The Man-Mountain

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(On *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, tr. by Donald M. Frame;
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It was a hill, really, that Montaigne lived on and drew his name from; it is only the Essays that are mountainous. Like mountains they tower along the horizon, vaguely known except to a few climbers, though generally admired as decorative, in the mistaken belief that they are what they seem from a distance.

The murmur of tradition, which one is likely to overhear and trust before the mind is fully awake, is that the Essays are a bedside book, the work of a humane skeptic who remarkably anticipates the doctrines of liberalism. Living in fanatical and dangerous times, he preached tolerance and desired progressive education, confessed to doubt and contemplated death, with the aid of multitudinous quotations from classic authors. One is supposed to go to him for random reflections on life, as Shakespeare is said to have done, and if it is to the French text or to Florio's English that one goes, one finds the reflections quaint as well as shrewd. Montaigne thus survives in conventional criticism as a sort of prose Chaucer or discursive Horace reiterating the religion of sensible men.

Any tameness in this is felt to be redeemed by extensive and candid self-revelation, some of it titillating; so that as autobiographer and explorer of the human condition (the phrase is his), Montaigne becomes IMPORTANT. If only he had had the gumption to put his – ah – er – insights into systematic form, if he had produced a *philosophy* susceptible of close analysis, the contemporary examiners of credentials such as the *douanier* Eliot would assign him a higher place. But then he would not be a bedside book. The *Essays* would be moved to the study and eventually to the public rooms, where they would impress the neophytes and supply them with topics of disputation.

Now, it may be too late to shake off the curiosity hunters; they do little harm as long as they remain a murmuring minority. But it is essential to give the rest, and especially the newcomers, a chance to see Montaigne for what he is; and for this Donald Frame's new translation of the entire canon – Essays, Letters, and Journal – comes remarkably apropos.

The first sight of the volume is in itself tonic: these eleven hundred large pages cannot possibly be turned into a bedside book – they crush dilettantism and shame impertinence; while the merest glance at the sinewy modern prose

dispels quaintness and brings before you, speaking and gesticulating, a subtle mind at the service of a powerful will. Though Montaigne's long paragraphs have been broken up to please our modern eye, the prevailing impression is that of an irresistible continuity of thought.

The greatest of Montaigne's readers, who was Pascal, felt this pressure of mind most deeply and forged his own philosophy by leaning against it, as many jottings and allusions in the Pensées testify. What is more, Pascal's ultimate triumph in the unwritten work projected in the Pensées was to rest on the same base as Montaigne had solidly erected in the Essays. Pascal uses the chart of existence that Montaigne has drawn, but adds to it the realm of Transcendence. And even the arguments for giving faith and primacy to that realm derive from the premises and conclusions common to both thinkers. When, therefore, Pascal says that in reading Montaigne one finds a man and not an author, the reference is not to the autobiographical details – that Montaigne was below medium height, walked briskly, wore only black and white, had a keen sense of smell, loved conversation, and hated beer – it is to the fact that the Essays embody knowledge and not learning.

The presence of the many quotations is in fact as misleading as the tradition of the wise old skeptic: it was only after Montaigne's death, in the first posthumous edition of 1595, that the bulk of the Latin insertions occurred. True, Montaigne had been gathering them during the last four years of his life, but who shall say that his motive was not the familiar one of seeking confirmation by parallels? The more independent and imaginative a writer is, the more in retrospect he is likely to find his novelties consonant with recorded reality. It is not as tags or as proofs that Montaigne multiplies classic instances; it is as a means of establishing an historical span for the truth of his observations. That is why he says "Historians are my meat," knowing that he was not compiling an anthology: "I speak others' minds only to speak my own the more."

Whoever wants to know Montaigne the discoverer, Pascal's Montaigne, and very likely Shakespeare's, had best begin with the very last essay, the thirteenth of the third book, "Of Experience." It is a culmination, to be sure, but thanks to it we are soon on a height from which we can survey the other parts of the range with less danger of mistaking their relations. And first we must know: Why these tumultuous essays? "I love order and clarity," says Montaigne earlier. Yet not one of his chapters or books gives the least semblance of what a publisher's reader would call order. The first paragraph of "Experience"

contrasts Experience with Reason; the second takes up the relation of civil codes to independent judges; then we are asked to consider the limitations of language that affect government, religion, and natural philosophy, only to come upon the great subject "Montaigne" that the author uses as a touchstone when the diversity of schools and rhetorics makes him suspect the errors of declared Reason and reported Experience:

> I study myself more than any other subject: this is my metaphysics and my physics too... In this universe of ours, I ignorantly and carelessly let myself be pushed about by the general tendency of things: it will be knowledge enough when I feel its effects. My knowing it would not change its course; it will not change for my sake. It would be folly to hope so and greater folly to regret the fact, since it is necessarily uniform, public, and common.

Thereafter all the subjects I have named, and others besides, intertwine into a great tapestry of ideas, facts, memories, and associations. To read the essay is not to follow with the mind but to participate with the senses. And this exemplifies the continual appeal from books and theories to nature and conviction: "I would rather understand myself at first hand than through Cicero. In the experience I have of myself I find enough to make me wise, if I only am a good pupil: whoever recalls the excesses of his past anger and how far this fever carried him, sees the ugliness of this passion better than in Aristotle, and conceives a more justified hatred of it."

The key to Montaigne's "method" (to use our modern jargon) is in this word *justified*. The open, fearless mind that our liberal theory posits finds the world raucous with doctrines – Scholastic and Humanist, Protestant and Catholic, naturalist and mystical. Indoors, learning always keeps a full attic – rarities and rubbish mixed, from the ancient poets and philosophers to their latest commentators or contemners, the Utopians and ideologists. Each written or spoken word is made the basis of a creedlet, in whose name force and folly disport themselves. Everyone is summoned to believe or surrender some or all of life – two forms of self-abdication, which is to say, two forms of lying. In this mélée Montaigne clings to the evidence that comes to him direct and that survives his relentless scrutiny. That is why he never drops a subject, no subject is cut off and disposed of, all subjects become himself; he has knowledge by carnal possession – as we have of food. This ruminating, by the time of his fullest strength in the essay "Of Experience," has become a passion:

> Judgment holds in me the master's seat; at least it tries to with infinite care; it lets my appetites go their way, and my feelings – both hate and love, even the love I bear myself –

> without being changed or corrupted thereby: if it cannot reform my other parts in keeping with itself, at least it does not let itself be deformed by them; it plays its own game, apart.

What a world of difference between this pertinacity, this jealous autonomy of mind, and the "free inquiry" which the "independent thinker" of any age follows chiefly in the editorial columns of his chosen radical weekly! Troubled by the wars of set ideas and brutish parties, Montaigne did not want merely reassurance and comfort – the warmth of partisanship, the joys of indignation, or the solace of being small and harmless. He wanted mastery over reality. For this he took risks, political as well as spiritual, far greater than has been recognized. The political risk was to be suspect to all parties and fall a victim to any by chance. This danger threatened more than once, in the open country, during the guerrillas, and once again in Paris, on orders of the Catholic League, as a member of the "brain trust" of Henry of Navarre, the future Henry IV.

But greater still was the spiritual danger, of which we have heard so much in these last years of the decay of liberalism. To reject dogma, sniff at ideologies, and erect one's intellect as the judge of the universe brings mastery only if one can be persuaded to include oneself in this lordly review. Montaigne's strength was to perceive this, which gives his "skepticism" and his "tolerance" an entirely different character from that shown in the acts of his supposed disciples in latter days. Skepticism in Montaigne is not a rhetorical precaution in arguing with opponents, but a condition of solid knowledge. For if *Que sçay-je*? implies only that he knows nothing, the question mark is an impertinence. In reality the motto means: "Don't be too sure," which ranks qualities of belief and keeps the way open for future truth. Truth is not all paid in and on deposit for the stockholders. Indeed, the game that Montaigne's judgment plays "by itself, apart" is the pragmatic Truth from Consequences, as against the rationalist game of Truth from Antecedents, from enunciated ideas, however advanced. Montaigne's punning objection to all rationalists is that "they give up things to run after causes" (*Ils laissent les choses et courent aux causes*).

But what are "things"? It can be argued against the pure empiricist that he rejects the tested knowledge of all humanity (to say nothing of divine revelation), in order to enjoy the conceit of his own error. Montaigne's rebuttal lies in his study of himself, which any man can emulate:

> When I find myself convinced by somebody else's reasoning that my opinion is false, I do not merely learn the new thing he has told me and my particular ignorance – that would be but a small gain: I learn my general weakness and the treacherousness of my understanding, from which I draw the reformation of the whole mass... To learn that

> one has said or done a foolish thing is nothing: one must learn that one is a fool – an ampler and more important piece of instruction. The blunders that my memory has so often led me into, even when it is most sure of itself, are not useless and wasted, for now it can swear to me its complete certainty, I turn a deaf ear: and the first resistance that anyone makes to its testimony will give me pause. I will not dare rely on it about any weighty thing, nor guarantee it in someone else's behalf. And were it not that what I do from bad memory others do still more often from bad faith, I should always take a matter of fact on another's word rather than my own. If every man watched closely the effects and conditions of the passions that rule him as I have done with those whose victim I am, he could see them coming and moderate their impetuous course.

So much for the conduct of the understanding in a world of over-articulate sophomores. The conduct of those very passions which not only limit a man's judgment but also define his spiritual complexion is no less important if we are to accept (as Montaigne wishes us to do) the human condition. Today the phrase has come to stand for "the damnable human condition," which means that we do not accept it at all; we flail about us, impotent and angry. Because one of the early essays bears the classic title "That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die," it is sometimes assumed that Montaigne anticipated our response, though with better grace, fashioning stoical virtues out of evil necessity. The Saint-Bartholomew, we are told, had on him the effect that Lidice or Dachau had on us; the long continuance of senseless war can only have lowered the estimate of man's estate in a thinker who denied mundane certainty and declined supernatural consolation.

The Essays themselves tell another story, and do so from the beginning. War is one of men's diseases, and death is one of life's conditions. Both are limiting but not crippling, nor are they breaches of any contract guaranteeing man's happiness. "Death is indeed the end, but not therefore the goal, of life; it is its finish, its extremity, but not therefore its object. Life should be an aim unto itself, a purpose unto itself." One might have foretold this teaching from Montaigne's passionate resolve to try all things and from his repugnance, too little noted, for the chief proponents of ready-made ends, the Aristotelians. That sect was still powerful and as ever in love with boxes, circles, and systems. Montaigne will have none for himself or for the mind he would educate: "Let him put everything through the sieve and lodge nothing in his head on mere authority or faith. Let Aristotle's principles be no principles to him, no more than the stoic or epicurean. Let him be offered this diversity of judgments: he will choose if he can..." Whereupon Montaigne quotes Dante (*sic*) on the desirability of doubt.

Tastes, feelings, instincts, come into play and incite the passion for diversity. Montaigne finds in himself a taste for books, but not for bookishness; he can think and write for weeks or months together without reading. He loves travel and the immediate sensation of things. Truth being his delight, he loathes the life of a courtier. Yet its opposite, the philosopher's, should not be withdrawn or vexatious by design. Philosophy is a gay science, to which the satisfaction of the senses is a proper minister. Money is to buy pleasure, and Montaigne "hates poverty as the peer of pain." But human condition or no, there are terms on which alone it is fitting to live: "by right and authority not by permission or as a reward."

Thus revolting against his century, Montaigne expects its disapproval. He might have suffered more had it been less busy with mutual extermination. And then, too, the form of his thought protects him: he writes neither for glory nor for the reader's benefit, but only because he discovers himself in composition and enjoys it, and because his descendants might like to know him as well. This enables him to develop his criticism of the age: ruined by false subtlety, it ignores nature and does not know simplicity: he speaks of the learned theorists of love and says:

> My young page makes love and understands it: read to him Leon Hebreo or Ficino – their words are about him, about his thoughts and acts – and he understands nothing. I cannot recognize in Aristotle my ordinary doings: they have been covered and cloaked with strange garments for the use of the schools. God grant that they did right! If I were a man of the trade, I should naturalize art as much as they artificialize nature. Let us drop Bembo and Equicola!

Yet neither nonsense, folly, crime, nor the worst of all states, that in which "unjust evil comes to be legitimate and just," can make Montaigne mistake his present condition for "the human condition." As a student of history he knows that times have been worse and better too. He knows what man is capable of in both directions. Hence he "hates the glum and surly spirits that slide over the pleasures of life and fasten and batten on its woes, like flies which cannot grip a smooth polished surface, but must cling to rough and uneven places, or like leeches that suck and crave only bad blood." For his part, he has enough resilience and strength to wax ironic about his times: for thirty years "every Frenchman has lived each hour under threat of death or ruin," but "let us give thanks to fate for making us live in a century that is neither soft nor idle and languishing: many a man who would never have achieved fame in any other way will now go down in history through his misfortunes."

Paradoxically, the strain of reality proved harder to stand when order was finally restored. In the century of Descartes and Pascal, Montaigne had to be expurgated. When Descartes wanted to make a clean sweep of chaotic teachings and a fresh start in thought, he felt bound to disregard experience and to begin with a close union of reasoning with the supernatural. When Pascal wanted to discredit cant and acknowledge the diversity of life, the "order and clarity" of Louis XIV's settled society was not enough for him: he wanted a more authentic resolution of conflicts hereafter. Though he had gone to school to Montaigne he could not, like him, "accustom his imagination to the continual variation of human things," and along with variation he rejected what Montaigne named as the handmaidens of his hard-won philosophy: health, wealth, physical beauty, leisure, and liberty.

Regardless of the rank accorded him, Montaigne has always caused astonishment and a kind of awe for the naturalness with which he writes about himself: no vanity and no false modesty, despite an abundance of statements creditable and disparaging; no weariness or disgust in the reader, despite many details of the most trivial and least scandalous privity. The literary tour de force by which this is accomplished is an object of pleasure in itself, though the explanation lies on the surface: in the meanders of his frequently mistitled essays Montaigne gives us the strictest kind of thought-pursuit, the absolutely original stream of consciousness. Our moderns – Proust or Joyce – seem apprentices in comparison.

Montaigne edits himself, to be sure, for the interior monologue or therapeutic confessional would distract us by its grammatical false starts and unmeaning repetitions. But the suppression of these stammerings does not change the substance. We see the growing thought turn and twist, grapple with an image, drop it half way for lack of a fitting close, pick up an earlier thread or spin a new one, return to the comparison and cap it with the image that will lodge it in the thinker's memory – it is a magical and unique inspection of another's mind, for it approaches the immediacy of introspection.

The prose that renders this has all the virtues that prose can have, including the faults of inattention that mark spontaneity. Balance, rhythm, rounded periods are never there when an abrupt stop, a redoubling of epithets, a mismating of clauses, actually occurred in response to the sudden sight of the object. It is this unrhetorical rhetoric, and not his antiquated vocabulary, that makes Montaigne hard to translate. Since Florio, who was in tune but inaccurate, the

Essays have generally passed into a monotone English that destroyed a part of their veracity. The mountain ruggedness became all road, and in being straight and smooth it often became dull. Donald Frame has changed all that. He knows his Montaigne as a cultural historian and critic, not merely as a linguist and translator. He divines, that is, the unwritten context and can thus render the intention. He can see an epigram or a play on words (for Montaigne is an habitual wit), and give them to us again in equivalents that preserve the salt; and just as important, he does not make epigrams when Montaigne is simply turning his back on elaboration.

One could argue, of course, about particular phrases, and especially about the always difficult choice of modern words to reproduce the easy crudity of Latin and French dealings with sex and the body generally. But all such hagglings and carpings disappear in the magnitude of the success achieved. That it should be matched by an exquisite tact in the supplying of notes and critical judgments shows that once in a while he who can do the greater can also do the less. No other proof of the translator's understanding and skill is needed than the way he preserves the differences between the Essays and the Journal, and between both and the Letters – differences which attest in the original author a natural complexity that only heightens our wonder at the conscious artist: Montaigne the traveler was a sober self-communer who, transfigured, embodies in the Essays the extravagance of man thinking, and who in the Letters stiffens into the dignity of the public man – a man of property, wearing a ruff, Mayor of Bordeaux, twice elected for his pains, though a trifle ridiculous in solid citizens' eyes for letting his otherwise respectable name appear in print.