

What do I know? What I do know

Dennis Letbetter January 2020

Imagine for a moment living in the XVIth Century where one might say without embarrassment “the sky is above us otherwise the world would fall down.” In southwest France, people had a minimal exposure to other cultures, traveled by horseback, hardly bathed, all food was prepared from scratch, there was scant access to expensive chocolate, coffee and sugar, little water was consumed but wine was served at every meal, fruits were mostly cooked, haute cuisine would not be developed in France until the XVIIth Century. The average life span was 30-40 years. Illness was thought to be controlled by God and a punishment rather than a function of biology. Medical care was defined and administered by the Catholic church as a charity. In painting it brought us Rubens, El Greco, Velazquez, Leonardo, Grunewald, Raphael, Durer, Titian and Brueghel. In France the towering voice of Rabelais.

This is before the Anthropocene which we now generally accept, embracing the notion that humans impact the earth. Our urgencies are fundamentally different from someone living in the 16th Century. Anaximander the pre-Socratic philosopher said that “things are transformed one into another according to necessity, and render justice to one another according to the order of time.” Kepler imagined stars as objects seen in a thin fixed sphere. He believed that God had made things into an intelligible plan at a time in which there was no clear distinction between astronomy and astrology. His laws of planetary motion wouldn’t be developed until the XVIIth Century. It wasn’t until 1543 that Copernicus developed his heliocentric model and as well, a year in which a boy living in France named Michel Eyquem de Montaigne was celebrating his 10th birthday.

“There were many terrible things in my life and most of them never happened.”

Anyone interested in essays has had an encounter with Montaigne. I observe a respect for the essays that have been presented to the *Chit Chat Club* since its inception and in 1883 John

Chase Hall presented before this club a learned piece entitled simply *Montaigne* mine is the second concerning him. There have been innumerable volumes written about Montaigne and the scholarship continues apace and unabated. In certain ways these studies only distance us from the *Essays*. We need direct, personal, authentic experience with his words. Translation is already distancing, and commentaries can too often seem to divert us from his eminently accessible work. The Francophile world today largely read Montaigne in modern translation. I at times attempt reading Montaigne in his XVIth Century language with perhaps ridiculous confidence given all of the linguistic differences from contemporary French. He has been described as the first modern man. It is hard to find writers who have not been inspired by him. His influence on Shakespeare was immense from the translations into English by John Florio. Not everyone considered him in a positive light; to mention just two; Pascal, who was disturbed by his skepticism and acceptance of human fallibility, claiming that “the last thing that people need is self-acceptance,” as well as the philosopher Malebranche who described his *Essays* as dangerous on the grounds that they were too enjoyable to read. “By giving pleasure, Montaigne dulled his readers’ reason, then seduced them into his own lax ways.”

My first encounter with Montaigne was rather wholly by accident. As an impassioned haunter of book shops around the world, I am in constant pursuit of the next voice, the new approach, the unknown poet, the hidden, to me, classic, the nuanced antecedents to my intellectual journey. Though one is cautioned not to judge a book by its cover, in this case, I did exactly that. Certainly among my most cherished printed and bound companions have been those published by Penguin. Somewhere tucked in the philosophy shelves of a bookstore on Valencia Street in San Francisco was a single used copy of a Penguin edition of *The Essays of Montaigne*. Not only was I intrigued by the near bite sized brevity of his essays but something as simple as his attractive name. Breaking with all sage advice, I bought this volume because of the image on its cover, a portrait of Montaigne by Dumonstier painted in 1578. I responded to the penetrating eyes of this man and perhaps equally compellingly the luscious green background. Not a single other thing launched me toward what has become a lifetime of fascination with him other than this portrait.

The book became my bedside book, my car book, my traveling companion and now (full disclosure) one of my *Kindle* books. I can think of no writer continually more satisfying to me than he. It is not only that I have an affinity with the work itself, but I have the sense that Montaigne himself seems to shine through the pages, making me feel as though one of my dearest friends, due to some unknown oddity of time, happens to live in the XVIth Century. The *Essays* of Montaigne have held an abiding place close to my hand and close to my spirit for several years. How can I explain their fascination for me if not by citing Montaigne's own words in attempting to describe his great friendship with La Boétie: "Because it was he, because it was I."

Among Persians, when a question arises or a personal problem encountered a volume of Hafez is opened at random, a finger poised onto a phrase which is then taken as something of an oracle. Recently unfortunately Montaigne has been turned into an aphorist, which he never was, is not in fact, and as a directive toward a user's manual for life. Marcus Aurelius and Rumi are being exploited similarly. Fragments of Montaigne's thought can now be found on pop psychology shelves. It perhaps began innocently enough in a passionate biography on him which I recommend written by Stephan Zweig. He sought in Montaigne a moral support and consolation whilst fleeing Nazi Germany.

Montaigne's writing methods allow, even invite randomness in reading him. It is consistent with the way in which he created his work. "The bees plunder the flowers here and there, but afterward they make of them honey, which is all theirs; ... Even so with the pieces borrowed from others; he will transform and blend them to make a work that is all his own, to wit, his judgement." Through three editions he continued to edit, develop and expand his thought.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a man of so many facets that he defies easy description. His grandfather, wealthy from the salted fish trade bought the designation "de Montaigne," and it's not impossible that the name was chosen somewhat at random, Though it

is unclear, it seems that the Eyquem family began as Spanish Jews, who had themselves baptized as Christians in order to assist in their determination to approach the ranks of aristocracy. The obscurity surrounding the Spanish origins of the family are because the records were deliberately fogged in order to secure the family's dearly sought nobility. Assuredly, as well, there were reasons to have an active fear of the Spanish Inquisition. His father further pursued the family's noble standing by marrying a woman, believed to have been Jewish, with a considerable dowry, about whom Montaigne says almost nothing.

Thus, Montaigne was born into the comfortable assumption of a carefully cobbled together place in high society in an isolated chateau in the Périgord in southwestern France. His father wanted to inaugurate for him a complete and formal education preparing him for a positioning amongst the highest spheres in society. In his infant years he lived in the cabin of a forester. He later resented what he took to have been his mother's abandonment of him. The experience gave him an abiding preference for the most simple of foods whilst at the same time developing a sympathy in him for those in less privileged circumstances who need and would continue to need help. "I prefer the company of peasants because they have not been educated sufficiently to reason incorrectly."

After his early years he was reintroduced to the family. To lighten the dreadful breaking of each day his father had him awakened to the sound of a flute or stringed instrument. A German tutor, barely fluent in French was hired to make Latin his mother tongue naturally and without stress, without books or rigorous declension exercises, learning a language as only a child can. In the household, all having contact with him had to learn words and phrases in Latin so as not to corrupt his training. He was fluent in Latin before he began to learn French at the age of six. He was reading Virgil, Ovid and Horace on his own. The ultimate irony was that he wrote his essays in French, the vulgar tongue instead of the expected Latin. His French was Occitan (ok see tan) or Languedoc. There were in France two main languages langue d'oc and langue d'oïl names given to them by Dante. The names are derived from the differing words used to say "yes": "oc" in the south and "oui" in the north. We know which one won out but the name lives on in the cherished Languedoc wine region.

Had Montaigne cared more about his posterity he would not have written in a language that had little assurance of surviving intact. Extraordinarily, even Stendhal in the XIXth Century expressed concern about the durability of his own French language.

Having such a gentle childhood without apparent resistance, to a certain extent formed him in ways that ill equipped him to deal with the inevitable conflicts one encounters in life. This inclination toward conflict avoidance made of him a splendid mediator in the tumultuous XVIth century, a time of unimaginable massacre and counter massacre between Protestants and Catholics. Millions died, either from warfare or disease. Adam Gopnic has said “It was a question not of two sides warring over beliefs but of two sides for whom the war had become the beliefs,” which was the situation when the war made its way into Bordeaux, southwestern France.

He was a counselor in the Cour des Aides of Périgueux and in the Parlement of Bordeaux, he traveled for seventeen months through Switzerland, Germany and Italy, seeking the waters as a curative for his maladies, meeting Pope Gregory XIII, best known to us as having commissioned a calendar, our calendar, the Gregorian calendar. The pope asked him to make changes to his *Essays* but he did not. Speaking of princes and ecclesiastical authorities, “All induction and submission is due them, except the mind’s. My reason is not framed to bend or stoop; my knees are.” He served twice as Mayor of Bordeaux, at that time the country’s third-largest city and its richest port. He was an avowed Catholic royalist and a close friend and confidant of the Protestant Henri de Navarre, serving as Navarre’s emissary and negotiator at the Catholic court of Henri III. He was elevated to the much cherished knightly Order of St. Michael, and even sojourned as a “guest” for a few hours in the Bastille after his one pointed attempt to intervene in the religious conflict. In 1571 at the age of thirty-eight he retired to his family estate, his legendary tower library and began to write primarily about himself. In his written explorations, he invented a new literary form, the essay. In French the verb *essayer* means “to try” or “to attempt” and in Latin *exagium* means “a weighing.” The essay form being one of weighing and

analyzing in a prose piece. Francis Bacon seems to have been the first to describe this form of writing from Montaigne as an “essay” in around 1590. Montaigne published his writings for the first time in 1580, and saw his *Essays* become an instant Renaissance bestseller. Just after publishing the first edition he had an audience with Henri III in Paris. Henri said he liked the book very much, to which Montaigne reportedly replied, “Sir, then your majesty must like me”. For, as he always maintained, he and his essays were one. “I have no more made my book than my book has made me.”

Perhaps Montaigne’s most recognizable quotation is *Que sçay-je?* It has been taken as a maxim positioning him as a skeptic, the philosophical position from which he wrote. *Que sçay-je?* Means quite simply “what do I know? or in his case “what do I really know?” His locus is one of modesty and inquiry rather than of doubt, a willingness to be puzzled, standard assumptions having no basis. Montaigne’s skepticism was of a different aspect than how we consider skepticism today. He was as suspect of reason and evidence as anything else, at the same time accepting what the church decreed.

Socrates said “All I know is that I know nothing”. The Pyrrhonians took it further adding in effect “and I’m not even sure about that. Everything is uncertain and certainty the most uncertain thing of all.” The Catholics accepted Pyrrhonism allowing that if we cannot trust in our own faculties, better to stick to a reliable orthodoxy than simply venturing off untethered as they proposed Protestants had done. Montaigne said “the oldest and best known evil is ever more tolerable than a fresh and unexperienced mischief.”

The Pyrrhonian response was always with the Greek word *ἐποχή* meaning “I hold back.” It seems that Renaissance readers found this a laugh inducing relief from their fatiguing and diligent moral and philosophical consternations. Montaigne had a medal struck with the word *ἐποχή* alongside an image of the scales of justice and his favored *Que sçay-je?*

He suggested that if he described himself well and honestly that every reader would recognize themselves in his reflections. "Who am I?" he asked himself, reflecting the inscription at Delphi, "know thyself." He described himself as "bashful, insolent, chaste, lustful, prating, silent, laborious, delicate, ingenious, heavy, melancholic, pleasant, lying, true, knowing, ignorant, liberal, covetous, and prodigal. I am myself the matter of my book, you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject." One is reminded of another writer addressing his readership in a very pointed fashion. Baudelaire in a line from a poem declares, "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère" (hypocrite reader- my fellow- my brother).

Montaigne quoted the ancients from memory, liberally and often incorrectly. These errors were not an attempt to cloak what might today be considered a soft plagiarism. Rather, it reveals the extent to which he digested and took as his own, from an internal recognition, the thoughts of writers as varied as Plutarch, Seneca, Sextus Empiricus, Lucretius. "Whoever goes in quest of knowledge, let him fish for it where it is to be found. Let nobody insist upon the matter I write, but my method in writing it. I make others say for me what, either for want of language or want of sense, I cannot so well myself."

This is a strange modesty from one of the most erudite men of the XVIth century.

Were he in our midst in this room today, I think we would delight in his company, but with a disarming surprise in store. He was unusually short and though silverware was in some usage in his time, he ate with his fingers. He complained that in his enthusiasms in discussion during a meal he would at times forget himself and bite his own fingers.

He viewed conversation as a creative act saying that "The most fruitful and natural exercise for our minds is, in my opinion, conversation."

Never trying to grandstand, or win in debate, avoiding quarrels and resentments. His notion was that we are meant to acquit ourselves as eloquently in defense of our argument as one would in legal proceedings. That when everyone had completely aired their convictions both personal and scholarly on a topic, a more profound understanding could then be reached together. Truth winning out over singular egos. He said “For the intimate companionship of my table I choose the agreeable not the wise; in my bed, beauty comes before virtue.”

The *Essays* began as a promise kept to his friend La Boétie who suggested that he should express himself in writing. Montaigne progressed from this commitment of friendship to one man into an engagement with all readers. “Anyone can see that I have set out on a road along which I shall travel without toil and without ceasing as long as the world has ink and paper.”

When I learned that Montaigne had retired to his tower library on his property in the Aquitaine, I was launched into a fascination with his biography. While working on a photographic study of the marvelous novelist Honoré de Balzac which took me to so very many interesting parts of France, I found myself in the vicinity of Montaigne’s château. There are many who want to take Montaigne out of his tower library but I want, for the moment to keep him in it. A recent biography of him “Montaigne: A Life,” by Philippe Desan is a very learned but mean spirited attempt to chip away at his most generous contributions by concentrating on his mortal short comings as seen through a contemporary prism.

A look into his circular library four centuries after his death still turns up compelling traces of his life. It survives intact, across the courtyard from his rebuilt chateau, the original having been destroyed by fire in 1885. It occupies the third floor of a tower, now cold and mostly empty. Missing is the inviting and comfortable aspect it likely had in Montaigne’s time, as well as the thousands of volumes lying flat, in vertical stacks on tables.

“When at home, I turn aside a little more often to my library, from which at one sweep I command a view of my household. I am over the entrance and see below me my garden, my farmyard, my courtyard, and into most of the parts of my house. There I leaf through now one book, now another, without order and without plan, by disconnected fragments. One moment I muse, another moment I set down or dictate, walking back and forth, these fancies of mine that you see here.

The shape of my library is round, the only flat side being the part needed for my table and chair; and curving round me it presents at a glance all my books, arranged in five rows of shelves on all sides... It offers rich and free views in three directions, and sixteen paces of free space in diameter... Sorry the man, to my mind, who has not in his own home a place to be all by himself, to pay his court privately to himself, to hide!”

Looking up when in the library today one finds an unexpected eloquence in the form of maxims inscribed on the beams in Greek and Latin. They are all taken from antiquity with the single exception of Montaigne’s contemporary, Michel de l’Hôpital.

The quotations on the beams make of his library a speaking room.

In the *Essays*, Montaigne is a writer constantly feeling his way, trying out often contradictory ideas, eschewing final statements and interpretations. For this reason, though it was not uncommon in his time, it seems somewhat non-Montaignian of him to have had such permanent inscriptions constantly in view. With the possible exception of the biblical texts which caution against human claims to understanding God, the aphorisms do not really add up to a personal code of behavior, but served him rather as an intellectual guide. They are more usefully and interestingly viewed as a privileged window on his method of research. Perhaps my interest in Montaigne’s library is given some license by Montaigne himself in his contention that the particular is richer than the general. In his assessment of Tacitus, he offers “I know of

no author who introduces into a register of public event so much consideration of private behavior and inclinations...This form of history is by far the most useful.”

We can never know to what extent these beam maxims shaped Montaigne’s life or writings, or even if at times he found them to be impossibly rigid and limiting. Still, not to fashion an image of the *Essays* taking shape beneath their patient presence is to risk an incomplete portrait of their creation. I maintain that they must have imposed a profound impact on his thought and writing. The quotations on the beams, obviously physically separated, can seem as though created in an intentional graphical presentation. This might have contributed to what is sometimes perceived as the fragmentary nature of his oeuvre.

The quotations amount to sensing, feeling and honoring his profound connection to antecedent thought. The *Essays* themselves, though full of classical quotations, only peripherally cite those on the beams. Amongst the maxims are shortened phrases, combined quotes or misquotes in Montaigne’s customized Latin. His constant revision of the *Essays* is reflected in his practice of occasionally having some maxims painted over by others. There is no telling how many quotes have been lost to us because of this repainting. Thirteen of the fifty-four left to us come from Ecclesiastes and many of these are outright misquotes, as if Montaigne were deliberately misconstruing, customizing or attempting to improve the Bible. Forty-six of them run along the joists; eight snake along two long beams on a twisting ribbon design. These last seem to tie all the other maxims together and to offer the mental framework of ancient skepticism in which Montaigne might have meant to approach them.

Sainte-Beuve said, “Montaigne is a neighbor us all; one can never know too much about one’s neighbor.” Though we can’t be sure how Montaigne’s library looked and what its atmosphere was in his lifetime and cannot even be certain about the titles of all of his books, we are nevertheless still invited to enter the space it occupied, breathe the air, look out of the windows, pace the same floorboards as he, and begin to sense the reveries the room imposes. Certainly much has been lost and much has changed. But for a moment, looking up and filling

one's field of vision with the inscribed beams, the four centuries that separate us from Montaigne seem to vanish. The thought is inescapable that he once stood in the very spot in which we can now stand and read the beams we can now see. Venerated places, such as Montaigne's library cast a mesmerizing spell for which a remedy must eventually be sought. Surely the most gratifying and comprehensive antidote in this case is in yet another satisfying dip into his *Essays*.

In 1996 I translated and published a small volume called *The Beams of Montaigne's Library* with my translations of the quotations on the beams, the first ever done in the English language.

Montaigne wants to lead us toward a courage to give proper voice to who we are. Eliot talks about tradition being inherited by great labour: "The pastness of the past and its presence." But if we remain only beholden to our received quiver of knowledge, full of those things we have learned from books and university studies, studies which we have with both difficulty and joy laced into our understanding of the world, our approach towards it and others, we in a certain fashion deprive ourselves and others of our inimical uniqueness. There can be a poor fit, a conflict, between classical education and the innate knowing that we possess at the youngest, even preverbal age, however malformed and inexplicit. Keats decried that Newton had unweaved the rainbow. I suggest that remaining wholly beholden to our classical educations can serve to unweave the rainbow that is each one of us.

I am not suggesting a lax hedonistic pursuit but rather an embrace of one's brush with fatalism. "There is as much difference between us and ourselves as there is between us and others."

We each have in us on first learning something a deep sense of recognition. As though our fully formed selves are lying (naycent) nascent, simply waiting to be nurtured. There are very few surprises in our aesthetic and educational encounters. The laws of mathematics

and physics pull the world together allowing us to embrace its complexities all the more fully. Somehow we know what Aeschylus wants to tell us before we have read a single page. There is a deep consolation in finding a near perfect connection with writers of all ages. Art, literature and music point out with a lasting beauty and eloquence our commonality. We find on encountering the Garden Room frescoes in Villa Livia north of Rome the immediate sense that these ancients had the same sense of the divinely beautiful as do we.

We can agree on the canon that we have inherited but not on our individual, essential predilections. Musicologists and performers teach us to understand the undeniable greatness of Beethoven. We know that we are supposed to love Mahler but maybe Bruckner is closer to one's sensibilities. There is Mozart, but maybe I prefer Haydn or on any given day Morton Feldman. And yet it is all music, all serious music. Personal preferences can occasionally run against the ever-fickle tide of contemporary critical opinion. Each one of us is a bit like a new computer. The second it is out of the box, our customizations, added programs, searches, configurations, passwords, have made of it a unique machine.

Our largely unexamined individual trajectories through our reading, through literature are of a wholly singular nature. We are all as uniquely individual as a snowflake.

In preparation for my first trip to Florence, I bought the massive, two volume *Art of Florence* by Glenn Andres. I diligently pored over it, planning my daily itineraries to visit those frescoes from the canon the first couple of weeks, saving perceived minor works for the end of my stay, were I to encounter a mishap of any kind that might curtail my explorations. To my surprise amounting to a revelatory consolation, I found that some of the artworks I had saved for the last week were those that ultimately touched me the most. This discovery of one's self requires the diligence of rigorous preparation.

In this I am a fatalist. I am free in choosing between a blue or green sweater, but if I choose the one that is my favourite color, let's say blue, I have chosen everything except the fact that blue is my favourite color. Blue seems to have chosen me. I am not intending to venture my argument into the deep waters of determinism versus libertarianism. Mine is a more gentle intent.

The temptation to do as everyone does is hypnotically attractive. Politically, culturally, aesthetically, whatever. We need remain free in our thought, lead from our heart, taste and scholarship towards enlightenment of self and the delight and edification of others. We have each had the unique pleasure of holding in our hands a book which transmits a volcano of inspiration, as though written just for us. Our mentors, our role models, the canon of a classical education are there to support us toward becoming ourselves, not in order to become clone-like. "What avails us," Montaigne asks, "to have our bellies full of meat, if it be not digested, if it be not transchanged in us except it nourish, augment and strengthen us?"

Montaigne decided to examine himself, imagining that he is like other men, and that there must and would be a natural concordance then with them. "I listen with attention to the judgment of all men; but so far as I can remember, I have followed none but my own." He invites us to examine and embrace ourselves. We, as individuals are not like everyone, but we are like many.

"It is an absolute perfection and virtually divine to know how to enjoy our being rightfully. We seek other conditions because we do not understand the use of our own... Yet there is no use our mounting on stilts, for on stilts we must still walk on our own legs. And on the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own derriere."

In each of us is a repository of our very selves; the nucleus of our inspirations and inclinations, whether personal or intellectual, and these riches plead or at least encourage a generous, eloquent, expression of their essence. We have inherited not to possess but to give. Our nonpareil offering to others is our authentic, well examined, kindest selves.

“You must lend yourself to others and give yourself to yourself.”