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HAROLD ROSENBERG: A BIRD FOR EVERY BIRD

I said to him: Why do you delay?

He said: Because of what you desire.

And I: You command my desires...

So sweetly the argument went on from year to year.

Meanwhile it was raining blood and rage.

The two Marquis, the white and the black

Were crying like gulls out of my throat -

My throat uncaring as the summer sky -

All to avenge themselves upon the dust.

Leopards drowed on the diving boards.

I knew who had sent them in those green cases.

Who doesn't lose his mind will receive like me

That wire in my neck up to the ear.

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10/12 Jan 1968
RACHEL BESPALOFF: THE MOMENT

"The times are not right to amend ourselves
except by record, by disagreement rather than
accord, by difference rather than likeness."
- Montaigne

It is not by chance that the two great books that have left the deepest mark on Western thought - St. Augustine's Confessions and Montaigne's Essays - both present an idea of duration in which the experience of the moment involves the question of freedom. It is doubtless natural that in periods of ~~extreme~~ violent transformation, the individual, linked to his time by disorder and unhappiness, should derive from his own existence a ^{new} notion of time. Augustine saw Roman unity crumble under barbarian pressure; Montaigne, Christian unity broken by the civil wars. Profoundly of their day, yet already detached from it, free with regard to the present which they criticize and the past which they sift, they belong to the new world that they are building, while possessing something that will outlast it. The essential thing is not that they should have put the question of time to themselves, but that they should ^{have} approached it in terms of a Self sensitive to the flux of its being, deprived of any assurance of continuity. It was a matter of their own lives; it is no theoretical solution they propose.

Augustine introduces his radical difference by associating time with the freedom of both the Creator and the creature. Not the movements of the stars, but the human substance gives measure and rhythm to time. In referring, for the first time, ~~with~~ past, present, and future to the operations of subjectivity - memory, expectation, attention - Augustine describes duration in terms that depict the becoming of consciousness. In place of an anonymous succession of moments marked on the causal chain and able to extend itself indefinitely, he substitutes the image

1. Sections of the original essay have been omitted. Quotation references are to the Florio translation, ^{of this} Modern Library edition (ed.).

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of a temporal whole pierced by death, open upon the infinite.

From the moment of conversion--the moment par excellence, since it carries to the point of paroxysm the paradox of a freedom which can do all and nothing--Augustine derives the moments of watchful ecstasy in which the soul receives premonition of eternal peace: "forgetful of what is behind me, without anxious aspiration toward what may come to pass, intent only on present things, I pursue with an effort excluding all distraction that palm of the celestial vocation." Change a single word in this text, replace "celestial vocation" by "earthly vocation" and you have a perfect definition of Montaigne's notion of the present instant. When the author of the Essays rediscovers (in this instance outside Christianity) the sense of inwardness, he can ^{properly} ~~rightly~~ be held ^{to be} the direct inheritor of the ~~Augustinian~~ doctrine of time. For the founder, as for the renewer of Western thought, ecstasy does not suppress in any sense the distance between man and God, does not imply the dissolution of the finite in the eternal. Augustine disdains the refuge beyond history offered by the unifying ecstasy of Plotinian mysticism. Montaigne does not at all seek an ecstasy that will cure him of the "dis-ease" of existing. Neither claims that the moment can release man from time, which is his very existence. If attention did not involve the aim of taking upon oneself an unveiled truth it would be empty. Montaigne, like Augustine, describes the duration of consciousness as a distentio, "a movement irregular, perpetual, without patterne and without terme." But to the incompleteness of becoming he opposes this other form of eternity, which is the fullness of the present for an earthly vocation.

The best image of this "ravishment" is perhaps that in which Montaigne evokes the happiness of "recovering as from a lightning, the

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faire Sunne-shine of health, so free and full" (p. 990) "By how much more health seemeth fairer unto me after sicknesse," he adds, "so neere and so contiguous, that I may know them in presence one of another in their richest ornaments" (p. 999) Just as recovered health recalls sickness, so fullness of being is mindful of death. Why pretend to defy it? Death "steals upon us little by little," "it is everywhere mingled and confounded in our life;" it is not at the end, it is at the center of existence, thus too in that instant when memory, attention, and expectation fulfilled are one. But here it no longer oppresses us with the threat of incompleteness which exposes our life to the absurd; it is this life "losable by its very nature" and which only he who has fully possessed it is prepared to lose without regret. Thus Montaigne is the first to replace the religious conception of the eternal with the poetic conception of the imperishable...

When Montaigne praises Socrates for having "brought humane wisdom from heaven againe, where for a long time it had beene lost, to restore it unto man" (p. 938), he is celebrating the revolution which he himself has accomplished. Has he not brought down from heaven to earth the passion for plenitude? With Augustine, as with Plato, the idea of perfection remains bound to that of divine immutability. Thought, according to him, "demands without hesitation that the immutable ought to be preferred to the mutable." He cannot find images enough to describe the blessedness which the soul experiences when it passes from perpetual flux to stability. He loves in God "a light limited by no extent... melodies not borne away by time... perfumes not dissipated by a breath of wind... embraces that satiety does not disintwine." Montaigne, on the contrary, feels vividly the attraction of fading light, dying melodies, fleeting embraces. The perfect moment is at once a recalling of Being, "which by a single Now fills the Always," and a reflection

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of becoming--to the degree that to reflect means to circumscribe, to capture and to transcribe appearances which spring up out of nothingness. The reward for this attention is joy: "For the measure in jovissance dependeth more or less on the application we lend it. Especially at this instant, that I perceive mine to be short in time, I will extend it in weight: I will stay the readines of her flight, by the promptitude of my hold-fast by it: and by the vigor of custome, recompence the haste of her fleeting. According as the possession of life is more short, I must endeavour to make it more profound and full" (p. 1009)

Contemplation, here become active, bursts forth in movements and attitudes which overflow the moment into daily life. By the sensation recaptured, "savoured, ruminated," the world flows toward the self, the self toward the world. The criterion of the true no longer belongs to reason alone, illuminated by natural or divine light, it also lies in deepening and enriching the ^{feeling} ~~manse~~ of existence by means of sensations. Perhaps here is one of the innovations richest in consequence of all that follow from Montaigne's conversion to the terrestrial.

In this connection, there are revealing similarities and differences in the descriptions of the moment in the Confessions, the Essays and The Reveries Of A Solitary. ~~Wittenborn~~ All poets of subjectivity and of the instant, Augustine, Montaigne, and Rousseau start from their individual selves, from their own adventure at a decisive turning point in history. All three are involved in a dramatic break ~~with~~ (with the pagan world, with medieval Christianity, with classical civilization) and in a conversion ~~to~~ (to Christianity, to humanism, to socialism). All three depict the flux of an agitated existence and the state of grace of the true present. "Everything is in continual flux on earth,"

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writes Rousseau. "Nothing keeps a constant and fixed form, and our affections, which are attached to external things, pass and change of necessity like them. Always running ahead of us or behind us, they recall the past that is no more or anticipate the future that often will not come to be at all: there is nothing solid which the heart may take hold of. But if there is a state in which the soul finds a fastness solid enough to repose entirely and there to gather together all its being without having need to recall the past or encroach upon the future; in which time is as nothing to it, where the present endures, yet without marking its duration and without any trace of succession, without any other feeling of privation or joy, of pleasure or pain, of desire or fear than that of our existence and that this feeling alone can fill it entirely; so long as this state lasts, whoever finds himself in it may call himself happy, not with an imperfect happiness, poor and relative, such as he finds in the pleasures of life; but with an all-sufficing happiness, perfect and full, which leaves in the soul no void which it feels the need to fill." Plenitude, peace, possession of the self in an authentic present, all are already there in Augustine and Montaigne. Yet these three experiences of the instant differ so profoundly that it would almost be possible to define by them the development whose landmarks they are. When Augustine was converted, he tore himself away from a world which had fed, if not satisfied, his ~~poor~~ ^{intense} hunger. He had plunged far from shore into the suffering and triumphant life of desire, he had embraced not phantoms but actual beings. It was not to cease loving but to love more, give more, receive more that he exchanged pleasures for happiness. There had been real sacrifice, real agony of passion. The Augustinian ecstasy

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flowered out of a depth of violence, of imperious sensuality cruelly subjugated. A mortal struggle had preceded the return to self, the return to the light "with which the soul is illuminated to see into itself" and understand the truth, the act which is at once an impulse of the heart and the summit of the highest reason: "I reject myself to choose Thee."

There is no echo of such a drama in the Essays. Returning to one's self, according to Montaigne, is not to leave the world, it is to rediscover and annex it by the intelligence and the senses, and also to judge it, introducing consequently the possibility of perfecting it. Here the moment presupposes not that subjugation of the self which gave man access to the sacred universe, to the celestial city, but the education of the self by doubt and by time, the breaking in of the human animal for the benefit of man and of the mind for the profit of the body. Sacred beauty, "so ancient and so new", ^{that} ~~which~~ conversion brought Augustine to adore is effaced before the grace of the creature which is master of itself.* Montaigne accepts the ideal of beauty celebrated by the arts, ^{poetry and culture of his epoch,} in which perfection is the promise of pleasure; but he adds what prevents it from becoming a lie: the test of time--growing old, sickness, the uniqueness of individual destinies, cruelty, death. In this he is the founder of a genuinely classical order and the enemy of classicism. Ideal beauty, which becomes for Chateaubriand the art of selecting and concealing, is for him, as for the classics which he introduces, the art of selecting in order to reveal everything. Thus the critical humanism of Montaigne associates the active spontaneity of the moment with the long practice of doubt, the respect for human beauty with a radical mistrust of every idealization.

Listening to Rousseau we hear a very different voice. A being

* "Beauty is a part of great commendation in the commerce and societie of men. It is the chiefe meane of reconciliation betweene one and other. Nor is there any man so barbarous, and so hard-hearted, that in some sort

feeleth not himselve stricken with hersweetness. The body hath a great part in our being, and therein keepees a speciall rancke: For, his structure and composition are worthy due consideration" (p.579)

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without refuge, whom reality offends, achieves upon this earth, through the moment, that peace which the saint hopes to obtain from eternal life. Rousseau continues the conversion to the terrestrial, but by withdrawing from the world which he wishes to remake without adulterating himself. With him ecstasy requires neither divine grace nor willed attention. A combination of happy circumstances is enough: within, calm of the passions; without, calm of nature animated by a "uniform and moderate motion without jar or interval" like a musical transposition of duration. After the pilgrim of the celestial City, after the explorer of the earthly city, here is the exile from every city. He no longer prays or judges; he has ceased to suffer. The rocking motion of water and trees lulls his inner unrest and the tortures of sensibility. One thinks of certain observations of Baudelaire and Kafka regarding that hour of deep solace between the anguish of day and the anguish of dreams. With Rousseau, the moment contains neither an intellectual intuition of truth nor an active savoring of joy. "What does one enjoy in such a situation? Nothing outside one's self, nothing except one's self and one's own existence; so long as this state lasts one is sufficient to himself, like God. The sense of existence stripped of all other feeling is in itself a precious sensation of contentment and peace, and would be enough to make this existence desirable and sweet for him who had cast off all the sensual and earthly impressions which ceaselessly distract us from it and dilute its sweetness here below)" (Reveries)⁶ What remains is the pure present in the consciousness of existing, the freedom of belonging to one's self in the Whole, instead of being thrust into the world to be thrust back upon one's self. There is left the happiness of being rather

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than of not being, without expectation and without regret. Here the moment is a total abandonment to the transparent, luminous, and liberating sensation, which frees the present, whether in memory or in real life, releasing it for poetic creation. Sacred beauty and human beauty have been replaced by the magic beauty of this present instant which, protected by living nature, lasts forever yet does not last, is not in the world yet causes the Whole to participate in the moment.

The differences in the various ecstasies of the moment are accentuated in the problem of the relation of vision to action, of boundless freedom to a freedom that is committed. Augustine complains of the "burden of habit", of slipping back into things here below "with their lamentable tyranny." He acknowledges the impossibility of enduring for long the excessive reality of the divine presence:* "Now and again Thou initiatest me into a strange plenitude of feeling which, if it reached its fullest intensity in me, would become an indefinable something which would have nothing in common with this life" (Confessions,X)ⓐ Is the revelation of the ecstasy invalidated as soon as the world, which has been put into question or into parentheses, re-asserts its claim? Certainly, Augustine does not believe it is. The moment of conversion implies for him the adherence to a community, a tradition, a church. The ecstasy subsides but it is guaranteed and confirmed by practicing a Christian life. One passes without stumbling, so to speak, from correct believing (which also means to the Platonist Augustine correct seeing) to correct living: "One ought not so to give himself over to the repose of contemplation that he does not think also of being useful to his neighbor, nor so to abandon himself to action that he is forgetful of contemplation" (City of God, XIX)ⓑ

* Cf. T. S. Eliot, Burnt Norton: "human kind/ Cannot bear very much reality."

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The same equilibrium exists in Montaigne; though contemplation is cut off from belief, it nonetheless imposes a style of life and thought which determines the social and political attitude of the individual. With Rousseau, for the first time, the link is broken between ecstatic unveiling and action. The Reveries and The Social Contract come from the same being, who suffers, loves, grows indignant--who reacts to offense sometimes by preaching, sometimes by lyrical outpourings. But between the writings of the reformer and the confessions of the poet there is no connection except with their author. Rousseau himself admits it when he recognizes that these "sweet ecstasies" are capable of making action distasteful to men. The moment no longer issues into reality, it dissolves in reverie, and detached freedom is degraded into a false freedom of escape. "During these strayings, my soul wanders and floats in the universe on the wings of imagination in ecstasies which surpass all other delight." Rousseau, it seems, confuses the enchantment which imagination brings him--and which he himself calls "straying"--with the happiness of clear contemplation, without realizing that this waking dream obscures the truth he reaches through the pure sense of existence.

Montaigne carefully avoids this confusion by distinguishing throughout the Essays between delight in self, which is an active acceptance of one's being, from mere self-complacency. Between them he makes room for the part played by judgment. This does not mean that the moment can be judged from the outside, submitted to some objective criterion, but rather that judgment is necessarily included in it as the capacity to evaluate life, to recapture the total meaning of the unfinished adventure. With Montaigne the role of imagination may be defined in terms of the need for clarity. No writer has made a richer

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use of the imagination in order to lend to thought the freshness of the original upsurge, the easy grace of spontaneity. No one, however, has been more on guard against its providing a disguise for an impotent pride. He grants imagination everything in the invention of forms, nothing as emotional compensation. Like Proust, he rejects fiction, plunging imagination into reality so that it may draw from it an abundant flow of comparisons. Confined to its true function, imagination articulates the moment into duration--supplying memory with concrete equivalents that recreate the content of each instant. When it is in the service of desire, imagination produces only waking dreams, pseudo-myths, ideologies demanded by the will to power. Against this fascination of the lie, reason itself is of doubtful use: "it marcheth ever crooked, halting and broken-hipt; and with falsehood as with truth" (p. 509). It has no means of its own for uprooting that love of falsehood which is as much a part of human nature as the love of truth. "Truth and falsehood have both alike countenances, their port, their taste and their proceedings semblable: Wee behold them with one same eyes. I observe that we are only slow in defending ourselves from deceit, but that we seeke and sue to embrace it. Wee love to meddle and entangle our selves with vanity, as conformable unto our being" (p. 929). If the imagination loses the moment whenever it wanders into a false time, reason does even worse: it destroys it by the very exercise of its function. "And concerning these words, Present, Instant, Even Now; by which it seemes, that especially we uphold and principally ground the intelligence of time; reason discovering the same, doth forthwith destroy it: for presently it severeth it asunder and divideth it into future and past time, as willing to see it necessarily parted in two" (p. 547). Long before Bergson, Montaigne testified to the powerlessness of the intellect to seize the present, hence to

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comprehend freedom. This consciousness of the moment upon which the intelligence of time is founded he conceives as an act of presence of the whole man. Thus it is not reason which he opposes to imagination, but the demand for truth which criticises both, correcting one by the other. In the last analysis, he subordinates both to a loyalty to truth, which for him is the supreme value. It alone creates the desire to witness and communicate the true which transforms the freedom of the moment into will to action.^{1.}

Gradually the clear wisdom of Montaigne frees itself of the Stoic rationalism which sets up a barrier of insensibility between the soul and the world.^{2.} The more it tends toward naked existence, the more it fills itself with particularities and amasses a store of ironical contingencies, of grotesque or sublime human data. But by the same movement with which it shakes off rationalism it separates itself from Christianity, since it refuses the help of a Mediator and employs its own means against the incoherence of becoming. "Nature placed us in the world free and unbound." One has only to return to Her. Does the will suffice to do this? Though Montaigne rejects the theological notion of the Fall, he retains the central idea of a corruption of man's primitive state, of an "original malady"--pride (présomption) which has destroyed freedom. "It is an inconsiderate affection, wherewith we cherish our selves, which presents us into ourselves other than we are/" (p.572) Like sin, it is untruth induced by love of false greatness. Yet what distinguishes it from original sin is that it can be cured only by the patient himself. Before Montaigne, the humanists had christianized classical wisdom; he is the first to dechristianize Christian concepts, not in order to pre-

1. "My soul, of its own complexion, flees falsehood and hates even to think upon it."

2. As to the Stoics, Montaigne finds himself in perfect agreement with Augustine, who writes: "A soul is not upright by virtue of inflexibility, and insensitivity is not health." City of God

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serve Christian morality or metaphysics, but to keep the sense of inwardness and duration. Thus he begins that long process of secularization whose most recent phase is Existentialism. However, by an approach exactly opposite to that of the moderns, who having reached the end of this evolution seek to resurrect the sacred in a primitive and barbarous form, Montaigne tends to replace the sense of the sacred with an attitude that he does not expressly define, but which might be called piety--a veneration for life in its wholeness, implying the recognition of its protective impenetrability.

Montaigne never questions the nature of the bond which binds him to the Divine Being. He accepts the mystery of this relation which can only be recognized, not elucidated. This mystery itself creates the paradox of the instant where existence, "losable by its own nature", is revealed at one and the same time as the lack of plenitude and its precarious possession. It is not surprising that Montaigne associates the God of plenitude with all that he judges essential, and gives thanks to Him in one of the most beautiful passages he has devoted to the instant: "The soul measureth how much she is beholding unto God, for that she is at rest with her conscience, and free from other intestine passions...Oh how availfull is it unto her to be so seated, that wherever she casteth her eyes, the heavens are calme round about her: here is no difficulty, either past, or present, or to come, over which her imagination passeth not without offence" (p. 1009). Montaigne could not have described himself better in fewer words. He asserts himself in the very movement that leads freedom back to the truth of the self. This ascent to a region of calm is also a return to the center, to the point where contraries intersect. Doubtless there was first the leap which

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projects freedom toward things, toward the world to be explored, but the pattern is only completed with the return toward the source. As the moment is here scarcely distinct from the behavior it gives rise to, it brings freedom back to its origin where pleasure in the self becomes an acceptance of God or the Whole. Beyond ambiguity, beyond all contradictions and antagonisms, the universe of Montaigne is one: everything holds together in it; horror and beauty are so entangled that it is impossible to will one without willing the other.

Possible
space

Yet Montaigne profoundly modified the notion of mystery when he situated it in man, in accordance with the needs of his conversion to the earthly. Once religious or cosmological, mystery has become psychological. "If the soul had knowledge of something, it would have knowledge first of all of itself." At least it can be aware of its own opaqueness, admit that it contains something impenetrable: "the more I frequent and know my selfe the more my deformitie astonieth me: and the lesse I understand my selfe" (p. 931) ~~But~~ The passion for knowledge is tempted to mistake the irreducible character of this opaqueness of subjectivity that conditions the study and unveiling of truth. Hence that glorification of darkness and "docte ignorance" which recurs throughout the Essays: "There is some kind of ignorance strong and generous, that for honor and courage is nothing beholding to knowledge" (p. 932) ⁹ By dissipating the illusion of a total knowledge that imprisons the mind in its own light, Montaigne wished to restore to thought the capacity for "wonder, the basis of all philosophy." Faithful to his method, Montaigne mobilises against deception both the passion for knowledge and the humility of ignorance.

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Montaigne's limits are plainly those of wisdom itself. He fought against presumptuousness by means of mental asceticism, by means of a pedagogy, of an esthetic. He did not see, or did not wish to see, that the struggle might lead to choosing self-sacrifice. In shying away from the alternative of submitting to force or accepting martyrdom, he draws the precise line where the domain of the hero or saint begins. "I will follow the best side to the fire, but not into it, if I can choose." Like us, he lived in a world of violence and extreme cruelty, but he speaks less of war than of his malady, much more of man's "original malady" than of the ills of the time. The passages in which he deals with the historical situation are very few in comparison with those he devotes to details of his private life. "I dare not only speake of my selfe; but speake alone of my selfe)" (p. 851) ^o

Yet the historical situation appears everywhere on the horizon of his work, through the very effort he makes to pull himself out of it. He insists that one of the most important functions of the historical man consists in holding history at a distance. If he tries to escape it or to lose himself in it he ceases to have a history, to exist in the full meaning of the word. Montaigne persistently reminds us that "the entire form of the human condition" reveals itself only in the particular experience in which everything is mingled--and is then ordered according to a hierarchy uniquely determined by subjectivity, and which it alone can modify. The event itself holds no privileged rank; it sometimes even drowns in "the cup of tea" for which a Dostoevskian hero said he would sacrifice

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the universe. In this way only does Montaigne communicate what concerns us and reach~~es~~ the core of our common impasse. In this way only does his freedom speak to ours and urge it not to yield to the intimidations of "the ~~g~~ general."

Though lacking militancy, Montaigne's critique is nevertheless not without practical value. Since it is radical, it goes to the root--of that in man which exists prior to the political, economic, and social conditions he produces, of that in him which most resembles death: the blind rigidity of the will to power. The liberty Montaigne can achieve through action does not necessarily seem more valuable to him than that which he mortgages in bowing to the demands of action. If he decides to submit to them, he intends at least to remain master of his own decision. Only "abstinence from doing" allows that discrimination which separates heroism from fanaticism by subjecting it to justice and subordinating it to freedom. "If action have not some splendor of liberty, it has not grace nor honor."

Double
space

Between the living self which "by its nature flows where it will" and the dressed-up self which appears in the work of art, the moment throws a bridge which the artist strengthens in the process of forming his personality. Like the work of art, the moment lies outside time; like existence which it deepens and draws together, it is duration, but a duration that calls ^{for} the creative act. Moments of revealing sensation and recollection in Proust, or of lucid pleasure and return to self in Montaigne--in both cases we feel that here~~y~~ the two selves are joined. ~~Now~~ Deeply pessimistic, Proust seeks to recapture and fix the spontaneity of the moment by means of art; more vigorous, with more confidence in nature,

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Montaigne wishes to prolong it ^{through} ~~by means of~~ an art of living. This art is the aim of his critical humanism, his doubt, his dialectic. "The glorious master-piece of man, is, to live to the purpose: all other things, as to raigne, to governe, to hoard up treasure, to thrive and to build, are for the most part but appendixes and supports thereunto" (p. 1005). Nothing is more alien to the spirit of Montaigne than to isolate certain beautiful moments in order to construct above ordinary life a world of contemplation intended to serve as a refuge against reality. Only "life lowly and without luster" interests him, common/ life as lived by each individual in particular. To submit his thought to the practices and tests of ordinary life remains the thoroughly Socratic basis of Montaigne's method and his dialectic of contradictions. Ordinary life, he reminds us, means private life, the ^{individual} ~~personal~~ experience of the common situation, the personal unveiling of the human condition. At a time when violence had destroyed the very notion of private life, Montaigne put all his energy into rehabilitating it, into defending against terror and even against the heroic the tasks and happiness of individual existence.

(Trans. from the French mss. by Margaret Giovanelli)

Montaigne does not solve all our problems. We have made the point that he never descended into hell. His modest instruction is simply not to transform life into a living hell. That is hard enough.

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