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## The “venatio sapientiae” in Early Modern Age: Montaigne reader of the *Idiota de sapientia*

### 1. THE HUNT OF KNOWLEDGE IN CUSANUS' *IDIOTA DE SAPIENTIA*

The first dialogue of Cusanus' *De idiota*, called *Idiota de sapientia* (1450), starts with a meeting between a layman and an orator. The first, described as poor and unschooled, the second as very whealy and erudite<sup>1</sup>.

Cusanus gradually delves into the characters' attitudes: the layman says that our science is mere foolishness without god and the real science leads to humility; on the contrary, the orator believes that without the literary studies nobody becomes better, and accuses the layman of being presumptuous and arrogant<sup>2</sup>.

The layman's reply reveals the real purpose of this dialogue: the layman judges himself to be charitable and he compares his condition to that of a “horse that by nature is free but that by contrivance is tied with a halter to a stall, where it eats nothing but what is served to it”<sup>3</sup>.

This means that there is a dualism between natural and artificial spheres, and both the layman and the orator are trapped in the second condition, because they are living in an authoritarian public sphere, based on appearance and individual profit<sup>4</sup>.

As Cusanus pointed out, the difference between them consists in their attitudes:

“You think that you are someone knowledgeable, although you are not; hence, you are haughty. By contrast, I know that I am a layman; hence, I am quite humble. In this respect, perhaps, I am more learned [than you]”<sup>5</sup>.

The orator believes to be wise and cannot recognize his own limits; the layman knows that he is ignorant and this is a starting point towards knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, in: NICOLAS OF CUSA: *On Wisdom and Knowledge*, translated by J. Hopkins. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press 1996, I, 1, 497.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 1, 497.

<sup>3</sup> “Equus natura liber, sed arte capistro alligatus praesepe, ubi non aliud comedit nisi quod sibi ministratur”. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 2, 497.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 3, 498.

<sup>5</sup> “Haec est fortassis inter te et me differentia: Tu te scientem putas, cum non sis, hinc superbis. Ego vero idiotam me esse cognosco, hinc humilior. In hoc forte doctior exsisto”. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 4, 498.

At this point, the layman leads the orator to adopt a new kind of epistemological approach, according to which the truth remains eternally distant:

“And for every [intellectual] spirit it is delightful to ascend continually unto the Beginning of its life, although [this Beginning remains] inaccessible. For to ascend [progressively] unto Life is to live progressively more happily. And when the intellect, while seeking its own life, is led to the point that it sees that its life is infinite, then the more it sees its own life to be immortal, the more it rejoices”<sup>6</sup>.

The Cusanus’ argument is clear: everyone tends to grasp Eternal Truth, but no one can completely understand it. The recognition of one’s limits in the search for Truth is the root of happiness and virtue, because it disposes individuals to the authentic relationship with reality and others.

Shortly after, Cusanus identifies this hunt of knowledge with Wisdom:

“It alone is a grade that has an aptitude for elevating itself unto a tasting of Wisdom. For in these intellectual natures the image of Wisdom is alive with an intellectual life, and the power of this life consists in bringing forth from itself a vital movement. This movement is a proceeding—by means of understanding—unto its own object, which is Absolute Truth, which itself is Eternal Wisdom”<sup>7</sup>.

The *venatio sapientiae* is the layman’s constant state of mind, which is coherent with the idea that God-Wisdom cannot be grasped, as it is, by anything but it would be received in another manner (than it exists in itself); in other words, “in the best way it can be”<sup>8</sup>.

At the end of the first dialogue, the orator shows his willingness to learn this kind of sapientia and the layman advises him to reject the academic culture: “Wisdom is not present in the art of rhetoric or in large books but in a separating from these sensible things and in a turning toward [that] infinite and most simple Form”<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> “Et dulce est omni spiritui ad vitae principium quamvis inaccessible continue ascendere. Nam hoc est continue felicius vivere: ad vitam ascendere. Et quando eo ducitur vitam suam quaerens, ut eam infinitam vitam videat, tunc tanto plus gaudet, quanto suam vitam immortaliores conspicit”. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 11, 502.

<sup>7</sup> “Et hic solus est gradus habens aptitudinem se ad sapientiae gustum elevandi, quia in illis intellectualibus naturis imago sapientiae est viva vita intellectuali, cuius vitae vis est ex se vitalem motum exserere. Qui motus est per intelligere ad proprium suum obiectum, quod est veritas absoluta, quae est aeterna sapientia, pergere”. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 26, 509–510.

<sup>8</sup> “Tunc recipitur meliori modo quo potest”. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 25, 509.

<sup>9</sup> “Sapientiam esse non in arte oratoria aut in voluminibus magnis, sed in separatione ab istis sensibilibus ac in conversione ad simplicissimam et infinitam formam”. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 27, 510.

2. WISDOM AND IGNORANCE IN THE DIFFERENT EDITIONS OF THE *ESSAIS*

In his major work, the *Essais*, Montaigne talks about the difference between knowledge and ignorance. This approach may be found in each edition of Montaigne's work, but especially in the last editions where there seems to be greater interest in the Cusanus' book *Idiota de sapientia*.

In the early editions of the *Essais* (1580, 1582), Montaigne writes:

"Yet how it can happen that a soul enriched by so much knowledge should not be more alert and alive, or that a grosser, commonplace spirit can without moral improvement lodge within itself the reasonings and judgements of the most excellent minds which the world has ever produced: that still leaves me wondering"<sup>10</sup>.

This is the prelude to the important distinction between knowledge and pedantry: those who prefer the mnemonic knowledge<sup>11</sup> just taste the outer crust of knowledge (*la croûte première*)<sup>12</sup>. These people, called rhetoricians—with the same meaning of the Cusanian notion of orator—pride themselves on deceiving "not our eyes but our judgement, bastardizing and corrupting things in their very essence"<sup>13</sup>; Montaigne observes that this attitude is characteristic of his time:

"Knowledge is a dangerous sword; in a weak hand which does not know how to wield it is gets in its master's way and wounds him [...]. It is understandable

<sup>10</sup> « Mais d'où il puisse advenir qu'une âme riche de la connaissance de tant de choses n'en devienne pas plus vive et plus éveillée, et qu'un esprit grossier et vulgaire puisse loger en soi, sans s'amender, les discours et les jugemens des plus excellents esprits que le monde ait portés, j'en suis encore en doute ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*. Translated by Michael Andrew Screech. London: Penguin Books 2003, I, 25, A, 151. Michael Andrew Screech uses the following symbols to indicate the different editions of the *Essais*: A=1580; A1=1582; B=1588; C=Edition of Bordeaux (prepared for the press when Montaigne died).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, A, I, 25, 153–154.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, A, I, 26, 163. In the same chapter, *De l'institution des enfants*, Montaigne talks about the metaphor of nourishment in the following way: « Les abeilles pillotent deçà delà les fleurs, mais elles en font après le miel, qui est tout leur, ce n'est plus thym ni marjolaine ». "Bees ransack flowers here and flowers there: but then they make their honey, which is entirely theirs and no longer thyme or marjoram". MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, A, 171. This seems to be a reference to some Cusanus' passages of *Idiota de sapientia*, in which he distinguishes the natural nourishment and nourishment of the books. Cf. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *The Layman on Wisdom*, I, 2–3, 12, 15–16, 497, 503–504. But, as O'Neill showed, it is clear that Montaigne takes this argument from Seneca's *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales* (Epistle LXXXIV): "Apes, ut aiunt, debemus imitari, quae vagantur et flores ad mel faciendum idoneos carpunt, deinde quidquid attulere disponunt ac per favos digerunt". "We should follow, men say, the example of the bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in". Cf. in: O'NEILL, J.: *Essaying Montaigne: A Study of the Renaissance Institution of Writing and Reading*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2001, 30.

<sup>13</sup> « Non pas nos yeux, mais notre jugement, et d'abâtardir et corrompre l'essence des choses ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, I, 51, A, 341.

that this curb on our freedom of judgement and this tyranny over our beliefs should spread to include the universities and the sciences”<sup>14</sup>.

These people “have no self-awareness; they never judge themselves and let most of their natural faculties stand idle”<sup>15</sup>.

On the contrary, the “highest possible form of human nature finds its home in such men”<sup>16</sup> and its aim is “to seek true, certain knowledge”<sup>17</sup>. It is, therefore, necessary to defeat the presumption and recognize the human weakness, ignorance and inability to reach consistent conclusions about Truth<sup>18</sup>. As Montaigne clearly explains, “recognizing our ignorance is one of the surest and most beautiful witnesses to our judgement”<sup>19</sup>, because “only humility and submissiveness can produce a good man”<sup>20</sup>.

Many of these points are further developed in the subsequent editions: the 1588 edition and the Bordeaux copy, discovered in the nineteenth century.

In the first book, in the chapter *Sur les chevaux*, in the wake of Cusanus, Montaigne adds an anecdote about the horse’s condition, a creature free by nature, but accustomed to slavery by man. Montaigne was amazed to see how “many horses are taught to come to their master’s assistance”<sup>21</sup> trained to do all sorts of manoeuvres<sup>22</sup>, referring the reader to the problem of social authority.

In the chapter *De l’incertitude de notre jugement*, Montaigne adds an important distinction between the abecedarian ignorance and the doctoral ignorance:

<sup>14</sup> « [La science] est un dangereux glaive, et qui empêche et offense son maître, s’il est en main faible, et qui n’en sache l’usage [...]. Vraiment c’était bien raison que cette bride et contrainte de la liberté de nos jugements, et cette tyrannie de nos créances, s’étendît jusques aux écoles et aux arts ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, I, 25, A, 158; II, 12, A, 605.

<sup>15</sup> « Qui ne se sent point, qui ne se juge point, qui laisse la plupart de ses facultés naturelles oisives ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 12, A, 559. See also: MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, A, 605 and the addition in II, 17, C, 746.

<sup>16</sup> « C’est en eux que loge la hauteur extrême de l’humaine nature ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 12, A, 559.

<sup>17</sup> « De chercher la vérité, la science et la certitude ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 12, A, 559.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 17, A, 721.

<sup>19</sup> « La reconnaissance de l’ignorance est l’un des plus beaux et plus sûrs témoignages de jugement ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 10, A, 458.

<sup>20</sup> « La seule humilité et soumission qui peut effectuer un homme de bien ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 12, A, 543.

<sup>21</sup> « Il se trouve plusieurs chevaux dressés à secourir leur maître ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, I, 48, B, 321.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 48, B, 326.

“There is an infant-school ignorance which precedes knowledge and another doctoral ignorance which come after it, and ignorance made and engendered by knowledge just as it unmade and slaughtered the first kind”<sup>23</sup>.

According to Montaigne, only the abecedarian ignorance leads us to the genuine self-knowledge<sup>24</sup> and to admit that there are limits to human reasoning, avoiding the formalism and the vices of rhetoric. In the chapter *Sur des vers de Virgile*, Montaigne increases his criticism of the doctoral approach to knowledge: “Erudite works treat their subjects too discreetly, in too artificial a style far removed from the common natural one”<sup>25</sup>.

It is in the chapter *Sur l’art de conférer* that Montaigne brings his argumentation on a new level. He says that some of his friends call him a raving idiot<sup>26</sup> without blaming them for having underestimated him; on the contrary he admits to be an idiot and he wants to improve himself; it follows that his idiocy does not coincide with the brute ignorance described in the first edition of the *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*<sup>27</sup>, but it reminds us of the idiocy mentioned by Cusanus.

In the same chapter, Montaigne says that everyone must seek truth, but no one can understand it adequately or distinctly; so, as introduced in the previous edition, it is well to recognize one’s ignorance and one’s limitations; as the French essayist pointed out:

“Amazement is the foundation of all philosophy; inquiry, its way of advancing; and ignorance is its end. [...] There is a kind of ignorance, strong and magnanimous, which in honour and courage is in no wise inferior to knowledge; you need no less knowledge to beget such ignorance than to beget knowledge itself”<sup>28</sup>.

In the chapter *Des trois commerces*, Montaigne praises the interpreters of natural simplicity<sup>29</sup>, such as Socrates and Cato<sup>30</sup>, and in the chapter *De l’expérience*, he introduces the Cusanian concept of *venatio sapientiae* with the following words:

<sup>23</sup> « Il y a ignorance abécédaire, qui va devant la science, une autre doctorale, qui vient après la science : ignorance que la science fait et engendre, tout ainsi comme elle défait et détruit la première ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 54, C, 349.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, I, 25, C, 159.

<sup>25</sup> « Les sciences traitent les choses trop finement, d’une mode trop artificielle, et différente à la commune et naturelle ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, III, 5, B, 988.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, III, 8, B, 1046.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 12, A, 870.

<sup>28</sup> « L’admiration est fondement de toute philosophie, l’inquisition le progrès, l’ignorance le bout. [...] Il y a quelque ignorance forte et généreuse qui ne doit rien en honneur et en courage à la science. Ignorance pour laquelle concevoir il n’y va pas moins de science que pour concevoir la science ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, III, 11, B–C, 1165.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. FRIEDRICH, H.: *Montaigne*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1991, 296.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, III, 12, B, 1174; III, 13, B–C, 1219, 1227.



“We are born to go in quest for truth: to take possession of it is the property of a greater power. [...] This world is but a school of inquiry [...]. No powerful mind stops within itself: it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities”<sup>31</sup>.

According to Montaigne, this continuous search after truth is the perfect wisdom, that is “entrust ourself to Nature”<sup>32</sup>.

It is clear that both Montaigne and Cusanus introduce this kind of contraposition: on the one hand the character of the layman who symbolizes wisdom, natural knowledge and *venatio sapientiae*; on the other hand the character of the orator/rhetorician who symbolizes pedantry, artificial knowledge and dogmatism. Moreover, both authors praise learned ignorance, as a guarantee of virtue and happiness, and condemns all forms of false knowledge.

### 3. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF MONTAIGNE’S READING OF CUSANUS

We must now examine the period during which Montaigne could have read Cusanus’ philosophy.

As his *Voyage en Italie* (1581) makes clear, at Padua, Montaigne left in the hands of one François Bourges the works of Cardinal de Cusa, which he had bought in Venice, intending to take them on his way back<sup>33</sup>. According to Pierre Villey, Montaigne purchased the Basel edition of Cusanus’ *Opera Omnia*<sup>34</sup>, which also includes the four books of *De idiota*; it is possible that Montaigne may have heard about this edition just during his stay in Basel, precisely the 30<sup>th</sup> September 1580, during a dinner with some local intellectuals, in which he debated over the religious differences<sup>35</sup>.

As is clear from his travel diary, he never did return to these towns again, but he could have read some Cusanian works during the period between his visit to Venice (6<sup>th</sup> November 1580) and his departure from Padua (12<sup>th</sup> November 1580); moreover, Montaigne may also have procured the complete works of Cusanus after his return from Italy.

It follows that Montaigne probably knew the Cusanus’ thought not before 1580.

<sup>31</sup> « Car nous sommes nés à quêter la vérité, il appartient de la posséder à une plus grande puissance. [...] Le monde n’est qu’une école d’inquisition [...]. Nul esprit généreux ne s’arrête en soi: il prétend toujours et va outre ses forces ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, III, 8, 1051; III, 13, 1211. According to Hugo Friedrich, this passage is somewhat reminiscent of Cusanus’ idea of *venatio sapientiae*. Cf. FRIEDRICH, H.: *Montaigne*, 28.

<sup>32</sup> « Se commettre à nature ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, III, 13, B, 1218.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *Diary of a Journey through Switzerland and Germany into Italy*, in: *Works of Michael de Montaigne*. New York: Derby and Jackson 1859, vol. IV, 273.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. VILLEY, P.: *Les sources et l’évolution des essais*. Vol 1: *Les sources et la chronologie des essais*. Paris: Hachette 1908, 112.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *Diary of a Journey through Switzerland and Germany into Italy*, 200–201.

The question becomes more difficult, because there are some possible references to Cusanus in the early editions of the *Essais*.

In the chapter *Comme notre esprit s'empêche soi-même*, Montaigne quotes some geometrical propositions, such as the container-contained relationship and the center-circumference relationship, for the purpose of demolishing all human certainties:

"Then if anyone were to follow that up with those geometrical propositions which demonstrate by convincing demonstrations that the container is greater than the thing contained and that the centre is as great as the circumference, [...] he would perhaps draw from them arguments to support the bold saying of Pliny: *Solum certum nihil esse certi, et homine nihil miserius aut superbius*"<sup>36</sup>.

According to André Tournon, Montaigne may have taken these kinds of arguments by Cusanus' *De docta ignorantia*<sup>37</sup>. In fact, in that work, Cusanus writes that "if it had a [fixed] center, it would also have a [fixed] circumference"<sup>38</sup>, and he adds that a container occupies more space than what is contained (by it)<sup>39</sup>.

There seems to be other references to this Cusanus' work in the *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*, in which Montaigne speaks of the impossibility to grasp the true causes of all things and criticizes attempts to reduce Truth to our own scale and our own laws<sup>40</sup>; similarly, in the second book of his *De Docta Ignorantia*, Cusanus says that God as absolute Exemplar remains unknown;

"therefore, it is fitting that we be learned-in-ignorance beyond our understanding [apprehensio], so that (though not grasping the truth precisely as it is) we may at least be led to seeing that there is a precise truth which we cannot now comprehend"<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> « Qui joindrait encore à ceci les propositions Géométriques qui concluent, par la certitude de leurs démonstrations le contenu plus grand que le contenant, le centre aussi grand que sa circonférence, [...] en tirerait à l'aventure quelque argument pour secourir ce mot hardi de Pline, *solum certum nihil esse certi, et homine nihil miserius aut superbius* ». MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, A, II, 14, 692–693. Montaigne also talks about two lines which ever approach each other but can never meet, a geometrical proposition that he attributes to the humanist, poet and mathematician Jacques Peletier. Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, A, II, 12, 644; II, 14, 692. According to C. Sasaki, concerning his mathematical skepticism, Montaigne may have been influenced by later skeptics and Agrippa von Nettesheim. Cf. SASAKI, C.: *Descartes's Mathematical Thought*. Dordrecht: Springer 2013, 381–382.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. TOURNON, A.: *Notes*, in: MONTAIGNE, M. de: *Saggi*. Milano: Bompiani 2012, 2381.

<sup>38</sup> "Si centrum haberet, haberet et circumferentiam". NICOLAS OF CUSA: *On learned ignorance*, translated by J. Hopkins. Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press 1985, II, 11, 90. Cusanus also talks about the circumference in *The Layman on Wisdom*, II, 42, 518.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. NICOLAS OF CUSA: *On learned ignorance*, II, 13, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. MONTAIGNE, M. de: *The Complete Essays*, II, 12, A, 557, 572; II, 17, A, 722.

<sup>41</sup> "Supra igitur nostram apprehensionem in quadam ignorantia nos doctos esse convenit, ut – praecisionem veritatis uti est non capientes – ad hoc saltem ducamur, ut ipsam esse



The similarities between the two authors' points of views may imply that Montaigne would have known the Cusanus' works before 1581: he probably already knew certain aspects of Cusanus' philosophy through a reading of the *Editio parisina*, *Nicolai Cusæ Cardinalis Opera*, edited in 1514 by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, or the work *Conjectures des derniers temps par le Cardinal de Cusa*, edited in 1562 by François Bohier; this first approach to Cusanus may have led Montaigne to deepen his thinking, and this would explain his purchase of the *Editio Basileensis* of Cusanus' works in Venice<sup>42</sup>.

It is also possible that, in the early editions of the *Essais*, Montaigne has recourse to other authors: for example, Erasmus, one of his favourite authors, "took the idea that foolish ignorance is the highest wisdom"<sup>43</sup> and Plutarch uses the same geometrical propositions presented by Cusanus and Montaigne in his *Platonic questions*<sup>44</sup>, a work included in *Les œuvres morales et meslées de Plutarque*, the Amyot's edition of 1572 found in Montaigne's library<sup>45</sup>.

The only certainty we can have is that Montaigne adds in the last editions passages about the Cusanus' doctrine of knowledge: in the third book in particular, Montaigne exceeds the Pyrrhonism of the early editions and introduces the Cusanian discourse about the hunting of wisdom.

## CONCLUSION

In reference to the Montaigne's relationship to Cusanus there are two distinct critical positions. The first holds that there is a strong difference between the two authors: Harvie Ferguson observes that the Cusanian theology, according to which "God is beyond even the highest ascent of intellect", is ignored by Montaigne, according to which God has given us the book of Nature and the Bible, and "the former, moreover, is the primary source of our knowledge of God, for it cannot be corrupted nor effaced nor falsely interpreted"<sup>46</sup>. Inigo Bocken observes that both authors recognize the opposition between God and man, but while Cusanus opens the possi-

videamus, quam nunc comprehendere non valemus". NICOLAS OF CUSA: *On learned ignorance*, II, Prologue, 58.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. VILLEY, P.: *Les sources et l'évolution des essais*, 112.

<sup>43</sup> KINNEY, A.F.: *Continental Humanist Poetics: Studies in Erasmus, Castiglione, Marguerite de Navarre, Rabelais, and Cervantes*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1989, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. PLUTARQUE: *Questions platoniques*, in: *Œuvres morales de Plutarque*. Paris: Didier 1844, vol. IV, 590–592.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. VILLEY, P.: *Les sources et l'évolution des essais*, 198.

<sup>46</sup> FERGUSON, H.: *Religious Transformation in Western Society (Routledge Revivals): The End of Happiness*. London: Routledge 2010, 166.

bility of a vision out of this opposition, Montaigne encloses man in his natural limits and sees fideism as the only possible approach to God<sup>47</sup>.

On the contrary, some interpreters talk about the close relationships between these two authors: according to Floyd Gray, “Montaigne adopted *Ignorantia* to counter their *Sapientia* for, by extension, his *Que scay-je?* Implies not only what do I know, but what do you know”<sup>48</sup>. According to Pierre Villey and Peter Burke, both Montaigne and Cusanus distrust of the scientific pride and praise the awareness of our inability to grasp the eternal knowledge<sup>49</sup>; as Inigo Bocken pointed out, this acknowledgement of the limit of philosophical thought is the most important continuity between the two authors: the human intellect is not able to rise above the relations of unity and multiplicity—such as those of stillness and movement—, so there is an impossibility of being measure or criterion of the things<sup>50</sup>.

In fact, Montaigne and Cusanus clearly diverge on the religious discourse: the Cusanus’ theology, in which geometric figures and mathematical analogies are used to explain spiritual verities in an abstract way<sup>51</sup>, is completely distant from Montaigne’s rejection of metaphysics and mathematics; Montaigne probably knew at least by reputation the spirit of this theologian, but found his *De docta ignorantia* too mathematical, too scholastic for his taste<sup>52</sup>; but this does not compromise their proximity with respect to the idea of *venatio sapientiae*: although Montaigne is more individualistic and naturalistic than the mathematical theologian Cusanus, for both authors the search for wisdom never ends.

47 Cf. BOCKEN I.: *Friede und Schöpfungskraft*, in: YAMAKI, K. (ed.): *Nicholas of Cusa: A Medieval Thinker for the Modern Age*. London: Routledge 2013, 70.

48 GRAY, F.: *The “Nouveaux Docteurs” and the Problem of Montaigne’s Consistency in the “Apologie de Raymond Sebond”*, in: BERVEN, D. (ed.): *Montaigne: Montaigne’s message and method*. New York: Taylor & Francis 1995, 187. The thesis on the presence of Cusanus’ *De docta ignorantia* in Montaigne’s *Apologie de Raymond Sebond* has briefly been pointed out in a lot of modern studies, such as: cf. LEROUX, J.-F.: *The Renaissance of Impasse: From the Age of Carlyle, Emerson, and Melville to the Quiet Revolution in Quebec*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing 2004, 31; ENNO GELDER, H.A.: *The two reformations in the 16th century*. Dordrecht: Springer 2012, 393; AVIS, P.: *Foundations of Modern Historical Thought: From Machiavelli to Vico*. London: Routledge 2016, 57.

49 Cf. VILLEY, P.: *Les sources et l’évolution des essais*, 112; BURKE, P.: *Montaigne*. New York: Hill and Wang 1982, 15.

50 Cf. BOCKEN I.: *Friede und Schöpfungskraft*, 69–70.

51 Cf. ZORACH, R.: *Meditation, Idolatry, Mathematics: The Printed Image in Europe around 1500*, in: WAYNE COLE, M., ZORACH, R. (eds): *The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2009, 338.

52 Cf. GRAY, F.: *The “Nouveaux Docteurs” and the Problem of Montaigne’s Consistency in the “Apologie de Raymond Sebond”*, note 15, 190.

*Abstract*

*In some chapters of his Essais Montaigne talks about the difference between true and false knowledge in terms of opposition between sagesse and pédantisme, a point of view very similar to that of Cusanus's Idiota de sapientia (1450). In fact, Montaigne indirectly makes references to this text and expressly says that he has bought Cusanus's philosophical works in Venice. In this paper I inquire into the relationship between Cusanus and Montaigne regarding the critique of the pride of human science, and the acknowledgment of ignorance as the only approach to the eternal wisdom of God, showing both the divergent points and their common conception of human knowledge as "venatio sapientiae".*