Two Ways to Think or Montaigne and Freud on the Human Paradox

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TWO WAYS TO THINK

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MONTAIGNE AND FREUD ON THE HUMAN PARADOX

By

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“Gratitude is the only secret than cannot reveal itself”

—Emily Dickinson
Preface

According to cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker in his Pulitzer Prize winning study *The Denial of Death*, man is “at the same time…given the consciousness of the terror of the world and of his own death and decay.” Becker’s study draws upon the theories of the philosopher Kierkegaard, Freud and such contemporaries as Otto Rank and Eric Fromm, men who were both his disciples and his critics. In his study, Becker insists that this precarious human paradox—a disjunction between mortal body and self-conscious mind—causes an immense anxiety over our imminent death and engages us in a search for immortality. Becker argues that we create *immortality projects*—a culture-footprint, anything that marks our participation within a society—so that we may live on through society and our immortality project after death. While Becker’s work is too demonstrative in scope and language for the purpose of this thesis, the fundamental claims are part of a nuanced exploration into the human condition, namely, the human paradox.

There are many ways to interpret the human paradox—mortal body, immortal soul. This thesis examines that of two thinkers of the ages, Michel de Montaigne and Sigmund Freud. Although not the only intellectuals to take these concepts into consideration in their writing, Montaigne and Freud provide the most comprehensive approach; they provide textual evidence that great minds have explored these ideas over the course of millennia. With an exposition of self-mastery, Montaigne and Freud first inspired their own historical milieu; following in their footsteps, successive generations have inculcated their techniques, gaining insight into the perennial issues that encompass the contemporary selves of each successive generation.

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Contents

Preface ............................................................................................................................................ ii

Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: How to Think (According to Montaigne) ........................................................... 3
  Think (Auto)Biographically ........................................................................................................ 5
  (Un)Think Essays; Think (Un)Philosopher ............................................................................ 22

Chapter Two: How to Think (According to Freud) ................................................................. 31
  Think Freudian ............................................................................................................................ 34
  Think Psychoanalytically ........................................................................................................... 42

Chapter Three: How to think (Colleagues of the Mind) ......................................................... 53

Chapter Four: How to Think (A Modern Synthesis, According to Becker) ............................. 59
Introduction

In her recent book *How to Live or A Life of Montaigne: In One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, Sarah Bakewell writes twenty “essays” that explore Montaigne’s *Essays*—a vast body of literature in which the sixteenth-century philosopher turned the looking glass inward, and examined his own thoughts and emotions as a source of information. Bakewell provides a map and guidebook on how to live according to Montaigne, the “most genial of interlocutors and hosts” (Bakewell 11). Using Montaigne’s own words to sum up his purpose for writing the *Essays* and his principle of life, which both largely have the same answer: “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” (III:2 740). Montaigne was less concerned with answers and more with the questions for their own sake—or for his own sake.

In this thesis, Freud is viewed as the prolific product of Montaigne’s generation of thought inspired by Montaigne’s early experimentation with the essential technique, termed “free association,” underlying both self-examination and psychoanalysis. For Montaigne and his *Essays*, free association meant a written exposition of free-form thought in which the subject and master were one and the same. For psychoanalysis, “free association” became a sort of golden rule of full verbal disclosure (a “talking cure”). One literary critic, Harold Bloom, remarks that, “Freud’s theory of the mind or soul, after a century or so, is alive and valuable,” and goes on to urge us to read Freud as a Montaigne of the twentieth century (*The Anatomy of Influence*, 14).

Reconciling and habituating, Freud took Montaigne’s theme, added his own weights, and was able to dive down even further. The critically acclaimed biographer of Freud, Peter Gay, in his work, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, attests that Freud “saw the human animal more clearly,
and more justly, than did anyone else. He recognized that humans—all humans—must face the
dilemma of civilization. For civilization is at once humankind’s greatest achievement and its
greatest tragedy” (Forward, ix).

Throughout history, these men have served as teachers on how to think about the self as
both an individual and part of civilization—humanity’s largest cultural spectrum.

For all the massive changes in life and culture that have taken place over the centuries [. .
.] these writers appear to have anticipated the questions we moderns have to put to them.
They speak out of a timeless wisdom, cast in the language of particular times and places,
from which new epochs derive nourishment and inspiration. In large measure their
greatness resides in their perpetual novelty. (Preface, Leavy xvii).

Montaigne and Freud have performed a service for society; both in their own way and
own time, these philosophers of the ages have forged a clearing in the woods of a prolific path
whereby future explorers, with overlapping footsteps, can extend human clarity. Montaigne took
the first steps by exploring unflinchingly his own mind; Freud braved the conventional tide in a
sea of enemies and moved forward to examine the minds of others, fighting both with and
against the scientific establishment. Today, the cognitive scientists are focused on mapping the
geography of the brain using many sophisticated tools and techniques, but also the dogged
courage, curiosity, and universality of these two groundbreaking adventurers.
Chapter One: How to Think (According to Montaigne)

When discussing the issue of procrastination, the Internet is inevitably introduced to the conversation. Among other things, a blog called “Hyperbole and a Half” is the type of go-to website for the best kind of amusing, narrative distraction. About an hour of hyperbolized neuroses—teetering on the border of candid hilarity and relational insanity—is long enough for an enjoyable excursion into the land of procrastination; a land populated, in one case, by an extremely extroverted stranger rambling about her personal thoughts to millions of other strangers eager to read over a thousand words about why this particular person thinks spiders are scary.

In the twenty-first century, the Internet is a bizarre and omniscient monster, or, at the very least, a verisimilitude of infinite possibilities. One would expect such an omnipotent force to have an oppressive effect, similar to the futile attempt to grasp our infinitesimal frame of existence on the earth’s vast geological time frame. If this were the case, the Internet would elicit these feelings of personal irrelevance when communicating on a grand scale by holding up the negligible individual against the rest of the world. But this is not the case.

Most dwellers of the developed world are of the opinion that the Internet is an emancipating force—a place to take endless subjective liberties, especially when “I” is the subject. In this vast space of ones and zeros, everyone is reserved the right to autonomy (as long as they have access to a network connection, that is). Trawling the Internet freely can be a captivating and active sport; one would be hard-pressed to find a privileged first-world being whose life did not, in some way revolve around an electronic medium, and the use of such a medium as a written exposition of “first-world” problems.
The author Sarah Bakewell mentions that one such dweller—the historian Theodore Zeldin—founded a website called “The Oxford Muse,” where individuals are encouraged to write, read, respond to brief autobiographies. According to Zeldin, “Oxford Muse,” is a way for people “to discover who inhabits the world, one individual at a time,” through the production and consumption of personal essays (oxfordmuse.com). The ability to communicate with real people separated by geographical borders and boundaries—and still find that individual differences are almost always shared—is a realization that comes with reading these essays.

In less poignant terms, the Internet is a hotspot for individuals to socially engage themselves without wearing pants. More important than clandestine indecency, however, is this idea of shared individuality. With the benefit of anonymity added by physical separation, duplicity and artifice are no longer necessary guises. The contributor is able to hide behind a computer screen; carefully wrapped in that remote safety blanket, individuals reveal themselves to a large and varied audience. With anxiety over perfidious dangers nearly eliminated, people are much more likely to discuss their differences; and, rather than leading to persecution or awkward social encounters, the responses reveal that strangeness often provides a common denominator.

The invention of the Internet is a zeitgeist by which people share the experience of being human on a wider, longer, and more instantaneous scale than ever before. Writing about oneself in order to share the experience of being human was not, however, created with the advent of the Internet. In her book *How to Live or A Life of Montaigne: In One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer*, Bakewell examines this idea of “writing about oneself to create a mirror in which other people recognize their own humanity”—and, as one might assume, it has not existed forever. Just like the Internet, it had to be invented; but, Bakewell goes on to say, “unlike many
other cultural inventions, it can be traced to a single person: Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, a nobleman, government official, and winegrower who lived in the Périgord area of southwestern sixteenth century France (3).

Think (Auto)Biographically

The unlikely candidate—Michel Eyquem de Montaigne—was born February 28, 1533, the eldest son of a recently accredited French noble family. Fifty-nine years of privilege, wise restraint and relative tranquility later, Montaigne died in his estate home in Bordeaux, on September 13, 1592.

The origin of Montaigne’s self is an important matter. Born into a line of wealthy tradesmen turned nobility, Montaigne’s heritage was reasonably well reconciled. The family château was Montaigne’s birthplace and his lifelong home, inherited from his father, Pierre Eyquem de Montaigne. A proud father, Pierre affectionately nicknamed his son Micheau—a name that carried itself in documents dating well into his manhood (Bakewell 28).

Pierre’s fatherly virtues are a subject Montaigne often alludes to in his writing, remarking on the power of inheritance and very much considering himself his father’s son. Musing on his family and their descriptive traits that had made their way down to himself through his grandfather and father, Montaigne includes an easy-going honesty and certain hereditary ailments—like a propensity for painful kidney stones that Montaigne witnessed first in his father and later suffered himself (Bakewell 28).

Although Montaigne finds many similarities in his heritage, he often remarks on his relative inadequacy in comparison with his father in regards to practical skills, like taking care of the Montaigne estate. Yet, as Bakewell notes, “he knew the advantage he had when it came to
literature and learning. Pierre’s knowledge of books was as limited as his love of them was boundless [. . .] He worshiped books without understanding them. His son would always try to do the opposite” (50).

Montaigne’s generation also sat in between the “turmoil of the late 1500s,” which, Bakewell cites, “stopped France from building a major New World empire like those of England and Spain, and kept it inward-looking,” leading to the France cultivated by the time of Montaigne’s death—“economically feeble, and ravaged by disease, famine, and public disorder” (51). It was no wonder, says Bakewell, “young nobles of his generation ended up as exquisitely educated misanthropes” (51).

The fathers filled their sons with literature and history, trained them in critical thinking and taught them to bandy around classical philosophies like juggling balls. By way of thanks, the sons dismissed it all as valueless and adopted a superior attitude. (50).

Despite all of this, the ideals of his father survive in streaks, though mutated in form; they are found in his essaying and appending of uncertain codas to everything he ventured to think and write—although, “softened, darkened, and with the certainty knocked out of them” (Bakewell 51). It is fitting, therefore, that the wake-up call from a characteristic generational idleness—a strain of the sulky teenage Montaigne, which persisted well into his thirties—came in the form of a request from his father, Pierre. One day, he “handed him a 500-page folio volume, written by a Catalan theologian over a century earlier, in stilted Latin and said, ‘translate this into French for me when you get a moment, will you, son?’” (Bakewell 120). Perhaps meant
to deter Montaigne from a literary career entirely, Pierre presented him with this dense and inscrutable Latin text.

The translation of Raymond Sebond’s *Natural Theology or Book of Creatures* (written in 1436 and published in 1484)—although, for the translator, a detestable book of rational arguments—had an indelible effect on Montaigne and his writing. Bakewell believes, “his father’s translation task lit the spark that one day blazed up into the *Essays*” (120). Commissioned by Marguerite de Valois a little later, Bakewell notes Montaigne was to defend the same work in what became his “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” the twelfth chapter of Book II of the *Essays*. In the first edition, the Apology occupies 248 pages, while the other ninety-three chapters average about nine pages.

The importance of the “Apology,” is expressed by Bakewell as having added weight to the *Essays* in more than one sense; without it, the first edition of Montaigne’s *Essays* would have been less controversial but also far less read. Contrary to what the term “Apology” would suggest, Montaigne doesn’t really defend Sebond’s text, but instead, he writes in defense of Sebond against other critiques that attempt to devalue the author’s text using rational arguments. “He does this,” Bakewell says, “by showing that rational arguments, in general, are fallible, because human reason itself cannot be relied upon [. . .] Thus,” continues Bakewell, “he defends a rationalist against other rationalists by arguing that anything based on reason is valueless” (122).

The driving force behind his unapologetic “Apology” was the third of the great Hellenistic philosophies, and certainly the strangest—Pyrrhonian Skepticism, originated by the Greek philosopher Pyrrho (died c. 275 BCE) who took the ordinary dogmatic form of skepticism one-step further. According to Montaigne, Pyrrho was an interesting character who, “did not
want to make himself a stump or a stone; he wanted to make himself a living, thinking, reasoning man, enjoying all natural pleasures and comforts, employing and using all his bodily and spiritual faculties” (II:12 454).

In order to achieve this state of being, Pyrrho and his skeptic followers in centuries to come modified Socrates’ common Skeptic principle, “All I know is that I know nothing,” adding, in effect, “and I’m not even sure about that” (Bakewell 113). By doing this, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics turned the “question everything” principle inside out on itself; they were a kind of super-Skeptic, hard-pressed on not being hard-pressed about anything, anything at all.

The Pyrrhonian key to all problems in life, therefore, is the revelation that nothing in life needs to be taken seriously; “Pyrrhonian Skepticism does not even take itself seriously . . . having stated its one philosophical principle,” Bakewell writes, “it turns in a circle and gobbles itself up, leaving only a puff of absurdity” (124). Creating shorthand for this maneuver, the Pyrrhonian Skeptics applied the Greek word “epokhe,” roughly translated as “I suspend judgement.” Enamored and greatly influenced by their radical calm, Montaigne came up with his own epithet in French, “je soutiens,” or “I hold back” (II:12 454).

According to Bakewell, “This phrase conquers all enemies; it undoes them, so that they disintegrate into atoms before your eyes” (124). Bakewell goes on to borrow an anecdote from a historian of Skepticism, Alan Bailey, to explain how the “epokhe trick makes you laugh and feel better,” freeing its subject from a need to find a definite answer to anything:

If someone declares that the number of grains of sand in the Sahara is an even number and demands to know your opinion, your natural response might be, “I don’t have one,” or “How should I know?” Or, if you want to sound more philosophical, “I suspend
judgement”—*epokhe*. If a second person says, “What rubbish! There is obviously an *odd* number of grains of sand in the Sahara,” you would still say *epokhe*, in the same unflappable tone. (125).

Bakewell continues by listing three deadpan statements that have been cited by Sextus Empiricus, the second and more rigorous developer of Pyrrhonian Skepticism during the second century AD, as the definitions of *epokhe*:

1. I cannot say which of the things proposed I should find convincing and which I should not find convincing.
2. I now feel in such a way as neither to posit dogmatically nor to reject any of the things falling under this investigation.
3. To every account I have scrutinized which purports to establish something in dogmatic fashion, there appears to me to be opposed another account, purporting to establish something in dogmatic fashion, equal to it in convincingness or lack of convincingness.

“This last formulation in particular,” Bakewell advises, “might be memorized as a useful way of shutting up anyone making outlandish claims about the Sahara or anything else” (125). In writing his “Apology,” Montaigne used Pyrrhonian Skepticism as a thumbtack to pop Sebond’s inflated balloon and let all those superior feelings of human importance dissipate into thin air; Montaigne also recognized these unfortunate pretensions in many others and believed they came with “regimenting, arranging, and fixing truth” (II:12 454).
Although Montaigne was a milder devotee to Pyrrhonism as a whole philosophy, he was attracted to this idea of taking in life provisionally and questioningly. These Skeptic tools were ones he always tried to carry with himself. In a sixteenth century fashion, he even “had a series of medals struck in 1576,” which Bakewell describes as “featuring Sextus’s magic word epokhe (here appearing as epekho), together with his own arms and an emblem of weighing scales . . . another Pyrrhonian symbol, designed to remind himself both to maintain balance and to weigh things up rather than merely accepting them” (127). The medal is a token that, both figuratively and literally, allowed Montaigne to always carry with him the Skeptic principles assisting him in life. Suffusing everything with words like “perhaps,” “it seems to me,” “though I don’t know,” Montaigne sought to “soften and moderate the rashness of our propositions” (III:11 959). In turn, he came to understand and appreciate both, “the puniness of knowledge and the astoundingness of the world” (III:6 841)—at home in the domestic sphere, at work in the social sphere, and especially in writing the *Essays*.

Montaigne wrote his *Essays* from 1572 to 1592. The dates, however, do not signify any sort of chronological pattern of organization. Rather, the pattern is that there is no pattern. Montaigne recognizes the value of divergence, as he writes of his own literary achievement: “It is the only book in the world of its kind, a book with a wild and eccentric plan” (II:8 338).

Throughout most of the 1570s, Montaigne began formally working on the *Essays*—his comprehensive yet unfinished immortality project. The *Essays* became a book of precepts on moderation, explained through the somewhat ordinary—and therefore, extremely extraordinary—life of one man. The discoveries Montaigne made of his own existence were immediately identifiable in the lives of so many others. It was in the last decade of his moderate
lifespan that Montaigne achieved literary fame as his series of life compendiums continued to grow in size and subject matter.

First published in 1580, the *Essays* filled only two small volumes that differed from the ones seen today in more than size—showing only rebellious traces of the intractable give and take quality of the later revisions. Bakewell remarks that “some of them even kept to their supposed point”; still, the works “were already suffused with Montaigne’s curious, questioning, restless personality, and they often opened up puzzles or quirks in human behavior” (222).

While the 1570s marked the period of Montaigne as a writer, the 1580s began his important period as an author. Over this next decade, the *Essays* doubled in size; Montaigne was sent around Europe, as both a public and literary figure; and he became the mayor of Bordeaux—these are the years that both “exhausted him, and made him a man who would be remembered” (Bakewell 226). Montaigne’s death in 1592 marks the stopping point to work on the editions of his *Essays*. “Looked at another way,” however, “it never stopped at all. It continued to grow, not through endless writing but through endless reading” (Bakewell 9). The *Essays* quickly found a keen audience, and Montaigne began his career as a well-established literary figure among his contemporaries. By the time of the publication of the third edition in 1587, Montaigne’s *Essays*, now, twice revised, “had become the fashionable reading for the French nobility of the early 1580s” (Bakewell 212).

Most surprisingly, in his own time, Montaigne’s *Essays* were viewed as a source of ecclesiastical wisdom. Although Montaigne does not seem to have been governed by faith in his arguments. Bakewell asserts with her own skepticism that the only exception to Montaigne’s rule, “question everything,” was his careful consideration of his own religious faith beyond doubt. “He adhered to the received dogma of the Catholic Church, and that was that” (130).
Bakewell does note Montaigne’s belief in a popular sect among intellectuals called Fideism, which she describes as placing “no reliance at all on human reason or endeavor” (132). In support of Bakewell’s theory of fideism as a way for Montaigne and others of his time to exist as nonbelievers, while still feigning devoutness with impunity, are the essays in which Montaigne broods on death. Apparently forgetting he is supposed to have a vested interest in a higher power and a belief in the existence of an afterlife, Montaigne writes:

I plunge head down, stupidly into death [. . .] as into a silent and dark abyss which swallows me up at one leap and overwhelms me in an instant with a heavy sleep free from feeling pain. (III:9 902).

By his forties, Montaigne had gained his first enthusiastic audience—a group of late Renaissance thinkers, “filled with neo-Stoics and neo-Epicureans fascinated by the question of how to live well” (Bakewell 118). Many of his contemporaries considered the Essays a manual for how to do exactly this. Bakewell mentions one friend and colleague, Florimond de Raemond, who “extolled Montaigne’s courage in the face of life’s torments, and advised readers to turn to him for wisdom, especially about how to come to terms with death” (117). Thus the foundations were laid for Montaigne’s fame as a “pragmatic philosopher, and as a guide to the art of living” (Bakewell 118).

In 1584, the biographer La Croix du Maine wrote of Montaigne as the one contemporary author worth classing with the ancients (329). Even Henri III, King of France, was one of Montaigne’s admirers. Bakewell recounts a story of Montaigne’s conventional presentation of a copy to the king. “Henri told him that he liked the book, to which Montaigne is said to have
replied, ‘Sir, then Your Majesty must like me’—because, as he always maintained, he and his book were the same” (223).

At age forty-seven and already a renowned author, Montaigne began to think differently about life. He had an interesting political career on the horizon, a literary one already established, and a—much less glamorous— inherited “propensity to attacks of kidney stones . . . Kidney stones form when calcium or other minerals build up in the system and create lumps and crystals which block the flow of urine . . . In Montaigne’s day, they carried a real danger of death each time, either from simple blockage or from infection” (Bakewell 227).

Satisfying a childhood dream to travel the world, Montaigne embarked on a seventeen-month journey through selected areas of Europe, including, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy. Since he was a nobleman, Montaigne was expected to travel with a large entourage of servants, friends, acquaintances, “from whom he tried to escape as often as possible. The group included four youngsters who came for the educational experience.” Included in this group was his youngest brother, Bertrand de Matteouillon, who was only twenty (Bakewell 230).

As Bakewell notes, “traveling was itself something of an extreme sport at the time” (230). There were roads established for pilgrimages, but some could be inhabited by danger—with bands of highwaymen, towns with plague outbreaks along the way, or corrupted government officials necessitating a bribe in order to pass. In other words, you had to have your wits about you, and be prepared to alter your route at any times. Once you had reached your destination, the proper paperwork had to be shown in order to enter the heavily armed entrances fortressing many of the cities in Europe. As for covering distances, most of the traveling was done on horseback, with few other options. Fortunately for Montaigne, riding was one of his
greatest pastimes, and certainly his preference for travel. In his own words, riding on horseback gave him the pleasurable ability to “roll relaxedly with the rolling of the heavens” (II:17 605).

Much to the complaint of his travelers, Montaigne often strayed from the path—wishing only to go with the flow, and follow his whims with little or no constraints. Bakewell recounts Montaigne’s blithe response to the complaints about his capricious habits: “Montaigne would say it was impossible to stray from the path: there was no path. The only plan he had ever committed himself to was that of traveling in unknown places. So long as he did not repeat a route, he was following this plan to the letter” (234). It is easy to pinpoint both the insouciance of the Pyrrhonian Skeptic and the irritation of an adult seated at the children’s table.

During his travels, Montaigne was extraordinarily sentient of his own adaptability. He tried very hard to blend in with the locals, attempting to hide any obvious variance—although, his foreignness was more obvious than not. He did, however, speak Italian quite well. During this time, he also made special note of cultural differences. With an anthropological interest, “odd events and human narratives of all kinds appealed to him” (235).

Montaigne had a special eye and a communicative interest in the abstract or the unknown. “He never tired of such thinking,” says Bakewell, “or of boggling his own mind by contemplating the millions of lives that had been lived through history and the impossibility of knowing the truth about them” (128). In the spirit of Pyrrhonian Skepticism, Montaigne reflects that even the knowledge of the most curious person is negligible: “even if all that has come down to us by report from the past should be true and known by someone, it would be less than nothing compared with what is unknown” (III:6 841).

The critic Hugo Friedrich, who comments on Montaigne’s philosophy of “unassumingness,” writes of the thinker that he had a “deep need to be surprised by what is
unique, what cannot be categorized, what is mysterious” (Montaigne. Friedrich 132, 130). And as Bakewell reflects, of all the complex and mysterious things, nothing amazed Montaigne more than himself, “the most unfathomable phenomenon of all” (128).

Montaigne’s travels were cut short after he received a request to take office as mayor of Bordeaux immediately. Montaigne was less than thrilled with the political decision made for him—yet, he assumed his duty with the usual reluctant obedience, and served as the mayor of Bordeaux for four years—1581 to 1585. He was probably chosen for his affability and mildness, as Bakewell points out: “he was known as a man who would listen thoughtfully to all sides, whose Pyrrhonian principle was to lend his ears to everyone and his mind to no one, while maintaining his own integrity through it all” (247).

While many of his late Renaissance contemporaries thought there was a lack of experience and enthusiasm in how he handled his mayoralty, his “virtues of sincerity and naturalness were much admired” (Bakewell 251). Montaigne’s conduct in politics is easily linked to his philosophical mildness—“stoicism encouraged wise detachment, while Skeptics held themselves back on principle” (Bakewell 250). It is no surprise, then, that Montaigne’s four years spent in a relatively demanding political office did not end with a gratifying ceremony and a moving speech. Instead, Montaigne’s mayoralty ended just like his Essays; it petered out into confusion (Bakewell 254).

Montaigne was often criticized for not carrying out his civic duty in this situation. Many biographers have viewed his political actions with disdain as he was “applying Skepticism to everyday life and showing emotional detachment from agreed standards. The Skeptic epokhe, or ‘I hold back,’ seemed to show an untrustworthiness in his nature” (254-255). In this case,
Montaigne’s tactic of wise detachment appealed more to indifference, and those critics of the new era equated it more with nihilism.

According to Bakewell, the term “nihilist” was almost synonymous with “terrorist” for a later generation of readers. They were people who, for the late nineteenth century, embraced “godlessness, pointlessness, and meaninglessness” while throwing bombs and advocating “the destruction of the existing social order”; most importantly, they were seen as “a kind of revolutionary wing to the Skeptics’ party, or Skeptics turned bad” (Bakewell 255). Montaigne’s popular Skepticism, therefore, now became a radical faction of violent revolutionaries who wished to deny or annihilate everything.

This debate was sparked by the long overdue removal of Montaigne’s Essays from the Index in France, a status that “raised his profile and opened the way for a larger readership, while intensifying the question of his moral acceptability” (Bakewell 255). Removed in 1854, the Essays became a source of considerable antagonism. One theologian in England, Richard William Church concluded that Montaigne felt an overwhelming sense of “the nothingness of man, of the smallness of his greatest plans and the emptiness of his greatest achievements,” which in turn belied “the idea of duty, the wish for good, the thought of immortality” (Bakewell 256). Guillaume Guizot, the French historian and politician, “who in 1866 called Montaigne a great ‘seducer,’ did his best to arm readers against such seduction. Having once fallen under Montaigne’s spell himself, he now wrote to guide victims out of the web, like a deprogrammed former cultist who devotes his life to helping others escape” (Bakewell 255).

Bakewell goes on by quoting Guizot, who describes Montaigne in a list of character defects, which include his withdrawal from “public life for purely selfish reasons, in order to spend more time in contemplation—and not even religious contemplation . . . when this
introspection turned up faults, he did not try to correct them; he accepted himself as he was” (Bakewell 256). Guizot says of Montaigne, “he will not make us into the kind of men our times require” (Bakewell 256). Even Montaigne remarks on the persistence of a certain slothful indolence within his character—though, he does so with a pensive grin. Rather than stirring up negativity and aversion, Montaigne believed character flaws were, in most cases, something to be appreciated and considered thoughtfully for their prominent role—they bring humans back down from their lofty positions and place them right on their rumps, where they belong.

Another moral problem for the nineteenth century readers of Montaigne related to his openness about the topic of sex. Although he wasn’t the first to discuss things that make many people feel uncomfortable, it functioned as the straw that broke the camel’s back—and fueled his critics with more ammunition to discredit his literary authority. As Bakewell notes, “his talk of buttocks, cracks, and tools had occasionally bothered people” (256).

One of the few female critics of the 1800s was an English editor who went by the pseudonym “Honoria.” Not only did she purge Montaigne’s Essays of any offensive sexual language, but she also edited Montaigne’s careless grammatical defects: “He is also so often unconnected in his subjects, and so variable in his opinions, that his meaning cannot always be developed” (257). Interestingly, “Honoria’s” edition of Montaigne’s Essays made him far more attractive and accessible to the nineteenth century audience. While rebuking him for certain discrepancies, “Honoria” actually praises Montaigne in the end for his good intentions, and highlights those intentions in her edition. According to Bakewell, “Honoria was attuned to the market of the coming nineteenth century, and helped to create for it a frowning, pensive new Montaigne in a starched collar” (257).
This was not enough to appease the entire audience; many chagrined followers throughout history have balked upon discovering the Montaigne of his Essays. They have looked to him for sentimental outpourings of emotion with rationality of philosophical insight; much to their surprise, they are almost always disappointed. This problem typically began with the Romantics, who wanted the Essays to drip from their hands with that same spontaneous outflow of feeling poured into their own writings and exertions in life. On the contrary, they were so disappointed by this absence of excess that they found the work excessively dry—something it certainly was not.

There is, however, plenty to find in Montaigne, as long as one looks to him for what he can provide. The Romantics looked to Montaigne for sentiment, but all they found was real-life—like the detailed accounts of his kidney stones and complimentary reviews of Swiss stoves found in his travel journals. Bakewell agrees that even the journals make “for a better read than any number of overblown Romantic travelogues,” precisely because they remain so tied to detail: “it has little beds under big beds, messy Swiss sauces, room-sized birdcages, circumcisions, sex changes, and ostriches”—what’s not to like? (237).

Montaigne was interested in recording what was actually there; so often over-looked and under-determined the “real” becomes a romance, in its own sake—bristling with new and exciting material. The other things—those that the Romantics and most other readers sought in vain in Montaigne—were mere trifling amusements when compared to the flourishing gardens he was able to cultivate from the endless expanse of rich soil contained within his own mind.

“In millenarian times,” the politiques, a faction Montaigne supposedly belonged to, “were the only people systematically to shift their perspective and think ahead to a time when the ‘troubles’ would have become history” (Bakewell 214). Similarly, some see Montaigne Essays
as an affectation of his own comfort and ease onto his readers—a somewhat heroic role, for those in times of peril and need. Although he is cast “as a hero of an unusual sort: the kind that resists all claim to heroism,” more often than not “he is admired for his stubborn insistence on maintaining normality in extraordinary circumstances, and his refusal to compromise his independence” (Bakewell 215).

In June 1585, Montaigne’s town of Bordeaux suffered a heat wave combined with an epidemic of plague that killed more than 14,000 people—almost a third of the population. Outbreaks of plague in the sixteenth century were so frequent that there is little historical memory, and therefore, little recollection of how catastrophic they were (Bakewell 252).

Throughout this whole period, Montaigne and his countrymen dealt with the ongoing tumultuous exchange between periods of tenuous peace and gruesome bloodshed characterizing the French Civil wars. The last battle ended in 1598; Montaigne died in 1592—he was never to see peace in his country again. This would also, by far, be the longest and the worst of the wars, with Montaigne’s estate directly affected by the religious and political troubles, domestically.

Although Montaigne keeps a cool air about his own life in relation to the turmoil around him in the Essays, with statements such as this: “I doubt if I can decently admit at what little cost to the repose and tranquility of my life I have passed more than half of it amid the ruin of my country” (III:12 975). His life, however, did not go unaffected by the carnage. While “there were no formal accusations, for there was nothing they could sink their teeth into . . .” there were “mute suspicions” about whether or not Montaigne was sympathetic to the minority, Protestants (III:12 972). During these times, Montaigne wrote of the war, as it passed onto his own estate and infected his tenants with plague:
A mighty load of our disturbances settled down for several months with all its weight right on me. I had on the one hand the enemy at my door, on the other hand the freebooters, worse enemies…and I was sampling every kind of military mischief all at once. (III:12 969).

Constantly in Montaigne’s lifetime, the struggle for balance between the actions of stronger and weaker factions comes into play. Another such example involves Henri III, and his decisions made when threatened with his enemy, the duc de Guise and the “Day of Barricades.” Detailing the course of events, Pope Sixtus V reports: “Guise was a reckless fool to put himself in the hands of a King whom he was insulting; the King was a coward to let him go untouched” (265). Bakewell remarks how “it was another of those delicate balances: here, a stronger party had to decide how far to push a challenge, while the weaker had to decide whether to bow his head or offer resistance” (265).

In the end, Henri showed “the very combination of weakness and excess that Montaigne considered disastrous” (Bakewell 265). His punishment, however, was that Henri III was now forced—having fled from his position of sovereignty—to abdicate the throne and accept the cardinal de Bourbon as his successor (Bakewell 265). Later on that year, the King was to go one step further when, attending a legislative assembly in the Blois castle with Guise there for negotiation, the King had him stabbed to death by royal guardsmen. Bakewell echoes: “the king had gone from one extreme to another, bypassing Montaigne’s zone of judicious moderation in the middle” and losing the small band of supporters he had left—except for a group of politiques, who stuck around on principle (268-9). A flood of propaganda publications now proclaimed Henri III the Devil’s agent on earth; thereby, killing him would be a holy duty (Bakewell 269).
After having been released from jail by a favor from Catherine de’ Medici, Montaigne was prepared to leave Paris. His journey was delayed, however, when the already suffering Montaigne was struck again by an attack of kidney stones—one that almost proved fatal. Years later, a friend—Pierre de Brach—wrote of the episode in a letter to Justus Lipsius:

When we were together in Paris a few years ago, and the doctors despairing of his life and he hoping only for death, I saw him, when death stared him in the face from close up, push her well away by his disdain for the fear she brings. What fine arguments to content the ear, what fine teachings to make the soul wise, what resolute firmness of courage to make the most fearful secure, did that man then display! I never heard a man speak better, or better resolved to do what the philosophers have said on this point, without the weakness of his body having beaten down any of the vigor of his soul. (Bakewell 267).

Obviously, Montaigne’s death in 1592 marks the stopping point to work on the editions of his *Essays*. “Looked at another way,” however, “it never stopped at all. It continued to grow, not through endless writing but through endless reading” (Bakewell 9). Certainly, some of the most absorbing things about Montaigne’s *Essays* are the relationships and responses of readers, and the historical milieu surrounding them.

How exactly did this twenty-first century Montaigne come to be? How much of this Montaigne is cultivated by misinterpretation or rapt semblances? Traveling almost half a millennium to get here, Montaigne and his *Essays* have been handled, battered, cherished, offended, and translated many times over. Throughout the centuries, Montaigne’s *Essays* have been accrued in very different ways by a succession of readers. Although, to a varying extent,
readers often seize from the text whatever complements or fancies their own beliefs, while ignoring other whole pieces—especially those that are contradictory to their opinions—there is still a traceable and exciting amount of cogitation that exists on Montaigne’s work.

(Un)Think Essays; Think (Un)Philosopher

When describing his writing project, it is difficult to determine a definitive goal. Although Montaigne did not want to explicitly tell people how to live their own lives, he recorded his own with such probity and detail that he really ended up recording universal motivations behind the human condition. In the end, he found equanimity in the human condition, and he didn’t intend to keep it private.

Montaigne is sometimes “described as the first writer of the Baroque period,” which he predated; a less anachronistic classification would be as a Mannerist Writer. According to Bakewell, “Mannerist art, flourishing just before Baroque, was even more elaborate and anarchic, featuring optical illusions, misshapes, clutter, and odd angles of all kinds in a violent rejection of the classical ideals of poise and proportion which had dominated the Renaissance” (224). Whatever the denomination, Bakewell remarks of Montaigne that he certainly “proved himself a literary revolutionary from the start, writing like no one else and letting his pen follow the natural rhythms of conversation [. . .] He omitted connections, skipped steps of reasoning, and left his material lying in solid chunks” (225).

Capturing the introspective flow of thought that characterized this large body of paradoxical and divergent writing, Montaigne says of his own inspiration:
If others examined themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, full of inanity and nonsense. Get rid of it I cannot without getting rid of myself. We are all steeped in it, one as much as the other; but those who are aware of it are a little better off—though I don’t know. (III:9 931).

While the spirit of Montaigne is furnished by this passage, the last four words—“though I don’t know”—have a special agency. That final coda—‘though I don’t know’—is pure Montaigne, says Bakewell. “One must imagine it appended, in spirit, to almost everything he ever wrote. His whole philosophy is captured in this paragraph. Yes, he says, we are foolish, but we cannot be any other way so we may as well relax and live with it” (43).

Like all great minds, Montaigne immured his *Essays* with an intractable, timeless quality. Yet, Montaigne’s contributions have become so submersed by the development of culture, that his influences are hardly ever distinguished. And, as Bakewell notes, there is good reason to: “[h]e started a literary tradition of close inward observation that is now so familiar that it is hard to remember that it *is* a tradition. Life just seems to be like that, and observing the play of inner states is the writer’s job. Yet,” Bakewell continues, “this was not a common notion before Montaigne, and his peculiarly restless, free-form way of doing it was entirely unknown” (Bakewell 38).

For the modern mind, essays often trigger the traumatic memory of swirling red letters and general revulsion; however, there is no need for negative association. Montaigne’s *Essays* are far from the structured writing assignments expected for the requisite Liberal Arts courses, today; and there would have been no such epithet for his contemporaries. Montaigne’s chosen word can be translated roughly from French as “trials” or “experiments”. This appellation is
certainly fitting for the author’s intent—a record of free-flowing thought exploring what Montaigne considered the most paradoxical and strange puzzle of all, himself.

Although popular, Montaigne’s style of recording himself was a breach of taboo. “You were not supposed to record yourself in a book, only your great deeds, if you had any” (Bakewell 223). For the most part, however, Montaigne’s readers were keen on his technique, of which Montaigne writes in the first edition:

I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there and keep it busy. Everyone looks in front of him; as for me, I look inside of me; I have no business but with myself; I continually observe myself, I take stock of myself, I taste myself…I roll about in myself. (II:17 606).

Montaigne’s Essays grow as thoughts do—sometimes vociferous and fleeting, and at other times slow and meditative. Yet, Montaigne, who forms the gravitational core, always holds his Essays together.

When I walk alone in the beautiful orchard, if my thoughts have been dwelling on extraneous incidents for some part of the time, for some other part I bring them back to the walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, and to me. (III:13 1036).

The developed world of the twenty-first century is a prolific source of evidence for this notion. Much of the Internet is dedicated to the pursuit of freeform, self-indulgence—although the motives of different readers and writers alike may vary slightly. What are these motives that drive people to extricate themselves from tangible human contact?
The picture is easy to paint—a person immobilized on a couch for hours on end, the light from the computer screen illuminating a face with status updates, tweets, and posts; meanwhile a neglected television flashes its white noise reminder in the background—an S.O.S. for possible Vitamin D deficiency forming in the bloodstream of yet another distracted blogger. Without sun, without physical encounters, those who fully embrace what the twenty-first century offers can accumulate and communicate with friends, family, employers, and fans without ever leaving their home.

And, yes, bloggers are a perfect example of Montaigne’s influence on modernity. Many thousands of mini-Montaignes actively create themselves through their Internet social lives—perpetuating a chosen persona (some more honest, more anonymous, more fantastic, etc. than others) through an infinite electronic medium. In this way, they spread a “self” in hopes of reward—the most basic of which is a connection with other people through shared interests in the human condition. They are sharing humanity without actually knowing every single one in which they are sharing themselves with—similar to the way that Montaigne, and others who have achieved literary fame—spread themselves across the globe. The Internet does all of this through an instantaneous transmission; and, although not always—there is the added benefit of the “delete” button.

Most inhabitants of the twenty-first century have a greater tendency to look to those great minds who are closer in proximity; more than ever, this decline in classical education over the last one-hundred years has clouded the importance of Montaigne’s influence, and the influence of Greek and Latin sources on his own writing (Wolf & Gedo 298). In this respect, modern readers may recognize the nomenclature and vaguely recall the theory, but hardly ever is there a placement of the classical subject or object in its proper place in history.
If one really wishes to study the past, Montaigne cannot be overlooked. The subject matter tackled in Montaigne’s *Essays* has the ability to transcend time, extending Montaigne through to our century. As Bakewell notes, “long after the sixteenth-century Stoic Montaigne was forgotten, readers in troubled times continued to think of him as a role model” (216). Often, his most reassuring advice comes with the least amount of sympathy. Montaigne’s tendency is to avoid excess; instead, he reminds the reader of historical perspective, normality, and utter humanness—the last of which may be a long, hard fall for some.

There are some examples of Montaigne having pervaded the popular scene, although not all may give due recognition correctly. This could be due to his stoic nature, what Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig referred to as a “mild temperate wisdom” (*Montaigne* 8-9). During his exile in Brazil, Zweig came across a copy of *Essays* and found a sort of psychologist in Montaigne’s words: “In this brothership of fate, for me Montaigne has become the indispensable helper, confidant, and friend” (*Montaigne* 10). Interestingly, this was not his first encounter with Montaigne; he had first read the text as a youth, but discarded his *Essays* as buttoned-up and irrelevant. Zweig reflects on the discrepancy in his opinions, observing: “It is in the nature of youth that it does not want to be advised to be mild or skeptical” (*Montaigne* 8-9).

Zweig’s point—that Montaigne’s reserved skepticism is better suited for those with more life experience, and less testosterone running through their veins—could very well be true. As a youth, however, Zweig and his generation lived in a world that felt Montaigne, who lived during a period of tyranny and serfdom, had become obsolete: “Montaigne seemed pointlessly to rattle chains that we considered broken long ago.” After all, hadn’t freedom for the individual “long ago become a self-evident matter, guaranteed by law and custom to humanity . . .?” (*World of*
Yesterday, 430-2). Even for those whose lives are not troubled with violence and oppression, there is always some bit of practical wisdom to be offered.

Drawing from Seneca, Montaigne’s theory about how to approach life, enumerated by Bakewell, follows, “If you fail to grasp life, it will elude you. If you do grasp it, it will elude you anyway” (37). Montaigne’s solution to this constant paradox is, simply, that you must follow it, and move with the voracity of the gluttonous subject above. “As Seneca put it,” continues Bakewell, “life does not pause to remind you that it is running out” (37).

It will cause no commotion to remind you of its swiftness, but glide on quietly . . . What will be the outcome? You have been preoccupied while life hastens on. Meanwhile death will arrive, and you have no choice in making yourself available for that. (“On the Shortness of Life,” Seneca 68-9).

As Seneca instructs and Montaigne learned, “you must drink quickly as though from a rapid stream that will not always flow” (68-9). Why was Montaigne so successful? Bakewell adequately sums up Montaigne’s ability to reach readers across time: “He makes us feel the passage of time in his inner world” (36). “I do not portray being,” wrote Montaigne, “I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another…but from day to day, from minute to minute” (III:2 740).

There are numerous writers who employed Montaigne’s Essays as an example of how to depict the flux of human experience. One author who became captivated by Montaigne was Virginia Woolf. Not simply just an admirer of Montaigne, Woolf appropriated Montaigne’s style, making herself an apprentice of his innovative freeform technique. With Montaigne as her
teacher, Woolf became a pioneer of “stream of consciousness” fiction, writing to “immerse herself in the mental river and follow wherever it led”; importantly, Bakewell continues:

[Woolf] identified Montaigne as the first writer to attempt anything of this sort, albeit only with his own single ‘stream.’ She also considered him the first to pay such attention to the simple feeling of being alive. ‘Observe, observe perpetually,’ was his rule, she said—and what he observed was, above all, this river of life running through his existence. (36-37).

While the novelist Virginia Woolf wrote about her enamored relationship with Montaigne, in his autobiography, her husband Leonard Woolf, recalls a strikingly similar impression of Sigmund Freud as an older man the day he and his wife were invited for tea at the Freuds’ London residence, 20 Maresfield Gardens. He writes in praise of Freud, saying he “was not only a genius, but also, unlike many geniuses, an extraordinarily nice man” (Downhill All the Way, Woolf 166). Having actually met Freud, Leonard Woolf’s praise is more personal his wife’s towards Montaigne; his words become just as genuine, however, only when considering he felt “no call to praise the famous men whom I have known. Nearly all famous men are disappointing or bores, or both. Freud was neither; he had an aura, not of fame, but of greatness” (Woolf 166). Although Freud was already very ill and quite reconciled to his bodily demise, Woolf paints a prodigious picture of a stoicism that was still very much live in Freud:

He was extraordinarily courteous in a formal, old-fashioned way—for instance, almost ceremoniously he presented Virginia with a flower. There was something about him as
of a half-extinct volcano, something somber, suppressed, reserved. He gave me the feeling which only a very few people whom I have met gave me, a feeling of great gentleness, but behind the gentleness, great strength. (Woolf 168-9).

As for their conversation, the autobiographer recounts a point where Freud diverges from Montaigne. During their tea-time, Woolf told a charming anecdote involving a recent newspaper article about a thief who had stolen a volume by Freud from Foyle's bookshop in London; the magistrate, after fining the man, expressed his wish to make him read all of Freud's volumes as punishment instead. In his book, Woolf records that although Freud was amused, he was also “deprecatory about it. His books, he said, had made him infamous, not famous. A formidable man” (Woolf 169). Evidently, Freud was to maintain his incurable pessimism—an antithesis to Montaigne’s incurable optimism—until his desire for death was met, when illness “would cut off the cruel process” (Freud to Marie Bonaparte, April 28, 1939).

Montaigne, however, often touches on what can be viewed as a similar weakness inherent in the inflated ideas of human and self-importance:

We have formed a truth by the consultation and concurrence of our five senses, but perhaps we needed the agreement of eight or ten senses and their contribution to perceive it certainly and in its essence (II:12 541-2).

What Montaigne says, Bakewell adequately summarizes: “A human being’s perspective,” she says, “may not merely be prone to occasional error, but limited by definition, in exactly the way we normally and arrogantly presume a dog’s intelligence to be” (129). With the remark above,
Montaigne proposes a shocking idea, “that we may be,” Bakewell says, “cut off by our very nature from seeing things as they are.” And, Bakewell continues, “only someone with an exceptional ability to escape his immediate point of view could entertain such an idea, and this was precisely Montaigne’s talent: being able to slip out from behind his eyes so as to gaze back upon himself with Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment” (129).

Similarly, Freud presented dreams as a text ripe with ideas about the unconscious, waiting to be read and translated. For Freud, “the dream frequently appears to have several meanings; [. . . and] in those considerations of how the psychical apparatus is constructed [. . .] the interpretation of dreams enables us, like a window, to cast a glance into its interior (Gay 169). It is ideas like this that shaped our worldview, and most importantly our self-analysis—our self-concept as human beings in a strange anxiety-provoking environment. Montaigne was able to engage in such a thorough self-analysis that he discovered and wrote about the unconscious human drives that Sigmund Freud named almost 300 years later.
Chapter Two: How to Think (According to Freud)

Out of the argument that Freud was Montaigne, 300 years later, comes the question of what these men and indeed their productions of immortality hold in common. There is no question that each man holds a certain element of experience and authority over their readers. Both of these things are, therefore, products of art—art and science for Freud and Montaigne were still inextricably linked. Their immortality projects, therefore, may be seen as a recycling and continuation of the productions of work before and between the two men. Composites of their learning, their experiences, and their valued authority as rhetoricians and thinkers, these men produced immortality projects that overlap significantly with those of not just each other, but many men and women throughout history.

According to author Peter Gay, Freud’s terse definition of “culture is a collective effort to master external nature and regulate the relations of humans to one another” (528). He adumbrates that we human beings are unhappy because nature has yet to be conquered by culture. Instead, “our bodies sicken and decay, external nature threatens us with destruction while our relations to others are sources of misery. Yet we all do our desperate utmost to escape that unhappiness through many existent palliative devices” (Civilization and Its Discontents, 75).

Freud provides an alarming list of the harmful ways in which nature exerts its forces on helpless common man—the last of which Freud enumerates as “the painful riddle of death, against which so far no little medicinal herb has been found and probably none will be found. With these vengeful forces,” Freud continues, “nature rises up against us, magnificent, cruel, implacable” (The Future of an Illusion, 15). Freud reaches his cultural conclusions in The Future of an Illusion by marking the vengeful spirit of nature—the bringer of death—an
unconquerable and pitiless enemy that Freud felt he knew personally. “As for humanity as a whole, so for the individual, life is hard to bear” (*The Future of an Illusion*, 16).

Both immortality and anxiety interact within the ego-drive to motivate our varying degrees of participation within culture and society. Indeed, the ego-drive, motivated by our need not only to survive, but to perpetuate and continue ourselves on into the indefinite future (i.e. *Immortality*) is the motivation that initially manifested itself in the creation of culture and society. Humans sought an outlet for their anxiety by producing immortality projects, and found that by creating interlaced networks with other human beings, they could immortalize themselves within those networks, and ensure that they could pass themselves and their influence on throughout a larger population—their ego could inhabit that ever expanding stage and perform for a relatively and exponentially increasing audience—than simple sexual drives will allow.

Montaigne and Freud, therefore, used their *narcissistic* impulse as a beneficial drive to create an immortality project by simply writing about themselves and their experiences with the human condition. They both studied the human condition and in doing so, sought to both perpetuate the collective and the individual. This mutually beneficial relationship (that of the researcher of the human-condition benefiting both himself as the individual, and himself within culture) is one Freud sought out within his own society, but one that was a happy by-product for Montaigne, but not a direct and intended result; Freud did what Montaigne did, but with structure and terminology.

The very thing that keeps them most popular in the minds of readers today, is their ability to transcend time and enter into a conversation with the reader, as if they were both in the same room, having a cup of coffee. This applicable phenomenon is something that every immortality project must contain in order to succeed in making itself immortal. It is the phenomenon of
sheer humanity. It is this ability to relate on the basic levels of the human condition, those things which seem so repetitive and which encompass and find similarities among the widest range of audiences (the widest sect of humanity) that creates the most lasting achievement of immortality—however long that may be.

Examples of this stretch back to Homeric poetry. Homer’s Iliad is riddled with a basic “Theory Of Mind” (TOM) that humans today still apply to their everyday lives. By exciting this in the audience, the poet, Homer, has been able to captivate humanity for the longest known amount of time with a literary work. So too, Montaigne and 300 years later, Freud, have been able to wind their way through history via the minds of their readers. They are perpetuated in their literature (immortality projects) for their sheer humanity—their ability to reach their audience with treatises on the very basic questions that parry with each and every human being: “How to Think” “How to live” “How to live well” and “How to die” are only a few examples that pervade their works, and find a dwelling and a pre-made schema in the minds of each and every human.

Interestingly enough, then, it may be assumed that the most successful immortality projects are not the most original. In order to successfully create an immortality project, therefore, Montaigne and Freud have taught us that you must reach down into the depths of yourself, and find the dark place that contains what it means exactly to be human—you must dwell on all of those imperfections, and then write about them. What you come up with, then, will certainly not be original, as it is contained within the minds of every single other human being—for everyone wishes to understand, every one thinks about what it means to be human.

The best immortality projects—the most successful ones—are the most honest, the most introspective, and the most common. They are successful because they deal with the theme of
humanity and the human condition. They find nothing that hasn’t been discovered, or isn’t available, waiting to be discovered in the deep, dark interior dwellings of every individual human mind. What makes Montaigne and Freud unique, however, is that they actually had the courage, insight, and enthusiasm to pursue this solitary dwelling, and hash it out for whatever it was worth—and, even more essential to the immortal equation, they wrote about it. Montaigne and Freud did what every human being has the imbued experience to do—but which only some actually achieve authority to have done.

*Think Freudian*

Through a vast rhetorical toolbox of strategies—including acting as the humble empiricist, invoking severe self-criticism, and displaying a methodological sophistication—Freud attempted to assign reason to our existence, and the inexplicable, yet omnipotent anxiety that haunts our psyche.

Freud’s work continues to be imbedded in our everyday because of its array of universal content and answers on the *why* and *where* in the mind of man. Although Freud is often criticized and his value to scientific inquiry questioned, there is nevertheless a real importance blooming from his creation and practice of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis and ideas about the unconscious of man have spread across to almost every far-reaching corner of our cultural world; and although Freud may no longer be foremost in psychological sciences, his ideas continue to be a basis for interpretation in the various fields of the humanities.

Bristling underneath every exterior and rising up to the surface is Freud’s anxiety over the human paradox—the mortal body / immortal mind controversy that, emancipated through the
ego-drive, seeks conciliation through cultural immortality. In order to insure immortal vicissitude, Freud was constantly looking for a brilliant young apprentice to carry his foundations further into the future. “An intimate friend and a hated enemy have always been necessary requirements of my emotional life . . . I always knew how to provide myself with both over and over” and sometimes the two were united in the same person (Interpretation of Dreams, 483). During his formative years, dating all the way back to his early childhood, Freud’s nephew John—a year his senior—fulfilled the role of a “fr-enemy.” Later, during his professional life, the role would be taken over by Wilhelm Fleiss, one of the most fateful friends and later, necessary enemies, in Freud’s life (55). Without friends, and certainly without enemies, Freud would have felt a deep void.

In developing the theory of psychoanalysis, Freud was to have more enemies, and fewer friends, than he wanted. Failure was probably; hostility and ridicule were virtually certain. Fleiss was precisely the intimate he needed: audience, confidant, stimulus, cheerleader, fellow speculator shocked at nothing. (Gay 55-6).

Although Fleiss and his theories are now discredited, the ideas around the turn of the century were not so entirely incredible. Similarly, Freud’s theories at the time were no less outlandish, and Fleiss came recommended to Freud by Breuer which was “to the Freud of the late 1880s a virtual guarantee of intellectual probity” (56).

In the spring of 1894, Freud wrote to Fleiss, “I am pretty much alone here with the clearing up of the neuroses . . . they pretty much consider me a monomaniac” (Freud to Fleiss, May 21, 1894). The congeniality between the two men was amalgamated by their isolation in
the medical field. As Gay remarks, “their correspondence must have seemed to Freud and Fleiss a conversation of two monomaniacs in possession of deep, still unacknowledged truths” (56).

Fleiss imparted Freud with critical ideas that manifested themselves later in his theories. More specifically, he gave him a better understanding of the “essential unity of all human culture and the evidentiary value of all human manifestations” (56). As Freud gratefully remarks to Fleiss in 1896: “You have taught me that a bit of truth lurks behind every popular lunacy” (Freud to Fleiss, June 30, 1896). What should have given Freud pause, regarding the nonsense of Fleiss’s obsessions, was his dogmatism, his inability to recognize the wealth and the baffling complexity of causes ruling human affairs. But as long as Fleiss’s praise was “nectar and ambrosia” to him, Freud was not about to raise or even think of, inconvenient doubts (57). But, as Gay continues:

Something other than flattery, something more than sheer neediness, was involved in this lapse into unscientific naiveté. Freud, the great rationalist, was not wholly free from superstition, especially number superstition. For years he harbored the haunting belief that he was destined to die at the age of fifty-one, and later, at sixty-one or sixty two; he felt pursued by these fateful ciphers as reminders of his mortality [. . .] Later in his career, Freud the psychoanalyst once regarded his own superstitions “as a suppressed desire for immortality. (58).

Fleiss was more than just a professional colleague, however. The men fostered feelings of camaraderie: “the two were simultaneously insiders and outsiders: highly trained professional physicians working at, or beyond, the frontiers of acceptable medical inquiry. What is more,
they were Jews confronting almost identical problems and prospects in their society, propelled into intimacy with the ease of brothers in a persecuted tribe” (58). Indeed, Fleiss was Freud’s very own analyst, whom he shared the most intimate emotional details of his life with—including those things about his wife, and about himself that he would never share with his wife. “You are the only Other,” Freud told Fleiss in May 1894, “the alter” (Freud to Fleiss, May 21, 1894). Freud had made Fleiss, also, into a confidante of his death deliria—those innermost anxieties and desires from which we attempt to disassociate ourselves.

One of those anxieties was around the idea of death. Freud constantly stresses his advancing age, feeling the frailties of his human outer shell. Characteristically, Freud posed as many hesitations as assertions about the applicability and success of psychoanalysis—his ability to project his ideas into the future. In a comment on the uncertainty that plagues every augur, Freud wrote, “I find it very hard to comment on the value of my writings and their influence on the future formation of science. At times I believe in it, at times I have doubts . . . the good Lord himself perhaps does not know it yet” (Freud to Ferenczi, January 10, 1910).

Freud’s tone was always a mixture of asperity and satisfaction—likewise, his demeanor both adamantine and compromising. In response to criticism, Freud was agape and often volatile; in contrast, Montaigne was a pachyderm—with the impenetrable armor of a Phyronnian Skeptic, criticism only would have buttressed his proclaimed and celebrated interest in human imperfection.

Evidence of Freud’s single-minded perseverance, his emotional imperiousness, his determination against “nonsense,” his unyielding impassionate advancements—all of these things are exemplified through his engagement to Martha Bernays. With four years of torturous separation, these isolated lovers’ only correspondence was maintained through letters. In these
epistolary times, Freud exercised his indefatigable grapho-manic tendencies on his fiancé, Martha Bernays, whose responses have a markedly temperate and conventional tone. Although Bernay’s responses were far less voluble, less passionate and less imaginative than her husband, “her tact, forbearance, and sheer emotional staying power,” combined with her sweet and kind responses proved a sufficient stronghold against Freud’s stormy disposition (Gay 38).

According to Gay, seeking to mold Martha Bernays, Freud turned pedagogue (40). Raised in an orthodox Jewish tradition, Bernays was very observant of her foundational religious practices. Freud, a pronounced non-believer (atheist), was determined to shake away his bride’s absurd beliefs in “superstitious nonsense” and alleviate the religious tension that sprouted between the two as Freud could not, on principle, resign himself to the role of an “indifferent nonbeliever.”

Passionate and authoritarian at times, “Freud left Martha Bernays in no doubt that he meant to be the head of his household” (Gay 38). There is a sizeable contrast between the domestic bourgeois virtues possessed by Freud and the conscious un-coconsciousness of Montaigne in the domestic sphere. If he had been free to choose, as Bakewell notes, Montaigne “would not have been the marrying kind at all” (159). Montaigne’s remarks on marriage in his Essays resound with lines such as: “Men with unruly hours like me who hate any sort of bond or obligation, are not so fit for it” (III: 5 783-6). It was the very principle of habit, the feeling of being boxed in that caused Montaigne’s aversion towards marriage. Although he fulfilled his conjugal and marital duties of that time, he did so reluctantly, “with only one buttock,” as Montaigne would have said.

In contrast, the prospects of domesticity were a delightful topic for Freud. Although his “imagination usually dwelt on his grand destiny,” Gay writes, “he could entertain with evident
relish fantasies that he shared with untold numbers of undistinguished, unmemorable bourgeois of his time” (41). With a purposeful eye always on the future goals of production and advancement, Freud arduously worked for both recognition and solvency to attain what he called his hoped-for “little world of happiness” (Freud to Martha Bernays, August 18, 1882. Briefe, 37).

Freud’s correspondence with Bernays provides the reader with an unaccustomed view of Freud as a romantic lover. If nothing else, Gay remarks, these love letters added up to a “veritable autobiography of Freud in the early 1880s [. . .] Hectoring inconsiderate in his frankness, unsparing with her feelings and even more with his own,” Freud made his newly discovered genre, the love letter, into a prolific analysis of himself and his correspondent (39). Filled with circumstantial reports, conversations and candid vignettes of conversations with colleagues and friends, Freud’s letters to Bernays are written in the language of a romantic lover, “with an attention to minutiae worthy of a detective—or a psychoanalyst” (39).

At the very most, one may find in these letters fistfuls of evidence on his candid exploration and association with the indispensable failings of human nature—“a veritable understanding of the human condition was what Freud always sought” (Gay 39). And, Freud withheld very little of this concern from his fiancé—including her in his repertoire of research texts to analyze.

Freud maintains a continual grasp on the duties of domesticity. During the years of the war, Freud remarks that he missed having patients who provided him not only with stimulus for theorizing but also whose fees supported his reliability as a provider. In 1916, Freud remarked to Abraham, “My psychic constitution urgently requires the acquisition and the spending of money for my family as fulfillment of my father complex that I know so well” (Freud to Abraham, December 18, 1916).
The idea of poverty, and the fear of it is a powerful theme throughout Freud’s life. Based on his impecunious childhood, monetary concerns played a candid role in shaping Freud’s perception of the world and his role in it. Both modestly tentative and fearfully intractable about his published works, Freud felt most were extremely negative in their reception of his ideas. “He seemed determined to feel himself surrounded by a void, and to anticipate nothing but misunderstanding and neglect [. . .]”; according to Gay, “public neglect and private desolation reinforced one another” (Gay 134). Although, Gay does go on to note that the reasons for Freud’s low spirits were in many ways financial (134). What’s worse, Freud “called on his self-discipline, his had-acquired mental balance to rescue him, but he succeeded indifferently at best” (134). In a letter to Fleiss on May 7, 1900, Freud acknowledges his lamentations: “I am too sensible to complain—except for one weak point: the fear of poverty” (Freud to Fliess).

After 1900, the year Freud turned forty-four, many of his letters are marked with lamentations about signs of old age and premature physiological decline. Freud was extremely bothered by his age and often ruminated on the increasing numbers with a feeling that he had yet to produce his true and everlasting imprint on society. “It will be a just punishment for me,” Freud wrote, “that none of the undiscovered provinces of mental life which I was the first mortal to enter will ever bear my name or obey my laws” (Freud to Fliess, May 7, 1900). He was wildly inaccurate, however, in his precepts, but his pessimism had burgeoned from the recent rejection of his dream book, which Freud found ultimately disheartening.

The two concerns present in Freud’s life but absent from Montaigne’s—that of criticism and monetary concern—were virtually removed during the years of the war. Freud saw fewer patients, but his monetary concerns were far less poignant than the early burgeoning years—the time Freud equates the war years with. In a letter to Andreas-Salomé, Freud writes “I often feel
as alone as I did in the first ten years, when there was desert around me [. . .] But I was younger and still endowed with a boundless energy for endurance” (Freud to Andreas-Salomé, July 30, 1915). Although Freud complained of the unsought and unwelcome leisure brought on by the war years, the spirit that lowered his morale simultaneously freed time for large-scale enterprises—the war years were far from barren (Gay 361). Mirroring Montaigne in Stoicism, the low mood of solitude did not appear to aversely affect Freud’s appetite for theorizing other than in the letters surviving him that preserve his musings and laments to friends like Abraham and Lou Andreas-Salomé.

Even Freud found this new bout of productivity alluring, and reported to Ferenczi that it was probably due “to the splendid improvement in the activity of my bowels . . .”; whatever the case, Freud continues, “whether I owe this to a mechanical factor, the hardness of the war-bread, or a psychological one, my necessarily changed relationship to money, I leave open”—more important than subjecting himself to analytic scrutiny, however, was the fact that the mood remained, and so did his productivity (Freud to Ferenczi, April 8, 1915).

At the end of the summer of 1915, Freud remarked confidently that the “fruit” of these war months would “probably be a book consisting of 12 essays, introduced by [a chapter on] drives and their fortunes.” In the end, a book on metapsychology had, according to Freud “just been finished except for the necessary reworking” and would be published before long (Freud to Andreas-Salomé, July 30, 1915).

Freud faced many of his obstructions in life with a force that was tactfully political, like that of clever Odysseus in Homeric poetry. At other times, however, he conducted a war of attrition on both himself and others, having been flayed by a conflagrate nature more like that of Achilles in the Iliad of Homer—Achilles’ Anger at Agamemnon for not bestowing him with his
due Honor and recognition for his services to society (the Achaians) is the single most destructive force.

To continue the *Iliadic* allegory, Montaigne held that wise, ancient and Stoic counsel more like that of Nestor—who, with all conscious scruples and propitious reasoning, was often unsuited to the task of staving off quarrel, avoiding exigent circumstances almost entirely. It is, however, those exigent circumstances that Freud was so well suited to deal with, and therefore, was able to convert into an advantageous mobilization of his theories within society.

Their rhetorical style is often suited for these different purposes. Montaigne, in his Phyrrhonian Skeptic guise, ended his rhetorical plunders with *codas*—like the appropriate addendum “though I don’t know.” Freud ended every one of his rhetorical verisimilitudes with *perorations*—Freud’s grandiose conclusion to *Totem and Taboo* is so felicitous that it is tempting to wonder whether if he had not gone all this distance to close his text with Goethe’s famous line from *Faust*, “In the beginning was the act” (Gay 331).

*Think Psychoanalytically*

During the expansive days between 1905 and 1915, psychoanalysis had staked its claim on Freud’s life and mental processes. Hans Sachs, who knew Freud at the time, describes him as “dominated by one despotic idea,” a single-mindedness and devotion to his work which his family supported wholeheartedly, “with the greatest eagerness, without a grumble” (*Freud: Master and Friend*, Sachs). Freud’s decisive energy was appropriate for such an expansive time in the world of psychoanalysis. Freud told Jung, “I am more and more penetrated by the conviction of the cultural value of ψΑ [. . .] and I could wish for a bright fellow to draw the justified consequences for philosophy and society from it” (*Freud to Jung, July 5, 1910*). For
Freud, “the time to apply the discoveries of psychoanalysis outside the consulting room was at hand” (Gay 310).

Although Freud had a definite propensity for self-criticism, his euphoric response to the prospect of psychoanalytic interpretation of culture was euphoric as he marked his ambitious conquest with utmost priority:

Psychoanalysis, he reported, is able to throw shafts of light on the origins of religion and morality, on justice and philosophy. Now the “whole history of culture” was only waiting for its psychoanalytic interpreter (Gay 310).

As his first real exposition of psychoanalytic theory, Freud was foolishly “intoxicated once again with that hope that now a step toward freedom and ease had been taken. The reception of the book and the silence since have once again destroyed the budding relationship with my milieu” (Freud-Fliess, March 23, 1900, 442). The book that Freud referred to as his “dream child” in a letter to Fliess on March 23, 1900, was supposed to establish this budding relationship with his milieu, but instead it did nothing to resolve his frustrations or relieve his sense of enforced solitude (Gay 135).

This idea of enforced solitude has implications for both Freud and Montaigne. Both men enforced their own solitude in their lives, and produced their prolific masterpieces from it. Freud, however, constantly maintained this indefinable urge to break free from his enforced solitude. He was an outsider looking for a ticket that would gain him access to the inside. Having been ostracized from the traditional scientific and medical sphere in his early years of
exploration and practice, Freud used his aptitude to create his own inside with psychoanalysis and the Psychoanalytic Society.

In this embattled decade, the making of polemical points, whether directed at open adversaries or at wavering supporters, was never far from the center of Freud’s intentions. (Gay 274).

Psychoanalysts say that “he finds his love objects on the path of narcissism, since Greek myths call a youth Narcissus, whom nothing pleased so much as his own mirror image” (“Leonardo,” 100). It was the Freud’s paper on Leonardo where he introduced the concept of Narcissism for the first time in psychoanalytic literature. This concept was to become a central focus of his practices in later years.

Along with the application of ideas on “Narcissism” to the artistic sphere, Freud argued that it was “the creative spark that makes art by leaping between experience and memory [that] gave the portrait of the enigmatic, enticin Mona Lisa its immortality” (Gay 272). While it is uncertain if and to what degree Freud identified himself in Leonardo, at the very least, he audibly admired his nonconformist scientific mind. Freud quoted Leonardo’s maxim for science, his “bold sentence which contains the justification for all free research: ‘He who amidst the struggle of opinions calls upon authority, works with his memory rather than his reason.’” (“Leonardo,” 122). Heeding Leonardo’s advice, Freud could also found a similar way to science: trading obedience to authority for a superior loyalty—obedience to evidence (Gay 272).

There is a constant interplay of experience and authority. For Montaigne, experience would have been the only way; for Freud, authority of evidence and reason were the most
valuable weapons against his captious critics—although he was often criticized for overshooting his claim to such ardent empiricism. “As we have had occasion to notice before, Freud’s couch and his desk were, physically and emotionally, very close to each other” (Gay 271).

While the theory of immortality is one notion about the motivations behind culture, Freud came up with his own that implied even more extravagantly the controversial existence of a “collective mind which undergoes mental processes as though it were an individual,” with the capacity to hand on “across many thousands of years” thoughts and motivations, burdens and oppressions. Instead of viewing those burdens as the anxiety over our paradoxical existence as humans (mortal body, immortal soul), Freud took a more extravagant route, arguing that the primal murder, “the elimination of the primal father by the band of brothers,” was a historical event, and that such an event “must leave ineradicable traces in the history of mankind” (Totem and Taboo, 155). Placing these ideas like a blanket over culture, Gay remarks on the implications posited by Freud’s Totem and Taboo:

The history of religion, the appeal of tragic drama, the exemplars of art, all point to the immortality of the primal crime and its consequences. [. . .] In short, if human beings can inherit the burden of conscious from their biological ancestors [. . .], then that “memorable criminal act,” was the founding act of civilization that stood at the beginning of “so much” in human history: “social organization, moral constraints, and religion. (330-1).

Absorbing himself in these domains of culture, Freud began his exploration of the history of culture from the psychoanalytic vantage point markedly asserted in Totem and Taboo. In his
own life, religion was the cultural domain that Freud sought the least engagement with, but when religion was employed as a target for psychoanalytic critical analysis, he considered the topic most interesting. Fond of religion mostly when engaged in target practice, therefore, as Gay quotes, Freud was a pugilist atheist, distancing himself from “everything that is Aryan-religious” (Totem and Taboo, SE XIII, 142). His theoretical work espousing cultural motivations in Totem and Taboo necessitated an interpretation that would, Freud hoped, “lay bare the roots of religion in primitive needs, primitive notions, and no less primitive acts” (Gay 331).

In some of his earlier letters to Jung, Freud had suggested the idea that religion was founded in helplessness. In Totem and Taboo, “he complicated this suggestion by adding that religion arose as well from a rebellious act against that helplessness,” taking these findings as further proof that the demands of religion were a retreat from science, and “a denial of the fundamental facts of mental life, in a word, mysticism” (Gay 332).

It was here that Freud carried his organization of the cultural life of human beings into infamous territory, by insisting on the Oedipus complex as the gravitation force, the central fact of life at which “the beginnings of religion, morality, society, and art converge” (Totem and Taboo, 156). In his usual presentational fashion, Freud’s tenacity about the historical reality of the primal crime was open to severe criticism on many grounds. Ironically, this point wasn’t even essential to his argument, and Gay remarks that Freud could have both anticipated and disarmed the most devastating criticisms of Totem and Taboo, if he had simply applied his clinical insight—rather than his persistence on historical and factual evidence for the primal crime—just as he had employed other knowledge gleaned from his couch (333).

Indeed, “the universality of family experience, of intimate rivalries and mixed feelings—in short, of the ubiquitous Oedipus complex—would have been sufficient to account for the
recurrence of guilt feelings and to fit them perfectly into his theory of mind” (Gay 333). If Freud had been willing to adhere to the inclusion of a scientific ideal, he would have been able to substantiate his evidence much further, agreeing with American anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber, who asserted in his reconsideration of *Totem and Taboo* in 1939: “certain psychic processes tend always to be operative and to find expression in human institutions” (“*Totem and Taboo* in Retrospect,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 447).

But, as Gay thoughtfully asserts, “to represent the primal crime as a unique event casting an immortal shadow, rather than as a pervasive, all-too-human fantasy, allowed Freud to remain at some distance from his own oedipal struggles with his father; it allowed him to plead, as it were, for the acquittal that a rational world should grant the true innocents who only fantasize about committing parricide.” Gay continues to rightfully present his argument that, “in view of Freud’s own showing that the world of mind is anything but rational, this is a somewhat pathetic attempt to flee the murderous implications of his Oedipal aggressions” (334-5).

In historical consideration of Freud’s journey along the creation of psychoanalytic theory, Gay places the Oedipal complex on a timeline, recalling that it was not a new discovery for Freud when he wrote *Totem and Taboo*. His first recorded hint at the oedipal family drama had come in 1897, in one of the memoranda he sent to Fleiss concerning hostile wishes against parents” and over the next few years the idea informed his thinking about analysands—it is referenced briefly in the case history of Dora, and in that of Little Hans, who he thought of as “little Oedipus.” Freud, however, “did not plainly identify the ‘family’ complex’ as the ‘Oedipus complex’ until 1908, in an unpublished letter to Ferenczi; he did not call it ‘the nuclear complex of the neuroses’ until 1909, in his case history of the Rat Man; and he did not employ the
memorable term in print until 1910, in one of his short papers on the vicissitudes of love (Gay 332).

The emotional tension of ambivalence, a lesson from Little Hans, Freud now saw as a classic form that held a central position in the human experience. The little boy loving his mother while simultaneously hating his father—and all the diversity and complexity with which this form can present itself—was now imparted by Freud with a steadfast significance. The argument he had been developing since the late 1890s, may be summed up in Freud’s words:

Every human newcomer has been set the task of mastering the Oedipus complex . . .

Whoever cannot manage it falls prey to neurosis. The progress of psychoanalytic work has sketched the significance of the Oedipus complex ever more sharply; its recognition has become the shibboleth that separates the adherents of psychoanalysis from its opponents. (*Three Essays On the Theory of Sexuality*, 226n).

In his book *The Truth About Freud’s Technique: The Encounter With the Real*, Michael Thompson reviews another very controversial distinction in Freud’s writing: the question of whether psychoanalysis is a science as we think of the term today. “Were it not for the prevailing dogma that equates scientific truth with objective validation,” Thompson believes “this would not be a question worth pursuing. However, in the constant state of attack by the uncomprehending that has been the fate of psychoanalysis since its inception, such questions and distinctions need to be faced again and again” (*Preface*, Leavy xvii).

Freud’s implicit replies to criticism resound in the paradoxical pursuit Freud engaged himself in. Recalcitrant, Freud casts his work with a duality of drives; “the biological scientist
attempting to look to his patients for substantiation of hypotheses established on biological models, was simultaneously engaged in the pursuit of the inner personal truth that defies objectification” (Preface, Leavy xviii).

As a reader unburdened by the requirement to fit psychoanalysis into the narrow bounds of traditional science, Freud’s messages may be read under a more natural light than the mechanistic, and often prejudiced, formulations. Although Freud’s disposition toward systematizing is present all of the time, Darius Ornston and others have demonstrated that Freud’s language and theory was literally concretized in the English translation, the Standard Edition of his works (Preface, Leavy xix). Unconcerned with making psychoanalysis sound like traditional science, “Thompson reads Freud in the light of a philosophy of existence that was alive in Freud’s time, but out of direct contact with his thought of that of his followers” (Preface, Leavy xviii).

Although Freud sought out teachers from many centuries, the classics would always mean more to him than the intuitive modern philosophies. “Indeed, as we have been taught, Freud rather disdained philosophy, although with bursts of admiration for a few philosophers. Like many natural scientists, he did not usually consider that scientific method itself was grounded in philosophic proportions” (Preface, Leavy xviii). At a certain point in his learning, Gay recalls that Freud began favoring his clinical work over research: “Much as he liked and profited from reading, Freud liked and profited from experience even more” (46). Similarly, Leavy and Thompson both extol Freud for his dual nature as a creator and thinker.

Freud differs from other creative geniuses in a respect we should never lose sight of: he was not only a literary and philosophic creator, but also the founder and chief exponent of
a therapeutic method, a method of caring for troubled humans through understanding, with the intention of alleviation of suffering. (Preface, Leavy xvii).

According to Gay, “Freud first used the fateful term ‘psychoanalysis’ in 1896, in French and then in German,” but psychoanalysis had been quite some time in the making (103). The concept of free-association is usually attributed to Breuer’s influence with his private deposition to Freud about his patient, Anna O., a case that Breuer had been willing to disclose in suggestive detail, and which was instrumental in teaching Freud about catharsis and its useful application—to create a very different kind of therapeutic technique than the futile one’s current in Freud’s day. From Breuer and his case history, Freud learned the therapeutic technique that was to be the basis of psychoanalysis on the couch—what the very patient Anna O. described as a “talking cure.”

The famous analytic couch was as much a metaphor for psychoanalytic technique as it was an actual piece of furniture in Freud’s office. Princess Marie Bonaparte, the great-grandniece of Emperor Napoleon I of France, was a later but still ardent supporter of psychoanalysis. She proved a good friend to have on many occasions, including the deportation of Freud and his family out of Nazi occupied Vienna (and almost certain death) to the political asylum of London. Just as Bonaparte lay on the couch for the doctor and swore to uphold the “fundamental rule,” so did many others, revealing and unraveling more and more of their mental disposition with each hour of free-association.

The couch has become a symbol for the type of candor expected of psychoanalytic patients when they free-associate. Although lying on the couch was not an essential for this type of candor, Freud advocated ‘free association’ as “the best means by which the unconscious can
be methodically and reliably disclosed. Yet, Freud devoted less than five pages to free association in his technical papers” (Thompson 168). According to other analysts, Freud undertook self-analysis in the mid-1890s (Gay 96). During this difficult time, his friendly relationship with Fleiss that he had become so reliant upon was dissolving and he had just given up the seduction theory. Freud felt he had been deceived in his expectations about the world, but from this strenuous and unsettling feeling, came a finer discrimination and more dazzling reward. “To be completely honest with oneself,” wrote Freud, “is a good exercise” (Freud to Fleiss, October 15, 1897).

Freud in the late 1890s subjected himself to a most thoroughgoing self-scrutiny, an elaborate, penetrating, and unceasing census of his fragmentary memories, his concealed wishes and emotions. From tantalizing bits and pieces, he reconstructed fragments of his buried early life, and with the aid of such highly personal reconstructions combined with his clinical experience, sought to sketch the outlines of human nature. (Gay 97).

The method Freud employed for his self-analysis was ‘free-association’ and the content was provided by his dreams. Freud regarded his Interpretation of Dreams as a record of this pitiless self-probing that he had engaged in systematically from the spring of 1897 on (Gay 96). As this technique yielded results, Freud published a handful of papers, working to create what Gay calls “his map of the mind.” This, along with revising psychoanalytic technique and theory, Freud worked on with an accelerated tempo, hoping eventually to invade other areas of interest, listed briefly by Gay, including, “art history, speculative anthropology, the psychology of religion, and cultural criticism” (103).
But, as Gay notes, Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, published at the end of 1899, was considered the cardinal text for the explication of his theories. Freud considered his dream book the key to his work: “*The Interpretation of dreams is the royal road to the knowledge of the unconscious in mental life*” (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 608). It is important to emphasize that the book is about more than just dreams. Along with Freud’s view of the book as a first real explication of his psychoanalytic principles, it is for the reader “an autobiography,” as Gay exclaims, “at once candid and canny, as tantalizing in what it omits as in what it discloses” (104).
Chapter Three: How to think (Colleagues of the Mind)

It may be assumed—although it is often disregarded—that “a man of Montaigne’s intelligence and integrity who commits himself totally to honest self-exploration, using techniques of free association similar to Freud’s, would make similar discoveries” (Wolf and Gedo 298). Indeed, Montaigne did make similar discoveries, which he was the first to coin, Essays.

As the theorist, L. White (1960) has demonstrated, “the genius and originality of Montaigne and Freud lie not in the discovery of the unconscious, as one so often hears, but in making the ‘irrational’ accessible” (Wolf and Gedo 298). Another theorist, Michael Thompson, stumbles upon Montaigne in the same way. While questioning “the technological stratification that has in too many hands deadened psychoanalytic theory and practice since Freud,” in his study, “The Truth About Freud’s Technique: The Encounter With the Real,” the author does his readers a service:

Thompson points out the affiliation—direct or not—of Michel de Montaigne with Freud. The sixteenth-century essayist had discovered that allowing his thoughts to run on would bring him to insight into the motivations as unexpected to himself as to his readers, and at a long remove from his ostensible subject. (Preface, Leavy xix).

Although the spontaneous products of Montaigne’s free associations were subjected to his own constant editing, Leavy states in the Preface to Thompson’s work that we may still “remain astonished and delighted at this candor and conscientiousness in allowing so many
unorthodox expressions to persist, and so doing to produce, as Didier Anzieu noted, ‘an awareness of universal mental processes’” (xxi).

In some ways, Montaigne and Freud were direct adversaries, but in others quite in adjunct. In almost every instance of these variants, there is a direct influence having been shed upon them by their respective time periods. Historical perspective, therefore, is proved indispensable to understanding these men and their writings; it was 300 years before Freud that Montaigne wrote his *Essays*. In his own words, Montaigne’s project was a “thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind, to penetrate the opaque depths of its innermost folds, to pick out and immobilize the innumerable flutterings that agitate it (II:6 273). The purpose of his undertaking, however, was not to create a philosophical system or any type of formal system, for that matter:

> I, who cannot see beyond what I have learned from experience, without any system, present my ideas in a general way, and tentatively […] I speak my meaning in disjointed parts, as something that cannot be said all at once and in a lump. (III:13 824).

Although Montaigne rejected fettering his work with the artificial constraints of organization, he did formally title his immortality project *Essays*. This is due in part to Montaigne’s mostly unstructured classical education and more broadly, to the world in which Montaigne lived. Among other historical considerations, sixteenth century France was still grappling with the problem of reconciliation between Christianity (Monotheism) and where to place the big inheritance of Paganism (Polytheism) from the classical authorities.
Montaigne’s world, however, was complicated even further by the Reformation and the bitter, bloody rivalry between Catholic and Protestant factions. On the one hand, this was a dangerous deterrent from writing about controversial subject matter as Montaigne undertook; on the other hand it was a valuable surface tension that in many cases actually served to mask the threatening nature of Montaigne’s inquiry, as long as he maintained in writing and deed—perhaps even with a few bite marks on his tongue—his devout Catholic (religious) soul. With the Essays, Montaigne created an unsystematic new introspective literary genre that culminated with the theme of “I”; he was the first to write only for himself, writing only about himself—and he filled volumes.

While Montaigne was the first to write in such a way, he was not the first person to think and live in constant view of the “I.” Drawing from, but not limited to, the rules recommended by the classical philosophers, Montaigne wrote with what seemed to be infinite material. There were no limitations on his scope of subject matter, but the vantage point from which all these things originated was fixed. “His thoughts lie where they fall,” and there are two constants about this. The first is what makes Montaigne a capable creator. Given to thinking or acting in an independent way, Montaigne actually records, with as much truth as ever could be, the sinuous routes of his mind.

Commenting on his style, Bakewell explains the cause of his vagrancy as changes of direction brought about partly by “this questioning attitude, and partly by his having written the book over twenty years.” After all, she continues, “a person’s ideas vary a lot in two decades, especially if the person spends that time traveling, reading, talking to interesting people, and practicing high-level politics and diplomacy.” Not to mention, Montaigne constantly revised
earlier drafts of the *Essays*, adding new material just as soon as the thought could be culminated into words and making no attempt to box it into an artificial consistency.

Although the latter is never constant, the subject, the “I” who distinctly relishes the unsystematic, is constant. Wherever Montaigne takes us, the story always remains under the control of the same narrator. Although, as Bakewell notes, “we might meet Montaigne as a young man, then as an old man with one foot in the grave, and then again as a middle-aged mayor bowed down by responsibilities”—no matter how many variations occur within the space of a few lines, the narrator of the *Essays* is always Montaigne. Subject to common human (ir)rationality, Montaigne is capable of being hot headed and outspoken one moment, but discreet the next, both fascinated by other people, and fed up with the lot of them. Accredited to Montaigne is the exaltation of our very humanness—the infirmities that plague all and sundry. These pettifogs and imperfections are integral parts of the human condition and any account of the paradoxical nature of humans must attempt to contain all the elements properly belonging, without diminution or exception, lest it lack tact and veracity.

Although Freud’s encompassing system may be subject to criticism on the grounds of ample demonstration, the essential Freudian theory of the unconscious is elucidated by the other side of Freud, “the side,” Thompson believes was implied from the start in Freud’s greatest technical invention, the fundamental rule of free association. The importance of this unique form of discourse is, according to Thompson, that Freud’s invention of free-association “moves of its own momentum toward the revelation of personal truth, which is the reality of one’s own being” (*Introduction*, xix). Thompson underscores the integrity of free association among Freud’s theories insisting that, “if the rest of Freud’s teachings were lost through some misguided censorship of psychoanalytic instruction, we could still reconstruct all that we needed for a great
rediscovery,” by listening, he says, to the unguarded discourses of patients, and responding “to them out of the parallel mental processes of our own minds” (xix).

Nothing persuades us more fully of the vitality of psychoanalysis as a supreme intellectual achievement than the fresh insights into Freud’s writings gained by successive generations of students. In them Freud offered far more than he could himself have been aware of. (Introduction, xvii).

Over time, the great Sigmund Freud—the Master of psychoanalysis and unriddler of human enigmas—has been multiplied and divided, added and subtracted to. There have become so many different Freuds to choose from that the real man is hard to discern. Even without being appropriated or reviled by analysts, theorists, or any other type of “–ist,” Freud himself is unduly controversial. Based on his output alone, those twenty-three volumes of immortal legacy, Freud may be divided into several categories. Thompson describes these divisions naming, “Freud of the structural model,” as the one that many believe is the “best,” and the Freud of the “technical papers,” who analyzed Dora and the Rat Man (Introduction, xxii). Moving into broader categories, Thompson makes a distinction between age and experience:

The earlier Freud was wild and in his prime, humanistic and personal. He made all the “mistakes.” He talked—and acted—like an outlaw, a “conquistador of the mind.” Later he gave us the ‘death drive,’ a theory about life’s enigma, existential to the core.
More important than this fraction taken from the extensive inventory of Freud interpreters is the insoluble influence Freud has had on our culture. Developed in a relatively brief period, the convenient inventory of different Freud’s marks how impressive his influence is; he has transcended the self-enclosed boundaries of conventional institutions (Introduction, Thompson xxii). Although his impact is legion, Thompson notes that it is still too immediate; Freud is too close to our age to assess.

It’s too much to take in. When we speak of the school of Freud, we speak of a “university”—a universe even—of possibilities. He is the source of a point of view so basic to our era and culture that we grasp at the wind to contain it. (Introduction, xxii).

The author’s assertion about Freud for modern readers and institutions brings up a very important point—how to separate Freud from culture, when he is still so very much a part of it? Having no real predecessor as of yet, Freud is still too integral to our culture, too much embedded in the present outlook to be studied objectively; without hindsight, in other words, we can hardly hope for our vision to be twenty/twenty.
Chapter Four: How to Think (A Modern Synthesis, According to Becker)

The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny of man. (Preface, xvii).

So wrote the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker in his 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*—the culmination of a life’s work deconstructing Freudian and other psychoanalytic theory, and the application of his formulation on the “why” of mankind. In his pièce de résistance, Ernest Becker explains all of human civilization, including the creation and participation in society and culture, as a defense mechanism elaborately formed and fortified from childhood on to repress the most universal and inherent human anxieties—the knowledge and terror of our mortality.

Today, people live with an availability of knowledge like never before with the continuing proliferation of communication and information systems. Writing only four decades ago, Becker’s generation of theorists was experiencing a similar rhetorical overload. Becker identified his belief that “the man of knowledge in our time is bowed down under a burden he never imagined he would have: the overproduction of truth that cannot be consumed” (Preface, xviii).

As a social scientist attempting to view his data both critically and empirically, Becker saw that the human condition was in need of what he defined in the preface of his book as “a synthesis that covers the best thought in many fields.” He looked at mankind through an interdisciplinary lens—combining anthropology and philosophy, psychology and theology, art and history with a humanistic concern.
Throughout *The Denial of Death*, Becker unravels this rich web of theory that great men like Montaigne, Freud, and many others following all helped to spin. In a thoroughly convincing argument, he moves back and forth between picking apart Freudian psychoanalytic theories and perspectives for their respective merits and faults and provides the reader with a historical basis for the universality of death anxiety that resounds with Montaignean (un)philosophy. Becker carefully and self-consciously identifies a center for the network of arguments throughout his book—“the universality of the fear of death, or ‘terror’” as he prefers to call it.

According to Becker, our fear, or terror of death exists because man has a dualistic nature; he exists both as a physical and spiritual being. Humans have a unique god-like ability to imagine and create; yet, this creativity is stifled by man’s fragile decaying physical existence. Humans are constantly repressing the anxiety-provoking knowledge of their inevitable demise, the weakness inherent in the physical body that man cannot escape. From early childhood, Becker argues that we build character defenses or “armor” to keep our anxiety of death at bay.

As a social scientist deconstructing a Freudian system of thought, Becker appears to be working towards the broader application for human liberation. His theories reveal an utter fascination with the uniqueness of human behavior. Not until Darwin’s theory of evolution, however, which instilled in man the frightening reality that he too was an animal, evolved from a once lower form and subject to the same unromantic demise, is the problem of physical weakness manifested as a larger psychological issue.

Becker also noted, however, a correlation between human language acquisition, producing the consciousness of thought, and a development of cultural symbol systems. As we are brought up in a social environment, we are “reinstinctivized,” a term Becker uses to denote that our freedom for self-expression is thwarted by our conformity to a narrow cultural
worldview. The way we achieve cultural immortality is by creating our own project for “heroic illusion” or what Becker calls, our *causa sui* project. Put in the deconstructionist terminology of Jacques Derrida, the *causa sui* project is simply man’s publication, in one everlasting way or another, of his own text. The forming of an empire, the writing of a book, building of a bridge, procreation—these are all ways to publish a text, a bid for your mortality according to Becker’s hero system. Becker goes on to state, “society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning” (7).

The final thread of Becker’s theory is an embodiment of what Becker was working toward in his work on *The Denial of Death*. At the very end of the first chapter of his book, Becker instills the belief that, “for twenty-five hundred years we have hoped and believed that if mankind could reveal itself to itself, could widely come to know its own cherished motives, then somehow it would tilt the balance of things in its favor” (8).

Picking up the timeline with a bolded mark for Montaigne and following it through to the bold mark for Freud, the last three hundred years of society may be understood through the knowledge of these two thinkers and the way they have communicated that knowledge. Montaigne began with the notion that one must look at their own self if they wish to look with any veracity at others. Freud took the tool that Montaigne had already engineered, called it “free association,” and diligently worked on making them universal and accessible to a modern sensibility. Since Freud, technology has helped create a more sophisticated cognitive map, filling in some of the missing pieces by deconstructing the human paradox, on the molecular level, so to speak. Calling for a new type of explorer of the mind, the Montaigne/Freud of the future will emerge on the scientific frontier.
As he or she extends the path blazed by two distinguished forebears, this modern-day Montaigne/Freud will use the tools of cognitive science to map fully every aspect of the human paradox, no doubt making unprecedented discoveries but also affirming many truths stumbled upon simply by sitting quietly and thinking.
Works Cited


