

The Master-Essayist

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Four hundred years have passed since Montaigne was born. It is hard to realise that this adorer of the Ancients is already becoming so ancient himself. He remains so modern – the first modern man, more advanced in many ways than this distracted world we live in, which only too closely resembles his in its fanaticism and brutality, and has so much still to learn from him. Today he seems nearer to us in mind than Shakespeare, who was younger and is as immortal; than Rousseau, who imitated his ideas and his self-revelations two centuries later; than our own grandparents. Generations have peered over Montaigne's shoulder into the little mirror where he studied himself, to find their own features looking back at them; generations to come, for whom the most flashing novelties of 1933 have grown dull and rusty, will bend over that mirror still. That a gaily self-indulgent old gentleman in Périgord once loved scratching his ears is and will be remembered where lives, by the thousand, of desperate industry and devoted idealism leave not a ripple on the inky waters of oblivion. Such is justice. He would have been the first to smile at the irony of it. And yet it is not unreasonable. Montaigne has done more to civilise Europe by quietly recording what he was, than they by all they do. That quiet voice has filled our whole world with echoes. They meet us, disguised, in *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest*. Webster wove its sentences into his bitter verse. Ben Jonson remarked in verse as bitter how good Montaigne was to steal from. Bacon followed in his tracks (Montaigne had been familiar with Anthony Bacon at Bordeaux); then Burton, and Addison, and Sterne. His influence has crossed the Atlantic as easily as the Channel, to mould Emerson and Thoreau. And in his own country, unlike Ronsard, he has never lost his place: admired as 'l'incomparable auteur de l'art de conferer' and detested as a pagan by Pascal; a still living friend for Madame de Lafayette and Madame du Deffand; a master for La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld, for Montesquieu and Rousseau; the sceptic ancestor of Sainte-Beuve and Renan and Anatole France. He has appealed to men of all sorts and conditions. 'A peine trouverez-vous un gentilhomme de campagne,' writes Huet (1630–1721) 'qui veuille se distinguer des preneurs de lièvres, sans un Montaigne sur sa cheminée.'

Why? Partly because he dared to wear his heart – not a golden model, but his own natural one – on the sleeve of his dressing-gown. Many have tried to do that since. But Rousseau and Chateaubriand pose, like most of their fellow-autobiographers; the one in a white sheet with a bottle of vitriol underneath, the other in imperious purple. And yet nakedness is not everything. Pepys exposes himself still more completely than Montaigne, not realising that the world is watching; but he has not exerted a tithe of Montaigne’s influence. He gives himself most charmingly away; but it is a simpler self and a smaller gift. Montaigne brings us a richer personality, a subtler brain, a more fascinating tongue; for he is three things in one – the unashamed Adam, but also the thinker and, third, the artist.

Yet if we ask what this thinker thought, we shall find that all his honesty and all his style have failed to give the world an unambiguous impression of what he actually believed. For some he has been the Sceptic; for some, the Epicurean. But it is better to avoid such labels. They are both too rigid and too ambiguous. A sceptic, for instance, may be one who rejects all beliefs, or only other people’s; who thinks that truth has not yet been found, or that it cannot ever be. But the soul of Montaigne is a living butterfly; nothing that can be pinned down in a glass case is really he.

Thus, he distrusted and despised most convictions; yet he retained strong ones. How utterly he distrusted them stands most clearly written, not in his pages, perpetually as they repeat it, but on the rafters of his library in the tower which is all that fire has left today of his château of Montaigne. There he had inscribed half a hundred of his chosen mottoes (we may recall and contrast those in the house of Ronsard), mottoes, above all, that express an almost nihilistic exultation in human purblindness – ουδεν οριζω (I take no definite view); επεχω (I suspend judgment); ακαταληπτω (I do not commit myself); αρρεπως (with nothing to choose either way); παντι λογω λογος ισος αντικειται (to every reason there is as good a counter-reason); *vae qui sapientes estis in oculis vestris* (woe to you that are wise in your own eyes); *ne plus sapias quam necesse est ne obstupescas* (be no wiser than you must so as not to be paralysed); ενδεχεται και ουκ ενδεχεται (it is possible and yet impossible); ου μαλλον ουτως εχει η εκεινως η ουδετερωσ (*it is not more this way than that way, or neither way*). This room is the very shrine of Doubt. The fence seems to Montaigne a pleasanter seat than any arm-chair. It is as if he felt the Universe capable of anything; and the human mind of nothing, except mares’-nests. There are passages in the *Essais* where he amasses *bêtises* almost with the misanthropic

exultation (though more impish and less enraged) of the author of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, and with the same moral: 'Il ne faut jamais conclure.' 'Ma maistresse forme est l'ignorance' – 'Il me semble que nous ne pouvons jamais estre assez meprisez selon nostre merite.' Like some delighted water-fowl he dives again and again into the depths of nescience and uses his wings to splash its dark waters with gusto over his shaking head.

And yet Montaigne was not really a sceptic; on most days, at least. What did he believe in? Christianity? What, indeed, is belief? It is quite false, I think, to picture him as a disguised Voltaire, sneering in his sleeve. No doubt, he might well have conformed outwardly through his life, merely to save it; he might have made a Christian death simply, as Gide suggests, for his wife's sake; but if an essay like that on Prayers, with its casual allusions to his own special fondness for the Paternoster and for the sign of the Cross, is all merely a cunning piece of stagecraft, then instead of the sincerest he was the insincerest of men. And why should he tell us, unless it were true, that he always receives the rites of the Church at the beginning of any attack of illness, to set his mind at rest? Sainte-Beuve has pictured him as a demon or enchanter leading the unsuspecting Christian on and on into the labyrinth of opinions by the light of the lamp of faith; then suddenly he blows it out and through the pathless darkness 'l'on n'entend plus qu'un petit rire.' So Port-Royal may have seen him; such, in effect, for some readers he may have been; but he surely did not see himself as this sort of 'Sphinx moqueur.' So much the worse for his head, perhaps; so much the better for his heart. Irony is fair enough; dissimulation may be necessary; but wanton hypocrisy is no part of the Montaigne we know. He tells us how astounded he was by the confession of an acquaintance that he had continued all his life to pretend beliefs he did not hold, in order to keep some position. Are we to think this too a pretence?

And yet how could he regard life and death with such pagan eyes? Always the heroes of Plutarch, not the Bible, are his models in practice; the heathen sages, not the Fathers, his masters in theory. His book is largely an *Imitatio Socratis*, the very antithesis of *The Imitation of Christ*. He writes of being himself 'ny ange ny Caton' – a juxtaposition that both Cato and the angel would have found equally surprising. Of death he speaks calmly as a half-pleasant sleep; he praises Roman suicides; in a crisis of illness he seems to have contemplated that way of escape as not impossible for himself. 'Sentiments tout païens,' groans Pascal. Could such a man believe in Hell? Certainly for repentance he has little use; he would live, he says, very much in the same way if he had his life over again. For

him health is the most precious thing in the world, ‘un plaisir solide, charnu et moelleux,’ the only object worth taking pains to win; whereas for Pascal it is a sin to desire it. True, Pascal was a religious maniac. But the Papal censors who found no fault with the *Essais* except such trifles as too frequent references to Fortune in place of Providence, or the monstrous suggestion that a heretic like Theodore Beza could be a good poet, were blind owls straining at gnats. When Rome put Montaigne on the *Index* under Louis XIV, she had been a century too slow in the uptake.

It is indeed an extraordinary picture of inconsistency. But Montaigne has given us, I think, the only answer. Man is ‘merveilleusement divers et ondoyant.’ He was a born pagan: yet he believed that he believed. In religion, one half of his brain did not really know what the other half thought. Reason was one thing, faith another. Sometimes the wall between these watertight compartments dwindles to such eggshell thinness that we cannot believe it will hold. Yet it does. Montaigne may find it easy to disbelieve in witches, devoutly accepted by Sir Thomas Browne a whole century later; or in doctors, who are for him much in the same category as witches; he may jettison the Ptolemaic astronomy for the Copernican, while perfectly prepared to see, as we have seen it, the Copernican abandoned in its turn. But though his mind is so critical and so elastic; though he talks often like a pagan theist; though Nature is his true God; the faith of his childhood, I believe, always kept its hold on one corner of that restless, agile brain.

But Montaigne is not immortal as a sceptic who lived ingeniously balanced on the hither side of the last ditch. There were more important and less muddled exceptions to his scepticism. In religion he might be capable, in his own phrase, of carrying a candle in one hand for St. Michael and in the other for the dragon. But in his scale of moral values, though he saw vividly how such things vary with years and frontiers, there were principles about which he never faltered. That marks him off from many a modern intellectual who regards Montaigne as a brother in disillusion. He never forgot his hero-worship, not less real, though better balanced, than Carlyle’s, for the great of antiquity; he never forgot his strong sense of what is becoming, and what is not, for ‘une nature bien née.’ Whatever he doubted, he kept his faith in sincerity and tolerance, in courage and mercy. This faith was largely instinctive; he had an aesthetic loathing for the ‘laideur’ of their opposites. But the man whom no risk of infection could drive from the bedside of La Boétie; who read and re-read the stoic pages of

Seneca; who admired above all characters that of Epaminondas and above all professions that of a soldier, was no more a pure Epicurean than a pure Sceptic.

Is there then any unifying principle behind the beliefs of Montaigne, any 'forme maistresse' under this contradictory character? The master-key to the chambers of his mind may be found, I think, not as he himself suggested, in a disdain of all supposed knowledge, but in a wider impulse – a horror of all constraint, a passion for independence which, in one on the whole so calm and easy-going, is at moments almost a claustrophobia. Whatever else might happen, he loathed the very idea of being caught, cramped, confined by any kind of bond or tie – by theories, principles, or formulae; by the obligations of a profession, or of a favour; by any sort of pedantry or even specialisation in knowledge; by passion for person or thing; by marriage, 'were it with Wisdom herself'; by the cares of property; or by any other compulsion from without or enthusiasm from within. Hence his passion for the escape of travel, his ideal of living 'le cul dans la selle,' his irritation at the idea of being told there was some corner in the Indies, even, he must not go to; hence, too, his intellectual vagabondage, the studied diletantism of this gipsy mind. He was half glad, he tells us, if an acquaintance was ungrateful, because it loosened the bonds between them. 'Extrêmement oysif, extrêmement libre,' he calls himself; 'ennemy iuré d'obligation, d'assiduité, de constance.' 'Si j'ay autre guide que ma pure et libre volonté, je n'y vaux rien.' He would rather be cheated than face the drudgery of reading through a business-contract. An entry in his annual accounts runs: 'Item, pour mon humeur paresseuse, mille livres.' This untameable creature simply cannot live in captivity. 'On n'est bien que dans Farriere-boutique.'

But what then is one to do there? Freedom is a merely negative thing. One cannot live simply by being 'agin' the government,' with no ruling principle but anarchy. What Montaigne wanted was not to be idle, nor a mere spectator, watching the world with wide, curious eyes till it is time to close them in sleep for ever; but to be, naturally and fully, himself – 'jouir loyalement de son etre.' If Freedom is for him one ultimate ideal, Health, of mind and of body, sanity and 'santé,' is really the other. Here he forgets all scepticism; and here he becomes completely un-Christian. His world does not groan and travail. His Virtue wears no rue: 'cette vertu supreme, belle, triomphante, amoureuse, delicieuse pareillement et courageuse, ennemi professe et irreconciliable d'aigreur, de desplaisir, de crainte et de contraincte, ayant pour guide Nature, Fortune et Volupté pour compagnes.' 'Il n'est rien plus gay, plus gaillard, plus enioue, et

à peu que ie ne die folastre' – thus he would have Virtue painted to the young; not 'd'un visage renfrogné, sourcilleux, et terrible.'

It is a strange morality, even now, to English ears. But Montaigne is a child of his race. He comes from further south than Ronsard. I shall never forget staying at Saint-Rémy and meeting on a farm there a local character – 'le poète.' He was an elderly countryman, sunburnt to the very image, in terracotta, of a laughing faun. From his twinkling eyes one looked down involuntarily at his feet as if to find a pair of twinkling goat's hoofs. His latest composition, I gathered, had been inspired by the refusal of his kitchen-fire to light. So he had sat down and extemporised some verses to the effect that nothing mattered now, since France had regained Alsace-Lorraine. Such hilarious irony was too much for any fire. From that moment, he assured us, it burnt like mad. In that happy Midi the art of writing letters, so dependent on the gift of gaiety, still survives; and Montaigne takes my memory back to one received from my hostess in Provence a little later: 'Nous sommes trop tannés, noirs et recuits ici, pour permettre au vent d'est de nous rendre durs, fins et penches vers l'abîme. Le soleil nous fait des coeurs sans ombre. C'est degoutant d'être si vulgaires – voila pourquoi les Parisiens nous meprisent tant.' In his gay courage, in his unembittered irony, in the smiling shrewdness that conceals a capacity for intense and enduring feeling, Montaigne with all his originality remains also, I believe, a typical child of his country at its best. Rousseau, his dour Genevan descendant, craved as passionately as Montaigne for freedom; but freedom, not for sane and gay vitality, but for neurotic self-torment.

There can be little doubt, however, that nurture strongly reinforced nature in making Montaigne so passionate for independence. Most know well enough the story of his education – the solicitude of the best of fathers (another parallel between Montaigne and Horace) for his one surviving son; the fostering of the child in a poor family, to make him both robust and compassionate; the use of soft music, after the child's return home, to wake him each morning; his acquisition of Latin in the nursery at Montaigne, not a syllable of French being allowed there; followed by some play-method of learning Greek, which was at least so effective that when Montaigne's sister had grown up and a friend of her husband's proposed to him in discreet Greek before her 'une debauchée d'amourette,' the astonished tempter found himself ordered out of the house. No modern parent with Freud upon his mind could have been more conscientious than Pierre Eyquem de Montaigne, more anxious to avoid repression or constraint. Only twice did the little Michel feel the rod. Then after some years of this audacious

experiment his father's courage faltered and he was sent like others to college at Bordeaux; but the effects were lasting. Not only was Montaigne a Latinist and classicist for life, the envy of his fellows and the terror of his masters; his dislike of subjection, of pedantry, of drudgery had become equally inrooted and, some will think, exaggerated. Even at the Collège de Guyenne all he learnt was by truant reading in stolen hours.

But if freedom and health were his ruling passions, there still remains the essential question of the use to be made of them. Without activity freedom is empty, and health impossible. More than half his life had passed before he found the final answer, in literary creation.

At first he studied law. Very young he became a counsellor in the Parliament of Bordeaux. Special missions took him to Court. He admits that he had felt the prickings of ambition. He admits that he felt also and indulged far more freely an appetite for gallantry. But he was too frank, too critical, too easy-going and too humane for a successful career in the ruthless France of the religious wars. In 1570, after his father's death, he resigned his magistracy and retired to his estate. He was thirty-seven. After sixteen years of service, the remaining half of his life should be in his own. On his next birthday a quaint Latin inscription in his library recorded how 'Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the bondage of the law and of public office, had withdrawn to rest on the bosom of the learned Virgins.'

But inactivity is not rest. He found his mind, left fallow, was beginning to grow weeds and whimsies. He realised what I believe is true of all lives, and certainly of bookish ones, that well-being depends, for individuals as for states, on a proper balance of imports and exports. Passively to absorb, without some corresponding activity to keep things even, can only leave a mind stuffed yet unsatisfied. Then came the idea of writing down his own stray thoughts. The balance was restored. Montaigne was safe for life: he was safe for immortality.

His first attempts are half commonplace-book, half commentary on it. The *Letters* of Seneca and the *Morals* of Plutarch provided his models. In part he was indulging his eternal curiosity; but he was also in search of thoughts to guide and sustain him on the downward slope to old age and death. But as time passes, he becomes less interested in growing a shell of Senecan stoicism, more in himself and in expressing himself. In 1580 his first two Books appeared. It was time for a change of activity. In 1578 he had been attacked by the stone, of which his father died ten years before: 'la plus soudaine de toutes les maladies, la plus douloureuse, la plus mortelle, la plus irremediable.' An excellent reason for

travelling, to see if spas are any less futile than doctors. And so there follows that seventeen-month excursion through South Germany, Tyrol, and Italy recorded in his *Journal* by this invalid who leaves his robust travelling-companions half prostrate, rushing off the route in every direction to see some new thing; hating, in his eagerness to get on, the very sight of the place where he had passed the night; and ready to go riding off all the way to Greece by land, instead of Rome-wards, if they would but let him. He examines with equal curiosity Swiss stoves and Swiss pastors; appreciates the mountain-scenery of the Brenner; visits the mad Tasso at Ferrara; dines with the Grand Duke (the Francesco de' Medici of Webster's *White Devil*) and the notorious Bianca Capello at Florence; sees at Rome horse-races and processions of flagellants, the circumcision of a Jewish infant and the casting out of a Christian devil; kisses the Pope's toe and argues about his *Essais* with the Papal censors; gives a ball with prizes for pretty peasant-girls at the Baths of Lucca; then learns that he has been elected Mayor of Bordeaux, with a special letter from the King forbidding him to refuse; and so home by the Mont Cenis. All this in the intervals of agonies from the stone, which drove him to groan and yell without restraint, but could not break his energy.

As Mayor his term of office lasted two years. He made it clear with his usual frankness at the outset that he proposed to do his duty but not, like his father, to be a martyr to it. He kept his word; Bordeaux re-elected him for two more. The troubles of the League grew worse; he had to spend days and nights in arms; but his boldness mixed with conciliation kept the peace in Bordeaux. At the end of his second term came the plague which swept off half the population of the city. He was in the country outside at the time; he had no further duties within the walls; he could have done nothing; he stayed where he was. It was not heroic. It was merely sensible. But he had faced calmly enough a case of the pestilence in his own household at Montaigne; and no one who remembers his quiet courage in other crises will join those who accuse him of having lacked it now.

He went back to his pen. The fruit appeared in a new edition of the *Essais* in the year of the Armada, 1588. The second and third editions of 1582 and 1587 had been little changed. But this contained some six hundred additions and the new Third Book. Then on the margins of this new issue the restless pen of this disbeliever in revision began anew to accumulate fresh additions – more and more improper and frivolous, many of them. For as the shadows darkened over his old age, he felt the need of more and more gaiety; just as the closet off his

library was bright with gay paintings of the loves of Mars and Venus, of Cymon and Pero. He refused the invitation of Henry of Navarre, the laughing prince after his own heart who had now become King at last, to be his confidential adviser. He was too old and broken now. In 1595 his adoptive daughter, Mlle. de Gournay, a young lady of Picardy who had been thrown into such raptures by discovering the *Essais* some ten years before, that her relatives dosed her with hellebore, saw through the press a final edition. But Montaigne himself did not see it. Three years before, he had quietly closed at home the Book of Life.

What does he still offer the modern reader? First, himself – the most vivid portrait we have from four centuries ago. With his gift and his passion for intimacy he sets himself body and mind before us – a short man, with a high and loud voice, even in talking to princes, and easily excited to exaggerate; fidgety, even on the most ceremonious occasions, so that he likes a stick to gesticulate with; given to scratching (*‘des gratifications de nature des plus douces’*), particularly to scratching his ears; riding rather than walking, the more so as little men get hustled in the streets; eating only twice a day, but so eagerly as to bite tongue and fingers (for he uses knife and fork little and needs his napkin the more); especially fond of high game, of sauces, of melons, and of fish (so that fast-days are no fasts to him); not content with less than eight or nine hours’ sleep, usually dreamless, with plenty of bedclothes, and his bed to himself, *à la royale*; given to wearing all white or all black; fond of reading (through a coloured glass), but without having read a book for as much as an hour on end in twenty years; delighting in conversation, except after meals when he needs to be quiet and prefers to listen, but hopelessly clumsy and incompetent at any game or practical occupation – such (not to mention various other peculiarities now scarcely mentionable) is Michel de Montaigne, prepared to talk endlessly about himself and life. Are not the two subjects, in fact, the same; and one man the epitome of all?

And what talk it is! He pretends to be quite artless. He even affects a certain contempt for scribbling. It is perhaps partly due to a foible not unknown among eminent writers – such as Meredith, Hugo, Proust, perhaps even Shakespeare – snobbery. For this candid Montaigne, while poking great fun at people who preen themselves about their pedigrees, is distinctly disingenuous in suggesting that his own ancestors had held their lands for centuries instead of trading, as his grandfather and great-grandfather did, in dried fish and wine at Bordeaux. In the same way he speaks rather disdainfully of correcting and revising; though

we still have elaborate corrections and revisions in his own hand. He knows nothing, he says, of orthography; yet he left minute instructions about it to his printer. He knows nothing of punctuation; yet death finds him still altering his own – notably commas into full stops. He pretends that he is irritated by praise of his style; let us take leave not to believe him. It is rather the attitude of Congreve; or of Heredia – ‘Ecrire, ce n’est pas mon métier, c’est une de mes élégances.’ This sage, this mocker so akin to Molière, is at moments not without traces of *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*.

Certainly he owes a great deal of his effect to this same despised gift of style; ‘sa vraie baguette d’enchantement,’ as Sainte-Beuve has called it. There is no better example of its qualities than his own description of the style he likes in others: ‘Le parler que j’aime, c’est un parler simple et naïf, tel sur le papier qu’à la bouche; un parler succulent et nerveux, court et serré; non tant délicat et peigne, comme véhément et brusque. . . non pédantesque, non fratresque, non plaideresque, mais plutôt soldatesque.’ And again: ‘J’aime l’allure poétique, à sauts et à gambades.’ Nine English readers out of ten read him in Florio or Cotton; vivid and excellent translators as they are (though Florio can render ‘poisson,’ for example, by ‘poison’), they are not Montaigne. He *must* be read in French. Pasquier may have reproached him to his face with his Gasconisms; the seventeenth-century Balzac may have regretted that Montaigne did not come after Malherbe had swept and garnished the French tongue. We cannot share their regrets. Perhaps with the milk of his peasant foster-mother Montaigne sucked in some of the energy of that popular speech which, like his own, gains so much force and frankness from calling things by their blunt names; to the preciousness of the literary he preferred the male language of ‘les halles de Paris,’ just as we find him centuries ahead of his time in appreciating popular poetry like the *villanelles* of Gascony. He will be nothing if not natural: ‘Si avons nous beau monter sur des eschasses; car sur des eschasses, encores fault-il marcher de nos iambes; et au plus esleve throsne du monde, si ne sommes nous assis que sur nostre cul.’ Such in their laughing bluntness are almost his final words to us, in the closing paragraph of his last book. He would rather lack even delicacy than force; as when he speaks of ‘les estroits baisers de la ieunesse, savoureux, gloutons, et gluants.’ But it is seldom indeed that he fails to combine them both. Like a man of the people, again, he has whole queues of epithets standing ready at his disposal. It is, I think, a possible principle of style, not more riddled with exceptions than such principles at best must be, that adjectives are best either very numerous or very few. The manner of the typical

eighteenth-century poet where every noun tends to be monogamously married, though seldom happily, with a single epithet serves only to illustrate Voltaire's remark about the adjective being the noun's worst enemy, even though it does agree with it in number and gender. But there is an exhilaration in watching Montaigne produce whole strings of them (he loves them in threes), hurrying in breathless eagerness on one another's heels and yet each admirably suited for its work. A third quality which he shares both with poets like Shakespeare and with peasants like Synge's is his concreteness of imagery. His language has not been vaporised into a mist of abstractions, like so much modern writing, by stewing in a study or by journalistic potboiling. He loathed the jargon of philosophic pedantry, which flourished as greenly then as now: 'Si i'estoy du mestier, ie naturalizeroy Tart, autant qu'ils artializent la nature.' He loathed the affectations of young literary revolutionaries that pestered his time like ours: 'Pourveu qu'ils se gorgiasent en la nouvelleté, il ne leur chault de l'efficace; pour saisir un nouveau mot, ils quittent l'ordinaire, souvent plus fort et plus nerveux.' He knows that a single new image is worth pages of new words; and shows it in his own practice: 'L'ayme mieulx forger mon ame, que la meubler' – 'la vieillesse nous attache plus de rides en l'esprit qu'au visage' – (of his mind in old age) 'qu'il verdisse, qu'il fleurisse ce pendant, s'il peult, comme le guy sur un arbre mort' – (of public office) 'c'est assez de s'enfariner le visage, sans s'enfariner la poitrine.' Cato again, he will say (and he prefers Socrates accordingly), 'est tousiours monté sur ses grands chevaulx'; or he describes how he goes his own way in humorous obstinacy, 'baissant ioyeusement les aureilles.' Even reason and spirit take flesh in his hands, as 'cette raison trouble-feste,' 'nostre esprit maladif, rabat-ioye.' Even dead things at his touch leap up and come alive: 'Le iour de iugement nous prend au collet.' And he speaks, again, of the heavenly spheres 'venants à se lescher et frotter l'un à l'autre en roulant'; whence arise 'les contours et changements des carolles des astres.' Of the less heavenly noise of the clock in his château, he will observe no less vividly – 'ce tintamarre estonne ma tour mesme'; and of the less heavenly connexion of appetite with indigestion: 'Ie hay ce sot accouplage d'une deesse si saine et si alaigne, avecques ce petit dieu indigent et roteur, tout bouffi de la fume de sa liqueur.'

There are, on the other hand, few purple patches of poetic fine writing in Montaigne; though occasionally some spectacle like the universal flux of things will wring from him a deeper note. Bacon, with much less poetry in his soul, put more of it into his prose. When Bacon writes of 'extreme self-lovers' that they will 'set an house on fire, and it were but to roast their eggs,' that is

precisely Montaigne's manner; when he denounces 'the detestable and extreme pleasure that arch-heretics, and false prophets, and impostors are transported with,' he is exactly of Montaigne's mind; but when he says, of friendship, 'a crowd is not company; and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love,' though Montaigne felt the same, there is a poetic stateliness in the language, with its Biblical echoes, that is foreign to the Gascon. But, for that very reason, there is no intimacy in the tone. Bacon, even when writing of Friendship, never made reader feel his friend, as Montaigne does. Nor in real life can we imagine Montaigne treating a friend like Essex, as Bacon treated him. Nor on the other hand can we imagine, as a superscription of the *Essais*, anything like the proud aloofness of 'These are the meditations of Francis of Verulam, which that posterity should be possessed of, he deemed *their* interest.'

This impression of easy familiarity in Montaigne's manner is completed by the 'wild civility' and artful artlessness of the *Essais* as wholes. Wholes indeed they seldom seem to be; leaping about from ships to sealing-wax with a garrulous disorder that, in their final form with all Montaigne's successive additions incorporated, sometimes grows perhaps a little too disorderly and long-winded. But he does succeed admirably in making his pen, not write, but talk. He is his own Boswell. Wayward as Sterne, without Sterne's crudity or silliness, whether he is gossiping about 'the elephant that in the love of an herb-wife, in the city of Alexandria, was corivall with Aristophanes the Grammarian,' or quietly discussing his own death, he creates the illusion of a living voice, ironic, whimsical, sincere. The first of essayists remains the master of them all.

And, after his art, his matter – what has that for us today?

It is too easy to think of Montaigne as rather a carpet-philosopher, an old Gallio in dressing-gown and slippers, nibbling at life in the snug security of his library, like a wise mouse in a cheese. 'I do not greatly think about Montaigne,' wrote Clough, who had learnt from Dr. Arnold a less compromising idealism. But Montaigne's was more than fair-weather wisdom. 'I have a thousand times,' he casually records, 'gone to bed in mine house, imagining I should the very same night either have beene betrayed or slaine in my bed.' His house escaped pillage, indeed, just because he had the audacity to leave it open and undefended. Few remember how in the Religious Wars, once when it was treacherously seized, and again when he was captured out in the country by masqued marauders and robbed, his frank serenity somehow touched the ruffians to forgo their advantage and release him. Few remember how many of these calm pages come from a man

tortured, without hope of relief, by incurable disease. Montaigne was no Horace safe on his Sabine farm in the peace of Augustus; no Fitzgerald in the country quiet of Woodbridge. This Epicurean had not, like Socrates, a Plato to record his fortitude. And because he painted himself so smilingly and unheroically, the world has taken him at his word as smiling and unheroic. He would not have minded. He was not proud of his philosophic calm. He had seen how quietly the poor could die. But for us who sometimes wonder today whether our world will last another year, who exist in an insecurity that would have appalled our grandparents, he remains also a magnificent example of how life can be lived calmly and fully in the midst of earthquakes and on the lap of volcanoes.

He would indeed have found nothing very unfamiliar in an age torn between Communist and Fascist instead of Calvinist and Papist; ready to kill and torture in the name of 'dialectical materialism' or 'the Nordic race' instead of 'the real presence' or 'sanctification by grace.' He would have found little to attract him in the dogmas pontificated on either side by zealots knowing what is best for everybody without even knowing their own selves. He would have been irritated by their impossible positiveness: 'rien ne me despise tant en la sottise, que dequoy elle se plaist plus que aucune raison ne se peut raisonnablement plaire.' He would have been horrified by the vomit of brutality and unscrupulousness to which Europe has returned in the last twenty years: 'l'inhumanité surtout et desloyauté, la pire espece des vices, que ie n'ay point le courage de concevoir sans horreur.' But he would not have sat breaking his heart over them, like some noble idealists one has known – as Lowes Dickinson sometimes did. He could live his life 'sainement and gaiement' even in a France which was falling to ruin during more than half of it. There is always 'l'arriere-boutique' – the garden of Candide. It is depressing that the world should be what it is. But that is nothing new. We should know life by this time. People whose faith waited to be shattered by the War, had either read little history or had read it with little imagination. Indeed life may be all the intenser under the shadow of death: 'sçachons gre au sort de nous avoir fait vivre en un siecle non mol, languissant, ny oysif.' Those brave words might often recur to us today.

Not that, as some imagine, Montaigne's creed of conduct was purely passive. He was moderate and so abused by both parties: 'au Gibelin, i'estoy Guelphe; au Guelphe, Gibelin.' But, like Solon, he held that in an actual civil conflict the good citizen cannot refuse to take sides; that is 'ny beau ny honneste.' It is easy, but absurd, to mistake Montaigne for a *fainéant*; forgetting that he thought the finest profession was a soldier's; forgetting, too, how contemporaries like Henri

IV, de Thou, or Florimond de Roemond admired his practical competence and knowledge of affairs. But it is true, I think, to say that his courage and his disposition had a tendency to be somewhat passive. He knew this himself: 'le danger n'estoit pas que ie feisse mal, mais que ie ne feisse rien.' But that would not have weakened a jot his belief that to replace voting by violence, argument by apostolic blows and knocks, is a relapse from civilisation to barbarism. If there remains one thing clearly worth fighting against in the modern world, it is surely this; if there remains one thing worth fighting for, it is freedom of thought and of speech, the rights of the individual intelligence against the new and monstrous chimera of the state. Montaigne himself exists as a perpetual witness to the benefits of tolerance; for had France not opened her doors to the outcast Jews of Spain and Portugal from whose race his mother sprang, the world would never have been enriched with the *Essais*.

But a more serious drawback, some will feel, to Montaigne's attitude towards life is a certain lack in him of passion, a slightly Oriental fatalism. It is part of his general defensiveness. Here too he dreads entanglements. In many ways he is what a modern psycho-analyst might call 'normal,' to a quite extraordinary degree; just as physically in his youth he so glowed with health that a doctor recommended an old consumptive to get Montaigne to live with him, so as to absorb some of this out-flow of vitality. That is his life's triumph. But it is possible to feel also that he analysed himself a little too much; that he dried and hardened his heart by excessive dissection. Pity he felt intensely: 'i'ay une merueilleuse laschete vers la misericorde et mansuetude.' Knowing so little, he felt, we know at least that pain is an evil. He would not have joined some of our delicate gentlemen of letters in deriving a vicarious virility from contemplating the 'mystic and aesthetic beauty' of bull-fights. 'I cannot well endure,' he says in Florio, with an echo of Shakespeare, 'a seelie dewbedabled hare to groane when she is seized upon by the houndes, though hunting be a violent pleasure.' And he is filled with rage by the exploitation, then as now, of the native by the European: 'the richest, the fairest, and the best part of the world topsiturvied, ruined, and defaced for the traffick of Pearles and Pepper.' But there remains about him a certain lack of affection. His wife seems, on the whole, to have been little more than his housekeeper (though we know that his feelings varied and that she took devoted care of his writings after his death). His mother who survived him, he never mentions. His daughter seems equally a matter of indifference. He refers to having lost 'two *or* three children' in infancy. He would prefer to die in an inn rather than at home (and yet is that so strange?).

He speaks fondly of friendship; but little of friends – with one exception. And that one is long dead.

We should have a different impression, I think, had we known Montaigne younger. Like Johnson, he is elderly – far older indeed than his years – when we first come to know him intimately. Yet for his father, it is clear, he had felt deep affection; it was to please him that Montaigne married and that he translated Ramond Sebond. And as for the one perfect friend, Étienne de la Boétie, let Montaigne speak for himself of what his life has been since death ended that: ‘Si ie la compare aux quatre annees qu’il m’a este donne de iouyr de la douce compaignie et societe de ce personnage, ce n’est que fumee, ce n’est qu’une nuict obscure et ennuyeuse.’ Some will be horrified that he deliberately set himself to distract his misery at the time with love-affairs; and some will understand. Seventeen years later, at the Baths of Lucca, a reminder of that lost friend is still enough to plunge him in a fit of melancholy. Montaigne was not cold; but he had grown afraid of warmth. He will not or cannot, like Ronsard, fly back and back to the flame.

But there is wisdom which is wise for mankind at large and wisdom which is wise only for certain individuals. Montaigne’s hatred of brutality, fanaticism, and the baseness unworthy of ‘une nature bien née’ is valid for the whole world. But it is for those who are so built themselves as to find his personality sympathetic, that he becomes, what he sometimes seems to me, perhaps the wisest man who has ever written. He has that calm and dignified sanity which distinguishes some Chinese poetry, some eighteenth-century prose. ‘Strong feelings, but no violent beliefs, no wild enthusiasms’ – that is surely one possible ideal of what human character should be. Strong feelings, for nothing great gets done without them; but no violent beliefs, for all violent beliefs involve both bad thinking and bad manners. One should have the strength of mind to act, knowing exactly the odds against one; and not need faith, to pretend they are really in one’s favour. Gaiety; health of mind and, for long, of body; courage; affection; good sense; the ceaseless curiosity of a scientist; the passion for beauty and the genius of an artist; the wit and humour of a man of the world; the vigorous shrewdness, on occasion, of a man of action – all these qualities Montaigne possessed. I do not know many others worth possessing. He owed them, largely, to France, to Greece, and to Rome. He is an enduring example of what humanism can do. Today we have lost faith in humanism. We are marvellous scientists, excellent engineers; and our art seems to me largely vulgar, our poetry pitiable. In ancient Alexandria, too, they invented steam-engines

and measured the earth's diameter; but it is Athens men remember. Today Montaigne would rather have lived in a garret, alone with his own thoughts, than have earned his living in many of our occupations, or joined many of the movements of the modern world. After all, would he be wrong? If only we were wise, I believe that among the essential text-books of our schools, and of our schoolmasters, would be the *Lives* of Plutarch and the *Essais* of Montaigne.