Published more than 500 years ago, Michel de Montaigne’s “Essais” (translated as “Attempts”) remains a classic of Western philosophy and literature. These days, “Essays” is acclaimed not only for its insights on a wide array of topics but also for its remarkably modern reliance on the subjective judgment of the author (who famously proclaimed, “I am myself the matter of my book”).

According to Philippe Desan, a professor of Renaissance Literature and History of Culture at the University of Chicago, critics have tended to take Montaigne at his word that he separated his public from his private self in “Essays” and have emphasized its universal qualities. As a result, Desan claims, they have missed the pivotal role played by the social and political context in 16th century France — and of Montaigne’s own career aspirations — on the various editions of “Essays.” A massively researched, monumental, and in many ways magnificent biography, Desan’s “Montaigne” provides a new angle of vision on a literary legend.

In part because the narrative is not consistently chronological, “Montaigne” is, alas, repetitious. Desan tells us six times, for example, that Montaigne was an excellent horseman. He spends too much time documenting the financial difficulties of diplomats. He writes twice (in two successive sentences) that Pope Gregory XIII opposed the appointment of Paul de Foix as ambassador to Rome, and again 30 pages later.

That said, Desan’s biography is full of fascinating details about Montaigne and his world. Because his family had recently acquired wealth and a title by selling fish and wine, Desan explains, it was especially important for Montaigne to “think and feel confirmed in his nobility” — and for him to have a patron, Germain-Gaston de Foix, the marquis of Trans, to help him become “a brilliant gentleman,” an exception to a nobility that preferred the sword to the pen. And Desan follows Montaigne closely as he makes his way in a country wracked by religious wars, serving in parliament; as mayor of Bordeaux; and as a negotiator between the Catholic King Henry III and the Protestant King Henry of Navarre.

When Montaigne’s “Essais” appeared in 1588, expanded by more than a third, Desan demonstrates, it was not the same work it had been in 1580. By then, his political patrons had disappeared, France had a new king, Henry IV (who did not have the support of his people), and Montaigne, who was suffering from kidney stones, felt isolated and marginalized. His literary introspection, Desan emphasizes, resulted from his involuntary retirement.

Ironically, perhaps, in 1588 (and in a posthumous publication of “Essais”), Montaigne’s political “defects,” including his candor, integrity and qualified commitments, became positive human qualities.

“In the present broils of this state,” Montaigne would now write, “my own interest has not made me blind to either the laudable qualities in our adversaries or those that are reproachable in the men I have
followed.” Along with his first motto (“I abstain”), this message resonates with many of us who feel overwhelmed by our own “present broils.”

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