AFTER MONTAIGNE

CONTEMPORARY ESSAYISTS COVER THE ESSAYS

To the Reader, Sincerely Of Liars Of the Education of Children Of Prayers Of Thumbs Of Smells Of Cannibals How the Soul Discharges Its Emotions Against False Objects When Lacking Real Ones Of Constancy Of Giving the Lie Of Friendship Of Idleness Against Idleness Of the Affection of Fathers for Their Children Of Wearing My Red Dress [after "Of the Custom of Wearing Clothes"] Of the Power of the Imagination That Our Mind Hinders Itself Of Books and Huecos Of Diversion Of Sex, Embarrassment, and the Miseries of Old Age [after "On Some Verses of Virgil"] Of Sleep Of the Inconvenience of Greatness Of Solitude Of Age Of Practice The Ceremony of the Interview of Princes We Can Savour Nothing Pure Experience Necessary

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Athens, Georgia 30602
www.ugapress.org

Designed by Melissa Bugbee Buchanan
Set in Adobe Garamond Pro and Cronos Pro
Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore
The paper in this book meets the guidelines for
permanence and durability of the Committee on
Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the
Council on Library Resources.

Most University of Georgia Press titles are
available from popular e-book vendors.

Printed in the United States of America
19 18 17 16 15 C 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
After Montaigne : contemporary essayists cover the essays /
edited by David Lazar and Patrick Madden.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8203-4815-5 (hardcover : alk. paper) —
ISBN 978-0-8203-4817-9 (ebook)
1. American essays—21st century. 2. Montaigne, Michel de,
1533–1592—Influence. I. Lazar, David, 1957– editor. II. Madden,
Patrick, 1971– editor. III. Montaigne, Michel de, 1533–1592. Essais.
PS689.A37 2015
814'.6—dc23
2014045430

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

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Acknowledgments

The editors heartily thank our essayists, for their engagement with the reimagination of Montaigne we asked of them. We also thank our students and teachers (it's nice to see the cart before the horse sometimes).

Much gratitude to Sydney Dupre and Walter Biggins at the University of Georgia Press for their extraordinary support.

Patrick Madden would like to thank his family, near and far, young and old. They are participants in and witnesses to his unwritten essays.

David Lazar would like to thank his lucky stars, since it's about time. Friends and family gathered under them, and were kind.

Steven Church's "Of Idleness" was first published as "On Loitering" in *Rumpus*, May 16, 2013, therumpus.net/2013/05/on-loitering.

Lia Purpura's "Of Prayers" originally appeared in *Ecotone* 8, no. 1 (Fall 2012).

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AFTER MONTAIGNE

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Introduction

> Montaigne . . . to whom, down even to our own day, even in point of subject-matter, every essayist has been more or less indebted . . . / . . . is an immense treasure-house of observation, anticipating all the discoveries of succeeding essayists. / He has left little for his successors to achieve in the way of just and original speculation on human life. Nearly all the thinking of the [succeeding] centuries, of that kind . . . is to be found in Montaigne's *Essays*.
>
> ALEXANDER SMITH / CHARLES LAMB / WILLIAM HAZLITT

What do the Beatles' "Twist and Shout," Aretha Franklin's "Respect," Elvis Presley's "Blue Suede Shoes," Jimi Hendrix's "All Along the Watchtower," and Ike and Tina Turner's "Proud Mary" have in common? They're all cover songs, songs originally recorded by other artists (the Isley Brothers, Otis Redding, Carl Perkins, Bob Dylan, Creedence Clearwater Revival, in these cases), then borrowed, modified, flavored in new ways by new musicians. Covering is a long and proud tradition in music, especially popular music in the last half century, and if you think about it, before recorded music, most performances were covers (of a sort). Recording a cover is a way of paying homage to a respected forebear while simultaneously asserting newness and individuality. In some cases, a cover song achieves greater popularity than the original. In some cases, people don't even realize the cover is a cover.

For 350 years, almost every essayist paid homage to the creator of the essay form: Michel de Montaigne. While there were precursors of the essay—cognates and close influences—Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys (great stuff!) are not Chuck Berry. But even Chuck Berry didn't *create* rock 'n' roll. Montaigne stands

virtually alone as having introduced a new form of writing: the 107 essays contained in books I, II, and III of the *Essais*, published in 1580, 1588, and 1595.

Essayists and aficionados of the essay will please excuse a few reiterations of the basics: Montaigne, who lived from 1533 to 1592 and was raised by a genteel and progressive father, led a life that was politically engaged in troubled times. He witnessed plague, wars of religion between Catholics and Huguenots, and personal tragedies: the deaths of his beloved friend Étienne de La Boétie, his younger brother (from a tennis ball that hit him in the head!), and all but one of his children in infancy. But Montaigne stayed engaged with life, with ideas, and, most important for our considerations, with the creation of a form that he called the *essai*, coining the term from the verb *essayer*, to try or attempt, which started and sustained an innovative, playful, experimental edge to prose.

Those doing the math at home will have noticed that 350 years doesn't quite get us to the present. This is our observation, one that sparked the creation of this book: that what was once so blatantly obvious—Montaigne's greatness and influence—has become less acknowledged. His formal inventiveness, disarming intimacy, and rhetorical complexity, which were once the essential tracks for anyone listening to the essay or listening to themselves trying to understand what an essay might be, are often simply ignored or are considered quaintly traditional. Some newcomers to the essay seem to have trouble hearing Montaigne's orchestral brilliance just because he is "old." It's like being unable to keep hearing how radical Louis Armstrong is. New students in MFA and PhD programs calling themselves essayists arrive (and sometimes even leave) without having read a single essay by the writer to whom they are inextricably indebted. Their curiosity about the tradition of the essay doesn't seem to reach very far back in the essay's history. This is a great shame, a disgrace. So much that's vital about the essay seems uncannily present, explicitly or in utero, in Montaigne.

This anthology aims to modestly correct that trend and reassert Montaigne's centrality. We asked more than two dozen of the most exciting essayists writing today to give us their take on a Montaignean subject. Like an album of cover songs paying homage to an influential band or composer, these essays attempt to reenvision Montaigne's topics through a contemporary sensibility. Each one uses Montaigne's original title (or an inspired variation) and begins with an epigraph from Montaigne, ending with a coda explaining the process through which the essayist translated, transfigured, reimagined, or rethought some of the essential ideas, figures, and motifs in Montaigne's original.

In between the quoted and critical apparatus are the essays, the heart of the heart of the matter. Each writer in the anthology attempts to find a way to revise and connect with Montaigne's original essay. We mean "revise" in the sense of "re-create," not "fix" or "correct." As impassioned as we are in our love for the master of the form, we don't see the *Essais* as museum pieces. They're living works of prose; they're multifaceted; they breathe; they have complex structures, and occasional *longeurs*. In short, they're brilliant and imperfect, which is probably why so many generations of writers have cleaved to them so closely, from Bacon to Hazlitt, Emerson to Woolf, Flaubert to Cixous, Sterne to Baldwin. Some wrote essays using the same subjects and even titles as Montaigne. One could argue that writers have been covering Montaigne, more or less, all along.

Montaigne is the ur-essayist, the essayist essayists have started with and returned to, like writing upstream, but his essays are both approachable and inexhaustible. As Hazlitt said of Shakespeare, it would be vulgar to create a godlike figure out of Montaigne. Our essayists, essayistically, play with his essays, because he gives us room to enter, engage, and think for ourselves.

Once you've enjoyed these new essays, or *while* you're enjoying them, we urge you to read the originals. You can start at www.aftermontaigne.org. Then we hope that you, too, will feel inspired to write essays after Montaigne.

1

To the Reader, Sincerely

DAVID LAZAR

Non men che saver, dubbiar m'aggrada.

DANTE, *INFERNO* XI

For it is myself that I portray.

MONTAIGNE, "TO THE READER"

Come here often?

We've both been around the block a few times. In fact, I think I may have even seen you loitering in my back pages. I don't hold it against you. It's like the old joke: we're both here, after all. My apologies if that sounds slightly salacious. But just as Montaigne wished he could appear naked, and worried that he'd be cast into the boudoir, it's that desire to be raw and that need to cook, wanting to blurt out everything and wanting, too, to be discreet, that creates the maddeningly necessary friction for essays. It's that thinking about what you think you thought. Raw rarely wins.

I want something from you and you want something from me, and I'm not trying to just be chivalrous when I say I know I owe you a good time, in the broadest sense. What I want from you is more complicated, reader. You're mostly doing a great job of giving me what I need just by being you. I know that sounds hackneyed: "Just be yourself." And of course, to a certain extent, you're my invention, whether you like it or not, the monster to my Frankenstein—or "steen," depending on my mood. Potato, potahto. But if we call the whole thing off, we must part. Keeping all of this in mind, I think it's fair to say you can read me like a book. But even as I'm imagining you, you're (with a little help) imag-

ining me. Which is to say, dearie, old pal of mine, that the thing about whistling in the dark is, "You just put your lips together and blow."

Reader, I divorced her. And she me. And perhaps I'm looking for a surrogate, a perfect other, perchance at least a friendly friend to while away the hours conversing with. After all, I spend so much time talking to myself, writing little concertos of prose in my head, that after a time, having spent too much time walking around the city and thinking in concentric loops, layering idea upon idea only to have them evaporate like the lightest of brain soufflés, it seems to make sense to write them down. I try to tell myself that the story I tell is real, but really, what would that really mean, other than that I really mean what I say? Nevertheless, I think, I've always thought, that intention counts for something. Isn't that recherché? Wasn't intention nine-tenths of the law in some places?

I'm sincere, in other words. Whether or not I'm honest is a judgment that shouldn't be self-administered. I'm sincerely sincere. I've always loved the song in *Bye Bye Birdie*, "Honestly Sincere":

> If what you feel is true
> Really feel it you
> Make them feel it too
> Write this down now
> You gotta be sincere
> Honestly sincere
> Man, you gotta be sincere

If I didn't have a dash of modesty, I'd be entirely and wholly sincere! I'm even sincere about the things I say that are slightly less than sincere, but which I try to sincerely slap myself around a bit for having been insincere about. It's one of the ways I can show you that I'm being reasonably honest. It's also a sincere display of how flawed I am. Look, if I told you I was thirty-nine, and then told you I was fifty (don't roll your eyes), you'd think I was a bit of an idiot, but at least you'd know I had a self-correcting mechanism. But I'd take everything I say with a grain of salt if I were you. And I mean that sincerely. I'm fifty-six, by the way. You could look it up.

If I really just wanted you to like me, I'd tell you a story. It would be a story of adversity of some kind, and I would be the protagonist. It would arc like crazy, like Laurence Sterne on Ritalin, and I'd learn something really valuable from my experience. But who knows where an essay is going to go? Really. I'd

be a defective essayist if all I did was tell stories. Sincere stories. Like the one about walking out of my house yesterday. I was feeling my age as summer bled into fall on a day that was really too nice for such a metaphor. A guy who was working on installing a new wrought iron fence outside (I love wrought iron—partly because I love the way it looks, and partly because of "wrought") told me he liked my style. "Thanks!" I said, thinking I was so smart to have bought that '50s vintage jacket online last week for fifteen dollars. Then the fine fellow said, "You look like Woody Allen."

I was taken aback. I had never been told I looked like Woody Allen. I'm not sure I want to look like Woody Allen. I don't mind sounding a bit like Woody Allen. It comes with the territory: Brooklyn Jewish, and he was an enormous influence on me. But, *look*? So I said, "I'm sorry, did you say I looked like Errol Flynn?" And he said, "Yeah, that's right, but not from *The Adventures of Robin Hood* but from *The Modern Adventures of Casanova*, in 1952, when he was dissolute."

I made that last part up. Forgive me? He really did say I looked like Woody Allen.

For the last few years everyone I've met has been telling me I look like Lou Reed. I don't see it. I was in one of my favorite bars in Chicago, the Berghoff (essay product placement), and a man was staring at me. He finally made his way to my table and said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to bother you, but are you Lou Reed?" I said, "No, I'm John Cale." He said, "Who's John Cale?" I mean, how can you possibly know who Lou Reed is without knowing who John Cale is? It's like walking up to someone and saying, "Are you Oliver Hardy?" "No, I'm Stan Laurel." "Who's Stan Laurel?"

In any case, I wasn't even sure of how I felt about that. Lou Reed was great looking, although a bit older than I; he was getting a bit weathered . . . and do I have to look like a Jewish New Yorker in the arts? What's the connection between Woody Allen and Lou Reed? Who's next? Mandy Patinkin? Harvey Fierstein? Hey, what about Adam Brody?

Look, reader, I'm sincerely not trying to look for things to complain about, but part of bedecking myself is the confusion and profusion of identities "I" shuffles through. Surely you have some version of this? Don't you have some walk-in closet of self or selves? I do have some version of a Fierstein shirt, a Patinkin suit, I suppose, especially when I'm being shticky. When my persona is shticky. When it's less so, I like to think I'm closer to

Me and my shadow
Strolling down the avenue
Oh, me and my shadow
Knock on the door is anybody there
Just me and my shadow

You might call me a self-made man. Hello to the essay Lazar, goodbye to the talker-walker Lazar. The former has inscribed the latter, imbibed the latter, put him through a meat grinder, and feasted. I'm self-immolated, a phoenix. Rise, he said. Or: Monty Python: I write rings around myself, logically, if not impetuously. (Don't you wish John Cleese had written essays?) The spirit of Whitman is in the essay: we enlarge ourselves even as we're talking about our pettiness, our drawers, our moths, our doors. The "I" that takes us along (remember that terrible song "Take Me Along"?—bad songs stay as long as delightful ones) does so because we're attracted to the way it vibrates or concentrates, clicks or skiffles. The essay voice is a boat that can carry two.

And no voices are alike—my own jumpy, interruptive style, which might not be to everyone's taste, will be seen as a flaw or a defect by some, and by others as the only dress in my closet. But let me tell you that I think that I, like most essayists, want to be known. That this "created" voice you're hearing (created voice, creative writing, creature of the night!), this persona, this act of self-homage and self-revelation, occasionally revulsion, frequently inquisition or even interdiction, actually is tied very closely to the author. Since I'm frequently my subject, to say the "I" who is writing isn't quite me is slightly fatuous; which "I" is the more sincere, the more honest self? That one? The ontology of essay writing involves a conversation with oneself, and one, after a while, exchanges parts back and forth so that writer and subject become bound, bidden, not interchangeable but certainly changeable. I become what I've created, and want to be known as that.

For Montaigne the wanting to be known was partly due to the loss of his soulmate, Étienne de La Boétie. At one point Montaigne offers to deliver his essays in person. I like that idea, reader. We've lost the telegram, after all. Wouldn't you like to open the door and have Mary Cappello or Lia Purpura hand you a personalized essay? "Essay, Ma'am," might just enter the lexicon. I'd write you

one. I could come over and read this one to you, if you like. Like Montaigne, I think I'm in search of company, and I talk to myself in essays as a way of finding it. So you're really very close to me. A matchbook length, a cough, a double-take away.

At the end of his invocation "To the Reader," his introduction to his *Essais*, in 1580, Montaigne bids farewell. It's a double joke. He's saying goodbye because, in an extension of the modesty topos, he has urged the reader to not read his vain book of the self, his new form: the essay. He is also bidding adieu to the pre-essayed Montaigne, the one who isn't self-created, self-speculated, strewn into words and reassembled, if so. A playful gauntlet. And he is invoking the spirit of his death. To write oneself is to write oneself right out of the world. It's the autothanatological moment: "when they have lost me, as soon they must, they may here find some traces of my quality and humor."

Montaigne says his goal is "domestic and private," and so it may have been, at first, though Montaigne's literary ambitions start seeming more and more clear as the essays lengthen and grow more complex, as Montaigne takes more risks with what he offers of himself. And my own, I ask myself, in the spirit of Montaigne. What are they? I'd say they're twofold: (1) to write the sentence whose echo doesn't come back; (2) to be known, in some essential way, without sucking the air out of the mysterium.

Montaigne's address to the reader occurred when doing so was still a relatively new, a reasonably young rhetorical move. According to Eric Auerbach, Dante seems to have been the first writer to establish an intimately direct poetic address to the reader. Dante then plays with this form, using it a structuring device, tossing off asides. And Montaigne quotes Dante in the essays. This dynamism is epistolary, liberating and seductive. *Sotto voce*. Let me whisper in your ear. It's just the two of us. Come on, you can tell me. Or rather, it's okay, I can tell you. The confession. After all, I'm writing about myself, and my subject is really important, right?

Except: Reader, she says—grabbing me by the shoulders, telling me that what she needs to tell me is more important than anything that's ever been told—I married him. And you thought *comedies* ended in marriage? In my triad of great addresses to the reader (meaning me, in the place where you are now), Char-

lotte Brontë's direct address will always be for me the most stunning, the single most relational moment, perhaps, in literature. "Reader." And for the moment it's your name. *Call me Reader*. And as a male reader, and as a male adolescent reader, my response was always: You should have waited for me.

Addresses to the reader are not, you see, just about intimacy. They're also secretly about infidelity.

Reader, comrade, essay-seeking fool, blunderer upon anthologies for whom the book tolls, when I said, "I divorced her," I'm sorry for the lack of context, but really what I wanted to talk about here wasn't her and me, that was a bit of a feint, but you and me. You know I've been missing you. Since we last met, across a crowded essay, I've really been thinking about nothing but you. Well, you and me, and me and you. Let's go for a little walk, shall we? Flaneur and flaneuse, or flaneur and flaneur. I might even let you get in a word or two.

Baudelaire must have breathed Montaigne. And his "Au Lecteur" or "To the Reader" (also the title of Montaigne's invocation) is almost like Montaigne inverted, Montaigne through the looking glass. Actually, Baudelaire and Charles Dodgson were contemporaries, which makes a kind of perverse sense. If you look at some of the language, some of the phrasing of "Au Lecteur," you find a Montaignean sensibility, if not a Montaignean tone: "In repugnant things we discover charms"; "our souls have not enough boldness"; "Our sins are obstinate, our repentance is faint." But whereas Montaigne is only suggesting, via a modesty trope, that his readers may be wasting their time (not really), Baudelaire is saying (Hey, you!) we're going to hell in a *panier à main*, which means, ironically, that we need to listen to his brotherly jeremiad. "Hypocrite reader, my brother, my double"—the antithesis and the brother (and sister) of Montaigne's and Brontë's addresses. Theirs are seductive in their close (reading), one-on-one asides to us, just us. They need an intimate, we feel, and so appeal to our need for intimacy. We need what they need. But so does Baudelaire, because who else would dare say that to us? Hey—you! Yeah, I'm talking to you! I remember being shocked by that, the audacity, someone daring to say that to me. He would have to . . . know me pretty well. My brother, my double? Push, pull.

Depending on my mood, I could tell you that there are better things to do than reading essays—going for a walk, watching a movie, throwing a rubber ball against a stoop. But at other times, perhaps when I'm treading across Charles Lamb's "A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behavior of Married People" or Eliza

Haywood's *The Female Spectator*, Nancy Mairs's "On Not Liking Sex" or John Earle's *Microcosmographie*, I feel like telling you that there may not be anything better to do, that in fact you're wasting your time reading novels, or going to plays, looking at art (I can't ever speak against the movies—I just can't), or doing the things you do to keep yourself alive. You should just read essays and live on the delight. The delight of Stevenson, Beerbohm, M. F. K. Fisher. But modesty tropes are worthwhile, so part of me wants to tell you: Go for a walk.

So, reader. Reader. Darling reader. There's something I want to tell you. It's a story, but it's more than a story. It's what I think about what's happened to me. To us. And where I might be headed. We might be headed. It involves movies, books, walking around if it's not miserably cold, and your occasional willingness to laugh at my jokes. Together, we might be able to cobble together an essay. We can assay! I'd love it if you really thought you knew me.

CODA

Montaigne's "To the Reader," less than a page, contains much of the internal friction and frisson of the creation of the essay's persona. It's full of play and a theoretical masterpiece in miniature. "To the Reader" has been my inspiration, and has inspired and intrigued essayists for 435 years. So I wanted to join Montaigne's along with a couple of my other favorite readerly salutations and try to let them breathe in my own question mark as lasso out to whoever might find or be looking to find that note of connection in the voice of reader and writer, writer and reader, who in the essay play a game, at times, of musical chairs.

2

Of Liars

E. J. LEVY

Lying is indeed an accursed vice.
MONTAIGNE, "OF LIARS"

I forget. Birthdays, appointments, the names of close friends, even the day of the week of late. I blame it on midlife pregnancy, on a long Latin word my friend Camille told me last week—a fancy phrase that I've forgotten.

I used to have a photographic memory, which always felt vaguely as if I were cheating on my college tests. Now I am happily disburdened of such guilt. Now I remember haphazardly, idiosyncratically. I remake the past to suit myself, a crazy quilt of recollection. I unnerve acquaintances by recalling intimate details long ago revealed—an erotic fantasy, a favorite book, an ungenerous opinion—but ask me what I ate for lunch the day before, and I am defeated.

"To err is human, to forgive divine," we say, so what better means to facilitate godlike generosity than a lousy memory? "Forgive and forget" gets the matter wrong, backwards, for nothing heals faster than poor recall. Forget—and all is forgiven.

This memory loss has been long in coming, and I know I am not alone. Bad memory is our national habit, allergic as we Americans are to history. There are others worse than I. My friend Cheryl, not long after marrying her second husband, found herself seated among strangers at a literary dinner in Portland where, to her horror, she found she could not recall her *new* husband's name. She remembered only that of her first, which understandably would not do.

We bemoan our poor memories, but would any one of us really prefer perfect

recall, the hyperthymesia that, since 2006, has officially plagued our human race? Officially, only a few dozen of us suffer from it, recalling in exact detail all events, conversations, and feelings from decades ago, swamping the present moment. No wrong ever forgotten, no betrayal softened by time, no chance of forgiving and forgetting.

But memory is a necessity, if we're to navigate our days. Increasingly I outsource mine. My iPhone is my memory. At night before I sleep I note there what I'm to do the following day—meetings, e-mails, phone calls—then promptly forget them all. Trusting it to remember for me. Like a butler in charge of what Augustine termed memory's many-roomed mansion, my little friend reminds me each morning, afternoon, and evening what I need to know. What I cannot afford to forget. (But will.)

There is a certain insouciant charm in forgetfulness, in a fallible memory like mine. Memory lapse can inspire courtesy as well as complaisance (who will argue a point they can't remember?). Marcus Aurelius was said to have addressed in flattering terms strangers and intimates equally, as my partner does in imitation of that great man: my beloved greets men as "Big Guy" and calls all women "Beautiful," he explained to me early in our courtship, in case he can't recall their names. It seemed a charming gallantry, until he took to calling me "Beautiful."

Perhaps the greatest gift bestowed by bad memory is the inability to lie: *if one cannot recall the truth, how can one be said to dissemble?* As Montaigne notes in his essay "Of Liars,"

> grammarians make a distinction between telling an untruth and lying. They say that to tell an *untruth is to say something that is false, but that we suppose to be true,* and that the meaning of the Latin *mentiri,* from which our French word for lying derives, is to go against one's conscience, and that consequently it *applies only to those who say the opposite of what they know.* (italics mine)

All of which makes an honest woman of me.

But such etymological defense does not relieve me of my suspicion that honesty is overrated in our age, as in the past. "I cannot tell a lie" is a watchword of

American schoolchildren weaned on fibs about our national history—Washington's cherry tree, honest Abe. But, honestly, what could be duller? Give me the exaggerated compliment, the embellished tale. Hardly anything is as uninteresting as earnest honesty in companions or in conversation.

Honesty in regard to the receipt of gifts is merely an excuse for boorishness or worse (a petition for a better gift). And would anyone *really* want a thoroughly honest spouse assessing one's enduring appeal over decades, one's lovemaking, or relative physical charms vis-à-vis the delectable young thing across the room? "Do you love me?" is, after all, a question most often asked when the listener is least inclined to answer in the affirmative.

When friends praise a book I have written, I do not wish for more frank assessment, a more honest evaluation of my intellect or talents. I want the lie that binds.

Honesty is said to be the best policy, but it is surely not the most interesting. (And the saying itself may be a lie. "The truth shall set you free" is after all not true if you are Bernie Madoff or Nixon or any of a number of liars one might name.) Literature is filled with fascinating liars from Iago to Lady Chatterly to Raskolnikov. For a good story, God give me a liar any day.

So why all the praise of honest men in our dishonest age? We tap the phones of friends and foes and citizens alike, call war-waging "peacekeeping," give the dullest of names to that most dreadful of weapons, the unmanned drone, and claim it does not kill civilians—in short, we lie. As NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden makes clear, an honest man is a despicable thing, a pariah, a blight on our nation, showing us up for hypocrites, spies, undemocratic as those we would convert to democracy.

Truth takes its toll after all. While lies may fuel conflict, wars are almost always fought in the name of truth, that unbending tool of the ideologue, the tyrant. Set aside the smug certitude of that word and most campaigns would crumble. Without truth on our side or its proxy, God, whom could we justify killing?

As a child I was painfully honest and had few friends. My fealty to frank honesty left me vulnerable. I was tormented for decades by the memory of a false accusation that I had cheated on a difficult exam, because my score was perfect, a possibility our science teacher could not imagine, but a score I'd nonetheless honestly achieved, as I regularly would in math and science until I discovered this was an unsociable habit and gave up both in my junior year in favor of the lie of popularity. I wonder if, as with the exaggerated heterosexuality of queer kids in my youth (of which I was one), those most attached to honesty in youth are those least inclined to practice it later in life. We understand that truth—like sexuality—is a performance rather than an absolute.

Truth and lies—like sex and death—each have their place in life, their charm. The virtue is in knowing which to embrace when. We look to facile absolutes (seek rules in regard to lies) to shade us from a harsher truth: we must assess, discriminate, consider occasion and proportion. A lie told to spare a friend's feelings is no wrong done ("I'd have invited you to dinner had I known you were in town!") when compared to unflattering candor ("We feared you'd drink too much and hold forth on 9/11 conspiracy theories"). Like children, we want to be disburdened of the obligation to discriminate, to weigh, *essayer*, decide for ourselves and take the consequences, when it comes to truth and lies. The question to ask perhaps is this: *Whom does the lying serve, oneself or others?* It takes an honest man or woman to know the difference and answer truthfully.

Common locution may illuminate the matter. One need only consider colloquialisms to discern the relative merits of each: "stretching the truth" has a capacious, generous ring, whereas "brutal honesty" does not; one "confronts the truth," whereas the perfidious "tells a little white lie," reminiscent of Mary's lamb . . .

The necessity of incessantly stating the case on honesty's behalf itself calls the practice into question. Like millennia of laws against sodomy that attest to homosexuality's enduring appeal, injunctions against lying ironically bespeak its charms. We think of lying as an injustice to others, but in many cases it serves the common good; the lubricant of lies creates a gentle buffer in an overcrowded and increasingly surveilled world.

What we mean, when we esteem the truthful, I think, is *don't lie to me*. Or rather, *don't deceive me in a way that will do me harm*. In business and politics,

honesty should arguably be the enforced norm, even as it is worth remembering that it is often not the lie that harms but the actions concealed thereby. I couldn't care less about the false rating of bad loans, but the bilking of the poor to line the pockets of the rich really tees me off. It is the theft—not the lie—that wrongs. And should be righted.

Dostoyevsky was right: lie to everyone but yourself. "The man who lies to himself . . . cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and others."

A lie, even the smallest lie, grants the liar a capacious cloak of privacy. In an age of increasing surveillance—our era of technological hyperthymesia, in which each tweet and call, each coming and going, every street crossing and red-light run may be recorded and kept in permanent archive—lying may be the last hope of the individual, offering a shelter in which the self may know itself in solitude, unobserved, creating a space into which one can retreat to contemplate one's life, one's thoughts, *unknown* to others, the last refuge of honest men.

CODA

One of the reasons that I return to Montaigne's essays time and again is for the freshness of his thought, his frank and often surprising reappraisal of the familiar—whether friendship, smells, or thumbs—which makes the matter under consideration, and my own thoughts, new to me again. A rare exception is his somewhat disappointing essay "Of Liars." While the opening of that essay delights with its extravagant, almost hubristic claim that his is the worst memory ever ("There is no man so unsuited for the task of speaking about memory as I am, for I find scarcely a trace of it in myself"), when the piece takes a turn toward its titular subject, Montaigne mostly reiterates cant. He seems—rare vice for him—to rely on the tried and (un)true claims of others in regard to the much maligned practice of lying. So I offer this response in homage and as gentle corrective to that noble adventurer in thought, if not exactly in praise of lying, then at least, I hope, in complication of its contemplation.

3

Of the Education of Children

BRIAN DOYLE

> But, in truth . . . the greatest and most important difficulty of human science is the education of children. For . . . after that which is planted comes to life, there is a great deal more to be done, more art to be used, more care to be taken, and much more difficulty to cultivate and bring it to perfection. . . . it is no hard matter to *get* children; but after they are born, then begins the trouble, solicitude, and care rightly to train, principle, and bring them up.
>
> MONTAIGNE, "OF THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN"

To the young woman who approached me last year after one of my muddled and peculiar readings and told me she was about to have twins, which I wasn't going to say anything about even though she was incredibly vast in the uteral area, but one thing you learn at Guy School is to never ever comment on what seems like a pregnancy unless you see a leg sticking out where you shouldn't be looking anyway, which reminds me later to discuss name tags and how they are always exactly at the breast level where you should not be looking no matter what; and who said also that she and her husband had a two-year-old child already, and she knew I had once been in her position, as a parent of one small agent of entropy with two more imminent, and did I have any advice for her?

I never yet saw that father, howsoever headlong and spillacious his son or daughter, or later surly and sneering and vulgar with his or her mobile phone permanently glued to his or her palm even if it is dinner or a wedding, who would disown that child, although to be honest I have often *thought* about disowning most of my children, and I know many a man who has contemplated

this also; and I would guess many a mother has been in similar position, with the distinction, subtle but telling, that this headlong or later surly child actually *lived inside her* once upon a time, down by the kidneys and the spleen, actually attached to her by a long tube rather like the tubing that you use when you distill whiskey. I am no obstetrician, as yet, but the fact that children live inside the mother, like tenants in an apartment building but without the rent and utilities and security deposit and maintenance man who just will not for heavenssake fix that thermostat, and then eventually, again like tenants, are forcibly ejected or evicted and must seek for new accommodations, is endlessly interesting to me, and not something, I feel, that we celebrate enough for the sheer whopping oddity of it. I mean, we could be born in so many ways, for example calving from the larger corpus of the mother, or hatching in a skin pocket and eventually being released, or becoming flesh from her morning thought or evening dream, or being laid as eggs in clear rushing water and then being fertilized by the father swimming by; but this image is so amazing to me, as my dad hated swimming and the very idea of him in his dark suit and gray overcoat and fedora hat and cigar desperately paddling down to the gravel nest that my mom made at the bottom of the river before the neighbor dads came over to see if they had a chance at it, that we had better move along finally to the second paragraph; remembering that Montaigne, bless his soul, also often began and ended paragraphs anywhere he damn well pleased, as if paragraphs were carriages to be driven any old distance, for example from Saint Michel de Montaigne to Paris, which is more than three hundred miles.

Not only have I pondered disowning my children, but in one case I actually no kidding thought about selling him via an ad in the newspaper, *Teenage Boy for Sale, Clean, Runs Well*, but his mother, my lovely bride, in whom he lived for a time, down by her spleen, with his twin brother, the two of them seething and elbowing each other for nine months in the epic glad bag of her amniotic sac before emerging startled into this world to continue the battle, adamantly refused to allow me to place the ad, even though she would have been cut in on the profits fifty/fifty, or I was ready to go to even seventy/thirty to her advantage, considering she had to carry him around inside her like a passenger on a bus for nine months, which I didn't, which thank God for that. One great thing about being a guy is that you never have anyone living inside you down by your spleen, and have to endure a moment when you are just sitting there happily smoking a cigar and watching the Celtics hammer the oily smarmy arrogant oleaginous cocky tinny prissy self-absorbed Lakers when suddenly a person inside you takes

it upon himself to *punch you in the bladder* for no discernible reason. There are many difficult things about masculinity, most of them having to do with insurance forms and ear hair, but being punched in the bladder by a person the size of a cod living inside you is not one of them, I am happy to say.

I happened the other day upon this piece of fortune; I was pawing through the epic piles of paper and letters and notes and exam papers and cards and test papers and et cetera that I have saved from each of the three children that the Coherent Mercy placed inside my lovely bride, right near her bladder, until they emerged mewling and spitting and in one case grabbing for the shiny scissors with which the doctor had cut the umbilical cord, and I stumbled across a sheet of foolscap on which I had written hurriedly THINGS MY CHILDREN HAVE SAID THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW I KNOW THEY SAID, and among those things were these lines: "Pretend you have been sleeping for two days, and you tied me with a rope, and I woke up and *shot* the rope, with the gun in my toes, and the rope turned out to be an elephant, and then it got married to an *eagle* and then we went upstairs and had soup!" and "I told dad I did my homework but the teacher *didn't give us any homework today* so the joke is on dad!" and "If you really like jello, and you really like mayonnaise, then you should be able to have a jello and mayonnaise sandwich, and dad is *wrong*!" and "I know I said I would be home at midnight, but *I* am the one who said that, so when *I* decided to not be home at midnight, I was not actually late, because *I* can change my mind!" and "If dad dies, mom has to marry his next younger brother, and if *he* dies, she has to marry Tommy, because he is the last brother, but if *Tommy* dies she is an unrestricted free agent," and other things like that, and even more amazing remarks, and I think you will agree with me that having children is lunacy. It is a species of madness. It is a fool's errand. There is no training for it. There is no licensing program. There is no real oversight or decent tutoring other than gnomic advice from your own parents, which they murmur between hysterical fits of vengeful laughter at the fact that you are now sentenced to being the parents of a child just like you. There is little serious outcome assessment and the only evidence of accomplishment is anecdotal, which is to say immeasurable. Financially, unless your child is going to be like my poor son Joe who all his life has had his father sit him down and stare him in the eye and say *Why are you on this earth, son?* to which the poor lad has had to reply, since he was age five, *To*

take care of you when you are old, dad, and ideally get wealthy enough to buy you one of the smaller Hawaiian islands, educating your children is an undeniable money pit into which you throw pretty much every iota of your cash and energy in exchange for things which again cannot be measured except anecdotally, amorphous and ephemeral things like love and pride and a sort of shivering feeling you get sometimes when they are asleep and they look cooler and more beautiful and more astonishing than anything else in the history of the universe, or when they say something so piercing and haunting and honest that your heart suddenly grows a new chamber, or when they do something with such intent creative independent zest that you sob suddenly in the stands at the basketball game and have to pretend you have a terrible cold to explain the profligate moisture. I suppose in the end the coolest thing about the education of children, and the thing that keeps you going through nights when everyone has the flu, or when they curse at you as teenagers, or when they lie about the car or their homework, or when they are surly and sneering and rude and vulgar and you contemplate selling them as crew to a tramp steamer in Malaysia, is that finally, if you are lucky, they educate you, rather than the other way around. I am much more humble and edified and easily elevated to tears now, after twenty years as a dad, than I was before I was a dad, in the years when I was myself a surly teenage, and then a careless and reckless and selfish young man. The best things that ever happened to me are the subtle joys and stabbing pains inflicted upon me by my children; in a real sense my children have been extraordinary universities from which I hope to never graduate, not even when I breathe my last; I am one of that breed of men who hope very much to afterwards be an attentive spirit, and so be able to laugh at my grandchildren giving their parents grief, and to weep when they weep in the fastness of the night, and to protect their divine spirits as much as I can, in a bodiless and probably incommunicative state, and throw my energy, in whatever form it assumes, against the darkness when it reaches greedily for my children and grandchildren; and perhaps they will feel a spin in the wind, and think of me; long gone but not gone at all.

"'Tis the custom of pedagogues to be eternally thundering in their pupil's ears, as they were pouring into a funnel, whilst the business of the pupil is only to repeat what the others have said," writes old Michel. "I would have a tutor to correct this error, and, that at the very first . . . put it to the test, permitting

his pupil himself to taste things, and of himself to discern and choose them, sometimes opening the way to him, and sometimes leaving him to open it for himself; that is, I would not have him alone to invent and speak, but that he should also hear his pupil speak in turn."

Amen to that, brother, I would say, if we were sitting together in his study and I was gently razzing him for how his countrymen, in my opinion, invented only two glorious things in all of French history, to wit the bra and the Etch-a-Sketch, whereas my countrymen invented jazz and basketball, so that, in my opinion, we are totally winning the creativity game, all due respect, but then I would say something like you are exactly right, Mike, about letting kids find out things for themselves, and eat new and strange foods, and find their own way, partly because that appears to be the best way to learn, and partly because kids don't listen to sermons and homilies and lectures and remonstrations and instructions and diatribes, they just don't, and believe me I know what I am talking about here.

And were we sitting in his study, he would be on his own home ground, and comfortable, and relaxed, and willing and able to be as garrulous in person as he certainly is on the page—you never saw a more long-winded guy than Michel—but for all his wandering and constant sudden quoting of Latin writers, he was a perspicacious man, which is why so many love and read him still, even though he was French, and probably, if we were sitting in his study, he would suddenly say, just as I was about to launch into an incredible litany of the million ways my kids have never listened to me at all not once, "What is it that you have taught them? What was it you wished to teach by lesson or example? What is it that you think crucial and holy about the education of children?"

And I would hem and haw for a moment, and resist the urge to make jokes, and then say something like, "I would not have their spirits cowed and subdued, to quote, dang it, you. I would wish that their independent creative questing spirits be supported when young so as to be firmly rooted against the storms that will come and howl and batter upon them. I would hope that I gave them some instruction and example of endurance and patience and mercy and laughter and kindness as the bedrocks of joyful existence. I would hope that it registered somewhere deep in their souls that love is bigger than mere romance and it has to do with reverence and celebration and witness and sacrifice and empathy and honesty and tenderness, tenderness above all. I would hope that they would overlook my fits of temper and my lazy hours and my shortcomings and note and remember and cherish some shards of the inarticulate love I bear them.