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MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE AND THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

*This essay argues that the main instrument Montaigne, 16th-century French thinker and writer, used for creating a “new ontology,” as Nicola Panichi calls it (2004, 278), was language and a special style of writing. He, first of all, created – or revived from the Antiquity – a new genre most suitable for a new discourse, and christened it *essai*. Then he applied a method known in humanist schools of the Renaissance as *ultraquem partem* to relativise all previous thought. Finally, he employed a thorough, frank examination of his own behaviour, habits and preferences, adorned with Latin sentences, to promote self-analysis as a path to personal contentment. This article applies the theory of Bakhtin, a 20th-century Russian philosopher and sociolinguist, especially his essay “Discourse in the Novel” (“Слово в романе”), in the analysis of the peculiarity of Montaigne’s composition and its purposefulness in expressing at that time dangerous, but already prevalent worldview. Since battling medieval Christian thought was the paramount assignment of his endeavour, the quotes are mostly taken from Montaigne’s only essay – and by far the longest in the three-volume collection – entirely dedicated to religion, “Apologie de Raimond Sebond.”*

KEY WORDS: Montaigne, language, Bakhtin, discourse, essay.

INTRODUCTION

In his famous *Essais*, Montaigne turns away from the discussion about God and faith so common in his day and age and turns to an exposition of his experience and opinions about everyday matters. He attacks presumption and advocates moderation, praises nobility of the soul and attacks bestiality. There is one essay, however, by far the longest in the collection, which addresses faith and religion: “Apologie de Raimond Sebond.” Throughout the work, the author presents himself as a defender of traditional Catholicism vehemently opposed to the Reformation; yet, the reader has to be struck by a complete absence of Christ in the essay. Montaigne’s God is clearly much closer to the Supreme Being of pagan philosophers than to the Incarnation of the Gospels.

The skepticism and the professed inability to know God in Montaigne’s essay “Apologie de Raimond Sebond” found a full expression in its form – the essay. With its emphasis on the author’s intention and the cultural context, Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on genres provides a fitting basis for examining Montaigne’s essay. Having placed Montaigne’s

“Apology” in the context of sixteenth-century affinity toward ancient philosophy and literature and the open rebellion against Catholicism, this essay employs the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism expressed through the dialectics of the author’s objective and the polyphony of the intellectual environment to examine the role of Montaigne’s style of writing in the expression of his worldview. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin defines the novel as a work of art using opposing worldviews expressed through language to convey one’s own opinions. By contrasting the essay with the features of the novel and the poem, the language and style of Montaigne’s essay could be defined as rhetorical aestheticism designed to articulate the primacy of the form and destined to announce the new intellectual relativism. So, this work analyses the role of language in Montaigne’s contribution to the general secularisation and individualisation of the society. It first looks at his choice of the genre. Then it uses Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia and dialogism to determine Montaigne’s relationship to his immediate intellectual surroundings. It also considers the function of his style. Finally, it examines the meaning of some of the words he uses in a wider, socio-cultural context.

ESSAY AS A GENRE

The first task is to qualify the essay, in particular Montaigne’s essay, as a genre. Bakhtin looks at genres as icons that fix the worldview of the ages from which they spring. For him, genre is a crystallization of the concepts particular to a given time; it embodies historically-specific worldviews. Bakhtin assigns the term “novel” to whatever form of expression within a given literary system, reveals the limits of that system as inadequate, imposed or arbitrary. According to that definition, the novel includes other genres as well. For Bakhtin, the novel is the main centrifugal force that battles the monoglossia of totalitarianism and strengthens heteroglossia. It stands for freedom of languages to express themselves, the freedom of the existence of multiple truths. Unlike the poetic genres, which unleash “forces that serve to unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (Bakhtin 1982, 270), it begins by presuming a verbal and semantic decentering of the ideological world, a certain linguistic homelessness of literary consciousness, which no longer possesses a sacrosanct and unitary linguistic medium for containing ideological thought” (278).

Certain genres, according to Bakhtin, “knit together with specific points of view, specific approaches, forms of thinking, nuances and accents characteristic of the given genre” (Bakhtin 1982, 289). Through the skepticism manifested by presenting opposing opinions, juxtaposing contrasting statements and judgments, and obscuring the point taken earlier with an unclear, often proverb-like, sometimes poetic and usually paradoxical concluding sentence in almost every longer paragraph: “Il nous faut abêtir pour nous assagir, et nous éblouir pour nous guider.” (“We must become like the animals in order to become wise, and be blinded in order to be guided.”) (Montaigne 2003, 208); “Les fièvres ont leur chaud et leur froid; des effets d’une passion ardente nous retombons aux effets d’une passion frileuse.” (“Fever has its heat and its cold; from the effects of a burning passion we fall back into the effects of a shivering passion”) (307). Montaigne’s essay serves as the ideal form for the relativistic nature of his thought. His style is a consequence of his skepticism

and his dialogue with the huge heteroglossia of Ancient and contemporary thought, and a manifestation of his general tolerance and open-mindedness.

One also has to determine, as Rigolot says, how the literary form has modified the author's thinking, or to what extent has the medium become the message (Rigolot 1991, 107). The essay, given its open-ended form, accommodates the complexities of thought. Its secondary issues such as observations, questions and objections graft itself into the main discourse (113). By describing himself in every given moment, which is always different, Montaigne attempts to perpetuate a permanent presence. Montaigne portrays himself through the *Essais*. He is, according to his biographers and his own testimony, so engrossed in his book that he becomes his work. He *is* the *Essais*. Since he never embraces a particular school of thought, a belief system or a set of convictions entirely and unconditionally, but rather flirts and toys with them, he negates the importance of content, and renders the form of his writing more significant. Thus he *becomes* the form. And the form he invents, or revives from the past, is perfect for his intentions: it gives limitless potential to the expression of his artistic creativity. Montaigne's intention—taken in the Bakhtinian sense—therefore, is not located in his thoughts and opinions, but entirely in his language. With this accomplished, he starts a centuries-long work towards the weakening of ideological strains and establishing the self-sufficiency of purely aesthetic pursuits.

Why the essay? Poetry is an expression of the artist's subjectivity, according to Bakhtin; the novel, in depicting the world around us, portrays its multi-faceted nature; otherwise, the intention comes across as too naïve and tendentious. Essay, on the other hand, especially an essay that discusses morals, is by definition a bold exposition of one's judgment. The assertive form it commonly uses—especially if it deftly surveys Ancient philosophy, revealing the author's supreme erudition—comes across as a pinnacle of human thought, a summation of the ancient wisdom. The essay "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" offers an *evaluation* of faith, and it has to come across, therefore, as authoritative. As it acquires maturity through accumulated readership and praise, it is destined, gradually, to become *the verdict* on one of the crucial periods in French and European history, and its religious state of affairs.

How does Montaigne accomplish this? Social diversity of speech in a poem would make both the normal development and the activity of symbols within it impossible, Bakhtin argues (1982, 298). Montaigne allows the diversity of opinion to stream in so he can yield the truth to Christianity, but recognition of various pagan and atheist judgments renders any worldview relative, and the belief in Christian revelation thus becomes merely another opinion. Montaigne exhibits opposing opinions for the sake of argument and denial of "the one and only" truth, but he is then seduced by them and even accepts them, thus demonstrating his openness to philosophical ideas. "Language is heteroglot from top to bottom," Bakhtin writes. "It represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different epochs of the past, socio-ideological groups in the present," tendencies, schools, circles and so on, and their intersection forms new languages (Bakhtin 1982, 291). In Montaigne's epoch, the time proved ripe to form a new worldview through a new genre. The crisis of Catholicism, the weakening of the

church, new discoveries, revival of the Classic art forms and themes, and an increased need for tolerance and liberty brought about Montaigne's summation of the new tendencies. They did exist before, but he skilfully defined them. It took decades for those tendencies to become universally evident and fully exposed, but his followers venerated the great essayist as a model and an invaluable stimulus.

DIALOGISM

Bakhtin's view of language belongs to the tradition of diachronic linguistics, more specifically to the tendency of looking at language in its socio-historical context. This trend took its modern shape in the concept of *Weltanschauung*, first posited by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who argued that "... language in actuality only exists in spoken discourse, its grammar and dictionary are hardly even comparable to its dead skeleton" (1988, 147). This general linguistic orientation culminated in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that the structure of a language determines people's perception of the world. According to Bakhtin diachronic approach, there is no such thing as "the text itself" only texts that are more or less implicated in their environment. A self, or a text, can never achieve complete autonomy, but the less determined each is by its local environment, the freer it is to live and have meaning in their contexts. In reaction to the heteroglossia of their spatio-temporal location, both Montaigne and Bakhtin orchestrate others' words in their own discourse. Montaigne's quotes blend into his narrative, and Bakhtin adopts his discourse to his ideological environment. Bakhtin even develops a theory about the dependency of cultures on the way they use others' speech, for him a known indicator of the level of heteroglossia. "Reported speech" [чужая речь] is intensely reflexive and it is most self-conscious. Sometimes in quoting his favourite poets and philosophers of antiquity (mainly Lucretius and Cicero), it seems that Montaigne, taken up by the beauty of the quote, interjects a verse or a sentence based on word association. Usually, however—due to the poetic style of some of Montaigne's sentences—the quote fits so well into the general idea of a paragraph that it would not be noticed if its French translation had been given instead of the original Latin. The ancients entirely support Montaigne's worldview, and his *langage* thus distances itself from its immediate surroundings immersing itself in the ancient past.

Bakhtin looks at language as an expression of individual and social worldviews. "Language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world," he asserts (1982, 293). The key word here is "utterance" or the dependence of a given enunciation on the particularity of its context. It is an expression of the embodiment of an idea in the living world. Montaigne assigns a crucial significance to the articulacy and particularity of thought expression as well, but, in contrast to Bakhtin, the errors in language he cites contribute to the ideas of randomness and chance he advocates. "La plupart des occasions des troubles du monde sont grammairiennes" ("Most of the occasions for the troubles of the world are grammatical"), he writes. "Nos procès ne naissent que du débat de l'interprétation des lois; et la plupart des guerres, de cette impuissance de n'avoir su clairement exprimer les conventions et traits d'accord des princes" ("Our lawsuits spring only from debate over the interpretations of the laws,

and most of our wars from the inability to express clearly the conventions and treatises of agreement of princes”) (Montaigne 2003, 252). This view demonstrates dependency on the interpretation of the formal elements of our speech, in which the dialogism of personal contact and of the entire communicational context is excluded. It also reinforces distrust in God and the fellow human.

“However varied the social forces doing the work of stratification [...] the work itself everywhere comes down to the [...] protracted and socially meaningful (collective) saturation of language with specific intentions and accents,” Bakhtin writes (1982, 293). By using entirely secular language, Montaigne contributes to the breaking down of the “medieval synthesis,” the monolithic integrity of European society (Robertson 1996, 1), accomplished through a unified language. Even when he uses Christian terms, like “repentance” and “sin,” the context in which he places them and the intention of the thought in which he uses them give them a different meaning. “De l’obéir et céder naît toute autre vertu, comme du cuider tout péché” (“From obeying and yielding spring all other virtues, as from presumption all sin”), Montaigne asserts (202). Nothing can be more in line with Christian teaching. Humility and obedience for Montaigne, however, does not signify the imperative to turn to the loving other, but to abandon every spiritual contemplation and to turn to the self.

STYLE

Albeit all critics credit Montaigne with a special gift of composition, many were perplexed by his style. T. S. Eliot, for example, writes that Montaigne is “a fog, a gas, a fluid, insidious element. He does not reason, he insinuates, charms, and influences; or if he reasons, you must be prepared for his having some other design upon you than to convince you by his argument” (1951, 410). Most would agree that the secret of Montaigne’s influence lies in his language. The essayist is the master of style. He pays a lot of attention to the beauty of the sentence and the structure of his essays. Not allowing the structure of the “Apologie” to fall apart is a remarkable feat, since it is much longer than Montaigne’s other essays and, according to Frame, pasted together from three shorter ones composed in different periods (1965, 233). He makes a lot of digressions, but they are never so long as to wander away from the topic too much. The stories he interjects usually fit into his overall argument; if they are only there because of the essayist’s association, their peculiarity justifies the sudden, but brief, change of direction. Montaigne achieves a special rhythm with repetitions and unusual word order. He also adorns his sentences with a frequent use of synonyms and related words: “L’incivilité, l’ignorance, la simplesse, la rudesse s’accompagnent volontiers de l’innocence; la curiosité, la subtilité, le savoir traînent la malice à leur suite; l’humilité, la crainte, l’obéissance, la débonnaireté [...] demandent une âme vide, docile et présument peu de soi” (“Uncouthness, ignorance, simplicity and crudity are prone to go with innocence; curiosity, subtlety, and learning bring malice in their train; humility, fear, obedience and amenability [...] require a soul that is open, docile, and with little presumption.”) (Montaigne 2003, 215); “Les privilèges fantastiques, imaginaires et faux, que l’homme s’est usurpé, de régenter, d’ordonner, d’établir la vérité, [Pyrrhon] les a,

de bonne foi, renoncés et quittés” (“The fantastic, imaginary, false privileges that man has arrogated to himself, of regimenting, arranging, and fixing truth, [Pyrrho] honestly renounced and gave up”) (225).

The intense humanist school training Montaigne received in rhetoric is evident in his essays. It demonstrates how humanist education stressed style over content, and the power of persuasion over the loyalty to one’s convictions. The beauty of trials for Montaigne, for instance, is not in their conclusion, which is common to every judicial sentence, “tant comme de la disceptation et agitation des diverses et contraires ratiocinations que la matière du droit souffre” (“as from the discussion and stirring up of the diverse and contrary reasonings which the matter of the law allows”) (Montaigne 2003, 230). The fact that he takes up an argument in order to challenge himself highlights the weight he places on form: “Maintes fois (comme il m’advient de faire volontiers) ayant pris pour exercice et pour ébat à maintenir une contraire opinion à la mienne, mon esprit, s’appliquant et tournant de ce côté-là, m’y attache si bien que je ne trouve plus la raison de mon premier avis, et m’en dépars” (“Many times (as I sometimes do deliberately), having undertaken as exercise and sport to maintain an opinion contrary to my own, my mind, applying itself and turning in that direction, attaches me to it so firmly that I can no longer find the reason for my former opinion, and I abandon it”) (304). Montaigne loves reversing conclusions based on common sense. He spends 45 pages proving that animals are smarter than humans, and interjects small inversions of reasoning whenever he gets a chance, as when arguing that men who keep slaves and animals really serve *them*, and not vice versa (167).

USE OF WORDS AS AN EXPRESSION OF CULTURE AND WORLDVIEW

Bakhtin says that no living word relates to its object in a singular way: “between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate” (1982, 276). The semantics of a word becomes especially interesting when another version of the same word, or its translation to another language, acquires a different meaning due to the specificity of its cultural context. Bakhtin cites the difference in the way the young radicals and the older conservatives in Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* pronounce the word principle, the former as *printsip*, and the latter “in the soft French way,” *principe*. Behind this small difference between consonants lie the philosophical and political confrontations in Russia of the 1850s between a generation turning to German scientism and a generation still espousing French deism (Clark 1984, 220). Pointing out a similar distinction between two words in “Towards a Philosophy of the Act,” Bakhtin relates his concept of being-as-event to the difference between truth as правда and truth as истина: “It is an unfortunate misunderstanding (a legacy of rationalism) to think that truth [правда] can only be the truth [истина] that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant in it” (Бахтин 2003, 37). The word истина refers not just to “truth” but rather to something like “the ultimate truth,” “the hidden truth,” and it often occurs with the word искать, “to

seek.” This latter example also accentuates his belief in the ontological constant resistant to a change in meaning.

The fact that Russians use both правда and истина much more often than speakers of English tells a lot about the difference between the two cultures, Anna Wierzbicka asserts (1997, 13). She argues that “the meanings of words from different language don’t match, that they reflect and pass on ways of living and ways of thinking characteristic of a given society, and that they provide priceless clues to the understanding of culture” (Wierzbicka 1997, 4). In the light of this idea, it is interesting to look at the meaning of some of the words Montaigne frequently uses in the “Apologie,” and what they reveal about his cultural environment and his personal worldview. The Russian word душа (“soul”) is associated, for instance, with the innermost essence of a human being, which is revealed in the phraseological clusters such as на душе (“on the soul (conscience)”), в душе (“in the soul, deep inside”), по душе (“according to the soul; to the liking”), излить душу (“to pour one’s soul out”), открыть душу (“to open one’s soul”) etc. Montaigne uses the word âme to denote everything that is not material in man, and sometimes the concept he talks about could even be replaced by the word “personality” (“Certes il est peu d’âmes si réglées, si fortes et bien nées, à qui on se puisse fier de leur proper conduite” (“Indeed there are few souls so orderly, so strong and wellborn, that they can be trusted with their own guidance”) (Montaigne 2003, 294), or “disposition,” as when he talks about the melancholic or choleric state of his soul (304). His use of this word, first of all, reveals the sharp duality between the entities of body and soul in Catholicism, reflected to a certain extent in St. Augustine’s sentence he quotes, “La manière dont l’âme est unie au corps est tout à fait merveilleuse et ne peut être comprise par l’homme” (“The way in which souls cling to bodies is completely wonderful, and cannot be understood by man”) (268). It also announces Descartes’ reliance on one’s own mind: “Si l’âme savait quelque chose, elle se saurait premièrement elle-même” (“If the soul knew anything, it would first of all know itself”) (297). He uses this fact to turn to the investigation of himself.

Also revealing is the substitution of the word “Fortune”—the idea Russians sometimes refer to as fate [судьба]—for God. When Montaigne talks about the reward for prayer, he discloses: “Je demandais à la fortune, autant qu’autre chose, l’ordre Saint-Michel, étant jeune” (“I asked of Fortune when I was young, as much as anything else, the order of Saint Michael”) (Montaigne 2003, 317). The use of this word was the first objection to the *Essais* of the Vatican censor who read it. Montaigne does not use the related word “destin” (“fate”) himself, but he quotes Manilius’s and Lucretius’s copious use of the word. When Montaigne talks about the influence of stars “non seulement sur nos vies et conditions de notre fortune” (“not only over our lives and the conditions of our fortune”) (153), he quotes Manilius: “le destin force les hommes à tout bouleverser” [...] Et moi-même si je parle du destin, c’est que le destin l’a voulu.” (“Fate makes men astray [...] This too is fated, that I write of fate; (154). “Tout est enchainé par les liens de la destinée” (“All things are bound by their own chains of fate”) (164), Lucretius sings. One could argue that if the same concept is denoted by another word, the substitution does not change the essential meaning of the thought, but, given the significance both Bakhtin and Montaigne ascribe to language,

the terminology Montaigne uses is both revealing of his worldview and of the changing intellectual orientation of the period. Just as Christianity relied on the vocabulary of the Gospels, Renaissance thought adopts the secular terminology of antiquity.

CONCLUSIONS

To a certain extent, primacy in communication belongs to the response, Bakhtin argues (1982, 280). The anticipated response thus becomes an active principle; it prepares the ground for active and engaged understanding. The orientation of the author of speech, therefore, is oriented toward a specific conceptual horizon, toward the specific world of the listener: The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. The ideological background during the epoch in which Montaigne created his *Essais* was very volatile, and he keenly felt what kind of common perceptions he was up against. Judging by the success of his essays, the time proved ripe to form a new worldview through a new genre. The crisis of Catholicism, the weakening of the church, new discoveries, complete acceptance of Classic art forms and perspectives, and an increased need for tolerance and liberty are all felt in the essays. Montaigne meanders, tests, and tackles different layers of conception.

Montaigne was trained in rhetorical techniques, he started collecting verses and quotes when he was still in school, and he had registered tectonic upheavals while practicing law during the decade of some of the bloodiest civil war conflicts in the history of Europe. The contingency he argues for comes result of a rejection of divine providence. “Nous sommes chrétiens à meme titre que nous sommes ou Périgourdins ou Allemands” (“We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordians or Germans”) he asserts (Montaigne 2003, 146). Montaigne’s critique of himself is disarming and his refusal to pronounce a definite judgment produces a fidgety target for criticism. Self-denunciation tends to incite sympathy, even admiration. The process of denigrating one’s own work and not confronting head-on problems, speaking up on them, testing them is what François Rigolot calls “marginal poetics” (1991, 112). Montaigne shows that when the mode of reasoning from both sides was applied to diverse examples, it undermined the ability to demonstrate universal modes (Schiffman 1991, 69–70). He rejects an illusion that would have us believe we can attain the truth through the practice of interpretive commentary: “Notre contestation est verbale” (“Our disputes are purely verbal”) (Montaigne 2003, 359). The semiotic crisis of which the civil “troubles” are a symptom affects above all the relation between words (*verba*) and things (*res*). “Signs have become opaque; they can mislead at any moment; deception rules,” Rigolot explains (1991, 116). The arbitrariness of the signifier is translated into the relativity of knowledge and opinions. Montaigne did not cause or start general individualisation of the society – no single person can do that – but with his deft use of language, he was certainly instrumental in this process.

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MICHELIS DE MONTAIGNE'IS IR KALBOS JĖGA

Santrauka

Michelis de Montaigne'is yra vienas iš įtakingiausių prancūzų Renesanso ir apskritai Europos ankstyvojo modernizmo rašytojų. Daugelis žinomų rašytojų ir mąstytojų, pavyzdžiui, Shakespeare'as, Pascalis, Emersonas, Nietzsche ir Gide'as, teigia, kad Montaigne'is juos stipriai paveikė. Atsižvelgiant į religijos svarbą per karą su protestantais, Montaigne'is skyrė vieną savo esė religijos klausimui. Ši esė, pavadinta „Raimondo Sebondo apologija“, išsamiai atskleidžia jo poziciją šia tema.

Remiantis Michailo Bachtino ir jo kritikų sukurtomis heteroglosijos ir dialogizmo koncepcijomis, *šiame straipsnyje* aiškinamasi, koks yra Montaigne'io socialinio ir istorinio konteksto poveikis jo mąstymui ir rašymui. Jis tariamai palaiko katalikybę, bet ši jo pozicija gali būti paaiškinta ir kaip noras likti ištikimam savo šalies tradicijoms ir institucijoms didelių politinių bei karinių perversmų laikotarpiu.

Pagrindinis šio straipsnio tikslas – išnagrinėti Montaigne'io kalbą ir jo pasirinktą žanrą bei įvertinti jo indėlį į bendrą sekularizacijos ir individualizacijos procesą Vakarų visuomenėje. Pir-

miausia darbe žiūrima į esė formą, jo sugrąžintą iš Antikos ir vėliau išpopuliarėjusią. Laisva esė forma prisitaiko prie žanro sudėtingumo. Tada taikomas Bachtino diachroninis požiūris į kalbą, norint nustatyti Montaigne'io santykius su arčiausia intelektualine aplinka ir jo pasaulėžiūra, atkreipiant ypatingą dėmesį į stilių. Galiausiai yra tiriami kai kurie jo platesniame socialiniame ir kultūriniame kontekste vartojami žodžiai. Dėl sugebėjimo sumaniai vartoti kalbą visais lygiais Montaigne'is galėtų būti įrašytas į istoriją kaip vienas iš svarbiausių dvasinės kontempliacijos atsisakymo, posūkio į šiuolaikines veiklas ir orientacijos savęs link postūmių.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: Michelis de Montaigne'is, kalba, Michailas Bachtinas, diskursas, esė.

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MONTAIGNE AND THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

Summary

Michel de Montaigne is one of the most influential writers of the French Renaissance and Early Modernism in Europe in general. Many famous writers and thinkers, including Shakespeare, Pascal, Emerson, Nietzsche and Gide, cite him as a great influence. Considering the importance of religion during the war with Protestants, Montaigne's only essay devoted to religion, "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" can reveal a lot about his stance on the subject. Using the concepts of heteroglossia and dialogism, developed by Bakhtin and his critics, this paper explains the role of Montaigne's socio-historic context in his thinking and writing. He seemingly supports Catholicism, but his adherence to his faith can be explained by his clinging to the tradition and authority of his country during the time of major political and military upheavals. The main purpose of this work is to examine Montaigne's language and his choice of genre, and to appraise its contribution to the general secularisation and individualisation of the Western society. It first looks at the form of the essay, which he reintroduced from the Antiquity and which became increasingly popular in the aftermath. Its open-ended form accommodates the complexity of form. Bakhtin's diachronic view of language is then employed to determine Montaigne's relationship to his immediate intellectual surroundings and his worldview, paying special attention to his style. Finally, the meaning of some of the words he uses in a wider, socio-cultural context is examined. With his skilful use of language on all levels, he comes down in history as one of the most significant contributors to the abandoning of spiritual contemplation and the turn to modern pursuits and the orientation toward the self.

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