CHAPTER FOUR

THEN AND NOW

Foucault's research may be historical, but it is aimed at our time. By pointing out aspects of the present that confine us, it seeks new potentialities by discussing texts from other centuries. "What I am trying to do is provoke an interference between our reality and the knowledge of our past history," Foucault said in an interview.[1] By "disturbing" and fragmenting our linear understanding of history as a continuous progress, he attempted to provide a basis for a transformative and emancipatory knowledge of society. Our present problematic is both what shapes his study of the past and that which arises out of his historical work, yet he consistently refused to prescribe or legislate for the future. His line of inquiry opens itself up to periods that he hardly studied and to issues that he did not investigate at all, thereby underlining the vitality of his legacy.

Indeed, where are we today and why should we ignore the account of past experiences of later life? What can we learn from Renaissance stories of later life? We cannot blindly reapply their practices for taking care of the aging self, but it does not mean that their remarks cannot produce something new. The point is to think about their ways of acting against time (and thus on time) in new contexts and in other situations. Despite advances in technology, medicine, and standards of living, the ways we adjust to increasingly difficult age-related changes have not varied much over the centuries. Strategies differ from person to person depending on circumstances, but unlike the history of sciences, the history of coping with the effects of time on our bodies and minds is not one of straightforward progress.

Far from being obsolete, stories of later life from Petrarch's and Montaigne's times can guide us in negotiating our relationships to ourselves, the world, and others. We see these texts as critical reflections on, and literary transformations of, old age, but they can also bring desirable

---

[1] Michel Foucault, "Truth is the Future," interview with M. Dillon, November 1980, in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews 1961–1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), p. 301. See also *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, Mass:, MIT Press, 1988), p. 10.

© Cynthia Skenazi, 2013
This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-NonDerivative 3.0 Unported (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0) License.

changes in the way we live now. Their pragmatic modes of articulating self-knowledge, in particular, deserve closer scrutiny. The writers consulted did not necessarily have all the answers or the "right" way of addressing the problem of aging gracefully; the past does not have ready-made solutions for the present, but it can provide a basis for revisiting current issues. Continuity and change go hand in hand, in this respect: to some extent, every literary representation of graceful aging is a form of *bricolage* that involves adaptations of previous texts to a personal story in a specific historical context. Renaissance self-portraits in later life are no exception. Reading them invites us, once again, to reweave our collective cultural past into the present.

In what follows I will examine these evolving attitudes in the dynamics of time, and will discuss three types of connections between "then" and "now." First, an ambitious research project from the end of the twentieth century, focusing on the care of the aging self, allows us to think about health issues in a diachronic perspective. Second, we will analyze the heuristic function of Erasmus's colloquium *The Old Men's Chat or the Carriage* and see how this text opens itself up to spiritual, social, and psychological perspectives on the aging process that are still relevant today. Third, Petrarch's and Montaigne's self-portraits in later life provide us with further insights on the aging self's multiple identities. If aging gracefully is a way of life that capitalizes mostly on Epicurean and Stoic attitudes toward time, it is also a mode of discourse; Montaigne's *Essais* are a brilliant illustration of narrative tactics.

The Care of the Aging Self

In 1984 the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation funded a study to develop the conceptual basis of a "new gerontology" focusing on life satisfaction and personal health. In reaction to gerontologists' preoccupation with disability, disease, and chronological age, the project intended to pinpoint "the many factors that conspire to put one octogenarian on cross-country skis and another in a wheelchair."[2] Sixteen scholars from disciplines relevant to aging (including sociology, epidemiology, genetics, and biology) individually researched "the many factors which permit individuals to continue to function effectively, both physically and mentally, in old age" (p. xii). The investigations ranged from studies on the daily life of over 1,000 high-functioning elders to genetic analyses of hundreds of pairs of Swedish twins, laboratory-based research, and examination of brain aging. While acknowledging the difficulty of defining "usual" physiological decline, the researchers focused on the move from "normal" aging to higher levels of functioning, seen as "successful aging." By gathering data on the changes in American society that would enable more men and women to age successfully, the study aimed at presenting new conceptualizations of later life. Hence it was part of a broader attempt to eliminate prejudices toward old people.[3]

---

[2] John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn, *Successful Aging* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), p. xii. Further references are incorporated into the text.

In the final report, published in 1998, John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn underscore the need to discard six stereotypes or "myths" about old age and longevity. First, they unmask the presumption that "to be old is to be sick," and observe that even if rates of chronic illness and disability increase in later life, a substantial number of seniors adapt to their physical limitations and live independently in their own homes. Second, they criticize the widespread assumption that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks," because neurobiology demonstrates that the human brain retains its ability to learn new things into advanced age. Third, they object to the idea that poor lifestyle choices should not be altered because the damage cannot be reversed, and point to data showing that lifestyle changes may delay disabilities well beyond middle age and reduce the need for long-term care. Fourth, they question the belief that the secret to successful aging is to "choose your parents wisely," noting that genetic factors play a smaller role in old age than they do earlier in life. Fifth, they reject the view that older people are unproductive and do not contribute to social welfare. And finally, they challenge the contention that seniors lack sexual interest, attraction, and performance ability. In reaction to the prevailing narrative of old age's physical frailty and decline, Rowe and Kahn observe:

> The notion that we can attain high-quality, vital, disease-free later years is a novel one. Even recently, it would have seemed paradoxical to discuss health promotion and disease prevention in the elderly. (p. 66)

Needless to say, the conceptual framework of the MacArthur Foundation's project has nothing in common with Galen's medical and cosmic views on aging. Its methodology and analyses would have been inconceivable in the Renaissance. How ironic then, that the MacArthur Foundation spent over ten million dollars to rediscover practices familiar to Petrarch's and Montaigne's contemporaries, and even to Galen's. The 1984 project expanded the perception of older people as healthy, self-reliant, productive, and sexually active. Just as in the Galenic health regimens discussed in chapter 1, individuals are expected to take prime responsibility for maintaining their own well-being throughout adult life. Echoing Galen's *De Sanitate tuenda*, the MacArthur report asserts that older people have significant abilities to prevent illnesses, to minimize losses in physical and mental function, and to enhance their engagement in life. Since each individual has an impact on the quality and the length of his or her life, the report provides simple ways to keep a sound mind in a healthy body. Every single recommendation of the MacArthur team confirms observations made by Galen and his followers: exercise regularly, eat nutritiously, maintain close social relationships, and stay involved in meaningful and purposeful activities that enhance mental acuity.[4]

---

[3] These attempts started in the late 1960s. See Thomas R. Cole, *The Journey of Life. A Cultural History of Aging in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 227–39.

Well before the MacArthur project, the writers under consideration in the previous chapters discussed the process of growing old in terms of lifestyle. By lifestyle, I mean a "more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity."[5] Yet while from one century to another the words and the processes to which they refer may be the same, their meanings do not necessarily coincide; whether we are aware of them or not, cultural beliefs and social values shape our understanding of and approach to aging. One obvious shortcoming of the MacArthur project is its failure to take into account the fact that subjective experiences—including the experience of growing old—have their own cultural and social historicity. The report elaborates on the potential for a healthy and satisfactory later life but does not investigate the wider intellectual and social context necessary for realizing success. On the one hand, the confrontation between "then" and "now" points to what might be universal across time and place in adjusting to aging-related issues; it highlights a stock of basic images, ideas, fundamental wishes, fears, and beliefs about the temporal nature of human life. On the other hand, comparing experiences from different time periods reminds us that universal problems only have historical answers rooted in a specific context.

---

[4] See chapter 1, the section on Galen.

[5] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 81.

Yet in spite of–and somehow because of—the differences between “then” and “now,” Renaissance stories of later life such as Erasmus’s colloquium *The Old Men’s Chat or The Carriage* open themselves up to a dialogue across time. At stake are social, spiritual, and psychological perspectives that point to the need for knowing oneself. What matters is not just the meaning of successful aging but how individuals respond to the process of growing old.

Erasmus’s Colloquium *“The Old Men’s Chat”*

First printed in the March 1524 edition of Erasmus’s *Colloquies*, *The Old’s Men Chat or The Carriage* stages a reunion of friends who have not seen each other since their university years in Paris, forty-two years previously.[6] They meet by coincidence while waiting for a cart to take them to Antwerp’s fair, and decide to hire a carriage for the four of them in order to exchange stories of their respective lives. The metaphor of the journey of life is transparent. The “device of bringing elderly men together to examine . . . the variety of human experiences and values is ancient and familiar,” Craig Thompson observes;[7] following this pattern, each of the four old men epitomizes certain virtues and vices related to the temporal nature of human existence.

Throughout the dialogue, the disparities of the protagonists’ respective lifestyles render impossible any global perspective on old people; far from being a homogenous group linked by common physical frailties, behaviors, and reactions, Erasmus’s protagonists represent four distinctively different ways of growing old. Glycion (“agreeable,” “delightful”) is sixty-six years old and seems not to have aged at all. He has all his teeth, no wrinkles, not a single white hair, and a beautiful complexion. His youthful and serene look is the result of healthy daily habits and principles of moderation. He carefully chose a good and loving wife for the sake of offspring, became a widower after eight years of happiness, and remained single to dedicate himself to his four children. His professional life strikes the same note of prudence and common sense. He holds a respectable public office that gives him no trouble, and has a good income and the financial means to assist his friends. He is generous, kind, esteemed by his fellow citizens, and has no enemies. When asked how he managed to stay in such good shape, he answers in true Galenic spirit that he closely monitors his diet, does not overwork himself, and takes good care of his body and mind. He also frequently leaves the city to relax in the green and peaceful atmosphere of his country house. During his leisure time, he enjoys listening to music and reading books.

---

[6] In some sixteenth-century editions, the text is entitled *Senile Colloquium*. Erasmus, *Collected Works. Colloquies*, ed. and trans. Craig Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) vol. 39, pp. 449–67. All further references are taken from this edition.

[7] C. Thompson, preface of *The Old Men’s Chat*, p. 448.

In contrast to Glycion, his friend Polygamus looks extremely old. As indicated by his name (*poly gamos*, "much married"), his numerous unions have taken a toll on his life. His unrestrained sexuality ruined his health and affected his professional career. Given his lavish lifestyle, he had to change "from a student of the seven liberal arts into an artisan with one art" (p. 455) to cover his debts, and is still struggling financially to raise his many children. He judges himself lucidly, but confesses his inability to reform his life. In fact, he is ready to marry again—for the ninth time—if there is any opportunity.

Pampirus's life was even more unstable than that of Polygamus. His father gave him a sum of capital to get a good start in trading, but he lost everything by gambling. When his father disinherited him, the parents of the beautiful and wealthy girl he was courting broke the engagement. As his name suggests ("Jack-of-all-trades"), Pampirus knocked about the world. In despair after losing his bride, he became a monk, traveling extensively and joining one religious order after another. He went to the Holy Land and came back worse than before his pilgrimage. He lived by his wits much of the time; at one point he lived by reading palms; later he enrolled in Julius II's army when the pope waged war against France. In contrast to Polygamus, however, he learned his lesson. He came back home, took over his father's business, and settled down.

The fourth man had a much quieter existence. Eusebius ("dutiful," "pious") studied medicine and theology in Padua for four years and was deliberating over the choice of a career when a church living with an ample income came his way. He accepted it, and now lives in a house next to the church. He has neither striking qualities nor dangerous vices, and although he is a clergyman, he has no deep religious feeling.

The dialogue ends abruptly with an unexpected epilogue: the coachman tells a coworker that these old men are nice because they gave him a good beer three times along the way. “Ah, ah! They’re good to *you*, anyway,” the other coachman replies (p. 461).

In *The Usefulness of the “Colloquies”* (*De Utilitate Colloquiorum*), Erasmus stresses the moral perspective of *The Old Men’s Chat*:

> how many things are shown, as though in a mirror, that should be avoided in life or that render life serene! Better that young people learned these from pleasant chats than from experience. Socrates brought philosophy down from heaven to earth; I have brought it even into games, informal conversations, and drinking parties. For the very amusements of Christians ought to have a philosophical flavor.[8]

The reference to Socrates directly echoes a remark by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*: “But Socrates was the first who brought down philosophy from the heavens and, snatched from the stars, forced it to live on earth among men, and to deal with morals and the affairs of men.” (5,4)[9]

What exactly should “young people” learn from *The Old Men’s Chat*? Obvious possibilities are how people construct their lives and make sense of aging. Throughout the dialogue, there is the expectation that individuals should take responsibility for achieving and maintaining health, emotional well-being, wealth, and a respectable social position. For each protagonist, old age is the final reckoning of how well such responsibilities have been met. The respective accounts of Pampirus and Polygamus constitute an unequivocal warning. Polygamus is the caricature of the Epicurean who destroys himself in hedonistic pleasures. His story is a reminder that youth is not eternal, and that lust is a dangerous and self-destructive sin. Pampirus, on the other hand, wasted his life because he failed to make it meaningful. As indicated by his name, he tried everything, and had no clear goal in mind; he misused his time and energy in pointless travels and sporadic activities without attempting to introduce unity into it. He lacked the power to examine and discriminate the various contents of representations. He was interested in religion but had the wrong conception of faith. In contrast to the Christian soldier in Erasmus’s *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, Pampirus did not dedicate his life to Christ, but was fascinated by the monks’ colorful clothes and by the beauty of rituals, without understanding their true meaning. Likewise, he went to the Holy Land not to be closer to God but because he found the notion of pilgrimage attractive. He is the incarnation of the literal-minded faith in mere formalities and decorum. Following Saint Paul's epistles, Erasmus sees these external constraints as antithetical to genuine piety and Christian liberty. Throughout his life, Pampirus focused on superficial matters rather than on the spiritual function of religious ceremonies. In addition, he served Julius II, whom Erasmus criticizes elsewhere for his secular ambitions and lack of piety.

---

[8] *“The Usefulness of the Colloquies”*, in Erasmus, *Collected Works. Colloquies*, vol. 40, ed. and trans. Craig Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), pp. 1102–3.

[9] Thompson fails to note this reference in his critical edition of Erasmus’s *Colloquies*.

If the lives of Pampirus and Polygamus are cautionary tales, might one of their companions be a role model for the young reader Erasmus had in mind when writing this colloquium? Certainly not Eusebius, whose name ("pious") ironically points to his lack of piety. Eusebius epitomizes the lust for material comfort and benefits, and the lack of devotion evident in many members of the clergy. For Craig Thompson, it is Glycion who embodies Erasmus's conception of a good life, since this character's opinions "are consistently like Erasmus' own." In Thompson's view, Glycion "is a decent, proper Christian who in practical affairs observes the Horatian mean and exemplifies common sense."[10] He has a happy family life and a respectable career; he lives in harmony with himself and with the world; he is keen to express his appreciation for life. As shown by his excellent physical and intellectual condition, Glycion's old age is in fact an extension of his middle age. It is true that Glycion had an "honest" and successful life (although a rather dull one, according to Pampirus, p. 453), yet I question that he represents Erasmus's ideal, as Thompson argues.

In my view, the colloquium does not propose a model for an exemplary and successful life. Rather than presenting guidelines that the reader should mechanically imitate, the text acts as "a mirror," to borrow Erasmus's own words (*De Utilitate Colloquiorum*, p. 1102). As stated in the *Usefulness of the Colloquies, The Old Men's Chat* has a pedagogic goal: it invites the reader to examine his own life in the light of a conversation that he has the illusion of overhearing. Erasmus expected his dialogue to generate a discussion on issues such as how to age gracefully and how to define a successful and happy life; in short, he anticipated his reader's personal reactions to the four old men's stories. By capitalizing on the audience's involvement and judgment, the colloquium invites the reader to weigh his priorities, his values, and the consequences of his actions; it urges him to get rid of bad habits if, like Pampirus and Polygamus, he has taken the wrong path. The dialogue's abrupt end confirms this interpretation since, as the coachman's final comment puts it, the four old men's stories are "good to [*us*]"—as readers—because rather than offering an unequivocal answer to the question of "how to live," they force us to think about our own way of growing old. As always in Erasmus's pedagogical texts, one should live according to one's principles: in his own words, "men are not born, they become" ("homines non nascuntur, sed finguntur") through persistent efforts to improve.[11]

---

[10] Introduction to *The Old Men's Chat*'s English translation, p. 448.

Only the living word—a conversation—can accomplish this goal. Not surprisingly, in the *Usefulness of the "Colloquies,"* Erasmus situates *The Old Men's Chat* in the tradition of Socratic dialogues. Like Socrates's conversations, this colloquium is an exercise that invites the readers (or listeners) to find the solutions they need by themselves. For Socrates, knowing oneself is the prerequisite to finding a valuable answer to any question concerning the self. Similarly, Erasmus's colloquium stresses the path the reader traverses with the four old men, without giving a definitive "recipe" for aging gracefully. Keeping in mind the metaphor of the journey of life that underlies the colloquium as a whole, Erasmus hopes that his readers will be better travelers than the four protagonists. Not surprisingly, Erasmus intended his dialogue to be read by a *young* reader, because people in the prime of life need to anticipate the inevitable effects of time on themselves. The four old men's stories teach their young, inexperienced readers that life choices are invariably aging-issues, since they have long-term implications. The expectation that the reading of this text will trigger a process of self-realization and improvement implies a belief in the freedom of the will. This belief takes its full meaning in Erasmus's pedagogical perspective.

Any reader familiar with Erasmus's Christian philosophy, with its blending of Christian and classical—especially Stoic—references, cannot fail to notice that spiritual concerns are conspicuously absent from the four old men's stories. As a text such as the poem *Carmen Alpestre* makes clear, for Erasmus, following Christ is the true measure of the "success" and satisfaction of a human life.[12] Yet the four old men behave like those busy people whom Seneca (one of Erasmus's favorite authors) ridicules in *De Brevitate vitae* (III, 4–5); despite their age, they forget that they are mortal, and seem indifferent to the afterlife. In fact, they do not think at all about salvation. Eusebius and Pampirus have (or had) connections with the Church, but show no sign of true devotion. For the reader, might God's absence in the protagonists' lives suggest that the true business of growing old is a movement toward the spiritual rather than the pursuit of good health, financial security, and a happy family life, as exemplified by Glycion? For Erasmus, only death reveals the true value of an individual's life. In his view, our effort to live according to religious and ethical principles is the prerequisite for our hope of salvation.

---

[11] *Colloquium religiosum, Collected Works*, vol. 40, p. 421.

[12] See chapter 1, the section on Erasmus.

From the Renaissance to the present day, similar aspirations are expressed in different ways within specific cultures and discursive formations. While twenty-first-century Westerners may not occupy the same situations as the colloquium's protagonists, we can still recognize and understand them. Detached from its historical context and considered in its most profound meanings, *The Old Men's Chat* forces us to reexamine our values and behavior. Social gerontologists note a tendency in our Western culture to deprive old age of ethical and spiritual meaning. In his study on aging in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Thomas R. Cole describes "a historical evolution from communal ideals of transcendence through societal ideals of morality to individual ideals of health."[13] Our consumer society has promoted and capitalized upon an obsession with youth and physical appearances, manifested in the sale of products and techniques ranging from vitamins and anti-aging creams to cosmetic surgery. Health in later years has become a business that requires a complex and heterogeneous set of apparatuses ("dispositifs," in Foucault's term) regulating space, medical, and administrative questions, etc. Today's elder Westerner from the upper or middle classes cannot be accused of neglecting himself, yet Foucault's criticism of the "modern" man is fully relevant here: in many ways, the forms of the elder's attention to himself, combined to the priority of scientific knowledge about aging, preclude a practice of care of the self as a practice of freedom. In reaction to this trend, today's proponents of "conscious aging" direct our attention to practices of self-transcendence drawn from religion and art.[14]

Although written in another social and cultural context, *The Old Men's Chat* invites us to move from the view that growing old is something that "happens" to us toward recognizing it as an experience with which we must engage. The colloquium urges the reader to concern himself less with what he *has* than with what he *is*, to think about how he spends his allotted time, and about the direction his life takes. Echoing classical and Christian values, it reminds us that fame, possessions and power are not sources of lasting fulfillment, and that our attention should focus inward. To continue to activate this experience, we have to remain constantly aware of our current situation, and to keep searching for practices that respond to the dangers and the needs of the present. Practices and discourses related to the care of the aging self arise as concrete responses to concrete problems, hence none of them can be seen as definitive and universal. Therefore, the art of aging gracefully has to be seen in a dynamic perspective.

---

[13] Cole, *The Journey of Life*, p. xxx.

[14] Harry Moody, "Productive Aging and the Ideology of Old Age", in *Productive Aging. Concepts and Challenges*, ed. Nancy Morrow-Howell, James Hinterlong, and Michael Sherraden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 175–95.

Foucault observed that Western "technologies of the self" are more diverse and fluid today than in the distant past, and I would add that an increasing number of people are now in a position to act out those choices. Renaissance stories of later life can help us problematize these choices. Despite differences in context and culture, texts such as *The Old Men's Chat* already represented aging as a heterogeneous experience and questioned the concept of old age as a distinct stage of life, with a fixed set of characteristics. It is this fragmentation of a highly socialized biological process that makes growing old such a key feature of Erasmus's, Petrarch's and Montaigne's time as well as of our present-day Western world. The acceleration of this fragmentation is a major feature of our twenty-first-century society, as reflected in the observation by Christopher Gilleard and Paul Higgins that "what has emerged is a variety of potentially competing cultures of aging."[15]

In addition, Erasmus's colloquium raises issues directly relevant to us that its author and readers could not have anticipated. Despite their age, all four protagonists are professionally active—not surprising since the notion of mandatory retirement was unknown in the sixteenth century. In contrast, today we read endless reports about the economic and social implications of an increasingly older population. This is part of a broader generational equality debate that was unconceivable in Erasmus's time, and stems from a current desire to raise the status of older persons as contributors to the collective welfare. On the one hand, age-related health issues are highlighted in the press because they impose growing demands upon the state. On the other hand, social gerontologists note a broadening of work opportunities for later life.[16] Proponents of "productive aging" try to counter concerns about the burden posed by an aging population, arguing that older people who work for a salary participate in economic growth. Likewise, seniors who are involved in volunteer activities are praised because their work benefits their communities. In many ways, the "productive aging" arguments embody the American values of individual success and social engagement: by giving back to society, older people contribute to their own growth.

---

[15] Christopher Gilleard and Paul Higgs, *Cultures of Ageing. Self, Citizen and the Body* (Edinburgh: Pearson Education, 2000), p. 8.

Debates on old age are taking center stage in today's social sciences, yet the focus on aging is often constructed out of "other" processes (unemployment, health care, retirement, pensions) and not considered as a lived experience of individuals seeking a satisfying later life. Medicine is not the only area where aging bodies are discussed; a concern for them also permeates political and economic thinking.[17] In Erasmus's *Old Men's Chat*, the notion of aging gracefully does not have such wide range of implications, but is a common arena for evaluating personal and social behaviors, religious and moral values. Furthermore, Erasmus's *Old Men's Chat* offers a perspective that transcends modern social policies and medical interventions: belief in the therapeutic value of reviewing one's life. Given its pedagogical orientation, the dialogue seeks to convince its readers that self-examination generates new beginnings at any age. Erasmus's views had Stoic and Christian sources, yet the implications of narrative gerontology continue to be explored today. In their *Practitioner's Guide*, Jeff and Christine Garland assert that a review "gives direction to people's lives as they move towards a valued endpoint, along a well-trodden track marked by success stories—and failures."[18] Beyond a thorough life review, there are other, more fragmentary and less analytical ways of evoking the past, allowing for a more flexible and mutable perspective on the self.[19] Regardless of format, however, the Garlands assert that the "storying" of one's life has a "multifaceted role":

> to aid the narrator in achieving new insight and peace of mind; to bring closure to troubling events from viewing them from a different perspective, to restore as far as possible neglected skills or abilities (p. 4)

---

[16] Ibid., pp. 1–7.

[17] Ibid., p. 7.

[18] Jeff Garland and Christina Garland, *Life Review in Health and Social Care: A Practitioner's Guide* (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001), p. 35.

[19] See Kathleen Woodward, "Telling Stories: Aging, Reminiscence, and the Life Review," *Journal of Aging and Identity* 2, 3 (1997), pp. 149–63.

By inviting the reader to engage in such a process, Erasmus's colloquium urges us not to resign ourselves, whatever happened in the past, and even if our action seems limited to us. The four old men's stories of failure and success encourage us, in Marcus Aurelius's words, to "be happy if one little thing leads to progress, and reflect on the fact that what results from such a little thing is not, in fact, so very little."[20]

A Way of Life and a Mode of Discourse: The Case of Montaigne

Erasmus's colloquium urges its Christian readers to cultivate a hermeneutics of desire privileging dutiful conduct. Its focus on a moderate use of pleasure for the sake of personal virtue also builds on classical ideals that correspond to Foucault's description of the Greek and Roman ethos in *The Use of Pleasure*.[21] The Horatian notion of *aurea mediocritas* is also part of Montaigne's ideal at the end of the *Essais*. In the final pages of the chapter "Of Experience," he observes:

> Moy, qui ay tant adoré, et si universellement, cet *ariston metron* du temps passé et ay pris pour la plus parfaicte la moyenne mesure, pretendray-je une desmesurée et montrueuse vieillesse? . . . Les plus belles vies sont, à mon gré, celles qui se rangent au modelle commun et humain, avec ordre, mais sans miracle et sans extravagance. (*Essais*, III, 13, pp. 1102, 1116)[22]
>
> Shall I, who in all matters have so worshiped that *golden mean* of the past, and have taken the moderate measure as the most perfect, aspire to an immoderate and prodigious old age? . . . The most beautiful lives, to my mind, are those that conform to the common human pattern, with order, but without miracle and without eccentricity. (pp. 1030, 1044)

The classical heritage of Erasmus, Montaigne, and their contemporaries is no longer part of our twenty-first-century culture, yet it has not lost its relevance, especially when we think about aging in terms of attitudes toward time. Indeed, practices exhibit their own continuity through time, and focus our attention to the construction of different forms of subjectivity through different types of relationship with ourselves.

---

[20] Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Antoninus*, ed. and trans. A. S. L. Farquharson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), IX, 29, 5. This work first appeared in print after Erasmus's death. Whether Erasmus read this text or not is a moot point; what matters is its Stoic overtone, which for a Christian reader also strikes a Christian note.

[21] Foucault's emphasis on self-mastery in the use of pleasure for the sake of civic virtue in the Platonic dialogues is, however, not really part of Erasmus's discussion in *The Old Men's Chat*.

[22] See also a similar comment in the same chapter: "Le peuple se trompe: on va bien plus facilement par les bouts, où l'extremité sert de borne d'arrest et de guide, que par la voye du millieu . . ." (III, 13, p. 1110/ "Popular opinion is wrong: it is much easier to go along the sides, where the outer edge serves as a limit and a guide, than by the middle way . . .", p. 1039).

Beginning with Plato, ancient philosophy represented itself as a training for death, understood as the separation of the soul from the body. In *Phaedo*, Socrates speaks of freeing the soul from the passions linked to the senses, to attain to an autonomy of thought. Pierre Hadot observes that from Socrates onward, "Training for death is training to die to one's individuality and passions in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity."[23] Following this classical tradition, Montaigne in the chapter "Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir" (*Essais* I, 20) recalls well-known arguments to maintain his peace of mind. This technique can easily be adapted to other signs of human finitude, including the decline of our physical and cognitive capacities over time. Moreover, if philosophy is learning to die, it is therefore learning to live, and to live means aging, as Montaigne observes in "Of Experience" (III, 13, p. 1089/p. 1017).

For the Stoics and the Epicureans in particular, the fear of death can be overcome by training one's body, reason, imagination, and sensitivity to the prospect of one's end. Hence one has to use all the tools—rhetorical, physical, intellectual, and so on—at one's disposal. Stoic exercises of meditation on future evils (in texts by Epictetus, Cicero, and Seneca, among others), and Plutarch's similar practices to correct some weaknesses (including curiosity or gluttony), nourished Petrarch's self-portraits in the *Secretum*, the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*, and his correspondence. His attempts to find peace of mind through recurrent exercises to discipline his desires, his will, and his inclinations point out the importance of attention to oneself and vigilance. The Christian tradition fully assimilated these notions: one observes oneself, frees oneself from personal attachment to futile objects, and seeks to find happiness and peace of mind in inner independence. Pierre Hadot notes that linked to the meditation upon death, the value of the present instant plays a fundamental role in every classical philosophical school.[24] I would add that this role takes its full meaning by the end of the journey of life, when the imminence of death reinforces the feeling of the scarcity of one's allotted time. Old age, far more than youth, is the time of *carpe diem*. Montaigne, Petrarch, and Erasmus learned from the Stoics (especially Cicero and Seneca) and the Epicureans (including Horace) to grasp the fullness of the present and not be affected by things that are beyond human control, such as old age's physical frailty. "Quand je dance, je dance; quand je dors, je dors," Montaigne claims (III, 13, p. 1107/ "When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep," p. 1036). In Horace's words, "Let the soul which is happy with the present learn to hate to worry about what lies ahead." "He will be master of himself and live joyfully who can say, every day: 'I have lived'," Horace proclaims in his odes (2, 16; 3, 29). Seneca also comments on this Epicurean motif in his *Letters to Lucilius*:

---

[23] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 95.

[24] Ibid., p. 69.

> If God should grant us tomorrow as well, let us accept it joyfully. That person is most happy and in tranquil possession of himself who awaits tomorrow without worries. Whoever says "I have lived," gets up every day to receive unexpected riches. (12, 9)

Only the present depends on us, Seneca adds in another letter: "He has peace of mind who has lived his entire life everyday" (101, 10).

In our modern world that encourages the constant dispersion of our thoughts, both Petrarch's and Montaigne's attitudes toward time act as a healthy reminder not to forget the present moment. Petrarch conceives this ideal in terms of tension and duty; Montaigne, at the end of his *Essais* in the chapter "Of Experience," sees it as an invitation to relaxation. Striving to free his attention from the woes of old age, he observes that the majority of us are tormented by fears, and hollow, senseless desires related to power, glory, wealth, or unbridled passions. The common characteristic of all anxieties and expectations is that they project us forward into an unknowable future. Montaigne confirms the quintessential Epicurean pleasure: the pleasure of living, and being in good health, and thereby experiencing the enjoyment of the present moment: "Pour moy donc, j'ayme la vie et la cultive telle qu'il a pleu à Dieu nous l'octroier" (III, 13, p. 1113/ "As for me, then, I love life and cultivate it just as God has been pleased to grant it to us" p. 1041). Later he adds: "C'est une absolue perfection, et comme divine de scavoyr jouyr loiallement de son estre" (III, 13, p. 1115/ "It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully" p. 1044). Petrarch's focus on vigilance, personal effort, and moral conscience bears the imprint of Stoic philosophers, including Cicero's *De Senectute*, and relies also on Christian sources; its appeal is quite different from the expression of Montaigne's joy of existence at the end of the *Essais*.

Montaigne's and Petrarch's respective self-portraits confirm that if aging gracefully is a way of life, it is also a mode of discourse. For Petrarch, this discourse has religious and ethical overtones, even if death and the afterlife are not its exclusive concern. The formative purpose of the *Rime Sparse* and the *Secretum* goes along with a rhetoric of "spiritual exercises" training the poet's persona with a nagging persistence, and trying to set him "right," in Petrarch's words (*Sen.* XVIII, 1, p. 672).[25] His self-portraits present the kind of relationship the reader ought to have with himself. This relationship, which combines Christian and pagan ethical rules of conduct, requires continual elaboration since it experiences temporal variations along the life course. In a seemingly more casual way, the *Letters of Old Age* also give the reader exemplary models of conduct in the public and private spheres. Montaigne's *Essais*, as we shall see shortly, opened up different perceptions of the self. But regardless of their respective orientations, both Montaigne and Petrarch (and other writers considered in the previous chapters) "used" old age as a pretext to distinguish themselves from others by speaking their minds, by eating, drinking, and sleeping, by attitudes toward social and moral values as well as toward love.

Foucault's perspective on the care of the self provides a framework for seeing the discourse on aging gracefully as a way to constitute oneself through a set of practices (*The Use of Pleasure*, pp. 5–6). In Petrarch's and Montaigne's texts, aging is not presented as a homogeneous process that reduces each individual to the same characteristics, but as a discriminatory process, during the course of which essential personal features are revealed.[26] Whereas Renaissance culture scripted old age into a small number of rigid categories, and offered simplistic, restrictive identities overly determined by the body, Petrarch's and Montaigne's self-portraits in later life point out the contradictions that constitute selfhood. Aging, understood as the human experience of time, allows them to recognize self as other, testifying to the dynamism of identity. In Petrarch's *Secretum, Rime Sparse*, and the *Letters of Old Age*, the aging self is "less an entity and more a kind of awareness in process."[27] As an older subject, Montaigne is even more susceptible to narrative instability than Petrarch, and his portraits are a site of conflicting versions of the self. His comments show his growing capacity to appreciate the multiple levels of his stories, and the multiple selves that tell them, as well as to revel in the play made possible by his detached view of himself. "On devient multitude," the nineteenth-century writer Amiel wrote in his later years. An avid reader of the *Essais*, he added a question that already obsessed Montaigne: "où réside en définitive notre Moi?"[28] In the *Essais*, this multiplying effect epitomizes Montaigne's fascination with the mutability of existence, and his continuous investigation of the self.[29]

---

[25] See chapter 2, the section on Petrarch. See also Zak, *Petrarch's Humanism and the Care of the Self*, especially the introduction.

[26] This process is not simply a matter of free constitution of the self by the self but also points out that social practices "give birth" to new forms of subjects. See Foucault, *Dits et écrits: 1954–1988*, vol. 2, p. 539.

[27] Eakin, *Our Lives Become Stories*, p. x.

Petrarch's self-portraits strike a note of continuity, coherence, and integration. Montaigne, for his part, represents himself from various perspectives; this polymorphous representation is reinforced by his eclectic use of a vast repertoire of sources. Throughout his work, he combines, reworks, distorts, and questions different views on aging, and appropriates various classical practices of the self (the Stoic exercise of vigilance, the Epicurean focus on natural pleasures) to adapt them to his own purposes. His habit of juxtaposing contradictory quotations and combining different sources (Plutarch's moral comments, cynic criticism of the conventional wisdom on old age, Pyrrhonic suspension of judgment, etc.) conveys his skeptical view of bookish knowledge. The multiplication of this citational and referential device is a way to reposition himself in others' eyes; moreover, as Jean-Yves Pouilloux has shown, his *Essais* are a vast orchestration of different voices that are part of the creation of a plural yet cohesive identity.[30]

Elaborating on Foucault's views of the self, one might describe Montaigne's self-representations as fictions that are neither fixed nor stable. Montaigne's self is "not a thing" (an essence or a substantive entity), but rather a process of signification within an open system of discursive possibilities.[31] The essayist recognizes himself in different types of relations with himself: politics (relations of power), erotics (relations of pleasure), and health care (relation of oneself to one's body) are all practical fields within which his aging self appears and which all have their possibilities of dangers and errors, their techniques and tactics for success, and their rewards. His knowledge of himself is worked out as a pragmatic matter, in terms of forms of attention to oneself and techniques of care of the self. Self-knowledge, and the self as an object of knowledge, therefore vary according to the essayist's perspective. However, this dynamic process of self-constitution also depends on historical conditions of possibility for such experience of the self. As Foucault notes:

---

[28] Henri-Frédéric Amiel, *Fragments d'un journal intime* (Paris: Stock, 1931), vol. 2, p. 296. "One becomes a multitude . . . Where, ultimately, does our self dwell?"

[29] See Jean-Yves Pouilloux's insightful study, *Montaigne, une vérité singulière* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), and André Tournon, *Routes par ailleurs. Le nouveau langage des "Essais"* (Paris: Champion, 2006).

[30] Pouilloux, *Montaigne, une vérité singulière*, pp. 12–55.

[31] Pouilloux, *Montaigne, une vérité singulière*, provides similar comments, but from a different theoretical perspective.

> Within the very history of care of the self, *gnothi seauton* does not have the same form and it does not have the same function. Consequently, the knowledge opened up and delivered by *gnothi seauton* is not going to be the same in each case. This means that the forms themselves of the knowledge which are put to work are not the same. This also means that the subject itself, such as it is constituted by the form of reflexivity proper to such and such a type of care, is going to change.[32]

It is this representation of a wide range of experiences (in the Latin sense of experimentation and observation)[33] that is Montaigne's enduring legacy to the Western "culture" of graceful aging. "Vires acquirit eundo": like his book, Montaigne "gathered strength as he went." Experience taught him that growing old in a graceful way is a matter of using simultaneously or successively different "methods"—tension and relaxation, humor and detachment, play, indifference, and so on. As far as practice was concerned, he viewed the various arts of living from the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition as experimental laboratories, and did not hesitate to adopt a Stoic perspective just because he also benefited from an Epicurean point of view. He compared the consequences of various experiences which illuminate one another, and appropriated the parts that suited him best. Using a Stoic model when needed, adapting an Epicurean one according to the specific circumstances of the moment, appropriating yet another ancient model (successively or simultaneously), and more importantly, reactualizing all of them following his own views, was Montaigne's way of achieving a certain balance in later life.

By generating a plurality of observations on himself, Montaigne stressed the value of resilience in surviving the physical, psychological, and social challenges of old age. Today's social gerontologists note that rigid thinkers tend to become overwhelmed by their experience of old age; they cannot manage the medical and social challenges, and become depressed.

---

[32] Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, pp. 442–43. My translation.

[33] On Foucault's definition of "experience," see Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, transl. E. Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 156.

In contrast, in Montaigne's *Essais*, growing old is an "art"—in the Greek sense of *technè*—perpetually in the making, and determined by the particularity of the circumstance and the moment since we are changing from one instant to another. The continuous distance of oneself from oneself is what becomes evident through this way of looking.

Montaigne's self-portraits in later life offer the reader a particularly astute and fruitful "*mode d'emploi*"—a user's guide—for old age: a narrative approach to the effects of time on the essayist's physical and cognitive capacities (whether these effects are real or not is another matter). His ways of coping with the woes of age in the chapter "On some verses of Virgil" and the *prosopopoeia* in "Of Experience" have striking similarities with the *mètis*, a "skill" that Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Détienne see as a fundamental aspect of Greek thought.[34] The *mètis* is a cunning form of intelligence, especially helpful when it comes to facing an overwhelming situation. Faced with a more powerful enemy or an obstacle impossible to overcome, it is useless to attempt a direct attack, or a face-to-face confrontation. The *mètis* operates indirectly, by seizing the right opportunity at the right moment. Since it reaches its goal by adjusting to specific circumstances, it requires a perceptive, flexible, and imaginative mind. Here experience, adaptation, and *savoir-faire* are more useful than reason and logic. Not surprisingly, there is no treatise on *mètis* because it is a "science of the singular": each case represents a unique set of constraints and opportunities. Obviously, the *mètis* is far from being a passive reaction to a difficult situation; it is a mode of production and invention.

Montaigne never mentions the *mètis*, but describes a similar practice in the brief chapter entitled "Of Diversion" ("De la diversion," III, 4). At the opening of this chapter, he explains how he capitalized on diversion's dual meaning—"divertir" and "détourner" (to distract, and to divert)—and on human inconstancy to help a lady to overcome her grief at her son's death. The theme of diversion is carried over into the following chapter, "On some verses of Virgil" (III, 5), where Montaigne experiments with the effects of diversion to chase away the gloom of old age.[35] As he notes in "Of Diversion," this practice has a therapeutic goal:

---

[34] Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Détienne, *Les ruses de l'intelligence. La mètis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).

[35] On the connections between the two chapters, and on the use of diversion in "In some verses of Virgil"; see Cynthia Skenazi, "La diversion de la vieillesse. Les ruses de Montaigne", in *Vieillir à la Renaissance*, ed. C. Winn and C. Yandell (Paris: Champion, 2009), pp. 339–57.

> Quand les medecins ne peuvent purger le catarre, ils le divertissent et le desvoyent à une autre partie moins dangereuse. Je m'apperçoy que c'est aussi la plus ordinaire recepte aux maladies de l'ame. (III, 4, p. 832)
>
> When the doctors cannot purge a catarrh, they divert it and lead it off into some other less dangerous part. I observe that this is also the most ordinary remedy for ailments of the soul. (p. 766)

Whether in medicine or in daily life, diversion is the product of an active imagination that strives to adjust to the inevitable changes of aging rather than to endure them with passive resignation. The aging essayist's meditations on erotic Latin poetry in the chapter "On some verses of Virgil" (III, 5), and the *prosopopoeia* of the "mind" in "Of Experience" (III, 13) are examples of the mind's inventions to chase away the clouds of old age.[36] The relief from such playful devices does not last; there will always be a need for renewed efforts. But it is in this space of play that resistance to the negative effects of time can "occur": there is always a way to effect a change within the age-related constraints imposed upon the essayist. In this perspective, old age is not simply repressive and limiting—it is also enabling. To continue to activate this experience, Montaigne keeps searching for techniques that respond to the difficulties of his present situation; he maintains an experimental attitude, a willingness to test new practices, and to reimagine the meaning and forms of his relation to himself and to others.

In *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, and even more in *La Volonté de savoir* (the first volume of his *Histoire de la Sexualité*), Foucault suggests that in any relation of power, there is necessarily the possibility of diffuse and local resistances.[37] Similarly, Montaigne's discourse on aging is a mediating and complicitous practice. It seeks to solve immediate problems—chasing away senile melancholy for a few hours, forgetting momentarily the woes of old age—through practices that belong to what Michel de Certeau calls the "invention of everyday life."[38] These kinds of oppositional practices, de Certeau notes, are a matter of tactics, as opposed to strategies. Whereas strategy is the privilege of those who are masters of the terrain, tactics are the resource of those who must take advantage of momentary circumstances and chance opportunities to meet their goals. What all these oppositional behaviors have in common is using old age's stereotyped shortcomings (loquacity, lack of focus, idleness, etc.) for one's own purpose; they put old age's weaknesses in the service of the narrator's interest. Montaigne cannot change the effects of time on his body and mind; he can, in contrast, exploit their narrative potential, making losses at one level into gains at another. This move attests to the centrality of rhetorical training in Renaissance authors, but the effects go beyond technical mastery. In fact, authors and readers can be changed by stories of graceful aging.

---

[36] See chapters 1 and 3, the sections on Montaigne.

[37] See especially pp. 126–27 of *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La Volonté de savoir*; pp. 96–97 in the English translation. On this topic, see also Ross Chambers's insightful comments in *Room for Maneuver. Reading* (*the*) *Oppositional* (*in*) *Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. xi–xx.

[38] Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien*, vol. 1, *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

The chapter "Of Vanity" (III, 9) reflects Montaigne's experimentation with an "old age style." Critics have noted the disorganization of this chapter, which places everything—even itself—under the sign of vanity. Referring to the common metaphor of writing as a journey, Montaigne defines himself as a loiterer, pointing out the chapter's random progression "by leaps and gambols" ("à sauts et à gambades" III, 9, p. 994/p. 925).[39] Yet scholars have neglected another analogy that also describes this chapter's (real or apparent) lack of direction: "Here you have . . . some excrements of an aged mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested," the essayist notes at the beginning of "Of Vanity" ("Ce sont icy . . . des excremens d'un vieil esprit, dur tantost, tantost lache et tousjours indigeste," p. 946/p. 876). He had a tendency to deprecate his literary production, yet as we shall see, he literally conceived this chapter as the production of an old mind. "Of Vanity" capitalizes on stereotyped, negative symptoms of aging that are beyond human control. This is, of course, a rhetorical *tour de force*, and a demonstration of Montaigne's intellectual alertness and vitality in his later years.

First, the length of the chapter bears out the stereotype of old age's loquacity. Old men are naturally talkative, Cato the Elder noted in *De Senectute* ("senectus est natura loquacior," 16, 55). His remark was already a commonplace in Cicero's time. Old Cephalus in Plato's *Republic*, for instance, recorded his increasing pleasure in conversing (I, 1328a), and Aristotle gave this observation a different twist by pointing out the selfishness of old people who speak solely of themselves (*Rhetoric* II, 13, 1390a). Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* also nourished Montaigne's thoughts on vanity and garrulousness.[40] Folly ironically claimed that the elder delights in life's ultimate pleasure: he talks too much,[41] and loquacity is the best way to cope with the woes of the winter of life. Likewise, the essayist claims to write down every thought that comes to his mind without making any effort to build a coherent argument. The chapter "Of Vanity" progresses by way of loose connections rather than logical relations between causes and effects: one thing leads to another that in turn opens itself up to another remark, and so on—from approximate analogies to transformations, from vague continuities to ruptures.

---

[39] On travel as a metaphor for writing in the chapter "Of Vanity", see Mary McKinley, *Les Terrains vagues des 'Essais'* (Paris: Champion, 1996), pp. 145–60; Terence Cave, *Préhistoires*, vol. 1 (Geneva: Droz, 1999), pp. 164–76; Paul J. Smith, " Montaigne, Juste Lipse et l'art du voyage," *Romanic Review* 94, 1–2 (2003), pp. 73–92.

Second, the chapter's disorganization is the alleged consequence of another stereotype of age: bad memory. Eramus's Folly saw this weakness as a blessing since forgetfulness prevents the elder from worrying about the past, the present, or the future. Building on this, "Of Vanity" claims to be the product of an aged mind failing to remember what it is speaking about, finding its arguments by coincidence, and unable to elaborate on them.[42] In *De Senectute*, Cato the Ancient regularly exercised his memory (VII, 21); Montaigne on the other hand, rejects the social values underlying the art of memory, valuing instead disorder, lack of rigor, and absence of focus.[43] The chapter capitalizes on these shortcomings of old age and progresses *because of* the weakening of Montaigne's intellectual capacities rather than *in spite of* such decline. Montaigne closely monitored the effects of this "old age style"; his alleged fear of boring the reader by repeating himself is futile. Moreover, he ironically observes that the chapter's length and detours are a way of keeping the reader's attention (III, 9, p. 995/p. 925), thereby confirming yet another stereotype of age: the elder's freedom of expression, and lack of concern for public opinion. In fact, the essayist's emphasis on his bad memory has a positive value in this respect: because Montaigne allegedly keeps forgetting other people's arguments, he cannot refer to them; therefore, he has to rely on his own judgment and observations.

Montaigne's reflections on the Roman ruins offer further insight on the creation of an "old age style" in "Of Vanity." The essayist had discovered the ruins of Rome at age forty-seven; his *Journal de voyage en Italie* gives a full account of this encounter, and is the basis of his observations in the *Essais*.[44] In "Of Vanity" the ruins of Rome give the essayist a visual and spatial representation of the effects of aging, while offering an opportunity for personal comments. The ruins reminded Montaigne of his childhood (he knew Latin before French, and Ancient Rome before sixteenth-century Paris, he said), of his approaching death, of his vain lust for immortality epitomized by the much coveted title "Citizen of Ancient Rome" bestowed upon him. The ruins also made him aware of the instability of the self, lending themselves to a meditation on the survival of the past. For Montaigne, Imperial Rome's sites of memory embodied an image of history in its "excrements," to borrow his term for describing his own chapter (III, 9 p. 946/p. 876).

---

[40] On Montaigne reader of Erasmus in "Of Vanity," see McKinley, *Les Terrains vagues des 'Essais'*, pp. 105–26.

[41] See chapter 1, the section on Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*.

[42] On this aspect, see Montaigne's remark in III, 9, p. 994/p. 925.

[43] See the following remark: "Quand je me suis commis et assigné entierement à ma memoire, je pends si fort sur elle que je l'accable: elle s'effraye de sa charge. Autant que je m'en rapporte à elle, je me mets hors de moy jusques à essaier ma contenance…" (III, 9, p. 963/p. 893).

Many contemporary writers had made similar observations, including Joachim Du Bellay in his *Antiquitez de Rome*.[45] Moreover, in Montaigne's time, ruins and old age had become part of moral meditations on vanity in painting. Martin Van Heemskerck painted his self-portrait in front of the Coliseum (1553); twenty years later, he chose the same setting for another self-portrait. Echoing the crumbling monument, his aging face reminded the beholder of time's flight. More strikingly, a landscape (dated 1536) by Herman Posthumus showed an old man in the middle of ruins; a line by Ovid offered the following comment: "O tempus edax et vetustas omnia destruitis." Likewise, Michel Coxcie painted the old god Time among Ancient Rome's broken columns, with an hour-glass and a crutch.[46]

Montaigne had probably not seen these paintings, but he knew Du Bellay's *Antiquitez de Rome*. The presence of these paintings and of works such as Du Bellay's collection of sonnets confirmed the relationship between ruins, old age, and vanity in sixteenth-century arts and letters. Montaigne's originality is in the elaboration of this triple motif in the chapter "Of Vanity." The Roman ruins gave him a spatial image of time, an image made of juxtapositions and superimpositions. As noted in the *Journal de voyage*, the ruins gave a partial and anachronistic view of Rome's history since ancient fragments could be found on top of more recent ones, and grafted onto them. "Of Vanity" capitalized on similar effects of montage and discontinuity. The chapter is an "ill-fitted patchwork," Montaigne noted ("une marqueterie mal jointe" p. 964/p. 894). "My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance ("mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois, c'est de loing, et se regardent, mais d'une veuë oblique" p. 994/p. 925), he observed later. He then added yet another remark on his tendency to omit the transition between different ideas: "I want the matter to make its own divisions. It shows well enough where it changes, where it concludes, where it begins, where it resumes, without my interlacing it with words, with links and seams…" ("J'entends que la matiere se distingue soy-mesmes. Elle montre assez où elle se change, où elle conclud, où elle commence, où elle se reprend, sans l'entrelasser de paroles, de liaison et de cousture…" p. 995/p. 926). Interestingly, this last remark precedes the description of the ruins of Rome.

---

[44] On Montaigne and the Roman ruins, see M. McGowan, *The Vision of Rome in Late Renaissance France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 228–50.

[45] On the topic of the ruins of Rome, see Cynthia Skenazi, *Le Poète architecte en France. Constructions d'un imaginaire monarchique* (Paris: Champion, 2003).

[46] See Sabine Foreo-Mendoza, *Le Temps des ruines. L'éveil de la conscience historique à la Renaissance* (Paris: Champvallon, 2002), chapter 4.

Like the ruins of Rome, the successive editions of his *Essais* contain layers of texts from different periods (modern editors identify them with the letters A, B, and C); the text "grows old" in some parts, and not in others, unevenly. The paradox of his self-portraits as a writer growing old is that these representations stem as much from his alleged weakness as from the wisdom he acquired over time.

As Montaigne observes in the chapter "Du Repentir," over the years, "L'homme marche entier vers son croist et vers son decroist" (III, 2, p. 817/ "Man grows and dwindles in his entirety," "Of Repentance," p. 752). His remark stresses the human limits of self-control. Subjective experiences have their own historicity, and depend to a large degree on elements in the surrounding culture and society; yet some recent self-help books seem to ignore these limits, or even to deny them. Detailed lists of healthy menus and daily activities promise the elder a safe and easy way to *Look Younger, Feel Younger, Be Younger*, as a 2011 title puts it.[47] By transforming health from a means of living well into an end in itself, these extreme views reveal the bankruptcy of an ideal unable to accommodate the realities of decline, and highlight our twenty-first century obsession with youth.[48] The "feel younger" attitude counters the claim that aging is all about loss;

---

[47] Bob Greene, *Look Younger, Feel Younger, Be Younger* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2011).

[48] There is a wide range of comments on this issue. See especially Margaret Morgenroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline. Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Middle* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

yet by rejecting this view, it assumes that age has no meaning: people are supposed to live the same way, at the same pace, until death. This attitude has become more pervasive since the baby boomer generation began to hit its fifth decade. This is understandable—the natural impulse is to pretend to ignore the passage of time and to cling to the selves we have been for as long as possible. Despite good intentions, such extreme views may reinforce age discrimination, since they focus on the body, whose decline is at the heart of the negative perspective of old age. The unrealistic optimism of the "forever young" attitude and the exaggerated pessimism of the view of aging as decay are opposite reactions to the same anxiety, generated by our inability to master the process of aging. Both assumptions remind us that notions of old age are imposed by culture upon the elderly, giving them a role that they must accept more or less passively, which influences their personal experience of the passing of time.

Montaigne's self-portraits in later life in chapters such as "Of Vanity," "Of Experience," and "On some verses of Virgil" show us that freedom and vitality lie in choosing to live within our limits, even as we struggle against them. Acceptance involves a giving in, but not a giving up; it means going around obstacles, yielding, and adapting. As these texts show us, new forms of discourse and of life constantly arise as concrete responses to aging's frailty and shortcomings. Aging gracefully is an ongoing and experimental art focusing on the transformative effects of time and capitalizing on new possibilities.

In his dedication "To the Reader" ("Au Lecteur"), Montaigne announces that he has written the *Essais* in order to know himself. This introspective goal deserves closer scrutiny. Before Socrates, the notion of self-knowledge was a matter of practical advice in a specific setting. The Delphic oracle reminded the Greeks of the danger of *hybris*—pride. Before entering Apollo's sanctuary, the passer-by had to think about himself as human—mortal—and contemplate the distance separating man from the gods: "do not suppose yourself to be a god"; and "be aware of what you really ask when you come to consult the oracle."[49] Likewise, by the end of the *Essais*, and of the chapter "Of Experience," the aging Montaigne refers to the temporal nature of human existence by quoting Plutarch in Amyot's recent translation:

> D'autant es tu Dieu comme
> Tu te recognois homme. (III, 13, p. 1115)

---

[49] See Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Entre mythe et politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p. 219.

> You are as much a god as you will own
> That you are nothing but a man alone. (p. 1044)

Accepting the very signs of one's finitude is a fundamental rule of the art of aging gracefully. Yet it is impossible not to notice how different Montaigne's views on growing old are from the prevailing perspectives of his time. In his *Epithetes* (first published in 1571, seventeen years before Montaigne's 1588 edition of the *Essais*), Maurice de La Porte gathered the adjectives that contemporary poets used in conjunction with the term "vieillesse." Except for a few terms ("honoree, paisible, saincte"; "honored, peaceful, sainted"), the list refers exclusively to old age's stereotyped shortcomings.[50] About a hundred years later, Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire françois* (1679) strikes the same note, stressing old age's decrepitude, and melancholy.[51] At the same time, Antoine Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) presents a slightly more positive image by stressing the stereotypes of old age's experience and the respect due to the elder:

> Vieillesse. Le dernier âge de la vie. Les Sibylles ont vescu jusqu'à une vieillesse decrepite. Il faut que chacun fasse honneur à la vieillesse. La jeunesse est folle, et parfois la vieillesse, dit Moliere. On dit proverbialement, Si jeunesse sçavoit, et vieillesse pouvoit, pour dire, Si on pouvoit joindre la force et l'experience.[52]
>
> Old Age. The last age of life. The Sibyls lived up to decrepitude. Everyone must honor old age. Youth is foolish, and so is old age sometimes, Molière says. One says proverbially, If youth knew, and if old age could, so as to say, If one could join strength and experience.

If the dictionaries kept repeating the traditional clichés about old age, the *Essais*, however, influenced the reading of *De Senectute* in the seventeenth century, and put Cicero's unconditional apology of old age in a more skeptical perspective.[53] Morever, Montaigne's vast erudition was not lost to seventeenth-century writers, and provided them with an anthology of classical comments on old age. In the same spirit, the 1602 edition of the *Essais*, published by the Parisian librarian Abel L'Angelier, appended to Montaigne's work a selection of the author's "rarest remarks" ("les plus rares remarques") organized in alphabetic order, like a dictionary. Interestingly, when it came to Montaigne's comments on "vieillesse" and "vieillard" (old age, old man), the compiler chose a dozen of sentences that all strike a negative note, since they are out of context.[54] Gone were Montaigne' s refusal of dogmatism, his complex variations of mood between the "jovial and the melancholy," as a 1588 addition to the chapter "Of Presumption" puts it (II, 17, p. 641/p. 591), and his superimposition of both states of mind.

---

[50] Maurice de La Porte, *Les Epithetes* (Paris: Gabriel Buon, 1571; Geneva, Slatkine Reprints, 1973), ff 277v°–278r°. "Vieillesse. Fleurie. I[d est] blanche, inutile, chancelante, laide, chetive, rechignarde, triste, morne, courbe ou courbee, infirme, pauvre, antique, otieuse, paisible, inopinee, sobre, fragile, plaintive, importune, sommeilleuse, moleste, honoree, precipitieuse."

[51] "*Vieillesse*. C'est le tems de la vie de l'homme, qui est entre l'âge viril, et l'âge décrépite [sic]. C'est un temperament du corps, sec et froid, produit par une longue suite d'années. [Arriver à une vieillesse honorable]. L'inutile vieillesse au tombeau nous apelle. La vieillesse est ordinairement chagrine, et surtout la dernière vieillesse qui commence à soixante et dix ans, et va jusques à la fin de la vie". Pierre Richelet, *Dictionnaire françois*, vol. 2 (Geneva: Slatkine, 1970), p. 528.

[52] Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, vol. 3 (Rotterdam: Arnout and Reinier Leers), 1690, no page number.

At about the same time, a similar effort to streamline the *Essais*'s nuanced observations on the effects of time on the human body and mind appears in the treatise of one of Montaigne's "disciples," Pierre Charron. In *De la Sagesse* (1601), Charron puts together comments on old age taken from different chapters of the *Essais*, without paying attention to the context of their occurrence, or their ironic tone.[55] Once again, Charron did not take into account the fact that play offered Montaigne a setting in which to control external forces such as the process of aging. Moreover, play produces joy, which adds life to years.

Montaigne's stories of later life in the *Essais* not only set him apart from his contemporaries, and attest to the "singularity" of his self; they also transcend the particularities of Montaigne's personality and time. In fact, they have not ceased to speak to their readers over the centuries; André Gide's and Amiel's self-portraits in later years, for instance, remain indebted to Montaigne's, and they are not the only ones. As Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneer of aging studies perceptively noted, Montaigne's most negative comments on the process of growing old need a closer look:

> there is a curious paradox that may have escaped him [Montaigne] but that is strikingly obvious to the reader: the *Essais* become richer and richer, more and more intimate, original and profound as the author of the book

---

[53] Emmanuel Bury, "Fortunes du *De Senectute* de Cicéron au XVII^{e} siècle," in *Ecrire le vieillir*, ed. Alain Montandon (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2005), pp. 33–57.

[54] *Les Pages du Sieur de Montaigne* in *Essais* (Paris: L'Angelier, 1602), repr. in the *Essais*, J. Céard et al. eds. (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2001), p. 1805.

[55] Pierre Charron, *De la Sagesse* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), I, 35, pp. 225–26.

> advances in age. . . . It was when he felt that his powers had declined that he was at his greatest. But no doubt he would never have attained this greatness but for the severity with which he treated himself.[56]

In Vino Veritas

"One man in his time plays many parts," Jaques says in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. He then describes seven stages of life on the world's stage, from the mewling and puking infant to the decrepit old man. Jaques is prompted to this reflection by spectacles of suffering and injustice:

> And so from hour to hour we ripe, and ripe,
> And then from hour to hour we rot, and rot;
> And thereby hangs a tale. (II, 7, ll. 26–28)[57]

Despite countless scientific and technological improvements over the centuries, life has always been—and will always be—a story of eventual "rotting," in Shakespeare's words. One may be tempted to stop here and conclude that the care of the self has a limited and rather modest effect, since it can only delay the universal law of biological decline. Yet Montaigne's self-portraits in later years allow us to consider Jaques's last line more carefully, because telling this "tale" can become a way to compensate for losses and even to turn them into narrative opportunities. What matters is not what growing old is—a process of "rotting"—but what this process can do at the discursive level. Montaigne's self-portraits capitalize on the seductive power of fables to divert the negative aspects of the effects of time on human beings. His stories of later life do not challenge human finitude but work with and within the process of "rotting." And the pleasure the narrative delivers is still available at a later date and in changed historical circumstances.

Let's therefore imagine Jaques's melancholic meditation on the stages of life from the perspective of a bottle of wine. After all, Galen recommends wine that warms and hydrates the elder, and Renaissance health regimens for the elderly follow his advice. Likewise, at the end of his book *On Longevity* (*De Vita longa*), Ficino praises Bacchus who preserves youth by offering humankind "the sweetest wine"; and in wine "perpetual freedom from care" (*De Vita libri tres*, II, 20, p. 235).[58] For his part, Laurent Joubert also values wine that cheers the elder up,[59] and Erasmus collected proverbs on wine in his *Adages*. Wine is beneficial for the elder's cold and dry body; moreover, it sparkles the convivial exchanges that enhance the social quality of later life. Even Petrarch, who claimed to be addicted to water, did not despise wine when taken in moderation.

---

[56] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, pp. 159–60.

[57] William Shakespeare. *As You Like It*, ed. J. H. Walter (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1965).

Since Montaigne had a vineyard, I will choose a wine produced in his region and whose name recalls Montaigne's given name, Michel Eyquem. The Château d'Yquem is a "premier cru classé supérieur" (the highest rating in the official French system of wine classification). Special wine growing practices already existed by 1593 when Jacques Sauvage, a descendent of a local noble family, was given tenure over Yquem. The Sauvage family gradually consolidated the vineyard as we know it today. The Château d'Yquem wine gains in stature as it ages—even up to a century, if the bottles have been cared for.[60] The Sauternes grapes are susceptible to attack by a mold, *Botrytis cinerea*. *Botrytis* grows on many fruits and vegetables, usually producing an unappetizing gray rot, but in the environment of Sauternes, it can do something quite magical to grapes. Called *pourriture noble*, or noble rot, it causes them to darken and shrivel and lose water, greatly concentrating sugar within. Only fully botrytized grapes are harvested to make the wine of d'Yquem. They have to be handled carefully because the mold has weakened their skins. The wine undergoes a three-year period of barrel aging, during which slow oxidation occurs, as well as secondary fermentation by yeasts and bacteria and an exchange of chemical compounds with the wood. During the fourth spring after vintage, the wine is bottled, but the process of aging continues.

By different means, the Château d'Yquem wine and Montaigne's self-portraits in later life in the *Essais* found ways to transcend the stereotyped young-versus-old oppositions. Aging made them more valuable, thereby demonstrating the positive potential of decay, since the "mold" is part of the process. As a sixteenth-century French proverb put it: "Vin vieil chanson nouvelle donne."[61]

---

[58] See chapter 1, the section on Ficino.

[59] Laurent Joubert's *Second Part of the Popular Errors*, p. 29.

[60] See the Château d'Eyquem's website www.yquem.fr and A. Weil, *Health by Aging. A Lifelong Guide to your Physical and Spiritual Well-Being* (New York: Knopf, 2005), pp. 104–6.

[61] "An old wine gives a new song." Jean-Antoine de Baïf, *Mimes, enseignemens et proverbes*, ed. J. Vignes (Geneva: Droz, 1992), II, p. 805.