

**“A knowledge broken”:
Essay Writing and Human Science
in Montaigne and Bacon**

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Plutarque aime mieux que nous le vantions de
son jugement que de son sçavoir; il ayme mieux
nous laisser desir de soy que satieté

Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26 (1580)

They may be as graynes of salte, that will rather
give you an appitite, then offend you with satiety

Bacon, *Essays*, “Dedicatory Epistle” (1610-1612)

Over the last three decades, literary theory and criticism have shown an increasing interest in studying the cognitive and critical relevance of the “essay” for modern history and culture.¹ I would like to supply supporting evidence for this perspective, examining the function of essay writing for both Montaigne and Francis Bacon’s conception of human thought and knowledge. In particular, I will focus on the epistemological implications of the essay and fragmentary prose, both considered forms of writing that express a particular way of thinking. To this end, I will rely on both authors’ statements about the relevance of these literary forms as modes of communication. Because of their philosophical significance and their biographical and literary relationships,²

¹ See for example Michael L. Hall, “The Emergence of the Essay and the Idea of discovery”, in Alexander J. Butrym (ed.), *Essays on the Essay. Redefining the Genre* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), p. 73-91; Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London-New York: Routledge, 1988); Pierre Glaudes (ed.), *L’Essai: métamorphoses d’un genre* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2002); Claire Obaldia, *L’Esprit de l’essai, de Montaigne à Borges* (Paris: Seuil, 2005); Charles Forsdick and Andy Stafford (eds.), *The Modern Essay in French. Movement, Instability, Performance* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005); Marielle Macé, *Le Temps de l’essai: histoire d’un genre en France au XX^e siècle* (Paris: Belin, 2006); Pierre Glaudes and Jean-François Louette, *L’Essai* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011).

² As we know, Montaigne had an epistolary relationship with Anthony Bacon, the *Montaigne Studies*, vol. XXVIII (2016)

Montaigne and Bacon allow us to understand the impact of essay writing on early modern human science. It should be noted that speaking of “human science” is not an anachronistic projection, for our authors employ analogous formulations in their works: Montaigne speaks of “science humaine” (II, 12, *passim*) and Bacon of “human knowledge” or “humanity” (which follows the knowledge of nature and God).³ Through these expressions, they refer to the study of human nature.

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Let us begin by recalling the meaning of the word.⁴ On an etymological level, the French word “*essai*” comes from the Latin *exagium-exigere*, and originally means the weighing of, and (figuratively) an accurate examination. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these meanings retreat slightly in favor of others, conveying the following ideas: test and testing (in the moral field), experience (in relation with methods and results), attempt, exercise, struggle, etc.⁵ This semantic range is at the origin of the English terminology, where the word “assay” (from the Anglo-French “*assa*”), appearing in the fourteenth century, is commonly substituted by “essay” (from Middle French

brother of Francis, to whom is dedicated the first edition of the *Essays* (1597). On this relationship, corroborated by a letter of Pierre de Brach to Anthony Bacon (October 10, 1592), see Pierre Villey, *Montaigne et François Bacon* (Paris: Revue de la Renaissance, 1913), p. 10-13; Warren Boutcher, “Montaigne et Anthony Bacon: la *familia* et la fonction des lettres”, *Montaigne Studies*, vol. XIII, 2001, p. 241-276. On the crucial importance of Early Modern French philosophy and culture for Bacon, see Marta Fattori, “Francis Bacon et la culture française”, in Élodie Cassan (ed.), *Bacon et Descartes. Genèse de la modernité philosophique* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2014), p. 25-47 (on Montaigne, p. 38-40). Butcher and Fattori suggest that Bacon read the *Essais* in their original language and not in the John Florio’s translation.

³ Our quotations of Montaigne are from *Les Essais* (ed. by Pierre Villey, Paris: PUF/Quadrige, 2004). Our quotations of Bacon’s works are from *Francis Bacon. The Major Works* (ed. by Brian Vickers, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): on this point, see *The Advancement of Learning*, II, p. 215, 205 and *passim*.

⁴ I am not trying to develop a typological theory of the essay, or to draw a genealogy of the essay from its historical premises. There is a huge critical literature in Europe and United States on this topic. Nevertheless, my analysis could cast some new light on these issues.

⁵ See the classic article of Andreas Blinkenberg, “Quel sens Montaigne a-t-il voulu donner au mot *Essais* dans le titre de son œuvre?”, *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Montaigne*, n° 29, 1964, p. 22-32, in which he gives a concise and useful analysis of the semantics spectrum of this term at the time of Montaigne, based on the Renaissance dictionaries (Robert Estienne and Jean Nicot) and the statements of contemporary writers (Lipsius, La Croix du Maine, Pasquier, etc.). See also the entry “*Essai*” in Philippe Desan (ed.), *Dictionnaire de Michel de Montaigne* (Paris: H. Champion, 2007). For the relationships between the *Essais* and the short narrative tale of the sixteenth-century see Deborah Losse, *Montaigne and Brief Narrative Form. Shaping the Essay* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

“essai”) in the seventeenth century, when it comes to be understood as a trial, attempt, endeavor, tasting, first draft, etc.⁶ From these several meanings arise some features that will become common markers of the essay writing of Montaigne and Bacon: the idea of a dynamic and transitive⁷ activity, a relationship to experience and training, and the notion of an incomplete and unsettled process.

In Montaigne’s *Essais*, both the word “*essai*” and the verb “[s’]*essayer*” indicate a way of thinking and writing, a reflexive and a discursive practice. As Hugo Friedrich writes, “le style de l’essai, chez Montaigne, est pour ainsi dire antérieur à la rédaction elle-même, il a son point de départ dans le processus de pensée”⁸. This does not mean that Montaigne’s literary practice proceeds from a preconceived thought, but that the essay’s form embodies and expresses a specific conception of thinking and knowing. What is this conception, and in what sense does it mark the start of the “*essai*”?

Among the several meanings of the words “*essai*” and “*essayer*”, Montaigne seems to favor the one designating a reflective and critical activity, the exercise of his “*facultés naturelles*”. In “*De l’institution des enfans*” we read:

Quant aux facultez naturelles qui sont en moy, *dequoy c’est icy l’essay*, je les sens flechir sous la charge. Mes conceptions et mon jugement ne marche qu’à tasons, chancelant, bronchant et chopant; et, quand je suis allé le plus avant que je puis, si ne me suis-je aucunement satisfait: je voy encore du país au delà, mais d’une veue trouble et en nuage, que je ne puis desmeler” (I, 26, 146, emphasis mine).

Montaigne’s book, titled *Essais*, is described here as the testing and the examination of natural cognitive capabilities, that is to say his “judgment” and its

⁶ See *Gli “Essays” di Francis Bacon. Studio introduttivo, testo critico e commento*, ed. by Mario Melchionda (Florence: Olschki Editore, 1979), p. 10-12.

⁷ Transitivity—the fact that essay writing and thinking are always related to temporal and historical experiences and objects—is a crucial feature of the essay, in contrast with the tendency of transcending the factual to attain pure intelligibility and metaphysical foundations, which is an important part of modern philosophy. As Theodor Adorno wrote: “the essay is not intimidated by the depraved profundity which claims that truth and history are incompatible. If truth has in fact a temporal core, then the full historical content becomes an integral moment in truth; the *a posteriori* becomes concretely the *a priori*” (Theodor W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, *New German Critique*, n° 32 (Spring-Summer), 1984, p. 151-171, here p. 158). La Croix du Maine (*Bibliothèque Française*, 1584) stressed the transitive nature of Montaigne’s *Essais* defining it as “experiences, c’est-à-dire discours pour se façonner sur autrui” (*Les Bibliothèques Françaises de La Croix du Maine et de Du Verdier* (Paris: Saillant et Nyon, 1772, II, p. 130, emphasis mine). Bacon’s philosophy shares this same conception of the historical and factual grounds of thought—on this point, see Guido Giglioni, *Francesco Bacon* (Rome: Carocci, 2011), p. 34-35, 46-47.

⁸ Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, trans. Dawn Eng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 346. See also Terence Cave: “[Montaigne] uses the word essay [...] to describe the nature of his thinking and his writing (the two simultaneously)” (*How to Read Montaigne* [London: Granta Books, 2007], p. 20-21).

products, the “conceptions”. The adjective “natural” must be understood in light of what Montaigne writes at the beginning of chapter I, 26 about his education and his superficial acquaintance with academic disciplines such as Medicine, Law and Mathematics. Speaking of his “natural” capabilities, Montaigne stresses their innate character (*in-natus*, born with him) as opposed to what is acquired through learning,⁹ i.e. “*la doctrine*”, that Montaigne strongly critiques in his work.¹⁰ He opposes the training and testing of judgment inherent to the essay to the knowledge, exercising memory, whose source is outside of us, that is typical of the doctrine: “Ce n’est pas ici ma doctrine, c’est mon estude; et n’est pas la leçon d’autrui, c’est la mienne. Et ne me doit on sçavoir mauvais gré pour tant, si je la communique. Ce qui me sert, peut aussi par accident servir à un autre” (II, 6, 378).

The intellectual activity tested by Montaigne in his book is nonetheless characterized by some essential features: it is unpredictable and uncertain, resulting in occasional progress in the order of ideas or “conceptions” that lead to new, unfamiliar regions of thought to explore. In a famous passage of chapter I, 50, “De Democritus et Heraclitus”, Montaigne describes this reflexive activity—called “*essai*”—through a vocabulary that also draws attention to some other epistemological features.

Le jugement est un util à tous subjects, et se mesle par tout. A cette cause, *aux essais que j’en fay ici*, j’y employe toute sorte d’occasion. Si c’est un subject que je n’entende point, à cela mesme je l’essaye, sondant le gué de bien loing; et puis, le trouvant trop profond pour ma taille, je me tiens à la rive: et cette reconnoissance de ne pouvoir passer outre, c’est un traict de son effect, voire de ceux dequoy il se vante le plus. Tantost, à un subject vain et de neant, j’essaye voir s’il trouvera dequoy lui donner corps, et dequoy l’appuyer et estançonner. Tantost je le promene à un subject noble et tracassé, auquel il n’a rien à trouver de soy, le chemin en estant si frayé qu’il ne peut marcher que sur la piste d’autrui. Là il fait son jeu à eslire la route qui luy semble la meilleure, et, de mille sentiers, il dict que cettuy-cy, ou celuy là, a esté le mieux choisi. Je prends de la fortune le premier argument. Ils me sont également bons. Et ne desseigne jamais de les produire entiers. Car je ne voy le tout de rien: Ne font pas, ceux qui promettent de nous le faire veoir” (I, 50, 301-302, emphasis mine).

As this passage shows, the essay of the “*facultez naturelles*” and of the “judgment” share the same purpose. They demonstrate reflexivity: a thoughtful reflection on objects or problems of experience that involves, at the same

⁹ See also chapter II, 10, “Des livres”: “C’est icy purement l’essay de mes facultez naturelles, et nullement des acquises; et qui me surprendra d’ignorance, il ne fera rien contre moy, car à peine respondroy-je à autrui de mes discours, qui ne m’en responds point à moy; ny n’en suis satisfait. Qui sera en cherche de science, si la pesche où elle se loge: il n’est rien dequoy je face moins de profession” (II, 10, 407).

¹⁰ On this point, see Thierry Gontier: “Doctrine et science dans les *Essais* de Montaigne”, in Philippe Bütgen and Ruedi Imbach (eds.), *Vera Doctrina. L’idée de doctrine d’Augustin à Descartes* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2009), p. 343-364.

time, a reflection on his own thinking, notably its powers and limits. Montaigne also specifies that the work of judgment leads to fragmentary productions,¹¹ along a more analytic than synthetic or synoptic approach—“je ne voy le tout de rien” is the contrary of the Greek word “συνοπτικός” (*synopticos*), i.e. “who can see the whole in a glance.” These epistemological features of the essay result in a conception of the writer not as a “cathedrant” (who speaks *ex cathedra*) producing a fixed and authoritative knowledge, but as an “apprenti” (novice) whose soul “est toujours en apprentissage et en espreuve” (III, 2, 805),¹² and which “propose des fantasies informes et irresolues [...] non pour établir la vérité mais pour la chercher” (I, 56, 317).¹³

It is a typical feature of Montaigne’s work to link this cognitive conception of the essay to a “theory” of the literary form that expresses it. As a mode of thought, the essay shapes its discursive mode of communication in an open, moving, and discontinuous fashion. In a well-known article, Theodor Adorno points out that the essay “draws the fullest consequences from the critique of the system”: its form is “fragmentary and random”, and does not suppose the “givenness of totality.”¹⁴ The essay does not subordinate concepts in a methodical construction but coordinates them following side paths, “methodically unmethodically.”¹⁵ Claiming intellectual modesty, the Montaignian essay practices an “oblique” logic of thought in contrast with a rational linearity.¹⁶ This lack of conceptual unity shows Montaigne’s personal and creative transformation of traditional rhetorical procedures such as *dispositio*, *compositio*

¹¹ “Je prononce ma sentence par articles descousus, ainsi que de chose qui ne se peut dire à la fois et en bloc” (III, 13, 1076).

¹² See II, 3, 350: “Car c’est aux apprentifs à enquerir et à debatre, et au cathedrant de resoudre.”

¹³ See also I, 56, 323.

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, art. cit., p. 157, 159. We can also think of Montaigne: “Qui ne voit que j’ay pris une route par laquelle, sans cesse et sans travail, j’iray autant qu’il y aura d’ancre et de papier au monde?” (III, 9, 945); “Joint qu’à l’aventure ay-je quelque obligation particuliere à ne dire qu’à demy, à dire confusément, à dire discordamment” (III, 9, 995-996).

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, art. cit., p. 161.

¹⁶ “Je m’escare, mais plustot par licence que par mesgarde. Mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois c’est de loing, et se regardent, mais d’une veue oblique” (III, 9, 994). According to Adorno, the essay’s form has an anti-Cartesian nature: “On the whole it could be interpreted as a protest against the four rules that Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* sets up at the beginning of modern Western science and its theory” (Theodor W. Adorno, art. cit., p. 161). This is a valid point, but it is also worth noting that Descartes’s *Discours de la méthode* (1637) was conceived as an introduction to three “essais” (*La Dioptrique*, *Les Météores* et *La Géométrie*) and supposed to show the method at work. Descartes represents another tradition of (essay) writing, involving a conception of thinking and knowledge very different from that of Montaigne and Bacon; for a survey of this topic, see Jean Lafond, “Discours et essai, ou de l’écriture philosophique de Montaigne à Descartes”, in Giulia Belgioioso et al. (ed.), *Descartes: il metodo e i Saggi* (Florence: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1990), p. 63-75.

and syllogism;¹⁷ it does not imply a lack of thematic and intellectual unity. In other words, unity is open, not given as an *a priori* feature of the text resulting from defined rules of composition. The essay's form, with its logic of fragments and sequences, its paratactic style, and juxtaposition of phrases and quotations¹⁸, requires the active interpretative work of the reader, perhaps more than any other form of philosophical prose.

This valorization of the fragment and the short form expresses the crucial commitment of the Montaignian essay to preserve its essential quality: the freedom of judgment and enquiry that Sextus Empiricus called the "zetetic" but which Montaigne, reader of the Latin translation of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, knew as the expression "*institutio quaesitoria*," the way and the method of research.¹⁹ When we read that "Nous sommes nés à quæster la vérité" (III, 8, 928) and "le monde n'est qu'une escole d'inquisition" (*ibid.*), we realize that the essay translates a philosophy of research and investigation, which its open and shattered form most suitably transcribes. In contrast to the "parler dogmatiste et resolutif" (II, 12, 509), which expresses itself in a conclusive manner, the essay is a provisional and incomplete work always calling for subsequent reflections by the author and the reader. In that perspective, we may appreciate the scientific value of the essay's form, insofar as it is inspiring and productive, and promotes the development of ideas and the advancement of research.

The discursive regime of the essay has an incentive as well as a performative function, inviting the reader to participate actively in the development of mutual thinking, and to exercise a critical evaluation, while constantly renewing how statements are interpreted. This creative reading is embodied by the "*suffisant lecteur*", the one who, rather than waiting passively for ready-made meanings, contributes to the search and production of meaning by an active understanding, providing the text with more than the text offers: "Un suffisant lecteur descouvre souvant és escrits d'autruy des perfections autres que celles que l'auteur y a mises et apperceues, et y preste des sens et des visages plus riches" (I, 26, 127). Finally, it is worth noting that the literary style of the essay also educates the mind and the passions of the reader in a very dynamic way, consistent with the philosophy of investigation I have shown above. By their incomplete and changing character, the *Essais* do not satisfy the reader's need for easy and immediate understanding, thus preserving his

¹⁷ See Jean Lafond, "Achèvement/inachèvement dans les *Essais*", in Claude Blum (ed.), *Montaigne et les Essais 1588-1988* (Paris: H. Champion, 1990), p. 175-185.

¹⁸ On parataxis, see III, 9, 995. As Peter Mack has shown, this logic owes much to the Rhetorical education of Montaigne, based on the grammar-school *copia* techniques of listing qualities, generating contraries and comparisons in developing and expressing ideas: Peter Mack, *Reading and Rhetoric in Montaigne and Shakespeare* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), in particular chapter 3, p. 42-73. For Terence Cave, this logic deserves a "cognitive" project, that is the construction of a critical and pragmatic thinking in the writer and the reader (Terence Cave, *op. cit.*, p. 4-5).

¹⁹ *Sexti philosophi Pyrrhonianum hypotyposeon libri III* (latin translation by Henri Estienne, Genève, 1562), I, III, p. 10.

or her desire to move forward and to think further. The literary model that inspires Montaigne in this case is Plutarch's *Œuvres morales*. As he wrote: "Plutarque aime mieux que nous le vantions de son jugement que de son sçavoir; il ayme mieux nous laisser desir de soy que satieté. Il sçavoit qu'és choses bonnes mesmes on peut trop dire" (I, 26, 157). "Ne dire qu'à demy", as Montaigne writes, is the best way of preserving a reader's desire to go further in thought.

Let us now turn our attention to Francis Bacon, the English philosopher and politician who, in 1597, published a small book entitled *Essays* (with 10 chapters). He kept working on this book throughout his entire life by rewriting and transforming its content and form, thereby giving two increased editions: one in 1612 (composed of 38 chapters), and the other in 1625 (composed of 58 chapters) which is considered the final text.²⁰ If critics usually stress the commonality of the Baconian rewriting process and Montaigne's revisions of the *Essais*, I believe they have undervalued other, more important similarities between them, notably in what concerns their anthropological and moral thought, as well as the care they took in defining the epistemological value of essay writing²¹.

Considering the dedicatory epistles of the first two editions of the *Essays*, we may note some passages dealing with form and style, which have relevant literary and philosophical implications. In "The Epistle Dedicatorie" of the 1597 edition, addressed to his brother Antony, Bacon expresses the partial and unsystematic character of the *Essays* defining them as "fragments of my conceits [i.e. conceptions]" (*Essays*, 545). In "The Epistle Dedicatorie" to the Prince Henry Stuart—written for the 1612 edition but finally removed probably because of the death of the Prince—Bacon delimits the nature of the *Essays* as follow:

certain brief notes, sett down rather significantly than curiously, which I have called *Essays*. The word is late, but the thing is ancient, for Seneca's *Epistles to Lucilius*, if one marks them well, are but *Essays*, that is, dispersed Meditations, though conveyed in the form of Epistles. [...] my hope is, they may be as grains of salt, that will rather give you an appetite than offend you with satiety. [...] I have endeavored to make them not vulgar, but of a nature whereof a man shall find much in experience, and little in books (*Essays*, 677-678).

²⁰ For a presentation of the editorial history of the *Essays* from 1597 to 1625, see the critical edition of Mario Melchionda, *op. cit.*, p. 3-56. This is a valuable edition of the *Essays* (London, 1625), with useful commentaries ("Schede di lettura") on each essay, and, generally, a mine of information.

²¹ I do not deal here with the debated question of the "influence" of Montaigne's *Essais* on Bacon's *Essays*—in my opinion, there is much strong evidence suggesting that this influence exist, and this article can be considered as a contribution towards this view. For the denial and depreciation of this influence, see the classic and misleading article of Jacob Zeitlin, "The development of Bacon's *Essays*, with special reference to the question of Montaigne's influence upon them", *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. XXVII, 1928, p. 496-519.

The *Essays* are here described as brief notes, more concerned with subject-matter and meaning than style and form,²² closer to men's experiences than to the doctrine of books, and whose purpose it is to stimulate the reader's appetite for knowledge rather than satisfying it.

These passages about the discursive and reflexive status of the *Essays* take on their full significance in light of the reflections of *The Advancement of Learning*,²³ devoted to the most suitable ways for "expressing or transferring our knowledge to the other" (230). Bacon calls this survey "Tradition" or "Delivery" (i.e. transmission), and considers it as a sub-section of the "Human Knowledge which concerns the Mind" (*Adv.*, II, 215).²⁴ "Tradition" corresponds to the rhetoric operations of *dispositio* and *elocutio*, dealing with the arranging and the communication of the found material with the invention.²⁵

The "Method of Tradition" has two parts: the one relates to the "use of knowledge" without increasing it (named "magistral"); the other relates to the

²² This commitment to weight and matter (*res*) rather than to form and phrase (*verba*) is consistent with the Baconian analysis of the "errors and vanities" which, intervened in the studies, discredit learning and block its advance (*Adv.*, I, p. 137). The rhetorical affectation and Ciceronian imitation are criticized as "the first distemper [i.e. disorder, disease] of learning, when men study words and not matter" (*Adv.*, I, p. 139). This attitude has strong affinities with the Montaignian denunciation of pedantry (see chapters I, 25, "Du pedantisme" and I, 26, "De l'institution des enfans") and, in general, with his contempt for verbal subtleties and vain imitation: "Je veux que les choses surmontent, et qu'elles remplissent de façon l'imagination de celuy qui escoute, qu'il n'aye aucune souvenance des mots. [...] L'imitation du parler, par sa facilité, suit incontinent tout un peuple; l'imitation du juger, de l'inventer ne va pas si vite" (I, 26, 171-172). When in *The Advancement* Bacon let see his preference for "weight of the matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, life of invention, or depth of judgment" (*Adv.*, I, p. 139), his position shows important affinity with that of Montaigne. On Bacon and rhetoric, see the fundamental works of Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and the Renaissance Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968); "Bacon and the rhetoric", in Markku Peltonen, *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 200-231 (on the distinction between *res* and *verba*, see p. 222-227). For the relation between rhetorical tradition and the method of science, see Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon. From magic to science* [1957] (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), chap. VI.

²³ *Of the Proficiency and Advancement of Learning, Divine and Humane* (1605) is followed by an expanded and Latinized version published in 1623 entitled *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum Libri IX*. Our quotations of the *De Augmentis* are from James Spedding et al. (eds.), *The Works of Francis Bacon* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1864, vol. II), book VI, chap. 2—for the English translation see volume IX.

²⁴ It may be recalled that the Baconian *partitio* of the "Human Philosophy" studying the intellectual operations of the mind has four stages: the art of inquiry or invention; the art of examination or judgment; the art of custody or memory; and the art of elocution or tradition (*Adv.*, II, p. 215-243). This roughly corresponds to the rhetorical operations of *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *pronuntiatio*, and *memoria* (see Peter Mack, *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric: 1380-1620* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], p. 305).

²⁵ See Sachiko Kusakawa, "Bacon's classification of knowledge", in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, *op. cit.*, p. 47-74, here p. 64.

“progression of knowledge” and seeks to promote further investigations (named “of probation”). According to Bacon, if the former is widely practiced by the scientific community, the latter is abandoned because of a “contract of error between the deliverer and the receiver” of knowledge, based, as a last resort, on the quality of their passion for learning:

He that delivereth knowledge desireth to deliver it in such form as may be best believed, and not as may be best examined; and he that receiveth knowledge desireth rather present satisfaction than expectant inquiry; and so rather not to doubt than not to err: glory making the author not to lay open his weakness, and sloth making the disciple not to know his strength (*Adv.*, II, 233).

Wishing to be believed, the “deliverer” communicates knowledge in the most persuasive possible form, without stimulating further examination. Desiring immediate gratification over the search for knowledge, the “receiver” prefers to be deceived rather than to doubt. Concerned for his “glory”, the master hides his weaknesses; hindered by his “sloth”, the disciple cannot test his cognitive strengths.

As Montaigne,²⁶ Bacon criticizes traditional teaching methods for the dogmatic and authoritative approaches that prevent the student from evaluating and judging the materials presented, and comfort him in uncritical learning. One could say that Bacon’s method of “probation” is similar to the Montaignian want of presenting his thoughts “comme les enfans proposent leurs essais: instruisables, non instruisants” (I, 56, 323), that is to say in a way which is “enquesteuse, non resolutive” (III, 11, 1030), and “non pour establir la vérité, mais pour la chercher” (I, 56, 317). This way of writing, calling for further work in the search of truth, evokes the Baconian image of the “*filios scientiarum*” (*Adv.*, II, 233), “the sons of sciences” who will grow and improve knowledge in the future, and to whom the method “of probation” is addressed.²⁷

According to Bacon, there is a form of writing that is very useful for the progress of knowledge and avoids the damages of the “Magistral” method. He calls it “writing in Aphorisms”, as opposed to the “writing in Method” that is the coherent and systematic exposition of knowledge (*Adv.*, II, 234), or its “over-early and peremptory reduction [...] into arts and methods” (*Adv.*, I, 145-146). Against this “unhealthy tendency”²⁸ of producing premature and authoritative knowledge, Bacon prescribes aphoristic writing and fragmentary discourse, because “knowledge, while it is in aphorisms and observations, it is in *growth*” (*Adv.*, I, 146, emphasis mine). The Book II of the *Advancement*

²⁶ For a survey of the pedagogical ideas of Montaigne, see my chapter in Joy A. Palmer Cooper (ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Educational Thinkers* (Oxon/New York: Routledge, 2016, in press).

²⁷ See also *De Augmentis*, VI, 2, p. 429 and the precisions of Spedding in note 1.

²⁸ The expression is from Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon. The Major Works, op. cit.*, p. 598.

contains a notable and coherent theory of the aphorism, showing Bacon's awareness of the epistemological significance of the literary form in communicating knowledge.²⁹ In sum, it could be said that, among its "many excellent virtues" (*Adv.*, II, 234), aphoristic writing stands out mainly for its unsystematic character, which allows the expression of observations and conceptions without locking them into a closed construction. Flexible and changing, this form of writing stays close to ordinary experience and accommodates those subjects who are "the most immersed" in the "particulars" and "in multiformity of matter" (*ibid.*, 235), namely the individual and social behaviors studied by moral and political philosophy.³⁰ Moreover, aphorism and fragmentary prose have an elevated cognitive potential and a strong "attractive power"³¹: "Aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire further; whereas Methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at furthest" (*Adv.*, II, p. 235). For all these reasons, aphoristic writing characterizes a large portion of Bacon's works, from the *Maxims of the Law* (1597) to natural science (*Novum Organum, Historia Naturalis et Experimentalis*), achieving its fuller application in the psychological, moral and political investigations of the *Essays*. As "fragment of [...] conceits" and "dispersed meditations," Bacon's *Essays* fulfill his ideal of a fruitful communication of knowledge and contribute mainly to his science of man.³²

* * *

On the basis of these analyses, we can see that Montaigne's and Bacon's reflections on essay writing and aphorism share some essential features. First, they are both aware of the need to communicate thought and knowledge in a particular way to provoke examination and further thought in the reader. To this end, they refute authoritative modes of communication, promoting the attitude of a "beginner's mind" in thinking and learning—in such forms as Montaigne's "apprentifs" and Bacon's "*filius scientiae*".³³ In this respect, I would

²⁹ As Brian Vickers writes (*Francis Bacon and the Renaissance Prose, op. cit.*, p. 60-61), aphorism is "the genre which provoked Bacon's richest theoretical discussion of form (indeed, one might say that this was his only adequate discussion of a literary form)".

³⁰ Aphoristic form is the best suited to represent the contingent and circumstantial character of everyday life: "particulars, being dispersed, do best agree with dispersed directions" (*Adv.*, II, p. 235; see also p. 265). The *De Augmentis* is more explicit: "*Quia vero actiones in vita communi sparguntur, non ordine componuntur, ideo magis iisdem conducunt etiam sparsa documenta*" (VI, 2, p. 431).

³¹ See Brian Vickers, *Francis Bacon and the Renaissance Prose, op. cit.*, p. 72.

³² On this point I follow Ronald S. Crane, "The Relation of Bacon's *Essays* to His Program for the Advancement of Learning", in B. Vickers (ed.), *Essential Articles for the Study of Francis Bacon* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1972), p. 272-292). Crane shows how the *Essays* (especially in the 1612 and 1625 editions) take a central role in the science of moral, social, and political life outlined in the *Advancement* and *De Augmentis*.

³³ As Montaigne refutes the "parler dogmatiste et resolutif" (II, 12, 510), Bacon critiques the "magistral and peremptory" ways of transmitting knowledge (*Adv.*, I,

argue that Bacon's theory of aphorism and fragmentary prose draws on Montaigne's view of the essay's form as the most suited to inspire new thoughts and experiences for the reader. Bacon builds his theory of the cognitive power of the aphorism and, in general, of the fragmentary style, modeling and adapting to his scientific design the main arguments and ideas developed by Montaigne.³⁴ Second, for both authors, the literary forms considered embody a mode of thinking that channels open, critical and experimental conceptions of knowledge, altogether avoiding models of systematic exposition and fixed process. This conception has implications for the epistemological status of their science of man, which is unsystematic and dispersed, and represents the discrete, moving and contradictory character of human experience. This last point is important because it represents the foundation of a tradition in philosophical anthropology at the dawn of the early modern period, which provided an alternative to the rising "systematic" philosophies of man, such as those of Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza.³⁵

For all of these reasons, I believe that the literary relationships between the *Essais* and the *Essays* require further investigation: they are not only essential for understanding the constitution of Bacon's moral and political anthropology,³⁶ but also for appreciating the complex emergence of the early modern philosophy of man, which also requires further study.³⁷

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p. 147). It is worth noting that both authors have in mind the authoritative mode of expression of the law, which is conclusive and irrefutable.

³⁴ According to Brian Vickers, "this concept of the attractive power of the aphorism in stimulating further thought seems to be quite original to Bacon" (*Francis Bacon and Renaissance Prose, op. cit.*, p. 71-72). Vickers draws this conclusion showing the novelty of the Baconian use and meaning of aphorism compared to the several Renaissance traditions of aphorism (see p. 60-72); and for the scope of his study, I think he is right. But if we consider other literary practices, and more particularly Montaigne's *Essais*, things do change. For the reasons exposed in this article, I am inclined to believe that Bacon's "originality" is inspired by Montaigne's views on essay writing and practice.

³⁵ I write "systematic" with quotation marks because these philosophies obviously have their incoherencies and blind spots. Nevertheless, they share a predilection for methodically ordered expositions that influences and marks their way of thinking and writing more or less strongly.

³⁶ This inquiry is part of a wider research project on Montaigne's relevance for the rise of early modern philosophies of man: see Emiliano Ferrari, *Montaigne: une anthropologie des passions* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014); Id. and Thierry Gontier (ed.), *L'Axe Montaigne-Hobbes: anthropologie et politique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016).

³⁷ This article is an abridged version of a paper delivered at an international conference on "O livro científico no Renascimento" (Universidade Federal Fluminense, Rio de Janeiro, September 29-30, 2014). I would like to thank the organizer, Celso Martins Azar Filho, for his kind invitation and hospitality. I would also like to express my gratitude to Kendra Walker for her reading and comments.