

**Why You Never Finished Your Essay:
Montaigne and the Motion of Writing**

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I want to express my thanks to St. John's College and the National Endowment for the Humanities, for giving me the opportunity to wander at leisure in the labyrinth of Montaigne's prose; and to the members of the Faculty Montaigne Study Group (Autumn, 2000), delightful comrades in my wandering.

Why You Never Finished Your Essay: Montaigne and the Motion of Writing

This lecture will have no parts, but it will have its moments.

One such moment can be dated with some precision, back to May 14, 1970, at a Special Faculty Meeting of St. John's College. According to the Faculty Minutes, Dean Robert Goldwin having made an instructional proposal to "change the title of the Senior Thesis to 'Senior Essay,'" and a certain Mr. Pitt having objected, and held to his objection, a special faculty meeting was convened. The proposal was narrowly approved, by a vote of 13 to 11, "with the understanding that a statement would be prepared clarifying the nature of the senior essay." This statement was not forthcoming until December 5 of that year—evidently clarity was not so easy to come by. In their brief statement, the Instruction Committee said:

The reason for the change in the name was a possible misunderstanding...arising from the name "thesis"; namely the misunderstanding that the essay must present a single position and argue for that position. Such an essay maintaining a "thesis"...might indeed be the important piece of work which is expected. But a quite different kind of essay might also be, for example, one which consisted in the exploration of a question, investigating many positions with respect to it, but perhaps ending with the raising of a better question.

Perhaps there might be some other form that an acceptable senior essay could take. Just as the essay does not have to defend a position, so the examination is not to be judged on whether the student succeeds in supporting what he is saying against a battery of examiners. He might maintain a position in the essay and abandon it in the oral and still have met the demands of both for a sustained performance in the liberal arts. The name "essay" is not to mean that the paper will be a casual bit of writing or the oral a casual conversation. Nor is it to mean an "attempt"

which is to be judged a success even if it is a failure in every respect.¹

The Committee was taking the word “thesis” etymologically, as a putting or placing, from τίθημι; the word “position” is the Latin equivalent. In putting or positing a claim, in taking a position, we place ourselves in a single, fixed position which we now must defend against the assaults of others. The change from “thesis” to “essay,” then, might be a change from fixity to motion, for example the motion of “investigating many positions,” moving from one to another.

But it is clear from the last sentence that the Committee was not willing to etymologize in the same way about the word “essay.” The word does indeed derive from the French *essai*, meaning among other things an attempt or a trial. The French version takes us back to the postclassical Latin word *exagium*, a weight or a weighing, or even a balance; our word “examine” is related, if we go back this far (but so, I must warn you, is the word “exaggerate,” meaning “to heap up”). “Essay” is also related to our word “assay,” which is what we do with metals to see if they are pure. So the French word *essai* can refer either to trying a thing, sampling, testing or evaluating it; or to trying to perform an action, with no assurance of success. It is the latter meaning that seemed to the Instruction Committee a possible Trojan Horse: a *mere* attempt, unsuccessful “in every respect,” inchoate, unfinished—To accept such an “essay” is to yield a fixed position, finite but at least satisfyingly determinate, in favor of the treacherous fluidity of fruitless motion, without end or goal. (That certainly sounds like some of the essays I’ve written.)

¹ St. John’s College, Annapolis, Faculty Minutes, December, 1970

Since Michel de Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, was the first to associate the word *essai* with the writing of short pieces of expository prose, perhaps he was the Odysseus who devised this treachery for us. Do we understand ourselves, in writing our essays, to be writing as Montaigne wrote? Most would say no. It is not hard to imagine the indignation, either vocalized in conference or emphatically indited in the margin, by the Freshman Language tutor to whom such a production might be submitted: “Your title, Mr. Montaigne, is *Of Cruelty*, but cruelty is not explicitly mentioned until the essay is two-thirds of the way through. Paragraph transition is a constant problem—the essay seems to have no structure or logical organization. Sometimes you seem to drift, or glide, from one topic to another; elsewhere there are abrupt and unmotivated transitions. Though you cite a wide variety of sources, you seldom identify them by author, and never locate them in the author’s work. No proper conclusion...” and so forth. If the tutor was very new to the College, she might even add, “And stop using that first-person pronoun!” It is not difficult to enumerate the ways in which Montaigne’s writings are an inappropriate paradigm for you and me in our writing. But I want to claim, on the contrary, that these strange, rambling little effusions provide the best model for us in pursuing many of the objects that we as writers should prize most highly.

What does Montaigne mean by “essay”? He uses forms of the word over 160 times in his work, whose title itself is *Essais*. But of these, fewer than one-fourth are forms of the noun, *essai*. The rest are all forms of the verb, *essayer*, usually intransitive. Clearly Montaigne thinks more often of the process of “essaying” than of the product. Furthermore, at no point does Montaigne refer to an individual chapter as an “essay,” in the sense of a literary genre or a form of writing. (That meaning was first established by

Bacon, a few years later.) At one point Montaigne refers to one of his chapters as an “article” (I.26, p.109) and elsewhere, rather improbably, as a “treatise” (II.12, p.808).² It would be as incorrect to say that there are 13 “essays” in Montaigne’s Book III, for example, as it would be to count the number of “thoughts” in the *Pensées* of Pascal.

The essentially verb-like character of the word (*essayer* rather than *essai*), expressing process or motion rather than a product or an entity, is perhaps best illustrated in the famous passage near the beginning of “Of Repentance” (III.2):

[refer to handout, Passage #1]

Je ne puis assurer mon object. Il va trouble and chancelant, d’une yvresse naturelle. Je le prens en ce point, comme il est, en l’instant que je m’amuse à luy. Je ne peints pas l’estre. Je peints le passage: non un passage d’aage en autre, ou, comme dict le peuple, de sept en sept ans, mais de jour en jour, de minute en minute. Il faut accommoder mon histoire à l’heure. Je pourray tantost changer, non de fortune seulement, mais aussi d’intention. C’est un contrerolle de divers et muables accidens et d’imaginations irresoluës et, quand il eschet, contraires; soit que je sois autre moymesme, soit que je saisisse les subjects par autres circonstances et considerations. Tant y a que je me contredits bien à l’aventure, mais la vérité, comme disoit Demades, je ne la contredy point. Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m’essaierois pas, je me resoudrois; elle est toujours en apprentissage et en espreuve.³

I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being; I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from

² For this numbering, see my note 4.

³ All French citations of Montaigne are from the Pléiade edition: *Oeuvres complètes de Montaigne*, ed. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat, Éditions Gallimard, 1962. This passage: p. 782.

minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. I may presently change, not only by chance, but also by intention. This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects. So, all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict. If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial.⁴

In this passage, the verb *essayer* is reflexive, something like the middle voice: *je ne m'essaierois pas*, (“I would not essay myself”) rendered by Frame as “I would not make essays.” The opposite case is *je me resoudrois* (“I would resolve myself”), here translated somewhat unsatisfactorily as “I would make decisions.” I don’t want to pick on Frame’s generally excellent English translation; anyone who thinks the passage is translatable is invited to propose an alternative rendering in actual English, rather than my subliterate gobbledegook. But how should I understand Montaigne’s phrase “essay myself”? To test myself critically? To attempt to paint myself, or to attempt to be myself? To sample myself in small doses, from moment to moment? Though he frequently speaks of “essaying” his “natural faculties” and specifically his judgment, more often the word is used absolutely: To “essay” is just to “essay.” Clearly the general activity of writing his book is represented as essaying himself; and it is a motion in response to the motions of constant mutability and flux, both in the outside world and within himself.

⁴ All English translations of Montaigne, unless modified by me and so noted, are from the Frame translation: *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, tr. Donald M. Frame, Stanford University Press, 1957. Unless I indicate otherwise, passages are identified by book and chapter number and by the page number in the Frame edition. This passage: III.2, p. 610-611.

What motions do I feel when I write? Right now I am aware, in a heightened way, of several ideas jostling in my mind, competing to be the one that comes out on the page. From moment to moment the number and identities of the jostling ideas change—It's always already too late to express myself; at best I can only express part of the self of a short time ago. And then, what about the other parts? The activity of writing keeps reminding me, unavoidably, of the deficiencies of my memory—just as Montaigne is always complaining about his. Time is our medium, and yet by writing we are seeking to arrest it, to attain a fixity within it; so time is also our enemy. My difficulty in this case is compounded by the time lag between the writing of my lecture/essay and its delivery: When I write the word “now,” am I referring to the “now” of writing? –but right now, in the “now” of speaking these words, the written “now” is not “now” but “then.” The sentence I just attempted is, of course, gibberish, whether I am speaking it aloud or typing it on a page—which proves my point. The problem would be the same if, instead of describing my state of internality, I were trying in language to track the external motion of my own body as it moves. My essay—the activity of tracking my thoughts about Montaigne—is a motion too, a parallel motion, but one that falls further and further behind.

In England in 1761, a rather peculiar little clergyman named Laurence Sterne published a very peculiar but not-so-little book, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. (In passing, please note my abrupt and unmotivated transition.) Sterne's novel (if that is what it was) has seemed to its modern readers far more like Joyce or Nabokov, or David Foster Wallace, than like anything that has a right to have been written in the eighteenth century. Anyway, the book's eponymous narrator-- (I 've

always wanted to use the word “eponymous” in a lecture here)—the book’s eponymous narrator, Tristram, is conceived on page 4, in my edition, but not actually born until almost page 300. At this point, having gotten past a number of digressions, including a digression about digressions, the narrator remarks as follows:

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume—and no farther than to my first day’s life—’tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it—on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back—was every day of my life to be as busy a day as this—And why not?—and the transactions and opinions of it to take up as much description—And for what reason should they be cut short? as at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write—It must follow, an’ please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write... Write as I will, and rush as I may into the middle of things, as *Horace* advises,—I shall never overtake myself—whipped and driven to the last pinch, at the worst I shall have one day the start of my pen—and one day is enough for two volumes—and two volumes will be enough for one year.—⁵

Phenomenologically, we are all in the same predicament as Tristram and Montaigne, though the latter is not writing a narrative. When we try to write ourselves, we unavoidably keep falling short, and shorter and shorter. If our souls could gain a “firm footing” (*prendre pied*), we could portray ourselves sufficiently. Ours is the predicament of Ptolemy and Copernicus, of Huygens and Heisenberg—How do you find a fixed place to stand, a position outside the diagram, from which to draw the diagram?

There is a class of utterances known as “paradoxes of self-reference.” The most famous is the “Cretan Liar Paradox”: All Cretans always lie, and I am lying right now,

says Epimenides the Cretan.⁶ This statement is true if it is false and false if it is true. But any utterance is implicitly self-referring—this is how it seems to me—and also inherently temporal—this is how it seems to me now. Thus, Montaigne might say, anything we ever say is always already false and always said too late. Paradoxes of self-reference are always time-paradoxes, and since all language unfolds in time, they are everywhere. Writing just makes it worse, and speaking in a lecture what I wrote months ago makes it worse still. All essays, all attempts, are in this sense failures. The “solution,” Montaigne and I would say, is to go on talking.

It’s time for a digression on digressions. Did you feel alarmed or disconcerted when I launched without warning into my little discoursus on Laurence Sterne and *Tristram Shandy*? I had several motives—*Tristram Shandy* is a good thing in itself, well worth your attention and mine; and by borrowing it, by letting it speak for me, I express myself better than I can directly. But I also wanted to illustrate one of Montaigne’s most characteristic stylistic features, and one that seems inseparable from “essaying”: veering off unexpectedly into an apparently unrelated topic that is only later, and perhaps only by implication, reunited with the main stream. He comments about this practice frequently, for example in this passage from one of his greatest chapters, “Of Vanity”:

This stuffing is a little out of my subject. I go out of my way [*je m’esgare*], but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance. I have run my eyes over a certain dialogue of Plato, a fantastic motley in two parts, the beginning part about love, all the rest about rhetoric. The ancients do not fear these changes, and with wonderful grace they let themselves thus be tossed in the wind, or seem to. The titles of my chapters

⁵ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (ed. James A. Work). New York: Odyssey Press, 1940. p.285-6.

⁶ For this reformulation I am indebted to John Verdi.

do not always embrace their matter; often they only denote it by some sign...I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, flighty, daemonic. There are works of Plutarch's in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in foreign matter...Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem.

(III.9, p.761)

It might seem strange that the writer's hurried motion, the race against the enemy time, results in the meandering of the motions of reading the text. You can't be in a hurry with Montaigne; if you are, reading him will drive you crazy. Often these veerings-off involve quoting someone else, "borrowing," as Montaigne calls it, usually without attribution and sometimes in a foreign tongue, so that the text is less a weaving than a collage or patchwork—an image Montaigne himself applies to his work (III.9, p.736). Some scholars think that the way Montaigne's book began was by his keeping what was in the Renaissance called a commonplace book, sort of a scrapbook of wise sayings and passages that he liked. This origin would explain the density of quotation throughout the *Essais*. Eventually, so the theory goes, Montaigne's own interpolated comments grew to the point of dwarfing the original quotations. It is a paradox, and one that Montaigne relishes, that he can be most himself by speaking through the voices of others. It is nonetheless true to our experience of him: Few authors we read have such a distinctive personal voice and seem so authentically themselves; and few authors quote others so much.

Perhaps the opposite tack from quoting—letting someone else speak for himself—is the kind of veering-off that suddenly applies what he has just been saying in general to himself personally. I tried to illustrate this too, by asking what motions I feel

when I write. But was that even a digression? I cannot digress from myself. If all my topics are linked by the common property that they are all mine, maybe it would be truer to say that Montaigne never digresses. Ask yourself whether a piece of atonal music has no melody, or whether, on the contrary, it is all melody. As Montaigne says, “nothing falls where everything falls” (III.9, p.734).

I have said that in essaying himself, Montaigne tracks one motion—living—with another—writing. He says quite explicitly that he views his writing as a motion in this way, as a few samplings will make clear: From “Of Repentance”: “In this case we go hand in hand [*conformément*] and at the same pace, my book and I” (III.2, p.611-2). And again from “Of Vanity,” which in its treatment of travels extends the master-trope of living and writing as motions:

At worst, this deformed liberty to present ourselves in two aspects, the actions in one fashion and the speeches in another, may be permissible for those who tell of things; but it cannot be so for those who tell of themselves, as I do; I must go the same way with my pen as with my feet.
(III.9, p.758)

I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming.
(III.9, p.761)

But it may be a false distinction to speak of two parallel motions, one tracking the other; for when Montaigne’s writing treats of the subject of Montaigne’s writing, the motion being tracked contains both those parallel motions collapsed together, and writing becomes a part of living, rather than a separate activity. For Montaigne himself, it seems to have been the center or focus of his life, after he withdrew to his chateau in 1571. He built himself a round library on the top floor of a turret, inscribed 57 strange little sentences to live by, on the walls and ceiling—25 in Greek, 32 in Latin—and for most of

the next 17 years, that was his cosmos. These narrow bounds did not prevent him from living fully in the world at large; he served two terms as mayor of Bordeaux, traveled to Italy, served as unofficial adviser to the King of France, and was unwillingly implicated in diplomatic intrigue and the wars of religion that were tearing the kingdom apart. But all the other commitments seem to him peripheral: Not only is the unexamined life not worth living, but the action of examining, of essaying, is life itself. Like most of the serious poets I have known, he probably wrote at least a little every day. If we too could make our writing a daily action, fully integrated in our lives, rather than a separate, occasional ordeal in which we have to stand and deliver, we would probably be less anxious about it, and we would be better at it. Reclaiming our writing for ourselves, rather than for others, depends on our regarding it as essaying: a process of exploration rather than a product. In the midst of that process, we learn and change. So your essay is not a report, after the fact, of the results of a train of thought; it is thinking in progress, a continuing conversation with yourself. You make a false distinction if you say, “I can’t write yet; I haven’t thought out what I have to say.” Writing is “thinking out what you have to say”; how will you know what you think until you formulate it? For the same reason, it has always seemed like nonsense to me to try to outline before I write; it’s like saying something before I say it.

When we write for ourselves, we also write to ourselves and of ourselves. To write at St. John’s College, to essay, is to learn the lesson of Michael Corleone: No matter how much they say that it’s business, that it’s not personal—*it’s always personal*. There may, there probably will be times and places later in your life, where the embargo on the word “I” is actually enforced, and they want you to write in the passive voice. It’s

a nice delusion to think that you can attain “scientific objectivity” by a stroke of the pen, and eliminate observer error by rhetorically eliminating the observer. Here, for the nonce, you have more freedom, and more responsibility, and both come from taking ownership of your writing. Montaigne often apologizes for speaking of himself, but he never stops doing it. What distinguishes my essaying from the writing of a thesis or a treatise is that whatever else the essaying is about, it is always about me. As Montaigne says in “Of Presumption”:

The world always looks straight ahead; as for me, 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 taste myself. Others always go elsewhere, if they stop to think about it; they always go forward:

nemo in sese tentat descendere;
as for me, I roll about in myself.

(II.17, p.499)⁷

So the motion of “essaying,” as here portrayed, is not so much linear as circular; in the inward turn, Montaigne redirects the activity of writing away from a determinate goal or object. “Myself” might seem like a single object for observation, but by the next sentence, it has become a venue, an arena, a place to roll about in. Within the spacious enclosure of the self, there is no limit to the variety of subject matter: In observing himself Montaigne has not left the world behind. But the circularity of the motion makes “essaying” into an activity that is potentially eternal, or bounded only by his death. Like any circular motion, this one is always on the way to where it has just been. “Circular” may be the wrong image, because it implies a kind of perfection, which Montaigne would certainly disclaim. But at least the motion describes a reentrant figure;

and it is self-congruent and continuous—“My book is always one,” says Montaigne (III.9, p.736)—like my lecture, Montaigne’s essaying has no parts. And as to the celebrated apparent irrelevance of his chapter headings: What need is there for descriptive chapter titles when the subject is always the same?

For Montaigne, then, there is finally no difference between living and essaying. It is notable that he often uses many of the same characterizations for the motion of his writing and for the journey of his life, or our lives: For example, in speaking of his practice of revision he calls the essays “an ill-fitting patchwork” [*marqueterie*](III.9, p.736); but elsewhere he remarks that “our actions are nothing but *pièces rapportées*, pieces brought together” (II.1, p.243) and, a bit further on,

We are all patchwork [*des lopins*], and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.

(II.1, p.244)

And again, in another chapter, he says again: “Man, in all things and throughout, is but patchwork and motley [*rapièssment et bigarrure*]” (II.20, p.511). It is, of course, possible that Montaigne’s similar descriptions of his work and of life in general spring from a claim that his work faithfully imitates his life, as a painting imitates its subject and would hence be similarly described. But he goes further still:

[refer to handout, Passage #2]

In modeling this figure on myself, I have had to fashion and compose myself so often to bring myself out, that the model itself has to some extent grown firm and taken shape [*formé*]. Painting myself for others, I have painted my inward self with colors clearer than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me—

⁷ I have here altered Frame’s rendering by leaving the passage from Persius in the Latin, and by omitting the citation of his name—in both cases following Montaigne’s own practice.

a book consubstantial with its author, concerned with my own self, an integral part of my life [*membre de ma vie*]; not concerned with some third-hand, extraneous purpose [*fin*], like all other books. Have I wasted my time by taking stock of myself so continually, so carefully? For those who go over themselves only in their minds and occasionally in speech do not penetrate to essentials in their examination as does a man who makes that his study, his work, and his trade, who binds himself to keep an enduring account [*qui s'engage à un registre de durée*], with all his faith, with all his strength.

(II.18, p.505; boldface indicates my emphasis]

What can Montaigne mean by the claim that his book is “consubstantial with its author”? The language is deliberately shocking; the word is a theological one, traditionally applied to the relations among the Persons of the Trinity.⁸ It seems that the reciprocal relation between Montaigne and his book—each forming and being formed by the other—gives way to an absolute identity between them. If in the normal course of literary imitation, the author takes flesh—objects in the world—and makes it into words, here we have an incarnation—the words made flesh. It is true that the words of Montaigne’s book are very “fleshy”: He tells us more than perhaps we want to know of his physical existence, his routines, his food preferences, his ailments, his excretions. He insists repeatedly that body and soul are inseparable (e.g. I.21, p.74; I. 26, p.113; II.12, p. 413; III.9, p.764), so it is perhaps reasonable that he should ask us to be interested in the products of his body, as well as the soul-children of his writing. He even refers to his writings as “excrements”—“now hard, now loose, and always undigested” (III.9, p.721). Of course, in doing so he is also ironically challenging the prudish reader who would like to deny his own materiality.

⁸ *Consubstantialis* is the Latin version of *ὁμοιοῦσιον* in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.

You may have gathered that my method here, if that's not too bizarre a word for it, is to try to mimic some of Montaigne's writing mannerisms, appropriating them at the same time that I discuss them. Hence I keep turning aside to myself, though as I have said, "aside" may be exactly the wrong word. In the same spirit, I have some pages here that will tell you more than you want to know about my body, its many idiosyncrasies and imperfections, what kind of wine I like, how much weight I need to lose, how often I urinate... But you know, it's getting kind of late, and I need to cut something. [*tear the pages up*] So I hope you will all take the will for the deed, and feel just as outraged at the idea of my reading such things to you as you would have been if I had really done it. And then I hope you will forgive me and Montaigne, and forgive yourselves, just as Montaigne forgives himself and challenges his readers to forgive themselves, for the sheer ridiculous indignity of having a body in the first place. Forgiveness, after all, is the purpose of incarnation.

In the passage I quoted, Montaigne implies a perfect parity and interpenetration of his self and his book, a perfect word-made-flesh. But just before that, he implicitly claims that the book is fleshier than the flesh itself; the colors of the painting are clearer than those of the original. Somehow the book—the painting—displaces its model; the *Essais* are more truly Montaigne's "self" than are his body, his mind and his soul. I could at this point make the Derridean move of claiming that what we want to think of as our "selves" is verbally constituted or constructed—we are always all "texts." But I think that Montaigne's claim is restricted to himself, and the extraordinarily intense and intimate relationship that he feels with his book. It is in a sense his only friend. I certainly have never written anything of which I could say it is more I than I myself am. Given his

propensity for self-depreciation, it's strange that Montaigne could make such a claim for the work he elsewhere refers to as "a flow of babble" and a "fricassee" (III.5, p.684; III.13, p.826). But in another way it's true that I'm never so much myself as in the process of writing. When I write I am more of a temporal being, explicitly aware of time's passage; I am fully in the present, even if what comes out is always a latecomer and a relic of the past. To be writing is to be attuned to my own viscera; it's a heightened receptivity to all sorts of proprioceptive stimuli. And do I feel more like myself in any of the other, more official roles I play, the masks and hats I wear? Since I intend while essaying to affirm no received wisdom, to question everything, I can hope thereby never to be caught in a lie or trapped in a pigeonhole, even one of my own making—I can hope to be free. If I were writing a thesis now, the text would present not me but a place I have chosen to inhabit and defend, perhaps even a common place, since it's so hard to say anything new. But if I am essaying, I am active, I'm energized, I'm more fully myself. The trade-off is that it's dangerous to be laying myself on the line, even if I actually succeed in doing it. And if you were really essaying, a few weeks or a few months ago, you were taking risks too. It's harder to write essays than to write theses.

One reason for the danger is that essaying is inherently unfulfilled. We start in the middle, *in mediis rebus*, in the μεταξύ, which is the confusing place where we live, and that is where we end, still trying to build our boats while swimming in the sea. Our minds never gain a firm footing. You recall the beginning of "Of Repentance": "If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not essay myself, I would resolve myself." But resolution is hard to come by, especially when we add the extra pressure of watching ourselves as we decide. The impetus to move, to judge, to utter, to resolve, is

counterbalanced by the sceptical ἐπέχω, the withholding of commitment. Montaigne remarks in the course of enumerating his faults in “Of Presumption”:

[refer to handout, Passage #3]

I do not want to forget this further scar, very unfit to produce in public: irresolution, a most harmful failing in negotiating wordly affairs. I do not know which side to take in doubtful enterprises:

ne sí, ne no, nel cor mi suona intero.

I can easily maintain an opinion, but not choose one.

Because in human matters, whatever side we lean to, we find many probabilities to confirm us in it...so in whatever direction I turn, I can always provide myself with enough causes and probabilities to keep me that way. So I keep within me doubt and freedom of choice until the occasion is urgent. And then, to confess the truth, I most often toss the feather to the wind, as they say, and abandon myself to the mercy of fortune...

(II.17, p. 496)

Any resolution he comes to is subject to second and third thoughts; the little A’s and B’s and C’s in the text indicate strata of composition, as he keeps inserting more thoughts, still in the middle. As he says, not entirely but mostly accurately, “I add, but I do not correct” (III.9, p.736). Even in the first composition, there is a constant sense of beginning over again, both in art and in life: Even in old age, he says, “we are always beginning to live all over again” (II.28, p. 531). And the same is true of his writing:

[refer to handout, Passage #4]

For in truth, as regards any kind of products of the mind, I have never brought forth anything that satisfied me; and the approbation of others does not repay me. My taste is delicate and hard to please, and especially regarding myself; I am incessantly disowning myself; and I feel myself, in every part, floating and bending with weakness. I have nothing of my own that satisfies my judgment.

(II.17, p. 481)

There are lessons for us, latterday essayists, in Montaigne's discontent. I find it usually true of myself and of most students I talk with that we don't like the products of our own essaying. Instead of yielding to despair, we need to reflect that it would be much worse to feel that our thinking about any subject was fully encapsulated in some written artifact. The remedy is not to discard but to add more: to add, not to correct. And whatever you do, don't throw anything away. The pages I have written may seem painfully trite and platitudinous to me right now, but if I wait long enough to forget my present objections to them, they may again seem to speak part of my mind. In any case, my relation to them will have changed. In this inability to arrest the production of new thoughts, there is not only frustration but opportunity, and even a certain pleasure.

Montaigne tells a wonderful story about the ancient atomist Democritus:

Democritus, having eaten at his table some figs that tasted of honey, immediately began to seek out in his mind whence came this unaccustomed sweetness; and to clear up the matter, he was about to get up from the table to see the situation of the place where these figs had been gathered. His maidservant, having heard the cause of this stir, laughed and told him not to trouble himself about it, for the reason was that she had put them in a vessel where there had been some honey. He was vexed that she had deprived him of this occasion for research and robbed him of matter for curiosity: "Go along," he said to her, "you have made me angry; I will not for all that give up seeking the cause as if it was a natural one." And he wilfully sought and found some "true" reason for a false and supposed effect.

(II.12, p.378)

The only quarrel that Montaigne and I should have with this anecdote is that it premises an outside source of truth that gives, or should give, finality and closure. If some maidservant could come to us and tell us the full and final truth about who and what we are and what we are thinking, we would be as perverse as Democritus in refusing to

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accept it as the last word. But there is no such maidservant; or if there were, how could we know that her version was true and complete? We are the best authorities of all about ourselves and our thoughts, and in the end, what do we know?

The consequence is that essaying is, and should be, a perpetually open-ended activity. As Montaigne remarks at the beginning of the chapter "Of Vanity": "Who does not see that I have taken a road along which I shall go, without stopping and without effort, as long as there is ink and paper in the world?" (III.9, p.721) The mechanism that propagates the motion is our continual difference from ourselves: "There is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others." Or as he says in another place (III.5, p.659), "What are we but sedition and discrepancy?" It is not surprising to hear him admit: "I who am king of the matter I treat, and who owe an accounting of it to no one, do not for all that believe myself in all that I write" (III.8, p.720). Once we utter, make out, some claim or proposition, our relation to it becomes dialectical. Any general or determinate statement must cry out for qualification, at best, and more often for contradiction outright. Montaigne says near the beginning of Book II:

[refer to handout, Passage #5]

Not only does the wind of accident move me at will, but, besides, I am moved and disturbed as a result merely of my own unstable posture; and any one who observes carefully can hardly find himself twice in the same state. I give my soul now one face, now another, according to which direction I turn it. If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways. All contradictions may be found in me by some twist and in some fashion. Bashful, insolent; chaste, lascivious; talkative, taciturn; tough, delicate; clever, stupid; surly, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; liberal, miserly, and prodigal: all this I see in myself to some extent according to how I turn; and whoever studies himself really attentively finds in himself, yes, even in his judgment, this

gyration and discord. I have nothing to say about myself absolutely, simply, and solidly, without confusion and without mixture, or in one word. *Distinguo* is the most universal member of my logic.

(II.1, p.242)

So one of the ways we learn from our writing is by differing from it: Once we have succeeded in making outer what is inner, we react against the finitude of what we have produced, and we are moved to add, to qualify, to disagree. This dialectical procedure is both a deferral and a conversation, literally a continued turning-back-again, that we hold with our text in a perpetual recommencement. There is a simple, perhaps over-simple gimmick that the student essayist can use to see this dialectical feedback loop at work: Suppose that your essay needs to be longer, more developed, deeper, more complex. Yet you feel yourself stuck, temporarily, with the limited version you have already written. The gimmick is to imagine yourself as a particular someone else: an intelligent person of general good will who is nonetheless determined to find some way to disagree with what you yourself have just written. By raising the best objections to what you yourself have said, you are testing, weighing, exercising judgment (one of Montaigne's favorite words)—essaying. And you are going on talking, producing more text. This technique is especially useful for seniors who have never written such a long paper and doubt that they can.

Nor is the gimmick merely a capricious way of padding, regardless of what is or is not the case. If we didn't care about what is really true, we would not be moved to doubt, nor would we feel the need to complexify. Like lawyers or Hegelians, we trust that greater truth may emerge from an adversary proceeding, the *sic et contra* of our conversation with our own writing. Montaigne, who sometimes seems, like Pilate, to ask

“What is truth?” and then not stay for an answer—Montaigne detests lies, half-truths, self-delusion, any temptation to stop questing for answers that feel fully adequate. Yet he knows in advance that any such answer will be weighed in the balance by some future self and found to be wanting. In Montaigne’s longest chapter by far, the famous “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” he sets forth his skepticism most explicitly. Here we find the famous question *Que sais-je?*—“What do I know?” (II.12, p.393)—to which his reply seems to be “Nothing.” But Montaigne distinguishes between two kinds of skepticism (II.12, p.371 f.): The Academic Skeptics, such as Carneades, assert dogmatically that nothing is humanly knowable. The followers of Pyrrho, on the other hand, apply their skeptical doubts even to Skepticism itself; they are agnostics about the possibility of knowledge. It is clear that Montaigne aligns himself with the Pyrrhonians, though he remarks in passing that the Pyrrhonians would “need a new language” (II.12, p.392). Perhaps a language with no affirmations, only questions? But even a well-formed question implicitly affirms many things. Just by referring, using nouns and verbs, any utterance will fall short of truly comprehensive doubt. All you can do is to question in the next sentence what you have implicitly already affirmed.

Montaigne’s skepticism seems to encounter a version of Meno’s paradox: He goes on seeking what he doubts he can find, or recognize if he should ever find it. One of Montaigne’s responses to this predicament is a pervasive and unremitting irony, more intricate and consistent than that of his hero Socrates. We are warned at the outset in our reading of his book, in the little note entitled “To the Reader,” that Montaigne is not to be trusted:

[refer to handout, Passage #6]

This book was written in good faith, reader. It warns you from the outset that in it I have set myself no goal but a domestic and private one. I have had no thought of serving either you or my own glory. My powers are inadequate for such a purpose. I have dedicated it to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament and by this means keep the knowledge they have had of me more complete and alive.

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

Thus, reader, I am myself the matter of my book; you would be unreasonable to spend your leisure on so frivolous and vain a subject.

So farewell. Montaigne, this first day of March, fifteen hundred and eighty.

(p.2)

Ask yourself, just for a second, why this little section is entitled "To the Reader." To whom then are the remaining 850 pages addressed? I hope I am not being capricious or overreading here, but he does say "goodbye" to us at the very moment he is supposed to be saying "hello." Like Socrates, Montaigne charmingly depreciates himself and his work; unlike Socrates, he tells us to go away. Yet he wants to be seen, and he has shown "respect for the public" in not portraying himself "entire and wholly naked." He seems to give with one hand and take away with the other. What is addressed only to his friends and family will be overheard, almost illicitly, by us; as readers we are left with no place to stand. Of course this is the book he published, revised with extensive additional

material for the second edition, and was hard at work revising yet again when he died. Yet he disclaims any artifice; this is his “simple, natural, ordinary fashion.” The most self-conscious writer in history is telling us that he is portraying himself directly and with no affectation. The first sentence is obviously meant to protest too much, and to set off alarm bells in our minds. But even if Montaigne wanted to write “in good faith,” how could he do it?

When Socrates is “ironic,” according to the accusations of his interlocutors, it is usually because he is professing ignorance and claiming to want to learn from others. Do we then agree that Socrates is dissembling, that he does not believe himself when he claims to know nothing? Or is it ironically the case that Socrates is being sincere when he is being ironic? Sometimes your true face is a mask. I would claim that the irony of Socrates, and that of Montaigne especially, is typically what William Empson called “double irony.” That is to say, it is not merely saying the opposite of what you think. If for example I were to say to you that it is inspiring to see so many pious worshippers here in the congregation on this Good Friday evening, you would probably think I was implying either that there are not very many of you, or that you really should be in church, not here. Such an interpretation takes my remark as simple sarcasm; it complies with what modern linguists call the “pretence theory” of irony—the time-honored view also adopted by the sophists who sparred with Socrates. But if I was speaking with Empson’s double irony, my intentions are harder to account for, even by me. My remark about Good Friday, taken in a more complex way, might imply that for our community, the Friday Night Lecture is a valuable ritual and that attendance at it does bespeak a certain kind of piety. But saying such a thing ironically, rather than straightforwardly,

contributes a wry tone that shows I am aware that what I am saying is peculiar or dubitable; I protect myself in advance by qualifying or contradicting what I say even as I say it. Otherwise I would have to go on to qualify what I just said by adding something else: that I don't mean to rank piety toward the college with the sacred awe we should express toward the more usual objects of our attention on Good Friday—or do I? And so forth. Thus I can say and unsay simultaneously; I can continue to judge, and speak, in the problematic mode rather than asserting anything. The statement proposes a set of possibilities, while my ironic tone communicates a strange, mixed feeling. I position myself, with respect to my hearer, with an interesting combination of distance and familiarity.

So for Montaigne, irony is a means of simultaneously affirming both a claim and its opposite. In doing so, he is trying to invent the new language that the Pyrrhonian skeptics would need. I have said that one response to skeptical doubt is to go on talking, using my difference from myself, or the self of a moment ago, as a way of engaging myself in dialectic or inner conversation. But by encapsulating both moments of the dialectic in one utterance, irony in effect short-circuits the process. Instead of allowing one formulation to generate its antithesis, qualification or addition, Montaigne allows the ironic tone to convey both possibilities at once, problematizing the issue immediately for the reader. Thus, for example, when Montaigne promotes nature and demotes artifice, he does so in the full consciousness that his way of writing is anything but “natural,” whatever that word may mean—and he indicates explicitly his awareness of its ambiguity (for example, in I.57, p.237). Hence we often feel, in spite of the personal, intimate character of the *Essays*, a kind of inscrutability about its purpose or its agenda.

Montaigne does not promise total self-revelation—he will not paint himself entirely naked—but he encourages us to think that the succession of moments of his essaying is spontaneous or even a product of fortune (for example, at II.10, p.297; or III.8, p.713). Nonetheless, we can often detect a design in the order of his “babblings” which suggests a strategic or an architectonic way of thinking. He both is and is not natural, candid and open. This doubleness is not exactly writing “in good faith,” but it is faithful to the doubleness in his own thought and feeling. As he says in “Of Repentance,” “I may contradict myself, but the truth I do not contradict.” The contradiction is itself the truth, except that it is falsely arrested in time.

Though I have been claiming that Montaigne’s essaying is, contrary to all expectations and tutorly proscriptions, a valuable precedent for the student essayist, I think I would draw the line here. It is hardly advisable to write with a pervasively ironic tone that seems both to claim and to disclaim responsibility for your own assertions; it might seem to be sneering at your reader. But more seriously, such writing can be a dead end. We do not want to arrest the dialectic of our conversations with ourselves; the open-endedness, the unfinished character of our essaying is one of its greatest virtues. By writing ironically, Montaigne makes his book less of a process and more of a product. It is in this way, I think, that he makes his book into a work of art, of poetry. Poets never lie, says Sir Philip Sidney in answer to Plato, because they do not affirm anything. If we read the *Essays* as a work of poetry, complexity becomes a virtue in itself, and we care more for what is interesting and delightful than for what is true. I do not suggest that the man, Michel de Montaigne, traded philosophy for poetry and truth for beauty; nor do I deny it. In a way, the question is merely a biographical one. But the persona, the self-

constituting voice, or polyphonic chorus, that speaks the words of the *Essays* seems to be willing, at times, to make the deal: It gives him a place to stand, and that is why reading the book is a pleasure and not a frustration. But don't try this at home: We should emulate Montaigne's open-endedness but not his ironic gestures of closure. (Of course, I am not exactly taking my own advice here, for motives that probably won't bear inspection.) Our annual essays are required to be pieces of expository writing, rather than poems or stories; and there is a good reason for this requirement: It allows the conversation to continue, in an essay oral or in some other venue. It allows us to go on talking.

Why does Montaigne go on talking? The widespread view of skepticism is that it too is a dead end, a kind of despair of learning that results in a knee-jerk response of withholding assent. Philosophy can end in doubt, as well as begin there. But in contrast with his irony, Montaigne's Pyrrhonian skepticism seems to be eternally hopeful: He continues to produce instances and counterexamples, revisions and additions to his text, contradictions and alterations of perspective, as if by heaping them up he could somehow scale heaven and find there the truth that he once set forth to seek. I think it is deeply wrong to see the *Essays* as narcissistic or self-satisfied; Montaigne is driven to continue the activity of essaying, forever disowning himself, to try to match up the flux he sees without and the flow of consciousness he finds within. As he remarks about his green old age, "Our desires incessantly renew their youth. We are always beginning to live over again" (II.28, p.531). This incessant self-renewal is nature's continuing triumph over art, in our lives and in our writing. It is natural, and good because it is natural, that our essays are unfinished; that we remain unresolved, if not irresolute, and find new reasons to go on talking. In that spirit, let us begin.