

## Virginia Woolf and the Art of Doubt: Modern Fiction between Moore and Montaigne

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*Is pleasure the end of all? Whence this overwhelming interest in the nature of the soul? Why this overmastering desire to communicate with others? Is the beauty of this world enough, or is there, elsewhere, some explanation of the mystery? To this what answer can there be? There is none. There is only one more question: "Que scais-je?"*<sup>1</sup>

1. **A**mong philosophical influences upon Bloomsbury, G. E. Moore is often ranked first. A dynamic young Cambridge professor in the undergraduate days of Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, Clive Bell, and Thoby Stephen, Moore was revered as "a great man" by the younger Apostles, who received his *Principia Ethica* (1903) as an anti-Idealist "new dispensation" that would ground Bloomsbury's stances toward critical thinking, ethics, and aesthetics, its ways of valuing states of mind and intimate friendships.<sup>2</sup> Did Virginia Stephen Woolf—"educated in the old Cambridge school" by her father, brother, and Bloomsbury friends, she joked to Vita Sackville-West—share this admiration?<sup>3</sup> Perhaps not to the same degree, a conversation with Leonard and Ray Strachey suggests: "We discussed the moral eminence of Moore, comparable to that of Christ or Socrates, so R. & L. held. They challenged me to match him in that respect by any of my friends. I claimed for Nessa Duncan Lytton & Desmond something different but of equal value. R. tends to think us a set of gifted but good for nothing wastrels."<sup>4</sup> Leonard con-

1 V. Woolf, "Montaigne", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*: 4, 71-3. From here on: E followed by volume and page numbers.

2 L. Woolf, *Sowing: An Autobiography of the Years 1880 to 1904*, 131; J. M. Keynes, "My Early Beliefs » (1938), *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs and Commentary*, 85.

3 V. Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*: 3, 86, 23 January 1924. From here on: L followed by volume and page numbers.

4 V. Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 1:155, 17 June 1918. From here on: D followed by volume and page numbers.

sidered Moore “a philosopher’s philosopher” who helped professionalize British philosophy and thought he may have been the only living philosopher Virginia read, though Ann Banfield gives Bertrand Russell center stage in exploring Cambridge philosophers’ influence on Woolf’s intellectual development and creative work.<sup>5</sup> But Virginia—and Bloomsbury—did read another philosopher whose work had great impact on hers: Michel de Montaigne, whose *Essais* could be said to have invented the modern art of doubt. Contrasting her comments on reading Moore with her active, fruitful translation of Montaignian doubt into innovative character-drawing in *Mrs. Dalloway*, this essay explores “something different but of equal value” that Woolf found in the *Essais* at a breakthrough moment in the evolution of her modernist aesthetics.

2. In August 1908 Virginia Stephen ploughed through *Principia Ethica* and issued regular bulletins on this Bloomsbury rite of passage. With self-mocking awe she announced to Clive Bell, “I am climbing Moore like some industrious insect, who is determined to build a nest on the top of a Cathedral spire. One sentence, a string of “desires” makes my head spin with the infinite meaning of words unadorned; otherwise I have gone happily”. (L1, 340; 3 Aug. 1908) She looked forward “with something like excitement” to her “nightly 10 pages,” she told Saxon Sydney-Turner, and—anticipating Lily Briscoe’s happy adorning of Mr Ramsay’s ideal table by a pear tree surround—put Moore’s examples to the test: “I sent myself to sleep last night by thinking what I feel at the prospect of eating an ice; and woke this morning convinced that Moore is right. He calls it a glass of port wine, but I suppose that makes no difference”. (L1, 347, 10 Aug. 1908)<sup>6</sup> Port and ices aside, Moore proved a severe pleasure for this omnivorous insect of a common reader: “I have to crawl over the same page a number of times, till I almost see my own tracks. I shall ask you [Saxon] to enlighten me, but I doubt that I can even ask an intelligible question”. (L1, 352-3; 14 Aug. 1908) She hoped the pain of such strenuous exercise might lead to gain: “I split my head over Moore every night,” she moaned,

feeling ideas travelling to the remotest part of my brain, and setting up a feeble disturbance, hardly to be called thought. It is almost a physical feeling, as though some little coil of brain unvisited by any blood so far, and pale as wax,

- 5 A. Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 392 n. 28; 45, citing A. J. Ayer, *Russell and Moore: The Analytical Heritage*, 4. Banfield positions Russell as “the synthesizer of Cambridge-Bloomsbury thought” (47).
- 6 Cf. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, chap. 3 §42: “[...] even when we do expect pleasure, it can certainly be very rarely pleasure *only* which we desire. For instance, granted that, when I desire my glass of port wine, I have also an idea of the pleasure I expect from it, plainly that pleasure cannot be the only object of my desire; the port wine must be included in my object, else I might be led by my desire to take wormwood instead of wine. If the desire were directed *solely* towards the pleasure, it could not lead me to take the wine; if it is to take a definite direction, it is absolutely necessary that the idea of the object, from which the pleasure is expected, should also be present and should control my activity. The theory then that what is desired is always and only pleasure must break down: it is impossible to prove that pleasure alone is good, by that line of argument. But, if we substitute for this theory, that other, possibly true, theory, that pleasure is always the cause of desire, then all the plausibility of our ethical doctrine that pleasure alone is good straightaway disappears. For in this case, pleasure is not what I desire, it is not what I want: it is something which I already have, before I can want anything. And can any one feel inclined to maintain, that that which I already have, while I am still desiring something else, is always and alone the good?”

had got a little life into it at last; but had not strength to keep it. I have a very clear notion which parts of my brain think. (L1, 357; 19 Aug. 1908)

3. At last she surfaced with her verdict: “I finished Moore last night; he has a fine flare of arrogance at the end—and no wonder,” she wrote Vanessa. “I am not so dumb founded as I was; but the more I understand, the more I admire. He is so humane in spite of his desire to know the truth; and I believe I can disagree with him, over one matter”. (L1, 364; 29 Aug. 1908) That night she “dreamt of Clarissa,” her nascent first novel’s heroine: “she was new born, and had a fine row of teeth, which were without roots; and she could say “no objection” which I thought proved something out of Moore”. (L1, 366; 30 Aug. 1908)
4. How Virginia disagreed with Moore she does not say; what her infant protagonist with the fine though unmoored (as it were) teeth pronounced unobjectionable has no existence. But where no certainty can be, doubt beckons. It is striking, first, that she judges Moore’s philosophical work at all; second, that she judges him “*so humane in spite of his desire to know the truth.*” Long before toiling to grasp Moore’s contribution to “a science of Ethics,”<sup>7</sup> she had embraced Montaigne, for whom ethics was no science but an eminently humane art inseparable from life. In Montaigne’s sixteenth-century France, riven by religious war, a desire to know the truth was an ethical liability. Three hundred years later, the sceptical Virginia esteemed Montaigne as a kindred spirit: a “great master of the art of life,” the modern inventor of the personal essay, and a congenial model of how to live and think as a temporal being and how to cast nets of words over everyday thought on the wing. For, she observes in “Montaigne”, “we all indulge in the strange, pleasant process called thinking, but when it comes to saying [...] what we think, [...] [t]he phantom is through the mind and out of the window before we can lay salt on its tail.” As for writing, the pen is “a rigid instrument,” slave to “habits and ceremonies”—“dictatorial too [...] always making ordinary men into prophets, and changing the natural stumbling trip of human speech into the solemn and stately march of pens.” For having invented a way to write from within the freedom of doubt—to capture elusive “thinking” with a pen free from the drag of habit and discipline while forbearing to dictate, prophesy, and pronounce “truth”—Montaigne “stands out from the legions of the dead with [...] irrepressible vivacity.”<sup>8</sup>
5. Not knowing but doubting, not truth but thinking, not literal living but immortal vivacity attract Virginia to Montaigne; and if this strange, pleasant thinking that eludes a dictatorial pen may seem to contradict the “fierce attachment to an idea” that she elsewhere calls the “backbone” of the essayist’s art, the doubt that founds both authors’ freedom to think

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7 G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* chap. 1 §5; cf. Leslie Stephen’s important work on the history and theory of philosophy, *The Science of Ethics* (1882).

8 V. Woolf, “Montaigne,” E4, 71-73. Woolf’s essay-review of the *Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Charles Cotton, cites Motheau and Jouaust’s French edition (1886-1889) and mentions Arthur Armaingaud’s emerging scholarly edition (Paris, 1924-9). Woolf refers to Montaigne in essays on Lady Anne Clifford, Lamb, and Hazlitt.

forms a natural limit to all such attachments.<sup>9</sup> Montaigne, who influenced writers and thinkers from Shakespeare, Descartes, and Pascal through Rousseau, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Pater to Butor and Sollers,<sup>10</sup> inspired Woolf's arts of living, thinking, and writing in doubt as she labored to cast the intimate voices of private and intimate genres—musings, conversations, diaries, letters, memoirs—into public ones: novel, essay, novel-essay.<sup>11</sup> Most strikingly, while preparing her essay on Montaigne she was thinking intensively about character-drawing in the modern, or “Georgian,” novel, as we know from the interrelated essays that evolved into “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown”, while simultaneously putting her new ideas into practice in her novel *The Hours*, eventually to become *Mrs. Dalloway*.<sup>12</sup> Montaigne's art of doubt inspired her “search for modes of thought proper to her poetic” at this defining moment in her theory and practice of fiction.<sup>13</sup>

6. Montaigne was a familiar of Virginia Stephen from early days. Her brother Thoby gave her the *Essays* for her twenty-first birthday, but he did not introduce her to Montaigne. She had “hunted him 3 years,” she wrote in thanks, adding knowledgeably that she prefers his gift to a “badly printed Florio second edition” that she came upon when “penniless.”<sup>14</sup> Virginia,

9 V. Woolf, “The Modern Essay”, E4, 224.

10 See D. M. Marchi, *Montaigne Among the Moderns: Receptions of the "Essais"*, esp. chap. 3, and “Virginia Woolf Crossing the Borders of History, Culture and Gender: The Case of Montaigne, Pater, and Gournay”. Marchi explores Woolf's adaptation of Montaigne's essayist technique of weighing probabilities, suspending dogmatic judgment, and breaking narrative sequence in such works as *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*.

11 V. Woolf, *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*. On Woolf, Montaigne, gender, and the essay, see A. Herrmann, *The Dialogic and Difference*, 40-41, citing F. Rigolot, “Montaigne's Purloined Letters,” 146-66; J. Dusinberre, *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance: Woman Reader or Common Reader?*, chap. 2, and C. Sandbach-Dahlström, “‘Que scais-je?’: Virginia Woolf and the Essay as Feminist Critique,” 275-93. Elena Gualtieri notes a critical tendency to ally Woolf's work with “the Montaignian tradition, with its stress on the importance of friendship and the humility of a writing persona identified by the tag “Que scais-je?” (*Virginia Woolf's Essays*, 16, cf. 50-53 & *passim*). For critical bibliography on Montaigne see D. L. Schaefer's review of *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. Woolf's reencounter with Montaigne seems to have deepened her vision of—and commitment to—her diary; “Just back from Cassis. Often while I was there I thought how I would write here frequently & so get down some of the myriad impressions which I net every day. But directly we get back, what is it that happens? We strip & dive into the stream, & I am obsessed with a foolish idea that I have no time to stop & write, or that I ought to be doing something serious. Even now, I pelt along feverishly, thinking half the time, but I must stop & take Grizzle out; I must get my American books in order; the truth is, I must try to set aside half an hour in some part of my day, & consecrate it to diary writing. Give it a name & a place, & then perhaps, such is the human mind, I shall come to think it a duty, & disregard other duties for it.” (D3, 6; 8 April 1925).

12 Holograph notebook M21, Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library, contains material related to *Mrs. Dalloway*, “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” and “Montaigne.”

13 C. Delourme and R. Pedot, Call for Papers, “Virginia Woolf parmi les Philosophes: Colloque International,” Collège International de Philosophie, Paris, 22-24 March 2012.

14 The Italian linguist John Florio published his translation of the *Essayes on Morall, Politike, and Millitarie Discourses of Michael de Montaigne* in 1603 and dedicated the 1613 second edition to Queen Elizabeth. A first edition copy bears Ben Jonson's signature. Washington State University's Pullman Library lists these volumes in its holdings of the Woolfs' library (if Thoby's gift is among them, it must be the 1759 edition, of which only vol. 3, bound by Virginia, survives):

*Les essais de Montaigne publiés d'après l'édition de 1588 avec les variantes de 1595 et une notice, des notes, un glossaire et un index par H. Motheau et D. Jouaust. Nouvelle bibliothèque classique des éditions Jouaust.* Paris: Librairie des bibliophiles; E. Flammarion, 1886-1889. 7 vols. VW—binder. \_\_\_\_\_ . *The Essays of Michael Lord of Montaigne*. Trans. John Florio. Sir John Lubbock's Hundred

who at fifteen had “free run” of her father’s “large and quite unexpurgated library,” had presumably read Montaigne under the informal tutelage of Leslie Stephen, and “no one,” she recalled, “respected and indeed insisted upon freedom more completely than he did.”<sup>15</sup> That avant-garde English sceptic, author of “An Agnostic’s Apology,” had at thirty (twenty years before Virginia’s birth) resigned his Cambridge tutorship because he had lost his faith and makes scepticism the alpha and omega of his influential *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876).<sup>16</sup> In *Hours in a Library* (1874-9) and *Studies of a Biographer* (1898-1902) he notes here that Shakespeare read Montaigne, there that Pascal echoes him. Montaigne with his groundbreaking doubt must have been a household word at 22 Hyde Park Gate, where Stephen defined “the Agnostic” as “one who asserts —what no one denies—that there are limits to the sphere of human intelligence”; “further, what many theologians have expressly maintained, that those limits are such as to preclude [...] ‘metempirical’ knowledge”; “further, in opposition to theologians, that theology lies within this forbidden sphere.”<sup>17</sup> If Virginia first encountered Montaigne while musing among the philosophers in her father’s library, as Cam remembers doing in *To the Lighthouse*, by 1900 she had joined his legions of intimates—“I always read Montaigne in bed,” she tells Thoby—and begun seeking a Montaigne of her own.

7. No less was Montaigne a household word in Bloomsbury, whose thinkers and artists painted him in various lights over the decades. In his 1912 *Landmarks in French Literature*, Lytton Strachey remarks the emergence of Montaigne’s “absolutely sceptical” “philosophy of life” amid violently contested creeds, opinions, and dogmas as France suffered “the horrors of religious strife.”<sup>18</sup> From his “immense and searching review of the errors, the incoherences, and the ignorance of humanity [...] Montaigne draws his inevitable conclusion of universal doubt”—a doctrine “of great practical importance, whatever its philosophical value, since it follows that persecution for the sake of opinion was simply a wicked folly.” For Strachey, the *Essais*—“so many variations” on the theme *Que sçais-je*—establish Montaigne “as one of the earliest [...] opponents of fanaticism and apostles of toleration in the history of European thought.” Yet, whether under the sway of Moore’s professionalized quest for “truth” or following

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Books, 14. London: Routledge, 1894. LW—signer.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Essays of Michael Seigneur de Montaigne*, translated into English. 7th ed. London: Ballard and Clarke, 1759. 3 vols. Vol. 3 only. VW—binder.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*. Trans. Charles Cotton. York Library. London: G. Bell, 1905. 3 vols. VW—handwritten title page.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Essays of Montaigne*. Trans. E. J. Trechmann. London: Oxford University Press, 1927. 2 vols. LW—annotations.

15 V. Woolf, “Leslie Stephen, the Philosopher at Home: A Daughter’s Memories,” E5, 588.

16 See F. Maitland, *The Life and Letters of Leslie Stephen*, 54, 174, and N. Annan, *Leslie Stephen: The Godless Victorian*, 45-8.

17 L. Stephen, *An Agnostic’s Apology*, [1]-2; the title essay first appeared in 1893. *The History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876/81) was judged an important addition to philosophical literature and led to his 1877 election to the Athenaeum Club; *The Science of Ethics* (1882) was widely taught and established Stephen as a leading British evolutionary ethicist.

18 L. Strachey, *Landmarks in French Literature*, 38, 43.

Montaigne himself, Strachey judges Montaigne's scepticism "not important as a contribution to philosophical thought," his mind lacking the "method" and "force necessary for the pursuit and discovery of really significant intellectual truths."<sup>19</sup> Strachey's Montaigne is "neither a great artist nor a great philosopher; he was not *great* at all." His "true eminence" lies rather in his "goodness," which "wells up in all its charm and all its sweetness, the beautiful humanity which is the inward essence of Montaigne"; his invention of literary self-portraiture; and his own self-portrait, which conveys "the intimate presence of a fascinating man".<sup>20</sup>

8. Leonard Woolf conjures a Montaigne who *is* great by virtue of the enduring political impact of his civilizing humanism.<sup>21</sup> Waving away the genial, conversational Montaigne evoked by Robertson's introduction to Trechmann's new translation of the *Essays*, Leonard describes a strategic antagonist of the belligerent religious certainties that bloodied sixteenth century France, one whose charming *Essais* pursue "a definite and persistent purpose": "to attack the religious beliefs which were making life in France intolerable."<sup>22</sup> Four decades later, in an autobiographical volume titled after Montaigne ("who says somewhere: it is not the arrival, it is the journey which matters"), Leonard returns to Montaigne's monumental stature as an avatar of Renaissance humanism and the "new civilization" it fostered. The *Essais* powerfully influenced the radical "change of mind and therefore of history," from the medieval ethos of "anonymous, impersonal members of classes or castes," to the emergence of individual "I's."<sup>23</sup> Montaigne's "intense awareness of and passionate interest" in his own and everyone's else's individuality, animal and human, make him "the first civilised modern man"<sup>24</sup>; in his humane fellow-feeling Leonard finds the revolutionary germ of a modern repugnance toward cruelty, felt in public outcry against the "tragic" Dreyfus Affair and the Armenian massacres promoted by the Ottoman government for "religious, racial, and economic"—that is, "senseless, uncivilized, and inhuman"—motives. The "civilized society, based upon individuality and liberty, equality and fraternity," that Montaigne, along with "Erasmus, Voltaire and Tom Paine," helped to foster was but sparsely established in 1900, Leonard observes; still, despite "the counter-revolution still fighting bitterly against it," it had seemed to have a future until the Great War destroyed its foundation.<sup>25</sup>

19 Montaigne declares, "I am no philosopher"; *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame, III 9 725.

20 L. Strachey, *Landmarks in French Literature*, 38-20. Strachey awards Pascal the palm for "the vigour, elegance, and precision" that made French prose unique in world literature (56-7). Contrasting Montaigne's prose with Sidney's in "The Elizabethan Lumber Room" (1925), Virginia observes "how exquisitely French prose was already adapted" to Renaissance "extravagance," not least "the unknown territories of the soul" (E4, 56).

21 On Leonard's Montaigne see K. Macnamara, "Mapping Woolf's Montaignian Modernism," 22-29.

22 L. Woolf, review of *The Essays of Montaigne*, *Nation and Athenaeum*, 17 September 1927, 778.

23 L. Woolf, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, 172, 18; cf. Virginia's "Montaigne": "the journey is everything[...] Let us not dwell on the end of the journey" (E4, 76-7); *The Complete Essays: III*, 747 & *passim*; N. Luckhurst, "To quote my quotation from Montaigne," 51f. Leonard locates the beginnings of this shift in the fourteenth century. His teacher A. M. Cook introduced him to Montaigne (V. Glendinning, *Leonard Woolf: A Biography*, 27).

24 L. Woolf, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, 18-19.

25 L. Woolf, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, 20-3.

9. In T. S. Eliot's 1931 essay on Pascal, Montaigne—Pascal's "great adversary" and "the most essential author to know, if we would understand the course of French thought during the last three hundred years"—all but steals the show.<sup>26</sup> Setting out to demolish Montaigne, Eliot writes, Pascal wound up more or less plagiarizing him—particularly his "astonishing" *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*, "upon which Shakespeare also probably drew in *Hamlet*."<sup>27</sup> For "by the time a man knew Montaigne well enough to attack him, he would already be thoroughly infected by him":

Montaigne's is no *limited* Pyrrhonism, like that of Voltaire, Renan, or [Anatole] France[...] what makes Montaigne a very great figure is that he succeeded, God knows how [...] in giving expression to the scepticism of every human being. For every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it.<sup>28</sup>

10. In the "real affinity" of his doubt with everyone else's, even Pascal's, Montaigne—no "ordinary life-sized sceptic" and "one of the least destructible" of thinkers—surpasses even Voltaire, "the greatest sceptic of all," while the intellectual "honesty" of Montaigne and Pascal makes Hobbes seem "crude and uncivilised".<sup>29</sup>
11. From these different vantages—philosophical scepticism, cultural history, political philosophy, Christian apology—Stephen, Strachey, Leonard Woolf and Eliot register the historical importance and evergreen contemporaneity of the urbane, unevangelical, colloquial, ever openminded and curious *Que scay-je* that Montaigne had struck as a medal and explores in his *Essais*—"the only book in the world of its kind,"<sup>30</sup> its author noted, and one of the earliest to embody the new danger of this nascent modernity to religious dogma.<sup>31</sup> In a France torn apart by clashing claims to the "truth" of the singular, sacralized Word of God and King, the *Essais* did not so much oppose as add the proliferant temporal words of an ordinary yet exemplary private individual: a "soul" "in which philosophy dwells"<sup>32</sup> and which communes with everyone around him while abiding amid the

26 T. S. Eliot, Introduction, *Pascal's Pensées*, xiii-xiv.

27 Sebond, Montaigne notes, "undertakes by humane and natural reasons, to establish and verify all the articles of Christian religion against Atheists"; his translation invokes the motto *Que scay-je* to remark the advantage of voicing doubt in interrogative, not logical terms, since "if you say 'I lie' and [...] are speaking the truth, then you lie"; whereas if you say *Que scay-je?* ("what do I know?") you remain balanced in Montaignian doubt (*The Complete Essay: II*, 12 392-3). Montaigne professes serene belief in the Christian God, abhorrence of atheism, scepticism about churchmen's disputes, horror at religious war, and repugnance toward human arrogance.

28 T. S. Eliot, Introduction, *Pascal's Pensées*, xiv-xv.

29 *Ibid.*, xiii-xv.

30 M. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, II, 8 79 n.1.

31 S. Toulmin charts the course of modern thought through Descartes's attempt to refute Montaigne by founding knowledge on the *cogito*, after which Montaigne became a "philosophical non-person" and the *Essais* "literature": "Professional philosophers dismiss Montaigne as unmethodical whereas he wrote of everyday experience and the things that really matter." Beside the Cartesian quest for certitude, Montaigne's scepticism marks a perennially relevant road not taken; Toulmin seeks to "reinstat[e]" him "as a philosopher" and regards Virginia Woolf as his heir (*Return to Reason*, 196, 24, 193 and *passim*). See K. Macnamara, "Mapping Woolf's Montaignian Modernism" (note 20 above), who aligns S.Toulmin's embrace of Montaigne with Adorno's as well as Woolf's.

32 M. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne: I*, 26 119.

ancient philosophers' wisdom. When Montaigne inscribed maxims of these ancients upon the ceiling joists of his round tower library, he gave architectural preeminence to Sextus Empiricus's sceptical precepts: on one of its two great beams are the words "I stay poised undecided amid judgments, believe one thing no more than another, lean neither this way nor that"; on the other, "I determine nothing, I halt, I examine, following custom and instinct."<sup>33</sup> Montaigne mounted no direct challenge to authorities and propounded no heresy; he simply wished, he said, to leave a memento of himself for friends who would miss him for awhile after his death. His essays are not adversarial and do not press claims; they make sallies and trials; they spring from and dwell in doubt; only implicitly do they counter the singular Word with the errant freedom of everyday life and words. At the same time, Montaigne's diplomatic finesse in blending Catholic piety with strange, pleasant essays in free thinking enabled the *Essais* to skate on thin ice with such grace and skill that (though the Papal censor advised him to substitute Providence for pagan Fortune) the Vatican took nearly a century to put it on the *Index of Prohibited Books*.<sup>34</sup> Further, however Montaigne may seem to have retreated from public life to explore the strange, free pleasures of thinking in private, the *Essais*' publication not only brought him immediate acclaim and an ever-widening readership but established an unprecedented place in *public* discourse for this exemplary private subject: this new way of saying "I," of casting an individual mind's evanescent thought into everyday substance—a new garb of language, disseminated far and wide by writing, print, and translation.

12. Virginia dwelt with her father and Bloomsbury friends in the bracing air of Montaigne's scepticism and refers to him in a very early essay as "the first of the moderns."<sup>35</sup> Unlike her Bloomsbury comrades, she read Montaigne from the vantage of a practicing artist in search of a poetics true to the condition of doubt in her own day. In 1923, in the very midst of her struggle to throw off Edwardian materialism and positivism and create a new fictional form to capture the "soul" of modern life, she returned to the *Essais* for inspiration. That June she sent the short story "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street" to T. S. Eliot, whose *Criterion* did not publish it; in July it appeared in the *Dial*. On 27 June she began *The Hours*, soon to evolve into *Mrs Dalloway*.<sup>36</sup> On 17 August she envisioned an essay on Montaigne for *The Common Reader* (D2, 261); on 11 September *TLS* editor Bruce Richmond commissioned a review of the Navarre Society's new edition of the *Essays*

33 Sextus Empiricus "expounded the two key insights of the Classical Sceptics: that we can know nothing about the world of the experience with complete certainty, and that any attempt to prove the superiority of one abstract, universal doctrine over its rivals is a product of human presumptuousness" (S. Toulmin, *Return to Reason*, 192-3).

34 Three editions of the *Essais* were published from 1580 to 1588; the first drew the Censor's eye in 1581. It was listed on the Index of Prohibited Books from 1676 until the Vatican II reforms abolished the Index in 1965; see D. M. Frame, *Montaigne: A Biography*, 32, 313-5.

35 V. Stephen, "The Decay of Essay-writing," *Academy & Literature*, 25 February 1905; the editor retitled it and cut it "by a good half"; Virginia's title was "A Plague of Essays" (*E* 1:25).

36 V. Woolf, "The Hours": *The British Museum Manuscript of Mrs. Dalloway*, [2]-3.



- (E4, 72 n.1). Woolf worked on her review essay “Montaigne” into January 1924, and it appeared at the end of that month.<sup>37</sup>
13. Woolf’s intense reengagement with Montaigne colored her work on *Mrs. Dalloway*. When she opens “Montaigne” with his memory of wondering, on seeing a self-portrait by the King of Sicily, “Why is it not, in like manner, lawful for every one to draw himself with a pen, as he did with a crayon?,” (E4, 71) she touches on the political charge of a subject’s presuming to imitate a monarch’s self-portraiture: Montaigne’s questioning rhetoric (“Why is it not [...] *lawful*”) serves “to muffle up opinions which it would be highly impolitic to speak outright[...] there are some things which at present it is advisable only to hint” (E4, 75). But she lays stress on the sheer difficulty of translating self-portraiture from a visual to a literary medium: from painting an image of the face to tracing the soul in letters; of encompassing in words “the whole map, weight, colour, and circumference of the soul in its confusion, its variety, its imperfection” (E4, 71, 72)<sup>38</sup>.
14. In alighting on “the soul” as the *Essais*’ elusive protagonist, and on Montaigne as a “great master of the art of life,” Woolf furthers her own task of figuring out how to render contemporary lives and souls. On finishing *Night and Day* (1919), which Katherine Mansfield privately judged “a lie in the soul”<sup>39</sup> and whose “philosophy” Leonard found “very melancholy,” she had pondered character-drawing as a problem at once technical and philosophical:
15. Yet, if one is to deal with people [...] how can one avoid melancholy? I don't admit to being hopeless though: only the spectacle is a profoundly strange one; and as the current answers don't do, one has to grope for a new one, and the process of discarding the old, when one is by no means certain what to put in their place, is a sad one. Still [...] what answers do Arnold Bennett or Thackeray [...] suggest? Happy ones—satisfactory solutions—answers one would accept, if one had the least respect for one's soul? (D1, 259; 27 March 1919.)
16. She was still thinking on the novelist’s problem of how to render the “soul” after Bennett criticized her characters in *Jacob’s Room* in March 1923. That autumn she began reading the Navarre Montaigne and in November published the first version of “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown.” “Montaigne” indirectly continues these ruminations as she studies Montaigne’s example: “Nothing matters except life, this freedom [...] which is the essence of our being,” and the quest for order, for the art of “private life,” to which one’s only guide is “an invisible censor within,” “un patron au-dedans” who “knows the truth” and respects “the soul’s freedom to explore and experiment” (E4 75). After “Montaigne” appeared in January, the *Essais*, which she read in English and French,<sup>40</sup> continued to occupy

37 Woolf included “Montaigne,” slightly revised, in her first *Common Reader* (1925).

38 J. Allen foregrounds this emphasis in “Those Soul Mates: Virginia Woolf and Michel de Montaigne,” 190-99, rev. as chap. 1 of *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Language*.

39 K. Mansfield, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*: 3, 97, 10 Nov. 1919.

40 Soon after “Montaigne” appeared, Woolf wrote Logan Pearsall Smith, “I am in your debt for ever over Montaigne—altogether a different thing in French” (L3, 90; 25 February 1924).

and inspire her as she pursued her watershed projects: *The Hours/Mrs Dalloway*, her first masterpiece still very much in the making; and her evolving manifesto for the new poetics it embodies. In May she revised “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” for a talk to the Cambridge Heretics Society; in July it appeared as “Character in Fiction” in the *Criterion*. Here she gives her novelist’s perplexity enduring polemical currency in the declaration that now appears for the first time: “On or about December 1910 human character changed”. (E3, 421)<sup>41</sup>

17. Rereading the *Essais* in 1923-24 not only nourished Virginia’s thinking about modernist poetics but unsealed her creative wellsprings. In adapting Montaigne’s self-portraiture to modern character-drawing, Virginia translates his sceptical stance into the open structure of this novel set on a single day—“if you have lived a day, you have seen everything. One day is equal to all days”<sup>42</sup>—and his agile pursuit of his own unfixable soul into a poetics supple enough to chase after the fleeting soul figured in “Mrs Brown.” Already in the November 1923 version of “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” “a character,” “a lady,” dissolves from a solid, opaque body to “a will-o’-the-wisp, a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window,” turning “solemn sights” to “ridicule” and investing “the most ordinary” with “beauty” (E3, 47). Her review essay too ventriloquizes a Montaigne whose sceptical way of being in the world inspires and infuses her essays on modern character-drawing and *The Hours/Mrs Dalloway*. Nicola Luckhurst remarks that “Montaigne” “bears the imprint of his style (so much so that it at first reads as a pastiche) and [...] of his ideas—she often appears to be summarizing the key concerns of the *Essais*. Yet she might equally be seen as drawing her own self-portrait.”<sup>43</sup> What drives this synergy is the fruitful example Montaigne provides of how to draw the soul and thereby render character. Thus, at once paraphrasing the *Essais* and posing the novelist’s problem, Woolf asks, “How could he explain other people’s souls when he could say nothing “entirely simply and solidly, without confusion or mixture, in one word,” about his own?” (E4, 73-4).

18. As her experiment with modern character-drawing proceeds in *The Hours/Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf embeds her characters’ vibrant interior monologues within an impersonal third-person narrative. This slow technical breakthrough leaves tracks in three versions of the novel’s opening passage, the first two composed before, the third after, “Montaigne.” In the short story “Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street,” an omniscient narrator begins in a stiff, reticent, stenographic style, at a remove from the scene, then suddenly strides in as if from a George Eliot novel to obtrude positivist commentary and banish any doubt that we are in authoritative hands:

Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the gloves herself.

41 Cf. the text of Woolf’s talk to the Heretics: “the <Georgian novel> men and women who began writing novel[s] about the year 1910—or 11 had an immensely difficult task before them” (E3, 510).

42 M. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne: I*, 20 65.

43 N. Luckhurst (note 22 above) 49.

Big Ben was striking as she stepped out into the street. It was eleven o'clock and the unused hour was fresh as if issued to children on a beach. But there was something solemn in the deliberate swing of the repeated strokes; something stirring in the murmur of wheels and the shuffle of footsteps.

*No doubt they were not all bound on errands of happiness. There is much more to be said about us than that we walk the streets of Westminster.* (4 June 1923)<sup>44</sup>

19. A few weeks later, a second attempt resorbs this narrator with her superior wisdom—"No doubt"—into a description of Westminster's consecrated buildings, whose mutually contradicting clocks autonomously debunk the air of important certainty attendant on the rare verb *asseverate* (to assert solemnly, emphatically, positively):

In Westminster, where temples, meeting houses, conventicles, & steeples of all kinds are congregated together, there is at all hours & halfhours, a round of bells supplementing <correcting> each other, *asseverating* that time has come a little earlier, or stayed a little later, here or there. (27 June 1923; emphasis added)<sup>45</sup>

20. The *OED* notes the word's long history of usage in religious contestation: "1637 *Litany* II. 8 King James absolutely assevers [...] that the Pope is Antichrist." We are centuries away from the religious wars of Montaigne's era, and not until 1931 would the Woolfs make a pilgrimage to Montaigne's chateau, where on his round tower's ground floor they saw his small Catholic chapel encircled with grisaille *trompe-l'oeil* empty niches—the Montaigne arms over the portal, his friends' arms above the "niches"—its ironic visual wit evoking its owner's complex sensibility: tolerant of his Protestant neighbors yet steadfast in his forebears' religion; a sceptic who considered that his "just, benign, *laissez-faire* God" might know even if he could not, and whose own niece was later canonized as a Catholic saint.<sup>46</sup>

44 V. Woolf, "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street," *Complete Shorter Fiction* 152; *Dial* (July 1923); emphasis added.

45 V. Woolf, "The Hours" 3; dated June 27, 1923; headed "The Hours."

46 D.M. Frame, *Montaigne*, 258; on Montaigne's "Christian scepticism," his "distinction between religious belief and morality," see 312f. K. Macnamara finds Virginia "more careful" than Leonard to respect Montaigne's coexistent scepticism and faith (25). The Woolfs saw the chapel in 1931: "Rang at Castle door. No one came. Women tending cows in ancient stables. A tower at one end. A garden with flowering trees. The usual renovated peaked & black tiled Chateau: over the door *Que S'cais-je*—A woman came. Took us up narrow stone steps, worn; opened thick nail studded door. This is his bedroom; this is his dressing room. Here he died. Here he went down—he was very small—to Chapel. Upstairs again is his library. The books & furniture are at Bordeaux. Here is his chair & table. He wrote those inscriptions on the beams. Sure enough it was his room; a piece of an old wooden chair might be his. A circular tower, very thick; 3 small windows looking along the wall to another tower. All that remains of the fire wh. burnt the old Chateau in 1880—or thereabouts. We wandered on the terrace. Saw the vineyards below; the shaped reddish hills & terraces: one or two brooding brown farms—much his view—the curious musing man must have halted to look at what we saw. So lovely now; as then. Americans &c. Every day of the year the woman said. A dog went with us fetching a chestnut & putting it on the parapet to be thrown" (D4, 20-1, 25 April); "Montaignes tower—a bare, ragged room, with 3 windows, on top, and his old saddle, a chair and table, and steps, room and chapel below and chair"; "the very door he opened is there: the steps, worn into deep waves, up to the tower: the 3 windows: writing table, chair, view, vine, dogs, everything precisely as it was—when?—I cant remember. Also 4 ancient saddles" (L4, 317, 321; 23, 24 April). They returned in 1937 and "roamed about in the Dordogne valley—Souillac, Sarlat, Treysac—do you know these little towns, on the river, near Cahors and Perigueux, but almost lost; no tourists; the loveliest farms, old houses that Montaigne's friends lived in and are now lived in by shoemakers" (L6, 140, 27 June, to Ottoline Morrell). On the chapel's renovation see L. Willett, "Romantic Renaissance in Montaigne's Chapel," 217-40.

Yet, as the overture of a Great War elegy balanced between a veteran's shattered psyche and the inner life of a society hostess who struggles to fend off "the death of the soul," these contending clocks affixed to houses of worship put the "truth" about life, experience, and time itself in question. Their clanging *asseverations* resonate with the religious wars of Montaigne's France as with the imperial-national war that destroys Septimus Warren Smith, even as they introduce a world constituted as an infinite web of myriad prismatic perceptions, where truth and doubt are nowhere and everywhere. In "Character in Fiction" a year later, Woolf repeats the unusual word in addressing resistance to the new poetics of her "Georgian" generation, represented by Lawrence, Strachey, Joyce, and Eliot: In 1910 "the British public" was "*asseverating* that they must see the hot-water bottle first," for to judge by the Edwardians—Wells, Galsworthy, Bennett—it is by Mrs Brown's hot-water bottle—not her soul—that we know her. (E3, 453; emphasis added)

21. In the third (and close to final) version, the narrator no longer stands apart to regard the novel's world. Now an unobtrusive third-person voice bends and sways with the flow of its characters' thoughts and feelings, translucent to their world as they apprehend it from within:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

For Lucy had her work cut ~~of~~ out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayers men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa, What a day! Cant

What ~~an ecstasy~~; <a ~~miracle~~>! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows ~~on & stepped out on to the terrace of Bourton.~~ & plunged at Bourton ~~on to the terrace~~ into the open air. (20 October 1924)<sup>47</sup>

22. Vesting the power of moment-by-moment narrative revelation in Clarissa's subjectivity, Woolf adapts to a fictional character Montaigne's example of the soul's various, evershifting life and its power to transfigure the world around it, as well as his technique of capturing on the page its passage through time. Here her description of the *Essais*' protagonist in "Montaigne" seems to have doubled as a blueprint for character-drawing:

No fact is too little to let it slip through one's fingers, and besides the interest of facts themselves there is the strange power we have of changing facts by the force of the imagination. Observe how the soul is always casting her own lights and shadows; makes the substantial hollow and the frail substantial; fills broad daylight with dreams; is as much excited by phantoms as by reality; and in the moment of death sports with a trifle. Observe, too, her duplicity, her complexity. She hears of a friend's loss and sympathises, and yet has a bitter-sweet malicious pleasure in the sorrows of others. She believes; at the same time she does not believe. Observe her extraordinary susceptibility to impressions, especially in youth. (E4, 77-8)

23. *Mrs Dalloway*'s great innovation—the characters' fluidly interpenetrating minds, dissolved and suspended in an impersonal, fluent prose that bears them on, each and all, through the hours of their common day—catches the soul's "strange power" to illuminate everything it touches. Fur-

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47 V. Woolf, "The Hours" 252; top margin: The Hours. Chapter One. Oct 20<sup>th</sup> 1924.

ther, as not one soul but many cast lights and shadows over the novel's material world, leaving intercutting wakes behind the passing hours, Woolf bestows upon her characters particular lights and shadows borrowed from Montaigne. The *Essais* capture "the very pulse and rhythm of the soul, beating day after day, year after year, through a veil which, as time goes on, fines itself almost to transparency," (E4, 78) she observes; and then draws Septimus Warren Smith as a translucent soul in a translucent world: "Why could he see through bodies, see into the future, when dogs will become men? [...] Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock".<sup>48</sup> At moments her characters echo her Montaigne verbatim: In "Montaigne" she describes the *Essais* as "an attempt to communicate a soul"; "he wishes only to communicate his soul. Communication is health; communication is truth; communication is happiness" (E4, 76); so too in *Mrs Dalloway* Septimus Warren Smith, isolated and endangered by his traumatic war experience yet momentarily bathed in sunlight, intimacy, and hope, mutters "Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication—" just before Dr. Holmes accosts him to incarcerate him in a "home".<sup>49</sup> In "Montaigne" Woolf melds what seems an allusion to Moore's argument in *Principia Ethica* that beauty, unlike pleasure, is good in itself<sup>50</sup> with Montaigne's prospect of death arriving as he plants cabbages in his unfinished, unregretted garden in "To Study Philosophy Is to Learn to Die":

Beauty is everywhere, and beauty is only two fingers'-breadth from goodness. So, in the name of health and sanity, let us not dwell on the end of the journey. Let death come upon us planting our cabbages, or on horseback, or let us steal away to some cottage and there let strangers close our eyes, for a servant sobbing or the touch of a hand would break us down. (E4, 77)<sup>51</sup>

24. So Septimus looks up at the aeroplane writing "smoke words" in the sky and senses the world signalling to him, "not indeed in actual words" but "bestowing upon him in their inexhaustible charity and laughing goodness one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty!".<sup>52</sup> For Woolf's Montaigne, the thought of death enhances the joys of life: "Best of all, let death find us at our usual occupations, among girls and good fellows who make no protests, no lamentations; let him find us "parmy les jeux, les festins, faceties, entretiens com-

48 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 68.

49 *Ibid.*, 93.

50 G.E. Moore argues that beauty, unlike pleasure, is good in itself (*Principia Ethica* chap. 6).

51 Cf. *The Complete Essays of Montaigne: I* 20 60, 62; *III* 9 747; & *passim*.

52 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 21-22. Cf. "Beauty, the world seemed to say. And as if to prove it (scientifically) wherever he looked at the houses, at the railings, at the antelopes stretching over the palings, beauty sprang instantly. To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks—all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere" (*Mrs Dalloway* 69).

muns et populaires, et la musique, et des vers amoureux”. But enough of death; it is life that matters” (E4, 77)<sup>53</sup>; and she gives Septimus a death that comes as he and Rezia make a hat together, laughing and “poking fun privately like married people”.<sup>54</sup>

25. Woolf draws a new, Montaigne-infused Clarissa too, very different from her earlier avatars in *The Voyage Out* and “Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street.” This Clarissa, Peter Walsh reflects, has been, ever since her young sister Sylvia’s accidental death, “oddly enough [...] one of the most thorough-going sceptics” of his acquaintance.<sup>55</sup> A Montaignesque soul who “would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that,” she feels “very young” and “unspeakably aged,” “slice[s] like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on,” knows “nothing; no language, no history,” “scarcely read[s] a book now, except memoirs in bed,” yet finds life “absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that”<sup>56</sup>. As Montaigne “succeeded in the hazardous enterprise of living” (E4, 78), Clarissa finds it “very, very dangerous to live even one day”; she rejects the Christian idea of god and stands stalwart under the blows of vicious deities she pictures as “ruffians who never lost a chance of hurting, thwarting and spoiling human lives”.<sup>57</sup> And when Septimus’s death first shocks her in the midst of her party, then “make[s] her feel the beauty, [...] the fun,” it is as if she divines—and her author stages—the sceptical wisdom Woolf mined from Montaigne, “But enough of death; it is life that matters.” Channeling Montaigne into the groundbreaking *Mrs. Dalloway*, she extrapolated his essaying “soul” into her characters’ psyches and netted them into a fluid, transparent narrative consciousness that builds on the technique of discrete interior monologues inaugurated by *Ulysses*.<sup>58</sup>

26. Woolf, then, drew on Montaigne’s art of doubt to solve the problem of character-drawing, to define and flesh out her characters’ modern sensibilities, and to plot the interplay of life and death in her dual protagonists’ hours. Further, as she developed her modernist poetics, she assimilated the Montaigne of her review essay to her own life as well as her characters’. Her touchstone thought “But enough of death; it is life that matters” condenses Montaigne’s “gay and sensible wisdom”<sup>59</sup> that the soul must resist

53 Cf. M. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne: III*, 9 746

54 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 143.

55 *Ibid.*, 77.

56 *Ibid.*, 7-8.

57 *Ibid.*, 8, 77.

58 J. Allen finds that Woolf’s poetics, like Montaigne’s, subvert “genre, the unified subject, hierarchies, binary oppositions, closure, and referentiality” while emphasizing “multiple voices, contingency, and process”, (“Those Soul Mates,” 192).

59 M. Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne: III*, 13 855. At the end of his final essay, “Of Experience,” D.M. Frame writes, Montaigne finds “the greatest, most dangerous folly” to be “the wish to reject the human condition. Within the limitations of man and of life lie great resources for wisdom, goodness, and happiness. Natural pleasures, whether of body or soul, should be gratefully accepted, not sourly disdained. Pain and grief should be confined, not cultivated, but at the same time recognized as necessary foils to pleasure and happiness. The arbitrariness of the soul, which makes it an imperfect instrument of knowledge, gives it absolute power to make what it will of the things we experience. “Our good and our ill depend on ourselves alone” (*The Complete Essays of Montaigne: I*, 50 220, xiii-xiv).

being engulfed by grief, pain, and fear and instead seek the goodness and happiness of the human condition; and she wields it with apotropaic force against overwhelming grief in her own life. On 5 May 1924, the twenty-ninth anniversary of her mother's death (when she has yet to write the scene in which the Bradshaws bring news of Septimus's death to Clarissa's party), she recalls "how I laughed [...] behind the hand which was meant to hide my tears; & through the fingers saw the nurses sobbing. But enough of death—its life that matters". (D2, 300)<sup>60</sup> A year later the words return when she hears of the death of her dear friend Jacques Raverat. He had just read *Mrs. Dalloway* in proof and sent her a letter that "gave me one of the happiest days of my life," making her "wonder if this time I have achieved something." Life uncannily imitating art, she receives news of her lost soul mate during a party of her own:

Jacques died, as I say; & at once the siege of emotions began. I got the news with a party here—Clive, Bee How, Julia Strachey, Dadie. Nevertheless, I do not any longer feel inclined to doff the cap to death. I like to go out of the room talking, with an unfinished casual sentence on my lips. That is the effect it had on me—no leavetakings, no submission—but someone stepping out into the darkness[...] . More & more do I repeat my own version of Montaigne "Its life that matters." (D3, 7-8; 8 Apr. 1925)

27. Eight years later Montaigne's counsel sustains her when she rings up to ask about a sick friend, hears good news to her "extreme relief," then reflects, "All very mysterious[...] this horror, that it means another extinction of one's own life: brings death nearer. But let us think no more of death. Its life that matters, to quote my quotation from Montaigne". (D4, 176; 2 Sept. 1933)
28. If Woolf breathes Montaigne's spirit—"the soul's freedom to explore and experiment"—into her essays on his *Essais* and on modernist poetics, as well as into *Mrs. Dalloway*, her "quest for order, for the art of life," does not end there. (E4, 75) When, in *A Room of One's Own*, she pictures a woman catching "those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling, when women are alone, unlit by the capricious and coloured light of the other sex,"<sup>61</sup> those elusive, as yet unworded shadows may seem to dance across a ceiling on which Montaigne's own wisdom is inscribed: "We can never doubt for an instant that his book was himself. He refused to teach; he refused to preach; he kept on saying that he was just like other people. All his effort was to write himself down, to communicate, to tell the truth, and that is a "rugged road, more than it seems" (E4, 72). She pursues the soul's freedom to explore and experiment to the farthest verge of portraiture and self-portraiture in the book titled first "The Moths" (whose ur-Bernard has read Montaigne,)<sup>62</sup> later *The Waves*, through the essay-novel *The Pargiters*, to her last essaying of the art of

60 Cf. N. Luckhurst, "To quote my quotation from Montaigne".

61 V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 84. Woolf's Montaigne makes H. Bloom's speculation, in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, that "feminists are unlikely ever to forgive Montaigne, who far exceeds Freud in male chauvinism" (148), seem curiously out of touch.

62 See B. A. Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion*, 181 n.69.

doubt, *Between the Acts*, created as bombers whined overhead and bombs exploded in London streets and Sussex fields.<sup>63</sup> “We shant I suppose be killed,” she writes Ethel Smyth from Rodmell in May 1940, “but I think of Montaigne, ‘let death find me planting cabbages’; his art of living in doubt is her talisman in face of the horror and everyday fact of global war as it is Clarissa’s in the dangerous business of living ‘even one day.’”<sup>64</sup> “Is pleasure the end of all?” she wonders, concluding “Montaigne” with an echo of Moore’s meditation on port wine. Whence this overwhelming interest in the soul, why this desire to communicate, is the world’s beauty enough or does something else explain the world’s “mystery”? Like the essay and its subject, Woolf’s art provides no answer, not even Moore’s; only the permanent question “Que scais-je?” that she, like Montaigne, keeps green, in pursuit less of “truth” than of the everyday mystery of being, in and out of time (E4, 79).

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63 Woolf (d. March 1941) was still working on *Between the Acts* during the Blitz (7 Sept. 1940-10 May 1941).

64 V. Woolf, *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 429.



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