THE PRISON-HOUSE OF WRITING:
THE EXERCISE OF TRUTH
IN MONTAIGNE'S *ESSAIS*

Kenneth R. Berri

> The horizon of understanding cannot be limited by
> either what the writer originally had in mind, or
> by the horizon of the person to whom the text was
> originally addressed.
>
> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

To interpret hermeneutically is to use certain critical preconceptions so that the meaning of a text may speak to us. Only our own critical prejudices and subjective horizons of expectations as readers constrain the way in which we elucidate this meaning. And as we procede along any given critical path, we may even modify our original stance during the act of reading.[1]

The text of Montaigne's *Essais* stands like a bulwark against an onslaught of critical interpretations and understandings. Michel Butor offers a topographical model of the three books of the *Essais*—the first conceived as a garland-like frame of manneristic grotesques surrounding an image of perfection which is missing (the *29 sonnets de La Boétie*), the second a fortress with the *Apologie* as its main bastion surrounded by a labyrinthine garden which transforms the reveries of Book I and the ramparts of the *Apologie* into a self-portrait, and Book III as the world outside the garden. Montaigne's thoughts float from one topic to another in the text, accompanied by the reader who wanders through this garden of protean figures where truth circulates in silence.[2] To complement these metamorphoses there is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological yet strangely rhetorical "Lecture de Montaigne" in *Signes*, a Lacanian reading by Anthony Wilden, George Poulet's chapter on Montaigne in his *Etudes sur le temps humain*, Starobinski's work on Montaigne and movement, illusion, and the unmasking of truth; and meanings

---

[1] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1975), p. 385.
[2] Michel Butor, *Essais sur les Essais* (Paris, 1968). Cf. especially p. 70, 109-113, 187.

found in the *Essais* by such diverse authors as Pascal, André Gide, and Hugo Friedrich. As Terence Cave so aptly points out, all of these different meanings have always been lodged in a text whose movement is "a movement without end or origin, committed to irregularity and to indeterminacy of meaning."[3]

In this paper I would like to comment on another critical contingency. The *episteme* of resemblance in the sixteenth century, as elaborated by Michel Foucault in *Les mots et les choses*, will serve as a critical filter for this reading of the *Essais*. This relation of modern theory to a Renaissance text will highlight certain paradoxical aspects of its interpretation, notably involving problems of the representation of truth and the ambiguous significance of writing as both an injurious crime against nature and a constructive exercise.

Such a methodological approach is, of course, inherently ahistorical in its choice to work primarily with reflections of Montaigne's text. By initially excluding a broad historical perspective of the French Renaissance, however, we do not mean to neglect Montaigne's privileged position in a generation of late sixteenth-century humanists. Montaigne's text stands in the middle of a critical paradox which imposes itself upon our reading. On the one hand, we have chosen to interrogate the *Essais* in the light of Foucault's somewhat optimistic intellectual mold for the entire sixteenth century. His is an epistemic model which is perforce a general one, implicitly stable and symmetrical. On the other hand, we cannot interpret Montaigne's writing without addressing his own misgivings and pessimistic fears of the complexity, instability, and irregularities of his own mind, in itself and as a microcosm of his society. The tension between critical exercise and textual argument may, of course, give rise to inconsistencies and ambiguities of interpretation. But Montaigne's self-portrait in the *Essais* is far from a portrait in black and white. The conflict between Foucault's model and Montaigne's voice does not lead us to a logical impasse nor does one side discount the critical or textual validity of the other. Instead, their integration enables us to pinpoint aspects of Montaigne's intellectual make-up which are distinctive signs of the shift between the Renaissance and the Classical episteme. These markers provide suggestive evidence of a new crisis in thought in Montaigne's generation.

---

[3] Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text* (Oxford, 1979), p. 318-320. Of special relevance is Cave's discussion of the two hypothetically extreme readings of the *Essais*: a negative reading of the text as a lengthy digression which manifests its own emptiness of meaning; the other, inversely, an affirmative reading which takes the *Essais* as an extraordinarily rich compendium of the epistemological and moral arguments available to Montaigne.

The exercise of working argumentatively through Montaigne's text, challenging the *Essais* to fit or not to fit within Foucault's mold allows us to emerge from our inquiry with a new understanding, itself subject to critique, of the man and his period. One further question remains: what is the relation between the epistemic role of resemblance in the awareness of knowledge and truths in the sixteenth century and the inscription of knowledge in truths in the *Essais*? By beginning to interrogate the text in this way, a dialogue ensues which we shall trace in due course. Only an initial willingness and tenacity are asked in facing and working through the paradoxes which arise and deter us, in order to recuperate meaning and discover new truths.

☆

Writing in the *Essais* is a metaphor for a personal exercise in truth searching which involves isolation, self-observation, and self-discipline. The goal of this exercise is the development of a method of self-understanding, the *Essai*, and the attainment of a two-fold knowledge, of oneself and of the world. In *Miroirs d'encre*, Michel Beaujour succinctly describes the character of the *Essais* as such:

> . . . les *Essais* dans leur ensemble visent à constituer une con-
> naissance et une méthode de connaissance de soi-même, qui
> rend d'ailleurs tout autre savoir superflu. Les *Essais* fondent
> ainsi un nouveau savoir irréfutable, une connaissance du sujet
> de tout savoir, et de toute ignorance.[4]

One way of looking at the *Essais* is as a monumental, convoluted, and extended metaphor for Montaigne himself and his knowledge of the world based on a system of infinite resemblances. This is where the theoretical model of resemblance comes into play. The sixteenth-century system of resemblance, proposed in *La prose du monde*, the second chapter of *Les mots et les choses*, is comprised of "conveniences" between similar things like the links of a chain: emulation, which takes the form of concentric circles; analogy, the fulcrum of proportions; and finally the interplay of sympathies and antipathies in ceaseless movement and dispersion which supports the entire system of resemblances. "Le monde, c'est la 'convenance' universelle des choses."[5] In emulation of this vast syntax of the world, writing in Montaigne's text represents the exercise of seeking and exploring

---

[4] Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre* (Paris, 1980), p. 189.

[5] Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966), p. 32-40.

relationships within the self as a microcosm of the world. Bits of knowledge gleaned from constant self-observation and study become subjective truths, and the expanding circles of emulation allow Montaigne to relate this knowledge to more universal truths in the world around him. The *Essais* represent Montaigne's superhuman effort to inscribe realities he sees, senses and perceives into his own discourse as a running commentary on himself and the world around him.

As Foucault points out, however, commentary is only a secondary discourse, not a natural language, which futilely yet persistently tries to simulate primary discourse. If nature or the world as a primary text could be given this mythical transparency of meaning in language, then language as commentary would be superfluous. Thus the dilemma of commentary according to Foucault:

> La tâche du commentaire, par définition, ne peut jamais être achevée.... Il n'y a commentaire que si, au-dessous du langage qu'on lit et déchiffre, court la souveraineté d'un Texte primitif. Et c'est ce texte qui, en fondant le commentaire, lui promet comme récompense sa découverte finale.... Le langage du XVIe siècle—entendu non pas comme un épisode dans l'histoire de la langue, mais comme une *experience culturelle globale*—s'est trouvé pris sans doute dans ce jeu, dans cet interstice entre le Texte premier et l'infini de l'Interprétation.
> (*Les mots et les choses*, p. 56)

Montaigne may affirm time and again that he is consubstantial with his book, but the text of the *Essais* as a self-portrait can only represent fragments of his actual being.

Montaigne's own perception of the world involves a phenomenological approach complemented by the element of imagination which is a necessary counterpart of resemblance.[6] In reference to the text of the *Essais*, we also need to include the element of reflexivity[7]—the appearance of an awareness of its own operations, references to the problems of self-representation in writing and of excessive interpretation. In the foreword to the English edition of *The Order of Things*, Foucault himself rejects a phenomological approach

---

[6] *Ibid.* p. 83: "la ressemblance se situe du côté de l'imagination, ou, plus exactement, elle n'apparaît que par la vertu de l'imagination et l'imagination en retour ne s'exerce qu'en prenant appui sur elle."

[7] Cf. Cave, *op. cit.* p. xiv: "reflexive writing comments on itself (explicitly or implicitly), displays and mirrors its own characteristics, presents itself as a topic."

to the history of knowledge. His own "archaeology," i.e. the historical analysis of scientific discourse, however, conceived as a theory of discursive practice, usefully applies to Montaigne's text in so far as it allows us to grapple with the tensions between its rhetorical framework and the dialectical mode of its content.

Of course, Montaigne's private goal, as he openly admits in the preface *Au lecteur*, is to present himself naturally as a souvenir for family and friends: "(a) C'est icy un livre de bonne foy. lecteur. Il t'advertit dés l'entrée, que je ne m'y suis proposé aucune fin, que domestique et privée." This profession of good faith, however, is but the first of many deceits in Montaigne's writing due to the conflict of desire in his private motivations. This conflict, too, results in textual contradictions and tensions. A self-portrait in words intended exclusively for family and friends would require no rhetorical sophistry. Yet the didactic impulse of his public goal, the desire to communicate his privately-meditated truths to others, requires that he supplement the dialectical force of his own interior dialogue with figures of rhetorical persuasion. This duality of intent makes for a wondrously rich intratextual discourse, but by the same token, the conflicting goals account in part for the indeterminacy of meaning in the text. If Montaigne senses that stable and unstable elements interact again and again in his own mind as well as in the very nature of his world, does this agitated state then not imply a similar instability within the otherwise stable interplay of the four resemblances? In contra-distinction to earlier, more self-assured humanists, Montaigne not only senses this instability but fears its terrifying hold upon him. So he not only writes about his insecurities, but as we shall see later, he attempts to use the constraints of writing to harness the unruly nature of his mind.

Resemblance, the basis of the general sixteenth-century episteme, functions accordingly in the *Essais* as a metaphor, *trope par ressemblance*,[8] between signs and the things they signalize. For example, aconite resembles the eye and bears a physical resemblance to it, the human face resembles the planets in the sky; *Des noms* (I, 46) is an extended metaphor of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, and "to philosophize" is "to learn to die" (*Essais* I, 20): the text of this essay is the *signature*, in the Foucaultian sense, of the resemblance suggested and drawn in its title. The system of resemblance is closed by the notion of "signature"—visible marks, written signs, the murmur of words—which enables resemblances to manifest their meaning to us.[9]

[8] Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours* (Paris, 1968), Chapter III. "Des Tropes par *ressemblance*, c'est-à-dire, des *Métaphores*," p. 99.
[9] Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, p. 40-45.

During or after the act of reading, the reader, too, begins to philosophize, having lifted aside the veil of signs and begun to examine the referents. "Chercher le sens, c'est mettre au jour ce qui se resemble. Chercher la loi des signes, c'est découvrir les choses qui sont semblables." [10] Montaigne's search becomes our own.

Writing becomes the vehicle in which Montaigne inscribes and comments upon resemblances drawn from a seemingly gargantuan and eclectic field of topics; the soul, customs, lies, ceremonies, warfare, imagination, education, friendship, cannibals, fortune, reason, ancient writers, solitude, sleep, age, family resemblances, knowledge, God, the faculties of the mind, vanity, parlance, physiognomy, experience, and innumerable others. At the same time, however, he is acutely aware of the uselessness of too many glosses which only contribute to the attrition of knowledge and understanding of the world:

> Qui ne diroit que les glosses augmentent les doubtes et l'ignor-ance.... Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations qu' à interpreter les choses, et plus de livres sur les livres que sur autre subject: nous ne faisons que nous entregloser. ("De l'experience" III,13, 1044-45) All citations from the *Essais* are taken from the Pléiade edition.

The flow of commentary—the murmur of words which reveals the otherwise silent prose of the world—is devalued by Montaigne (for reasons similar to Foucault's) as an impossibly poor imitation of something which is constantly eluding our grasp. Gloss and extensive commentary, under the pretext of representing true meaning, only widen the gap which separates commentary as secondary discourse from the primary Text of the world. They create a mirror of ink:

> Dans la mesure ou la glose et le commentaire, sous pretexte de parvenir au sens authentique, ne font que creuser la distance et l'étrangeté qui sépare le texte second (le commentaire) due premier (le texte commenté), et qu'ils favorisent un futile effort de remémoration du sens, ils tombent sous le coup de la même condamnation que la mémoire; leur prolifération est depourvue de centre, déchue de la présence à soi: "Tout four-mille de commentaires; d'auteurs, il en est grand cherté." (III, 13, 1046c) [11]

[10] Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 44: ("car, dès qu'on soulève les signes et qu'on regarde ce qu'ils indiquent, on laisse venir au jour et étinceler dans sa propre lumière la Ressemblance elle-même)."

[11] Michel Beaujour, *op. cit.* p. 122.

For Montaigne, the *texte commenté* is the prose of the world which includes literature. Commentary as *copia* mimics the productivity of nature in perverse emulation. Cave's deconstructive image describes excessive interpretation for Montaigne as an act of extreme violence done to a primary text by commentary: "Interpretation is destruction and dissipation: the murdered text reverts to its anonymous particles." [12] So the paradox of Montaigne's writing–already a commentary on other "texts"–raises its ugly head as a reconstructive exercise which is also a heinous crime. And the *Essais* themselves succumb to their own poison. [13]

In the 'Discourse on Language' appended to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault also discusses the paradoxical yet interdependent roles of commentary as secondary text or discourse: "On the one hand, it permits us to create new discourses ad infinitum. . . ." but "On the other hand, whatever the techniques employed, commentary's only role is to say *finally*, what has silently been articulated *deep down*" in the primary text:

> The infinite rippling of commentary is agitated from within by the dream mask of repetition: in the distance there is, perhaps, nothing other than what was there at the point of departure: simple recitation. Commentary averts the chance element of discourse by giving it its due: it gives us the opportunity to say something other than the text itself, but on condition that it is the text itself which is uttered and in some ways, finalised. [14]

The infinity of resemblances, however, makes the project endless since language also contains its own inner principle of proliferation. Foucault's critique of commentary paints a theoretical picture which perfectly complements the arduousness of Montaigne's critical enterprise:

> Le commentaire ressemble indéfiniment à ce qu'il commente et qu'il ne peut jamais énoncer; tout comme le savoir de la nature trouve toujours de nouveaux signes à la ressemblance parce que la ressemblance ne peut être connue par elle-même, mais que les signes ne peuvent être autre chose que

---

[12] Cave, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

[13] Cave, *ibid.*, p. 316: "The Essais extend themselves not only by "glossing" other texts, but also by glossing themselves. The text is not merely reflexive here; it reflects on its own reflexivity and, at the same time, on the movement of supplementation, excess, or infinite regression which allows it to proliferate."

[14] Foucault, "The Discourse on Language" appended to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London, 1972), p. 221.

> des similitudes. Et de même que ce jeu infini de la nature
> trouve son lien, sa forme et sa limitation dans le rapport du
> microcosme au macrocosme, de la même façon la tâche infinie
> du commentaire se rassure par la promesse d'un texte effec-
> tivement écrit que l'interprétation un jour révélera en son
> entier.[15]

Earlier in the section of *La prose du monde*, which concludes with these
words, Foucault discusses the encyclopaedic project of language between the
end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, not to
reflect what one knows in the natural element of language, but to reconsti-
tute the very order of the universe in syntactic, textual form. According to
Foucault, such an interweaving of language and things, in a space common to
both, presupposes an absolute privilege on the part of writing. The *Essais* do
reconstitute the universe in their own fashion and they enclose it in non-
neutral, first person language. Montaigne's text must perforce reflect a
subjective viewpoint and a point of departure and focus which he wisely
insists upon, yet this stance jars the universality of the encyclopaedic project.

Here it is wise to remember that Montaigne is an innovator in his genre.
His are the first *coups d'essai* in what has become a traditional form of
personal expression. The *Essais* sound out a full symphony of intricate notes,
abounding in universal overtones, yet each resonance is either in harmony or
dissonance with a personal chord.

In *"La prose du monde"* Foucault uses the privileged position of writing
to underscore the twin presence of two indissociable forms of knowledge
in the sixteenth century. The first is the intersection of observation and
language: "Il s'agit d'abord de la non-distinction entre ce qu'on voit et ce
qu'on lit, entre l'observé et le rapporté." (*ibid.* p. 54) We might call this
Montaigne's own form of reportage, as in "De la force de l'imagination"
(I, 21), where he incorporates personal anecdotes with classical references,
the observation of physical malfunctions, events he knows of or has witnessed
which illustrate the power of the imagination, and quotes from Ovid, Virgil,
and Lucretius. The second form of knowledge involves the immediate disso-
ciation of all language from anything else: "et il s'agit aussi, à l'inverse, de la
dissociation immédiate de tout langage que dédouble, sans jamais aucun terme
assignable, le ressassement du commentaire." (*idem.* p. 54) All of the text's
own comments on its reflexivity fall into this second form as well as Mon-
taigne's tirade on the emptiness and non-utility of glosses as a hindrance to
knowledge and true understanding in "De l'experience" (III,13):

[15] Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, p. 56-57.

> Je ne sçay qu'en dire, mai il se sent par experience que tant
> d'interprétations disspent la verité et la rompent. . . . Qui ne
> diroit que les glosses augmentent les doubtes et l'ignorance . . .
> (For example, the *Apologie* which raises skeptical doubts
> about God before affirming man's ignorance without Him) . . .
> Au rebours, nous obscurcissons et ensevelissons l'intelligence;
> nous ne la descouvrons plus qu'à la mercy de tant de clostures
> et barrieres. . . . (1044)

yet he does not deny the ever-present need for commentary:

> Il y a tousjours place pour un suyvant, (c) ouy et pour nous
> mesmes, (b) et route par ailleurs. Il n'y a point de fin en nos
> inquisitions; nostre fin est en l'autre monde. (1045)

and he chides himself for having needlessly extended his own book by includ-
ing so many glosses on its own writing: "(b) Combien souvent, et sottement
à l'avanture, ay-je estandu mon livre à parler de soy?" (1046) Nor does he
neglect to mention the universality of resemblance as the raw material for
commentary:

> (b) Toutes choses se tiennent par quelque similitude, tout
> exemple cloche, et la relation qui se tire de l'experience est
> tousjours defaillante et imparfaicte; on joinct toutesfois les
> comparaisons par quelque coin. (1047)

By a stretch of the imagination, these 'corners' become the chain, circles,
fulcrum, and movement of the system of resemblance. The starting-point of
inquiry is arbitrary: any argument will do as a subject to start the ball of
commentary rolling since all things are linked together by resemblance:
"Tout argument n'est egallement fertille . . . Que je commence par celle qu'il
me plaira, car les matieres se tiennent toutes enchesnées les unes aux autres."
("Sur des vers de Virgile," III,5, 854) Thus the two apparently antagonistic
forms of knowledge posited by Foucault in language are also present in the
Essais. The language of truth, therefore, as the consequence of this two-fold
knowledge is found and developed in the writing of commentary:

> Savoir consiste donc à rapporter du langage à du langage. A
> restituer la grande plaine uniforme des mots et des choses. A
> tout faire parler. C'est-à-dire a faire naître au-dessus de toutes
> les marques le discours second du commentaire. Le propre du
> savoir n'est ni de voir ni de démontrer, mais d'interpréter.[16]

---

[16] Foucault, *ibid.*, p. 55.

Montaigne's text, as a commentary on the storehouse of knowledge which he uses to interpret the world, is his own *signature* of truth. And the commentary knows no physical bounds: "Qui ne voit que j'ay pris une route par laquelle, sans cesse et sans travail, j'iray autant qu'il y aura d'ancre et de papier au monde?" ("De la vanité . . , III, 9, 922) Nevertheless, Montaigne continues to write down his diagnostic examination of himself and his world, in ever increasing isolation. Through the act of writing he forces himself and truth into consubstantiality with his book. At the same time, he imprisons himself more and more deeply in his study in the library which is yet another metaphor for the book itself.

<p style="text-align:center">☆</p>

A new scenario: Montaigne is alone in his tower, surrounded by books and inscriptions staring at him from the walls and ceiling. He looks inward at himself and outward at the world, before him are an infinite sheaf of paper and a bottomless pot of ink. In his mind there is the recognition that writing is in a sense a crime against nature as well as a pathway to truth: the constructive, humane exercise of knowledge to which he has condemned himself in self-exile in order to harness the restless fervor of his mind and the dispersion of truth.

In this instance, writing takes on the guise of a Derridian *pharmakon*, a drug which is both a deadly poison to the father of the *logos* and a magical potion whose ambivalent charms, though completely unstable and logocentric, may restore to the potion-taker an illusion of *sophrosune* (soundness of mind, i.e. wisdom) which may lead him to truth. The *pharmakon* leaves its deadly trace in commentary as a supplement to truth which is constantly differed:

> La vérité de l'écriture, c'est-à-dire, nous allons le voir, la non-vérité, nou ne pouvons la découvrir en nous-mêmes par nous-mêmes. Et elle n'est pas l'objet d'une science, seulement d'une histoire récitée, d'une fable répétée. . . . L'écriture doit donc redevenir ce qu'elle *n'aurait jamais dû* cesser d'être: un accessoire, un accident, un excédent.[17]

---

[17] Jacques Derrida, "La pharmacie de Platon," in *La Dissémination* (Paris, 1972), p. 83. p. 144: "L' "essence" du *pharmakon*, c'est que n'ayant pas d'essence stable, ni de caractère propre, il n'est, en aucun sens de mot (métaphysique, physique, chimique, alchimique) une *substance*." Cf. also p. 144-147 and p. 153.

Foucault's conception of the trace of truth in 'the prose of the world' involves a more robust and less insidious image than the *pharmakon*. It is like a stain upon *language*: "En effet, celui-ci existe d'abord, en son être brut et primitif, sous la forme simple, matérielle, d'une écriture, d'un stigmate sur les choses, d'une marque répandue par le monde et qui fait partie de ses plus ineffaçables figures."[18] The trace of this "unique and absolute layer of language" (*idem.*) gives rise, on the one hand, to commentary which attempts to interpret the order of things as a set of true relations and, on the other hand, to an unwritten text below it: "Le texte dont le commentaire suppose la primauté cachée au-dessous des marques visibles à tous." (*idem.*)

Let us now pursue the problem of writing not so much as a supplement to truth but rather as a corrective and disciplinary exercise. Montaigne, as his own judge, wields the power to enforce the writing of commentary which bears the trace of punishment upon himself. Montaigne's text occupies the third position in Foucault's paradigm of the three modes in which the power to punish exercises itself: figuratively, the mark, the sign and the trace which correspond respectively to ceremony, representation and exercise. These three modes exemplify three different technologies of power which enforce the *pouvoir de punir* as execution, physical punishment, or rehabilitative and educational exercise.[19] The exercise of writing conceals the trace of a benignly severe yet constructive punishment. The subtlety of this coercive, secretive exercise, in contrast with the violent measures of the other two modes of punishment, emphasizes a gradual process of surveillance, discipline, and learning. The incarcerated body (i.e. Montaigne, and his mind, and the corpus of the *Essais*), by becoming the target for new constraints of power, also lends itself to new forms of knowledge.[20]

The activity of self-observation is an assiduous source of raw material for

---

[18] Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

[19] Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1979), p. 134. The *marque* is the most violent manifestation of monarchical power exhibited in the public ceremony of the criminal's execution, the *signe* involves some physical representation of the power to punish, and the third modality, the *trace*, is the most benign, directly related to the rehabilitation of the prisoner through observation, learning, and the constant recording of his activities.

[20] Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 157. Notice how well the submission to self-scrutiny applies to the copious writing of the *Essais*: "l'exercice, devenu elément dans une technologie politique du corps et de la durée, ne culmine pas vers un au-delà; mais il tend vers un assujetissement qui n'a jamais fini de s'achever."

personal commentary. By deciding to withdraw from society to study himself and muse upon the world from his isolated vantage point, Montaigne offers himself the privilege of his own self-surveillance. He becomes his own gaoler and imposes his own *technique pénitentiare* upon himself: "Etre regardé, observé, raconté dans le détail, suivi au jour par une écriture ininterrompue était un privilège."[21] The tower becomes an observatory for constant surveillance and learning. And the exercise he performs there is coercive, corporal, solitary and secret.

Montaigne's activity bears an uncanny resemblance to Foucault's description of the salutory effects of the penal system as it was developed in the nineteenth century. This ahistorical similarity makes the *Essais* seem both more modern and more universal. Writing, as a punitive, disciplinary, constructive and corrective exercise performed in isolation, is marked by the trace of power and the desire to learn:

> Le point idéal de la pénalité aujourd'hui serait la discipline indéfinie: une interrogation qui n'aurait pas de terme, une enquête qui se prolongerait sans limite dans une observation minutieuse et toujours plus analytique, un jugement qui serait en même temps la constitution d'un dossier jamais clos, la douceur calculée d'une peine qui serait entrelacée à la curiosité acharnie d'un examen, une procédure qui serait à la fois la mesure permanente d'un écart par rapport à une norme inaccessible et le mouvement asymptotique qui contraint à la rejoindre à l'infini.[22]

Montaigne's tower is the ideal panopticon, and it isolates him from his familial and civic duties. And what more comfortable cell than one's own library? Butor's description of Montaigne's view from the tower emulates Foucault's figures of the *episteme* of resemblance: "... cet universe qu'il conçoit comme le déroulement illimité d'un tissu de foyers irradiants *jouant* les uns avec les autres. ..."[23] Montaigne marvels at the profusion of resemblances he perceives in the world, he is haunted by the concept of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (Butor, 202) as a model of universal emulation, he realizes that our perception and understanding of the world is governed by the unstable movement and dispersion of resemblances:

> Si nous voyons autant du monde comme nous n'en voyons pas, nous apercevrions, comme il est à croire une perpetuele

---

[21] *Ibid.,* p. 193.

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 228.

[23] Butor, *op. cit.,* p. 200.

(c) multiplication et (b) vicissitude de formes. ("Des coches,"
III,6,886)

The choice of the phrase "perpetuelle multiplication et vicissitude" indicates
Montaigne's awareness of the continuous mobility and instability of words
and things whose interrelation governs his field of knowledge. And he knows
that his own mind imitates this instability. So we are faced with another
obstacle to the knowledge of truth, this time not an intrinsic problem of
writing, but rather the resemblance of the instability of the world to the
mind. The turmoil which he finds in his state ("Le pis que je trouve en nostre
estat, c'est l'instabilité" II,17,639) is a metaphor for the same state in his
mind.

Montaigne complains again and again about the disorderliness of the
mind and the vagaries of the imagination: "Mai nous ne dirons jamais assez
d'injures au desreglement de nostre esprit." (I,4,27) He repeatedly criticizes
the mind for its feebleness and inability to sustain concentration in the first
essay of Book Two, "De l'inconstance de nos actions":

> Je crois des hommes plus mal aiséement la constance, que
> toute autre chose, et rien plus aiséement que l'inconstance
> (316)

> (c) Nous flottons entre divers advis; nous ne voulons rien libre-
> ment, rien absoluement, rien constamment. (317)

> Nous sommes tous de lopins et d'une contexture si informe et
> diverse, que chaque piece, chaque momant, faict son jeu. Et se
> trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de
> nous à autruy. (321)

The mind is the scene of the crime which Montaigne blames and punishes
himself for by forcing himself to write a sustained and uniquely-focused
commentary. But the mind is too volatile and the self-centered commentary
spills over continuously onto the world. In "De l'oisiveté" (I,8) Montaigne
turns to writing as a method of harnessing his mind and 'registering' his
thoughts ("j'ay commance de les mettre en rolle"). Otherwise, his mind
is like a runaway horse, it produces "chimères et mostres fantasques." (idem.)
And the same monstrous image is later transfered to writing: the irrational
disorder of the Essais is like a highly manneristic picture frame:

> Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crotesques et corps
> monstrueux, rappiecez de deivers membres, sans certaine
> figure, n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite? (I,
> 28,181)

which encloses an empty space, the absence of la Boétie's scholarly and

rhetorically constrained texts, the *Contre Un* and the *29 Sonnets d'Etienne de La Boétie*, which form "un tableau riche, poly et formé selon l'art." (*idem.*,182)[24]

As it vacillates between its own rhetorical and anti-rhetorical stance, Montaigne's text is "a book with a wild and bizarre plan": "C'est (c) le seul livre au monde de son espece, d' (a) un dessein farouche et extravagant." (II,8,364) It uses writing as *pharmakon* which attempts to stabilize in fixed form the flights of fancy of the mind: "Nostre esprit est un util vagabond, dangereux, et temeraire: il est malaisé d'y joindre l'ordre et la mesure." (II,12,541)[25]

The text of the *Essais*, according to Michel Beaujour,[26] dialectizes the tension between Montaigne's *cogito*, 'je pense,' and its active expression, 'je parle,' or by extension within the limits of this opposition, 'j'écris.' Montaigne was not content to philosophize in the absence of writing. The act of writing and the *lieu de l'écriture* as a privileged place become the battleground for the tension in the text between dialectic and rhetoric. The externalization of Montaigne's study of himself in the form of commentary actually permits the disappearance into the writing of self as Subject where it reappears as an alienated self, or Other. This psychological vanishing act is in part the result of Montaigne's reproaches of the instability of the mind and his denigration of the imagination delicately balanced with his attraction to poetic and philosophical 'madness,' the frenzied activity of a fertile mind. Montaigne's insistence that he is consubstantial with his book is also an affirmation of his powerlessness to impede a complete exteriorization of the self;

[24] Cf. Beaujour, *op. cit.*, p. 16 note 2: "un vide . . . trou ou viendrait se loger les textes de l'Autre . . . textes formés selon les finalités rhétoriques et/ou selon l'art que transgressent les *Essais*."

[25] Is this indirect prefiguration of the Classical episteme of *mathesis* "entendue comme science universelle de la mesure et de l'ordre" (Cf. *Les mots et les choses*, p. 70) merely a coincidence or does it herald a new shift in the predominant sixteenth-century "code of knowledge"? Montaigne is certainly not an isolated specimen mistakenly born into the wrong century. Foucault's mold, however, broadly defined to apply to the entire sixteenth-century, cannot neatly contain all the mental permutations of such a diversified thinker as Montaigne. He stands in a transitional generation between the self-assured confidence of Rabelais, for example, and the Cartesian doubt of self-deprecating mannerist literature. Just as the undirected, unbridled minds of men "se jettent desreiglez, par-cy par là, dans le vague champ des imaginations" (I, 8, 33), so the *Essais* themselves form, in Montaigne's opinion, "une marqueterie mal jointe."

[26] Cf. Beaujour, *op. cit.*, p. 16-19.

"Je n'ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m'a faict, livre consubstantiel à son autheur ... " (II,18,648) The textual effigy of Montaigne imitates the silent recognition of truths in his mind as he uses knowledge to interpret himself and the world.

According to Gadamer, the self-alienation into which Montaigne leads himself is perhaps an inevitable consequence of self-representation:

> All writing is, as we have said a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because this meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down, this transformation back is the real hermeneutical task. The meaning of what has been said is to be stated anew.... [27]

Montaigne's insistence that he is writing only for himself as the sole object of his study (II,6, 357-359) is perhaps his greatest deceit. All other reasons aside, Montaigne needs a reader in order for meaning to be hermeneutically restored to his text. Malebranche wittily exposes the deceit: "Mais s'il composé son livre pour s'y peindre, il l'a fait imprimer afin qu'on le lût." [28]

Another paradox of writing: by choosing to write, Beaujour implies that Montaigne alienates his *cogito*. Instead of trying to retrieve knowledge of himself internally, he writes endlessly, delving ever deeper into himself and assuring the exile of the self into writing as Other. Philippe Sollers' rewording of the Cartesian *cogito* to fit Mallarmé also applies to Montaigne: "j'écris, donc je pense à la question: qui suis-je?" [29] Montaigne's book becomes his body and ultimately his tomb; after having completely stepped into his text, he has no real referent in the external world. Montaigne punishes his mind for its aberrant nature yet he privileges himself in his rhetorical stance. He forces the monsters of his *cogito* into words. So the inner subject manifests itself as an external object, congealed in writing, but like Proteus, it is constantly moving and changing.

In his solitary confinement, Montaigne is always to be found sifting truths: "Cette capacité de trier le vray ... je la dois principalement à moy.... " (II,17,641) Montaigne's text is an unstable world of *copia*, overflowing with resemblances to itself, to other texts, to the world at large, and bearing figures of its own reflexivity. From the midst of this maze of knowledge, the truths which emerge from the stable yet curiously unstable interplay of resemblances are personal ones:

---

[27] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 354-355.

[28] In *Recherche de la verité* cited by Beaujour in *Miroirs d'encre*, p. 155.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Son idée de la vérité s'affranchit des buts d'une connaissance objective et ontologique et devient l'idée d'une vérité personnelle. La rigueur de celle-ci consiste dans la précision de l'écoute de soi. Elle dit seulement ce qui est vrai pour l'auteur au moment où il écrit. . . . [30]

Montaigne may contradict himself constantly, but by admiting the contradictions, he makes himself a bearer of truth. The elusiveness of truths demands that they be continuously sought after. If objective or divine truth belongs only to God, the consequence for man is that he must pursue subjective truths by whatever means they present themselves for his scrutiny. Consider the movement of truth in these citations:

Nous sommes nais à quester la verité; il appartient de la posseder à une plus grande puissance (III,8)

Je festoye et caresse la verité en quelque main que je la trouve, et m'y rends alaigrement (III,8)

La vérité a ses empeschemens, imcommoditez, et incompatibilitez avec nous (III,10)

La verité et le mensonge on leurs visages conformes (III,2)

La sagesse de ma leçon est en verité (III,5)

Butor sees a conflict, however, between this subjective pursuit and what he calls Montaigne's dream of restoring 'a central paradise which is a perpetual absence.' At the same time, this dream is a perpetual promise to be fulfilled when commentary as secondary discourse perfectly overlaps the truth of the primary Text of the world:

Il lui faut donc reassembler toutes les parties du monde en une oeuvre annulaire, faisant pressentir en son coeur cette seule region pour lui habitable, ou pour ses amis. [31]

Montaigne's text looks back to the discourse of the ancients through the myth of the cratylic transparency of meaning in ancient languages and forward to a utopia where the voice of sincerity (Montaigne's?) holds sway as it speaks in a natural language through which Truth shines transparently in all its glory.

Most fortunately for us, Montaigne has enclosed himself deeply in his own prison-house of writing. The felicitous exercise of his punishment, if we adhere to this interpretation, enables us to experience his world anew and to

---

[30] Hugo Friedrich, *Montaigne* (Paris, 1968), p. 32.

[31] Butor, *Essais*, p. 208.

interpret his wisdom or folly for ourselves into new understandings. Just as there will always be new meanings for a text, since "the word of human thought is directed toward the object, but it cannot contain it as a whole within itself," [32] so Montaigne's reading of 'the prose of the world', and our reading of Montaigne, represents only a partial understanding. Our own thoughts, as we read Montaigne, are constantly moving toward new perceptions as we reach new horizons of understanding.

Kenneth R. Berri is a graduate student in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Berkeley. His emphasis is French literature; his minor literatures are Italian and ancient Greek. After having taken his B.A. degree (1973) at Berkeley, he studied at the University of Chicago (M.A. 1976) and at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Areas of special interest to him are literary theory, relations between classical and modern literature, lyric and symbolist poetry, and nineteenth-century French literature. He has published a structuralist reading of Jules Verne's *Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Bégum* and has recently begun research for a dissertation on *écrits esthétiques* from Diderot to Baudelaire.

[32] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 385.