



Emma Winsor Wood

A Lovely Woman Tapers Off into a Fish: Monstrosity in Montaigne's *Essais*

Montaigne would have us think of his book, and therefore his mind, as monstrous: “I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself” (III.11, 958). And “I find that...like a runaway horse, [the mind] gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or purpose” (I.8, 25). And elsewhere: “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 proportion other than accidental?” (II.28, 165).

The collected *Essais*, bound in a single enormous volume and printed on tissue-thin paper, is, well, a monster of a book. Even with a table of contents and a numbering system to make the text easier to navigate, it is nearly impossible to do so. The attentive reader is constantly flipping backward and forward, trying to find a specific essay, page, or sentence, to retroactively trace a line of thought. That the titles of the essays often correspond little to the content therein makes this even more difficult: In “De l’expérience,” Montaigne expends the first few pages on a lengthy discussion of the French legal system; in “Des boyteux,” he discusses the French calendar, rumors, miracles, and sorcery before, in the essay’s final few paragraphs, getting to the “boyteux” of the title. It is difficult to navigate even *within* single essays, especially as they swell in size. Montaigne’s arguments are circular, repetitive, digressive, rhizomatic, oblique, even paratactical. He does not hold the reader’s hand: “I love the poetic gait, by leaps and gambols...It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I” (III.9, 925).

This monstrosity is especially evident to scholars of Montaigne. While reading critical articles, I noticed the lack of a uniform citation method for the *Essais*. Some scholars provide just the page numbers, others (much more helpfully!) the section and essay numbers along with a page number; some provide dual French/English citations—though, it seems, others’ editions are never quite the same as my own. It is rare, it seems, for scholars to provide the titles of the essays. To find a quotation I had seen quoted elsewhere from a Montaigne essay I had not yet read, I had to read the whole essay. There is no way through the essays but... through. Montaigne derided the scholar: “It is more of a job to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books about books than about any other subject: we do nothing but write glosses about each other” (III.13, 996). So, it is fitting that he has created a text that almost successfully evades such glosses.

But the monstrosity of the text extends far beyond its materiality. In the same way that mainstream culture has come to conflate Victor Frankenstein with his monster—so that many who have not read Mary Shelley’s novel believe Frankenstein to *be* the monster—we similarly have come to conflate Montaigne-the-person with Montaigne-the-text, even though, “[t]he narrative self depicted by the writer can never be construed as self-identical” (Kritzman 8). The text of the *Essais* has eclipsed and replaced the actual person of Montaigne just as Victor Frankenstein’s monster destroyed and then, in public imagination, replaced his creator. Like the monster, who lives on (presumably indefinitely) after Frankenstein’s death, so Montaigne’s book “continues to live on and have a life of its own” (Kritzman 7). The same could be said of children and grandchildren: over time, one’s descendants—who are not identical but rather “like”—eclipse and eventually replace the aging, dying, dead parent. As the monster’s creator, Victor Frankenstein is both father and mother to it; likewise is Montaigne both father and mother to the “chimeras and fantastic monsters” his mind has “birthed.” The *Essais* are thus fashioned as a kind of “enfant monstrueux” (a titular phrase of an essay I will discuss in a later section)—a male child, a son, born unnaturally, of one man, alone.

I. The Monster

When Montaigne was writing, the monster and the child were inextricably linked. According to Ambroise Paré, the barber surgeon whose book *Des Monstres et Prodiges* (1573) Montaigne read: “Monsters are things that appear outside the course of Nature...such as a child who is born with one arm” (3). In other words, the Renaissance “monster” was a child born with what we would understand today as a birth defect or disability (Hampton 17). Because of these disabilities, the “monster” rarely lived to adulthood: its image was therefore of the perpetual child.

Monsters were usually understood as having been created in the womb. Although Paré’s “causes of monsters” ranged from too great or too little “a quantity of seed,” “the glory of God,” and the size of the womb, the most prevalent and most widely discussed theory regarding their creation was that of the maternal imagination. Under this theory, it was believed that so-called monsters could be formed as a result of the mother’s exposure to certain images during her pregnancy (Huet 5). Or, as Montaigne writes in “De la force de l’imagination”:

Nevertheless, we know by experience that women transmit marks of their fancies to the bodies of the children they carry in their womb... [T]here was presented to Charles, king of Bohemia and Emperor, a girl from near Pisa, all hairy and bristly, who her mother said had been thus conceived because of a picture of Saint John the Baptist hanging by her bed. (I.21, 82)

The monster was thus understood, quite literally, to be a product of the female imagination, and it was monstrous in part because it bore resemblance to an external image rather than to the father: like had not begotten like. In this way, a monstrous birth was seen as publicly revealing the mother’s shameful, sometimes illegitimate desires (Huet 17). While an artist creates with intentionality, usually with the goal of making an object of beauty, the mother, by contrast, has no control over her creation. The monstrous

creation, thus, “does not mislead, [but] reveals...It expose[s] the shameful source of its deformity, its useless and inappropriate model”—its creator, the mother (Huet 26).

This language sounds familiar. Montaigne’s *Essais*, “fantastic monsters” which he—by his own analogy—“birthed” expose “the shameful source” of their deformity, their “useless and inappropriate model”: Montaigne himself. The famous passage from “De l’oisiveté,” quoted earlier, reads in full:

But I find that... like a runaway horse, [the mind] gives itself a hundred times more trouble than it took for others, and *gives birth to so many chimeras and fantastic monsters*, one after another, without order or purpose that in order to contemplate their ineptitude and strangeness at my pleasure, I have begun to put them in writing, *hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of itself*. (emphasis my own; I.8, 25)

In this moment, Montaigne acknowledges the shameful secrets (“chimeras and fantastic monsters”)—admissions, desires, weaknesses, obsessions, pains—made public via his text, in addition to confessing his own lack of control over his mind/imagination (“like a runaway horse”) and consequently the text. Thus, Montaigne does not present himself as the conventional male artist working deliberately to craft a beautiful, symmetrical object but as a mother-artist, incapable of choice or discrimination, giving birth to “fantastic monsters” from his out-of-control, overabundant, and so female, imagination. Without this imagination, there would be no *Essais*. For, in birthing these monsters of the mind, Montaigne is also giving birth to himself as a writer, to his text, and to the essay as form; without the monstrous thoughts, there would have been no urge to write (Regosin 156). Neither does Montaigne present himself as a penitent, seeking to confess and repent for these shameful thoughts. Instead, he is an essayist: a passive observer of and witness to his own monstrous thoughts and monstrous nature (Regosin 155).

II. The Child

Of the six daughters Montaigne's wife, Françoise de la Cassaigne, carried to term, only one, Léonor, survived to adulthood. He had no sons in the era of primogeniture and the Salic law, which excluded women as well as any men who derived their right to inheritance from the female line from inheriting the throne. Only a son, through inheritance of name, title, position, and land, could truly (and legally) act as a representative for and of the father; only a son could produce 'true' descendants, could pass on the family name, could help Montaigne live on after death.

Though Montaigne mentions his missing son several times across the essays, he discusses his surviving daughter only twice across the entire book, and names her only once: "they all die on me at nurse; but Léonor, one single daughter who escaped that misfortune..." (II.8, 341). This moment is grammatically striking because of his use of the present tense: "they all *die* on me at nurse" (*Ils me meurent tous en nourrisse* [F60]). In French, as in English, the present tense has many functions, and more than one resonates here: the *présent continu* (continuous present), used to describe an ongoing, unfinished action, e.g. "They *are* all *dying* on me at nurse"; *présent de vérité générale* (the present of universal truth), as in "The sky is blue" or here, "All my children die in infancy"; *présent de narration* (the present of narration), used to create a sense of immediacy when telling a story about past events; and the *présent d'habitude* (habitual action), which, as in English, relates repeated or regular actions—"My children keep dying." In any of these uses, Montaigne's choice of the present tense reads as evidence of an unhealed emotional trauma; the action of his infant daughters' "dying" cannot yet be considered a past action.

Two things perhaps amplified the pain Montaigne felt at his daughters' deaths: their sex and the brevity of their lives, both of which suggested a weakness or lack on the side of the father. In the Renaissance, the figure of the woman was seen as a kind of monster since it deviated from the 'neutral' and 'normal' male body (Huet 3). Montaigne's five dead daughters were all 'deformed' by virtue of their

sex—by virtue of the fact that they took more after their mother than their father, a signal that her imagination overpowered his own. And, they were, like the Renaissance monsters, perpetual children: they did not get to grow up. If the child was supposed to be created in the father’s image, what did Montaigne’s failure to produce not only a son but also healthy, robust children who were able to survive past infancy say about him as a father, as an image? I can imagine it must have seemed to him, at times, as if he were giving birth to monsters, or even to death itself. The infant became for him a figure of abjection, increasingly synonymous with the corpse, evidence of death’s insistent materiality—a monster.

This biographical knowledge casts new light on the strange analogy in the opening of “De Poiseveté”:

...and as we see that women, all alone, produce mere shapeless masses and lumps of flesh, but that to create a good and natural offspring they must be made fertile with a different kind of seed; so it is with minds. Unless you keep them busy with some definite subject that will bridle and control them, they throw themselves in disorder hither and yon in the vague field of imagination. (I.8, 25).

The reading that emerges of this passage is twofold. First, the biographical dimension opens the passage up to be read as a self-condemnation. Montaigne’s own children, though fertilized from both the male and female “seed,” were neither “good” (*bonne*) nor “natural” (*naturelle*)—they kept dying “at nurse.” And, since his daughters died in infancy, they could (tragically, painfully) be described as “mere shapeless masses and lumps of flesh.” Indeed, as Montaigne writes elsewhere: “infants that are hardly born...hav[e] neither movement in the soul *nor recognizable shape to the body*” (emphasis my own; II.8, 339). Perhaps Montaigne’s dead children were a type of monster created by Paré’s “too little a quantity of [male] seed,” and so perhaps he was to blame for their short lives. Second, the passage reads as a description of Montaigne’s own mind post-retirement. While he advises “you” (which reads here, as it often does, as an address to the self) to “keep [the mind] busy” so as to produce “good and natural offspring” instead of

“masses and lumps,” it’s clear he has not taken this advice. The essays are neither bridled nor controlled, and, though their titles suggest otherwise, they take no “definite subject.” Montaigne admits as much by the end of this short piece when he compares his mind to a “runaway horse” and calls his essays “chimeras and fantastic monsters.” The essays are thus *not* good and natural offspring, but “shapeless masses and lumps of flesh” (*amas et pièces de chair informes* [F69]).

This seems like an apt characterization of the *Essais*: in writing prose with a “poetic gait,” Montaigne ignored the rhetorical conventions of both his contemporaries and ancient predecessors, writing a new form that appeared formless. It is especially apt given that he kept adding to—and rarely, if ever, subtracting from—the essays throughout his lifetime; they simply kept amassing (“Moreover, I do not correct my first imaginings by my second—well, yes, perhaps a word or so, but only to vary, not to delete” [II.37, 696]). However, in this reading of the essays as the unnatural offspring, Montaigne strangely places himself in the position of the mother, one of those women reproducing “all alone” (*toutes seules*), letting his ‘maternal’ imagination run wild, and so giving birth to monsters—his essays.

III. The Stone

In “De l’expérience,” Montaigne spends six pages detailing the non-metaphorical, material ‘monsters’ he births: kidney stones. It isn’t a stretch to imagine them as monsters: in his book, Paré calls the stones “monstrous things” in his chapter “Of Stones That Are Engendered in the Human Body” (52). And, from his lengthy description of his own illness, it becomes clear that Montaigne also sees the stones as much more than stones.

The stones are abject objects and emblems of his own mortality: “It is some big stone that is crushing and consuming the substance of my kidneys, and my life that I am letting out little by little” (III.13, 1023). Nearly all of the essays, regardless of their named subject, are primarily concerned with death and dying, and since the “stone”—that is, his illness—forces Montaigne to confront death, it can be

read as the very impetus to write the essays in the first place. In fact, he creates a direct causal link between his illness and his writing:

For lack of a natural memory I make one of paper, and as some new symptom occurs in my disease, I write it down. Whence it comes that at the present moment, when I have passed through virtually every sort of experience, if some grave stroke threatens me, by glancing through these little notes, disconnected like the Sibyl's leaves, I never fail to find grounds for comfort in some favorable prognostic from my past experience. (III.13, 1021)

In this passage, the “paper memory” of new symptoms quite clearly corresponds with the essays: “these little notes, disconnected like the Sibyl's leaves” that provide “some favorable prognostic from my past experience.” Thus, the essays are figured as both a material archive of memory and as symptoms of “my disease” (*mon mal* [F303]). This, in turn, forces us to read “disease” more broadly—as, for instance, the condition of being human and mortal (after all, most of the essays never mention the kidney stones). Again, Montaigne's passivity stands out: as the essayist, he is merely observing and recording his symptoms, neither seeking a cure nor striving to interpret each one.

Montaigne's father died of kidney stones, and he believes this affliction, his inheritance, will kill him, too (Williams 136). For this reason, the disease is also emblematic of family, and in particular of the bond between parents and children; at one point he even describes the illness as “paternally tender” (III.13.1019). If he had had a son, perhaps he would have passed the disease onto him. And, in fact, the act of inscribing his personal experience of the disease into the text of the *Essais* in such detail is a way of passing it onto his progeny, this monstrous book-child, just as his father passed it onto him. With the resonance of the parental relationship in mind, the stones can also be seen as stand-ins for Montaigne's lost daughters—like the daughters, the stones are created from his own seed and are “born” with a body but no life. His inheritance—both from his father and to his daughters—is death. The text, in recreating Montaigne's experience of passing the kidney stones, thus contradictorily re-produces the births of his

daughters, events that led him to suffer and confront death, while also attempting to birth a new child, a son, who has a material body but cannot die: a book.

Montaigne designates the essays as symptoms of “my disease”—the broader condition of being human. His description of the experience of having the specific disease of kidney stones, however, reads as a metaphor for writing the essays in which the kidney stones—those shapeless, monstrous lumps which Montaigne must push out from a narrow passage, as a mother pushes out an infant—correspond to the essays. Of the process of voiding the stones, Montaigne writes:

[Other people] see you sweat in agony, turn pale, turn red, tremble, vomit your very blood, suffer strange contractions and convulsions, sometimes shed great tears from your eyes, discharge thick, black, and frightful urine, or have it stopped up by some sharp rough stone that cruelly pricks and flays the neck of your penis... (III.13, 1019)

The resonances with labor are clearly visible here: the sweat, the trembling, the contractions, the tears, the large object that must be pushed out regardless. This is both an actual labor—the voiding of the stone—and a metaphorical one—the labor of writing the essays, of birthing a new genre, of creating a ‘son’ who will carry on his name. The act of writing the essays is thus represented as a deeply physical, and physically demanding, one. In the throes of creation, Montaigne transforms from an impassive observing mind to an agonized, suffering body—from ‘male’ to ‘female,’ from passive to active. Montaigne-the-writer is once again represented as Montaigne-the-mother.

Yet, here, he surpasses the mother! Not only does he later imply that he voids stones at least once a month—“If you do not embrace death, at least you shake hands with it once a month” (III.13, 1020)—reproducing far more quickly and efficiently than a woman, he also goes on, after describing his “labor” above, to describe his countenance during this agony:

...that cruelly pricks and flays the neck of your penis; meanwhile keeping up conversation with your company with a normal countenance, jesting in the intervals with your servants, holding up

your end in a sustained discussion, making excuses for your pain and minimizing your suffering.

(III.13, 1019)

In other words, he not only labors far more efficiently than a woman, he is even able to do so with a “normal countenance” (*une contenance commune* [F302]), while jesting and making conversation. This passage turns Montaigne-the-mother into the expectant father—waiting in the other room while the woman labors; he assumes both roles here. The ‘male’ mind converses, jests, discusses—writes—while the ‘female’ body labors—also writes. This duality captures one of the contradictions of being a writer: one is simultaneously observer and participant; one records but, in the act of recording, one also is also doing: creating a material text, creating the self via the page, creating, in Montaigne’s case, a new genre and form.

The essays are often depicted as something excreted from his body: here, as the kidney stone but elsewhere as excrement, vomit, blood; thus, the *Essais* have not just emerged from his body but are consubstantial with it. Montaigne’s insistence on his writing’s corporality registers as a desire to turn the figurative book-child into an actual child, full of all of the monstrous and marvelous physical evidence of living—piss, shit, vomit, blood, kidney stones. It also reads as an argument for writing and thinking as true, even physical, labor. Finally, it is a marker of what makes the genre of the essay different and new. The essay, intent on locating ideas within the lived experience of a specific body, is birthed from the fusing of mind and body, male and female, spirit and flesh.

IV. The Monstrous Child

Montaigne dedicates only one short essay to the monster. The brief piece, “D’un enfant monstrueux,” which I will end up quoting nearly in full in the following pages, chronicles a specific firsthand encounter with a child who has a birth defect (he is what we would now call a parasitic twin). The essay begins with a dismissive gesture: “This story [*ce conte*] will go its way simply, for I leave it to the doctors to discuss it” (II.30, 653 / F373). Montaigne’s deferral to “the doctors,” whom he elsewhere denigrates and derides, is

strange. Here, however, the doctors hold significance as symbols of rationality and as experts in the study of the physical body—in science rather than in signs. The early modern monster was rarely seen as a material body: it was understood as an allegory and as a warning or prophecy of the future. By starting with the doctors, Montaigne immediately foregrounds the physicality of this monster over its potential symbolism.

He goes on:

The day before yesterday I saw a child that two men and a nurse, who said they were the father, uncle, and aunt, were leading about to get a penny or so from showing him, because of his strangeness. In all other respects he was of ordinary shape; he could stand on his feet, walk, and prattle, about like others of the same age. He had not yet been willing to take any other nourishment than from his nurse's breast; and what they tried to put in his mouth in my presence he chewed on a little and spat it out without swallowing. There seemed indeed to be something peculiar about his cries. He was just fourteen months old. (II.30, 653 / F373).

Montaigne's insistence on specific temporality (the day before yesterday; *avant hier*) is an important feature of the essay, a marker of the fact that the writing emerges from a specific place, time, body, and mind (Williams 149). This is neither the open-ended generality of "Once upon a time" that one might see in a traditional *conte* nor the objective specificity of historical writing, e.g. "In April 1580." *Avant hier* is a highly subjective mode of noting time, one that is both specific (on the day it is first spoken) and general (since it is undated, any day could be "the day before yesterday"). Thus, the description of the child is set up within two frames—the medical as well as the subjective, human one. The two are in tension throughout.

Our introduction to the child is unusual. We learn that three people perhaps posing as relatives are showing the child (*le montrer*) for money "because of his strangeness." Because of the title, and because they are *showing* him, we assume this strangeness is physical. But rather than jump straight to a description of this "strangeness," Montaigne jumps *over* it. When I first read the passage, I thought I had skipped a

sentence because of the way Montaigne begins the next: “In all other respects” (*en tout le reste*). How can he tell us about “all other respects” when he has yet to explain the initial respect—the physical strangeness—which must have struck him immediately upon seeing the child? But he does, and in doing, so chooses to give primacy to what makes the child ordinary: he walks, talks, prattles, nurses, spits out food. And yet there is “something peculiar about his cries.” For Montaigne, the source of this child’s *éstrangété* is first located in his speech (Hampton 20). The paragraph ends with the child’s age. Notably, though young, the child is already older than any of Montaigne’s infant daughters when they died; he has survived so far.

From there, Montaigne launches into a physical description of the child in a style that Richard Regosin qualifies as “matter-of-factly, coldly, objectively” (165) and Wes Williams, as having “medical precision” (151) and being close to a “medical report” (153). It reads:

Below the breast he was fastened *and* stuck to another child, without a head, *and* with his spinal canal stopped up, the rest of his body being entire. For indeed one arm was shorter, but it had been broken by accident at their birth. They were joined face to face, *and* as if a smaller child were trying to embrace a bigger one around the neck. The juncture *and* the space where they held together was only four fingers’ breadth or thereabouts, so that if you turned the imperfect child over and up, you saw the other’s navel below, thus the connection was in between the nipples and the navel. The navel of the imperfect child could not be seen, but all the rest of his belly could. In this way all of this imperfect child that was not attached, as the arms, buttocks, thighs, and legs, remained hanging *and* dangling on the other and might reach halfway down his legs. The nurse also told us that he urinated from both places. Moreover, the limbs of this other were nourished *and* living *and* in the same condition as his own, except that they were smaller and thinner. (emphasis my own; II.30, 653 / F373).

Though the description is certainly of a detail and attention that is rare in the *Essais*, it appears neither cold and objective nor medically precise to me. What struck me most on a first reading was, in fact, how blurry

an image it gave me and how intentionally confusing the passage seemed to be. I was able to pinpoint a number of sources for this confusion.

First of all, Montaigne over-describes. Seemingly unable to choose one accurate word, here he insists on doubling up: he was fastened *and* stuck; they were joined face to face, *and* as if trying to embrace; the juncture *and* the space. Note other similar instances italicized in the passage above. While the “and” could be used to narrow the description and become more specific, here it joins either two synonymous words (hanging and dangling), creating a redundancy, or it joins two things that feel unlike enough to give pause (juncture and space). A similar redundancy occurs when Montaigne lists all the parts of the “imperfect child” that were *not* attached—“the arms, buttocks, thighs, and legs”—even though he has already made abundantly clear to the reader where the parasitic twin was attached and that the “rest of his body [was] entire.” Clarity (and “medical precision”) is usually marked by concision and careful word choice; this passage is marked by prolixity and the inability to choose a word.

Secondly, after establishing that what we are seeing is one child with another, headless body fastened to his ribs, Montaigne goes on, a sentence later, to describe their position as “face to face” (*face à face*). When I first encountered that, I had to reread, just to be sure I hadn’t misunderstood, but no: the body is just a body; it has no head, no face. From there, he uses one of his *and*’s, which only adds to my confusion: “and as if a smaller child were trying to embrace a bigger one around the neck.” The tenderness of this description alone could refute both Regosin’s and Williams’s characterizations of this account—but, on top of that, it’s visually confusing. Even if I understand “face to face” to mean the two bodies are frontally facing each other, the headless body is still attached in the middle of the torso and thus angled downward. I can’t visualize it.

Finally, there is Montaigne’s uncertainty with how to refer to the child: rather than settling on specific pronouns and terms beforehand, Montaigne moves between singular and plural pronouns (*il/ils*) as well as from “another child” (*un autre enfant*) to “imperfect” one (*l’imparfaict*) before returning back to

“the other” (*l'autre*) (Williams, 153). This profusion of words and phrases creates a sense of uncertainty in the reader of which child is being described, further weakening the image and creating confusion (at least in this reader).

Montaigne’s highly subjective, highly literary, and purposefully confusing description is mimetic of the strangeness and doubleness—especially in the excessive use of double descriptions—of the child itself. Montaigne obscures at the same time as he describes. This is the opposite of the coldly neutral medical gaze; in fact, this cloudy, confused description demonstrates his desire *not* to turn the child into an object. It’s significant that the passage ends with the nurse asserting the functionality (“he urinated from both places”) and thus the humanity of *both* bodies, which also, crucially, are not entirely identical—in addition to having a shorter arm, the “other” one is also “smaller and thinner.” This difference is a mark of the individuality, and so again the humanity, of both bodies. Though conjoined, they are not one.

From there, the essay—to quote Horace via Montaigne—“tapers off into a fish” (I.28, 164). Montaigne explains how one might conduct an allegorical reading of the child as a “favorable prognostic to the king that he will maintain under the union of his laws these various parts and factions of our state” before dismissing the idea, and all types of divinations outright.

Next, he describes another monstrous figure he encountered who, unlike the first figure, is made monstrous by lack and could, clothed, pass for normal:

I have just seen a shepherd in Médoc, thirty years old or thereabouts, who has no sign of genital parts. He has three holes by which he continually makes water. He is bearded, has desire, and likes to touch women. (II.30, 655 / F374)

In such a condensed description, it’s interesting what Montaigne chooses to include: Like the child with the parasitic twin who urinates from two places, the shepherd is also an unusually productive “water” maker. It is their differences that enable the child and the shepherd alike to bring more urine—more of themselves—into the world than others. Monstrosity thus becomes a figure of productivity and creation.

From here, Montaigne moves into an epigrammatic, philosophical mode, which I won't quote in full:

What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it... From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and ordinary and regular...

We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be. (II.30, 655)

Having begun the essay with a deferral to the doctors, arbiters of knowledge and reason, at its conclusion, Montaigne unexpectedly turns toward God—that which defies human knowledge and reason. And he concludes that even “monsters” are not contrary to nature since they also come from it. Of this moment, the scholar Timothy Hampton writes that “the monstrous body is a marker of the limits of human knowledge, of our capacity for our understanding” (20). We may not be able to understand why it exists, but it does; the monstrous body serves, then, as a reminder that we “know” only in the dark—without knowing.

Though Montaigne discourages allegorical readings of the child, such readings inevitably arise in the mind of the reader (in part because he himself invokes the idea!). The monstrous child of course reads as a figure of the monstrous writer with his monstrous text, but which body is the book, and which is the writer? The child is obviously more ‘real’: it has a head, a navel, and an otherwise regular body. While the parasitic body—the ‘imperfect child’—is smaller and thinner with one shortened arm, no visible navel, and no head. But both function; both are living. While Montaigne lives, he is the thinking, moving, acting child and the book, the parasite. But, once Montaigne dies, the two switch places: the book-child assumes the thinking, acting, living body while the author/father becomes its appendage. As he writes in “De l’amitié”:

There have been nations whereby custom the children killed their fathers, and others where the fathers killed their children, to avoid the interference that they can sometimes cause each other; and by nature the one depends on the destruction of the other. (I.28, 166)

The child also can be seen as an allegory for Montaigne as the bereaved father and friend. After the death of a child or a friend as dear as Étienne de la Boétie, the person left behind can feel as if their grief takes on material weight, like they are carrying around the corpse of that “second self” (I.28, 174). And indeed, the essays often read like attempts to converse with those lost, second selves—the lost friend, the lost children. But the monstrous child, with its single head, shows this to be impossible. As a product of Montaigne’s mind, the book can never truly talk back; the essay, despite its conversational tone and dialogic nature, can only ever be a monologue. Still, the essays are born from the desire to know and to be known—even if only by oneself.

V. Toward a Conclusion

“I have seen no more evident monstrosity and miracle in the world than myself,” Montaigne writes in “Des boyteux” (III.11, 958). The essayist is necessarily a monster and miracle to himself—endlessly strange and incredible. To write from and about the self is to be “pieced together of divers members” (once again *Frankenstein* comes to mind!) (II.28, 165). The monstrous self is shapeless in part because it is infinite and so possesses an “infinity of forms”—of ideas, interests, traits—to explore in writing; the essayist can go on indefinitely, infinitely, in any direction (II.30, 655). In his hands—from his specific subjectivity, location, body—every subject becomes interesting, personal. It is only, however, through the writing of the book that this strangeness and diversity—monstrosity—fully emerges. This monstrosity, though it takes many forms, seems to be nothing so much as a marker of the inconsistent, contradictory,

body-bound, custom-bound human. To see and accept one's own monstrosity is to fully see and accept one's own complicated, messy, terrible, terrifying self.

At the same time, the *Essais* speak to the human wish for an inhuman end: to transcend mortality, to live beyond one's physical death. By imagining the essays as a son, Montaigne is able to both birth a child who is 'like' him in a way his daughter isn't (and as the others couldn't have been, had they survived), a son who will, since he lacks a mortal body, surely outlive him—as children are meant to. In this way, this 'son' will bring Montaigne's name and likeness to future generations, just as an actual son might have. In "Au Lecteur," the brief prefatory note to his book, Montaigne even positions the *Essais* as having this function:

I have dedicated it to the private convenience of my relatives and friends, so that when they have lost me (as soon they must), they may recover here some features of my habits and temperament, and by this means keep the knowledge that they have had of me more complete and alive.

Montaigne's book-child is of him and *like* him but not self-identical: relatives and friends can recover only *some* of his features. The child, like the kidney stone, is an abject object: something that is like but unlike, that is and is not, its creator. And the child, too, holds within it the father's death; eventually, as the child grows, he will be waiting for his father to die so that he can inherit his father's land and position. The *Essais* are perhaps monstrous for this reason, too. Though they come from Montaigne's mind, are of him and often about him, they are still strange to him. And only with his death could the *Essais* take on a life of their own—become more than the parasite .

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