

Montaigne and I

A notebook entry on the ontology of selfhood becomes a dialogue with the dead as, thinking of Montaigne, I find myself invoking him.



1.

A sane and very humourous fellow
In his round tower, walls emblazoned
With aphorisms, all-occasioned
And all-illuminating. Mellow,

As well, his mind and temperament,
So frank and easy, utterly
Without pretension, wholly free
Of ideological sediment.

Shakespeare transformed you into Prince
Hamlet, after he'd taken you
Into himself. Ah, what to do
If you're the Prince, what could convince

You to kill Claudius, the hated
Usurper? In your thoughtful headiness
You find a way to die in readiness,
Faithful, but still, not quite persuaded.

Warming up to my subject...

2.

How sceptical a wonderer
You were, Michel (if you don't mind),
And with the genius of a kind
Nature. A little outside you were

At all times, saw from many angles.
So full of curiosity
And kidney stones, the agony
Of passing water. A question dangles

Its head, shy flower atop its dot,
Over each paragraph you write.
Doubt makes you question even the white
Man's precedence, his gains ill-got

From those colonial escapades.
Your mother's mother's anguish was
Expulsion from her Spain, because
She was a Jew. You knew 'in spades'

The lot of those out on the borders
Of the Community, the Power.
They could be undone in an hour
By some king's mercenary orders,



One's family ties, one's history,
Places familiar and dear,
Wealth, rank, and reputation clear...
If all this could be instantly

Expunged, what in this world is real
Or solid? What can we assume?
Nothing. What do we know? A Doom
Of sorts is coming that will seal

Up all in rest. The little doom
Of private death. The Judgment Days
That Revolution sets ablaze.
Heat death and universal gloom

At the end of Epicurean time,
When clocks stand still and measure nothing.
Then all the less a thing of loathing,
Life, ah, the beautiful and sublime!

3.

*My father sent me, when I was
A boy of tender years, to live
Awhile with peasants. And I give
Thanks everyday for this, because*

*It taught me that the human lot
Is common to the high and low,
Which nobles little care to know.
But everyday I gave a thought*

*To those whose suffering and strength
Was all they had of earthly good:
To milk the cows, to gather wood,
To huddle through a winter's length.*

*But you, like many of our class,
Saw the poor as commodities.
When pleasure had been wrung from these,
On you would blithely, cruelly pass.*

*Such attitudes as these condemn
The poor to added bitterness,
Being paid for their worthlessness.
And yet you died as one of them!*

Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt.

*One ought to feel compassion for
Oneself. Only compassion knows.
Through sympathy our knowledge grows,
Values both otium and chore.*

*The dogmatist, a tyrant in
The world of spirit, never feels
The self-doubt that alone reveals.
To cast a stone is the worst sin.*

*One ought to be bemused and tender,
Make of what is one's level best,
And seize the day! which, gone, nox est
Perpetua una dormienda.*

