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Signs

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9 / Reading Montaigne¹

"I commit myself with difficulty."
(*Essays*, III, x)

"We must live among the living."
(*Essays*, III, viii)

WE THINK we have said all there is to say about him when we say he is a skeptic, that is, that he questions himself and does not answer, refusing even to admit that he knows nothing, and holding himself to the famous "What do I know?" None of this takes us very far. Skepticism has two sides. It means that nothing is true, but also that nothing is false. It rejects *all* opinions and *all* behavior as absurd, but it thereby deprives us of the means of rejecting any one as false. Destroying dogmatic, partial, or abstract truth, it insinuates the idea of a total truth with all the necessary facets and mediations. If it multiplies contrasts and contradictions, it is because truth demands it. Montaigne begins by teaching that all truth contradicts itself; perhaps he ends up recognizing that contradiction is truth. *I do indeed contradict myself at random; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict at all.* The first and most fundamental of contradictions is that by which the refusal of each truth uncovers a new kind of truth. Thus we shall find in Montaigne a doubt which rests upon itself and is endless, we shall find religion, and we shall find Stoicism. It would be useless to pretend that he excludes any of these "positions," or that he ever makes anyone of them *his own*. But perhaps in the end he finds in this ambiguous *self*—which is offered to everything, and which he never finished exploring—the place of all obscurities, the mystery of all mysteries, and something like an ultimate truth.

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Self-consciousness is his constant, the measure of all doctrines for him. It could be said that he never got over a certain wonder at himself

1. All the quotations from Montaigne are taken from Book III of the *Essays*.

which constitutes the whole substance of his works and wisdom. He never tired of experiencing the paradox of a *conscious being*. At each instant, in love, in political life, in perception's silent life, we adhere to something, make it our own, and yet withdraw from it and hold it at a distance, without which we would know nothing about it. Descartes will overcome the paradox and make consciousness mind: "It is never the eye which sees itself . . . , but clearly the mind, which alone knows . . . the eye and itself."² Montaigne's consciousness is not mind from the outset; it is tied down at the same time it is free, and in one sole ambiguous act it opens to external objects and experiences itself as alien to them. Montaigne does not know that resting place, that self-possession, which Cartesian understanding is to be. The world is not for him a system of objects the idea of which he has in his possession; the self is not for him the purity of an intellectual consciousness. For Montaigne—as for Pascal later on—we are interested in a world we do not have the key to. We are equally incapable of dwelling in ourselves and in things, and are referred from them to ourselves and from ourselves to them.

The Delphic oracle must be corrected. It is well to make us return to ourselves. But we do not escape ourselves any more than we escape things. "*It is always vanity for you, within and without, but it is less vanity when it is less extensive. Except for you, O man,*" said that God [at Delphi], *each thing studies itself first, and according to its need, has limits to its labors and desires. There is not a single one as empty and necessitous as you, who embrace the universe; you are the scrutinizer without knowledge, the judge without jurisdiction, and, after all, the fool in the farce.* Confronted with the world of objects, or even the world of animals resting in their nature, consciousness is hollow and avid. It is consciousness of all things because it is nothing; it grasps at all things and holds to none. Involved in spite of everything in this flux they wish to be unaware of, our clear ideas risk being masks we hide our being beneath rather than the truth about ourselves.

Self-understanding for Montaigne is dialogue with self. It is a questioning addressed to the opaque being he is and awaits a response from. It is like "essaying" or "experimenting on" himself. He has in view a questioning without which reason's purity would be illusory and in the end impure. Some are amazed that he should want to speak about even the details of his mood and temperament. It is because for him every doctrine, when it is separated from what we do, threatens to be mendacious; and he imagined a book in which for once there would be expressed not only ideas but also the very life which they appear in and which modifies their meaning.

2. Léon Brunschvicg, *Descartes et Pascal lecteurs de Montaigne*.

So beneath clear ideas and thoughts he finds a spontaneity abounding in opinions, feelings, and unjustifiable acts. *Myson, one of the seven wise men . . . , questioned as to why he was laughing to himself, replied: "For the very reason that I am laughing to myself." How many stupid things I say and answer every day in my own eyes, and thus how much more frequently I am apt to do so in the eyes of others.* Consciousness has an essential foolishness, which is its power to become no matter what, to become itself. In order to laugh to ourselves we need no external cause; we need only think that we can laugh to ourselves and be company for ourselves. We need only be dual and consciousness. *What is taken to be rare about Perseus King of Macedonia—that his mind attached itself to no rank but went wandering through all kinds of life and representing customs to itself which were so vagabond and flighty that it was not known to himself or others what man this was—seems to me more or less to apply to everyone. We are always thinking somewhere else, and it could not possibly be otherwise. To be conscious is, among other things, to be somewhere else.*

The very powers found in animals and related to the body are in man transformed and distorted because they are caught up in the movement of a consciousness. We see dogs who bark while they dream; so they have images. But man does not have just a few images painted into his brain. He can live in the realm of the imaginary. The sight of actors *so deeply involved in a mourning role that they still weep about it in the dressing room* is a wondrous one, as is the sight of a man by himself who fashions a crowd around him, grimaces, is astonished, laughs, fights and is triumphant in this invisible world. Or this prince who has his well-beloved brother killed as a result of a bad dream, or that other one who kills himself because his dogs howled. If the body alone is considered, the penis ought to give only a precise pleasure, comparable to that of other bodily functions. But *throughout most of the world, this part of our body was deified. In the same province some skinned theirs in order to offer up and consecrate a chunk of it, while others offered up and consecrated their semen. In another province, young men pierced theirs publicly, opening them in various places between flesh and skin, and through these openings they passed skewers, the longest and biggest they could bear; and afterwards made a fire from these skewers as an offering to their gods, who were held to have little vigor and chastity if they happened to be astonished at the force of this cruel suffering.* Thus life is borne away outside itself; the extreme of pleasure resembles pain.³ *Nature itself, I fear, attaches*

3. ". . . considering . . . this face inflamed with cruelty and passion at the tenderest effect of love, and then this solemn, harsh, ecstatic haughtiness in

some instinct for inhumanity to man. It is because our body and its peaceful functions are traversed by the power that we have to devote ourselves to something else and give ourselves absolutes. Besides, there is no desire which goes to the body alone and does not seek another desire or an assent beyond the body. *Thus these men say it is the will that they contract for, and they are right. . . . I am horrified at imagining that a body deprived of affection is mine.* Love is not just love of the body, since it intends someone; and it is not just love of the mind, since it intends him in his body. The word "strange" is the one that most often recurs when Montaigne speaks of man. Or "absurd." Or "monster." Or "miracle." *What a monstrous animal he is who horrifies himself, whose pleasures weigh upon him, who clings to misfortune!*

Descartes will briefly confirm the soul and body's union, and prefer to think them separate; for then they are clear to understanding. Montaigne's realm, on the contrary, is the "mixture" of the soul and body; he is interested only in our factual condition, and his book endlessly describes this paradoxical fact that we are. That is to say that he thinks of death, the counter-proof of our incarnation. When traveling he never stopped in a house without wondering if he might be sick there and die comfortably. *I feel death continually gripping at my throat or loins.* He spoke very well against meditation upon death. It deforms and misses its object; for it concerns distant death, and distant death, being everywhere in our future, is harder than present death, which advances before our eyes in the form of an event. It is not a question of corrupting life by thinking about death. What interests Montaigne is not death's pathos—its ugliness, the last sighs, the funeral trappings which form the customary motif of discourses on death and are images of death used by the living. *These men do not consider death itself at all; they make no judgment about it whatsoever: they do not bring their thought to rest on death but run toward, intend a new being.* Those who listen to the consolations of the priest, lift up their eyes and hands to heaven, and pray aloud, *these flee the struggle, turning their consideration away from death, as we amuse children while we intend to prick them with a lancet.* Montaigne wants us to measure non-being with an incisive glance and, knowing death in all its nakedness, know life laid wholly bare. Death is *the act of one person alone.* In the confused mass of being, death cuts out that particular zone which is ourselves. It puts in matchless evidence that inexhaustible source of opinions, dreams, and passions which secretly gave life to the spectacle of the world. And thus it teaches us better than any

such a foolish action . . . and that the greatest sensual delight can be as chilling and as doleful as pain . . ."

episode of life the fundamental accident which made us appear and will make us disappear.

When he writes: "*I study myself more than other subjects. It is my metaphysics and my physics,*" these words must be taken literally. He rejects in advance the explanations of man a physics or a metaphysics can give us, because it is still man who "proves" philosophies and sciences, and because they are explained by him rather than he by them. If for example we wanted to isolate mind and body by relating them to different principles, we would hide what is to be understood—"the monster," the "miracle," man. So there cannot in all good conscience be any question of solving the human problem; there can only be a question of describing man as problematic. Hence this idea of an inquiry without discovery, a hunt without a kill, which is not the vice of a dilettante but the only appropriate method for describing man. *The world is only a school for inquisitioners.* Hence too the attention he gives to thoughts' streaming and the spontaneity of dreams, which makes him anticipate at times Proust's tone,⁴ as if for him already the only victory over time lay in expressing time.

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Having set out in this way, attentive to all that is fortuitous and unfinished in man, he is at the opposite pole from religion, if religion is an explanation of and key to the world. Although he often puts it outside the range of his inquiries and beyond his reach, nothing he says is a preparation for belief.⁵ *We are in the midst of the world's peat and dung, tied to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe.* Animal instinct is more perfect than our reason. Our religion is a matter of custom: *we are Christians in the same way we are Perigordians or Germans.* Circumcision, fasting, Lent, the Cross, confession, the celibacy of priests, the use of a sacred language in worship, the Incarnation of God, Purgatory—all these elements of Christianity are found in pagan religions. In each village miracles are fabricated beneath our eyes through ignorance and hearsay. A Platonic legend has Socrates born of a virgin visited by Apollo. Men have looked for and found in Homer all the oracles and predictions that they needed. In short, revealed religion is not very different from the folly men cause to

4. "They befall me like dreams. In dreaming I commend them to my memory (for I readily dream that I dream); but the next day, although I easily represent their color to myself as it was, the more I strain to find out what else they were, the more I drown in forgetfulness. And also the only part of these fortuitous discourses which fall upon me in fantasy that remains in my memory is a shadowy image."

5. L. Brunschvicg collected a series of fragments which are very convincing in this respect (*Descartes et Pascal lecteurs de Montaigne*, pp. 56-78).

appear on earth. It remains to be seen whether we must conclude from this, as Montaigne does at times, that barbarian religions are already inspired—or that our own is still barbarous. How can there be any doubt as to his answer when he even reproaches Socrates for his *demonries* and *ecstasies*? In morals as in knowledge, Montaigne contrasts our terrestrial inherence to every supernatural relationship. We can repent an action, he says; we cannot repent being ourselves; and yet according to religion this is what we would have to do. There is no new birth. We cannot annul anything we have done: *I customarily do what I do completely, and proceed all of a piece*. He makes an exception in the case of a few men who already dwell in eternity, but casts suspicion upon them by adding: *just between us, supercelestial opinions and subterranean customs are things I have always judged to be in singular accord with one another*.

What he retains of Christianity is the vow of ignorance. Why assume hypocrisy in the places where he puts religion above criticism? Religion is valuable in that it saves a place for what is strange and knows our lot is enigmatic. All the solutions it gives to the enigma are incompatible with our monstrous condition. As a questioning, it is justified on the condition that it remain answerless. It is one of the modes of our folly, and our folly is essential to us. When we put not self-satisfied understanding but a consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence, we can neither obliterate the dream of an other side of things nor repress the wordless invocation of this beyond. What is certain is that if there is some universal Reason we are not in on its secrets, and are in any case required to guide our lives according to our own lights. *In ignorance and negligence I let myself be guided to the general way of the world. I will know it well enough when I perceive it*. Who would dare to reproach us for making use of this life and world which constitute our horizon?

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But if we reject religious passion, must we not reject all other passions as well? Montaigne often speaks of the Stoics, and favorably. This man who wrote so well against reason, and showed that we can in no case get beyond opinion to see an idea face to face, has recourse to the *seed of universal reason embedded in every man who is not perverted*. As there is the invocation of an unknown god in Montaigne, there is the invocation of an impossible reason. Even though nothing is wholly “within our power,” even though we are not capable of autonomy, must we not at least withdraw and carve a corner of indifference for ourselves from which we look upon our actions and our life as unimportant “roles”?

This view is found in Montaigne, among other things. *We must lend ourselves to others and give ourselves only to ourselves.* Marriage, for example, is an institution which has its laws and its conditions of equilibrium. It would be madness to mix passion with it. Love which *enslaves us to another* is acceptable only as a free and voluntary practice. At times Montaigne even speaks of it as of a bodily function which is a matter of hygiene, and treats the body as a mechanism we need not make common cause with. So much the more will he place the State among those external devices we find ourselves joined to by chance and ought to use according to their law without putting anything of ourselves into them. Imagination and prestige always reign in our relationships to others. And much more so still in public life, which associates us with those we have not chosen, and with many blockheads. *Now it is impossible to deal in good faith with a blockhead. At the hands of such an impetuous master, not only my judgment but my conscience as well is corrupted.* In public life I become mad with the madmen. Montaigne strongly feels that there is a witchcraft in social life: here everyone puts in the place of his thoughts their reflection in the eyes and idle chatter of others. There is no longer any truth; there is (Pascal will say) no longer any self-consent to oneself. Each is literally alienated. Let us withdraw from public life. *The common weal requires us to betray and lie and massacre; let us resign this commission to those more pliant and obedient.* It is true that we are not always able to abstain, that furthermore to do so is to let things slide and that after all there is certainly a need for men of state or a Prince. How can they help it? The Prince will have to lie, kill, and deceive. Let him do it, but let him know what he is doing and not disguise crime as virtue. *What remedy is there? There is no remedy. If he was really bothered between the two extremes, he had to do it; but if he did it with no regrets, if it did not weigh upon him to do it, this is a sign that his conscience is in a bad state.* And we who look on? All there is left for us to do is (as it will be said later) to obey despising what we obey. We must despise, since the State is against everything that matters in the world: against freedom, against conscience. But we must obey, since this folly is the law of life with others; and since it would be another folly not to deal with the State according to its laws. Yet Plato puts the philosopher in the government. He imagines a just city and sets out to construct it. *But is there any evil in a polis which is worth being fought against with such a mortal drug? . . . Plato . . . does not consent to violence being done to his country's peace in order to heal his country; he does not accept an improvement which costs the blood and ruin of its citizens, but establishes it as the office of a virtuous man to leave everything as*

it is in such a case. . . . It is absurd to want to rule a history made of accidents by reason. . . . *In my time I have seen the wisest heads of this Kingdom assembled, with great ceremony and public expense, for treaties and agreements about which the true decision nevertheless depended in all sovereignty upon the desires of milady's chamber and the inclination of some silly little woman.* Foresight and laws will never be equal to the variety of cases; reason will never be able to judge public life. In a time when public life is split into a thousand particular conflicts, Montaigne does not even suspect that a meaning can be found for it. It is impossible to be reconciled with this chaos. To live in public affairs is to live according to others. Montaigne is clearly inclined to live according to himself.

And yet is this his final word? He sometimes spoke differently of love, friendship, and even politics. Not that he simply contradicted himself in doing so. It is because the Stoic separation of external and internal, necessity and freedom, is abstract, or destroys itself; and because we are indivisibly within and without. We cannot always obey if we despise, or despise always if we obey. There are occasions when to obey is to accept and to despise is to refuse, when a life which is in part a double life ceases to be possible, and there is no longer any distinction between exterior and interior. Then we must enter the world's folly, and we need a rule for such a moment. Montaigne knew it; he did not swerve from it. And how could he have? He had described consciousness, even in its solitude, as already mixed according to its very principle with the absurd and foolish. How could he have prescribed that consciousness dwell in itself, since he thinks it is wholly outside itself? Stoicism can only be a way-point. It teaches us to be and judge in opposition to the external world; it could not possibly rid us of it. What is most peculiar to Montaigne may be the little bit he has told us about the conditions and motives for this return to the world.

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It is not a question of reaching a reassuring conclusion at no matter what cost, nor of forgetting at the end what has been found on the way. It is from doubt that certainty will come. So we must measure the extent of it. Let us repeat that all belief is passion and makes us beside ourselves, that we can believe only by ceasing to think, that wisdom is a *resolution to be irresolute*, that it condemns friendship, love, and public life. And so here we are back to ourselves again. And we find chaos still, with death, the emblem of all disorders, on the horizon. Cut off from others, cut off from the world, incapable of finding in himself (like the Stoic wise man) and in an inner relationship to God the

means of justifying the world's comedy, Montaigne's wise man, it would seem, no longer has any conversation except with that life he perceives welling madly within him for a little while longer, any resource except the most general derision, any motive except despising himself and all things. In this disorder, why not give up? Why not take animals for a model—these neighing horses, these swans who sing as they die—why not join them in unconsciousness? The best thing would be to go back to the *puerile security, the ignorance* of beasts. Or to invent, against the feeling of death, some natural religion: *the extinction of a life is the way to a thousand other lives.*

This movement is to be found in Montaigne. But there is another one too, which appears just as often. For after all the doubts, there remains to be explained—precisely because we know that every attempt to know multiplies questions and obscures what it wants to clarify, and that for each head severed, the Hydra of ignorance grows three new ones—why there are opinions, why we believed to begin with that we held truths, and why doubt needs to be learned. *I know what it is to be human better than I know what it is to be animal, mortal, or rational.* Descartes will remember this saying. It means that the mind's movement and irresolution are only half of the truth. The other half is the marvel that our volubility has stopped, and at each moment stops again, in appearances which we may indeed show cannot withstand examination, but which at least had the air of truth and gave us the idea of it. Thought, when it questions itself, never stops prolonging and contradicting itself; but there is a thought in act which is no little thing, and which we have to take into account. The critique of human understanding destroys it only if we cling to the idea of a complete or absolute understanding. If on the contrary we rid ourselves of this idea, then thought in act, as the only possible thought, becomes the measure of all things and the equivalent of an absolute. The critique of passions does not deprive them of their value if it is carried to the point of showing that we are never in possession of ourselves and that passion is ourselves. At this moment, reasons for doubting become reasons for believing. The only effect of our whole critique is to make our passions and opinions more precious by making us see that they are our only recourse, and that we do not understand our own selves by dreaming of something different. Then we find the fixed point we need (if we want to bring our versatility to a stop) not in the bitter religion of nature (that somber divinity who multiplies his works for nothing), but in the fact that there is opinion, the appearance of the good and true. Then regaining nature, naivete, and ignorance means regaining the grace of our first certainties in the doubt which rings them round and makes them visible.

In fact, Montaigne did not simply doubt. Doubting is an action; thus doubt cannot demolish our action, our doing, which is in the right against it. The same author who wanted *to live according to himself* felt passionately that we are among other things what we are for others, and that their opinion reaches us at the core of our being. *I would gladly come back from the other world*, he says in sudden anger, *to give the lie to the man who would shape me differently than I was, even though it were to honor me*. His friendship with La Boétie was exactly the kind of tie which *enslaves us to another*. He did not think he knew himself better than La Boétie knew him. He lived beneath his eyes, and after his death he continued to do so. It is in order to know himself as La Boétie knew him that Montaigne questions and studies himself; *he alone possessed my true image and took it away with him. That is why I decipher myself so curiously*. We rarely see such a complete gift. Far from La Boétie's friendship having been accidental to his life, we would have to say that Montaigne and the author of the *Essays* were born of this friendship, and that for him, in sum, existing meant existing beneath his friend's gaze. The fact of the matter is that true skepticism is movement toward the truth, that the critique of passions is hatred of false passions, and finally, that in *some* circumstances Montaigne recognized outside himself men and things he never dreamed of refusing himself to, because they were like the emblem of his outward freedom, and because in loving them he was himself and regained himself in them as he regained them in himself.

Even in pleasure, which he sometimes speaks about as a doctor, Montaigne is not after all cynical. *It is madness to devote all one's thoughts to it and commit oneself to it with a furious and indiscreet affection. But on the other hand, to get mixed up in it without love and willing-obligation, in the manner of actors—in order to play a common role of the age and its customs and put nothing of one's own into it except words—is in truth to provide for one's safety, but in a very cowardly way, like the man who would abandon his honor or advantage or his pleasure out of fear of danger. For it is certain that those who set up such a practice cannot hope to gain from it any fruit which would touch or satisfy a noble soul*. As an old man, Montaigne says that success in seduction depends upon choosing the right moment. But what does this late wisdom prove? When he was young and amorous, he never carried on his love affairs like battles and according to tactics. *I often had a lack of luck, but sometimes of enterprise as well; God save the man who can still joke about it! In this century it requires more temerity, which our young people excuse under pretext of ardor; but if they looked more closely, they would find that it comes more from scorn than ardor. I feared superstitiously to offend, and I gladly respect*

what I love. Not to mention that whoever takes away reverence for this commodity rubs away its luster. I like a man to be a bit of the child and fearful servitor in his love. If this is not enough, I have besides some aspects of the stupid shame Plutarch speaks about, and have been in the course of my life wounded and spotted by it in different ways. . . . I have as tender an eye for sustaining a refusal as I do for refusing; and it weighs upon me so much to weigh upon others that on those occasions when duty forces me to test someone's will in something which is doubtful and costs him dear, I do it sparingly and in spite of myself. There is a very tender cynic. Fate did not have him love from love as he did from friendship, but he himself had nothing to do with it.

He entered the bewitched realm of public life; he did not withhold himself. *I do not want a man to shrink from attention, steps, speeches, and if need be sweat and blood in the responsibilities he assumes.* The people named him mayor several times. *I wish them all possible good; and certainly, if the occasion had arisen, I would have spared nothing to serve them. I was as disturbed for their sake as I am for my own.* How was he able to live a public life if he was *disgusted with mastery, both active and passive?* He obeys without liking obedience and commands without liking command. He would not even like to be a prince. The prince is alone. He is not a man, since he cannot be challenged. He does not live, he sleeps, since everything gives way before him. But the passion to obey is ugly too, and useless. How could a man who delivers himself up body and soul be esteemed? Capable of giving himself unconditionally to a master, he is also capable of changing masters. Yes, we must take sides, and follow the consequences to the very end; but *just opportunities* are less frequent than is believed, and we must not choose too readily, for then it is no longer the cause but the sect we love. *I am not subject to these penetrating, intimate mortgages and commitments. Wrath and hatred are beyond the call to be just, and are passions serving only those who do not hold strictly enough to their duty simply through reason. . . . We must not (as we do every day) give the name "duty" to an intestine bitterness and acerbity which is born of private interest and passions; nor "courage" to a treacherous, malicious behavior. They call their propensity to spitefulness and violence "zeal." They fan the flames of war, not because it is just but because it is war. When my will is given to a party, it is not with such a violent obligation that my understanding is infected by it.* A man can serve a party and be a harsh judge of what is going on there, find intelligence and honor in his enemy, in short, continue to exist in the social world. *I have been able to get mixed up in public responsibilities*

without swerving from myself by a hair's breadth, and to give myself to others without abandoning myself.

Perhaps it will be said that these rules make snipers, not soldiers. That is true, and Montaigne knows it. He is able at times, and lucidly, to force himself to lie; he does not make a habit or a way of life of it. *Whoever wants to make use of me as I am, let him give me things to do requiring rigor and freedom, and conduct which is short and to the point yet still risky, and I shall be able to do something for him. If long, subtle, laborious, artificial, crooked conduct is required, he would do better to ask someone else.* Maybe there is some scorn here. But it is also possible that Montaigne means more than that. We always ask questions as if they were universal, as if in an instant we chose the good of all men in choosing our own. But what if this were a presumption? Being what he is, Montaigne will never be partisan. We do well only what we do willingly. He must not affect a lofty manner. He can serve better and more outside the ranks. Is it unimportant, this weight attached to his words because men knew he neither lied nor flattered? And did he not act all the more effectively because he did not care too much for action?

Passions seemed to be the death of the self, since they swept it away outside itself, and Montaigne felt threatened by them as by death. Now he tries to describe to us what have since been called *free passions*. Having experienced that what he loves is at stake, out there, he resolutely confirms the natural movement which was bearing him outward. He joins the human game. Upon contact with this freedom and courage, passions and death itself are transformed. No, it is not meditation upon death which overcomes death. The good arguments are *those which make a peasant and whole peoples die just as steadfastly as a philosopher*, and they all come back to a single one—we are living beings, it is here we have our tasks, and as long as we draw breath they are the same. Meditation upon death is hypocritical, since it is a morose way of living. In the movement which throws him at things, and precisely because he has shown what is arbitrary and perilous in it, Montaigne discovers the remedy for death. *It is my impression that it is indeed the end, yet not the aim of life; it is its end, its extremity, yet not its object. Life should have itself as its aim and design; its proper study is to govern, conduct, and undergo itself. Among the several other offices that this general and principal chapter comprehends is this article of knowing how to die; and if our fear did not give it weight, it would be among the lightest.* The remedy for death and passions is not to turn away from them, but on the contrary to go beyond them as everything bears us beyond them. Others threaten our

freedom? But *we must live among the living*. We risk slavery there? But there is no true freedom without risk. Action and attachments disturb us? But *life is a material and corporeal movement, an action that by its own essence is imperfect and disordered; I occupy myself with serving it as it is*. There is no sense cursing our fate; both good and evil are found only in our life.

Montaigne tells that the doctors had advised him to lace himself tight with a napkin when he traveled on shipboard, in order to fight seasickness. *Which I did not even try*, he adds, *having accustomed myself to contend with my defects and master them by myself*. His whole morality rests upon a movement of pride through which he decides to take his risky life in hand, since nothing has meaning if it is not in his life. After this detour toward himself, all seems good to him again. He said he would rather die *on horseback than in his bed*. Not that he counted on the warrior's anger to help him, but because he found in things, along with a threat, a viaticum. He saw the ambiguous link that bound him to them. He saw that he was not required to choose between himself and things. The self is not *serious*; it does not like to be tied down. But *is there anything as certain, resolute, disdainful, contemplative, solemn, and serious as an ass?* It is unconditional freedom which makes us capable of absolute attachment. Montaigne says of himself: *I have been so sparing in promises that I think I have kept more than I have promised or owed*. He sought and maybe found the secret of being simultaneously ironic and solemn, faithful and free.