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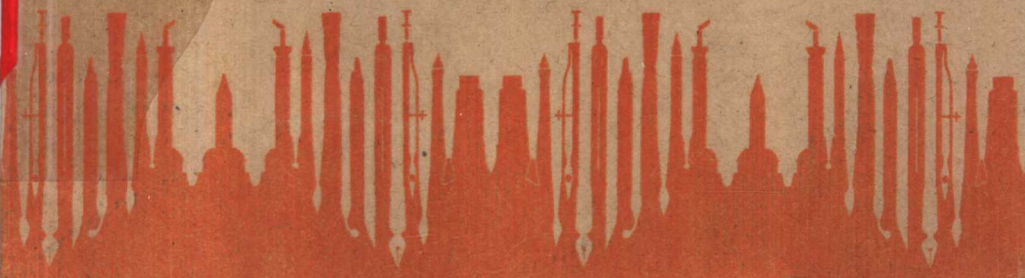
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Essays

蒙田随笔集（节选本）

Michel de Montaigne

〔法〕米歇尔·德·蒙田



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[法] 米歇尔·德·蒙田



Michel de Montaigne



Translated with an Introduction by

J. M. COHEN

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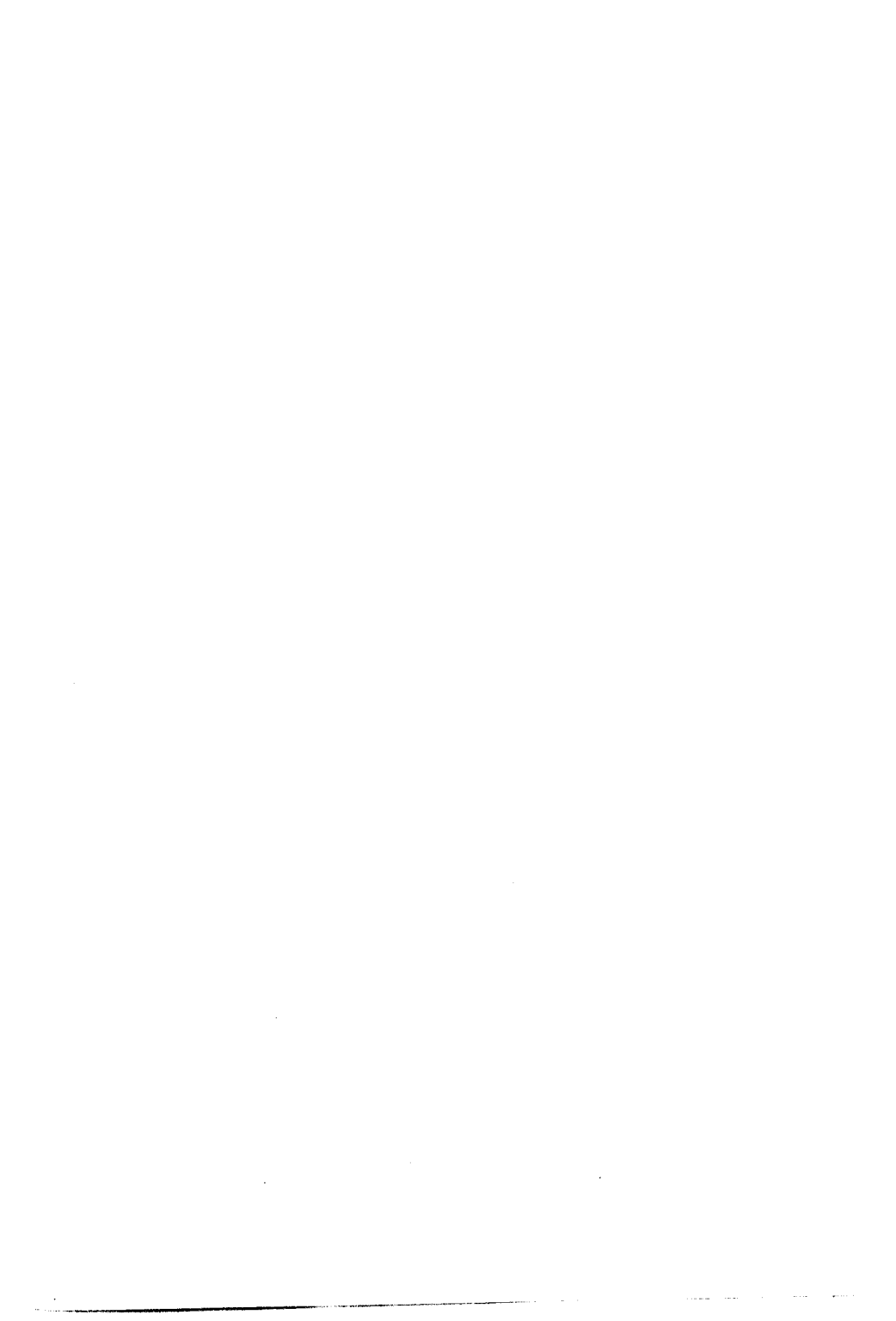
有史以来,无论东方西方,皆有这样一些人——他们仰望星空,环视人类,目极八荒,思接千载;他们探索真理,创立学说,预设问题,启迪众生。这样一种人,我们称之为人类精英;他们披发沥血写就的著述,我们视之为不朽经典。而正是这样的人和书,在影响和推进着全人类的整体进步。

在此之中,毫无疑问,西方文化迥异于中国传统文化。一个世纪前的先哲们,在国门初开之际,即深明此理,而将西学大量引入中国,对中国在 20 世纪的崛起和发展,确曾影响深远。然而,经典浩瀚,殊多沧海遗珠;虽有百年译述充栋,却仍多千秋巨著无觅于市。且译作虽佳,终不如原著之精准;而多语对照,则更能阐隐发幽,得前贤之精髓。因是,值此新世纪初年,我社为继承和弘扬世界文化遗产,促进中西文化交流和提高国人英文阅读水平,特推出“英语阅读文库”。

本文库呈完全开放状,不限时代,不限学科,不限国别,不限数量。凡中外知识界公认的名著皆可入选,所选皆为英文原版或他语英译之善本,旨在与国内业已出版的大批汉译名著交相辉映,并方便学子参照互读,丰富知识,拓宽视野,加深对西方历史与文化的理解。由于国际之别,众多原版好书国人买不到、借不到甚或买不起。本文库则尽量首选国内尚未推出且便于阅读的大众经典,精编精校,分批推出,意在让国人以国内版书价而拥有外版书,为后代求知者行一扇方便法门。

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INTRODUCTION

I

MONTAIGNE'S Essays are, in effect, an extended autobiography, the only one ever to be written in this way. Other autobiographers begin with the writer's birth, and carry on, with more or less digressions, to that moment when he picks up the pen to sketch out his first chapter. Montaigne, however, does not proceed along the line of time; he does not tell us what event succeeded what other. His aim is to present a portrait of himself in a frame of timelessness; to build up from a number of partial sketches the essential man; not as an unchanging being, but as one who retained a core of identity more important as a subject than the events that befell him.

Montaigne, as he says several times, is following a new method. In order to leave this portrait of himself as a memorial for his friends and relations, he makes a number of *trials* – for such is the meaning of the word *essai*, which he invented as a literary term – in order to test his response to different subjects and situations. He writes on education and friendship, on the uncertainty of our judgement and the strength of the imagination, or develops what appears to be an entirely wayward reflection on the subject of cannibals or coaches. But all the time he is making a trial of himself and his opinions, in an endeavour to see which of them are permanent and which temporary; which of them arise from the passing circumstances of his life and the particular climate of his times, with its pedantic scholarship, its religious dissensions, and its cruel civil wars, and which belong to the man himself, Michel de Montaigne.

This constant reference back to the man himself might suggest that it is a monstrous egoist we shall be meeting. If he can consider nothing for its own sake, then Montaigne must surely take an inflated view of his own personality. This is certainly not so. One of the greatest charms that has drawn readers to the *Essays* throughout the four centuries since they were first published, is that of Montaigne himself, as he is revealed in them. He is modest, truthful, humorous, and objective; he is clear-

sighted, unprejudiced, and a great conversationalist. He has, in fact, all the qualities that the most exacting man could desire in a friend.

Montaigne is, moreover, tireless in his search for the truth; neither humbug nor easy theories could convince him. The first forty years of his life were devoted to a search for it in objective form. Yet in 1576, at the age of 42, he ordered his famous medal to be struck with the inscription, *Que sais-je?* – What do I know? He had come to recognize by experience and reading that the intellect was powerless to discover those truths about which he was most curious. This is the period of his so-called scepticism, which was far less complete than his pious detractors have supposed. He was never a sceptic in the modern sense. The astronomical theories of Copernicus, and travellers' tales from the New World, showed him that Western Man, with his classical culture and his revealed religion, was not the centre of the Universe. What passed as truth was often a matter of climate and upbringing, of passion and prejudice, depending entirely on the inquirer's viewpoint. 'When I play with my cat, who knows whether she is amusing herself with me, or I with her?' he asks,

Montaigne could not shrug his shoulders, however, and become, like some men of our own century, a mere conforming relativist. He could not say to his neighbour, in Pirandello's phrase: 'That's the truth if you think it is'. Most things were, as he now saw, unknowable. But there remained one subject about which a man might discover something: himself.

Those great men of the past whose books were Montaigne's most constant reading and to whom he most frequently refers in his writings – Plato and Seneca, Cicero and Plutarch – had found an approach to truth by way of self-knowledge and self-discipline: twin virtues upon which, in Montaigne's opinion, all the classical philosophies depended. So he resolved to follow their example, and in no egoistic spirit set out to study the one subject available to him. In his reflections on death (Book Two, Chapter 19) he observes that in this last act there can be no more pretence. 'We must use plain words', he goes on, 'and display such goodness or purity as we have at the bottom of the pot.' Montaigne's purpose in his writings is to discover just what there is at the bottom of his pot.

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Most autobiographers are anxious to build up a personality, to present themselves as more consistent, more resolute, more far-sighted, and built on an altogether grander scale than they would have appeared to their wives or their intimates. Their ambition, in the words of M. Ramon Fernandez,* is to foist a *false personality* upon the world. Fernandez divides the makers of false personalities into two classes. 'The first', he says, 'claim to possess an individual self, endowed with a positive existence, but one that cannot be projected beyond the boundaries of their own mind without being either distorted or destroyed.' The real truth about themselves, they say, can never be told. 'Men of the second class wish us to judge them', he goes on, 'by certain external signs which they believe will be sufficient to make us accept their pretensions.' Goethe presents himself in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* solely as a poet; the rest is not our concern. But the more commonplace inventor of an external false personality involves himself in continuous posturings and pretences. To defend his vanity and sustain the rôle he has adopted, he must perpetually do violence to whatever he truly is. But the internal kind of false portraiture, though rarer, is even more insidious; and its classic exemplar is Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

'Rousseau', says Fernandez, 'gives an account of his morality in terms of his desires. He makes the person he was coincide with the person he would like to be by explaining his intentions after the event.' The *Confessions* are full of incidents that show Rousseau pretending to emotions that he never had, and that clearly belonged to an imaginary self, whose secret, by Fernandez' definition, could never be revealed. Rousseau takes it for granted that this romantic ego was really in control of events and aware of situations at the moment when they happened, that it was, in fact, capable of consciously, and sometimes mysteriously, planning his life.

Rousseau must therefore explain, though he cannot explain away, any incident in which he fell short of the ideal picture of himself which he cherished in his imagination. Montaigne never explained his actions in this way; he merely noted them down. The word that he uses to describe this recording process is *constater*: a verb which implies no suggestion of moral or wish-

* *De la personnalité*. Paris, au Sans Pareil, 1928.

ful criticism. Had he been guilty of a meanness like some of Rousseau's, he would no doubt have noted it down. Indeed he notes down many things that would be to the discredit of an ideal Michel de Montaigne, if he had carried one about with him. He confesses in his essay on Presumption (Book Two, Chapter 17) to writing a rough style – which we would consider a gross self-libel – to speaking with a provincial accent, to being rather dull in company, and to having largely forgotten his Latin. When Rousseau made such admissions, it was chiefly in the interests of his own glory. If he confessed to an inferior intellect, it was in order to throw into greater relief the alleged purity of his emotions.

Montaigne, on the other hand, by *testing* himself in a number of situations, discovers that, in Fernandez' words, 'his ego is no more than a tendency to act in this or that fashion; it is his knowledge of what he can and cannot do'. His essential personality is, in fact, a kind of observer which, although incapable of controlling the complete mechanism of his life, is able to prevent its springing too many surprises on him. It was to nourish and strengthen this observer that the *Essays* were written.

In Montaigne's view, says Fernandez, 'a man must not identify himself with his impressions and his passions; he is not truly himself except in so far as he refrains from following the promptings of his senses to the end.' Montaigne's watchword, like Goethe's, is *Restraint* (*Je m'abstiens*), which he took from the Greek sceptics, and inscribed, in Greek, on the reverse side of his famous medal.

The reward for restraint was, as Montaigne saw it, consistency:

What I do, I do habitually; and I go forward all of a piece. Hardly anything stirs in me that is secret or hidden from my reason; hardly anything takes place that has not the consent of every part of me, without divisions and without inner rebellion. My judgement takes the complete credit or the complete blame for my actions; and once it takes the blame, it keeps it for ever. For almost since my birth it has been undivided, with the same inclinations, the same methods, and the same strength; and in the matter of general opinions, I adopted even as a child the position in which I was to remain.*

* Book Three, Chapter 10, 'On the control of the will'.

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Such is Montaigne as he appears in one of his final essays, when he has passed from a mood of scepticism to a final and lively acceptance of all experience, even the most painful. In the first forty-seven years of his life, much of his knowledge had been drawn from books. As a young man, he had been at Court, and he had practised as a lawyer at Bordeaux, but the centre to which he constantly returned was his library, which he had built in one of the towers of his country-house. Into it he had retreated in 1571, at the age of 38, to begin his writings in the next year, which was that of the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew. But in 1580, with the first two books of the *Essays* composed and published, though not in their final form, he re-emerged to make a journey from spa to spa of Italy and Germany, in search of a cure for the gall-stones from which he had begun to suffer. Henceforth, his life was more active; and it is this new activity that enabled him to carry his self-analysis further. He had seen himself in comfort, and in the company of his books; now he found himself among men, in strange society, travelling through unfamiliar scenery, and often in severe pain. All this gave him fresh means for self-examination.

He was recalled home from Italy by the news that he had been elected Mayor of Bordeaux, a post once filled by his father. His immediate task was to hold the city for the Catholics, and pacify the countryside. He had friends, however, in both parties; which prevented his gaining political advancement – supposing he had desired it – from his partial success in this task. He left Bordeaux when his second term of office was over, and did not return, since the plague was raging there. After making some detours to avoid infection, he returned to his estate. Some accused him of deserting his responsibilities. But in his own district, scarcely less deadly than the plague, were bands of robbers disguised as religious partisans, who were laying waste the countryside, murdering the peasants, and holding the land-owners to ransom. Once he was captured by a company of freebooters, once they invaded his home, and often he was forced to ride out in pursuit of them; and all the while he was subject to attacks of his cruel complaint, that did not, however, prevent him either from hunting, which he had always enjoyed, or from performing his military duties.

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Montaigne's reflections now were always practical. If he quoted a book it was because it provided an interesting parallel to his own experience. Many autobiographers have retired into some private place from which they could look back on their past life, and make their actions conform in retrospect to the idea they had formed of themselves. Montaigne, on the other hand, emerged from his retirement to finish his portrait. Now the active side of his nature was called in to supplement the passive; and at intervals during the last three years of his life he wrote the new essays of his third book, or added a relevant experience or example to the more theoretical arguments of the first two.

The picture that he leaves of himself is an entirely pleasing one. Not only was he, as has already been noted, modest, truthful, and unprejudiced, not only had he a sound knowledge of his own limitations, but he had also great and endearing powers of admiration for all that he found excellent in books and in his fellow-men. By cast of mind he was a country gentleman, but one who had undergone the influence of the New Learning, which was strongly established in France in his boyhood. Brought up to speak Latin as a child, by a system of education comparable to that instituted by Gargantua for the young Pantagruel, Montaigne came to know and love some Latin writers—Ovid, Virgil, Horace, and Seneca in particular—at an age when children under looser discipline were enjoying the romances of chivalry. Latin he always read fluently and easily, but he knew little Greek, and was familiar with Plato, Plutarch, and Xenophon only in contemporary French translations.

As he again and again insists, Montaigne was no scholar. He seldom read books through, but preferred to dip into them in search of arguments, anecdotes, and observations that threw light on his current interests. He did not care for the apparatus of learning, with its lengthy preliminaries, its strictly marshalled pleadings and proofs. He was always impatient to come quickly to the heart of the matter.

An intelligent man with little taste for scholarship, an active man without the guile, patience, or partisanship to achieve political advancement, Montaigne was rich on the emotional side by reason of a single relationship; his loving admiration for

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his older friend Étienne de la Boétie. With him only did he establish community of spirit. 'If I were pressed to say why I love him,' he writes in his essay 'On friendship' (Book One, Chapter 28), 'my only reply could be: "Because it was he, because it was I"... At our first meeting ... we found ourselves so captivated, so familiar, so bound to one another, that from that time nothing was closer to either than each was to the other.' The friendship lasted for five years, beginning when Montaigne was 25 and ending with la Boétie's premature death in 1563. La Boétie, a judge at Bordeaux and a Hellenist, undoubtedly fostered Montaigne's taste for speculative writing; his influence lasted with his younger friend to the end of his life.

Montaigne tells us something of his father, but hardly anything of his mother, his brothers, his children, or his wife. With them it would seem, his relations were, to quote his own definition, 'natural and social'. One can feel some warmth in his references to his father, but he can have experienced very little emotion in his family life. The highest of all relationships was in his eyes a spiritual communion that could not coincide with the tie of kinship or sex. He found it again at the end of his life in his attachment to his adopted daughter, Mlle de Gournay, who was attracted to him, as he tells us, by his writings long before she met him face to face.

Though Montaigne hardly mentions his wife, he says a good deal about his amours, sometimes in rather frank detail, since they provided interesting material for his observations. We know his sexual preferences as we know his domestic habits, his hours of sleeping and waking, and the processes of his digestion. Until he met Mlle de Gournay, emotion seems to have been absent from his relations with women, whom he thought incapable of the highest kind of friendship. It was in large part absent too from his religion, which was a mere conforming Catholicism. Many of his relatives belonged to the Huguenot party. And he himself would willingly have pared away much of the old religion's dogma, if churchmen had not insisted that the Church's whole teaching hung together.* In fact, he kept his religion apart from his life, seeing God as just, but so far above man

* See Book One, Chapter 27, 'That it is folly to measure truth and error by our own capacity'.