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Biancamaria Fontana: Montaigne's Politics

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INTRODUCTION

Montaigne: A Profile View

For over four hundred years, since his death in 1592, Michel de Montaigne has proved a difficult subject for portrait. The small group of loyal friends who first tried to celebrate his qualities and achievements—as the news that the author of the *Essais* was dead spread slowly across Europe—may have found some comfort in the panegyrics, tributes, and praises they lavished upon his memory.¹ But the man who invented a radically novel, breathtakingly modern way of writing about the self had fatally undermined the future efforts of interpreters and commentators, keeping for himself all the original insights, and leaving for posterity only the dry bones of conventional rhetoric and of standard literary formulas. There is simply nothing anyone can say about Michel de Montaigne, about his temperament, experiences, and ideas, that has not been said more interestingly and effectively by himself.

The choice that is made here of selecting one particular dimension of Montaigne's contribution—focusing upon those aspects of his reflection that are relevant to the understanding of politics—may also seem (and perhaps is) a self-defeating exercise. It goes against the spirit of the writer's work, which deliberately rejected any specialized approach to the understanding of human reality, and it contradicts his deliberate blurring of the contours of his private and public persona. The very nature of the *Essais*, which stand as an intricate, closely knit unit, in which the world is apprehended through the unique filter of the self, seems to preclude any clear separation of domains of inquiry. Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed that what Montaigne offered as self-portrait was in fact just a profile, a carefully selected perspective;² whether he was right or not in his judgment, I intend to follow his suggestion: a profile view is what I shall be attempting in this book.

As a rule, those intellectual historians who are interested in the political and ideological implications of Montaigne's work prefer to avoid any direct confrontation with the intrusive personality of the author: they concentrate instead upon the text of the *Essais* taken as a distinct, disembodied entity, or upon the discursive contexts surrounding it. Such approaches offer the advantage of methodological coherence and can certainly help to clarify the language and structure of Montaigne's writings, but they still leave open the question of their interpretation. Recent attempts to place Montaigne's career in the context of sixteenth-century literary and political patronage have the great merit of injecting some historical substance

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into our reading of the *Essais*; such studies, however, are less preoccupied with Montaigne's own intellectual project, than they are with the definition of some wider category (patron, author, political professional) that he might be taken to represent.

Though the *Essais* are generally regarded as a landmark in the history of modern European thought, we have no clear understanding of what they represent or stand for in any ideological or political context; similarly, the labels currently employed to describe the author's position—such as skepticism, neo-stoicism, civic humanism or humanism *tout court*, individualism, libertinage—seem far too hazy, and remain on the whole peripheral to the actual content of his work. As a result, there is a lack of proportion between the elevated status of Montaigne the writer—established by a vast and ever growing stream of literary scholarship—and the uncertain reputation he enjoys as moralist, philosopher, and observer of the social and political reality of his time.³

Modern historians are not alone in finding Montaigne's work difficult to interpret and to classify; this state of affairs began long ago, possibly among the first generation of readers of the *Essais*. But instead of resulting (as one might expect) in a variety of conflicting pictures of the author, the uncertain responses of those early interpreters and commentators converged very early on upon a single, enigmatic persona. In fact, unlike other major intellectual figures, Montaigne has never been the object of much controversy, except perhaps on a few particular aspects of his work: the image of the writer promoted by his admirers, and the one set forth by his detractors, are surprisingly similar, and differ in tone and coloratura rather than in substance. This shared image has changed very little through time and the commonplace views currently held about the *Essais* were already firmly established in the interpretative tradition by the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁴

To the audience of his friends and imitators—from Justus Lipsius to Pierre Charron, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Voltaire—the writer appeared as a benevolent sage, a tolerant, compassionate man who kept his distance from partisan struggle; a sparkling intellect, perhaps a little too frivolous and aloof if one considers the dramatic historical events that formed the background of his life. Mme de Lafayette effectively summarized these sentiments when she described Montaigne as someone it would be nice to have as one's neighbor, thus promoting the reputation of the writer as the embodiment of renaissance refinement and gentlemanly virtues, to the detriment of any possible role as *maître à penser*.⁵

This same image of Montaigne as wise and witty occupant of his chateau can be found in the writings of his enemies, from Blaise Pascal and those *dévots* who followed his lead—Malebranche, Garasse, Berulle, Bossuet—down to Sainte-Beuve, with the difference that, far from wishing to have

him living next door, they strongly disapproved of him and denounced his relaxed style and disengaged attitude. In their eyes the writer's levity and detachment appeared as a guilty lack of commitment, while the digressive, self-referential style of the *Essais* was stigmatized as an indecent display of authorial vanity.⁶

Admirers and detractors have also been united by a shared mistrust of the writer's Christian sentiments and of his professed loyalty to the Catholic Church. The question of Montaigne's religion is one of the few truly controversial issues in scholarly interpretations of his life and work. In the seventeenth century Pascal and the *dévots* accused Montaigne of hypocrisy, denouncing the *Essais* as an apology not just for skepticism, but for incredulity; their campaign of denigration led to the inscription of the book on the Index of forbidden works on the part of the ecclesiastical authorities in 1676, thus reversing the decision of the sympathetic Roman censors who had accorded it the *imprimatur* in 1580.⁷ Protestant commentators thought that Montaigne's professed Catholicism was an excuse to avoid addressing any serious doctrinal issues, clinging instead to a religion of external forms and rituals. Freethinkers and libertines for their part were ready to rally to the judgment of the *dévots*, adopting Montaigne as a fellow traveler who had taken the prudent option of disguising his true opinions under the appearance of conformity. All parties harbored the uneasy feeling that the writer's real intentions eluded them; all chose to believe that he had deliberately misled or deceived them, thus promoting the tenacious legend of his ambiguity and duplicity.⁸

It would be easy to suggest that, when Pascal denounced Montaigne's obsession with self-analysis, or when André Gide dissected and exposed his ambivalence, they were in fact projecting upon the author of the *Essais* some intimate traits of their own.⁹ Yet it remains true that Montaigne's credibility as moralist and as a political thinker has been seriously undermined by a double indictment that bears at the same time upon his work and upon his personal position. The first accusation is one of quietism. In short, it is claimed that, if Montaigne produced a series of lucid critical insights about contemporary society and about the exercise of power, he failed to suggest any remedy or propose some alternative political model. A conservative at heart, he disapproved of all initiatives directed toward the subversion, or even the radical reform, of existing institutions, either because he thought they would prove ineffective or because he believed they would generate disastrous side effects. In so far as he held "liberal" views, he did so from the purely negative perspective of the protection of the individual sphere of the self from external threats.¹⁰

The second accusation is one of concealment, the charge being that in the *Essais* the author deliberately failed to make explicit the most radical and subversive implications of his reflection, especially in sensitive matters

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such as religious belief, hiding them behind a smoke screen of ambiguous rhetorical formulas. A certain obscurity surrounds the relation between the first and the second accusation: it is not clear, for example, if Montaigne is supposed to have feared the philosophical implications of his views, or their practical consequences; whether a frank admission of his true beliefs may have resulted in an altogether different line of action in public life. Yet coherence is hardly the point here: what matters is the diffuse feeling, persistent through centuries of commentaries and interpretations, that the writer has somehow betrayed the expectations of his readers, by failing to fulfill the promise of his novel and provocative literary enterprise.¹¹

In other words, if the *Essais* was the first great contribution to the critique of the *ancien régime* written in the French language—in line with works such as Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*, or Diderot's *Encyclopédie*—it was a contribution that never really came into its own, because the author was unwilling or unprepared to announce his true colors. As to the promotion of the *Essais* to the status of a literary monument that transcends all particular historical and political context, this exalted position, in its blandness, is no compensation for the ideological battle (for which cause, against what enemies?) that was never engaged.

The Politics of Survival

The widespread feeling that, if Montaigne's work addresses a number of crucial social and political issues, it still falls short of its original promise, is partly based upon a misunderstanding of its intentions and significance. It is also sustained, in the first instance, by two external circumstances: firstly, the production of the *Essais* apparently coincided with the author's resolution to withdraw from public life by giving up his parliamentary office; secondly, it has generally proved difficult to associate Montaigne with one or other of the political factions involved in the protracted civil conflict that dominated most of his adult life.

The writer's professed intention of leaving all other business to serve the Muses—famously recorded in the inscriptions that appear on the beams across the ceiling of his library¹²—finds apparent confirmation in the chronological sequence of events: Montaigne began to work on the early drafts of the *Essais* after selling his office in the *parlement* of Bordeaux in 1570. The date itself is not without importance, since Montaigne “abandoned” his parliamentary post shortly before the tragic events of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre: in particular, he was no longer a *conseiller* in October 1572, when the parliament voted, against the passionate plead-

ings of its *président* Lagebaston, the death of some three hundred Huguenots, who were held in custody by the town's authorities. Montaigne's subsequent reluctance to make any direct reference in his writings to the events of 1572 (refraining from any celebration of the massacre of the kind produced by some of his famous literary friends such as Guy de Pibrac or Pierre de Ronsard, but also from any explicit condemnation) is inevitably perceived by the modern reader as a disturbing omission.¹³

Montaigne's contemporaries would have recognized the image of the writer isolating himself from the world to pursue his vocation for what it was, a literary formula, embedded in classical rhetoric and in tune with the language of the learned academies that flourished under the Valois¹⁴—a conventional posture, which announced the writer's intellectual ambitions and his philosophical colors rather than describing his practical projects. Posterity, possibly influenced by the sequence of historical events, or simply oblivious of Renaissance literary conventions, has taken the idea of retirement more seriously, as an accurate description of the writer's position; it has also read the author's insistence on the "private" and "domestic" character of his work quite literally, as a profession of disengagement from public responsibility. Recent scholarship has done its best to correct this view, showing that Montaigne's "retirement" was far from being a quiet and sheltered retreat, and arguing that the writer continued to take active part in political life until his death over twenty years later. Yet these incontrovertible historical claims have failed thus far to reverse the impression transmitted by tradition, possibly because the surviving evidence on Montaigne's political contacts and diplomatic activities is patchy, and his role difficult to characterize.

Montaigne was twenty-nine years old when the first religious troubles broke out in 1562; when he died, thirty years later, in 1592, the conflict was only just approaching its conclusion; it would still take several years before the new king, Henry IV, achieved a complete pacification of the country, while the marks of destruction across French territory would remain visible for decades afterwards.¹⁵ The protracted character of the French crisis—with civil war becoming a permanent and almost "normal" state of affairs—should be kept in mind, since it helps to explain how people in Montaigne's generation tried to shape their lives both away from and around public events, alternating moments of intense participation with intervals of disaffection and despair, falling in and out of the projects and initiatives that were subsequently hatched to provide a political solution.

Whatever his feelings about the political situation, Montaigne's resolution to sell his office in 1570 was largely circumstantial: at that particular time he had just inherited his father's estate and felt some obligation, as the eldest son, to look after the family's land and properties, an occupation

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of which, admittedly, he soon tired.¹⁶ His activity at the Bordeaux parliament, limited as it was to the *chambre des requêtes*, was rather dull: unlike the *grande chambre*, the main assembly of parliament in which all the affairs of public importance were discussed, the *chambre des requêtes* was an administrative subcommittee that dealt essentially with ordinary litigation; Montaigne's office involved much tedious paperwork and offered limited possibilities of advancement, especially to someone whose family was already well represented within that same institution; the number of members of the same family who could sit in the *grande chambre* was in fact restricted by law, and Montaigne—who had married into a prominent parliamentary family, the de Chassaignes—had to face the competition of older relatives and in-laws.¹⁷

In a provincial, tightly knit community such as the magistracy of Bordeaux, Montaigne's domestic and parliamentary connections were inhibiting in other ways, in particular by associating him with a Catholic party which, since the beginning of the first religious war in 1563, had acquired an increasingly intolerant and aggressive profile. After his resignation he continued to provide legal advice to the parliamentary chambers, but was more at liberty to cultivate relations with the other pole of political power in the region, the one represented by the lieutenant of the Guyenne and his officials, men who were directly dependent on the king and the Parisian court, and who often found themselves in conflict with the different parliamentary factions. He also moved into higher social circles, and soon enjoyed the friendship and patronage of the de Foix-Candales, the grandest aristocratic family of the Guyenne, Catholics who had traditional bonds of kinship and feudal allegiance to the kings of Navarre. It was in their house that Montaigne first met Henry of Navarre; by the end of the 1570s he had been appointed "gentleman of the chamber" of both Henry III of Valois at his Parisian court, and Henry of Navarre at his provincial, but intellectually lively, court at Nérac. He also befriended a string of noble ladies who are associated with the composition of the *Essais*: Diane de Foix, Marguerite de Duras, Navarre's wife Marguerite de Valois, his sister Catherine de Bourbon, and his politically influential mistress Diane ("Corisande") d'Andoins.¹⁸ It was thanks to the support of the de Foix entourage that Montaigne was appointed mayor of Bordeaux in 1580, a post for which he had not canvassed (he was traveling in Italy at the time) and which he held for four anxious years, spending a considerable amount of time and energy on the effort to keep the city free from unrest and military assaults.¹⁹

In retrospect, Montaigne's move out of parliament could be said to have marked the beginning, rather than the end, of his public career. Though power relations and allegiances shifted through time, the writer found a natural political niche among those members of the Catholic elite

of the Guyenne who patiently canvassed to limit the damages of the conflict and to keep their region—so dangerously enclosed between zones under Protestant influence—as much as possible out of trouble. With equally good connections in the Huguenot camp, he frequently acted as go-between among the various parties involved in the conflict: the parliament of Bordeaux, the town council, the king's officials and military commanders, and their counterparts on the Protestant side. We also know, though only by tantalizing hints (such as ambassadors' reports or contemporary memoirs) that he was entrusted with confidential missions by the kings Henry III of Valois and Henry of Navarre, as well as by the leader of the Catholic League, the Duke of Guise. Given the circumstances, he proved altogether a deft and successful political operator; by the time of his death, in 1592, he basked in the friendship and reflected glory of the new king, Henry IV, the "heretic" enemy he had so stubbornly supported, and who had finally emerged as the winner in the protracted dynastic struggle for the possession of the French crown.²⁰ When he died, those who had known him were unanimous in paying tribute to his ability to handle with confidence and experience "*les affaires du monde*," an acknowledgment that seems to contradict the writer's modern reputation.²¹

Far from being written in isolation and detachment from public life, the subsequent drafts of the *Essais* accompanied Montaigne through the instructive, if distressing, experience of the religious wars. One important dimension to emerge from the layered structure of the book is precisely the growing confidence the writer displayed in assessing political circumstances and lines of action. There is a visible shift from the bookish knowledge, largely derived from the study of classical historians, that characterized the early drafts, and the intimate understanding of the mechanisms of power, born of direct observation and experience, that comes out of the pages of Book III, written in the last years of the writer's life.²² It is true, however, that the *Essais* are difficult to classify in political terms, since they do not speak with the voice of a particular ideology or faction. Montaigne belonged to a generation, raised in the cult of classical history and literature, whose ambitions, political as well as intellectual, were wrecked by the advent of the religious conflict. Before the conflict began, the writer had found a congenial project in the proposed reforms of French institutions set forth by the Chancellor Michel de l'Hospital: these involved a reform of the Church, to eliminate those abuses in the administration of ecclesiastical benefits which had contributed to the development of heresy, and, in parallel with this, a reform of the law, in particular the abolition of the venality of offices and of other corrupt practices.²³

This lofty Erasmian vision, which claimed that the Catholic monarchy should confront the crisis of the Reformation not by attacking her heretic opponents, but by amending her own ways, found predictably little sup-

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port among the different segments of the French establishment, and especially in the parliamentary milieu to which Montaigne belonged; whatever precarious credibility this vision had gained throughout the 1550s was swept away at the beginning of the 1560s by the outbreak of the conflict. The premature death of Montaigne's beloved friend Estienne de La Boétie in 1563, besides having a deep emotional impact upon the writer, contributed somehow to his feeling of being one of the few surviving heirs to the best hopes and ideals of his own generation. By that time he had also outgrown his own professional role of magistrate: years of practice in the legal profession, the "*chicane*" as he contemptuously called it, had eroded any residual loyalty the young *conseiller* might have felt toward French parliamentary institutions and French justice—though paradoxically this negative experience would never entirely destroy his disposition to look at public issues primarily from the distinctive perspective of the man of law.

Unlike some of his siblings (one of his brothers and a sister converted to Protestantism), Montaigne was never seriously attracted to the ideas of the Reformation, which he failed somehow to recognize as a spontaneous religious movement, with genuine (if misguided) spiritual motivations;²⁴ what he saw instead was the manipulative action of a leadership of religious fanatics and ambitious warlords, who used the religious issue to promote their own interests, mercilessly exploiting the credulity of an impoverished and discontented population. Precisely because he was convinced that the French people had many good reasons to revolt against their rulers (such as poverty, exploitation, a ruthless and corrupt administration) Montaigne found it difficult to see the priority of a doctrinal dispute that, in his view, could hardly be understood by the mass of the people; his personal contacts with some of the leaders of the war on both sides probably contributed to reenforce his belief in the shamelessly opportunistic character of their motivations.

While he had no sympathy for the Reformation, Montaigne was unable to identify with the crusading spirit of the loyalist Catholics: being opposed on principle to the practice of torture and to cruel executions, he found the means employed in the persecution of heretics barbarous and horrifying, and judged the penchant for populist violence and feudal brutality developed by the Catholic party equally unacceptable. If Montaigne can be appropriately described as a "*politique*"—the name given to those moderates who, throughout the conflict, tried to reach some kind of settlement between the two religious factions—this label does not associate him with any definite political ideology. During the wars moderates were often accused by both religious parties of indifference and incredulity; modern historians have followed their lead, by associating the position of the *politiques* with the secular ideology of reason of state or with straight-

forward opportunism. This view is somewhat misleading: if some *politiques* can be described as religious skeptics, the great majority of them were, like Montaigne, sincere Christians, who could not be reconciled to the idea of a fratricidal war fought on religious grounds. What united them in the search for a viable compromise was the spontaneous solidarity of people trying to survive a civil catastrophe of unprecedented proportions, without any common project or design beyond the immediate one of the limitation of damage.²⁵

In the *Essais* Montaigne expressed a clear (if not overstated) preference for republican government: in the text republics were described as the most ‘natural’ and ‘equitable’ form of regime, while collective political decisions were judged safer than individual ones. Monarchy featured invariably as second best, a form of government imposed by particular historical circumstances and traditions.²⁶ There were probably a number of different reasons that led Montaigne to support the cause of Henry of Navarre: loyalty to his local patrons, a shrewd assessment of Navarre’s superior abilities, cultural and temperamental affinities may all have played a role; but certainly a belief in the merits of monarchy, let alone absolute monarchy, was not one of them. As to the political initiatives associated with Henry IV’s reign, while it is pointless to speculate about developments that occurred principally after Montaigne’s death, it can be said that some of them, such as the king’s conversion to Catholicism, or the establishment of religious coexistence, were certainly close to the spirit of the writer’s own convictions; while others, such as the reform that turned the venality of offices into a permanent feature of French law, went against the advice that Montaigne had offered to the king in the years of their association.²⁷

In a poignant passage of his work the writer observed, echoing Erasmus, that it was his fate to be alienated from both parties and to be regarded as “Guelph by the Ghibelline and Ghibelline by the Guelph.”²⁸ In fact his position, far from being unusual, was probably common to many moderates confronted with a context in which conflicts were strongly radicalized and allegiances unstable. However, after Montaigne’s death, the difficulty of associating him with any official faction in the universe of the religious wars and their aftermath—Catholics or Huguenots, partisans of royal absolutism or *monarchomach* anti-royalists, *politiques* or *ligueurs*, libertines or *dévots*—has deprived him of the support and credibility that come from being adopted within a recognized ideological tradition. On the whole historians have found Montaigne’s lack of affiliation puzzling and have tried to explain it away as indifference, resigned submission to authority, or secret disaffection—attitudes that seem ill-suited to capture the fierce independence and highly individual vision of the world that characterized the *Essais*.

Intellectual Ambitions

But where did the vision come from, how did Montaigne come to adopt such a distinctive personal approach to the understanding of the world around him (or, as he would rather say, of himself through it)? At some fundamental level the question is of course unanswerable: no one can really explain a literary vocation or a particular impulse toward exploring the self through the medium of writing. Yet in a more superficial dimension it is at least possible to trace, in the development of the text, some converging paths through which the author came to focus upon his object.

The first of these paths to emerge is unsurprisingly the most obvious and conventional one: the attempt, on the part of a still inexperienced author, to produce an ambitious work of historical and juridical interpretation, testing his views against the established wisdom of both classical and modern authorities. It is difficult to tell to what extent this exercise was purely academic, or whether it was prompted from the start by the need to come to terms with contemporary French events, to find some explanation for the religious crisis, and to predict its possible developments. Probably all these factors played a role, but as the work took shape, contemporary reality kept intruding into the text, gradually conjuring up the sombre picture of a violent and corrupt European society on the brink of disintegration.

The most striking aspect of the first religious war that began in the early 1560s was, for those who experienced it (and there is no reason to think that Montaigne was an exception), its sudden and unexpected character. Though it was obvious to observers that French society was traversed by tensions which, in unfavorable circumstances, might destabilize it, the particular form taken by the conflict was on the whole novel and surprising. What was new was not the spreading of the Reformed faith (an already familiar phenomenon from the previous decades), nor the bouts of revolt and of ferocious repression that accompanied it.²⁹ The novelty was represented instead by the quick process through which a whole range of latent conflicts—social, economic, territorial, dynastic, institutional—were absorbed within the single mode and the distinctive rhetoric of the war of religion.

Confronted with an apparently new type of civil unrest, with communities, once united, now fighting furiously over chapels and burial grounds, holy images and stations of the cross, those in charge of public order reacted with due alarm, but without any great clarity of purpose; thus the measures adopted by local authorities, magistrates, and the king's officials were often contradictory, and were often made ineffective by paralyzing conflicts of competence. Montaigne must have been familiar with the report that his friend La Boétie had written on behalf of the Bordeaux parliament, after accompanying the king's envoy, the Lieutenant de Burie, on

a tour of inspection of the region of Agen. In the months that preceded the outbreak of the war, the region had been the theater of serious incidents between Catholics and Protestants; against their best judgment, Burie and the other delegates had hastily introduced some measures of compromise to restore order, but in reporting to the *parlement* La Boétie expressed the view that their effect would not prove long lasting.³⁰

On the whole the reaction of observers fluctuated between two alternative interpretations of the crisis: the first one saw the war as a struggle for the true faith, an epochal conflict of paramount spiritual significance; the second described it as the replaying, under new names and new pretexts, of old and essentially worldly disputes. Seen from the first perspective, Christian civilization in France, perhaps even in Europe, was coming to an apocalyptic end; from the second, the nation was just experiencing a particularly nasty display of ordinary vices—resentment, envy, greed, desire for revenge, and so on—which, if appropriately dealt with, would eventually subside again within the boundaries of social discipline.³¹

In the *Essais* Montaigne would explore both hypotheses, but to begin with he was engaged in the definition of a broader methodological perspective from which the question could be addressed. What we know about the evolution of the text shows that the early drafts, written in the first half of the 1570s, focused mainly upon questions such as the role of chance in military and political undertakings, the stability of regimes, the ambivalence of men's emotional responses, and other themes connected with historical prediction and causality. To confront these questions Montaigne mobilized a considerable mass of sources published in the four languages he read fluently (French, Latin, Italian, and Spanish), ranging from Greek and Roman historiography through modern commentaries, chronicles, and memoirs, down to travel narratives and to the fashionable modern genre of legal histories.³² His command over such vast literature—artfully presented in the text as the product of casual, whimsical reading—did not fail to impress his early readers, so that a solid reputation for erudition and learning accompanied the author of the *Essais* through the centuries.

Yet this scholarly tour de force, initially undertaken with considerable energy and enthusiasm (typical perhaps of someone who had come relatively late in life to such systematic intellectual activity), would soon expose the weakness of those doctrines and theories from which he had initially hoped to fashion his own interpretation. By testing the range of explanatory models on offer, Montaigne was soon able to show that historical examples could be used in different contexts to support contradictory outcomes; that the search for primary causes runs into circular arguments; and that, more generally, individual as well as collective human responses defy all attempt at straightforward prediction. As a result, he rapidly lost his initial confidence in abstract models of classification and

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explanation and in the possibility of defining a general framework, within which the mechanisms regulating social consensus and social conflict could be understood.

Up to the initial stage of his investigation Montaigne's project was not very distant from the spirit of some of his most prestigious modern sources, works such as Machiavelli's *Discorsi*³³ or Jean Bodin's *Methodus*.³⁴ Like Machiavelli, Montaigne was fascinated by the experience of ancient republics, and held them as a paragon against which modern political events and circumstances should be measured. His legal background, his familiarity with jurisprudential discourse, his persistent concern with the origins and nature of the law, meant also that he felt an obvious affinity with Bodin's reflection. However, he remained no less unconvinced by Machiavelli's attempt to define, in near-scientific terms, predictable patterns of social and individual behavior, than he was by Bodin's ambitious synopsis, which linked different phases in the history of humankind with specific types of legal institutions. Both approaches seemed in the end too general and abstract to come to terms with the forever shifting, infinitely intricate reality of human interaction.

Montaigne's resolute departure from the conventional path of systematic inquiry turned the *Essais* into a novel, highly distinctive type of work, which no longer resembled any of its original models; but his approach did not lessen the work's commitment to some of the basic issues he shared with them, although these now appeared in a richer, more diversified context. The shift in methodology tends to hide this fact, as if in developing his new skeptical approach, the writer had given up addressing any specific questions about the structure of human societies and about political institutions, or as if he had lost interest in finding any specific answers for them, satisfying himself instead with a set of philosophical paradoxes.

Recent studies focusing upon the tradition of Pyrrhonism and Montaigne's philosophical views have helpfully stressed that skepticism need not imply an abdication from action, either in individual circumstances or in a social context. On the contrary, the adoption of the skeptical method may serve to break away from the constraints of theory in order to establish a more direct, flexible connection with reality and with living experience. In the case of the *Essais* this process is more visible if, instead of focusing exclusively upon the *Apology of Raymond Sebond*—Montaigne's methodological manifesto in Book II—as commentators have traditionally chosen to do, the impact of the skeptical approach is considered across the whole text of the *Essais*. Where the *Apology* presents in fact a general philosophical discussion of the limits of human reason, it is in dealing with a variety of social and ethical issues that the eminently practical scope of Montaigne's skeptical method becomes apparent.³⁵

The new approach enabled the writer to expose the limitations of those

established authorities who, by clinging to abstract schemes and models, failed to grasp the complexity and instability of human circumstances. Historians, for example, were misguided when they described the lives and characters of famous men according to patterns that make them look all the same, arranging the historical evidence to suit a set of ideal images of how great men should behave. Like all those who aimed at controlling and manipulating human actions, they were inclined to attribute to these a continuity and coherence that in practice was simply nonexistent.³⁶ In opposition to these schematic approaches, Montaigne revived the classical metaphor that compared any serious attempt to understand and influence human actions to the art of medicine: a practice ready to acknowledge the infinite peculiarities of living organisms and capable of adjusting to them.

What was in question was not simply the adoption of a novel intellectual strategy, but a radical change in the attitude and disposition of the person who, by speaking or writing, took up the role of authority. It was not sufficient to point out that the conventional discourses of philosophy, history, or jurisprudence were inadequate; one must be ready to adopt a type of language that might prove radically different in tone: less arrogant, less dogmatic, ready to question its own motives, simple; a language in fact that ordinary people might understand because it was close to their experience and to their sentiments, rather than addressing them from above. It was necessary, Montaigne claimed, to follow the example of Socrates by establishing a conversation with ordinary people such as artisans and manual workers, because it was with such persons—not with poets or philosophers—that we spend most of our lives, as it is on them that we depend practically for our everyday survival.³⁷

Montaigne's growing anti-intellectualism had recognizable antecedents in the ancient and Christian traditions: beyond its skeptical mistrust of system, it could be associated with the Socratic insistence upon self-knowledge, with stoic and epicurean aspirations to restore nature and reject artifice, but also with the evangelical values of humility and love brought back into the contemporary debate by Erasmus.³⁸ In the *Essais* the figures of Socrates and Christ appeared blended in a single image of the philosopher-teacher capable of addressing, in simple language, his fellow men as equals and of speaking to their hearts before their minds.

In contrast with the more conventional anti-intellectual postures inherited from classical literature, the task Montaigne set for himself in the *Essais* was that of bringing the dimension of practice into the writing, "contaminating" as it were his prose with the eclectic and confused peculiarities of human experience, with the oddities, emotions, and trivial details of everyday life. He developed this provocative style with the same relish and dedication he had originally invested in accumulating bookish knowledge and academic credentials. His anti-intellectualism did not

develop as a mere rhetorical expedient: it grew instead into a militant vocation, boldly exhibited and charged with all the writer's personal emotions and sentiments.

Passions

Moving away from the more specifically intellectual dimensions of the *Essais*, a different point of entry into the work is offered by a set of the author's emotional responses: the growth of feelings of outrage, compassion, and indignation, fed by the mounting horrors of the wars, represents an essential support to Montaigne's analysis, though one that the writer clearly decided not to emphasize. Whatever their attitude toward Montaigne's work, past and present commentators are in fact unanimous in their appreciation of the author's moderation and detachment: they praise his capacity to face with equanimity the most disruptive experiences and to show no partisan animosity in response to the tragic events of his time. For Montaigne's contemporaries this serene attitude was associated with a specific philosophical ideal—that of stoic wisdom and of philosophical detachment from the world—though it is possible that the writer's easy nature and friendly disposition might have contributed to the result as much as any self-imposed discipline, Gascon bonhomie breathing new life into the austere Roman stereotype.

This image of Montaigne as impassive, smiling sage has long survived its original connotation, taking on different forms over time and reappearing as Christian compassion, humane benevolence, skeptical irony, enlightened sympathy, liberal toleration, or postmodern indulgence, in tune with changing cultural fashions. The paradox in this tenacious characterization of Montaigne is that it is both genuine and misleading. It is genuine because it corresponds to the rhetorical strategy the writer deliberately adopted in his book: if we cannot tell what the author of the *Essais* really felt about a number of sensitive issues, we can at least recognize his determination to oppose moderate tones to partisan peroration, common sense to fanatical preaching, modesty and doubt to dogmatic certitude, irony to arrogance. It is misleading, on the other hand, because it conceals the passionate sentiments that sustain the whole enterprise: feelings of rage, disgust, indignation, outrage, carefully mastered under the smooth surface of an easy, meandering prose, which only at unguarded moments flare up unexpectedly like flashes of lightning across the page.

In itself Montaigne's choice of understating his emotions, steering away from the tones of acclaim, invective, and peroration that characterized French literary production in the aftermath of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, is impeccable, and greatly enhances the impact of his writ-

ing. And yet the undercurrent of passionate involvement, however strategically concealed, gives body and animation to the text, turning it into something far more engaging than the erudite performance of an accomplished intellectual. As to the nature of his emotional response, this is best described as an overwhelming sense of outrage: the unnecessary, cruel suffering of innocent people on account of the willful actions of human agents offended him as an intolerable breach of natural justice, which nothing could ever legitimate or condone. In the *Essais* this sentiment of outrage appeared in a very wide range of contexts; though contemporary French events were naturally prominent in his narrative, Montaigne was not especially interested in denouncing abuses and atrocities committed by a particular set of political actors: the picture he conjured up showed the human race, across space and time, tragically divided between the socially privileged and those whose lives counted for nothing, the grossly rich and the abjectly poor, the victims of persecution and their oppressors, masters and slaves.

Montaigne did not regard this reality of injustice and domination as a natural state of affairs. Nature exposed men to sickness and death, to need and fear; in some very primitive forms of society close to the state of nature, such as primitive tribes, men would no doubt subsist in very deprived, precarious circumstances; their efforts to survive would be hard and painful, their lives short and brutish. But it was only in the more complex social setting of civilization that people would be left to starve on the doorstep of houses replete with food, that they would be sacrificed to the vanity and ambitions of the powerful or perhaps tortured and executed in order to prove some obscure point of doctrine. If men in their natural state were capable of violence and cruelty, it was only in the realm of civilization that they committed crimes under the pretense of serving justice or religion, insulting their victims with their hypocrisy and arrogance.³⁹

This bleak picture of the evils of the civilized state had recognizable Augustinian undertones (Augustine's *City of God* featured very prominently among the sources of the *Essais*): in his struggle to elevate himself above his original near-animal condition, man could only magnify the most perverse features of his nature such as greed, deceit, cruelty, and ambition. Human society was flawed because humans were basically incapable of any consistent effort toward peace and justice and tended to slide back into a logic of spiritual and material enslavement—a reality that was of course even more damning for those generations and those nations who had enjoyed the benefit of Christian revelation and of God's grace through baptism.

If he was an attentive reader of the *City of God*, and if he brought into the *Essais* echoes of its tragic vision of humanity, Montaigne placed his own analysis upon rather different ground, in tune with the critical read-

ings of Augustine's work promoted by the Erasmian school.⁴⁰ In his view neither the corruption of the individual, nor the decadence of human societies, should be regarded as predetermined results, dictated by man's sinful nature and inscribed in the experience of the Fall. For him, the most distinctive feature of human nature was precisely its plasticity. Man was double: he was what he was, but he was also what he might become; all one could hope to capture was not man's essence, but a passing state. Experience showed the existence of a wide range of human types, from the most brutish to the most elevated, to the extent that the very notion of "human" was difficult to associate with a set of definite features; even the discontinuity between "human" and "animal" species appeared problematic.⁴¹

To Montaigne the circumstances that caused such dramatic inequality of conditions among human beings practically everywhere on earth seemed neither necessary nor irreversible. He thought, like Rousseau, that such circumstances were manmade and largely accidental; but unlike the author of the two *Discourses* (who remained more faithful in this respect to the original Augustinian model) he did not regard history as the progressive fall of mankind into moral decadence and material enslavement, but rather as a cluster of confused and often contradictory movements. To assume otherwise, to think that the fate of mankind must unfold according to a predictable pattern, was an act of presumption (how can we expect to know what God has in store for us?) and suggested a lack of faith in God's infinite mercy. Since human nature was capable of change, and since history must be seen as a complex and essentially open process, one should never accept injustice as a historical or anthropological necessity. Whatever the circumstances that led to it, injustice was always the product of specific human actions and human choices; such human choices were always, in the last instance, individual ones, and it was this individual responsibility for evil actions, rather than some global sense of human perversity, that must be addressed.

Inevitably the main target of the writer's revulsion, as it emerges from the pages of the *Essais*, was the people in power, those who used their authority and privileges to crush the less fortunate: greedy officials, unscrupulous judges, vengeful aristocrats, fanatical religious leaders, deceitful rulers, ruthless colonialists. Such people would happily hang a peasant for a crime he had not committed, rather than taking the trouble to investigate his guilt; they were ready to torture some hapless servant who followed the new heretical faith out of loyalty toward his master, or to burn alive some harmless lunatic who thought she possessed magic powers. They might, like the king of Portugal, trick thousands of Jews into giving up their homes and properties on the promise of safety, only to leave them to die on rafts at sea; or perhaps, like the men in the service of the crown

of Castile, they might be ready to massacre and enslave entire nations on behalf of the commerce of pearls and spices. Montaigne was convinced, like Erasmus before him, that the crisis experienced by French and, more generally, by European society in the time of the religious wars was largely to be imputed to the deficiencies of her ruling classes. The corrupt practices of the clergy had discredited religion in the eyes of many, leaving the people exposed to the preaching of zealots and the manipulations of demagogues. The greed and partiality of the magistracy had destroyed popular trust in the law and in justice. The violent habits of a brutal, ill-educated nobility, with no useful skills other than the combat for which they continually trained, were turning Europe into a vast feudal gangland.⁴²

Yet, if he reacted vividly to the abuses of the men in power, Montaigne was convinced that the responsibility for the crisis did not stop at the higher levels of the social scale. No doubt those who belonged to the ruling elite were doubly guilty, because they were in charge of things and could influence people, and also because they should have known better. However, in a situation where injustice and violence were widespread, everyone carried a share of responsibility: not just those who initiated the abuses and their followers, but also those who, from cowardice, indifference, or simple inertia, stood by and did nothing to stop them (indeed the writer placed himself in this last category of passive bystanders). A craving for domination was not the exclusive vice of the rich and powerful, though of course they had greater opportunities to indulge in it than ordinary people: even the most humble and insignificant members of society were capable of oppressing those they perceived as more feeble than themselves, as in the case of parents who brutalized their children, of children torturing animals, or of able-bodied persons victimizing the crippled and the insane. Such instincts were deeply rooted in human nature, where they fought with the equally natural sentiments of sympathy and compassion, and must be eradicated early on by education and example, since they remained beyond the reach of the law.⁴³

Montaigne did not consider domination (*maîtrise*) primarily as the feature of specific political systems, though he suggested that some types of regime were more conducive to it than others; instead he portrayed the exercise of abusive power as a flaw that cut across the whole spectrum of human associations: it was present in the relations among individuals, families, social groups, tribes, nations, empires; it even extended to the relations between living species, since humans were inclined to exercise an arbitrary and often abusive dominion over animals and over their natural environment.

At moments, when the subject of domination is discussed, it is possible to recognize in the *Essais* echoes of the classical republican rhetoric that characterized La Boétie's influential "*Discours de la servitude volontaire*";

men are slaves because they choose to be, whenever, from lack of courage and virtue, they submit without resisting to tyranny; freedom comes from the absence of relations of personal dependence, and the only just polity is one in which all citizens are equal in front of the law. The obvious affinity between the *Discours* and some of the arguments of the *Essais* has led some scholars to suggest that Montaigne, rather than La Boétie, was its real author, or that he was at least responsible for redrafting it in the 1570s.⁴⁴

Elsewhere in the text, however, the writer looks beyond the classical universe of the republic threatened by tyranny, to consider the reality of oppression in a much broader perspective: in the family, in the school-room, and in the village, wherever petty despots exercise their power; among those human groups, anywhere in the world, who are targeted for persecution; across the continents, in the relations between conquering colonists and the populations they enslave. Thus, halfway through building up his case, Montaigne moved away from the familiar ground of the defense of republican freedom to espouse instead the sentiments of Christian universalism: passionate indignation, the sense of scandal in the face of cruelty and injustice, and its counterpart, compassion, are among the most distinctly Christian features of the *Essais*, and this regardless of any assumption one might choose to make about the personal religious beliefs of the author. In his work Montaigne returned over and over again to the subject of justice, exposing the imperfections and limitations of all human laws and the flaws attached to the practice of their administration. Yet, beyond the inadequacy of their own rules and arrangements, he thought men were still capable, in the face of gross abuse, to glimpse the truth of God's justice: they might be unable to agree about its prescriptions and to follow them, but they could not entirely free themselves from its incumbent presence.

This move toward a superior conception of justice is not without consequences for the overall coherence and credibility of Montaigne's vision. The author's Christian sentiments propelled the *Essais* beyond the boundaries of the classical republican tradition; but the same sentiments made the work incompatible with those contemporary political doctrines that advocated the restoration, in Europe, of a Christian polity (monarchy or empire) placed under the guidance of the Church. The *Essais* have been occasionally associated by historians of political thought with the neo-stoic tradition of reason of state; if this association is partly justified by the fact that Montaigne shared with writers, such as his admirer Justus Lipsius, a common background in the Ciceronian and Tacitean heritage,⁴⁵ it rests nevertheless upon a misunderstanding of the essence of Montaigne's Christianity, which was radical, egalitarian, sternly opposed to violence, and made no concessions either to the secular ambitions of the Church or to the requirements of a superior statecraft. The passionate denunciation

of the genocide of the Amerindian populations in Book III—where the conquering style of the king of Castile, “the greatest prince of the habitable world, to whom the Pope, representing God on earth, had given the principality of all the Indies,” was most unfavorably compared to that of Alexander the Great—showed just how little trust the writer put in the ideal of a Christian empire.⁴⁶

The problem with this universalistic approach is that it blurs to some extent the focus of Montaigne’s original indictment; if the duty of the citizen confronted with the enslavement of the republic is clear enough—to fight against the tyrant or to perish—what is the appropriate ground to resist abuses committed in such diverse and complex settings across the planet? When sovereigns and entire nations are guilty, when oppression stretches across continents in intricate webs of interest and complicity, what possible redress could there be on this earth for the helpless victims?

Today, after the age of Marxist internationalism, this “global” vision has gained new credibility as a possible standpoint from which to address issues such as the defense of human rights, the equitable distribution of resources, or the protection of the environment. In this context some of Montaigne’s insights sound much closer to contemporary preoccupations than to those political issues discussed by influential sixteenth-century works. But on the whole it is unsurprising that commentators should regard the *Essais* as rather marginal to the development of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political theory and that they should place them instead in the no-man’s land of “humanism,” a philosophical ideal with no clear content beyond a set of liberal sentiments, and no obvious political implications, stretching conveniently from the “Renaissance” to “modernity.”⁴⁷

Yet some at least of the principles embedded in Montaigne’s Christian vision of the world had clear practical implications. One of them was the belief that only a community founded upon cooperation, understanding, and peace was truly human: no doubt experience showed that other types of association were practically viable, but they did not correspond to the way in which men should live according to their moral potential and to God’s design. In one of the most famous of the *Essais* (essay 31 in Book I), the writer described a community of savages (possibly inspired by contemporary accounts of Brazil), the Cannibals, comparing it polemically to contemporary French society: the Cannibals were pronounced less barbarous than the French, since their brutal habits (such as the practice of eating their enemies) were the expression of a primitive, near-animal nature rather than the product of corruption and deliberate cruelty. The Cannibals’ society was practically viable, and yet nowhere in the text does Montaigne suggest that sharing their lifestyle would be a desirable state of affairs; such a primitive community, ruled by basic needs and appetites,

corresponded perhaps to an early phase in the evolution of mankind, but it was nonetheless barbarous, and remained below the level of sociability that men could achieve in virtue of their reason.⁴⁸

Another theme in the *Essais* that links the work with the “pacifist” currents in the Christian tradition was the mistrust of violence as a means toward redressing wrongs and restoring justice. Violence, even when employed in the service of a just cause, was always wrong, both because whoever resorted to it was bound to create new abuses, and because the exposure to violence, for example during a prolonged war, had the effect of corrupting society at large, by generating brutality and indifference to suffering.⁴⁹ Moreover, as the experience of the Reformation had shown, in any situation of conflict or civil unrest, it was the lives of poor, defenseless people that were most likely to be sacrificed. Crucial to Montaigne’s vision was in fact the belief that the lives of all human beings were equally valuable, regardless of their personal abilities, their culture, or their status; in particular, the lives of ordinary people were as important to society—which they sustained and made viable by means of their menial activities—as those of distinguished and superior persons.

These Christian presuppositions in Montaigne’s outlook suggested that the development of friendly, cooperative relations among human beings, or, in other words, the promotion of sociability, constituted a moral obligation for all people. Humans might be naturally sociable, if only for utilitarian reasons; but, in practice, achieving a reasonable degree of consensus and solidarity in any community required a collective effort, which must be even greater in circumstances in which public trust and civil peace had been thoroughly destroyed. There were of course ways in which sociability could be promoted from above, by well-meaning rulers, on a large institutional scale: for example, by formulating agreements, by introducing better laws, and by fighting against the corruption of public institutions; at a different level, by reforming education, developing commercial relations, offering better religious instruction, and so on. In the first instance, however, sociability represented a moral obligation for the individual: each person could contribute to make society more compassionate and just, in the same way in which, in bad times, each person contributed to make it more hostile and unlivable. Montaigne did not underestimate the importance of political and legislative intervention; indeed he considered that in the aftermath of the civil war some reforms (such as the reform of the legal system) would be essential to restore order and confidence within French society. However, what really interested him, the question he placed at the center of his reflection in the *Essais*, was not how society could be improved by legislative action, but how sociability was to be built (or destroyed) from the bottom up, how it could emerge from the murky, diversified, unstable world of individual experience.

The Individual Perspective

Whether we look at the development of Montaigne's work from the perspective of its intellectual background and references, or from the angle of its emotional motivations, we end up with the same notion of what is required to satisfy the writer's aspirations: the elaboration of a distinctly individual, personal approach to the issues that are being discussed. It is the choice to speak simply and immediately for himself that makes it possible for the writer to break with academic conventions and to abandon systematic presentation in favor of a more flexible, critical type of inquiry: an experimental style of writing aptly described by the equally novel title of "*essais*."⁵⁰ The same choice allows him to address the reader not from a position of authority, but directly and modestly, as an equal; not voicing partisan views or dogmas but giving expression to the uncertainty of his own judgment.

To some extent this project of writing as *homo pro se* was part of the classical Ciceronian tradition, still very much alive in Montaigne's time. The model was that of the private citizen or public man in (hopefully temporary) retirement, who wrote for the instruction of his family and friends: such an author would compose his work in a simple, understated style, with the aim of leaving behind him a treasure of personal memories and wise exhortations. Montaigne subscribed to the conventions of this genre in the Preface of the *Essais*, where he claimed that the aim of his writing was purely "domestic and private," his intention being that of leaving to his family and friends something to remember him by after his death.⁵¹ Elsewhere in the text, however, he stigmatized the complacent aspects of this type of autobiographical writing, and ridiculed those ambitious public men—such as Cicero—who expected to gain glory by the idle display of "chatter and verbiage," and who manufactured seemingly private letters, artfully crafted in impeccable style, for the sole purpose of putting them into circulation.⁵² The effort of speaking for and about oneself was of no interest, if it remained confined to the exhibition of conventional sentiments and elegant prose: to be worth the effort such writing must explore in depth the essence of one's thoughts and experiences.

Thus Montaigne was not satisfied with recording exemplary memories or expressing well-considered opinions, but brought to the text the full stream of his experiences, fantasies, physical sensations, whims, and emotions—the magma from which he believed human opinions took their fluid and uncertain shape. As has often been pointed out, these self-referential elements were absent from the initial drafts of the *Essais*—which were modeled upon a more traditional (and impersonal) style of historical commentary; but once they were introduced, they completely trans-

formed the work, giving it a new feeling of vividness and variety, as the distinctive personality of the author gradually invaded and took over the text. Book and writer complemented one another: the writer gave his own living form to the book, and at the same time adjusted his personality and behavior to the image of himself he was creating on the page.⁵³ As Montaigne famously observed in a letter addressed to Henry III of Valois, the king having graciously expressed his appreciation for his book, he must necessarily like the author, since author and book were one and the same thing.⁵⁴

On the whole Montaigne's contemporaries were not impressed by his efforts to create a less conventional, more spontaneous style of address. They judged the prose of the *Essais* digressive, careless, and generally lacking in style (defects enhanced by the lack of purity of the author's Gascon French). If they were ready to admire the erudition and sound judgment of the writer, they also believed he took excessive liberties with his subject (whatever that was) and pronounced the book unpolished and poorly structured.⁵⁵ Modern (and especially postmodern) commentators have reversed this verdict, finally recognizing the extreme originality and depth of Montaigne's experiment; yet to a large extent this appreciation focuses upon the *Essais* as a literary work and as an aesthetic achievement. From the vantage point of political and moral reflection, Montaigne's solitary enterprise is still regarded with suspicion: interpreters have seen his insistence upon the individual perspective as an elusive strategy, an attempt to avoid public commitment by seeking refuge within the microcosm of personal sensibility. Though it is generally acknowledged that the ambivalence and circularity that characterize the argumentation of the *Essais* belong, like the suspension of judgment, to the strategy of skeptical discourse, there is still a tendency to see these fluctuations in the prose as the marks of a capricious and contradictory intellect, constantly seeking a way out of the conclusions of its own analysis.

Montaigne's ambition to construct an independent standpoint from which to express his critical judgment is obviously central to the project of the *Essais*, but the relation between his fictional independent author and his imaginary audience remains difficult to interpret. In the text he expressed disapproval of those authors who published in the hope of gaining money and glory, in the same way in which he distanced himself from those people who were ready to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of public advancement. He also confessed that the pleasure he derived from writing was so great, that it would be worth the effort even if his book failed to attract a single reader. This fierce profession of freedom and dignified self-sufficiency did not exclude the intention of taking position in a public debate; on the contrary, the main reason why a writer must not be influenced by instrumental motives, or by the desire for public approval, was

precisely that only complete honesty and independence would give true authority to his views and make them worth listening to.

As Jean Starobinski argued in his classic study of Montaigne, the themes of the world as theater, of false appearance and hypocrisy as dominant features of human society, were central to the culture of the period.⁵⁶ In the *Essais* this broad philosophical question of the relation between reality and appearance, or truth and falsity, was also articulated in the form of a specific historical judgment about the practical consequences of deception. Montaigne was convinced that one of the greatest evils associated with civil conflict was the corruption of public discourse: after decades of propaganda, people were so disgusted by the voicing of partisan views, by the constant manipulation of truth, that they did not believe any longer anything they were told. Even the laws issued during those years avoided calling crimes by their real names and invented new, “gentler” terms to describe transgressions and abuses that had become commonplace.⁵⁷

This policy founded upon deception was self-defeating, and those princes and leaders who practiced it must know that sooner or later people would see through their lies, and lose all confidence in their authority. But meanwhile the damage done to the community was beyond measure: words were an essential component of the fabric of human society; in relations between men, speech and persuasion represented the only viable alternative to violence. Whoever connived in their corruption did in fact “betray human society,” undermining the foundations of peaceful coexistence and of public trust.⁵⁸ In this context the writer could offer a distinctive contribution to the reestablishment of public confidence: by showing, within the limited scope of his own individual work, that good faith and sincerity were possible, he might do something to restore the credibility of language. Thus, against the tide of debased, deceitful discourse, the author of the *Essais* was determined to speak “by his own universal being,” not “as a grammarian, poet, or jurisconsult but as Michel de Montaigne”; the expression of a personal viewpoint, divested of any technical authority, would alone prove truly universal, as the diversity of their individual voices was precisely what all human beings could recognize as common ground.⁵⁹

It is interesting to compare Montaigne’s notion of the role of the writer as independent voice with that expressed by Voltaire during the preparation of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Writing to Mme du Deffand in February 1760, Voltaire explained that he was engaged in “giving to myself in alphabetical order an account of all I must think about this world and possibly about the next—all of this for my own benefit, and perhaps, after my death, for the benefit of honest people,” and added: “I go about my task as frankly as Montaigne did about his.”⁶⁰ Though Voltaire set forth the obligatory modest reservations as to the appeal of his work (“perhaps after

my death . . .”), in his case one has no doubts that his voice would hit the desired target of the crowd of “*honnêtes gens*” ready to become his audience. His public was out there, marshalled in the ranks of the republic of letters, the very embodiment of enlightened public opinion, eager to be stirred up by his words; the existence of a receptive readership justified the writer’s solitary effort, ensuring that what he had to say would make a difference.

In the case of Montaigne, on the other hand, things do not seem so straightforward. In a bout of ferocious self-irony the writer claimed that he published on the same principle that ruled the practice of public hangings: they did nothing for the improvement of those who were executed, but served as a warning to possible future offenders.⁶¹ For all the rhetorical cautions about writing only for one’s family, it is clear that the *Essais*, just like Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique*, were in fact intended for public circulation. If Montaigne was sincere when he claimed that he did not expect money, advancement, or fame from his writings, it is clear that the reputation he acquired through his work engaged him, with each successive revision of the *Essais*, in a dialectical relation with his readers. As Rousseau once observed when comparing himself to the author of the *Essais*, the only difference between them was that he, Jean-Jacques, wrote only for himself, while Montaigne wrote for other people.⁶² Somehow, however, the people who formed Montaigne’s readership do not have the same solid collective identity as Voltaire’s public (or as the identity we are inclined to attribute to an enlightened eighteenth-century audience). Whom did Montaigne write for? If he did attach to the exercise of writing a distinctive moral value, if he thought he was creating, in his own way, new bonds of human friendship and understanding, who were the people he wished to involve in this virtuous verbal exchange?

We know the identity of some of the early readers of the *Essais*: the circle of Montaigne’s noble patrons (including the kings of France and Navarre); distinguished intellectuals who were personally known to him (like the jurist Florimond de Raemon, the poet Pierre du Brach, Pierre Charron); foreign writers like Justus Lipsius, who entered in correspondence with him after reading his book; a young woman from Picardy called Marie de Gournay, who fell in love with the author of the *Essais* and later became his “adoptive daughter” and literary executor, as well as a writer in her own right.⁶³ We also know that Montaigne was struck by the fact that, once the book was in circulation, his reputation as a writer was greater abroad than in his own domestic surroundings.⁶⁴ Yet neither this known audience of notables, professional intellectuals, and learned women, nor the shadow of anonymous readers that can be conjured up by looking at the number of subsequent editions, can tell us much about Montaigne’s imagined public.⁶⁵

In the dedication to the reader that introduced the book—possibly one of the most famous texts in modern European literature—Montaigne stressed the good faith of his work, its lack of artifice and his own readiness to appear “naked” in front of his public: he described in fact his own disposition, without making any assumption about his readership, apart from the fact that, whoever they were, they were probably wasting their time.⁶⁶ When Rousseau used a similar artifice in 1760 in the Preface to the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, he actually pointed at the sort of people who were likely not to like his work (wits, *dévots*, libertines, and so on).⁶⁷ Montaigne did nothing of the sort, neither indicating a privileged audience (such as Voltaire’s “honest people”), nor denouncing potentially hostile critics. His negative rhetoric left in fact the question of the recipients of his work completely open.

Did he actually imagine that, by writing a new and provocative type of book, he might reach a different public from the one he would have attracted with a more conventional work? Possibly not (after all, there were not so many readers out there in 1580); he might, however, hope to make a different kind of impact upon his audience. Directness, sincerity, the reckless exposure of self, might leave the readers indifferent and even disgust them, but might jolt some of them out of their mental habits and perhaps kindle somewhere a sparkle of imaginative sympathy. The dubitative mode is important here, since Montaigne had no confidence that his strategy would succeed: to the end of his life he was unable to stop writing and yet his doubts about his work grew with each new draft and new revision. Writing was an individual act of faith, in which the writer would bare his soul in the hope of becoming the catalyst of some human response. He did not write in order to reach an audience as much as to create one, in the same way in which he had fashioned himself through his book. This was the visionary challenge of the *Essais*: that out of the ruins of a decomposed, acrimoniously divided society it might be possible to piece together the fragments of a rational human conversation.