

MASTER-MIND LECTURE

Montaigne

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MONTAIGNE WOULD HAVE BEEN AMUSED—and no doubt secretly gratified—to find himself elected to the exclusive club of Master-Minds. In a well-known passage from the chapter ‘Des vaines subtilitez’ (‘On vain subtleties’), he distinguishes the vanishingly small circle of ‘great minds’ both from the ‘simply ignorant’ (whom he treats with indulgence and sympathy) and from the middling minds, the ones Pascal was later to call the ‘half-clever’ (‘demi-habiles’). It is to this last unflattering category that Montaigne assigns the readers he thinks are most likely to appreciate the *Essais*:

si ces essays estoient dignes qu’on en jugeat, il en pourroit advenir, à mon advis, qu’ils ne plairoient guiere aux esprits communs et vulgaires, ny guiere aux singuliers et excellens; ceux-là n’y entendoient pas assez, ceux-cy y entendoient trop; ils pourroient vivoter en la moyenne region.¹

There is no doubt a substantial dose of self-irony in this remark, and it is probably best to see the privileged group of ‘rare and excellent minds’ not so much as an actual elite from which Montaigne excludes himself, but rather as the embodiment of what communication with one’s readers

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¹ ‘If these essays were at all worthy of judgement, it might in my view transpire that they would not be much to the taste of ordinary and vulgar minds, nor of rare and excellent ones; the former would see too little in them, the latter too much; they might find a mode of existence in the in-between region’ (I. 54, p. 300). In the absence of a universally accepted edition of the *Essais*, I have chosen to refer to Montaigne, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Albert Thibaudet and Maurice Rat ([Paris], 1962), which is widely accessible and in general reliable (see also below, n. 11); book and chapter numbers are given in the form ‘I. 54’. All translations are my own. They are working translations, aiming primarily at fidelity to the original, and especially to the distinctive shape and construction of Montaigne’s sentences.

might ideally be like.² Elsewhere he speaks of the difficulty of finding the right kind of reader, the one who sees the point, who shares with him the sense of what he writes, and may even outdo him in grasping the sense and scope of the text;³ he also says that the *Essais* are not for beginners.⁴ This last remark is taken up by Marie de Gournay in the long apologetic preface she wrote for the posthumous 1595 edition of the *Essais*. People complain that they are obscure, she says, but they were not written for novices:

Ce n'est pas le rudiment des apprentifs: c'est l'Alcoran des maistres, la quinte essence de la philosophie: œuvre non à gouter mais à digerer et chylier, le dernier livre qu'on doit prendre et le dernier qu'on doit quicter.⁵

For us, his modern readers, there are various corresponding difficulties. The first is the uncertain position of Montaigne's book in the European canon. Is it primarily a work of philosophy or of literature? Most philosophers have regarded Montaigne's writing as too casual, too approximate, too unsystematic to count as 'philosophical' except in the loose, popular sense of the word, and have been happy to leave him in the literary camp, together with other so-called essayists. However, the *Essais* are not essays, at least not in the belle-lettristic sense that word was later to acquire (I shall return to this point shortly). They are written in the discourse of reflective truth-telling, and they address a number of major ethical and epistemological themes, persistently if not consistently. Various attempts have therefore been made to salvage Montaigne for philosophy; the most recent is a study by the American philosopher Ann Hartle.⁶ Hartle accepts that Montaigne is not a systematic thinker; she emphasises his mode of reflection rather than the propositional content of his writings; and she takes due account of the formal properties of the *Essais*,

² For a similar gradatio, see II. 17, pp. 640–1.

³ For the notion of the 'suffisant lecteur', the fully competent reader who is capable of perceiving in the text qualities and meanings of which even the author was not conscious, see I. 24, p. 126. See also my article 'Problems of reading in the *Essais*', in I. D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean (eds.), *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 133–66.

⁴ See III. 8, pp. 916–17 ('Mon humeur n'est propre, non plus à parler qu'à écrire, pour les principians'); Montaigne is talking here about conversation, but it is clear from the 'non plus . . .' phrase that he includes his own writings.

⁵ 'This book is not an elementary manual for apprentices: it is the masters' Koran, the quintessence of philosophy: a work not for tasting but for digesting and chylifying, the last book one should take up and the last one should put down' (Marie de Gournay, preface to the 1595 edition of the *Essais*, reproduced by Olivier Millet in *La Première Réception des 'Essais' de Montaigne (1580–1640)* (Paris, 1995), pp. 81–128 at p. 96).

⁶ Ann Hartle, *Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge, 2003).

their style and structure. Colin Burrow, in his excellent review in the *London Review of Books*, applauds this approach but still thinks that Hartle remains a philosopher at heart, and that she ‘and other philosophers . . . perhaps . . . have more to learn from literary criticism than they realise’.⁷

Burrow points out that Montaigne is not a philosopher in the sense that Descartes is, and he argues that it is because the Cartesian way of doing philosophy—rationalising, systematic, starting from first principles—has dominated Western thought until relatively recently that Montaigne has not been taken seriously as a thinker, although he concedes that change is in the air: ‘Maybe if this tendency continues, Montaigne will one day come to seem as significant a figure in the history of philosophy as Descartes.’⁸ This association and contrast between two styles of thought is of course not historically random. Descartes was born only four years after Montaigne died in 1592, and he certainly knew the *Essais*; arguably, his use of a radical sceptical strategy to create a *tabula rasa* and then establish a method designed expressly to evacuate sceptical doubt can be seen as a deliberate turning of the tables on Montaigne. Montaigne and Descartes, then, are a historical pair before they become a symbolic philosophical pair.

I am speaking here primarily of a history of philosophy which might still be taken as serving the cause of philosophy itself, as it does for Hartle, Burrow and Toulmin. There is, however, another kind of history of philosophy, in which it is the history that has priority: Ian Maclean’s work on Montaigne, and in particular on implied or disguised Aristotelian assumptions in the *Essais*, provides an exceptionally well-informed illustration of such an approach.⁹ At that point, the history of philosophy begins to move towards a broader history of ideas, where the commonplace view of the *Essais* is that they are chiefly important as a vehicle of ancient scepticism, and in particular of the radical scepticism (Pyrrhonism) that Descartes exploited and then rebutted.

My purpose here is rather to sketch out yet another kind of historical reading of the *Essais*, a reading that might help us to recover at least something of the modes of thinking and writing peculiar to the period in which they were written. Montaigne is often claimed to be distinctively ‘early modern’ in the sense that his mental landscape appears to anticipate many of the features we would regard as belonging to the modern period:

⁷ ‘Friskes, Skips and Jumps’, *London Review of Books*, 25, no. 21 (6 Nov. 2003), 21–2 at 22.

⁸ ‘Friskes, Skips and Jumps’, 21. For a similar view, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, 1990).

⁹ Ian Maclean, *Montaigne philosophe* (Paris, 1996); see also the essay cited below, n. 18.

a relativistic or sceptical habit of thought, a predominantly secular way of talking about humans and their relation to the world, a tolerant perspective on matters of religion in a period torn by religious strife, and a deep and abiding preoccupation with what we would call ‘the self’. That reading carries with it a self-evident risk of backward projection, and the view I want to put forward here is that the difficulty of reading the *Essais* is in precisely this sense historical. His book belongs to a history that we all know in advance, whether it is a history of philosophy, a history of ideas, or more generally a history of Western European culture. It even appears to mark a threshold, the point at which the ways of writing and thinking of another age begin to look familiar to us. Yet Montaigne cannot have been aware of any such threshold, since the threshold is itself defined by the as yet unknown future it was to give access to. Whatever else early modern people may have thought or felt, they could not have thought that they were early modern.¹⁰

That question, then—the question of how we read without distortion the signs of a future story—will form a central methodological thread in what I have to say. But within that frame, I shall focus, as I suggested above, on the modes of thinking and writing that characterise the *Essais*. Montaigne may certainly be called a Master-Mind in the sense that he is fascinated by the endlessly variable and elusive processes of thought itself, and by the problem of capturing them. But since the only way that thought-processes can be captured is through language, modes of writing will be equally central. Indeed, everything that is worth saying about Montaigne has to begin, I believe, at the grassroots, feeling one’s way in sentence by sentence. I shall therefore use individual sentences as the basis for everything I say, and it is important to emphasise that these are not meant only as pieces of textual evidence or quotations spelling out a given point. I want to suggest that they make things happen by the exact way in which they are written. I shall sometimes quote two or even three consecutive sentences rather than one in order to provide enough context, but the difference is in fact minimal, since the borderline between sentences in the *Essais* is often indistinct, depending on a punctuation which changed from edition to edition (that point is in itself central to the kind of argument I want to make).¹¹

¹⁰ For a more detailed account of these methodological issues, see the introductions to my twin studies *Pré-histoires: textes troublés au seuil de la modernité* (Geneva, 1999) and *Pré-histoires II: langues étrangères et troubles économiques* (Geneva, 2001).

¹¹ As already indicated, I have used as my edition of reference an edition which is accessible but approximate. The only edition which claims an achievable degree of fidelity to Montaigne’s

I

I begin with a sentence that immediately places before the reader an aspect of the mind's activities. In the late 1560s, when he was in his mid-thirties, Montaigne had an accident which might easily have proved fatal. While out riding, he was thrown off his horse and knocked unconscious. His servants carried him home, thinking that he was dead, but on the way he began to show signs of life and was even capable of speech. He continued to be semi-conscious for several hours, convinced that he was dying from a gunshot wound to the head—he lived in an area where the civil wars were particularly intense. It was only later that the memory of the accident itself came back to him:

Mais long temps après, et le lendemain, quand ma memoire vint à s'entr'ouvrir et me représenter l'estat où je m'estoy trouvé en l'instant que j'avoy aperçu ce cheval fondant sur moy (car je l'avoy veu à mes talons et me tins pour mort, mais ce pensement avoit esté si soudain que la peur n'eut pas loisir de s'y engendrer), il me sembla que c'estoit un éclair qui me frapoit l'ame de secousse et que je revenoy de l'autre monde.¹²

This sentence does not strive for elegance. Its multiple subordinate clauses and parenthetical insertions seek rather to follow precise sequences of time and causation. In fact, it seems designed to *imitate* the moment of anamnesis, when Montaigne remembered how the accident happened: first the indicators of time and mental process; then the raw event; then in parenthesis the last moment of consciousness, the response to the event as it happened; and finally the sensation of anamnesis itself, like a flash of lightning.

The narrative thus comes full circle. It had begun a few pages earlier with a more circumstantial account of the accident, perceived almost as if it was happening to someone else (pp. 352–3). It had then lingered on the sensations of tranquil unthinking consciousness during the period of amnesia, a state in which death seemed imminent but was not at all frightening, and then returned, with the anamnesis, to the accident itself.

mobile text is *Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, ed. André Tournon, 3 vols. (n.p., 1998); however, since Tournon modernises the spelling and uses his own complex system of notation for punctuation and variants, his edition was not suitable for my purposes here.

¹² 'But long after, on the following day, when my memory began to open up and represent for me the state in which I had found myself at the moment when I had perceived the horse bearing down on me (for I had seen it at my heels and took myself for a dead man, but this thought had been so rapid that fear had had no time to take hold), it felt as if a lightning flash was striking my soul with a shuddering blow and that I returned at that moment from the other world' ('De l'exercitation' ('On practising'); II. 6, p. 357).

It is important to note that Montaigne is writing this down some four years after the event, as he tells us in a phrase which appeared in the first edition of the *Essais* but was subsequently deleted.¹³ He is reconstructing and recording the accident itself and all the sensations and perceptions associated with it, in their particular sequence, as an act of memory: the final episode, the anamnesis itself, is in fact introduced by the phrase 'Je ne veux pas oublier ceci' ('I don't want to forget the following'). Memory is at work at two levels here, then, both within the experienced time of the accident and in the recovery and recording of the incident four years later.

I have not chosen this as my first example because it is typical of the way Montaigne represents his own life. In fact, there are very few autobiographical episodes of this kind in the *Essais*, and none of the others is treated at such length and with so few interruptions: for example, in the first edition there were hardly any of the verse quotations that one finds on virtually every page of his writing elsewhere. I cite it rather because it provides a good point of entry into the question of the way Montaigne seeks to represent processes of the mind. It is a good point of entry because it is tangibly concrete and immediate, and thus forestalls any assumption that Montaigne is an abstract thinker whose main interest lies in his contribution to the history of ideas. Throughout the *Essais*, he shows an acute concern for physical experience and for relations between mind and body: as he says elsewhere, 'C'est tousjours à l'homme que nous avons affaire, duquel la condition est merueilleusement corporelle.'¹⁴ Even his abstractions are infused at every point with metaphors, usually metaphors of the body and of physical movement. Thus the anamnesia sentence is the careful tracing, in the terms available to a sixteenth-century writer, of a process that is at once physiological and psychological.

I emphasise: in the terms available to a sixteenth-century writer. If this chapter in any sense anticipates modern scientific ways of thinking (psychological observation, trauma studies, neuropsychology), it is only as it were by accident. Montaigne's perspective is moral and personal, not scientific: he subsequently calls the episode a 'trivial story' and says that its only value is that it taught him a lesson about how to become familiar with death.¹⁵ This is the theme signalled in the title 'De l'exercitation' ('On

¹³ See *Essais*, ed. Tournon, 1, p. 77, note.

¹⁴ 'It is always with man that we have to deal, whose condition is wonderfully corporal' (III. 8, p. 909).

¹⁵ II. 6, p. 357: 'Ce conte d'un événement si legier est assez vain, n'estoit l'instruction que j'en ay tiré pour moy; car, à la verité, pour s'aprivoiser à la mort, je trouve qu'il n'y a que de s'en avoisiner.'

practising'), and in the first edition (1580) the chapter ended shortly after this comment. In the final phase of composition of the *Essais*, however, that is to say after 1588, Montaigne added a long passage on the novelty of his enquiry into the processes of the mind.¹⁶ Even while remaining within the mental frame of reference of his period, then, Montaigne is capable, as we shall see shortly, of grasping the strangeness of his enterprise, as if he were dimly aware of its possible future.

I turn next to two sentences from the opening passage of the chapter on education ('De l'institution des enfans'):

Quant aux facultez naturelles qui sont en moy, dequoy c'est icy l'essay, je les sens flechir sous la charge. Mes conceptions et mon jugement ne marche qu'à tasons, chancelant, bronchant et chopant; et quand je suis allé le plus avant que je puis, si ne me suis-je aucunement satisfait; je voy encore du país au-delà, mais d'une veuë trouble et en nuage, que je ne puis desmeler.¹⁷

In the previous sentence, Montaigne has spoken of his special attachment to poetry and of the power that the constraint of poetic form confers on language. This is the pressure that he feels himself ill-equipped to sustain, and the shift from the high art of poetry to his own more approximate and improvised manner is crystallised in the apparently parenthetical phrase 'dequoy c'est icy l'essay': essaying, not poetry, is his natural mode. Montaigne regularly uses the adverb 'icy' to refer to his writing as a place, the place of a continual movement forward; and 'essay' is the word he chooses with increasing frequency and confidence to describe the nature of his thinking and his writing (the two simultaneously), until by 1580, the date of the first edition, it has become the title of the book itself.

¹⁶ See in particular p. 358: 'Nous n'avons nouvelles que de deux ou trois anciens qui ayent battu ce chemin; et si ne pouvons dire si c'est du tout en pareille maniere à cette cy, n'en connoissant que les noms. Nul depuis s'est jetté sur leur trace. C'est une espineuse entreprinse, et plus qu'il ne semble, de suyvre une alleure si vagabonde que celle de nostre esprit; de penetrer les profondeurs opaques de ses replis internes; de choisir et arrester tant de menus airs de ses agitations.' ('We have news of only two or three Ancients who have beaten a path in this direction; and even then, we cannot say whether it was entirely in the same way as I have done it here, since all we know of them is their names. No one since has set off in their tracks. It is a thorny enterprise, more so than it might seem, to follow a movement as wandering as that of our mind; to penetrate into the opaque depths of its inner recesses; to tease out and pin down so many of its subtle shades and stirrings.')

¹⁷ 'As for my natural faculties, which I am here putting to the test [essaying], I feel them giving way under that pressure. My conceptions and my judgement can only grope their way forward, staggering, tripping and stumbling; and when I have gone as far as I am able, I am still in no way satisfied; I can see further terrain in the distance, but with a murky, cloudy vision which I am unable to resolve' (I. 26, p. 145).

It has often been pointed out that, in the sixteenth century, the word *essai* does not designate an established genre; the individual titled pieces of which the volume is made up are called ‘chapters’, not ‘essays’. The title *Essais* thus denotes not the literary genre to which the work belongs, but the mode of thinking and writing it embodies. Drawing on the whole semantic field from which the word comes, Montaigne speaks of his thought and his writing as ‘trials’, ‘attempts’, ‘soundings’; one often finds the verb, too, especially in the reflexive form ‘je m’essaye’. This sense is echoed in synonymous terms in certain chapter titles, in particular ‘De l’exercitation’ and ‘De l’expérience’; it is consequently also the sense in which the word should be understood in my opening quotation (‘si ces essays . . .’).

Montaigne’s choice of title had a result he could never have anticipated: the word later became the name of an informal genre of prose writing, of which he is traditionally regarded as the originator. So it seems natural enough to say that he wrote ‘essays’. Natural, but misleading: the genre of the essay, as cultivated particularly by later writers in the English language (Charles Lamb being of course the canonic example), sets up an entirely different set of expectations in the reader. It has a belle-lettristic character which is wholly absent from the *Essais*, while at the same time it lacks the sustained reference to the flow of the writer’s own thought that Montaigne’s use of the word evokes. Even collocations such as ‘philosophical essays’ crucially fail to capture this last notion.

In these two sentences from ‘De l’institution des enfans’, then, Montaigne moves away from the highly controlled and symmetrical patterns of poetry to the unplanned, groping shape of his own sentence, where the metaphor of walking forward through a mist, in uncharted country (another of Montaigne’s corporal metaphors), is progressively explored by association and accumulation, using coordinating conjunctions such as ‘mais’ and ‘et’ and clusters of synonymous terms. Thinking about poetic structure and how it works prompts Montaigne to imagine a graphic illustration of his own way of thinking and writing: this is the ‘essaying’ or probing mode, where outcomes are never anticipated and always provisional.¹⁸

¹⁸ In a seminal essay (‘Le país au delà: Montaigne and philosophical speculation’, in *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, pp. 102–32), Ian Maclean takes the phrase ‘je vois encore du país au-delà’, and others like it, as an indication that Montaigne senses at times that his thought probes its own limits and even those of the period to which it belongs (see esp. pp. 126–7); this insight is germane to one of my principal lines of argument here.

My third example, the last of this group, comes from ‘De l’oisiveté’ (‘On idleness’), which is one of Montaigne’s shortest chapters and appears to be one of the earliest; it might well have served as a preface to the book as a whole:

Dernierement que je me retiray chez moy, deliberé autant que je pourroy, ne me mesler d’autre chose que de passer en repos et à part ce peu qui me reste de vie, il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté, s’entretenir soy mesmes, et s’arrester et rasseoir en soy: ce que j’esperois qu’il peut meshuy faire plus aisement, devenu avec le temps plus poissant, et plus meur. Mais je trouve,

variam semper dant otia mentem,

que au rebours, faisant le cheval eschappé, il se donne cent fois plus d’affaire à soy mesmes, qu’il n’en prenoit pour autruy; et m’enfante tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres, sans ordre et sans propos, que pour en contempler à mon aise l’ineptie et l’estrangeté, j’ay commencé de les mettre en rolle, esperant avec le temps luy en faire honte à luy mesmes.¹⁹

This passage contains echoes of the Latin inscription that Montaigne had had engraved on the wall of his library on his thirty-eighth birthday (28 February 1571) to mark his retirement. We have here another movement of opposition, this time between the goal that he had assigned himself of a gradually ripening reflection, resulting in determinate thoughts and conclusions, and the bizarrely elusive flow of his imaginings when he left his mind to its own devices. The development of the second sentence—which is also the last in the chapter—is again primarily coordinating and accumulative; dominated by the opening image of the runaway horse, it seeks to imitate the erratic, unpredictable flow of thought itself when it is given, as we say, free rein. (And although equestrian metaphors are for obvious reasons frequent in early modern writing, one has to remember that a runaway horse had already by this time nearly killed Montaigne.) As in the last example, too, the writer is highly conscious not only of the

¹⁹ ‘When I recently retired to domestic life, determined to involve myself, as far as I was able, with nothing but spending in leisure and privacy the little of life that is left to me, it seemed to me that I could do no greater favour to my mind than to leave it in complete idleness, allowing it to commune with itself, to settle and find a fixed point within itself: something I hoped it could from now on achieve more easily, having in the course of time become more weighty and more mature. But I find—*leisure always makes the mind restless* [Lucan IV. 704]—that on the contrary, playing the runaway horse, it gives itself a hundred times as much trouble dealing with itself than it used to take for the sake of others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastical monsters one on top of the other, without order or relevance, that in order to contemplate their oddity and ineptness at my leisure, I have begun to make a record of them, hoping in the course of time to make my mind ashamed of them and thus of itself’ (I. 8, p. 34).

flow of thought, but also of how the act of writing can seek to capture it: the metaphor is now one of recording ('mettre en rôle'), of creating a continuous record which will enable him to review and assess his thought-processes over time, rather than allowing them to evaporate into thin air.²⁰

II

The *Essais* are much better characterised in this way as a continuous record of ever-shifting reflections on the writer's mental and physical experiences than as a self-portrait, which is the conventional metaphor used by Montaigne in his very brief preface 'Au lecteur' and elsewhere (although he himself is aware of its limitations). At this point, however, we need to step back and place the *Essais* amid the varieties of writing current in Montaigne's lifetime. The kind of sentence-structure I have drawn attention to—the loose-weave, exploratory mode—is at least partly derived from classical models, in particular Seneca's style in the Letters to Lucilius; several of Montaigne's chapters are in fact framed as letters, usually to well-born women of his acquaintance, and the informal, personal mode of the epistolary genre is a major point of reference for the writing of the *Essais* as a whole.²¹ Montaigne adapts the Senecan manner in his own idiosyncratic way, and puts it to uses no classical or indeed humanist writer ever dreamed of.

At the level of textual composition, he clearly owes a great deal to his favourite author Plutarch, but the key feature is the grouping of diverse materials from many sources under thematic headings in the manner of the commonplace book or miscellany. The importance of commonplace collections in the Renaissance both in their own right and as a model for writing is now widely acknowledged, thanks to the work of colleagues like Ann Moss.²² They form part of a still wider humanist practice of *imitatio* for which Erasmus is the overriding model, in Northern Europe at least. Montaigne would certainly have been familiar with the Erasmian way of imitating past authors, which requires first exhaustive reading,

²⁰ The notion of a register or inventory recurs at several points where Montaigne is talking of his attempts to pin down and record the movement of his thoughts; see also the quotation from II. 17, below, p. 196.

²¹ See for example I. 40, p. 246, where Montaigne asserts (in a late addition) that he would happily have used the letter-form to publish his thoughts if he had had someone to write to (he is perhaps thinking here of the early loss of his friend Estienne de La Boétie).

²² See Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford, 1996).

then a process of appropriation or ‘digestion’ (‘chylification’, as Marie de Gournay might have said), and finally a reissuing of these digested materials as the writer’s own personal discourse.²³ Montaigne read Latin as easily as he read French, thanks to his father’s experiment of having him taught to speak Latin as a small child, and the *Essais* are full of quotations: the verse quotations are especially visible, but there are plenty of prose ones as well, from Latin historians and moralists, and to these must be added a vast subcontinent of hidden quotations or ‘borrowings’, as Montaigne calls them.²⁴ In this sense, he subscribes to the ‘quotation rhetoric’ which, as Marc Fumaroli has shown,²⁵ was especially characteristic of the *magistrature*, the class of legally trained administrators to which Montaigne by and large belonged (although he preferred to think of himself as a member of the old aristocracy, the *noblesse d’épée*).

Another individual sentence takes us into the centre of this topic. It comes from the last chapter but one, ‘De la phisionomie’ (‘On physiognomy’):

Comme quelqu’un pourroit dire de moy que j’ay seulement faict icy un amas de fleurs estrangeres, n’y ayant fourni du mien que le filet à les lier.²⁶

Montaigne quite often talks about this aspect of his writing and is certainly conscious of the foreign voices that permeate his text at every point; it could hardly have been otherwise. But this sentence, like other similar ones, is the prelude to a self-defence: he may quote and borrow a good deal, he says, but he does it negligently, without being too particular about where the borrowing comes from or whether he has remembered it correctly. Quoting, he continues, is simply a contemporary fashion he feels he has to follow; if he had trusted himself, he would have taken the risk of speaking exclusively with his own voice (‘Si je m’en fusse cru, à tout hasard, j’eusse parlé tout fin seul’). From a modern perspective, it is difficult to appreciate the boldness of this intention, the extent to which it is not simply disingenuous. Speaking exclusively with one’s own voice is what

²³ I discuss these questions in some detail, both in general and in relation to Montaigne, in *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford, 1979).

²⁴ On the development of practices of quoting in early modern France, and on Montaigne’s place in that development, see Antoine Compagnon, *La Seconde Main, ou le travail de la citation* (Paris, 1979).

²⁵ See Marc Fumaroli, *L’Âge de l’éloquence: Rhétorique et ‘res literaria’ de la Renaissance au seuil de l’époque classique* (Geneva, 1980), esp. pp. 464–6.

²⁶ ‘As someone might say about me that all I’ve done here is put together a heap of foreign flowers, and that the only thing of my own that I’ve added is the thread to bind them with’ (III. 12, p. 1033).

nearly everyone tries to do nowadays; in the sixteenth century, virtually no one did, so that even the formulation of the idea is historically interesting. The very act of conceiving the possibility changes things; it creates a kind of mutation in the Renaissance practice of imitation.

We may return now to our last sentence: all he has supplied, says Montaigne, is the thread to tie together a bunch of other men's flowers. This almost imperceptible binding thread is in fact the first-person syntax which runs through the whole labyrinthine book and converts what might have been a florilege—and was indeed read as such by some of its earlier readers—into an unprecedentedly intimate record of its author's personal reflections.

III

We have thus arrived, via the structure of sentences and the practices of Renaissance imitation, at the heart of a perennial topic in Montaigne studies, the question of the way he represents what we would call 'the self'. This, as I said earlier, is an early modern topic par excellence, one that is also much pursued by students of Montaigne's contemporary Shakespeare; indeed, it is often claimed, both by historians of ideas and by literary scholars, that this was the period when the modern notion of the self originated.²⁷ My aim here is to look at that preoccupation in Montaigne's writing, for the moment at least, as if it were not the beginning of our story: as if it had no future.

A sentence from the chapter 'Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir' ('Doing philosophy is learning how to die'; I. 20), provides a relatively unassuming example of the emergence of first-person syntax amid much commonplace material. Montaigne says at one point in this chapter that he is writing just two weeks after his thirty-ninth birthday, that is to say in mid-March 1572, exactly a year after he retired; assuming that the whole of this chapter in its first version was written at that time, it belongs to the earliest phase of composition of the *Essais*. As has often been pointed out, it is full of quotations and borrowings from classical sources on the theme of death; Seneca, Horace and Lucretius are particularly prominent. In this sense, it fits almost routinely into the Renaissance

²⁷ See for example Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 177–84; John Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford, 2000), esp. pp. 200–3.

practice of *imitatio*, making a collection of striking *loci communes* and deploying them in sequence to form an argument of broadly Stoic character. The linking thread of the first person singular none the less appears intermittently, for example in Montaigne's reference to his birthday, and in a passage where he speaks in his own name about his constant readiness for death. One might regard these remarks as a display of neo-Stoic bravura on the part of a man in the prime of his life, as in the following example:

Quelcun, feuilletant l'autre jour mes tablettes, trouva un memoire de quelque chose, que je vouloy estre faite apres ma mort. Je luy dy, comme il estoit vray, que, n'estant qu'à une lieue de ma maison, et sain et gaillard, je m'estoy hasté de l'escrire là, pour ne m'asseurer point d'arriver jusques chez moy.²⁸

If one reads the *Essais* in sequence, it is easy enough in fact to dismiss this as a *boutade*. But we already know that, only a year or two before he wrote the thought down, Montaigne had had a close encounter with death while out riding a league away from home. It appears then that his anxiety about time and the precarity of life is no abstraction: it is thoroughly and concretely motivated (the possibility of local disturbances during the wars of religion is no doubt also a factor in this sense of insecurity). Yet Montaigne makes no mention of the riding accident here. It is not until a year or two later that he has the idea of recounting that anecdote and dwelling on it in detail in 'De l'exercitation'. And when he has written all the chapters of Books I and II and comes to arrange them in sequence, he preserves that separation, rather than placing these two chapters on practising death next to one another, as he does in other cases (for example, I. 25 and I. 26 on the theme of education, or II. 16 and II. 17 on 'gloire').

What conclusions can we draw from this apparently odd way of handling what seems to us like essentially autobiographical material? Above all, it should remind us once again that Montaigne's habits are not ours. The first person singular is indeed a powerful linking thread in the *Essais*, but that function only develops gradually and always emerges through rather than against a network of textual memories, allusions, quotations, and the like. It only assumes the form of autobiographical narrative briefly and intermittently; 'De l'exercitation' is famously exceptional in

²⁸ 'Someone who was leafing through my notebooks the other day found a memorandum about something that I wanted done after my death. I told him, as was indeed the truth, that although I was only a league away from my house, and in good health and spirits, I had hastened to write it down on the spot, as I couldn't be certain of getting home safely' (I. 20, p. 86).

this sense. Once those reservations have been made, however, one may cautiously point to the emergence here of something strange and unprecedented, a break-through into the discourse of *imitatio* of another kind of language that tentatively sketches out the contours of an individual's particular way of thinking and feeling. Or perhaps a momentary break-out of that language from the habits of Renaissance humanist writing.²⁹

A passage in the chapter 'De la præsumption', from the second book, shows the same process at an advanced and extremely self-conscious stage:

Le monde regarde tousjours vis à vis: moy, je replie ma veue au dedans, je la plante, je l'amuse là. Chacun regarde devant soy; moy, je regarde dedans moy: je n'ay affaire qu'à moy, je me considere sans cesse, je me contrerolle, je me gouste. Les autres vont tousjours ailleurs, s'ils y pensent bien; ils vont tousjours avant, *nemo in sese tentat descendere*, moy je me roule en moy mesme.³⁰

This is clearly a hyperbolic instance of first-person syntax, where the subject pronoun 'je' is repeated insistently, almost obsessively, accompanied by the emphatic or disjunctive pronoun 'moy' and a series of reflexive forms: 'je me considere', 'je me contrerolle', 'je me gouste', 'je me roule'. There are in fact no fewer than twenty variants of the first-person pronoun in these sentences alone (which, if one takes out the contrastive references to what other people do, amount to no more than three lines). The obsessive quality arises also from the paratactic presentation: there is no argument here, only a single motif repeated again and again in different forms and with different metaphorical flavours. These metaphors, from 'me replie' to 'me roule', themselves denote a reflexive movement; the standard portrait image is now transformed into a mirror; and essential threads in the composition of the *Essais* are evoked both in 'je me contrerolle', which picks up the phrase 'mettre en rolle' of I. 8 (see above,

²⁹ The break-out, needless to say, also has its own pre-history, in which figures such as Petrarch and Erasmus are known to play distinctive roles. The difference in Montaigne's writing may be ascribed primarily to his adoption of a resolutely secular perspective (regardless of the view one takes on the vexed question of his religious beliefs), and to that fascination with the processes of thought itself which is a central theme of this paper.

³⁰ 'People are always looking at other people; as for me, I turn my gaze inward, I fix it there, I keep it busy there. Everyone looks at things in front of themselves; as for me, I look inside myself: my only concern is with myself, I observe myself continuously, I monitor myself, I sample myself. Others are always going somewhere else, if they think about it at all; they're always going forwards, *no one attempts to descend into himself* [Persius IV. 23]; as for me, I wrap myself up in myself' (II. 17, p. 641). The word 'contreroller', translated here as 'monitor' to fit the context, can also mean 'to keep a record of'.

pp. 191–2 and n. 20), and in ‘je me gouste’, which belongs to a series of words and metaphors semantically related to the notion of the *essai*.

This is an astonishing piece of bravura writing, having no precedent as far as I know in the whole history of European culture. Yet it only writes out more boldly the tentative project of tracing the mind’s elusive wanderings that is already contained embryonically in the sentence I quoted from the end of ‘De l’oisiveté’, or the documentation of the mind in a semi-conscious state to which the central part of ‘De l’exercitation’ is devoted.³¹ We therefore need to be careful about how we describe this apparent historical shift. As I have said, in no sense does it have the effect of turning the whole book into an autobiography; it is entirely innocent of any modern conception of psychology, still less psychoanalysis; and the acute self-consciousness it exhibits, despite the rich linguistic resources that are brought to bear in order to imagine it and give it a palpable existence, does not lead to the coining of a noun ‘le moi’, which for us would be the self-evident consequence of such a move. In fact, the first use of *moi* as a noun in French is attributed to a contemporary poet, Philippe Desportes; the instance is probably symptomatic but not in itself especially interesting. Within fifty years of Montaigne’s death, however, that noun is being used at an absolutely critical moment in Descartes’s *Discours de la méthode*; twenty years later again, Pascal makes the *moi* the object of a scathing criticism, openly responding to what he calls Montaigne’s ‘silly project of self-portraiture’.³²

IV

We may thus return, via this theme, to the historical relation between Montaigne and Descartes. The first thing to say is that this relation is not supported by a great deal of explicit textual evidence. Descartes only refers to Montaigne in a single letter and on a specific point (the supposed lack of difference between humans and animals);³³ he also asserted on numerous occasions that he disliked long books and avoided reading

³¹ See also the passage quoted in n. 16, above, which shows how conscious Montaigne was of the novelty of his enterprise.

³² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Philippe Sellier (n.p., 1976), fragment 644; cf. fragments 567–8. On the pre-history of ‘le moi’, including the Desportes example, see *Pré-histoires: textes troublés au seuil de la modernité*, ch. 4.

³³ Letter of 23 Nov. 1646 to the Marquis of Newcastle, in René Descartes, *Œuvres*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 4 (Paris, 1972), pp. 573, 575.

them.³⁴ Apparent echoes of Montaignian themes in Descartes's writings could in most cases be accounted for by reference to other sources or to a common culture of early seventeenth-century *topoi*. Should we then regard this historical pairing as retrospectively invented by the historiography of ideas, and thus as spurious? We may first, perhaps, wonder whether Descartes is not being somewhat disingenuous when he says that he dislikes long books. Since his whole philosophical strategy depends on the creation of a *tabula rasa*, he is not likely to spend much time acknowledging the weight of existing texts; yet it is difficult to imagine that he had not at some earlier stage in his life read a great deal, and equally difficult to imagine any intelligent French reader of the early seventeenth century who had not acquired at least a passing acquaintance with the *Essais*. It might indeed seem plausible to suggest that, while Descartes's engagement with this powerful text led him virtually to eliminate it from his mental universe at the explicit level, it remained present, as it were, on the margins, as a reverse image of his own method.³⁵ In what follows, I am not claiming that Descartes set out to perform such a reversal, only that it is heuristically instructive to regard the relation in that light. My point here is to evoke Descartes as a figure belonging to the *future* of the *Essais*, a projection that enables one to see more clearly, by antithesis, what it is that Montaigne himself does and how thinking is imagined in the late sixteenth century.

Bearing this caution in mind, then, let us turn to Descartes's striking use of the pronoun 'moi' as a noun in the *Discours de la méthode*: 'ce Moi, c'est à dire, l'Ame par laquelle je suis ce que je suis, est entierement distincte du cors. . .'.³⁶ Anything one may want to say about Descartes's use of words is complicated by the fact that the *Discours* is only the brief outline of a philosophical project written in Latin, where of course the linguistic resources and constraints are different. I shall not address that question here. Nor shall I offer a philosophical commentary on his identification of the self with the soul. I would simply remark that 'le moi' is certainly not, in this context, the complex, shifting, incorporated, intes-

³⁴ I am grateful to Ian Maclean for providing me with information on this question. For a more detailed account, together with textual references, see the introduction to his forthcoming translation of Descartes's *Discours de la méthode* (Oxford (The World's Classics), 2006).

³⁵ Curiously, Montaigne also avers, in more than one passage of the *Essais*, that he likes to write in the absence of books (see for example III. 5, pp. 852–3; cf. the quotation given above, p. 193: 'Si je m'en fusse cru . . .'). His efforts to emerge from under the heap of 'authorities' might thus be seen to prefigure Descartes's more radical and ruthless emergence.

³⁶ 'this self, that is to say the soul, through which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body . . .' (Descartes, *Œuvres*, 6 (Paris, 1965), p. 33).

tinal phenomenon it is in Montaigne's *Essais*, and that Descartes shows no interest at all, at the point where he uses *moi* as a noun, in the ramifications of *individual* mental or psychological or bodily experience. On the contrary: this page of the *Discours*, which is one of the most famous in the history of philosophy, is devoted essentially to the presentation of a single formula as the foundation stone of a whole philosophical enterprise: 'je pense, donc je suis'. As sentences go, this one has clearly proved to have a historical vocation. Let us compare its structure, then, with the features of Montaigne's first-person style we have been looking at.

'Je pense' consists of a subject and a verb, with no object. Of course 'penser' is not normally a transitive verb, so it can have no direct object. However, it is obvious that thought can have objects, and that that relation can be grammatically expressed in all kinds of ways. Descartes is here interested only in thought as an activity in itself, an intransitive activity with a first-person singular subject. It is true that, elsewhere in his writings, a version of the *cogito* appears in the second person: the work in question is a dialogue where one speaker argues that his interlocutor must reach the same conclusion;³⁷ in the *Principia*, moreover, most of the argument leading up to the establishment of the *cogito* is conducted in the first person plural.³⁸ However, it seems clear that, in these cases, Descartes is always arguing that the luminous truth of the *cogito* is grounded in the experience of an individual subject; the pronouns used are thus the deictic first and second persons, never the third person, and in the *Principia*, despite the plurals, the *cogito* itself is expressed in the singular, as if that were an invariant form.

What we have in the *Discours*, then, is a thinking first-person singular subject with no object. Now it will be recalled that Descartes had arrived at this particular structure by means of an elegantly simple argument designed to counter the radical doubt of Pyrrhonist scepticism while at the same time exploiting that doubt. Let us imagine all of the possible objects of thought, he says, and then concede to the sceptics that they are subject to doubt; let us allow, for example, that even the most concrete

³⁷ *Recherche de la vérité*, in *Œuvres*, 10 (Paris, 1966), p. 515. I am grateful to John Cottingham for this and the following reference.

³⁸ In his paper "'The only sure sign . . .': Descartes on thought and language", in J. M. Preston (ed.), *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 29–50 at pp. 35–6, 45, John Cottingham cites the use of pronouns other than the first person singular in these passages as evidence against the (anachronistic) view that Descartes's *cogito* entails the essentially private nature of thought. As I see it, this argument in no way conflicts with mine; indeed, it helpfully clarifies the scope and nature of the syntactical procedures we are considering here.

and immediate of my experiences may be an illusion and that I may be dreaming the world I think I live in, even my own body; however much the objects of my thought may be called in question, it cannot be doubted that I am thinking them. I am thinking; therefore I and my thought, I as a thinking self, am not subject to sceptical doubt. I am thinking, therefore I am.

If we now return to Montaigne and his first-person constructions, we see at once that, while a thinking first-person figure is at the focus of attention, while the grammar of the first person is clearly, as he puts it, the linking thread in his work, and while all the objects of thought are presented as provisional and subject to doubt, there is yet no sense in which those objects are bracketed out, removed from view in order to leave the thinking self alone on its well-scrubbed *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, they proliferate; they provide the materials for a reflection which can go on, as Montaigne again says, as long as life lasts, an unending quest with no goal other than the pursuit itself.³⁹ Without those objects, there would be no book entitled *Les Essais*; there would be no project of ‘essaying’ human experience through the experiences of a particular subject.

We could reduce the *Essais*, hypothetically, to a single *reflexive* sentence such as ‘je m’essaie’; we have looked at several variants of this sentence. But the reflexive object pronoun ‘me’ in those sentences is not an empty abstraction; it stands in for all the objects of thought that particular subject may have, and for what one might call the family likeness of its objects of thought. If we wanted to construct a Montaignian equivalent of Descartes’s ‘je pense, donc je suis’, it would have to run something like this: ‘I am continuously thinking the indefinitely extensible series of things that I happen to think and that over time constitute me.’

This model is not quite complete, however: one element is lacking, the element that signifies perpetual uncertainty or non-resolution. The proliferation in the *Essais* of objects of thought, opinions, ideas—‘imagination’ or ‘fantasies’ as Montaigne often calls them—is licensed by a group of persistently recurring words and expressions. They are usually referred to in linguistics as modalising expressions,⁴⁰ but the best way of illustrating them is to quote a sentence from Montaigne’s late chapter ‘Des boyteux’ (‘On the lame’):

³⁹ See for example the opening of ‘De la vanité’ (III. 9, pp. 922–3), and ‘De l’expérience’ (III. 13, p. 1045).

⁴⁰ On Montaigne’s use of these expressions, and the linguistic frame of reference within which they may be understood, see Kirsti Sellevold, ‘*J’ayme ces mots . . .*: expressions linguistiques de doute dans les *Essais de Montaigne* (Paris, 2004).

J'ayme ces mots, qui amolissent et moderent la temerité de nos propositions: *A l'avanture, Aucunement, Quelque, On dict, Je pense, et semblables*.⁴¹

These are of course the ordinary everyday expressions by means of which we distance ourselves from the point of view we put forward, or at least make clear that it is only a personal opinion. Montaigne recurs to them so habitually that the whole tenor of his writing is affected by them. His practice of quotation works in the same way; and it happens that the sentence I quoted to illustrate the theme of Montaigne's use of borrowed materials ('Comme quelqu'un pourroit dire de moy . . .'; see above, p. 193) contains a similar device. In this case, rather than expressing an opinion marked as personal and provisional, Montaigne puts forward a possible reading of the *Essais* as someone else's imagined perspective: 'comme' (this is only an analogy, an imaginary case); 'quelqu'un' (someone else's voice, not Montaigne's); 'pourroit' (a modal verb in the conditional mood, indicating again that this is a hypothetical case). Qualifying expressions of this kind are of necessity entirely absent from Descartes's foundational sentence.

What is the point of this exercise of reducing Descartes and Montaigne to the structure of a sentence? I would suggest that it presents a certain move in the history of thought in a particular light. What happened between Montaigne and Descartes cannot be explained in terms merely of the use and refutation of certain Pyrrhonist strategies: Descartes did not in fact need to read the *Essais* in order to find out about Pyrrhonism, which was transmitted via a number of channels. What is irreducible is the power and the particular form of Montaigne's writing, including the shape of his sentences and the insistent use of a first-person syntax; to which one could no doubt add a crucial connection between that syntax and arguments of a Pyrrhonist character. Once again, I am not speaking here of some history of the early modern self, where Montaigne appears as a founding father and Descartes as the brightest of prodigal sons. I am speaking of an enormous, imaginatively realised sentence, with all its qualifications and nuances and unpredictable shifts of topic, the book-length sentence which Montaigne called *Les Essais* and which was an overshadowing presence in the high culture of early seventeenth-century France. In order to think his way through to the *cogito*, Descartes had to strip that elaborate organism down to the bone and start again, taking a diametrically opposite route. In the process, he turned Montaigne into a

⁴¹ 'I like the words we use to soften and moderate the presumptuous character of our arguments: *Perchance, To some extent, Some, It is said, I think, and others like them*' (III. 11, p. 1007).

philosopher; but that philosopher was Descartes, not Montaigne. Some twenty-five years later, Pascal was to express much the same idea in a powerful formula which is itself borrowed from one of Montaigne's sentences: 'Ce n'est pas dans Montaigne mais dans moy que je trouve tout ce que j'y vois'.⁴² In these ways both Pascal and Descartes belong to the unimagined future of the *Essais*, just as Rousseau's *Confessions* belong to another part of that future.

The *Essais* may thus be understood as a historical object in various senses. The one I have focused on primarily is both anthropological and archaeological: it treats Montaigne's work as a unique artefact that could only have been produced by a particular culture and at a particular moment in the history of that culture. The historical testimony it offers is inseparable from the substance of which it is made, namely language, and I have assumed that any possibilities of future development it may (unwittingly) contain are carried by that substance, as by a genetic fingerprint. It seems to me that such a view, which can be adopted for any other written artefact, has the further advantage that it relies on a mode of close reading that is equally satisfying if one's aim is not, or is not primarily, to recover or reconstruct the ways of thinking and feeling of another age. But inversely, I would not want it to be thought that my reading is in any sense 'literary' rather than historical. On the contrary: the separation between the two is here entirely out of place. A certain kind of history—and I include here both the history of ideas and the history of philosophy—can only be done with the tools of literary analysis or close reading; they can reach layers of the archaeological record that cannot be reached by other means.

There is, finally, a sense in which Montaigne already imagines for us the task that confronts us in such cases. When he describes the difficulty of tracking and recording the fleeting traces of the activities of the conscious mind—let alone of impulses and mental experiences which are not wholly conscious, like the workings of the imagination, or the way we are conditioned by habit, or states of amnesia such as the one that followed on his riding accident—he gives us an uncannily powerful model of the difficulty of a history turned towards the inner world, the world of

⁴² 'It is not in Montaigne but in me that I find everything I see there' (Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Sellier, fragment 568); see Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 26, p. 150: 'Ce n'est plus selon Platon que selon moy, puis que luy et moy l'entendons et voyons de mesme' ('It is no longer Plato's opinion any more than it is my own, since he and I understand and see it in the same way'). Pascal had also, of course, read Descartes.

mental conceptions and feelings as they were experienced at a given moment and in a given context, in all their ephemerality.

In order to evoke that ephemerality one last time, let me quote a passage from ‘Sur des vers de Virgile’ (‘On some lines of Virgil’):

mon ame me desplait de ce qu'elle produict ordinairement ses plus profondes resveries, plus folles et qui me plaisent le mieux, à l'improveu et lors que je les cerche moins; lesquelles s'esvanouissent soudain, n'ayant sur le champ où les attacher; à cheval, à la table, au lit, mais plus à cheval, où sont mes plus larges entretiens. . . . je voyage plus souvent sans compaignie propre à ces entretiens de suite, par où je prens tout loisir de m'entretenir moy-mesme. Il m'en advient comme de mes songes; en songeant je les recommande à ma memoire (car je songe volontiers que je songe), mais le lendemain je me represente bien leur couleur comme elle estoit, ou gaye, ou triste, ou estrange; mais quels ils estoient au reste, plus j'ahane à le trouver, plus je l'enfonce en l'oubliance. Aussi de ces discours fortuites qui me tombent en fantasie, il ne m'en reste en memoire qu'une vaine image, autant seulement qu'il m'en faut pour me faire ronger et despiter après leur queste, inutilement.⁴³

Perhaps Montaigne's riding accident made him especially aware of the fragility of mental events; if so, it may also have helped to make him so remarkably skilful in catching them on the wing. The claim that he should be admitted to the exclusive circle of ‘grands esprits’ (‘Master-Minds’) would have to rest principally, I believe, on that skill. It would rest on his ability to shape sentences that capture the strange and elusive things that happen in the mind, and hence on the mind's ability to reach out, hesitantly and gropingly, towards possible futures.

Note. I am grateful to John Cottingham, Neil Kenny and Ian Maclean for their helpful comments and advice on drafts of this paper.

⁴³ ‘My mind displeases me in that it usually produces its most profound and wild imaginings, and the ones I like best, on the spur of the moment, when I am least on the lookout for them; they vanish immediately, since I have nowhere handy to write them down; on horseback, at table, in bed, but most of all on horseback, where I give rein to my most wide-ranging reflections. . . . I usually travel without any company fit for sustained conversation, with the result that I can devote all the time I want to conversing with myself. What happens in such cases is much the same as with my dreams; while I'm dreaming, I recommend them to my memory (for I often dream that I am dreaming), but the next morning, although I can perfectly well conjure up their colour just as it was, whether gay, sad, or strange, the harder I struggle to recall what they were like in other respects, the more I plunge it into oblivion. Similarly, of these chance thoughts that drop into my imagination, all that remains in my memory is an empty outline, just enough to make me consume and torment myself in their pursuit, to no purpose’ (III. 5, pp. 854–5).