Shakespeare Versus Montaigne

by David P. Gontar (August 2014)

The Philosopher Pyrrho in Stormy Seas by Petrarcameister (Hans Weiditz)

"There is something unknown in knowing." — Richard Eberhart

I. Introduction

Recent Shakespeare criticism has suggested a positive influence on the English dramatist by the 16th century French essayist. Though the point has been reiterated until well nigh taken for granted, its accuracy and scope may be questioned. For it is hard to imagine two more different authorial voices. Shakespeare created a vast dramatic realm, including larger-than-life heroes embroiled in *sturm und drang*. We thrive in the passions of these promethean characters. High tension and radical transformation are his meat. Whether one considers the bathetic escapades of the comedies, the unrelenting confrontations of his histories or the explosive self-revelations of the tragedies, all set forth in the most compelling language ever to emerge from the human soul, Shakespeare is the master of life's affective dimension, the Michelangelo of the mind. His characters' emotional contortions enlarge and illuminate our own follies and triumphs. We participate in their lives vicariously, learning their lessons without undergoing their trials. Their catharsis is ours too.

Montaigne, on the other hand, is not a thespian but a thinker. His sere sensibility, forged over a lifetime of study and contemplation, is cool, unruffled and deliberate. His anecdotes are emblematic rather than engrossing. His personal heroes are not wounded giants but rather reserved and resourceful geniuses, sages who sift the sands of human experience to bring forth kernels of wit and wisdom. Epicurus, Lucretius and Pyrrho, philosophers whose teachings aim at the overcoming of passion and tempestuous struggles in favor of meditation, insight and inner peace, are his models. While it may be that Shakespeare perused these *Essays*, allowing us to recognize in his oeuvre what seem to be borrowed phrases or themes, such instances are not what most of us mean by "influence." For over the course of living, everything leaves its mark in one way or another. As Tennyson's Ulysses famously says, "I am a part of all that I have met." But most of the traces within us are mere shades which color but do not constitute what we are. Had Montaigne exercised a detectable influence on Shakespeare, we'd have a different corpus today. In addition to such tormented figures as Lear, Coriolanus, Troilus and King Richard II, we would find other, more restrained and refined protagonists, seeking to

hold themselves aloof, above the fray, beyond the rough and tumble of the quotidian round. Of course, Shakespeare knew philosophy and made use of it. But his characters simply do not manifest the serene and steady aim of a Montaigne. Cicero has a cameo appearance in *Julius Caesar*, but Brutus, trained as a Stoic, fails conspicuously to make use of the doctrines in which he was schooled. Cassius tells him so. (IV, ii, 197-198) Apemantus's bickering with Timon in Act Four of *Timon of Athens* is a harsh and discordant departure from the wry ripostes he delivers earlier. The fact is that Shakespeare's restless spirit dwells not at the "still center of the turning world," but at the margins, the extremities of life, whose roaring tides we must navigate or perish. Shakespearean humanity becomes what it is, and reveals itself as such, through opposition and stress. Over and over, he teaches that we must strive, use our talents, make ourselves reflected in the world and leave a legacy, or we are nothing. (See, *e.g.*, *Troilus and Cressida*, III, iii, 90-114) Martius strides into the city of the Corioles alone. (*Coriolanus*, I, v., 16) Banished from Rome, he embraces his enemies and wars upon his erstwhile countrymen. Yet it is his indomitable ego which more undoes him than the tribunes, the commons and Aufidius. For Shakespeare the dramatist, dull peace is rarely an option; it is barren, idle, of no more significance than "the lascivious pleasing of a lute." (*King Richard III*, I, i, 13) On the other hand, unchecked war is a curse. The Stoic philosophers who clustered on their high porches to poke fun at the foibles of mankind would not be in his terms fully present. They are mere observers, not participants. Though arguably proof against despair and anxiety, they could not achieve the pinnacle of human glory or purchase the profound and searching self-knowledge they sought. With the possible exception of Marcus Aurelius, they were unwilling to pay the price of action. Remember that Christianity triumphed over Stoicism precisely because of the *passion* of Christ. The god of Stoicism has no preferences, no cares. If Montaigne were advising Tennyson's Ulysses, then, his counsel would be to build a stony tower in Ithaka and stay put. Why tempt fate again, putting oneself in harm's way? In brief, then, those who would contend that Shakespeare's art betrays the imprint of Montaigne, though they advance an intriguing hypothesis, bear a heavy burden of persuasion. In the following pages we will inspect their argument and find it wanting.

II. Skepticism

As the principal link between Montaigne and Shakespeare is alleged to be the philosophy of skepticism, and as that descended from the ancient Greeks, we should first seek to grasp what it portended for those in whom it had its inception and roots, the philosophers of Athens and their progeny. The Socratic turn brought philosophy down "from heaven to earth," making the axiological concerns of human life rather than physical and cosmological speculations the center of investigation. Not "What is Nature?" but "What are We?" becomes the issue for

Socrates and his students. Out of his dialectical colloquies emerge the great academic philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, which concentrate increasingly on the acquisition and elaboration of knowledge understood as a comprehensive system resting on metaphysical principles. Of at least equal importance, however, is another strain of thought which would eventually send philosophy in a different direction, one consonant with the primary Socratic concern with human affairs. As the hegemonic control of Athens, Sparta and their associated city states began to unravel, many sought to employ philosophy to cope with gathering uncertainties. The nature of happiness (*eudaemonia*) was an urgent personal agenda before it became a conceptual puzzle. In this connection, a number of thinkers and schools arose offering, in the face of historical setbacks and disasters, philosophies of consolation, including hedonism, Epicureanism, cynicism, stoicism and skepticism. Those outlooks were variations on the theme of civilized life, a cognitively based enterprise which conceived of its proper end as a wisdom which might afford its possessors not merely theoretical insight but, more importantly, those accessible fulfillments and gratifications suitable for giddy creatures such as ourselves. One of these, stoicism, rose to become the dominant standpoint of the ancient world, its name synonymous with philosophy itself.

In the case of skepticism, however, on account of the contemporary application of the term, it is difficult for moderns and "post-moderns" (whatever they may be) to comprehend what it meant to our ancestors. Modern "skepticism" arose in the context of the physical and cosmological ideas and revelations of Copernicus and Galileo, who urged among other things the superiority of the heliocentric hypothesis. After 1609-1610, when the telescope began to be used to survey the heavens, it became apparent that geocentricity could no longer be maintained. This astounding discovery, celebrated as a breakthrough which finally set forth the nature of the cosmos for "homo sapiens," carried darker and more ominous implications. Soon Blaise Pascal was complaining that "the eternal silence of the infinite spaces terrifies me." Implicit was the stark fact that our race had been utterly deluded about the nature of things from the beginning of recorded time. To put it bluntly, we were wrong, very wrong. To wake up after a gross delusion of 10-20,000 years and embrace a new and incongruous vision of the world may have been momentarily exhilarating, but on reflection must also have been a humbling and even unsettling turn of events. What were regarded as fundamental and self-evident truths had to be jettisoned. And it is likely that the full consequences of this sea-change have yet to be assessed. To make matters worse, modern learning could set in place of the traditional *weltanschauung* no definite image, no fixed concept or idea, but rather an interminable succession of hypotheses and theories. Indeed, the very word "modern" implies a mere "*mode*" or form of comprehension, to be replaced sooner or later by another. The citadel of truth had been razed by error, and in its place still loomed a yawning abyss.

The philosophical response to this predicament was swift and dramatic. In 1641, René Descartes, a close student of Galileo's physics and astronomy, published in Latin his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which lamented the state of human ignorance and sought to employ *doubt*, not self-evident principles, as the ground of any future knowing. A first-hand witness to the overthrow of ancient cosmology and its bi-polar physics, Descartes wrote that our condition was like that of someone thrown into deep water, who had no way of telling what was up and what was down. A sense of intellectual vertigo became prevalent. All so-called "knowledge" was suspect. Hence, although he is remembered primarily as a "rationalist," Descartes was in method and heuristic attitude a skeptic who so impugned the adequacy of extant knowledge that none of it survived as such. This was nothing short of a spiritual putsch. And though he attempted to restore the *status quo ante* on the basis of unimpeachable rational deductions, what emerged from his pen was quickly seized on by other skeptics who demolished Cartesian rationalism's house of cards. Modern skepticism exudes, then, an atmosphere of incalculable devastation. Its mood is *au fond* one of defeat and resignation, the waiving and surrendering of any claim to durable and reliable knowledge. This is the central theme in modern philosophy, exhibited by such devices as British empiricism on the one hand and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction on the other. It is the intellectual catastrophe of modern skepticism, then, which leads institutions and journalists to batten a perplexed people on electronic gizmos and vapid images of "exploration" and "conquest" of a "universe" hazily understood at best. "Progress" is the chief dogma of modernity, our sacred cow, a way of keeping doubt at bay. Yet sooner or later the dark must dawn.

When students of literature look back at classical skepticism without sufficient care, they may tend to suppose that the limitations and frustrations of our generation were also felt by the ancients. But as suggested above, this view is largely a coarse anachronism. For the original skepticism was not a crisis but a program of edification designed, like its allies, hedonism, cynicism, Epicureanism and stoicism, as a roadmap to contentment. Its ethos was not despair but genial delight. And as we are about to see, much the same misunderstanding occurs when literary critics and philosophers seek to argue that a supposedly subversive skepticism of Michel de Montaigne exercised an unnerving influence on the art of William Shakespeare. That claim can only be held in ignorance of Montaigne's skeptical stance and the nature of his philosophical enterprise in general. We will find at all times that Shakespeare and Montaigne stand at the metaphysical antipodes.

III. Pyrrhonian Skepticism

Classical skepticism is a philosophy of consolation. It was formulated not as a 'theory of knowledge' in our sense of the term, but as a cognitive recipe for detachment and inner peace.

Contemporary skepticism, on the other hand, is symptomatic of a dilemma. What is termed "epistemology" by writers of the 20th and 21st centuries is a concoction of those who call themselves "professional philosophers," academics whose business it is to tussle with problems of perception and truth which are the detritus of such sciences as physics and physiology. Hence classical and modern skepticism are not merely different, they are wholly inimical to one another in feeling-tone and meaning. Contemporary philosophers would find absurd the idea of any connection between the "theory" of skepticism and personal satisfaction. On the contrary, the whole thrust of modern philosophy is the refutation of skepticism's challenge and its supplanting by a robust, if shallow, common sense. Modern skepticism is a Problem; ancient skepticism was a Solution. Unless this contrast is kept firmly in mind, any discussion of "the influence of Montaigne on Shakespeare" can only confound and mislead.

It was dissatisfaction with Cyrenaic Hedonism's identification of happiness with pleasure which led to the development of Epicureanism, which measured satisfaction not by intensity of sensual gratification but by the absence of pain and woe. In fact, for Lucretius, the foremost exponent of Epicureanism, high voltage pleasure is a derangement of the soul akin to torture. The pacification of consciousness yields a state known as "ataraxia." The Stoics, by a different and more theistic route, denominated the goal as the similar "apatheia." The teachings of the Epicureans and the Stoics were designed to wean people away from crude notions of happiness to something more accurate, practical and productive. And this was the aim also of Pyrrho of Elis, (360 BC – 270 BC) the first known Skeptic, who adapted the concept of "ataraxia" to signify the equilibrium of beliefs and opinions achieved by declining to embrace any of them. Much as Socrates said that the fear of death is a pretended knowledge, so Pyrrho taught that our anxiety in the face of any unknowing is basically delusive and grounded in needless and inappropriate pretensions. To the welter of opinions which compose our discourse the ancient skeptics steadfastly demurred, refusing to choose. If you argued for "A," the skeptic would defend "not A," and vice versa. Seeing the impossibility of any single ideology or argument vanquishing its rivals, the classical skeptic disavowed all positions, withholding assent at every moment. The "cash value" (William James) of this strategy is not the shallow smugness of agnosticism, but a spiritual liberty which attends the recognition that theory always elicits its nemesis. Thus it was that Pyrrho of Elis achieved the same "*ataraxia*" which Epicurus and Lucretius accomplished with their rejection of unrestricted pleasure. Not libertinism but intellectual fraternity affords true happiness. Instead of intellectual contention which divides us from one another, Pyrrhonian skepticism is consistent with an amity in which colleagues shrug off the burdens of contentious knowledge, and return to the modesties of common sense, not because it is established as veridical, but rather because at the end of the day, none of the fractious ideologies is left standing. As G.E.

Moore was to say in defense of our common world: “here is one hand, here is the other.” No rarefied epistemic doubt has the compelling vigor of the simplest article of habitual belief, and when we finally step off the carousel of assertion we find ourselves content. Thus to the catalepsia of the Stoics, a binding principle in which intellectual insight coheres with the data of sense, the Pyrrhonian skeptics opposed their “acatalepsia,” in which more joy is found in noble confusion than in partisan claims which all hound one another.

Pyrrho of Elis appears in a well-known picture by Petrarca-Meister (aka Hans Weiditz), “The Philosopher Pyrrho in Stormy Seas.” In the middle of a foundering ship he is seated calmly, his back to the mast, his head shrouded in a blue wide-brimmed hat. One leg rests calmly athwart a rolling canon. Sailors and passengers are in pandemonium. Pyrrho points to a pig mindlessly grubbing about the rolling deck. We know this tale: he admonishes the frightened crew that a mere pig, a most ignorant brute, has no fear of pelting rain and churning sea. Why should those denominated “homo sapiens” exhibit less self-possession than a lowly beast? Do we know that this storm is a manifest evil for us? No. That would be presumptuous. Suppose we go to watery graves. Might we not thereby be spared far greater horrors? Pyrrho teaches by the example of his own insularity. Of course *das Narrenschiff* is a metaphor for the clash of opinions, including the debate about the fate of the soul after death. The Pyrrhonian view is that there is more to fear in that interminable disputation than in death itself.

It is interesting to note that a philosophy identical to Pyrrho’s arose in ancient China. Its originator and foremost exponent was Chuangtse. Pyrrho and Chuangtse both died c. 270 BC. How these two creative thinkers could have developed identical metaphysical views at the same historical moment in different languages on opposite sides of the planet is an intriguing puzzle. [To sample Chuangtse’s presentation of Pyrrhonian skepticism, See *The Wisdom of Laotse,* by Lin Yutang, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 2009, Book one, pp. 013 ff.]

IV. Montaigne’s Skepticism

It is thus fairly clear that it is not enough to speak casually of Montaigne’s skepticism in general. Just what *sort* of skepticism did this 16th century thinker advance? As he died prior to (1) the use of the telescope in astronomy (1609-1610), (2) the physics and astronomy of Galileo, (3) Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and (4) the appropriation of Cartesian principles by the English-speaking empiricists beginning with John Locke (1632-1704), we can say with confidence that the *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne preceded the epistemological problematic by at least half a century. As a writer of the later Renaissance, his philosophizing emerged out of a broadly based humanistic ethos which can be traced back to

15th century Italian thought which itself derived from the Socratic turn in ancient Greece. As might be expected, then, in an author as well versed as he was in the literature of antiquity, Montaigne's skepticism owed much to the philosophies of consolation mentioned above, most particularly to the original skepticism of Pyrrho of Elis.

We'll first consult the authoritative Introduction to *The Complete Essays* of Montaigne, by editor M.A. Screech.

i. By any standards the publication in 1562 by Henri-Estienne of the first edition of the original Greek text of Sextus' account of Pyrrho's scepticism was a major event. Montaigne probably relied chiefly on his Latin translation – also found in the second edition of 1567, but quotations from the original Greek enlivened his library. (xxxiv)

ii. Opinion is not knowledge. Pyrrhonist sceptics reveled in that fact. Sextus Empiricus systematized that contention into a powerful engine of doubt **which helped a wise man to suspend his judgement and so to attain tranquility of mind**. (xxxiv, emphasis added)

Where is the tranquility of mind in *Cartesian* skepticism? There is none. In fact, in a moment of literary paranoia, Descartes in his *Meditations* conjures up the prospect of a malignant genie who might exercise his powers to instill in the poor philosopher's mind ideas, apprehensions and notions all misleading and delusive. This leads Descartes to consternation and dejection. Certainly the revelation that the human understanding of heaven and earth is, as perceived, scarcely better than a mirage is a thorn in his side until he has set up a proof that our perceptions of the world are reliable and indicative of the nature of things. The skeptical moment for Descartes or any other modern epistemologist is one of concern and dismay.

For Pyrrho and his disciple, Montaigne, on the other hand, doubt itself is the desideratum, for intellectual equilibrium yields equanimity, the solace of incredulity.

Montaigne writes:

> [T]he professed aim of Pyrrhonians is to shake all convictions, to hold nothing as certain, to vouch for nothing. Of the three functions attributed to the soul (cogitation, appetite and assent) the Sceptics admit the first two but keep their assent in a state of ambiguity, inclining neither way, giving not even the slightest approbation to one side or the other. (Montaigne, 560)
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> Now the Pyrrhonians make their faculty of judgment so unbending and upright that it

registers everything but bestows its assent on nothing. This leads to their well-known *ataraxia*: that is a calm, stable rule of life, free from disturbances (caused by the impress of opinions, or of such knowledge of reality as we think we have) which give birth to fear, acquisitiveness, envy, immoderate desires, ambition, pride, superstition, love of novelty, rebellion, disobedience, obstinacy and the greater part of our bodily ills. In this way, they even free themselves from passionate sectarianism, for their disputes are mild affairs and they are never afraid of the other side. (Montaigne, 560)

If it is a child who makes the judgment, he does not know enough about the subject: if it is a learned man, then he has made up his mind already! – Pyrrhonians have given themselves a wonderful strategic advantage by shrugging off the burden of self defence. It does not matter who attacks them as long as somebody does. Anything serves their purpose: if they win, your argument is defective; if you do, theirs is. If they lose, they show the truth of Ignorance; if you lose, you do. If they can prove that nothing is known: fine.

They make it their pride to be far more ready to find everything false than anything true and to show that things are not, rather than that they are. They prefer to proclaim what they do not believe, rather than what they do. Their typical phrases include: 'I have settled nothing'; 'It is no more this than that'; 'Not one rather than the other'; 'i do not understand'; 'Both sides seem likely'; 'It is equally right to speak for and against either side'. To them, nothing seems true which cannot also seems false. They have sworn loyalty to the word *epokhé* [transliterated from Greek]: 'I am in suspense'; I will not budge. (Montaigne, 562-563)

After a deep and extensive analysis and considering all objections, Montaigne accepts Pyrronistic skepticism. The key is the secure foundation it provides for human satisfaction and security.

We would be better off if we dropped our inquiries and let ourselves be moulded by the natural order of the world. A soul safe from prejudice has made a wondrous advance towards peace of mind.

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No system discovered by Man has greater usefulness nor a greater appearance of truth [than Pyrrhonism] which shows us Man naked, empty, aware of his natural weakness, fit to accept outside help from on high: Man, stripped of all human learning, and so all

> the more able to lodge the divine within him, annihilating his intellect to make room for faith; he is no scoffer, he holds no doctrine contrary to established custom; he is humble, obedient, teachable, keen to learn – and as a sworn enemy of heresy he is freed from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by erroneous sects. (Montaigne, 564)

The stamp of Pyrrhonism on Montaigne can be found throughout the *Essays*. In the midst of the strife of systems, he remains free, yet judicious. The carnage of intellectual battle confirms his faith. He is "cool," like the cynics and their modern descendants, the beatniks. "We do not *goRuminating on the Stephen Hawking Phenomenon," by Colin Bower, New English Review, August 26, 2006.)*

Things go from bad to worse, as Prof. McGinn identifies "knowledge and skepticism" as the first of three themes promoted by "Shakespeare's philosophy." (McGinn, 3) As human existence has always been viewed as the vessel of "knowledge," Shakespeare must be understood as at least a maverick and, depending on the degree of one's principles, possibly a modern heretic. For the great thinkers of western civilization according to McGinn defined human nature in terms of its capacity for knowledge. (McGinn, 4) The lone dissenting voice was that of Socrates, who advised caution, the testing of our ambitious ideas, and who counseled "epistemological modesty." (McGinn, 5)

> It was left to the Greek skeptics, notably Sextus Empiricus, to push the Socratic lesson to its conclusion: that knowledge, however desirable, is simply not within our grasp. Plato's entire philosophy therefore founders, since it is just not possible to know anything worthwhile . . . Man does not have the capacity to satisfy his epistemological desires – he is too prone to illusion, error, and uncertainty. We cannot be sure that our senses are not deceiving us, or that our reasoning faculties yield sound inferences, even whether we are dreaming. Man is a small and feeble creature, epistemologically blighted, and not able to comprehend the universe. At its extreme, such skepticism claims that no belief has any greater justification than any other, so that belief itself is an irrational act (this is the school known as Pyrrhonism). The skeptics accepted Aristotle's dictum [that the purpose of human being is to achieve knowledge] but argued that it is man's nature also to be thwarted in his desire for knowledge. (McGinn, 5)

These claims are false. As stated by McGinn, human existence, defined by the desire for a knowledge which is incessantly being "thwarted," would be doomed to frustration and despair. But, quite to the contrary, Pyrrhonistic skepticism, as we have seen, was a practical path leading not to hopelessness but to unshakeable reserve.

In his taxonomy of skepticism, Montaigne put his finger on the confusion.

> Whoever sets out to find something eventually reaches the point where he can say that he has found it, or that it cannot be found, or that he is still looking for it. The whole of Philosophy can be divided into these three categories; her aim is to seek true, certain knowledge.
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> 1. Peripatetics, Epicureans, Stoics and others think they have discovered it. They founded the accepted disciplines and expounded their knowledge as certainties.
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> 2. Clitomachus, Carneades and the Academics despaired of their quest