

From: ds4life@googlegroups.com [<mailto:ds4life@googlegroups.com>] **On**
Behalf Of Andrew Lipka
Sent: Thursday, July 30, 2015 10:14 PM
To: ds4life@googlegroups.com
Subject: [ds4life] Me, Myself, and I - The New Yorker

I came across this essay on Montaigne in the archives of the New Yorker recently. I find myself returning to his essays in this month after Yale for Life. What a satisfying dip it is into his waters.

Andy

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/09/07/me-myself-and-i>

From: Hill, Charles
Sent: Friday, July 31, 2015 4:05 PM
To: ds4life@googlegroups.com
Reply To: ds4life@googlegroups.com
Subject: RE: [ds4life] Me, Myself, and I - The New Yorker

Dear Andy, You might be interested in a 2010 book, "How to Live: a Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty answers" by Sarah Bakewell. I first engaged Montaigne in the old Modern Library Giant volume, translated by the Elizabethan John Florio, in an antique English that seems unfathomable but eventually begins to convey the intricacies of his mind. ==Charlie

From: Andrew Lipka <andrew.lipka@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: [ds4life] Me, Myself, and I - The New Yorker
Date: July 31, 2015 at 10:38:10 AM EDT
To: ds4life@googlegroups.com

Thank you for this recommendation, Charlie!

I am currently engaged with a wonderful book by our esteemed David Quint, "Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy. Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais." David's own gentility comes across in his take on Montaigne. I think that Montaigne's process of looking inward with an insight and humility that reaches across the centuries is every bit as important as the wisdom he conveys, and in writing on Montaigne, David can't help but look into himself. That process is, in turn, an inspiration to me.

Between Machiavelli's images in the "Letter to Vettori," and the picture I have in my mind of Montaigne as he thought and wrote, I have internalized an ideal of the life of the mind that brings an optimism to my days. I look to a future where I might attempt a puny imitation of this reflection and put it to paper (or at least to the electrons on my screen). And in the present, I have all of you to engage in another form of this exchange.

A few years ago, I had to move my office to a new location. I took the opportunity to have a desk built by a local artisan. At the time, and every working day since, I sit at this desk and keep these ideas and intentions in mind. While certainly one can take on the great work anywhere, I find that I care about the setting; I want it to be worthy of the endeavor, like the "garments of court and palace" that Machiavelli, at least figuratively, dons. That is one of the many delights of our Yale for Life program, and it is why I have insisted, for example, that each year we have a place we can go to at night to study; last year, it was Pierson's library open to us 24/7.

For this reason among others I look forward to visiting Montaigne's study one day.

Meanwhile, today is my wife Wendy's birthday. In the essay on the essayist that I forwarded, he quotes from Montaigne's "On Vanity" at length. I found it so apropos that I quoted it myself today, in my birthday card to her:

"In a truly loving relationship—which I have experienced—rather than drawing the one I love to me I give myself to him," he says, remembering La Boétie. "Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me, I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me: it is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

Obviously, Montaigne never knew my wife, or he would not have bemoaned the absence of a woman that rose to the level of friendship he found with La Boétie. A good thing - for me; she would never have been able to resist him.

Best,
Andy

On Jul 31, 2015, at 1:24 PM, Richards, David A. <drichards@steptoe.com> wrote:

With Charlie I recommend Bakewell's book. Being in Rome at the moment, I also recommend Gelato for the non-mind

Dave Richards

On Jul 31, 2015, at 4:04 PM, Alex Troy <alex.troy@honestscholar.com> wrote:
And since it's 93 on the last day of July I recommend an afternoon snooze

Alexander Troy

John Boardman

Re: [ds4life] Me, Myself, and I - The New Yorker

For those who are interested in Montaigne and his place in philosophy, I recommend "The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault" by Alexander Nehamas. Nehamas traces a tradition in philosophy as the search by individuals on how to live their lives, rather than a quest for "knowledge." He begins with Platonic and Socratic Irony, goes on to Montaigne's "Of Physignomy" as A Face for Socratics' Reason; then, Nietzsche on "The Problem of Socrates;" and, Foucault on the Care of the Self.

Regards from Greenland where there is a lot of time to think, John

[Here is the article from The New Yorker:]

Me, Myself, and I

Montaigne's essays chart the course of twenty years of self-investigation.

Every French schoolchild learns the date: February 28, 1571, the day a well-regarded and uncommonly educated nobleman named Michel de Montaigne retired from "the slavery of the court and of public duties," moved a chair, a table, and a thousand books into the tower of his family castle, near Bordeaux, shut the door, and began to write. It was his thirty-eighth birthday, and, by way of commemoration, he had the first two sentences he wrote that morning painted on the wall of a study opening onto his new library—announcing, if mainly to himself, that having been "long weary" of those public duties (and, presumably, of his wife, at home in the castle, a few steps across the courtyard) Michel de Montaigne had taken up residence in "the bosom of the learned Virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life, already more than half expired." His plan, he said, was to use the second half looking at himself, or, as he put it, drawing his portrait with a pen. He had his books for

company, his Muses for inspiration, his past for seasoning, and, to support it all, the income from a large estate, not to mention a fortune built on the salt-herring and wine trades, which, in the last century, had turned his family into landed gentry. (His full name, as most oenophiles can tell you, was Michel Eyquem de Montaigne.)

Montaigne's pursuit of the character he called Myself—"bashful, insolent; chaste, lustful; prating, silent; laborious, delicate; ingenious, heavy; melancholic, pleasant; lying, true; knowing, ignorant; liberal, covetous, and prodigal"—lasted for twenty years and produced more than a thousand pages of observation and revision that he called "*essais*," taking that ordinary word and turning it into a literary occupation. When he died, at fifty-nine, he was still revising and, apparently, not at all surprised, since Myself was a protean creature, impossible to anticipate but also, being always at hand, impossible to ignore. I like to think of the essays as a kind of thriller, with Myself, the elusive prey, and Montaigne, the sleuth, locked in a battle of equals who were too close for dissimulation and too smart for satisfaction. And it may be that Montaigne did, too, because he often warned his readers that nothing he wrote about himself was likely to apply for much longer than it took the ink he used, writing it, to dry. "I am myself the matter of my book," he said, when the first two books of essays appeared, in 1580. "You would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject."

He was wrong. By the time he finished a third book, eight years later, everyone in France with a philosophic bent and a decent classical education had read the first two—lured, perhaps, by the writer's promise that "my defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed"—and, given that some ninety per cent of the French were illiterate, that probably means that everyone who could read the essays did. By sixteenth-century standards, Montaigne had produced a best-seller, although he maintained the pretense that he wrote only for himself or, at most, "for a few men and a few years." ("The public favor has given me a little more confidence than I expected" is how he described the effect on him.) News of the essays travelled fast. The first known English translation, by an exuberantly prolific language tutor named John Florio, went on sale in London at the turn of the seventeenth century, in time for Shakespeare to buy a copy. It was followed, in 1685, by the poet Charles Cotton's lovely version—the one that most Englishmen and Americans read until 1957, when Donald Frame, a Columbia professor who went on to become Montaigne's preëminent American biographer, produced his own translation. Thirty years later, the Oxford professor M. A. Screech did the same for Britain. I have used all three, along with, in French, my old, dog-eared Flammarion copy of the essays and the seriously intimidating new Pléiade edition, which came out in Paris in 2007, doubled in size by nearly a thousand pages of endnotes and annotations incorporating four hundred years of Montaigne research. (I admit to tweaking a few of the English quotes, in the spirit of competition and interpretation.)

However you read them, Montaigne's books were utterly, if inexplicably, original. They were not confessional, like Augustine's, nor were they autobiographical. You could call them the autobiography of a mind, but they made no claim to composing the narrative of a life, only of the shifting preoccupations of their protagonist in an ongoing conversation with the Greek and Roman writers on his library shelves—and, of course, with himself. His belief that the self, far from settling the question "Who am I?," kept leaping ahead of its last convictions was in fact so radical that for centuries people looking for precedents had to resort to a few fragments of Heraclitus on the nature of time and change—or, eventually, to give up and simply describe Montaigne as "the first modern man." It didn't matter if he was quoting Seneca in an essay called "To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die" or, a few pages later, in an essay about imagination, musing on the vagaries of penises: "We are right to note the licence and 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; it imperiously contests for authority with our will: it stubbornly and proudly refuses all our incitements, both of the mind and hand." He followed himself wherever his attention settled, and his regard was always the same—intent, amused, compassionate, contrarian, and irresistibly eclectic. (He could jump from Plato's discourse on the divinatory power of dreams to dinner at the castle—"a confusion of meats and a clutter of dishes displease me as much as any other confusion"—and do justice to

them both.) One of his favorite philosophers, starting out, was the skeptic Sextus Empiricus, who had famously cautioned his followers to “suspend judgment” on everything but the experience of their own senses. Voltaire called Montaigne one of history’s wise men, but when it came to the big philosophical questions that absorbed him—the nature of justice, say, or morality—he seemed to be saying, like Sextus, that there may be no truths, only moments of clarity, passing for answers.

The best way to read Montaigne is to keep watching him, the way he watched himself, because the retired, reclusive, and pointedly cranky Michel de Montaigne is in many ways a fiction—a mind so absorbingly stated that by now it can easily pass for the totality of Montaigne’s “second” life. In fact, he went to the best parties in the neighborhood. He attended all the important weddings—and never mind that, by his admission, he’d practically been dragged to his own; the bride was a suitable Bordeaux girl named Françoise de la Chassaigne and the alliance more or less arranged. (His view of marriage, he wrote in the essay “On Some Verses of Virgil,” was that he was “not so fit for it” but had acquiesced for “posterity,” and he held to the common wisdom that the secret of a peaceful, companionable marriage was to keep one’s wife permanently unaroused, the better to fix her thoughts on the details of hospitality and “sound housekeeping.”) He had everybody’s ear. He corresponded with beautiful, educated women who read his drafts. He dined at the castle with wellborn men who had learned to value his advice and, more to the point, his tact during his years of “public duties,” both as a local emissary to the court of Charles IX, in Paris, and as a magistrate at the law court known at the time as the Parlement de Bordeaux.

He claimed to have forsworn his youth, which was apparently so unruly that eight years of it are missing from the public record; “I burned myself at [lust] in my youth, and suffered all the furies that the poets say come upon all those who let themselves go after women without restraint and without judgment” was how he described those years, when he was in his fifties. But he never forswore women or, for that matter, the thrill of watching a good battle, or any of the other indulgences of his class. (“For the intimate companionship of my table I choose the agreeable not the wise; in my bed, beauty comes before virtue,” he once said.) He left his tower in 1580 for a year of travelling. He left it again in 1581 to become the mayor of Bordeaux—at the time the country’s third-largest city and its richest port. Two years later, he agreed to a second term. And, while an avowed Catholic royalist (whether by conviction or, as a few of the essays suggest, because of a suspicion that taking a leap of faith on the big loyalties of his time was the best way to clear his mind for more enticing subjects), he was also a close friend and confidant of the Protestant Henri de Navarre, and was Navarre’s emissary to the Catholic court of Charles’s brother and successor, Henri III. His lifetime encompassed the spread of Calvinism through France, and the eight Catholic-Protestant wars provoked by conversions like Navarre’s within the royal family. And if Montaigne did not take sides in those wars, it may be that he thought of them as a family matter, which in a way they were. The Henris were both directly descended from Louis IX—the paterfamilias of three hundred years of French kings—and by 1584, with the death of Henri III’s brother, Navarre was himself first in line to the French throne. “My house, being always open, easily approached and ever ready to welcome all men (since I have never let myself be persuaded to turn it into a tool for a war in which I play my part most willingly when it is farthest from my neighborhood), has earned quite a lot of popular affection,” Montaigne wrote, about a year later, in the essay he called “On Vanity.”

Authors are, of course, sneaky. (Montaigne put it nicely: “All is a-swarm with commentaries: of authors there is a dearth.”) They lead you exactly where they want to go, and no farther. By the end of the essays, you know a great deal about Montaigne’s mind and temperament, but, as for his promise that “my defects will here be read to the life,” you are still waiting for the details of that life and most of the people in it. His evasions are legendary. He writes a great deal about the tyranny of laws but nothing about his fourteen years as a magistrate or his four years as a mayor, or even about his response, as mayor, to the plague that struck Bordeaux toward the end of his second term, leaving a third of the population dead. (He fled.) He writes a great deal about wives but rarely refers to his own and never by name, though he claims to have made himself “fall in love” to marry, a task perhaps made briefly pleasant by the fact that Françoise is said to have

been an exceptionally beautiful and lively girl. Montaigne, at the time, was thirty-two and, he says, ready to be a dutiful and respectful husband. But he was not much interested in Françoise—nor, it may be, she in him, since some scholars have thrown her into the arms of his younger brother Arnaud, a good-natured and *sportif* Army captain who died young, from a tennis ball to the ear. Montaigne himself rarely slept in his wife's bed, except for purposes of procreation; she gave him six daughters in thirteen years, and only one of them, Léonor, lived past infancy—a fact he dismissed with the unnerving remark (Montaigne experts are still arguing about why he made it and what it meant) that he had “lost two or three.”

As for his mother, he alludes to her twice, but only in passing. Her name was Antoinette Louppes de Villeneuve. She came from a far-flung merchant clan, similar to the Montaignes in wealth and influence, but with the notable exception that, while the Montaignes were then solidly and safely Catholic, some of the Louppes were Protestant, and the family themselves were Sephardic *conversos* from Saragossa, where their name was Lopez de Villanueva. (Several had left Spain before the expulsions of 1492, and were thriving in Europe as properly minted Christians, or, as the new Pléiade edition chooses to put it, a Christian family “*anciennement convertie*.”) Antoinette grew up in Toulouse. She arrived at the castle a reluctant bride of sixteen, to marry Pierre Eyquem, an eccentric but apparently exemplary chatelain (and a future mayor of Bordeaux himself), and, once having settled her duty to her children by bearing them, she was attached mainly to herself. She claimed that Michel had exhausted her getting born—eleven months of pregnancy, by her calculations—and was furious to learn that, by her husband's last will, he was not only heir to but steward of the estate she had expected to manage in her lifetime. Their relations were, by anyone's standards, sour. The year after Pierre died, she threatened to sue Michel over the ownership of a family necklace; he discovered it in his wife's jewel box and gave it back, hoping to avoid the scandal of a court case—after which she spent a long, bitter, and contentious widowhood in the company of a granddaughter who seems to have been the only relative she liked.

But Montaigne was not much interested in family histories of any sort, and his own was apparently untouched by not only the anti-Semitism that attached to the children of “new Christian” immigrants like the Louppes but also the Catholic-Protestant wars at home. Some of Montaigne's siblings became Protestant, with no evident disruption to the family—even during the St. Bartholomew's Day massacres of 1572, when thirty thousand French Calvinists died. He doesn't mention those massacres in the essays, either. For him, the subject of Protestants and Jews (who had been barred from practicing their religion in France since the end of the fourteenth century) seems to have been, at most, food for his meditations on the absurdities of persecution and the fatal distractions of disharmony. He efficiently wrote off Martin Luther for leaving behind in Germany “as many—indeed more—discords and disagreements because of doubts about his opinions than he himself ever raised about Holy Scripture.” He quoted Josephus and admired the Maccabees. But, when it came to seeing an old Jew herded naked through the streets of Rome, he remained a reporter—curious, compassionate, but not particularly disturbed. He did not expect much better from the world. Relatives, to his mind, were accidents of birth, consideration, and proximity. The genealogy that interested him was the genealogy of thought. He was far more interested in thinking about religion with the Sophists and Sceptics in his library than he was in the part that religion, even his own Catholicism, played in him.

For all that, he was a passionate traveller. His search for the spa that would cure his kidney stones—the disease had killed his father and would eventually help kill him—took him to Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. His love of the classics took him to Italy. In Rome, where his own copy of the essays had been seized by the Inquisition, he walked the streets of his dead mentors: “I like thinking about their faces, their bearing and their clothing,” he said. “I mutter their great names between my teeth and make them resound in my ears.” (Latin, by his father's decree, was not only his first language but the only one he was allowed to speak for his first six years.) He prowled the ghetto, visiting a synagogue, watching a circumcision, and happily cross-examining the rabbi. (By the end of his visit he had met the Pope and was made an honorary Roman citizen.) Today, we would call him a gentleman ethnographer, more enchanted than

alarmed by the bewildering variety of human practices. “Yes. I admit it,” he wrote in “On Vanity.” “Even in my wishes and dreams I can find nothing to which I can hold fast. The only things I find rewarding (if anything is) are variety and the enjoyment of diversity.” He was interested in all things unfamiliar and exotic, from immolations in India to cannibalism in the New World. In the essay he called “On the Cannibals,” he described “a very long talk” he had once had with a Tupi chief, brought to France from Brazil and, at the time, on display in Rouen for a royal visit. He admired the Indian’s gentleness and his evident perplexity at the pomp and the poverty and the cruelty displayed so indifferently and indiscriminately to *him*. “I think there is more barbarity in eating a man alive than in eating him dead,” he wrote, “more barbarity in tearing apart by rack and torture a body still sentient, in roasting him little by little and having him bruised and bitten by pigs and dogs (as we have not only read about but seen in recent memory, not among enemies in antiquity but among our fellow-citizens and neighbors—and what is worse, in the name of duty and religion) than in roasting him and eating him after his death.” No one has said it better.

“Anyone can see that I have set out on a road along which I shall travel without toil and without ceasing as long as the world has ink and paper,” Montaigne wrote at the beginning of “On Vanity,” his late and perhaps greatest essay. “I cannot give an account of my life by my actions: fortune has placed them too low for that; so I do so by my thoughts.” He compares himself to a nobleman he once knew who would keep his chamber pots for a week to display, seriatim, to his friends—“He thought about them, talked about them: for him any other topic stank”—saying, “Here (a little more decorously) you have the droppings of an old mind, sometimes hard, sometimes squittery, but always ill-digested.” He starts to extrapolate—“Scribbling seems to be one of the symptoms of an age of excess. When did we ever write so much as since the beginning of our Civil Wars? And whenever did the Romans do so as just before their collapse?”—and catches himself in time to add that “each individual one of us contributes to the corrupting of our time: some contribute treachery, others (since they are powerful) injustice, irreligion, tyranny, cupidity, cruelty: the weaker ones bring stupidity, vanity, and idleness, and I am one of them.” He accuses himself, a little pridefully, of pride—in writing at all, with his country at war, and in the small, stubborn habits with which he flaunts his disregard, saying that “if one of my shoes is askew then I let my shirt and my cloak lie askew as well: I am too proud to amend my ways by halves. . . . The words I utter when wretched are words of defiance.”

Montaigne called “On Vanity” one of those essays which, being quite long and not at all confined by the titles he gave them, “require a decision to read them and time set aside.” It is a meditation on dying and, at the same time, on writing—or, you could say, on writing oneself to life in the face of death, on getting “lost” in words and in “the gait of poetry, all jumps and tumblings” and in the kind of space where “my pen and my mind both go a-roaming.” (“My mind does not always move straight ahead but backwards too,” he says. “I distrust my present thoughts hardly less than my past ones and my second or third thoughts hardly less than my first.”) And it draws pretty much the whole cast of characters from his library into the conversation—the kings and philosophers and poets and historians and statesmen and assorted saints and scoundrels whom he introduced on the first pages of Book I, with the words “Man is indeed an object miraculously vain, various and wavering. It is difficult to found a judgment on him which is steady and uniform.” Since then, they have appeared and reappeared through the essays like characters in a novel, demolishing one another’s arguments. Now, in a way, he both honors and discards them, along with their cluttering truths, their most congenial wisdom, and the deceptive comfort they sometimes bring.

Thus his ruminations on vanity move quickly from disreputable shoes (and the way that the “forlorn state of France” mirrors his “forlorn age”) to Petronius, Horace, and Lucretius, each discoursing, in Latin, on the metaphysics of droughts, storms, crop failures—the deaths of nature. But he isn’t interested. He interrupts them to complain about the burden of managing his own land, and the difficulty of economizing, in lean years, for someone “used as I am to travel not merely with an adequate retinue but an honorable one.” He says that, unlike Crates, who “jumped into the freedom of poverty . . . I loathe poverty on a par with pain.” He prefers the freedom that money gives him to go away. “I feel death all the time, jabbing at my throat and

loins. But I am made otherwise: death is the same for me anywhere. If I were allowed to choose I would, I think, prefer to die in the saddle rather than in my bed, away from home and far from my own folk. There is more heartbreak than comfort in taking leave of those we love. . . . I would willingly therefore neglect to bid that great and everlasting farewell.” He considers the case of Socrates, who, preferring death to banishment, took the hemlock—and then nails him with praise as one of those “heaven-blessed” men whose qualities are “so soaring and inordinate that . . . I am quite unable to conceive them.”

At the same time, he worries, or pretends to, about his inattention at home. He agrees with Diogenes, who said that the wine he liked best was always the wine somebody else had made, but then, typically, berates himself. He describes the good husbandry of his father: “I wish that, in lieu of some other part of his inheritance, my father had bequeathed me that passionate love for the running of his estates. If only I can acquire the taste for it as he did, then political philosophy can, if it will, condemn me for the lowliness and barrenness of my occupation.” (Pierre, he said, was “the best father that ever was”; he had studied law to please him, and once spent more than a year translating Raymond Sebond’s enormous treatise “Theologia Naturalis” from Latin to French so that his father, who rued the lack of Latin in his own education, could read it.) A few lines later, he remembers that he is a father himself—and he turns to the problem of finding “a son-in-law who would fill my beak, comfort my final years and lull them to sleep, into whose hands I could resign the control and use of my goods . . . provided that he brought to it a truly grateful and loving affection.” But he doesn’t mention Léonor, or, for that matter, his dead children. When he thinks about loss now, at fifty-three, it is his father he mourns and, more than anyone, his “soul’s” friend Étienne de la Boétie, a Bordeaux poet who was arguably the love of his life and whose early death, he once said, drove him to marriage in the hope of solace and then into his tower for escape. They are the absent interlocutors of “On Vanity”: the people he talks to about death, talking to himself; the only ones he describes with what could be called a deep sense of relationship.

How to describe the dazzling ramble of “On Vanity”? For nearly all of its sixty pages, it has no arguments, personal or philosophical, to expound, no revelations on the nature of man to offer, no path to salvation to propose. What we get, instead, is the gift he has given himself: “scope and freedom” of interpretation; language that is “blunt” and “raw”; and, most of all, the experience of Montaigne thinking. (Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a classic essay on Montaigne, wrote that the “marrow of the man reaches to his sentences. . . . Cut these words, and they would bleed.”) He can move in a few paragraphs from the admonitions in I Corinthians 3:20—“Those exquisite subtleties are only good for sermons: they are themes which seek to drive us into the next world like donkeys. But life is material motion in the body, an activity, by its very essence, imperfect and unruly: I work to serve it on its own terms”—to a riff on the corruption of judges, the hypocrisy of moralists and diet doctors, and the secret sex lives of Greek philosophers, as described by an exceptionally expensive fourth-century-B.C. courtesan named Lais, who said, “I know nothing of their books . . . but those fellows come knocking at my door as often as anyone.” You could call this intellectual free association, but it is far too sterile a term for the mind of Michel de Montaigne running after itself, arguing against argument, reading his thoughts and his aging body at least as carefully as he reads his books. (His copy of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, at the Cambridge University Library, is filled with enough Latin and French margin notes to make a book themselves.) But he thinks of himself as a browser, and in a way he is, because, by his account, a couple of interesting thoughts or stories in one book will always remind him of something smarter, or more interesting—or, better still, contradictory—in another book, and he opens that. By the time he begins “On Vanity,” most of his favorite quotes have been carved into the beams and woodwork of the tower—for inspiration, fast access, and, perhaps, distraction. (He would have loved Google.) Those words are the preferred company of his old age, however spurious their counsel. He wants to “die, grinding [his] teeth, among strangers,” and what more accommodating strangers than dead ones, speaking across millennia from his rafters—the kind of strangers who, like paid companions to the old and frail, “will leave you alone as much as you like, showing you an unconcerned face and letting you think and moan

in your own way.” Death, he says, “is not one of our social engagements: it is a scene with one character.”

But the truth is that writing about death—surrounded by the books that he says “console me and counsel me to regulate my life and my death”—has put him off dying. The world intrudes on his gloom, battles for his attention, and almost always wins. He longs to revisit Rome. His wife must have been against this, because he says, “Truly, if any wife can lay down for her husband how many paces make ‘far’ and how many paces make ‘near,’ my counsel is to make him stop half-way...and let those wives dare to call Philosophy to their aid.” Like the clueless Professor Higgins, he wishes that women were more like men. “In a truly loving relationship—which I have experienced—rather than drawing the one I love to me I give myself to him,” he says, remembering La Boétie. “Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me, I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me: it is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence.” The question, of course, is what the absence called death means.

The penultimate pages of “On Vanity” are an homage to Rome (and perhaps to himself, since he quotes in full the papal bull that made him a Roman citizen). But he ends the essay in the oracular heart of Greece, with the Delphic admonition to “know thyself,” and in a few pages turns the idea of vanity on its head, defending his pursuit of himself, however fractured, transitory, or imperfect, as the only knowledge he, or anyone, can hope to gain. It is the one argument for a “truth” he makes in a hundred and seven essays: “Nature has very conveniently cast the action of our sight outwards. We are swept on downstream, but to struggle back towards our self against the current is a painful movement; thus does the sea, when driven against itself, swirl back in confusion. Everyone says: ‘Look at the motions of the heavens, look at society, at this man’s quarrel, that man’s pulse, this other man’s will and testament’—in other words always look upwards or downwards or sideways, or before or behind you. Thus, the commandment given us in ancient times by the god at Delphi was contrary to all expectations: ‘Look back into your self; get to know your self; hold on to your self.’ . . . Can you not see that this world of ours keeps its gaze bent ever inwards and its eyes ever open to contemplate itself? It is always vanity in your case, within and without, but a vanity which is less, the less it extends. Except you alone, O Man, said that god, each creature first studies its own self, and, according to its needs, has limits to his labors and desires. Not one is as empty and needy as you, who embrace the universe: you are the seeker with no knowledge, the judge with no jurisdiction and, when all is done, the jester of the farce.”

When Montaigne moved his books to the third floor of his tower, he moved a bed to the floor below. He would cross to the castle for dinner, after which he would say good night and leave. It is tempting to imagine him at his desk then, pen in hand, books scattered around him, and candle flickering, but in fact he never wrote or read after the sun set—a habit he recommended to his readers, saying that with books “the soul disports itself, but the body, whose care I have not forgotten, remains inactive, and grows weary and sad.” He was seven years into the essays when he suffered his first serious attack of kidney stones, writing that illness and sleep, like madness, “make things appear to us otherwise than they appear to healthy people, wise men, and waking people.” He lived in fear of the next attack, and, even more, of what he called “emptiness.” He was the man who (*pace* Roosevelt and Thoreau) first said, “The thing I fear most is fear . . . it exceeds all other disorders in intensity.”

Toward the end of his life, he claimed to have accepted emptiness. He had once called his essays “monstrous bodies, pieced together of diverse members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental,” and blamed the fact that “my ability does not go far enough for me to dare to undertake a rich, polished picture, formed according to art.” But there is every indication that, growing older, he missed the statesman’s life. When Navarre succeeded to the throne, in 1589, becoming Henri IV of France—and, after four more years of religious war, making a shrewd conversion to Catholicism with the words “Paris is well worth a Mass”—Montaigne wrote to volunteer his services again. Henri replied, delighted, and in January of 1590, when his letter arrived, Montaigne wrote back, saying that he had always

wished for the succession, “even when I had to confess it to my curate,” and then offering the advice that “where conquests, because of their greatness and difficulty, could not be thoroughly completed by arms and by force, they have been completed by clemency and magnanimity, excellent lures to attract men, especially toward the just and legitimate side.” The passage is vintage Montaigne: a prescription for wise rule lurking in a few fine, flattering phrases about the fruits of victory; a strategic detour into the real world to say that “if rigor and punishment occur, they must be put off until after the possession of mastery”; and, finally, an appropriate classical example—in this case, Scipio the Elder. In July, Henri summoned Montaigne to Paris, but by September, when he had hoped to go, Montaigne was too sick to travel. ♦