

MONTAIGNE IN MOTLEY, MONTAIGNE IN TEARS:
THE STABLE MADNESS OF THE *ESSAIS* READ THROUGH EARLY-MODERN
MELANCHOLY

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This dissertation argues for a melancholic reading of Montaigne's *Essais*, through the lens of early-modern notions of melancholy and folly, placing Montaigne "in a motley" and "in tears," and hence, fully within his period. As such, Montaigne is seen to embody one of the most complex, unique, and critical forms of subjectivity: early-modern melancholic subjectivity, as it will be surveyed in this dissertation through a wide variety of literary and visual concepts and figures that engage and resonate with one other, to produce the "world" of early-modern melancholy, rather than just a psychological state.

A reading of Montaigne's *Essais* as a melancholic text will demonstrate the consistency and unity of a text famous for its heterogeneity and diversity. If these diverse parts of the *Essais*, ranging from cats to fathers, from honesty to cruelty, from the act of essaying to the critique of custom, from Montaigne's views on passions to his views on death, can all be read and enveloped within [one] melancholy, then the implications are both that melancholy is not a pathology defined by lack, but rather a subjectivity, and moreover — a privileged subjectivity, whose insight and critical abilities now parallel those of the "privileged" work of the *Essais*, as a work of immense complexity, singularity, value, and meaning.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yael Wender received her BA in Comparative Literature, *summa cum laude*, and in French, *magna cum laude*, from Tel Aviv University in 2007. During her bachelor's studies, she was awarded two competitive French language scholarships to study at the linguistic centers of Besançon (CLA) and Vichy (CAVILAM), France. She received her MA in Romance Studies from Cornell University in 2013, and is completing her PhD in Romance Studies at Cornell University. Her interests have shifted from the absurd and existentialism to the literary investigation of emotions, specifically those pertaining to contemporary discourses of mental health, with a focus on the early-modern period and the work of Michel de Montaigne. In addition to pursuing her PhD, she is currently training to become a certified LI CBT (Low Intensity Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) therapist at Wingate Institute in Israel. She is currently a lecturer of EAP (English for Academic Purposes) at Ruppin College and has previously taught courses in Literature, English, French, and Hebrew at Cornell University, Queens College, and The Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT).

To my father Dr. Abraham Wender,
le meilleur des pères qui furent oncques

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INTRODUCTION

Tis the grave doctrine of the schools / that contraries can never be / consistent in the highest degree / but thou must stand exempt from their dull narrow rules.

JOHN NORRIS¹

Montaigne's *Essais* have been associated with some of the greatest and most novel ideas, including the essay genre itself, the invention of the "I" behind them, and the human nature that they have been said to model. While Montaigne's melancholy, or rather his "melancholy humor," has been duly noted, the *Essais* themselves have not been considered a melancholy text.

This dissertation argues that melancholy fully structures the *Essais*, and ties its various parts and meanings together, thus far considered incongruent or otherwise celebrated in their incongruity. Melancholy offers consistency and unity to an otherwise digressive and diverse text through the notion of early-modern melancholy read as a "unity and consistency of contraries," as the introductory quote polemically conveys.

This argument is situated in contrast to the readings of the *Essais* as a digressive and monstrous form, as viewed by psychoanalytic readings, for example in the work of Lawrence D. Kritzman; by postmodern readings of the *Essais*, for example in Hassan Melehy's work; as well as by tendencies to focus on the act of writing in Montaigne and the genesis of the *Essais* themselves, for example in Richard

¹ John Norris, "To Melancholy," in *A Collection of Miscellanies: Consisting of Poems, Essays, Discourses & Letters*, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1717), 130.

² Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological*

Regosin's work, all of which focus on lack and loss as the *raison d'être* of the "formless" *Essais*.

If Freud marked melancholy as a pathological state of depletion, of loss of world and self,² while Julia Kristeva further emphasized its muteness and the loss of language, then, as she writes, melancholy can only be seen as a *cause* or a trigger for writing, but cannot be meaningful in its own right.³ Thus, by arguing against related psychoanalytic or genetic accounts of the *Essais* as the *formless* result of an initial melancholy emptiness, and by arguing instead for melancholy as the meaning and *matter* of Montaigne's arguments, figures, rhetoric, values and philosophy — this dissertation makes the claim that "being" melancholy and "being" meaningful are complementary rather than contradictory positions.

Aligning meaning with melancholy, by aligning the *Essais* with melancholy, is made possible through the mediation of early-modern melancholy, where subject, world, body, and mind, are yet to be divided and categorized in the modern sense, and before that symbolic moment when, as Michel Foucault writes in the preface to *Madness and Civilization*, "madness and reason no longer communicate with each other."⁴ Therefore, a select corpus of early-modern writings and visual representations that span the "long" sixteenth century and pertain to melancholy or to its close

² Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14 (1914-1916), ed./trans. James Strachey, 243-258 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957).

³ "For those who are raked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia." Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3.

⁴ "In the serene world of mental illness, modern man no longer communicates with the madman," Michel Foucault, "Preface," *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), x.

neighbor, folly, are the chosen theoretical framework for this dissertation, and for reading the *Essais* as a melancholy text.

This dissertation explores and reveals both early-modern melancholy and Montaigne's *Essais* as so many figures, images, tropes, and themes that resemble and echo each other in an early-modern world, where, as Foucault has poetically described it: signs were tied to each other, not to signification, not to things, through networks of resemblances and reverberations.⁵ The majority of the early-modern texts that this dissertation closely analyzes are also written by self-avowed melancholics: Marsilio Ficino, Sebastian Brant, Albrecht Dürer, Robert Burton, and finally Michel de Montaigne, which further allows us to reveal some of these deep and consistent affinities, or reverberations, that hold Montaigne's *Essais* together in a new and compelling way.

In addition to this early-modern corpus which produced the framework for melancholy as a theory for analyzing Montaigne, I am indebted to Olivier Pot's *L'inquiétante étrangeté*, for breaking with the tradition of viewing the *Essais* as springing from the loss and mourning of Montaigne's friend La Boétie, in favor of understanding Montaigne's melancholy in line with early-modern notions, such as humoral theory. This dissertation is particularly inspired by his suggestion of a parallel between Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I* and Montaigne's digressive style, and its implications for a non-pathological and, in fact, privileged view of melancholy. As such, Dürer's image has proven instrumental to reading the *Essais* as melancholy, and

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Tavistock/Routledge Publishing (New York; London: Routledge Classics, 2005), 33.

its imagery and symbolism will consistently run in the background of the other readings.

In addition, Georges Canguilhem's⁶ understanding of health and pathology as subjective feelings and assessments, rather than objective and abstract measures, as well as his understanding of health and pathology as mobile and reactive states, has helped me reveal the oscillations and shifts characteristic of melancholy as healthy rather than pathologically "fragile," a characteristic that also provides an alternative framework for the variety and diversity of the *Essais*.

While the turn away from the digressive, diverse, formless, and free form of the *Essais* might seem like a dangerous move in light of the importance these notions impart on political theories and ethics inspired by Montaigne's *Essais*, early-modern melancholy proves to be a subversive critique in its own right, proving that there is no need to break from the subjective or the "abnormal," in order to produce critical and ethical values.

Finally, a structured and unified view of the *Essais* could seem to go against the grain of Montaigne's most revered values and philosophies, for example his perpetual questioning and skepticism against any one view and any totality, his relativism, or his radical acceptance of diversity and difference. All of these stand in contrast to the melancholic position as a position of harsh indictments, criticism, and a favoring of the self against others. The former values portray a moderate, patient, and

⁶ Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett, (New York: Zone Books. 1991); Canguilhem, Georges. *Knowledge of Life*, trans. Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg, (New York: Fordham University Press. 2008).

compassionate Montaigne who, according to M.A. Screech,⁷ if melancholic by “temperament,” keeps his melancholy in check and the madness at bay.

My readings of Montaigne and his *Essais* present a “saltier” counterpart to the “sweet” version of Montaigne, in a way that resembles Philippe Desan’s recent biography on Montaigne, *Montaigne: A Life*.⁸ The adjective connotes Montaigne’s other, more hidden origins as son of a family of salt fish merchants on the side of his father, Eyquem, who bought their nobility, and the name Montaigne, through money they earned from selling “salty fish” — an origin which, as Desan argues, Montaigne tried to cover up.⁹ Like Desan, who reads Montaigne more suspiciously, reading his secret political agendas through his literary tropes and rhetoric, melancholy presents another “saltier” version of Montaigne, one related to a more personal strategy for survival and manipulation of reality in the *Essais*, as well as alluding to the salt of Montaigne’s — perhaps invisible — tears.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 explores early-modern folly and melancholy through a diverse range of images and figures, while each one produces an important concept or theory that relate to melancholy. Chapter 2 provides additional background to early-modern melancholy by exploring three early-modern theories, humoral theory, skepticism and Blaise Pascal’s notion of diversion as a critique that resembles folly. My reading of passages and figures from Pascal’s

⁷ M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays*, new ed. (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

⁸ Philippe Desan, *Montaigne: A Life*, trans. Steven Rendall and Lisa Neal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁹ Adam Gopnik, “Montaigne on Trial: what do we really know about the philosopher who invented liberalism?” *The New Yorker*, January 16, 2017.

Pensées provides a foretaste for the melancholy readings I will perform of Montaigne in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 is a melancholy reading of Montaigne's values and philosophy in the essay *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, and Chapter 4, which performs a similar melancholy reading of the essay *De l'amitie*, focuses on the notion of the monstrous as another expression of melancholy subjectivity.

In attempting to stay close to the early-modern modes of thinking and writing I have analyzed, this dissertation takes an approach that resembles the sixteenth-century paradigm of understanding evoked earlier — through analogies, figures, and metaphors, in relation to the texts and to each other, rather than asking the texts to answer contemporary questions. Questions such as: What is melancholy? How does it occur? How is it different from depression? How, and at what point, is melancholy considered a disease? And so on.

Due to this analogous or discursive approach, the scope of this dissertation necessarily extends to topics that appear beyond the scope of melancholy if it were to have been studied through a more definitional and rationalist approach. In Chapter 1, early-modern melancholy will be understood, and not defined, by exploring it in relation to its “neighbors” and the various contexts in which it appears: to folly, to other emotions, to motion, to subjectivity, to critique, to universality but also to singularity, to name a few. Each section of Chapter 1 will be dedicated to an early-modern figure or concept that is closely related to melancholy, as melancholy will never present as one thing, but will prove consistent nonetheless.

Chapter 2 will continue this approach by providing additional context to early-modern paradigms and ways of thinking. The first is humoral theory as a theory that is

not based in causality, and which maintains a sense of the occult when it comes to knowing and understanding the body and mind; the second theory is skepticism which, in a similar manner, maintains that since the world cannot be known, it must be observed without judgment, and hence without classification. Both early-modern paradigms are more congruent for understanding important questions posed by Montaigne scholars than psychoanalytic approaches to the *Essais*, questions such as the role of melancholy in the *Essais*, Montaigne's reason for writing the *Essais*, and the mystery concerning certain "abnormal" experiences presented there.

Chapter 2 continues with a reading of Pascal's notion of "diversion" as a model for reading melancholy in a philosophical text, by which melancholy structures its philosophical arguments and accounts for various gaps. It suggests the existence of a melancholy subjectivity behind a rigorous worldview, through the theoretical terms provided by the various close-readings of chapters 1 and 2.

Chapters 3 and 4 perform melancholy readings of two of Montaigne's essays, along with other essays and important notions and passages from the work as a whole. These readings consist in intertextual close readings of the various "digressions" in the essays as consistently melancholy, morbid, and folly, to which Montaigne's philosophy and values become subservient, and yet no less crucial and valuable. The interaction and contradictions between the two essays, along with their relations to other essays, will aim to present a textual unity and wholeness of the shifts and contraries encompassed in one melancholy.

Through these two chapters, concepts that are widely associated with Montaigne's philosophy and values, particularly self-possession, a stoic acceptance of

death, honesty, transparency, the singularity of the self, will be viewed and accounted for as part of Montaigne's melancholy subjectivity. Other notions associated with Montaigne, such as moderation, compassion, and acceptance of otherness, will be problematized and perhaps contested through this same melancholy subjectivity.

The kind of reading this dissertation performs also serves to reinforce its own argument, as it performs and mimics the kind of melancholy it aims to convey. The readings themselves are obsessive, tightly wound, and repetitive of the same "truth," while each repetition reveals that same truth from a different perspective and, as I suggest, radical angle, much like a "hermeneutics of suspicion." In this case, however, the texts of early-modern folly and melancholy themselves perform this "hermeneutics of suspicion" of the world they observe and engage with. In this world, everyone is folly, everyone is melancholy; and the world in its entirety, and in each instance, is condemned as mad, miserable, and foolish. Everything worldly and every pursuit, particularly the pursuits of knowledge that aim to break away from this omnipresent misery and weakness, is subject to the critical gaze of melancholy and the laughing face of folly. In this manner, folly and melancholy can be seen as positions of critique, positions of a literary criticism, at the same time that critique is being deemed too "paranoid,"¹⁰ or too contrarian, and perpetuating of negative feelings.¹¹

In this sense, my readings have been inspired by the re-appropriating of, or

¹⁰ I am referring to "paranoid reading" and the turn towards more positive, restorative readings in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 2003).

¹¹ For an excellent discussion on the steering away from a "hermeneutics of suspicion," to more general terms like criticism, as a way to stay away from the image of the critic as an arrogant "nay-sayer," see Rita Felski. "Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion." *M/C Journal* 15, no. 1 (2012): <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/431>. The parallel I draw here between early-modern folly and melancholy and the contemporary notion of critique could, I believe, be a fruitful one.

surfacing of, negative and unhappy feelings or experiences in affect theory and queer theory. This work is also closely tied with reflections on disability theory, whose most powerful claim is, I believe, addressing the problematic size of its category, and its consequent difficulties in defining itself. That “disability” may include an endlessly diverse and large group of individuals, that it is a “malleable” and “unstable” category where “people slip in and out of disability with the blink of an eye,”¹² and where, upon scrutiny, the notion of ability is found to be simply incompatible with the human experience — is taken as a sign to begin viewing “health,” “independence,” and “ability” as entirely misleading and dangerous illusions.

This dissertation indirectly will reveal that this view is essentially early-modern, in that the human condition cannot be defined outside the realm of universal melancholy, understood as a variety of losses, feelings and pain, or outside of folly — understood as an infinite variety of faults and weaknesses. Moreover, the early-modern texts here will reveal, to the contrary, that those who *appear* to know the most, to be most in control, and most independent, are the most wretched, miserable and foolish. In Montaigne’s language they will appear as the most “blind,” and the most “impaired,” for the sole reason that they have not *seen* this human disability.

This work also stems from a concern with the way in which negative feelings, or those that are perceived to be negative or “mood killers,” in Sara Ahmed’s language, *stick* back to those who utter them. For example, expressions of anger make the person uttering them “angry,” and feelings of depression make the person feeling them person “depressing” to others. According to Ahmed, such people are considered

¹² Leonard J. Davis, “The End of Identity Politics: On Disability as an Unstable Category,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 4th ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (London: Routledge, 2013), 272.

*killjoys or affect aliens.*¹³

In this light, we can even think of criticism, particularly literary criticism, as one such “mood killer” in relation to other disciplines and modes of thought whose goal it is to move forward, to answer “vital” questions in a positivist manner, to have the semblance of providing concrete solutions, as more “agreeable” participants in the larger trajectory of “the promise of happiness,”¹⁴ from the perspective of academics and research.

Therefore, reading one of the most canonical works of literary complexity and philosophical esteem, Montaigne’s *Essais*, as thoroughly melancholic, provides an example of how we can hear negative feelings, and hear their meaning, without these feelings leading to the dismissal of their voices, and to the deligitimaizing of their utterances.

¹³ Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 38-39.

¹⁴ Ahmed, “Happy Objects.”

CHAPTER ONE:
FIGURES OF EARLY-MODERN MELANCHOLY AND FOLLY

INTRODUCTION

In the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton asks us to give him “a little leave” so he can set before our eyes a “vast infinite Ocean full of incredible madness and folly.”¹⁵ For a contemporary reader, this promise can read as something of a contradiction or a disappointment, given that the term “melancholy” fails to appear in the articulated promise of an *anatomy* of melancholy.

As many early-modern scholars have noted, the early-modern period abides by a paradigm of thought that is far less divided and defined in a way understood to modern and contemporary readers and thinkers, including divisions between body and mind, between different emotions, between subject and world, between subject matters and fields of interest or inquiry.¹⁶

Following this important observation, drawing a distinction between melancholy, subjectivity, and the world, and a variety of “neighboring terms” such as folly and madness, but also sorrow, misery, and even happiness and joy, is anachronistic in relation to early-modern works that aim to deal with or understand melancholy. In a similar manner, an attempt to draw distinctions between different symptoms, causes, disorders, and cures, is also thwarted by the discursive and diverging lists, topics, and examples, whose relation to each other is often not only one

¹⁵ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), III, 4, 1, 1.

¹⁶ For the importance of viewing the early-modern body and emotions in relation to the world and the environment, see: Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

of resemblance but also one of contradiction.¹⁷

Therefore, in order to approach early-modern accounts and descriptions of melancholy, or any other notion for that matter, a number of assumptions and expectations have to be reset in relation to early-modern thought paradigms. The first has to do with analogous thinking, and the second with causality, and in a sense, suspending the latter in favor of the first. While “bad air” or “sleep” as a cause for melancholy might make some sense to a contemporary reader, the idea of “sorrow as a chief cause of melancholy,” might be more uncomfortable, because the cause is still lacking, especially as it is placed alongside so many other concoctions of causes and emotions: sorrow in the midst of laughter, miseries of love, miseries of solitude, miseries of study, miseries of ignorance, and on and on.

Many accounts of early-modern thought therefore raise the significance of viewing early-modern notions through the early-modern paradigm of analogous and emblematic thinking, according to which the universe is seen as “a vast open book” with every entity linked to every other through a network of signs and symbols,¹⁸ and where, as Foucault writes, “to search for a meaning is to bring to light a resemblance.”¹⁹

To provide an anecdote for this difference in paradigm, something this chapter will have in abundance, many accounts of early-modern thought offer the anecdotal

¹⁷ For a discussion on the historical perspective of melancholy as an all-encompassing category of mental illness until the advent of psychiatry, see Jennifer Radden, “Medical, Psychological and Moral Concepts,” in *Moody Minds Distempered: Essays on Melancholy and Depression*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), particularly 152-154.

¹⁸ Allison P. Coudert, “All Coherence Gone.” *Religion, Magic, and Science in Early Modern Europe and America*. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 4-5.

¹⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, 33.

example of Conrad Gesner, a sixteenth-century Swiss naturalist, whose *Historia Animalium* (1551-1558) was a 4,500-page encyclopedia of animals, including over 200 hundred elaborate and decorative woodcuts of birds alone. As an expression of this “emblematic worldview,” William B. Ashworth writes that for Gesner, observing the physiology of the peacock as a way to understand its nature was insufficient — a way of thinking that was in general foreign to Renaissance thought. Instead, Gesner, as an example for early-modern thought, relied on myth, associations, affinities, fables, proverbs, or anything else linking the peacock to the rest of creation:

To know the peacock, as Gesner wanted to know it, one must know not only what the peacock looks like but what its name means, in every language; what it symbolizes to both pagans and Christians; what other animals it has sympathies or affinities with; and any other possible connection it might have with stars, plants minerals, numbers, coins, or whatever.²⁰

Therefore, while many accounts of early-modern melancholy have relied on explanations stemming from humoral theory, which often become causal and material accounts, I have approached the topic from a literary and figurative approach, in order to approximate the analogous paradigm. Consequently, this chapter explores early-modern melancholy almost uniquely through early-modern figures and tropes, both visual and literary, which taken together, convey a *sense* of melancholy and some of its modes: its use as a critique, its neighboring meanings, most notably, folly, its subjective expressions and language, its contradictions and movements, its historical context when possible, how melancholy relates to society and others, and so on.

²⁰ William Ashworth, “Natural history and the emblematic world view,” in *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, reprint ed., ed. David C. Lindberg and Robert S. Westman (London: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 332, quoted in Allison P. Coudert, “All Coherence Gone,” in *Religion, Magic, and Science in Early Modern Europe and America* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 6.

For this purpose I survey a number of figures ordered in sections, while also constantly demonstrating their overlap, and the collapse or engagement of tropes with each other, since early-modern subjectivity and concepts tend to operate like the Deleuzian “fold” (*pli*), which I will allude to as a way to talk about the relations between different correspondences or affinities. I have also relied on Foucault’s understanding of early-modern madness and folly from the “Stultifera Navis” chapter in *Madness and Civilization*, which has proven fruitful for a discussion on melancholy as well.

Section I provides some historical background of melancholy through the notion of ambiguity, a concept that is emphasized and heightened in the early-modern thinking and work of Marsilio Ficino. Section II is an analysis of the most famous visual depiction of early-modern melancholy, Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, which provides one way of defining melancholy as a “distorted” or “pathological” vision, an analysis and image that permeate and structure the entire first chapter, and the following chapters as well.

Section III is a discussion of Folly through its visual depiction in *The Fool’s Cap Map of the World* and Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of Fools*, where Folly is presented as an overarching critique of the world, and seen as a universal condition. Section IV takes folly and melancholy together and shows their mutual involvement, particularly as they both relate to “the human condition,” where the conjoined figures of Democritus and Heraclitus serve as a metaphor for these two seemingly opposite states, and through an analysis of select anecdotes and poems from Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, shown to shed a light of folly on melancholy and misery. Section V

discusses the notion of diversity mainly through Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and through new and different figures reiterating the relations of ambiguity, tension, and oscillation, in connection with melancholy as a radical subjectivity.

The final section, Section VI, concludes with a discussion of folly and melancholy in relation to normativity based in the character of Jaques from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and suggests some ways in which folly and melancholy might be relevant to contemporary criticism. Together, these figures, tropes, images, and stories, provide multiple ways for discussing melancholy and folly, and ultimately for revealing them in Montaigne's *Essais* in chapters 3 and 4.

Rather than defining melancholy in any particular way and applying it to my reading of Montaigne, concepts like oscillation, distance, singularity, mystery, subjectivity, critique, and distortion, revealed in this chapter in their relation to melancholy, will guide the later readings and revelations of Montaigne's *Essais* as a melancholy text.

I. MELANCHOLY AMBIGUITY

Early-modern melancholy is a figure of ambiguities, of movement between extremes, and of tension. Ficino's figure of the "melancholy genius" is one that is most commonly viewed as enveloping these ambiguities and tensions as a union between two kinds of melancholy: the disease of black bile on the one hand, and the inspiration of genius on the other; between the lows of suffering and the heights of creativity; between mental capacities and bodily suffering.

Traditionally, melancholy has always been conceived of as a condition of polarities and ambiguity, a condition of both mind and body, one that could either connote special talents, or end in sickness. This polarity is frequently described as the manic-depressive quality of melancholy that had vanished with Freud.²¹ In classical pre-Socratic thought and especially in Galenic medicine, melancholy was considered a physical disease, residing in the black bile fluid and caused by its excess. And yet it always contained a mental component as well, as those who were prone to this excess or who frequently experienced it were considered to have a melancholy temperament, whereby humors (physical entities) went hand in hand with temperaments understood as “personality types.”²² Similarly, melancholy could be a temperament or disposition kept in check or maintained, providing an overall healthy state; or, in less successful cases, it could lead to a fully debilitating disease.²³

These various ambiguities have always characterized theories of melancholy, and are not unique to the early-modern period. Yet, as I will show, early-modern melancholy emphasized and raised them to a higher degree, focusing on what these tensions and contrarities *feel* like, or do, internally — the striving and struggle of the “melancholy man,” and the notion of the “genius within,” which would also give way to Renaissance depictions and theories of a person’s “natural bent” and inherent, natural capacities or talents.²⁴

²¹ Levine, Michael P. *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).

²² Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books Publishing Company, 1964), 14-15.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Darrin McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault indicates the transition from medieval folly to renaissance folly as a transition from objective sin or vice to an internal collapse of folly within each man: a process of individual self-reflection into each individual's own faults and flaws.²⁵ A similar collapse could be said of melancholy, which also moves inward and threatens to literally tear the subject apart from within. As Burton writes, signaling this turn inward: "If there be a hell upon earth, it is to be found in a melancholy man's heart."²⁶

While Aristotle had famously asked in his *Problem XXX.I* why it is that those who are outstanding in philosophy, politics, poetry, or the arts are also affected by the disease of black bile,²⁷ he expressed an *observation*, and separated the two aspects of melancholy, which Ficino would later fuse together for his contemporaries: having exceptional talent on the one hand, and being prone to the disease, on the other.

By combining Aristotle's observation with Platonic *frenzy* (poetic or divine inspiration), Ficino's "answer" relates the physical disease, and these unique talents, to an internal capacity and power of the soul.²⁸ When Ficino affirms, "divine madness is never incited in anyone else but melancholics,"²⁹ he ascribes a hidden and internal power to melancholic individuals with which this divine illumination interacts, with which it is "incited."

²⁵ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 26-27.

²⁶ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, 4, I.

²⁷ "Why is it that all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile, as is said to have happened to Heracles among the heroes?" Aristotle, *Problems* (London: Aeterna Press, 2015), XXX, I.

²⁸ On Ficino's fusion of Aristotle and Plato, see Jennifer Radden, "Ficino: Learned People and Melancholy," in *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 88.

²⁹ Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 117.

Internalizing both natures or forces — sickness on the one hand, and the capacity of the soul on the other — Ficino also asserts that the melancholy sickness does not just affect people of talent, as Aristotle observes, but also, the other way around: the active pursuits of “great men” can lead to melancholy sickness. Contrary to Aristotle’s examples of melancholy men, which consisted mainly of men of action, or “heroes,” like Heracles, Ficino’s paradigmatic examples are scholars, much like Ficino himself, whose intellectual and mental activity put them at risk of becoming ill — “sick and invalid scholars” — to whose pursuits and health his *Three Books on Life* (1489) is dedicated:

I am the first to attend as a physician sick and invalid scholars [...] Gladly approach the physician who will dispense to you (God revealing and helping) salutary counsels and remedies for the accomplishment of your purpose!³⁰

Although Ficino provides three causes for the melancholy of scholars — celestial, natural, and human — all three causes are in deep correspondence with the soul, such that almost all three causes are in fact *internal* and “human.” The celestial cause is the “summoning” of the scholar to study; the natural cause is defined in terms of the “difficult” nature of pursuing knowledge, which requires the soul to “remove itself from external things to internal things”;³¹ and finally, the human cause is the act of contemplation itself, which in its activity and motion mimics the natural process of the build-up of black bile in the blood: “Contemplation with a kind of rigorous gathering up, almost seizing, contracts one’s nature like black bile.”³²

Altogether, melancholy is portrayed as the internal movement of the soul,

³⁰ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, trans. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: MRTS, 1989), 109.

³¹ *Ibid.*, *Three Books on Life*, 113-114.

³² *Ibid.*, 115.

towards the planetary heights, and from external to internal things, until finally it is “seized” by its own strenuous activity, where its motion is a narrowing and condensed “contraction.” In the course of this strenuous form of thinking, described as various motions of the soul, the soul can stretch so far outside of the body in order to reach “incorporeal truths,” that it practically tears away from the body, causing the destruction and disintegration of the corporeal:

the more they [the learned] apply their mind to incorporeal truth, the more they are compelled to disjoin it from the body. Hence their body is rendered as if it were half-alive and often melancholic.³³

This final near split between soul and body, takes the internal polarity and oscillations of melancholy to its extreme, from melancholy as something more akin to a manageable temperament, to melancholy as a fully destructive disease. This image of a near “tear” looming over the creative or mental activity of the scholar or genius, should they strain their mind any further, will also be echoed in Dürer’s image in the next section, through a scene whose “balance” is, analogously, hanging by a thread.

In Ficino’s personal letters and correspondences, we see that he himself experiences melancholy in this manner: as an internal push and pull, an internal conflict between its “gifts” at times, and its “curse” at other times, while he attempts to reconcile this struggle by accepting the fusion of the two forces that he himself theorizes... and by practically forcing himself to see them as interdependent, against which the pain of the condition itself constantly pushes back.

The first portion of the passage below, from a correspondence with his friend, Giovanni Cavalcanti, expresses an attempt to take back his complaint against

³³ Ibid., 115.

melancholy, by writing a *palinode* to Saturn at Cavalcanti's request, asking him to recant. But as soon as Ficino starts recanting, he immediately falls back into pain and complaint, asking: "but where have I landed myself?" realizing that, again, he might soon have to recant if he does not hold back his feelings. The second portion expresses the continued difficulty and hesitation in embracing the ambiguity of melancholy as not only a curse but also a "divine gift" ("I will try to find a way out"... "if you must have it so"), but which he feels he must do in order to keep his suffering and complaining in check, offering a general overview of these internal struggles and oscillations:

Because of that excessive timidity, which you occasionally charge me with, I complain of my melancholy temperament, for to me it seems a very bitter thing, and one that I can only ease and sweeten a little by much lute-playing; [...] Saturn methinks gave it to me from the beginning, when in my horoscope he stood in the ascendant in the sign of the Water-Bearer...but where have I landed myself? I can see already that you will once more, with some justice, oblige me to embark on a new palinode on Saturn. So what shall I do? I will try to find a way out, and either I will say that melancholy, if you must have it so, does not come from Saturn; or else, if it necessarily comes from him, then I will agree with Aristotle, who described it as a unique and divine gift.³⁴

II. MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: THE PATHOLOGICAL VISION OF MELANCHOLY: AN ANALYSIS OF ALBRECHT DÜRER'S *MELANCOLIA I* (1514)

Albrecht Dürer's image, *Melancholia I* (1514) [Figure 1], is the most iconic representation of the melancholy temperament. In the engraving, a winged personification of Melancholy, often referred to as Dürer's "brooding angel," or "winged genius," echoing Ficino's "melancholy genius," sits dejectedly and rests her

³⁴ Ficino quoted in Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and Art*, 258.

head on her hand, symbolically holding a caliper — an instrument of measurement. In Erwin Panofsky's earlier interpretation of this image in *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*,³⁵ *Melancholia I* is thought to represent the artist at work, alluded to by the various geometrical and artist tools scattered in the room, aligning creativity with melancholy, combining inspiration with dejection, much along the lines of Ficino's notion of the "melancholy genius."³⁶

In their later study, *Saturn and Melancholia*, Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl offer a more productive and less pathological image of *Melancholia I*, by focusing on the tension and activity of the figure, by reading her pose as conveying "hard thinking" instead of dejection, and on the tension between the clenched left fist that supports the head [the site of mental activity], and the lethargic right fist that is holding the caliper, suggesting another kind of effort and deeper motion than the portrait of an artist at work, with the dejected aftermath. As their initial analysis goes, it seems as though the figure of Melancholia expresses a "psychological unconcern" for all the tools of creation and construction that lie idly at her feet, and out of use, which would seem to explain why her gaze dejectedly looks away:

the things on which her eye might rest simply do not exist for her. The saw lies idly at her feet; the grindstone with its chipped edge leans uselessly against the wall; the book lies in her lap with closed clasps; the rhomboid and the astral phenomena are ignored; the sphere has rolled to the ground; and the compasses are "spoiling for want of occupation."³⁷

³⁵ Panofsky, Erwin. *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton Classic Ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, 315.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 316.

As they further analyse the image more closely, they reveal that Melancholia is far from being asleep, as in earlier medieval depictions of slothful melancholia, but rather almost to the contrary, is obsessively preoccupied with something other than the unused tools: her internal state of struggle, and interior visions. By giving special attention to the clenched left fist supporting the head — the seat of thought, in contrast to the lethargic right hand holding the compass, the contrast between the gaze looking towards an empty distance, and its intensity, expressing “hard thinking,” but also through the figure of the dog “half-starved and shivering on the cold earth” as opposed to enjoying sleep and warmth — their analysis generates tension and thereby motion between the acts of thinking, attempting, and dejection, immobility, and failure, against their earlier and more static analysis.³⁸

In an excellent analysis of this image, Wojciech Bałus takes this notion of motion and tension to its extreme, by describing the scene as one that is simultaneously of immanent destruction and permanent suspension, which he refers to as a “dynamism in immobility.”³⁹ Focusing on the polyhedron, a geometrical block, somewhat at the center of the image, Bałus portrays a world in motion, or of imminent motion, a world on the verge of collapse and destruction as the large block “looms bulkily, almost threateningly,” out of balance as if it is about to fall and crush the dog below it, while the scope of the crash will be determined by what happens to those objects at both sides of the dog.⁴⁰ The putto is also brushing up against the scales, and the wings against the hourglass, with a sense of an approaching clash, while at the

³⁸ Ibid., 318-319.

³⁹ Wojciech Bałus, “Dürer’s “Melencolia I”: Melancholy and the Undecidable,” *Artibus et Historiae* 15, no. 30 (1994): 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14.

same time, all remains still — the dog is sleeping, the polyhedron is for the moment held in place, generating this “dynamism in immobility.”⁴¹

Finally, in his chapter “L’essayiste et son humeur,” Olivier Pot offers a slightly different analysis of the image, which will also play an important role in the understanding of melancholy throughout this dissertation. As a paradigm of a “distorted perspective,” melancholy for Pot becomes, precisely due to its distortion, bias, and idiosyncrasy, the paradigm for subjectivity, in the absence of any “objective” or “normal” perspectives.

Pot asserts the unique *otherness* of the melancholy perspective and gaze in *Melancholia I*, beyond its symbolic meaning in the figuration of the suffering genius just discussed. In *Melancholia I*, Pot describes the elusive glancing into that empty distance as “anomalous” in the disability sense, as a visual “limp,” a “boîterie,” and a “claudication,” and even describes it as “one-eyed” (*borgne*) or “cross-eyed” (*louche*), in an idiosyncratic distortion and vision that he does not shy away from calling “pathological.”⁴² However, by aligning the subjective (idiosyncratic) with the pathological, Pot frees the pathological from its status as “abnormality” or “deviance,” and restores it to the level of a normal anomaly, a normal difference, to connote Canguilhem’s terms from *On the Normal and the Pathological*.⁴³

In this manner, Pot regards the “pathological vision” (*pathologie du regard*) of the melancholic as a *privileged* anomaly or impairment of vision. Given the problem

⁴¹ Ibid., 16.

⁴² Olivier Pot, “L’essayiste et son humeur,” in *L’inquiétante étrangeté: Montaigne, la pierre, le cannibale, la mélancolie* (Paris: Slatkine, 1993), 10.

⁴³ Georges Canguilhem, “A Critical Examination of Certain Concepts: the Normal, Anomaly, and Disease; the Normal and the Experimental,” *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett, (New York: Zone Books. 1991).

of perspective and mimetic crisis experienced in the Renaissance, which problematized the relation between the interior and the exterior, natural world — the idiosyncratic, biased, subjective position or gaze, becomes the only opportunity to catch a kind of original, nascent observation. Therefore, melancholy, as the distorted glimpse itself, offers a privileged view of that subjective act, as the only original act — a “bit of nature” (*morceau de nature*) to a nature otherwise inaccessible.⁴⁴

In a sense, it is due to the fact that it is in vision itself, in the act of seeing, although distorted, blinded, impaired — not looking at anything in particular in its distant, distracted, gaze — that reality and signification are postponed, thus allowing for a certain privileged access to truth, or rather, to nature — the nature of observation itself.

Beyond the distortion of the melancholic gaze, the perspective of the image itself presents a subversive composition, one that is at odds with linear perspective and the illusion of a perfect image, as invented and praised in the Renaissance. Linear perspective, according to Balus, has to do with “seeing along direct lines of sight,” clearly subverted by the figure herself, but also for the spectator for whom the focal point (“the convergence at a single point of all lines receding from the viewer”), falls not at the center of the image, as it *should*, but at the upper left hand side, below the figure of the dragon-bat, cutting through the two tips of the wings.⁴⁵

Melancholia I, in contrast to other Dürer paintings in which linear perspective was perfected, displays instead a broken and oblique (or impaired in Pot’s sense) line of sight, from which additional disorder and chaos ensue. Balus reminds us that

⁴⁴ Pot, “L’essayiste et son humeur,” 12-13.

⁴⁵ Balus, “Dürer’s “Melencolia I”: Melancholy and the Undecidable,” 12.

subversion in perspective is not just optical, but a disruption of the *perspectiva communis*. That is, a subversion of the *normal* way of seeing, represented by linear perspective or (to follow Pot) the illusion of one.

Contrary to *Saturn and Melancholy*'s symbolic analysis of the room, its objects, and what they represent, Bałus insists on the utter distortion of perspective and disorientation of the whole scene, which alludes to the undecided and mysterious nature of melancholy itself. For example, the ladder cuts diagonally across the image in an awkward manner, distorting perspective but also leading to nowhere or to an unknown place, as it is cut off at the top.⁴⁶ Such an example provides an alternative symbol, one of mystery and disorientation, against the clear symbolism of *Saturn and Melancholy*, where the focus falls on the various "tools of creation" like the caliper, the saw and nails, the compass and so on.

Thus, the different readings or interpretations of the image also suggest a contrast between two ways of seeing, or two ways of viewing the image, depending on what the gaze — this time the spectator, or interpreter's gaze [normal/abnormal], falls on.

III. FIGURES OF FOLLY: THE FOOL'S CAP & SHIP

Jean de Gourmont's monochrome map, the *Fool's Cap Map of the World* (1575) [Figure 2], presents a witty retort to what is considered the "first modern world map," and the most accurate and accessible map of the sixteenth century, by placing this very

⁴⁶ Ibid., 14.

map inside a fool's head, and inside the motley (costume) of a fool. Adding to the witty combination of map and fool, the image is surrounded by commentaries and critiques in the form of a variety of inscriptions related to vanity, folly, and melancholy on every end, comprising an abundance of *memento mori* and *vanitas*, almost as abundant and "charted" as the map itself, whereby the fool's costume is, like the map, covered in these sayings and signs.

Across the top of the image is the French translation of the Socratic dictum, "Know Thyself" ("Congnois toy toy-mesme"), on top of the fool's cap reads "O head, worthy of purgation," (the traditional procedure to help cure melancholy), and scattered all over the image and motley are the various inscriptions of *vanitas*: "asse's ears, who's without them," "the number of fools is infinite," "Oh, how vain are the worries of men," and even a short framed piece of writing to the left of the image, that mentions the two philosophers, Heraclitus and Democritus, the laughing and weeping philosophers which will be the subject of another section in this chapter.

The *Fool's Cap Map* is a figuration of early-modern folly as a critique and disavowal of the novelty, knowledge, power and conquest symbolized by the world map and globe that it surrounds: A form of *contemptus mundi* (contempt of the world), and also *vanitas*, or *memento mori* (remember you must/will die), at the same time when these forms of knowledge and power are being canonized, printed, circulated, and literally, mapped. In this sense, folly will be understood as a critique of, or a critical retort to, the state of the world.

Following the first modern atlas, Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570), the century's most familiar image of the world, by just five years,

Richard Helgerson describes the *Fool's Cap Map* as “a simultaneous production of criticism and retort to a relatively mass-produced form of knowledge and mastery in the form of the new world map, turned onto itself.”⁴⁷ This gesture is reflective of the early-modern “double-consciousness” in response to modernity and knowledge of which maps, and mapmaking, were highly symbolic. As Helgerson notes, mapmaking itself was a somewhat ambiguous endeavor of modernity, on the one hand, and critique of modernity and its folly and madness on the other:

If maps were the pre-eminent sign of modernity, they could also be made to speak out against the modern. Indeed, their very prominence made them especially available for contrarian appropriation. Maps were regularly inserted into interpretive contexts that radically altered their meaning, contexts that turned their worldly uses against themselves, revealing the folly of both maps and the modernity to which they were so actively contributing [...] mocking that very project [of maps] and all those who had devoted themselves to it.⁴⁸

As Helgerson notes, even Ortelius's original atlas, whose title, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, means “Theater of the World,” included inscriptions of *vanitas* that provided an ingenious critique of its very endeavor and production. The original atlas was accompanied by a Latin inscription about human limitation that read: “For what can seem of moment in human occurrences to a man who keeps all eternity before his eyes and knows the vastness of the universe?” and the following quote from Seneca was added to a later edition of the map: “O how ridiculous are the boundaries of mortals!”⁴⁹ Inversely, the *Fool's Cap Map* is a critical commentary of the map, but is also itself a map, demonstrating that early-modern practices of knowledge and power,

⁴⁷ Richard Helgerson, “The folly of maps and modernity,” in *Literature, Mapping and the Politics of Space in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Andrew Gordon and Bernhard Klein (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 243 (my emphasis).

⁴⁸ Richard Helgerson, “The folly of maps and modernity,” 242-243.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

and their counter-discourse of *contemptus mundi*, went together hand in hand, to the point where the map itself could serve to replace skulls as *memento mori* in writings and paintings.⁵⁰ These *vanitas* and *memento mori* were crucial to early-modern artists, writers, and mapmakers as they offered their endeavors a “talismanic insurance against that worldly involvement.”⁵¹

The Fool’s Cap Map extends beyond the *memento mori* or *vanitas* as this “insurance against worldliness,” and beyond a critique and commentary on the novel and modern. It is also a symbol of the trope of “universal folly,” as folly is depicted here, quite literally, as the *face* of everything: the folly and madness, which Foucault, observes, “involves everyone and everything in a kind of secret complicity.”⁵²

Where *vanitas* and *memento mori* are traditionally intended as *reminders* of worldly vanity, of mortality, and the consequent ethics of humility, early-modern folly is of the world: worldliness and folly seem to be one and the same, or seem to fold into each other. Accordingly, as Helgerson notes, early-modern eyes would not have seen a *map* inside of a fool’s head, but rather the *world* inside of the fool’s head.⁵³

“Universal folly” in this manner evokes an even wider sense of disavowal, a more sweeping *contemptus mundi*. As we will see later through Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, folly continues to expand onto the world and fully inhabit it, no longer just casting a critical shadow upon its most ambitious and modern pursuits, like art, knowledge, and conquest. In Burton, the world itself is already made like a fool’s head, in a passage that cites this *Fool’s Cap Map* image: “thou shalt soone perceive

⁵⁰ Ibid., 250-251.

⁵¹ Ibid., 249-250.

⁵² Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 13.

⁵³ Richard Helgerson, “The folly of maps and modernity,” 243.

that all the world is mad, that it is melancholy, dotes: [...] that it is made like a Fools head.”⁵⁴

Foucault similarly marks the early-modern period by a transition that subsumes death, fear, and darkness into the lightness of folly and madness. Death, as the threat of annihilation and nothingness, is already present in life, if the world and everything in it are already folly and madness, already “emptied out”:

Death’s annihilation is no longer anything because it was already everything, because life itself was only futility, vain words, a squabble of cap and bells. The head that will become a skull is already empty. Madness is the *déjà-là* of death.⁵⁵

On the one hand, this proximity between death and folly, between maps and death, binds everything together in this universality in which not only is everyone complicit and part of this shared human lot, but meaning itself folds onto itself, and no longer appears as meaningful, or as deep.

The Socratic inscription across the image, *Know Thyself*, might refer to *knowing* this nothingness, and facing this annihilation and emptiness of folly. On the other hand, to “know thyself” also means, in a more specific way, to know one’s folly — aided by the reflection/image of the world as a fool. This interpretation derives from the inscription’s relations to the other ones in the image. For example, seen in relation to the inscription across the fool’s cap: “O head, worthy of purgation,” where purgation was a form for curing melancholy, to know thyself could also mean to self-diagnose, to self-care, in the form of self-awareness — the awareness to faults and flaws as mentioned in Foucault. With the additional view that maps were forms of developing self-, regional, and national identities, the map becomes a metaphor for

⁵⁴ Robert Burton quoted in Richard Helgerson, “The folly of maps and modernity,” 243.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 16.

“seeing oneself,” for self-reflection, in the sense of finding one’s own faults and follies.

Nonetheless, the image does not provide a specific guidance, and does not return a specific image, except for an image of an omnipresent vanity, according to the general notion that “no one is exempt from this condition” (Burton), that everyone is folly. Yet far from being a blanket statement about the state of the world, the readings in this dissertation will illustrate how revealing, finding, and representing follies constitute a subjective act and a special capacity for re-ordering the world, re-presenting it, much like the visual metaphor of Dürer’s chaotic (i.e., re-ordered) room, and re-ordered perspective have illustrated.

Furthermore, early-modern works convey the importance of, and even sense of imminent urgency about, self-identifying as folly. This sense of urgency is strongly sensed in Sebastian Brant’s famous work, *The Ship of Fools* (1494),⁵⁶ in the metaphorical rush to throw everyone on board the ship of fools, not leaving a single person on shore. The author imagines a voyage to a “fool’s utopia” — a dream of colonizing the world with fools,⁵⁷ while one of the woodcuts that accompany the oration shows men hurrying to catch up with the ship crying “beita, beita” [“wait, wait”].⁵⁸

Brant’s at times violent language, as the example below shows, expresses what appears to be a frustration and anger with people’s inability to see the folly within themselves, in their lives and conduct, thinking that folly always lies elsewhere and

⁵⁶ Sebastian Brant. *The Ship of Fools*, 1494, Vol. 2, ed./trans. by Edwin H. Zeydel (New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1962).

⁵⁷ Brant, “Introduction”, *The Ship of Fools*, 15.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

with others. The recurring image of “universal folly” in *The Ship of Fools* is that of the “fool’s cap,” which the author offers to tailor and fit to everyone’s size — to any kind of fool, from any walk of life: “Fools poor and rich, high-bred and tyke, / Yes, everyman will find his like, / I cut a cap for every chap.”⁵⁹ This holds even for young girls, and even if this “fitting” will require force and labor:

I’ll deck their heads and veils demure / With fool’s cap, though I’m sure it hurts / For girls, too, have on idiot’s skirts
[...]
Who thinks that he is not affected / To wise men’s doors be he directed, / There let him wait until mayhap / From Frankfurt I can fetch a cap.⁶⁰

Because folly is, or ought to be, a universal “diagnosis,” one whose application evokes a sense of urgency and importance — perhaps as a frustrated response to the realistic lack of demand to board the ship — the author himself eagerly volunteers to be first on board (“on this ship I’m number one”). Opening the canto to his book with the noteworthy title, *Of useless books*, the author is the first self-identified fool in his long list of fools:

In dunce’s dance I take the lead,
Books useless, numerous my creed,
Which I can’t understand or read.
[...]
If on this ship I’m number one
For special reasons that was done,
Yes, I’m the first on here you see
Because I like my library.
Of splendid books I own no end,
But few that I can comprehend;⁶¹

It is no coincidence, of course, that the author’s folly is the presumption and vanity of knowledge and books, which corresponds with the *Fool’s Cap Map* and its

⁵⁹ Brant, *The Ship of Fools*, 59.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

retort to knowledge. Through the image of the scholar who is overcome with a passion for collecting books he cannot read or understand, knowledge embodies the ambivalence of an attractive pursuit that is nonetheless “useless” or empty, much like the endeavors of mapmaking and mastery of the world as represented in the fool’s head, and perhaps like the tools of creation and art in Dürer’s image.

Therefore, the “special reason” accorded to the “first folly” in Brant’s list is not only the author modeling himself as the first to self-identify as a fool and board the ship, but also, much like melancholy, due to the special role that folly plays in relation and in response to knowledge, or as Foucault notes, the special place folly accords to “the very excess of false learning.”⁶²

The folly associated with “excess learning” also echoes the dangers of “study” in melancholy terms, expressed, for example, through Ficino’s notion of *contemplation* as an activity that mimics the build-up of black bile, its drying up of the brain (“melancholy *adust*”), and the damaging straining of the soul associated with it.

Figure 3 is an image of the engraving accompanying Brant’s chapter, *Of useless books*, noteworthy in this context because it aligns folly and melancholy through the dejected gaze of the scholar/artist. In this image, drawing up several important parallels with Dürer’s image, the scholar’s gaze is obfuscated by the thick glasses he is wearing, and while he is holding a book on his lap, his gaze is directed fully above and beyond it, while his right arm dusts his collection of books rather than reads them, also implied by Brant’s confession that he cannot read the books he cherishes and owns. The books, like Melancholia’s tools, appear to be out of use in

⁶² Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 25.

their ordinary sense, and the scene is taken over by an incomprehensible, mysterious, and “abnormal” relation to the environment.

As we have seen, Folly takes center stage in the Renaissance, accounting for everything and everyone, which is why we find endless “follies” and, as we will see, endless “melancholies” too. This diversity and variety, why each person “has their own fool’s cap,” is also due to the fact that, as Foucault notes, Folly does not have to do with truth and the world, but with man himself: his delusions about himself, his limitations, flaws, and primarily his presumption, to which this form of “excess” or “false” learning is closely tied.^{63,64}

The symbol of madness will henceforth be that mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own *presumption*. Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive.⁶⁵

Like the image of the world as a fool, the image of the ship of fools, as an overloaded vessel on the verge of tipping over, with as many “follies” and “flaws” as there are people, conveys a clear sense that Folly is the only category and “diagnosis” relevant to the human condition. This notion is also expressed in Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, where Melancholy, Madness, and Folly, will interchangeably be just that — a general human category of weaknesses, flaws, faults, from which “no living man is free.”

However, since these weaknesses are not objective moralities or vices, as

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁴ Also noteworthy is that fact that, much as the *Fool’s Cap Map* was a retort to new conquest and knowledge, and followed the production and circulation of the atlas by a number of years, Brant’s *Ship of Fools* was written only two years after the first voyage of Columbus to the New World, of which Brant had knowledge. See Brant, “Introduction,” *Ship of Fools*, 15.

⁶⁵ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 27 (my emphasis).

Foucault observes, the application of Folly, or these overarching, general categories, depend on the self-perception and self-reflection of each individual: *knowing thyself*, to go back to the map, means knowing one's own folly in the larger mirror of the folly of the world. The categories themselves, like the overly general image of the world as a fool's head, however, can only serve as very general and symbolic representations, able to reflect back only "whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive."⁶⁶

On the other hand, this connection between self-reflection (*know thyself*), and the author's hope that this will result in a self-identification with folly — boarding the ship of fools by whatever weakness or limitation one finds within himself — positions *presumption* as the greatest and ultimate folly, forming a kind of paradoxical relation between the openness of the category of Folly, and its strict confines or limits.

Through this kind of paradox, presumption is conceived solely as a position in which one presumes *not* to be folly, and not perceive himself as sharing in these human limitations. Therefore, while the category of folly, madness, and melancholy is general and all encompassing, those who do *not* join its ranks, are plagued with the greatest fault, and become marked, according to a reverse logic: "The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."⁶⁷ According to this reversed logic, the self-identifying fool, who does not presume to be wise, is in a sense protected from this newly conceived type of "ill."

Burton's description of Melancholy in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, also as an overarching condition, whereby all humans are full of "cares, woes and miseries," and

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), V, I, 28, 195.

Melancholy “is the character of mortality,”⁶⁸ involves a similar logic of reversal excluding those who do *not* identify with melancholy, or recognize it, while offering some protection to those who *do* “board the ship,” or in Burton’s language below, those who are “armed to endure it,” and know it to be a character of life. Melancholy and Folly in this manner become kinds of *vanitas* in their own right.

And he that knows not this is not armed to endure it, is not fit to live in this world (as one condoles our time), he knows not the condition of it, where with a reciprocity, pleasure and pain are still united, and succeed one another in a ring.⁶⁹

This passage once more evokes the defining ambiguity of melancholy, here understood as an expression of “pleasure and pain united with reciprocity.” If melancholy is the “bitterness” to happiness, as Burton says, it is because life is “bitter-sweet,”⁷⁰ “a succession of pain and pleasure,” thereby igniting the analogy and sympathies between melancholy and life or between melancholy and the human condition.

In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault demonstrates the relative freedom that madness enjoyed until the classical age — from the liminal status of the “ship” to the fixed and definite status of the “hospital.” This dissertation, particularly in the discussion of Pascal and, in greater detail, Montaigne, will focus instead on what is radically harsh and critical of folly, a judgment that conceals an expectation to self-reflect in a way to find one’s weaknesses, one’s false pursuits, and presumptions: the *contemptus mundi* of folly, its *vanitas* and *memento mori*. Those who do not embrace folly, who, as a result are blind to their impairment and limitation, become the true

⁶⁸ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, I, I, 5

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Burton’s original phrasing of “bitter-sweet” is in Ancient Greek: “it is all γλυκύπικρον” [glukupikron], which most closely translates to “it is all bitter-sweet.”

fools who have alienated themselves from the human condition with which folly, and by analogy melancholy, become synonymous.

Finally, while the terms, madness, melancholy, folly, often appear interchangeably, particularly in Burton's *Anatomy*, and particularly when used to describe these general, universal states ("a world gone mad", "a fool's paradise", "everyone is melancholy, mad, dotes"), the main texts analyzed in this dissertation are written by self-professed and "known" melancholics, primarily Montaigne, Ficino, Burton, Dürer, and also Brant. This means that their depiction of folly as a *contemptus mundi*, and their critical and condemning focus on those who presume to be wise, and who refuse folly, is also a reflection of their melancholic insight and perception, as Dürer's distorted perspective and gaze have already symbolized. Therefore, in the complex dynamic between melancholy and folly, it is important to keep in mind that in the hands of melancholy, as will be explored in the following chapters, folly might seem less "joyous" or less "free" in Foucault's sense, and more condemning and dangerous.

IV. PERSPECTIVES OF FOLLY

This alternative vision and reality through the distorted vision of the melancholic is what enables Burton to display so many different kinds, indeed infinite instances, of folly and melancholy. How for example is "being learned" considered to be a folly? We have already seen multiple connections between scholars and melancholy and folly, but there are countless other images, depending on the

perspective and the criticism one wants to convey. In fact Burton will present an opposite image of the folly of the scholar to those presented by other melancholics, one who in his immobility and silence becomes a mere statue to be admired for no apparent reason.

To do this Burton has to focus and choose a certain quality about scholars and learning, something that also relates to the particular values he wants to reveal as “normative.” He takes the specific quality of learned men being often *silent*. If learned men are silent, how do we know they are wise? Therefore, if they are admired, it is a *blind* admiration because we cannot assume that their muteness is a sign of them “thinking hard,” in complete contrast to the analysis of Melancholia.

the boys flock around him, and the people stare / so stiff! / so mute! / some statue, you would swear.⁷¹

As we can see, the folly of the scholar is now a reflection of the folly of his admiration, one that is blind and uncritical. Surely at other times, Burton will commend study and philosophy, for example for the purpose of diversion and focusing the mind on something, even as a means for preventing suffering, like here:

For if thou do'st not ply thy booke / By candle-light to study bent, / Imploy'd about some honest thing, / Envy or love shall thee torment.⁷²

Here, “bending over to study by candle-light” is not portrayed as an image of folly, although we can see it has that potential. This is because it is framed in the context of other greater and more dangerous forces, like envy and love, and each context, environment or relationship will call for a different critique, a different “quid pro quo”: a term used by Foucault to denote a full reversal of values through the

⁷¹ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 113.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 203.

critique of folly.

In order to present education as a cause for melancholy, to take another example, Burton must present the image of the *evil* schoolmasters, teachers, and parents who are:

always threatening, chiding, brawling, whipping and striking; by means of which, their poore children are so disheartened and cowed, that they never after have any courage, a merry houre in their lives, or take pleasure in any thing [...] Some frighten their children with beggers, bugbears, and hobgoblins, if they cry, or be otherwise unruly.⁷³

Education as a cause for melancholy therefore goes off-topic, much in the Montaignian style, to portray the follies and cruelties of those who deliver the education — a separate topic altogether, but also a golden opportunity for social critique and for promoting his views on how children should be brought up and educated. Therefore there is no universal *contemptus mundi* that applies to particular values, and each case is a separate “story” or “image.”

Furthermore, it seems as though if Burton were to present a less extreme and elaborate image of wickedness and violence, he would not be able to convey the folly itself, i.e., the folly is not a mere natural fact of a “world gone mad.” Certainly moderate examples of educators and parents existed, or at the very least, examples where violence in education did not prevent children from having “one single merry houre in their lives” to follow, as Burton’s extreme depiction in the above passage conveys, a liminality that will also define Montaigne’s *Essais*.

While it is understandable that poverty can be a cause for melancholy, the great “folly” arises not from being poor but rather from the lengths people go to,

⁷³ Ibid., 330.

according to Burton, to avoid being poor, even at the price of taking one's own life and the lives of others: "[we] will dive to the bottom of the Sea, to the bowels of the earth"... "will turne to Parasites and slaves, prostitute our selves, sweare and murder, rather than endure this insufferable yoke of Poverty."⁷⁴

Suddenly poverty is not related to melancholy or folly at all, but is an opportunity to present the folly of the disproportion of human conduct in regards to life, honesty, and respect for others. Burton continues to go off-topic by bringing up the main reason for which "Poverty" is a source for melancholy — that society deems wealth to be so valuable and the wealthy so esteemed that *those people*, the wealthy, can in fact get away with murder, and still be loved, "no matter how he gets it [the wealth], of what parentage, how qualified, how virtuously endowed, or villainously inclined."⁷⁵

Finally, even to remember that we have bodies, that we are natural creatures with bodily needs and natural limitations amidst all those human pursuits and delusions of immortality (i.e., folly), requires the utmost creative imagery and novel representation, as depicted by the image with which Montaigne concludes his *Essais*: "On the loftiest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own ass."

Si, nous avons nous beau monter sur des eschasses, car sur des eschasses encores faut-il marcher de nos jambes. Et au plus eslevé throne du monde, si ne sommes nous assis, que sus nostre cul.⁷⁶

Pascal will say something similar in many respects, through his notion of "divertissement," which chapter 2 will discuss:

⁷⁴ Ibid., 344.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 345.

⁷⁶ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, ed. Albert Thibaudet (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), III, XIII, 1096.

A king is surrounded by people whose only thought is to divert him and stop him thinking about himself, because, king though he is, he becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself.⁷⁷

To see and depict a king as a fool, an image the following chapter will expand on, is a highly selective and socially subversive depiction of folly, whereas a more “normative” representation would find folly in the fool, i.e., in the outcast.

V. TEARS OF LAUGHTER OR LAMENTATION?

THE COMBINED TALES OF FOLLY AND MELANCHOLY AS FORMS FOR UNDERSTANDING EARLY-MODERN SUBJECTIVITY

The dejected melancholic gaze in Dürer’s *Melancholia I* and the “lightness” of Folly reflected in the Fool’s Head are two opposing and yet complementing approaches captured by the joint appearance of two ancient philosophers in early-modern representations and thought: Democritus, known as the laughing philosopher, and Heraclitus, known as the weeping philosopher.

The pairing of the two philosophers and two positions, in writing and visual representations, is said to have originated in the Renaissance, and to have fascinated early-modern readers. The early-modern fascination with this couple is notable by comparison to their original representation in Lucian’s dialogue *Philosophies for Sale* (*Auctio Vitarum*), where the two philosophers who were auctioned by the gods remained unsold as a “joint purchase” due to their incessant weeping/laughter, which was found too abnormal and peculiar to understand.⁷⁸ Together, they express an

⁷⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995), VIII, 136, 38.

⁷⁸ Cora E. Lutz, “Democritus and Heraclitus,” *The Classical Journal* 49, no. 7 (1954): 309.

“unvarying attitude toward the human scene,”⁷⁹ particularly through this incessant weeping and laughter, and through the distance they assume from this human scene (*theatrum mundi*), which they see as either lamentable or laughable, but either way — condemnable.

Through this figurative pairing, folly and melancholy are both portrayed as consistently removed or distant positions of critique, and the heaviness and the solemnity of melancholy (*Melancholia I*) mixes with the levity and emptiness of folly (*Fool’s Cap Map*) while, in addition, each position itself contains that very mixture. For example, as displayed through the internal paradoxes of *Melancholia I*: the levity of the flight versus the heaviness of the pose, the artistic aspiration and its failure, the “dynamic immobility,” the angelic bestiality of the figure, examples of mixtures and dualities which this chapter will continue to explore.

Ficino is known to have owned a mural of the two philosophers flanking a world globe in his study, likely resembling Peter Paul Rubens’s later painting of the philosophers, *Democritus and Heraclitus* (1603) [Figure 4]. In his *Meditations on folly*, where he also mentions his mural, Ficino expresses a “combined” understanding of the two positions. Both philosophers, he writes, were reacting to the very same reality, which Ficino agrees with as “the madness and folly of mankind.”⁸⁰ For Ficino, the fact that one philosopher “ridiculed” and the other “bewailed,” was not so much a sign of contradiction or even complementarity, but rather a heightened expression of the condemned state of the world — so condemnable that *both* philosophers, *both*

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Marsilio Ficino, “Meditation 20” in *Meditations on the Soul: Selected Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London (Rochester, VA: Inner Traditions International, 1996), 32.

reactions were so strong, definitive, and consistent.⁸¹

According to their combined appearance and signification, both melancholy and folly become positions of distant spectatorship, made very clear by the visual representation [Figure 4], of a “world gone mad.” The reactions to this world may be “heavy” or “light”: a brooding, dejected Melancholia, a world verging on destruction, or the levity, vanity, and inanity of the Fool’s head, the map, the empty edicts, and the various *vanitas* that accompanied it, a world already “destroyed” or already “emptied out by madness,” as noted by Foucault. These differences are indeed smoothed over through an overarching critique and *contemptus mundi*, produced by this extreme distance from the world — so distant that it is seen as a globe or world atlas, and the people as so many specks or “players” on it, in their myriad forms of madness and folly, captured in Rubens’s painting.

In the Preface to the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which was written under the pseudonym of Democritus Junior, Burton provides in poetic form a depiction of Democritus as the philosopher devoted to studying human madness and melancholy (“the seat of black choler to see”). This depiction bears a striking resemblance to the visual scene of *Melancholia I*, thus blurring the lines between melancholy and folly once more:

Old Democritus under a tree,
Sits on a stone with book on knee;
About him hang there many features,
Of Cats, Dogs and such like creatures,
Of which he makes anatomy,
The seat of black choler to see.

⁸¹ Ficino does not write this explicitly, but I gather this from his rhetoric, using questions: “Why is Democritus laughing?”, “Why is Heraclitus weeping?” which seem emphatic, and which he repeats twice. To these rhetorical questions he responds angrily in this section that all of mankind is condemnable and going to waste.

Over his head appears the sky,
And Saturn Lord of melancholy.⁸²

In his essay about the two philosophers, *De Democritus et Heraclitus*, Montaigne curiously states his preference for the position of “laughter” to “lamentation.” He claims that lamentation tends to “mix” with compassion, and with some appreciation for the thing it condemns, and will therefore not maintain enough scorn for the faults of humankind:

J’ayme mieux la premiere humeur [le rire], non par ce qu’il est plus plaisant de rire que de pleurer, mais parce qu’elle est plus desdaigneuse, et qu’elle nous condamne plus que l’autre; et il me semble que nous ne pouvons jamais estre assez mesprisez selon nostre merite. La plainte et la commiseration sont meslées à quelque estimation de la chose qu’on plait; les choses desquoy on se moque, on les estime sans pris. Je ne pense point qu’il y ait tant de malheur en nous comme d’inanité; nous ne somme pas si miserables comme nous somme viles.⁸³

[I prefer the first humor; not because it is pleasanter to laugh than to weep, but because it is more disdainful, and condemns us more than the other; and it seems to me that we can never be despised as much as we deserve. Pity and commiseration are mingled with some esteem for the thing we pity; the things we laugh at we consider worthless. I do not think there is as much unhappiness in us as vanity, nor as much malice as stupidity. We are not so full of evil as inanity; we are not as wretched as we are worthless.]⁸⁴

As Montaigne claims to prefer laughter and inanity to lamenting and misery, it might appear that again, in Foucault’s terms, folly takes the rein, and the vanity and emptiness of the “squabble of cap and bells” expel the darkness and solemnity with which lamentation sees the world. But another aspect to Montaigne’s preference relates to Starobinski’s positioning of him as the ultimate spectator of the human scene, of which Montaigne’s self-exile from public life, his library tower where he wrote his *Essais*, are common metaphors.

⁸² Burton, “The Argument of the Frontispiece”, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Ixii.

⁸³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, L, 291

⁸⁴ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), I, 51, 221.

Following Starobinski, Montaigne's preference for Democritus is also an expression of a greater and clearer distance and separation, where crying and lamentation risk, perhaps even accidentally, a certain *involvement* in the form of this "commiseration," causing an accidental mingling or mixture. For Montaigne, as the analysis of his melancholy humor in Chapter 2 will show, this "involvement" could be a risky endeavor for someone of his melancholy, or melancholy-sanguine, temperament, and his more strategic avoidance of "mixture" and involvement with humankind will structure the reading of his melancholy in Chapter 4.

Thus, this extreme distancing, expressed by his siding with Democritus, serves as an example of a moral or ethical Montaignian position revealed as personal, and specifically melancholic, as the readings of Montaigne will further explore. When Montaigne writes that there is more vanity in us than misery, or unhappiness — "Je ne pense point qu'il il y ait tant de malheur en nous comme d'inanité" — it should be seen also as an expression of his own desire or need not to cry like Heraclitus.

Similarly to Brant's lists of fools, cutting a "cap for every chap," only much larger in scope, Burton's *Anatomy* sets before us a "vast Ocean of madness and folly": a wide-spanning multitude of examples, lists, and endlessly varied manifestations of it. The "secret complicity" of everyone in folly and melancholy, of which Burton provides tireless kinds and varieties, produces a comic effect, casting folly over the most serious and severe melancholic cases, including death, deadly fears, and even suicide.

The examples and cases listed vary from children to the elderly, from the piously religious to secular scholars, from one individual's phobia of "cracking" or

“shattering,” “that they are all glass and will suffer no man to come near them,” to others who fear that they are “light as feathers,” some fearing divine punishment, that they will be damned and go to hell, that the sky will fall on their heads, or that their heads will fall off their shoulders, to yet others who fear becoming ill, fearing this or that disease. Some live in perpetual paranoia that they will be “questioned for some fact they didn’t do and they shall surely be executed,” others are convinced they have swallowed this or that creature, be it a frog, toxic water, or a pin, that will not be removed and causes them infinite torment, while others complain of “some loss of office,” some loss of reputation, or money, and on and on.⁸⁵ Some fear death so badly, and to such an extent, that they end up killing themselves, “in a contrary humor.” It is this rapid movement, expressed for example by the phrase “in a contrary humor,” shifting abruptly from a fear of death, to killing oneself, that is one of the paradigmatic examples of how melancholy becomes folly, and how melancholy entails rapid and comical shifts.

The loss of a dearest friend or loved one is portrayed in the same breath as an “un-triggered” melancholy mood amidst something joyful “after a merry feast, holy day or pleasing sport,” or as a result of some degree of solitude, unemployment, a minor worry, and again, the list continues. After naming “Death of Friends” as one of the chief causes of melancholy, Burton immediately digresses into other *minor* causes of melancholy, which nonetheless cause the same level of offense and injury. The death of a friend is placed in the context of “the world as folly,” and does not obtain the “special status” we might ascribe to something *traumatic*. After this “chief cause

⁸⁵ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, I, 3, 418-421.

of melancholy,” he lists in the same breath a mother who “weeps and howls” after her children who have merely returned to school after a holiday, and the experience of parting from a friend for *just several hours* “as a cow lows after her calf”:

at the departure of friends only whom they shall shortly see again, weep and howl, and look after them as a cow lows after her calf.⁸⁶

Against this staging of a wide and diverse scene of “madness,” radical subjectivity takes the fore as its only defining measure, and the defining measure of melancholy. That is, each person is melancholy according to how they feel or react, independent of objective measures or causes, such that “that which is but a flea-biting to one, causeth insufferable torment to another”⁸⁷ — a short departure from friends is equivalent to death, a small rumor can kill, and loss of money can bring instant suicide, and vice versa.

The subjectivity of melancholy, the subjective freedom to feel it, regardless of cause and justification, takes the “pathological vision” of the melancholic gaze, its idiosyncratic vision, in Pot’s term, to a limit, particularly as it is set alongside a variety of other “pathological visions,” other subjectivities and distorted perspectives, further emphasizing this idiosyncrasy and subjectivity.

In Burton it is evident that there can be no distinction, no difference, between a “significant” injury and a “minor” one, as the melancholy subject is “free” to feel the utmost pleasure or pain independent of “reality.” A reality, which, like the one constructed through Dürer’s alternative and skewed perspective, is cast into doubt by the very subjectivity of these feelings. Where the subject of Enlightenment is obliged

⁸⁶ Ibid., I, IV, VII, 356-357.

⁸⁷ Ibid., I, I, V, 138.

to constancy, whereby sickness, pain, and change are exceptions to be accounted for, for the early-modern subject, they are defining characteristics. Compared with this constancy, early-modern subjectivity is unsubjected, as it operates according to its own logic, one that is not even traceable to the outside:

For that which is but a flea-biting to one, causeth insufferable torment to another; and which one by his singular moderation and well-composed carriage can happily overcome, a second is no whit able to sustain, but upon every small occasion of misconceived abuse, injury, grief, disgrace, loss, cross, rumour, etc. (if solitary or idle), yields so far to passion, that his complexion is altered, his digestion hindered, his sleep gone, his spirits obscured, and his heart heavy [...]⁸⁸

While this passage might be shown to display some judgment on the part of the author in regards to the excessive moaning and complaining, “upon every *small* occasion and *misconceived* abuse,” the comparison between the different subjectivities and reactions precludes any concrete ability to judge or determine if the reaction is appropriate. After all, it is not that the injury is compared to that of a “flea-bite.” Rather, the “flea-biting injury” only serves as a term of comparison with another subject’s reaction or feeling, displaying a range of inter-subjective proportions: “For that which is but a flea-biting to one, causeth insufferable torment to another.” That is, it is “flea-biting” to one person, but “torment” to another, with the implication that we have no way of determining of what nature the injury actually is.

In this regards, I will note that in contrast to Freud, who placed melancholy in terms of loss, pre-Freudian melancholy subjectivity, and one of its recurring themes, is as a “groundless fear and sadness,” a fear “without cause.” However, to speak of melancholy “without cause” does not mean that any causes or occurrences for

⁸⁸ Ibid., I, I, V, 138.

melancholy and the emotions associated with it are absent, but rather that they might be unknown to the subject, or alternatively that the causes might be “insufficient.”⁸⁹

In Burton, the notions of “cause,” “insufficient cause,” “without cause,” are rendered especially complex and intricate, and create their own dynamic, which further emphasizes and radicalizes this traditional pre-Freudian understanding of melancholy subjectivity. As we have seen through Aristotle’s articulation of melancholy, it nonetheless presents as a “problem,” and as something to be deciphered, whereas for early-modern melancholy, particularly as expressed by Burton, this “investigation” and quest seem irrelevant, and the obscurity (“without cause”), gives way to the “anatomical” and yet infinite discourse.

A wide range of variations of these looser notions of causality can be noted in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. “Insufficient cause,” is expressed through examples like the “short departure from friends,” or in the melancholy triggered “upon every small occasion,” and “misconceived abuse” in the above passage; and something akin to a “misplaced cause” is expressed in the springing of melancholy during “a merry feast with friends.” The variation of “without cause” altogether, will be fully demonstrated through the reading of Burton’s poem below, where moods will shift entirely spontaneously, and entirely devoid of any apparent cause, or any mention of one.

To this radical subjectivity and the diversity it creates among people, each “injury” produces a list of “effects” and “symptoms,” which cannot be predicted and are also highly dependent on each individual. The body itself is not clearly delineated, and the entire organism can collapse given any “small occasion”... “yielding *so far* to

⁸⁹ Levine, Michael P. *The Analytic Freud: Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1999), 219-220.

passion, that his complexion is altered, his digestion hindered, his sleep gone, his spirits obscured,” such that, in the end, the melancholy subject is always under threat of moving or sliding from a “slight abuse” to a near collapse and death.

The following anecdote from the *Anatomy* is one of many stories, anecdotes, and tales that capture the infiltration of folly into melancholy and vice versa through the internal oscillations of the melancholy subject. Whereas the “mobility” of Dürer’s Melancholia was muted, or suspended, or too interior to observe, Burton’s subjective oscillations between extreme states will prove rapid and dizzying. Its rapid and symmetrical transitions set the tone for Burton’s radical version of melancholy subjectivity, as a fully unsolicited (“without cause”), internal dynamic:

Ausonius relates, in a neat epigram, a story of a melancholy man, who, on going into a wood, with intention to hang himself, in order to get rid of the miseries of poverty, fortunately found a large bag of money concealed at the foot of the tree, which had such an effect upon his spirits, that he flung away the rope, and went merrily home, with the treasure under his arm, quite cured of his melancholy: but the man who had wished to secrete it, on coming to the spot, and finding it gone, fell into such a sudden despondency, that he hanged himself with the very rope which the fortunate finder of his treasure had flung away.⁹⁰

This brief tale achieves the conversion from melancholy into folly on multiple levels: the format of the tale itself (the genre) is a primary source for the affect of folly. The rhythm of the tale is swift, even hurried, with abrupt shifts and easy or even magical resolutions of plot complications — for example, the money is at the exact location where the melancholic came to hang himself, the “perfect” or “tragic” timing of it all, or the mention that “*the very rope*” that was abandoned by one, then “conveniently” served the other in this perfect inverse symmetry.

The potential severity of the “miseries of poverty” depicted here, leading to

⁹⁰ Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, I, II, 360.

melancholy and eventually suicide, is emptied out through these abrupt shifts and the fickleness of the subject, even when supposedly “consumed” by melancholy. The folly of this melancholic man, who came with the intention to kill himself, is that his suicidal intention was not so deep or “serious” to begin with, so that upon finding a bag of money, after which he flung the rope, he was “quite cured of his melancholy.” In inverse symmetry, the man coming to recover his treasure had no previous “illness,” no signs of melancholy, except that upon discovering his loss he immediately and abruptly “fell into such a *sudden* despondency” that he killed himself using the same rope that the now resurrected melancholic had abandoned with the same haste, that is, also instantaneously shifting from a “high” to a “low.”

At the same time, it is also important to keep in mind that folly and melancholy also perform critiques of the world they observe, as the earlier analyses have suggested, in addition to reflecting a subjective and fully internal state. As such, this passage too can be seen to mix melancholy subjectivity, in these rapid and spontaneous motions, with an astute social critique that will become more and more apparent in all the sections and chapters to follow: that poverty involves “miseries”; that poverty itself is a form of melancholy; and poverty, in this sense, can kill and alternatively, money can save a life (“a melancholy man, who, going on into a wood, with intention to hang himself, in order to get rid of the miseries of poverty”).

These examples and tales demonstrate the “freedom” of Burton’s subjects to feel independently of “objective” measures, particularly in light of the endless diversity of madness and melancholy, where what torments one, is meaningless or pleasurable to another. His introductory poem to the *Anatomy*, “The Author’s

Abstract of Melancholy,”⁹¹ removes the subject from the endlessly diverse context of the “vast Ocean of folly and madness,” and takes a look at melancholy within the “heart of man.” As an internal experience, melancholy displays an internal ambiguity and oscillation between extremes, which resemble and also develop the notions of ambiguity and oscillation seen in Ficino’s work.

Neutralized and removed from almost any external reality, the melancholy subject still oscillates between extreme pleasure and extreme pain, entirely unprovoked by any “cause” or the slightest indication of a shift. The line: “The scene is turn’d, my joys are gone,” is the only sign of a “transition” in the entire poem.

Each stanza is a frozen moment of the subject with his own internal reality of sensations, fantasies, and feelings. More remarkable is the fact that even the interior reality and internal perceptions between stanzas that are supposed to reflect opposing moments of feeling are practically identical. The only change and reversal is how *it* – that indiscernable non-reality – feels: from pleasure and joy, to torment and horror.

The following lines from the poem represent a sample of the subjective “events” of extreme pleasure (left) next to those of extreme pain (right), to show their nearly identical articulation, all while producing opposite emotional results:

<p>“Pleasing myself with phantasms sweet,” ... “Methinks the time runs very fleet.”</p>	<p>“Methinks the time moves very slow” ... “My thoughts on me then tyrannise,”</p>
<p>“When to myself I act and smile, With pleasing thoughts the time beguile,”</p>	<p>“When I lie, sit, or walk alone, I sigh, I grieve, making great moan,”</p>

⁹¹ Burton, “The Author’s Abstract of Melancholy,” *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, lxix.

“Methinks I hear, methinks I see,
Sweet music, wondrous melody,”

“Methinks I hear, methinks I see
Ghosts, goblins, fiends;”

“Friends and companions get you gone,
'Tis my desire to be alone;”

“’Tis my sole plague to be alone,
I am a beast, a monster grown,”

Yet these contrary experiences are still conceived and identified as part of the same “melancholy,” as they are in Ficino. The subject of the poem himself uses the unifying term, melancholy, to name and assess both extremities: once it is *sweet* melancholy, and at another time it is *damn’d* melancholy, repeated in the poem’s refrain:

All my joys to this are folly,
Naught so *sweet* as *melancholy*.

All my griefs to this are jolly,
Naught so *damn’d* as *melancholy*.

Similarly to Ficino’s notion of melancholy, melancholy is at once a gift, beyond all joys, and another time, a curse, beyond all pains. But in addition, through this comparison: “none so sweet / none so damned,” melancholy also names the emotional experience of feeling the most extreme, or absolute “high” or “low” that can possibly be attained.

As such, melancholy becomes not only the expression of subjectivity, but also of singularity: a unique sensation to which no other sensation, no other past, no other states compare, both in relation to oneself and to one’s recent past: “all *my* joys to this are folly” / “all *my* griefs to this are jolly”... “*My* pain’s past cure, another hell,” as well as in relation to other individuals: “I’ll not change life with any king,” and the complete opposite: “I’ll change my state with any wretch.”

These sensations of singularity attributed to melancholy maintain a continuity of subjectivity despite the rupture of difference, diversity, and even self-difference. Early-modern melancholic subjectivity is therefore not constructed through continuity of perception, sensation, or cognition, but rather by this knot of interiority that holds together their contradictions, even on the verge of costing an internal “splitting” into utter destruction and disease. This view of melancholy subjectivity as a position of diversity and singularity held in *one* (individual/moment/essay), will be pertinent to my reading of Montaigne’s melancholy position culminating in the singularity of the monstrous.

Given this radical notion of subjectivity, and the absolute complications of causes and causality, there appears to be no moral imperative to feel any one certain thing — something that eighteenth-century theories of passions will aim to change by generating systems and classifications common to all. Additionally, to evoke the two philosophers, there is no imperative as to whether or not one should laugh or cry — these reactions are almost entirely interchangeable, because they are fully subjective.

Thus, when Montaigne positions himself between Heraclitus and Democritus, he might very well claim to identify with Democritus, so as to hold humanity in more contempt. But in fact, his “choice” in the matter: “J’ayme mieux la premiere humeur,” as if by “liking” a humor more, one can simply embody it, can also be taken as a commentary on the mobility and fluidity between emotional states, whereby we should not see sadness or compassion as necessary moral reactions to a reality that would normatively be perceived in that way.

Montaigne’s essay on “tristesse,” *De la tristesse*, is the most powerful

testament to the seriousness with which people perceive emotional reactions, of which the seriousness attributed to “tristesse” is most emblematic for Montaigne. While his essay surveys various reactions and representations of deep and unspeakable grief and sadness resulting from the loss of loved ones, it ends with a woman who died out of the “shock of ease/gladness” — “qui mourut surprise d’aise de voir son fils revenue,”⁹² (“who died overcome with gladness to see her son back”⁹³), resulting from seeing her son return alive from a journey. This anecdote is followed by an even greater “folly” regarding the “importance” and seriousness of this passion, “tristesse,” (“tesmoignage de l’imbécilité humaine”), relaying a story about a philosopher who, not being able to grapple with and win an argument that was directed at him, “died on the spot” from a passion no less “great” than this “noble” tristesse, the passion of “shame”:

Et pour un plus notable tesmoignage de l’imbécilité humaine [...] Diodorus le Dialecticien mourut sur le champ, espris d’une extreme passion de honte, pour son eschole et en public ne se pouvoir desveloper d’un argument qu’on luy avoit faict.⁹⁴

[And as for a more remarkable testimony of human frailty [...] Diodorus the dialectician dies on the spot, seized with an extreme passion of shame, for not having been able to shake loose, in his own school and in public, from an argument that had been put on him.]⁹⁵

This melancholic and emotional fluidity, which I have identified as radical subjectivity, places melancholy and folly on a spectrum where they can flow into each other, or resemble each other depending on the case, as Burton’s examples and Montaigne’s “tristesse” have just demonstrated.

As noted earlier in relation to Montaigne’s “choice” of laughter, folly also

⁹² Montaigne, *Essais*, I, II, 17.

⁹³ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 2, 8.

⁹⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, II, 17.

⁹⁵ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 2, 8.

possesses a protective quality, and it is not a coincidence that as melancholics, laughter and folly are Burton and Montaigne's chosen perspective on the outside world. When Montaigne aims at a position of levity and distance from human existence in regards to the most solemn matters, like death, like illness, it becomes apparent that this is a strategic distancing that also stems from an obsessive concern and fear of death and illness.

When in *Que philosopher c'est apprendre a mourir*, Montaigne tries to put our lamentations over death under the distancing and neutralizing gaze of folly, his justifications only reveal a deeper concern and sadness. This is because, as will be shown to be typical of Montaigne, his liminal and practically inhuman examples and take on the matter make it difficult to believe that this is in fact a human position that he holds or expects others to hold.

The following anecdote from *Que philosopher c'est apprendre a mourir* will illustrate just that. Through his persistent and obsessive efforts to provide rhetoric and examples through which death should not be taken seriously, he gives the example of some unknown small creatures who, as he has read in Aristotle, live on the banks of the Hypanis river, and whose entire lifespan is only one day long. Through the anecdote and analysis he provides, the longevity of these creatures is supposed to put human life in perspective — comparing one day to a human lifetime. To the extreme and absurd point (perhaps?) where considering any human death as premature, and where to lament any death, is just *as great a folly* as to say, that if one of these creature dies at eight in the morning, it has died in its “youth,” whereas if it dies at eight in the evening, to say that it has died in “old age”:

Aristote dit qu'il y a des petites bestes sur la riviere de Hypanis, qui ne vivent qu'un jour. Celle qui meurt à huit heures du matin, elle meurt en jeunesse; celle qui meurt à huit heures du soir, meurt en sa décriétude. Qui de nous ne se moque de voir mettre en consideration d'eux ou de malheur ce moment de durée?⁹⁶

[Aristotle says that there are little animals by the river Hypanis that live only a day. The one that dies at eight o'clock in the morning dies in its youth; the one that dies at five in the afternoon dies in its decrepitude. Which of us does not laugh to see this moment of duration considered in terms of happiness or unhappiness?]⁹⁷

Now, as our human lives are now put in perspective, we should conclude that it is with the same folly that we would be deploring a death of *any* length, and hence death at all for that matter: "Parquoy c'est pareille folie de pleurer de ce que d'icy à cent ans nous ne vivrons pas, que de pleurer de ce que ne vivions pas il y à cent ans" [...] "Rien ne peut estre grief, qui n'est qu'une fois."⁹⁸ ("Wherefore it is as foolish to lament that we shall not be alive a hundred years from now as it is to lament that we were not alive a hundred years ago."... "Nothing can be grievous that happens only once").⁹⁹

VI. "WHO IS THE FOOL?": A QUESTION CONCERNING NORMATIVITY

The image of the *Fool's Cap Map of the World* raises another question that is pertinent to this folly-melancholy discussion: who, in the end, is the melancholic or the fool? Is it the world and all its inhabitants in their folly and ridicule, as the fool and melancholic say, or is it the jester in the cap and bells and the melancholic who argue this? Is this radical, subversive judgment, that the whole world is mad, a mere result and sign of their own folly and melancholy?

At times, those who make these assertions about the folly or madness of the

⁹⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XX, 91.

⁹⁷ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 20, 64.

⁹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XX, 91.

⁹⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 20, 64.

world are themselves considered to be fools or melancholic. This is Sara Ahmed's argument about the figure of the *killjoy*: those who "kill the joy" in turn become the ones who are considered problematic to begin with.¹⁰⁰

Jaques the melancholic from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is an excellent example for this backfiring. A self-professed melancholic famously proclaiming that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players," he shares in with the positions of *contemptus mundi* and spectatorship evoked earlier in this chapter. When Jaques is warned that listening to music will make him more melancholy, he replies by recounting all the pleasure and nourishment he gets out of melancholy, being able to "suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs," he wants *more*:

I thank it. More, I prithee, more. I can suck melancholy out of a song as a weasel
sucks eggs. More, I prithee, more.¹⁰¹

Interestingly for our discussion on the relationship between folly and melancholy, Jaques the melancholic also wants to become a fool like Touchstone, the court jester — "worthy fool!" he calls him. Jaques is envious of the "liberty" the fool possesses to vent, criticize, and speak the truth, "to blow on whom I please; for so fools have." He believes that if this were allowed to him, he could cure this "infected world," thereby expressing the envy of the melancholic for the "shield" of folly, thereby emphasizing that the "killjoy" is not heard in his own right:

Invest me in my motley; give me leave
To speak my mind, and I will through and through
Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,
If they will patiently receive my medicine.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Ahmed, "Happy Objects," 38-39.

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II, V, 128.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, II, VII, 135.

Thus, it appears that without the motley of the fool as shield, without the social function of the fool that permits this truth-saying, this self-perceived “healer of the world” is far from how others see him. Instead, his position about the world *sticks* back to him, in Ahmed’s terms: *he* is ridiculed, and deemed foolish, both for his melancholic “attitude,” his obsession with isolation, his lamenting and wallowing amidst all the festivities, and also for the very (melancholic) experience that he deems valuable and insightful, and which others perceive as his shallow and petty fixations.

His own perceived “depth,” a supposed “gift” of melancholy, is ridiculed as repetitive and trivial. Touchstone mockingly plays back to him his own melancholic language, the expressions of the futility of life and the fleeting nature of time, by mimicking it in the form of a mere succession of the hours — from 1 o’clock to 2 o’clock — that is, with Jaques’s special insight and experience entirely emptied out of meaning and of the knowledge he purports to have:

Thus may we see ... how the world wags. / ’Tis but an hour ago since it was nine/ And
after one hour more ’twill be eleven / And so from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
/And then from hour to hour, we rot and rot; /And thereby hangs a tale.¹⁰³

Jaques, however, fails to perceive it as a mockery but rather sees the fool as a contemplative and deep-kindred spirit, whose spot he envies. Thus a line is drawn between the melancholic and the “others,” between the naysayers and those who want to keep the party going, or the dinner table conversation agreeable and happy.¹⁰⁴ What deepens the melancholic’s melancholy increases his removal and alienation from the world.

¹⁰³ Ibid., II, VII, 133.

¹⁰⁴ Ahmed, “Happy Objects,” 38.

CONCLUSION

The question of “who is the fool,” much like the questions of “who is melancholy,” “who is impaired,” “who is abnormal,” perhaps even “who is wrong,” are questions that get at the heart of normativity. These questions are central to all discourse that aims to reverse relations of power between a constructed otherness and a perceived normalcy, across identities of gender, race, and disability, and as observed also in queer theory and affect theory in relation to negative versus happy feelings or experiences.

Jaques’s melancholy viewpoint and feelings, as an example, are delegitimized due to the fact that they do not agree with the “common” or general feelings and concerns. But the way they are delegitimized is by turning his very own melancholy and judgments on him. If he deems the world sick — he is sick, if he does not enjoy the party — he is not enjoyable, if he thinks he has special insight — he has no insights, and so on, following Ahmed’s analysis.

When Ahmed conceives of certain negative and unhappy affects and utterances as ones that *stick* to those who bring them into the conversation, she is suggesting that some feelings, those perceived as disrupting or “killing” the mood or the sense of agreement, cannot in fact be heard. They become *signs* of the unhappiness, sadness or anger of the person expressing them, and that person becomes a *killjoy*. To examine this from the perspective of the other, of the melancholic, of the person with *abnormal* judgments and feelings, it is as if their interior becomes merely an exterior.

In this manner, when we observe the figure of Dürer’s Melancholia and only see a slothful immobility, lack of interest in the world around, sorrow, pathology, or

perhaps even condescension or eccentricity, we are ignoring an interior mobility, and therefore ignoring the individual, and also perhaps the world and environment (the context) taking place inside or around the individual, of which we know nothing. We are equally ignoring anything that may have happened or may happen — the recent aspiration and activity of the artist, or the potential crash. We are ignoring the oscillations and movements that have been described through Ficino’s notion of melancholy, the internal tensions, mental activity, and no less significant — the spectrum of experience from wretchedness to royalty, as Burton’s poem expressed.

In a sense, it is as if the “normative” *spectators* of *Melancholia* and *Melancholia I*, see something they do not like that causes them to look away. Thereby looking away from the dejected gaze, because it itself looks away, and therefore appears to not take part in the shared world of normativity, where all gazes must be centered and focused on an object in use.

Representations and literary figures are a means through which an alternative reality can be constructed, as an exteriorizing version of this interior space that remains otherwise unheard if it merely tries to participate in the conversation. Subverting and contesting normativity merely through a pronouncing of judgments and condemnations, as Jaques does, and through the melancholic complaints of “moans and woes,” may not be as effective as these alternative representations of the world, with alternative or reversed values, like the ones constructed through the dejected, impaired gaze of *Melancholia*. In other words, without the “abnormal” or “pathological gaze,” we would not have the image (*Melancholia I*), or the world it creates.

Valuing the notions of creating, representing, and constructing alternative orderings and views of the world, through the alternative and “impaired” vision, connotes contemporary debates on the importance of carving out and creating alternative spaces, cultures, and other norms, as opposed to trying to live alongside the norm, either by hoping for be accepted as other, or by hoping for the “equal rights” to enjoy the same norms.¹⁰⁵

In terms of early-modern theory, I will show how folly performs this reversal of normative values and normativity. Folly, as Foucault observes, does not present as a vice, an objective immorality; rather, folly is defined as a complete quid pro quo — it performs a full reversal of values, taking the false for the true, death for life, man for woman, and so on.¹⁰⁶ Ficino defines folly and madness as just that exchange of opposites, whereby we seek one thing in its opposite: value in money, love in property instead of family and friends, mastery in others rather than in ourselves: “The man who believes he will find one thing in its opposite is mad and miserable.”¹⁰⁷

Ficino interprets or converts the platonic falsity into the folly of the world by depicting human behavior and life as a “monstrous” inversion between body and soul, low and high, false and true, passing and eternal, self or soul versus otherness, and a foolish and mad concern for the former over the latter. The following passage expresses the foolish inversion and concern over petty and material matters, like choosing beautiful furniture, taking extra care to tune a musical instrument, or an

¹⁰⁵ Such a debate is evident in queer theory between discourses of “gay rights” versus queer resistance to the adoption of heterosexual norms to gay and queer life, a position that has been termed by queer theorist adversaries as “homonormativity,” for example in Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 33.

¹⁰⁷ Ficino, “Meditation 20,” page 34.

obsession with finding remedies for the body. These concerns that humanity labors over become “folly” and “madness” in light of the neglect of the most human concerns, portrayed in inverse symmetry: the beauty, measure, and health of the soul.

They [men] would like all their household furniture down to the least article to be made as beautiful as possible, but they are hardly ever concerned that the soul should become beautiful. They diligently seek out remedies for bodily diseases, but neglect the diseases of the soul [...] They lay out the parts of buildings to a measure, and tune strings on a lyre to a hair’s breadth, but they never attempt to harmonize the parts and movements of the soul.¹⁰⁸

In effect, a neglect of the soul over the body maps onto to worldliness and folly, valuing money instead of the soul or fellow men, caring for possessions, “cultivating fields” instead of cultivating themselves, caring for their livestock more than their family, conserving money but wastefully spending time,¹⁰⁹ all constituting “daily deaths” of an un-lived present, while humans only express concern and fear for the one final death.¹¹⁰ This understanding of folly as an inversion of values also maps onto to a form of self-possession and honesty that are offered, as in Pascal, as in Montaigne, as antidotes to folly: striving to possess external virtues and affairs, such as glory, money, striving to master others, while self-mastery, self-possession, and internal virtue, internal peace, are neglected and forgotten.

Oh fools! Oh wretches! Since you cannot lay hold of anything by any means but through your own selves, how will you ever come by outer possessions if you have lost the inner? Travelers! Why do you seek treasure far away, when it is nearby, indeed within yourselves?¹¹¹

As the close readings and analysis of Burton’s *Anatomy*, and the early-modern figures and images demonstrate, folly and melancholy become complex assessments

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹¹⁰ Ficino, “Meditation 21,” 35.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 34-35.

of the world, and, more importantly, critical and alternative representations/creations of the world, achieved through great subjective efforts and creativity (the busy activity behind melancholy immobility). In order to ensure that they will not *stick back* to those pronouncing them, judgments of folly and melancholy should not just be pronounced by a subject begging to integrate into a normative conversation or world, say by the melancholic poetic subject like John Donne, but must be *constructed* and *represented* through a particular organization or reorganization of the world and its values, notwithstanding the assistance of folly as a subversive *quid pro quo*.

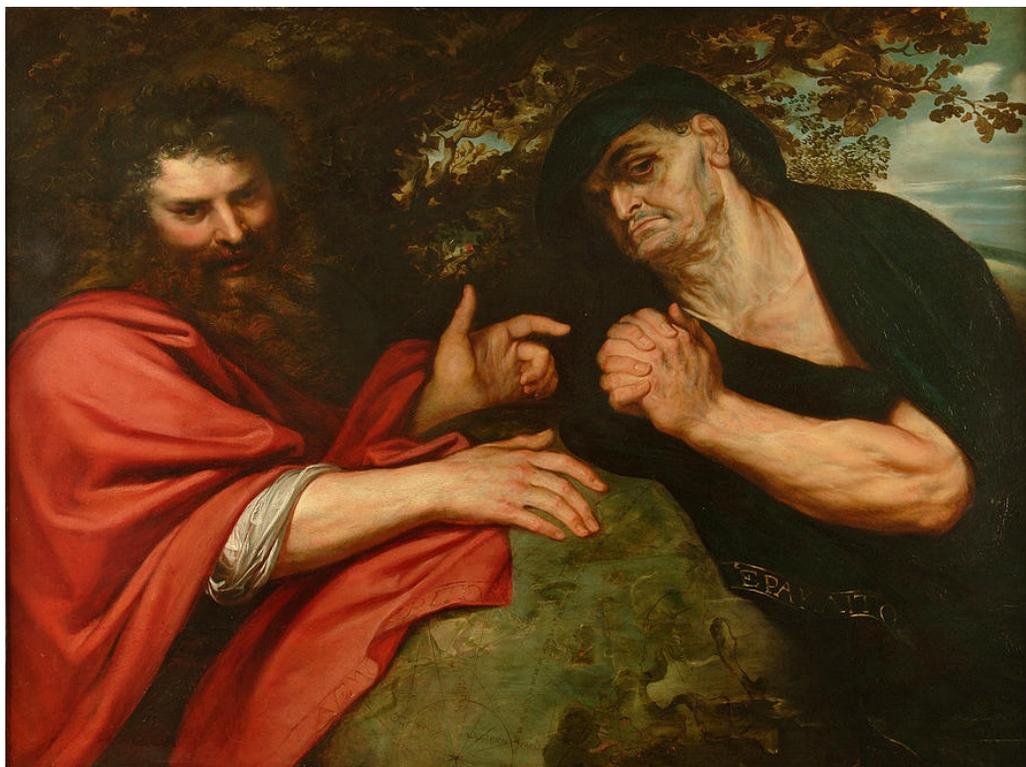
In this manner, and to return one last time to Dürer's image, the "chin resting on hand," the "dejected gaze," the "lethargic arm holding caliper," are alternatives to "forms of life," to borrow Wittgenstein's term, perceived as norms, and therefore as malleable and not fixed: that we dispute colors but not math, that we do not gnaw at our food like animals, that we do not express sorrow by smiling, that we walk on our legs and so forth. And so in our context, we normatively are expected to stare *at* something and not into space, to appear busy and not just *be* busy (with thoughts); if we are holding an object, we must be using it in some way; our face should not tense up if we are at rest, and so on.



[Figure 1] Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I*, 1514



[Figure 3] Haintz-Nar-Meister, *The Book Fool*, 1494.



[Figure 4] Peter Paul Rubens, *Democritus and Heraclitus*, 1603.

CHAPTER TWO:
HUMORAL THEORY, SKEPTICISM AND “DIVERTISSEMENT”
THREE EARLY-MODERN THEORIES OF MELANCHOLY

I. THE MELANCHOLY HUMOR: “IT’S COMPLICATED”

The following passage, which comprises the opening lines of Montaigne’s essay *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*, the essay discussed in the following chapter, constitutes his most explicit confession of his “melancholy humor,” and is frequently used to explain the role of melancholy in the *Essais*.

C'est une humeur melancolique, et une humeur par consequent très ennemie de ma complexion naturelle, produite par le chagrin de la solitude en laquelle il y a quelques années que je m'estoy jetté, qui m'a mis premierement en teste cette resverie de me mesler d'escrire. Et puis me trouvant entierement despourveu et vuide de toute autre matiere, je me suis presenté moy-mesmes à moy pour argument et pour subject.¹

[It was a melancholy humor, and consequently a humor very hostile to my natural disposition, produced by the gloom of the solitude into which I had cast myself some years ago, that first put into my head this daydream of meddling with writing. And then, finding myself entirely destitute and void of any other matter, I presented myself to myself for argument and subject.]²

The “melancholic humor,” brought about by the “chagrin of solitude”³ into which Montaigne had “cast himself,” is usually accounted for by the monumental loss of his dearest friend and alleged lover Étienne de La Boétie. In turn, this state of idleness and void is thought to have propelled the writing of the *Essais* in a “work of mourning”⁴ and compensation for loss.⁵

¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 364.

² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 278.

³ “Chagrin” is translated by Frame as “gloom,” but could mean many things including grief, affliction, sorrow, resentment, and even anger.

⁴ “Language gives shape to the voice of bereavement,” Lawrence Kritzman, *The Rhetoric of Sexuality and the Literature of the French Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 70.

⁵ “The eternizing properties of written discourse compensate the lost immediacy and

This reading, however, although congruent with parts of the text, is too causality-laden, presenting a perfect economic “payoff” — the void produced by grief has in exchange produced an artistic monument —, while also being too material and concrete — the book as substitute for the friend, in order to fit in with Montaigne’s more general belief systems and style.

It introduces grief and mourning into a passage concerning melancholy, which are very separate notions, especially in early-modern thought. Moreover, it presents Montaigne’s writing as an avoidance or diversion *away* from something, from loss. Even if this movement is understood to be a movement away from the “chagrin,” it would still assume that the text in its original form is already suffering from some lack, since it is merely secondary to a psychoanalytic “Thing”: the real friendship, plenitude, happiness. For example on the perpetual self-exceeding nature of Montaigne’s writing, Lawrence Kritzman writes, “[his book] functions as a receptacle that is, paradoxically, filled with “crotiques”, the result of epistemological and ontological emptiness.”⁶

It is important to note in this regard, that finding a justification for Montaigne’s writing of the *Essais* appears to be of extreme importance to Montaigne scholars, since Montaigne himself often notes, his project was socially a risky undertaking — in his words, it was “the only book of its kind,”⁷ and indeed it was first of its genre. In his decision to make a book about himself, Montaigne was defying one of the greatest

fluidity of a living friendship,” Barry Weller, “The Rhetoric of Friendship in Montaigne’s *Essais*,” in *Reading Montaigne: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Dikka Berven, 41-61 (London: Routledge, 1995), 42.

⁶ Lawrence Kritzman, *The Fabulous Imagination: On Montaigne’s Essays*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 61.

⁷ “C’est le seul livre au monde de son espece,” Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 364.

taboos of his time,⁸ which would perhaps shed some light on the importance of revealing a deep justification for the project. Starobinski, for example, notes that melancholy serves Montaigne to “plead innocent of the crime of writing,”⁹ yet early-modern melancholy theory and subjectivity refute the need for such justifications and explanations.

Against the temptation of a psychoanalytic interpretation that posits a relational and causal “loss” and “gain,” against the temptation to “imagine and recreate a satisfying presence in place of an absence,”¹⁰ Pot, in his chapter, “L’essayiste et son humeur,” exposes the “inexplicable mystery” of melancholy and its origin according to this passage. If Montaigne does not name the cause of his melancholy here — the loss itself, the friend — it is because it does not refer back to one, except in an unpredictable and mysterious manner. In the essay *De l’affection des peres aux enfans* analyzed in Chapter 3, Montaigne will again *not name* La Boétie when referring to his loss, but refers to his *experience* as a “trop certaine experience” (“comme je sais par une trop certaine experience.”)¹¹

According to Pot, Montaigne’s *Essais* cannot provide a model for the “work of mourning.” The appropriate model for Montaigne’s time period would instead be “humoral theory,” which would emphasize the mysterious, accidental, and hence singular manifestations of the early-modern subject. As we have seen in the previous

⁸ Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays*, 24.

⁹ Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne in Motion*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 23.

¹⁰ Pot, *L’inquiétante étrangeté*, 4.

¹¹ “Car comme je sçay par une trop certaine experience, il n’est aucune si douce consolation en la perte de noz amis, que celle que nous apporte la science de n’avoir rien oublié à leur dire” (II, VIII, 376). This “experience” will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

chapter, these “distorted” and “subjective” perceptions and views are paradoxically what allow a glimpse into something natural and true — the “birth” of perception, the “pathological vision” that points to its own singular bias, an expression of a “mimetic crisis” and skepticism about the ability to know the world, which would come up against emerging notions of perfect representation and linear perspective, as in Dürer’s *Melancholia I*. Even when the explanations for melancholy and complexions were astrological they did not present as causal explanations, but rather as complex sets of relationships between qualities and shared properties, “freed from a confining substantial basis,” which in the seventeenth century replaced Aristotelian “causality of substance.”¹²

Ficino, for example, in his *Three Books on Life*, describes at length the characteristic qualities of melancholy in terms of Earth-like qualities such as dryness, being “immovable at the center,” heaviness, along with a *pull* (again a cosmic term) towards Saturnine qualities such as being “the highest of planets,” writing that Saturn “makes us persevere in investigating doctrines and retain them when discovered,” the result of this tension being likened to the melancholic struggle.¹³ Even the expression “born under Saturn,” an accepted astrological denomination of melancholics, indicates a cosmic and more occult influence and pull, rather than a concrete and causal connection. Consequently, it was also not a fully deterministic fate, as it was possible to contend with the planetary forces, to find freedom within this pull, particularly using the guidance of other planets that possessed different or more desirable qualities.

¹² Jennifer Radden, “Introduction: From melancholic states to Clinical Depression”, *The Nature of Melancholy: From Aristotle to Kristeva*, ed. Jennifer Radden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

¹³ Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 114-115.

As the figures of melancholy subjectivity from Chapter 1 have illustrated, early-modern subjectivity involves interior motions and shifts that might be either invisible (Dürer), hard to decipher, or else fully interiorized, unprovoked, and untraceable as in Burton's poem. Indeed, these interior movements provide other kinds of (non-causal) relations, which we can now revisit in Montaigne's description of his melancholy humor:

[une humeur melancholique] produite par le chagrin de la solitude, en laquelle il y a quelques années que je m'estoy jetté, qui m'a mis premierement en teste ceste resverie de me mesler d'escrire.¹⁴

Melancholy does not refer back to a loss or a cause, nor to any external reality for that matter, but back to itself, back to other forms of pain and sensations that could have “triggered” it, or complicated it, “mixed” in with it, to evoke the humoral terms of fluids. But even if the cause is not fully internal, since causes do not refer simply to external stimuli, the relevance or feel of the experience is internal: “produite par le chagrin de la solitude” [“produced by the sorrows of solitude”]. This relationship is especially true if melancholy is part of one's complexion as it was for Montaigne, making him prone or disposed to the illness of melancholy that could occur through added “mixtures” and complications. This notion, too, as we have seen, is part of the ambiguous nature of early-modern melancholy and the threat of “tipping over.”

This non-causal notion of mixtures is further elucidated by the fact that, as Montaigne notes in this passage, his “natural complexion” was not melancholy: “une humeur par consequent très *ennemie* de ma complexion naturelle,” meaning that the melancholy humor was not only hostile (*ennemie*), as in different from his natural

¹⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 364.

humor, or other, but also *dangerous* to his “natural complexion.” Screech suggests Montaigne’s awareness of this dangerous concoction, his natural complexion being “sanguine-melancholy” (“between the jovial and the melancholic”). According to humoral theory at the time this would mean a calm demeanor if there were no significant disturbances.¹⁵ Yet this calm complexion could easily be tipped in one direction, and if the balance were disturbed in the direction of melancholy (excess of it), it could result in mania and in the disease form of melancholy, as it supposedly did for Montaigne here — perhaps in this sudden “*resverie de me mesler d’escrire*,” hinting perhaps at a manic state of the inspired poet or melancholic genius.

Given this account provided by humoral theory, the “*chagrin de la solitude*” could have disturbed the balance, but in any case, even given the logic of humoral theory, these terms remain vague and indeed mysterious. This is true especially when read within the larger context of early-modern melancholy, for example through the radical variety of Burton’s melancholy “cases” in the previous chapter, which defy any systematic approach altogether.

Finally, as Montaigne’s language or absence of language on the matter makes clear, by virtue of his neglecting to name and provide a cause, as Pot notes, there is nothing material and external such as a loss, or even grief resulting from a loss, that puts him in a “dream-like” state of writing. Rather, he confesses to have fallen victim to the mysterious and inexplicable force of melancholy which “*put the crazed idea of writing into his head*”: “*qui m’a mis premierement en teste ceste resverie de me mesler d’escrire*,” putting him outside of himself — that is, in a dream-like, perhaps

¹⁵ M. A. Screech, *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays*, new ed. (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 25.

delusional state.¹⁶

Melancholy, much like sensations and perceptions more generally, does not relate to an external object and cause but to its own senses and passions, back to the “sorrow of solitude,” which again is entirely internal, and like the senses and passions is foreign to external phenomena. The following passage from the *Apologie de Raimond Sebond* reflects Montaigne’s own skeptical views regarding sensation and perception of external things in general:

Nostre fantasie ne s’applique aux choses estrangeres, ainsi elle est conceue par l’entremise des sens; et les sens ne comprennent pas le subject estranger, ains seulement leurs propres passions[.]¹⁷

[Our conception is not itself applied to foreign objects, but is conceived through the mediation of the senses; and the senses do not comprehend the foreign object, but only their own impressions.]¹⁸

The notion of sorrow bringing on melancholy, or sadness bringing on melancholy or dejection or fear, but also idleness, boredom and even joy, and any “internal” passion for that matter, is also central to how Burton explores melancholy in the *Anatomy* — without ever being able to “catch” melancholy and define it or its causes once and for all. Due to its multiplicity, spontaneous, and even surprising “happening,” it is deemed to be an occurrence “without cause,” or one with a very loose and mysterious relation to cause(s), as Chapter 1 has explored. When attempting to discuss and describe melancholy, it can therefore only be addressed discursively, by referring back to other “melancholic” language, “sorrow, need, sickness”: “The melancholy ‘disposition’ is caused from ’sorrow, need, sickness, trouble, feare, grieve,

¹⁶ Depending on how we understand “resverie” if more on the pleasant side of “daydreaming” or the slightly more delusional side, Montaigne is not condemning this state as something “sick,” “bad” or even painful.

¹⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, XII, 585.

¹⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 12, 454.

passion, or perturbation of the Minde, any manner of care, discontent”[...]¹⁹

Understanding Montaigne’s melancholy in these ways, from within early-modern discourses on melancholy, runs contrary to how Screech understands Montaigne’s relation to melancholy in *Montaigne and Melancholy: The Wisdom of the Essays* as a state to keep in balance and be cautious of; he notes Montaigne’s disdain for excess, particularly “out of body” experiences like “mania,” and excessive passions like “tristesse,” as we have also discussed albeit from a different perspective. Therefore, again, as many other critics suggest, the act of writing is perceived as an act of taming and regulating excess, or alternatively of mitigating or taming loss.

These views position Montaigne as the moderate philosopher rather than the crazed poet, a dichotomy that might hold true, except that it understands “melancholy” as a very narrow set of things in relation to its manifold of meanings in early-modern thought and as explored here. For example, the notion of the “crazed poet” against which Screech positions Montaigne is only one narrow aspect of early-modern melancholy, but in fact it is merely one of many *symbols* that express tension, oscillations, relations to extreme positions, interior conflicts and differences, and so on.

Against the psychoanalytic economy of loss and compensation, of a “real” gain in exchange for a “phantasmatic” one (“recreating a satisfying presence in place of an absence”²⁰), Burton’s *Anatomy* offers an alternative “economy” of melancholy, one that is not based on exchange, but rather on an economy of debt, whereby, once it hits,

¹⁹ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, I, I, 5.

²⁰ Pot, *L'inquiétante étrangeté*, 4.

it increases the chances of getting into deeper and deeper debt. Imagine “melancholy” as being thrown into prison for debt once, and then being held in prison further and longer each time by new claims made by new debt collectors. This is how “melancholy” is conceived not as a “state,” but rather as something that “takes hold,” a power, which can increase or decrease, go deeper and deeper, as the terms “plunge,” “gulf,” and “seizing” below evoke. This is an alternative logic by which “sorrow” can be said to *cause* “melancholy.”²¹

As it is with a man imprisoned for debt, if once in the gaol, every creditor will bring his action against him, and there likely hold him — if any discontent seise upon a patient, in an instant all other perturbations will set upon him: and then, like a lame dog or broken-winged goose, he droops, and pines away, and is brought at last to that ill habit or malady of melancholy it self: so that, as the philosophers make eight degrees of heat and cold, we may make eighty eight of melancholy, as the parts affected are diversely seised with it, or have been plunged more or less into this infernal gulf, or waded deeper into it.²²

Burton’s image depicts a radically different model. If someone is already being “held” by some difficulty, as the prison metaphor goes, held by any kind of pain, illness, fear, loss, then it is more likely that as a “preexisting” vulnerability, it will lead to additional vulnerabilities, which will lead to more and other vulnerabilities, since some level of agency and freedom have been impinged on — the metaphor of “being held” in prison — and will decrease further each time another injury occurs. To illustrate this understanding of “folding” and “deepening” of melancholy with a very mundane example: a simple cold can make us miss work, which can make us stressed or anxious, which can deprive us of getting the rest needed to “get over” the cold...

²¹For an important explanation of early-modern causality as an *adherence* in things, akin to magical power, see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), particularly II, 11.

²² Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, I, I, I, 138.

which of course at that point, can turn into a chest cold, and then into pneumonia, and back to mental stress and what we might call depression, and so on.

Finally, not being able to “get out of debt”²³ in this manner also conveys the importance of understanding vulnerability through this context of melancholy, contrary to the assumption that one gets “hit” and then after some time gets back up. If we keep in mind that melancholy also goes hand in hand with social critiques, then what does it mean that melancholy is like an indefinite prison, or that prison can be indefinite, since the analogy goes both ways? That debt incurs more injuries and more debt, that moreover, injuries (prison, debt) do not elicit compassion but rather further cruelty, imprisonment, and further “debt”? By analogy, this would also mean that vulnerability and disability, should socially incur *less* injuries and *less* punishment, so that the sinking into this “internal gulf” could be mitigated.

Uniquely to the early-modern notion of subjectivity, melancholy can be said to deepen melancholy, sorrow can deepen into melancholy, which can shift into a more manic state, or “dry out” the body by that very excess as Ficino’s melancholy caused by contemplation illustrated. There is no one direction or course in which melancholy, or passions for that matter, if we remember how “sorrow,” “gladness,” and “shame” produced the very same effects on the soul and body in Montaigne’s *De la tristesse*, could develop. At the very least, this progression and workings of the passions cannot be known or accessed in any humanly predictable way, evoking the theory of skepticism that will follow this discussion.

Montaigne’s melancholy is in the same way part of a broader interior working,

²³ The same logic would apply to expressions like “getting out of depression” and all those expressions that urge us to “get out,” “up,” and “over negative states.

and not an event that would produce other events or actions, such as the monstrous project of the *Essais*, which are commonly attributed to his melancholy state. As the following section will show, Montaigne, in accordance with early-modern thought, would not accord “melancholy” with such a distinct, and divided place, from outside a larger scheme of internal and “abnormal” phenomena, or even, from outside of phenomena in general.

II. SKEPTICISM

Although the “honest” and aspirationally “naked”²⁴ author of the *Essais* has confessed falling victim to melancholy, and having no control over this, he was in fact attacked by melancholy after which he was possessed by a *resverie* to write, he is not confessing anything *about* his melancholy in fact. He is not woe-ing or howling like Burton’s characters, he is not describing how melancholy tyrannizes him like the subject of Burton’s poem (“damn’d melancholy”), he does not curse his “condition” as Ficino did in his letter. He does not confess a “bittersweet” relationship with his pain, the oscillations of pleasure and pain, nor the now pleasant now painful musings of the melancholic imagination, and not even what it feels like to be thrust into this state where a mysterious force invades him and makes him write.

Is the experience painful or pleasant? What are the *qualities* of this experience?

It is not even clear if “resverie” is delightful or frightening, while the notion of

²⁴ “Que si j’eusse été entre ces nations qu’on dit vivre encore sous la douce liberté des premières lois de nature, je t’assure que je m’y fusse très volontiers peint *tout entier, et tout nu*,” Montaigne, “Au Lecteur,” *Essais* (my emphasis).

“casting oneself” or “thrusting oneself” into the “sorrows of solitude” (“le chagrin de la solitude, en laquelle il y a quelques années *que je m’estoy jetté*”²⁵), would or should evoke something painful. The reader is thus precluded from accessing the experience, and the interiority of these workings.

This non-confessional confession resonates with Montaigne’s other formal confessions about the monstrous births of his idle mind in *De l’oisivete* (“m’enfante tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques”²⁶), where, as Regosin has noted, despite the build-up, no monsters actually appear in the essay, or anywhere in the *Essais*.²⁷

As the final chapter of this dissertation will explore, when actual monsters do appear, they are neutralized and their monstrosity dispelled, especially when they are related to the *other* as monstrous. When the monstrous, on the other hand, applies to Montaigne himself, the monstrous abounds and regains its miraculous status. And yet, as I will argue in this final chapter, these monsters, which Montaigne applies to himself, are metaphorical devices that he employs in order to evade judgment and avoid confession altogether and even more fully. It appears that, for Montaigne, confessions are highly rhetorical and selective, and they are strategized in such a way so as to defend experience, rather than disclose it — as the fortress of an “arrière boutique”²⁸ — to the domination of external events, and from the penetrability and judgment of the outside.

In his essay *De l’oisivete*, Montaigne confessed to being attacked by his own

²⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 364.

²⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 8.

²⁷ Richard L. Regosin, *Montaigne’s Unruly Brood: Textual Engendering and the Challenge to Paternal Authority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 156.

²⁸ This term is from Montaigne’s essay *De la solitude* (I, XXXIX, 235); the term represents a highly secure and deeply interior space, which will further be discussed in Chapter 4.

sensations and mind, this time under the grip of his idle mind gone wild and proving impossible to rein in — “faisant le cheval eschappé, [...] [l’esprit] m’enfante tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres.” The attack is staged in relation to his “naïve” expectation and belief in the calmness and ease (*repos*) that a retired life would offer him: “il me sembloit ne pouvoir faire plus grande faveur à mon esprit, que de le laisser en pleine oysiveté” [...]. But as Regosin observes:

There is something disconcerting about Montaigne’s insistence on a program of “chimeres et monstres fantasques,” because, in spite of all I have said about the grotesque and the monstrous in the *Essais*, the text does not literally “perform” it. Montaigne’s mind does not throw itself in disorder into the vague field of the imagination, it does not lose itself in an indefinable nowhere, nor does it produce wild and unfettered thoughts without order or purpose, neither here in this essay nor in the world as a whole.²⁹

Therefore, instead of showing us any monsters, any disorders resulting from the idle mind in this highly structured essay, instead of performing the thing he confesses, Montaigne, according to Regosin merely announces them — *that* they exist. Here, I rely on Regosin’s analysis of the double meaning of the French verb “monere,” the etymological origin of the “monstre,” to make a similar argument regarding Montaigne’s confession of melancholy. “Monere” in Old French means both “to show” in the literal sense, but also “to show” in the sense of a “portent” — something that points beyond itself to a hidden meaning, usually an omen or a divine sign, an understanding that is consistent with a traditional view of the monstrous.³⁰

Similarly to *De l’oisivete*, Montaigne in his confession in *De l’affection des peres aux enfans* is also *just showing* in the first sense. He is merely showing *that* he thrust himself into the “sorrow of solitude,” *that* a melancholy humor put a “resverie”

²⁹ Regosin, *Montaigne’s Unruly Brood*, 157.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

into his head, without showing as a way of exposing any depth or hidden meaning, any interior experience.

In “The Invisible woman in Montaigne’s Essays,”³¹ Kathleen Long argues that the revival of Pyrrhonian skepticism in France in the sixteenth century has influenced not only epistemology and the doubt cast on the possibility of knowing external reality, but also the psychological views of the period. The psychological phenomena, which were later deemed “abnormal” and sought to be managed and corrected in the Foucauldian sense — madness, dreams, sexuality, cross-dressing, incest, to repeat a few mentioned in Long’s article — were considered in the same light as ordinary phenomena in the early-modern view impacted by skepticism, and as such needed to be left *as is*, that is, outside of rational systems of knowledge and categories. As Long explains:

Where scepticism tries to see these phenomena as existing in themselves, free of rational constraints, psychology tries to some extent to reconcile them with a more rational course of action, bringing them into a context in which they can be discussed and analysed. That is to say, psychological methods create a discourse around these phenomena, which scepticism views as extra-discursive.³²

Montaigne, in line with this skeptical influence, “does not see such [mental/psychological] disturbances as definitively correctable but as part of the human nature.”³³ Since, as Long points out, both the psyche and the epistemic were influenced by and subsumed by skepticism, it makes sense to conclude that for Montaigne then as well, these supposedly “abnormal” psychological events are merely phenomena to be observed and accepted. Therefore, a “fit” of melancholy or madness,

³¹ Kathleen Long, “The Invisible Woman in Montaigne’s *Essais*,” *Montaigne Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum* 9, no. 1-2 (1997).

³² *Ibid.*, 136-137.

³³ *Ibid.*, 136.

a wild and unruly imagination, would not constitute “abnormal” events for Montaigne. Abnormal or monstrous events that he would have felt a burning need to confess, in some special level of detail distinct from any other experience, nor the need for that matter, to provide them with deeply rooted explanations. As such, he *merely shows* them, that they are, that they took place.³⁴

Perhaps then, melancholy according to the initial passage is just another trope and image, which continues to illustrate Montaigne’s views regarding mystery, the monstrosity of the self, as part of a more general manifestation of his skepticism and inability to know. A further illustration therefore, of the need to cast doubt and reflect on our ability or rather inability to *know* others and ourselves in the way a modern subject would expect, but also of the plagues (monsters) of *presumptions* to knowledge that Montaigne’s own time, i.e., science, culture, custom, represented to him.³⁵

To conclude this section, we could say that perhaps melancholy, along with the “fantastical” monsters of the mind, do not need to be searched for in melancholy or in *melancholizing* — in the content of the melancholic fit or soliloquy, in the melancholic complaint or cry, or alternatively in external deformities when it comes to the monstrous bodies or monstrous productions of the mind. These phenomena can be found instead anywhere and everywhere, since Montaigne does not in fact allocate a

³⁴ In any case, a “burning need to confess” is something that is entirely contrary to Montaigne’s *Essais* and the views they express. In part due to this skeptical understanding of the world, a disbelief in “burning matters” over others, a disbelief in what “culture” signals as crucial, or “confessable.” His essay, *Du repentir*, is a great example of the equanimity with which he views “sacred” matters.

³⁵ On the relation between presumption to know and the monstrous see: Kathleen Long, “Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, 715-731 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). This issue will be taken up in greater detail in Chapter 4.

special place for them, given that they do not *mean more* or *point to more* (“portent”) than other phenomena.

For this reason, as this skepticism applies to melancholy too, a “flea-bite,” a “minor” injury, even joy, can constitute insufferable torment. One does not need the category or diagnosis of madness or melancholy, in order to denote an exceptional happening, an exceptional phenomenon, or abnormality. Exceptionality, much like how it is conceived by skepticism and early-modern melancholy, depends on the individual and on the individual’s sensations and perceptions.

III. PASCAL’S DIVERTISSEMENT: A MELANCHOLIC BIAS

The psychoanalytic version of diversion is often used to explain Montaigne’s writing project and “digressive” writing style, as a substitution for loss, emphasizing the death of La Boétie, and the loss of “totality” as an ideal: the text, meaning and subject as a “whole,” which Montaigne’s writing and project resist.

The production of writing reveals, however, that writing does not restore the self to its plenitude. This is perhaps why Montaigne’s project can never conclude in any absolute way. What the essayist comes to know in his absence to himself is that the self he seeks to recover always remains in some sense absent.³⁶

In Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, “the work of mourning” presents as a diversion tactic in the form of a slow process of moving *away* from the irremediably lost object, and a turn towards new, substitute objects that are already “beckoning” the grieving subject. Moreover, this “work of mourning,” and turning away from the lost object, constitutes the *normal* reaction to loss, one that ends in time, as opposed

³⁶ Regosin, *Montaigne’s Unruly Brood*, 38.

to the *pathological* reaction of melancholia, presented as an endless mourning, with the lost object unacknowledged and eventually internalized.³⁷

As Marc Shachter has noted, also against the logic of the “work of mourning,” when Montaigne uses the notion of “diversion” in his own writing, he employs it as a form of self-mastery and in order to set the terms of his own subjection, diverting *himself* from one passion (pain) to another (love).³⁸ According to this reading, diversion for Montaigne is more a diversion *inward* than a working away from an object of pain or loss, highlighting Montaigne’s concern with his *internal* integrity, both in the sense of wholeness and honesty.

Pascal’s diversion (*divertissement*) offers another useful contextualizing for Montaigne’s project, again from within early-modern theories of melancholy and folly and away from psychoanalytic readings. Pascal’s “diversion” is not a movement away from “loss,” particularly not from one *primary* loss like the death of La Boétie, but on the contrary reflects a perpetual and monstrous move away from the human condition, defined as melancholy.

A critical term, like folly, this notion of diversion subverts the normative order: life for Pascal is already melancholy, and death is but one of the “one thousand and one accidents” and injuries that plague humans at all times, or that remain lurking and

³⁷ The normative definitions of these two conditions in Freud’s text can be alluded to through mere differences in how long they each last, otherwise seemingly identical: ...“although mourning involves grave departure from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment. We rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful.” Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 233-234.

³⁸ Marc Schachter, “Qu’est-ce que la critique: La Boétie, Montaigne, Foucault,” in *Montaigne after Theory/Theory after Montaigne*, ed. Zahi Zalloua, 122-141 (Seattle: University of Washington Press and Whitman College, 2009).

waiting to happen. And much like the universal world of folly and madness, and with the same rigor and rhetoric that we have seen in the previous works, he observes that, “all men complain: princes, subjects, nobles, commoners, old, young, strong, weak, learned, ignorant, healthy, sick, in every country, at every time, of all ages, and all conditions.”³⁹

Understanding Pascal’s notion of diversion requires that we first adopt his underlying melancholic “bias” as laid out in Chapter 1 with the analysis of *Melancholia I*. Pascal sees both the human condition as melancholy, and all human pursuits as folly and miserable, to which the only “healthy” reaction would be a direct contending and *dwelling* within the truth of mortality and melancholy. Pascal assumes that the very nature of “pursuits,” and almost any activity whatsoever, is not only a distraction from the truth, but also necessarily miserable in its own right, such that in order to understand “diversion,” one must accept these assumptions, and this melancholic “bias.”

Even beyond the “hunting,” “gambling” and “billiard playing” that describe a majority of man’s life according to Pascal, the “esteemed” pursuits of public and active life are also described as a mere extension of this distracting “chase.” Men’s political and active life in “court or in war” are described as “dangers and troubles,” even “passions” are simply understood negatively as part of “quarreling,” and “wicked enterprises”:

When I set to thinking about the various activities of men, the dangers and troubles which they face at Court, or in war, giving rise to so many quarrels and passions, daring and often wicked enterprises and so on.⁴⁰

³⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Classics, 1995), X, 148, 45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII, 136, 37.

Beneath these diversions, the human condition itself is also miserable and melancholy (these terms are again not used in a distinct manner): “the natural unhappiness of our feeble mortal condition, so wretched that nothing can console us when we really think about it.”⁴¹ In fact, the human condition is so miserable and impossible to bear, that man is willing to avoid it at all costs, including by choosing “the dangers of war,” which are nothing more than an “agitation that takes our mind off it and diverts us,”⁴² preferring war to peace, death to life, in this deviant “game” — literally playing with life. Diversion, therefore, becomes not a coping mechanism, as in the psychoanalytic account, but rather an *evasion* of truth and honesty, and therefore a terrible loss in its own right. Perhaps, in the end, diversion is the only loss, since it is the only one that is not “accidental,” and that could be overcome by facing our human lot for what it is.

This understanding of diversion approaches the notion of *folly*, as it has been described in Chapter 1. Like folly, diversion sees the world as diverse and changing, full of accidents and losses in the plural — “the vast Ocean of folly” — of humoral subjects in constant flux, a world of unpredictable “flea-biting” injuries, and endless variations of loss and pain, thwarted in between extreme joy and torment, compared to the more one-dimensional, and causal world of a central loss or death described by Freud.

Like folly, diversion is also a critical term, of platonic resonance, that reflects the worldly and deceptive existence on the “world as stage” (*theatrum mundi*), where

⁴¹ Ibid., 38.

⁴² Ibid.

all values have been reversed such that men seek value in the fleeting, while ignoring their nature and basic condition and moving away from it — “seeking *far*,” in Ficino’s terms.⁴³ Similarly, Pascal contends that diversion may not provide any sense of pleasure or happiness, “because it comes from *somewhere else, from outside*; so he is dependent, and always liable to be disturbed by a thousand and one accidents, which inevitably cause distress.”⁴⁴

As a critical term, diversion, like melancholy and folly, is also a reflection of Pascal’s *contemptus mundi*, as he sees all humans as wretched, engaged in an infernal pursuit of vain goals, to their bitter ends. As such, Pascal’s diversion, like folly and melancholy, positions him as the (weeping) spectator of the world’s stage, with all its follies and faults, and as a Jaques, who sees the truth and the “cure,” and is desperate to speak his mind (“to blow on whomever he pleases”).

Finally, much like folly, diversion also provides a subversive social critique by pointing out that what we esteem to be of most value is most corrupt, in direct parallel with the “quid pro quo” logic of inversion: “Men spend their time chasing a ball or a hare; it is the very sport of kings.”⁴⁵ For Pascal, with this critical vision, the king, as the one purporting to be most in control and have the most power, becomes the greatest fool, since folly is found to exist in direct relation to those who are most presumptuous, and therefore most self-deceptive about their human condition, understood as limitation, vulnerability, and essentially — melancholy.

The early-modern critique of folly is part of a longer tradition of *memento*

⁴³ From Ficino, and quoted in Chapter 1: “Oh fools! Oh wretches!” [...] “Why do you seek treasure far away, when it is nearby, indeed within yourselves?” Ficino, “Meditation 21”, 34-35.

⁴⁴ Pascal, *Pensées*, VIII, 136, 37.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 39, 8.

mori, discussed in relation to the *Fool's Cap Map* in Chapter 1. One of its famous medieval iterations, in the genre of the *dance macabre*, whereby dead and skeletal figures would take prominent figures like kings, generals, and popes, and dance around the graves with them, is an excellent illustration of how folly and diversion similarly aim to take down the mighty, or at least “remind” them (*memento*) of their human condition (*mori*).

In this reversal of values, power and even, or especially royalty — the “normative” symbols of the king — are measured inversely, as the ability to sustain boredom and melancholy, and as the ability to sustain solitude and quiet, completely devoid of diversions. A repeated metaphor for this state of (subversive) power in Pascal, is the ability to remain alone in one’s town, house, and room, and not engage in *any* pursuits, nor in *any* conversation or commerce: “all of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”⁴⁶ This is something the king has no practice with, and will therefore become the most wretched if he were not at all times distracted:

he is bound to start thinking of all the threats facing him, of possible revolts, finally of inescapable death and disease, with the result that if he is deprived of so-called diversion he is unhappy, indeed more unhappy than the humblest of his subjects who can enjoy sport and diversion.⁴⁷

Since the behaviors of diversion and folly are by definition *uncritical* behaviors, when presented from the distant spectator’s view of the melancholic: Pascal, Montaigne, Ficino, Burton, Dürer, they are also presented, in their liminality, as dangerous.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, VIII, 136, 38.

This danger is central, particularly to Montaigne, since in the absence of self-mastery, one is left to abide by norms or custom, which, for Montaigne, as well as for Pascal, and the other authors I am exploring, are at the source of cruelty, ignorance, and other social ills. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, norms and customs are at the source of the utter loss, of the waste of the self, of an honest life in Montaigne, of the soul in Ficino, or of salvation in Pascal, which are all related terms in the context of my argument. These norms either enslave us or kill us, whether literally through tyranny and war, or by losing the chance at an honest life, with a variety of costs that will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter 3, through the notions of *avarice* and *waste*.

In *De la solitude*, Montaigne’s discussion of the false orientation and absurdity of human concerns towards what is external to them, is illustrated through a depiction of a miserable scene of battle carried out “for the sake of a man whom perhaps they never saw, who is not in the least concerned about their doings and who at that very moment is plunged in idleness and pleasures.”⁴⁸ A closely related passage from Pascal reads similarly about the dangers of custom and the tyranny of external rule giving war as an example:

Larceny, incest, infanticide, parricide, everything has at some time been accounted a virtuous action. Could there be anything more absurd than that a man has the right to kill me because he lives on the other side of the water, and his prince has picked a quarrel with mine, though I have none with him?⁴⁹

Moreover, even war itself, as an earlier quote suggested — “the dangers and troubles of war” — is a mere diversion and not a goal in its own right, provided that it

⁴⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 39, 177.

⁴⁹ Pascal, *Pensées*, III, 60, 16.

allows us to avoid our own melancholy human condition by providing “the agitation that takes our mind off it and diverts us,”⁵⁰ from which we can derive the subversive conclusion: men go to war in order to avoid melancholy.

The “finer and higher” satisfactions that sublimation offers in the form of cultural achievements as described by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*,⁵¹ are the very same which for Pascal, and to a great extent for Montaigne as well, encourage and reward masquerading, competitiveness, pride and manipulation on the human stage of folly as they see it.

For both Pascal and Montaigne, these pursuits and achievements, these externalized sublimated desires, constitute *dangerous* diversions away from the true condition according to humanist values of honesty that involve a turn inward. Therefore the question of “how to live” is the “wager” with the highest stakes. In this regards, there is a deep connection between Pascal’s metaphors for diversion as “gambling” (Pascal’s wager), “hunting” and “chasing,” and the binary of avarice/waste, which will be central to my readings of Montaigne in chapters 3 and 4.

One of Ficino’s notable descriptions of melancholy is its analogy to the Earth, and its earth-like qualities, such as being “immovable at the center,” “heavy,” “cold” and “dry.”⁵² In resonance with this understanding of melancholy, Pascal challenges humanity to reside at this earthly and heavy “center” — to dwell, as melancholy

⁵⁰ Ibid., VIII, 136, 38.

⁵¹ “A satisfaction of this kind, such as an artist’s joy in creating, in giving his phantasies body, or a scientist’s in solving problems or discovering truths, has a special quality which we shall certainly one day be able to characterize in metapsychological terms. At present we can only say figuratively that such satisfactions seem ‘finer and higher.’” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Reprint ed., ed./trans. James Starchey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), II, 3, 731.

⁵² Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 114.

dwells — as the wiser “gamble.” Taking a “gamble” on “dwelling” or on melancholy, offers a chance at the salvation of the self and soul, as a radical alternative to all the “noise” and “distractions,” which guarantee a removal from ourselves, and are for this reason nothing but a necessarily lost gamble.

Finally, Pascal’s vision, as quoted earlier, of “sitting quietly in a room alone,” reflects a melancholy vision of a certain “nascent” and “naïve” scene, in resonance with the “room” in which Dürer’s *Melancholia* figure sits: an “undecided” abstract or symbolic room or location, where all perspective, order, norms, and also distractions, are lacking.

IV. READING PASCAL: A MODEL FOR READING MONTAIGNE’S *ESSAIS*

This parallel between Pascal’s vision and that of *Melancholia I*, however, also simultaneously invokes the notion of the subjective distortion or bias of the melancholic gaze or perspective, as has been discussed. Therefore, despite the universal claim regarding the human condition, and its melancholy, Pascal’s notion of diversion unravels Pascal’s own views, and, I argue, *subjective* opinions, regarding the human condition and what *should* be its central occupation. For diversion would assume a *truth* that human kind is looking away from and avoiding, whether it merely pretends to ignore it or mask it, or whether it has truly lost touch with its origins by force of those diversions.

Montaigne, as critics have often addressed, exiles himself from social and

public life in order to find tranquility and freedom, according to classic principles of stoic self-possession and *ataraxia* (tranquility). But for a melancholic, diversion as the “world as stage” upon which everyone (else) is a player, can be felt in a more acute and painful way. Externalized, worldly existence, can more acutely hurt the melancholic’s specific sense of freedom,⁵³ and therefore externalized existence is *perceived* and represented by melancholy as diversion and theatricality, whereby diversion is constructed as a melancholy-laden term in this derogatory and false sense.

For Pascal, and by implication for Montaigne as well, the opposition between a “truth” as one sees it, and “dissimulation” as that which others are performing, is necessarily subjective and an indication of a melancholic viewpoint. In this regards, we may think of the viewpoint of *Melancholia I* as both a perspective and a destruction of another perspective — that of order, linearity and use, and yet it is still itself a perspective.

Pascal’s obsessive need to never be diverted and always remember the “wretchedness” of the human condition, with the radical view that each and every diversion masks a hideous human truth, is further clarified by understanding the paradoxical nature of *memento mori* (“remember you must die”), the philosophical and practical theory to remember mortality and reflect on it.

⁵³ I take this idea from Barthes in his *Journal de deuil*, where he details and observes his grief. Barthes notes that the typical advice to distract yourself, to “get out there,” is harmful in relation to deep grief, and aggravates the pain, against which solitude can in fact be a kind of remedy: “M. et moi éprouvons que paradoxalement (puisque d’ordinaire, on dit: Travaillez, distrayez-vous, voyez du monde), c’est lorsque nous sommes bousculés, affairés, sollicités, exteriorisés, que nous avons le plus de chagrin. L’interiorité, le calme, la solitude le rendent moins douloureux.” Roland Barthes, *Journal de deuil*, Seuil ed. (Paris: Seuil/Imec, 2009), 110.

Robert Smith, in an article about Pascal's relationship with the philosophical idea of *memento mori*, points to the paradoxality of how this notion plays out in his work. Since the imperative to remember mortality suggests that it *can* be forgotten, from whence is derived the role of the remembrance as ritual or practice to begin with. Pascal, on the other hand "rankles at the indifference of those who do not ruminate upon it," finding it "monstrous" and "not natural" that humans could neglect their very own condition, not fearing their mortality and suffering while at the same time worrying deeply about worldly affairs and losses that are so minor in comparison with this death and eternity.⁵⁴

In light of death, any other form of worrying is *folly* for Pascal. We see here a similar logic to the dynamic discussed between melancholy and folly in Chapter 1: that there is also a certain folly to melancholy, especially when presented alongside such a vast and varied list of worrying and woe-ing. Pascal, similarly, converts melancholy into folly in order to present the "correct" melancholy as truth — only the melancholy of the human condition is properly melancholy, while the myriad forms of "mundane" melancholic experiences should be entirely dismissed:

[...] the same man who spends so many days and nights in rage and despair over the loss of some office or over some imaginary affront to his honor is the very one who, without anxiety or emotion, knows he is going to lose everything through death.⁵⁵

The "loss of some office" is not a worthy source of melancholy, and must always be contextualized against mortality against which it becomes mere folly. The notion of "some *imaginary* affront to his honor," further suggests Pascal's need to

⁵⁴ Robert Smith, "Memento Mori," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 3, no. 3 (June 1998): 47-48.

⁵⁵ Pascal quoted in Smith, "Memento Mori," 160.

downplay human affairs and human feelings in their current form, in order to assert his horrific image of a looming death.

All this melancholy revealed in Pascal's reasoning, his stylistics, his sentence structures, as well as his own digressions in narrative, further emphasize his melancholy "bias," as he repeatedly claims with as much vigor as the damnation he believes in, that "*all* our pleasures are simple vanity, that our afflictions are infinite, and lastly that death, which threatens us at *every moment*, must *in a few years* infallibly present us with the appalling necessity of being either annihilated or wretched for all eternity" [...] "*nothing is so important* to man as his condition. *Nothing is so frightening* to him as eternity."⁵⁶

This extreme language of annihilation of *all* of human behavior, at *all* times, including all human pleasures, as Pascal sees it, the variations of which I have highlighted above, evokes the all-encompassing annihilating vision of melancholy/folly from Chapter 1, with the similar tone of rigor and anger we have seen for example in Brant, revealing Pascal's own anger and frustration.

We can even hear the opposition between the extremes of "high" and "low" characteristic of the melancholic subject featured in Burton's poem: "None so sweet"/"None so damn'd"... "Nothing so important/Nothing so frightening," reflected here. Both in how he feels, as well as in what he thinks — his subjective assessments: "simple vanity"/"appalling necessity." In other words, Pascal is also enveloping the tensions of "melancholy man" within himself.

As I have also noted in Chapter 1, through Burton's various social critiques,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

positions of melancholy and folly are subjective and elaborate *representations* of the world, that depend on narrative, imagery, representation, and so on, and are not expressions of empty statements and clichés, of which Jaques is accused. Like Montaigne and Burton, Pascal too is representing the world as folly and melancholy through this extreme usage of language, through these oppositions, and by concealing any moderate or alternative options in universalist, truth-ringing statements.

As Burton has portrayed the folly of study by digressing to describe the folly of the schoolmaster, whose violence resulted in preventing those children “*a single hour* of pleasure anytime after in their entire lifetime”... “their poore children are so disheartened and cowed, that they never after have any courage, a merry houre in their lives, or take pleasure in any thing,” so Pascal is *representing* an image of the world as a death sentence waiting to happen, while everyone is nonchalantly playing outside, and busy hunting. Therefore, pleasure too must be represented as mere folly and something that will soon lead to tragedy, annihilating any possibility that humans are in fact experiencing pleasure.

Furthermore, Pascal’s narrative in his *Diversion* fragments also reveals melancholic digressions or slips in narrative that expose his melancholic thinking, the kind that I will reveal in Montaigne’s narrative on a much larger scale in the following chapter. For instance, when Pascal pauses to provide an example of the human reliance on diversion for the sake of feeling happiness, the example he provides is no less than that of a man “who lost his only son a few months ago.” Who, therefore, as his narrative continues to slip into his melancholic “bias,” when he is met with lawsuits and quarrels became “less troubled and oppressed” because these

distractions made him simply “not think about it any more.” “*All his attention,*” Pascal writes, is focused on following his dogs in their hunt for the boars, concluding that: “that is all he needs.”⁵⁷

The simplicity with which Pascal presents grief and loss here, easily remedied by a hunting game, compared with the emotional strength and power which he attributes to mortality and the human condition, is a clear indication of the melancholic thinking that underlie his arguments, and his own melancholic biases.

Far from staining or dismissing Pascal’s theories, however, these findings structure them and shed new light on them, as well as on our understanding of melancholy and its surrounding discourses, such as happiness, the human condition, and the important dynamic between singular and universal truths and views.

This brief reading of Pascal through a melancholic and not a “neutral,” “philosophical” lens, is meant to provide an example of sites where melancholy can provide a useful literary tool for filling in gaps in narrative in new ways, particularly of philosophically oriented texts where those gaps appear less “inviting,” and where the universal and objective style deter subjective readings of the text and authors.

While Pascal’s text does not reflect his melancholic *state*, his own sorrows and lamentations, the text itself reveals melancholy as a structuring view of the world (Dürer’s “perspective”). For example, the extreme and binary oppositions in expressions and thought, annihilating views of the world as it is (*contemptus mundi*), particularly “dark” digressions, strikingly negative choices and examples, and other melancholic perceptions of the world, some of which were discussed at length in

⁵⁷ Pascal, *Pensées*, VIII, 136, 41.

Chapter 1.

Reading melancholy as a perspective or viewpoint adds subjective weight to his “philosophy,” allowing subjectivity to be uncovered through “philosophy,” and allowing the two to overlap in a way that philosophy does not rank higher than subjectivity and, at the same time, does not rank higher than melancholy either.

Pascal’s “objective” or explicit philosophy, regarding the human condition and death, ends up being a form of rhetoric and representation through which his subjective, melancholic biases are conveyed, forming a “subjective philosophy” (i.e., a subjectivity) from under the guise of an “objective philosophy.” For example, the “subjective philosophy” in this reading of Pascal is that the term “diversion” is not what all humans do — the objective form — but how a melancholic position views what other human beings are doing.

This type of reading reveals these relativities, and allows us to think of the binaries of happiness/unhappiness, or sadness/pleasure freed from their seemingly universal status and claims, such that we can also free the subject from a “pre-defined” relationship to the world. For example, that “happiness” means to express certain views or feelings, or that expressing negative feelings means you are unhappy, as the discussion of Ahmed’s work has touched on.

CHAPTER THREE:
WHY MONTAIGNE RUSHES EVERYONE OFF TO BED:
IMAGES AT THE LIMIT IN *DE L'AFFECTION DES PERES AUX ENFANS*

What is good in Montaigne can only be acquired with difficulty.

PLAISE PASCAL¹

INTRODUCTION

Montaigne's unique writing style has received much attention in Montaigne studies, from a wide range of perspectives, noting the fragmentary, heterogeneous and divergent qualities of the *Essais*. These observations often follow Montaigne's own many self-avowals of his "stille et esprit vagabonds," his "evasive" subject matter ["il va trouble et chancelant"²], his work as "patchwork", and finally his "deformed" and "monstrous" writing. Indeed his writing style has been linked to the workings of the "fortuitous" nature of the mind and the imagination (his "esprit vagabond"), to the sublimation of loss in discourse and writing that therefore resists unity, to diversion from loss. Finally, it has been ascribed to the humanist genre and education practices of Montaigne's own time period, the "commonplace-book": collections of fragments and quotes under a single heading/title, as a form of rereading and reusing ancient models ("exemplarity") for contemporary use (the "exempla").³

The essay *De l'affection des peres aux enfans* is no exception to this tangential divergence between essay title and essay, between various topics, anecdotes and examples. In fact, as I will discuss, this essay on "the affections of fathers" shows not

¹ Pascal, *Pensées*, XXV, 649, 212.

² Montaigne, *Essais*, III, II.

³ Ann Moss, "'De l'amitié' (Essais 1.28): 'Luy' and 'Moy,'" in *Distant Voices Still Heard: Contemporary Readings of French*, ed. John O'Brien and Malcolm Quainton, 185-201 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000)..

a single example of a positive fatherly affection or fatherhood, but rather only disaffections, parricide, infanticide, theft, avarice, and folly. The fathers of the essay are “broken and half-alive” (“cassé, et demy-mort”)⁴, they “bite and slap” in their old age. While blood has already ceased to run through their veins, they hold on to a tyrannical and threatening façade, “ces mines fieres et tyranniques d’un homme qui n’a plus de sang ny au coeur, ny aux veines,”⁵ (“these fierce and tyrannical looks from men who have no blood left in either heart or veins”)⁶, and are nothing but “mere scarecrows” (“vrais espouvantails de chenevriere”)⁷. Montaigne has already “buried them alive,” in order to prove his point, through a highly structured affective “aversion,” through indictments and *contemptus mundi*, rather than through the “diversion” of a wide range of loosely related topics.

The *structure* that the early-modern “exempla” and humanist genre provide to the fragmentation and heterogeneity of the essay will be the most relevant one to the melancholy reading of the essay.

While Ann Moss explains how this fragmentary and heterogeneous writing style of the humanist “commonplace-book” genre allows Montaigne and his contemporaries to “assemble themselves from scattered parts of dead men’s speech,” referring to the ancient examples and quotes collected under “title headings,” her notion of “establishing subjectivity” again relies on psychoanalysis to contextualize this in terms of a “universal” subject “bereft of an ideal,” having to constitute himself through the ruptured and already fragmentary nature of language: “How indeed is the

⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 367.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 285.

⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 373.

subject to be constituted? Our near contemporary, Lacan, would reply: by language as such a chain of signifiers, ‘in a manner always disjointed and intermitted.’”⁸

Beyond this psychoanalytic dynamic that focuses on a structural rupture or loss, of ideals, of authority, of meaning, which ends up emphasizing the *formal* side of Montaigne’s writing — the fragmentary as form, the ruptured writing style — the present reading of Montaigne as a melancholy subject, with a melancholy viewpoint (perspective), enables us to focus instead on the singular and unique *content/matter* of Montaigne’s writing.

Rather than continue to marvel at the fragmentary, as if we were marveling at the distorted perspective and distorted gaze in *Melancholia I*, which only continues to perpetuate it as deviant, we may turn our gaze away from the “impairment” — the “impaired” gaze in Pot’s language⁹ — and towards the *world* that has been distorted, and yet constructed by this “pathological” gaze. Thereby sharing in the world seen or envisioned by that gaze instead.

This gazing beyond the *fact* of the distorted gaze, would involve seeing and sharing in Montaigne’s harsh indictments on the world and human behavior, as the above descriptions of fathers indicate, the folly and melancholy of the world, his firm positions and values, his own vehement passions, the many liminal and morbid images, a persistent and haunting occupation with death — the many *vanitas* and *memento mori* that flood his writing.

The following quote from the essay gives us a taste of the Montaignian typical

⁸ Moss, 198.

⁹ Pot, *L’inquiétante étrangeté*, 10.

digressions, which I will argue, do not reveal the rupture of ideals and wholeness, but in terms of content, reveal his liminal and morbid thinking, and his “biased” melancholic viewpoint and fears. Looking elsewhere, gazing into an empty distance, as we observe in Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, away and beyond the topic of the “affections of fathers,” towards a horizon of emptiness and death, but which is nonetheless full, significant and signifying, and rich with its own order:

“Voulons nous estre aimez de nos enfans? leur voulons nous oster l’occasion de souhaiter nostre mort?”^{10,11}

Do we want our children to love us? Do we want to take away from them the occasion for desiring our death?¹²

Montaigne is asking something quite preposterous and even outrageous: do we want to prevent our children from wanting us dead? But isn’t it obvious that we do not wish for this? And does it not require extreme thinking and a skewed view, in the direction of something very morbid and melancholic, to even be able to *conceive* of such a formula, even if it is a rhetorical one, and particularly when the essay topic is “the affections of fathers”?

These liminal, and “skewed” melancholic perspectives, which constitute the diverse digressions in his writing, are everywhere in the essay and provide it with a highly hermetic structure. Of the multitude of possible “examples” of fathers, Montaigne chooses the most liminal father figures — the miserly, withholding fathers, who, to take these figures the furthest, are in a deteriorated state and on the brink of

¹⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 369.

¹¹ In his final edition, Montaigne retracts a bit, providing his awareness to the absurdity of the question, and condoning any such violence. In parenthesis adding, “Combien que nulle occasion d’un si horrible souhait peut estre ny juste, ny excusable.”

¹² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 282.

death. Furthermore, as I will show, the distracted gaze into the far horizons that extend beyond the topic at hand will often be looking at or into death, as the most distant and liminal focal point, that Montaigne brings closest to him, and to us.

Through these liminal figures — the far edges of the distracted gaze — I argue that Montaigne’s subjective and personal fears and sorrows come to light, simultaneously revealing his powerful social critiques and values, which only his melancholy makes possible. Through the miserly fathers, Montaigne’s critique and values are carried by virtue of aversion, a form of looking away or elsewhere, — what not to do, how not to behave, in order to persuade, in the most hyperbolic way of the opposite: generosity, honesty. These values in turn, are also idealized to a practically inhuman and nonsensical way, by which they too become liminal images and define the opposite edges of the same melancholic/distracted horizon.

The primary binaries produced by the miserly father are avarice/generosity, holding on/letting go, performativity/honesty, tyranny/love, withholding/revealing, values which are pertinent to Montaigne’s “philosophy” but are often read only when Montaigne discusses them explicitly, as positions he holds, and not as coming to light through a melancholic viewpoint and internal state, through his fears, obsessions, or sadness.

Death, as the edge of the “normative” focal point, is brought most closely to the center, running through almost each and every image or value, or rather dictating what and how all other topics will come into view. Or, as the metaphorical expression that occasionally flickers through the essay goes: “taking one’s leave”, “stripping down” and “going to bed.” An expression Montaigne reverses from its common

proverbial form, into its most subjective, singular form: a private use of language and norms, which will be further explored towards the end of this chapter.

The liminal father figures on the threshold between life and death allow Montaigne to attain thoughts about death and evoke his (obsessive) *memento mori* throughout the essay, such that the essay practically digresses into his other essay explicitly dedicated to dying: *Que philosopher c'est apprendre a mourir*.

I. THE PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR FOLLY

As Ann Hartle has pointed out in *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher*, Montaigne reverses philosophy on its head, and in this process becomes an entirely original philosopher — a singular philosopher.^{13,14} This process of reversal is akin to the singular “exempla” drawn from rereading, reworking, and rejecting of ancient models of “exemplarity” as universal rules to follow, in attunement with singular and diverse *experiences* instead.

I further tie this notion of the “singular philosopher” with the theory I have been expanding upon, that early-modern subjectivity as a singularity most manifested in melancholy, and philosophy, are not mutually exclusive, and that melancholy constitutes a complete viewpoint of subjectivity, and hence a philosophy. Since I have explored melancholy in terms of a paradigmatic subjectivity, in its idiosyncratic distortion, point of view, ordering of the world, and also internal sensations that are

¹³ Ann Hartle, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Hartle uses the term “accidental philosopher” but in the sense of “singular” which is less confusing in the context of my argument.

not reality-dependent, philosophy becomes a natural extension of melancholy as the world can no longer be viewed and organized separately from sensations and internal states.

This point is further elucidated in contrast to the subject of the Enlightenment, a “universal subject,” who can supposedly access agreement and shared realities with others. A relative objectivity due not only due to the self-grounding nature of reason, but also due to a perceived proximity between objects, and internal ideas or sensations; a much later incarnation perhaps of the Aristotelian view of man as a “rational animal,” with which this essay strongly disputes.

The following reading of *De l'affection des peres aux enfans* is a case in point on how the singular subject, the melancholic, who draws from his experiences, sensations and perspectives, which as I will show are “folly” and “melancholy” through and through, is at the very same time a philosopher. And, conversely, how the “singular philosopher,” by reversing philosophy and morals on their head, is in turn the melancholic subject. This reading will simultaneously expose folly and melancholy, both of the world and of the author, and a “singular philosophy” imbued with melancholy views. Or vice versa: a melancholy singularity imbued with a universal philosophy.

Montaigne frames his essay with a seemingly classic, philosophical debate between the powers of nature and those of reason, a theme that repeats often in his writing. Nature commands all animals to love their own, according to the law of the “begetter loves the begotten,” an extension of the law of self-preservation and self-love, which will later in the essay become crucial to the folly of the miserly father.

S'il y a quelque loy vrayement naturelle, c'est à dire quelque instinct [...] qu'apres le soing que chasque animal a de sa conservation et de fuir ce qui nuit, l'affection que l'engendrant porte à son engeance, tient le second lieu en ce rang.¹⁵

[If there is any truly natural law, that is to say any instinct [...] after the care every animal has for its own preservation and for its own preservation and the avoidance of what is harmful, the affection that the begetter has for his begotten ranks second.]¹⁶

To this Aristotelian principle, Montaigne mixes in another, contradictory universal principle, in order to “make it his own,”¹⁷ his own singular mix, demonstrating the “crisis of exemplarity” and its relevance to Montaigne’s singularity. To this *law of nature* Montaigne adds the *law of reason*, so that two contradictory and yet *universal* principles are now acting upon each other. If the nature argument placed humans as “animals,” the law of reason now places humans above nature with the more godly capacity of “reason,” and the “voluntary liberty,” to not be “slaves to nature” [“carried away tyrannically by her”]:

Puis qu'il a pleu à Dieu nous doüer de quelque capacité de discours, affin que comme les bestes, nous ne fussions pas servilement assubjectis aux lois communes, ains que nous nous y appliquassions par jugement et liberté volontaire, nous devons bien prester un peu à la simple autorité de nature, mais non pas nous laisser tyranniquement emporter à elle ; la seule raison doit avoir la conduite de nos inclinations.¹⁸

[Since it has pleased God to give us some capacity for reason, so that we should not be, like the animals, slavishly subjected to the common laws, but should apply ourselves to them by judgment and voluntary liberty, we must indeed yield a little to the simple authority of Nature, but not let ourselves be carried away tyrannically by her: reason alone must guide our inclinations.]¹⁹

After superimposing one universal law upon another, it is as if Montaigne has mixed them together, creating a subtle combination of both rules that replaces both

¹⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 365.

¹⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 279.

¹⁷ See Moss, 198, on the ‘commonplace-book’ as a common humanist form of reading and learning, where through fragmented quotes and examples through the subject of Montaigne’s time would “assemble [himself] from scattered parts of dead men’s speech collected in ordered places.”

¹⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 366.

¹⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 279.

laws in a kind of “ideal balance” — “nous devons bien prester *un peu* à la simple autorité de nature: mais non pas nous tyranniquement emporter à elle.” And yet, this proves to have been deceptive, as Montaigne concludes in another contradiction that only the rule of reason should guide us: “la seule raison doit avoir la conduite de nos inclinations.” At this point, after these various combinations and mixtures, a general confusion has been cast on what rule or even what combination of rules should be followed.

After reversing philosophy on its head with these “singular” mixtures and borrowings, Montaigne essentially pits philosophy, with its universal rules, against itself, thus getting it out of the way and clearing the way for his primary concern and interest — the human stage of folly as he sees it. In the world of folly and human nature outside of philosophical discourses, rule following in general, whether of reason or of nature or of their mixture, is a philosophical fiction (and presumption).²⁰

If “rule following,” or “principles,” in Aristotelian language, are found amongst the chaotic and diverse folly of the world in its actual state, it is performative and inauthentic, which is yet another folly. *Custom* is Montaigne’s prime rule that humans can in fact be found to follow, behaving according to norms and beliefs that are precisely *not* “processed” and “assembled” on a singular basis (like the *exempla*), and therefore custom is a blind and dangerous force in its own right, as discussed in

²⁰ This argument interestingly resonates with the argument Erasmus makes in *The Praise of Folly*, that philosophy as the sciences of logic and reason (“the enemies of the human race”), and the notion that man was granted with reason, are responsible for creating the *fiction* of folly as if folly were a divergence from man’s natural condition: “In fact, a horse ignorant of grammar is not wretched for that reason, and no more is a foolish man automatically unhappy, because these conditions belong to their nature.” Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton & Company, 1989), 32-33. But as I will show, Montaigne’s take on folly will be different, and much more “subjective.”

the section on Pascal in Chapter 2. In this essay, the “customs” that the miserly fathers follow are the ones that dictate their withholding. Not letting go of what allegedly is keeping them safe — savings, money, pride, force — turns out to be a social and manipulated form of self-preservation: ruling by force and tyranny rather than through love due to existing conventions of fatherhood and child rearing.

Folly takes the last rein over philosophy and its pretense for a universal and rational human, as fathers are first introduced in their violation of both the law of nature and the law of reason. While man was initially here compared to beast and then in a second move raised to a more godly level by virtue of “reason,” the folly of fathers takes them back to a state *below* that of beasts in a third move that demolishes the debate altogether, thereby demonstrating the annihilating impact of melancholic reasoning, the destructive and not merely distracted gaze.

Contrary to beasts who take care of their own, humans are all too excited and moved by the “games and tricks” of their newborns, “des trepignemens, jeux et niaiseries pueriles de noz enfans,”²¹ while withholding care and love as these babies become older and actually require it for their own survival.

What we have here then is a complete manifestation of the quid pro quo by folly explored in Chapter 1. That is, applying love and care to the things that are the furthest from the proper of human life: power over others instead of power over self, personal wealth over internal wealth, love of power versus love of children, caring for children when they are still like “monkeys” rather than when they are “men,” and perhaps even favoring survival in terms of quantity, over quality, as these poor fathers

²¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII 366.

illustrate, and finally, of course, caring for these at the expense of happiness, or a “good life.”

The fathers of the essay sink below the level of beasts when these meaningless “diversions” of “babyish tricks” in Pascal’s sense, constitute the only form of fatherly love which furthermore evaporates once these “pet monkeys” become more adult and “more human.” Diversion becomes tragic, or rather melancholic, when, in contrast, the “true” needs, and true or necessary forms of love and support are withheld and neglected. The folly-tragedy here is that it is as if parents only loved their children as a “pastime” and as a diversion, before they are “human,” and that tragically — the more “human” they become, the less they love them and give to them.

... comme si nous les avions ayez pour nostre pasetemps, comme des guenons, non comme des hommes.²²

[... as if we had loved them for our pastime, like monkeys, not like men.]²³

Montaigne’s own (rhetorical) “confessions” that he will not stand for these “soulless” newborns to be nursed and cuddled in his proximity, add another dimension of folly. As he confesses not being able to relate at all to this human diversion and adoration for tricks, pet-monkeys and cuddly babies, he also distances himself from this “world as theater,” and positions himself as its spectator, and the spectator of its madness, as a Democritus who finds it laughable.

As previously discussed, in his essay *De Democrite et Heraclites*, Montaigne admits his preference for the laughter of Democritus to the weeping of Heraclitus as it is more “condemning” of human nature, and more devoid of compassion for it.

²² Ibid., 366.

²³ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 280.

Despite this admission, we now see how his passionate disaffections and aversions, his *contemptus mundi*, and his more adamant refusal to be participate in world affairs, also shed a more weighty and lamenting melancholic light on him, making him more resemble Heraclitus, or at least both figures. Even beyond this, as someone who cannot stand the trivialities of human behavior, and who also conveys a sense of anger and desperation to “cure the world” of its “disease,” he bears a resemblance even with the melancholic position illustrated through Jaques, and certainly with Pascal’s.

The ruins of the nature/reason debate continue to remain in the background so as to enhance the folly of fathers who continually violate both principles. They love in a more bestial way (“babyish tricks”), but they also love less than beasts because they withdraw their love when these babies become “human” and when their *Nature* settles in.

The figure of the miserly father carries the weight of the folly of fathers in the essay, to fully display this violation and hence folly/tragedy. With the ruins of the nature/reason argument still as the frame, the father as the generator, the begetter, becomes close-fisted (*restrain*), and miserly (*espargnan*), thereby destroying his own creation, and according to that law of nature, even himself. In an even greater folly (a suicidal behavior?), he also ends up violating the most fundamental law of self-preservation, since self-preservation was the foundation upon which the care for the “begotten” was founded.

The father’s miserliness, and folly, is that he seeks self-preservation at the cost of his child’s life by withholding any “expenditures” of wealth, affection, guidance, but also later as we will see, honesty, friendship, communication. In a sense, the

miserly father withholds generosity itself. In this economy of the miserly father, by not spending anything, he is the most wasteful: literally wasting away the lives of his children, and as we will see later, even his own life. Ultimately, this will be the greatest tragedy the essay builds up to implicitly, up and against the explicit logic of giving to one's children.

While the “broken and half-dead” father (“cassé, et demy-mort”) sits alone in a corner of his house enjoying all his assets and success to himself, “jouysse seul à un coing du foyer,”²⁴ his children are out cold in the world, desperately seeking another way to provide for themselves, turning, as a result, to *crime and theft* in another extreme and liminal representation of folly. To paint the folly of the miserly father in the most extreme and dangerous light, Montaigne claims to have met *many* such young men that have even become addicted to theft as a result of the miserliness of their fathers, and were bound to *forever live as criminals*... “*si addonnez au larcin*”... “*que nulle correction les en pouvoit destourner.*” This again echoes Burton and Pascal's extreme language and imagery for the sake of persuading the dangers and critique of folly:

Comme j'ay veu de mon temps plusieurs jeunes hommes de bonne maison, si adonnez au larcin, que nulle correction les en pouvoit détourner. [...] par la rigueur et avarice de son pere²⁵

As I have seen in my time several young men of good family so addicted to stealing that no correction could turn them from it. [...] by the rigor and avarice of his father²⁶

From a slightly different angle, the non-linearity (non-causal relation) of early-modern melancholy and melancholic thinking would allow Montaigne to suggest that

²⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 367.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 280.

any given behavior or event, in this case fatherly avarice, can bring about any level of torment, any passion or behavior, in this case — addiction to theft without correction. This is due to the mysterious and uniquely interior processing and perceptions of the early-modern subject, for whom what might be a “flea-biting” injury, would cause “insufferable torment” to another.

Beyond the folly of violating the natural law of “begetter loves the begotten,” ruining his own creation as these liminal images depict eventually ruining and killing himself according to the same law, the miserly father’s greatest folly stems from the fact that he is not even alive: his Nature has already run its course, “ces mines fieres et tyranniques, d’un homme qui n’a plus de sang, ny au coeur, ny aux veines.” Therefore, he stays alive on “borrowed time,” himself a thief of life, a life that should be handed over to his children from whom he is now stealing.

All these follies lead the way to Montaigne’s greatest concern and obsession with death. The miserly father’s folly is in a final moment neglecting the imperative of *memento mori*, or in Montaigne’s language, not knowing how to die, most highlighted by the father’s miserliness that takes place, and even *increases* on the brink of his death and time to leave:

Voire il semble que la jalousie que nous avons de les voir paroistre et jouyr du monde, quand nous sommes à mesme de le quitter, *nous rende plus espargnans et rétrains envers eux*; il nous fache qu’ils nous marchent sur les talons, comme pour nous solliciter de sortir.²⁷

Indeed it seems that the jealousy we feel at seeing them appear in the world and enjoy it when we are about to leave it *makes us more stingy and tight with them*; it vexes us that they are treading on our heels, as if to solicit us to leave.²⁸

²⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 366-367, my emphasis.

²⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 280 (my emphasis).

Montaigne depicts the father's miserliness as occurring at the very same moment of his "time to leave" and approaching death, so there is no question that he is foolishly fighting back, against Nature (the philosophical argument continues to crumble): "quand nous sommes à *mesme* de le quitter." These developing humans arrive, appearing as if a threat emanating from nowhere, "treading on our heels," taking a bite of the same world at the very same time in which the fathers must leave it. A father that cries out that his child is chasing him out of the world, coming of age only to rob him of his lifetime endeavor and reminding him of his near end, is an image that could fit in seamlessly with the many of the *Anatomy* tales we have seen.

But, as I am simultaneously trying to show, Montaigne takes enormous care to present, or moreover, to *represent* the fathers in such a way that there is no question about their folly, that their time is indeed up... but who, in fact, has this knowledge? And who lives in anticipation of this in fact?

Learning how to die, according to the Socratic tradition, involves a letting go of death and finitude, giving oneself up to death. In Montaigne, on the other hand, learning how to die presents as a constant anticipation and even obsession, or even an attempt to master it by structuring all of the human actions as potentially *final* actions, so that death catches us at the perfect time, or so that everything we do up until death, is deemed more meaningful by it. This is the more explicit argument I read in Montaigne's essay *Que philosopher c'est apprendre a mourir*, when he comments for example, on the ridicule and folly of a historian who, with his last breath, complained

only of the fact that his chronicle of kings will be cut too short and not be completed.²⁹ Montaigne, who does not want to end up like this poor man, wishes that death could “catch him planting his cabbages,” in a state where he is not only feeling a casual indifference to it (“nonchalant d’elle”), but also in regards to his unfinished or “imperfect garden”: “que le mort me treuve plantant mes chous, mais nonchalant d’elle, et encore plus de mon jardin imparfait.”³⁰

In his representation of the world, Montaigne must make sure that the fathers’ miserliness be not at all contextualized by their *own needs* and by their own self-preservation, nor by the forces that they are up against in light of old age, indeed death (from their own viewpoint), and not even by their concerns facing the foolish behavior and cruelty of their heirs — the *other* form of folly left ignored and unaccounted for by him.

Montaigne is not interested in making this into a philosophical *argument* by which men are below beasts in their folly. Rejecting philosophical authority and the productive ruins it produces, is merely the framework through which he presents his singular views and melancholy: the ridicule of human behavior, the tragic waste of diversion and inauthenticity, blindness towards one’s own condition, the weight of mortality, and so on.

As a melancholic and not as a traditional philosopher — indeed, as a melancholic and a singular philosopher — Montaigne *sees* and *represents* ridicule everywhere. And because he is obsessed with death, like Pascal, he only sees, through

²⁹ “J’en vis mourir un, qui, estant à l’extremité, se pleignoit incessamment, de quoy sa destinée coupoit le fil de l’histoire qu’il avoit en main, sur le quinziesme ou seixiesme de nos Roys.” Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XX, 87.

³⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XX, 87.

his “pathological vision,” the ridicule of men living their lives in ignorance of death: fathers *wasting* away their final years in contempt and greed, *wasting* their children’s future and prospects, *wasting* their potential bond and love. This particular notion of waste, understood and represented only from a particular (biased) angle, conveys the waste in saving and withholding. That is, as with the principle of madness and folly, a principle of quid pro quo produces a meaningful social critique, in juxtaposition to the customary notions of waste which are applied to the opposite: the material waste of money and goods, as the following tale will further explicate.

II. BLINDNESS AND FOLLY

In the essay Montaigne tells a personal story of a miserly old man he knows, who brags to him about the tight rein and the obedience he keeps his family under. But Montaigne tells his story as a classic fools’ tale; “it is all a farce,” he writes. While this acquaintance-protagonist boasts his vigilance, his “clear sight” into things (“Quant de fois s’est il vante de moy de la bride qu’il donnoit aux siens”... “combien il voyoyt cler en ses affaires”)³¹, Montaigne builds up the comic tension between his assumed knowledge, and evident ignorance, quoting Terence: “Lui seul ignore tout,”³² (“He alone is unaware of it all”).

While once glorious in his youth, old age has made him mad: “il frappe, il mord, il jure”³³ (“he slaps and bites and swears”). Transformed by age, he is now

³¹ Ibid., II, VIII, 373.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

burdened by fears and suspicions of everyone that surrounds him. He holds his keys at all times near, “plus chèrement que ses yeux”³⁴ (“dearer than sight itself, dearer than his eyes”),³⁵ yet everyone still has access to all his possessions and uses them and his house as they please. Drunkenness, gambling, prodigality, gossip, and conspiracies at his expense are taking place everywhere in his house right under his nose. Presuming to be in control, this father is presented by Montaigne as a classic fool, blind to what is going on behind his back and “unbeknownst to him, is the one being controlled and exploited in fact.

This tale indicates that there is another option for folly that Montaigne purposefully does not account for, choosing instead to neglect it in favor of the specific form of folly that he needs to represent in order to carry out his more subversive critique, not only of customs and norms, but also of vanity and *memento mori*.

These “other,” overlooked follies and faults are those committed by the father’s children, his heirs, and his household members or supposed confidants — follies of drunkenness, gambling, deceit — acts and faults that are *normatively* considered exemplary of wastefulness, and even of folly in an earlier notion of vices and sin. The potentially disturbing fact that the heirs and confidants are fooling their loved one, furthermore weakened by old age and ill, closer to his death than they, is not a matter of concern for Montaigne, for whom moralism is replaced by this early-modern folly as critique. Its goal, as we see here, is to reveal deeper and reversed

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Once again the motif of blindness appears. Blindness means not knowing that which you are blind to. You might be watchful of one thing, but blind to something even more consequential.

principles to normative ones.

Indeed, Montaigne is representing an opposite, non-normative, view of folly than the customary and (his) contemporary one in relation to the case of the miserly father. The expression that the essay reverses on its head is the common proverb: “Il ne faut pas se depouiller avant de se coucher”³⁶ (“one must not strip down, give away all their belongings before lying down”), to which Montaigne provides a positive variation of its negative form: “*Il faut se depouiller avant de se coucher.*”³⁷

In its origin and use, this proverb was destined to protect the father against his heirs and against humiliation of old age, whereby heirs were viewed as “vultures,” awaiting the father to die: “l’avidite et l’ingratitude ont, de tout tems, caracterise les heritiers.”³⁸ In fact, in one Brant’s cantos, the folly of the fathers is presented exactly in these terms, in allowing the children to abuse him and waste his money, whereby his folly lies in thinking that in return, they will take care of him and return the favor.³⁹

The questions, therefore, of “who is the fool?” is not an evident and immediate one. It relies on the literary and artistic representation, of bias, of distortion, and yet of a particular and meaningful order, as we have initially analyzed through Dürer’s image. While the aged miserly father is the chosen fool, as constructed by Montaigne, for his differently understood wasteful and self-humiliating behavior, it would have

³⁶ “Et à celui-là peut servir justement cette responce que les peres ont ordinairement en la bouche : ‘Je ne me veux pas despouiller devant que de m’aller coucher.’” (Montaigne, *Essais*, II. VIII, 370).

³⁷ ... “de nous coucher, quand les jambes nous faillent” (Ibid., 371). “Il est assez en estat, s’il est sage, pour avoir desir de se despouiller pour se coucher” (Ibid., 370).

³⁸ Jean-Charles-François Tuet, *Matinées sénonoises ou Proverbes françois, suivis de leur origine; de leur rapport avec ceux des langues anciennes et modernes, de l’emploi qu’on en a fait en poésie et en prose, de quelques traits d’histoire, mots faillans, & usages anciens dont on recherche aussi l’origine, &c. &c.* Paris: Née de La Rochelle and Vve tarbé, 1789. In *Gallica* (June 2009):

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5657384q/f6.image> (accessed May 2017), 430-431.

³⁹ Brant, “Of the Teaching of Children,” *The Ship of Fools*, 72-73.

been possible to depict his children and servants as fools for taking advantage of him, for duping him, and cruelly waiting to inherit his money which they are already spending. It would have been equally possible to critique the waste of the heirs, and their own waste of soul in favor of the body. Except that, paradoxically, since they are *not* ill and dying, the liminality and power of waste would have lost their effect in favor of an abstract moralism, providing further insight into how Montaigne's rhetoric and art serve his subjectivity. Like many other moments in the text, this is an important "singular Montaigne" moment to keep in mind, since Montaigne's singularity will shift and change according to his (melancholic) needs, and with it his representations and distortions of melancholy and folly.

Montaigne digresses for at least two pages into a discussion about all the small details of the scams and conspiracies against the miserly father, without sparing any negative detail: "Les pas de la vieillesse sont si lents, les sense si troubles"⁴⁰ ("Old people's steps are so slow and their senses so confused"), that the valet who was just now fired by the father can continue his usual position in the house due to the father's weakness and ignorance. If the father receives a letter, he depends on others to read it to him. These supposedly close family members and servants take this opportunity to "invent things on the spot" ("on y treuve sur le champ ce qu'on veut"),⁴¹ for their own profit, and according to their whim: "et fait-on a tous coups que tel luy demande pardon qui l'injurie par mesme lettre"⁴² ("and all the time they have someone asking

⁴⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 374.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

his pardon who is really insulting him in this very letter”).⁴³

Contrary to Pascal, for whom diversion was a blindness to, and turning away from, the human condition as wretched, for Montaigne, blindness is the *human condition* which humans ignore, evoking a dizzying image of “blindness to blindness,” another image that folds onto itself and contains its own tensions characteristic of early-modern imagery related to melancholy. Specifically, in Montaigne, blindness is the human assumption to knowledge despite inherent ignorance in the epistemological, skeptical sense (the inability to attain knowledge), but also despite the infinity of nature and forms compared with which the human eye, and our span of experience, is remarkably lacking — a critique that has crucial ties with the monstrous, as will be further expanded on. Thus blindness is a fundamental human folly, one that goes beyond “not knowing that one does not know,” it means not seeing that one cannot see, thereby moving from the philosophical to a liminal image.

This “blindness to our own blindness,” feeds into our sense of certainty and arrogance, the manifest expression of which is in the certainty of “custom,” which is therefore blind in turn. This certainty stemming from blindness, or this blindness to blindness, is responsible for many of the social ills (and monsters) that Montaigne decries at every opportunity: ethnocentricity, prejudice, lack of tolerance, and a justification for domination and bloodshed. In his essay *De l’education*, Montaigne writes that the prosecution of witchcraft and magic is of a greater folly than the practices themselves, since the prosecution stems from certainty and presumption to know, while the practices do not. “No folly can be greater,” he writes, than assuming

⁴³ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 286.

to know “the possible and impossible and the limits of the possible and knowledge.”

Many Montaigne critics, such as Richard Regosin and Bernard Sève, address the importance of ignorance in Montaigne, but in a philosophical, Socratic spirit. While according to this philosophical tradition ignorance is opposed to knowledge and truth, and is the mark of the human condition, it is only such as part of the infinite quest for knowledge, i.e., that the more one knows, the more one knows one’s own ignorance, which ends up being a a mark of wisdom in fact.

As with the other “reversals” of philosophical concepts and binaries, Montaigne plays with, and reinterprets ignorance as well, specifically in the direction of his demonstration of folly. He is not concerned with the Socratic quest to always learn how little you know, and thereby attain wisdom [the figure of the sage], but rather with human behavior and folly in their actual *lived* forms. Montaigne is not concerned with the philosophical binary of knowledge/ignorance in itself, or even in deconstructing it in its own right.

With his famously coined “*Que sais-je?*” (What do I know?), Montaigne expressed his utmost disdain for this “knowing” and certainty, another philosophical position he reverses on its head with a *question*, rather than an assertion, that performs perpetual doubt, beyond and even against the mere skeptical position of “not knowing.” The perpetual doubt is not only about “not knowing the world” or even oneself, but the form of the question folds back onto itself, questioning the question, removing external reality and a subject-object relation altogether.

Montaigne’s skepticism, however, is also part of his melancholy. Compared with the later model of Cartesian doubt, where “not knowing” is used to assert the

subject, in its ability to at least perform doubt, Montaigne's formula is of a subject who lives inside doubt and questioning, a subject who does not experience the constancy through which to assert and establish himself. Therefore, compared with the stability, or desire for stability of a Cogito, skepticism in Montaigne also bears resemblance to melancholic instability and oscillation, while Hassan Melehy, for example, has read this instability as a sign of self-difference through the alterity of time and language, where Montaigne's self is constituted instead in the act of writing as its closest form of "being."⁴⁴

As Montaigne distances the performance of doubt even from the self, from the "je," Richard Scholar finds that Montaigne performs doubt through liminal figures, in the form of a "conceptual persona," a concept he borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The "conceptual persona" is a means for the philosopher to think through, and embody his philosophy through a conceptual figure who "haunts his thinking." For Montaigne, according to Scholar, this persona is the "blind man."⁴⁵

Without making philosophical assertions, and in fact again breaking with skeptic philosophy or going beyond it, the conceptual persona who is also a liminal figure, enables Montaigne to explore and *show* the limits of our knowledge"an image at the threshold of the existing world, beyond sense and knowledge.⁴⁶ "*Que sais-je?*" as a question, suggesting that even "not knowing" should remain unsure, therefore calls for a turn to the figurative and to a demonstration or showing of knowledge at its

⁴⁴ Hassan Melehy, "The Essay: The Writing of the Subject," in *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Richard Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 246.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

limits.

The particular example of a blind man from Montaigne's *Apologie de Reymond Sebond*, as Scholar shows, is one who ends up not being blind, or rather not "suffering from blindness." In fact, his blindness points instead to "sighted humanity" for labeling him as such. The "blind man" in this essay has no idea of his blindness prior to hearing about it through words provided by others. Prior to this, he has full access to all pleasures and experiences, including visual ones: he enjoys playing tennis, and expresses delight in "seeing" his handsome godson (a visual descriptor).

The function of this image is to evoke, not through positive proof but again through images, the uncertainty and awareness of "whether or not sighted humanity is not equally blind." Montaigne asks:

...que scait-on si le genre humain faict une sottise pareille, a faute de quelque sens, et que par ce default la plus part du visage des choses nous soit cache?

[...what do we know about whether mankind is doing something equally foolish for some lack of sense, and whether by this lack the greater part of the face of things is hidden from us?]⁴⁷

Again we see how presumption of knowledge and certainty, presumption of "sight" to follow the image, is the greatest folly according to Montaigne. To follow this image: what if we are missing a sense? What if there are other hidden qualities that we cannot perceive through our senses? What if we have not yet seen *everything*? Clearly, we have not... therefore humanity is blind in its very nature. It is not an impairment that can be "overcome." This is particularly true if we think of the "limping" gaze of Dürer's *Melancholia*, the "cross-eyed" and "one-eyed" (*borgne*,

⁴⁷ Montaigne quoted in Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something*, 247.

louche) gaze as discussed in Chapter 1, not as a deviance and abnormality but rather as paradigmatic of an “anomaly” understood as a “difference,” which is in fact “normal” in Canguilhem’s terms”the norm of diversity and difference to which there is no “normal,” no perfect “health.”⁴⁸ Thus, the “pathology” becomes an “anomaly” which in fact becomes “normal” singularity and hence “normal” subjectivity. This idea is also further connected to the notions of melancholy and folly as universal categories, in that a general impairment, a general limitation, defines all of us, despite the fact that its manifestations and examples might be infinite and unclassifiable: “They dote all, but not alike.”⁴⁹

Returning to our Montaigne passage:

...que scait-on si le genre humain faict une sottise pareille, a faute de quelque sens, et que par ce default la plus part du visage des choses nous soit cache?

The passage produces meaningful alliterations and rhymes: *faict / faute / default*, which creates deep resonances between lack, mistake and defect. There is ambiguity here in relation to whether or not “*ce default*,” refers back to the factual lack of a sense (“a *faute de quelque sens*”), as the translation above suggests, or rather, to the acting and doing (*faict*) *as if* one has *no* lack. That is, in the first case there is a physical lack or deficiency, while the second reading suggests that “*ce default*” refers to the “sottise” of acting this way, i.e., the human presumption as lack.

This second reading evokes a piercing sense of tragedy and melancholy that accompany this great folly: what if we are getting *everything* wrong, by assuming we have seen everything? What if all our beliefs and ways of living as a result are

⁴⁸ Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett, (New York: Zone Books. 1991), 74-77.

⁴⁹ Burton, “Democritus to the Reader”, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 31.

altogether incorrect? Most important, what if as a result of thinking we know, we prevent ourselves from seeing more, discovering more, *living more*?

III. THE CONCEPTUAL PERSONA OF THE MISERLY FATHER

In *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, the one who purports to see and know, the miserly father from our story, suffers from the most intense blindness. And not only is his blindness literally the blindness into the affairs of his household and family affairs, nor that of the state of the money he is losing while he thinks he keeps it locked up, but more importantly the blindness about *his* human condition (the emphasis of singularity, of “his” human condition is crucial). Specifically, that his blindness is *costing* him much more than what he is *saving*: the love of his children, the lives of his children, a worthy death and a worthy life wasted through the misery and miserliness of his death.

Using this notion of the “conceptual persona” I argue that the miserly father functions similarly to the blind man, both as another instance of the “blind man,” as I have shown in folly’s link to blindness, but also in the *extra* “liminality” that the miserly father manifests. The miserly father is not only at the limits of “sight” as he cannot “see” his condition and its consequences. He is also at the limits of “life” and “passion,” practically at a loss of his very humanity due to the vile passion of avarice that has taken over him, blinding him to any other affections: generosity, love for his children, even self-love.

Through this liminal passion of avarice, and its counterparts here: apathy,

cruelty, tyranny, the miserly father is at the limits of our means and ways of knowing but also at the limits of feeling, of passion. According to David Hume, for example, avarice is barely even a passion, but rather a residual one that appears in old age “where all the other affections are extinct,”⁵⁰ its “all-consuming” force underlies the human weakness and blindness for Montaigne. At the same time and even more importantly the figure of the “miserly father” is liminal also in its position between life and death: to the blindness of the miserly father is added another dimension of folly, which is being miserly in the face of death. Montaigne’s *memento mori* is further woven into the tale, adding to the folly and waste conveyed by the figure of the miserly father, his horrific failure to remember death, even as it is (supposedly) encroaching.

Avarice is often depicted in its absurdity, and is considered a threat because it often does not yield to reason or any other passions. In its cumulative nature, it always wants more. More absurdly, it accumulates without wanting to put the accumulated possession and wealth to use — without wanting to spend any of it. The prop of the miser is his “coffers of avarice,” and the symbolic behavior is the absolute refusal to unlock them: “Avoir de l’argent dans un coffre autorise toutes les possibilités de dépense sans se faire de ses économies.”⁵¹

The most liminal image of the miser is that he prefers to take his treasure to the grave, less it be spent by someone else, even if that someone else is his very own extension and his own creation — his offspring, those early pet monkeys he cherished

⁵⁰ David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), III, VII, 3.

⁵¹ Philippe Desan, “L’avarice chez Montaigne,” *Seizième Siècle* 4, no. 1 (2008): 116.

so much. Even on his deathbed he remains obsessed with cost and not spending: “on the very brink of the grave,” “refusing *themselves* the most common necessities of life.”⁵²

Hume in *Of Avarice* tells several such stories, the most liminal one being a tale he borrows from Antoine Houdar de La Motte, in which a miser who is already dead and needs to cross the River Styx, manages to avoid paying the ferry passage by swimming across when the guard looks away (obviously, all the other ghosts paid their fare share). His punishment, a punishment directed at his vice of avarice, was to get sent back to earth and see how all his heirs are spending his riches. Avarice, therefore, is portrayed as having such (blind) determination, that it not only defies death by ignoring it, but also to such a point that getting sent back to earth, getting sent back to life, becomes a punishment to see his money being spent there by his heirs.⁵³

The miser prefers to not live in the moment by not spending anything in the moment, in exchange for living in a phantasmatic future, even beyond death. By not spending even after the bitter end, by continuing to occupy lofty estates, by holding the keys near even while health and youth have fully escaped him, the miser imagines himself infinite, in a kind of delusional diversion from the reality of death and *memento mori*.

The philosophical-logical argument in the background of this essay enhances the miser’s folly even further. The law of nature conveys his self-destructive and self-sabotaging conduct, given that his children are extensions of himself. Finally, in his blindness, the miser’s own nature and finitude have been replaced and wasted away by

⁵² Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, III, VII, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

a phantasmatic life beyond these.

IV. THE FROWNING FATHER — “GRIMACE PATERNELLE”

To the image of the “miserly father” Montaigne adds another “negative” (“aversive”) and liminal example of fatherhood, namely the stern, unmoving and authoritative father — an affective miser. One who is constantly “with a frown” on his face, who shows himself to his son only with a “gravité et grimace paternelle,”⁵⁴ only with a “façon tyrannique,” a tyrannical façade, meaning, not only showing this “face” but also, only showing his “bad side” (façon), evoking a duplicity that did not exist in the case of the “miserly father.”

A form of emotional avarice, the “frowning father” withholds and stores his love inside, “dans son ame,” while externally maintaining a frigid distance and only showing a distant and spiteful attitude: “Et ce pauvre garçon, disoit-il, n’a rien veu de moy qu’une contenance refroignée et pleine de mespris.”⁵⁵

However, unlike the story of the miserly father who is turned foolish and blind by age, the tale of the “frowning father” contains no comic elements. It tells the tragic and painful tale of a father who comes to full tragic awareness of his faults, who gains sight of his “error” or “tragic flaw” (Greek, *hamartia*) in the classical sense, as he realizes not only the *cost* of his “grimace paternelle,” but also its vainness and

⁵⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, I.VII, p. 375.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

misleading falsehood, calling it now a “vain disguise” (“ce vain masque”)⁵⁶. With the transition from comedy to tragedy, the loss and cost of these negative images of fatherhood is increased, and with them Montaigne’s warnings to “remember death” are more acutely heard.

This melancholy tale and digression tells the story of Monsieur de Monluc, another father figure in this essay who, according to Montaigne, confides in him about his fatherly struggles and feats. According to Montaigne, Monsieur de Monluc confides in him that he is now full of regrets that come piling on top of the grief and heartache he has over the loss of his son, a young gentleman of “great promise,” who dies before his potential can be realized, evoking yet another layer of “waste” to the general feelings of waste this essay builds off of.

Montaigne in this section clears the stage for the cracked voice and deep heartache of this grieving father. Beyond the grief, however, Montaigne chooses to focus on the father’s pain of *regret*, something that involves miscalculated decisions and mistakes during his lifetime — his “tragic flaw” — rather than the feelings of loss and mourning, which are presented as circumstantial and irrelevant to the pain as Montaigne chooses to narrate it.

[II] me faisoit fort valoir, entre ses autres regrets, le desplaisir et creve-coeur qu’il sentoit de ne s’estre jamais communiqué à luy [...]⁵⁷

It is not merely “creve-coeur,” heartbreak, but rather, “creve-coeur *que*”... heartbreak *that* he had never *shown* himself to him, heartbreak *that* he had withheld

⁵⁶ It appears that there is a relationship between folly and melancholy in the selection of texts I have analyzed, where the two differ only in relation to awareness: folly is a blindness to melancholy, and melancholy perhaps is too deeply aware of folly.

⁵⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VII, 375.

his affections, versus heartache about or over the loss. Focusing on the father's weighty regrets and the anger he directs at himself, Montaigne makes room for his tragic soliloquy (Montaigne here quotes Monluc at length), where Monluc asks himself for whom he has been *saving up* this *singular* affection — “A qui gardoy-je”...“cette singuliere affection?” A complete “waste,” he realizes, since this “singular affection” was reserved only for this one person, and can no longer be of “use”:

A qui gardoy-je à découvrir cette singuliere affection que je luy portoy dans mon ame? estoit-ce pas luy qui en devoit avoir tout le plaisir et toute l'obligation?⁵⁸

[For whom was I keeping the revelation of that singular affection that I bore him in my soul? Wasn't he the one who should have had all the pleasure of it and all the gratitude?]⁵⁹

The father's loss here is not of his son, but rather the loss of the *truth* and *honesty* that pertain to his relationship with his son, and the false knowledge and communication they had of and with each other. The “frown” and stern disguises (the “masque vain”) have now stamped these lives forever in the form of the mask, rather than in their true image, and true reflections of their souls. The father laments that his son died without having been able to share himself (his true self), and real affections with his son, “le desplaisir et creve-coeur qu'il sentoit de ne s'estre jamais communiqué à luy”; “avoir perdu la commodité de *gouster et bien cognoistre* son filz”⁶⁰ (“the sorrow and heartbreak he felt for never having opened up to him.” [...]) “he had lost” [...] “the comfort of appreciating his son and knowing him well” [...])⁶¹.

The essay continues to slide on the plane of affections. The essay on fathers'

⁵⁸ Ibid., 376.

⁵⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 287.

⁶⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VII, 375-376.

⁶¹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8, 287.

affections for their children becomes an essay on fathers' lack of affections, and then about affections that, albeit their depth and sincerity, are *mistakenly* bottled up. Similarly, Monluc's story of loss, which seemed like it would be about mourning, becomes a story about error and regret, and the father's own choices and realizations about *himself*, and about *his* dishonesty and mistakes. At this point, the topic of the affections of fathers for their sons becomes an essay about the fathers themselves, their lives, their well-being, and their survival.

Since Montaigne is not focusing on Monluc's loss, but rather on his error, this allows Montaigne to focus on his [Montaigne's] own well-being and survival in yet another digression. The excuse for the digression is to "agree" with Monluc, and to "agree" with the logic of his heartbreak, an odd intervention in its own right: "Je trouve que cette plainte estoit bien prise et raisonnable."⁶² In the final 1595 edition of the *Essais*, Montaigne adds that he is "better off" for having had this full knowledge of his friend, and for having savored him (*gouster*), emphasizing his personal stakes in the theory through which the essay has been operating:

En vaux-je mieux d'en avoir le goust, ou si j'en vaux moins ? j'en vaux certes bien mieux. Son regret me console et m'honore.⁶³

The verb "gouster" is what differentiates Monluc's experience and tragedy from Montaigne's experience and loss of La Boétie in another digression to Montaigne's own loss, which he does not name except by indicating "une trop certaine experience." Monluc failed to know his son in the embodied and full sense evoked by "gouster," while for Montaigne, *experience*, a term that for him encapsulates tasting,

⁶² Ibid., 376.

⁶³ Montaigne, "Notes," *Essais*, 1533.

trying, and trying out (various facets), renders every *literal* experience into something that is always “full,” and fully unique and internal, and in a sense, inalienable — immune to the kind of devastation expressed by Monluc.⁶⁴ Montaigne has transformed the *event* of Monluc’s loss to his *internal* regret and heartache over his own *affections* and behaviors.

In Monluc’s case, what has been lost is not primarily the person” — again *quid pro quo*, a loss for a loss — but the true and *real affections* that were blocked by the mask, and were not spoken, communicated or shown: “j’y ay perdu le plaisir de sa conversation, et sa volonté quant et quant,” “et aussi de luy declarer l’extreme amitié qu’il luy portoit, et le digne jugement qu’il faisoit de sa vertu.”⁶⁵

As with the critique of folly, the focus is turned to the *things that matter*, the things that are deemed less ephemeral and worldly, which here also overlap with the things over which one has no control, like death. Following the platonic understanding evoked in the context of folly in Chapter 1, there are two kinds of pains, and two kinds of losses: the loss of communication and honesty, which is deemed worse than the loss caused by death. The loss of not having experienced (“gouster,” “cognoistre”) or revealed (“à découvrir cette singuliere affection,” “l’extreme amitié qu’il luy portoit”) one’s “true image” and “acquaintance,” the loss of sincerity, are far more devastating than death itself.

This is not only because Montaigne simply values honesty and authenticity, and not only because of the primacy of the internal workings and the self, but also

⁶⁴ This notion of the “fullness” of experience is inspired by Starobinski’s notion of the “thickness” of experience that Montaigne tries to produce in order to compensate for the brevity of life, as Starobinski describes it, Starobinski, *Montaigne in Motion*, 237.

⁶⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 376.

because there are two (or many) kinds of lives. Montaigne shows how death structures life at every moment, interpreting and sealing anything prior in its light. In this case, the father's "vain" affections and his "frowning face" have robbed him and his son of a "good life," even prior to his son's death, symbolizing, in fact, a life that had already been lost to this masquerading.

By choosing to give voice to the pains of regret rather than mourning in this way, Montaigne approaches his *memento mori* from yet another angle. In the first half of the essay, the violation of *memento mori* is sounded out through the miserly father's refusal to "take his leave" on time, his persistent reign by force despite his senses and capacities being too weak, which cost him love and a worthy life, as well as through the repeated iterations throughout the essay's warning about the dangers of not knowing "when to take your leave," not knowing to "lie down when your legs fail," ("de nous coucher, quand les jambes nous faillent,"⁶⁶ portraying the father as a thief towards his own children and even towards himself. In this portion of the essay, *memento mori* is now sounded out tragically through the ruination of the "good" and "honest" life of this son and father, whose pride and concern with hierarchy, discipline, and other customs have meant that his son will never know he loved him, and that simultaneously, he will always know that his son died unloved. And Monluc, in turn, will have nothing, internally, to survive on, or to lessen the pain with.

For Montaigne, through his melancholic digressions, life is shown to be fully structured by death and "final actions," like the historian who died thinking his chronicle will be unfinished. In contrast to a position of *memento mori* as a *reminder*

⁶⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 371.

of death, mortality, and humility, and to the philosophical position of learning how to die, the digressions in the essay structure it as one unified melancholy image, whereby the affections of fathers for their children digress into many images of *memento mori*, along with the many melancholy/folly distortions and reversals of values that this chapter has analyzed.

As we have seen in the discussion on Pascal, death is something that *can* be forgotten, and it is only *melancholics* like Pascal as I read him, who are scandalized by humans who do not perpetually dwell in their finitude and the fact that they are “wretched for all eternity.” The melancholic becomes a master of *memento mori*, and in a sense, death replaces life in a final *quid pro quo*, and in a final proverbial reversal. From the “normative” position that views death as the *end* of life, its limit, to viewing life as a continual dying, or rather an “art” of dying: “Tout ce que vous vivez, vous le desrobez à la vie; c’est à ses despens. Le continuel ouvrage de vostre vie, c’est *bastir la mort*”...⁶⁷ (“All the time you live you steal from life; living is at life’s expense. The constant work of your life is to build death”).⁶⁸ Therefore, even death itself is not an “objective” event, since everything within life, death included, is a human artifact that involves not only the agency of construction, but also of assembly, composition and art (“*bastir*”).

Following the *normative* view of death, as an external accident that ruptures life, proves in this essay and elsewhere to be much more *costly* than this alternative melancholic view of death, since saving up, either money or love, prove to pertain to

⁶⁷ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XX, 91.

⁶⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 20, 65.

an immortal life, and thus to an inhuman life, and therefore the melancholic model proves to have universal value.

V. “PAR UNE TROP CERTAINE EXPERIENCE”

Montaigne’s placing of *experience* and internal life above and beyond a concrete loss or a concrete friendship is further emphasized by his refusal to name and specify these, outside of the mysterious and vague referral to a “trop certaine experience,” similar to the intentional mystery and vagueness of the “melancholy humor” and “chagrin” in Chapter 2.

...car comme je sçay par une trop certaine experience, il n’est aucune si douce consolation en la perte de noz amis, que celle que nous apporte la science de n’avoir rien oublié à leur dire, et d’avoir eu avec eux une parfaite et entiere communication.⁶⁹

While a unique (“certaine”) experience is seemingly being denoted, the “trop” throws us off towards a notion of multitude, intensity and doubling which folds the *external* experience inward, and once more onto the *internal* sense of experience. By virtue of being “too” unique and specific, or by virtue of being “too much,” the experiences themselves lose touch with the external ones, and become irrelevant or else inaccessible and untraceable, as the figure of the monster in Chapter 4 will be a symbol for.

In addition, “par une trop certaine experience,” as in an “all too familiar experience” suggests not only the loss of La Boétie. Montaigne, to whom death is “all too familiar,” has also experienced the loss of his four children during infancy, as he

⁶⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 376.

mentions in this essay only “by the way.” Early on in the essay when Montaigne expresses his condemnation of violence in education, another side-topic, digression, to “fatherhood,” he casually mentions that he himself was raised without violence, and did the same with his own children. Except, as he says, they all “died on him” as babies: “J’ay deu la pareille aux enfans que j’ay eu; ils me meurent tous en nourrisse;”...⁷⁰

Despite the survival of his one daughter, Leonor, which he acknowledges further below in the essay, Montaigne nonetheless writes here, “Ils me meurent *tous* en nourrisse,” another significant melancholic slip, with the aim of representing a complete or radical “experience” (“trop certaine”), through which he can make his extreme arguments. Perhaps, in this manner, Montaigne finally becomes his own liminal image, his own conceptual personae. Someone who survives and even enjoys life despite having lost everything as his image of an “arrière boutique” — a deeply private and internal metaphorical space, “toute nostre, toute franche,”⁷¹ evoked in *De la Solitude*, would want to persuade us of: “discourir et y rire comme sans femme, sans enfans, et sans biens, sans train et sans valetz, afin que, quand l’occasion adviendra de leur perte, il ne nous soit pas nouveau de nous en passer”⁷² [“here we must talk and laugh as if without wife, without children, without possessions, without retinue and servants, so that when the time comes to lose them, it will be nothing new to us to do without them”⁷³]. Any moderate or more “realistic” account or description

⁷⁰ Ibid., 369.

⁷¹ Ibid., I, XXXIX, 235.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 39, 177.

of loss, would lessen the effect of his radically alternative representation of the world.

Montaigne's "all too familiar experience" with death and loss was also experienced through the illness of "the stone," an illness that his father suffered and died from, and which he knew, also, "all too well," that he had inherited from him. In *De la ressemblance des enfans aux peres*, he writes: "Il est à croire que je dois à mon pere cette qualité pierreuse, car il mourut merueilleusement affligé d'une grosse pierre, qu'il avoit en la vessie" ...⁷⁴ — "qualité pierreuse" being a (melancholic) play on the name of the illness and the name of his father, Pierre.

VI. ADAPTIVE MELANCHOLY

Montaigne defends himself against death by constantly preparing for it, designing it such that death should find him only "planting his cabbages," in complete ease in relation to any endeavors that might remain incomplete, or any other regrets, for example anything that he may have wanted to say, to evoke the metaphor of the *Essais* themselves in relation to his life/death project.

This seemingly pastoral image of Montaigne enjoying his garden, and its humorous tone, reveal a harsher reality — Montaigne's adaptive, melancholic self-staging for his alternative, melancholic view or experience of the world. And yet, this melancholy is still "*normal*" as a way of life and a philosophy, and is perhaps a "normal" adaptation to realities or circumstances he might need to look away from,⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, XXXVII, 742.

⁷⁵ This is a paraphrasing of Canguilhem's notion of health as an overcoming of changes in the environment: "life is not indifferent to the condition it meets with." Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, 72.

the various deaths and losses, the various anticipations of illness and suffering, but also the passions and dispositions, the fluidity of it all, and finally, simply being human, or being a subject.

It is only *normal* perhaps that Montaigne, who has lost his four children at infancy, and did not get a chance to educate them according to his beliefs and in that “soft” way that he was raised, might focus and notice only those fathers who use violence against their children and *waste* away their fatherhood. Notably through their avarice, envy and hate, ruining not only their children’s happiness but also *wasting* this potential bond and love, with the ultimate and tragic result of wasting their own lives. At many different points in the essay he slips into saying, with resounding pain - if we can or want to hear it — emphasized by the conditional, that “unreal” tense that “he would have”... “loved to”... “give”... “share”... “be loved”...

In speaking of the violence people use in education, Montaigne writes that he himself practiced tenderness with his children. Except, as he abruptly writes: they died as babies. He then adds: “J’eusse esté beaucoup plus religieux encores en cela envers des masles,”⁷⁶ (“I *would have been* much more meticulous on the matter with boys”), and then later and even more strongly felt as a projection of the chance he did not have, he writes: “j’eusse aymé à leur grossir le coeur d’ingenuité et de franchise,”⁷⁷ (“I *would have loved* to make their hearts overflow with openness and frankness”). In speaking of the “violent approach,” Montaigne does not understand these fathers, as he sees them throwing away an opportunity to *feel loved*. Sadly, for him, this opinion can only be expressed in the tragic conditional:

⁷⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 369.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Quand je pourroy me faire craindre, j'aimeroy encore mieux me faire aymer.⁷⁸

[If I were able to make myself feared, I would have much rather enjoyed making myself loved.] (My translation.)

For Montaigne, death means not only what he has been robbed of in relation to what others throw away because perhaps they have so much of it, but it also means living life differently, and setting up beliefs and values that add “taste” and meaning to life, a certain “thickness” against life’s ephemerality in Starobinski’s terms,⁷⁹ especially if this were to end prematurely.

Part of this “thickness” and meaning can be offered through the values of generosity, tolerance, honesty and love, and reversing values as needed to be able to adapt and live better within certain circumstances, even if those circumstances are still understood as many “concoctions” of the interactions between subject and world. In *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*, this means being able to “savor” (*gouster*) a loved one, remembering to tell them and show them everything, and never withhold love, as Monluc failed to do. But more importantly, and more crucially, it means honesty in relation to oneself, so that death does not “catch” one with this “chagrin” of regret and error, in the middle of a worldly and ephemeral endeavor such as the charting the chronicles of kings, while the things most dear to us left untouched, undone or unsaid.

Love, according to this reading, has to involve generosity, transparency, and honesty. Not for the sake of “love” and “memory” so much as for the interior experience that is always one’s proper, one’s “arrière boutique,” the only thing to have and draw from in a mournful/mad/melancholy/foolish world where loss is “all too

⁷⁸ Ibid., 373.

⁷⁹ “Perceptible fullness emerges when action ‘holds and fixes’ an infinitely light substance, namely life, thereby giving it weight long enough to be perceived.” Starobinski, *Montaigne in Motion*, 237.

much” and “all too familiar.”

But this love as a defense against death involves more than just generosity and honesty. Love according to Montaigne also involves letting go and turning inward. The value of letting go is something that these miserly, withholding fathers demonstrate the opposite of. By following custom blindly in their attachment to “social” self-preservation, by creating a violent schism between themselves and their very own children according to custom or normative ideals, they have lost the chance of “feeling loved,” a worthy life stamped by a worthy death, and lastly an interior plenitude that would have stemmed from placing one’s own honest feelings and needs before custom — Monluc’s regret and his interior depletion.

Beyond a straightforward “giving” to the other what is yours, letting go has more to do with a general renouncing of a worldly, external existence: retreat, a turn inward, even solitude — other values that are dear to Montaigne and that protect him from loss and death, as made explicit by the passage from *De la solitude*.

In an important comparison, and in line with the quid pro quo logic of the critiques performed by melancholy and folly, Montaigne in an essay entitled *De mesnager sa volonté* argues *in favor* of avarice. Since, as we have learned, there are many kinds of avarice and folly, and many ways of displaying avarice or folly. In this essay Montaigne argues that people are all too ready to sacrifice their privacy and time and lend themselves to public use, defending their finances and success, but not their souls. Here, by “*not giving oneself*,” *protecting* internal integrity and the freedom of the mind, and ridiculing “regular” avarice from yet another angle, for the purpose of advocating for personal independence and authenticity:

Personne ne distribue son argent à autrui, chacun y distribue son temps et sa vie; il n'est rien dequoy nous soyons si prodigues que de ces choses là, desquelles seules l'avarice nous seroit utile et louable.⁸⁰

While others neglect to notice that “their time is up,” Montaigne is anxiously preemptive about already taking his leave, and giving up his time, imagining where he wants to be and how he wants to feel (“en plantant mes choux”), living alongside and towards death (“bastir la mort”). Montaigne everywhere writes that he is “always taking his leave,” evoking the same obsession and personal defense as with the other values I have discussed.

The values of “withdrawing” and “letting go” are illustrated in another digression that this essay performs through Montaigne’s reversal of the French proverb, which, as noted earlier, he deconstructs and rebuilds throughout the essay: “Il ne faut pas se dépouiller avant de se coucher” [“one mustn’t undress before getting into bed”]. As mentioned earlier, this proverb means the exact opposite of what this essay conveys: “Il ne faut pas se desaissir, se priver de son bien avant sa mort,” meaning that one *must* be vigilant and watchful all the way until death — death marks the limit of life for the non-melancholic, but for the melancholic, death is within life.

While this proverb expresses the logic behind the behavior of the miserly father, Montaigne rewrites it to express the dangers of following customs blindly, and not living honestly by one’s own needs — by following “exemplarity” over the unique and tailored “*exempla*.” The reversal of this expression throughout the essay: “Il est assez en estat, s’il est sage, pour avoir desir de se despouiller pour se coucher”; “la raison nous commande assez de nous despouiller, quand noz robes nous chargent et

⁸⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, X, 981.

empeschent, et de nous coucher quand les jambes nous faillent;”⁸¹ which also exploit and add new “laws of nature” — our weakness and failing legs signal to us to let go — to Montaigne’s current agenda, reveal again Montaigne’s melancholic bias and adaptation of rules to his own experience, an expression of his own private dictionary: “J’ay un dictionnaire tout à part moy,”⁸² which will be a central part of the following chapter.

⁸¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 371.

⁸² *Ibid.*, III, XIII, 1091.

CONCLUSION:
“THE CHILDREN OF THE MIND”

To conclude the analysis of the essay, I will discuss the final part of the essay that is frequently commented on, which deals explicitly with the concept of non-biological, conceptual, fatherhood through the figure of the author. With this final subtopic or digression, I wish to show how it too ties in with the melancholic structuring of the essay.

In this final section, Montaigne digresses fully away from any concrete, corporeal forms of fatherhood, as if in the “assiduous contemplation” of his subject-matter, his soul indeed flew out of his body, in Ficino’s language¹ — landing on the topic of the “the births of the mind,” (“les enfantemens de nostre esprit”²). The “children of the mind” are intellectual productions and art work — no less worthy and in fact, more worthy than the offspring of the body, the biological children, due to their immortality.³

This theory is ascribed to a long tradition of the *topos* of the author or poet as the father of his work, and Montaigne is typically positioned in this fatherly role, in a “fantasy of parentage” through the act of writing.⁴ And yet this “fantasy of parentage” does not fit Montaigne’s values and beliefs, in this essay or elsewhere. Much of what he says in this final part of the essay, denying his desire for real children, and

¹ Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 115.

² Montaigne, *Essais*, II, VIII, 380.

³ In *De l’amitie*, Montaigne quotes a philosopher who when asked about whether he loves his children because they are his, answers by spitting on the ground, so as to demonstrate that not everything that the body produces is worth admiring, such as worms and feces. This is noteworthy in relation to the contradictions in values between the two essays, as explored in Chapter 4.

⁴ Kritzman, Lawrence. “Montaigne and the Crisis of Autobiography.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, edited by Maria diBattista and Emily O. Wittman, 49-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 52.

especially boasting that his children are far more “perfect” than biological children (“more noble than the body”) do not fit in with his views on love and loss, and the overall tone of the essay. There is something off about how Montaigne goes from “absolute communication” with a loved one, to the favoring of the sterile endeavor of writing, to even suggesting that the victories of war and conquest are comparable “children of the mind,” and more worthy than biological ones.

Instead of automatically identifying these declarations as a psychoanalytic “defense mechanism” as Kritzman does — the book as substitute for the child — by closely reading the values that the author-book relationship represents, I suggest that the book should be read not as a substitution for loss but rather as one final example of fatherhood. That is, one more final digression in the essay, rather than a certain fruition of the argument, whereas the book is not a vile and smelly example of fatherhood, but rather a pure and noble image, such that the aversive images have something ideal to interact with.

The purity of this authorly relationship is not that it transcends death and loss, and that it is obviously free of human flaws, as a surface reading suggests. Authorship for Montaigne is not represented here, I believe, as a “fantasy of parentage,” but as a symbol or image of the purest values of fatherhood as such. As yet another image, namely that of “authorship,” and moreover, another liminal image as we will see, Montaigne finally provides an *exemplary fatherhood*. Although, of course, it cannot be “blindly followed” since he provides us with only with an [inhuman/liminal/ideal] image, always referring us back to ourselves for more guidance.

The author as father does not, as the *topos* goes, extend himself into his work,

thus immortalizing himself. Instead, the author gives everything to his book, who will go on to be immortal *without him*, allowing his book to be “wiser” and greater than him. The book will go on to speak without him, saying even more than he himself, Montaigne, could fathom and know:

...il peut sçavoir assez de choses que je ne sçay plus, et tenir de moy ce que je n’ay point retenu [...] Il est plus riche que moy, si je suis plus sage que luy.⁵

The authorship of the book provides the image of the ideal father. The father who gives and does not steal, who lets go, not remaining watchful and vigilant, who does not hold back, and who *says* everything, literally as a form of transparent communication to which the *Essais* project aspires. The image of the author as an ideal father finally provides a counterexample to the miserly and withholding fathers, and displays, figuratively, the values of fatherhood and a model for fatherhood that Montaigne can entrust. Emphasizing not the purity of the (inhuman) child, the immortal child of art, as the trope goes, but rather, the *giving* of the father — an image of *giving*: “*comme on donne aux enfans corporels.*”

A cettuy cy tel qu’il est, ce que je donne, je le donne purement et irrevocablement, comme on donne aux enfans corporels;⁶

As Montaigne has shown, this pure and unconditional love is *not* given to “corporeal” (real and human) children, who become beggars and thieves as a result of the waste and folly of their fathers. Thus Montaigne does not position himself as the father who seeks to birth a non-biological child-substitute in this phallic compensatory act. Rather, he positions himself as the author in order to exemplify and demonstrate pure love, fatherly or other, in this ultimate form of giving and letting go. With the

⁵ Montaigne, II, VIII, 383.

⁶ Ibid.

book, Montaigne concludes his argument, and also, once more, takes his leave: “Ce peu de bien que je luy ay fait, il n’est plus en ma disposition.”⁷

⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR:
PLAYING WITH MONSTERS

Every injury would be fatal if tissues were incapable of forming scars and blood incapable of clotting.

GUÉYENOT ¹

INTRODUCTION

Montaigne's essay, *De l'amitie*, is most commonly read as an ode to his friend, La Boétie, and to their "ineffable and inevitable friendship."² La Boétie's death, as discussed, is often considered to be at the heart of the writing of the *Essais* project and its fragmented nature: "the loss of the friend sublimated by the text"... "the loss of wholeness in favor of fragmented writing".³

As Montaigne himself claims in the opening of his essay, La Boétie's renowned treatise against tyranny, *La Servitude Voluntaire*, was to serve as the *centerpiece* of the essay, in order to honor the friend. As one of Montaigne's many self-deprecating avowals go, he confesses at the beginning of the essay that his only skill and talent lie in the art of ornamentation, i.e., filling in the void around the centerpiece with grotesque or monstrous figures, while falling short at the structured portrait or center. Notably, this confession is found to reflect the monstrous writing style considered as one of the hallmarks of his *Essais*. As a result of this "shortcoming," therefore, Montaigne decides to borrow a "centerpiece" from his

¹ Guéyenot quoted in Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, 73.

² Desan, *Montaigne: A Life*, 144.

³ Richard L. Regosin, *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's Essais as the Book of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 23.

friend: “Je me suis advisé d'en emprunter un [un tableau] d'Estienne de la Boitie, qui honorera tout le reste de cette besongne.”⁴

But as we notice already in this simple confession of a shortcoming in which his friend surpasses him in talent (“je n'en connois point qui luy soit comparable”⁵) — the “honor” might only serve to shine on, and honor, Montaigne’s own work, rather than commemorate the friend: “qui honorera tout le reste de cette besongne.” The emphasis is placed on a “borrowing” (*d'en emprunter*) for Montaigne’s own sake — a borrowing, which I will show, will further be transformed into a full demand and ceasing of what belongs to his friend.

Furthermore, as we find out at the end of the essay, Montaigne has pulled back on his decision to commemorate his friend with this “centerpiece,” and none of La Boétie’s writing ends up appearing in his essay, an omission that has been considered a central mystery regarding the *Essais*.⁶

While for Regosin the missing essay merely replicates and reproduces the unease of loss and absence,⁷ Régine Reynolds-Cornell argues more subtly for a political justification for the omission: an intentional obscurity and refusal to say everything. Suggesting that, Montaigne did not have faith in overt dissent, and therefore chose the covert dissent of his *Essais* to the overt dissent expressed in his friend’s treatise, which he felt might be too explicit and subversive.⁸

⁴ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVII, 182.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For an elaborate discussion of the “mystery” of the omission of La Boétie’s treatise, and possible justifications, see: David Lewis Schaefer, ed., *Freedom Over Servitude: Montaigne, La Boétie, and On Voluntary Servitude* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

⁷ Regosin, *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne’s Essais as the Book of the Self*, 20.

⁸ Régine Reynolds-Cornell, “Smoke and Mirrors: Covert Dissent in Montaigne’s *Essays* and Overt

Desan, on the other hand, takes the essay's ode to this "ineffable and inevitable friendship," with a grain of salt, and instead uncovers some of Montaigne's rhetorical devices and manipulations. Desan points to the fact that this notion of an ideal friendship was a common literary *topos* of the sixteenth century, used as an "exercise in humanism," rather than a lived reality: "humanism puts friendship on a pedestal, because it symbolizes the most human of feelings."⁹ According to Desan, Montaigne, whose fame, and political and authorial status lagged behind La Boétie's, exploited this *topos* "in order to generate a mutual and reciprocal debt which would explain all the political and authorial fame and advancement Montaigne gained from La Boétie."¹⁰

My reading of this essay agrees with Desan's more suspicious, rhetorical and even manipulative reading of Montaigne. However, instead of reading the "generation of mutual and reciprocal debt" created through this figure of an ideal friendship, as a political or authorial one, I reveal the personal and subjective "gains" of a friendship "placed on a pedestal," in terms of Montaigne's melancholic subjectivity. This reading approaches Montaigne's melancholic subjectivity to Canguilhem's notion of *health*, understood as an adaptation to a change in "milieu" and "norms," in contrast to the Freudian notion of melancholy seen as a pathological reaction to the environment, specifically to loss. Finally, this *healthy* "adaptation," as I will show, takes place through the notion of early-modern melancholy as radical subjective oscillations in

Dissent in the Discourse *On Voluntary Servitude*," in *Freedom Over Servitude: Montaigne, La Boétie, and On Voluntary Servitude*, ed. David Lewis Schaefer, 115-126 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

⁹ Desan, *Montaigne: A Life*, 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

feelings and perspective.

If, according to Desan, the ideal friendship figured in this essay as a monstrous attachment and conjoinedness, allows Montaigne to omit his treatise from the essay and in this sense abandon La Boétie, provided the justification that the two friends are *one*,¹¹ I argue that Montaigne exploits conjoinedness in order to personally absolve himself of guilt and mourning. Not as an end in itself, but in order to preserve the primacy of *experience* as an internal phenomena, which any sort of division and relationality would necessarily disrupt.

Preserving the integrity of experience in this manner is more than a stoic “immunity to misfortune” against the uncontrollable forces of external reality, as it is a shifting malleable interior and emotional relation to the environment, and not a fixed state of a certain “freedom from emotions.”¹² Read in contrast to the previous essay, *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*, I will reveal shifts and reversals in values and ethics, corresponding with the melancholic position of oscillation between, and commitment to, new and changing realities, perceived as offering health and adaptability to the subject.

Similarly, I argue that these contrarities and oscillations also find their expression through Montaigne’s *play* with the notion of the monstrous itself. Much like his play with the norms of fatherhood, the norms of avarice, the norms of folly, of which the play on the proverb: “*Il faut se depouiller avant de se coucher*,” was symbolic in the previous essay and chapter, this new liminal figuration of a monstrous

¹¹ Desan, *Montaigne: A Life*, 116.

¹² Russell, Bertrand. *A History of Western Philosophy*. (New York: Simon & Schuster/Touchstone, 1967), 264.

attachment, of his friendship as monstrous, will be represented as a play on and with other monsters in Montaigne's essays, and moreover, a play on the more traditional, and again, normative, notion of the monstrous in his time.

In particular, the figure of the "monstrous friendship" as *truly* monstrous, miraculous, and *truly* rare, will be read in contrast to Montaigne's other monsters, specifically in relation to the "monstrous child" of another essay, *D'un enfant monstrueux*. Contrary to the "monstrous friendship," which will prove beyond comprehension and classification, the monstrosity and rarity of the "monstrous child" lends itself to understanding and familiarization, and is consequently normalized. This distinction between the truly rare, or the truly monstrous, and that which is merely novel or anomalous, in Canguilhem's terms, meaning simply "diverse," will further emphasize Montaigne's subjective shifts in worldviews and theories, to which he matches these strategic images and figurations.

The complete reversal of values and ethics between *De l'affection des peres aux enfans* and *De l'amitié*, and between the different figurations of monstrosity, will illustrate that the reversal of values characteristic of folly and melancholy, is not a fixed reversal, and is subject to the rapid shifts of subjectivity and perspective that define the melancholic subject of early-modern thought.

In stark contrast to the Freudian understanding of melancholy as a pathological versus a "normal" reaction to loss, pathological due to a failure of individuation between the ego and the loved object (resulting in "melancholy cannibalism"),¹³ this reading will present Montaigne's potential "cannibalism" in terms of *health*, according

¹³ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", 249-250

to Canguilhem's understanding of the term.

Health for Canguilhem is first and foremost a *subjective* evaluation on the part of the individual, and not an external or objective measure: a qualification of wellbeing as consciously felt and reported by the individual or sick person. Secondly, health is defined as the ability to adapt to, and be compatible with life in its diversity and change. *Pathology*, Canguilhem writes, "implies *pathos*, the direct and concrete *feeling* of suffering and impotence, the *feeling* of life gone wrong."¹⁴ Against naturalist and biological accounts, which have been tainted by statistical and physical measures, Canguilhem places health within the human psyche, and the human ability to tolerate variations in norms, "adaptation to a personal milieu is one of the fundamental presuppositions of life."¹⁵

In this manner, Montaigne's "devouring of the other" in this monstrous attachment, can be read as a healthy response to the norms of individuation, which might institute loss and grief. In addition, the monstrous figure allows Montaigne to self-define, and to constitute his own subjective norms, reshaping and reclaiming his *experience*, or *pathos* against what is customary. Given that for Montaigne the monstrous friendship is also a literary figure, it is important to keep in mind that this "healthy adaptation" also symbolizes Montaigne's views and critique of social norms. In this way, the monstrous figuration parallels melancholy's duality, at once in the form of subjective and internal perceptions, and in its own critique and (externalized) condemning of the world, i.e., its *contemptus mundi*.

¹⁴ Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*, 77 (my emphasis).

¹⁵ Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*. Translated by Stefanos Geroulanos and Daniela Ginsburg. (New York: Fordham University Press. 2008), 129.

Finally, these melancholic oscillations also provide additional context to the well-noted notion of self-difference in Montaigne's writing, the notion of a subject as "patchwork," ("Nous sommes tous de lopins"¹⁶), where, according to Montaigne, "each day brings about a new fantasy" ("Chaque jour nouvelle fantasie"¹⁷), and "each bit [of us], each moment [in time], plays its role" ("chaque piece, chaque momant, faict son jeu"¹⁸).

Hassan Melehy has identified Montaigne's essay form with the notion of self-difference, as a discourse produced in layers, assembled in parts, through revisions and the rewriting of experience over time. The self-different subject constitutes itself in this form of writing as a kind of tracing of experience, a movement towards a unified self, that remains forever disrupted by the movement itself, in time and language.¹⁹ Melehy's notion of self-difference primarily expresses the alterity produced by language, in Derridian terms of a self-exceeding self and the impossibility of auto-affection and pure presence, which situates the Montaignian subject as already postmodern.

Early-modern melancholy, on the other hand, provides a notion of self-difference that maintains the internal integrity, and even wholeness, of experience and interiority, which I believe are more consistent with Montaigne's subjectivity. Within this context, the oscillations and tensions internal to the melancholic subject, explored in Chapter 1 through Burton's poem: "I'll not change life with any king," / "I'll change my state with any wretch," also shed light on Montaigne's fundamental notion of self-

¹⁶ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, II, 321.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁹ Melehy, *Writing Cogito*, 68.

difference where “each day brings about a new fantasy,” and there is as much internal otherness, “between us and ourselves,” as there is otherness between ourselves and others (“Et se trouve autant de difference de nous à nous mesmes, que de nous à autrui”²⁰).

Approaching early-modern melancholy oscillations to Montaigne’s self-difference, suggests that, while the subject might not be self-identical over time, the shifts are not simply produced by the alterity of language as an external force. And that, as I will show, Montaigne’s rhetoric and figurations display an agency and even mastery over these various and shifting adaptations. Melancholy, therefore, pervades the *Essais* not in its fragmented style and monstrous form reflective of an absence or a lack, but rather in the fragmented content and values, reflected in these contingent, and, often contradictory, feelings and needs that each different moment brings, unified through melancholy subjectivity, rather than lost in time.

I. A NEW *CONTEMPTUS MUNDI*, AND NEW VALUES

Montaigne’s *contemptus mundi* expressed through his harsh indictments of the fathers in *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*, his calls to value generosity and letting go, which he alone claimed to embody as friend and author, cease to apply in his essay, *De l’amitie*. Here, a new *contemptus mundi* will find new targets, presenting a new reversal of values, and a new ethics. In *De l’amitie*, this new *contemptus mundi* will be directed at all “common” and “ordinary” relationships, encompassing all relationships but his own, including father-son relationships, where the honesty and perfect communication advocated for in *De l’affection*, become misplaced and even

²⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, II, 321.

immoral.

In a similar shift, the rhetoric persuading us of letting go, will be replaced by the figure of a “monstrous friendship”: a monstrous attachment to the other that will dissolve and obviate these values of generosity and letting go altogether. Through this new figuration, taking becomes giving, theft becomes the most ethical, and an obligation to grieve the dead loved one is subsumed by the attachment and the indivisible monstrosity of the two.

Presented as an ode to his friend, *De l'amitie* immediately digresses into a defense of Montaigne's “half life” and “halfness” — “il me semble n'estre plus qu'à demy,”²¹ such that continuing to live would mean not only living in infinite grief, but also in infinite guilt. Quoting Terence, Montaigne writes: “Nor may I rightly taste of pleasure here alone, — so I resolved — when he who shared my life is gone.”²² Montaigne expresses this dilemma and guilt as the fear that he is “stealing his share” (“il me semble que je luy desrobe sa part”²³), since everything, including life, is shared down to each moment, experience, pleasure, projected into the future from which the other will continually be absent, and will continually be unable to claim and enjoy his share.

The monstrous union — what is his is mine — is therefore not just an expression of pure love and even attachment. It is also an attempt to respond to, and perhaps even prevent, the prompting of infinite and monstrous grief — infinite because, without the monstrous attachment, and with the (normative) division between

²¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII, 192.

²² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 143.

²³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII, 192.

two people, life and death would also go their separate ways:

et les plaisirs mesmes qui s'offrent à moy, au lieu de me consoler, me redoublent le regret de sa perte [...] il me semble que je luy desrobe sa part.²⁴

Far from a “work of mourning,” adjusting to the new “reality principle” of absence, mourning, which is again unnamed here, except as the “*regret de sa perte*” (again the “*chagrin* of losing him”), proves to deepen with time, to double itself (“me redoublent”), with each moment that is lived or enjoyed without the other, and with each moment that the other continues to not enjoy. Contrary to the notion of death and loss as an event outside of life, Montaigne provides us with yet another image of death as a fully internal experience, one that therefore can be structured internally (“*bastir la mort*”), even as it regards the death of the other.

The image of the “monstrous friendship” absorbs the “half life” into its fold, even beyond the “gouster” and “savoring” of the friend from the previous chapter, into an endless and definitively indivisible hybridity or mixture. Through this new liminal image, life belongs to both friends, indivisibly, and so do the pleasures, and any other experiences and goods. It is as if Montaigne wants to argue that even if he wanted to, he could not discern what belongs to him, and what belongs to his friend. And therefore, in light of this monstrosity, Montaigne is not “stealing his share,” or for that matter even living without his friend, since life, and even “personhood,” is transferable from the one to the other: “celuy qui n'est pas autre : c'est moy.”²⁵

Not letting go of his friend, “taking” from his friend by continuing to live in his absence, are now the means by which Montaigne survives even *more* honestly and

²⁴ Ibid., *ibid.*

²⁵ Ibid., 190.

more ethically than he would if he were living according to the values of letting go and generosity that he modeled in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*. He achieves this by constructing an alternative world, another “distorted” world of melancholy, in which taking from the friend, or enjoying what has belonged and will belong to the friend, is doing the utmost service to the friend.

As a surviving “half,” Montaigne must “steal” from his friend, in order to continue survive: “Nous estions à moitié de tout : il me semble que je luy *desrobe* sa part” (“In everything we were halves: I feel as though I am stealing his share from him”). At the same time, he has to justify, to lay claim to his life and all its “pleasures,” therefore asserting that he is in fact no other than his friend: “celuy qui n’est pas autre : c’est moy,” by which he generates “a mutual and reciprocal debt,” in Desan’s terms. Consequently, anything that belongs to the one, also belongs to the other, not only material goods, but also spiritual and mental ones (“volontez, pensemens, jugemens”), thereby supposedly solving the ethical dilemma of the remaining “half”:

Tout estant par effect commun entre eux, volontez, pensemens, jugemens, biens, femmes, enfans, honneur **et vie** [...] ils ne se peuvent ny prester, ny donner rien.²⁶

[Everything actually being in common between them — wills, thoughts, judgments, goods, wives, children, honor, **and life** [...] they can neither lend nor give anything to each other.]²⁷

Specifically in relation to the generosity/avarice, giving/theft, letting go/holding on — the dichotomies analyzed in Chapter 3, Montaigne in this essay argues that with a *true* friend, the concept of theft radically dissolves, as the two are in

²⁶ Ibid., 189 (my emphasis).

²⁷ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 141 (my emphasis).

fact one, and therefore what belongs to one belongs naturally to the other: “ile ne se peuvent ny prester ny doner rien.”

The very notion of giving/taking, if it exists between the friends, undermines the friendship, and renders it, in a derogatory sense in this essay, “common and familiar” (“amitez ordinaires et coustumières”²⁸). A friendship that abides by any notion of “economy” whatsoever renders it a non-friendship, compared with this perfect, true and rare form of union, next to which all other forms are less than shadows or “sorry excuses.”

Therefore, while this figure of a perfect friendship may be an expression of a literary *topos* of ideal and ineffable love, it is also a perfect expression of early-modern melancholy, carried by the figure of the monster: a position of unique superiority against which everything else is common, low and worldly, which resonates with the feelings of radical singularity demonstrated in the analysis of Burton’s poem: “all my joys to this are folly”, giving way to new “indictments,” and a new *contemptus mundi*.

In this perfect identity, union, and consubstantiality, no “exchange” is possible, no lending, and no borrowing: “ils ne se peuvent ny prester ny donner rien.” Keeping in mind that Montaigne wanted to “borrow” a centerpiece from the “talented” La Boétie, we can now take note that such a borrowing would have in fact been impossible, as it would have undermined Montaigne’s central argument regarding their union. Perhaps, then, the omission can be seen as a consistent replication of this monstrous indivisibility, rather than the “replication of absence,” as Regosin

²⁸ Ibid., 188-189.

suggested. This justification for the omission is further solidified by Montaigne's mention that La Boétie's treatise against tyranny was also referred to as *Le Contre Un* ("mais ceux qui l'ont ignoré, l'ont bien proprement depuis rebatisé, *Le Contre Un*"),²⁹ which emphasizes the importance and ambiguity of Montaigne's *oneness*: the *oneness* of the monster as a tribute, and yet an oblique tribute, to the original *oneness* of tyranny in La Boétie's treatise.

To fully seal his argument of the impossibility of "taking" from the friend, Montaigne pushes his examples and images to the limit and to their complete reversal, much like he did in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*. In *De l'amitié*, he demonstrates how when one friend ends up taking something from the other, it is the other — the giver — who is indebted to his friend: "Si, en l'amitié dequoy je parle, l'un *pouvoit* donner à l'autre, ce seroit celuy qui recevroit le bien-fait, qui obligeroit son compaignon."³⁰ ["If in the friendship of which I speak, the one *could* give to the other, it would be the one who received the benefaction who would lay an obligation."] (My translation).

The conditional is used here since it is merely hypothetical that it was possible to give to a friend, since in fact there is no start or end to the union between the two, and no possible distinction that would allow this economy. But given this hypothetical situation in which one friend gave something to the other, Montaigne effects a full reversal of the giving/taking dynamic. The giver, and not the receiver, would be indebted to the friend to whom he gave something, because the receiver is the one who allowed for the giver to achieve his most supreme desire — to give to his friend. In

²⁹ Ibid., 182.

³⁰ Ibid., 189.

this complete reversal, it is the receiver who turns into the giver, “*donnant ce contentement à son amy d’effectuer en son endroit ce qu’il désire le plus,*”³¹ giving his friend an opportunity to give. The receiver gives giving to the giver.

In Jacques Derrida’s account of death and friendship in *Donner la mort*, which strongly echoes *De l’amitié*, the ideal ethical act is the act of a *gratuitous* giving of one’s life for another. But ultimately, Derrida points to the impossibility of the gratuitous gift that defines an altruistic disinterested friendship, since those conditions of possibility would be *inhuman*: requiring complete anonymity, that there be no trace of any exchange or indebtedness, no interest or purpose, which are inevitable aspects of language and communication.³²

Against this account, and through these liminal imageries and scenes, Montaigne proves the impossible possible, especially since he has opted for the image of the monstrous, which allows him to surpass these *human* limitations of an exchange. By providing examples that exceed seemingly reasonable and common circumstances, notably, the monstrous, Montaigne is capable of “proving” the purity of his disinterested friendship and consequently resolving the dilemma of living without the friend, by taking from the dead friend, instead of attempting to give to him, as in Derrida’s account.

By confusing and reordering the giving/taking dynamic (here we can be reminded again of the “chaotic ordering” of the *Melancholia I* scene), Montaigne offers that his friend give what one would normally take: goods, pleasure, life, while taking

³¹ Ibid., *ibid.*

³² Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999).

is redefined as “giving giving” — allowing the friend to give, which is, according to Montaigne, the greatest gift one can give his friend, even at the friend’s own self-sacrifice and his giving up of his life and his share.

In another digression and anecdote, Montaigne gives the example of the philosopher Diogenes, who, instead of asking his friends for money when he needed some, *reclaimed* it from them, as if it were his money — it *is* his, Montaigne writes, with the same consubstantiality that defines his friendship: “Quand le Philosophe Diogenes avoit faute d’argent, il disoit, qu’il le redemandoit à ses amis, non qu’il le demandoit.” Again we see how these extreme examples, extreme behaviors, and what could seem like “folly,” are strategically reversed in order to generate the values and ethics that Montaigne needs, and which the particular “moment” requires.

Still using “folly” as a critical representation of the world, Montaigne poses himself with another preposterous question, in another melancholic digression that fully reverses the logic presented in *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*. In *De l’amitie*, he does not digress into a confession of the death of his children, as he did there, but instead claims that he would happily be willing to kill *his only surviving daughter*, if that were his friend’s request:

à qui s’enquerroit à moy de cette façon: “Si vostre volonté vous commandoit de tuer vostre fille, la tueriez vous?” et que je l’accordasse. [...] par ce que je ne suis point en doute de ma volonté, et tout aussi peu de celle d’un tel amy.³³

[if someone questioned me in this fashion: “if your will commanded you to kill your daughter, would you kill her?” and I said yes [...] because I have no doubt at all about my will, and just as little about that of such a friend.]³⁴

³³ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII, 188.

³⁴ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 140.

His ethical justification for this murderous act lies in the absolute union of his will with that of his friend's, such that it would be as if he, Montaigne, had asked himself to kill his own daughter, and one does not doubt their own will... another confession that we should find quite shocking, but that hides behind these images and *conceptual personae* that speak *for* Montaigne, producing a rhetorical distance that seems to absolve him of "getting caught." Or rather, which preserve his internal integrity and the impenetrability of the interior to the outside, to which the self as the monster will allude.

Further exploring the shifts and contradictions between the two essays, *De l'affections des peres aux enfans* in Chapter 3, and *De l'amitie* in the present chapter, the imperfections, or rather, foolish and extreme "faults" that were attributed to fathers in relation to their sons in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, are in *De l'amitie* depicted as natural and necessary, not at the fault of either party, but structural and cultural. In some places, Montaigne writes, it is customary for children and fathers to murder each other, in order to prevent the mutual threat or competition. In stark contrast to the horror he expressed of this kind of relationship in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, here he even suggests that their mutual destruction is only natural: "et naturellement l'un depend de la ruine de l'autre."³⁵ Under this light, in this essay, trial, tasting, experience, there is nothing to marvel at, ridicule or critique in the acts of parricide, competition and avarice on each side, it is *mere* custom, and understandably so, as fathers and sons are "natural" contenders.

Fathers and sons, like husband and wife, like master and servant, like brothers,

³⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII, 183.

and like all other friendships (“common and familiar,” not genuine and true), with the exception of “this one,” are bound and dictated by law and convention, by needs and economic exchanges: laws of marriage, civic laws, family law, as opposed to *freewill*.

The freewill that Montaigne granted to the fathers in *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*, which they alas failed to live up to in their folly and avarice, the freewill that was a necessary condition for them to “err” and commit these tragic follies, is no longer portrayed as a flaw of blindness, but rather as a structural and defining condition.

While in *De l’affection des peres aux enfans*, the smelly and frightening fathers were the examples against which Montaigne modeled *memento mori*, honesty and gratuitous generosity, these flawed father-son relationships now serve to avert and warn against a different and opposite phenomena: believing to have a true friendship and honest communication when one does not, and when such a friendship cannot exist, for lack of freewill which can only derive, paradoxically, from an *involuntary* and mystic mixture of wills and desires, as exemplified by his friendship.

More specifically, these inherently *dishonest* relationships, like those between fathers and children, now warn us against the tyrannical, forceful nature of civil society, which only a true friendship can transcend, and to which the only antidote is such a friendship.

L’amitié se nourrit de communication qui ne peut se trouver entre eux [entre enfans et peres], pour la trop grande disparité, et offenceroit à l’aventure les devoirs de nature. Car ny toutes les secrettes pensées des peres ne se peuvent communiquer aux enfans pour n’y engendrer une messeante private, ny les advertissemens et corrections, qui est un des premiers offices d’amitié, ne se pourroient exercer des enfans aux peres.³⁶

³⁶ Ibid.

[Friendship feeds on communication, which cannot exist between them [fathers and sons] because of their too great inequality, and might perhaps interfere with the duties of nature. For neither can all the secret thoughts of fathers be communicated to children, lest this beget an unbecoming intimacy, nor could the admonitions and corrections, which are one of the chief duties of friendship, be administered by children to fathers.]³⁷

This same full, and honest communication, this deep familiarity and friendship that Montaigne deplores with Monluc in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, whose most significant heartbreak according to Montaigne was not having been able to fully communicate with him and declare the deep *friendship* he felt for him, is in *De l'amitie* only reserved for the rare friendships from which family relations are excluded, and even constitute a violation of nature (“offenseraient a l’aventure les devoirs de nature”³⁸).

In *De l'amitie*, Montaigne even argues, that such a communication between fathers and sons would involve an *inappropriate intimacy*, a familiarity that unsuitable for this kind of relationship: “pour n’y engendrer une messeante privaute” (“not to create an inappropriate intimacy”). That is, the very value that was lost to the fathers in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, and that deemed their lives wasteful and shameful in Montaigne’s eyes, is now deemed impossible and even inappropriate to begin with.

II. THE MONSTER AND MELANCHOLY

While the subject of Burton’s poem expresses rapid and inexplicable oscillations, it also expresses an attachment and commitment on the part of the subject

³⁷ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, I, 28, 136.

³⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII, 183.

to each and every changing subjective position, as a unique and rare experience that cannot be shared or understood by anyone else.

The repeating contrasting positions: “I’ll not change life with any king,” / “I’ll change my state with any wretch,” have shown to express not only an extreme shift, but also a “unique” feeling of being “higher” and “lower” than everyone else — the feeling of an incomparable feeling. This “unique” position, even as it is expressed in suffering, as the *absolute* worst, or lowest (“I’ll change my state with any wretch”), is another figure of early-modern ambiguity and internal movements held in one.

Similarly, and even more hyperbolically, the “monstrous friendship” of *De l’amitie*, expresses a oneness, an indivisibility so perfect, and so unique, that it precludes any outside access, any understanding, and any comparison to any other relations experienced by anyone else. It is, or feels like, the “rarest thing in the world,” “la chose la plus une et unie, et dequoy une seule est encore la plus rare à trouver au monde,”³⁹ of which nothing similar can even be read about: “si entiere et si parfaite que certainement il ne s’en lit guiere de pareilles,”⁴⁰ and of which not even a trace of such a perfection can be found in society, “et entre nos hommes il ne s’en voit aucune trace en usage.”⁴¹

The relationship between this construction of a truly monstrous and rare attachment and Montaigne’s melancholic position is further reinforced in its stark opposition to Montaigne’s general theory of the monstrous as a rarity and otherness to be familiarized with and admonished.

³⁹ Ibid., 190.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 182.

⁴¹ Ibid., 182.

Early-modern humanism maintained both later medieval views of the monsters as wonders and miracles of Nature that do not fit into systems of knowledge, and as portents for divinations or allegorical interpretations, along with more scientific approaches which classified the monstrous within these systems, thereby neutralizing their rarity.⁴²

Most critics tend to see Montaigne's monstrous in line with this second approach. As Regosin notes:

Montaigne's commentaries have the effect of neutralizing the monstrous, of removing the stigma of aberrance, and of eliminating its conventional referential value as a meaningful sign that points beyond itself (as prophecy, prediction, omen).⁴³

But, as Long points out, Montaigne in a sense mocks both approaches: the monster as marvel, and the systematizing and medical neutralizing of the monstrous. Both approaches ascribe a certain level of pathology and abnormality to the monstrous, whereas Montaigne sees the monstrous as the "simple fact" of diversity found everywhere. Instead, Montaigne employs the term monstrous critically, as one that points to the human presumption to know all things, and master the world, and therefore, for Montaigne, the term becomes a sign of human limitation, of the "deformity" of human knowledge itself.⁴⁴

Similarly, Daston and Park describe the pre-scientific endeavors of preternatural philosophy at the ordering the natural world, into the very edges of its

⁴² Kathleen Long, "Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. Philippe Desan, 715-731 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 720.

⁴³ Regosin, *Montaigne's Unruly Brood: Textual Engendering and the Challenge to Paternal Authority*, 164.

⁴⁴ The "deforming aspect of human cognition" is central to the chapter: Long, "Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity."

marvels and occult forces,⁴⁵ as a challenge at the heart of human presumption itself, such that wonders became:

a gauntlet thrown down to the man who could explain not only particulars, but extraordinary particular, thus proving himself a wonder in his own wright. In this way, wonder became a reflection of virtuosity and connoisseurship [...]⁴⁶

Montaigne, of course, is at odds with this excitement into the occult, and views it as an “impudent desire to know inessentials and secrets.”⁴⁷

These views are consistent with Montaigne’s essay *D’un enfan monstrueux*, where the case of the “monstrous child” is both an opportunity to familiarize oneself with what appears as monstrous — to observe its body and difference, and as a result, to dispel its rarity and otherness. It is also an opportunity for Montaigne, to point once more to the human presumption to know “all forms,” which, according to this essay, is responsible for producing the monstrous sight.

In this essay, monstrosity is placed in the context of a *novelty* presented to the limited scope of human knowledge and experience, as it is for someone who upon seeing a “river” for the first time, would mistake it for an “ocean”: “Celuy qui n’avoit jamais veu de riviere, à la premiere qu’il rencontra, il pensa que ce fust l’Ocean”⁴⁸ [“He who has never before seen a river, will, upon the first one he will meet, think it was the Ocean”].

This error resulting from the human limitation of knowledge and experience is a reflection of the human limitation in regards to the entirety of forms, and the entirety

⁴⁵ Lorraine J. Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 160.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁴⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVI.

of Nature, to which human sight will always be blind or impaired. Being unaware, i.e., being blind to this limitation, however, produces feelings of wonder and astonishment (“cette figure qui nous estonne”), and thus an *illusion* of the monster:

Et est à croire, que cette figure qui nous estonne, se rapporte et tient, à quelque autre figure de mesme genre, incognu à l’homme⁴⁹

If we postpone judgment, Montaigne may be implying, and learn to adjust our sight to the novel and different that at first astonish us, we would become as accustomed to the monster as to anything else, and its novelty would fade away, along with its astonishing otherness, which is nothing less than a human error:

Nous appellons contre nature, ce qui advient contre la coustume. Rien n’est que selon elle, quel qu’il soit. Que cette raison universelle et naturelle, chasse de nous l’erreur et l’estonnement que la nouvelleté nous apporte.⁵⁰

[We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be. Let this universal and natural reason drive out of us the error and astonishment that novelty brings us.]⁵¹

Self-awareness towards the ways in which custom and culture familiarize us with certain things versus others, which has far reaching ethical and political implications. Montaigne expresses concern with the prejudice and *othering* involved in judgments of the monstrous, which lead to forms of tyranny, colonization and killing. This is Montaigne’s argument in *C’est folie de rapporter le vrai et le faux à notre suffisance*, as its title suggests. Judging the other, non-European as “savage,” prosecuting witches due to a presumption to know the “possible” from the “impossible,” is a greater folly than the practices of witchcraft or magic themselves.

This understanding of human limitation is applied to Montaigne’s approach

⁴⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, XXX, 690.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 691.

⁵¹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 30, 539.

regarding a “monstrous child” he witnesses and reports on in *D’un enfant monstrueux*, who having another child attached to him [conjoined twins], was being put on display by his parents in hopes of “making a penny off his strangeness” (“pour tirer quelque soul de le monstrer, à cause de son estrangeté”⁵²).

A matter-of-fact, straightforward, depiction of the child he observes (“Ce comte s’en ira tout simple”), noting that the two are attached only in one limited area, which is easily observable (“La jointure et l’espace par où ils se tenoient n’estoit que de quatre doigts”), and that despite being conjoined, both infants are intact, looking almost as if “one smaller infant was trying to hold onto a larger one,” and finally, as Montaigne is sure to report to us — each infant has an independent and functioning urination system, “La nourrice nous adjoustoit, qu’il urinoit par tous les deux endroits.” A matter-of-fact observation of the monstrous, without any allegorizing interpretation, or any interpretation at all for that matter, constitutes Montaigne’s “departure from the dominant mode of presenting the monstrous”.⁵³

The notion of Montaigne’s “monster” as a critical term and as a critique, specifically of human presumption and the fundamental limitation or “blindness” it expresses, is therefore not unlike folly, and not unlike melancholy, as they have been discussed in Chapter 3, through the folly of the fathers in their blindness and presumption to reign, and through Monluc’s blindness to the force of death while living in ignorance and dishonestly. Like the concept of the monstrous, folly also relates primarily to human presumption, to false or misperceived pursuits, which entail

⁵² Montaigne, *Essais*, II, XXX.

⁵³ Long, “Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity,” 715.

similar dangers of self-sabotaging and violence, as we have seen through Pascal's "diversion." In response, through its literary representations, like folly it calls for a reflective, critical gaze at oneself, much like finding oneself in the fool's head, finding one's own kind and label of folly as in the *Ship of Fools* — finding the flaws and weaknesses from *within* oneself, as Foucault notes.

Thus, as was the case with folly, the monstrous variations will be found and *represented* in accordance with Montaigne's own subjective ("distorted") views and needs, taking advantage of the "endlessly varied" application of the term itself, in "a defiance of order and understanding as the notion it aims to represent."⁵⁴

III. THREE KINDS OF MONSTERS:

DE L'AMITIE, D'UN ENFAN MONSTRUEUX, MONTAIGNE

In contrast to the "monstrous child" of *D'un enfant monstrueux*, presented as an opportunity to observe a physical otherness that the act of witnessing and storytelling would normalize, my reading of the "monstrous friendship" in *De l'amitie*, problematizes the conventional readings of the monstrous in Montaigne as normal and natural, as he coopts and preserves the more traditional characteristics of the monstrous for himself: rarity, exceptionality, singularity ("one of a kind"), hybridity, even portraying it as a miracle. Montaigne's monstrous friendship lies, in fact, outside our systems of knowledge, resulting in a kind of mega-monster. This distinction, between the monsters to be normalized, and those to be preserved, reveals

⁵⁴ Ibid., 722.

Montaigne's double standard, or rather radical shift, when the ethical questions or critique may be directed at him.

The image of the monstrous friendship parallels in many ways that of the monstrous child from *De l'enfan monstrueux*: the image of conjoined twins, tightened by a "seam," which joins the two together — "la cousture qui les a jointes" (*De l'amitie*) / "La jointure" ... "par où ils se tenoient" (*D'un enfan monstrueux*).

The first term (*cousture*) suggests a more intentional, violent attachment, which could also mean "suture," — a suture in the place of a preexisting wound? But also a more monstrous term suggesting hybridity, the attachment of two foreign entities, compared to the latter (*jointure*) which suggests a more straightforward, physical attachment. In *De l'enfan monstrueux*, the two *bodies* are joined together, in *De l'amitie* — it is the two souls that are bound by this stich/seam:

En l'amitié dequoy je parle, elles [les ames] se meslent et confondent l'une en l'autre, d'un meslange si universel, qu'elles effacent, et ne retrouvent plus la cousture qui les a jointes.⁵⁵

[In the friendship I speak of, our souls mingle and blend with each other so completely that they effect the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again.]⁵⁶

The adjoining seam, the monstrous bind, gets lost in a mixture so complete ["meslange si universel"], that no trace of their attachment, of their hybridity can be found or rendered visible to the outside: "qu'elles effacent, et ne retrouvent plus la cousture qui les a jointes," preventing *a priori* any individuation and preventing Montaigne from facing not only the "reality principle" of the lost object, but more importantly, allowing him to maintain his (monstrous) singularity against the banality,

⁵⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII, 183.

⁵⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 139.

boredom, and painfully compromising nature of the outside.

Unlike the phantasmatic preservation or devouring, the “narcissistic cannibalism” of melancholy, and its denial of loss in Freudian terms, Montaigne denies that there was any divide to be had in the first place — it is all plenitude without the markings and delineations of a “je.” The self-differentiated subject described by Melehy, whereby monstrosity is a reflection of this self-difference over time, is in fact an undifferentiated subject mixed in, and folded with, external forces and others, mixed in with experience — forming a “perfect” mixture in the sense that no “parts” will have survived.

While the monstrous child was shown, after a non-prejudiced scrutiny, to in fact be *two* independent children, with the exception of some physical points of attachment, Montaigne’s absolute lack of individuation in the monstrous friendship precludes even an individuation of experience, including grief.

In addition to the absolving of grief and guilt, Montaigne’s “monster” provides him a “shield” from within which he can refuse to partake in anything that is less than perfect. That is, anything lesser than what is fully himself. The absolute giving to the other, the absolute mixture with no outside, prevents, so he claims, any other forms of generosity and giving, any other partaking or sharing: “chacun se donne si entier à son amy, qu’il ne luy reste rien à departir ailleurs.”

Compared with this stitch/seam that is confounded within the perfect monstrous mixture, other “connections,” other “ties” and “knots” are weak and loose, and therefore incomplete and undesirable to Montaigne:

Au demeurant, ce que nous appellons ordinairement amis et amitez, ce ne sont qu'accointances et familiaritez *nouées par quelque occasion* ou commodité, par le moyen de laquelle nos ames s'entretiennent.⁵⁷

[For the rest, what we ordinarily call friends and friendships are nothing but acquaintanceships and familiarities *formed by some chance* or convenience, by means of which our souls are bound to each other.]⁵⁸

The notion of the “cousture” is, within “ordinary” friendships, represented with the word *nouer*, “nouees par quelque occasion,” a liaison, a tie, implying a more external connection, one that is visible, easy to find and therefore perhaps one that can easily be undone. *Nouer* also suggests a weaker attachment, as well as a sense of artificiality and interestedness, in the sense of an alliance (as in the expression “noüer amitié,” meaning, “to make alliance”), with which Montaigne is trying to portray all “commonplace” and ordinary relationships (i.e., all relationships but this one) — all others are tied by a particular circumstance or benefit: “par quelque occasion ou commodité,” and not by the supreme, voluntary and absolute mixture of the souls.

While the seams of the monstrous child can be observed, even accurately measured at a “four finger breadth” [“l'espace par où ils se tenoient n'estoit que de quatre doigts”], and while the different parts and members of their attachments can be distinguished and looked at, i.e., familiarized with, this current mixture of souls is opaque to the human eye and cognition, which as Montaigne has suggested, do not have insight into all forms and all of Nature.

In contrast to the physical and visible body parts of the “monstrous child,” the parts that form the friendship are themselves singular and monstrous and cannot be

⁵⁷ Ibid., 186 (my emphasis).

⁵⁸ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 139 (my emphasis). The translation to “formed” loses all the connotations of monstrosities, mixtures, and ties I am alluding to, so a better option would be “tied by some chance.”

explained except in reference to themselves, the “membres” being *him* (luy) and *me* (moy) — “Par ce que c’estoit luy, par ce que c’estoit moy.”

Si on me presse de dire⁵⁹ pourquoy je l’aymoys, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer, qu’en respondant : Par ce que c’estoit luy, par ce que c’estoit moy.⁶⁰

[If a man should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I find it could no otherwise be expressed, than by making answer: because it was he, because it was I.]⁶¹

In this line, “Par ce que c’estoit luy, par ce que c’estoit moy,” famous for the expression of an indescribable love, an inexplicable *je ne sais quoi* that binds them together, I also read a sense of deterrence and avoidance of the outside. This evasion or closure to the outside is conveyed through the rare and singular position of the monstrous that leaves no room for any others, nor for interpretation and intervention upon the singular experience, which resonates with the melancholic position of a removal and self-distinction from anything or anyone else.

While the “monstrous child” was in fact not such a miraculous sight, as one could become accustomed to it and understand it after observation and familiarization, adjusting to the “optical illusion” of the monstrous novelty, the monstrous unity of which Montaigne speaks in *De l’amitie* cannot grow familiar and normal, especially not to others — *outsiders*: the readers, the public.

So opaque and distant it is from view and from understanding (of those *ordinary* people in *ordinary* relationships), that Montaigne must emphasize this once more, by adding that not only can the traces of the seam not be found, but also no trace of such a perfect friendship can be found in society in its entirety, nor even in the

⁵⁹ Note also the “anti-social” language, the resistance to interference and communication with the outside: “If I were ‘pressured’ or ‘pushed’ to say...”

⁶⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII.

⁶¹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 139.

writings of the ancients:

si entiere et si parfaicte [cette amitié], que certainement il ne s'en lit guere de pareilles : et entre nos hommes il ne s'en voit aucune trace en usage. Il faut tant de rencontre à la bastir, que c'est beaucoup si la fortune y arrive une fois en trois siecles.⁶²

[a friendship so perfect and so entire that certainly you will hardly read of the like, and among men of today you see no trace of it in practice. So many coincidences are needed to build up such a friendship that it is a lot if fortune can do it once in three centuries.]⁶³

So exceptional is Montaigne's experience, that anything in comparison is weak and dreary ("lasches"), so much that he believes a friendship like his must only come by, to the entire human race... only once every three decades!

Due to the lack of melancholic affect and expression of suffering and woe-ing ("No pain is like thy pain / no pleasure too like thine"⁶⁴), we are not likely to associate Montaigne with a melancholy experience. And yet, his arguments and reasoning express this very position.

In *De l'amitie*, Montaigne, through his melancholic gaze, depicts another negative and sterile world: a world with no friends. "O mes amys, il n'y a nul amy," quoting Aristotle. Again, as the melancholic spectator, he depicts a world with only artificial pursuits, and impure, interested relations. Like his position in *De l'affection des peres aux enfans*, and contrary to his seemingly "diverse" essaying, and diverse opinions, he positions himself as the only (true) friend here, and the only (true) father there.

His monster theory and melancholy converge as the absolute rarity and opacity

⁶² Montaigne, *Essais*, I, XXVIII.

⁶³ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, I, 28, 136.

⁶⁴ Norris, "Ode to Melancholy."

of the monstrous friendship and experience (“la plus rare à trouver au monde”) serve a melancholic agenda — to at once be able to continue living in face of the death of the “other half,” via a monstrous attachment, and at the same time preserving his singularity against the demands of the outside, conceived as the “impure” and unwanted “mixture” upon the singular individual.

The fact that Montaigne’s greatest monstrosity is himself, as he claims, is typically understood as an extreme version of this human limitation to mastery and knowledge, a form of skepticism, applied to the self.

Je n’ai vu monstre et miracle au monde, plus exprès, que moi-même. On s’appriivoise à toute étrangeté par l’usage et le temps. Mais plus je me hante et me connais, plus ma difformité m’étonne : moins je m’entends en moi.⁶⁵

[I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself. We become habituated to anything strange by use and time; but the more I frequent myself and know myself, the more my deformity astonishes me, and the less I understand myself.]⁶⁶

Melehy, for example, explains the monstrous self as an extension of the self-difference of the writing subject over time: “The more Montaigne’s ‘I’ writes, reads its own writing, rewrites it, moves toward the plenitude of the expression of the self in the book, the more foreign it becomes to itself.”⁶⁷ But, in addition to the monstrous as an expression of difference and human limitation, or the fragmented subject, we also read that the other, “original” monster, the one who is exceptionally rare, miraculous and unique, is also still alive and well.

The self as the “greatest monster and miracle” should also be seen in direct opposition to the familiarizing and normalizing of the *other* as monster, and of the

⁶⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, XI.

⁶⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, III, 11, 787.

⁶⁷ Melehy, *Writing Cogito*, 68.

physical or bodily otherness as monster. By presenting Montaigne's "double standard" regarding the monstrous, it appears that Montaigne also argues for the presence of a true, rare, miraculous monster, even, and especially as he reverses the "things" to which the term applies.

The differing views about what counts as monstrous are part of what comprise the contrasts, the radical shifts and oscillations in subjective views and perspectives, representing significant reflections of subject. A subject, who, is not so much postmodern, subject to language and alterity, as much as early-modern — subject to *internal* and humoral fluctuations, the expressions of which we find in these varying literary figurations and representations of imagery, conceptual personae, and finally, monsters.

In this regards, it is important to note that the above passage, Montaigne's famous confession of his own monstrosity, engages *directly* with his other views, as expressed in *D'un enfant monstrueux*, and *C'est folie de rapporter le vrai et le faux a notre suffisance*. The first line, "On s'appriivoise à toute étrangeté par l'usage et le temps," is an exact articulation of his general approach to the monstrous. That it is a result of novelty, that it can be overcome through custom and familiarization, corresponding with the observation he made through the monstrous child, writing that "Nous appellons contre nature, ce qui advient contre la coutume," and accordingly, that understanding this can admonish the astonishing effect of novelty: "Que cette raison universelle et naturelle, chasse de nous l'erreur et l'estonnement que la nouveleté nous apporte." Yet the continuation to this phrase represents the polar opposite view as it applies to himself: that the more he tries to shake off his own

novelty, and the more he gets to know himself (“plus je me hante et me connais”), the greater the deformity appears, and greater its effects of astonishment, “plus ma difformité m’étonne.”

Montaigne, the author and also “subject matter” of his own book, and moreover, the book’s sole and unique topic, and the only thing of which he knows and claims to speak of, despite the supposed range of diverse topics, now reserves the right to coopt the monstrous all for himself and anything that concerns him. Notably, his book, his friendship, and of course, himself — all deemed to be “one of a kind,” while asking others — the readers, the public — to reflect on how our relativism and blindness produces the monster, in light of our limitation in regards to the totality of forms and Nature.

This “double standard,” therefore, is consistent from the perspective of a life and a project wholly devoted to the self, and whose objective is not to presume to know or speak of anything outside the self. What’s more, Montaigne’s project even asks to set a model for this “double standard” — investigating and speaking of oneself, and not of others — which as a result becomes the greatest form of honesty against the norms by which people always presume to judge and speak of others: “Si le monde se plaint dequoy je parle trop de moy, je me plains dequoy il ne pense seulement pas à soy,”⁶⁸ (“If the world complains that I speak too much of myself, I complain that it does not even think of itself”⁶⁹).

The project of speaking uniquely, and only about the self, that is the *Essais*, has something to do with this “double standard.” If Montaigne speaks only of himself,

⁶⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, II.

⁶⁹ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, III, 2, 611.

it is also because he does not presume to speak of anything or anyone else. Seen in this way, his unique autobiographical project is a project of “no presumption,” more than it is a project of establishing selfhood. To reread the passage again in this new light:

Je n'ai vu monstre et miracle au monde, plus exprès, que moi-même. On s'apprivoise à toute étrangeté par l'usage et le temps. Mais plus je me hante et me connais, plus ma difformité m'étonne : moins je m'entends en moi⁷⁰

Montaigne is not just saying that he is the greatest and most manifest miracle.

He is also saying that he is the greatest and most *manifest* miracle that he has ever seen: “Je n'ai vu monstre et miracle au monde, plus *exprès*, que moi-même.” Meaning, inversely, that he has *not* seen anything else as manifestly, as *clearly* monstrous, in anyone or anything else... and *his* deformity, is only astonishing to *him*, “plus *ma* difformité *m'étonne*.” Therefore, when it comes to all other ‘monsters,’ he remains unpresumptuous and also un-inquisitive in the same way. He does not ‘haunt them’ obsessively as he does himself (“plus je me hante et me connais”), making room for them to vanish over time and become familiar, which still remains consistent with his ethics of otherness. And, as Montaigne would suggest, everyone should concern themselves only with themselves to this extent (the process of “hanter” and “connaître”), where they would become their greatest monsters, and the only monsters they should presume to see.

IV. THE MONSTER AS AN ANTI-SOCIAL SHIELD

But the “double standard” of the monstrous is not just an ethical and moral

⁷⁰ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, XI.

position. It is also a figure for anti-social values and a shield against the judgment of others, which is, I believe one of Montaigne's deepest concerns, not just morally, but from a personal fear of being judged. If Montaigne finds the judgment of others, the judgment of the 'monstrous' to be presumptuous, foolish and even immoral, it is also because he wants to make the argument that one cannot rightfully or accurately judge him or his work.

The 'genuine,' or traditional monster that Montaigne claims as his '*propre*,' also conceals anti-social values, or melancholic values as suggested earlier, in the form of a feeling of an utter differentiation from 'the crowd,' the position of the genius, and the subject of Burton's poem.

The early-modern melancholic position, as a position of radical subjectivity and uniqueness, allows Montaigne to evade 'common' judgment, which he is anyways highly wary of specifically due to this human presumption, which demonizes anything "different," and would also likely include himself. On this note, the concerns of being or feeling judged are inherent to the *Essais*, and are echoed in many of Montaigne's warnings, and self-deprecations concerning his work as "vain," "frivolous," "without aim" and "deformed," and likely not worth his reader's time, and finally, in his distrust in the reader's (mis)interpretations: "C'est l'indiligent lecteur, qui perd mon subject; non pas moy"⁷¹ ["'Tis the indiligent reader who loses my subject, and not I"].

De l'amitie "digresses" from a "pure" relationship of the friendship to discussing "impure" commonplace relationships like family, work, marriage, and so on, and from there it digresses to the broader notion of "judgment." Arguing

⁷¹ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, IV.

specifically, that these “common,” practical and *interested* relationships cannot or should not be based in the “judgment” of the other party, but only in the “end” or “purpose” around which the impure relationship revolves. In short, the cook should only be judged by his food.

Since the relationship is “impure,” involving an exchange of sorts, then by definition, so Montaigne argues, there can be no grounds on which to judge the other on matters outside of that exchange, i.e., as a person, as a *whole*. Rather, only within the monster (whether the monstrous friendship or self), can one be seen and judged as “whole.” Except that the absolute mixture obscures and precludes any access to such judgment, except from within.

In these other, lesser relationships, which are the face of all relationships as Montaigne argues — each person can only be judged based on the specific quality that is by definition involved in the exchange: the cook may only be judged based on his cooking, not his religion, his sexual practices, not even his ignorance, whether he is a gambler, and so on (more ignoring of folly?). “I’ve done it this way, do it however it suits you,” quoting Terence, Montaigne ensures that his *essaying*, his actions, his friendship, his grief or pleasures, will be free of external judgment, since he has already sufficiently proven that no one else has access to this “one of a kind” and “indivisible” union.

This digression to the topic of “judgment” is again telling of Montaigne’s own melancholic vulnerability and sense of uniqueness often concealed behind his philosophy and more explicit morals. On the one hand, premature and prejudiced judgment is dangerous, and responsible in Montaigne’s eyes for the religious wars and

massacres during his time, and even early-colonialism as the indigenous people were seen and treated by the Europeans as “savages.” At the same time, his persistent digressions to this topic of “judgment” when only very tangentially related, expose his personal fears and concerns. Not only fears of being judged, but also of being compared to anyone or anything, and even fears of being *involved* in anything outside of himself. Thus, Montaigne’s subjective fears — of judgment — play into his political tolerance, and philosophical values as this critique of human presumption through the monstrous.

The new monstrous figure, like the unique melancholic position, also allows Montaigne to avoid *mixing* and mingling with common obligations, duties, and other relationships. Instead of positioning Montaigne as a Stoic who desires solitude out of a desire to achieve *ataraxia* (tranquility and ease), and as a means to practice self-mastery and self-care, this reading reveals his “exile” or “retirement” from public life also as a form of *contemptus mundi*: his distaste for the “art” of social life and manipulation, the plagues of dishonesty, ambition, and greed as he defines them.

Montaigne’s seeming philosophical affiliation with the Stoic practice of “self-possession,” which in the classical sense also went hand in hand with civic life and duty, and political ambitions, seems to serve more as a guise for his *personal* desire to remain “unmixed” and untainted by these social “games.” This was also evidenced through his confessions in *De la solitude* and *De l’oisivete*, which I hinted at in Chapter 2 in relation to Montaigne’s true agenda behind his “busy mind,” as a way to keep busy (writing) without being bothered.

His personal letters reveal more explicitly some of his less mediated disdain

for social affairs and obligations, where he confesses, after inheriting his family estate and domestic responsibilities with the death of his father, that he “would rather do anything than read through a contract”... and that he would prefer to descend into poverty in exchange for being freed from the “relentless encroachment of business affairs.”⁷² In other words, Montaigne *preferred* the management of the self to the management of the house or of government — roles he was often thrust into against his will.⁷³

Here, in *De l'amitie*, Montaigne writes that the “tie” to the one true friend, undoes, “unties” [descoust] all other ties: “L'unique et principale amitié descoust toutes autres obligations,” expressing an ethical priority perhaps, but also certainly a *preference* for the true and the “propre” of selfhood over social life with all its masquerading and vigilant calculations, and perhaps also an opportunity/excuse to evade it — through this monstrosity, and finally perhaps through the act of writing itself as a monstrous “shield,” rather than a compensatory device.

In this respect, against the usual interpretations of writing as a means to cope with loss, or writing as a result of the idle mind or a melancholy humor, I would argue that writing serves as a kind of *private* labor that postpones social judgment and social engagement, especially in the endless form with which Montaigne approaches it, claiming that he will writing “as long as there is ink and paper in the world,” (*De la*

⁷² Montaigne quoted in Stefan Zweig, *Montaigne*, trans. Will Stone (London: Pushkin Collection, 2015), 81-82.

⁷³ This subjective preference and melancholic state would suggest an alternative to reading Montaigne as an exemplary figure for Foucault's “care of the self,” and subjective yet *political* resistance to governmentality as Schachter describes it, since the driving factor would be even more subjective and private and less intentionally political in this sense, Schachter, “Qu'est-ce que la critique: La Boétie, Montaigne, Foucault.”

vanite), a kind of tactic reminiscent of Penelope's infinite weaving/unweaving, which she deploys in order to postpone the "reality principle" of responding to her suitors.⁷⁴

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, it is also important to remember that the essay itself was originally written in order to publish La Boétie's treatise, *La Servitude Volontaire*, and that at the very end of the essay Montaigne confesses that he went back on his decision to publish this treatise. Contrary to the justifications provided by critics, my justification follows the argument of the monstrous as a defiance of, and disbelief in the outside, expressed as a fear of "impurity" and "mixture" with it, i.e., the *wrong* kind of mixture that would contaminate the perfect union and perfect self. *De l'amitie* conveys a clear fear of contamination, and to use again the monstrous term that frequently appears in the essay — a fear of mixture (*meslange*) — with other relationships and other experiences that are not of "the one" he enjoyed with the "only friend," La Boétie.

In addition, Montaigne mentions that the omission is due to the fact that he found the treatise was being used with "evil intent" by those who brought it forth, who he blames for "*mixing* his work up with some of their own concoctions," other thoughts, other intentions ("qu'ils ont meslé à d'autres escrits de leur farine"), and therefore wanting to protect the "purity" of the work, essentially, from being contaminated by public opinion. The figure of the monstrous friendship therefore becomes a metaphor for intentional omissions, evasions, and obliqueness, yet one that is not "political" as Cornell-Reynolds and Desan suggest, but personal and self-

⁷⁴ See Bertolín, R. (2008) "The Mast and the Loom: Signifiers of Separation and Authority." *Phoenix*, 62, (1/2): 92-108, for a discussion on Penelope's tactic of exploiting private, feminine, labor, within the public and political sphere.

defensive — protective of the interiority of experience, and its uniqueness.

A CONCLUSION TO MONTAIGNE: ESSAYING AND MELANCHOLY

Finally, I would like to consider the very significant term of the *essay* itself in relation to the monsters and singularity discussed here in this chapter, which I portrayed as melancholic strategies, or at least paralleling the melancholic position in important ways. In almost every Montaigne study the *form* of the essay is noted in relation to Montaigne's diverse, vagrant, or rather formless and monstrous writing style.

Outside of Montaigne's many descriptions of his own *Essais* as a monstrous writing and project, we find this very interesting and, as I will argue, melancholic explanation of the essay form:

Si mon ame pouvait prendre pied, je ne m'essaierais pas, je me resouldrois,⁷⁵

[If my soul could take footing, I would not essay, but resolve.]⁷⁶

Here, the essay is not framed in terms of the *human* instability and wandering *nature* of the "esprit vagabond," the "idle mind" or "imagination," but in terms of the negative outcome of a personal inability to rest and find peace. This failure is very different from the failure of "idleness" in *De l'oisivete*, a natural failure of tranquility caused by the "idle mind," which surprisingly started to work ten times harder the second it had nothing to be employed with. In *De l'oisivete*, the essay and writing are the natural results of the natural workings of the mind. Here, the essay is framed as an almost explicit failure, one that is personally felt — of an inability to find a "footing," to find the rest yearned for: "je ne m'essaierais pas," "I would not have essayed," "je

⁷⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, VIII.

⁷⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, III, 13.

me resouldrois,” “I would have resolved” which could also mean, “I would have been cured,” as in “solved,” the kind of cure that comes from being “decided” and “resolute” perhaps.⁷⁷

One must ask, therefore, if this experience of one’s soul not even having the *capacity* to rest and settle, this image of being able to slip or fall off... this experience of swaying like the “wind,” is indeed a pleasant or comfortable one, as Montaigne often makes it seem. And furthermore, if being or feeling oneself entirely different from one moment to the next, is not also painful in the melancholic sense conveyed in Burton’s poem, rather than just a natural diversity and self-difference where “chaque piece, chaque moment, fait son jeu.”

Montaigne often treats this “volubilité et discordance”⁷⁸ as a merely natural and universal human trait, despite the fact that he everywhere observes and angers at the very opposite behavior: opiniâtreté, presumption, and dogmatism, suggesting that these contrarities and swayings may not be as natural and commonplace, and are more reflective of his own nature, which he aspires others could adopt too — another social critique that stems from his melancholic otherness.

In *De l’expérience* and *De l’inconstance de nos actions*, Montaigne will go so far as to compare himself, and this variability, with the wind: with being swayed in whichever direction the wind blows:

Non seulement le vent des accidens me remue selon son inclination : mais en outre, je me remue et trouble moy mesme par l’instabilité de ma posture⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Etymologically, *resouldre* could also mean the exact opposite, “dissolved” or essentially annihilated, which of course would reverse the dynamic and suggest that essaying in fact saved Montaigne from disintegrating.

⁷⁸ Montaigne, *Essais*, II, I.

⁷⁹ Montaigne, *Essais*, II.I.

[Not only does the wind of accident move me at will, but, besides, I am moved and disturbed as a result merely of my own unstable posture]⁸⁰

This imagery, conveying instability and fragility, the “instability of posture,” vital to the essay project, despite the portrayal of variability and essaying as empowering and certainly truthful and honest,⁸¹ makes me think nonetheless of the motif of brittleness and fragility of melancholy, evoking some of the common fears and phobias of breaking, cracking, shattering mentioned in the *Anatomy*.

The “glass delusion” or phobia associated with melancholy made famous by the French king, Charles VI, who refused to allow people to touch him, and wore reinforced clothing to protect himself,⁸² is one of many such fears pertaining to brittleness and fragility and fear of the penetration of the outside: fear of ceilings and sky collapsing, fear of being made of glass or cork, which are but a few of such phenomena listed in the *Anatomy*.

Montaigne of course might not be blown *accidentally* by the wind, hither and thither as he suggests, from moment to moment, but certainly might be *adapting* to melancholic or subjective vicissitudes and fears associated with inconstancy and fragility.

Montaigne’s final line of defense, as I will display it here, is his aptitude at structured and *meaningful* (literary) variability, the generation of conceptual personae and figures through which an alternative view and mindset would mitigate the painful

⁸⁰ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, I, 242.

⁸¹ As mentioned in chapter 2, psychoanalytic readings of the essay present the essay form to “match” the ruptured self, in the preclusion of a totality, and other readings highlight it as the “natural” form and operation of the imagination and the mind, to digress and wander in this way (see for example Bernard Sève in *Montaigne: des règles pour l’esprit*).

⁸² Gill Speak, “An Odd Kind of Melancholy: Reflections on the Glass Delusion in Europe (1440–1680),” *History of Psychiatry*, 2 (2) (1990): 193.

vicissitudes, an alternative pathos serving the *healthy* “overcoming of norms.”

Alternatively, phrased in terms of the capacity pertaining to the melancholy and folly positions — his aptitude for the Dürerian re-ordering and re-presenting, which I find a confession of in his “private dictionary that is all [his] own,” in *De l’experience*: “J’ay un dictionnaire tout à part moy.” That is, his figurative, linguistic and literary prowess can be seen to mitigate or render his melancholy operative and meaningful: to attribute new meanings to old words and concepts, to give and reassign words and meanings to experiences and things, of which the reversal of the expression “Il *ne faut pas* se depouiller avant de se coucher,” from Chapter 3 was most symbolic.

In the passage that follows this “private dictionary” confession of singularity, but also of intentional strategizing, Montaigne will expose another melancholic digression, another *memento mori* similar to the many we have already seen. Using the example of the conventional, proverbial expression “*passer le temps*” (“passing time”), Montaigne again demonstrates his strength in deconstructing a common expression by which he gains personal value and meaning, and in a sense even, overcomes a certain death by preemptively folding it within his own life and experiences.

An expression of *diversion*, he says, people experience their lives in this wasteful way, to evoke again this notion of waste from a melancholic/subjective viewpoint. “Passing the time,” letting life pass them by, Montaigne, like Pascal, again criticizes these “ordinary people” (*contemptus mundi*), of treating life as some boring and unpleasant event that they are waiting to be over. But Montaigne can reinterpret this expression and this experience, and use it for his (shifting needs), with the help of

his “private dictionary”:

je passe le temps, quand il est mauvais et incommode ; quand il est bon, je ne le veux pas passer, je le retaste, je m’y tiens.⁸³

I ‘pass the time,’ when it is rainy and disagreeable; when it is good, I do not want to pass it; I savor it, I cling to it.⁸⁴

When time is painful or unpleasant, he indeed “passes the time,” or lets it go to waste, not paying attention to it, not savoring it. When it is pleasurable, on the contrary, he makes it last, and holds on to it. By making the good last, and the bad go to waste, he makes a small victory over death and nature, by assigning his *own* singular, internal meaning to them rather than by ignorance and blindness to mortality and the “one thousand and one accidents” that await, in Pascal’s terms.

Once more the values of waste and avarice, of holding on, letting go, are shifting. Not in the direction the wind blows, but in relation to the shifting needs and viewpoints of melancholy. The melancholic digression which follows Montaigne’s “dictionary” play, is his confession of always being in a position to savor life, because he is always preparing for, or on the verge of losing it (“Je me compose pourtant à la perdre sans regret”), consistently considering life as “inherently wasting away,” (“perdable de sa condition”), again voicing his obsessive *memento mori*:

Je me compose pourtant à la perdre sans regret : Mais comme perdable de sa condition, non comme moleste et importune.⁸⁵

However, I am reconciling myself to the thought of losing it, without regret, but as something that by its nature must be lost; not as something annoying and troublesome.⁸⁶

Montaigne’s ability and need to produce a “private dictionary,” to creatively

⁸³ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, XIII.

⁸⁴ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, III, 13, 853.

⁸⁵ Montaigne, *Essais*, III, XIII.

⁸⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, III, 13, 853.

assign and reassign meaning to words, stems from his melancholy — from shifting experiences of pain and pleasure, from living a life on the verge of death that render each moment crucial, from a sense of distinction from others whose words and expressions (“passer le temps”), but also relationships, obligations, and finally *ties*, do not apply to him.

In confessing that “if his soul *could* take footing, he would *not essay* but resolve,” Montaigne leaves room for us to believe that essaying might not have been his preferred form of living. Perhaps Montaigne would have wanted to enjoy the normativity of custom, of banal ties and occupations which he condemns — “the comfort and warmth of a world one has already taken in,” the comforts of “fitting in.”⁸⁷ But since rest, and stability, which norms provide but also require, are not available experiences to him, he *essays* — so as to at least “find footing” for each changing moment, each day and the shifts it springs upon him, in his humors and experiences alike.

⁸⁷ This is how Sara Ahmed describes the comfortable feelings of heteronormativity in Sara, Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 148.

CONCLUSION

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault had famously noted Descartes's exclusion of madness from the domain of reason. That while dreams, error, or the misperceptions of the senses, such as bad eyesight, should be considered and overcome by the doubting subject, the very possibility of madness should be excluded from thought itself, and prior to continuing the investigation for ascertaining *truth*, which requires absolute certainty.¹ The passage this reading relates to most explicitly is from

Descartes's *First Meditation*:

How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to a madman, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass.²

This description of the “persistent vapours of melancholia,” which “damage the brain,” such that the investigation must stop if this were to be the case, signals a symbolic moment after which “melancholy vapors,” as a “disease,” will forever taint the assertions and truths expressed by that “damaged” subject.

The goal of this dissertation was to explore a selection of early-modern works and theories before the vapors had clouded the mind in such a way that its philosophies and “truths” were tossed aside, and while they were considered integral to subjectivity: to its perceptions, to its feeling, and finally to its production of a viewpoint and a critique that culminated in the literary writing of Montaigne's *Essais*.

¹ “In the economy of doubt, there is an imbalance between madness, on the one hand, and dream and error, on the other. Their situation in relation to the truth and to him who seeks it is different; dreams or illusions are surmounted within the structure of truth; but madness is inadmissible for the doubting subject,” Michel, Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.

² René Descartes, “Meditation I”, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, translated by Donald A. Cress. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

In opposition to Descartes's exclusion of melancholy from the domain of thought, the early-modern theories and writings I have explored throughout this dissertation raised the "pathological vision" of the clouded mind to the privileged status of subjectivity as such, with an astute capacity for philosophy and critique, and the personal ability to survive the motions of a "mad world," by holding on to these shifts from within, even as this might bring on a vicious internal rupture.

As such, early-modern melancholy, as this unification of difference, becomes most equipped to deal with the melancholy of the world, where a renunciation of these internal ruptures would mean a denial of a diverse and changing world, and would mean settling for the fixity of norms and custom, which would mean wasting away that one and only life we each have.

In this way, an ironic overlap between the Cartesian point of view and the early-modern point of view is revealed. Early-modern subjectivity and early-modern melancholy as explored here, would agree with Descartes that melancholy would indeed cast doubt over the most basic certainties, for example even that "these hands or this whole body are mine," a doubt which for Descartes, if it existed, would be a sign that he had gone mad. Except that, it is not melancholy as a condition, its "damaged brains," that would cast doubt, but rather melancholy as a *subjectivity* and as a critique, that would cast doubt over even these seemingly basic certainties, as each moment, each humor, each occasion of the "one thousand and one" play their part, without a "footing" in which to find rest.

Even "death," as we have seen, is not a "certainty" but rather a subjective occupation, a subjective staging and representation, in the way that, *memento mori*

was shown to thoroughly structure a variety of worlds and world views: Dürer's scene, with the various *vanitas* and their particular arrangements, the map inside the Fool's head, the philosophers crying and laughing over the world globe, Montaigne's miserly fathers as a *memento mori* for us all, and so on.

Descartes's manipulation of melancholy here, Descartes's own "melancholic slip," so to speak, is that it is not so much that the "pauper maintains firmly that he is king," but rather that "firmly maintaining" something is a projection of Descartes's own language and his own needs from life and how to live which correspond to what level of certainty *he, Descartes*, needs, what *he* can and cannot tolerate in his mind, in his vicinity, what life *has* to be about for him.

Perhaps, anecdotally, had Descartes and Montaigne met, they would have hated each other, not for their diverging philosophies, that one asserts a "je" and one asserts nothing but difference, but for their clashing worldviews that would be hurtful to the other's subjectivity and needs. If the melancholic we have met within the course of this dissertation does in fact "firmly maintain" he is king, it is the lot of everyone in this "world of folly" to feel, behave, and believe in singular ways, which are, if we go along with Descartes's interest in truth, always "erroneous" and always distorted, because they are, at all times, subjective.

Instead of a concern for truth, for early-modern melancholy and folly, it is all about perspective: finding new perspectives and angles, new *contemptus mundis*, new follies, new madnesses, whether presenting us with a story about animals who live for only one day to make us feel less bad about our human lifespan, whether it finds the waste in avarice, whether it sees war as a diversion, whether it makes us see babies as

less developed humans, whether it allows us to compare debt to a disease, or relate poverty to suicide.

As extremely malleable concepts and subjective positions, this dissertation argues for the value and relevance of early-modern melancholy and folly in contemporary criticism. Their critical capacity, both despite, and in light of their openness and malleability, force us to question our insatiable need for classifications, definitions and identities, clouding our access to general shared notions that pertain to the “human condition,” which is essentially and continuously variable. To argue with these early-modern concepts is to argue with this truth.

Do we *want* or *need* to view the king as powerful or wretched? This answer cannot and should not be provided except by an individual, subjective, representation. In this vein, this dissertation hopes that the answer, “*it depends*,” can gain more respect and value, and can — despite its lack of “ornamentation,” to evoke Montaigne — be used and applied nonetheless for the purposes of understanding this “human condition,” a concept that has itself been stigmatized, in part, for the very same reasons that classifications are adored.

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FIGURES

- Figure 1: Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I*, 1514, Copperplate. Nuremberg, Germany. Städel Museum, Germany: Frankfurt, Germany, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%C3%BCrer_Melancholia_I.jpg.
- Figure 2: Jean de Gourmont, *Fool's Cap Map of the World*, ca. 1575, woodcut. Antwerp, Belgium. Bibliothèque nationale de France: Paris, France. <http://longstreet.typepad.com/thesciencebookstore/2016/03/in-the-fools-cap-a-map.html>.
- Figure 3: Haintz-Nar-Meister, *The Book Fool*, 1494, woodcut. Basel, Switzerland. University of Houston Library: Houston, TX. <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll15>.
- Figure 4: Peter Paul Rubens, *Democritus and Heraclitus*, 1603, oil on wood. Valladolid, Spain. Museo Nacional de Escultura: Valladolid, Spain.

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