HOW TO READ

MONTAIGNE

TERENCE CAVE

CONTENTS

SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

How am I to read *How to Read*?

This series is based on a very simple, but novel idea. Most beginners' guides to great thinkers and writers offer either potted biographies or condensed summaries of their major works, or perhaps even both. *How to Read*, by contrast, brings the reader face-to-face with the writing itself in the company of an expert guide. Its starting point is that in order to get close to what a writer is all about, you have to get close to the words they actually use and be shown how to read those words.

Every book in the series is in a way a masterclass in reading. Each author has selected ten or so short extracts from a writer's work and looks at them in detail as a way of revealing their central ideas and thereby opening doors on to a whole world of thought. Sometimes these extracts are arranged chronologically to give a sense of a thinker's development over time, sometimes not. The books are not merely compilations of a thinker's most famous passages, their 'greatest hits', but rather they offer a series of clues or keys that will enable readers to go on and make discoveries of their own. In addition to the texts and readings, each book provides a short biographical chronology and suggestions for further reading, Internet resources, and so on. The books in the *How to Read* series don't claim to tell you all you need to know about Freud, Nietzsche and Darwin, or indeed Shakespeare and the Marquis de Sade, but they do offer the best starting point for

further exploration.

Unlike the available second-hand versions of the minds that have shaped our intellectual, cultural, religious, political and scientific landscape, *How to Read* offers a refreshing set of first-hand encounters with those minds. Our hope is that these books will, by turn, instruct, intrigue, embolden, encourage and delight.

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A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Montaigne's *Essais* were originally written in French. No translation is ever an exact equivalent of the original, and in this case the problem is exacerbated by Montaigne's highly personal and idiosyncratic manner of writing. Early translations (such as John Florio's famous version of 1603, which was known to Shakespeare) are free and often obscure to the present-day reader; modern translators are understandably inclined to rearrange Montaigne's sentences in order to make them more digestible. I have therefore provided my own translations, which aim to remain as close to the text as possible and to preserve Montaigne's distinctive syntactic structures; in one or two key cases where I talk about the meaning of a word or phrase, I give the French in brackets following the English rendering. Readers who wish to explore the context of the passages quoted here, or to read more of the *Essais*, will find some remarks on available translations in my 'Suggestions for Further Reading'.

Readers will find that the letters [A], [B] and [C] sometimes appear in quoted texts. These refer to the three main strata of the *Essais* according to the chronology of their composition: all text following [A] was present in the first edition of the work (1580); text marked [B] first appeared in the 1588 edition; text marked [C] was added subsequently. This way of presenting the text is possible because Montaigne rarely changed what he had already written but often returned to earlier materials and made additions of varying lengths, from single words to passages of

several pages. It has the advantage that it brings out the movement of Montaigne's thought through time, but it is approximate and corresponds to no actual edition of the *Essais* published before modern times. The 1580 edition contained only Books I and II; Book III was added in 1588. Where a quotation begins with no indication of its date, the text is from the [A]-stratum (for quotations from Books I and II) or the [B]-stratum (Book III) until otherwise indicated. One further detail concerning chronology: the order in which Montaigne arranged the chapters in the first two books does not correspond to the order in which they were composed. Thus, for example, I.26 appears to have been written after II.12.

Montaigne's quotations from Latin authors will be given in italics in English translation; the source will be given in a note.

The title of Montaigne's work will always be given here in French, and the individual titled segments we are inclined to call 'essays' will be referred to – as Montaigne himself refers to them – as 'chapters'. These two procedures are designed to avoid projecting back on to the *Essais* the modern sense and associations of the word 'essay', which had not yet come into being in Montaigne's day. Individual chapters will be identified in the form 'I.8' (= Book I, chapter 8).

INTRODUCTION

'It is the only book of its kind in the world, wild and extravagant in conception' (II.8): this is how on one occasion Michel de Montaigne describes the extraordinary miscellany of writings which he first published in 1580 and which he subsequently elaborated and extended until his death in 1592.

The *Essais*, as he called it, is a highly original outgrowth of the humanist, Latin-based culture of late Renaissance France. Michel de Montaigne's father engaged tutors to speak Latin to him from his earliest childhood, so that he was virtually bilingual in French and Latin. His family had made its money in trade and its aristocratic title was only recently acquired; he himself had legal training and occupied prominent positions in the local judiciary and administration. Some three years after his father died in 1568, he gave up these public duties, at least for a while, in order to devote himself to his domestic responsibilities. This 'retirement' also had another purpose, however: it gave him leisure to read, reflect and write, and within a remarkably short time he was beginning to compose fragments of what would become the *Essais*, the only original composition that he published during his lifetime.

When one opens the book, one finds more than a thousand pages of dense writing but no evident centre of gravity. Montaigne seems to talk about everything; he shifts topic frequently and unexpectedly, cites large numbers of texts, writers and examples which are likely to be unfamiliar to the modern reader, and is addicted

to quoting fragments of Latin verse, usually without saying who wrote them. If one looks for statements of philosophical, religious or political opinion in his writing, one can find plenty of them, but they are in virtually all cases put forward cautiously and provisionally, with a let-out word or phrase ('perhaps', 'it seems to me'). Many of Montaigne's readers have assumed that he must have held firm positions and beliefs, even if they changed over time, and have interpreted the *Essais* accordingly. Such readings have created strong presuppositions, for example that he was primarily a sceptical thinker, or that one can discern in his work the origins of the modern sense of self. There is of course some truth in these and similar assertions, but it is crucial not to take them for granted before one starts reading Montaigne.

'We are concerned here with the manner of speaking, not its matter', says Montaigne in 'On the art of conversing' (III.8), and one can find many remarks of the same kind in the *Essais*. The overall coherence of the *Essais* as a book and – perceived from the inside, as one actually reads it – as a project in progress becomes apparent if one attends to the way in which Montaigne envisages his own aims and how he writes rather than to what he writes about. This study will therefore begin with modes of thinking and writing and then go on to look at what happens to questions of philosophy, belief and ethics within that perspective: Montaigne's 'position' on particular topics becomes secondary to the way in which he handles them. Other themes – travel, the self, conversation – will focus on the method itself, often in metaphorical form, and show how such entities as the self, whether in isolation or in its relation to others, emerge in the texture of Montaigne's writing as the product of a documentary account of the mind's activities.

This emphasis on the way in which the *Essais* are written is not just a question of 'style' in the aesthetic sense of the word. Montaigne is persistently interested in how he thinks, how thoughts flow through his mind, and the flow is rendered by the shape of his sentences, his metaphorical habits, his way with adverbs and other features of his writing. As he puts it himself, he gropes his way forward, always uncertain of the terrain ahead. That is why his book is called 'Trials' or 'Soundings' ('Essays' is strictly speaking a mistranslation). His reflections are thought-experiments rather than propositions or statements of position, and collectively they make up what is probably the richest and most productive thought-experiment ever committed to paper.

This way of looking at his writing deeply affects the relation between the historical status of the *Essais* and the value of the book for modern readers. Montaigne of course assumes that the reader will be familiar with the historical world in which he lived: the religious controversies, the wars of religion that ravaged France in the last third of the sixteenth century, the crisis of the French monarchy, reports from the recently discovered 'New World'. Equipping oneself with enough information to understand these allusions is clearly an essential task, and this book will provide such information when it is required, as economically as possible (the chronology may also be consulted where necessary). A more fundamental question is whether we are to read the *Essais* primarily as a product of late Renaissance humanism, steeped in the cultural habits of that period, or as already a remarkably modern work. The answer is that it is both, and that any viable reading will need to see both aspects, shuttling between them as between the duck and the rabbit in the famous trick picture that Wittgenstein discusses in the

Philosophical Investigations (a drawing that can be seen as the head of either a duck or a rabbit but not both at the same time).[1] The *Essais* is quintessentially an 'early modern' work: it is early *modern* in that it anticipates a whole range of preoccupations and attitudes that we value, such as tolerance, open-mindedness, a broadly secular view of the world and an acute awareness of the individual self. Yet these values cannot simply be excerpted from his writing. They appear in a context which is at every turn different from what we might expect. As a citizen of a past culture, Montaigne is *early* modern, almost as much a foreigner to us as the 'cannibals' of the New World were to him. To catch the nuances of his meaning, we need to listen to him carefully and familiarize ourselves with his disconcerting habits of mind. Otherwise we shall simply be constructing a mirror-image of ourselves, an exercise which leads nowhere. If the encounter with his mind and his voice is to be productive, the tension of difference has to be maintained. I have therefore chosen at certain key moments to shift to and fro between the historical and the 'modern' perspective in order to remind readers of that tension. Ideally, one would present the duck and the rabbit as a single creature, but that isn't possible in the linear mode of expository prose.

How then can we characterise the *Essais* as a whole without betraying its uniquely shifting character? Perhaps the best way is to read it as a work that seeks above all to devise *cognitive* strategies: strategies of reflection capable of handling not only the abstract business of thinking but also the frictions that arise from living in the real world, whether from religious or ethical constraints, illness, sexuality, or relations with other people. The word 'cognitive' has recently emerged as central to a number of disciplines, in

particular psychology and linguistics, where it has acquired specific meanings. I use it (particularly in the later part of this book) in a less technical sense, although the insights of both those disciplines are, I believe, highly relevant to the *Essais* and to the way we read them. What I mean to capture by means of the word is Montaigne's enduring preoccupation with thought as an experience to be studied and documented non-judgementally and non-didactically; his elaboration of a mode of writing that meets this requirement; and the value of the *Essais* as a book to think with, an intellectual resource still remarkably potent more than four hundred years after it was written.

1

DOCUMENTING THE MIND

> When I recently retired to domestic life, determined to concern myself, as far as I was able, with nothing but spending my few remaining years in leisure and privacy, it seemed to me that I could do my mind no greater favour than to leave it in complete idleness, allowing it to commune with itself, to settle and find a fixed point within itself: something I hoped it could from now on achieve more easily, having in the course of time become more weighty and more mature. But I find,
>
> *leisure always makes the mind restless,*[2]
>
> that on the contrary, playing the runaway horse, it gives itself a hundred times more trouble dealing with itself than it used to take for the sake of others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastical monsters one on top of the other, without order or relevance, that in order to contemplate their oddity and ineptness at my leisure, I have begun to make a record of them, hoping in the course of time to make my mind ashamed of them and thus of itself.
>
> I.8: 'On idleness'

'On idleness' is one of Montaigne's shortest chapters (a single page) and, as the word 'recently' in the first sentence of the passage attests, one of the earliest. It contains echoes of the Latin inscription that Montaigne had had engraved on the wall of his library on his thirty-eighth birthday (28 February 1571) to mark his retirement from public life. This retirement turned out to be only partial: Montaigne was later to be elected Mayor of Bordeaux, and he also acted as an intermediary in the contemporary civil wars, shuttling between leading representatives of the warring factions

and exercising his considerable diplomatic skills. But the withdrawal into an inner, mental world was in fact decisive, having consequences that Montaigne himself could not have foreseen. This passage suggests that he had intended to use his leisure to develop a more coherent and mature perspective on life, something like a personal philosophy, perhaps; writing seems not to have formed a part of this original project. What emerged very rapidly was something quite different, almost the opposite of a 'philosophy': an awareness of the bizarrely elusive flow of his imaginings when he left his mind to its own devices.

Let us look for a moment at the way in which the second sentence (which is also the last in the chapter) unfolds. Its shape is primarily accumulative, adding phrases and clauses by association rather than constructing a logical, predictable sequence. It seeks, in fact, to imitate the erratic, unpredictable flow of thought itself when it is given, as we say, free rein. This last metaphor had appeared a few lines earlier, where Montaigne speaks of the mind as 'rushing about here and there, in a disorderly fashion, in the indistinct field of the imagination'. It is now crystallized in the image of a runaway horse, and it leads on, again by association, to an evocation of even wilder beasts: chimeras, creatures that exist solely in the imagination.

The imagination is a key concept in Montaigne's *Essais*. In the sixteenth century, it was the faculty that united sense impressions and made them available to the mind; its close synonym, 'fantasy', could easily come to suggest the more unreliable aspect of such mental images, which in themselves made no distinction between truth and falsehood and were thus capable of deceiving the rational faculty. Montaigne's chapter 'On the power of the imagination' (I.21) provides a compilation of standard materials on the way the

imagination works, but as always with an individual twist, not least in the passages on male sexual problems, where the 'unruly member' behaves in a way reminiscent of the runaway horse of I.8. Both 'imagination' and 'fantasy' could also be used to mean 'idea' or 'conception', that is to say the product of mental activity rather than the faculty itself. Montaigne's regular choice of those words rather than their more abstract equivalents implies a preference not only for 'embodied' ideas, such as metaphors, but also for thought which has in some sense freed itself from strict rational constraints.

The final sentence of the quoted passage, then, registers progressively a loss of control, a movement into the unpredictable and into the purely imaginary; it evokes an infinitely expanding mental landscape rather than a schematic, controlled realm of abstract ideas. It is only when this point is reached that a new kind of 'control' comes into view: the act of writing can seek to capture the flow of thought, in order not to tame it but to submit its very disorder to sustained scrutiny. In this final phase of the sentence, the metaphor is one of recording, of creating a continuous record which will enable the writer to review and assess his thought processes over time, rather than allowing them to evaporate into thin air. The notion of a register or inventory recurs at several points where Montaigne speaks of his attempts to pin down and record the movement of his thoughts (see also the quotation from II.17, below, pp. 86–7); the French verb he most often uses for 'to record' is *contreroller* (or its synonym *mettre en rolle*), which is related to the English word 'control' but lacks its implication of constraint and domination.

This brief chapter, inserted unassumingly among a number of others on unrelated topics near the

beginning of Book I, sounds very much like a draft preface to the whole book. By evoking so graphically the genesis of the mode of writing that was to become the *Essais*, it in fact provides a better initial guide to the reading of Montaigne than the note 'To the reader' with which Montaigne eventually prefaced his book and which presents it as a self-portrait. The writing of the *Essais* is more fluid, more shifting, than the image of a portrait suggests, and what it records is not so much the character of an individual person as the idiosyncratic flow of that person's thoughts.

Metaphors of riding are commonplace in early modern writing, but the image of the runaway horse in 'On idleness' is not a casual one. Sometime between 1567 and 1570, when he was in his mid-thirties, Montaigne had an accident which might easily have proved fatal: while out riding on his estate, he was thrown off his horse and knocked unconscious. Some four years later – the time-span is indicated in a phrase which appeared in the first edition of the *Essais* but was subsequently deleted – he wrote an account of this near-death experience in 'On practising' (II.6). It begins with a circumstantial account of the accident itself:

> thinking I was completely safe and so close to home that I didn't need a better mount, I had chosen a horse that was comfortable but somewhat unsteady. On the way back, when I was suddenly presented with a situation where I needed to use the horse for a purpose it wasn't really suited for, a servant of mine, a tall strong man riding a powerful carthorse – one with a wilful mouth, fresh and vigorous into the bargain – in order to show how bold he was and get in ahead of his companions, managed to urge his mount on at full gallop right into my path, and bear down like a colossus on the little man on his little horse, and strike him like a thunderbolt with all his force and weight, sending both of us head over heels: so there was the horse lying stretched out unconscious and me ten or a dozen paces further on, dead, lying on my back, my face all bruised and lacerated, the sword that I had had in my hand more than ten paces further on again, my belt in pieces, showing no more signs of movement or

feeling than a log of wood.

This graphic story is told almost as if it had happened to someone else, and with a markedly humorous detachment. It is in fact clearly in part at least a reconstruction, since he could not himself have observed the details of how he and his horse and sword lay scattered after the accident; yet Montaigne delivers it in what is virtually a single breathless sentence, forcefully evoking the rapidity and confusion of the event.

The sense of a narrative happening to someone else is sustained in what immediately follows: Montaigne's servants carried him home, thinking that he was dead, but on the way he began to show signs of life and was even capable of speech. However, the account then goes on to focus at some length on his own sensations of tranquil unthinking consciousness during the period of amnesia which followed the accident. This memory of a state with no past and apparently no future, in which death seemed imminent but was not at all frightening, is the principal point of the story. As Montaigne says on the opening page of the chapter, one can fortify oneself by habit and experience against pain, shame, poverty and other misfortunes: that is the sense of the chapter title, 'On practising'. Only death cannot be practised in advance; we are all apprentices when we come to die. Yet Montaigne's accident had provided him with a near-death experience, one that was reassuringly lacking in pain and fear.

Montaigne documents with care his own physical and mental responses in this state of amnesia. In other words, as the last sentence of 'On idleness' had prescribed, he records a particularly striking example of the strange things that can happen in the mind, and in the body to which it is intimately attached. He is interested, for instance, in the way in which his mind

reconstructed a false context for the accident: he was convinced that he was dying from a gunshot wound to the head – he lived in an area which was at that time affected by the civil wars. The preoccupation with memory, its loss and its return, recurs in the final stage of the account. It was only much later, he says, that the memory of the accident itself came back to him:

> I don't want to forget the following: the last thing that came back to me was the memory of the accident, and I had people tell me several times where I was going, where I was coming from, at what time it happened, before I could conceive it for myself. As for the reason why I had fallen, they hid it from me to protect the man who was reponsible for it, and invented others. But long after, on the following day, when my memory began to open up and represent for me the state in which I had found myself at the moment when I had perceived the horse bearing down on me (for I had seen it at my heels and took myself for a dead man, but this thought had been so rapid that fear had had no time to take hold), it felt as if a lightning flash was striking my soul with a shuddering blow and that I returned at that moment from the other world.

Like the sentence from 'On idleness' we looked at earlier, the last one in this passage shows no sign of striving for elegance. Its multiple subordinate clauses and parenthetic insertions seek rather to follow precise sequences of time and causation. In fact, it seems designed to *imitate* the moment of anamnesis, when Montaigne remembered how the accident happened: first the indicators of time and mental process; then the raw event; then in parenthesis the last moment of consciousness, the response to the event as it happened; and finally the sensation of anamnesis itself, like a flash of lightning. This psychological process is captured faithfully within the shape of a sentence: the apparently rambling syntax mirrors the movement of the mind.

Montaigne is writing this down years after the event. As the phrase 'I don't want to forget the following'

makes explicit, he is reconstructing and recording the accident itself and all the sensations and perceptions associated with it, in their particular sequence, as an act of *present* memory or anamnesis. Memory is at work at two levels here, then, both within the experienced time of the accident and in the recovery and recording of the incident four years later.

There are very few autobiographical episodes of this kind in the *Essais*, and none of the others is treated at such length and with so few interruptions: in the first edition, for instance, this chapter contains hardly any of the verse quotations that one finds on virtually every page of his writing elsewhere. Yet Montaigne's account of the event provides an exemplary instance of the way he presents processes of the mind. It is tangibly concrete and immediate, and forestalls any assumption that he is a thinker whose main interest lies in his contribution to the history of abstract ideas. Throughout the *Essais*, he shows an acute concern for physical experience and for the everyday interaction between mind and body: as he says elsewhere, 'It's always with man that we have to deal, whose condition is wonderfully corporal' (III.8). Even his abstractions are infused at every point with metaphors, usually metaphors of the body and of physical movement.[3] That final sentence describing the moment of anamnesis is the careful tracing of a process that is at once physiological and psychological.

It is traced, of course, in the terms available to a sixteenth-century writer. If this chapter in any sense anticipates modern scientific ways of thinking (psychological observation, trauma studies, neuropsychology), it does so by interrogating in a novel perspective the conception of mind-body relations which was current at the time. The point of the exercise, moreover, is expressly moral and personal, not

scientific: he subsequently calls the episode a 'trivial story' and says that its only value is that it taught him a lesson about how to become familiar with death.

In the first edition (1580), the chapter ended shortly after this comment. In the final phase of composition of the *Essais*, however, that is to say after 1588, Montaigne added a substantial passage on the novelty of his enquiry into the processes of the mind and on the value of self-study. His remarks in this 'afterword' echo and embroider the concluding sentence of 'On idleness':

> [C] […] We have news of only two or three Ancients who have beaten a path in this direction; and even then, we cannot say whether it was entirely in the same way as I have done it here, since all we know of them is their names. No one since has set off in their tracks. It is a thorny enterprise, more so than it might seem, to follow a movement as wandering as that of our mind; to penetrate into the opaque depths of its inner recesses; to tease out and pin down so many of its subtle shades and stirrings.

This is one of several passages in the *Essais* which show that Montaigne was capable of grasping the strangeness and originality of his enterprise, as if he were dimly aware of its possible future. The late addition as a whole strongly suggests, indeed, that the original text of 'On practising' represents a key step in the evolution of the *Essais* into a sustained exercise in self-reflection. The richness of the writing and the confidence with which Montaigne develops this theme over some three pages seem to flow naturally from the record he had made more than fifteen years previously of his near-death experience. One may reasonably conclude that the accident itself played an important if obscure role in the genesis of the whole project of registering the wayward and elusive movements of the mind.

However, there is a further complication. If one assumes – as seems likely from the sketchy

chronological reference that Montaigne provides – that the accident occurred a year or two before his retirement, why did he wait a further two or three years before committing it to paper? During that period, he had already written a chapter on death, 'Doing philosophy is learning how to die' (I.20). He says at one point in I.20 that he is writing just two weeks after his thirty-ninth birthday, in other words exactly a year after he retired. As has often been pointed out, the chapter is full of quotations and borrowings from classical sources on the theme of death, interspersed with remarks about Montaigne's own constant readiness for death:

> Someone who was leafing through my notebooks the other day found a memorandum about something that I wanted done after my death. I told him, as was indeed the truth, that although I was only a league away from my house, and in good health and spirits, I had hastened to write it down on the spot, as I couldn't be certain of getting home safely.

If one reads the *Essais* in sequence, it is easy enough in fact to dismiss this as a display of Stoic bravura on the part of a man in the prime of his life. But since we know that Montaigne had already had a close encounter with death while out riding a league away from home, it looks as if his anxiety about time and the precariousness of life was no abstraction: it was thoroughly and concretely motivated (the possibility of local disturbances during the wars of religion was no doubt also a factor in this sense of insecurity). Yet Montaigne makes no mention of the riding accident here. It was not until a year or two later that he had the idea of devoting a whole new chapter to that story. And when he arranged the chapters of Books I and II in sequence for the 1580 edition, he preserved that separation, rather than placing these two chapters on practising death next to one another, as he did in other cases (for example, I.25 and I.26 on the theme of

education, or II.16 and II.17 on pride and presumption).

This apparently odd way of handling what looks to us like essentially autobiographical material should remind us that Montaigne's habits were not ours. Self-reflection, the recording of the flow of thoughts through the mind, is indeed the central function of the *Essais*, but that function only develops gradually. It always emerges through a network of *textual* memories, allusions, quotations and the like, and only assumes the form of autobiographical narrative briefly and intermittently. In order to understand Montaigne's way of handling this highly charged personal material, we shall need to look more closely at the modes of writing with which he was familiar and which provide the primary context for the genesis of his book.

2

ESSAYING

History is more in my line, or poetry, for which I have a special fondness: for, as Cleanthes said, just as the voice, when forced through the narrow passage of a trumpet, sounds sharper and louder when it comes out, so too, it seems to me, a thought, when constrained by the rhythmic feet of poetry, comes across more powerfully and strikes me a livelier blow. As for my own natural faculties, which I am here putting to the test, I feel them giving way under that pressure: my conceptions and my judgement can only grope their way forward, staggering, tripping and stumbling; and when I have gone as far as I am able, I am still in no way satisfied: I can see further terrain in the distance, but with a murky, cloudy vision which I am unable to resolve. And, having undertaken to speak without distinction of everything that presents itself to my imagination and making use only of my own innate resources, if it happens – as it often does – that I by chance come across in the great writers the very topics that I have undertaken to discuss, as I have recently done in the case of Plutarch's discourse on the power of the imagination, recognizing how feeble and inadequate, how clumsy and slow-witted I am in comparison with them, I feel pity or contempt for myself. And yet I would give myself credit for this: that my opinions have in such cases the honour of coinciding with theirs; [C] and that I at least follow them at a distance, saying 'Yes, that's true.' [A] Also that I have the capacity, which not everyone has, to recognize the extreme difference between them and me. And, despite this, I let my thoughts, feeble and lowly as they are, run free just as they emerged from my mind, without plastering over and stitching up the flaws in them that this comparison has brought to my attention. You need to be solidly built if you want to try marching shoulder to shoulder with people like that. Those undiscerning writers of our own times who, amid their worthless compositions, scatter whole chunks from ancient authors to win themselves

glory, do the reverse.

I.26: 'On bringing up children'

Montaigne begins this chapter on education by asserting that he is himself only superficially acquainted with the more technical branches of learning such as medicine and law, let alone the systematic and often abstruse Aristotelian philosophy still current in his day.[4] This disclaimer is presented as a pretext for the informal, unlearned character of the *Essais* and is part of Montaigne's deliberate strategy of positioning himself at the margins of contemporary thought and scholarship. His preference for history and poetry is highly visible throughout the *Essais* in the many anecdotes and examples Montaigne draws from ancient and modern history and in the numerous quotations from the Latin poets. Twenty-first-century readers are likely to think that Montaigne's easy familiarity with Latin marks him out as a scholar, but this is far from the case. Latin was the foundation of all education in Montaigne's day, and – as he tells us later in this same chapter – his father had conducted the experiment of bringing him up from his very earliest years to speak and read Latin as his mother tongue.

The opening opposition between formal education and the more approachable historians and poets is however rapidly succeeded by another antithesis. The structure of the sentence describing the discipline imposed by poetic form is not at all characteristic of Montaigne. Its syntax is highly symmetrical, each element of the first part being exactly paralleled in the second, and it takes the form of a simile ('just as … so too …'). Montaigne much more often uses metaphor, in which the image and what it represents are fused, as in the sentence beginning 'my conceptions and my judgement can only grope their way forward …': here, the physical and everyday character of the image is

entirely typical of Montaigne's style. He thus evokes for a moment the beauty of poetic form in order immediately to fall back with a kind of relief to the less structured movement of his own writing, which is closer to improvisation. As if to illustrate the point, his sentences now become less ordered, more open-ended. They progress by association, connected by a repeated 'and' and other similar link words, so that it is in fact impossible to determine where particular 'sentences' begin and end in this extraordinary passage.

The apparently parenthetic phrase 'which I am here putting to the test' provides the focal point for the movement of rebound from poetry to the manner of the *Essais*, the way of writing that comes naturally to Montaigne. He regularly uses the adverb 'here' to refer to his writing as the place of a continual movement forward; and in the phrase I have translated as 'putting to the test', he uses the word *essai*, which he chooses with increasing frequency and confidence to describe the nature of his thinking and his writing (the two simultaneously), until by 1580, the date of the first edition, it has become the title of the book itself. The French word means 'test' or 'trial', and in the sixteenth century it was not used to designate an established genre; the individual titled pieces of which the volume is made up are called 'chapters', not 'essays'. The title *Essais* denotes not the literary genre to which the work belongs but the mode of thinking and writing it embodies. Drawing on the whole semantic field from which the word comes, Montaigne speaks of his written thoughts as 'trials', 'attempts', 'soundings'; one often finds the verb, too, especially in the reflexive form 'I try myself out' (*'je m'essaye'*). This sense is echoed in synonymous terms in certain chapter titles, in particular 'On practising', where, as we have seen, the theme emerges strongly at the end of the chapter, and 'On

experience', the title of the final chapter.

Montaigne's choice of title for his book had a result he could never have anticipated: the word later became the name of an informal genre of prose writing, of which he is traditionally regarded as the originator. So it seems natural enough to say that he wrote 'essays'. Natural, but misleading: the genre of the essay, as cultivated particularly by later writers in the English language (Charles Lamb being the canonic example), sets up an entirely different set of expectations in the reader. It has a belle-lettristic character which is wholly absent from the *Essais*, while at the same time it lacks the sustained reference to the flow of the writer's own thought that Montaigne's use of the word evokes. Even phrases such as 'philosophical essays' fail to capture this last notion, which is as clearly present in the metaphors of the passage quoted above as it was in 'On idleness'. Here we have first a groping progress through uncharted country, then, in place of the runaway horse, an image of thoughts that are allowed to run free, like dogs let off the leash. A reflection on poetic structure and how it works thus prompts Montaigne to imagine a graphic illustration of his own very different way of thinking and writing – the 'essaying' or probing mode, where outcomes are never anticipated and always provisional.

The kind of sentence structure I have drawn attention to – the loose-weave, exploratory mode – is at least partly derived from classical models, in particular Seneca's style in the Letters to Lucilius; several of Montaigne's chapters (including this one) are in fact framed as letters, usually to well-born women of his acquaintance, and the informal, personal mode of the epistolary genre is a major point of reference for the writing of the *Essais* as a whole. In fact, Montaigne asserts in a late addition to I.40 ('A reflection on

Cicero') that he would happily have used the letter form to publish his thoughts if he had had someone suitable to write to.

At the level of textual composition, he admits – just before the quoted passage and often elsewhere – that he owes a great deal to the late Greek writer Plutarch, who wrote informal discourses ('essays' of a kind) on a wide variety of topics and whom Montaigne read in the recently published French translation by Jacques Amyot, since his own knowledge of Greek was insufficient. What would probably have been most immediately recognizable to a contemporary reader, however, is the grouping of diverse materials from many sources under thematic headings in the manner of the 'commonplace book' or miscellany. The importance of commonplace collections in the Renaissance both in their own right and as a model for writing is now widely acknowledged.[5] Students were encouraged to read classical Latin and Greek texts with a notebook to hand and make a selection of references and quotations which could be used later in their own compositions. Readymade compilations of this sort were also available on the market and they clearly sold well; one of the most famous is Erasmus' *Adages*, an enormous collection of pithy sayings from ancient sources, accompanied by commentaries which contain a profusion of further citations and quotations.[6] Montaigne's book belongs in its own highly idiosyncratic way to this genre of miscellanous writings, as he admits in the last chapter but one of the *Essais*, 'On physiognomy':

> As someone might say about me that all I've done here is put together a heap of foreign flowers, and that the only thing of my own that I've added is the thread to bind them with.

Montaigne's text is indeed full of 'borrowings', to use

his own word: the verse quotations are especially visible, but there are plenty of prose ones as well, especially from Latin historians and moralists. Although these are marked as quotations simply by the fact that they are in a foreign language, the name of the author is often omitted, and scholars have shown that there is also a vast subcontinent of hidden borrowings, semi-quoted passages rendered in free translation, which are simply absorbed into Montaigne's own prose. For example, the remark about poetry attributed to Cleanthes in the passage from 'On bringing up children' quoted above is in fact paraphrased from Seneca, who himself attributes it to Cleanthes.[7]

These habits of writing form part of a still wider humanist practice of 'imitation', for which Erasmus is again the overriding model, in Northern Europe at least. Montaigne would have been familiar with the Erasmian technique of imitating past authors, which requires first exhaustive reading, then a process of appropriation or 'digestion', and finally a reissuing of these digested materials as the writer's own personal discourse. [8] Such methods were routinely used by the teachers who, whether in university lectures or private tuition in the homes of the wealthy, provided young men (and occasionally women) of the sixteenth century with the cultural skills they were expected to have at their fingertips.

Montaigne begins his chapter on education by denigrating both the older 'scholastic' traditions that inculcated Aristotelian logic as the basis for all learning and the misuse by 'those undiscerning writers of [his] own times' of the newer humanist methods for enriching one's composition with 'flowers of rhetoric' culled from the Ancients (the passage I have quoted continues in fact for two or three pages in this vein, with numerous additional comments inserted later). He

also dwells at times on this aspect of his own writing, showing an alert awareness of the foreign voices that permeate his text at every point. How, then, does he defend his own approach? In the passage from 'On bringing up children', his tone is initially self-deprecatory: he can't rival the formal perfection of poetry, his thought is hesitant and stumbling, his writing is feeble and lacking in substance compared with the great works of the Ancients. Yet there emerges at the same time a sense of quiet confidence. Montaigne is at least conscious of his own capacities. He knows what suits him, how he wants to write, and he finds his own metaphors for that style. He also credits himself with independently forming ideas that coincide with those of writers like Plutarch. And above all, in a remarkably pithy sentence that occurs a little later, he asserts his rights of ownership of everything that he says, regardless of where it comes from: 'I only say other people in order better to say myself.' Similarly, in 'On physiognomy', he goes on to say that, although he may quote and borrow a good deal, he does it negligently, without being too particular about where the borrowing comes from or whether he has remembered it correctly. Quoting is simply a contemporary fashion he feels he has to follow; if he had trusted himself, he would have taken the risk of speaking exclusively with his own voice. From a modern perspective, it is difficult to appreciate the boldness of this intention, the extent to which it is not simply disingenuous. Speaking exclusively with one's own voice is what nearly everyone tries to do nowadays; in the sixteenth century, virtually no one did, so that even the formulation of the idea is historically interesting. The very act of conceiving the possibility changes things; it creates a kind of mutation in Renaissance practices of writing.

It now becomes easier to see why Montaigne's early chapter on death (I.20) preceded his detailed account of the riding accident. It is a virtuoso collection of excerpts from the Ancients, in which verse quotations (many of them added later) are particularly prominent. At this first stage in his 'essaying' of issues and ideas, Montaigne remained close to the habits of his day, although he also wove in some personal material, such as the reference to his birthday and the anecdote about the memo he wrote while out riding. It was only when he had gathered confidence in the value of what *he* had to say and of his own experience that he was able to devote almost a whole chapter to his unique encounter with death.

I have spoken of Montaigne's writing habits, but he himself prefers to think of himself as speaking (or thinking) on paper. Towards the end of I.26, he calls his preferred style a form of speaking, 'simple and natural, the same on paper as on the tongue'. His model is the oral mode of everyday speech; it aims above all to communicate.[9] As in letter-writing, it presupposes a reader who is not some distant, impersonal figure, but something like a friend. Or again, it may be expressed as a form of improvisation: 'essaying' can only be authentic when it avoids all premeditation and registers the random flow of thought.

The notion of randomness should not, however, be taken too literally. The structure of individual chapters is informal in the sense that it expressly avoids the orderly sequence and tidy divisions of the formal treatise, but there is usually a hidden logic in the way the various topics and arguments unfold. What look initially like digressions have a habit of proving themselves to be highly relevant to the central theme, and the clusters of apparently unrelated topics one finds in chapters such as 'On coaches' and 'On the lame'

equally prove to be organically related, creating unexpected possibilities of meaning by their juxtaposition. Many chapters have prefatory sections, leading directly or tangentially into the main topic (I.26 is an obvious case), and there are also chapters where verbal leitmotifs create a set of unobtrusive thematic links: variations on the word 'form' and its compounds proliferate, for example, in 'On repenting' (III.2). Such techniques, which one would normally regard as 'literary', have a function which is only incidentally aesthetic. They supply the means by which Montaigne is able to draw a precise map of the paths followed by the runaway horse of his thoughts. They also provide a close parallel, on a larger structural scale, to the shape of his subtly wandering sentences; one might almost say that the whole book is one long essaying sentence, endlessly prolonged, hijacked, recovered and prolonged again, infinitely open to whatever the reflections of the moment may bring, yet somehow always kept on a long leash.

Montaigne did not initially plan to write three books or elaborate a structure laid down in advance. A particularly arresting glimpse of his earlier reflections on how his work should be organized is provided by the opening of the chapter 'On friendship' (I.28):

> Considering the working methods of a painter employed in my house, I found myself wanting to follow them myself. He chose the most attractive spot in the middle of each wall and created there a painting on which he lavished all his skill; and as for the space surrounding it, he filled it with grotesques, that is to say fantastic designs whose only attraction lies in their variety and strangeness. What are these [writings of mine], too, but grotesques and monstrous bodies, patched together from different limbs, with no definite form, no order, sequence or proportion other than a purely accidental one?
>
> *The body of a beautiful woman ends in a fish.*[10]
>
> I can keep up with my painter through this second stage, but I remain at a loss as far as the first – and superior – one is

new passages in existing chapters, and of the chronological displacements that method brings about. It also, amid a good deal of quietly ironic modesty, asserts the ultimate unity of the book despite its appearance of being a mere hotchpotch of different materials. That unity is detectable at various levels, in the recurrence of themes, preoccupations and attitudes over the whole span of composition, and in the consistency of style and vision. We have seen how Montaigne's descriptions of his own method echo one another from chapter to chapter, calling on a family of related metaphorical expressions. Listening for such echoes is a helpful way of reading the *Essais*. What is more crucial, however, is to perceive that the unity of the book is not to be found in its topics: on the contrary, they proliferate beyond the point at which one might hope to reduce them to a more or less coherent argument. The *objects* of thought must indeed proliferate in order to provide the raw material on which Montaigne tries out his judgement. The trials themselves, or rather the activity of trying out, become the unifying principle: hence, once again, the emergence of the word *essais* as the title of the book. If we reduce this method to the structure of a sentence, we can say that the objects of the sentence may be multiplied indefinitely while the verb remains the same – or rather, the verb and its *subject*. The linking thread Montaigne refers to in 'On physiognomy' (see above, p. 23) is precisely this 'essaying' subject, a first-person singular verb which subtly connects all the fleeting utterances it gathers together over the years. That is the infinitely stretchable leash that both allows the strange animals of the mind to run as they will and enables the subject to 'control' them, register their every movement.

3

PHILOSOPHIES

> Look at the Pyrrhonian philosophers, who cannot express their general conception through any form of speech: for they would need a new language. Ours is made up entirely of affirmative propositions, to which they are rigorously opposed. So that when they say 'I doubt', one can immediately take them by the throat and make them admit that at the very least they affirm and know that they doubt. They have thus been obliged to take refuge in a medical comparison, without which their attitude would be impossible to explain. When they declare 'I am ignorant' or 'I doubt', they say that this proposition is itself evacuated together with the rest, just like rhubarb, which purges harmful humours and gets rid of itself at the same time. [B] That mode of thought is more reliably conceived by means of the interrogative form: 'What do I know?', a motto which I have adopted in the image of a pair of scales.
>
> II.12: 'Apology for Raimond Sebond'

The chapter from which this passage is taken is by far the longest in the *Essais;* Montaigne twice remarks on its length himself. It therefore unavoidably draws attention to itself, and has done so since the earliest reception of the book. It is also unusual in that it pursues a single theme (the impossibility of attaining to any certain knowledge) more or less consistently through most of its two hundred pages. These features have encouraged many readers to regard the chapter as a philosophical statement, even as a declaration of commitment to a particular mode of thought: the phrase 'Montaigne's scepticism' is routinely used as if it were

taken for granted that the *Essais* is primarily a vehicle for the dissemination of radical scepticism in early modern Europe.[11] This question is further complicated by the fact that the chapter is advertised by its title as a defence of the fifteenth-century theologian Raymond Sabunde (commonly known in Montaigne's spelling as Raimond Sebond); it thus raises obliquely but crucially the issue of belief. In what follows, these two strands will be separated: the present chapter will deal with the philosophical themes (primarily with the question of how scepticism is presented in the *Essais*), while the next chapter will discuss the apologetic function and religious implications of the 'Apology'.

We should first recall that Montaigne's chapter, despite its length, is not an isolated treatise, published as a specialist work of philosophy. Its meaning and function are determined to a significant extent by its place in the context of the *Essais* as a whole and by the practices of writing discussed in the previous two chapters. For Montaigne, the philosophies of Greece and Rome were a part of that wider corpus of ancient writings from which Renaissance humanists habitually borrowed. Like many others in his period, he thinks eclectically, and is primarily preoccupied with philosophical issues which are relevant to practical human experience. He is thus consistently suspicious both of the powerful Aristotelian tradition of philosophy, where a whole system of thought is grounded in a highly technical logic, and of the neo-Platonism which had been fashionable in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with its markedly transcendental emphasis and its consequent contempt for the concrete and the everyday. As we have seen, he prefers the informal philosophical reflections of Plutarch, from whom – to cite just one striking example – a long passage in the closing phase of the 'Apology' is

borrowed directly and acknowledged indirectly.[12] To this eclectic habit that Montaigne shares with his contemporaries, the principle of the *essai* gives a special twist: the insights of the Ancients are provisional possibilities to be explored, not systems to be adapted and appropriated.

In that context, the 'Apology' appears rather as a vast survey of philosophical opinions on everything from animal behaviour to varieties of religious belief and hypotheses about the nature of the soul, bristling with quotations and with the paraphrased arguments of named philosophers. The rule of the *essai* is here carried to almost hyperbolic lengths. The extended assault on human pretensions to knowledge which forms the main thrust of the chapter begins with a sentence that brackets it off, as it were, conferring on it an expressly provisional character: 'Let us therefore *for the moment* consider man on his own, without support from elsewhere, armed solely with his own weapons and deprived of divine grace and knowledge, which constitute his entire claim to honour, his strength and the foundation of his being' (my italics). The passage quoted above, in which Montaigne attempts to describe the paradoxical nature of Pyrrhonist thought, thus appears at first sight as just one of literally hundreds of citations of classical and other sources, deserving no special status.

Why, then, has Pyrrhonist scepticism come to be regarded as so central to the *Essais* that Montaigne is often seen as the inaugurator of a sceptical habit of thought which is in some sense distinctively modern? And what is meant here by 'Pyrrhonist scepticism'? Perhaps the best way to begin to answer both questions is to link the passage already quoted with an earlier one in the 'Apology' in which this philosophical school is first mentioned. Having already explored at some length

the failures of human knowledge in general, Montaigne proceeds by limiting the discussion to the achievements of the small select band of acknowledged philosophers. If they cannot offer answers, no one can. He divides all of the various known philosophies into three broad classes: the first and largest contains the dogmatic philosophers such as the Aristotelians and the Stoics, those who assert that they have found the truth; the next (the Socratic philosophers or 'Academic sceptics') consists of those who insist that nothing can be known; in the third class are those who are unsure whether truth can be found and are still searching. These are the Pyrrhonians, whose doubt is so radical that it is itself subject to doubt. Although the 'dogmatics' will be cited abundantly elsewhere in the chapter – essentially in order to show that their opinions contradict one another – Montaigne at this point dwells at considerable length on the Pyrrhonians, presenting and explaining salient points of their doctrine, as in this passage:

> Their ways of speaking are as follows: 'I establish nothing'; 'This is no more the case than that, or neither one nor the other is the case'; 'I don't understand'; 'Appearances are the same on both sides: it is equally legitimate to speak both for and against'; [C] 'Nothing seems true that may not seem false.' [A] Their most sacred word is *epecho*, that is to say, I abstain, I do not budge. Such are their refrains, together with others of similar import. They have the effect of creating a pure, complete and absolute withholding and suspension of judgement. They use their reason in order to enquire and debate, but not in order to stop and choose. Anyone who imagines a perpetual confession of ignorance, a judgement that remains level and has no preferences in any conceivable circumstances, will have grasped the nature of Pyrrhonism. I strive to express this way of thinking as far as possible, because many find it difficult to grasp; even the authors represent it rather obscurely and diversely.

Montaigne is clearly fascinated by this third type of philosophy, giving it unambiguous preference over the

respected. It is problematic, however, on a number of grounds. The most important objection is that Montaigne was never, and never aspired to be, a 'thinker' who moved from one philosophical position to another in the course of his life. It is true that fragments of Stoic thought are prominent in certain of the earlier chapters (see for example I.20, 'Doing philosophy is learning how to die', discussed above), but they follow the rule of the *essai* and never crystallize into a consistently held doctrine. Likewise, there is no evidence that Montaigne underwent a 'sceptical crisis'. Villey's famous phrase is a back-projection from the life experience of many young French intellectuals of the early twentieth century, who typically lost the Christian faith they had been brought up in; more broadly, it presupposes a retrospective history of ideas in which the late Renaissance must represent a period of crisis and doubt, anticipating the free-thinking movements of the seventeenth century, clearing the decks for the new rationalism of Descartes, and heralding the decline of organized religion and the coming of a secular modern era. In that story, the 'Apology' appears as a key episode, and Montaigne as the prophet of a modern sceptical world-view.

It is difficult to do without such stories, but they need to be counterbalanced by an attempt to grasp what the function and import of the 'Apology' might have been in Montaigne's own time, before that later history had happened. One way of doing that is to explore further the proposition that the 'Apology' is the chapter in which the *essai* is carried to its logical extreme. This is true not so much because of its length, nor even because of the number of different philosophical opinions and arguments it cites, sometimes in bewildering proliferation and unexpected juxtapositions. The 'Apology' is the *essai* incarnate

because the Pyrrhonist thought to which it insistently returns is a philosophy constantly in suspense, affirming no single opinion or position other than that of perpetual enquiry. No other philosophy is so open to the infinite and indefinite play of the mind in relation to its possible objects. In other words, the elusive flow of thought that fascinates Montaigne from 'On idleness' onwards finds its philosophical and conceptual equivalent in Pyrrhonism. If he had already read Sextus Empiricus before he began to write the *Essais*, that might explain why Montaigne was able from the outset to imagine his thought and his writing in those terms. It is more likely that the notion of a register of his ever-mobile mental processes was formed in the particular circumstances of his early retirement and was then, some five years later, overwhelmingly endorsed by his discovery of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

The word 'overwhelmingly' may well be all too appropriate here. The distended proportions of the 'Apology', the constant return to Pyrrhonist principles amid a general demonstration of the mutual contradictions and sometimes the downright absurdity of philosophical opinions, must for a while have felt like an end-game: what else is there to write after this? At the same time, Montaigne had an instinctive aversion to formal philosophy, with its technical vocabulary and abstract arguments, and Pyrrhonism is in this sense like other philosophies. The 'Apology' shows that he understood its principles extremely well, but one only has to read the chapter in parallel with the *Outlines* to become aware how different they are, how far Montaigne transformed sceptical discourse into his own mode of thinking and writing. He does not simply adopt Pyrrhonism as his own preferred philosophy, even at this moment of his most intensive encounter. He wrestles with it, restates it, and also takes his distance

from it. In addition to the sentence which, at the outset of his assault on human knowledge, makes it clear that this is a provisional exercise, there are many other passages where he allows his discourse to shift away from the most paradoxical extremes of Pyrrhonism – for example, by allowing a space for plausible argument or for the notion of progress in knowledge. Most strikingly and famously, there are two or three pages, about three-quarters of the way through the chapter, where he abruptly changes his tone and warns the anonymous princess to whom the 'Apology' is dedicated,[15] and through her his readers, to avoid these potentially dangerous arguments except in cases of extreme necessity:

> this final thrust of the rapier should only be used as a remedy of last resort. It is a desperate tactic, by which you are obliged to abandon your weapons in order to make your adversary drop his, and a secret trick which should be used rarely and with reserve. It is rash in the extreme to destroy yourself in order to destroy someone else. […] We are here shaking the limits and last fences of the realms of knowledge […].

These remarks, and the almost obsessive expression throughout this aside of a sense of excess and danger, may be attributed in part to Montaigne's shift from a private to a public voice: he is here addressing directly a person of exalted rank and needs to defend himself against possible accusations of irresponsible extremism. That explanation might perhaps have sufficed if this had been a preface, a preliminary warning printed outside the main body of the text. But it is in fact presented as a parenthesis, buried deep in the 'long body' of the 'Apology', as he calls it in the same passage. One may thus suppose that it represents a response within Montaigne's own flow of thought to the potential danger of the arguments he is pursuing. It feels like a sudden cross-current in the apparently unstoppable tide

of the chapter.

Why should Pyrrhonist arguments create anxiety in an intelligent and widely read writer of the late sixteenth century? Montaigne gives two indications in the quoted passage. The first is that he imagines them being used in debate, where they may be a potent weapon for destroying the position of your adversary but at the same time undermine any position you yourself may wish to adopt. Since Montaigne was particularly fond of informal debate (see chapter 8), it is not surprising that he is aware of this potentially destructive effect: Pyrrhonism could in principle lead to a complete breakdown in meaningful discussion. The second indication is still more alarming, if less precise. Radical scepticism takes one to the ultimate limits of knowledge itself, and indeed 'shakes' those very limits – the metaphor suggests both transgression and insecurity. Renaissance writers were familiar with the notion of the 'paradox', which they understood in the classical and etymological sense as a proposition contrary to common opinion, rather than in the modern sense as a contradiction in terms. Pyrrhonism is a perpetual paradox, an ever-renewed shock to the habits of mind by means of which we chart our approximate way through the field of knowledge. It is therefore understandable that the very force of the Pyrrhonist perspective that he sketches out in the 'Apology' should cause Montaigne, at least for a moment, to step sharply back from the brink.

This move is not only conceptual. It is partly imaginative: the metaphor of the 'limits and last fences of the realms of knowledge' provides a graphic spatialization of the issue, linking it to questions of territoriality and thus legitimacy. And that particular metaphor is not just a local feature; it is intrinsic to the whole way Montaigne writes, to his language. When he

Often the reader feels that an apparently unassuming series of thoughts and anecdotes has suddenly turned a corner and opened out, as if by accident, on one of the great themes of philosophy. That is clearly how Montaigne himself saw it: in the 'Apology', he sees himself with amused irony as 'A new figure: an accidental, unpremeditated philosopher!'[20] Yet Montaigne did not set out to be a philosopher, and if the *Essais* have a place in the history of philosophy, it is on the sidelines rather than in the mainstream. Philosophies have a value for Montaigne in so far as they provide a testing ground in which he can develop his own cognitive faculties, but they have no special status: they are absorbed into the endlessly various flow of thoughts he set himself to observe and capture.

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