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Alexander Roose. *La Curiosité de Montaigne. "Regardez dans vous, reconnoissez vous, tenez vous à vous."* Paris: Honoré Champion, 2015. 192 pp. Bibliography and index. \$63.80 U.S. (pb.) ISBN 978-2745327413.

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Any well-educated person who today dares for the first time to engage in a serious reading of the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) will immediately confront the massive waves of erudition which characterize many of the memorable texts of Renaissance Europe.[1] For this eminent author, the term "*essai*" means a sort of weighing of the multifaceted products of Greek and Latin antiquity. His emblem or *jeton* effectively captures this attitude: it consists of a scale or balance whose two plates are evenly suspended from the beam. The superscripted motto, "What do I know" (*QUE SÇAY-JE*), interprets the visual motif. Following this maxim and clearly refusing to choose which matter on the scale appears "truer," Montaigne involves himself in navigating three major philosophical currents: Stoicism, Epicureanism and Skepticism (from the Greek *skopeo*, "I view, I examine.") Since the seventeenth century, puzzled scholars have debated which of these elaborate ways of knowing wins the day. But suspension of judgement vividly and consistently colors Montaigne's attitude. His refusal to take sides is in part fueled by the contemporary events and discoveries which shook the continent: "new worlds" everywhere; America and its "Savages"; heliocentrism; the intense political and religious debates that led to civil dissent and violence; revolutionary insights into the nature of languages, plants, animals, medicine, sexuality, law, etc.... Of course, this turbulent stream of facts and fiction was all beholden to one incontrovertible human hunger: curiosity. Although Montaigne was far from clear regarding this voracious appetite for knowledge, his own interests, whether they were judicial, political, philosophical or literary, abundantly proved that he was himself the prey of curiosity.

In this book, Alexander Roose develops significant insights into the discussions of *curiositas* in the literature and culture of sixteenth-century France and delves deeply into Montaigne's opinions. When he specifically referred to curiosity, Montaigne echoed the teachings of Saint Augustine who stipulated that curiosity was nothing but a deleterious lust (*libido sciendi*) to use our sentient faculties in order to dominate any topic with flawless understanding. Montaigne also put on trial the consequences of curiosity which he branded a scourge, a disease and, most strikingly, *la première poison*, the treacherous venom with which Eve, forever culpable--the feminine form of the adjective hints at her sin--doomed us to a blizzard of moral, physical and metaphysical calamities. Jean Cousin's enigmatic painting "Eva Primadora" (1550) acts as a testimony to early modern Europe's fascination with curiosity, both an archetypal ill and an

inducement for presumed advances of human civilization.[2] A paradigm of male and female victims of this psychological addiction readily comes to mind: Pandora, Adam, Lot's wife, Daedalus, Orpheus, Oedipus, Odysseus, Empedocles, Pliny the Elder (who died incinerated on Vesuvius while observing its eruption), Marie Curie, and any number of artists or scientists whose discoveries have either enriched or harmed us.

The Latin etymology and definition of *curiosus* illustrates the semantic range of this adjective: avidity for knowledge, indiscretion, the nefarious activities of a spy working for a secret state police and concocting calumnious accusations against political enemies. The adverb *curiose* also points to the wonders (*admirabilia*) that captivate the collectors and visitors of cabinets of curiosities. Inquisitiveness is also colored by the semantics of *cura*, affectionate and expert attention to the preservation of objects or persons, as in "curative" and "curator." [3] This conceptual spectrum implies a strong correlation with the intellectual and ethical concerns of Montaigne's longest essay, the "Apology of Raymond Sebond," a veritable treatise concerning the deficiencies of human "reason" and the catastrophic consequences of the quests inspired by hubris and anthropocentrism. The title of Montaigne's essay announces that he was defending Sebond's book, the *Theologia Naturalis*, in which the fifteenth-century Catalan scholar asserted that God reveals his Divine presence through the Bible and the wonders of the book of Nature. [4] Montaigne's argumentation nevertheless sapped such a confident outlook and indicated that men must remain in doubt and even dwell in the most radical doubt such as it was articulated by the Pyrrhonian skeptics. Any arrogant claim we entertained about unveiling mysteries and clearly grasping the scheme of things amounted to vain and perilous fancy, an attempt to secure epistemological comfort for our unmoored minds.

The first movements of Roose's work present the anecdote concerning Thales of Miletus, esteemed by Plato as one of the Seven Sages of Greece. Thales was a Presocratic philosopher, mathematician and astronomer. During the Renaissance, Thales was also considered an astrologer. Copernicus, whom we know as the key precursor to Galileo, was also an expert in astrology. [5] Montaigne gleefully recalled the Thales anecdote in the "Apology" and added the detail, found in the rich tradition of Antiquity, that an "impudent adolescent from Miletus" saw Thales and chided him thus: "You rather should look after yourself than in the sky." [6] Later, Jean de la Fontaine, in the fable "The Astrologer who lets himself fall in a well," argued that this type of inane and dangerous speculation was a hunt for "chimeras." This moral criticism echoed the thematic of Montaigne's "On Vanity" in which Roose locates the citation he uses as a subtitle: "Look into yourself, recognize yourself, hold on to yourself." [7] With this memorable quip, an injunction from the Delphic Apollo deity of light and reason, Montaigne exhorted the individual who, because of self-conceit, focused his thoughts on esoteric or exoteric topics, while neglecting the interior psychological commerce which substantially guided his behavior. With a pointed allusion to the Delphic "Know yourself," the sentence rhymes "you" four times and draws a philosophical triangle metaphorically uniting the sense of sight with the intellectual perception of one's deficient self-knowledge, and with a mental sense of touch—"hold on to"—allowing us, as in some unexpected emergency, to remain concentrated in the flood of human affairs.

At the beginning of his first chapter, Roose points out the term *polupragmosunê* that conveys the notion of "curiosity" in Ancient Greek, and glosses it by paraphrasing Hans Blumenberg's statement: "this inchoate activity ... refers to the attention of an individual who has lost his required and central orientation, who is seeking his satisfaction from external things and who has "forgotten" his primitive origin from the spiritual world. At this point, he has succumbed to

dispersion" (pp. 12-13). Blumenberg, a notable theoretician of the historical and cultural position of early modern Europe, questions the legitimacy of twentieth-century European culture and thought on account of its excessive secularization which has stripped it of its spiritual bearings. He locates the initiation of this trend in the sixteenth century with regards to Copernicus's heliocentric propositions—a crucial theme in the *Apology*—and to the discoveries of the New World.[8] In Greek, *polupragmosunê* also implies an excessive number of actions (*pragmata*) draining the inquisitive busybody's intellectual vigor and self-knowledge. In antiquity, Plutarch (46-120 CE), eminent practitioner of intellectual curiosity, wrote one of the major discussions of this human condition in one of his moral essays, "About curiosity." [9] Montaigne repeatedly acknowledged his debt to this polymath by admitting that "hardly had [he] caught a glance upon [his] writings that a thigh or a wing grew upon me" [10] and thus indicating that his essays gained in mobility and range on account of these frequent borrowings. A substantial acquaintance with Plutarch's essays is indeed required for additional insight into Montaigne's discourse.

Roose shows how Plutarch's treatment of *polupragmosunê* operated as Montaigne's crucial intertext. This "thigh or wing" introduced an insistent thematic thread invoking sight/blindness or light/darkness dichotomies and thus re-motivated the semantic force of this most common of commonplaces. For example, in the "Apology" he alluded to one of Plutarch's texts that evoked Democritus' self-mutilation: "This admirable philosopher pierced his eyes to disencumber his soul from the debauchery they elicited and to be able to philosophize in all liberty." [11] Plutarch also depended on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in order to indict a type of ontological curiosity: the King of Thebes, in spite of Tiresias' refusal to reveal to him the terrible secret of his father's death and of his subsequent union with Jocasta, his mother, stubbornly insists that he is extremely eager to know all. He then asserted: "...so bittersweet, so uncontrollable is the itching of curiosity (*tês polupragmosunês*), that itching which gets bloody whenever we scratch it." [12] The ancient prophet, himself unsighted, finally utters the awful words. As a consequence, Oedipus later blinds himself with two of Jocasta's dress-pins. I would argue that Montaigne, for whom sight was an essential paradigm, was aware of this striking image in Plutarch.

As an epigraph to the second chapter, Roose selects a passage from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610), a play widely interpreted today as an early meditation on European colonialism. In an exchange with Caliban, Trinculo, Prospero's jester, accuses "the monster" of being drunk. In contrast with the insults leveled against him, the deformed servant, son of the witch Sycorax, rebels against his master and reveals the sweet rewards of the island to the newly arrived strangers. He then calls Trinculo "thou wondrous man," plausibly as a hint of the buffoon's gift "trinkets" or worthless *pacotille*. This textual snippet economically addresses the crux of Roose's book: the encounter between two worlds which attempt to communicate at cross-purposes. In historical terms, the "new" monster—object of wonder and/or horror to its counterpart—inspires in indigenous populations the perverse wish to change masters and to submit to a handful of Englishmen assailing them. This fatal move turns them into a *monstrum*, in Latin augural jargon, a construct which may lead to either negative or positive interpretation. In this problematic bargain, indigenous populations offer them immense natural wealth and gain very little in return. On the other hand, the "old" continent treacherously promises spiritual salvation to these "others" while massively oppressing and enslaving them. In the Shakespearian confrontation between "the cannibal" and the Jester, we may ask who is the "abominable monster," object of maximal curiosity. [13]

This Shakespearean “teratology” (the study of monsters) sharpens Roose’s analysis of Montaigne’s “Des cannibales,” human beings who are the French version of the seen, heard and smelled *bdelygma* the visitor must either neutralize or destroy. In order to frame this famous text, Roose recalls the major Western narratives that organize New Worlds as either utopian or dystopian entities. In this category belong the Old Testament’s Eden, Greek and Latin myths about the Golden Age, Plato’s Republic, the Atlantis of the *Timaeus*, and Saint Augustine’s eschatological Jerusalem. Sixteenth-century Europe also showed a keen imaginative affinity with medieval, semi-legendary accounts of Marco Polo’s explorations transmogrified by Jean de Mandeville (1300–1372) whose *Livre des Merveilles* still fascinates readers with its bizarre Cynocephals and Sciopods. In the first half of the Renaissance, Erasmus’s intimate friend, Thomas More, reconstructed these representations of spiritual and/or physical renditions of “nowhere” in his masterfully crafted and highly learned *Utopia*.

In chapter two, Roose covers well-established works—with Frank Lestringant as *figure de proue*—addressing initial Spanish and Portuguese conquests and the futile attempts of Henry II to found a colony he baptized “la France Antarctique,” namely Brazil, near the bay of Rio de Janeiro. The Dominican monk Bartolomé de las Casas (1484–1566) urged the Spaniards to convert the Indians in a humane manner, while treating them as worthy of Christ’s teachings. Following the publication of his manifesto, *Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies* (1542), he soon incurred the wrath of the Spanish aristocracy whose hunger for wealth and power in Europe he menaced by his religious and ethical zeal. In France, the well-traveled Franciscan André Thevet (1516–1590), honored by the title “Cosmographer to the King” by four successive monarchs, became central to the reportage of the brutal ways of conquerors from the Iberian Peninsula. Thevet resisted the fashion for popular cosmographies since their allure relied upon the mixture of some believable kernels of information with a thick foam of ludicrous fancies feeding the exoticism the public’s taste required. His two main works were *The Singularities of Antartique France* (1557), anchored in his personal travel to Brazil, and his *Universal Cosmography* (1575), which wedded personal experience to monumental erudition. Montaigne clearly embraced Thevet’s intellectual position and similarly assigned the responsibility of unfathomable deformation to Nature’s illimitable variety, rather than to Satan’s influence. He benefited from a live encounter with three “cannibals” in Rouen, and their polite and sincere demeanor impressed him, although his untrained intermediary proved unable to communicate many parts of their speeches. He nevertheless marveled at their shrewd observations about the social inequities surrounding them in a city where immense wealth and dire poverty, probably heightened by the Wars of Religion, stunningly clashed.

For clarity of presentation, I will now return to passages in chapter two of Roose’s book and the discussion of Montaigne’s fictitious country of Angrougne. In hindsight, it is an episode necessary to announce our return to the Old World in the next instalment of the book. In “About the resemblance between fathers and children,” Montaigne movingly depicted Angrougne, a tiny “country” in the Atlantic Pyrenees over which the King had granted him a type of tutelage. He narrated the detrimental transformation of this utopic microcosm whose naïveté and moral rectitude were wrecked by the economic interests of a notary and a medical doctor, two professions which Montaigne despised, although he himself was a lawyer. Angrougne’s fall from grace strongly recalled that of the Amerindians who, before the French landed on their shores, were evidently ignorant of all European sophisticated niceties. Montaigne implicitly juxtaposed the health and candor of these two nations with the conditions imagined in Plato’s perfect Republic in which “no contracts, no successions, no respect for lineage” existed. The erasure of

certain words in the Platonic *autre monde* encapsulated this situation, according to Montaigne: "Unheard of were the very terms that [today] refer to lies, treason, avarice, detraction, denigration [of any one's qualities]." Hence the question: "How would Plato have evaluated the Republic he had imagined if it stood [even] at a small distance from the perfection he envisaged"? This sophisticated philosophical entanglement resembled the humble utopian possibilities found in the *France profonde* of Béarn, an island of well-being in a French countryside soon to be disparaged by unscrupulous individuals educated at prestigious universities.

Chapter three, "Monsters and interior miracles," functions as the keystone of Roose's elegantly poised edifice and initiates a transition to the social, political and religious phenomena that racked the old continent. His target is now contemporary Europe and its well-stocked inventory of teratologies. Montaigne unveiled his misgivings towards these phenomena with a range of discussions regarding the violence inspired by religious schism and an unprecedented questioning of the King's power. He registered his criticism in his essay, "Regarding a monstrous child": "What we call monsters are not so for God who sees the infinite number of forms which he has included in the immensity of his creations." [14] This sentence obliquely praised Ambroise Paré's anatomical expertise, surgical skills and empirical explications of human deformations in *Monsters and Prodiges* (1573). Monstrosity invaded Gallic society in another radical way through the Wars of Religion (1562-1598). Montaigne, although he remained Catholic, nevertheless censured these internecine conflicts as offenses to the God of all Christians that should never have occurred. This senseless carnage transformed those who participated in such infamy into perpetrators of fratricide, matricide and infanticide. He uttered his hatred for all manners of cruelty and intolerance and showed himself quite reluctant to advocate the torture and burning of female witches, whose evil acts he ascribed to mental illness. This conviction placed him in opposition to Jean Bodin who firmly believed in the efficiency of the craft and evil deeds of sorcerers whose vile curiosity led to the development of monstrous recipes. His book, *On the demonomania of sorcerers* (1593), is an encyclopedic compendium of his biased learning on the subject.

In chapter four, Roose lucidly demonstrates the similarities between Montaigne and Cardan, a polymath and mathematician who prided himself in employing his self as an inner laboratory and wondered at the complexities of the constant flights of fancy undermining his rationality. This material frames a Montanian *coup de théâtre*: "I have never seen in this world either a monster or a miracle more manifestly than myself." (reviewer's translation). Monster or miracle, wonderful or abominable? This ambivalence puzzles and even amazes. Chapter five deepens this problematic by examining Montaigne's defense of animals, especially in the "Apology," where an extensive passage intends to make our anthropocentric prejudices come to light. "On cruelty" prefigured this protective stance: "Our humanity binds us to a general duty to show respect not only to animals, who have both life and feeling, but also to trees and plants. We owe justice to men: and to the other creatures we owe gentleness and kindness [*grace* in the French text]. Between them and us there is some sort of intercourse and a degree of mutual obligation." [15] Clearly animals are not totally sub-human as they are central to our survival, perhaps more so than we are to theirs.

The use of the loaded term "grace" in this context has weighty religious implications in the early modern world where the concept of divine forgiveness became a burning argument: Can God's Grace alone forgive us, as Calvinism maintains? According to the adherent's perspective, are Protestants or Catholics penetrated by an inhuman bestiality or an angelic missionary zeal? The

final passage of the “Apology” recognized our need for an ultimate transfiguration which would ensure a transcendence: “Oh what a vile and abject thing is Man if he does not rise above humanity. A pithy saying, a most useful aspiration, but absurd withal... You may stride wider than your legs can stretch... [but this] is monstrous and impossible... Nor may a man mount above himself and humanity...” (Screech, p. 683). This quotation echoes *Roose’s* subtitle, while reversing its orientation. Montaigne insisted that, whether we investigate anything with the restricted ability of our eyes or utilize instead our feeble intellectual and spiritual capacities, the results would be flawed and result in impeachable actions. The weakness of our acumen condemned us a hazy grasp of reality, since these psychological and bodily faculties would never be able to claim a sustainable accuracy. Consequently, we would not be able to realize the Delphic injunction “know thyself” which is often paired with “Nothing in excess.” Only the extraordinary virtues and curiosity of Socrates would have a chance to fulfill these duties, abandoning the rest of us to the animal limitations that drastically compromise the human condition.

The few pages of the last chapter, “The hard work of a painter,” brings us back to the pre/face of the essays, the dismissal of readers of who cannot bear the truth of a written painting (an *ecphrasis*) “stripteasing” its author. This shutting out of the excessively prudish (and perhaps “tartuffian”) temperaments pertains fully to New World problematics through the addition of this phrase: “If I were to live among the free nations that we witness still living under the sweet freedom of the first laws of nature, I assure you that I would have very willingly painted myself entirely naked.” [17] These words testify to Montaigne’s selection of a limpid or “natural” style shunning the artifice of ornamental rhetoric. On the other hand, a dilemma arises when he claims his *oeuvre* merely to offer a frame or supplement to La Boétie’s treatise “On voluntary servitude,” penned when his exemplary friend was still a very young man.

Montaigne began his essay “On friendship”—a fervent ode to this rare event and a brilliant portrait of La Boétie—by castigating his own discursive style as defaced by “grotesques” (drawings of monstrous bodies that aim to entertain the spectator/reader) and confessed that his best efforts could match the polished beauty of La Boétie’s revolutionary exhortations that just men should uproot tyrants by any means necessary. The perfection of the writings of Montaigne’s “double” somewhat undermined his pretensions that his book was unique and exemplary. Just as he wished the reader to understand his inner monstrosity, Montaigne deprecated his auto-portrait with a major grain of salt. His attempts at elaborating a self-portrait proved to be an aimless logorrhea which never satisfies our curiosity. Although we desire to “see him for real,” he could not fulfill his initial promises. Our experience as readers questing for truth must arrive at the conclusion that a monstrous book chases its monstrous author, and vice-versa.

Roose’s erudite exploration into the multifaceted concept of curiosity in Montaigne is remarkable. His skillful and elegant prose pursues various folds of historical and literary documents which amplify each other and culminate in a unique account of *polupragmosunê*. I also wish to underline that this book encourages the reader to think about the behavior of human beings in more complicated terms. Just as Plutarch selected Oedipus as the most extreme example of the desire for self-knowledge and self-mastery gone wrong, our own overwhelming curiosity and overweening arrogance leads us from discovery to discovery. However, when we behold how we have endangered the world in the process, we could well wonder if it had not been wiser to be less curious and more concerned with leading a satisfactory and virtuous life without expending our energies on such destructive propositions.

NOTES

[1] The best English translation of the essays is Michel Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne* (London: Penguin Classics, 1993). The standard scholarly reference is still Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais. Livres I-III*, texte établi par P. Villey et V. L. Saulnier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de la France, 2004). In this review, I will use Screech's translation.

[2] See Dora Panofsky and Erwin Panofsky, *Pandora's box; the changing aspects of a mythical symbol* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956). This book masterfully explores the urge to be curious in the Renaissance. Jean Cousin's painting can today be seen in the Louvre Museum.

[3] There is also an emblem used by Johannes Sambucus, whose motto is POLUPRAGMOSUNE. It features a monkey who kills itself inadvertently through excessive inquisitiveness. See: Johannes Sambucus. *Les Emblèmes* (Antwerp: Christophe Plantin 1567). www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/books.php?id=FSAA. In another emblem, Alciato (1492-1550), inventor of these visual/textual constructs, conveyed the message that the observation of objects above us is a form of curiosity punished by death. A hunter aiming a crossbow at a bird is killed by the bite of a snake he had failed to notice lurking in the grass. In the Latin note, there is a reference to Thales as another example of the dangers of this kind of distraction. See: www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FALd083.

[4] On Sebond and Montaigne, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_of_Sabunde.

[5] See www.sites.hps.cam.ac.uk/starry/copersatrol.html. See the following pages for further evidence of this linkage between astrology, astronomy and curiosity: www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=A56a083 and https://www.persee.fr/doc/palla_0031-0387_1983_num_30_1_1137.

[6] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 604.

[7] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 1132.

[8] Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Boston: MIT Press, 1985).

[9] For a good translation of Plutarch's text see: bostonleadershipbuilders.com/plutarch/moralia/curiosity.htm.

[10] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 989.

[11] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 672.

[12] Plutarch's text preserves this last and perhaps most resounding literary reference to emphasize the personal and political tragedies to which curiosity leads. For a very compelling reading of this text, see Julia Doroszewska, "Windows of Curiosity: Eyes and Vision in Plutarch's *De Curiositate*" *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* (2019): 158-178.

[13] In the Old Testament (cf. Leviticus 18:22, 20:13), the term “abomination” (*bdebygma* in biblical Greek, literally “a stench in God’s face”) is an insult casting anathema equally upon homosexuality, shellfish, mixed fabrics, and disrespect of Old Testament Law. Trinculo thus wields the performative force of “abominable” against Caliban—whose name is an anagram of “cannibal”—to trigger the use of all the possible epithets of opprobrium that indict anyone not belonging to our familiar spheres. “Abominable” thus means *ab/homo*, a “thing” cast out from the continent of humanity.

[14] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 808.

[15] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 488.

[16] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. 683.

[17] Screech, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, p. lviii.

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