

6. Montaigne's Essays

“**I AM LARGE,** I contain multitudes”, wrote Walt Whitman in *Song of Myself*, and it seems an appropriate description of *The Complete Essays* of Michel de Montaigne, which in the Penguin edition by M.A. Screech runs to 1283 pages and includes one essay, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, which is almost 200.

Michel Eyguem de Montaigne was born in 1533 near Bordeaux on the family estate named Montaigne. His father, who had been mayor of Bordeaux, was a wealthy winegrower and his mother was a descendant of a Spanish Jewish convert to Catholicism. As a command of Latin was widely regarded as the highest goal of a humanistic education, Montaigne was taught exclusively in Latin by servants and a German preceptor who knew little French, until about the age of six, when he was sent to board at the Collège de Guyenne at Bordeaux. He later praised it as the best humanist college in France.

After a decade there, it is not clear what he did because the period is patchily documented. He may have returned to the estate, or even attended the University of Toulouse, but at some stage he must have studied the law because he became a magistrate and then counsellor to the Bordeaux *parlement*. While in this post in his mid-twenties he met Étienne de la Boétie with whom he developed a very close friendship. La Boétie, who was a humanist poet as well as a state official, wrote a sonnet in which he expressed the hope that his and Montaigne's name would be paired for all eternity, like those of other 'famous friends' throughout history such as Socrates and Alcibiades.

Whether it was a homosexual relationship or not is impossible to say. La Boétie was already married and Montaigne married later. In her readable new biography of Montaigne, *How to Live* (Chatto and Windus, 2010), Sarah Bakewell says that the intensity of their language is striking, not only in the aforementioned sonnet but also in the passages of Montaigne's works where he describes their friendship as a transcendent mystery, or as a great surge of love that swept them both away. His attachment to moderation in all things failed him when it came to La Boétie, and so did his love of independence. He wrote: "Our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again". In a marginal addition, he stated: "If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering, because it was he, because it was I".

Then, on 9th August 1563, at the age of 33, La Boétie came down with stomach pains and diarrhoea. Montaigne rushed to his bedside and stayed for the next 9 days until his death, almost certainly of the plague, on 18th August. Montaigne's grief was overwhelming – afterwards, everything was 'nothing but dark and dreary night'. But he eventually resolved to write about La Boétie and thereby discovered its therapeutic effects. It was writing about his friend that eventually led him to write the *Essays*.



Death followed Montaigne for years afterwards. In 1568 his father died and he inherited the estate. Then the next year his brother died in a freak tennis accident. Not long after, he himself nearly died in a riding accident. In 1570 his first child was born but died after two months (in all, he had six daughters, but only one survived him). So in 1571 he decided to retire from the Bordeaux *parlement* to his tower room – its roof beams painted with classical quotations – and devote himself to writing.

As well as editing the works of La Boétie, he began writing the *Essays*. He essentially invented this literary form, a short subjective treatment of a given subject, by calling it an *essai*, which is French for 'trial' or 'attempt'. As he himself put it, his mind could 'never gain a firm footing', which meant that his ideas were always 'an apprenticeship and on trial'. He warmly embraced imperfection as a fact of life, which is why his essays often ramble, take sidetracks and even contradict themselves. In this sense, his *Essays* are at total variance with the concept of a 'proper' academic essay, which dutifully sticks to the point.

There is almost a lifetime's reading in here. There were 107 essays in total, written over the period 1572 to 1592 and first published in 1580, on subjects ranging from the dizzy heights of friendship, the power of the imagination, educating children, ceremonial at the meeting of kings, the uncertainty of our judgment, and observations on Julius Caesar's methods of waging war, to the more mundane concerns of thumbs, smells, the scent on his moustache, sleep, and drunkenness. There is even an essay entitled *To philosophise is to learn how to die* and another headed *That we should not be deemed happy till after our death*.

Montaigne's general philosophy as revealed in the *Essays* is an eclectic mixture of Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism. The last named is very apparent in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* which, as already stated, is by far the longest he wrote. Indeed, in the 1580 edition it occupies 248 pages, whereas the other 93 essays average nine and a half pages each. Sebond was a 15th century Catalan scholar and professor of theology at Toulouse who produced in Latin his *Theologia Naturalis* ('Natural Theology') in the 1420s or early 1430s. Montaigne's father had asked him to translate it into French, which he did in 1569 after his father died.

Sebond believed that the truths of religion could be proved partly by rational argument, but Montaigne was closer to being a fideist, placing no reliance at all on human reason and claiming instead that religious truths could only be known through faith. However, 'apology' in classical usage, as in Plato's dialogues of that name, is a defence, so it might appear that Montaigne is actually siding with Sebond. According to Bakewell, it is quite the contrary. She quotes the critic Louis Cons who once remarked that Montaigne's essay supports Sebond 'as the rope supports the hanged man'. 

Why, then, does Montaigne call it an apology? Bakewell thinks that he purports to defend Sebond against those who have tried to bring him down using rational arguments (Sebond's *Theologia Naturalis* had been put on the Catholic Index, though only in the original Latin, not in Montaigne's translation). He does this by showing that rational arguments are generally fallible, because human reason itself cannot be relied on. Thus he defends a rationalist against other rationalists by arguing that anything based on reason is valueless. Montaigne's defence undermines Sebond's enemies all right, but it deliberately undermines Sebond himself even more fatally.

What supports Bakewell's reading is that almost every story in the essay is designed to show how useless human reason is, how feeble human powers are, and how silly and deluded almost everyone is, not excepting Montaigne himself, as he happily admits. The essay contains his motto which is in the form of a question: "Que sais-je? (What do I know?). However, he is being unfair to himself, because it is his own considerable reasoning powers that enable him to be so sceptical. He says that he is, at least formally, obedient to the Church, but adds, "otherwise I could not keep myself from rolling about incessantly". And he is all too aware of the Church's failings: "there is no hostility that exceeds Christian hostility". Indeed, Sainte-Beuve regarded the *Apoloogy for Raymond Sebond*, as a covert attack on Christianity. The Catholic Church eventually came to the same conclusion about his *Essays* in general, as they were placed on the Index at the end of the 17th century and not reprinted until the mid-19th century.

Montaigne's Humanism is not the optimistic variant of Pico della Mirandola or Erasmus. It is more stoically aware of human weaknesses and limitations, which is why he is forever debunking human pretensions, often with animal stories which place the animal on a par with humans. "When I play with my cat", he asks, "who knows whether she is not amusing herself with me more than I with her?" As for us, "man is certainly stark mad; he cannot make a flea, yet he makes gods by the dozen". We are forever relating the qualities of other things to our own qualities; beyond this relation and this principle our minds cannot go. "For why should a gosling not say thus: 'All parts of the universe have me in view: the earth serves for me to walk on, the sun to give me light, the stars to breathe their influences on me'. Now, by this same reasoning we human beings are the end and goal of which the universality of things arise". So, like the goslings, we have defined the universe and its alleged creator in our own image. Man's presumption is matched only by his littleness.

Montaigne's Humanism is also distinguished by its *humanity*. As Bakewell suggests, cruelty nauseated him: he had a *cruel* hatred of it, as he wrote in his essay *On Cruelty*, making a point of the paradox. He could not stand hunting, and even seeing a chicken having its neck wrung, or a hare caught by dogs, horrified him. Still less could he stomach the human tortures and judicial killings that were common in his day – "even the executions of the law, however reasonable they may be, I cannot witness with a steady gaze". In his own career, he was expected to order punishments, but he refused to do so. As for torture, it seems to be a test of endurance rather than of truth. Confessions that are obtained under torture are useless because they can be made up by the suspect just to escape the torture to which he is being subjected. He asks: "Why shall pain rather make me confess what is, than force me to say what is not?"

For Montaigne, all humans share an element of their being, and so do all other living creatures. He writes, in very 'modern' language: "There is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other creatures that may be capable of receiving it. There is some relationship between them and us, and some mutual obligation". Just after this passage, he comments about his dog: "I am not afraid to admit that my nature is so tender, so childish, that I cannot well refuse my dog the play he offers me or asks of me outside the proper time". I know exactly what he means.

As Bakewell comments, "he indulges his dog because he can imaginatively share the animal's point of view: he can *feel* how desperate the dog is to banish boredom and get his friend's attention". She then refers to Leonard Woolf's judgment that in his essay *On Cruelty* Montaigne revealed himself as "the first person in the world to express this intense, personal horror of cruelty. He was, too, the first completely modern man". The two were linked because his modernity resided precisely in his 'intense awareness of and passionate interest in the individuality of himself and of all other human beings' – and non-human beings, too.

And of our essential equality as well. In his essay *On the Cannibals* he describes his encounter with the members of the Tupinamba people from Brazil, and questions European assumptions of superiority. What the visitors find strange about France is its inequality and the acceptance of it by the mass of people. In echoes of La Boétie's own tract *On Voluntary Servitude*, a

founding text of passive resistance, the Tupinamba are astonished that the poverty-stricken masses do not take the rich by the throat 'or set fire to their houses'.

Montaigne's *Essays* are a series of dialogues of the mind with itself. They reveal someone who is fallible, humane, sceptical, freethinking and open-minded. "I am myself the subject of my book", he wrote. Yet, as Bakewell suggests, he was in effect inventing the idea of writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognise their own humanity. As for his answer to the question of how to live, the goal should be happiness or eudaimonia in this world, not in a hereafter. In his final essay *On Experience* he states: "Life should be an aim unto itself, a purpose unto itself". So, there we have, in the words of Michel de Montaigne, the essence of Humanism: don't worry about death; read a lot; question everything; live temperately; hate cruelty; and realise that the meaning of life is life itself.

To be wise and happy does not mean that we have attained plenitude but that we have agreed to live in incompleteness and finitude. As Montaigne concludes, "I want death to find me planting my cabbages, but careless of death, and still more of my unfinished garden".

NOTE

1. *Michel de Montaigne: The Complete Essays*, translated by M.A. Screech, is published by Penguin Books at £20.

2. *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*, by Sarah Bakewell is published by Chatto and Windus at £16.99.

3. See also: *The Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*, by Tzvetan Todorov, Princeton University Press, 2002. □

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