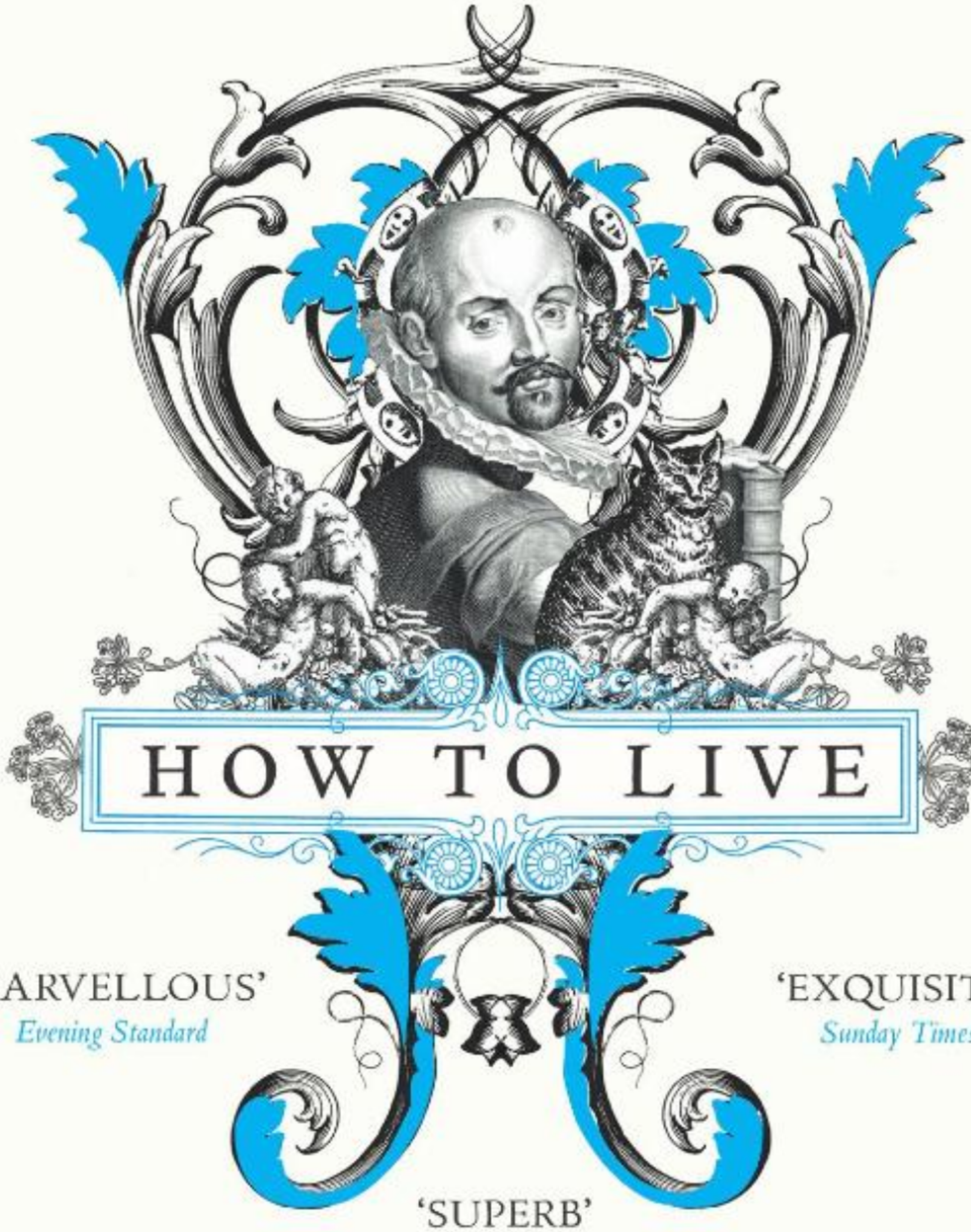
SARAH BAKEWELL



HOW TO LIVE

'MARVELLOUS'
Evening Standard

'EXQUISITE'
Sunday Times

'SUPERB'
Guardian

A Life of Montaigne
in one question and
twenty attempts
at an answer

VINTAGE

SARAH BAKEWELL

How To Live

OR

A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Published by Vintage 2011

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by
Chatto & Windus

Vintage
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.vintage-books.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780099485155

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at: www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

FSC Mixed Sources
Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. TT-COC-2139
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX

Contents

Q. How to live?

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE IN ONE QUESTION AND TWENTY ATTEMPTS AT AN ANSWER

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY is full of people who are full of themselves. A half-hour's trawl through the online ocean of blogs, tweets, tubes, spaces, faces, pages and pods brings up thousands of individuals, fascinated by their own personalities and shouting for attention. They go on about themselves; they diarise, and chat, and upload photographs of everything they do. Uninhibitedly extrovert, they also look inward as never before. Even as bloggers and networkers delve into their private experience, they communicate with their fellow humans in a shared festival of the self.

Some optimists have tried to make this global meeting of minds the basis for a new approach to international relations. The historian Theodore Zeldin has founded a site called 'The Oxford Muse', which encourages people to put together brief self-portraits in words, describing their everyday lives and the things they have learned. They upload these for other people to read and respond to. For Zeldin, shared self-revelation is the best way to develop trust and co-operation around the planet, replacing national stereotypes with real people. The great adventure of our epoch, he says, is 'to discover who inhabits the world, one individual at a time'. The 'Oxford Muse' is thus full of personal essays or interviews with titles like:

Why an educated Russian works as a cleaner in Oxford
Why being a hairdresser satisfies the need for perfection
How writing a self-portrait shows you are not who you thought you were
What you can discover if you do not drink or dance

What a person adds when writing about himself to what he says in conversation
How to be successful and lazy at the same time
How a chef expresses his kindness

By describing what makes them different from *anyone* else, the contributors reveal what they share with *everyone* else: the experience of being human.

This idea – writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognise their own humanity – has not existed for ever. It had to be invented. And, unlike many cultural inventions, it can be traced to a single person: Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, a nobleman, government official and wine-grower who lived in the Périgord area of south-western France from 1533 to 1592.

Montaigne created the idea simply by doing it. Unlike most memoirists of his day, he did not write to record his own great deeds and achievements. Nor did he lay down a straight eyewitness account of historical events, although he could have done: he lived through a religious civil war which almost destroyed his country over the decades he spent incubating and writing his book. A member of a generation robbed of the hopeful idealism enjoyed by his father's contemporaries, he adjusted to public miseries by focusing his attention on private life. He weathered the disorder, oversaw his estate, assessed court cases as a magistrate, and administered Bordeaux as the most easygoing mayor in its history. All the time, he wrote exploratory, free-floating pieces to which he gave simple titles:

Of Friendship
Of Cannibals
Of the Custom of Wearing Clothes
How we cry and laugh for the same thing
Of Names
Of Smells
Of Cruelty
Of Thumbs
How our mind hinders itself
Of Diversion
Of Coaches
Of Experience

Altogether, he wrote a hundred and seven such essays. Some occupy a page or two; others are much longer, so that most recent editions of the complete collection run to over a thousand pages. They rarely offer to explain or teach anything. Montaigne presents himself as someone who jotted down

whatever was going through his head when he picked up his pen, capturing encounters and states of mind as they happened. He used these experiences as the basis for asking himself questions, above all the big question that fascinated him as it did many of his contemporaries. Although it is not quite grammatical in English, it can be phrased in three simple words: 'How to live?'

This is not the same as the ethical question, 'How *should* one live?' Moral dilemmas interested Montaigne, but he was less interested in what people ought to do than in what they actually did. He wanted to know how to live a good life – meaning a correct or honourable life, but also a fully human, satisfying, flourishing one. This question drove him both to write and to read, for he was curious about all human lives, past and present. He wondered constantly about the emotions and motives behind what people did. And, since he was the example closest to hand of a human going about its business, he wondered just as much about himself.

A down-to-earth question, 'How to live?' splintered into a myriad other pragmatic questions. Like everyone else, Montaigne ran up against the major perplexities of existence: how to cope with the fear of death, how to

get over losing a child or a beloved friend, how to reconcile yourself to failures, how to make the most of every moment so that life does not drain away unappreciated. But there were smaller puzzles, too. How do you avoid getting drawn into a pointless argument with your wife, or a servant? How can you reassure a friend who thinks a witch has cast a spell on him? How do you cheer up a weeping neighbour? How do you guard your home? What is the best strategy if you are held up by armed robbers who seem to be uncertain whether to kill you or hold you to ransom? If you overhear your daughter's governess teaching her something you think is wrong, is it wise to intervene? How do you deal with a bully? What do you say to your dog when he wants to go out and play, while you want to stay at your desk writing your book?

In place of abstract answers, Montaigne tells us what *he* did in each case, and what it felt like when he was doing it. He provides all the details we need to make it real, and sometimes more than we need. He tells us, for no particular reason, that the only fruit he likes is melon, that he prefers to have sex lying down rather than standing up, that he cannot sing, and that he loves vivacious company and often gets carried away by the spark of repartee. But he also describes sensations that are harder to capture in words, or even to be aware of: what it feels like to be lazy, or courageous, or indecisive; or to indulge a moment of vanity, or to try to shake off an obsessive fear. He even writes about the sheer feeling of being alive.

Exploring such phenomena over twenty years, Montaigne questioned himself again and again, and built up a picture of himself – a self-portrait in constant motion, so vivid that it practically gets up off the page and sits down next to you to read over your shoulder. He can say surprising things: a lot has changed since Montaigne was born, almost half a millennium ago, and neither manners nor beliefs are always still recognisable. Yet to read Montaigne is to experience a series of shocks of familiarity, which make the centuries between him and the twenty-first-century reader collapse to nothing. Readers keep seeing themselves in him, just as visitors to the 'Oxford Muse' see themselves, or aspects of themselves, in the story of why an educated Russian works as a cleaner or of what it is like to prefer not to dance.

The journalist Bernard Levin, writing an article on the subject for *The*

Times in 1991, said, 'I defy any reader of Montaigne not to put down the book at some point and say with incredulity: "How did he know all that about me?" ' The answer is, of course, that he knows it by knowing about himself. In turn, people understand him because they too already know 'all that' about their own experience. As one of his most obsessive early readers, Blaise Pascal, wrote in the seventeenth century: 'It is not in Montaigne but in myself that I find everything I see there.'

The novelist Virginia Woolf imagined people walking past Montaigne's self-portrait like visitors in a gallery. As each person passes, he or she pauses in front of the picture and leans forward to peer through the patterns of reflection on the glass. 'There is always a crowd before that picture, gazing into its depths, seeing their own faces reflected in it, seeing more the longer they look, never being able to say quite what it is they see.' The portrait's face and their own merge into one. This, for Woolf, was the way people respond to each other in general:

> As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror . . . And the novelists in future will realize more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue.

Montaigne was the first writer to create literature that deliberately worked in this way, and to do it using the plentiful material of his own life rather than either pure philosophy or pure invention. He was the most human of writers, and the most sociable. Had he lived in the era of mass networked communication, he would have been astounded at the scale on which such sociability has become possible: not dozens or hundreds in a gallery, but millions of people seeing themselves bounced back from different angles.

The effect, in Montaigne's time as in our own, can be intoxicating. A sixteenth-century admirer, Tabourot des Accords, said that anyone reading the *Essays* felt as if they themselves had written it. Over two hundred and fifty years later, the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson said the same thing in almost the same phrase. 'It seemed to me as if I had myself written the book, in some former life.' 'So much have I made him my own,' wrote the

twentieth-century novelist André Gide, 'that it seems he is my very self.' And Stefan Zweig, an Austrian writer on the verge of suicide after being forced into exile during the Second World War, found in Montaigne his only real friend: 'Here is a "you" in which my "I" is reflected; here is where all distance is abolished.' The printed page fades from view; a living person steps into the room instead. 'Four hundred years disappear like smoke.'

Enthusiastic buyers on the online bookstore Amazon.com still respond in the same way. One calls the *Essays* 'not so much a book as a companion for life', and another predicts that it will be 'the best friend you've ever had'. A reader who keeps a copy always on the bedside table laments the fact that it is too big (in its complete version) to carry around all day too. 'There's a lifetime's reading in here,' says another: 'For such a big fat classic of a book it reads like it was written yesterday, although if it *had* been written yesterday, he'd've been all over *Hello!* magazine by now.'

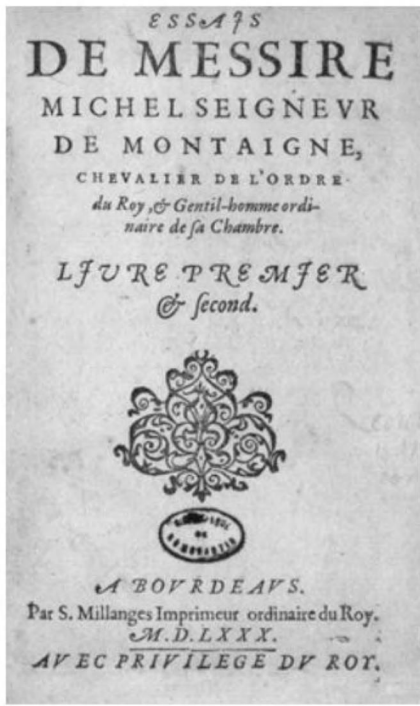
All this can happen because the *Essays* has no great meaning, no point to make, no argument to advance. It does not have designs on you: you can do as you please with it. Montaigne lets his material pour out, and never worries if he has said one thing on one page and the opposite overleaf, or even in the next sentence. He could have taken as his motto Walt Whitman's lines:

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Every few phrases, a new way of looking at things occurs to him, so he changes direction. Even when his thoughts are most irrational and dream-like, his writing follows them. 'I cannot keep my subject still,' he says. 'It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness.' Anyone is free to go with him as far as seems desirable, and let him meander off by himself if it doesn't. Sooner or later, your paths will cross again.

Having created a new genre by writing in this way, Montaigne created *essais*: his new term for it. Today, the word 'essay' falls with a dull thud. It reminds many people of the exercises imposed at school or college to test knowledge of the reading list: reworkings of other writers' arguments with

a boring introduction and a facile conclusion stuck into each end like two forks in a corn-cob. Discourses of that sort existed in Montaigne's day, but *essais* did not. *Essayer*, in French, means simply to *try*. To essay something is to test or taste it, or give it a whirl. One seventeenth-century Montaignist defined it as firing a pistol to see if it shoots straight, or trying out a horse to see if it handles well. On the whole, Montaigne discovered that the pistol shot all over the place and the horse galloped out of control, but this did not bother him. He was delighted to see his work come out so unpredictably.


ESSAIS
DE MESSIRE
MICHEL SEIGNEVR
DE MONTAIGNE,
CHEVALIER DE L'ORDRE
du Roy, & Gentil-homme ordinaire de sa Chambre.
LIVRE PREMIER
& second.
A BOVRDEAVS.
Par S. Millanges Imprimeur ordinaire du Roy.
M.D.LXXX.
AVEC PRIVILEGE DV ROY.

He may never have planned to create a one-man literary revolution, but in retrospect he knew what he had done. 'It is the only book in the world of its kind,' he wrote, 'a book with a wild and eccentric plan.' Or, as more often seemed the case, with no plan at all. The *Essays* was not written in neat order, from beginning to end. It grew by slow encrustation, like a coral reef, from 1572 to 1592. The only thing that eventually stopped it was Montaigne's death.

Looked at another way, it never stopped at all. It continued to grow, not through endless writing but through endless reading. From the first sixteenth-century neighbour or friend to browse through a draft from Montaigne's desk to the very last human being (or other conscious entity) to extract it from the memory banks of a future virtual library, every new reading means a new *Essays*. Readers approach him from their private perspectives, contributing their own experience of life. At the same time, these experiences are moulded by broad trends, which come and go in leisurely formation. Anyone looking over four hundred and thirty years of Montaigne-reading can see these trends building up and dissolving like clouds in a sky, or crowds on a railway platform between commuter trains. Each way of reading seems natural while it is on the scene; then a new style comes in and the old one departs, sometimes becoming so outmoded that it is barely comprehensible to anyone but historians.

The *Essays* is thus much more than a book. It is a centuries-long conversation between Montaigne and all those who have got to know him: a conversation which changes through history, while starting out afresh almost every time with that cry of 'How did he know all that about me?' Mostly it remains a two-person encounter between writer and reader. But sidelong chat goes on among the readers too: consciously or not, each generation approaches Montaigne with expectations derived from its contemporaries and predecessors. As the story goes on, the scene becomes more crowded. It turns from a private dinner party to a great lively banquet, with Montaigne as an unwitting master of ceremonies.

This book is about Montaigne, the man and writer. It is also about Montaigne, the long party – that accumulation of shared and private conversations over four hundred and thirty years. The ride will be a strange and bumpy, for Montaigne's book has not slid smoothly through time like

a pebble in a stream, becoming ever more streamlined and polished as it goes. It has tumbled about in no set direction, picking up debris, sometimes snagging on awkward outcrops. My story rolls with the current too. It goes 'befuddled and staggering', with frequent changes of tack. At first, it sticks more closely to the man himself: Montaigne's life, personality and literary career. Later, it diverges ever further into tales of his book and his readers, all the way up to very recent ones. Since it is a twenty-first-century book, it is inevitably pervaded by a twenty-first-century Montaigne. As one of his favourite adages had it, there is no escaping our perspective: we can walk only on our own legs, and sit only on our own bum.

Most of those who come to the *Essays* want something from it. They may be seeking entertainment, or enlightenment, or historical understanding, or something more personal. As the novelist Gustave Flaubert advised a friend who was wondering how to approach Montaigne:

> Don't read him as children do, for amusement, nor as the ambitious do, to be instructed. No, read him *in order to live*.

Impressed by Flaubert's command, I am taking the Renaissance question 'How to live?' as a guide-rope for finding a way through the tangle of Montaigne's life and afterlife. The question remains the same throughout, but the chapters take the form of twenty different answers – each an answer that Montaigne might be imagined as having given. In reality, he usually responded to questions with flurries of further questions and a profusion of anecdotes, often all pointing in different directions and leading to contradictory conclusions. The questions and stories *were* his answers, or further ways of trying the question out.

Similarly, each of the twenty possible answers in this book will take the form of something anecdotal: an episode or theme from Montaigne's life, or from the lives of his readers. There will be no neat solutions, but these twenty 'essays' at an answer will allow us to eavesdrop on snippets of the long conversation, and to enjoy the company of Montaigne himself – most genial of interlocutors and hosts.

1. Q. How to live? A. Don't worry about death

HANGING BY THE TIP OF HIS LIPS

MONTAIGNE WAS NOT always a natural at social gatherings. From time to time, in youth, while his friends were dancing, laughing and drinking, he would sit apart under a cloud. His companions barely recognised him on these occasions: they were more used to seeing him flirting with women, or animatedly debating a new idea that had struck him. They would wonder whether he had taken offence at something they had said. In truth, as he confided later in his *Essays*, when he was in this mood he was barely aware of his surroundings at all. Amid the festivities, he was thinking about some frightening true tale he had recently heard – perhaps one about a young man who, having left a similar feast a few days earlier complaining of a touch of mild fever, had died of that fever almost

before his fellow party-goers had got over their hangovers. If death could play such tricks, then only the flimsiest membrane separated Montaigne himself from the void at every moment. He became so afraid of losing his life that he could no longer enjoy it while he had it.

In his twenties, Montaigne suffered this morbid obsession because he had spent too much time reading classical philosophers. Death was a topic of which the ancients never tired. Cicero summed up their principle neatly: 'To philosophise is to learn how to die'. Montaigne himself would one day borrow this dire thought for a chapter title.

But if his problems began with a surfeit of philosophy at an impressionable age, they did not end just because he grew up. As he reached his thirties, when he might have been expected to gain a more measured perspective, Montaigne's sense of the oppressive proximity of death became stronger than ever, and more personal. Death turned from an abstraction into a reality, and began scything its way through almost everyone he cared about, getting closer to himself. When he was thirty, in 1563, his best friend Étienne de La Boétie was killed by the plague. In 1568, his father died, probably of complications following a kidney-stone attack. In the spring of the following year, Montaigne lost his younger brother Arnaud de Saint-Martin to a freak sporting accident. He himself had just got married then: the first baby of this marriage would live to the age of two months, dying in August 1570. Montaigne went on to lose four more children: of six, only one survived to become an adult. This series of bereavements made death less nebulous as a threat, but it was hardly reassuring. His fears were as strong as ever.

The most painful loss was apparently that of La Boétie: Montaigne loved him more than anyone. But the most shocking must have been that of his brother Arnaud. At just twenty-seven, Arnaud was struck on the head by a ball while playing the contemporary version of tennis, the *jeu de paume*. It cannot have been a very forceful blow, and he showed no immediate effect, but five or six hours later he lost consciousness and died, presumably from a clot or haemorrhage. No one would have expected a simple knock on the head to cut off the life of a healthy man. It made no sense, and was even more personally threatening than the story of the young man who had died of fever. 'With such frequent and ordinary examples passing before our

eyes,' wrote Montaigne of Arnaud, 'how can we possibly rid ourselves of the thought of death and of the idea that at every moment it is gripping us by the throat?'

Rid himself of this thought he could not; nor did he even want to. He was still under the sway of his philosophers. 'Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death,' he wrote in an early essay on the subject:

> At every moment let us picture it in our imagination in all its aspects. At the stumbling of a horse, the fall of a tile, the slightest pin prick, let us promptly chew on this: Well, what if it were death itself?

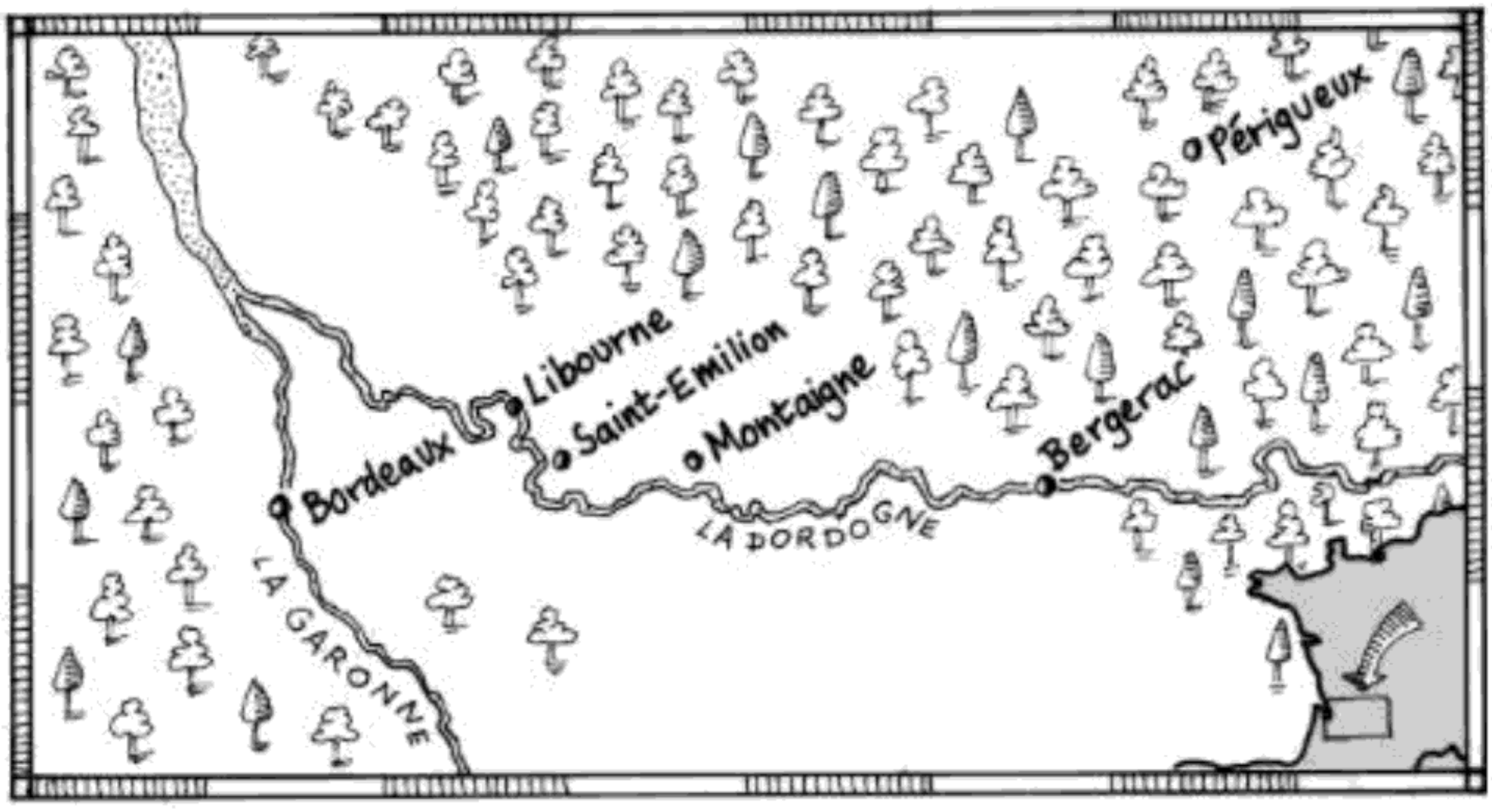
If you ran through the images of your death often enough, said his favourite sages, the Stoics, it could never catch you by surprise. Knowing how well prepared you were, you should be freed to live without fear. But Montaigne found the opposite. The more intensely he imagined the accidents that might befall him and his friends, the less calm he felt. Even if he managed, fleetingly, to accept the idea in the abstract, he could never accommodate it in detail. His mind filled with visions of injuries and fevers; or of people weeping at his deathbed, and perhaps the 'touch of a well-known hand' laid on his brow to bid him farewell. He imagined the world closing around the hole where he had been: his possessions being gathered up, and his clothes distributed among friends and servants. These thoughts did not free him; they imprisoned him.

Fortunately, this constriction did not last. By his forties and fifties, Montaigne was liberated into light-heartedness. He was able to write the most fluid and life-loving of his essays, and he showed almost no remaining sign of his earlier morbid state of mind. We only know that it ever existed because his book tells us about it. He now refused to worry about anything. Death is only a few bad moments at the end of life, he wrote in one of his last added notes; it is not worth wasting any anxiety over. From being the gloomiest among his acquaintances, he became the most carefree of middle-aged men, and a master of the art of living well. The cure lay in a journey to the heart of the problem: a dramatic encounter with his own death, followed by an extended mid-life crisis which led him to the writing of his *Essays*.

The great meeting between Montaigne and death happened on a day some time in 1569 or early 1570 – the exact period is uncertain – when he was out doing one of the things that usually dissipated his anxieties and gave him a feeling of escape: riding his horse.

He was about thirty-six at this time, and felt he had a lot to escape from. Following his father's death, he had inherited full responsibility for the family château and estate in the Dordogne. It was beautiful land, in an area covered, then as now, by vineyards, soft hills, villages and tracts of forest. But for Montaigne it represented the burden of duty. On the estate, someone was always plucking at his sleeve, wanting something or finding fault with things he had done. He was the *seigneur*: everything came back to him.

Fortunately, it was not usually difficult to find an excuse to be somewhere else. As he had done since he was twenty-four, Montaigne worked as a magistrate in Bordeaux, the regional capital some thirty miles away – so there were always reasons to go there. Then there were the far-flung vineyards of the Montaigne property itself, scattered in separate parcels around the countryside for miles, and useful for visits if he felt so inclined. He also made occasional calls on the neighbours who lived in other châteaux of the area: it was important to stay on good terms. All these tasks formed excellent justifications for a ride through the woods on a sunny day.



Out on the forest paths, Montaigne's thoughts could wander as widely as he wished, although even here he was invariably accompanied by servants and acquaintances. People rarely went around alone in the sixteenth century. But he could spur his horse away from boring conversations, or turn his mind aside in order to daydream, watching the light glinting in the canopy of trees over the forest path. Was it really true, he might wonder, that a man's semen came from the marrow of the spinal column, as Plato said? Could a remora fish really be so strong that it could hold back a whole ship just by fastening its lips on it and sucking? And what about the strange incident he had seen at home the other day, when his cat gazed intently into a tree until a bird fell out of it, dead, right between her paws? What power did she have? Such speculations were so absorbing that Montaigne sometimes forgot to pay full attention to the path and to what his companions were doing.

On this occasion, he was progressing calmly through the woods with a group of other mounted men, all or most of them his employees, some three or four miles from the château. It was an easy ride and he was expecting no trouble, so he had chosen a placid horse of no great strength. He was wearing ordinary clothes: breeches, a shirt, a doublet, probably a cloak. His sword was at his side – a nobleman never went anywhere without one – but he wore no armour or other special protection. Yet there were always dangers outside town or château walls: robbers were common, and France was presently suspended in a lawless state between two outbreaks of civil war. Groups of unemployed soldiers roamed the countryside, looking for any loot they could get in lieu of wages lost during the peace interlude. Despite his anxieties about death in general, Montaigne usually remained calm about such specific risks. He did not flinch from every suspicious stranger as others did, or jump out of his skin at hearing unidentified sounds in the woods. Yet the prevailing tension must have got to him too, for, when a great weight slammed into him from behind, his first thought was that he had been attacked deliberately. It felt like a shot from an arquebus, the rifle-like firearm of the day.

He had no time to wonder *why* anyone should fire a weapon at him. The thing struck him 'like a thunderbolt': his horse was knocked down, and Montaigne himself went flying. He hit the ground hard, metres away, and instantly lost consciousness.

> There lay the horse bowled over and stunned, and I ten or twelve paces beyond, dead, stretched on my back, my face all bruised and skinned, my sword, which I had had in my hand, more than ten paces away, my belt in pieces, having no more motion or feeling than a log.

The arquebus idea came to him later; in fact, there was no weapon involved. What had happened was that one of Montaigne's servants, a muscular man riding behind him on a powerful horse, had goaded his mount into a full gallop along the path – 'in order to show his daring and get ahead of his companions', as Montaigne surmised. He somehow failed to notice Montaigne in his way, or perhaps miscalculated the width of the path and

thought he could pass. Instead, he 'came down like a colossus on the little man and little horse'.

The rest of the riders stopped in consternation. Montaigne's servants dismounted and tried to revive him; he remained unconscious. They picked him up and, with difficulty, started carrying his limp body back towards the castle. On the way, he came back to life. His first feeling was that he had been hit on the head (and his loss of consciousness suggests that this was right), yet he also started coughing, as if he had received a blow to the chest. Seeing him struggling for air, his men lifted him into a more upright position, and did their best to carry him at that awkward angle. Several times, he threw up lumps of clotted blood. This was an alarming symptom, but the coughing and vomiting helped to keep him awake.

As they approached the castle, he regained his wits more and more, yet he still felt as if he were slipping towards death, not emerging into life. His vision remained blurred; he could barely make out the light. He became aware of his body, but what he saw was hardly comforting, for his clothes were spattered with the blood he had been throwing up. He just had time to wonder about the arquebus before drifting back into semi-oblivion.

During what followed, as witnesses later told him, Montaigne thrashed about. He ripped at his doublet with his nails, as if to rid himself of a weight. 'My stomach was oppressed with the clotted blood; my hands flew to it of their own accord, as they often do where we itch, against the intention of our will.' It looked as if he were trying to rip his own body apart, or perhaps to pull it away from him so his spirit could depart. All this time, however, his inward feelings were tranquil:

> It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, but in truth not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling that people have who let themselves slide into sleep.

The servants continued to carry him towards the house, in this state of inward languor and outward agitation. His family noticed the commotion

and ran out to him – 'with the outcries customary in such cases', as he later put it. They asked what had happened. Montaigne was able to give answers, but not coherent ones. He saw his wife picking her way awkwardly over the uneven path and considered telling his men to give her a horse to ride. You would think that all this must have come from 'a wide-awake soul', he wrote. Yet, 'the fact is that I was not there at all'. He had travelled far away. 'These were idle thoughts, in the clouds, set in motion by the sensations of the eyes and ears; they did not come from within me' – *chez moy*, a term usually meaning 'at home'. All his actions and words were somehow produced by the body alone. 'What the soul contributed was in a dream, touched very lightly, and merely licked and sprinkled, as it were, by the soft impression of the senses'. Montaigne and life, it seemed, were about to part company with neither regret nor formal farewells, like two drunken guests leaving a feast too dazed to say goodbye.

His confusion continued after he was carried indoors. He still felt as if he were borne aloft on a magic carpet instead of being heaved around by servants' hands. He suffered no pain, and no concern at the sight of those around him in emergency mode. All he felt was laziness and weakness. His servants put him to bed; he lay there, perfectly happy, not a thought in his head apart from that of how pleasurable it was to rest. 'I felt infinite sweetness in this repose, for I had been villainously yanked about by those poor fellows, who had taken the pains to carry me in their arms over a long and very bad road.' He refused all medicines, sure that he was destined just to slip away. It was going to be 'a very happy death'.

This experience went far beyond Montaigne's earlier imaginings about dying. It was a real voyage into death's territory: he slipped in close and touched it with his lips. He could *taste* it, like a person sampling an unfamiliar flavour. This was an essay of death: an exercise or *exercitation*, the word he used when he came to write about the experience. He would later spend much time going over the sensations in his mind, reconstructing them as precisely as possible so as to learn from them. Fortune had handed him the perfect opportunity to test the philosophical consensus about death. But it was hard to be sure that he had learned the right answer. The Stoics would certainly have looked askance at his results.

Parts of the lesson were correct: through his *exercitation*, he had learned

interrogating witnesses. None of it struck any spark until the whole incident came back at a blow, with a shock like being struck by lightning – a reprise of the 'thunderbolt' of the initial impact. His return to life was as violent as the accident: all jostlings, impacts, flashes and thunderclaps. Life thrust itself deeply into him, whereas death had been a light and superficial thing.

From now on, he tried to import some of death's delicacy and buoyancy into life. 'Bad spots' were everywhere, he wrote in a late essay. We do better to 'slide over this world a bit lightly and on the surface'. Through this discovery of gliding and drifting, he lost much of his fear, and at the same time acquired a new sense that life, as it passed through his body – *his* particular life, Michel de Montaigne's – was a very interesting subject for investigation. He would go on to attend to sensations and experiences, not for what they were supposed to be, or for what philosophical lessons they might impart, but for the way they actually felt. He would go with the flow.

This was a new discipline for him: one which took over his daily routine, and – through his writing – gave him a form of immortality. Thus, around the middle of his life, Montaigne lost his bearings and found himself reborn.

2. *Q. How to live? A. Pay attention*

STARTING TO WRITE

THE RIDING ACCIDENT, which so altered Montaigne's perspective, lasted only a few moments in itself, but one can unfold it into three parts and spread it over several years. First, there is Montaigne lying on the ground, clawing at his stomach while experiencing euphoria. Then comes Montaigne in the weeks and months that followed, reflecting on the experience and trying to reconcile it with his philosophical reading. Finally, there is Montaigne a few years later, sitting down to write about it – and about a multitude of other things. The first scene could have happened to anyone; the second to any sensitive, educated young man of the Renaissance. The last makes Montaigne unique.

The connection is not a simple one: he did not sit up in bed and immediately start writing about the accident. He began the *Essays* a couple of years later, around 1572, and, even then, he wrote other chapters before coming to the one about losing consciousness. When he did turn to it, however, the experience made him try a new kind of writing, barely attempted by other writers: that of re-creating a sequence of sensations as they felt from the inside, following them from instant to instant. And there does seem to be a chronological link between the accident and another turning-point in his life, which opened up his path into literature: his decision to quit his job as magistrate in Bordeaux.

Montaigne had hitherto been keeping two lives going: one urban and political, the other rural and managerial. Although he had run the country estate since the death of his father in 1568, he had continued to work in Bordeaux. In early 1570, however, he put his magistracy up for sale. There were other reasons besides the accident: he had just been rejected for a post he had applied for in the court's higher chamber, probably because political enemies had blocked him. It would have been more usual to appeal against this, or fight it; instead, he bailed out. Perhaps he did so in anger, or disillusionment. Or perhaps his own encounter with death, in combination

with the loss of his brother, made him think differently about how he wanted to live his life.

Montaigne had put in thirteen years of work at the Bordeaux *parlement* when he took this step. He was thirty-seven – middle-aged perhaps, by the standards of the time, but not old. Yet he thought of himself as retiring: leaving the mainstream of life in order to begin a new, reflective existence. When his thirty-eighth birthday came around, he marked the decision – almost a year after he had actually made it – by having a Latin inscription painted on the wall of a side-chamber to his library:

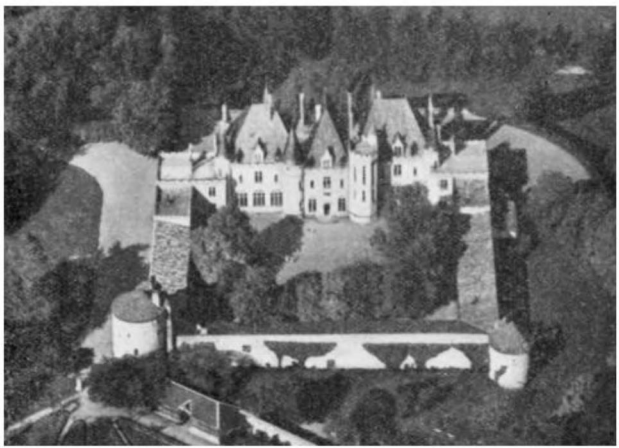
> In the year of Christ 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, on the last day of February, anniversary of his birth, Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned Virgins [the Muses], where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life now more than half run out. If the fates permit he will complete this abode, this sweet ancestral retreat; and he has consecrated it to his freedom, tranquillity, and leisure.

From now on, Montaigne would live for himself rather than for duty. He may have underestimated the work involved in minding the estate, and he made no reference yet to writing essays. He spoke only of 'calm and freedom'. Yet he had already completed several minor literary projects. Rather reluctantly, he had translated a theological work at his father's request, and afterwards he had edited a sheaf of manuscripts left by his friend Étienne de La Boétie, adding dedications and a letter of his own describing La Boétie's last days. During those few years around the turn of 1570, his dabblings in literature coexisted with other experiences: the series of bereavements and his own near-death, the desire to get out of Bordeaux politics, and the yearning for a peaceful life – and something else too, for his wife was now pregnant with their first child. The expectation of new life met the shadow of death; together they lured him into a new way of being.

Montaigne's change of gear during his mid- to late thirties has been compared to the most famous life-changing crises in literature: those of Don Quixote, who abandoned his routine to set off in search of chivalric

adventure, and of Dante, who lost himself in the woods 'midway on life's path'. Montaigne's steps into his own mid-life forest tangle, and his discovery of the path out of it, leave a series of footprints – the marks of a man faltering, stumbling, then walking on:

June 1568 – Montaigne finishes his theological translation. His father dies; he inherits the estate
Spring 1569 – His brother dies in the tennis accident
1569 – His career stalls in Bordeaux
1569 or early 1570 – He almost dies
Autumn 1569 – His wife becomes pregnant
Early 1570 – He decides to retire
Summer 1570 – He retires
June 1570 – His first baby is born
August 1570 – His first baby dies
1570 – He edits La Boétie's works
February 1571 – He makes his birthday inscription on the library wall
1572 – He starts writing the *Essays*



Having committed himself to what he hoped would be a contemplative new life, Montaigne went to great trouble to set it up just as he wanted it. After his retirement, he chose one of two towers at the corners of his château complex to be his all-purpose retreat and centre of operations; the other tower was reserved for his wife. Together with the main château building and the linking walls, these two corner-pieces enclosed a simple, square courtyard, set amid fields and forests.

The main building has gone now. It burned down in 1885, and was replaced by a new building to the same design. But, by good fortune, the fire did not touch Montaigne's tower: it remains essentially unchanged, and can still be visited. Walking around, it is not hard to see why he liked it so much. From the outside, it looks endearingly chubby for a four-storey tower, having walls as thick as a sandcastle's. It was originally designed to be used for defence; Montaigne's father adapted it for more peaceful uses. He turned the ground floor into a chapel, and added an inner spiral staircase. The floor above the chapel became Montaigne's bedroom. He often slept there rather than returning to the main building. Set off the steps above this room was a niche for a toilet. Above that – just below the attic,

quotations on the walls of his villa in Tuscany, and later, in the Bordeaux area, the baron de Montesquieu would do the same in deliberate homage to Montaigne.

Over the years, Montaigne's roof beams faded too, but they were later restored to clear legibility, so that, as you walk around the room now, voices whisper from above your head:

Solum certum nihil esse certi
Et homine nihil miserius aut superbius
Only one thing is certain: that nothing is certain
And nothing is more wretched or arrogant than man. (Pliny the Elder)

ΚΡΙΝΕΙ ΤΙΣ ΑΥΤΟΝ ΠΩΠΟΤ ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΝ ΜΕΓΑΝ ΟΝ
ΕΞΑΛΕΙΦΕΙ ΠΡΟΦΑΣΙΣ Η ΤΥΧΟΥΣ' ΟΛΟΝ
How can you think yourself a great man, when the first accident that comes along can wipe you out completely? (Euripides)

ΕΝ ΤΩ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΝ ΓΑΡ ΜΗΔΕΝ ΗΔΙΣΤΟΣ ΒΙΟΣ
ΤΟ ΜΗ ΦΡΟΝΕΙΝ ΓΑΡ ΚΑΡΤ' ΑΝΩΔΥΝΟΝ ΚΑΚΟΝ
There is no more beautiful life than that of a carefree man;
Lack of care is a truly painless evil. (Sophocles)

The beams form a vivid reminder of Montaigne's decision to move from public life into a meditative existence – a life to be lived, literally, under the sign of philosophy rather than that of politics. Such a shift of realms was also part of the ancients' advice. The great Stoic Seneca repeatedly urged his fellow Romans to retire in order to 'find themselves', as we might put it. In the Renaissance, as in ancient Rome, it was part of the well-managed life. You had your period of civic business, then you withdrew to discover what life was really about and to begin the long process of preparing for death. Montaigne developed reservations about the second part of this, but there is no doubt about his interest in contemplating life. He wrote: 'let us cut loose from all the ties that bind us to others; let us win from ourselves the power to live really alone and to live that way at our ease'.

Seneca, in advising retirement, had also warned of dangers. In a dialogue

called 'On Tranquillity of Mind', he wrote that idleness and isolation could bring to the fore all the consequences of having lived life in the wrong way, consequences that people usually avoided by keeping busy – that is, by continuing to live life in the wrong way. The symptoms could include dissatisfaction, self-loathing, fear, indecisiveness, lethargy and melancholy. Giving up work brings out spiritual ills, especially if one then gets the habit of reading too many books – or, worse, laying out the books for show and gloating over the view.

In the early 1570s, during his shift of values, Montaigne seems to have suffered exactly the existential crisis Seneca warned of. He had work to do, but less of it than he was used to. The inactivity generated strange thoughts and a 'melancholy humour' which was out of character for him. No sooner had he retired, he said, than his mind galloped off like a runaway horse – an apt comparison, considering what had recently happened. His head filled with nonsense, just as a fallow field fills with weeds. In another vivid image – he loved piling up effects like this – he compared his idle brain to a woman's unfertilised womb, which, as contemporary stories maintained, gives birth only to shapeless lumps of flesh instead of babies. And, in a simile borrowed from Virgil, he described his thoughts as resembling the

patterns that dance across the ceiling when sunlight reflects off the surface of a water bowl. Just as the tiger-stripes of light lurch about, so an unoccupied mind gyrates unpredictably and brings forth mad, directionless whimsies. It generates *fantasies* or *reveries* – two words with less positive associations than they have today, suggesting raving delusions rather than daydreams.

His 'reverie' in turn gave Montaigne another mad idea: the thought of writing. He called this a reverie too, but it was one that held out the promise of a solution. Finding his mind so filled with 'chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose', he decided to write them down, not directly to overcome them, but to inspect their strangeness at his leisure. So he picked up his pen; the first of the *Essays* was born.

Seneca would have approved. If you become depressed or bored in your retirement, he advised, just look around you and interest yourself in the variety and sublimity of things. Salvation lies in paying full attention to nature. Montaigne tried to do this, but he took 'nature' primarily to mean the natural phenomenon that lay closest to hand: himself. He began watching and questioning his own experience, and writing down what he observed.

At first, this mainly meant following his personal enthusiasms, especially stories from his reading: tales from Ovid, histories from Caesar and Tacitus, biographical snippets from Plutarch, and advice on how to live from Seneca and Socrates. Then he wrote down stories he heard from friends, incidents from the day-to-day life of the estate, cases that had lodged in his mind from his years in law and politics, and oddities he had seen on his (so far limited) travels. These were his modest beginnings; later, his material grew until it included almost every nuance of emotion or thought he had ever experienced, not least his strange journey in and out of unconsciousness.

The idea of publication may have crossed his mind early on, though he claimed otherwise, saying he wrote only for family and friends. Perhaps he even began with the intention of composing a commonplace book: a collection of thematically arranged quotations and stories, of a kind popular among gentlemen of the day. If so, it did not take him long to move beyond this, possibly under the influence of the one writer he liked more than Seneca: Plutarch. Plutarch had made his name in the first century A.D. with lively

potted biographies of historical figures, and also wrote short pieces called *Moralia*, which were translated into French in the year Montaigne began writing his *Essays*. These gathered together thoughts and anecdotes on questions ranging from 'Can animals be called intelligent?' to 'How does one achieve peace of mind?' On the latter point, Plutarch's advice was the same as Seneca's: focus on what is present in front of you, and pay full attention to it.

As the 1570s went on and Montaigne adjusted to his new post-crisis life, paying attention became a favourite pastime. His biggest writing year was 1572: that was when he began most of the essays of Book I and some in Book II. The rest followed in 1573 and 1574. Yet it would be a long time before he felt ready to publish; perhaps only because it did not occur to him, or perhaps because it took him many years to be satisfied with what he had done. A decade would pass from his retirement in 1570 to the day after his forty-seventh birthday, 1 March 1580, when he signed and dated the preface to the first edition of the *Essays* and made himself famous overnight.

Writing had got Montaigne through his 'mad reveries' crisis; it now taught him to look at the world more closely, and increasingly gave him the habit of describing inward sensations and social encounters with precision. He quoted Pliny on the idea of attending to such elusive fragments: 'each man is a good education to himself, provided he has the capacity to spy on himself from close up'. As Montaigne the man went about his daily life on the estate, Montaigne the writer walked behind him, spying and taking notes.

When he came at last to write about his riding accident, therefore, he did it not only to shake out what remained of his fear of death like sand from his shoes, but also to raise his spying techniques to a level beyond anything he had tried before. Just as, in the days after the accident, he had made his servants repeatedly tell him the story of what had happened, so now he must have gone through it in his mind, reliving those floating sensations, that feeling of his breath or spirit lingering at the threshold of his body, and the pain of return. He 'processed' it, as psychologists might say today, through literature. In doing so, he reconstructed the experience as it actually *was*, not as the philosophers said it should be.

There was nothing easy about this new hobby of his. Montaigne liked to pretend that he threw the *Essays* together carelessly, but occasionally he forgot the pose and admitted what hard work it was:

> It is a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilise the innumerable flutterings that agitate it.

Montaigne may have extolled the beauty of gliding lightly over the surface of life; indeed, he did perfect that art as he got older. At the same time, as a writer, he worked at the art of plumbing the depths. 'I meditate on any satisfaction,' he wrote. 'I do not skim over it, I sound it.' He was so determined to get to the bottom even of a phenomenon that was normally lost by definition – sleep – that he had a long-suffering servant wake him regularly in the middle of the night in the hope of catching a glimpse of his own unconsciousness as it left him.

Montaigne wanted to drift away, yet he also wanted to attach himself to reality and extract every grain of experience from it. Writing made it possible to do both. Even as he lost himself in his reveries, he secretly planted his hooks in everything that happened, so that he could draw it back at will. Learning how to die was learning to let go; learning to live was learning to hang on.

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In truth, however hard you try, you can never retrieve an experience in full. As a famous line by the ancient philosopher Heraclitus has it, you cannot step into the same river twice. Even if you return to the same spot on the bank, different water flows in upon you at every moment. Similarly, to see the world exactly as you did half an hour ago is impossible, just as it is impossible to see it from the point of view of a different person standing next to you. The mind flows on and on, in a ceaseless 'stream of consciousness' – a phrase coined by the psychologist William James in 1890, though it was later made more famous by novelists.

Montaigne was among the many who quoted Heraclitus, and he mused on how we are carried along by our thoughts, 'now gently, now violently, according as the water is angry or calm . . . every day a new fancy, and our

insensibly' – hardly the usual notion of an admirable death. With this, the piece abruptly finishes, just as the reader is beginning to wonder whether this means Montaigne has lived well or not.

Thus, most of Montaigne's thought consists of a series of realisations that life is not as simple as he has just made it out to be.

> If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial.

The changes of direction are partly explained by this questioning attitude, and partly by his having written the book over twenty years. A person's ideas vary a lot in two decades, especially if the person spends that time travelling, reading, talking to interesting people and practising high-level politics and diplomacy. Revising earlier drafts of the *Essays* over and over again, he added material as it occurred to him, and made no attempt to box it into an artificial consistency. Within the space of a few lines, we might meet Montaigne as a young man, then as an old man with one foot in the grave, and then again as a middle-aged mayor bowed down by responsibilities. We listen to him complaining of impotence; a moment later, we see him young and lusty, 'impertinently genital' in his desires. He is hot-headed and outspoken; he is discreet; he is fascinated by other people; he is fed up with the lot of them. His thoughts lie where they fall. He makes us *feel* the passage of time in his inner world. 'I do not portray being,' he wrote, 'I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another . . . but from day to day, from minute to minute.'

Among the readers to be fascinated by Montaigne's way of depicting the flux of his experience was one of the great pioneers of 'stream of consciousness' fiction in the early twentieth century, Virginia Woolf. Her own purpose in her art was to immerse herself in the mental river and follow wherever it led. Her novels delved into characters' worlds 'from minute to minute'. Sometimes she left one channel to tune in elsewhere, passing the point of view like a microphone from one individual to another, but the flow itself never ceased until the end of each book. She identified Montaigne as the first writer to attempt anything of this sort, albeit only with his own single 'stream'. She also considered him the first to pay such

attention to the simple feeling of being alive. 'Observe, observe perpetually,' was his rule, she said – and what he observed was, above all, this river of life running through his existence.

Montaigne was the first to write in such a way, but not the first to attempt to *live* with full attention to the present moment. That was another of the rules recommended by the classical philosophers. Life is what happens while you're making other plans, they said; so philosophy must guide your attention repeatedly back to the place where it belongs – *here*. It plays a role like that of the mynah birds in Aldous Huxley's novel *Island*, which are trained to fly around all day calling 'Attention! Attention!' and 'Here and now!' As Seneca put it, life does not pause to remind you that it is running out. The only one who can keep you mindful of this is you:

> It will cause no commotion to remind you of its swiftness, but glide on quietly . . . What will be the outcome? You have been preoccupied while life hastens on. Meanwhile death will arrive, and you have no choice in making yourself available for that.

If you fail to grasp life, it will elude you. If you do grasp it, it will elude you anyway. So you must follow it – and 'you must drink quickly as though from a rapid stream that will not always flow'.

The trick is to maintain a kind of naïve amazement at each instant of experience – but, as Montaigne learned, one of the best techniques for doing this is to write about everything. Simply describing an object on your table, or the view from your window, opens your eyes to how marvellous such ordinary things are. To look inside yourself is to open up an even more fantastical realm. The philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty called Montaigne a writer who put 'a consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence'. More recently, the critic Colin Burrow has remarked that astonishment, together with Montaigne's other key quality, fluidity, are what philosophy should be, but rarely has been, in the Western tradition.

As Montaigne got older, his desire to pay astounded attention to life did not decline; it intensified. By the end of the long process of writing the *Essays*, he had almost perfected the trick. Knowing that the life that remained to him could not be of great length, he said, 'I try to increase it in

weight, I try to arrest the speed of its flight by the speed with which I grasp it . . . The shorter my possession of life, the deeper and fuller I must make it.' He discovered a sort of strolling meditation technique:

> When I walk alone in the beautiful orchard, if my thoughts have been dwelling on extraneous incidents for some part of the time, for some other part I bring them back to the walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, and to me.

At moments like these, he seems to have achieved an almost Zen-like discipline; an ability to just *be*.

> When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep.

It sounds so simple, put like this, but nothing is harder to do. This is why Zen masters spend a lifetime, or several lifetimes, learning it. Even then, according to traditional stories, they often manage it only after their teacher hits them with a big stick – the *keisaku*, used to remind meditators to pay full attention. Montaigne managed it after one, fairly short lifetime, partly because he spent so much of that lifetime scribbling on paper with a very small stick.

In writing about his experience as if he were a river, he started a literary tradition of close inward observation that is now so familiar that it is hard to remember that it *is* a tradition. Life just seems to be like that, and observing the play of inner states is the writer's job. Yet this was not a common notion before Montaigne, and his peculiarly restless, free-form way of doing it was entirely unknown. In inventing it, and thus attempting a second answer to the question of how to live – 'pay attention' – Montaigne escaped his crisis and even turned that crisis to his advantage.

Both 'Don't worry about death' and 'Pay attention' were answers to a mid-life loss of direction: they emerged from the experience of a man who had lived long enough to make errors and false starts. Yet they also marked a beginning, bringing about the birth of his new essay-writing self.

3. Q. How to live? A. Be born

MICHEAU

MONTAIGNE'S ORIGINAL SELF, the one that did not write essays but merely moved and breathed like everyone else, had a simpler start. He came into this world on 28 February 1533 – the same year as the future Queen Elizabeth I of England. His birth took place between eleven o'clock and noon, in the family château which would be his lifelong home. He was named Michel, but, to his father at least, he would always be known as Micheau. This nickname appears even in documents as formal as his father's will, after the boy had turned into a man.

In the *Essays*, Montaigne wrote that he had been carried in his mother's womb for eleven months. This was an odd claim, since it was well known that such a prodigy of nature was barely possible. Mischievous minds would surely have leaped to indelicate conclusions. In Rabelais's *Gargantua*, the eponymous giant also spends eleven months in his mother's womb. 'Does this sound strange?' Rabelais asks, and answers himself with a series of tongue-in-cheek case studies in which lawyers were clever enough to prove the legitimacy even of a child whose supposed father had *died* eleven months before its birth. 'Thanks to these learned laws, our virtuous widows may, for two months after their husbands' demise, freely indulge in games of grip-crupper with a pig in the poke, heels over head and to their hearts' content.' Montaigne had read Rabelais, and must have thought of the obvious jokes, but he seemed unconcerned.

No paternity doubts emerge elsewhere in the *Essays*. Montaigne even muses on the power of inheritance in his family, describing traits that had come down to himself through his great-grandfather, grandfather and father, including an easygoing honesty and a propensity to kidney stones. He seems to have considered himself very much his father's son.

Montaigne was happy to talk about honesty and hereditary ailments, but was more discreet about other aspects of his heritage, for he came not from ancient aristocracy but, on both sides, from several generations of upwardly

mobile merchants. He even made out that the Montaigne estate was the place where 'most' of his ancestors were born, a blatant fudge: his own father was the first to be born there.

The property itself had been in the family for longer, it was true. Montaigne's great-grandfather Ramon Eyquem bought it in 1477, towards the end of a long, successful money-making life dealing in wine, fish and woad – the plant from which blue dye is extracted, an important local product. Ramon's son Grimon did little to the estate other than adding an oak- and cedar-lined path to the nearby church. But he built up the Eyquem wealth even further, and started another family tradition by getting involved in Bordeaux politics. At some point he gave up trade and began living 'nobly', an important step. Being noble was not a *je ne sais quoi* of class and style: it was a technical matter, and the main rule was that you and your descendants must engage in no trade and pay no taxes for at least three generations. Grimon's son Pierre also avoided trade, so noble status fell, for the first time, on generation number three: Michel Eyquem de Montaigne himself. By that time, ironically, his father Pierre had turned the estate from a tract of land into a successful commercial concern. The château became the head office of a fairly large wine-producing business, yielding tens of thousands of litres of wine per year. It still produces wine today. This was