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11 Embodied Transitions in Michel de Montaigne

Nora Martin Peterson and Peter Martin

How does the mind–body relationship develop over the human life span? What role does embodiment play in the transition to later life? And what might we learn about cognition and mortality from looking at essays from the sixteenth century? Embodied cognition has become an important part of the psychological and gerontological literature. During the last decade, psychologists and gerontologists have begun to use embodied cognition as a theoretical framework and to investigate how cognitive functions are intertwined with the body and with physical actions, particularly as the body changes over time. M.C. Costello and E.K. Bloesch define embodied cognition as “a theoretical framework which posits that cognitive function is intimately intertwined with the body and physical actions” (1). The major premise of this approach is that body and mind are closely linked (Foglia and Wilson). Whereas cognitive theory views cognitive processes as the “center” of all behaviors and perceptions, and the body is an independent vehicle for the execution of behavior, embodied cognition emphasizes the direct inter-relatedness of body and cognition highlighting that the body is a “co-producer” of cognitive processes (Costello and Bloesch).

During his life, Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) served as the mayor of Bordeaux and as a religious and political negotiator, but he is best known for his collection of *Essays*. Written in the sixteenth century, these essays, which were literary in nature and which can be broadly described as reflections on various subjects from negotiating a peace treaty, to the relationship between fathers and sons, to the role of the imagination, might seem like an unlikely place to start looking for evidence of embodied cognition. But Montaigne professes a deep interest in reflecting on what we would today call embodiment. “I am myself the matter of my book” (3), he proclaims in his preface to the reader, and throughout the *Essays*, which are by various turns full of humor, circular logic, self-assessment, and perhaps above all, open-endedness, readers are introduced to a man who accepts, takes advantage of, and is curious to explore the interrelatedness of the mind and the body. Montaigne published several editions of the *Essays* between the first (in 1580) and the last (published posthumously in 1588) and in each edition, he revised, added on to, or even reversed his opinions from previous versions. He reveals interest not only in embodying himself textually, but also in exploring an active cognitive practice of self-

embodiment. Indeed, Montaigne appears to embrace the “unstable relationship between himself and his text” (Claus 21). Just as humans have an ever changing, at times unstable, but always necessary relationship with their bodies, Montaigne demonstrates that the same can be true of a relationship between writer and text.

Literary scholarship on Montaigne is vast; as are studies that explore how Montaigne’s embodiment is informative to the way we read him.¹ Relatedly, others have explored how Montaigne’s writing itself is a documentation of his body: writing as textual embodiment of the self, an “uncertain bodily odyssey” (O’Neill 74).² But fewer studies have focused on what we, twenty-first century readers and scholars, can learn from Montaigne’s embodied methodology in an interdisciplinary context. This approach requires creating active links between literary texts and other disciplines such as gerontology.³ The field of cognition has, increasingly, been emerging as a fruitful angle from which to look at literature. Literary and cultural studies explore ways in which literature creates, participates in, and reflects the human experience. Scholars of this discipline are deeply interested in ways in which text and human experience interact. By their very nature, the questions raised by literary scholars often share methods of inquiry with a variety of other disciplines. Terence Cave recently suggested that the study of literature is essentially a “cognitive discipline” (12) because of the way it “makes things happen, gives a local habitation and a name to unfamiliar feelings and events, or makes familiar ones strange” (1). Gerontology as a discipline provides a perspective of physical, functional, and cognitive changes experienced by individuals over time and how these changes fit within the framework of successful aging (Martin et al.).

Reading through the lenses of embodiment, health, and geropsychology, we will consider Montaigne’s relationship to his body, mind, and text from a cognitive perspective.⁴ Montaigne writes about a variety of embodied transitions: a near-death experience, aging and cognitive decline, and a lengthy discussion of how to face one’s own mortality. In the following pages we will focus on a few of these embodied transitions. We will highlight moments in which Montaigne’s body—through his text—documents the aging process and the passage of time (Yandell 78–81). And we will suggest that Montaigne’s text mirrors human transitions throughout life.

By constructing a textual building whose architecture remains constantly in progress, Montaigne creates a parallel between his text and cognitive embodiment over the human life span. Thus, we believe, looking to Montaigne opens up new ways to explore current and future work on the mind–body relationship and on successful aging. Both in terms of what he writes and how he writes it, Montaigne shows readers that the transition through life is an embodied one, and that accepting the body as “co-producer” of cognitive processes (Costello and Bloesch 267) can lead to a more balanced acceptance of the complexity that accompanies the aging process and how we view older people. We hope to show that Montaigne’s essays—innovative in their own time—remain important in discussing embodied transitions today.

Montaigne and the Mind–Body Relationship

Men do not know the natural *infirmity* of their mind: it does nothing but *ferret* and *quest*, and keeps incessantly *whirling around*, building up and *becoming entangled* in its own work, like our silkworms, and is *suffocated* in it ... It thinks it notices from a distance some sort of glimmer of imaginary light and truth; but while *running* toward it, it is crossed by so many new quests, that it *strays* from the road, bewildered.

(Montaigne III.13, 817; emphasis added)

In this passage from “Of Experience,” the last essay in Montaigne’s collection, the author uses bodily vocabulary to describe the inner workings of the mind. Running, entanglement, and suffocation, are a few of the words Montaigne chooses to highlight the mind’s natural weakness. It is worth noting that the French title, “De l’Experience,” is derived from “faire l’essai de” in sixteenth-century French. This roughly translates to “to try out,” or “to experience” [for the first time]. But it is also worth noting the proximity of “faire l’essai de” and Montaigne’s own *Essays* (“essais” in French): they, too, are something to work through, try out, sample. Thus, an experience is, by its very definition, both bodily and something to be reflected on. An experience is a transition from one moment, or thought, or state of being, to another. Because we inevitably participate in the moments and thoughts of our own lives, experiences are implicitly embodied, involving both our bodies and our minds. Montaigne is explicit about this connection, and insists on the inextricability of one from the other. The same kind of corporal emphasis exists in many other passages of the *Essays*; indeed, Montaigne often relies on the body’s vocabulary when he describes transitional states, such as the cognitive decline that frequently accompanies old age (Yandell 78). In “Of Physiognomy,” for example, he suggests that the mind “grows constipated and sluggish as it grows old” (III.12, 809). His thoughts, and his thoughts about how these thoughts change during the aging process, are marked by traces of the body.

Montaigne’s writing about the human life span reflects the common thinking of his time. He mentions, at various points, historical examples of the ideal age at retirement (I.57, 237), the development of the intellectual soul (I.57, 237–238), and the customary life expectancy, which he mentions having exceeded (I.57, 237). But he also acknowledges the tension that develops between the mind and the body during the aging process (Yandell 78):

In my youth I needed to warn and urge myself to stick to my duty: blitheness and health do not go so well, they say, with these wise and serious reflections. At present I am in another state. The conditions of old age warn me, sober me, and preach to me only too much. ... This body of mine flees disorder and fears it. It is my body’s turn to guide my mind toward reform.

(III.5, 638)

When Montaigne reflects on the differences between young and old people, he grants advantages to both. While the young are healthy and agile, older individuals are wise and serious. The body's dominance transitions into a dominance of the mind in later years. This transition corresponds to many of the personal characteristics discussed in research on aging: as people get older, they often become more reflective and introverted ("the conditions of old age warn me"), as well as more conscientious ("this body of mine flees disorder") (Srivastava et al.). Changes in vision, hearing, and mobility also may start in midlife and often continue on a downward trajectory throughout the second half of life (Tinetti).

From the gerontological perspective, wisdom may well be the end result of identity development. In Erik Erikson's (1959) theory of development, wisdom is attained with the resolution of the eighth and final stage of life: the last developmental task is to cognitively "integrate" previous experiences and one's life as it has been. Integrity is a focus on priorities of the self (Staudinger and Glück) and results in wisdom. For Montaigne, the advantage to this loss of physical prowess is that in old age, people are afforded "more freedom to prate and more indiscretion in talking about oneself" (III.2, 611). During the transition to older age, humans realize the strength and wisdom of their mind as their physical strength and health begins to decline.

But Montaigne notes that the transition to a superiority of mind is not always a straightforward transfer. Often, it is complicated by cognitive decline. Naturally, this would be something to fear, since it would disrupt the already fragile and arguable advantage of the mind over the body in older age. In the passage above, Montaigne emphasizes that he fears and flees from "disorder."⁵ In other essays he is similarly frank about the negative effects of cognitive decline on older adults. Indeed, physical changes are often accompanied by cognitive changes in later life. In some (but certainly not all) older adults, these changes result in cognitive disorders, such as Alzheimer's disease or other dementias, but in most older adults changes are gradual, and they do not limit everyday functioning. These "usual" changes may affect short-term ("working") memory (Zacks), processing speed (Salthouse), and spatial abilities (Klencklen, Després, and Dufour). More recently, cognitive changes have also been linked to physical activity levels (Kraft). Even though Montaigne establishes a binary between cognitive and physical decline, he himself questions this opposition when he repeatedly writes about cognitive decline in embodied terms (Yandell 81). In "Of Repentance" he writes that "old age puts more wrinkles in our minds than on our faces; and we never, or rarely, see a soul that in growing old does not come to smell sour and musty" (III.2, 620). Souls can smell musty just as little as minds can be wrinkled, and for Montaigne, the two go hand in hand.

Even Montaigne's anxieties about cognitive decline are expressed using the vocabulary of the body. The interplay between cognitive and physical function has been noted by life span developmental psychologist Paul Baltes, who reflects on the "incomplete architecture of human ontogeny." Baltes suggests that because of evolutionary selection pressures, biological potential decreases

(“physical decline”) but is compensated by a greater need for culture (“cognitive growth”) with age. Because of the increasing imbalance of growth relative to decline, the life span architecture may become more incomplete with age. In Baltes’ view, the increasing decline in functioning relative to the potential for growth requires individuals to direct more psychological and social resources toward the regulation and management of loss.

Baltes’ view, however, stands in contrast to alternative gerontological perspectives that emphasize the potential for successful aging well into very late life. In their seminal paper on successful aging, Rowe and Kahn emphasize that aging will be “successful” or “optimal” if aging individuals avoid disease and disability, and function well physically and cognitively.⁶ Physical health, cognitive health, and social engagement are all important aspects of successful aging. The arguments put forth by Baltes, on the one hand, and Rowe and Kahn, on the other, need not be mutually exclusive. Incompletion does not preclude success; indeed, Montaigne seems to suggest that evolution, contradiction, and (self) revision are important components to life. Recognizing this seems to be a key part of the way that Montaigne embodies himself, even when he is writing about the transition to a chapter of life that is understandably filled with uncertainty.

Whether it is viewed as an incomplete architecture or as successful aging, the last chapter of life may be viewed with fear, and there is fear, and social stigma surrounding cognitive decline in Montaigne’s works. Readers get the sense that cognitive loss can be equated with loss of control over one’s own departure from life. If the process happens quietly, slowly, unremarkably, then embodied cognition remains intact for longer periods of time. Montaigne writes that “God is merciful to those whose life he takes away bit by bit; that is the only benefit of old age. ... Thus do I melt and slip away from myself” (III.13, 845). But on the other hand, if cognition—meant to be at a greater advantage in older age than the body’s physical loss of strength—begins to decline prematurely, then the natural transition into old age becomes something to be feared: “How stupid it would be of my mind if it were to feel the last leap of this decline, which is already so far advanced, as acutely as if it were the whole fall. I hope this will not happen” (III.13, 845). In another passage, he writes: “What strange metamorphoses I see old age producing every day in many of my acquaintances! It is a powerful malady, and it creeps up on us naturally and imperceptibly. We need a great provision of study, and great precaution, to avoid the imperfections it loads upon us, or at least to slow up their progress” (III.2, 620–621). This transition is one in which mind and body are once again in a mutually dependent relationship. The body is necessary to describe cognition, while cognition is necessary to stay in control and take stock of one’s physical losses.

Montaigne is frank about acknowledging the obstacles faced by many who lose their cognitive faculties before their bodies grow weak: “Sometimes it is the body that first surrenders to age, sometimes, too, it is the mind; and I have seen enough whose brains were enfeebled before their stomach and legs; and

inasmuch as this is a malady hardly perceptible to the sufferer and obscure in its symptoms, it is all the more dangerous" (I.57, 238). Again, Montaigne implies that cognitive decline is more problematic than physical aging because the former undermines the supposed advantage that people gain in older life. It would seem that there is a tipping point at which cognitive embodiment is no longer a symbiotic relationship. Thus, rather than declare the victory of mind over body, or of the atrophy of the human mind *and* body as the only possible outcomes during the aging process, Montaigne suggests that mind and body are in a constantly evolving transition, always adapting to whatever relationship needs to be built up given the circumstances.

Cynthia Skenazi notes that our attitudes towards age and aging are not so different from those of the early modern period. Montaigne, for example, refuses to see aging as unproblematic, and his text highlights "the complexities of aging as a cultural and psychological notion" (580). Indeed, many of the same complexities exist today in discussions about how to define successful aging (Peterson and Martin). What we can learn from Montaigne is that discord and ambivalence are part of the human aging process. Montaigne's writing invites, even depends upon, incompleteness and at the same time, it contains within it a constant sense that his mind and his body accompany him textually along his journey. Is this so different from the many kinds of transitions that humans face over the course of a life span?

Montaigne on the Transition from Life to Death

Now that we have considered the mutually dependent relationship of the mind and the body as they transition into older age, and have established the omnipresence of bodily vocabulary in Montaigne's thoughts about cognitive decline, we will turn to ways in which embodied cognition can help aging individuals prepare for and come to peace with their own mortality. This transition, also referred to in the gerontological literature as "gerotranscendence," challenges older adults to reflect on their own experiences and on ways in which to cope with loss (Tornstam). Here, too, the transition from living to dying appears to be one that calls for practice (even though, as Montaigne points out, practicing death is, in practical terms, impossible), and one that equally involves the mind and the body. And again, Montaigne seems to experiment with the relationship between the two in his own embodiment of the transition. The most powerful of commentaries about facing one's own mortality comes in an essay called "On Practice."

In this essay, Montaigne remembers a day when, during a journey home, he is thrown from his horse. He loses consciousness, even calls himself "dead," for a span of over two hours. No one is able to revive him. In today's terms, Montaigne's account would be commonly recognizable as a "near-death experience." These experiences might include impressions of being "outside one's own physical body" and/or "visions of deceased relatives with a general transcendence of spatial and temporal boundaries" (Greyson). Montaigne writes:

Those who were with me, after having tried all the means they could to bring me round, thinking me dead, took me in their arms and were carrying me with great difficulty to my house. ... On the way, and after I had been taken for dead for more than two full hours, I began to move and breathe.

(II.6, 269)

Montaigne's physical death is accompanied by cognitive absence—he cannot write, think, or speak during this period. But in projecting himself back into the space of physical death in this essay, he reconstructs the experience. Specifically, Montaigne reflects on the relative peace he experiences cognitively even while his body is in the throes of a physically distressing event. He writes:

It seemed to me that my life was hanging only by the tip of my lips; I closed my eyes in order, it seemed to me, to help push it out, and took pleasure in growing languid and letting myself go. It was an idea that was only floating on the surface of my soul, as delicate and feeble as all the rest, but in truth not only free from distress but mingled with that sweet feeling that people who have let themselves slide into sleep.

(II.6, 269–270)

Here, Montaigne uses embodied language in order to describe his cognitive state: his life is hanging by the tip of his lips, he closes his eyes, he pushes life out, lets it go. This unusually vivid image (which is the same in the original French) directly links the body to death; life lingers, hanging onto the lips (a part of the body that links the interior to the exterior), as if to imply that whether he will live or die depends on his soul's embodied hesitation between existence and nonexistence. At the same time, he lingers over the sweetness of the *disembodiment* of the experience. Rather than feel the physical pain of the fall, he is able to drift easily in and out of consciousness. Because he believes that he is approaching death, he tries to make the transition as easy and painless as possible. He comments on the fact that his thoughts take place in an abstract, a purportedly disembodied space: "These were idle thoughts, in the clouds, set in motion by the sensations of the eyes and ears; they did not come from within me. I did not know, for all that, where I was coming from or where I was going, nor could I weigh and consider what I was asked ... I was not there at all" (II.6, 271). A sense of peace and painlessness as well as a sense of removal from the world is often characterized by people who recall their near-death experience (Mauro). The declaration that Montaigne "was not there at all" appears at first glance to dissolve into an existential contradiction: how can a physical subject "not be there"? The moment suggests a distancing of cognition from the body, a dissolution of the very relationship of dependence that Montaigne and today's scholarship insist upon. But perhaps there is more at stake here. First of all, in this moment, Montaigne's cognition takes over, numbing what would otherwise be an unbearably painful embodied experience,

especially in the age before anesthetics. But the ability to withstand such physical pain depends on the mind's ability to block it. In this way, cognitive embodiment in Montaigne's near-death moment actually proves the mutual dependency between mind and body. And indeed, Montaigne adds that "when I came back to life and regained my powers, ... which was two or three hours later, I felt myself all of a sudden caught up again in the pains" (II.6, 272). His mind's temporary ability to numb the worst of the pain allows his body to heal to the point that he will survive—physically and mentally.

What about those who do not, or will not survive? All of us, Montaigne is well aware, will at some point be dealt a mortal blow or succumb to old age and, finally, to death. Montaigne uses his near-death experience as a kind of case study, an example for how actual death might feel for people. And Montaigne suggests that though we might see their bodies in a state that appears to be painful, this might not be the case at all, and that a similar kind of separation might be occurring internally:

I believe that this is the same in which people find themselves whom we see fainting with weakness in the agony of death; and I maintain that we pity them without cause, supposing that they are agitated by grievous pains or have their soul oppressed by painful thought.

(II.6, 269–270)

What people fear, Montaigne writes, stems from the anticipation of death, from the unknown, from something that one cannot practice before it happens. Gerontological studies suggest that fear of death is actually greater among younger adults and declines with increasing age, particularly after the age of 60 (Cicirelli).⁷ For the oldest-old population, qualitative interviews suggests that this age group is not likely to fear death itself; instead, they fear the dying process (Johnson and Barer). By textually embodying a transition that fills many people with as much fear today as it did five hundred years ago, Montaigne provides some comfort for those wondering what it will feel like, for those fearing the pain that they imagine when they see a loved one on their death bed. Montaigne hopes to change the cultural representation of death. His strategy, sharing a moment that for him was the example of cognitive embodiment at its best, is to offer an alternative to those who expect the opposite.

At the moment before death, Montaigne suggests that the mind and body are working together most closely. It is the pinnacle of a lifetime of work together: the mind can overcome the pain of the body and allow the individual to slip out of life. Achieving this sort of peaceful transition out of one's embodiment comes after years of "listening to his body" (O'Neill 215), of knowing himself, of coming to an embodied understanding of the need to die. In the end, Montaigne's focus on bodily pain and the cognitive representation of death allows him to accept finitude. When decline of health is not deniable any more, when death is inevitable, acceptance becomes the last stage of the dying process (Kübler-Ross). This kind of perspective, which traces the relationship of body

and mind through the transition to old age and towards death, shows cognitive embodiment at its best. It also highlights that the mutual dependence of mind and body can be a symbiotic one, even during the last and hardest of transitions.

The point, perhaps, is that the relationship into which mind and body enter at birth has developed, by late in the human life span, into something so finely tuned, so symbiotically matched, that we do not even recognize how well it is functioning. Just when it would seem that cognitive embodiment would fail is when it is at its best. Throughout his *Essays*, Montaigne shows an interest in highlighting moments of complexity and ambivalence in the human experience. Above all, Montaigne insists that while complexity and ambivalence are inevitable parts of life, we also have an invaluable tool at our disposal for the hardest transitions that we as humans will face. By recognizing and embracing the constant interplay between mind and body at work within ourselves, Montaigne suggests, we can quite literally change the way in which we think about embodied transitions. Rather than being condemned to face with fear what culture often depicts as the weakness and atrophy that come with old age, we can cognitively accept the things that we do not know. Successful aging, for Montaigne, is the acceptance of the transition from mind to body, and of the increasing role that cognitive embodiment can play later in life. In the twenty-first century as in the sixteenth, embodied transitions are made richer when we see the revisions, contradictions, and hesitations that accompany them as complementary rather than conflicting.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, O'Sullivan; Cave; Yandell; and O'Neill. For a general overview, see Thane.
- 2 For a seminal work on Montaigne's embodied movement throughout the *Essays*, see Starobinski.
- 3 Cave suggests that the reason why cognitive readings are not popular in literary studies partly lies in the dominance of other interpretive frameworks (Saussurean structuralism, deconstruction, postcolonialism, etc.)—frameworks that depend more on binaries, and the undoing thereof, than on symbiotic relationships such as the one Cave proposes between literature and cognition (15).
- 4 Among the few essays on Montaigne's representations of aging are those of Bellenger, on the one hand, and Friedrich, on the other. Neither of these works focuses on the cultural implications of Montaigne's representations of aging.
- 5 In the gerontological literature this is discussed as "dedifferentiation." See Hülür et al.
- 6 See also Martin et al.
- 7 See also Thorson and Powell.

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