Introduction

This book explores the relationship between self-examination, self-regulation and human freedom in a late Renaissance text: the *Essais* (c. 1571–92) of Michel de Montaigne.[1] More than any other literary or philosophical work of its period, the *Essais* have come to be regarded as a landmark in the development of modern subjectivity – as an embodiment of conceptions and concerns astonishingly akin to our own. I argue that this sense of familiarity is, in certain fundamental respects, illusory – a projection of our own preoccupations and expectations on to Montaigne's text. By drawing attention to questions about the freedom of the self in the *Essais*, I hope not only to illuminate a lost dimension of Montaigne's work, but to recover something of the strangeness and fertility of a way of thinking about the self largely occluded in our own culture.[2]

One of the most striking and original features of the text is its rejection of abstract and didactic learning in favour of a dynamic portrait of the

[1] Born in 1533, Montaigne is thought to have begun work on the *Essais* in about 1571 (see Villey 1933). Books I and II were first published in 1580, in a two-volume octavo edition printed in Bordeaux by Simon Millanges (Montaigne 1580). A considerably expanded quarto edition (the fifth edition) appeared in Paris (Abel L'Angelier) in 1588, with the addition of a third volume and the insertion of much new material into the first two books of the existing text (Montaigne 1588). The margins of the 'Bordeaux Copy' – Montaigne's own working copy of the 1588 edition, now preserved at the Bibliothèque municipale in Bordeaux (Rés. 1238) – are filled with further, extensive manuscript additions made in his own hand in the years before his death in 1592. This resource has recently been made available in a colour facsimile edition (Montaigne 2002a) and is also available online as part of the Montaigne Project hosted by the University of Chicago (Montaigne 2002b). The Bordeaux Copy diverges at a number of points from the first posthumous (folio) edition of 1595 (Paris: Abel L'Angelier), which was prepared by Montaigne's 'fille d'alliance' (II.17: P 701, V 661, F 502), Marie de Gournay (Montaigne 1595). For fuller bibliographical information, see Sayce and Maskell 1983. For information about the editions used in this book, see under 'Conventions'.

[2] Recent years have witnessed a surge of interest in the history of subjectivity and selfhood: see, for example, Taylor 1989, Porter 1997, Reiss 2005, Seigel 2005, Martin and Barresi 2006 and Sorabji 2006. These accounts, however, have little to say about the role of freedom in the construction of personhood and individual agency. For a stimulating exploration of the difficulties involved in studying representations of the person and the self in other periods and cultures, see Carrithers, Collins and Lukes 1985.

author's own dispositions and cogitations. Montaigne claims to [A]'examine', 'monitor' and 'sample' himself, to [B]'see' himself and 'seek for' himself 'down to the very entrails'.[3] At the heart of this groundbreaking project of self-study is a call for a symbolic retreat from the world into the seclusion of one's own home, library or *arriereboutique* – spaces in which it is possible to live for or belong to oneself ([A]'*estre à soy*').[4]

This foregrounding of the self resonates strongly with modern readers, who tend to think of themselves as individuals possessed of hidden feelings and inward depths, caught in a web of language and social performance always falling short of their essential being. From this perspective, Montaigne's efforts to distinguish all that is properly 'moy' or 'à moy' (myself, my own) from all that is not reflect a striving for sincere self-presence and self-expression in a world of alienating appearances and constructed roles.[5] Subjectivity here emerges at a point of perceived friction between artificial and authentic layers of conduct and self-understanding – between our concern to establish ourselves as the authors of our own identities and the suspicion that our 'selves' are mere performances, scripted by social and ideological forces beyond our control.[6]

My objection to this approach is that it involves the suppression of a crucial dimension of Montaigne's project: the fact that the [B]'ruling form' that he claims to discover in himself is specifically that of a *free* self.[7] [C]'Idleness and freedom', he writes in *On vanity*, are his 'most favoured qualities' – a point reiterated just a few pages later with the claim that [C]'liberty and idleness' are his 'ruling qualities'.[8] His soul, we are told in *On presumption*, is [A]'free and all its own'; he succeeds only when moved by his 'own pure and free will', having had 'neither forced governor nor master to this day'.[9] As these quotations suggest, Montaigne's self-portrait is at

[3] [A]'Je me considere sans cesse, je me contrerolle, je me gouste'. II.17: P 697, V 657, F 499. [B]'Moy, qui me voy, et qui me recherche jusques aux entrailles'. III.5: P 889, V 847, F 643–4.

[4] I.38: P 246, V 242, F 178.

[5] See, for example, Cameron 1968, Lüthy 1987, Kushner 1993, Martin 1997, Delègue 1998, Martin 2004 and, above all, Starobinski 1993; cf. (in the context of English Renaissance drama) Maus 1995. For further examples and more extensive discussion, see Chapter 2, Section IV. For a critique of this approach in relation to seventeenth-century English 'life-writings', see Shuger 2000.

[6] This dichotomy between subjectivity (understood as autonomous self-creation) and subjection to power (in the Foucauldian or Althusserian sense) is central to Greenblatt 1980; see also (again in an English context) Barker 1984 and Belsey 1985. For recent appeals to Montaigne as the exponent of an inner self ultimately irreducible to social and ideological determination, see Lee 2000 and Grady 2002.

[7] [B]'Forme maistresse'. III.2: P 851, V 811, F 615.

[8] [C]'Mes qualitez plus favories, l'oysiveté, la franchise'. III.9: P 1014, V 969, F 741. [C]'La liberté et l'oysiveté, qui sont mes maistresses qualitez'. III.9: P 1038, V 992, F 759.

[9] [A]'Ma pure et libre volonté [. . .] J'ay une ame libre et toute sienne [. . .]. N'ayant eu jusques à cett' heure ny commandant ny maistre forcé'. II.17: P 680–1, V 642–3, F 487.

its heart that of a man who belongs to himself, in the sense that his will is his own, instead of being enslaved to someone or something other than himself. It is with the analysis of this self-image that the following study is principally concerned.

Montaigne's reflections on freedom, as this book seeks to make clear, resist incorporation into any one framework of analysis. Certain dimensions of his thinking – in particular his preoccupation with dependency, with the enslavement of the will, and with the vicissitudes of personal obligation (as opposed to legitimate subjection) – resonate unmistakably with what has come to be described, in the wake of Quentin Skinner, as a 'neo-Roman' or 'republican' understanding of freedom as nondomination.[10] Montaigne's version of that language, however, is ethical, rather than constitutional, in its orientation: freedom is to be secured not through political participation in a free state, but through a personal practice of self-regulation allowing us to preserve our will from subjection and expropriation. That project of voluntary disengagement is, in turn, indebted to ancient thought, and in particular to Stoic conceptions of independence as a state of inner tranquillity and detachment. Here again, however, that language of moral freedom and self-control appears in a heavily revised and nuanced incarnation, couched in a discourse of human frailty, vulnerability and self-protection, emphasising the limits of our voluntary power over ourselves and centred on the withdrawal or suspension of the will, rather than its assertion.

These considerations all serve to direct the question of subjectivity and interiority in the *Essais* away from conceptions of *identity* (the text as a celebration of Montaigne's unrepeatable and singular individuality) and towards the more explicitly ethical notions of agency, personhood and control. A primary aim of this book is thus to reorient critical attention to a crucial but hitherto overlooked strand in Montaigne's conception of self. The historical importance and interest of the *Essais*, I contend, lies not only in their anticipation of later forms of autobiographical and introspective writing, but in their distinctive and highly nuanced approach to the problem of personal liberty.

It is also possible, however, to give my argument a more polemical twist. I do not wish to suggest that the existence of a hidden, affective self would have been unintelligible to Montaigne; nor do I wish to imply, just as implausibly, that countless readers of the *Essais* have been mistaken in their assessment of the text as a remarkably original work, unprecedented in its attention to the inner dispositions and reflections of its author.

[10] Skinner 2008b contains the most recent and complete statement of this analysis.

When we realise, however, that Montaigne's efforts to return to and live for himself are, at least in part, an expression of his concern to preserve himself from slavery, conventional appeals to sincerity or authenticity as defining attributes of his notion of self lose much of their force. The *nature* of Montaigne's interest in the self, I suggest, has been fundamentally misrepresented and misunderstood. His book represents him as he truly is – but as a witness of his moral character as a free man, not as an expression (sincere or otherwise) of his innermost psychological being.

As the title of the work suggests, Montaigne's eclectic reflections are offered not as doctrines to be studied or learned, but as material for further evaluation and elaboration. He examines problems from a multiplicity of angles, 'trying out' and 'sampling' a variety of opinions without binding himself to any one school of thought or point of view. As one recent commentator has emphasised, this discontinuous and open-ended way of writing serves to promote a particular kind of 'free-thinking', in which both writer and reader may participate.[11] Montaigne judges matters for himself, instead of deferring to the authority of other thinkers; his text is purely his own, free of philosophical and literary debts. The freedom made possible by the *essai*, however, extends beyond his autonomy as a writer and as a thinker. For Montaigne, I argue in Chapter 1, liberty and dependency constitute ethical, as well as intellectual, concerns. His claim to own his book, and to be represented within it, embodies an appeal to moral, and not merely literary, independence.

Chapter 2 focuses on the terms in which Montaigne himself describes his project of 'self-study' and on the language that he uses to articulate what we would now call 'the self'. My analysis centres on two patterns of discourse: a rhetoric of inwardness urging us to look or withdraw *into* ourselves, and a rhetoric of self-possession calling for us to *own* or *belong to* ourselves. I am able to show, first, that these expressions reflect habits of language inherited from ancient texts, in particular the writings of Plutarch and Seneca; and, second, that the habits of thought which underpin them are far removed from our own. When Montaigne contrasts that which is inside us with what is merely external, he is not referring to the distance that separates self and mime, referent and sign, in our own culture. He is instead distinguishing that which is intrinsic to us – in the sense that it can truly be accounted as our own, that it is in our power – from all those possessions and attributes that are merely accidental or fortuitous. When he claims to belong to himself, or to be his own, he is not affirming himself

[11] Scholar 2010.

as the origin and author of his own identity, unfettered by what we would think of today as the forces of ideological subjection; nor does he mean, as some scholars have supposed, that he is his own property.[12] To belong to oneself is instead to be one's own man and master, as opposed to another man's creature.

As I seek to show in Chapter 3, liberty, and not authenticity, provides the key to Montaigne's way of thinking and writing about the self. His appeals for us to return to and reclaim ownership over ourselves emerge as an urgent and practical response to the problem of public engagement and service in a turbulent and corrupt world. Public life, Montaigne claims, should be shunned because it removes us from ourselves – not in the sense that it exposes us to the distorting gaze of others, but because it turns us into slaves by rendering us dependent on the favour of others and by encouraging us to live for the sake of that which lies beyond our powers. Solitude and privacy, in this context, are defined not in opposition to social life per se, but rather to the active pursuit of public office, advancement and reputation. Montaigne's retreat to his estate is an exile of the will, an inward refuge from slavery. Freedom here consists both in the absence of personal subjection to the will of others and in an internal disposition of the mind, achieved by turning one's efforts and will back towards oneself. To be free is to govern oneself in accordance with one's own will, and thus to belong to oneself.

This conception of liberty as a form of self-possession radically reorients our understanding of Montaigne's turn to 'self'. However, it does not quite get us, on its own, to the heart of what the *Essais* have to say about liberty: it is only one half of a complex picture. Chapter 4 considers a strand in Montaigne's reflections that appears at first sight to be entirely separate from, and at variance with, the robust language of independence and self-ownership discussed in Chapter 3. Freedom is here associated with idleness (*oysiveté*) and negligence (*nonchalance*) – with the fragility of an indolent and ill-disciplined will that recoils from occupation and strain, not because it yearns for independence, but because it seeks to be without care. Pressing further, we come to see that these two threads of discourse – self-possession and carelessness – are in fact part of a single story about liberty.

Having analysed Montaigne's composite account of freedom under its two leading aspects, it remains for us to ask how that liberty is to be achieved and defended in practice. Chapter 5 examines the nature and limits of self-discipline in the *Essais*, focusing in particular on Montaigne's use of the

[12] Schaefer 1990, esp. pp. 315–21, Van Delft 1990, Levine 2001, Jordan 2003, Jordan 2004.

language of *mesnagerie* (household management) as a metaphor for the prudent disposition of the will. Montaigne's approach to the government of his household, as it is represented in his text, offers a tacit subversion of the counsel of vigilant control and command offered by the canonical ancient treatise on the subject, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. In Montaigne's hands, *mesnagerie* comes to be associated with a form of strategic inattention to the affairs of the household and with the acceptance of the limited and 'impure' nature of one's authority. This emphasis on judicious compromise and restraint, I contend, provides both a mirror image and a model for his indirect and surreptitious approach to self-regulation and self-containment. Like the household, the self here emerges as a space of managed (rather than wholly controlled) freedom, sustained by a loose and measured rein.

Liberty provides the central focus of this book and of the reading of the *Essais* that it proposes. I am not claiming, however, that freedom provides the key to the text – that the work as a whole is to be understood exclusively, or even fundamentally, in the terms foregrounded in this study. Montaigne's designation of his book as an exercise in self-study provides formal coherence and retrospective unity to a sprawling and multifarious text, without fully containing or controlling it. My principal interest lies in just one of the projects pursued by this eclectic and archipelagic text: the cultivation of an art of both living and writing centred on the self. It is this aspect of the work, this strand in Montaigne's project, that freedom helps illuminate.

A few qualifications and clarifications are therefore in order before drawing this introduction to a close. I am not suggesting, in the first place, that liberty is the highest moral value adumbrated in the *Essais*. The problem of personal freedom is, as I hope to show, one of Montaigne's most persistent ethical preoccupations. There may be other principles or ideals, however, for the sake of which a free man might choose to surrender his liberty, allowing or accepting himself to fall into dependency. The [A]'true and perfect' friendship that Montaigne claims to have shared with the late Estienne de La Boétie, in particular, is implicitly presented as a form of 'voluntary servitude' – at once a pure expression of his will and a state of slavery.[13]

Unlike those friendships [A]'which law and natural obligation impose on us', and which bind fathers and sons, or husbands and wives, Montaigne's

[13] [A]'Ces vrayes et parfaictes amitiez'. I.27: P 191, V 185, F 136. *On friendship* was originally conceived as a frame for La Boétie's polemic against tyranny, the *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (see Chapter 3, Section III). See Langer 1994 and Rigolot 2005.

friendship with La Boétie is a product of his free will (*liberté volontaire*).[14] Yet this friendship, in which one gives oneself, one's soul and one's will entirely to another, unmistakably involves a form of mastery, [A]'possessing the soul, and ruling it with absolute sovereignty'.[15] Montaigne and La Boétie belong to each other, rather than to themselves:

> [A]I know not what quintessence of all this mixture, which, having seized my whole will, led it to plunge and lose itself in his; [C]which, having seized his whole will, led it to plunge and lose itself in mine: with equal hunger, equal rivalry. [A]I say lose, in truth, for it reserved nothing that was proper to us, nor was anything either his or mine.[16]

This vision of friendship as a [A]'confusion' of wills[17] probes the outer limits of freedom as self-possession. Montaigne surrenders his will and his liberty to his friend, leaving him with nothing that he can call his own.

This servitude is not only voluntary, however, but reciprocal: La Boétie's will is indistinguishable from Montaigne's. This Aristotelian construction of the friend as an *alter ego*[18] results in the dissolution of obligation both outside and within the friendship. The bond of perfect friendship is so all-encompassing as to supersede all other ties of fellowship, requiring of us that we be [C]'friends more than citizens, friends more than friends or enemies of [our] country, or friends of ambition and disturbance'.[19] In [B]'this sovereign and masterful friendship', moreover, consideration of debt and service has no place: [A]'the union of such friends, being truly perfect, makes them lose the sense of such duties, and hate and banish from between them, these words of division and difference, benefit, obligation, gratitude, prayer, thanks, and the like'.[20]

Not only can Montaigne's account of perfect friendship be read as an attempt to transcend the dichotomy between freedom and servitude that is elsewhere so fundamental to his reflections, but the ideal of liberty

[14] [A]'À mesure que ce sont amitiez que la loy et l'obligation naturelle nous commande, il y a d'autant moins de nostre choix et liberté volontaire'. I.27: P 191, V 185, F 137.

[15] [A]'Cette amitié, qui possede l'ame, et la regente en toute souveraineté'. I.27: P 198, V 191, F 141.

[16] [A]'C'est je ne sçay quelle quinte-essence de tout ce meslange, qui ayant saisi toute ma volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre dans la sienne, [C]qui ayant saisi toute sa volonté, l'amena se plonger et se perdre en la mienne: d'une faim, d'une concurrence pareille. [A]Je dis perdre à la verité, ne nous reservant rien qui nous fust propre, ny qui fust ou sien ou mien'. I.27: P 195, V 189, F 139.

[17] 'Cette confusion si pleine de nos volontez'. I.27: P 197, V 190, F 141.

[18] On this point, see Langer 1994 and Cave 1999, pp. 120–3.

[19] [C]'Plus amis que citoyens, plus amis qu'amis ou que ennemis de leur païs, qu'amis d'ambition et de trouble'. I.27: P 196, V 189, F 140.

[20] [A]'L'union de tels amis estant veritablement parfaicte, elle leur faict perdre le sentiment de tels devoirs, et haïr et chasser d'entre eux, ces mots de division et de difference, bien-faict, obligation, recognoissance, priere, remerciement, et leurs pareils'. I.27: P 197, V 190, F 141.

is itself tacitly subjected to significant limitations. In the first place, his representation of freedom as an unlearned, natural condition identifies self-possession and carelessness as aristocratic qualities, accessible only to a [B]'few souls so orderly, so strong and well-born, that they can be trusted with their own guidance'.[21] Although the focus of this book is on the intellectual and discursive contexts (rather than the social conditions) that govern Montaigne's thinking about liberty, it is important to emphasise that independence, frankness, leisure and nonchalance are all traits characteristically associated with the nobility of *ancien régime* France.[22] To this extent, Montaigne's self-presentation as a free man reflects the ideology of a particular class, defined in opposition to a servile majority of vulgar scholars and mendacious flatterers, rather than an ethics of more universal application. Contrary to those scholars who have linked the *Essais* to the morality of an emergent bourgeoisie,[23] it is hard to see how liberty, as Montaigne understands it, could be either imagined or realised in the absence of the economic self-sufficiency and freedom from occupation of the land-owning aristocracy. Freedom is intimately tied to freehold: the free man can do without the material rewards of princely service; he is not in the employ of any other man; he lives in a state of leisure; he has dominion and authority over his own household.

Liberty, in this perspective, is itself the hostage of our birth – a paradox highlighted by Montaigne in *On vanity*, where the ability to live within the limits of one's own power, instead of relying on the favour of other men, is unmasked as a product of divine grace.

> [B]Oh, how much am I obliged to God that it was his pleasure that I should receive all I have directly from his grace: and that he has kept all my indebtedness for himself privately! [C]How earnestly I beseech his holy mercy, that I may never owe thanks for essential things to anyone! Fortunate freedom: which has guided me so far. May it continue to the end![24]

Montaigne may be free from debts to any man, but for this he is indebted to God. The freedom of the self, in this light, operates within a purely human sphere, circumscribed by the soul's dependency on God. The question as to

[21] [B]'Il est peu d'ames si reglees, si fortes et bien nées, à qui on se puisse fier de leur propre conduicte'. II.12: P 592, V 559, F 419.

[22] Posner 1999.

[23] In addition to the works cited in Footnote 12 above, see Desan 1992 and the more qualified claims made by Keohane 1977.

[24] [B]'Ô combien je suis tenu à Dieu, de ce qu'il luy a pleu, que j'aye receu immediatement de sa grace, tout ce que j'ay: qu'il a retenu particulierement à soy toute sa debte! [C]Combien je supplie instamment sa saincte misericorde, que jamais je ne doive un essentiel grammercy à personne! Bien heureuse franchise: qui m'a conduict si loing. Qu'elle acheve'. III.9: P 1013, V 968, F 739.

what limits, if any, our duty of subjection to God imposes on the exercise of our liberty is unfortunately not one that I can hope to adequately answer here. The problem of free will, moreover, lies beyond the scope of this book, which is more particularly concerned with the self's relationship with other agents and with the inner disposition of the soul towards that which lies beyond its power.[25]

It may be helpful, however, to recall here Pascal's castigation of Montaigne's 'sot projet' of self-portrayal – a condemnation rooted in the claim that the self (*le moi*) is 'unjust because it makes itself the centre of everything', as part of that fallen 'instinct which incites one to make oneself God'.[26] The self, for Pascal, is worthy of hate as a source not merely of narcissistic *divertissement*, but of self-idolatry and rebellion against God. Montaigne's withdrawal into the self offers as a solution to human misery what is in fact the cause of our unhappiness and enslavement: our failure to acknowledge our dependency upon God and our existence, not as self-sufficient entities, but as 'members' of humanity and of Christ, in the literal sense of bodily parts that have no life on their own but only insofar as they partake of the whole.[27] Pascal's objection to Montaigne thus centres not (as is often supposed) on the immodesty of his fascination with himself, but on the sin of pride that leads him to seek contentment in, and independence for, himself.

One way, however, of understanding the argumentative arc of the final three chapters of this book – from self-possession to carelessness to 'impure' self-management – would be to insist on the precariousness and imperfection of Montaigne's freedom. One of his main concerns in writing the *Essais*, certainly, is to demonstrate that his essential and natural condition is one of liberty. He does not, however, claim always and everywhere to be in possession of his freedom; still less does he pretend to master himself. Montaigne's conception of 'self', as I hope to have made clear, hinges on a fundamental moral distinction between that which is subject to his will and that which lies beyond the limits of his power. In practice, however, that boundary is rarely clear-cut.

Finally, a few words about my approach to the text. My guiding concern has been to analyse the *Essais* as a landscape of intuitions, inclinations and preoccupations rather than as the expression of fixed assumptions or deeply

[25] But on this question, see Langer 1990 and Carraud and Marion 2004.
[26] Pascal 2004. 'Ce sot projet de se peindre' (fragment 653). 'Le moi est haïssable. [. . .] Je le hais parce qu'il est injuste, qu'il se fait centre de tout' (fragment 509). 'Qui ne hait en soi son amour-propre, et cet instinct qui le porte à se faire Dieu, est bien aveuglé' (fragment 524).
[27] Mesnard 1989.

held beliefs. One effect of my argument, as I have already intimated, is to draw attention to the persistence and depth of Montaigne's commitment to personal freedom. I have ultimately found it more helpful, however, to think of interpretation as a way of explaining what makes Montaigne's book into the particular text that it is, rather than as a way of reconstructing his patterns of belief. In other words, I have sought to understand the text not as an archival imprint of his fundamental 'views' about liberty, but as an exceptionally flexible exercise of judgment, allowing him to draw upon and confront contrasting argumentative and rhetorical strategies. My aim has been to evoke a dense tapestry of thinking habits inscribed in the text, made up of persistent preoccupations and anxieties, recurrent motifs and configurations, echoes between chapters, and traces left by other texts – to examine Montaigne's reflections on freedom as a palimpsest of discourse rather than a solid edifice of ideas.

In an effort to view that palimpsest in its full complexity, I have chosen to treat the *Essais* as a single body of discourse instead of structuring my analysis around the close, sequential reading of discrete chapters. This approach has led me to focus attention on particular passages and reflections, sometimes juxtaposing discussions situated some distance apart in the text. It is vital to stress, however, that these quotations are offered not as insights into Montaigne's 'position' or 'beliefs' on the theme of freedom, but as instances of his intricate handling of the language of liberty. Mindful of Jean-Yves Pouilloux's warnings against the temptation to anthologise Montaigne's text, I have sought to interpret these passages not as disembodied fragments of prose, but as reflections embedded within particular textual contexts, invested with a peculiarly self-reflexive and self-critical force.[28]

I have also sought, however, to carry the discussion initiated by Pouilloux one step further. Crucially, it seems to me, the *Essais* represent more than a purely formal exercise in critical thinking. They address particular problems and questions in particular ways, acting within and upon prevailing systems of discourse. To explain the *Essais*, to explain Montaigne's *manière*, is thus not only to elucidate the sceptical and self-critical dynamic of his writing (and rewriting). It is also to understand the preoccupations, presuppositions and interpretative categories that nourish and shape his fluid reflections – to reconstruct the complex horizons of understanding and expectation which it inhabits and brings into being. To explain the text, in this sense, is to read Montaigne as a *bricoleur*, appropriating and refashioning preexisting tropes,

[28] Pouilloux 1969, Pouilloux 1995.