The Beams of Montaigne’s Library
Inscriptions on the
Beams of Montaigne's Library
The aim of all knowledge for man: rejoice in that which comes without heed for the rest. *Ecclesiastes*

God hath given man the grievous task of seeking out by wisdom in order to torment him. *Ecclesiastes*

Empty wineskins are swollen by wind; men without spirit by insolent presumption.

All things under the sun are ruled by the same law and fortune. *Ecclesiastes*

In unreflectingness lies life’s charms. *Sophocles*

Neither is it this and that, nor this nor that. *Sextus Empiricus*

From the greatest to the smallest things that God hath wrought in such great number, the notion is within us. *Ecclesiastes*

For I see that we are but phantoms or fleeting shadows all we who live. *Sophocles*

Our spirit wanders in darkness; blind, it cannot discern the truth. *Michel de l’Hospital*
O wretched human minds! O hearts without vision!
How dark and dangerous the life in which this tiny span is lived!
Lucretius

If ever a man reckons himself to be great, a moment's reflection obliterates this fancy in a single stroke.
Euripides

All things, the sky, the land, and the sea,
are nothing compared to the universal whole.
Lucretius

Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit?
There is more hope of a fool than of him.
Proverbs

As you know not how the soul is united to the body, you know not the work of God.
Ecclesiastes

This may be and may not be.
Sextus Empiricus

Beautiful: Good. Plato

Man is clay.
Erasmus

Be not wise in your own esteem. Romans

Superstition follows pride and obeys it like a son. Sextus Empiricus

WIDE IS THE RANGE OF WORDS, ON THIS SIDE AS ON THAT. Homer

ALL IS VANITY. Ecclesiastes

MANKIND IS TOO FOND OF TALES. Lucretius

FOR EVERY REASON, THERE IS AN EQUAL OPPOSING REASON. Sextus Empiricus
ENJOY THE PRESENT, THE REST LIES BEYOND YOUR KEN. Ecclesiastes

WHYTIRE YOUR SOUL WITH COUNSELS OF ETERNITY? Horace

BE NOT WISER THAN IS NECESSARY; BE SOBERLY WISE. Romans

God does not permit inspired thoughts to anyone but himself. Herodotus

For thou knowest not whether this or that shall prosper, nor whether both shall prosper equally. Ecclesiastes

Who knows whether life is that which is called death, and death that which is called life? Euripides

All things are too full of complexity for man ever to succeed in uttering them. Ecclesiastes

How much emptiness there is in things! Persius

A man who is nothing beguiles and deceives himself thinking he is something. Galatians

The man who presumes to be knowledgeable has not yet learned what knowledge is. Corinthian

Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes. Isaiah

Mud and ashes, what have you to be proud of? Ecclesiastes

How much emptiness there is in things!
God has made man like a shadow, which if judged far from the light will vanish. *Ecclesiastes*

There is nothing certain but uncertainty and nothing more wretched and arrogant than man. *Pliny the Elder*

Of all of God's works nothing escapes man's understanding more than the path of the wind. *Ecclesiastes*

That in which you take the greatest pride will keep you from believing yourself to be someone. *Menander*

Men are tormented by the opinion they have of things, not by the things themselves. *Epictetus*

It is a fine thing that mortals have thoughts appropriate to the measure of man. *Sophocles*

Thy judgements, O Lord, are a great deep. *Psalms*

I establish nothing. *Sextus Empiricus*
NO MAN HAS EVER KNOWN THE UNVEILED TRUTH, NOR EVER WILL.
Xenophon

FEAR NOT YOUR LAST DAY, NOR WISH FOR IT. Martial

I AM A MAN, I DEEM THAT NOTHING HUMAN IS FOREIGN TO ME. Terence
I understand it not. Sextus Empiricus

Tradition and the senses for guides.

I search out. Sextus Empiricus

I do not understand. Sextus Empiricus

Judgement in balance.

I do not understand. Sextus Empiricus

Nothing more.

Sacramental. Sextus Empiricus

Have no leanings.
I can think of no writer continually more satisfying than Montaigne. It is not only that I have an affinity with the work itself, but with the sense that Montaigne himself seems to shine through the pages, making me feel as though one of my dearest friends happens to live in the XVIth Century. The Essays of Montaigne have held an abiding place close to my hand and close to my spirit for several years. How can I explain their fascination for me if not by citing Montaigne’s own words in describing his great friendship with La Boétie: Because it was be, because it was I.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1592) was a man of so many facets that he defies description. He was fluent in Latin before he began to learn French at the age of six. A Catholic loyalist, a counselor in the Cour des Aides of Périgueux and in the Parlement of Bordeaux, he traveled for seventeen months through Switzerland, Germany and Italy, served as Mayor of Bordeaux twice, served as negotiator between Henry of Navarre and Henry III of France and even sojourned as a “guest” for a few hours in the Bastille. In 1571 at the age of thirty-eight he retired to Montaigne in the Périgord region of France to his legendary tower library and began to write primarily about himself. In his search, he invented a new literary term, the essay. In French the verb essayer means “to try” or “to attempt” and in Latin exagium means “a weighing.”

A look into Montaigne’s circular library four centuries after his death still turns up compelling traces of his life. It still survives intact, across the courtyard from his rebuilt chateau, the original having been destroyed by fire in 1885. It occupies the third floor of a tower, now cold and mostly empty. Missing is the inviting and comfortable aspect it likely had in Montaigne’s time, as well as the thousands of volumes lying flat, in vertical stacks. “When at home, I turn aside a little more often to my library, from which at one sweep I command a view of my household.”
I am over the entrance, and see below me my garden, my farmyard, my courtyard, and into most of the parts of my house. There I leaf through now one book now another, without order and without plan, by disconnected fragments. One moment I muse, another moment I set down or dictate, walking back and forth, these fancies of mine that you see here... The shape of my library is round, the only flat side being the part needed for my table and chair; and curving round me it presents at a glance all my books, arranged in five rows of shelves on all sides. It offers rich and free views in three directions, and sixteen paces of free space in diameter... Sorry the man, to my mind, who has not in his own home a place to be all by himself, to pay his court privately to himself, to hide!” (iii, 3) Looking up, one finds an unexpected eloquence in the form of maxims inscribed on the beams in Greek and Latin. They are all taken from antiquity with the single exception of Montaigne’s contemporary, Michel de l’Hospital.

In the Essays, Montaigne is a writer constantly feeling his way, trying out often contradictory ideas, eschewing final statements and interpretations. For this reason, though it was not uncommon in his time, it seems somewhat non-Montaignian of him to have had such permanent inscriptions constantly in view. With the possible exception of the biblical texts which caution against human claims to understanding God, the aphorisms do not really add up to a personal code of behaviour. They are more usefully and interestingly viewed as a privileged window on his method of research. Perhaps our interest in Montaigne’s library is given some license by Montaigne himself in his contention that the particular is richer than the general. In his assessment of Tacitus, he offers “I know of no author who introduces into a register of public events so much consideration of private behaviour and inclinations... This form of history is by far the most useful.” (118)

We can never know to what extent these maxims shaped Montaigne’s life or writings, or even if at times he found them to be impossibly rigid or false. Still, not to recall the image of the Essays taking shape beneath their patient presence is to risk an incomplete portrait of their creation. The Essays themselves, though full of classical quotations, seldom cite those on the library ceiling, at least not directly. Among the maxims are shortened phrases, combined quotes or misquotes in Montaigne’s customized Latin. Thirteen of the fifty-four left to us come from Ecclesiastes and many of these are outright misquotes, as if Montaigne were deliberately misconstruing the Bible. Forty-six of them run along the joists; eight snake along two long beams on a twisting ribbon design. These last seem to tie all the other maxims together and to offer the mental framework of ancient skepticism in which Montaigne meant to approach them. His constant revision of the Essays is reflected in his practice of occasionally having some maxims painted over by others. There is not telling how many quotes have been lost to us because of this repainting.

Sainte Beuve said, “Montaigne is a neighbor to all of us; one can never know too much about one’s neighbor.” Though we can’t be sure how Montaigne’s library looked, what its atmosphere was in his lifetime, and cannot even be certain about the titles of all of his books, we are nevertheless invited to enter the space it occupied, breathe the air, look out of the windows, pace the same floorboards as he, and begin to sense the reveries the room imposes. Certainly much has been lost and much has changed. But for a moment, looking up and filling one’s field of vision with the inscribed beams, the four centuries that separate us from Montaigne seem to vanish. The thought is inescapable that he once stood in the very spot in which we now stand and read the beams we now see. Revered places, such as Montaigne’s library, cast a mesmerizing spell for which a remedy must eventually be sought. Surely the most soothing and comprehensive antidote in this case is in yet another satisfying dip into the Essays.

Dennis Letbetter

Note: The Montaigne quotations are translated by Donald M. Frame, from The Complete Works of Montaigne, Stanford University Press, 1948.
At home I slip off to my library a little more often; it is easy for me to oversee my household from there. I am above my gateway and have a view of my garden, my chicken-run, my backyard and most parts of my house. There I can turn over the leaves of this book or that, a bit at a time without order or design. Sometimes my mind wanders off, at others I walk to and fro, noting down and dictating these whims of mine.

It is on the third storey of a tower. The first constitutes my chapel; the second, a bed-chamber with a dressing-room, where I often sleep when I want to be alone. Above that there is a large drawing-room. It was formerly the most useless place in my house: I spend most days of my life there, and most hours of each day, but I am never there at night. It leads on to quite an elegant little chamber which can take a fire in winter and agreeably lets in the light. If I feared the bother as little as the expense – and the bother drives me away from any task – I could erect a level gallery on either side: a hundred yards long and twelve yards wide, having found all the walls built (for some other purpose) at the required height. Every place of retreat needs an ambulatory. My thoughts doze off if I squat them down. My wit will not budge if my legs are not moving – which applies to all who study without books.

My library is round in shape, squared off only for the needs of my table and chair; as it curves round it offers me at a glance every one of my books ranged on five shelves all the way along. It has three splendid and unhampered views and a circle of free space sixteen yards in diameter. I am less continuously there in winter since my house is perched on a hill (hence its name) and no part of it is more exposed to the wind than that one. By being rather hard to get at and a bit out of the way it pleases me, partly for the sake of the exercise and partly because it keeps the crowd from me. There I have my seat. I assay making my dominion over it absolutely pure, withdrawing this one corner from all intercourse, filial, conjugal and civic. Everywhere else I have but a verbal authority, one essentially impure. Wretched the man (to my taste) who has nowhere in his house where he can be by himself, pay
court to himself in private and hide away! Ambition well re-
wards its courtiers by keeping them always on display like a
statue in the market-place: ‘Magna servitus est magna fortuna.’*
[A great destiny is great slavery.] They cannot even find
privacy on their privy! I have never considered any of the
austerities of life which our monks delight in to be harsher
than the rule that I have noted in some of their foundations:
to be perpetually with somebody else and to be surrounded
by a crowd of people no matter what they are doing. And
I find that it is somewhat more tolerable to be always alone
than never able to be so.

If anyone says to me that to use the Muses as mere play-
things and pastimes is to debase them, then he does not
know as I do the value of pleasure, plaything or pastime.
I could almost say that any other end is laughable. I live from
day to day; and, saving your reverence, I live only for myself.
My plans stop there. In youth I studied in order to show
off; later, to make myself wiser; now I do it for amusement,
ever for profit. A silly spendthrift humour that once
I had for furnishing myself with books, not to provide for
my needs but three paces beyond that so as to paper my
walls with them as decorations, I gave up long ago.

Books have plenty of pleasant qualities for those who
know how to select them. But there is no good without ill.
The pleasure we take in them is no purer or tarnished
than any other. Reading has its disadvantages — and they
are weighty ones: it exercises the soul, but during that time
the body (my care for which I have not forgotten) remains
inactive and grows earth-bound and sad. I know of no excess
more harmful to me in my declining years, nor more to be
avoided.

There you have my three favourite private occupations.
I make no mention of the ones I owe to the world through
my obligations to the state.

Montaigne, iii, 3

*Seneca, Consolatio ad Polybium, xxvi.


Published by eyemag.org in June 2017.

The translation of the inscriptions are by Dennis Letbetter with the assistance of Michael Taylor. The original texts are from Jacques de Feytaud’s essay Une Visite a Montaigne, 1984.


Acknowledgements: Sharon Anderson, Paul Ashurst, Nathan Garland, Solomon Rino

eyemag.org
1256 Masonic Avenue
San Francisco, California 94117-2917
www.eyemag.org
dennis@eyemag.org

eyemag.org © 2014
photographs Dennis Letbetter © 1990
Dennis Letbetter © 2017
Without lightness I achieve nothing; application and over-serious effort confuse, depress, and weary my brain.

Montaigne, 11.10