



A Visit to Montaigne

Written, photographed, and illustrated by Daniel M. Stern, ©2022

In September 1998 my wife Deborah and I went on a literary pilgrimage—to the library tower of my favorite writer, Michel de Montaigne.



Montaigne's chateau

occasionally stuck behind tractors, I tried to imagine Montaigne on the same route.

Montaigne spent most of his life in a red-roofed manor on a windy hilltop thirty miles east of Bordeaux, France. Today the countryside around Bordeaux is much as it was during his life. As we traveled across rolling hills, through grape covered slopes and fields of corn, occa-



He would have traveled by horseback, at a more leisurely pace except for the mad dash to avoid marauding armies and bandits. The period during which he lived (1533-1592) was marked by almost continual war, religious strife, and devastating plagues. It's a miracle his library tower still exists. Yet in the midst of those turbulent times Montaigne man-

aged to find a sense of perspective, humor and peace. And that is what has always drawn me to him.



The author with grapes.

After missing the sign off the main road, then following another sign through dense woods up the side of a small mountain, we came to the hilltop town of St. Michel de Montaigne, still inhabited by only 290 people. We arrived at sunset and walked through woods and fields, serenaded by birds and crickets.



Deborah with flowers.

The next morning I woke up before dawn and passed the time re-reading my battered edition of Montaigne's *Essays* (translated by Donald Frame, which also has an excellent introduction):



"When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep; yes, and when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts have been dwelling on extraneous incidents for some part of the time, for some other part I bring them back to the walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, and to me." (p. 850)



"We are great fools. 'He has spent his life in idleness,' we say; 'I have done nothing today.' What, have you not lived? That is not only the fundamental but the most illustrious of your occupations...To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquility in our conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately. All other things, ruling, hoarding, building, are only little appendages and props, at most." (pp 850-851)

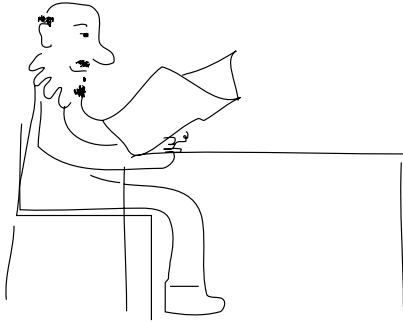


The library tower.

As soon as the library opened, with Deborah in tow, I ran to the chateau. Owned by his descendents until the 18th century, Montaigne's library is a tower on one corner of the property. I was immediately impressed by how large the tower is—a whole family could live comfortably in its four floors and six rooms.



The other side of the library tower (as seen from the from inside the courtyard).



His library was his favorite place: "There I leaf through now one book, now another, without order and without plan....In my library I spend most of the days of my life and most of the hours of the day...There is my throne." His books



were his friends: "I do not travel without books, either in peace or in war...[they are] the best provision I have found for this human journey."

On the first floor is a chapel. I was startled to find vivid murals: a deep blue ceiling with gold stars above colorful coats of arms on top of trompe l'oeil images of recessed niches.



A winding stone staircase led up to the next floor: his bedroom and adjoining room, both with fireplaces.



A window in Montaigne's bedroom.





The library.

On the third floor is his library. A statue of Montaigne stands on one side, a facsimile of his *Essays* on a desk with a chair where he would have sat.

The books in his library are no longer there, but beams on the ceiling are still inscribed with quotes from his favorite authors in Latin and Greek.

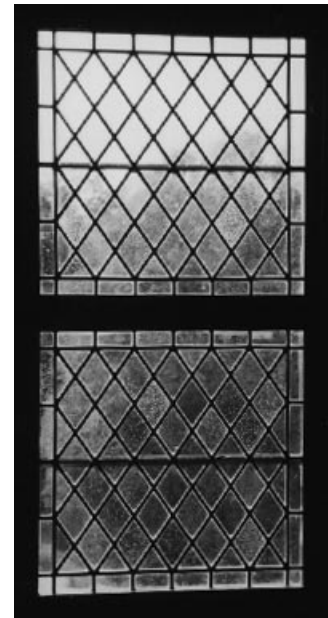


The author enjoying an illicit pleasure.



A quote from one of Montaigne's favorite authors, Terence: "*Homo sum, humani a me nil alienum puto.*" ("I am a man; I consider nothing human foreign to me.")

Leaded glass windows with delicate shades of pink, blue and green open onto views of the main house, forest and fields.



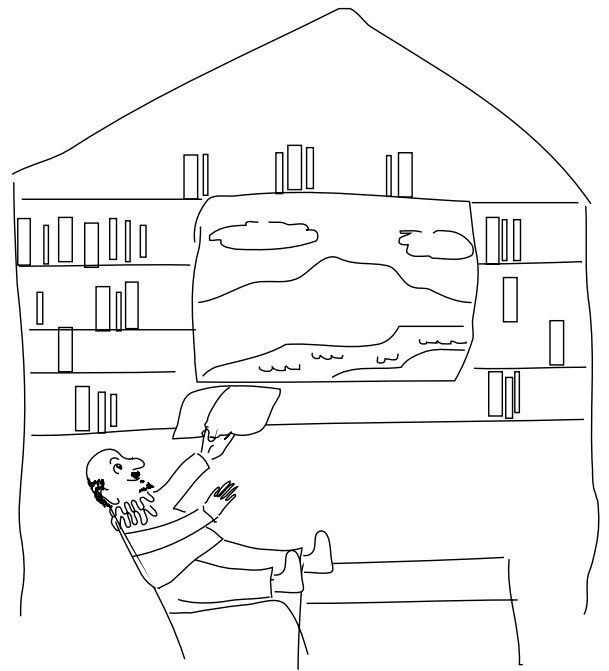
In a study adjoining the library (with a very short doorway), Montaigne inscribed a dedication in Latin on a wall covered with traces of once colorful murals. It too is still there:



"In the year of Christ 1571, at the age of thirty-eight, on the last day of February his birthday, Michel de Montaigne, long weary of the servitude of the court and of public employments, while still entire, retired to the bosom of the learned virgins, where in calm and freedom from all cares he will spend what little remains of his life now more than half run out. If the fates permit, he will complete this abode, this sweet ancestral retreat; and he has consecrated it to his freedom, tranquility, and leisure."

I tried to imagine Montaigne pacing back and forth, looking through one book, now another. But somehow his book, his words seemed more real than his library. "Maybe the place doesn't hold his personality as well as his writing does," said Deborah. And now that I write about it and look at the pictures, the experience seems more real to me than when I was there!

Montaigne's *Essays* speak to me from just across the table instead of 400 years ago. They are filled with mischief, wonder and a love of life. Montaigne plays with ideas, takes them for a walk, often wandering far from his original path. The effect is that of a sketch rather than a finished painting—"I do not portray being: I portray passing."—loose, spontaneous, random, vivid, breathing, and alive.



Perhaps Virginia Woolf said it best when she wrote of Montaigne's *Essays*, "As the centuries go by, there is always a crowd before that picture, gazing into its depths, seeing their own faces reflected in it, seeing more the more they look....He laid hold of the beauty of the world with all his fingers. He achieved happiness."





The author goes wild...



while Deborah waits patiently.

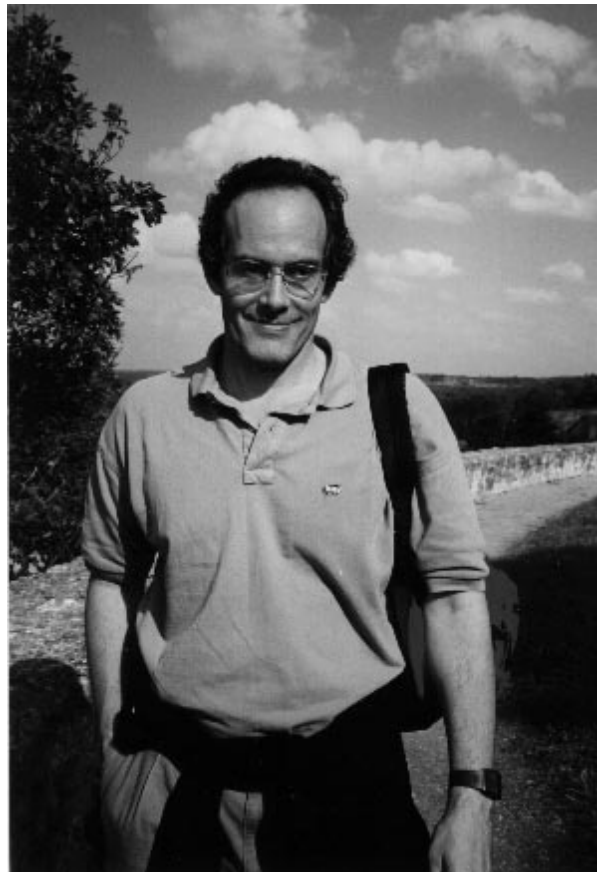




Well, maybe not that patiently.



"Can we please go now."



"Okay. Now we can go."