

Montaigne by Leo Rosten

¹BLOOD POURED down the map of France. For 36 years, civil war inflamed the passions of politics with the fanaticisms of faith: Catholics burned Protestants, Protestants murdered Catholics, and God alone spared Anabaptists, freethinkers, Jews. What the sword and the pyre missed, plague and pillage finished.

²In 1571, having witnessed atrocities “that make me blench with horror,” 38-year-old Michel Eyquem, *seigneur* of his father’s estate of Montaigne, near Bordeaux, retired from the hideous world around him to a library he built in the third story of the tower of his chateau. He had served 15 years in the Bordeaux *parlement* and high court, had fought bravely as a soldier, had acted as envoy between princes. Now he wanted to write—what could he call it? Not a book, not an autobiography, not a journal. He wanted only to explore himself—his habits, foibles, whims, ideas, “to speak on paper as I do to the first person I meet.” There was no precedent in literature for so casual, so formless, so entirely personal an expose, so Montaigne invented a name for his rambling ruminations: *essais* — efforts, attempts.

³It took him nine years to finish the “essays” he first published, a farrago of trifles and digressions, it seemed: “I am of somewhat less than medium height...I seldom dress in anything but plain black or white...I scratch myself mostly on the inside of my ears...I have had madness or quicksilver in my feet, for they are always fidgeting...You can’t imagine how strangely all sorts of odors cling to me...I like to sleep on a hard bed, alone, even without my wife, like royalty...I seldom dream, and when I do it is of fantastic things commonly pleasant or absurd,

rather than sad...My father hated, and I love, every sort of gravity.”

⁴Is this all—this garrulous prattle? If it were, who would remember Montaigne’s name? But the personal details are paraded with such grace and ease, such *directness* of rapport between writer and reader, that we are swiftly captivated. This Renaissance dilettante is master of the rarest of writers’ talents: the knack of enveloping us inside his private world. His pages light up with wit, with delicious fancies and ironic observations on men, women; honor; on sex, passion, chastity; on hooks and pleasures and the laughter of the gods; on the follies of men and the function of kings. To reveal one man, Montaigne said, is to explain all men—and gain a new understanding of one’s self: “Every man carries within himself the whole condition of humanity...Within us, in our own breast, where nothing is forbidden and everything is hid, to be honest there—that’s the rub! Perched on the loftiest throne in the world, we are still sitting on our own behind.”

⁵His reflections on the human condition—part tragic, part comic, part noble, part ludicrous—are supremely cool and incisive: “A woman is no sooner ours than we are no longer hers...Few men have been admired by their valets...The games of children are...their most serious business...The man who [tries] to please the multitude is never done...Nothing tempts me to tears but the tears of others...When I consider the absurd titillation of [love], the brainless motions—it excites...the countenance inflamed with fury and cruelty during its sweetest effects; the grave, solemn, entranced air in an action downright silly...the supreme moment...bathed, like pain, in sighing and fainting—I then believe with Plato, that the gods made men for their sport.”

⁶He was a devout Catholic, not because he was sure his faith was true; he quoted a Greek skeptic's "every man's true worship [is] the one he finds customary wherever he happens to be," and continued, "we are Christians by the same token we are Frenchmen or Germans." He loathed that "wretched disease which rivets a man so firmly to his own belief that he becomes incapable of conceiving other men may believe otherwise." He ridiculed "those who gull us with fables: our alchemists, astrologers, fortune-tellers...[and those] who presume to interpret...the designs of God himself." It is man who makes God in his own image, he remarked, not the other way around. "Religion is a thing of [our] own contrivance. What kind of truth is it that is true on one side of a mountain and false on the other?" In a time when beliefs were enforced by the thumbscrew and the faggot, he urged "detachment and moderation in...opinions...hatred of that wrangling, self-satisfied arrogance that is the...enemy of truth." All this almost two centuries before Voltaire!

⁷Reason, he said, is imperfect, our convictions are but guesses, our sacred faiths but accidents of geography. Then to what can man hold fast? "The height of wisdom is to take things as they are...to endure what we cannot evade...[We must learn] how to rule our behavior and understanding, how to live and die well...Give every man a free rein to laugh, and we will all live in peace...My trade and art is to live my life."

⁸But could this stoic gospel of escape and prolonged introspection make sense to the poor, the persecuted, those hounded by fate or tormented by bigotry? Must not liberals despise Montaigne's *apologia* for an established yet evil order ("We owe loyalty and obedience to our kings, good or bad") simply because he preferred peace to bloodshed? Must not conservatives dislike his ironies about the

hallowed certitudes, or reactionaries hate his championing of freedom of opinion? The answer is that for nearly 400 years, men, whatever their political bent, have turned to Montaigne for inspiration, for solace, for self-renewal. He was the first writer we can call modern. His subject was not Man, idealized and abstract, but man, that contradictory creature who eats, breathes, breeds, worships, doubts.

⁹The "sweet solitude" of the tower was interrupted by diplomatic missions, the mayorship of Bordeaux, a brief jailing in the Bastille. His chateau was often threatened by marauders, and he wandered around the countryside with his family for six ghastly months, when a plague drove them out of Montaigne. But he returned to the ivory tower to pen more of his casual, crystalline "tries," unembittered by experience, strengthened in his bemusement and skepticism.

¹⁰Emerson called him the most honest of all writers: "Cut these words, and they would bleed." Yet for all the racy confessions, Montaigne is often elusive-or silent. "I [write]...by halves." He does not once mention his mother, who lived with him; is it because she was still alive, or because her family, expelled from Inquisition Spain, were Jews, converted to Protestantism?

¹¹He is one of the most civilized intelligences, one of the most widely read and loved authors, who ever lived. The enduring miracle of Montaigne is this: Whoever picks up his essays, in whatever time or circumstance, finds him contemporary. —LEO ROSTEN

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