MONTAIGNE

STEFAN ZWEIG

TRANSLATION: VANESSA WALSH

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by Stefan Zweig (1942)

Translation by Vanessa Walsh (2021)

Aureon Verlag GmbH

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CHAPTER 1

There are a few writers who are open to everyone at every age and in every epoch of life – Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe, Balzac, Tolstoy – and then there are others who only reveal their full significance at a certain hour. Montaigne is one of them. One must not be too young – and not without experiences and disappointments – to be able to appreciate him properly, and his free and unflinching thinking becomes most helpful to a generation which, like ours for instance, has been thrown by fate into a cataractous turmoil of the world. Only he who has to live through a time in his own shaken soul, which threatens the life of the individual with war, violence and tyrannical ideologies, and within his life again the most precious substance, individual freedom, knows how much courage, how much honesty and how much determination are needed to remain true to his innermost self in such times of herd folly. Only he knows that no one thing on earth is more difficult and problematic

than to preserve one's spiritual and moral independence untainted within a mass catastrophe. Only when one has doubted and despaired of reason – of the dignity of humanity – can one praise it as an act when an individual upholds himself in an exemplary manner in the midst of a world chaos.

I have experienced for myself that Montaigne's wisdom and greatness can only be appreciated when one is experienced and has been tested. When I picked up his "Essais" for the first time at the age of twenty, the only book in which he left himself to us, I honestly didn't know what to do with it. I did have enough literary and artistic sense to respectfully recognise that an interesting personality was making himself known here: a particularly clear-sighted and far-sighted person, a lovable man and, moreover, an artist who knew how to give each sentence and each dictum an individual character. But my joy remained a literary and an antiquarian joy; it lacked the inner ignition of passionate enthusiasm – the electric leap from soul to soul. Even the subject matter of the "Essais" seemed rather absurd to me and, for the most part, without the possibility of overflowing

into my own soul. What did the Sieur de Montaigne's rambling digressions on the "Cérémonie de l'entrevue des rois" or his "Considérations sur Cicero" concern me as a young person of the twentieth century? How school-like and out-dated the French seemed to me, already heavily browned by time and peppered with Latin quotations. And even to his mild, tempered wisdom I found no relationship. It came too soon. For what was the point of Montaigne's wise admonition not to toil ambitiously, not to become too passionately entangled in the outer world? What could his appeasing urge to be temperate and tolerant mean to an impetuous age that does not want to be disillusioned and does not want to be calmed, but unconsciously only wants to be strengthened in its vital impetus? It is in the nature of youth that it does not wish to be advised to be lenient, to be sceptical. Every doubt becomes a hindrance to it, because it needs faith and ideals to trigger its inner impetus. And even the most radical and the most absurd delusion will be more important to it, provided it only fuels it, than the most sublime wisdom, which weakens its willpower.

And then – that individual freedom, whose most determined herald for all time Montaigne became – did it really still seem to us to need such stubborn defence around 1900? Hadn't all this long since become a matter of course and a possession guaranteed by law and custom of a humanity long since emancipated from dictatorship and servitude? It seemed to us that the right to our own lives, our own thoughts and their uninhibited expression in speech and writing, belonged to us as naturally as the breath of our mouths and the pulse of our hearts. The world was open to us – country after country; we were not prisoners of the state, were not enslaved in military service, and were not subject to the arbitrariness of tyrannical ideologies. No one was in danger of being ostracised, banished, incarcerated and expelled. So, Montaigne seemed to our generation to be senselessly rattling chains that we thought had long since been broken, unaware that they were already being reforged for us by fate, harder and crueller than ever. So, we honoured and respected his struggle for the freedom of the soul as a historical one, long since superfluous and irrelevant to us. For it is one of the mysterious laws of life

that we only become aware of its true and essential values too late: of youth when it disappears, of health as soon as it leaves us, and of freedom, the most precious essence of our soul – only at the moment when it is to be taken from us or has already been taken.

So, in order to understand Montaigne's art of living and wisdom and in order to understand the necessity of his struggle for "soi-même" as the most necessary confrontation of our spiritual world, a situation had to arise that was similar to that of his own life. We too, like him, first had to experience one of those appalling relapses of the world from one of its most glorious ascents. We, too, had to be whipped back from our hopes, experiences, expectations and enthusiasms to that point where one finally defends only one's naked self – one's unique and irretrievable existence. It is only in this brotherhood of fate that Montaigne has become my indispensable helper, comforter and friend, for how desperately similar his fate is to ours! When Michel de Montaigne enters life, a great hope begins to fade – a hope identical to the one we ourselves experienced at the beginning of our century: the hope for a

humanisation of the world. In the course of a single lifetime, the Renaissance, with its artists, its painters, its poets, and its scholars, had given blessed humanity a new beauty never hoped for in equal perfection. A century – no, centuries seemed to dawn – where the creative force carried the dark and chaotic existence step by step, wave by wave towards the divine. All at once the world had become wide, full and rich. From antiquity, the scholars brought the wisdom of Plato and Aristotle back to man with the Latin and Greek languages. Humanism under Erasmus' leadership promised a unified, a cosmopolitan culture; the Reformation seemed to establish a new freedom of faith alongside the new breadth of knowledge. The space and the borders between the peoples broke down, for the newly discovered printing press gave every word and every opinion the possibilities of buoyant dissemination; what was given to one people seemed to belong to all. It was believed that, through the spirit, a unity had been created above the bloody strife of kings, princes and arms. And another miracle: at the same time as the spiritual, the earthly world expanded into the unimagined. New coasts and new lands

emerged from the hitherto trackless ocean, a vast continent guaranteed a home for generations and generations. The bloodstream of trade pulsed more rapidly, wealth flowed through the old European earth and created luxury, and luxury in turn created buildings, pictures and statues – an embellished, spiritualised world. But whenever space expands, the soul stretches. As in our own turn of the century, when, once again, space expanded magnificently thanks to the conquest of the ether by the aeroplane and the invisible word floating over the lands. When physics and chemistry, technology and science snatched secret after secret from nature and made its powers serviceable to mankind, unspeakable hope animated mankind, which had so often been disappointed, and from a thousand souls the answer of Ulrich von Hutten's jubilant cry sounded: "It is a pleasure to live.”

But whenever the wave rises too steeply and too rapidly, it falls back all the more cataractously. And, just as in our time, new achievements and wonders of technology turn into the most terrible factors of destruction; so, the elements of the Renaissance and humanism, which seemed

salutary, turn into murderous poison. The Reformation, which dreamed of giving Europe a new spirit of Christianity, produces the unprecedented barbarity of the religious wars. The printing press spreads furor theologicus instead of education, and intolerance triumphs instead of humanism. All over Europe, every country was tearing itself apart in murderous civil war; while in the New World, the bestiality of the conquistadors was unleashed with unparalleled cruelty. The age of Raphael and Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer and Erasmus reverts to the atrocities of Attila, Genghis Khan and Tamerlan.

To have to watch this horrible relapse from humanism into bestiality and one of these sporadic outbreaks of madness of humanity – as we are experiencing it again today – we are completely powerless, despite unflinching spiritual alertness and the most compassionate mental shock: that is the real tragedy of Montaigne's life. He did not see peace, reason, or conciliation; all these high spiritual forces to which his soul was conspiring – at work for one moment of his life in his country and in his world. At the first glimpse of time, as at the parting, he turns away – as we do – in horror from the

pandemonium of rage and hatred that desecrates and disturbs his fatherland and that desecrates and disturbs humanity. He is half a boy, no more than fifteen years old, when the popular uprising against the "gabeile" (the salt tax) is crushed before his eyes in Bordeaux with an inhumanity that makes him himself a raging enemy of all cruelty for the rest of his life. The boy sees people being tortured to death by the hundreds – hanged, impaled, quartered, decapitated, and burned; he sees the ravens fluttering around the place of execution for days after to feed on the burnt and half-rotten flesh of the victims. He hears the screams of the tormented and has to smell the scent of burnt flesh smouldering through the alleys. And no sooner had the boy grown up than the civil war began, which, with its fanatical opposites of ideologies, devastated France as completely as social and national fanaticisms destroy the world from one end to the other today. The "Chambre Ardente" had the Protestants burned; the Night of St Bartholomew exterminated eight thousand people in one day. The Huguenots again repay crime with crime: they storm the churches, and they smash the statues; even the