HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Introduction to Montaigne and The Essays

The formulator of the phrase 'What do I know? 'Michel de Montaigne, entered life as a scion of ambition and care. His dad, who was his mentor and guardian angel, set him out for the first three years, to learn what life is, as an infant presence in a local peasant family, where the basics of life, and the simple equality of all people, impressed themselves permanently on the young presence. Montaigne's grandfather was very wealthy, and his father, for whom ambition was endless, had worked hard to get the Montaigne family line into the registry of noble families in the region near Bordeaux, in the Aquitaine region of France. Montaigne's family were on the whole staunch Catholics, although a number of family branches ascended into Spanish and Spanish Jewish heritage. Of note, Montaigne was devoted to dad, yes, but only mentions his mother on two occasions, perhaps because she added little to the family claims to nobility.

Montaigne's dad had in mind, in housing him with a peasant family, an opportunity to begin a program of instruction in Latin, for his young son and his tutor, and for the entire Montaigne family, which would be obliged to speak only Latin in the chateau. (The youngster praises the educational system, which stimulated his freedom of spirit, and through games and family sorts 'associated the study of Latin and Greek with agreeable rhythms and musical harmonies.') Montaigne went from home to a distinguished boarding school, the College de Guienne, whose headmaster was one of the era's great classicists, George Buchanan. From that point on he went into the study of law—in which he never greatly advanced--and before long found himself as a courtier at the court of Charles IX. He was present at the battle of Rouen, and received a medal of the Order of Saint Michel, an important step in the young man's identity formation. Back in Bordeaux, Montaigne formed a deep and close relationship to his dearest life friend, Etienne de la Boetie, whose death in 1563 was a great blow to Montaigne. (An astute critic has suggested that this loss may have been the spur to Montaigne's starting to write his essays.)

In l565 Montaigne married. He had six children, of whom only the second, a girl, survived.

In l570 Montaigne moved back into the family chateau. This was the beginning of a virtually life long withdrawal into his study, into his life of prodigious writing, and into a cut off from his family and family matters. His library, of 1500 books, gave him the basis for the initial pieces of his essays, which would first be published in 1580.

In 1578 Montaigne developed a terrible case of kidney stones—a family curse—and in l580-81 he travelled extensively in Italy and France, taking the waters, hunting for medical cures to this lifelong curse.

In 1581 Montaigne was elected Mayor of Bordeaux, a position that necessitated much more social contact than he had experienced at the time of retirement into his tower. In 1585-6, during his second term as Mayor, the plague in Bordeaux drove Montaigne back to his tower.

At the age of 59 Montaigne died of quinsy at his chateau. Paralysis of the tongue, one byproduct of the disease, withdrew from the writer the power to converse, which he considered the highest of social pleasures. He died shortly after, participating with fellow landowners at a private mass in his house.

The Essays are the story of the Tower. We have to imagine most of their writing taking place in the lofty, valley-scoping, book-lined.many windowed corner of Montaigne's family chateau, where for twenty years the master of the house made himself virtually unfindable. His moderate skepticism is a natural foundation for his writing----his stance is to look around in puzzlement, as he does in questioning what he knows; to adopt a fine tuned curiosity about the topic in question; to peruse several interpretations or ways of looking at the issue, and to leave it to the reader to complete the dialogue. (There was of course much writerly planning going on around those *essiys,* a word meaning trials or even experiments; there

was the ordering of paper, the communication with publishers, the fussing over pens and inks; but it was inside the writer's head that the desire to share the surprise of worldly existence came to flower and develop. We can hardly say that there was a thematic unity to the whole, but this flowering of experiments leaves us more alive than ever, to the variable richness of life.

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The Essays

BOOK ONE

Essay 1 That men by various means arrive at the same end

Introductory

Montaigne chooses to open on a loose topic—what kinds of resolution are there, for a situation in which you deal with a person (or foe) who is angry with you or has been offended by you? Or in which you are an aggressor determined to get rid of your enemy, and seemingly have no pity for him? By and large the author chooses to consider different kinds of resolutions to such situations: passive resistance that turns the mood of the aggressor; violent strike-back from the aggressed that shocks or startles the aggressor into reexamining his attitude; unexpected attacks of compassion or forgiveness on the part of the figure of power.

Examples that illustrate Montaigne's way into his theme

Compassion Edward the Black Prince furiously assaults a French city, determined to obliterate the inhabitants. As he enters the city, however, he sees three brave and defiant French Cavaliers, walking the streets, and obviously refusing to surrender. The Prince is so touched and impressed, by the defiance of these three men, that he spares the city.

Compassion The Emperor Conrad III of Germany sacks an enemy city, and in his fury proposes to wipe it out. So comprehensive is his fury that he orders even the women and children to leave the city, taking with them all they can carry on their backs. To the Emperor's amazement, the women leave the city gates taking their husbands with them on their backs. The Emperor's fury disappears, and he spares the city.

Conclusion

Some times a shocked response to oppression will dispel it, while at other times the oppressed can effectively win the compassion of an aggressor. Montaigne observes that there are various ways to peace and resolution.

Montaigne's conclusion. From the instances of surprising behavior, which Montaigne finds in his examples of the various means by which people arrive at the same end-- peace, resolution, or quiet—Montaigne concludes that 'man is 'a marvelous, vain, fickle, and unstable subject'—and from that conclusion follows directly onto his reflection about himself, his autobiographical reflection: 'I have a marvelous propensity to mercy and mildness, and to such a degree that I fancy that of the two I should sooner surrender my anger to compassion than to esteem…"

Essay 2. On Sorrow

Introductory

Montaigne opened his first essay with a discussion of the various ways in which conflict situations can be resolved. He is especially concerned with the unpredictable elements in human character, that lead us at one time to be inexplicably compassionate, at other times to be brutal. This discussion of the uncertain focus of our emotions flows into the discussion of Essay Two, in which Montaigne turns to the emotion of sorrow, and to the unpredictable and fickle ways in which it manifests itself.

A bevy of examples support Montaigne's scorn for the 'foolish and base' emotion of sorrow, which seems to him another playground for the unstable and unreliable nature of mankind. 'No one is more free from this passion than I.' says Montaigne, as he goes on to add that to the ancient Stoics—he is referring to his favored ancient wisdom sources in Zeno (5th cent. B.C.) , Seneca (1-65 A.D.), Epictetus (d. 135 A.D.)—sorrow was a particularly objectionable emotion.

Examples

Father's sorrow The fifth century Greek historian, Herodotus, includes in his *History* many instances of perplexing, and irrational behavior. In one instance a father, caught up in the mind numbing sandblast of war, notes the deaths (corpses) of his son and daughter, but in some way processes away the sight. He endures it without undue emotion. Not much later, however, the father passes the corpse of a 'familiar friend,' also a battlefield victim but of no special intimacy to him, and breaks down with grief. The cumulative power of exposure to death is too much for Father; it overweighs whatever is plain common sense about the unparalleled shock of seeing one's own children dead. The emotion of sorrow is a poor judge.

Father's sorrow Sorrow can change its character like a chameleon, rendering it a fickle guide to the true nature of whatever has provoked it. A man sorrows for a slain soldier on the battlefield, then, on looking closer, discovers it is his son. His emotion is still sorrow, but it is sorrow intensified to a high and nuanced power of itself. Montaigne tirelessly dwells on the imprecision of sorrow as an emotion.

Harmful sorrow Sorrow can lead us to torture ourselves needlessly. Diodorus was humiliated by being bested in a contest of dialectic. His sorrow was inexpugnable. He could not be consoled. He was a passive victim of his sorrow. He was helpless, and to no good end.

Excessive grief Contrast two ancient models. There is Niobe, whose nine children were slain by Leto, the goddess, for her excessive hybris. Driven to an excess of sorrow, Niobe went nine days without eating. Finally, transformed by extremes of sorrow, she was turned to stone. Her sorrow overcame her. On the other hand—and this is a personal example, given by Montaigne—there is the case of being so overburdened by sorrow that the increment irrationally dispels the stockpiled emotion, and one feels freed. Niobe was freed by petrification, while Montaigne was freed by excess, the trespass on the limits of endurance. An emotion (sorrow) which can lead to such paradoxical results—two antithetical kinds of freeing—is of little value to the human animal, which must rely on emotions as guides on the path toward reality.

Conclusion

Montaigne seizes on this last example to characterize himself (though not by boasting) as a person not subject to sorrowing after such loss. 'I am for my part of a stubborn apprehension, which also, by reasoning, I every day harden and fortify.'

Montaigne, as we are seeing, constructs an incremental autobiography, through the inserting of his own opinions into the relatively new essay form. He tends to work around a broad philosophical humanism, grounded in the reading of the ancient classics. (He was raised speaking Latin, trained by the best

classical tutors of his time, and carried out his studies at the Universite de Bordeaux, where he was taught by outstanding Renaissance Humanists).

Montaigne is a skeptical thinker, a lover of life but of reason in life, and a shrewd analyst of human behavior and emotions. It is from the latter stockpile that he draws the fine distinctions that build out each of his essays. The very finesse with which he distinguishes sorrow from compassion, committing himself to the latter but distancing from the former, indicates his inclination to make fine distinctions in language, which mirror the intricate modifications to which the fickle animal man is prey.

Essay 3. That our affections carry us beyond us

Introductory

The autobiography. We let Montaigne construct his autobiography incrementally. He does so with great care, and example-filled adjustments, and though he may seem chiefly to be pursuing philosophical arguments—say the broad critique of mankind as faulty, fickle, and unreliable—the deeper intention of the author is to 'record some traits of my character and of my humors.' At this point, we should have to say that there is fragile unity emerging from the 'traits' of Montaigne's character. Compassionate, suspicious of sorrow, a friend of living in the present: the traits accumulate slowly, and enrich themselves as a complex self-portrait. Looking ahead—there will be three books of essays, 107 chapters, by the completion (*1592*) of the whole project, by which time Montaigne will live before us as a full, and often self-contradictory, 'modern man.' History was bringing to birth, almost simultaneously, two unprecedentedly prescient personalities: Shakespeare and Montaigne.

Reminder. It will be remembered that— in the first two essays-- attention was drawn to the unstable, unreliable, even vile condition of human being. This dark view of human nature ran parallel to an astute attention to specific instances of human behavior—to the various modes by which we resolve serious conflicts, to the indication of what sorrow is, and of what value it is to man. In the course of exploring these specific instances, Montaigne let us in to his own inclinations, to compassion (rather than assets) and to emotional control, rather than sorrow. This, we begin to see, is the way Montaigne constructs his autobiography, by increments embedded in a discussion of largely ancient examples. The broad tenor of the discussion is humanist skeptical, the work of a creative observer of life too smart to be taken in by appearances. The third essay addresses peculiarities of thought and behavior as they pertain to our thoughts about death, our preparations for death, and, more generally, the mindset which leads us to reach in fear toward the future, rather than dealing with the present which is up close and pertinent.

Platonic perspective. Montaigne contrasts the distractive human value system, with the mindset Plato recommends. Plato puts it concisely: 'do thine own work, and know thyself.' (For Plato, as the author explains, each part of his adage implies the other: in doing your work you will know yourself, while in knowing yourself you will do your own work.) The operative practice, for most of us, is never to be 'present with, but always beyond, ourselves; fear, desire, hope, push us toward the future.' We lack the gift of what today, in the West, we praise as *mindfulness*. For Montaigne, this gift was precious; he saw its roots in examples from ancient classical spirituality rather than (like us) from eastern Buddhism.

The text of the third essay. Once again, Montaigne's text abounds in germane examples, largely drawn from Greek and Roman examples. What have the examples in common? They all deal with our thoughts, plans, and arrangements concerning death, a condition in the wake of which we will no longer be here. In what ways does Montaigne show us projecting out from the present so as to deal with death? How does he Illustrate thereby the ways in which our affections get out ahead of us?

Montaigne urges us to live in the present, and to follow Plato's prescription that we should know ourselves and do our work well, without being distracted by thoughts of the future. Naturally one consequence of the Platonic position is that we free ourselves from anxiety about death, which is a useless preoccupation.

Examples

Live the present. Epictetus, the fifth century Athenian skeptic, established an academy of sages. But he dispensed his highly disciplined students from any obligation to think about the future—which has no existence.

Shame The Emperor Maximilian, ashamed (like Montaigne himself, who regularly exposes his 'male problems'), could not endure to be seen urinating, so when the need was on him he slipped away to do it in private. Particularly eager not to be seen naked in death, the Emperor ordered that he should be entombed in his shorts.

Death Count no man happy til you see him dead. This dark-light view of death was vigorously expressed both by the lawgiver Solon, and by the bitter fifth century lyric poet, Theognis. It gives paradoxical expression to the idea that happiness and death can coincide. Like the Epictetus example, this one illustrates an effective thinking-about-death strategy, which allows the thinker to live in the present.

Death Contrary to Epictetus' principle—example one-- was the practice of the ancient Lacedemonians, as reported by Herodotus. Upon death, the Lacedaemonian hero was the object of elaborate ceremonies, rending of garments, wailing. Death is not a condition here but a tragedy. It is an absolute instance of living in the anxieties caused by worry about death.

Death Edward I, king of Scotland, ordered that upon his death his flesh should be boiled, and his bones collected by his son, as a talisman to be used in future battles. The man's presence was devoted to the ongoing furies of the next life.

Death Socrates is not surprisingly the most inventive of those Montaigne cites, as thinkers thinking their own death, but without living for what is not. Take your time to spend yourself creatively in death, says Socrates. 'Happy,' he says, 'are those who can gratify their senses by insensibility, and live by their death.' This imaginative prospect of living your own death, is Montaigne's suggestion of a response to the Platonic advice, about living in the present. By making the present your living point, you are always in it; when dead you are in the present, and can live joyfully there, as—a modern instance—do the Irish and the Nigerians, who live joy (dance, drink, babble) in festive funerals.

Conclusion

Montaigne contrasts the distractive human value system, with the mindset Plato recommends. Plato puts it concisely: 'do thine own work, and know thyself.' (For Plato, as the author explains, each part of his adage implies the other: in doing your work you will know yourself, while in knowing yourself you will do your own work.) The operative practice, for most of us, is never to be 'present with, but always beyond, ourselves; fear, desire, hope, push us toward the future.' We lack the gift of what today, in the West, we praise as mindfulness. For Montaigne, this gift was precious; he saw its roots in examples from ancient classical spirituality rather than (like us) from eastern Buddhism.

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Essay 4. That the soul expends its passions upon false objects, where the true are wanting

Introductory

For Montaigne, the thinking that goes into the study of universal propositions—his essay titles—is also the thinking that generates his growing sense of who and what he is—his character and humours. As writerly consciences, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and Montaigne turned, in the Renaissance, to the distinctive new and contemporary form of the essay, with its informal inquisitiveness They simultaneously freed from within themselves a new and conversational presence of their intimate thoughts. These intimate thoughts differed from the more formal thinking of a Descartes, or even of Pascal, as well as from the 'literary,' imaginative thinking of a Shakespeare or Moliere. With the essay a new kind of thinking, as well as a new kind of autobiography, was being created.

Self-revelations—as a compassionate man, of disciplined emotions—say, when it comes to sorrow—and as a believer in living carefully in the present, rather than in fantasies of a future—these self-revelations emerge in tandem with a highly skeptical view of human nature, which Montaigne views as false, fickle, and easily carried away. By and large the traits and humors Montaigne finds in himself are the negatives of the traits he finds dominant on the street. In the fourth essay he proliferates extensive exempla showing that 'the soul expends its passions on false objects, where the true are wanting,' exempla which, in demystifying, Montaigne finds fascinating avenues for a self-presentation which, though never boastful, broadens his emergent autobiographical portrait.

Passions We have a super abundance of passions. The same pets we adulate, on occasion, are not always bundles of love. When wounded by a natural object, like a root or stone, they are likely enough to take out their fury on the offending object—which has no awareness. False objects are attacked, when true objects are not available.

The soul is a cauldron of passions, which want expending on the objects that attract its attention. We have in our souls, for instance, an abundance of affection, more than we can properly expend on other humans. Therefore, we turn to pets, to absorb our excess of passions. Our contemporary pet industry or the scene at any major pet cemetery take us straight to Montaigne's thinking.

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Examples

Irrationality 1 Plutarch provides an example from the philosopher Bion. Bion observes a man who is extremely upset, and who is, as we say, tearing his hair out. Bion says: I didn't know that baldness was a cure for griel.

Irrationality 2 Gamesters grow furious when they lose their money at dice, and sometimes express their fury by chewing up their losing cards or swallowing their losing dice, as though the cards and dice had stolen their money.

Irrationality 3 The Emperor Augustus, after losing a great battle, smashed his head against the walls of his palace.

Irrationality. 4 Caligula, the brutal and often half mad Roman Emperor, had a great palace destroyed, because of the pleasures that his mother had had there.

Irrationality 5 The wild Thracians, when enraged with the Gods after a serious military loss, shot vengeful arrows into the sky.

Irrationality 6 To a bereft maiden: 'It is not your lovely tresses you should attack, but the bullet that shot your brother.'

Conclusion

Montaigne. Montaigne himself is an astute and persistent observer of human nature and its weaknesses. Does the weakness targeted in the present essay—the need to strike out when wounded, even if the cause of your wounding is not to be found, even if you must accept an inappropriate object for your wrath—does that weakness enter the account of mankind as basically vile and unstable? Yes. Montaigne is consistent in his mistrust of human nature—very far, let us say, from the thinking of such a Romantic poet as Wordsworth, for whom 'nature hath ample power to chasten and subdue." Our need to find a cause or explanation for what wounds us prevents us from discovering our own responsibility for our failings. …'we can never enough decry the disorderly sallies of our minds.'

Montaigne's larger point is accurate and arguably of universal application. Sulking is a universal name for this vengeful response to events which seem provided by fate to thwart us. It rains on my party and I curse the gods. The world bypasses my dream of inscribing world history with the name of my greatness. My teen ager is beaten up just as he is about to take his SAT exams. How can I not feel that the universe is against me? How can I not bang my head against the wall?

Essay 5. Whether the governor of a place besieged ought himself to go out to parley.

Introductory.

Montaigne frequently opens his essays with an open question to be discussed: how conflicts get resolved; how we can live in the present, how we can direct our passions to valid objects, how best we can deal with sorrow. The essay is a form in which the author, while speaking with frankness from his own voice, can address broad human issues. In this fifth essay Montaigne turns his attention to a matter which at first seems closely tied to military issues—whether the governor of a besieged fortress should himself descend to negotiate with the enemy, or whether he should remain in his fortress. Ultimately, though, the essay is about human behavior and human choice.

Examples

Strategy Quintus Marcus, in fighting king Perseus, asked his opponent for extra time, to fix the battle for an appropriate moment and place. He was thereby deceiving his foe, buying time to build up his army. Montaigne apparently shares what was at the time the preferred strategy, to avoid any guile in military affairs—to leave that kind of deceptive strategy to those like the wily Greeks. We take a look ahead, in this discussion, to the virtue-based conclusion of Montaigne himself.

Honor Montaigne—and this follows from the point in the first example—clearly admires those military strategists of old, for whom a battle was a pre-arranged contest of valor, who staged the upcoming battle with clearly defined groundrules, and who fought openly, like those heroes of Homer's Iliad, who engaged in pitched two person battles which spring up and occupy the entire narrative screen. Montaigne's heart is with the man who, besieged and called on to exit and give up, replies that so long as he has his sword he is neither besieged nor ready to take orders.

Prudence Montaigne is as always on the side of good sense, and urges on the governor inclined to emerge: discuss terms, stick close to your fort, and stay under shelter until firm protective conditions are in place for you.

Conclusion

Montaigne Montaigne raises a question for debate, and yet we know that he will slyly insinuate his own take at the end. We know how self-awarely he is constructing his autobiographical portrait, of which we have already seen diverse traits: that he is critical, a severe judge of such human foibles as severity, thoughtless commiseration, preoccupation with the future, vengefulness toward the empty air, false objects which stand in for obstacles to the greedy human I.

Montaigne, noted for skepticism, and for his raising the question of his own identity—who am I really? What do I know, really, for sure?—Montaigne has shared with us a few instances of spontaneous virtue—unexpected compassion or unexpected sorrow, at the random death of a man on the street,with his firm belief in the present and joy (Platonic or Socratic style). Skeptic Montaigne remains, but not a dark pessimist in the fashion of a Schopenhauer, who feels the universe has been created counter to the human.

The issue of the current essay, whether the governor of a besieged city should go down for parley—that is in order to discuss terms and conditions with the enemy—seems at first not to provoke a discussion of what kind of person Montaigne is, or of Montaigne's moral values—but in fact we will get to that 'what kind of person,' at the very end, when Montaigne tells us how he would answer the guiding question of the essay. He raises the question of how he would behave, as governor of a besieged city, in the case where the enemy has informed him that they have sapped the foundations of the besieged castle, so that it will collapse momentarily. (In other words, so that the governor. believing his foe's claim and warning, should get out fast, before the structure collapses).

Montaigne's response to the situation is characteristically subtle. He thinks of the consequences for his honor, if he were to be thought to be running like a rat, to save his life.
"I could, and do, with great facility, rely upon the faith of another; but I should very unwillingly do it in such a case, as it should thereby be judged that it was rather an effect of my despair and want of courage than voluntarily and out of confidence and security in the faith of him with whom I had to do."

In other words Montaigne would prioritize the question of honor, and put even the appearance of this honor before the possibility of being blown up. I might do the same thing.

Montaigne will follow the dictates of common sense, but not at the expense of his honor.

Essay 6. That the hour of parley is dangerous

Introductory

It will strike us that many of Montaigne's themes and examples are drawn from the experience of warfare. The fifth and sixth essays center on military behaviors carried out during siege warfare, especially as it involved parleys, negotiations, and agreements between armed camps or between a besieging army and the civilian population it is overcoming. (Even in the first two essays, the examples were regularly drawn from the battlefield, while in the third essay he develops such war-pertinent examples as those touching Caligula or Augustus, in which we see evidence of the collusion of power and madness.) War and power moves were of course at the forefront of social experience in Montaigne's moment, which saw a flurry of religious conflict struggles, efforts of the old landholding society to retain what remained of the mediaeval life of formalized intra-nobility land grabs, and the actual growth of the first urban power centers, in North Italy and France. Among these centers of influence and power, it is not surprising that issues of peace treaties, conditions of surrender, and underlying questions of trust would underly many influential situations.

Examples

Treachery 1 Montaigne's first example draws on an event from ancient Roman society, and involves a dilemma facing the Roman general Lucius Regillus. Lucius was determined to establish a justifiable treaty pack with the citizens of a city which he had just conquered. His proposal was accepted by the former foe, but then, while Lucius' attention was elsewhere, his people—the mobs attending his army—cut loose and ransacked the defeated city, treacherously undermining Lucius' intentions.

Treachery 2 The Greek general Cleomenes settled on a peace treaty with a defeated enemy. Little did that enemy know that the Greek general believed integrity irrelevant to the rigors of war. The two sides established a peace treaty applicable for five days, but on the third night the forces of Cleomenes attacked and massacred the enemy, on the pretext that the peace agreement was for five days, but not for five nights.

Treachery 3 From Montaigne's own time he draws the instance of M. d'Aubigny, who was besieging Capua. In the midst of drafting peace resolutions, the citizens of Capua realized they were being assaulted by the forces of M. d'Aubigny. One thinks back to Essay Five, and what seem necessary precautions for any defeated foe to take, and for any negotiating potentate to hold in mind. We are not far from the moment of Machiavelli's Prince which has taught the world lessons in the sophisticated art of trickery and confusion in warfare.

Moderation 1 The Greek philosopher Chrysippus carved out advice, on the relation to others in competition, which bears on the military issues discussed above. When you run a race against your opponent, says Chrysippus, give it your all, from start to finish, but do not resort to tricks like tripping or pushing your opponent in the course of the race. The ancients from whom Montaigne usually takes his examples, tend to blame the Greeks for unscrupulous morals in competition.

Magnanimity Alexander the Great was ready to besiege the Persian Emperor Darius. One of his adjutants urged him to attack just at nightfall, when the enemy would be least prepared to counter the attack. Alexander refused indignantly: 'By no means; it is not for such a man as I am to steal a victory.' We are taken back to essay four, in which Montaigne refers to the good old times of Roman military propriety, when wars were fought at appointed times, by professional warriors (knights) and followed expected rules of propriety. *(We* note this at a time of serious international conflict in our own world, in which the moralities of war time behaviors are as hotly debated as they can have been in Montaigne's day.)

Conclusion

Montaigne's take on his examples. When we consider the historical distance between our time and the sixteenth century western Renaissance, we can assume that there will be noteworthy differences in value systems. Montaigne himself stresses the importance of honor, and especially trustworthiness, as he assesses the qualities of a military leader—although he (like Machiavelli) fully understands the reigning guilefulness which marks the new, and already far from chivalrous, contemporary world.

His stress on trustworthiness has a flavor to it, for Montaigne, as we know, was a privileged noble, a gentleman brought up on largely noble classical models—the very models from which he draws the examples for many of his essays. Montaigne expects behavior, on the battlefield, which will mirror the gentlemanly standards accepted in his own background. The military elite of our Western moment, today, scope out enemy protestations, weigh carefully whatever is proposed to them, and make sure they have the weapons they need. On television, however, they are careful to display chestsful of medals of honor.

Montaigne is between two worlds, as a military moralist. One side of him is rooted in the knightly chivalric world of honor, professionalism, and especially trust, while the other side, increasingly 'modern,' though prior even to the concept of 'modern,' is raising the question about what the human being is, what we can know, and what kind of values are appropriate to a newly acquisitive society. One thinks of Montaigne's regard for Platonic values, in Essay Three. How does he see those values playing out in contract negotiations on the battlefield?

Essay 7. *'That death discharges us of all our obligations.'*

Introductory.

Montaigne has a fine eye for moral variations. He can isolate the volatile ethos of a military man who decides to spare his enemy because he admires three defiant enemy cavaliers, or the startled sorrow of a man breaking down before the corpse of a slain unknown soldier, while not long before the same man had gazed on the slain corpse of his son with a certain equanimity. He can measure the complex difference between a general who stalls for time, in order to reconfigure his army, and a military man who would refuse to save his life by escaping dishonorably from his sapped fortress foundation. We speak of situational ethics today, meaning that ethical values can be perceived as they appear in living interactional situations. Montaigne goes even farther than that, in parsing the moral choices we make as we pass from life into death.

Examples

Postmortem. 1 King Henry VII hated the Duke of Savoy, and wants ultimate vengeance on him. He asks his son, Philip, to capture this enemy and to bring him into court. Philip agrees, but on condition that no harm will befall the Duke of Savoy. The recusant Duke is brought into court, without harm, but at the moment of his capture, when he is under the power of Philip, the King dies. The King's last testament is opened to reveal that he commands Philip to execute the Duke of Savoy. The intention proves to be the 'judge of our actions.' Our intentions can prove operative up to and beyond our deaths.

Postmortem 2. At Brussels in the war between Spain and the Netherlands, the Duke of Alva demanded the surrender of Counts Egmont and Horn; Egmont having accordingly promised Horn that he could safely comply with the order to surrender. Having surrendered, and facing execution, Egmont asked to be the first to be executed, so that he could be freed of his obligation (the obligation of the living to the living) to the living Horn, to whom Egmont had promised security upon surrender. Both men were executed in 1568, the intention of Egmont, to satisfy his obligation to Horn, having been thwarted by the executioner's sword. Egmont was not able to go beyond his will. The human experience is all about will and intention. 'We are masters only of our will.' 'We cannot be bound to what we are unable to perform.'

Postmortem 3 Montaigne adduces the example of the mason in Herodotus, who during his lifetime kept to himself the secret of the treasure of the King of Egypt. At the mason's death, he revealed this treasure to the children of the Pharoah. Doth death discharge us of our obligations, or did the mason carry with him, into the next world, the obligation to have disclosed the treasure?

Postmortem. 4 Montaigne excoriates those who put off paying their bills until the time comes to make our their wills, and then in allocating this and that to various debtors crimp and cut the true debt until they have greatly reduced it. Equally objectionable are those who maintain their personal hatreds beyond the grave, taking out their ire in the provisions of their will.

Conclusion.

Montaigne longs for a scrubbed conscience, which will enable him to pass on equal with the world he lived in: 'I shall take care, if I can, that my death discover nothing that my life has not first and openly disclosed.' (Socrates, on his death bed, remembers that 'I owe a cock to Aesculapius,' the ultimate in fighting to keep one's conscience clear.) In addition, though,

Montaigne introduces philosophical riffs, into his discussion of dying well. He divagates onto the power of the will, which, even though it cannot always be fulfilled, is the ultimate judge of our actions. We cannot guarantee the ultimate fate of what we will, but we are free to will what we like, and in so doing we reveal a great deal about ourselves.

Essay 8 *Of Idleness*

Introductory

Montaigne is consistently interested in the way the mind works. He decided at the age of thirty eight to retire from active public life, and to devote himself to 'tranquil study and reading.' He supposed, at that point, that his mind would exfoliate out into ordered and self-enriching new ideas, but what he found was quite different, that his mind went wild with monsters and fantasms, every matter of wild and disordered fantasies. This experience played into the themes of his essays, in which, as we have already seen, there is regular emphasis on mind control, on what in Buddhism is called mindfulness. Indiscriminate sorrow, as Montaigne has argued, is a harmful emotion; for happiness' sake one should try to live in the moment, knowing your own self; the passions should be carefully aligned with significant objects of emotion; one should negotiate with others in a state of close attention to details and to one's own safety; one should freely exercise one's will, without deluding oneself into the belief that what you will will necessarily come into effect.

Examples

Disorder in nature When an abandoned field, full of grasses and soil, is seeded properly, it grows florid, springs up into vibrant plant forms, and produces seeds which can be turned into the profitable seeding of a new field.

Order in nature and mind The right seeds, whether in a planted field, in human genetics, or in the ordering and instructing of young minds are the indispensable means to profitable growth. Plants require cultivation, so do children's minds.

Direction is essential 'The soul that has no established aim loses itself.' The mind, left alone, tramples in all directions, like a wild horse.

Conclusion

Montaigne has little confidence in 'the state of nature.' He believes in discipline, whether that of disciplined studies or disciplined behaviors, and is himself the product of a highly disciplinary upbringing, by a father who insisted that Montaigne (along with all the servants in the household) speak Latin for ordinary discourse, that studies should be systematically inculcated from early youth, and that education should be offered on the highest level, as at the distinguished Bordeaux University, where Montaigne mastered the classical languages from which he selects in detail for his 'examples.' On the other hand--and remember that Montaigne is a Renaissance Humanist, sometimes considered 'the first modern man,'-- Montaigne is a lover of humanity, a benign observer of our follies but also of our unexpected graces—as in our willingness to spare a city out of sympathy for the inhabitants, whose women carry the men to safety, on their backs.

Essay 9 Of Liars

Introductory

A review of the earlier essays will leave us in no doubt that Montaigne is a friend of honesty. Through what other lens could he be promoting the necessity of trustworthiness in the formulation of military peace deals, the life-saving importance of aligning your passions to true objects or your attention to the texture of everyday present life, as it is, or the discipline of mind against the careless thinking and ready self-entrapment of lying. Distinguishing between speaking 'untruth,' good faith error in assertion, and 'lying,' Montaigne blesses himself that he has a poor memory, risks no fabrications, and has learned to deal, by honest explanation, with the complaints of his friends, that he has forgotten them or promises made to them. Montaigne goes so far as to claim that a good memory 'goes with infirm judgment.' For one thing, a weak memory reduces any ambition Montaigne might have—you need a good memory to be a ruler—while for another Montaigne's own bad memory spares him from holding grudges. He believes one of his best qualities is his true instinct for friendship. In relations with others he can never remember what it is he was angry about.

Examples

Lying 1 Francis I needed information from the Duke Sforza of Milan, and to that end sent a spy, fitted out with a false identity, to ferret out the details from the Duke in Milan. Sforza became suspicious of the unconvincing spy, Merveille, who was caught by the agents of the suspicious Duke, and executed at once during the night. When asked by Francis to explain why the execution was carried out at night, Francesco Taverna, Francis' Ambassador to Sforza, invented a false explanation, that the Duke would never wish to have such an execution take place during the day. It was a palpable self-serving lie, of which the keen sniffing Francis 1 was instantly aware. Disastrous results followed, for the lying Ambassador.

Lying 2. Pope Julius sent an Ambassador to the King of England, to urge him to take arms against the King of France. The king of England responded that there were many difficulties facing an assault against France, to which the Pope's Ambassador replied that he too was worried about that issue, and had discussed it with the Pope. The King of England suspected that the Ambassador was secretly on the side of France, and was not on a good faith mission. The Ambassador, in short, was lying, betraying his true attitude, when he urged the King of England to assault France. When the Ambassador returned to Italy, he found himself without a house, lucky to have his life spared.

Conclusion.

In two examples drawn from contemporary history, Montaigne illustrates the serious error of lying in the political climate of the pre modern Western European cultural climate. We will remember that Macchiavelli—*The Prince,* 1532—is lenient, when it comes to self-serving political subterfuges, but also that the same judge is extremely scrupulous when it comes to choosing your occasions, and calculating your risks. Neither the Pope's Ambassador nor Francesco Taverna, in the examples above, was careful to construct or cover their lies.

Montaigne himself, of course, carries the weight of Catholic moral disapprobation into his critique of lying. Though he first of all rejects lying as doomed self-deception he sustains the basic Christian (and broadly religious) principles which infuse Renaissance European thought. Respect for the other person is essential to the Mosaic religions and (for example Buddhism) and is in Montaigne potently fused with a secular analysis of the 'problems of the lie.'

Essay 10. Of Quick or Slow Speech

Introductory

In his third and fourth essays, Montaigne attends to the housekeeping of the mind. He urges us to control our passions, and to see that they do not vent themselves against , say, harmless objects like the hair we pull out in our anger or the arrows we shoot at the heavens after they have dealt us a military loss. He is equally alert to the care of language, to its effects and to his own skills and limitations.

Montaigne reviews his own verbal gifts in the present essay, and does so by reflecting on two kinds of gifts given to mankind: slow, deliberate, and thoughtful speech, peculiarly needed in the pulpit, and more informal, quick, and flexible speech, such as that required of a good trial lawyer, who must be able to go with the flow, in language and thought. He concludes with a look at his own weaknesses and strengths, both in speaking and writing.

Examples

Lawyers and Preachers While the preacher can meditate over his sermon for the following Sunday, the trial lawyer must be ready to meet the changing ploys and diverse pieces of evidence, brought against him by the opposing side. The lawyer must be ready to change direction, while the preacher will normally want to pursue a consistent theme without distractions,

Lawyers. 1 A distinguished trial lawyer, M. Puyet, is commissioned to plead a case before the Pope, though at the last moment the format and nature of his presentation are sharply changed. The lawyer is flummoxed, and cannot say a word. You can only be so agile witted.

Lawyers. 2 The Roman lawyer, Servus Cassius, was an exemplary trial lawyer when he was under pressure from circumstances or from a masterful opponent. The situation brought out the most flexible of his arguments; he does not insist on a severe logic which would, so to speak, break the neck of the bottle of language.

Montaigne himself. 1 Montaigne is at his worst—in writing or speaking—when he is 'in his own possession'—that is, knows just what he is doing. 'Accident has more to do with anything that comes from me, than I…' Even the varying tones and ranges of his own voice can spur him on to creative speech or writing…he can be auto-inspired. Accordingly, the 'things I say are better than those I write…'

Montaigne himself. 2. 'When it comes to speech, I am already so lost that I know not what I was about to say…' 'a stranger often finds it out before me…' Even good improvisatory lawyers, Montaigne implies, build less discovery room into their briefs than does a good conversationalist.

Conclusion

Montaigne is an astute observer of diverse kinds of speech and writing, including his own. He comes down strongly onto the god given gift of improvisation and discovery. (His shrewdest observations pertain to the collaborative work of a good conversation, in which an initial speaker can strive to formulate thoughts which his interlocutor completes for him, or insinuates out of him—a maieutic of language to which we owe many of the best conversations.)

The essay form itself, which was under creation by the mid sixteenth century in Europe, was itself the product of a conversational version of writing. The essayist, we have seen, was at his best speaking his I, and permitting his reader to enrich and unfold his half-completed thoughts.

Essay. 11. Of Prognostications

Introductory.

Citing Cicero, Montaigne assures us that divinations and prognostications, which played large roles in personal and state decisions, in ancient Greece and earlier, had by the time of Jesus virtually faded away. (Was the Christian Revelation the broom that swept away pagan superstition? Montaigne remains on the fence, a propos that revelation). Animal sacrifices and divinations, organ auscultation, the interpretation of dreams, astrology, and spirit-read apparitions: all these means for reading the unknown were falling out of currency. That they were not totally outdated, however, could be amply substantiated by instances of prognostication in Montaigne's own time.

Examples

Superstitious belief Francesco, Marquess of Saluzzo, Lieutenant to King Francis, owed his prosperous lifestyle and Dukedom to the munificence of King Francis, and had every apparent reason to remain loyal to the King. However he fell under the spell of Tuscan divinatory practices, and was persuaded to join the forces of the Emperor Charles V. Pure superstition led him to this fatal disloyalty.

Superstitious belief 2 Casually Montaigne makes a brief foray into the anthropology of the practice of prognostication, and in doing so reveals his own mindset, mediaeval plus early modern. He reports, from Cicero's authority, that an Italian laborer, cutting into the soil, came upon the ascending figure of the god Tages—infantile but profound with wisdoms—whose oracular value would continue to attract knowledge-needy humans for many years. This encounter with Tages will bear on the living potential of prognostication, to which even in the present essay Montaigne will conclude with a half-believing reference. Montaigne walks a fine edge between true skepticism and openness to superstition.

Superstitious belief 3 Montaigne assures us he would rather build his future on the throw of the dice than on a superstitious prediction. We might think a few decades ahead, here, to the French philosopher Pascal, who believes that, in the throw of the dice we might make, to wager on the existence of God, it was worth betting on just exactly the presence of this divine creator.

Divine supervision On a dangerous coast, known for its shipwrecks, stand memorials to those spared shipwreck by divine intervention. Why then, intervenes the critic, not rather count the number of those who perished in the waters, and were not saved? This is Montaigne's default critical position, when it comes to evaluating claims for the divine and its presence is shaping our lives. He tends to believe that the burden of proof is on the 'divine,' to establish its plausibility.

Socrates' daimon Montaigne's skepticism leads him to what proves a difficult test. Socrates claimed that he was guided by a *daimon*, a 'personal god' that oversaw his life. Can Montaigne accept that notion? He closes down the brief discussion with a doff of the hat to Plato's teacher, who was a hard genius to undermine.

Conclusion

Among Montaigne's disparate takes on the realms of divination, spirit presences, or star reading, he opens from within himself a vein promising for its richness of application to the present (and previous) essay. Socrates'*daimon* is a prompt from within that resembles Montaigne's own gift, in conversation, to discover by leaving it to his interlocutor to complete his 'meaning.' Isn't it that creative openness, in Montaigne himself,that readies him to appreciate the spontaneously unfolding tableau of new meanings with which the Socratic *daimon* beckoned Plato's pupil?

Essay 12. Of Constancy

Introductory

In his third essay, Montaigne deals with the appropriate behavior of a fortress commander, when faced with the decision whether to descend and negotiate, for the fate of his citadel, or to remain steadfast in his defensive position. A particular case is brought up, that involved the threat by the besieging foe, to have sapped the foundations of the fortress, so that the commander will face certain death if he refuses to yield. Montaigne expresses his preference for remaining in place, lest the impression be given, that he as commander is saving his skin by yielding the fort, rather than remaining honorably within the doomed self-structure. That question, honor versus reasonable self-protection, dominates the present essay.

Montaigne maintains that a decent level of self-preservation is permissible to all mankind. Just as is an initial feeling of fear and trembling, in the face of battle. While not of heroic temper, Montaigne takes his favored examples from ancients like the Stoics, who in battle feel—like us all—an initial fear at the shock of battle, but recover quickly, and persevere with constancy.

Examples

Flight and pursuit One way of open battle strategy is to combine retreat with assault. In fighting the Persians, at the battle of Plataea, the Spartans found themselves boxed in by a larger and tightly packed enemy line. Their recourse was to disassemble their own line and to flee, 'more dangerous from the back than from the front.' Once scattered and in mock retreat, the Spartans found the enemy, dispersed, following them in hot but confused pursuit. The Spartans then turned and slaughtered the unbalanced foe.

Direct confrontation Montaigne ponders the pros and cons of constancy as it involves the relation between a fixed line of cannoneers and an opposing squadron of field artillery, directly facing them. His advice is to remain staunch, beside your potent weapons—though nature will see to it instantly, if and when the time to duck or budge announces itself. At that point Montaigne leaves no room for heroics. Duck, for Christ's sake! This unequivocal Montaigne is the same person for whom the claims of honor were strong, upon the fortress commander who was invited to flee his sapped structure.

Up close and personal. Like most eminent men of his time, in Western Europe, Montaigne was familiar with battlefield fighting, and with the shocking sounds and sights of direct combat. Hearing rifle (arquebus) fire nearby, but not where he expects it, he (like any of us) feels an initial disorientation-terror. However, taking his clue from the prescriptions of the ancient Stoics, who 'yield their consent to their fright and discomposure,' rapidly take control of their responses. 'The Peripatetic sage does not exempt himself from perturbations of mind, but he moderates them.'

Conclusions.

Pre-nuclear, pre-drone, Montaigne lives at a time when there is prolific warfare—especially among the numerous city-states, imperial forces, and inter-urban conflicts—but when the mediaeval traditions of personal valor, formal courage, and above all knightly behavior still make their presence felt. It is thus that the broader senses of constancy—consistency, honor, steadfastness—are central warfare issues for Montaigne. That these constancy issues apply in an age of advanced military hardware, like ours, is less clear: the Army lieutenant sending a drone from New Jersey to Aleppo may indeed hone in on an ISIS commander, but what if he hits the family next door?

Essay 13. The Ceremony of the Interview of Princes

Introductory

Montaigne himself was born into sufficient wealth, and nobility, that the topic of this essay, protocols for meetings among the social, political, or royal of this world, was not unfamiliar to our writer. In dealing with such protocols, however, he retains that good sense, and basic awareness of the human condition, which throughout his Essays forever calls us back to modesty and humility. We will remember, in that regard, that Montaigne's father sent him to spend the first three years of his life with a local peasant family, deeply familiarizing the young human with the universal basics of the human condition. Throughout his essays, Montaigne—like, say, Jean Jacques Rousseau-- will retain the ability to remain at ease in all types and kinds of social milieu.

Examples

Social rule 1 It is an embedded assumption, of the social world in which Michel de Montaigne grew up, that if someone your equal or superior announces their intention to visit you, you must be at home and awaiting them when they arrive. One should not go out in advance to meet the visitor—you might miss them—but you are free to meet them at your door.

Social rule infraction 1 Montaigne is naturally refractory—though far from rebellious-- in following the social playbook. (Thanks to his stubborn nature, and perhaps also to his infant years, Montaigne carries with him at all times great ease, of finding himself in any human environment. He wants to keep his house to himself, and not to be slave to the intrusive expectations of others. While following the spirit of protocol, he reserves a priority for human values.

Interview protocol. Royal level 1 In 1533 there was a high level, consequence- rich, interview meeting between Pope Clement and King Francis of France. The King made all necessary preparations, then left the meeting venue for several days, so that the Pope could get the feel of the place. In this, an unwritten premise of interview practice was vivid. The Pope was 'spiritually' the loftier of the two rulers.

Interview protocol. Royal level 2. In 1532 there was a significant meeting between the Pope and the Emperor Charles V. The Pope was the first to arrive, in accordance with the practice mentioned in Example 3. In addition, another factor played into the special accommodation provided for the Pope. The venue chosen, for the interview, was on land owned by the Emperor, which fact make it especially incumbent on Charles to host munificently.

Conclusions

Montaigne opens the present essay with the sardonic comment—fully in his vein—that no topic is too banal to be made the subject of one of his essays. With classic grace, however, he builds the topic into a case study in morals and manners. (With the growing urbanization of pre-modern societies in Europe, the protocols of social living, down to the levels of dress and table manners, were demanding new kinds of attention, from writers, artists, and even theologians, interested as they were in the finer relations among god's creations.)

Montaigne shows, in the present essay, that he too is part of this growing movement of social finesse, and yet he also takes his stand for comfort. What was his retreat from the busy social world, in mid life, except a determination to lead life in his own way. That way was broadly independent, though Montaigne never doubted that manners were an enriching element in the development of society. He adds, though, a characteristically subtle, and patrician, caveat: that when one lapses from protocol it should be seen as a gesture of choice, not as a sign of poor breeding.

Essay 14 *That men are justly punished for being obstinate in the defense of a fort that is not in reason to be defended.*

Introductory

Montaigne frequently deals with the issue of defending, protecting, or making large decisions, with particular reference to the valor, recklessness, honor or prudence evinced by one's behavior under circumstances of siege intensity. Among his early essays are two which consider, respectively, the dangers of peace negotiations between commanders, and the challenge, to the commander of a fortified structure, of how to proceed. In negotiations with the other side one should be perspicacious, and attend to it that one's own rabble should not inappropriately enter the enemy city, and prejudice the negotiations. One should also take one's own time in deciding whether or not to resist the enemy, or to accept offers of safe passage. At stake in these various instances is the exercise of one's valor, normally considered a virtuous disposition, but one susceptible to abuse—passing over into temerity, and folly-- as in the instance where, for example, a commander insists on an imprudent, no-win defense of his fort. We might take Montaigne's discussion, here, both a tactical message to commanders in the field, and a brief advisory to the imprudently macho in man, the valorous that can quite properly inspire the punishment of death.

Examples

Punishment 1. Constable Montmorenci, at the siege of Pavia, found his advance blocked by the defenders of a small tower perched on a bridge of entry into the city. He had every one of the few defenders hanged. Fools!

Punishment 2. The Dauphin of France, on a military expedition beyond the Alps, trussed the military governor, and the few defendants, of a small and inconsequential palace blocking a mountain pass.

Punishment 3. Captain Martin du Bellay strung up Governor Buono, who was in charge of a resistant but undermanned enemy fort, 'all his people having been cut to pieces.'

Punishment 4. Attackers and the attacked.

Some ad hoc rules of behavior deserve the attention of both attackers and attacked. The attacker must make sure he has not underestimated the strength of the fort resisting him. The attacker must calculate the power of his reputation, as a factor in forcing the foolishly valorous to surrender. Those vaunting their power to resist, should remember that some attacking commanders, drunk with almost Oriental power, will slaughter their adversaries down to the last breath.

Conclusion

This brief essay provides a good opportunity for tracking the curve of Montaigne's mindset in the making of an essay.

Reason is stressed from the start. One should not undertake a fort that is not in reason defensible. This is the voice of the prudent and skeptical Montaigne. (We can remember that he intensely reproved the fault of obstinacy in children, and believed that it should be beaten out of them.) Valor, Montaigne sees, is a virtue up to a certain point, when it crosses over into the vices of temerity and folly. Crossing over into those vices the commander makes himself a legitimate sitting duck for destiny. He crosses the line from protecting his honor, and enters the grey zone of disastrous bad judgment.

Essay 15. Of the punishment of cowardice

Introductory

Montaigne introduces us to a scene taking place, in which a Prince is listening to a narration of M. Vervin's surrender of Boulogne to the English (1444, to Henry VIII). As the case develops, we see that the person being tried is accused of having surrendered Boulogne but cannot be put to death, for though cowardice does seem to be in question, the motives behind cowardice are complex, the actual details of cowardice are hard to pin down, and the legal judgment of cowardice is difficult to pass. The surrender of a city can result from cowardice, sure, but that cowardice can also result from treachery or infirmity. We are, therefore, into a classic Montaigne issue concerning moral distinctions, and opening up fresh perspectives onto moral judgment. Montaigne immediately opens a wide perspective by observing that, in some moralists' eyes, we can only be found guilty of what we assert or perform against our conscience. Cowardice doesn't seem to fit that definition.

Examples

Punishment 1. It was the belief of the Greek philosopher Charmidas that the best punishment for cowardice is ignominy. The guilty individual should either be ignored or humiliated.

Punishment 2. The earliest Greek philosophers had a specific punishment tailored to cowardice. Those who fled battle were for three days displayed attired in women's clothing. Montaigne clearly respects the thinking behind this punishment. There was none of the waste of manpower which would follow on sentencing the coward to death. There was an opportunity for the coward to review his behavior, and to recover his courage.

Punishment 3. By classical Roman law, however, it was quite customary to enact the death penalty for what was by their law viewed as cowardice. The Emperor Julian put to death ten soldiers who turned their backs on the Parthian enemy, during an infantry confrontation.

Punishment 4. The Romans did not normally invoke the death penalty on deserters, but felt that the resultant humiliation was sufficient punishment. Evidence suggests, says Montaigne that in antiquity the desperation of ignominy was so powerful that it drove many deserters mad. Once again Montaigne leans toward the legal pathway which provides most leeway for repentance and reformation, thinking of ways to redeem vice, but recognizing the great power of humiliation.

Punishment 5. In 1523 Seigneur de Franget surrendered the fort of Fontarabia to the Spaniards. (We are back to the issue of surrendering a city or fort, with which we began, and in discussing which we noted Montaigne's refusal to settle for strict punitive guidelines.) For this dereliction he, and Montaigne supplies several other contemporary instances, was stripped of all his medals, privileges, and special rights of nobility, like Prince Andrew in our own time. It was a stiff punishment.

Conclusions.

There is no single thunderous conclusion. We begin to know Montaigne, complex and modern for his time. Does he believe that fallen man—fickle, vain, ready to lie, often ready to run and flee—is also redeemable, gracious, willing to learn, sociable? The present essay offers us several ways to view this question. A man may seem to be a coward, may be unreliable in battle, may turn his back on the enemy, yet may be redeemable after humiliation, and may also, in fact, be displaying what we take as treachery or cowardice which is actually rooted in infirmity. Roman field commanders may have been tough as nails, ready to shoot deserters, but Montaigne wastes no words of praise or analysis on them. We can guess that Montaigne, like yours truly, would have had General Patton censored for slapping his subaltern.

Essay 16 *Proceeding of some ambassadors*

Introductory

Montaigne travelled often, in France and Italy, and made it a point, he says, to inquire of people he met, and to learn from them. His preference, he says, is to learn from people about their specific area of knowledge—engineering, agriculture, construction—rather than about matters they are incidentally interested in. This is an important point, it seems, for most people want to talk about something that is not their special skill, but, perhaps, a fancy of theirs, a skill they would like to acquire, and which fascinates them. So common is this inclination that the querying traveler may simply find out what a person wants to talk about, not what they are in a position to talk about.

Examples

Criticism 1. Archidamas, an ancient Greek critic, used to say of Pertander, that 'he quitted the glory of being an excellent physician, to gain the repute of a very bad poet.'

Criticism 2. Julius Caesar, in his writings about his battles in Europe, forever drifts away from his one magisterial skill—his military tactical brilliance and his gift for leading men—to discuss what he truly wants to talk about, his competent but not exceptional skills as an engineer and bridge builder.

Criticism 3. Dionysius was a great military captain, but wanted to be known as a great poet—like Archidamas, in Example 1. The gods were not that generous.

Distraction 1 Montaigne himself digresses, here, to present a barrister who is easily distracted, but has a vast collection of books; a near kin, as it turns out, to the expert who wants to wander off into fields where he would like to be an expert. The barrister goes to visit the collection of a fellow bibliophile—he is eager to study the man's collection-- but becomes distracted by the barricade placed at the top of the stairs, leading into his friend's study door. Montaigne chooses an extreme example, to illustrate the distracted and fixated condition of certain amateur specialists.

Concentrations. 1 Montaigne segues into the issues of concentration and distraction, as they bear on the matter of following instructions.

The same people who are likely to digress, when asked about what they know best, are likely to have problems with the following of instructions. There are some cases, in which a judicious craftsperson, say, can choose to follow his own bent, in complying with specific instructions. In such cases, as those of the specialists working for the king of Persia, so much free rein is given to the individual craftsperson, that he must continually resort to his master for more explicit instructions., But generally it is desirable that the craftsperson should stick to the subject and follow instructions. The Roman triumvir Crassus ordered twin masts made for one of his sailing vessels. He was demanding, but at the same time seemed to be seeking advice. Instruction giving should be clear and direct, without undertones, just as requests, for information about one's special skill, should be to the point.

Conclusions

Montaigne's thought follows a sinuous and subtle course. The instance of the present essay is typical. We pass from the question of travel, curiosity, and learning from strangers, to the question of following instructions. While the two parts of the essay seem separate, a bridge joins them. Both the specialist interrogated for his special skill, and the craftsperson faced with explicit instructions from his boss, should make an effort to follow just what is requested, while leaving some room for individual judgment.

Essay 17 Of Fear

Introductory

For Montaigne, fear is the least understandable, and arguably the most powerful, emotion, 'more importunate than death itself.' Terrible astonishment and confusion descend on us during the fit of fear, and for people of less developed analytic skills fear evokes hallucinations, rumors of ancestral sufferings, senses of apocalypse. None of us, even the most hardened man of arms, acquires immunity to the emotion of fear.

Examples

Fear 1 When M. de Bourbon took Rome, in 1527, an ensign on guard ran the wrong direction, out of fear, and headed directly for the enemy lines. By luck of the confusion into which he threw the astonished enemy, he reversed course immediately and made it back to his lines unscathed. Not so lucky was a certain Captain Julio's ensign, who in terror jumped out of his ship's porthole, and found himself in the midst of a surprised enemy, who slaughtered him.

Fear 2 In the same siege, a gentleman of Captain Julio's force went stone immobile with fear. He was dead, without an injury. Fear had killed him.

Fear 3 Tacitus recounts a fixed battle between the Roman general Germanicus and the German tribes on the northern border of the Empire. In terror of one another, the two sides both fled, but both ended up in the tactical position from which the other had fled. Fear had simply transposed the two lines.

Fear 4 The Emperor Theophilos was so terrified by losing an important battle that he found himself unable to move. One of his ensigns, hoping to save him from a shameful reaction, shook the Emperor into consciousness, and threatened to kills him—for the sake of his own honor-- unless he came to.

Fear 5 In a battle against the Carthaginians, 11,000 Roman foot soldiers panicked, and in this state of delirium threw themselves on the enemy and slaughtered every man jack of them.

Fear 6 Pompey's friends, noting a terrible murder transpiring within his ship, were nonetheless so terrified, by the sight of an Egyptian ship coming close to board them, that they could not pay attention to the murder in question.

Fear 7 Those who have received a serious fright, in face to face battle, may forever after be anxious about conflict; while those who are victims of conflict—enslaved or emprisoned people—can often as not live quite merrily.

Conclusions.

Montaigne himself says that he fears nothing so much as fear. As his examples indicate, fear generally produces terror, total confusion, irrational risk taking, inaccurate observations, or shameful behavior. (On rare occasions, as he notes, panic may lead to a sudden burst of energy or military ferocity, but the Stoic tradition, from which he largely inherits, precludes Montaigne from any enjoyment in extreme emotions.) Fear at its worst can paralyze us naked in the universe. Panic terrors, with no determinable cause, were known to strike the Carthaginians in the desert, leaving them helpless.

Essay 18 That men are not to judge of our happiness til after death…

Introductory

Montaigne's concern with basic moral issues leads him frequently to return to the question of death. What role does death play in life? Is death part of the drama of life, which we should be prepared for? Does a good life lead to a happy death, or is death both distant and far at any given moment, so that the conclusion of one's life may be reversed in a moment? Montaigne follows the thinking of classical Greece, on much of this matter.and especially the thinking of the Stoics and Epicureans.

Examples

Death 1 Croesus, king of Lydia, was taken prisoner by Cyrus, ruler of Persia. He was sentenced to death, and as he was approaching his final moments he cried out, 'O Solon! O Solon!' His reference was to the adage, of the classic Athenian lawgiver, that 'you should count no man happy til you see him dead.' Croesus, famed for wealth, but short on wisdom as he aged, fell victim at last to false expectations of death. His was not a lucky death.

Death 2 Agesilaus remarked on the 'lucky' king of Persia, but added that Priam too was once happy.

Death and Fall 1 Montaigne reflects on the powerful kings of Macedon, the followers of Alexander whose hegemony they distributed throughout the Near Eastern world. Not so long after Alexander's death these epigoni had become scriveners and joiners in the city of Rome, nothing more than handymen. Their own deaths, be it noted in the spirit of Montaigne, may or may not have been happy, but in the larger picture, of a few generations, their fall had been quick and dramatic. Their master, Alexander, had been ruler of 'one half of the world,' but had been reduced to a 'suppliant of the rascally officers of the King of Egypt.'

Death and Fall 2 Ludovico Sforza, the Tenth Duke of Milan, coming from the heights of nobility and power, died a miserable death after ten years in captivity, imprisoned for much of the time in an iron cage.

Adage Seneca: 'my last day must be the judge of all my life.'

Conclusion

Montaigne's best friend was a brilliant young writer of his own age, Etienne de la Boetie, who died in 1563, having shared seven years of profound friendship with Montaigne. The death of this 'other I' affected Montaigne deeply. So did the dramatic intensity of death, surrounding which, as our notes on this Essay suggest, widely various interpretations swirl. What we know of the death of Montaigne, himself, will only add to the complex richness of the death event, which for Montaigne was an instant of judgement on a life. Montaigne's own final affliction crippled his vocal powers, grounding a man famous for brilliant loquacity. Unable to speak, he made it evident to his chamberlain that he wanted his friends, fellow nobles of the neighborhood, to join him at mass on Sunday a few days hence. While the priest was saying the mass, for the small assembly, the moment came for the elevation of the host; at that moment Montaigne collapsed and passed away, a true but, as we have to understand, immensely complex Roman Catholic.

Essay 19 *That to study philosophy is to learn to die*

Introductory

Montaigne opens on a line of Cicero, observing that 'to study philosophy is nothing but to prepare oneself to die.' Such study, Montaigne believes, is a process of detaching one's soul from one's body, thus readying the earthly self for being left behind, a 'semblance of death.' While this perception, of the process of study, might seem gloomy, it is in fact quite the opposite, for all reasoning, as Montaigne puts it, teaches us not to fear death, but rather to 'live at our ease,' as Holy Scripture urges us to do. The element of pleasure emerges, from these insights, as the highest good for humans—when high pleasure is correctly understood. (A firm distinction is established here, between high pleasure, pleasure deeply virtuous yet sensuous, gay, sinewy, and robust, and vulgar pleasure, which gives passing gratification to the senses, but nothing more. Vulgar pleasure is fragile and passing; true pleasure, what Montaigne calls divine pleasure, is deeply contenting and maintained by the kind of study described above, which separates us from the earthly.

In the spirit of his age, classical but Catholic, Montaigne devotes the bulk of the present essay to reflections on how to live a good and happy life on the edge of death. He works the territory of the *ars bene moriendi*, the art of dying well, which was a spiritual theme as well as a literary genre, well into the early modern period in Europe.

Examples

Scorn for death Xenophilus, a noted Greek musician, lived happily and healthily to the age of 106. He belongs to a 'type' of model longevity, familiar in the West from classical as well as Biblical texts. Aeschylus, killed in his nineties by a tortoise falling on his bare pate, is another of Montaigne's favored examples of robust longevity and scorn of death. Montaigne is always aware of his own death, which is intertwined with his life, but since he was 'born for action' he does not brood over mortality. He takes what he has received from fate, and lives it, in the spirit of that return into the world of the mind, which had drawn him to withdraw in midlife from active involvement with his busy life.

Readiness for death Death is right around the corner, when least we expect it; we should always be 'booted and spurred and ready to go'; in evidence of which Montaigne provides numerous examples of the 'imminence of death: after high feasts the Egyptians would drag a dried skeleton through the banquet hall, as a memento mori for the guests; none knows the time of his death—King Henry I was killed in a sporting tournament, just when he was most vigorous, a Roman Emperor was killed by an infection caused by combing his hair and cutting his scalp; a brother of Montaigne was killed by the concussion caused by a tennis ball's blow to his temple; Aristotle, speaking of 'little beasts that die within a day,' alerts us to the brevity of life.

Dealing with death. 'Let us disarm death by talking constantly of it,' says Montaigne, suggesting we keep death closely in mind, even in the midst of our revels. Let us remember the exact time of our birth and death—Montaigne reports he was born between 11—12 AM on Feb. 1, 1553 A.D—and that nothing guarantees he will not slip back to the other side of that birth, at any time; we should accordingly be ever alert. We should keep in mind that death, when it comes, will be our greatest liberation; 'wherever your life ends, it is all there.'

Conclusions

Montaigne thinks a rich brew of thoughts, pertaining to our existential condition. We might say he inherits the best of classical-Christian wisdom, concerning our prospects after death, and blends it with that mature skepticism which is his trademark, and which makes him distinctively 'modern.'

Essay 20 Of the Force of Imagination

Introductory.

Montaigne inherits the largely Roman notion of imagination, which has its roots in the notion of the *imago*, the visual image. As Montaigne develops that notion, he gives it increasing depth by adding in the senses *of intuition or insight*. That is, he moves from the bare visual image toward the supersensible, even toward the mysterious in awareness. In that gradual enrichment, of the idea of *imagination,* Montaigne does reach out to the culture shaping dimensions imagination later acquired in modern European thinking, where, for example in Coleridge or Wordsworth, the concept of imagination characterizes the entire higher life of the mind, as it gives all of us access to the riches of nature and the arts. The supersensible or intuitive, Montaigne's implications for the term imagination, fall short of the world-valuing claims the Romantics attributed to the term *imagination*. Montaigne thinks as both a late mediaeval and early modern interpreter of mind.

Examples.

Power of imagination 1 Montaigne fears the power of imagination, especially because it renders him painfully sensitive to the sufferings of others. (Another's slightest cough tickles Montaigne's lungs, The more beloved the cougher, the greater Montaigne's pain. Here we see imagination in the form of emotional outreach.)

Power of imagination 2 MontaIgne is hypersensitive to the feelings other people have to other people. A psychiatrist goes mad from investigating others' madnesses. 'Boiling youth' satisfies amorous desires in the course of sleep. Antiochus fell into a fever from the sight of his beautiful beloved. A supersensitive man hears voices on all sides, at all times, in the air. At the same time his body can remain immune to feelings. A twenty year old girl turned into a male, as through excess fascination with the masculine she extends herself into a wide reaching leap, releasing male genitals from her crotch. First modern man? That's putting it mildly.

Power of imagination in sexuality 1 Montaigne devotes much attention to the woes of the imaginative, in sexual relations, and particularly to the ravages of impotence. He is wary of the fetishes and ligatures whose proper tying can promote benign marital rites. He cautions the marrying male, who finds himself susceptible to the sorcery imposed by the jealous or rivals, to ready his mind—especially the anxiety producing center of his imagination—against the pitfalls awaiting the marital act. One move within this psychodrama is to warn your partner, in advance, that you have difficulties with intercourse—then to surprise her with your performance. Another move is prayer. Amasis, King of Egypt, could not get it up with his wife, so followed advice and prayed to Venus, who restored his power. Of value, among these precautions in the game of sex, is remembering that the penis, key player, is ever whimsical, reluctant to obey, then out of control.

Imagination as infection 1. Montaigne recounts the tale of a bird in the top of a tree and a fox, at the foot of the tree staring up at the bird. Their eyes are locked. Eventually the bird falls straight down into the fox's maul. Imagination has infected them to one another. Another tale recounts the birth- giving of a hairy female baby; the mom had been infected by a depiction of John the Baptist, on the walls of her hospital room. Hares and partridges turn white in the winter, from exposure to the snow. A festive dinner party in heralded by the voice of the major domo announcing that the main dish, at that moment being served, was baked cat. The guests scattered, missing a splendid *ragout de veau*.

Conclusions

Montaigne concludes his essay on imagination with some subtle remarks on his own beliefs and observations. He speaks as the first modern man, but as a rich byproduct of the still pre- scientific Middle Ages. His message: he is conscientious in reporting what he has heard from others and observed about

the human brain; he is ignorant of much and many of those from whom he has learned are ignorant. In the end it is 'not too important whether an old story be thus or so.'

Essay 21 *That the profit of one man is the damage of another.*

Introductory

Montaigne has his way of wrestling a theme to the ground, then chewing all the meaning he can out of it. The dominant theme, in the very brief Essay 21, is that of the inherent selfishness of human actions, and the barriers we find within us, to wishing the best for others. Montaigne draws our attention to the inner motivations of a wide range of citizens, from funeral directors through lawyers to divines, in each of which professions the professional has ample interest to see others fail where he has succeeded. And to see his success promoted by others' 'failures.'The funeral director, still alive, is grateful to the dead for having given him business, The barrister thinks less of his client's fate than of the oratorical skill by which he has put to shame his seething rivals. Divines, who should by all rights be most ready to praise the Creator's works, and to forgive those who stray, may in their finest sermons be praising their own fine oratory, and reflecting on the verbal clumsiness of his rivals.

Examples.

Funeral Director The funeral director can only do a thriving business if there is an ample supply of corpses to bury. The director fills his pockets with gold, as the dead enter his mortuary, one by one. Is Montaigne correct to interpret this selfish transaction as indifference to those who have died? Or could the director's view include the position that he too is a part of the social web, and will in his turn be serviced by the living?

Barrister The barrister owes thanks to his clients for committing the crimes for which he has to defend them. Their loss is his gain. Is it, though, quite that simple? Is the barrister purely a profiteer? Or does his oratorical skill, on behalf of the losers, open the social world to new horizons, which will eventually breed higher levels of social behavior, and diminish the cases of malfeasance.

Preachers Great preachers would seem to batten on the fallen behaviors of mankind. What else, after all, is Bossuet to thunder at than the latest adultery at court? It bears reflection, though, whether Montaigne is, in such examples, pointing to a general truth about the way the world works. Is he convincingly showing us that our virtues are tightly locked into our failings?

Conclusion.

Montaigne is skeptical about human nature. He finds many faults in us: disloyalty, mindlessness, cowardice, fear, dishonesty, vengefulness, dishonesty. He ventures the argument that because of our weaknesses we are prompted to glow in the achievement of our virtues. We thrive on the failures of our fellows.

Essay 22 *Of custom, and that we should not easily change a law received*

Introductory

Montaigne opens the brilliant discussion on an ancient tale, about a countrywoman who is accustomed from childhood to lifting a baby calf in her arms, and who continues to do so, on a regular and daily basis, until in middle age she finds herself lifting a full grown ox. This tale is all about getting used to challenges, or stages of social achievement and development, on a gradual basis. The wide ranging essay expresses Montaigne's cosmic view of the rightness of natural process, whether in the heavens, in civil society, or in morality. It is easy to see how this 'gradualism' aligns with the skeptical view of mankind, which Montaigne so brusquely formulates in the brief essay which precedes the present one. Gradualism is the best counter to the wilfulness of nature.

The ramifications of our embeddedness in custom are wide. Custom is rooted in experience and trial and error and reflects our innate capacity to adapt intelligently to new situations. Each trade gets used to the noises it makes, each culture to the foods available to it—no end to the outlandishness of the comestible (snake, insect, or bark—and Montaigne himself has easily grown insensible to the church bells which every morning loudly proclaim the Angelus outside nis window. The routine and benign, in this accustoming process, are easily appreciated, and can be understood as the healthy fabric that holds together effective laws and practices in a society. Custom can, however, prove to be a tyrant, welding us to the habits, sensations, and attitudes we have become 'accustomed to' and making it hard for us to see other ways of doing things—though on the whole Montaigne finds innovation harmful and dangerous. On the negative side of custom, not the dominant theme here, Montaigne stresses the danger of bad habits in childhood, which can progressively root, until they become the vicious habits of maturity.

Examples.

Objectionable customs Despite Montaigne's resounding final stress on custom, as man's path toward harvesting valuable experience and even wisdom, he is profuse with examples of customary harm. As a close critic of child-raising practices, Montaigne is especially eager to prevent childhood viciousness—he stresses cruelty, here, toward animals, pets, other children, as well as the importance of total freedom from lying or deception. (Montaigne speaks here of his own 'extreme aversion from deceit.') Montaigne notes with equal aversion those deeply 'foreign' practices, which local custom makes part of daily life in remote parts of the world. (The author of these perspectives is in this discussion of custom and value infinitely complex: a widely learned pre-anthropologist, steeped in both lore and travel reports; a strict classical disciplinarian in the Western European pre modern vein). He veers toward scatological instances of foreign custom: courts at which the King's shit will be collected, in cloth containers, by his respectful retinue, or in which, when the king spits, his spittle is eagerly grabbed by his retainers, before it hits the ground; in which virgins display their pudenda, while wives hide theirs; in which women make water standing, while men squat; dead bodies are boiled, or dirty fingers at table are wiped on their owners' genitals.

Valuable customs The most brilliant imaginings of Montaigne revolve around his formulations of 'custom as ruler of the world.' For though he sees the tyranny of custom, as a possible path into perversity or stagnation, he sees that healthy innervations preserve valuable social experiences, sustain the harmony of the spheres, and the very music of the cosmos, and protect us against that most hateful development, the *innovation*. Novelty, whether in clothing, personal tastes, or governance is Montaigne's abhorrence. The Christian religion, he insists, above all mandates respect for order—the saving sacrifice instituted by the Christ—and requires obedience to civil magistrates. Such as Socrates were surely right, though the judgment of him was created by fools, in that he refused to abjure the laws of his state, even though it cost him his life.

Conclusions

This essay is wide ranging, touching many topics and perspectives. Montaigne is an anthropologist *avant la lettre*, erudite in ancient classical literature, and widely read in the travel literatures of his time, which were drawing widespread attention, at this stage of Renaissance exploration and growing popular culture. Montaigne, though, is also a philosophical sociologist, deeply perceptive of the ligatures that hold together the social fabric, their gradual accumulation of learning and experience, and their value as intersections between human and cosmic harmony. We know that Montaigne's dad lodged his son for the first three years, with a local peasant family. Montaigne acquired a face to face training in honesty, clear thinking, and an awareness of how the social fabric is created.

Essay 23. Various events from the same counsel

Introductory

In the preceding essay, Montaigne expatiated on the multiplicity of customs that go to make up a world of diverse humans. As an exploratory Renaissance mind, Montaigne found these customs both fascinating and foreign/bizarre, but consistently argued for the value of distinctive customs in general, as experience-based elements in whatever is stable about humans. He hated innovations. In the present essay he explores the elements of common sense in the behavior of princes, and the wealth of good judgment available there. He is looking for keys to personal security, dignity, and calm, trademarks of the kind of selfhood he set for himself when in midlife he retired from the busy world.

Examples

Dealing with the enemy 1 A man of note at court learns that a hired killer is out to get him. Should he be proactive, and wipe out the man? After reflection the nobleman invites the prospective killer to an interview, in which he brings out the bad conscience and humiliation of the would be killer. From that time on the would be killer is tame as a cat.

Dealing with the enemy 2 The Emperor learns that young Cinna plans to try to assassinate him. He calls the promising youth to him, and lays out, before the young man, his reflections over whether he should or should not punish him. He considers his, the Emperor's, wife's pleas for leniency. Finally the Emperor Augustus relents, wins the lasting friendship of Cinna, and inherits Cinna's fortune when Cinna dies.

Dealing with the enemy 3 Physicians, artists, painters, and in fact skilled citizens must in general rely on fortune to support their efforts and achievements. That is one way of putting what Montaigne calls 'working with nature,' a concept he considers, like fortune, to indicate a fruitful way of dealing with the life-hand you have been dealt. Presenting oneself as a spokesperson for good fortune is a good way to ward off jealousies—no one can envy you. Montaigne is a regular proponent of doing everything in the shortest and most direct way, the very life blood of a person whose willingness to flow with what he has been given is the best protection.

Dealing with the enemy 4 Montaigne tells the story of a military man who is being hunted down by enemy forces, but who manages to escape them for a long time, by hiding out in the bush. After a long time of hiding and being ion the run, the military man gives himself up to be killed. He can't endure the anxiety and indignity of his situation. We know when we have had enough. For Montaigne, courage and living with nature—as well as prudence – are essential for the happy life, and regularly promote the greatest success.

Dealing with the enemy 5 Montaigne praises an ancient power-gaining trick, by which a ruler can subdue his opponents. The ruler colludes with a tricky ally, to advertise that the ally has asked for a talent (26 kilograms) of pure silver in return for a strong power-giving secret. The 'talent' having exchanged hands, the ruler then lets it be known, with the support of the 'ally,' that he is in control of a great secret, the 'nuclear option; and had better not be messed with. He is left alone..

Conclusions

Montaigne's own values become clear, once again, in his cautionary advice. He is for dignity, self-control, courage, insight—into human behavior, and going with the flow. Because he is preternaturally astute, over the range of human behaviors and reactions, he qualifies himself for that 'first modern man' tag, which marks him off as savvy and self-reliant.

Essay 24 Of Pedantry

Introductory

There was an atmosphere of scorn for pedantry, both in Roman antiquity—which attributed the vice to the Greeks--and in Montaigne's own time, when the pedant was the joke of stage and countryside. Montaigne himself is much concerned with the distinction between what we might call informed intelligence and the brain-stuffed condition of pedantry, which furthers nothing. It will be observed that Montaigne himself is characteristically modest, and takes care to remind us that, because as we know he has 'no memory,' he is not a victim of pedantry, the disease in which what has been remembered is all there is.

Examples

The stuffing of the brain Montaigne describes pedantry as a condition in which the brain is too full, and the contents compressed so tightly that no currents—intelligence—can pass through it. (He compares the brain of the pedant to an overwatered and water logged plant into which more and more fluid keeps being poured; eventually it drowns in its own squishiness.) This imagery, however, leads Montaigne to question the borderline between the overfull and the intelligently functioning brain. Why are certain people gifted with the ability to translate their learning into the simple raw material of intelligence, and to digest wider learning in a practical and efficient manner?

The procedure of the brain Montaigne observes the way the pedant's brain puts together scraps of knowledge, a bit from here, a bit from there, without experiencing them together as a whole. He references the case of a wealthy Roman gentleman who surrounded himself with experts in each major department of knowledge—the arts, warfare, carpentry, worship—and when involved in conversation, concerning such real world skills, simply turned to the appropriate expert, and asked him to speak. (The same rich man might, in our time, simply conduct rapid Google searches). Montaigne carefully relates this weakness of brain muscle to the thinking of the easily distracted man. In an earlier essay Montaigne describes a librarian who, visiting a fine library, finds himself distracted by the portal through which one enters the library. In the present instance the distractable person has been sent to a nearby house, to bring back fire for kitchen cooking in his own house. However when he arrives in the kitchen of the neighbor, whose fire he is about to borrow, he finds a cozy oven blaze and sits down to warm his hands. He stays there; he has forgotten why he went to the neighbor's house.

Usefulness and knowing Montaigne concedes that there are highly intellectual and effective people—his examples range from military distinction to civil government—who are learned in an effective way, and do not step into the trap of pedantry, which is at the antipodes of wisdom. Wisdom, in fact, is a proper goal of learning, though not the only proper use of the development of mind. Montaigne joins many ancient sources in praising the education of youth among the Lacedaemonians, who taught virtue and goodness to their children, in preference to those skills of oratory, persuasion, and logic, which formed the backbone of Athenian culture.

The case of philosophy Montaigne devotes especial attention to the kind of knowing characteristic of philosophy, which was always spotlighted as a key ancient achievement of mind, by which the individual acquires maturity through inquiring, asking what the meanings of life are. The pedant is far from the philosopher, for while the former is mired in detail, the latter is before all an opener of prospects; however the philosopher is rarely, in the end, effectual in shaping 'real life.' He is rarely a more formative influence than the pedant.

Conclusions

Montaigne allows himself wide range in discussing the notions of pedantry, learning, and the differences between superficial knowledge and the true ability to achieve things through the work of mind. In the end Montaigne is, as he says, interested in better learning, rather than more knowledge, and finds himself—

we sense—most in harmony with men of the world whose intelligence is well constructed, under continuing instruction, and who can use that intelligence to earn, do, and improve.

Essay 25 Of the Education of Children

Introductory

Though Montaigne writes this lengthy and ambitious pedagogy, for a distinguished lady of his acquaintance, who is on the verge of childbirth, he takes the opportunity to reveal his own personal educational story, and to lay out broad views of the whole learning process. We will note that Montaigne regularly derides the scholastic educational theories—trivium and quadrivium, intricacies of Aristotelian logic—and remarks his collegial kinship with thinkers like Hobbes and Bacon. To some degree the following is simply an application of Montaigne's distinctively humane Renaissance perspective, while at the same time it is a provocative and forward looking attempt to conceive the education of the whole person, a goal in which we are actively interested today, and which is part of our understanding of the dangers of that unholistic pedantry Montaigne ridiculed in the foregoing essay.

Examples

Montaigne's own education Montaigne opens by explaining the most unusual upbringing he himself experienced, one which tinctures all he will say about education in general. He was, as we know, from a distinguished and independent family, and from a father who had distinctive pedagogical ideas. For his first three years he was lodged with a local peasant family, where he learned the equality of all to all. The sense of the universality of the human condition is potent throughout Montaigne's work. At six he transferred to a high standard private tutor, then upon graduation from that home based education, in his teens, he completed his formal education at the University of Bordeaux, one of the pre-eminent Renaissance faculties, for instruction in Greek, Latin, and classical literature. It can be no surprise, that Montaigne's educational advising includes a strong emphasis on individualized instruction. However, the fierce emphasis on the classics is seriously moderated in the advice provided to Mme. de Foix, for the education of her soon to be newborn son.

Humane education: getting started Montaigne's pedagogical advice is built around the training offered a young gentleman, by a resident tutor—preferably one of foreign language and culture. A close supervisory relation is imagined, between the youth and his tutor. (The tutorial relation is close to that described by Tolstoy, in his *Childhood*, Boyhood, Youth. The tutor constantly observes the development of his pupil, so calibrating the sequence of his learning experiences, that he—the pupil—is given increasing liberty to choose his path. As we can imagine, the pupil's first learning period will involve physical training, the fine art of relating to others of all sorts, and 0f all social conditions. (Montaigne also places great stress on the honesty and obedience of the learning youth—'abominate impertinence'—and on his ability to digest, rather than simply consider, the life lessons he is running into along the way.)

Making the whole learner. Once in the proper relation to his tutor—compliant, but curious, freedom-seeking, ready for anything—the young man is urged to take on the world: to meet others, of all classes and gifts, to converse confidently, to observe the human scene—to take that kind of astute pleasure Pythagoras describes, among the spectators at the Olympic Games, those that simply attend to watch. It will be only after these preliminaries that the young man will turn to studies in the stricter sense. These will commence with good use of language—which for Montaigne means the robust use of common everyday French—even market place French—becoming used to the natural in language, the reflection there of a person at ease with people and their world. It will be at this stage—one might guess late in the second five years of one's first decade—that the youngster turns from language to philosophy—the gayest and liveliest science, nothing but 'feasting and jollity'—and from there, accustomed to dealing with arguments, into his choice among the more disciplinarian sciences, geometry, history—of particular interest, for its exposure to the lives of great men, military and leaderly—and languages. Rethinking his own example, Montaigne stresses the learning of foreign languages, with special stress on the foundation-building of Greek and Latin, but also with emphasis on the 'foreign' element, for after all

education, as Montaigne conceives it, is about urbane, tough, flexible, and deeply grounded ways of responding to the world. Ten to fifteen years of education should suffice, leaving the young man ready for his true mission, action in the world.

Conclusions

Montaigne thinks in terms of a deeply private and individualistic course of education, in which the presence of one or more full time tutors is indispensable. The bias is entirely toward the formation of a strong and intelligent young man, who will enter life at a level of military or political influence, and who will, as we might say, reproduce the system over again. This is patrician male education, not unknown in the industrialized west today, and yet preserving within it echoes of a brilliant Renaissance which—as in the thinking of Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo—exemplified a sense of the wholeness and possibility of the human individual.

Essay 26. *That it is folly to measure truth and error by our own capacity*

Introductory

Montaigne opens with a bow to the superficial rationalism of his day—which was not the hard nosed disicplinary perspective that would make its way into Enlightenment thought two centuries later in France, but rather the debunking kind of rationalism, which considers itself above all forms of superstition. It is that kind of presumed superiority, of the 'thinking person,' that Montaigne attacks here, while admitting that he too, for a long time, shared that perspective, the first to criticize 'superstition.' Ultimately, though, it struck Montaigne that to maintain that superior attitude was to limit what was possible to God—namely, any and everything--perhaps within the bounds needed by God to continue being God. Nature seemed a much more open field to the mature Montaigne, than it had to the youth, eager to share the values of his clique. Montaigne invites us to imagine possibility.

Examples.

Enlarging purview The man who has never seen the ocean assumes that the first river he comes on is itself the ocean. As our purview grows more complex, and the range of our experiences grows, the more we admit into the possible.

Novelty There is a provocation to us, in rare things or parts of nature with which we are not familiar. This provocation is the cause of our ongoing curiosity about our world, and of our growing openness to what can occur in that world. Our own limits, as we surmise from the title of this essay, are not sufficiently broad to entitle us to judge reality.

The seeming incredible. Montaigne distributes examples of events that seem miraculous or, in other cases, pushing the limits of belief, like events said to have been reported almost at the moment they occurred. A Roman Emperor loses a significant battle in the Alps, but the report of it is announced simultaneously in Rome. Churchmen of great repute—Montaigne puts it just this way, and includes such as Saint Augustine-- have reported many miraculous healings, curings of blindness, teaching of the lame to walk. Neither pagan nor Christian examples seem to raise special doubt in Montaigne, who has absorbed his own maxim, that we should not measure the possibilities of the world by our limited understanding.

The 'scourges of the soul.' 'Glory and curiosity are the scourges of the soul. The latter prompts us to thrust our noses into everything, the other forbids us to leave anything doubtful and undecided.' This brilliant analysis, of the restless human mind, foretells our difficulty in negotiating life as a path between infinite search—the quest that 'science' represents in cultural history—and resignation to the belief doctrines (Glory) that appear to wrap experience in certitude.

Conclusions.

Early modern, caught between mediaeval superstitions—which were by the sixteenth century being identified as such—and the first cumulative efforts of modern science—Montaigne keenly intuits the dangers of a hasty rejection of the past. He is, furthermore and as we know, a sharp analyst of the human mind, so sees clearly that a harsh rejection of the past will never succeed in formulating a keen scientific perspective.

Chapter 27. Of Friendship

Introductory

Montaigne sidles into the deep and subtle question of friendship, that male bonding—for his instances are men—that meant so much to classical cultures--Achilles and Patroklos, David and Jonathan. In such examples of friendship Renaissance Humanism found support for the idea of the splendor of mankind. We soon learn that Montaigne references throughout his dear friend Etienne de la Boétie, with whom he had enjoyed, over a period of four years, unparalleled friendship-identity, and who had coined the priceless expression 'voluntary servitude,' to describe the intimacy of the male-friendship bond. So intense is Montaigne's devotion to the memory of Boétie, that he establishes that bond as the prime example of friendship as a whole, far surpassing the friendship of man for woman, yet fiercely avoiding the abomination of 'Greek love,' homosexuality.

Examples.

Limits on friendship Friendship is not to be assumed among siblings or relatives. Plutarch, in conflict with his brother over testament details, says 'I make never the more of him for coming out of the same hole' as me. Similarly grumpy ancient commentators remark that while fathers, through their generative power, make sons, they also produce spit from their bodies. As for the love of women, Montaigne joins the (male) opinion of his time, in believing that love or friendship toward women is limited, for women are by nature fickle, unfocused, and unsteady; the marriage relation not qualifying as the basis for durable affection.

True friendship True friendship, for Montaigne, involves an identity between the two friend-selves, an identity so complete that what Mr. X does for Mr. Y, is precisely what X would do for himself. The friend's needs, behaviors, reactions all assume identity with the friend who has become his very identity. Of his relation with Boétie, Montaigne observes that there was no 'seam between the two of them,' and that 'we sought each other long before we met.' The identity of this friendship situation enables the situation of the ancient philosopher Dionysius, who, when he needed money, 'redemanded it of his friend,' who, as his other, shares totally with him. In the same vein Montaigne tells the tale of the man who, upon his death, bequeaths to his two closest friends, the obligation to care for his aged mother and his marriageable daughter. The friends are delighted with this expression of their friend's identity with their own intentions.

Conclusions.

Montaigne gives intense expression to his feelings for his friend, Etienne de la Boétie, with whom he shared four years of intense mutual pleasure and understanding. It seems Montaigne's final conclusion, after reflecting on the loss of his friend, is that in true friendship the benefit of the other far outweighs any benefit to oneself.

Essay 28 Nine and twenty sonnets of Etienne de la Boétie

This essay (or chapter) contained thirty nine sonnets written by Montaigne's friend, Etienne de La Boétie. The amorous material included here is of inferior quality, and customarily omitted from collections of Montaigne's essays.

Essay 29 Of Moderation

Introductory

Montaigne is a precise observer of human nature. He astutely anatomizes our inclination to excess, and finds it manifest both in what we do and what we fail to do. ('Both in what I have done and in what I have failed to do,' run the Abrahamic religions' 'confessionals,' in their effort to suggest the complexity of individual sinfulness.) In everyday language, Montaigne claims that 'the archer that overshoots misses as much as he that falls short.' Moderation is the point at which the precise target is identified. One need only plunge ahead to another French visionary, the nineteenth century poet Arthur Rimbaud, to find an instructive opposite to Montaigne, an argument for the 'dérégulation complet de tous les sens,' a 'disordering of all the senses,' as a pathway to the discovery of truth.

Examples

I love temperate natures If we review the essays of Montaigne, to the point we have reached, we will note that they tend to strive for moderation. Military commanders exercise control—neither using subterfuge on an enemy nor conceding justly won territory. Temperate men manage their sorrow justly, neither giving in immoderately to it, nor fighting against it with a protective shield. The education of the young man should prepare him to be both headstrong—in the right time and place—and obedient when it is appropriate. The temperate nature is flexible, but only in order to avoid the extremes, excesses. 'Be soberly wise,' says Montaigne.

The excess of love is not love Montaigne's moderation is clear in his view of marriage, which he sees not as a passionate binding, but solely as a means of providing for children. (Only one of his own six children survived infancy.) A man may learn erotic tricks of the trade, in growing up through his culture—the odd playgirl, the odd whore—but he is not to bring these tricks into the connubial bedroom. Marriage should be a 'discrete and conscientious pleasure,' in which no indulgences of passion are fitting. Moderation is the keynote of a good marriage.

'Our pleasures are not legitimate guides.' Montaigne recounts a number of tales—of Homeric gods and Persian monarchs, with a taste for debauch—in which the excess of lust is gross and counterproductive. We are aware that Montaigne himself is no prude—he speaks vigorously of choosing beauty when it comes to the bed—and he takes his pleasure in a cultural milieu where male dominance has everywhere its sway. But his whole body of writing is about reason and common sense, and with no trace of actual sensual concentration.

Conclusions.

Montaigne hews to the classical precepts of moderation, which advocate for great care in dealing with others. The Greeks enshrined this behavioral maxim in their discussions of *hamartia*, the action of missing the target, of a consequential error in judgment, which can lead to errors of excess—too much, too little—that impact badly on relationships, financial outcomes, or military undertakings.

Essay 30 Of Cannibals

Introductory

By the sixteenth century, Western Europe had in full force begun its discovery of the wider world of the Americas, both North and South, and was paying intense economic interest to the mines and raw materials of these areas, as well as 'cultural and philosophical' interest to the peoples found there. As an early anthropologist, deeply interested in the way cultures are formed, and create their values, Montaigne grasped at the opportunity, taken by European intellectuals from the Renaissance on, to anatomize their own culture by placing it side by side with a real or fictive foreign culture. We will see that this is what Montaigne does, with the alleged 'plain story' passed on to him by a seafaring man of his acquaintance, who had wide acquaintance with a certain fascinating people little known outside their island land.

Examples

Ancient Lore Montaigne sets the stage, for his seminal encounter with the mariner—one might think of Coleridge's introducing of the 'ancient mariner' into his own tale of the distant south seas. He discourses about Plato's Atlantis, and of more recent island domains rising from the sea, laden with meaning for a west just beginning to think about its own culture critically. He speaks of cataclysmic natural events which reshape lands and oceans, as well as the minds of men.

The New Land The narrating mariner tells Montaigne that in the world he has visited the general view is that the rest of settled reality—whatever that could be—is barbarous. (Montaigne of course begins here with his self-mockery, of a France which is parochial and meaninglessly 'superior.') The new world, in this tale, is close to natural rhythms, healthy, happy, well adjusted. The environment is lush and beautiful, abounds in rich fruits unknown in Europe. The narration treats us to abundant details of the fine environment, down to the wonder of complexly, and elegantly woven birds' nests and spider webs, themselves testimonies to the Inherent brilliance of uncontaminated nature. (Which, as Montaigne takes care to stress, far exceeds art in skill of workmanship.)

Life in the New Land Life in the new land shares beatific traits with the land of the Lotos Eaters in the Odyssey, or with Samuel Butler's Erewhon. People live collectively, in long houses accommodating several hundred people each, sleep in hammocks—men and women separately—eat one meal a day, a large one at daybreak—and throughout the day dance and drink the universal beverage of the people, a root based claret- like beverage to which Montaigne nods approvingly, having been invited to share with his mariner narrator. Lest the New Land scene appear self-indulgent, there is a steady procession of supervisory priests, circulating in and around the citizen dancers, guardians of decorum and productive behavior.

The warlike in the New Land The men of the new land are as warlike as they need to be, to protect their vulnerable culture. They go to war naked except for their fierce lances, take enemy heads as trophies—which they attach to their door lintels—eat the enemy dead—to take on their power—and make a veritable communion meal out of their enemies. (Montaigne contrasts this open anthropophagy with the duplicity darkening his own society of lying, treachery, betrayal, tyranny, and disloyalty, while taking special care to reflect on the relation between the new land's taste for body, and the symbology of communion in the Catholic Church.)

Discrepancies Montaigne winds down with certain observations by recent visitors to France from the new land. The wife husband relation surprised their French hosts. In the New Land, men have several wives, who encourage their mates to take on as many new conquests as possible—a sign of prowess which redounds well on the wife. Montaigne's final arch comment—'the men wear no breeches'—seems to belong to this fascinating new-world praise of the natural.

Conclusions

Montaigne takes the opportunity, as it presents itself, to criticize the inequality of wealth in his own culture—one fact especially noted by visitors to France from the New Land—French women's jealousy, cultural shibboleths like 'holy communion' in Europe, even perhaps the preoccupation with illness, which contrasts with the natural healthiness of those whom the French would be happy to call 'barbarians.'

Essay 31 That a man is soberly to judge of the divine ordinances

Introductory

Montaigne strikes out, here, against those believers who think that 'god is on their side,' and that their worldly successes—say in battles—are to be taken at face value, as signs of god's approval. For Montaigne it is foolish for us to think that we can interpret god's will into its details, and even more foolish, to assume that our strongest reason to belief is that god does good things for us. Once again, in this argument, Montaigne makes simple but subtle points, clearly and effectively. He reminds us of the true foundations of faith, that it is audacious to assume god has his eye on our little corner.

Examples.

Cautionary thinking 'Nothing is so firmly believed but what we least know,' says Montaigne, striking out both against our dangerous ignorance and against the bitter partisan religious forces, which are tearing France apart with 'religious wars' at just the timer this essay is written. God's will is a particularly easy tool for the ignorant, in the construction of religious arguments. Though the lives of the ignorant may be tossed and turned by turbulent developments, they often persist in seeing within themselves a manifest set of 'divine ordinances.' They think, foolishly, that the deity is speaking directly to them.

Unfolding of divine ordinances One should take what comes from the wisdom of the gods. In the Indies all fortune, good or bad, is ascribed to the gods. No questions asked. The Christian should likewise accept what comes. Montaigne rejects any inclination to affirm and support 'our' Christian religion by the prosperity of our enterprises. To do so is to offer ourselves up to the criticism that we have no better proof than success to justify our belief, whereas—Montaigne implies—we have convincing proof of the basic truths of the Christian religion. As we see in the Book of Job, our suffering can also be part of our creator's interest in us.

Conclusion

Montaigne has urged us to judge 'soberly' of divine ordinances. He lived in a period of ferocious religious wars, in which Protestants and Catholics, in France, were bitterly opposed—for a parallel one might think of the hostilities which for so long separated Northern and Southern Ireland. To tie religion to prosperity seemed at the time to be an easy way to brag that god was on your side, but the thought strategy was feeble, for by this way of thinking, as soon as you lose a battle you have to concede that god is no longer your leading force.

Essay 32. That we are to avoid pleasures, even at the expense of life

Introductory

Montaigne concurs with the ancient belief, as well as with common sense, that it is better to die than to live badly, mired perhaps in vice, the worst, or in steep decline, to such a point that the body is primarily a source of pain. In the brief course of Montaigne's discussion, we catch glimpses of him as the Christian of the late Middle Ages, and as the early modern man of temperate reason.

Examples

Flee vice Montaigne opens this example by citing the ancient Roman Stoic, Seneca, who is part of the classical wisdom-trove that our author relies on. Seneca addresses a distinguished noble friend, who is

aging and caught up in the trammels of a life vitiated by immorality. It is Seneca's opinion that the man should fade away into death, rather than hold on to life. We remember earlier essays of Montaigne in which he considered the end of life, and the high importance the writer put on the final condition in which we leave life. It is partly a question of the legacy we leave, and partly one of presenting ourselves befittingly in the next world. Montaigne concurs with Seneca, on the importance of taking a timely step out of vice into a death without spot.

Embrace death Montaigne expatiates on the case of Hilary, the eminent Bishop of Poitiers and one of the greatest 'doctors of the church,' according to Augustine. Montaigne is fascinated by the bishop's complex input into the question of death and virtue. Hilary's daughter is a beautiful, charming, and virtuous candidate for marriage, who catches the attention of a prominent nobleman, who seeks her hand in marriage—all this reported to Hilary by his loving wife. The prospect of this elite upscale marriage, into a sensually rich world, bound up with matters of politics and power, is revolting to Hilary, who decides it would be far better for his daughter to die, than to take this potentially degenerate marital step. Hilary urges his wife to intervene with their daughter, but to no avail. The Bishop devotes himself to praying for his daughter's death, and rejoices when at last she dies, and is in heaven. In the end his wife shares his opinion, and herself dies—in joy, as is Hilary, now that she is freed from the filth of the world.

Conclusions

Early modern does not mean modern, and Montaigne regularly startles us 'truly moderns' with the firmness to which he is committed to the 'next world' of the Christian Middle Ages. In the two examples above, Montaigne's mindset seems cautionary. He is eager for the soul to avoid desecration by the world, though he is also well adjusted to the human condition, and knows how to appreciate the given world. In his essay on Cannibals he knows how to portray an earthly paradise, that of a humanity not yet touched by the viciousness of the New Land.

Essay 33 That fortune is often-times observed to act by the rule of reason

Introductory

Just as Montaigne hovers between Christian assuredness, of our survival after death, and a darker skepticism, on that final uncertainty, so he hovers between a mediaeval world-set in which chance is taken to represent mystery and luck, and one in which chance speaks with a reasonable voice of its own, and 'makes sense.'

In the following instances, the coincidence that constitutes chance is for the most part beneficial, part of an often surprising way events have, of working themselves out. Montaigne leaves us to wonder, in the end, whether some of his instances are 'tongue in cheek,' for the overall cast of his mind is far from 'superstitious,' and yet, viewed as a whole, Montaigne seems to be moving toward a potent idea of order.

Examples

Malign coincidence Montaigne opens with his only truly malign instance of chance. A well-known duke is invited to dine with his son, his enemy, and the Pope. Presuming that his arch enemy will be the first to arrive, the duke provides the butler with a special bottle of (poisoned) wine, which can be opened and served to the Duke's enemy. Unfortunately the Pope is the first to arrive, asks for a glass of wine, and of course has no idea that the special brand has been set aside for the presumed first arrival, the duke's foe. The pope drinks the poisoned portion, and dies in slow agony.

Complex coincidence A certain gentleman wins the hand in marriage of a lovely lady, whom he had sought, in keen rivalry with a second nobleman. Rejoicing at his success, the first gentleman decides to celebrate what will be his marriage night, by heading out on a merry joust. He falls into lance thrusting with a second knight, who turns out to be his love-rival; and being defeated in the contest, on his marriage night itself, he is taken to prison, where he remains incarcerated for two years, while his wife to be pleads

for his release. He is ultimately released. The coincidence? Choosing precisely his deadly rival to joust with triggers a painful reversal of fortune, only later re-reversed.

Random coincidence The Eastern Roman Empire falls to Constantine and his bride Helena. The Fall of the Eastern Roman Empire—to the Ottoman Turks—occurs under the reign of the Emperor Constantine and his wife Helena. The rule of reason, in these first two instances, comes down to very different faces of chance: savage miscalculation, word-play: so broad, we see already, are the homophonies and contrarieties that can be generated by fate.

Benign coincidence The ancient Greek painter, Protagoras, was painting a picture of a dog, when he came to some final touches that were evading him. He was trying to depict the slavering muzzle of the animal, but with each stroke he further unbalanced his depiction. Finally, exasperated, he picked up a sponge and threw it at the canvas. The moist sponge so re shadowed and smudged the image that it assumed a perfect likeness of the painting as Protagoras originally conceived it.

Benign coincidence. The Emperor Clovis besieges a city until its walls fall down. It so happens, though, that a mine has been sprung beneath the city, and in exploding shocks the fallen walls into the air from where they fall once more, perfectly in place as they had been before.

Benign coincidence A certain illustrious Jason of antiquity suffered from a tumor in the chest. In great pain from the festering growth, he decides to throw himself into battle, as a final act. In the heat of man on man conflict his opponent's lance pierces his chest, and dissipates the malign growth, freeing Jason from pain and illness.

Conclusions

Montaigne observes the world around him, and sees homologies, coincidences, creative accidents which all suggest some meaning-convergence in the given world. In the title of the essay Montaigne calls this convergence the 'rule of reason,' and though some of the examples of this rule seem implausible, even imaginative, the thinking behind the collection is that of a rationalist on his way to the French Enlightenment. Montaigne is spying on order and reason, which to eighteenth century thinkers like Diderot might cumulatively emerge as evidences of order.

Essay 34 Of one defect in our government

Introductory

Montaigne, born into wealth and raised, in childhood, both for three years in a peasant's family, and otherwise in a noble castle, among servants who addressed him in Latin, was surrounded by a large library of classical volumes, and by an abundance of youthful peers—at least until he went off to school in Bordeaux, at the age of six. While the theme of his work is the equality of all people, and his own bent was toward simple life and simple values, he can have had little contact with the pulse of the small market villages which were the lifeblood of communal existence. Bookish, brilliant, destined for high political interactions, and sophisticated tourist travel in mid life, he nonetheless remained attached to earlier perceptions derived from the regional thinking of his father, whom he admired—for though the man was not lettered, he was practical and managed a large and multiform estate. We can understand Montaigne better by understanding a couple of details about his father, that struck the young man.

Examples

A social idea Montaigne is attracted to an idea dear to his father. There should be, in the center of every town, a chapman (trader, journeyman,) who would be stationed in a single place, ready to answer questions, give advice, consult and refer. (The visitor's center, in the Iowa Town where I live, is stationed centrally, right under the town's water tower, and is staffed on most days by a volunteer who can provide

a town tour, advice on neighboring communities, or of course pointers to where this or that can be purchased. By this moment, Google is doubtless intruding on the would be role of the chapman.)

A use for the chapman Montaigne's ever forward-thinking mind leads him to think of the network of economic implications that might follow if, say, one went into the village to ask the chapman to buy you pearls. The chapman himself might head for Paris, to negotiate, which would bring into existence an economic nexus, established by the purchaser and chapman, and various merchants, money lenders, pearl traders, and aesthetic appraisers might eventually be caught up in the after shock of the citizen's initial pearl request to the chapman. Montaigne the early modern economist is already far into the analysis of social economy.

A benign societal perspective. A rich notion angles off from these comments on the chapman. The remarks lead Montaigne to reflect on large-world people of quality—he references two distinguished scholars who have fallen into urgent poverty—and who would be candidates for a kind of generosity his father, a friend of learning and humanity, would happily have hosted on his estate, ornaments of learning and a joy for conversation. Dad's goal: 'to service rare and remarkable persons of any kind.'

A practical device. Montaigne noted, about his admirable father, that the man carried two notebooks: one for accounts, one for recording daily events—marriages, deaths, visits, absences, sales, events. He kept business separate from daily life.

Conclusions

This essay is an eloge to Dad. Montaigne greatly admires his father, and seemingly owes him his own sense of the unity of mankind, and of the basic importance of simple and useful human behavior.

Essay 35 Of the Custom of wearing clothes

Introductory Montaigne's day was full of travelers' reports from distant and newly discovered parts of the world, like the Americas, India, or North Africa. It was observed by all westerners, both from human specimens and from prints and drawings, that many of the inhabitants of these regions wore few or no clothes, and if not to that extreme wore no shoes or head covering. Montaigne characteristically turned back to consider his own culture, and to consider why they were so addicted to clothing. We are carried back to Montaigne's earlier essay on customs, in which he seemed up for a radical relativism, in which he attributed a wide variety of habits to the natural variation among peoples. There follow here a few examples of Montaigne's response to the reports of unfamiliar social practices.

Examples.

Clothes are not a god-sent necessity. Montaigne wants it clear that many people, in other cultures than his, with much less clothing or none, tolerate harsher weather than that of France. The French, Montaigne says, have unnaturally imposed clothes on themselves. 'Our petticoats and breeches are to a large degree unneeded.' Had God wanted us covered, Montaigne continues, he would have given us thicker finger tips and shoe soles.

Naked is natural Turks go naked for devotion, Montaigne learns. He cites the response of a naked Turkish worshipper, when asked why he refuses to wear clothes: 'You go with your face bare. I am all face.'

Toughness Ancient writers confirm that the Persians, who fought the Egyptians with their heads elaborately swathed, died in battle from oversensitive skulls, while the Egyptian soldiers presented tough and resistant naked scalps to the elements, and toughed it through effectively.

Military strength Julius Caesar was used to lead his men on military campaigns, in all weathers, with his bare skull gleaming for all his men to follow.

A good practice Plato urges men to go barefoot and bareheaded in all weather. Montaigne doubles down, in so many of the present examples, on the unnecessity of the elaborate clothing his fellow citizens are fond of. The subtext, of all these instances, is scorn for the parochial habits of Montaigne's elite social formation. (When he speaks of laborers working for him he notes that they wear the same clothes in all weather, and are inured to inclement weather.)

The author's confession Montaigne admits to needing his own personal warmth. He cannot endure being 'unbuttoned or untied,' or exposed to the cold.

***Conclusions*.**

Montaigne admits to being fond of his own national comforts, while opening his mind and eyes to much different clothing and covering practices in several other cultures. This is his style: ensconced in his own world, but open to the largeness of the creation and to the multiplicity of the ways of nature.

Essay 36 *Of Cato the Younger*

Introductory

Though we know Montaigne for his hatred of lies, his scorn of youthful impertinence, his insistence on masculine uprightness (in the Long Letter on the Education of Children), and though we know that he is suspicious of overblown imagination, we may be surprised by the full-fledged and unshaded assault, of the present essay, against the moral collapse of his own time. He carefully avoids couching this critique in the language of moral superiority—he tells us outright that he views himself as no measurement standard for appropriate behavior, and that he frankly criticizes only to aid others in their effort to prove their superiority to him. Wherever he can find value, whether or not the bearer of it shares his perspective, Montaigne is delighted.'I apprehend a thousand ways of living.' There follow instances of Montaigne's views on the issue of higher virtue in society.

Examples

Self-appraisal Montaigne walks a fine line, in this essay, between contempt for the folly of his age —the people around him are stupid and without standards—and exhortation to his fellow citizens to strive for ever higher plateaux of moral achievement. Montaigne puts himself down, but particularly elevates the memory of Cato the Younger, who expressed the highest ideals of the Roman Republic, and its opposition to Julius Caesar and his powerful pull toward autocracy. (Though Montaigne has much of value and praise to say of Caesar, too.)

Self-abasement. Montaigne describes himself as 'crawling upon the slime of the earth,' but reminds his reader that he looks up to heaven, scoping out the supreme values, and meditating on the essential character of virtue, that is intention or will directed to actions which are their own reward, and for which there is no tangible payback. This is where the nobility of Cato the Younger enters, a lifetime opponent of Julius Caesar, an opponent who refused to cooperate with the partisan politics which was dragging Republican Rome into imperial autocracy. Cato remained aloof from the political elite, though he was born into its networks, and he left behind a model for such as Montaigne. Cato's suicide was his final statement of defiance, a pure act of protest that kept him in the annals of Roman virtue straight through the Empire, and into the model mills of mediaeval Christianity.

Greek virtue The Spartans were widely admired for the purity of the virtue in which they raised their children. They were not easily satisfied with even the finest youthful discipline. The example is given of a certain extremely virtuous man named Aristodemus, who was deeply valued in his defence of his homeland against the Athenians. Until the last moment, the Spartan assembly had decided upon awarding Aristodemus a large national prize for virtue. Just at that moment, however, a Spartan legislator objected, reminding his fellow citizens that Aristodemus had in his past been stained by one moment of poor judgment in a military encounter, therefore that the virtue of his present heroism was not blameless, as he had an interest in cleaning up his record. His heroism could not be viewed as an *acte pur.*

Conclusions

Montaigne will at times appear as a hedonist, up for enjoying good food—on his midlife journey to Italy he records his appetites, and fussiness about removal from his home diet—no crayfish—while his pleasure in the day, in beauty, in sex—'I am not continent,' 'beauty first in bed' is oft announced—but in the end he is careful about behavior, a great appreciator of others, and a modest brilliant man who willingly admits to admiring people of strength and virtue, whether monks or generals, providing they remain pure devotees of their ideals.

Essay 37 That we laugh and cry for the same thing

Introductory

From his first essay, you will recall, Montaigne is sensitive to the mood changes of the human being; one thinks of the invading general, who is about to wipe out the enemy city, but is so impressed by the bravado of three 'enemy' officers walking defiantly toward him, that he decides to 'save the city.' In his essay Of Sorrow, similarly, Montaigne speaks of a military man surveying the enemy dead: he observes two of his grown children lying there dead, then passes on, but is assaulted by great sorrow, not much later, by the sight of an anonymous corpse, whose pathos brings forth deep and heartfelt sorrow. The source of this unpredictability of human response, Montaigne believes, in line with the medical thinking of his time, derives from the complex congeries of humors in the human body. What examples does Montaigne favor, to illustrate this argument for unpredictability?

Examples.

Mood unpredictability Montaigne opens with three examples of military brass, who find themselves saddened (confused, perplexed) by their sorrow over the loss of their principle enemy on the battleground. (Antigonus was angry with his son for showing him the head of the enemy commander; Rene, Duke of Lorrain, mourned the death of his opposite general, and went to his funeral; the commanding general at the Battle of d'Avray was very moved to see the dead body of the enemy commander.

Mood concealment 'The heir's tears behind the mask are smiles.' In his first example Montaigne stresses the unpredictability of mood, while in the present instance, he insists on the difficulty of reading another's mood, which is often intended as a disguise.

Unity of laughing and crying Children often laugh and cry at the same thing; departure from loved ones, to a no matter how greatly longed for journey, inevitably produces a mixture of sadness and joy, Schadenfreude.

Attitude change Many times we lament a person who has died, but for whom we would otherwise have had no special feeling.

Mood complexity I may curse my servant at one moment, but at the next forgive and even praise him. I was never defined as 'one who can't stand his servant.' Long term appreciation of the man simply blended with a patch of anger.

Seeming changeability Xerxes was criticized for a deep shift in countenance. The fact was, though, that he was first of all meditating proudly on the vast fleet he was about to lead against the Athenians, but while he was meditating his mind digressed onto the thought of the number of brave souls who would perish in the engagement, and his face clouded over.

Conclusions.

Montaigne opens a rich theme, when he aligns laughter and crying around the same cause. He shares some of the Shakespearean attitude, that all of life is a stage, and all the players are actors. Human personality is volatile, pain and pleasure—as we learn from recent psycho--historical research, or from the work of the Marquis de Sade—are two sides of the same coin.

Essay 38. Of Solitude

Introductory

Montaigne continues here to take his inspiration from the ancient Roman Stoics, who, like their contemporary Epicureans, were studious observers of human behavior, and shared ,the conviction that a calm, steady, and disciplined private life was the best path through human existence, especially as it approached its later years. In the present essay Montaigne offers abundant advice for such a personal aging, and in doing so draws both on his own experience and on his wisdom acquired from the ancients, of whom his knowledge, especially of Roman literature and culture, is astonishing and invariably pertinent.

Examples

The end is all one, to live at more leisure and at one's ease.' One hears again the unmistakably patrician voice, of a man who was able to retire into his study in midlife, and who was used, throughout his life, to studying and conversing with upscale peers. Nonetheless, Montaigne comes over as speaking for humanity as a whole, for practices which commend themselves to rich and poor, educated and simple, alike. Looking unsentimentally into the aging of the human condition, he urges us all to choose pursuits and pleasures suitable to an endgame finally freed from the exposure and exhaustion of the public sphere.

The quest for peace Whether we are King or modest householder, peace will be hard to find or sustain, because you always have your own turbulent self to contend with. No hair shirt or sequence of prayers can fully guard you against the troubles the self brings with it. Socrates, when told that a friend had had a very disagreeable trip, remarked 'I very well believe it, for he took himself along with him.'

Solitude as 'backshop' Each of us should carry, inside him, a backshop in which he can store provisions, that he can draw on when the pressure of the public world gets too heavy. It is important to stay disentangled from the pressures and complexities of people and things, when puttering around in one's inner space. Montaigne speaks firmly about the avoidance of too much entanglement with wife, children, or other intimates; sources of distraction against which he has warned fleetingly throughout his essays, in which he has consistently spoken of marriage as a valuable shelter for children, but not as romantic nest. In fact, as will surprise no student of upper echelon Renaissance culture, Montaigne's social zone included his male offspring—actually he had none—his male peers and women of interest in the culture at large.

'Ambition is the most contrary to solitude.' In your solitude be content, at ease, and cheerful, and make no effort to compete with rivals. The beggar at your door, Montaigne characteristically remarks, is

likely to be the happiest person you meet, and you should emulate him by holding on to the small but real pleasures life holds out for the aged.

Conclusions

Montaigne's essays are ripe with the sense of intelligent, disciplined joy in life. Being 'at your ease,' whether young or old, is for him a prime virtue; a virtue nourished, of course, in an elite and privileged milieu, but promoted, by Montaigne, with a broad sense of the human situation, and of (what he takes to be) the wisest way to deal with it.

Essay 39 A consideration upon Cicero

Introductory

Montaigne opens this marvelous essay, upon the life of writing, with a consideration of two great Roman letter writers, Cicero and Pliny, who were even more gifted when it came to affairs of state. Both of them were distinguished Roman consuls under the Empire, and were guaranteed a 'place in history,' for which they were equally and intensely ambitious. Each of them furthermore, was jealous to immortalize his thoughts and feelings in personal letters through which they recounted their travels and encounters throughout a hyper active public life. This observation, in which Montaigne notes that letters were not necessary, to prop up the lasting fame of these two men, also leads Montaigne into the dominant query of the essay, whether one should be known for one unique skill—say that of ruling a nation, or being a great orator—or for one single gift. We will see, from the examples, that Montaigne quite gladly identifies his own gift as essay writer, having noted that he particularly enjoys the writing of letters, but can develop himself more fully in the essay. (Might it have been the blog today?) We turn to a few examples of the way Montaigne develops his thought, in the present essay on the essay.

Examples

Ambition Cicero and Pliny were both great statesmen, but their ambition drove them, and they wrote copious letters to their friends, in order to assure a legacy of awareness of their own great deeds. In their cases, for they wrote excellent epistles, the enrichment of the men's deeds was valuable. But in most instances, as Montaigne sees it, a person of gifts or power should stick to the special power granted him, a king to being king, a wise man to being instructive, a whore to preserving the marital bedroom. A consul is a consul, a letter writer a letter writer.

Being the one skill of high ability you are Philip, son of the great ruler Alexander, said to his father, after hearing him sing, 'art thou not ashamed to sing so well,' that is, to be other than Alexander?

What people think of Montaigne's essays. Readers of his essays, Montaigne thinks, often fail to penetrate their substance, or for that matter the 'delicate sound they make.' Montaigne would like to be honored not only as an essayist, but as an essayist of fine tones. And not only that. He wants his readers to know him as bluff, non-ceremonial, to the point. He is paring down the distinctions among the ways his readers can be left free to mistake his unique tone.

Regrets Montaigne regrets, briefly, that he has not written his essays as letters. He then reflects, however, that he could have written this work as letters only if he had had a genuine addressee in mind, a 'settled intercourse,' and a real situation. He cannot stand falsification, 'traffic with the wind.'

Conclusions.

Montaigne is sensitive to the unique genre of the essay, the author of which must be honest to himself, must speak directly from his private life, While great letter writers, like Cicero and Pliny, may also pride themselves on wondrous careers, Montaigne appreciates the value of a writing genre, which frees its author from all temptations to speak to the grand.

Essay 40 That the relish for good and evil depends in great measure upon the opinion we have of them

Introductory

Montaigne opens with classic views of man's condition: man can control his sufferings, moderate his joys, and give cheer to the pains of being human. The power for this control is in the individual's hands, a lesson we have been taught by the great religions, which universally offer what they consider a path to peace and control over our lives. Despite his own entry, into a crowded and familiar field of traditional wisdoms on the matter of our condition, Montaigne manages to establish thoughtful perspectives of his own, which repeatedly take us back to the freshness of his genius. The following examples will provide some instances of the pathways he treads.

Examples

Cheer in face of death Montaigne's text proliferates with examples of cheer in the presence of pain or death. (His anecdotal example list proves the fastidious use he made, of his large library of contemporary accounts and street wisdoms.) In the kingdom of Narsangah wives gladly go to be buried with their deceased husbands—a cultural practice which supersedes anxiety. Examples of enthusiastic suicide, even large scale suicide—think Jamestown—abound, say in the case of groups wishing to escape mass slavery. Anxiety lies behind much anticipatory suffering: the Greek philosopher Pyrrho, standing on the deck of a sinking ship, surrounded by weeping passengers, points to a hog which is being transported in the hold: 'is he worried,' asks Pyrrho pungently, watching the stolid pork. In the face of death, it is our attitude that counts.

What about pain? Montaigne notes, again in great anecdotal detail, that pain can for many of us prove more fearsome than death. Pain, he continues, is the true test of our virtue, and can only be faced by recourse to the soul, the body's partner. While the body is uniform, solid and of a piece, the soul is multiform and flexible, and can adapt to threats to the person. The body is of course strong—we are reminded of the Spartan lad who hides a fox in his coat, so that his theft of the animal will not be discovered, but who lets the animal chew out his guts rather than reveal the theft—but it has no ingenuity. A man can read a book while he's under surgery, Montaigne says, but that's because the soul can protect us from the body's vulnerability. The soul can protect that vulnerability even under the pains people can voluntarily impose on themselves, in order to beautify their flesh or rearrange their teeth—matters of concern to the finer ladies of Montaigne's Paris. The soul can invite onto its body such hair-shirt or self-whipping exercises as many religious worshippers have turned to in search of their savior's path.

How about personal self-protection? Montaigne is fully aware of the fear and anxieties that riddle the mind of every mortal. He knows those anxieties from inside, but he also knows, as he shows in the above examples, ways to make life's hardest issues tolerable. In the latter part of this essay he sketches out practices that are his own, and that he thinks helpful. He avoids personal entanglements; has rather little use for children or for marriage when it goes beyond child raising; believes in strict payment of debts; views avarice as one of the chief pitfalls of the elderly; despises the marketplace, hating nothing more than 'driving a bargain'. Almost as his ultimate advice, he recommends trusting other people, which is the true test of our virtue.

Conclusions.

Despite deep references into the mystery of Christ's (and mankind's) suffering, Montaigne remains practical in his discussions of the human condition. He sketches out perspectives, onto death and pain, which can alleviate anxiety and fortify behavior. Like many best seller psychologists of our moment, he generates purviews onto anxiety and dread, which target our weakness, and show us paths to living well. But Montaigne surpasses contemporary psychology by his fascination with what he calls the soul, which can be understood only as a category of faith.

Essay 41. Not to communicate (partake in, share) a man's honour

Introductory

Montaigne opens by reminding us how precious our honor is to us. (He lived at a time when honor, especially among the elite, was a powerful personal treasure, not to be shared or lost. In the industrialized West, today, we may have diluted the honor issue with a portion of old Green Odyssean wiliness, which recognizes the value of success above all.) Montaigne goes on to remark, however, that though nothing is more precious to a man than his honor, nothing is more foolish than the pursuit of glory and honor. Honor and glory are of very little actual value—says Montaigne who is, of course, a man of principle—and yield, in nobility, to the act of furthering another man's glory. A new virtue is thus created by this discussion, the virtue of consciously not partaking in another man's honor, not sharing his honor, so that he will have full credit for it. Not to share, in this case, provides us with the rare opportunity for respite from the demand for private, personal glory. Let's look at a few examples, of this finely facetted form of virtue.

Examples

Faking Catulus, a spirited leader, finds in the midst of battle that his men have turned tail and are fleeing. Reluctant to expose them to the inevitable obloquy, he fakes a counter fear, and himself flees along with his men, in order to save them from the charge of cowardice.

Self-abnegation In 1537 Charles V prepared for battle in Provence. His chief counsellor, although in fact in agreement with Charles ' battle plan, was anxious to direct all the strategy glory to his imperial leader, and therefore, consciously, opposed Charles' plan in the final battle preparations. The counsellor wanted to enhance his boss's individually conceived plan, and not to horn in on the glory that was sure to accompany it.

Refusal King Edward of England refused to support his son in battle; afte rfirst informing himself that his son was going to prevail, Edward felt safe in assuring that he himself would consume no part of his son's glory.

Provocative The mother of the Spartan commander, Brasidas, was devasted by the news of her son's death, but in order to provoke a good round of admiration from the Spartan crowd, she went before them and in announcing her son's death remarked that many Spartans were more doughty fighters than her son. In this fashion she provoked an outpouring of grief and admiration for her son.

Conclusions.

Montaigne has a fine sense of inmost turns of the human mind, and has invariably a subtly pertinent set of examples to back up his point. Worth noting: the fine differences among the four examples given above, each of which has differently illustrated the concept of promoting another's honor.

Essay 42 Of the inequality amongst us

Introductory

In imagination Montaigne strips down mankind to its bare essentials, and asks of what value success, power, and leadership are to this hairless animal. He concludes, on the basis of various examples, that to rule over others is a source of strain, unhappiness, confusion, and illness. The ruler has no friends, the ruler has no solitude, the ruler has no access to honest opinions. Only men who are simple and true of soul lead happy lives, and it makes no difference whether they are poor or rich, powerful or weak. Let's look at some illustrations of Montaigne's thinking.

Examples

Sole power The King of Thrace had sole power over his people, and in fact had his own private gods, which enabled him to wield control. But he was powerless to escape any of the ills and ailments of all men.

Real Blood Bleeding from a wound, Alexander—reputedly the son of an immortal—remarked to his courtiers that the blood flowing from the wound in his thigh was as real and mortal as it gets.

Abundance 'There is nothing so distasteful and clogging as abundance.' Montaigne makes a wide ranging point here, implying subtle downsides of the life of power: that one is never alone, can never trust others, and cannot be relieved of pains: therefore he is always bumping up against impediments and has a clogged life, without freedom.

The long way around the barn King Pyrrhus explains, to his philosopher-counsellor, some of the upcoming battles he intends to undertake, to Italy, Sicily, Egypt, North Africa and eventually back to Greece, where he can settle down. His counsellor asks him, wrily, why he cannot just settle down where he is and relax? We hear Montaigne in the counsellor.

Conclusions.

We occupy different statuses in life, but our fundamental destinies—birth, copulation, death—are in common. Wealth cannot exempt us from the stones, or cancer; power cannot win us friendship or trust. What is the best response to this situation? Voltaire, at the end of *Candide*, after empathizing with the innumerable pitfalls that assail his literary figure, settles for the answer that one should just cool it; 'il faut cultiver son jardin,' 'we must attend to our gardens.'

Essay 43 Of Sumptuary Laws

Introductory.

Sumptuary laws, pronouncedly enacted during the European Middle Ages (12th-14th centuries) were laws intended to minimize luxury spending within courtly society. It is Montaigne's opinion that, by limiting the taste for such fine items as meat, turbot, and highly decorative robes, a government does nothing but stimulate the taste for such items. If only princes can eat turbot and wear lace, then everybody will want these items. However, because the populus in general is without taste, they will fail in their efforts to upbeat and updress, and will end up, as is in fact the case, wearing comical dirty garments, and plain cloth. In other words, Montaigne sees little value in sumptuary laws, which accomplish the opposite of their intent. Some examples follow.

Examples

Social change The nouveaux riches acquired a taste for fine food and clothing, and especially after the death of Henri II, when for a while plain clothes were required, that taste escalated into a rash of unbecoming social developments. Able again to appear in their finery, such now wealthy people as doctors and surgeons turned to the elegant dressing and fine dining they valued. The taste of the vulgar, however, was whetted in a direction which proved deleterious to society. Long effeminate locks, elegantly woven robes from Miletus, great bellied doublets; all these follies of poor judgment were opened onto the public. Elaborate and irrelevant gestures of greeting were exchanged by half-educated people 'in the know.' Since all these developments took place essentially around the court, and the court set the style for the nation, the nation-state as a whole lost its cultural poise and judgement.

Norms Zeleucus, King of the Locrians, was much concerned to bring discipline and uniformity to his people. Each man was permitted only one gold ring. No effeminate clothing was permitted. Norms of decent dress and thus behavior were strictly enforced. This was a gesture toward finer taste, but unfortunately the result of coercion.

Traditions Montaigne himself is no friend of the innovative in social behavior, including dress and diet. Proper dress and proper respect are the essentials of his code of behavior. Don't stand bare headed before the nobility. Don't stand before them without your sword on the ready. Proper behavior is the proper goal of the sumptuary perspective, but for Montaigne the source of all values lies deep and hidden in the social fabric .It cannot be legislated. He commends the thought of Plato, in the Laws: 'change nothing unless it's evil,' may no one know when a law was first instituted, but simply live it as part of his social existence. From this highly traditional perspective, Montaigne views with some contempt the efforts of society to manipulate the social customs of his age.

Conclusions.

In the large picture Montaigne is no friend of social engineering. He has little good to say for the limiting of people's foods or dress, although he finds many social behaviors—elaborate greetings, long locks, effeminate cloaks—objectionable. By and large Montaigne is true to the traditions of the nobility—of which he is one, and of the upbringing of one of which he had written extensively in his Essay on The Education of Children. He lives in and accepts a highly traditional society, for which change is not welcome—in and of itself.

Essay 44 Of Sleep

Introductory

Montaigne opens with the topic of the dignified and calm soul, one of his ideals in the seasoned male. The ethos of dignity and the honor that go with it seem to Montaigne particularly tested in the case of sleep, a restorative condition that makes up a good third of our lifespan. During sleep we seem vulnerable to outside pressures, anxieties, noises, and hopes which the man of calm soul and good conscience can often sail effectively through. What examples does Montaigne collect, to illustrate his anthology of sleep behaviors?

Examples.

Alexander Before one of his greatest battles Alexander slept like a log. His plans were fully formed, and his conscience cleared. Montaigne particularly admires the calm of the justifiably great.

Emperor Otho The Emperor Otho decided to commit suicide during the night. Prior to the hour he had set for his demise, he had been waked by a messenger, issued orders in the usual manner, then fallen back into a deep sleep, from which he awakened near dawn, at his self-appointed time, and calmly killed himself.

Cato and Augustus The imperturbable Cato found himself blindsided by an arch traitor, Metellus, with whom he had a face to face confrontation, in which deadly words were exchanged. Cato then went directly to bed, slept like a log, and in the morning had to be manually roused by his servant. In a similar vein, the Emperor Augustus, having properly planned a crucial naval strategy for the following morning, fell fast asleep, and had to be waked the next morning, after the battle was over, to receive the news of his victory.

Sleep deprivation At Rome, men have been killed while being deprived of sleep. Sleep that is, is essential to life.

Sleep excess With what attitude we are not certain, Montaigne recounts two ancient tales about sleep. He cites Herodotus—who was such a fabulous tale teller—who refers to a country where the men ‘sleep by 500 year increments.’ And he reminds us that the sage Epaminondas was known to have slept seven hundred and fifty years.

Conclusions.

Amidst the anecdotes, Montaigne clearly targets a single point. A great man, of good conscience, and of course the necessary sang froid, can fall deeply and undisturbedly asleep, no matter what is at stake around him, and may need to be waked in the morning. This is the kind of man we might expect to be admired by the Montaigne who has earlier given us such a manly roadmap for the education of a young scion.

Essay 45 Of the Battle of Dreux

Introductory

The Battle Montaigne discusses, here, proved to be of decisive importance for the development of the Wars of Religion which were starting to spread in mid sixteenth century France. The two other battles discussed in this essay, are only partially germane to that first battle, of Dreux, which was fought on Dec. 19, and turned out to be a powerful Catholic victory. Certain aspects of the battle of Dreux, as Montaigne describes it, overlap with the two battle accounts which follow, both of them drawn from antiquity, and only peripherally related to the account of the battle of Dreux. The overlapping points in all three of the battles will be of interest to military historians, for all three accounts involved the importance of clearly defined military strategy, and the dangers either of slowing your command pace, in mid conflict, or modifying your ultimate point of assault in the middle of the battle.

Examples.

Halting The first example is immediately contemporary to Montaigne, and proved to be of central importance for the Wars of Religion. The complaint under discussion, here, is that the duc de Guise, who was commanding the Catholic forces in the battle, halted in mid battle, to reconsider his point of attack, and in so doing let down on the concerted effort he was making with his Chief Constable, to close a fatal pincers lock on the enemy. By this error in timing and judgment, the Duc left many of his own contingents helpful victims of the foe, and although by the completion of the battle he had decimated the rear guard of the enemy army, he was considered guilty of a most expensive failure in consistency. His halting was seen as an abuse of his commanding Constable, who was beaten and imprisoned in the conflict.

Philemon The Greek general, Philemon, like the Duke de Guise, succeeded at the end of a crucial struggle, to decimate his enemy from the rear. In order to achieve this, he too, like The Duke de Guise, had had to pass through the hell of seeing his own men hacked to death as he worked out his masterplan strategy.

Agesilaus and the Boeotians In the conflict referenced here Agesilaus too played a waiting game, letting his opponents rush by, while he held his fire and scrutinized the situation. In the end, although facing superior odds, he decided upon sending his men into a valorous, rather than just a dutiful, assault, and he carried the day.

Conclusions.

It is probable that Montaigne, immersed in the Wars of Religion, failed (in the present writing) to bind together the three military strategies conjoined in the present essay. His attention appears to be on the Battle of Dreux itself, and even on that he appears rather to outline a battle plan, than to enter the moral details of decision making that make that battle distinctive. (His attitude toward the Duc de Guise is less clearly his own, than a report on how the people in general evaluated the battle.) Montaigne's conception of the essay, a new and fascinating literary form at the time, left him room for entries like the present, in which a personal voice moved freely over a sequence of loosely related events, and little obligation lay in the matter itself, to draw pungent conclusions from it.

Essay 46 Of Names

Introductory

Montaigne opens on the theme of his essays, 'apologizing,' as it were, for their simplicity and unpretentiousness of approach. This mock apologetic, common in Montaigne, cloaks a great repertoire of learning, anecdotal alertness, and simulated relaxations of language, despite the actual fact in our face that Montaigne never wastes a word, invariably discovers an erudite word that serves his purposes, and deplores his own weaknesses, but only to the end of supporting points about the human condition in general.

There are two main themes in the rest of the essay. Montaigne points out the main issues of naming, among people of all ranks. His reflections turn around the connotations of certain names—for good or for ill. Names can connote the nobility or the valorous, who proudly carry the family name. Frequently, however, we see names dissipated when through marriage new names replace old relationships. It is at such times that the fragility of the name is clearest. What is a name, after all, except a brush or pen stroke, easily erased?

The last point ushers in the true Montaignian theme, for the fragility of the name serves the writer to move back into the issue of vanity, that unshakeable accompaniment of the human struggle for fame, dignity, and recognition. A dignified name, it is felt on all levels of society, can provide extra security for the ambitious human, eager to leave behind him a legacy of respect and honor.

Examples.

Good repute names Montaigne values good repute, has no problem with such time-honored monikers as reflect rustic Anglo Saxon virtues. Noble names, reflecting the greatness of distinguished houses—his own was one—were far too likely to dwell on the proper use of titles, the memory of which was quickly forgotten, although their presence remained an honor to the house.

Names as toys 'Nature has given us this passion –naming—as a pretty passion to play with.' Montaigne brings up the case of a poet who was continually changing his name, transposing its letters to make fantastic variations on itself. It is the whim of many families to play with their ancestral names, adding unknown dignities and distant relationships to them. A tale is told of a gentleman who invited many old buddies to dinner at his chateau. Each of them presented himself, in every case expounding on the distinguished new foreign and hitherto undiscovered dignitaries who had added themselves to his family. Tiring of the hyperbole, the host retired to a basement room, alleging that he no longer felt worthy to dine in such company.

Miracle Montaigne includes the tale of a young man who has been frequenting prostitutes, and is waiting for a visit from one. When the lady arrives at his door he asks her her name, and is given 'Mary,' which, who knows why, he takes to be a sign of the Virgin Mary. He ushers the lady out, has nothing further to do with women whose lives do not 'magnify the lord.'

Conclusions.

Montaigne assembles a variety of thoughts around the topic of names. He admires old names, that live up to their promise of integrity. He is contemptuous of fake or artificially added names. He is a friend of first names rooted in national tradition.

Essay 47 Of the uncertainty of our judgment

Introductory

Montaigne, as we know, often interests himself in the moral and tactical issues generated by jousting or military endeavors. Such events brought into play the skills of the elite, in Montaigne's time, and played an unending role in the Roman culture texts—especially Plutarch—which Montaigne regularly cites for examples. The current essay, though entitling itself as a broad piece of philosophy, is primarily intent on practical issues of military statecraft.

A broad thesis of the essay overarches the specific military issues that arise. Montaigne, always moderately skeptical, is raising the question of 'certainty of judgment,' in general. Does the human being typically exercise accurate and efficient judgment—in life, generally—or is judgement—of whom to marry, how much to invest, what to eat for dinner—inevitably approximate and of uncertain worth? The following examples will suggest the slant Montaigne adopts, toward the issues raised here.

Examples.

Victory or restraint? Montaigne's essay opens with examples concerning whether military commanders are wise to press through to victory, at all costs, or to consider limiting their assaults, not pressing quickly or dominantly for a complete victory. It is of course Montaigne's position to claim that there are rival perspectives, and that even the best decision is in the end a hostage of fortune. Within that large category, fortune, there will be a hundred intangibles—lay of the land, time of day, condition of the men—hovering over the commander's final decision over whether to move slowly or go for broke. Unfortunately we must revisit precisely this issue in our own time, as we watch heavy armor driven over the enemy or strategically delayed.

Insult the enemy? Within the broader theme of victory or restraint, Montaigne entertains the pros and cons of verbal harassment of the enemy. We are dealing here with fixed enemy cavalry lines, or regiments of bayonet carrying foot soldiers, and the issue is whether one should insult them, attempt to humiliate them, or leave them alone. Will they be humiliated or enraged? Who knows? The commander's judgment will be faced with an imponderable, for once again, as in the dilemma of absolute victory or restraint, there are many imponderables, and fortune has the last word.

Pageantry or Simplicity? Montaigne recognizes two opposite ways of equipping an army, each representing a different, and supportable, view of the best way to engage in battle. Some commanders dress their troops to the teeth, with elegant vestments and stunning weaponry, figuring that this display of elegance will demoralize the foe, while boosting the morale of the troops. On the other hand certain commanders clothe their troops in modest fabrics and style, encouraging them to fight like true men of the soil, with no trace of dandyism. Once again, there is no room for a simplified answer. Fortune is smiling in the corner. There is no cut and dried answer to fall back on. Our judgements are uncertain, and rarely definitive.

Conclusions

Montaigne pays abundant tribute to Lady Fortuna, as a decision maker. The examples he chooses are from the military sphere. His central point is that life confronts us with multiple decisions, upon which we have to exercise our own judgment, without the benefit of certainty. Luck seems the field In which this state of affairs most clearly displays itself, although Montaigne faced heavy papal criticism for bowing too deeply to a condition, Fortuna, over which God himself may seem to have had too little control.

Essay 48 Of war horses or *dextrarios*

Introductory

Chivalry, the social political driver of elite mediaeval society, was still an active factor in Montaigne's day, and the cheval (horse) who empowered the chivalric system was a valued commodity. The incessant early modern wars, among families and mini states and principalities, promoted a regular trade in fine horses, and fine military equipment— crafted pikes, lances. spears, daggers, saddles, spurs; all of which was part of a thriving and aesthetically demanding industry. Montaigne, as we know, was much concerned with castles, knights, and sieges, and was himself both seasoned in horsemanship and fighting, and an influential player in the negotiation of military/economic deals.

The present essay is both an analysis of horses and horsemanship in Montaigne's world, and an anecdotal reflection on other cultures' relations to the horse. Throughout runs a theme of admiration, for high skills of horsemanship, for adroit and powerful horses, and for military infighting.

Examples.

Service horses (dextrarios) Montaigne opens his examples with the *dextrarius*or service horse, which was familiarly used in ancient Rome as an adjunct to the rider's main steed, a second, so to speak, to which the rider could jump, when in the midst of battle he found himself threatened. This kind of twin horse galloped in unison with his brother, and was trained to carry the rider, now on his own back, to a different position from which he could continue fighting. A skillful horseman and a nimble service horse were required for this act.

Military horsemanship Montaigne greatly admires the bond that forms between distinguished cavalry leaders and their favorite horses, who get to know their masters and the nature of battle. Such horses can, in the midst of battle, throw themselves against enemy riders or horses, and gnash a powerful path of infighting for their riders. Not only do the riders of such fine cavalry benefit from the infight savvy of their steeds, but they bond with their steeds. Such heroic figures as Alexander and Caesar virtually belonged to their fighting horses. Caesar was able to manage his favorite horse –give him proper direction, control his speed, demand that he jump—all bareback, and with his hands tied behind him. Alexander's steed, Bucephalus (bull-head), was a powerful driving force in all his major battles and greatly feared attacks.

The arts of horsemanship Montaigne himself, no military hero, asserts his own great pleasure at bareback riding, and takes us in thought to those northern tribes, the Parthians, and their habit of virtually living on horseback, where they conduct their business, converse, and carry on affairs of state. When properly managed and understood, as they are by the noble riders in Italy, Italian horses are taken into battle carrying gleaming spears and lances; the finest and proudest of horses were the formidable heart of the army.

Conclusions.

From his own childhood, as Montaigne recounts at the end, he remembers Itinerant trick riders who passed through his village, performing brilliant tricks, standing upright In their saddles, leaping from horse to horse. So deep lies Montaigne's fascination with the beauty and adroitness of the horse. What would he have said to the upstart Iowa farm boy who reminded him—I believe this is accurate—that in fact pigs are among the smartest domesticated animals, and horses far from the top.

Essay 49 Of Ancient Customs

Introductory

We know by this point that Montaigne is interested in customs and traditions from around the known world, and especially in those which deviate from the norm in his own culture. In discussing 'cannibals,' military practices, and codes of dress and behavior, in other and ancient (usually Roman) cultures, Montaigne frequently disparages his own culture, not least for its provincialism, in the present case the French suspicion of the foreign, and particularly the French passion for trendy styles of clothing—doublets reaching one day up to the chest, on the next day descending to some point between the thighs-- and behavior, styles which may be gone tomorrow only to be ardently resurrected in a few years.

The springboard of the present essay is its critique of French faddishness, but the substance of the discussion rapidly passes to traits of ancient Roman culture which particularly deviate from the French world. Let's look at some examples Montaigne offers, of ancient non-French customs:

Examples.

Bathing practices For both the Greeks and the Romans, the baths were socially and culturally important meeting places. The Romans preferred bathing in perfumed water; women frequently bathed naked before the servants and friends, and often allowed themselves to be rubbed down by a male slave. This female practice had no place in Greek life, where the men bathed naked, and were scrubbed down by acolytes.

Coiffure Women's (men's too sometimes) hair was often pinched off, as was also the style in the Paris of Montaigne's day. One popular Roman hair style—which Montaigne sees as effeminate and absurd—was shaving the hair at the back of the head, and permitting it to grow long at the front. (Some professional wrestlers in America fancy this style today. Can you remember Gorgeous George?)

Eating The Greeks and Romans generally ate reclining on a couch, though Cato introduced the practice of eating in a sitting position. (The Turks of Montaigne's day ate reclining, Montaigne adds, joining his ancient historian brother, Herodotus, in noting things by the by, as he passes through life.)

Urination and defecation Montaigne notes the Roman practice of cleaning the anus, after defecation, with a wet sponge. He does not discuss the French practice, but goes far simply by bringing the issue up. (Daring language and inquiry, on the level of strong thinking and high art, had already been sanctioned by Montaigne's predecessor Rabelais) Montaigne seemingly admires the practical Roman solution to pissing in public, and praises the (male oriented) policy of placing urination tubs on the sides of busy streets in ancient Rome.

Luxury The wealthy of ancient Rome enjoyed such amenities as freshwater streams flowing through the ground level of their mansions. (Petronius, in the *Satyricon*, depicts a setting for such an amenity.) At dinner time, guests would descend to the water, choose their fish for the evening, and settle down to drink while the cooks and carvers busied themselves in the kitchen.

Conclusions.

In the end, after having bedeviled the French for their provincialism, Montaigne has fun with Roman social practices. His main point is that the French should wake up. The world is old and big! But like Herodotus he is fascinated by difference and doesn't mind, shocking the home folks.

Essay 50 Of Democritus and Heraclitus

Introductory

Montaigne puts together large pieces of what we might call, at this point in the essays, his 'emergent philosophy,' giving us a fundamental account of the knowing and spiritual processes of the mind, then sharing with us his view of humanity as seen through those processes (the way we perceive, think, evaluate, make wholes of the fleeting drama of phenomena that constantly deploy before our inner eye.) Finally he turns to a pair of emblematic ancient Greek philosophers, Democritus and Heracleitus, to portray two fundamental ways of viewing mankind, the former scornful of his kind, the later pitying of mankind. Montaigne adds to the profile of his 'emerging philosophy' by siding with Democritus, believing mankind is 'not so full of mischief as inanity, '

Examples.

Judgment Our judgement is uncertain. When faced with important decisions we humans are often unclear on which way to move. It depends, Montaigne says, on our angle of approach to any given problem. We have little internal guidance. Montaigne's own governing procedure for judgment is ignorance. Remember how stereotypically he is remembered for his portmanteau query, 'que sais-je?,' 'what do I know?' with which he inclines to answer difficult conundrums.

Governing method Montaigne's governing method, by which he approaches life's issues and problems, is 'ignorance.' He simply does not know the truth in many situations. He is followed in this agnostic belief by Rene Descartes, whose *Discours de la Methode* was a constructive metaphysics built on systematic doubt.

The Soul For Montaigne the soul is the knowing principle inside us that sees the world passing by and establishes meaning here and there, as she feels right. Our souls continually reprocess death, love, hope, remaking those conditions of existence as she feels right. 'Our good or ill has no other dependence but on ourselves.'

Person mixture The individual is a mixture of good and bad, ignorant and insightful. Alexander, the King of the World, was given to carousing, and to playing chess—a game Montaigne ridicules—and thus to diluting the greatness of his person.

Democritus and Heraclitus Montaigne, as we said in the introduction, views these two ancient Greek philosophers as emblematic of two main views of mankind: *contempt* and *commiseration*. Montaigne is all about contempt, thinking mankind a fatuous blunder.

Conclusions.

Montaigne comes clearly into the open, perhaps for the first time in the essays. He does indeed view the human mind with skepticism, but, even more clearly, thinks the human being flawed, incapable of true understanding or knowledge, and unable to judge clearly. Is this a Christian perspective? Are we talking 'original sin'?

Essay 51 Of the Vanity of Words

Introductory

We know, from Montaigne's preference for Democritus over Heraclitus, that he has a generally low opinion of mankind, one in which, savingly, he also includes himself, having made amply clear that he has no memory, that his judgment is shaky at best, and that he has no place among the great thinkers. In the present essay he targets the vanity of words, the often meaningless sounds human utter, especially in the quest to magnify themselves. With that perspective Montaigne turns his criticism first of all on rhetoricians, those builders of empty vanity, skilled in 'making the worse appear the better argument,' and in 'magnifying the ordinary.' We find here several examples of the vanity of words.

Examples

Pericles Thucydides complains that he is unable to beat Pericles in wrestling, because when Pericles loses, is pinned, he instantly leaps up with a breathless account of how he was tricked, or of how he was fact the winner. Is there any point, then, in trying to beat Pericles on the mat? Have you wrestled Donald Trump?

Well governed states Well governed states—Athenian and Muslim instances are offered—do not need or welcome either orators or rhetoricians. What is is good enough and needs no puffery to be described. By contrast, especially In Rome, rhetoric most flourished when the affairs of state were out of order, anld the statement of plain truth was not in fashion.

Word extravagance Montaigne describes in detail a conversation recently had, with a new member of his household staff. The gentleman let himself go into extravagant detail, about the sequence, freshness, and appropriateness of his menu items until he had reached a climax of breathless admiration, which Montaigne viewed with an inner smirk.

Grammar Montaigne has earlier explained that he is no grammarian, that he began his language learning by rote absorption of Latin, and that to his day he speaks his own provincial French in the language of the streets. When he hears would be academicians—and they abound around him—speak of metonymy, metaphor, allegory, he wonders if they know what they are talking about. He doubts it.

Conclusions.

Montaigne admires plain speech—though as the language of his essays proves, he is constantly establishing subtle distinctions in that speech, and making fine distinctions in thought. He loves careful observation, but he despises pretentious and thoughtless puffery in language.

Essay 52 Of the Parsimony of the Ancients

Introductory

Montaigne, as we know, gladly takes the majority of his examples, and his springboards for thought, from the ancient Romans. He is widely conversant in Latin literature—much less familiar with Greek—and he normally contrasts his own day with that of the Romans. We have seen him scorn his contemporaries for their fashion trendiness, but more broadly for being uncreative and uneducated followers. He is prone to admire the Romans for their staunchness and discipline—at best, though of course there's Petronius—and in the following examples, there is a great deal of half-explicit admiration for ancient Roman parsimony.

Examples

Attilius Regulus Attilius, a noted Roman General in Africa, learned that a hind on his estate, in Rome, had run away with all his 'instruments of husbandry.' Much damage had been done to his seven acre estate, and much inconvenience had been caused, to his wife and children. He asks the Roman Senate to call him home. Instead they take the recourse of reimbursing him for all financial losses, and housing and caring for his wife and children at government expense. He is satisfied.

Cato the Elder Returning to Rome, Cato sold his warhorse, to save the costs of transporting him. At the time Governor of Sardinia, he satisfied himself with one accompanying officer, with whom, on foot, he carried out all his administrative duties. He prided on himself on the plain modesty of his cloaks, and the limited funds he set aside, for shopping in the market.

Scipio Aemilianus After two consulships and two triumphs, Scipio was one of the great men of Rome. Nonetheless he went on an Embassy on behalf of the Republic, with only seven attendants in his train. This was cutting business expenses to the bare bone. Homer—by Montaigne's report—traveled with one servant, Plato with three, and Zeno the Stoic with none.

Tiberius Gracchus The most renowned Roman in his time, was given a strict budget by the Roman Republic, and kept an account book proving his rigid adherence to agreed on expenditures.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is no friend of human nature, which he, like Democritus, views darkly. He thinks his fellow humans silly, disorganized, and able only to follow. He seizes the chance to praise discipline, self-control, and sense of duty, as he finds it in instances of ancient Roman self-discipline.

Essay 53 Of a Saying of Caesar

Introductory

In turning to the ancient Stoics and Epicureans, to poetic philosophers like Lucretius, and to great minded states people like Julius Caesar, Montaigne readies himself to harvest the ripest moral thinking of the classical tradition. Not only in their parsimony—see previous essay— but in their keen introspective querying of our mental processes, these later antique moralists spoke to everything in Montaigne which was dubious about the animal man. In the present essay, Montaigne deals with two different kinds of ideas: that man cannot harvest and use the present; that as Caesar says, 'we are most troubled by things that are invisible and unseen.' These two perspectives reinforce one another. Let's see how Montaigne manipulates the thoughts involved here.

Examples

Decaying material Montaigne opens by saying that 'if we look at ourselves instead of others, we see of how 'infirm and decaying material this fabric of ours is composed.' We are familiar with this critique of mind as a wild monkey, jumping here and there, from one issue or perception to another. It is the central critique addressed by Buddhism—or other meditation centered learning practices— to the area of psychology.

Satisfaction 'We cannot establish our satisfaction in any one thing.' This insight follows from the defective nature of our concentration. In the digital age, an age of planned distraction, we daily live Montaigne's point about the empty busyness of the mind. 'We seize things present with an unruly and immoderate haste.'

Sovereign Good What, for Montaigne, is man's sovereign good? Montaigne admits that, without the power to find the good in the detailed work of the mind, we have no hope of discovering an overarching good for ourselves. 'Que sais-je'? asks Montaigne again, faced with this grand query.

A Saying of Caesar Caesar observes that we are most drawn by 'things that are invisible and unseen,' and that therefore we turns our backs on what is closest to us. Montaigne shares Caesar's view that we are ill equipped to live effectively in the real world.

Conclusions.

Montaigne expounds many values. He is a man with a fierce passion for honesty, integrity, patience, self-discipline, simplicity. He lives in a universe of moral values. However the mind—or soul—in which he sees these values operative, is one of disorder, fleeting impressions, inability to concentrate or harvest the present. Many of us will, to one degree or another, recognize a spiritual doubleness of the kind that Montaigne houses. Does Montaigne look for religion to make a whole of his person? Does skepticism itself provide a shelter for his dilemma? Or does he, like the 'modern man' we call him, bring many doubts, hopes, and anxieties into the complex broth of living in the second millennium A.D.?

Essay 54 Of vain subtleties

Introductory

Montaigne has a gamey mind, and sometimes carries us, in his essays, through wordplay and subtle humor, though it is part of his genius, even on such occasions, to keep his eye on the ball. In the present essay he offers us a sampler of game play from within his own family; the game is to identify extremes that hold together without a middle, like the two opposite senses of the word Sir, to address the nobility or to address a tradesman. One can see from the start that this kind of game can lead to thought provoking issues, as well as to dilemmas of wordplay. Let's look at examples of the thinking of Montaigne and his family, on these 'vain subtleties.'

Examples

Democritus Montaigne, as we know, is a partisan of Democritus, with whom he contrasts Heracleitus in an earlier essay. Democritus provides the opposition between gods and beast—human beings at the mid-point—which serves as a polarity of extremes. It is often a rider, on these examples, that the two extremes in question join one another substantively, like extreme heat and extreme cold, which. to Montaigne seem to fuse into a single identical form of existence.

Wear It was the custom of the Romans to wear the same outfits for feasts and funerals. While the ceremonies inviting this wear were opposed in nature, a single mood seems to be generated between them, by the identical garments chosen for each kind of ceremony. For the Irish and the Nigerians, in our time, precisely the same paradox of wear plays out across funerals and feasts. One rejoices at welcoming a new figure into the world of the ancestors.

Avarice and Profusion Avarice derives from an extreme of love for money. You hate to let it go. Profusion springs from a readiness to share or spread to the world what good you have to offer—money, goods, or love. The desire to share money and the goods money buys is a single expression =of love of money. Both the philanthropist and the hoarder are in love with money.

Christians There are, Montaigne asserts, two kinds of good Christians, the wise and profound who have superior insight into the religion, and the stupid and docile (among whom he includes himself) who simply follow the rules and procedures of the faith. Each of these types of Christian is good, and essential to the faith.

Conclusions.

Montaigne opens with a gentle tirade against trick poems, which adopt the form of their argument. (The British Metaphysical poets--Donne and Herbert-- were in the next century after Montaigne to make this kind of sophisticated fad into a special kind of masterly lyric). But he turns the tirade against himself, by characterizing his 'notes on opposites' as baubles, 'vain subtleties.' And in the examples he gives, of pertinent and provocative oppositions, he is modest even when making substantive points. However the points he makes, by thinking extremes together, are not without importance. He finds his way to the meeting point between traditional and high culture poetry, the point where each great achievement co-exists with the other. He reaches pungent psychological differences between people who are above the accidental and those who are ground level sufferers of it—two groups who occupy extremities and meet. His own essays, he is careful to conclude, hang In the middle regions, far from the grandeur of the extremes.

Essay 55. Of Smells

Introductory

Montaigne lived in an age growingly conscious of the niceties of social life, in all classes, according to their degree of finesse, and as a nobleman he was from early in life disciplined in a Renaissance version of the proprieties of behavior and manners. It is no surprise that the issue of personal hygiene and personal odors was of much concern. Nor is it surprising that women played an outsized role in monitoring the proprieties of smell. Montaigne pays ample tribute to women as the trailblazers, in social propriety, and especially, perhaps, in the control of perspiration or period odors. It is no surprise, given Montaigne's own sensibility to bodily processes and social situations, that he unpackages the details of his own olfactory life, revealing the fact that the sweet odor of a kiss could linger on him for as much as six hours, and that he was in general uncommonly sought out by passing street odors, which would cling to him.

Examples.

The best smell The great Alexander was thought to have had a rare and noble smelling sweat, a joy to inhale. And yet, says Montaigne, the best skin is that which is odorless. Women do much to conceal their natural odors, and in so doing have always stumbled on perfumes, or natural herbs, which made them seem delectable. And yet, in the end, 'to conceal, though well, is to stink.'

The sensitive author Montaigne himself, as he says, is peculiarly sensitive to smells, and seems to be a magnet for them. Luckily for him, he, like Socrates, was able to live through the plague without being infected.

Food Odors When the King of Tunis visited France he prepared a great feast for his distinguished French hosts. One peacock and two pheasants were smothered in spices peculiar to North African cuisine, and the streets of Paris, in every direction from the feast, were drenched in the rich odor of sauces.

Beauty and stench For Montaigne the two most beautiful cities, Venice and Paris, were flawed by their terrible smells—Paris from its dirtiness, Venice from its marshes.

Conclusions.

Our sense of smell, sensitive enough that it vanishes during an epidemic like Covid, is also powerful enough that it can seduce or revolt those in its orbit. Ours is a predominantly visual age, used to the manipulation of visible signs and signals, but the sense of smell, in early modern Europe, pervaded life and death with a boldness we shudder at.

Essay 56 Of Prayers

Introductory

Montaigne grows up into religious wars, between Protestants and Catholics, and makes no bones about his deep Catholicism. For him the prayers of the church demand the reverence of all believers, and should be uttered with care and attention. The language they integrate should also be used 'with care,' as in our steady practice 'not to use the Lord's name in vain.' In reaffirming these principles of his church, Montaigne is quick to insist on the humbleness of his lay voice, and on the propriety of leaving, to the divines of the Church, the true interpretation and formulation of holy doctrine. Montaigne's modest, conversational tone enables him to tincture his humble discourse with attitudes of his own, without entering into conflict with holy theology.

Examples.

The Lord's Prayer Montaigne urges his fellow believers to repeat, and interiorize the Lord's Prayer, which he considers Jesus's essential formulation of man's relation to God. We can feel the emphasis of Montaigne here, in passages where even his usual reserve of urbanity concedes the floor to what is from the heart.

Pure heart God is subtle and observant. By and large he deals with us through his justice rather than his power, and he makes no exceptions among individuals. He accepts prayers from a pure heart, and is not deceived by those who conceal second thoughts in the recesses of their minds. A special warning is issued here, to those of malign intention who are infiltrating society; the 'evil modern world' is creeping thematically into the urbanization of Western Europe.

Disrespect for authority Montaigne clarifies the above, in his warning to a 'new modern society.' He has made a point, from the beginning of the essay, of his own limitations as a commentator on church and theology. He has exempted himself from the charge of speaking out of place. This kind of impropriety is exactly what he assaults in the new society. Women and children, so to speak, lecture learned divines on fine points of theology.

Holy Bible Montaigne strikes out against any disrespect for the Holy Bible. He refers to the adoration Jews and Mohammedans devote to their sacred texts, and urges Christians—we have seen that Montaigne has generally low respect for his fellow citizens—to do likewise. Montaigne is accordingly dubious of translations of the Bible, points at which misunderstanding and ignorance can imperceptibly infiltrate what is God's word. At several points Montaigne comments favorably on the state of ignorance, as bliss compared to half-knowledge or religious sophistication.

Conclusions.

Montaigne makes his 'religious' points carefully, emphasizing his humility—and embodying it in language—but adopting an appropriate gravity. The reader may wonder, at this point in the essays, whether Montaigne is a 'religious' man. He declares his eternal fidelity to the Catholic Church. But when it comes to details of theology he is more nearly a pan-human religious temperament.

Essay 57 Of Age

Introductory

Montaigne wishes, for us and for himself, lo live and die at ease. He has inherent trust in the powers of nature, which he believes are governed by God, and he knows that it is vain to try to intervene against that will, no matter how great the attendant suffering may prove to be—and he complained bitterly of the great suffering he later had with 'the stones.' The best recourse in life is to go with nature, behaving with moderation and good sense at every stage, and to trust. A clear soul, of course, is Montaigne's fundamental requirement for a satisfactory life.

It should be noted that because of the shortish lifespan typical of Montaigne's place and life—fifty years was a long life—the available work time for the individual was limited. (Men had no control over their property until they were twenty five.) It was Montaigne's strong belief that society should readjust to the biology of its citizens, and institute earlier work practices, which would extend society's wealth and prosperity greatly. This is among the age related issues of which the following examples emerge from Montaigne's essay.

Examples.

Living and dying at ease Montaigne was no friend of worry, for he felt that the course of events in life was in God's hands. Although he speaks occasionally of the pleasures of good eating and drinking, he is naturally careful in his living style, and puts a high priority on moderation, sports, riding, etc. The highest priority, of course, is on having a good conscience, and taking charge of one's final account on earth. This housekeeping concern supersedes any fussy attention to one's own precise age.

Ancient Rome: life foreshortened The distinguished Roman statesman, Cato, was in the process of committing suicide at age forty, when friends intervened, insisting that he was too young for the act. He angrily rejected their intervention, assuring them that he was in control of his life, and had lived a full robust length.

Age and Social Planning Montaigne is an early innovator in social engineering. He spurns the reigning custom—both in Roman antiquity and among the nobility in France at his time--that prioritizes the dignity of age, and, for example, refuses a young man's right to manage his own property until he is twenty five. Montaigne is for reversing the age-work balance in society, for the beginning of an active work life, and accordant responsibilities, by age twenty, and then (for instance) permitting judgeships to be awarded at age thirty, and veterans benefits to be doled out from age forty five, ages when, by ancient consensus, it was appropriate to begin reflecting on life. Montaigne draws our attention to the fact that the great Augustus was Emperor of the world at the age of nineteen.

Childhood and Age Montaigne believes that even the greatest of men, in his time, have done their best work, or performed their finest deeds, when they were young. The classic military rivals, Scipio and Hannibal, continued through their active lives to strive nobly for their countries—Rome and Carthage—but in the end the reputations of both men relied on their earlier exploits. Montaigne himself believes that the soul is fully competent by age twenty, but that he himself had declined steadily since the age of twenty. Whether it is brain or body going first, he does not know, but he feels sure that the process was taking him over.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is a forerunner in seeing age issues as instrumental considerations for social planning and organization. Though his own upbringing was patrician, he was lucky to have been raised on the peasant level for his first three years, thus acquiring a down to earth sense of the human condition, as it plays out in every life.

BOOK TWO

Essay 1 Of the Inconstancy of our actions

Introductory.

It is, Montaigne says throughout his essays, impossible to ignore the inherent flightiness of mankind. The human being is instable, likely to abjure one moment what he had sworn himself to a week ago, likely to turn courageously against the enemy today, and flee from the same foe tomorrow. Such fickleness is particularly evident, Montaigne usually implies, among the French, while examples of lifetime stability are easily available in the staunchness of Roman culture, and in polities like that of the Lacedaemonians, whose citizens tended to follow their own first steps in life straight forward to their final day. Saying which, interestingly enough, Montaigne does not at all imply that he is above his own people, in confessing to such fickleness. Rather he considers himself a flighty soul par excellence, whose banner, in logic, is *Distinguo, I am drawn to distinctions, to be torn apart by the competing charms of life.*

Examples

Multiple persons in one Montaigne compiles instances of individuals who have fluctuated rapidly from one 'soul' to another. The Roman Senator Marius was son of Venus, all ardor, one day, but the next day a son of Mars, ready for battle. Pope Boniface VIII was, at three different stages of his life, a fox, a lion, and a dog begging favors of his master. Nero, though famed for cruelty, was accustomed to breaking down in tears, when obliged to sign any criminal's death sentence. A soldier, cured of a serious illness through the intervention of his Emperor Antigonus, complained because he was deprived of the cause for deep self-examination.

Two Souls The above examples illustrate Montaigne's view that a human being has two souls, we might say personalities, which war with one another on a recklessly unpredictable basis. Montaigne himself, as he says, is a boiling cauldron of diverse and self-contradictory passions. When he says this, of course, we must think away our acquaintance with another French writer, Arthur Rimbaud, who in the nineteenth century spoke of his soul as a matrix for 'le dereglement complet de tous les sens,' 'the total disorder of all the senses.' Montaigne is a classicist and a philosopher, whose boiling passions are simply the intersection of those emotional leanings that make up moderate humanity.

Chance The fact is, says Montaigne, repeating an opinion he has often expressed, that we are all dependent on chance, God's will in our daily lives. We can only love or really understand those whom God has intended us for. This dependence on fate is all we can count on for stability, in a personal life inevitably tossed by back and forth emotions and thoughts.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is as always an analyst of the human condition, both ruthlessly sharp, in his observations of our volatile and unstable natures, and compassionate toward the burden of our tempestuous creatureliness, our common human heritage.

Essay 2 Of Drunkenness

Introductory

'The world is variety and dissemblance,' says Montaigne, picking up his familiar theme of transience and instability. He recognizes that there are many vices, in the human repertoire, that we readily exaggerate the vices of others, and that there is a great difference between a small vice and a great one. (Sacrilege is a greater vice than stealing a cabbage.) Drunkenness is one of the lesser vices, though it is a 'gross and brutish vice,' which is 'totally corporeal and earthly,' and which 'renders the body stupid.' We can understand Montaigne better, on this vice of tippling, from the following examples.

Examples

Dangers of Wine Wine 'vents the most inward secrets,' and is therefore reputed to be dangerous. Women are susceptible to great indiscretion, and loss of chastity, from the drinking of wine. On the other hand, says Montaigne, balancing his argument, many men can hold their secrets even when drinking heavily. A German can hold his secrets even when drunk as the devil. The commanders of the Persian government regularly held their meeting under the strong influence of wine, feeling, as did the Greeks and Romans both, that wine clarifies the mind. The Stoics felt that wine can 'refresh the soul,' and Montaigne himself found that an extra large gulp of red wine, at the end of his meal, improved his digestion.

Don't sweat it For Montaigne wine drinking is a minor vice, so minor that it should be indulged with more vigor than currently it was in France of the time, with its modest couple of glasses with the noon and evening meals. Of all the vices, Montaigne believes, wine drinking least involves one's conscience—it's nothing to be ashamed of unless you get carried away. Montaigne himself proclaims that he is never satisfied with the first glass—it takes a bit for the palate to warm up—and he adduces the evidence of Plato, in *The Laws*, who while forbidding children to drink until eighteen, and allowing no drunkenness til age forty, strongly recommends the use of wine to set older men to dancing and singing, wonderfully opening the soul.

Dad Montaigne builds into his argument a fascinating picture of his father—a picture of inherent interest, and relevant to the drunkenness issue, for Dad appears to have been a robust lover of life, a sportsman, athlete, quite the well-curried ladies' man, and body builder; one for whom wine is as natural as water, part of life. We see in the man a mirror reflecting directly back onto the author.

Conclusions.

Montaigne's easiness with life comes out attractively in the present essay. When it comes to drinking, he clearly takes it in stride, enjoys what he can of it, doesn't sweat the consequences of the act. He never mentions what we would call 'hard liquor,' and in general takes his cues from the Greeks and Romans, for whom wine drinking was daily and natural, the wine heavily cut with water, and the milieu typically social and fresh air.

Essay 3 A Custom of the Isle of Cea

Introductory

Montaigne is always interested in quality of life, and concerned with ways to live well, often to live well according to examples drawn from Greco-Roman antiquity, sometimes from mediaeval Christianity or his contemporary France. We find, in the present essay, that he has borrowed strongly from Roman practice, in laying out his own version of the uses of suicide. Condemned by the Catholic Church as a criminal theft—stealing a life that God has freely created and given to us—Montaigne finds many occasions to dispute the teachings of the Church, in which, nonetheless, he is a devout believer. We will best understand this complex attitude by considering examples of Montaigne's thinking.

Examples

Death and Freedom Montaigne honors suicide as a way of guaranteeing one's freedom, in circumstances which condemn the individual to great suffering, loss of honor, or intolerable pain. (He concludes the entire essay by claiming that severe pain, and fear of a death which will be more intolerable than one's allotted life, are the most compelling grounds for suicide.) Suicide is always ready to hand, as a recourse, but of course, one must never abuse its seeming, but easily deceptive, benefits.

Voluntary death For Montaigne the most acceptable death is voluntary, and his text abounds in instances of this extremity of personal choice. Enemies of the great Alexander, pressed by his siege, planned mass suicide, their only escape. Atipa, a city in Spain, similarly acted out in the face of ruthless siege, burning all their valuables and then going into the flames themselves. A variety of instances testifies to the prioritizing of suicide over loss of chastity. A certain Hyberborean nation, as Plato asserts, is prone to throwing themselves off the cliffs into the sea, as an escape from dishonor.

The Stones Montaigne puts himself into his own picture—not only here but passim throughout his writings—by discussing the terrible pain he suffered from the stones, gallstones. We have to imagine this preoccupation behind his interest in a communal practice of the city of Marseille, where a public poison supply was set aside, from which responsible citizens could under sufficient duress simply call for their portion of lethal life termination. As often Montaigne jacks his private concerns up into areas of public value.

Conclusions.

Montaigne believes deeply in God, and in the creator's omnipresence, especially as a guarantor of cosmic order, both in nature and the human soul. He is, however, keenly sensitive to points at which cosmic order trips over human realities, and vast suffering is left for the human to deal with. These are crisis points, says Montaigne, when the created human is justified in stepping in and relieving intolerable pain.

Essay 4 Tomorrow's a New Day

Introductory

Montaigne is often at his best in vignettes of daily life and its choices and implicit values. He opens the present essay with praise of the French Bishop, scholar, and translator of Plutarch, Jacques Amyot, who—says Montaigne—has brought high language and good sense to French readers, providing them with a new breviary and indeed a schoolmaster. Protesting that he himself needs all the help he can get in Greek, Montaigne urges Amyot to proceed to translate Xenophon into French. All of which is a prologue to the following episodes, into which a small tale by Plutarch provides a subtle bridge.

The Plutarchian bridge is simple. Rusticus, Plutarch begins, was at a ministerial level dinner when he received a message from the Emperor. Rusticus put the message in his pocket, and continued with his oonversation, refusing to put what was immediate and hot in front of the dignity and flow of a civilized conversation. He maintained a level of gravity and imperturbability for which Plutarch admires him. Montaigne goes on from there to discuss the pros and cons of such displays of gravity.

Examples.

Imprudence A case can be made for the kind of gravity Plutarch admired in Rusticus. On the other hand, such behavior can easily be considered imprudent. The message from the Emperor may well contain some significant information, affairs of state upon which lives may depend. (Montaigne refers here to a gentleman who was 'in good company at supper' when a message was delivered to him announcing a treasonous plot underway, to destroy his city; by luck, he opened the message at once. In another example, we are reminded that Julius Caesar, on his way to his death at the hands of the Roman conspirators, ignored a message passed to him, from which he would have learned how to avoid his fate.) Montaigne tops off this point by confessing that he himself is basically negligent, *imprudent* as he has been calling it. He tries to avoid being negligent in matters of state.

The consular place As frequently, Montaigne takes his examples from the daily practice of the ancient Romans, for whose good sense our author has unlimited admiration. The Romans adopted the practice of setting aside one corner of the formal tables, in use for discussions of state, in which a dignitary (a consul, perhaps) would take his meat, part of the general conversation, but available for interruptions such as message delivery, and notes of exceptional importance. It would be understood that the occupant of the 'consular place' could be interrupted, in case of urgent need, and could come and go from the general discussion, as need dictated.

Conclusions.

Montaigne was an astute observer of the structures and proprieties of social behavior. His instinct for intelligent compromise—respecting social felicity while guaranteeing prudence—is perfectly demonstrated by his support for the 'consular table.'

Essay 5. Of Conscience

Introductory

Montaigne opens this discussion by describing a carriage ride he and his brother are taking, in a war torn area of France, in which it was hard to know on which side of the fighting you were located, thus whom to fear, whom to embrace. Montaigne, with a good conscience, and with little to fear, was undisturbed by the situation. His brother, however, was sweating every minute of the trip, fearing he might fall into the King's hands. His fear fed what for no good reason became a bad conscience, with the result that everything about him appeared guilty, confused, and powerless. Montaigne writes unsparingly about the problems that result from a bad conscience.

Examples.

Bessus of Paeonia Bessus destroyed a nest of sparrows, hating them for what they endlessly sang, accusations of him as a murderer. So intensely did Bessus' bad conscience torture him, for what was in fact his evil action, that he was unable to hold back his terror, of discovery, and that he took it out verbally on the birds. The end result, naturally, was that wiser people than Bessus interpreted the meaning of his bird killing, and his crime came into the open.

Evil and Punishment Montaigne explores the relation between sin and guilt, and favors the view of the Greek poet Hesiod, for whom sin and the sense of guilt, bad conscience, take place simultaneously. Montaigne embraces many views of bad conscience, that of Apollodorus, who dreamed he had been flayed and boiled for his sin, or of Epicurus, who said that no hiding place could be deep enough to hide the bad conscience of a sinner.

The strength of a good conscience Faced with numerous unproven charges against him, Scipio, who had a justifiably good conscience in all matters regarding his duty, was called to testify before the Roman Senate. Questioned about uses of public moneys, while serving as an administrator on the frontier, Scipio refused to turn over his account books, which he had with him, to the perusal of his fellow senators. He considered it an insulting imputation of possible guilt, to be subject to this request for proof. He tore up his accounts, before the full senate, and proceeded with the business of the day.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is a strong advocate of honesty, transparency, and truth, though through today's lens he might seem far more willing than we would care to be, to minimize the dark or shadow sides of his own person. One can see, from his long essay on education that he believes in bleaching out vices, before the adolescent's life starts to congeal around its bad habits.

Essay 6 Use Makes Perfect

Introductory

Montaigne opens on the question of instruction and true learning. We may be taught to do this or that—in childhood or later by an instruction manual—but we will not be able actually to do what we have learned, without hands on practice. Philosophers realize this, who urge their students to perform exercises in how we perceive, and doctors know this, who test out experiments on animal subjects, before moving on to humans. Montaigne will continue by relating a near death tale of his own in the course of which he himself tasted the fruits of practice. He will conclude by characteristic examinations of his own mind, as well as by a characteristic defense of self-investigation. 'Use makes perfect'? You have to go there yourself into the action, into the experience, even of near death, until you begin to see into yourself, into 'what a thing is man.'

Examples.

Practice makes real Montaigne is a friend of imagination, when it is under control, but he is most content with empirical experience, which leads him to practice—thinking, observing, conversing —in the real world. (His complex turn of mind reminds me of the perceptual process of the American writer, Sherwood Anderson, in his memorably 'real' *Winesburg Ohio*.) Julius Caesar, long curious about the nature of death, experimented with his own consciousness in various comatose stages, and Montaigne emulated him by a lifetime interest in such issues as the connection between sleep and death.

Death real or simulated? While out riding, Montaigne is thrown off his horse by a reckless rider, and tossed half dead onto the stones in front of his mount. At first, as he recalls the event, he was virtually unconscious, then morphed slowly into a state of milder unconsciousness—euphoric, in fact, while being carried the considerable distance from his home. (Reflecting back on that deathlike condition, and the transitions out of it, he supposes having gone through something like a near death experience.) On return to full consciousness in his own bed he is at first joyful then hit by a crushing pain. Ultimately he emerges from the sequence of overwhelming events, but not without deep awareness of having experienced the real boundary between life and death, life and practice, if you like. He will live on that cusp for the rest of his life.

Self-inspection Montaigne has described the importance of practice, and has illustrated the depth with which our 'descent into the real world" can virtually inflect the deeper than real world. Scraped clean by the horse fall experience, Montaigne remains throughout life insistent on the importance and legitimacy of self-inspection, that 'everyday psychology' at which he is expert, and in which his genius frequently carries him deeper than 'everyday' experience.

Conclusions

Practice and deep self-understanding are conjoined energies in Montaigne's world. He is always empirical, observing, inquiring—despite abjuring the inquiring side of his nature—and too intelligent to take pride in his discoveries. If he is the 'first modern man' would the second be a universal intelligence like Goethe, whose knowledge includes his own limitations?

Essay 7 Of Recompense of Honor

Introductory

The present essay was occasioned by the decision of King Henri III (in 1578) to establish and start granting new royal medals of honor to be conferred on especially valorous French citizens of the crown. That decision leads Montaigne to reflect on the royal decision, the value of such honors, and the meaning of valor in his time. As usual Montaigne works through a variety of perspectives onto the issue.

Examples

State honors The Emperor Augustus, in Rome, was prolific in the donation of medals to exceptionally worthy citizens of the Empire. Reflecting on that piece of history, Montaigne notes the practice being enriched, in France, by the issuance of a new medal of honor. He is aware of the value of such an honor, believes it healthy for the state, and salutes the practice. He is keenly aware, however, that this kind of recognition of valor is only justifiable if the honored individuals are deserving. His pervasive skepticism about mankind kicks in here, as well as his doubts about the notion of heroism at his moment—in the midst of Civil War—when morale and morality tend to be degraded.

Honor, not money Montaigne fully appreciates the purely honorific quality of state gifts, and accepts it as given, that if medals and rewards are handed out, they should have no monetary value, but only the symbolic value of commemoration.

An appropriate recipient \To make himself quite clear, about the kind of valor he would consider deserving, for a contemporary honor, Montaigne suggests an individual strong, judicious, and impartial enough to bring a close to the Religious Wars which are tearing France apart.

Valor as qualification The virtue rendering a citizen worthy of honor is best called *valor,* a rooted French term which Montaigne tracks to the Latin*, vis,* and which he associates with force and determination. This is the occasion for Montaigne to stress the central position of his own elite, military-background class, with its monopoly on power.

Conclusions.

Montaigne's concern with force, power, and elite social behaviors, reflects his historical position on the far side of a knightly-chivalric culture, into which the Renaissance—with its steps into industry and the voice of the people—is beginning to intrude. As a pre modern man—contemporary of Shakespeare—he can still feel the power of the royal gesture, and of a past in which noblemen had a leg up when it came to honor.

Essay 8 Of the Affection of Fathers for their children

Introductory

Montaigne reflects, from the outset, that his discussion may seem a flight of fancy, giving himself permission to consider n a widely varied series of issues. He is exceptionally modest while discussing the relation of fathers to sons, perhaps because he himself bore only girls, and only one survived, perhaps also because he is addressing a woman he greatly admires, the mother of a young man he considers of stalwart promise.

His position is paternal, part of the male's distinctive sense of being the begetter, and he emphasizes the unique bond of begetter to begotten. It is in the nature of things, he says, that fathers will care more for their children than the reverse, for the current of history flows thus. The essay built around these perceptions continues by considering aspects of the father-son relation.

Examples.

Newborns 'Those things are dearest to us that have cost us most,' reflects Montaigne, once again of course thinking back on his own troubled past as a begetter. Yet Montaigne, like a later culture critic, Dr. Samuel Johnson, feels little instinctive love for infants, with whom we can have no exchange. For Montaigne, the element of judgment is missing in the child; a sharp limitation. And when we look at the youngest generation soberly, we must admit that their role in human replacement is simply to show us the door.

Dealing with the young Writing from the perspective of an aging wealth holder, one faced with making an equitable transition, from aging to the next world, Montaigne is sharply aware that the younger generation, and the youngest of it, should be equably endowed. Looking around him, he sees the older landed class doing little more than conserving their wealth, tight around them—and at a time when munificent sharing, with the younger generation, would enable those (privileged) scions to invest in those travels, contacts, and skill investments they require, in order to occupy influential positions in their new world.

Living well in a family setting. Montaigne reiterates that he was himself a lovingly raised child—'I only felt the rod twice'—and led a moderate and agreeable life from that point on. But that progress involved a good deal of learning. Montaigne was wise enough not to marry early—he married at the age of thirty-three—and to restrain his marital pleasures to the household and the maintenance of order and child development. As far as possible, he contrived to live in his own house as long as he could, and thereby to enjoy regular, though modest, contact with his daughter throughout her young adult life.

Familial legacy Montaigne wishes to express his love to all who deserved it, and in this fashion he made himself a lifelong friend to his family and community. He was happy to be called father—not the usual form of address—and he was placating toward his wife, who as was frequently the case, was quite a bear toward him, at least as he saw it. An unusually good counselor, Montaigne was known as an excellent listener, often the unseen side of being a great conversationalist, which at least in mind he was,

Conclusions

Montaigne, as we would expect, is frank and direct, and persuades us that he would have been so in person as well as on the page. He was clearly modest within the household, though he had formed ideas about child raising, as well as trust in a coming generation which would be better than his own.

Essay 9 Arms of the Parthians

Introductory

In this brIef essay, Montaigne enters the Lists against the vaunted French military power, comparing it scornfully to the free-swinging power of the barbarian Scythians. He devotes considerable attention to the disadvantages of the heavy weaponry the French carry with them, often overburdening themselves with more than they can effectively manage in close combat.

Montaigne urges on the French the choice of light or no armor at all, as was the practice of Alexander of Macedon, and earlier Greek heroes, dating back to thr Homeric period. Stripped down and quick, would be the Montaignian model, for presence on the battle field, and we have every reason to suspect hard discipline from him. In discussing the Lacedemonians, he deeply respected their commanders, for their habits of making their soldiers eat while on the march, and who rarely pardoned them for such luxuries as sleeping beneath a porch roof. The Greeks were so overburdened that they were thought unable to rise after falling, and were often left for dead on the battleground. The Parthians, on the other hand, traveled very light, shot their arrows backwards —which was not expected—and frequently made prisoners of those who were confused by their tactics. The Roman historian Marcellinus commented with amazement at the armor of the Parthians, which was composed of thick pieces of overlapping phalanges, which were virtually impenetrable to enemy armor.

Examples

Parthian horses' coats

The horses of the Parthians, far in the East of the Empire, were covered with thick dark layers of leather, which were virtually impenetrable leather, so that they were almost impossible to wound. This wear, which made them seem gigantic, and almost entirely metallic, aligned potently with the lightness of the war garment, which was appropriate for quick starts.

Marcellinus The Roman historian, expostulates on the self-discipline and readiness to fight of the Roman forces. He added much to his authority by the fact that he was a trained militiaman, and fully familiar with the Roman practice of battlefield struggle.

Demetrius The Emperor Demetrius took such care of his weaponry that he carried a double set of armor into every battle.

Conclusions

The ancients were understandably preoccupied with the quality of their military gear; as we can guess the arms and weapons dealers of industrial Rome were also delighted.

Essay 10 Of Books

Introductory

The reader of the foregoing essays will have startled at the erudition of Montaigne, largely confined, as he was, to the private library he had at hand in his chateau. From it he gathered classic and rare items concerning the literature and culture of antiquity, odd compendia of anthropological and archeological lore, dating from the discoveries of the early Renaissance and any number of documents of mythological and folk religious lore. From that considerable collection he drew the reading notes in this retrospective scan of a life as a Renaissance writer.

It is no surprise that the key foundation, of the present set of reading notes, is ancient Roman and (much less) ancient Greek texts. As a child, we know, Montaigne was immersed in the Latin language, speaking it at all times with the servants, and writing it on all kinds of domestic issues. When it came to his study at the College de Guienne, as an elementary student, he was already well versed in the outlines of the Roman literary tradition. His later decision to retire, in mid-life, was to provide himself with the leisure to think and reflect, and the fruits of this pre-retirement are evident in his later letters and reflections.

Examples.

Inherent modesty Montaigne was modest about his claims both as a Reader and a Writer. Privileged from the start, he made the most of his cultural and linguistic advantages. He was uniquely lucky, as he emphasizes many times, in the praise of his sturdy, open minded, positive thinking dad.

Latin and Greek Instruction in Greek and Latin was highly developed at the College de Guienne, where Montaigne had the blessing of distinguished scholars, for teachers, and where, among his schoolmates, he met some of the to-be distinguished classicists of his age. While it must be said that Montaigne read fluently in Latin, throughout his life,and used the close knowledge of Latin for business and personal reasons, he was not strictly speaking a Latin writer, but a connoisseur of the language.

The use of ancient languages Montaigne makes clear that he uses foreign languages as portals to great literature which he would himself not have been able to create. (As always, and especially in his earlier essay on imagination, he minimizes his own creative skill, thereby highlighting, we might say, his own derivative talent—and the distinctive character of the essay itself.)

Favorites Montaigne admires, among the ancient Romans, especially the most noted—Horace, Catullus, Cicero, Julius Caesar, Plutarch and Virgil-- and, among the writers of his own times, Boccaccio's *Decameron,* and Rabelais. In other words, Montaigne's taste was not only for the classics, but of a classical tone in itself. The reader will have been touched, in surveying this Montaignian overview, by this essayist's restraint, dignity, control, universal perception—trademarks of the classical.

Conclusions.

It was Milton who wrote that 'a good book is the life blood of a master spirit.' We can imagine Montaigne subscribing to this universalist perspective, which inscribes literature among the supreme testimonies to the human condition.

Essay 11 Of Cruelty

Introductory

Montaigne makes a great deal, throughout this essay, of the advantages he has had in his life, as the son of a truly wise and thoughtful father, and of an ancient Gallic family line. To these blessings he attributed what virtue he had, which was in fact little more than following tradition and his own naturally gentle nature, the nature which made him feel close to animals and to beauty in nature. He recognizes however that virtue is more than good nature, and involves training, like that provided by religion, which alone is responsible, for example, for the gift of abstaining from vengeance. Montaigne has no doubt that religion is an essential aid in fighting back such temptations. In this context Montaigne turns to Socrates for model, a man, it seems, of a truly uncontentious nature. To deepen the above points, Montaigne turns to examples.

Examples.

Life-death balance Montaigne is interested in the balance established between one life, and the life that preceded it. He values the rhythm of a weak-soul strong-soul alternation; the thought that his own weakness—the tender side—will someday be balanced by the soul of a successor who is tougher than he at dealing with life's challenges. (Isn't there a hint, here, of a Buddhist karmaic-transaction, ultimately calculated to restore the psychological balance of the universe?)

Montaigne's modesty 'I know not how to manage quarrels or debates in my own bosom, and consequently owe myself no great thanks that I am free from several vices.' ' I have naturally a horror for most vices.' In other words, Montaigne feels that his seeming natural goodness is given to him by others, and that he should receive, in exchange, no special praise. He has not struggled to be vrtuou

Kindness to nature and animals. Montaigne offers the example of his natural love for nature, that he cannot endure the plucking off of the chicken's neck, or the many violences to domestic animals which are a daily part of the farm life around which he himself had spent much of his youth.

Personal hypersensitivity Montaigne admits that nothing moves him as much as tears. He cannot resist them. This is part of the charm of his openness, as well as of his daring directness.

'To unlearn evil.' The purpose of education, Montaigne is able to confirm, is 'to un learn evil," a phrase taken from a Roman philosopher, and seeming to describe the baggage of harmful expectations with which we enter into life.

Conclusions.

Without taking personal credit, for any goodness found in him, Montaigne manages to portray himself as a winningly sympathetic man. Perhaps he makes us think of Prospero in T*he Tempest*, a character of innate charm and mysterious empathetic power. Montaigne is supremely aware of the supporting presence of his father, and of his native stock and region, in providing him with the experience of natural virtue.

Essay 12 Apology for Raimond Sebond

Introductory

Montaigne's longest essay, the *Apology for Raimond Sebond,* has its roots in Montaigne's family life. His father, not a philosopher or academic, had, in the course of an active upper class military life, made the acquaintance of many men of military and academic distinction, many men who visited Montaigne's home, and some of whom, who were under discussion in the intense atmosphere of the Chateau, and among the great figures of the intellectual past, who were in the air of discussion, was a Spanish friar, Raimond de Sebond, who had lived some 'two centuries earlier.' His master work*, The Book of God's Creations*, was left with Montaigne's dad, as the visitor departed, and the younger Montaigne, about whose curiosity so much of the present book is written, made use of the chance, and immersed himself in the text of Sebond, aspects of which we mention in what follows.

Examples.

The reputation of Raimond de Sebond. Raimond had been a preacher and physician at Toulouse, two centuries earlier. He was controversial in his time, for his pronounced belief that reason cannot serve as the proper gateway to knowledge, but that a 'divine infusion' was the launching pad for the knowing process. His reputation suffered, for he was going against the most widely held beliefs of the Fathers of the Church. It must be added that, at the time of Montaigne's contact with this controversial book, the Huguenot-Catholic religious wars were roaring and making such issues as the above hot and dangerous.

The world picture of Raimond For Raimond the world was a brilliant model of God's greatness, a holy temple into which we enter at birth. Atheism is an impossible folly. If we hold firmly to the precepts of the Church, we will have a firm foundation, support against the changing winds of time. 'The architecture of the universe cannot be there simply for our pleasure, but must be part of the thinking of a magnificent artificer. His unmistakable mark is on all his creatures. 'Man,' says Montaigne, speaking for Sebond, 'is the weakest and proudest of all God's creatures.' 'Presumption is our natural and original disease.'

Man and the other animals Sebond sees man as a partner to, and in certain ways an inferior to, the other animals, and though the relation of man to those animals has long been close, it is threatened 'today'—and we might at our time underline the 'today' issue—by man's indifference to the animal world. (Moves to protect endangered species are necessary only because we have endangered those species).

The indifference of man, to other species, is enjoyed at our own cost, for we have traditionally been the winners in our complex and communication rich relation with animals. By losing contact with animals, sheltering In our homes, killing off unwanted species, reducing the populations of domesticated animals, and polluting our air, we seem to have done much, already, to disrupt the contact between man and the other animals. The wisdom of the animal world, at housing, feeding, home building, self-protection, self-healing, is fading from our awe and usage, as we humans turn increasingly toward technical means for communications, agriculture, and even healthcare. It was as seems of defining importance, to add that animals do not wage war on each other—as humans do with pleasure—and abstain from the pleasure in cruelty, which in war, as in peace, proves a lasting amusement for human beings. In the face of all this 'man is a thing of nothing,' One hears here many undertones of Montaigne's own thinking.

Sanity and Suicide Montaigne clearly feels that the path away from nature and from God's laws—his first law is 'to obey'—is already a dangerous aberration. Whereas animals can learn from modelling off the behaviors of their parents, humans cannot do so quickly or instructively. Among animals self-harm is virtually unknown, while within human communities, at times of stress, suicide can prove to be a widespread social menace.

If Montaigne identifies any cure for this widespread human illness, it would be presumption, assuming a privileged position within the seething complexity of the human universe, and forcing on a modest central creature the grandeur of unwarranted nobility.

Conclusions.

Among the rich materials extraordinarily compelling, in Montaigne's survey of the work of Raimond Sebond, is the excursus on ancient Greek philosophy, entering into much detail about pre-Socratic philosophers, and the place of Plato in the tradition; the nature, value, and dangers of curiosity; the importance of ignorance and poverty, on the enrichment of the soul; the place of Pyrrhonism, total doubt about the availability of truth, and the refusal to make judgments.

Essay 13. Of the Judging of the Death of Another

Introductory.

Classical Roman literature was pervaded with scenes taken from deathbeds and battlefield confrontations with death. There were no hospital scenes, with orderlies scurrying in every direction, but living people In or out of armor, making speeches, a whole literary genus in itself. It was possible for the author, of the dramas including such scenes, to develop characters of great depth, dealing with life and death issues. Montaigne chooses the present kind of terminal scene to explore the varieties of mindsets adopted by men (largely Roman) finding themselves on the brink of death. He is providing, as it were, a small encyclopedia of attitudes adopted towards other people's deaths.

Examples

Another, not ourselves Montaigne has chosen the topic of another's death, not of ourselves, for, as he says, we do not readily accept the fact of our own death, but rather think that it will come later, more abstractly, at a distance, while the death of another person will seem up close and personal. As for our own death, it is natural for us to think it will come at some other time,at a good time for making wise comments on it. We think, as Montaigne puts it, that the world cannot do without us just now, and that the world will just have to wait, while others satisfy the death-hunger of society. In another formulation, Montaigne imagines that, for most of us, our own dying involves a whole reconfiguration of the stars.

Ourselves, not another The fear of the death that is their own leads some men to choose suicide as a way of taking control of their own termination. Yet that path has its particular terrors. For some it takes too much courage to despatch themselves, and they must turn to others to do the job for them. Some of them turn to their servants, with explicit instructions on which veins should be used, and in what kind of environment. The Emperor Helagabalus prepared an elaborate and elegant suicide event for himself, and brought in the court to watch. but, like Lucius Domitius, was unable to carry through. Hadrian, the Emperor, marked on his own chest the area which his servants were to strike, in killing him.

These are studied and digested deaths' (Montaigne) The best deaths, among his thanatographies, says Montaigne, are deaths into which some planning has gone. We are, today, far from the age when the planned death was in style. Fancy funerals mean expensive funerals, but by and large the funeral industry has gone private and familial. The Roman funeral, especially when it involved men of state, was highly public, and carried out under the eyes of the leaders of the nation. These studied and digested deaths include many in which there was room to mediate their significance; Socrates, for example, had thirty days to consider his sentence; Atticus, the close friend of Cicero, called his friends to tell them his pain was too great, too much for him, but then decided he had gone so far in the death experience, that he wanted to eke it out; he savored the stages of his death. Tullius Marcellinus, though, summoned his friends, who gave him the advice to go ahead with the death process. Bathing himself in warm water, he complied and went ahead, feeling sensations that were almost pleasant; then dying in peace.

Conclusions.

Montaigne takes a detailed interest in death and dying, as he does in every aspect of the human adventure; nothing is too hard for him to face, or too painful for him to look at closely. He admires the sang froid of the good dyer, but fully recognizes the serious terror of the unknown which is presented to us in our death.

Essay 14 That our mind hinders itself

Introductory

The reader of our moment may wonder at the diversity of styles and manners with which Montaigne debriefs himself. His ease is calculated, as is his strategy of arousing interest: sometimes, as in the story of Raimond de Sebond, by fascinating us with a matter of unique interest, our relationship to the other animals, and to our own weakness, sometimes by focusing our minds on a small but vast conundrum, as in the present short 'piece' on the nature of difference, in which, like the startling contemporary, Jacques Derrida, Montaigne sees important keys to the way mind works and the thought-world resolves itself. It might be worth noting that the finesse of these delicate inquiries, into mind, has rarely been paralleled, but if ever by the work of a 20 th century French essayist, Alain, in *his Sentiments, Passions, et Signe*s. What contemporary perceptions had Montaigne intuited in his essay on difference and mind?

Examples.

Perfect balance and mind Montaigne opens by imagining a person torn between two equal desires; for a luscious piece of ham, on the one hand, or for a savorous bottle of burgundy on the other. Imagine that the balance of desires is perfect. Would the result be that we die of inanition, unable to move in either of two directions? If not, what could introduce movement in one direction or the other? What could make one desire prevail?

Stasis and Movement Turning to his number one philosophical recourse, Montaigne finds that the Stoics have most carefully dissected the issues around difference, the motor of change, thus around the issue of what would get the figure in the above example to make a move.

Difference The difference between the ham and the bottle of wine, in the present instance, can be put this way: accidental impulse, which is an elemental component of our existence on earth, is inherent to the structure of entities, in a world which was itself the offspring of change. 'Nothing presents itself to us in which there is no difference."

No difference-free whole Montaigne invites us to imagine a fissure free whole—say of tightly wound cord—to which all the self-enclosing norms of geometry and structural perfection apply. The very perfection of the unitary construct is sufficient guarantee that it will generate a way to show the imperfection of its wholeness, its self-creation as difference.

Conclusions.

Montaigne makes us think, here, of the conundrums Descartes will soon pose to himself, in pondering over the relations among thought, material reality, and the brain. For Descartes, the inevitable movement of thought, the *je pense*, implies the existence of the thinker, in whom, once his mobility is established, difference in already included.

Essay 15 That our desires are augmented by difficulty

Introductory

Montaigne opened Essay l4 on a discussion of the nature of difference, and especially on the question of why difference exists. (The Ur mind form, say in the infant, would seem to point toward a sameness of what-is, as it presents itself to the youngest human; only then comes the differentiation.) Montaigne follows the Stoics in imagining that only a slight accidental impulse can introduce movement into stasis. The same definition-dilemmas are raised by the question of desire, and especially by the question of what drives and sustains it. In the present essay, Montaigne digs deeply into the nature of desire and into the way it thrives on difficulty. The balance between desire and the thing desired can be so perfect as to contain no motor toward change and fulfillment. I sit between the ham and the bottle of wine, and die of inanition. Or do I? Do I move, prompted by some accidental impulse in things? What kinds of provocation within the structure of things does Montaigne find operative in daily behavior?

Examples.

Is our will more obstinate for being opposed? The stasis which precedes differentiation, which we met above, becomes active, differentiated, upon being confronted with an opposition to its stable condition. 'There is no reason that has not its contrary,' adds Montaigne, encouraging us to consider that divergence too is part of the fundamental structure of reality.

Attraction and distance in love Montaigne opens here one of his favorite themes, the inner geographies of love. (Later French 'autobiographers'—Stendahl, Rousseau, Alain—all devote intense attention to 'amour.') It appears that love is par excellence the example of interrelation between obstacle and fruition, a tussled relation which can never be fully solved. Within the anatomy of love, 'spice' is required: the Spartan ruler Lycurgus passed various state laws declaring 'that lovers should enjoy one another only by stealth.' (Only difficult romantic relations provide the 'spice for the sauce.')

Pleasure and pain in love The pain of unrequited—or simply 'difficult'—love is pleasant, a theme deeply woven into French literature, and latent throughout the discussion of obstacles to romance, cited above. (In Romantic poetry, in classical tragedy, In Opera such as *Manon Lescaut*, the challenges to love are what heighten it, and make it available as the one bourgeois way to transcend the ordinary in life, before it is increasingly reduced to the commodity state.)

Desire and Fruition Women know better than men, that the pleasure of the chase is the heart of romance. While satiety promotes a fatuous dull condition, as distinct from the chase, it is also the resolution to the tireless pursuit that spurs human action for much of the active life of a person.

Women's and men's drives Fundamentally, Montaigne begins to conclude, we need to realize that the difference, which provides the conflict between the two genders, is also the key to the action of the battle, which is taking place all the time, all around us. Men have an innate desire to trample on the artifices by which women long to seduce their male counterparts. Women have the desire to be violated—says Montaigne, echoing a normal male read on society, at his time.

Peace in the midst of conflict Montaigne gradually moves the topics of discussion away from the gender battlefield, and into areas of domestic analysis, which closely touch the lived issue of the Religious Civil Wars, in the midst of which Montaigne is continually learning (painfully) what it means that man is just a worm. In the midst of this vast learning curve, Montaigne is being obliged to decide to pull himself apart from the crazy frays of life, and to settle in a hoary castle, with enough repose to read, write, and think. And in the return to his castle he is being given fresh food for thought, as he realizes that his property alone, among all that is in his part of the countryside, has been spared vandalism or assault, in the course of the brutal civil wars, which are ravaging the entire land. The explanation for his exemption? He has left his chateau unlocked and unguarded, though he has been within, unguarded. Peace breeds peace?

Conclusions

Peace and conflict, both in private and public existence, make up the heart of this lengthy and thoughtful essay. While Montaigne is a shrewd judge of the war between the sexes, he is equally sharp on the mobility of peace, the way it can move in, to shelter a battered community, or battered soul in the midst of a love affairs. Montaigne is a rigorous judge of both humanity and himself, but open to what pleasure can make its way through the challenges.

Essay 16 Of Glory

Introductory

Montaigne opens the essay with pertinent remarks on our approach to God, in language. We can circle his glory with names that are on the outside of that glory, but we cannot get inside the glory itself. The name of that glory rings dully against the sides of the real thing. Yet our most important accolades are reserved for those who have risen to glory in battle, by having convinced others that glory is the goal and justification of vast suffering, by having sacrificed their lives in wars which proclaim the glory of a chosen cause.

Upon reflection, Montaigne seems of the opinion that the greatest glory in the world is hardly worth extending your hand toward. The typical experience of our unreadiness to address glory is our confusion of glory with true glory, with others' unsolicited suggestion that there has been glory in our actions. The appropriate judge of that kind of social compliment is the recipient of the compliment, who if he has good sense will reject the compliment. Our own consciences can rapidly disabuse us of any suspicion of our glory.

Let's test a few examples of ways the word *glory* can be used and misused.

Examples.

Glory and virtue Virtue is the true test of glory; not for the headlines. It is easy to compliment others, but difficult to enter the details of helping them to solve a problem. If the reward of our virtue, say a helping act to a friend, will only pay full reward if you remain silently and patiently on top of the issue, if the reward of your virtue is nothing more public than a good conscience, you have your reward. True virtue remains unrewarded, except in the mind of the virtuous man.

Withdrawal as virtue Virtue hesitates to say its name, and Montaigne approaches gently to declare the minimal. He himself had in mid-life, as we know, withdrawn to live in his chateau—which was at best a quiet haven, depending on the situation with the war. He had remained there in relative peace for many years, sheltered as he put it, by his lack of self-defense, and one ancient valet. Montaigne did much of his writing in that shelter, and much of the thinking that made such original writing possible. One wants to compare Montaigne's library with the Dutch Oven shelter (the *poele*) in which fifty years later Descartes grasped the initial conceptions of the *Discours de la Methode*, and in silence became aware of the mental condition in which human self awareness takes birth.

Epicurus and Carneades: The Case for Glory Two figures of ancient Greek culture serve Montaigne as competing theorists of glory. Epicurus, practical as we have seen, and in this guise attractive to Montaigne, took a practical view of glory, in the light of which it was easy for him to come down squarely on the side of that elevated condition. For him, glory was practical gain, and would be your commitment to riches and happiness for your children. The philosopher Carneades took a different stance. He supposed that any virtue that derives its good repute from glory, is suspect, and unconvincing—based on market place commentary. True virtue, and true honor, derive their value from their inherent worth. The buzz on the streets will never penetrate those corners of silent choice and decision, in which value judgments are established, on the grounds of which we enter the world as moral agents.

Conclusions.

Montaigne adopts a strongly moral position, toward glory and societal reputation. He is as little inclined, as a New England Puritan, to accept the worldly cult of glory. He is all about conscience, very little about reputation. (He has seen the hollowness of reputation. It is what his fellow citizens are killing themselves over.). As for glory, he knows from battle that heroism is a term of chance, attributed to rare individuals whom luck pushes to the front at the right moment.

Essay 17 Of Presumption

Introductory

Montaigne has regularly insisted on his modesty, refusing himself either airs or the unneeded exaggerations which so regularly accompany efforts to speak of oneself. (We have so much invested in ourselves, that it is almost impossible not to create inner propaganda for ourselves, and then to be taken in by it. Our author is a scrupulous foe of this mind-trap.) In the present essay he puts himself seriously on guard, against the inner trickery of self-praise. He cuts at the root of such praise by noting that 'we are nothing but ceremony,' and then he proceeds to parade the hollowness of his own inward life. The innocent self, it might be a self-portrait here, struggles with a dual temptation: to minimize his own faults, to maximize those of his neighbor. Let alone the question of love, the issues of simple equity in judgment demand their hearing here. As for the love, Montaigne is careful to treat his servants as he would like them to treat him—short, nimble lord of the manor--after having worked for half a lifetime to protect his inherited native plot.

The self Montaigne wishes to shepherd through the darkness and danger—we are in the midst of the highly dangerous Religious Wars, and even in the kind of free zone Montaigne has established, caution is essential. Montaigne keeps his head low, lives in virtual isolation. He presumes as little as necessary, and he keeps his head low.

Examples.

No farmer Montaigne emphasizes his lack of agricultural know how. Living in his chateau, keeping careful guard of the place, so far as he can with no firearms and one ancient gate keeper. He lives a fairly frugal existence, though far from abandoned, and the beneficiary of what attention was possible, from the surrounding (but beleaguered) landowners.

Presuming nothing The more Montaigne is alone, depending on his own reading, and his own thoughts, the more he concentrates on the littleness of man, the 'ceremonial animal.' Interestingly, this sense of the smallness of man makes him increasingly comfortable, because it allows him to think in the proper scale of the presence of the human in the global world. One thinks back, here, to Montaigne's praise of the globalism of Raimond de Sebond.

'I have a slow and perplexed apprehension.' Montaigne gives close attention to his writing style, for which he has little good to say, but which, under study, shows him to be the canniest of self-critics, subtle, careful, and never one to lack the right word.

Conclusions.

Montaigne's modernist quest, to be and find himself, is given ample wing by isolation in his castle. It will be remembered, that the Lord of the Manor was safe in that refuge, because he shut no one out.

Essay 18 Of Giving the Lie

Introductory

To give the lie to a person, today, is to 'accuse him or her of lying,' an accusation so frequently appropriate in our time that without some shading it seems like a 'simple synonym' for 'call a person a liar.' 'Give another person the lie,' however, has the special sense of 'showing another by your actions' the falsehood he committed against you by saying X or Y. It is 'calling him a liar' on the 'basis of evidence.' Montaigne gives his critics—who claim that his essais are just self-puffery—the lie by showing them of what living texture they are made, and to what extent his true interest, in these essays, is 'giving a true account' of what kind of man he was.

The present essay is a giving a true account, to those who deride his essays, of the character of those pieces, and the modest, purely private intentions he has, in creating this record. The essence of the 'justification' is that each life is a story to tell, and deserves the interest of fellow humans for the simple reason that it is a record of life. Or rather, to put it as Montaigne did, his book of essays constructed him, gave him a life, and he tagged along keeping up with it.

What did he mean by this account of what his essays were?

Examples

Not a statue Montaigne makes much of the live nature of his diary entries. He is not presenting anything to embellish a skyline or take a pose on your screen. He is writing records of life—parts of his large project, which is the 'study of man'—and in fact he is recording the kinds of daily life events of which he himself would gladly have known more, when it came to the daily lives of his own grandparents. He is not, however, simply attempting to chronicle historical difference, but is always alert to the innate and ultimate sense of daily life, 'The most delicious pleasures digested within, and leaving no trace of themselves,' are precisely the corners Montaigne prefers to explore. They are where the life of his essays takes place.

A pinch of the other Montaigne includes, among the chief traits of his essays, the presence in them of constant reference to the major public and literary figures of classical, and especially Roman, antiquity Montaigne gives room for occasional remarks on the literary works of his own moment in Renaissance France, but by and large his reference point is the classical. His admiration for such figures as Cicero, Pompey, Demetrius, Cato, Caesar—is unbounded, and includes a consistent attention to their courage and patriotism, virtues Montaigne feels he cannot sufficiently praise, as he himself lives in an age rotten to the core.

Memoirs of truth For Montaigne his essays are memorials of a finer age, in which the truth came first in any statement. Lying, as he believes, has become an acceptable vice, although in fact, as Montaigne sees it, lying is an offense against God. Plutarch, one of Montaigne's favorites, says that men play with words, as children play with toys: neither of them concerning themselves meaningfully with the quality of his playthings.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is eager to justify the activity to which he has been devoting his adult life, his genre-innovating essais, which fail to fall in the usual categories of study as they were understood at his time. Many people accused him of the simple desire to blow his own horn, when in fact he was a person of no great reputation or concern. In the present essay, Montaigne defends what is essentially his own life practice.

Essay 19. Of Liberty of Conscience

Introductory

From the beginning of the *Essais* we are aware that Montaigne shares the cultural crisis of the sixteenth century religious wars in France. He is a Catholic Christian, fights on the side of the Monarch, and believes fully in the monarchic-Christian values of the conflict. He lives the continuity between the classical (chiefly Roman) ideals of culture and the New World's necessary rethinking of those ideals. As for the ancient pagan stance, he is no friend of the pre Christian cults, which flourished in Imperial Rome, but which by the time of the present Essay were historical relics, conveyed largely in the literary imagination.

That latter state of affairs, however, did not prevent Montaigne from making Julian the Apostate (331-363 AD) a model of the tenacity of Roman paganism, and a culture idol, a man of universal integrity and discipline. What most impressed Montaigne, about Julian, was his dignity, which at the same time shed retrospective light onto the beauty and power of the pagan tradition.Julian dignified those around him by respecting the individual conscience wherever he encountered it—resembling, if anyone in Roman history, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* are perhaps are most distinguished inheritances from the Roman conviction of the dignity and liberty of the individual.

Examples.

Good intent; bad results Montaigne points out that during the Civil Wars, men of good intent, if rigid and doctrinaire, could frequently be found behind the worst of results; zeal drove them to excess, and to the loss of their humanity.

Missing the mark Montaigne is from the start a liberal minded friend of independent thought, and of openness. He particularly disliked the narrow mindedness of the Catholic factions, when their narrowness led to across the board condemnation of the pagan world. (Montaigne, as we know, was profoundly touched by his knowledge of the Classics and for all his Christianity a defender of the ancient world in general.).

Julian the Apostate Julian the Apostate was the Eastern Roman Emperor (331-363 AD)who reversed the Christianization of the Eastern Imperium, and made strong efforts to restore the pagan cult world in Constantinople. Julian was a passionate defender of liberty of thought, fought for the rights of free speech, and defended the cause of scholarship and learning. He divided the night, while on military manoeuvers, into four parts; one was for conversation with his men, and one for scholarship and religious study, the key actions of his life, the salvation of his soul, in which he had absolute confidence. The rest was for sleep. For Montaigne, Julian remains the supreme example of a virtuous pagan, and a model for his own troops.

This model turned back, onto the troops, those examples of self-discipline and faith, which were regularly lacking in the most orthodox Christianized troops. Julian's natural respect for liberty and independence of thought was a shining example for the Roman army. Killed at the age of thirty one, Julian carried with him absolute confidence in his soul's survival, and on his lips, legend tells words announcing that the Nazarean had 'won at last.' For Montaigne this was a heightened assertion of the 'liberty of conscience,' the 'coming into clarity' at the end.

Conclusions.

Montaigne, like Julian, was a global soul, concerned with the breadth of the human condition, and though inflecting his position in a Catholic Christian form nevertheless open to other paths to salvation. He had great respect for pre-Christian paganism, though in the instance of Julian he makes one significant reservation (or it is a slip)? We are told that Julian was 'besotted with sacrifices,' a great friend of divination, forever on the look for signs from on high, or signs from above. For Montaigne this is where

the pre-Christian vision of God is eclipsed, and the broad sense of meaning in the universe is temporarily cut back.

Essay 20 That we taste nothing pure

Introductory

Montaigne opens with an erotic issue, that 'in our extremest pleasure lies some sort of groaning and complaining.' The discussion is about to open into the large issues of pleasure and pain, and the ways those two feelings intermix in us with sharp stress on the pleasures and pains of sexuality. Then Montaigne explains the root cause to this fraught state of affairs, which defines the human condition. 'We do not purchase but at the price of evil.' All pleasure costs us, as though it was in itself an expensive evil. This is that sweeping broadsides, against the human condition, to which Montaigne occasionally gives expression, and which appears to exceed his own commonsense skepticism, readiness to debunk rosy accounts of daily reality. Let's look ahis t some examples of the way in which he supports his ideas that pleasure and pain are inextricably mixed.

Examples

Labor and pleasure associate When it comes to the internal anatomy of our emotions, Montaigne pastes and juxtaposes, until in the end he creates a convincing profile, in which both the vitality and the fallibility of the individual are laid bare to inspection. We are not looking at a dark New England puritan portrait of mankind, the imagery we will later get from a Jonathan Edwards' '*Sinners in the Hands of an angry God.'* We are looking at a 'realistic' portrait of the human presence, with its inherent limitations, its breakthroughs of occasional novelty, and the inevitable gap between valour and withdrawal. Into this 'realistic portrait' enters the de facto reality that our labor gives us pleasures, in part because it gives direction and meaning to our lives. None of the tones in this human portrait is monochrome, but the overall tone is gray and realistic.

Pleasure in Melancholy Montaigne is highly sensitive to the pleasures that go into sadness, and into its sister, melancholy. There is a fine bond between the mood of pleasure and the delicate sense that comes from reflecting on one's friends who have passed away. (Montaigne daringly compares that sense to the taste of tart apples. He extends his point to the effect achieved in many admirable paintings, in which laughter and weeping seem almost to coalesce into one another. The conclusion of a painted smile will build into itself the first buds of sadness.)

Interior mixtures Montaigne is in this essay, as often, concerned with the mixtures of feelings and attitudes which coincide to make up human personality. Given our proclivity to foreground alternating facets of our personality, to seem to be made of this taste now that taste tomorrow, it is wise to leave ample room for changes and repositionings in basic personality. In the present instance, Montaigne has presented us with a rich palette of personality ingredients.

Conclusions

By essay's end, we are at peace with a multi-faceted profile of the human personality. Montaigne has simply chosen to exemplify his view of the mixed modalities of the human personality, which is capable, as we all know, of simultaneous pleasure and pain, sadness and laughter. What are the Essais, after all, except forays into the physiognomy of the human?

Essay 21 Against Idleness

Introductory

The current essay concerns military idleness, and contrasts It sharply with mere amusement. Montaigne enters this topic from the standpoint of a quasi- military person, concerned above all with honor, with completing the military task as understood from the individual's whole career. Noteworthily, Montaigne assembles his cast of characters largely from Roman military history, and picks his battles from historical material transpiring many centuries prior to him, largely in the eastern Mediterranean. Cavalry traditions, from ancient Roman to pre modern French times, remained largely standardized and formal, and consequently served well, throughout the ages, as a touchstone for proper military and especially cavalry behaviors. It was not that Montaigne participated, for any extensive time, in the official French army, but that his patronly breeding, his life time familiarity with horsemanship, both served as a natural segue into the military operations and defense of his native land.

Not surprisingly, in this setting, Montaigne took the military career seriously, as a testing ground for himself, and as a grid against which to measure young men's behaviors. He believes that young men could chose no better discipline than the cavalry, which will keep them strong and flexible; and he has no praise for easy learning, such as that of the Ottomans, who in his time were gaining renown for their scholarly rather than their military savvy. Make the model Roman, Montaigne hints, learn your lessons standing up, eat while marching, be sure to know your master's orders, and follow them assiduously, for they derive from planning, and should not deviate from the initial care that shaped them.

What examples does Montaigne suggest, as guidance for the individual starting out to learn the world through the strictures of military and cavalry discipline?

Examples.

Obedient and true The learner, in the school Montaigne envisages, Is obedient and true, from start to finish. He follows carefully planned strategies, from which he does not deviate, and when, and if it comes to death, he needs to know that he has rigorously followed orders. (He must, of course, have implicit confidence that his commander is on the same page with him.) He would in this kind of life course have satisfied the orders of an Emperor like Vespasian, who says that 'the Emperor must die standing.' He would, if possible, also be following the strict requirements of an Emperor Julian, who is in his zeal to give the soul free play at the end, insisted that the dying body should be as little tainted as necessary by the stain of bodily functions, or by the presence of spittle.

A noble death? Good advice from the author reminds us that that one should not promise too much—even to oneself—in the way of a noble and inspiring death. Too many unexpected events may intervene—though anything like cowardice would be impermissible; the Spaniards and Portuguese, for instance-- are unwilling to die fighting, may die in the process of being viciously slain, and pass beyond the point where the human can even try to make a beautiful spectacle of himself.

Mule Modoch, King of Fez This North African monarch refused to die in a bone-crushing slaughter, so prolonged the battle farther into the Sahara, where the Portuguese lost their bearings and their orientation. Drawing the Portuguese far off base, to certain destruction, Modoch refused to go down to defeat, though to death he finally yielded.

Conclusions.

Idleness certainly plays no role in the battlefield ethos for which Montaigne would love to see his youthful learners—this is a kind of text—prepared. One must be ready for bloody battles and developments—like Modoch's elaboration of the bloody encounter in the desert—for which there is nothing in the rule book.

Essay 22 On posting

Introductory

On the short and husky side, known for his life of good health Montaigne is a modern man, for sure, associative and self-ironic. Montaigne had to have seemed a natural at posting on horse, and yet he found the activity tiring, and his own endurance, in this skill so essential to distance riding, far below what he wanted to expect of himself. With characteristic deftness he moves his discussion from that topic, which shows him at a disadvantage, to the topic of what he is reading. This kind of associative thinking is part of Montaigne's kind of contribution to the fictional potential of the essay style.

At once—with the present change in narrator topic-- we are onto the exploits of the Persian King Cyrus. We are on the topic of communications in a great Empire, of getting the message across, posting over distance, as when in the old days one excitedly posted a letter to a pen pal in a foreign country Unfortunately, on horseback however, Montaigne felt shaken up by the rapid up and down rhythm of posting, and by that confessed serious weakness as a horseback rider. He is dreaming of the universal to communication system of Cyrus, who had horses posted throughout the empire, ready to carry the baton to imperial victory.

Montaigne moves on in thought to Cyrus' messenger horses and particularly to the sense of 'sending them to their posts, ''dispatching them to distant points,' as those movements suggest largeness of enterprise into which the individual's effort can fit. Montaigne is in mind, suddenly, moving from the self-doubt embedded in his own unsureness about his own posting, then showing that he has much more with which to illustrate the gap between his own self-confidence, and the prowess illustrated throughout the world by feats of horsemanship.

Montaigne is a nimble mind, an ever ready imaginer of new directions, and an ally for our own moment. What would Montaigne say to me as I turn to add a post to my Facebook page? Has a writer any responsibility for the meanings acquired by words which he was used to employ in an ancient sense? Post? Does my next door neighbor John, an erudite guy, know Montaigne's sense of post? What would Montaigne himself have said to the here ensuing debate about movement and absorption in human history? Did he realize he was stepping over the limits into the philosophy of history? Would not Montaigne be among the first 'essayists' we would want to read, on this fundamentally postmodern issue of what a word means when it is reappropriated by another culture, as we did with his original

Examples.

Cyrus King of Persia Montaigne is intrigued by the communications genius of Cyrus, who built the strength of his Empire around the rapid transfer of news and information. Posting, in the ancient physical sense as well as in today's sense of 'communicating,' was the key term for the multiple activities at stake here.

Lucinus Rufus, Herald to Pompey This furiously driven courier would hire high speed steeds and a carriage, to get the latest in front of his Master. If his team encountered a foaming river they simply charged right through it.

Messenger pigeons Speed-message pigeons were multiple on the streets of Rome When possible Romans carried messenger pigeons in their shirts. The birds could be sent off, with urgent messages, to many central locations in the capital.

Conclusion

The present essay is different and seductive. Montaigne opens by confessing to a weakness in posting. Once we have let the word 'posting' through the door, in our translation, we are exposed to a wide range of neologisms which cannot have meaning for Montaigne, but which open the discourse of the Essay. It is part of Montaigne's genius that he reaches, through his rich language, here in a two century old British translation, into issue themes to plumb which would soon invest us in a conversation about Postmodernism and Derrida. What is posting, after all?

Essay 23 Of Ill Means employed to a good end

Introductory

We know of the paradoxical turn to Montaigne's mind, for which it is especially expectable that human being will prove to be full of surprises and contrarieties. Man is a worm, a coward without consistency, and nothing if not unloyal and jealous. It is therefore a momentary respite, to find that man Is able to accomplish great things, even though on occasion those great things have to be achieved at the cost of deviousness and taking advantage of those who fall into the path of our strategy.

It is well to start toward Montaigne's position by thinking back to the *Apologie for Raimond Sebond*. In that piece Montaigne conducts us through a rivetting discussion of the intimate mesh between nature and the human world, with special attention to what seem re-formed harmonies between the two realms. Because the natural and the human inter communicate so deeply, and in so many ways actually 'care' for one another, one front waxing, the other waning, the powers of nature both waxing and waning; because of this complex interrelation between nature and man, it can be no surprise that often blameless Mother Nature turns against her hairless and impotent child, feeds it on rounds of drought and storm, and then on a sudden, as has happened with crop devastation in Africa, ozone mutilation in America, or species destruction in the Amazon, gradually awakens man, the sleeping giant or dormant Prometheus, to the point where he trembles, stirs, wakes, and realizes—as humans do at such moments-- that he has to do in full consciousness with the entirety of his ecosystem, that he can no longer remain satisfied with temporary lodging in the universe.

Examples.

Mother Nature and other angry ladies. Accidental, as well as inwardly planned, Mother Nature has blasted us with plagues, volcanoes, viruses, while at the same time providing a regular beautiful dose of 'the sun in the morning and the moon at night.' It is amazing and worth it, she cries, while battering us with a passing asteroid. Within her confines, nature watches cities, states, and we have to say planets, grow sick and die. Don't think Mother Nature isn't provoking us, to learn to live on Mars, to keep our eyes and our mouths shut, while traveling the galaxy.

Emigration. Immigration It could be thought 'cruel' of nature to abet our overcrowded cultures, our militant perspectives, and those expurgational strike backs, with which we periodically empty our countries, and send excess citizens, sometimes among our own finest, to places like the Outback or Barrow, Alaska. It is happening at our moment, on a mass scale, and if the edges of the earth can be civilized by the initial prod of an uncultured narcissist, we have all the evidence required that ill means can be employed to good ends.

Wisdoms of Anatomy Montaigne makes much of the ancient Rome practices—both in gladiatorial settings, in actual staged combats among citizens, and In medically staged scenarios—of fighting to death, arranging to display all the realities of human anatomy, and making visible, to all the fellow citizens, exactly what kind of thing a human carcass is. The overall point, of this ill-fitting attack on society, was that the human society owes it to its residents, to learn to cope as successfully as possible with the reality of life on earth.

Conclusions.

Montaigne takes as wide a view as possible of the human situation. He recognizes that 'evil' drives in nature can be harnessed, which can lead to sharp social improvement, advances in human self-awareness, and that even harsh ex- posure to the brutal presence of human anatomies can conclude by instructing humans in ways to intervene on behalf of their lives.

Essay 24 Of the Roman grandeur

Introductory

We are aware, by this point in Montaigne's essays, that Ancient Rome—its history, literature, and culture—is the keystone of his world system. Early modern France still thought of itself as a close descendant of the Roman world, and Montaigne himself, because for personal reasons (he was interested in validating his own Roman origins, and minimizing his own native mediaeval roots) he wanted to stress his closeness to *Romanitas.* In the present essay, Montaigne opens by expressing great scorn for any comparison drawn between the grandeur of ancient Roman society, and the Renaissance society in which he lives. We realize, as we read, that Montaigne has expressed little fondness for the culture of France around him—especially for the locals or for regional history—and that the earlier history of the origins of his nation are a blank to him.

How does he illustrate his startling impression of Roman grandeur?

Examples.

Cicero: Book of Epistles VII In the epistle in question, Cicero writes to Julius Caesar that he should continue on sending recommendations. (Promo letters on behalf of needed candidates within the vast Roman Imperial system. i.e. young men favored by family connections, fungible power, or useful pockets of wealth.). 'I will make Marcus Furius King of Gaul,' Cicero replies, adding that he is ready to make further recommendations, if Caesar will just continue 'sending them on.'

What Montaigne admires, here, is surely the grand gesture, Cicero's sense of citizen confidence, that he can speak for the Roman nation and people—a verbal and spiritual package long respected throughout the Mediterranean—and with a doff of the hat dispense with a kingship. The bravoura of such a gesture speaks kingdoms to Montaigne. We can hear him from our own perspective, too, in the streets of Miami, where we hear Chinese businessmen lunching over the sale of properties, which in time will seem like the routine skyline of a great western city. The example is right. Within the vastness of the Roman Empire, especially in Central Asia, it was not unknown for wealthy entrepreneurs to buy and sell cities. They were rich, they were Roman, and they moved with the confidence of buccaneers, from one end of the desert to the other.

Giving, not Taking It was the assertion of Marcus Antonius that the Romans were 'greatest In what they gave, and not in what they took.' One can doubtless see, from Montaigne's own essays, that he would readily value the 'giving spirit' in ancient Rome. This was the spirit, as later centuries came to fathom it that led the Romans to leave native queens and kings in place, after they had been defeated by the Romans, to rebuild what had been destroyed in battle, and to provide generously for newly created immigrants to play future substantive roles in the Empire.

Conclusions.

Memories of great Empires can linger far into the future, shaping attitudes and building powerful cities and armies. It is easy to see the power that the memory of ancient Rome exercised over Montaigne. The language he spoke and wrote was a rich off shoot of classical Latin, those cities and monuments which scattered the coasts, deserts, and mountainsides of former colonial outposts—in Africa or along The Silk Road—were for the patrician Montaigne, growing into his privileged intellectual heritage around the ancient city of Bordeaux, the living presence of Rome itself.

Essay 25 Not to counterfeit being sick

Introductory

Montaigne centers in, here, on an experience probably familiar to many modern children, in many corners of the world: the experience of faking sickness, so as to get out of school or a doctor's appointment for the day. This familiar childhood trick is of course not limited to childhood, but is useful for new recruits, people seriously in debt, or befuddled lovers hoping not to have a choice forced on them. Faking incapacity or sickness is a ready but seldom very useful strategy for escaping what seems an intolerable dilemma. Montaigne stages a foxy list of examples of downfalls often invited by the above strategy, examples which, in the end, he attempts (with the help of Seneca) to put inside a broader depiction of human nature and behavior.

Examples.

Downsides of the counterfeit. (1) A certain Roman gentleman, anxious for a prolonged justification for absence from court, asserts widely that he is suffering from gout. He wraps himself up in thick layers of bandages, remains immobile in his own home, surrounded by servants, but when the time comes to go away on a trip, he finds himself immobilized, his legs weak and tired, his appetite gone. He has spent his credit on buying freedom from pressure, but now that he is free he cannot summon up the pleasure to enjoy freedom.

Downsides of the counterfeit (2) Five English blades took off from England on a spree, to do mischief in France, then to return home with a big surprise for their girlfriends. They travelled as one eyed, each with a patch over one eye. Unfortunately they lost their sight in the patched eye, while on their journey, and when they returned to their girls it was as five one eyed veterans. An unpredictable humour, taking advantage of a gouty condition which had formed in the eyes of each of them, had rendered each of them blind in one eye.

A dream downside Pliny tells of a man who dreams that he is blind, and in the course of his dream gradually becomes blind. Montaigne swims through dimensions of brain waves and hallucination, describing to us the fate of this man, who in the dream's finale wakes blind. Montaigne is close to thinking of a serious corporal agency, like eyesight, as subject to psychological adjustments.

A Senecan perspective Montaigne uses some creative thinking by one of his Stoic masters, Seneca, in order to enframe the discussion of blindness and sight in darkness. A lady, blind, urges her maidservant to take her out into the light, so she can see again. She is under the illusion that all she needs to do is go outside, out of the house or out of her town, to see again. She is mistaken, though in a certain sense she is simply discovering, in her own predicament, the interior darkness of the whole human predicament, from which none of us is free, and inside which each of us is trapped, ignorant of our final destination or even of our 'next best move.'

Conclusions.

It is characteristic of Montaigne to deplore the harmful effects of counterfeit behavior. While he abhors lying, he nevertheless finds a way past the Big Lie—Senecan version—to the point where he can ingeniously, and freshly, reassess the human condition as a whole.

Essay 26 Of Thumbs

Introductory

Montaigne takes special interest in the resources and corners of the human body and could be called 'modern' if for no other reason, than his refusal to accept at face value the accounts of our kind that are generally passed over as given. What, indeed, has less about us to question than our thumbs? Montaigne's readiness to defy this assumption is part of his charm and energy, He is able to conclude by enlarging our imaginations, and making our bodies into richer plains of significance for us.

What kinds of insight does Montaigne give us Into the runty knobs so heavily built into the corners of our hands?

Examples

Thumb twisting, blood sucking Tacitus reports that, among barbarian kings on the far borders of the Roman Empire, it was customary to trade oaths by intertwisting their thumbs until the pressure brought blood to the surface. They could then suck one another's thumb blood, and in that blood make everlastingly valid pacts.

Etymologies of power Ancient physicians called the thumb the 'master finger,' and favored the Greek term for thumb, which meant 'another hand.' To depress and turn your thumb inwards was a widespread sign of favor. (Montaigne's father was able to walk the perimeter of a table on his thumbs). Those who were maimed in their thumbs were exempt from war—though those who tried to avoid war, by maiming or mutilating their thumbs, were liable to heavy penalties. The Emperor Augustus cut off the estate of a nobleman who had dethumbed two sons, in order to keep them out of war. Another gentleman of distinction in Rome got life behind bars for dethumbing himself, with a view to avoiding military service.

Naval dethumbing Montaigne is rich In examples of victorious Roman naval commanders, who broke the thumbs of their vanquished enemies, in order to render them unable to use the oars. Is there not something unusually cruel about this behavior? What did Montaigne think of it? We speak of Montaigne as a 'modern man.' How far can we carry that? What would he have said to the analysis of a thumb as a reduced penis, a retracted erection?

Conclusions.

Montaigne is a skeptic, calls man a worm, and Is quick to demystify ennobling readings of human nature. Is it not then appropriate that Nietzsche would greatly have admired Montaigne? What does Montaigne admire most about the human being?

Essay 27 Cowardice the mother of cruelty

Introductory

Montaigne is a determined enemy of lies and cowardice, both of which deprive the person of ease and comfort, and destabilize what dignity the human person can design for himself. He is, however, also unusually sensitive to the turbulent movement of negative emotions which swirl through us at all times, and which join the desire for revenge in a trio of destabilizing modes. A cowardly vengeful liar is no rarity in the human menagerie, but it is a surefire formula for disease and faulty perception or insight. In the present essay, Montaigne gives free rein to his critique of the. Issue of quiet knowing. Let's track some examples of his analyses, of he ravages created by cowardice.

Examples.

Alexander of Pheres Alexander was an ancient tyrant notorious for the sufferings he had brought onto others, victims of military assault, or personal mistreatment. He was a successful but brutal military leader, but he was uncontrollably sensitive to scenes of suffering and passion, so that he could not allow himself to be to the theatre, where the sight of him weeping over the miseries of Hecuba or Andromache would totally undermine the macho image he wished to leave of himself. His blend of cruel, even sadistic behavior, with excessive sentimentality, feminine no less, was for Montaigne a formular for the most disastrously bad contribution to society

War time cruelty The kinds of sentimental cruelty natural to Alexander are in the actual theater of war rare— a figure like Alexander of Pheres, for instance, being a cowardly sadist, not much more, and in that disposition joining, Montaigne says, those scum like characters who do the real killing inside a military contingent, hanging around to slaughter, and then to claim retrospective credit for the killing— which reduces largely to a mopping up of corpses. Montaigne works hard on the themes of honesty and dignity, which control even our basest instincts, in time of war.

Vengeance and Repentance Throughout the above discussion, Montaigne anticipates superior outcomes, through battle and conflict these outcomes can lead to repentance—at best, or if not that to a review of once's behavior. A battlefield fight, for Montaigne, is a clash not just of camps but of values. In many cases genuine personal conflicts are being brought into heavy thudding conflict. In other words, the true claims of moral growth are at stake beyond the sword, and the effeminate inability to deal creatively with a wounded adversary marks the contender as un- worthy for the dignities of battle.

Why is cowardice the mother of cruelty? It takes a true man—remember Montaigne is living in deep macho centered culture—to see in armed conflict an occasion to force truth and honor out of an opponent, rather than, simply, to extract pain. Montaigne moves the larger discussion, here, over into the larger issues of armed conflict in dueling, where the finer tuning of weaponry and skill are required. The dueller cannot turn away, and in fact now—in Montaigne's own day— can hardly function without a small army of assistants, who do some of his fighting and much of his negotiating for him. The individual at the center is lost in a sea of officiants, who effectively dispense with the honorific elements of the fight.

Conclusions.

Cowardice is the mother of cruelty, for Montaigne, because it saps away the strength that would be required to make a true learning and knowing experience out of manly conflict, whether on the battlefield or on the fencing field. It is a sign of Montaigne's fallen age, he insists, that most men are cowards, thus unable to sustain the conditions of disciplined conflict.

Essay 28 All things have their season

Introductory

The ancients were regularly fascinated by the mysteries and weaknesses of old age, and owe some of their most profound insights into life and death to the minds of the broadly admired Catos, or of Cicero, whose De Senectute remains one of the great wisdom texts of Roman antiquity. The Romans admired a distinguished aging, as they did the courage—when it was fitting-- to abrogate aging by suicide. Aging, in other words, was among the Romans a matter to discuss, not just to endure, and whatever could be done, to mitigate the pain and anxiety of the situation, should be freely undertaken.

One of those mitigations was distraction, as in games, another was philosophy, always a kindly mother to the moral philosophers of the late Roman time. With philosophy went discussion, moral reasoning at public venues, or private banquets: the kinds of discussion and meeting site precious to a culture which is ready to harvest the wisdom of its truly senior citizens.

Cato the Elder, for instance, began at an advanced age to study Greek, a seemingly admirable cause, and yet he was regularly asked why he would begin, at an advanced age, the study of an arduous language, normally reserved for the first youthful stages of education. One can only surmise the dryness of his rejoinder. In a similar vein of incredulity, Eudemonidas, seeing the aged Xenophon studying, asked 'if he is yet learning'? In both instances the questioner seems puzzled by the respondent's vigorous affirmation of the lifelong value of learning. The question answered itself.

We ourselves live in an age when the elderly are being exhorted, on all sides, to keep their brains active Puzzles, games, mathematical conundrums, cross word pages —these print era teases enliven the often sedentary mind of the increasingly ubiquitous community of older humans. Lifelong learning also has made a place for itself in a new generation of the young old, that prematurely mature cohort, now in midlife, who have taken advantage of the false vitality of a digital existence, to buy themselves an early taste of societal wisdom.

What example does Montaigne himself set, for the modelling of an intelligent and sensible aging?

Examples

Montaigne himself. 1 Montaigne was no enthusiast for high attention departures. He had chosen some kind of peace for himself in midlife, enjoyed having settled in his 'family castle,' 'living nobly,' as he wished to have it, and he was not a natural candidate for a high pressure old age. He reflects, as he ages into his fifties and sixties, on the brevity of his own life projects, and finds that in no direction do his plans extend more than a year in any direction. Inwardly, he lets us know, he indulges in attitudes such as this: 'What a contemptible thing is an old guy learning his ABC's.' He behaves himself, of course, and as he approaches his maker, he invites the parish priest, plus distinguished local nobles, for a final mass. By this point, Montaigne has lost his voice, yet this does not prevent his taking the wafer between his fingers, and performing for a final time the ingestion he believed essential to his salvation.

Montaigne himself. 2 Montaigne urges himself to live reasonably, modestly, responsibly—especially when it comes to the duties expected of a citizen and landowner. (The recent tome, *Montaigne A Life*, 2014. by Philippe Desan, examines in detail the place of responsibility, landownership, and 'nobility,' in the thinking of Montaigne himself, and in that of his father, for whom the transition from bourgeois mercantilism to nobility was the true culmination of individual maturity. For Montaigne himself, that deepest level of individual maturity, the noble citizen, was a factor of his own gained nobility, which in his case became a vivid life-definer in early midlife.)

Conclusions

For Montaigne's age, and its exemplars in ancient Rome, 'old age' was the period of wisdom. As we know from his essay on education, Montaigne believed in strict, but firm, discipline in youth and childhood. Maturity, for Montaigne, aligns with good judgment, kindness, political savvy, and a properly skeptical attitude toward the human being.

Essay 29 Of Virtue

Introductory

Montaigne opens on a familiar theme, that where virtue Is present it will be most evident in the daily life of an Individual, in his or her commonplace activities, and not In grand gestures or deeds. Montaigne carefully includes the possibility of flights of brilliant charisma, or of unpredictable grace in behavior, but he wants to stress the ordinary, for his moral foundation.

Though Montaigne has emphasized his strong Catholic Faith, and though he died in good faith with the Church, he turns rather to the late ancient Stoics, or to his readings in travel and anthropology, when he inclines to explore the nature of human virtue.

The late ancient Stoics, inheriting from Plato, frequently open pathways for moral development. Pyrrho the Stoic was a favorite of Montaigne, notable for aligning his doctrine with his behavior—a perfect match, here, might exemplify the perfection of the moral. Pyrrho could endure an incision or cautery with no pain—the flow of his present was at that point not into pain; he would carry on with a conversation even while he was heading toward a cliff, counting, correctly, on his friends to divert him from falling to his death.

This consistency of late antique ethic, which involved total listening to the self, had its counterpart in an equally unnegotiable singleness of moral purpose, as we might find it in extremes of sexual jealousy: cases of revenge, in which one self-mutilates, from contempt for the sexual other, or from frustration with one's own inability to perform. These versions of 'moralism to the extreme' blend with other radical self shapings to depict versions of the moral which were unique to the late antique moral landscape. Montaigne has an active ear for such aberrations.

Montaigne's openness to radical moral discovery sharply diverts him from what might resemble the Christian struggles of his own historical moment. (The Catholic Huguenot battles of his moment, tended to transpire between poles of Lutheran and Thomistic rationality.) The moral universe most deeply compelling Montaigne, in the current survey of virtues, includes such behavioral imperatives as the traditional suttee of the uppper-class Indian bride, ardent to add her loving death to that of her husband. Virtues, we might say in view of this essay, are acquiring the meaning of compelling behavioral patterns, deeply built into society, or into subtly specialized society members, who can serve as model-formers for their fellows.

Let us isolate a few of the virtuous instances that draw Montaigne's attention in this essay.

Examples.

Suttee For Montaigne it is a noteworthy tweak to the Hindu practice of suttee that the women in question quarrel ardently over their rights as spectacles to be in their husbands' funerals. (Their funerals too). We may be surprised to see how readily Montaigne blends his own working skepticism-stoicism with traditional, and far from western, Hindu practice.

Transcendental presences Montaigne awakens us both to the far from western practice of ritual immolation, suttee with baroque ornamentation of concurrent details, and to the transcendental perspective of the Hindu religion, under which it is assumed that the unfolding screen of what-is is unchangeable, will not be hurried, and through inner settings like *karma* guarantees changeless substantiality to itself. Montaigne's tale of the hare indicates his own position in this metaphysic. A man

wishes to kill a hare with a shotgun. It is not time for the hare to die. He cannot die until it is his moment. Finally it is his moment. The man kills the hare.

The Assassins Montaigne speaks of a barbarian outlier tribe, the Assassins, who live in the region of Libya. It is their firm moral belief that the best path to reach heaven is through the slaughter of a devotee of another religion. Once again Montaigne lets us into his perspective, that bloods leads to value, and that simple good sense does not suffice to free the path.

Conclusions.

Montaigne makes us take him, often, as a man of common sense, hyper critical of human folly, and fundamentally rational in his formation of moral principles. The fact may rather be, however, that Montaigne the modern Renaissance man is—like say, Christopher Marlowe, or the Shakespeare of the *Tempest*—a thinker and interpreter on the margins, pushing the limits of our ability to deal with our universe.

Essay 30. Of a monstrous child

Introductory

Montaigne has made clear, in his essay on *Raimond Sebond*, that he sees extraordinary correspondences between nature and humanity— points of unexpected understanding and relationship. The current essay concerns what might in Montaigne's time (or ours too?) eem to be a breach of the continuity between nature and humanity. We are taken into the presence of a sight, in Montaigne's time under discussion among physicians, concerning what may be a medical miracle combined with some hucksterism at the expense of a fourteen month 'freak'of nature.

This creature, fourteen months of age, was being carried around (for show and money?) by three individuals— in appearance a father, an uncle, and an aunt—who are 'displaying' the creature to the curious, who are paying to satisfy their curiosities. Montaigne goes to considerable length to describe the 'miracle.'The being is able to nurse, and to some extent to chew and digest its food. Under the breast, where she was nursing, she was joined to another child, headless, who was at it were clutching the larger child. (It was as though a 'lesser child,' headless, was trying to throw its arms around the neck of a taller; a fleshy juncture of some four inches was all that bound the lower to the upper child body. The creature—as Montaigne was assured by its Nurse—urinated from both bodies—while both Bodies nursed (from the nursemaid) at the same time. While both parts of the body appeared to nurse adequately, the impression given to Montaigne was that the conjunction of body parts, presented to him in this scene, gave promise of viability.

Montaigne is a master at micro descriptions of such scenes as the above, which he presents both as visually present to him, and as 'in the air,' part of the medical community buzz, which was at that point, in early modern medical investigation, deeply concerned with the limits of the natural, and with traces of the 'miraculous.' As an anthropologist working on the limits, in the present instance, Montaigne introduces himself to fresh questions for thought.

Examples.

News Note on Nature As an addendum, Montaigne clips a note on a Farmer, from Medoc, who lacks genitals, but who has sexual desires. Nature squeezes through this last detail, which seems an indicator that in this victim man, as in the 'monstrous child' above, nature still has its voice. Montaigne's first insight, into a condition such as described in the above news note, is into the ruling directives given by nature, rather than into the isolated oddities which rise up from within nature.

God and Nature Montaigne is a deist, sees God's hand throughout creation, and is not easily blindsided by what might seem anti natural turns in God's plan. The essay for Raimond Sebond displays this faith in the whole at its most powerfully defensible.

Conclusions

For Montaigne the created world is full of curiosities, and in fact he tends to be an observer of the angular, or unpredictable, who is forever opening us up to new insights into human nature. His *Apology for Raimond Sebond* is a probing testimony into the inter connections between nature and the human, an effort to see the wholeness in creation.

Essay 31 Of Anger

Introductory.

Montaigne opens with a tirade against education In his time--a theme his own unique classical training often unlocks—and salutes Plutarch for his warning, that the training of the young should not be left to their fathers. (Fathers are not responsible enough, and in fact education should, as Aristotle said, be left to the laws. Polities like the Lacedaemonians have done so, with rare admirable results.) The laws cast a firm shield of protection around the young, protecting them from the moods of their parents, who are often preoccupied by life issues of their own, and have no time to devote to children. Children are, in particular, subject to be called out angrily, within the house, and treated as less than human.

Anger is of special concern to Montaigne, in the present essay. He stresses the importance of unchecked anger, either in the family or the state. (Later in the essay, he will stress his own anger-management issues.) Once anger is let in the door she is hard to expel, so initial care must be taken, to keep anger away, and above all to avoid touching another person in anger. (The true protective work must be done in mind, before temptation to strike has a chance to take seed). It is important to know that effective chastisement, well thought out in advance, can do more good than any amount of ranting. Montaigne admits to a choleric temper of his own, and to the need to moderate himself. Like the late ancient Stoics he is generous with suggestions for this moderation.

Examples

Mindsets Like some of their meditating peers in India at the time, the ancient Roman moralists laid much stress on control of the mind, which should never be given free reign. Tone and volume of voice are to be carefully controlled. Montaigne, not surprisingly, insists that children should not be shouted at. Of assistance, in this training: remember that when you are angry you still have a message to impart. Don't forget that message. Make sure that your point is what your interlocutor receives, and not simply the intensity of your anger.

Careful chastisement At the opposite pole from anger, comes care in critique. Montaigne recognizes the difficulty, of thinking while at the same time expressing reprobation. Montaigne recognizes the difficulty he has, in performing this mental balancing act, in the course of which he often 'falls off the side of the precipice' into shapeless anger, which is too amorphous to be of value to its target.

Discipline in discourse Montaigne takes pleasure in rethinking certain ancient Roman practices of discourse. Some of these are 'belligerent,' that is intended to carry through mental critique without crossing the line into that 'warfare of minds' that leaves the individual critic feeling diminished rather than strengthened. The practice in question runs this way: the orator is con structing a fully convincing argument, when he discovers that his interlocutor is growing furious with him. He listens quietly to his opponent's rebuttal, ignoring the opponent's visible anger, then when the counter tirade has spent itself he, the orator in question, simply pauses, then continues, repeating the earlier discussion just where it had been left, as though the 'opposite' side had not interposed a word of objection.

Conclusions. Montaigne is glad to find, in late ancient thought, and especially in Plutarch, much useful good sense, about the harms of anger, resources we can adopt against anger, and reminders of ways to anticipate and control anger. The keyword is discipline, but we must conclude that Montaigne has learned it in the hard way, by permitting himself outbursts he later regretted.

Essay 32 Defense of Seneca and Plutarch

Introductory

The reader of Montaigne notes, from the start, that his author constantly refers to the 'ancients,' and particularly to the moralists, orators, and philosophers of late Roman antiquity. (These were Roman figures like Cicero, Julius Caesar, Tacitus, Seneca, and Ovid, in whom many of the most mature thoughts of the ancient Greeks had been rendered more general and available. Plato of course continued to be of ruling importance in this group, though with a rich inheritance that overspread many of the thinkers who represented his trend of argument.) The back- story to Montaigne's classicism, of course, must include his own background, his father's insistence that his son should speak only Latin as a youngster—and be surrounded by a totally Latin speaking personnel, servants included—and the subsequently intense Latin schooling that swept Montaigne up from age six, and flourished in him through his University training in the distinguished University world of Bordeaux.

The Montaigne so immersed in the classical world, so eager to defend it in the following essay, remains a vigorous Catholic Christian, dies in communion with the Church, yet thinks and feels for a lifetime through values which though generically Christian have emerged onto Montaigne's western European mind map wearing much of the vestment of late antiquity. When we say we feel comfortable thinking of Montaigne as a 'modern man' we need to mean that 'like us' he exists outside the central Christian understanding, but unlike us without any formed cultural grasp on the future.

How does Montaigne see himself in the continuum of cultural history into which he is brought up?

Examples

Borrower Montaigne says directly that he has borrowed everything he knows from Plutarch and Seneca. This is a strong statement of dependence, making one wonder how to break it down. What has he borrowed? What he has not borrowed would be the rich and complex culture of Classical Athens—the playwrights, the sculptors and architects who have constructed the universally awe inspiring Great Century of Democracy. Montaigne rarely refers to that period preceding Plato and the Death of Socrates, but charges with full attention Into the Imperial Roman world from which the Great harvesters of the Classical raise their voices, Plutarch to write compendiously about the 'lives of the great men' of earlier times, Greek and Roman, and Seneca to put the best of thinking into the clearest examples of self-preserving morality, blended with dramas in which the drastic limits of tragedy can be advance-tested.

Learner For Montaigne the common sense but idealistic pragmatism of Plutarch and Seneca models his own sense of reason and value. We have seen that for Montaigne good sense, patience, modesty and kindness serve as governing principles of behavior, and it is these broadly 'humane' values that Montaigne treasures in Plutarch and Seneca, both of them nontechnical, sophisticated, and existentially daring.

Defender Montaigne takes it on himself—in the current essay— to defend Plutarch and Seneca from charges, which come down to the fact that they lack the wisdom Christianity introduces. For Montaigne this is fatuous and illogical reasoning, and should be subordinated to what those ancient writers offer us: scenes of moral endurance, suffering in the face of uncivil cruelty, and undying faithfulness to loyal friends and causes.

Conclusions

Montaigne is a representative of the Humanist tradition which had gradually made its way to the dominant early Modern position in Europe. He was deeply immersed in a certain ancient set of traditions, a communicant Catholic, and, thanks to his openness to the mystery of human nature, a quiet visionary. Two of a kind, Montaigne and Desiderius Erasmus (d. 1536) represent the richest flowering of early modern (or late Ancient) tradition.

Essay 33 The Story of Spurina

Introductory

Hair shirts, Montaigne observes, can not be relied on to subdue passion, and there is much to be said for reason as the best regulator of nature within us. Yet reason too has its limits, as the philosopher Xenocrates discovered, when he found himself in bed with one of the most beautiful women in the world. What better recourse did the wise man have, than to set fire to the most vulnerable passion-points in himself?

As for Julius Caesar, the central figure of the present essay, he was the most vain of men, in matters of physical beauty—a radical depilator, a connoisseur of the finest perfumes, a four times married paragon of magnetism to the ladies—yet he was fastidious about his career, determined never to let the claims of passion and of self-beautification get in the way of ambition. (Montaigne compares Caesar to Muhammed, in the matter of military power co-habiting with magnetism for the ladies. Both men lay at the hot cross roads of desires).

None, however, can have surpassed Caesar in pure ambition, for which he could ultimately never accept a substitute. Every moment of governmental or military achievement was precious to him and he was known to observe that the most evil man in the world, provided he furthered Caesar's political ambition, would rightly deserve Caesar's fullest admiration. The comment simply underlines the extent to which Montaigne centers the present narration around the conflicts between personal ambition and personal vanity.

In the end Caesar's devotion to duty, and kindness in the treatment of others, even 'enemies,' brings his achievement to the fore, ahead of the remarkable beauty of his person. Montaigne reinforces this point by allowing in the story of Spurina, a man of over-bearing beauty, quite irresistible to see, yet who suffered so greatly, from the reification of him for his beauty, that in the end he mutilated himself.

Examples

The tussle between vanity and statesmanship

Montaigne is fascinated by the polarity of Muhammedand Caesar, both equally men of personalattraction and military conquerors. Caesar himselfcomes in for a detailed portrayal, so exquisiteis his blend of kindness, passion for work and precision, and personal beauty.

The hazards of beauty. The story of Spurina comes to us as the voice of Montaigne, who not surprisingly ---he is modesty itself—sees the danger in an immoderate fascination with one's own appearance. We remember the vile fate that awaited the philosopher Xenocrates when he tried to burn away his physical passion.

The inner richness of Caesar The finest accolades of Caesar are embedded In Montaigne's portrait of the man's kindness, his instinct for the feelings of the subordinate, his sensitivity to the fate of civilian populations during sieges, his unwavering attention to work and its details.

Conclusions

Montaigne opens himself here to reflections on multiple topics: vanity and generosity; the military and the amorous in relation to one another; the dangers of narcissism; and the beauty of ordinary people, who simply lead quiet lives.

Essay 34 Observations on the means to carry on a war. According to Julius Caesar.

Introductory

In essay 33 Montaigne lavished praise on the persona of Julius Caesar, both as a military leader and as an Intelligent military administrator. Caesar's kindness and concern for the individual, whether soldier or citizen, marked him off as a lofty but gentle warrior. (We also know him of course as a superb stylist and orator.) In the present essay Montaigne turns to the special skills of this leader, in the conduct of war. Montaigne cannot imagine a stronger model for military command and human insight. The essay is full of examples of the inborn natural skills, which Caesar brought to military leadership.

Examples.

Numbers Having learned that the army of Cyrus was very large, and feeling obliged to share this information with his men, Caesar broke expectation by exaggerating even the expected number of Cyrus' men. The result was that from the start his men were surprised by the negotiable size of the foreign force. It was less rather than more than they expected.

Secrecy Caesar was careful to keep his military plans secret, enjoying the discovery that his men had tried to second guess him (and failed.) In that way he took no chances on slips of information, and maintained the surprise factor for himself, often using it to spring energy-giving attack surprises on the unsuspecting enemy.

Planning Caesar maintained a casual demeanor, during truce-breaks, periods agreed on for negotiations, or the intervals when messengers were either being sent for or arriving. While appearing casual, Caesar was in fact constantly attentive to the amount of time passed in this or that operation. When he sprang military surprises it was to his advantage, for he was typically one commander in the field who knew precisely how much time was needed or had elapsed.

Evaluator Caesar could on occasion be peremptorily rough on certain commanders or legions which failed in their maneuvers or strategies. On one occasion he humiliated the entire Ninth Legion, berating them sharply. On the other hand, when Caesar was particularly pleased with a legion's performance, he gave a license of games and freedom to the men involved. The gang cut loose.

Risk taker Caesar was a superb war orator, and could talk his men into any plausible military project. He always set them solid examples—riding hundreds of miles at a stretch, through rough territory-- to evaluate parts of Central Europe for attack; swimming through choppy waters holding his military commander's garb, with his tablet between his teeth. At times he would disguise himself and slither through enemy lines, to bring back strategic information to his men.

Conclusions

To excel as a military commander, in the Roman Army, one needed connections—which Caesar had In abundance, charm and personal savvy, quick and accurate reactions, a brilliant mind for strategy, and a sense of how to make every moment count, without drawing undue attention to it.

Essay 35 Of Three Good Women

Introductory

Montaigne opens with a crisp format, promising a search for three good women. Suspecting a tongue in cheek discussion, we are surprised to learn that we get precisely what we were offered. Our contemporary notion of 'a good woman' may come out of the discussion a little mod- ivied, but how could it not, given the time gap, Imperial Rome to 1550 A. D., that transpires inside the telling of these small tales.

The essay turns around the issue of happiness, for Montaigne takes for granted that the true test of a successful marriage is the happiness it brings. (Note that he does not mention, at this stage, the children produced; nor does he mention his own wife, when it comes to assessing great wifely virtue. In each instance happiness is achieved, if only through moral fulfillment, and the obligations of marriage are upheld) The true test of the following marriages is self-sacrifice. Let's look at the central examples Montaigne offers us.

Examples.

Self-sacrifice Montaigne opens on a clear preference for wives who have been lifetime faithful, and who do not, upon their husbands' deaths, discover the old boys storehouses of unexpected value. It is well known, Montaigne makes clear, that widows normally move on to other spouses, which is appropriate and natural, but it is worth no- ting, along the way, that a small number of widows perform what amount to extraordinary acts of sacrifice and life-giving, in the course of helping their life partners to rest.

A woman of modest estate. Pliny records an example of rare marital fidelity. The long time husband has contracted a terrible case of dermatitis over his entire genital area; he is in such discomfort that he decides to kill himself. Requesting permission to view the sore, the man's wife is horrified, and cannot imagine letting her husband go alone into the fate of such a death. She too jumps into the raging river and drowns, tightly bound to him.

Self-violence A lady of high repute falsely assumes that a second lady, of equally high repute with the first, has had an affair with her husband. By acting out, throwing herself against a wall, she induces her husband to kill himself. Moral values tremble through these texts, which at the same time hover over the pure ideal of marriage.

The ultimate duo Seneca the philosopher and statesman was far older than his wife, and to his amazement, as he approached death, all the while soaking in his hot bath, trickling forth blood, and philosophizing to the watchers, he realized that his wife was preparing to die with him. She too had learned the lessons of his philosophy.

Conclusions

A conservative moderate, Montaigne knows how to value acts of moral courage. This has been evident In his admiration for military valor, for intelligent self-discipline in childhood education, for integrity in public dealings. He is clearly sympathetic to the profiles of self-sacrificers, though with his back- ground in classical insight he is unlikely to be fooled by any except the most authentic friends of mankind.

Essay 36 Of the most excellent men

Introductory

In the preceding essay, Montaigne directed his attention to a trio of admired women. These ladies had in common a profound fidelity to their dying husbands, and a readiness to sacrifice their lives for these men. The Vedic practice of suttee came to mind, as we reviewed the historical depths of female fidelity.

In the present essay Montaigne turns his mind to several excellent men, who have inspired his own life. (The model for Montaigne's thought, here, would seem to be Plutarch's Para*llel Lives*, the exceptional popularity of which was notorious throughout the later classical era, and which continued its popularity undiminished throughout the Renaissance.) The juxtaposition of 'great men' from Ancient Hellas, with similar figures from Roman antiquity, was especially provocative, as both the classical cultures aligned around the 'great man' notion. (Later European writers—cf. Carlyle, Nietzsche, or Emerson— continued this kind of 'conversation of the greats' in portraits of the ruling intellectual figures of their own day.)

The exceptional men to whom Montaigne turns, In the present essay, are poets and military figures, and with one exception stereotypes of the 'glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome.' Let us sample Montaigne's examples.

Examples.

Homer Matched with Virgil, for whom Montaigne has seemingly unlimited respect, Homer nonetheless comes through as almost godlike, as if, in his flawless sense of control and vitality , it is not he who writes but the gods that flow through him. This is the way Montaigne speaks, and because he is, as we say, a modern man, we do a familiar double take of partial understanding. Does he *mean* this etherial language of great-figure adulation? Does he still *think* in terms of mythical figures?

Alexander the Great Alexander is by nature all the brilliance we acquire from Homer himself—and in 'real life,' a brilliant commander, the ultimate rounded genius. 'He had his virtues from nature, his vices from fortune,' says Montaigne, reinforcing the sense that the finest of the Greeks were virtually perfect as made. In this Alexander rivals other Greek generals, like the Spartan Epaminondas, who was the apex of Hellenic discretion: 'never any man knew so much and spoke so little.'

Julius Caesar Inevitably this greatest of Roman generals demands mention in connection with Alexander. Montaigne has previously lavished his praise on the personal beauty and military grace of Caesar. He sees in Alexander the same kind of god given perfection of judgment and execution, that he has worshipped in Caesar.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is an admirer of powerful male figures, military or creative. Models drawn from classical antiquity are basic for him, and set his standards. Fortunately his pleasure in machismo continually blends with his own personal circumstances, so that he can live on comfortably as an observer of the classical past.

Essay 37 Of the resemblance of children to their fathers

Introductory

Montaigne opens with an apology for the looseness, and indecisive tone of the essays In this part of his collection. He recognizes that the individual makes so many plans, but that fortune frequently forestalls the completion of those plans. When it comes to his own essays he seldom reviews them closely, and if he changes anything it is a word or two, and not the whole complexion of an argument.

The guiding theme of the present essay is genetic, and touches on our surprising awareness, that a tiny seed of procreative energy is sufficient to generate the vast cosmos of the human person. Within this cosmos, Montaigne emphasizes, exist the infinitely complex interrelations that make up the ramifications of family networks— son to grandfather to nephew, etc.—a network within which we see the inner logic of the age similarity of the Montaigne tribe—he and his father and grandfather all having moved into or across the seventy year marks-- and not only their age similarity, but also their susceptibility to a single disease, the stones, which ravaged the tribe, causing great pain to which Montaigne testifies passionately throughout his later years. That is not the only common fruit of the present disease- susceptibility, for the pain involved here promoted in all these men a lifetime hatred of physic, medical science as it was then understood.

It might be said that the bulk of the essay concerns physic, and a number of Montaigne's attitudes toward this 'Renaissance science.' Let's look at some examples

Examples.

Ancestral hatred It was the cliché among the male ancestors of Montaigne, to condemn the use of physic, which was made up of animal parts powdered, herbals of every sort, unguents and ointments. Montaigne himself used these aids, but remained alienated by the knowledge that the chief ingredient in his cure of stones was powdered rat bones.

Anti physic traditions Montaigne is aware that many cultures, at many places and times—and at his moment the world was expanding awesomely—have managed to survive without organized medical assistance. He directly raises the question whether mankind needs physic to live.

Bathing It was congruent with Montaigne's time to take bathing and spa cures, and among the curative and relaxing modes of such treatment were the many curative waters to be found throughout Europe. Montaigne, like many fellow Frenchmen, was regularly drawn to these recourses against the excruciating pain of the stones.

Conclusions.

Montaigne draws a portrait, here, of a family Inherited disease, the stones, from which he, like a number of his male ancestors, suffered throughout life. The problem of pain, and of the relative value of life itself, was regularly raised in terms of the efficacy of the cures offered for such tortures as the stones.

BOOK THREE

Essay 1 Of Profit and Honesty

Introductory.

Montaigne dips deeply into that part of his career which we should best call intern- national diplomacy, and which brought him into the delicate wranglings that adjudicated high level decisions in the Religious Wars so prominently dominating French Renaissance Society. These wars inevitably involved both material and spiritual conflict, lands to be won and fortunes to be lost; situations, in short, in which both profit and honesty were to be put to the test, especially in the case of a 'man of distinction and nobility,' like Montaigne, who through his impartiality had recommended himself to both sides in the conflict. Some of Montaigne's finest thinking is created by the dilemmas of war time negotiation.

A dilemma facing the Emperor Tiberius illustrates the kind of close thinking required by the type of negotiation Montaigne found himself in, in pursuit of his duties as an influential nobleman. A query is sent to Tiberius, while his armies are fighting in Germany, inquiring whether he would like to have Arminius—an arch enemy among the Germans—put to death by poison. Tiberius characteristically errs on the side of honesty, replying that it is the custom of the Romans to carry out their affairs openly, in daylight, with the sword, and not sneakishly, with poison. The question raised by the anecdote is: is there a place for blunt honesty in the manner of Tiberius? Is there a place for simple honesty in diplomatic discussions?

Let us look at some examples of the issues raised by Montaigne in connection with profit and honesty as they enter diplomacy.

Examples.

The reality of negotiations It has been Montaigne's experience, that vice as well as virtue, villains as well as charmers all play their roles in the social and historical fabric, as parts of a total which is simply made of 'all there is,' and where there is 'place for everything.' To pretend total innocence, as a negotiator, is to miss many opportunities to open up fresh avenues of explanation. Yet, as Montaigne amply argues, diplomatic victories are not worth losing your soul for.

Profit and care Montaigne makes no bones about his work as a professional negotiator, or about the complex double responsibility he regularly finds himself in, representing his own superior hierarchy, but doing so without violating his oaths or trusts. (It is his feeling that, if he has promised a kidnapper such and such ransom, he is obliged to honor that debt, when it can be done. Ultimately he concedes the necessity of compromise with the truth, but he rejects any temptation to perjure himself before a third party. He feels he can walk everywhere with 'head erect,' 'having proven himself equable to both parties.'

Deep secrets Montaigne vigorously adds, to his recipes For negotiating honestly but publicly, that he wants no part of deep secrets, whether proper to the 'opposition' or to his own 'side,' which means the King of France or any of his senior enablers. He wants his negotiatory work to be out in the light, and not constructed on who knows what secrets peculiar to his paymaster.

Conclusions

Montaigne reminds this reviewer of Henry Kissinger, suave, subtle and persuasive, drawing on a deep background of knowledge and under- standing. Like Kissinger, Montaigne designs pathways of convergence that leave the 'opponent' suspecting that he has 'given away more than he intended to.' He is usually right.

Essay 2. Of Repentance

Introductory

Montaigne is at his best declaring his own modest goals as a writer and as a human being. Whereas the notion of repentance might seem to suggest the need to cleanse oneself, or set oneself right with the creator, that is not Montaigne's goal, for by and large he expresses satisfaction with his life, of which the best part may simply be that he has left no startling or humbling legacy. He wishes to have lived as a simple human being, and to have recorded that fact. He wishes his life to be known as a life 'ordinary and without lustre.' 'He would be glad to be known as capable of having profited from knowledge, if he had had it.'

Where then does the notion of repentance enter the picture? Montaigne has long made it clear that he sees his historical time as vice-filled and cheap, that in fact he finds the whole human experience fallen and sin filled. Repentance might seem like a recourse in a world where one has been sin touched, but for Montaigne the simple working through of life, with a good conscience, and respect for the whole human cycle of existence, is sufficient for an individual's life. Montaigne puts great emphasis on the 'complacency,' or self-satisfaction that one can enjoy, with a free conscience. A troubled consciousness, on the other hand, will never leave you alone, and repentance for it will be nothing more than a verbal gesture, from within the individual, to declare null certain inexpugnable elements of one's past.

Examples.

1 'I do not teach, I only relate.' Montaigne attributes to himself little power to Improve the lives of the others, or for that matter to improve his own life. He is not one for New Year's resolutions, or more moral tirades. He paints a picture of mankind, as he says, and of man without dressing.

2 'No man is a hero to his valet de chambre' When Montaigne expresses his interest in his own lustreless life, he means a life of no repentance, decent behavior, moderate pleasures—wine and women for sure. —in their time and place-- and respect for the orders of church and society. He knows he is no hero—that is part of what is modern about him—and that to repent would simply be to pile more language on the account he is already giving of himself..

Commented [FW1]: thk

3 Living life over Montaigne makes clear that he would live life over just as he had lived it the first time. He is without regrets, as he is without grounds for self-praise. A's modern man? Yes. Remember Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man without Characterisics*?) That masterpiece of oncoming modernity hung latent In Montaigne's own self-analysis.

Conclusions.

Montaigne simply is, to himself, and simply does what he Is. He is a full character citizen, manly, committed to his culture and to his society, convinced of the meaning of history, yet he holds back from characterizing him-self, modest and prudent, ambitious and analytical. He is as clearly made of language as is any fictional character—Hamlet or Marlowe—but he has his word feet on the ground, and steadies himself with his own reality.

Essay. 3 Of Three Commerces

Introductory

Montaigne opens the essay on a familiar theme, that life is flexible, and that to live well is to go with the flow. By the end of the essay, it is true, he will seem to argue for an increasingly fixed, and removed, kind of private existence, but he remains true to the flow issue, to the extent that he embraces the idea of what he calls 'meditation,' and living by one's own standards. But such irregularities in argument only reinforce his belief that one must keep alive and fresh in the mind. That, after all, is a large part of this essay's point—that with books near us we need never be far from the life of ideas.

The 'three 'commerces' in question are the trio of men, women, and books, Montaigne's and in general men's, principal recourses in life. Each of these recourses is of particular Importance, according to the time of life.

Montaigne's preference is for 'sincere and able men,' who say what they mean—with a seasoning of wit and humor—while avoiding pedantry, and retaining the ability to talk with all sorts of people. (Montaigne's praise of the speech of 'ordinary people' foreshadows that of Wordsworth, in the *Lyrical Ballads*, a similar encomium of the everyday speech of daily life.) Scion of a macho society, Montaigne leaves little doubt that when it comes to opinions, values, and leading notions, it is to men, not women, that one should turn.

Conversation with women is lighter, less full of implications —except where it crosses the line into the always dangerous zone of flirtation—and far more stimulating than man talk, if kept under control.

The third commerce is books, products now of a burgeoning print and binding industry, which though only a century old, in Montaigne's time, had dramatically modified the reading and thinking styles of the western elite. For Montaigne the book is the supreme recourse, for wisdom and wit, for a defense against boredom, for permanent companionship. With no surprise we learn that, on his many travels in Europe, Montaigne was never without a collection of books, 'the life blood of a master spirit,' as Milton was to say a little over a century later.

Can we conclude with examples of the special values provided by each of the three commerces?

Examples

Example 1. Montaigne's first level of involvement Is the conversation among men, whom he finds straightforward at best and sufficiently informed about the realities of the world they inhabit. Although Montaigne is open as to intimate male friendships—his love for Etienne de la Boetie was ultimate—he recognizes a level of male-male business which is fresh, cool, and unintimate. He values that kind of talk. It is the common counter of life in the village, and he values the down home Gascon version of it, his own.

Monsieur et Madame Montaigne observes that because all women, ugly as they be, believe in their all trumping power to seduce, they are always a danger to men, even to old men like him, who have passed the potent stage. Once entangled with them, one is hostage to their vanity, and will not easily be released.

Books In this third section Montaigne describes in full and luscious detail the setting of his personal library, on the top story of his chateau, looking down onto the fruitful valleys below, and providing him ample shelter from storm winds and raucous guests alike. In a circular room, surrounding his books, he can be imagined as a secular priest of the word.

Conclusions

Montaigne's three c*ommerces* are exits into the world from and for a man who, increasingly with age, becomes solitary, and values his time alone. In an age without digital communications, that is Montaigne's, conversation and reading insisted on an important part in the educated life. Hunger for news, fascination with gossip, and a desire to see how the story ends—these modern constants took firm hold on Montaigne and his culture though one had to wait longer, back then, to learn the ending.

Essay 4 Of Diversion

Introductory

Montaigne is always interested in the way the mind works, even more than in the yield of mind as it addresses the world. Would we today call him a psychologist? Or is it just commonplace introspection, carried out with great finesse that we find so instructive in this author? Is he also a kind of 'scientist'?

From the start, Montaigne has been plagued by the reversals, fantasies, false hopes, and easy distractions of the mind, that operative driver of human action. He knows in depth to what extent we are easily distracted, from what petty causes we can reverse whole systems of belief, or from what petty fears we can reverse the plans of a lifetime. The first case in point, to illustrate our fallibility as thinkers, concerns our (men's in this case) inability to console troubled or grieving women. Instead of commiserating quietly with their loss, we men tend to explain the loss away, to describe the alternate benefits it can lead to, or otherwise to fail to go to the root of the lady's discomfort. Commiseration, with a turn toward advice, can accomplish more than the little Montaigne can offer—'too sharp and dry'—under similar circumstances.

Diversion, in such a case, would involve soothing and smoothing out the rough emotional patch. And in a similar fashion, Montaigne goes on to Illustrate, the diversion of attention from pain proves the most effective way to mollify difficult circumstances.

A bevy of examples follows .Let's track some of them.

Examples.

Tricks and no tricks In the Greek story of Atalanta, the brilliant Runner, Hippomenes, losing the race, tricks his opponent by scattering apples along her way, and counting, correctly, on her irresistible desire to slow her pace and pick up these lovely fruits. Sure he wins.

Socrates plain and simple Unlike many facing their deaths by execution, Socrates makes no effort to 'change the subject,' draw attention to something else, or affect indifference. He moves casually into the stages of hemlock consumption and light attention, remembering only the debt of a cock to Aesculapius. He neither requires nor requests alleviation of the event which is taking place.

Consolatory diversions Men going to their executions not infrequently draw attention to the kinds of grave prepared for them, their recent victory in battle, or the good sides of the loss of a child: consolation can be derived from the simple protocols of casting an eye on what appear to be lowering storm clouds.

Diversion as distraction The Athenian pretty boy and politician Alcibiades was harshly viewed by the Athenians for a golden lifetime of pranks, questionable patriotism, and irreligiosity. He made a grand gesture, toward drawing attention away from his foibles, by mutilating—ears and eyes—his pet dog and leaving him to pass away in the public marketplace. by trumping his earlier exploits, Alcibiades hoped to divert attention from his rotten reputation.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is open to the many tricks mind plays on itself, in its effort to face away from the truth, no matter how harsh it may be. Is he attempting to escape from the truths of life and death, or coly anatomizing the twists and turns of the fragile human consciousness?

Essay 5 Upon some verses of Vergil

Introductory

Montaigne opens this essay with thoughts of His childhood, the merriment and free spirit of those days. He reflects onto a happy childhood, and one in view of which his later learning— the material of this essay—seems to have thrust him rapidly into the adult world after a gentle childhood in the hilly country of Gascony; a much travelled courtier reflecting back onto youth. The difference is that now, today, he lives in cloudy weather, has little horizon to look to, and is deeply embedded in evaluating his entire life. 'I avoid the lightest punctures.'

The tone adopted in this entire essay is confessional, as though, in approaching the final texts of these essays, Montaigne is freshly motivated o be on a par with the truth of his life. He makes it newly clear, in this essay, that for him even adultery is worse than lying. The truth must trump the argument. 'My philosophy,' he says, 'is in action, in natural and present practice,' not in vast schemes or speculations.

Montaigne draws attention on several levels to the best way to deal with aging. 'Let the mind flourish like mistletoe,' he, and like Socrates maintain a steady countenance, born of continual conversation with himself. From this inner conversation, Montaigne has learned to admit his vices to himself, to the extent that he feels himself capable, at any time, of making a complete public confession. He is transparent to himself and others. Montaigne wishes to achieve the peace of Plato, who when told that people were speaking ill of him replied that they were speaking of someone else, that there is nothing of me there.'

Montaigne tackles life issues, in this Essay, which is devoted to the art of aging well and drawing life together intelligently. Examples?

Examples.

A good marriage Montaigne believes that a good marriage is a quiet one, like his own, in which his wife, who is hardly characterized by him, remains in the background, quietly and effectively raising his only child, a daughter. It's a man's world out there! The fact is, though, that a good marriage works, in Montaigne's eyes, when the husband has enough sense to realize that his wife understands intimacy and its needs better than he does.

Respect for women While promoting a largely male agendum, Montaigne pays tribute to the courage of women, who fight more stalwartly to preserve their maidenheads than does any armed soldier on the battlefield, struggling to preserve his life against the onslaught of the enemy.

No cover up Montaigne says repeatedly that he knows the world of prostitutes and freely loving adults. He is as worldly, say, as the Rousseau of the *Confessions*—now in this salon, now in that—and yet he, like Rousseau, keeps his balance by honesty. The source of this passion is Montaigne's father, whose influence steadies and directs him throughout life.

Conclusions

Montaigne is a value centered gentleman, whose fidelity to traditional styles sparked a lifetime of reflections on the human condition, in the course of which he enjoyed his age of libertinage, but fully repaid the system by physical suffering in midlife and advanced age. Where did he get the extensive drive to read and think? Was it at the University in Bordeaux, where he was surrounded by distinguished classicists? Was it the good sense of the Romans, on whom Montaigne draws so fully throughout the essays? Or was it dad?

Essay 6 Of Coaches

Introductory

Montaigne opens up with the 'lower half of the body,' inviting us to think of sneezing, belching and farting, as three of our primal, and self-defining, expressions. He goes on to remark that it takes courage to give expression to such sounds, as it takes courage to break free of the constraints of fear which attach us all to our society. It is his impression, he adds chattily, that the more he ignores fear the better he fares.

In an effort to remain inconspicuous,Montaigne in general shuns any pomp or circumstance that could surround his life. He wants to live below the radar, but at ease and content. A case in point is his preference in means of transportation. Naturally he chooses travel which involves as few shocks and bounces as possible—litters or boats, especially—and is only truly comfortable on horseback. To make his point as forceful as possible, he adds to his list of transportation nightmares: such Roman extravagances as the Emperor Firmus' ostrich borne chariots, or Marc Antony's horse carried coaches with a wild wench singing atop them. The remainder of the essay moves gradually into the vices and extravagances of various monarchs, who put their pleasures ahead of the people they are intended to serve.

Into what kind of abuses do the rich and mighty slip, as they take their bumpy but elegant rides across their domains? (The coach slips into the role of directive image here, as we see Montaigne himself move increasingly away from fancy contrivances.)

Examples.

Greatness hobbled Montaigne feels the frustration of incomplete architectural projects, which would have provided some justification for royal expenditures: such projects as the under construction Pont Neuf in Paris, or, in St Petersburg, Russia, Catherine the Great's huge architectural undertakings. Montaigne's attitude; the ruler should complete his extravagances, or never begin them.

Bigtime Show offs Philip of Macedon installed vast theatrical extravagances, to awe his people, and to reinforce his own power. What possible justification can there be, Montaigne seems to ask, for displays of mutually destroying bears and lions? Talk about coaches! Talk rather about the joys of riding bareback!

Mountains of gold As we know from Montaigne's earlier essay, 'On Cannibals,' this supremely inquisitive man was contemporary to the astounding revelations of early modern explorers, as they unfolded the hitherto still remote mysteries of the Americas. Montaigne was appalled to learn, from the thrilling travel accounts out there in his lifetime, of the ruthless Spanish invasions of the Vast Civilizations of the Incas (in Peru) and the Aztecs. Talk about coaches! As an Egalitarian aristocrat, Montaigne had no use for the unsparing rape of exotic cultures.

Conclusions

Montaigne likes a smooth horseback ride, a gentle survey of the hills and valleys surrounding his chateau. He is not one for coaches or litters, or boats. He is not one for extravagant tyrants or hyper wealthy imperial stage managers. While he is proud of his lineage, and fought to establish his credentials as a member of the nobility, he is a piece of universal humanity, and refuses to put on airs.

Essay 7 On the Inconveniences of greatness

Introductory

Montaigne digs down into his childhood memory, In order to find the key to the 'inconveniences' of the present title. Boys of his age had the habit of considering him inferior to them, when it came to playing games. Montaigne suffered from being the 'last one chosen,' when it came to setting up teams. By a subtle passage he relates this inconvenience, of being the kid left out, to being the monarch who is in effect the 'kid left out,' because no one will include him in their competitive camaraderie circle, and he will be left out of the game. From this point Montaigne goes on to discuss the disadvantages of greatness in general.

Montaigne has himself longed for greatness, in the way fantasizing humans do, but he has decided against those fantasies: 'I love myself too much' ; ' I am trained up to a moderate condition'; 'I would rather be # 3 in Paris than # 1 in Bordeaux.' He has indeed prepared us for this kind of self-analysis, for we will by the end of the essays understand that Montaigne has had only one enormously important friend, Etienne de la Boetie, but apart from that one case no more than the usual routine of collegial friends. As he said in an earlier essay, he is 'open and made for friendship,' but quite willing to live a comfortable life largely out of sight.

Let's look at a few examples of Montaigne's way to lead the good life:

Examples

Competitive For Montaigne it is painful to be unable to be one of the crowd. A King can never enjoy that pleasure; no one will tell him the truth, and if one does go so far as that, the monarch is likely enough to remove the competitor's head. (Remember, this is the thinking of entrenched monarchies, not of 'modern democracies,' yet abundant dangers await the contemporary who makes too much noise, like the Saudi journalist Khashoggi, who was murdered in Istanbul. In short, the best life will still be simplest, enjoying one's peers and beloveds. 'I love myself too much,' as Montaigne has put it, explaining why he has no interest in the inconveniences of greatness.)

Independent. Montaigne cites the example of the followers of Alexander the Great, who 'always carried his head bent to one side.' Thinking this was the thing to do, Alexander's followers followed his practice. In court and out they carried their heads to the side. Montaigne deplores the habit of following the styles and habits of the great, and notes that the free life is the best.

Horses and rivalry Montaigne expands his argument from Kings to competition in general, and recommends that an individual should compete with, say, a horse rather than a king. The horse will run competitively with you, and if he wins he will accept the victory—perhaps with pleasure—while he will exact no punishment on you for your loss, except his win. Who knows what the King will do?

Conclusions.

Montaigne respects the modest life, with few remarkable challenges, and little fear of retribution for mistakes made along the way. While he is a thinker of strong opinions, Montaigne is not a combative thinker but rather a universalist, always looking for the common human values in men's thought and feelings.

Essay 8 Of the Art of Conference

Introductory

In conferences, exchanges of views, men discern much they did not know, about others, and reveal a great deal about themselves—which they also did not know. For Montaigne, whose skills at writing-thinking are supremely important, the art of conference, conversation, seems of greater importance and potential yield than the art of writing. (Montaigne dares to choose speech and hearing over sight, as an organ of human awareness.) It is clear, from the present essay, that for the author the fine texture of thought and feeling are more effectively transmitted in speech than on the written page.

In conference, it is fruitless for a man to sing his own praises—everyone else will yawn-- and opportunities abound for the same man to become an analyst of others' behavior. Montaigne believes that poor conference skills readily betray others' weaknesses, their inability to design an orderly argument and stick with it, their difficulties in detaching their argument from their own personal interests, and their propensity to compensate for poor reasoning by shows of strong feeling. Montaigne himself enjoys conference jousts in which his interlocutor is vigorous and determined, in which he can enjoy 'stout impressions among gentlemen,' and in which he can enjoy his honest pleasure in learning, and being shown where the true strength of an argument lies.

Montaigne clearly envisages a learning process to emerge from conference. What can be learned? What advantages can 'conference' confer?

Examples.

Sharpens the critical eye Poor conference performance—ignorant use of language, pitifully shaky construction of arguments, failure to read or hear between the lines—stirs the social interlocutor to listen or read critically, to seek out the holes in the tale being told him. Montaigne cites with approval the adage that the wise have more to learn from the foolish, than the reverse, and amplifies this point by discussing the peculiar kinds of pleasure he derives from observing the pathways by which strong arguments overcome weak ones. Truth, he insists, is the chief component of any argument that deserves to come out on top.

The arrow of criticism 'Acquiescence is tedious in discourse,' says Montaigne, by way of underlining his competitive sense of 'good conversation.' His initial tastes, in verbal style, go back to his extensive reading in the Roman orators, whose wit, historical reference, and on occasion thundering demands keep any interlocutor alert.

The art of discourse 'Stout expressions among gentlemen' is Montaigne's formula for good conversation. He enjoys sallies into Gascon humor and lingo, and he appreciates the presence of skilled conversationalists. What he talks about, by preference, we can probably guess from a review of the topics of his essays, which take us from Peruvian antiquity through the anthropology of thumbs to the grandeur of ancient Rome to the nature of anger. An essay is open to any topic congenial to the men discussing it, and is itself, in fact, simply a conversation--with oneself one might say-- in which the rules of successful conversation are applied to the concerns of a leisurely community of fellow ruminants.

Conclusions.

Conclusion. Montaigne treasured his leisurely retreat in the Library of his family Chateau, and after midlife spent as much time there as possible. As a fellow noble, in the still quite rural setting of Guienne, Montaigne was clearly both a practiced conversationalist and, when armed with the pen, as fine a thought-spinner as any in France. The intertwined birth of conversation with the reflective genre of the essay made a perfect match.

Essay 9 Of Vanity

Introductory

'When should I have done reporting the continual agitation and mutation of my thoughts.'? (Montaigne recalls, in self-disparagement, an ancient author, Diocles, who wrote 6000 books on the topic of Greek grammar. The present essay is full of laments on the vanity or our dearest activities—writing, reading, travelling, conversation—laments in the vein of the dark, Biblical text of *Ecclesiastes.)* In his sixties, Montaigne is clearly casting a critical eye over His *Essais*, and wondering whether his writing has been of any importance. By the end of the present essay we will find that Montaigne has brought himself to dark thoughts concerning his literary work.

While attempting to hold himself to a single theme, Montaigne finds himself drawn—part of the self-assessment he follows—into the topic of his travels, which have been formative in shaping his own values—his eyes-wide- open approach to other cultures, his growing globalism, which reaches, by the end of this outline of his thinking, to a mystical awareness of the meanings of 'reaching out to one another." Montaigne seems to have grown from travelling; he has come to consider himself virtually a 'citizen of the world,' able to feel at home anywhere.

The third theme of the present essay—vanity and travel opened the discussion—is the end of life. Montaigne the traveler has seen various life styles, has eaten enough of life's dust, and is truly closing in on the nature of the life he has led. Is he pleased with what he has accomplished? Does his religious belief shape his hopes as he approaches the end of life? Or is his greatest support the father whom he loved, and who so deeply invested himself in Montaigne's youth? In the end, we should say, Montaigne turns to husbandry, and concern for the management of his inheritance, and contents himself with necessity as a surrogate for the vanity of things.

Examples of the vanity of things abound in the present essay. We listen:

'Life is a tender thing and easily molested' Montaigne is a connoisseur of the fine textured features of human life—our readiness to exaggerate, lie, deny; our weakness in knowing, as in our efforts to combat illness; our pugnacity, when threatened or challenged. The greatest challenge to a comfortable life is precisely the vanity issue—where are we headed?

'The gods play at ball with us' Montaigne is dubious of the life outcome. It is his nature to live with the flow of the existence he has been given, but the evidence of life complexities has begun to overwhelm him. 'I endeavor to have no express need of anyone,' he says, amassing an entire point of view, that the best life is the most nearly removed into itself.

Death by horseback Montaigne's final preference, death while on horseback. Montaigne is a friend of horseback riding. He likes the solidity of the busy animal between his legs, and he feels at home in the openness of the world. While he is a sophisticate of the courts, and has travelled widely in Europe, his response to the vanity of worldliness is to retract into simplicity. He appears to have weathered the storms of the religious wars, which raged in his neighborhood, by leaving his gates open, speaking with whoever presented himself, and keeping a low profile, reading and writing in his study.

Conclusions

Montaigne remarks significantly on the way he travels. Unlike his fellow French, who seek out compatriots when they travel, he seeks the new and unfamiliar. He does so in the face of the familiar, which would be too simple for him, and would not teach him anything. His largeness of spirit vaults him over the regional into the air of the universal, the Polander.

Essay 10 Of Managing the Will

Introductory

Montaigne opens this characteristic argument by speaking for 'enlightened self-interest,' a condition he values, in himself. (He hurries to say that he is 'too tender by nature and use,' and thus hardly fit for engaging in others' life matters. It is all he can do to handle his own life—to keep his affairs in order, and now, when he has recently accepted the position of Mayor of Bordeaux, to do the necessary paper work to serve in public office. Self-control and self-interest— virtues Montaigne highlighted from the time, in midlife, when he retired to the peace of his family chateau—are essential to his midlife discipline, the foundation of his thinking ethic.

Montaigne broods steadily over the obligations he owes to others, as he enters a newly public phase of his life. He wrestles with the issues of favoritism and impartiality, determined to keep his soul honorable. Complexities accrue. 'We must often deceive others, that we do not deceive ourselves,' he finds himself admitting, as he deepens his relations to the managing of a society. 'The poverty of goods is easily covered, the poverty of the soul is irreparable.'

Ultimately Montaigne finds himself searching for a path of objectivity and wide under- standing, as he surveys the human situation over which he has now some control. Avoiding occasions of dispute seems to him an essential precaution in his dealings with people. 'The births of things are weak and tender,' he repeats, in urging himself to avoid vengeance, and to sidestep partiality, two of the traps set for clear thinking, in any management of other selves.

Montaigne clearly finds the management of the will challenging. Let's inspect three examples of the way this challenge presents itself.

Examples.

A father's example Montaigne grew up aware of his father's struggles to incorporate his status, as landed nobility; a complex social tactic for which the older man, not himself lettered, was not truly prepared. Thanks to his dad's superb planning, Montaigne himself was assured a remar- kably fine education, right through the University in Bordeaux. Thanks to this foundation Montaigne learned early how to balance his books and manage his affairs, although business was not his forte. To the end of his life, as he puts it, he prefers a life of quiet on his estates, and of immersion in his texts—not to mention the continual attention to his long growing body of essays.

Slowing love Montaigne reckons as one of his chief challenges the tendency to form opinions and express attitudes too quickly. He recalls an episode of early love—his own example—in which he worked to slow the process of that strong emotion, simply because he distrusted the loss of control, with which he was threatened.

'We must live for others, In order to live for ourselves' Montaigne has placed much sensitive emphasis, In this essay, on protecting oneself, so that one can remain free of insoluble interconnections with others. One would, for example, never be able to write the *Essays* without having, first of all, devoted a good part of a lifetime to self-analysis rather than to first-aid for others.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is a 'modern man' in that he grapples, differently from pre-Renaissance man, with the problems of an interconnected economy, with the subtleties of social adjustment, with the creation of a coherent self. If any literary predecessor comes to mind, as a herald of this sixteenth century figure, it may be Don Quixote, a big fantasist of the human condition, and like Montaigne a tireless inspector of his own emotions.

Essay 11 Of Cripples

Introductory

Montaigne takes off from the issue of the newly created Gregorian calendar, which was instituted— both for the world at large and for the Catholic Church-- by Pope Gregory in 1582. The readjustments made by this calendar were wide ranging, and for conservative mortals, the given universe seemed temporarily upside down. The event provides a perfect launch pad for one of Montaigne's favored themes, the unexamined assumptions humans make, about the nature of the world they inhabit.

'The effects concern us, but the means not at all.' The world presents itself, in its complexity—the order we expect of it often not to be found—but the true surprise is that the means by which the world becomes what it is are not 'explained.' It is partly for this reason that what pass for miracles continue to make themselves encountered, or challenged, without any ultimate resolution to their manner of being. The confusing appearances of the world are the source of its vanity, to which Montaigne makes constant references in his final essays.

The image of Montaigne himself, as he goes deeper into his life, grows increasingly dark; the more he studies himself in action the more nearly he seems to himself to be a monster and cripple. Charity to one another is 'passing on the truth,' aiding others to experience life as it in honesty is, and yet the truth is that our deepest condition is ignorance, on which we can rely to keep us open to our miserable condition.

Montaigne provides us with multiple instances of the poverty of our condition:

Examples.

We are easily awe smitten. Thinking of ourselves with appropriate accuracy, we can easily see on all sides of us models of what we would wish to be. The ultimate of ignorance, in fact, is the point where we reach the summit of our self-understanding.

Ultimate ignorance Ultimate ignorance, for us, will consist in discovering that miracles are fantasies, that the dream love of our lives is unreal, and that cripples are truly where the beauty in existence resides. Cripples, who live and love from the deep sense of their disability, have the most developed sexual presences, and most robustly bring out our sexualities.

Confession of ignorance The confession of ignorance is the basis of self-knowledge. Socrates led our way in his admission that all he knows is that he knows nothing. Knowing that much, he knew something, was not totally Ignorant, but did not know enough to entitle himself to proclaim wisdom.

Conclusions.

Montaigne is a unique hedonist, wondering with awe at the world, frankly enjoying its pleasures when they present themselves, but under no illusions about the ultimate destiny of life. All of this qualifies him for the 'first modern man' sobriquet, a fellow of our own community.

Essay 12 Of Physiognomy

Introductory

Montaigne returns to his familiar theme, that life as we experience it, history in the large frame, is a set of smoothly interlocked assumptions, into the causes and explanations of which we have little access. Inside this framework, we take our values and assumptions pretty much as given to us. The historical frame is filled out for us. All its graces are puffed out and ready for us.

Humans in general are puffed up with wind, whereas Socrates, or Jesus, is what he is, at all times. Even books, which we may consider our recourse to the great thinking of our predecessors, are essentially there to exercise us, to keep us active, rather than to instruct us, which just happens by our being here. The chief event of that being here, for Montaigne, is his immersion in the Religious War—Catholics against Huguenots—which is tearing his country apart.

Montaigne is exceptionally explicit, In this essay, about the horrors of the war. (He emphasizes the corruptness which has entered the country by way of mercenaries, who respect none of the traditional standards of war, and who make the French commanders themselves into solicitous panderers to the outsiders who are fighting their wars for them. Against this background we understand better Montaigne's continual lament at the evil and stupidity of his people and time.

Throughout this war, Montaigne adds, he has himself been blessed with good help, and with the kinds of farmlands and crops guaranteed for him by the hard work of his ancestors and hired labor. He attributes much of his success, also, to his self-confident, objective, and non-partisan attitude to neighbors, ordinary men and women, and even to opposition partisans. His *physiognomy*— and here he introduces a concept rich and widely used at his time—that is, his inner character, the essence of his appearance— persuade even hostile folk to give him slack, to free him from a nasty hostage taking episode. His honesty stands out.

Examples.

What examples does Montaigne give us of inner virtue, inner form, in the workings of men under the pressure of war?

Turkish mercenaries Turkish mercenaries, strictly trained to the rules of warfare, maintain the highest standards set down for mercenary actions; no Turkish mercenary would plunder even a single ripe apple from an orchard properly belonging to the foe he is charged with defeating. Absolute border line between fighting zones and private land. The inner self is highly disciplined.

Freedom from Hostage Holding Montaigne recounts the tale of hostage taking that put him at the mercy of a wartime opposing force. After many threats to his safety, he was freed—his inner expression of goodness, humility—real traits, won from real life—and released. The self inside the robust and honest face was to be trusted to the last word.

Freedom through Simplicity Montaigne is confronted outside his chateau by a band of dangerous intruders, yet by his plainly honest responses to their threats he convinces them to leave him In peace. This time it is his evident honesty and reputation in the region that protects him. We are also made aware that Montaigne is aware that he is 'seemly of appearance.' He uses his finesse of appearance, to buttress up his winning self-confidence.

Conclusions

Since the first of these essais we have known Montaigne as comfortably self- confident, in the manner one might expect from the (lower) nobility, the exceptionally educated, and from a person accustomed to the company of the finer sort of beauty and authority. He gives us ample proof of his charm and guts, in

the current essai, and leaves us suspecting that the middle way is possible, in a bitter family quarrel where people know one another in advance.

Essay 13 Of Experience

Introductory

Montaigne opens this final self-inspection essay by a discussion of what self-scrutiny, and especially 'critique' or 'criticism' is. He gasps at the energy humans devote to the minute dissection of the meaning of texts, of who is right about who won which battle, or of what was the meaning of this or that word in the chorus of a Greek play. It seems that every product of human activity or intelligence can be reviewed and reinterpreted, until in the end we have to wonder what we have learned from our mind trips, or whether we have in fact just multiplied interpretations ad infinitum.

One field for detailed analysis would be the Laws, of which France possesses an awesome number, often self-contradictory and hard to apply justly. (Montaigne asks why the language we use for the discussion of wills and codicils, transactions of central human importance, should be so exceptionally hard to express clearly.) Of the Laws, as of all domains of uncertain social interpretation— scientific disputes, diplomatic clashes, economic choices—the question can be raised, whether exhaustive analysis clarifies, or simply multiplies conflicting interpretations. Do we in the end, in our juggling of diverse legal interpretations, simply substitute one word for another, and often for one less understood'?

Not a 'philosopher,' but a practical man accustomed to using the thought tools provided by society, Montaigne is satisfied to bumble along inside a language which is careless, and inside systems—like the legal—which are dangerously unsteady—and to rely for stability on his long list of habits—of when and how to sleep, what to eat with what, how to keep comfortable in all seasons, how to avoid the night dews, wat kind of company to accept an invitation to dine with. Inside and around and among which complexities, we know that the man before us is of indefatigable writing energy, creating, reviewing, paying attention to artefactual details, such as the regular provision of the proper grade writing paper for his next essai.

Interspersed within this final essay Montaigne offers us more than usual of his personal habits and characteristics, no small part of the growing picture of this 'first modern man.'

Examples abound here, yet—perhaps unlike the fragments of law that never come together—they cohere with the growing self-portrait Montaigne allows us to derive from all his brilliant but modest self-imagings.

Examples.

Easily distracted Noises disturb Montaigne, who likes the sounds of the countryside around his chateau. One thinks, here, of Montaigne's discussion of the wholeness of nature, and the wisdom of silence in the thought of Raimond de Sebond.

Driven wild by the stones Gallstones tormented Montaigne throughout His adult life, and are the earliest indicator that he will accept the body's intrusion on the otherwise flowing and privileging life he is raised in. The stones are unbeatable.

Appreciates military environment Montaigne was brought up in an atmosphere of cavalry operations, horseback feats, and macho congeniality, and remains fond of that milieu.

The meaner sort of people Montaigne was brought up privileged, first as a young Bordeaux bourgeois, then, with his family's social upgrade, as a scion of the new regional nobility, which he and his family prided themselves on. The 'meaner sort,' however, connotes the smart young intellectuals, irreverent to the core, whom he got to know during his schooling in Bordeaux. Tough guys in a tough time.

Natural death In a time of calamity and death, such as that of Montaigne, born in the midst of the Religious Wars, our author wishes for a quiet death, in which he 'meets and steals away from himself…' As he has lived, basically below the radar, though well known in his region, Montaigne wants to let his own words, his essais, stand for him.

Conclusions

Montaigne is self-confident but modest, a lover of truth and honesty, a brilliant critic of the human condition and its enormous weaknesses, and a keenly private man, in an intensely male world. He is a modern man in the sense that he would understand many of the trademarks of our own moment: our gift for innovation and risk, our rampant globalism, and our prioritizing of man over nature.

TACKLING IT

Montaigne 'tackles it.' He enters the human situation exactly where it presents itself to us. He strips his reader down to the essence of being human, naked human, and then obliges that reader to look at himself closely. Has this been done before, in western literature? You might go back to Archilochos or Sappho, or Solon--they are fresh, so was the song of Inana or Gilgamesh, or those Egyptian love songs in which your words wrap around the wet bathing flesh of the beloved. Fresh may be the word. I personally feel I could talk with the makers of these pieces of language. By that I mean I could listen to them and put myself at the center of the voice-feeling they are being. I can't prove that would be true, but what I read off the page implies it. And if we can't go with our gut, when it comes to the great expressions of human emotion, we will ourselves remain short of the essai that life requires of us,.

Fresh Montaigne is, and subtle, and moving in and out as the variability of life impinges on him,. What are the ruling themes in his essais? There are themes, and one can name some central ones—human frailty and folly; cruelty and weakness; inclination to lie; jealousy; imprudence; vanity; pedantry; parochialism; compassion; discipline in education; conscience; friendship; prudence; wisdom. The access to these themes constitutes what I am calling tackling it, working your way into the corners of given life and clarifying them there and then, often with a breathless accuracy to just the way it is.