

RENEWING SELF-KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE ESSAYIST AUTOBIOGRAPHY: MONTAIGNE'S PHILOSOPHY OF HUMANITY IN THE *ESSAYS*

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This paper contends that the concept of the autobiography in the essayist tradition, most prominent in the *Essays* of Montaigne, has the capacity to powerfully renew a philosopher's understanding of the constantly changing self. This is possible not only due to the characteristics of Montaigne's style such as his skepticism, his relativism, but his experience of his weaknesses and circumstances as *common conditions* of universal humanity. As a totality, these guide him towards a philosophical understanding of the mystery that is the "miracle" of the self. The objective, process and result of Montaigne's *Essays*, is a heightened understanding of himself by examining, as closely and frankly as possible, his own unique condition, which also happens to be shared by common humanity. The subsequent examinations on the self renew themselves constantly, for there is a focal point of universal reference. This paper brings together specific techniques of Montaigne's stylistic discourse and ideas on various subjects that all renew, in part, his understanding of his mysterious self. This paper is aimed at a general audience that may not have enjoyed full exposure to the vast compendium of Montaigne literature, and is offered in the hope of contributing to the process of understanding how the autobiographical essay renews a successful meditation on one's self and vocation to humanity.

INTRODUCTION

The essayist tradition draws much of its vigor from Michel de Montaigne, whose discourses demonstrate a flair for articulating philosophy that is difficult to match even for other autobiographers. However, although the medium of essays has long been recognized as a form of philosophy, its latent potential runs deeper. This paper argues that the autobiographical essay can renew and illuminate a philosopher's understanding of the individual "self" as a totality within the tradition of humanist philosophy. It is hoped that what this essay offers is found to be helpful for general readers of philosophy, who may not have studied at length the vast and intimidating range of literature on Montaigne. In particular, the autobiographical-monographic practice is a fundamental aspect of Montaigne

that has contributed immensely to modern philosophy, and it deserves to be acknowledged as a constructive instrument of philosophical practice.

As emphasized, the renewal of self-contemplation is not limited to philosophers of elite echelons; it is a starkly worldly endeavor. Marcel Tetel believes that Montaigne's *Essays* are, in their true essence, fundamentally grappling with a practical question: How should human beings wrestle with the challenges of life and come to terms with the human condition?¹ And in this light, how does an autobiographical narrative renew self-knowledge? The fundamental answer is that it renews self-understanding thanks to its multifaceted role in Montaigne's *Essays*, which, taken as a totality, bring him to greater self-comprehension through different *modes* of understanding, such as humanism, imagination, skepticism, and experience. I am convinced that while the autobiographer treads a dangerous line between self-articulation and self-indulgence, Montaigne's greater, ultimate concern is to articulate himself through directing the diversity, volatility and unpredictability of human behavior and institutions into himself, and then relating the most basic and important aspects of his external world experiences to himself. Montaigne integrates this novel approach with the philosophy of the Greeks and Romans, and approaches events transpiring around him that define his self with a refreshingly progressive outlook. This self whom Montaigne seeks to articulate is, at its most basic, "a miracle"² that is nevertheless misshapen and which he attempts to rectify through the autobiographical confession in the essay form. Through recording this intensely personal experience that serves as the gateway to the heuristic practice of philosophy, one comes, almost ironically, to conform with what Montaigne sees as the common measure: a life that is "human and ordinate, without miracles though and without rapture."³ This is his avowed, universal, humanistic purpose of his work as "the study of man", as expressed by Raymond la Charite.⁴ The existential question of humanity and the personal question of self-discovery have become one, and in Montaigne's essays, a refreshing renewal of the two, is found.

The first portion of this essay sets the scene by explaining Montaigne's intention to align his own experience with all of humanity; that is, to confess himself fully as an extension of

¹ Tetel, (1974) pg. 36

² Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 11, pg. 1164

³ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1269

⁴ Charite, (1968) pg. 82

universal humanity. It also illustrates how Montaigne's specific techniques of discourse provide himself and his readers with access to a reliable knowledge of a concept of self that *is also most familiar to oneself*. The second segment builds on Montaigne's different ideas that encompass an intensely personal philosophy within his essays and how this subjective approach renews the practice of self-meditation.

1. SELF AND HUMANITY'S RENEWAL

The objective of Montaigne is at the same time similar, yet unfamiliar, to the typical approach of autobiography. As emphasized, he wishes to find and expose his self as it truly is, in all his strengths and weaknesses that make him human. This is a different approach to the traditional approach of Platonic or Aristotelian presupposition, and there is no "pretention" to assume that we are made in the image of a Deity or some substance of Good. Much of his writing style honours this: his language remains at the level of particulars rather than universals; he emphasizes the differences, diversity, and discordance between cultures, people, customs, and opinions. Yet each person bears the entire form of the human condition, as well as its limitations and defects. It is helpful to set the scene, then, of the humanism that Montaigne demonstrates. It bears great significance in how personally he associates himself with his experiences and the recording of such experiences as "self" in his essays.

Joseph Mazzeo affirms that the lifestyle of a humanist is an affirmation of all that "is finally intensely personal, the possession of a unique personality, capable of infinite variations within its overarching patterns of order."⁵ In his chapter *The Text as Self-Image*, Frederick Rider suggests that it was only through a gradual process that the young essay format could serve as the most honest way of expressing and bringing to realization one's self⁶. The narrative agenda here, then, is for Montaigne to patiently reveal himself to the reader, because the lifestyle of the humanist, to Mazzeo, "...involves the most intimate, basic patterns of a man's thought, feeling and action..."⁷ And intimate writing is the agenda of Montaigne: "As a courtesy to the Huguenots who damn our private auricular confession I make my confession

⁵ Mazzeo, (1965) pg. 150

⁶ Rider, (1973) pg. 24 – 25

⁷ *ibid.* pg. 14 – 15

here in public, sincerely and scrupulously.”⁸ For him such an exercise in reflectional essays leads one to expose one's identity is to discover the “misshapeness” that lurks in the soul. It is necessary to face one's demons, to articulate them and elaborate on them in the form of a narrative construct. To do so is to gain a greater knowledge of oneself: “I have not seen anywhere in the world a prodigy more expressly miraculous than I am... nevertheless, the more I haunt myself and know myself the more my misshapeness amazes me and the less I understand myself.”⁹ A striking sense of the validity of individual identity is present here, because Montaigne knows that the task he has set himself is fraught with the possibility of self-love, which is merely the reflection of a fatal falsehood.¹⁰ There are two ways in which he remedies this. Firstly, he follows Socrates in his path to “know himself” and through such a study reach the point of despising himself. In this Socrates was worthy of being called the Sage.¹¹ Similarly, due to the weakness of human foibles, the only thing Montaigne can do is to show wisdom in judging himself, and good faith in witnessing to himself, high and low indifferently. For this purpose, Montaigne sees the practice of living his life as his business, or his art.¹²

The second factor is his emphasis on the shared condition between him and humanity, or insofar as the autobiographical work itself is concerned, his weaknesses and strengths are relevant to all mankind:

“I am expounding a lowly, lacklustre existence. You can attach the whole of moral philosophy to a commonplace private life just as well to one of richer stuff Every man bears the whole of the human condition.”¹³

This is not mere rhetoric. As noted, everything in the world is directed within himself, becoming universal impositions on the entire human condition. So implicit in Montaigne's ideas is that any one person who articulates himself or herself thus possesses the condition of humankind. Norton, aside from the spatial, temporal, and psychological dimensions of the

⁸ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 5, pg. 955

⁹ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 11, pg. 1164

¹⁰ Montaigne, Book II, Chap. 6, pg. 426

¹¹ Montaigne, Book II, Chap. 6, pg. 426 – 7

¹² Montaigne, Book II, Chap. 6, pg. 425

¹³ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 2, pg. 908

essayist, affirms the importance of the relation between the discourse *Essays* and the reader, which is the humanist dimension of Montaigne the essayist:

“Montaigne is, then, conscious of the supremely unique nature of his undertaking and of the role of introspection, not only as it works in tandem with philosophy, but as an ethical alternative to be contemplated by all mankind...”¹⁴

A normal and moderate life is valid because such a person's experience is relevant to all humanity. In this humanist spirit he writes to the reader as an honest confessional friend, a philosophical outlook that is constantly looking within and transcending personal life, and revealing the self through introspection (philosophy and introspection are complementary).¹⁵

Among the established literary genres of autobiography, Montaigne is the first to write autobiography in the essayist tradition; he is also among the first concerned solely with writing as a “man”, with his entire being. For if autobiography is to have any value in shedding light on one's monstrosities, it cannot be communicated through the simple act of “writing”. For Montaigne, to communicate his humble and inglorious life is to write about his life with his “entire being”, because when writing autobiography he is writing of life, not simply a subject of writing such as grammar, poetry or law:

“Authors communicate themselves to the public by some peculiar mark foreign to themselves; I – the first ever to do so – by my universal being, not as a grammarian, a poet or a jurisconsult but as Michel de Montaigne”.¹⁶

Montaigne hands to himself a heavy burden by claiming to be the first author to write with all his being. By this he implies that a grammarian is only one aspect of one person's identity, a poet simply a profession. The writer of the *Essays* approaches his reader not simply as an author, for an author cannot single-handedly reveal a self; he must work with the personhood itself to accomplish this. Montaigne does not attempt to become a poet, rather, he now tries to

¹⁴ Norton, (1975) pg. 19

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 2, pg. 908

bring all the special extrinsic marks together in him; the grammarian, the poet and jurist become Michel de Montaigne. Honesty is what concerns him in his writing and compared to being *known*, he is not interested in justification or apology. His confidence in his readers' ability to relate to his personal life is a line of attack in itself. Throughout his sporadic compilation, he writes on many a varied subject; although their common theme is that his intention never exceeds the temporal bounds of the present, communicating with experience that is measured against the past. And as experience changes, the individual also shapes his self within accordingly. This is the process of renewal at its most fundamental renewal. Bergson describes it as a constant "changing", or "mutation".¹⁷ His belief in the shared condition of humanity allows him to explore his self with no restrictions, yet at the same time his reflections remain uniquely his. Now the random arrangement of the essays is apparent, and the motifs that give shape to the self are also visible. It remains for the actual discourse of the *Essays* to reveal to the writer himself and the readers what self-discovery entails.

2. THE RENEWAL OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE PHILOSOPHY IN THE *ESSAYS*

Montaigne's *Essays* remain unique in the sense that their erratic, unpremeditated compilation means that he is not writing as an authority, and that the communication of his self he is communicating what he believes to share with every other person. The imposition of his own condition on humanity has a twofold meaning: he is also approaching the reader as a friend and wishes to elucidate his innermost being and to examine in his disorganized writings the strengths and weaknesses that constitute his life. The empathy he hopes to draw from the reader comes from his experience of life that is, as previously mentioned, imprinted with the condition of universal humankind. The reader is alongside him as he articulates himself, because as already noted, he remains at the level of particulars, using a language of everyday motifs and experiences rather than the traditional philosophical use of universals. This allows the individuation of time, experience and subsequent aesthetic creation, which is an outspoken objective of Montaigne. Norton summarizes Bergson's thoughts on the discourse: "The Essayist, embarked on a project of individuation and aesthetic creation, cannot, in fact, regard his life as the exemplary stamp of another life; rather, he sees it as a state of constant

¹⁷ Bergson, *L'Evolution creatrice*, 6

becoming in which each moment grows organically from the preceding one."¹⁸ This section of the essay explores several themes that constitute such an endeavor: aesthetic renewal, the practical application of renewal through politics and death, and knowledge.

Aesthetic writing constitutes a major part of his literary style: it remains deceptively spontaneous yet the detail and attention paid to the essays is in fact extremely meticulous¹⁹, until his "firmer identity" gradually begins to be fleshed out when the essays of any subject that touch his own experience are penned²⁰. His self-depreciation is also an aesthetic, demonstrated with increasing frequency in Book Three. It seems almost playful in many parts, remarking on the writer's own essays as, "droppings of an old mind, sometimes hard, sometimes squittery, but always ill-digested."²¹ It perplexes the reader as to whether she should take him seriously as an autobiographer. But aside from accentuating his enjoyment of life as well as his skepticism, self-depreciation also entails self-criticism, which therefore qualifies him to be taken seriously as a philosopher. An important chapter in his attempts to reflect on this self that analyses and critiques itself is in fact his last chapter (unexpectedly *not* an essay), a discourse on experience. Montaigne gives experience a special place in the accrument of knowledge:

"There is no desire more natural than that of knowledge. We try all ways that can lead us to it; where reason is wanting, we therein employ experience,

"Per varios usus artem experientia fecit,

Exemplo monstrante viam,"

[‘By various trials experience created art, example shewing the

¹⁸ Bergson, *L'Evolution creatrice*, 14

¹⁹ *ibid.* pg. 25

²⁰ *ibid.* pg. 27

²¹ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 9, pg. 1070

way.'—Manilius, i. 59.]

which is a means much more weak and cheap; but truth is so great a thing that we ought not to disdain any mediation that will guide us to it.'²²

Ironically, this discourse on experience, which is not an essay, ties all his previous monographs together in a fabric of humanity, because experience (and reflection upon such) is the practical tool that leads to understanding. Montaigne asserts "desire of knowledge" to be the most natural desire, and experience brings knowledge that Reason itself cannot offer, despite the latter being a first choice for philosophers. Montaigne sees experience as relative, and this relativism, or "dis-concordance," operates on all levels, from the national²³ to the private. Honest recognition of this experience lends power to his self-discovery through its public and private diversity, bringing him a form of imaginative creation (according to Philip Hallie, the two kinds of imagination in the *Essays* are the *Poetic* imagination, which assumes an exclusively metaphorical form, and the *Assertive* imagination, intent on persuasion and the assertion of Montaigne's truth).²⁴ Seen in this light, significant portions of the *Essays* become intentional metaphor that directly express his own experience of such metaphors (among them the infamous aforementioned "droppings" of his writing). With so much emphasis on the individual and experience, it is difficult not to pick up within the text a sense of the limits of rational, knowledgeable discourse. His fideist position also betrays his favour towards a blunted outlook on the potential of Reason to attain absolute knowledge for oneself. Still, while using metaphor and sometimes-abstract language, it does not obscure the meaning Montaigne intends. The words written are from experience, and experience is in many ways more reliable than *a priori* knowledge, because it is the bedrock of reflections that come after events have transpired. This is reinvigoration in one sense, a reinvigoration of recollection.

²² Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1207

²³ In Chapter 13 Montaigne refers to China: "a kingdom whose polity and sciences surpass our own exemplars in many kinds of excellence without having had any contact with them or knowledge of them and whose history teaches me that the world is more abundant and diverse than either the ancients or we ever realized..."

Montaigne, Book 3, Chap. XIII, pg. 1215 - 6

²⁴ Hallie, (1966) pg. 76

The practical application of such philosophy does not end with merely identifying with the universality of human life. It renews the entire spectrum of individual and collective existence. John O'Neill writes that Montaigne's work constitutes an essential part of the political life of the Renaissance. "They [the *Essays*] display their liberty in the ordinariness of their topics, in their essentially anthropological centre and their avoidance of the conceits of theological or philosophical alienation."²⁵ In this sense, the study of the self becomes almost a commentary on ones' own times. One of these examples is in his essay "On Cannibals"²⁶, where he decries a very specific, anti-natural form of humanism²⁷ that condemns a Brazilian tribe as "barbarous." By the rules of reason they are, but they (Renaissance society) are infinitely worse: judicial torture, practiced in the name of piety and religion, is far more savage than their cannibalism. Indeed, their barbarity is surpassed by our own in every way. Like Erasmus, who he greatly admired²⁸, Montaigne's humanism is of a double-nature: due to the "distinctions between what a man appears to be from the point of view of the public and how a man feels, thinks and acts in the intimacy of his personal life," a student of human beings must, according to Erasmus, deemphasize casual distinctions and make men look long at their selves, completely naked. The wiles of a prince provide an exemplar instance: he may be wealthy and powerful as far as his occupation allows, but can be a slave to his own passions or weaknesses. In opening the self in this manner, peering through the pages and through his superficial character, one renews the deepest self, asking not if one is a king or duke, but whether he would be a good father or friend. This has become a common theme in humanism: to judge a man underneath his "clothes," to strip away the falsehood and "lay bare" all the virtues and vices that make the man a "human being."

Tetel postulates that "a basic enterprise of the *Essays* is Montaigne's endeavor to find out how to live and die",²⁹ and a constant theme, indeed, is that philosophizing is learning how to die (Montaigne goes so far as to devote an entire essay to this).³⁰ To come to terms with one's own death provides an endless renewal of self-knowledge. Meditation on death, followed by

²⁵ O'Neill (1982) pg. 29

²⁶ Montaigne, Book I, Chap. 31

²⁷ Frame (1955) pg. 97 – 99

²⁸ Hallie (1966) pg. 14

²⁹ Tetel, (1974) pg. 37

³⁰ Montaigne, Book I, Chap. 20, pg. 20

its validation on the fragility and precious state of life and virtue cannot be taken lightly: "God shows mercy to those from whom he takes away life a little at a time... Everywhere death intermingles and merges with our life: our decline anticipates its hour and even forces itself upon our very progress."³¹ In another affirmation in his experiential outlook on what it means to die, he writes: "And of our disciplines it is those which ascend the highest which, it seems to me, are the most base and earth-bound. I can find nothing so abject and so mortal in the life of Alexander as his fantasies about his immortalization."³² Alexander's fancies of eternal life are folly to Montaigne; dreams of godhood that are falsehoods in the human world. Human beings must abandon the absurd lies they have conjured in the name of comfort and self-pride: "Children are frightened of their very friends when they see them masked. So are we. We must rip the masks off things as well as off people."³³ Actual experience plays an important role in the activity of honest renewal, because the heart is motivated more by action and circumstances rather than mere words.

But his final solution of "experience" does not solve the contradictions and inconsistencies inherent in knowledge itself and the external physical, social world. In this manner of mutating self-realizations, as Norton sees it, Montaigne absorbs teachings of past Western teachers like Cato and Socrates³⁴ and attempts to prove his assertions by referring to these traditions to conform to what Floyd Gray sees as an already "preconceived philosophy of natural living".³⁵ He adopts Pyrrhonian skepticism, yet alters it heavily to suit his own ideas of a more open-minded mode of skepticism (some of his philosophical positions, in fact, conflict with those of Pyrrho).

An important example is that it does not do justice to Montaigne's style of skepticism if it is accused of denying anything that can be considered knowledge. Because unlike traditional Skepticism, Montaigne places value on the external world that brings experience into the autobiographer's life, enriching an internal world uncluttered by judgmental, dogmatic opinions. He adopts an open-minded skepticism only because he believes that it entails

³¹ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1251

³² Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1268

³³ Montaigne, Book I, Chap. 20, pg. 108

³⁴ *ibid.* pg. 41

³⁵ Gray, (1961) pg. 135

honesty. He is to be completely faithful to his own life as a person. The essays are telling of his identity as an outspoken advocate of freethinking and an opponent of dogmatism, because the individual cannot experience internal renewal if the mind itself refuses to receive meaning from the external world. His vision, according to Norton, is "a first personal, sensory vision that channels a continuing stream of data into his inner life."³⁶ It is the reason why he does not stop at the internal world to find his selfhood. The self cannot be restricted; it must be constantly expanding:

"No powerful mind stops within itself: it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities. It makes sorties which go beyond what it can achieve: it is only half alive if it is not advancing, pressing forward, getting driven into a corner and coming to blows; its inquiries are shapeless and without limits; its nourishment consists in amazement, the hunt and uncertainty, as Apollo made clear enough to us by his speaking (as always) ambiguously, obscurely and obliquely, not glutting us but keeping us wondering and occupied".³⁷

Throughout his essays, his identity is instead renewed through the Greek tradition of questioning, curiosity and persistence in the search of knowledge. By his refusal of rigid ideas and to force himself into a single school of thought, his self-discovered convictions regarding the relativism of morality and customs, the power of imagination, and fortune remained consistently grounded throughout his essays.³⁸ As one discovers more about the external world, the individual self responds by reacting on this stimulus and building knowledge upon this circumstantial frame. Understanding both the external world and the internal self comes through experience of circumstances. Montaigne is a student of Sextus Empiricus in this individualized spatial-temporal perspective: "We understand by circumstances the states in

³⁶ Norton, (1975) pg. 189

³⁷ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1211 – 2

³⁸ Tetel, (1974) pg. 22

which we are."³⁹ The highest priority of knowledge is of oneself; it takes precedence over all other studies:

“As Nature has furnished us with feet to walk with, so has she furnished us with wisdom to guide us in our lives. That wisdom is not as clever, strong and formal as the one which they have invented, but it is becomingly easy and beneficial; in the case of the man who is lucky enough to know how to use it simply and ordinally (that is, naturally) it does – very well – what the other *says* it will... **I would rather be an expert on me than on Cicero** [my emphasis].”⁴⁰

Montaigne here is supporting self-knowledge as an important moral and aesthetic aspect of the Good Life. An ordinary life becomes a fulfilling one, one in which one is given freedom, motivation and time to pursue the truth and pleasures that may be relevant to that life. “The most beautiful lives to my liking are those which conform to the common measure, human and ordinate, without miracles though and without rapture.”⁴¹ By the “common measure” he means what he and his reader have in common, the human condition, its miracles and deformities. Throughout his essays he constantly argues against the notion of transcending the common measure of what gives humans their identity, or, rising above the human condition. The experience of profound things like death, when grounded in the mortal life, is humanity's foundation and the subsequent discovery of virtue. It is already acknowledged that Montaigne, while demonstrating ideas from the Stoic, Epicurean, Socratic, and Skeptic traditions, never moulds his self strictly into one school. On occasions typically Epicurean, he believes validation of what makes life enjoyable is to acknowledge an attained identity. According to Montaigne, validation of human identity and existence is to acknowledge the basic value of pleasure, happiness, moderation, and the pursuit of knowledge. Once again, his stylistic syncretism of skepticism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism is apparent. He scorns Xerxes for wanting more pleasure when he was already surrounded “by every decadence known to man,” but at the same time scorns a man who turns down pleasures that nature and the human

³⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Skepticism, Man and God*, ed. Philip P. Hallie, pg. 59

⁴⁰ Montaigne, Book III, Chap 13, pg. 1218

⁴¹ Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1269

body has given him.⁴² Travelling, the experience of the erotic, friendship – man's estate is to gain consciousness through the contemplation of one's own existence and the realization of pleasure. Modern philosophers like A.C. Grayling sum up Montaigne's spirit in the words of Socrates: "The considered life – free, creative, informed and chosen... of pleasure and understanding, of love and friendship... humanely lived."⁴³ In the end, how Montaigne physically achieves self-revelation is through the actual act of writing and expressing such a considered life. His humanist position leads to a renewal of the humanity that he discovers, through writing, to be the self he sought. This renewal is therefore thanks to the natural productivity⁴⁴ that comes with a joyful attitude to discovery.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction of this essay the suggestion was put forward that the *methodology* of Montaigne's autobiographical essays and his subsequent *universal imposition* on the entire human condition gave potential to a renewal of understanding the self philosophically. But it must be noted, with a degree of caution, that this optimistic outlook of "understanding" is characteristic of classical Enlightenment attitudes, which have come under serious scrutiny since the 20th Century. I would also argue that the traditional humanism's self-examination falls short of more cosmic ethical vision of philosophies that embrace non-human sentients as well, such as Buddhism⁴⁵ or modern humanism. Triumphalism is unjustifiable, and Montaigne's self-deprecating style, in particular his emphasis on the discordance of human life, stands out as a check against humanistic complacency and *hubris* in understanding the human essence. Fortunately, contemporary humanism will have little problems adjusting to the philosophical needs of the 21st Century. The practical application of an autobiographical, or "self-centred" philosophy therefore requires further refinement, and by no means has concluded its journey thus far.

Through his writing, his philosophy and dimensions of self-knowledge, the uncovering of his "misshapeness" and the validation of the value of his own life, Montaigne weaves a tapestry

⁴² Montaigne, Book III, Chap. 13, pg. 1256

⁴³ Grayling, (2004), pg. 249

⁴⁴ Frame (1969) pg. 32

⁴⁵ Shantideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*, (6.122).

of self-reflection in light of the events, people and philosophers that have influenced the moulding of his self. Because of this, his *Essays* are perhaps the best mode of access to the man himself. It is the most straightforward way to discover how Montaigne understood his *self* as a human being. While this writing is only one step of the philosophical journey – for the rest lies in its practical application – the *Essays* exude a certain sense of achievement in having identified with the universal potential of humankind, by giving a public account of his thoughts that disclose his character and whatever that is “he.” Essays, for Montaigne, could not only serve as the memoirs for the recognition of his intellectual brilliance⁴⁶, but as a living work that testifies to its author's *experience* as a selfhood and the interactions between the internal thoughts of the human mind and the external world of experience. Self-examination through autobiography, and more specifically through the essayist technique, can be said to be an expedient and practical means to the end of philosophy, and the inquiring, witty, somewhat wry spirit of Montaigne found a home in its double nature as both an intensely personal yet universal composition. With this final point in mind, perhaps Norton summarizes the Frenchman's success best when he highlights the significance of his self-discovery through his essays:

“By both their timeliness and timelessness, they form, above all, a vast mirror in which are reflected our own humble proportions. Gradually, artfully, the lines of Montaigne's self-portrait become disturbingly familiar until we finally glimpse in their delineation the gaunt figure of ourselves. This man of the common sort who bears the entire form of the human estate has reached out through the introspective act to encompass us all.”⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ *ibid.* pg. 24

⁴⁷ Norton, (1975) pg. 211

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