ABSTRACT

THE DEFICIENT SUBJECT:
THE PROBLEMATICS OF IDLENESS AND SOLITUDE IN MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE’S
ESSAIS

by Starra Priestaf

In Michel de Montaigne’s Essais the subject often retires from society in order to address
questions of selfhood. The problems of autonomy and self-knowledge permeate the subject’s
quest. In particular, the marginalized subject is central to Montaigne’s project and how he/she
acquires autonomy during moments marked by deficiency and fragmentation. At the center of
his discussion of idleness and solitude is a rhetoric of deficiency, negation and loss. This thesis
explores the paradoxical construct of idleness and solitude and the deficiencies inherent in being.
This project will also consider the ways in which Montaigne identifies marginalized figures as
carriers of truth, pleasure and plenitude.
The Deficient Subject:
the Problematics of Idleness and Solitude
in Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais*

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Introduction

During the Renaissance literary figures were often fiercely devoted to the quest for self-knowledge. In Sebastian Brant’s satirical poem about the vices plaguing humanity, he aspires to edify his fallible readers with the following prescription: “N’obtenir point d’autre richesse / Que de se connaitre soi-même.” ¹ The maddened figure is exiled from society and obliged to follow an endless course at sea in search of his reason. A half a century later, in Francois Rabelais’s text, Le tiers livre, Panurge, the protagonist performs countless interrogations in a quest for self-knowledge. In these texts the desiring subject embarks upon a pilgrimage into the unknown and occupies a geographically or symbolically marginalized position. Given this particular formulation, we are compelled to ask: is self-discovery in someway predicated on the notion of seclusion, exile? Must the desiring subject occupy a liminal, indeterminate space in order to access the intimacies of being? And in the end, does this inward posture precipitate greater self-knowledge? In the Essais, a collection of essays, Michel de Montaigne often withdraws from society in an effort to address similar questions of selfhood. In particular, the themes of idleness and solitude often frame the author’s quest. Although these concepts are certainly not complementary, the problems of agency and self-expression permeate these categories. An eminent humanist and statesman, Montaigne first published his Essais in 1580 and subsequent editions appeared in 1588 and 1590. There are numerous essays in which Montaigne analyzes the role of marginalized forms of representation; however, in this thesis I am interested in a close reading of “De l’oisiveté,” “Des Boyteux” and “De la solitude.” In these essays Montaigne often examines metaphors of deficiency and a self or selves that cannot be mastered and consequently elude definition. At the center of the essayist’s discussion of idleness and solitude is a rhetoric of deficiency, negation and loss. We witness the fragmentation or deficiency inherent in being and a self that manifests through a discourse of negation. Interestingly, Montaigne privileges these marginalized figures and identifies them as paradoxical carriers of truth, pleasure and plenitude.

In the first part of this paper, I explore the way in which the idle subject’s emergence is marked by participation in a system which both represses his/her autonomy while ensuring his/her existence. In the essays “De l’oisiveté” and “Des Boyteux,” Montaigne rhetorically performs an undoing in which the formation of the subject is contingent on subjugation to a

¹ Sébastien Brant La nef des fous trans. Nicole Taubes. (Corti: Les Massicotés, 1790) 3.28.
corrective force. The idle subject expresses agency appropriated from the very power insistent upon its subjectification and thus acquires autonomy through deprivation and submission. Furthermore, the marginalized subject occupies an indeterminate space from which paradoxical forms of productivity and creativity ultimately emerge.

The second part of this paper is thus dedicated to examining two central themes in Montaigne’s discussion of solitude: deprivation and reversal. The problematics of solitude permeate this essay in which solitary practices necessitate a delicate unraveling from society as well as the repression of one’s public identity. According to Montaigne, the undone self—free from exterior engagements—retires from society in search of psychological inwardness. Through the act of repossession Montaigne aspires to live only for himself, to minutely and rationally examine himself. The text underscores this repossession—the taking back of the self so as to secure a sense of stability; however, implicit in the representation of the undone self are signs of loss and negation. Moreover, apprehension and anxiety mark this separation as the subject desires to preserve even the minutest association with society. My reading of “De la solitude” thus discloses that solitary practices do not engender stability, rather the appearance of a fragmented self.
I. Idleness and the Rhetoric of Negation in Michel de Montaigne’s Essais

1. Sans une certaine semence: the generative force of idleness

Perhaps one of Montaigne’s most celebrated essays, “De l’oisiveté” recounts his retirement from civic life. Published in 1580, this short essay appears to condemn idleness and its vain progenies; rather, upon further analysis, I will attempt to demonstrate that “De l’oisiveté” is a eulogy to inactivity and deficiency. In the Essais and certainly in “De l’oisiveté,” the various representations of idleness contribute to a revalorization of natural and unrestrained production. Montaigne exploits the theme of idleness through agricultural, biological and psychic metaphors. Most notably, he uses a rhetoric of negation in order to capitalize on the anomalous productions of idle fields, females, and minds. Near the end of the essay, Montaigne retires into idleness and registers the numerous anomalies of his idle mind. Although this unnatural psychic crop degrades the mind’s terrain, the retired essayist esteems the mind’s vain productions. Ultimately, it seems that deficiency produces an exemplary work of fecundity and utility; the useless writings render a fruitful oeuvre, a literary crop inseminated with rhetorical negativity.

In “De l’oisiveté,” Montaigne’s point of departure for his discussion on idleness is the image of fallow lands. In the imagery he uses here, Montaigne juxtaposes two agriculturally divergent spaces. Idle lands engender a thousand types of unfruitful vegetation; whereas, the labored field—a spatially demarcated and organized area—constitutes a systematic harvesting of certain crops. The essayist stresses the corrective nature of manual labor—a secondary component that impedes the vain and disordered proliferation of weeds. He observes: “Comme nous voyons des terres oysives, si elles sont grasses et fertilles, foisonner en cent mille sortes d’herbes sauvages et inutiles et que pour les tenir en office, il les faut assubjectir et employer à certaines semences, pour nostre service…”2 What is striking here is that the fields are grasses and fertilles; the land does not become dormant or sterile despite the absence of cultivation or insemination. To be sure, hyperbolic imagery permeates this passage and contributes to the

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paradoxically productive effects of idleness. The verb “foisonner” signals the copious nature of weeds. He narrates how the field engenders a hundred thousand weedy species, an image which invokes immeasurable productivity. In response to this unregulated production, Montaigne stresses the corrective nature of manual labor—an external force that impairs the homogeneity of idle lands. These lines reveal a discourse of necessity; the idle fields are the object of need and must therefore be subjected to a corrective force or certaines semences.

From the discussion of idle lands, Montaigne explores the anomalous consequences of idleness through the metaphor of biologically idle females. Here, he narrates how idle females produce heaps of shapeless flesh without male semen and thus exploits the theme of idleness by projecting lack onto the inactive female. Montaigne offers the following observation: “…comme nous voyons que les femmes produisent bien toutes seules des amas et pieces de chair informes, mais que pour faire une generation bonne et naturelle, il les faut embesoigner d’une autre semence.” ³ Without the male semence, the female body, although not entirely sterile, engenders malformed monstrosities. And thus, Montaigne stresses the importance of a secondary agent which negates reproduction in isolation. Grammatically speaking, the conjunction mais separates the two sentences and signals the corrective or remedial function of the latter clause. The comparative structure of this sentence juxtaposes the two divergent forms of reproduction—the former is inherently problematic and monstrous, whereas the latter produces a natural and good descendant. More importantly, The female also becomes the object of grammatical substitution. She is replaced by the direct object “les.” In a way, her body, like the idle field, is the subjected terrain (the direct object) of the corrective action marked by the verb “embesoigner.” There is no intermediary between the feminine corporeal space and the verb which will embesoigne or put to work the female reproductive system. Since the idle female is not a sufficient companion onto herself she must yield to the generative male substance or “une autre semence.” The grammatical construction of these lines stresses the subjugated position of the female. As the impersonal verb “falloir” implies, the female subject is the object of a need or necessity. According to Montaigne, male insemination puts the female body to work and thus satisfies her deficiency or need.

This discourse of labor reveals a framework in which the female assumes a devalued position in the Essais. According to the essayist, it is necessary to subject, like the terres

³ Montaigne III.VIII.33a.
oysives, the female reproductive organ to the male seed. Montaigne stages her difference as biological lack; however, I would argue that she ultimately expresses a form of agency by externalizing her difference (birth of deformed flesh). In order to consider the question of difference, it’s worth reading Judith Butler’s theory of subjection to think about the female’s condition and the way in which her subjugated position may inform her condition. Is the idle female’s submissive posture, as Judith Butler argues, an essential component of her condition as a subject? By becoming a subjected figure does she in fact become a subject? In the introduction to her text on power and theories of subjection Butler claims that the subject comes into being through a dependency on power, an attachment which both paradoxically prompts the subject’s subordination and agency. Butler also posits that agency becomes a reflexive action; the subject enacts its own survival by eclipsing power with the very power responsible for initiating its ontological status as an individual. The subject’s survival demands the deprivation of agency and yet “subjection is nevertheless a power assumed by the subject.” In the context of the Essais, the idle female may be bound to a masculine force insistent upon her subordination; however, she eclipses this power with production. Although her agency manifests as deficient productivity, she appropriates this force of deprivation. By giving birth without the male sperm, she actualizes her own survival as a subject. Does this performance revendicate deficient productivity? Montaigne could have easily represented idleness through sterility, yet productivity emerges from negation. If power assumed by the female, despite its deficient status, is responsible for the formation of the subject, can we revendicate, on some level, the monstrous productions of idleness? If her survival necessitates the assumption of power and its subsequent expression, do the fleshy masses signal her condition as a subject and thus become less problematic?

After considering the generative power of idle females, Montaigne problematizes the psychic terrain of the idle mind. The imagery he uses here signals an inward movement; representation shifts from geographical and corporeal spaces to the psychic space of the mind. Montaigne proposes a corrective force to idle minds; however, he valorizes the fantastical reveries and monstrosities brought forth by his own unoccupied mind. Why does he assign a rhetorically negative value to idle minds only to later retire into full idleness? As a

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5 Butler 11.
complementary illustration to the subjugated lands and inseminated females, idle minds also engender anomalous productions. When passing from the indolent female body to the image of idle minds, he links these two images together. The latter image, as the colon implies, is an enumerative example of the female body “...il les faut embesoigner d’une autre semence: ainsin est-il des esprits. Si on ne les occupe à certain sujet, qui les bride et contreigne, ils se jettent desreiglez, par-cy par là, dans le vague champ des imaginations.” 6 In much the same way that the female body is subjugated to male insemination, the mind must be engaged by a stimulus in order to impede the emergence of its imagination. This stimulus exercises the mind by restraining its erratic and surging movement. As this passage suggests, idle minds throw themselves in a disorderly fashion as they literally become undone; “ils se jettent desreiglez.” The word “desreiglez” is defined as “unruly, disordered, outrageous, unbridled; unmannerly; immoderate, immodest; irregular, unreasonable, unmeasurable, out of frame.” 7 The rhetorical force of this adjective conveys the transgressive force of an idle mind. One might compare this force to the proliferation of weeds in the opening passage. The unoccupied minds become undone and step out of frame or resist being measured. Despite the sense of negation, it is interesting to consider the exemplary position that these minds assume when they display such irregularities. Owing to the apparent privation of order or moderation, idleness produces extreme effects of immeasurability. Much like the indistinct masses of aborted flesh engendered by females, the mind’s movement cannot be rendered distinct as it has transgressed the limits of moderation. In effect, I would argue that such immeasurability actually contributes to the unrivaled force of idleness and is comparable to the power assumed by the subjugated female.

Through the figure of analogy, the essayist further complicates the transgressive force of physic idleness. Here he cites a passage from Virgil’s Énéide: “Comme l’eau qui trémule en un vase d’airain / Réfléchit le soleil ou la lune brillante, Les éclats lumineux voltigent dans les airs / Et s’élèvent frappant les lambris du plafond.” 8 The refractive effects of light closely resemble the idle mind’s own reflexive movements. As the citation suggests, water acts as a reflexive

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6 Montaigne III.VIII.33a
7 Randle Cotgrave, A French-English dictionary; compil’d by Mr Randle Cotgrave: with another in English and French. Whereunto are newly added the animadversions and supplements, &c. of James Howell Esquire (London, 1634) 130.
medium and emits the light of the sun and the moon. Although the reflected light retains a likeness of the projected image, the light does not retain the original image only the energy emitted. The specular reflection closely resembles the reflexive structure of the *Essais.* Montaigne’s writings are the space onto which the mind’s trembling reveries are reflected.

In what follows, Ferdinand de Saussure’s work on the arbitrary nature of language will frame my analysis of the deficient status of representation and language. ⁹ Saussure’s seminal theories on linguistics, helps us to recognize the specular quality of language—like the refracted light—a medium that can never recuperate the emitted image. Saussure suggests that the linguistic sign functions as a symbolic placeholder for the signified concept and the sound image. Because of linguistic symbols, our thoughts—no longer “only a shapeless and indistinct mass”—are rendered distinct. Although linguistics works to combine the sound image and mental concept, “their combination produces a form, not a substance.” ¹⁰ In the *Essais,* the written word gives form to Montaigne’s vague thoughts; however, it fails to give substance to mental concepts. I would like to argue that this deficiency operates at the center of Montaigne’s writings as language can never fully restore the projected object or mental concept. As an imperfect vessel, language, like the vacillating water, is a specular manifestation of the mind’s productions. At the locus of the linguistic sign (meeting point between the signified and signifier) pervades discontinuity, thus resulting in deficient representation. The *Essais* therefore become an insufficient representation—a reflected image—of Montaigne’s thoughts. Does this discontinuity jeopardize Montaigne’s literary project? I think that Montaigne capitalizes on this discontinuity and exploits the anomalous condition of representation. To be sure, the essayist engages rhetorically negative metaphors that further signal the problems of deficiency which permeate the *Essais.* However, what is most striking is that Montaigne manages to situate these problems in an indeterminate space between negation and productivity.

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¹⁰ *Ibid.,* 166.
2. Monstrous Textual Progeny

Later in the essay, owing to the maturity and heaviness of his mind, the retired essayist claims that his mind will profit from idleness. After having shown the monstrosities generated in idleness, we may demand why Montaigne chooses to become idle. Does he believe that his mind need not fear idleness and its progenies because of his intellectual maturity and fortitude? Or, does he want to purposefully engender such monstrosities? When Montaigne retires to his ivory tower and falls into idleness; he offers the following account:

Dernièrement 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 rasseroir en soy : ce que j’esperois qu’il peut meshuy faire plus aisément, devenu avec le temps plus poissant, et plus meur. Mais je trouve … 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…

In the imagery used here, the idle subject is situated in a reflexive position. Grammatically speaking, this passage emphasizes the mind’s inward motion through the repetition of the reflexive pronominal verbs—s’entretenir and s’arrester. There is quite clearly a marked absence of external components as the mind both enacts and receives the action, a phenomenon analogous to the metaphor of the idle fields, women and minds. Furthermore, despite a favorable prospect regarding his retirement into idleness, his idle imagination figuratively shatters the mind and divides it into several fragments which “se jettent desreiglez, par-cy par là.” Here Montaigne expresses the force of the mind’s troubles in quantitative terms such as “cent fois” or the adverb of quantity “tant de.” This language contributes to the sense that even the essayist is incapable of measuring or expressing in finite terms the force of the imagination. It appears that these fantastical monsters resist containment with such force, preferring instead to transcend order. The discourse of negation—“sans ordre et sans propos”—similarly communicates an absence or privation and thus idleness is staged as a condition of lack. It would seem, then, that

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11 Montaigne I.VIII.34-35a.
12 Ibid., I.VIII.33a.
this passage juxtaposes images of incalculable production with a pronounced sense of deprivation.

In the context of “De l’oisiveté,” the condition of idleness is one in which vain forms signal abundant psychic activity. To be sure, the distinguishing mark of idleness is his rampant imagination, an immoderate faculty by which “chimeres” and monstres fantasques” are formed. In Renaissance thought the taxonomy of the imagination is rather variable. For instance, the imagination is understood as an intermediary faculty that transmits images from the external world and the substantive production (imaginations, fantasies) of this process. In his article on the imagination, John O’Brien discusses the numerous connotations of the imagination in the *Essais*. Derived from Aristotelian theory, “l’imagination se conçoit comme l’intermédiaire entre le sens extérieurs et la raison, à laquelle elle transmet les données sensibles, une fois composées en phantasmata, elle s’associe à la représentation du monde extérieur et intérieur….…” 13 In “De l’oisiveté,” the phantasms produced in idleness constitute a spectral manifestation of the impressions captured from the sensible world. Rather than suppress his phantasms, the essayist’s literary project is predicated on the production of illusive forms. The *Essais* are thus consecrated to examining the subject marked by deficient impressions.

3. *Je donne à mon ame tantost un visage, tantost un autre*: the displaced subject

Interestingly enough, when Montaigne refrains from attributing a corrective form to these idle thoughts, he initiates the creative force of the *Essais*. His *Essais* become a repository of idle thoughts, a literary space onto which he projects his fantasies. He recounts that “…que pour en contempler à mon aise l’ineptie et l’estrangeté, j’ay commancé de les mettre en rolle, esperant avec le temps luy en faire honte à luy mesmes.” 14 Although he wishes to shame his thoughts, his astonishment reveals a deeper pleasure as he wants to “contempler à [son] aise” the deformed progenies of a fallow mind. He could have suppressed his idle thoughts; however, he ensures their survival through registering. Despite their ineptitude, the essayist wishes to “mettre en

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14 Montaigne I.VIII.34a.
rolle” his monstrous crop of thoughts. The pleasure of contemplation is inscribed in the marvelous and unknown. Contemplation necessitates a reflexive movement; the subject gazes inward and observes the inept and strange markings of the self. The reflexive subject materializes through language; the subjective pronoun *je* observes its now externalized counterpart—the “tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques.” The doubled self operates as both agent and recipient of examination. And in turn the subject bears witness to that which previously remained hidden, unborn. Furthermore, when part of the self is projected as strange, a process of fragmentation or psychological estrangement occurs. In turn, part of the self is objectified and expressed as other, as alien. In his article, “Montaigne’s Fantastic Monsters and the Construction of Gender”, Lawrence Kritzman addresses this relationship between self-alienation and contemplation. His analysis foregrounds the revelatory effects of projecting one’s own otherness. He proposes that “Montaigne’s monster can be seen here as a figure for self-portraiture that renders the text the site of the *unheimlich*, the strange and yet the thoroughly familiar. […] By becoming a stranger to himself in the language of the essay Montaigne’s text ironically transcribes his most intimate secrets in a process of self-alienation.”

Kritzman’s argument underscores the binary constitution of the self and the way in which the text renders essential this strangeness. What is striking here is that the creation of the *Essais* is predicated upon a process of self-alienation. The estranged self bears witness to that which would otherwise remain secret, unknown. Although contemplation prompts a particular form of alienation, this rupture generates both scriptural and psychic excess.

Throughout this essay, rather than simply align himself with a particular force, Montaigne prefers a discursive method of representation. This method is perhaps a response to the excesses engendered in idleness, a way to mitigate boundless forms of inactivity. In particular, Montaigne vacillates between identification with masculine and feminine figures. We have encountered a transient figure, a subject whose condition is marked by variability or displacement. I would argue that Montaigne aligns himself with oppositional forces in order to lessen the anxiety associated with textual representation—a process that threatens to arrest the process of becoming. For example, in the opening lines of “De l’oisiveté,” through a discourse

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of inclusion, Montaigne inhabits the paternal force intent on eradicating agricultural idleness and the maternal force herself. He partially acknowledges his participation in a system which will suppress unregulated agricultural reproduction. Here, Montaigne aligns himself with a masculine force insistent upon exercising the field (“pour nostre service”). On the other hand, through textual production, the essayist also aligns himself with nature, a force elsewhere figured as maternal. 16 Most notably, his monstrous literary progeny bear close resemblance to the savage weeds teeming in the fallow field.

In the second exemplum of idleness the subject occupies multiple positions. Let us again take into account the role of paternal authority in the case of the self-inseminating female: “…et comme nous voyons que les femmes produisent bien toutes seules des amas et pieces de chair informes, mais que pour faire une generation bonne et naturelle, il les faut embesoigner d’une autre semence…” 17 When procreation is a process solely enacted by the female, paternal involvement is negated. Montaigne consequently informs the reader that paternal intervention is imperative. By setting the female’s body to work with his semen, the male imposes a form upon the otherwise deformed progeny. Although not explicitly addressed in this essay, by virtue of his sex—Montaigne fathered five girls—he is implicated in this intervention and subsequent generation of a “natural” descendent. Conversely, by privileging (through textual reproduction) the appearance of his idle imaginings, he valorizes solitary conception and aligns himself with the creative maternal force. And it would then appear that Montaigne’s paternity is temporarily displaced or silenced in order to cultivate an irregular and unnatural child. Montaigne’s reaction to idleness allows us to witness a self that cannot be mastered. In his text on monstrous progenies and the matter of paternal authority, Richard Regosin addresses the themes of displacement and repression in the *Essais:*

In this essay about the engendering of the mind, conception is figured not as male but as female, as nature and as earth, as if to imply that Montaigne’s own literary “paternity” must be bracketed, that it can never be other than a form of maternal reproduction, displaced, repressed. Montaigne has perhaps been a literary mother all along. 18

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17 Montaigne I.VIII.33a.

His analysis is compelling given the idea that Montaigne’s paternal authority is bracketed; however, I understand this “bracketing” not as an absolute form of repression, but as characteristic of Montaigne’s dualistic nature. In other words, the model of conception is predicated on the feminine and yet the presence of a paternal force signifies a resistance, an anxiety concerning the negation of authority. And thus the bracketed subject—at once both separate and part of the context—vacillates between identification with the feminine and the masculine.

4. A perfect pair: pleasure and deficiency in “Des Boyteux”

The relationship between deficiency and idleness is also central to Montaigne’s treatment of cripples in “Des Boyteux.” Here, Montaigne naturalizes difference and problematizes the marginalized position of truncated subjects and he once again situates himself in a position marked by lameness and monstrosity. Published in 1588, this essay appears in the third volume of the second edition of the *Essais* and emphasizes the essayist’s affinity for pleasure, difference and ignorance. Throughout the essay, crippled figures inhabit a privileged space and come to exemplify an absolute form of veracity or pleasure, specifically with regards to the deformed female subject. My reading will thus attempt to examine the paradoxical force of crippled subjects—figures marked by absence, excess, and a lack of mastery.

The opening lines of “Des Boyteux” focus on an amendment made to the calendar, a highly anticipated modification that fails to incite any change. Intended to rectify the errors inherent in the Julian calendar, the Gregorian calendar conforms more closely to astronomical and seasonal patterns. Although external forces work to effect this change, this amendment does not alter the quotidian rhythm of life. Montaigne observes that his neighbors nevertheless manage both commercial and agricultural affairs as nothing “bouge de sa place” and “ny l’erreur ne se sentoit en nostre usage, ny l’amendement ne s’y sent.”

19 These lines underscore the futile effects of the reform and consequently Montaigne cites other less intrusive modifications that could have satisfied the appearance of the irregular bissextile day left unresolved by both

19 Montaigne III.XI.1002-1003b.
calendars. He promotes the eventual erasure of this irregularity: “Et si par mesme moyen on.
pouvoit prouver à l’advenir, ordonnant qu’après la revolution de tel ou tel nombre d’annéees ce
jour extraordinaire seroit tousjours eclipse…” In the supposition he presents here, an arbitrary
instrument for measuring time will eclipse this jour extraordinaire. However, this attempt to
exercise jurisdiction over the vicissitudes of time is problematic. He points out that “il y a tant
de siecles que le monde s’en sert; et si, c’est une mesure que nous n’avons encore achevé
d’arrester…” Montaigne does not problematize the mutability of time; rather, he attributes the
indiscretion to our crippled perception. “Tant il y a d’incertitude par tout, nostre apercevance est
grossiere obscure et obtuse.” We implement instruments of change hoping to achieve mastery
over that which eludes us. Furthermore, these lines demonstrate that this temporal irregularity is
quite benign and thus lead us to question the estimation of crippled phenomena.

Montaigne extends the metaphor of uncertainty and mutability to human reason. Much
like the irregularities of the calendar, he emphasizes the vagaries of human reason. Rather than
pursue the truth, one addresses the consequences of a particular case. Consequently, one often
accepts that which one cannot contest and ignorantly apply oneself to certain causes. Montaigne
labels these individuals as plaisir causeurs; however, those who inquire into the causes do not
derive greater pleasure from the effects. He exploits this argument through a metaphor about
wine. “Ny le vin n’en est plus plaisant à celuy qui en scait les facultez premiers.” This
metaphor demonstrates that understanding becomes a paradoxical form of deficiency.

Knowledge of the primary components of wine fails to enrich the taste of the final product. In
contrast, the absence of knowledge—an inferior position—induces pleasure. The text suggests
that mastery and pleasure are not complementary forces. Rather, “le determiner et le sçavoir,
comme le donner, appartient à la regence et à la maitriser; à l’inferiorité, subjection et
apprentissage appartient le jouyr, l’accepter.” Montaigne employs a dialectic in which
mastery implies knowing and determining; however, it is divorced from pleasure. In contrast,
while a lack of knowledge implies inferiority and subjection, it is coupled with enjoyment.
When inferiority and enjoyment are paired as complementary forces, this allows us to think
about the paradoxical force of subjugation. It might appear that such a condition is wholly void

20 Ibid., III.XI.1003b.
21 Ibid., III.XI.1003b.
22 Ibid., III.XI.1003b.
23 Ibid., III.XI. 1003c.
24 Ibid., III.XI.1003c.
of power; however, I would suggest that the emergence of pleasure is a form of agency. The *plaisan causeur* or apprentice occupies a subjugated position only to transform lack into a form of power expressed as enjoyment. While Montaigne previously critiqued the referential nature of human logic, this passage depicts a disinterested subject whose evasive techniques (an aversion to mastery) bring about “quelque nouveau plaisir [...] à ceux qui l’essayent.” Later, I will explore the way in which Montaigne aligns himself with the ignorant apprentice and calls into question his former affinity for examining causes.

5. Truncation and Truth

Later in the essay, Montaigne refers to the trial of Martin Guerre, an infamous case of impersonation during which the evidence greatly surpassed the judge’s knowledge and thus, according to Montaigne, led to a dubious condemnation. Montaigne argues that the judge should have dismissed the case owing to insufficient understanding and knowledge. His account of this “accident estrange” is elliptical; he admits to having forgotten the main details of the case (“en me souvient aussi d’autre chose”\(^\text{26}\)). His second-hand testimonial omits the belated arrival of the crippled Martin Guerre, an appearance which discredits Guerre’s impersonator. I think that it is worth returning to the Montaigne’s previous analysis of mastery and inferiority in order to consider this case from a different vantage point. The judge occupies a superior position to which knowledge and truth are critical. As opposed to those who “s’amusent plus volontiers à en chercher la raison qu’à en chercher la vérité,”\(^\text{27}\) the judge examines the presented facts, hoping to unveil the truth. The judge may understand the principal properties of the trial and yet the truth is no more apparent. In this case, absolute truth and knowledge pertain to inferiority and lameness. In his analysis of Martin Guerre’s trial, Lawrence Kritzman addresses the relationship between lameness and truth. He remarks that Martin Guerre’s identity is confirmed by evidence of his deformed appendage when he belatedly limps into the courtroom. The “real” Martin Guerre becomes a spectacle of visual lameness; however, as Kritzman argues “the tardy cripple

\(^{25}\) Montaigne III.XI.1011b.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., III.XI.1008b

\(^{27}\) Ibid., III.XI.1003b.
who appears at the end of the trial, comes to embody the truth.”

Kritzman’s analysis conveys the paradoxical force of physical difference—his monstrous stature confirms his identity and vehicles truth. It would seem, then, that corporeal deficiency generates an excess of truth that ultimately threatens juridical authority.

Montaigne similarly explores his own difference in this essay. Since his deformities are not represented through visual lameness, he rhetorically represents his crippled identity. In much the same way that Martin Guerre’s lameness reveals the truth regarding his identity; I would argue that for Montaigne difference is integral to his identity. He states that, “je n’ai vu monstre et miracle au monde plus expres que moy-mesme.” The adverb of negation “ne…que” denotes a restriction; however, it does not imply absolute negation. What is striking here is that his alterity (through rhetoric) assumes a superlative quality. In effect, the negative particle discloses the singular nature of his identity. What is the function of projecting one’s own otherness? Will his alterity embody the truth or lead to further deformation? I would suggest that when Montaigne projects his difference he makes himself an object of and for contemplation. When the reflexive subject materializes through language, the subjective pronoun je observes its counterpart—the reflexive pronoun moy-mesme. Most importantly, during this process, the reflexive subject becomes acutely aware of his monstrous ontological status. Despite such an equivocal character, Montaigne privileges this crippled textual portrait. Moreover, it is quite clear that he will mitigate or efface his monstrousness through a discourse of mastery or correction.

The final exemplum of lameness is illustrated by the sexual potency of the crippled female. Here the essayist represents lameness through female sexuality. Most notably, this form of proficiency originates from deficiency and inferiority not from a superior force guided by mastery. Montaigne attributes the cripple’s sexual proficiency to the irregular movements of her body. Presumably fueled by personal experience, his supposition seems to originate directly from the source. In spite of this, he discredits his observation in favor of a verdict set forth by ancient philosophy:

J’eusse dict que le mouvement detraqué de la boiteuse apportast quelque nouveau plaisir à la besongne et quelque pointe de douceur à ceux qui l’essayent, mais je viens

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29 Montaigne III.XI.1006b.
d’apprendre que même la philosophie ancienne en a décidé; elle dit que, les jambes et cuisses des boîteuses ne recevant, à cause de leur imperfection, l’aliment qui leur est du, il en advient que les parties génitales, qui sont au dessus, sont plus plaines, plus nourries et vigoureuses.  

Apart from the veracity of either argument, the masculine gaze objectifies the feminine corporeal space and in effect, this voyeuristic observation frames sexual intercourse with a lame woman as a process of undoing and negation. What is particularly compelling about his explanation is that the image of engorged and plentiful genitals is coupled with lack and inferiority. Sexual intercourse with a boîteuse involves le movement détraqué—a disorderly motion symbolic of depravation and corruption. The adjective detraqué signals a perversion or defilement of the natural motions of sexual intercourse. This act is furthermore qualified as a besongne—the superior male force sets to work her idle body. As I have also attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of “De l’oisiveté”, the crippled female occupies a subjugated position; however, unlike the corrective measures in “De l’oisiveté”, intercourse will neither correct nor awaken her body and limbs. Rather, she expresses agency as the carrier of absolute pleasure and perhaps perfection. When the female subject appropriates this power she eclipses her male counterpart. Montaigne exercises his desire to have intercourse with a boîteuse; yet, in the end, he depends on her for sexual gratification and thus falls subordinate to her sexual prowess.

Montaigne’s discussion of sexual intercourse with a boîteuse is framed by an account of Amazonian women who discarded “bras, jambs et autres membres qui leur donnoient avantage sur elles…” In order to appropriate the power traditionally assumed by men, the rulers of this feminine nation truncate the males’ bodies. The mutilated body mediates the females’ desires as they “se servoient d’eux à ce seulement à quoy nous nous servons d’elles par deçà.” Although Montaigne does not engage in the ritualistic severing of limbs, his commentary contributes to the sense that the idle feminine corporeal space is severely fragmented. In the language he uses here, the engorged genitals stand in place of the body. During sexual intercourse with a boîteuse, the crippled body is almost entirely displaced by the eclipsing power of genitals, the prized

30 Montaigne III.XI.1011b.
31 Cotgrave 132.
32 Montaigne III.XI.1011b. In support of his hypothesis, the essayist refers to an italian proverb, “…que celuy-là ne cognoit pas Venus en sa parfaicte douceur qui n’a couché avec la boîteuse.”
33 Ibid., III.XI.1011b.
appendage of pleasure. It would seem, therefore, that the genitals function independent of the whole (lame body).

I would argue that the metaphor of appendages is central to Montaigne’s literary project. Rather than discard these members, I believe that Montaigne capitalizes on the paradoxical force of detached extremities. In the *Essais*, he qualifies severed extremities as beneficial, as the figurative edifice of his work. In place of figures of unity, his writings stage the convergence of truncated and incongruous images. In the “De l’amitié”, a eulogy to his deceased friend, Étienne de la Boétie, the problems of representation permeate the essay. Before Montaigne recounts the final moments preceding his friend’s untimely expiration, he addresses the grotesque and hybrid composition of his writings. Montaigne preserves these diverse limbs, preferring to reunite crippled ideas and images through the medium of writing. He distinguishes his project from the work of a painter whom he employs. He expresses his interest in imitating the painter who will depict “le plus bel endroit” in order to create “un tableau élabouré de toute sa suffisance…” 34 Unable to imitate the painter, he remarks: “Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crotoses et corps monstreux, rappiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n’ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite.” 35 The discarded limbs are rhetorically embedded in the *Essais*; one has the impression that Montaigne collects the dismembered body parts and reassembles the limbs back together. The resulting *tableau* is an amalgamation of appendages arranged without order or proportion. And moreover, these limbs, despite their truncation, constitute the paradoxical force of the *Essais*.

34 Montaigne I.XXVIII.181a
35 Ibid., I.XXVIII.181a
II. Spaces of Perdition

1. The Eradication of Corruption

In the second part of this paper, I’m interested in examining the function of solitude in relation to social apparatuses which govern selfhood. In “De la solitude” the text foregrounds the importance of geographical and psychic seclusion from the highly injurious and contagious public realm. According to Montaigne the dynamic process of development should be conducted in seclusion. In this essay solitary practices are consecrated to the study of the private self; Montaigne forges a psychic space in which the sequestered self cultivates a heightened subjectivity. The solitary figure turns inward and engages in an acute study of the self. Montaigne’s writings reveal an often closed, centripetal system where the self is the ultimate source of knowledge. Although the subject is figured as a sufficient and perhaps impervious entity, striking images of negation and fragmentation bring to light the complexities embedded in his discussion on solitude. This analysis will thus underscore the deleterious effects of solitude and those practices which ultimately insight loss.

In the opening lines of “De la solitude,” Montaigne announces that he will not address the proverbial comparison between the solitary life and the active life; however, this comparison is central to this essay. Figured as a realm plagued by immorality, the solitary figure must flee the violent grasp of active life. Montaigne’s theory of solitude seems to imply the suppression of one’s public identity; however, later in the essay his observations suggest a more nuanced schema. The public sphere is initially conceived as threatening, a space defined by excess and an absence of limits. For Montaigne, excess marks this space in which moderation and virtue are explicitly ignored. Through the image of contagion, the text underscores the transmittable nature of moral depravity, a highly communicable pestilent. “La contagion est très-dangereuse dans la presse.” The communal realm constitutes a space in which the bystander is vulnerable to the crowd and consequently the recipient—through ocular or physical proximity—contracts numerous vices.

In order to stress the communicable nature of corruption in a populated space, Montaigne turns to the image of the seafaring vessel. The defined and limited space of the ship is juxtaposed with the vast and indeterminate spatiality of the sea. Due to the fixed ship’s perimeters, the passengers cannot easily evacuate the ship in the event of a problem. The presence of a transgressive figure aboard the ship compromises crowd unity as well as the ship’s safety. Montaigne illustrates his argument with the following example: “Et les marchands qui vont en mer ont raison de regarder que ceux qui se mettent en même vaisseau ne soient dissolus, blasphémateurs, mechans: estimant telle société infortunée.”

Montaigne validates the merchant’s discriminatory selection process. Aside from the fear that corruption will affect the crowd onboard, I would also argue that the merchant’s choice is emblematic of a deeper anxiety. Aboard the ship there is an abundance of mobility and conversely an absence of stability. In response to this absence, the merchant imposes certain limits in an effort to elicit a sense of stability or perhaps solitude. His selection process is symbolic of a desire for constancy and the suppression of corruption.

In the Essais the public sphere represents a space of perdition in which the subject expends his energy, thus causing his own depletion or destruction. The text foregrounds the recuperative efforts of solitude; entrance into solitude requires an unwrapping of the mind from the anxieties of public life so as to embrace the la vraie solitude: “d’en vivre plus à loisir et à son aise.” Interestingly, leisure and ease are not achieved by mere relocation as “souvent on pense avoir quitté les affaires, on ne les a que changez.” One may have spatially changed one’s environment; however, one is still plagued by civic and familial responsibilities. Consequently, the self is immobilized; entangled in domestic occupations—“l’ame soit empeschée, elle y est toute…” Since paralysis replaces motion, l’ame empeschée stagnates and oscillates, ingesting the weight of external responsibilities. And accordingly, this action creates paralysis and negatively affects the source. Most notably, the self is depleted and its motion arrested by the oppressive qualities of public duties. Montaigne declares that “…et pour estre les occupations domestiques moins importantes, elle n’en sont pas moins importunes. D’avantage, pour nous estre deffaits de la Cour et du marché, nous ne sommes pas deffaits des principaux tourmens de

37 Ibid., I.XXXIX.232c.
38 Montaigne I.XXXIX.233a.
39 Ibid., I.XXXIX.233a.
40 Ibid., I.XXXIX.233a.
The importunity of domestic affairs far exceeds commercial obligations. Upon retirement, one’s obligations may have assumed a different form; however, domestic concerns are equally persistent and inconvenient. We may have *deffait* or undone our societal commitments, yet we still harbor and nourish the accompanying torments and anxieties of domestic life.

Throughout the essay Montaigne stresses the importance of geographical isolation. Although the solitarian possesses a degree of immunity, solitude requires physical remoteness from the public as ocular or verbal exchange can be injurious to the observer: “Ce n’est pas que le sage ne puisse par tout vivre content, voire et seul en la foule d’un palais ; mais s’il est choisir, il en fuira, dit-il, mesmes la veuë. […] Il ne luy semble point suffisamment s’estre desfait des vices, s’il faut encores qu’il conteste avec ceux d’autruy.” 42 Quite clearly, the act of looking often permits the transference of vices or maladies from the agent to the innocent recipient. Therefore, ocular witnessing compromises the observer’s solitude because he is still partially engaged in others’ affairs. In the imagery he uses here, we recognize that one’s retirement encompasses more than geographical seclusion. In fact, one’s departure is framed by rhetorical displacement or negation. According to Montaigne, the aim of solitude is to “s’estre desfait des vices.” On one hand, when the subject relinquishes his public identity and affiliations, his vices are ostensibly undone or left off. And in turn, the public self is temporally sequestered or evacuated so that the private self may assume a privileged position. On the other hand, I would like to draw attention to the striking absence which marks the undone self. The grammatical elements in this passage confirm the problematic process of seclusion. The reflexive verb “s’estre” implies a reflexive movement in which the agent is also the recipient of the action. The subject (agent and object) is subsequently doubled and performs an action on or for itself, specifically the gesture of negating the public self (subject-object). When elements of the transgressive public self are effaced, the subject is inevitably fragmented. Montaigne rhetorically conceives of a self that can be partitioned or silenced through reversal. The public identity (that which harbors the vices) is negated or thrown into reversal and consequently a self marked by loss emerges.

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42 Montaigne I.XXXIX.233a.
Montaigne’s treatment of solitude is primarily characterized by failure, instances where the individual is unable to find solitude. For example, the subject erroneously positions solitude in relation to socially constructed environments—the academic institution and the monastery. These institutions are symbolic of a refuge apart from the excesses of the external world, a space marked by limits and intellectual and spiritual moderation. The subject invests in the authority attributed to these spaces and is nonetheless no closer to abandoning the excesses accrued in society. Montaigne notes that “on n’en cherche pas toujours bien le chemin.” One may leave the public sphere; however, one is still mentally invested in civic, social, and familial affairs. Consequently, our movement away from society is inherently problematic because “l’ambition, l’avarice, l’irresolution, la peur et les concupiscences ne nous abandonnent point pour changer de contrée.” These burdensome emotions impede our severance from society. “Elle nous suivent souvent jusques dans les cloisters et dans les escoles de philosophie. Ny les desers, ny les rochez creusez, ny la here, ny les jeunes ne nous en démeslent…” These external spaces are clearly an ineffective intermediary to achieving solitude. Montaigne points out that extrication is highly difficult for neither deserts, nor rocky caves, nor hair shirts, nor fasting will sufficiently rid the mind of ambition and its companions. Ensnared in a complex web of desire, solitude remains elusive, inaccessible.

I previously intimated that the subject tries to eradicate both external and internal figures of threat by investing in socially constructed institutions. The subject continues his quest by turning to the body—the space in which one acquires solitude through pain, abstinence and deprivation. I’m particularly interested in exploring the function of the body and how it vehicles solitude. In this essay the body becomes a site physically and symbolically marked by the problematic instruments of solitude—hair shirts and fasting. The hair shirt is an instrument of resistance and penitence; bodily mortification is a ritualistic act of self-punishment for the committal of sins such as ambition or concupiscence. The wearer seeks a solitude impervious to morally abject desires, a remoteness from the world of the flesh. Instead of the monastery or school of philosophy, the mortified body ostensibly vehicles solitude. Next, like bodily mortification, abstention from food marks the body through deprivation and pain. The internal body is figuratively scarred by this practice. The deprivation of nutrients hollows out the body.

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43 Montaigne I.XXXIX.233a.
44 Ibid., I.XXXIX.233a.
an empty space. And hence, the body becomes a rochez creusez in which the mind seeks seclusion and retirement. However, in the end, instead of vehicling solitude and eradicating threat, deprivation incites further fragmentation and loss.

In order to further examine this process of fragmentation, I would like to consider Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of self-fashioning. In his introduction to Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, Greenblatt underscores the various institutional modes (social, theological and psychological) which govern the formation of identities during the sixteenth century. In response to the authority exercised by these institutions, there is “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of the human identity as a manipulable, artful process.” And in turn, the construction of one’s identity becomes a performative endeavor, a desire to shape the self through speech or actions. As Greenblatt points out, this process is nonetheless governed by complex social and psychological structures that ultimately influence behavior and various modes of expression. His theory rests upon several assumptions, a few of which I would like to explore in relationship to Montaigne’s authorial identity and his literary project. The following example is one of the conditions central to Greenblatt’s theory of self-fashioning: “Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other—heretic, savage, witch, adulteress, traitor, Antichrist—must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.” Greenblatt’s thesis allows us to reconsider the function of solitude in the Essais. For Montaigne, the shaping of one’s identity is integral to achieving solitude. In other words, “De la solitude” presents prescriptive methods for shaping oneself for solitude. Throughout the essay we witness the scattering, discarding, and parceling of an identity, a self that must internalize the destructive preface to solitude. Here, the threatening Other is located both inside and outside the self. First, society’s malicious crowds are projected as strange and hostile and radically threaten one’s solitary endeavors. Through geographical relocation we easily dodge society’s encroaching grasps; however, we still manage to internalize “l’ambition, l’avarece, l’irresolution, la peur et les concupiscences.”

47 Greenblatt also points out that, during this period, self-fashioning is an increasingly secularized concept. Identities are no longer exclusively fashioned in the image of Christ, a shift that, according to Greenblatt, generates anxiety.
48 Ibid., 9.
49 Montaigne I.XXXIX.233a.
Consequently, the Other is located inside the self and must be eradicated through negation. The text bears witness to the difficult task of dividing the self in order to destroy the internalized Other. “Nostre mal nous tient en l’ame: or elle ne se peut échaper à elle mesme.” ⁵⁰ Greenblatt ends his discussion by noting that “self-fashioning always involves some experience of threat, some effacement or undermining, some loss of self.” ⁵¹ And thus, the self fashioned for solitude is ultimately marked by loss and fragmentation.

2. The Thronged Self: The Difficulties of Departure

Elsewhere in this essay the problematics of loss frame the subject’s extrication from society. Therefore, Montaigne theorizes that one must extricate oneself from the haunting grips of ambition and disentangle or unwind oneself from the inside: “…ce n’est pas assez de s’estre escarté du peuple : ce n’est pas assez de changer de place, il se faut escarter des conditions populaires qui sont en nous : il se faut sequestrer et r’avoir de soy.” ⁵² The rhetorical force of this passage is quite striking, specifically, the spatial figuration of this metaphor. The self is conceptualized as a receptacle, a space that harbors des conditions populaires. In order to eradicate these baser instincts, one must literary discard or throw away that part of the self espoused to des conditions populaires. The verb écarter signifies both a scattering or discarding and a departure. The defining characteristics of the public self (les conditions populaires) are scattered—obliged to depart. And thus, the fragmented self departs in search of solitude. Furthermore, the reflexive verb se falloir indicates that the subject performs an action on or for itself, specifically the reflexive gesture of sequestering the self. Sequestration also has judicial implications; it is the “delivery of a litigious thing into the hands of third indifferent man; or, the separating of it from the possession of those that contend for it.” ⁵³ The self represents both the third indifferent party and the litigious and contended thing, thereby undergoing a process of

⁵⁰ Ibid., I.XXXIX.234a.
⁵¹ Greenblatt 9.
⁵² Montaigne I.XXXIX.234a.
⁵³ Randle Cotgrave, A French-English dictionary: compil’d by Mr Randle Cotgrave: with another in English and French. Whereunto are newly added the animadversions and supplements, &c. of James Howell Esquire (London, 1634) 332.
multiplication. The litigious identity—that which possesses *des conditions populaires*—is separated from the solitary part of the self. The verb *ravoir*—“to recover, to have again”—accentuates the coming back or again into oneself. There is an attempt to recover or to go back to the original, unaltered space. Implicit in this statement is the return, not an arrival to a new, undiscovered place, but the rediscovery of an existing, visited place.

According to Montaigne we are so inherently riveted to ourselves that geographical relocation does not necessarily produce solitude. Since evasion is impeded, we are unable to unravel or undo ourselves from our public selves. The self becomes the true obstacle to obtaining solitude because as Socrates recalls “‘il s’était bien emporté avec soi.’” 55 Despite the malignant nature of external torments, we resist separation from our paralyzing liaison with society. As apprehension and anxiety mark this separation, we wrestle to preserve even the minutest association with society. Why is this movement marked by such distress? Through the following metaphor, Montaigne addresses the problem of severance and departure. The quotation by Perse offers greater insight into this troubled division: “Je viens de rompre ainsi mes fers, me direz-vous. Oui, tel le chien qui tire et brise enfin sa chaîne: Dans sa fuite, il en traîne un long bout à son cou.” 56 Montaigne reiterates Perse’s commentary by stating that: “Nous emportons nos fers quand et nous; ce n’est pas une entiere liberté, nous tournons encore la veuë vers ce que nous avons laissé….” 57 These lines contribute to the sense that the greater obstacle is not the escape itself, but liberation from the physic binds, from the dragging chain that indicate our imprisonment. Perhaps more interesting is the implicit refusal to *défait* ourselves from society. We may yearn for freedom and yet we are fearful or incapable of severing this binding association. I would argue that this severance constitutes a traumatic event and therefore one’s desire is oriented toward the lost object—the public realm. This severance accentuates the void that permeates solitude. Can one recuperate this loss and if not, does a mournful or melancholic response occur? Dominick LaCapra’s persuasive article underscores the primary differences between loss and absence within the context of both historical and transhistorical events. He asserts that these two terms are often confounded and do not in fact constitute a simple binary. Loss, he argues, is “often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the

54 *Ibid.,* 305.
55 Montaigne I.XXXIX.234a
past, so lack is to the present and future. […] Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing.” 58 LaCapra’s argument allows us to consider Montaigne’s commentaries from a new vantage point. The subject regretfully turns away from the lost object of the past and enters into the future, a solitary space marked by lack. I would argue that solitude is thus framed by that should have been there but is in fact omitted or repressed.

Inscribed in Montaigne’s discourse on solitude is the theme of loss. Interestingly, Montaigne recuperates this loss by figuring the self as doubled. Through solitude, one must be a throng to oneself, a paradoxically single figure of multitude. Solitude is staged as practice in which the doubled self creates a solitary, yet thronged space. Solitude is therefore founded on the following principle: “Sois dans la solitude une foule à toi-même.” 59 Moreover, it is interesting to note that this secluded retreat is a mimetic representation of the realm from which one’s flees. The text underscores the importance of engaging in conversation with oneself: “…faut-il prendre nostre ordinaire entretien de nous à nous mesmes, et si privé que nulle acointance ou communication estrangiere y trouve place; discourir et y rire comme sans femme, sans enfans et sans biens, sans train et sans valet…” 60 Here the self is multiplied in order to withstand the deficient structure of solitude. Montaigne advises the solitary subject to engage in dialogic conversation as if to absorb the absence of the other—his wife, children and servants. He transforms solitude into a kind of plenitude and yet loss and deficiency resonate. It is also important to note that idleness is emblematic of this loss and for this reason, in solitude, the soul must assume an unparalleled fortitude: “Nous avons une ame contournable en soy mesme; elle se peut faire compaignie; elle a dequoy assaillir et dequoy defendre, dequoy recevoir et dequoy donner, ne craignons pas en cette solitude nous croupir d’oisiveté ennuyeuse….” 61 This imagery invokes both the soul’s singularity and its doubling. As the verb “recevoir” suggests, the soul receives, comprehends, and contains itself. In a rather paradoxical manner, the soul maintains its status as a singular entity while functioning as an ideal counterpart.

58 Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss.” Critical Inquiry 25.4 Summer (1999): 703 (Chicago: U of Chicago P). LaCapra locates loss at the historical level. It can be linked to a historical past or event, whereas absence is transhistorical and not attributable to a particular past event. LaCapra offers the example of the castration complex experienced by females as an example of absence.
59 Montaigne I.XXXIX.235b “in solis sis tibi turba locis” Tibulle, IV,XIII, 12.
60 Ibid., I.XXXIX.235a.
61 Ibid., I.XXXIX.235a.
In Montaigne’s treatment of solitude the recovered and sequestrated self should also functions as a self-sufficient entity. The solitary subject occupies a space unaffected by external catastrophes. As long as he possesses himself he is not in need of anyone or anything else. Montaigne recounts the adventure of Stilpon, who having escaped a burning city where he lost his entire family, remains composed. He states that “Dieu mercy, rien perdu du sien.” Stilpon still possesses himself; therefore, despite the loss of his family, he has lost nothing. The philosopher Antisthenes echoes this notion when stating that “que l’homme se devoir pourveoir de munitions qui flottassent sur l’eau et peussent à nage eschapper avec luy du naufrage.” The self-sufficient man furnishes his soul with floatable and impermeable munitions which accompany him to safety during a shipwreck. In other words, the soul’s cargo remains intact despite the shipwreck. Montaigne argues that “l’homme d’entendement n’a rien perdu, s’il a soy meme.” In commenting on Stilpon and Antisthenes’ observations, we recognize the central motif of loss. In effort to recuperate this loss, solitary practices necessitate a kind of psychic resiliency. Even though one’s life may be severely fragmented, the self-sufficient subject should not ingest this loss.

For Montaigne, solitude is not an entirely hermetic practice; a cloistered existence encumbers his conception of vraye liberté. Moderation is preferential to excess; the moderated self esteems uniformity in approach and strives for equilibrium. Solitude vehicles this equilibrium—a delicate balancing of one’s identity with oneself and with the world. The retired individual, rather than negate all external obligations and interests, seeks a fluid and non-binding involvement with the outside world and the inner world of the self. Montaigne advocates for a fluid intercourse with the self and the public sphere. Fluctuating and liberal affiliations permit an effortless unraveling or separation, whereas a binding and invariable intercourse requires a brutal and traumatic escape. Montaigne cautions the reader:

Il faut desnoier ces obligations si fortes, et meshuy aymer ce-cy et cela, mais n’espouser rien que soy. Le reste soit à nous, mais non pas joint et colè en façon qu’on ne le puisse despendre sans nous escorcher et arracher ensemble quelque pièce du nostre. La plus grande chose du monde, c’est de sçavoir estre à soy.

62 Ibid., I.XXXIX.235a.
63 Ibid., I.XXXIX.235c
64 Ibid., I.XXXIX.235a.
65 Ibid., I.XXXIX.236a.
Unraveled from society’s violent clutches, one may express limited and liberal affection for external phenomena; however, the repossessed self espouses nothing other than itself. Moderation and fluidity are nonetheless integral to this type of union. The sequestered self should not be bound to a single practice or become too wrapped up in itself. Interestingly, the leaving-off or getting-out of this kind of bind implies physical violence—a ripping or tearing of flesh. Quite clearly, the wounded body—escorché and arraché—is a visible manifestation of an inward violence that signals the undoing of a tightly bound coupling. The body bears witness to this painful psychological entanglement and its subsequent extrication.

3. Stability regained?

In the Essais instability and excess plague the public sphere and interestingly enough, when Montaigne adopts a posture of self-reflection and examination, he encounters physic instability. The text reveals that solitude does not always engender stability or moderation. In “De la praesumption” he examines the movements of an imperfect self: “…car les plus fermes imaginations que j’aye, et generalles, sont celles qui, par maniere de dire, nasquirent avec moy. Elles sont naturelles et toutes miennes. Je les produisis crues et simples, d’une production hardie et forte, mais un peu trouble et imparfaicte…” 66 In this solitary construct, the self generates deficient forms of production while engaged in self-examination. In Perpetuum mobile: métamorphoses des corps et des œuvres de Vinci à Montaigne, Michel Jeanneret discusses the chaotic state of the self. He argues that, “Tel est l’acte de naissance des Essais: le sujet solitaire découvre en soi la division et le trouble. Les forces étranges—produit sauvages de l’imagination, délires et hantises—envahissent son espace mental et menacent son équilibre.” 67 Jeanneret’s analysis stress the fact that the mind is not conceptualized as an ordered and homogenous space. There are factors which oppose a state of constancy or equilibrium. And therefore, the solitary subject must contend with a self that resists order and hierarchy. More interestingly, Montaigne does not employ methods which will lead to the demarcation or the

66 Ibid., II.XVII.641
fixing of the self. The text emphasizes that he won’t create an arresting self-portrait by limiting the shape and movement of the self.

There are other instances in the Essais that testify to the erratic constitution of the self, a being governed by constant motion despite its solitary surroundings. The text bears witness to the ways in which movement is integral to the essayist’s auto-portrait. Here the essayist comprehends and examines the self using a rhetoric of motion. “Je ne puis assurer mon object. Il va trouble et chancelant, d’une yvresse naturelle. […] Je ne peints pas l’estre. Je peints le passage….” Given that he cannot firmly grasp his being, he depicts its erratic and natural motion. His writings reveal the passing of his being not the being itself. Interestingly, the moderation and stability afforded in solitude are in part compromised by the drunken stupor of his object—the self. The ephemeral and transitory qualities of existence are quite compelling. In the end, it seems that principles of variability and insufficiency characterize one’s existence.

4. La Trace Effacée?

If, according to Montaigne, la vraie solitude requires geographical and psychological seclusion, do his published essays compromise his solitary enterprise? Is he simply unraveling and retiring from society only to later produce a work ultimately destined to receive public recognition? The essayist asserts that “il faut faire comme les animaux qui effacent la trace à la porte de leur tanière.” Does Montaigne erase his footprints or does he leave a trace, a path leading the reader directly to his solitary den? Despite his obstinate disregard for the reader, we are invited into the essayist’s arrière-boutique and offered an intimate view of his solitary landscape. Starobinski also traces the paradoxical movements inscribed in the Montaigne’s project. Starobinski’s analysis calls attention to Montaigne’s denunciation of counterfeit appearances and deception. To be sure, he argues that the Essais enacts Montaigne’s departure from the realm of contrivances. The object of his inquiry is, according to Starobinski, “d’accéder

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68 Montaigne III.II.782b
69 Ibid., I.XXXIX.242a.
à l’être, à la vérité, à l’identité…”  His arrière-boutique symbolizes a secure respite from the treacherous workings of the outside world, a space where “nous establissons nostre vraye liberté et principale retrait et solitude.” Notably, his solitary retreat is highly visible construction. From the heights of his library, he fully scopes and embraces his condition of freedom and repose. This edifice denotes his continuing, yet distanced participation in the outside world. It would then appear that Montaigne vacillates between two extremes, unable to completely relinquish his participation in the public sphere. Starobinski’s following commentary underlines this movement:

Il ne se dérobe pas à ce qu’il tient pour un devoir à l’égard du bien commun. Mais l’important, pour lui, est d’avoir conquis la possibilité de s’établir en un territoire personnel et privé, d’y prendre à tout moment un recul absolu, en sortant du jeu : l’important est d’avoir donné à la distance réflexive sa localisation à la fois symbolique et concrète, de lui avoir réservé un site toujours accueillant, sans s’obliger à l’habiter constamment.

This passage brings to light Montaigne’s affinity for the unrestrained expression of desire. The essayist is more interested in successfully exercising his will than leading a strictly cloistered life. Starobinski capitalizes on Montaigne’s ingenuity—his ability to successfully leave society and evade its harmful grasps. And hence, we might even say that solitude is more concerned with the departure rather than the practice itself. The text essentializes a form of solitude that is neither obligatory nor binding. He does not need to erase “la trace à la porte de [sa] tanière” because he has successfully established a private territory. In turn, the montaignian subject may freely move from one milieu to another and most importantly, he retains his agency and right to freely exercise his will.

The essays serve as a tangible representation, a natural and imperfect production of the self. Due to this reciprocal relationship between the book and the self, his essays are unprecedented. In “Du dementir” the essayist remarks: “Je n’ay pas plus faict mon livre que mon livre m’a faict, livre consubstantiel à son autheur, d’une occupation propre, membre de ma

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70 Starobinski, 9.
71 Cotgraver 228. Cotgrave’s definition of liberté reveals a plurality of meaning. Liberté is defined as “liberty, freedome; full scope, good leave, ample or free choice; uncontrollable condition; also opennesse, plainnesse, boldnesse in speech or action.” His liberty functions on multiple levels. From his library, he may fully scope the surrounding landscape and possess visual command of his property. In addition, after leaving the public sphere, he may openly and plainly express himself in speech or action.
72 Montaigne I.XXXIX.235a.
73 Starobinski 28.
Although his published writings are problematic vis-à-vis project as a solitarian, he covertly maintains quasi solitude by stating that his writings are consubstantial with the author. His essays are a product of his solitary endeavor of inwardness and self-knowledge, an inimitable and exemplary project. Conceived in an isolated space, Montaigne’s auto-study can never be paralleled; therefore, despite its publication, his writings and his authorial identity exist in a figurative solitude distinct from his predecessors and contemporaries. He is not concerned with engaging a third party in the creation of his essays, although he often conducts himself in the image of virtuous scholars. The essays are an extension of the author, not a separate creation forged by extraneous forces. The published essays are certainly a consumable and enduring product; however, he contends that “je ne dresse pas icy une statue à planter au carrefour d’une ville, ou dans une Eglise, ou place publique….”  

The book of the self inhabits a paradoxical space. Upon publication, Montaigne erects a statue consecrated to the self, a visible product of his inward movement. However, Montaigne never reveals that which he discovers when he looks inside of himself because as he notes, “et puis, me trouvant entierement despourveu et vuide de toute matiere…”  

Starobinski remarks: “Montaigne ne nous dit pas ce qu’il découvre dans la dimension intérieure vers laquelle il a tourné toute sa curiosité. Dès le début, cet espace a été désigné par un terme négatif : insuffisance ; il s’est qualifié comme un vide et un manque.”  

This literary statue is a lacuna, an unfilled and vague space. As a result, the reader can never fully seize that which constantly evades definition and demarcation. At the center of the essays, emptiness pervades. In spite of this marked absence Montaigne secures a place through solitude.
Conclusion

Montaigne’s work thus consists in assigning a paradoxically positive value to deficient forms of representation. As opposed to defining idleness in ultimately depreciative terms, I believe that his essays challenge us to consider the way in which immeasurable forms of productivity materialize from deficient and idle subjects. In the end, these subjugated spaces—the fallows lands, the rampant mind, and the dormant female body—become figures of difference. Rather than condemn such transgressive figures, Montaigne essentializes difference. Interestingly enough, it seems that this difference contributes to the singular nature of the crippled figure. Perhaps this exemplary condition becomes a form of agency, a power appropriated from the very force insistent upon the subject’s submission. And although solitary practices in “De la solitude” radically deviate from the monstrosities engendered in idleness, in the end, fragmentation and loss link these themes. Within the constructs of idleness and solitude, the desiring subject begins his quest in search of plenitude and encounters pervading emptiness and deficiency. However, rather than simply recoil from this gaping lacuna, Montaigne locates plenitude in the void. And perhaps given this reformulation, we are compelled to reassess the perimeters of self-knowledge and consider for a moment the paradoxical force of a deficient subject.
Works Cited


