Chapter 1

Institution

BEGINNING

This book is an attempt to map a beginning of the modern subject—the locus of agency in the modern epoch, during which humanity assumes a definitive relationship of domination with regard to the world in which it represents itself as living. I prefer to say *a* beginning, because it would be impossible to speak of *the* beginning, indeed impossible to say that there is just one beginning of the subject in modernity, or just one beginning of the modern epoch. It is common to designate the subject of modernity as the Cartesian subject; I would like to contend that Descartes and the interpretation of his texts offer one account—a compelling account, I hope to show, but not the only possible version of events. I would also like to contend that reading him with Montaigne—whose writing continually acknowledges the multiple forces that traverse it in its production of meaning—reading him as in a number of ways responding to Montaigne, is one means of bringing to light the ways in which his account is one among a field of possibilities, yet moves to make itself unique.

It is always tempting to identify the modern period as homogeneous and uniform, as entailing a clear break from previous forms of social organization, cultural life, and intellectual activity, even if it manifests residual effects of the older forms; as clearly beginning, for example, with Descartes or between Montaigne and Descartes. It was much easier to do so when studies in the matter could more easily bear on a delimited geographical area, a restricted body of texts and related phenomena, and methods of inquiry that assumed the possibility of finding a clear answer. But for some time now we have seen ongoing critical engagement with established and inertially persistent institu-

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tional demarcations: our critical activities have had to recognize their own shortcomings, the ways in which they have been governed by deep-rooted prejudices and have refused to look in many directions and to listen to many voices. I am speaking not only of the still-contested rise of new disciplines in North American universities over the last twenty-five years or so, which represent cultural labor of social groups previously unrepresented in our institutions. I am also speaking of the concurrent and also contested appearance, following developments in France that predated it by about a decade, of theoretical practices whose primary purpose has been to examine the limits that our institutions of knowledge have imposed on their objects, against these institutions' determination not to acknowledge their own exclusive nature. To identify absolutely discrete periods and ways of apprehending the world becomes a much more complicated task, when we see that these are usually composed of an aggregate of forces and phenomena, arising in different times and places and in response to different conditions, none neatly representable as a century or national tradition.

Our practices have had to recognize their own positing of a unique subject, a subject that dominates a world assumed to be knowable through knowing it and that is the subject of the history of modernity. I am suggesting that to maintain the notion of a single, uniform epoch of modernity, and of a unique subject with a definite beginning and form, would be very much to remain unquestioningly within the institutional boundaries of the subject, and really not to examine it critically. In order to examine the notion of the subject critically, we must begin by realizing that anything we think of it may be the result of its own capacity to persist, to maintain its own integrity by presenting a certain image of itself, that is, to deflect our criticism.

That is, we must take our practices in the direction of a self-reflection. My concern in this study is more with the reflection on the limits than with what might lie beyond them—although in order to engage in reflection it is necessary, at least some of the time, to borrow a position designated as that of an outsider. But my focus is on those conceptual formations that have effected the dominance of a single subject, on the strategies by which a certain institution of the subject is maintained. Such a project requires that I privilege certain texts: those which have attained the status, in our institutionally received notion of modernity, of being viewed as contributing to a foundation of modernity, such status enabled in part because they are assembled through gestures by which they privilege themselves as foundational monuments. These gestures must of course be followed through by the institutions that regulate the monumental status of a body of texts, so the suitability of these texts to the institutions, as well as a broader characterization of the latter, is a part of my project.

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I am speaking of the institutional process, in literary studies, of canon formation. My project involves reading selected works from the canon in order to investigate this process. But what I would like to bring to light is that a close examination of the texts at issue reveals that in certain readerly confrontations they produce significations that sharply exceed their canonical status. A consideration of the tension between those aspects of the texts by which their canonical status is enabled and those productive of excess—I want to be careful not to suggest a purely binary opposition here—yields a discovery of the limits of the institutional process, of the mechanisms by which canonical meaning is established and of some of the interests that contribute to the maintenance of the institution. If Montaigne is appreciated for being the "first" to write an entire book made up of statements originating in a contingent subjectivity rather than in the higher authority of God, to use the first-person singular pronoun to represent an autonomous writing subject, he must also be seen as the one to examine the problem of how such a subjectivity emerges and locates itself, of the impossibility of its being metaphysically grounded—to examine the metaphysical basis of authorship. And if Descartes is the one to attempt to ground the subject firmly, he is also the one who either grapples with or disguises the extent of the problem, who presents the possibility that it has no solution.

If, in the institution in which our studies take place, we wish to take it for granted that the problem has been solved, and that the subject existed from a certain date that more or less coincides with the beginning of modernity, and we do so by referring to the received version of the texts in the canon, then through attentive reading these same texts will show us, perhaps often against our wishes, that the entity of the subject and the point of its origin are, at the very least, broadly dispersed events. A careful examination of texts from the canon, undertaken through a strategically oriented reading, begins to show us how the institutional maintenance of the canon operates, how certain versions of literature, of literary history, of the history of philosophy, and of other histories are established as dominant. Other, minor versions of these groupings of texts and histories then begin to become available, both in the form of neglected or even repressed aspects of canonized texts and in that of new texts and types of cultural phenomena. That is, a strategically critical reading of the canon must ultimately yield an open-endedness of the institution.

The strategy of reading involved is not one that assumes the necessity of a rejection of the traditional canon, but rather one that resists the streamlining tendencies of the institutional process of text selection and canon formation. I would like to distinguish my approach from that found in certain versions of cultural studies, whose extreme form would maintain the necessity of considering mainly noncanonical cultural phenomena on the assumption that the canon is hopelessly bound up with the interests that maintain the

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institution and can offer nothing but their perpetuation. This characterization of the canon is a whole-hearted acceptance of its most banal and conservative aspects, a belief in the homogeneity and unidirectionality that the uncritical and uncriticized institutional reception of the canon would present the latter as possessing. It also leaves one open to reproducing the gestures of this reception, since they tend to remain hidden from view, in one's apprehension of objects of study.[1]

MONTAIGNE AND DESCARTES

I take as a starting point the received version of the Cartesian subject, which I will elaborate mainly in the second section of the book by way of certain texts of Descartes—the *Discourse on the Method* (1637) and the *Meditations* (1641), with reference to a few others. As I elaborate this concept I will show how it is instantiated in the texts but also how it is at the same time disrupted—how, for the received version to be bequeathed to us, many complications must be either overcome or simply pushed aside through tactics of dissimulation. The institutional gestures deployed have everything to do with the subject's situating itself in an *épistémè* of modern scientificity: the latter should be seen as the aggregate of practices whose condition of possibility is the separation and elevation of the mind of the knower with respect to that which is known, with the accompanying supposition of the latter's knowability. In the trajectory of modernity that traverses Descartes and that is articulated by him, the subject is presented as the domain in which the mental image comes to overtake and to exhaust the object. First sketched out in the *Discourse on the Method*, and elaborated as one of the main purposes of the *Meditations*, Descartes's wish is to assure the correspondence of mental image and physical object.

So Descartes's confrontation is with the integrity of the sign; it is also with the excesses that present themselves when the sign is considered in relation to written language (Descartes no longer accepts the authority of the books through which he was educated, and then must write his own book to publicize his ideas—I address this problem both in chapter 5 and in chapter 6). The excesses of signification are condensed in the methodological exercise of the evil genius, the latter offering the thought experiment of a complete dissolution of the certainty of knowledge and of the subject. The cogito (Descartes's Latin "I think"), the only principle to withstand the assaults of this devil, arises in the division between sense and nonsense; it is subsequently instituted as the origin of sense, at the exclusion of nonsense (which becomes designated as, among other things, madness). Descartes faces a problematic of language that is radically different from that which the cogito

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renders after the confrontation, with which the cogito still effectively leaves us in our institutional practices.

In connection with this problematic, in chapters 3 and 4 I will examine the *Essays* (1580, 1588, 1595) of Montaigne. Concerned, like Descartes, with the human subject, with human reason, with how they may be represented, with the effectiveness and with the limits of representation, Montaigne, anticipating the advent of the cogito, refuses its finality. The excesses of language are examined without limit in Montaigne—or the limits are subjected to an unending series of reinscriptions; although the subject does engage in an interaction with the language it writes and speaks, it continually relinquishes its claims to authority and autonomy. The danger of the loss of the latter that Descartes must confront is extensively deliberated by Montaigne—and Montaigne demarcates, in his writing, the field of language on which Descartes attempts to erect the cogito. Much of Montaigne's text turns up in his writing, reworked and refigured, those aspects that would assault the cogito undergoing a repression: one may even see reinscribed, unacknowledged citations, marking precisely what needs to be delimited, subordinated—excluded through an interior confinement—interwoven in Descartes's texts. (I will devote a good deal of chapter 4 to characterizing the intertextual relation between the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Essays*.)

What Montaigne offers to the reading of Descartes is a concentrated (though regularly self-decentering) site of the problematic of language of the late Renaissance, the problematic on which Descartes arrives, a way of reading this problematic for the purpose of witnessing the transformation that occurs with a certain technicization of language that accompanies the containment of the latter's signifying activity. It is such technicization that comes to characterize the conception of knowledge in modernity. The utter technicization of our own era may be, to a certain extent, questioned, through a critical reinscription of this transformation. Just as Descartes is by no means the sole author of the subject, but rather offers an emblem for its advent and an institutionally necessary point of reference, Montaigne provides a series of texts by way of which one may initiate a reinscription or a rewriting of the history of this transformation. It is through both the canonical texts and the strategies of reading that resist the institution that such a rewriting, conducive to an opening of institutional borders, may be achieved.

I situate Montaigne in the project in order to extend a theoretical treatment of the relation of language and the subject, which I will subsequently direct toward reading Descartes. The selection of Montaigne and Descartes, then, may be called an *institutional* choice: it is effected within a received notion of modernity in which these texts in certain ways offer themselves as privileged. The mechanism of reception—and the means of perpetuation of any "notion of modernity"—is nothing else than the academic institution; this

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is the home of official knowledge in its relatively unquestioned form, or in the form in which it may deflect thoroughgoing interrogations of itself. It is through problems raised in texts of Montaigne and Descartes—through problems raised in reading these texts—that I will proceed.

READING IN THE INSTITUTION

It should be recognized, at this point, that when I speak of "reading," I must do so very much within a particular determination of the relation of the subject and language, a determination to whose critical consideration I hope to contribute with this project. The reading that I will undertake is one that posits as its object the limits of its own determination. That is, it suggests a particular representation of its own institution and proceeds to examine and to reconfigure the limits of that institution and the latter's representation, the gestures by which these limits have come to be in place. The word *institution* refers to the structure of determination of the subject (the place given to the subject), to the form in which the subject is cast such that the latter remains in a fixed set of relations and exclusions; it also refers to the process by which this place is established (the giving of the place), to the productive activity of instituting. The institution of reading within which I am working, then, is one that is both an affirmation of boundaries and a continual reestablishing of them. Hence, reading the limits of reading, a reflective practice, becomes a possibility in such a critical framework.

And this "institution of reading" also intersects with the empirical academic institution: it is in the latter that the former, in its multiple senses, achieves an articulation. The academic institution functions as a "mediation of received values": as such it is the site of validation and thereby of exclusion. It should be noted that in its functioning, the academic institution necessarily produces its own questioning; even a radical critique of the academic institution can make no claim to being purely external to the institution, although it does work toward the borders of the institution's spaces of exteriority. Such a critique must continually deliberate the insinuations of its own participation, its own complicity. The institution of reading that I am discussing here has its own particular stakes: it establishes what is valid and what is not in the consideration of a text or a set of texts, what is important and what is not, what is significant, and how the text will signify. It does so in part by tying itself to a tradition: I am working in a venue within the United States, which distinguishes itself by its sizable interest in "continental" theory and philosophy. My own strategies, though resistant to certain dominant trends in the institution, engage in an institutional process of their own, in such a way as to be a continual reflection on their own deployment.

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It is according to the tradition of continental philosophy that I may place the outset of philosophical modernity in Descartes, and that I may speak of Montaigne as his predecessor. Heidegger's placement of Descartes in the metaphysical tradition is indispensable to this approach, as are the various critical trajectories that have ensued from this placement. Both Derrida and Foucault have seen themselves as working toward the limit of a system that has its early articulation in Descartes. Derrida identifies his own work as addressing the closure of the epoch of logocentrism—one determination of being and of the sign in the history of Western metaphysics—that begins with the Cartesian cogito. There is at that point the exclusion of writing as a disruption of the instituted sign, the latter becoming available as immediate meaning in the voice. And Foucault's early work evokes the foundations of the classical *épistémè*—in whose reorganization of signification our knowledge still operates—by way of texts of Descartes.[2]

THE POSTMODERN IN THE MODERN

Although my interest is in mapping the beginnings of modernity, I do not place much emphasis in this project on determining the moment at which modernity gives way to postmodernity. Indeed, I am working toward a characterization of modernity that does not present it as an integral unity, but rather as an aggregate of trajectories that can never form a single, cohesive, overarching narrative; the idea that there would be one moment at which the period of modernity would give way to something else is alien to the conceptual schema of this project. What is characteristic of modernity, however, is that it does *present* itself as a unity, as a period that may be narrated by a single subject; it is to the status of the latter that the Cartesian subject aspires, as I have suggested and as I will show, in large part by ruses, strategies of dissimulation. The subject and the narrative of modernity, I want to demonstrate, are multiple, made up of collections of forces that work together in certain ways, managing to effect exclusions in order to present themselves in the ways that they do. Beginning to see them in their workings, in their processes of aggregation and assembly, is to begin to reveal and undo their exclusivity. It is to valorize what Lyotard terms the "little narrative" (*petit récit*) against its subsumption in the "great narrative" (*grand récit*);[3] or an attempt to show that the great narrative of modern philosophy and modernity, of the historical destiny of philosophy—as instantiated in Descartes's founding gesture—achieves its status only by disguising the fact that its composition is an assemblage of little narratives.

In this sense, in that it acknowledges the lack of viability of the great narrative and the necessity of recognizing the little narrative, my project iden-

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tifies itself with the postmodern: the postmodern should not be understood as something purely and simply distinguished from the modern, but rather, in such a project, as subsisting in the heart of the modern and offering the labor that will shape its representation. The postmodern of the modernity that Descartes takes on, then, may be found in Montaigne, as well as in Descartes's intertextual relation with him; it is in large part by way of Montaigne that my mapping of the modern will proceed.[4] My project may then be said to operate from within postmodernity: but it shows that postmodernity has been, at least at certain key points in modernity, fully activated. The distinction between the modern and the postmodern is not a distinction between two different periods; the discernibility of a period designated as modern, then, must further be called into question. Periodization is itself a modern strategy. Of course, when the institution admits the validity of heterogeneous little narratives and allows the contestation of its own unitary integrity, it may be said that the time in which this takes place is a postmodern time—with the caution concerning periodization. The mapping of the modern in which I am engaging is of necessity something postmodern; in a way, then, I am marking it as participating in a moment of transition to a new institutional configuration—which is for the most part indescribable at this point, although I would like to return to its consideration at the end of the study.[5]

THE INSTITUTED SUBJECT

My own efforts are in line with an approach to the critique of the academic institution characterized by certain affiliations with "continental" philosophy, which proceeds by directing its efforts toward the exclusions whose traces may be discerned in certain texts in the instituted and institutionalized history of philosophy.[6] I hope, through the engagement in such an approach, to examine the ways in which these exclusions are still operational in our institutional practices. And again, although the texts I treat come from an institutionally determined canon, through a critical treatment bearing on their challenge to instituted signification they may achieve a mutability by which they exceed the determinations of their canonical status. I align myself with a trajectory in the history of Western philosophy that may be termed the "institution of the subject"—in which Descartes holds a privileged position—and in so doing aim to undertake a critique of aspects of the network of institutions in which this trajectory subsists, the mechanisms by which it subsists.

I speak here as someone initiated in this trajectory and the connections it makes with the just-mentioned institutional network. Or: I speak, having been *instituted*, to evoke another sense of the word. The "institution of the subject," as I will elaborate it, is something pedagogical. With Descartes the

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task of philosophy becomes to teach in a way that produces an autonomous subject, man as epistemic master: man becomes subject through the ascendancy of reason, and reason is developed in each human being through an initiation in philosophy. I characterize philosophy as this type of institution mostly by way of Descartes—with references to a set of texts and methodologies that connects itself to Descartes as an initiator of modern philosophy—keeping in mind the aim of delineating the function of the institution in which I am working, in which I am producing this writing. Viewed in this way, an institution provides the proper initiation, after having passed through which one may speak authoritatively in the delimited field of study in which one has been initiated. We become masters, experts. We pass through the institution and, if successful, become the perpetuators of the institution. We become subjects, the sites of institutional agency.

Someone who has been initiated in the institution is authorized to make these remarks. The critical vocabulary and concepts, the traditions, the texts and methodologies, the names—I may write them, may reinscribe them, as an institutional subject. It is in writing them—in writing this book—that I may affirm my position as subject. The "I" that writes here, that is written here, is an institutional "I," validated as such in the writing of the book. The subject writes the book, but the subject is also made by the book. At the same time, this subject arrives at a point of being ready to write the book by having acquired knowledge in a controlled institutional setting. When the subject gets to this point, there is the expectation, on the one hand, that the knowledge be presented according to accepted prescriptions of exposition—it must be "about" a discernible topic and must make reference to established scholarship in the area; and on the other, that it be an "original" contribution to the discipline, the product of this subject on whom a disciplined—and hence disciplinary—autonomy has been conferred. According to both expectations, the book should constitute a unity, something that represents the subject's mastery of a body of knowledge—although they both suggest a problem with the very notion of a book as unity. What is delimited within the unity of the book as institutionally produced work—what challenges this unity—is the capacity of writing to produce significations that exceed its institutional determination, which is also the power by which the book may claim "originality."

In the above paragraph I allude to the two epigraphs of this book, from Montaigne and Descartes. In both of them what is at issue is the possibility of the book as representation. There are two models put forth: one is that of the book that necessarily transforms and reforms the writer, with no clear, dualistic separation between them, neither achieving the status of pure unity; the other is that of the book whose aim would be a plenary representation of the author, or of the clear thoughts of the author, who is already a plenary subject. The first type of book is not a plenary representation, but a series of layers of

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signification in which the writer participates—the language of the text necessarily exceeds any control the author may attempt to impose on it and is a disruption of strictly instituted signification. If this type of book is a representation at all, it is one that is constructed in a system whose functioning codes necessarily involve dissemblance.[7] Of course Montaigne states at the outset, in his note to the reader, that his book is of the first type—"I am myself the matter of my book";[8] and Descartes, although he expresses the desire to have written a book of the second type, admits his discovery that such an aim was impossible without recourse to a representation that is, like the painter's practice of *chiaroscuro* to which it is compared, illusory. In the *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes finds that he is unable to control the deceptive vagaries of his own writing; and as I will show in chapter 5, that is precisely why the cogito must come on the scene. Following the cogito, the text of philosophy becomes completed work or *oeuvre*: the institution may be declared a unity with definite borders. Even in admitting the impossibility of *oeuvre*, Descartes affirms the latter's necessity—even if dissemblance is thereby required. Moving in the path of Montaigne, Descartes must act to subordinate, through grounding the writing subject, the vagaries of the *Essays* by which this subject explores its own limits.[9]

And likewise it is the multidirectional motion of writing that is subordinated, redirected, in the scholarly work. The choice of subject matter is institutionally restricted; the sentences are held together in a syntax, with each discipline having its accepted styles. Through its institutionality the book asserts a control over the boundaries of its contents; and this control in its turn becomes a sign of the author's power of control. But writing—with its "aphoristic energy"[10]—presents a constant evasion and a constant subversion of this control. There is a constant attempt on the part of the institution to reaffirm control: control is enacted, however, by way of a system in which signification is determined, in which the book is sealed as a unity. And the system (it is a liberal institution, in the United States) is open to limited alteration, transformation, according to the contributions presented in the form of writings. This system is itself a written series—a writing that effaces itself in its instantiation, which is the originating gesture of the institution: the institution writes itself by imposing the requirement to write, and then effaces this writing by closing borders to form a book.

I would like to announce, here in my opening statements, my project's engagement in and reflection on its own institutional status. Although there are references to and elaborations of the concept of "institution" throughout, and suggestions of its connection to contemporary institutionality, it is here in the first chapter that I would like to make that aspect of this study explicit and concentrated. The introductory section of any book functions as a kind of controlling section, an assurance that it is read as a definite type of undertaking.

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It begins the presentation of the material and the argument of the book, and thereby contributes to the unification of the theme of the book. Following the title and prefatory material, the opening chapter functions as an orientation for the reading subject. It is—if I may once again extend significations—an *institution* of the book. It is the section, more so than any other, where the institutional status of the book is affirmed, where the author's intention and controlling subjectivity are declared, where the sense of the book is delineated.

Of course, any attempt to present the entirety of the book in summary form is necessarily a betrayal of the specificity of the labor of the writing. The controlling theme, the intention, and so on, may be stated at the outset, but they are carried out only in the execution of the text. Insofar as it is an attempt to fix these factors on the book—even to render it a book, or a work, an *oeuvre*[11]—statements in the opening section are a limitation on the multiple directions, the essayistic composition, of the writing. As a challenge to such attempts, the writing continues to transgress the limits stated at the outset: hence the opening takes its place in a series with the other sections of the book.

That is one of the reasons that this chapter, having some functions of an introduction, is the first in the book's sequence of chapters: it sets itself apart from the other chapters in that it is the first and is introductory, but its status as a controlling section is de-emphasized by virtue of its participation in the series of chapters. It states concerns that will arise throughout the project, and makes references, more than the other chapters, to the other chapters; but each of the chapters will have its own singular contribution to the composition of the book. Each of them functions as an essay, in the sense I will elaborate in chapters 3 and 4; and each contributes to the overall purpose, carried out explicitly in chapters 5 and 6, the reading, the reinscription—the *writing*—of cogito.

INSTITUTIONAL DIVISIONS—BOOKS IN MODERNITY

Although Montaigne and Descartes may be said to belong, respectively, to literature and to philosophy, their writings are received in the canons of both disciplinary divisions. The ways in which each is treated would be different from one field to the other. One of my aims in reading Montaigne and Descartes together here is to examine and criticize the institutional separation. My emphases are on the functioning of literary language on the one hand, and on the elaboration of philosophical concepts on the other—effectively on the way that these two intersect and interact. I will demonstrate how Montaigne's extensive deployment of literary language occurs in relation to a specific his-

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torico-philosophical determination of writing; the particular philosophical concept I am interested in, of course, is that of the subject. And then, extending this demonstration, I will consider the instantiation of the cogito within a field of literary language—the ways in which the subject separates itself from literary language and subordinates the latter to its control. I am, in other words, interested in the cogito as marking a moment of separation of the institutional realms of philosophy and literature, as those realms come into play in this study, and as they govern classifications of books in modernity.

The very act of writing a book on the shape of modernity, I would like to suggest, participates in the repetition of the foundational gesture of modernity and thereby necessarily traverses some of these classifications. This is the case even if the founding gesture is discernible entirely as a dispersion over different times and places, is itself formed as a repetition that is necessarily the production of a difference, though a difference whose effacement is one task of modernity in that the latter works to present itself as unitary. Such a book, by its subject matter, places itself in a series with the books of modernity and plays the role of the book in modernity: it participates in the presentation of modernity as a narrative coherency, in its ideal form quite homogeneous and handed to us in the discipline of literary studies as the canon. Hence what is also characteristic of modernity is the continued effort to show the inadequacy of this presentation, to find those spots, which are effectively all over the place, in which coherency breaks down and may be maintained only as a simulacrum. (This is the characteristic that Lyotard valorizes in the modern, in constant tension with the claim to adequacy made by the received forms of representation; he thereby lays the ground for his characterization of the postmodern, the very point of whose strategies of presentation is the refusal of the adequacy of presentation.)[12]

In the Christian Middle Ages the book was the Bible, in which the signs of God were written in order to be read by humanity. Medieval ecclesiastical reading went to the correct allegorical interpretation of the signs of God. Books of commentary on the Bible were written under the aegis of *auctoritas*, which referred to God as the author of existence. The keys to apprehending existence, then, could be found in the writing of God that had been conferred on humanity. Canon formation during the Middle Ages was directed toward establishing those authors as *auctoritates* whose writing could be seen as contributing to the interpretation of the signs of God; certain books were thus accorded the status of absolute authority, and their teachings could not be questioned.[13] Modernity may then be seen as a giving way in this conception of the authority of the book, occurring with the affirmations that the representation of the world available in authoritative books and the world itself are often quite at odds with each other—that the world is continually exceeding

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its own delimitations as an inscription of signs. Of course, there is no one moment when this happens; indeed it may be said that there were moments of modernity occurring throughout the Middle Ages, whenever and wherever the book held its institutional position.[14] But it also may be said that modernity comes into full swing when this tension between books and the world becomes the object of institutional inquiry; and one may discover some of the historical moments of tension by way of works in the canon that thematize the tension.

In the foreword to a recent edition of *Don Quixote*, Carlos Fuentes suggests that Cervantes' novel provides an exemplary illustration of the inauguration of modernity. Although he acknowledges the futility of attempting to locate the moment of transition in one time and place—it is, after all, an emergence, which only in retrospect, in our narratives, begins to take the shape of a coherency—he finds it easy enough to state, "Given a choice in the matter, I have always answered that, for me, the modern world begins when Don Quixote de la Mancha, in 1605, leaves his village, goes out into the world, and discovers that the world does not resemble what he has read about it."[15] The world of books and the institution that has the charge of maintaining the closure of this world come under serious questioning: the written sign whose authority is presented as unquestionable shows itself to be flawed; written signs are no longer reliable, and a new ground for the foundation of knowledge must be found. And it is in this modern world that the space for the institution of the human subject is cleared: the knight of the rueful countenance "illustrates the rupture of a world based on analogy and thrust into differentiation. He makes evident a challenge that we consider peculiarly ours: how to accept the diversity and mutation of the world, while retaining the mind's power for analogy and unity, so that this changing world shall not become meaningless."[16] The relationship of humanity, the book, and the world is profoundly reconfigured.

In light of this shift, even the traditional notion of humanism has lately undergone revision. In a recent collection on the French Renaissance entitled *Humanism in Crisis*, that broadly based education—centered on revivified Greek and Latin texts by which a "universal" culture was sought—is shown to have been plagued from the beginning by the forces that have traditionally been portrayed as bringing on its demise. In introducing the book by explaining the critical need for the essays contained in it, Philippe Desan remarks,

> It seemed to me that, from very early on, the ideals presented in the texts of the ancients and replicated by humanist education simply did not convey or reflect the historical preoccupations of the intellectuals who read those texts. Nonetheless, my assumption was that those people were certainly not stupid and that they must have understood that what

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> they were reading in classical works did not relate much to their daily experience. I suspected either that they must have enjoyed living in a dream world or that some kind of dissidence also existed.[17]

Desan thus finds that this extension of the institution of reading that marked the Renaissance, following the invention of the printing press, the rediscovery and reinvention of antiquity following Charles VIII's invasion of Italy, and other events, necessitated the shift that is at issue here, which opens modernity in the received version with which I am working. And in the chapter he contributes to the collection, Desan identifies the "decline" of humanism—when the forces he names become fully active and necessitate new institutional configurations—as occurring "in France between 1580 and 1630—i.e., between Montaigne and Descartes."[18]

MONTAIGNE'S INSTITUTION

Montaigne's name figures quite prominently in *Humanism in Crisis*, as his writings offer so much testimony of a shifting attitude toward books and of the relocation of the agency of knowledge in the human intellect, of the crisis in the integrity of the written sign. Over the next few pages I would like to expand on this issue by way of a brief commentary on an essay of Montaigne in which the author speaks of the intellect and its relation to books and the world—an essay to which I will return several times in the course of the book—"Of the Institution of Children [*De l'institution des enfans*]"(I:26). The essay is primarily concerned with "institution" in the sense of education, of initiating children into the status of autonomous wielders of intellect; but also, I think, with another sense of institution, that of the maintenance of the place of the intellect such that it continues to have a social effectiveness. This essay emphasizes the importance of maintaining a tradition of reading books, and it also suggests, at a time when the authority of books is in serious question, that institution may be propagated in other ways.[19] Indeed, I would like to suggest that what Montaigne is getting at is an expanded notion of writing: interaction with the world is still a matter of reading and writing, but one that involves more than just the restricted version of the written sign that is to be found in the institution of the book.

In his treatment of institution, the transmission of knowledge and of the capacity to apprehend the world, Montaigne places emphasis on its function of strengthening a broader social stability, that is, of functioning as an institution. This stability has everything to do with the passing of the law of the father from one generation to the next, with a process of filiation, the continuity assured by the resemblance of the son to the father with regard both to physical appearance and to systems of mores.

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> Well, someone who had seen the preceding article ["Of Pedantry"] was telling me at my home [*chez moy*] the other day that I should have enlarged a bit on the subject of the institution of children. Now, Madame, if I had some competence in this matter, I could not use it better than to make a present of it to the little man who threatens soon to come out so bravely from within you [*de chez vous*] (you are too generous [*genereuse*] to begin otherwise than with a male). For having had so great a part in bringing about your marriage, I have a certain rightful interest in the greatness and prosperity of whatever comes out of it; besides that, the ancient claim that you have on my servitude is enough to oblige me to wish honor, good, and advantage to all that concerns you.[20]

Filiation is assured through the containment of the next generation in the familial network of the present one, the latter having an extended system of support in the contemporary class system whose manners of interrelation are reflected in Montaigne's affirmations that are at once deferential and reclaiming of his own titular authority. This institution is primarily in the dominion of males,[21] as it is through them that the reproduction of the same, over the threat of difference that the temporal progression presents, is carried out. In this institution women are relegated to a secondary position, adjuncts to the male desire for ascendancy, to be made a part of a household to enable the propagation of male family members for which their wombs serve as temporary lodging.

But as is often the case with Montaigne, the semantic content of his statements is undercut and even opposed by one or more of their other signifying aspects. When he speaks to Mme de Foix, the addressee of "Of the Institution of Children," of her being "too generous [*genereuse*] to begin otherwise than with a male," the word *genereuse* evidently bears the meaning of "noble, belonging to a *gens*," which it retains from its Latin origin. Its added connotation of "giving" is present also, a sense correlative with that of nobility. A dutiful, noble woman will be too giving not to provide her house with a male as the firstborn, so that the house may be maintained. But the sense of "giving" belongs to the word *genereuse* partly through a crossing of its different meanings; another meaning of *generosus* in Latin is "producing or generating well," specifically with respect to the procreative faculty. (As I will show further in chapter 3, it is important to see that Montaigne's French is embroidered with Latinity and that its meanings are often as a result multiplied.) So he is making a reference to Mme de Foix's female fertility, precisely the faculty that men do not have, what differentiates women from men. He is speaking of her difference and of her capacity to produce difference—which will of course be subordinated to the male authority of the house. Without male direction,

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women's production of difference would disrupt the male production of resemblance, as Montaigne remarks in "Of Idleness" (I:8): "We see that women, all alone, produce mere shapeless masses and lumps of flesh, but that to create a good and natural generation [*generation*] they must be made fertile with a different kind of seed."[22] But nonetheless Montaigne calls attention to this capacity and signals its necessity: the other must be sought out in the maintenance of the same, the same having no autonomous generative faculty and thereby depending on the other with which it intertwines itself. This description of procreation is a metaphor for the process of writing, both female and male aspects of which are avowed to be at work in the production of the *Essays*. As Montaigne refers to his mind's feminine generative capacity as productive of "imagination," "madness," and "revery,"[23] and only at the end briefly mentions the task of "put[ting] them in writing"[24] to give them shape, it is evident that he is valorizing the production of difference that is indispensable to any production.[25]

There is a further suggestion, in the selection of certain words and their possible other meanings in the passage from "Of the Institution of Children" considered above, that this difference will remain as such and not simply be appropriated to the same: in referring explicitly to Mme de Foix's womb, from which "the little man" will soon emerge, Montaigne uses the words *chez vous*. This expression resonates with his own *chez moy*, a few lines above, his own household with all its aristocratic accoutrements and *générosité*. If his own house will generate a lineage, the household to which Mme de Foix belongs will do the same, as will the household that belongs to her, her womb. And although her womb is presented as subordinate to her husband's household, the possibility is raised, in the wording used to describe it, that it will simply remain a different household and institution, in its own right, and so transform the conception of the uniqueness of male dominance. Montaigne's statement in "On Some Verses of Vergil" (III:5) on not being concerned with the education of his daughter, then, may also be understood as an affirmation of the difference of femininity in a world of masculine authority, of its right to constitute its own domain and thereby to take issue with the claim of masculinity to integral authority: "The government of women has a mysterious way of proceeding; we must leave it to them."[26]

The very fact that a woman is the addressee of this essay is a further disruption to the masculine closure of institution. The "you" addressed, the reader, is feminine—or the gender of the reader is de-emphasized, in gentle defiance of the very institution that Montaigne characterizes in this essay. Although Montaigne constantly insists on the difference between his own book and the great classics, as well as on his own lack of learned qualification, the act of writing the *Essays*, a book that makes constant reference to the

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classics, is an attempt to affect the character of reading and the firmness of institution as it is given. (In chapters 3 and 4 I will further address the relation between the *Essays* and the classical canon that they face in the sixteenth century.) The books of institution are selected in order to maintain filiation, to strengthen and add to the resemblance of male children to their fathers. There is, then, a reproduction of the same involved in this selection and in the ways by which the books are interpreted and taught. The *Essays* are not such a book—and the books of institution, in the face of the *Essays*, cannot simply maintain their institutional status.[27]

In many places throughout, including in "Of the Institution of Children," Montaigne suggests that this book is like a child, though a child that is markedly different from its parent, that is, that defies the standards of filiation. The comparison is one that follows the Western tradition of characterizing writing as filiation, or as the betrayal of filiation. A foundational formulation of this characterization, according to our canons, is in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates says that writing needs the presence of its "father" to guarantee its meaning or to answer questions about what it says. The implication is that since writing is usually read in the absence of its "father," it necessarily betrays the latter's intentions (275d–e); in its status as child it does not speak, and it allows for all sorts of interpretations of its signs. And although institution should, in keeping with its established function, be the maintenance of the patriarchal lineage, in opening his essay on the subject Montaigne characterizes his own book as disrupting that progression.

> I have never seen a father who failed to claim his son, however mangy or hunchbacked he was. Not that he does not perceive his defect, unless he is utterly intoxicated by his affection; but the fact remains that the boy is his. And so I myself see better than anyone else that these are nothing but the reveries of a man who has tasted only the outer crust of sciences in his childhood, and has retained only a vague general picture of them: a little of everything and nothing at all, in the French style [*à la Françoise*].[28]

The son who has skin or skeletal defects—that is, in whom the father is not recognizable in face or posture—is still avowed by the father to be his own. That is, the father will still claim paternal dominion over the son—but this dominion is not one that can maintain itself as unidirectional and as reproductive of its own image, if it allows its generation to be different from itself and affirms the recognition of this difference. And Montaigne likewise affirms that his book is a poor reflection on him: it is not only that his book is productive of difference with regard to the linear transmission of institution, but that it shows that he himself is not suited to this transmission. Rather

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than the "sciences" that would be appropriate to it, he offers "reveries," images that are at best poor representations of their objects, of which he never took anything except superficially, in his own childhood a secondary participant in the process of institution by which filiation would be strengthened. The remnants of his studies now leave him with a poor impression of the face of the sciences—not a reproduction of the same, but something that will produce difference in the form of fragmentation and decay. Nothing at all, "à la Françoise," in the French style or the French language—the language in which he composes his book, not the Latin that belongs to institution and to the fathers who will transmit it. His own relationship to Latin is, in any case, one that disrupts the paternal lineage, as he tells us toward the end of the essay. Although he learned Latin as an infant because of the efforts of his father, who wanted the best institution for his son, as a result of this striving for excellence it was his first language or "mother tongue"[29]—passing by way of the mother or the other, and thereby becoming transformed, before being brought back to the propagation of the same (I will address this point at greater length in chapter 3), and so not allowing the same to remain the same.

Montaigne continues his account of institution by telling us that, because of his relationship to the procedure, he is completely unsuited for participation in it.

> There is not a child halfway through school who cannot claim to be more learned than I, who have not even the equipment to examine him on his first lesson, at least not according to that lesson. And if they force me to do it, I am constrained, rather ineptly, to draw from it some matter of universal scope, on which I test his natural judgment: a lesson as strange to them as theirs is to me.[30]

The examination that Montaigne would give a pupil is one that would necessitate a change of direction in the latter's studies, that would derail the linearity of progression involved in institution. What Montaigne would aim for is what he himself is in the process of discovering, "natural judgment": a faculty that does not simply operate according to the prescriptions of institution, and whose directions are indeed quite different from if not utterly contrary to those prescribed. His guidance would lead the pupil away from the position assigned by institutional affiliation.

And likewise his own book, by the very process of its construction, is led away from being something produced purely and simply under the authority of its author, and by the same token from something that is contained within the tradition of reading and writing to which it necessarily, in that it is a book, addresses itself. "I have not had regular dealings with any solid book,

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except Plutarch and Seneca, from whom I draw like the Danaïds, incessantly filling up and pouring out. I attach some of this to this paper; to myself, little or nothing."[31] If Montaigne has dealt with very few solid books, his own book can't be called "solid"—it doesn't offer an entire, coherent set of teachings, but rather functions as an assemblage of fragments. One may read Montaigne's book as he reads the books of Plutarch and Seneca, desolidifying them in the process: he takes bits of them, passages that he attaches to his own paper, where they take on a character that they may not have had in their original contexts. (In chapters 3 and 4, I will treat Montaigne's practice of citation and its role in the different ways his writing produces and addresses signification.) And as the passages take their place in his book, none of their lessons stay with him: that is, the book, in the process of its assembly, produces meaning in ways that quite exceed the control of its "father"—in defiance of its filiation, and of the progression of institution that reading and writing normally involve. As a writing subject, Montaigne is anything but an integral, self-contained unity.[32]

That Montaigne extends this notion of the functioning of books to the entire canon, suggesting that they have capacities to produce meaning that well exceed their canonical status and the institutional closure that this status imposes, he makes evident in his statements on the role of books in his proposal for the institution of the child. "Dealings with men,"[33] direct experience through contact with the world rather than mediation through books, is of course more valuable to this late humanist; however, among these men there should be, first and foremost, "those who live only in the memory of books."[34] The value of books comes in their capacity to exceed their canonical determination, the restrictions that their authorial affiliation places on them. The pupil, following the guidelines of his instructor,

> will associate, by means of histories, with those great souls of the best ages. It is a vain study, if you will; but also, if you will, it is a study of inestimable value, and the only study, as Plato tells us, in which the Lacedaemonians had kept a stake for themselves. What profit will he not gain in this field by reading the *Lives* of our Plutarch? But let my guide remember the object of his task, and let him not impress on his pupil so much the date of the destruction of Carthage as the characters of Hannibal and Scipio, nor so much where Marcellus died as why his death there showed him unworthy of his duty. Let him be taught not so much the histories as how to judge them. That, in my opinion, is of all matters the one to which we apply our minds in the most varying degree. I have read in Livy a hundred things that another has not read in him. Plutarch has read in him a hundred besides the ones I could read, and perhaps besides what the author had put in.[35]

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The written signs in books may be dislocated from their various institutional determinations; the language of books may become the language of the reading subject—what Montaigne is proposing may be termed a "counterinstitution." These signs lose their quality as authoritative, as determining all knowledge of the world. Rather, they take their place alongside the signs found in the world; the idea of reading becomes expanded and begins to refer to the apprehension of all phenomena encountered in the world. Institution itself is a part of this writing: the guide will "imprint" lessons on the disciple. But this apprehension will function in a state of openness, the faculty of judgment continually adapting itself in response to the singularity of its interactions, the judging subject allowing itself to be shaped by the flux of the world:

> whoever represents to himself as in a painting the great picture of our mother Nature in her full majesty; whoever reads such universal and constant variety in her face; whoever finds himself there, and not merely himself, but a whole kingdom, as a dot made with a very fine brush: he alone estimates things according to their just proportions.[36]

The world is placed in a picture—not a picture that represents accurately, according to the familiar perspective of the judging subject; but one that offers a very disorienting image that defies the attempt to contain the world in knowledge that follows institutional prescription.

And in this way the world comes to be seen as a book, a book that provides an image of the self that continually challenges the borders of a self produced in the filiation of institution as well as the institutionalized borders of the book.

> This great world, which some multiply further as being only a species under one genus, is the mirror in which we must look at ourselves to recognize ourselves from the proper angle. In short, I want it to be the book of my student. So many humors, sects, judgments, opinions, laws, and customs teach us to judge sanely of our own, and teach our judgment to recognize its own imperfection and natural weakness, which is no small apprenticeship.[37]

This book is an open book, open to continual rediscovery and reinterpretation, not under the determining control of an *auctor*, not restricted in its meaning like those whose boundaries of meaning and interpretation are set by institution. It is notable that Montaigne does not name God or any other entity as the author of this book and that this characterization follows a treatment of books in which their value is said to lie in that they exceed their

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