

SKEPTICAL POIESIS: MONTAIGNE, RIMBAUD

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This dissertation proposes that the oeuvre of Rimbaud is the next major link in the line of radical Pyrrhonian writing launched by Montaigne's *Les essais*. Although some have noted that Rimbaud read *Les essais* and was excited by a passage concerning poetic inspiration, this dissertation proposes a different model of intertextuality showing that both writers created a Pyrrhonian structure of poetics and poesis (concerning the inspiration for and creation of texts) as a response to a crisis. This model contends that Montaigne helps uncover an ongoing Pyrrhonian crisis through his popularization of ancient skepticism in his "Apologie de Raymond Sebond." This crisis, which includes the paradox of radical doubt (that we can doubt our very act of doubting too), entails the suspension of judgment, but it also requires trying out different ideas and beliefs. Montaigne thus created a new form of writing about a mutable and multiple way of thinking and being in response to the crisis. Rather than taking a philosophical approach, this dissertation argues that Montaigne also turned to the power of poetry (and its need for ambiguity, vanity, and imagination) to find new and truer ways of reading and writing the world and the self. Rimbaud also wrote about a similar crisis, such as in his short story "Un cœur sous une soutane" which shows a young seminarian poet in his own personal and poetic crises. His *Une saison en enfer* expresses a metaphysical crisis, where the narrator-poet searches for a new way of believing and being, and a poetic crisis, where he both turns against his former poetic program, and presents the poems of his past, a dual structure of (non-)palinody recalling the (non-)apology structure of Montaigne's "Apologie." His texts continue to oscillate between new

ideas and ways out of the crises and moments of despair and doubt, and through this oscillation, Rimbaud creates a new form of Pyrrhonian writing. This unique take on Montaigne and Rimbaud has implications for the radical practice of poiesis and poetics as responses to an unresolvable but generative Pyrrhonian crisis.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nicholas E.L. Huelster (b. 1989) attended Macalester College in his hometown of Saint Paul, Minnesota where received his B.A. with honors in 2012, majoring in Humanities, Media and Cultural Studies–Theory, and French and Francophone Studies, and with a concentration in Critical Theory. His other hometown is Bayfield, Wisconsin. His undergraduate advisor was Professor A. Kiarina Kordela, and he completed an honors project entitled *Témoignage à la croisée des études critiques (Testimony at the Crossroads of Critical Theory)*. He also studied acting for many years in various schools and programs in Minnesota and New York and studied creative writing while at Macalester with Professor Marlon James. He spent his senior year of college in Paris, France, where he lived in Belleville and studied in the CIEE–Critical Studies program at the Centre Parisien d’Études Critiques, which included taking classes for credit at the Université de Paris VII–Diderot and with the Collège International de Philosophie. His best friend who is German (and whom he frequently visits in Bad Tölz and Leipzig) and his best friend’s mother encourage him to continue to study German, and he is also learning some Irish as he loves to visit his ancestral Ireland. He moved to Fall Creek in Ithaca, New York in 2014 and completed his qualifying exam in 2015, going into the Rare and Manuscripts Collections at Cornell to study the “epiphanies” of James Joyce from his manuscript diary, writing a paper called “Epiphanic Realism: James Joyce’s ‘The Dead.’” He served on the Editorial Board of *Diacritics* from 2017-2019. In 2019 he won the Romance Studies TA Award for Outstanding Performance as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. He received his MA at Cornell University in 2017 and his Ph.D. at Cornell University in 2022 in the Department of Romance Studies, with concentrations in French Literature, Comparative Literature, and Literary Criticism and Theory.

This dissertation, which was accompanied by happy golden years of reveries and experiences in our Ithaca, is dedicated to A.J.S.

*“Par ce que c’etoit luy, par ce que c’etoit moy.”*  
—Montaigne, *Les essais*

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This project was slightly prolonged during the Covid-19 pandemic, which is still cruelly spreading throughout the country and world. As Montaigne and Rimbaud saw their own world crises, it was heartbreaking at times to observe from the safety of Ithaca the pandemic and political crises of insurrection and infection spread throughout the land. I was quite safely and happily—it must be said, for which I am so lucky—poring over the texts of two of my most beloved writers, while also escaping into the woods and along the waters of Cayuga Lake. But what I required to bring my ideas to life was the support of scholars who were willing to engage with my strange epiphany and let me take risks with it, and once I found this generosity in these four professors, the trust that flowed from them to me and back allowed me to work through my own self-doubt and let my own poesis gush out—like the gargoyle of Rimbaud’s Montaigne.

To each of these four professors, I offer my deepest gratitude and admiration. Professor Mann has a keen calling for early modern poetics and poesis, and her honest zeal and natural insightfulness flashed forth at crucial moments. Her generosity and ideas shaped this project in

many ways, and I am so fortunate to have been able to work with her and plan to continue to follow her work with sincere interest. Professor St. Clair did not hesitate when I asked him to join my committee and share his expertise on Rimbaud, and he did this so wonderfully. I am forever grateful for his bigheartedness, advice, and mentorship. Not only could this project not have been completed in such a rewarding way without his detailed help and guidance, but I know that his luminous work on Rimbaud will continue to serve as inspiration for my own engagement with our shared beloved friend well into the future. Professor Greenberg captured my attention from my earliest days at Cornell: his many works on early modern French theatre and the Baroque captivate me in their fantastic and seamless links between theory and literature, without the one overshadowing the other. His kind support and counsel have persisted from those early days of taking his classes until now, and I thank him for the trust that he has given to this project and the exciting ideas and connections that he continues to provide. Finally, Professor Long has been a wonderful mentor and teacher to me, I cannot put into words how thankful I am for her. Her support and trust began in the workshop of her classes; I recall excitedly writing on a board the structure of the Pyrrhonian paradox when I first encountered it. She has always matched and exceeded my excitement around my exploration of *Les essais*, and that true delight, combined with her expertise and her unceasing support to get me to the end of this project, helped create the magic formula that has turned this entire project into something that I will forever be proud of. Whatever comes, I could not have created this text as it is without all four of these professors, and the experience in which they played a huge part is something for which I will always be grateful my whole life long.

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## Introduction

The wise man's eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all. Then I said in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.

—*Ecclesiastes*

*Les essais (The Essays)* of Michel de Montaigne and the poetic oeuvre of Arthur Rimbaud are two central works in a line of radical literary production that practices writing as a poietic and poetic response to the ontological and epistemological crisis imposed by Pyrrhonian skepticism. Both produce a complex poetics that responds to and performs Pyrrhonian thought—that is, they do not produce a philosophy of it, but an art or writing of it that requires meta-poiesis, a form of writing that consciously, and skeptically questions the source and conditions of its creation. Montaigne's *Essais* helped reintroduce the radical paradox of Pyrrhonian skepticism to the world, and he became so passionate about the unique movement of Pyrrhonian thought that his entire writing project was shaped by it. His resurrection of this philosophical movement was thus inscribed in his writing practice, through his use of poetry, and through his unique poietic quest, that is, his writing about his writing process, which is related to his Pyrrhonian project to know himself and the world. By searching for truth and trying to also know himself through that writerly search, Montaigne asked the question, “Que sçay-je?” (“What do I know?”);

II.12, 527; 393), and he discovered that the self was ultimately an unknowable other.<sup>1</sup> Three centuries later, Rimbaud's poetic writing quest to search for truth and to know himself also brought him to the same field of Pyrrhonian paradox, although he did not necessarily know it, and he would respond to Montaigne's *Essais* and its "Que sçay-je?" with his writing corpus and with his poetic, radical affirmation, "Je est un autre" ("I is an other"; 370-1).<sup>2</sup>

Montaigne scholars have long questioned the status of skepticism in *Les essais*, and to what extent such skepticisms are inculcated in the form of the text itself. Some recent approaches choose to eschew reading skepticism as a historical, ideological construction of the text, instead opting for material studies of the book as an object defined by its circulation in a social milieu (see Warren Boutcher's *The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe* picking up on George Hoffman's work). In the other direction, some philosophical readings of skepticism do indeed treat Montaigne's skepticism as a construction of a system of idealized meaning left for us to decode and reassemble (see Ann Hartle's *Montaigne and the Origins of Modern Philosophy*). However, I situate my argument concerning skepticism within the scholarly discussion that treats his skepticism as a shifting philosophical practice that Montaigne inscribes into a discursive experience and act of writing (see Hassan Melehy's *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Modern Subject*, and Zahi Zalloua's *Reading Unruly: Interpretation and Its Ethical Demands* and *Montaigne and the Ethics of Skepticism*). If we take Montaigne at his word

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations of Montaigne are of the Villey edition, and all translations of Montaigne are of the Frame edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations and translations of Rimbaud are of the Fowlie bilingual edition unless otherwise noted.

when he writes that his is “le seul livre au monde de son espece” (“the only book in the world of its kind”), then we should consider his version of skepticism as a unique creation enacted through the “dessein farouche et extravagant” (“wild and eccentric plan”; 2.8.385; 278) of his book. Skepticism becomes something of his own making, then, that is indelibly attached to the formal manifestation of his writing. To this end, I argue that poetry and his reflections on poiesis—that is, reflections on the inspiration for, creation, and arrangement of his text—are the two crucial elements of his skeptical literary form. I therefore also situate my research within that smaller, crucial group of Montaignist scholarship that recognizes the importance of poetry to the writing of *Les essais* and which goes even further by arguing that Montaigne’s writing not only approaches the experimental space of poetic writing, but also should at times be conceived of as poetry itself (in this I rely especially on *Quand “les poètes feignent”*: “Fantasie” et fiction dans *Les essais de Montaigne* by Olivier Guerrier and *Prose et poésie dans Les essais de Montaigne* by Nathalie Dauvois).

When Montaigne published *Les essais*, his discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism contributed to a preexisting crisis in sixteenth century European society. The hegemony over truth-making by the Catholic Church was being challenged by Protestantism, and the accompanying Wars of Religion raged throughout the decades of both Montaigne’s political and writing career (Popkin ch. 1). The radical message of Pyrrhonian skepticism, which Montaigne helped resurrect, insists that the quest for truth wherein one tries out ideas by the suspension of disbelief (what I call its zetetic aspect) be balanced with its calling into question these ideas by

the suspension of judgment (what I call its aporetic aspect).<sup>3</sup> I argue that skepticism continues to be wrongly conceived of as something synonymous with its aporetic aspect, but Montaigne's writing makes clear that he was always trying out different ideas and engaging his faculties of belief, faith, and imagination, all governed by Pyrrhonism's zetetic aspect. Montaigne's Pyrrhonian quest for truth entails not just a search for the objective truth of external reality, nature, and God, but a writerly practice of Pyrrhonian inquiry that both seeks these external truths in a complicated, continual way that does not rest on any dogmatic truth, and as an equally complicated practice of skeptical, introspection through the same writing practice. Furthermore, he would turn to the imaginative art of poetry to express the Pyrrhonian paradox of the overlap of the aporetic and zetetic aspects. Pyrrhonism goes one step further than what most people today think of as skepticism—that is, what is called Academic Skepticism, which would make the statement that “la vérité ne se pouvoit concevoir par nos moyens” (“truth could not be conceived by our powers”; 502; 371). Another way of saying this would be to say that “we can doubt everything.” By affirming this absolute statement, Academic Skepticism becomes the very dogmatism that skepticism is supposed to oppose, and therefore the Pyrrhonians go one step further by radically doubting themselves, including in every act of doubting itself. The Pyrrhonian would say that “we can doubt everything, including that we can doubt,” or rather, they would merely accept that the confines of human rational language are insufficient to

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<sup>3</sup> I outline these fundamental aspects of Pyrrhonism based on Sextus Empiricus's description of its nomenclature: “The Skeptic School, then, is also called ‘Zetetic’ from its activity in investigation and inquiry...[and] ‘Aporetic’ or Dubitative either from its habit of doubting and seeking, as some say, or from the indecision as regards assent and denial” (5).

represent the truth. Montaigne selects the perfect quote from Lucretius to figure this fundamental Pyrrhonian paradox: “*Nil sciri quisquis putat, id quoque nescit/ An sciri possit quo se nil scire fatetur*” (“Whoever thinks that we know nothing does not know/ Whether we know enough to say that this is so”; II.12, 502; 372). It is because of this incertitude, too, that Montaigne turns at times to poetry, because only it could go beyond the bounds of rational language. His incertitude also explains why his creation of new ways of writing his essays can be called a meta-poiesis, because going through the Pyrrhonian paradox required him to question his creative process in a complex, ambiguous way that allowed him to deeply question his self and the world around him.

The form and style of Montaigne’s essay writing (coming from the word *essayer*, to try, as in to try out different ideas) was already similar to skeptical inquiry in its open, meandering, and polyvocal search for truth; but Pyrrhonian skepticism proper comes in the clearest focus through *Les essais*’ crucial longest essay “Apologie de Raymond Sebond” (“Apology for Raymond Sebond”). He purports to write an apology for Raymond Sebond, the author of a controversial fifteenth century treatise called *Theologia Naturalis sive Liber Creaturarum* (*Natural Theology or Book of Creatures*). Sebond’s book concerns the medieval philosophical and theological concept of natural theology, the ability to know of God through the natural world of his creatures, which includes animals, humankind, and even non-living things. Montaigne himself had translated *Theologia naturalis*, an experience he describes at the beginning of the “Apologie” (439-40; 319-20).<sup>4</sup> But Sebond’s conjectured ability to know God through nature

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<sup>4</sup> The Latin original text and Montaigne’s translation are available via the Corpus Montaigne on the Classiques Garnier Numérique edited by Claude Blum. Montaigne’s translation was most recently printed in the 1932 Louis Conard publication of Montaigne’s *Oeuvres Complètes*, but no

was deemed dangerous by the religious authorities because it suggested that the reader might learn the ability to know of God without needing the support of the Bible, even though Sebond insisted that one must also be enlightened by divine grace to be able to read the Book of Nature (Screech xxv). The great conundrum is this: Montaigne can superficially be read as not having truly defended Sebond in the “Apologie,” because he at times appears to skeptically dispute the ability of human reason and sensation to know anything at all. In so doing, he thus seems to dispute Sebond’s central thesis, which is that by observing nature, we can successfully know God through our reason and sensation.

Contrary to Montaigne, Sebond's argument supports the supremacy of humankind in the scale of creatures with our ability to be illuminated by divine grace, and only through that grace be able to read and know the Book of Nature made by God. Sebond heavily draws upon this medieval trope, that God created two books: the first book, the Book of Nature, and the second one, the revealed truth of the Bible. For Sebond, “to read the second book one must be a clerk,” but the Book of Nature was readable by all, and unlike the Scripture, it was unfalsifiable and thus would not lead to heresy and dissension (Screech xxv). Yet, according to Sebond, because of original sin and the Fall of man, we have lost the ability to read the letters (the creatures) of the Book of Nature, and for this, one needs the illumination of the divine. But at the same time, Sebond proposes that his treatise can teach us how to read again the Book of Nature. And again,

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critical edition with notes has yet been published. An essential study of Sebond, Montaigne’s translation, and the “Apologie” is *Montaigne, Apologie de Raimond Sebond, De la theologia à la théologie*, edited by Claude Blum, as well as Joseph Coppin’s 1925 *Montaigne, traducteur de Raymond Sebon*.

although this program is for the sake of understanding God, it was regarded by the Catholic church to be close to heresy, because it could be implied that one does not need the second book, the Bible, at all, to understand God or nature.

It is in this controversial nexus of theology that Montaigne introduces Pyrrhonism, and at one point, he calls it a tool of last resort, “un coup desesperé auquel il faut abandonner vos armes pour faire perdre à vostre adversaire les siennes, et un tour secret, duquel il se faut servir rarement et reservément” (“a desperate stroke, in which you must abandon your weapons to make your adversary lose his, and a secret trick that must be used rarely and reservedly”; II.12, 558; 419). In this sense, he makes use of skepticism to defend Sebond, because the atheists and the heretics attack Sebond and misread his intentions. But to defend him, Montaigne instead goes on the offensive against his critics, to show that skepticism proves that since one cannot declare anything positively, that these critics know no better about anything than anyone else. All the while, Montaigne describes how enamored he had become with Pyrrhonism. It is in this strange context of apologizing and philosophizing that the paradox of Pyrrhonism begins to take on a life of its own in the “Apologie.” The paradox is not just a tool with which to attack Sebond's critics, but a structure that even will allow Montaigne to reassess his former investment in Sebond's enterprise, and reinvigorate his Pyrrhonism throughout his writing of *Les essais*. In the “Apologie,” Montaigne highlights and identifies with the skeptic whose *Pyrrhoniae Hypotyposes* (*Outline of Pyrrhonism*) had been translated into Latin in 1559 by Henri Estienne, Sextus Empiricus, who himself was writing about the ancient Greek skeptic, Pyrrho.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Floridi's “The Diffusion of Sextus Empiricus's Works in the Renaissance” p. 65, and *Sextus Empiricus*; see also Popkin esp. ch. 2.

Like Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne distinguishes broadly between three types of positions in relation to knowledge: “Quiconque cherche quelque chose, il en vient à ce point: ou qu’il dict qu’il l’a trouvée, ou qu’elle ne se peut trouver, ou qu’il en est encore en quête. Toute la philosophie est départie en ces trois genres” (“Whoever seeks anything comes to this point: he either says that he has found it, or that it cannot be found, or that he is still in quest of it. All philosophy is divided into these three types”; II.12, 502; 371). The first group, the dogmatists: “Les Peripateticiens, Epicuriens, Stoiciens et autres, [qui] ont pensé l’avoir trouvée...ont establi les sciences que nous avons, et les ont traitées comme notices certaines” (“The Peripatetics, Epicureans, Stoics and others [who] thought they had found it...established the sciences that we have, and treated them as certain knowledge”; II.12, 502; 371). The second group who “a eu la plus grande suite et les sectateurs les plus nobles” (“had the greatest following and the noblest adherents”) are the “Academiciens [qui] ont desespéré de leur quête, et jugé que la vérité ne se pouvoit concevoir par nos moyens” (“Academics [who] despaired of their quest, and judged that truth could not be conceived by our powers”; II.12, 502; 371). The third group is Montaigne's concern: “Pyrrho et autres Skeptiques ou Epechistes...dissent qu’ils sont encore en recherche de la vérité. Ceux-cy jugent que ceux qui pensent l’avoir trouvée, se trompent infiniment; et qu’il y a encore de la vanité trop hardie en ce second degré qui assure que les forces humaines ne sont pas capables d’y atteindre” (“Pyrrho and other Skeptics or Epechists...say that they are still in search of the truth. These men judge that those who think they have found it are infinitely mistaken; and that there is also an overbold vanity in that second class that assures us that human powers are not capable of attaining it”; II.12, 502; 371). The “Epechist” denomination refers to the key Greek word ἐπέχω: “*epecho*, c’est à dire je soutiens, je ne bouge” (“ἐπέχω, that is to say, ‘I hold back, I do not budge’”) which is the “mot sacramental” (“sacramental word”; II.12, 505;

374) of the Pyrrhonians, and the one associated with the signature concept of the skeptical suspension of judgment that is supposed to lead to *ataraxia* (tranquility).<sup>6</sup>

Montaigne attached himself to the Pyrrhonian skeptical movement, as he narrates in the "Apologie": "Cette fantasie est plus securement conceue par interrogation: Que sçay-je? comme je la porte à la devise d'une balance" ("This idea is more firmly grasped in the form of interrogation: 'What do I know?'—the words I bear as a motto, inscribed over a pair of scales"; II.12, 527; 393). But for Montaigne, this aporetic abstinence that allows the Pyrrhonian to "aneantis[e] son jugement pour faire plus de place à la foy" ("annihilat[e] his judgement to make room for more faith"; II.12, 506; 375) is also coupled with the active quality of seeking for truth, certainty, and knowledge. Both participate in the necessary regress *ad infinitum* of knowledge, where the judgment (the zetetic) of appearances by either the faulty senses or the use of reason shows itself to be without ground (the aporetic):

Pour juger des apparences que nous recevons des subjects, il nous faudroit un instrument judiciaire; pour verifier cet instrument, il nous y faut de la demonstration; pour verifier la demonstration, un instrument: nous voilà au route. Puis que les sens ne peuvent arrester nostre dispute, estans pleins eux-mesmes d'incertitude, il faut que ce soit la raison; aucune raison ne s'establira sans une autre raison: nous voylà à reculons jusques à l'infiny. (II.12, 600-1)

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<sup>6</sup> Screech also translates Montaigne's "je soutiens" as "I am in suspense," and Frame in a separate footnote also translates the Greek word as "I abstain" (563; 371n25). Note that in my analysis, I subsume this Epechist attitude of the suspension of judgment under the "aporetic" aspect of Pyrrhonism.

To judge the appearances that we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle. Since the senses cannot decide our dispute, being themselves full of uncertainty, it must be reason that does so. No reason can be established without another reason: there we go retreating back to infinity. (II.12, 454)

The infinite regress of reason shows that whether one attempts to ground reason with senses, or reason, since both are uncertain, the entire operation of thought enters into an inevitable circularity. On the one hand, this shows the necessary failure (aporia) of reason and knowledge, but on the other hand, the fact that it is a circle implies that the zetetic trying out of different ideas allows for the quest of knowledge to roll onward. This important, zetetic quality of skepticism can perhaps more actively oppose the paralysis of the dogmatists and the Academics. Following his citation of the aforementioned quote by Lucretius which expresses the Pyrrhonian paradox, he restates the flaw of the Academics: “L’ignorance qui se sçait, qui se juge et qui se condamne, ce n’est pas une entiere ignorance: pour l’estre, il faut qu’elle s’ignore soy-mesme” (“Ignorance that knows itself, that judges itself and condemns itself is not complete ignorance: to be that, it must be ignorant of itself”; II.12, 502; 372). The Pyrrhonian innovation is that meta-skeptical ability to be able to also doubt even one's mental act of doubting itself: “par cette extremité de doubte qui se secoue soy-mesme, ils se separent et se divisent de plusieurs opinions, de celles mesmes qui ont maintenu en plusieurs façons le doubte et l’ignorance” (“by this extremity of doubt that shakes its own foundations, they separate and divide themselves from many opinions, even from those which in many ways have upheld doubt and ignorance”; II.12,

372). Montaigne thus first explains Pyrrhonism in the context of presenting an epistemological principle with which to attack Sebond's critics, but the paradox and movement of thought and writing becomes more than just a passing reference to Montaigne. With his newfound obsession with Pyrrhonism, his writing of *Les essais* became infused with the Pyrrhonian process of both trying out ideas and suspending judgment.

Leading from the publication of *Les essais*, it has been theorized that Montaigne helped spark a widespread *crise pyrrhonienne* (Pyrrhonian crisis) across many areas of French and Western society, especially in French pre-Cartesian philosophy (Popkin 56). And if the ground of dogmatic knowledge could be shown to be nonexistent, then perhaps the grounds underpinning the hegemony of the Catholic church and the Kingdom of France could also be questioned, furthering the unrest of the Wars of Religion. Others took the approach that Pyrrhonism could help provide a solution to the unrest, but the aporias they exposed were also dangerous. So fundamental was the existence of God to the people's understanding of their existences, that to question one's ability to know anything at all constituted not only a metaphysical crisis for epistemology but also for ontology. But at the same time, even as religious belief was beginning to give way to new humanist epistemologies and ontologies of the Renaissance, Pyrrhonism could also show that these new systems of knowledge and belief were equally groundless. Popkin writes: "By extending the implicit skeptical tendencies of the Reformation crisis, the humanistic crisis, and the scientific crisis, into a total *crise pyrrhonienne*, Montaigne's genial "Apologie" became the coup de grâce to an entire intellectual world" (56). And although some scholars critique the importance of Montaigne's role in the Pyrrhonian

crisis,<sup>7</sup> and others argue that Montaigne's skepticism is closer to the school of Academic skepticism than to that of the Pyrrhonian,<sup>8</sup> it is undeniable that *Les essais* inscribes the radical state of crisis that the paradox of Pyrrhonism teaches us into the very writing style and form of his text. Montaigne thus constructs his own Montaignist-Pyrrhonism through the writing of *Les essais*.

By highlighting this literary—poietic and poetic—response to the Pyrrhonian crisis that is sometimes given less priority in Montaigne studies (as opposed to the more philosophical readings), to put Montaigne in dialogue with the metaphysical-minded, meta-poetic, and meta-poietic writing of Rimbaud becomes not only possible but important and productive. In Rimbaud's writing, skepticism is less readily recognizable as an explicit concern, but, his preoccupation with the network of belief and its skeptical counterparts—both in terms of religion and of his belief in his poetic project—is key to Rimbaud's singular, experimental writing form and ethical quest. We can go so far as to read Rimbaud as a Pyrrhonian, in the literary line of Montaigne. His early manifesto-like “Lettres du voyant” (Seer Letters)—in which he zetetically professes the oracular power of poetry—appear to come into conflict with his later *Une saison en enfer* (*A Season in Hell*), where Rimbaud seemingly turns against his previous experimental poetry as if in an aporetic mode. But upon closer analysis, *Une saison en enfer*, and other Rimbaudian texts show a Pyrrhonian writing in the way that they weave between zetetic and aporetic modes while circulating around metaphysical and poetic crises, similar to the Pyrrhonian crisis of Montaigne's making. In Rimbaud's case, his production of a new form of

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<sup>7</sup> e.g. Caldwell, Force, Defaux, and Perler.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Force.

irony shows us how the Pyrrhonian paradox between satire and sincerity does not have to be a negative cognitive dissonance but is a productive conflict that can spark the creative, poetic experience of writing.

This unexpected reading of Rimbaud with Montaigne also responds to the potential in Rimbaud scholarship to connect to wider philosophical and literary discourses to which his work responds. I situate my study of Rimbaud within the subfield of Rimbaudian studies that attempts to expand Rimbaud's work to the French philosophical intertext, but there have been no major attempts to connect the works of Montaigne and Rimbaud. The small number of articles and mentions of the connection between the two has largely focused on the account by Rimbaud's teacher, Georges Izambard, of Rimbaud's supposed reading of Montaigne in Douai, without these studies expanding the inquiry into skepticism into Rimbaud's larger oeuvre. The only explicit work on this was Daniel A. De Graaf's interesting 1954 article "Rimbaud Lecteur de Montaigne." Robert Greer Cohn makes a few provocative interpretive references to Montaigne in his *The Poetry of Rimbaud* (esp. p. 283); Steve Murphy makes only three passing, but dismissive assessments of the connection in *Rimbaud et la Commune* and in "Le cœur parodié: Rimbaud réécrit par Izambard" (185, 695; 58); and a suggestive inclusion of the Montaigne quote via Izambard made its way into Anne Berger's intriguing monograph on Rimbaud, *Le Banquet de Rimbaud* (273). When it comes to connecting Rimbaud and his poetics to a wider philosophical context, some scholarly work has more systematically studied the connection between Rousseau and Rimbaud (including the thoroughly argued chapter "Rimbaud et le rousseauisme" in Marc Eigeldinger's *Mythologie et intertextualité*, and the intriguing article "Deux 'enfances'—essai de comparaison: Rousseau/Rimbaud" by Yasuaki Kawanabe). This dissertation seeks to do the same type of larger project of comparison between Montaigne and

Rimbaud, not as a genealogy of influences that requires us to show that Rimbaud's different texts can directly be traced to Montaigne and Pyrrhonism, but as an inquiry into the two authors' texts' demonstrable resonances and correspondences.

Rimbaud ought to be considered the next major link in the Montaignian line of Pyrrhonian writing. Montaigne's *Essais* sketched human subjectivity via the interconnection of reason and imagination in the search for truth through a Pyrrhonism that required the support of poetry to express an outside of language and thought, a poetry that could engage the imperfect senses, and thus, the body. Rimbaud's novel arrangement of parody, satire, and irony in his writing around the areas of literary genre, poetics, and religious and spiritual questions reveals similar fundamental principles of Montaignian-Pyrrhonian writing. Furthermore, Rimbaud's writing points to a radical desire for a third way out of the dualistic structures that dominate Western thought: atheistic versus religious, truth versus falsity, spirit versus body, and salvation versus damnation. Both texts decenter different forms of certainty (by the aporetic aspect of the Pyrrhonian operation), but they channel this message through the lens of the human subject via the enterprise of writing. The act of seeking different forms of truth through writing requires the function of the imagination and belief (likewise, the zetetic aspect). In their respective Pyrrhonian writing quests, both Montaigne and Rimbaud sought a new way, new style, and new language which could grasp and represent reality, or truth or beauty, or God or nature, but through the art of writing with its poetic structures that necessitate the engagement of the unstable imagination and body. While the underexplored connection between the two appears accidental, analysis of each writer's Pyrrhonian structures of writing and poetry reveals their intimate, transhistorical correspondence. And while other writers replicate similar structures and concerns, none have channeled those concerns through their writing in the radical way that

Montaigne and Rimbaud did. Just as I argue that the zetetic aspect of Montaigne's skepticism needed to be better understood to allow for the way that imagination and belief are crucial aspects of Montaigne's Pyrrhonian writing quest of complicated external truth-seeking and writerly introspection, I also argue that Romantic irony operates in Rimbaud's own Pyrrhonian writing quest in a different manner than the existing analyses of his Romantic irony would suggest.<sup>9</sup>

It is important that Pyrrhonian writing not be considered as a rational project under the command of systematic philosophical thought, that is, that it not be considered an aspect of the hegemonic teleological or dualist systems where any one element is prioritized to obey the law of non-contradiction (whether it is spirit or thought over material or body or vice-versa, for example). Instead, Pyrrhonian writing should be considered as a representation of the complex experience of thought, being, and creation that entail decentered structures in motion, which have a multiplicity of swerving, non-teleological elements. In their writings, both Montaigne and Rimbaud confront these hegemonies and express these structures of being and thought in their own ways and own words. Montaigne disrupted dogmatic philosophies and notions of subjectivity with his art of writing or essaying the Pyrrhonian, multiple subject who sought not to represent stable being but the passage of becoming: "Je ne peints pas l'estre. Je peints le passage" ("I do not paint being: I paint the passage"; III.2, 805; my trans.). Rimbaud radically broke with poetic tradition, not merely through his dismantling of traditional verse structures, but also through his radically new style of writing that included his disruptive irony to unsettle the

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<sup>9</sup> In Chapter 2, I will engage with these Rimbaldian critics who discuss Romantic irony: Collins and Gershman, and Frohock.

notions of the stable *je* locutor of the poem, as well as of the stable subject supposedly behind that *je*. In his “Lettres du voyant,” this radical break was also his way of expressing the quest of “painting the passage”: “[Le poète] devra faire sentir, palper, écouter ses inventions ; si ce qu’il rapporte de là-bas a forme, il donne forme : si c’est informe, il donne de l’informe. Trouver une langue” (“he will have to have his inventions smelt, felt, and heard; if what he brings back *from down there* has form, he gives form; if it is formless, he gives formlessness. A language must be found”; 376; 379). Both produce a form of writing that both responds to and performs the Pyrrhonian crisis and paradox, a form that skeptically questions the source and conditions of its own making. Their focus on these elements has resulted in widespread disputes and confusion over the interpretation of their works, with both authors becoming claimed by Christians and atheists alike, as we will see. While it might be argued that, in Rimbaud’s case, there is no direct or explicit evocation of the Pyrrhonian tradition, nevertheless the structures of what we have detailed in Montaigne as having resulted from a lasting concern with the paradoxes of Pyrrhonism can be observed in the way in which Rimbaud treats his radical writing project and poetic form. This is especially the case where he disrupts the traditional understanding of how irony works in a manner similar to Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism and which, at base, constitutes a complex form of skepticism allowing for two opposing ideas to be likewise entertained and held in suspense.

When it comes to the Montaigne-Rimbaud intertext, however, in the published recollection by his teacher Izambard, Rimbaud was said to have at one moment read and been

inspired by at least a section of *Les essais*.<sup>10</sup> According to Izambard's account, if it is true, Rimbaud excitedly repeated aloud a crucial quote (of Montaigne quoting Plato) from "De la vanité" concerning the poiesis of poetic inspiration, the body, and irony:

Le poète, dict Platon, assis sur le trepied des Muses, verse de furie tout ce qui luy vient en la bouche, comme la gargouille d'une fontaine, sans le ruminer et poiser, et luy eschappe des choses de diverse couleur, de contraire substance et d'un cours rompu. Luy mesmes est toute poetique, et la vielle theologie poesie, dissent les sçavants, et la premiere philosophie. C'est l'original langage des Dieux. (III.9, 995)

The poet, says Plato, seated upon the muses' tripod, pours out with fury whatever comes

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<sup>10</sup> Murphy maintains the accepted historical reading of Izambard's citation of this supposed episode in his published book of recollections, *Rimbaud, tel que je l'ai connu*, when he describes it as something Izambard included to elevate the status of Rimbaud's poem, "Cœur supplicié," or "Le cœur volé" (*Commune* 695). By comparing the scatological poem's to Montaigne's citation of Plato with the grotesque image of the inspired poet regurgitating multicolored matter, Murphy asserts that Izambard is taking advantage of the respectable Montaigne connection: "interprétant intertextuellement le verbe rimbaldien comme il a pu se prévaloir d'un passage de Montaigne pour la lecture du *Cœur supplicié*" ("intertextually interpreting Rimbaud's language as he was able to take advantage of a passage of Montaigne for his reading of *Cœur supplicié*"; 695; my trans.). By pointing out this Montaigne encounter, it is also possible that Izambard was attempting to portray himself in a good light as having a positive, uncontroversial literary influence on Rimbaud.

into his mouth, like the [gargoyle] of a fountain, without considering and weighing it; and things escape him of various colours, of contrary substance, and with an irregular torrent. Plato himself is throughout poetical; and the old theology, as the learned tell us, is all poetry; and the first philosophy is the original language of the gods. (III.9, 761)

Establishing their shared line of Pyrrhonian writing does not require a direct chain of influence, rather, we consider Montaigne and Rimbaud as corresponding writers whose projects circulate around the same Pyrrhonian paradoxes in complementary ways. This critical passage on poetry that links Montaigne and Rimbaud contains a multitude of connections, but the central Pyrrhonian feature that we will explore in other ways is its overlap of two different modes of meaning production: the high notion of poiesis and poetic inspiration and the low matter of the grotesque and the bodily, a duality that both writers ultimately refuse by exploring both levels, showing that writing is an embodied practice. On the high side, the phrase has the sweeping power of universal theology, philosophy, and poetry: all of these are one in an ancient mode of poetic creation to which the vatic poet has access in this classic figure of inspiration. On the low side, there is a grotesque image at the heart of Plato's figure: a gargoyle, furiously spewing out everything that comes into his mouth, a gross mixture of different colors, substances, and without ruminating all of it. It even more simply throws upon the mind the image of someone furiously vomiting. The verb *ruminer*, to ruminate, already contains the two levels in its two meanings, which is true in both French and English: "to revolve, turn over repeatedly in the mind; to meditate deeply upon," and, "Of an animal: to chew the cud; to chew again food that has been partially digested in the rumen" (OED). In the high mode of the passage, the original vatic poetic theology and philosophy did not require rumination, in that it passed directly from the Muse through the poet in a state of fury, or divine poetic inspiration, nevertheless entailing an

embodiment of that fury. On the low side, again, there is a more grotesquely humorous bodily dimension to the entire passage, and it was perhaps this that, according to Izambard, titillated Rimbaud so much:

Parmi les classiques, il y avait un Montaigne sur lequel Rimbaud jeta tout d'abord son dévolu: un après-midi, rentrant à la maison, je le vois qui m'attend devant la maison, notre Montaigne à la main l'air amusé. Dès que je l'ai rejoint, il me met le livre sous les yeux, marquant du doigt une phrase qu'il me récite tout d'une haleine à mesure que je la lis. Il y est question de l'inspiration poétique. Pour la définir, le malin essayiste a choisi ses métaphores, semble-t-il, de façon à laisser transparaître un sens bouffon, de haute gresse, sous les artifices d'une phrase très congruement agencée... Cette posture, ces hoquets, ces soubresauts égayaient fort Rimbaud, non qu'il eût l'esprit très porté à la grosse gauloiserie, mais une gaminerie ne pouvait effrayer l'inventeur du *Degueulare superbos*. Toute cette journée et les suivantes, il me resservit à tout bout de champ sa rengaine... (109-10)

Among the classics, there was a Montaigne upon which Rimbaud right away had his heart set on: one afternoon, returning to the house, I see him waiting for me, our Montaigne in hand, seemingly amused. As soon as I join him, he puts the book before my eyes, pointing to a sentence that he recites to me aloud as I read along. It is there a question of poetic inspiration. To define this, the clever essayist has chosen his metaphors, it seems, so as to let a buffoonish meaning shine through, of great importance, under the artifices of a very congruently arranged phrase... This posture, these hiccups, these jolts greatly diverted Rimbaud, not that he was very inclined to course bawdiness,

but such childishness could not frighten off the inventor of the *Degeulare superbos*. All that day long, and the following ones, he gave me his refrain all the time... (my trans.) Izambard in his respectable way insists that it was this Rimbaud of this “puérile anecdote” (“childish anecdote”) who would later compose “Le cœur volé” (“The Stolen Heart”). That poem, too, had an overlap of high-minded language concerning the heart, alongside the bodily and grotesque nonsense language of the lower order: “Mon pauvre cœur bave à la poupe, Mon cœur est plein de caporal...” (“My sad heart slobbers at the poop, My heart covered with tobacco-spit”; 72-3). Izambard, when he received this poem included with one of the famous “Lettres du voyant,” whose transcendental theories about poetry taken together with this bawdy poem epitomizes Rimbaud’s ironic overlap of the high and the low, claims to have remembered Rimbaud’s flirtation with Montaigne and that key line, and wrote back: “Je vois que vous vous êtes ressouvenu de notre vieux Montaigne” (“I see that you have remembered our old Montaigne”; 112; my trans.). But when Rimbaud had sent him another missive a year prior, with another piece of writing, a manuscript of the short story “Un cœur sous une soutane” which also featured this same overlap of the high realm of poetic inspiration and the lowly orders of sexuality and abject bodily elements, Izambard had responded very differently, telling Rimbaud not to continue in that line of writing (Mouret 76).

But Rimbaud’s fascination with poesis or the poetic inspiration, with the bodily and bawdy order, and especially, his fascination with their interrelation was something that he focused on throughout his corpus, starting with that short story, “Un cœur sous une soutane.” For it was in writing about this combination that Rimbaud first glimpsed into the strange structure of what Pyrrhonism had revealed to Montaigne: the coexistence of different modes of experience which could not be collapsed the one into the other. It took a radically new form of writing to

respond to this coexistence and to capture it in his writing. For Rimbaud, his experiments coalesced around a different form of Romantic irony, which traditionally indicates abrupt shifts in texts between expressions of personal fantasy and their dramatic deflations, and this new form of irony would evolve throughout his career (Collins and Gershman 678-9). In the early writings, these experiments were firmly rooted in writing the interaction of the high and the low around the poietic matter of poetic inspiration and the place of the body and sexuality alongside that experience of poiesis.

In Rimbaud's later writing, exemplified by *Une saison en enfer*, that new form of irony gets expanded into a text that dives even more deeply into the drama of the Pyrrhonian crisis. The poet-narrator suffers two crises, one poetic, and one metaphysical, and he continues to swing wildly back and forth between hopeful, zetetic statements, and discouraged, aporetic ones. In terms of his poetic crisis, like Montaigne's (non-)apology, Rimbaud inserts his poems from his past period of *voyance* (a period defined by his attempt to create a new, quasi-magical form of writing that would engage all the senses), and he both presents them as something to be read and remembered, while he also disparages them as the products of "une de mes folies" ("one of my follies"; 284-5). In that section *Délires II: Alchimie du verbe* (*Delerium II: Alchemy of the Word*), the poet-narrator displays his poietic quest, exploring those poems and discussing his poetic project, "inventer un verbe poétique accessible un jour ou l'autre, à tous les sens" ("on inventing a poetic language accessible, some day, to all the senses" (284-5). His accompanying metaphysical crisis has him trapped within Western religion and ideology but finding cracks and windows of escape, alongside many accompanying statements of the failure of these escape attempts: "On ne part pas" ("You cannot get away"; 268-9). But when it comes to Rimbaud's new form of irony, which follows the textual jumping back and forth from within and without

the crises, it shows us that he follows the Pyrrhonian way of writing that purposefully dives into the crisis and produces a complex form of writing to match that paradoxical crisis. He does not have to choose whether the means of escape are finally impossible or not, or whether his poetry succeeded in creating a new form of writing or not. The Pyrrhonian way of writing embraces the struggle and the ambiguity that the questioning of one's poiesis reveals, and Rimbaud follows Montaigne in this complex, unique, and productive way of writing.

This dissertation is divided into two parts, the first on Montaigne and the second on Rimbaud. The first part consists of one chapter which establishes Montaigne's *Essais* as a form of meta-poietic, Pyrrhonian writing. This writing is meta-poietic because it not only concerns poiesis, or the imaginative creation of writing, but Montaigne skeptically examines his poietic process and shows that the ambiguous nature of Pyrrhonism is the motor that fuels his writing quest. That Pyrrhonism requires the two levels: the zetetic aspect of trying out new ideas and truths, and the aporetic aspect which opposes different ideas by suspending judgment. That quest is both a skeptical inquiry of the world and an introspective inquiry of the self, both of which are complex endeavors that can only be figured by the meta-poietic, Pyrrhonian form of writing and with the support of poetry. In Chapter 1, I focus on this dynamic through the essays "Apologie de Raymond Sebond" and "De la vanité."

The second part, on Rimbaud, argues that his writing corpus is—perhaps unknowingly—the next major corpus of meta-poietic, Pyrrhonian writing. In Chapter 2, I first theorize this Pyrrhonian reading of Rimbaud focusing on an early, underexplored short story "Un cœur sous une soutane," which I argue first shows Rimbaud developing a new form of Romantic irony, which I call his poietic irony. In Chapter 3, I continue to theorize how Rimbaud's persistent form of poietic irony in *Une saison en enfer* also continues to foreground a Pyrrhonian writing—for

example, like the circulation in “Un cœur sous une soutane” between sincerity and satire, here Rimbaud intensely and ironically circulates between different expressions of inspiration and dejection. Like the skeptical circulation concerning Rimbaud’s inserted poems, the poet-narrator of *Une saison en enfer* experiences a Pyrrhonian metaphysical crisis and continues to seek out new forms of spiritual fulfillment, truth, and revelation, even as he continues to suffer setbacks which lead him to despair and discouragement. It is out of that Pyrrhonian oscillation between sincerity and satire, or between nostalgia and derision, and the accompanying poetic ironic jumps, that Rimbaud’s Pyrrhonian writing quest is continually fueled. Both Rimbaud and Montaigne’s Pyrrhonian writing quests show that the Pyrrhonian crisis does not hinder, but inspires, the creation of these new forms of writing which must inevitably oscillate between the zetetic and aporetic modes.

To go into more detail, in Chapter 1, I will reassess the literary function of skepticism in Montaigne's work, through his longest essay, "Apologie de Raymond Sebond," where skepticism gets his most direct presentation. First, I will investigate how Montaigne’s articulation of the Pyrrhonian crisis affects his presentation of a mutable subjectivity in a way that is meta-poietic. The difficulty in interpreting Montaigne’s text lies in his understanding that both humanity and the world are in constant change and motion, and therefore, to portray this mutability requires a form of writing that exhibits that change and motion. Among the techniques to do this, he created a different form of irony which allows for the Pyrrhonian mutability of the subject to be expressed by playfully jumping between the different sides of every argument. Because of this Pyrrhonian, ironic mutability, Montaigne has often been interpreted by partisans as either dogmatically religious, or on the contrary, atheistic. Instead of taking the approach of the dogmatic partisans, I argue that Montaigne’s dual Pyrrhonian quest of essaying the world and

questioning his process of creating writing allowed for him to develop a new way of writing that allowed for the complex mutability of the world and the self to be approached. In this way, I argue that Montaigne's *Essais* represent a Pyrrhonian form of writing.

As an example of this Pyrrhonian writing, I show that in the "Apologie," Montaigne resurrects a personal poietic paradox inhering in his translation of Raymond Sebond's *Theologia naturalis*. I first show this imaginative aspect of Pyrrhonism via his resurrection of his translation of Sebond in the "Apologie," where he continues to highlight how his translation had foregrounded the necessary function of the imagination in the natural theology's attempt to read the Book of Nature. In this, I rely on Mireille Habert's incisive study, *Montaigne traducteur de la Théologie naturelle: Plaisantes et saintes imaginations*. There are some odd elements of misremembering and distortion that highlight the place of the imagination, first in Montaigne's original translation of Sebond, and then in the way that he discusses Sebond's text in the "Apologie." These distortions allow for Montaigne to further express the split nature of that mutable subjectivity, which allows Montaigne to come to terms with his text's split between its zetetic, imaginative aspects (its *fantasies* and *inventions*) and its aporetic impulse to also suspend judgment on these vain inventions. Such a complex, poietic understanding finally allows one to understand how the "Apologie" is both an apology and a non-apology—that is, Montaigne plays with the arrangement of his text to highlight its imaginary elements including poetry, and to foreground the Pyrrhonian paradox at the heart of the text.

Elsewhere in the "Apologie," I show that the paradox is this: how can one accept the wild inventions of philosophers and theologians when such inventions can also be called into doubt through the aporetic moment within skepticism? That is, why does the zetetic aspect of Pyrrhonism not get overruled by the aporetic one? Put another way, what does Montaigne do

with his Pyrrhonian awareness that the imaginary element of human *invention* and *fantasie* (I will discuss all these early modern terms including *invention*, *fantasie*, and *imagination*) purports to invent and create truth, when on the rational, aporetic side of the Pyrrhonian balance, there is the opposing principle that we cannot truly know anything? To explain how Montaigne's writerly Pyrrhonian quest becomes a poietic paradox, I finally argue that through the form of the "Apologie," Montaigne turns this paradox back onto himself, and back onto his readers. Both the world and the self—and both Montaigne and his readers—are affected by flux and mutation, and Montaigne's Pyrrhonian skepticism is his way of accounting for this. I argue that, fundamentally, Montaigne works out this poietic paradox through his formal play with the imaginative elements of writing, language, and above all, poetry. By highlighting the imaginative aspects of the invention in the "Apologie," I show that he also draws upon the ambiguity of poetic poiesis that was discussed at the time concerning, on the one hand, the divine power of the poet to be inspired to create, and on the other, the technical nature of writing as a vain human practice where invention goes too far and often fails. I also show that Montaigne shows this same ambiguous overlap of the divine and the foolish through his concentration on pagan authors as a reflection of the Pyrrhonian crisis of faith and reason. All these aspects of the "Apologie"—Montaigne's resurrection of the ironic ambiguity surrounding the imagination in his translation of Sebond, his focus on the ironic ambiguity surrounding invention, his discussion of the potentially divine poetic poiesis, and the focus on the pagan authors who figure the Pyrrhonian crisis—establish what I argue is Montaigne's Pyrrhonian structure of poiesis.

In the second part of Chapter 1, I will continue to show how this fundamental function of poetry in Montaigne is further pursued and intensified in the third book of *Les essais* and especially in the essay "De la vanité." I draw on Phillippe Desan's argument that in the third book,

Montaigne had an intensified concern for the body, sensation, experience, and for his literary form. I also rely on the group of Montaigne scholars who argue that Montaigne's *Essais* must be understood through the lens of poetry, and that there are even aspects of his writing that should be considered as approaching the function of poetry or even as prose-poetry itself (see especially the texts by Guerrier and Dauvois). For example, this intensified concern for form and poetic language can be seen in additions to the "Apologie" from the Bordeaux copy which are from the same period as the third book.

In "De la vanité," Montaigne also introduces a self-critical, Pyrrhonian, ironic paradox: whether or not it is vain to write so much about vanity? He ironically disparages the vanity of even his own writing, or what he calls "escrivallerie" ("scribbling"), as something that ought to be criminalized—"Ce n'est pas moquerie," he insists ("This is no jest"; III.9, 721). And he equates this paradox of vanity, that both the topic of the writing as well as the act of writing about it are both vanity, with his neighbor who grotesquely collects and studies his excrement, since what topic could be vainer, and what study? But at the same time, he recognizes that vanity is a mystery that has religious, mystical connotations, as from his favorite Book of *Ecclesiastes* (and its message, "vanity of vanities! All is vanity"; *Harper Collins Study Bible*, Eccl. 1.3, 892), and he notes that, "j'ay pris une route par laquelle, sans cesse et sans travail, j'iray autant qu'il y aura d'ancre et de papier au monde" ("I have taken a road along which I shall go, without stopping and without effort, as long as there is ink and paper in the world"; III.9, 721).

Montaigne duplicates this variety of directions concerning the paradox of vanity in the digressive style of his essay, in which he wanders and jumps from topic to topic, from the theme of vanity to that of travel, and then to poetry. I also connect Montaigne's attitude to the paradox of vanity to his frequent inclusion of Horace, whose Horatian satire is like Montaigne's Pyrrhonian form

of irony: it comprises both self-derision and self-inclusion.

Finally, in “De la vanité,” I show how Montaigne analyzes his poiesis and essay writing as a form of poetry, like his own theory of poetry or *art poétique*. He describes the kind of poetry he likes as a kind of wandering, just like his own digressive writing style in “De la vanité” and other essays. He also crucially cites the passage from Plato where he describes an image of the potentially vatic or divine process of poetic inspiration, the poet pouring out multicolored matter from his mouth like a gargoyle (III.9, 995; 761). This citation, showing once again that ambiguous, Pyrrhonian overlap of sincerity (concerning the vatic power of poetic inspiration) and satire (the grotesque, bodily image of the poet vomiting) sparks what André Tournon calls Montaigne’s “structural irony” (56). This structural irony and Montaigne’s entire Pyrrhonian poiesis is a creative and productive response to the Pyrrhonian crisis.

In Part II of the dissertation comprising two chapters on Rimbaud, I will explore how Rimbaud as a writer and as a poet continued in the Pyrrhonian line of writing, and we will show how he developed his version of Romantic irony that, *mutatis mutandis*, can be read in correspondence with Montaigne’s Pyrrhonian poiesis. In Chapter 2, I first theorize this Pyrrhonian reading of Rimbaud focusing on an early, underexplored short story “Un cœur sous une soutane,” which I argue first shows Rimbaud developing a new form of Romantic irony, which I call his poietic or poietic irony. This poietic irony is similarly structured to Montaigne’s poiesis, in that it foregrounds the Pyrrhonian structure in its ambiguity between satire and sincerity in regards to the main character and narrator Léonard, and his romance and composition of erotic and religious poetry.

In Chapter 3, I continue to trace the Pyrrhonian crisis and quest at work in Rimbaud’s later text, *Une saison en enfer*. Like in my reading of Montaigne, I read Rimbaud against those

who dogmatically read this narrative of a poet-narrator in metaphysical and poetic crisis—namely, some argue this text shows him either as wholly Christian or as wholly atheistic. I argue instead that as an expression of a Pyrrhonian crisis, Rimbaud is instead trying out the different modes of being and thinking that the West has created, while also seeking out new modes through and out of the crisis. For example, out of the Christian mode which separates body and spirit, Rimbaud suggests a radical coupling of the two, which his attempts to create new forms of poetry also tries to produce. The text also resembles Montaigne’s Pyrrhonian textual form of the “(non-)apology” in the way that it is also a “(non-)palinody.” That is, Rimbaud inserts poems from an earlier period which he purports to critique (a rhetorical, poetical form called a palinody) as the excessive products stemming from his zealous, period of so-called *voyance* writing. But at the same time, by publishing these poems, and exhibiting their ambiguous poetic structures—for example, using a polyvocal dialogue in the poem “Éternité” which takes opposing positions concerning a version of the Pyrrhonian crisis—Rimbaud is also not apologizing for the poems, but he holds them up as the result of his Pyrrhonian poetic quest. Rimbaud’s intensification of poetic irony in *Une saison en enfer* also continues to foreground that quest—for example, just as with Léonard’s circulation between sincerity and satire, here Rimbaud oscillates between different expressions of inspiration and dejection. The poet-narrator of *Une saison en enfer* endures a Pyrrhonian metaphysical crisis, as he seeks out new forms of spiritual fulfillment, truth, and revelation, even as those positive moves upward also lead to despair and discouragement. Rimbaud’s Pyrrhonian oscillation between sincerity and satire or between nostalgia and derision, and the accompanying poetic ironic jumps, power Rimbaud’s Pyrrhonian writing quest.

My hope is that my emphasis on the zetetic aspect of Pyrrhonism in both Montaigne and

Rimbaud, as well as on its oscillation with its aporetic counterpart, will encourage both Montaigne studies and Rimbaud studies to see the inspirational, creative, and literary potential of the Pyrrhonian crisis. I am convinced that Montaigne was right to persevere on the Pyrrhonian paradox and that its structures are still relevant to the contemporary era, not only for literary studies and creative writing but also for daily life. I also hope that this dissertation can begin to show that Rimbaud was observing the same dynamics of Pyrrhonism, but on his own terms and via his own journey through his own particular poetic and metaphysical crises. As a writer and scholar, I see the real potential of Pyrrhonian writing: we must continue to push ourselves to try out new ideas and to believe in new ways of being and thinking, and try to creatively write through these discoveries. But we must also always be ready to question ourselves and to question others, and to exhibit this changed course in all writing. This dual attitude of self-questioning, and the impetus to create, is the poetic ethos that corresponds to the Pyrrhonian crisis. Other writers—especially those who are engaged in confronting the prickly religious and metaphysical questions through their writing, but who also have the flair for expansive forms of irony—can be considered in this framework of Pyrrhonian writing, but in my estimation, Montaigne and Rimbaud are the two whose writing undeniably follows the radical, wandering, experimental Pyrrhonian quest out of the Pyrrhonian crisis. Montaigne’s writing asks, “Que sçay-je?” (“What do I know?”; II.12, 527; 393) and Rimbaud’s responds, “Je est un autre” (“I is an other”; 370-1).

## Chapter One:

### *Que sçay-je ? Pyrrhonian Poiesis in Montaigne's Essais*

In order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion, we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress ad infinitum.

—Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

The radical paradox of Montaigne's Pyrrhonism is the ability to see the statement of doubt undone by its enunciation, a paradox he illustrates by explaining the use of natural medicines like rhubarb: “quand ils [les philosophes Pyrrhoniens] prononcent: J’ignore, ou: Je doute, ils disent que cette proposition s’emporte elle mesme, quant et quant le reste, ny plus ne moins que la rubarbe qui pousse hors les mauvaises humeurs et s’emporte hors quant et quant elle mesmes” (“when they [the Pyrrhonian philosophers] declare ‘I do not know’ or ‘I doubt,’ they say that this proposition carries itself away with the rest, no more nor less than rhubarb, which expels evil humors and carries itself off with them”; II.12, 527; 392-3). Not only does the act of doubting carry away that which it doubts, but it carries itself away too—that is, it carries doubt away too—leaving a radical uncertainty beyond doubt. Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism is a product of his unique form of writing, where the philosophical message is combined with irony to also include irony and satire along with its seriousness; here the philosophical idiom is given a

gastro-intestinal envelope, allowing for both seriousness and satire. This capacity for a form of irony that allows for the two levels to coexist is inherent to the Pyrrhonian paradox since one idea can be tried out alongside an alternative, very different idea, such as the expression of a serious, philosophical truth alongside a humorous, excremental metaphor. I argue that, unlike what colloquially is understood to be the meaning of skepticism, there is space for the positive position of belief within Pyrrhonian skepticism. Following the doubt or suspension of belief (the aporetic moment) is not simply the shooting down of other and all positions, but also the capacity for the suspension of disbelief—that is, for belief (the zetetic moment), but non-dogmatic, since it is open, uncertain, and impermanent once in combination with the aporetic moment. Just as when one enters the space of theatrical fiction and imagines as real the different roles and fictions presented on-stage, one must purposefully try out different beliefs or positions to advance the debate or the quest for truth. This zetetic aspect allows for the doubt of skepticism to turn full circle back to the possibility of different beliefs and different ideas to be tried. After the rhubarb-like doubt carries itself away too, the radical uncertainty means that another idea can be zetetically tried out, and it can be aporetically doubted again. It does not imply that all ideas are doomed to failure, rather, the radical uncertainty means that both the zetetic and aporetic options are possible. For Montaigne, finding a way to express both levels of Pyrrhonism was not a way out of the Pyrrhonian crisis, in which the criterion of reason was shown to be ungrounded, but a way of confronting it through his writing. This confrontation of the Pyrrhonian conditions of subjectivity reveals his self to be mutable and multiple in its skeptical attempts at essaying the world. By writing through this revelation with its zetetic and aporetic levels, Montaigne engages in a skeptical meta-poiesis (a self-analysis of his poiesis, the conditions of the creation of his writing) and invents a Pyrrhonian way of writing.

## Paradox of the Mutable Montaignist Subject

Montaigne's unique literary quality replicates on a formal level what he concentrates on in his essays, that is, his central understanding that the coherent, unified subject is a fiction, and that the self that underlies the fictional front is multiple, changeable, and forever in motion.<sup>11</sup> He writes of this decentered subject when he writes about the changeable nature of the judgment, of perceptions, and every variety of natural and human life throughout his essays:

Les autres forment l'homme; je le recite et en represente un particulier bien mal formé, et lequel, si j'avoy à façonner de nouveau, je ferois vraiment bien autre qu'il n'est. Meshuy c'est fait. Or les traits de ma peinture ne forvoyent point, quoy qu'ils se changent et diversifient. Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne. Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse: la terre, les rochers du Caucase, les pyramides d'Aegypte, et du branle public et du leur. La constance mesme n'est autre chose qu'une branle plus languissant. Je ne puis

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<sup>11</sup> The crucial study on Montaigne and the subject remains Hassan Melehy's *Writing Cogito: Montaigne, Descartes, and the Institution of the Early Modern Subject*. Jean Starobinski's *Montaigne en mouvement* is also foundational in its theoretical discussion of the shifting subjectivities Montaigne takes on throughout the *Essais*. Another key source in this area is Antónia Szabari's "'parler seulement de moi': The Disposition of the Subject in Montaigne's Essay 'De l'art de conferer.'" Her approach also shows that Montaigne undermines the presentation of an imaginary self through the process of his writing: "the imaginary dimension of a text is no longer defined by its subsidiariness to the extra-textual reality called 'self' but by its own rhetorical, logical, and poetical properties" (1002).

asseurer mon objet. Il va trouble et chancelant, d'une yvresse naturelle. Je le prens en ce point, comme il est, en instant que je m'amuse à luy. Je ne peints pas l'estre, je peints le passage: non un passage d'aage en autre, ou, comm edict le people, de sept en sept ans, mais de jour en jour, de minute en minute. Il faut accommoder mon histoire à l'heure. Je pourray tantost changer, non de fortune seulement, mais aussi d'intention. C'est un contrerolle de divers et muables accidens et d'imaginations irresolues et, quand il y eschet, contraires: soit que je sois autre moy-mesme, soit que je saisisse les subjects par autres circonstances et considerations. Tant y a que je me contredits bien à l'aventure, mais la verité, comme disoit Demades, je ne la contredy point. Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois: elle est tousjours en apprentissage et en espreuve. (III.2, 804-5)

Others form man; I tell of him, and portray a particular one, very ill-formed, whom I should really make very different from what he is if I had to fashion him over again. But now it is done. Now the lines of my painting do not go astray, though they change and vary. The world is but a perennial movement. All things in it are in constant motion—the earth, the rocks of the Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt—both with the common motion and with their own. Stability itself is nothing more but a more languid motion. I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing [*le passage*]. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. I may presently change, not only

by chance, but also by intention. This is a record of various and changeable occurrences, and of irresolute and, when it so befalls, contradictory ideas: whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects. So, all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict. If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial. (III.2, 610-11)

Montaigne's *Essais* is not a philosophical treatise on stable being, but a text on changeable subjects that he can only *peindre* (portray or paint) as if an artist. Both the Montaignist subject (his self, but also, the way he generally defines and describes subjectivity) and the world are in motion, multiple, and other: "soit que je sois autre moy-mesme, soit que je saisisse les subjects par autres circonstances et considerations" ("whether I am different myself, or whether I take hold of my subjects in different circumstances and aspects"). Note how the alliteration of the *s*'s and use of the subjunctive intensifies the othering of the *je* and the subjects of the world in this crucial sentence in this famous passage. From one essay to another, one edition to another, if not from the start to the end of even one sentence, we are asked to dispel the notion of any one stable intention of the author Montaigne. What is stable, however, is Montaigne's faithfulness to the quest for the truth; it is just that the products of that quest are always in motion: "Tant y a que je me contredits bien à l'aventure, mais la verité...je ne la contredy point" ("I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth...I do not contradict"). This understanding of his text as a collage of many, even contradictory ideas in motion, while also remaining faithful to the truth, is in line with what he developed under the aegis of Pyrrhonism in his longest, most philosophical essay.

As outlined in the introduction, Montaigne's development of his Pyrrhonian writing in

the “Apologie de Raimond Sebond” shows his oscillation between zetetic and aporetic modes, an oscillation that allows him to best express the mutability of the subject and the world, both of which are subject to the mutability which results in the epistemological Pyrrhonian crisis. That mutability also expresses itself in the epistemological antinomy at the heart of the “Apologie”—that is, that humankind can or cannot have knowledge, and equally, that humankind’s search for that knowledge is or is not vain. This antinomy between these two contradictory ideas is the tension at hand concerning Sebond’s project of natural theology, or the ability to know of God through nature.

On the one hand, Montaigne aporetically states that it is the teachings of religious truth, that human life is the vainest of vanities, and thus that human reason and humankind itself are mutable, that humankind is unable to know or be known:

Que nous presche la verité, quand elle nous presche de fuir la mondaine philosophie, quand elle nous inculque si souvant que nostre sagesse n’est que folie devant Dieu; que, de toutes les vanitez, la plus vaine c’est l’homme; que l’homme qui presume de son sçavoir, ne sçait pas encore que c’est que sçavoir; et que l’homme, qui n’est rien, s’il pense estre quelque chose, se seduit soy mesmes et se trompe? (II.12, 449).

What does truth preach to us, when she exhorts us to flee worldly philosophy, when she so often inculcates in us that our wisdom is but folly before God; that of all vanities the vainest is man; that the man who is presumptuous of his knowledge does not yet know what knowledge is; and that man, who is nothing, if he thinks he is something, seduces and deceives himself? (II.12, 328)

He even claims that “Ces sentences du saint esprit expriment si clairement et si vivement ce que

je veux maintenir” (“These statements of the Holy Spirit express so clearly and so vividly what I wish to maintain”; II.12, 449; 328). What could be a stronger statement than that? But Montaigne’s Pyrrhonian style of *passage* admits no stopping points, and the other side of every antinomy or contradiction is also tried out.

On the other side, Montaigne writes in favor of Sebond’s work, which shows that we might know God through nature: “Sebond s’est travaillé à ce digne estude, et nous montre comment il n’est piece du monde qui desmante son facteur” (“Sebond has labored at this worthy study, and shows us there is no part of the world that belies its maker”; II.12, 446; 326). Indeed, Montaigne quotes from the Bible again to show that this correspondence between above and below is also enshrined in Scripture: “Les choses invisible de Dieu, dit saint Paul, apparoissent par la creation du monde, considerant sa sapience eternelle et sa divinite par ses oeuvres (“The invisible things of God, says Saint Paul, appear by the creation of the world, when we consider his eternal wisdom and his divinity by his works”; II.12, 446; 326). That antinomy between the ability to know or not to know in the “Apology” is also given expression in a third way, so that the text keeps going back and forth, oscillating around the paradox. Montaigne accepts that Sebond’s arguments to show God through nature are simply the first step, that faith must intervene if humankind wants to truly know God. But he supports Sebond by saying that, even if we say that all human knowledge without faith and grace is vanity, or *fantasies pures humaines*, he says that Sebond’s vain *fantasies* are the best ones possible, the arguments made:

Et, quand on les despouillera [des argumens de Sebond] de cet ornament et du secours et approbation de la foy, et qu’on les prendra pour fantasies pures humaines, pour en combattre ceux qui sont precipitez aux espouvantables et horribles tenebres de l’irreligion, il se trouveront encores lors aussi solides et autant fermes que nuls autres de

mesme condition qu'on leur puisse opposer de façon...qu'il souffrent la force de noz preuves, ou qu'ils nous en facent voir ailleurs, et sur quelque autre sujet, de mieux tissues et mieux estofées. (II.12, 448)

And even if we strip [Sebond's arguments] of this ornament and of the help and approbation of faith, and take them as purely human fancies, to combat those who are precipitated into the frightful and horrible darkness of irreligion, they will still be found as solid and as firm as any others of the same type that may be opposed to them; so that...they must admit the force of our proofs, or show us elsewhere and on some other subject proofs better woven and of better stuff. (II.12, 327)

In this positive light, even though they might be *fantasies*, they still might have some solid and firm rational grounds.

In this serpentine, Pyrrhonian way, which supports one side of an argument, and then another, Montaigne's apology of Sebond paradoxically also becomes a non-apology, since it both agrees that his work directs us to know God, but also that human knowledge is in itself vain *fantasie* without rational grounds. Montaigne seems to only mildly remember Sebond's text with fondness, and because he seems to not directly and vigorously defend Sebond, many critics have perpetuated the inaccurate notion that the "Apologie" is, as Catherine Demure puts in a take characteristic of these attitudes, "the longest *Essay* on a text which Montaigne literally destroys!" (200). Philippe Desan, too, interprets the seeming non-apology of Sebond as the result of Montaigne having had to write the "Apologie" as a way of publicly distancing himself from his translation of *Theologia naturalis*, since the political and religious situation had changed from when it was first published in 1569, making it more dangerous to affiliate his views with Sebond:

"why did he spend so much time on this famous defense that is an apology only in name?" (286). However, Demure also later accounts for the ambiguous nature of the text and admits the paradox: "He is totally for and against Sebond, throughout, in contradiction and in paradox—in the coherent but contradictory affirmation that we must approach the theological quest as perhaps the most urgent, fundamental pursuit, while at the same time we are convinced of the aporetic result of such a quest" (200). But many critics have tended to elide the first half of this paradox, the understanding of Pyrrhonism as a type of urgent, fundamental "quest"; not just critics, but readers, too, are easily misled to read the text in this dualistic light.

From the start of *Les essais*, Montaigne also recognizes that the reader may be in a state of doubt, split between thinking that we may know or do not know. **We** are often left wondering what Montaigne means or wondering whether one is reading the text inadequately. In the preface, the question is raised by his insisting on his sincerity, whether the reader can trust the writer or not: "C'est icy un livre de bonne foy, lecteur...Je veus qu'on m'y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention et artifice: car c'est moy que je peins" ("This book was written in good faith, reader[...]I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice, for it is myself that I portray[/paint]"; I, 3; 2). While this statement might at first glance appear to be an unironic promise that what he writes is his honest, good faith ideas, without artifice or trickery, the very expression "bonne foy" itself can contain its opposite, and indeed multitudes, since the phrase invokes multiple questions of faith. By insisting on his "good faith," one might ask oneself why Montaigne would have to assert the

good faith in the first place—that is, in this way, he raises suspicion rather than dispelling it.<sup>12</sup> It can be taken to mean that he is merely well-meaning, but that the “bonne foy” is fallible. Zahi Zalloua characterizes this paradox through the rhetoric of the time: “the matter of ‘bonne foy’ is not beyond scrutiny, since the rhetorically savvy Renaissance reader would not have failed to ‘make irony happen’ (to use Linda Hutcheon’s suggestive expression)...that is, by recognizing the ways in which Montaigne’s note ‘Au lecteur’ functions as a *captatio benevolentiae*: a rhetorical move aimed at winning over his readers, at capturing their good will” (*Montaigne* 8). With the mutability of the Montaignist subject and the world (“je peints le passage”), and Montaigne’s potentially ironic style from the very start to match, the reader must learn to keep up: “C’est l’indiligent lecteur qui pert mon subject, non pas moy; il s’en trouvera tousjours en un coing quelque mot qui ne laisse pas d’estre bastant, quoy qu’il soit serré. Je vois au change, indiscrettement et tumultuairement. Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes. Il faut avoir un peut de folie qui ne veut avoir plus de sottise” (“It is the inattentive reader who loses my

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<sup>12</sup> This useful interpretive technique can be identified in Freud’s concept of negation, which he explains in the essay of the same name, with his famous example of an analysand who was telling Freud about a dream he had. The patient says, “You ask who this person in the dream can have been. It was *not* my mother” (367). Freud writes, “We emend this: so it was his mother...It is just as though the patient had said: ‘It is true that I thought of my mother in connection with this person, but I don’t feel at all inclined to allow the association to count’” (367). Although it is not expressed through negation (though the other negations in the prologue might be explored in the same way), it is as if Montaigne is raising the question of bad faith through his statement of good faith.

subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room. I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming. A man must be a little mad if he does not want to be even more stupid, say the precepts of our masters"; III.9, 761). Time and time again, Montaigne seems to accept that his mutable, changeable style and his corresponding impulse to write are on the side of "folie," or of "fantasie." In this case, Montaigne challenges the reader to not be the inattentive reader, but to join him in this new way of reading that accepts the *passage* and change of the mutable subject.

It is also because of this mutable subject that Montaignist criticism has been contentious because it has often depended upon either interpreting the intention of Montaigne as some ideological position like atheist, Catholic, Epicurean, or the like, or upending traditional categories of understanding Montaigne in place of another (sometimes inaccurate) category—as when Charles Bashaw, like others, declares him to be "skeptical, like Socrates and Augustine, rather than an absolute skeptic, like Sextus Empiricus; in ancient skeptical terms, an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian," although the use of "absolute" in the context of Pyrrhonism always seems to be contrary to that form of skepticism (177). According to what is often referred to as Pierre Villey's schema, generally, in book one, Montaigne was a Stoic (or from about 1572 to 1576), then in book two (or around 1576) he was in his skeptical crisis, and in book three (or from 1576 on), Epicurean, a schema that breaks down upon investigation (Frame "A Detail" 160).<sup>13</sup> Other Montaigne debates have been waged throughout the centuries, from the earlier

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<sup>13</sup> See Villey's *Les sources & l'évolution des Essais de Montaigne*. Against this "evolutionist" interpretation of Montaigne, others like Armaingaud argued that *Les essais* showed a consistency

disputes leading from the Pyrrhonian crisis as to whether or not Montaigne was a libertine atheist, to much more recent ones which continue to try to pinpoint Montaigne's political, religious, and philosophical positions.<sup>14</sup>

Among these latter philosophical interpretations of Montaigne's mutable subject are those that seek to fit *Les essais* into a preconceived mold, even though they might be useful as hypotheses to observe the problems of Montaigne's text. One major example of this is André Tournon, who rightfully calls Montaigne's skepticism a quest for a form of a new language. For Tournon, this new language consists of Montaigne's "route par ailleurs" (route by another way),

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of Montaigne's character and core opinions. One could also contend that as a skeptic, he could be taking on any philosophical mode at any moment without becoming for that matter a Stoic or an Epicurean.

<sup>14</sup> The Port-Royal philosophers, including Pascal, had a complex relationship to Montaigne, but mostly read him as an atheist (Popkin 180-3; Norton 4). Sainte-Beuve would later concur (Norton 6). On the other hand, there were those like Charron and La Mothe le Vayer who adapted Montaigne's skepticism into Catholicism (Popkin 57-61, 84-86). Jan Miernowski underlines this later position, showing how Montaigne's skepticism is consistent with the Augustinian tradition of negative theology, the concept that God cannot be understood in thought or represented in language (37-8). Popkin refers to Montaigne as a "skeptical fideist," consistent with Montaigne's notion in the "Apologie" that one must be skeptical of human reason but also have faith (*fides*, in Latin) in God. But Popkin's interpretation is loose: "Whether he was trying to undermine Christianity or defend it, he could have made the same non sequitur that he did—namely, because all is doubt, therefore one ought to accept Christianity on faith alone" (56).

a “stratégie de zététicien” (zetetic strategy) wherein, by presenting a paradox, the readers must sort through the mixture of different narrative detours of sincerity and irony to consider for themselves that paradox. But Tournon implies that the reader must finally transcend this “embroilment” and “feeling of disorder,” as it is only a strategy of Montaigne's to challenge us to find the underlying unity (35-6). In different terms, Ann Hartle's philosophical approach to Montaigne's skepticism comes to the same conclusion as Tournon, that a diachronic, dialectical philosophical order is presented in Montaigne, where “the dialectic transform[s] unexamined belief and autonomous reason to bring them into harmony...from simple inarticulate belief he ascends through doubt to autonomous rationality and then descends to the truth of faith” (145). Hartle's dialectical interpretation becomes a diachronic one that depends upon the linearity of narrative time, instead of entertaining the possibility of keeping two antinomic elements separated, even if the narration of the text appears to transcend from one to the other: “he cannot simply return to or deliberately adopt the stance of unthinking belief as if he had never ascended from it” (145). On the contrary, Montaigne's mutable subject contains multitudes. Hartle's reading, like Tournon's unifying one, are models that suspend the radical, paradoxical crisis and oscillation between truth and faith that Montaigne's “Apologie” presents, and the other oscillating elements that he presents in *Les essais* through his Pyrrhonian writing, which ebb and flow without any final resolution. Montaigne's dual Pyrrhonian quest of essaying the world and questioning himself—his meta-poiesis—allowed for him to develop a new way of writing that allowed for the complex mutability of the world and the self to be approached.

## Poiesis and Imagination in Natural Theology

Montaigne develops his Pyrrhonian writing to express his skeptical poiesis—that is, the ambiguity surrounding the creation and writing of his essays, and the ambiguity of whether his use of his imagination, *invention*, or *fantasie* affects the truth-value of his quest for truth in his essays. The concept of poiesis is usually associated with poetic writing, and originates from the age of ancient philosophy, with poiesis meaning “making” or “an act or process of creation” (Brown 7). The term reemerged in the early modern discussions of poetry, with Sir Phillip Sidney arguing that the poietic act meant that the poet,

disdaining to be tied to any subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow, in effect, into another nature, in making things either better than nature brings forth, or quite anew, forms such as were never in nature...so as he goes hand in hand with nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts, but freely ranging within the zodiac of his own wit. (Sidney cited in Brown 7)

Poiesis thus maintains this meaning, that of the poet who makes out of nothing. On the other hand, Heidegger introduced another interpretation of the notion, when he detailed poiesis as instead a kind of “bringing forth”: “As Heidegger...frequently reminds us, *poiesis*, for the Greeks, meant a bringing forth, a *pro-duction* to presence, and covered not only that which is brought forth by the artist and craftsman but also by nature. *Poiesis*, then, is very much an act of disclosure and drawing forth rather than a willful ‘making’” (Corby 123). Writing that becomes Pyrrhonian inevitably stumbles upon this ambiguity concerning poiesis, because the question of how poetry and writing are made has forever been caught in the mystery of whether the writing subject can create from nothing, or whether there is a power in nature that writes through the

writing subject as some sort of vessel or medium. This inherent skeptical ambiguity in poiesis is usually also uncovered when the poet or writer is skeptically realizing that the world and the self are mutable and unknowable, and therefore this type of act of questioning the conditions of one's poiesis, and then expressing that questioning in one's writing becomes a meta-poiesis.

Furthermore, Sidney also considered that poiesis went beyond the duality of truth and false, but instead the poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (52).<sup>15</sup> In this, the poet goes beyond the ambiguity of truth and false, and like the Pyrrhonian, does not affirm but inhabits a different poetic realm beyond the everyday logic and rational language. Montaigne's Pyrrhonian writing proves to be like poetry in its skeptical ability to both engage and supersede rational thought, like the frenzy of the divinely inspired, or vatic poets. He also taps into this poetic and meta-poietic ability to go beyond rational thought in his engagement of the imagination in his translation of Sebond and later (non-)apology of his text.

In the "Apologie," Montaigne skeptically and meta-poietically resurrects the prehistory of his translation of Sebond's *Theologia Naturalis*, because by writing his strange apology that is also a non-apology of Sebond, the issue of his support for Sebond in his early translation is also raised. Montaigne self-questions the poietic creation of his version of Sebond, into which he inserted changes that stressed the importance of the imagination in Sebond's natural theological

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<sup>15</sup> See Sarkar for an illuminating discussion of this idea of poiesis as "non-affirmation" in Sidney, early modern English literature, and Shakespeare (94).

enterprise.<sup>16</sup> If Montaigne's mutable subject is papered over, the radical nature of his apology-non-apology structure—or (non-)apology—and the underlying meta-poietic pre-history of his translation of Sebond can easily be misinterpreted. Mireille Habert's innovation in her *Montaigne traducteur* is to show that Montaigne had changed many of Sebond's Latin expressions concerning understanding and reason to words related to the imagination in his translation of Sebond. For example: “in corde cogitare” (“to think in one's heart”) in an excerpt becomes: “Puis que [l'homme] a receu de [Dieu] la suffisance de discourir et d'imaginer, *que peut-il moins faire que d'employer son discours et son imagination à le concevoir le meilleur et le plus grand qu'il pourra ?*” (“Since [man] received from [God] the ability to discourse and to imagine, what less could he do than to use his discourse and his imagination to conceive the best and the greatest that he can?”; 185). Both Montaigne's understanding attitude to the potential vanity of Sebond's project, and his highlighting of this subjective aspect of the imagination to participate in the venture of natural theology, contribute to an underscoring of that essential ambiguity of the imaginary function in the project of natural theology. Humankind's attempts to understand nature, faith, and reason come up against the essential ambiguity at play in the paradox that is also at work in Pyrrhonism.

Montaigne made many changes to Sebond's text, which at face value appear to show Montaigne softening the blow of Sebond's natural philosophy—that is, he changes the wording

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<sup>16</sup> A critical edition of Montaigne's translation has still not been published, and it still is absent from Montaigne's *Œuvres complètes* established by the Pléiade, nor is there any available English translation of either Sebond's Latin original or of Montaigne's translation.

when it appears that Sebond implies that one does not need the support of Scripture when the Book of Nature would suffice for us to understand God's truth. Screech presents a key passage to show Montaigne's theological differentiation; first the Sebond version: "In addition this science teaches everyone really to know, without difficulty or toil, every truth necessary to Man concerning both Man and God; and all things which are necessary to Man for his salvation, for making him perfect and for bringing him through to life eternal. And by this science a man learns, without difficulty and in reality, whatever is contained in Holy Scripture" (xxiii). Then Montaigne's adapted translation: "In addition this science teaches everyone to see clearly, without difficulty or toil, *truth insofar as it is possible for natural reason*, concerning knowledge of God and of himself and of what he has need for his salvation and to reach life eternal, *it affords him access to understanding what is prescribed and commanded* in Holy Scripture" (xxiv). Desan provides other key examples: "when Sebond writes 'the foundation of all the knowledge that is necessary for man,' Montaigne translates this as 'the little foundations of the doctrine pertaining to man for his salvation'... '[the reader] will learn more in less than a month from this knowledge than from the study of learned doctors for a hundred years' is rendered by 'in a few months he will make himself more knowledgeable and versed in several subjects, to know which it would be required to spend a long time reading several books'" (293).

Montaigne's translation does indeed dilute the notion that there is an exact comparison between these two books, or that there is the possibility of deducing real analogies between God and his correspondences in nature, "comme une vérité en soi...comme si le théologien voulait faire oublier que la pensée analogique ne produit qu'une équivalence proportionnelle entre des ordres de grandeurs différents" ("as a truth in itself...as if the theologian wanted to make us forget that analogy only produces an proportional equivalence between orders of different

magnitudes”; Habert *Montaigne traducteur* 148).<sup>17</sup> Analogy, the medieval way of thinking from Saint Augustine that encouraged seeing such correspondences between heaven and earth, only allowed humankind to go so far: “[l’analogie] ne lui permet jamais d’aller jusqu’à Dieu car seule la personne du Christ peut le faire” (“analogy didn’t allow us to go up all the way to God, since only the person of Christ could do that”; 148). At times, Montaigne’s adjustments are humorous: Sebond’s chapter outline that “per hominum *imus et ascedimus in Deum* sicuti per veram scalam per quam debemus ascendere in cognoscendo” (“and from humankind we ascend to God by a true ladder which we climb in our understanding”) becomes for Montaigne “et tout d’un fil il *enjambera* de l’homme jusques à Dieu” (“and in one stretch he leaps from humankind right up to God”; 152). Here Montaigne’s ironic wording shows that such an endeavor might not be as easy as Sebond asserts. Philip Hendrick goes even further in interpreting these adjustments and argues that Montaigne sought to betray the spirit of Sebond’s original theory of natural theology through his translation altogether (*Montaigne et Sebond*). But the differences between the original Latin Sebond and Montaigne’s French Sebond cannot be entirely reduced to a desire to avoid Church censorship and to conform.

Other analyses, including Habert’s, point the way to a deeper understanding of how Montaigne’s translation work reveals the seeds of more important literary thinking about **the** paradox of subjectivity that he would later pursue in *Les essais*. Habert shows that Montaigne focuses his attention on subjectivity in his translation including the greater use of *je* and *nous*, and an increased awareness of the subjective philosophical dialogue with the reader: “La traduction ne trahit pas le discours théologique; elle fait simplement de la parole l’émanation non plus d’une voix intemporelle et anhistorique, mais d’un sujet vivant défini par sa pensée et son

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<sup>17</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

projet; qui s'adresse à d'autres sujets singuliers dont il partage les efforts intellectuels, les espoirs, les doutes, et les inquiétudes" ("The translation doesn't misinterpret the theological import, it merely makes the language of the text no longer the emanation of an atemporal and ahistorical voice, but of a living subject defined by its thought and intention, and which addresses itself to other discrete subjects with whom it shares its intellectual efforts, its hopes, its doubts and its concerns"; *L'inscription* 47). Habert's thesis is that Montaigne's translation thus changes Sebond's focus on an objective, rational ability of humankind to understand and to prove, to a subjective position of belief, one that, through changes in the translation, "semble inviter le lecteur à considérer la démarche de la 'théologie naturelle' moins comme suspecte que comme vaine" ("seems to invite the reader to consider the process of 'natural theology' not so much as suspicious but as vain"; *Montaigne traducteur* 134). In tandem with this attitude to Sebond's perhaps vain project, though, are the elements of subjectivity in the translation that highlight the essential, fundamental—but unstable, Pyrrhonian—function of the imagination.

*Imagination* and its pseudo-cognate *fantasie* (fancy, imagination) in the "Apologie" maintain this ambiguity. When introducing the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment, *fantasie* is used (one of only two times in *Les essais*) in reference to the more nefarious potentiality of the faculty of the imagination: ("Is it not better to remain in suspense than to entangle yourself in the many errors that the human fancy [*fantasie*] has produced? Is it not better to suspend your conviction than to get mixed up in these seditious and quarrelsome divisions?"; II.12, 373). Imagination, on the other hand, appears 116 times in *Les essais*, and twenty-six times in the "Apologie." Its field of signification is much wider, comprising both the notion of human fancy as vanity and the positive aspect of imagination that appeared in Montaigne's translation of *Theologia naturalis*. In fact, the first usage of imagination in the "Apologie" is raised in positive

reference to Sebond: “Je trouvoy belles les imaginations de cet authour, la contexture de son ouvrage bien suyvie, et son dessein plein de pieté” (“I found the ideas [*imagination*s] of this author fine, the arrangement and sequence of his work good, and his plan full of piety”; II.12, 440; 320). The critics who overlook the necessary ambiguity of Montaigne’s use of the imagination would have to interpret this first usage of it as dissimulation, a kind thing to say before overthrowing Sebond.

Invention is a major term in the “Apologie” that expresses the ambiguity of early modern theories of imagination in poesis. Patricia Parker shows how the rhetorical concept of invention was linked in the early modern period with the faculty of the creation and production of copious material for a text or argument, as there was a tension between the needs for “copious invention and orderly arrangement” (114). With some distinctions, imagination was linked in the early modern discourse to the crucial, literary, rhetorical faculty of invention, and in fact, Montaigne appears to use the two as pseudo-cognates when first discussing Sebond:

Cet ouvrage me semblant trop riche et trop beau pour un authour duquel le nom soit si peu conneu...je m’enquis autrefois à Adrien Tournebu, qui sçavoit toutes choses, que ce pouvoit estre de ce livre; il me respondit qu’il pensoit que ce fut quelque quinte essence tirée de Saint Thomas d’Aquin: car, de vray, cet esprit là, plein d’une erudition infinie et d’une subtilité admirable, estoit seul capable de telles imaginations. Tant y a que, quiconque en soit l’authour et inventeur (et ce n’est pas raison d’oster sans plus grande occasion à Sebond ce tiltre), c’estoit un tres-suffisant homme et ayant plusieurs belles parties. (II.12, 440)

Since this work seemed to me too rich and splendid for an author whose name is so little

known...I once inquired of Adrianus Turnebus, who knew everything, what could be the truth about this book. He replied that he thought it was some quintessence extracted from Saint Thomas Aquinas; for in truth, that mind, full of infinite erudition and admirable subtlety, was alone capable of such ideas. At all events, whoever is the author and inventor (and it is not reasonable, without greater occasion, to rob Sebond of that title), he was a very able man with many fine qualities. (II.12, 321)

In this excerpt, Montaigne connects Turnebus's attribution of the text to Aquinas as a matter of uncovering who was the "inventeur" of the text capable of such "imagination."

In *Pléiade Poetics*, Grahame Castor delineates the early modern significations of both *imagination* and *invention* to prove that, while they are quite distinct, they both partake in an area of writing that can be considered in the realm of poetics:

The concept of invention, of finding the material of art in Nature, had always been closely connected with the 'classical' theory that all art is in some sense an imitation of Nature. It was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, with the triumph of the 'romantic' view of art as an independent product of the human mind, that invention was superseded by the concepts of genius, originality, and creative imagination. (86)

This early modern concept of invention was not only the creation of ideas but an uncovering and recycling of ideas through the preexisting matter in nature and arguments in literature and history. As Castor puts it, "the poet has not always been a creator. In the sixteenth century, and probably for some time afterward as well, he was simply a maker, a *facteur*" (90). In some ways, though, what Castor calls the "romantic" or "creative imagination" is similar to the first early modern view of invention as the imaginative faculty to create and produce copious arguments. Poiesis, as we have shown, maintained this exact ambiguity between whether the creator creates

or uncovers the idea or argument as a part of their process of invention.

A potentially divine element of poiesis, of the creation of works, even though more associated with the post-romantic theory of poetry, was however sometimes connected to the more methodical early modern concept of invention: “the idea that invention is an inborn quality which the gods bestow upon those destined to become poets was current long before Voltaire...[and] [t]he link between invention and the individual visitations of divine inspiration was also of long standing” (88). Raphael Falco uncovers a similar ambiguity in the renaissance writings of Marsilio Ficino, who is usually connected with the resurrection of an ancient theory of inspiration via so-called divine furor with the soul as mediator (in a state of furor) between the divine and the human. Falco points out yet again the ambiguity between the creator as a persona with agency or as a vessel of inspiration (the vatic poet) in Ficino’s work: “a curious paradox emerges: at the same time that he rejects the inspired poet’s agency in producing poetry, Ficino manages to remythicize vatic myth and fashion for himself a vatic persona” (102). Although for the most part, Ficino is focused on the divine origins of the vatic myth, at the same time there remains this ambiguity concerning “the function of the human poet’s will in the process of inspiration” (122). In poiesis itself, and early modern understandings of poetry, there is an ambiguity between the imagination of divine inspiration or creation, and the notion of invention as a making from the created forms already present in nature.

The negative aspect of “invention,” similar to the case of “fantasie,” is attached to the word at many moments, while the excusable (because universal) side of the vanity of human knowledge counterbalances this negative aspect, as in Montaigne's assessment of both religious traditions and philosophers. First, he expresses the vanity of both endeavors:

Il y a d'autres subjects qu'ils ont belutez, qui à gauche, qui à droite, chacun se travaillent

à y donner quelque visage, à tort ou à droit. Car, n'ayans rien trouvé de si caché dequoy ils n'ayent voulu parler, il leur est souvent force de forger des conjectures foibles et folles, non qu'ils les prissent eux mesmes our fondement, ne pour establir quelque verité, mais pour l'exercice de leur estude...Et, si on ne le prenoit ainsi, comme couvririons nous une si grande inconstance, varieté et vanité d'opinions que nous voyons avoir esté produites par ces ames excellentes et admirables? Car, pour exemple, qu'est-il plus vain que de vouloir deviner Dieu par nos analogies et conjectures, le regler et le monde à nostre capacité et à nos loix, et nous server aux despens de la divinité de ce petit eschantillon de suffisance qu'il loy a pleu despartir à nostre naturelle condition? (II.12, 512-13)

There are other subjects that they [the philosophers] have sifted and tossed, some to the left, some to the right, each one laboring to give them some appearance, right or wrong. For, having found nothing so occult that they did not want to talk about it, they often had to forge weak and foolish conjectures; not that they themselves took them for a foundation, or to establish any truth, but for the exercise of their study...And if we did not take it this way, how could we defend such great inconsistency, variety, and vanity in the opinions that we see produced by these admirable and excellent souls? For what is there, for example, more vain than to try to divine God by our analogies and conjectures, to regulate him and the world by our capacity and our laws, and to use at the expense of the Deity this little shred of ability that he was pleased to allot to our natural condition? (II.12, 380)

In this passage, not only does Montaigne ascribe to the philosophers and even theologians the

negative aspect of invention that “vanité” represents, but here is perhaps his most obvious non-apology of Sebond’s natural theology. For, “qu’est-il plus vain que de vouloir deviner Dieu par nos analogies et conjectures” (“what is there... more vain than to try to divine God by our analogies and conjectures”); does this not sound like a description of Sebond’s attempt to read God in the Book of Nature? But at the same time, the negative aspect of vanity is combined with admiration for the vain endeavor nevertheless, since Montaigne notes—perhaps unironically—that the vain endeavors are undertaken “par ces ames excellentes et admirables” (“by such admirable and excellent souls”). Furthermore, one can detect in Montaigne’s use of the verb “belutez” (“sifted and tossed”), “qui à gauche, qui à droite” (“some to the left, some to the right”) an image of some flour or powder floating in the wind, as if recalling the vain wind of *Ecclesiastes*, a book referenced elsewhere in the “Apologie.” Oddly enough, the verb appears only once again in *Les essais*, in the “Apologie,” when describing what Montaigne’s acquaintance, “de profession ecclesiastique” (“an ecclesiastic by profession”), does to a passage to the Bible to interpret it to his liking: “Pourtant se trouve un stile nubileux et douteux en si frequent et ancient usage...Nombre d’esprits, le [l’auteur] belutants et secouants, en exprimeront quantité de forms, ou selon, ou à costé, ou au contraire de la sienna, qui lui feront toutes honneur” (“It is for this reason that a cloudy and doubtful style finds itself in such frequent and ancient usage...Numerous minds, sifting him [the author] and shaking him, will squeeze out of him a quantity of meanings, either like his own, or beside it, or contrary to it, which will all do him honor; II.12, 442). Here to sift means to manipulate a text to the level where one can extract any meaning from it that one wants, and with the mention of the friend being an ecclesiastic, the subtle connection to the vanity of *Ecclesiastes* joins the otherwise obvious description of a writerly vanity in this passage, and the former one.

The same attitude of excusing the condition of vanity in the inventions of human understanding is also extended to the inventions of human faith, and here Montaigne specifically focuses on the word invention. Just following the passage on vain philosophers, he describes one pagan approach to religion that he finds excusable, as it approaches the familiar concept of negative theology:

De toutes les opinions humaines et anciennes touchant la religion, celle là me semble avoir eu plus de vray-senblance et plus d'excuse, qui reconnoissoit Dieu comme une puissance incomprehensible...Dieu, par sa misericorde, daignant à l'avanture fomenter par ces benefices temporels les tendres principes d'une telle quelle brute connoissance que la raison naturelle nous a donné de luy au travers des fausses images de nos songes. (II.12, 513)

Of all the ancient human opinions concerning religion, that one, it seems to me, was most probable and most excusable which recognized God as an incomprehensible power...God in his mercy, perhaps deigning to foster by these temporal benefits the tender beginnings of a rough knowledge of him, however feeble, that natural reason has given us amid the false images of our dreams. (II.12, 380)

The opposing line follows: "Non seulement fausses, mais impies aussi et injurieuses sont celle que l'homme a forge de son invention" ("Not only false, but also impious and harmful, are those that man has fabricated of his own invention"; II.12, 380). The negative situation of the vanity of the opinions "que l'homme a forge de son invention" is counterbalanced with the more excusable vanity where "Dieu...daign[e] à l'avanture fomenter...les tendres principes d'une telle quelle brute connoissance que la raison naturelle nous a donné de luy." Invention or opinion within the

pagan religions can indeed have an excusable outcome, and he then cites two other examples of excusable inventions of pagan religion: “de toutes les religions que Saint Paul trouva en credit ꝑa Athenes, celle qu’ils avoyent desdiée à une Divinité cachée et inconnue luy sembla la plus excusable” (“of all the religions that Saint Paul found in credit at Athens, the one that they had dedicated to a hidden and unknown Deity seemed to him the most excusable”; II.12, 513; 380). A remarkable passage follows, which excuses human vanity and imagination in perhaps the clearest terms in all of the “Apologie”:

Pythagoras adombra la verité de plus pres, jugeant que la connoissance de cette cause premiere et estre des estres devoit estre indefinie, sans prescription, sans declaration, que ce n’estoit autre chose que l’extreme effort de nostre imagination vers la perfection, chacun en amplifiant l’idée selon sa capacité. Mais si Numa entreprint de conformer à ce projet la devotion de son peuple, l’attacher à une religion purement mentale, sans objet prefix et sans meslange materiel, il entreprint chose de nul usage: l’esprit humain ne se sçauroit maintenir vaguant en cet infini de pensées informes, il les luy faut compiler en certaine image, à son modelle. (II.12, 513)

Pythagoras adumbrated truth more closely in judging that the knowledge of this first cause, and being of beings, must be undefined, unprescribed, undeclared; that it was nothing else but the utmost effort of our imagination toward perfection, each man amplifying the idea of it according to his capacity. But if Numa undertook to make the piety of his people conform to this plan, to attach it to a purely intellectual religion, without any predetermined object or any material admixture, he undertook something unusable. The human spirit cannot keep on floating in this infinity of formless ideas; they

must be compiled for it into a definite picture after its own pattern. (II.12, 381)

Montaigne focuses on Pythagoras's paradoxical antinomy: on the one hand, the human mind is driven towards perfection, meaning that we are driven to fill in the gap of that empty first cause. This is what occurs at the zetetic level of the "imagination" which goes "vers la perfection" as a matter of "extreme effort." And although logically the missing first cause (which is God, the creator of the created world) cannot be represented, the human spirit needs ideas to take form, and after its own pattern. He must "amplifi[e] l'idée selon sa capacité," that is, represent ideas through the vanity of the limited human mind. We therefore must anthropocentrically imagine God, because everything must be represented through the human capacity, something that Montaigne in other moments is at pains to criticize. Once again, this ambiguous structure, around the related notions of vanity, invention, and imagination when it comes to human understanding and religion, prevails.

The citation of the "first cause" in the context of Pythagoras cannot help but recall the problem of the infinite regress of reason, which plays so large a role in Sextus Empiricus's presentation of Pyrrhonism. There, it is shown that human reason must fail because of this infinite regress towards the impossible first cause, when one keeps asking the cause of something else *ad infinitum*, something that the dominant Christian medieval scholasticism (such as Aquinas following Aristotle) constructed differently to fill in that first cause with God, thus stopping up the infinite regress. Here, Montaigne allows for the imagination to latch onto the image of the Christian God in one of his most direct statements on religion, and in particular, against the ban on iconography of the Protestant Christians:

La majesté divine s'est ainsi pour nous aucunement laisse circonscire aux limites corporels: ses sacremens supernaturels et celestes ont des signes de nostre terrestre

condition...Mais à peine me feroit on accroire, que la veue de nos crucifix et peinture de ce piteux supplice, que les ornements et mouvemens ceremonieux de nos eglises, que les voix accomodées à la devotion de nostre pensée, et cette esmotion des sens n'eschauffent l'ame des peuples, d'une passion religieuse, de tres-utile effect. (II.12, 513-4)

The divine majesty has thus let itself be somewhat circumscribed within corporeal limits on our behalf; his supernatural and heavenly sacraments show signs of our earthly condition...I could hardly be made to believe that the sight of our crucifixes and the pictures of that piteous agony, the ornaments and ceremonious thoughts, and that stirring of the senses, do not warm the souls of people with religious emotion very beneficial in effect. (II.12, 381)

Even Christianity, it is implied, fills in the void of the first cause with something of an artifice, because it is the vanity of human imagination that causes so great an effect, one that stirs the senses and warms the soul with emotion.

Another excusable, imaginary invention that warms Montaigne's soul follows directly after the previous statement on Christianity, a pagan one that is both caught up in ambiguous paradox and that is expressed through the poetry of Ronsard:

De celles ausquelles on a donné corps, comme la necessité l'a requis, parmy cette cecité universelle, je me fusse, ce me semble, plus volontiers attaché à ceux qui adoroient le Soleil, la lumiere commune, l'oeil du monde; et si Dieu au chef porte des yeux, Les rayons du Soleil sont ses yeux radieux...Fils aîné de nature et le pere du jour. D'autant qu'outre cette sienne grandeur et beauté, c'est la piece de cette machine que nous descouvrons la plus esloignée de nous, et, par ce moyen, si peu connue, qu'ils estoient

pardonnables d'en entre ren admiration et reverence. (II.12, 514)

Of the divinities that have been given a body, as necessity required, in the midst of this universal blindness, it seems to me I would most willingly have joined those who worshipped the sun—

the common light,

Eye of the world; and if our God has eyes,

They are the sun's bright rays that light the skies,

.....

First-born of nature, father of the day...

—inasmuch as besides this its grandeur and beauty, it is the part of this machine that we find farthest from us, and therefore so little known that they were to be pardoned for regarding it with wonder and reverence. (II.12, 381)

It is difficult to imagine such moments slipping past the Roman Catholic censors when they were scouring *Les essais* for questionable passages, even if it is couched in language such as noting the “universal blindness” of the pre-Christian ancients. The paradox is in the same structure as the first cause: we are blind to the true body of the sun, but worshipful of its effects and of the image we make of it. And even contemporary poets like Ronsard continued in this same tradition, combining the pagan and Christian beliefs, but using poetry as a form of imaginative invention that expresses itself through language, thus combining the fundamental paradox of the overlap of the irrational and the rational.

The vanity of human invention is also expressed through the form of Montaigne’s writing, as when Montaigne follows this passage with a long list that amplifies the diverse and

amazing things that the pagans had ascribed to God: “Thales, qui le premier s’enquesta de telle matière, estima Dieu un esprit qui fit d’eau toutes choses; Anaximander, que les Dieux estoient mourans et naissans à diverses saisons, et que c’estoyent des mondes infinis en nombre;

Anaximenes, que l’air estoit Dieu, qu’il estoit produit et immense, tousjours mouvant.

Anaxagoras...” (“Thales, who first inquired into this matter, thought God a spirit who made all things of water. Anaximander, that the gods were dying and being born at various seasons, and that they were worlds infinite in number. Anaximenes, that the air was a god, that he was created and immense, ever moving. Anaxagoras...”) and so on and so forth, through twenty-four further pagans and their various, strange, but remarkable beliefs (II.12 514; 381-2). What is remarkable here is not so much the content of the various pagan beliefs—although they are fascinating and throw poetic images upon the mind in unique ways—but that Montaigne performs their stunning variety through this long list. The vanity of human imagination is thus not just told but shown.

Montaigne ends the list with a humorous, mockingly ironic remark: “Fiez vous à vostre philosophie; vantez vous d’avoir trouvé la feve au gasteau, à voir ce tintamarre de tant de cervelles philosophiques!” (“Now trust to your philosophy; boast that you have found the bean in the [Twelfth Night] cake, when you consider the clatter of so many philosophical brains!”; II.12 516; 383). At first glance, this statement must be ironic, since in this discussion of the various schools of philosophy, and the various pagan religions, only the Christian faith, with its revealed understanding given to us by God, is beyond reproach. But once again, Montaigne finds the vanity of human reason and pagan religion excusable:

Le trouble des forms mondaines a gaigné sur moy que les diverses moeurs et fantasies aux miennes ne me desplaisent pas tant comme ells n’instruisent, ne m’enorgueillissent pas tant comme ells m’humilient en les conferant; et tout autre choix que celuy qui vient

de la main expresse de Dieu, me semble choix de peu de prerogative...Les polices du monde ne sont pas moins contraires en ce subject que les escholes: par où nous pouvons apprendre que la Fortune mesme n'est pas plus diverse et variable que nostre raison, ny plus aveugle et inconsiderée. (II.12, 516)

The confusion in the ways of the world has gained this from me, that conduct and fancies different from mine do not so much displease me as instruct me, do not so much swell my pride as humble me when I compare them; and any choice other than that which comes from the hand of God direct seems to me a choice of little advantage...The governments of the world are no less contradictory in this respect than the schools; whereby we learn that Fortune herself is no more diverse and variable than our reason, nor more blind and unthinking. (II.12, 383)

This is the mention of the pagan Fortune that the Roman censors required Montaigne to alter; it was a change that he never made (Desan *Les formes* 108). And although he does not worship the pagans or agree with their different fanciful inventions of religion and philosophy, he excuses it, finds poetry that partakes in the same ambiguous dilemma, and himself is participating in the paradox through his writing style and his subject matter. He is not truly agreeing that you should “trust to your philosophy,” when you consider so much diversity of fanciful inventions; but it is not a truly ironic remark, since he is also affirming that there is an element of trust in human understanding, or an element of faith, or the imagination.

It is this larger conception of the necessity of vanity and the imagination in Pyrrhonism that is also what Montaigne calls the most useful and truthful invention:

Il n'est rien en l'humaine invention [que le Pyrrhonisme] où il y ait tant de verisimilitude

et d'utilité. Cette-cy presente l'homme nud et vuide, recognoissant sa foiblesse naturelle, propre à recevoir d'en haut quelque force estrangere, desgarni d'humaine science, et d'autant plus apte à loge ren soy la divine, aneantissant son jugement pour faire plus de place à la foy, ny mescreant, ny establissant aucun dogme contre les observances communes; humble, obeisant, disciplinable, studieux; ennemi d'haeresie, et s'exemptant par consequent des vaines et irreligieuses opinions introduites par les fauces sectes.

(II.12, 506)

There is nothing in man's invention [as Pyrrhonism] that has so much verisimilitude and usefulness. It presents man naked and empty, acknowledging his natural weakness, fit to receive from above some outside power; stripped of human knowledge, and all the more apt to lodge divine knowledge in himself, annihilating his judgment to make more room for faith, neither disbelieving nor setting up any doctrine against the common observances; humble, obedient, teachable, zealous; a sworn enemy of heresy, and consequently free from the vain and irreligious opinions introduced by the false sects.

(II.12, 375)

As a human invention, Pyrrhonism is a form of acknowledgment (*recolnoissant*) of vanity, but stripped away of that vanity as much as possible by recognizing it. The passage ends with a biblical passage Montaigne had inscribed on the ceiling of his library that he attributes there to *Ecclesiastes* but is actually found elsewhere, in the *Book of Psalms*: "*Dominus novit cogitationes hominum, quoniam vanae sunt*" ("*The Lord knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity*"; II.12, 375). The amplification of such expressions of the universality of vanity, being a condition of the rhubarb-like, meta-skeptical Pyrrhonism, underlines the notion that Montaigne places the

invention of Pyrrhonism underneath the ambiguity of the same vanity, and with all the ambiguity that the term invention also carries with it. Even though Pyrrhonism “s’exemptant par consequent des vaines et irreligieuses opinions introduites par les fauces sectes” (“is a human invention free from the vain opinions of the false sects”), it is never perhaps, totally immune from the inescapable human vanity (II.12, 506; 375). Everything can be incorporated into Pyrrhonism as possibilities, so long as there is no final assent. Therefore, at the end of the “Apologie” the possibility of understanding God is raised as an idea, but only under exceptional circumstances.

It is perhaps in this same vein that Montaigne uses the words of religion to describe the Pyrrhonian “sect”: “Leur mot sacramental, c’est *epecho*” (“Their sacramental word is ἐπέχω”; II.12, 505; 374). And in discussing the life of Pyrrho, he disputes the fables that show him as a “stupide et immobile” figure, “attendant le hurt des charretes” (“waiting for carts to hit him”; II.12, 505; 374). He writes: “Cela est encherir sur sa discipline... Si n’est-il point de secte qui ne soit contrainte de permettre à son sage de suivre assez de choses... s’il veut vivre” (“That is outdoing his doctrine[...]. Moreover, there is no sect that is not constrained to permit its sage to conform in a number of things[...]. if he wants to live,”) and this includes that:

il est tenu d[e]...se laisser remuer aux apparences, pourveu qu’elles n’ayent point d’expresse contrariété. Il a un corps, il a une amie; les sens le poussent, l’esprit l’agite. Encore qu’il ne treuve point en soy cette propre et singuliere marque de juger et qu’il s’aperçoive qu’il ne doit engager son consentement, attendu qu’il peut estre quelque faulx pareil à ce vray, il ne laisse de conduire les offices de sa vie pleinement et commodement. (II.12, 506)

He is bound to...let himself be swayed by appearances, provided that they show no express contrariness. He has a body, he has a soul, his senses impel him, his mind stirs him. Even though he does not discover in himself that peculiar and singular mark of the right to judge, and perceives that he must not pledge his consent, since there may be some falsehood resembling this truth, he does not fail to carry on the functions of his life fully and comfortably. (II.12, 374)

The quasi-religious element of Pyrrhonism is also coupled with the unalterable fact that, even Pyrrho himself “a un corps” (“has a body”) and a soul where “les sens le poussent” (“senses impel him”) and “l’esprit l’agite” (“mind stirs him”). The necessity of the imaginary or inventive function is also implied in these remarks.

A Pyrrhonian reading of Montaigne must maintain the ambiguity of Montaigne's Pyrrhonian paradox: we cannot take either the side of the power of fallen human reason. The aporetic side of the balance insists that we suspend judgment, so if we only took this side we might declare Montaigne to be an atheist, or a pagan-influenced philosopher. Or, if we only took the side of the power of the imaginary function, of faith, we might have Montaigne, the uncomplicated Catholic fideist or even conservative Catholic. But these two levels must work together, in *passage*. On this other side of the balance is the imaginary, zetetic side of the Pyrrhonian paradox which can make the cycle of Pyrrhonism continue, because one must also be willing to, at times, suspend disbelief. For the Pyrrhonian: “Des trois actions de l’ame, l’imaginative, l’appetitive et la consentante, ils en reçoivent les deux premières; la dernière, ils la oustiennent et la maintiennent ambiguë, sans inclination ny approbation d’une part ou d’autre” (“Of the three functions of the soul, the imaginative, the appetitive, and the consenting, they accept the first two; the last they suspend and keep it ambiguous, without inclination or

approbation, however slight, in one direction or the other"; II.12, 503; 372). So much Montaignist criticism gets lost in the difficulty in Montaigne's own invention, in his pursuit to figure the two sides of the balance in the essay form of the "Apologie." The mutable subject of Montaigne is also difficult to represent with our faulty language of reason, which Montaigne understands and explains in his meta-poietic way. To accept the truth of nature and humankind in *passage* requires a different way of writing. By writing this partial apology in favor of inventors like Sebond and the other poets and philosophers whom he cites, while also introducing the Pyrrhonian crisis of rationality (which figures the non-apology side of the essay), he figures this further crisis between reason and faith. It is a crisis and a paradox that must not be resolved.

To best figure this Pyrrhonian paradox, *Les essais* must be considered as a form of poiesis under the species of poetry, and not as a philosophical treatise of reason and systems. Montaigne's poietic and poetic essaying is a form of writing that, like the early modern notion of *invention*, includes an element of divine, or vain, imaginary inspiration that, just as the figure of the rhubarb, undoes and goes beyond the rational, propositional aspect of prosaic, everyday language. Therefore, it can be said to be closer to poetry than the pre-existing forms of prose, insofar as prose generally adheres to the everyday rules of language and fallen reason with its propositional, Academic logic. It is also a meta-poiesis because it questions the making of its text, as when Montaigne recalls his personal experience in coming to writing and translating Sebond, or when he draws upon his own experience as a reader-writer, or cites so many authors alongside his resurrection of Pyrrhonism. Through the paradox of Pyrrhonism, he also analyzes the fallibility of human reason and its paradox of infinite regress and need for the imagination, not only in others, but in oneself and at the very time of its own act of analysis. The meta-poietic poetry of *Les essais* with its paradoxical Pyrrhonism and paradoxical, mutable subjectivity

appears in its first complete outlines in the “Apologie” of the second book, and it is his project of meta-poietic poetry that intensifies in Montaigne’s third book, which contains the essay “De la vanité” which Rimbaud would stumble upon about three centuries later.

## **Montaigne's Poetic Turn to Form and the Body**

Although Montaigne's unique Montaignist-Pyrrhonian writing of the mutable subject both predates his focus on skepticism in the “Apologie de Raymond Sebond” and can characterize his entire oeuvre, there is a perceptible shift within this consistently inconsistent style that appears with the 1588 publication of his third book and in the later handwritten additions to the so-called Bordeaux copy, an intensified concern for form and the body that was already fundamental to *Les essais*. The entire shift or intensification for Montaigne concerning form and writing in the third book is associated with an increased concern for the body and different forms of bodily sensation and experience and a new form of writing that is both inspired by and similar to or perhaps a form of poetry. This new form of writing is not, as some have argued, the result of a disassociation from the world, but an ethical response that confronts the Pyrrhonian crisis productively, because its poietic and poetic formal experimentation expresses Montaigne's innovation that the self is an other. Through his writing of *Les essais*, his poietic experiment in form allowed Montaigne to try on a multitude of different perspectives, and this Pyrrhonism allowed him to split his self into this radical multitude and to write out this process.

Desan has proposed this shift and Montaigne's increased concern with form and the body in his research, especially in *Montaigne: les formes du monde et de l'esprit*: “Au fur et à mesure

des allongails, on remarque que le corps occupe une place de plus en plus centrale. Ainsi, le troisième livre lui consacre plusieurs chapitres; ce qui permet à Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani d'affirmer que 'l'écriture du moi devient dans le troisième allongail une écriture du corps.' En effet, le corps de Montaigne se confond bientôt avec son moi, surtout après 1588”

(“Progressively via Montaigne's additions, it is apparent that the body becomes more and more central. Thus, the third book dedicates several chapters to it, which allows Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani to assert that ‘the writing of the self becomes for the third books’ additions a writing of the body.’ In fact, the body of Montaigne soon gets mixed up with his self, especially after 1588”; 52-3; my trans.).<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Desan also summarizes concisely the changed aspects of Montaigne's writing from the third book onwards: “C’est à cette époque qu’il commença à multiplier les remarques sur lui-même, ses expériences, ses opinions et jugements personnels, voire ses habitudes de table et les dysfonctionnements d’un corps malade” (“It is at that time that he began to multiply his remarks on himself, his experiences, his opinions and personal judgements, even his table manners and the disfunctions of his ill body”; *De la nature*, 11). In his biography on Montaigne, Desan narrates this turn to his self and body and to form as being a result of Montaigne’s supposedly failed excursion into politics, and this narrative of the shift allows us to entertain what aspects of Montaigne's turn correspond to some version of crisis, whether personal or Pyrrhonian (*A life* 518). Rather, in the text itself, this new form of writing confronts the Pyrrhonian crisis, firstly, through its return to radical poietic formal experimentation that was already fundamental to his Pyrrhonian innovation of *Les essais*.

During the section near the end of the “Apologie” where Montaigne demonstrates how even the senses are untrustworthy, we can see a progression between the different editions and

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<sup>18</sup> All translations of Desan are mine.

the way that a concern for form, the body, and language is intensified from the 1588 edition onwards. In the following passage, [A] refers to the first, 1580 and 1582 editions, [B] to the additions added when the third book was published in 1588, and [C] to the marginal additions of the Bordeaux copy, which Montaigne was writing by hand into a 1588 version for future publication when he died:

[A] A un homme ennuyé et affligé la clarté du jour semble obscurcie et tenebreuse. Nos sens sont non seulement alterez, mais souvent hebetez du tout par les passions de l'ame. Combien de choses voyons nous, que nous n'appercevons pas si nous avons nostre esprit empesché ailleurs?... Il semble que l'ame retire au dedans et amuse les puissances des sens. Par ainsin, et le dedans et le dehors de l'homme est plein de foiblesse et de mensonge. [B] Ceux qui ont apparié nostre vie à un songe, ont eu de la raison, à l'avanture plus qu'ils ne pensoyent. Quand nous songeons, nostre ame vit, agit, exerce toutes ses facultez, ne plus ne moins que quand elle veille; mais si plus mollement et obscurement, non de tant certes que la differance y soit comme de la nuit à une clarté vifve; ouy, comme de la nuit à l'ombre: là elle dort, icy elle sommeille, plus et moins. Ce sont tousjours tenebres, et tenebres Cymmerienes. [C] Nous veillons dormans, et veillans dormons. Je ne vois pas si clair dans le sommeil; mais, quand au veiller, je ne le trouve jamais assez pur et sans nuage. Encores le sommeil en sa profondeur endort par fois les songes. Mais nostre veiller n'est jamais si esveillé qu'il purge et dissipe bien à point les resveries, qui sont les songes des veillans, et pires que songes. Nostre raison et nostre ame, recevant les fantasies et opinions qui luy naissent en dormant, et autorisant les actions de nos songes de pareille approbation qu'elle faict celles du jour, pourquoy ne mettons nous en doubte si nostre penser, nostre agir, n'est pas un autre songer, et nostre

veiller quelque espece de dormir? (II.12, 596)

[A] To a man vexed and afflicted the brightness of the day seems darkened and gloomy. Our senses are not only altered, but often completely stupefied by the passions of the soul. How many things we see which we do not notice if our mind is occupied elsewhere!...It seems as though the soul draws the powers of the senses inward and occupies them. Thus both the inside and the outside of man is full of weakness and falsehood. [B] Those who have compared our life to a dream were perhaps more right than they thought. When we dream, our soul lives, acts, exercises all her faculties, neither more nor less when she is awake; but if more loosely and obscurely, still surely not so much so that the difference is as between night and bright daylight; rather as between night and shade. There she sleeps, here she slumbers: more and less. It is always darkness, and Cimmerian darkness. [C] Sleeping we are awake, and waking asleep. I do not see so clearly in sleep; but in my wakefulness I never find pure and cloudless enough. Moreover sleep in its depth sometimes puts dreams to sleep. But our wakefulness is never so awake as to purge and properly dissipate reveries, which are the dreams of the waking, and worse than dreams. Since our reason and our soul accept the fancies and opinions which arise in it while sleeping, and authorize the actions of our dreams with the same approbation as they do those of the day, why do we not consider the possibility that our thinking, our acting, may be another sort of dreaming, and our waking life another kind of sleep? (Montaigne II.12, 450-1)

In this remarkable passage, not only does Montaigne's overall argument show a radical suspension of judgment by raising the possibility of whether or not we can even discern if we are

ever awake or dreaming, but the progression from the different editions shows the intensification in Montaigne's project quite clearly.

In the first edition's section of this passage on dreaming and waking, its argument, as before, uses the comfortable third person to describe what is, in its content, radically destabilizing: “A un homme ennuyé et affligé” (“To a man vexed and afflicted”). It also does refer to “nos sens” (“our senses”), but then it goes back to referring to “l'ame” and “l'homme” generally speaking. Then, in the 1588 edition's addition, the content is intensified with a vivid image that hints at a more personal illustration, using firmly the first person plural: “Quand nous songeons, nostre ame vit, agit, exerce toutes ses facultez, ne plus ne moins que quand elle veille” (“When we dream, our soul lives, acts, exercises all her faculties, neither more nor less when she is awake”). And when he speaks of the soul here, it is more so personified than merely described: “là elle dort, icy elle sommeille, plus et moins” (“There she sleeps, here she slumbers: more and less”). The language itself is intensified in its rhetorical structures, and the staccato rhythm of the short clauses and lists approaches poetic prose. These tendencies on the level of form and content are then expanded in the Bordeaux copy additions, with Montaigne's initial affirmation seeming to serve as both chiasmatic, poetic aphorism and radically uncertain, Pyrrhonian paradox: “Nous veillons dormans, et veillans dormons” (“Sleeping we are awake, and waking asleep”). The strange structure of the phrase might be rendered in translation as: “We awake asleep, and waking we sleep,” which shows through the uncanny grammatical changes of the similar structures of the words the interchangeable and radically indeterminate qualities of sleeping and waking. It is also a terrifying baroque topos of illusion and reality, whether or not life is a dream,

comprising an entire world of Pyrrhonian crisis.<sup>19</sup> Consciousness is intertwined with the unconscious, the stable, wakeful self is undermined into the otherness of dreams. The rhetorical structure further performs this blending, as what at first glance appears to be a chiasmatic form (with the verbs in chiasmic positions) in fact differs from that form by changing the verb forms and instead reveals a false parallel between the two halves of the phrase. As confusing as this poetic pseudo-chiasmatic statement may be, he follows it up with personal reflection, first put into first person singular, and then in first person plural to amplify this othering of the self: “Je

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<sup>19</sup> The confluence of baroque topoi with Pyrrhonism and the Pyrrhonian crisis in Montaigne is a rich area for further research. This includes this baroque topos where dreams and reality are put into ambiguous, Pyrrhonian interchangeability (as evidenced by the Spanish play *La vida es sueño* {*Life is a Dream*} by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Corneille’s *Clitandre*, or Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). A similar baroque technique occurs with the *mise en abîme*, or the play-within-a-play in theatre, as in *Hamlet*. It also can be seen in the more fundamental theatrical topos of the “*Theatrum mundi*,” also familiar from Shakespeare, the idea that “all the world’s a stage.” This baroque structure can be seen in the Pyrrhonian zetetic mode, where one must “suspend disbelief” like the spectators observing a theatrical fiction, but also in its aporetic underbelly, where the dream or theatrical illusion must also switch back to reality. There are other aspects of theatricality in Montaigne, not just when he comments on his own history as an actor in “De l’Institution des Enfants,” but in the overall performativity of his Pyrrhonian writing as this overlap of zetetic and aporetic modes, which correspond to the baroque overlapping of illusion and reality (II.26, 175). See Jean Rousset’s *La Littérature de l’âge baroque en France* for the classic study on the French baroque.

ne vois pas si clair dans le sommeil; mais, quand au veiller, je ne le trouve jamais assez pur et sans nuage” (“I do not see so clearly in my sleep...but our wakefulness is never so awake....”). Instead of leaving the Pyrrhonian crisis as a remote, philosophical paradox, Montaigne's innovation is to incorporate it into his personal, physical experience of hard sleeping, dreaming, and the daydreams of reveries and fancies.

As this passage alone also hints at, this turn in the third book also concerns the body, which was already fundamental to *Les essais*, showing even more strongly that the Montaignist-Pyrrhonian innovation throughout the entire *Essais* is a radical poiesis. By questioning the ontology of the self and subjectivity, and in this passage's case, of the wakeful and dreaming self, Montaigne's increased concern for the form of his writing is refracted through the body with its sensations and its perceptions (and dreams). The process of writing is thus affirmed as a process that is bodily in every way, and not the realm of a dualist system that would separate it from an idealized mental activity.

This return in the third book to a concern for form and the body that was already fundamental to *Les essais* shows even more strongly that the Montaignist-Pyrrhonian innovation throughout the entire *Essays* is a new form of writing that is inspired by and adjacent to poetry.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> There are a few who make the argument that Montaigne's prose is or must be considered close to prose-poetry, but the argument is certainly a minor one when compared to the tendency of specialists to consider either Montaigne's philosophical engagements or to analyze his writing as prose. There is precedent, such as Dorothy Gabe Coleman who also asserts that Montaigne's essays are like “prose-poems” and analyzes the poetics of his text in its connection to the Latin authors. While her argument does very interestingly revolve around a reading of Montaigne's

Montaigne compares the ability of animals to communicate to the ability of human gestures to communicate—it is communication beyond the fallen language:

Quoy des mains? nous requerons, nous promettons, appellons, congedions, menaçons, prions, supplions, nions, refusons, interrogeons, admirons, nombrons, confessons, repentons, craignons, vergoignons, doubtons, instruisons, commandons, incitons, encourageons, jurons, tesmoignons, accusons, condamnons, absolvons, injurions, mesprisons, deffions, despitions...et quoy non? d'une variation et multiplication à l'envy de la langue. De la teste: nous convions, nous renvoyons...Quoy des sourcils? quoy des espauls? Il n'est mouvement qui ne parle et un langage intelligible sans discipline et un langage publique: qui faict, voyant la varieté et usage distingué des autres, que cestuy cy doibt plus tost estre jugé le propre de l'humaine nature. (II.12, 454)

What of the hands? We beg, we promise, call, dismiss, threaten, pray, entreat, deny,

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poetics connected to the tradition of the “allusiveness” of poetry leading from the classic poets, she does not make the systematic connection between that poetic practice and the congruent realm of skepticism (see ch. 5-8). Other studies that explicitly and usefully link Montaigne to poetry are by Gérard Bocholier, Lance K. Donaldson-Evans, and Gisèle Matheiu-Castelani, with the latter two comparing Montaigne to the Pléiade poets. Two other crucial and very useful studies on Montaigne and poetry are *Quand “les poètes feignent”*: “fantasie” et fiction dans les *Essais de Montaigne* by Olivier Guerrier (2002), and *Prose et poésie dans les Essais de Montaigne* by Nathalie Dauvois (1997). Andrea Frisch also makes the fascinating connection between poetry and his real experience hearing the Tupi as he recounts in “Des cannibales.”

refuse, question, admire, count, confess, repent, fear, blush, doubt, instruct, command, incite, encourage, swear, testify, accuse, condemn, absolve, insult, despise, defy, vex... and what not, with a variation and multiplication that vie with the tongue. With the head: we invite, send away... What of the eyebrows? What of the shoulders? There is no movement that does not speak both a language intelligible without instruction, and a public language; which means, seeing the variety and particular use of other languages, that this one must rather be judged the proper to human nature... (II.12, 332)

This extraordinary passage replicates in the visual form of its list and in the images thrown onto consciousness what it seeks to prove in its content: that human language is fallible, but that human nature has an order of being that is beyond that fallible language. It is also one of the several passages throughout *Les essais* that foreground the poetic qualities of language. The list of gestures works, because we can imagine them, changing the ordinary function of language into something visual. It is perhaps also another nod to Sebond's *Theologia naturalis* where the signs of nature's creatures (including both animals and humankind) can be read like letters. This reading of signs is a potentiality to read nature outside of the fallible, fallen human reason and language. At the same time, by putting these gestural words in such an imposing list, Montaigne shows what can be added to language by referencing this super-linguistic order of communication, and in this way, the list takes on a poetic form. Poetry reaps the benefits of language reaching beyond its logical limits, and here Montaigne pushes his language beyond the limits of spoken language.

Rational human language is affected by the fallibility of human reason, a necessary failure (like the zetetic necessity of the imagination or vanity) which informs Montaigne's intimate, poetic writing of Pyrrhonism:

Je voy les philosophes Pyrrhoniens qui ne peuvent exprimer leur generale conception en aucune manière de parler: car il leur faudroit un nouveau langage. Le nostre est tout formé de propositions affirmatives, qui leur sont du tout enemies: de façon que, quand ils disent: Je doute, on les tient incontinent à la gorge pour leur faire avouer qu'au-moins assurent et sçavent ils cela, qu'ils doutent. Ainsin on les a contraints de se sauver dans cette comparaison de la medicine, sans laquelle leur humeur seroit inexplicable... (II.12, 527)

I can see why the Pyrrhonian philosophers cannot express their general conception in any manner of speaking; for they would need a new language. Ours is wholly formed of affirmative propositions, which to them are utterly repugnant; so that when they say "I doubt," immediately you have them by the throat to make them admit that at least they know and are sure of this fact, that they doubt. Thus they have been constrained to take refuge in this comparison from medicine, without which their attitude would be inexplicable... (II.12, 392)

The way Montaigne makes it sound in this discussion of the Pyrrhonians' poetic understanding of their creation of their quest for truth, they would prefer not to speak at all if they could, or they wish that they could communicate by a telepathy which would not be constrained by the fallibility of human language and reason. Their poesis is shot through with skepticism since they cannot even "exprimer leur generale conception" without feeling constrained by language. Montaigne incorporates the first and third person strategically here, since he is discussing "ils," the Pyrrhonians, and he describes how "on les tient incontinent à la gorge" ("you [or we] have them by the throat"). The "on" involves all of us, including Montaigne, into the position of not

just looking at the Pyrrhonians from the outside, but figures us even attacking them violently out of our confusing their explanation of their strange manner of discourse. But this turns out to be mere poietic, Pyrrhonian gymnastics: Montaigne is not at the throat of the Pyrrhonians, for only a few lines later he is enshrining their idea and phrase as his motto, “Que sçay-je?” Montaigne must rip himself out of himself and try on the cloak of the Academic skeptic at the Pyrrhonian skeptic’s throat, before he reveals that he was that Pyrrhonian all along—“ils” were “je,” the self must be split into multiple selves, and these selves tried on like the actor trying on different costumes and roles on a Pyrrhonian quest for truth. And like the actor who gestures on the stage, bringing poetry to life, that quest also entails the need to seek out a way of communicating truth that is different from the rational language of philosophy. Montaigne points toward the “nouveau langage” of poetry, and to the meta-poiesis of the paradox of vanity.

### ***Omnia vanitas: Vanity and Fortune from the "Apologie" to "De la vanité"***

As we have seen in the “Apologie,” paradox is a structure to which Montaigne is attached, and in “De la vanité,” this form is also intensified, transforming the metaphysical paradox resulting from Pyrrhonism into one that is fundamentally about Montaigne's meta-poietic writing form. In the “Apologie,” the main paradox revolves around whether or not humanity has the ability to read the truth of God via the Book of Nature, or if one requires the revelation of the divine word. In other words, is human knowledge vain, or not? As we have seen, a version of this paradoxical structure concerns Montaigne's translation of Sebond as it is crystallized around his discussion of the inventions of the philosophers, or, of their processes of the creation of texts or arguments, that is, poiesis. We can appreciate the vain, wild inventions of

philosophers (and of the pagans philosophers before them, as with the long passage of the twenty-four different pagan divinities; II.12 514; 381-2) who each attempt to rationalize the world through their diverse fancies and reveries, their inventions and imaginations. But on the other hand, there is the negative aspect of invention and imagination, where the excesses of vain imagination and invention in the quest to seek truth aligns with the aporetic suspension of judgment. That is, the inventions of the philosophers must be put into rational language, but because of the limits of our reason and our language, according to Pyrrhonism, the creations of imagination and invention can also be shown to be untrue. Implied, however, is the fact that Montaigne's chapter is a version of this paradox in a meta-poietic way, since he does not only analyze the paradox of poiesis of others, but he shows his Pyrrhonian antinomy of, on the one hand, his imaginative quest for truth, and on the other hand, his aporetic failures. In this way, Montaigne's discussion of the paradox of Pyrrhonism becomes a writing that both is and is about poiesis. And yet, in the "Apologie," the full weight of this argument—radical though it is in its outlines—is somewhat lessened through a depersonalized style, in comparison to book three.

This shift from a depersonalized poiesis to a personal, intensified form of it can be seen around the use of the topos of vanity. Additions to the "Apologie" from 1588 onwards underscore the intensification of Montaigne's argument, showing the move from the argument on the level of content to the level of form. An example of vanity as a Bordeaux copy addition shows this intensification of Montaigne's formal Pyrrhonian argument: "[B] La difficulté est une monoye [C] que les sçavans employent, comme les joueurs de passe-passe, pour ne découvrir la vanité de leur art, et [B] de laquelle l'humaine bestise se paye aysément" ("[B] Difficulty is a coin [C] that the learned employ, like conjurors, in order not to reveal the vanity of their art, and [B] which human stupidity readily accepts as payment"; II.12, 508; 376). This insertion of the

Bordeaux copy (the [C] addition) within the addition of the 1588 version entails a formalization of the matter at hand: the vanity of the philosophers. Keep in mind that by engaging in philosophical questioning or essaying, the fact that Montaigne asserts that philosophizing is vain, sophisticated trickery is already a somewhat destabilizing theme. Just previously, in the original version, Montaigne presents the same problem of the difficulty of philosophers, but as before, in the form of a somewhat less destabilizing, rational presentation:

Aristote nous entasse ordinairement un grand nombre d'autres opinions et d'autres creances, pour y comparer la sienne et nous faire voir de combien il est allé plus outre et combien il a approché de plus pres la verisimilitude...[II] est le prince des dogmatistes; et si nous aprenons de luy que le beaucoup sçavoir aporte l'occasion de plus doubter. On le void à escient se couvrir souvant d'obscurité si espesse et inextricable qu'on n'y peut rien choisir de son advis. C'est par effect un Pyrrhonisme sous une forme resolutive. (II.12, 507)

Aristotle ordinarily piles up for us a great number of other opinions and other beliefs, to compare with his own and show us how much further he has gone and how much closer he has come to verisimilitude...[He] is the prince of dogmatists; and yet we learn from him that knowing much gives occasion for doubting more. We see him often deliberately covering himself with such thick and inextricable obscurity that we cannot pick out anything of his opinion. It is in fact a Pyrrhonism in an affirmative form. (II.12, 376)

In this original passage, the notion of Aristotle's piling up of others' arguments in his own discourse as a "Pyrrhonism in an affirmative form" is a fascinating signal towards a new formalization of what Montaigne had been describing as Pyrrhonism. But its wording is distant

and somewhat systematizing: “que le beaucoup sçavoir aporte l'occasion de plus doubter” sounds pithy and clever, and explains Aristotle’s Pyrrhonian connection well, but very impersonally. The analysis seems to be describing a third person, and yet, the fact that Montaigne had already announced his attachment to Pyrrhonism with its “mot sacramental...*epecho*” as his motto, combined with his obvious similarity to the situation that he is describing—Montaigne's citational practice of citing the opinions of so many others—he creates a disturbing tension. The addition of the 1588 version ups the ante with the expression “difficulty is a coin,” thus differentiating the rational argument of the original text via the rhetoric of metaphor to illustrate itself. And by placing the metaphor on the universal level of “l’humaine bestise,” the tension is intensified, since the problem of Aristotle and “humaine bestise” (“human stupidity”) is reemphasized for perhaps all of us. The Bordeaux copy addition adds another layer of rhetorical illustration, the comparison of difficulty as a coin, with those who practice sleight-of-hand: “comme les joueurs de passe-passe, pour ne descouvrir la vanité de leur art” (“like conjurors, in order to not reveal the vanity of their art”; II.12, 376). This image is an even more vivid example. Although the metaphor of “difficulty as a coin” begins to formalize the problem of dense philosophical texts as a kind of equation with monetary values, with the image of the conjurer of sleight-of-hand, a quasi-poetic image of this conjurer is thrown onto the mind. The word “passe-passe” itself refers to any number of magic tricks wherein the magician must perform tricks with dexterity, the quick movements of the hands, of cups, cards, or other implements, and thus, the image of such tricks entails the fact that behind this activity is falsity, trumpery, or vanity. In the original version, the possibility that Montaigne is describing himself is inevitably raised, then with the 1588 edition, the use of metaphor intensifies the problem. But with the simile of the “vanity” of the “*passe-passe*,” a third layer of tension is created. The paradox of Montaigne's

discourse on vanity in the “Apologie” is only intensified through the frames added with the 1588 and Bordeaux copy additions. Vanity is thus raised in the “Apologie” as a theme, but in fact, it is truly only given this intensity through the 1588 and Bordeaux copy additions, so it makes sense that Montaigne would devote an essay to vanity in the third book, in “De la vanité.”

The third book's “De la vanité,” is often described as the most complex of Montaigne's essays, except for the “Apologie,” which in its length is even more exceptional, because of the way it interweaves so many seemingly diverse themes as vanity, travel, house management, philosophy, and Rome. Montaigne's paradox of vanity, whether or not it is vain to write about vanity, opens up a wide, and weird, space in which Montaigne can think about his book and what value there is or is not to his vocation as a writer, if it is also necessarily, ultimately a vain activity. He qualifies writing generally in many negative terms, condemning “escrivailerie” (“scribbling”), as “quelque symptome d'un siècle desbordé,” (“a sort of symptom of an unruly age”) as if setting up his humility as a writer via *excusatio propter infirmitatem* (by excuse of infirmity; III.9, 721). He calls such writing idle, corrupt, vain. He equates the foolishness of writing to the criminality of vagabondage and idlers, and even asserts that there ought to be some law against all of these three figures equally: “il y devrait avoir quelque coercion des loix contre les escrivains ineptes et inutiles, comme il y a contre les vagabons et faineants. On banniroit des mains de nostre peuple et moy et cent autres. Ce n'est pas moquerie” (“there should be some legal restraint aimed against inept and useless writers, as there is against vagabonds and idlers. Both I and a hundred others would be banished from the hands of our people. This is no jest”; III.9, 721). Montaigne even claims that his own scribbling ought to be criminalized. He then rather graphically, and grotesquely, compares his writings to excrement, by way of the story of the gentleman who studied his daily *escroupements*: “Ce sont icy, un peu plus civilement, des

excremens d'un vieil esprit, dur tantost, tantost lache et tousjours indigeste" ("Here you have, a little more decently, some excrements of an aged mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested"; III.9, 721). But at the same time, and even before his disparagement of writing, he asserts that this paradox of vanity is something on the level of a religious vocation: "la divinité nous en a si divinement exprimé devroit estre soigneusement et continuellement medité par les gens d'entendement" ("What the Divinity has so divinely told us about it ought to be carefully and continually mediated by people of understanding"; III.9, 721). On the one hand, vanity is that empty thing upon which Montaigne must vainly meditate *ad infinitum*: "Qui ne voit que j'ay pris une route par laquelle, sans cesse et sans travail, j'iray autant qu'il y a aura d'ancre et de papier au monde?" ("Who does not see that I have taken a road along which I shall go, without stopping and without effort, as long as there is ink and paper in the world?"; III.9, 721).

On the other hand, this repetitive cycle is raised to an eternal level, where the wisdom of Montaigne's favorite Book of *Ecclesiastes* imposes its paradox upon people who seek understanding: "Vanity of vanities: all is vanity" (Eccles., i. 2.).<sup>21</sup> The essay begins under

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<sup>21</sup> An inscription of a version of this second line of *Ecclesiastes* appeared at a beam on Montaigne's ceiling above his bookshelves where one could easily see it (Legros 365-6). Scholars have often noted the way that *Ecclesiastes* is an outlier in the Bible with its skeptical message, with some even analyzing its disjointed and haphazard formal structure, which one could even compare to Montaigne's wandering essay style of *De la vanité* (Pfieffer; Attridge 891). Montaigne's interest in vanity may also hearken back to Gianfresco Pico della Mirandola and to Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, who were also influenced by the rediscovery of Sextus Empiricus, with Fortunat Strowski convincingly arguing that two of their texts show strong

Montaigne's personal version of the biblical doubling of vanity of vanities: “Il n'en est à l'avanture aucune plus expresse que d'en escrire si vainement [de la vanité]” (“There is perhaps no more obvious vanity than to write of it [vanity] so vainly” III.9, 945; 721). The doubling of vanity in Montaigne's witty, but real example, is then repeated in his clear reference to the Bible: “Ce que la divinité nous en a si divinement exprimé devoit estre soingneusement et continuellement medité par les gens d'entendement” (“What the Divinity has so divinely told us about it ought to be carefully and continually meditated by people of understanding”; III.9, 945; 721). Here, as with the doubling of vanity, Montaigne doubles divinity, representing on a linguistic formal level the paradox at hand.

The strangest formal innovation in “De la vanité,” however, is the way it performs this vain exercise in writing about vanity. The essay at first purports to be about this paradox of vanity, but then digresses and varies the theme of this paradox of vanity toward the associated paradoxes related to language and rhetoric, toward the secondary argument on the vanity of travel. Pages after the introductory passages on vanity and writing, Montaigne begins to transition away from a subsequent discussion of fortune, ending with the line, “La priere me gaigne, la menace me rebute ; la faveur me ploye, la crainte me roydit,” to suddenly shift topics and declare that, “Parmy les conditions humaines, cette-cy est assez commune: de nous plaire plus des choses estrangeres que des nostres et d'aymer le remuement et le changement” (“Prayer

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resemblances to the “Apologie” in the way that it notes the variety and vanity of pagan attempts to affirm the truth, a truth that only Christianity could later attain (Schmitt 106). While Agrippa and Pico della Mirandola take a more negative stance against the vanity of these pagans, Montaigne’s meta-poietic take on vanity directs his (non-)apology towards himself as well.

wins me, threats repel me; favor makes me bend, fear makes me stiffen. Among human characteristics, this one is rather common: to be better pleased with other people's things than with our own, and to love movement and change"; III.9, 947-8; 723). Here is one of the essay's most jarring digressions with no transition whatsoever. The new theme of travel serves to continue the theme of vanity introduced earlier, but there is no logical step from the preceding discussion of illness and this new one. Instead of simply discussing vanity, Montaigne performs it. He has made his essay perform its theme of travel, by having the reader's attention suddenly transport from one idea to another. Just as vanity is split between its divine aspect and its silly emptiness, by shocking the reader with his digressive shifts, the variety of approaches to his essay shows us the inherent multiplicity and variety as a condition of the world as vanity. The style of this digression matches the content of Montaigne's desire for novelty in travel. Following the first digression about "choses estrangeres" and humanity's pleasure of "le remuement et le changement," he admits his own personal "humeur avide des choses nouvelles et inconnues" ("greedy appetite for new and unknown things"; III.9, 723). As the text goes on to shift through new subjects and digressions, often without transition as before, but in every case with a speed and a swerving quality, it becomes clear that the "humeur avide" for the strange and new is not only Montaigne's modus operandi in travel, but in writing.

One might outline the first major external narrative frame of the essay via its logical development of the question of vanity raised at the outset of the essay: "Il n'en est à l'aventure aucune plus expresse que d'en escrire si vainement" ("There is perhaps no more obvious vanity than to write of it so vainly"; III.9, 721). In the introductory passages, Montaigne then implies that his essays are an example of such vain writing. Since he does not write of grand actions that might include him as an actor on the scene of history, he can only write of his fantasies: "Je ne

puis tenir registre de ma vie par mes actions: fortune les met trop bas; je le tiens par mes fantasies” (“I cannot keep a record of my life by my actions: fortune places them too low. I keep it by my thoughts [fantasies]”; III.9, 721). Fantasies are similar to the early modern imagination and invention in that it corresponds to the imaginative and not the rational faculty, but it goes even further than the imagination in their link to “l’illusion et l’aberration” (Desan *Dictionnaire* 448). The emphasis here is on whether or not the link to reality is valid, or because it indicates some distortion due to the imagination, but this ambiguity and uncertainty of *fantasie* is fundamental: “Omniprésente et indépassable, elle visie l’ensemble des perceptions, partant l’ensemble du savoir, dont elle anéantit les prétentions à l’université et l’objectivité” (“Omnipresent and unsurpassable, it targets all perceptions, hence all knowledge, thus undoing all knowledge’s claims to universality and objectivity”; 448). As he had posed vain writing negatively with the connection of writing to excrement and criminality, he at the same time connects it to another excess of those who would think their knowledge objective or universal: the vain theorizations of the grammarians. He notes that Diomedes wrote “six mille livres du seul subject de la grammaire” as if nothing could be worse than writing about grammar, words about words; “Tant de paroles pour les paroles seules!” (“six thousands books with the sole subject of grammar...So many words for the sake of words alone!”; III.9, 721). This is in line with the excesses of the hegemonic rhetoric Montaigne has generally opposed, and yet, as scholars have shown, this also is a paradoxical relation, in that Montaigne also makes use of rhetoric to often oppose it.<sup>22</sup> Once again, Montaigne is describing the fundamental vanity of other writers and

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<sup>22</sup> Critical to the studies on Montaigne and rhetoric is the figure of Ciceronian eloquence, against which Montaigne has asserted his own style, while he at the same time also flirts with this

knowledge producers who may not be aware of their participation in vanity; but for him, his poetic investigation into vanity means that he understands his writing to be subject to these ambiguous conditions of truth as *fantasie*, truth as vanity.

This paradox of vanity is something with which Montaigne is intimately caught up, and this begins to create the first inkling that there is a poetics of this paradox being produced along the way around the image of the creator of the essay. He is not above the problem being discussed, he is a part of it: “quand seray-je à bout de représenter une continuelle agitation et mutation de mes pensées, en quelque matière qu’elle tombent[?]” (“when shall I make an end of describing the continual agitation and changes of my thoughts, whatever subject they light on”; III.9, 721). In this way, one begins to wonder about the status of this text as a genre: the prose productions of rhetoric traditionally would seek to persuade, but here he is dissuading, and not from the outside but the inside. Is what is being created rather in the image of a satire, and a Horatian satire?

We know of Montaigne’s fondness for the classical poets and their satires; in “De la vanité,” Horace is cited nine times, from various *Odes*, *Epistles*, *Epodes* and *Satires*, more than in any other essay. It is as if in this essay of his third book, Montaigne was returning to all of Horace. As opposed to many of the stranger types of citation that Montaigne often includes, these citations of Horace act as a complement to his discussion at that moment, as if he was using Horace’s thoughts to replicate his own:

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eloquence and rhetorical devices. See esp. Mathieu-Castellani in *Montaigne et la rhétorique: actes du colloque de St. Andrews*, and Deborah Knop’s “Montaigne on Rhetoric” in the *Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*.

Or j'arreste bien chez moy le plus ordinairement, mais je voudrois m'y plaire plus qu'ailleurs.

*Sit meae sedes utinam senectae,*

*Sit modus lasso maris, et viarum,*

*Militiaeque.* (III.9, 952) <sup>23</sup>

Now I do indeed stay at home most of the time, but I should like to enjoy myself there more than elsewhere. (III.9, 726)

If, as it seems, Montaigne associates himself with Horace in this essay, then we can surmise that he sought to also associate himself with Horace's unique style of satire. As Debailly's "Le Rire Satirique" makes evident, Horace's was not a satire that merely chided others, but one that was—as with the Pyrrhonian—potentially included within the act of chiding:

Chez Horace, le rapport à la vérité, que ses contemporains ne cessent à ses yeux de bafouer et de galvauder, passe nécessairement par le rire. Son mot d'ordre... est 'ridentem dicere verum,'<sup>24</sup> devise qui exprime une conception de la critique exempte de dogmatisme, à la fois décidée, mais toujours teintée de scepticisme de peur de se trouver soi-même en butte aux défauts qu'on déplore. Mais le rire d'Horace, dans le cadre

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<sup>23</sup> "[Let me have Tiber, founded by an Argive settler], as the home of my old age; let that mark the end for one who is weary of the sea and of marching and fighting" (*Odes*, bk. 2.6, lines 6-8; 106).

<sup>24</sup> "Furthermore, not to skim over the subject with a laugh like a writer of witticisms—and yet what is to prevent one from telling *truth as he laughs...*" (*Satires*, bk. 1.1, lines 23-5; 6-7).

flexible de la *satira* qu'il considère comme un *sermo cotidianus* induit en outre une attitude de nonchalance et de familiarité clémente avec le monde et les hommes...ce rire est un rire de conciliation, de bienveillance, de mansuétude. (699-700)

For Horace, the relationship to truth, which his contemporaries never cease in his eyes to ridicule and overuse, necessarily involves laughter. His slogan is '*ridentem dicere verum*,' a motto which expresses a conception of criticism free from dogmatism, on the one hand determined, but always tinged with skepticism for fear of finding oneself the butt of the faults that one deplures. But Horace's laughter, in the flexible framework of *satira* which he considers as a *sermo cotidianus* also induces an attitude of nonchalance and of forgiving familiarity with the world and with humankind...this laughter is a laughter of conciliation, of benevolence, of clemency. (my trans.)

Whereas Juvenal's satirical laugh was one of condemnation, with Horace it was on the order of this Pyrrhonian structure, comprehending both derision and self-inclusion: "Alors que l'art d'Horace implique une allégeance, une fusion avec l'objet de la critique, où le rire fait office de liant et de baume, celui de Juvénal trahit une fracture, un divorce radical, une condamnation irréductible..." ("While Horace's art implies an allegiance, a fusion with the object of criticism, where the laughter acts as a binder and a balm, Juvenal's betrays a fracture, a radical divorce, an irreducible condemnation"; 701; my trans.). Just like Horace who does not place himself above the criticized object of his satire, Montaigne in "De la vanité" judges himself to be a part of the paradox of vanity. Montaigne's authorial self continues to be a mutable, multiple self that is other: he writes at times without analyzing the products of his vain fantasies, but then is able to turn his poetic lens back upon his own vanity. As we have seen, Montaigne's mutable

subjectivity also results in a mutable writing form that twists and turns.

Like the digressiveness of “De la vanité,” Montaigne describes the form of his essays as formless or without order, as “une marqueterie mal jouinte” (“an ill-fitted patchwork”; III.9, 964; 736, cited in Sayce 260) and as an “embrouilleure” (“embroilement”; III.9, 995; 762, cited in Sayce 260).<sup>25</sup> In books one and two he had described his writing in similar terms, as “une galimafrée de divers articles” (“a hodgepodge of various articles” I.46, 276; 201). In book one, the formlessness is described as such: “Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crottesques et corps monstreux, rapiecez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n'ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuité?” (“And what are these things of mine, in truth, but grotesques and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members, without definite shape, having no order, sequence, or

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<sup>25</sup> There has been much work done on the form of digressiveness of Montaigne’s *Essais*. Virginia Green’s “Montaigne’s Vanity: Reading Digressions on Travel” is the perfect overview of “De la vanité,” and she argues that his crucial digression on travel links the ambiguously vain act of writing to the ambiguously vain act of travel: “by stressing the ubiquitousness of vanity, Montaigne makes the vanity of his enjoyment of travel/writing seem a relatively minor fault. Montaigne acknowledges, admits to, and even flaunts, the vanity of his travels and the pleasure he derives from this activity. And he blithely continues the vain self-indulgence of both his physical and literary voyages, unrepentant” (36). She also lists the many critics who have been struck by the intense digressiveness of “De la vanité”: “I am thinking specifically of comments made by Guez de Balzac, Charles Sorel, Pascal (See Appendix II in the Villey and Saulnier edition) and of Villey himself” (n1, 36).

proportion other than accidental?” I.28, 183; 135).<sup>26</sup> But then from book three onward, he doubles down and connects the formlessness explicitly with his subjectivity, and also makes form his concern, he writes, “Mon humeur est de regarder autant à la forme qu'à la substance” (“My humor is to consider the form as much as the substance”; III.8, 928; 708). In the passage in “De la vanité” concerning poetry, where he affirms that “J’aime l’allegre poetique, à sauts et à gambades,” he gives a more self-conscious explanation of his form of formlessness: “Je m’egare, mais plustot par licence que par mesgarde. Mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois c’est de loing, et se regardent, mais d’une veuë oblique” (“I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols...I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas [*fantasies*] follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance”; III.9, 994; 761). In book three, then, this formlessness, where his fancies (fantasies) follow one another, is sought out “plustot par licence que par mesgarde” (rather on purpose than on accident).

Montaigne’s emphasis on this purpose to the vanity of his writing is the essential point of his poesis: Montaigne has accepted his subjective mutability, the vanity of his interests in travel, in writing, and the subjects of his essays, and he has accepted that this mutability and vanity are inescapable conditions of the world, the self, and thus of his writing. He does not attempt to escape those conditions of vanity, even though the ambiguity of vanity prevails—namely, that it

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<sup>26</sup> See Kathleen Perry Long’s enlightening work which investigates the multiple connections to monstrosity in Montaigne’s *Essais*, including through this key passage, especially “Montaigne on Monsters and Monstrosity,” “Montaigne, Monsters, and Modernity” and “From Monstrosity to Postnormality: Montaigne, Canguilhem, Foucault.”

is not only allowable because it is universal, but it is also at the same time, emptiness and pointlessness. Instead, as a Pyrrhonian writer, he embraces the conditions of Pyrrhonism which indicates that knowledge, too, is caught up in the paradox of vanity, so that he does not escape that paradox or the Pyrrhonian crisis, he dives into it and lets his writing follow the contours of that paradox and that crisis. His turn to poetry is the flower of that writing quest.

### **Montaigne's *Art poétique* in "De la vanité"**

All these elements converge in the famous passage on poetry in "De la vanité," where these re-engagements with the formalism of poesis and the Pyrrhonian paradox of "vanity" are expressed through Montaigne's presentation of his version of a theory of the art of poetry, or *art poétique*. This return in the third book to a concern for form (and the body) that was already fundamental to *Les essais*, especially through the essay "De la vanité" and its presentation of Montaigne's version of a theory of the art of poetry, or *art poétique*, shows even more strongly that the Montaignist-Pyrrhonian innovation throughout the entire *Essais* is a new form of writing that is inspired by and adjacent to poetry. Here, he describes the best poetry as a kind of wandering, reflecting the parallel presented in the essay between writing and travel, and in so doing, he presents his vagabond writing style of *Les essais* as a kind of poetry. We have thus seen that Montaigne turned to form, and that vanity was a theme in the "Apologie," which he continued in "De la vanité" to focus on his intensification of his meta-poesis. At the heart of "De la vanité" is an *art poétique* that expresses this intensification. It also recalls that configuration of imagination and invention from the "Apologie."

Before Montaigne gets to the key section on the vatic, divinely inspired poet, the

text twists and turns around the subject of travel, and on various reasons why it is vain, but why he nevertheless is drawn to this vanity. He then turns to the self-referential discussion of his writing as a kind of wandering. The long middle section on travel ends with a digression on political order, and on the duty (or lack thereof) to follow the laws of the establishment. Perhaps in line with his stoic political stance on this issue, Montaigne agrees that one should obey the political order, but at the same time, here he notes that if they prove to reveal their ungrounded vanity too, and in a dangerous way, then one should either hide oneself, or just “suyvre le vent; ce que j'estime loisible, quand la raison ne guide plus” (“follow with the wind, which I consider permissible when reason no longer guides”; III.9, 994, 760). Like the vain wind in *Ecclesiastes*, the law itself falls under the greater, divine law of vanity, which blows through all existence like the wind. To transition to the final section on writing and poetry, Montaigne cites from Virgil, weaving together the various themes of vanity, travel, and diversion: “*Quo diversus abis?/ Cette farcisserie est un peu hors de mon theme. Je m’egare, mais plustot par licence que par mesgarde. Mes fantasies se suyvent, mais par fois c’est de loing, et se regardant, mais d’une veue oblique*” (“Whither do you leave the course [Virgil]?/ This stuffing is a little out of my subject. I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas [fantasies] follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance”; III.9, 761) Whither wander you? He cites this verse from Virgil to admonish his digressions, calling his digression like a disconnected stuffing, a “farcisserie;” but again in the skeptic, satirical mode of his own, he states that he diverts himself not on accident, but for the pleasure of it. In the same way, he discusses how Plato and Plutarch’s textualities operate according to the same logic of wandering.

The *art poétique* of the citation of Plato also shows a return to a concern for the body and

sensation, via the reference to the theory of vatic inspiration, but its ambiguous appearance also signals the Pyrrhonian paradox that is also inherent to poetry. Montaigne's vagabond poiesis and poetics thus continue to meditate on the Pyrrhonian paradox. More to the point, theories of poetic inspiration are like that of the ambiguity of invention. In this passage on poetry, a concentrated, highly charged, and self-referential *art poétique* is produced. Montaigne first lauds the variety found within Plato, and likens it to the variability found within his essays:

J'ay passé les yeux sur tel dialogue de Platon mi party d'une fantastique bigarrure, le devant à l'amour, tout le bas à la rhétorique. Ils ne creignent point ces muances, et ont une merveilleuse grace à se laisser ainsi rouler au vent, ou à le sembler. Les noms de mes chapitres n'en embrassent pas tousjours la matiere; souvent ils la denotent seulement par quelque marque... J'ayme l'alleure poetique, à sauts et à gambades. C'est une art, comme dict Platon, legere, volage, demoniacle. (III.9, 994)

I have run my eyes over a certain dialogue of Plato, a fantastic motley in two parts, the beginning part about love, all the rest about rhetoric. The ancients do not fear these changes, and with wonderful grace they let themselves thus be tossed in the wind, or seem to. The titles of my chapters do not always embrace their matter; often they only denote it by some sign...I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols. It is an art, as Plato says, light, flighty, daemonic. (III.9, 761)

This final phrase has been taken as one of Montaigne's most self-referential statements on his rambling style, and yet, what is often lost is his focus on its "alleure poetique" ("the poetic gait"): this is not merely a fragmentary prose style, but an act of poetic making. Even Montaigne points out the possibility of Plato's multivalent approach: "se laisser ainsi rouler au vent"—again

recalling the Ecclesiastic theme of the vain wind—has an element of controlled disorder to it, “ou à le sembler” (“or seem to”). But Montaigne’s delight in this subject is clear, as he praises the poetry of Plutarch, and compares it again to his own:

Il est des ouvrages en Plutarque où il oublie son theme, où le propos de son argument ne se trouve que par incident, tout estouffé en matiere estrangere: voyez ses alleures au Daemon de Socrates. O Dieu, que ces gaillardes escapades, que cette variation a de beauté, et plus lors que plus elle retire au nonchalant et fortuite. C’est l’indiligent lecteur qui pert mon subject, non pas moy; il s’en trouvera tousjours en un coing quelque mot qui ne laisse pas d’estre bastant, quoy qu’il soit serré. Je vois au change, indiscrettement et tumultuairement. Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes. (III.9, 994)

There are works of Plutarch’s in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in foreign matter. See his movements in “The Daemon of Socrates.” Lord, what beauty there is in these lusty sallies and this variation, and more so the more casual and accidental they seem. It is the inattentive reader who loses his subject, not I. Some word about it will always be found off in a corner, which will not fail to be sufficient, though it takes little room. I seek out change indiscriminately and tumultuously. My style and my mind alike go roaming. (III.9, 761)

Again this idea of stuffing is repeated—“tout estouffé [stuffed] en matière estrangere”—and just like the traveler, Montaigne was forever on a vain search for new and strange things. In the text he also extolls this quality in writing: “O Dieu, que ces gaillardes escapades, que cette variation a de beauté.” He implies that it is the undiligent reader who loses the beauty of this textual

wandering: Montaigne may be diverting himself from his path, but he has not lost his way. As if sealing indelibly the parallel wandering paths of this essay on vanity, he writes: “Mon stile et mon esprit vont vagabondant de mesmes.” What makes this style so beautiful, so inspired, is that it—like the best of ancient prose—is also governed under the species of poetry:

Il faut avoir un peu de folie qui ne veut avoir plus de sottise, disent et les preceptes de nos maistres et encores plus leurs exemples. Mille poetes trainent et languissent à la prosaïque; mais la meilleure prose ancienne (et je la seme ceans indifferemment pour vers) reluit par tout de la vigueur et hardiesse poetique, et represente l'air de sa fureur. Il luy faut certes quitter la maistrise et preeminence en la parlerie. (III.9, 995)

A man must be a little mad if he does not want to be even more stupid, say the precepts of our masters, and even more so their examples. A thousand poets drag and languish prosaically; but the best ancient prose—and I scatter it here indiscriminately as verse—shines throughout with the vigor and boldness of poetry, and gives the effect of its frenzy.

To poetry we must certainly concede mastery and preeminence in speech. (III.9, 761)

And then, as an example of this Muse-inspired fury, he gives—in an addition to the Bordeaux copy—a striking image of the vatic poet via Plato:

Le poete, dict Platon, assis sur le trepied des Muses, verse de furie tout ce qui luy vient en la bouche, comme la gargouille d'une fontaine, sans le ruminer et poiser, et luy eschappe des choses de diverse couleur, de contraire substance et d'un cours rompu. Luy mesmes est tout poetique, et la vieille theologie poesie, disent les sçavants, et la premiere philosophie. C'est l'originel langage des Dieux. (III.9, 995)

The poet, says Plato, seated on the tripod of the Muses, pours out in a frenzy whatever comes into his mouth, like the spout of a fountain, without ruminating and weighing it; and from him escape things of different colors and contradictory substance in an intermittent flow. He himself is utterly poetic, and the old theology is poetry, the scholars say, and the first philosophy. It is the original language of the Gods. (III.9, 761)

Having weaved together the paradox of vanity to describe his approach to travel and his vagabond style, Montaigne suggests a fundamental epistemological overlap between philosophy, theology, and poetry as with the ancients.<sup>27</sup> Even if a true overlap between these fields might not be overtly evidenced throughout *Les essais*, poetry is presumably given this primary place as the cause or the ideal of Montaigne's vagabond style. And simultaneously, the question of the meaning and production of poetry is placed on the same divine level as the skeptical book of *Ecclesiastes*.

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<sup>27</sup> Another approach to Montaigne's different combinations of poetry and philosophy throughout *Les essais* might be tried through the lens of the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy which leads from the early modern, back to Plato's *Republic* and its discussion of Socrates's hostility to poetry versus Aristotle's *Poetics*, which attempted to rationalize poetry via rhetoric. This split, replicating one between mythos and logos, or between reason and the imagination, may be so fundamental that it is not only Western and historical but also universal or psychoanalytic, or what Thomas Gould called "an eternal quarrel within the psyche itself" in *The Ancient Quarrel Between Poetry and Philosophy* (85). A version of this conflict might also be seen in the early modern debates concerning poetic invention, whether inspiration might be divine or only a matter of a rhetorical art of making.

But how should one interpret Montaigne's apparent praise of what was, at the time, a somewhat orthodox myth of the divine act of poetic creation, if we accept that Montaigne's style is also skeptical—one that is also based on a structural irony? Tournon explains this skeptical, structural irony as such:

[L]'écrivain s'interroge sur la validité des propos qu'il vient d'enregistrer; ce faisant, il les met en suspens, les exhibe comme acquis provisoires de son enquête, sujets à réexamen, à critique, à remise en cause radicale par changement de perspective. Telle est chez lui la formule de la zététique, réalisée non par des énoncés dubitatifs occasionnels (encore qu'il y en ait) mais par le retour de la pensée sur elle-même; et pas nécessairement avec effet corrosive. L'ironie est ici structurelle, bien au-delà de la finalité satirique qui lui est couramment attribuée. (56)

The writer examines the validity of the remarks he has just made. In doing so, he puts it in suspense, exhibits them as provisional achievements of his inquiry, subjects to reexamine, to critique, to radically question by a change of perspective. Such is his formula of the zetetic process, realized not by occasional skeptical statements (although there are some) but by thought's return back onto itself, and not necessarily with a caustic effect. The irony here is structural, well beyond the satirical purpose commonly attributed to it. (my trans.)

We note that in Tournon's case, he ascribes the "zetetic" to what I argue is the Pyrrhonian's aporetic aspect; but he also is right to note that in that process, the zetetic and aporetic processes imply both the caustic sting of self-examination and the radical quest to reexamine new perspectives and ideas. In this sense, Montaigne's structural irony goes beyond satire, to include

both satire and the critical attempt to gain new perspectives. Just as with Montaigne's variety of viewpoints on the vanity of travel—there are reasons why travel is a vain enterprise, but on the other hand he is all for it—there are these sincere statements on poetry and writing and hence on his writing, in opposition to other textual moments where he is jesting and satirical. Is, then, this citation of the power of vatic poetry the sincere belief of Montaigne? We might consider it in the same sense that vanity has been treated, without even needing to resort to the interpretation of authorial intentions. The text's Pyrrhonian structure allows for one to see how both sides of the problem are two directions that the text takes without the need for any final resolution. Even if one were to say that there may be a tendency towards satire, in this case, on the other hand, the text leaves open the strong possibility that Montaigne also flirts with the pagan tradition of the vatic poet. Montaigne scholars have disagreed about the final analysis of Montaignist interpretation, and it all seems to boil down to whether one feels the need to create a final order out of the skeptical, vagabond poetics of Montaigne's text, or, if one allows for this alterity to remain in its non-linear and multiple swerves.

At the very end of the essay following the passage on poetry, there is a response to the initial writerly and philosophical problem of vanity, although it is also presented as a paradox:

C'estoit un commandement paradoxe que nous faisoit anciennement ce Dieu à Delphes: Regardez dans vous, reconnoissez vous, tenez vous à vous ; vostre esprit et vostre volonté, qui se consomme ailleurs, ramenez la en soy ; vous vous escoulez, vous vous respandez ; appilez vous, soutenez vous ; on vous trahit, on vous dissipe, on vous desrobe à vous. Voy tu pas que ce monde tient toutes ses veues contraintes au dedans et ses yeux ouverts à se contempler soy-mesme ? (III.9, 1001)

It was a paradoxical command that was given us of old by that god at Delphi: “Look into yourself, know yourself, keep to yourself; bring back your mind and your will, which are spending themselves elsewhere, into themselves; you are running out, you are scattering yourself; concentrate yourself, resist yourself; you are being betrayed, dispersed, and stolen away from yourself. Do you not see that this world keeps its sight all concentrated inward and its eyes open to contemplate itself? (III.9, 766)

The repetition of the *vo-* words overwhelms the passage—hinting at its affiliation with the *va-* of *vanité* and of *vagabondage* (the former is potentially derived from a theoretical Indo-European root of many words entailing both departure and vacuity).<sup>28</sup> But the *vous* of “you,” of the reader and the subject is repeated: *Vous, vous, vous à vous, vostre, vostre, volonté, vous vous, vous vous, vous, vous, vous, vous, vous, vous, voy...* at last giving way to the near rhyme of *veues* and *yeux*, in a paradoxical symbol of vanity, these eyes of the world with its openness to the outside, yet they look only within. This doubling of the pronouns with you-you poeticizes the self-referential themes of *Les essais* and recalls one of Montaigne’s citations of Horace here. While discussing

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<sup>28</sup> The *American heritage dictionary of Indo-European roots* edited by Calvin Watkins gives the theoretical root of vanity as “eue- To leave, abandon, give out, whence nominal derivatives meaning abandoned, lacking, empty” (25). Among the many words which could have resulted are: wane, wanton, want, vain, vanity, vaunt, evanesce, vanish (these last five from Latin *vánus*, empty), vacant, vacate, vacation, vacuity, vacuum, void, avoid, devoid, evacuate, waste, devastate (25). With *vagabond* and *vague* coming from *vagus* (wandering, undecided), the link between *vánus* and *vagus* is poetically evident, both in sound and in the worlds of their meanings, and Montaigne’s essay exemplifies their linkage.

his desire to travel, and his dislike of the vanities of house husbandry, he interrupts his phrase with Horatian verses: “J’ayme l’ordre et la netteté, / et cantharus et lanx/ Ostendut *mihi me*<sup>29</sup>, / au pris de l’abondance; et regarde chez moy exactement à la nécessité, peu à la parade” (I love order and cleanliness—/ The plates and glasses/ Reflect my face [Horace] / —as much as abundance; and in my house I give careful attention to what is needful, little to ostentation; III.9, 954-5; 728). Montaigne changes the Horatian pronouns to first person, perhaps signaling his lack of desire for house guests and presenting an image of he himself at home alone, looking at his reflection in his cup and plate—or perhaps it is a self-reflective image of vanity.

For humanity, as a thing of this world, *all is vanity*, yet, “elle [vanité] est moins vanité quand elle est moins estendue” (“it is less vanity when it is less extensive”; III.9, 1001; 766) therefore, the best one can attempt to do is to avoid to stretch one’s vain, limitless desire and designs to infinity, but to limit oneself and obey the command to at least try to look within, to know thyself. The essay thus ends with this dramatic conclusion, that: “Sauf toy, ô homme, disoit ce Dieu, chaque chose s’estudie la premiere et a, selon son besoin, des limites à ses travaux et desirs. Il n’en est une seule si vuide et necessiteuse que toy, qui embrasses l’univers: tu es le scrutateur sans connoissance, le magistrat sans jurisdiction et apres tout le badin de la farce” (“‘Except for you, O man,’ said that god, ‘each thing studies itself first, and, according to its needs, has limits to its labors and desires. There is not a single thing as empty and needy as you,

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<sup>29</sup> “[Here is what I charge myself to provide—and able and willing I am: that no untidy coverlet, no soiled napkin wrinkle up your nose]; that tankard and plate become for you a mirror...” (Epistles, bk. 1.5, lines 31-4). The Latin verse reads: “ne non et cantharus et lanx ostendat *tibi te*” (bk. 1.5, lines 23-4).

who embrace the universe: you are the investigator without knowledge, the magistrate without jurisdiction, and all in all, the fool of the farce.”; III.9, 1001; 766). The divine command of “that god,” although a paradox, is for humanity to look within, even though it is condemned to always look without, and condemned at the same time to always relate everything back to itself vainly; after all, we are “le badin de la farce.” The writer of the essay is perhaps also the *badin*, insofar as his essay has spread over so much territory, changing from theme to theme so abruptly and so frequently, and because the *badin* likes to laugh, but like Horace, tells truth with a laugh. Perhaps the essay is not just satire, but farce, a performance of vanity in its construction, full of comic examples of vain, wandering thinking, and yet stuffed (*farcis*) with moments of clarity and insight.

## Conclusion

As a work that is fully engaged with poetry, Montaigne concludes in his own words before the final passage from the voice of the God of Delphi, Apollo, the God of Poetry (who in turn spoke through his Oracle, an indication again of so many frames of speech and chains of inspiration from the source of divine inspiration down to the reader). Montaigne had concluded in his authorial voice, “Si les autres se regardoient attentivement, comme je fay, ils se trouveroient, comme je fay, pleins d’inanité et de fadaise. De m’en deffaire, je ne puis sans me deffaire moy-mesmes. Nous en sommes tous confits, tant les uns que les autres; mais ceux qui le sentent en ont un peu meilleur compte, encore ne sçay-je” (“If others examined themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, full of inanity and nonsense. Get rid of it I cannot without getting rid of myself. We are all steeped in it, one as much as another; but those

who are aware of it are a little better off—though I don't know”; III.9, 1000; 766). Montaigne states that perhaps one who would study themselves would at least be aware of their folly and vanity, that we are full of ourselves: full of empty inanity, full of foolish fatuity. And yet this filling cannot be emptied, cannot be undone from its container, without undoing the entire being in the process. The development of the essay then presents itself in these terms: I know very well that all is vanity, and that to write about vanity is the ultimate vanity, and yet, how could I have done anything else but write my vain poetic writing, when I have been compelled to do so, and to delight in it, by some strange impulse? Ethically speaking, he takes pleasure in the vanity of his poetic writing, even while it is vain, thus skeptically suspending judgment on the paradox of vanity, and allowing the pleasure of the zetetic side of the balance to, for a time, coincide with the vatic impulse of poetry. His language echoes the Pyrrhonian uncertainty of the “Apologie” with “encore ne sçay-je” (“though I don't know”). And like the laughing, satirical Horace, he writes on vanity as a poet does, looking out while looking within, and he “verse de furie tout ce qui luy vient en la bouche, comme la gargouille d'une fontaine, sans le ruminer et poiser, et luy eschappe des choses de diverse couleur, de contraire substance et d'un cours rompu...” (“pours out in a frenzy whatever comes into his mouth, like the spout of a fountain, without ruminating and weighing it; and from him escape things of different colors and contradictory substance in an intermittent flow”; III.9, 761).

## Chapter Two:

### Rimbaud Vates: A Zetetic Heart under an Aporetic Cassock

But the presence of irony does not necessarily mean that the earnestness is excluded. Only assistant professors assume that.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*

Rimbaud is rightly remembered as a poet, however, two of his major works do not fall under the category of poetry at all (though they do contain *mise en abyme* passages of verse poetry). *Une saison en enfer* (*A Season in Hell*), the most important of these two, was designed to be published and could be described as a narrative in which there are poetic elements and poems inserted into the text, thus disrupting the generic divisions. Secondly, Rimbaud's famous so-called "Lettres du voyant" (Seer Letters) are also considered important productions within Rimbaud's oeuvre, even though they were not necessarily designed to be publishable works of art.<sup>30</sup> While he was trained as a poet in Latin through his schooling where he won national prizes (and was thus, like any other poet in the nineteenth century, early set on a path of poetic excellence via the scholastic practice of imitation), there is one work in prose near the start of his writing career, produced when he was the equivalent of a high school student, that stands out: the short story "Un cœur sous une soutane" ("A Heart Under a Cassock"). It constructs the complex

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<sup>30</sup> For Rimbaudian criticism, the idea of Rimbaud becoming a *voyant*—that is a seer or medium, but in the context of his poetic process—also resulted in the noun *voyance* which has no adequate equivalent in English (clairvoyance?), and so I will therefore use the French terms.

figure of a character, the seminarian Léonard, whose poetic impulses stretch from the sublimity of heaven down into the gritty vulgarity or profanity of awakening sexuality, while up against the confines of the Christian denial of the metaphysical comingling of body and spirit. “Un cœur sous une soutane” purposefully confronts body and spirit, and its corresponding literary structure—like the one that *Une saison en enfer* will construct later, as we will see in the following chapter—incorporates in the body of the text past poems and passages of poetry of varying modes of poetic inspiration and creation and uses a complex narrative framing structure to produce a new, different form of irony.<sup>31</sup> The intermixing of the short story’s narrative frames with poetry, its central issue of the status of the body and its value in the creation of sense and meaning as well as in poetic creation, and the connected dilemma about whether the text is ironic or sincere, all combine to create a radical Pyrrhonian writing experiment.

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<sup>31</sup> As I will focus on later in the chapter, there is a Pyrrhonian and poetic form of irony in Rimbaud’s oeuvre, starting with “Un cœur sous une soutane.” Sincerity and satire are both offered as antinomic possibilities of the text, where both possibilities are incompatible, but one cannot choose one over the other, as in a Pyrrhonian structure of radical uncertainty. In this sense, Rimbaud’s use of irony is radical, although it has also been theorized as a continuation of the more conventional, Romantic irony of the nineteenth century (Collins and Gershman). I draw upon this small but fascinating area of research on irony in Rimbaud to theorize his Pyrrhonian, poetic irony.

## Rimbaud's ambiguous *cœur* in “Un cœur sous une soutane”

“Un cœur sous une soutane: Intimités d'un séminariste” (“A Heart Under a Cassock: Intimacies of a Seminarist”), a short story Rimbaud wrote in 1870 at the age of sixteen, is presented as the diary of the young seminarian, Léonard, who documents a year in which he takes up writing poetry, then confusedly seems to fall in love with a young woman, Thimothina, and continues to compose strange poetry inspired by her which mixes the sacred language of the Church with profane language expressing his sacred love and bodily desires. Rimbaud originally followed the subtitle of this short story with, “Roman,” but then crossed it out and wrote “Nouvelle” (“~~Novel~~ *Short Story*”; Murphy 17; my trans.).<sup>32</sup> The very barring of the supposed original intention of the story as a longer sort of intimate novel in the tradition of other such autobiographical novels of the time, to make way for the shorter *nouvelle* form, foreshadows in itself the fluctuation of aspiration and desires within the text, which is another aspect of the Pyrrhonian nature of the text. The palimpsestuous remnant of the story as a novel also gives further credence to the notion that this strangely composed short story signals a more important literary desire that also permeates Rimbaud's entire oeuvre, one for a new type of writing.

It is understandable in a sense that Rimbaud's teacher Izambard and others would have mistaken the short story as merely a bawdy joke. The sexual innuendos and erotic language of “Un cœur sous une soutane” are evident even from the title itself, with *cœur* also being a widespread 1870s slang word for penis, “the motivation being that the glans looks like the more

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<sup>32</sup> All quotations of Rimbaud's “Un cœur sous une soutane” are of the Murphy edition, and all translations of Rimbaud's “Un cœur sous une soutane” are my own.

familiar anatomical heart” (Houston 162-3).<sup>33</sup> There are hints of same-sex eroticism which any seminary would have wanted to remain unspoken, and which Rimbaud might have witnessed or experienced from his own Collège de Charleville sharing classes with the town’s seminary next door: “j’ai remarqué que les élèves sortent fort souvent pour xxxx dans la cour... [i]ls restent fort longtemps à l’air, maintenant, et, quand ils reviennent, ricanent, et referment l’isthme de leur pantalon fort minutieusement, —non, je me trompe, fort lentement, —avec des manières, en semblant se complaire, machinalement, à cette opération qui n’a rien en soi que de très futile....” (“I noticed that the students went out quite often to xxxx in the courtyard...they stay a real longtime outside, now, and when they come back, snickering, and closing the isthmus of their pants real meticulously, —no, I’m wrong, real slowly,—with, as if pretending to complain, mechanically, about that operation which has nothing very difficult in itself...”; 18-20). When it later comes to Léonard’s passion for Thimothina, his erotic language turns more perverse, or at least, it is not clear if Léonard is aware of how the language that he uses contains explicitly erotic connotations, or if it is a matter of his erotic drives spilling over inadvertently into his poetry in unexpected ways and of Rimbaud playing tricks on the reader through play within the narrative structure.

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<sup>33</sup> In Murphy’s “Contextes du ‘coeur’ rimbaldien,” he notes Verlaine’s use of cœur in this way: “voir *Balanide*: ‘C’est un plus petit coeur/ Avec la pointe en l’air’ (35). Delvau’s nineteenth century *Dictionnaire érotique moderne* also lists it as pertaining to “La nature de la femme,” as do Houston and Murphy (110; 162; 34). In this sense, there is the possibility that Rimbaud’s erotic use of the word might also include a hermaphroditic pun, or if it might refer to the main character’s heterosexual erotic drive to keep his erotic poetry underneath his robes.

This type of uncertainty surrounding Léonard's erotic use of language adds to this purposefully ambiguous structure of Rimbaud's short story, as when his attention turns to strange details of Thimothina's appearance:

ton nez, plein de l'odeur des haricots, soulevait ses narines délicates ; un duvet léger, serpentant sur tes lèvres, ne contribuait pas peu à donner une belle énergie à ton visage ; et, à ton menton, brillait un beau signe brun où frissonnaient de beaux poils follets...Je cherchai vainement tes seins ; tu n'en as pas...je vis tes omoplates saillantes et soulevant ta robe, et je fus percé d'amour, devant le tortillement gracieux des deux arcs prononcés de tes reins !...Dès ce moment, je t'adorai... (34-6)

your nose, full of the odor of beans, lifted its delicate nostrils; a light down, winding upon your lips, contributed not a little to giving a beautiful energy to your visage; and, at your chin, shone a beautiful brown mark where beautiful scatterbrained hairs quivered...I sought vainly your breasts; you have none...I saw your shoulder blades jutting out and lifting your dress, and I was pierced with love, before the graceful writing of the two pronounced arches of your back!...

From that moment, I adored you...

At this first moment of attraction, Léonard has displaced his preexisting passion and love onto the partial objects of Thimothina's oddly described body—perhaps even joining the odd bodies throughout Rimbaud's poems, such as in “Vénus Anadyomène” or “Mes petites amoureuses”—occupying an unusual border between the normative erotic structures and the creative potential of a new one which attaches itself to unexpected objects. Later, his attraction for Thimothina

turns to the fouler realm of odors—recalling the *effluvia* from before:

Ne trouves-tu pas qu'on sent un gout ? répétait-elle ; son père ne comprenait pas ; mais mon cœur le comprit : c'était la Rose de David, la Rose de Jessé, la Rose mystique de l'écriture ; c'était l'Amour ! Elle se leva brusquement, alla dans un coin de la cuisine, et, me montrant la double fleur de ses reins, elle plongea son bras dans un tas informe de bottes...tout à coup, elle fronça le front, et s'écria : —Cela sent encore !...Je m'aperçus bien que tout cela n'était dans ma chère vierge que les mouvements intérieurs de sa passion ! (38-40)

“Don't you find that there's a smell?” she repeated; her father didn't understand; but my heart understood: it was the Rose of David, the Rose of Jesse, the mystical Rose of scripture; it was Love! She got up brusquely, went to a corner of the kitchen, and, revealing the double flower of her loins, she plunged her arm into a vague pile of boots...all at once, she knitted her brow, and cried, “It still smells!”...I realized that all of that in my virgin flesh was only the interior movements of her passion.

Now as Léonard's attention turns to the odor of “Amour,” there is more uncertainty, still, about whether Léonard is even completely aware of the unusual nature of his attractions or not, or if here it is because of the distortions of his “chère vierge” that such odors and “mouvements intérieurs de sa passion” are being perceived as holy emanations. John Porter Houston reflects that, in the short story, “The slang use of *cœur* can only be funny if the normal sense of the word is also more than a possibility...the seminarian does not seem to know any but the standard meaning of *cœur*. He is far too innocent...to speak so crudely: the ambiguities... are all in the reader's sense of language” (163). At the same time, it cannot be said that Léonard was not also

aware of his erotic urges and passion, so the issue remains complicated and exceeds this humorous effect of Léonard's erotic language which, it is true, plays on the reader's awareness of the erotic double-entendres of the relatively innocent Léonard's passionate expressions.

The negative reactions in the short story's material and publication history resulting from this bawdy in some part accounts for its obscurity. When Rimbaud sent the short story in the summer of 1870 to Izambard, as the teacher later recounted in a 1929 letter to Marcel Coulon, he told him that it was in poor taste: "C'est en juillet 1870—j'étais encore à Charleville, prêt à partir en vacances—Rimbaud me remit avec d'autres pièces quelques pages qui portaient ce titre. Je lus et je lui dis que c'était mauvais et peu ragoûtant. Je l'encourageai à ne pas donner dans ce genre-là, le genre 'frère calotin'" ("It was in July 1870—I was still in Charleville, about to go on vacation—Rimbaud gave me along with other pieces some pages under that title. I read it and told him that it was gross and in poor taste. I encouraged him to not fall into that kind of genre, the 'friar' genre"; Izambard quoted in Murphy *Un cœur* 72; my trans.). Paterne Berrichon, Rimbaud's brother-in-law who with his sister Isabelle endeavored to promote a Catholic image of Rimbaud following his death, including publicizing his purported deathbed reconversion, was among those who kept the text from publication. He finally gave the text to Breton and Aragon who published it in their Surrealist publication *Littérature* in 1924. They similarly took the text as a piece with anticlerical, anti-religious power, calling Berrichon a "mendiant" for concealing such a piece to sabotage Rimbaud's legacy: "On a publié d'Arthur Rimbaud jusqu'à ses devoirs scolaires. On a tenté par tous les moyens de le travestir en bon élève. Enfin, on a falsifié ses lettres pour tirer de sa vie une moralité commode" ("Arthur Rimbaud's work has been published going all the way back to his schoolwork. They have tried in every way to dress him up as a good student. They have even falsified his letters to draw from his life a convenient morality");

Breton, cited by Poisson; my trans.). In this way, Breton and Aragon joined their ideological opponent Berrichon in misreading the text as an outright anticlerical, anti-religious or atheistic piece, but it is understandable why they and others would have done so: the text opens an indeterminate space within the quarrel of religious and anti-religious sentiment that is so fundamental that it permeates language and writing itself.

It is the indeterminacy of the writing that is overlooked if the text is taken as merely an anti-clerical satire. To read “Un cœur sous une soutane” as a satirical anti-clerical attack depends on an interpretation of the text as an irony in which a dualistic division between the attacked position (the Church) and its negation (the atheistic critique) is presupposed. Steve Murphy characterizes in his comprehensive study of the short story the commonplace Rimboldian criticism of the story:

Monsieur Léonard, poète médiocre, épris des vers de Lamartine et d’une étrange Muse, subit sa crise d’adolescence comme une sorte de destin tantôt glorieux, tantôt tragique. Pour le lecteur, il n’y a sans doute ni gloire, ni tragédie, mais seulement une vie ridicule, une poésie qui ne l’est guère moins, sinon un récit satirique sans grande portée et sans subtilité. Monsieur Léonard serait très exactement le contraire, en tout, d’Arthur Rimbaud. Il serait comme une combinatoire des bêtises et tares du séminariste carolopolitain, un portrait-robot du petit vicieux qui se prend pour un mage. (74)

Léonard, mediocre poet, taken with the poetry of Lamartine and with a strange Muse, experiences an adolescent crisis like a sort of destiny that is at times glorious and at times tragic. For the reader, there is definitely neither glory nor tragedy, but only a ridiculous character, a poetry which isn’t any less ridiculous, if not a satirical narrative without great

value and without subtlety. Léonard would be exactly the opposite, in every way, of Rimbaud. He would be like a combination of the idiocies and flaws of a Caripolitan seminarist, a sketch of a little pervert who took himself for a mage. (my trans.)

The seemingly simple nature of the text and its seemingly simple irony can be easily mistaken, even by the most adept Rimbaldians. The list of important Rimbaldian critics who discounted the short story as unserious or merely obscene is long, including Suzanne Bernard who wrote it had been “Sans doute écrit très vite” (“Without a doubt written very fast”), and for Jean-Pierre Giusto it was a mere “pochade” (“sketch”) while for Marc Ascione and Jean-Pierre Chambon it was “au total...une pochade obscène” (“overall...an obscene sketch”; cited in Murphy *Un cœur* 65).

Far from simple, the story involves a complex narrative device that, from the start, creates tension around the diary entries of the past as they clash with the narrative frame of the present. The fact that it is presented as a diary, and narrated from the present as a short story, both from the perspective of Léonard, produces two different temporal, diegetic units with ostensibly different perspectives on the story’s central conflict. Léonard of the present of the text reveals at the start of the short story that in the end, he would don his Priest’s robes—the cassock. This indicates to us that although the past of the story includes the account of his poetic output and romance with Thimothina, we are supposed to know that it will be a failed romance since of course the Catholic priest must embrace celibacy and renounce worldly desire of the flesh. It opens: “.....O Thimothina Labinette! Aujourd’hui que j’ai revêtu la robe sacrée, je puis rappeler la passion, maintenant refroidie et dormant sous la soutane, que l’an passé, fit battre mon cœur de jeune homme sous ma capote de séminariste !.....” (“.....O Thimothina Labinette! Today now that I have put on the sacred robes, I can recall the passion, now chilled and dormant under the cassock, that, last year made my young man’s heart beat underneath my

seminarist's tunic!....."; 18). Yet, this opening line functions as a seemingly contradictory statement, raising the question of the unreliability of Léonard as a narrator. On the one hand, and on a simplistic level, if we take Léonard's statement at face value, Léonard is saying that the passion of his youth is in the past. The passion is "maintenant refroidie et dormant." But on the other hand, and at the level of what desire the line enunciates, Léonard's passion continues to smolder. Rimbaud chooses an apostrophe to start the short story, "...O Thimothina !" like a completely conventional Romantic ode to the one he loved (or still loves?), revealing through the manner in which the expression of renunciation is delivered the trace of Léonard's continuing desire. And even though Léonard claims that that passion has been made "refroidie et dormant sous la soutane," the fact that it is only because he has put on the cassock that day that this is now ("maintenant") the case indicates the artificiality or performativity of that statement: Léonard is both passionate lover, and now chastened priest. Finally, the intimate nature of the sentence—with its recollection of passion and the physical effect of it on his young body, and with its erotic echoes including with "cœur" playing its part in the confusion throughout the text—comes into direct conflict with the assertion that Léonard is that day committing to becoming a priest and don the sacred robes. The end sequence of the frame narrative thus continues in this clash between Léonard's statement and enunciation but is written in a such a way that we again can question whether this clash reflects a figure of ironic ridicule and anti-clerical satire, or if there is something more at stake in this discrepancy.

Through the overarching frame concerning Léonard's chastening versus his continuing passion, Rimbaud is already constructing the figure of a false dualism that turns out to be an external impression that covers up a complex subjectivity. The framed interior past narrative, which is enveloped between the beginning and end present narrative frame passages, are the

dated journal entries starting from May 1. These detail Léonard's supposedly failed experiences writing poetry and his falling in love, which would seem to support the initial interpretation of Léonard as having renounced his passion. He first fails in his poetic career, in that, when he reads his poetry aloud to Thimothina and an assembled party, he is laughed at and ridiculed, including by her, and when his poetry is intercepted by the priests at the seminary, he is chastised by them and by his classmates. While in the end he does not give up his zeal for poetry or strictly speaking his love for Thimothina, at the very end of the framed diary narrative in the entry for June 30, he renounces her in the name of his faith: "Désormais, je laisse à la muse divine le soin de bercer ma douleur; martyr d'amour à dix[-]huit ans...n'ayant plus celle que j'aime, je vais aimer la foi !" ("From now on, I leave to the divine muse the care of soothing my pain; martyr to love at eighteen years old...having no more the one I love, I shall love the faith!"; 60). And yet, once again, in final the frame narrative, the announced final act of renunciation is complicated and contaminated by the intermingling of continued zeal and desire regardless of that renunciation. Even though, as he writes, "Un an après, 1er Août—Aujourd'hui, on m'a revêtu de la robe sacrée ; je vais server Dieu" ("One year later, August 1<sup>st</sup>—Today, I was given the sacred robes; I shall serve God") he also admits that, ".....Quant à cette passion cruellement chérie que je renferme au fond de mon cœur, je saurai la supporter avec constance : sans la revivre précisément, je pourrai m'en rappeler quelquefois le souvenir : ces choses-là sont bien douces !" ("As for that cruelly cherished passion which I lock up in the depths of my heart, I will be able to bear it steadily: without reviving it exactly, I will be able to sometimes recall the memory of it: those things there are rather sweet!"; 62). Even without citing the fact that, in the final revelation, Léonard reveals he is still wearing the socks Thimothina gave him, it is clear from Léonard's statement that, although he claims the passion is to be locked up in his heart, it is nevertheless in

his heart—and besides this, the construction of “que je renferme” (“which I lock up”) indicates the present-tense of this locking up in his heart, a struggle that is ongoing—that he “will be able to bear...steadily” (62). Even if this is true for Léonard, however, his passion continues despite its apparent disavowal. Rimbaud’s simple frame narrative turns out to hide a story of intense complexity.

The title of the short story, too, surreptitiously underlines this final complexity of Léonard as an eternally passionate priest: it indicates that since it is “un cœur sous une soutane” and not “sous une capote,” this strange formula concerning the passion of a curate refers to the Léonard of the frame narrative, that is the later period after he has donned the cassock as a priest, following his renunciation of Thimothina, and not the framed narrative when Léonard the seminarist was merely wearing the *capote* (tunic, which incidentally, is also slang for condom by the 1870s, as Delvau confirms; 85). What at first glance appears to be the underlying contradiction in Léonard’s character—between his lusty passion and his priestly renunciation—turns out to be a false contradiction, thereby undermining any facile interpretation of the short story as mere ironic ridicule and anti-clerical satire.

If Rimbaud thus chooses such a contradictory figure in Léonard not merely as a figure of ironic ridicule and anti-clerical satire, then what is the third possibility to explain this strange character of Léonard, and what is the purpose of this seeming contradiction between irony and sincerity, this tension between the satirical and the lyrical? It is this construction of a multifaceted character whose impulses lead to the complexity of non-contradiction that allows us to see this type of logical structure as a Pyrrhonian one, in that what at first seems to be a possible statement of fact—that Léonard renounces passion—is on the other hand skeptically deconstructed by a separate movement: namely, Léonard’s renunciation is a Pyrrhonian

antinomy with the narrative structure's suggestion of enduring or continuing passion. On the level of text and the way it appears to us, too, the first stab at truth (that the text is an anti-clerical satire) is coupled with a contradictory movement, one towards poetic sincerity, and the beauty of Léonard's poetic zeal. And yet, in the Pyrrhonian circularity between these two movements, there is no resolution possible, which is also true for Léonard's case and the text's case. It is not clear by Rimbaud's ending whether Léonard has actually put out the flame of his passion by donning the sacred robes, or if the heart under them is still burning its strange desires, and if the lust of his sock-wearing perversion for Thimothina and for sublime poetry would continue unabated. But to be truer to the ambiguity of the text, we should say that both potentialities, the two main propositions that are constructed by the text concerning Léonard and their seeming opposites—whether we start from the proposition that Léonard is chaste or that he is lusty—are both true and are both possible to be true and not in contradiction. But to read it as one or the other—as the majority of Rimbaudian critics have done since the short story was first published overlooks this radical dimension of Léonard's tale. Additionally, the gap between the profane and the sacred does not exist merely for the anti-clerical, satirical purpose; this would be to ignore the sincere zetetic elements of Léonard's zeal. To read Rimbaud's story in this way reveals this third way of the text, one in which the seeming contradiction produces a different figure of irony, one which does not mock one level of the text (Léonard's passion for love and poetry) in favor of the other (the anti-clerical satire), and many other indications throughout the text go to show that this third way is the mystery that the figure of Léonard's represents.

## TU VATES ERIS: Rimbaud's disjunctive poiesis

The text's first constructed Pyrrhonian framing complexity concerning Léonard as both chaste and lusty is a structure of ambiguity that is duplicated around the short story's creation of a new type of irony concerning its approach to poetic inspiration, religion, and sexuality. The construction of a complex subjectivity in itself might not be the most innovative aspect of *Un cœur sous une soutane*, but when it is coupled with the stakes of the intertwined matters of Léonard's sacred poetic aspirations and his gritty sexual tendencies, Rimbaud's depiction of Léonard's subjective complexity takes on a more powerfully critical—and Montaignist-Pyrrhonian—attitude. Montaigne's Pyrrhonian approach to the vanity of the imagination in the "Apologie," in "De la vanité," and elsewhere such as in "De la force de l'imagination," underlined the function of the imagination as necessary, and in so doing, was able to critique those whose arguments concerning God and nature would depend entirely upon rejecting the fantasies of the imagination. But it also sought to make the reader aware that that same vanity and function of the imagination was a universal, excusable, and even valuable aspect of human subjectivity in which everyone, including both reader and author, was implicated. In his Pyrrhonian presentation of this structure, Montaigne would try out each position like a costume, confusing the reader in the process.<sup>34</sup> Rimbaud's approach in "Un cœur sous une soutane" to

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<sup>34</sup> This same critical approach using the metaphor of theatre could also be applied to Rimbaud. James Lawler's *Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self* uses the metaphor of the theatre, and the personae of the actor to explore Rimbaud's different periods of production. In the previous chapter, we argued that within Montaigne's Pyrrhonian writing, the zetetic mode entails the theatrical

Léonard's passion takes on this same approach: it heightens the imaginative intensity of Léonard's poetic flights and the baseness of its outlets through such earthy impulses as bodily smells and awkward corporeal shapes, which allows for the texts' anti-clerical satirical potential, but at the same time, Rimbaud seems to validate Léonard's poetic impulses as also beautiful, natural, and honest. It is in the interstices between these two positions, or because of their interaction, where Rimbaud's other early (and later) poetic output intimately resonates. Firstly, in focusing on Léonard's intense flights of imagination and his poetic concern with his poetry, Rimbaud was already drawing on some earlier and contemporary writings of his which dealt with the same matter—in a notably similar case, where the lyric subject is caught in the conflict between seemingly contradictory forces affecting poetic inspiration.

One early example which should be put into dialogue with "Un cœur sous une soutane" is the Parnassianesque poem "Credo in unam," later called "Soleil et chair," with similar matters concerning poetic inspiration both within the text and surrounding its production. In May 1870, Rimbaud had sent a version of "Credo in unam..." to Théodore de Banville as a part of a missive imploring Banville to include three of Rimbaud's poems which he had sent to him in hopes of being included in the slated second edition of the Parnassian anthology, *Le Parnasse contemporain*. The version he sent to Banville was entitled, "Credo in unam," signaling the issue of faith and belief that is at stake in the poem. It alludes to the Apostles' Creed, with its chants of "Credo in Deum Patrem...Credo in Spiritum Sanctum" ("I believe in God the Father...I believe in the Holy Spirit"), but that belief in Christian monotheism is contrasted with the poem's vision

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topos—drawn from the Baroque theatre—that the spectator, or knowledge seeker, must "suspend disbelief," complementing the aporetic mode wherein one "suspends judgment."

of erotic pagan nature, polytheism, and the sacred feminine. The *unam* is shifted from belief in the one God of the Bible, to that of the sacred feminine incarnated by the female deity Venus in the poem. The story of the poem reflects this contrast between the current age of “Notre pâle raison” (“Our pale reason”) which “nous cache l’infini!” (“hides the infinite”; 18-9) coupled perhaps with the authority of the Church as alluded to in the title (echoed in the line, “Oh! la route est amère/ Depuis que l’autre Dieu nous attelle à sa croix”; “Oh! the way is bitter/ Since the other God harnessed us to his cross”; 14-15), and the vision of the unrepressed, erotic pagan nature where “Les Dieux écoutent l’Homme et le Monde infini!”; “The Gods listen to Man and to the infinite World!”; 22-3).

Most critiques of this poem have focused on its stylistics, and seek to show that it is either entirely in line with some aspects of Parnassian style and therefore unremarkable, or, that it diverges, however, slightly in certain crucial ways from the Parnassians. A frequent addition to this reading is to pair it with the Rimbaud’s other poem on Venus, “Vénus Anadyoméne” with its ironic image of a so-called Venus “belle hideusement d’un ulcère à l’anus” (Hideously beautiful with an ulcer on the anus”; 24-5), as if this later grotesque poem dialectically undoes the earlier poem in which Venus is prominently and more positively featured, “Credo in unam.” A critique somewhere in between these two customary varieties is Seth Whidden’s *Leaving Parnassus: The Lyric Subject in Verlaine and Rimbaud*, which for the most part remarks that Rimbaud’s earlier poems “only hint at destabilization,” and that they “very rarely distance themselves from the Parnassian mould they tried to emulate” whereas Whidden shows that for the most part Rimbaud’s poetry purposefully departs from aspects of Parnassian poetics and disrupts what he describes as its more traditional subjective positions (132, 131). It would be more accurate, however, to consider the heterogeneity of the Parnassians, but Whidden’s analysis of

destabilization is useful to show how this phenomenon works in itself against the fantasy of traditional subjective position, even if it does not represent any Parnassian poetics as a whole.<sup>35</sup> Whidden briefly comments on how the poem shows this hint at destabilization, but only treats here two small parts of the poem that hint at this destabilization, including the line “Et tout croît, et tout monte!” which he says shows the “subject’s difficulty in clearly describing anything beyond the immediate and tactile” through the vagueness of both the referent and the described action (135). For the most part, this poem is taken to be Rimbaud’s parody of the strain of Parnassian poetics with neoclassical themes of Paganism; but if we pay attention to the content of the poem, to its conflict between the pagan and modern realms, the effect it implies on the subject/object position is much more notable in the way that it connects to Rimbaud’s more

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<sup>35</sup> Murphy in his useful article “Versifications ‘parnassiennes’ (?)” (sic) cites another useful monograph on the diversity of the Parnassian poets by Yann Mortelette: “Alors cependant que les recenseurs contemporains cites par l’auteur ne cessent de parler de l’obsession de la forme chez les Parnassians” (“Although the contemporary reviewers cited by the author constantly speak about the obsession with form among the Parnassians”)—that is, a caricature of the Parnassians which persists to this day—“la monographie en question d’y accorde qu’un role des plus secondaires, privilégiant l’impassabilité, l’Art pour l’Art, la reference antique, la question formelle étant envisage principalement par le truchement de “L’Art” de Gautier” (“the monograph in question gives it only a secondary role, favoring impassibility, Art for Art, the reference to antiquity, the formal question being envisioned principally through Gautier’s ‘Art’”; 14; my trans.). See also the first chapter of the luminous *Poetry, Politics, and the Body in Rimbaud* by Robert St. Clair.

widespread strategy of complicating his process of poiesis in such a way that ambiguous, Pyrrhonian antinomies are uncovered.

Rimbaud's take on the Parnassian thematic of Paganism distinguishes itself through its twist on the usual topos of the "*regret*" for the past in that it also presents as a seemingly contradictory counterweight to this nostalgia the insistence that that nostalgia is also impossible due to the conditions of the present-day. In Leconte de Lisle's collections of poems, such as his *Premières Poésies*, *Poèmes antiques*, and *Poèmes barbares*, the neoclassical age is often looked back to as a time that is impossible to reattain, and the lines describing that ancient world are folded into other lines pertaining to the nostalgia and regret at the impossibility of attaining that time again. For example, in "Vénus de Milo," both the poet's regret and the visions of the neoclassical past are combined into the time and space of the same stanza:

Îles, séjour des Dieux ! Hellas, mère sacrée !  
Oh ! que ne suis-je né dans le saint Archipel,  
Aux siècles glorieux où la Terre inspirée  
Voyait le Ciel descendre à son premier appel ! (*Poèmes antiques* 135)

Islands, abode of the Gods! Hellas, sacred mother!  
Oh! Why was I not born in the holy Archipelago,  
In the glorious centuries where the inspired Earth  
Saw Heaven descend at its first call! (my trans.)

Similarly, in his poem, "Premier regret," the opening stanza includes both attitudes, the regret, and the visions of the past, in this case, not of the neoclassical past but of the past of the lyric subject's former age of inspiration, are presented at the same time:

Mélodieuses voix qui chantiez mon aurore,  
Extase, amour, génie, ô mes rêves perdus,  
Ô mes rêves si doux, reviendrez-vous encore ?  
Essaims éblouissants, qu'êtes-vous devenus ?... (*Premières Poésies* 1)

Melodious voices which sang of my dawn,  
Ecstasy, love, genius, Oh my lost dreams,  
Oh my dreams so sweet, will you come back again?  
Dazzling swarms, what has become of you?...; (my trans.)

Although it blends the two times of the visions of the past and the lyric subject's regret, this should be read as an example of regular subject/object forms, because the vision of the lyric subject is presented as one consistent unity. The power of the poet, through the lyric subject, is expressed through its stable, intact voice in the present, although the regret for a powerful past is given the full weight of the lyrical expression.

Rimbaud, in his supposed parody of aspects of the Parnassians in "Credo in Unam" exceeds any stable subject/object construction, in that it splits more markedly the vision of the pagan past from the lines expressing the regret of the lyric subject, thus offering two separate spaces whose separate envisioned realities can come into conflict with one another, while still also remaining unresolved. Rimbaud's poem's split between the pagan past and the corrupt modernity also thus exhibits a split in the lyric subject which signals the disruption of the stable subject/object relationship. In the first part of the poem, although both regret and the vision of the pagan past are included, they are mostly given separate space in the poem, except for the customary refrain in the third and fourth stanzas of "Je regrette les temps..." ("I miss the time";

12-3). In that third stanza, mostly we hear the expansive vision of different Gods and spirits and their world explored without the interruption of the lyric subject's regret, of the time of: "l'antique jeunesse, / Des satyres lascifs, des faunes animaux, / Dieux qui mordaient d'amour l'écorce des rameaux" ("ancient youth, Of lascivious satyrs, of animal fauns, Gods who bit, because of love, the bark of boughs"; 12-3). In the last, fifth stanza, a shift emerges, and the expression of the lyric subject's regret and hatred for modernity dominates: "Misère! Maintenant il dit: Je sais les choses, / Et va, les yeux fermés et les oreilles closes" ("Woe! Now he says: I comprehend things, And goes off, with eyes closed his ears closed"; 14-5). André Guyaux notes this split, commenting that "cette dissertation en vers cadrerait mal avec le panthéisme primitiviste et l'optimisme de la rédemption par l'amour qui animent tout le reste du poème" ("this scholarly exercise in verse fits in poorly with the primitive pantheism and the optimism for the redemption by love which animates the rest of the poem"; (Rimbaud and Guyaux *Œuvres* 825).

This section of his "dissertation en vers" reflects the lyric subject's destabilizing position based on the corrupt present because it is developed in such depth and not blended in a unified way with the rest of the poem with its mood of *regret* and longing for the pagan past and its hopes for the return of that pagan plenitude in the future. These three separate temporalities do, however, find expression in this section, but they are each destabilizing in their combination. It is destabilizing to the rest of the poem because it introduces in the lyric subject the disruptive—and aporetic—attitude of doubt. In the later, longer version of the poem, "Soleil et chair," directly following the stanza beginning with "Misère," he continues in this vein: "Et pourtant, plus de dieux! Plus de dieux! L'Homme est Roi, / L'Homme est Dieu!" ("And yet, no more gods! No more gods! Man is King, Man is God!"; 14-5). In the third section, this theme is picked up, though it is immediately opened by a line evoking regret for the pagan time and hoping for its

return in the future: “Si les temps revenaient, les temps qui sont venus! / —Car l’Homme a fini! L’Homme a joué tous les rôles!” (“If the times which have passed came back! —For Man is finished! Man has played all roles!”; 16-7). If we take the zetetic theatrical metaphor of the actor trying out each role as having been exhausted, then what remains is to next try out the other mode, the aporetic mode of doubt. Indeed, in the rest of this section, which does not remain in the “Soleil et chair” version of the poem (verses 81 to 116 are only in the “Credo in unam” version sent to Banville; *Œuvres Rimbaud and Guyaux*, 37-45, 824), Rimbaud composes a complex image of humanity, attempting to return to the pagan time, but is plagued by its newfound attitude of doubt. It is even more disruptive, because in this section, too, there is the expression of hope for the return of “L’Idéal, la pensée invincible, éternelle, / Tout le dieu qui vit, sous son argile charnelle, / Montera, montera, brûlera sous son front![...] / Le Monde vibrera comme une immense lyre Dans le frémissement d’un immense baiser: —Le Monde a soif d’amour: tu viendras l’apaiser” (“The Ideal, the invincible eternal thought, The whole god who lives, under his clay of flesh, Will rise, will rise, and burn under his brow![...] The World will vibrate like an immense lyre, In the trembling of an immense kiss: —The World thirsts for love: you will come and slake its thirst”; 16-7). The seeds of doubt thrown into this section in the expanded version thus produce even more of a contrast:

L’Homme veut tout sonder, —et savoir![...]  
 —Et l’Homme, peut-il voir? Peut-il dire: je crois?  
 La voix et la pensée est-elle plus qu’un rêve?[...]  
 Nous ne pouvons savoir!—Nous sommes accablés  
 D’un manteau d’ignorance et d’étroites chimères!  
 Singes d’hommes tombés de la vulve des mères,

Notre pale raison nous cache l'infini!  
Nous voulons regarder:—le Doute nous punit!  
Le doute, morne oiseau, nous frappe de son aile...  
—Et l'horizon s'enfuit d'une fuite éternelle!... (18)

Man wills to sound all depths—and know![...]  
—Can Man see? Can he say: I believe?  
Is the voice of thought more than a dream?[...]  
We cannot know!—We are weighed down  
Under a cloak of ignorance and narrow chimeras!  
Apes of men, fallen from our mothers' wombs,  
Our pale reason hides the infinite from us!  
We try to see:—and Doubt punishes us!  
Doubt, gloomy bird, strikes us with its wing...  
—And the horizon rushes off in an eternal flight!... (19)

The three modes of the poem are in this section: regret for the past, hatred of the doubt-filled present, and hope for the future (“Tout le dieu qui vit...montera”). But by asking the questions “peut-il voir? Peut-il dire: je crois?,” both the visionary power of the lyric subject and the associated ability to believe in those pagan visions of the past or the hopeful ones of the future are thrown into disarray. If ostensibly the lyric subject speaks from the present, then this double assertion of humanity’s “manteau d’ignorance” and “étroites chimères” raises the specter of impossibilities, a potentially inescapable limit to our vision, our imagination, and our knowledge. Rimbaud’s combination of these various possibilities of the text produces this radical situation of

a split that goes beyond the simple doubt that he represents as the text's present.

The end of the stanza beginning with "Misère!" does include a vision of the pagan past, but by combining it with a characteristically Rimbaudian image of eroticism, the split within the subject of facing both the vision of the past and the corruption of the present is heightened: "Oh! si l'homme puisait encore à ta mamelle, / Grand mère des dieux et des hommes, Cybèle; / S'il n'avait pas laissé l'immortelle Astarté/ Qui jadis, émergeant dans l'immense clarté/ Des flots bleus, fleur de chair que la vague parfume, / Montra son nombril rose où vint neiger l'écume" ("Oh! If man still drew strength from your nipple, Great mother of gods and men, Cybele; If only he had not abandoned immortal Astarte/ Who, once, emerging in the immense light/ Of blue waves, flower-flesh the wave perfumes, Showed her rose-colored navel where the foam came snowing"; 14-5). By instilling into the vision of the past these erotic scenes, the lyric subject is charged with an erotic vision that can only play out within the present of that lyric subject, even though that present is supposedly the time dominated by hatred of modernity. There are a few other such visually erotic and shocking moments in the poem, starting from the very beginning of the poem where the Sun and Earth are personified with erotically charged language, bringing to mind a Lucretian vision of the sexual reproduction inherent to nature itself: "Le Soleil, le foyer de tendresse et de vie, / Verse l'amour brûlant à la terre ravie" (The Sun, hearth of tenderness and life, Pours burning love over the delighted earth; 12-3). The verse, "Singes d'hommes tombés de la vulve des mères" ("Apes of men, fallen from our mothers' wombs"; 18-9) is also an unexpected formulation which is both shocking and real. Rimbaud associates these bodies with a pre-Christian idolization of women and their bodies, enacting in a generative way the cult of Venus and Aphrodite. In this sense, he does not objectify them, but instead gives them power and strength; on the other hand, it is the ostensibly male lyric subject who is split between

regret for the past, eroticism, hatred for the present, and hope for the future, and instead occupies an unstable subjective position, capable of disrupting any common sense ordering of subjective temporal relations which would lead uncomplicatedly from past to present and future.

The aforementioned section containing Rimbaud's dirge of human doubt, in which past, present, and future are combined—with some erotic imagery—in a shocking combination is ended with a dotted line-break, and what follows is the crystallized version of these three modes summarizing the overall theory of the poem: the nature of a split within Being between the gloom of "Doute" and Humanity's ability to "chant[er]" the redemptive power of nature alongside that same power from nature:

.....

Le grand ciel est ouvert! Les mystères sont morts  
Devant l'Homme, debout, qui croise ses bras forts  
Dans l'immense splendeur de la riche nature!  
Il chante...et le bois chante, et le fleuve murmure  
Un chant plain de bonheur qui monte vers le jour!...  
—C'est la Rédemption! C'est l'amour! C'est l'amour!...

..... (18)

The great sky is open! the mysteries are dead  
Before erect Man crossing his strong arms  
In the vast splendor of rich nature!  
He sings...and the wood sings, and the river murmurs  
A song full of joy which rises toward daylight!...

—It is Redemption! It is love! It is love!... (19)

The stanza shifts from the regret that “[l]es mystères sont morts” concerning the present state of humankind, who “croise ses bras forts” as if unable to recognize the “immense splendor de la riche nature!” But then that announcement of that rich nature sets off a new action by humankind: “Il chante...”, an action which, given what comes before, is unexpected, to say the least. How does humanity go from its modern attitude, cut off from the immense splendor of nature and ruled by “Doute,” to the prophetic future of love and “Rédemption?” It does so through a transformative song: “[L’Homme] chante,” in the same way that nature does, “naturally.” And just as the lyric subject expresses this faith in the song, the lyric, the poem performs its own vision, as the next section—section four according to the “Soleil et chair” numeration—beginning “Ô splendeur de la chair! Ô splendeur idéale!” launches a series of Ovidian visions of the gods and spirits in their natural environments. It goes from “Ô grande Ariadne, qui jette tes sanglots/ Sur la rive, en voyant fuir là-bas sur les flots” to “la Nymphé qui rêve, un coude sur son vase, Au beau jeune homme blanc que son onde a pressé” (“O great Ariadne, who pours your sobs/ Over the shore, as you see over there on the waves; the Nymph, one elbow on her urn, dreaming/ Of the handsome white youth her wave pressed against”; 20-1). The singing upsets the lyrical subject, because in a complication of the subject/object position, not only does “Il chante,” but “le bois chante, et le fleuve murmure”—in singing, humanity recovers not a poetic power to create visions that only human language can, but that singing or chanting is an emanation of a natural order which sings or chants, too. And once again, a disarmingly erotic image dominates through implication at the start of this series, this time of the classical version of Venus as the Venus Callipyge, an anasyrma, or an erotic or provocative gesture of self-exposure, in the case of the Venus Callipyge of her buttocks: “Ô renouveau

d'amour, aurore triomphale/ OÙ, courbant à leurs pieds les Dieux et les Héros/ Kallipyge la blanche et le petit Éros/ Effleureront, couverts de la neige es roses, Les femmes et les fleurs sous leurs beaux pieds écloses!" ("O renewal of love, triumphal dawn/ When, prostrating Gods and Heroes at their feet/ White Callipyge and little Eros, Covered with the snow of roses, Will lightly touch women and flowers full-blown under their beautiful feet!"; 18-9). We should parenthetically note that the presence of the rear-baring Venus Callipyge with "prostrating Gods and Heroes at their feet" could show even more thematically continuity than is realized by the customary narrative of Rimbaud's supposedly pre- and post-Parnassian phases, between this poem and the supposedly anally fixated Rimbaud of "Vénus Anadyomène." In this jarring combination of doubt, hope, and faith in the power of poetic vision, along with erotic imagery, instead of a foil against which to compare Rimbaud's more customarily ironic poems, we have in this poem already a form that highlights the ability to shift rapidly between differing images of poetic attitudes: from one where humanity is stuck in doubt and unable to know or believe, to one flooded with the poetic vision leading from the ability of humankind to poetically "chant" alongside nature—a vision played out in the poem's form—and seduced by the hope for love and redemption.

As with the attitudinal dynamic in "Un cœur sous une soutane," where the two modes of the ironic lusty Léonard and the sincere chaste Léonard are presented but in which neither one takes final interpretive authority, in "Credo in unam" or "Soleil et chair," these two opposing situations are explored, between the mode of humanity in "Doute" and the vision of the pagan past and prophetic and poetic future, initiated by the poetic ability to "chant" and thus participate in nature's visionary power. In a way, the reception of "Credo in unam" has been something of an inverted critical image of "Un cœur sous une soutane": critics have tended,

when deigning to read the text at all, to see the latter only under the lens of cynical satire, and the former only through that of naïve sincerity. Since most critics seem to overlook this Parnassian poem as Rimbaud's derivative vision of fantastical pagan plenitude, they would do right to focus on that disturbing presentation of modern humanity in doubt in the poem, presaging as it does not only the conflict between attitudes in Léonard's tale but the much later *Une saison en enfer*. To interpret the poem dualistically would allow the critics to say that this episode of doubt is entirely overcome by the shift in the poem's narrative toward its final stanza of humanity's potential renaissance of a pagan poetic power. The only way they could do this is to take the section of doubt as hypophora—merely putting on an opposing argument to then discount it. Yet the repetition of questions haunts the heart of the poem:

—Pourquoi l'azur muet et l'espace insondable?  
Pourquoi les astres d'or fourmillant comme un sable?  
Si l'on montait toujours, que verrait-on là-haut?  
Un Pasteur mène-t-il cet immense troupeau  
De mondes cheminant dans l'horreur de l'espace?  
Et tous ces mondes-là, que l'éther vaste embrasse,  
Vibrent-ils aux accents d'une éternelle voix?  
—Et l'Homme, peut-il voir? Peut-il dire: je crois? (18)

—Why the silent sky and the unfathomable space?  
Why the golden stars swarming like sand?  
If one mounted forever, what would one see up there?  
Does a Shepherd drive that huge flock

Of worlds journeying through the horror of space?

And do all those worlds, embraced by the vast ether,

Tremble at the sound of an eternal voice?

—Can Man see? Can he say: I believe? (19)

The *p* of the two “Pourquois” is repeated by the reference to the “Pasteur” and his “troupeau,” and again in the two questions with “peut-il.” These two questions are both fundamental ontological and epistemological ones that ask the same skeptical questions about the criterion of human reason. The ontological question, do we have the nature to be able to see? “l’Homme, peut-il voir?” And the epistemological one, “peut-il dire: je crois?” And not only are these questions relevant to the modern time of humanity’s doubt, shared by Montaigne’s resurrection of skepticism, or the religiously skeptical era following Nietzsche’s death of God, God the “Pasteur,” but the question of a shepherd of an “immense troupeau de mondes” is a classical one, more like Lucretius’s scientific-like proposition of multiple worlds which is at odds with a purely pagan understanding of the universe. Cohn recognizes the transhistorical and Montaignist nature of that passage: “the eternal questions about our origins, the stars in space, in the Baroque-Romantic-Modern vein of Montaigne, Pascal, Hugo” (43). By ironically naming the earlier version of the poem, “Credo in unam,” Rimbaud also underlines the fact that the poem is meant to represent not just a wistful vision of an impossible but beautiful past, but a complicated one in which the contemporary poet, in the modern era, dominated simultaneously by Christianity and atheistic scientism, looks back to an entirely separate pagan era. And through the near-magical ability of humanity to “chant[er]” in tune with a nature that sings back in turn, that vision of imaginative fantasy where redemptive love, eroticism, and vitality coexist can be resurrected.

Understandably, critics would usually interpret the poem completely through its quality

of sincerity because of the aspects of the poem that do fall under that overall attitude. In an important intertext to the poem, Rimbaud's letter to Banville containing "Credo in unam" records an excitement surrounding his poetic inspiration, and a commitment to devote himself to the Parnassian poetic ideals:

Dans deux ans, dans un an peut-être, je serai à Paris. —*Anch'io*, messieurs du journal, je serai Parnassien! —Je ne sais ce que j'ai là...qui veut monter... —Je jure, cher maître, d'adorer toujours les deux déesses, Muse et Liberté. Ne faites pas trop la moue en lisant ces vers:... Vous me rendriez fou de joie et d'espérance, si vous vouliez, cher Maître, *faire faire* à la pièce *Credo in unam* une petite place entre les Parnassiens,... Je viendrais à la dernière série du *Parnasse*: cela ferait le Credo des poètes!... —Ambition! Ô Folle!  
(362)

In two years, in one year perhaps, I will be in Paris. —*Anch'io*, gentlemen of the press, I will be a Parnassian! —I do not know what is inside me...that wants to come out...—I swear, *cher Maître*, I will always worship the two goddesses, the Muse and Liberty. Do not frown too much as you read these verses... You would make me delirious with joy and hope, if you were willing, *cher Maître*, to make room for the poem *Credo in unam* among the Parnassians...I would like to be in the last issue of *Parnasse*: it would become the Creed of the poets...Oh mad Ambition! (363)

While this language presages Léonard's over-the-top lyrical enthusiasm, it might at first be difficult to draw the connection between the subject of Rimbaud's short story and the lyric subject in "Credo in unam"; much the same could be said for the difficulty of locating the traces of something like irony in this latter poem, and indeed in this period of Rimbaud's poetic

production, marked as it apparently was by sincere enthusiasm and belief in the power of poetry and its “deux déesses, Muse et Liberté.”

The even earlier Latin poetic work “Ver Erat,” with similarities to “Credo in unam,” reveals the Pyrrhonian-ironic stakes of both early poems more clearly. Each poem situates the poetic impulse—the impulse to create poetry as originating from a source either within the self or from without—as a conflict stuck between at least two antinomic modes or attitudes related to the possibility or impossibility of tarrying with inspiration. The Pyrrhonian-ironic form of each situation is such that, although shifting between the two modes of the lyric and the satiric (a slippage often marked by formal elements that for purely satirical writers might imply traditional satire or irony), Rimbaud upholds both levels as coexisting entities. In the case of Léonard, a truly satirical text would tear down Léonard’s writing and acts of faith as genuinely ridiculous, foregrounding instead his perversion (and the perversion of everyone around him) as the emotional and logical endpoint of the text. But as in the Pyrrhonian structure, this is not the case: Rimbaud makes both of these antinomic sides able to coexist as potential. In the case of “Credo in unam,” the Pyrrhonian twists are twofold. It is not like a traditional neoclassical Parnassian poem in that it is not a simple positive image of the pagan era without the antinomic presentation of the doubtful modern age. It exceeds the neoclassical Parnassian poems that do represent the regret of the impossibility of reattaining the past (which do not represent that same antinomic conflict), in that it also positively shows the renaissance of the powerful past in a poetic prophetic present and future. For the 1869 Latin exam when Rimbaud composed one of his first documented pieces of verse, “Ver erat” (It was Springtime), he was asked to write a Latin composition by amplifying a passage from Horace. In this text, likewise, Rimbaud’s central subject of poiesis, in this case of the inspiration of poetry, is invoked. Here, too, the non-ironic

duality exists almost entirely between the external conditions of the text's production as being an examination exercise (which are preserved in the form of the text, as well), and its extraordinary presentation of the apotheosis of the poet. This apotheosis scene also contains *pre-voyance* notions of poiesis that disrupt the traditional subject/object divide and reveal the fascination for Pyrrhonian reversals already at work in Rimbaud's earliest writing.

What is curious about "Ver Erat" is that it narrates the story of a young Horace, who escapes from the boredom of school to the countryside, where he becomes inspired by nature and then experiences a sacred apotheosis and is crowned a vatic poet by Apollo: "Divina vocale manu praetendere plectrum. Tum capiti inscripsit caelesti haec nomina flamma: TU VATES ERIS..." ("His divine hand offered me the sounding lyre, and with fire from heaven he traced these words on my brow: YOU WILL BE A [VATIC POET]..."; Rimbaud and Schmidt 323). The self-referentiality can be presumed because we know that Rimbaud was sitting in the examination, doubling the position of Horace, who thanks to the fact that "a malady immobilized Orbilius," his teacher, "the weapons of a terrible teacher were stilled. The sounds of slaps no longer reached my ears. The whipping-stick no longer kept me in continual pain," and therefore, "I took my advantage, sought the smiling countryside, Forgetting all; free from studies and free from care...Boring classes, the teacher's harsh lectures/ Were blotted out of mind" (319). Horace's fuge as a story would not be ironic if we did not also know that Rimbaud was chained to the desk at its composition; even the perfection of the Latin verses speaks to the fact that Rimbaud was not free to escape from his situation and wander the "smiling countryside" like Horace in the intertextual palimpsest of "Ver erat." But this last point is not ironic either. It is not ironic that the material history of the poem seems to reveal it as marking a failure of freedom or a parody of inspiration (the scholarly imitation of a classical model), for the intensity of Horace's

vatic flight is so powerful that the text raises questions beyond simple irony. It raises the question of if Rimbaud successfully describes the potential of poetry to represent freedom and the imaginative power of poetic inspiration. Rimbaud describes the process as a mystical experience that exceeds reason:

Nor did I, childishly, seek empty rural idleness:  
I was filled with feelings greater than my small breast;  
An unknown intent more divine added wings  
To these exalted feelings: I watched what I saw,  
Marveling silently, and in my breast was born  
A love for the warm countryside: like an iron  
Ring the Magnesian rock by some mysterious force  
Attracts, and silently binds to itself with invisible hooks... (321)

These lines themselves meta-poetically perform their content: the logic of the lines of the Latin verse describes the countryside as an entity and source of inspiration which is both outside and inside: “pectusque calentis/ Insinuabat amor ruris” (“and in my breast was born/ A love for the warm countryside”)—the “calentis” could pertain to either the warmth of his breast or heart, or the warm countryside, thus showing the power of the poetic impulse (here, the image of the magnet and the iron) as a force connecting and superseding the difference between interiority and exteriority, subject and object, self and other. What proceeds shows Rimbaud’s keen awareness of the sensory ability of poetic language to meta-poetically perform that mystery of inspiration, his sense that language links the inside of thought to the outside world of nature and bodies: “Deponens, jacui viridanti in fluminis ora/ Murmure languidulo sopitus, et otia duxi, Permulsus volucrum concentu auraque Favoni” (“And I lay down on the green-growing bank of

a stream; Lulled by its languishing murmur, I lay and took my ease, Charmed by the songs of birds and the breath of the Western wind"; 321). The onomatopoeia of the murmuring, languishing stream combines with the length of those words to portray the scene, with the image of Horace, "otia duxi" quickly enveloped between that sensory scenery and the double senses of the sound of the "volucrum concentu" and the feel of the "auraque Favoni." Following that point, Apollo's doves appear and carry Horace away. Yet, here too, the possibility that Horace fell asleep by the water could be read as one more ironic or skeptical element disrupting the imagined reality of his apotheosis, suggesting that Horace, just like Rimbaud, is still there, chained to a school desk and the repetitive vacuity and vanity of Latin themes. But what is clear is that Rimbaud's poetic ascendance, in the ability of his poetic language to circulate around the mystery of inspiration and then write from every sense—de tous les sens—was already at work in this curious earliest poem about a schoolboy and a vatic poet.

### **Léonard Vates: The Mysterious Passion of Poetry**

Within the story of "Un coeur sous une soutane," Léonard's zeal for poetry is expressed in terms that complicate the traditional subject/object separation, in terms which continue the poetic scenarios first explored in "Ver erat" and "Credo in unam," and then later more explicitly postulated in his "Lettres du voyant." Léonard's zeal is first expressed through his experiments in writing before he falls in love with Thimothina, so even though his first poem is only directed as a Marian paean or chant to Mary, elements of it are deemed inappropriate by the Brother "J\*\*\*" who intercepts Léonard's poem to bring to the *Supérieur*. It is contained in the entry for May 4<sup>th</sup>, the entire entry of which appears to have been seen by the brother, since he cites from

the prose line which follows the paean:

Tenez, hier, je n'y tenais plus : j'ai étendu, comme l'ange Gabriel, les ailes de mon cœur.

Le souffle de l'esprit sacré a parcouru mon être ! J'ai pris ma lyre, et j'ai chanté :

You know, yesterday, I couldn't stand it any longer: I spread, like the angel Gabriel, the wings of my heart. The breath of the sacred spirit ran through my being! I took my lyre, and I sang: Draw near!/ Great Mary!/ Dear Mother!/ Of Sweet Jesus!/ *Sanctus Christus!*

O Pregnant Virgin/ O Sainted Mother/ Hear our Prayer!

On the one hand, there are fascinating poetic impulses that are expressed through Rimbaud's description of Léonard's creation of this poetry: the way the simple, heartbeat-like tetrasyllables come out like the "ailes de mon cœur" ("wings of my heart"), and the description of the "souffle de l'esprit sacré [qui] a parcouru mon être" ("breath of the sacred spirit [which] ran through my being"), potentially both give a bodily depiction of a true poetic, primal scene of what it feels like at the conception of a poem. The reference to Jesus's conception via the body of Mary also sparks the notion of the feminine sacred, as if imbuing poetic creation and poesis with an element of the divine. On the other hand, there are aspects of the ridiculous here—for example, the humorous sound of "Du doux," or "Jésus" rhyming with "Christus," a silly redundancy. Then, he had "commis l'imprudence de laisser tomber la précédente confidence..." and "J\*\*\* l'a ramassée, J..., le plus féroce des jansénistes, le plus rigoureux des séides du sup\*\*\*, et l'a portée à son maître" ("made the mistake of dropping the preceding confidence...J\*\*\* picked it up, J\*\*\*, the most ferocious Jansenist, the staunchest henchman of Sup\*\*\*, and brought it to his master"; 52). He is interrogated by the grotesquely described seminary *supérieur* (elliptically referred to as "sup..."), who makes fun of Léonard's poem, twisting it into a mockery by merely elongating or stuttering the syllables: "Granade Maarieie !... Mèèèrè Chéééerieie !" (53). The

students at the seminary would later simply repeat these lines, in order to mock Léonard: “trois ou quatre chuchotent en chœur: Grande Marie... Mère chérie !” (“three or four whispered in unison”; 54). Léonard decries his bullying, since what to him is pure and beautiful can so easily be twisted, merely because of its naively devout and simple intent, perhaps. Léonard writes about the superior, “Il ravalait ma poésie! Il crachait sur ma rose ! il faisait le Brid-oison, le Joseph, le bête, pour salir, pour souiller ce chant virginal. Il bégayait et prolongait chaque syllabe avec un ricanement de haine concentré” (“He debased my poetry! He spat on my rose! He played the *Brid’oison*, the Joseph, the dummy, to sully this virginal song. He stuttered and prolonged each syllable with a snicker of concentrated hate”; 53). For Léonard, it was pure, but since he included, “O vierge enceinte,” the superior deemed it impious. And while this first poem or paean is perhaps not yet the most poetically beautiful of Léonard’s compositions, and indeed also includes aspects of ridiculous parody, what is more remarkable is the meta-poetic language he uses to describe the mysterious impulse to poetry that Léonard experiences, both a force that is described through both religious and bodily terms and an objective impulse that he describes as coming from outside before it then affects the body. Rimbaud would also later do this in his “Lettres du voyant.”

In 1871, Rimbaud would write two letters in which he formulates the paradox of the poetic process, that is, the mystery about the inspiration entailed in writing poetry: from where does that inspiration originate, from within, from without, or from both? In his May 13 1871 letter to Izambard, Rimbaud names this debate in an original way, when he exclaims that he wants to create a “poésie objective” as opposed to what he calls a “poésie subjective” associated with the realm of “le râtelier universitaire” (“university trough”; 371) which the poet deems “horriblement fadasse” (“horribly insipid”; 371). He does not directly define this objective

poetry, but goes on to associate it with a theory of inspiration in which the authorial subject is surpassed by a force that exceeds the subject, and which his new program would harness:

je travaille à me rendre *Voyant*... Il s'agit d'arriver à l'inconnu par le dérèglement de *tous les sens*. Les souffrances sont énormes, mais il faut être fort, être né poète, et je me suis reconnu poète. Ce n'est pas du tout ma faute. C'est faux de dire: Je pense: On devrait dire: On me pense.—Pardon du jeu de mots.—Je est un autre. Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon... (370)

I am working to make myself a *Seer*: you will not understand this, and I don't know how to explain it to you. It is a question of reaching the unknown by the derangement of *all the senses*. The sufferings are enormous, but one has to be strong, one has to be born a poet, and I know I am a poet. This is not at all my fault. It is wrong to say: I think: One ought to say: [one] thinks me.—Pardon the pun.—I is [an other]. It is too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin. (371)

In this famous formulation, the “Je” that records is transformed into the mere medium or vessel through which the real poet, the “autre” or “on” thinks and writes. The next “Lettre du voyant” to Paul Demeny dated two days later includes a similar formulation connecting “Je est un autre” to the notion of the material of the wood and the instrument of the violin: “Car Je est un autre. Si le cuivre s'éveille clairon, il n'y a rien de sa faute. Cela m'est évident: j'assiste à l'éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l'écoute: je lance un coup d'archet: la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d'un bond sur la scène” (“For I is [an other]. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it is not its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at this birth of my thought: I watch it and listen to it: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths, or comes

on to the stage in a leap”; 374-5).

These expressive formulations, while inexact or nebulous in their theoretical outlines, have been interpreted in a variety of ways within Rimbaudian criticism. A psychoanalytic approach would be attentive to the subject here as the subject of the unconscious, whose core alterity (call it “id” or “le réel”) is that which truly speaks in the subject: “*ça parle*,” as the infamous Lacanian gloss goes (Lacan 16). And although Rimbaud distances himself from the subject-centric Romantics on the one hand, on the other, he aligns himself with a subset of Romantics (“les seconds romantiques”) whom he considers connected to the line of *voyants*. And he theorizes the poietic theory of inspiration as coming from a mysterious other, either building from “les profondeurs” or out of nowhere “d’un bond sur la scène,” which is itself also a hallmark of the Romantic era of poetic theory (one thinks, for example, of Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp” which proposed a divine poetic inspiration wherein the poet was a mere passive channel of the divine winds). In Rimbaud’s case, however, his notion of “poésie objective” would intend to move away from the subjective focused emotional poetry of Romanticism, while maintaining this subset of the *voyant* tradition which prioritized an unknown source of poietic creation, either from somewhere outside, beyond, or deep within the writing subject. In Léonard’s case, in affirming a Romantic-like poietic theory of inspiration as something mysterious and sacred—a vatic poiesis—Rimbaud is thus also exploring a paradox that the “Lettres du voyant” would later treat.

The fact that the seminary *supérieur*’s henchman picks up not just Léonard’s chant but also the entire diary entry page upon which Léonard also commented on his poem also allows Rimbaud to make his (Léonard’s) poetic process the focus of the short story. Here a structure similar to Rimbaud’s concern with vatic poiesis is also at work, yet the satirical elements of the

short story have perhaps enabled Rimbaud to portray the excesses of “la poésie subjective” in Léonard’s over-the-top emotional productions. At the same time, the objective nature of Léonard’s poetic impulses is also at hand. In the passage leading up to the excerpt of poetry, the comparisons Rimbaud has Léonard choose are taken from the religious language of the seminarian: “j’ai étendu, comme l’ange Gabriel, les ailes de mon cœur. Le souffle de l’esprit sacré a parcouru mon être !” (“I spread, like the angel Gabriel, the wings of my heart. The breath of the Holy Spirit ran through my being”; 52). The “étendu” echoes the building tension in the previous entry of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, when, oppressed by the “atmosphère empuantie de l’étude, sous la lumière du gaz, dans la chaleur fade du poêle !... J’étends mes bras ! je soupire, j’étends mes jambes... je sens des choses dans ma tête, oh ! des choses !...” (“stinking atmosphere of the study hall, under the gaslight, in the dull heat of the stove!...I stretch my arms! I sigh, I stretch my legs... I feel things in my head, oh! things!...”; 52). In his oppression and boredom, Léonard is subjected to bodily impulses and drives which he cannot name except to call them—things! Things which he feels in his head as if giving birth to them (conceiving them), and which causes him to stretch his limbs. The (erotic) tension builds up until, as he says, “Je n’y tenais plus” (“I couldn’t stand it anymore”; 52). He had to release the tension, which had played out its symptoms in his head and through his body, by releasing his poetry. And while the new comparisons are put into sacred language, they also continue to take on a bodily expression.<sup>36</sup> It

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<sup>36</sup> While there are many examples throughout Rimbaud’s poetry where poetic problems are expressed through the body, one which strongly recalls Léonard’s frustration and his grotesquely sexualized environment is “Oraison du soir”: “Tels que les excréments chauds d’un vieux colombier, Milles Rêves en moi font de douces brûlures” (“Like the warm excrement of an old

is like the angel Gabriel that he now stretches or spreads “les ailes de mon cœur” (“the wings of my heart”), with cœur again potentially carrying (at least) a double entendre, thus doubling again the meaning between the sacred heart and (a dually sexed) bodily passion. In this line before the first excerpt of poetry, Léonard also feels that “[l]e souffle de l’esprit sacré a parcouru mon être !” (“the breath of the Holy Spirit ran through my being”), a Rimbaldian formulation that again raises the question of the causality of Léonard’s poetic impulse: from where comes the poetic impulse, from a vatic source that cannot be named?

When Léonard names the “esprit sacré” (“Holy Spirit”) which ran through his entire being, it is as if he is giving a name with the only language to which he has access—the sacred language of the Church—to describe what, following the excerpt of poetry, he also describes as “les effluves mystérieuses [*sic*] qui secouaient mon âme” (“mysterious effluvia which shook my soul”). Again, there is the overlap between something sacred (“mystery and the soul”), and something potentially bodily and grotesque (effluvia, meaning a waste product, an outflow, and *secouer* indicates a bodily shaking-up that potentially carries (auto)erotic connotations, as with the slang meaning of *secouer* for masturbation). But the Léonard’s impulse to poetry comes from the outside, as in an unstoppable spirit or force that shook through his soul, which he cannot truly understand except as something mysterious which pours out from somewhere, and not just from one place, but from a multiplicity of potential sources: “effluves,” not *effluve*. In this way, it cannot be a subjective poetry, because the unitary subject-creator is thus multiplied and

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pigeon house, A Thousand Dreams gently burn inside me”; 138-9). Further on it is “Doux comme le Seigneur du cèdre” (“Sweetly as the Lord of the cedar”) that the locutor “pisse vers les cieux bruns” (“piss[es] toward the dark skies”; 138-9).

transcended by the mysterious (but objective, because real in its effects) higher power. And, in a way, it seems that through Léonard's gloss following the poem, it is the poiesis, the act of writing the poem which most excited him, not even the poem in itself: "O ! si vous saviez les effluves mystérieuses [*sic*] qui secouaient mon âme pendant que j'effeuillais cette rose poétique ! Je pris ma cithare, et comme le Psalmiste, j'élevai ma voix innocente et pure dans les célestes altitudes !!! *O altitudo altitudinum !...*" ("O! If you knew the mysterious effluvia which shook my soul while I was plucking the petals of this poetic rose! I took my cithara, and like the Psalmist, I raised my pure and innocent voice into the celestial altitudes!!! *O altitudo altitudinum !...*"; 52; my trans.). He does not say, "Oh, if only you know how much Mary Mother of God inspires me," but says "if you knew the mysterious effluvia which shook my soul, as I was composing this poem about Mary." It is as if for him, Mary, Queen of Heaven, is the language he has for what he then describes as something even more primordial or a power even higher, the "celestial altitudes," the "height of heights" (*altitudo altitudinum*). In this expression of the inspiration within the poietic process, Rimbaud through Léonard is again exploring the material of the "Lettres du voyant," that is, the vatic mystery of poiesis.

The other poems and glosses of Léonard's can be read at this level, where they are inspired, beautiful, and innocently erotic, and in such a way that there is a sincere heart underneath the mocking exterior cassock of the text. Léonard's gloss to his poem "Ne devinez-vous pas" underlines this when he sews one poem into his undergarments because his classmates had been stealing his poems to mock him:

J'ai fait ces vers là hier...je me suis entré dans la chapelle, je me suis enfermé dans un confessionnal, et là, ma jeune poésie a pu palpiter et s'envoler, dans le rêve et le silence, vers les sphères de l'amour. Puis, comme on vient m'enlever mes moindres papiers dans

mes poches, la nuit et le jour, j'ai cousu ces vers en bas de mon dernier vêtement, celui qui touche immédiatement à ma peau, et, pendant l'étude, je tire, sous mes habits, ma poésie sur mon cœur, et je la presse longuement, en rêvant... (54-5)

I made these verses yesterday...I entered the chapel, I shut myself in the confessional, and there, my young poetry could palpitate and fly off, in dream and silence, toward the spheres of love. Then, as they come to rob me of my least papers in my pockets, night and day, I have sewn these verses to the bottom of my last vestment, that which touches immediately my skin, and, during study, I pull, under my clothes, my poetry onto my heart, and I press it a long time, dreaming...

Although the last line, again, could potentially disrupt the sincerity of the description with the omnipresent double-entendre of *cœur*, even were this to be the case, Léonard's description of his sensual and wondrous apogee toward "les sphères de l'amour" and "dans le rêve et le silence" can still strike the ear as sincere and beautiful poetic lines. Rimbaud adds poetic effect to these lines of prose when the first line is broken up into rhythmic units that lead toward the "sphères de l'amour." The line begins with a "je" which anaphorically repeats thrice, and once Léonard makes the transition into the space of the confessional, the true subject of poetry can reveal itself and the "je" disappears. In its place is, "ma jeune poésie" which is personified or metaphorized as something that can "palpiter" and then "s'envoler." That same palpitation or beating staccato rhythm is then used at the end of the description when Léonard paratactically describes his passion that he has manifested into this sensual ritual of his poetry, if not made flesh, made to touch his flesh. The entire episode could be laughed at, or, if read through the lens of sincerity, it can be seen as a sensual ode to poetry itself that can be read alongside and with the separate but

connected satirical aspects of the story.

### **Rimbaud's Pyrrhonian Irony**

On the one hand, and as we have seen, there is the dominant anti-clerical interpretation of “Un cœur sous une soutane.” It would be overly hasty to discount this ironic and satirical side entirely in favor of the “sincere reading” of Léonard’s passion as a figure of Rimbaud’s representation of poetic inspiration and poiesis generally. One must read both levels together, rather. Not to do so would be to discount this double presence of irony and sincerity within the rest of the Rimbaud oeuvre, which some critics have perceptively analyzed under the theory of Romantic irony. A Pyrrhonian reading can add to these extant understandings of this double nature of Rimbaud’s writing the notion that the double structure signals a quest for truth, as opposed to merely being a use of the language of rhetoric to describe what the textual structure is.<sup>37</sup> In “Romantic Irony in Rimbaud,” Douglas P. Collins and Herbert S. Gershman expanded

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<sup>37</sup> For as humorous and life-affirming it may be, irony is deadly serious, when one considers how fundamental it is as a concept from the ancients to today, and not just a concept, but a feature of our epistemology and ontology. Claire Colebrook’s perspicacious inquiry into the entire history of irony affirms this fact, showing that today, for example, “[Irony] can also refer to the huge problems of postmodernity; our very historical context is ironic because today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation, and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony” (1). As a crucial feature of modernity, from the early modern era through the nineteenth century and into post-modernity, it is no mistake that the

the theory of Romantic irony in Rimbaud from W. M. Frohock's introduction of the notion in his *Rimbaud's Poetic Practice*, and while these explicit studies of irony in Rimbaud adequately describe aspects of this double structure and establish a compelling practical genealogy of Romantic irony from its German philosophical origins, we can show how a Pyrrhonian theory of Romantic irony with a Montaignist genealogy can better treat the double structure in Rimbaud's oeuvre, as Rimbaud's early writings such as "Un coeur sous une soutane" and "Credo in unam" affirm.

Collins and Gershman define the term Romantic Irony as a literary device with philosophical foundations which was theorized from the German Romantics before applying it to Rimbaud. Generally, they write, "The phrase is now more broadly used to designate abrupt mood changes or dramatic deflation of any extravagant or romanticized personal fantasy," but it also developed out of a more specific German context regarding the poetic act of literary creation and its philosophical underpinnings (678-9). First, Fichte established that "human nature is a product of an unresolvable conflict between the infinite aspirations of the human spirit and man's inherent limitations which make impossible the realization of those aspirations" (677). Then, for Schlegel, "romantic irony constituted the simultaneous awareness of these two opposing realities," what Collins and Gershman refer to as a "dialectic, constantly attracted by the infinite only to be repelled by the ever-present realization that its attainment was impossible," and which Schlegel called an "intrinsic dualism and duplicity—(and I use the term here, not in its usual moral sense, but in a higher signification, which is purely psychological and metaphysical)"

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Pyrrhonian writings of Montaigne and Rimbaud would concentrate on irony. It is also what might make their Pyrrhonian writings still so important today.

(677). Schlegel also describes this conflict in *The Philosophy of Language* as an inherent structural feature of human thought: “so deeply is this dualism rooted in our consciousness, that even when we are, or at least think ourselves alone, we still think as two, and are constrained as it were to recognize our inmost profoundest being as essentially dramatic. This natural colloquy with self, or generally, this internal dialogue is...the natural form of human thinking” (677).

Collins and Gershman then explain how Schlegel made the connection between this philosophical problem and that of literature.

Schlegel looked to the problematic of the Socratic method to extract the literary dimension which resulted from the philosophical conflict between the desire for infinity and the reality of limitation. Although Collins and Gershman point out that it has been criticized as a distortion of the Socratic method, for Schlegel:

Socratic irony makes everything at once a joke and a serious matter, at once ingenuously open and deeply dissembled...It comprises and evokes a sense of insoluble opposition between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the simultaneous necessity of total communication. It is the freest kind of poetic license, for by this means one becomes superior to oneself. (677)

The crucial implication, or the unspoken strawman against Schlegel’s explanation of the Socratic irony, Collins and Gershman underline, is that “the ordinary poet runs the risk of becoming completely absorbed by his work to the extent of confusing literature with reality” (677-8). The “freest kind of poetic license” which can disrupt this dogmatic attachment to one’s literary creation, is the gift, “[f]or the German philosopher” for “the true romantic poet, the ironic poet, [who] is like a God who keeps his cherished liberty intact by being simultaneously immanent and transcendent with regard to his creation, manifesting himself in his work while remaining

aloof” (378). The next phase of the literary drift of the Romantic development of irony, Collins and Gershman explain, is the difference between Schlegel’s original theory of Romantic irony—which “held that the ironic author revealed himself indirectly in his work”—and Tieck’s version, who “saw no reason not to interrupt the narrative progression of his plays with the introduction of an author-surrogate, who would then proceed directly to make ironic reflections upon himself or the work in progress” (678). In both cases, however, the authors can exert control through their ironic disruption of their fictional creations, thus avoiding their excessive absorption in them.

When it comes to analyses of Romantic irony in Rimbaud, only Frohock’s *Poetic Practice in Rimbaud* establishes the explicit connection, and Collins and Gershman are right in pointing out that his explanation of the phenomenon is structurally inexact. As Frohock writes, “This technique is standard with Romantic ironists from Stendhal to Henri de Montherlant. ‘Aedificabo et destruum,’ writes Montherlant, ‘I shall construct, but to destroy’” (210). Frohock’s introductory example of Romantic irony in Rimbaud is from the preface to *Une saison en enfer* and seeks to highlight the two voices of the text’s narrative, the one which reflects upon the *voyant* writing experience, and which declared, “j’ai songé à recherché la clef de l’ancien festin, où je reprendrais peut-être appétit. La Charité est cette clef” (“I thought of looking for the key to the ancient banquet where I might possibly recover my appetite. Charity is the key”), and the other, which interrupts the resurrection of that experience of inspired poesis with a sharp rejoinder: “Cette inspiration prouve que j’ai rêvé” (“This lofty thought proves I dreamt it!”; 265). In Frohock’s analysis, with which Collins and Gershman rightly take issue, it is merely a matter of “I construct to destroy,” thus, in the case of the other voice which interrupts, “Here again, and as always, the second voice is the voice of reality and sanity” (210). This would imply that the

interpretation of the text gives authority in the final analysis to this second voice when the text's dual structure is not so clear cut. As Collins and Gershman show using the example, Frohock gives of the poem "Roman," this dual structure of "construct to destroy" is not so clear cut as that which Frohock's dualist vision of irony encourages. In this poem, these three critics agree, "the poet is mocked (and undoubtedly mocks himself) for his sentiments and his poetry," or as Frohock puts it, "At the end of 'Roman'...the poet returns from flights of erotic reverie to the realization that he must look like something of a puppy" (679, 210). But the pair of critics dispute Frohock's reading of Romantic irony through this very example, insisting that the "erotic reverie" was that which was built in order, precisely, for it to be dismantled poetically. "If anything," they rightly observe, "at the end of the poem, the poet's amorous fantasies are reinforced" (Collins and Gershman 679):

—Puis l'adorée, un soir, a daigné vous écrire!...

—Ce soir-là,...—vous rentrez aux cafés éclatants,

Vous demandez des bocks ou de la limonade...

—On n'est pas sérieux, quand on a dix-sept ans

Et qu'on a des tilleuls verts sur la promenade... (40)

—Then, one evening the girl you worship deigned to write to you...!

—That evening,...—you return to the bright cafés,

You ask for beer or lemonade...

—We're not serious when we are seventeen

And when we have green linden trees in the park... (41)

Collins and Gershman dispute that this is an example of Romantic irony at all or is if anything

“relatively ambivalent” because “[t]he final lines, with their effervescent hope, could as easily support other more festive conclusions” (42, 41). It is at this point that we must differentiate a Pyrrhonian reading of Rimbaud’s Romantic irony from Collins and Gershman: what they read as relatively ambivalent underestimates the unique, multifaceted power of Rimbaud’s reappropriation of Romantic irony. We cannot know if the seventeen-year-old poet received a positive or a negative letter from the girl about whom he fantasizes, just as we cannot know for certain if the final refrain of going back to the cafés is a repetition of a reverie cycle or an ironic expression of dejection. And that is the point. It might not, therefore, be an example of Romantic irony if the conceptual emphasis here is placed on the decisive literary act which moves from the mode of “reverie” (inspiration or construction) to the mode of “rejection” (irony, or deconstruction). Pyrrhonian irony, however, allows for potential movement from one to the other provided that a core indecision as to how we read between the two (or more) modes be left in abeyance. And though Collins and Gershman’s incisive adoption of Frohock’s innovative reading of Romantic irony realizes the outlines of this crucial form within Rimbaud’s writing, emphasizing one side of the operation is again to settle the tension between imagination and reality that they otherwise theorize so clearly (in a manner incompatible with Rimbaud’s Pyrrhonic-ironic poetics):

Solger, the German romantic aesthetician, considered this form of irony to be the highest possible form of objectivity available to the artist. It is objective in that it permits ‘the reconciliation of opposites, of the conscious and unconscious, of “wit” and “contemplation.” Thus the poet would be objective to the extent that his poem incorporates both imaginative flights into the sacred territory of pure literary reality and a statement of the ultimate invincibility of profane reality—two realms disparate and

apparently irreconcilable. (690)

To emphasize the priority of the “ultimate invincibility of profane reality” puts a stop to poiesis. It is only in the circulation from that aporetic level, back again to the zetetic level of trying out an idea, giving flight to fancy, and letting the poet’s imaginative powers display their enthusiasms, that the conflict between these two realms can fuel literary creation.

What we are calling a Pyrrhonian or poietic irony can thus be traced from Rimbaud’s earliest writings. In their notable study, Collins and Gershman underline how Frohock identifies this figure, especially at work in *Une saison en enfer*—which we will analyze in the next chapter—but they also do identify “Un cœur sous une soutane” as a part of the lineage of what they call Rimbaud’s Romantic irony:

Many have seen a split in Rimbaud, dividing his poetic career into two distinct periods: the early charm and hope of the *voyant* and pre-*voyant* stage followed by the scepticism of *Une Saison en Enfer* and his ultimate inability to use poetry to arrive at an absolute. But the evidence refuses such comfortable categories; rather it confirms that these polarized attitudes are to be found throughout his work (at least as early as *Un Cœur sous une soutane*), and often within the same poems. (Collins and Gershman 688)

Because of Romantic irony’s ambiguous nature, and because it is grounded in the epistemological functions of human imagination and reason that Rimbaud purposefully plays with in his poietic explorations of his various figures who find themselves inspired to write and chant—Horace, the lyric subject of “Credo in unam,” Rimbaud in his “Lettres du Voyant,” and of course Léonard—these figures of enthusiasm, redemptive love, vision, and faith are often mistaken as mere strawmen to throw on the heap in favor of the later, skeptical attitude which Rimbaud also throws into the equation to put his writings into question. But as we have learned

from Montaigne, skepticism cannot be reduced to what we might call Academic skepticism, wherein skepticism only signifies the aporetic power to doubt dogmatism and to doubt everything; for this totalizing skepticism does not realize that it has already slipped into dogmatism itself. Montaigne's skepticism means Pyrrhonian skepticism—that is, that which is like the medicinal rhubarb: “Quand ils prononcent, J'ignore, ou: Je doute, ils dissent que cette proposition s'emporte elle mesme, qyant et qyant le reste, ny plus ne moins que la rubarbe qui pousse hors les mauvaises humeurs et s'emporte hors quant et quant elle mesmes” (“when they [the Pyrrhonian philosophers] declare ‘I do not know’ or ‘I doubt,’ they say that this proposition carries itself away with the rest, no more nor less than rhubarb, which expels evil humors and carries itself off with them”; II.12 527; 392-3). We must doubt everything, including doubt, just like the rhubarb which carries itself away, too, during its digestive cleansing action. Montaigne follows this line with what itself appears as a biting ironic and skeptical rejoinder: “Cette fantaisie est plus securement conceue par interrogation: Que sçay-je?” (“This fancy will be more certainly understood by interrogation: ‘What do I know?’”). What is entailed within or by the concept must always also include an awareness of a constitutive circularity within skepticism, between aporetic and zetetic modes, since through the flushing away of itself by itself, the aporetic mode opens up the possibility for the zetetic to reappear, and for the essay process to repeat itself. “Que sçay-je” is both a witty rejoinder that implies that one does not know (perhaps anything), as well as a phrase that one utters before one answers the question: this I know. By rejecting the dualistic readings of Rimbaud which would reject how his writings explore the function of the imagination and the unconscious in the mystery of poiesis is to impose an Academic skeptical reading on what is from the very start a Pyrrhonian textual universe in Rimbaud's corpus.

### Chapter Three:

“*Mes divagations spirituelles*”: Pyrrhonian Crisis in Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*

Je ne regrette pas ma vieille part de gaieté divine: l’air sobre de cette aigre campagne alimente fort activement mon atroce scepticisme. Mais comme ce scepticisme ne peut désormais être mis en œuvre, et que d’ailleurs je suis dévoué à un trouble nouveau, —j’attends de devenir un très méchant fou (I don’t miss what I once possessed of divine happiness: the calm of this despondent countryside gives a new vigor to my terrible scepticism. But since this scepticism can no longer be put into effect, and since I am now given over to a new worry—I expect to become a very wicked fool).

—Rimbaud, “Vies”

*Une saison en enfer* (A Season in Hell) is where Rimbaud’s radical writing project gets its fullest expression as the paradoxical meta-poietic text of a Pyrrhonian crisis. In the early texts like “Un cœur sous une soutane,” the overlap between sincerity and irony characterized his early fascination with the ability of literature to reveal the complex subjectivity of the poet in the poietic act of creation, and he built upon past constructions of Romantic irony to begin to write in a fashion that we have called his poietic irony.<sup>38</sup> A few years later, closer to the end of his

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<sup>38</sup> As explored in Chapter 3, theories of Romantic irony showed that the author (or author-surrogate) would “interrupt the narrative progression of his plays...to make ironic reflections upon himself or the work in progress” (Collins and Gershman 678). This allowed the authors to avoid excessive absorption in the worlds of their creation, which were characterized by Romantic

writing corpus, *Une saison en enfer* would serve as the medium in which to develop his poietic irony into its more developed form. The text is a nine-part narrative in poetic prose with inserted poems concerning the poet-narrator who has fallen from the heights of his idealism and poetic project into the tortured depths of a multilayered crisis of belief and inspiration. The complex subjectivity of that poet-narrator in a skeptical crisis is expressed through the poietic-ironic presentation of an oscillation between two levels: the moments which exhibit the heights of his inspired writing and attempts to grasp metaphysical truth, and the moments of his profound skeptical crises of belief and writing. Rimbaud's poietic irony, including the insertion of past poems into the text itself, shows that a Pyrrhonian crisis encompasses and affirms both levels, not just the dejected one of the poet-narrator doomed to Hell, failure, and despair, but also that of inspiration, hope, and creation.

A Pyrrhonian reading of Rimbaud's poietic irony can also reframe the critical question as

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irony. That irony was rooted in the German idealist philosophy of Fichte, who proposed an internal dialogue around the split in human nature "between the infinite aspirations of the human spirit and man's inherent limitations which make impossible the realization of those aspirations" (677). This Romantic irony is thus rooted in an "*aedificabo et destruam*," or "I shall construct, but to destroy" (Frohock 210). What I call Rimbaud's poietic irony is in fact a Pyrrhonian irony: as with Pyrrhonism, neither humankind's "infinite aspirations" nor its "inherent limitations" would be prioritized, as Romantic irony does when it uses irony to deflate those aspirations on behalf of the limitations. At the heart of the Pyrrhonian writers' poiesis, or making of their texts, is the desire to put the Pyrrhonian oscillation between both terms of aspirations and limitations into the form of the writing itself.

to whether a way out of the text's crisis is possible. Rimbaud's long obsession with that structure of poetic irony which jumps from one proposition or sentiment to other, seemingly contradictory ones, makes clear his continuation of the Montaignian-Pyrrhonian line of writing. As Montaigne's work echoes with the paradoxical quest of "Que sçay-je?", Rimbaud's responds with "Je est un autre," and in *Une saison en enfer*, that *je* is exploded into a multitude of positions and lines of inquiry, as a result of his skeptical quest which spans both nihilistic pessimism and hopeful spiritual longing. Critics have often overinvested in a biographical reading of the text, collapsing the *je* with the Rimbaud who gets shot by Verlaine and soon would leave poetry behind, a tendency which has disallowed them to realize the radical mutable subjectivity which Rimbaud's poesis expresses. The crisis of the Rimbaud's *je* becomes Pyrrhonian, because his multitudinous poetic subject and text in crisis never finalize the dualistic ironic reversal or resolution towards either the pessimism of determination or the optimism of agency and the various ways Rimbaud's text oscillates between versions of this polarity. His multiple poetic subject and text make the *Saison* an experience of the Pyrrhonian oscillation between and through these modes, in such a way that the oscillation does not hinder but makes possible an ongoing skeptical quest for truth and revelation.

### **Metaphysical and Poetic Pyrrhonian Crises in *Une saison en enfer***

In *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud describes a period of a metaphysical and personal skeptical crisis parallel to a poetic crisis. The locutor—a poet-narrator—explains his alienation from the West and its Christianity and questions whether there is another way to attain revelation. He has also gone through the intense experience of an all-consuming writing period,

with parallel impulses of a poetic project to attain truth through poetry which brought him dangerously close to self-destruction. Perhaps only obviously thanks to the recuperation of Rimbaud's letters, we can now rightfully connect this aspect of the text to his so-called "Lettres du voyant" of a couple of years prior, where he theorized the quasi-magical power of poetry and wrote a manifesto of his poetic project. In the crucial section, *Délires II: Alchimie du verbe*, Rimbaud writes, "je me flattais d'inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou a l'autre, à tous les sens" ("I prided myself on inventing a poetic language accessible, some day, to all the senses"; 284-5) but the poetic project had devolved into illness: "Je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon esprit. J'étais oisif, en proie à une lourde fièvre[...]Ma santé fut menacée. La terreur venait"; At the end I looked on the disorder of my mind as sacred. I was idle, a prey to a heavy fever[...]My health was threatened. Terror came"; 288-9; 294-5). There are other obvious parallels to Rimbaud's real experience in the text, but already the form of the text in itself makes apparent the poet-locutor's dual crises. Throughout the text, the issue of the locutor's skeptical quest for revelation is treated, revealing Rimbaud's intensified writing of a Pyrrhonian crisis, but his locutor's downward spiral concerning his poetry is at the heart of the text. This confusion between the authorial and the textual *je* is inevitable given Rimbaud's purposeful confrontation of the traditional lyrical tradition and its emphasis on the locutor with his poetic project which attempts to dismantle that tradition. Real similarities or differences aside, Rimbaud the author produces a text which has in itself the writing of a metaphysical and poetic crisis. In the fifth section of the text, even as he claims the poems that he had been writing were dangerous failures—the rhetorical form of a palinody, or apology for what one had previously written—important poetic elements, as well as the simple fact of their republication in the text are signs that the palinody is also non-palinody. It is the interpretation of the strange poetic construction

of these (non-)palinodic poems at the heart of the text that will clarify the judiciousness of a Pyrrhonian intervention.

At the same time as the poet-narrator's poetic crisis, he also turns against the scientism of the West and its Christianity as an inadequate environment for true spiritual growth:

je vois que mes malaises viennent de ne m'être pas figuré assez tôt que nous sommes a l'Occident...Mais n'y a-t-il pas un supplice réel en ce que, depuis cette déclaration de la science, le christianisme, l'homme *se joue*, se prouve les évidences, se gonfle du Plaisir de répéter ces preuves, et ne vit que comme cela! Torture subtile, niaise; source de mes divagations spirituelles. La nature pourrait s'ennuyer, peut-être! M. Prudhomme est né avec le Christ. (296)

I see that my discomfort comes from not being understood early enough that we are in the West...But is there not real torture in the fact that, since the declaration of science, and Christianity, man *deludes himself*, proving obvious truth, puffing up with the pleasure of repeating his proofs, and living only in this way? A subtle, ridiculous torture; source of my spiritual meanderings. Nature might be bored, perhaps! M. Prudhomme was born with Christ. (297)

The narrator accepts but bemoans his embeddedness in the culture of the West with its positivism and Christianity—that is, a lazy version of each that only believes in something without deep investigation, like the fictional character M. Prudhomme. He recognizes that as a part of the West, he is thus put into conflict with his upbringing and incited to “mes divagations spirituelles,” a phrase that perfectly represents the meandering, wandering oscillation of a

Pyrrhonian crisis (Rimbaud and Guyaux 936).<sup>39</sup>

Within these “divagations spirituelles” of his conflict with the culture’s institutionalized Christianity, the poet-narrator does not simply remain trapped in the season of Hell, but he is also on a quest to find a new spirituality and way of life. The text asks, “Vite! Est-il d’autres vies?” (Quick! Are there other lives?; 272-3). Rimbaud’s narrator’s journey into Hell because of his alienation from the West and his poetry is the first skeptical impulse to oppose the certainties of his culture and his project, but then alternative ways out of that state of Hell and new ways of being and creating are sought. In that sense, too, the text performs the Pyrrhonian oscillation, because one attitude is suspended (the aporetic side of Pyrrhonism) and another attitude is entertained (the zetetic side), without the one canceling out the other.

A non-Pyrrhonian reading would insist that one of these terms cancel out the other, that since there is an antinomy, or a seeming contradiction between the two, it would be impossible to allow for both terms to remain true, that only one must take precedence over the other. By that token, too, the dominant Western logic derived from the philosophical principle of “the law of non-contradiction,” is a non-Pyrrhonian logic. In Rimbaud’s case, *Une saison en enfer* expresses an antinomy between his being embedded in the dominant logic of the West and its

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<sup>39</sup> *Divaguer* coming from the Latin *diviagari* (“errer çà et là,” to wander here and there) most certainly echoes the “vagabondage” which interplays in various forms throughout both Montaigne and Rimbaud, including with its important, related and Pyrrhonian term in Montaigne, *vanité*, as explored in Chapter 2 (“divaguer, v.” *Ortolang*). The historical difference between Montaigne and Rimbaud can be felt here: while Montaigne’s text may exhibit “divagations spirituelles,” he could never have openly stated it like this for risk of prosecution.

institutionalized Christianity, and looking for ways out of these systems to an authentic way of grasping truth through poetry and some recovery of a more authentic spirituality. The aporetic aspect of skepticism is what most people think of when they think of skepticism, the moment of the “suspension of judgment,” the seemingly negative moment in which two opposing truths are put into balance and the decision left unresolved or the judgment suspended.<sup>40</sup> While the suspension of judgment seems negative (in the sense of opposing that something is true), it is in fact undecided. The zetetic aspect of Pyrrhonism refers to the active quest for truth which incites the problem or question and enacts the “suspension of disbelief.” The Pyrrhonian takes skepticism to a radical point, where we cannot even know if we can know whether we can know anything or not, putting the action of putting truth into suspension itself. The aporetic side of skepticism is mistakenly seen as its end goal where all positions are held in suspension, but the creative poetic skepticism of Montaigne and Rimbaud makes it clear that the zetetic quest is equally important since it is that attitude and ability to entertain different positions and beliefs that keeps the quest in motion, along with the aporetic side.

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<sup>40</sup> The term “suspension of judgment” (just like its partner, the “suspension of disbelief”) can be confusing since it implies that the judgment is suspended or withheld, but also seems to raise the image of the two undecidable positions in balance, as if suspended in air, themselves. The term more properly refers to the former interpretation, although it is not wrong to also imagine the second image which makes sense according to the scenario. Note also that the term “suspension of disbelief,” introduced by Coleridge, is not “suspension of belief,” which is sometimes wrongfully used. “Suspension of belief” would be more like the “suspension of judgment” in its signification.

As discussed in the context of “Un cœur sous une soutane” in Chapter 3, the dispute concerning Rimbaud and his work’s religiosity, or lack thereof, has divided critics throughout the years. On the one side, Rimbaud’s sister claimed that his supposed deathbed confession brought him back into the fold of Catholicism, and critics and writers such as Claudel interpreted Rimbaud’s work overall as supportive of the Christian message. On the other side, others such as the Surrealists like André Breton affirmed that Rimbaud’s writings including “Un cœur sous une soutane” placed Rimbaud firmly on the side of anticlericalism and atheism. Both sides fell into dualistic readings of Rimbaud’s poetry that could not consider the Pyrrhonian alternative that both positions could be possible at the same time in a suspension of judgment, or something else entirely. Rimbaud’s work contains a deeply earnest quest for metaphysical truths (but beyond institutionalized Christianity) while at the same time containing revolutionary attitudes against various apparatuses of Church, family, and state. Most major studies of *Une saison en enfer* today identify that there is a metaphysical quest at stake, but in opposing the Christian interpretation, they still tend to align themselves with an atheistic reading of the text, which does not consider the text’s complex structure of weaving between aporetic and zetetic modes, as we will see. Furthermore, these dual modes are evident in the poietic structure of Rimbaud’s writing itself; even in “Un cœur sous une soutane,” there were early traces of his complex structure of Pyrrhonian, poietic irony. This complex irony does not favor either side of the polarity, but that oscillation between the terms reveals the complex subjectivity at play that necessitates this poietic innovation of Rimbaud’s writing. In *Une saison en enfer*, that poietic irony is both intensified and combined with an even more autobiographical-seeming narrative, and thus the critical debate around the text was equally intensified.

In the section that first confronts the metaphysical question directly, *Mauvais sang*,

Rimbaud raises the question of what it would mean to have “la liberté dans le salut” (“freedom in salvation”):

La raison m’est née[...]Dieu fait ma force, et je loue Dieu[...]Je ne suis pas prisonnier de ma raison. J’ai dit: Dieu. Je veux la liberté dans le salut: comment la poursuivre? Les goûts frivoles m’ont quitté. Plus besoin de dévouement ni d’amour divin[...]Chacun a sa raison, mépris et charité: je retiens ma place au sommet de cette angélique échelle de bon sens. (272)

Reason was born in me[...]God is my strength, and I give Him praise[...]I am not a prisoner of my reason. I said: God. I want freedom in salvation. How can I pursue it? I have no more taste for frivolity. No more need of devotion or divine love[...]Each is right, scorn and charity. I reserve my place at the top of the angelic ladder of common sense. (273)

For Rimbaud’s Christian interpreters like Claudel, such statements concerning salvation were evidence that Rimbaud was a Christian “mystique à l’état sauvage” (“mystic in the wild state”; Claudel, cited in Frémy 133; my trans.). Yann Frémy, an important Rimbaudian specialist, joined in the fray against such interpreters, implying that they were wrong to Christianize (or re-Christianize, considering his upbringing) Rimbaud, since “Rimbaud ne veut pas d’un Dieu inhibiteur, mais d’un absolu affirmatif et laïc” (“Rimbaud does not want a God of prohibition, but an absolutely affirming and secular one”; 132; my trans.).<sup>41</sup> In this sense, although Frémy’s analysis is rightly following Rimbaud’s metaphysical crisis, Frémy joins the other side of the

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<sup>41</sup> All translations of Frémy are mine.

polarizing debate, wherein Rimbaud's text must be either Christian or secular-atheist. The notion of a "liberté dans le salut" encompasses the paradox at hand that results in the critical confusion and polarization: how can we be free within a concept of salvation that has been so prescribed by Western law and the Church for centuries? The demand to seek an answer is what the text does try to do, but it does so in the interstices of a double movement, of a zetetic drive to find that metaphysical salvation, and an aporetic one that affirms its difficulty.

For the most part, the narrative describes despair from within the aporetic perspective of the Christian damned: "Je me crois en enfer, donc j'y suis" ("I think I am in hell, therefore I am"; 274-5). In this expression of damnation, Rimbaud performs an ironic reversal of Descartes's philosophy, which was itself a response to the Pyrrhonian crisis that Montaigne helped to bring about. In that reversal, the dark vision of aporetic skepticism feared by Descartes, that perhaps a dark God was tricking our senses into a false reality, becomes the condition of Rimbaud's damnation. Frémy, too, interprets the text as figuring a crisis out of which there is no exit, and for him, the quest for "liberté dans le salut," signals an impossible endeavor: "l'on perçoit bien que dans les termes aporétiques dont Rimbaud pose le problème, il ne peut réaliser son projet de 'liberté dans le salut'" ("one detects that with the aporetic terms in which Rimbaud poses the problem, he cannot realize his project of 'freedom in salvation'"; 133). But Rimbaud's formulation of the metaphysical crisis continues to exhibit potential windows of hope which show alternative possibilities for access to spiritual truths, staking out the zetetic possibilities not glimpsed by Descartes's dark interpretation of the Pyrrhonian crisis, or by aporetic interpretations of the text.

In the penultimate section, *Matin*, a vision expressing a kind of light after the dark night has also provided different critical responses to the text's crisis, with some like Yoshikazu

Nakaji taking the approach that, in combination with a later poem from the *Illuminations*, it signals a sincere escape from the text's pessimistic cage, and others like Frémy who, despite agreeing that “[d]ans *Matin*, *Génie* [est] en germe,” insists that, “nous ne sommes toutefois pas convaincu que “Génie” représente par rapport à *Matin* une sortie définitive de la crise” (“In *Matin*, “Génie” takes seed; I am however not convinced that “Génie” represents in relation to *Matin* a definitive exit from the crisis”; 133-4). In *Matin*, after the locutor finishes the narrative of his period of Hell, the text takes a marked turn towards a lyrical expression of renewed hope:

aujourd’hui, je crois avoir fini la relation de mon enfer. C’était bien l’enfer; l’ancien, celui dont le fils de l’homme ouvrit les portes. Du même désert, à la même nuit, toujours mes yeux las se réveillent à l’étoile d’argent, toujours, sans que s’émeuvent les Rois de la vie, les trois mages, le cœur, l’âme, l’esprit. Quand irons-nous, par-delà les grèves et les monts, saluer la naissance du travail nouveau, la sagesse nouvelle, la fuite des tyrans et des démons, la fin de la superstition, adorer—les premiers—Noël sur la terre! Le chant des cieux, la marche des peuples! Esclaves, ne maudissons pas la vie. (300)

today I think I have finished the story of my hell. It was really hell; the old hell, the one whose gates were opened by the son of man. From the same wilderness, in the same night, my tired eyes always awaken to the silver star, although the Kings of life, the three magi, the heart the soul, and spirit, are not moved. Where shall we go beyond the shores and the mountains, to salute the birth of the new work, and the new wisdom, the flight of tyrants and demons, the end of superstition, and be the first to worship Christmas on earth? The song of heavens, the marching of nations! Slaves, let us not curse life. (301)

Compared to the previous two sections with their endings in misfortune and the loss of eternity,

this section suggests a sincere expression of hope for a new spirituality (yet builds upon the old, Christian one, with its references to the Christmas star and story, as well as suggesting the “désert” of Jesus’s trial by the Devil and the “nuit” perhaps suggesting the night of Judas’s betrayal). It also suggests a sincere hope for a “sagesse nouvelle,” and it is expressed in a rhythmic, lyrical passage that builds to a triumphant and decided end to embrace life, even with our being fallen and embedded in a culture (as its “esclaves”). And yet Frémy seems here to overrule the positive outlook of this passage by taking the side of the more negative aspects of *Une saison en enfer*, arguing that the work overall contains “la dimension irrémédiablement destructrice de ce qu’il nomme l’‘enfer’” (“the irreversibly destructive dimension of what he calls ‘Hell’”; 134). A Pyrrhonian interpretation would allow each section to coexist, suspending judgment on choosing one outlook as the overall meaning of the text. Elsewhere, however, Frémy does agree that “Génie” fulfills more uncomplicatedly the vision of hope and beauty at which *Saison en enfer* could only point. The poem describes a spirit “Génie,” who “est l’amour, mesure parfait et réinventée, raison merveilleuse et imprévue, et l’éternité[...]lui qui nous aime pour sa vie infinie...” (“[He] is love, perfect and reinvented measure, miraculous, unforeseen reason, and eternity[...]he who loves us because his life is infinity...”; 352-3). In comparison [to what? A propos of “Matin”?], Frémy writes, “le ton de l’ensemble est celui du désenchantement. Le lyrisme rimbaldien est inséparable d’une tristesse qui alourdit considérablement le climat de la *Saison*, qui rend pesant tout enthousiasme. Aussi la force du sujet rimbaldien ne parvient-elle jamais à rejoindre la positivité de son essence, puisque l’enfer fait barrage à toutes les réalisations notables” (“the tone of the ensemble is that of disenchantment. The Rimbaldian lyricism is inseparable from a sadness that considerably weighs down the climate of the *Saison*, which drags down all enthusiasm. The force of the Rimbaldian subject also never manages to

catch up with the positivity of its essence, since the Hell blocks off all notable realizations”; 144-5). The aspects of Hell throughout the text interact with the moments, like in *Matin*, that offer escapes and exits from the Hell being described. But what is at play here is a question of knowing how to interpret that oscillation between hope and Hell. Frémy appears to have given the balance to the pessimistic, aporetically infernal side of the text since he implies that only “Génie” uncomplicatedly Rimbaud’s shining expression of hope and joy without the weight of any dark clouds. On the contrary, a Pyrrhonian reading allows for both aspects of the text to express their separate truth values, and other important textual elements suggest that it is this type of reading that Rimbaud’s text proposes as the point of his expressing the crisis in such a bifurcated way.

Frémy otherwise brilliantly diagnoses the stakes of that dual structure of *Une saison en enfer* as a key component of Rimbaud’s “projet fondamental” to confront the metaphysical through his writing. He writes, “à ‘l’amour terrestre’—pour reprendre une expression de *Mauvais sang*—, il demanda ‘l’amour divin’...et inversement. Rimbaud ne propose rien de moins qu’un dépassement de la phénoménologie vers l’ontologie” (“to ‘worldly love’—to take an expression from *Mauvais sang*—, he demands ‘divine love,’...and vice versa. Rimbaud proposes nothing less than an overtaking of phenomenology by ontology”; 128), although, to follow the logic of the complementarity of both the divine and worldly loves, it would be more proper to say Rimbaud’s project entails the two different approaches to being. The structure at stake when it comes to writing is the same as that outlined in the “Lettres du voyant,” how to “régler le dérèglement afin que ce dernier puisse continuer à être productif...de capter des opportunités non stériles, des germes qui, à terme, puissent livrer quelques secrets figuraux, sensitifs et cognitifs” (“regulate de-regulation in order that this latter might continue to be

productive...to grasp non-sterile opportunities, seeds which eventually, could give up some figural, sensory and cognitive secrets”; 129). When it comes to writing about the power of being, and the secrets at stake in capturing and expressing that *dérèglement* as something both sensory and also bordering on the divine, however, one confronts the structures of Christianity, and this very “dualisme chrétien[...]met en danger le projet ontologique rimbaliden. C’est le choc de deux projets, de deux époques: le projet dissociative chrétien contre le projet associative de Rimbaud qui ne propose rien de moins que de renouveler la relation mulitséculaire...qui reliera la ‘liberté’ au ‘salut’” (“Christian dualism[...]puts in danger the Rimbaldian ontological project. It is the shock of two projects, of two eras: the dissociative Christian project against the associative project of Rimbaud which proposes nothing less than to renew the age-old relation...which relinks ‘freedom’ with ‘salvation’”; 131). It is Christian dualism that would demand that the worldly, sensual body be separated from that of the divine soul. Frémy convincingly outlines the structure as follows: “Le système dualiste chrétien impose cette croyance en deux amours—un amour concret, tourné vers le monde, purement immanent, qui contente le corps mais ignore l’âme, face à un autre amour épris d’abstractions, d’idées pures, et qui nie le monde sensible” (“The dualist Christian system imposes this belief in two loves—a purely immanent, worldly love turned towards the world, which deals with the body but ignores the soul, faced with another love enamored by abstractions, pure ideas, and which denies the world of the senses; 131). And yet, it is exactly the combination of both of those realms—the bodily, worldly love with the divine, abstract spiritual love—which Rimbaud’s poetry and which the Pyrrhonian poiesis of *Une saison en enfer* seeks to reconfront.

In the section *L’impossible*, Rimbaud glimpses a self-realization of his being different from the entire dissociative culture of the West, and he glimpses a project to follow the call of

“l’esprit” and deal with all the false developments which had been put onto it by the institutions of the “faux élus,” (“false elect”; 296-7). Yet again, the narrator talks through his self-realization in real-time shifts which exhibit the twists and turns of a Pyrrhonian circulation:

M’étant retrouvé deux sous de raison—ça passe vite!—je vois que mes malaises viennent de ne m’être pas figuré assez tôt que nous sommes à l’Occident[...]Bon! voici que mon esprit veut absolument se charger de tous les développements cruels qu’à subis l’esprit depuis la fin de l’Orient...Il en veut, mon esprit!...Mes deux sous de raison sont finis!—L’esprit est autorité, il veut que je sois en Occident. Il faudrait le faire taire pour conclure comme je voulais. (296)

Since I have recovered two cents worth of reason—it disappears fast!—I see that my discomfort comes from not being understood early enough that we are in the West[...]My spirit is insistent upon taking over all the cruel developments which the spirit has undergone since the end of the East...My spirit does insist!...My two cents of reason is over!—The spirit is authority. It wants me to be in the West. I would have to silence it to conclude as I wished. (297)

The real-time disappearance of the vision of the truth shows its flightiness, but for that moment before the two cents of reason evaporates, the narrator sees himself as fleeing from the West on a quest to seek after some unadulterated, pre-Western form of spirit. In fact, it is seen as a metaphysical call from “l’esprit,” personified as “il.” In some way, it seems that the vision of those two cents of wisdom—“se charger de tous les développements cruels qu’à subis l’esprit depuis la fin de l’Orient” (to *attend to*, *deal with*, or *take on* these developments)—could be possible from within the position of the West.

The fact of the narrator's simultaneous confinement and embeddedness within the necessary conditions of the West (including its bourgeois Christianity and its dominant post-Cartesian hegemony of reason over the imagination with its law of noncontradiction), as well as his attempts to seek escape from it, represent the Pyrrhonian logic of the text with its mutually dependent, dual elements, repeated in such various ways throughout *Une saison en enfer*. "On ne part pas," the narrator decries, just after he declares he is leaving Europe ("You cannot get away"; 268-9). In *L'impossible*, the dual logic is encompassed by the phrase from the same section of *L'impossible*, set off by separate paragraphs: "J'ai eu raison dans tous mes dédains: puisque je m'évade! Je m'évade! Je m'explique" ("I was right in all my scorn, since I am escaping! I am escaping! Let me explain"; 296-7). This shows the dual movement of the aporetic desire to leave—to leave Europe and to persist in his scorn for others and himself—but at the same time, there is the concomitant zetetic desire to leave behind that scorn and seek something else, as well as the desire to explain himself in writing which inevitably uncovers further zetetic visions of hope. For example, this section eventually leads through the "sagesse première et éternelle" ("first eternal wisdom") and to the antediluvian vision of Eden: "C'est vrai, c'est à l'Éden que je songeai!" ("It is true; I was thinking of Eden"; 298-9). At the same time, according to the same Pyrrhonian logic, the narrator continues to twist and turn back and forth from zetetic visions to aporetic pits of despair.

Rimbaud writes that, instead of the confines of Christianity with its false morals of sacrifice, its cult of scientific truth and its violence, its "palmes des martyres, les rayons de l'art, l'orgueil des inventeurs, l'ardeur des pillards" ("martyr's palms, rays of art, pride of inventors, enthusiasm of plunderers"; 296-7) he wishes—or wished—to return to a purer, non-Western wisdom: "je retournais à l'Orient et à la sagesse première et éternelle" ("I returned to the East

and to the first eternal wisdom”; 296-7). By putting the tense in the imperfect, however, it is perhaps a wish in the past, and he follows it with a qualifier, that perhaps the vision is merely a dream of vulgar laziness: “Il paraît que c’est un rêve de paresse grossière!” (“It seems like a dream of vulgar sloth”; 296-7). This expression of the anxiety concerning the sensual nature of the potentially impossible dream of seeking this hidden, eternal wisdom is a problem that returns to the heart of the metaphysical crisis throughout the text, and the entire text even ends with this very problem: “il me sera loisible de *posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps*” (“I shall be free to *possess truth in [a body and a soul]*”; 304-5). Alain Vaillant notes the curiosity that Rimbaud incongruously returns in a sense to the “notations sentimentales ou amoureuses” here, even though the narrative had been more concerned with the metaphysical and poetic crises; but the way that the question of love is then punctuated by the ontological issue of the duality or unity of soul and body combines the discourse of love with that of being (*Posséder* 13). The truth, perhaps sparked by love, must be both bodily and spiritual—but is it a dream only accessible in the future, as a new order of being, or a new law or jurisprudence? The future tense maintains that skeptical oscillation: the hope keeps alive the dream of a new law, beyond the Western hegemonic dualist split of body and soul to one where both are validated without valuing the one over the other. But the future tense also creates tension and separation from that unity or coexistence of body and soul: instead, perhaps the divine soul will continue to outweigh the profane body. The metaphysical part of the narrator’s crisis is duplicated in the other area of the poet-narrator’s crisis—namely, concerning his past poetic project and the drama that it entailed. The poetic crisis may also be able to clarify the temporal configuration of the Pyrrhonian logic.

On the poetic level of the crisis, the Pyrrhonian circulation plays out in a similar, but

much more paradoxical way than it does for the religious part of the narrative. For all the downward movement into the season in Hell, at the heart of the text is a paradox that provides the Pyrrhonian skeptical elements which strangely reverse the situation. In *Délires II: Alchimie du verbe*, the poet-narrator writes about his poetic project as a dangerous folly of the past, as he writes, it is “L’histoire d’une de mes folies” (“The story of one of my follies”) where in the end, “La terreur venait,” (“The terror came”) and “Cela s’est passé” (“That is over; 284-5, 294-5). But then why does Rimbaud insert seven poems of that period of folly into the text? The narrative surrounding their insertion at first glance seems to disparage them and discount their value, but to publish them implies that their literary value remains. Indeed, Guyaux calls this a desire to make an “anthologie” of his prose poems (Guyaux, *Duplicités*). It is understandable that Rimbaud was also publishing them, but then why is there this strange ambiguity that disparages the poems and presents them at the same time? Like Montaigne’s non-apology, this is Rimbaud’s non-palinody, since the narrative surrounding the poems appears to take the poetic form of the palinody, wherein one retracts what one had previously written, but the fact of their publication as is indicates that the palinody is a non-palinody.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Vaillant has a critical take on this aspect of *Une saison en enfer*. He writes of the line in the prologue, where the locutor has already begun his crisis of going back and forth between wanting to “rechercher la clef du festin ancien” (“looking for the key to the ancient banquet”) and thinking that it is impossible, “Cette inspiration prouve que j’ai rêvé!” (“This lofty thought proves I dreamt it!”; 264-5). The locutor, addressing himself to Satan, says, “Mais, cher Satan, je vous en conjure, une prunella moins irritée! et en attendant les quelques petites lâchetés en retard...” (“Dear Satan, I beg you, show a less glaring eye! While waiting for the few [late] small

The narrator encloses the seven poems with that language of the period of his writing as the “histoire d’une de mes folies,” and indeed, the title “*Délires*,” indicates the poor mental health brought about by the poetic project. He writes that “Je fixais des vertiges” (“I described frenzies”; 286-7), “Je m’habituai à l’hallucination” (“I grew accustomed to...hallucination”; 288-9), and had “le désordre de mon esprit” (“the disorder of my mind”; 288-9), all of which taken at face value also suggest symptoms of illness. He writes, “Aucun des sophismes de la folie,—la folie qu’on enferme,—n’a été oublié par moi” (“Not one sophistry of madness—madness that is locked up—was forgotten by me”; 294-5). But around this word—*sophismes*—Rimbaud suggests that the poems are not merely negative symptoms of an illness that are locked

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acts of cowardice...”; 264-5). Here, Vaillant notes, these “quelques petites lâchetés en retard” are the seven poems which Rimbaud inserts into the text of *Une saison en enfer*: “elles seront ‘en retard’, puisqu’elles viendront alors que Rimbaud a déjà cessé d’y croire” (“they are ‘late’ because they will come when Rimbaud has already stopped believing in them”; 111; my trans.), that is, in his former poetic project and in his former attachment to religion. Vaillant writes: “Ces quelques lignes elliptiques de la *Saison* doivent être tenues, grâce à la signification implicite de l’enchaînement des propositions, pour l’un des textes de Rimbaud à la plus forte valeur métalittéraire, à l’égal des célèbres ‘lettres du Voyant’” (“These few elliptical lines of *Une saison* must be taken, thanks to the implicit meaning of the chain of propositions, for one of the texts of Rimbaud with the strongest metaliterary value, only matched by the famous ‘Lettres du voyant’”; 111). Vaillant’s essay “‘Posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps’: la morale énigmatique d’*Une saison en enfer*” raises crucial questions concerning the central paradoxes of the text and the various interpretations of its finale.

away or hidden, but are also what he elsewhere calls the “sophismes magiques” at the heart of his poetic project: “Puis j’expliquai mes sophismes magiques avec l’hallucination des mots!” (“Then I explained my magic sophisms with the hallucination of words!”; 288-9). This recalls the “Lettres du voyant” credo of the project to become a *voyant* by undergoing a “long, immense et raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens” (“[a] long, gigantic and rational *dérangement of all the senses*”; 376-7), in that the poet seeks to see the world—as a *voyant*—in a truer way and to express that recovered vision with an equally radical poetic creation of words and meaning. But to call these words *sophismes* seems to indicate that the use of language as the medium to express the poetic vision introduces an element of the imaginary, or the false, into the equation. On the one hand, *sophisme* at its root could signify the wisdom of the philosophical Sophists, but on the other, it implies a deceptive argument, or one indifferent to truth or reason. In the same way that the text sets up the poems as the productions of *la folie*, they are also here shown to be the products of folly—and yet at the same time, it is a magical folly, where “je finis par trouver sacré le désordre de mon esprit” (“At the end I looked on the disorder of my mind as sacred”; 288-9)—and that *désordre* to also be potentially the *voyant*’s project of *dérangement*.

A previous poem of Rimbaud’s which he mentions, well known beyond its insertion in *Saison en enfer*, “Voyelles,” shows off the *dérangement* in the way it seeks to construct its “bizzareries de style” to reflect the dreamlike vision of the world, to create a “verbe poétique, accessible, un jour ou l’autre, à tous les sens” (“a poetic language accessible, some day or another, to all the senses”; 284-5), suggestively citing the past poem: “J’inventai la couleur des voyelles! —A noir, E blanc, I rouge, O bleu, U vert” (“I invented the color of vowels!”; 284-5). Here, *sophisme* is again at stake, in that the strange, synesthesia-filled construction of “Voyelles” is, on the one hand, supposed to be a new kind of poetry accessible to all of the senses, but on the

other hand, its strange language might defy translation if only he has the final translation since he says about that *verbe poétique*, “je réservais la traduction” (“I reserved translation rights”; 284-5). That idea is echoed in his citation of sophism, that “Aucun des sophismes de la folie[...]n’a été oublié par moi: je pourrais les redire tous, je tiens le système” (“Not one sophistry of madness[...]was forgotten by me. I could say them all again. I know the system”; 294-5).

Immediately before the penultimate 1872 poem in *Délires II*, what was later published (as a slightly different version) as “Éternité,” the same framing of the poem as something to be derided, as folly or even *folie* is present: “De joie, je prenais une expression bouffonne et égarée au possible” (“From joy I took an expression as buffoonish and strange as possible”; 292-3). The poem figures the rediscovery of eternity as an image of nature, and there are evident signs of the same dual Pyrrhonian logic of inspiration and dejection:

Elle est retrouvée!

Quoi? l’éternité.

C’est la mer mêlée

Au soleil.

Mon âme éternelle,

Observe ton voeu

Malgré la nuit seule

Et le jour en feu.

Donc tu te dégages

Des humains suffrages,

Des communs élans!

Tu voles selon...

—Jamais l'espérance,

Pas d'*orietur*.

Science et patience,

Le supplice est sûr.

Plus de lendemain,

Braises de satin,

Votre ardeur

Est le devoir.

Elle est retrouvée!

—Quoi?—l'Éternité.

C'est la mer mêlée

Au soleil. (292)

It has been found again!

What has? eternity.

It is the sea mixed

With the sun.

My eternal soul,  
Observe your vow  
In spite of the night  
And the day on fire.

So, you free yourself  
From human approval,  
From common impulses!  
You fly off as...

Never any hopes,  
*Pas d'orientur.*  
Science and patience,  
The suffering is sure.

No more tomorrow,  
Embers of satin,  
Your ardor  
Is duty.

It has been found again!  
—What has? —Eternity.

It is the sea mixed

With the sun. (293)

Rimbaud's religious and metaphysical crisis of *Une saison en enfer* can be glimpsed in the divergence between the pessimism of the "nuit seule et le jour en feu" and the "Jamais l'espérance[...]le supplice est sûr," alongside the optimism of the "âme éternelle [qui] observe ton voeu" and the rediscovery of wonder and beauty implied by the refrain that eternity "est retrouvée." Even though the poem begins with the assertion of the rediscovery of eternity and the suggested image of the setting sun on the ocean, the second stanza has the locutor praying to his soul to observe its vow, despite the night and the "jour en feu" (as if to say, despite the darkness of the midnight and the burning brightness of midday). Furthermore, the way the refrain is split into a polyvocal dialogue—as if it were an internal monologue of the poet amazed at the beauty of the sun on the sea—also reflects that inner crisis between the two modes. The one zetetic voice confirms the message, that eternity has been rediscovered, but the other voice of aporia cannot see the beauty or it disputes it: "Quoi?" The fact that it is the *âme éternelle* put into the position of doubt adds a further twist to the problem of the poem since it is that holy soul that one would expect to be already able to recognize the vision of eternity. And since the locutor speaks to the soul as "tu," we also are put into the position of that doubting or unseeing soul. This conflictual divergence in the poem between those two voices, and between the two units of the text that either do or do not see that beauty of the elemental vision of the sun setting upon the water is replicated by three significant aporias.

The central image of the "mer mêlée au soleil" itself represents a significant aporia, in that the image itself is only suggestively depicted by the literal words of "la mer mêlée au soleil" which are imprecise in their formulation (although they exhibit a heavy use of the moist,

slippery, liquid consonants *m*, *l*, and *r*). This suggestiveness is natural enough for poetry, but given the strength of the image regardless of the imprecise wording to suggest it, it seems to distill the poetic visionary project of *voyance* in its overall dynamic (perhaps the sly usage of the liquid consonants is one ingredient in this secret, sensual poetics?). Rimbaud uses imprecise wording to suggest the image of a setting sun on the ocean, but the vivid image is nevertheless easily thrown upon the visual imagination by these words, a textbook example of the suggestive power of *phanopoeia* (Pound 37). Secondly, the ellipse following the “Tu voles selon...” (“you fly off as...”) represents a significant absence—namely, it introduces doubt as to whether or not the soul can attain freedom by flying away from the confines of “humains suffrages, Des communs élans” (“human approval, From common impulses”). The “selon...” leaves open the success of that flight, since “selon” all alone leaves open as to what it grammatically is meant to signify, if it should mean that the locutor was going to name what the soul was going to fly off as ...some power other than the suffrages or the élans), or if it might suggest “c’est selon” (“it depends”) or “selon que” (“depending on whether”). There is zetetic hope suggested by the ability of the locutor’s soul to attain eternity, but also an aporetic ellipsis. Finally, the metaphor in the fifth stanza replicates the central image of the sun on the water, but with an aporia: “braises de satin” (“Embers of satin”) might serve as an image of the colorful, glimmering light upon the water, but as a poetically invented phrase it also makes sense out of nonsense.

All things considered, “Éternité” with its inner plot replicates what we have been calling here the Pyrrhonian dynamic at work in the entire *Saison en enfer*. By showing the conflict among the polyvocal poetic subject, and the questions they raise concerning the success of the *âme éternelle* to attain that eternity (the *âme sentinelle*, is the variant version from the other recorded version in Rimbaud’s so-called *Derniers vers*), the power of the poetic project of

*voyance* is shown to be also engaged in the skeptical dynamic of folie/folly, where the ability of the poet to represent the world must also revolve around aspects of uncertainty but alongside an equally valid attempt to represent the world's truth. The work of Rimbaud's detailed aporias in "Éternité" throws light upon the Pyrrhonian play of (non)-palinody that the act of inserting these supposedly rejected poems figures. Rimbaud rejects the poems as excessive experiments of a period of writing that, in its execution, might have brought danger or even illness (*folie*); it brought about an aporia, which in this case manifested as a failure, a realization of impossibility. And by associating them with this danger, the unsuccess of that project is suggested as inherent to the success of the poems' abilities to attain their truths. "Éternité" directly suggests that metaphysical—religiously connected—truth, because it is the metaphysical that is in crisis also throughout *Une saison en enfer*. But by publishing the poems, Rimbaud indicates obliquely but powerfully that these poems represent his poetic project, both as its failures and as its successes. They are both objects of apology, and not, palinody, and not. Like the rest of the text, these poems are odes to the Pyrrhonian experience of striving for truth, and its other side, the impossibility, and failures of that quest. But both the zetetic and the aporetic elements are represented at once, and the one does not cancel out the other. Indeed, the Pyrrhonian refrain (with its two elements of recognizing and not recognizing) of "Elle est retrouvée. Quoi?" is repeated following the stanzas expressing suffering and the lack of hope, as if to both allow for the recovery of eternity once again, but also to foreground its uncertainty with the repetition of the poet's soul asking the question, itself a figuration of indefiniteness and open-endedness, as though a figure which figures the text's own interpretability: "Quoi?"

## La Beauté, injuriée

Beyond the innovation of the (non-)palindomic insertion of poems into the text, Rimbaud manifests the skeptical crisis on a formal level by poietically creating an intensely polyvocal monologue throughout the entirety of the narrative, similar to the polyvocal play in “Éternité.” This polyvocal monologue expresses the crises through a development of his poietic irony on the level of the metaphysical quest and despair, and on the level of the poetic crisis. The various voices respond to each other, self-interrupt and self-contradict various optimistic and pessimistic messages concerning the poet’s creation of his writing and the source of that writing, that is to say, his metaphysical quest. Incredibly for a poet whose purpose is to speak, in *Nuit de l’enfer*, the narrator interrupts himself despairing at his damnation to say, “Tais-toi, mais tais-toi!...” (“Be quiet! Will you be quiet!...”; 274-5). “*L’impossible*” ends with a reversal, going from “Par l’esprit on va à Dieu” to “Déchirante infortune!” (“Through the spirit man goes to God! What heartbreaking misfortune!”; 298-9). But unlike in Romantic irony, these ironic oscillations do not work to “*aedificabo et destruo*” or build in order to destroy.

The text begins in the strange sort of prologue with this paradox of the disjunction between pessimism and optimism at the heart of the poets’ quest, saying on the one hand, “ma vie était un festin où s’ouvraient tous les cœurs, où tous les vins coulaient” (“my life was a banquet where everyone’s heart was generous, and where all wines flowed”), but on the other, “Un soir, j’ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux.—Et je l’ai trouvée amère.—Et je l’ai injuriée” (“One evening I pulled Beauty down on my knees.—I found her embittered and I cursed her”; 264-5). Like with “Un cœur sous une soutane,” which used a complex frame narrative that revealed an ironic portrayal of the poets’ complex subjectivity, the narrative frame is

complicated by the ambiguity of any clear teleology it may at first seem to indicate. Even the way this prologue is structured is unusual—namely, it is untitled, so people take it to be the prologue, but then as a sort of frame narrative looking backward, it also seems to act as a main section of the narrative, as if beginning in media res. Furthermore, the divergence between the two is given a third level of skepticism by the text’s opening: “Un jour, si je me souviens bien,” (“One day, if my memory serves me”; 264-5). We have shown in Chapter 3 how Rimbaud displayed a skeptical attitude from these earliest writings including with “Un cœur sous une soutane,” where he used the apparatus of fiction to explore an obsession with both the metaphysical quest for truth and joy (and its atheistic and anticlerical other side) and the poetic zeal of inspiration (and the deflation of that poetic and romantic inspiration which Léonard experienced at various points). In that text, we have also shown how the formal Pyrrhonian experimentation of these two obsessions plays out in such a way that both sides of each set of oppositions can be expressed as part of the presentation of the poets’ complex subjectivity without one side eventually canceling out the other—namely, through what we have defined as Rimbaud’s poetic irony.

This opening to *Une saison en enfer* establishes immediately the continuation of his fundamental poetic irony by foregrounding a complex split between two attitudes of the poet-narrator, as well as suggesting a former period of writing which shows that the narrator is poetically arranging his text in such a way as to make sense of his writing of the past. It seems to imply that the inspiration of his (that is, the figure of himself as poet within the text) past creative life is decidedly in the past, but then deliberate ambiguous statements in the present tense (which systematically circulate between inspiration and discouragement) continue to permeate the narrative: “j’ai songé à rechercher la clef du festin ancien, où je reprendrais peut-

être appétit. La charité est cette clef—Cette inspiration prouve que j’ai rêvé!” (“I thought of looking for the key to the ancient banquet where I might possibly recover my appetite. Charity is the key. This lofty thought proves I dreamt it!”; 264-5). The “festin” of this moment recalls the “festin où s’ouvraient tous les cœurs” of the fundamental split at the start of the prologue between the “festin” of “Beauté” and the moment where “je l’ai injuriée,” signaling the continuing importance of that split. Beauty as an allegorized figure reappears throughout the narrative, up until the end of *Nuit d’enfer* where, following the dark night of the soul, he writes, “Cela s’est passé. Je sais aujourd’hui saluer la Beauté” (“That is over. Today I can greet beauty”; 294-5). In many ways, that undoing of the poetic ideal of beauty in its personified form and then in other forms throughout the text shows its dismantlement from a lofty ideal to something real, which one can *saluer* as a peer, pointing to a recovered hope for a new aesthetic or even metaphysical ideal. But then other moments of tension persist, as when in *Adieu* he writes, “Une belle gloire d’artiste et de contour emportée!” (“A fine reputation of an artist and storyteller lost sight of!”; 302-3). Here his beautiful glory, or fine reputation, as an artist who deals with beauty, is taken away. And even it could be suggested that “saluer la Beauté” could potentially be a play on words since it might not only mean to greet but to say goodbye to. Like this, the statement, “Cette inspiration prouve que j’ai rêvé!” is one among many that underscore an even more radical skepticism: does the description of the inspiration as a dream undermine that inspiration as if to say it is merely a dream or is calling the inspiration the product of a dream a positive description that shows the narrator’s deep truth?

This split and ambiguity continue throughout the text, and the conflict has often been explained by scholars as the direct representation of the biographical aspect of Rimbaud’s evidently semi-autobiographical text, with this text as merely the representation of that dramatic

year of Rimbaud's life that resulted in his being shot by Verlaine in a hotel in Brussels and his return to the family farm at Roche to finish his manuscript. Regardless of the more or less direct autobiographical links to personal crisis (such as the famous breakdown of his relationship with Verlaine), as a literary work, the text constructs a particular skeptical Pyrrhonian crisis, one which takes on its own skeptical, polyphonic Pyrrhonian form, as the narrator of the *Saison* traverses a writerly crisis of belief. If we read the text's ambiguities less as referential trace and more as the literary construction with which Rimbaud had been preoccupied since his earliest writings, we can see how the problem at hand is not autobiographical but epistemological, and ontological or metaphysical; that is to say, we can read these nodes of abeyance as fundamentally linked to his poietic quest for truth and for joy (or, *bonheur*, a core vocable that recurs throughout the *Saison*). In Rimbaud's non-dualist, nonteleological form of the Pyrrhonian circulation between optimistic inspiration and pessimistic failure—or between versions of the zetetic and aporetic modes of skepticism—which reaches its apex in *Une saison en enfer*, neither inspiration nor discouragement gets the final word. That is why Rimbaud's text is not left in the position of pessimistic failure, which would not be a very Pyrrhonian attitude, since the aporetic suspension of judgment does not imply failure. Instead, Rimbaud's combination of his failures and hopes produces an open system of differing directions which each elicit further writing. The circulation propels the poetic subject through his continuous poietic act of creation which confronts the Pyrrhonian problem of its quest for the truth.

The name for and quality of the type of truth in that quest—within both the metaphysical and the poetic crises—takes on different forms throughout the narrative and its nine sections, in the two main plots of metaphysical and poetic crises. The way it is poietically confronted involves different types of ironic reversals which perform the Pyrrhonian construction.

Following the split between “la Beauté” and “je l’ai injuriée” in the prologue, the second section *Mauvais sang* describes the struggle of the narrator to escape his ancestral roots which have instilled in him an insincere form of Christianity. Here, the narrative’s major conflict of the metaphysical search for a truer form of spiritual fulfillment than that of his upbringing and culture is raised, as the poet bemoans his momentary inability to grasp that fulfillment (the aporetic element), while also pointing to the present desire for it (the zetetic element): “Le sang païen revient! L’Esprit est proche, pourquoi Christ ne m’aide-t-il pas, en donnant à mon âme noblesse et liberté. Hélas! l’Evangile a passé! l’Evangile! l’Evangile” (“The pagan blood comes back. The Spirit is near. Why doesn’t Christ help me by giving my soul nobility and freedom? Alas! the Gospel has gone by! The Gospel! The Gospel”; 268-9). The zetetic element of yearning for the spiritual or even religious fulfillment is here coupled with the aporetic blaming of Christ for not allowing that fulfillment.

For an example of this overall Pyrrhonian logical structure at the heart of *Mauvais Sang*, the Pyrrhonian quest for truth is given first as a pair of questions, and then as a proposition: “Connais-je encore la nature? me connais-je?—*Plus de mots*...Cris, tambour, danse, danse, danse, danse!” (“Do I know nature yet? Do I know myself? —*No more words*...Yells, drum, dance, dance, dance, dance!”; 270-1). Like “que sçay-je,” which Montaigne associated with Sebond’s quest to read the Book of Nature as well as with the cortical philosophical quest of the *gnothi seauton* (“know thyself”), Rimbaud’s responds to “me connais-je” is with the idea that the truth of his self which he seeks exceeds rational words. “*Plus de mots*” as a response to the quest to know nature and the self gives way to the vision of the rhythmic dance and is coupled with a swirling image of the loss of self and the external world, as a means of a transition to the vision that follows: “Je ne vois même pas l’heure où, les blancs débarquent, je tomberai au néant” (“I

can't even see the time when the whites will land and I will fall into the void"; 270-1). The use of the italicized other voice here also inscribes into the text this polyvocal dialogue within, where the *je* is also becoming other.

Rising out of that nothingness and otherness, the long section which follows describes the zetetic vision of the converted poet, whom Rimbaud has associated with his idea of non-Western, African tribesmen whom he sees as further away from the corrupted, violent Western society which had gotten farther away from the possibility of beauty and truth to exist: "J'entre au vrai royaume des enfants de Cham...Les blancs débarquent. Le canon! il faut se soumettre au baptême, s'habiller, travailler. J'ai reçu au cœur le coupe de la grâce. Ah! je ne l'avais pas prévu!" ("I am entering upon the true kingdom of the children of Ham...The white men are landing. The cannon! We will have to be baptized and put on clothes and work. I have been shot in the heart by grace. Ah! I had not foreseen it!"; 270-1). The vision of conversion continues, with statements such as "La raison m'est née. le monde est bon. Je bénirai la vie. J'aimerai mes frères. Ce ne sont plus des promesses d'enfance. Ni l'espoir d'échapper à la vieillesse et à la mort. Dieu fait ma force, et je loue Dieu...Je ne suis pas prisonnier de ma raison. J'ai dit: Dieu. Je veux la liberté dans le salut: comment la poursuivre?" ("Reason was born in me. The world is good. I will bless life. I will love my brothers. These are not the promises of a child. Nor the hope of escaping old age and death. God is my strength, and I give Him praise...I am not a prisoner of my reason. I said; God. I want freedom in salvation: How can I pursue it?"; 272-3). This entire vision can be read as anabasis, and the only way to read the entire oscillating scenario as negatively ironic would be thanks to the few interspersed lines which sew doubt into that vision: "Vite! est-il d'autres vies?" ("Quick! Are there other lives?"; 272-3). So far, the Pyrrhonian structure of the text is in its rising and falling nature, up into positive visions of hope and down

into the pits of despair, which taken together create a new kind of Pyrrhonian field of multiple impulses that inspire further poiesis. In this strange field, the ambiguous split between zetetic and aporetic elements are thus accompanied by another element, where the narrative and its form become even more indistinguishably split between the two.

On this third further skeptical level, a radically ambiguous statement concludes the section of the poets' conversion: "Farce continuelle! Mon innocence me ferait pleurer. La vie est la farce à mener par tous ("An endless farce. My innocence would make me weep. Life is the farce we all play"; 274-5). The "innocence" links back to the start of this section, where Rimbaud proposes, "Appréciations sans vertige l'étendue de mon innocence" ("Without being dazed, let us evaluate the extent of my innocence"; 272-3). Since the beginning of the vision of his conversion as if a converted African, up until now, he has been focusing on the mostly positive outcome of this conversion, with the interspersed moments of katalypsis. Taken together, the movement works as a Pyrrhonian quest—it is not merely a quest to describe the positive nature of his conversion and vision, but also goes back into the negative side of things. But here, concluding the long passage, the idea that the entire episode is merely a "Farce continuelle" adds an even more radically skeptical feature to the back and forth. Does the "farce continuelle" refer to only the positive vision of what preceded, and thus, he cries out of despair at its impossibility? Or does calling the entire episode a farce also include the oscillation overall—and so, what if the farce would not just be the poets' enthusiastic vision of a new conversion, but, also, the constant back and forth between that vision and its disruption? That is to say, what if that entire oscillation is what is the *farce continuelle*? Although it can also be a statement to disrupt the vision of his reconversion, the idea that "la vie est une farce continuelle à mener par tous" is a statement that is even more radically Pyrrhonian. The idea of farce indicates that the

truth behind some façade might never be attained—just as, with Pyrrhonism, ideas and propositions are continually tried out as a part of a quest, but judgment on their truth-value is eternally suspended. This suspension of judgment is not a peaceful, static resolution where nothing can finally be dealt with since that would result in a poiesis of Academic skepticism. Rimbaud’s Pyrrhonian poiesis is such that the ironic reversals do not finally result in despair and pessimism, but instead, the moving field of different potentialities creates a more dynamic ataraxia. Hope and even optimism at fulfilling the quest for truth are always waiting in the wings, too, along with further, unpredictable reversals of all kinds. The suspension of judgment leaves one in suspense, as the Pyrrhonian paradox becomes a productive motor of writing.

### **Rimbaud’s *nobles ambitions***

The same poietic ironic shift in the prologue—its sudden jump from the “festin” to the moment where the poet injures Beauty—thus occurs at various points and in differing forms throughout *Une saison en enfer*. That initial moment in the prologue that establishes this fundamental structure is in many ways the poet’s descent into the season in hell—following the topos of many literary moments of “katabasis,” the going down into the underworld as a part of a quest, as with Odysseus’s descent to Hades in Nekyia, the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus resurrects the spirits and questions the ghost of Tiresias about the way back to Ithaca in the ancient rite called a *nekyia*. But if we were to posit the conflict of that descent as a conflict between the space or dynamic into which one descends and, then, from which one descends or to which one must return, it is more proper to think of the subject of the text as being at minimum two seasons: rather than just a story of katabasis which deals entirely with a problematic of loss

and despair, there would be, on the one hand, the season of descent, or katabasis, and a season of ascent or, “anabasis.” Instead of relating these terms to their more traditional rhetorical associations of anabasis and katabasis as a decrease or increase of intensity of sense or emphasis in a phrase or sentence, we might see Rimbaud’s season(s) as the working-out of a Pyrrhonian process of katabasis-descent from a statement of zetetic seeking of truth (an anabasis) into an aporetic statement that suspends judgment on that statement of truth or deflates it in a pessimistic way. Yet, as we have seen, this duality is a placeholder for a multiplicity of positions in a field of Pyrrhonian poesis. This is a structure that plays out on various scales throughout *Une saison en enfer*, from phrase to phrase, as well as on a larger narrative or structural scale. But what makes the process more complex is that these jarring moments of poietic irony can jump in either direction, from zetetic to aporetic—a katabasis—or from aporetic to zetetic—an anabasis—and so on, and even create ambiguity around which direction they go in the first place. This circular movement constitutes Rimbaud’s intensified Pyrrhonian form, his development from the (somewhat) gentler, wandering Pyrrhonian *Essais* of Montaigne.

A major form of this frequent Pyrrhonian disruption in the text includes the opening to the section *Nuit de l’enfer*, which begins with the poet recounting the pessimistic descent—“J’ai avalé une fameuse gorgée de poison... Va, démon!” (I swallowed a monstrous mouthful of poison... Come on, demon!”; 274-5)—only to immediately follow the scene of demonic-poetic poisoning with (encouraging?) poetic vision:

J’avais entrevu la conversion au bien et au bonheur, le salut. Puis-je décrire la vision,  
l’air de l’enfer ne souffre pas les hymnes! C’était des millions de creatures charmantes,  
un suave concert spirituel, la force et la paix, les nobles ambitions, que sais-je? Les  
nobles ambitions! (274)

I had caught a glimpse of my conversion to the good and to happiness, salvation. Can I describe the vision? The air of hell does not permit hymns. They were millions of charming creatures, a sweet spiritual concert, strength and peace, noble ambitions, [what do I know]? Nobles ambitions! (275).

Compared to the prologue's image of the event of the poet's descent from "festin" to the injuring of Beauty, the action of swallowing a "monstrous mouthful of poison" which he associates with the diabolical "demon" heightens the tension concerning this katabasis into a hellish situation:

"Les entrailles me brûlent. La violence du venin tord mes mebres, me rend difformme, me terrasse. Je meurs de soif, j'étouffe, je ne puis crier. C'est l'enfer, l'éternelle peine! Voyez comme le feu se relève!" ("My entrails are burning. The poison's violence twists my limbs, deforms me and hurls me to the ground. I am dying of thirst and am choking. I can't cry out. It is hell and eternal punishment. See how the fire rises up again! I am burning as I should"; 274-5).

The aporia of the initial situation of the "festin" of "Beauté" when the poet was initially fulfilled and inspired is revealed by this scene of intoxication, transformed into something hollow, dangerous, and poisonous. But the katabasis is forever accompanied and made ambiguous by its concomitant figure: the anabasis. In this context, after the image of intoxication, the reversal occurs, and the poet is also given the holy vision of the "conversion to the good and to happiness." Biographically oriented readers might see in this a reference to potential drug and alcohol use that played a role in that year's theoretical breakdown and, ultimately, tragic Belgian drama; in this same vein, the "fameuse gorgée de poison" could be seen as a continuation of the

opium-dream and hashish literature via Baudelaire.<sup>43</sup> Although these are possible, the structure of the back and forth of the poets' dejection and inspiration persists as a formal feature of the text. And to make the possibility of a Pyrrhonian formula of aporetic katabasis and zetetic anabasis even more intriguing, could Rimbaud have included a citation of Montaigne: "que sais-je?"

This most famous Montaignist-Pyrrhonian phrase comes in the *Nuit de l'enfer* at one of the first moments of poetic ironic reversal, where the reversal itself not only creates complexity by going from inspiration to dejection or vice versa but also creates ambiguity by making us question what manner of reversal it is in the first place. Does the following phrase "nobles ambitions," repeated twice, as a description of the vision of the "conversion au bien et au bonheur" constitute a pessimistic reversal, or could it possibly also optimistically affirm the hope of that vision of conversion? On the one hand, the "nobles ambitions," seems to indicate that all of his vision of conversion is merely a noble—but impossible—ambition, and nothing more.

Rimbaud's draft of the *Mauvais sang* chapter, called *Fausse conversion* emphasizes this

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<sup>43</sup> Alessandro Cabiati, for example, traces the mythological line of (or under the) influence from Baudelaire's *Paradis artificiels* to Rimbaud and beyond to psychedelic experimentation of The Doors "Fabulous Operas, Rock 'n' Roll Shows: The Intoxication and Poetic Experimentation of Arthur Rimbaud and Jim Morrison" in *Literature and Intoxication* (98). The poisonous connection is also present between *Saison en enfer* and the "Lettres du voyant" where Rimbaud says that to become a *voyant* one must use poisons: "il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons, pour n'en garder que les quintessences" ("He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences"; 376-7).

reading of the “false conversion” of that scene. There, “nobles ambitions” is followed by “ma haine” (“my hatred”): “[Dès que *corrigé en C*’était] [l’apparition *biffé*] des milliers [de femmes *corrigé en d’âmes*] charmantes, un admirable concert spirituel, la force et la paix, les nobles ambitions, que sais-je! Ah ! les nobles ambitions ! ma haine” (Rimbaud and Guyaux 282). In this context, the exclamation of “nobles ambitions” is associated with the exclamation “ma haine,” since the vision of the hope of the aforementioned conversion must be deflated. What follows continues in this vein, the katabasis going down from that vision into the damnation of daily life: “[Recommence *corrigé en C*’est] l’existence enragée ; la colère dans le sang [la vie bestiale, *biffé*] l’abêtissement [le malehur, [*mon malheur et le malheur des autres, biffé*] ce qui m’importe peu *add. interl.*] et c’est encore la vie ! Si la damnation est éternelle [C’est encore la vie, encore. *Biffé*]” (282). In the final version, what remains is simply, “Et c’est encore la vie!—Si la damnation est éternelle” (“And this is still life!—And damnation is eternal!”; 274-5). The interpretation would tend to read the “Si la damnation est éternelle” and the darker language concerning damnation that follows as an indicator of a turn towards the pessimism signaled by “Les nobles ambitions,” with “c’est encore la vie!” as a type of exclamation that this situation of damnation and hell, where visions are dashed, is a matter of everyday life, and not even the damnation of hell. The hell that awaits us is already here. The language of the draft also lends itself to this interpretation: the damnation of everyday life is fleshed out into “l’existence enragée,” “la colère,” and “l’abêtissement.” But there is another reading made possible by the changes made for the final version.

On the other hand, the expression could allow for another interpretation, which is that the vision of the conversion—no longer glaringly called out as “fausse” in the final version—corresponds to sincere hopes and ideals which cannot be canceled out even though the text

oscillates back towards despair. In this sense, the exclamation, “nobles ambitions” would not be taken ironically, but as a sincere descriptive statement. Considering the more obvious understanding of the ironic reading of this passage, this sincere reading at first would appear to be as naïve as Claudel’s understanding of Rimbaud as expressing a true Christian conversion in the text. But the power of the text derives from both readings being possible; the reversal to despair from his vision of the conversion to good is only truly desperate if the real desire for that conversion is also expressed. But in another sense, the fact of the reversal being so strong could potentially indicate that the locutor also accepts that the opposite may also be true.<sup>44</sup>

This situation of expressing the Pyrrhonian relativity of the multiple subjective states of the poet, which comes through not just via this moment, but through the many reversals throughout the text, corresponds to what Hermann Wetzels has called Rimbaud’s “ironie féroce” (“fierce irony”) in *Une saison en enfer* (118). He distinguishes Rimbaud’s irony from what he called the earlier texts of an “âge parodique” (“era of parody”) which deployed itself against a “contre-modèle positif” (“positive counter-model”) with “la poésie parnassienne” (“Parnassian poetry”) opposed by “la nouvelle poésie ‘objective’” (“the new ‘objective poetry’”) and “l’Évangile” (“the Gospel”) opposed by his “contre-Évangile” of the *Proses évangéliques* (according to Brunel’s interpretation) on behalf of his “illuminisme social” (“social illuminism”; 118; my trans.).<sup>45</sup> Once it came to the period of *Une saison en enfer*, says Wetzels, his prior ideological attachments were no longer viable alternatives with which to parody the counter-

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<sup>44</sup> Once again, Freud’s theory of negation discussed in Chapter 1 comes to mind here: “It was *not* my mother!” (367).

<sup>45</sup> All translations of Wetzels are mine.

models: “Cette base solide, *grosso modo* socialiste, s’est effrité aussi vite que l’ancienne, la chrétienne... Rimbaud a perdu la naïveté de croire à une base idéologique solide et pour ainsi dire vraie et en même temps il a dépassé le stade de la simple négation ridiculisante, fût-ce la négation du christianisme ou du socialisme” (“that solid base, more or less socialist, crumbled as quickly as his older, Christian one... Rimbaud lost the naïveté to believe in a solid and true, so to speak, ideological base and at the same time he overtook the stage of the simple mocking negation, be it negation of Christianity or of Socialism”; 118, 119). For Wetzel, once these ideological attachments are lost, then the ironic citation of these pre-texts is no longer done for mere mockery, but “la citation permet une attitude polyvalente envers l’énoncé cite; elle n’est pas seulement et exclusivement négative, mais distanciée et réflexive” (“the citation allows a polyvalent attitude towards the cited statement, it is not only and exclusively negative, but distanced and reflexive”; 119). Wetzel is correct to associate Rimbaud’s use of irony with the polyvalent subjective situation of Rimbaud’s poet-subject of the text, and his analysis hints at the skeptical scenario behind his definition of this irony: “Dans aucune des expressions... on ne peut être sûr d’entendre parler l’auteur Rimbaud... les textes d’*Une saison en enfer* nous renvoient l’écho de plusieurs états de conscience du locuteur. Ce sujet parlant a perdu son unicité et l’assurance idéologique qui lui permettrait de décider une fois pour toutes de la vérité” (“In none of the expressions... can one be sure to hear the author Rimbaud speaking... the texts of *Une saison en enfer* return to us the echo of several subjective states of the locutor. This speaking subject has lost his unicity and the ideological assurance which permits him to decide once and for all the truth”; 119). Wetzel is right to distinguish the concept of irony from the more dualistic parody, but in expanding the concept to include all the vagaries of Rimbaud’s subjective oscillation, he obfuscates slightly the fact that in most traditional understandings of irony, that

same dualistic and mocking attitude of the parodic remains the dominant feature of irony. It is for this reason that new terms and precise analyses of Rimbaud's form of irony remain necessary.

At the same time, Wetzel understates the positive content that remains in this more complex version of irony in *Une saison en enfer*. When it comes to the aforementioned citation of "Noël sur la terre," he rightly explains that this citation, far from being derisive, maintains some nostalgia: "Rimbaud cite et le Noël chrétien et le Noël laïque, il ne s'en moque plus, au contraire, il le mentionne avec la nostalgie du désillusionné qui regrette la perte de deux idéaux à la fois" ("When Rimbaud cites the Christian Christmas and the secular Christmas, he is no longer mocking, on the contrary, he mentions it nostalgically from the standpoint of disillusionment which regrets the loss of two ideals at the same time"; 119). In this respect, the nostalgia at stake is seen entirely as a negative interpretive value, in accord with Wetzel's biographical interpretation of Rimbaud's ideological archeology ("Cette base solide, *grosso modo* socialiste, s'est effritée aussi vite que l'ancienne, la chrétienne"; "that solid base, more or less socialist, crumbled as quickly as his older, Christian one..."). The problem with this interpretation of Rimbaud's nostalgia for his past visions of conversion (which is a conversion *au bien et au bonheur*, something that both implies Christian and social ideals as well as exceeds them in its vagueness) is the context of the text as a whole, which renders this object of nostalgia as something that is not entirely lost. In *Une saison en enfer*, Rimbaud is seeking for new and real anabases; the poet seeks new visions and values. If one were to understand that his *ironie féroce*'s moments of nostalgia are only imaginary and unattainable, this would reaffirm the dualistic situation of parody, where the citation is overcome and rendered ridiculous. Even though Wetzel's main argument that this irony is "distanciée et réflexive," this would be to

imagine that Rimbaud's past attachments to Christianity and socialism had entirely crumbled. Instead, Rimbaud's poetic irony is similar to Wetzel's *ironie féroce*, in that the entire Pyrrhonian situation of the poetic subject allows for a real nostalgia to dwell in the text and enter into relation with the other moments of pessimism in an even more conflictual way than if the nostalgia were something that could evaporate so quickly because it was merely a past ideological attachment.

Finally, as opposed to reading the text as a careful construction where one line corresponds to damnation, and another reverses it to a desire for revelation—although there are indeed lines throughout the text that also follow this logic—there is a third possibility in which the clarity with which one reads a reversal as either katabasis or anabasis is replaced with an ambiguousness in which either figure could be implied at the same time. This admittedly, and perhaps inevitably, risks generating a certain heuristic confusion; yet such ambiguity is necessary to the overall effect of Pyrrhonian oscillation to which the Rimbaudian text gives such expressive form. If one reads closely enough, it is indeed possible to experience all three of these levels at the same time. This is a Pyrrhonian possibility of interpretation in which all are possible, and the one does not preclude the other. The only improper reading, at those moments, might be to insist on one of the interpretations over the others, in an Academic skeptical fashion.

### **La sortie définitive de la crise?**

Although the concern for Pyrrhonian poesis reaches its structural apex in *Une saison en enfer*, this latter text is not Pyrrhonian in the sense that it resembles a skeptical dialogue or philosophical treatise. If that were the case, different statements and arguments would be tried

out for their truth value in the zetetic mode and then the aporetic suspension of judgment would be employed, and so on in oscillation; but neither was Rimbaud's nor Montaigne's text philosophical in this sense. It should be furthermore underlined that Pyrrhonism from the start was not conceived of as a philosophical system but an attitude, an ethos. But Rimbaud's text is not the same Pyrrhonian attitude as Montaigne's either, since, although he rejected the philosophical method of inquiry and genre of writing, he commented directly on skepticism as well as incorporated its mystery into his essayistic writing form. Rimbaud's poetic writing is something else.

Rimbaud's text radicalizes the Pyrrhonian crisis of epistemology on both levels of signifier and signified, the formal, textual level, and the level of its content. Each section of *Une saison en enfer* portrays a multitude of skeptical zetetic quests and aporetic retreats. Rimbaud's skeptical form jumps back and forth from moments that show the poet longing for revelation and spiritual fulfillment, while others suddenly shift to the pessimism that such fulfillment could never be attained or represented in poetry or realized in experience. These moments where the hope for totality and successful representation is preserved are not mere moments of nostalgia, because they are coupled right next to blocs of text in which that nostalgia is opposed. Like the Pyrrhonian paradox—that they doubt whether or not they can trust the faculty of doubt in the first place—Rimbaud's writing is made to question the ability of his text to grasp truth by combining the different modes or forms in relation to the question of optimistic agency or pessimistic determination, instead of just sticking to one coherent form or mode. In this way, while Rimbaud never overtly discussed Pyrrhonism, he radicalized Montaigne's Pyrrhonian line of writing by maximizing its problematic at all levels of his text. This necessitates the question of: is there or should there be a “sortie définitive de la crise,” or is the crisis of the text not only a

negative one where Hell dominates but a productive one that enables a new kind of poetic project?

What the poietic, Pyrrhonian reading of Rimbaud's text makes clear is that the skeptical crisis is not a matter of accident, but a structural issue that concerns language itself. Though Nakaji insists that "Génie" represents an exit from *Une saison en enfer's* metaphysical crisis concerning Rimbaud's confrontation with the Christian dissociative power with his associative one that seeks "la vérité dans une âme et un corps," with which Frémy takes issue, the Pyrrhonian reading of the crisis shows that the two logics of zetetic anabasis and aporetic katabasis are both necessary to find a new way to express the visionary writing of Rimbaud's poetic project. The (non)-palinodic insertion of the poems standing in for the supposedly failed period of *voyance* shows that, far from being simply failures of that project, they are the expression of that project that—of necessity—contained the seeds of skeptical discordance. Rimbaud's enthusiasm is such that the closer that his writing approaches a new way of attaining truth, the more risk there is at its disruption by the evaporation of that enthusiasm or the failure of that attempt to attain truth. By intensely focusing on this Pyrrhonian paradox throughout *Une saison en enfer* as an aspect of his writing and life experience—that is, meta-poietically—Rimbaud calls attention to the centrality of the phenomenon where attaining truth and the hope of spiritual fulfillment are combined with their opposites, without the one canceling the other out. Furthermore, that skeptical poietic look into his writing and life experience allowed the *je* to become *autre*, not just finding these multiple modes of the personal skeptical quest, but at the end of *Une saison en enfer* in "Adieu," that *je* also shifts at moments to the collective: "Le combat spirituel est aussi brutal que la bataille d'hommes; mais la vision de la justice est le Plaisir de Dieu seul. Cependant c'est la veille. Recevons tous les influx de vigueur et de tendresse

réelle. Et à l'aurore, nous entrerons aux splendides villes" ("A spiritual battle is as brutal as a battle of men; but the vision of justice is the pleasure of God alone. However this is the vigil. Let us welcome all the influxes of vigor and real tenderness. And, at dawn, armed with ardent patience, we will enter magnificent cities"; 304-5). The spiritual battle is like the Pyrrhonian crisis, playing out as it does both on the spiritual and the human levels. The question, personal and writerly as it is for both Montaigne and Rimbaud, nevertheless always has the socio-historical context swirling around in the background, and even in the foreground of their writings. For Rimbaud to include the collective here, also makes the Pyrrhonian writing a communication of the crisis from writer to reader. We also must begin to understand the unique structure of the Pyrrhonian crisis, so that we may confront the aporias of our quests, but also embrace the ability of the zetetic moments to persist and flourish within Pyrrhonism as the engine of its system. Perhaps to a Pyrrhonian, the attainment of truths and fulfillment can only emerge out of this skeptical process, and to counter those who see the text as a pessimistic treatise and a goodbye to writing should recall the continually repeating refrain of "Éternité": "Elle est retrouvée!—Quoi?—l'Éternité. C'est la mer mêlée au soleil."

## Conclusion

How is Rimbaud's "Je est un autre" a response to Montaigne's "Que sçay-je?" On the one hand, it reveals the fact that Montaigne's seemingly philosophical epistemological question was already a program of poetics and a theory of poesis from the start. Not only do we read Rimbaud through the lens of Montaigne and his foundation of a set of problems which we now consider the crucible of Western modernity (although Descartes often gets the attention with his "Je pense, donc je suis," seeing as he embodies the rationalistic ideology of modernity through his attempt to paper over the black hole of uncertainty which Montaigne's Pyrrhonism opened), but this transhistorical project to bring Montaigne and Rimbaud together also requires us to read Montaigne through the innovation of Rimbaud. Rimbaud also helps us understand aspects of the new structures of modernity that Montaigne was one of the first to grapple with via his Pyrrhonian poietic program since those structures re-emerged in Rimbaud's personal and historical moment of crisis. What Rimbaud's confrontation of the Pyrrhonian crisis in his unique ways has underlined is what is expressed by his famous line—namely, the *je* of human subjectivity (the subject of enunciation) is revealed to be doubled, multiplied, and mutable, through the poetic program and its requisite linguistic *je* of the text (the subject of the statement).<sup>46</sup> Rimbaud's writing of a new kind of poietic irony explores this very paradox.

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<sup>46</sup> The distinction between the subject of the statement and the subject of enunciation comes from Lacan's *Le séminaire Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse (Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis)*. There are many Pyrrhonian resonances in this text, among which is the ability to see how the cyclical nature of the two levels of the subject indicates for Lacan that the unconscious is structured like language so that in order to

The subject *je* of reality is not the stable entity of the text, and preceding his formulation Rimbaud writes, “C’est faux de dire: Je pense: On devrait dire: On me pense” (“It is wrong to say: I think: One ought to say: People think me”; 370-1). The supposedly singular act of the thinking subject in control of his thoughts is exposed as a fiction, in reality, the act of thinking is a complex web that entails the collapse of the subject-object divide, and includes the multitude of people, things, of which we are unconscious in each act of thought. Rimbaud furthermore introduces this formulation as he questions his poesis, that is, he considers his subjectivity in the poetic act of creation. There, there is the mysterious metaphysical level of Rimbaud’s *voyance*, as if a higher power of the Muse, or something *autre* speaks through Rimbaud’s *je* in poesis: “il faut être[...]né poète[...]Tant pis pour le bois qui se trouve violon” (“one has to be born a poet[...]It is too bad for the wood which finds itself a violin”; 370-1). In this expression of the mystery of how behind the *je* of the text these multiple, unknown forces are at work, the poet and his linguistic *je* are mere materials or vessels for the poesis to self-actualize. In his other “Lettre du voyant” to Demeny dated two days later, Rimbaud puts this reflection on the *je* of poesis in similar terms following the identical famous phrase: “Car Je est un autre. Si le cuivre s’éveille clairon, il n’y a rien de sa faute. Cela m’est évident: j’assiste à l’éclosion de ma pensée: je la regarde, je l’écoute: je lance un coup d’archet: la symphonie fait son remuement dans les profondeurs, ou vient d’un bond sur la scène” (“For I is [an other]. If brass wakes up a trumpet, it

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access the unconscious is to pay attention to the chain of signifiers on the level of the statement (138-40). In Pyrrhonism, since there is no certain access to any deep or final truth, the play of zetetic and aporetic moments (appearances) instead constitutes the field of study, or in the case of our writers, the textual field of their poesis.

is not its fault. This is obvious to me: I am present at this birth of my thought: I watch it and listen to it: I draw a stroke of the bow: the symphony makes its stir in the depths, or comes on to the stage in a leap"; 374-5). In this version, the self is doubled into the maker poet who observes the otherness at work, manifested into the textual matter of poiesis. Rimbaud's continuous focus on a new type of poietic irony which delves into the ambiguities at work in poiesis is the continuation of his understanding of the multiple poietic subject, and it is through this Rimbaud that we have been able to read the Montaigne of the mutable, multiple subject who creates a new way of writing through a Pyrrhonian poiesis.

On the other hand, a Pyrrhonian reading of Rimbaud shows us through the "Lettres du voyant" and throughout his work that the engagement with the Pyrrhonian crisis is not confined to the early modern. After having been initiated into the Pyrrhonian paradox of radical doubt, and after having found that even if there is no escape from the crisis, Montaigne and Rimbaud both show us that there is a writerly response possible, and one cannot help but wonder to what extent a radical Pyrrhonian poiesis is still vital for those of us seeking to write through the multitude of skeptical crises that constitute worldly existence, and for those of us who feel strongly at moments that our perception of ourselves and the world is a skeptical play of painting the *passage*. It is difficult to imagine the sheer magnitude of the horrors of the arguably genocidal French Wars of Religion, and incredible to grasp that Montaigne came to a textual Pyrrhonian crisis whose purpose was peace and happiness in this historical context of war and hatred. Rimbaud too was one such writer who found himself not only at a historical time of crisis—namely, the accumulation of crises wrapped up with the Paris Commune—but he found himself confronting a personal poetic crisis (his interconnected, personal romantic crisis with Verlaine notwithstanding). To be sure, other writers could be considered as partaking in the line

of radical poietic responses to the Pyrrhonian crisis—and the literary history of the philosophers and writers following Montaigne is fascinating in how it reveals the potentially dangerous *libertinage* at play in the program of skepticism.<sup>47</sup> But there are few writers like Montaigne or Rimbaud who happened to be living through real crises, but undertook Pyrrhonian poietic quests to find new ways of seeing the world and new languages or forms of writing which could accommodate that new way of seeing in a similar Pyrrhonian manner.<sup>48</sup>

What Rimbaud and Montaigne's Pyrrhonian poietic programs make clear is that the Pyrrhonian crisis is not primarily psychological, personal, or historical, and is then simply

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<sup>47</sup> Once again, Popkin serves as a starting point to the story of what comes after Montaigne: the *nouveaux Pyrrhoniens* and *libertins érudits*, Charron, Gassendi, La Mothe le Vayer, Théophile de Viau and Des Barreaux (see chapters four to seven). The entire affair of the erotic and obscene poems of the *Parnasse satirique* in 1622 with De Viau's condemnation for his alleged authorship of the opening sonnet could potentially be investigated as a result of the Pyrrhonian crisis, and a comparison could be made to Rimbaud's participation in the satirical, obscene poetry of the *Cercle des poètes zutiques* and Rimbaud's other odd, erotic and obscene writings.

<sup>48</sup> I tend to think of the modernist and post-modernist formal programs of Proust and Joyce in this context. Proust's evident engagement with philosophical and aesthetic questions is omnipresent in his novel, and Joyce's epiphanic realism is glimpsed through his poietic approach to the many portraits of the artist throughout his works. While they engage with radical Pyrrhonian questions of poiesis and in the ability of their poiesis to adequately supersede mimesis, they cannot as clearly be said to be foreground the crisis in as highly charged and concentrated a form as Rimbaud's poetry, letters, and narratives.

mimetically recorded into a literary text, but as a function of a poiesis, the crisis is itself a textual matter. Through his Pyrrhonian initiation in writing the “Apologie,” Montaigne realized the inadequacies of the mimesis of the dogmatists who believe they can have direct access to truth. Montaigne’s self-reflexive Pyrrhonian crisis engendered a Pyrrhonian kind of writing which is a working out of a poetics. Montaigne came to understand that Sebond’s reading of the Book of Nature required the imagination, though it was vain and empty, because it was inherently ambiguous, uncertain, and unstable, and so Montaigne’s awareness of Natural Theology required him to shift from mimesis to poiesis. His Pyrrhonian discovery of poiesis via the “Apologie” solidified what Montaigne had already been on to in his preface: the poietic quest for self-knowledge in *Les essais* had to be worked out through writing, since “je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre” (“I am myself the matter of my book”; 2). The only way to gain self-knowledge was by undertaking a Pyrrhonian writing quest and thereby responding to the crisis which challenged self-knowledge by diving headfirst into the Pyrrhonian crisis. Just as Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” makes obvious the split between the subject of the statement and the multitudinous subject of enunciation, Montaigne’s “je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre” does the same.

“Que sçay-je?” poses itself as a question that also seems to be a statement, and naysayers may first try to read in its desire a dogmatic, Academic avowal that we cannot know anything. But Montaigne has already explored his motto’s textual valences: like the medicinal rhubarb, it flushes itself out along with the offending zetetic statement this one accompanies. And yet just because that zetetic statement required the medicinal effect of the skeptical rhubarb, does not mean that we should never try out the zetetic ideas. Montaigne understood that vanity works in the same way: we can void ourselves of vanity, and embrace the emptiness of vanity, but the

poietic cycle of Pyrrhonian writing always regenerates itself again, as the enjoyment of vanity re-embodies and re-actualizes itself in the unending poietic quest where vanity becomes invention. A new kind of peace comes to the Pyrrhonian writer only by writing through this ironic crisis of the world in *passage* and crisis of the doubled and multiplied subject who is other. That peace comes not just by voiding oneself of vanity, but by recognizing that, if “Je est un autre,” a new way of writing is required to pursue the other side of vanity, from whence the flow of new ideas and fictions comes, “comme la gargouille d’une fontaine, sans le ruminer et poiser, et luy eschappe des choses de diverse couleur, de contraire substance et d’un cours rompu...”

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