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Elizabeth Guild, *Unsettling Montaigne: Poetics, Ethics and Affect in the Essais and Other Writings*. Cambridge, and Rochester, New York: D.S. Brewer, 2014 [Gallica, 34], xii + 291 pp. Notes and index. £70.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-84384-371-9.

Review by Wes Williams, University of Oxford.

Montaigne has been the focus of a great deal of intense and varied attention over the past few decades, and there is, happily for those of us who engage with matters early modern, little sign of waning interest in either the man or his several works. Elizabeth Guild follows a growing trend in offering a critical conspectus not only of the *Essais* for which Montaigne is most well known (and has been since his own lifetime), but also of his “Other Writings.” Like a good few other recent readers, she recognises in her subject not so much the timeless thinker but someone very much of his own—bitterly conflictual—times. Hers is an early modern rather than a Renaissance Montaigne, and one, furthermore, who knows himself to be unsettled in multiple ways by the ongoing, protracted fratricidal wars—at once “civil” and sectarian—that lasted throughout his writing lifetime. The argument here is that the *Essais* serve Montaigne as a form of response and a kind of challenge to this determining, constraining context, their distinctive and radical “open-mindedness” setting itself at odds with the intolerance of his times. Guild shows, furthermore, how decades of dogmatic argument and war raised difficult questions concerning the ethics of difference that are both of their time, and vital to our own. Addressing the figuration of conflict across the entire corpus of Montaigne’s writings (and beyond), her own narrative is most innovative, and at times most unsettling for the reader, with respect to its determined refusal to accept habitual discursive boundaries. Guild’s restless style moves not only across topics, but also between registers and forms of methodological approach.

Even though this is a work grounded in a contextual understanding of its author, and one which is richly cognisant of the historiography of the early modern period as well as recent moves in Montaigne studies, it is nonetheless an unusually demanding, and in many ways *untimely* book. For what is distinctive about Guild’s approach to the now largely familiar set of circumstances in which she places Montaigne is her fusing of a carefully historicised approach to his complex situatedness with a determined insistence on the continuing pertinence of psychoanalysis to an understanding of his work. This creates at times a sort of critical time-lag effect: with Lacan, Derrida, Butler and Rose as key methodological reference points (and occasional engagement with Kristeva, Bhabha, de Certeau, Rorty, Žižek, among others). Guild pursues a conversation about the relation between psychoanalysis and literature which can feel dated, both in its peculiar intensity and its tonality. Put simply: whilst such protocols of reading are still operative in modern French studies, they have been largely displaced in the early modern field, where various modes of materially bound historicism or cognition have (re)gained credence and authority. The quality and richness of Guild’s insights, however, give an indication of what we risk losing if we set up false dichotomies between methodological approaches. For in refusing to choose between registers which other readers might wish to keep separate, she sustains an unusually demanding, complex meditation on Montaigne and metaphor, on “the complexities of intersubjectivity and related stylistic and semantic devices...the poetics and psychic economy of Montaigne’s tolerant, sceptical, uncertain thinking” (pp. 1-2).

Figuration proves here to be a revealing index of Montaigne's relationship to anxiety, loss, and the peculiar challenge set by conflictual times. And for the most part, the effort of following Guild on this multiply inflected interpretive journey is richly repaid. To many readers, the themes addressed in this study will seem initially familiar; they take in (*entre autres*) friendship and alterity, cannibalism and the Eucharist, confession and reading, poetics and politics. Chapter six, for instance, "The Place of the Brother," revisits Montaigne's accounts of his Italian travels in "De la vanité" and in the *Journal de voyage*. Setting them alongside a rich variety of other points in his writing where he is visited by the ghosts of his father and his "spectral" symbolic brother, La Boétie, Guild shows how Montaigne here finds a way to "account for" the survival of his own body on the road and in writing.

This kind of analysis will, as I say, be familiar to seasoned readers of Montaigne, but the journey Guild takes us on throughout this study is nonetheless always instructive and usually a pleasure. For, of course, words, phrases and themes we thought we knew, when placed in new contexts, make for new meanings, and the strength of Guild's close analysis of certain passages in particular proves that what interests her is also what interests Montaigne: the interstitial spaces, places and figures which scramble the otherwise settled coordinates of identity. Rather than (yet) another work about "Montaigne and Scepticism" (for instance), what this study offers is the delicate tracing of sceptical thinking in embodied action; like her subject, Guild is constantly in motion, between faith and doubt, between languages, between interpretive modes, and between the words and things which animate affective life and are the conditions of possibility for our relations with others.

The first of the book's seven chapters, "The Possibility of Their Being Otherwise," sets out the guiding proposition that Montaigne and his writing are best understood as emerging from within a curiously productive civil war: productive in that the unsettling relationship to the other which the wars enact proves to be an incentive to innovative self-definition as well as an index of confessional difference. The cannibal also emerges here as a key figure, moving between the imagined and the actual, polemic and poetics: Guild sets the "God-eating" of the Eucharist squarely in the context of the cannibalism of the French civil wars, even as she also anticipates the more metaphorically charged discussion of later chapters. The second chapter, "'Je ne vois le tout de rien': The Cannibal and the Place of Knowledge," has "Des cannibales" at its centre, but also takes in other texts narrating or retrospectively reflecting on the 1562 encounter in Rouen. What emerges is an at times disorientating, but finally (again) productive meditation on the question of timeliness itself, culminating in some especially luminous insights on the risks and rewards of reading *après-coup* (pp. 65-6).

Difficult questions of method are already posed in these two opening chapters, and the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the contextual approach taken here become clear. The case for "Des cannibales" being best grasped as "about" 1562 is, I think, overstated; by the same token, even if certain related things happened in the same year, they might not all "take place" in the *Essais* at the same time. The significance and resonance of Estienne's translation of Sextus Empiricus, for instance, extends far beyond the brute fact of its emergence in 1562. The history of reading (to which Guild is otherwise very carefully attuned) is of course often quite distinct from that of the book. But the critical journey as conducted in this study is consistently rewarding for all the caveats and grumbles along the way. For Guild might take you on an etymological excursion in search of the meanings of certain privileged terms—such as the verb *se hanter* (p. 20), the pronoun *ce* (pp. 96-7), or the specific gravity of *calcul* (p. 215)—or she might lead a search for a more exact sense of Montaigne's own sense of timing in intervening in this or that contemporary debate.

Chapter four, "Confessions: The Desire for Knowledge, the Passion for Ignorance," is exemplary in this regard, as it makes of a reading of "Sur des vers de Virgile" a dizzying roller-coaster ride taking in original sin, sexual desire, the desire for knowledge, ethics, and the poetics of confession, grasped as a kind of "psychoanalytic conversation," but/and which enacts a series of telling "swerve[s]" away from its declared subject, endlessly "deferring speaking openly" (p. 123) about either needs, wants, or desires.

Some readers will find this degree of movement destabilising; others will take the risk, hold tight, and enjoy the ride as Guild follows Montaigne on horseback out into the lands around his tower or as far as Italy, or pursues the workings of a significant notion as it makes its way through several different texts and across the centuries to readers today.

A sustained interest in La Boétie (whose marked absence is introduced early and proves to be a recurrent theme) brings together different moments from the *Essais* and other writings in new and intriguing ways; it also serves as a *fil conducteur* for this study. Collocating friendship and death, as well as the several senses of both hunger and eating, the third chapter, for instance, “Cannibal, Beloved: On Eating What Is Good...,” works through the prism of Montaigne’s relation to La Boétie both to retell the now familiar story of the *Essais*’ emergence as a response to the friend’s death, and to argue the “place” of the future reader as constitutive of the work. Following the various senses of the (Derridean) directive, “il faut bien manger” (a pun: “you/we must eat well,” and “you/we have to eat at some point”), Guild argues that the theme of incorporation offers a kind of “model for living well” (p. 90). What is both unflinching and rewarding about this study is its stress on the metaphorical register, or what she calls “figuration”: for it shows that “incorporation” (for instance) figures not so much a happy fusing of souls, or a marriage of poetic and ethical practice under the sign of “imitation,” but rather the risk of a “deadly confusion of identification and identity” (p. 95). There is, then, little flinching in this book at the darker or otherwise unsettling side of the psychoanalytic themes addressed.

This is as true of Guild’s discussion of melancholy and loss, as it is of her own language when she addresses physical, embodied action. Chapter five, “Tickling, Shaking, Shitting,” works hard to engage readers in a distinctly somatic account of sceptical thinking as a form of affect (rather than, say, an irenic withdrawal from the world). The insights of cognitive neuroscience here rub shoulders (and other body parts) with those of philology, psychoanalysis, and political history. The effect is at times startling, and occasionally overstated; or rather, Montaigne’s own language is construed as working in a register that too neatly supports the argument. To take just one example: when Montaigne, in a celebrated passage in “De mesnager sa volonté” sets up his (now) famous statement concerning the separation of his symbolic and his private identity (“le Maire et Montaigne ont toujours esté deux”), he does so by distinguishing himself from those who “entreinent leur office jusques en leur garde-robe”; there is fun to be had in Guild’s translation of this as “taking their status with them even when they go for a shit” (p. 196), but it is distracting, and risks diverting attention from the real insights to be gained from her revisiting of this passage, twice (pp. 168; 196).

The last chapter, “Uncertain Futures,” homes in on Montaigne’s imagined relationship to future readers, setting it under the initially unlikely, but (once again) productive sign of sacrifice. Guild’s closing set of moves—in which the Lacanian imaginary is most insistent—are at once compelling, insightful, infuriating, and absorbing. To take the risk of working with this study is, then, to engage with a powerful account of the workings of anxiety in Montaigne, together with the possible effects of this anxiety on his readers. The Janus-faced “unsettling” in its title is both verbal and adjectival in aspect: facing in two directions at once, it serves to indicate that Guild’s project is concerned both with how Montaigne himself was unsettled by the times, questions, and problems he wrestled with, and how his writings can have distinctive, unsettling effects on our own habits of mind, and on our relations with others, today. Dislodging Montaigne from the more comfortable, as it were tenured, positions in which he is commonly placed, this study offers a compelling account of the texture and significance of his life’s work.

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