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Zahi Zalloua, *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism*. Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 2005. xii + 102 pp. Index. \$39.95. ISBN 1-886365-56-3.

Review by Hassan Melehy, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Although it was not long ago that a number of schools of literary criticism would have received a book on ethics with skepticism, it is very much through an engagement with what is best about these schools that Zahi Zalloua succeeds in delineating the ethics advanced in the skepticism of Montaigne.

Traversing several of the dominant currents in Montaigne criticism, Zalloua brings out this ethics by examining how Montaigne “rhetorically *fashions* his ethical *self* in the *Essais*” (p. 1). Zalloua reads Montaigne, quite appropriately, in connection with some of the so-called postmodern theorists of the last forty years. A number of the latter have taken up a conceptual problematic raised continually in the history of the West, one that from the perspective of skepticism questions universalism and absolutism, valorizing the particular, the perspectival, and the local. It is quite true that the reception of some of these theorists has suggested a full-scale rejection of ethics. However, it was through the cautious relativism that led to the rejection of universalism that writers, such as Foucault and the later Derrida, began to formulate ethical positions. One might almost term these emerging positions as ethics of forbearance or ethics of respect for alterity: it is the result of a skeptical epistemology, one that shapes a self that recognizes the limits of its own cognizance of the other. Zalloua advances the case for such an ethics through this reading of Montaigne, perhaps the most thoroughgoing theorist of alterity in the history of the West.

Zalloua situates his argument with regard to what he identifies, by way of Philippe Desan, as the “two interpretive currents” that “divide sixteenth-century [French] studies today” (p. 4). These are the “poeticist” approach, “which begins with the text (giving primacy to Montaigne’s textuality),” and the “contextualist” approach, “which begins with history (giving primacy to Montaigne’s referentiality)” (p. 4). Quite commendably, Zalloua announces his intention to bridge the gap between these two approaches. What he ends up doing is closer to valorizing the poeticist approach—not because his book doesn’t deliver on its stated project, but rather because it does so with great success. His starting point, Desan’s overview of Montaigne scholarship, is from 1991, and much has changed in French Renaissance studies since then. The 1980s were the decade of textuality, which posed a challenge to received notions of historical context and authorship, and continue to do so. Textuality offers a way of reading texts as challenges not only to their own contemporary contexts but to present-day institutions; its aim is to examine literature as something other than a mere artifact of its time, standing in relation only to its time and with a tenuous relationship to the present.

The focus on textuality presented a challenge twenty years ago, and it presents a challenge now, one that is heard considerably less in French Renaissance studies today than in the 1980s and 1990s. It is more and more difficult to make a case for the importance of rhetorical readings of early modern texts, of the ways that they challenge language and institutions in the present. These days even rhetorical studies tend to begin from strictly Renaissance rhetoric, not presenting the early modern text as effective with regard to current institutions, conventions, and language. It is quite understandable to wish to avoid, by engaging in the contextualist approach, a divorce of literary texts from their historical situations that would promote a purely presentist reading. But in examining the linguistic and rhetorical specificity of texts, the poeticist approach allows the student of literature to engage with the

production of historically-based concepts and the formation of institutional and social configurations in the inception of their forcefulness. It is only bad poeticist or theoretical treatments of texts that yield an ahistorical and empty formalism.

Zalloua demonstrates a clear understanding of these issues. He undertakes a reading of Montaigne's elaboration of an ethics that, insofar as at least parts of the Western world still face complexities that one may recognize in the *Essais*, continues to be challenging in the present. He does so by questioning the binary opposition of referentiality and textuality (p. 5) in quite theoretically rigorous fashion. His approach involves "rethink[ing] the *Essais* 'outside' the binary opposition of text and context, to imagine Montaigne's *moi* as emerging in a dynamic space situated precisely at the intersection of textuality and referentiality" (p. 5). And he succeeds: by valorizing this dynamic space, his reading of Montaigne apprehends the historical Montaigne in his time and the historically effective Montaigne who may be read as operating in the context of present convention and institution. To recognize Montaigne as such is already to bear an ethical disposition toward him, as a historical other whose precise relationship to those of us living in the present is in continual emergence; so Zalloua sets the stage for reading the ethics that Montaigne offers us.

He proceeds through three lengthy and detailed chapters: on Socrates as a model of the other in the *Essais*' strategy of apprehending alterity; on Etienne de La Boétie as the other with respect to the intimate space of the self; and on the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas as radical and spatial other. Chapter 1 introduces the subsequent chapters. In his examination of Socrates, Zalloua explores "how Montaigne's essayistic practice helps to sustain the indeterminacy of the other, how his art of prolonging (his additions to the *Essais*), along with the digressions and changes in topics (multiplying the subject matter), not only call into question *inventio* (the choice of arguments, gathering of material, or in the case of "De la phisionomie," of *what* is to be said about Socrates), but also interrupt the classical order of *dispositio* (the arrangement of arguments in a coherent, persuasive manner)" (p. 23). In examining the essayistic writing of the *Essais*, Zalloua in part uncovers familiar territory in Montaigne scholarship, drawing on the most important treatments of the author's compositional practices and their effects. Nonetheless, the study remains highly original in that Zalloua foregrounds the ethical disposition that Montaigne develops. It is noteworthy that Zalloua attributes philosophical seriousness to Montaigne's interest in Socrates--something not all commentators do, choosing instead to follow Hugo Friedrich's 1949 judgment that Montaigne's Socrates is a figure in a literary exercise. *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism* thereby takes its place alongside a number of recent studies that do engage Montaigne as an entirely legitimate philosopher.[1]

In continuing his study with Montaigne's treatment of Etienne de La Boétie, Zalloua shows that the alterity with which Montaigne is concerned in connection with Socrates and the New World is also operative in intimate relationships. Zalloua draws out the ethical implications for such a notion of alterity: when the self notes the distance it experiences with respect to a proximate self, it must also notice its own unfamiliarity with itself. Zalloua notes the sublime quality of Montaigne's enigmatic explanation of his friendship with La Boétie: "Par ce que c'estoit luy; par ce que c'estoit moy" (pp. 88-9). I would have liked to see him pursue this point a little further, because of the importance of sublimity in the ethics of respect for alterity that Lyotard elaborated. But Zalloua makes an excellent argument on a contested issue, that of the relationship of the *Essais* to Augustine's *Confessions*: instead of seeing the former as ironizing the latter in order to present its failure, Zalloua shows that Montaigne examines the ways that the self may be offered to others in light of its alterity to itself and to others as well as its tenuous relationship to language (pp. 91-100). In the third chapter, on Montaigne's treatment of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas in "Des cannibales" (1:31) and "Des coches" (3:9), *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism* takes on a more broadly social and indeed a global scope. Zalloua surveys the vast literature on this topic--indeed, this aspect alone of his work is indispensable to anyone currently writing on these essays--and stakes out a position that is fully justified but unfortunately not commonly encountered. He is not content with seeing the essay as a mere repetition of European commonplaces of

Native Americans and hence an effacing of the latter, nor with excusing Montaigne for undertaking such an exercise by insisting that “Des cannibales” is principally an allegory of the French inhumanity toward the French. Rather, Zalloua demonstrates Montaigne’s strategy of exhausting the clichés of European representational operations in order to reveal the difficulty in apprehending the radical other: such apprehension begins in the acknowledgement of the absence of the other to these operations. In this respect, Zalloua engages Montaignian epistemology far more effectively than most of the writing on these essays, signals the importance of epistemology for the *Essais*, and engages in a genuinely philosophical consideration of Montaigne’s conception of the relationship of epistemology and ethics. He is then able to show exactly what Montaigne brings from his observations on the New World to his comments on the cruelty of the French religious wars.

Each of these chapters could stand alone as an important contribution to a particular area of Montaigne criticism. Taken together, they offer a very cohesive revision of a particular received version of Montaigne who is playful but not consistently philosophical, and an observer of morals rather than a purveyor of a well-developed ethical position. Indeed, in his concluding chapter Zalloua shows that the relationship between Montaigne’s statements on ethics and his personal and public actions is not so disjunctive as previous studies have tried to make it. The Montaigne that emerges over the course of this study is quite refreshing because he is so consistently concerned with alterity and ethics—as has been recognized but not systematically demonstrated in such a thoroughgoing manner as Zalloua’s—and also highly relevant to the present day.

NOTES

[1] Among these studies are Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); David Sedley, *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

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