Montaigne & Melancholy

The Wisdom of the *Essays*

NEW EDITION

M.A. Screech

Foreword by Marc Fumaroli

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For
Professor
Araki Shôtarô
the wise authority on
Montaigne
in the University of
Tokyo

When Thales reckons that a knowledge of man is very hard for man to acquire, he is telling him that knowledge of anything else is impossible.

(Montaigne, *Essays* II.12).

Montaigne – the 'French Thales'.

(Justus Lipsius).

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FOREWORD

A Spirituality for Gentlemen

by Marc Fumaroli

A pre-established harmony could be said to exist between M. A. Screech and the subject of his latest book. Such a precondition is rare, and even less often is it evoked at conferences on methodology in the humanities – out of modesty I would like to think. The fact is that such fortunate encounters, between the right man and the right subject, are as hard to define as the friendship between Montaigne and La Boétie: '*Parce que c'étoit luy, parce que c'étoit moy.*' Like divine grace, it is either there or it isn't, and if it isn't there, then all the epistemological scholasticism in the world cannot prevent a work born under an evil star from being grace-less. To take just one, uncontroversial example: if Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal* is such a triumph that is because everything had conspired to make him the right man at that moment for that subject. The great critic had just recovered from his Romantic fervour and the exacting niceness of his taste meant that he was the first to grasp the atticism implicit in Jansenist spirituality. His experience as a poet and an autobiographer (in *Volupté*), nurtured on Augustine's *Confessions*, enabled him to interpret correctly, from within, the exquisite individual nuances which characterize the doctrine and the sensibilities of each member of the Port-Royal group. Compared with that masterpiece of historical and literary *Einfühlung*, the conceptual apparatus and ambitious methodology of Lucien Goldman, in his *Dieu caché*, crush the subject rather than elucidate it. In this sense, and to this extent, any successful work of criticism is autobiographical.

Professor Screech's book is as brief as it is dense. It is written with the warm simplicity of speech, of maturity addressing youth, of one friend addressing another in evocation of a friend in common. We are here *'en mesnage'* with Montaigne. Screech's aim is not to say everything about Montaigne, and in this respect the book may seem less ambitious than the same author's epochal *Rabelais* (1979), but this implicit *'figure de modestie'* is not to be taken literally. The whole of Screech's earlier work had predisposed him, once he turned to Montaigne, to go straight to the heart of the *Essays,* and that he has done. The rest, as the Gospel has it, shall be added unto us.

What we discover here for the first time, and what Screech alone could have made us discover, is quite simply the religious dimension of the *Essays,* the spirituality contained within Montaigne's wisdom. Hitherto, and largely under the secretly determinant influence of Pascal, Montaigne's religious attitude has been studied negatively, as it were. It is a subject that has been thrust into the margins of the best books devoted to the *Essays*. Whether Montaigne has been adjudged an agnostic, or a pre-libertine or even a good Catholic for political reasons, he has passed as the very type of the secular humanist, untouched by the religious experience and *a fortiori* by that refinement of it by culture and psychological tact which we call spirituality. More recently, the tendency has been to see in him the pure writer achieving a 'secular salvation' through 'writing'. In vain did St François de Sales declare his debt to Montaigne, while a whole current of Christian humanism which dominated France in the seventeenth century was fed by the *Essays*; in vain did Henri Busson, in his *Littérature et religion* (1948), insist on the close friendship between Montaigne and the great Jesuit theologian Juan Maldonado. Pascal has always had the last word, as if he alone epitomized authentic religious experience. He had the last word similarly over Descartes, who was for a long time cast out from the religious sphere by Pascal's remark: *'Descartes inutile et incertain'*. It took the work of Ferdinand Alquié and his follower, Jean-Luc Marion, to get people to notice, in France at least, the religious and spiritual dimension of Descartes's philosophy, by distinguishing this carefully from the posthumous developments of Cartesianism. In the world of spirituality, as in that

of art, the Father's house has many mansions. Questions of style, and of adaptation to social conditions, to individual temperament, to a profession, to the historical and cultural moment, all modify the *'données immédiates'* of religious experience.

As a layman and a member of the gentry, free from all vows or constraints, Montaigne was certainly no *moine manqué*. But must we conclude necessarily, from his liberated 'air', his ingenuity in sexual matters, his style and his manners, which were deliberately other than those of the academics and the clerics, that he was not, at bottom, a Christian? On the contrary, it could well be that his greatest originality, and his powerful and lasting influence in classical France, rests on his successful attempt to work out a perfectly orthodox form of spirituality for the use of laymen and of the gentry, a *liberal* spirituality quite distinct from the models traditionally conceived for clerics bound by constraining vows, inscribed within a narrow hierarchical discipline and thus ill suited to the specificity of an independent lay existence. Everything seems to show that such a need was keenly felt in the last third of the sixteenth century in Catholic circles, as an answer to the solution which the Protestants of the Reformation had proposed to this old malaise in Christendom. Granted which hypothesis, St François de Sales's *Introduction à la vie dévote* appears as one panel, conceived by a bishop for the use of noblewomen living 'in the world', of a diptych of Christian *'honnesteté'* whose masculine panel is the *Essays*. The difference between the two is that Montaigne's *moy*, which is at once the director of his conscience and the directed, takes more risks than would be allowed to a woman. This is proper for a gentleman, but it does not imply that he was unable, within these margins of extreme risk, to find the right path, in accordance with the traditional teachings of the Church.

Screech does not formulate the hypothesis in these terms, but his book provides a cluster of proofs which from now on it will be hard to disregard. By taking it upon himself to confront, for the first time in its full extent, the religious dimension of the *Essays,* Screech is in fact tackling the major difficulty. Unlike those critics who have broached the question before him, his starting-point is not the essay on the *Apologie de Raimond de*

Sebonde, although he naturally takes it fully into account elsewhere. However important this particular essay may be, it is only one chapter among many in the work, and there is a strong temptation for the interpreter of Montaigne to lodge the few religious 'ideas' attributed to him in this one place. We know however, since Popkin's fundamental *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (1964), that even the radical scepticism to be found in that essay is in the mainstream of the most vigorous Catholic apologetics after the Council of Trent. Screech is elegant enough not to insist on this established fact in the history of ideas: it is not his starting-point either.

He starts by addressing not Montaigne's ideas, but the roots of those ideas in Montaigne's 'experience'. Now the root of his ideas is also the origin of the literary undertaking of the *Essays* and remains the horizon of the entire work: an attack of melancholy, with all that that term implies of threats of insanity as well as the promise of ecstasy or the temptation to heresy. Screech is not the only one to draw attention to the insistent presence of the topos of melancholy in the *Essays*; it is excellently developed by Jean Starobinski in his fine study, *Montaigne en mouvement.* As well as being a great literary critic, Starobinski is also a doctor, a historian of medicine and a philosopher. Screech does not neglect the therapeutic aspects of the *Essays,* which are brought out by Starobinski, but he puts the accent on the other side of the topos: the one involving enthusiasm, inspiration, ecstasy and the *furor poeticus*; in short, the experience of the dionysiac and the perils as well as the exaltations of the soul. He shows that this zone of *véhémentes agitations* is constantly present, not only at the origin but throughout the writing of the *Essays.*

In his books on Rabelais, and especially in his superb *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (1980), Screech has analysed meticulously the scholarly fascination which these extreme states of religious experience, pagan as well as Christian, exercised on the best minds of the sixteenth century: Ficino, Erasmus, Rabelais, Cardano. He has done more than Bakhtin to uncover for us the Dostoevskyan side of the sixteenth century, and who better to draw attention now to the experience and consciousness of this 'Dostoevskyanism' in Montaigne, who is in this the creature of his age? By the same token Screech is able to

show the perseverance and faultless sense of spiritual *good taste* with which Montaigne broke with the fascinations of his predecessors. By channelling and controlling the disruptive energies that threatened his equilibrium, he gave to them the form of a 'civil' Christian wisdom, nurtured no doubt by the wisdom of antiquity, but softened and pacified by faith, hope and charity. Having started from a solitary *moy*, grieving and endangered, he is reunited with the universal form of man, the image of God, accepting the grace of being that image, however imperfect, but an image just the same, of divine perfection and plenitude. Montaigne appears here as the Loyola of a religious order without either vows or ecclesiastical discipline, and the *Essays* as the *Spiritual Exercises* of the modern Christian gentleman. This was to be the sentiment of the next century in France, though not that of Pascal and most modern commentators. In 1668, *Le gentilhomme chrétien,* the work of the capuchin Yves de Paris, offered, in a version different from Charron's *Sagesse,* a compendium of Montaignian spirituality for the use of the nobility.

I wish I had the space to deal with every point raised by Screech's demonstration which, in its sober way, covers the themes of the *Essays* as a whole – his setting-right of the traditional misinterpretation of the *'entre-nous'* in the essay 'On Experience' is particularly enjoyable. Suffice it to say that the book has, aside from its author's masterly scholarship, the two distinguishing marks of the truth: coherence and simplicity. There are, thank heaven, other ways in which Montaigne can and will be read, but from now on this book will be the key to any reading of him in his context, by the light of history and philology. It opens a fresh chapter in the critical 'fortune' of the *Essays.* It offers a sure foundation of the reinterpretation of classical French humanism, and among other things, of its supposed 'libertine' element, which is perhaps less 'libertine' or, at least, libertine in another way from what is currently believed.

Screech's book may also have other, broader repercussions. The founder of a spirituality for the lay gentry in France is also the founder of French literature. Starting from Screech, it is not now excessive to see taking shape the singular authority which that spirituality was to acquire in French culture, from La Rochefoucauld to Joubert, and Maine de Biran to Marcel Jouhandeau: that of a direction of conscience for

laymen, more sinuous than that of the casuists, but aiming always to keep the individual *moi* within the limits – which are also an assumption – of a simple, noble *humanitas*, itself inseparable from *sanitas*.

Preface to the 1983 edition

This book has been simmering for over a quarter of a century. It embodies an approach to the wisdom of Montaigne which I have developed when reading the *Essays* with university students in England, Canada and the United States – especially in the University of Birmingham in the 1950s and, since 1961, at University College London.

Madness, good, bad or merely medical, underlies a great deal of Renaissance thought, worship, morals, literature and humour. When I was studying ecstasy and folly in Erasmus and Rabelais, I was led to find out how Montaigne came to terms with them. The case made out in this book can be resumed succinctly: the melancholy element in Montaigne's complexion encouraged him to take all forms of ecstasy and mania very seriously indeed.

If we follow the ins and outs of Montaigne's thought we can see the reasons for his preoccupation. Virtually unshaken authority took his complexion to be the essential foundation for genius. Aristotle believed that many madmen, and all geniuses, were melancholic, an assertion he explained with the help of Plato: he took the inspiration of the true genius to be one of the good 'manias' which Socrates praised in the *Phaedrus* – a form of ecstatic madness closely allied to the raptures experienced by seers, prophets, poets and lovers. No essential distinction could be made between the mania which led Hercules, say, to kill his children and the mania which inspired Plato or made Socrates the wisest of men. Melancholy was behind them all.

These doctrines were adopted and expounded in the late fifteenth century by Marsiglio Ficino (1433-1499), a learned

priest who dominated the Florentine Academy. Ficino had been brought up in the court of Cosimo de' Medici, where he fell under the influence of the movement started by the Greek scholar Gemistus Pletho, who had visited Italy to attend the Council of Florence (1438-9). Pletho encouraged Cosimo to have Plato and Plotinus, as well as the works of Hermes Trismegistus, translated into Latin.

Ficino did not produce Renaissance Platonism single-handed, but most Renaissance readers knew their Plato in his Christianised version. Even scholars like Erasmus who rejected his Platonising magic were influenced by the exciting leaven of Platonism and Neoplatonism with which he enlivened traditional scholastic philosophy and Christian theology.

Ficino's world was marked by magic, by spirits and daemons, by talismans and by all the charismatic manias of Plato – which he also found in Aristotle, as he interpreted him. This was the foundation of so much that strikes us as irrational in the Renaissance – including the widespread belief in witchcraft and in revelations, raptures and ecstasies of many different kinds.

Montaigne is the heir to the best part of a century of criticism of such doctrines. The *Essays* show that he rejected a great deal of what Ficino and others stood for; what he kept he hedged about with caveats and provisos. The *Essays* wander in and out of the problems posed by Ficino's reading of the ancient philosophers and the Christian authorities. In the course of writing them, Montaigne came to terms with Renaissance irrationality and Renaissance magic, and with widespread claims to inspiration.

The *Essays* do not treat such matters systematically. The pleasure to be found in them depends partly on their apparent lack of order – a feature sometimes artistically contrived but also attributable to the various layers of text with which the reader is confronted. Montaigne may return to the same topic in widely different places or, more confusingly, on the same page at widely different dates. That is because the *Essays* are not a work expounding an established doctrine; they lead us along the criss-cross paths of a journey of discovery. Montaigne set out to discover himself. What he discovered was the human race. He came to see that local labourers dying of the plague were a match for the Roman Stoics; that Socrates, Seneca or Cato may be better than we are, but are not different in kind; that Socrates,

Plato or anybody else may teach us something as men, but nothing at all infallibly, so that we must not take them for God's mouthpiece. If we are to find infallible guidance, we have to turn away from Man to God or his Church.

In this book I have tried not to impose an order or system on Montaigne, but to tease out these ideas in a way that will, I hope, make Montaigne more widely enjoyable, as well as more understandable. The *Essays* are cited in English. So are all other works. An appendix gives a concordance of references to the original texts in modern editions.

Whenever it helps to do so, I have followed the standard practice of indicating the main layers of Montaigne's text by means of (A), (B) and (C). What comes after (A) represents the text of the earliest editions – those before 1587 and mainly, in fact, the text of 1580 and 1582. What comes after (B) is the text of 1588, which was Montaigne's first major revision and expansion of his existing chapters as well as the whole of Book III, newly conceived. Everything after (C) derives mainly from the manuscript notes and variants written by Montaigne for the printer in the copy of his works which he was preparing for the press when he died. Partly in the interest of simplicity, other variants are not given, fascinating though they are. In all cases the translations are based on the *Edition Municipale*.

I am most grateful to the Provost of University College London who, despite the current economies, found means of granting me a term's paid leave, thus enabling me to spend nearly four months (September to December 1981) at All Souls College, Oxford, where I was a visiting fellow and where this book was mainly written. These months form a period of pure delight, of uninterrupted reading and writing in the best of company, in that most delightful of libraries, the Codrington. To the Warden and Fellows I owe a debt which I can scarcely begin to repay.

Many people have helped me, not least those students who have discussed Montaigne with me in tutorial and seminar. As always, D.P. Walker and the other members of the annual University College London Renaissance Colloquy (now well into its second decade) have provided help, advice, stimulus and challenge. A special word of thanks is due to Mrs Ruth Calder who collaborates closely with me in the teaching of the Renaissance. Another is due to the scholarship of my wife, Anne

Reeve, who works so selflessly as my research assistant. The last is due to Mrs Pamela King, who can type with speed, accuracy and intelligence from the most daunting of manuscripts.[1]

University College London, 1982 M.A.S.

Preface to the new edition

Montaigne and Melancholy was given a warm reception when it first appeared. It has stood the test of time. A handful of slips and misprints have been corrected for this new edition. The Concordance at the end has been expanded to include references to my translation of the *Essays*.[2]

Meanwhile an exciting discovery has been made. The most quoted poem in the *Essays* is *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, the Roman poet who thought like a Greek. Montaigne's own copy has turned up in England covered with his copious notes. They have now been studied and transcribed.[3] Lucretius is a major source of our knowledge of Epicureanism. He was convinced that the senses form our only gateway to knowledge. He loathed superstition – and all the religions he knew were superstitions for him. His outlook was intuitively akin to that of many a nineteenth-century natural scientist. He was also a very great poet. Montaigne's first copious notes – in Latin – were made before 16 October 1564. Many more, in French, were added later. Montaigne's learned leisure in retirement brought to a head his attack of melancholy. Did long studying of Lucretius contribute to the build up of that melancholy humour? Probably. It certainly influenced his life.

Montaigne's *Lucretius* helps to deepen our appreciation of his masterpiece. Nothing in it entails any modification to the themes of this book.

Wolfson College, Oxford M.A.S.
The Feast of Lancelot Andrewes, 1999

[1] This book has been so written that the footnotes can be entirely ignored by those who do not want to go into technicalities.

[2] The hardback edition is published by Allen Lane, the Penguin Press; the paperback edition by the Penguin Classics. The pagination is the same for both.

[3] M.A.S., *Montaigne's Annotated Copy of Lucretius. A transcription and study of the manuscript, notes and pen-marks. With a Foreword by Gilbert de Botton.* Droz, Geneva, 1998.

CHAPTER ONE

Originality

1. Curiosity

Montaigne was a man of rare originality – the kind of man who, if he had been a professional philosopher, could have turned the philosophy schools upside down. He stands astride the gap separating Rabelais and Shakespeare, but, while Rabelais and Shakespeare partly share a common view of the universe now long discarded, he seems to inhabit a world whose intellectual assumptions are close to our own. Indeed the way Montaigne thought has profoundly influenced ways of thinking right up to the present – both directly and through thinkers as diverse as Pascal and Francis Bacon. But this very 'modernity' can be misleading: for all his originality, Montaigne was very much a man of his time.

Montaigne's family was noble, though not venerably so. He was a Macmillan among Douglas Homes. As Michel Eyquem he was born on the family estates at Montaigne near Bordeaux on 28 February 1533. Rabelais was then probably in his fifties, with *Pantagruel* published and *Gargantua* on the stocks. Michel Eyquem, sieur de Montaigne, died – still at Montaigne – on 13 September 1592, some five months before his sixtieth birthday; the youthful Shakespeare then had nearly all his plays still to write. Rabelais's *Chronicles*, like Shakespeare's plays, mirroring the convictions of many of the best thinkers of their age, found room for witches with real powers, for enigmatic prophecies, for portents, for impressive magic, good or bad, for spirits and daemons who guided wise men, for inspired charismatic fools, for a constant overlapping of the human, the superhuman and the

divine. At one extreme man might rise above humanity to angelic heights; at the other, he might open the way to the devil or sink below humanity to the level of the beast. Neither Rabelais nor Shakespeare sensed the natural limits of humanity as sharply as Montaigne came to do. In the end Montaigne discarded absolutely the notion that natural man, in his wisdom, can or should aspire to rise above humanity. On the other hand there is no room in Montaigne for naturally brutish Calibans, or for Othello's

> ... Cannibals that each other eat,
> The Anthropophagi and men whose heads
> Do grow beneath their shoulders.

Montaigne, especially when it suited him in a sceptical mood, was prepared to put other people's credulity to good use. This is particularly true of his delightfully paradoxical 'Apologia for Raimond Sebond'. Pliny and Herodotus were notoriously gullible; Montaigne cited them – 'if you will believe them' – for tall stories (which even Pliny doubted) about 'species of men in some places which have very little similarity to our own', and for 'half-breed, ambiguous forms between human nature and beasts' (II. 12, p.259). In fact the world as Montaigne conceived it contained no strange savages remotely like that. On the contrary, he came to insist on the unity of the species 'Man', and on the 'humanity' of every single human creature.

Montaigne took little on trust, whether in book, legend or traveller's tale. He wanted to find things out for himself. He would visit men and women with strange deformities; he did not find them to be 'monsters' – miraculously 'demonstrative' signs from God, that is – but human beings of interest to doctors (not soothsayers) and within the infinitely varied orders of creation, even if they did seem to have something wrong with them. He went to see self-confessed witches in their prison-cells and found them to be silly old women, deluded but not diabolical; it was more likely, he thought, that an old woman should be mad, than that she should be able to ride about on a broomstick (III. 11, p. 316). In the same spirit he was not put off by the horror evoked by the name of Cannibal. Many thought of these creatures (whom Cardano for example dubbed the 'Anthropophagi, whom we now call Cannibals') as uncouth, barely human savages who

farmed children for food on slave-women. (They were, Cardano thought, rather like Scottish highlanders.) Montaigne did not accept such notions. He did his best to find out what Cannibals were really like by reading and inquiry. (As for Scotsmen, he had been taught by one of the best of their humanists, George Buchanan.) Montaigne found that Cannibals were not sub-human beasts, wallowing in the forbidden delights of human flesh; they were warriors performing a liturgy of ritual vengeance – an act humanly understandable and far less bestial than French cruelties in the Wars of Religion or Spanish barbarity in the New World. He was more inclined to idealise the savages than to condemn them. He saw Cannibals as men and women closer than moderns were to the simple goodness of the Golden Age of the poets. Give Montaigne the chance to question through an interpreter a couple of Cannibals brought to France from the Americas, and he soon has them showing the beauty of their poetry – and making criticisms of the French monarchy so devastating that Gallic insularity was reduced to impotent sneers: 'Not bad; but they don't wear breeches' ...

2. Doubt

Montaigne throve on doubt, on uncertainty, on an endless search for truth. He was not alone in his grasp of scepticism as an intellectual tool; scepticism was in vogue among Roman Catholics as a defence against Protestants who sought to subvert them with arguments they could not answer. In such cases, the only safe reaction was to demolish reason and scholarship entirely – both theirs and yours, while clinging, by faith, to the Church alone. Christian scepticism was Catholic scepticism.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries experienced assault after assault on inherited certainties – assaults from classical literature made widely available; from Church Fathers edited and translated; from original texts of the Scriptures, translated, glossed and preached upon; from rival schools and methodologies within every university discipline, not least philosophy; from New Worlds discovered and from the Old Worlds of China and Japan, with all the troubling impact of their venerable cultures based on premises other than those of Jerusalem, Athens and Rome.

Montaigne was not a pure sceptic – he found too much to

admire in Stoicism and Epicureanism for that – but he also found scepticism a good prop to his faith in the Old Religion as taught by 'the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church'. He also found scepticism a stimulus. He delighted in the ancient sceptical authors – in Sextus Empiricus (whose writings had finally been printed and translated in the 1560s), in that most sceptical of Biblical works, Ecclesiastes, and in Cicero's *Academics*. He also knew the moderns – Pico della Mirandola, for example, and Cornelius Agrippa; he borrowed much from Agrippa's declamation *On the Vanity of all learning and on the Excellence of God's Word* when developing his 'Apologia for Raimond Sebond' – the chapter which gives full scope to his Catholic scepticism (II. 12).

Montaigne was a hard man to convince. He found no ultimate certainty in any branch of human inquiry. If scholars claimed to base their certainties on natural reason, Montaigne emphasised his mistrust of all human reason when working by itself, without the guidance of divine grace. Even Copernicus's theory did not impress him over much: somebody would eventually come along with another one. As, of course, they did: the stately circular motion of Copernicus's planets was soon to be superseded by Kepler's discoveries.

Claims to human knowledge based on *experience* – experience and experiment, that is – he found just as uncertain as those based on reason; if anywhere, experience should be on its own dunghill in medicine, and yet doctors disagreed about the simplest matters. Experience was evoked as 'the Certain Master in uncertain things'. Not, however, by Montaigne. Man is finite, truth is infinite; so our experience will always fall short. We can never know enough to talk of certainty, solidly based, about any subject whatever – unless, that is, we can enjoy revelation. In most matters Montaigne was sure that we cannot.

3. The good life

In terms of Renaissance science he was of course right. Schoolchildren nowadays see the error of much of what was then taught as fact. But Montaigne had wider ambitions than simply to demolish the pretentions of the doctors and natural scientists of his day. His main concern was with ethics. He wanted to find out, by human inquiry, how he should live and how he should

die. The Church supplied the answers in her own terms. Montaigne, especially after the Roman censors gave a friendly jog to his arm, protested his complete acceptance of her conclusions and then – in the *Essays* – set them firmly aside, to be brought in when solutions were sought, not at the outset or when he was enjoying the chase. He acknowledged his Church's right to censor, but he also asserted that Theology (with a capital T) best kept her dignity by remaining apart from the mere humanities. As a humanist he enjoyed seeking after truth, even though truth, by human means alone, can seldom if ever be found within this life. Such an attitude strikes some as insincere, as though Montaigne were writing tongue-in-cheek. But Montaigne, in one respect, shared something with those university Aristotelians who were called Nominalists. They, like him, maintained that human inquiries and Theology were better kept apart for their mutual good. Then Theology could display her truths and have them accepted on the Church's impregnable authority, while human inquiry proceeded to explore doubtless lesser truths in humbler and more tentative ways. Of course, such a claim opens the way to cynical lip-service to one sort of truth and a real concern with the other. That is not, however, the essence of this claim.

Aristotle lies behind some of Montaigne's most novel conclusions, for Montaigne was original but not timeless. He thought mainly with the tools of inquiry which Renaissance philosophy gave him.

The scepticism is obvious enough to anyone who reads the *Essays*. Following a long tradition, stemming from Plato, Montaigne used the word 'opinion' mainly for convictions resting on grounds insufficient to establish them with certainty. Opinion (*doxa*) was typical of the limited wisdom and knowledge of mankind lodged in a sublunary world of change, decay, disintegration and coming-into-being. To find certainty – not mere opinion – one needed to have access to permanent, stable truths which are not subject to the flux of the world and of humankind. Claims of mere men to have access to such unchanging truths were more and more distrusted by Montaigne. He contrasted particularly sharply human opinion on matters of religion – the opinions, say, of even the wisest and most pious pagans – with the shining certainties of divine revelation vouched for by the Church. There is no room for

opinion within Christian truth; there is room for little else within all the human disciplines put together.

4. The self

Of Montaigne's originalities none was greater than his decision to write about himself, to make himself the central subject of a constantly expanding book. The idea did not come to him all at once. Originally the *Essays* were conceived on a much more modest scale. At first he was content to write down his reactions to particular pieces of conventional wisdom or controverted assertions. Soon he was so disturbed by strange fancies that he decided to write them down too. Later, he thought he would leave behind a portrait of himself in words for his family to remember him by. (Self-portraiture was a feature of some Renaissance painters: Montaigne was probably influenced by their example.) His last step was to believe that by studying himself he could find out what the nature of mankind really was and so how he, or anyone else, should wisely live and wisely die, in accordance with Nature's leadership alone.[1]

Montaigne's decision to write about himself merits not only the approval implied by the word 'original' in English but the oddness implied by '*original*' in French. Nobody in Western culture had ever done what Montaigne set out to do. A thousand years earlier, it is true, Augustine had given a partial portrait of himself in his *Confessions*, but the Renaissance placed that work far below the *City of God*. Montaigne may not even have read it, though he certainly read the *City of God* and cites it. The *Confessions* lead from Manichaeism to Catholicism, and show the effects of original sin on fallen man. Montaigne was not exploring himself in that way. It was precisely natural man – fallen man no doubt – which interested him and which led him

[1] That the wise man follows the footsteps of Nature, the best of Guides, is a commonplace going back especially to Cicero but also to Seneca. There was no necessary opposition between the claims of Nature and those of God; for many Renaissance Christians, including Montaigne's beloved Etienne de la Boëtie, Nature was God's minister to whom were delegated general powers. Barthelemy Aneau includes an emblem to this effect in his *Picta Poësis* (Lyons, 1568, p. 59). The emblem asserts that 'Nature, the best of Guides, is to be followed' (*Natura optima dux sequenda*). Aneau explains that to struggle against Nature (*reluctari Naturae*) is to act like the foolish giants in the Greek fable and rashly to fight against God (*'et temerè pros Theon antimachein'*).

from a study of himself as man to a study of mankind as a whole.

Aesop had condemned self-love (*philautia*) as the prime source of human error. Self-love, so the Latins said, was blind. The authoritative commonplaces which conveyed these moral imperatives are given, with commentaries, in Erasmus's *Adagia* (1.6.85ff. – Rabelais drew upon many of them for the *Tiers Livre de Pantagruel*, making them even more widely known). Christians of all persuasions had made these ideas part of their own moral system, equating *philautia* with the Old Adam in man. To write about yourself without overwhelming cause was to stand condemned by towering and august authority, both ancient and modern. A few Renaissance authors were tentatively beginning to breach this interdict. Montaigne went far beyond them; yet there was nothing narcissistic about his study of himself. He came to believe that such a study provided him with the only effective way of assaying the worth of moral teachings or examples. The words or deeds of even Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Epaminondas, Cato, Seneca or Cicero are weighed against Montaigne – and Montaigne is weighed against them. He was a judge who prided himself on schooling his power of judgment, and who strove to be fair and to compensate for the blindness which self-love entails. A prerequisite of his work was truth. If self-love led him to flatter himself or devalue others, his enterprise would collapse like a pack of cards.

Montaigne felt the full force of the oddness of his undertaking. So did many of his contemporaries, including those who read him with fascination. That he persisted, and brought his *Essays* to a conclusion in a work which has delighted and instructed readers ever since, is proof of his emotional balance and of his sanity. Yet he feared that there was an element of madness in what he had taken on. Other men turning in upon themselves have indeed produced monsters, not manifest wisdom. The Rousseau of the *Rêveries*, for one. Yet Montaigne's *Essays* arose from wild *rêveries* too. There is, of course, a paradox in claiming to study yourself, and a danger in trying to do so. What part of you can conceivably stand apart and weigh you up dispassionately and fairly? Montaigne reduced tensions and avoided unbalanced judgments partly by refusing the temptations of naked introspection. To study himself he ceaselessly studied others, past and present – what they did, what they said, what they wrote, what they were like in repose, in crisis,

in death, and how their comportment when dying corresponded to their lives and doctrines. All this matter he 'brought home' to himself. He peopled his solitude, in the end, with something other than wild fantasies: with thoughts about himself in relation to all sorts and conditions of men. Rousseau came to believe that he was alone of his kind – overflowing with love, hated, yet impassable like God himself. Montaigne took the opposite road, which, he found, led him to think little of himself and to bring all men and women together, in their confusing variety, within the wide span of humankind and to laugh out of court anyone mad enough to draw comparisons between himself, a creature, and his Creator.

The conclusions seem so wise – and the winding paths of the *Essays* are so fascinating – that it is easy to forget that Montaigne had moments of great misgiving about what he was doing. His worries were not random or vague; they were quite specific. Indeed it was because of an association of ideas in which insanity played a part that Montaigne was led to write the *Essays*, a book 'consubstantial with himself'. These associated ideas derive from theories of melancholy and its effects.

CHAPTER TWO

Genius

1. The nature of genius

A Renaissance author setting out to question the received wisdom of his day had far from finished his task when he had demolished faith in reason and experience. What he had to tackle were revelatory ecstasies. From the outset ecstasies play a preponderant rôle in Christianity. Without ecstasy, Paul's teachings as an apostle have no authoritative foundation. Montaigne had to come to terms with religious ecstasy, and with many other kinds as well. Huge claims to infallible knowledge depended on their reality: no discipline taught in school or university was without its authorities, who were often venerated sages from remote antiquity. Many maintained that these authorities were inspired geniuses, specially gifted men to whom wisdom or knowledge had been unveiled during ecstasies. Genius, since Plato and especially Aristotle, was believed to be a privileged capacity for experiencing ecstasies and profiting by them.

All Christians affirmed the reality of the revelatory ecstasies of the Apostles – but, from the earliest times, disagreed about those claimed for pagans. In the mediaeval universities, Abelard and Roger Bacon taught that 'special illuminations' had been vouchsafed to Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, in order to bestow divine sanction on to their doctrines. Others such as St Bernard or Duns Scotus limited such claims or rejected them. The quarrels continue through the Renaissance; for Erasmus the great pagans are inspired forerunners of Christianity; for Rabelais, all true learning in all disciplines is 'manna from heaven'. That was a standard humanist doctrine.

This view of genius depends upon a theory of man's nature which was widely held, being accepted by doctors and lawyers with as much certainty as by philosophers and theologians. Man, it was thought, was composed of body and soul. The body tied man to the earth and made him akin to the beasts: the soul had affinities with the divine and linked him with the angels. Geniuses are the men or women whose souls at least partially detach themselves from the restraints and pollution of their bodies; while in this state they may be influenced by good spirits or glimpse divine Truth and Beauty. More sinister, such people can also be possessed by evil spirits. Or they may be mad.

Christianity came to limit spiritual possession to diabolical forces, though Platonic doctrines – which do not so limit them – proved very resilient; belief in good daemons was widespread during the Renaissance in the highest intellectual circles. More at home with traditional Christianity is the belief that the soul, once freed from the restraints of its body, catches glimpses of the divine; in specially privileged cases it may even become for a while 'one with God'. These ideas are Greek in origin. By New Testament times they had found their way into Latin and Jewish thought. With such modifications as orthodoxy required they became widely accepted by the Fathers of the Church. Christian mysticism depended upon these doctrines. By returning to the sources, Renaissance scholars gave them a new and vigorous life in almost every field of human activity.

Not all ecstasies were high, spiritual ones: the soul might strive to leave its body for many different reasons. Ecstasies of various sorts were a common experience. Drunkenness was a form of ecstasy; so was falling in love; so were sexual climaxes; so was bravery on the field of battle; so was scholarly devotion to selfless inquiries; so was poetic inspiration; so were the revelations which made Socrates, say, and Hippocrates the authorities they are; so too were several kinds of madness, which share some spiritual powers with genius itself. 'Ecstasy' covered them all.

2. Genius and melancholy

Most studies of the *Essays* bring out the stages on Montaigne's journey towards wisdom and self-discovery: his critical interest in the Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans; his wide reading of Latin literature – and of Greek in Latin or French translation; his passion for Latin poetry and for Plutarch's prose in Amyot's French; his unique friendship for Etienne de la Boëtie; his travels in Europe (especially Italy); the effect on his thought of the new horizons opened by the discovery of the East, the Antipodes and the Americas.

This book looks at the *Essays* from a different point of view. It goes back some thirty years to a day in the early 1950s when I was troubled by misrepresentations of the final pages of the *Essays*. These misrepresentations are still common. If they were minor it would not matter. As it is, they distort some of the most challenging pages of an attractive writer and thinker who delights undergraduates, in my experience, more than any other. As so often, the problem is one of context, and of the meanings of words and of the force of the allusions to authoritative commonplaces. Towards the end of the *Praise of Folly*, for example, Erasmus, enthusiastically championing a form of ecstasy all but indistinguishable from madness, alluded to I Corinthians 2:9: 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.' For a thousand years and more before Montaigne that verse of St Paul (partly because of its eventual source in Isaiah 64:4) was a standard commonplace to cite in ecstatic contexts. It remained so for centuries to come. Merely to allude to it was enough to evoke association with ecstasies, visions and revelations. Shakespeare could use it for complex jesting in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Bottom the weaver awakes from his dream:

> ... a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was ... The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was (Act 4, Scene 1).

By mangling this commonplace, Shakespeare made Bottom give an appropriately low degree to his popular, comic vision and ecstatic transport. Erasmus and Shakespeare could count on their public's recognising the force of their allusion. So too could Montaigne, who evoked I Corinthians 2:9 to telling effect in his apology for Sebond (see below, Chapter 18, n.1.). There are several such authoritative 'ecstatic' commonplaces in the *Essays*. Once they have been noted it becomes possible to approach

Montaigne with less erroneous conceptions in mind. Some of these texts, such as St Paul's 'desire to be loosened asunder and to be with Christ', help to cut through obstacles to an understanding of the cultural world within which Montaigne explores and expounds wisdom as well as the limits which he sets to his inquiries.

It has long been possible to read the *Essays* without even recognising this cultural world. When that is so a convenient way to begin to recover the lost context would be to read in succession the last few pages of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, a few chapters of Rabelais (*Tiers Livre*, 37; 44-45: *Quart Livre*, 55-56), the first dozen sonnets of Du Bellay's *Regrets* and the closing pages of the *Essays* themselves. Erasmus and Rabelais exemplify attitudes which Montaigne came to distrust outside strictly limited Christian subjects; both associate authentic revelations and rapture with Socrates and mad-seeming Platonic 'enthusiasm'. In Montaigne the same associations lead to negative conclusions. Nevertheless all share in the common language of Renaissance ecstasy, with analogous, interrelated terms appearing widely in French, English and Latin. Time has emptied most of them of their force. Some pose little difficulty once this fact is recognised – they include such French words as *ardeur*, *frénésie*, *furieux*, *ravissement*, *transport* and, of course, *extase* itself. Some of the most important phrases are easier to overlook; they include terms which show a man to be 'above' himself (*au-dessus de luy*), 'beyond' or 'beside' himself (*au-delà* or *hors de luy*). Verbs such as *ravir* and *s'eslancer* often have the sense of the soul's being plucked from its body or leaping outside it; so, almost always, does the adjective *vehement*, taken to mean 'bearing the mind away' or 'depriving of mind'; so does any suggestion that the soul wishes to 'part company' with its body (*se dissocier du corps*), to rise upwards from it (*s'eslever*) or to escape from it (*s'eschapper*). Increasingly Montaigne saw this as a desire to escape not simply from 'the body' but from *l'homme*, from 'Man' as such. Any suggestion of spiritual possession – including *enthousiasme* and Montaigne's pejorative *daemoneries* – also entails a theory of ecstasy. When the soul is deeply disturbed (*agitée*, *distraicte*, *estonnée* or *transye*) the ecstasy concerned was classed as a form of *admiration* (amazement) – a common yet often vitally important variety of trance or ecstatic confusion. All of these states overlapped various forms of madness caused by the maladjustment of soul and body: common terms for them are *folie*, *resverie*, *fureur* and *manie*.

3. Essays and assays

Montaigne did not write 'essays'. He wrote a volume called *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, and we call them his *Essays* for convenience. *De l'experience* is not an essay which happens to come at the end; it is the last chapter of the third and last book of the *Essais*. Each chapter contains numerous *essais*. *Essais* are the work of an apprentice: a craftsman has already produced his masterpiece, Montaigne's title claims that he has not. His wisdom is an 'apprenticed wisdom'. Not by accident, the last word in Book I is *apprentissage*.

As well as being apprentice-pieces, *essais* are 'assays' of Montaigne's character undertaken by himself. This gives a special double sense to the title of his book. The *Essais de Michel de Montaigne* are Michel de Montaigne's 'assays' of Michel de Montaigne's form of mind. They are assays, too, of his ideas and of those of the authors he read and of the people he met, judged against his own. He is like the smith in the Assay Office, testing the silver and gold, stamping a hallmark on the good and rejecting the counterfeit. The last word of Book II is, again, revealing: *diversité*.

Essays, in a modern sense, can be read in any order. They do not necessarily lead back to earlier ones or forward to later ones. Montaigne's chapters do. The last pages of the last chapter, *De l'experience*, form the climax of all three books. They are the end of a long quest.

The chapters of Montaigne's books are not assembled by date of composition. The order corresponds to a higher preoccupation. In none of the hundreds of modifications which Montaigne made to his text is the order of a chapter changed. The final pages are modified in the final version, but they remain the final pages. In them, the three books of the *Essays* gather up like a huge wave and break upon the reader in the last few paragraphs. To weaken their force is to falsify the work as a whole. For Montaigne, at the end of his quest, had come to terms with melancholy and ecstasy – and so with religion, life and death, and with his being as a man.

4. Ecstasy interiorised

Before Montaigne, generations had raged or laughed at the universities for teaching how to argue *pro et contra* – for and against any thesis imaginable – but not teaching wisdom. When Montaigne cast his earliest writings for the *Essays* in the *pro et contra* mould he was following suit, showing how easy it was to be wise after any event. But he was soon led – by his natural bent, it seems – to a much more personal mode of writing. The temple at Delphi in Ancient Greece bore commandments which had been divinely revealed, the most famous of which was *Know Thyself*; Socrates strove to know himself. He was judged to be the wisest of men by the Oracle because he knew one thing only: that he knew nothing at all. Socrates is one of Montaigne's principal models.

Today many of the great figures of the past have been belittled and brought low. The tendency was not unknown in Montaigne's time, but in those days it was still an awesome task to emulate Socrates. Montaigne was confronted with a Socrates whom many had made a companion of the saints and patriarchs. For Erasmus Socrates was an inspired prefiguration of Christ; for Rabelais he was a figure entrusted with divinely revealed wisdom. Plato, the disciple of Socrates, was regularly called divine, like his master. Aristotle might be either divine or daemonic (a term which claimed spiritual enlightenment for him, but not the very special revelation claimed for Plato and for Socrates). These philosophers could be surpassed by the Christian revelation (which in any case they had helped to form), but by little else. As time went by, Montaigne rejected such ideas: Plato was great – but with 'human greatness only'. Socrates too came under criticism for just those aspects of his life which some accounted superhuman or divine. Montaigne had no time for the fashionable debunking of ancient heroes; he believed the ancients to have been better than the degenerate men of his own day in an ageing world. But the raising of Socrates or Plato to divine or saintly heights ranged them above the bounds of common humanity. Mankind had its limits. They, like all pagans, were firmly within them. A few, very few, Christian mystics might escape in their ecstasies to greater heights and enjoy them constantly. Not so Socrates, Plato or any sage of the ancient world, nor many in the Christian: ecstasies they might have, but they were lesser ones, lay ones. And they exacted a price.

5. Montaigne's earlier writings

Before Montaigne published a word of the *Essays*, readers could have formed a picture of him as a very special man. In 1569 he published his French translation of the *Theologia naturalis* of the theologian we all call Raimond Sebond. Sebond was a Catalan, professing in fifteenth-century Toulouse; his book claims to establish Christian truths by natural reason and the world of nature, without calling on Scripture or revelation. (Sebond was strongly influenced by Raymond Lull's theology, it seems). Montaigne translated the *Theologia naturalis* for his father, who had heard of it as an antidote to Lutheranism; the translation shows sophisticated theological awareness. Montaigne's preface as translator hints at some of his later themes, including his mistrust of 'words and language, a merchandise so vulgar and vile that the more a man has the less he is probably worth'.

Montaigne consistently contrasted words with actions (*effets*) and things. His main criticism of universities was that they were 'yap-shops' (*escoles de la parlerie*). His preference for action over words needs no comment, but his contrast between words and things may.

The Renaissance continued the old debate which went back to Plato: are words the mirror of things, or are they simply labels stuck on to objects and concepts by an act of arbitrary will? Extreme Platonists could hold that one of the ways of getting to know objects or concepts was to study words and their etymologies. There is little of that in Montaigne, though plenty in Rabelais. In the *Essays*, Plutarch, the fluent Greek, is cited as feeling the concrete reality behind Latin words, but not in a fully Platonic sense. For Montaigne, words are a *pis aller*. As for French, it changed rapidly all the time. How could stable truth be held in such leaky vessels? Right to the end Montaigne distrusted words. Yet they were all he had.

The year after the appearance of Montaigne's version of Sebond came his preface to an edition of La Boëtie's French version of Plutarch's *Consolation to his wife* – a tender piece of writing addressed by Montaigne to his own wife who had just lost

a child. Such a production was rare in the French Renaissance, when wives were kept in the background. But Montaigne classed both La Boëtie and his own wife as *amis*. 'Friendship' will never do as a translation of Renaissance *amitié*: *amitié*, like the Greek *philia*, is a term embracing love of friends, parents, children, wives. Within *amitié*, the soul (the *âme*) was thought to dominate. Montaigne, a hater of novelty – 'which in truth has cost our wretched country so dear' – hankered after the good old days when man not only took a wife but married her. La Boëtie had asked Montaigne to share his work with those he loved – with his *amis*. 'I believe I have none', he wrote to his wife, 'more intimate than you.'

Metaphors based upon married love which only death can sever are vital to Montaigne's mature thoughts.

The dedication of his edition of La Boëtie's version of Plutarch's *Matrimonial precepts* is interesting too. It is addressed to Monsieur de Mesmes, to whom Henry Estienne had dedicated his Latin translation of the *Hypotyposes of Pyrrho* in 1562.

This book of Sextus Empiricus was unknown to the Latin middle ages. For the Renaissance it was the most influential work of scepticism inherited from ancient Greece. In writing to Monsieur de Mesmes it may seem tactless of Montaigne to have dismissed as 'follies' man's ingenuity in shaking received opinions which bring comfort. But Renaissance scepticism was an ally of tradition. It destroyed the validity of arguments for change, throwing man back on to traditional virtue and faith. To clever reason, used destructively, Montaigne preferred childish trust and the guidance of Truth personified:

> Not without good reason, childhood and simplicity have been highly commended by Truth himself.

La Verité mesmes is Christ. Of his triple claim to be the way, the truth and the life, Montaigne was most concerned with the second. Christ, not as man but as Truth, placed children in their simplicity above all the wisdom of the world. In the Renaissance this old doctrine took on a new urgency as it merged into the theme that Christianity is a certain kind of folly and Christians are a particular kind of holy fool. This folly of the Gospel is Erasmus' theme in the *Praise of Folly*. Montaigne read it also in

Cornelius Agrippa. Rabelais expounded a version of it in the *Tiers Livre de Pantagruel*. To some extent Montaigne made it his own in his apologia for Sebond.

Christian folly was always connected, from the New Testament onwards, with madness, real or apparent; with men wrongly accused of being insane, – 'beside themselves' or diabolically possessed – and, above all, with ecstasies. A major form of Christian folly is to live 'outside oneself' in this world. Christian folly and insane folly often look alike. There is a madness about them both.

No critique of Renaissance quests for truth would be anything like complete without reflexions on the nature of ecstasy and rapture and their place in lay knowledge and wisdom, let alone in the Christian experience.

6. The hunt for wisdom

Montaigne enjoyed hunting truth as noblemen liked hunting game, and he used the language of the chase to describe the search. But, in the last resort, truth is not to be found in men. In all Montaigne's writings only one body is allowed to resolve disputed points: the Church. And, to the end, only one person is called the Truth.

Montaigne affects a gentlemanly disdain for midnight oil and long periods of study, but study he did. His syllabus was wide enough to last a lifetime. Soon after he retired to his estates and his library tower, he set about 'assaying his natural faculties':

> What I look for in books is pleasure from an honourable entertainment; if I do study I only look for knowledge of myself, teaching me to die and to live well (II.10, p.103).

Quite a syllabus! As an exercise of natural faculties it covers most of what would, then as now, be classed as ethics, as well as some of what would then have been classed as physics and metaphysics. Montaigne's territory is that of Plato and, increasingly, of Aristotle, as well as Plutarch and Pyrrho, of Seneca and Cicero – of all the ancient Greek and Latin authors who were avidly studied in the Christian schools and universities of the Renaissance for guidance on ethics and philosophy.

Such authors, working by the fitful light of natural reason,

could reach the conclusion that revelation was needed; they could even reach true conclusions about the essence of God. But they gave access to neither. Earlier generations were not so sure. Montaigne was adamant: to have access was a privilege, requiring God to intervene. Natural reason could get so far, but there was a threshold; from then on theology took over. And that was not Montaigne's domain. Ever since the conclusion of the Council of Trent (1564), Roman Catholics left theology to the professionals. It was no task for laymen. Montaigne was a moral philosopher who touched on the fringes of theology only when his subject required.

The Reformation had made the Bible dangerous reading for Roman Catholic laymen. Montaigne cites it rarely, mainly for purposes connected with natural reason, revelation and ecstasy. His biblical quotations are often loose, not rigidly textual. This was perhaps a deliberate affectation. Protestants argued about jots and tittles: Montaigne did not.

Similarly, his arguments for the truth of Roman Catholicism are those of natural reason: since truth should be the same everywhere, the variations of the Protestants must be wrong; the schismatic English must be wrong, too, since they change their church by act of Parliament; a strong human argument for the Christian religion is that Christ lived and was put to death under the rule of law. And so on. Christ is the Truth; he is also an example. When Montaigne argued from his example, it was from his humanity, not his divinity.

In the few cases where Christ is cited in the *Essays* as speaking directly he is treated as God incarnate: there is nothing to do but to hear and obey him – under the guidance of the Roman Catholic Church.

That applies to Montaigne's chapters on any religious theme such as repentance or the need to judge God's *ordonnances* with restrained sobriety. It was not Montaigne's right to speak as an Old Testament prophet or a professor of theology. It was even less his right to bandy arguments based on New Testament texts. That right was claimed by his armed Protestant opponents. For Montaigne Christ, *la Verité mesme*, entrusted such truths to nobody but his Church.

Montaigne's professions of submission to the Church carry conviction, but they do not prove anything. Nothing is easier to

counterfeit than devotion – as Montaigne says himself. But these professions are reinforced in the final version; the *Essays* make good sense if they mean what they say. Some want Montaigne to convince them of his sincerity, but that can never be demanded of Montaigne or of anyone who ever lived.

Montaigne is prepared to doubt everything in his Roman Catholic layman's search for ethical truth and self-knowledge. He likens himself to the schoolmen who try out 'disputable opinions' in debate. He can be as bold as he likes: the resolution of such topics is reserved to his Church alone. But theologians can be wrong, especially about matters outside their field of revelation. Much that man seeks to know he will never know in this world.

Montaigne's *Essays* are the account of a hunt – a well-read layman's hunt for self-knowledge and for ethical guidance on how to live and how to bear that painful separation of body and soul which is death. *Quiconques meurt, meurt à douleur*, 'Whoever dies, dies in pain': Villon's line held a ghastly truth. Death in Montaigne means the act of dying. He treats it as a layman, not a priest. The after-life is not within his territory of how to live and die aright.

In the course of his happy hunting, Montaigne gaily shook many of the foundations of what had long passed for wisdom and certainty. Is that what makes him seem so modern? But the errors he had to meet head on were those of the Renaissance, and they were enough in all conscience. France was torn by religious wars; fallible men interpreted infallible books; fallible men squabbled within and without an infallible Church; new quarrels split the universities without driving out the old. Everywhere one was met by claims to infallibility or special status: by a divine Socrates, a divine Plato, an inspired Aristotle, an Hippocrates who could not err; by prognostications, portents, visions, revelations, ecstasies.

A man with melancholy in his complexion must have been tempted to join the band and stake a claim to be inspired. His humour was one which might tempt him to seek revelations and ecstasies rather than to look at them critically. Montaigne was brought to be critical by his very melancholy. How that happened is a constant thread which I have pursued throughout this book.

7. Wider doubt

Montaigne ousted ecstasy, rapture and revelation from the privileged places they had occupied in philosophy, the natural sciences and the humanities as ultimate guarantees of certainty. That led to a vast widening of the sea of doubt. Not one single ancient classical writer retained final authority in any matter whatever. Men such as Montaigne's much admired Turnebus were discovering the classics in context, as pagans not as prophetic proto-Christians.

Rabelais had been unable to recognise the validity of criticism of Hippocrates or Galen, even when based on recent anatomical dissections. Now, as Montaigne delighted to show, the art of medicine was in disarray as never before.

For Montaigne all the disciplines, however venerable, are based on human reason, human judgment, human authority. None have sure foundations; all are open to doubt and questioning. They are matters of opinion, of possible facts to be accepted tentatively. There are no criteria for judging some things to be natural and others miraculous; mankind does not know the limits set to nature.

Montaigne was born with a mind made for doubt. He throve on doubt. The Greek Sceptics strengthened this cast of mind but do not explain it away. It was their arguments and his native temperament which, together, led to his stripping Plato, Socrates and others of the divine sanction claimed for them because of their ecstasies. Once that was done, Platonic teaching could no longer vouch infallibly for the spiritual realities.

By humanising Socrates and Plato Montaigne did not bring them into contempt. But he did bring them down to the same level as other great men. If Socrates is preferred at times to Aristotle it is not for what he said but for what he was. Students of Aristotle were making similar points: a good example is the Jesuit Pedro Fonseca in his *Commentaries on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (1559, I, col. 10ff.).

Montaigne had no respect for the average product of the philosophy schools in the universities. He oversimplified the issues, mocking graduates who merely recite chunks of undigested Aristotle. But he himself could not manage without Aristotle – nor, to some extent at least, without the commentators. Perhaps it was Aristotle who helped him to

distinguish uncertain opinion from certain knowledge (*epistēmē*; *scientia*), though the *locus classicus* for this is Plato in the *Timaeus*.

Montaigne came to wonder whether man ever acquired knowledge at all. He eventually placed most that passed for knowledge in the category of opinion. Much was simply wrong. Moreover 'almost all the opinions we do have are held on authority or on trust' (III. 12, p. 322, first sentence).

Montaigne was not prepared to be impressed by either. For example, his view of medicine was even lower than Molière's. Pedro Fonseca considered that Hippocrates, 'the founder of medicine', was 'a great philosopher', with 'philosophical truths hidden in nearly every word'; his doctrines are so unshakeable and definitive that 'for nearly two thousand years he has never been proved wrong in any but trivial matters, and cannot be accused of error'.

Such authority Montaigne simply overturned. Even the Socrates of Plato's dialogues was esteemed by most people, he thought, for the wrong reasons. Such a man would have few admirers if he lived and taught today.

From Montaigne's pen that was a challenge and a claim.

CHAPTER THREE

Montaigne's Melancholy

1. The earliest hints of melancholy

Aristotle and Cicero among the ancients, philosophers and authors of *chansons de geste* among the medievals, theologians, poets and moralists during the Renaissance, all saw friendship as something special. It was a virtue, potentially the highest form of the kind of love called *philia* by the Greeks or *amicitia* by the Romans. It bound men together at the highest level of their humanity. Centuries might go by without a single example of such friendship coming to light. Or so Montaigne thought.

The friendship of La Boëtie and Montaigne was one of those rarest kinds. Then, within six years, La Boëtie died (in August 1563). The effect on Montaigne was profound and lasting.

The death – from an illness which was 'somewhat contagious' – was ugly and distressing. La Boëtie, who was concerned for Montaigne's 'natural disposition', since the disease was 'unpleasant and melancholic', begged his friend not to stay at his bedside for more than short periods at a time.

Montaigne did as he was asked. That is the first hint that melancholy played a part in his character, or *naturel*. All versions of the *Essays* confirm it. Chapter Two of Book I is devoted to sadness (*tristesse*). Chapter Three explores the fact that our emotions may carry us *au-delà de nous*, 'beyond ourselves'. Both have links with melancholy as the Renaissance understood it.

In late medieval and Renaissance France *tristesse* was an aristocratic emotion, a sign of sensitivity and depth. Such delightful delicate sadness gradually merged into the more ambitious state of melancholy affected by many noble figures of

fact and fiction. Dürer captured the mood in his portrayal of Melancholia, as did Milton in *Il Penseroso*. Melancholy also shared much with *acedia*, the pensive sloth that afflicted contemplatives in monasteries.

Burton catches the feeling of this pensive melancholy. Melancholy is as 'Albertus Durer' paints her: 'like a sad woman leaning on her arm with fixed looks, neglected habits.' Some think her proud; others, half mad:

> ... and yet of a deep reach, excellent apprehension, judicious, wise, witty: for I am of that nobleman's mind: 'melancholy advanceth men's conceits more than any humour whatsoever' (*Anatomy of Melancholy* I. 3; 1,2; p. 392).

A man who imitated Melancholia's pose could hope to be admired for his intelligence (wit) and for the profundity of his mental concepts.

2. Fashionable melancholy and sanguine melancholy

Tristesse suggested noble sensitiveness; melancholy suggested genius – no wonder so many thought they were marked by it. No affectation was so widely cherished. Empty-headed men pretended to be stricken with it; at the other extreme characters as diverse as Hamlet and Alceste (Molière's *Misanthrope*) were cast in the mould of high melancholy.

Montaigne took care to distance himself from the affectation. In 1580 he used amusingly belittling terms for his melancholic humour; he was, he said, not so much a melancholic as an empty dreamer (*non melancholique, mais songecreux*). There is an edge to the word *songecreux*, the stage-name of the best comic actor of his youth, Jean du Pont-allais.

Montaigne also displays more than a hint of the same playful mock-modesty as led Cicero to affect to believe that his melancholy meant backwardness: 'Aristotle says that all geniuses are melancholic. That makes me less worried at being slow-witted' (*Tusculans* 1.33.80). Cicero is juggling with the fact that in Greek and Latin *melancholia* covered many states, ranging from genius to stupidity and madness. The Renaissance inherited all these senses, with a millennium and a half of thought and comment attached to them. When Montaigne (as

he often does) refers to himself as sluggish, heavy and slow, he is probably making the same sort of statement as Cicero – and emphasising his melancholy. As he wrote of his disposition in childhood: '(A) Beneath this (C) heavy (A) complexion I nourished bold imaginings and opinions above my age' (I. 26, p. 227).

When Montaigne eventually decided to make the *Essays* a book about himself, he was defying one of the basic taboos of all civilised society and one of the great interdicts of European culture. Lovers of self, blind to their own faults, were thought to be lynx-eyed for those of their neighbours. Montaigne took pains to show that he was not like that.

Quite the contrary. The first chapter in which he wrote about himself is devoted significantly to presumptuous vainglory. By dwelling on his shortcomings he quietly showed that he was not blinded by self-love. This lends an unbiassed air to much of what he has to say, including his account of his complexion (his physiological and psychological disposition). 'My face', he says, 'is not fat but full; my complexion is between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately sanguine and hot' (II. 17, p. 421). If Montaigne's complexion was *entre le jovial et le melancholique* he had reason to be pleased – all the more because it was *moiennement sanguine et chaude*.

A complexion such as Montaigne's was the sign of genius. His melancholy was not to be confounded with *tristesse* – that refined sadness paraded by men of fashion; at the very beginning of *De la tristesse* (II. 2) Montaigne asserted that he was 'among the most exempt from that passion'. In the margin of the edition he was preparing when he died, he explained himself more clearly: he neither liked *tristesse* nor esteemed it, though the fashionable world had decided 'to honour it with particular favour'. Men dress Wisdom, Virtue and Conscience in her garments. Such tawdry ornaments are silly and monstrous. The Italians are much wiser; they use *tristezza* to mean 'malignity', for it is a quality which is always harmful, always mad (*folle*). Since it is always cowardly and low, the Stoics forbid it to their Wise Men (I. 2, p. 9).

Montaigne realised that melancholy *tristesse* could be cultivated for the pleasure it gave. He touches on this in the chapter which asserts that none of our tastes are pure and

unalloyed (II. 20). In ancient times Metrodorus said that there is always a trace of pleasure in sadness; Montaigne was not sure that he understood what Metrodorus meant, but was convinced that in his own times people did indeed complacently cultivate melancholy, quite 'apart from ambition, which can also be mixed up with it'. For them it was like a dainty thing to eat. Some 'fed on melancholy'; in melancholy there is a 'shadow of *friandise*' (as though we were dealing with sweetmeats). 'Some complexions make it their only food.'

Montaigne wrote as though he knew the taste of such *friandises*. But his account of his complexion as one balanced between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately sanguine and moderately hot, is quite another matter. It takes us out of the world of fashionable affectation into the world of humanist erudition.

3. True melancholia

In medieval French *merencolie* was used for both fashionable *tristesse* and for serious mental illness. By the early sixteenth century these twin meanings were strongly reinforced. Throughout the century many theologians, philosophers, moralists, lawyers, doctors, poets and writers of all sorts were agreed on one essential, however much they might differ over details or implications: melancholy might lead to genius; it could also lead to many forms of madness.

Renaissance theories of melancholy reinforced the astrological aspect of traditional medicine. Terms such as saturnine, jovial, lunatic, solar or mercurial were given a new lease of life. Some played down or excluded the planetary influences, but even those who did so often used the same terminology.

Montaigne was inclined to question everything except the Church in her inspired counsels. Lay authority, however venerable, did not blunt the edge of his criticism; medical authority he laughed at; yet he never questioned the dominant theory of humours and complexions nor the place of melancholy within them. On the contrary, he explains his own personality in just such terms.

'Melancholy' was used in two distinct ways by Renaissance writers, as the name of an illness and of a temperament. As an illness it was, as in mediaeval times, used for particular kinds of

madness. As a temperament it was the subject of more comment than all the other temperaments put together.

Body and soul were believed to be affected, for better or worse, by the balance – or temperament – of the four primary humours found in the bloodstream. These primary humours were liquids: blood itself, phlegm, bile (or choler) and black-bile – *melancholia* in Greek, *atrabilia* in Latin. The ideal temperament would hold these four humours in exactly equal proportions. That never happens, in fact. When one humour predominates, a person is sanguine, phlegmatic, bilious (choleric) or melancholic. Two can dominate jointly, producing, for example, a temperament which is a sanguine modification of the melancholic.

The man of melancholy humour did not have to worry too much about melancholy madness, provided he remained within reasonable limits. There was little reason in theory why a melancholy temperament should lead to insane melancholy, but since the same adjective 'melancholy' was used for both, they seem always to have been associated in people's minds. In his authoritative discussion of the subject, the French royal physician André du Laurent dwelt at length on the dreadful manias, catalepsies and epilepsies classified as melancholic, but then reassured his patients and his readers: 'not all those whom we call melancholics' are troubled by 'pitiful afflictions'. Many remain within the 'bounds of health which, if we trust the ancients, embrace a not exiguous latitude' (*Opera therapeutica*, 1627, I. 3).

Trouble started when a complexion became dominated not by the melancholy humour as such but by 'burnt' melancholy. It is this burnt melancholy (called 'melancholy adust' – the adjective coming after the noun) which so troubled Burton that he leisurely explored the topic in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Burton's book remains the most fascinating account of melancholy adust in any language. He believed in it and was sure that he suffered from it.

Melancholy adust, despite its name, could be produced in the body by the burning of any of the four primary humours. While Greek medicine probably restricted it to the corruption of yellow bile, from Avicenna onwards any form of the four humours was held to produce it. Burnt melancholy itself produced melancholy adust, but so did burnt bile (choler), burnt phlegm or burnt

blood. No matter what a man's natural temperament might be, melancholy madness was always a possibility once the balance was upset, especially by the burning of his dominant humour. Many assumed that the melancholy humour was more likely to become adust than the other three; this made melancholics particularly inclined to be anxious about madness.

The old categories still linger on in English. We know more or less what to expect if someone is described as phlegmatic, bilious, choleric, sanguine or melancholic. The characteristics we associate with these terms derive from the old beliefs but are not identical with them. Du Laurent is a clear guide, so I follow him here, but he is one among many. Happily, to understand Montaigne's melancholy it is not necessary to go into great historical detail.

Phlegmatic people were thought to be lacking in feelings (*stupidi*), hesitant, backward, with the higher qualities of their souls sunk in torpor. They are useless for any task requiring judgment and nobility of mind. Such people ought to be 'banished to dining-rooms and kitchens'. Montaigne agreed. In the chapter devoted to education he wryly suggested that tutors should quietly strangle children who were incapable of higher interests. Even sons of dukes may best be made pastry-cooks (I. 26, p. 211). No one held out any real hope of changing humours for the better, but they could be modified.

Bilious or choleric people are subtle and quick but not profound. They are unfit for tasks requiring application.

Sanguine people delight in good companionship and friendship, in laughter and joking. They are ill-suited to graver matters and are easily distracted by their senses.

This leaves the melancholics, a category which embraces the best and the worst.

4. Melancholy: genius or madness?

Today the *Problems* are not the most widely read of Aristotle's works. Yet two or three pages of them have influenced the interpretation of human genius as much as anything ever written. Few doubted the book's authenticity: it was cited as genuine by Plutarch and Cicero, as Ludovicus Septalius points out in his commentary (Lyons, 1622, p. 348).

The *Problems* are divided into 38 short books, dealing with a

number of related questions. Book 30 treats matters concerned with thought, intelligence and wisdom. Aristotle was often tentative in his answers but not in the opening question: 'Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in philosophy, politics, poetry or the arts are melancholic?' The implications of his answer remained disturbing across the centuries; the certainty of his assumptions proved irresistible. Seneca alluded to it in the closing sentences of one of his most influential treatises devoted to praising peace of mind (*De tranquillitate animi* 17.10-12). Montaigne cites it.

Among the great melancholics Aristotle ranged 'Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and many other well-known men.' If you were a Renaissance melancholic you might hope to be classed with them. On the other hand, you might be a candidate for chains in Bedlam, since Aristotle took the vital step of explaining the genius of melancholics in terms of that Platonic madness (*mania*) which the Latins called *furor*. Such people were 'furious'.

5. The ecstasy and madness of melancholics

Montaigne drew on Aristotle's interpretation of genius and madness. He knew how Ficino had made this interpretation conform closely to what is conveniently called Renaissance Platonism. He examined such theories in several parts of the *Essays*. These doctrines are important for the understanding of Montaigne, partly because the *Essays* assume that the reader knows them; they are also important in that Montaigne's melancholy made him subject to the hopes and fears which Aristotle and Ficino raised.

Expressions such as 'to keep body and soul together' go back to a time when the reality of the soul and body as the two major divisions of man dominated thinking, in medicine as in law, in philosophy as in theology. The body and soul can be badly joined or loosely joined. The joints can be strained or come apart. Their final dissolution is death; their temporary severance or loosening can be madness (when due to illness), or ecstatic inspiration (when due to higher causes).

The philosopher who gave the highest place of all to the soul was Plato. For him it was immortal. Man dies: his soul does not.

The real man is his soul. In essentials a human being is a soul using a body destined to be discarded. The true philosopher partly discards it already in this life.

Christianity eventually rejected that doctrine; it teaches instead that the soul of man, immortal as created by God, will be reunited with its body at the general resurrection. Nevertheless the influence of Platonic asceticism on Christianity was immense, leading at times to a Platonising suspicion of the body which came close to supplanting orthodoxy. That is true of some of the fathers of the Church. It is truer still of many Renaissance humanists, who often write as if Christianity were primarily concerned with a Greek belief in the soul's immortality rather than with that resurrection of the dead which dominates the New Testament.

Plato taught that the soul is not at home in the body. It belongs to heaven. It is in the body as a punishment. It yearns to return to heaven and, in the case of lovers of wisdom, strives to do so. These teachings, especially as expounded in two dialogues, the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, underlie much classical and post-classical mysticism. Suitably adapted, they entered into the heart of Christian mysticism. During the Renaissance some, such as Ficino, can seem more Platonist than Christian. Others, like Erasmus, were Platonising Christians, probably without ceasing to be orthodox.

Plato asserted that the soul existed before it was born into this world. Belief in the pre-existence of the soul became incompatible with Christian orthodoxy about the time of Augustine and was largely dropped, at least in theory. As battles against heretics such as the ecstatic Montanists were waged by the Catholics in the second century, Plato's belief that the souls of the prophets were driven from their bodies by *daemons* – angelic spirits who possessed them – was also modified, but not abandoned. There is hardly a hint of the immortality of the soul in most books of the New Testament. The gap was filled with later works, sometimes innocently antedated. But already in New Testament times a Jewish philosopher like Philo of Alexandria was Platonising Judaism. Platonic influences can be found in St Paul; more can be read into him.

Platonic beliefs remain closely interwoven into the Christian theology of the Renaissance. One such belief is that Christian philosophers, no less than ancient Platonists, practise dying.

The chapter entitled *Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir* (I.20) starts off with a reference to this philosophical 'dying', taken from Plato through Cicero. Death is the separation of body and soul. Philosophers train their souls to die – to leave, that is, their bodies, so far as they are able – in order to contemplate divine truth and beauty. This detachment from the body is made possible by the soul's kinship with the changeless world of heaven (*Phaedo* 80A-81A). The Greek fathers of the Church used such terms; the Latin fathers did too, following Jerome (PL XXII, 598). Christian mystics followed suit; such ideas were championed by some of the most influential thinkers of the Renaissance. When the soul leaves the body – or strives to do so – there is ecstasy or rapture. Rapture, strictly speaking, is an ecstasy in which the soul is caught away to God, but Montaigne and others use *ravissement* for any ecstasy, even for one brought on by natural causes.

Plato's teaching in the *Phaedo* about soul-departing philosophy became closely linked with similar doctrines in the *Phaedrus* about good and bad madness. Since wisdom is a good, men might conclude that insanity (*mania*) is bad, but Socrates denied that this was so. Plain insanity attributable to illness is, of course, bad. But lovers are insane too, so are philosophers, prophets, poets. They are insane in that their souls are all striving to leave their bodies. In the case of lovers their souls yearn to merge with the beloved; in the case of philosophers their souls yearn to soar aloft towards divine Truth and Beauty; in the case of prophets and seers their souls are taken over or driven out by spirits. These notions are not simply metaphorical.

Platonic ideas of inspiration found room for spiritual possession, posing problems for Christians who wished to follow the example of Plato or Socrates. Sibyls were possessed; so were poets and seers; so was Plato, so was Socrates. Spirits (daemons) took over a person so that he might not even know what he said or did. Christians rejected this in the case of good daemons, who do not obliterate anyone's responsibility for what he says or does. Evil daemons (devils) do.

When, for whatever reason, the soul was leaving the body or striving to do so, the person concerned was said to be 'beside himself', 'furious' or 'outside himself'. One reason why Renaissance Christianity found it easy to accept the Platonic linking of melancholy with ecstatic madness was that Aristotle

(or Pseudo-Aristotle) had done so. For centuries before Montaigne philosophy was in a sense a commentary on Aristotle. In some matters of great importance, Aristotle rejected the teachings of Plato, but not where melancholy madness was concerned.

Aristotle adopted the Platonic doctrine of ecstatic possession to explain the genius he attributed to melancholics. A genius may be mad in a good sense, in that his soul is striving to leave his body in order to rise to a higher order of things. In addition he may be mad because of inspiration or enthusiasm – caused by the prompting of the good daemon who strives to possess him. Melancholy made a man or woman especially open to both.

The fusion of Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines with Renaissance Platonism was made by Ficino in his interpretation of *Problems* 30. 1: a philosopher is a man who seeks truth and beauty where they exist in stable permanence. Nothing in this sublunary world is stable or permanent; such beauty as there is is a reflection of beauty as it exists in the mind of God. So too for truth. These doctrines encourage philosophers and artists to seek ideal truth and beauty in ecstatic revelations or from spiritual inspiration. A philosopher, artist or prophet will detach his 'soul', 'spirit' or 'mind' from his body and send it winging its way aloft to the realm of permanence in the mind of God. When he cannot actually do so, he will strive to do so. Great lovers, as a step on the way to this, will have souls which leap ecstatically toward union with the beloved so as to 'live in him'.

For those who accepted their authority, the sources of these ideas made it impossible to separate melancholy genius from madness. In the *Problems*, the first example that Aristotle gave of an outstanding melancholic was Hercules (Heracles) and his 'sacred disease' (epilepsy, considered to be a case of spiritual possession). Aristotle mentioned Hercules' 'insane frenzy towards his children'; linked this frenzy with Ajax 'who went completely mad' and then recalled the case of Bellerophon who craved for solitude in places where no men were. Without a break he went on to 'Empedocles, Plato, Socrates and others', as examples of geniuses associated with melancholy frenzies.

Aristotle explained these frenzies and inspired madnesses by analogy with men drunk with wine. This was a classical commonplace; it became a Stoic one, then a Christian one. Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Gregory of Nyssa, Erasmus or

Montaigne pass just as easily as Rabelais does from questions of drink to questions of ecstasy and melancholy madness.

Melancholics, like men inflamed with wine, may become variously 'maniacs, clever, amorous or talkative'. The melancholy humour may become heated. When this heating occurs near the seat of the mind, men become 'madmen or enthusiasts'; when their condition is not caused by illness or disease, they are the seers, prophets and *entheoi* – men like Socrates, inspired by a 'god within' (Aristotle, 954a).

These Greek ideas were transmitted to the Renaissance partly in the original but mainly through Latin translations. Montaigne used the Latin rather than the Greek. Both languages employ words which carry their own associations. In Aristotle, Heracles betrayed his melancholy 'by his *ekstasis* (frenzy) towards his children'; such melancholics are *manikoi* (madmen) or *enthousiastikoi* (men possessed and inspired). These terms require the reader to associate melancholy with madness, manias, inspirational revelations and ecstasies (Aristotle, 953a-954a).

The keyword is the *ekstasis* of the original, as that enabled Aristotle's view of melancholy genius to be associated with the Latin terms used to translate it, especially with *furor*, a word which had many meanings, including most of the forms of Platonic mania and embracing the fury of the man who is mad with anger, the frantic bravery of the warrior and the distracted inspiration of seer or poet. Latin versions of the *Problems* do not underplay the madness. For the *ekstasis* of Heracles, Theodore Gaza used 'mental disturbance' (*motio mentis*) and Ludovicus Septalius a stronger variant, *commotio mentis*. Where Aristotle wrote of *entheoi* (persons with a 'god within'), Gaza wrote of 'people who are believed to be goaded on by a divine in-breathing' (*divino spiraculo*), and Septalius, more classically, wrote of *numine afflati*, people 'breathed on by the godhead'.[1]

[1] The relevant section of *Problems* 30.1 (in Latin forms in which it was widely known) is given in Appendix B. For the extent to which Plato and Aristotle were taken as being in agreement over the necessary association of genius with melancholy 'madness', see for example, the authorities gathered together by Valleriola in his *Enarrationes medicinales*, Lyons, 1554, Book 6. *Enarratio* 10 is largely devoted to discussing Aristotle's assertion in *Problems* 30-1, and the nature of both melancholy and genius. On p. 428 the 'divine Plato in the *Theaetetus*' is given priority over Aristotle for having recognised that 'most geniuses are violently stimulated and mad' ('*ingeniosos concitatos, furiososque esse solere*'). Democritus reached the same conclusion, asserting that 'there are no great men apart from those who have been excited by a form of madness (*furor*)'. This is linked to Socrates' teaching about inspired madness in the *Phaedrus* and discussed in relationship to Galen's largely incompatible opinions. Valleriola knew Ficino's writings and admired them but, like Montaigne, was not prepared to accept that most geniuses were inspired by divine or angelic spirits who drove them to fits of good, creative melancholy madness, raising them above the level of ordinary humanity. Where melancholy is concerned Valleriola is only one author among many, but he is a good one to read for background to Montaigne's attitudes towards the subjects under discussion in this book.

These ecstasies may arrive unbidden. Philosophers may encourage them by practising dying; yet even great melancholics may topple over from good ecstasies into genuine insanity – not merely into the high madness of poetic *furor* affected by the poets of the Pléiade, although Ronsard linked his own poetic *furor* to his melancholy. The madness feared by melancholics led to chains and padded cells.

But fear of madness went hand in hand with hopes of genius – a form of genius which gave special access to revealed truth. Not only were Socrates or Plato *divini* – mad ecstatics enjoying the privilege of special revelations – but so was St Paul, whose rapture to the third heaven became the greatest ecstasy of them all.

Astonishment, too, was associated with melancholy. Since *estonnement* is an ecstasy, it is not explained simply in terms of the soul's being stunned within the body but as the soul's striving to leave its body behind. Such men and women ecstatics are 'beside themselves' or 'outside themselves' for joy or fear or wonder. When they recover they are said to be 'given back to themselves' or to 'come back to themselves'. Many experience ecstasy in the sudden presence of goodness, beauty, truth, bravery or any great-souled action, especially when unexpected.

6. Montaigne's sanguine melancholy

As a man subject to melancholy, Montaigne could hope for genius and fear lunacy. In his case, genius was more likely than madness, since his complexion was, as we saw, 'between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately sanguine and hot'. But this balance could be upset. In Montaigne's case it was.

To say that you are jovial is another way of saying that you are

sanguine. Each humour was associated with a planetary influence; Jupiter (Jove) influenced sanguine people; Saturn influenced melancholics. Montaigne was saturnine with jovial influences. Such a complexion brought hope and assurance. It put you firmly on the right side of those thin partitions which divide great brains from madness. Du Laurent describes in some detail a complexion like Montaigne's:

> Melancholics are considered particularly capable of great responsibilities and high undertakings. Aristotle in his *Problems* wrote that melancholics are the most ingenious. But this passage must be understood aright, for there are several sorts of melancholy. One kind is entirely gross and earthy, cold and dry. Another is hot and adust – we call it *atrabilis*. There is another which is mixed with a little blood, but with more dryness than humidity. (*Des maladies mélancholiques*, 1598, p. 244, or *Opera therapeutica*, 1627, I. 3.)

Many agreed with Du Laurent that it was this third kind of melancholy alone which marked out men of genius. Indeed, cold and earthy melancholy is 'asinine'; it makes men gross and slow in mind and body. Hot and adust melancholy makes men mad, unfit for any office or responsibility. 'Only that kind of melancholy which is mixed with a little blood makes men ingenious, excelling all others.'

But probably few melancholics were ever totally at ease with their complexion. Montaigne was not. Scholars agreed on many things to do with melancholy, but disagreements there were. When pundits disagree, laymen doubt. Burton is worth reading on this point too:

> Why melancholy men are witty, which Aristotle hath long since maintained in his *Problems* – and that all learned men, famous philosophers and lawyers *ad unum fere omnes melancholici*, have still been melancholy – is a problem much controverted. Jason Pratensis will have it understood of natural melancholy, which opinion Melanchthon inclines to, in his book *de anima*, and Marsilius Ficinus, *de sanitate tuenda lib. 4 cap. 5*, but not simple [melancholy] for that makes men stupid, heavy, dull, being cold and dry, fearful, fools and solitary.

Some say that melancholy must be mixed with other humours, 'phlegm only excepted, and they not adust, but so mixed with

blood as to he half, with little or no adustion.' For Du Laurent, as Burton reports him, melancholy humour

> must be mixed with blood, and somewhat adust, and so that old aphorism of Aristotle may be verified, *Nullum magnum ingenium sine mixtura dementia*, no excellent wit without a mixture of madness.
>
> Fracastorius shall decide the controversy: 'Phlegmatic are dull; sanguine are lively, pleasant, acceptable and merry, but not witty; choleric are too swift in motion, and furious, impatient of contemplation, deceitful wits.

And then we come to melancholy:

> Melancholy men have the most excellent wits but not all; this humour may be hot or cold, thick or thin; if too hot they are furious and mad; if too cold, dull, stupid, timorous and sad; if temperate, excellent, rather inclining to that extreme of heat than cold. (*Anatomy of Melancholy* I.3: 3, p. 422).

The genius which Aristotle attributed to melancholics – sanguine melancholics according to Du Laurent and others – makes men 'outstanding in intellect and exceeding others in sharpness of judgment' because it clears the mind of waste matter, makes the imagination more subtle and profound and 'when the melancholy humour is heated by sanguine vapours it excites a kind of holy *furor* called enthusiasm, bringing out unusual effects in philosophy, poetry and prophecy, so that something divine seems to come forth' (*Opera* I. 3).

It is precisely because genius consists in a drive on the part of the soul to leap 'outside itself' and leave the body behind that madness is a constant risk. Anyone whose *complexion* was sanguine-melancholic would have had cause for worry if he fell victim to an access of melancholy *humour*. Montaigne complacently noted that his own complexion normally tended the other way, towards a more 'stupid' form of melancholy which gave him some modest experience of 'vehement' disturbances but not enough to thwart his Socratic desire for self-knowledge:

> (A) Being of a soft and heavy complexion, I certainly do not have a great experience of those *agitations vehementes*, most of which

suddenly take our soul by surprise, without giving it time to know itself (II. 12, p.320).

But things were not always like that ... Nevertheless Montaigne's 'heavy' melancholy became his strongest ally against the flightier, vehement, disturbing kind. And he prided himself on his judgment.[2]

[2] A man's natural complexion did not exclude changes of mood – as when he was 'out of temper' or affected by an access of a particular 'humour'. Montaigne distinguishes at times between a temporary melancholy 'humour' and the 'complexion' (melancholy modified by blood) which gave him his basic character; cf. II. 12, p. 316 (V/S. p. 566; Platt. p. 346, Pl. p. 549):

(A) Il se faict mille agitations (C) *indiscretes & casuelles* (A) chez moy. Ou l'humour melancholique me tient, ou la cholerique, à cet'heure le chagrin predomine en moy, à cet'heure l'alegresse.

Elsewhere Montaigne follows the confusing Renaissance practice of also using *complexions* to mean passing humoral states; cf. III. 11, p. 313; (V/S. p. 1033. Platt. p. 134, Pl. p. 1011) – the context is usually enough to make the distinctions needed to avoid confusion:

(B) Certes, j'ay non seulement des complexions en grand nombre, mais aussi des opinions assez, desquelles je desgouterois volontiers mon filz, si j'en avois.

Passing 'complexions' or 'humours' do not supersede the basic complexion which forms a man's temperament, but they can fundamentally modify it or even pervert it.

CHAPTER FOUR

From Genius to Madness: Torquato Tasso

1. Poetic madness, or a lunatic's chains?

Genius may plunge down into a bestial form of madness. Such a conviction is fundamental to Montaigne and deserves a short chapter to itself.

The traditional explanation of this linking of madness and genius derives from the ancient belief that both madmen and geniuses have souls and bodies more loosely knit together than other men do.

In a short final addition to the chapter on drunkenness Montaigne resumed Platonic doctrine with a direct borrowing from the *Timaeus*:

(C) Plato contends that the faculty of prophesying is 'above ourselves'; that we must be 'outside ourselves' when we treat it; our prudence must be darkened by sleep or illness or else snatched out of its place by a heavenly rapture (II. 2; end).

Here we find the commonplaces of ecstasy, including *audessus de nous* (above ourselves), *hors de nous* (outside ourselves); they lead easily on to prudence which is *enlevée de sa place par un ravissement celeste* (snatched out of its place by a heavenly rapture).

All acknowledged that such rapture was akin to madness. Montaigne did, in the earliest version of his apologia for Sebond: from the actions of madmen we can properly see how close folly comes to the most vigorous operations of our soul:

(A) Who does not know how imperceptible is the neighbourhood

> dividing folly from those lively elevations of a free spirit, and from the effects of the highest extraordinary virtue? Plato says that melancholics are the most able to learn and the most outstanding; but there are also none who have a greater propensity towards folly. An infinite number of spirits are ruined by their own force and suppleness (II. 12; p. 212).

Genius may become sheer madness; the example which Montaigne gives concerns one of his most famous contemporaries, Torquato Tasso, the Italian Renaissance poet (1554-1595). He describes him as a man 'judicious, ingenious' and formed in the classical school of poetry, whose last years were marked by squalid lunacy. Montaigne believed him to have been 'blinded by the light'; the force of his reason had brought him to unreason.

Was it Tasso's careful and toilsome quest for learning, Montaigne asked, which brought so great a poet to such *bestise*, to such animal-like madness? *Bestise* – a favourite word of Montaigne's – is impossible to translate. It means silliness of course, but also stupidity and animality. In the *Essays* a man may be a beast in a great many ways. Montaigne included in Tasso's *bestise* the squalor of his madness, its subhumanity. Tasso had raised his soul to the heights only to fall below humanity, down to the state of a beast. Madness, madness alone, is recognised by Montaigne as the means by which a man may cease to be fully human and so slip down the scale to bestial status.

When he was in Ferrara Montaigne – typically – went to see Tasso for himself. He felt less compassion than anger. He wondered whether it was Tasso's 'rare aptitude for the exercises of the soul' which had deprived him not only of exercise but of the soul itself. The soul's *exercises* (in ecstatic terminology) are the same as its 'practisings' when it practises dying. Tasso had practised dying in order to write inspired poetry: he ended up as a madman in chains. Goethe and the Romantics honoured Tasso even in his madness as a higher, Platonic maniac, a genius still. Montaigne emphatically did not. He did not even feel pity for him. He was more inclined to feel irritation:

> I had more irritation than compassion at seeing him at Ferrara in so pitiful a state, surviving himself, not recognising himself or his works ... (II. 12, p. 212).

Given his own complexion, Montaigne's interest in Tasso as a melancholic genius turned bestial madman is to be expected. It was a natural association for a well-read man to make. Ludovicus Septalius did the same in his commentary on Aristotle's *Problems* (p. 350). He pointed out that Aristotle was writing about those who had been 'endued with melancholy by nature', and added: 'As we know, in our own day Torquato Tasso, easily the prince of Italian heroic poets, was at times in the toils of insanity.'

2. Drunkenness and Platonic mania

Melancholy madness fascinated Montaigne; so, too, did melancholy genius. But he did not always like what he found. His interest became increasingly marked by suspicion, distrust and rejection. At first he was positive: men of genius rise above humanity by the elevation of their free spirit. Yet he did not look for wisdom there. And he did not see this as one of the ways God ordinarily speaks to man.

Roman Stoics, hard on emotion, were strangely indulgent to occasional drunkenness. In his own chapter on drunkenness ancient associations led Montaigne from a concern with tipsy excesses to great-souled ecstasies: Platonic ecstasy is a sort of spiritual drunkenness; a man's soul cannot reach the heights if it remains in its normal seat:

> [The soul] must leave it and rise upwards, taking the bit between its teeth; it must bear its man off, enrapture him away so far that he astonishes himself by what he has done; just as, in the exploits of war, the heat of the combat often makes the valiant cross such hazardous steps that they are the first to be struck with astonishment, once they have come back to themselves (II. 2, p. 20).

Soul-departing ecstasy is explained by classical analogies which noblemen could understand – in terms of drunkenness but also of bravery in battle. It was not only an analogy. 'Furious' bravery is a form of ecstasy.

In peace as in war, ecstatic souls practise leaving their bodies, enjoy their liberty and then 'come home'. When that happens men may be said to have 'come back to themselves' – the term

Montaigne employs. The immediate source is Seneca, *De tranquillitate animi* 17.11. As a Stoic, Seneca is associated less with ecstasies than with constancy and tranquillity, with mastery over the body and the emotions by use of right reason. But like other Roman Stoics he made a distinction between some senses of the Greek word *mania* and the word *furor*, which often stands for it in Latin: one sense of *mania* is madness or foolishness; the Stoic Wise Man cannot be mad or foolish, so he cannot experience that form of *mania*; but *furor* in the sense of frenzied rapture he can experience. Cicero made the same point in the *Tusculans* (3. 5).

Montaigne was long attracted by many aspects of Stoicism. Even when that attraction was at its height he had no cause to question on stoical grounds the reality or the desirability of those frenzied ecstatic raptures to which the melancholy complexion made men of genius subject. For the mass of mankind – even for philosophers – the great ideal was, indeed, *tranquillitas animi*, peace of mind. Yet Stoics admitted that there was an even higher form of wisdom, namely that good *furor* of which the *furor* of occasional drunkenness could act as a reminder. It was called (not least by Christian theologians) *nēphalios methē*, *sobria ebrietas*, sober drunkenness. But Montaigne detested drink taken to excess, and it may have been this antipathy that led him to question the desirability of even those ecstasies of genius which were akin to drunkenness. He did not intend to get drunk; he eventually made it plain that he had no desire to be philosophically or theologically drunk either. For his taste, such *fureurs* came too close to *folie*.

And indeed the distinction between *fureur* (as frenzied madness) and *folie* is not always maintained in French, or, *mutatis mutandis*, in Latin. Montaigne pointed out that poets, like soldiers, are often 'seized by astonishment' when they realise what they have done. They cannot explain how they did it. 'It is what we call, in their case, *ardeur* and *manie*':

> And just as Plato says that a sedate man knocks in vain at poetry's door, so too Aristotle says that no outstanding soul is free from a mixture of folly. He is right to call *folly* any leap upward – however praiseworthy it might be – which goes beyond our own judgment and discourse. All the more so in that wisdom is a controlled handling of our soul, carried out with measure and proportion (II. 2, p. 21).

The linking of the ecstasy of admiration with astonishment in the face of both bravery in arms and great literary creation was an important theme in Renaissance writers. One French poet, Barthelemy Aneau, invented an emblem to signify this. He called it '*stupor admirationis* from the presence of arms and literature'. *Stupor* is a regular word for ecstasy when caused by wonder (*admiratio*). It suggests a dazed amazement caused by the soul's distraction. The emblematic picture shows Pallas, the goddess of Wisdom, clad in the full panoply of a knight. The poem which accompanies it explains that great praise is due to arms and letters. In the emblematic picture, petrified men stare at Wisdom; 'so great an astonishment had enraptured' them, that you could 'take them for stones'. The association of bravery and similar great-souled actions with the soul-departing ecstasy of philosophers and mystics goes back to Plato and Aristotle – in Aristotle's case yet again to *Problems* 30, 1.

Given the way in which his classical sources had linked drinking with rapture a less independent man than Montaigne might well have done the same. Rabelais did so, holding that wine quickened the spirit. For Montaigne there was nothing spiritual about it; drunkenness is 'gross and brutal', *corporel et terrestre*, an affair of the body and earth, not of the soul and heaven. The only *stupor* it produces is a bodily one: *il estonne le corps* (II.2, p. 11). It is an ecstasy, no doubt, but a gross and bodily one – not a case of the soul rising above its normal links with the body but of the body cutting itself off from its normal links with the soul.

The reality of ecstasies of all sorts is never in question (their causes are). As type after type of ecstasy is examined in the *Essays* the frontiers of wisdom are strengthened against them. In the end most ecstasies are firmly excluded from the wisdom which the *Essays* gradually uncover.

CHAPTER FIVE

Privilege and Grace

1. Privileged ecstasy

The apostles derive much of their authority from particular ecstasies or raptures. Apart from Paul's rapture there is the ecstasy of amazement of Peter at the Transfiguration and the ecstatic vision by which he learned that no food was unclean.

The Renaissance Church rated religious ecstasy very highly. Theologically speaking, all such ecstasies are privileges. No human being can ever merit them. This applies to all grace (*gratia*) which, in the last analysis, is *gratis*; but saintly ecstasies are very special privileges, special miracles wrought by grace quite outside the whole order of Nature. Ancient philosophers were allowed to glimpse the need for them: they were wrong (Montaigne thought) in believing they had ever experienced them.

Ecstasies such as those which Peter and Paul were granted, appearing as they do in the basic texts of Christendom, were commented upon by scholars, preachers and mystics, becoming embedded in the Christian teaching and conscience. When Montaigne alludes to them he is treating matters of importance. The example of Paul's ecstasy is Montaigne's answer to an anti-religious contention of Lucretius; it was also a challenge to the lukewarm religion of ordinary Frenchmen, including, in a sense, himself.

In the first version of his apologia for Sebond, Montaigne called upon Paul's ecstasy in a very effective manner. Paul wrote (Philippians 1:23) that he 'wanted to be loosened asunder and to be with Christ'. Montaigne exploited that with great sophistication and to considerable effect, in a way which shows

that he knew what his contemporary theologians made of it:

> (A) Those great promises of everlasting blessedness – if we were to receive them as having authority like that of a philosophical discourse, we would not hold death in such horror as we do. 'I wish to be loosened asunder,' we would say, 'and to be with Jesus Christ.' The force of the discourse of Plato on the immortality of the soul led some of his disciples to death, so as to enjoy more promptly the hopes which he gave them (II.12, p. 149).

To deal first with the appeal to Paul: this text was taken to mean that, although he would go on living for the sake of his flock, he really wished to die, so as to enjoy more fully the blessedness he had known in his rapture. Paul wrote of 'having the desire to be loosened asunder' – in the Latin Vulgate, (*desiderium habens dissolvi*. The force is in the verb, *dissolvi*, What is being 'loosened asunder' is the soul from the body. The Vulgate text lies behind this passage of Montaigne, but a little indirectly, since the expression long used in Latin to refer to Paul's yearning for the ecstasy of death was regularly simplified to *cupio dissolvi*. That is the source of Montaigne's version, *je vueil estre dissout*: 'I want to be loosened asunder.'.

Montaigne appealed to this same text of Paul in the chapter devoted to 'a custom of the island of Cea', in which there is much discussion of suicide. Montaigne makes, more fully, the same association of ideas as in the apologia for Sebond:

> (A) But one may sometimes desire death out of hope for a greater good. 'I want', said St Paul, 'to be loosened asunder so as to be with Jesus Christ', and 'Who shall deliver me out of these bonds?' Cleombrotus Ambraciota, having read the *Phaedo* of Plato, entered into so great a yearning for the life to come that, without further cause, he cast himself into the sea (II.3, p. 37).

This was an important point for Montaigne: such a 'voluntary sundering' of body and soul gives the lie to those who say that the desire to die means sinful despair. There can be not despair but solid judgment based on burning hope. A warrior bishop who threw himself into the heat of battle under St Louis exemplified this.

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What, then, about the Christian interdict on suicide, which Montaigne is often said to have tossed aside in favour of a stoical admiration for suicide in its proper place? Was that old bishop a

Platonist or a Stoic, not a Christian? That question cannot be answered without looking at what Renaissance teaching on the subject of suicide really was; Montaigne, far from being bold or whimsical, is simply following – in detail – Renaissance theologians. Others beside Montaigne linked Paul's *cupio dissolvi* with Cleombrotus, the impetuous young Platonist who leapt to his death and the world of the spirit. The reformed theologian Simon Goulart does so in a work translated in English in 1621 as *The Wise Vieillard* (p. 170f.); he insists, however, that Plato would never have approved of Cleombrotus and that true consolation is to be found in Paul: 'It is to be unshackled and delivered out of a galley or prison, to be with Christ (Philippians 1:23).' The Franciscan court preacher Boucher made somewhat similar points in 1628 in his *Triomphes de la Religion Chrestienne* (p. 794). But Montaigne's linking of Paul and the example of Cleombrotus may be found, used exactly as he does, in theologians nearer to his own heart than Goulart or Boucher. Indeed the association of Cleombrotus with the two verses of Paul alluded to in the *Essays* shows that Montaigne was writing within an established tradition. Montaigne's reproach to Christians for not even receiving the promises of the true religion with the zeal shown by others for mere philosophical promises can be thrown into relief by excellent theologians. For example, the *Exposition* of Thomas Aquinas by Bartholomew of Medina of the order of preachers explains that we abhor death through our 'sensitive appetite', since that appetite knows nothing of the world to come. 'But it is right that we should seek death through our rational appetite', out of desire for that 'perfect blessedness' which cannot be had in this mortal life. 'That is why many philosophers promptly killed themselves in order to acquire this happiness, even though they only had a very tenuous knowledge of it.' Cicero's *Tusculans* are cited to show this, because of his mention of the 'man named Ambrosiastes ... who cast himself into the sea after reading Plato's book on the immortality of the soul.'

> But to pass over these, which are uncertain, St Paul, most truly, in I Philippians, says *cupio dissolvi*, 'I wish to be loosened asunder and to be with Christ'; and in Romans 7: 'wretched man, who will free me from this body of death?'

Ambrosiastes and Cleombrotus Ambraciota are the same man. Montaigne also alludes to Romans 7:24, though more loosely. 'This body of death' is cited as 'these bonds' (*ces liens*). This is a conflation of Paul with standard Platonic-Christian vocabulary, found also in Bartholomew of Medina (*Expositio in IIam IIae*, 1588, p. 302).

It is not impossible that Montaigne took his material from this commentary on Aquinas, who was in his mind in the apologia for Sebond, since 'Adrien Tournebus, who knew everything', assured him that Sebond's book was the 'quintessence of Aquinas' (II. 12, p. 143). At all events there is no difficulty about reconciling the protestations of Roman Catholic orthodoxy in the *Essays* with the attitudes of Montaigne towards suicide. On the contrary, his attitudes are exactly what one would expect them to be at the time that he wrote.

But man is 'loosened asunder' in death as in ecstasy. This enabled Montaigne to use the exclamation of St Paul also against classical pessimism. It gave force to his interpolation of a quotation from Lucretius in the 1588 edition of the apologia for Sebond, immediately before alluding to *cupio dissolvi*. *Dissolvi* is classical as well as Christian in the sense of the loosening asunder of soul and body; so Montaigne wryly associated a sceptical verse of Lucretius with the joyful confidence of Paul. The juxtaposition of classical irreligion and Paul's ecstatic yearnings is a fruitful one: The passage, as expanded, now reads:

> (A) Those great promises of everlasting blessedness – if we were to receive them as having authority like that of a philosophical discourse, we would not hold death in such horror as we do.
>
> (B) *Non jam se moriens dissolvi conquereretur*
> *Sed magis ire foras, vestémque relinquere ut angis*
> *Gauderet, praelonga senex aut cornua cervus.*
>
> [The dying man would not then complain that he is being loosened asunder, but would rather rejoice to be 'going outside', like a snake casting off its skin, or an old stag casting off his overlong antlers.]
>
> (A) '*Je vueil estre dissout*', we would say, 'and to be with Jesus Christ' ...

Lucretius, scoring points off believers who are afraid of dying, asserted what would happen if men really believed in eternal bliss: when dying, no one would complain of being loosened

asunder. Montaigne assumed that his readers knew a Biblical tag as current as *cupio dissolvi* and so jumped a step in his argument. Instead of citing *cupio dissolvi* in Latin, translating it and attributing it to St Paul, he simply assumes that we know it; without explanation he alludes to the traditional French version, *je vueil estre dissout*, which, indeed, all but the illiterate must have known. But it is the unstated Latin verb *dissolvi* which links St Paul's *estre dissout* to Lucretius, so making the dutiful Paul – who felt poignantly the desire to die, but who went on living for his flock – into a powerful reply to Lucretius and his sarcastic pessimism.

Paul's privileged rapture also shows how far ordinary Christians fall below the saints. As Montaigne put it, 'We are Christians by the same title that we are Perigordins or Germans.' The point is a sharp one: Germans suggest Lutherans; Perigordins suggest Roman Catholics. For many this is all that religious differences mean; yet zealous Christians should be yearning, like St Paul, to die, even though they go on living because it is their duty to do so.

Before the end of the *Essays* Montaigne became less demanding of others – and of himself. In fact he turned all this upside down. His praise of suicide is nevertheless quite orthodox. Theologians such as Bartholomew of Medina show that any good man – Montaigne as much as Seneca – may yearn for death with his rational appetite; indeed that his rational appetite should urgently wish for death, even though his earth-bound sensitive appetite never can. Heresy only arises if the rational appetite is allowed to have the very last word. For Christians the Church's revealed teaching overrides natural reason just as it overrides the example of Cleombrotus. As a pagan Cleombrotus lacked grace; he had no way of knowing infallibly that 'the Almighty had fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter'. Without that canon, Hamlet would have been right to put an end to his own life.

2. Grace

Montaigne's religious world is a world of grace – though reason has to manage without it in the *Essays*. Montaigne stresses that anything to do with true ecstasy is *un estude privilegé* (III. 13, end). No human creature can ever, of himself, see God as he is. Standard works such as the late mediaeval *Pantheologia* of

Raynerius of Pisa show this as clearly as did Montaigne: the essence of God is, by nature, inaccessible to man; but God is not bound by nature; he may grant men privileges:

> It was conceded to Moses and to Paul, *ex singulari privilegio*, that they should see the essence of God in rapture (*Pantheologia*, 1585, p. 806).

Plato wrote of a kind of religious conviction based on fear, which makes believers out of atheists. That meant nothing good to Montaigne. It might just do for 'mortal and human religions'; but it 'does not touch a true Christian'. All Christians know they need grace. Montaigne defended Sebond and his 'natural theology' as a useful book for Christians, but he never saw natural theology as having any effective power apart from grace.

Two verses of the New Testament are conflated in the *Essays* to modify and justify Sebond's claim to prove the Christian verities from nature and by natural means. Montaigne, who always treats the Bible as verbally inspired, cites them as 'God's own word speaking to mankind':

> (A) It is not believable that in all this fabric of the world there should not be some mark printed by the hand of this great Architect; that there should be no image in the things of the world referring somehow to the Workman who built them and formed them. He left within these great works the imprint of his divinity; it is only because of our weakness that we cannot discover it.
>
> It is what he tells us himself: that he makes manifest his invisible actions by the visible ones (II. 12; p. 151).

There is no scriptural text which corresponds word for word to Montaigne's account of what 'God tells us himself'. He was, I think, idiosyncratically alluding to the Vulgate text of Hebrews 2:3, which Aquinas took to have a sense in conformity with Plato's teachings. If so, he linked it with another text, central to Sebond's argument in the *Theologia naturalis*: Romans 1:20:

> 'The invisible things of God,' says Saint Paul, 'are seen by the creation of the world, perceiving his everlasting wisdom and divinity through his works.'

Sebond had used this text, but Montaigne applied it in a more orthodox way.[1]

In the *Theologia naturalis* Sebond believed that he had proved from nature that Christian doctrines are true and necessary: Montaigne more prudently, and more traditionally, asserted that this can only be done for men already touched by grace. He used an analogy from Aristotelian physics, in which every object consists of form and matter: 'Human reasons and arguments are like heavy sterile matter; God's grace is the form.' That is why Socrates or Cato, for all their virtue, were, in the end, 'vain and useless'. They never knew the love and obedience due to the 'true Creator of all things'.

> (A) It is the same with what we imagine and with our arguments; they have some 'body', but it is a formless mass, without shape, without light, if faith and the grace of God are not joined on to it. When faith comes to give colour and light to Sebond's arguments it makes them firm and solid. They are capable of serving as travelling directions and a beginner's guide for an apprentice to put him on the road to this knowledge. They give him a certain fashioning and make him 'capable' of the grace of God ... (II. 12, p. 152).

That is what makes man, 'according to our belief', perfectible.

[1] (a) God himself, according to Montaigne, said, 'que ses operations invisibles, il nous les manifeste par les visibles'. That may be an echo of Hebrews 11:3, Vulgate: *ut ex invisibilis visibilia fierent* ('that from invisible things visible things might be made'). Platonic interpretations were given to this text, which was taken to mean that God had created the world after the pattern of the divine Forms (or Ideas). See, for a dense discussion of this verse, Cornelius à Lapide's commentary on the Epistles (Lyons, 1660, p. 865).

(b) Romans 1:19-20 was regularly interpreted as Montaigne did. In the Vulgate it reads, 'Deus enim illis manifestavit invisibilia enim ipsius a creatura mundi, per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspiciuntur sempiterna quoque eius virtus et divinitas' ('For God has manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made; his eternal power also, and divinity'). With this text Cornelius à Lapide (p. 36) justifies the theological insight of Gentiles such as Hermes Trismegistus, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, let alone saints such as Athanasius or Bernard. Montaigne's argument may derive from Duns Scotus, who associated Hebrews 11:3 and Romans 1:19-20 in much the same way. Cf. *Scriptum Oxoniense*, on Sentences I, dis. 3, qu. 1, art. 10, §4, *Sed econtra* (Venice, 1612, p. 145).

(c) Raymond Sebond exploits Romans 1:19-20 in the *Theologia Naturalis* (Book 2, chapter 16).

A fundamental Christian doctrine is underlined here by repetition: Sebond's arguments are said to be made effective (*capables*) by prevenient faith and grace. They in turn make an apprentice-Christian *capable* of further grace. These are technical theological terms. Montaigne is asserting that Sebond's book may help a Christian beginner who reads it with the eyes of faith to move on to higher things, indeed, to become *capax Dei*: able to receive the grace of God in all its plenitude.

Montaigne never wavers: natural reason can stumble on to Christian verities and hold ideas or imagery identical with Christian ones. Yet without grace man would have no reason to put all his trust in Christianity. And he would certainly be no closer to God.[2]

Grace is outside Nature. For Montaigne any advance in a man's religion always depends on it. In the final version of the *Essays* frequent interpolations of words and phrases emphasise this. One word frequently so interpolated is *extraordinaire*: divine intervention does not follow the *ordo rerum*, the natural order of the world; it is always *extra*, always outside, that order.

God, for Montaigne, is transcendent Being: man is contingent and so has nothing to do with absolute Being (*Essence*). If Man and God are to meet, the initiative must ever and always come from God. In the chapter on repentance Montaigne wrote that he 'rarely repents'. No wonder! He was writing not of acts of penance but of that repentance by which a man sees his whole life and his whole person as through the eyes of God. To do that he needs grace (III. 2, pp. 32-5).

The apologia for Sebond ends by quietly stressing the need for grace. Plutarch knew that God is absolute Being. But Plutarch affords no means of access to that divine Essence. Seneca condemns men who fail to rise above their mere humanity. That is quite 'absurd'. You cannot, unaided, make the pace greater than the stride. Man cannot, of himself, 'climb above himself or above humanity':

[2] What Gentiles could and should learn from natural reason is that God is one and eternal, the prince and judge of the world. For a brief discussion of the issues involved, see Cornelius à Lapide, pp. 35-6 and, on the essentialness of grace for effective Christian belief, p. 30. Raymond Sebond believed that essential and specifically Christian truths can be obtained by man's *enlightened* natural reason rightly reading God's 'book' of Nature.

(A) He will rise if God lends him his hand; he will rise by giving up and renouncing his own means, letting himself be raised and supported by *divine grace, not otherwise*.

At this point Montaigne made several changes for the edition he was preparing when he died. He interpolated, for example, the adverb *extraordinairement* to emphasise that a miracle is required: 'he will rise if God lends him, extraordinarily, his hand.' And the last words of this extract, shown here in italics, are replaced by the following:

... (C) purely heavenly means. It is up to our Christian faith, not to his Stoic virtue, to claim this divine and miraculous transfiguration (II. 12, end).

With such uncompromising certainty his long doubting chapter ends.

The verb to rise (*s'elever*) alludes to that *elevatio* by which the mind of man is raised by grace up towards God, in contemplation or selfless charity. Similar assertions are made in the chapter on repentance. Christians may repent in a manner worthy of God, the searcher out of men's hearts, but only through divine intervention: *Il faut que Dieu nous touche le courage*', 'God must touch our hearts' (III.2, p. 37).

This is an echo of I Kings 10:26: 'hearts God had touched'. The source may seem a bit out of the way, but in fact it was not; a contemporary of Montaigne, Georgette de Montenay, has a picture and poem on this theme in her *Emblemes ou devises chrestiennes*, designed to represent *Frustra* (In vain): all man does is 'in vain, if God does not touch his heart'.

By the time Montaigne reached the end of his apologia for Sebond he had discredited reason when deprived of grace. With Christian scepticism he defends Roman Catholicism at the expense of reason itself. In this he was following tradition. A generation earlier Rabelais's wise old evangelical king, Gargantua, had been pleased to note that all the best thinkers were pyrrhonist sceptics now (*Le Tiers Livre*, 1546, TLF, 36, 130).

Sceptical orthodoxy was certainly in the air. Quite independently of Montaigne, in nearby Toulouse, François Sanchez wrote an exciting little book in the 1560s or 1570s, which

he then kept in a drawer for years. He entitled it, 'That Nothing is known', *Quod nihil scitur* (Lyons, 1581). Montaigne was more hesitant; he struck a medal and stamped on it, '*Que sçay-je*?' (What *do* I know?).

CHAPTER SIX

Everyman's Ecstasies

1. Sexual ecstasy

Montaigne championed the classical ideals of the golden mean, temperance, peace of mind and, up to a point, controlled emotions. To modern ears ecstasy sounds incompatible with these ideals. But classical moralists found no difficulty in reconciling ecstatic mania or inspired *furor* with the staider virtues. Socrates reconciled them by teaching and example.

In the *Phaedrus* Plato asserted that the mutual love of true lovers is the happiest form of mania. Lovers exchange souls. Each lover dies, his departing soul living in the other; true lovers live therefore in permanent ecstasy, their souls sojourning outside their own bodies. For Renaissance Platonists, 'to die with love' was not a jaded metaphor. It expressed a vital truth.

High Platonic love is largely an affair of the soul; bodies play only a minor rôle in it. It is, nevertheless, considered to be a form of *eros*, not of *philia*. When these ideas became more widely spread in Latin, the distinction became blurred. This was even more the case in French, where *amitié* might be used for many kinds of love and several kinds of friendship which were represented in Greek by different words, sometimes sharply distinguished. Montaigne did not express his friendship for La Boëtie in terms of *eros* or of ecstasy; there was no claim to be 'living in' his beloved nor of 'dying to him'. On the other hand, Platonic love is exclusive: you can only exchange souls with one person. Exclusiveness is also central to Montaigne's highest *philia*. No third person could, at this highest level, share in it. It was of course quite compatible with other forms of affection, including that intimate form of *philia* which binds husband and wife together in mutual tenderness.

In Plato, the ideal love is male-homosexual. Many admirers of Plato in the Renaissance did not see this, partly because Ficino obscured it in his Latin translation and commentary. Montaigne did see it: he dismissed Greek homosexuality as incompatible with 'our manners' and as a mere parody of heterosexual love. With that, he let the subject go. It did not worry him. But in his own way he played it down; when Socrates was older than Montaigne his soul was still susceptible to passion; in Xenophon Socrates described how his heart went a-flutter as he shared a book with a handsome pupil; Montaigne calls the pupil *un objet amoureux*, thus effectively obscuring his sex.

By reflecting on this incident, Montaigne humanised Socrates. Even at the height of his career as a moral philosopher, Socrates had weaknesses. He remained a great man but human, not more than human. Montaigne at first marvelled: 'A mere touch, by chance, on the shoulder, was enough to warm and disturb a soul chilled and enervated by age! And that soul, the first of all human souls in reforming itself!' But he finally wrote in the margin: 'And why not? Socrates was a man: he never wanted to be, or to seem to be, anything else' (III. 5, p. 137).

Montaigne's love for La Boëtie was in no way physical. It concerned the soul and was therefore solid and stable, in life as in death. It burnt with a 'general, universal, temperate and equal heat', being 'spiritual, with the soul refining itself by usage'. The souls of women may not be firm enough to experience so great a friendship, but the question is left open.

It is here that Socrates and his homosexual affections come to the fore in order to be criticised. Such love is a parody of the love Montaigne feels for 'fair and honest women'. His ideal would be an application of this Socratic parody to his own circumstances: if only a man could feel the *philia* of friendship and the *eros* of sexual love for one and the same woman ... If it were possible, then such a love as that would surpass even the highest form of friendship he had experienced with La Boëtie: 'Not only would their souls have this total enjoyment, but their bodies would have their share in this engagement too.' But there has been 'no example so far' of women ever reaching these heights. The final version adds that the ancients rejected such a possibility. Yet a love which could bind a man and woman, by soul and body, would be one where *l'homme fust engagé tout entier* – where man and woman were engaged with all their being (I. 28, p. 243).

Such love was indeed unknown to Plato, though not to Renaissance theorists, poets and novelists who accommodated Plato's doctrines to Christian manners. Most of them continued to make love into an ecstasy, with the man and woman 'dying' to themselves and reliving in each other. Montaigne did not. But he did, in the one case of his rare loving friendship for La Boëtie, isolate the soul from the body. There is not the slightest hint that the body played any part at all in the genesis or course of their love. But it is not presented as an ecstasy.

2. Sexual climaxes

It was reflexion on sexual love which, more perhaps than anything else, led Montaigne to conclude that all but a few should strive to keep body and soul closely bound together, avoiding ecstasy constantly and effectively.

In theory Christianity accepts the body. To reject it is heresy. Yet many traditional moralists and philosophers – especially those influenced by Platonism – remained suspicious of the body, which they treated as not only lower than the soul but as a clog, a prison, a set of fetters for the soul. Moralists dwelt on the grossness of the body and the animality of the sexual embrace. Philosophically sexual climaxes were regularly seen as affairs of the body alone and therefore bestial in the full sense of that word: an activity shared with lower creation and so somehow unworthy of man's higher nature. In philosophical, moral and ethical writings the sexual embrace was only grudgingly admitted as a second-best for those who could not aspire to worthier ends. It was hedged about with provisos and limitations. All the books ever written on the subject had been written by men – most of them unmarried; women often appeared in books as dangerous creatures, naturally inclined to unlimited lust. It was man's duty to try to hold them in check. It was his duty to control his own sexual urges too. Philosophy saw sexual intercourse as one of the bodies 'necessary' functions, like eating and drinking, but not one to be allowed free play. Montaigne rejected the teaching that would make sex into a purely bodily ecstasy and concluded that 'male and female are cast in the same mould; education apart, there is not much difference between them' (III. 5, end).

Those who did engage the soul as well as the body in sexual intercourse could be worrying. Hippocrates believed that sexual climaxes were a form of *petit mal*, a 'small epilepsy'. Moralists dwelt on that theory for nigh on two thousand years.

Tiraqueau, the jurisconsult and friend of Rabelais, wrote an authoritative treatise on the *Laws of Marriage* which grew into a compendium of almost everything ever said on sex and marriage. It makes sombre reading. The fifteenth law expounds a long litany of illnesses caused by sexual intercourse. No part of the body was exempt. On sex as epilepsy, it is uncompromisingly certain:

> Hippocrates the greatest of doctors whose property it is never to deceive nor to be deceived (as Macrobius attests in Book One of the *Dream of Scipio*), considered that sexual coïtus is part of that terrifying illness which the Greeks call *epilepsia* and the Latins *morbus comitialis* (*De legibus connubialibus*, 1586, p. 289).

Aulus Gellius (19.2), citing Hippocrates, talks of 'a small, or if you prefer, a brief epilepsy'.

If sexual climaxes are a form of epilepsy, then they are a form of insanity or sick ecstasy – and one to which melancholics are peculiarly prone. Aristotle is definite about that (*Problems* 30.1).

Montaigne examined sexuality above all in *Sur des vers de Virgile* (III. 5), a chapter which takes its title from passionate verses in the *Aeneid* (8. 387f., 404f.), which Montaigne considered to be a delightful evocation of love enriched by poetry, though rather too passionate for sex within marriage. Aulus Gellius had already been struck by them (9.10); it was quite usual to express some surprise at their intensity.

In most of the treatises on morals one can look in vain for any advice on marital relations, other than to cut sex down to the minimum; François de Sales cannot bring himself even to mention the subject: he likens the need for sex to 'the need for food' and lets you draw your own conclusions. Not untypically, in his treatise on divine love, he jumped straight from the holy mystical ecstasy, which he venerated, to coïtus, treated as an ecstasy both brutal and 'epileptic'. In Montaigne, on the contrary, there is room for love and tenderness, which for him are what marriage mainly concerns – together with children.[1]

[1] François de Sales stresses, of course, the honourable nature of the nuptial

Several times Montaigne contrasted, to its disadvantage, the burning fire of sexual passion with the solid constancy of marriage. Finally he went back to what he wrote to his wife in his preface to Plutarch's consolatory letter: 'To wed without marrying is treachery.' He found, to his surprise, that he had kept his marriage vows better than he had ever expected (III. 5, p. 85).

Sexual passion he assumed to be extramarital, in the tradition of mediaeval mistresses and servitors. But he never called it an epilepsy. Unlike most, he never suggested that it leads, by its nature, to illness of any sort. Quite the contrary. In one of his few criticisms of university theologians (*Nos Maistres*, as they were called) he stakes the claim of sheer good health in provoking ecstasies of many, less 'distracted' kinds:

> (C) *Nos Maistres* are wrong when they seek the causes of our spirits' extraordinary transports. Leaving aside the attribution of some of them to divine rapture, to love, to the harshness of war, to poetry, to wine, they do not give its due part in them to good health (III. 5, p. 73).

The *Essays* amply show that Montaigne is not just rejecting the Platonic theory underlying the teaching of *Nos Maistres* nor all later developments of it. But his own life had taught him that youthful good health has a part to play in what was classed as enthusiasm, passion or ecstasy. When he was young, in 'boiling health' and with time on his hands, he found this to be true:

> This joyful fire gives rise to flashes in our spirit; they are lively, bright, beyond our natural reach; they are some of our most spritely enthusiasms even though they are not the most distracted.

couch. But his suspicion of the sexual embrace transpires even in the chapter in which he asserts its purity (*Introduction à la vie dévote*, Part 3, chapter 39). In this chapter he is, however, less morose about sex than a married layman like Tiraqueau. Nevertheless on sexual intercourse as a brutal ecstasy he is quite uncompromising in *De l'amour de Dieu* (Book 7, chapter 4: *Du ravissement*): Man is certainly in a true, though brutal, ecstasy when enraptured by carnal pleasures; he is, in fact, cast 'outside himself'. The soul is said to be 'ravished and caught away outside itself, because these bestial pleasures put it beyond the use of reason and intelligence with such a mad violence that, as one of the greatest Philosophers said, man, being in this state, seems to have fallen into an epilepsy'. In François de Sales the love and tenderness of married couples is seen as something distinct from sexual intercourse, not as something expressed through it.

Old age, of course, does the contrary. Montaigne does not think that old men should ape youth, but he does think that commerce with women may have good effects on a man's declining years. Some old men are spurred on by avarice or ambition: he could more easily be spurred on by love, which would make him take more trouble over his appearance and help to lighten the burdens which old age brings in its train:

> (B) it could divert me away from a thousand painful thoughts, (C) from a thousand melancholy sorrows (B) which idleness burdens us with in that age (C) and from the bad state of our health (III. 5, p. 139).

It was a standard belief that melancholics were prone to the power of love, but that is not Montaigne's point. He saw commerce with women as a palliative for senile melancholy. It is striking, however, that the verbs he uses to say this are all in conditional tenses. It is how things might be, not how they are. As he wryly commented, with a laugh at blue-stockings who made sex a matter of the mind, no beautiful woman was ever ready to trade her young thighs against the decrepit wisdom of Socrates – nor, by implication, of himself (III. 5, p. 143).

In the *Timaeus* (91Aff.), Plato made both the male and the female organs of generation into wilful parasitic creatures, working havoc on their hosts when thwarted. Montaigne increased the element of frenzy beyond what he found in Plato or his translator Ficino. For the male he uses *furieux*; for the female *forcené*, 'raging mad' (III. 5, p. 94). Yet this aspect of the sexual embrace did not please him. Montaigne coarsens his language. However indulgent he was to Socrates when his soul was disturbed by a chance touch, philosophers like Zeno and Cratippus are roundly condemned for the frenzy of their sexual passion. He uses the language of ecstasy, but these ecstasies are bad ones. He disliked the 'rage' that finds its place in sexual intercourse; he dislikes 'the face inflamed with *fureur* and cruelty' at the very 'sweetest point of love' as well as 'that grave, severe and ecstatic face in so mad an activity'. Sexual intercourse should not be like

that; for the wise it is a happy, foolish, madcap activity, more akin to Cupid than to Venus.

At this point, as a stage in his argument, he dwells upon the animality of it all – as so many moralists did. Sexual intercourse makes fools and wise men alike; it makes men like beasts; eating and drinking are shared with other animals without our losing our advantage over them, not so sexual intercourse; it 'drives out all the theology and philosophy' of Plato; it is a mark of 'original sin, or human vanity' (III. 5, p. 118).

This is then answered in terms which lead eventually to the ringing convictions at the end of the *Essays*. Philosophy teaches moderation, not rejection. But can she be right to assert that 'bodily appetites must not be increased by the spirit'; that we should not find ways of sharpening our appetites:

> ... just as, in the service of love, Philosophy orders us to take an object which simply satisfies the needs of the body and which does not disturb the soul; the soul must not make it its concern, but follow nakedly along, accompanying the body – *suyvre nuement et assister le corps*? (III. 5, p. 137-8).

These last words are worth noting. Montaigne returns to these terms a few lines later to make a telling point.

Philosophy certainly took a low view of sexual intercourse. Rabelais can quote ancient sayings interpreted by Erasmus as meaning that a philosopher should lie with a woman with complete indifference, as far as his soul is concerned, so that he can be said to have had the woman, but not she him (*Tiers Livre de Pantagruel*, TLF, 35, p. 50ff.). Montaigne felt the weight of such assertions, but refused to be overawed. He was feeling his way, so the reply is a tentative one:

> But am I not right to think that these precepts – which are by my standards rather rigorous – concern a body which is doing its duty?

In the case of a sickly or ageing body, may not art and fantasy play a part in bringing back lost appetites and joy? He then ventures to compare ordinary human beings in their sexuality and saints in their penances. His point is all the more forceful, since he uses the language of Platonic asceticism – the body being thought of as the 'prison' of the soul:

> 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?

Can we not do for pleasure what saints do for pain? 'Pain, for example, is vehement to the point of perfection in the souls of the saints doing penance.' Medicine established a natural link, a *colligantia*, between body and soul: 'By right of this *colligance*' the body plays a part in penance even though it could have had 'but a little part in the cause' – the sins of saints being spiritual ones.

Montaigne then takes up the terms just applied by philosophy to the soul, inverts the situation and applies them challengingly to the attitudes of holy penitents towards their bodies:

> The saints were not content that the body should follow nakedly along, accompanying the afflicted soul – *qu'il suyvît nuement et assistât l'ame affligée* (III. 5, p. 138).

Saints, that is, chastise their bodies, which in this way share in the penance of their souls.

A man who holds those convictions is well on the way to rejecting ecstasy as an ideal for most people. Far from freeing the soul from the body, he gives each the rôle of sharing in the pains and joys of the other. If it is right for saints to inflict pain on their bodies, it must, at the other extreme, be right for ordinary mortals to encourage their souls to join in the sexual joys of their bodies.

3. Poetic ecstasy

On Platonic authority true poets were believed to enjoy revelations of truth through inspiration. Many believed that these revealed truths were then 'veiled' by the poets in fable. By veiling truths the poets clad them in beauty and disguised them. In this way they saved them from profanation: anyone could enjoy their poems for their beauty, but only a privileged few could lift the veil and uncover the divine yet hidden truth. When they did so, they were astonished and enraptured.

Theories such as these were all the more easily acceptable in

that similar ones justified both the allegories which Christians found in the Old Testament and the use of psalms in Christian worship. David, it was said – like all the Old Testament writers – had been vouchsafed knowledge of Christian truths, which he had hidden beneath a Jewish veil. To some extent poets other than David could be treated as inspired, including pagan ones such as Homer, Hesiod, Virgil and others – which is why they were called 'divine'.

Montaigne accepted poetic rapture and used its language very freely but, so far as he himself was concerned, with nothing like the full Platonic sense. The Bible he treated as the word of God, which no pagan writings ever were. Montaigne probably read his Plato in Ficino's edition, with Ficino's notes and Latin translation; but that seems to have been for convenience. He rejected Ficino's Christianising of *Plato noster*. Plato's teachings, like those of any other man not enlightened by revelation and vouched for by the Church, were open to discussion.

Ficino was a prime authority for the reality of poetic ecstasy. Montaigne went back beyond him to the two original sources of his theories in Plato: the *Phaedrus* and the *Io*. These dialogues were widely read. Ronsard exploited them in a famous poem to a famous man: his *Ode à Michel de l'Hospital*. Ronsard, in other words, made the theories his own. Montaigne did not.

According to Plato, poets compose in trance or rapture; they are seized by a divine spirit which inspires them to rise above human limitations. Their driving force is a yearning to glimpse divine truth and beauty. The insights vouchsafed them in their inspiration are then passed on through their poetry. Inspiration works like a magnet.

This poetic rapture is also a case of mania, of *furor*, of ecstatic madness. The normal expression for it in Renaissance French was *fureur poëtique*. (Doctrines such as Plato's have to be adapted if they are to be seriously accepted as true in the light of developed Christian doctrine. As myth the Renaissance found them quite acceptable.)

Montaigne made a major addition to his final version of the chapter on the Younger Cato in order to expound briefly the doctrines of Plato: poets are at their best when they sing the virtues of great men, composing not plodding verse (an 'art' which follows rules) but the poetry of inspiration. Great poetry

cannot be coldly judged: it ravishes the judgment. As in Plato's *Io* (533D) this is explained in terms of magnetism, with inspired 'poetry' contrasted with mere 'art' (I. 37, end).

Plato's terms are there in the *Essays*: ecstasy, *furor*, enrapturing beauty. What is missing is an influence literally divine. Who – or what – inspires the poets, we are not told. Do poets actually glimpse the beauty of the living God? Nothing suggests that this is so. For Plato, as for Ficino, the goad which prods the poet on to painful creativity is a truly divine one. Divine too is the inspiration. For them poetic *furor* is genuine. It was specifically classed by Ficino with St Paul's privileged rapture.

In Montaigne poetic ecstasy is not even remotely in the same category as the rapture of Paul or of Christian contemplatives. If ever a man talked of being enraptured by the beauty of poetry, that man was Montaigne. But he does not suggest that the great classical poets were truly inspired, nor that they were God's mouthpieces for revealed truths, nor that they were privileged interpreters of God. Nor does he make the ecstasies induced by reading poetry into anything like a Platonic trance. For such attitudes we can turn to Rabelais, but not to Montaigne.

As a frenzy – an inspired mania – poetic *furor* was too close to madness for Montaigne's taste. Ficino acknowledged the closeness of the two sorts of *furor* or mania in the opening words of the dedication of his Latin translation of the *Phaedrus* to Lorenzo de' Medici:

> Our Plato, most excellent Lorenzo, defined *furor* in the *Phaedrus* as an alienation of the mind. He taught that there were two kinds of alienation. One comes from human illness: the other from God.

The first is plain *insania*; the second divine *furor*: Ficino taught that madness – insane *furor* – makes man subhuman, 'in some ways changing him from man to beast', while poets enjoy a divine *furor*, 'which raises man above nature so that he crosses over to God' (Plato, trans. Ficino, 1539, p. 167).

Montaigne found bestial madness real enough – witness Torquato Tasso. But there he stopped. Geniuses may be 'ravished' only by their own heady thoughts; poets may enrapture others with the beauty they create, but of rapture in the strict sense, Montaigne is suspicious; he would not allow that

mere man can ever 'cross over to the divine'. A gulf unbridgeable to unaided man separates creature from Creator. It can be crossed only by a privileged few. Any author who obscures that fact is eventually smashed to the ground – Cicero for one. He was only a poor creature subject to calamities, yet when he talked of man and of the human condition you would think he was talking of an 'all-living, all-powerful God'. Even the greatest of the pagans fell into that stupid error; Aristotle, Democritus, Chrysippus, Seneca ... (II. 12, p. 208).

As a reader of poetry Montaigne experienced rapture of a sort – but not such as to bring him face to face with the divine. He saw poetry as being like fair and honourable women: beautiful, the beauty enhanced by art and all on display. Poetry contains no revelations of theological truths and no wisdom other than the exquisitely human – and philosophy is a better vehicle for human wisdom. When Montaigne talked of poetry in his own name, not Plato's, he called it an 'art'. That is why women can read poetry, if read they must:

> ... it is an art, playful, subtle, feigning, wordy – all pleasure and all display, like they are.

Women are welcome to read and enjoy it. But if they want to learn how to limit their desires, prolong the pleasures of life and put up with harsh, unfaithful husbands and ugly old age, they must turn to moral philosophy (III. 3, p. 46).

By calling poetry an art, Montaigne rejected what Socrates says of art and inspiration in the *Io*. Indeed, without spiritual possession or divine inspiration, Plato's teachings have no literal force. If his terms continue to be used by those who do not believe in them, it is to serve for conventional poetic decoration – or else they are applied hyperbolically to purely natural ecstasies, which are real but not divine.

Montaigne's raptures on reading great poetry were like his copious quotations: glimpses of poetic beauty in a sea of prose. Poetic rapture was for him a thing apart, even though it did take him out of himself. In other matters he intended to regulate his life by the natural order: 'all actions which go beyond the bounds of the ordinary' are open to sinister interpretations; 'you risk not rising above the *ordo rerum*; you may fall below it.' There is a lesson to be drawn from those philosophical martyrs of

classical times who jested under torture. They are impressive, yet not to be followed:

> You must confess that there is some change for the worse in those souls, some frenzy (*fureur*) however holy (II. 2, p. 20).

With the one exception of the vehement, joyful but natural rapture derived from reading poetry, such frenzies are best avoided or played down.

It is the same with Stoic bravado. Antisthenes exclaimed that he would rather be mad (*furieux*) than a voluptuary. Such bravado, it was said, comes from a heart soaring above its natural range. It recommended itself less and less to Montaigne as he went more deeply into himself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Privacy

1. Melancholy retreat

Melancholy tends to be imagined as the gloom of an older man such as Molière's Alceste, sulking 'alone with his black sorrow in his dark little corner.' Traditionally, however, it covered both public and private states and could be found even in children. Aristotle asserted in the *Eudemian Ethics* (229a) that 'passion makes a man ecstatic'; the frenzied bravery of soldiers who are beside themselves in the heat of battle was certainly often to be attributed to ecstatic melancholy. (Montaigne notes the bravery but does not advise emulation.) Renaissance ways of thinking linked these madly brave soldiers with vehemently devoted scholars in their bookrooms, with gloomy, irascible dominies in school and with suspiciously studious pupils poring over their books.

Schools should not be gaols. Montaigne distrusted melancholy in the schoolroom; as a complexion and as an illness it should be closely watched.

> (A) I do not want a pupil to be left to the melancholy humour of a furious schoolmaster ... (C) When you see a boy over-devoted to studying his books because of a solitary or melancholy complexion, it is not good, I think, to encourage him in it (I. 26, p. 212).

Yet, at least when Montaigne took up his position in the country on the death of his father, he had much in common with that bookish boy. Schoolboy melancholics creep culpably off to their books. So did Montaigne. Reading 'honest' books in some

compensation to an older man for losing the company of 'honest' friends and fair 'honest' women. Books afford a slackish pleasure, but you can shut them up at will. And you can have conversations of a sort with them.

Montaigne was no hermit; his withdrawal to his estates was marked by pomp and paint. Two inscriptions on his walls recorded his action for posterity. One lamented the death of La Boëtie; the other, dated from Montaigne's thirty-eighth birthday (28 February 1571), dedicated the ancestral home to *libertati suae, tranquillitatique et otio*. These are philosophical ideals, not mere peace and quiet.

Libertas is power over your own life; Cicero called it the power to live as you wish. *Tranquillitas* is serenity of mind – a stable, lasting state. Cicero called it *placida quietaque constantia*. As for *otium*, it is studious leisure, made possible by disengagement.

Such was Montaigne's ideal: peaceful study at his own pace, in his own place. It all went wrong. He was plagued by melancholy humour. By way of escape he started to write. He gave an account of all this to explain how he came to begin what he calls 'this daft undertaking'. '*Cette sotte entreprise*' is a strong expression; it stuck. Pascal echoed it, referring to the 'daft project' which Montaigne had of painting his own portrait (*Pensées* II. 62).

At this stage Montaigne wondered what could save him from damning criticism – perhaps only the strangeness and novelty of it all. How odd his book must seem! Perhaps its 'phantastical' nature would see it through:

> It was a melancholy humour – and therefore a humour very inimical to my natural complexion, produced by the moroseness of the solitude I cast myself into a few years ago – which first put into my head this *resverie* of meddling with writing (II. 8, p. 69).

Resverie is one of those misleading words: here it means not vague dreaming but mad frenzy. (François de Sales uses it the same way in his *Traité de l'amour de Dieu* VII. 9: 'in *resverie* and frenzy, beyond use of reason.') Under the influence of melancholy adust, peculiarly dangerous to a man newly plunged into a life of retirement, Montaigne conceived the idea of portraying himself, of assaying himself. It was the kind of notion that might have occured to a lunatic.

Any author may play down his work: Montaigne went well beyond convention. His terms mean that people might judge his undertaking to be insane. His self-imposed task was *farouche et extravagant*, 'wild and abnormal'.

It is understandable that he felt that way. He was breaking absolutely new ground. We do find self-awareness in the Renaissance – in the exiled poet Clément Marot, in the melancholy Du Bellay of the *Regrets*, in an erratic scholar like Cardano of Ferrara. But Montaigne outstripped them all. He looked into himself and found things strange and monstrous. According to Burton (I. 3, 1, 3) sufferers from an access of melancholy do just that: 'there is nothing so vain, absurd, ridiculous, extravagant, impossible, incredible, so monstrous a chimera', that they will not imagine.

Montaigne found that out for himself. He had hoped that his soul would 'entertain itself'. Nothing of the sort happened; on the contrary, his soul bolted off like a runaway horse, giving birth 'to so many chimeras, so many fantastical monsters, one after the other, without order, without sense, that, so as to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness', he started to write them down (I. 8; end; cf. II. 8 beginning).

In the chapter in which he admits the role of an access of melancholy humour in the genesis of his work, he was led to reflect on one melancholic he knew who was brought to such a sorry state by his melancholy that, when Montaigne visited him, he had already spent twenty-two years in his room, without once going outside (II.8, p. 79f.). Even less extreme cases could be troublesome to a man withdrawing to his country fastness. Montaigne learned that a soul left to its own devices was like a fallow field: the 'agitations' which shook it might well bring forth a crop of madness: 'There is no *folie* or *rêverie* which it will not bring forth in that agitation' (I. 8, beginning). Strong words indeed.

The melancholy humour which beset Montaigne, high up and isolated in his bookish retreat, was indeed, as he states, hostile to his natural complexion: it upset the balance of his native temperament (melancholy tempered by the sanguine), tilting it toward melancholy adust. Montaigne risked becoming 'unbalanced', with the distinct possibility of mental disturbances.

In *Il Penseroso* Milton wrote of 'the Melancholic in his lonely tower'. Such, quite literally, was Montaigne.

2. Bravery and pedantry

Montaigne conquered this melancholy adust with its drive towards mad extremes by the strength of his recovered balanced temperament. Meanwhile he meditated on the curious links which brought frenzied scholars and soldiers close together.

The most interesting example of this comes in the chapter on solitude:

> That man you can see over there, furiously beside himself, scrambling high up the ruins of that battlement, the target of so many volleys from harquebuses; and that other man, all covered with scars, wan, pale with hunger, determined to burst rather than to open the gate to him! Do you think they are in it for themselves? It could well be for somebody they have never seen, someone plunged, meanwhile, in idleness and delights, who takes no interest in what they are doing.
>
> And this man over here, rheumy, filthy, blear-eyed, whom you can see coming out of his workroom after midnight! Do you think he is looking in his books for ways to be better, happier, wiser? Not a bit. He will teach posterity how to scan the verse of Plautus and spell a Latin word, or else die in the attempt (I. 39, p. 314).

Both soldier and scholar are furiously 'beside themselves'; prepared to die for things that do not really matter.

3. A place of one's own

The remedy for such frenzies is one which a balanced melancholy complexion provides for the man who knows how to cultivate it – especially when he is older. When he is young a good man must espouse his wife, not simply take her. But now, with old age, the time approaches when every knot must be untied save one. The exception is that last knot of all, the knot by which the soul is espoused to the body till death it do part; that must be strengthened. Now even the claims of a beloved wife and the sexual embrace must be relaxed:

> (A) God gives us time to make things ready for our departure. Let us prepare for it. Let us pack our bags and take our leave of the company in good time; let us untangle ourselves from those violent holds which engage us elsewhere and take us away from ourselves. We must unknot those strong binding obligations and,

from this day forward, love this and that but marry nothing but ourselves (I. 39, p. 315).

Montaigne is writing about solitude – about being alone in lonely places. He insists – from experience – that a wise man does not wildly retreat to a wilderness. Solitude must be prepared for. In any case real solitude is within us. We must learn how to be alone, how to lose those we love. In death we shall lose the lot.

We must not allow the soul to roam wildly about on fantastical flights of fancy, as unbalanced melancholics do. It is at home in the body. Bring it home and keep it there. That is the way to find real solitude. It is not enough to 'get away from the crowd out there: we must get away from the crowd inside ourselves'. We suffer from an illness of the soul: the soul needs the whole of man to help it; by itself it cannot escape outside obligations:

(A) So we must bring it back, pull it back to us. That is what true solitude is. You can enjoy it in the midst of towns and in the courts of kings, but more conveniently apart (I. 39, p. 312).

The wise man, unlike the man of furious enterprise, binds his soul to his body; that is the antithesis of ecstasy. It enables wise people to carry their own solitude about with them. It is not a question of rejecting those whom we love but of slackening the ties which bind us to them; in one way or another all will be broken, if only by death: 'We should have wives, children, goods and, especially, health – if we can. But we must not so bind ourselves to them that our happiness depends on them':

(A) We should set aside an *arriereboutique*, a room, just for ourselves, at the back of the shop, keeping it entirely free and founding there our true liberty and our principal place of retreat and solitude (I. 39, p. 313).

Montaigne delighted in expressing his wisdom in everyday words. *Arriereboutique* is one of them: everybody can be a philosopher, if all you need is a private room at the back of the shop where no public business is allowed to enter and take over.[1]

[1] Huguet (*Dictionnaire de la langue française du XVIes*) lists many examples of *arriere boutique* in the sense of *arrière pensée* or dissimulation and once only in the sense of 'ultimate resource'. Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionairie of the french and English Tongues*, 1632, after the literal definition ('a back-shop; or back room, used for privat wares, or working in') gives the same two figurative senses: *sans arriere boutique* he renders by 'plainly, openly, wholly' etc., whilst *Il a une arriere boutique* or *il se reserve une arriere boutique* he translates as 'He dissembles, or suppresses as yet his courage or cunning; he reserves, or spares them for his last cast, or for his last effort'. Montaigne uses the term in neither of the figurative senses listed by Cotgrave or Huguet. I know no author before him who did so in his sense.

This famous passage comes in the first version of the *Essays* (1580). It expresses a conviction which Montaigne never departed from. Man's soul is peculiarly fitted for this kind of solitude:

(A) We have a soul capable of turning in on itself; it can keep itself company; it has means of attacking, defending, receiving, giving. Let us not fear that, in a solitude like this, we shall be crouching in boring idleness.

The *Essays* are largely an account of what went on inside Montaigne's 'private room'. But Montaigne could do what he did because he had a temperament fitted to it: 'There are some complexions', as he admitted, 'more suited to these precepts than others are' (I. 39, p. 316).

This calm withdrawal into self was the mark of the equable, sanguine melancholic. Its greatest contrast is with the solitary wildness of the man suffering from melancholy adust, as Montaigne had been when he first came home to live in studious idleness.

It may help us to get closer to Montaigne if we read what others wrote about the same subject. Such matters are attractively expounded, for example, by Jacques de Bosc in a treatise of general interest to male and female psychology, confusingly entitled *L'Honneste femme* (best known from its enlarged edition of 1635). As *The Compleat Woman* it had a considerable influence in England too. Du Bosc insists on the constancy of people blessed with a balanced melancholy complexion. 'They always reserve for themselves a privat roome, where the tempests of Fortune cannot reach. There it is that the soule retires, to maintaine her self in an eternall serenity.'

This 'privat roome' (*place secrette*) is the only place where we can 'consider with an attention less distracted, what we are, when our imagination represents us to ourselves.' Du Bosc

contrasts this with 'the ecstasies which the poets feign.' The image for these is Narcissus gazing in his pond, dangerously seeking himself 'out of himself' (*L'Honneste femme*, 1635, p. 122f.; *The Compleat Woman*, 1639, p. 40f.).

The best complexion of all, according to Du Bosc in his concluding words on melancholy, is one which adds a little sanguine gaiety to the melancholy temperament.

Montaigne did just that.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Love and War

1. Amorous zeal

The Wars of Religion were civil wars, fought to an end or to a standstill. They were marked by the great cruelties of the rival armies. Religious zeal merged into anger (*cholère*), finding satisfaction in exceptional cruelty. Montaigne often described such fighting as *furieux*. He cited the Byzantine theologian Nicetas who condemned the factions of Christian princes in his own day, 'armed not with zeal but with anger' (I. 56, p. 414).

In battle (as in other activities traditionally marked by frenzy, fury, inspired madness or ecstasies of soul or body) Montaigne counselled the control of the various manias connected with them or else their outright rejection. Sometimes, as was the case with sexual intercourse, he sought to replace them by more humane qualities which acknowledge the fact that men and women are souls united with their bodies.

It is, tellingly, in the chapter on cruelty that Montaigne rejects, from his own experience, the kind of sexual embrace that 'transports us outside ourselves' and 'enraptures us in voluptuousness'. In amorous affairs he prefers the image of the chase to the image of the kill (II. 11, p. 131).

2. Religious zeal

Christian culture is badly placed to condemn cruelty. Cruelty is not one of the seven deadly sins. Traditional works of piety or ethics did not usually treat it as a sin at all. Montaigne considered the ferocity of his countrymen pitched against each other and of the Conquistadores with their base mechanical

triumphs over simple people close to nature; he loathed it. The desire for vengeance is a *furieux appetit*, an appetite with a streak of madness in it. He was shielded from it by his natural complexion, which was opposed to all vehemence. If he had been born with 'a more unruly complexion' things would have gone 'pitifully' with him. He had assayed himself and found 'no firmness' in his soul capable of 'maintaining passions' which were even slightly 'mind-departing' (*vehementes*). As for justice, if it goes beyond straight-forward executions of the guilty, then it becomes cruelty too (II. 11, pp. 120, 127, 130, 133).

This absence of passion was cultivated by Montaigne to an extent which can mislead. He refused to use the distorting language of hate even about religious opponents, past or present. The Calvinist leader Beza is condemned for his wrong theology but admitted to be a good erotic poet. Praising Beza's love poetry is partly a way of embarrasing a man later known for his austerity, but it is more than that. The Roman censors objected to his ranging Beza, a heretic, among great contemporary poets. Montaigne believed he was right and stood his ground; he held that 'the magistrate' had exceeded his charge. He never blackened a man he did not agree with.

This would lead one to expect Montaigne to have been in favour of religious tolerance. No doubt he was, but mainly from necessity. 'Freedom of conscience' – religious toleration – was forced on to exhausted warring enemies. Montaigne doubted the wisdom of the policy and accepted it only reluctantly. He believed – out of respect for 'the honour' of the 'religious devotion' of French kings – that 'not being able to do what they wanted, they pretended to want what they were able to do' (II. 19, p. 463).

This policy gave rise to a chain of thoughts within him which afforded him the opportunity of being publicly fair to one of the almost legendary enemies of Christianity.

Freedom of conscience had been the policy of the fourth-century Roman Emperor Julian who compelled rival Christians to tolerate each other in the hope that this *licence* – abusive freedom – would weaken all forms of so quarrelsome and so despicable a religion. Christians in power traditionally did not allow freedom of conscience to rival Christians. Julian did.

Julian had become, like Ganelon or Judas Iscariot, one of the figures from the past whom it was good to hate. It is intriguing to

see how Montaigne treats him. His chapter on freedom of conscience follows hard upon his condemnation of lying and his reminder that, in earlier times, merely verbal attacks of enemies were overlooked by potentates (II. 18, end).

The legends which had been foisted upon Julian by pious hatred are stripped away. Christians had called him the Apostate; his life and morals were decried. As Swinburne recalled, it is alleged that at the end of his life he conceded victory to the pale Galilean. Montaigne examined this legend critically and cast it aside. Julian is presented as an emperor who avoided cruelty and even let his Christian enemies rail against him to his face in public. He was a philosopher who despised the things of this world and who believed in the immortality of the soul. His death was 'somewhat like that of Epaminondas' – high praise: Epaminondas was a very special hero for Montaigne.

Julian was a ruler who was good for the Empire, bad for the Church. It is only after having listed his many good qualities that Montaigne abruptly asserted that 'in matters of religion he was totally vicious' (*vicieux partout*). Montaigne is sometimes said to have tried to 'rehabilitate' Julian the Apostate. He was doing something more unusual: giving a lesson to his warring countrymen. Religious hatred and anger were splashed over books as over battlefields. Montaigne was not worried by the verbal attacks and, by implication, could tolerate any amount of railing or blaspheming. He himself drew strength from a surer Christian age – that of Prudentius, the Catholic poet who lived as a child under the very emperor whom Christians had been encouraged to regard with detestation.

Prudentius is best known to English readers for the Christmas hymn, *Of the Father's heart begotten*. His praise of Julian comes in another poem on the divinity of Christ:

> I remember that in my boybood there was the most valiant leader in war of all the emperors, a founder of laws, famed for his skill with tongue and hand. He was devoted to our country but not to the maintenance of true religion – loving as he did three thousand gods. He was faithless to God, not faithless to the world he governed:
>
> *Perfidus ille deo: quamvis non perfidus orbi (Apotheosis, 450-5).*

This serene judgment, which upset Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* XXII, end), since he wanted Christians to

appear as intolerant bigots, is the one adopted by Montaigne. He certainly adopted the same tone. No one is gratuitously attacked in the *Essays*. The good qualities of enemies are noted and praised. Nowhere does Montaigne's zeal become vehement anger. This does not mean that he thought it wise to follow the policies of Julian, though one might be forced to. He would tolerate Reformed worship reluctantly if he had to. He would loyally have served a legitimate Protestant king. When he fought for the Roman Catholic faith he fought with no needless cruelty. Against influential opinion in his Church, he was convinced that torture or quartering were wanton cruelty. And, in real life, he supported the legitimate claims of Henry of Navarre even when a protestant.

One of the fruits of his meditation is a calm refusal to advocate ecstasy in battle or in quarrels about the true religion. What he came to appreciate was moderation in ali things. 'Even when it does not offend me', he wrote, 'the lack of moderation astonishes me – even towards that which is good' (I. 30, p. 258).

CHAPTER NINE

Person to Person

1. Change and decay

In certainty and uncertainty Montaigne was no hater of those who disagreed with him. He found very little to be certain about, in any case.

Where do we find such truths as may be accessible to the natural reason of natural, philosophical man? As far as morals are concerned, sceptics of Montaigne's bent normally took refuge in conservatism, accepting traditional moral and social imperatives as practical guides to conduct. But, conservative though he was, this was not in itself enough for Montaigne. He needed some certainty somewhere, as a base from which to enjoy doubting everything else. Could such a base be found? The Renaissance had its answers. There was little new about many of them, but wider horizons opened even venerable solutions to new criticisms.

Those who knew no Latin were not debarred from an awareness of such questions and solutions, as they spilled over into French, partly in works of vulgarisation but also in great literature. The works of Rabelais alone would suffice to show a Renaissance reader how much could be doubted and where wisdom was said to be available to man. (The only French author picked out for high praise in Montaigne's chapter on books is Rabelais.)

The major division in philosophy was between Platonists and Aristotelians, though in practice many found it possible to harmonise them. Those who followed Plato sooner or later turned for help to the supernatural world. Those who followed Aristotle – especially if they were 'Moderns' or 'Nominalists' – did not

seek any philosophical truths in revelation, which they restricted to the higher discipline of theology. It was possible to be a Platonist in theology and an Aristotelian in philosophy. Montaigne took his matter where he found it. His respect for Socrates did not turn him into a genuine Platonist; he certainly made recognisably important use of the writings of Aristotle, that 'monarch of the Moderns', as he called him, but he read him without 'biting his nails over him' (I. 26, p. 187).[1]

The Renaissance seeker for truth – especially for such truths as can be expressed in language – might turn to Plato's *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*, or to works deriving from them. In the first of these dialogues, Cratylus, like Homer and Heracleitus before him, is portrayed as believing that everything is in a state of flux. Such a notion disturbed Socrates – or Plato, who tells us so – though it was characteristic of Montaigne (III. 2, beginning).

If everything is in a state of flux, so too is language; in which case nothing is knowable in the sense that nothing can be expressed immutably and clearly in language, unless we can discover something unchanging which communicates its stability to both thing and word.

Platonists did not seek this 'something' in the material world. If it was to be found anywhere, it would be in the world of the spirit. This spiritual element may, however, lend some of its stability to things and words as known to man.

Aristotelians, unless influenced by Plato, did not agree. For them there was stability in the world (which is itself eternal). Language, on the other hand, was an arbitrary construct. You would not expect to find truth in words as such – words as such have no link with the superhuman.

These are the kind of problems that form the backcloth to the

[1] It was once normal to dismiss out of hand Aristotle's influence on the *Essais*, to ignore Aristotelianism in general and to pass over scholastic influences completely. Even Villey does so (*Sources et évolution des Essais*, 2nd edition, 1933, pp. 69-72). As for Hugo Friedrich, he is wildly misleading (cf. *Montaigne*, Berne, 1949, p. 74); so are many others. But there is now a considerable interest in these questions, some of which were brought up in Dr Sharratt's Edinburgh colloquy, and in Dr Bolgar's Cambridge one, in 1974. Useful is Edilio Traverso's *Montaigne e Aristotele*, Florence, 1974. The only work I know which overlaps some of the preoccupations of this present book is an original study by A. Compagnon, which repays struggling with: *Nous, Michel de Montaigne*, Paris, 1980. His conclusions are different from mine but very challenging. Among other scholars interested in similar problems is Dr Ian Maclean of Queen's College, Oxford.

Essays when they treat matters related to Renaissance scepticism or Renaissance dogmatism.

2. Platonic forms

A stable language could convey truths about stable things. But language is not stable. How can we overcome this?

One of the ways suggested in the *Cratylus* is to uncover the etymologies of words, so giving access to their *etymon*, the 'truth' which the word allegedly conveys. This theory depends on notions which later views of the world have rendered strange and improbable. It assumes that at the beginning of language there were inspired lexical creators who made words as mirrors of the things they stood for.

This theory presupposes Plato's doctrine of forms (or ideas). The effects of his teachings are still with us, though even in Plato's time the unphilosophical laughed at them.

Since all is in flux in the world of matter, Plato concluded that there must exist, in pure reality, in the higher world of souls, 'forms', which are the ideal patterns of all things which do come into being. Once those forms are even partially known, discourse is possible. Everything there is in the material world of change corresponds to a stable form, which, for Christian Platonists, is an unchanging pattern in the mind of God. Behind the mere fleeting appearances of the material world, there lies the spiritual world of stable, immutable Being (*ousia*). Montaigne believed that Man, on his own, had absolutely no contact with Being:

> (A) Finally there is no constant existence, either in our being or in that of objects. We and our judgment and all mortal things are ceaselessly flowing and rolling. And so nothing certain can ever be established from one to another: both what we judge and what we judge with are in continual change and movement. We have no communication with Being (II. 12, p. 366).

3. How to know individuals

What, then, is to be done? Are Plato's ideal forms the answer? Certainly his doctrine of forms was used to account for what philosophers term universals and individuation – a problem

central to Montaigne. If you call one particular man 'Socrates' – and if he alone bears that name – you know where you are; but how is it that we can use a single universal term, Man, for countless individual human beings? What is the meaning of any such universal term? Is there such a thing as Man apart from countless individual people? How can you know what Man or, indeed, what any universal term means? This matters to Montaigne, whose main concern in the *Essays* is how to live and die as Man.

Revelation apart, the Platonic answer relies on the pre-existence of souls. We are born trailing clouds of memory; our souls dimly recall the forms which are the patterns on which individuals are made. We recognise individuals because we remember forms.

There is a form, Man. It really exists in the spiritual world. Philosophers can get to know that form. They may glimpse it as mirrored in the etymologies of words used for it; they may recall it to mind by the memory within their souls; they may practise dying and so glimpse the spiritual reality of form. Anyone who recalls or glimpses the forms – or is taught by one who has done so – knows what constitutes the humanity, the 'Man-ness', of each individual human being.

This applies to every kind of individuation. For Platonists, certainty begins and ends with the forms. No certainty is to be found anywhere else. If this is true, Montaigne's hunt seems hopeless:

> (A) It is impossible for the pieces to be arranged by anyone who does not have in his head a form of the whole (II.1, p.8).

4. The forms of Aristotle

Aristotle rejected these doctrines of Plato. He did not believe that forms, as Plato described them, existed at all; nor did he have constant recourse to divine promptings when human reason proved inadequate. He did not believe that words have ingeniously or divinely placed etymologies which reveal stable truth about forms – or about anything else. Indeed, apart from onomatopoeias and the like, Aristotle taught that words result from the 'arbitrary imposition' of sound on meaning and so cannot have any genuine links whatever with the things they signify. Words do not picture things nor do they mirror them.

There is no real connexion between word and thing: you cannot get at the truth about a thing from the word used for it in any language; nor is there any need to. Forms for Aristotle are not ideal patterns in the divine mind, but moulds which give common characteristics to all the individual members of a genus and, more particularly, of a species. (Those who did not reach such things in their philosophy schoolbooks could have read them in their Cicero: *Topica* 7.31.)

In Aristotelian physics everything is composed of form and matter; an individual human being is composed of the form Man (which is in some way common to all individuals of the human species) and of matter (which is unique to him as an individual person). The matter makes him a separate individual; the form makes him human.

There are forms so demanding that they use up all the available matter, such as the form of the sun. But as far as mankind is concerned the matter is, for practical purposes, limitless. The form of Man is capable of limitless individuation.

Followers of Aristotle believed in strict definitions. All individuals belong to a genus and a species: an individual human being belongs to the genus Animal and the species Man. We should be able to grasp the essentials of a particular individual from the full definition of its general and specific qualities. In the case of an individual man – Socrates, say, or Montaigne – we should be able to approach him from the 'general' characteristics of the 'genus' Animal and from the 'specific' characteristics of the 'species' Man.

5. Real or nominal?

These Platonic and Aristotelian theories lie behind the claims of the Realists and Nominalists of philosophy before, during and after the Renaissance. Realists claim that universals have a real existence, and thus that the form Man is a reality; Nominalists say that it is only a name.[2]

[2] For an excellent study of the ways in which Realist and Nominalist affected early Renaissance and Reformation thought, see H.A. Oberman, *Masters of the Reformation*, Cambridge, 1981. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century glossed editions of Aristotle are also very helpful. I have used particularly (but by no means exclusively) the edition of Pedro Fonseca, that of the Jesuits of Coïmbra and that of Antonio Scaynus.

Montaigne addressed himself to these matters. He had to, if his work was to have validity. Rational theism is impossible if there are no universals. Christian Nominalists do make Christian doctrines irrational, since they insist that such doctrines exist independently of reason. They are matters for faith alone. On the other hand, Christian Realists tend to devalue the material world, preferring spiritual reality to unstable material things. They place souls not only above bodies – everyone did that – but immeasurably far above.

From the earliest times attempts had been made to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. Divisions between Platonist and Aristotelian, Realist and Nominalist, are not always stark and sharply defined, but Montaigne could not avoid taking up positions. He wanted to know an individual person: himself. He also wanted to know what natural philosophy had to tell Man about wise living and wise dying.

He 'assayed' himself in order to find out.

CHAPTER TEN

Assays and Resolutions

1. The footloose soul

Montaigne contrasts assays with solutions: 'If my soul could only find a footing, I would not be assaying myself but resolving myself' – *je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois* (III. 2, p. 21).

No final resolution of the problem of identity is, in human terms, possible: the world is compounded of constant and age-long change (*une branloire perenne*). Even great natural features such as the Caucasus and huge man-made buildings like the Pyramids are not exempt. Man, more volatile, changes from moment to moment. What one calls constancy is merely a slower rate of change – a body blow aimed at Stoics for whom constancy is the principal virtue.

Montaigne cannot portray absolute being, only his becoming-and-passing-away – *Je ne peins pas l'estre, je peins le passage.*

These themes, developed at the beginning of his chapter on repentance (III. 2), take up what was said even more powerfully at the conclusion of the apologia for Sebond:

> 'the whole of human nature is always in between birth and dying, so that it gives only a dark appearance and shadow of itself, an uncertain, weakly opinion.' (II. 12, pp. 366-7; quoting from Plutarch).

Since the gulf separating man from the Being of God is absolute, to cross it man needs a miracle; God must go beyond the order of things and lend him a hand. Plato's ideal forms are not part of the natural order of things. Even if they do exist, the mass of

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