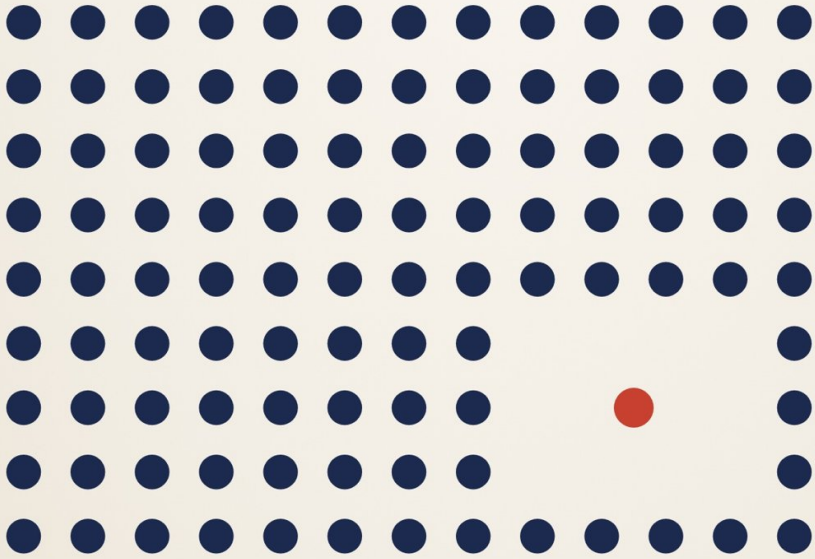
ANNOTATED EDITION

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

On *Solitude*

Montaigne and the Art of Being Alone in an Age of Phones and Loneliness



"In lonely places, be a crowd unto yourself."

A new translation, with notes and essays by

JULIAN DELPHIKI

Thinking School

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Translation, notes, preface, context and essays © Julian Delphiki, 2027.

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We must set aside a back shop all our own, entirely free.

Montaigne

PREFACE

A Tower, a Back Shop

On February 28, 1571, his thirty-eighth birthday, a Bordeaux magistrate had a Latin inscription painted on the wall of a small room next to his library. It said, more or less, that Michel de Montaigne, long weary of servitude at court and of public office, was withdrawing while still whole into the bosom of the learned Virgins (the Muses), to spend in calm and freedom from cares whatever little remained of a life already more than half spent.

Thirty-eight. More than half spent. At that age today, one is finishing off the student loans and starting to think about a mortgage, if the bank allows it.

Montaigne lived twenty-one more years. He did not spend them in calm or free from cares. He traveled across half of Europe, served two terms as mayor of Bordeaux, negotiated between Catholics and Protestants in the middle of a religious war, suffered kidney stones,

plague and plunder, and wrote a book he never finished correcting. The inscription is still on the wall. The plan did not last ten years.

It is worth starting there, because this is a book about solitude, and the word is slipperier than it looks.

English, unusually, has two words for two things. *Solitude* is the being alone that someone chooses: the afternoon with no one, the long walk, the room with the door shut. *Loneliness* is the being alone that happens to you: the empty house you did not ask for, the Sunday with no calls, the new city where no one knows your name. Most languages make do with one word. Montaigne's French did. Spanish still does, and has had to coin a phrase for the second kind: *soledad no deseada*, unwanted solitude.

Montaigne's essay is almost entirely about the first. Today it is almost always read from inside the second.

This book comes from a habit: underlining. For years I have kept what I underline, and the file now holds more than eight thousand passages from nearly eight hundred titles. They are short, a dozen words on average, because long things don't fit in memory. The label I have used most to sort them is "personal growth," which, in someone who distrusts self-help, is best confessed at the start. Montaigne did something similar on a grander scale: he had sentences painted on the beams of his library. Mine live in a spreadsheet. This book is what happens when those passages start arguing with an essay from 1580.

Why now

The figures are in the essays that follow, with their sources. Here the outline is enough.

In June 2025 the World Health Organization published the report of its Commission on Social Connection: one in six people in the world is affected by loneliness. Two years earlier the US Surgeon General had issued an advisory calling it an epidemic. Britain has had a minister with loneliness in the job description since 2018.

At the same time, books on *the art of being alone* sell very well. There are apps for meditating in silence, weekend retreats without phones for the price of a flight to Tokyo, and cabins in the woods rented out for "disconnecting," Wi-Fi included.

The odd thing is that we have to buy it. Many cultures gave solitude an official place: the time apart in rites of passage, the hermit's cave people climbed up to for advice, the retreat before a grave decision. Ours treats it as a gap between two engagements. And gaps, as we know, get filled with a screen.

In other words: we have an epidemic of the solitude we don't want and a thriving market in the solitude we do. Sometimes the same person is on both sides in the same month.

Remember when social media was going to cure loneliness? In 2017 Facebook rewrote its mission to say it wanted to "bring the world closer together." Nine years later the world is closer than ever and people feel lonelier than ever. That is not all Facebook's fault. But it is worth remembering who promised what.

What Montaigne says

Montaigne writes for someone who can afford to withdraw. He has a tower, a library of about a thousand books, servants, land and an income. He says so without hiding it, and his advice starts there: we should have wives, children, property and health, if we can, but not hang our happiness on them.

Then comes the image that justifies this book. We must set aside, he says, an *arrière-boutique*, a back shop "all our own, entirely free," where we hold our daily conversation with ourselves.

The back shop is not the shop. The shop stays open in front, with its customers, its till and its bills. Montaigne does not propose shutting up shop or going off to the desert (in fact he mocks those who do and take their worries along). He proposes that behind the counter there be a room no one else enters.

That idea, of a solitude that lives alongside public life instead of replacing it, is what we need now. Because the two errors of our time are ones Montaigne already knew: believing that going far away fixes what is inside, and believing that being surrounded by people (or by screens) is the opposite of being alone.

Nietzsche, who had no tower and no income and spent his last lucid years in rented rooms, put it less politely. In the fourth part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he warns: "In solitude, whatever one brings into it grows, the inner beast included. That is why solitude is inadvisable for many." It is the other side of the back shop. The room where you meet yourself does not choose whom it lets in.

My most reliable back shop has no walls: it is running. In that file of underlinings there are a few lines that belong to nobody but

me, and nearly all of them are about the same thing: running, time, and who you are after a while on the move. One came out in English, and I left it that way: *slow or fast but without hurry*. I know no better description of a back shop: somewhere you go alone, come back from, and where nobody asks why you took so long.

What is in this book

First, a short context: who Montaigne was in 1571 and what happened next, because the essay reads better once you know its author did not do what he proposed.

Then the text, in a new translation made directly from the French of 1595, the posthumous edition prepared by his circle. Montaigne quotes Latin poets in almost every paragraph; here they are translated in the body of the text, and the Latin and its source are in the notes, along with what you need to know about each name. I have tried to keep his tone, which is that of a man thinking out loud and contradicting himself without apology.

Thirteen essays follow, in four parts. Each takes an idea of Montaigne's and sets it against a present-day problem: chosen solitude and the other kind; remote work; a room of one's own in an age of unaffordable housing; the phone; machines that make conversation; reading; friendship, which is what Montaigne lost before he climbed his tower; the temptation to disappear; travel as escape; the loneliness of carers; grief; old age; and the last retreat, that of the dying.

Every essay asks, in one way or another, the same question, which is the only tool this book offers: does this solitude have stairs? Montaigne's tower did. He climbed it to be alone and came down to dinner. A solitude you can come down from when you choose is a back shop; one you cannot find your way out of is something else, however alike they look from outside. I will call this, without much solemnity, the stairs test.

The book closes with counterpoints, the strongest objections to Montaigne and to me, and a short epilogue. There are no lessons. Montaigne would have laughed at them, and rightly.

One warning, which is not a disclaimer: this is not a self-help or mental health book. If the solitude someone lives with is not a quiet afternoon but something heavy every day, talking to a professional will do more than any essay, this one included.

CONTEXT

Montaigne, 1571

Michel Eyquem was born on February 28, 1533, at the Château de Montaigne in the Périgord, a few hours' ride from Bordeaux. The noble name was recent. His great-grandfather, Ramon Eyquem, a merchant in wine and salt fish, had bought the estate in 1477. In three generations the family went from the quayside to the *noblesse de robe*, the nobility of offices and law courts.

His father, Pierre Eyquem, had fought in the Italian wars and came back with odd ideas about education. He put the boy in the hands of a German tutor who spoke no French, with orders that no one in the house speak to him except in Latin. Montaigne learned Latin before his own language. He tells the story himself, with more pride than he admits.

He studied at the Collège de Guyenne in Bordeaux, then law. In 1557 he became a councillor in the Parlement of Bordeaux, which

was a court of law, not an assembly. There he met the most important person in his life, Étienne de La Boétie, author of the *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*. The friendship was short: La Boétie died in 1563, at thirty-two, and Montaigne speaks of four years together. Montaigne later wrote that they loved each other "because it was he, because it was I," and he never had another friend like him.

In 1568 his father died and Montaigne inherited the estate. In 1570 he sold his seat in the Parlement. And on February 28, 1571, his birthday, he had the retirement inscription painted.

The tower

The château had a round tower at one corner of the enclosure. Montaigne made it his own. On the ground floor, a chapel; above it, a bedroom; on the top floor, the library: a circular room with about a thousand books and a view over the courtyard, the garden and the fields.

On the ceiling beams he had sayings painted in Greek and Latin: from the Bible, from Sextus Empiricus, from Lucretius, from Horace. They survive. Up there, he says in another essay, he spent most of his days and most hours of the day, without plan or order, leafing through one book and then another. And there he began to write what were first notes and later came to be called *Essais*, which in French means trials, attempts.

Three editions

The first edition appeared in Bordeaux in 1580, in two books. The second, much expanded and with a new third book, in Paris in 1588. Montaigne kept correcting a copy of that edition by hand, the so-called Bordeaux Copy, until he died. In 1595, three years later, his "adoptive daughter" Marie de Gournay and his circle of friends published the posthumous edition, with the last additions.

That 1595 edition is the one translated here. Modern editors argue over whether to follow it or the annotated copy; in this chapter the differences are minor and do not change the argument.

"On Solitude" is chapter 39 of Book I in the modern numbering (38 in 1595). It belongs to the first years of retirement, when Montaigne was still reading Seneca and the Stoics like a man looking for a manual, and was retouched in later editions.

What he was reading

To understand "On Solitude" you need to know what was on Montaigne's desk when he wrote it.

Above all, Seneca. The *Letters to Lucilius* are the source of half the chapter: the idea that travel does not cure because you take yourself along, the animals that wipe out their tracks at the entrance to their den, the sage for whom one reader or none is enough. In the early years of his retirement Montaigne reads Seneca the way one reads instructions, and sometimes quotes him without saying so.

Then Plutarch, in Jacques Amyot's French translation: the *Lives* had come out in 1559 and the *Moral Works* came out in 1572, just

as Montaigne was starting to write. In another essay he says that without that book, ignorant men like him would be lost. Many of the anecdotes about philosophers and generals in the chapter come from there.

And the Latin poets, whom he quotes from memory and not always accurately: Horace, Lucretius, Persius, Virgil. In "On Solitude" Horace appears eight times. Montaigne uses them the way a musician quotes other songs: not for authority, but to change key.

It is also worth saying what he was not reading for this chapter. There is almost nothing of the Christian desert tradition or the mystics, who were the obligatory reference on solitude in his day. Montaigne mentions them once, respectfully and from a distance, to say that their way is better than Pliny's or Cicero's, but it is not his. His solitude is that of a reader of Seneca, not of a monk.

What happened next

The retirement was short and full of exits.

In 1572, the year after the inscription, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre filled Paris and other cities with corpses. France was in a civil war over religion, and the war did not respect towers or libraries. Montaigne, a Catholic, had Protestant friends and served as gentleman of the chamber both to King Charles IX and to Henry of Navarre, leader of the Protestant side and the future Henry IV.

In 1580, with the first edition out, he went traveling. He stopped in Paris to present the book to the king, then went on through Switzerland, Germany and Austria to Italy, partly out of curiosity