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REVIEW

Sarah Bakewell, *How to Live, or, A life of Montaigne in one Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (New York: Other Press, 2010), ISBN: 978-1590514252

Flaubert once advised a friend wondering how to approach Montaigne with the following advice: "Don't read him as children do, for amusement, nor as the ambitious do, to be instructed. No, read him *in order to live*."¹ Sarah Bakewell's delightful *How to Live, or A life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*, takes up Flaubert's challenge, combining a rollicking account of Montaigne's quest to learn how to live and a biography of the man who sought to ask that question with humility and grace. As Foucault once suggested in his 1983 lectures at the Collège de France, Montaigne's *Essays* present a new ethics of the self, a way of fashioning the self to resist and surmount not only fortune's arrows but also the powerful structures and discourses that unconsciously shape our relationships to ourselves and to others. By writing his *Essays*, Montaigne reconstituted this ancient ethic with a wholly new form of self-reflection and self-exploration; Bakewell's book promises to translate the making of this reflective, thoughtful self to today.

How to Live consists of three interwoven strands: the story of Montaigne's life and times in sixteenth century France; a history of the reception of the *Essays*, beginning with the great popularity Montaigne enjoyed in his own time and ranging through the periodic criticism and acclaim in the following centuries; and an account of the chief elements of Montaigne's thought. Nobleman, government official, and winegrower, Michel Eyquem Montaigne lived in the Périgord area of southwestern France from 1533 until 1592. Having received a classical education in the manner of Erasmus (speaking Latin) and studied law (rather desultorily), Montaigne passed thirteen years working at the Bordeaux *parlement* when he decided, at thirty-seven, to retire to his library. "From now on, Montaigne would live for himself rather than for duty," Bakewell writes. (24) Setting up his collection of books, housed in five rows on a curving set of shelves meant to fit the round tower of his literary *atelier*, Montaigne created a veritable chamber of marvels including historical me-

¹ Gustave Flaubert to Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie, June 16, 1857. Cited in Sarah Bakewell, *How to live, or, A life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer* (New York: Other Press, 2010), 11. All quotations from Montaigne come from the Donald Frame translation used by Bakewell. Page numbers refer to Bakewell's text.

morabilia, family heirlooms, and artifacts from South America—all meant to inspire his wandering (and writing) mind. Surrounded by inscriptions from Pliny the Elder, Euripides, and Sophocles on his roof beams, Montaigne fashioned a meditative existence far from the bloody troubles raging around him as he sought to unravel himself and his own experience, depicting, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty once put it “a consciousness astonished at itself.”²

The crafting and probing of this consciousness in the *Essays* has rarely ceased astonishing Montaigne’s readers. A “baroque bestseller,” (222) the *Essays* counted among its fashionable readers Henri III, King of France. At the same time, and in roughly the same generation as Montaigne, Descartes and Pascal each found his work objectionable: Montaigne’s “boundary-blurring ambiguities” alarmed the precision-seeking Descartes, while Pascal, despite having an abiding affinity for Montaigne, could not bear the latter’s celebration of skepticism. While Montaigne was nominally a Catholic, his lack of doctrinal purity landed the *Essays* on the Catholic Church’s Index of Prohibited Books in 1676, although by that time, as Bakewell notes, Montaigne had already become the favorite reading “of a disreputable crew of fops, wits, atheists, skeptics, and rakes.” (152) The proceeding generations would have to find their Montaigne in bowdlerized or foreign editions as the Church’s edict dried up what was once a steady stream of Montaigne’s prose.

Foreign editions also had peculiar lives of their own. While earlier German readers most loved (and reprinted) Montaigne’s *Volkslieder*, the “cannibal love songs” he repeats in “Of Cannibals,” English readers were charmed by the *Essays*’ style and content. John Florio’s translation in 1603 brought the *Essays* across the Channel; William Shakespeare was among its first readers. Indeed, Montaigne appears to have influenced Shakespeare in plays ranging from *Hamlet* to *The Tempest*—Harold Bloom has recently referred to Montaigne’s *Essays* as “palpably a resort for *Hamlet* and for Hamlet, play and prince.”³ William Hazlitt would later carry forward the English tradition of “Montaignesque” writing while also compiling a *Complete Works* in 1842, which became the standard edition in Britain over the coming years.

Back in France, a sleek modern edition of 1724, designed by Pierre Coste, elicited a subversive Montaigne by adding extra paraphernalia including the complete text of *On Voluntary Servitude*, a Renaissance analogue to the Frankfurt School’s *Studies in Authority and the Family* authored by Montaigne’s dearest friend, Etienne de la Boétie. Montaigne’s intense feelings for La Boétie brought praise from Romantics, although they could not support the *Essays*’ many pleas to “live temperately.” As George Sand put it, she was “not Montaigne’s disciple” when it came to his Stoical or Skeptical indifference. Yet it was pre-

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Lecture de Montaigne,” in *Éloge de la philosophie et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 321-347, 322, Cited in Bakewell, 37.

³ Harold Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 40.

cisely this practiced indifference that played an elemental role in Montaigne's elaboration of what it means to live—and speaks to his continued promise today.

The efflorescence of varied and often contradictory responses to Montaigne's work testifies to the wonderful openness of his *Essays* as well as the great difficulty of saying anything definitive (or definite) about his thought. While scholars have anxiously sought to pin Montaigne as a neo-Stoic or a Skeptic or even a proto-postmodern theorist, Bakewell celebrates the sheer diversity of Montaigne's possible meanings—perhaps the single greatest source of his persistent popularity. A brief rehearsal of some of Bakewell's "twenty attempts at an answer" to the question of how to live gives a sense of the *Essays'* range and diversity. Bakewell asks, "how to live?" Montaigne might answer: "Don't worry about death." Or: "Read a lot, forget most of what you read, and be slow-witted." Or: "Be convivial with others." Or: "Guard your humanity." Or, simply: "Be ordinary and imperfect." Montaigne calls his readers (and himself) both to be themselves and to achieve their humanity in the process. "Life should be an aim unto itself, a purpose unto itself," he writes. (326)

Bakewell rightly situates the beginning of the *Essays* in a vivid encounter with death to which Montaigne frequently returned in his writings. When Montaigne was about thirty-six, he was out riding when something collided with him from behind, knocking down his horse and sending Montaigne into the air. As Montaigne put it:

There lay the horse bowled over and stunned, and I ten or twelve paces beyond, dead, stretched on my back, my face all bruised and skinned, my sword, which I had had in my hand, more than ten paces away, my belt in pieces, having no more motion or feeling than a log. (13)

One of Montaigne's servants, riding his horse at full gallop, had struck him" like a colossus." (14) His life in the balance, Montaigne found himself experiencing the proximity of death somehow at a distance. "I felt infinite sweetness in this repose," he later wrote. It was going to be "a very happy death." (19)

Montaigne did not, of course, die. Instead, this encounter with his own death profoundly affected the *Essays*. One could rightly say, as the title of an early essay put it, that for Montaigne "to philosophize is to learn how to die." Accepting death became Montaigne's "most fundamental, most liberating answer to the question of how to live," (21) and this acceptance led Montaigne directly to the philosophy of the *Essays*: the exploration of the living self and all its richness of experience. Having confronted death as a certainty, Montaigne felt liberated to live with abandon; not fearing his non-existence Montaigne could now exist intensely. Soon Montaigne would leave his job as magistrate in Bordeaux and dedicate himself to his reflections.

In the wake of his accident and as he strove to live with his newly-won equanimity, Montaigne found common cause with three schools of ancient philosophy: the Stoics, the Skeptics, and the Epicureans. While each differed in important respects, "Montaigne mixed

and matched them according to his needs.” (109) Montaigne followed these schools’ dedication to *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, which they pursued through practices aimed at achieving *ataraxia*, or equilibrium and imperturbability. The Epicurean Lucretius suggested to Montaigne how one can picture one’s death in order to assuage anxieties over the disappearance of the self. With the Stoic Seneca, Montaigne also praised *prosochē*, or mindfulness, as a call to attending the inner world as well as to how the outer world can influence and unsettle one’s interior balance. Both Stoics and Epicureans relied on a conception of nature as the standard by which to measure one’s own life, and Montaigne took this up as well. Being truly human means “living appropriately, or *à propos*, so that one estimates things at their right value and behaves in the way correctly suited to each occasion.” (247)

The tradition of skepticism founded by Pyrrho in the fourth century BCE, called “Pyrrhonian skepticism,” proved perhaps most influential for Montaigne’s thought. Pyrrhonian skepticism distinguished itself from other skeptical traditions by aiming above all else at achieving tranquility and also by assigning pride of place to appearances. Like Stoicism and Epicureanism, it amounted to a form of therapy, an approach to living with oneself and one’s place in the world. This approach, moreover, encouraged one neither to take life nor oneself too seriously—a philosophy in perfect harmony with Montaigne’s preternatural sense of fallibility. “I suspend judgment,” a translation of the Skeptical mantra *Epokhē*, Montaigne took for his own; as Hugo Friedrich put it, Montaigne’s philosophy is one of “unassumingness.” (128) Skepticism guided Montaigne in work and life, but one sees it especially suffusing the *Essays*. Bakewell recounts how Montaigne “filled his pages with words such as ‘perhaps,’ ‘to some extent,’ ‘I think,’ ‘It seems to me,’ and so on—words which, as Montaigne said himself, ‘soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions.’” Bakewell adds: “They are not extra flourishes; they *are* Montaigne’s thought, at its purest.” (128)

With only the loosest of doctrines—a hope that philosophy may help one learn to die, a faith in nature’s standard for guidance in life, an irreverent love of human fallibility—Montaigne’s “thought” is better described as a verb than a noun, as a commitment to the activity of thinking and reflection rather than to a system of thought. “Philosophy is incarnate” for Montaigne, Bakewell writes (129), and its incarnation comes in the very body of the philosopher—the subject and the substance of thinking:

I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy. Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself, I take stock of myself, I taste myself... I roll about in myself. (224)

Montaigne radicalized the “philosophy as a way of life” propounded by the Hellenistic schools, bringing it to a whole new form of self-exploration, where every man or woman could become a site of illuminative discovery. As Montaigne commented on his own undertakings: “I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up

all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as with a life of richer stuff." (317-8)

The *Essays* not only depict the man Montaigne wrestling with himself; they also model this self-exploration for their readers. Do the *Essays* then teach a particular way to live? Early in her study, Bakewell asserts that "the *Essays* has no great meaning, no point to make, no argument to advance." (7) This strikes me as slightly disingenuous. While Montaigne decidedly is not a doctrinal philosopher, one cannot overlook at least one historical and political point of the *Essays*, namely, their skeptical resistance to the religious fanaticism during France's decades of "troubles." As strident belief fueled horrific violence around him, Montaigne's *sangfroid* appeared in both thought and practice. Montaigne praised equilibrium in the essays and pursued it as a high-level emissary between Henri III and Henri of Navarre, the then-Calvinist contender for the throne who would later convert and become Henri IV. Montaigne, in Bakewell's words, "was known as a man who would listen thoughtfully to all sides, whose Pyrrhonian principle was to lend his ears to everyone and his mind to no one, while maintaining his own integrity through it all." (247)

Picking up on this particular point of the *Essays*, Bakewell suggests that Montaigne can speak directly to the turmoils produced by religious conflict in the twenty-first century. Recounting Leaguist (ardent pro-Catholic) preachers and lawyers as unleashing a "fatwa" against Henri III for his killing of Henri, duc de Guise, their leader (269), Bakewell evokes today's discontents while describing how Montaigne sought to defuse those in his own time. Indeed, Bakewell goes farther in her final chapter, suggesting that the world "has been sorely in need of a Montaignean politics," and that "it could use his sense of moderation, his love of sociability and courtesy, his suspension of judgment, and his subtle understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved in confrontation and conflict." (327) By all means! But what exactly would this "Montaignean politics" look like?

At first glance, it seems all too easy to assimilate Montaigne to today's self-help culture of gurus and consumerist individualism, and in two ways. On the one hand, Montaigne simply offers, as Max Horkheimer once put it, "the Stoicism of the rich"⁴—a kind of narcissistic self-exploration only made possible by wealth and the privilege of isolation. On the other, while Montaigne's construction of the modern self may have possessed a critical edge against the religious dogmas of his own day, today's cult of the self exists inextricably wrapped up with forms of power attributable to capitalism: the isolated self as consumer, unencumbered by claims of family, religion, or community. Montaigne may then present precisely what Foucault hoped the ethics of the self might prevent, that is, the disciplining of the self by power into a self-policing modern subject. Bakewell's own slips into the clichés of self-help, such as her characterizing Montaigne's philosophy as teaching how to "go with the flow" (22) or "keep one's feet on the ground," (220) do little to contradict such a reading. If today's discourses of the self qua isolated subject, as Charles Taylor has sug-

⁴ Max Horkheimer, "Montaigne and the Function of Skepticism," in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 265-312, 272.

gested, impoverish our ability to articulate the self's deeper sources and thus to create any meaningful horizons for understanding our own existence, Montaigne may do more harm than good.⁵

Yet Bakewell also warns against just such an interpretation. Rather than reading Montaigne as offering only "an incitement to self-indulgence" or simply heightening today's destructive cults of the self, Bakewell claims that Montaigne calls his readers to a newly revitalized experience of their relations with others—a kind of humanism. As Bakewell writes: "No abstract principles are involved: there are only two individuals, face to face, hoping for the best from one another." (327) Montaigne takes the self-help culture and elevates it. Montaigne's ethics of the self then emerge through dialogue and attentive relationship to human, non-human, and even material others. Montaigne found the highest moments of life in conversation with his beloved friend La Boétie; he discovered his greatest insights when gazing at his cat; he found remarkable significance in cataloging the strange eating habits of different places and times. This kind of engaged receptivity toward himself and others seeks above all to break free from habit and thus live as a more fully human being. A "Montaignean politics" built on this foundation is surely worth pursuing.

While the dangers of a shallow self-creation persist today, Montaigne thus reminds us that creating and sustaining a self must come through our relationships with others. Put more polemically, the struggle for the self must also be political: Achieving a "Montaignean politics" is not just a matter of each one of us cultivating our own gardens by adopting some of Montaigne's "tricks" to achieve equanimity and mindfulness; we require one another in order to live. By creating the *Essays* and thus an audience for his self-reflections, Montaigne acknowledged the need for more than lonely lucubration; he sought connection with his readers and solidarity for his self-exploration. Bakewell has broadened Montaigne's public to include us denizens of the twenty-first century. Read, learn and live.

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⁵See Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 1992).