

INTRODUCTION



Over the centuries, Montaigne's *Essais* have gradually lost their historical character. It could certainly be said that this is the fate of great texts that enter the cultural patrimony of modern societies. Universality demands the erasure of temporality, and in the case of Montaigne we have to recognize that the author saw to it that all that remained was the famous literary portrait of himself (*peinture du moi*), the model and "pattern" (*patron*) of "the human condition."¹ Lord Michel de Montaigne, knight of the Order of Saint Michael, gentleman of the chamber of the kings of France and Navarre, mayor and governor of Bordeaux—titles and offices duly mentioned on the title pages of the first editions of the *Essais* in 1580 and 1582—has slowly given way to the generic Montaigne—without a first name or a social status—to which we are now accustomed: a Montaigne dissociated from history.

Philosophers and specialists in literary studies emphasize this universal, atemporal Montaigne, but too often they ignore the royal servant and public official, just as they underestimate the role played in his conduct by professional choices and career strategies. But for all that let us not condemn the critics. Montaigne himself demands that a distinction be drawn between the private and the public: "The mayor and Montaigne have always been two, with a very clear separation."¹ This famous declaration has caused much ink to flow and has often been taken at face value. When he wrote, the author of the *Essais* is supposed to have laid aside the mayor's finery and at the same time the social dimension that made him a political actor in his time. However, a long study of the *Essais*, illuminated by the historical context, teaches us that we must not always take Montaigne at his word. As he himself recognizes, the perception and interpretation of events and human actions is often adapted to the circumstance and to subjective considerations that emanate from the moment at which they are experienced or reported. That is why one's "history needs to be adapted to the moment."² Writing often reflects an adjustment that has to do with the social practices of a period, and the artificial separation of the private from the public sometimes results in a failure to take them into account.

Setting out to write a biography of Montaigne requires us to look into the historicity of the *Essais*, that is, into their situation in the political and social

¹ This expression is not a hapax legomenon, as has been claimed, because it appears six times in the *Essais*, including three times in the 1580 edition.

practices of the late French Renaissance. Must we disregard history in the name of an atemporal objectivization of the man and his work in order to facilitate the constitution of a philosophical object? Or are we, on the contrary, obliged to reconstitute the political dimension of a text that, while claiming that it does not take up the problems of its time, can nonetheless not escape them? In short, is it possible to provide a political reading of the *Essais* while at the same time preserving the philosophical and literary dimension of this text that is foundational for modernity? Here I have not focused on Montaigne's genius or wisdom, because it would be very difficult to situate in his period concepts that were popularized and propagated only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, I have concentrated solely on Montaigne's career as an author in relation to his ambitions and political activity.

Without denying the aesthetic and stylistic value of the *Essais*, I will approach Montaigne's work on the basis of the functions it might have had at various points in the author's life. Written over a period of twenty years, the *Essais* were published four times during Montaigne's lifetime, in different cities and in different formats. Each edition differs from the preceding one not only in its content and form but also in the publishing and political project that accompanies it. Rather than an evolution of Montaigne's thought, we note, on the contrary, successive transformations of a text that refer to conceptions, distinct and sometimes contradictory, of political commitment and public service. To understand these mutations of the text in the course of the various editions, we must therefore approach it—without neglecting the other works—on the basis of a sociopolitical analysis that will allow us to grasp these separate objects in their specific historical contexts and to discern their respective functions over time.

Did Montaigne create a book so unique and imbued with such a marked idiosyncrasy that it eludes sociological analysis? No, because the *Essais* also bear witness to a period. Can this book be situated within a social group or order that influenced its literary and philosophical production? Does it bear the trace of its author's social origins, his upbringing, and his career expectations? I think it does. Such a proposition will appear dangerous to literary scholars, because it tends to chip away at the pedestal on which Montaigne has stood since the early nineteenth century. My goal is not to praise his judgment or to make him an author in quest of freedom, but rather to evaluate the way in which the writing and publication of the *Essais* were the result of more worldly concerns and intentions. It is possible to become a great writer while at the same time pursuing more frivolous and material ends, because literature inevitably passes through the social and the political.

Questions of Method and the Politics of a Book

The literary and philosophical constitution of the *Essais* was influenced by Montaigne's need to realize his political ambitions and aspirations. We have to demystify the conventional image of the essayist isolated in his tower, far from the agitations of his time, playing with his cat and inquiring into the human condition. Even when he retired from society, the author of the *Essais* aspired to rejoin it and resume his political service. Every retirement implies the taking of a position and a reaction with regard to a particular conjunctural situation in which the individual concludes that he no longer has a place. This conclusion is political in nature. Writing is conceived in its social context, which necessarily includes the people with whom the writer spends time and who directly or indirectly influence his projects for publication as a translator, editor, and author. From his relatives and friends to the king, by way of his colleagues in the parliament, neighboring lords, humanists in Bordeaux, Protestant and Catholic military leaders, members of the Bordeaux *jurade*,ⁱⁱ and the highest officials of the kingdom—all these influenced, at one time or another, the conception and composition of the *Essais*. In its literary expression, Montaigne's self exists only in relation to others, that is, in a system of interactions that are certainly singular, but multiple, and of which the *Essais* provides the right measure.

Montaigne's philosophical thought—which, moreover, he refuses to define as such—is part of what he calls a “comedy,” more a social than a human comedy, because its rules are temporal. Montaigne cites Petronius: “The whole world plays a part.”³ All occupations are merely “farcical,” and each person has to play his role. Life itself is a comedy in four acts, or in four seasons, as Montaigne reminds us: “And at worst, the distribution and variety of all the acts of my comedy runs its course in a year. If you have taken note of the revolution of my four seasons, they embrace the infancy, the youth, the manhood, and the old age of the world. It knows no other trick than to begin again. It will always be just this.”⁴ Human actions are repeated over time and are thus foreseeable. Politics is transformed into a social science insofar as it takes an interest in the recurrence of behaviors in time and tries to define rules in the service of the prospect of gaining or maintaining power. That is the whole project of Machiavelli, a counselor and historian in the service of the prince. Montaigne distantly echoes the discourse of the time and takes cognizance of the multiple roles that everyone has to play in life.

The world is the theater of our actions, and Montaigne—who we know was interested in theater while he was studying at the College of Guyenne—was on

ⁱⁱ The name given to Bordeaux's municipal council under the Old Régime. [Trans.]

several occasions in the forefront of the political arena, acting before a local, regional, and then national audience.⁵ Like many of his contemporaries, he also knew how to playact, even if he repeatedly warns the reader against masks and appearances. Public responsibilities require one to play a role.⁶ These stagings are the matter of the *Essais*, even if Montaigne later chose to accord them less value, or even to forego any reference to them. From 1560 to 1592, during the Wars of Religion, Montaigne tried out several roles—offices that he called “borrowed” or “temporary” when he passed on to other projects, other responsibilities, other stages. But we have the feeling that when Montaigne occupied a public office, he believed in it fully, at least at first. It was only later on, with the appropriate distance, that he analyzed the success or failure of his tryouts. These political experiences provided him with an opportunity to define more clearly the moral boundaries of public service: “I am called to a more worthy role; so if anyone wanted to employ me to lie, to betray, and to perjure myself for some notable service, even to if not to assassinate or poison, I would say: If I have robbed or stolen from any man, send me rather to the galleys.”⁷ The “more worthy role” Montaigne mentions is the product of a later assessment made possible only in light of the experiments he carried out in various public offices.

It seems illusive to approach the *Essais* as if it were a fixed philosophical or literary object, without taking into account the historical context of its writing over two decades. What interests us here is the production of the *Essais* and other works by Montaigne in their immediate relationship to the market, considering them as objects conceived in a network of exchange and consumption. The works Montaigne translated, edited, and wrote corresponded to particular expectations at the time, but they were also perceived as “novelties” that allow their author to distinguish himself from others and to innovate with respect to codified social practices. These objects had multiple functions and were all, in their own way, part of essentially political strategies. The publication of the *Essais* in 1580 represents a literary event, to be sure, but it must also be approached as a *social fact*, that is, a way or mode of being and appearing.

The various works Montaigne published will be analyzed here as “social objects” that sometimes go beyond individual intentions and have to do with collective behaviors. Montaigne’s particular choices regarding publication have to be understood in the framework of the political conditions and practices of his time. Similarly, the personal opinions expressed in a book—even one with the innovative title of *Essais*—participate in the dialogue of a period, with the beliefs, tendencies, and inclinations peculiar to a group, order, or social class. The conditions and modalities of these collective habits are transmitted and perpetuated by ideologies. At the end of the nineteenth century, in a passage that foreshadows Pierre Bourdieu’s analyses, the sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote: “Collective custom does not exist only in a state of immanence in the successive

actions which it determines, but, by a privilege without example in the biological kingdom, expresses itself once and for all in a formula repeated by word of mouth, transmitted by education and even enshrined in the written word.”⁸ We will examine Montaigne’s works in the context of the social and cultural practices of the late Renaissance, all of which are connected with social orders—clerics, nobles, magistrates, bourgeois—but are also illuminated by corporatist and clientelist behaviors, notably in parliamentary, diplomatic, and administrative milieus (the *jurade* of the city of Bordeaux for example), not to mention the middle-level nobility of Guyenne.

The private is transformed into objective reality for others. In fact, the dichotomy that seems to exist between the private and the public disappears as soon as one considers that every social fact is also the realization in time of apparent “individual facts.” Studying Montaigne and his thought consists in looking *around* the author to understand the milieu from which he came, his family’s social itinerary, the upbringing he received, and the ideological and political convictions of the circle of friends and nobles that facilitated his entry into the Cour des Aidesⁱⁱⁱ in Périgueux and then the parlement of Bordeaux, and that placed him at the head of that city and propelled him to the royal Court. His first writings (the translation of Raymond Sebond in 1569, the edition of La Boétie’s works in 1571, and the publication of the first edition of the *Essais* in 1580) served as springboards for gaining access to careers as a member of the parlement and as an ambassador or diplomat. Each publication allowed him to develop a conversation with a restricted group and to assert that he was a member of it. As Durkheim notes, the individual always acts as part of a group, because every personal act is situated in “collective *modes of being*.”⁹ Similarly, Montaigne and the *Essais* have modes of being. These represent various roles for different audiences; they are based on shared ideologies. The flagrant contradictions in the *Essais* acquire meaning if they are seen in light of the preceding careers or professional choices. In Montaigne’s case, these modes of being are fundamentally political, because they seek to shape and control the social image fashioned by the individual in a precise conjunctural framework. Therefore I will emphasize the political dimension of what has been called the “self-fashioning” (another mode of being) of late Renaissance authors.¹⁰ The representation of the political can sometimes resemble a poetics, that is, it can facilitate the adaptation of the episodes of a life to the topoi prescribed by current literary genres.¹¹

If the seventeenth century can be defined as a stage in the process of civilization marked by the appearance of a Court society, the sixteenth century was

ⁱⁱⁱ The *Cours des Aides* were appellate courts dealing primarily with fiscal and financial matters. [Trans.]

similarly characterized by the emergence of another kind of Court society—that of the parlement. It was the transfer of the culture of the magistrates of the late Renaissance to the milieu of the middle-level nobility—by means of complex but clearly defined strategies of passage—that forced the high nobility of the sword to turn in on itself and concentrate its distinctive behaviors in a single place (the Louvre or Versailles), which Louis XIV later transformed into a unique space of sociability. The decline of the low and middle nobility throughout the sixteenth century and the regrouping of the values of the nobility in a system of even more regulated etiquette made it possible for a time to produce the illusion of a sociability that led to the civilizing process Norbert Elias analyzed.¹² However, the sociogenesis of modern sociability obliges us to consider the parlements of the sixteenth century as essential spaces in the period's social and political relationships, because simply by circumventing the strict rules of membership in the Old Régime's three orders, they helped redefine the very idea of nobility and changed forever the social relationships that emerged from the Middle Ages.

In a system of mutual dependency with regard to the nobility and in accord with the codes and behaviors specific to members of the parlements, the culture of the magistrates gave rise to new strategies of social ascent. Montaigne's case in particular allows us to study the passage from one court society to the other. In fact, his first career as a member of a parlement, with its rules of etiquette and its logic of prestige inherited from its corporatist organization, soon gave way to a system of values expressing a nobility that revealed itself more in its way of life than in the signs usually displayed by that order. The *Essais* have a sociological interest insofar as they bear the mark of this shift from one culture to the other and allow us to retrace, by studying their publication history, the steps that eased the transition from a parliamentary court society to a Court society proper.

Without being aware that his acts were part of a *habitus* (to borrow Bourdieu's term), which does not mean that he could not have identified with a group or clientele, or even opted for alliances that were temporary and sometimes unnatural, Montaigne nonetheless expresses himself in the name of a constituted entity, and thus it is possible to approach his particular acts from a sociological point of view. Beneath the veneer of institutions and sometimes in contradiction with the orders, groups, or clienteles to which they belong, individuals also have personal aspirations that must not be underestimated.¹³ Montaigne learned to adapt to the worlds he joined, and he knew how to incorporate himself into networks, but he did hesitate to assert his independence with regard to his models when his models no longer corresponded to his expectations. We might say that Montaigne spent a large part of his life distinguishing himself from groups he had nonetheless avidly sought to join, or from individuals

with whom he had at first felt a certain intellectual or political affinity. He became expert at justifying his choices, his errors, and himself in general.^{iv}

In the case of Montaigne, no philosophical reflection extracted from the *Essais* can be dissociated from a relationship to the collectivity; Montaigne's way of life and his way of thinking express and also determine a collective life and thought. For this reason, it seems to me difficult to dissociate literature, philosophy, and politics. Traditional history has often highlighted a few "exceptional" thinkers who, thanks to their writings, are supposed to have made possible the emergence of capitalism and modern science (Luther, Calvin, Copernicus, Galileo), as if the two automatically went together in a broader conception of modernity. According to this approach, a teleological or theological discourse characteristic of the Renaissance gave rise to new economic and scientific behaviors. Simple *qualitative* changes in the spiritual domain are even supposed to have made it possible to redefine and reorient society's economic and political organization. This form of psychological determinism, which gives priority to the individual as the motive force in history seems inadequately founded when past centuries are being studied. Rejecting this idealist view of history, I have not made Montaigne a genius or a sage. On the contrary, he was a man like others, with dreams and desires that were to be expected in his period.

The typical career course of other individuals belonging to the same collective way of life helps us imagine Montaigne's aspirations. His discourse, which at first seems unusual, follows socially coded guidelines and forms that are observable in the "social facts" (and not only in the historical events) of his time. Montaigne's particular type of consciousness—his way of life and his point of view—produces common practices. So Montaigne's sense is also common sense. Our approach here understands the discourse and actions of a single agent as revelatory of the expression of a group. For example, we will have to ask whether the private character of Montaigne's opinions was shared by other members of the group to which he belonged. It is in that perspective that we will interpret his adhesion to (and then rejection of) the magistrates' ideology (Montaigne's

^{iv} The works of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot (*De la justification: Les économies de la grandeur*. Paris: Gallimard, 1991) have made it possible to foreground this construction on two levels—collective will and particular interest—which leads to a "common superior principle" in which individuals constantly adapt to the new situations they encounter in different worlds and thus arrive at a compromise that satisfies them. The justification for this compromise inevitably leads to a relativization of the common good because of the individual's questioning and detachment vis-à-vis the norms and values of the common good. Montaigne constantly practiced this mode of social interaction, which allowed him to free himself from the authorities and dogmas that limited his possibilities of societal and political action.

first career was as a member of the Bordeaux parlement), his activity as mayor in the service of the Bordeaux nobility, and finally the aristocratic aspirations made visible through the noble values he declares in his writings.

These social and political groups—in the regional milieu of Guyenne and the city of Bordeaux in the late sixteenth century—express ideologies that are sometimes contradictory but are nonetheless connected when they are analyzed in relation to the production of the *Essais*. Montaigne's thought is obviously paradoxical if it is reduced to a text presented in a homogeneous way, in a single edition, but the divergences among the three “strata” of the *Essais* (1580, 1588, 1595) are no longer abnormal or paradoxical if they are considered in the unstable, changing historical and political climate of the Wars of Religion. Thus in my analysis I will seek to take into account the temporality of writing and publishing the *Essais*. Many of the peremptory and often discordant statements acquire a very different meaning when they are seen in their immediate social and political context. It does not suffice to study Montaigne's political thinking in his writings—that has been done many times;¹⁴ instead, we need to see how this thinking is articulated with social and professional practices related to particular periods in Montaigne's life. In this sense, Montaigne's political thought often responds to punctual situations. That is why I have given priority to the study of the relations between immediate history and the publication of the different editions of the *Essais*. Sociological and historical approaches help us understand the rather complex publication history of the *Essais*, particularly in their relation to the works of Raymond Sebond and Estienne de La Boétie. Montaigne's publications are closely linked with his professional ambitions and his political career. I will argue that Montaigne actually tried his hand at politics by developing his activities as translator, editor, and author.

The various printings of Montaigne's books exist as objects independent of one another: first his translation of Raymond Sebond's *Theologia naturalis* (1569 and 1581); then his editing of La Boétie's works (1571)—including the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, which Montaigne initially intended to publish, and the *Memorandum* on the edict of January 1562, which he preferred not to discuss; the journal of his journey through Germany, Switzerland, and Italy (written in 1580 and 1581); the editions of the *Essais* published in 1580, 1582, and 1588; and finally the manuscript additions in the Bordeaux Copy,^v which

^v What is now commonly called the *Exemplaire de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux Copy) is a printed copy of the last edition of the *Essais* published during Montaigne's lifetime, brought out by Abel L'Angelier in 1588. This copy is annotated in the author's hand and includes numerous additions, suppressions, corrections, typographical modifications, substitutions of words, changes in punctuation and spelling, and stylistic variations. But it is above all the textual developments, which Montaigne calls the last *allongueil* (“extension,” “prolongation”), written between autumn 1588 and September 13, 1592 (the date

extend from 1588 to 1592. All these texts respond to specific publishing strategies and were influenced by political considerations. The Sebond and La Boétie “affairs” showed Montaigne how necessary it was to clear away potential dangers in matters of publication politics. How could he say things without giving the impression that he was committing himself too much to one side or the other? The very form of the essay might be a response to this great question of political engagement that marks the end of the French Renaissance. In this sense, Montaigne is indeed a *politique*—in the sixteenth-century meaning of the term, but also in its modern sense—in the successive politics of publishing he adopted. His writing never claims to be definitive; it remains tentative while waiting to be confirmed or disconfirmed by the events of his time.

A reading of the *Essais* in light of their author’s successive political engagements does not put in question the originality of the work. Montaigne often distances himself from the political practices of his time, but the reactions and judgments expressed in the *Essais* sometimes led him to develop an idealist view of politics. All the same, the quest for universals does not dispense one from assuming political responsibilities, and Montaigne recognizes that political responsibilities cannot be avoided by those who occupy administrative or military offices. Morality results from an ongoing construction and cannot be fixed. The temporality of public life was a reality that Montaigne never ignored.

Before working out the theory of politics, Montaigne passed through the practice of politics. The goal of this study is to relate the two inseparable aspects of his life: literature and political action. Private life and public life cannot be detached from each other in a permanent way. If the *Essais* are now an essentially philosophical or literary object, we still have to understand the relationship that this allegedly private object entertained, through its successive editions, with events or political positions taken by its author and other political actors of his time. When Montaigne takes an interest in ancient philosophers, he considers first of all their lives, drawing no dividing line between the private and the public. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives*, in Jacques Amyot’s French translation, remained his favorite book, and he tells us why: “those who write biographies, since they spend more time on plans than on events, more on what comes from within than on what happens without, are most suited to me.”¹⁵ This movement that begins “from the inside” and rejoins the social and political world is the object of the present biography of Montaigne.

Montaigne specialists long refused to take an interest in the author’s life. It was Dr. Payen, an avid collector of everything that had to do with Montaigne, who best formulated this position when he asserted, in the middle of the nine-

of his death), that make the Bordeaux Copy a unique object whose peculiarity is to be both a manuscript and a printed text.

teenth century, that “Montaigne’s biography does not have to be written in order to know his character, his genius, the influence he received from his time and the influence he exercised. . . . Montaigne’s life is all in the *Essais*.”¹⁶ There we find an interpretive credo that long remained dominant in Montaigne studies: it is pointless to look outside the *Essais*, because the book itself constitutes the author’s biography. The *Essais* have even been approached as a full-fledged autobiography.¹⁷ Couldn’t the man’s character, his passions, convictions, and frustrations, all be found in it? This biographical reading of the *Essais* was long based on the sincerity and honesty Montaigne claimed. His life, reconstructed on the basis of information gleaned from the *Essais*, made it possible to discern a unity of the man on the basis of a *uniform text*. Everything tended toward a single project, that of the fully realized man. The “last Montaigne” was already present in the “first Montaigne,” in accord with a logic of the evolution of the text that is founded on a synthetic, unifying model. The two great specialists on Montaigne in the twentieth century, Pierre Villey¹⁸ and Hugo Friedrich,¹⁹ remained the prisoners of this illusion of a “finished” text and of the “constitutiveness” of the man and his work, basing their interpretations on ideas present in the *Essais* and discerning in them successive stages that led ineluctably to a kind of successful realization of a life, generally called “wisdom” (*sagesse*). Confronting a “finished” text—namely, the posthumous edition of the *Essais*—critics still tend to approach Montaigne through an evolutionary schema: Stoic, Epicurean, Skeptic, and finally sage—the order of this progression varying depending on the period.

Would Montaigne’s name be known to history without the publication of his *Essais*? The answer is no. We are accustomed to seeing in him the creator of a new genre, the essay, rather than as a political man. Most of what we know about Montaigne is extracted from his *Essais*, because the documents that present him as a political actor are relatively rare. For that reason, it is difficult to speak of Montaigne’s life without drawing on his writings. Most of Montaigne’s biographers have succumbed to this easy solution and have borrowed heavily from the *Essais* in attempting to reconstruct his career as a public man. A large majority of these studies are content to adduce—often at second hand—a few public “moments” in Montaigne’s life, such as the time he spent as mayor of Bordeaux, his conversations with Henry III and Henry of Navarre, his imprisonment, and such. But the goal is always a better understanding of the text of the *Essais*—which, we have to recognize, offer a view of the Wars of Religion and of many of the major events of his time attenuated by forgetfulness or by omission.

The argument advanced to make Montaigne an important political actor is the following: Montaigne (the sixteenth-century author), being Montaigne (the author incorporated into our modern literary canon), must necessarily have

known the great men of his time and was undoubtedly admired by his contemporaries. How could it be otherwise? Who wouldn't want Montaigne to be at the royal Court, conversing with De Thou, Duplessis-Mornay, and Pasquier, or in regular correspondence with princes and military leaders? A few of these meetings and conversations actually took place, but they were almost always conjunctural and relatively exceptional. That does not mean, however, that Montaigne did not try to make his way into the closed milieus that were the Bordeaux parlement or the royal Court. Montaigne's personal ambition has not been granted the place it deserves. He has often been compared with other great writers and poets of the sixteenth century by attributing an exuberant sociability to him. This may be a retrospective illusion, for what critic would not have liked to meet the author of the *Essais* to speak with him about his book? At the opposite extreme from this approach we find the proponents of a Montaigne retired to his tower and silent about the political and religious tribulations during the Wars of Religion.

Today, the technique that consists in browsing through Montaigne's writings in order to extract the important moments of a life is still the point of departure for most biographies of him. Since the nineteenth century, biographers of Montaigne have emphasized the private character of the man, and they have invariably seen his work against the same background. His service as a member of the Bordeaux parlement, mayor, and negotiator are not forgotten, but they hardly influence the construction of the author's literary persona. Public life and private life usually remain separate. However, we must mention a few exceptions to this rule, notably the biographies by Alphonse Grün,²⁰ Bayle Saint John,²¹ Théophile Malvezin,²² and Donald Frame,²³ which accord politics an important place and try to free themselves from an essentially literary perspective on Montaigne's life.²⁴

Nonetheless, the great majority of biographies of Montaigne use history as a background, a decorative mural that serves to bring out the author's singularity. The important stages in Montaigne's life, corresponding to historical events, strengthen a reading that is primarily literary or philosophical, in which the different "Montaignes"—those of childhood, youth, maturity, and wisdom—fit nicely into one another. The goal is to demonstrate the coherence and unity of the text by playing down the role of political and religious turmoil, which are supposed to have left the essayist indifferent. The events or experiences of a life, insofar as they correspond to stages, have meaning only in the apotheosis of a last Montaigne: wise, moderate, and tolerant. Thus the first Montaigne merely offers us a preparatory reading of the last Montaigne, the only one truly worthy of study because he is the objectified sum of the preceding Montaignes. This cumulative reading of Montaigne and his writings expresses the main difficulty the modern reader confronts, a difficulty accentuated by editorial choices that

often amalgamate the various printings of the *Essais*, of which the posthumous edition of 1595 is supposed to be the logical outcome. I shall propose, on the contrary, that readings of the editions of the *Essais* that are distinct and separate in time are better to gauge the multiple printings from 1572 to 1592.

The way in which Montaigne approaches politics has little to do with what the *Essais* have become for us in the twenty-first century. When he translated Raymond Sebond, edited Estienne de La Boétie, or composed his *Essais*, Montaigne was far from imagining a renown that was ultimately rather slow in coming and was essentially posthumous. For him, writing and publishing led to an immediate *benefit* that we can try to quantify. This gain is economic for the printer and symbolic for the author. Getting published corresponds to expectations, because we always write for someone else. The various editions of the *Essais* emanate from strategies elaborated on the basis of logics that differ in time; they take into consideration the ideology of the period; for example, what is “outside the book” (the *hors-livre*), the social function it occupies both for the author and for the reader. For instance, we have to ask what the author’s expectations were. Publication strategies are typically constructed on an anticipation of the impact the book will have on the readers targeted and the possible “returns” on this investment. For that reason, an analysis of Montaigne’s readership is indispensable for interpreting the books he translated, edited, or wrote. Similarly, the reception of a cultural object implies positioning its author in a social, political, or professional network and requires that others be able to identify this object. The categories and genres current in the Renaissance certainly influenced the subjective choices Montaigne made. It would be paradoxical to offer a biography of Montaigne solely in the light of what the author was willing to tell us about his public life, because this political experience necessarily transforms the idea that the individual can have of his private life. His particular remarks are inevitably part of a period’s discourse on the same subject.

This biography of Montaigne closely connects him with the political activity of the groups, orders, or social classes with which he was associated at various times in his life. Whether it was the milieu of the parlement, the Bordeaux bourgeoisie, the middle-level nobility of Guyenne, or the royal Courts in Paris and Nérac, Montaigne understood his publication enterprises in relation to objective expectations on the part of the groups to which he was attached at certain points in his life. Always aware of his reader, Montaigne used him/her as a means of achieving goals that were initially political before they became literary. However, we must not overestimate Montaigne’s importance on the historical level. He was a member of the minor nobility, and his “château” was far from being among the most sumptuous of his region. In Montaigne’s time, “nobility” was a diluted term. It was also a status—or rather a way of life—that Montaigne was later to claim. Until 1580, when he was approaching fifty, he

had achieved nothing noteworthy on either the public or private level. The testimonies of his contemporaries and the memoirs written at the time accord the author of the *Essais* only a small place. No one presents him as a major political actor of the end of the sixteenth century. We find references to Montaigne in the archives, but they are not as important as biographers have claimed. Montaigne played a political role between 1580 and 1588, but that was the case for many other minor lords in Guyenne. His name was hardly on everyone's lips, and we have to keep his political influence in proportion. Thus it is important to avoid the anachronisms resulting from an a posteriori evaluation of Montaigne's place in the history of philosophy and literature.

Some critics have tried to restore a historical dimension to Montaigne, but the studies that have taken this path have been interested only secondarily in publication history, and thus ignore the particular functions of each publication, not only of the *Essais* but also of other texts with which Montaigne is associated. Moreover, biographers who make Montaigne a moralist often adopt an idealistic bias. According to that way of reading, Montaigne always offers a truer and more accurate view of his period. Holed up in his observation tower, he is supposed to have attained an objectivity never equaled by his contemporaries. In my view, this is an error in judgment and method, because the position that claims that the *Essais* express moral truths inevitably leads to an essentialization of Montaigne's thought. On the basis of a "wisdom" present in the *Essais*, there is then a risk of transforming Montaigne's declarations and judgments into maturely considered axioms. That is the whole danger of formulas, aphorisms, and maxims. Hence we will seek to qualify personal judgments by always integrating them into social and cultural practices. Moreover, this approach is in accord with what Montaigne recommends when he says he prefers to project the image of a man devoted to "the moderate measure."²⁵ We will see that he anticipates and pursues his ambitions, maneuvering and intriguing in the same way as those in his cohort. Our procedure will therefore seek to contextualize Montaigne's remarks as much as possible and to situate them in the practices of orders, groups, networks, and clientele.

Is the notion of the self useful for understanding a work in its social and historical context? To the specialist in literature, the answer seems obvious. Yes, clearly, the expression of the self intrigues and fascinates us. As if this concept allowed us to capture the essence of an author and transform it into a model. But in my view this quest for Montaigne's self is both deceptive and doomed to fail, because it confines the author to *his book*, while at the same time making it seem that his experience of people and the world exist only in his difference from others. What do we find, in the end? A genius who admits of no generalization and is distinguished by his exception. It is tempting to classify in this category authors like Shakespeare, Cervantes, Descartes, and others of the same

caliber who form the literary and philosophical canons. Montaigne, on the contrary, interests us by his predictable side when he acts in a codified system of social and professional possibilities, when he acts and thinks like others. Distinguishing oneself from colleagues and companions is not always in good taste, and one has to assert in a timely way one's membership in the group or the order that has allowed one to occupy a place in a social and political network, or to attain a position or an office. If Montaigne often differentiates himself from his neighbors and fellow citizens when he presents himself in the *Essais*, he also shared their ideas when he confronted in his turn the same practical problems. Like many of his contemporaries, he knew how to take advantage of his political options, adapted to the current situation, and took responsibility for his allegiance to the powerful.

There are two ways of proceeding in order to connect the events in a life with a literary or philosophical object. The first is accepting a form of psychological determinism, a variant of the "the man and his works" syndrome. This approach had its adepts in the early twentieth century, and whole series of books were even created on this model, which interprets a text on the basis of a reconstructed psychology (what was then called "the writer's character"), or even in certain cases on the basis of a psychoanalysis. According to this interpretive schema, the text is explained by the writer's strength of character, his personality, emotions, and feelings. The second approach brings biographical elements to bear on the understanding of the text: this is by far the most widespread method today. The goal is to elaborate a relatively vast tableau that makes it possible to place a work in its historical and political context. The author thus becomes the interpreter of a *weltanschauung*. His particular experiences can be understood only in the framework of an epistemology. Liberated from the problems of psychologism, this second way of seeing things falls, however, into another trap, that of reflection. In fact, according to this type of analysis, the literary work is part of the ideological superstructure, which is itself the result of the mode of production and the society's economic infrastructure. This positivist reductionism generally makes the author and the artist simply agents caught in the implacable mechanism of the abstract functioning of power, classes, and the state. The captive of an ideology of which he is not conscious, the author is supposed to merely reproduce a discourse or ideas that are in the air at the time. The biography of an author is assumed to be representative of a group, or even of a social class, which is the only thing worth studying.²⁶

A happy medium between these two approaches is obviously desirable. That is what both Durkheim and Bourdieu sought to produce in their own ways. How can a place be restored to the individual and to the expression of his subjectivity without losing sight of his membership in the social, political, and ideological structures that shape him? This "middle road" seems particularly

pertinent for the study of Montaigne. The two methods described above are a problem that concerns the author of the *Essais*. Tracing the contours of Montaigne's character does not allow us to understand a book written over almost a quarter of a century. Montaigne's celebrated "self" cannot be seen as a fixed object—whence the impossibility of speaking of a character or personality of Montaigne. Movement—that is, the successive transformations of a multifaceted text and its author—has to be taken into consideration.²⁷ However, the notion of movement can lead to a new critical difficulty, because we have to reject the idea of a dialectic of Montaigne's thought based on a quantity of experiences that, when added to one another, would objectively define a future behavior. Montaigne sweeps that methodological premise away with a single sentence: "Myself now and myself a while ago are indeed two; but when better, I simply cannot say."²⁸ No wisdom accumulated through experience, no self that establishes itself. Whence the necessity of approaching the composition of the *Essais* via a biographical approach that is limited in time and based on a schema that gives priority to the *moyenne durée*.^{vi} The problem raised here is that of the limits of the biographical approach that tends to accumulate the important events in a life on the basis of a simple chronology, adding up the experiences and connecting them to one another in an implacable logic that leads to a form of good sense and intellectual maturity. When studying Montaigne, it is impossible to talk about an *accumulated value* of the past. His various experiences do not form a kind of multilayered pastry, because they belong to different worlds. The parlement, the Court, the embassy to Rome, and the mayor's office in Bordeaux do not necessarily fit into a unique and rectilinear itinerary. Montaigne played several different roles, and his publications correspond to differing life scenarios that often contradict one another.

A biography of Montaigne must therefore be anchored in the political practices of the time. Without denying their philosophical and literary contribution, I have chosen to give a predominant place to Montaigne's political experiences *outside* the *Essais*. In fact, retrospective readings that seek to discover in the *Essais* the traces of a public life are too often impressionistic. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote, "nothing is more misleading than the illusion created by hindsight in which all the traces of a life, such as the works of an artist or the events at a biography, appear as the realization of an essence that seems to pre-exist them."²⁹ This remark applies to the reception of Montaigne and to his biography. Such a retrospective reading can only bring out the formative moments—which are usually the only ones known—of a life that invariably tends toward the realiza-

^{vi} "Middle length of time," as opposed to *longue durée* and *courte durée* ("long-term" and "short term"). *Longue durée* and *courte durée* are widely used in French historiography. [Trans.]

tion of a project conceived at the outset. Here I refer, of course, to Montaigne's political ideas, but especially to his career objectives *in politics*, to his ambitions, which were not always realized. In this way we reject any cumulative reading of the *Essais* and give, for example, an important place to the short chapters in the first two books of the *Essais*, which allowed Montaigne to make his entrance on the political stage.

In a book that constantly claims to be consubstantial with a body of flesh and blood, it is hard to distinguish between the public man and the private man—which sometimes fuse, no matter what Montaigne says.³⁰ Toward the end of his life, the author of the *Essais* tried to impose on his reader a sharp separation between introspection, on the one hand, and on the other, conjunctural remarks connected with political events that he underwent without approving of them. To be critical, one has to have an opportunity to express oneself. This remark applies to past centuries as well as to our own period. Keeping silent is not always a sign of impotence or acquiescence; sometimes it is also a strategic decision, and thus fundamentally a political act. Montaigne's failure to mention certain things has been seen as proof of his detachment with regard to society. Despite a few studies that have proposed a systematic reframing of the *Essais* in their political and social context, Montaigne's silence concerning the events of his time still impresses the contemporary reader, who sees in this silence a proof of wisdom. Some have even gone so far as to read between the lines of the *Essais* in order to show that Montaigne could not have expressed himself overtly regarding the bloody and calamitous events that punctuated the civil wars in France. This is to ignore the fact that pamphlets, diatribes, factums, and other forms of politically engaged literature proliferated in the sixteenth century. Others have argued that Montaigne must have necessarily expressed his views in anonymous publications, as if he had no other choice. This is far from reality. Like many authors of the late Renaissance, Montaigne spoke up when he felt like it and did not mince his words. If he sometimes chose to keep silent, it was not out of fear of censorship or possible repression, it was a political choice, that is, a choice made on the basis of precise interests that had to do primarily with career strategies.

Montaigne thought that the political events of his day would not stand the test of time. Let us quote, for example, his curious analysis of the Wars of Religion in France: "It will be a lot if a hundred years from now people remember in a general way that in our time there were civil wars in France."³¹ This way of distancing himself from religious and political upheavals must, however, be interpreted with caution, because Montaigne then had political pretensions that he abandoned only after 1588. His château was located at the heart of a zone of civil conflict, and his desire to forget the Wars of Religion may also testify to a will to write a history as seen by a man who was enduring events while deplor-

ing his failure to participate in them to a greater degree. It is this kind of *political questions* that are asked here. Without totally abstracting from the literary work, I focus on Montaigne's engagement and his political accommodations, a series of careers that he envisaged at the international and national levels, but which were essentially local—or rather, regional. There were eight civil wars in France during Montaigne's lifetime, the first seven of which—from 1562 to 1580—preceded the first publication of the *Essais*. We can imagine how much these wars might have weighed on the conception, composition, and publication of the book that made Montaigne famous. His public and political careers were also marked by thirty years of religious conflict. Episodes of increasingly violent confrontations, moments of relative civil peace and stubborn negotiations, and lapses back into even more bloody incidents form the background of his activity as a man of letters.

Like many of his contemporaries who came from the same milieu, Montaigne could dream of rising to the most elevated offices of the state, perhaps even becoming a royal steward or ambassador. He obtained only municipal responsibilities, except when he served briefly as an intermediary between Henry III and the king of Navarre. His political itinerary underwent several ups and downs caused by reversals of situations that were impossible to foresee. Confronted by the events that marked his period, Montaigne was a prudent, level-headed, wait-and-see kind of man who emphasized these character traits as advantages in politics. Immoderate and extreme engagement was not in Montaigne's nature. Throughout his life he maintained an indefectible loyalty to the established authority, whatever it was. He was born a Catholic and remained one, refusing to confuse religion and politics—a very paradoxical approach at this period. In a region where religious and ideological conversions were frequent, not so much for reasons of personal belief but rather out of political opportunism or economic interest, Montaigne was a man of convictions. On the basis of his own experiences, he finally fell back on a conception of politics that ran counter to the practices current in his period. His failures in politics nonetheless allowed him to find the right tone for a new literary and philosophical genre that he built on the ruins of his career in public service. He made several attempts at politics before his book transformed him into a literary monument.

In the end, Montaigne's *Essais* constitute an attempt to reappropriate politics in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. This attempt was not unique; it was situated in a more general intellectual enterprise in which we could classify Jean Bodin's *Six Livres de la République* (1576) and François de la Noue's *Discours politiques et militaires* (1587). Following some of his contemporaries, Montaigne refused to fall into the excessive reaction of the supporters of Innocent Gentillet's *Discours . . . contre Nicolas Machiavel* (1576) and proposed

in his own way an innovative configuration of politics in which actors could serve the king and their country with full transparency. For Montaigne, there were too many words, too many speeches, too many books. In these Wars of Religion, politics had to take the high ground and do what it could to slow a course of events marked by constant acceleration. The *Essais*—in their different editions published during Montaigne’s lifetime—represent political moments dissociated from one another, but they also reminded their author of the misfortunes of his public life. One can often learn from mistakes, and Montaigne’s book never claims to be a dogmatic political treatise at a time when what had to be done was to reinvent a dynamic conception of government and of power in general. Negotiation was necessary, even if it was often doomed to fail. That mattered little; what counted was to preserve, at any price, the civility necessary to maintain society. In their own way, the *Essais* helped decenter political discourse in order to give it a new aim that was more private and less dependent on the effects of belonging to a group, a clan, or a faith. That is certainly why Montaigne belonged to no alliance, no league, no brigade.

As conversations seeking to expose humans’ political dimension, the *Essais* also explore the possibility of an ethics reconciling private morality in its universal dimension (both ancient and Christian) with a practice of government founded on compromise and jurisprudence. Montaigne does not like the model of political affiliation proposed by Machiavelli in chapter XVIII of *The Prince*; he prefers transparency and candor. Pretense is sometimes necessary, but it must not be taken for a philosophy. Ideally, Montaigne’s political project corresponds to his literary project and can be summed up in this confession: “Had I been placed among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet freedom of nature’s first laws, I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked.”³² The pluperfect subjunctive Montaigne uses here and sometimes elsewhere expresses a perplexity, if not an impossibility. We can doubt this claim and turn against Montaigne the same reproach he makes, not without irony, against the Indians of the New World: “All this is not too bad—but what’s the use? [He] doesn’t wear breeches.”³³ This passage contradicts the principle enounced in the preface “To the Reader” and demonstrates the contradiction inherent to Montaigne’s task as a writer. At the Court as in Rome, it would have been impossible to show himself “naked”—a fact that Montaigne, as a political man from Aquitaine, knew very well. Aware of this fracture between an ideal but impossible world and an all-too-pragmatic world in which intrigues and barbarity reigned, Montaigne always remained on the side of political realism, but a realism tempered by a constant critique of its excesses.

All political people know the euphoria of victory and the loneliness of defeat and disgrace. As did Henri de Mesmes who, after having served the king as a *podestà* in Siena and refused an ambassadorship in Rome, returned to France

after the defeat at Saint-Quentin in order to “enjoy a repose that he placed above all the goods conferred by fortune.”^{vii} His disillusionment with politics “led him to abandon the court and live henceforth in retirement.”³⁴ Here we have the feeling that we are reading Montaigne. Political life consists of withdrawals and returns. Princes pass, and their counselors and servants have to find new positions or adapt to the new requirements of the established power. In politics, one spends a large part of one’s time awaiting favors and benefits that do not always come. Under the Old Régime, there was not enough room for all the ambitious people at the Court, and only a few favorites succeeded in gaining access to the restricted circle of the princes. The others were forced to wait for better days. The change in France’s rulership following the death of Henry II was hardly propitious for Henri de Mesmes, who was also a brilliant jurist and a skilled diplomat. His career testifies to a series of ups and downs that were inevitable in the religious and political turbulence of his time.

With each new king, each new chancellor, positions were redistributed. In Montaigne’s case—at a lesser level of service to the state—we find a similarly functioning of political life. Henri de Mesmes evaluated his own situation at the time of the death of Henry II: “I was disposed, after his death, to travel less and court less, and I thought that it would be better for me to stick to my books and my office.”³⁵ A wise decision on the part of this contemporary of Montaigne. The author of the *Essais* pondered this question in turn after the assassination of Henry III. An exit from political life can represent a new departure. Can one merge Henri de Mesmes the member of the Council of State and servant of the king with Henri de Mesmes the author of memoirs? What are the points of intersection between these two careers that were, nonetheless, conceived as linear and distinct in time? I have asked the same questions about Montaigne, councillor in the parlement, mayor of Bordeaux, and essayist.

^{vii} *Biens de fortune*. According to Brunetto Latini (thirteenth century), there are three of these: wealth, power, and glory (“richece, signourie, et gloire”). [Trans.]

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