Nothing seems to have occupied Montaigne more than the experience of time. From his decision to write in the French of the people rather than the Latin of the scholars, to his incessant editing and re-editing of the *Essays* themselves, to his unwavering refusal to transcend the contingency of experience, Montaigne wholly gave himself over to the flux of temporal becoming. The advent of the essay makes possible a radical proximity to lived time inasmuch as the reflection carried out through the essay moves wholly within concrete subjectivity. This emphasis on the lived perspective is immediately apparent in the opening note to the reader of the *Essays*, in which we are told that what follows is a record of “habits and temperament.”

“I am myself the matter of my book,” Montaigne writes. His are “essays in flesh and bone,” corporeal metaphors that signal the extent to which the *Essays* must be approached as a body of thought, that is, a description of a life in its concrete embodiment. They originate, as it were, within sensory, affective modes of existing. Whatever meaning one assumes Montaigne’s reflections or judgments to have, they are from the first weighted down with the terrestrial matter of their author.

It is this radical privileging of the lived body and its temporal modes that caught the attention of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Montaigne’s self-observation is anchored in the factical coordinates of subjectivity, and the *cogito* that he inhabits bears the worldly traces of his existence. There is, thus, a direct phenomenological interest in the *Essays*, inasmuch as for Merleau-Ponty the reduction performed on the natural attitude is a return to the existential foundations (spatial and temporal) of the being of the subject. These foundations make possible the perceptual comprehension of a meaningful and significant world. Yet, with respect to the temporal structure of our perceptual communication with objects, Merleau-Ponty reads Montaigne in a cautionary light. By exclusively privileging the sensible, he disrupts his perceptual comprehension of objects. In short, there is a failure to surmount or transcend the immediacy of sensory appearances for the public
world. Montaigne does not know that perceptual anchorage in the world that sustains the natural attitude and its faith in the perception of objects. Since the existential understanding of transcendence operates only on the presumption of the being-in-the-world of the individual (i.e., the individual as “bound” to the world through his or her situation), the experience of time in the *Essays* dramatically reflects the phenomenon of transcendence in an “unbound” state: unable to maintain a stable field of perception, the temporal subject is submitted to the movement of existence, a passive witness to the play of sensory fields. In describing Montaigne’s experience of time as “transcendence unbound,” I am thus referring to radical sensory mobility of the subject that occurs once the body-world relation no longer holds.

To pick up the trail of the temporal effects that follow upon Montaigne’s retreat from the objective world to the subjective body we can turn to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in particular the chapter “Space.” This perhaps seems an odd place for an analysis of Montaigne’s experience of time. Wouldn’t the chapter on “Temporality” be the obvious starting point, especially since there, under the influence of Heidegger, the notion of transcendence assumes the full weight of the subject’s existence? This question is relevant only if we approach these two chapters as unrelated, as if having finished with the discussion of spatiality, we are then free to move on to the temporal modality of the perceiving subject. Such a serial ordering, however, ignores the basic grounding of spatial relations in the original temporal unfolding of the world relationship. If we look to the chapter on “Space” to decipher the analysis of Montaigne’s self-observation, this is because his experiences on the spatial level are comprehensible only through the temporal meaning of transcendence having become loosened from its terminus in the perceived world, the world towards which all our apprehensions gravitate and from which they take their bearings.

We begin, then, with the question: What function does Montaigne serve in the phenomenological recovery of spatiality as a fundamental way of being toward the world? Merleau-Ponty locates the issue facing the *Essays* in the divorce of sensory appearances from perceptual reality. Unwavering fidelity to the sensory immediacy of empirical experience is the overriding principle of the type of reflection contained within the “essay.” In the following passage, Montaigne reveals the lived origins of his self-observation:

I cannot keep my subject still. It goes along befuddled and staggering, with a natural drunkenness. I take it in this condition, just as it is at the moment I give my attention to it. I do not portray being: I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as the people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment. I may presently change, not only by chance, but also by intention.