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Given the enormous disparity in size between the "L'Apologie de Raymond Sebond" (II: 12) and "Des pouces" (II: 26), by a factor of about one hundred and seventy-four to one (the number of pages in each), it would seem an unreasonable thing to ask of Montaigne's text that the discourse on thumbs in any significant way respond to, or be placed in the balance with, or double, the one on theology. Yet if what has elsewhere proved true should ultimately prove so here, perhaps it would not have been by accident that such an apparently unmatchable pair of essays as these should immediately follow so eminently matchable a pair as the two about cruelty. For we might need a little encouragement at this juncture.

If it is difficult to imagine much of the "Apologie" (II: 12) finding its reflection in "Des pouces" (II: 26), the reverse, on the other hand, is by no means out of the question. As it happens, the first sentence of the latter turns out to contain no less than five echoes from the former, and in each instance but one, these words and turns of phrase can be found nowhere else in Livre II but in these two essays: "Tacitus recite que, parmy certains Roys barbares, pour faire une obligation assurée, leur maniere estoit de *joindre* estroictement leurs *mains* droites l'une à l'autre, et *s'entrelasser* les *pouces*; et quand, à force de les presser, le sang en estoit monté au bout, ils les blessoient de *quelque legere* pointe, et puis se les *entresuçoient*" (II: 26, 670a [Pléiade ed.]). Near the beginning of the "Apologie" Montaigne speaks of those who profess to be atheists but who "ne lairront de *joindre les mains* vers le ciel, si vous leur attachez un bon coup d'espee en la poitrine" (II: 12, 423c). Besides the verbal echo, unique to these two essays in Livre II according to the Leake *Concordance*, these two hand-joining gestures are each accompanied by a puncture, that of the threatening sword and the one made by "*quelque legere pointe*." Now the latter is anticipated in the "Apologie" by a "*quelque* *marque legiere*" that is itself presented, in a self-referential moment, as a sufficient sign of resemblance: "aux peintres, quand ils peignent le ciel, la terre, les mers, les monts, les isles escartées, nous leur condonons qu'ils nous en rapportent seulement *quelque* *marque legiere*" (II: 12, 519c)--as if it were referring to itself. To itself, that is, as a sufficient representation, a sufficient recollection, of something else--that is, of the "quelque legere *pointe*" that echoes it in II: 26. As if, that is, the actual "isles escartées" and the painted repetition of them were to each other as these two isolated essays--themselves distant islands in

the ocean of the *Essais* separated by more than a dozen intervening chapters--are, though with the difference that each is in turn the original of which the other can serve as the recollection. That it is indeed accurate to read the *Essais'* distantly-echoing essays, or perhaps the echoes themselves, as "isles escartées" is suggested by the way that adjective is used in the essay "De Democritus et Heraclitus"--"*Semant icy un mot, icy un autre, eschantillons despris de leur piece, escartez, sans dessein et sans promesse*" (I: 50, 289c)--that so self-referentially echoes (as I argue elsewhere) its equivalent in its symmetrically-placed companion essay "De l'oisiveté": "tant de chimeres et monstres fantasques les uns sur les autres, *sans ordre et sans propos*" (I: 8, 34a), showing that they were themselves examples of such words "semés" here and there in the text, though obviously not without order or design.

Strange to tell, these "isles escartées" re-emerge some thirty-six pages later in the "Apologie," where they are cited as something (1) that might escape one's attention (so far they haven't here), (2) that can best be accounted for when one has figured out which *center* it is that all things revolve around (which we have, as far as the *Essais* are concerned: the numerically central chapter of each book), and (3) that involves the discovery of a counterpart of equal significance (so that even the minuscule "pouces"] can become that for the massive "Apologie"):

Ptolemeus, qui a esté un grand personnage, avoit estably les bornes de nostre monde; tous les philosophes anciens ont pensé en tenir la mesure, sauf quels *Isles escartées* qui pouvaient eschapper à leur cognoissance; c'eust esté Pyrhoniser, il y a mille ans, que de mettre en doute la science de la Cosmographie, et les opinions qui en estoient receuës d'un chacun, c'estoit heresie d'avouer des Antipodes; voilà de nostre siecle une grandeur infinie de terre ferme, non pas *une isle* ou une contrée particuliere, mais une partie *esgale à peu près en grandeur à celle que nous cognoissions*, qui vient d'estre decouverte. Les Geographes de ce temps ne faillent pas d'asseurer que meshuy tout est trouvé et que tout est veu, "Nam quod adest praesto, placet, et *pollere videtur*" [Ce qu'on possède plaît, on le préfère à tout (Lucretius)].  
(II: 12, 555ab)

No better proof is needed that the Essais are in this passage speaking of their own "cosmographie," of their bipolar and concentric construction in which each essay finds a counterpart on the other side of the central chapter of the book in which it is placed, than the fact that Montaigne is engaging at this very moment in one of the corresponding echoes through which that counterpart may be discovered: In "Des pouces" he derives the etymology of *pouce* from *pollere*: "Les medecins disent que les pouces sont les maistres doigts de la main, et que leur etymologie Latine vient de *pollere*" (II: 26, 670a). There is, in other words, a *pouce* hidden in that *pollere* in the "Apologie."

*Pouces* themselves appear in the "Apologie," and in ways that anticipate the erotic use to which a *pollex* [pouce] will be put in "Des pouces": "Les Grecs l'appellent *antixeir*, comme qui diroit une autre main. Et il semble que par fois les Latins les prennent aussi en ce sens de main entiere, 'Sed nec vocibus exitate blandis, / Molli *pollice* nec rogata surgit' [Mais point besoin de voix charmeuse qui la dresse / Ni d'excitation caressante du *pouce* (Martial)]" (II: 26, 670a). In the "Apologie" it appears as both *pouce* and *pollice*, in two different contexts on two consecutive pages. In the first Montaigne is speaking of chiromancy: "Il ne faut que sçavoir que le lieu de Mars loge au milieu du triangle de la main, celui de Venus au *pouce*, et de Mercure au petit doigt" (II: 12, 542a). In the second context, the thumb, in its Latin incarnation, does what it is asked to do as *pollice* in "Des pouces" (II: 26): mold something into shape: "les sciences et les arts ne se jettent pas en moule, ains se forment et figurent peu à peu en les maniant et *pollissant* à plusieurs fois, comme les ours façonnent leurs petits en *les lechant à loisir* . . . en retastant et pétrissant cette nouvelle matiere, la remuant et l'eschaufant, j'ouvre à celuy qui me suit quelque faciitee pour en jouir plus à son ayse, et la luy rends plus souple et plus maniable, "ut hymettia sole / Cera remollescit, tractaque *pollice*, multas / Vertitur in facies, ipsoque fit utilis usu [C'est la cire d'Hymette amollie au soleil / Et qui, pétrie au *pouce*, y prenant mille formes, Servira d'autant mieux qu'on s'en servira moins (Ovid)]" (II: 12, 543a). That these two thumbs should appear in the "Apologie" so close together (just a page apart) and for such apparently unrelated reasons is itself suspicious; that what is actually said on those two occasions--that Venus dwells in the thumb, that the thumb has a shaping power--should reappear, combined, in the venereal use to which it is (though vainly) put in "Des pouces" is even more so.

So much so that one begins to wonder if there isn't perhaps an erotic subtext to both passages. That perhaps even the "licking... at leisure [*lechant à loisir*]" may come into play, together with the "mutual sucking [*entresuçoient*]" of "Des pouces." No *sucking* goes on anywhere else in the 1580 edition (the first edition) of the *Essais* but here--and, as it happens, in the "Apologie": "L'humeur que *succe* la racine d'un arbre, elle se fait tronc, feuille et fruit" (II: 12, 584a). Nor any of that other activity in which thumbs are engaged--the "interlocking" of "et *s'entrelasser* les pouces"--except, again, in the "Apologie": "À manier une balle d'arquebouse sous le second doigt, celui du milieu estant *entrelassé* par dessus, il faut extremement se contraindre, pour advoüer qu'il n'y en ait qu'une, tant le sens nous en represente deux" (II: 12, 577a). Here--in addition to elephants who perform "des dances à plusieurs *entrelasseures*, coupeures et diverses cadances très-difficiles à aprendre" (II: 12, 443a), the halcyon who builds her nest by "*entrelassant*" (II: 12, 460a) fish bones, and the "*entrelassemens* des corps celestes" (II: 12, 517c)--it is *fingers* that are interlaced, as it will be *thumbs* in "Des pouces." And in a passage (cited above) that speaks of how this *entrelassement* gives rise to a tactile illusion that makes us think there are two where there is only one. Once more Montaigne's text refers,

above and beyond its immediate context, to itself--to the *entrelasseures* these two essays together perform.

"Des pouces" does what it says thumbs do not only by interlacing itself with its corresponding text but also by being an *antixeir*, another *hand* by virtue of being a synecdoche of a hand, a part that can stand for the whole ("une autre main . . . et aussi en ce sens de main entiere" [II: 26, 670a]). For *pouce* is to *main* as "Des pouces" is to the "Apologie," in which hands are the very sign of God's handiwork, as the thumbs that reappear in these two essays are the sign of Montaigne's. It is at this point that the argument itself of the "Apology" assumes a more than theological relevance:

Aussi n'est-il pas croyable que toute cette machine n'ait quelques marques empreintes de la *main* de ce grand architecte, et qu'il n'y ait quelque images es choses du monde raportant aucunement à l'ouvrier qui les a basties et formées. Il a laissé en ces hauts ouvrages le caractere de sa divinité, et ne tient qu'à nostre imbecillité que nous ne le puissions découvrir. C'est ce qu'il nous dit luy mesme, que ses operatons invisibles, il nous les manifeste par les visibles. Sebond c'est travaillee à ce digne estude, et nous montre comment il n'est piece du monde qui desmante son facteur. . . . Car ce monde est un temple tressainct, dedans lequel l'homme est introduict pour y contempler des statues, non ouvrées de mortelle *main*, mais celles que la divine pensée a fait sensibles. (II: 12, 424ab)

This was the principal argument of Raymond Sebond's *Theologia naturalis sive liber creaturarum*, which Montaigne's father had set him the task of translating, and of which the "Apologie de Raymond Sebond" is the defense. What happens in the course of that defense is that Montaigne, while at first seconding Sebond's contention that the world is full of the imprint of God's hand (which is why not only stars but elephants and halcyons too are able to perform intricate *entrelasseures*, their surprising intelligence being a faint reflection of their Creator's), eventually undercuts that argument's reliance on human reason (reason that progresses from the evidence of visible things to invisible ones) because Montaigne finds it necessary (in a "dernier tour descrite . . . un coup desesperé, auquel il faut abandonner vos armes pour faire perdre à vostre adversaire les siennes" [II: 12, 540a]) to argue that human reason is too fallible to argue anything at all. That we can draw no conclusion about God, nor even approach Him, by our own means. Our grasp--our hands--are too small; the "Apologie" closes with the image of God's hand doing what man's cannot: "'O la vile chose . . . et abjecte que l'homme, s'il ne s'esleve au dessus de l'humanité! . . . Car de faire *la poignée* plus grande que *le poing* . . . est impossible et monstrueux. Ny que l'homme se monte au dessus de soy et de l'humanité: car il ne peut voir que de ses yeux, ny saisir que de ses prises. Il s'eslevera si Dieu lui preste extraordinairement *la main*; il s'eslevera, abandonnant et renonçant à ses propres moyens, et se laissant hausser et subslever par les moyens purement celestes" (II: 12, 588a).

The "Apologie" indeed does for hands what "Des pouces" does for thumbs, abounding in examples of all they can do: "Zenon peignoit de geste son imagination sur cette partition des facultez de l'ame: la main espandue et ouverte, c'estoit apparence; la main à demy serrée et les doigts un peu croches, consentement; le poing fermé, comprehension; quand, de la main gauche, il venoit encore à clorre ce poing plus estroit, science" (I: 12, 483c). "Quoy des mains? nous requerons, nous promettons, appellons, congedions, menaçons, prions, supplions, nions, refusons, craignons, vergoignons, doubtons, instruisions, commandons, incitons, encourageons, jurons . . . d'une variation et multiplication à l'envy de la langue" (II: 12, 431c).

But what also happens, in a kind of parody of Sebond's project, is that Montaigne counters Sebond's evidence of God's hand in His creation by planting evidence of the imprint of his--Montaigne's--thumb in *his*. Thumbs become the counterpart of God's hand, the evidence of Montaigne's handiwork in the intratext of these essays. Here is a punning example: "Comme si ce luy estoit plus et moins de remuer un empire ou la feuille d'un arbre, et si la providence s'exerçoit autrement, inclinant l'évenement d'une bataille, que le sault d'une *puce*! La *main* de son gouvernement se preste à toustes choses de pareille teneur, mesme force et mesme ordre; nostre interest n'y apporte rien; nos mouvements et nos mesures ne le touchent pas. «Deus ita artifex magnus in magnis, ut minor non sit in parvis» [Dieu, si grand ouvrier dans les grandes choses, ne l'est pas moins dans les petites (Augustine)]." Leave the *puces* to God, the *pouces* to Montaigne. Nothing is too small to escape the attention of either, and those who cannot believe that Montaigne could have been concerned with something as minor as the exact placement of his *pouces* do not realize the extent to which he has designs on playing (or, given the parodic quality it assumes here, of playing at playing) God in the *Essais*.

In one of the two appearances of *pouces* in Livre II other than those in "Des pouces" and the "Apologie" what is at issue is precisely whether such a thing is possible. Whether, that is, it is possible to be precise in the number of *pouces* one has created otherwise than by chance: "Un homme qui pense ailleurs ne faudra point, à un *pousse* près, de refaire tousjours un mesme nombre et mesure de pas au lieu où il se promene; mais, s'il ly est avec attention de les mesurer et conter, il toruvra que ce qu'il faisoit par nature et par hazard, il ne le fera pas si exactment par dessein" (II: 12, 634a'). Once again, Montaigne has found a way to have it both ways: this *pousse*, like all the other *pouces* (and it is the same word, despite the variant spelling), is both precise and unconscious. Like the "sans ordre et sans propos"/"sans dessein et sans promesse" symmetrically placed in I: 8 and I: 50, it has deniability.

The other *pouce* to appear in Livre II beyond the confines of II: 12 and II: 26 provides an even more remarkable clue to the interpretation of Livre II's *pouces*: "Je l'ai veu, par delà soixante ans, . . . faire le

tour de la table sur son *pouce*" (II: 2, 326c). Montaigne is speaking of his father, the man who imposed on Montaigne the task of translating Sebond's theological treatise, a filial duty he fulfilled not only by doing the translation, but by writing as well the "Apologie" to justify his father's faith in the worth of Sebond's book. And then Montaigne created a context for that defense that enabled him at the same time to thumb his nose at the ludicrous frailty of Sebond's (and, alas, his father's!) intelligence and yet also accomplish the feat for which his father was famous: to balance his entire weight on a *pouce*. For that is the remarkable stunt "Des pouces" pulls off when it becomes the *antixeir* (the "other hand") of a text one hundred and seventy-four times its size.