

# MONTAIGNE STUDIES

## An Interdisciplinary Forum

Philippe Desan, Editor  
The University of Chicago

Managing Editor : Benjamin Ransom

### Editorial Board

Jean Balsamo  
Université de Reims

Lawrence Kritzman  
Dartmouth College

Telma de Souza Birchal  
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais

Ulrich Langer  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Claude Blum  
Université Paris-Sorbonne

Alain Legros  
CESR, Tours

Warren Boutcher  
University of London

Frank Lestringant  
Université Paris-Sorbonne

Concetta Cavallini  
Università di Bari

Joan Lluís Llinàs Begon  
Universitat de les Illes Balears

Valerie Dionne  
Colby College

Olivier Millet  
Université Paris-Sorbonne

Véronique Ferrer  
Université de Nanterre

John O'Brien  
University of Durham

Thierry Gontier  
Université Lyon 3

Nicola Panichi  
Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa

George Hoffmann  
University of Michigan

Paul J. Smith  
Rijksuniversiteit Leiden

The journal MONTAIGNE STUDIES is strongly interdisciplinary and welcomes a variety of approaches from different disciplines and written in either French or English. Contributors should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

MONTAIGNE STUDIES (ISSN 1049-2917) is published annually in the Winter at the University of Chicago. The cost of softbound double issues is \$32 or 32€, plus postage and handling. Checks are payable to "The University of Chicago".

Editorial correspondence and purchase requests should be sent to Philippe Desan, MONTAIGNE STUDIES, The University of Chicago, 1115 East 58<sup>th</sup> Street, Chicago, Illinois 60637.

Copyright 2018 by The Division of the Humanities, The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

# Montaigne Studies

## An Interdisciplinary Forum

### Montaigne, Affect, Emotion

Editor, Todd W. Reeser

Volume XXX • March 2018 • Number 1-2

### Contents

TODD W. REESER Essaying Affect	3
ZAHİ ZALLOUA Essayistic Desire: Affect and Meaning in the <i>Essais</i>	15
ALISON CALHOUN Montaigne's <i>Branloire</i> : Passage, Impact, Vibrant Matter	29
ELIZABETH GUILD On Tenderness and Tickling: Body, Emotion, Thought	41
JEFFREY N. PETERS Of Lost Islands: Affect and the New in Montaigne	55
KATHERINE IBBETT Faking it: Affect and Gender in the <i>Essais</i>	69
EMILIANO FERRARI Montaigne on Fictional Emotions: From Rhetoric to Knowledge	83
TIMOTHY HAMPTON Montaigne's Gaiety	97
KATIE KADUE Irritating Montaigne	111

## Irritating Montaigne

*Katie Kadue*

[B] Vaines pointures, [C] vaines par fois, [B] mais toujours pointures.  
“De la vanité”<sup>1</sup>

In “De l’oisiveté,” a kind of belated preface to the *Essais*, Montaigne explains how his planned pastoral retirement has mutated into a parade of annoyances. His hopes of pasturing himself to his tower, to “ne me mesler d’autre chose, que de passer en repos, et à part, ce peu qui me reste de vie” (I, 8, 33), has horribly, depressingly backfired. His mind, instead of mildly maturing unto death, has become perversely productive, bearing him so many random mental monsters, “les uns sur les autres, sans ordre, et sans propos,” that he has no choice, if he ever hopes to “les mettre en rolle,” but to become their full-time manager (33). But if the proclaimed goal of this accounting is, eventually, to make his mind ashamed of itself by showing it its formless excretions for what they are, it seems a Sisyphean task. By the beginning of “De la vanité” – deep in the third book of the *Essais*, hundreds of pages into this *mise en rolle* – Montaigne is still asking, in vain, “quand seray-je à bout de représenter une continuelle agitation et mutation de mes pensées” (III, 9, 946)? The answer, we may guess at this point, is never. Even in the space of Montaigne’s rhetorical question, the idea of describing his disordered mental activity as *agitation* seems to require its own re-accounting, demanding a mollifying – or is it exacerbating? – modification into *mutation*.

The uncertainty on both Montaigne’s part and our own about whether the effects of this management of mental and textual agitation are calming or only further agitating comes out of his attempt to manage both his personal and his political situation in slight, local, and temporary ways. Asides, self-corrections, suspensions, and their relatives are the mechanisms by which Montaigne’s writing reproduces itself, offering local repetitions with minor differences as potentially the only available responses to the intractable and incommensurable problems of the French wars of religion, on the one hand, and the writing of the self, on the other. That his micro-movements through

---

<sup>1</sup> Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Pierre Villey (Paris: PUF, 2004), 950.

minor differences lead him out of aporia would be an overstatement; they do no more than reproduce, but not exactly replicate, the conditions of his life. As he complains in “De la vanité”:

[B] Nous nous corrigeons aussi sottement souvent comme nous corrigeons les autres. [C] Mes premières publications furent l’an mille cinq cents quatre vingts. Depuis d’un long traict de temps je suis envieilli, mais assagi je ne le suis certes pas d’un pouce. Moy à cette heure et moy tantost sommes bien deux; mais, quand meilleur, je n’en puis rien dire. Il feroit beau estre vieil si nous ne marchions que vers l’amendement. C’est un mouvement d’yvroigne titubant, vertigineux, informe, ou des joncs que l’air manie casuellement selon soy. (III, 9, 964)

Abruptly shifting mid-sentence from a staggering drunk to some randomly blowing reeds, Montaigne seems to have decided that mobile intoxication is too exciting an image to convey the futility of the self’s progress, and that anything more than mildly troubled vegetable sessility would oversell the point.

Put another way, the unpredictability of the self’s progress is less an extraordinary cause of drama for Montaigne than an ordinary cause of irritation. His commitment to the endless description (and re-description) of his erratic agitations has often been understood as an ethically exemplary practice of calm introspection even in the face of uncertainty. His constant vigilance over his body and mind is taken as a philosophically sophisticated technology of the self, a *mise en rôle* that, whatever its practical failures, adequately fulfills a moral imperative to tell the truth about oneself.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this open-ended self-examination is often taken as one of our essayist’s purely literary or aesthetic, even decadent, charms: his frequent close-ups on his idiosyncratic quirks have been likened to shameless selfies, a harmless narcissism that makes us feel better about our own self-involvement by being so completely autotelic, too absorbed in its own process to make any ethical claims at all.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jean Starobinski is typical in this regard: “Whatever the outcome of our actions [...], Montaigne is in no doubt as to the correct moral choice: insistence on veracity remains his unvarying standard of judgment, his permanent criterion for criticizing morals and for governing his own behavior. [...] Such is his concern for honesty that it is untouched even by his recognition of the mutability of all things.” *Montaigne in Motion*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Desan notes that the French media has credited Montaigne with inventing the blog and the selfie. *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Desan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5. Sarah Bakewell, in her popular *How to Live: or, A Life of Montaigne in One Question and Twenty Attempts at an Answer* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2010), emphasizes Montaigne’s pleasure in the randomness of his writing process. Referring to a reader who compared “essaying” to “firing a pistol to see if it shoots straight, or trying out a horse to see if it handles well,” she underscores Montaigne’s equanimity: “Montaigne discovered that the pistol shot all over the place and the horse galloped out of control, but this did not bother him. He was delighted to see his work

When Montaigne diverges from such topics of import as theology, education, cruelty, judgment, and honor and devotes the same careful attention to salad, thumbs, cats, and laziness, readers tend to experience not agitation but charm. But looking to Montaigne as either an ethical exemplar or a blogger *avant la lettre*, lofty and laudable or comfortingly close to home, prevents us from seeing the profound – or rather, profoundly superficial – agitation and irritation pulsing awkwardly and irregularly on the surfaces of both the *Essais* and the human body with which Montaigne famously claimed his book was consubstantial. The annoyances of domestic life and the pain of his kidney stones, like the agitation of his thoughts, can only be temporarily quieted by constant adjustments, and the resulting smoothing out of irritation, only ever partially and provisionally successful, in a kind of incomplete exfoliation, is a constant, iterative, small-scale labor that constitutes Montaigne’s text.

This essay will take Montaigne’s complaint of “continual agitation” seriously, if not quite to heart, as a discourse that troubles the border of private and public experience. Elizabeth Guild’s recent effort to “unsettle Montaigne” poses an important challenge to self-help-friendly readings of Montaigne’s tolerance and equanimity: the goal of Montaigne’s writing, she states at the outset of her book, is “not tranquillity, but a more provisional containment of anxiety.”<sup>4</sup> When she addresses Montaigne’s thinking through and performance of unsettling affects like agitation, however, Guild concludes with an assurance that ethical ends are always clearly in Montaigne’s sights: “For the soul to be moved to act well, it must be shaken out of tranquillity.”<sup>5</sup> The implied causal connection here between being shaken and acting well suggests that the point of being agitated out of tranquillity is then to recollect oneself *in* tranquillity, an end that, if ever temporarily achieved in the *Essais*, is continually shaken off.<sup>6</sup> When Guild goes on to focus on the intense, operatic feelings of fear and grief and attributes to Montaigne’s unsettlement a therapeutic function, we get the sense that Montaignean peace of mind may have to be worked for, but it can be heroically achieved nonetheless. I will argue, by contrast, that both the apparent capacious calm and the apparent benign playfulness of the *Essais* are unsettled not by surges of emotion that can then be cleanly assimilated into an ethical system, but rather by what Sianne Ngai calls, in her diagnosis of textual irritation, “a minor but continuous state of inflammation or discomfort.”<sup>7</sup> This state is coextensive with an affect that

come out so unpredictably” (8).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Guild, *Unsettling Montaigne: Poetics, Ethics and Affect in the Essais and other Writings* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Guild points out that minor features like repetitions and hesitations leave traces of Montaigne’s “unsettled” affect, but identifies her own focus as the broad workings of “figuration,” including irony, anamorphosis, and “highly charged” motifs (*ibid.*, 3). By contrast, I attend to small formal traces as signs of affect’s role not as a big mover and shaker in Montaigne’s writing, but as an iterative, irritating, and (temporarily) maintaining presence.

<sup>7</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 207.

is “explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release.”<sup>8</sup> Montaigne’s excruciatingly local discomforts, deeply but only literally internal to his house and body, should complicate readers’ impulse to identify with the essayist either ethically or aesthetically, as well as our understanding of the relationship Montaigne models between the private, domestic self and the public, political world.

Kidney stones and household chores are incongruously paired, both in my analysis and in the *Essais* themselves, under the same affective rubric. The irritation they cause is defined by both its association with semipermeable boundaries between self and world – like the skin, or, in Montaigne’s case, his domestic space and his urethra – and its incommensurability with its object, if it has an object at all. Classifying irritation as “a mood” as opposed to an emotion, Ngai draws on Annette Baier’s distinction: while emotions are “about something,” “moods, if they are about anything, seem to be about nearly everything”; they are “either objectless, or have near all-inclusive and undifferentiated objects. They sometimes involve emotions searching for appropriate objects.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet part of what makes Montaigne’s irritation – and writing about that irritation – so irritating is that it often doesn’t *quite* seem to qualify as irritation, chafing against the category discordantly, if only slightly so. Montaignean irritation is a kind of mildly frustrated expression, the low-level but unshakeable sense that some kind of vague blockage is disrupting the normal commerce between internal and external spaces, or between signifier and signified. In this, it sits most comfortably with Ngai’s definition of irritation as “offishness,” “incongruity,” “disproportionality,”<sup>10</sup> or “a strangely aggressive kind of weakness.”<sup>11</sup> Ngai derives her understanding of this feeling in part from Aristotle, who says the irritable man is one who is affected too much or for too long (we are “irritated by the wrong things, more severely and for longer than is right”), and adds a corollary: we are irritated by people who do not feel outraged enough, or who feel merely irritated, at what should be really upsetting.<sup>12</sup> In Ngai’s case study, Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand*, the biracial protagonist displays the same psychosomatic annoyance when confronted with unattractive teacups as she does when faced with assertions of racial inferiority, and readers balk. They accuse her not exactly of feeling the wrong thing, but of feeling it incorrectly and in the wrong proportion, or of confusing bad aesthetics – which should merely irritate us – with bad politics or ethics, which should enrage us.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Annette Baier, “What Emotions Are About,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 4 (1990): 1-29, 3, quoted in *ibid.*, 179.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 106, qtd. in *ibid.*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 175. Ngai is, of course, writing about a much different text and a much different social and political context than Montaigne’s, and I do not mean to

Some theorists of the passions have, however, seen irritation as salutary, or at least as preservative of virtue. Juan Luis Vives saw irritation as less an improper than a preliminary response, the early stirrings of what may ripen into the full-fledged feeling of hatred, anger, or envy: an “initial brush” or “first contact with something discordant or harmful,” a small shock to warn us that we have crossed, if only infinitesimally, an invisible moral boundary, checking evil’s seductions and teaching us what our body and soul ought to want.<sup>14</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder finds irritation working at the heart of life itself, or rather, at the heart of the heart. “Has anything more wonderful ever been seen than a beating heart with its inexhaustible irritation?” Herder asks, noting how such irritation “spreads out from this inexhaustible fount and abyss through our whole *I*, enlivens each little playing fiber.”<sup>15</sup> In this sense of small-scale energetic animation, irritation rubs up against what is elsewhere referred to as “agitation.” Steven Goldsmith’s *Blake’s Agitation* takes as its point of departure the convergence – in Blake’s poetry, in Enlightenment and Romantic thought, and in our own critical practice – of agitation’s two senses: affective and political. Agitation is at once “an interior, *affective* state” of unsettled emotion, what Jean-François Lyotard calls a “visceral vibrato, an excitation of the life force,”<sup>16</sup> and a form of public activism that aims to unsettle a political state.<sup>17</sup>

For Montaigne, however, agitation’s continual excitation is not exactly exciting, and the interior commotion of his irritation never seems to produce any kind of discernible echo in the political world. If agitation, in Goldsmith’s account, articulates a bridge between private and public, making internal feelings “legible on the body’s surface,”<sup>18</sup> the effects of Montaigne’s “continual agitation” are often invisible; sometimes, the invisibility of effects is precisely the cause of irritation. That his household affairs are quite materially limited and particular to his estate literalizes the “domestic” use and “commodité

suggest any equivalence between Montaigne and Larsen or her protagonist. But I find Ngai’s diagnosis of the misguided expectation that affect can and must “legibly, unambiguously, and immediately” (188) respond to social and political realities to be instructive here.

<sup>14</sup> Juan Luis Vives, *The Passions of the Soul: The Third Book of “De Anima et Vita,”* trans. Carlos G. Noreña, *Studies in Renaissance Literature Vol. 4* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 60.

<sup>15</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, “On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul,” *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 189, 190. For a sustained study of Herder’s interest in irritation, see Amanda Jo Goldstein, “Irritable Figures,” in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, ed. Dalia Nassar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx,” trans. Cecile Lindsay, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 327-28, qtd. in Steven Goldsmith, *Blake’s Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Goldsmith, *Blake’s Agitation*, 43, 49.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

particuliere” Montaigne circumscribes in “Au lecteur” as his book’s only purview (3), and his failure to discharge his kidney stones means not only that his pain continues, but also that he lacks an external referent for his pain. Both his bodily and his linguistic products, he complains when calling his writing “des excremens d’un vicil esprit” barely more presentable than the contents of a chamber pot, are “tousjours indigeste” (III, 9, 946), neither totally and satisfactorily absorbed into the body nor totally and satisfactorily expressed out of it.

The somewhat illegible and somehow incomplete character of irritation makes it like those minor, microscopic movements of and between bodies identified by affect theory as worthy of consideration not despite but because of how they elude our detection, wafting somewhere under the threshold of the bigger, bolder emotions. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, evocatively titled “An Inventory of Shimmers,” Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth cast the sifting out of these ineffable phenomena as a kind of foraging expedition in an enchanted forest, the specimens collected in (and gently released from) the “sieves of sensation and sensibility” with an awe at their “vaporious evanescence,” their “intracellular divulgences.”<sup>19</sup> For theorists like these, affect, even or especially in its most ephemeral appearances, always proves excessively seductive, always teasingly escaping the bounds of our reason. But for all such romanticizing of the “mere” and the “slight,” irritation – that which is just plain annoying – is as minor as any fleeting flight of fancy, but far less charming. Montaigne offers us an inventory not of shimmers, but of pinpricks. Somehow flat even in their sharpness, recurrent enough to feel constant but never regular enough to be predictable, what Montaigne, describing his household cares in “De la vanité,” calls “vaines pointures” suspend themselves on the surface of the skin, never quite reaching the intensity of passion despite their occasional half-hearted gestures in that direction.

Irritation is Montaigne’s mode not only affectively but also politically. When Montaigne’s political investments have been acknowledged, he has been cast as one who would smooth out, not exacerbate, prickly differences. David Quint has argued that the *Essais* provide a more than adequate response to Montaigne’s political situation, taking us into an enlightened ethical age with forward-thinking attempts to reform the French nobility out of the pettiness and cruelty that had led to the “troubles” of the time. Quint describes Montaigne’s prescribed political virtue as “a pliant goodness” born of “ordinary fellow feeling,” a code of conduct that is above all “accommodating to other human beings,”<sup>20</sup> perhaps his readers most especially. Ventriloquizing Montaigne as saying “it is heroic enough to be a human being,” Quint finds it easy to go along with Montaigne’s proposed ethic of accommodation,

<sup>19</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Gregg and Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>20</sup> David Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the Essais* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), ix.

accepting it as “not a perfect morality, merely the best available.”<sup>21</sup> Envisioning Montaigne’s – and his own – project as absorbing all potential conflict into a flexible and forgiving moral program, Quint overlooks some of the itchier, messier moments in the *Essais*, moments that do not quite muster a violent resistance to assimilation into tolerance and tranquillity but that “trouble” the case of any such assimilation, with that word carrying both affective and political weight.

I aim to trouble as well as be troubled by Montaigne not only by taking his negative affects seriously, as Guild does, but also by not seeking to recuperate negative moments as part of a healthy morality and by instead preserving them in suspension.<sup>22</sup> In this I follow Ngai, whose stated goal is to “dwell on affective gaps and illegibilities, dysphoric feelings, and other sites of emotional negativity” in order to explore “ambivalent situations of suspended agency.”<sup>23</sup> This, Ngai says, is the aim of *Ugly Feelings*, the chapters of which “draw together two seemingly disparate philosophical definitions – Hannah Arendt’s claim that ‘what makes man a political being is his faculty of action’ and Baruch Spinoza’s description of emotions as ‘waverings of the mind’ that can either increase or diminish one’s power to act.”<sup>24</sup> My aim, then, is to exfoliate how the private, trivial, and futile preoccupations of Montaigne’s *Essais*, particularly “De la vanité” and “De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres,” constitute a political dimension, barely dimensional though it may be, that complicates not only the conceptual separation of action and passion but also Arendt’s particular distinction between the non- or pre-political (“labor” and “work”) and the political (“action”).<sup>25</sup> The merely skin-deep, shaky, and non-cathartic affect of irritation is Montaigne’s response to his medical condition and his task of estate management as well as to his deeply disordered age. Endless writing is both a “symptom” (III, 9, 946) of this age and, if only potentially, a management strategy.

The demotion from the vehement passions that are the focus of Guild’s study to the more minor and mundane affect of irritation involves a shift from heroic action to the domestic drudgery of managing oneself and one’s circumstances. Ugly feelings, characterized by a “flatness or ongoingness” rather than the dramatic entrances of emotions like anger or fear,<sup>26</sup> require such management. Writing about “De mesnager sa volonté,” where Montaigne discusses his mayoralty at greatest length, Timothy Hampton

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, xii.

<sup>22</sup> Here I depart again from Quint, who identifies himself as Gregory Sims’s hypothetical reader who “insists, come what may, on reading Montaigne as a moralist.” Sims, “Stoic Virtues/Stoic Vices: Montaigne’s Pyrrhic Rhetoric,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1993): 235-66, 252n, qtd. in Quint, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy*, 165n.

<sup>23</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

discusses how Montaigne's attempt to define himself as "both politically engaged and psychologically and emotionally disengaged" requires a careful interweaving of the discourses of home economics and moral philosophy.<sup>27</sup> This management of and between domestic and moral economies is attempted, in part, through the management of text. Pointing to the characteristic instance of textual adjustment in the essay's opening sentence – "peu de choses me touchent, ou, pour micux dire, me tiennent" (III, 10, 1003) – Hampton finds in "the halting *correctio*, 'pour micux dire,'" that the problem of describing a public service that is "engaging but not entangling" is at once ethical and compositional.<sup>28</sup> Retouching his sentence to insist on his indifference to what touches him superficially is one iteration of how Montaigne's smoothing out, or glossing over, of the effects of his irritation can bear an uncanny resemblance to irritation itself. When he goes on to elaborate on the difference between what touches him and what holds him, what engages and what entangles, Montaigne agitates to and fro through repeated examples, as if entangled in his own refusal of entanglement. Of "affaires estrangeres," he says he has agreed:

de les prendre en main, non pas au poulmon et au foye; de m'en charger, non de les incorporer; de m'en soigner ouy, de m'en passionner nullement: j'y regarde, mais je ne les couve point. J'ay assez affaire à disposer et ranger la presse domestique que j'ay dans mes entrailles et dans mes veines, sans y loger, et me fouler d'une presse estrangere. (1004)

Montaigne's obsessively rehearsed policing of the borders of his body, patrolling back and forth between what he will and will not do, suggests that even his refusals to manage external pressures require syntactical management on the page.

In "De la vanité," Montaigne's irritation comes from both the obvious incommensurability of his own trivial occupations with the crisis of civil war, on the one hand, and, on the other, his suspicion that talking about his own stupid life maybe really *is* an appropriate way to respond to the degraded political climate – even more appropriate, somehow, than either his actual engagement as Mayor of Bordeaux and member of the Politiques or any ideal, philosophical retirement from public concerns altogether. The *Essais* are peppered with expressions that express so little that we are left unsure whether to be pleased with their aphoristic pith or irritated by their self-negating glibness. "De la vanité" opens with a self-reflexivity so annoyingly satisfying it seems to settle the subject as soon as it is posed: "Il n'en est à l'avanture aucune plus expresse que d'en escrire si vainement" (III, 9, 945). Here what irritates is not "offishness" but a too-perfect coincidence of content and form, as involuted as an ingrown hair: the perfect example of vanity is writing vainly

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Hampton, "Difficult Engagements: Private Passion and Public Service in Montaigne's *Essais*," *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850*, ed. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 34.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

about vanity, which is exactly what this sentence does. At once an index and an exhaustion of Montaigne's resources, this opening does not prevent the chapter from going on for fifty-five pages, in which vanity begins to take on, and periodically shake off, political dimensions. After suggesting that his idle cataloging of agitations ought to be illegal, Montaigne backtracks: in such ignoble times, doing nothing is "comme louable" (946) – "practically praiseworthy," but not quite. A page later he adjusts himself again; far from a check on the national trend of corruption, his personal "desolation" in fact perfectly "se rencontre à la desolation de mon aage" (947). If the personal is political for Montaigne, it is only insofar as both are completely hopeless, and yet in constant need of comment, and those comments in constant need of revision.

If the situation is hopeless, however, it is not serious, or at least not spectacular, not dramatic, and not transformative. Montaigne responds to his profoundly "ungovernable age" with the superficial affect of irritation. Ngai explains that irritation, like the other apparently trivial affects she documents, functions as "a mediation between the aesthetic and the political in a nontrivial way."<sup>29</sup> She attributes the etiolated state of contemporary emotional life to the fact we no longer live in a time when our emotions translate as smoothly into political terms as they did for thinkers like Aristotle or Hobbes, who understood the affective dimension of politics under the sign of "relatively unambiguous emotions like anger or fear."<sup>30</sup> But affective responses to politics could be ambiguous even before late capitalism, and for Montaigne, agitated both in sympathy with the corrupted social and political body and by the incongruity of that sympathy, ambiguous emotions may have been all that was available.

That both the personal and the political could be understood as some kind of constant and incorrigible agitation is thus a sign less of a satisfying homology of private and public states than of their unhappy coincidence. If we might find in Montaigne's toggling between his worries about the *police*, or "polis," and "cette police d'affaires domestiques" (III, 9, 951) an instructive analogy between estate management and civil government, or a suggestion that private experience might have some significance for public life, he is quick to pre-empt any such neat conclusion by claiming that his activities are so politically meaningless that he would have ample time to reform his ways before anyone got around to holding him to account (946). But his professed lack of interest in being of public use is not because of any preference for home economics. Even when Montaigne admits the pleasure he derives from running his household, it is a pleasure "par necessité meslé de plusieurs pensements fascheux," to the point that it hardly seems a pleasure at all, "plus empeschante que difficile" (949).

As if to prove this, Montaigne has a hard time getting away from this topic he has so little interest in, constantly impeded by his compulsion to narrate yet another chore that irks him. "Je ne suis pas philosophe," he finally

<sup>29</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

says in exasperation, insisting that the inconveniences of estate management simply are what they are, and oppress him in exact accordance with their weight: "les maux me fouillent selon qu'ils poisent" (950). But just as he seems about to close the issue with a summarizing "En fin..." his irritation subsumes his entire being, becoming at once verb, subject, and object: "pour sottie cause qui m'y aye porté, j'irrite mon humeur de ce costé là, qui se nourrit après et s'exaspere de son propre branle; attirant et emmoncellant une matiere sur autre, de quoy se paistre" (950). Montaigne's "humor" is motored by irritation, until the humor seems to become irritation itself, chafing against itself as it sustains itself, or sustaining itself *by* chafing against itself.

The close proximity of self-nourishing to self-exasperation informs Montaigne's approach to managing not only his household but also his writing. In the midst of explaining – and, with his constant additions and recapitulations, performing – how something always goes wrong ("Il y a toujours quelque piece qui va de travers"), Montaigne once again seems on the point of pithily summing it all up: "Vaines pointures," the B text runs, "mais toujours pointures" (950). But he adds, in the C text, a qualifier: "Vaines pointures, [C] vaines par fois, [B] mais toujours pointures." This point – emphasizing the sometime triviality, which has already been established, without elaborating on what, if not trivial, these *pointures* might be – adds nothing, except another syntactical tic, extending our experience of pinpricks without clarifying anything, suggesting that, even if they are not always *vaines*, no other word is available to describe them, and so here we are again, redoubling the prick of triviality even if the point was to temper it.

The constant "vaines pointures" of household cares, which Montaigne then renames as "espines domestiques" (950) – these compulsive, minuscule self-corrections that are both exasperating for and sustaining of whatever animates the text – intrude everywhere in the *Essais*. In "De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres," we find these thorns further domesticated, into Montaigne's own body, in the form of his extremely irritating kidney stones. In the chapter of the *Essais* most explicitly, or at least nominally, concerned with the progressive transmission of personal qualities through generational lines, Montaigne focuses instead on the stone, a recurrent metabolic formation of his own body. His "qualité pierreuse" (II, 37, 763) is his body's capacity to petrify biological material into crystalline formations that, though they thankfully do not endure forever, last longer than their sufferer might hope. Arriving intermittently, neither with predictable punctuality nor with the habituating permanence of other innate qualities, Montaigne's kidney stones work in the local, unpredictable, and mostly invisible mode of irritation to preserve a family legacy, this "qualité pierreuse," like the estate that so vexes Montaigne, being owed to his father, Pierre.

What irritates him about these recently inherited internal pinpricks is their instability: the pain he feels is excruciating, but it only arrives in irregular intervals; his condition persists as a constant "qualité," but its existence is only proven when it (temporarily) no longer exists, and even when the stone passes, the puny physical evidence is in comic disproportion to the intensity of the

pain it caused. Though Montaigne gestures in the direction of ennobling his long struggle with kidney stones, and though the condition causes excruciating pain, there is something irrevocably comical about the stubborn interiority, smallness, and ordinariness of the "stone," in spite or even because of the inordinate suffering it causes and its frustration of the body's most basic natural functioning. In her analysis of Montaigne's *Journal de voyage*, in part a chronicle of his attempts to cure himself of the condition while in Italy, Alison Calhoun argues that Montaigne's passing of a stone is like extracting an arrow from a battle wound in that it provides concrete proof of his suffering, "though perhaps comically."<sup>31</sup> Calhoun's parenthetical admissions of the comic element of kidney stones do not go far enough, in my view, to give us a sense of just how unheroic this condition is for Montaigne, whose essayistic metabolism in "De la ressemblance" transmutes the stone not into a talisman of heroic action, but into a product of domestic labor, the source of suffering pathetically domesticated as "comme une fève" or "plus grosse qu'un gros grain de froment."<sup>32</sup> However painfully situated the stones may have been, beans and cereals hardly evoke the awe of a lethal weapon.

By attending to Montaigne's commitments to frivolity, drudgery, and deep irritation, we avoid reading his treatment of his kidney stones, household management, and other phenomena on the border of his interior self and the exterior world as straightforward reversals of traditional aristocratic values. Calhoun notes that, as deaths from illness began to overtake military deaths in the late sixteenth century, men of the noble classes had to think of more creative ways to stage heroic deaths – even sacrificing one's life for religious beliefs during the civil wars fell short of the epic ideal of dying on foreign soil. From Montaigne's account, the courageous performance of La Boétie on his deathbed would seem to elevate an ignoble death from the plague into a final act worthy of praise.<sup>33</sup> But in "De la ressemblance," rather than preparing for a singular, monumental act of death – *la belle mort* carefully planned by any *gentilhomme* deserving of the name – Montaigne treats the formation of his legacy as metabolic labor, irritations that shrilly demand constant alteration, adjustment, and correction.

"Je me suis envielly de sept ou huit ans depuis je commençay" (II, 37, 759), Montaigne informs us near the beginning of the essay, the micro-corrective "ou" converting certainty to ambiguity and reducing accounting to approximation, as if whether he has aged by seven or eight years since

<sup>31</sup> Alison Calhoun, "Redefining Nobility in the French Renaissance: The Case of Montaigne's *Journal de Voyage*," *MLN* 123, no. 4 (Sept. 2008): 836-54, 845. Montaigne mentions in the *Journal* that one stone had "exactement la forme du membre masculin." Calhoun, while expressing doubt as to whether we should read this "seriously," suggests that the stone could be a "subconscious substitute" for Montaigne's manhood (845). It could also be, I would argue, a resigned admission that whatever is left of his masculinity is in the toilet.

<sup>32</sup> Montaigne, *Journal de voyage*, ed. Fausta Garavini (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 331, 352, qtd. in Calhoun, "Redefining Nobility," 845.

<sup>33</sup> Calhoun, "Redefining Nobility," 840, 843.

beginning his project were not significant enough to warrant precision, but significant enough that the field of possibilities should be narrowed to two years. His indifference extends even to indifference: as explained in a parenthesis, the afflictions most people find “horribles” are – in a disproportionate affective response – “à peu près indifferentes” to Montaigne, who with his “à peu près” declines to specify the exact relationship of this feeling to true indifference (760). If the steady and, in theory, exactly quantifiable progress of chronological time is not the most important metric for Montaigne, it is because he has another system of measurement available, both more immediate and, paradoxically, less knowable (*contra* Elaine Scarry’s well-known claim, Montaigne’s great pain gives him little certainty<sup>34</sup>): the development of his stones.

This development is measured indirectly, as the product of Montaigne’s accommodation of the inconvenience. He describes his “five or six” previous episodes with the stone essayistically: “J’en ay desjà essayé,” implicitly comparing his *Essais*, as he does explicitly in the reference to the “excremens d’un vieil esprit” in “De la vanité,” to metabolic byproducts. But these experiences have not gone entirely to waste, for there is “en cet estat dequoy se soustenir,” something sustaining and even profitable, though this profit is described as coming out even, and coming out even means coming to nothing: “J’ay aumoins ce profit de la cholique, que ce que je n’avoys encore peu sur moy, pour me concilier du tout et m’acointer à la mort, elle le parfera; car d’autant plus elle me pressera et importunera, d’autant moins me sera la mort à craindre” (760). This creative, if not exactly smooth, way of accommodating death is one place where Montaigne, as he puts it, enters into “composition” with his rocky condition, understood as at once essayistic invention and experiential control: “J’entre des-jà en composition de ce vivre coliqueux,” he says, finding in it “de quoy me consoler et dequoy esperer” (759). Irritation is woven into the structure of his text, just as when he irritates his humor he becomes one with irritation – exasperating himself both into and out of being.

Sidesteps, tangents, and disappointing repetition with only trivial differences define Montaigne’s engagement with both his past and his present circumstances. Montaigne finds that history, like the constant mollification of recurring irritation, repeats itself without necessarily passing down any coherent lessons. When we learn, a bit belatedly, the provenance of “cette qualité pierreuse” in Pierre Eyquem, this is only a probability (“à croire”), not a certainty (763). And it is not, after all, the “pierres” themselves that

<sup>34</sup> What Scarry attributes to secondhand accounts of pain – “When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth” – applies as well to Montaigne’s experience of his own pain, which, for all its immediacy, he holds at arm’s length in his writing, and which breeds endless uncertainty. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

Montaigne has inherited, but the potential – “qualité” – they qualify. The stubborn propensity to produce stones *ad infinitum* – if, that is, it could continue to be passed on – could outlast any stone monument that endures into the future, though its sometime products are both unpredictable and undesirable. Montaigne himself, who later claims to have devoted himself to creating his life rather than his book, seems to have infinitesimally self-monumentalized in a manner akin to that of his self-forming kidney stones. Having spent a lifetime building himself up but, frequently stalled by contradictions and aporia, not quite getting anywhere, Montaigne finds an equivalence between the body of medical knowledge – riddled with inconsistencies but still, apparently, holding strong – and his own opinion, which are both based on examples and experience (764). By this account, the micro-tradition of an individual life – which again, for Montaigne, does not progress forward so much as move in small lateral ways, like the “titubant, vertigineux, informe” movement of a drunkard – is as valid as tradition passed down cumulatively, with the illusion of knowledge accumulating over time, through generations. Citing the long, medicine-free lives of his forefathers, Montaigne deems these self-contained, local “exemples domestiques” sufficient. And yet, Montaigne avers, his “antipathie” for the medical art is “hereditaire” (764); or, as he rephrases later, “derivée en moy par mes ancestres” (785). His distrust for tradition has itself been passed down through generations, its origins superfluous to the bounds of the individual body.

I have tried to indicate some of the ways in which both Montaigne’s irritation and our own can inform our reading of the *Essais*. I want to end with Steven Goldsmith’s claim, pursuant to his comparison of Blake’s agitation to our own critical practices, that Matthew Arnold’s “liberal ideal” of the critic as “a nonconforming, sovereign individual” has itself become the inert, default state we all conform to, and that we must seek out “stronger, stranger emotions” in order for texts truly to make us see and make ourselves and our world anew.<sup>35</sup> But as we seek out those stronger and stranger emotions, we need something to sustain ourselves, however precariously and haltingly, and the name for that self-sustenance, and the consubstantial self-exasperation, might be irritation. Irritating ourselves and our humors in the direction of vain causes does not have any inherent ethical or aesthetic value. But the attention irritation insists on – a constant minimal, or sometimes minimal, attention – can at least allow us to register how the relationship between our ethics and our aesthetics is often an abrasive one, if not always a thorn in our side, or a stone in our kidney.

University of Chicago

<sup>35</sup> Goldsmith, *Blake’s Agitation*, 272.