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Catherine Hampton

Strategies for Reading French Texts

07/11/13

Examine the interplay between truth-telling and story-telling in 'Des Cannibales'.

Montaigne's 1580 essay, 'Des Cannibales', may be considered interesting from a critical point of

view for the way in which the interplay between truth-telling and story-telling becomes the main

focus of the essay. As stated by the critic Steven Rendall, the essay's "main subject, despite the title,

is not cannibals" (56), rather, Montaigne seeks to uncover a deeper intellectual truth, introducing the

reader to "the liberating experience of changing his mind" (62). However, the extent to which

Montaigne's approach may be described as 'truth-telling' is debatable, for this may be said to imply

a sense of didacticism which, it may be argued, is largely absent from the work, both explicitly and

implicitly. Good point to take forward. It would be helpful to set out how you attend to address this

conundrum in what follows.

What is first striking about 'Des Cannibales', in comparison to the rest of the *Essais*, is Montaigne's

apparent decision to write about a subject of which he had very little first-hand experience. This

appears a strange course of action for a man who, throughout the rest of the collection, appears

more concerned with abstract concepts such as 'La Tristesse' or 'l'Amitié', to whose discussion first-

hand experience and immediacy is key. This opens up a paradox within the essay, as Montaigne

claims to wish "que chacun écrivît ce qu'il sait, et autant qu'il en sait" (128). We may believe

Montaigne, who advocates "des topographes" (128) as a source of information, has made the

mistake of falling victim to the "vice" (128) of cosmography, in attempting to describe a culture

which he himself has never fully experienced, never having visited the societies described. ✓ His

reliance on both classical authorities, such as the story of "le roi Pyrrhus" (124), and the testimony of

the "homme simple" (128), a supposed eye-witness to the society and culture of the New World,

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Comment [1]: You need an initial footnote that gives the bibliographic details about this source. The same is the case when you quote Montaigne. When quoting subsequently from your primary source, you may then add a note to the effect that 'subsequent references will follow quotations.' It is customary to continue to refer to secondary material using short footnotes (Duval, p, ...)

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Comment [2]: Key because Montaigne wants it to be. These were commonplace subjects typically treated by the schoolboy with reference to classical texts.

creates the sense of a lack of immediacy, and this is furthered by a frustrating lack of attention to detail on the part of the narrator. Nearing the end of the essay, Montaigne fails to recount fully his meeting of and discussion with the “trois”(141) “[c]annibales”(124), almost entirely dismissing what might have been a pivotal point for discussion with the admission that “ils répondirent trois choses, d’où j’ai perdu la troisième”(141). This apparent dis-interest in the supposed subject matter of ‘Des Cannibales’ causes us to question whether any of Montaigne’s essay may really be described as truth-telling, for any links to the truth are, at best, tenuous and vague, and at their worst, apparently completely unfounded. Even the use of classical authorities, which would have been at least highly-regarded by contemporaries, fails to create any sense of real, empirical knowledge of the New World itself, for Montaigne himself concedes that neither the account of “Platon”(125) concerning “Atlantide”(125), nor that of the man who, for convenience’s sake, is assumed to be “Aristote”(127), are applicable to the situation that is now in hand. ✓ Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that Montaigne’s essay is one that holds its main foundation in story-telling, rather than truth-telling; however the impact which this has on the validity of his argument as a whole is debatable.

Certainly, anthropological factual accuracy appears to play a relatively small role in communicating the deeper meaning of the work. As previously noted, Rendall suggests that the authorial aim here was not an accurate account of the societies and cultures discovered in the New World, rather to introduce the reader to “a profound and exciting experience of intellectual liberation”(63). ✓ This is best exemplified through the rationalisation of cannibalism, for rather than falling into the trap of excessive storytelling, Montaigne chooses to focus not on the act itself, but on the motives behind it. ✓ He is eager to point out that the ‘[c]annibales’(124) do not eat their prisoners “pour s’en nourrir”(134), rather this is a means of “extrême vengeance”(134), and furthermore goes to great lengths to put the fact that the prisoners of the ‘[c]annibales’(124) are “bien traité[s]” in parallel with Portuguese methods of torture, stating that “il y a plus de barbarie à manger un homme vivant qu’à le manger mort”(135). ✓ It is also noted, with regards to the Portuguese, that the ‘[c]annibales’ “commencèrent de quitter leur façon ancienne pour suivre celle-ci”(135), and here it seems

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Comment [3]: What about the details of daily life and of the eating ritual? Perhaps more detail here? Is there a difference between ethnographic detail and the rather partial quality of the conversation M later recounts?

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Comment [4]: Uninterest?

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Comment [5]: Though perhaps M’s reference to his faulty memory could be construed as very honest?

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Comment [6]: And one which perhaps emphasizes the rather slippery nature of language?

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reasonable to suggest that Montaigne uses this comparison to challenge the moral preconceptions of his readership. ✓✓ Evidently, through the introduction of the Portuguese, the focus here is not the cannibalistic nature of tribes in the New World, but rather the intellectual and moral constructions of the old, which Montaigne appears to hold almost exclusively accountable for the European reaction to these New World societies.

This is particularly evident through Montaigne's eloquent use of irony in describing "la parfaite religion, la parfaite police"(129) of his own country, as here contemporary readers could not help but recall the carnage of the French Wars of Religion, and particularly the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, in which a large number of French Huguenots were murdered at the hands of Catholic malcontents, led by Catherine de Medici. Montaigne's indirect allusion to these events appears to question the presupposed infallibility of European, particularly French, society, in which ideas concerning the nature of "la parfaite religion"(129) were not only subjective, but were in fact the source of a conflict verging on "barbarie"(135), one in which "la [parfaite] police"(129) might be said to have played a central role, the conflict having originated, at least partially, in government, and the high politics of the aristocratic factions. ✓ Thus, as this use of rhetoric and of ironic 'story-telling' questions the 'perfection' of French society, so a reader may also begin to question the definition and attainability of perfection itself. It seems illogical to find another culture wanting through methods of judgement which are, in themselves, flawed. It is in this way that Montaigne moves his readership into uncomfortably close parallel with the "[c]annibales"(124), forcing them out of their intellectual comfort zone and causing them to question not the world itself, but rather the very social structures through which it is perceived. Thus, Montaigne uses 'story-telling', both explicitly and through allusion, to introduce deeper truths concerning the nature of perception and reality itself. Good

However, it must be noted that Montaigne avoids any sense of didacticism throughout 'Des Cannibales', making it difficult to describe his approach as one of 'truth-telling', an idea which is

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Comment [7]: Take care: the 'là' in each instance here is not the definite article, but the preposition

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Comment [8]: Interesting line of argument

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Comment [9]: A kind of cultural relativism

perhaps best shown by the paradoxical nature of the essay itself. Edwin M. Duval notes the “strange contortions and inconsistencies”(99) of Montaigne’s “paradoxical” work(Duval, 96), stating that “Montaigne’s perspective in the Cannibals shifts markedly over the course of the chapter”(98), and this alone may be seen to suggest that any ‘truth’ Montaigne might wish to impart may not be found within the writing of the essay, and certainly not in its conclusion.✓ The thought process contained within the essay is complex, consistently redefining and undermining previously agreed meanings of the words “sauvage” and “barbare”, first defining these to mean something that is natural and unfamiliar respectively, then claiming that the cannibals ought to be admired for their use of artifice in “the very nonbarbaric “invention” of the prisoner’s defiant war song”(Duval , 98). Thus, Montaigne’s ideas contradict each other; we may either praise the “[c]annibales” for remaining completely natural and uncorrupted by European artifice, or for mastering this same artifice and thereby becoming far more similar to ourselves.✓✓ However, we cannot conceivably do both, as Montaigne apparently expects us to. Thus, the focus of the essay is completely unrelated to not only its supposed subject matter, but also its implicit subject matter: a reading of the essay will result in no enlightenment as to the subject of cannibals, nor will it give any particular conclusive insights into a proscribed mode of thinking for European civilisation to adopt. It is, in fact, an essay whose meaning may have been put across without the use of any of the ‘stories’ Montaigne has adopted here, whose argument would have been just as valid had it concerned almost any subject at all. The focus of the essay is not on facts, rather it is the ability of the reader to be flexible with their thought processes, to alter even the most thoroughly engrained perspectives and view the world around them with an open mind. Nicely put. Thus it appears that the “profound and exciting experience of intellectual liberation”(63) described by Rendall is not integral and necessary to the structure of the essay, but does in fact form the ‘ultimate truth’ that Montaigne wishes to express, a truth which is experienced, rather than told. Thus, ‘Des Cannibales’, whilst it can be viewed as an exercise in storytelling which leads to the discovery of profound truth, may not be considered an act of truth-telling itself, such is the subtlety of the methods adopted by its author.✓

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Comment [10]: You could support this idea with reference to Duval.

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Comment [11]: I'm not quite sure what you mean here. 'Prescribed' in place of 'proscribed' perhaps?

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Comment [12]: Is not connoted by the structure of the essay?

Thus, it must be concluded that, since the essay contains no truth-telling as such, to examine the interplay between storytelling and truth-telling might be perceived as an act of futility. The term 'truth-telling' suggests a sense of didacticism, whereas Montaigne's methods do not seek to 'teach' his readership, rather to aid them in their own course of personal discovery. This status of the essay as a "dialectical experience" (Rendall, 56) provides an explanation for the lack of attention to detail concerning first-hand experience. The factual accuracy of the essay is unimportant, and its effect on the reader is paramount, an idea which rather coincides with the more modern theoretical standpoint of New Criticism, in which literature is no longer seen as a reflection of reality, more a refraction, a refined translation of the world in which it has been created. Montaigne's truth is uncertainty itself; it is not 'told', rather it is created within the reader. ✓✓ His stories of 'Des Cannibales' are merely a catalyst for the discovery of 'truth' through the intellectual liberation of not only Montaigne's readership, but also the essayist himself.

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Comment [13]: Very good, and nicely put

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Comment [14]: No need to give date of consultation of a published article reproduced on the web (treat this as you would a printed source for referencing purposes)