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On Similitudes: Montaigne in Matthew Prior's *Alma* and the Late "Dialogues of the Dead"

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"The work [of Matthew Prior] is far from deserving to be neglected. He that shall peruse it will be able to mark many passages, to which he may recur for instruction or delight; many from which the poet may learn to write, and the philosopher to reason." Thus Samuel Johnson summed up his account of the merit and faults of Matthew Prior in his *Lives of the Poets*.[1] And yet, from the vantage point of posterity, Johnson's call to attend to Prior's works appears the first sign of the increasing neglect in which the poet has subsided ever since his death in 1721. The consideration of the justice of Prior's fortunes as a writer lies beyond the scope of this essay, which seeks instead to reclaim him as a figure of importance at least for literary history. The extensive debt to Montaigne that can be traced in Prior's late works attests to his philosophical inclinations, and the study of it enlightens a crucial aspect of the reception of the *Essais* across the Channel after Charles Cotton's English translation (1685–86).[2]

By then (late 1710s), Prior had suffered his fall from grace. His origins were humble and obscure, but his talents had raised him to a position of great political influence in the first two decades of the eighteenth century, and he had been a key figure in the settlement of the peace of Utrecht (1713). However, with the fall of the Tory ministry of Harley and Bolingbroke (to whom Prior was closely associated), his luck ceased, and he was put under house arrest by the new Whig government, which sought (unsuccessfully, as it turned out) to impeach him with Robert Harley. He was released, penniless, only a year later, in 1716, but he managed to secure relative economic tranquillity thanks to the charity of his friends (Harley especially), and to the popularity of his poetry (his 1719 *Poems*, sold by subscription, was one of the most profitable books in eighteenth-century publishing history).[3] The long Hudibrastic poem *Alma, or, The Progress of the Mind*, written in dialogic form during Prior's confinement in 1715–16 and published in 1719, sheds light on a vein of humorous scepticism that

descends from Montaigne to Pope and Hume.[4] Equally, the four prose "dialogues of the dead" that he composed in his late years reveal the eclectic nature of Prior's philosophy, and, although they remained in manuscript until 1907, we have evidence for their contemporary circulation.[5] The *Dialogue between Mr. John Locke and Seigneur de Montaigne* and *Alma* will be the principal focus of this essay.

In the *Dialogue between Locke and Montaigne*,[6] Prior stages a dispute between two attitudes to the practice of philosophy. According to Pope, who read the piece in manuscript after Prior's death in 1721 and, we are told, much enjoyed it,[7] the opposition is between a "very loose" and a "most regular" way of thinking: Montaigne represents the wide-ranging and copious richness of the gentleman, and Locke the punctilious methodology of the system-building metaphysician. Thus, when Locke accuses Montaigne of pilfering his ideas from other authors, whilst priding himself on "spin[ning] my Work out of my own thoughts," Montaigne retorts:

> Spin! so does a Spider out of her own Bowels; and yet a Cobweb is good for Nothing else . . . but to catch flies, and Stanch cut Thumbs. I am so far from concealing what you seem to call Thefts that I glory in them. . . . Let me be Compared to a Bee, who takes Something from every Flower and Shrub, and by that various Labour collects one of the greatest Ingredients of Human health, and the very Emblem of Plenty. (604–13)

Indeed, Prior is not weaving this double simile out of his own thoughts: he is filching it from his friend Swift, who had similarly described the Ancients and the Moderns in his *Battel of the Books* (1704), thus performing the argument in favor of literary thievery.[8]

But the irony is more complex: throughout the dialogue Prior is reworking into his piece many *loci* out of Montaigne's "De l'institution des enfants" (I.26), which, among its textual folds, offers this passage to the reader:

> Les abeilles pillotent deçà delà les fleurs, mais elles en font après le miel, qui est tout leur; ce n'est plus thyn, ny marjolaine: ainsi les pieces empruntées d'autruy, [l'élève] les transformera et confondra, pour en faire un ouvrage tout sien. (157)[9]

Similarly, Montaigne is here transforming and fusing a long medieval and humanist tradition of apian imagery,[10] ultimately stemming from his much-admired Seneca (*Epistulae* LXXXIV.5), to serve as an ironic foil for his unwavering commitment (especially discussed in "De l'institution" but ubiquitous in the *Essais*) to what he calls "emprunt" (borrowing).

Prior transforms the simile, glancing at Montaigne's passage through Swift's, and framing what might be called, borrowing the phrase of a classicist, a "window" allusion.[11] As he acts out his argument, he indirectly suggests a similitude between his own literary practice and that of Mon-

taigne, and seems to intimate a coincidence between his viewpoint and that expressed by the Frenchman's persona in his dialogue. And indeed the Montaigne persona has been interpreted as Prior's mouthpiece,[12] and his engagement with the French philosopher throughout his works as one of unambiguous concord.[13] However, the truth of this remark appears more nuanced when we observe Prior's borrowings from the *Essais*: Prior does not simply "inherit" a sceptical way of thinking from Montaigne, he is also constantly engaged in a performance of this scepticism, which transforms his debt to the Frenchman into an ironic dramatization of his own positions.[14]

In the unfinished essay "Opinion," Prior imitates the digressive style and embraces the views of the French essayist on the changeableness of men's minds. And yet he maintains the impossibility of similitude: "no Man is so different from another as the Same man is from himself" (239–40)—an opinion that is itself readapted from Montaigne's "De l'inconstance" (II.1) and "Du repentir" (III.2), in which the essayist sketches the lineaments of his own thoughts in terms of constant contradiction. Of such nature is the relation between Prior and Montaigne: a parallel can subsist only when an ironic incongruity disrupts it, a similitude can be built only on the uncertain foundation of difference. The Montaignian moments in Prior's corpus always enact such difference; they ironize, they falsify Montaigne—and are perhaps truly Montaignian because of their contradictoriness.

The *Dialogue between Locke and Montaigne* is as much a dispute between the English empiricist and the French essayist as it is a conversation between Prior and the *Essais*; in it and in other late works such as *Alma*, Prior's allusions to Montaigne are "allusions" in the etymological sense of the word (from the Latin *ad-lūdere*), they "play with" the text of the *Essais*, and, in composing a similitude between himself and his French master, Prior is performing the sceptical lesson he received. When in the *Essais* Montaigne talks of his borrowings as a form of incrustation, or a shell formed on himself and his text, he avows that "Je ne dis les autres, sinon pour d'autant plus me dire"[15] ("De l'institution," 153)—thus Prior, through the shell of personae, says Montaigne to say himself, or, borrowing an expression from *Alma*, he "plays the commentator" (III.156) in order to show himself entirely his own.

In the *Dialogue* Locke accuses Montaigne of literary thievery by openly borrowing a passage from "De l'inequalité qui est entre nous" (I.42): as we think of a horse in terms of its natural qualities rather than its fine trappings, so we should consider men for what is their own nature rather than their external possessions. And, as Montaigne has written his essays extensively borrowing thoughts and phrases from other authors, so he hasn't actually

written anything worthy of consideration. Thus, forcing a syllogism onto Montaigne's text, Locke charges him of a recidivism in thieving to which Montaigne had already pleaded guilty in "Du pedantisme" (I.25).[16] There Montaigne, after attacking the fatuity of pedantry by reusing a Homeric simile (as birds carry food in their beaks to their chicks without eating it, so pedants do not properly ingest the contents of the lessons they deliver to their infant charges),[17] adds:

> C'est merveille combien proprement la sottise se loge sur mon exemple. Est-ce pais faire de mesme, ce que je fay en la plus part de cette composition? Je m'en vay, escornifflant par-cy par-là, des livres, les sentences qui me plaisent . . . pour les transporter en cettuy-cy, où . . . elles ne sont non plus miennes, qu'en leur premiere place. (141)[18]

The passage, however, is a later addition subsequent to the 1588 edition of the *Essais* (it appeared for the first time in the 1595 posthumous edition, which included Montaigne's handwritten additions in the Bordeaux Exemplar).[19] What Prior is borrowing for Locke was originally a manuscript marginal note in the Bordeaux Exemplar, written by Montaigne after 1588 and commenting on the 1580/2 text (the Homeric simile). Locke therefore plays the antagonistic commentator by rehearsing a passage which is itself a gloss on Montaigne's earlier "exemple." Prior restages Montaigne's own concerns with humanist practices of learning, thus engaging with the *Essais* in a way that bears a similitude to Montaigne's ironic relationship with the erudition of his own text.[20]

And in fact, as the genre of the "leçons" of the French humanists had grown out of the practice of the "glose" in sixteenth-century France, so had the "commentaire" developed into a form of "essai."[21] But, if the commentators tended to smooth out textual difficulties and provide coherence, Montaigne propped his own incoherence and variety precisely on the irreducible difference and disparity of ancient *exempla* and *sententiae*.[22] Montaigne's indebtedness to the practice of glossing and commentary is indeed rehearsed in the text of the *Essais*, often ironically.

Thus, the initial section of "De l'experience" (III.13, the final essay of the book) displays the gloss as an addition to the text that obscures its meaning, and dissipates it, opening up infinite paths of enquiry, and leaving men in a labyrinthine quest after an illusion of truth. And, as Montaigne talks about the incessant, irregular thrust of the "esprit" beyond itself, he borrows from Étienne de La Boétie (his intimate friend who died at thirty-two, and whose works he posthumously edited for publication in 1571) a poetic passage describing the paradox of a river being always the same although always made of different water, each wave pushing and being pushed beyond itself, and adds:

Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations, qu'à interepreter les choses: et plus de livres sur les livres, que sur autre sujet: Nous ne faisons que nous entregloser. *Tout fourmille de commentaires; d'autheurs, il en est grand cherté.* (1115)[23] [my italics to indicate another addition to the 1588 text in the 1595 edition]

Montaigne here seems to find again his theme after meandering into despair and paradox; and yet he is also adding his own gloss to the friend's gloss, for the passage from La Boétie is itself a reinterpretation (in some lines a literal translation) of Pythagoras's discourse on metempsychosis, death and rebirth of matter, and transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (XV.179–85). Thus Montaigne is also commenting on the inexorable flow of memory, writing several years after La Boétie's death, and the impossibility of knowing a friend fully: we cannot but "intergloss" each other, add our own feeble interpretation to the unknowable. Indeed, after 1588, Montaigne adds another manuscript marginal gloss in the Bordeaux Exemplar ironically degrading his text to a swarming "commentaire."[24]

Just a few lines later Montaigne admits that "mon theme se renverse en soy" and that explanatory glosses only substitute the terms they purport to clarify with more obscure words: "Une pierre c'est un corps: Mais qui presseroit, Et corps qu'est-ce? substance: et substance de quoy? ainsi de suitte: acculeroit en fin le respondant au bout de son Calepin" (1116).[25] This passage provides the materials for Montaigne's attack on Locke in the *Dialogue*:

I hold a Stone in my hand, and ask you what it is, You tell me 'tis a body, I ask you what is a Body, you reply it is a Substance; I am troublesome enough once more to ask You what is a Substance, you look graver imediately, and inform me that it is something whose Essence consists in Extension in such a manner as to be capable of receiving it, in Longitude, Latitude, and Profundity; The Devil is in it if I am not Answered. (104–10)

Prior borrows Montaigne's imaginary interrogation of his own self-glossing text, and joins it with a definition of *res extensa* taken from Descartes's "Meditatio Tertia."[26] By collapsing Descartes and Locke into an ambiguous "You" (and their philosophies can be justly considered different, even opposed in their respective rationalism and empiricism), Prior has his Montaigne compose an uncanny similitude between the two as methodological system makers, thus staging the irregular eclecticism that characterizes the heaping of "emprunts" in the *Essais*.[27]

Such eclecticism is tightly bound to the apian simile: as an eclectic gathers things out of their context (the Greek etymology of the word comes from the verb λέγω, "gather," and the preposition ἐκ, "from"), so does the bee collect nutrients from different flowers. Indeed, Montaigne imagines in "De la phisionomie" (III.12) that "quelqu'un pourroit dire de moy: que j'ay seulement faict icy un amas de fleurs estrangeres, n'y ayant fourny du mien,

que le filet à les lier" (1102).[28] Thus the *Essais* display their kinship with the anthology (literally a "collection of flowers," ἄνθος, "flower," and again the verb λέγω) and the commonplace book, in its paradoxical status as something composed entirely out of alien materials and yet as a very personal object—a diary of readings, and a collection compiled for private use, both a *copia* (a manuscript copy) and a *cornucopia* (an abundant receptacle of passages, resembling the mythical horn of plenty).[29]

Locke similarly maintains that Montaigne "only ha[s] to go to [his] Commonplace book [and] find out some Excerpta" (620–21) to write, to which Montaigne replies that "Truth and reason lye in common to all the World like Air and Water" (569–70). But, before reaching this stately conclusion, he revealingly digresses into a metaphor for textual collecting:

> If I am in the possession of a Medal or a Jewel, what care I if it came out of the Arundel Collection, was taken by the Duke of Bourbon in the plunder of the Vatican, If Irene wore it in her Bulla, of even if Memmius brought it to Rome from Corinth. (565–69)

This sounds more like Prior than Montaigne: Prior was an avid collector of medals, a practice that he mentions often in his works.[30] And yet one should care about the provenance of a medal, for, as Prior says in his unfinished essay on *Learning*, "the Antiquary or Virtuoso will be sure to top false ones upon [the Gentleman-collector]" (100–1); indeed "Charles Patin was Banished [out of the French] Kingdom because it was Suspected by some that the Otho which he Sold the King was not Genuine" (*Opinion*, 143–45). Such are the risks of dealing in medals, and collections of *loci* are not exempt from concealed trickeries: Memmius might have brought medals from Greece for the benefit of luxurious Rome, but he was also the dedicatee of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, the Epicurean poem denying Providence and godly intervention (or indeed interest) in human affairs, and a source of plentiful borrowings both in the *Essais* and in Prior's poems (*Solomon* preeminently).

As a medal may be true or false, but always remains the object of intense desire on the collector's part, so the truthfulness or fallacy of a *locus* does not and should not prevent it from being borrowed. "Autant peut faire le sot, celuy qui dit vray, que celuy qui dit faux" (973),[31] Montaigne says in "De l'art de conferer" (III.8): as a collector can buy a false medal not realising the mistake, so a foolish man can borrow a truthful saying without being aware of its value—or a wise man may relate a foolish thing fully realising its silliness. This is why we should be attentive to "comment [la verité] est logée en son autheur" (981),[32] to the forms of presentation of the borrowed piece—to judge whether the collector of *loci* is wise or foolish in his wide-

ranging gathering: "nous sommes sur la maniere, non sur la matiere du dire" (973).[33] In other words, the "emprunt" is always both an object (the passage borrowed) and an action (the borrowing of it); and it should always be considered as a literary performance rather than as an acquisition of an *auctoritas*. And in this point Montaigne is truly Prior's master, and Prior truly the pupil, because he is mischievous enough to apply the teacher's judicious lesson to judge of his authority. In this consists Prior's debt to Montaigne: not in alluding to Montaignian passages as authorities for his discourse, but as ways of testing their wisdom and his own scepticism.

According to Mat (Prior's persona in *Alma*), among the many follies besetting men when "Alma settles in the Head" (III.418), medal collecting figures prominently. Such is the "Toil" spent by the collector "[t]o get one Medal wanting yet, / And perfect all his Roman Sett"—but when

> 'Tis found: and O his happy Lot!
> 'Tis bought, lock'd up, and lies forgot:
> Of These no more You hear him speak:
> He now begins upon the Greek.
> These rang'd and show'd, shall in their Turns
> Remain obscure, as in their Urns.
> (III.448–57)

As Mat satirizes collectors because of the triviality of an enterprise undertaken for its own sake, which leaves the objects in their "obscurity," Prior obliquely glances at the accumulators of knowledge—those ants storing up pieces of philosophical systems. But he also engages in a form of self-mockery:[34] thus Prior ironizes about his own collecting, both numismatic and textual, for Mat had similarly brimmed with boastful pride in his copious commonplacing in the second canto:

> . . . Richard,[35] cast your Eye,
> By Night upon a Winter-Sky:
> Cast it by Day-light on the Strand,
> Which compasses fair Albion's Land:
> If you can count the Stars that glow
> Above, or Sands that lie below;
> Into those Common-places look,
> Which from Great Authors I have took;
> And count the Proofs I have collected,
> To have my writings well protected.
> (II.533–42)

The (indeed commonplace) similes of stars and grains of sand standing for innumerability here hint at the futility of collecting, for there would be no end to it. Not only do these lines ring with the proverbial *superbia* of the pedant, but they also rehearse Montaigne's argument about concealing one's

"emprunts" in the text as a way to "protect" the text from critics: they would justly fear blaming a passage, as they might unwittingly censure an *auctoritas* hidden in it (see "De livres," II.10, 428, but also "De l'art de conferer," 985–86).

And indeed, if we were to criticize the central conceit of Prior's Hudibrastic dialogue, according to which "Alma" enters the body at the toes and proceeds towards upper regions with age, finally settling in the head (I.252–65), our censure would also fall on Montaigne's "De l'yvrongnerie" (II.2). In it we read an amusing passage that briefly describes how, according to "les bons compaignons," "la chaleur naturelle"[36] (363; which Prior reworks as "Alma") rises from the feet in infancy to the throat in old age (thus explaining the bibulous proclivities that supposedly characterize the elderly). Unsurprisingly, Prior concealed his borrowing in *Opinion*, where he talks of this hint as "a pritty Spanish Conceit" (46) he read somewhere and elaborated into a poem.[37]

Montaigne had praised Plutarch for the wide range of hints he offers for borrowing and elaboration, and he had similarly commended La Boétie for developing a simple "remark" from Plutarch (Montaigne says "mot," literally "word") into his *Discours de la Servitude Volontaire* ("De l'institution,"162). He had even implicitly drawn a resemblance between himself and Plutarch in their common practices of borrowing and digressiveness in "De la vanité" (III.9): "Il est des ouvrages en Plutarque, où il oublie son theme . . . tout estouffé en matiere estrangere . . . Mon stile, et mon esprit, vont vagabondant de mesmes" (1040–41). [38]

As Prior thus casts the hint into a burlesque metaphysical system, he seems to parody Montaigne's concern about the interaction of the body and the mind (especially in the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond," II.12).[39] And yet, if Prior parodies Montaigne, he also ridicules himself. As Plutarch and Montaigne are suffocated by the "foreign matter" of their borrowings, so is Prior beset by an obsession for medal collecting, which, as Mat says, ultimately proves futile: the medals may be sold "by the Pound" by the heirs ignorant of their value—they

> May be with learned Justice weigh'd:
> To turn the Ballance, Otho's Head
> May be thrown in; and for the Mettle,
> The Coin may mend a Tinker's Kettle
> (III.573–77)

If Montaigne wisely says that "[j]e ne compte pas mes emprunts, je les poise"[40] ("Des livres," 428), Mat suggests that instead the foolish collector counts his medals to see how far he is from "perfecting the sett," but that the unknow-

ing heirs might weigh them—and the wisdom of the "Ballance" of "learned Justice" will nullify the question of the falsity of Otho's coin, and destine it to a very practical use. Or, to stretch the metaphor further, Prior is weighing his "emprunt" from "De l'yvrongnerie" to balance his own ironic wisdom.

Prior is himself attracted to digressiveness: the second canto of *Alma* opens with Mat's digression praising Samuel Butler for his digressing style in *Hudibras*. As a dancer on a rope affects a seeming stumble, only to excite the crowd to admiration, so Butler lapses into detours away from his subject, but regains ground at the right moment. The simile (borrowed from Pliny the Younger, *Letters* IX.26, and mediated through Dryden's comparison of the rope-dancer to Virgil in *A Parallel Between Poetry and Painting*), itself digressing away from *Alma*'s central concern, executes what it affects to praise, and presents the work of art and the pursuit of wisdom as a balancing act. If philosophical subject matter weighs it down on one side, literary irony on the other suspends the scale.

Thus we seek balance in wisdom; but, should balance ever be achieved, our state would be a sorry one. For, if "Alma merely is a Scale" (II.194), it is then conceivable that when the stasis of equilibrium is realized between two objects equally desired, the mind would be immobilized. If you saw

> . . . two distant Pots of Ale,
> Not knowing, which was Mild or Stale:
> In this sad State your doubtful Choice
> Would never have the casting Voice:
> Which Best, or Worst, You could not think;
> And die You must, for want of Drink.
> (II.202–7).

This would be the case of Alma if she had to choose between two philosophical schools equally opposed: she would "[sit] between two Stools," not knowing "which were Wise" and "which were Fools" (I.230–31).

The paradox is traditional, but Prior reworks it from Montaigne's "Comme nostre esprit s'empesche soy-mesmes" (II.14), where he imagines "un esprit balancé justement entre deux pareilles envyes," and offers this tentative solution: "aucune chose ne se presente à nous, où il n'y ait quelque difference"[41] (648–49). Montaigne here balances his own judgement against that of the Stoics, who say that the soul is in a constant irregular motion, before this brief "essai" reaches its close. At the end he appends a *sententia* from Pliny the Elder, in relation to which the "essai" seems a reversed commentary: "*solum certum nihil esse certi, et homine nihil miserius aut superbius*" (649).[42] Montaigne implicates himself in the "*miseria hominis*" faced with the paradox of impossible knowledge; ironically, the paradox suspends judgment, and the "essai" assays its own inadequacy.

Similarly, Mat and Dick compare systems of philosophy in *Alma* (as Locke and Montaigne do in the *Dialogue*) so that Prior may probe their insufficiency. By the means of dialogue, Prior balances oppositions, and enacts what Montaigne had suggested in "De l'art de conferer": "[i]l en peut estre aucuns de ma complexion, qui m'instruis mieux par contrarieté que par similitude: et par fuite que par suite [...] [l]e plus fructueux et naturel exercice de nostre esprit, c'est à mon gré la conference"[43] (966). An art of agonistic conversation, yes—but also an art of comparison: the Latin etymology of "conférer" ("to discuss") hovers behind the text (from *cōn-ferō*, "I bring together," "I compare"); and its textual usage for the comparison of passages (abbreviating the imperative *confer* to "cf.") also suggests an art of glossing.

When, in the *Dialogue of Locke and Montaigne*, Locke accuses his opponent of piling "Simile upon Simile" without "Consequential Proof," indeed of "catch[ing] at Similes as a Swallow does at Flies" (375–76—Locke also knows how to ironize), Montaigne defends his philosophical tools of comparison maintaining that "Simile is the very Algebra of Discourse" (385). Yet, when Mat objects to Dick's simile that Alma is somehow like a clock, with a "*Mathematic*-Wheel" (III.208) in the stomach, saying that "to Me thou seem'st to mean, / That Alma is a mere *Machine*" (III.304–5), Richard snaps:

> . . . what I never meant
> Don't You infer. In Argument,
> Similies [sic] are like Songs in Love:
> They much describe; they nothing prove.
> (III.312–15)

Here is perfect balance: a condemnation of similes in a simile amounts to nothing. The equation of discourse proves to be vacuous, and irony suspends the argument into a paradox—which is precisely Dick's point.[44]

But, if paradoxical wisdom balances man into misery, and similes catch at nothing, we should study to learn through imbalance, and dissemblance. Montaigne had similarly suggested that "conférence" was beneficial "par difference" rather than "par similitude"[45] ("De l'art de conferer," 966). So, in "De l'experience," he opens the "essai" with a discussion of similitudes. Proverbially, to express similitude, both we and the ancients use the simile of eggs. But, he reports, borrowing the anecdote from the much-admired Plutarch, at Delphi there was someone who recognized marks of difference even between eggs. Thus, "[l]a dissimilitude s'ingere d'elle-mesme en nos ouvrages, nul art peut arriver à la similitude" (1111).[46]

And yet, we always try to grasp the truth by the experience of the "ressemblance" of events, and, as the opening sentence of the "essai" admits, "Il

n'est desir plus naturel que le desir de connoissance" (1111).[47] This maxim conceals an "emprunt": so had Aristotle begun his *Metaphysics*. Thus Montaigne suggests a parallel—and a difference. He speaks through the disliked system-builder to speak himself. Or, he glosses his antecedent in philosophy to find the right counterbalance to his own wisdom. Thus Mat in *Alma*:

> . . . Wisdom, peevish and cross-grain'd,
> Must be oppos'd, to be sustain'd.
> (I.192–93)

The similitude between Montaigne and Prior is thus framed on a recognition of its impossibility, and on the necessity of opposition.[48] Prior's Montaignian attitude has much less to do with having Montaigne posthumously tramp down systematic logicians than with weighing his "emprunts" from his French master on the scale of irony. Dialogue, conférence, opposition, the (im)balance of similitude are all vital to wisdom, and they always take dissimilar forms. "Si mon ame pouvoit prendre pied, je ne m'essaierois pas, je me resoudrois".[49]

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NOTES

1 Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, ed. John H. Middendorf (Yale U. Press, 2010), 2:728.

2 See Cristopher Tilmouth, "'Honest Montaigne' from Temple to Pope," *Montaigne Studies* 24 (2012): 83–104.

3 See Prior's biography by Charles Kenneth Eves, *Matthew Prior: Poet and Diplomatist* (Columbia U. Press, 1939).

4 See especially Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature* (Oxford U. Press, 2003). Owen Ruffhead, in his *Life of Alexander Pope* (London, 1769), reports that Pope considered "*Alma* of *Prior*" as "the only work that (abating its excessive scepticism) he could have wished to have been the author of" (482). For *Alma*'s influence on Hume, see Christopher MacLachlan, "Hume and Matthew Prior's 'Alma'," *Hume Studies* 26.1 (2000): 159–70.

5 See the commentary to the dialogues in Wright and Spears edition of Prior's *Literary Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 2:1011–21.

6 All references are to Wright and Spears's edition, with line numbers and book (when relevant) in parentheses.

7 The anecdote is reported in *Joseph Spence: Observations, Anecdotes, Characters of Books and Men*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 1:92.

8 As a reader of Bacon, Prior might have known the original tripartite structure of the simile in *Novum Organum*, 95, where Bacon compares the empiricists (*empirici*) to the accumulating ants, and the rationalists (*rationales*) to the self-digesting spiders, and auspicates for the middle way of the bee as the ideal of intellectual enquiry. In *Locke and Montaigne* Montaigne borrows a simile from Bacon's *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, and Locke, who knows his Bacon well, does not miss the chance to reprimand him (557–62).

9 "Bees cull their several sweets from this flower and that blossom, here and there where they find them, but themselves after make the honey, which is all and purely their own, and no longer thyme and marjoram: so the several fragments the pupil borrows from others he will transform and blend together to compile a work that shall be absolutely his own" (62). All translations are Charles Cotton's, page number in parentheses (from William Hazlitt's edition of the *Works*, 1842 reprint). For the French text, unless otherwise specified, I use the Balsamo et al. edition (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), page number quoted parenthetically; I append book and "essai" number when mentioning a title for the first time.

10 For the medieval background, see Jürgen von Stackelberg, "Das Bienengleichnis," *Romanische Forschungen* 68 (1956): 271–93; for the humanist one, see G. W. Pigman, "Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance," *Renaissance Quarterly* 33.1 (1980): 1–32.

11 See Richard F. Thomas, "Virgil's *Georgics* and the Art of Reference," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 90 (1986): 171–98. Thomas discusses the "window" reference as a way of "correcting" the intermediate text. I do not think this is the case here.

12 Frederick M. Keener's *English Dialogues of the Dead* (Columbia U. Press, 1973) considers Montaigne as the recipient of Prior's "favoritism" and "devotion" (65, 66). Monroe K. Spears, "The Meaning of *Alma*" *ELH* 13.4 (1946): 285, presents Prior as an "exponent of Pyrrhonism and a disciple of Montaigne." Both Frances M. Rippy, *Matthew Prior* (Boston: Twayne, 1986) and John Higby, "Idea and Art in Prior's *Dialogues of the Dead*," *Enlightenment Essays* 4.2 (1974): 62–69, recognize that neither Locke nor Montaigne wins the dispute, but they consider the dialogue in terms of opposition, and therefore do not focus on the textual interplay between the dialogue and the *Essais*.

13 See Monroe K. Spears, "Matthew Prior's Religion," *Philological Quarterly* 27.2 (1948): 159–80; "Matthew Prior's Attitude toward Natural Science," *PMLA* 63.2 (1948): 485–507; "Some Ethical Aspects of Matthew Prior's Poetry," *Studies in Philology* 45.4 (1948): 606–629.

14 In considering scepticism as an ironic performance, I must acknowledge my own debt to Fred Parker, *Scepticism and Literature*, who briefly discusses Prior's dialogue in relation to Pope's *Epistle to Cobham*.

15 "I quote others only in order to express myself" (60) is Cotton's very loose translation.

16 This "essai" forms a diptych with the adjacent "De l'institution," from which Prior borrows several passages. Montaigne's claim of having looked "[i]nto the great Miror of the World" (*Locke and Montaigne*, 395) recalls this passage: "[c]e grand monde . . . c'est le miroüer où il nous faut regarder" (157; "This great world . . . is the mirror wherein we are to behold ourselves," 66).

17 In Homer Achilles is comparing himself to the bird who does not eat its food for others' sake, because he has fought for others' women (i.e., Helen, the wife of Menelaus—*Iliad*, IX.323–7). Ironically, Montaigne found the simile put to this use in Plutarch's treatise *De Amore Prolis* (494d).

18 "And here I cannot but smile to think how I have paid off myself in showing the foppery of this kind of learning, who myself am so manifest an example; for do I not the same throughout almost this whole book? I go here and there, culling out of several books the sentences that best please me, [...] to transplant them into this; where [...] they are no more mine than in their first places" (54).

19 However, the four editions of the *Essais* that Prior owned do not indicate such textual segmentation. H. B. Wright's unpublished PhD dissertation "Matthew Prior: A Supplement to His Biography" (Northwestern U., 1937) transcribes the MS inventory of Prior's library (now in the British Library, Add.MS.70362). These editions are listed in the inventory as 1. "Montaigns Essays (London 1632)" in folio (fol. 26 recto), 2. "Pensées de Montaign 4 Tomes (Paris 1700)" in duodecimo (fol. 30 recto—this was an abridgment of the original *Essais*), 3. "Essays de Montaign (Paris 1635)" in folio (fol. 32 verso), and 4. "Essais de Montaign (Paris 1595)" in folio (fol. 41 verso). For a French edition of Montaigne that signals the segmentation of the text, see the Villey-Saulnier edition, *Les Essais de Michel de Moutaigne* 2 vols. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1978).

20 Montaigne's problematic involvement with glossing and the abundance (*copia*) thereof is discussed by Terence Cave's *The Cornucopian Text* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), which devotes a chapter to the French author.

21 See Jean Céard's chapter "Les formes du commentaire," in *Précis de Littérature Française du XVI^e Siècle: la Renaissance*, ed. Robert Aulotte (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 177–92.

22 This is the thesis of André Tournon's *Montaigne: La Glose et l'Essai* (Paris: H. Champion, 2000; especially 162–63), which he discusses particularly in relation to the practices of legal glosses.

23 "There is more ado to interpret interpretations than to interpret the things, and more books upon books than upon all other subjects; we do nothing but comment upon one another. Every where commentaries abound: of authors there is great scarcity" (495).

24 It is suggestive to notice how "fourmiller" ("to swarm") derives from the noun "fourmi" ("ant")—the third forgotten insect in Bacon's version of the philosophical simile at this essay's head.

25 "[M]y theme [reflows into itself]"; "A stone is a body, but if a man should farher urge, "and what is a body?"—"substance;"—"and what is substance?" and so on, he would drive the respondent to the end of his common-place book" (495).

26 In *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (Parisiis: Apud Michaelem Soly, 1641) Descartes mentions "magnitudinem sive extensionem in longum, latum & profundum" (45, "size or extension in length, breadth, and depth") as one of the attributes of bodies that can be apprehended by the individual mind, and a few lines later reflects "lapidem esse substantiam . . . lapidem verò esse rem extensam" (47, "that a stone is a substance . . . a stone is indeed something extended in space", my translation).

27 On eclecticism see Pierre Force, "Montaigne and the Coherence of Eclecticism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70.4 (2009): 523–44.

28 "[S]ome one may say to me that I have here only made a nosegay of culled flowers, and have brought nothing of my own but the thread that ties them together" (489).

29 See Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts* (U. of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), chap. 4.

30 On Prior's collections of art, see H. B. Wright and Henry C. Montgomery, "The Art Collection of a Virtuoso in Eighteenth-Century England," *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945): 195–204.

31 "He may play the fool as well who speaks true, as he that speaks false" (429).

32 "[H]ow [truth] is lodged in the author" (433).

33 "[W]e are upon the manner, not the matter, of speaking" (429).

34 Such moves of self-debasement through a persona standing for the author are also Chaucerian in spirit, and resemble Chaucer's self-portrayal as the narrator of the foolish story of Sir Thopaz in the *Canterbury Tales*. Prior's admiration for Chaucer is attested not just by his imitations of his medieval master (in one of them, appeared in the famous 1718 edition of Prior's poems, "Full oft doth Mat. with Thopaz dine," "In Chaucer's Stile," l. 1), but also by bibliographical facts such as the cross-references to Chaucer he annotated in his edition of Spenser (see William L. Godshalk's article, "Prior's Copy of Spenser's *Works*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 61 [1967]: 52–55). Prior arguably shared this interest with Pope, judging by the archaising tone of their mutual appellations: in *Alma* Mat refers twice to "*dan* Pope" (II.120, 291); Pope replied by referring to "[o] ur Friend Dan *Prior*" (*The Sixth Satire of the Second Book of Horace* [1738], 153). Are we witnessing the remnants of an inside joke lost to literary history?

35 This is the persona for Richard Shelton, Prior's lifelong friend and Mat's interlocutor in *Alma*. Details of their friendship are given in Eves, *Mathew Prior.*

36 "[T]he good fellows," "[t]he natural heat" (158).

37 The parallel is noted in Wilfred P. Barrett's article "Matthew Prior's *Alma*," *Modern Language Review* 27.4 (1932): 454–8. Otis Fellows's article "Prior's "Pritty Spanish Conceit"" (*MLN* 87.6 [1972]: 3–11) argues for a proverbial source in *Don Quixote* and notes parallels with the works of Arbuthnot and the *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*.

38 "There are pieces in Plutarch where he forgets his theme, . . . stuffed throughout with foreign matter . . . my style and my wit wander at the same rate" (461).

39 See Tilmouth, "'Honest Montaigne'," 97.

40 "I do not number my borrowings, I weigh them" (186).

41 "[A] mind exactly balanced between two equal desires," "nothing presents itself to us wherein there is not some difference" (285–86).

42 "The only certainty is that there is nothing certain, and that nothing is more wretched or more proud than man," my translation. This maxim was "borrowed" by Montaigne to be inscribed on one of the beams of his library. On these inscriptions see Alain Legros, *Essais sur pouters* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000).

43 "There may be some of my complexion, who better instruct me by contrariety than similitude, and more by avoiding than imitating . . . [t]he most fruitful and natural exercise of the mind, in my opinion, is conversation" (426–27).

44 On the nothingness and the richness of paradox see Rosalie Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Princeton U. Press, 1966).

45 "By differing" rather than "by consenting" (427).

46 "Dissimilitude intrudes itself of itself in our works; no art can arrive at a perfect similitude" (493).

47 "No desire in us is more natural than that of knowledge" (493).

48 Although Prior could justly claim the title of friendship with the main satirists of the age, he was never a satirist in spirit: he saw similitude through opposition. Having written a parody of Boileau in 1695, he managed to become his close friend shortly thereafter. See Wilfred P. Barrett's unpublished PhD dissertation, "Prior and His Literary Relations with France" (Cambridge U. Press, 1932).

49 "Du repentir" (845). "Could my soul once take footing, I would not essay, but resolve" (371).

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