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TRANSLATED BY CHARLES COTTON

Essays

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INTRODUCTION TO MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

By Donald M. Frame

Montaigne resists simple definitions. He is the first essayist, a skeptic, an acute student of himself and of man, a champion of a man-based morality, a vivid and charming stylist, and many other things besides. No one description tells nearly enough, and indeed it is hard to see which one to place at the center.

Yet this very difficulty points to one answer: that the book is the man. Montaigne's principal conscious aim was to make it so. "I have no more made my book than my book has made me," he wrote; "a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life." In his concern to present himself exactly as he was, he addressed the reader in his natural, everyday language. "I correct the faults of inadvertence, not those of habit," he once wrote in answer to a hypothetical critic of his style. "Isn't this the way I speak everywhere? Don't I represent myself to the life? Enough, then. I have done what I wanted. Everyone recognizes me in my book, and my book in me". His greatest attraction for most readers is that the book reveals a man and that the man becomes a friend and often another self.

Rousseau resented the fact that the *Essays* were not frank

enough to suit him; but Montaigne was not writing confessions. When he started his book he had lost a dear friend, Etienne de La Boétie, to whom he had been able to express, as he never could to any one person again, his every thought, view, and feeling. Self-sufficient though he was, he had an imperious need to communicate. The *Essays* are his means of communication; the reader takes the place of the dead friend.

When we talk to a friend we do not constantly confess and plumb the depths of our soul; for to do so is to threaten, by excessive self-concern, the tacit equilibrium that friendship assumes and needs. Rather we talk about our hopes and fears, what has happened to us, what we have seen, heard, or read that has interested us, how we assess our own actions and those of others. And this is what Montaigne does. He has no use for the introvert's anguish over the impenetrability of ultimates, the absurdity of man's place in the universe, or the discrepancy between our ideals and our attainments. The first two of these he accepts without despair as unfathomable data of human life. The third he seeks to resolve by introspective study of human nature and human conduct, over which we have some control. If by this practicality he loses a kind of depth, he gains in friendly communication with the reader; and this is what he wants.

One of the mysteries of the *Essays* is how the portrait of Michel de Montaigne seems to become that of every man and thus of the reader. No one has explained this. Emerson expressed it when he wrote of his first reading of Montaigne: "It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life, so sincerely it spoke to my thought and experience." Pascal's comment is intriguing: "It is not in Montaigne, but in

myself, that I find all that I see in him."

A writer with whom we identify ourselves is naturally seen in as many lights as he has readers. We each have our own Montaigne, as we have our own Hamlet and Don Quixote. But this is not the only reason for the diversity of Montaigne's public image. Writing as he did over a period of twenty years, from just under forty until his death, he changed as he wrote, recognized and accepted his change, and made his portrait vary to fit his own variation. "I do not portray being," he wrote; "I portray passing... My history needs to be adapted to the moment.... I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict."

Though the evolution of Montaigne's ideas and attitudes is continuous and gradual, there are moments in his thought that have represented different Montaignes to different generations. His readers have seemed, in a sense, to grow older with him. The stoical humanist of the earliest essays was the Montaigne that his contemporaries saw, the one whom Estienne Pasquier called "another Seneca in our language." In the seventeenth century the skeptical revolt against human presumption was seen as the center of Montaigne, the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" as the one important chapter, "What do I know?" as the essence of his thought. Descartes used his skepticism to show that we need a fresh start and that we cannot doubt without knowing at least that we are thinking when we do. Others earlier and later in the century—Marston, Webster, and probably Shakespeare in England, Pascal in France—found a source of cosmic despair in Montaigne's eloquent catalogue of human limitations. A century after Pascal, Rousseau was struck by the self-portrait that had become Montaigne's principal aim

only after the "Apology." Most modern readers, like Gide, are struck by the sturdy individualism, the faith in self, man, and nature, that emerge so triumphantly in the final *Essays*. All these attitudes are in Montaigne; none contains him.

The style of the *Essays* is part of the self-portrait. Free, oral, informal, personal, concrete, luxuriant in images, organic and spontaneous in order, ranging from the epigrammatic to the rambling and associative, it communicates the flavor of the man. Abstract notions live and move and breathe under his pen. Here is a sample, on borrowing ideas from others: "The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; it is no longer thyme or marjoram". Or again, on the theme that small learning makes for presumption, great learning for humility: "To really learned men has happened what happens to ears of wheat; they rise high and lofty, heads erect and proud, as long as they are empty; but when they are full and swollen with grain in their ripeness, they begin to grow humble and lower their horns". The whole chapter on education—a subject in which stylistic anemia is endemic—is a stream of images as vivid as they are appropriate. Often Montaigne exemplifies ideas, with the same effect: complacency in the man who, after making a stupid speech, was heard in the lavatory muttering conscientiously that the credit belonged to God, not to himself; dogmatism in the donkey, earnest, contemplative, disdainful, resolute, cocksure; the narcissism of the creative artist in the friend who kept his diary by his daily chamber pots, and in whose nostrils all conversation on other subjects stank. Each reader can fill in his own favorite examples.

His concreteness is everywhere apparent. He himself tells

us that the speech he loves is "a speech succulent and sinewy, brief and compressed, not so much daintv and well-combed as vehement and brusque". Flaubert described Montaigne's style as a delicious fruit that fills your mouth and throat, "so succulent that the juice goes right to your heart " Emerson found him "wild and savoury as sweet fern," full of a "sincerity and marrow" that reaches to his sentences. "Cut these words," he wrote, "and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive."

Sainte-Beuve summed it up superbly when he wrote: "Montaigne's style is a perpetual figure, renewed at every step; you receive his ideas only in images ... Any one of his pages seems like the most fertile and wild of prairies, a 'free and untamed field': long, 'lusty' grasses, perfumes underneath the thorn, a mosaic of flowers, singing insects, streams beneath, the whole thing teeming and rustling ... Thought and image, with him, it is all one."

Michel de Montaigne was born in 1533 in his father's chateau on one of the vine-covered hills that rise up from the gentle Dordogne about thirty miles east of Bordeaux. The chateau was a "noble house" (conferring minor nobility on its owner) which had been in the family for just over fifty-five years. Great-grandfather Ramon Eyquem had bought it in 1477, and his grandson Pierre Eyquem de Montaigne, Michel's father, had enlarged and greatly improved it. The Eyquems were important and enterprising businessmen with an international trade in fish and wine; the family of Montaigne's mother, Antoinette de Louppes (Lopez) of Toulouse, was of Spanish Jewish origin and equally important and prosperous. The children were brought up in the Catholic faith, and Montaigne himself, three brothers, and one sister remained in it, along with

their parents; one brother and two sisters became Protestants. In an age of fierce religious passions the family atmosphere was tolerant.

At the time of Montaigne's birth the moderate humanistic reform of Erasmus, though embattled, seemed triumphant in France. Three years earlier, Francis I, patron of arts and letters, had founded his country's first nontheological school of higher learning, the future College de France. A few months earlier Rabelais had published his first comic story, Pantagruel, mocking the conservative, scholastic Sorbonne, and, in the famous letter from Gargantua to his son, hailing the advent of a new golden age of learning. Four years later, however, a grimmer age began. Erasmus was dead, King Francis had turned sharply against all reformers, Calvin had published his Institutio and was making Geneva a citadel of militant reform. Persecution grew steadily more severe, especially in the 1550's under Henry II, yet French Protestantism grew stronger, particularly in the region around Montaigne and further south. Before Montaigne was thirty, the religious civil wars had broken out. They were to continue intermittently all the rest of his life.

Pierre Eyquem de Montaigne, in his son's words "the best father that ever was," had served in the wars in Italy and there picked up many new ideas which be put into practice in bringing up his eldest son. To make Michel feel close to the common people, he gave him peasant godparents and sent him out to nurse in a nearby village. He obtained the services of a tutor who spoke Latin but no French, so that the boy, hearing and speaking nothing but Latin until he was six, learned this as his native language. At the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, where young Montaigne was sent for the next seven years, his

fluency intimidated a faculty that numbered some of the finest Latinists in France, and he took pleasure in performing leading roles in some of their Latin plays. In general, however, this schooling did little but teach him the ugly side of education: monotony, confinement, sadistic punishment.

In 1554 his father purchased a position in the Cour des Aides of Périgueux, newly created by Henry II to deal with certain tax cases and first to bring in money by the customary sale of the new offices. Soon afterward, Pierre de Montaigne was elected mayor of Bordeaux and resigned his counselorship to his son. The new court lasted only three years. Violently opposed by others on whom its powers encroached, it was incorporated in 1557, by order of the king, into the Parlement of Bordeaux, where the newcomers were very grudgingly received. Montaigne spent thirteen years in this body as counselor in the Chambre des Enquêtes, which mainly prepared and reported on cases. His failure to be admitted to the more important Grand' Chambre in 1569 was one of the causes leading to his resignation a year later.

Montaigne was a dutiful counselor, but found the work neither enjoyable nor valuable. The injustice and inadequacy of the laws dismayed him and strengthened his skepticism about the powers of the human mind. Hoping to find more worthwhile and congenial employment, he made many trips to Paris and the court, but with few immediate results. Almost the only good thing he derived from his years in the Parliament was his friendship with Etienne de La Boétie.

This bond is eloquently described in Montaigne's chapter "Of Friendship" and in a letter to his father on his friend's death. La Boétie was a little older than Montaigne, married, already

a promising young public servant, known as the author of an eloquent treatise against tyranny. The friendship was a blending of souls which Montaigne later never ceased to mourn. While La Boétie lived, Montaigne did not fully share his stoical views; but the death of his friend gave those views a greater hold on him than before. They color the early *Essays*.

In 1565, after two years of seeking diversion from his grief in various amours, Montaigne followed the urging of his father and married Francoise de La Chassaigne, the daughter of a colleague. She bore him six children, only one of whom lived beyond infancy. Montaigne was a reasonably dutiful husband, but his remarks about marriage are mainly caustic.

In 1568 his father died, leaving him the title and the estate. Before his death Pierre de Montaigne had asked his son to put into French the Latin "Book of Creatures, or Natural Theology" of the fifteenth-century Spaniard Raymond Sebond, an attempt to demonstrate the existence and nature of God by analogies drawn from the levels of his creation—inanimate, vegetable, animal, human. Too presumptuous in its claims for the power of unaided human reason, especially in the Preface, the treatise had been put on the Index of Prohibited Books in 1558-59. When the Index was revised in 1564, the body of the book was removed from the list but the Preface remained. Montaigne's translation is generallv elegant, understanding, and faithful, except in the condemned Preface, where his version sharply reduces Sebond's sweeping claims. Obviously he already felt at this time the same reservations that he showed later in his "Apology for Raymond Sebond."

His new responsibilities as head of the family and lord of Montaigne must have made him more impatient than ever with

the futility of his duties in the Parlement. After a vain attempt to find more useful work there, be sold his position and went to Paris, where he published most of La Boétie's remaining works, with his own dedications to various public figures. He returned home and solemnized his official retirement with the following Latin inscription on the wall of a little study next to his library:

> *"In the year of Christ 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, on the last day of February, his birthday, Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares be will spend what little remains of his life, now more than half run out. If the fates permit, he will complete this abode, this sweet ancestral retreat; and he has consecrated it to his freedom, tranquillity, and leisure."*

The adjustment to idleness and solitude was not easy, as the chapters on those subjects show. Montaigne evidently intended to write but was not sure what he had to say or how to say it. It took him five or six years of thinking and writing to develop fully the concept of the *Essays* as a self-portrait, as the trials or tests of his judgment and his natural faculties. The earliest chapters, written in 1572-74, are mainly short and relatively impersonal compilations of anecdotes with a rather brief commentary. In some, however, Montaigne enlarged on certain problems that then beset him, such as death, pain, solitude, and inconsistency. As he continued, the chapters became longer, looser in structure, more personal, more consistently on subjects of direct concern to himself. The longest and most skeptical of these, the book-length "Apology for Raymond Sebond," was

composed in the main around 1576. After this the self-portrait emerged clearly and became Montaigne's central theme. In 1580 the first two books of *Essays* were published in Bordeaux.

Meanwhile Montaigne's life was not all in his books. He received the order of Saint Michael; he was made a gentleman-in-ordinary of the king's chamber by Charles IX (and later by Henry III); and he was similarly honored by Henry of Navarre. Sometime between 1572 and 1576, after the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew's Day, he made a vain attempt to mediate between Henri de Guise and Henry of Navarre. In 1578 be fell ill with the kidney stone, a disease that had killed his father and that filled him with dread. Finding to his delight that life was still bearable, he now felt he had nothing to fear.

His *Essays* published, he went to Paris, presented a copy to his king, took part in the siege of Protestant-held La Fère, and then set out on a trip, with his brother and several friends, to Rome via the mineral baths of Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. He kept an account of the trip, partly in Italian, in a Travel journal which was not intended for publication and was first published almost two centuries later. Though not a literary work in the same sense as the *Essays*, it offers a fine view of Montaigne in action and a check on the self-portrait he prepared for publication. There are many details—the comments of the papal censors on the 1580 *Essays*, Montaigne's behavior as host at a public dance in Italy, his reflections on pain and death after a night of torture from the kidney stone, to name only a few—that found no place in the *Essays* but deserved to find one.

From Italy he was summoned back late in 1581 to take up his duties as mayor of Bordeaux. He had neither sought

nor known of this election in absentia, which showed the confidence placed in him as an able, loyal moderate, by four of the greatest persons in France, who as a rule did not easily agree—Catherine de' Medici, Henry III, Henry of Navarre, and Margaret of Valois. Montaigne served two terms of two years each, the second of which, as his letters show, was extremely busy. The town was Catholic and loyal to Henry III, but there were extremists of the ultra-Catholic League within and Protestant forces nearby. Working closely with Marshal de Matignon, the king's lieutenant-general in Guienne, Montaigne strove successfully to check trouble before it started, and meanwhile helped keep communications open between Protestant Navarre and Catholic France. His mayoralty ended during a plague in Bordeaux that killed nearly half the inhabitants. Out of town at the time, he returned, with the consent of his colleagues the jurats, not into the city but only to the outskirts for the election of his successor. He was to be severely criticized for this three centuries later.

He apparently went back to his chateau and his *Essays* for about a year. During the siege of Protestant-held Castillon, a few miles away, by a large League army in 1586, he was harassed as a loyal moderate by extremists on either side. Then the plague broke out in the besieged town and spread to Montaigne's home, forcing him to take his family away and lead the unhappy caravan from place to place for six months. By about the end of 1586 he was able to return to his home and his book.

He must have worked steadily and surely to write a great part of Book III of the *Essays*, plus six hundred-odd additions to Books I and II, in 1587. In the thirteen new chapters, generally