Editorial

“Essaying” Ideas in Conversation: Gestalt Writers, Readers, Interpreters, and the Legacy of Montaigne¹

S U S A N L. F I S C H E R, P H . D.

When Michel de Montaigne began writing the Essays around 1572, he was the first French writer to cultivate the genre; the word “essay,” we may recall, derives from the Latin exagium—a weighing—and is by definition “an effort to perform or accomplish something, an attempt” (Random House Dictionary). Because Montaigne wishes to include every valid viewpoint in his weighing or essaying, he comments upon myriad things and invokes myriad authors, often considering himself a plagiarist, an accusation made by others as well. If one topic leads easily to another, ambivalence, ambiguity, and antithesis cannot but pervade his work. In probing a subject, the Essays are also an effort to “think oneself” and hence to “create oneself.” In this sense, they are consubstantial to Montaigne: all 107 of them form one substance with him; he is the Essays, and they are he.

¹ The inspiration for this editorial comes in large part from the Essays of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), who “essayed” his ideas in conversation with other ideas and other writers. It also comes from many exchanges with Sonia March Nevis on the power of essaying ideas in conversation through the art of asking questions.

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D., is professor emerita of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Bucknell University in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. She graduated from the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland’s Intensive Post-Graduate Program in Gestalt Methods in 1982 and later completed workshops organized by the Gestalt International Study Center. She has incorporated Gestalt perspectives into her teaching, as well as into some of her publications on seventeenth-century Spanish theatre. She is fluent in Spanish and French and now lives in Brookline (Boston), Massachusetts.

©2011 Gestalt Intl Study Center
If the act of writing and the consciousness of it leads to a progressive accumulation of self-knowledge, the paradoxical nature of this process is nevertheless discernable: one can only substitute the text to be written, read, and interpreted with another text to be interpreted, itself subject to interpretation, infinitely. ² But Montaigne is against the kind of interpretation that seeks to determine a definitive—literal, authorial—significance by way of the “gloss,” or brief notation of the meaning of a word in a text. He makes this mockingly clear in the final Essay of Book III, “Of Experience,” the culmination of his quest to study and know himself:

It is more of a job to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books about books than about any other subject: we do nothing but write glosses about each other. The whole world is swarming with commentaries; of authors there is a great scarcity. (Montaigne, 1588/1960, pp. 313-314)³

The search for a kind of inherent meaning inscribed in a text is misguided, in Montaigne’s view, because such a quest does not explore the continually shifting significance of a text gained through the activities of reinterpretation and reappropriation. The essayist queries:

Who would not say that glosses increase doubts and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, whether human or divine, with which the world busies itself, whose difficulties are cleared up by interpretation? . . . When do we agree and say, “There has been enough about this book; henceforth there is nothing more to say about it?” (Montaigne, 1588/1960, p. 312; emphasis added)⁴

His answer to this query, especially provocative for the sixteenth century in which he lived, is never: the process of meaning-making is infinite, never arriving at a point beyond which new readings and interpretations cannot be generated. “There is always room for a successor, yes, and for ourselves, and

² For good commentary on this process of iterative interpretation, see Rendall (1979).
³ “Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations qu’à interpreter les choses, et plus de livres sur les livres que sur autre subject: nous ne faisons que nous entrelegoser. Tout fourmille de commentaires; d’auteurs, il en est grand cherté” (Montaigne, 1588/1962, p. 1045).
⁴ “Qui ne diroit que les glosses augmentent le doubtes et l’ignorance, puis qu’il ne se voit aucun livre, soit humain, soit divin, auquel le monde s’embesongne, duquel l’interpretation face tarir la difficulté. . . . Quand est-il convenu entre nous: ce livre en a assez, il n’y a meshuy plus que dire?” (Montaigne, 1588/1962, p. 1044).
a road in another direction. There is no end to our researches” (Montaigne, 1588/1960, p. 313). As Rendall (1979) aptly comments, “The text is a labyrinth into which the interpreter plunges at his [sic] peril, but which he nevertheless finds irresistible,” for the mind “loses its way in the maze of meanings to which the text lends itself” (p. 1057):

[Wo]men do not know the natural infirmity of their mind: it does nothing but ferret and quest, and keeps incessantly whirling around, building up and becoming entangled in its own work, like our silkworms, and is suffocated in it. *A mouse in a pitch barrel* [Erasmus, *Adages*, II.iii.68]. It thinks it notices from a distance some sort of glimmer of imaginary light and truth; but while running toward it, it is crossed by so many difficulties and obstacles, and diverted by so many new quests, that it strays from the road, bewildered. (Montaigne, 1588/1960, pp. 312-313)

Montaigne is surprisingly modern in his conception of reading and meaning-making as being mediated by the interpretive strategies of the reader or writer. Implicit throughout his critique of definitive, authorial interpretation is the notion that “interpretive commentary cannot found its authority or value on its association with the work it interprets,” but that the interpreter “must become an author in his [sic] own right, and assume responsibility for his work at the same time that he offers it up for interpretation by his readers” (Rendall, p. 1069). In this sense, Montaigne arguably anticipates certain trends in latter-day “reader-response criticism” which, as I have stated elsewhere, describes a multiplicity of approaches that “adhere to the phenomenological assumption that it is impossible to separate the knowner from the known, the perceiver from the perceived, the subject from the object” (Fischer, 1979/1989, p. 110). Put another way, in a reader-oriented approach,

the text’s autonomy, its absolute separateness, is rejected in favor of its dependence on the reader’s *creation or participation*. Perception is viewed as interpretive; reading is not the discovery of meaning but the creation of it. In reader-response criticism,

---

5 “Il y a toujours place pour un suivant, ouy et pour nous-mesmes, et route par ailleurs. Il n’y a point de fin en nos inquisitions” (Montaigne, 1588/1962, p. 1045).

6 “Les hommes mescognoissent la maladie naturelle de leur esprit: il ne fait que fureter et quester, et va sans cesse tournoiant, bastissant et s’empestrant en sa besongne, comme nos vers de soye, et s’y estouffe. *Mus in pice* [Erasmus, *Adagia*, II.iii.68]. Il pense remarquer de loing je ne sçay quelle apparence de clarté et vérité imaginaire; mais, pendant qu’il y court, tant de difficultez luy traversent la voye, d’empeschemens et de nouvelles questes, qu’elles l’esgarent et l’enyvrent” (Montaigne, 1588/1962, p. 1045).
examination of a text in-and of-itself is replaced by a discussion of the reading process, the “interaction” of reader and text. (Maillot, 1977, p. 414; emphasis added)

* Why this seemingly gratuitous foray into Montaigne and interpretation? Why this sortie into reader-response criticism and the participatory creation of textual meaning? Why this focus on individual subjectivity, not disinterested objectivity, and on dialogue, not dissection, in the in act of reading and interpreting writings? This volume of *Gestalt Review*, as the special title indicates, is a celebration of writing, and more particularly of the 25th anniversary of the founding of GestaltPress; as well as a tribute to two individuals who have demonstrated selfless and inspired commitment to enabling writing and supporting writers throughout the Gestalt community–Sonia March Nevis and Edwin C. Nevis. All of the articles in this issue of *Gestalt Review*, each in its own way, reveal the writer’s interpretive participation in the creation of meaning as he or she reflected upon the useful and unexpected ways in which indicated books or book chapters, virtually all of which were published by GestaltPress, had impacted them in their writings, teachings, or clinical/coaching/organizational practice. The notion of “impacted” meant that the writers had learned something that mattered from the books or chapters, including what they were inspired to write about critically in a published piece; or to talk, teach, or lecture about.

conversation with Gordon Wheeler.
Various other forms of writing are supported in this celebratory issue. Sonia March Nevis and Joseph Melnick’s dialogue, “Sonia Nevis: The Reluctant Writer,” is followed by the re-publication of one of S. Nevis’s favorite conversational pieces, “Marriage: The Impossible Relationship” (1985), realized in collaboration with Zinker at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. The Reviews and Reflections section contains a choice of creative contributions: a review by Frank Rubenfeld of Brian O’Neill’s edited volume, *Community, Psychotherapy and Life Focus*; a multipartite poem by Carol Brockmon entitled, “Moving In and Out,” whose sections are divided into “Five Elements and Six Senses”; and a montage piece by Susan Partridge, which encompasses prose, photography, and poetry. You, our readers, may wish to notice whether the Gestalt concepts in which the poem and the montage were grounded—however unconsciously during the creative process—become figural as you read.
In total, this special issue of *Gestalt Review* is a tribute to all of the readers, writers, and interpreters who have essayed (and continue to essay) their ideas, à la Montaigne, in conversation with other ideas and other writers. They have interacted with the text(s) at hand, each in his or her own way, offering necessarily provisional perspectives that cannot but be subject to modification, as figures continually re-emerge in re-readings or new readings. Kudos to the 19 individuals represented here—whether original authors or translators, subsequent readers or writers, story writers or poets—with many more to come in the two remaining issues of Volume 15. And, once more, our deepest gratitude to Sonia and Edwin Nevis, for having spearheaded and sustained the writing enterprise with indefatigable energy and decorous aplomb.7

Susan L. Fischer, Ph.D.
sfischer@bucknell.edu

REFERENCES


7 For a brief history of the founding and development of GestaltPress and the Writers’ Conferences, see E. Nevis and Melnick, 2010.

