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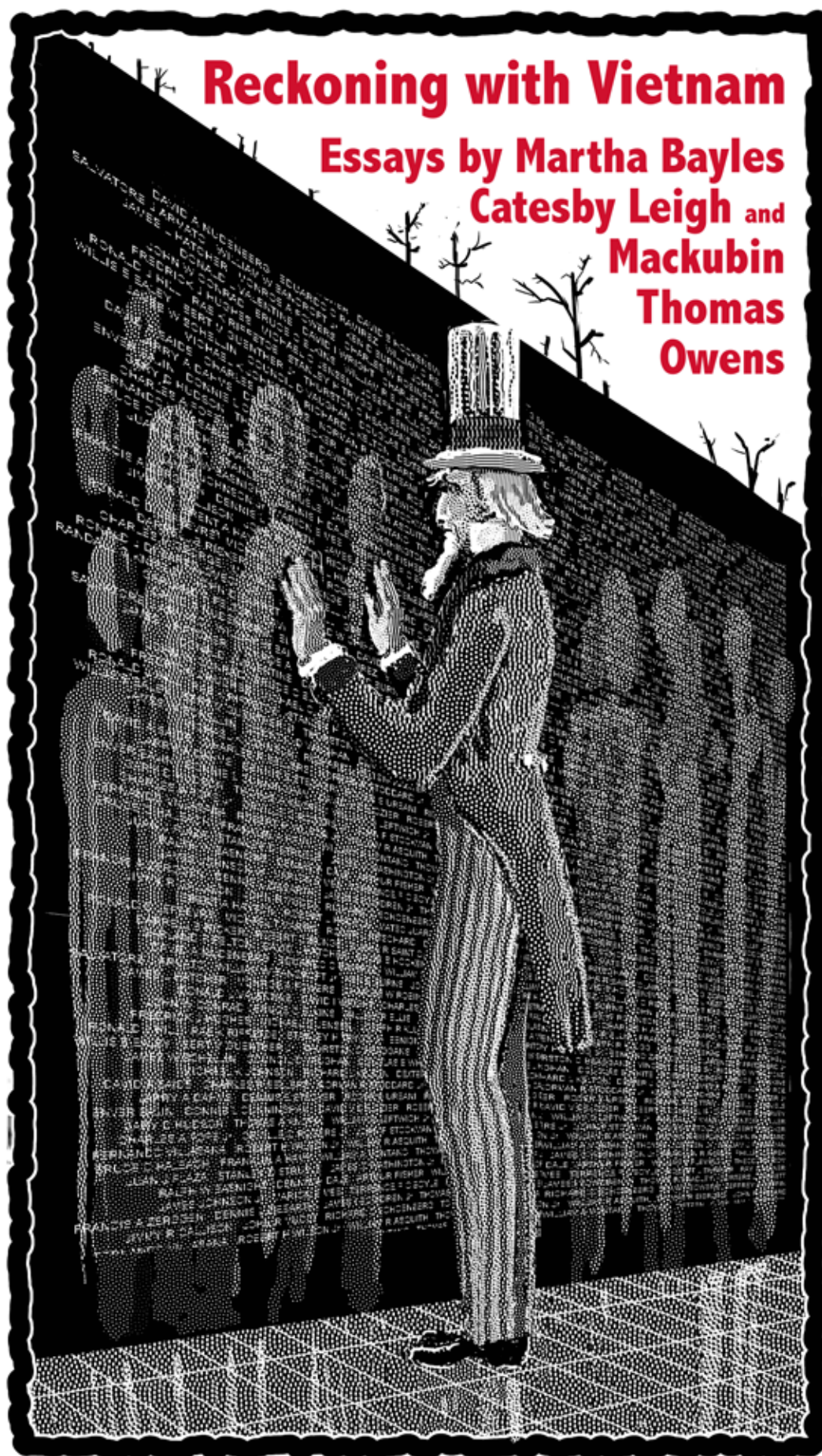
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MISREADING MONTAIGNE

Montaigne: A Life, by Philippe Desan, translated by Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal.
Princeton University Press, 832 pages, \$39.95

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE'S *ESSAYS* IS one of the most widely read French literary and philosophical classics. It is certainly one of the most quotable. The first book with that title, the *Essays* was published in some four successive, revised, and expanded editions from 1580 until after the author's death, at the age of 59, in 1592. Monumental in size, it is mysterious in form and content: its final version comprises three books containing 107 chapters of widely varying length, addressing in no apparent order such diverse subjects as "thumbs," "virtue," and "sleep," often rambling far beyond their titles.

Montaigne's preface presents the *Essays* as a work of self-portraiture intended for his friends and relatives, and warns others against wasting time reading it. In fact, its wide audience over centuries; the author's extensive discussions of moral, theological, and political issues; the admiration or imitation it won from Bacon, Descartes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche; and the thousands of classical quotations it contains attest to the ironic, misleading character of that description. On numerous occasions Montaigne hints that the naïve openness he professes in the beginning is insincere, and that the apparent disorder of his book masks a hidden plan that requires thorough study to understand.

I argued in *The Political Philosophy of Montaigne* (1990) that Montaigne deserves to be recognized as one of the philosophic founders of modern liberalism. But he also played an active role in the political affairs of his time. Having served in the Bordeaux *parlement*, he resigned in 1571 to devote the rest of his life to the Muses, according to his account, eventuating in the publication of the *Essays*. But he later served two terms as mayor of Bordeaux, and negotiated between rival claimants to the French throne amid horrifying civil warfare growing out of the Reformation.

In *Montaigne: A Life*, Philippe Desan, a native Frenchman who teaches Renaissance literature and the history of culture at the University of Chicago, and who is the author or editor of numerous studies of Montaigne and his time, painstakingly illuminates Mon-

taigne's public career. Desan's is the most comprehensive life of Montaigne yet published, supplanting Donald Frame's *Montaigne: A Biography* (1965).

REGRETTABLY, DESAN'S ACCOUNT OF Montaigne's life and thought is distorted by his intention to debunk the *Essays* itself, the one thing that would reasonably interest serious readers today. While acknowledging that Montaigne is "known to history" only because of his book, Desan targets a straw man by claiming that "the great majority" of Montaigne's biographers aim "to demonstrate the coherence and unity" of the *Essays* "by playing down the role of political and religious turmoil, which are supposed to have left the essayist indifferent." Although Montaigne once professed to have spent his life tranquilly amid his country's "ruin," the *Essays* contain numerous denunciations of that turmoil and its perpetrators.

Desan properly rejects readings of the *Essays* that treat it as a purely literary work of private reflection. But he overlooks the possibility that Montaigne aspired to *shape* the politics of the future, rather than recapitulate the conventional political attitudes of his time and class.

Only one of Desan's 11 chapters focuses on the text of the *Essays*, which he regards as secondary to the political career to which Montaigne originally aspired. He suggests that the reason for Montaigne's resignation from the Bordeaux *parlement* was that partisan controversies blocked his promotion to higher judicial office. Indeed, continued membership in the *parlement* might have made him a "potential hostage," given allegations that he sympathized with the Protestants.

Remarkably, Desan argues that Montaigne originally conceived the *Essays* itself "as a kind of curriculum vitae" designed to display his credentials to the court, so as to win higher office. Were Desan's interpretation correct, the *Essays* would surely be the longest C.V. ever, running 857 tightly-printed pages in the best English translation (by Donald Frame). Its size, the scope of its learning, and the subtleties of its argumentation would compel us to doubt the sanity of anyone who

undertook so vast an enterprise for such a reward, especially one who disparaged the pursuit of public renown.

Without textual evidence, Desan maintains that Montaigne avoided "philosophical introspection" until he abandoned his hopes of a high-level political career, four years before his death. He misrepresents the *Essays* as "a mixture of...erudition and a knowledge of ancient culture," such as was possessed by "members of parlement," with "a significant number of reflections on war, horsemanship, dueling" and other gentlemanly concerns—all designed to show his suitability for royal service. Desan also maintains that the *Essays* in the 1580 edition display an "attitude of submission and allegiance to the power that employs him," when even in that first edition Montaigne expresses his disdain for "the servitude of courts."

IN REALITY, LITTLE OF MONTAIGNE'S original text was devoted to such subjects as war, horsemanship, or dueling. In fact, careful reading will demonstrate that essays ostensibly devoted to military matters are actually concerned with far different topics.

Besides careerism, Desan offers a supplemental rationale: having seen all but one of his children (a daughter) die in infancy during the 1570s, Montaigne conceived the *Essays* as an alternative means of perpetuating his name. Because this explanation is in tension with the modest "literary" aspirations Desan maintains Montaigne originally had, he surmises that the "success" of the 1580 edition "allowed Montaigne to glimpse the possibility of an illustrious fame" without putting him at the mercy of hypothetical descendants or the chances of war.

This time, Desan is on to something, but he inverts Montaigne's priorities. Montaigne not only notes the arbitrariness of military glory, he scandalizes critics by professing such indifference regarding the deaths of his infant children that he can't recall their number. And in "Of the Affection of Fathers for Their Children," having identified the begetter's affection for his begotten as the second most likely natural instinct after self-preservation, Montaigne disparages the former attachment

by comparison to love of “the children of our mind,” to whom “we are father and mother both.” If worthy, these offspring honor us more than do “our other children,” in whose achievements we share little.

The implied linkage between achieving immortality through authorship and through lawgiving is of the greatest importance for understanding Montaigne’s philosophic and political intent. As such scholars as Pierre Manent and Benjamin Storey have recently reminded us, Montaigne’s ostensible self-portrayal indeed became a new model of gentlemanship in the following century and beyond that of the frank, unpretentious *honnête homme*. Additionally, despite deprecating the usual means of seeking glory, Montaigne explains his devotion to the cause of “the little people,” “whether because *there is more glory in it*, or through natural compassion” (emphasis added). The *Essays* is the means by which Montaigne will achieve posthumous glory, not as a stylist but as a revolutionary moral and political thinker, whose teaching will elevate the common people’s condition while securing freedom for philosophy.

IN WRITING THE *ESSAYS*, MONTAIGNE sought and ultimately achieved far more than a historicist scholar like Desan can imagine, given his assumption that every thinker is inevitably the prisoner of his era’s biases. Far from giving voice to monarchical or aristocratic prejudices, Montaigne mocked their foundations, and even called “popular rule...the most natural and equitable” form of government, if only it could be purged of the people’s susceptibility to religious superstition. His political egalitarianism and warfare against religious fanaticism are both aspects of his secularized compassion, in contrast to the cruelties perpetrated in the name of the Christian God, making him the hero of political theorist Judith Shklar’s celebration of liberal morality, *Ordinary Vices* (1984).

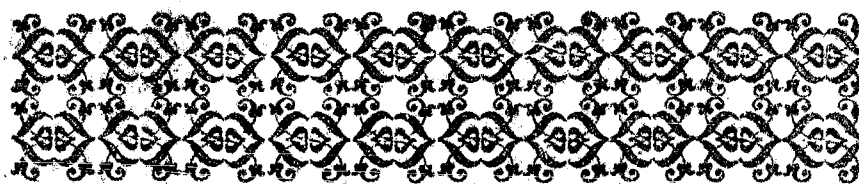
That Desan has misunderstood Montaigne’s thought and authorial intent, however, does not mean that his exploration of Montaigne’s immediate political activities lacks value. He elucidates, for instance, Montaigne’s relation to his local political patron, Gaston de Foix, and his dealings with the queen mother, Catherine de Medici. He illuminates Montaigne’s judicial career, and provocatively argues that his extended visit to Rome may have been intended to win a position as ambassador to the Vatican. And he offers evidence that Montaigne’s mayoralty was less successful than he maintained. In short,

Desan helps combat the misrepresentation of Montaigne as an apolitical memoirist.

BUT IN THE END DESAN’S BIOGRAPHY supplies no reason, beyond amusement, to concern ourselves with the *Essays*. Only at one point does he attribute a transformative political intent to the book, that of “propos[ing] a different way of practicing diplomacy and politics” from the accepted one. But here he seems to be alluding only to Montaigne’s account of his supposedly “artless” mode of negotiating among “our princes,” when a close reading demonstrates that Montaigne actually, like Machiavelli’s Alexander

VI, knew how to deceive men into *thinking* him plainspoken. Far from an idealistic innocent, Montaigne warns against “depriv[ing] deceit of its proper place.”

Thinking Montaigne a failure in his attempt to reform political life through honesty, just as he had failed in his other political ambitions, Desan represents his life as ending in disappointment. His penultimate chapter concerns Montaigne’s “marginalization” in his final years. “Convincing himself that he had to live a private life, for lack of something better” in Desan’s interpretation, the author finally turned himself into the Montaigne “we treasure most today, because



ESSAIS DE MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE.

LIVRE PREMIER.

Par diuers moyens on arrive à pareille fin.

CHAP. I.



UN plus commune façon d’amollir les cœurs de ceux qu’on a offensés, lors qu’ayant la vengeance en main, ils nous tiennent à leur mercy: c’est de les esmouvoir à commiseratiō & à pitié: toutesfois la brauerie, la constance, & la resolution, moyens tous contraires, ont quelquefois serui à ce mesme effect. Edouard Prince de Galles, celui qui regenta si long tēps nostre Guicēne, personnage, duquel les conditions & la fortune ont beaucoup de notables parties de grandeur, ayant esté bien fort offensé par les Limosins, & prenant leur ville par force, ne peut estre arresté par les cris du peuple, & des femmes, & enfans abandonnez à la boucherie, luy criants mercy, & se iettans à ses pieds, iusqu’à ce que passant tousiours outre dans la ville, il apperceut trois gentils-hommes François, qui d’une hardiesse incroyable soustenoyent seuls l’effort de son armee victorieuse. La consideration & le respect d’une si notable vertu, reboucha premierement la pointe de sa cholere, & commença par ces trois à faire misericorde à tous les autres habitās de la ville. Scanderberch, Prince de l’Epire, suyv-
uant vn soldat des siēs pour le tuer, & ce soldat ayāt essayé par

A

Facsimile of Page 1 of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays*, Paris, 1588

he is self-sufficient and accepts his subjectivity as an end”—whatever that might mean. Desan most appreciates the overtly “personal” character of Montaigne’s last additions, which led some 20th-century interpreters to argue that the essayist’s thought as well as style had “evolved” from the relatively non-judgmental, third-person sheen of the 1580 text, filled with classical quotations and anecdotes, to the freer, franker persona who discoursed at length on such themes as his licentiousness and his dining, sleeping, and bowel habits.

Desan thinks that only in Montaigne’s final years did he take “an interest in the human condition in its universality and atemporality”—a judgment that can hardly be supported by any open-minded assessment of the book as a whole. In effect, Desan wants to make scholars like himself gatekeepers to the *Essays*: you’ll never understand the book unless you first study ancillary materials as I have spent my career doing—even though Montaigne never tells his readers to do this.

The evolutionary interpretation cannot account for some crucial facts. Montaigne denies having altered his thought, for one. Moreover, numerous views that scholars attribute to the “late” Montaigne were present in the first edition, and vice versa. The later

texts do create an overall, if uneven, *appearance* of evolution. But that impression reflects a rhetorical plan of gradually moving readers from conventional admiration for classical learning, piety, and political submission to a more liberal, even libertine view of life that the author espouses most openly in Book III, in conjunction with a lowered, more limited conception of the purpose of government.

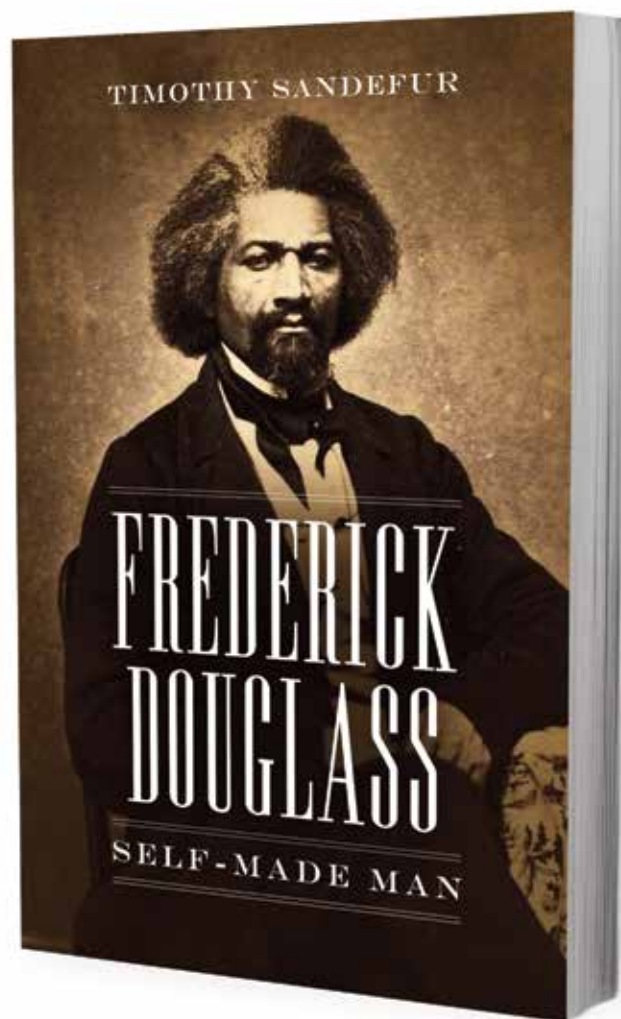
DESAN’S EXPLANATION OF MONTAIGNE’S turn towards “subjectivity” during the years of political marginalization at the end of his life fails to account for the fact that Book III, the most consistently personal book, had already appeared in 1588, and must have been in preparation prior to the author’s supposedly abandoning his hopes of high office. It also fails to explain why the original preface claimed the book to be a mere enterprise in self-portraiture, despite the first two books’ deviating from that claim. Without elaboration, Desan simply asserts that “on rereading the preface...when the *Essais* of 1588 was published...Montaigne identified himself...with the new practice of a much more private writing.”

Desan mocks the 20th century’s supposed “preoccup[ation]” with viewing the *Essays* as “the first great text of modern philosophy,” as if “the questions that the author

of the *Essais* asked were also our questions.” In response, he highlights “the dangers of a strictly philosophical approach that would reinforce the myth of a universal subject,” i.e., a permanent human nature, “to the detriment of its purely historical and political dimension.” This criticism would apply against Montaigne himself, who frequently cites the variability and diversity of human behavior, but also remarks that “each man bears in himself the entire human condition,” so that in ostensibly portraying himself, he is actually examining human nature.

Anyone wondering why the serious study of great philosophic and literary works has fallen into decline in our time can find an explanation in works like Philippe Desan’s biography. He largely resists the temptation to subject Montaigne to politically correct judgments, despite insisting that “[t]he ahistorical view of human thought” reflects the “ideology” of “[e]conomic liberalism.” But students hoping to find meaningful guidance by studying the classics are simply told by Desan that such books can’t answer their questions. Why then waste time reading them?

David Lewis Schaefer is professor of political science at the College of the Holy Cross, and the author of The Political Philosophy of Montaigne (Cornell University Press).



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