Montaigne & Melancholy

The Wisdom of the *Essays*

NEW EDITION

M.A. Screech

Foreword by Marc Fumaroli

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Plato or anybody else may teach us something as men, but nothing at all infallibly, so that we must not take them for God's mouthpiece. If we are to find infallible guidance, we have to turn away from Man to God or his Church.

In this book I have tried not to impose an order or system on Montaigne, but to tease out these ideas in a way that will, I hope, make Montaigne more widely enjoyable, as well as more understandable. The *Essays* are cited in English. So are all other works. An appendix gives a concordance of references to the original texts in modern editions.

Whenever it helps to do so, I have followed the standard practice of indicating the main layers of Montaigne's text by means of (A), (B) and (C). What comes after (A) represents the text of the earliest editions – those before 1587 and mainly, in fact, the text of 1580 and 1582. What comes after (B) is the text of 1588, which was Montaigne's first major revision and expansion of his existing chapters as well as the whole of Book III, newly conceived. Everything after (C) derives mainly from the manuscript notes and variants written by Montaigne for the printer in the copy of his works which he was preparing for the press when he died. Partly in the interest of simplicity, other variants are not given, fascinating though they are. In all cases the translations are based on the *Edition Municipale*.

I am most grateful to the Provost of University College London who, despite the current economies, found means of granting me a term's paid leave, thus enabling me to spend nearly four months (September to December 1981) at All Souls College, Oxford, where I was a visiting fellow and where this book was mainly written. These months form a period of pure delight, of uninterrupted reading and writing in the best of company, in that most delightful of libraries, the Codrington. To the Warden and Fellows I owe a debt which I can scarcely begin to repay.

Many people have helped me, not least those students who have discussed Montaigne with me in tutorial and seminar. As always, D.P. Walker and the other members of the annual University College London Renaissance Colloquy (now well into its second decade) have provided help, advice, stimulus and challenge. A special word of thanks is due to Mrs Ruth Calder who collaborates closely with me in the teaching of the Renaissance. Another is due to the scholarship of my wife, Anne

Reeve, who works so selflessly as my research assistant. The last is due to Mrs Pamela King, who can type with speed, accuracy and intelligence from the most daunting of manuscripts.[1]

University College London, 1982 M.A.S.

Preface to the new edition

Montaigne and Melancholy was given a warm reception when it first appeared. It has stood the test of time. A handful of slips and misprints have been corrected for this new edition. The Concordance at the end has been expanded to include references to my translation of the *Essays*.[2]

Meanwhile an exciting discovery has been made. The most quoted poem in the *Essays* is *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, the Roman poet who thought like a Greek. Montaigne's own copy has turned up in England covered with his copious notes. They have now been studied and transcribed.[3] Lucretius is a major source of our knowledge of Epicureanism. He was convinced that the senses form our only gateway to knowledge. He loathed superstition – and all the religions he knew were superstitions for him. His outlook was intuitively akin to that of many a nineteenth-century natural scientist. He was also a very great poet. Montaigne's first copious notes – in Latin – were made before 16 October 1564. Many more, in French, were added later. Montaigne's learned leisure in retirement brought to a head his attack of melancholy. Did long studying of Lucretius contribute to the build up of that melancholy humour? Probably. It certainly influenced his life.

Montaigne's *Lucretius* helps to deepen our appreciation of his masterpiece. Nothing in it entails any modification to the themes of this book.

Wolfson College, Oxford M.A.S.
The Feast of Lancelot Andrewes, 1999

[1] This book has been so written that the footnotes can be entirely ignored by those who do not want to go into technicalities.

[2] The hardback edition is published by Allen Lane, the Penguin Press; the paperback edition by the Penguin Classics. The pagination is the same for both.

[3] M.A.S., *Montaigne's Annotated Copy of Lucretius. A transcription and study of the manuscript, notes and pen-marks. With a Foreword by Gilbert de Botton.* Droz, Geneva, 1998.

CHAPTER ONE

Originality

1. Curiosity

Montaigne was a man of rare originality – the kind of man who, if he had been a professional philosopher, could have turned the philosophy schools upside down. He stands astride the gap separating Rabelais and Shakespeare, but, while Rabelais and Shakespeare partly share a common view of the universe now long discarded, he seems to inhabit a world whose intellectual assumptions are close to our own. Indeed the way Montaigne thought has profoundly influenced ways of thinking right up to the present – both directly and through thinkers as diverse as Pascal and Francis Bacon. But this very 'modernity' can be misleading: for all his originality, Montaigne was very much a man of his time.

Montaigne's family was noble, though not venerably so. He was a Macmillan among Douglas Homes. As Michel Eyquem he was born on the family estates at Montaigne near Bordeaux on 28 February 1533. Rabelais was then probably in his fifties, with *Pantagruel* published and *Gargantua* on the stocks. Michel Eyquem, sieur de Montaigne, died – still at Montaigne – on 13 September 1592, some five months before his sixtieth birthday; the youthful Shakespeare then had nearly all his plays still to write. Rabelais's *Chronicles*, like Shakespeare's plays, mirroring the convictions of many of the best thinkers of their age, found room for witches with real powers, for enigmatic prophecies, for portents, for impressive magic, good or bad, for spirits and daemons who guided wise men, for inspired charismatic fools, for a constant overlapping of the human, the superhuman and the

divine. At one extreme man might rise above humanity to angelic heights; at the other, he might open the way to the devil or sink below humanity to the level of the beast. Neither Rabelais nor Shakespeare sensed the natural limits of humanity as sharply as Montaigne came to do. In the end Montaigne discarded absolutely the notion that natural man, in his wisdom, can or should aspire to rise above humanity. On the other hand there is no room in Montaigne for naturally brutish Calibans, or for Othello's

> ... Cannibals that each other eat,
> The Anthropophagi and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders.

Montaigne, especially when it suited him in a sceptical mood, was prepared to put other people's credulity to good use. This is particularly true of his delightfully paradoxical 'Apologia for Raimond Sebond'. Pliny and Herodotus were notoriously gullible; Montaigne cited them – 'if you will believe them' – for tall stories (which even Pliny doubted) about 'species of men in some places which have very little similarity to our own', and for 'half-breed, ambiguous forms between human nature and beasts' (II. 12, p.259). In fact the world as Montaigne conceived it contained no strange savages remotely like that. On the contrary, he came to insist on the unity of the species 'Man', and on the 'humanity' of every single human creature.

Montaigne took little on trust, whether in book, legend or traveller's tale. He wanted to find things out for himself. He would visit men and women with strange deformities; he did not find them to be 'monsters' – miraculously 'demonstrative' signs from God, that is – but human beings of interest to doctors (not soothsayers) and within the infinitely varied orders of creation, even if they did seem to have something wrong with them. He went to see self-confessed witches in their prison-cells and found them to be silly old women, deluded but not diabolical; it was more likely, he thought, that an old woman should be mad, than that she should be able to ride about on a broomstick (III. 11, p. 316). In the same spirit he was not put off by the horror evoked by the name of Cannibal. Many thought of these creatures (whom Cardano for example dubbed the 'Anthropophagi, whom we now call Cannibals') as uncouth, barely human savages who

farmed children for food on slave-women. (They were, Cardano thought, rather like Scottish highlanders.) Montaigne did not accept such notions. He did his best to find out what Cannibals were really like by reading and inquiry. (As for Scotsmen, he had been taught by one of the best of their humanists, George Buchanan.) Montaigne found that Cannibals were not sub-human beasts, wallowing in the forbidden delights of human flesh; they were warriors performing a liturgy of ritual vengeance – an act humanly understandable and far less bestial than French cruelties in the Wars of Religion or Spanish barbarity in the New World. He was more inclined to idealise the savages than to condemn them. He saw Cannibals as men and women closer than moderns were to the simple goodness of the Golden Age of the poets. Give Montaigne the chance to question through an interpreter a couple of Cannibals brought to France from the Americas, and he soon has them showing the beauty of their poetry – and making criticisms of the French monarchy so devastating that Gallic insularity was reduced to impotent sneers: 'Not bad; but they don't wear breeches' ...

2. Doubt

Montaigne throve on doubt, on uncertainty, on an endless search for truth. He was not alone in his grasp of scepticism as an intellectual tool; scepticism was in vogue among Roman Catholics as a defence against Protestants who sought to subvert them with arguments they could not answer. In such cases, the only safe reaction was to demolish reason and scholarship entirely – both theirs and yours, while clinging, by faith, to the Church alone. Christian scepticism was Catholic scepticism.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries experienced assault after assault on inherited certainties – assaults from classical literature made widely available; from Church Fathers edited and translated; from original texts of the Scriptures, translated, glossed and preached upon; from rival schools and methodologies within every university discipline, not least philosophy; from New Worlds discovered and from the Old Worlds of China and Japan, with all the troubling impact of their venerable cultures based on premises other than those of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome.

Montaigne was not a pure sceptic – he found too much to

opinion within Christian truth; there is room for little else within all the human disciplines put together.

4. The self

Of Montaigne's originalities none was greater than his decision to write about himself, to make himself the central subject of a constantly expanding book. The idea did not come to him all at once. Originally the *Essays* were conceived on a much more modest scale. At first he was content to write down his reactions to particular pieces of conventional wisdom or controverted assertions. Soon he was so disturbed by strange fancies that he decided to write them down too. Later, he thought he would leave behind a portrait of himself in words for his family to remember him by. (Self-portraiture was a feature of some Renaissance painters: Montaigne was probably influenced by their example.) His last step was to believe that by studying himself he could find out what the nature of mankind really was and so how he, or anyone else, should wisely live and wisely die, in accordance with Nature's leadership alone.[1]

Montaigne's decision to write about himself merits not only the approval implied by the word 'original' in English but the oddness implied by '*original*' in French. Nobody in Western culture had ever done what Montaigne set out to do. A thousand years earlier, it is true, Augustine had given a partial portrait of himself in his *Confessions*, but the Renaissance placed that work far below the *City of God*. Montaigne may not even have read it, though he certainly read the *City of God* and cites it. The *Confessions* lead from Manichaeism to Catholicism, and show the effects of original sin on fallen man. Montaigne was not exploring himself in that way. It was precisely natural man – fallen man no doubt – which interested him and which led him

[1] That the wise man follows the footsteps of Nature, the best of Guides, is a commonplace going back especially to Cicero but also to Seneca. There was no necessary opposition between the claims of Nature and those of God; for many Renaissance Christians, including Montaigne's beloved Etienne de la Boëtie, Nature was God's minister to whom were delegated general powers. Barthelemy Aneau includes an emblem to this effect in his *Picta Poësis* (Lyons, 1568, p. 59). The emblem asserts that 'Nature, the best of Guides, is to be followed' (*Natura optima dux sequenda*). Aneau explains that to struggle against Nature (*reluctari Naturae*) is to act like the foolish giants in the Greek fable and rashly to fight against God (*'et temerè pros Theon antimachein'*).

from a study of himself as man to a study of mankind as a whole.

Aesop had condemned self-love (*philautia*) as the prime source of human error. Self-love, so the Latins said, was blind. The authoritative commonplaces which conveyed these moral imperatives are given, with commentaries, in Erasmus's *Adagia* (1.6.85ff. – Rabelais drew upon many of them for the *Tiers Livre de Pantagruel*, making them even more widely known). Christians of all persuasions had made these ideas part of their own moral system, equating *philautia* with the Old Adam in man. To write about yourself without overwhelming cause was to stand condemned by towering and august authority, both ancient and modern. A few Renaissance authors were tentatively beginning to breach this interdict. Montaigne went far beyond them; yet there was nothing narcissistic about his study of himself. He came to believe that such a study provided him with the only effective way of assaying the worth of moral teachings or examples. The words or deeds of even Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Epaminondas, Cato, Seneca or Cicero are weighed against Montaigne – and Montaigne is weighed against them. He was a judge who prided himself on schooling his power of judgment, and who strove to be fair and to compensate for the blindness which self-love entails. A prerequisite of his work was truth. If self-love led him to flatter himself or devalue others, his enterprise would collapse like a pack of cards.

Montaigne felt the full force of the oddness of his undertaking. So did many of his contemporaries, including those who read him with fascination. That he persisted, and brought his *Essays* to a conclusion in a work which has delighted and instructed readers ever since, is proof of his emotional balance and of his sanity. Yet he feared that there was an element of madness in what he had taken on. Other men turning in upon themselves have indeed produced monsters, not manifest wisdom. The Rousseau of the *Rêveries*, for one. Yet Montaigne's *Essays* arose from wild *rêveries* too. There is, of course, a paradox in claiming to study yourself, and a danger in trying to do so. What part of you can conceivably stand apart and weigh you up dispassionately and fairly? Montaigne reduced tensions and avoided unbalanced judgments partly by refusing the temptations of naked introspection. To study himself he ceaselessly studied others, past and present – what they did, what they said, what they wrote, what they were like in repose, in crisis,

in death, and how their comportment when dying corresponded to their lives and doctrines. All this matter he 'brought home' to himself. He peopled his solitude, in the end, with something other than wild fantasies: with thoughts about himself in relation to all sorts and conditions of men. Rousseau came to believe that he was alone of his kind – overflowing with love, hated, yet impassable like God himself. Montaigne took the opposite road, which, he found, led him to think little of himself and to bring all men and women together, in their confusing variety, within the wide span of humankind and to laugh out of court anyone mad enough to draw comparisons between himself, a creature, and his Creator.

The conclusions seem so wise – and the winding paths of the *Essays* are so fascinating – that it is easy to forget that Montaigne had moments of great misgiving about what he was doing. His worries were not random or vague; they were quite specific. Indeed it was because of an association of ideas in which insanity played a part that Montaigne was led to write the *Essays*, a book 'consubstantial with himself'. These associated ideas derive from theories of melancholy and its effects.

CHAPTER TWO

Genius

1. The nature of genius

A Renaissance author setting out to question the received wisdom of his day had far from finished his task when he had demolished faith in reason and experience. What he had to tackle were revelatory ecstasies. From the outset ecstasies play a preponderant rôle in Christianity. Without ecstasy, Paul's teachings as an apostle have no authoritative foundation. Montaigne had to come to terms with religious ecstasy, and with many other kinds as well. Huge claims to infallible knowledge depended on their reality: no discipline taught in school or university was without its authorities, who were often venerated sages from remote antiquity. Many maintained that these authorities were inspired geniuses, specially gifted men to whom wisdom or knowledge had been unveiled during ecstasies. Genius, since Plato and especially Aristotle, was believed to be a privileged capacity for experiencing ecstasies and profiting by them.

All Christians affirmed the reality of the revelatory ecstasies of the Apostles – but, from the earliest times, disagreed about those claimed for pagans. In the mediaeval universities, Abelard and Roger Bacon taught that 'special illuminations' had been vouchsafed to Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, in order to bestow divine sanction on to their doctrines. Others such as St Bernard or Duns Scotus limited such claims or rejected them. The quarrels continue through the Renaissance; for Erasmus the great pagans are inspired forerunners of Christianity; for Rabelais, all true learning in all disciplines is 'manna from heaven'. That was a standard humanist doctrine.

This view of genius depends upon a theory of man's nature which was widely held, being accepted by doctors and lawyers with as much certainty as by philosophers and theologians. Man, it was thought, was composed of body and soul. The body tied man to the earth and made him akin to the beasts: the soul had affinities with the divine and linked him with the angels. Geniuses are the men or women whose souls at least partially detach themselves from the restraints and pollution of their bodies; while in this state they may be influenced by good spirits or glimpse divine Truth and Beauty. More sinister, such people can also be possessed by evil spirits. Or they may be mad.

Christianity came to limit spiritual possession to diabolical forces, though Platonic doctrines – which do not so limit them – proved very resilient; belief in good daemons was widespread during the Renaissance in the highest intellectual circles. More at home with traditional Christianity is the belief that the soul, once freed from the restraints of its body, catches glimpses of the divine; in specially privileged cases it may even become for a while 'one with God'. These ideas are Greek in origin. By New Testament times they had found their way into Latin and Jewish thought. With such modifications as orthodoxy required they became widely accepted by the Fathers of the Church. Christian mysticism depended upon these doctrines. By returning to the sources, Renaissance scholars gave them a new and vigorous life in almost every field of human activity.

Not all ecstasies were high, spiritual ones: the soul might strive to leave its body for many different reasons. Ecstasies of various sorts were a common experience. Drunkenness was a form of ecstasy; so was falling in love; so were sexual climaxes; so was bravery on the field of battle; so was scholarly devotion to selfless inquiries; so was poetic inspiration; so were the revelations which made Socrates, say, and Hippocrates the authorities they are; so too were several kinds of madness, which share some spiritual powers with genius itself. 'Ecstasy' covered them all.

2. Genius and melancholy

Most studies of the *Essays* bring out the stages on Montaigne's journey towards wisdom and self-discovery: his critical interest in the Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans; his wide reading of Latin

maladjustment of soul and body: common terms for them are *folie*, *resverie*, *fureur* and *manie*.

3. Essays and assays

Montaigne did not write 'essays'. He wrote a volume called *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, and we call them his *Essays* for convenience. *De l'experience* is not an essay which happens to come at the end; it is the last chapter of the third and last book of the *Essais*. Each chapter contains numerous *essais*. *Essais* are the work of an apprentice: a craftsman has already produced his masterpiece, Montaigne's title claims that he has not. His wisdom is an 'apprenticed wisdom'. Not by accident, the last word in Book I is *apprentissage*.

As well as being apprentice-pieces, *essais* are 'assays' of Montaigne's character undertaken by himself. This gives a special double sense to the title of his book. The *Essais de Michel de Montaigne* are Michel de Montaigne's 'assays' of Michel de Montaigne's form of mind. They are assays, too, of his ideas and of those of the authors he read and of the people he met, judged against his own. He is like the smith in the Assay Office, testing the silver and gold, stamping a hallmark on the good and rejecting the counterfeit. The last word of Book II is, again, revealing: *diversité*.

Essays, in a modern sense, can be read in any order. They do not necessarily lead back to earlier ones or forward to later ones. Montaigne's chapters do. The last pages of the last chapter, *De l'experience*, form the climax of all three books. They are the end of a long quest.

The chapters of Montaigne's books are not assembled by date of composition. The order corresponds to a higher preoccupation. In none of the hundreds of modifications which Montaigne made to his text is the order of a chapter changed. The final pages are modified in the final version, but they remain the final pages. In them, the three books of the *Essays* gather up like a huge wave and break upon the reader in the last few paragraphs. To weaken their force is to falsify the work as a whole. For Montaigne, at the end of his quest, had come to terms with melancholy and ecstasy – and so with religion, life and death, and with his being as a man.

4. Ecstasy interiorised

Before Montaigne, generations had raged or laughed at the universities for teaching how to argue *pro et contra* – for and against any thesis imaginable – but not teaching wisdom. When Montaigne cast his earliest writings for the *Essays* in the *pro et contra* mould he was following suit, showing how easy it was to be wise after any event. But he was soon led – by his natural bent, it seems – to a much more personal mode of writing. The temple at Delphi in Ancient Greece bore commandments which had been divinely revealed, the most famous of which was *Know Thyself*; Socrates strove to know himself. He was judged to be the wisest of men by the Oracle because he knew one thing only: that he knew nothing at all. Socrates is one of Montaigne's principal models.

Today many of the great figures of the past have been belittled and brought low. The tendency was not unknown in Montaigne's time, but in those days it was still an awesome task to emulate Socrates. Montaigne was confronted with a Socrates whom many had made a companion of the saints and patriarchs. For Erasmus Socrates was an inspired prefiguration of Christ; for Rabelais he was a figure entrusted with divinely revealed wisdom. Plato, the disciple of Socrates, was regularly called divine, like his master. Aristotle might be either divine or daemonic (a term which claimed spiritual enlightenment for him, but not the very special revelation claimed for Plato and for Socrates). These philosophers could be surpassed by the Christian revelation (which in any case they had helped to form), but by little else. As time went by, Montaigne rejected such ideas: Plato was great – but with 'human greatness only'. Socrates too came under criticism for just those aspects of his life which some accounted superhuman or divine. Montaigne had no time for the fashionable debunking of ancient heroes; he believed the ancients to have been better than the degenerate men of his own day in an ageing world. But the raising of Socrates or Plato to divine or saintly heights ranged them above the bounds of common humanity. Mankind had its limits. They, like all pagans, were firmly within them. A few, very few, Christian mystics might escape in their ecstasies to greater heights and enjoy them constantly. Not so Socrates, Plato or any sage of the ancient world, nor many in the Christian: ecstasies they might

have, but they were lesser ones, lay ones. And they exacted a price.

5. Montaigne's earlier writings

Before Montaigne published a word of the *Essays*, readers could have formed a picture of him as a very special man. In 1569 he published his French translation of the *Theologia naturalis* of the theologian we all call Raimond Sebond. Sebond was a Catalan, professing in fifteenth-century Toulouse; his book claims to establish Christian truths by natural reason and the world of nature, without calling on Scripture or revelation. (Sebond was strongly influenced by Raymond Lull's theology, it seems). Montaigne translated the *Theologia naturalis* for his father, who had heard of it as an antidote to Lutheranism; the translation shows sophisticated theological awareness. Montaigne's preface as translator hints at some of his later themes, including his mistrust of 'words and language, a merchandise so vulgar and vile that the more a man has the less he is probably worth'.

Montaigne consistently contrasted words with actions (*effets*) and things. His main criticism of universities was that they were 'yap-shops' (*escoles de la parlerie*). His preference for action over words needs no comment, but his contrast between words and things may.

The Renaissance continued the old debate which went back to Plato: are words the mirror of things, or are they simply labels stuck on to objects and concepts by an act of arbitrary will? Extreme Platonists could hold that one of the ways of getting to know objects or concepts was to study words and their etymologies. There is little of that in Montaigne, though plenty in Rabelais. In the *Essays*, Plutarch, the fluent Greek, is cited as feeling the concrete reality behind Latin words, but not in a fully Platonic sense. For Montaigne, words are a *pis aller*. As for French, it changed rapidly all the time. How could stable truth be held in such leaky vessels? Right to the end Montaigne distrusted words. Yet they were all he had.

The year after the appearance of Montaigne's version of Sebond came his preface to an edition of La Boëtie's French version of Plutarch's *Consolation to his wife* – a tender piece of writing addressed by Montaigne to his own wife who had just lost

a child. Such a production was rare in the French Renaissance, when wives were kept in the background. But Montaigne classed both La Boëtie and his own wife as *amis*. 'Friendship' will never do as a translation of Renaissance *amitié*: *amitié*, like the Greek *philia*, is a term embracing love of friends, parents, children, wives. Within *amitié*, the soul (the *âme*) was thought to dominate. Montaigne, a hater of novelty – 'which in truth has cost our wretched country so dear' – hankered after the good old days when man not only took a wife but married her. La Boëtie had asked Montaigne to share his work with those he loved – with his *amis*. 'I believe I have none', he wrote to his wife, 'more intimate than you.'

Metaphors based upon married love which only death can sever are vital to Montaigne's mature thoughts.

The dedication of his edition of La Boëtie's version of Plutarch's *Matrimonial precepts* is interesting too. It is addressed to Monsieur de Mesmes, to whom Henry Estienne had dedicated his Latin translation of the *Hypotyposes of Pyrrho* in 1562.

This book of Sextus Empiricus was unknown to the Latin middle ages. For the Renaissance it was the most influential work of scepticism inherited from ancient Greece. In writing to Monsieur de Mesmes it may seem tactless of Montaigne to have dismissed as 'follies' man's ingenuity in shaking received opinions which bring comfort. But Renaissance scepticism was an ally of tradition. It destroyed the validity of arguments for change, throwing man back on to traditional virtue and faith. To clever reason, used destructively, Montaigne preferred childish trust and the guidance of Truth personified:

> Not without good reason, childhood and simplicity have been highly commended by Truth himself.

La Verité mesmes is Christ. Of his triple claim to be the way, the truth and the life, Montaigne was most concerned with the second. Christ, not as man but as Truth, placed children in their simplicity above all the wisdom of the world. In the Renaissance this old doctrine took on a new urgency as it merged into the theme that Christianity is a certain kind of folly and Christians are a particular kind of holy fool. This folly of the Gospel is Erasmus' theme in the *Praise of Folly*. Montaigne read it also in

Cornelius Agrippa. Rabelais expounded a version of it in the *Tiers Livre de Pantagruel*. To some extent Montaigne made it his own in his apologia for Sebond.

Christian folly was always connected, from the New Testament onwards, with madness, real or apparent; with men wrongly accused of being insane, – 'beside themselves' or diabolically possessed – and, above all, with ecstasies. A major form of Christian folly is to live 'outside oneself' in this world. Christian folly and insane folly often look alike. There is a madness about them both.

No critique of Renaissance quests for truth would be anything like complete without reflexions on the nature of ecstasy and rapture and their place in lay knowledge and wisdom, let alone in the Christian experience.

6. The hunt for wisdom

Montaigne enjoyed hunting truth as noblemen liked hunting game, and he used the language of the chase to describe the search. But, in the last resort, truth is not to be found in men. In all Montaigne's writings only one body is allowed to resolve disputed points: the Church. And, to the end, only one person is called the Truth.

Montaigne affects a gentlemanly disdain for midnight oil and long periods of study, but study he did. His syllabus was wide enough to last a lifetime. Soon after he retired to his estates and his library tower, he set about 'assaying his natural faculties':

> What I look for in books is pleasure from an honourable entertainment; if I do study I only look for knowledge of myself, teaching me to die and to live well (II.10, p.103).

Quite a syllabus! As an exercise of natural faculties it covers most of what would, then as now, be classed as ethics, as well as some of what would then have been classed as physics and metaphysics. Montaigne's territory is that of Plato and, increasingly, of Aristotle, as well as Plutarch and Pyrrho, of Seneca and Cicero – of all the ancient Greek and Latin authors who were avidly studied in the Christian schools and universities of the Renaissance for guidance on ethics and philosophy.

Such authors, working by the fitful light of natural reason,

7. Wider doubt

Montaigne ousted ecstasy, rapture and revelation from the privileged places they had occupied in philosophy, the natural sciences and the humanities as ultimate guarantees of certainty. That led to a vast widening of the sea of doubt. Not one single ancient classical writer retained final authority in any matter whatever. Men such as Montaigne's much admired Turnebus were discovering the classics in context, as pagans not as prophetic proto-Christians.

Rabelais had been unable to recognise the validity of criticism of Hippocrates or Galen, even when based on recent anatomical dissections. Now, as Montaigne delighted to show, the art of medicine was in disarray as never before.

For Montaigne all the disciplines, however venerable, are based on human reason, human judgment, human authority. None have sure foundations; all are open to doubt and questioning. They are matters of opinion, of possible facts to be accepted tentatively. There are no criteria for judging some things to be natural and others miraculous; mankind does not know the limits set to nature.

Montaigne was born with a mind made for doubt. He throve on doubt. The Greek Sceptics strengthened this cast of mind but do not explain it away. It was their arguments and his native temperament which, together, led to his stripping Plato, Socrates and others of the divine sanction claimed for them because of their ecstasies. Once that was done, Platonic teaching could no longer vouch infallibly for the spiritual realities.

By humanising Socrates and Plato Montaigne did not bring them into contempt. But he did bring them down to the same level as other great men. If Socrates is preferred at times to Aristotle it is not for what he said but for what he was. Students of Aristotle were making similar points: a good example is the Jesuit Pedro Fonseca in his *Commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (1559, I, col. 10ff.).

Montaigne had no respect for the average product of the philosophy schools in the universities. He oversimplified the issues, mocking graduates who merely recite chunks of undigested Aristotle. But he himself could not manage without Aristotle – nor, to some extent at least, without the commentators. Perhaps it was Aristotle who helped him to

distinguish uncertain opinion from certain knowledge (*epistēmē*; *scientia*), though the *locus classicus* for this is Plato in the *Timaeus*.

Montaigne came to wonder whether man ever acquired knowledge at all. He eventually placed most that passed for knowledge in the category of opinion. Much was simply wrong. Moreover 'almost all the opinions we do have are held on authority or on trust' (III. 12, p. 322, first sentence).

Montaigne was not prepared to be impressed by either. For example, his view of medicine was even lower than Molière's. Pedro Fonseca considered that Hippocrates, 'the founder of medicine', was 'a great philosopher', with 'philosophical truths hidden in nearly every word'; his doctrines are so unshakeable and definitive that 'for nearly two thousand years he has never been proved wrong in any but trivial matters, and cannot be accused of error'.

Such authority Montaigne simply overturned. Even the Socrates of Plato's dialogues was esteemed by most people, he thought, for the wrong reasons. Such a man would have few admirers if he lived and taught today.

From Montaigne's pen that was a challenge and a claim.

CHAPTER THREE

Montaigne's Melancholy

1. The earliest hints of melancholy

Aristotle and Cicero among the ancients, philosophers and authors of *chansons de geste* among the medievals, theologians, poets and moralists during the Renaissance, all saw friendship as something special. It was a virtue, potentially the highest form of the kind of love called *philia* by the Greeks or *amicitia* by the Romans. It bound men together at the highest level of their humanity. Centuries might go by without a single example of such friendship coming to light. Or so Montaigne thought.

The friendship of La Boëtie and Montaigne was one of those rarest kinds. Then, within six years, La Boëtie died (in August 1563). The effect on Montaigne was profound and lasting.

The death – from an illness which was 'somewhat contagious' – was ugly and distressing. La Boëtie, who was concerned for Montaigne's 'natural disposition', since the disease was 'unpleasant and melancholic', begged his friend not to stay at his bedside for more than short periods at a time.

Montaigne did as he was asked. That is the first hint that melancholy played a part in his character, or *naturel*. All versions of the *Essays* confirm it. Chapter Two of Book I is devoted to sadness (*tristesse*). Chapter Three explores the fact that our emotions may carry us *au-delà de nous*, 'beyond ourselves'. Both have links with melancholy as the Renaissance understood it.

In late medieval and Renaissance France *tristesse* was an aristocratic emotion, a sign of sensitivity and depth. Such delightful delicate sadness gradually merged into the more ambitious state of melancholy affected by many noble figures of

fact and fiction. Dürer captured the mood in his portrayal of Melancholia, as did Milton in *Il Penseroso*. Melancholy also shared much with *acedia*, the pensive sloth that afflicted contemplatives in monasteries.

Burton catches the feeling of this pensive melancholy. Melancholy is as 'Albertus Durer' paints her: 'like a sad woman leaning on her arm with fixed looks, neglected habits.' Some think her proud; others, half mad:

> ... and yet of a deep reach, excellent apprehension, judicious, wise, witty: for I am of that nobleman's mind: 'melancholy advanceth men's conceits more than any humour whatsoever' (*Anatomy of Melancholy* I. 3; 1,2; p. 392).

A man who imitated Melancholia's pose could hope to be admired for his intelligence (wit) and for the profundity of his mental concepts.

2. Fashionable melancholy and sanguine melancholy

Tristesse suggested noble sensitiveness; melancholy suggested genius – no wonder so many thought they were marked by it. No affectation was so widely cherished. Empty-headed men pretended to be stricken with it; at the other extreme characters as diverse as Hamlet and Alceste (Molière's *Misanthrope*) were cast in the mould of high melancholy.

Montaigne took care to distance himself from the affectation. In 1580 he used amusingly belittling terms for his melancholic humour; he was, he said, not so much a melancholic as an empty dreamer (*non melancholique, mais songecreux*). There is an edge to the word *songecreux*, the stage-name of the best comic actor of his youth, Jean du Pont-allais.

Montaigne also displays more than a hint of the same playful mock-modesty as led Cicero to affect to believe that his melancholy meant backwardness: 'Aristotle says that all geniuses are melancholic. That makes me less worried at being slow-witted' (*Tusculans* 1.33.80). Cicero is juggling with the fact that in Greek and Latin *melancholia* covered many states, ranging from genius to stupidity and madness. The Renaissance inherited all these senses, with a millennium and a half of thought and comment attached to them. When Montaigne (as

he often does) refers to himself as sluggish, heavy and slow, he is probably making the same sort of statement as Cicero – and emphasising his melancholy. As he wrote of his disposition in childhood: '(A) Beneath this (C) heavy (A) complexion I nourished bold imaginings and opinions above my age' (I. 26, p. 227).

When Montaigne eventually decided to make the *Essays* a book about himself, he was defying one of the basic taboos of all civilised society and one of the great interdicts of European culture. Lovers of self, blind to their own faults, were thought to be lynx-eyed for those of their neighbours. Montaigne took pains to show that he was not like that.

Quite the contrary. The first chapter in which he wrote about himself is devoted significantly to presumptuous vainglory. By dwelling on his shortcomings he quietly showed that he was not blinded by self-love. This lends an unbiassed air to much of what he has to say, including his account of his complexion (his physiological and psychological disposition). 'My face', he says, 'is not fat but full; my complexion is between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately sanguine and hot' (II. 17, p. 421). If Montaigne's complexion was *entre le jovial et le melancholique* he had reason to be pleased – all the more because it was *moiennement sanguine et chaude*.

A complexion such as Montaigne's was the sign of genius. His melancholy was not to be confounded with *tristesse* – that refined sadness paraded by men of fashion; at the very beginning of *De la tristesse* (II. 2) Montaigne asserted that he was 'among the most exempt from that passion'. In the margin of the edition he was preparing when he died, he explained himself more clearly: he neither liked *tristesse* nor esteemed it, though the fashionable world had decided 'to honour it with particular favour'. Men dress Wisdom, Virtue and Conscience in her garments. Such tawdry ornaments are silly and monstrous. The Italians are much wiser; they use *tristezza* to mean 'malignity', for it is a quality which is always harmful, always mad (*folle*). Since it is always cowardly and low, the Stoics forbid it to their Wise Men (I. 2, p. 9).

Montaigne realised that melancholy *tristesse* could be cultivated for the pleasure it gave. He touches on this in the chapter which asserts that none of our tastes are pure and

blood. No matter what a man's natural temperament might be, melancholy madness was always a possibility once the balance was upset, especially by the burning of his dominant humour. Many assumed that the melancholy humour was more likely to become adust than the other three; this made melancholics particularly inclined to be anxious about madness.

The old categories still linger on in English. We know more or less what to expect if someone is described as phlegmatic, bilious, choleric, sanguine or melancholic. The characteristics we associate with these terms derive from the old beliefs but are not identical with them. Du Laurent is a clear guide, so I follow him here, but he is one among many. Happily, to understand Montaigne's melancholy it is not necessary to go into great historical detail.

Phlegmatic people were thought to be lacking in feelings (*stupidi*), hesitant, backward, with the higher qualities of their souls sunk in torpor. They are useless for any task requiring judgment and nobility of mind. Such people ought to be 'banished to dining-rooms and kitchens'. Montaigne agreed. In the chapter devoted to education he wryly suggested that tutors should quietly strangle children who were incapable of higher interests. Even sons of dukes may best be made pastry-cooks (I. 26, p. 211). No one held out any real hope of changing humours for the better, but they could be modified.

Bilious or choleric people are subtle and quick but not profound. They are unfit for tasks requiring application.

Sanguine people delight in good companionship and friendship, in laughter and joking. They are ill-suited to graver matters and are easily distracted by their senses.

This leaves the melancholics, a category which embraces the best and the worst.

4. Melancholy: genius or madness?

Today the *Problems* are not the most widely read of Aristotle's works. Yet two or three pages of them have influenced the interpretation of human genius as much as anything ever written. Few doubted the book's authenticity: it was cited as genuine by Plutarch and Cicero, as Ludovicus Septalius points out in his commentary (Lyons, 1622, p. 348).

The *Problems* are divided into 38 short books, dealing with a

number of related questions. Book 30 treats matters concerned with thought, intelligence and wisdom. Aristotle was often tentative in his answers but not in the opening question: 'Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, politics, poetry or the arts are melancholic?' The implications of his answer remained disturbing across the centuries; the certainty of his assumptions proved irresistible. Seneca alluded to it in the closing sentences of one of his most influential treatises devoted to praising peace of mind (*De tranquillitate animi* 17.10-12). Montaigne cites it.

Among the great melancholics Aristotle ranged 'Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and many other well-known men.' If you were a Renaissance melancholic you might hope to be classed with them. On the other hand, you might be a candidate for chains in Bedlam, since Aristotle took the vital step of explaining the genius of melancholics in terms of that Platonic madness (*mania*) which the Latins called *furor*. Such people were 'furious'.

5. The ecstasy and madness of melancholics

Montaigne drew on Aristotle's interpretation of genius and madness. He knew how Ficino had made this interpretation conform closely to what is conveniently called Renaissance Platonism. He examined such theories in several parts of the *Essays*. These doctrines are important for the understanding of Montaigne, partly because the *Essays* assume that the reader knows them; they are also important in that Montaigne's melancholy made him subject to the hopes and fears which Aristotle and Ficino raised.

Expressions such as 'to keep body and soul together' go back to a time when the reality of the soul and body as the two major divisions of man dominated thinking, in medicine as in law, in philosophy as in theology. The body and soul can be badly joined or loosely joined. The joints can be strained or come apart. Their final dissolution is death; their temporary severance or loosening can be madness (when due to illness), or ecstatic inspiration (when due to higher causes).

The philosopher who gave the highest place of all to the soul was Plato. For him it was immortal. Man dies: his soul does not.

The real man is his soul. In essentials a human being is a soul using a body destined to be discarded. The true philosopher partly discards it already in this life.

Christianity eventually rejected that doctrine; it teaches instead that the soul of man, immortal as created by God, will be reunited with its body at the general resurrection. Nevertheless the influence of Platonic asceticism on Christianity was immense, leading at times to a Platonising suspicion of the body which came close to supplanting orthodoxy. That is true of some of the fathers of the Church. It is truer still of many Renaissance humanists, who often write as if Christianity were primarily concerned with a Greek belief in the soul's immortality rather than with that resurrection of the dead which dominates the New Testament.

Plato taught that the soul is not at home in the body. It belongs to heaven. It is in the body as a punishment. It yearns to return to heaven and, in the case of lovers of wisdom, strives to do so. These teachings, especially as expounded in two dialogues, the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, underlie much classical and post-classical mysticism. Suitably adapted, they entered into the heart of Christian mysticism. During the Renaissance some, such as Ficino, can seem more Platonist than Christian. Others, like Erasmus, were Platonising Christians, probably without ceasing to be orthodox.

Plato asserted that the soul existed before it was born into this world. Belief in the pre-existence of the soul became incompatible with Christian orthodoxy about the time of Augustine and was largely dropped, at least in theory. As battles against heretics such as the ecstatic Montanists were waged by the Catholics in the second century, Plato's belief that the souls of the prophets were driven from their bodies by *daemons* – angelic spirits who possessed them – was also modified, but not abandoned. There is hardly a hint of the immortality of the soul in most books of the New Testament. The gap was filled with later works, sometimes innocently antedated. But already in New Testament times a Jewish philosopher like Philo of Alexandria was Platonising Judaism. Platonic influences can be found in St Paul; more can be read into him.

Platonic beliefs remain closely interwoven into the Christian theology of the Renaissance. One such belief is that Christian philosophers, no less than ancient Platonists, practise dying.

The chapter entitled *Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir* (I.20) starts off with a reference to this philosophical 'dying', taken from Plato through Cicero. Death is the separation of body and soul. Philosophers train their souls to die – to leave, that is, their bodies, so far as they are able – in order to contemplate divine truth and beauty. This detachment from the body is made possible by the soul's kinship with the changeless world of heaven (*Phaedo* 80A-81A). The Greek fathers of the Church used such terms; the Latin fathers did too, following Jerome (PL XXII, 598). Christian mystics followed suit; such ideas were championed by some of the most influential thinkers of the Renaissance. When the soul leaves the body – or strives to do so – there is ecstasy or rapture. Rapture, strictly speaking, is an ecstasy in which the soul is caught away to God, but Montaigne and others use *ravissement* for any ecstasy, even for one brought on by natural causes.

Plato's teaching in the *Phaedo* about soul-departing philosophy became closely linked with similar doctrines in the *Phaedrus* about good and bad madness. Since wisdom is a good, men might conclude that insanity (*mania*) is bad, but Socrates denied that this was so. Plain insanity attributable to illness is, of course, bad. But lovers are insane too, so are philosophers, prophets, poets. They are insane in that their souls are all striving to leave their bodies. In the case of lovers their souls yearn to merge with the beloved; in the case of philosophers their souls yearn to soar aloft towards divine Truth and Beauty; in the case of prophets and seers their souls are taken over or driven out by spirits. These notions are not simply metaphorical.

Platonic ideas of inspiration found room for spiritual possession, posing problems for Christians who wished to follow the example of Plato or Socrates. Sibyls were possessed; so were poets and seers; so was Plato, so was Socrates. Spirits (daemons) took over a person so that he might not even know what he said or did. Christians rejected this in the case of good daemons, who do not obliterate anyone's responsibility for what he says or does. Evil daemons (devils) do.

When, for whatever reason, the soul was leaving the body or striving to do so, the person concerned was said to be 'beside himself', 'furious' or 'outside himself'. One reason why Renaissance Christianity found it easy to accept the Platonic linking of melancholy with ecstatic madness was that Aristotle

(or Pseudo-Aristotle) had done so. For centuries before Montaigne philosophy was in a sense a commentary on Aristotle. In some matters of great importance, Aristotle rejected the teachings of Plato, but not where melancholy madness was concerned.

Aristotle adopted the Platonic doctrine of ecstatic possession to explain the genius he attributed to melancholics. A genius may be mad in a good sense, in that his soul is striving to leave his body in order to rise to a higher order of things. In addition he may be mad because of inspiration or enthusiasm – caused by the prompting of the good daemon who strives to possess him. Melancholy made a man or woman especially open to both.

The fusion of Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines with Renaissance Platonism was made by Ficino in his interpretation of *Problems* 30. 1: a philosopher is a man who seeks truth and beauty where they exist in stable permanence. Nothing in this sublunary world is stable or permanent; such beauty as there is is a reflection of beauty as it exists in the mind of God. So too for truth. These doctrines encourage philosophers and artists to seek ideal truth and beauty in ecstatic revelations or from spiritual inspiration. A philosopher, artist or prophet will detach his 'soul', 'spirit' or 'mind' from his body and send it winging its way aloft to the realm of permanence in the mind of God. When he cannot actually do so, he will strive to do so. Great lovers, as a step on the way to this, will have souls which leap ecstatically toward union with the beloved so as to 'live in him'.

For those who accepted their authority, the sources of these ideas made it impossible to separate melancholy genius from madness. In the *Problems*, the first example that Aristotle gave of an outstanding melancholic was Hercules (Heracles) and his 'sacred disease' (epilepsy, considered to be a case of spiritual possession). Aristotle mentioned Hercules' 'insane frenzy towards his children'; linked this frenzy with Ajax 'who went completely mad' and then recalled the case of Bellerophon who craved for solitude in places where no men were. Without a break he went on to 'Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and others', as examples of geniuses associated with melancholy frenzies.

Aristotle explained these frenzies and inspired madnesses by analogy with men drunk with wine. This was a classical commonplace; it became a Stoic one, then a Christian one. Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Gregory of Nyssa, Erasmus or

sanguine. Each humour was associated with a planetary influence; Jupiter (Jove) influenced sanguine people; Saturn influenced melancholics. Montaigne was saturnine with jovial influences. Such a complexion brought hope and assurance. It put you firmly on the right side of those thin partitions which divide great brains from madness. Du Laurent describes in some detail a complexion like Montaigne's:

> Melancholics are considered particularly capable of great responsibilities and high undertakings. Aristotle in his *Problems* wrote that melancholics are the most ingenious. But this passage must be understood aright, for there are several sorts of melancholy. One kind is entirely gross and earthy, cold and dry. Another is hot and adust – we call it *atrabilis*. There is another which is mixed with a little blood, but with more dryness than humidity. (*Des maladies mélancholiques*, 1598, p. 244, or *Opera therapeutica*, 1627, I. 3.)

Many agreed with Du Laurent that it was this third kind of melancholy alone which marked out men of genius. Indeed, cold and earthy melancholy is 'asinine'; it makes men gross and slow in mind and body. Hot and adust melancholy makes men mad, unfit for any office or responsibility. 'Only that kind of melancholy which is mixed with a little blood makes men ingenious, excelling all others.'

But probably few melancholics were ever totally at ease with their complexion. Montaigne was not. Scholars agreed on many things to do with melancholy, but disagreements there were. When pundits disagree, laymen doubt. Burton is worth reading on this point too:

> Why melancholy men are witty, which Aristotle hath long since maintained in his *Problems* – and that all learned men, famous philosophers and lawyers *ad unum fere omnes melancholici*, have still been melancholy – is a problem much controverted. Jason Pratensis will have it understood of natural melancholy, which opinion Melanchthon inclines to, in his book *de anima*, and Marsilius Ficinus, *de sanitate tuenda lib. 4 cap. 5*, but not simple [melancholy] for that makes men stupid, heavy, dull, being cold and dry, fearful, fools and solitary.

Some say that melancholy must be mixed with other humours, 'phlegm only excepted, and they not adust, but so mixed with

blood as to he half, with little or no adustion.' For Du Laurent, as Burton reports him, melancholy humour

> must be mixed with blood, and somewhat adust, and so that old aphorism of Aristotle may be verified, *Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementia*, no excellent wit without a mixture of madness.
>
> Fracastorius shall decide the controversy: 'Phlegmatic are dull; sanguine are lively, pleasant, acceptable and merry, but not witty; choleric are too swift in motion, and furious, impatient of contemplation, deceitful wits.

And then we come to melancholy:

> Melancholy men have the most excellent wits but not all; this humour may be hot or cold, thick or thin; if too hot they are furious and mad; if too cold, dull, stupid, timorous and sad; if temperate, excellent, rather inclining to that extreme of heat than cold. (*Anatomy of Melancholy* I.3: 3, p. 422).

The genius which Aristotle attributed to melancholics – sanguine melancholics according to Du Laurent and others – makes men 'outstanding in intellect and exceeding others in sharpness of judgment' because it clears the mind of waste matter, makes the imagination more subtle and profound and 'when the melancholy humour is heated by sanguine vapours it excites a kind of holy *furor* called enthusiasm, bringing out unusual effects in philosophy, poetry and prophecy, so that something divine seems to come forth' (*Opera* I. 3).

It is precisely because genius consists in a drive on the part of the soul to leap 'outside itself' and leave the body behind that madness is a constant risk. Anyone whose *complexion* was sanguine-melancholic would have had cause for worry if he fell victim to an access of melancholy *humour*. Montaigne complacently noted that his own complexion normally tended the other way, towards a more 'stupid' form of melancholy which gave him some modest experience of 'vehement' disturbances but not enough to thwart his Socratic desire for self-knowledge:

> (A) Being of a soft and heavy complexion, I certainly do not have a great experience of those *agitations vehementes*, most of which

> suddenly take our soul by surprise, without giving it time to know itself (II. 12, p.320).

But things were not always like that ... Nevertheless Montaigne's 'heavy' melancholy became his strongest ally against the flightier, vehement, disturbing kind. And he prided himself on his judgment.[2]

[2] A man's natural complexion did not exclude changes of mood – as when he was 'out of temper' or affected by an access of a particular 'humour'. Montaigne distinguishes at times between a temporary melancholy 'humour' and the 'complexion' (melancholy modified by blood) which gave him his basic character; cf. II. 12, p. 316 (V/S. p. 566; Platt. p. 346, Pl. p. 549):

> (A) Il se faict mille agitations (C) *indiscretes & casuelles* (A) chez moy. Ou l'humour melancholique me tient, ou la cholerique, à cet'heure le chagrin predomine en moy, à cet'heure l'alegresse.

Elsewhere Montaigne follows the confusing Renaissance practice of also using *complexions* to mean passing humoral states; cf. III. 11, p. 313; (V/S. p. 1033. Platt. p. 134, Pl. p. 1011) – the context is usually enough to make the distinctions needed to avoid confusion:

> (B) Certes, j'ay non seulement des complexions en grand nombre, mais aussi des opinions assez, desquelles je desgouterois volontiers mon filz, si j'en avois.

Passing 'complexions' or 'humours' do not supersede the basic complexion which forms a man's temperament, but they can fundamentally modify it or even pervert it.

CHAPTER FOUR

From Genius to Madness: Torquato Tasso

1. Poetic madness, or a lunatic's chains?

Genius may plunge down into a bestial form of madness. Such a conviction is fundamental to Montaigne and deserves a short chapter to itself.

The traditional explanation of this linking of madness and genius derives from the ancient belief that both madmen and geniuses have souls and bodies more loosely knit together than other men do.

In a short final addition to the chapter on drunkenness Montaigne resumed Platonic doctrine with a direct borrowing from the *Timaeus*:

> (C) Plato contends that the faculty of prophesying is 'above ourselves'; that we must be 'outside ourselves' when we treat it; our prudence must be darkened by sleep or illness or else snatched out of its place by a heavenly rapture (II. 2; end).

Here we find the commonplaces of ecstasy, including *audessus de nous* (above ourselves), *hors de nous* (outside ourselves); they lead easily on to prudence which is *enlevée de sa place par un ravissement celeste* (snatched out of its place by a heavenly rapture).

All acknowledged that such rapture was akin to madness. Montaigne did, in the earliest version of his apologia for Sebond: from the actions of madmen we can properly see how close folly comes to the most vigorous operations of our soul:

> (A) Who does not know how imperceptible is the neighbourhood

> dividing folly from those lively elevations of a free spirit, and from the effects of the highest extraordinary virtue? Plato says that melancholics are the most able to learn and the most outstanding; but there are also none who have a greater propensity towards folly. An infinite number of spirits are ruined by their own force and suppleness (II. 12; p. 212).

Genius may become sheer madness; the example which Montaigne gives concerns one of his most famous contemporaries, Torquato Tasso, the Italian Renaissance poet (1554-1595). He describes him as a man 'judicious, ingenious' and formed in the classical school of poetry, whose last years were marked by squalid lunacy. Montaigne believed him to have been 'blinded by the light'; the force of his reason had brought him to unreason.

Was it Tasso's careful and toilsome quest for learning, Montaigne asked, which brought so great a poet to such *bestise*, to such animal-like madness? *Bestise* – a favourite word of Montaigne's – is impossible to translate. It means silliness of course, but also stupidity and animality. In the *Essays* a man may be a beast in a great many ways. Montaigne included in Tasso's *bestise* the squalor of his madness, its subhumanity. Tasso had raised his soul to the heights only to fall below humanity, down to the state of a beast. Madness, madness alone, is recognised by Montaigne as the means by which a man may cease to be fully human and so slip down the scale to bestial status.

When he was in Ferrara Montaigne – typically – went to see Tasso for himself. He felt less compassion than anger. He wondered whether it was Tasso's 'rare aptitude for the exercises of the soul' which had deprived him not only of exercise but of the soul itself. The soul's *exercises* (in ecstatic terminology) are the same as its 'practisings' when it practises dying. Tasso had practised dying in order to write inspired poetry: he ended up as a madman in chains. Goethe and the Romantics honoured Tasso even in his madness as a higher, Platonic maniac, a genius still. Montaigne emphatically did not. He did not even feel pity for him. He was more inclined to feel irritation:

> I had more irritation than compassion at seeing him at Ferrara in so pitiful a state, surviving himself, not recognising himself or his works ... (II. 12, p. 212).

The linking of the ecstasy of admiration with astonishment in the face of both bravery in arms and great literary creation was an important theme in Renaissance writers. One French poet, Barthelemy Aneau, invented an emblem to signify this. He called it '*stupor admirationis* from the presence of arms and literature'. *Stupor* is a regular word for ecstasy when caused by wonder (*admiratio*). It suggests a dazed amazement caused by the soul's distraction. The emblematic picture shows Pallas, the goddess of Wisdom, clad in the full panoply of a knight. The poem which accompanies it explains that great praise is due to arms and letters. In the emblematic picture, petrified men stare at Wisdom; 'so great an astonishment had enraptured' them, that you could 'take them for stones'. The association of bravery and similar great-souled actions with the soul-departing ecstasy of philosophers and mystics goes back to Plato and Aristotle – in Aristotle's case yet again to *Problems* 30, 1.

Given the way in which his classical sources had linked drinking with rapture a less independent man than Montaigne might well have done the same. Rabelais did so, holding that wine quickened the spirit. For Montaigne there was nothing spiritual about it; drunkenness is 'gross and brutal', *corporel et terrestre*, an affair of the body and earth, not of the soul and heaven. The only *stupor* it produces is a bodily one: *il estonne le corps* (II.2, p. 11). It is an ecstasy, no doubt, but a gross and bodily one – not a case of the soul rising above its normal links with the body but of the body cutting itself off from its normal links with the soul.

The reality of ecstasies of all sorts is never in question (their causes are). As type after type of ecstasy is examined in the *Essays* the frontiers of wisdom are strengthened against them. In the end most ecstasies are firmly excluded from the wisdom which the *Essays* gradually uncover.

CHAPTER FIVE

Privilege and Grace

1. Privileged ecstasy

The apostles derive much of their authority from particular ecstasies or raptures. Apart from Paul's rapture there is the ecstasy of amazement of Peter at the Transfiguration and the ecstatic vision by which he learned that no food was unclean.

The Renaissance Church rated religious ecstasy very highly. Theologically speaking, all such ecstasies are privileges. No human being can ever merit them. This applies to all grace (*gratia*) which, in the last analysis, is *gratis*; but saintly ecstasies are very special privileges, special miracles wrought by grace quite outside the whole order of Nature. Ancient philosophers were allowed to glimpse the need for them: they were wrong (Montaigne thought) in believing they had ever experienced them.

Ecstasies such as those which Peter and Paul were granted, appearing as they do in the basic texts of Christendom, were commented upon by scholars, preachers and mystics, becoming embedded in the Christian teaching and conscience. When Montaigne alludes to them he is treating matters of importance. The example of Paul's ecstasy is Montaigne's answer to an anti-religious contention of Lucretius; it was also a challenge to the lukewarm religion of ordinary Frenchmen, including, in a sense, himself.

In the first version of his apologia for Sebond, Montaigne called upon Paul's ecstasy in a very effective manner. Paul wrote (Philippians 1:23) that he 'wanted to be loosened asunder and to be with Christ'. Montaigne exploited that with great sophistication and to considerable effect, in a way which shows

that he knew what his contemporary theologians made of it:

> (A) Those great promises of everlasting blessedness – if we were to receive them as having authority like that of a philosophical discourse, we would not hold death in such horror as we do. 'I wish to be loosened asunder,' we would say, 'and to be with Jesus Christ.' The force of the discourse of Plato on the immortality of the soul led some of his disciples to death, so as to enjoy more promptly the hopes which he gave them (II.12, p. 149).

To deal first with the appeal to Paul: this text was taken to mean that, although he would go on living for the sake of his flock, he really wished to die, so as to enjoy more fully the blessedness he had known in his rapture. Paul wrote of 'having the desire to be loosened asunder' – in the Latin Vulgate, (*desiderium habens dissolvi*. The force is in the verb, *dissolvi*, What is being 'loosened asunder' is the soul from the body. The Vulgate text lies behind this passage of Montaigne, but a little indirectly, since the expression long used in Latin to refer to Paul's yearning for the ecstasy of death was regularly simplified to *cupio dissolvi*. That is the source of Montaigne's version, *je vueil estre dissout*: 'I want to be loosened asunder.'.

Montaigne appealed to this same text of Paul in the chapter devoted to 'a custom of the island of Cea', in which there is much discussion of suicide. Montaigne makes, more fully, the same association of ideas as in the apologia for Sebond:

> (A) But one may sometimes desire death out of hope for a greater good. 'I want', said St Paul, 'to be loosened asunder so as to be with Jesus Christ', and 'Who shall deliver me out of these bonds?' Cleombrotus Ambraciota, having read the *Phaedo* of Plato, entered into so great a yearning for the life to come that, without further cause, he cast himself into the sea (II.3, p. 37).

This was an important point for Montaigne: such a 'voluntary sundering' of body and soul gives the lie to those who say that the desire to die means sinful despair. There can be not despair but solid judgment based on burning hope. A warrior bishop who threw himself into the heat of battle under St Louis exemplified this.

What, then, about the Christian interdict on suicide, which Montaigne is often said to have tossed aside in favour of a stoical admiration for suicide in its proper place? Was that old bishop a

Platonist or a Stoic, not a Christian? That question cannot be answered without looking at what Renaissance teaching on the subject of suicide really was; Montaigne, far from being bold or whimsical, is simply following – in detail – Renaissance theologians. Others beside Montaigne linked Paul's *cupiò dissolvi* with Cleombrotus, the impetuous young Platonist who leapt to his death and the world of the spirit. The reformed theologian Simon Goulart does so in a work translated in English in 1621 as *The Wise Vieillard* (p. 170f.); he insists, however, that Plato would never have approved of Cleombrotus and that true consolation is to be found in Paul: 'It is to be unshackled and delivered out of a galley or prison, to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23).' The Franciscan court preacher Boucher made somewhat similar points in 1628 in his *Triomphes de la Religion Chrestienne* (p. 794). But Montaigne's linking of Paul and the example of Cleombrotus may be found, used exactly as he does, in theologians nearer to his own heart than Goulart or Boucher. Indeed the association of Cleombrotus with the two verses of Paul alluded to in the *Essays* shows that Montaigne was writing within an established tradition. Montaigne's reproach to Christians for not even receiving the promises of the true religion with the zeal shown by others for mere philosophical promises can be thrown into relief by excellent theologians. For example, the *Exposition* of Thomas Aquinas by Bartholomew of Medina of the order of preachers explains that we abhor death through our 'sensitive appetite', since that appetite knows nothing of the world to come. 'But it is right that we should seek death through our rational appetite', out of desire for that 'perfect blessedness' which cannot be had in this mortal life. 'That is why many philosophers promptly killed themselves in order to acquire this happiness, even though they only had a very tenuous knowledge of it.' Cicero's *Tusculans* are cited to show this, because of his mention of the 'man named Ambrosiastes ... who cast himself into the sea after reading Plato's book on the immortality of the soul.'

> But to pass over these, which are uncertain, St Paul, most truly, in I Philippians, says *cupio dissolvi*, 'I wish to be loosened asunder and to be with Christ'; and in Romans 7: 'wretched man, who will free me from this body of death?'

Ambrosiastes and Cleombrotus Ambraciota are the same man. Montaigne also alludes to Romans 7:24, though more loosely. 'This body of death' is cited as 'these bonds' (*ces liens*). This is a conflation of Paul with standard Platonic-Christian vocabulary, found also in Bartholomew of Medina (*Expositio in IIam IIae*, 1588, p. 302).

It is not impossible that Montaigne took his material from this commentary on Aquinas, who was in his mind in the apologia for Sebond, since 'Adrien Tournebus, who knew everything', assured him that Sebond's book was the 'quintessence of Aquinas' (II. 12, p. 143). At all events there is no difficulty about reconciling the protestations of Roman Catholic orthodoxy in the *Essays* with the attitudes of Montaigne towards suicide. On the contrary, his attitudes are exactly what one would expect them to be at the time that he wrote.

But man is 'loosened asunder' in death as in ecstasy. This enabled Montaigne to use the exclamation of St Paul also against classical pessimism. It gave force to his interpolation of a quotation from Lucretius in the 1588 edition of the apologia for Sebond, immediately before alluding to *cupio dissolvi*. *Dissolvi* is classical as well as Christian in the sense of the loosening asunder of soul and body; so Montaigne wryly associated a sceptical verse of Lucretius with the joyful confidence of Paul. The juxtaposition of classical irreligion and Paul's ecstatic yearnings is a fruitful one: The passage, as expanded, now reads:

> (A) Those great promises of everlasting blessedness – if we were to receive them as having authority like that of a philosophical discourse, we would not hold death in such horror as we do.
>
> (B) *Non jam se moriens dissolvi conquereretur*
> *Sed magis ire foras, vestémque relinquere ut angis*
> *Gauderet, praelonga senex aut cornua cervus.*
>
> [The dying man would not then complain that he is being loosened asunder, but would rather rejoice to be 'going outside', like a snake casting off its skin, or an old stag casting off his overlong antlers.]
>
> (A) '*Je vueil estre dissout*', we would say, 'and to be with Jesus Christ' ...

Lucretius, scoring points off believers who are afraid of dying, asserted what would happen if men really believed in eternal bliss: when dying, no one would complain of being loosened

Sebond had used this text, but Montaigne applied it in a more orthodox way.[1]

In the *Theologia naturalis* Sebond believed that he had proved from nature that Christian doctrines are true and necessary: Montaigne more prudently, and more traditionally, asserted that this can only be done for men already touched by grace. He used an analogy from Aristotelian physics, in which every object consists of form and matter: 'Human reasons and arguments are like heavy sterile matter; God's grace is the form.' That is why Socrates or Cato, for all their virtue, were, in the end, 'vain and useless'. They never knew the love and obedience due to the 'true Creator of all things'.

> (A) It is the same with what we imagine and with our arguments; they have some 'body', but it is a formless mass, without shape, without light, if faith and the grace of God are not joined on to it. When faith comes to give colour and light to Sebond's arguments it makes them firm and solid. They are capable of serving as travelling directions and a beginner's guide for an apprentice to put him on the road to this knowledge. They give him a certain fashioning and make him 'capable' of the grace of God ... (II. 12, p. 152).

That is what makes man, 'according to our belief', perfectible.

[1] (a) God himself, according to Montaigne, said, 'que ses operations invisibles, il nous les manifeste par les visibles'. That may be an echo of Hebrews 11:3, Vulgate: *ut ex invisibilis visibilia fierent* ('that from invisible things visible things might be made'). Platonic interpretations were given to this text, which was taken to mean that God had created the world after the pattern of the divine Forms (or Ideas). See, for a dense discussion of this verse, Cornelius à Lapide's commentary on the Epistles (Lyons, 1660, p. 865).

(b) Romans 1:19-20 was regularly interpreted as Montaigne did. In the Vulgate it reads, 'Deus enim illis manifestavit invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur sempiterna quoque eius virtus et divinitas' ('For God has manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made; his eternal power also, and divinity'). With this text Cornelius à Lapide (p. 36) justifies the theological insight of Gentiles such as Hermes Trismegistus, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, let alone saints such as Athanasius or Bernard. Montaigne's argument may derive from Duns Scotus, who associated Hebrews 11:3 and Romans 1:19-20 in much the same way. Cf. *Scriptum Oxoniense*, on Sentences I, dis. 3, qu. 1, art. 10, §4, *Sed econtra* (Venice, 1612, p. 145).

(c) Raymond Sebond exploits Romans 1:19-20 in the *Theologia Naturalis* (Book 2, chapter 16).

A fundamental Christian doctrine is underlined here by repetition: Sebond's arguments are said to be made effective (*capables*) by prevenient faith and grace. They in turn make an apprentice-Christian *capable* of further grace. These are technical theological terms. Montaigne is asserting that Sebond's book may help a Christian beginner who reads it with the eyes of faith to move on to higher things, indeed, to become *capax Dei*: able to receive the grace of God in all its plenitude.

Montaigne never wavers: natural reason can stumble on to Christian verities and hold ideas or imagery identical with Christian ones. Yet without grace man would have no reason to put all his trust in Christianity. And he would certainly be no closer to God.[2]

Grace is outside Nature. For Montaigne any advance in a man's religion always depends on it. In the final version of the *Essays* frequent interpolations of words and phrases emphasise this. One word frequently so interpolated is *extraordinaire*: divine intervention does not follow the *ordo rerum*, the natural order of the world; it is always *extra*, always outside, that order.

God, for Montaigne, is transcendent Being: man is contingent and so has nothing to do with absolute Being (*Essence*). If Man and God are to meet, the initiative must ever and always come from God. In the chapter on repentance Montaigne wrote that he 'rarely repents'. No wonder! He was writing not of acts of penance but of that repentance by which a man sees his whole life and his whole person as through the eyes of God. To do that he needs grace (III. 2, pp. 32-5).

The apologia for Sebond ends by quietly stressing the need for grace. Plutarch knew that God is absolute Being. But Plutarch affords no means of access to that divine Essence. Seneca condemns men who fail to rise above their mere humanity. That is quite 'absurd'. You cannot, unaided, make the pace greater than the stride. Man cannot, of himself, 'climb above himself or above humanity':

[2] What Gentiles could and should learn from natural reason is that God is one and eternal, the prince and judge of the world. For a brief discussion of the issues involved, see Cornelius à Lapide, pp. 35-6 and, on the essentialness of grace for effective Christian belief, p. 30. Raymond Sebond believed that essential and specifically Christian truths can be obtained by man's *enlightened* natural reason rightly reading God's 'book' of Nature.

> (A) He will rise if God lends him his hand; he will rise by giving up and renouncing his own means, letting himself be raised and supported by *divine grace, not otherwise.*

At this point Montaigne made several changes for the edition he was preparing when he died. He interpolated, for example, the adverb *extraordinairement* to emphasise that a miracle is required: 'he will rise if God lends him, extraordinarily, his hand.' And the last words of this extract, shown here in italics, are replaced by the following:

> ... (C) purely heavenly means. It is up to our Christian faith, not to his Stoic virtue, to claim this divine and miraculous transfiguration (II. 12, end).

With such uncompromising certainty his long doubting chapter ends.

The verb to rise (*s'elever*) alludes to that *elevatio* by which the mind of man is raised by grace up towards God, in contemplation or selfless charity. Similar assertions are made in the chapter on repentance. Christians may repent in a manner worthy of God, the searcher out of men's hearts, but only through divine intervention: *Il faut que Dieu nous touche le courage*', 'God must touch our hearts' (III.2, p. 37).

This is an echo of I Kings 10:26: 'hearts God had touched'. The source may seem a bit out of the way, but in fact it was not; a contemporary of Montaigne, Georgette de Montenay, has a picture and poem on this theme in her *Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes*, designed to represent *Frustra* (In vain): all man does is 'in vain, if God does not touch his heart'.

By the time Montaigne reached the end of his apologia for Sebond he had discredited reason when deprived of grace. With Christian scepticism he defends Roman Catholicism at the expense of reason itself. In this he was following tradition. A generation earlier Rabelais's wise old evangelical king, Gargantua, had been pleased to note that all the best thinkers were pyrrhonist sceptics now (*Le Tiers Livre*, 1546, TLF, 36, 130).

Sceptical orthodoxy was certainly in the air. Quite independently of Montaigne, in nearby Toulouse, François Sanchez wrote an exciting little book in the 1560s or 1570s, which

he then kept in a drawer for years. He entitled it, 'That Nothing is known', *Quod nihil scitur* (Lyons, 1581). Montaigne was more hesitant; he struck a medal and stamped on it, '*Que sçay-je*?' (What *do* I know?).

Montaigne & Melancholy

The Wisdom of the Essays

NEW EDITION

M.A. SCREECH

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Montaigne (1533-1592), the personification of philosophical calm, had to struggle to become our wise Renaissance humanist. His balanced temperament, sanguine and melancholic, promised genius but threatened madness. When he started his *Essays*, Montaigne was upset by an attack of melancholy humour: he became temperamental and unbalanced. Writing about himself restored the balance but broke an age-old taboo - happily so, for he discovered profound truths about himself and about our human condition. His charm and humour have made his writings widely enjoyed and admired.

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