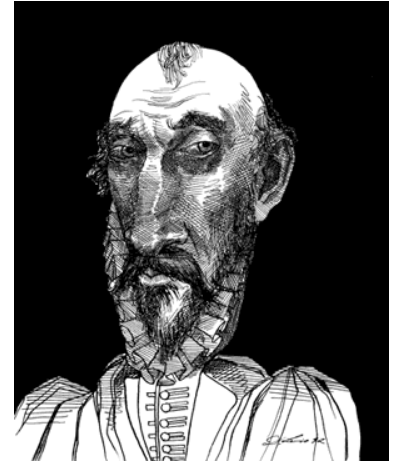


Montaigne: What Was Truly Courageous?

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Remarking on a painter he had hired to decorate his house, a man whose habit was to fill in the empty spaces around his central painting with “odd fantastic figures without any grace but what they derive from their variety,” Montaigne draws a comparison with his own writing. “And in truth,” he says, “what are these things I scribble, other than grotesques and monstrous bodies, made of various parts, without any certain figure, or any other than accidental order, coherence, or proportion?”

By way of corroboration, he tosses in a line from the Roman poet Horace, *Desinit in piscem mulier formosa superne* (a fair woman in her upper form ends in a fish), then winds up observing that while at least the painter begins with a strong, clear picture and adds the grotesques only as fillers around it, he alas, as a writer, is incapable of providing “a rich piece, finely polished, and set off according to art.” Only the grotesques.



Michel de Montaigne; drawing by David Levine

Does he mean it? Is this a promising way to speak of a collection of essays that in its unabridged version runs to 1,300 pages? Grotesques, without “any other than accidental order”?

Montaigne, William Thackeray wryly observed, could have switched the titles of all his essays around for all the difference it would have made; the content was always the same. “Montaigne is a fog,” pronounced T.S. Eliot, “a gas, a fluid, insidious element. He does not reason, he insinuates.” Montaigne “has truly increased the joy of living on this earth,” enthuses Nietzsche. He was the “freest and mightiest of souls.”

How disorienting. Perhaps our puzzlement approaching Montaigne is that while on the one hand we immediately feel drawn into a relationship and recognize the warmth of an intimate voice, something we tend to equate with modern life, on the other we have no idea where that voice is going or why. What is this all *about*? And what could be less modern than stringing together dozens, scores, literally hundreds of quotations from the authors of Roman antiquity? (*Mihi sic usus est; tibi, ut opus est facto, face*, he cites the playwright Terence, shortly after giving us Horace’s mermaid—“This has been my way; as for you, do whatever you find appropriate.”) Montaigne seems familiar, sometimes too familiar—he appears to know and understand our inner lives—yet remains quite exotic, as if he inhabited a parallel world whose basic coordinates were obscure to us.

Whenever an acquaintance is both bewitching and bewildering, it’s as well to check out his background. How does or did this behavior fit in with the society that produced it? Was it normal perhaps? Or at least in evident opposition to the norms of the time?

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne was born in 1533 on his family’s estate, Château de Montaigne, some thirty miles east of Bordeaux, and his infancy was anything but normal. The first surviving child of wealthy parents, he was installed with a peasant family for the first three years of his life, because he must get to know the common people; then he was brought home but given a German tutor who didn’t know French and was instructed to speak to him only in Latin. Everybody who spoke to the boy was to speak in Latin, never French, until he was six. It was to be his mother tongue. After which he was dispatched to a posh college in Bordeaux to study law.

In short, Montaigne was the product of an educational experiment at a time when those who could afford such things had become fascinated by the possibilities of social and psychological engineering. Like all educational experiments it produced something, or someone, quite different from what was intended. Montaigne’s father—diligent and industrious, with a steadfast dedication to public duty displayed both as a soldier in Italy and as mayor of Bordeaux—was dismayed to find his son disorganized, impractical, and inclined to take things easy. A first will, later revoked, gave control of the family estate to his wife—something quite unusual at the time—for fear the boy, then a teenager, wouldn’t perform.

For his part Michel was dismayed to see his father worn out by his commitment to civic duties and later afflicted by excruciating bladder stones. The son's whole life might be seen as a demonstration for educators of the impossibility of shaping another's character and destiny according to a predetermined model. That he nevertheless loved and admired his father and insisted that his education was the best a child could ever have only added to the benevolent irony that seeps through all Montaigne's thinking; it was the right education because it did not produce what its designer intended.

"What is it that makes all our quarrels end in death nowadays?" asks Montaigne in one of his essays, and in so doing points to another circumstance that profoundly affected his approach to life: violence. Aged fifteen, at college in Bordeaux, he was witness to street riots and saw the governor of the town beaten to death. At home his father entertained the family with terrifying accounts of military butchery in Italy. Above all, there were the so-called "religious wars" between Catholics and Protestants that kept France in a state of civil strife more or less continuously from 1562 through to the end of the century. Pitching one Christian dogmatism against another, nobles against king, dynasty against dynasty, and state against state, the wars were as cruel as they were complex, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths in mob massacres, open warfare, executions, and assassinations. "In our time above all," Montaigne remarks, "you cannot talk to the world in general except dangerously or falsely." At no point in his essays does he discuss the doctrinal or even political differences between the two sides. It was the only way to avoid danger and falsity. Yet the many "odd fantastic figures" he conjures up for us constantly imply that missing scene of violence in their center, its peril and its folly.

What was it, though, that made these quarrels end in death? The essay that puts that question is entitled "On Cowardice, the Mother of Cruelty" and begins rather oddly by attributing people's haste to kill to their cowardice; if they really wanted revenge they would make sure their enemies stayed alive to savor their defeat ("To kill a man is to shield him from our attack"). By the end of the essay, however, he is making what might seem the opposite argument, that "everything which goes beyond mere death [i.e., torture] seems to me to be cruelty." And this again is the product of cowardice. Both killing and causing gratuitous suffering are cowardly. The drift beneath the surface, never openly stated, no doubt for fear of religious dogmatism, is that flexibility and clemency are the only real forms of courage. "Souls are most beautiful when they show most variety and flexibility," he tells us in another essay discussing quite other matters. "We should not nail ourselves so strongly to our humours and complexions."

So if a certain mild waywardness was Montaigne's reaction to his father's educational regime, a refusal to engage passionately with doctrinal differences was his response to the religious wars. He is Catholic, he tells us, but has great respect for the Protestants. The word "Christian" only occurs once in a new selection of his essays, *Drawn from Life: Selected Essays by Michel de Montaigne*,* thus:

When we hear our Christian martyrs shouting out to the tyrant from the midst of the flames, "It is well roasted on this side; chop it off and eat it; it is cooked just right: now start on the other side"... then we have to admit that there is some change for the worse in their souls, some frenzy, no matter how holy.

Where I have shown an elision Montaigne inserts a similar but non-Christian example of fanatic martyrdom that runs to a full ten lines, thus keeping the words "Christian" and "frenzy" safely apart.

Aside from the threat of war and violence—at nineteen Montaigne was present at the siege of Protestant Rouen; in his fifties he would be captured by bandits and briefly imprisoned in the Bastille—there was the ever-present hazard of disease and early death. Outbreaks of the plague occurred in Bordeaux in 1548, 1563, 1585, and 1586. Infant mortality was the norm. Montaigne's parents had lost two children before him, and he and his wife would lose five of their six children in early infancy. In 1563, aged thirty, Montaigne lost the one great passion of his life to the plague—a man, not a woman. There were women and, he admits, doses of the clap—no pleasure without danger—but the one truly intense friendship of his life was with fellow lawyer Étienne de La Boétie. It was a meeting of minds and dispositions that had nothing to do with any shared cause or creed, a friendship entirely focused on mutual regard, lasting just five years, much of that time spent apart. Later Montaigne would write that relationships must never become so close that they cannot be lost "without flaying us or tearing out part of our whole." Rather "we must... espouse nothing but ourselves." It was a strategy for survival.

Whether talking about death in war or from sickness, Montaigne's reflections on mortality—and almost everything he speaks about brings him back to that—are always framed in the language of fear and courage. However much he digresses, backtracks, or meanders, this is the force field in which experience is understood. Fear is the most understandable reaction in the world, since the world is unspeakably dangerous. But it robs us of ourselves. In battle, sports, or sex, it prevents us from performing (Montaigne has a great deal to say about impotence).

Fear inhibits freedom, and freedom, which requires constant courage, remains the supreme good. “I am so sick for freedom, that if anyone should forbid me access to some corner of the Indies, I should live distinctly less comfortably.” When he tells us that “the thing in the world I am most afraid of is fear,” it is because the fearful man has lost his freedom. A courtier cannot be free, because constant concerns over his master’s reaction “corrupt his freedom and dazzle him.” When Montaigne attacks social customs it is because they inhibit his freedom; afraid of breaking with tradition one is frustrated and constrained. “Whichever way I want to go I find myself obliged to break through some barrier of custom,” he opens an essay entitled “The Custom of Wearing Clothing.” The endless examples he gives of outlandishly different traditions in different times and climes are all quietly aimed at eroding the intimidating pressure of present custom.

How to be free, then, and enjoy life in a world that demands so much of us? On his thirty-eighth birthday, six years after Étienne de la Boétie’s death and shortly after a near-death experience of his own following a collision on horseback, Montaigne had these words painted on a wall in his house:

In the year of Christ 1571... Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned Virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life now more than half run out.

Retire. Shun obligation. Shun passion. Once you are in something, it is hard to get out.

I find that the remedy which works for me is, from the outset, to purchase my freedom at the cheapest price I can get.... With very little effort I stop the first movement of my emotions, giving up whatever begins to weigh on me before it bears me off.

In his house, all customary etiquette was waived; family members were not obliged to exchange tedious pleasantries. Murals of famous battles and ships in stormy seas reminded Montaigne of the dangers he had renounced. Meanwhile, he retired to the little tower where he kept his library; one great advantage of the relationships we have with books, he remarks, is that they aren’t upset when you put them down for a while. Alone in his room, he waited for the learned Virgins, the muses, to show him what to write.

It would not be a grand treatise or an all-encompassing system of thought; for, alongside social obligation, ambition with its consequent fear of underachievement was another dangerous enemy. One had to have courage to underachieve. Even philosophy, in excess, “enslaves our native freedom”; even attacking custom could become an imprisoning hobbyhorse. Fortunately, friends in his younger days “judging rightly enough of my own strength, that it was not capable of any great matters,” had encouraged him “to free myself from any such ambition, and to sit still.”

So Montaigne sat still and wrote. Or rather he paced back and forth, or went out for walks, because when he sat too long the thoughts would not flow. Wrote what? “I would have preferred to publish my whimsies as letters,” he said, “if I had had anyone to write to.” Anyone, that is, on the same wavelength, like La Boétie. Why letters? Because they offered opportunities for intimacy, for acknowledging subjectivity, tying what was said to the mood of the moment. And of course for dialogue, which is the enemy of all dogmatism and a means of turning inquiry into pleasure.

Admirers of Montaigne make large claims about the essay form he was to develop in the absence of a suitable correspondent. Sarah Bakewell, for example, believes that he single-handedly created a peculiarly autobiographical form of writing. This is not quite true; his models go back to Plato and Cicero. “You will probably detect my inner restlessness in the changeable behavior in my letters,” Cicero writes. That is exactly the tone Montaigne was looking for. Closer to his time, from Petrarch onward the Italian Renaissance was full of writers looking for a more intimate tone in which to frame their reflections. Montaigne read them avidly. In France, a friend of his, Étienne Pasquier, published a collection of letters that he referred to as “a history of my inclinations.” It would not have been a bad title for Montaigne’s essays.

Nevertheless, as he began to work in this tradition, Montaigne did indeed transform it into something quite new, an irresistible mix of purposefulness and digression, purposefulness *in* digression, and above all juxtaposition. His extraordinary knowledge of Roman literature, by-product of his father’s educational scheming, was crucial. The



Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Engraving of Michel de Montaigne, 1725

authors of antiquity offered a vast store of respectable anecdote spread across many centuries and far-flung lands. Whatever subject Montaigne tackled, he could summon any number of colorful examples to his aid. Publius Sulpicius Galba did this. The philosopher Solon said that King Massinissa could not be persuaded to wear anything on his head, come cold, wind, or rain. According to Suetonius. The same is said of Hannibal. Certain Cythian women could kill their enemies just by looking at them. Pythagoras's daughter-in-law thought a woman "should doff her modesty with her kirtle." Certain Brahmin virgins, being ugly, would put their "matrimonial parts" on display to attract a husband. Pliny says bladder stones are a good reason for suicide. Emperor Theophilus was so amazed to find himself losing a battle against the Agarenes that he couldn't even run away. And so on.

Presented without any geographical or chronological context, these narrative fragments create the impression of a hugely variegated, ongoing body of human experience in which simply anything is possible. The effect is reinforced by mixing modern history with ancient, yesterday's news from Paris with bizarre tribal behavior in the Americas or anecdotes and hearsay from Montaigne's own travels in Germany and Italy; the public rubs elbows with the personal, myth with history, the solemn with the trivial. In the process, each string of anecdotes risks becoming more interesting and piquant than the general argument it was supposed to be supporting.

Talking about the power of the imagination to affect the body, we shift from Latin poetry invoking adolescent wet dreams, to Gallus Vibius who tried so hard to empathize with the mad that he became mad himself, to girls who thought so much about the male member that they developed one, to saints and their stigmata, and, out of the blue, to a long discussion on the psychosomatic basis of impotence. A hilarious personal anecdote is followed by "Amasis, a King of Egypt" who "wed Laodice, a very beautiful Grecian maiden" but, finding himself unable to perform in bed, suspected her of witchcraft. This anecdote then gives way to some sound advice for dealing with impotence in married life and casual sexual encounters. "Those who know that their member is naturally obedient should merely take care to out-trick their mental apprehensions."

"The stubborn nature of my stones, especially when in my prick..." begins one paragraph in another essay, again apparently apropos of nothing. It was the kind of intimate confession that many readers, particularly in more priggish times, would find hard to understand or forgive. Yet considering the overall effect of the essays, it's clear that these moments of scabrous personal revelation are an essential part of his underlying strategy. Montaigne is at pains (to risk a pun) to remind us how much we are at the whim of our bodies, so many parts of which have lives of their own. "Our members have emotions proper to themselves which arouse them or quieten them down without leave from us." Even our will can be charged with "sedition and rebellion because of its own unruliness and disobedience. Does it always wish what we want it to?" We are bundles of absurd contradictions without any continuity. Hence, implicitly, any pretense of laying down severe doctrines is absurd.

This was another thing that later readers of Montaigne were to find alarming: the apparent lack of any hard core of belief, any public-spirited advice. Blaise Pascal in particular, a man who began as a scientist and became a fervent Christian apologist, twining together the two main strands of intellectual life in the seventeenth century, was fascinated and appalled by Montaigne. "He contradicts both those who maintain that all is uncertainty, and those who maintain it is not, because he does not want to maintain anything at all." How could science thrive if a mentality like this took hold? How could religion thrive?

Pascal's opposition to Montaigne, condescendingly laughed off by Montaigne enthusiasts, alerts us to the abyss between mainstream Western thought and the spirit of Montaigne's essays. They are so engaging, so seductive, that many readers will revel in their intimacy and irreverence without entirely grasping the challenge they throw down to us. Thirsting for freedom in the deepest sense, Montaigne, like the Buddha so many centuries before him, identifies his enemy in our attachment to the world and its pleasures, our inability to let go. It is this that enslaves us. Life, he concluded, was to be enjoyed or suffered moment by moment, without seeking to control or direct it overall:

When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep. Nay, when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts are some part of the time taken up with external occurrences, I some part of the time call them back again to my walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of that solitude, and to myself.

Life, like each essay, is a performance, happening now. If I digress, I digress.

Pascal on the contrary thirsted not for freedom, but for meaning, for explanations and revelations, scientific and religious. One lived in preparation for the future, in a spirit of progress, and expectation of the afterlife, seeking to understand and control. Pascal's position—but it is also Galileo's and Bacon's and Newton's—would be absolutely victorious; it is our inheritance. Montaigne suggests a way that Western thought might still have taken, not based on information, idealism, or concepts of progress. He is perhaps the last writer who gathers together the vast wisdom of

antiquity and, entirely ignoring Christianity, seeks to seduce us toward a happier way of life. The Vatican knew exactly what it was doing when it included the *Essays* in its index of banned books from 1674 to 1858.

Not that Montaigne thought one should withdraw entirely from the world. In 1582, having published a first volume of essays and already suffering from the bladder stones that had plagued his father and would kill him ten years later, Montaigne was invited, almost ordered, to become mayor of Bordeaux. Reluctantly he accepted, but laid down his terms: he was willing to take public duties “in hand” but “not in lung nor in liver! I accept the burdens but I refuse to make them parts of my body.” In short, he would not make himself ill. “He who does not live a little for others hardly lives at all for himself,” but “any man who gives up a sane and happy life in order to provide one for others makes (in my opinion) a bad and unnatural decision.”

That parenthesis “(in my opinion),” with its implicit recognition that his views are there to be taken or left, not imposed, conceals all the man’s discreet and beguiling genius.

* Notting Hill, 2016. [↪](#)