CONTENTS

Michel de Montaigne, c. 1590, anonymous artist

AN INTRODUCTION

BY PHILIPPE DESAN

Michel de Montaigne was born in 1533.

His father had high ambitions for his son and made certain he received the best education possible at the College de Guyenne in Bordeaux. The young Michel excelled at Latin and was an avid reader of the ancients. His favorite readings were Plutarch and Seneca, with a particular interest in past historians. Later, his father bought him a public charge so that Michel could enter the Parlement of Bordeaux (judicial Court of Appeal) as a young magistrate. However, political and religious tensions were so extreme in the southwest of France of the 1560s that, unable to adjust to the intricacies of local politics, Montaigne eventually abandoned his public roles.

After the death of his father in 1569, Montaigne retired as a gentleman on his *seigneurie* (feudal lands) with the intention of living "nobly". His political patrons, the Foix family, arranged for him to be knighted in the highly coveted Order of Saint Michael (at the time the highest honor for a nobleman in France). This "proof" of his nobility represented quite an accomplishment for someone whose ancestors were merely rich merchants and had become *bourgeois* of the city of Bordeaux, thanks to the commerce of wine and salt fish.

Because of his new noble aspirations, Michel abandoned his patronymic name of Eyquem and adopted the name of the noble house – Montaigne – purchased by his grandfather, Ramon Eyquem, in 1477. He was henceforth known as "Lord Michel de Montaigne, Knight of the noble Order of St Michael, and one of the Gentlemen in Ordinary of the French King's Chamber".

THE ESSAYS

In 1580, Montaigne published in Bordeaux a book unique in its title: *Essays*. A literary genre was born. In a time when most books were about great people or events, or works of academic theology or philosophy, the author tells the reader that his only desire is to show himself "familiar and private". He denies any intention of glory for himself or benefit to his reader:

> "Had my intention been to forestall and purchase the world's opinion and favor, I would surely have adorned myself more quaintly, or kept a more grave or solemn march."

In his opening message "To the Reader", he declares his will to paint himself "in my simple, natural, and ordinary garb, without study or artifice, for it was myself I had to paint." He ends the note by saying, "Thus, reader, I am myself the subject of my book; it is not worth your while to take up your time longer with such a frivolous matter."

We must take these declarations of humility with a grain of salt, and indeed they may simply have been a literary strategy for the author of a work categorized as a "novelty" by its publisher – an author who, after all, was not then famous, and who had apparently not accomplished anything worth writing about. It is telling that, after a few editions of the *Essays*, and after he had become much better known, Montaigne would never modify this modest-sounding Preface to the reader.

Montaigne started writing his first essays (all very short) in 1571, when he was in his late thirties. Over the next 20 years, until his death

in 1592, he would rewrite and republish the *Essays* several times. However, it would be false to believe that Montaigne was only a writer. He had diplomatic and political aspirations, and the literary aspect of his career always came *after* his political and public life, at least until he became very sick (kidney stones) after 1590.

In 1581, Montaigne became mayor of Bordeaux, the fifth-largest city in France at this time. In 1582, his publisher took advantage of his new political visibility to publish a second edition of the *Essays*. In 1588, with his growing notoriety, Montaigne published a third edition with copious additions and even added a third book with 13 new chapters. He was now published in Paris by one of the most successful publishers and book dealers of his time: Abel L'Angelier. Until his death, Montaigne would continue adding text in the margins of his copy of this Parisian edition.

There is a habit among modern editors of the *Essays* to segment Montaigne's text in three layers, often signaled by A, B, and C. These correspond to three different editions (1580, 1588, and the posthumous edition of 1595). The text of the first edition (1580) represents approximately 44 percent of the complete *Essays*. The additions between 1580 and 1588 (with the third book added) amount to another 33 percent of the total text, and the marginal manuscript additions written between 1588 and his death (published in the first posthumous edition of 1595 by Marie de Gournay) make up another 23 percent of a complete modern edition of the *Essays*.

However, the book was never intended to be read with these layers in mind. Such editorial artifice might help the modern reader to identify contradictions over time and across editions, but it also creates the impression of an evolution of the text which was never intended by Montaigne. As he pointed out:

> "I am grown older by a great many years since my first publications, which were in the year 1580; but I very much doubt whether I am grown an inch the wiser. I now, and I anon, are two several persons; but whether better, I cannot determine" (Book III, Chapter 9).

PERSONAL OVER ABSTRACT

The *Essays* resembles a patchwork of personal reflections which all tend toward a single goal: to live better in the present and to prepare for death. These considerations offer a point of departure for the modern reader's assessment of his or her own life. It is indeed a book in which the "competent reader" (Book I, Chapter 23) must invest themselves in order to benefit personally and, in turn, produce their own judgments. In brief, one does not read Montaigne, one practices Montaigne.

For modern readers, an important question endures while reading the *Essays*: how does one systematize and synthesize the thought of an author who did not claim to write anything other than *essays* – literally "attempts" – bound to never quite succeed? The very form of the essay presupposes its failure, for otherwise it would no longer be an essay. But in the case of Montaigne, the quest is always more interesting and beneficial than the end.

Thinkers and philosophers are meant to create *systems*, not essays! Yet Montaigne elaborated a philosophy of life without precepts, mottos, or systems. His thought claims to be amorphous, or better, multisided (which does not mean powerless). Whereas Descartes and all Western thought, from the seventeenth century on, sought to develop philosophies *of content*, Montaigne, on the contrary, endeavored to think in terms of *the form* itself, or rather many different forms of thought, knowledge, and human experience. For him, these forms can only be apprehended in their relation to other thoughts, other cultures, other possible worlds (Christopher Columbus had recently "discovered" a New World).

Montaigne's true originality is to think of form itself as an organizing principle of all knowledge. All is form – or rather *forms* – since diversity and variety are inherent to the human condition. For example, he argues that what matters is not what is said but how we say it. Things are a matter of opinion ruled by subjectivity. He concludes his

first edition of the *Essays* with a statement that recaps what is essential in the book:

> "And there never were, in the world, two opinions alike, no more than two hairs, or two grains: their most universal quality is diversity" (Book II, Chapter 37).

For Montaigne, variety is the driving principle of humanity and its history. From the books of the ancients to the worldview of cannibals in the New World, we see the complexity of human thought and practice.

Essays, 1588 edition

MY WORLD, NOT *THE* WORLD

Montaigne makes the conscious decision to describe the world in its multifaceted representations rather than seek to show some prescriptive overlying order. The world is always *his* world, nothing more. Judgment cannot be generalized or imposed on others. For this reason, civilizations must be understood on their own terms and should not be judged according to their "advancements" in relation to other civilizations. On this point, Montaigne is very critical of the conquest of the New World and its accompanying moral discourse. He prefers to imagine himself on the other side of what he observes, so that he can understand fully what it feels like and means to be different.

The more he looks at customs around the world, the more he doubts that humans can be generalized into a single essence. He excels at describing his own existence (with its particular experiences) in relation to other existences and develops his method of *distingo*: understanding oneself first, one can begin to understand others. This interactionist principle of human existence defines Montaigne's writing – and it is an approach we should take seriously, today more than ever.

Starting from a materialist perspective (the existential conditions observable throughout the world and universe), Montaigne realizes that the body is the foundation for all knowledge, and that the mind itself is inseparable from the body:

> "Is it not a ridiculous attempt for us to forge for those to whom, by our own confession, our knowledge is not able to attain, another body, and to lend a false form of our own invention; as is manifest in this motion of the planets; to which, seeing our wits cannot possibly arrive, nor conceive their natural conduct, we lend them material, heavy, and substantial springs of our own by which to move. . ." (Book II, Chapter 12).

Human experience has limits, which is where the mind comes in. In this crucial moment – one that defines "modernity" – knowledge thus depends on both the experiences of the body and the conceptualizations of the mind. They cannot be separated. However, epistemologically, this harmony between what Descartes will call "common sense" (reason) and the senses does not last long. In the seventeenth century they are separated to create modern philosophy, which in its abstractions relegates the senses and the body to "noise".

MONTAIGNE THE PHILOSOPHER

For Montaigne, reason and imagination are both equal in terms of producing new knowledge. Like the oscillations of the world and the universe, "the body and soul are in perpetual moving and action" (II, 37). This perpetual motion defines life itself. Montaigne's philosophy is movement since there can be no knowledge outside the human body. We could argue that Montaigne is a wanderer of writing: "my style and my wit wander at the same rate" (III, 9). The wandering body never allows itself to be imprisoned in common places; it constantly flees forward. Montaigne is always elsewhere; we rarely find him where he tells us he is going. From this understanding, all knowledge becomes relative insofar as it depends on bodily experiences that will sometimes adapt to the mind, and at other times dominate the mind.

Montaigne acknowledges that the mind and the body often assert their monstrosity in remarkable ways (the religious wars of his time, for example), but this is an evil that he deems worthy of consideration and reflection. Theory and action are for him inseparable. As he puts it, "my fancy does not go by itself, as when my legs move it" (III, 3). All ideas require action. The mind may explore the world in all its shapes and forms, but personal experiences validate the ideas that we form. This journey through the meanders of thought – a thought which can only be understood in its relation to different thoughts – leads Montaigne into an analysis of himself, a process we call introspection. While

he lays himself open to the many contradictions of his experience, he chooses not to suppress them from his book.

Introspection and reflections about the self only work because Montaigne establishes "commerces" with others, principally his friend who passed away (Étienne de la Boétie), notable women in his circle such as Diane de Foix, and books (ancient philosophers, whom he copiously references and quotes). And yet, Montaigne would not really become the Montaigne we know and appreciate today, i.e. the observer of cultural differences and the founder of anthropology (a discipline that is not prescriptive, but simply tries to describe human variation), until he finally accepted (after 1585) to content himself with "reporting" human behaviors in all their contradictions – rather than looking for a common denominator in them.

> "Others form man; I only report him: and represent a particular one, ill fashioned enough, and whom, if I had to model him anew, I should certainly make something else than what he is but that's past recalling" (III, 2).

Montaigne would soon abandon any attempt to find the "human condition" (his term), and therefore a possible unity or an essence of the human race, in order to concentrate on a descriptive anthropology. Descartes is often presented as the architect of modern philosophy (creating a blueprint of human essence). Montaigne remains an endless surveyor, observer and describer of human customs and mores.

MONTAIGNE THE SOCIAL THINKER

No grand theory, no system is present in the *Essays*. Over the centuries, critics have generally refused to consider Montaigne a social thinker; he's been pictured as a literary man and "accidental" philosopher, withdrawn in his tower, playing with his cat. And yet,

although there is no project of a better society in the *Essays*, it is possible to identify several constitutive elements of a sociology and an anthropology that we could group under the heading of "social discourse" (one that is often critical of the social organization of his time) in Montaigne's often contradictory statements. This social discourse is manifested in his own political actions as a mayor of Bordeaux and governor of Guyenne. Indeed, Montaigne's two terms as mayor of Bordeaux from 1581 to 1585 allow us to form a more precise idea of his social commitments and his participation in the political debate of his time.

Let us give two examples. Re-elected with difficulty as mayor in 1583, Montaigne turned against the Parlement (his former employer) and denounced abuses such as tax evasion by those who enriched themselves on the backs of the poor. Too many judicial officers were exempt from taxes, and too many relatives of presidents and councilors were declared "noble" and therefore not subject to taxation. In a book of grievances (*cahier de doléances*) addressed to the king, Montaigne and six members of the Jurade (city council) complained about the fact that "the richest and opulent families of the said city would have been exempt" from these taxes "for the privilege claimed by all the officers of justice and their widowers". Thus, in the year 1583, Montaigne spoke firmly regarding social justice and openly criticized the ennoblement of members of Parlement and their families. He spoke as a noble himself and seems to have forgotten his own' family's rise in society. The author of the *Essays* reminded Henry III that the king's justice must be administered free of charge (court actions were expensive) and "to the smallest crowd of the people as possible". He also endorsed the following statement: "all levies might be imposed equally on everyone, the strong carrying the poor, and suggest that it is very reasonable that those who have greater resources feel the burden more than those who survive only by chance and the sweat of their brows".

MONTAIGNE THE POLITICAL ACTOR

Despite Montaigne's social declarations in favor of justice and equality, many of his contemporaries were quick to point out his failure as mayor of Bordeaux. He did not contradict his critics:

> "They say also that my administration passed over without leaving any mark or trace. Good! They moreover accuse my cessation in a time when everybody almost was convicted of doing too much" (III, 10).

Indeed, Montaigne was perceived as a "centrist" at a time when extremes assumed power on both sides (Catholics and Protestants). He preferred negotiation and moderation in a time of *coups de force* and violence. But the result of a position perceived as indecisive and feeble-minded was isolation. Montaigne could have done more, but the political price would have been higher still.

His service in public life led him to make some negative judgments upon it in the *Essays*. If the *Essays* had first been conceived as a means to enter public life, it slowly became a means to remove himself from it. Politics is about winners and losers, and Montaigne never felt comfortable with decisions that would please one camp to the detriment of another. He was even accused of nonchalance and indolence by his detractors:

> "All public actions are subject to uncertain and various interpretations; for too many heads judge of them. Some say of this civic employment of mine (and I am willing to say a word or two about it, not that it is worth so much, but to give an account of my manners in such things), that I have behaved myself in it as a man who is too supine and of a languid temperament; and they have some color for what they say. I endeavored to keep my mind and my thoughts in repose" (III, 10).

If Montaigne failed in politics, it was perhaps because he was "too human". At least that is the way he liked to represent his political career after his two terms as mayor of Bordeaux. His unconditional confidence in men would have led him to be deceived. After all, he valued nobiliary values (honor and keeping his word, for example) and deplored bourgeois values (efficiency and utility). Likewise, his difficulty in thinking of people as aggregates or groups sharing the same ideology (corporatism, or the "orders" – clergy, nobility, others – of the *Ancien Régime*) turned out to be a disadvantage for someone who only felt comfortable in individual relationships. Montaigne was never a party man, and his personal judgment did not accommodate political platforms or positions supported by what he perceived as unnatural alliances.

Montaigne was ultimately a lone wolf in his political behavior. The *Essays* enabled him to reflect upon his experiences in public life, and he ultimately chose to highlight the positive side. But he wanted to move on. After 1588 (i.e. in the manuscript additions of a copy of the 1588 edition of his *Essays*), Montaigne started to emphasize the private aspect of his book and distanced himself from his former public life.

ON TIME AND HISTORY

Montaigne wrote his *Essays* at a time of great social, religious, and political transformation. In the face of this turmoil, he preferred to focus his attention on the present moment, believing it impossible to predict future behaviors and actions. He considered it a waste of time to imagine a better tomorrow, and to focus on the now:

> "I do not paint its being. I paint its passage; not a passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute, I must accommodate my history to the hour" (III, 2).

Montaigne made a famous declaration on the wars of religion: "It will be much if, a hundred years hence, it be remembered in general that in our times there were civil wars in France" (II, 16). He was obviously wrong, but that is not the gist of his point. He approached history on a very pragmatic level and could even be labelled a "conservative" when it came to social action. His position was always to avoid turmoil in the public sphere and to therefore make do with the social order in place. Liberty was for him a matter of free speech and freedom of conscience but was never followed by a call to arms. That meant peace at any price, even if the benefits fell to reactionaries. However, this conservatism only applied to public life. His book, on the contrary, represented a personal space to express compassion, respect, and appreciation of differences.

Montaigne theorizes his conception of "immediate history" in several places. For him, events might be given historical importance because they are ideologically invested at different times. The present does not yet have the capacity to "transform documents into monuments" (to cite the French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), and, for Montaigne, events of his time are purely anecdotal and therefore relegated to an exemplary status. In this sense, Montaigne always remains close to an atomist conception of society and history, rather than looking for great themes or laws that thread through it.

The people, for example, remain an unpredictable entity whose motivations and actions can never be explained in a reasoned way. What is the use of explaining events that respond to other logics, at other times? The social and religious fragmentation of the late Renaissance generated in Montaigne a form of relativism which did not allow any regrouping or organization into rules or laws. We do not learn from the past; it is in this way that the wars of religion can never be invoked in a didactic way. Memory does nothing to help reason.

Let us remind the reader, one last time, that the *Essays* were written over 20 years. It is therefore normal that political and ideological positions expressed in a specific social and political context

would change over time. Montaigne, like many of his contemporaries (Machiavelli for example), is pragmatic when it comes to politics, and his sense of adaptation (not to mention evolution) is reflected in his ability to absorb contradictions within the same book, while claiming that his views do not contradict each other. Montaigne literally puts himself to the test:

> "whether it be that I am then another self, or that I take subjects by other circumstances and considerations: so it is that I may peradventure contradict myself, but, as Demades said, I never contradict the truth. Could my soul once take footing, I would not essay but resolve: but it is always learning and making trial" (III, 2).

Montaigne's position towards the Reformation, for example, changed over time, until it became compatible, in the early 1580s, with the current of politics which sought to guarantee civil peace and was therefore ready to grant more freedoms (of conscience and worship) to Protestants. During times as tormented as the civil wars in France, we understand the difficulty of thinking about the social realm in a systematic fashion. Too many counter-examples weaken possible conclusions on political actions and modes of social organization. Moreover, the acceleration of events gives the feeling of a headlong rush. If we are to produce a theory of anything, it is at the daily level – and, in this sense, this is what Montaigne is doing.

Of course, his study of antiquity allowed Montaigne to find a certain stability of example that contemporaneous events did not provide him. But he was fully aware that things were changing fast, and that his world would never be the same – like the world of the cannibals encountering the foreign invaders. Living through the savagery of the religious wars produced a form of skepticism that was far from academic. It also shaped the form of the essay and produced a permanent questioning.

THE MONTAIGNE METHOD

It is true that Montaigne contradicts himself, which makes reading the *Essays* difficult, and sometimes problematic. The danger with Montaigne is to take him at his word and discover a few pages later that he says the opposite of what he had previously written. An analysis of his declarations organized in themes therefore has its limits. And yet, Montaigne offers personal and social considerations worth meditating on, not as a doctrine or a philosophy, but rather as attempts to seize a problem at a specific time. The *Essays* work as a laboratory that allows us to identify some essential principles of a model of individual and society that is almost always unrealizable, but nonetheless thinkable. For Montaigne, experimentation prevails over application, and the rules resulting from observation and experience never quite allow us to conceive of a social science, or to pass from theory to practice.

Rather than developing a grand analysis of humankind, Montaigne prefers to describe what he observes on the ground (for example, during his travels through Germany, Switzerland, and Italy) or what has been observed directly and without mediation by others (like the sailor who travelled to the New World and was employed by Montaigne). Thus, his reflections on mores and customs should not be seen as philosophical investigations on an abstract and unattainable human condition. For this reason, we cannot speak of a Montaignian ontology, or philosophy of being.

Montaigne strives to understand his own mores – always in their political, religious, and cultural context – in relation to other cultures, other schools, and other systems of thought. But should we only be amazed at otherness? Is it possible to take an inventory of people around the world and infer fundamental rules? These questions are always present in the *Essays*. Even a cursory reading makes it clear that Montaigne does not believe in human "essence". Humans are incredibly varied across cultures, and so the category of "humanity" is problematic. It is safer to just observe singular behaviors and actions.

Until the seventeenth century, resemblance as an organizing principle was enough to create the illusion of a theory of knowledge, of a

hidden order which brought together everything that seemed, at first glance, different. The Spanish theologians of the *Conquista* looked at the Indians of the New World in this way, i.e. as a pretext for the domination of other cultures because they could not find in these societies what the West valued (writing, monuments, private property). This ideological bias is criticized by Montaigne in his essay "On Cannibals". On the contrary, valuing difference as an enhancement of his own self, Montaigne delights at seeing himself in the eyes of the cannibals.

Because Montaigne is always aware of his own cultural and social environment, he carefully avoids moral judgment; his interest in different cultures and customs is only illustrative of human complexity. He leaves it to others to find an order in the world and its peoples, and the "progress" of civilizations does not interest him very much. As a good observer, Montaigne turns his gaze towards the generic Other (neighbors, foreigners, cannibals) and tries to understand the irreducibility of cultural specificities: "Every nation has particular opinions touching their use, and particular rules and methods in using them" (II, 37). The "empire of custom" (I, 22) makes us confuse the universal qualities of humans with the importance in our own societies of these "qualities". Being French or German, according to Montaigne, is in fact nothing more than following the customs of these countries. The power of customs even tends to modify human physiology: "You make a German sick if you lay him upon a mattress, as you do an Italian if you lay him on a feather-bed, and a Frenchman, if without curtains or fire. A Spanish stomach cannot hold out to eat as we can, nor ours to drink like the Swiss" (III, 13).

BIRTH OF THE MODERN, SKEPTICAL SELF

Throughout the *Essays*, freedom of personal judgment is privileged over society and education; the subject can always understand the world by himself and for himself. This self-sufficiency of the individual, out of its historical reality, also represents a trap for many modern readers of the *Essays*. In fact, one finds few references to possible

political actions in Montaigne's writings; the accent is almost always placed on commenting on the world rather than changing it. Montaigne's trademark is the moment of introspection, withdrawal, and self-sufficiency.

The possibility of a theoretical truth of the world unconsciously conforms with our own bourgeois mentality, precisely because it isolates the subject from its immediate social and political environment. It is true that Montaigne offers a foundation for the liberal ideology that will soon assert itself from the eighteenth century on. Montaigne's doubts and questions about authority (leading to independence of thought and eventually liberty), and the confidence in his own judgment, have been associated with the birth of modern liberalism. A modern self emerges that is distanced from the authorities of the past, enjoying the victory of private judgment over institutions that limit individual freedom. However, this type of ideological appropriation often ignores the biography of Montaigne. He was not a political thinker, and the *Essays* were conceived in a specific political, religious, and social context.

Other critics have seen in Montaigne an adept of skepticism, but they seem to forget that one is not born a sceptic, one becomes one. Skepticism is not a philosophical choice for Montaigne; it is anchored in the reality of his time and resulted from a slow deterioration in moral values during the second half of the sixteenth century. With Montaigne, it is difficult to speak of skepticism in the singular – as the mere expression of the philosophical doctrine of this name. One should rather speak of "skeptical moments" in the plural. These moments were produced by personal experiences which were first and foremost of a political nature before becoming, eventually, a *modus operandi*. Indeed, it is difficult not to link philosophy and political experiences in Montaigne's work.

We have thus often confused a philosophical system – Skepticism – with what, in Montaigne's *Essays*, is essentially an inclination or a posture of the mind in the face of specific negative or dangerous political situations. The *Essays* are strewn with skeptical conclusions

and impressions that are the result of Montaigne and his estate being in the middle of an atmosphere of unrest and terror. Shocked by the events he lived through – from the Saint-Bartholomew's Day massacre in 1572 to the assassination of Henry III in 1588 – it is very difficult to regroup his conflicting reactions and attitudes into a doctrine. One thing is certain: the religious situation of France between 1563 (beginning of the religious wars) and 1592 profoundly influenced the writing of Montaigne's book and nourished his skepticism.

THE NECESSITY OF DOUBT

Resistant to models and systems, Montaigne takes pleasure in the fortuitous and contradictory aspect of the multitude of things encountered. He attempts to seize them in the fleeting moment of personal judgment that must be understood within its historical milieu. Judgment is never final, because it expresses a point in time and space, of this man in this world.

Montaigne's biography is filled with these "doubt moments" which, through their repetition, create in the author a skeptical reflex which in time becomes a natural reaction. Yet the reflex has the function of helping him rediscover a moral stability in a time of upheaval – a time when as he famously puts it, "the world eternally turns round" (III, 2).

The various political and religious crises that punctuated the second half of the sixteenth century called into question a morality that was now discredited and obsolete. In short, utility replaced honesty. Montaigne offers an excellent analysis of this moral crisis in "On Profit and Honesty" (III, 1). In this chapter written after 1585, he shows how bourgeois values gradually replaced noble values such as honor, frankness, loyalty, good faith, and moral transparency. Past behaviors no longer exemplified moral models, as personal profit was now established as the only rule of behavior. Montaigne is the witness of this ideological transformation – anchored in historical and economic developments – which sees honor and truth replaced by utility, success, and

personal experience. It is perhaps a weaker path "which is a means much more weak and cheap; but truth is so great a thing that we ought not to disdain any mediation that will guide us to it" (III, 13).

The reappraisal of the notion of truth is obviously influenced by Montaigne's personal experiences. They leave him with a feeling of a permanent relativism which no longer allows him to judge anything in a lasting way. In a time when the vicissitudes of religious conflict seemed to govern everything, it makes sense to doubt what education has transmitted to you. In place of eternal values, a new truth has emerged: the truth of those who came out victorious.

Rather than commenting on the political, religious, and social situation of his country, Montaigne takes refuge in personal introspection. It replaces the rhetorical demonstrations of which he was always suspect. Morality is shaped by the military actions of clashing religious forces. Doubt then becomes a natural reflex at a time when all humanist benchmarks are systematically destabilized. The truths of yesterday crumble and the sandy soil upon which philosophy was built suddenly opens. The end of the Renaissance is a yawning abyss that engulfs past practices and knowledge, leaving only the necessity of doubt.

CONCLUSION

To summarize: The famous "the world eternally turns round" evoked by Montaigne no longer allows man to impose on others received knowledge or to claim possession of universal truths. The skeptical attitude which characterized the end of the Renaissance, and of which Montaigne is one of the best examples, was essentially due to an ideological and moral crisis linked to the experience of the wars of religion. In the second half of the sixteenth century, skepticism cannot be conceived of as a philosophical system; it rather a simple reaction to events – a response to a moral crisis which no longer allowed one to have ready-made answers.

The implication, which was clear to Montaigne, was that the truth could no longer be taught; it had to be discovered by the individual

subject. In matters of authority, everything was now up for grabs. Far from being received, truth must now be conceived individually from unique and private experiences. Montaigne was for this reason outside any didactic scheme: "so many interpretations dissipate truth and break it" (III, 13). He further concedes that "example is a vague and universal mirror, and of various reflections" (III, 13) and therefore loses its exemplarity. This is why Montaigne systematically deconstructs models to reduce them to specific cases.

At this time of crisis in political, social, and religious authority, the best reasoning comes from seeing what is in front of our eyes, rather than looking for guidance from previously celebrated universal truths. As Montaigne writes in his chapter on Raimond Sebond:

> "I always call reason that appearance or show of discourses which every man devised or forged in himself: that reason, of whose condition there may be a hundred, one contrary to another, about one self same subject: it is an instrument of lead and wax, stretching, pliable, and that may be fitted to all biases and squared to all measures" (II, 12).

Skepticism towards the religious and political situation relegates Montaigne to the role of a passive observer. He reports without judging, at least in a vindictive way. His approach of a "middle path" was aptly called *politique* (as the term was defined in the 1570s and 1580s), namely a compromise and *juste milieu* between extreme positions.

In the end, the *Essays* analyze what can be broadly defined as human nature, the endless process by which people attempt to impose themselves and their opinions upon others through the production of laws, policies, or philosophies. For Montaigne, this recurring battle for "truth" needs to be put into a historical perspective:

> "The truth of these days is not that which really is, but what every man persuades another man to believe" (II, 18).

Montaigne's famous motto, "What do I know?" (inscribed above the fireplace in his study), is a question that always needs to be asked, even when others give us ready answers.

In summary, reading him today teaches us that the angle we have defines the world we see. Or, as he wrote: "it does not only import that we see the thing, but how and after what manner we see it" (I, 40).

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

For this edition we have used Charles Cotton's translation. Cotton (1630– 1687) was considered one of the "most charming" poets of the late seventeenth century. In 1667, he translated the *Moral Philosophy of the Stoics* by Guillaume Du Vair and, a few years later (1671), *Horace* by Corneille.

Published in 1685, Cotton's translation of the *Essays* is dedicated to George Savile, Marquis of Halifax. Almost a century after John Florio's first translation of the *Essays* in English, Cotton's language reflects the taste of his time. His prose is simple, clear, less flowery, and certainly more exact than that of Florio or other writers of the Renaissance. His translation enjoyed some popularity through the eighteenth century considering the large number of reissues (1693, 1700, 1711, 1738, 1743, 1759, 1760). Close to Montaigne's original language, this translation (which we have modernized slightly, removing some archaic words) remains very readable today. It includes some of Cotton's remarks and references, along with those of a later editor, William Carew Hazlitt. There are also remarks from the translator of a 1724 French edition, Peter Coste. All these notes are in square brackets, as distinct from the regular brackets used by Montaigne himself.

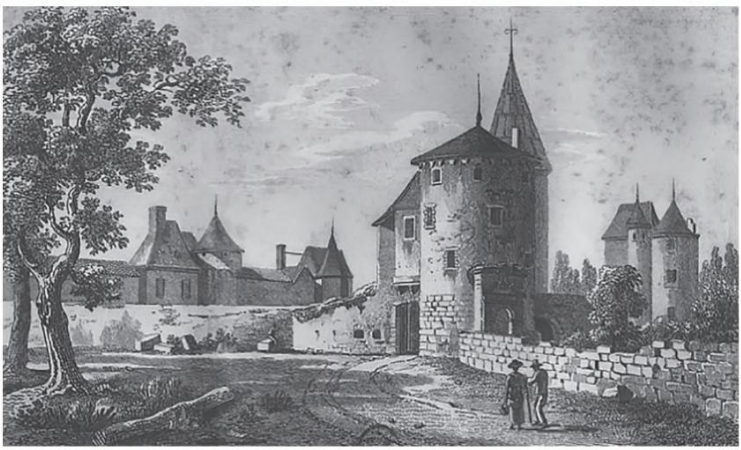
As a complete edition of the *Essays* would run to over 1200 pages, most modern editions are selected. We have chosen 11 out of 57 chapters from Book I, 8 out of 37 chapters from Book II, and 7 out of 13 chapters from Book III. Although the unavoidable and best known chapters such as "To Study Philosophy Is to Learn to Die", "On the Education of Children", "On Friendship", "On Cannibals", "On Books",

"On Repentance", "On Coaches", "On Vanity", and "On Experience" are present in this edition, we have also selected less known chapters which are often kept out of the Montaignian canon but nonetheless seem relevant for the twenty-first-century reader.

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE – TIMELINE

- Born in 1533, the son of Dordogne landowner Pierre Eyquem, and Antoinette de Louppes. Her family is Christian but descended from Sephardic Jews.
- Receives excellent education at the College de Guyenne in Bordeaux. Well-versed in Latin by age 7. In his teens studies at the Universities of Bordeaux and Toulouse.
- At age 20, follows his father in becoming a councilor at the Bordeaux parliament, where he meets friend and mentor Étienne de la Boétie. Period working at the court of Charles IX.
- 1565: marries Françoise de La Chassaigne. The marriage is arranged; she is mentioned a handful of times in the *Essays*.
- 1568: father dies and he inherits family estate including chateau in Perigord. Works in a library in a circular tower above the estate buildings. Writes: "Miserable, to my mind, is the man who has no place in his house where he can be alone, where he can privately attend to his needs, where he can conceal himself!"
- 1569: publishes in Paris a French translation of Raymond Sebond's *Theologia Naturalis*.
- 1570: daughter Toinette is born. Dies three months later.
- 1571: daughter Léonor is born, the only one of several daughters to survive into adulthood.
- 1572–4: France is in civil war. Montaigne joins the royalist side and works on its behalf in Bordeaux.
- 1577: has his first attack of "the stone" – a hereditary kidney disease.
- 1580: the *Essays* are published. Montaigne presents a copy to Henry III.

- 1580–81: journeys around Europe, going from one spa to another seeking a cure. Has audience with Pope Gregory XIII. Recalled home when elected (against his will) mayor of Bordeaux, a position previously held by his father.
- 1582: second edition of the *Essays* published.
- 1583: heir to the throne Henry de Navarre visits Montaigne and stays in his chateau. Re-elected mayor of Bordeaux.
- 1588: third edition of the *Essays* published, including the new Book III. Arrested and taken to the Bastille as a hostage but released the same day.
- 1592: Montaigne dies. His wife and Marie de Gournay, a writer and translator who had become close to Montaigne, arrange for the publication of a final 1595 edition of the *Essays*.
- 1613: first English translation of the *Essays* published, by John Florio.



Château de Montaigne, by Jean-Jérôme Baugean, c. 1800, with Montaigne's tower in the foreground. It still exists as a Monument historique and can be visited.

GUIDE TO THE CHAPTERS

BOOK I

On Idleness

When Montaigne retired from public life to his famous tower study on his estate, it did not turn out as he expected. Time on his hands did not lead to clarity of thought; rather, it made him more self-obsessed, melancholic, and prone to undisciplined imaginings.

On Liars

To lie well you need a good memory, which Montaigne distinctly lacks. In fact, his poor memory was a blessing in that he quickly forgot slights and could enjoy books he had read many times before. As humans are a species of word and speech, lying is the greatest vice, Montaigne argues.

That the Way We See Good and Evil Depends Upon the Opinion We Have of Them

Events are not good or bad in their own right, but our experience depends on how we perceive them. Montaigne agrees in principle, but chronic pain from his kidney stones and colic make it hard to live by these principles.

To Study Philosophy Is to Learn How To Die

A key part of Stoic philosophy was the premeditation or practicing of death so that it would not take us unawares. One should have perfect equanimity in the face of death or misfortune. Montaigne considers

the vanity of humans who busy themselves and take on great projects as if they would live forever.

On the Power of Imagination

Mental impressions, ideas, thoughts, and fears have a hold on us, and it is often only by "sorcery" or tricks that we can loosen their power. Montaigne's example is sexual performance; he reveals old wedding-night customs designed to make things go well. Other examples of the power of thought and images include a woman who, having birthed a hairy child, blamed it on having a portrait of John the Baptist above her bed. Montaigne discounts history as being largely the work of the imagination; he is better at observing the present.

On Custom, and That We Should Not Easily Change an Established Law

The discovery of new worlds and peoples in Montaigne's time, plus the constant turmoil of political events in France and Europe, made him err on the side of custom or "rules of thumb". What has been around for a long time has survived for good reason. "Novelty" is usually just some individual's idea of how things could change, often with negative social results.

On the Education of Children

In a chapter dedicated to his friend Diane de Foix (at the time, pregnant) Montaigne is full of quite modern ideas about how to bring up children, including teaching by inspiration rather than strong discipline. By analogy, kings and rulers should also act like a responsible and loving parent, instilling good values among their subjects.

On Friendship

"Friendship" here for Montaigne means bonds established in all kinds of relationships that are about the meeting of two souls (rather than

just bodies). His model here is his deep friendship with Etienne de la Boétie, who had been accused of seditionary writings. Their loyalty to each other over time is analogous to a citizen who is loyal to the state.

On Moderation

Whatever pleasures humans find, they take things to excess, thereby making pleasure a vice. Even the study of philosophy, if engaged in too much, will make a person have contempt for religion and accepted laws and customs. "Everything in moderation", and having respect for others, are a good rule for life.

On Cannibals

Montaigne is unusually open-minded for his time on the matter of "natives". We only think them barbarous because they are so different to us in dress, beliefs, and customs. Western civilization has its own array of enterprises and customs which would look cruel and nonsensical to outsiders. Amid our hubris, we would do well to remember that the greatest "art" in the universe is nature itself.

On Solitude

Wherever we go, we take ourselves along. Montaigne sought freedom of mind and tranquility in his tower study, but found he was a prisoner of wandering, unhelpful thoughts. We do not need physical solitude as monks and nuns seek, but to be *in* the world and yet live with some level of detachment.

BOOK II

On the Inconstancy of Our Actions

Humans are full of contradictions, and mostly drift along with the flow of life without having a real plan. Our moods and affections change with the weather, and there's as much difference within *us*, as *between*

individuals. Given that we allow chance to play such a part in our lives, it's no wonder that chance will dominate and take us places we'd rather not go.

Use Makes Perfect

Sometimes translated as "On Practice", the practice in question is not mastering of a skill but preparing for death. Montaigne, like most people, feared death. That was until he was thrown off his horse in an accident and was concussed; from that moment he had more equanimity. Relating the incident leads to a discussion of how much one should talk about oneself. Not too much, he thinks, but never talking of oneself also goes against human nature.

On Books

Montaigne reveals his reading habits, noting that he will only keep reading a book he really enjoys; he feels the ancient books are more solid than recent ones; and he follows Horace's division of books into those that merely delight, and those that delight and are useful (particularly ones that help him be a better person). Among the poets, he ranks Virgil highest. Among the useful writers, he likes Plutarch and Seneca; Cicero is too wordy. Among historians, he finds most weak because they put narrative over fact.

On Cruelty

The chapter begins by discussing virtue. Montaigne does not see himself as particularly virtuous. If he has good qualities, most were developed through education and good family – neither of which were his creation. He is not free of vice by any means, but one vice he would never engage in is cruelty. If someone is put to death, let it be quick. Torture for public enjoyment is disgusting. We should be kind to animals because they have feelings.

On Giving the Lie

Montaigne's own age, in fact every age in history including the classical world, is one of lies and dissimulation. He despises lying for the bad effects it carries through time. It is both cowardly towards other people, and disrespects God. His *Essays* are, if nothing else, an attempt to convey the truth – even if messy or awkward, or lacking direction or resolution.

On a Monstrous Child

Montaigne relates seeing two curiosities: male conjoined twins; and a man born with no genitals who nevertheless was aroused by women. Though they may seem "monsters", in God's eyes they cannot be, because as God made everything in nature, it all must be perfect. The universe has a great multitude of life, which we can wonder at.

On Three Good Women

A further meditation on love and marriage. Montaigne takes three examples from antiquity of devotion of wives to their husbands. He also salutes the great suicide of Seneca, who stayed true to his Stoic principles, with equanimity shown until the end.

BOOK III

On Profit and Honesty

Sometimes, there appears to be a conflict between personal virtue and matters of politics or business. Cicero wrote that what is right and what is expedient can never be separate things, and Montaigne largely agrees. In a time of war (as he was), one has to take sides, but in all personal and public dealings one should act with justice and sympathy, never becoming so inflamed that one acts with vengeance or cruelty.

On Repentance

Montaigne's subject here is the question of whether one has acted honorably, given the facts and circumstances at the time of decision. He has largely trusted his own judgment on things, and therefore is fully responsible for this life. It is less worrisome anyway to appreciate that things turned out as they meant to, and that one's decisions matter little in the scheme of things. There is little that can agitate Montaigne, and his relative lack of ambition or intensity has worked well for him. If you are moderate, you will have peace.

On Some Verses of Virgil

The chapter title disguises the real subject: human sexuality. Montaigne begins by noting he is too old to engage in much sex now, but he enjoys himself with memories. He admits his marriage was arranged but respects the institution of marriage and has kept to his vows. Sex is so strong an impulse that the world revolves around it. Women have desires as strong as men, and he looks wryly on women who claim to have their mind only on higher things. It is only education and custom that make women and men seem so different.

On Coaches

Horse-drawn coaches were still a symbol of luxury in Montaigne's time, so he uses them as the means to criticize pomp and ostentation. When rulers have grand transports and caravans, it is a sign that they lack confidence in their power and judgment and make up for it with display. They spend on lavish festivals to make the people feel good about them, when the money would be better spent on ports, bridges, schools, hospitals. He contrasts this with the apparent nobility of the New World rulers, admiring the civilization they built before the Spanish conquest.

On the Art of Conversation

Montaigne loves conversation so much, that he would rather lose his sight than his speech or hearing. In contrast to the solitariness of reading, conversation builds our character and skills. He welcomes strange or shocking views, because from every chat you learn something and it gets you closer to truth. He prefers being contradicted to being praised, and loves light-hearted banter. Speaking reveals who you are. Many a ruler would have preserved the sense of awe around them by keeping silent.

On Vanity

Montaigne admits that the greatest vanity is writing about vanity. Yet here he is, with his self-indulgent scribblings. Each person contributes in some way to the decline of their era. Some through their vain actions foster more injustice or cruelty than there was before. Others (like he himself) simply add more silliness or laziness. He should be content with running his estate, like his father was, but he fancies himself as a man of state, travelling and meeting important people. The Delphic maxim is Know yourself, but when he has examined himself, all he has found is emptiness and foolishness.

On Experience

Montaigne's meditation on his life-long search for wisdom, paradoxically, comes down to being a point of consciousness within a body. For this reason he goes into some details on his diet, sleeping habits, illnesses, etc. Though he has done nothing of great distinction, he has had thousands of experiences – and so feels as qualified to comment on life as anyone. Using the analogy of his kidney disease, and his aversion to medicine, he argues that life is to be faced up to, not avoided. In doing so we might find some (very modest) self-knowledge or wisdom.

ABOUT PHILIPPE DESAN

Philippe Desan is the Howard L. Willett Professor Emeritus of History of Culture at the University of Chicago. He specializes in the history of ideas in the Renaissance and more particularly in Montaigne. Books include the definitive biography, *Montaigne. A Life* (Princeton University Press, 2018) as well as *Montaigne: penser le social* (Odile Jacob, 2018) and the *Oxford Handbook of Montaigne* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Editor-in-chief of *Montaigne Studies* since 1988, he received the Grand Prize from the French Academy in 2015 for his scientific work.

ABOUT TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

Tom Butler-Bowdon is the author of the bestselling 50 Classics series, which brings the ideas of important books to a wider audience. Titles include *50 Philosophy Classics, 50 Psychology Classics, 50 Politics Classics, 50 Self-Help Classics* and *50 Economics Classics*.

As series editor for the Capstone Classics series, Tom has written Introductions to Plato's *The Republic*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Lao Tzu's *Tao TeChing*, and Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich*.

Tom is a graduate of the London School of Economics and the University of Sydney.

www.Butler-Bowdon.com

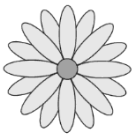
CONTENTS

TO THE READER

THIS, reader, is a book without guile. It tells you, at the very outset, that I had no other end in putting it together but what was domestic and private. I had no regard therein either to your service or my glory; my powers are equal to no such design. It was intended for the particular use of my relations and friends, in order that, when they have lost me, which they must soon do, they may here find some traces of my quality and humour, and may thereby nourish a more entire and lively recollection of me. Had I proposed to court the favour of the world, I had set myself out in borrowed beauties; but it was my wish to be seen in my simple, natural, and ordinary garb, without study or artifice, for it was myself I had to paint. My defects will appear to the life, in all their native form, as far as consists with respect to the public. Had I been born among those nations who, it is said, still live in the pleasant liberty of the Jaw of nature, I assure you I should readily have depicted myself at full length and quite naked. Thus, reader, I am myself the subject of my book; it is not worth your while to take up your time longer with such a frivolous matter; so fare thee well.

MONTAIGNE, 1st March, 1580

8



ON IDLENESS

As we see some grounds that have long lain idle and untilled, when grown rich and fertile by rest, to abound with and spend their virtue in the product of innumerable sorts of weeds and wild herbs that are unprofitable, and that to make them perform their true office, we are to cultivate and prepare them for such seeds as are proper for our service; and as we see women that, without knowledge of man, do sometimes of themselves bring forth inanimate and formless lumps of flesh, but that to cause a natural and perfect generation they are to be husbanded with another kind of seed: even so it is with minds, which if not applied to some certain study that may fix and restrain them, run into a thousand extravagances, eternally roving here and there in the vague expanse of the imagination:

Sicut aqua tremulum labris ubi lumen ahenis,
Sole repercussum, aut radiantis imagine lunae,
Omnia pervolitat late loca; jamque sub auras
Erigitur, summique ferit laquearia tecti.

[As when in brazen vats of water the trembling beams of light, reflected from the sun, or from the image of the radiant moon, swiftly float over every place around, and now are darted up on high, and strike the ceilings of the upmost roof.

—*Aeneid*, viii. 22.]

in which wild agitation there is no folly, nor idle fancy they do not light upon:

Velut aegri somnia, vanae
Finguntur species.

[As a sick man's dreams, creating vain phantasms.
—Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 7.]

The soul that has no established aim loses itself, for, as it is said:

Quisquis ubique habitat, Maxime, nusquam habitat.

[He who lives everywhere, lives nowhere.
—Martial, vii. 73.]

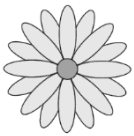
When I lately retired to my own house, with a resolution, as much as possibly I could, to avoid all manner of concern in affairs, and to spend in privacy and repose the little remainder of time I have to live, I fancied I could not more oblige my mind than to suffer it at full leisure to entertain and divert itself, which I now hoped it might henceforth do, as being by time become more settled and mature; but I find –

Variam semper dant otia mentem.

[Leisure ever creates varied thought.
—Lucan, *Pharsalia*, iv. 704]

that, quite contrary, it is like a horse that has broke from his rider, who voluntarily runs into a much more violent career than any horseman would put him to, and creates me so many chimaeras and fantastic monsters, one upon another, without order or design, that, the better at leisure to contemplate their strangeness and absurdity, I have begun to commit them to writing, hoping in time to make it ashamed of itself.

9



ON LIARS

There is not a man living whom it would so little become to speak from memory as myself, for I have scarcely any at all, and do not think that the world has another so marvellously treacherous as mine. My other faculties are all sufficiently ordinary and mean; but in this I think myself very rare and singular, and deserving to be thought famous. Besides the natural inconvenience I suffer by it (for, certes, the necessary use of memory considered, Plato had reason when he called it a great and powerful goddess), in my country, when they would say a man has no sense, they say, such an one has no memory; and when I complain of the defect of mine, they do not believe me, and reprove me, as though I accused myself for a fool: not discerning the difference between memory and understanding, which is to make matters still worse for me. But they do me wrong; for experience, rather, daily shows us, on the contrary, that a strong memory is commonly coupled with infirm judgment. They do, me, moreover (who am so perfect in nothing as in friendship), a great wrong in this, that they make the same words which accuse my infirmity, represent me for an ungrateful person; they bring my affections into question upon the account of my memory, and from a natural imperfection, make out a defect of conscience. "He has forgot," says one, "this request, or that promise; he no more remembers his friends; he has forgot to say or do, or conceal such and such a thing, for my sake." And, truly, I am apt enough to forget many things, but to neglect anything my friend has given me in charge,

yet even this by reason it is a vain body and without any hold, is very apt to escape the memory, if it be not well assured. Of which I had very pleasant experience, at the expense of such as profess only to form and accommodate their speech to the affair they have in hand, or to humour of the great folks to whom they are speaking; for the circumstances to which these men stick not to enslave their faith and conscience being subject to several changes, their language must vary accordingly: whence it happens that of the same thing they tell one man that it is this, and another that it is that, giving it several colours; which men, if they once come to confer notes, and find out the cheat, what becomes of this fine art? To which may be added, that they must of necessity very often ridiculously trap themselves; for what memory can be sufficient to retain so many different shapes as they have forged upon one and the same subject? I have known many in my time very ambitious of the repute of this fine wit; but they do not see that if they have the reputation of it, the effect can no longer be.

In plain truth, lying is an accursed vice. We are not men, nor have other tie upon one another, but by our word. If we did but discover the horror and gravity of it, we should pursue it with fire and sword, and more justly than other crimes. I see that parents commonly, and with indiscretion enough, correct their children for little innocent faults, and torment them for wanton tricks, that have neither impression nor consequence; whereas, in my opinion, lying only, and, which is of something a lower form, obstinacy, are the faults which are to be severely whipped out of them, both in their infancy and in their progress, otherwise they grow up and increase with them; and after a tongue has once got the knack of lying, it is not to be imagined how impossible it is to reclaim it whence it comes to pass that we see some, who are otherwise very honest men, so subject and enslaved to this vice. I have an honest lad to my tailor, whom I never knew guilty of one truth, no, not when it had been to his advantage. If falsehood had, like truth, but one face only, we should be upon better terms; for we should then take for certain the

contrary to what the liar says: but the reverse of truth has a hundred thousand forms, and a field indefinite, without bound or limit. The Pythagoreans make good to be certain and finite, and evil, infinite and uncertain. There are a thousand ways to miss the white, there is only one to hit it. For my own part, I have this vice in so great horror, that I am not sure I could prevail with my conscience to secure myself from the most manifest and extreme danger by an impudent and solemn lie. An ancient father says "that a dog we know is better company than a man whose language we do not understand."

Ut externus alienopene non sit hominis vice.

[As a foreigner cannot be said to supply us the place of a man.

—Pliny, *Natural History*. vii. I]

And how much less sociable is false speaking than silence?

King Francis I vaunted that he had by this means nonplussed Francesco Taverna, ambassador of Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, a man very famous for his science in talking in those days. This gentleman had been sent to excuse his master to his Majesty about a thing of very great consequence, which was this: the King, still to maintain some intelligence with Italy, out of which he had lately been driven, and particularly with the duchy of Milan, had thought it convenient to have a gentleman on his behalf to be with that Duke: an ambassador in effect, but in outward appearance a private person who pretended to reside there upon his own particular affairs; for the Duke, much more depending upon the Emperor, especially at a time when he was in a treaty of marriage with his niece, daughter to the King of Denmark, who is now dowager of Lorraine, could not manifest any practice and conference with us without his great interest. For this commission one Merveille, a Milanese gentleman, and an equerry to the King, being thought very fit, was accordingly despatched thither with private credentials, and instructions as

ambassador, and with other letters of recommendation to the Duke about his own private concerns, the better to mask and colour the business; and was so long in that court, that the Emperor at last had some inkling of his real employment there; which was the occasion of what followed after, as we suppose; which was, that under pretence of some murder, his trial was in two days despatched, and his head in the night struck off in prison. Messire Francesco being come, and prepared with a long counterfeit history of the affair (for the King had applied himself to all the princes of Christendom, as well as to the Duke himself, to demand satisfaction), had his audience at the morning council; where, after he had for the support of his cause laid open several plausible justifications of the fact, that his master had never looked upon this Merveille for other than a private gentleman and his own subject, who was there only in order to his own business, neither had he ever lived under any other aspect; absolutely disowning that he had ever heard he was one of the King's household or that his Majesty so much as knew him, so far was he from taking him for an ambassador: the King, in his turn, pressing him with several objections and demands, and challenging him on all sides, tripped him up at last by asking, why, then, the execution was performed by night, and as it were by stealth? At which the poor confounded ambassador, the more handsomely to disengage himself, made answer, that the Duke would have been very loth, out of respect to his Majesty, that such an execution should have been performed by day. Any one may guess if he was not well rated when he came home, for having so grossly tripped in the presence of a prince of so delicate a nostril as King Francis.

Pope Julius II. having sent an ambassador to the King of England to animate him against King Francis, the ambassador having had his audience, and the King, before he would give an answer, insisting upon the difficulties he should find in setting on foot so great a preparation as would be necessary to attack so potent a King, and urging some reasons to that effect, the ambassador very unseasonably replied that he had also himself considered the same

difficulties, and had represented them to the Pope. From which saying of his, so directly opposite to the thing propounded and the business he came about, which was immediately to incite him to war, the King of England first derived the argument (which he afterward found to be true), that this ambassador, in his own mind, was on the side of the French; of which having advertised his master, his estate at his return home was confiscated, and he himself very narrowly escaped the losing of his head. [Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum* (1703), iv. col. 684.]

Chapter 14

One that they were leading to the gallows told them they must not take him through such a street, lest a merchant who lived there should arrest him by the way for an old debt. Another told the hangman he must not touch his neck for fear of making him laugh, he was so ticklish. Another answered his confessor, who promised him he should that day sup with our Lord, "Do you go then," said he, "in my room [place]; for I for my part keep fast to-day." Another having called for drink, and the hangman having drunk first, said he would not drink after him, for fear of catching some evil disease. Everybody has heard the tale of the Picard, to whom, being upon the hangman's ladder, they presented a common wench, telling him (as our law does sometimes permit) that if he would marry her they would save his life; he, having a while considered her and perceiving that she halted: "Come, tie up, tie up," said he, "she limps." And they tell another story of the same kind of a fellow in Denmark, who being condemned to lose his head, and the like condition being proposed to him upon the scaffold, refused it, by reason the girl they offered him had hollow cheeks and too sharp a nose. A servant at Toulouse being accused of heresy, for the sum of his belief referred himself to that of his master, a young student, prisoner with him, choosing rather to die than suffer himself to be persuaded that his master could err. We read that of the inhabitants of Arras, when Louis XI took that city, a great many let themselves be hanged rather than they would say, "God save the King." And amongst that mean-souled race of men, the buffoons, there have been some who would not leave their fooling at the very moment of death. One that the hangman was turning off the ladder cried: "Launch the galley," an ordinary saying of his. Another, whom at the point of death his friends had laid upon a bed of straw before the fire, the physician asking him where his pain lay: "Between the bench and the fire," said he, and the priest, to give him extreme unction, groping for his feet which his pain had made him pull up to him: "You will find them," said he, "at the end of my legs." To one who being present exhorted him to recommend himself to God: "Why, is someone

going to Him?" said he; and the other replying: "It will presently be yourself, if it be His good pleasure." "Shall I be sure to be there by to-morrow night?" said he. "Do, but recommend yourself to Him," said the other, "and you will soon be there." "I were best then," said he, "to wait and carry my recommendations myself."

In the kingdom of Narsingah to this day the wives of their priests are buried alive with the bodies of their husbands; all other wives are burnt at their husbands' funerals, which they not only firmly but cheerfully undergo. At the death of their king, his wives and concubines, his favourites, all his officers, and domestic servants, who make up a whole people, present themselves so gaily to the fire where his body is burnt, that they seem to take it for a singular honour to accompany their master in death. During our late wars of Milan, where there happened so many takings and retakings of towns, the people, impatient of so many changes of fortune, took such a resolution to die, that I have heard my father say he there saw a list taken of five-and-twenty masters of families who made themselves away in one week's time: an incident somewhat resembling that of the Xanthians, who being besieged by Brutus, fell – men, women, and children – into such a furious appetite of dying, that nothing can be done to evade death which they did not to avoid life; insomuch that Brutus had much difficulty in saving a very small number. ["Only fifty were saved." – Plutarch, *Life of Brutus*, c. 8.]

Every opinion is of force enough to cause itself to be espoused at the expense of life. The first article of that valiant oath that Greece took and observed in the Median war, was that everyone should sooner exchange life for death, than their own laws for those of Persia. What a world of people do we see in the wars between the Turks and the Greeks, who would rather embrace a cruel death than uncircumcise themselves to be baptised? An example of which no sort of religion is incapable.

The kings of Castile having banished the Jews out of their dominions, John, King of Portugal, in consideration of eight crowns a head, sold them a retreat into his for a certain limited time, upon

condition that the time fixed coming to expire they should begone, and he to furnish them with shipping to transport them into Africa. The day comes, which once lapsed they were given to understand that such as were afterward found in the kingdom should remain slaves; vessels were very slenderly provided; and those who embarked in them were rudely and villainously used by the passengers, who, besides other indignities, kept them cruising upon the sea, one while forwards and another backwards, till they had spent all their provisions, and were constrained to buy of them at so dear a rate and so long withal, that they set them not on shore till they were all stripped to the very shirts. The news of this inhuman usage being brought to those who remained behind, the greater part of them resolved upon slavery and some made a show of changing religion. Emmanuel, the successor of John, being come to the crown, first set them at liberty, and afterwards altering his mind, ordered them to depart his country, assigning three ports for their passage. He hoped, says Bishop Osorius, no contemptible Latin historian of these later times, that the favour of the liberty he had given them having failed of converting them to Christianity, yet the difficulty of committing themselves to the mercy of the mariners and of abandoning a country they were now habituated to and were grown very rich in, to go and expose themselves in strange and unknown regions, would certainly do it. But finding himself deceived in his expectation, and that they were all resolved upon the voyage, he cut off two of the three ports he had promised them, to the end that the length and incommodity of the passage might reduce some, or that he might have opportunity, by crowding them all into one place, the more conveniently to execute what he had designed, which was to force all the children under fourteen years of age from the arms of their fathers and mothers, to transport them from their sight and conversation, into a place where they might be instructed and brought up in our religion. He says that this produced a most horrid spectacle the natural affection between the parents and their children, and moreover their zeal to their ancient belief, contending against this violent decree, fathers

and mothers were commonly seen making themselves away, and by a yet much more rigorous example, precipitating out of love and compassion their young children into wells and pits, to avoid the severity of this law. As to the remainder of them, the time that had been prefixed being expired, for want of means to transport them they again returned into slavery. Some also turned Christians, upon whose faith, as also that of their posterity, even to this day, which is a hundred years since, few Portuguese can yet rely; though custom and length of time are much more powerful counsellors in such changes than all other constraints whatever. In the town of Castelnaudari, fifty heretic Albigeois at one time suffered themselves to be burned alive in one fire rather than they would renounce their opinions.

Quoties non modo ductores nostri, sed universi etiam exercitus, ad non dubiam mortem concurrerunt?

[How often have not only our leaders, but whole armies, run to a certain and manifest death?"

— Cicero, *Tusculum Disputations*, i. 37.]

I have seen an intimate friend of mine run headlong upon death with a real affection, and that was rooted in his heart by divers plausible arguments which he would never permit me to dispossess him of, and upon the first honourable occasion that offered itself to him, precipitate himself into it, without any manner of visible reason, with an obstinate and ardent desire of dying. We have several examples in our own times of persons, even young children, who for fear of some little inconvenience have despatched themselves. And what shall we not fear, says one of the ancients [Seneca, *Letters*, 70.] to this purpose, if we dread that which cowardice itself has chosen for its refuge?

Should I here produce a long catalogue of those, of all sexes and conditions and sects, even in the most happy ages, who have

either with great constancy looked death in the face, or voluntarily sought it, and sought it not only to avoid the evils of this life, but some purely to avoid the satiety of living, and others for the hope of a better condition elsewhere, I should never have done. The number is so infinite that in truth I should have a better bargain to reckon up those who have feared it. This one case therefore shall serve for all: Pyrrho the philosopher being one day in a boat in a very great tempest, showed to those around him who were terrified, the example of a hog that was not at all concerned at the storm. Shall we then dare to say that this advantage of reason, of which we so much boast, and upon the account of which we think ourselves masters and emperors over the rest of all creation, was given us for a torment? To what end serves the knowledge of things if it renders us more unmanly? If we thereby lose the tranquillity and repose we should enjoy without it? And if it put us into a worse condition than Pyrrho's hog? Shall we employ the understanding that was conferred upon us for our greatest good to our own ruin; setting ourselves against the design of nature and the universal order of things, which intend that everyone should make use of the faculties, members, and means he has to his own best advantage?

But it may be objected: Your rule is true enough as to what concerns death; but what will you say of indigence? What will you, moreover, say of pain, which Aristippus, Hieronymus, and most of the sages have reputed the worst of evils; and those who have denied it by word of mouth have, however, confessed it in effect? Posidonius being extremely tormented with a sharp and painful disease, Pompeius came to visit him, excusing himself that he had taken so unseasonable a time to come to hear him discourse of philosophy. "The gods forbid," said Posidonius to him, "that pain should ever have the power to hinder me from talking," and thereupon fell immediately upon a discourse of the contempt of pain: but, in the meantime, his own infirmity was playing his part, and plagued him to purpose; to which he cried out, "You may work your

Avida est periculi virtus.

[Courage is greedy of danger.

— Seneca, *De Providentia*, c. 4]

Were there no lying upon the hard ground, no enduring, armed at all points, the meridional heats, no feeding upon the flesh of horses and asses, no seeing a man's self hacked and hewed to pieces, no suffering a bullet to be pulled out from amongst the shattered bones, no sewing up, cauterising and searching of wounds, by what means were the advantage we covet to have over the vulgar to be acquired? It is not fleeting evil and pain, the sages say, that a man should most covet, but to perform acts which bring us the greater labour and pain.

Non est enim hilaritate, neclascivia, nec risu, aut joco comite levitatis, sed saepe etiam tristes firmitate et constantia sunt beati.

[For men are not only happy by mirth and wantonness, by laughter and jesting, the companion of levity, but ofttimes the serious sort reap felicity from their firmness and constancy.

—Cicero, *De Finibus*. ii. 10.]

And for this reason it has ever been impossible to persuade our forefathers but that the victories obtained by dint of force and the hazard of war were not more honourable than those performed in great security by stratagem or practice:

Laetius est, quoties magno sibi constat honestum.

[A good deed is all the more a satisfaction by how much the more it has cost us.

—Lucan, *Pharsalia*, ix. 404.]