulness. The transaction is typical insofar as it reveals at the same time, in the relation to the Ancients, a great dependence, since one must work with their materials, and a great lack of constraint, since these materials are shifted, actualized and recontextualized.

Erasmus exposes at length these techniques in his treatise De duplici copia verborum ac rerum, a school manual meant to provide the budding writer or the orator with an abundance of means of expression (Book I) and of semantic supplies (Book II), among which he can choose. After a general statement on the techniques of inventio, the second book shows how to collect themes and commonplaces, in such a way that when it is time to write or to speak, the student will have at his disposal the richest and the most diverse resources possible. The author then adds some advice on how to

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classify the collected materials. The student reads pen in hand, he
dismembers the original and reorganizes the pieces—and thus the
primitive units are ready for new uses.

Now Erasmus is perfectly conscious that textual modules, taken
out of their context and their cultural environment, run the risk of
changing meaning. The very method whose intention was the re-
production of invariable data ends up showing, on the contrary,
their versatility. The fragments extracted from the authors are like a
signifier which can take on board many signified. Take for example
the commonplace of Socrates's death; Erasmus notices that one can
use it to illustrate ideas which are completely different: death
doesn’t frighten the wise man, virtue is useless, philosophy can be
dangerous. . . . A semantic unit can also be diverted from its usual
meaning because it is treated in the ironic mode, or else because a
symbol is endowed with a different value. This freedom of use makes
the classification complicated, warns Erasmus, since a common-
place can always jump from one thematic box to another. But with-
out this mobility, the user can only be a parrot and the work, an
impersonal collage of foreign materials. The blocks of the classical
edifice are perhaps distorted, but if they could not be disguised, the
system itself would seize up completely.

As for the first book of the De Copia, it teaches how to improve
one’s style. To get the student to find the most appropriate turn of
phrase, Erasmus unfolds in front of him a multiplicity of formulations,
for example: 195 versions of the theme “tuæ litteræ me
magnopere delectaretur,” 200 ways to express the idea “semper
dum vivam tui meminero.”8 Synonymous variations, passage from one
level of language to another, use or absence of figures of speech,
exercises of compression or of dilatation, anything goes to convince
the user of the extraordinary diversity of the expressive means at his
disposal. At the same time, Erasmus shows that Latin, far from being a
dead system, opens a wide space to research and to “do-it-yourself.”

Parody is another way, disrespectful and playful, to stir up the
Ancient speech. Henri Estienne, who, like Erasmus, is a learned
grammarian, also enjoys these games of multiplication and textual
propagation. On his own printing press, he prints the small volume
Parodiae morales,7 which propounds a long theory of parody and a

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5 Ibid., 639.
6 See chapter 33.
7 Henri Estienne, Parodiae morales, in poetarum veterum sententias celestres ( . . . )
(n.p.: H. Estienne, 1575). I owe the discovery of this book to an article by Silvia
practical demonstration. The characteristic of parody, he explains, is to unfold a text, and through amplifications, through grafts, expand it to the point of producing an unlimited number of new versions—at the same time structural and semantic expansions from the initial matrix. Estienne is less interested in the comical effect of the diversion than in its exemplary value. Indeed, parody seems to reveal certain fundamental mechanisms of imitatio and therefore of literary creation. Moreover his historical inquiry goes back to Homer who shifted lines from the Iliad to the Odyssey, and to Virgil and Ovid, also lovers of re-writing. Thus he suggests that the circulation and alteration of textual units, in literature, might stand as originary activities.

In the practical part, Estienne adopts, for each one of his examples, a line of Latin verse borrowed from a famous poet and plays at reformulating it in multiple ways. The parodical modulations are classified according to a gradation which leads from the smallest intervention to the most daring one. A series of progressive modifications unfolds, under the reader’s eyes, the film of textual metamorphoses. Here, for example, is a series of variations on the line from Juvenal: “Si natura negat, facit indignatio verbum”:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Si natura negat, verba indignatio praebet} \\
&\text{vel} \\
&\text{Si natura neget, dabat ira audacia verba} \\
&\text{Si natura neget, cor audax suggerit ira} \\
&\text{Si natura negat, dat saepe os ira disertum} \\
&\text{Si natura viam negat, indignatio praebet}
\end{align*}
\]

\textit{Parodiae aliae libriores}
\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Quas natura negat, pedibus timor admoveat alas} \\
&\text{Quas renuit natura, timor compellit ad artes} \\
&\text{Si natura negat, mollescunt corda timore} \\
&\text{Quae natura dedit, timor excutit aspera verba} \\
&\text{Quem natura dedit, soluit saepe ira pudorem} \\
&\text{Quam natura dedit legem, indignatio soluit.}
\end{align*}
\]

Like Erasmus, Estienne limits himself to a few samples from a list which remains open, as an invitation aimed at the addressee, engaging him to continue the work. To help this relay operation, he adopts a surprising solution: he leaves blank all the pages on the

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\(^8\) Juvenal, Satires I, v. 79, and in Estienne, Parodiae morales, 82.
right and explains that they are meant for the reader's exercises. The Latin lines which are the motor for the parody are a kind of virtual literature; the ancient text is not interesting per se, but as a spring board for the variations that others create.

Still, coming from the very serious Henri Estienne, editor of the Greeks and Latins, the rigorous philologist, these manipulations are surprising. Aren't they a threat to the Ancients' dignity? The majority of humanists would have answered no. To treat the great authors harshly in order to actualize them and to reintroduce them in the productive circuit is a way of honoring them. I show my respect by judging them able to participate, hic et nunc, in the thought and the art that are in the making. By bringing the Ancients to be reborn in new forms, I demonstrate their strength and their permanence. The Iliad is fully achieved when it engenders the Aeneid and the Aeneid fulfills itself in the poems which copy, modernize, or disguise it. For the dynamic outlook of the humanists, the transfer of cultural goods works this way; the tradition offers a set of latent resources asking to be actualized—to actualize, that is to say, at the same time to proceed from the virtual to the real state and to give a modern relevance to an ancient object. From Homer to Virgil, from Plutarch to Montaigne, classical works are constituted by metamorphosis and recycling. Real greatness cannot stay put in established situations; to be, in the full sense of the word, is to grow; to be universal, one must be capable of change.

**Devouring**

The learned like Erasmus and Estienne, when they experiment with the productivity of a commonplace, wish to put their readers in a certain state of mind—an inventive and interventionist attitude—and to provide them with directions for use—the diverse techniques of multiplication. But this method reaches its end only when it leads to a personal creation. It is therefore not enough to collect materials or to multiply them by using mechanical processes: a more intimate relation, a deeper transformation must intervene. A quantitative criterion is thus replaced by a qualitative demand. It is no longer a question of having a thorough knowledge of the Ancients, but of integrating them, not so much of having them as of being them. The reader will interiorize the texts to the extent of considering them as his own belongings. The division between present and past, the tension between the quest for one's own voice and the
submission to the other are then suspended. The disciple has so thoroughly made the master’s example his own that, while using it, he can rightfully speak for himself. Between the two parties, a communion is established, which may owe something to the ideal of the Eucharist which was haunting everyone’s conscience at the time.

So, after the dismemberment of the Ancients, here comes the cannibalism phase. And, as we will see, the metaphor is hardly exaggerated. As often, the theory has recourse to figures to remedy the deficiency of conceptual language. I will mention two of these figures. The first one, the figure of the bees, embraces moreover the two phases I have just distinguished: collection and absorption. The bees begin by gathering pollen from different flowers; this is the action of accumulating. Then they transmute the multiplicity of food in an homogeneous product; this is the task of conversion and assimilation. Following many others, Montaigne uses this analogy to express the double role of impregnation and transformation in the development of personality:

The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram. Even so with the pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgment. (I, 26; 111)

In a letter by Seneca, in which, through a series of metaphors brought together for the first time, he elaborates a real theory of the reading process as transmutation and devouring, the bee paradigm is closely associated with the one of the eating body. As in the “honeyfication,” digestion transforms food into strength and blood. “So it is with the food which nourishes our higher nature—we should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged or it will be no part of us. We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power.” Quintilian too advises one to assimilate things read in the same way as one chews and digests food. And, from that time on, the variations on that motif will be multiplied. To name this osmosis, the medieval monks had made up an even more expressive figure: ruminatio. Petrarch takes this figure as his own in

9 Seneca, Letters to Lucilius 84, 5-7.
10 Ibid.
11 Quintilianus, Institutio oratoria X, 1, 19.
order to describe the total fusion of the eater and the eaten, of the subject reader and the object read. I devoured the Latin authors, he says:

I ate in the morning what I would digest in the evening; I swallowed as a boy what I would ruminate upon as a man. These writings I have so thoroughly absorbed and fixed, not only in my memory but in my very marrow, these have become so much a part of myself, that even though I should never read them again they would cling in my spirit, deep-rooted in its inmost recesses.\textsuperscript{13}

The cannibal metaphor, of course, is used for warding off the danger of vampirism and alienation that we were talking about earlier. To avoid being eaten, one has to eat the other. The authors using the food analogy are, above all, the ones who, like Petrarch, obey to an introspective demand and expect that writing will provide a means to deeper self-knowledge. Paradoxically, the Ancients, who were threatening to colonize the self, can now contribute to the construction of one's identity. They bring to the reader a strength, a quality of being, a trust, allowing him to assume himself better and to assert himself. The reader, filled with their energy, realizes his own resources, and recognizes his personal qualities. This transfer of power is described by Erasmus:

You must digest what you have consumed (\textit{devoraris}) in varied and prolonged reading, and transfer it by reflection (\textit{meditatio}) into the veins of the mind (\textit{in vena animi}), rather than into your memory or your notebook (\textit{indiciem}). Thus your natural talent (\textit{ingenium}), gorged on all kinds of foods, will of itself beget a discourse (\textit{ex se gignat orationem}) which will be redolent, not of any particular flower, leaf, or herb, but of the character and feelings of your own heart (\textit{indolem affectusque pectoris tu}) , so that whoever reads your work will not recognize fragments excerpted from Cicero, but the image of a mind replete with every kind of learning.\textsuperscript{14}

In this way, the Ancients are mobilized to help the writer to become more himself. Montaigne is the champion of this strategy, making at the same time a theory and a practical demonstration of it.

The worst way to use the Ancients, he says, is the pedants’ one: the school masters who, instead of nourishing the students, stuff their

\textsuperscript{13} Quoted by Greene, \textit{The Light in Troy}, 98-99 from Petrarch, \textit{Epistulae familiares} 22, 2.

heads with an indigestible science. They don’t transform knowledge, they are satisfied with transporting it from the past to the present, from one book to another, or to lay it down in one’s memory, the most submissive, the most impersonal of all the faculties. This is probably why Montaigne repeats that he has himself a bad memory. This avowal is suspicious, but it is logical, coming from someone who wants to be dependent on the Ancients only if he can make them completely his own.

I leaf through books, I do not study them. What I retain of them is something I no longer recognize as anyone else’s. It is only the material from which my judgment has profited, and the thoughts and ideas with which it has become imbued; the author, the place, the words, and other circumstances, I immediately forget. (II, 17; 494)

If Montaigne insists on the usurpation of texts and on the interiorisation of the Ancients, it is because the Essais, saturated with foreign materials, were running the risk of turning into a compilation or of limiting themselves to mere commentaries in the margins of the classical works, which amounted to adopting the pedants’ method. He boasts of having turned the scholars’ hierarchy upside down: instead of his working for the Ancients, they will work for him, even if they have to be deeply altered. Books are used only to guide him in his introspection: “if I study, I seek only the learning that treats the knowledge of myself” (II, 10; 297). The question Montaigne asked of a text is less: “what did the author want to say?” than “what does it mean to me?” The narcissist assimilation is total; Montaigne likes the Ancients because they offer him a mirror in which he can contemplate himself.

This does not mean that he abides by their lessons. He watches others to grasp his own singularity better. The most frequent scenario, in the appropriation of the Ancients, is the contradiction, the confronting with a partner constantly quoted, often contested, but who cannot defend himself. If Montaigne likes showing his opposition, it is because it sharpens his critical mind. Disagreement teaches one to question one’s own thought and, in that way, leads one, through the awareness of one’s difference, to a better self-knowledge. To read in a subjective, partial and discordant manner, helps the son to separate himself from the father; it helps him to consolidate his personality; it allows him especially to strengthen a decisive faculty in the conquest of the self-judgment. Instead of bowing to the ancient work, the reader judges it, he absorbs it in his own space of
reference in order to evaluate, and criticize it. The norm has been displaced: it is now the modern subject which has the initiative, it is his self and his enterprise that count and the Ancients, demystified, are used as instruments.

A few words to conclude. There are still today ideas concerning the relation between Renaissance and Antiquity, which are a little too one-sided. The return to the Greek and Roman arts and sciences, the restitution of the ancient texts in their full authenticity, the restoration of Latin, all these repetitive and regressive activities are of course inscribed in the humanist program. But if the Renaissance had only imitated the past, if it had been only motivated by an archeological nostalgia and a philological respect, it would have succumbed to academism, it would have been a simple avatar of neoclassicism: a fossilized culture, hypnotized, and paralyzed by the authority of its models. Now, what is wonderful is that the great authors of the Renaissance have completely assumed the ancient heritage without giving up their freedom or compromising their creative energy. Many others, before and after them, deplore their powerlessness—you know the story: we are perched on giants’ shoulders, everything has been said and we come too late. . . . As for the humanists, they accept being second, because they know very well that there is no absolute beginning, and that thought and art are, by definition, secondary.

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