

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Balsamo, Jean. La Parole de Montaigne: littérature et humanisme civil dans les Essais

George Hoffmann

Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070187ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34103>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hoffmann, G. (2020). Review of [Balsamo, Jean. La Parole de Montaigne: littérature et humanisme civil dans les Essais]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 210–212. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34103>

Balsamo, Jean.

La Parole de Montaigne: littérature et humanisme civil dans les Essais.

Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2019. Pp. 392. ISBN 978-88-7885-724-7 (paperback) €29.

Jean Balsamo has single-handedly renewed literary historical approaches to criticism in a series of bibliographies, editions, and key essays that have become indispensable for serious French Renaissance scholars. A significant segment of his work on Montaigne is gathered in this volume which, given both the originals' dispersal and the depth and quality of their reworking here, stands as a major entry in a crowded field. Balsamo begins by marking his distance from biographically inspired criticism of Montaigne (to which he himself has contributed significantly) and follows by puncturing the *Essays'* modern reception by noting how rarely introspection appears in this work celebrated for its "interiority."

Montaigne's book, Balsamo reminds, constituted a "public representation" of its author, not "overheard" private musings. But Balsamo also resists the demystifying impulse behind such a move: while he acknowledges the *Essays'* role in defending Montaigne's recent knighthood, he quickly specifies that Montaigne transformed the terms and values of that rank in an idiosyncratic combination of ways: Socratic, self-deprecatory, and magnanimous. Later, in a series of brilliant remarks about Montaigne's reading habits toward the end of his life, Balsamo emphasizes how starkly Montaigne broke with the protocols and aims of "civil conversation," pointing out that most of his last reading must have occurred in his own book, by himself, and alone.

Another contention that will surprise some readers concerns how thoroughly Montaigne appears throughout as a committed Catholic. This allegiance links inextricably to Montaigne's attachment to his father who, Balsamo trenchantly argues, constitutes easily as central a figure to the *Essays'* project as the often-cited La Boétie. As Balsamo reminds, Montaigne himself foregrounds the *Pater Noster* in his expression of Catholicism which qualifies as a "paternal alliance" (64). Hence the Wars of Religion constitute the "focal point" of Montaigne's work (84), which will participate indirectly in Henri IV's attempt to distance France from its bloody recent past and adopt a measured and philosophical attitude towards the wars (291–92). At the same time, perhaps more subtly, Montaigne's Catholicism reflects his deep appreciation

of Italian culture, nowhere more penetratingly analyzed than in these pages. Far from ornamental flourishes gleaned on his trip to Italy, Montaigne's Italian quotations and allusions betray a longstanding familiarity with Italian writers that significantly predates the voyage, probably inspired in part through Jacques Peletier du Mans.

Although Balsamo draws expertly upon the history of genre, stylistics, and social, political, and religious history, he proves most astute as an intertextual critic. Peeling back the *Essays*' surface to reveal the unsuspected ways Montaigne's sources shaped his thinking, Balsamo discerns the bodies of reading, their sequence and intermediaries, and the editorial policies that lie behind the attitudes, shifts, and progression of Montaigne's own writing. For example: if Montaigne approached Machiavelli through Innocent Gentillet, he approached Tacitus via Jean Bodin, all the while abetting and publicizing his publisher's efforts to promote French translations of the Roman historian rather than anticipating the Neostoic Taciteanism of a Justus Lipsius. In analyses like this one, Balsamo excels at moving from unpacking layers of transmission to using them to explain sequences of chapters not as thematically linked but genetically related, showing how a cluster of essays will spin out from a specific reading program.

Balsamo always manages to accomplish one of two feats: either he presents research that casts significant new light on the *Essays*, or he rehearses well-known questions in a combination and from a perspective that completely changes our understanding of them. One striking example comes when he shows how a well-known passage expressing Montaigne's love for "jumpy," "cavorting" writing has been misread due to not recognizing the technical dance vocabulary that suffuses this page and that identifies, rather, a fondness for measured poetry filled with "pirouettes." Balsamo further advances a cogent argument for Montaigne's anti-classicism in which classical sources are divorced from the "ideal" of beauty and from any pretension to stand as models. Balsamo finely exposes the skeptical attitude that underlies Montaigne's substitution—in place of beauty—of the value of *naïveté*, or one's transparent correspondence to one's intrinsic nature.

Philology combines with beautiful close readings in these pages. Balsamo rarely overlooks historical context, no matter how tightly grained, but he never allows it to overwhelm the *Essays*' status as a literary work of art. The ultimate expression of humanism even as it undermines humanists' idealism,

Montaigne's work becomes above all in Balsamo's reading an expression of humaneness—by which he means the interiorization of classical virtues, adapted to the values and hierarchies of Montaigne's own social world and conducted in the spirit of skeptical-Christian humility. Hugo Friedrich's 1949 *Montaigne* has long and justifiably reigned as the best single-volume study of Montaigne. Balsamo's book now replaces it.

GEORGE HOFFMANN

University of Michigan

Borlik, Todd Andrew, ed.

Literature and Nature in the English Renaissance: An Ecocritical Anthology.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 602. ISBN 978-1-316-51015-5 (hardcover) US\$110.

This comprehensive and scrupulously edited anthology of early modern writing about the natural environment covers writing from “The Creation of the World” taken from *Genesis* to the “Noah’s Flood” excerpt from Michael Drayton’s 1630 *Poly-Olbion*. It is a ground-breaking contribution to the burgeoning field of early modern ecocriticism—or, “early modern natural history” (6)—as Todd Borlik describes it ambitiously and accurately. The publication of this book is a significant achievement, both because of the sizeable body of primary texts assembled and because of the depth of the editorial principles, the comprehensive explanatory notes, and a fresh critical framing of the texts, offered in a detailed and engagingly written introduction full of original insights based on extensive scholarship. The main idea that governs the principle of selection, and that underpins the anthology, is that early modern writing on nature was both complex and diverse, and reveals a kind of ecological and environmental cultural subconscious of a society so “enamored” (5) intimately with its natural environment, and which transformed it regularly so that the environment significantly shaped the vocabulary and literary expression of the period. The book’s offerings are bountiful and full of lexical and stylistic innovations, which attune the modern reader’s awareness to the possibility that early modern nature writing was a project of cultural imagination, responding to the notion of nature being God’s creation swelling