

CAMILLE R. LA BOSSIÈRE

## The World Revolves Upon an I: Montaigne's Unknown God and Melville's Confidence-Man

—*in memoriam* John Spencer Hill (1943–1998)

Les mestis qui ont ... le cul entre deux selles, desquels je  
suis... / The mongrell sorte, of which I am one ... sit  
betweene two stooles ....

—Michel de Montaigne, "Des vaines subtilitez" /  
"Of Vaine Subtilties"

*Deus est anima brutorum.*

—Oliver Goldsmith, "The Logicians Refuted"

YEA AND NAY—

EACH HATH HIS SAY:

BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.

—Herman Melville, "The Conflict of Convictions"

LATE-MODERN SCHOLARLY accounts of Montaigne and his oeuvre attest to the still elusive, beguilingly ironic character of his humanism. On the one hand, the author of the *Essais* has invited recognition as "a critic of humanism, as part of a 'Counter-Renaissance'."<sup>1</sup> The wry upending of such vanity as Protagoras served to model for Montaigne—"Truely *Protagoras* told us prettie tales, when he makes man the measure of all things, who never knew so much as his owne," according to the famous sentence

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Burke, *Montaigne* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) 11.

from the “Apologie of Raimond Sebond”<sup>2</sup>—naturally comes to mind when he is thought of in this way (Burke 12). On the other hand, Montaigne has been no less justifiably recognized by a long line of twentieth-century commentators<sup>3</sup> as a major contributor to the progress of an enduring philosophy “qui fait de l’homme, selon la tradition antique, la valeur première et vise à son plein épanouissement.”<sup>4</sup> The Athenian text in translation that lends its high lyrical dignity to the last page of “Concerning Experience” (and of the *Essais* as a whole) signs the nature and lasting appeal of that valuation:

*D'autant es tu Dieu, comme  
Tu te recognois homme.  
So farre a God thou mai'st accompted be  
As thou a man doost re-acknowledge thee. (FM 664)*

If on occasion he stands for nothing much more than a wretched little creature whose proud *bêtise* makes a dog seem all the wiser, Montaigne’s “man” can also be remembered walking arm-in-arm with the the paragon of Pico’s *De hominis dignitate oratio* (Burke 11–12).

How, then, to account for such an apparent contradiction?

Modern scholarly answers to that question have been many and varied, but more or less of a piece. Broadly speaking, ‘expla-

---

<sup>2</sup> Cited from the first edition of Florio’s translation, *The Essayes ... of Michaell de Montaigne* (London, 1603) 323–24; hereafter abbreviated *FM*. The original reads: “Vrayement Protagoras nous en contoit de belles, faisant l’homme la mesure de toutes choses, qui ne sceut jamais seulement la sienne” (cited from Alexandre Micha’s critical edition of the *Essais*, 3 vols. [Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1969] 2: 222; hereafter abbreviated *E*).

<sup>3</sup> See Burke 11, 75. Burke’s balancing account of Montaigne’s (anti)humanism aligns itself with readings advanced by Hugo Friedrich’s *Montaigne* (Bern: A. Franke, 1949), Donald M. Frame’s *Montaigne’s Discovery of Man: The Humanization of a Humanist* (New York: Columbia UP, 1955), P.O. Kristeller’s *Renaissance Thought: The Classic, Scholastic, and Humanist Strains* (New York: Harper, 1961), Charles Edward Trinkaus’ *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (London: Constable, 1970), and Roger Trinquet’s *La Jeunesse de Montaigne: Ses origines familiales, son enfance et ses études* (Paris: A.G. Nizet, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Alexandre Micha, “Introduction” to his 1969 edition of the *Essais* (1: 19).

nations' of Montaigne's (anti)humanism have relied on a historicizing along one or both of the following lines: true to the protean, mutable being he aimed veritably to represent, Montaigne shifted his position with the passage of time logged in his writing's progress ("The world," as he says and shows, "runnes all on wheelles: All things therein moove without entermission" [FM 483]);<sup>5</sup> and like many a wit among his contemporaries, Erasmus and Pierre Boaystuuau for instance, he practised the Renaissance high art of debating by paradox, in a way consistent with the old verity that "*Ogni medaglia ha il suo reverso*" (E 3: 246; Burke 12).<sup>6</sup> Reference to the existential fidelity of Montaigne's self-writing or to the fact of the rhetorical set-pieces for and against the dignity of man by other intellectuals of his age would seem to account adequately enough for the eccentric yet representative character of the individual mentality and the ironic humanism embodied in the *Essais*. In each or either case, the knot of contradiction is explained, if not cut, by descriptive reference to Montaigne's contemporary circumstance.

The aim of this essay, which issues from yet another mode of historicizing, of a transtemporal and consequently more 'philosophical' kind, is to work towards yet another apprehension of Montaigne's (anti)humanism, though in a context that would suggest its substantially unparadoxical construction. The preliminary outlining of that context proceeds from a recollection of the 'holying' or 'theologizing' of Montaigne and his enterprise during the nineteenth century that Walter Pater was prompted to resume under the sign of "*Que sçais-je?*"<sup>7</sup>—an age when Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve could imagine Pascal, Saint-Évremond, Hume, Keats, himself, and perhaps all of his contemporaries as a line of followers in Montaigne *l'enchanteur's* funeral cortege;<sup>8</sup> when pilgrim to Saint-

---

<sup>5</sup> "Le monde n'est qu'une branloire perenne. Toutes choses y branlent sans cesse" (E 3: 220). For a magisterial account of the three *couches* or strata in Montaigne's text, the supplementing of the 1580 edition in the versions of 1588 and 1590, see Pierre Villey's *Les Sources et l'Évolution des Essais de Montaigne*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1908).

<sup>6</sup> "Every medal has a reverse side"; according to Florio, "Each outside hath his inside" (617).

<sup>7</sup> Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1893) 174.

<sup>8</sup> Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal*, ed. René Louis Doyon and Charles Marchesné (Paris: La Connaissance, 1926) 3: 13, 59–60.

Michel-de-Montaigne John Sterling found occasion to companion Luther with Shakespeare's Hamlet and Montaigne's "Saint Socrates" in a religion of the unknowing self founded on doubt;<sup>9</sup> and when Harvard Divinity School graduate Ralph Waldo Emerson invoked "Saint Michel de Montaigne," "this prince of egotists," as guide, familiar, and patron in his own apostolate for invincible whimsicality and self-reliance.<sup>10</sup> If such a secular theologizing sits somewhat awkwardly with the more or less strong disjunction between faith and reason, sacred wisdom and secular folly as subtly advanced in "Of Praisers and Orisons," for example, where Montaigne observes "That this fault is oftener seene, which is, that Divines write too humanely, than this other, that humanists write not theologically enough" (*FM* 175),<sup>11</sup> it remains entirely consistent with his twitting, as in "Of Experience," of those wisdom-lovers who would divorce godly from human savvy: "Philosophie ... brings forth a childe ... when she betakes herselfe to her Quiddities and Ergoes, to perswade us, that it is a barbarous aliance, to marrie what is divine with that which is terrestriall .... It is not that, which *Socrates*, both [her] ... and our Maister, saith" (*FM* 663).<sup>12</sup> Montaigne the humanist and Montaigne the divine have aptly been wed—and not only by the nineteenth-century sages whose sense of his wisdom-writing helped sustain, even inspire, the development of their own.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> John Sterling, "Montaigne and His Writings," *London and Westminster Review* 29 (1838): 321–52.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903–04) 4: 173, 162.

<sup>11</sup> "Qu'il se veut plus souvent cette faute que les Theologiens escrivent trop humainement, que cett'autre que les humanistes escrivent trop peu theologalement" (*E* 1: 382).

<sup>12</sup> "La philosophie fait bien l'enfant ... quand elle se met sur ses ergots pour prescher que c'est une farouche alliance de marier le divin avec le terrestre.... Ce n'est pas ce que dict Socrates, son precepteur et le nostre" (*E* 3: 325). Avid equestrian Montaigne's punning on "se monter sur ses ergots" (to get on one's high horse) is occluded in Florio's translation.

<sup>13</sup> For accounts of Montaigne's deep impress on nineteenth-century wisdom-writing in English, see Charles Dédéyan, *Montaigne chez ses amis anglo-saxons: Montaigne dans le romantisme anglais et ses prolongements victoriens*, 2 vols. (Paris: Boivin, 1943), and Camille R. La Bossière, *The Victorian Fol Sage: Comparative Readings on Carlyle, Emerson, Melville, and Conrad* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1989).

Celebrations of that marriage have endured well into the late-modern age. At bottom, there is arguably little to distinguish the divinely ludic humanism that impels André Gide's *Essai sur Montaigne* and Michel Butor's *Essais sur les Essais*, for example, from Emerson's spirituality in "Montaigne, or the Skeptic," the essay that centres his *Representative Men*.<sup>14</sup>

But of all the instances of Montaigne's canonization that might be adduced from the nineteenth century, Herman Melville's calls for special notice by virtue of the sheer cogency of the discernment that enables it. As to just how substantially Melville's studied response to the *Essais* informed his own pursuit after such wisdom as he was prepared to find in Holy Writ, this nicely anachronistic text from *Mardi* (1849), the first of his genuine romances spun from the notion that "the world revolves upon an I," gives a clear enough indication: "St. Paul ... argues the doubts of Montaigne."<sup>15</sup> The argument productive of that observation goes something like this: if "now" we see *per speculum in aenigmate*, in the words of Melville's cardinal New Testament text (1 Cor. 13.12), what we read in the mirror of "God's Publications"<sup>16</sup> is the living dubiety that is the world and ourselves. Like book, like author, like reader; like enigmatic God, then, like enigmatic Man, since neither is readable unvaguely, by reason's light. "So man's insanity is heaven's sense"<sup>17</sup>—so Melville would subsequently have the doubtful, riddling narrator of his Bible-mimicking *Moby-Dick*, with its prefatory references to St. Paul's darkling glass<sup>18</sup> and a Montaigne text of ships and men swallowed up by a monstrous whale,<sup>19</sup> provoca-

<sup>14</sup> See Camille R. La Bossière, "Of Montaigne and Dostoevsky: A Gidean Sotie," *Living Record: Essays in Memory of Constantine Bida*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P) 233–42; and *The Victorian Fol Sage* (30).

<sup>15</sup> Herman Melville, *Mardi* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963) 2: 279, 54.

<sup>16</sup> A standard Melvillean trope, as in all of *Mardi*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pierre*, and *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, and in the Preface to *Israel Potter*.

<sup>17</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963) 2: 170.

<sup>18</sup> "With full eyes and empty glasses .... Here ye strike but splintered hearts together—there, ye shall strike unsplinterable glasses!" (*Moby-Dick* xii).

<sup>19</sup> "And whereas all the other things, whether beast or vessel, that enter into the dreadful gulf of this monster's (whale's) mouth, are immediately lost and swallowed up, the sea-gudgeon retires into it in great security, and there sleeps.—Montaigne, *Apologie for Raimond Sebond*" (*Moby-Dick* xiv). Cotton's translation (1685) is indicated here; but, on the occasion of his visit to the British Museum in

tively conclude from his experience of humanity's questing after godhood bodied forth in a hunt for the Leviathan of Leviathans. What sense the "awful Chaldee" writ on the great Melvillean white whale's brow has to convey is naturally made to dizzy human reason: the divinely "plaited ... riddles" that *Moby-Dick* itself simulates effectively scribe a "circle ... impossible to square" (2: 83–84). "*Nescio quid sit*," as the author of the great American book of "The Whale" found ample reason to respond, in company with another close reader of Montaigne, Sir Thomas Browne, to the question of "what the Spermacetti is" (1: xvi). Speaking in words altogether his own, in Chapter 14 of *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, Melville spells out the grounds for his own radical conjoining of unknowing and unknowable Man with an unknown since unknowable God:

Upon the whole, it might rather be thought, that he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature *the same* that, in view of its contrasts, is said of divine nature, that it is past finding out, thereby evinces a better appreciation of it than he who, by representing it in a clear light, leaves it to be inferred that he clearly knows all about it.<sup>20</sup>

Reference to the living reality of the "duck-billed beaver" or *ornytorhynchus paradoxus* that many a scientist of his age initially denounced as a fraud—a stuffed rodent with a bill "artificially stuck on" (59)—introduces that text for the genuine conjoining of divine and human nature in mystery. The wondrous platypus of *The Confidence-Man*, like the ManGod homo paradoxus (and therefore *ambiguous*) Melville found modelled in the *Essais*,<sup>21</sup> is made

---

November 1849, Melville also consulted Florio's version of the *Essais*, and gazed on "Shakespeare's autograph (in Montaigne)" (Jay Leyda, *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville, 1819–1891* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1951] 1: 339). Earlier that year, Melville had remarked "the great Montaignism of Hamlet[s]" dictum that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so; to me it is a prison" (Leyda 1: 291).

<sup>20</sup> Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, ed. Hershel Parker (New York: Norton, 1971) 59; emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Thomson's *Melville's Quarrel with God* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1952) is acutely cognizant in this regard: the epigraphs of each of the chapters are drawn from the *Essais*, and mostly from the "Apologie."

to stand for the hidden, mystic verity of verities in the natural order of things. The ostensibly eccentric is the rule of Creation in the world according to *The Confidence-Man*.

Now, to propose a reading of Melville's ManGod as Montaigne's cogently discerned and reconfigured might seem somewhat inapt, given the manifold sentences against overreaching that dot and tone the text and spiritual complexion of the *Essais*. Heaven knows, instances of Montaigne's assailing of humankind's inordinate pride in its capacity to think and to articulate—"la folle fierté de langage ayant pour but de ramener Dieu à la mesure de la pensée humaine"—are not hard to find in the "Apologie" (Micha 16). Humbled by the doubt that comes of bona fide self-knowledge, Montaigne in this mood presumes not God to scan; he finds himself more suitably occupied with playing chase-your-tail with brother kitten.<sup>22</sup> Prudence, self-abasement, and limitation are his watchwords. Montaigne in this persona can mock the Cicero of *De finibus*, for example, for affirming that "the infinitie of things, the incomprehensible greatnesse of nature, the heavens, the earth, and all the seas of this vast universe, are made known unto us" by the intromission of human science, "the knowledge of Letters" (FM 282).<sup>23</sup> Nor does his scoring of the humanist will to knowledge "derive[d] from self-over-weening" ("qui nous conduit à mettre le nez partout") stop there: "Seemeth not this goodly Orator to speake of the Almightyes and everliving Gods condition?" asks the persona of Montaigne's "Apologie," and then immediately goes on to indicate

---

<sup>22</sup> See Melville's letter of 5 October 1885 to Mrs. Ellen Marett Gifford: "It is now quite a time since you first asked me for my photo: Well, here it is at last, the veritable face (at least so says your now venerable friend.... What the deuce makes him look so serious, I wonder. I thought he was of a gay and frolicsome nature, judging from a little rhyme of his about a Kitten [Montaigne and His Kitten], which you once showed me" (Leyda 2: 793–94). Emerson earlier had evoked the image of the kitten famous for having played with Montaigne: "If you could see with her eyes you would see her surrounded with hundred of figures performing complex dramas, with tragic & comic issues . . . many ups & downs of fate, & meantime it is only puss & her own tail" (*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William Gilman et al. [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1960– ] 8: 259).

<sup>23</sup> "Il n'est rien, dict Cicéro, si doux que l'occupation des lettres . . . par le moyen desquelles l'infinité des choses, l'immense grandeur de nature, les cieus en ce monde mesme, et les terres et les mers nous sont découvertes" (E 2: 155).

the extent of the nosineness and presumption to which the Cicero of *De finibus* attests (FM 282).<sup>24</sup> Self-effacing Montaigne would have no truck with any earthly intelligence that would aspire even to begin to seek to approach the condition of God.

But, wily as it is with the wisdom of *ogni medaglia ha il suo reverso*, Montaigne's autobiography in balancing doubt bespeaks a proudly humble turn of mind. The generation of virtue from vice and vice from virtue proceeds as a matter of course in the ironic, vice-versa moral universe according to the *Essais*. Again, "Of Praiers and Orisons" provides a salient example. If the first paragraph of that essay opens with a profession of obedience to "the holy prescriptions of the Catholike, Apostolike, and Romane church," it ends with a confession true to the cosmopolitan worldliness of the whole of autoscopic Montaigne's enterprise as *fol sage*: "[And yet] ... do I meddle so rashly, to write of all manner of purposes and discourses, as I do here" (FM 172).<sup>25</sup> With "here" he hits the white. For all its sending up of heads ballooned like Protagoras and Cicero's, his book likewise concerns itself with "the infinitie of things." "This goodly Orator," one might ask of the wit disporting itself in the body of the *Essais*, seems he not "to speake of the Almightyes and everliving Gods condition?" That question, in "Of Praiers and Orisons" as in the "Apologie," is rhetorical, since "the infinitie of things" and "du *moi*"<sup>26</sup> demonstrably figures as the ruling theme and subject of the *Essais*. Essayist Montaigne's is a wily agency—a frankly covert con-artistry, as it were—in the cause of a wisdom-loving wed to self-divination. The 'personality' or presiding genius that "Of Experience" inscribes, certainly, is something of a diabolico-angelical omnivore: "I suffer few things to escape about me .... I studiously consider all I am to eschew and all I ought to follow" (FM 640).<sup>27</sup> Montaigne's audacious confession

---

<sup>24</sup> "Cettuy-cy ne semble il pas parler de la condition de Dieu tout-vivant et tout-puissant?" (E 2: 155).

<sup>25</sup> "Et pourtant ... je me mesle ainsi temerairement à toutes sorte de propos, comme icy" (E 1: 377).

<sup>26</sup> "Je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre," in the words of Montaigne's prefatory address "Au Lecteur" (E 1: 35). "My selfe am the ground-worke of my booke" (FM, "The Author to the Reader").

<sup>27</sup> "Je laisse eschaper autour de moy peu de choses.... J'estudie tout: ce qu'il me faut fuir, ce qu'il me faut suyvre" (E 3: 287).

in "Of Profit and Honestie," that "Verilie (and I feare not to avouch it) I could easilie for a neede, bring a candle to Saint *Michell*, and another to his Dragon" (*FM* 476),<sup>28</sup> rings true to that self. Melville would aver likewise in his double-speaking *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, which opens with a rewriting of the Pauline sentences immediately preceding "For now we see through a glass, darkly" (2–3). "[There is] something Satanic about irony," according to the enigmatic, devilishly tricky confidence-man Frank Goodman (a.k.a. "The Cosmopolitan"), who professes himself "Philanthropos" and a friend of reason (119, 198).

As *The Confidence-Man's* probing revisitiation of Montaigne's theme of the alliance of human with divine nature in ambiguity invites the recollection, the text of the *Essais* is rife with signs of a substantial enigmatism. "Nature," according to the Platonic "divine saying" embraced in the "Apologie," "is nothing but an aenigmaticall poesie [of] ... infinite varietie"; all contraries find themselves gathered up and reconciled in "this infinite vaste Ocean" (*FM* 311, 258).<sup>29</sup> Nature, like the greatest poetry, "the good and loftie, the supreme & divine, is beyond rules, and above reason," in the words of Montaigne's essay "Of Cato the Yonger" (*FM* 115).<sup>30</sup> Humankind and its history as meditated in "Of Bookes" constitute a subject the truth of which is no less unfathomable to reason: "a subject ... so full and large," the history of man "is almost infinit" (*FM* 242).<sup>31</sup> The text of the *Essais* represents a launching out into just such a virtually boundless element, "this infinit altercation, and perpetuall discordance of opinions and reasons," "this infinite confusion of opinions," "this infinit varietie of contrarie reasons," "this ... huge heap of learning and provision of so infinite different things" such as the author of that book of "infinite irresolution" finds recapitulated in

---

<sup>28</sup> "À la verité, et ne crains point de l'advouer, je porterois facilement au besoin une chandelle à S. Michel, l'autre à son serpent" (*E* 3: 7).

<sup>29</sup> "Ay je pas veu en Platon ce divin mot, que nature n'est qu'une poésie oenigmatique?"; "cette mer infinie" (*E* 2: 202, 116).

<sup>30</sup> "La Poésie ... la bonne ... la divine, est au-dessus des regles et de la raison" (*E* 1: 283).

<sup>31</sup> "Un sujet si plain et ample ... l'histoire de l'homme est à peu près infiny" (*E* 2: 89).

himself (*FM* 321, 326, 320, 325, 288).<sup>32</sup> And Montaigne's own writing, its autobiographical speculation "turning, tossing and floating up and down, in this vast, troublesome and tempestuous sea," justly figured as "this infinite deepe [of thoughts]" (*FM* 301, 297),<sup>33</sup> spells out with due witty candour and indirection his own epitomizing of the human condition that he would compass, however inconclusively. A Montaigne tongue-in-cheek would prudently leave to others, "the wiser sort," the work of stitching together the bits and pieces of his "articles loose and disjoynted ...; [and] to Artists" the task of "rang[ing] into sides ... the infinite diversitie of visages ... so double, so ambiguous and partie-coloured" figured in his *Essais* (*FM* 640–41),<sup>34</sup> where "contraries meet."<sup>35</sup> "Our life," so Montaigne rehearses the Platonic refrain, "is composed, as is the harmonie of the World, of contrary things and of divers tunes, some pleasant, some harsh, some sharpe, some flat, some low and some high: What would that Musician say, that should love but some one of them? He ought to know ... how to intermingle them" (*FM* 648–49).<sup>36</sup>

Who among fellow humans, then, could rationally compass or read with any certainty the design of such a life? What sense that life might have must seem unfathomable, no less deep than that of the God of wondrous obscurity Montaigne had occasion to scan in

---

<sup>32</sup> "Cette infinie et perpetuelle altercation et discordance d'opinions et de raisons"; "cette infinie confusion d'opinions"; "cette infinie variété de raison et d'opinions"; "cette irresolution infinie" (*E* 2: 218, 225, 205, 217).

<sup>33</sup> "Tournoyant, flottant dans cette mer vaste, trouble et ondoyante...."; "cet infini de pensées" (*E* 2: 186, 179). Duly responsive to the whimsical, negative logic of Montaigne's discourse here, Florio translates the "pensées" in this passage as "shapeless conceites" (297).

<sup>34</sup> "Pas comme les sçavans ... je prononce ma sentence par articles decousus .... Je laisse aux artistes ... de renger en bandes cette infinie diversité de visages ... tant elles sont doubles et bigarrées à divers lustres" (*E* 3: 287).

<sup>35</sup> Jean Rousset, *Circé et la paon: La Littérature de l'âge baroque en France* (Paris: José Corti, 1954) 27: "[chez Montaigne] les contraires se rejoignent."

<sup>36</sup> "Nostre vie est composée, comme l'armonie du monde, de choses contraires, aussi de divers tons, douz et apres, aigus et plats, mols et graves. Le musicien qui n'en aymeroit que les unes, que voudroit il dire? Il faut qu'il s'en sçache servir en commun et les mesler" (*E* 3: 287).

the pages *De docta ignorantia*, speculative mystic Nicholas of Cusa's book of "ignorance ... doctorale" (*E* 1: 370).<sup>37</sup>

Ubi vedetur in caligine et nescitur, quae substantia aut quae res aut quid entium sit, uti res, in quo coincidunt opposita.... Haec visio in tenebra est, ubi occultator ipse deus absconditus ab oculis omnium sapientum.<sup>38</sup>

And who, then, it might also be asked, could comprehensively discern the self behind the "infinite diversitie" of Montaigne's "visages"? Strictly or logically speaking, the answer to that question must be no one: in the words of Alexandre Micha's Introduction to his recent edition of the *Essais*,

La physionomie [de Montaigne] ne se laisse pas entièrement déchiffrer. Un sourire énigmatique ... accueille le lecteur. L'enchanteur dont parle Sainte-Beuve éteint sa lampe au cours de la promenade où nous l'accompagnons pour réapparaître là où nous ne l'attendions pas, entre deux ombres, ou dans une lumière vite obscurcie. (1: 22–23)

*In tenebra*, the reader of Montaigne encounters a being *in quo coincidunt opposita* remarkable by virtue of his special, yet characteristically human, "sinuosité artiste" (Micha 1: 25). Obscurity answers unto obscurity, darkling human art unto divine artistry—six of one, half-dozen of the other, rhetorically at least. According to the ruling sentence of the "Apologie," "Things most unknown are fittest to be deified" (*FM* 298).<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas of Cusa's *Opera* was published in Paris in 1514. Montaigne owned a copy of the 1576 edition of *De docta ignorantia* (1440). Unlike Montaigne's, though, Cusa's vision of humanity is resolutely "Christological" (Pauline Moffitt Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982] 37). The significance of that difference is discussed below (n48).

<sup>38</sup> "We encounter God in darkness, ignorance, where we cannot know what substance, what thing, what being He is; a being in which opposites coincide. This vision takes place in an obscurity, where the hidden God eludes the sight of all sages" (Nicholas of Cusa, *Opera* [Paris, 1514] 1: I.viii). My translation.

<sup>39</sup> "Les choses les plus ignorées sont plus propres à estre déifiées" (*E* 2: 182).

The most substantive of the questions left up in the air by the *Essais* thus suggests itself: when Montaigne responds to the “so bottomlesse a deapth, and infinit a varietie,” “the infinit course of an eternall night” (*FM* 640, 304)<sup>40</sup> that he reads in the mirror of nature, man, and himself, does he not do so in a voice that bespeaks divinity? Montaigne leaves little doubt in this regard, most notably in the “Apologie,” when he observes that “of our Creators works, those beare his marke best, and are most his owne, which we understand least” (*FM* 289).<sup>41</sup> Apparently, it is by virtue of our *bestise*<sup>42</sup> or *ignorance doctorale* that we accede to a wisdom most like God’s—or like Montaigne’s: “*Cavete, nequit vos decipiat per Philosophiam & inanes seductiones, secundum mundi. Take heed, lest anie man deceive you by Philosophie and vaine seducements, according to the rudiments of the world,*” as he philosophically recontextualizes St. Paul (Col. 2.8; *FM* 282).<sup>43</sup> Montaigne’s Saints Socrates and Paul—each of whom authorizes the notion that to philosophize is to doubt—“philosopher, c’est doubter” (*E* 2: 123)—are of a mind on the godliness of human ignorance, uncertainty: in the ironic language of the most apparently candid of Montaigne’s essays, “Of Experience,” “*Affirmation & selfe-conceit, are manifest signes of foolishness*” (*FM* 640)—that is to say, “signes exprès de bestise” (*E* 3: 286). If, according to Melville, “St. Paul ... argues the doubts of Montaigne,” Montaigne’s St. Paul argues the doubts of his Socrates, “le maistre des maistres” (*E* 3: 280), the holiest of men. “So sacred an image of humane forme,” as Montaigne is disposed repeatedly to acknowledge, “the soule of Socrates ... is absolutely the perfectest that ever came to my knowledge” (*FM* 628, 244).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> “Une profondeur et variété si infinie ...”; “le cours infini d’une nuit éternelle” (*E* 3: 286, 2: 192).

<sup>41</sup> “Des ouvrages de nostre createur, ceux-là portent mieux sa marque et sont mieux siens, que nous entendons le moins” (*E* 2: 165).

<sup>42</sup> A favourite Montaigne pun (*bête/bêtise*), the substantive sense of which is somewhat lost in Florio’s consistent translation of the word as “folly.”

<sup>43</sup> Montaigne stops short of citing Col. 2.8 in full: the Pauline verse ends with “... and not according to Christ.” For an account of Montaigne’s treatment of St. Paul as a classical philosopher, see Camille R. La Bossière, *The Progress of Indolence: Readings in (Neo)Augustan Literary Culture* (Toronto: York Press, 1997), chapters 2 and 3 in particular.

<sup>44</sup> “Une si sainte image de l’humaine forme”; “l’âme de Socrate est la plus parfaite qui soit venue à ma connaissance” (*E* 3: 265, 2: 93).

But, according to Montaigne's own writing for learned ignorance, would not human folly stand as wisdom before God? If humanity is created *in imago Dei* and if godhood is signed by human unknowing, both of which hypotheses the text of the *Essais* seems well designed to advance, the answer to that question is understandably yes. Melville, shrewd reader of Montaigne's *bêtisier* and pursuer after divinity who found himself lost in the unfathomable mystery of a Being beyond measure, answers accordingly, with a duly rhetorical exaggeration rich in joking wit: "man's insanity is heaven's sense." Enigmatic like the ineffable publications of the Creator, the weave of texts that constitutes the *Essais* reveals itself a godly work. Of Montaigne's writings, "those beare his marke best, and are most his own, which we understand least." *À bon rat, à bon chat*, as it were.

Now, it might logically be objected that the above purchase on the enigmatism of the *Essais* proceeds from a straw-man style of confounding two very different kinds of mystery, which confounding has then been foisted on Montaigne. Certainly, the affirmation by the author of the "Apologie," that "if there bee any thing" that is his in what he writes, "then is there nothing [in it] that is Divine" (*FM* 300),<sup>45</sup> patently flies in the face of such a proceeding. But Montaigne, it goes without saying, was not very long on the traditional formal logic. There are indications galore of his disposition *à se démentir*, to betray himself: "sans cesse [il] se contredit et se trahit lui-même," as André Gide with good reason has been pleased to recall.<sup>46</sup> It is no less evident a matter of historical record that Montaigne effectively helped prepare the way for the "humanist theology" of the many Victorian sages who read him religiously and were likewise disposed to "conflate the mystery of existence with the mystery of the Bible," by making use of the traditional Christian "language of numinous awe to deify a ... [secular] universe."<sup>47</sup> The distinctly *Christian* character of the humanism traced by John Spencer Hill's recent *Infinity, Faith and Time*, from Au-

---

<sup>45</sup> "S'il y a quelque chose du mien ... il n'y a rien de divin" (*E* 2: 184).

<sup>46</sup> André Gide, *Les Pages immortelles de Montaigne* (Paris and New York: Éditions Corrêa and Longmans Green, 1939) 37–38.

<sup>47</sup> Ronald Hepburn, "A Critique of Humanist Theology," *Objections to Humanism*, ed. H.J. Blackham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963) 32.

gustine, Anselm, and Cusa to modern times, is remarkable for its absence from the writings of Carlyle, Melville, and Emerson, for example, as much as it is from those of Montaigne.<sup>48</sup> Reference to the ManGod Christ, to the mysteries of the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Ascension, is scarcely to be found in the *Essais*. And if Montaigne, unlike the main body of his nineteenth-century emulators, never sought overtly to diminish the gap between his own folly and divine wisdom, his rhetoric of the infinite belies such a demurring. He retains the vocabulary proper to matters divine, even as he makes it his business not to refer to the mysteries basic to traditional Christian belief: as the Sainte-Beuve of *Port-Royal* pointedly observes, Montaigne was certainly a Catholic, less certainly a Christian (*Port-Royal* 3:13).<sup>49</sup> This is not to suggest, though, that Montaigne's text compasses no wisdom at all. "I helpe my selfe to loose, what I perticularly locke up" (*FM* 378), so he confesses himself in "Of Presumption."<sup>50</sup> Logically invincible as they are, illogicians always have reason on their side.

We are now in a position to retranslate Montaigne's sentence against Protagoras: "Truely Protagoras told us prettie tales, when he makes man the measure of all things, who never knew so much

---

<sup>48</sup> John Spencer Hill, *Infinity, Faith and Time: Christian Humanism and Renaissance Literature* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1997). Hill gives full weight to the faith and Christology that underpin and enable Nicholas of Cusa's sense of infinity in *De docta ignorantia* (see chap. 3 in particular). When the text of the *Essais* reads "l'ignorance doctorale," it does so in a way that occludes the substantial difference Cusa recognizes between Pauline fideism and Socratic doubt, as in this passage from L. Moulinier's translation of the *De docta*: "C'est là notre docte ignorance, par laquelle saint Paul lui-même s'éleva à l'idée que ce Christ, qu'il ne connut par le savoir que quelque temps, il l'ignorait, quand il se haussa jusqu'à lui. Nous sommes donc conduits, nous, fidèles du Christ, dans la docte ignorance, jusqu'à cette montagne qu'est le Christ, que la nature de notre animalité nous empêche d'atteindre..." (Nicolas of Cusa, *De la docte ignorance* [Paris: Félix Alcan, 1930] 212). Justifiably, given Hill's theme of "Christian humanism," Montaigne comes in for only a passing mention, in a note: "Time for Montaigne, is time present. His subject is himself, and he seeks wholeness and continuity by looking steadily at the flux of his own being" (176–77 n20).

<sup>49</sup> See La Bossière, *Progress* (17).

<sup>50</sup> "Loose" here in the sense of "lose" as well; and "locke up," also in the sense of "hold dear." Montaigne's text reads: "Je m'aide à perdre ce que je serre particulièrement" (*E* 2: 314).

as his owne.” Protagoras never knew so much as his own because what he could not fail but not know was immeasurable, like the infinity of things, and of God. Thus a Protagoras ignorant of himself told a true story in making man the measure of all things. And it is in this sense that Montaigne’s mocking of Protagoras substantially accords with “the quaint inscription, wherewith the Athenians honored the coming of *Pompey* into their Cittie”:

*D'autant es tu Dieu, comme  
Tu te recognois homme.  
So farre a God thou mai'st scompted be  
As thou a man doost re-acknowledge thee. (FM 664)*

The following lines from Melville’s poem “The Conflict of Convictions” inscribe a closely parallel sense of ManGod:

YEA AND NAY—  
EACH HATH HIS SAY.  
BUT GOD HE KEEPS THE MIDDLE WAY.<sup>51</sup>

This unknown God traditional to the sceptical, negative logician’s balancing way Melville had found exemplified in bold in the *Essais*. And according to *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, this unknown, ambiguous, infinite God is made in the image of its creator—that is to say, in the image of an artist as sceptic who endlessly reads himself in a mirror. Like his mentor in wisdom-writing Montaigne, Melville the latter-day Renaissance sceptic scales God according to the measure of human ignorance: “Upon the whole, it might rather be thought, that he, who, in view of its inconsistencies, says of human nature the same that, in view of its contrasts, is said of the divine nature, that it is past finding out . . .” Pursuant to Montaigne the enchanter’s enterprise as *fol sage*, Melville’s logically concludes with an extinguishing at once of human science and the positive wisdom of Holy Writ. *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, his last completed prose fiction, ends with a “lights out” (217) that brings the curtain down on a mystifying perform-

---

<sup>51</sup> Herman Melville, *Poems* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963) 10.

ance of muscular humility consistent with the proposition that "*Deus est anima brutorum*."<sup>52</sup> Darkness calls unto darkness, unknowing unto unknowing, deep unto deep, *bêtise* unto *bêtise*.

---

<sup>52</sup>The Latin quotation is from Oliver Goldsmith's poem "The Logicians Refuted," written in imitation of Montaigne and Jonathan Swift; see *The Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. James Prior (New York: Darby and Jackson, 1857) 4: 126–27. The immediate context reads as follows:

Logicians have but ill defin'd  
As rational the human mind,  
Reason, they say, belongs to man,  
But let them prove it if they can.  
Wise Aristotle and Smiglesius,  
By ratiocination specious,  
Have strove to prove with great precision,  
With definition and division,  
*Homo est ratione peditum;*  
But for my soul I cannot credit 'em;  
And must in spite of them maintain,  
That man and all his ways are vain;  
And that this boasted lord of nature  
Is both a weak and erring creature.  
That instinct is a surer guide  
Than reason, boasting mortals' pride;  
And that brute beasts are before 'em,  
*Deus est anima brutorum.*

For accounts of Goldsmith's impress on *The Confidence-Man*, see Martha Izora Costner's pamphlet, "Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* and Melville's *The Confidence-Man*" (Comanche, OK, 1963), and La Bossière, *Progress* (chap. 4). See also, William H. Gilman, *Melville's Early Life and Redburn* (New York: New York UP, 1951) and Christopher S. Durer, *Herman Melville, Romantic and Prophet* (Fredericton: York Press, 1996), which indicate the importance that English neo-classical writers held in Melville's studies as a youth. Leyda's documentary life of Melville contains multiple references to writings from Goldsmith.