

I

After centuries of neglect, at times hostility, after being scattered and burnt and surviving only in partial forms in the vaults and libraries of monasteries, the wisdom of ancient Greece and Rome returned triumphantly to favour in the sixteenth century. Among the intellectual élites of Europe, a consensus emerged that the finest thinking the world had yet known had occurred in the minds of a handful of geniuses in the city states of Greece and the Italian peninsula between the construction of the Parthenon and the sack of Rome – and that there was no greater imperative for the educated than to familiarize themselves with the richness of these works. Major new editions were prepared of, among others, Plato, Lucretius, Seneca, Aristotle, Catullus, Longinus and Cicero, and selections from the classics – Erasmus's *Apophthegmata* and *Adages*, Stobaeus's *Sententiae*, Antonio de Guevara's *Golden Epistles* and Petrus Crinitus's *Honorable Learning* – spread into libraries across Europe.

In south-western France, on the summit of a wooded hill 30 miles east of Bordeaux, sat a handsome castle made of yellow stone with dark-red roofs.



It was home to a middle-aged nobleman, his wife Françoise, his daughter Léonor, their staff and their animals (chickens, goats, dogs and horses). Michel de Montaigne's grandfather had bought the property in 1477 from the proceeds of the family salt-fish business, his father had added some wings and extended the land under cultivation, and the son had been looking after it since the age of thirty-five, though he had little interest in household management and knew almost nothing about farming ('I can scarcely tell my cabbages from my lettuces').

He preferred to pass his time in a circular library on the third floor of a tower at one corner of the castle: 'I spend most days of my life there, and most hours of each day.'



The library had three windows (with what Montaigne described as 'splendid and unhampered views'), a desk, a chair and, arranged on five tiers of shelves in a semicircle, about a thousand volumes of philosophy, history, poetry and religion. It was here that Montaigne read Socrates' ('the wisest man that ever was') steadfast address to the impatient jurors of Athens in a Latin edition of Plato translated by Marsilio Ficino; here that he read Epicurus's vision of happiness in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives* and Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, edited by Denys Lambin in 1563; and here that he read and

re-read Seneca (an author 'strikingly suited to my humour') in a new set of his works printed in Basle in 1557.

He had been initiated in the classics at an early age. He had been taught Latin as a first language. By seven or eight, he had read Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Before he was sixteen, he had bought a set of Virgil and knew intimately the *Aeneid*, as well as Terence, Plautus and the *Commentaries* of Caesar. And such was his devotion to books that, after working as a counsellor in the Parlement of Bordeaux for thirteen years, he retired with the idea of devoting himself entirely to them. Reading was the solace of his life:

It consoles me in my retreat; it relieves me of the weight of distressing idleness and, at any time, can rid me of boring company. It blunts the stabs of pain whenever pain is not too overpowering and extreme. To distract me from morose thoughts, I simply need to have recourse to books.

But the library shelves, with their implication of an unbounded admiration for the life of the mind, did not tell the full story. One had to look more closely around the library, stand in the middle of the room and tilt one's head to the ceiling: in the mid-1570s Montaigne had a set of fifty-seven short inscriptions culled from the Bible and the classics painted across the wooden beams, and these suggested some profound reservations about the benefits of having a mind:



The happiest life is to be without thought. – Sophocles

Have you seen a man who thinks he is wise? You have more to hope for from a madman than from him. – Proverbs

There is nothing certain but uncertainty, nothing more miserable and more proud than man. – Pliny

Everything is too complicated for men to be able to understand. – Ecclesiastes

Ancient philosophers had believed that our powers of reason could afford us a happiness and greatness denied to other creatures. Reason allowed us to control our passions and to correct the false notions prompted by our instincts. Reason tempered the wild demands of our bodies and led us to a balanced relationship with our appetites for food and sex. Reason was a sophisticated, almost divine, tool offering us mastery over the world and ourselves.

In the *Tusculan Disputations*, of which there was a copy in the round library, Cicero had heaped praise upon the benefits of intellectual work:

There is no occupation so sweet as scholarship; scholarship is the means of making known to us, while still in this world, the infinity of matter, the immense grandeur of Nature, the heavens, the lands and the seas. Scholarship has taught us piety, moderation, greatness of heart; it snatches our souls from darkness and shows them all things, the high and the low, the first, the last and everything in between; scholarship furnishes us with the means of living well and happily; it teaches us how to spend our lives without discontent and without vexation.

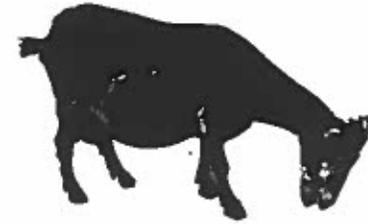
Though he owned a thousand books and had benefited from a fine classical education, this laudation so infuriated Montaigne, it ran so contrary to the spirit of the library beams, that he expressed his indignation with uncharacteristic ferocity:

Man is a wretched creature . . . just listen to him bragging . . . Is this fellow describing the properties of almighty and everlasting God! In

practice, thousands of little women in their villages have lived more gentle, more equable and more constant lives than [Cicero].

The Roman philosopher had overlooked how violently unhappy most scholars were; he had arrogantly disregarded the appalling troubles for which human beings, alone among all other creatures, had been singled out – troubles which might in dark moments leave us regretting that we had not been born ants or tortoises.

Or goats. I found her in the yard of a farm a few kilometres from Montaigne's château, in the hamlet of Les Gauchers.



She had never read the *Tusculan Disputations* nor Cicero's *On the Laws*. And yet she seemed content, nibbling at stray pieces of lettuce, occasionally shaking her head like an elderly woman expressing quiet disagreement. It was not an unenviable existence.

Montaigne was himself struck by, and elaborated upon the advantages of living as an animal rather than as a reasoning human with a large library. Animals knew instinctively how to help themselves when they were sick: goats could pick out dittany from a thousand other plants if they were wounded, tortoises automatically looked for origanum when they were bitten by vipers, and storks could give themselves salt-water enemas. By contrast, humans were forced to rely on expensive, misguided doctors (medicine chests were filled with absurd prescriptions: 'the urine of a lizard, the droppings of an elephant, the liver of a mole, blood drawn from under the right wing of a white pigeon, and for those of us with colic paroxysms, triturated rat shit').

Animals also instinctively understood complex ideas without suffering long periods of study. Tunny-fish were spontaneous experts in astrology. 'Wherever they may be when they are surprised by the winter solstice, there they remain until the following equinox,' reported Montaigne. They understood geometry and arithmetic, too, for they swam together in groups in the shape of a perfect cube: 'If you count one line of them you have the count of the whole school, since the same figure applies to their depth, breadth and length.' Dogs had an innate grasp of dialectical logic. Montaigne mentioned one who, looking for his master, came upon a three-pronged fork in the road. He first looked down one road, then another, and then ran down the third after concluding that his master must have chosen it:

Here was pure dialectic: the dog made use of disjunctive and copulative propositions and adequately enumerated the parts. Does it matter whether he learned all this from himself or from the *Dialectica* of George of Trebizond?

Animals frequently had the upper hand in love as well. Montaigne read enviously of an elephant who had fallen in love with a flower-seller in Alexandria. When being led through the market, he knew how to slip his wrinkled trunk through her neckband and would massage her breasts with a dexterity no human could match.

And without trying, the humblest farm animal could exceed the philosophical detachment of the wisest sages of antiquity. The Greek philosopher Pyrrho once travelled on a ship which ran into a fierce storm. All around him passengers began to panic, afraid that the mutinous waves would shatter their fragile craft. But one passenger did not lose his composure and sat quietly in a corner, wearing a tranquil expression. He was a pig:

Dare we conclude that the benefit of reason (which we praise so highly and on account of which we esteem ourselves to be lords and masters of all creation) was placed in us for our torment? What use is knowledge if, for its sake, we lose the calm and repose which we should enjoy without it and if it makes our condition worse than that of Pyrrho's pig?

It was questionable whether the mind gave us anything to be grateful for:

We have been allotted inconstancy, hesitation, doubt, pain, superstition, worries about what will happen (even after we are dead), ambition, greed, jealousy, envy, unruly, insane and untameable appetites, war, lies, disloyalty, backbiting and curiosity. We take pride in our fair, discursive reason and our capacity to judge and to know, but we have bought them at a price which is strangely excessive.

If offered a choice, Montaigne would in the end perhaps not have opted to live as a goat – but only just. Cicero had presented the benevolent picture of reason. Sixteen centuries later, it was for Montaigne to introduce the adverse:

To learn that we have said or done a stupid thing is nothing, we must learn a more ample and important lesson: *that we are but blockheads.*

– the biggest blockheads of all being philosophers like Cicero who had never suspected they might even be such things. Misplaced confidence in reason was the well-spring of idiocy – and, indirectly, also of inadequacy.

Beneath his painted beams, Montaigne had outlined a new kind of philosophy, one which acknowledged how far we were from the rational, serene creatures whom most of the ancient thinkers had taken us to be. We were for the most part hysterical and demented, gross and agitated souls beside whom animals were in many respects paragons of health and virtue – an unfortunate reality which philosophy was obliged to reflect, but rarely did:

Our life consists partly in madness, partly in wisdom: whoever writes about it merely respectfully and by rule leaves more than half of it behind.

And yet if we accepted our frailties, and ceased claiming a mastery we did not have, we stood to find – in Montaigne's generous, redemptive philosophy – that we were ultimately still adequate in our own distinctive half-wise, half-blockheadish way.

2

On Sexual Inadequacy

How problematic to have both a body and a mind, for the former stands in almost monstrous contrast to the latter's dignity and intelligence. Our bodies smell, ache, sag, pulse, throb and age. They force us to fart and burp, and to abandon sensible plans in order to lie in bed with people, sweating and letting out intense sounds reminiscent of hyenas calling out to one another across the barren wastes of the American deserts. Our bodies hold our minds hostage to their whims and rhythms. Our whole perspective on life can be altered by the digestion of a heavy lunch. 'I feel quite a different person before and after a meal,' concurred Montaigne:

When good health and a fine sunny day smile at me, I am quite debonair; give me an ingrowing toe-nail, and I am touchy, bad-tempered and unapproachable.

Even the greatest philosophers have not been spared bodily humiliation. 'Imagine Plato struck down by epilepsy or apoplexy,' proposed Montaigne, 'then challenge him to get any help from all those noble and splendid faculties of his soul.' Or imagine that in the middle of a symposium, Plato had been struck by a need to fart:

That sphincter which serves to discharge our stomachs has dilations and contractions proper to itself, independent of our wishes or even opposed to them.

Montaigne heard of a man who knew how to fart at will, and on occasion arranged a sequence of farts in a metrical accompaniment to poetry, but such mastery did not contravene his general observation that our bodies have the upper hand over our minds, and that the sphincter is 'most indiscreet and disorderly'. Montaigne even heard a tragic case of one behind 'so stormy and churlish that it has

obliged its master to fart forth wind constantly and unremittingly for forty years and is thus bringing him to his death.'

No wonder we may be tempted to deny our uncomfortable, insulting coexistence with these vessels. Montaigne met a woman who, acutely aware of how repulsive her digestive organs were, tried to live as though she didn't have any:

[This] lady (amongst the greatest) ... shares the opinion that chewing distorts the face, derogating greatly from women's grace and beauty; so when hungry, she avoids appearing in public. And I know a man who cannot tolerate watching people eat nor others watching him do so: he shuns all company even more when he fills his belly than when he empties it.

Montaigne knew men so overwhelmed by their sexual longings that they ended their torment through castration. Others tried to suppress their lust by applying snow-and-vinegar compresses to their overactive testicles. The Emperor Maximilian, conscious of a conflict between being regal and having a body, ordered that no one should see him naked, particularly below the waist. He expressly requested in his will that he be buried in a set of linen underpants. 'He should have added a codicil,' noted Montaigne, 'saying that the man who pulled them on ought to be blindfolded.'

However drawn we may be towards such radical measures, Montaigne's philosophy is one of reconciliation: 'The most uncouth of our afflictions is to despise our being.' Rather than trying to cut ourselves in two, we should cease waging civil war on our perplexing physical envelopes and learn to accept them as unalterable facts of our condition, neither so terrible nor so humiliating.

In the summer of 1993, L. and I travelled to northern Portugal for a holiday. We drove along the villages of the Minho, then spent a few days south of Viana do Castelo. It was here, on the last night of our holiday, in a small hotel overlooking the sea, that I realized – quite without warning – that I could no longer make love. It

would hardly have been possible to surmount, let alone mention the experience, if I had not, a few months before going to Portugal, come across the twenty-first chapter of the first volume of Montaigne's *Essays*.

The author recounted therein that a friend of his had heard a man explain how he had lost his erection just as he prepared to enter a woman. The embarrassment of the detumescence struck Montaigne's friend with such force, that the next time he was in bed with a woman, he could not banish it from his mind, and the fear of the same catastrophe befalling him grew so overwhelming that it prevented his own penis from stiffening. From then on, however much he desired a woman, he could not attain an erection, and the ignoble memory of every misadventure taunted and tyrannized him with increasing force.

Montaigne's friend had grown impotent after failing to achieve the unwavering rational command over his penis that he assumed to be an indispensable feature of normal manhood. Montaigne did not blame the penis: 'Except for genuine impotence, never again are you incapable if you are capable of doing it once.' It was the oppressive notion that we had complete mental control over our bodies, and the horror of departing from this portrait of normality, that had left the man unable to perform. The solution was to redraw the portrait; it was by accepting a loss of command over the penis as a harmless possibility in love-making that one could preempt its occurrence – as the stricken man eventually discovered. In bed with a woman, he learnt to:

admit beforehand that he was subject to this infirmity and spoke openly about it, so relieving the tensions within his soul. By bearing the malady as something to be expected, his sense of constriction grew less and weighed less heavily on him.

Montaigne's frankness allowed the tensions in the reader's own soul to be relieved. The penis's abrupt moods were removed from the Cimmerian recesses of wordless shame and reconsidered with

the unshockable, worldly eye of a philosopher whom nothing bodily could repulse. A sense of personal culpability was lessened by what Montaigne described as:

[The universal] disobedience of this member which thrusts itself forward so inopportunistly when we do not want it to, and which so inopportunistly lets us down when we most need it.

A man who failed with his mistress and was unable to do any more than mumble an apology could regain his forces and soothe the anxieties of his beloved by accepting that his impotence belonged to a broad realm of sexual mishaps, neither very rare nor very peculiar. Montaigne knew a Gascon nobleman who, after failing to maintain an erection with a woman, fled home, cut off his penis and sent it to the lady 'to atone for his offence'. Montaigne proposed instead that:

If [couples] are not ready, they should not try to rush things. Rather than fall into perpetual wretchedness by being struck with despair at a first rejection, it is better . . . to wait for an opportune moment . . . a man who suffers a rejection should make gentle assays and overtures with various little sallies; he should not stubbornly persist in proving himself inadequate once and for all.

It was a new language, unsensational and intimate, with which to articulate the loneliest moments of our sexuality. Cutting a path into the private sorrows of the bedchamber, Montaigne drained them of their ignominy, attempting all the while to reconcile us to our bodily selves. His courage in mentioning what is secretly lived but rarely heard expands the range of what we can dare to express to our lovers and to ourselves – a courage founded on Montaigne's conviction that nothing that can happen to man is inhuman, that 'every man bears the whole Form of the human condition,' a condition which includes – we do not need to blush nor hate ourselves for it – the risk of an occasional rebellious flaccidity in the penis.

Montaigne attributed our problems with our bodies in part to an absence of honest discussion about them in polite circles.

Representative stories and images do not tend to identify feminine grace with a strong interest in love-making, nor authority with the possession of a sphincter or penis. Pictures of kings and ladies do not encourage us to think of these eminent souls breaking wind or making love. Montaigne filled out the picture in blunt, beautiful French:

Au plus eslevé throne du monde si ne sommes assis que sus nostre cul.

Upon the highest throne in the world, we are seated, still, upon our arses.

Les Roys et les philosophes fientent, et les dames aussi.

Kings and philosophers shit: and so do ladies.



King Henri III



Catherine de' Medici

He could have put it otherwise. Instead of 'cul', 'derrière' or 'fesses'. Instead of 'fienter', 'aller au cabinet'. Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues (for the furtherance of young Learners, and the advantage of all others that endeavour to arrive at the most exactly knowledge of the French language)*, printed in London in 1611, explained that 'fienter' referred particularly to the excretions of vermin and badgers. If Montaigne felt the need for such strong language, it was to correct an equally strong denial of the body in

works of philosophy and in drawing rooms. The view that ladies never had to wash their hands and kings had no behinds had made it timely to remind the world that they shat and had arses:

The genital activities of mankind are so natural, so necessary and so right: what have they done to make us never dare to mention them without embarrassment and to exclude them from serious orderly conversation? We are not afraid to utter the words *kill*, *thieve*, or *betray*; but those others we only dare to mutter through our teeth.

In the vicinity of Montaigne's château were several beech-tree forests, one to the north near the village of Castillon-la-Bataille, another to the east near St Vivien. Montaigne's daughter Léonor must have known their silences and their grandeur. She was not encouraged to know their name: the French for 'beech tree' is 'fouteau'. The French for 'fuck' is 'foutre'.

'My daughter – I have no other children – is of an age when the more passionate girls are legally allowed to marry,' Montaigne explained of Léonor, then about fourteen:

She is slender and gentle; by complexion she is young for her age, having been quietly brought up on her own by her mother; she is only just learning to throw off her childish innocence. She was reading from a French book in my presence when she came across the name of that well-known tree *fouteau*. The woman she has for governess pulled her up short rather rudely and made her jump over that awkward ditch.

Twenty coarse lackeys could not, Montaigne wryly remarked, have taught Léonor more about what lurked beneath 'fouteau' than a stern injunction to longjump over the word. But for the governess, or the 'old crone' as her employer more bluntly termed her, the leap was essential because a young woman could not easily combine dignity with a knowledge of what might occur if in a few years' time she found herself in a bedroom with a man.

Montaigne was faulting our conventional portraits for leaving out so much of what we are. It was in part in order to correct this that he wrote his own book. When he retired at the age of thirty-eight, he wished to write, but was unsure what his theme should be. Only gradually did an idea form in his mind for a book so unusual as to be unlike any of the thousand volumes on the semicircular shelves.

He abandoned millennia of authorial coyness to write about himself. He set out to describe as explicitly as possible the workings of his own mind and body – declaring his intention in the preface to the *Essays*, two volumes of which were published in Bordeaux in 1580, with a third added in a Paris edition eight years later:

Had I found myself among those peoples who are said still to live under the sweet liberty of Nature's primal laws, I can assure you that I would most willingly have portrayed myself whole, and wholly naked.

No author had hitherto aspired to present himself to his readers without any clothes on. There was no shortage of official, fully clothed portraits, accounts of the lives of saints and popes, Roman emperors and Greek statesmen. There was even an official portrait of Montaigne by Thomas de Leu (1562–c. 1620), which showed him dressed in the mayoral robes of the city, with the chain of the order of Saint-Michel offered to him by Charles IX in 1571, wearing an inscrutable, somewhat severe expression.



But this robed, Ciceronian self was not what Montaigne wished his *Essays* to reveal. He was concerned with the whole man, with the creation of an alternative to the portraits which had left out most of what man was. It was why his book came to include discussions of his meals, his penis, his stools, his sexual conquests and his farts – details which had seldom featured in a serious book before, so gravely did they flout man's image of himself as a rational creature. Montaigne informed his readers:

That the behaviour of his penis constituted an essential part of his identity:
Every one of my members, each as much as another, makes me myself: and none makes me more properly a man than that one. I owe to the public my portrait complete.

That he found sex noisy and messy:

Everywhere else you can preserve some decency; all other activities accept the rules of propriety: this other one can only be thought of as flawed or ridiculous. Just try and find a wise and discreet way of doing it!

That he liked quiet when sitting on the toilet:

Of all the natural operations, that is the one during which I least willingly tolerate being disrupted.

And that he was very regular about going:

My bowels and I never fail to keep our rendezvous, which is (unless some urgent business or illness disturbs us) when I jump out of bed.

If we accord importance to the kind of portraits which surround us, it is because we fashion our lives according to their example, accepting aspects of ourselves if they concur with what others mention of themselves. What we see evidence for in others, we will attend to within, what others are silent about, we may stay blind to or experience only in shame.

When I picture to myself the most reflective and the most wise of men in [sexual] postures, I hold it as an effrontery that he should claim to be reflective and wise.

It is not that wisdom is impossible, rather it is the definition of wisdom that Montaigne was seeking to nuance. True wisdom must

involve an accommodation with our baser selves, it must adopt a modest view about the role that intelligence and high culture can play in any life and accept the urgent and at times deeply unedifying demands of our mortal frame. Epicurean and Stoic philosophies had suggested that we could achieve mastery over our bodies, and never be swept away by our physical and passionate selves. It is noble advice that taps into our highest aspirations. It is also impossible, and therefore counter-productive:

What is the use of those high philosophical peaks on which no human being can settle and those rules which exceed our practice and our power?

It is not very clever of [man] to tailor his obligations to the standards of a different kind of being.

The body cannot be denied nor overcome, but there is at least, as Montaigne wished to remind the 'old crone', no need to choose between our dignity and an interest in *fouteau*:

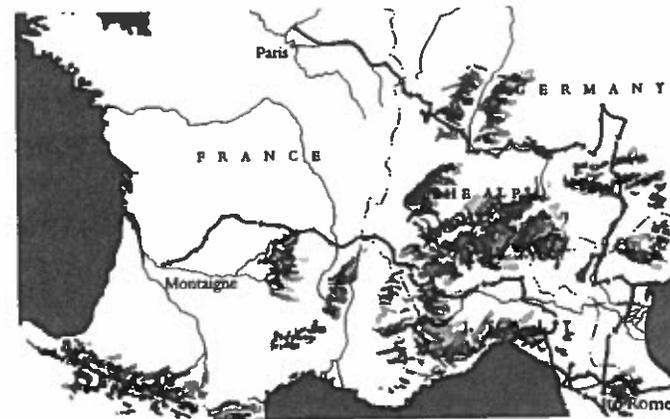
May we not say that there is nothing in us during this earthly prison either purely corporeal or purely spiritual and that it is injurious to tear a living man apart?

3

On Cultural Inadequacy

Another cause of a sense of inadequacy is the speed and arrogance with which people seem to divide the world into two camps, the camp of the *normal* and that of the *abnormal*. Our experiences and beliefs are liable frequently to be dismissed with a quizzical, slightly alarmed, 'Really? How weird!', accompanied by a raised eyebrow, amounting in a small way to a denial of our legitimacy and humanity.

In the summer of 1580, Montaigne acted on the desire of a lifetime, and made his first journey outside France, setting off on horseback to Rome via Germany, Austria and Switzerland. He travelled in the company of four young noblemen, including his brother, Bertrand de Mattecoulon, and a dozen servants. They were to be away from home for seventeen months, covering 3,000 miles. Among other towns, the party rode through Basle, Baden, Schaffhausen, Augsburg, Innsbruck, Verona, Venice, Padua, Bologna, Florence and Siena – finally reaching Rome towards evening on the last day of November 1580.



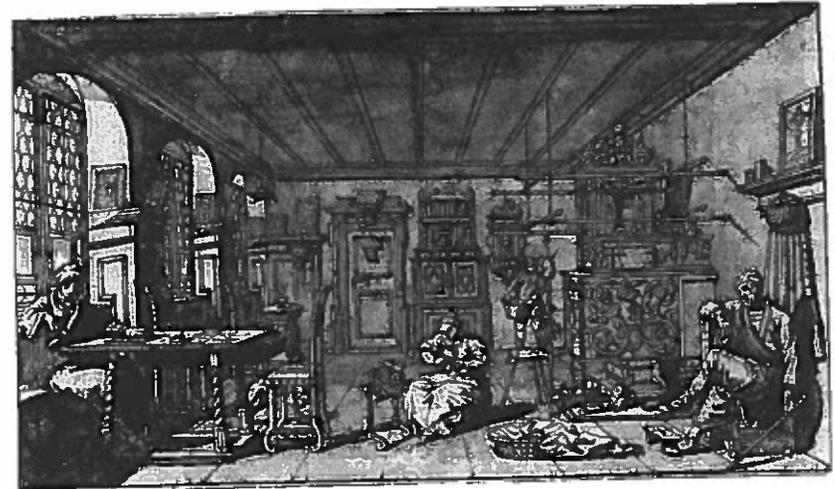
As the party travelled, Montaigne observed how people's ideas of what was normal altered sharply from province to province. In inns in the Swiss cantons, they thought it normal that beds should be raised high off the ground, so that one needed steps to climb into them, that there should be pretty curtains around them and that travellers should have rooms to themselves. A few miles away, in Germany, it was thought normal that beds should be low on the ground, have no curtains around them and that travellers should sleep four to a room. Innkeepers there offered feather quilts rather than the sheets one found in French inns. In Basle, people didn't mix water with their wine and had six or seven courses for dinner, and in Baden they ate only fish on Wednesdays. The smallest Swiss village was guarded by at least two policemen; the Germans rang their bells every quarter of an hour, in certain towns, every minute. In Lindau, they served soup made of quinces, the meat dish came before the soup, and the bread was made with fennel.

French travellers were prone to be very upset by the differences. In hotels, they kept away from sideboards with strange foods, requesting the normal dishes they knew from home. They tried not to talk to anyone who had made the error of not speaking their language, and picked gingerly at the fennel bread. Montaigne watched them from his table:

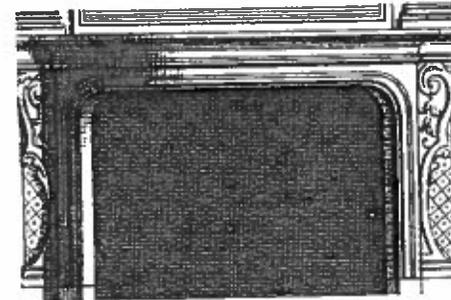
Once out of their villages, they feel like fish out of water. Wherever they go they cling to their ways and curse foreign ones. If they come across a fellow-countryman . . . they celebrate the event . . . With a morose and taciturn prudence they travel about wrapped up in their cloaks and protecting themselves from the contagion of an unknown clime.

In the middle of the fifteenth century, in the southern German states, a new method of heating homes had been developed: the *Kastenofen*, a freestanding box-shaped iron stove made up of rectangular plates bolted together, in which coal or wood could be

burnt. In the long winters, the advantages were great. Closed stoves could dispense four times the heat of an open fire, yet demanded less fuel and no chimney-sweeps. The heat was absorbed by the casing and spread slowly and evenly through the air. Poles were fixed around the stoves for airing and drying laundry, and families could use their stoves as seating areas throughout the winter.



But the French were not impressed. They found open fires cheaper to build; they accused German stoves of not providing a source of light and of withdrawing too much moisture from the air, lending an oppressive feeling to a room.



The subject was a matter of regional incomprehension. In Augsburg in October 1580, Montaigne met a German who delivered a lengthy critique of the way French people heated their houses with open fires, and who then went on to adumbrate the advantages of the iron stove. On hearing that Montaigne would be spending only a few days in the town (he had arrived on the 15th and was to leave on the 19th), he expressed pity for him, citing among the chief inconveniences of leaving Augsburg the 'heavy-headedness' he would suffer on returning to open fires – the very same 'heavy-headedness' which the French had long condemned iron stoves for provoking.

Montaigne examined the issue at close quarters. In Baden, he was assigned a room with an iron stove, and once he had grown used to a certain smell it released, spent a comfortable night. He noted that the stove enabled him to dress without putting on a furred gown, and months later, on a cold night in Italy, expressed regret at the absence of stoves in his inn.

On his return home, he weighed up the respective qualities of each heating system:

It is true that the stoves give out an oppressive heat and that the materials of which they are built produce a smell when hot which causes headaches in those who are not used to them . . . On the other hand, since the heat they give out is even, constant and spread all-over, without the visible flame, smoke and the draught produced by our chimneys, it has plenty of grounds for standing comparison with ours.

So what annoyed Montaigne were the firm, unexamined convictions of both the Augsburg gentleman and the French that their own system of heating was superior. Had Montaigne returned from Germany and installed in his library an iron stove from Augsburg, his countrymen would have greeted the object with the suspicion they accorded anything new:

Each nation has many customs and practices which are not only unknown to another nation but barbarous and a cause of wonder.

When there was of course nothing barbarous nor wondrous about either a stove or a fireplace. The definition of normality proposed by any given society seems to capture only a fraction of what is in fact reasonable, unfairly condemning vast areas of experience to an alien status. By pointing out to the man from Augsburg and his Gascon neighbours that an iron stove and an open fireplace had a legitimate place in the vast realm of acceptable heating systems, Montaigne was attempting to broaden his readers' provincial conception of the normal – and following in the footsteps of his favourite philosopher:

When they asked Socrates where he came from, he did not say 'From Athens', but 'From the world.'

This world had recently revealed itself to be far more peculiar than anyone in Europe had ever expected. On Friday 12 October 1492, forty-one years before Montaigne's birth, Christopher Columbus reached one of the islands on the archipelago of the Bahamas at the entrance of the gulf of Florida, and made contact with some Guanahani Indians, who had never heard of Jesus and walked about without any clothes on.

Montaigne took an avid interest: In the round library were several books on the life of the Indian tribes of America, among them Francisco Lopez de Gomara's *L'histoire générale des Indes*, Girolamo Benzoni's *Historia de mondo novo* and Jean de Léry's *Le voyage au Brésil*. He read that in South America, people liked to eat spiders, grasshoppers, ants, lizards and bats: 'They cook them and serve them up in various sauces.' There were American tribes in which virgins openly displayed their private parts, brides had orgies on their wedding day, men were allowed to marry each other, and the dead were boiled, pounded into a gruel, mixed with wine and drunk by their relatives at spirited parties. There were countries in

which women stood up to pee and men squatted down, in which men let their hair grow on the front of their body, but shaved their back. There were countries in which men were circumcised, while in others, they had a horror of the tip of the penis ever seeing the light of day and so 'scrupulously stretched the foreskin right over it and tied it together with little cords'. There were nations in which you greeted people by turning your back to them, in which when the king spat, the court favourite held out a hand, and when he discharged his bowels, attendants 'gathered up his faeces in a linen cloth'. Every country seemed to have a different conception of beauty:

In Peru, big ears are beautiful: they stretch them as far as they can, artificially. A man still alive today says that he saw in the East a country where this custom of stretching ears and loading them with jewels is held in such esteem that he was often able to thrust his arm, clothes and all, through the holes women pierced in their lobes. Elsewhere there are whole nations which carefully blacken their teeth and loathe seeing white ones. Elsewhere they dye them red . . . The women of Mexico count low foreheads as a sign of beauty: so, while they pluck the hair from the rest of their body, there they encourage it to grow thick and propagate it artificially. They hold large breasts in such high esteem that they affect giving suck to their children over their shoulders.

From Jean de Léry, Montaigne learned that the Tupi tribes of Brazil walked around in Edenic nudity, and showed no trace of shame (indeed, when Europeans tried to offer the Tupi women clothes, they giggled and turned them down, puzzled why anyone would burden themselves with anything so uncomfortable).



Tant les hommes que la femme étaient aussi entièrement nus que quand ils sortirent du ventre de leur mère. Jean de Léry, Voyage au Brésil (1578)

De Léry's engraver (who had spent eight years with the tribes) took care to correct the rumour rife in Europe that the Tupis were as hairy as animals (de Léry: '*Ils ne sont point naturellement poilus que nous ne sommes en ce pays*'). The men shaved their heads, and the women grew their hair long, and tied it together with pretty red braids. The Tupi Indians loved to wash; any time they saw a river, they would jump into it and rub each other down. They might wash as many as twelve times a day.

They lived in long barn-like structures which slept 200 people. Their beds were woven from cotton and slung between pillars like hammocks (when they went hunting, the Tupis took their beds with them, and had afternoon naps suspended between trees). Every six months, a village would move to a new location, because the inhabitants felt a change of scene would do them good ('*Ils n'ont d'autre réponse, sinon de dire que changeant l'air, ils se portent*

mieux' – de Léry). The Tupis' existence was so well ordered, they frequently lived to be a hundred and never had white or grey hair in old age. They were also extremely hospitable. When a newcomer arrived in a village, the women would cover their faces, start crying, and exclaim, 'How are you? You've taken such trouble to come and visit us!' Visitors would immediately be offered the favourite Tupi drink, made from the root of a plant and coloured like claret, which tasted sharp but was good for the stomach.

Tupi men were allowed to take more than one wife, and were said to be devoted to them all. 'Their entire system of ethics contains only the same two articles: resoluteness in battle and love of their wives,' reported Montaigne. And the wives were apparently happy with the arrangement, showing no jealousy (sexual relations were relaxed, the only prohibition being that one should never sleep with close relatives). Montaigne, with his wife downstairs in the castle, relished the detail:

One beautiful characteristic of their marriages is worth noting: just as our wives are zealous in thwarting our love and tenderness for other women, theirs are equally zealous in obtaining them for them. Being more concerned for their husband's reputation than for anything else, they take care and trouble to have as many fellow-wives as possible, since that is a testimony to their husband's valour.

It was all undeniably peculiar. Montaigne did not find any of it abnormal.

He was in a minority. Soon after Columbus's discovery, Spanish and Portuguese colonists arrived from Europe to exploit the new lands and decided that the natives were little better than animals. The Catholic knight Villegagnon spoke of them as 'beasts with a human face' (*'ce sont des bêtes portant figure humaine'*); the Calvinist minister Richer argued they had no moral sense (*'l'hébétude crasse de leur esprit ne distingue pas le bien du mal'*); and the doctor Laurent Joubert, after examining five Brazilian women, asserted that they had no periods and therefore categorically did not belong to the human race.

Having stripped them of their humanity, the Spanish began to slaughter them like animals. By 1534, forty-two years after Columbus's arrival, the Aztec and Inca empires had been destroyed, and their peoples enslaved or murdered. Montaigne read of the barbarism in Bartolomeo Las Casas's *Brevissima Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (printed in Seville in 1552, translated into French in 1580 by Jacques de Miggrode as *Tyrannies et cruautés des Espagnols perpétrées es Indes occidentales qu'on dit le Nouveau Monde*). The Indians were undermined by their own hospitality and by the weakness of their arms. They opened their villages and cities to the Spanish, to find their guests turning on them when they were least prepared. Their primitive weapons were no match for Spanish cannons and swords, and the *conquistadores* showed no mercy towards their victims. They killed children, slit open the bellies of pregnant women, gouged out eyes, roasted whole families alive and set fire to villages in the night.



They trained dogs to go into the jungles where the Indians had fled and to tear them to pieces.



Men were sent to work in gold- and silver-mines, chained together by iron collars. When a man died, his body was cut from the chain, while his companions on either side continued working. Most Indians did not last more than three weeks in the mines. Women were raped and disfigured in front of their husbands.



The favoured form of mutilation was to slice chins and noses. Las Casas told how one woman, seeing the Spanish armies advancing with their dogs, hanged herself with her child. A soldier arrived, cut the child in two with his sword, gave one half to his dogs, then asked a friar to administer last rites so that the infant would be assured a place in Christ's heaven.

With men and women separated from each other, desolate and anxious, the Indians committed suicide in large numbers. Between Montaigne's birth in 1533 and the publication of the third book of his *Essays* in 1588, the native population of the New World is estimated to have dropped from 80 to 10 million inhabitants.

The Spanish had butchered the Indians with a clean conscience because they were confident that they knew what a normal human being was. Their reason told them it was someone who wore breeches, had one wife, didn't eat spiders and slept in a bed:

We could understand nothing of their language; their manners and even their features and clothing were far different from ours. Which of us did not take them for brutes and savages? Which of us

did not attribute their silence to dullness and brutish ignorance? After all, they . . . were unaware of our hand-kissings and our low and complex bows.

They might have seemed like human beings: 'Ah! But they wear no breeches . . .'

Behind the butchery lay messy reasoning. Separating the normal from the abnormal typically proceeds through a form of inductive logic, whereby we infer a general law from particular instances (as logicians would put it, from observing that A_1 is \emptyset , A_2 is \emptyset and A_3 is \emptyset , we come to the view that 'All A s are \emptyset '). Seeking to judge whether someone is intelligent, we look for features common to everyone intelligent we have met hitherto. If we met an intelligent person who looked like 1, another who looked like 2, and a third like 3, we are likely to decide that intelligent people read a lot, dress in black and look rather solemn. There is a danger we will dismiss as stupid, and perhaps later kill, someone who looks like 4.



1.



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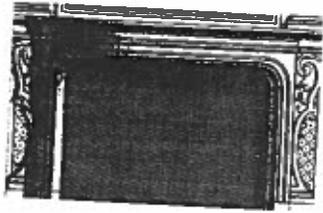


3.



4.

French travellers who reacted in horror to German stoves in their bedrooms would have known a number of good fireplaces in their country before arriving in Germany. One would perhaps have looked like 1, another like 2, a third like 3, and from this they would have concluded that the essence of a good heating system was an open hearth.



1.



2.



3.

Montaigne bemoaned the intellectual arrogance at play. There were savages in South America; they were not the ones eating spiders:

Every man calls barbarous anything he is not accustomed to; we have no other criterion of truth or right-reason than the example and form of the opinions and customs of our own country. There we always find the perfect religion, the perfect polity, the most developed and perfect way of doing anything!

He was not attempting to do away with the distinction between barbarous and civilized; there were differences in value between the customs of countries (cultural relativism being as crude as nationalism). He was correcting the way we made the distinction. Our country might have many virtues, but these did not depend on it being *our* country. A foreign land might have many faults, but these could not be identified through the mere fact that its customs

were unusual. Nationality and familiarity were absurd criteria by which to decide on the good.

French custom had decreed that if one had an impediment in the nasal passage, one should blow it into a handkerchief. But Montaigne had a friend who, having reflected on the matter, had come to the view that it might be better to blow one's nose straight into one's fingers:

Defending his action . . . he asked me why that filthy mucus should be so privileged that we should prepare fine linen to receive it and then should wrap it up and carry it carefully about on our persons . . . I considered that what he said was not totally unreasonable, but habit had prevented me from noticing just that strangeness which we find so hideous in similar customs in another country.

Careful reasoning rather than prejudice was to be the means of evaluating behaviour, Montaigne's frustration caused by those who blithely equated the unfamiliar with the inadequate and so ignored the most basic lesson in intellectual humility offered by the greatest of the ancient philosophers:

The wisest man that ever was, when asked what he knew, replied that the one thing he did know was that he knew nothing.

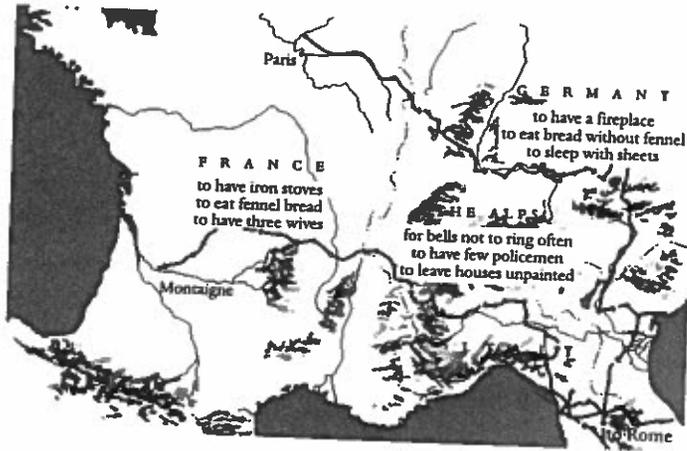
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What, then, should we do if we find ourselves facing a veiled suggestion of abnormality manifested in a quizzical, slightly alarmed 'Really? How weird!', accompanied by a raised eyebrow, amounting in its own small way to a denial of legitimacy and humanity – a reaction which Montaigne's friend had encountered in Gascony when he blew his nose into his fingers, and which had, in its most extreme form, led to the devastation of the South American tribes?

Perhaps we should remember the degree to which accusations of abnormality are regionally and historically founded. To loosen their hold on us, we need only expose ourselves to the diversity of

customs across time and space. What is considered abnormal in one group at one moment may not, and will not always be deemed so. We may cross borders in our minds.

WHAT IS CONSIDERED ABNORMAL WHERE



truth, he could in a similar way line up the theories of the universe held by all the great ancient philosophers and then witness, despite the confidence of each thinker that he was in possession of the whole truth, the ludicrous divergence that resulted. After such comparative study, Montaigne sarcastically confessed to having no clue whether to accept:

the 'Ideas' of Plato, the atoms of Epicurus, the plenum and vacuum of Leucippus and Democritus, the water of Thales, the infinity of Nature of Anaximander, or the aether of Diogenes, the numbers and symmetry of Pythagoras, the infinity of Parmenides, the Unity of Musaeus, the fire and water of Apollodorus, the homogeneous particles of Anaxagoras, the discord and concord of Empedocles, the fire of Heraclitus, or any other opinion drawn from the boundless confusion of judgement and doctrines produced by our fine human reason, with all its certainty and perspicuity.

The discoveries of new worlds and ancient texts powerfully undermined what Montaigne described as 'that distressing and combative arrogance which has complete faith and trust in itself':

Anyone who made an intelligent collection of the asinine stupidities of human wisdom would have a wondrous tale to tell . . . We can judge what we should think of Man, of his sense and of his reason, when we find such obvious and gross errors even in these important characters who have raised human intelligence to great heights.

It also helped to have spent seventeen months journeying around Europe on horseback. Testimony of other countries and ways of life alleviated the oppressive atmosphere of Montaigne's own region. What one society judged to be strange, another might more sensibly welcome as normal.

Other lands may return to us a sense of possibility stamped out by provincial arrogance; they encourage us to grow more acceptable to ourselves. The conception of the normal proposed by any particular province – Athens, Augsburg, Cuzco, Mexico, Rome, Seville, Gascony – has room for only a few aspects of our nature, and unfairly consigns the rest to the barbaric and bizarre. Every

Montaigne had filled his library with books that helped him cross borders of prejudice. There were history books, travel journals, reports of missionaries and sea captains, the literatures of other lands and illustrated volumes with pictures of strangely clad tribes and fish of unknown names. Through these books, Montaigne had gained legitimacy for parts of himself of which there was no precedent in the vicinity – the Roman parts, the Greek parts, the parts of himself that were more Mexican and Tupi than Gascon, parts that would have liked to have six wives or have a shaved head or wash twelve times a day; he could feel less alone with these readings. He turned to copies of Tacitus's *Annals*, Gonçalez de Mendoza's history of China, Goulart's history of Portugal, Lebeliski's history of Prussia, Postel's collection of Turkish and oriental histories and Strabo's universal cosmography (which promised pictures of 'peuples estranges'). He felt oppressed by the claims made by others to universal

man may bear the whole form of the human condition, but it seems that no single country can tolerate the complexity of this condition.

Among the fifty-seven inscriptions that Montaigne had painted on the beams of his library ceiling, was a line from Terence:

Homo sum, humani a me nihil alienum puto.

I am a man, nothing human is foreign to me.

By travelling across frontiers, on horseback and in the imagination, Montaigne invited us to exchange local prejudices and the self-division they induced for less constraining identities as citizens of the world.

Another consolation for accusations of abnormality is friendship, a friend being, among other things, someone kind enough to consider more of us normal than most people do. We may share judgements with friends that would in ordinary company be censured for being too caustic, sexual, despairing, daft, clever or vulnerable – friendship a minor conspiracy against what other people think of as reasonable.

Like Epicurus, Montaigne believed friendship to be an essential component of happiness:

In my judgement the sweetness of well-matched and compatible fellowship can never cost too dear. O! a friend! How true is that ancient judgement, that the frequenting of one is more sweet than the element water, more necessary than the element fire.

For a time, he was fortunate enough to know such fellowship. At the age of twenty-five, he was introduced to a twenty-eight-year-old writer and member of the Bordeaux Parlement, Étienne de La Boétie. It was friendship at first sight:

We were seeking each other before we set eyes on each other because of the reports we had heard . . . we embraced each other by our names. And at our first meeting, which chanced to be at a great crowded town-festival, we found ourselves so taken with each other, so well acquainted, so bound together, that from that time on nothing was so close to us as each other.

The friendship was of a kind, Montaigne believed, that only occurred once every 300 years; it had nothing in common with the tepid alliances frequently denoted by the term:

What we normally call friends and friendships are no more than acquaintances and familiar relationships bound by some chance or some suitability, by means of which our souls support each other. In the friendship which I am talking about, souls are mingled and confounded in so universal a blending that they efface the seam which joins them together so that it cannot be found.

The friendship would not have been so valuable if most people had not been so disappointing – if Montaigne had not had to hide so much of himself from them. The depth of his attachment to La Boétie signalled the extent to which, in his interactions with others, he had been forced to present only an edited image of himself to avoid suspicion and raised eyebrows. Many years later, Montaigne analysed the source of his affections for La Boétie:

Luy seul jouyssoit de ma vraye image.

He alone had the privilege of my true portrait.

That is, La Boétie – uniquely among Montaigne's acquaintances – understood him properly. He allowed him to be himself; through his psychological acuity, he enabled him to be so. He offered scope for valuable and yet until then neglected dimensions of Montaigne's character – which suggests that we pick our friends not only because they are kind and enjoyable company, but also, perhaps more importantly, because they understand us for who we think we are.

The idyll was painfully brief. Four years after the first meeting, in August 1563, La Boétie fell ill with stomach cramps and died a few days later. The loss was to haunt Montaigne for ever:

In truth if I compare the rest of my life . . . to those four years which I was granted to enjoy the sweet companionship and fellowship of a man like that, it is but smoke and ashes, a night dark and dreary. Since that day when I lost him . . . I merely drag wearily on.

Throughout the *Essays*, there were expressions of longing for a soul

mate comparable to the dead companion. Eighteen years after La Boétie's death, Montaigne was still visited by periods of grief. In May 1581, in La Villa near Lucca, where he had gone to take the waters, he wrote in his travel journal that he had spent an entire day beset by 'painful thoughts about Monsieur de La Boétie. I was in this mood so long, without recovering, that it did me much harm.'

He was never to be blessed again in his friendships, but he discovered the finest form of compensation. In the *Essays*, he recreated in another medium the true portrait of himself that La Boétie had recognized. He became himself on the page as he had been himself in the company of his friend.

Authorship was prompted by disappointment with those in the vicinity, and yet it was infused with the hope that someone elsewhere would understand; his book an address to everyone and no one in particular. He was aware of the paradox of expressing his deepest self to strangers in bookshops:

Many things that I would not care to tell any individual man I tell to the public, and for knowledge of my most secret thoughts, I refer my most loyal friends to a bookseller's stall.

And yet we should be grateful for the paradox. Booksellers are the most valuable destination for the lonely, given the numbers of books that were written because authors couldn't find anyone to talk to.



Montaigne might have begun writing to alleviate a personal sense of loneliness, but his book may serve in a small way to alleviate our own. One man's honest, unguarded portrait of himself – in which he mentions impotence and farting, in which he writes of his dead friend and explains that he needs quiet when sitting on the toilet – enables us to feel less singular about sides of ourselves that have gone unmentioned in normal company and normal portraits, but which, it seems, are no less a part of our reality.

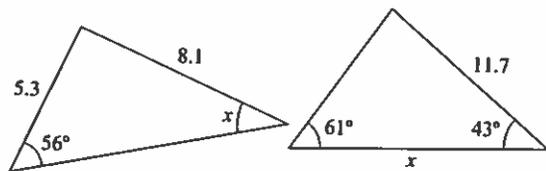
4 On Intellectual Inadequacy

There are some leading assumptions about what it takes to be a clever person:

What clever people should know

One of them, reflected in what is taught in many schools and universities, is that clever people should know how to answer questions like:

1. Find the lengths or angles marked x in the following triangles.



2. What are the subject term, predicate term, copula and quantifiers (if any) in the following sentences: Dogs are man's best friend; Lucilius is wicked; All bats are members of the class of rodents; Nothing green is in the room?
3. What is Thomas Aquinas's First Cause argument?

4. Translate:

Πᾶσα τέχνη καὶ πᾶσα μέθοδος, ὁμοίως δὲ πράξεις τε καὶ προαίρεσις, ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐφίεσθαι δοκεῖ· διὸ καλῶς ἀπεφύησαντο τάγαθὸν οὐ πάντ' ἐφίεται. (διαφορὰ δὲ τις φαίνεται τῶν τελῶν· τὰ μὲν γὰρ εἰοῖν ἐνεργεῖαι, τὰ δὲ παρ' αὐτὰς ἔργα τινά· ὧν δ' εἰσὶ τέλη τινὰ παρὰ τὰς πράξεις, ἐν τούτοις βελτίω πέφυκε τῶν ἐνεργειῶν τὰ ἔργα.) πολλῶν δὲ πράξεων οὐσῶν καὶ τεχνῶν καὶ ἐπιστημῶν πολλὰ γίνεται καὶ τὰ τέλη· ἰατρικῆς μὲν γὰρ ὑγίεια, ναυπηγικῆς δὲ πλοῖον, στρατηγικῆς δὲ νίκη, οἰκονομικῆς δὲ πλοῦτος.

(Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I i–iv)

5. Translate:

In capitis mei levitatem iocatus est et in oculorum validitatem et in crurum gracilitatem et in staturam. Quae contumelia est quod apparet audire? Coram uno aliquid dictum ridemus, coram pluribus indignamur, et eorum aliis libertatem non relinquimus, quae ipsi in nos dicere adsuevimus; iocis temperatis delectamur, immodicis irascimur.

(Seneca, *De Constantia*, XVI. 4)

Montaigne had faced many such questions and answered them well. He was sent to one of France's best educational establishments, the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, founded in 1533 to replace the city's old and inadequate Collège des Arts. By the time Michel started attending classes there at the age of six, the school had developed a national reputation as a centre of learning. The staff included an enlightened principal, André de Gouvéa, a renowned Greek scholar, Nicolas de Grouchy, an Aristotelian scholar, Guillaume Guerente, and the Scottish poet George Buchanan.

If one tries to define the philosophy of education underpinning the Collège de Guyenne, or indeed that of most schools and universities before and after it, one might loosely suggest it to be based on the idea that the more a student learns about the world (history,

science, literature), the better. But Montaigne, after following the curriculum at the Collège dutifully until graduation, added an important proviso:

If man were wise, he would gauge the true worth of anything by its usefulness and appropriateness to his life.

Only that which makes us feel better may be worth understanding.

Two great thinkers of antiquity were likely to have featured prominently in the curriculum at the Collège de Guyenne and been held up as exemplars of intelligence. Students would have been introduced to Aristotle's *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*, in which the Greek philosopher pioneered logic, and stated that if A is predicated of every B, and B of every C, necessarily A is predicated of every C. Aristotle argued that if a proposition says or denies P of S, then S and P are its terms, with P being the predicate term and S the subject term, and added that all propositions are either universal or particular, affirming or denying P of every S or part of S. Then there was the Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro, who assembled a library for Julius Caesar and wrote six hundred books, including an encyclopedia on the liberal arts and twenty-five books on etymology and linguistics.

Montaigne was not unmoved. It is a feat to write a shelf of books on the origins of words and to discover universal affirmatives. And yet if we were to find that those who did so were no happier or were indeed a little more unhappy than those who had never heard of philosophical logic, we might wonder. Montaigne considered the lives of Aristotle and Varro, and raised a question:

What good did their great erudition do for Varro and Aristotle? Did it free them from human ills? Did it relieve them of misfortunes such as befall a common porter? Could logic console them for the gout . . . ?

To understand why the two men could have been both so erudite and so unhappy, Montaigne distinguished between two categories of knowledge: *learning* and *wisdom*. In the category of learning he placed, among other subjects, logic, etymology, grammar, Latin and Greek. And in the category of wisdom, he placed a far broader, more elusive and more valuable kind of knowledge, everything that could help a person to live well, by which Montaigne meant, help them to live happily and morally.

The problem with the Collège de Guyenne, despite its professional staff and principal, was that it excelled at imparting learning but failed entirely at imparting wisdom – repeating at an institutional level the errors that had marred the personal lives of Varro and Aristotle:

I gladly come back to the theme of the absurdity of our education: its end has not been to make us good and wise, but learned. And it has succeeded. It has not taught us to seek virtue and to embrace wisdom: it has impressed upon us their derivation and their etymology . . .

We readily inquire, 'Does he know Greek or Latin?' 'Can he write poetry and prose?' But what matters most is what we put last: 'Has he become better and wiser?' We ought to find out not who understands *most* but who understands *best*. We work merely to fill the memory, leaving the understanding and the sense of right and wrong empty.

He had never been good at sport: 'At dancing, tennis and wrestling I have not been able to acquire more than a slight, vulgar skill; and at swimming, fencing, vaulting and jumping, no skill at all.' Nevertheless, so strong was Montaigne's objection to the lack of wisdom imparted by most schoolteachers, that he did not shrink from suggesting a drastic alternative to the classroom for the youth of France.



If our souls do not move with a better motion and if we do not have a healthier judgement, then I would just as soon that a pupil spend his time playing tennis.

He would of course have preferred students to go to school, but schools that taught them wisdom rather than the etymology of the word and could correct the long-standing intellectual bias towards abstract questions. Thales from Miletus in Asia Minor was an early example of the bias, celebrated throughout the ages for having in the sixth century BC tried to measure the heavens and for having determined the height of the Great Pyramid of Egypt according to the theorem of similar triangles – a complicated and dazzling achievement, no doubt, but not what Montaigne wished to see dominate his curriculum. He had greater sympathy with the implicit educational philosophy of one of Thales's impudent young acquaintances:

I have always felt grateful to that girl from Miletus who, seeing the local philosopher . . . with his eyes staring upwards, constantly occupied in contemplating the vault of heaven, tripped him up, to warn him that there was time enough to occupy his thoughts with things above the clouds when he had accounted for everything lying before his feet . . . You can make exactly the same reproach as that woman made against Thales against anyone concerned with philosophy: he fails to see what lies before his feet.

Montaigne noted in other areas a similar tendency to privilege

extraordinary activities over humbler but no less important ones – and just like the girl from Miletus, tried to bring us back to earth:

Storming a breach, conducting an embassy, ruling a nation are glittering deeds. Rebuking, laughing, buying, selling, loving, hating and living together gently and justly with your household – and with yourself – not getting slack nor being false to yourself, is something more remarkable, more rare and more difficult. Whatever people may say, such secluded lives sustain in that way duties which are at least as hard and as tense as those of other lives.

So what would Montaigne have wished pupils to learn at school? What kind of examinations could have tested for the wise intelligence he had in mind, one so far removed from the mental skills of the unhappy Aristotle and Varro?

The examinations would have raised questions about the challenges of quotidian life: love, sex, illness, death, children, money and ambition.

An examination in Montaignean wisdom

1. About seven or eight years ago, some two leagues from here, there was a villager, who is still alive; his brain had long been battered by his wife's jealousy; one day he came home from work to be welcomed by her usual nagging; it made him so mad that, taking the sickle he still had in his hand he suddenly lopped off the members which put her into such a fever and chucked them in her face. (*Essays*, II.29)
 - a) How should one settle domestic disputes?
 - b) Was the wife nagging or expressing affection?
2. Consider these two quotations:

I want death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor the unfinished gardening. (*Essays*, I.20)

I can scarcely tell my cabbages from my lettuces. (*Essays*, II.17)

What is a wise approach to death?

3. It is perhaps a more chaste and fruitful practice to bring women to learn early what the living reality [of penis size] is rather than to allow them to make conjectures according to the licence of a heated imagination: instead of our organs as they are, their hopes and desires lead them to substitute extravagant ones three times as big . . . What great harm is done by those graffiti of enormous genitals which boys scatter over the corridors and staircases of our royal palaces! From them arises a cruel misunderstanding of our natural capacities. (*Essays*, III.5)

How should a man with a small 'living reality' bring up the subject?

4. I know of a squire who had entertained a goodly company in his hall and then, four or five days later, boasted as a joke (for there was no truth in it) that he had made them eat cat pie; one of the young ladies in the party was struck with such a horror at this that she collapsed with a serious stomach disorder and a fever: it was impossible to save her. (*Essays*, I.21)

Analyse the distribution of moral responsibility.

5. If only talking to oneself did not look mad, no day would go by without my being heard growling to myself, against myself, 'You silly shit!' (*Essays*, I.38)

The most uncouth of our afflictions is to despise our being. (*Essays*, III.13)

How much love should one have for oneself?

Setting people examination papers measuring wisdom rather than learning would probably result in an immediate realignment of the hierarchy of intelligence – and a surprising new élite. Montaigne delighted in the prospect of the incongruous people who would now be recognized as cleverer than the lauded but often unworthy traditional candidates.



I have seen in my time hundreds of craftsmen and ploughmen wiser and happier than university rectors.

What clever people should sound and look like

It is common to assume that we are dealing with a highly intelligent book when we cease to understand it. Profound ideas cannot, after all, be explained in the language of children. Yet the association between difficulty and profundity might less generously be described as a manifestation in the literary sphere of a perversity, familiar from emotional life, where people who are mysterious and elusive can inspire a respect in modest minds that reliable and clear ones do not.

Montaigne had no qualms bluntly admitting his problem with mysterious books. 'I cannot have lengthy commerce with [them],' he wrote, 'I only like pleasurable, easy [ones] which tickle my interest.'

I am not prepared to bash my brains for anything, not even for learning's sake, however precious it may be. From books all I seek is to give myself pleasure by an honourable pastime . . . If I come across difficult passages in my reading I never bite my nails over them: after making a charge or two I let them be . . . If one book wearies me I take up another.

Which was nonsense, or rather playful posturing on the part of a man with a thousand volumes on his shelf and an encyclopedic knowledge of Greek and Latin philosophy. If Montaigne enjoyed presenting himself as a dim gentleman prone to somnolence during philosophical expositions, it was disingenuousness with a purpose. The repeated declarations of laziness and slowness were tactical ways to undermine a corrupt understanding of intelligence and good writing.

There are, so Montaigne implied, no legitimate reasons why books in the humanities should be difficult or boring; wisdom does not require a specialized vocabulary or syntax, nor does an audience benefit from being wearied. Carefully used, boredom can be a valuable indicator of the merit of books. Though it can never be a sufficient judge (and in its more degenerate forms, slips into wilful indifference and impatience), taking our levels of boredom into account can temper an otherwise excessive tolerance for balderdash. Those who do not listen to their boredom when reading, like those who pay no attention to pain, may be increasing their suffering unnecessarily. Whatever the dangers of being wrongly bored, there are as many pitfalls in never allowing ourselves to lose patience with our reading matter.

Every difficult work presents us with a choice of whether to judge the author inept for not being clear, or ourselves stupid for not grasping what is going on. Montaigne encouraged us to blame the author. An incomprehensible prose-style is likely to have resulted more from laziness than cleverness; what reads easily is rarely so written. Or else such prose masks an absence of content; being incomprehensible offers unparalleled protection against having nothing to say:

Difficulty is a coin which the learned conjure with so as not to reveal the vanity of their studies and which human stupidity is keen to accept in payment.

There is no reason for philosophers to use words that would sound out of place in a street or market:

Just as in dress it is the sign of a petty mind to seek to draw attention by some personal or unusual fashion, so too in speech; the search for new expressions and little-known words derives from an adolescent schoolmasterish ambition. If only I could limit myself to words used in Les Halles in Paris.

But writing with simplicity requires courage, for there is a danger that one will be overlooked, dismissed as simpleminded by those with a tenacious belief that impassable prose is a hallmark of intelligence. So strong is this bias, Montaigne wondered whether the majority of university scholars would have appreciated Socrates, a man they professed to revere above all others, if he had approached them in their own towns, devoid of the prestige of Plato's dialogues, in his dirty cloak, speaking in plain language:

The portrait of the conversations of Socrates which his friends have bequeathed to us receives our approbation only because we are overawed by the general approval of them. It is not from our own knowledge; since they do not follow our practices: if something like them were to be produced nowadays there are few who would rate them highly. We can appreciate no graces which are not pointed, inflated and magnified by artifice. Such graces as flow on under the name of naivety and simplicity readily go unseen by so coarse an insight as ours . . . For us, is not naivety close kin to simplemindedness and a quality worthy of reproach? Socrates makes his soul move with the natural motion of the common people: thus speaks a peasant; thus speaks a woman . . . His inductions and comparisons are drawn from the most ordinary and best-known of men's activities; anyone can understand him. Under so common a form we today would never have discerned the nobility and splendour of his astonishing concepts; we who judge any which are not swollen up by erudition to be base and commonplace and who are never aware of riches except when pompously paraded.

It is a plea to take books seriously, even when their language is unintimidating and their ideas clear – and, by extension, to refrain from considering ourselves as fools if, because of a hole in our budget or our education, our cloaks are simple and our vocabulary no larger than that of a stallholder in Les Halles.

What clever people should know

They should know the facts, and if they do not and if they have in addition been so foolish as to get these wrong in a book, they should expect no mercy from scholars, who will be justified in slapping them down, and pointing out, with supercilious civility, that a date is wrong or a word misquoted, a passage is out of context or an important source forgotten.

Yet in Montaigne's schema of intelligence, what matters in a book is usefulness and appropriateness to life; it is less valuable to convey with precision what Plato wrote or Epicurus meant than to judge whether what they have said is interesting and could in the early hours help us over anxiety or loneliness. The responsibility of authors in the humanities is not to quasi-scientific accuracy, but to happiness and health. Montaigne vented his irritation with those who refused the point:

The scholars whose concern it is to pass judgement on books recognize no worth but that of learning and allow no intellectual activity other than that of scholarship and erudition. Mistake one Scipio for the other, and you have nothing left worth saying, have you! According to them, fail to know your Aristotle and you fail to know yourself.

The *Essays* were themselves marked by frequent misquotations, misattributions, illogical swerves of argument and a failure to define terms. The author wasn't bothered:

I do my writing at home, deep in the country, where nobody can help or correct me and where I normally never frequent anybody

who knows even the Latin of the Lord's prayer let alone proper French.

Naturally there were errors in the book ('I am full of them,' he boasted), but they weren't enough to doom the *Essays*, just as accuracy could not ensure their worth. It was a greater sin to write something which did not attempt to be wise than to confuse Scipio Aemilianus (c. 185–129 BC) with Scipio Africanus (236–183 BC).

Where clever people should get their ideas from

From people even cleverer than they are. They should spend their time quoting and producing commentaries about great authorities who occupy the upper rungs of the tree of knowledge. They should write treatises on the moral thought of Plato or the ethics of Cicero.

Montaigne owed much to the idea. There were frequent passages of commentary in the *Essays*, and hundreds of quotations from authors who Montaigne felt had captured points more elegantly and more acutely than he was able to. He quoted Plato 128 times, Lucretius 149 and Seneca 130.

It is tempting to quote authors when they express our very own thoughts but with a clarity and psychological accuracy we cannot match. They know us better than we know ourselves. What is shy and confused in us is succinctly and elegantly phrased in them, our pencil lines and annotations in the margins of their books and our borrowings from them indicating where we find a piece of ourselves, a sentence or two built of the very substance of which our own minds are made – a congruence all the more striking if the work was written in an age of togas and animal sacrifices. We invite these words into our books as a homage for reminding us of who we are.

But rather than illuminating our experiences and goading us on to our own discoveries, great books may come to cast a problematic shadow. They may lead us to dismiss aspects of our lives of which there is no printed testimony. Far from expanding our horizons, they may unjustly come to mark their limits. Montaigne knew one man who seemed to have bought his bibliophilia too dearly:

Whenever I ask [this] acquaintance of mine to tell me what he knows about something, he wants to show me a book: he would not venture to tell me that he has scabs on his arse without studying his lexicon to find out the meanings of *scab* and *arse*.

Such reluctance to trust our own, extra-literary, experiences might not be grievous if books could be relied upon to express all our potentialities, if they knew all our scabs. But as Montaigne recognized, the great books are silent on too many themes, so that if we allow them to define the boundaries of our curiosity, they will hold back the development of our minds. A meeting in Italy crystallized the issue:

In Pisa I met a decent man who is such an Aristotelian that the most basic of his doctrines is that the touchstone and the measuring-scale of all sound ideas and of each and every truth must lie in conformity with the teachings of Aristotle, outside of which all is inane and chimerical: Aristotle has seen everything, done everything.

He had, of course, done and seen a lot. Of all the thinkers of antiquity, Aristotle was perhaps the most comprehensive, his works ranging over the landscape of knowledge (*On Generation and Corruption, On the Heavens, Meteorology, On the Soul, Parts of Animals, Movements of Animals, Sophistical Refutations, Nicomachean Ethics, Physics, Politics*).

But the very scale of Aristotle's achievement bequeathed a problematic legacy. There are authors too clever for our own good. Having said so much, they appear to have had the last word. Their genius inhibits the sense of irreverence vital to creative work in their successors. Aristotle may, paradoxically, prevent those who

most respect him from behaving like him. He rose to greatness only by doubting much of the knowledge that had been built up before him, not by refusing to read Plato or Heraclitus, but by mounting a salient critique of some of their weaknesses based on an appreciation of their strengths. To act in a truly Aristotelian spirit, as Montaigne realized and the man from Pisa did not, may mean allowing for some intelligent departures from even the most accomplished authorities.

Yet it is understandable to prefer to quote and write commentaries rather than speak and think for ourselves. A commentary on a book written by someone else, though technically laborious to produce, requiring hours of research and exegesis, is immune from the most cruel attacks that can befall original works. Commentators may be criticized for failing to do justice to the ideas of great thinkers; they cannot be held responsible for the ideas themselves – which was a reason why Montaigne included so many quotations and passages of commentary in the *Essays*:

I sometimes get others to say what I cannot put so well myself because of the weakness of my language, and sometimes because of the weakness of my intellect . . . [and] sometimes . . . to rein in the temerity of those hasty criticisms which leap to attack writings of every kind, especially recent writings by men still alive . . . I have to hide my weaknesses beneath those great reputations.

It is striking how much more seriously we are likely to be taken after we have been dead a few centuries. Statements which might be acceptable when they issue from the quills of ancient authors are likely to attract ridicule when expressed by contemporaries. Critics are not inclined to bow before the grander pronouncements of those with whom they attended university. It is not these individuals who will be allowed to speak *as though they were ancient philosophers*. 'No man has escaped paying the penalty for being born,' wrote Seneca, but a man struck by a similar sentiment in later ages would not be advised to speak like this unless he

manifested a particular appetite for humiliation. Montaigne, who did not, took shelter, and at the end of the *Essays*, made a confession, touching for its vulnerability:

If I had had confidence to do what I really wanted, I would have spoken utterly alone, come what may.

If he lacked confidence, it was because the closer one came to him in time and place, the less his thoughts were likely to be treated as though they might be as valid as those of Seneca and Plato:

In my own climate of Gascony, they find it funny to see me in print.

I am valued the more the farther from home knowledge of me has spread.

In the behaviour of his family and staff, those who heard him snoring or changed the bedlinen, there was none of the reverence of his Parisian reception, let alone his posthumous one:

A man may appear to the world as a marvel: yet his wife and his manservant see nothing remarkable about him. Few men have been wonders to their families.

We may take this in two ways: that no one is genuinely marvelous, but that only families and staff are close enough to discern the disappointing truth. Or that many people are interesting, but that if they are too close to us in age and place, we are likely not to take them too seriously, on account of a curious bias against what is at hand.

Montaigne was not pitying himself; rather, he was using the criticism of more ambitious contemporary works as a symptom of a deleterious impulse to think that the truth always has to lie far from us, in another climate, in an ancient library, in the books of people who lived long ago. It is a question of whether access to genuinely valuable things is limited to a handful of geniuses born between the construction of the Parthenon and the sack of Rome, or whether, as Montaigne daringly proposed, they may be open to you and me as well.

A highly peculiar source of wisdom was being pointed out, more peculiar still than Pyrrho's seafaring pig, a Tupi Indian or a Gascon ploughman: the reader. If we attend properly to our experiences and learn to consider ourselves plausible candidates for an intellectual life, it is, implied Montaigne, open to all of us to arrive at insights no less profound than those in the great ancient books.

The thought is not easy. We are educated to associate virtue with submission to textual authorities, rather than with an exploration of the volumes daily transcribed within ourselves by our perceptual mechanisms. Montaigne tried to return us to ourselves:

We know how to say, 'This is what Cicero said'; 'This is morality for Plato'; 'These are the *ipsissima verba* of Aristotle.' But what have we got to say? What judgements do we make? What are we doing?

A parrot could talk as well as we do.

Parroting wouldn't be the scholar's way of describing what it takes to write a commentary. A range of arguments could show the value of producing an exegesis on the moral thought of Plato or the ethics of Cicero. Montaigne emphasized the cowardice and tedium in the activity instead. There is little skill in secondary works ('Invention takes incomparably higher precedence over quotation'), the difficulty is technical, a matter of patience and a quiet library. Furthermore, many of the books which academic tradition encourages us to parrot are not fascinating in themselves. They are accorded a central place in the syllabus because they are the work of prestigious authors, while many equally or far more valid themes languish because no grand intellectual authority ever elucidated them. The relation of art to reality has long been considered a serious philosophical topic, in part because Plato first raised it; the relation of shyness to personal appearance has not, in part because it did not attract the attention of any ancient philosopher.

In light of this unnatural respect for tradition, Montaigne thought it worth while to admit to his readers that, in truth, he thought Plato could be limited and dull:

Will the licence of our age excuse my audacious sacrilege in thinking that [his] *Dialogues* drag slowly along stifling his matter, and in lamenting the time spent on those long useless preparatory discussions by a man who had so many better things to say?

(A relief to come upon this thought in Montaigne, one prestigious writer lending credence to timid, silent suspicions of another.) As for Cicero, there was no need even to apologize before attacking:

His introductory passages, his definitions, his sub-divisions and his etymologies eat up most of his work . . . If I spend an hour reading him (which is a lot for me) and then recall what pith and substance I have got out of him, most of the time I find nothing but wind.

If scholars paid such attention to the classics, it was, suggested Montaigne, from a vainglorious wish to be thought intelligent through association with prestigious names. The result for the reading public was a mountain of very learned, very unwise books:

There are more books on books than on any other subject: all we do is gloss each other. All is a-swarm with commentaries: of authors there is a dearth.

But interesting ideas are, Montaigne insisted, to be found in every life. However modest our stories, we can derive greater insights from ourselves than from all the books of old:

Were I a good scholar, I would find enough in my own experience to make me wise. Whoever recalls to mind his last bout of anger . . . sees the ugliness of this passion better than in Aristotle. Anyone who recalls the ills he has undergone, those which have threatened him and the trivial incidents which have moved him from one condition to another, makes himself thereby ready for future mutations and the exploring of his condition. Even the life of Caesar is less exemplary for us than our own; a life whether

imperial or plebeian is always a life affected by everything that can happen to a man.

Only an intimidating scholarly culture makes us think otherwise: We are richer than we think, each one of us.

We may all arrive at wise ideas if we cease to think of ourselves as so unsuited to the task because we aren't 2,000 years old, aren't interested in Plato's dialogues and live quietly in the country:

You can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life just as well as to one of richer stuff.

It was perhaps to bring the point home that Montaigne offered so much information on exactly how commonplace and private his own life had been – why he wanted to tell us:

That he didn't like apples:

I am not overfond . . . of any fruit except melons.

That he had a complex relationship with radishes:

I first of all found that radishes agreed with me; then they did not; now they do again.

That he practised the most advanced dental hygiene:

My teeth . . . have always been exceedingly good . . . Since

boyhood I learned to rub them on my napkin, both on waking up and before and after meals.

That he ate too fast:

In my haste I often bite my tongue and occasionally my fingers.

And liked wiping his mouth:

I could dine easily enough without a tablecloth, but I feel very uncomfortable dining without a clean napkin . . . I regret that we have not continued along the lines of the fashion started by our kings, changing napkins likes plates with each course.

Trivia, perhaps, but symbolic reminders that there was a thinking 'I' behind his book, that a moral philosophy had issued – and so could issue again – from an ordinary, fruit-resistant soul.

There is no need to be discouraged if, from the outside, we look nothing like those who have ruminated in the past.



Cicero 106–43 BC

In Montaigne's redrawn portrait of the adequate, semi-rational human being, it is possible to speak no Greek, fart, change one's mind after a meal, get bored with books, know none of the ancient philosophers and mistake Scipios.

A virtuous, ordinary life, striving for wisdom but never far from folly, is achievement enough.



V

Consolation for a Broken Heart