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Wisdom

Michel de Montaigne: the man who invented the essay by writing about himself

A French nobleman who withdrew to his tower at 38, the question "What do I know?" and why his books are still read more than four centuries later

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In 1571, at the age of 38, the French nobleman **Michel de Montaigne** decided to withdraw from public life. He shut himself in the tower of the family château near Bordeaux, where he kept his library. On the ceiling beams he had carved sayings from Greek and Latin authors. There he began to write.

"Trials" of thought

The French word *essai* means "trial" or "attempt". Montaigne called his texts *Essais* because in them he tested his judgement on very different subjects: friendship, fear, the cannibals of the New World, thumbs, the education of children, death. The first two books were published in 1580; an expanded edition with a third book appeared in 1588.

What was new was the voice. Montaigne did not write as an authority but as a man thinking aloud, who changes his mind, who admits his own weaknesses and contradictions. He wrote that he himself was the matter of his book.

"What do I know?"

In 1576 Montaigne had a medal made with the question *Que sais-je?*, "What do I know?", and a pair of scales in balance. He had been influenced by ancient scepticism: the idea that we should be careful with our certainty, because the senses and reason can deceive us. This led him not to despair but to humility and curiosity.

> *Of his friendship with the writer Étienne de La Boétie, who died young, Montaigne wrote that he had loved him "because it was he, because it was I".*

Death and ordinary life

In an early essay Montaigne repeats the ancient idea that to philosophise is to learn to die. Later, having seen ordinary people face illness and death calmly, his emphasis shifted: what matters most is learning to live well. He believed that every person, even the most ordinary, bears within himself the whole form of the human condition.

Montaigne was not only a recluse. Between 1581 and 1585 he served as mayor of Bordeaux, at a time of religious wars in France.

Cannibals and barbarism

One of Montaigne's best-known essays is "Of Cannibals". Drawing on the accounts of people who had been to Brazil and on a meeting with some natives brought to France, he wrote that each person calls barbarism whatever is not their own custom. He even suggested that the tortures Europeans inflicted on one another in the name of religion might be more barbaric than ritual cannibalism. At the time of the wars of religion in France, this was a bold view that challenged the sense of European superiority.

A well-made head

In his essay on the education of children, Montaigne wrote that it is better to have a well-made head than a well-filled one. He criticised learning texts by heart and asked that the pupil learn to judge for himself, to travel, to talk with different people and to test knowledge in life. The teacher, according to him, should let the pupil speak and listen to him, instead of only speaking to him. Many of these ideas still sound modern today, more than four centuries later.

Travel and kidney stones

In 1580 and 1581 Montaigne travelled through Switzerland, Germany and Italy, partly in search of thermal waters that he hoped would help against the kidney stones from which he suffered badly. He kept a travel journal, in which he recorded with curiosity the customs, food and people he met, as well as the state of his health. This journal remained unknown for almost two centuries and was published only in 1774, after it was found in the family château.

The Bordeaux copy

Montaigne never considered the *Essays* finished. In a copy of the 1588 edition, known today as the "Bordeaux Copy", he went on adding hundreds of handwritten notes and additions until his death in 1592. After his death, the writer Marie de Gournay, whom he called his "adopted daughter", prepared the 1595 edition. Scholars still debate which version is closer to the author's final wishes.

Shakespeare and Montaigne

In 1603 John Florio published the English translation of the *Essays*. Scholars have long noticed that in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, the speech of the character Gonzalo about an ideal society without property, trade or rulers follows very closely a passage from "Of Cannibals" in Florio's translation. This is one of the clearest pieces of evidence that Shakespeare had read Montaigne. His influence continued later in Pascal, Rousseau and Nietzsche, among many others, and he is still read today as one of the founders of the modern essay.

What we can learn

1. **Write in order to think.** A page written about a question that troubles you clears the mind.
2. **Accept that you may be wrong.** "What do I know?" is a healthy question before any

debate.

3. **Observe yourself without harsh judgement.** Montaigne noted his habits and weaknesses with curiosity, not shame.
4. **Read the ancients, but think for yourself.** He quoted many authors, but always to answer with his own thought.

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