VOLUME XXVII NUMBER 1

SYMPOSIUM

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL IN MODERN FOREIGN LITERATURES

SPRING 1973

PUBLISHED BY SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS

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ANCIENTS AND INDIANS IN MONTAIGNE'S "DES COCHES"

MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY of commentary testifies to the richness and complexity of Montaigne's "Des coches." Its many themes, its apparently disjointed structure, and its curious title have provoked a variety of interpretations.[1] Most parts of the essay have been subjected to devoted scrutiny. An important exception, however, is the comparison between the ancients and the Indians of the New World, which, although made explicit at only three points, runs throughout and provides a focus around which much of the essay's diverse material can be organized. In spite of Montaigne's well-known preference for individual cases, his distrust of generalizations, this comparison operates in general terms; "Des coches" presents its ancients and Indians not only as individuals but also as representatives of two generally conceived ways of life. Montaigne's willingness to generalize about the Indians is implicit in his frequent use of the expression "New World." When, for example, he tells us that "Nostre monde vient d'en trouver un autre [...] non moins grand, plain et membru que luy, toutesfois si nouveau et si enfant qu'on luy aprend encore son a,b,c,"[2] he is not using the word "*monde*" geographically. The "world" that is "si nouveau et si enfant" is not the American continent but rather the way of life to be found there. Apparently newness and childishness are the common denominators that unite various individual Indians in a common "world"; Montaigne's comparison between them and the ancients not only illustrates that newness and childishness but also reveals the common denominators which constitute a similarly generalized ancient way of life, an ancient "world" that is more sophisticated and mature than the Indian "world."[3] I wish to consider the comparison between these two "worlds," to examine how it functions as a principle of coherence within "Des coches," and to suggest its significance for Montaigne's thought in general. Sophistication is often associated with decadence in the *Essais*, while the childishness of Indians and other primitive peoples is usually a sign of their natural goodness. By juxtaposing

ancients and Indians in "Des coches," however, Montaigne establishes unmistakably the limits of his "primitivism."[4]

We may start with the three points in the essay at which the comparison becomes explicit. The first of these passages occurs as Montaigne begins to praise the courage of the Indians: "Quant à la hardiesse et courage, quant à la fermeté, constance, resolution contre les douleurs et la faim et la mort, je ne craindrois pas d'opposer les exemples que je trouverois parmy eux aux plus fameux exemples anciens que nous ayons aus memoires de nostre monde par deçà" (p. 875). The second, which comes soon after, is motivated by reflection upon how "*honteusement*" and "*vilement*" the Indians have been deceived and exploited by the Spanish. Montaigne begins by asserting the superiority of the ancients to the Spanish but finally involves the Indians in the comparison through the assertion that Alexander or the Greeks or Romans could have "poly et defriché ce qu'il y avoit de sauvage" in the Indian arts and virtues:

> Que n'est tombée soubs Alexandre ou soubs ces anciens Grecs et Romains une si noble conqueste, et une si grande mutation et alteration de tant d'empires et de peuples soubs des mains qui eussent doucement poly et defriché ce qu'il y avoit de sauvage, et eussent conforté et promeu les bonnes semences que nature y avoit produit, meslant non seulement à la culture des terres et ornement des villes les arts de deçà, en tant qu'elles y eussent esté necessaires, mais aussi meslant les vertus Grecques et Romaines aux originelles du pays! (p. 876)

And the final passage of explicit comparison, near the end of the essay, is inspired by Montaigne's admiration for the famous Indian road from Quito to Cusco:

> Quant à la pompe et magnificence, par où je suis entré en ce propos, ny Graece, ny Romme, ny Aegypte ne peut, soit en utilité, ou difficulté, ou noblesse, comparer aucun de ses ouvrages au chemin qui se voit au Peru, dressé par les Roys du pays, depuis la ville de Quito jusques à celle de Cusco (il y a trois cens lieuës), droict, uny, large de vingt-cinq pas, pavé revestu de costé et d'autre de belles et hautes murailles, et le long d'icelles, par le dedans, deux ruisseaux perennes, bordez de beaux arbres qu'ils nomment molly. (p. 880)

Each of these comparisons makes a value judgment upon the relative merits of the ancient and the Indians "worlds," but the evaluations expressed seem to be contradictory. Montaigne's wish that the Indians had been conquered by Alexander or by the ancient Greeks or Roman because they could have "poly et defriché" the Indian arts and virtues seems to be a straightforward testimony to ancient superiority. On

the other hand, his claim that he would dare to compare examples of Indian courage with the most famous ancient examples of that virtue and his assertion that the road from Quito to Cusco surpasses anything produced by Greece, Rome, or Egypt imply that at least one Indian virtue and at least one product of Indian art need no polishing by ancient hands. Strictly speaking, of course, there is no contradiction here; Montaigne may be thinking of other virtues than courage and of other arts than those involved in road building when he goes so far as to wish the ancients had conquered the Indians. If such thoughts are in his mind, however, he does not say so, and the apparent contradiction therefore subsists, producing one of those blurrings of the focus of thought that are so disturbingly characteristic of the *Essais*. As critics have pointed out, Montaigne's departures from the normal rules of literary coherence often represent a deliberate attempt to express both the variety of his own personality and his sceptical sense of the uncertainty of human judgment in general. When he seems most contradictory, he is in fact, according to this view, most consistent with himself and with human nature; his contradictions show him to be a man like others, "un sujet merveilleusement vain, divers, et ondoyant" (p. 29).[5] Sometimes, however, especially when they reveal themselves to be only apparent, Montaigne's contradictions can have a further purpose. Sometimes Montaigne deliberately blurs the focus of his thought with pedagogic rather than sceptical intent, with the aim of forcing the burden of intellectual clarification onto the reader himself. Indeed the apparently contradictory evaluations that appear when one juxtaposes the explicit comparisons between the ancients and the moderns in "Des coches" are essentially pedagogic in this sense. By not revealing Montaigne's opinion clearly, these evaluations arouse our curiosity—which "world" does Montaigne really prefer?—and by the terms in which they are put—arts and virtues—they point the way for us to satisfy our curiosity within the context of "Des coches" itself. For, upon examination, the essay proves full of evidence about ancient and Indian arts and virtues that enables us to test the validity of Montaigne's explicit evaluations. He tells us he would dare to compare ancient and Indian courage, and although he does not actually undertake such a comparison himself he provides us with examples that make it possible for us to. He asserts the superiority of the Quito to Cusco road to anything produced by the ancients, and describes not only that road but also certain ancient works of art so that we can judge for ourselves. Thus he engages us actively in the processes of thought that lie behind his essay and finally reveals to us, as though it were a discovery of our own, his full opinion about the relative merits of the ancient and the Indian "worlds." In this Montaigne rather resembles the good pedagogue

described in "De l'institution des enfants," who does not tell his pupil the answers but makes him discover them for himself, who makes the soul of his pupil "gouster les choses, les choisir et discerner d'elle mesme: quelquefois luy ouvrant chemin, quelquefois le luy laissant ouvrir" (p. 161).[6]

To allow us to make our own comparison between ancient and Indian courage, "Des coches" includes one outstanding example of that virtue from the ancient "world" and two from the Indian "world." The ancient example is freely adapted from Alcibiades' account, in the *Symposium*, of Socrates' conduct during the Athenian rout at Delium. Three characteristics made the courage of Socrates stand out on that occasion: first, his "*avisement*" and "*resolution*," then "la braverie de son marcher, nullement different du sien ordinaire," and finally "sa veue ferme et reglée, considerant et jugeant ce qui se passoit autour de luy, regardant tantost les uns, tantost les autres, amis et ennemis, d'une facon qui encourageoit les uns et signifioit aux autres qu'il estoit pour vendre bien cher son sang et sa vie à qui essayeroit de la luy oster." By such courage, concludes Alcibiades, Socrates saved himself, for men who show that they are not dismayed by danger are not attacked; "on court apres les effraiez" (p. 865). As Indian examples, the essay offers the kings of Peru and Mexico. Although the Peruvian king was cheated, tricked, and beaten at every turn by the Spanish, he never failed to display evidence "d'un courage franc liberal et constant, et d'un entendement net et bien composé" (p. 877). Although he was finally put to death by torture, he suffered his fate "sans se démentir ny de contenance ny de parole, d'une forme et gravité vrayement royalle" (p. 878). In his anecdote about the king of Mexico, moreover, Montaigne stresses a similar capacity for suffering adversity nobly. This king too was deceived and beaten but, without any sign of weakness, bore every torture that the Spanish could inflict. On one occasion, for example, along with "un des principaux seigneurs de sa court," he was subjected to the torment of being roasted alive. Montaigne relates with admiration how the king endured the heat without flinching and how, when his companion indicated by a piteous look that he could bear no more, "Le Roy, plantant fierement et rigoreusement les yeux sur luy, pour reproche de sa lascheté et pusillanimité, luy dict seulement ces mots, d'une voix rude et ferme: Et moy, suis-je dans un bain? suis-je pas plus à mon aise que toy?" (p. 878). Later, this king too suffered a cruel death bravely.

How are we to compare these examples which Montaigne dares to set in opposition? A qualitative rather than a quantitative distinction seems called for. Montaigne does not indicate any way of determining who showed the most courage, but his accounts do suggest that the

kind of courage exhibited by Socrates is qualitatively different from the kind exhibited by the two kings. For while their courage appears to be essentially passive, rising to its height in suffering the torments of captivity, the courage of Socrates expresses itself actively; specifically, it is presented as the active kind of courage that preserves one from captivity. Socrates' "veue ferme et reglée, considerant et jugeant ce qui se passoit autour de luy" dissuaded his enemies from attacking him; they could see that the fear which had disordered and rendered vulnerable the other Athenians had not affected him, and they left him alone. Montaigne makes it clear, moreover, that the distinction between the passive courage of the Indian kings and the active courage of Socrates does not reflect merely accidental differences of circumstance, does not result simply from the fact that, in the examples given, the Indian kings are already in captivity and consequently unable to exhibit their courage except through passive suffering, while Socrates is still free, with ample opportunity to display a more active spirit. Passivity seems to be an essential element in the courage of the Indian kings, for the description of the proud and active courage that saved Socrates from death and captivity is meant to be compared not only with the accounts of the final sufferings of the Indian kings but also with the description, at the very end of the essay, of the Peruvian king's conduct during the battle in which he was captured:

> Ce dernier Roy du Peru, le jour qu'il fut pris, estoit ainsi porté sur des brancars d'or, et assis dans une cheze d'or, au milieu de sa bataille. Autant qu'on tuoit de ces porteurs pour le faire choir à bas, car on le vouloit prendre vif, autant d'autres, et à l'envy, prenoient la place des morts, de facon qu'on ne le peut onques abbatre, quelque meutre qu'on fit de ces gens là, jusques à ce qu'un homme de cheval l'alla saisir au corps, et l'avalla par terre. (p. 881)

Here we see one of the Indian kings in circumstances which ought to have aroused his courage to extraordinary activity, in a desperate situation very much like that of Socrates at Delium. But what could be more striking than the contrast between the figure of Socrates, striding boldly among his intimidated although victorious enemies, and the figure of this king, awaiting his fate in a sedan chair with apparently utter passivity, as his subjects rush up to be slaughtered beneath him? Socrates saved himself even without the help of Alcibiades, but the Peruvian king hardly tries to help himself, it would seem, as he is pulled down in the midst of his loyal soldiers. Great as he is in suffering, he lacks the active courage necessary to save himself; his essentially passive courage serves him well in captivity but leaves

him an easy prey, as Socrates never would have been, to the insolent aggression of the Spanish.

As the outstanding examples of Indian courage, moreover, the two kings appear to be representative of their "world." In the passage just quoted, for example, the passivity and ineffectiveness of the Peruvian king's courage is reflected in the conduct of his soldiers. Surely there is no hint of cowardice in the eagerness with which they hasten to certain death, but Montaigne's description suggests in addition to their courage something passively mechanical and needlessly ineffective in their conduct. They do their duty without flinching, yet all their bravery accomplishes nothing but their own destruction. And in spite of their numbers, an almost inexhaustible supply for slaughter, they cannot prevent a lone Spanish horseman from pulling their king to the ground. By contrast, the example of Socrates, who is also on foot and who does not call for aid although his friend Alcibiades is nearby "sur un bon cheval" (p. 865), may suggest the well-known military axiom that resolute and active foot-soldiers can always defend themselves, even against horsemen.[7] Of the two kinds of courage defined in "Des coches," then—one active and effective at warding off dangers and the other passive and able to suffer unflinchingly—it seems that not only the Indian kings but their subjects too are deficient in the former. Thus Montaigne leads us to perceive the irony of his claim that he dares to compare the finest examples of ancient and Indian courage. He does in fact literally dare to do so, but the results are unexpected. They reveal not only the excellence of Indian courage but its crucial limitation as well, and they enable us to understand at least part of Montaigne's wish that the ancients had conquered the Indians. If Alexander, the student of a student of one of Socrates' students, or any of the ancient Greeks and Romans had conquered the New World, the example of Socrates might indeed have "poly et defriché" the virtues of the Indians by illustrating the kind of courage in which they are deficient.

Beyond helping us to identify the particular deficiency of Indian courage, Montaigne's presentation of Socrates points, moreover, to a general defect of the Indian "world." The explicit lesson Montaigne draws from the example of Socrates' courage is the following: "Considerer et juger le danger est aucunement le rebours de s'en estonner" (p. 865). According to him, then, Socrates met danger effectively because he understood it; he was not astonished at Delium because he was able to consider and judge. Montaigne's explicit analysis of the Indian defeat by the Spanish indicates, on the other hand, that it was precisely their astonishment along with a failure to consider and judge the nature of the enemy that made the Indians so vulnerable. In a single, complex sentence, Montaigne contends that if the Indians

had not been taken in by "ruses et batelages," and if they had not been overcome by "estonnement" at the sight of bearded men, horses, guns, and other wonders, the conquistadors would have been denied "toute l'occasion de tant de victoires" (pp. 875–76). It is true that at one point in the sentence Montaigne qualifies the Indian astonishment as "juste" and that he makes a good deal of the Spanish weapons, especially their firearms, "capables de troubler Caesar mesme;" but he does not seem to have taken the common view that the Indians were defeated primarily by their technological inferiority. In his view, they were overcome more by their astonishment at the sight of unknown weapons than by the unknown weapons themselves. To admit that Caesar would have been troubled by firearms is far from saying that he would have been overwhelmed by astonishment at the sight of them. There may be a great difference between trouble and an astonishment that causes one's ruin.[8] Obviously the Indians could not have avoided being troubled by the Spanish guns, but Montaigne also knew from his sources that neither Cortés nor Pizzaro, with their few hundred men apiece—not all of whom were armed with guns—had enough firepower to defeat, except through astonishment, Indian armies that contained thousands of men.[9] In fact Montaigne describes one group of Indians whose conduct suggests how a determined resistance based upon consideration and judgment might have stopped the Spanish in spite of their guns. This tribe, which Montaigne does not identify by name, found itself in exactly the same situation as the Aztecs and Incas, approached with deceitful friendliness and threatened by men and weapons such as they had never seen before. Unlike the Mexicans and the Peruvians, however, these Indians met the pretenses of peace and the covert threats of the Spanish with shrewd common sense and an impressive threat in return. They considered the intruders, judged them for what they were, and refused to be fooled or intimidated. Pointing to the heads of executed criminals prominently displayed about their city, these Indians told the Spanish to leave or suffer the same fate. The Spanish departed, partly perhaps because they had not found "les marchandises qu'ils cerchoient" (p. 877), but more probably, if we remember that these Indians did in fact admit to having some gold, because, to adapt the saying of Alcibiades, "on ne court qu'après les étonnés." In any case, the courage of this unnamed tribe that considered and judged the Spanish and stood up to them makes the astonishment of the great Mexican and Peruvian empires appear childishly naive rather than "juste."[10] It may be that Montaigne wants to suggest that it was this naive astonishment, arising from a failure to consider and judge, that paralyzed Indian courage and thus caused its passivity and ineffectiveness. At least his stress on the connection between courage and consideration and judgment in the examples of

Socrates and the unnamed Indians brings to mind the Socratic idea that, to be complete and effective, courage, must be based, like any other virtue, on a broad knowledge and understanding; it cannot coexist with naïveté. What is certain, however, is that the childishness which Montaigne identified earlier as the unifying characteristic of the Indian "world" now stands revealed as an inability to consider and judge, a capacity for astonishment, a disastrous naïveté. The general characteristic of the Indian "world" thus involves a general defect.

By its obvious irony, Montaigne's comment upon the speech by which the unnamed Indians turned away the Spanish—"Voilà un exemple de la balbucie de cette enfance" (p. 877)—makes clear his view that although they inhabit the American continent, these Indians are not part of its childishly naive "world." They do not stammer like children: their capacity to consider and judge exemplifies an exceptional maturity in a "world" still learning "son a,b,c." On the other hand, "Des coches" indicates that the maturity of Socrates, his capacity for consideration and judgment, albeit extraordinary, does not constitute the same kind of exception in the ancient "world." In spite of the fact that the description of his courage at Delium emphasizes his superiority to his fellow Athenians, the essay as a whole suggests that if the general defect of the Indian "world" stems from its childishness, by contrast the general source of strength in the ancient "world" was its relative maturity. Paradoxically, a sense of this general maturity in the ancient "world" begins to emerge from the evidence that Montaigne provides to allow us to test his assertion that the Indian road from Quito to Cusco surpasses any of the works of Greece, Rome, or Egypt. Like the essay's examples of courage, this evidence—examples of ancient and Indian works of art—works through pedagogic irony, forcing us to qualify radically Montaigne's explicit praise of the Quito to Cusco road, while at the same time revealing in unexpected places a source of ancient strength.

Montaigne's praise of the Inca road is carefully detailed. He tells us that it is straight, even ("*uny*"), wide, paved, walled on both sides, bordered by streams and trees, level (for the Incas cut through hills and filled in valleys), and furnished with palaces for shelter and provision at regular intervals. Moreover the work that went into its construction merits admiration because the builders "ne batissoient poinct de moindres pierres que de dix pieds en carré; ils n'avoient autre moyen de charrier qu'à force de bras, en trainant leur charge; et pas seulement l'art d'eschafauder, n'y sçachant autre finesse que de hausser autant de terre contre leur bastiment, comme il s'esleve, pour l'oster après (p. 880). In comparison with this remarkable accomplishment, the examples of ancient art Montaigne chooses to describe, far from suggesting the maturity of the ancient "world,"

seem at first glance almost trivial. One might expect to find this supreme example of Indian art compared with obviously equivalent ancient examples—with one of the great Roman roads, for example, a Greek temple, or the pyramids of Egypt—but Montaigne offers instead the huge public amphitheaters of Rome, "encroustez de marbre au dehors, labouré d'ouvrages et statues, le dedans reluisant de plusieurs rares enrichissemens" (p. 871), and the mechanically elaborate spectacles produced within them, replete with simulated forests, caverns, oceans, and mountains, real animals and artificial monsters (pp. 870–73).

Such amphitheaters and such spectacles are, of course, commonly symbols of Roman decadence, and Montaigne himself refers to them as "excez" and "vanitez" (pp. 870, 873). At the same time, however, he points out that these very "excez" and "vanitez" prove "combien ces siecles estoyent fertiles d'autres espris que ne sont les nostres" (p. 873), and he refuses to associate them exclusively with political decadence. According to him, the Emperors who exploited the spectacles for personal political ends were corrupting a long established custom, for the Roman people had been "de tous temps accoustumé d'estre flaté par telle sorte de spectacles et excez" (p. 870). Originally, he explains, "c'estoyent particuliers qui avoyent nourry cette coustume de gratifier leurs concitoyens et compaignons principallement sur leur bourse par telle profusion et magnificence," but, the custom, which was once harmless enough, came to have "tout autre gout quand ce furent les maistres qui vindrent à l'imiter" (pp. 870–71).[11] Montaigne indicates the original spirit in which the spectacles were properly given and received when he writes, "S'il y a quelque chose qui soit excusable en tels excez, c'est où l'invention et la nouveauté fournit d'admiration, non pas la despense" (p. 873). At their best, then, the Roman spectacles aroused admiration through invention and novelty. So if we remember that it was precisely an inability to understand and deal with invention and novelty that caused "estonnement" among the Indians and their destruction, we shall begin to understand how the arts of the coliseum can represent, within the context of "Des coches," not ancient decadence but rather ancient breadth and sophistication, ancient maturity. Romans who had become accustomed to see not only "silvestria [...] monstra" but even "aequoreos [...] cum certantibus ursis [...] vitulos, et equorum nomine dignum, Sed deforme pecus" (p. 872) rising suddenly from the depths of the arena would not have been as easily astonished as the Indians at confronting "des gens barbus, divers en langage, religion, en forme et en contenance [...] montez sur des grands monstres incogneuz" (p. 875).

That the Indians who were so easily astonished also built the Quito to Cusco road will not seem incongruous, moreover, if we

examine more closely Montaigne's description of it. For, in spite of the fact that the road is said to surpass any of the works of Greece, Rome, or Egypt, it may also be seen symbolically as the expression of Indian limitation and naïveté. Although pleasant, the road is walled in. Although the product of impressive effort, much of that effort was necessary only because of the Indian ignorance of elementary techniques of engineering, such as scaffolding, which were commonplace in the ancient "world." Even the straightness, evenness, and levelness of the road may suggest the rigidity of a civilization that is admirable in many ways but so turned in upon itself that it was paralyzed by astonishment at sight of new and unusual dangers. In fact such a view of the Quito to Cusco road seems consistent with the implications of the essay's other descriptions of Indian art: the description of the Aztec king's garden, for example, "où tous les arbres, les fruicts et toutes les herbes, selon l'ordre et grandeur qu'ils ont en un jardin, estoyent excellemment formez en or," or the description of his "*cabinet*," in which could be seen gold models of "tous les animaux qui naissoient en son estat et en ses mers" (p. 875). Elsewhere in "Des coches," in an ancient language adapted from an ancient author, Montaigne sketches a vast panorama of nature which provides a commentary upon these golden artefacts: " 'Si interminatam in omnes partes magnitudinem regionum videremus et temporum, in quam se injiciens animus et intendens ita late longeque peregrinatur ut nullam oram ultimi videat in qua possit insistere: in hac immensitate infinita vis innumerabilium appareret formarum' " (p. 873).[12] In the light of this vision of an infinitely varied and mutable universe, the Aztec king's golden garden, in which all growth and development has been eliminated, and his zoo of animals not only fixed forever in precious metal but limited to the species of his own lands reveal at once the splendor and the crucial limitations, the attractiveness but also the childish naiveté of the Indian "world." Beside this garden and this zoo the ever-changing mechanical wonders of the Roman spectacles appear both more vulgar and more complex and sophisticated; they are undeniably "*excez*" and "*vanitez*," but they are also a truer image of nature's "infinita vis innumerabilium [...] formarum." Thus, within the context of "Des coches," Indian arts, no less than Indian courage, exhibit the childish limitations of the Indian "world," while the arts of the coliseum come unexpectedly to represent ancient maturity. Like the courage of Socrates, Roman spectacles suggest ways in which Indian arts and virtues might have been "poly et defriché" by those of the ancient "world."

Furthermore, the general contrast between the maturity of the ancient "world" and the childish naïveté of the Indian "world" that we have discovered beneath the surface of "Des coches" extends

beyond the specific discussions of courage and the arts to other details in the essay—most notably, in view of the emphasis placed on consideration and judgment so far, to certain details that suggest a comparison between ancient and Indian learning or philosophy. For example, the Mexican king's golden zoo, which was limited to creatures from his own region, may be compared not only with the inventions and novelties to be seen in the Roman spectacles but also with the collections made by those Egyptian priests whom Montaigne mentions as having been praised by Solon for their "maniere d'apprendre et conserver les histoires estrangeres" (p. 873). These ancient priests supplemented the restricted experience of their own time and place by enquiring into the history of other places, and they were praised by another ancient for doing so. There is no evidence in the essay, however, that a similar class of men, animated by an impulse towards broad and varied learning and thought, existed anywhere in the Indian "world." Indeed Montaigne's one discussion of Indian learning points unmistakably to its narrowness: "Aussi jugeoient-ils, ainsi que nous, que l'univers fut proche de sa fin, et en prindrent pour signe la desolation que nous y apportames. Ils croyoyent que l'estre du monde se depart en cinq aages et en la vie de cinq soleils consecutifs, desquels les quartre avoient desjà fourny leur temps, et que celuy qui leur esclairoit estoit le cinquiesme" (pp. 879–80). By the words "ainsi que nous," Montaigne reminds us of the judgment that he passed on such beliefs earlier in the essay:

> Comme vainement nous concluons aujourd'hui l'inclination et la decrepitude du monde par les arguments que nous tirons de nostre propre foiblesse et decadence,
>
> Iamque adeo affecta est aetas, affectáque tellus; ainsi vainement concluoit cettuy-là sa naissance et jeunesse, par la vigueur qu'il voyoit aux espris de son temps, abondans en nouvelletez et inventions de divers ars:
>
> Verúm, ut opinor, habet novitatem summa, recénsque
> Natura est mundi, neque pridem exordia coepit. (p. 874)

At the beginning of this passage, Montaigne criticizes his European contemporaries, but it should be clear by now that the charge of vainly inferring the decadence of the universe from one's own weakness can with equal justice be leveled against the Indians. In Montaigne's opinion, then, Indian learning, no less than Indian arts and virtue, reflects a limited and childish "world." The two citations in Latin, both of which are from Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, attest, on the other hand, to the comparative philosophical maturity of the ancient "world." Although Montaigne's explicit comment apparently condemns Lucretius as strongly as the Indians or the Europeans for

having committed himself to a limited point of view, the reasons for which Lucretius is said to have held this view—the intellectual vigor of his time and its abundance of "nouvelletez et inventions"—are strikingly like the reasons which lead Montaigne to prefer the ancient "world" to the Indian "world." Thus Montaigne suggests a kind of sympathy with Lucretius' expression of confidence in spite of its limitations. Beyond this, however, the explicit condemnation of Lucretius obviously requires further qualification. For the first of the passages cited from *De Rerum Natura* proves that in fact Lucretius did not commit himself single-mindedly to the view that the universe is young and even suggests that he may not have held that view at all. In fact, *De Rerum Natura* contains contradictory statements about the age of the universe, and, as his citations indicate, Montaigne is well aware that Lucretius' exact view on the matter can be determined, if at all, only by careful interpretation.[13] Montaigne is acquainted with the richness and complexity of Lucretius' poem, but he pretends not to be in order to confront us with one of his most playful exercises in pedagogic irony. It was certainly with a sense of humor that he daringly juxtaposed his deliberately inaccurate disparagement of Lucretius and the evidence provided to correct that inaccuracy in the very same sentence. A momentary blurring of the focus of thought is inescapable, but, as elsewhere in the essay, it leads to ultimate clarification; within the context of the essay as a whole, the point that emerges is clear. In contrast to the childish single-mindedness of the Indians, who are convinced that the world is decrepit, the maturity of the ancient philosopher's thought is apparent in his ability to comprehend both sides of the question, in his willingness to entertain contradiction and complexity.

Contradiction and complexity are, of course, salient characteristics of Montaigne's own style, and nowhere are they more apparent than in the subtle pedagogic process by which "Des coches" leads us to discover the full meaning of its comparison between the ancients and the Indians. Perhaps nothing demonstrates more clearly than that process itself Montaigne's profound kinship with the sophisticated ancient "world" and his alienation from the childishness of the Indians. His artful pedagogy is more like an elaborate Roman spectacle, introducing us to novelties and delighting us with strange inventions, than like the garden of the Mexican king, limited to familiar horizons. Far from imitating the straightness and evenness of the road from Quito to Cusco, Montaigne builds in twists and turns, taking his readers to other "worlds" than their own. Like Cicero, he is conscious of nature's infinite variety. Like Lucretius, he sets different points of view in problematic opposition. And by forcing us to leave no assertion unexamined, to subject everything to the keen scrutiny of

consideration and judgment, he teaches us to emulate Socrates himself. Thus, through this process, Montaigne leads us not only to recognize his opinion about the superiority of the ancient "world" to the Indian "world" but also actually to experience something of the breadth of knowledge and habits of condideration and judgment that characterized ancient greatness; ultimately Montaigne's comparison between the ancients and the Indians in "Des coches" involves us in a kind of imitation of the ancients. The example of his own life, offered near the beginning of the essay as a humble analogue to Socrates, seems to promise that the fruit of such imitation will be the maturity to live in a mutable and sometimes dangerous world if not unscathed at least with "les yeux ouverts, la veue livre, saine et entiere [...] sinon sans crainte, toutesfois sans effroy et sans estonnement" (p. 865). The limits "Des coches" sets to Montaigne's "primitivism," to his admiration for the childish "world" of the Indians is now clear. His admiration for their virtues is real enough, but it goes with an understanding of the naïveté that made them so tragically vulnerable to the rapacity of the Spanish.[14] Behind the limits of his "primitivism," moreover, we glimpse the eminently practical side of Montaigne's thought and character, the level-headed prudence and political toughness that saw him successfully through two difficult terms as mayor of Bordeaux and made his help and advice constantly sought after in the midst of troubles that astonished and overwhelmed lesser men.

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1. See, for example, Pierre Villey, *Les Sources et l'évolution des "Essais" de Montaigne* (Paris: Hachette, 1908), II, 285–88; Jacob Zeitlin, ed. and trans., *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne* (New York: Knopf, 1936), III, 362–69; René Jasinski, "Sur la composition chez Montaigne," *Mélanges d'histoire littéraire de la renaissance offerts à Henri Chamard* (Paris: Nizet, 1951), pp. 266–67; R. A. Sayce, "Baroque Elements in Montaigne," *French Studies*, 8 (1954), 7–8; Morris Parslow, "Montaigne's Composition: A Study of the Structure of the Essays of the Third Book," unpublished dissertation, Princeton University, 1954, pp. 214–24, and "Montaigne's Fat Man and the Meaning of 'Des coches,' " *Renaissance News*, 12 (1959), 10–12; Wolf Eberhard Traeger, *Aufbau und Gedankenführung in Montaignes Essays* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1961), pp. 227–30; René Etiemble, "Sens et structure dans un essai de Montaigne," *Cahiers de l'association internationale des études françaises*, 14 (1962), 263–74; Henry E. Genz, "An Early Reference by Montaigne to 'coaches' and its Possible Bearing on the Meaning of 'Des coches,' " *Renaissance News*, 14 (1962), 133–34; and Robert Griffin, "Title, Structure and Theme of Montaigne's 'Des coches,' " *Modern Language Notes*, 82 (1967), 285–90.

2. *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Albert Thibaudet (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1934), p. 874 All parenthetical page references are to this edition.

3. Cf. Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne* (Berne: A. Francke, 1949), pp. 252-53: "Es gibt in den *Essais* keinen konstruktiven Begriff der Geschichte. Sie ist hier eigentlich nicht viel mehr als der wirbelnde Jahrmarkt des Menschlichen. Weite Zusammenhänge, Subjekte höherer Einheit (Staaten, Völker, Institutionen) tauchen nicht auf. Vom römischen, griechischen, französischen Staat ist nicht die Rede, immer nur von einselnen Römern, Griechen, Franzosen [. . .] Seine [Montaigne's] individualisierende Anschauung widersetzt sich, wie auf allen Feldern, so auch auf dem der Geschichte, jeder übergreifenden Synthese." Interpreters of the *Essais* must learn to distrust generalizations as much as Montaigne himself did. He resists even the generalization that he never generalizes.

That Montaigne was aware of important differences among the various ancient peoples and among the various Indian peoples whom he mentions in "Des coches" cannot de doubted. His long acquaintance with classical literature must have alerted him to the fact that the ancient ways of life in Greece and Rome were hardly identical, and his remark, in "Des coches" itself, that the Mexicans were "plus civilisez et plus artistes" than the other Indians (p. 879) proves his sensitivity to distinctions in the New World as well. For the purposes of his comparison in "Des coches," however, Montaigne chose to stress not the manifold differences separating all these peoples but rather the similarities that unite them in two distinct "worlds."

4. Montaigne's "primitivism," his admiration for the simpler ways of life still flourishing in parts of the world only recently discovered by European explorers has been widely discussed; see, for example, Geoffroy Atkinson, *Les nouveaux horizons de la renaissance française* (Paris: Droz, 1935), pp. 427–28; Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press, 1948), pp. 30–31, 238; Friedrich, pp. 253–57; Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York: Scribner's, 1950), pp. 507–508, 523–24, and 461–544 *passim*; Donald M. Frame, *Montaigne's Discovery of Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), pp. 97–104; Edward William Tayler, *Nature and Art in Renaissance Literature* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 36–37, 53, 86–88, 108–109; and Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Bloomington and London; Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 74–81, 125–27. Certain of these critics—notably Atkinson, Frame, and Levin—suggest that Montaigne's admiration for the simplicity and naïveté of primitive peoples is not as unqualified as it first seems. Because discussion has neglected "Des coches" and has centered on the much less complex "Des cannibales," however, the full extent to which Montaigne qualifies his "primitivism" has not been brought out.

5. For a very fully developed and carefully nuanced statement of this critical commonplace, see Friedrich, pp. 403–61. And see also Erich Auerbach's discussion of Montaigne's style in *Mimesis* (Berne: A. Francke, 1946), pp. 271–97.

6. Cf. Montaigne's praise of Plutarch in the same essay: "Il y a dans Plutarque beaucoup de discours estandus, tres-dignes d'estre sceus, car à mon gré c'est le maistre ouvrier de telle besongne; mais il y en a mille qu'il n'a que touché simplement: il guigne seulement du doigt par où nous irons, s'il nous plaist, et se contente quelquefois de ne donner qu'une attainte dans le plus vif d'un propos. Il les faut arracher de là et mettre en place marchande" (p. 167). Montaigne's pedagogic style in "Des coches" imitates Plutarch's method of touching on a matter so as to point out "par où nous irons, s'il nous plaist."

Elsewhere, it is true, Montaigne seems to reject the role of pedagogue. His remark in "Du repentir," "Je n'enseigne poinct, je raconte" (p. 775), for example, is often quoted. Aside from the fact that one may suspect some irony in this particular statement within the context of "Du repentir," however, it should be clear that no simple statement of this kind is likely to define adequately what

Montaigne does in every part of every essay. We must read him with a constantly fresh eye. Cf. n. 3 above.

7. Cf. Montaigne's remarks in "Des destries" (p. 284), and see Machiavelli's fuller discussions of the relative merits of horsemen and foot-soldiers in *Discorsi*, II. xviii, and at the beginning of the second book of *L'arte della guerra*.

8. Near the beginning of the essay, in fact, Montaigne seems to offer his own experience as proof that men can be troubled by danger without falling into self-destructive astonishment: "Tous les dangers que j'ay veu, ç'a esté les yeux ouverts, la veuë libre, saine et entiere: encore faut-il du courage à craindre. Il me servit autrefois, au pris d'autres, pour conduire et tenir en ordre ma fuite, qu'elle fut sinon sans crainte, toutesfois sans effroy et sans estonnement: elle estoit esmeue, mais non pas estourdie ny esperdue" (p. 865).

9. The main source for the discussion of the Indians in "Des coches" is Lopez de Gomara's *Histoire générale des Indes occidentales et terres neuves* (see Villey, I, 137–38; II, 286). Gomara often gives very precise information about armaments, the number of men involved in engagements, etc. See, for example, II. liv, and V. vi.

10. Unless, of course, "*juste*" is to be taken ironically in the sense of "appropriate to" or "what one would expect from" the Indian "world."

11. Cf. Pierre Grimal, *The Civilization of Rome*, trans. W. S. Maguinness (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), pp. 282–86.

12. For the original Latin of Cicero, which Montaigne has altered considerably, see *De Natura Deorum*, I. xx.

13. Lucretius' view is still a problem for modern interpreters. See, for example, Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935; New York: Octagon Books, 1965), pp. 235–42, and Cyril Bailey, ed., *Titi Lucreti Cari De Rerum Natura Libri Sex* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), II, 976, III, 1370.

14. Within the context of "Des coches," of course, the rapacity of the Spanish represents the rapacity of Montaigne's own "world." For reasons of space, consideration of the essay's presentation of the European "world" has been impossible here, but it should be obvious in the light of Montaigne's harsh criticism of that "world" and his sense of kinship with the ancients that he felt himself rather an outsider in sixteenth-century Europe. Of his dearest friend, Etienne de la Boétie, whom he felt to be almost his second self, Montaigne wrote in praise, "Il avoit son esprit moulé au patron d'autres siecles que ceux-cy" (p. 204).