MONTAIGNE

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CHAPTER 1

There are a few writers who are open to everyone at every age and in every epoch of life – Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy – and then there are others who only reveal their full significance at a certain hour. Montaigne is one of them. One must not be too young – and not without experiences and disappointments – to be able to appreciate him properly, and his free and unflinching thinking becomes most helpful to a generation which, like ours for instance, has been thrown by fate into a cataractous turmoil of the world. Only he who has to live through a time in his own shaken soul, which threatens the life of the individual with war, violence and tyrannical ideologies, and within his life again the most precious substance, individual freedom, knows how much courage, how much honesty and how much determination are needed to remain true to his innermost self in such times of herd folly. Only he knows that no one thing on earth is more difficult and problematic than to preserve one's spiritual and moral independence untainted within a mass

catastrophe. Only when one has doubted and despaired of reason – of the dignity of humanity – can one praise it as an act when an individual upholds himself in an exemplary manner in the midst of a world chaos.

I have experienced for myself that Montaigne's wisdom and greatness can only be appreciated when one is experienced and has been tested. When I picked up his "Essais" for the first time at the age of twenty, the only book in which he left himself to us, I honestly didn't know what to do with it. I did have enough literary and artistic sense to respectfully recognise that an interesting personality was making himself known here: a particularly clear-sighted and far-sighted person, a lovable man and, moreover, an artist who knew how to give each sentence and each dictum an individual character. But my joy remained a literary and an antiquarian joy; it lacked the inner ignition of passionate enthusiasm – the electric leap from soul to soul. Even the subject matter of the "Essais" seemed rather absurd to me and, for the most part, without the possibility of overflowing into my own soul. What did the Sieur de Montaigne's rambling digressions on the "Cérémonie de l'entrevue des rois" or his "Considérations sur Cicero" concern me as a young person of the twentieth century? How school-like and out-dated the French

seemed to me, already heavily browned by time and peppered with Latin quotations. And even to his mild, tempered wisdom I found no relationship. It came too soon. For what was the point of Montaigne's wise admonition not to toil ambitiously, not to become too passionately entangled in the outer world? What could his appeasing urge to be temperate and tolerant mean to an impetuous age that does not want to be disillusioned and does not want to be calmed, but unconsciously only wants to be strengthened in its vital impetus? It is in the nature of youth that it does not wish to be advised to be lenient, to be sceptical. Every doubt becomes a hindrance to it, because it needs faith and ideals to trigger its inner impetus. And even the most radical and the most absurd delusion will be more important to it, provided it only fuels it, than the most sublime wisdom, which weakens its willpower.

And then – that individual freedom, whose most determined herald for all time Montaigne became – did it really still seem to us to need such stubborn defence around 1900? Hadn't all this long since become a matter of course and a possession guaranteed by law and custom of a humanity long since emancipated from dictatorship and servitude? It seemed to us that the right to our own lives, our own thoughts and their

uninhibited expression in speech and writing, belonged to us as naturally as the breath of our mouths and the pulse of our hearts. The world was open to us – country after country; we were not prisoners of the state, were not enslaved in military service, and were not subject to the arbitrariness of tyrannical ideologies. No one was in danger of being ostracised, banished, incarcerated and expelled. So, Montaigne seemed to our generation to be senselessly rattling chains that we thought had long since been broken, unaware that they were already being reforged for us by fate, harder and crueller than ever. So, we honoured and respected his struggle for the freedom of the soul as a historical one, long since superfluous and irrelevant to us. For it is one of the mysterious laws of life that we only become aware of its true and essential values too late: of youth when it disappears, of health as soon as it leaves us, and of freedom, the most precious essence of our soul – only at the moment when it is to be taken from us or has already been taken.

So, in order to understand Montaigne's art of living and wisdom and in order to understand the necessity of his struggle for "soi-même" as the most necessary confrontation of our spiritual world, a situation had to arise that was similar to that of his own life. We too, like him, first had to experience one of those

appalling relapses of the world from one of its most glorious ascents. We, too, had to be whipped back from our hopes, experiences, expectations and enthusiasms to that point where one finally defends only one's naked self – one's unique and irretrievable existence. It is only in this brotherhood of fate that Montaigne has become my indispensable helper, comforter and friend, for how desperately similar his fate is to ours! When Michel de Montaigne enters life, a great hope begins to fade – a hope identical to the one we ourselves experienced at the beginning of our century: the hope for a humanisation of the world. In the course of a single lifetime, the Renaissance, with its artists, its painters, its poets, and its scholars, had given blessed humanity a new beauty never hoped for in equal perfection. A century – no, centuries seemed to dawn – where the creative force carried the dark and chaotic existence step by step, wave by wave towards the divine. All at once the world had become wide, full and rich. From antiquity, the scholars brought the wisdom of Plato and Aristotle back to man with the Latin and Greek languages. Humanism under Erasmus' leadership promised a unified, a cosmopolitan culture; the Reformation seemed to establish a new freedom of faith alongside the new breadth of knowledge. The space and the borders between the

peoples broke down, for the newly discovered printing press gave every word and every opinion the possibilities of buoyant dissemination; what was given to one people seemed to belong to all. It was believed that, through the spirit, a unity had been created above the bloody strife of kings, princes and arms. And another miracle: at the same time as the spiritual, the earthly world expanded into the unimagined. New coasts and new lands emerged from the hitherto trackless ocean, a vast continent guaranteed a home for generations and generations. The bloodstream of trade pulsed more rapidly, wealth flowed through the old European earth and created luxury, and luxury in turn created buildings, pictures and statues – an embellished, spiritualised world. But whenever space expands, the soul stretches. As in our own turn of the century, when, once again, space expanded magnificently thanks to the conquest of the ether by the aeroplane and the invisible word floating over the lands. When physics and chemistry, technology and science snatched secret after secret from nature and made its powers serviceable to mankind, unspeakable hope animated mankind, which had so often been disappointed, and from a thousand souls the answer of Ulrich von Hutten's jubilant cry sounded: "It is a pleasure to live."

But whenever the wave rises too steeply and too rapidly, it falls back all the more cataractously. And, just as in our time, new achievements and wonders of technology turn into the most terrible factors of destruction; so, the elements of the Renaissance and humanism, which seemed salutary, turn into murderous poison. The Reformation, which dreamed of giving Europe a new spirit of Christianity, produces the unprecedented barbarity of the religious wars. The printing press spreads furor theologicus instead of education, and intolerance triumphs instead of humanism. All over Europe, every country was tearing itself apart in murderous civil war; while in the New World, the bestiality of the conquistadors was unleashed with unparalleled cruelty. The age of Raphael and Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer and Erasmus reverts to the atrocities of Attila, Genghis Khan and Tamerlan.

To have to watch this horrible relapse from humanism into bestiality and one of these sporadic outbreaks of madness of humanity – as we are experiencing it again today – we are completely powerless, despite unflinching spiritual alertness and the most compassionate mental shock: that is the real tragedy of Montaigne's life. He did not see peace, reason, or conciliation; all these high spiritual forces to which his soul was

even the dead are not left in peace by the obsession and the graves of Richard the Lionheart and William the Conqueror are torn open and plundered. From village to village, from town to town, the troops move; they are sometimes Catholic, sometimes Huguenot, but always French against French, citizen against citizen, and neither party yielding to the other in its overwrought bestiality. Whole captured garrisons are slaughtered from the first man to the last and the rivers are polluted by the flooding corpses; the villages that are destroyed and plundered are estimated at 120,000, and soon, the killing is detached from its ideal pretext. Armed gangs attack the castles and the travellers, whether Protestants or Catholics. A ride through a neighbouring forest in front of the house is no less dangerous than a trip to new India or to the cannibals. No one knows any longer whether their house is theirs and their belongings really belong to them; they do not know whether they will be alive or dead tomorrow, captive or free. In 1588, Montaigne wrote: "In this confusion in which we have been living for thirty years, every Frenchman faces an hourly situation which may mean a complete reversal of their fortunes." There is no longer any security on earth: this basic feeling will necessarily be reflected in Montaigne's spiritual outlook. One

must therefore seek to find such security outside this world and away from one's fatherland; one must refuse to romp along with the Chorder possessed, and create one's own fatherland, one's own world, beyond time.

How humane people felt at that time – horribly similar to our own feelings – is attested to by the poem La Boétie addressed to Montaigne, his twenty-seven-year-old friend, in 1560, in which he calls upon him: "What fate has made us be born just in these times. The ruin of my country lies before my eyes, and I see no other way than to emigrate – to leave my house and go wherever fate takes me. Long has the wrath of the gods admonished me to flee, pointing me to the wide and open lands beyond the ocean. If, on the threshold of our century, a new world arose from the waves, it was because the gods ordained it as a refuge where men should till their fields freely under a better sky, while the cruel sword and an ignominious plague doomed Europe to ruin."

In such epochs, when the noble values of life like our peace, our independence, and our inherent right, or everything that makes our existence purer, more beautiful, more justified, are sacrificed to the obsession of a dozen fanatics and ideologues – all problems for the human being who does not want to lose his

humanity converge into one: how do I remain free? How, in spite of all the threats and dangers, do I preserve the incorruptible clarity of mind amidst the madness of parties? How do I preserve the humanity of heart undisturbed in the midst of bestiality? How do I escape the tyrannical demands that the state or the church or politics want to impose on me against my will? How do I resist going no further in my communications or actions than my innermost self inwardly wants? How do I protect this single, unique parcel of my being against the attitude of the regulated and the externally decreed measure? How do I protect my very own soul and the matter that belongs only to me – my body, my health, my thoughts, and my feelings – from the danger of being sacrificed to alien delusions and interests?

To this question, and to this question alone, Montaigne turned his life and his strength. For the sake of this freedom, he observed, monitored, examined and rebuked himself in every movement and in every feeling. And this search for spiritual salvation – for the salvation of freedom in a time of general servility to ideologies and parties – brings him closer to us today as a brother than any other artist. If we honour and love him above all others, it is because he, like no other, devoted himself to the highest art of life: "rester soi-même – be yourself".


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