

## Montaigne

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Montaigne is the author of a single book – the *Essays*. But in this one book, written without preconceived plan, without method, as events or his reading chanced to suggest, he claims to give us his whole self. He published four surviving editions of it – four different settings, I might almost say – the first in 1580, when he was forty-seven years old. This text he revised, he corrected, he perfected, and at his death, in 1592, he left yet another copy of his work loaded with emendations and addenda which were incorporated in later editions. Meanwhile Montaigne travelled through South Germany and Italy, in 1580 and 1581, and then filled the important post of Mayor of Bordeaux; he gives his readers the benefit of the observations he gathered in foreign lands and of the experiences of his public life at a period when the wars of religion were profoundly troubling his country.

From this time onwards, leaving public affairs in order to occupy himself only with his own thoughts, he shut himself up in his library and for the rest of his life never left the little chateau in Périgord where he was born. Here he wrote the additional chapters that constitute the third book of the *Essays*; he revised the old ones, corrected, improved, and expanded them. Occasionally, he encumbered his first text, too, with a load of quotations gathered in the course of his continual reading, for Montaigne was persuaded that everything had already been thought and said, and he was anxious to show that man is always and everywhere one and the same. The abundance of these quotations, which turn some of his chapters into a compact pudding of Greek and Latin authors, might cast a doubt on Montaigne's originality. It must indeed have been exceptionally great to triumph over such a jumble of antiquities.

This show of erudition was not peculiar to Montaigne, for his was a time when men's heads had been turned by Greek and Latin culture. Gibbon has very justly remarked that the study of the classics, which dates from much further back than the beginning of the Renaissance, retarded rather than hastened the intellectual development of the peoples of the West. The reason for this is that writers were then hunting for models rather than for inspiration and stimulus. Learning, in the days of Boccaccio and Rabelais, weighed heavily on men's minds and, far from helping to liberate, stifled them. The authority of the ancients,

and of Aristotle in particular, drove culture into a rut and during the sixteenth century the University of Paris turned out almost nothing but bookworms and pedants.

Montaigne did not go so far as to rebel against this bookish culture, but he succeeded so well in assimilating and making it his own that it was never a hindrance to his mind, and in this he differs from all other writers of his time. At most, he follows the fashion by interlarding his works with quotations. But he asks, “What avails it us to have our bellies full of meat, if it be not digested? If it be not transchanged in us? except it nourish, augment and strengthen us?” And again, and more prettily, he compares himself to the bees who “here and there suck this and cull that flower, but afterward they produce the honey which is peculiarly their own; then is it no more thyme or marjoram.”

The success of the *Essays* would be inexplicable but for the author’s extraordinary personality. What did he bring the world, then, that was so new? Self-knowledge – and all other knowledge seemed to him uncertain; but the human being he discovers – and uncovers – is so genuine, so true, that in him every reader of the *Essays* recognizes himself.

In every historical period, an attempt is made to cover over this real self with a conventional figure of humanity. Montaigne pushes aside this mask in order to get at what is essential; if he succeeds, it is thanks to assiduous effort and singular perspicacity; it is by opposing convention, established beliefs, conformism, with a spirit of criticism that is constantly on the alert, easy and at the same time tense, playful, amused at everything, smiling, indulgent yet uncompromising, for its object is to know and not to moralize.

“Montaigne is the frankest and honestest of all writers,” says Emerson, who places him in his constellation of six “Representative Men” with Plato, Swedenborg, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Napoleon. In his study on “Montaigne, or The Sceptic,” he tells us that the *Essays* “is the only book which we certainly know to have been in the poet’s library” – the poet here being Shakespeare. Leigh Hunt, he adds, “relates of Lord Byron, that Montaigne was the only great writer of past times whom he read with avowed satisfaction,” and further on he says, “Gibbon reckons, in these bigoted times [the sixteenth century] but two men of liberality in France: Henry IV and Montaigne.”

For Montaigne, the body is as important as the mind; he does not separate the one from the other and is constantly careful never to give us his thoughts in the abstract. It is particularly incumbent on us, therefore, to see him before

we listen to him. It is he himself who furnishes us with all the elements of a full-length portrait. Let us look at it.

He is rather short; his face is full without being fat; he wears a short beard according to the fashion of the period. All his senses are “sound, almost to perfection.” Although he has used his robust, health licentiously, it is still very hearty and only slightly affected by gravel at the age of forty-seven. His gait is assured, his gestures are brusque, his voice is loud and sonorous. He is fond of talking and always talks vehemently and excitedly. He eats of everything and anything so gluttonously that he sometimes bites his own fingers – for in those days forks were not in use. He rides a great deal, and even in his old age he is not fatigued by long hours in the saddle. Sleep, he tells us, takes up a great portion of his life. And I would on no account omit a little detail which may make American readers smile: when he sits down, he likes to have his “legs as high or higher than his seat.”

The importance of an author lies not only in his personal value but also and greatly in the opportuneness of his message. There are some whose message is only of historical importance and finds no echo among us to-day. In past times, it may have stirred men’s conscience, fed their enthusiasms, aroused revolutions; we have no ears for it now. Great authors are not only those whose work answers to the needs of one country and one period, but those who provide us with a food which is able to satisfy the different hungers of various nationalities and successive generations. “A heedy reader,” says Montaigne, “shall often discover in other men’s compositions perfections far different from the author’s meaning, and such as haply he never dreamed of, and illustrateth them with richer senses and more excellent constructions.” Is he himself such an author and will he be able to answer such new questions as the “heedy reader” of young America may wish to put to him?

In our time and in all countries, constructive minds are in particular request; the authors who are most admired are those who offer us a carefully composed system, a method for solving the agonizing political, social, and moral problems which are tormenting almost all peoples and every one of us individually. Montaigne, it is true, brings us no method (how could a method that might have been valid at his time be practicable in ours?), no philosophical or social system. No mind could be less ordered than his. He leaves it free to play and run wild as it pleases. And even his perpetual doubt, which made Emerson consider him as the most perfect representative of skepticism (that is to say, of anti-dogmatism, of the spirit of inquiry and investigation), may be compared, it has been said,

to those purgative medicines which the patient ejects together with the stuff of which they rid him. So that some people have seen in his maxim “*Que sçais-je?*” (What do I know?) at once the highest mark of his wisdom and of his teaching. Not that it satisfies me. It is not their skepticism that pleases me in the Essays, nor is that the lesson I draw from them. A “heedy reader” will find in Montaigne more and better things than doubts and questions.

To Pilate’s cruel question, which re-echoes down the ages, Montaigne seems to have adopted as his own, though in a quite human and profane manner, and in a very different sense, Christ’s divine answer: “I am the truth.” That is to say, he thinks he can know nothing *truly* but himself. This is what makes him talk so much about himself; for the knowledge of self seems to him indeed as important as any other. “The mask,” he says, “must as well be taken from things as from men.” He paints himself in order to unmask himself. And as the mask belongs much more to the country and the period than to the man himself, it is, above all, by the mask that people differ, so that in the being that is really unmasked, it is easy to recognize our own likeness.

He even comes to think that the portrait he paints of himself may be more generally interesting in proportion as it is more peculiar to himself; and it is by reason of this profound truth that we do, in fact, take so great an interest in his portrait; for “every man beareth the whole stamp of human condition.” And more than this: Montaigne is convinced that, “as Pindarus said, to be sincerely true is the beginning of a great virtue.” These admirable words which Montaigne borrowed from Plutarch, who himself took them from Pindar, I adopt as my own; I should like to inscribe them in the forefront of the Essays, for there, above all, lies the important lesson I draw from them.

And yet Montaigne does not seem to have himself at first grasped the boldness and reach of this resolve of his to admit only the truth about himself and to paint himself as Nature made him. This accounts for a certain early hesitation in his drawing, for his attempt to find shelter in the thick undergrowths of history, for his piling up of quotations and examples – authorizations, I was tempted to say – for his endless gropings. His interest in himself is at first vague and confused; with no very clear idea as to what is important, and with a suspicion that perhaps the things that are most negligible in appearance and the most commonly disdained may in reality be just those that are most worthy of attention. Everything in himself is an object of curiosity, amusement, and astonishment: “I have seen no such monster or more express wonder in this world than myself. With time and custom a man doth acquaint and enure

himself to all strangeness; but the more I frequent and know myself, the more my deformity astonisheth me, and the less I understand myself.” How delightful it is to hear him talking like this of his “deformity,” when what we like about him is precisely what enables us to recognize him as one of ourselves – just an ordinary man.

It is only when he gets to the third and last book of the *Essays* (which does not figure in the first edition) that Montaigne, in full possession not of himself (he will never be that – no one can be) but of his subject, ceases to grope his way; he knows what he wants to say, what he must say, and he says it admirably, with a grace, a playfulness, a felicity, and an ingenuity of expression that are incomparable. “Others,” he says (speaking of moralists), “fashion man, I relate him.” And a few lines further on and more subtly, “I describe not the essence but the passage.” (Germans would say the *Werden*, the becoming.) For Montaigne is constantly preoccupied by the perpetual flux of all things, and in these words he points to the nonstability of human personality which never *is*, but is only conscious of itself in the evanescent moment of becoming. And as all other certainties break down around him, this one at least grows greater and stronger, that on this subject, at any rate – the subject of himself – he is “the cunningest man alive” and that “never man waded further into his subject, nor arrived more exactly and fully to the end he proposed unto himself,” for which he has “need of naught but faithfulness”; and he immediately adds, “which is therein as sincere and pure as may be found.”

I think the great pleasure we take in Montaigne’s *Essays* comes from the great pleasure he took in writing them, a pleasure we feel, so to speak, in every sentence. Of all the chapters that compose the three books of the *Essays*, one alone is distinctly tedious; it is by far the longest and the only one he wrote with application, care, and a concern for composition. This is the “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” a Spanish philosopher, born in the fourteenth century, who professed medicine in France at the University of Toulouse, and whose “*Theologia Naturalis*” Montaigne had laboriously translated at his father’s request. “It was a strange task and new occupation for me: but, by fortune, being then at leisure and unable to gainsay the commandment of the best father that ever was, I came ere long (as well as I could) to an end of it.” This chapter is the first that Montaigne wrote. It is one of the most celebrated and often-est quoted, for Montaigne’s mind, by nature so rambling and unordered, here strives to develop a sort of doctrine and give apparent consistency to his inconsistent skepticism. But just because he is keeping his mind on the lead, it loses

almost all its grace, the exquisite charm of its indolent progress; he is directing it, we feel, towards an object, and we are never enchanted as we are later on when he allows it to venture tentatively down untraced paths and gather all the casually encountered flowers that grow by the wayside. No works, I should like here to remark, are more naturally perfect and beautiful than those which the author has most delighted in writing, those in which difficulty and effort are least apparent. In art, seriousness is of no avail; the surest guide is enjoyment. In all, or almost all, the other writings which go to make up the different chapters of the *Essays*, Montaigne's thought remains, as it were, in the fluid state, so uncertain, so changing, and even contradictory, that the most diverse interpretations of it were subsequently given. Some writers, as, for instance, Pascal and Kant, attempt to see in him a Christian; others, like Emerson, an exemplar of skepticism; others a precursor of Voltaire. Sainte-Beuve went so far as to look upon the *Essays* as a sort of preparation, of antechamber to Spinoza's "Ethics." But Sainte-Beuve seems to me nearest the truth when he says: "With an appearance of making himself out peculiar, of reducing himself to a bundle of odd manias, he has touched each one of us in his most secret heart, and while portraying himself with careless, patient, and incessantly repeated strokes, he has cunningly painted the majority of mankind, and all the more successfully as he has the more minutely dissected his single self – 'wavering and diverse' as he says. Each one of us finds a morsel of his own property in Montaigne."

I consider it a mark of great strength in Montaigne that he succeeded in accepting his own inconsistencies and contradictions. At the beginning of the second book of the *Essays*, the following sentence sounds the alarm: "Those who exercise themselves in controlling human actions, find no such difficulty in any one part as to piece them together and bring them to one same lustre; for they commonly contradict one another so strangely, as it seemeth impossible they should be parcels of one warehouse." None of the great specialists of the human heart – whether Shakespeare or Cervantes or Racine – has failed to have at any rate fleeting glimpses of the inconsistency of human beings. But, no doubt, it was necessary to establish for the time being a somewhat rudimentary psychology, on general and sharply defined lines, as a preliminary to the construction of a classical art. Lovers had to be nothing but lovers, misers wholly misers, and jealous men a hundred per cent jealous, while good care had to be taken that no one should have a share of all these qualities at once. Montaigne speaks of those "good authors" (and what he says is even truer of those who followed him than of those he was acquainted with) "who choose an universal air and following

that image, range and interpret all a man's actions; which, if they cannot wrest sufficiently, they remit them unto dissimulation." And he adds, "Augustus hath escaped their hands," in much the same tone as Saint-Evremond, who nearly a century later says, of Plutarch, "There are corners and twists in our soul which have escaped him. . . . He judged men too much in the rough and did not believe them to be so different from themselves as they are. . . . What he thinks contradictory he attributes to external causes, . . . which Montaigne understood far better." It seems to me that Montaigne, unlike Saint-Evremond, saw more than the mere "inconstancy" in man; I think that it is precisely under cover of this word that the real question lies hidden, and that it was not until much later that Dostoevsky, and then Proust, attacked it so that some people say, "What is at issue here is the very conception of man on which we are now living" – a conception which Freud and some others are now in process of breaking down. Perhaps the most surprising thing about Montaigne, the thing that touches us most directly, is the occasional sudden light he casts unexpectedly, and, as it were, involuntarily, upon the uncertain frontiers of human personality and upon the instability of the ego.

Montaigne's contemporaries no doubt slid over the few passages which shake us most to-day without having eyes to see them, or at any rate to judge of their importance. And, no doubt, Montaigne himself partly shared their indifference, just as he shared their curiosity as to things which no longer interest us; and if he were to come back to earth to-day, he might very well say, "If I had known, that that was what you would care about, there is a great deal more I might have told you!" – Why in the world didn't you, then? It was not your contemporaries it was important to please, but us. The points which were criticised or overlooked by a writer's own epoch are often the very points by which he succeeds in reaching and communicating with us across the ages. To foresee in the midst of the day's preoccupations what will still deserve the interest of coming generations demands a peculiar penetration indeed.

Love does not seem to have played much of a part in Montaigne's life; sensuality played a larger one. He seems to have married without great enthusiasm. And if, in spite of this, he was a good husband, he, nevertheless, wrote towards the end of his life, "It is haply more easy to neglect and pass over all the sex than duly and wholly to maintain himself in his wife's company" – which does not point exactly to his having done so. He had the lowest opinion of women, and beyond the pleasure he takes with them, confines them to the cares of the household. I have noted all the passages in the Essays in which he speaks of

them; there is not one that is not insulting. And yet towards the end of his life he made an exception to this severity in favor of Mlle. Marie de Gournay, his “*filie d’alliance*,” “and truly of me beloved with more than a fatherly love, and as one of the best parts of my being enfeoffed in my home and solitariness.” And he even adds, “There is nothing in the world I esteem more than her.” She was only twenty and Montaigne was fifty-four when she was taken with an affection “more than superabounding” for the author of the *Essays*. It would be ungrateful not to mention this mutual attachment, which was entirely spiritual in its nature, for it is to Mlle. de Gournay’s care and devotion that we owe the extremely important new edition of the *Essays* which appeared in 1595 – three years after Montaigne’s death – as well as the preservation of the manuscripts which served later for the establishment of the most authoritative text.

As to his own children, “they all die out at nurse,” he tells us perfunctorily. An only daughter “escaped this misfortune,” and the successive bereavements do not seem to have affected him greatly.

Montaigne, however, was by no means incapable of sympathy, and particularly towards small and humble folk: “I willingly give myself. . . unto the meaner sort. . . through some natural compassion, which in me is infinitely powerful.” But, for equilibrium’s sake, his reason immediately demands a correction. “I have a very feeling and tender compassion of other men’s afflictions, and should more easily weep for company’s sake, if possible for any occasion whatsoever I could shed tears.” La Rochefoucauld says at a later date, forestalling Nietzsche’s famous, “Let us be hard”: “I am little susceptible to pity, and wish I were not so at all.” But such declarations as these touch me particularly when they come from those who, like Montaigne and Nietzsche, are naturally tenderhearted.

Of Montaigne’s sentimental life, friendship alone has left any trace in his work. Etienne de La Boëtie, his elder by three years, and author of a single short work on “Voluntary Servitude,” inspired him with a feeling which seems to have occupied an important place in his heart and mind. This little book is not enough to make us consider La Boëtie “the greatest man of the age,” as Montaigne did, but no doubt it helps us to understand the nature of the attachment which the future author of the *Essays* felt for a singularly generous and noble character.

Notwithstanding the beauty of this friendship, we may wonder whether it did not put some constraint upon Montaigne, and ask ourselves what the voluptuous author of the *Essays* would have been like if he had not met La Boëtie, and, above all, what the *Essays* would have been like if La Boëtie had not died

so young (at the age of thirty-three), and if he had continued to exercise his influence over his friend. Sainte-Beuve, our great critic, quotes a very fine saying of the younger Pliny's: "I have lost the witness of my life. I fear I may henceforth live more carelessly." But this "carelessness" is just what we like so much about Montaigne. Under La Boëtie's eyes, he draped himself a little in antique fashion. In this, too, he was as sincere as ever, for he was greatly enamored of heroism; but he did not like a man to be artificial, and liked it less and less; more and more, he came to fear that to grow in height must mean to increase in narrowness.

La Boëtie, in a piece of Latin verse addressed to Montaigne, says: "For you, there is more to combat, for you, our friend, whom we know to be equally inclined both to outstanding vices and to virtues." Montaigne, when once La Boëtie disappeared, withdrew more and more from the combat, as much from natural inclination as from philosophy. There is nothing Montaigne dislikes more than a personality – or rather an impersonality – obtained artificially, laboriously, contentiously, in accordance with morals, propriety, custom, and what he likens to prejudices. It is as though the true self which all this hampers, hides, or distorts, keeps in his eyes a sort of mystic value, and as if he were expecting from it some surprising kind of revelation. I understand, of course, how easy it is here to play upon words and to see in Montaigne's teaching nothing but a counsel to abandon oneself to Nature, to follow one's instincts blindly, and even to grant precedence to the vilest, which always seem the sincerest – that is, the most natural – those which, by their very density and thickness are invariably to be found at the bottom of the recipient, even when the noblest passions have shaken him. But I believe this would be a very wrong interpretation of Montaigne, who, though he concedes a large allowance, too large perhaps, to the instincts we have in common with animals, knows how to take off from them in order to rise, and never allows himself to be their slave or victim.

It is natural that with such ideas, Montaigne should feel very little inclined to repentance and contrition. "I am grown aged by eight years since my first publications," he writes in 1588, "but I doubt whether I be amended one inch." And again: "The disorders and excesses wherein I have found myself engaged, . . . I have condemned according to their worth. . . . But that is all." Such declarations abound in the last part of the *Essays*. He also says, again to some people's great indignation: "Were I to live again, it should be as I have already lived. I neither deplore what is past nor dread what is to come." These declara-

tions are certainly as little Christian as possible. Every time Montaigne speaks of Christianity, it is with the strangest (sometimes, one might almost say, with the most malicious) impertinence. He often treats of religion, never of Christ. Not once does he refer to His words; one might almost doubt whether he had ever read the Gospels – or rather, one cannot doubt that he never read them seriously. As for the respect he shows Catholicism, there undoubtedly enters into it a large amount of prudence. (We must remember that the great massacre of Protestants throughout France on the eve of St. Bartholomew's Day took place in 1572.) The example of Erasmus was warning to him, and it is easy to understand that he was far from anxious to be obliged to write his "Retractations." I know that, as a matter of fact, Erasmus never wrote his, but he had to promise the church that he would. And even a promise of this kind is a nuisance. Far better to be wily.

In the 1582 and 1595 editions of the Essays, a multitude of conciliatory additions have been introduced into the chapter entitled "Of Prayers and Orisons." During his travels in Italy in 1581, Montaigne had presented his book to Pope Gregory the Thirteenth, who was the founder of the Gregorian calendar now in use. The Pope complimented him but made a few reservations of which Montaigne took account in the passages he afterwards introduced into the Essays. In these and in others as well, Montaigne insists, to excess and with much repetition, on his perfect orthodoxy and submission to the church. The church, indeed, showed herself at that time extremely accommodating; she had come to terms with the cultural development of the Renaissance; Erasmus, in spite of the accusation of atheism which caused his books to be condemned in Paris, was put up as a candidate for the cardinalate; the works of Machiavelli, notwithstanding their profoundly irreligious character, had been printed in Rome by virtue of a "brief" of Clement the Seventh. This tolerance and relaxation on the part of the church incited the great leaders of the Reformation to a corresponding increase of intransigence. Montaigne could come to an understanding with Catholicism but not with Protestantism. He accepted religion provided it was satisfied with a semblance. What he wrote about princes applied in his mind to ecclesiastical authorities as well: "All inclination and submission is due to them, except the mind's. My reason is not framed to bend or stoop; my knees are."

In order still further to protect his book, he felt impelled to insert other passages of a very reassuring nature, in which he is hardly recognizable, into those very parts of the Essays which are most likely to arouse alarm in the hearts of sincere Christians: "This only end, of another life, blessedly immortal, doth

rightly merit we should abandon the pleasures and commodities of this our life.” This passage (which for that matter was left in manuscript and only published after his death) and other similar ones seem to have been stuck into his book like so many lightning conductors – or better still, like labels of lemonade or ginger ale fixed upon bottles of whisky when a state has “gone dry.” And, in fact, a few lines after the lightning conductor come the words: “We must tooth and nail retain the use of this life’s pleasures, which our years snatch from us one after another.”

This passage of the first edition, which the added lines attempt in vain to disguise, shows the true Montaigne, that “sworn enemy to all falsifications”; and I should be indignant at this cautious recantation if I did not think that it had perhaps been necessary in order to get his wares safely through to us. Sainte-Beuve says of him very justly: “He may have appeared a very good Catholic except for not having been a Christian.” So that one might say of Montaigne what he himself said of the Emperor Julian: “In matters of religion he was vicious everywhere. He was surnamed the Apostate because he had forsaken ours; notwithstanding this opinion seems to me more likely, that he never took it to heart, but that for the obedience which he bare to the law he dissembled till he had gotten the empire into his hands”; and what he said later, quoting Marcellinus, again about Julian – he “hatched Paganism in his heart but forasmuch as he saw all those of his army to be Christians, he durst not discover himself.” What he likes about Catholicism, what he admires and praises, is its order and ancientness. “In this controversy by which France is at this instant molested with civil wars, the best and safest side is no doubt that which maintaineth both the ancient religion and policy of the country,” he says. For “all violent changes and great alterations, disorder, distemper, and shake a state very much.” And “the oldest, and best known evil is ever more tolerable than a fresh and unexperienced mischief.” There is no need to look for any other explanation of his ignorance of the Gospels and his hatred of Protestant reformers. He wishes to keep the church’s religion – France’s religion – as it is, not because he thinks it the only good one but because he thinks it would be bad to change it.

In the same way, we feel throughout Montaigne’s life and writings a constant love of order and moderation, care for the public good, refusal to let his own personal interest prevail over the interest of all. But he believes that the honesty of his own judgment and the preservation of that honesty are more valuable than any other considerations and should be set above them. “I would rather

let all affairs go to wrack than force my faith and conscience for their avail.” And I prefer to believe in the sincerity of this statement rather than ask myself whether he is not bragging a little; for it is as important nowadays that such words should be listened to as it was important in Montaigne’s troubled times that there should be men to keep the integrity of their conscience and maintain their independence and autonomy above the herd instincts of submission and cowardly acceptance. “All universal judgments are weak, loose, and dangerous”; or again: “There is no course of life so weak and sottish as that which is managed by Order, Method, and Discipline.” Passages of this kind abound in the Essays, and as they seem to me of the highest importance, particularly nowadays, I will quote one more: “The Commonwealth requireth some to betray, some to lie” (and, alas, he was obliged to add later) “and some to massacre: leave we that commission to people more obedient and more pliable.” When he resigned his post of magistrate and later on too, when he retired from the mayoralty of Bordeaux to occupy himself henceforth exclusively with himself, he judged very rightly that the elaboration of his Essays would be the greatest service he could render to the state, and – let me add – to all mankind. For it must be observed that the idea of mankind for Montaigne predominates greatly over that of country. After a wonderful panegyric of France, or at any rate of Paris, “the glory of France and one of the noblest and chief ornaments of the world,” which he loved “so tenderly that even her spots, her blemishes, and her warts are dear to me,” he takes care to say that his love of the human race is greater still. I esteem, he says, “all men as my countrymen”; and as “kindly embrace a Polonian as a Frenchman, subordinating the national bond to universal and common.” “Friendships,” he adds, “merely acquired by ourselves do ordinarily exceed those to which we are joined either by communication of climate or affinity of blood. Nature hath placed us in the world free and unbound; we imprison ourselves into certain straits, as the Kings of Persia, who bound themselves never to drink other water than of the river Choaspez, foolishly renouncing all lawful right of use in all other waters.”

Each of us inevitable;  
Each of us limitless; each of us with his or  
her right upon the earth,

says Walt Whitman. How Montaigne would have delighted – Montaigne who was so unblushing on the subject of his person, so anxious not to oppose the soul to the flesh and to proclaim the latter’s legitimate and healthy pleasures –

how he would have delighted to hear Whitman sing, indecently and gloriously, the beauties and robust joys of his body!

One never comes to an end with Montaigne. As he speaks of everything without order or method, any man can glean what he likes from the Essays, which will often be what some other man would leave aside. There is no author it is easier to give a twist to without incurring the blame of betraying him, for he himself sets the example and constantly contradicts and betrays himself. “Verily (and I fear not to avouch it), I could easily for a need bring a candle to Saint Michael and another to his Dragon.” This, it must be admitted, is more likely to please the Dragon than Saint Michael. Montaigne, indeed, is not beloved by partisans, whom he certainly did not love, which explains why after his death he was not held in much favor, at any rate, in France, which was torn in two by the bitterest factions. Between 1595 (he died in 1592) and 1635, there were only three or four re-issues of the Essays. It was abroad, in Italy, in Spain, and particularly in England, that Montaigne soon became popular during this period of French disfavor or half-favor. In Bacon’s essays and Shakespeare’s plays, there are unmistakable traces of Montaigne’s influence.

The British Museum has a copy of Florio’s translation of Montaigne which bears, it is believed, one of the rare signatures of the author of “Hamlet.” It is in this play in particular that English critics have found traces of Montaigne’s philosophy. And in “The Tempest” he makes Gonzalo say:

Had I plantation of this isle . . .  
And were the king on’t, what would I do? . . .  
I’ the commonwealth I would by contraries  
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none; . . .  
No occupation; all men idle, all;  
And women too, but innocent and pure;  
No sovereignty . . .  
All things in common nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavor; treason, felony,  
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,  
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth,

Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,  
To feed my innocent people.

These lines are almost a translation from a passage in the chapter of the *Essays* on “Cannibals,” or, at any rate, are greatly inspired by it. Everything that Montaigne says in this chapter may be of particular interest to Americans, for his subject is the New World, which had been recently discovered, and towards which Europe was turning ecstatic glances. It hardly matters that countless illusions went to make up the prestige of these distant lands. Montaigne delights in describing their inhabitants and the purity of their manners and customs, just as Diderot, two centuries later, painted the manners of the Tahitians in order to shame those of the Old World. Both understand what instruction and guidance the whole of humanity might gather from the example of one happy man.

In his drift away from Christianity, it is to Goethe that Montaigne draws near by anticipation. “As for me, then, I love my [life] and cherish it, such as it hath pleased God to grant it us. . . . Nature is a gentle guide, yet not more gentle than prudent and just.” Goethe would, no doubt, gladly have endorsed these lines which are almost the last of the *Essays*. This is the final flowering of Montaigne’s wisdom. Not a word of it is useless. How very careful he is to add the idea of prudence, justice, and culture to his declaration of the love of life!

What Montaigne teaches us especially is what was called at a much later date “liberalism,” and I think that it is the wisest lesson that can be drawn from him at the present time, when political or religious convictions are so miserably dividing all men and setting them against one another. “In the present intestine trouble of our State, my interest hath not made me forget neither the commendable qualities of our adversaries, nor the reproachful of those have followed.” He adds a little later: “A good orator loseth not his grace by pleading against me.” And further on these admirable lines: “They will. . . that our persuasion and judgment serve not the truth but the project of our desires. I should rather err in the other extremity; so much I fear my desire might corrupt me. Considering, I somewhat tenderly distrust myself in things I most desire.” These qualities of mind and soul are never more needed and would never be of greater service than at the times when they are most generally disregarded.

This rare and extraordinary propensity, of which he often speaks, to listen to, and even espouse, other people’s opinions, to the point of letting them prevail over his own, prevented him from venturing very far along the road that was

afterwards to be Nietzsche's. He is held back by a natural prudence, from which, as from a safeguard, he is very loth to depart. He shrinks from desert places and regions where the air is too rarefied. But a restless curiosity spurs him on, and in the realm of ideas he habitually behaves as he did when travelling. The secretary who accompanied him on his tour kept a journal. "I never saw him less tired," he writes, "nor heard him complain less of his pain" (Montaigne suffered at that time from gravel, which did not prevent him from remaining for hours in the saddle); "with a mind, both on the road and in our halting places, so eager for any encounters, so on the lookout for opportunities to speak to strangers, that I think it distracted him from his ills." He declared he had "no project but to perambulate through unknown places," and further: "He took such great pleasure in travelling that he hated the neighborhood of the place where he was obliged to rest." Moreover, he "was accustomed to say that after having passed a restless night, when in the morning it came to his mind he had a town or new country to visit, he would rise with eagerness and alacrity." Montaigne himself writes in his Essays: "Well I wot that being taken according to the bare letter, the pleasure of travelling brings a testimony of unquietness and irresolution, which, to say truth, are our mistress and predominant qualities. Yes, I confess it: I see nothing but in a dream or by wishing, wherein I may lay hold. Only variety and possession or diversity doth satisfy me, if at least anything satisfy me."

Montaigne was very nearly fifty years old when he undertook the first and only long journey of his life through South Germany and Italy. This journey lasted seventeen months and in all probability would have lasted still longer, considering the extreme pleasure he took in it, if his unexpected election as Mayor of Bordeaux had not suddenly recalled him to France. From that moment he directed towards ideas the high-spirited curiosity that had sent him hurrying along the roads.

It is very instructive to follow through the successive editions of the Essays the modifications of his attitude towards death. He entitles one of the first chapters of his book "That To Philosophize Is To Learn How To Die," in which we read: "There is nothing wherewith I have ever more entertained myself than with the imaginations of death, yea, in the most licentious times of my age." His idea was that, by familiarizing himself with these "imaginations," he would diminish their horror. But in the last edition of his Essays he reached the point of saying: "I am now by means of the mercy of God in such a taking that without regret or grieving at any worldly matter I am prepared to dislodge whensoever

he shall please to call me. I am everywhere free; my farewell is soon taken of all my friends, except of myself. No man did ever prepare himself to quit the world more simply and fully, or more generally left all thoughts of it, than I am fully assured I shall do. . . nor can death put me in mind of any new thing." He almost comes to love this death as he loves all that is natural.

We are told that Montaigne made a very Christian end. All we can say is that he was by no means on the road to it. It is true that his wife and daughter were present at his last moments, and, no doubt, they induced him, out of sympathy as often happens, to die not that "death united in itself, quiet and solitary, wholly mine, convenient to my retired and private life," with which he would have been content, but more devoutly than he would have done of himself. Was it a presentiment of this that made him write of death, "If I were to choose, I think it should rather be on horseback than in a bed, away from my home, and far from my friends"?

If I am accused of having sharpened Montaigne's ideas to excess, my answer is that numbers of his commentators have busied themselves with blunting them. I have merely removed their wrappings and disengaged them from the wadding that sometimes chokes the Essays and prevents their shafts from reaching us. The great preoccupation of pedagogues, when they are faced with authors of some boldness, who yet are classics, is to render them inoffensive; and I often wonder that the work of years should so naturally contribute to this. After a little, it seems as if the edge of new thoughts gets worn away, and, on the other hand, we are able to handle them without fear of injury.

During his travels in Italy, Montaigne is often surprised to see the loftiest monuments of ancient Rome half buried in a mass of fallen litter. Their summits have been the first to crumble, and it is their own fragments that strew the earth around them and gradually raise its level. If, in our day, they do not seem to tower so high above us, it is also because we do not stand so far below them.