

"Oh, a friend!" Psychotherapy and the Other in the Light of Montaigne's *Essays*

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This essay is dedicated to the life and friendship of my wonderful director, Bernd Jager. He lived and taught the simplicity and humility of the humanist vision, inspiring his students to do the same, through daily life, conversation, reading and writing, teaching and psychotherapy. His hospitable presence shaped our lives in so many ways, and the gift of his friendship lives on.

Abstract

The irrepressible 16th century humanist and essayist, Michel de Montaigne, wrote a self-portrait with such unprecedented candour and conversational flair, that he all but jumps from the page and shakes your hand. At Montaigne's invitation, I bring together psychotherapists and the *Essays* in a conversation that revives the notion of friendship, and evokes the pleasure of mutual revelation in the search for understanding. In the light of the *Essays*' "gay and sociable wisdom", I see essaying and therapy as discrete yet closely intertwined cultural tasks. Each is an openhearted work of being together, of making room for alterity rather than conquering it with theory. Only in a world made coherent through the practices of friendship and hospitality can we come to cultivate the otherness of painful separations, tolerate the strangeness of our ordinary foibles, and draw closer to life.

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I'd like to introduce you somebody that I have come to think of as a good friend: Michel de Montaigne, the celebrated writer of the *Essays* of Michel Eyquem de Montaigne. Montaigne wrote, "I have not made my book any more than it has made me – a book of one substance with its author, proper to me and a limb of my life"¹². He is "the matter of [his] book"³. Thus, our visit is also a conversation with the *Essays* themselves as a body of work. In fact, Montaigne invented the essay genre: small, disarmingly intimate, and open-minded, conversational pieces of prose. He even coined the term *essai*, a French word which meant attempt, try, test, or even taste. Montaigne

asked the age-old Socratic question ‘What do I know?’, and his *Essays* are 107 attempts at an answer. But attempt is the operative word here, because early on in the 20-year period during which he wrote, – which, by the way, was from 1572 until the day he died in 1592– Montaigne cheerfully gave up searching for any sort of grand or fixed truths from authoritative sources. In the 16th century, the fashion was to write either systematic philosophical treatises, or commonplace books. The latter were in effect scrapbooks of information, a way of compiling and remembering facts and ideas. In stark contrast, Montaigne’s innovative project was a festive medley of continually renewed attempts – essays – to draw closer to more fleeting and fallible truths:

If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial.⁴

Montaigne tests or weighs his own and other people’s thoughts about Socrates, opinions about cannibals, and comments on history and current events. He throws in Latin aphorisms, musings about his cat, philosophical ideas, endless personal observations about his body, snippets of gorgeous classical poetry, anecdotes about his unusual childhood - whatever comes into his head as the words tumble onto the page in front of him. He is constantly at play with otherness. Instead of synthesizing these strange fragments into a sturdy argument, our convivial host juxtaposes, making room for alterity. He places the unruly pieces, which he describes as “chimeras and fantastic monsters”⁵, alongside each other so that they become voices in a conversation, “lead[ing] to moments of [shared] revelation though not necessarily to any final synthesis.” (Hall, 1989, p. 82)

Like any good friend, Montaigne doesn’t impose. His words leave room for you to weigh your own judgements, to come to new understandings, and to learn anew about your world. His wondering stance and his sidelong glances ask for a response from the other: from the reader, from himself, and from the text. Our companion discovered that the light of understanding comes from exchange, not from authoritative wisdom, or from private subjectivity. Montaigne finds himself “born for company and friendship”⁶ and it is this way of being with and towards others that grants us access to a particular world. We can see this world clearly not only because of our own intelligence or Montaigne’s unique experience, but because he stands beside us: “essaying requires an exchange of lives” (O’Neill, 1982, p. 191). Pen in

hand, Montaigne arrived at the profound intuition that the world becomes coherent through hospitality and friendship, rather than systematic knowledge.

The Wine-Maker from Bordeaux

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me give you a bit of background about this Renaissance man, our wine-maker from Bordeaux. Michel de Montaigne was born into recent nobility near the end of the Renaissance in 1533. His grandfather, a wealthy fish merchant by the name of Raymond Eyquem, bought the Chateau Montaigne and its profitable vineyards in 1477. At the time, Bordeaux red wine, also known as claret, enjoyed great popularity across the channel and was being imported in vast quantities by the English. Along with the house, which stands on the top of a mountain (or hill, really), came the noble title, Lord of Montaigne.

As a child, in order to be fluent with the wisdom of classical texts, Montaigne was spoken to exclusively in Latin. This experimental and "natural" approach meant that he had only his German tutor for company as nobody in his family could actually speak Latin. It wasn't until the age of six that he was permitted to learn French. And yes, this was rather odd, even at that time. Latin had not been spoken colloquially in at least a millennium. Actually, no one is quite sure about how true this story is, but what we do know, is that luckily for us, Montaigne's early Latin immersion afforded him a rare intimacy with the recently rediscovered classical texts. His colloquial rather than scholarly ease allowed him to set the table for a uniquely lively and fertile conversation with the great thinkers of antiquity.

After a solid humanist education, Montaigne worked as a magistrate in the court system- a somewhat lacklustre career by his own account – and served time both in the army and as a gentleman at court. It was at the parliament of Bordeaux, in 1558, that he met the great friend of his life: poet and fellow humanist, Etienne de la Boétie. Sadly, their friendship was cut short after only six years by la Boétie's untimely death. Ten years later, at the ripe old age of 38, (which was considered a little long in the tooth), Montaigne retired from public life to the tower on his estate to write. Incidentally, I was 38 when I began to read and write about the *Essays* – a detail that has always made me feel slightly better about starting my PhD at such a geriatric age.

Books One and Two of his *Essays* were first published to great success in 1580. They went through five editions before Book Three was added in 1588. Three years after his death in 1592, a complete edition was published which integrated his abundant marginalia, and came to be known as the Bordeaux Copy. Interestingly, the *Essays* were quickly translated into English by John Florio in 1603, and had an immediate impact on English writing and thinking, even more so than in France. When you consider that the *Essays* are about a 1000 pages, this swift translation speaks to the enthusiasm of the public response. News of what Friedrich (1991) called "the most personal book that had appeared to date in world literature" (p. 208) travelled very quickly indeed. To this day, Florio's translation is considered an important version. The influence of the *Essays* on Western thinkers and writers is extensive albeit often overlooked. But to give you an idea, consider Montaigne's young contemporary, Shakespeare. Obviously, Shakespeare did not write essays, but the themes and rhythms of many of his passages, as well as his pioneering use of metaphor⁷, owe a deep debt to Montaigne. For example, "To be or not to be", is considered by many to be Shakespeare's response to the *Essays*. The Renaissance humanists were in the midst of a love affair with ancient philosophy, in particular with the scepticism⁸. Montaigne, being a man of his time, was a sceptic⁹, not in the hardnosed way that we view scepticism now, but rather with a sceptic ease, buoyed on the rolling waves of doubt. It could be, maybe so, maybe not, perhaps to be, or perhaps not to be. The *Essays* and Hamlet share this reflexivity- that of a sceptical mind thinking. Atwan (1995) points out that Hamlet, like Montaigne, juxtaposes his own judgement processes with more authoritative thinking. "Shakespeare, [...] was essaying the essay within his tragedy, and in so doing he provided one of the earliest commentaries on Montaigne's literary creation." (p. 8) Melville was known to have scribbled in the margins of his copy of Hamlet: "Here is forcibly shown the great Montaigneism of Hamlet." (p. 7)

Then, of course, there are the parts that Shakespeare simply copied directly from the *Essays*. But that's another story.

The Unity of Presence

The open-endedness of his mind's sceptical rhythms leaves room for all sorts of possibilities to spontaneously emerge in the *Essays*. At times, like a

wild horse, Montaigne careens off on unexpected tangents. The beauty is that despite, or perhaps by virtue, of these “disciplined digression[s]” (Kauffmann, 1989, p. 238) there is a sense of unity, a powerful sense of the *Essays* as a whole. In the margins of his manuscript, Montaigne scribbled: “My book is always one.” (Compagnon & Freccero, 1983, p. 48) This unity is presence: an intimate, genuine and surprising revelation. Through all of the wise and the humourous, the familiar and the strange, a palpable presence emerges.

[P]erhaps the greatest feat that he achieved was to reconcile these conflicting strands, crossing and recrossing one another ; to make them into an active force possessing a unity – not a unity of expression, but of life. (Sichel, 1911, p. 249)

I’ve always been struck by the sway of Montaigne’s presence; even just hearing or reading about him through others is captivating. When I speak about the *Essays* and Montaigne to friends and colleagues, I am continually surprised by the keenness of their interest. They always want to know more: where can they find the book, which essay should they read, which edition, etc. In other words, they want to talk about him. “And so the ‘*Essays*’ find readers who find readers like friends seeking one another. By word of mouth.” (O’Neill, 1982, p. 7) The astonishing gift of the *Essays* is that they are continually reborn in conversation with each reader, and it is through these infinite ordinary relationships, as opposed to, say, a biography, that Montaigne’s presence emerges so vividly. Through essaying, Montaigne comes to evoke what Saul Frampton (2011) calls a sense of “betweenness”, “an awareness of others as integral to ourselves.” (p. 273)

All relationships start by renouncing complete knowledge of the self, other and world. In light of *full* presence, we wouldn’t need words. But the self and other always escape us – we only have moments of presence, and thus conversation and essaying are infinite attempts to be together.

We are beginning to see that the *Essays* lead us on another route to knowledge, a more lively and accidental route to a different kind of knowledge, what Frampton (2011) would call “a form of meeting” (p. 205), or what we might call understanding. It is in this conversational context that presence and friendship manifest themselves. We therapists are fellow travellers with Montaigne on this road. But it’s not an easy way to travel. He shared our anxiety about the itinerary. He too worried about knowledge

and its institutions. Is what I'm writing going to be acceptable? Am I using a valid methodology? We share this the same struggle as thinkers.

*"He who lives not at all unto others, hardly lives unto himself."*¹⁰

Montaigne came to see writing and thinking as unifying movements. Rather than an assembly of fragments, the *Essays* are "the site of a social event" (p. 275): a conversation that unifies the textual self and the thinking self, and creates the whole of a couple. In this cosmological perspective, humanity, or what makes us human, points to alterity - to what arises between couples: "god and man, man and woman, child and adult, neighbour and neighbour, friend and friend, soul and body, native and foreigner," reader and writer, speaker and listener. (Jager, 1991, p. 64) Our humanity can be lost if not continually cultivated through tentative reaches, or essays, across mysterious thresholds that at once demarcate and unite lived worlds. In contrast to the metaphorical unity of the cosmos, modern unity finds humanity already there within a self-enclosed individual: one who is subject to the same indifferent laws as everything else in the material universe. In this monolithic view, it's impossible to see how the evocation of presence involves leaving room for the revelation of the other, how the question of oneself is inseparable from the question of the other.

The cosmological or mythical perspective is timeless, but was particularly salient during the Renaissance. The humanists' flourishing Christian civilization was founded on the idea that they were symbolically united with the other: the newly rediscovered Roman culture, which in turn was founded on an encounter with the Greeks. Rather than assimilating this strange culture into some sort of neat synthesis about human nature, or tossing away what they feared as too foreign or pagan, the humanists worked extremely hard to maintain a cultural conversation through translation, transcription, reading, writing, education, love and friendship. Such relationships were the source of Montaigne's culture, of his understanding about himself, the world, and his position in it.

It is interesting to consider that not only are the *Essays* engaged in an intimate conversation with the world of Antiquity, they are one of the first European writings to consider the "cultural and epistemological consequences of the discovery and exploration of the New World." (Langer, 2005, p. 4) As a matter of fact, Conley (2005) says, given that the New

World is no longer new, the *Essays* are both “[t]he first and last places where we encounter the New Worlds.” (p. 93) Surprisingly, even though classical and biblical views of geography had only recently been thrown into question, the initial response to the New World was generally muted. People regarded it as “simply ‘there’” (p. 75), as having little impact on their lives. Even in the 16th century, there were only a few travel journals and a handful of political tracts about the American Indians. Montaigne was the first writer to really grapple with the meaning of the New World to the Europeans’ sense of self, most notably in the chapters, “On the cannibals” and “On coaches”. Montaigne’s “imaginative and reasoned” (p. 74) reflections on both the otherness and common humanity of the peoples of the New World, serve as a mirror to his non-transparent relationship with himself. Radical alterity makes his self-portrait come to life. On the very first page of the *Essays*, otherness comes into play:

I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray. My defects will be read to the life, and also my natural form, as far as respect for the public has allowed. Had I been placed among those nations which are said to live still in the sweet freedom of nature's first laws, I assure you I should very gladly have portrayed myself here entire and wholly naked.¹¹

Swept up in a spirit of discovery, Montaigne was able to see the lay of the land of both inner and outer worlds through new eyes, so to speak. He needed the other to know himself. With an *élan* typical of the Renaissance, Montaigne embodied the message that the world is a lot bigger than we know.

The Presence Within Absence

So now you know a little bit about Montaigne’s life and *Essays*. I’ve introduced the idea that the unity of this “[t]his bundle of so many disparate pieces”¹² stems from Montaigne’s remarkably visceral presence. We have also seen that the *Essays*’ compelling “unity of life” is best understood within the Renaissance humanists’ relational perspective, as distinguished from our modern view. Perhaps, you have the feeling that that essaying and psychotherapy share some common ground. It’s clearly time to get to know our friend a little better. Let me tell you a story about

friendship and loss, about how Montaigne came to appreciate the dual nature of his humanity.

Montaigne began his project in part as a way of dealing with the loss of his best friend, Étienne la Boétie. Theirs was a wonderful meeting of two erudite young humanists in their 20's, each probably a little bored in their jobs, each bursting with ideas and questions about books, philosophy and the meaning of a good life. They had heard of each other before they met. Montaigne had already read a circulating manuscript of la Boétie's well-known treatise against tyranny, *On Voluntary Servitude*.

We sought each other before we met, because of the reports we heard of each other, which had more effect on our affection than such reports would reasonably have; I think it was by some ordinance from heaven, We embraced each other by our names. And at our first meeting, which by chance came at a great feast and gathering in the city, we found ourselves so taken with each other, so well acquainted, so bound together, that from that time on nothing was so close to us as each other.¹³

And so it began. Of the two, la Boétie was more well-regarded, already a writer, married, and a little more advanced in his career even though he was only two years older. Together, they were inspired by the exalted and highly rational models of classical friendship, often likening themselves to Socrates and his young friend Alcibiades (p. 92). But in time, their friendship escaped the confines of idealism, and flourished into something unique and invented anew: "Our friendship has no other model than itself, and can be compared only with itself."¹⁴ Just before tragically succumbing to a brief illness, (probably the plague), with Montaigne at his bedside, la Boétie bequeathed his library of about 1000 books to his great friend.

Ten years later, Montaigne undertook the writing of the *Essays*, in particular, the 28th chapter, "On friendship", as a monument to his friend, as well as in an effort to continue their dialogue, to restore their connection: "In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again."¹⁵ However, Montaigne's book, which "built itself up with diverse interruptions and intervals"¹⁶, was founded on a fundamental gap, a profound absence at its core. The "effaced seam" had come undone. Montaigne's self-portrait was not built up around a nucleus of the self, but

around the painful absence of his friend. It's worth recalling that in Montaigne's time, the French language did not even have a word for the self⁷, for that nugget of solidity. There was no *cogito*.

In keeping with humanist tradition, Montaigne committed to posthumously publishing la Boétie's writings. However, instead of simply printing them, he decided that *On Voluntary Servitude* should have the place of honour as the centrepiece of his own book, lovingly incorporated into the *Essays*' embrace. The first book of the *Essays* was made up of 57 chapters, and the treatise would constitute the middle, or 29th chapter. But just as Book I was going to print, the Huegenots claimed la Boétie's manuscript as their own revolutionary text. The outraged Catholic Parliament ordered it burned. So, early on in the writing of the *Essays*, to avoid political difficulties, and also fearing that la Boétie's ideas would be distorted, Montaigne decided to replace the treatise with 29 of his beloved friend's unpublished sonnets. He did not edit or reconfigure the surrounding text when he made the substitution. Montaigne generally avoided any corrections to his *Essays* because he wanted to paint as real a portrait as possible, one that included "the imperfections that are ordinary and constant in me"¹⁸.

Michael Butor (1968, as cited in Compagnon & Freccero, 1983, p. 26) provides a thought-provoking interpretation of the centrality of Montaigne's great friend to the unity of the *Essays*. Butor sees the 29 sonnets, preceded by 28 chapters, and followed by 28 chapters, as forming a triptych typical of a Renaissance painting. In Chapter 28, "On friendship", Montaigne wrote:

As I was considering the way a painter I employ went about his work, I had a mind to imitate him. He chooses the best spot, the middle of each wall, to put a picture labored over with all his skill, and the empty space all around it he fills with grotesques, which are fantastic paintings whose only charm lies in their variety and strangeness. And what are these things of mine, in truth, but grotesques and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or proportion other than accidental?¹⁹

Originally, Montaigne conceived of his project as "chimeras and fantastic monsters"²⁰ surrounding the still beauty of la Boétie's free-standing work.

His *Essays* had no body, only random limbs. He hoped that the stillness of the centre would hold both himself and his book together. But what is remarkable is that he crossed out even the 29 sonnets in his final manuscript, leaving only the dispassionate note, "These verses may be seen elsewhere"²¹. Bakewell (2010) describes the double deletion in Chapter 29 as "a ragged stub or hole which Montaigne deliberately refused to disguise. He even drew attention to its frayed edges." (p. 99)

Through essaying, Montaigne transformed absence into a threshold at which he could maintain a symbolic connection with la Boétie. The absence that is death became an infinite source of renewal as the *Essays* accumulated. It is at the "frayed edges" between presence and absence that we, the readers, catch such powerful glimpses of our friend. There is no stable self at the centre of this book. Instead, Montaigne said, "I am over the entrance"²², at the threshold between past and present, self and other, reader and writer. With the "tolerated absence" (Jager, 1999, p. 93), or cultivated difference at its heart, the *Essays* were no longer disjointed body parts; they became a metaphorically unified body, "essays in flesh and bone"²³.

If we follow this train of thought and move closer into the symbolic unity at the heart of the *Essays*, we come to one moment in 1000 pages where our garrulous companion comes to sudden halt, at a complete loss for words. He doesn't even bother to digress. You have the sense that Montaigne pulls up short at the edge of the chasm between himself and la Boétie, stunned by grief:

If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I.²⁴

In this famous passage, Montaigne tries and fails to put their relationship into words. He comes up against the limits of language. Not only can he not translate his lived experience of their friendship into the universal language of humanism (Zalloua, 2003, p. iii), he cannot find the right words to reach out to la Boétie across the abyss. The sentence is yet another trace of the wound. But it is also a point where he accepts the separation and offers the work of his imagination up to the public to contemplate. In this moment of transcendence, we feel Montaigne very near.

If we look at the differences between publications, as well as at the differences in ink used in his copious marginalia, we can find out a little more about Montaigne's grappling with absence, his work of creating an ephemeral order out of the chaos of grief. Frampton (2011) charts Montaigne's search for consolation in the material world. For example, at one point later in the *Essays*, Montaigne tries to look at his separation from la Boétie as absolute and literal: "They are dead. So, indeed is my father, as absolutely dead as they are, and as distant from me and from life in 18 years as they are in 1600."²⁵ Perhaps seeking further comfort, he continues his objective investigation with a mathematician named Peletier:

Now these are things that often clash; and I have been told that in geometry (which thinks it has reached the high point of certainty among the sciences) there are irrefutable demonstrations that controvert the truth of experience. For instance, Jacques Peletier was telling me at my house that he had found two lines travelling toward each other so as to meet, which nevertheless he proved could never come to touch even at infinity.²⁶

But he's still lost. The objective view seems to peter out, and the life of the *Essays*, like la Boétie's verses, is found elsewhere. Montaigne returns to the abyss in Chapter 28. (Remember, Montaigne was constantly adding to all of the *Essays*.) In the first edition of the *Essays*, "On friendship" contained only the phrase:

If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed.

It is as though he does not have the heart to even try. Several years of essaying later, in the marginalia that became part of the posthumous Bordeaux copy, he was able to add, "except by answering: Because it was I." Essaying the abyss involves drawing close and stepping back, speaking and listening. Montaigne found that there is no "I" without a "he". With new technology, it has recently been discovered that the first part of the sentence was added later still, giving us the final phrase, "Because it was he, because it was I." (Phillippe Desan, 2004) In this dance of absence and presence, Montaigne was better able to tolerate the abyss and see himself in a new light. Rather than fusing with la Boétie into an idealized union, or remaining radically separate, like geometric lines in a material universe, the possibility of a new conversation arose:

Besides this profit that I derive from writing about myself, I hope for this other advantage, that if my humors happen to please and suit some worthy man before I die, he will try to meet me. [...] If by such good signs I knew of a man who was suited to me, truly I would go very far to find him for the sweetness of harmonious and agreeable company cannot be bought too dearly, in my opinion. Oh, a friend!²⁷

There is a discontinuity at his core: a Montaigne before the death of la Boétie, and a Montaigne after. Clearly, we are not in the paradigm of progress. He did not attempt to smooth over the gap to make the book more uniform, or nor did he stand paralyzed in defeat before it. Instead, Montaigne essayed. The *Essays* are a work of continual partings and returns, and this is enough. Montaigne becomes human by transforming absence into a source of culture, a vital source and resource for human life.

Incidentally, the etymology of the word “heritage” sheds light on this conception of humanity and on the significance of La Boétie’s deathbed bequest of his personal library to Montaigne. Jager (personal communication, August, 2012) reminds us that “heritage” stems from the Indo-European roots: “ghe” and “do”. “Ghe” indicates an absence, a gap left by something that has disappeared. The next element, “do”, gives rise to the word “donation”, or “don” in French, which means “gift”. Together, these elements create a metaphor that leads us from the crisis of losing what was once there, to the appearance of an unbearable absence, which is then transformed into a gift. In this sense, our cultural heritage allows what has disappeared to be reborn in a new way, from one generation to another, from one mode of being to another, from utter despair to the grace of a new conversation.

The aim of psychotherapy, like essaying, is to learn to cultivate or live with absences, with the opaqueness of the other. We learn to live with what escapes us. Our starting point is loss. Rather than seeking truth as an ultimate haven so that you don’t lack anything, you let someone in on your thought. You give up on your own truth in favour of presence. Psychotherapy is always about giving up the dream of being sufficient to yourself.

The *Essays* shed light on the inverse also. Being sick means that you can't meet the other. You may be paralyzed by your yearning for fusion with a loved one, or running as far away as you can. In both situations, you close yourself off to dialogue. As J.H. van den Berg (1975) says, all psychological symptoms call out for the healing presence of the other (p. 182). What frees us from lonely paralysis or the alienating mechanical repetition of unsatisfying behaviour or thinking, is the presence of another. This blind circle of reflection only opens up if there is someone to talk to.

*"The Initiator of Psychology"*²⁸

The *Essays* were "born in the [...] goodness of being loved and understood." (O'Neill, 1982, p. 19) Montaigne drew on his friendship with la Boétie to have the courage to come forward with, as Spears (1988) puts it, unprecedented "candor and honesty" (p. 312). He was the first writer to speak so frankly about the most ordinary details of his life.

For Montaigne may be said to have been the initiator of psychology- of a subtle personal note in his study of life and men that was unknown before him, a study made at closer quarters with his kind than any ventured by his predecessors. (Sichel, 1911, p. 175)

Our *honnête homme*²⁹ confides that that he actually knows nothing about the fermentation of grapes, even though wine is the primary product of his estate. And he only recently found out that bread was made from yeast. We learn that the only fruit he likes are melons, and that he often eats so quickly that he bites his fingers. He's a middling runner unlike his father who was very sprightly and could run and jump well into old age. He's unfortunately on the short side. He has a round but not fat face. He has terrible singing voice, stiff and clumsy hands, and a "heavy and lazy disposition"³⁰ As for the faculty of memory, he confesses that "it is entirely lacking in me."³¹

My library [...] is sited at one of the corners of my house. If an idea occurs to me which I want to go and look up or write down, I have to tell someone else about it in case it slips out of my mind as I merely cross my courtyard.³²

His “study made at closer quarters” is not presented in the form of an autobiography nor as a “regimented self-interrogation” (Brush, 1994, p. 174). Montaigne, the psychologist, is “seeking acquaintance, not science.” (p. 174) The ordinary details are offered in conversation with larger shared questions, literally juxtaposed with questions about how to live, truth, experience, the body, friendship, love, language, death, and education. Intimate details bring him closer to the lived world, while knitting him into the wider human fabric.

Montaigne’s enterprise of transforming loss into a source of creativity led to what he called his brain children³³. He saw his love for la Boétie in the truth of their progeny, the *Essays*. Put another way, his intimate conversations with his lost friend led to surprising moments of connection to the larger world of truth. All of the humanities – understood broadly to be an approach that seeks the revelations of the arts, myth, religion, history, literature, and philosophy- flow out of loving conversational practices, like friendship. These relationships are our sources of understanding about the human condition, our psychology.

Today, in psychotherapy, our ideals or exemplars are not personal works, but rather theories about the self, statistical means, positions on curves of normality. They lead us to mischaracterize and loathe ourselves (de Botton, 2012, July 13, 12:25). By painting such a frank portrait of a very ordinary human being rather than an exemplary person, Montaigne “makes our human follies less shameful” (9:49). When we feel less alone, it’s possible to be serious and ridiculous: we are all steeped in just as much “inanity and nonsense”³⁴. Montaigne, (whom the Vatican referred to as the French Socrates), admired Socrates for his rigour, but he cut himself a lot more slack and had more fun (Spears, 1988, p. 315) than his hemlock-drinking forefather: “I have not, like Socrates, by the force of reason, corrected my natural propensities, and have not in the least interfered with my inclinations by art. I let myself go as I have come. I combat nothing.”³⁵

Psychotherapy is also about articulating and learning to live with the otherness of our faults, the strangeness of our weaknesses and insecurities, not necessarily about doing anything with them. To a certain extent, we learn to give them space and let them be. We meet our problems and let them speak rather than solve them. Like Montaigne, we come to the idea that reality is messy, but that a good life involves a “more or less gracious accommodation [...] with reality” (de Botton, 2012, July 13, 15:02), all

while keeping our intellectual confidence in check. “[W]e try to be fully human, but not more than human” (Spears, 1988, p. 318).

It’s fascinating to consider that the friendship between Montaigne and la Boétie has continued to be spoken and written about in vaunted tones since the 16th century, even though we actually have few verifiable facts about its existence. For unlike many other celebrated friendships between writers, there exists no correspondence between Montaigne and la Boetie. The only documentary evidence that we have that the two ever saw one another is a will witnessed by them on June 2, 1563 for Montaigne’s uncle (Gray, 1961, p. 205). Now we do have a letter that Montaigne wrote to his father describing the impressively Stoic death of La Boetie, but here, Montaigne admits that his friend did go on and on a little at the end. Come to think of it, Montaigne’s comments about their friendship are often a little dry, in my opinion.

The great friendship that has touched so many readers does not emerge through facts, or direct observations about the relationship. Instead, it is reborn through the practice of essaying. Montaigne transformed the symbolic wound that is the very heart of the *Essays*, into a living work that must be eternally renewed between reader and writer. This living work shows us - among many things - that what matters in life is a relationship like Montaigne’s friendship with La Boetie: a relationship in which you can talk freely and candidly about everything and anything, where what matters to them is most important to you,

Montaigne discovered that what counts was not "laying down [truth]"³⁶, but learning to relate to someone while continually revising his view of himself, the other and the world. What is important is learning to talk together. Things start to appear when you relate to other people. The thrilling discovery of both the *Essays* and psychotherapy is that you can speak as freely as you can and be listened to! This may be taken for granted these days, but for Montaigne as for Freud, this idea was quite radical. Montaigne creates an intimate space where he can receive his friends and address his readers, where you can talk about cannibalism, farting, kings, or sex, and no one gets upset. Bernd Jager says that this idea is the background for a civilization: you can consider everything without necessarily acting upon it. You make decisions with friends and those around you about what to do. Montaigne, as a Renaissance man, is highly aware that civilization,

with its cultures and customs, lies behind him, bolstering him in times of great loss and uncertainty.

Psychotherapy is really about coming to the understanding that our life is not governed by our consciousness, but by our friends and loves. It is about creating a relationship in which we can come to understand the world and how to live well within it. Together can we be confident that it is not necessary to know everything. Such a relationship in which we stand together to face life has become very precious in modern times.

“Oh, a friend!”

I propose Michel de Montaigne as a patron of psychotherapy, a mentor, but most importantly, a friend for lonely therapists working away behind closed doors. Just as Montaigne was intrigued upon hearing about la Boétie through mutual friends, I want to inspire this same feeling: the delightful possibility of a world of friendship waiting to be discovered. Rather than introducing a substantive self, a factual or objective Montaigne, I hope to invite you into a world that is opened up through Montaigne’s innovative way of practicing friendship. In the lived world of the essay, unlike in the material uni-verse, “personhood necessarily implies a relationship to other persons.” (Jager, 2013) Thus, I am encouraging a meeting in the intersubjective sense, by trying to convey some of the vivid interpersonal quality that comes through Montaigne’s writing. In this realm, seeing is also being seen, speaking is also being heard, and writing is also being read. When I refer to Montaigne as a person, I approach him, not as an individual consciousness, but as a body of work – a book – a manifestation of his presence that reveals a world.

It is highly fitting that our essayistic friend is a man of the Renaissance, since therapy helps us to enlarge our culture, in a sense to become Renaissance men and women. Culture gives us resources to face the groundlessness of our existence, to create order through conversation. As “Montaigne’s latent and pervasive smile” (Tetel, 1979, p. 79) suggests, there is a positivity that comes from access to culture. I like André Gide’s (1964) comment that the pleasure we take in reading the *Essays* is the pleasure that Montaigne took in writing them (p. 8). This suggestion of pleasure is remarkable considering the particularly dark and bloody times during which Montaigne lived, not to mention his recent and lingering bereavement. In

addition to the loss of la Boétie, he was mourning the deaths his beloved father, five infant daughters, and an unlucky brother felled by a tennis ball.

Ideally, a therapist is a cultured person who has the ability to introduce the patient to the wider world. Such a therapist has access to poetry, literature, film, history, religion and art, as well as the sciences. He or she is someone who can dwell comfortably in and pivot between multiple worlds, perhaps between private lives and public worlds, or between utilitarian and cosmological realms. In the therapeutic conversation, there is a rhythm between lived experience in the here and now, and reflection on this experience. We distinguish and pivot between these views. As Donna Orange (2009, November 10) says, “We engage and notice that we engage with our patients, [we do] not just observe them.” (34:13)

A Humanist Psychotherapy

I want to introduce Montaigne and his *Essays* to fellow psychotherapy students, to pique the interest of those students, including myself, who feel like something is missing in our increasingly depersonalized education. I propose that our discipline of psychotherapy, which is based on particular conversations with particular people, may also be fruitfully explored through a relationship with one such particular, personal world. With a friend we are better able to do two things: to say who we are and to see where we belong. We need a friend to stand by us to better articulate our particular creative work, and to help us to see where we stand in conversation with the other: with books, ideas, our ancestors, other disciplines, our patients, and ourselves. Montaigne is our man.

Like Montaigne's “restless inquiry” (Hampshire, 2003, p. xx), therapy flows from a particular disciplined relationship, an attempt to be together in a world made coherent by the practices of friendship and hospitality. Together, therapist and patient find the heart to engage with their subject matter and follow it closely, which paradoxically allows us to become aware of other things, to inscribe our experience within a larger story. Therapy and essaying share this central aim: to draw people out into the light of relationships, to live more intensely, in richer colour and finer detail.

Our common attitude is one of humility, for ultimately all we can do is essay, and that is enough. (This is in contrast to the natural sciences, in

which you cannot speak until you know.) Like Montaigne, we accept that we cannot make pronouncements that will reverberate throughout the ages: “How many things were articles of faith to us yesterday that are fables to us today?”³⁷ Instead of uncovering timeless anonymous facts about human nature, we renew the question of how to think our humanity. We continue to essay our beginnings and revisit our creative works. Such is the work and imagination required to maintain relationships.

Montaigne’s immediate presence imbues us with the Renaissance spirit of discovery, a sense that we are beckoned by something more. The *Essays* sensitize us to the experience of presence and to the question inherent in presence which asks us to step forward and be candid ourselves. It is tragic that in our modern time we get to truth by making ourselves absent in an indifferent world. Montaigne shows us that hospitality and friendship are fundamental moves that open a human world to self and other. The *Essays* began in wonder about his own humanity and that of others. Montaigne wondered about how to be good neighbours, how to leave space for the other, how to cultivate difference. The question that arises for therapists is how do we create an atmosphere in which people can stop being scared, and start talking with confidence in a benevolent world, instead of clamming up? (Jager, personal communication, May, 2011) How do we lay the table for such a vital conversation? This cultural exercise is the basis for a humanist psychotherapy.

“And then, for whom do you write?”³⁸

In our modern world we don’t really have room for the idea of friendship. We see it as biological, or as some sort of economics of self-interest, or as repressed homosexuality, or at best as something sentimental. Its original primacy, as felt during Antiquity and the Renaissance, is completely lost. Montaigne reminds us that letting our guard down and seeing something together leads to discovery. He reminds us of the pleasure of being together in the search for understanding. The *Essays* shows us that friendship is the very condition for clarity. Whether we are approaching a friend, a patient, a text, or a work of art, we are seeking a mutual revelation of presence, which allows us to see. (Jager, personal communication, December, 2012)

Reviving the old fashioned notion of friendship takes us out of a purely theoretical paradigm and into the lived world. Essaying friendship shows

otherness or difference to be an experience that comes to life in a particular conversation, structured by the symbolic bond between listener and speaker. To literalize or universalize any conception of the "other" is, paradoxically, to become indifferent. Thinking and friendship cease when we try to fit our scholarship into an ambitious frame, when we adopt the pretence that a theory gives you the key to some special, ultimate knowledge. The other disappears in the authoritarian regime of this kind of theorizing.

I think that the idea of friendship is an interesting place to dwell for therapists; it draws our attention to a different stance than we may be used to, and perhaps to a different, yet recognizable notion of what we do. What we are doing in friendship is building a common world and giving ourselves a place in it. In the modest realm of friendship, we have to depend on words and gestures that can only hint at meaning. But there is someone there to receive our thoughts, to *alter* and renew our conceptions. Therapy is by and large convincing people, (often both therapist and patient), that conversations are how we learn to manoeuvre in life.

The other day, my ever-eloquent director, Bernd Jager, sent me this email:

The "presences" that guide our life are mostly of this symbolic variety. [...] the parting words of a good friend, the reactions of an old teacher to what we said on a particular occasion, all stay with us in a durable way so we see and hear them again at the right time when we have to make a particular decision or find ourselves at the crossroads for some other reason. [...] Come to think of it, Montaigne was accompanied in his explorations, not only by memories of his old friend, La Boétie, but also by a great number of ancient authors who "stood by him" and who are everywhere present in his work. The old Cartesian and modernist project of "thinking entirely on our own" appears in this light as a harmful, scientific fiction. Maybe the voice of the muse of artist and writer is actually the sound of a choir made up of people we have known and loved and who have known and loved us and continue to support and encourage us on our way. Stripped of these voices we fall mute. (Jager, personal communication, January, 2013).

As once la Boétie bequeathed his beloved library to his great friend, Montaigne bequeaths the *Essays* and the essay form to modernity in an act of friendship. We receive this heritage not as information, but as a symbol

of the humanist transfer of knowledge, turning his absence into a gift. Montaigne's gift reminds us of our lost vision of humanity, and suggests other possibilities of courageously responding to its absence. The discipline of psychotherapy is one such response.

Montaigne encouraged mixing with all sorts of people, not to learn facts or “measurements”, but to learn of their “characters and ways [...]”, to rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others”³⁹. Now that I’ve introduced you, fellow therapists, to our friend from Bordeaux, I hope that you will open a bottle of wine together, (preferably a Montaigne wine, which, by the way, is still in production), enjoy and marvel at each other as you “rub and polish” each other’s minds.

To communicate is our chief business; society and friendship our chief delights; and reading, not to acquire knowledge, not to earn a living, but to extend our intercourse beyond our own time and province. (Woolf, 1925)

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Notes

1 For ease of reading, I have placed all of the citations from the *Essays* using the following format: (TRANSLATOR INITIAL, BOOK:chapter, page). I mainly refer to Donald Frame (Montaigne, 2003), M.A. Screech (Montaigne, 1991), and Charles Cotton's (Montaigne, 1877) English translations of the *Essays*.

2 (S, 11:18, 755)

3 (F, preface, 2)

4 (F, III:2, 740)

5 (F, I:9, 25)

6 (F, III:3, 758)

7 Montaigne was the first writer to use visual metaphor so extensively. He explored the “poetic gait” (F, III:9, 925) of familiar words to “enrich their own, give more weight and depth to their meaning and use; they [good writers] teach the language unaccustomed movements, but prudently and shrewdly.” (F, III:5, 807)

8 Montaigne was particularly interested in the pragmatic schools of thought, which also include Stoicism and Epicureanism.

9 Today, one might view a sceptic as one who doubts things, and requires proof about knowledge. In the Hellenistic era (when it was born) and during the Renaissance, scepticism, especially Pyrrhonian scepticism, was almost a form of therapy. Pyrrhonism, which comes to us from the Greek philosopher Pyrrho (ca. 360 BC - ca. 270 BC) and was later elaborated by Sextus Empiricus in the second century AD, says that we need take nothing seriously in life, including Pyrrhonism itself. Bakewell (2010) sums up ordinary (Academic) scepticism in Socrates’ remark “All I know is that I know nothing.” (p. 124) The Pyrrhonian sceptic would go one step further and say that they are not even sure that they know nothing! The resultant absurdity may have the effect of making you feel better, even laugh, because you are freed from the exasperating search for fixed truths. You still judge and look for answers, but you are content with drawing closer to phenomenological truths.

10 (F, III:10, 936)

11 (F, preface, 2)

12 (F, II:37, 696)

13 (F, I:28, 169)

14 (F, I:28, 169)

15 (F, I:28, 169)

16 (F, II:37, 696)

17 The term “*le moi*” only came into common usage in the 17th century. (Brush, 1994, p. 215)

18 (F, III:5, 809)

19 (F, I:28, 164)

20 (F, I:9, 25)

21 (F, I:29, 177)

22 (F, III:3, 762)

23 (F, III:5, 777)

24 (S, I:28, 169)

25 (passage from III:9 as translated by and cited in Frampton, 2011b, p. 39)

26 (F, II:12, 522)

27 (F, III:9, 911-912)

28 (Sichel, 1911, p. 175)

29 In 17th century France, the ideal man was an “*honnête homme*”. This term literally translates as “honest man”, but is more closely associated with the idea of honour than of honesty. Such a man was a cultured amateur whose worth was measured by conversational skill and manners rather than glory, by his broad general culture rather than specific expertise. He embodied social and moral values such as charm, wit, modesty, and moderation. Freidrich considers Montaigne to have been the first “*honnête homme*” (Philippe Desan, 1991, p. xxiii).

30 (C, II:17)

31 (F, II:17, 598)

32 (S, II:17, 739)

33 (S, II:8, 451)

34 (F, III:9, 931)

35 (F, III:12, 988)

36 (S, I:56, 355)

37 (F, I:27, 164)

38 (F, II:17, 605)

39 (F, I:26, 136)