

An Essayist of Three Hundred Years Ago

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

(*The National Review*, 1883, v. I, pp. 175–192)

The great American essayist, in his characteristic representations of representative men, has represented the most charming of French essayist as the typical sceptic. Mr. Emerson's genius, however, expresses itself in epigrams, and no epigram can accurately express the genius of Montaigne. It is many-sided, and not one of its many sides is permanently uppermost in his own expression of it. Balzac (the elder)* likened Montaigne's discourse to a body all in pieces; which, though they lie together, are nowhere joined together. And here, if anywhere, the style is the man. I do not quarrel with Mr. Emerson's definition of the man – it is admirably employed by him, and it is as good as any other; but all are misleading, for which reason I have resisted the temptation to call the subject of these remarks “an egotist of three hundred years ago”; though, if one wanted to express the perfection of literary egotism by the name of a single writer, I know of none which would better serve the purpose than that of Michel, Seigneur de Montaigne.

I say, the perfection of literary egotism; for not of Rousseau, not of Byron, not of any other literary egotist, can this be said: that the more his egotism is pronounced, the less obtrusive it appears, and the more insinuating it becomes. Yet this is the literary effect of Montaigne's egotism; and the reason of it is that, when he talks about himself, he talks about us all, – nor does he talk to us, nor at us, but with us. Talking is the only word applicable to the style of this writer. We do not read him, we converse with him. He says of himself, “I speak better than I write, if either were to be preferred where neither is worth anything.” Voltaire said of him, “*On se plait à converser, à changer de discours et d'opinion avec lui*”; and La Harpe, “*Ce n'est pas un livre qu'on lit, c'est une conversation qu'on écoute.*” To theorists and system-mongers Montaigne is a stumbling-block and an offence. Pascal

*The favourite of Cardinal Richelieu; he had great influence on the development of French prose. But his criticism of Montaigne, though it does not go very far, is intelligent and fair. When Montaigne wrote, France had no Academy; and the man of whom Boileau said “*Enfin Malherbe vint*” had not yet appeared. But considering how soon and how severely those peculiarities in the style of Montaigne, which to us foreigners, after the lapse of three hundred years, are the most pleasing, because they are the most characteristic of his time and province, were condemned by his own countrymen. Balzac deserves great credit for his unreserved recognition of the grace and strength and beauty of Montaigne's writing, notwithstanding its bad spelling and its Perigordian barbarisms.

cannot speak of him without flying into a passion; Malebranche asserts that his ideas are false though fine, and his discourses ill-reasoned though well-imagined. Scaliger called him an audacious ignoramus. The systematic Diderot was distressed by his slipshod ways. But, for three hundred years, men of the world have cherished his society, and found their account in it. To John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, he was "the incomparable Montaigne." George Saville, Lord Halifax, spoke of his essays as "the book in the world I am best entertained with." He is certainly the best of talkers; but were he one of the worst he would certainly still be an instructive, if not an entertaining companion. For no man can tell us all about himself without telling us something about his age, and the age of Montaigne was crowded with incidents and characters which still excite our curiosity. Born in 1583, he was within six months of sixty years old when he died in 1592. His life, therefore, was not a long one, yet it was long enough to make him the contemporary of six kings of France. It began during the reign of François I, it ended during that of Henri IV, and it embraced one of the most interesting periods in the history of his country. At the opening of it stands the image of one prince, and at the close of it that of another, in each of whom was concentrated the whole character of their time and nation.

From Valois to Bourbon! This is the short picturesque road along which the youth of France sped gaily to its dismal end. Mirth and Folly were its mates. A thoughtless, passionate, pugnacious, gallant, graceful, light-hearted youth it was. Untrained to any arts but those of love and war, yet withal open-minded and quick-witted. Into the new era this Young France stepped with a courage and gaiety which, though severely repressed, and its life considerably saddened, by the terrible Cardinal, revived in the person of another Richelieu, and avenged themselves on that severe and dreadful name by forcing history to associate it with every kind of charming frivolity. Gaiety is the natural atmosphere of youth, and it is sad to see its bright elastic element grow dull and gross when manhood seriously begins to study what men call "the happiness of the people." But the suppression of national gaiety is always the first step taken, and generally the last point reached, by reformers in their way of making people happy. To the stern apostles of the public good, the carelessly-contented are the worst of criminal classes. It was not in colour only that the Jacobin's Cap resembled the Cardinal's Hat: and once more, under its sanguinary regimen, Mirth and Folly had to mount the scaffold. Folly survived the Red Republic, and still remains in France, ready to play the fool without Mirth or Grace: but these have disappeared, and to the Drab Republic neither M. Grevy nor M. Gambetta have restored them.

Changed, and more than middle-aged, as they are, however, the modern French still delight in the stories of their younger and livelier days. A population of little land-holders and little fund-holders recalls with pride the time when it was called Coligny, Guise, Montmorency, Brisa, and Bussy. And never did this middle-aged France more cherish the chronicle of its early sins, never did it better love to revive those records of its youthful follies and adventures which were re-written for it in the dissolute pages of Brantôme, than under the sober government of its Burgher King. Throughout that period (the only brilliant intellectual period of Modern France) the nightly scenes of the playhouse, the daily pages of the popular novel, even the dignified chairs of the Academy, all were busily occupied about the payment of intellectual tribute to the graces and vices, the charms and crimes, of a world that had fallen headlong and headless into the basket of the guillotine. The stage then restored to the Tour de Nesle its dangerous assignations, to the Louvre its political plots, to the Bastille its mysterious prisoners, and to the Pré aux Clercs its saucy duellers. And, when the play was done, and the theatric curtain had fallen upon the intrigues of kings and cardinals and courtiers, the rivalries of Catholic and Huguenot houses, or the midnight meetings between masked ladies and ruffled rakes, then the grocers of Paris spread homewards their gingham umbrellas, went to sleep Mousquetaires, and awoke National Guards.

What Brantôme has related, Montaigne saw. He was secretary to Catherine de Medicis, and wrote from her dictation the instructions she addressed to her son, Charles IX, *sur la manière de régner*. To him, at one time or another, the three marriages of Mary Stuart, and her death, the battles of St. Quentin, St. Denis, Jarnac, Moncontour, the peace of St. Germain, the massacre of St. Bartholomew, the revolt of the Netherlands and the execution of Egmont and Horn, the recovery of Calais, the day of the Barricades, the assassinations of Condé and the Duc de Guise, were events of the day. But he was busied about other things. He tells us that all this while he was to the Ghibelins Guelph, and to the Guelphs a Ghibelin. "It is a truth," he says, "and I fear not to confess it; I could, were it necessary, hold a candle to St. Michael, and another to his serpent, after the manner of the old woman. I will follow the right side even to the fire, but will keep out of it if possible. Let Montaigne be overwhelmed in the public ruin, if it must be so; but if it be not necessary, I would thank my stars for his safety; and I make use of all the length of line which my duty allows me for his preservation."

Is this scepticism? Certainly not. Still less is it cynicism. What makes every passage from the old time to the new so uneasy is the extreme narrowness of the way. The stream of Time flows broad and deep between the

Future and the Past. It is spanned only by a single bridge, the Present; and the bridge is crowded. They who rush forward and they who cling fast, the impetuous, the prudent, the eager, the unwilling, all alike hustle and jostle each other midway. Each hinders his fellow; and countless combatants fall hourly under the feet of their comrades without helping the conflict. In our own country there must be, at this moment, many wise men (they are probably the wisest, and perhaps the only wise ones, among us) who, not being compelled by duty, will not be drawn, by inclination, into the political hubbub. It is not from indifference to what they perceive clearly, – that steep place towards which the herd is violently running; but their position has put them under no obligation to tend swine or mend fences, and they also perceive that there is no demand in that business for the wisdom they employ in keeping themselves out of it; since, after much ado by Heaven-born Minister This, Popular Orator That, and Rising Statesman The Other, the herd is still unstopped, and the steep is still unfenced. It is not cynicism that keeps out of troubled waters. It fishes in them, and throws its fly from one side to the other. Montaigne's philosophy was not that of Mr. Facing-both-ways. His political scepticism ends where our modern political sceptic begins. I will have no dealings with dilemmas, if by any honest means I can avoid them. But, am I so placed that follow one side I must, then "I will follow the right side even to the fire." My choice, in this case, may be at best no better than the least of two evils; but the wind shall not turn me from it, let the weathercocks rattle their loudest. I will not be a Tory to-day and a Radical to-morrow, or *vice versâ*, because a Parliamentary majority has changed during the night. Least of all, will I dupe myself or others by calling this impartial common sense. "For a man," says Montaigne, "to be wavering and trimming, to keep his affections unmoved, and without inclination, in the disturbances of his country, and in a public division, I think it neither decent nor honest. That is not taking the middle way, but really no way at all; like those who wait for the turn of things, in order to take their resolution accordingly." Montaigne's age was less tolerant than ours. We think it neither indecent nor dishonest in a public man, whose professed aim is impartiality, if he seeks to attain it by taking office now on one side and now on another, so long as he remains impartially free from the smallest enthusiasm for either. It is his judgment only that is at fault. He seeks to adjust the uneven balance between political principles by alternately casting into each scale the same number of scruples and ounces. But he forgets that, before his contribution to either of them, the scales were unequally weighted. Montaigne thought, "it would be a sort of treason to proceed after this manner in affairs wherein a man must

necessarily be of one side or the other; though," he added, "for a man to sit still, who has no office nor express command to urge him to action, I think it more excusable." And so he betook himself to what he called his *dulces latebrae*, the quiet chateau, and the well-stored library, in whose pleasant hiding-place posterity has found him.

Here, the man himself is like a parchment in folio. The half-length graven image of him, in copper-plate, from the portrait of 1725, is full of personal significance. Its most conspicuous feature is the full round ruff; a solid-set substantial piece of bodily furniture, out of which the bony bald head emerges as if it had been thrust through the centre of a millstone. One of Montaigne's editors (Duval) avers that in person he resembled Horatius Flaccus. How that was I know not. According to Montaigne's description of himself, he must have been rather a tall man. But in some of its features and aspects, his mind certainly resembles that of Horace, and most of all in the vitality of its charm. Works that treat of men's characters and manners are, for the most part, national rather than cosmopolitan. The manners of one age and country differ from those of another; and in each the literature of manners employs a different idiom. "So that," as Montaigne observes, "two persons of different nations are not men with regard to each other; and a foreigner, to one who understands not what he says, cannot be said to supply the place of a man." La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld are admirable critics of human nature; but, after all, it is French human nature they describe, and, therefore, they are little read by Englishmen. The *Spectator* is still, perhaps, our best collection of essays on manners. Though the generation it addressed has passed away, our own still retains enough of the national character depicted in those essays to find them more or less applicable to the form and body of its social life. But Sir Roger de Coverley and his club resemble nothing that has ever had any existence in the social life of Parisians, Romans, or Viennese. If Pope is more cosmopolitan, and, therefore, more modern, it is because he imitated Horace, who is at home in every civilised land and age. Of other imaginative writers, the one who most resembles Horace in this respect is the author of *Gil Blas*. But Montaigne, who did not imitate Horace, is just as cosmopolitan. Before him, in this portrait, lies a book with his motto for its title – the renowned one, *Que sais-je?* That is a question which he did not disdain to answer, to himself at least, and copiously. His writing reflects abundant reading. Two-thirds of it consists of quotations or appropriations, of which (if he knew nothing else) he knew how to conceal the origin and diversify the meaning, much to the mystification of his commentators. Yet every line of it is emphatically original. That cannot be justly said of Montaigne which I have heard said

of a man of much study, that his unassimilated learning lies in scraps and patches on the surface of his mind, like lumps of marl upon a barren field; disfiguring what they do not fertilise. He seems to have absorbed into himself the essence of many a learned life not his; and what he borrowed he never returned to its owner. Montaigne, however, did not deny this habit of appropriating the thoughts of other men; and, if he did not acknowledge his thefts, it was because it amused him to mislead his critics. He was wag enough for this. His friends complained that he liked to make sport of the whole world, and said of him that he was a true Gascon. For that matter, had he been a true Irishman, he would not have belied his nationality. For he seems to have held that appropriation legitimises possession; and that one can go furthest, on the road of the mind at least, with borrowed horses and one's own whip. "*Il commence partout,*" says Balzac, "*et finit partout.*" But I had rather say of his way of thinking and writing, that he begins anywhere and ends everywhere. The same critic observes that Montaigne always knows what he is saying, but rarely what he is going to say. He adds, with great truth, that this writer's wanderings are happier than his straight goings; for when he takes leave of the good he generally arrives at the better. And, certainly, he never takes from another any thought which does not in turn take from his use of it a higher or a larger signification. This method is best vindicated in his own words: "He that follows another follows nothing, finds nothing, nay, does not seek for anything. Let him at least know what he knows. It will be necessary that he imbibe their juices, but not that he should learn their maxims. *No matter if he forget whence he derived them, provided he knows how to appropriate them to his own use.* Truth and reason are common to all men, and no more his who first declared them than his who declared them afterwards. It is no more according to Plato than according to me, since both he and I understand and perceive in the same manner. Bees suck flowers here and there, where they find them, but make their honey afterwards, which is all and purely their own, and no longer thyme and marjoram. *So will the pupil transform and blend the several Fragments he borrowed from others in order to compile a work that shall be altogether his own; that is to say, his judgment, his instructions, his labour and study, are to be wholly employed in forming such a work. He is not obliged to discover the sources from whence he had the least assistance, but only to produce what he himself has composed.* No man accounts to the public for his revenue, but everyone publishes his purchases."*

*B. 1, c. xxv, "On the Education of Children."

And this is why Montaigne could not, if he would, restore to the original proprietors the thoughts he had taken from them. Those thoughts had ceased to be what they were when he took them. The juices he had imbibed were no longer thyme and marjoram. Yet it cannot be denied that he pushed this system of appropriation to a point which confounds all sense of *meum* and *tuum*. The twenty-first essay of his first book is a striking example of this.

Demades, the Athenian, condemned a fellow citizen, who furnished out funerals, for demanding too great a price for his goods; for if he got an estate, it must be by the death of a great many people. But I think it a sentence ill grounded, forasmuch as no profit can be made but at the expense of some other person, and that every kind of gain is by that rule liable to be condemned. The tradesman thrives by the debauchery of youth, and the farmer by the dearness of corn.*

Then follows an enumeration of analogous cases, leading up to a reflexion which ends the essay thus: –

Upon which consideration this thought came into my head, that nature does not hereby deviate from her general policy; for the naturalists hold that the birth, nourishment, and increase of any one thing is the decay and corruption of another.

Now we need not discuss the Athenian's condemnation of the undertaker's business, for our modern opinions about gain and loss have no claim to classical authority. But what concerns me in this essay is, *firstly*, that, from beginning to end it is taken, without acknowledgment, from Seneca, and has in it nothing of Montaigne's own composition except the observation he associates with a quotation from Lucretius; and, *secondly*, that here, as elsewhere, his whip has made other men's horses go further than they ever carried their own proprietors along the road from which Darwin picked up his famous formula of the struggle for existence. What a scientific age now expresses by this formula, Montaigne, in an unscientific age, managed to know without any formula at all, and he has expressed it in these incisive words: "Ce que considérant, il m'est venu *en fantasie*, comme nature ne se dement point en cela *de sa generale police*." Here, surely, Malebranche's depreciative criticism implies an unconscious compliment. If the discourse be not well reasoned, it is all the more surprising that it should be so *well imagined*.

In his preface to the edition of 1580, Montaigne says that he is himself the subject of his book; "and," he adds, "if I had dwelt in those nations

*No longer in England, at least.

which are said to live still under the sweet liberty of the primitive laws of nature, I assure thee, I should gladly have drawn my own portrait at full length and quite naked." Reproved for this, he replied: "If people complain that I speak about myself too much, I for my part complain that they do not think about themselves enough." In the artless *naïveté* of this confession his contemporaries did not believe. They charged him with vanity. Upon which the Duke of Buckingham observed that "if he has not been altogether exempt from it, never did any person take so right a method to disguise it." And Peter Coste, his greatest editor, insists that, as all Montaigne's vanity "was to publish his foibles and imperfections as freely as his good qualities, it was a vanity of a very particular species, and perhaps would deserve another name." From this view of the matter Malebranche dissents, and I think justly, as regards those claims to the merit of exceptional sincerity which was put forward by literary egotists, or by their admiring dupes on their behalf. Throughout the filthy confessions of Rousseau, the only quality of their writer's character they truthfully reveal is the one they do not confess, and that is vanity. But Rousseau's vanity was the vanity of a Yahoo; and, so far, it may be considered as something not in the common category of literary motives. Well, Byron's vanity was the vanity of a man, yet he liked to be thought preternaturally wicked. Sincerity was assuredly not the motive which induced him to attitudinise in the character of a hardened sinner. Moreover, like Montaigne, Byron had in him a spice of literary roguery. He, too, was not a writer, but a man of the world with a restless imagination that craved incessant expression; and he relished the offended "ohs" and "ahs" he provoked from those critics whose seriousness was caught in the trap he laid for their stupidity. These not only flattered his vanity, but tickled his sense of humour. A modern writer, whose profession was the study of character and the portraiture of manners, had a habit of addressing his readers in confidential tones, substantially to this effect: "My good friends, let us be sincere with each other. We have a secret in common: why deny it? since it is the secret of all the world and the true bond of affinity between us. We are all snobs. The only difference between you and me is that I am a snob and know it, whereas you are such snobs that you never get enough on one side of your snobbishness to observe it scientifically." To such a writer some of us would be disposed to reply: "Speak, sir, for yourself. You are impertinent, because you ignorantly exaggerate your knowledge. Your familiarity is unwarrantable. Possibly you know yourself and your fellows, in whom I am not interested. But of me you know nothing. What you mistake for the vast deep of human nature, is only a nasty little puddle which can reflect no images but theirs who stoop over it." In this ease, also,

however, it is Vanity that assumes the mask of Sincerity. Malebranche (in his *Recherche de la Vérité**) asserts that to describe one's own faults in public is an exaggeration of vanity. "If," he says, "you look closer into the matter, you will find that the faults thus acknowledged are just those which a corrupt society is proud of. Either they give a man the reputation of being a freethinker, or they are aristocratic vices; or else the pretended sincerity of their confession has no other purpose than to set off to advantage the virtuous side of his character by whom they are avowed, and so enhance his credit with the world. Anyhow, I better like the man who conceals the shameful part of his character than him who unblushingly displays it." In a general way the observation is true, and the sentiment just. Many people avow a defect as if they were proclaiming a good quality. A man with a face like a monkey says, "I don't set up for an Adonis"; and one who has never mustered syntax observes complacently that he is not a bookworm. Moreover, in all self-portraiture there is some tendency to unintentional inaccuracy from the universal imperfection of self-knowledge. The majority of people are more habitually conscious of their smallest merits than of their greatest faults. A man finds out the strength of his muscles more easily than the weakness of his mind. He ascertains every inch of his stature before he has discovered that he is a dunce. Many a woman who knows she is incapable of slipping or straying from the narrowest and straightest path of propriety, is quite unconscious that she is also a scandalmonger. Nevertheless, I cannot but think that the censure passed by Malebranche upon that common kind of literary vanity which apes the demeanour of sincerity, is only applicable to Montaigne in a very slight degree, if, indeed, it be fairly applicable at all. Doubtless, Montaigne is not free from vanity; this is the characteristic quality of his nation and his craft, and so much may be allowed without depreciation of either, for in noble or amiable natures vanity often becomes an amiable or noble quality. But, at any rate, his vanity is never unpleasant. On the whole it is, perhaps, not much greater than that of many a writer who, being neither garrulous nor a Gascon, has escaped the imputation of it.

In 1724–5, Peter Coste (the French translator of Locke), was encouraged, mainly by Montaigne's English admirers, to the production of that excellent and beautiful edition of the *Essays*, upon which the present dissertation is principally founded. This edition, amongst other things of value, contains about forty criticisms upon Montaigne, by the best French writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And it is interesting to compare the opinions of those writers; for, in criticising Montaigne, they criticise each

*Livre ii., partie 3, chap. 9.

other. Thus, La Bruyère, reviewing the opinions of Balzac and Malebranche, remarks that the former was too little of a thinker to find to his liking an author who thinks deeply and independently; whereas the latter was too nice a thinker (*trop subtil*) to appreciate the charm of one who thinks simply and naturally. It is worth while to see what La Bruyère meant when he called Malebranche over nice (*trop subtil*). That philosopher's criticism of Montaigne's Essays may be thus condensed: "They are an example of the influence of one man's imagination over that of others. The source of this influence is a power to persuade without giving reasons. Montaigne puts forth his thoughts in a manner so lively, and *seemingly* natural, that you cannot read them without being persuaded by them. His studied negligence and his well-bred worldly manner impose upon his readers, who accept what he says without examining, and often without understanding, it. His arguments, however, are utterly unfounded, for they rest on no principle. He scatters about a few historical facts and anecdotes which have no relation to each other, or some verses of Horace, or some proverbs of Cleomenes, which prove nothing, and then he says, Here is the truth of the matter. Wherefore we must not take him seriously. He amuses himself and us; that is all. Wishing to please, and succeeding in this, he is satisfied. His purpose is not to instruct. Hence, he is dangerous. Our corrupt inclinations succumb to the charm of his delusive discourse, and he gets from us the praise of being open-minded and free from pedantry. But I say that he *is* pedantic. A half-philosopher with his mouth full of quotations; who talks for talking's sake, and to be talked of. One who tries to prove by aphorisms, collected from miscellaneous reading, what can only be proved by arguments and systematic reasoning. Pedantry is the reverse of sense, and he is a pedant who contents himself with the admiration of ignorant people. Vanity, pride, a good memory, and a little judgment, these suffice to make a pedant. Montaigne has them all. Strong in quotation, weak in argument, imaginative but frivolous, he cannot regulate or restrain himself within the boundaries of truth."

This is what La Bruyère calls *subtil*. I should call it merely insolent. When Malebranche quotes Montaigne against Montaigne in order to confute him, he conspicuously establishes the futility of his own criticism. "A man," saith he, "must have an inordinate opinion of himself if he thinks it of any importance to the world that it should know him thoroughly." But this is neither subtle nor true. From St. Augustine down to Goethe, men have held in honour the inscription on the Delphic temple of Apollo. Nor has the world been ungrateful for the gifts of those who have revealed to it the results of their self-knowledge. A man who knows himself may, very probably, not

know everybody else. But he knows human nature, which is what he has in common with everybody else. If a man does me a service out of vanity, I am grateful – not for his vanity, but for his service. And if Montaigne wished to bequeathe to the world a true description of one man, I am glad that he selected, for the subject of it, himself, and not me. Montaigne admitted that he was vain. Oh, but he did this out of vanity! Well, then, as regards this trait of his character, the portrait he has painted of himself is all the truer – since the portrait proves what it describes.

Quite another question (and one much more to the point) is suggested by that spiteful remark of Malebranche. Yet he has missed it. Can any autobiography be strictly true? For my part, I doubt it. The autobiographer can paint himself to-day, just as to-day he happens to be. But to-day is the merest inch of any full-length portrait of a life-time. Can the man accurately know or show all he was yesterday, or all he will be to-morrow? Work he never so fast, Nature is quicker than he; and, before he can finish the portrait, she has altered pencil, painter, and model, all in one. The man describes the boy, the old man describes the young one, and at no point in the process is the describer precisely what he describes. But though the perfect execution of such a task is, perhaps, always impossible, even the most incomplete performance of it is generally instructive, and seldom uninteresting. Therefore, when Montaigne says of himself, “I am now full of discretion, now dissolute; at one time truthful, at another a liar; chaste and shameless by turns; sometimes liberal to prodigality, and sometimes a miser,” it is just the same to us (unless we are to discard knowledge of human nature altogether for a useless thing) as if we heard all these things said of him by somebody else. What we are told of Montaigne by his critics is not more believable than what he tells us himself.

The fact is, Michel, Seigneur de Montaigne, is not to be reckoned by us among the philosophers. He philosophised, no doubt; but we must not look to find in his thoughts a definite method, or in his opinions a definite body of doctrine. His mind never starts from a particular point of view, in the direction of a particular object. But, as he always set out in search of *something*, he never came home empty-handed. And so it happens that what we find him at home with, is a mass of more or less heterogeneous acquisitions, heaped together without system or order, as such things are in the store-room of a collector. Montaigne was a collector of intellectual things. And, just as some men collect arms, pictures, and cabinets, so he collected human facts, aphorisms, and thoughts, from all countries and from all ages. These he examined, compared, played with. He turned them round and round in his mind, amused himself by noticing their resemblances and

dissimilarities, set them now in this light, now in that, but never thought it worth while to come to a definite conclusion about them. You will sometimes, nay often, learn from Montaigne's Essays what he thought about the matter he discusses, but rarely, if ever, what he meant *you* to think of it. He enforces no opinion, and seldom gives any positive advice. After elaborately (often too elaborately) developing his premises, he behaves like the hermit crab; who takes a bold plunge into the ocean, but, having fished out of it a mouthful for himself, retires with his capture into his shell (which shell he has stolen from some other fish), and seems to say, "My house is my castle." The objective thinker betakes himself, on a sudden, to the most subjective proceedings; and if you are on the back of his shell, you know no more of what he is doing inside it, than you would know of Canon Liddon's theology by standing on the dome of St. Paul's. The sceptical turn of this writer's mind is illustrated even by the titles of his essays. This one for instance, "That men arrive at the same end by different means." Here, his ostensible purpose is to show us how we may best save ourselves from destruction by a powerful enemy, when fortune has placed us at his mercy. He begins by observing that an incensed conqueror is best mollified by unreserved submission. Then, he proceeds to set before us examples of success achieved in the pursuit of that object by a completely opposite course of action. But does he, therefore, recommend that course of action? No; for forthwith he reverts to the previous postulate, and is just beginning to prove, from the life of Alexander of Macedon, that valour and fortitude are, in this matter, no more efficacious than humility and surrender, when all of a sudden he breaks off with the reflection that it is not easy to frame any certain and uniform judgment in reference to a being so wonderfully vain, fickle, and unstable as man.

Polonius would have said of this conclusion, "'Tis true, 'tis pity, pity 'tis, 'tis true." But Montaigne, like Othello, was "unused to the melting mood." With "sadness" he would have nothing to do. "I neither like it myself," he says, "nor admire it in others; though the world is pleased to honour it, as it were, in the lump with a particular favour, and to make it the ornament of wisdom and conscience." The end of this sentence is noteworthy, for one would not suppose the sixteenth century to have been sentimental. But all vehement emotions (whether of grief or joy, love, anger, or ambition) were to Montaigne incomprehensible: and it is the comfortable habit of the human mind to cheapen what it cannot comprehend. The stronger the mental fibre, the more confident and uncompromising is the contempt of its possessor for that to which it is impenetrable. Voltaire could liken music to nothing but the noise made by shaking a bag of nails about his ears. A mathematician,

witnessing a ballet for the first time, asked “What is this meant to prove?” And at the Court of Weimar the venerable Chamberlain von Riedesel flung aside Wieland’s *Oberon* (which in those days was much admired) exclaiming, “Why, ’tis all nothing but damned lies!” Yet ’tis only through his passions that man becomes a creator. These, nature has given him, either that he might control them, or that he might develop them to a higher pitch. In politics, in literature, in art, the passionless man creates nothing, produces nothing. His highest attainable function is to analyse and methodise the produce of others. On the other hand, what comes from the too passionate man is of little worth. The vapour that drives an express train sixty miles an hour, has no motive power till it is closely confined and allowed but a single issue. Passion, in the practical sense, is the eloquence of feeling; therefore poetry and art demand strong feelings from the poet and the artist. But to art and poetry alone, is reserved this higher language of the passions. He only who feels strongly can be a poet; yet he who only feels strongly is none. The strength of feeling which inspires the poet to fit utterance, suffocates other men if it be in them; smothers and chokes them, and keeps them inarticulate. So that of himself the poet may say, like Macbeth’s wife, –

That which hath made them drunk, hath made me bold:
What hath quench’d them, hath given me fire.

Were it otherwise, the true Sappho would be the servant girl who stabs herself with a kitchen knife, because her young man is keeping company with another. And in this sense Seneca’s words, –

Curae leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent,

express but half a truth. In fact, that highly cultivated Roman only meant to imply by them that in silence there is an inexpressible yet perfectly comprehensible eloquence; for the language of looks begins where that of lips has come to an end. But our unconscionable Gascon only seizes on this saying of Seneca’s for the sake of a single word in it, and he uses the expression *stupent* as fresh evidence of the *stupidity* he is looking out for.

Yet, in the main, Montaigne’s position on this point is sound and impregnable. All philosophers, from Epictetus to John Stuart Mill, greatly as they disagree with each other, have admitted or contended, in different terms, (some of them unconsciously,) that what Montaigne calls Pleasure, and they Happiness, is the motive and the object of all human action. But, as he, I think, says somewhere, there is only one way of hitting the mark, and many thousand ways of missing it. And if Pleasure, or Happiness, be the mark hit, Sadness must be, in at least one of its aspects, the mark

missed. A veritable ἁμαρτία, which our theologians have translated Sin. Nor could the ethical doctrine of happiness be more nobly stated than it is in the following passage: –

Let the philosophers say what they will, the mark at which we all aim, even in virtue itself, is PLEASURE. I love to rattle this word in their ears, because it is so very grating to them; and if it denotes any supreme delight, or excessive satisfaction, it is more owing to the assistance of virtue than to any other aid. This pleasure, for being more gay, nervous, robust, and manly, is only the more seriously voluptuous. And we ought to give it (*Virtue*) the name of Pleasure, as that which is more favourable, gentle, and natural; not that of Vigour, from which we have denominated it (*Virtus*). The other more sordid pleasure, if it deserved so fair a name, it ought to be upon account of concurrence, not by privilege, I do not think it less free from inconvenience and crosses than virtue. Besides that, the enjoyment of it is more momentary and unsubstantial, it has watchings, fastings, and labours, even to sweat and blood; and, moreover, has so many several sorts of wounding passions in particular, and so stupid a satiety attending it, that it is as bad as doing penance. We are very much mistaken in supposing that its inconveniences serve as a spur to it, and as a seasoning to its sweetness, as we see in nature that one contrary is quickened by another. And to say, when we come to virtue, that the like consequences and difficulties overwhelm it, and render it austere and inaccessible; whereas, much more aptly than in voluptuousness, they ennoble, sharpen, and heighten the divine and perfect pleasure which virtue procures us. He is certainly very unworthy of being acquainted with it, and neither knows its charms, nor how to use it, who weighs the expense against the profit. They who preach to us that the pursuit of it is rugged and painful, but the fruition pleasant, what do they mean, but that it is always disagreeable? For what human means ever arrived at the attainment of it? The most perfect have been forced to content themselves with aspiring to it, and to approach, without ever possessing, it. Of all the pleasures we know, the very pursuit of them is pleasant. The attempt savours of the quality of the thing it has in view. The felicity of rectitude which shines in virtue fills up all its apartments and avenues, even from its first entrance to its utmost limits.

Here, again, Montaigne has pillaged the stables of the Stoics, and stolen from the stud of Epicurus, to harness his own coach. But it is his driving, and not their horses, we admire. Upon the writer of this admirable passage Malebranche has wasted much philosophical resentment. In accusing Montaigne of vanity and presumption, he himself reveals a familiarity with those failings which discredits the good faith of his judgment. It is certainly surprising that a philosopher so staid and serious as Malebranche should think it worth his while to enter with such passionate animation into a matter

which he might more becomingly have dismissed with a shrug of his philosophical shoulders. Vanity and presumption are common to mankind, few men are wholly free from some particle of them. Common failings scarcely merit extraordinary notice, and a philosopher does not win our respect for his own views when he loses his temper in speaking of those who have boldly expressed opinions opposed to them. Just listen to this tirade : – “What are we to think,” exclaims Malebranche, “of a man who makes no distinction between spirit and matter, and who quotes dissolute verses on such a subject as the essence of the soul without marking his disapproval of them? A man who is not penetrated by the sense of that necessary truth, the immortality of the human spirit, and who pretends that the human intellect is incapable of understanding its necessity? One who regards the proofs of it as dreams into which we are beguiled by the flattering persuasion of our own wishes? One who looks upon the dumb animals as our brethren and comrades (*nos confrères et nos compagnons*)? Who believes a spider to have intellect and judgment, and who is not ashamed to give it as his opinion that there is more difference between one human individual than another, than between humanity in the mass and the rest of the animal creation.”

To these angry questions let me offer one reply. For herein lies the gist of the matter. Montaigne (and this I say of him without reproach, but very much by way of compliment) was essentially a *dilettante*. To which cause I attribute the partiality shown to his writings by the mass of educated society in all ages and all countries. For everywhere the mass of society is made up of dilettanti. The dilettante differs from the man of science not in degree, but in nature; and so does dilettante knowledge from professional knowledge. For instance, a musical dilettante may have more knowledge of music than a professional musician; but it is not exactly the same kind of knowledge. He may even play the piano, or any other instrument, better than it is played by some acknowledged virtuoso. Nevertheless, he remains an amateur musician; and for that reason there is in his music some quality which the professional musician will detect (and perhaps dislike) as unprofessional. The same observation applies to every branch of philosophy. The position occupied by Schopenhauer in relation to the professors of philosophy is an illustration of it. Schopenhauer took up his position outside the professional circle, and amongst the dilettanti, whom he addressed in their language, not in that of the professors. No one can say that Schopenhauer’s knowledge was deficient, or his judgment superficial. But the distinctive quality of both was non-professional, and the professors of philosophy would have nothing to say to him. During his lifetime they refused to sign his passport to attention, and if, since his death, he has become (in his own country at least) the

most popular, and probably the most influential, of German philosophers, it is not because the professors have altered their opinion about him, but because the dilettanti have asserted theirs. Some imaginative writers, also, who wrote from a point of view more common, and in a style more congenial, to unprofessional men of the world than to professional men of letters, have had more imagination, and not a few of them more knowledge (or what is now called culture, as if intellect were the only thing to be cultivated) than the majority of poets who are only poets, or of novelists who are only novelists; yet had the recognition of their genius, or the extent of its influence, depended on the professors of literature, they would have got but few pence from their publishers, and little praise from their posterity. It is to the common-sense of the dilettanti that they owe their fume and power.

Montaigne was not even under an obligation to separate himself from the circle of professional philosophers, for no such circle existed in his time. And when the professional philosophers declined to accord him a recognised place amongst them, he was no longer alive to claim it.

But it is the privilege of dilettanti that, though they often miss their mark, they sometimes succeed in undertakings upon which the professors dare not venture at all. M. Niepce, the dilettante, succeeded in producing portraits from fumes of silver, the fixation of which Sir David Brewster, the professor, declared to be impossible. Shakespeare was not a professional philosopher, but he wrote *Hamlet's* monologue, which the professional philosophers have been unable to answer, though they have elaborately studied the subject of it. As much may be said of Montaigne. Unfettered by considerations that restrain the vagaries of systematic thinkers, he launched opinions and hazarded conclusions which, centuries after his death, have been better, though not positively, established. The contention that those dissimilar groups of phenomena which we conveniently distinguish from each other by the terms Spirit and Matter, are but different effects or manifestations of one and the same force, is not yet beyond dispute; and perhaps some day it may be discarded for a more victorious hypothesis. But it is already much in favour with men of science; and at any rate no one of our time will venture to sneer at it, as did Malebranche. Few naturalists, if any, now admit the old metaphysical distinction between reason and instinct; and as for the claims upon our fellow-feeling which Montaigne conceded to "our dumb brethren," the step from manhood suffrage to animal suffrage would seem to be the only one which can now be taken, with any show of originality, in the development of Mr. Gladstone's famous "flesh and blood" argument. A large number of the ladies and gentlemen who annually occupy the attention of our criminal courts are probably voters; and yet that

influential moralist, the daily press, in its comments on their moral and intellectual exploits, habitually institutes comparisons, by no means flattering to these interesting human beings, between their intelligence and that of the brutes. Nor will anyone now blame Montaigne for having anticipated the words we thank Goethe for putting into the mouth of Faust: “Thou leadest past me the procession of all living creatures, and teachest me to recognise my brethren in the quiet thicket, in the air, and in the waters.”

Of a writer so unsystematic as Montaigne it is difficult to write systematically. I have neither attempted nor wished to do so. Being myself one of the dilettanti for whom he wrote, and to whom he addressed himself, I welcome in him an illustrious champion of their rights. For those rights are rarely asserted at all, and still more rarely asserted with the same success. But in doing this, let me not be thought to depreciate the public value of the professional intellect in literature or art. Its representatives are so powerful, so formidably equipped, and so easily incensed, whilst the profane vulgar to which I belong is so notoriously incapable of self-defence, that I would not willingly offend them, even were I less sensible than I am of what we owe them. But we owe them much. So few of us have any inducement or disposition to think for ourselves, even unsystematically, that we can scarcely be too grateful to those who are at the pains to think systematically for us. Only, the authority justly due to their industry has a deplorable tendency to confirm us in our own laziness; as if thinking and feeling were not so much the natural and proper functions of all men, as the special business of those whose profession is to think or feel. It is pushing the division of labour too far that we should get all our mental clothing and moral equipment exclusively from the professional industry of others, as we get our boots and clothes made for us by the shoemakers and tailors. Montaigne has been blamed by one of his critics for taking his chance too readily with everything – religion, philosophy, science, no matter what, so as he set his mind free at all points; and this disposition to take one’s chance with everything is, no doubt, the vice of dilettantism. But how much should we have lost had Montaigne been scared into silence by the imputation of it! Around everyone of us lies a universe bounded by no system, and teeming with mysteries insoluble by any formula. Exclusive rights of way through it belong to no man; and, of all men, Montaigne was the least disposed to claim, as he was also the best entitled to dispute, such rights. He sounded the abyss in all directions as best he could; but he never forgot the limit of his line, or the infinitude of the element through which he was voyaging. “My thoughts,” he says, “bow beneath the burden of it. My fancy and judgment do but grope in the dark, staggering, tripping, stumbling: and when I have gone as far as

I can, I am by no means satisfied; for I see more land still before me, but so wrapped in clouds that my dim sight cannot distinguish what it is." Yet, under the strict guidance of the most systematic thinker, we shall not be one whit surer of our road than in the pleasant company of this brisk, alert, old busybody; who questions every man he meets, examines everything he picks up, pushes open all doors he finds ajar, spies upon nature, respects none of her secrets, betrays all her confidences, and peers into her smallest holes and corners on the chance of finding something in them.

We live now in days when Authority is said to be worn out and discredited. But never was Authority more numerously or more noisily represented. In the disintegration of the old social body every little worm that springs from its corruption into life comes forth exclaiming "I am He!" Each clever youth who has just left school is in haste to found a school of his own. Every philosopher shouts "Eureka!" Every politician has taken out a patent of his own for the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Ask what question you will, someone is at hand to answer it with assurance. But from all these confident professors of conflicting certainties, what answer shall we take to the question Montaigne asked himself three hundred years ago, — *Que sais-je?*