

# Essays, Book II

(without 'Defence of Raymond Sebond')

Michel de Montaigne

1572–80

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type.—Essay 12, 'Defence of Raymond Sebond', is about 200 pages long and is not included here. —Montaigne kept adding to this work. Following most modern editions, the present version uses tags in the following way:

<sup>[A]</sup>: material in the first edition (1580) or added soon thereafter,

<sup>[B]</sup>: material added in the greatly enlarged second edition (1588),

<sup>[C]</sup>: material added in the first posthumous edition (1595) following Montaigne's notes in his own copy.

The tags are omitted where they seem unimportant. The ones that are retained are kept very small to make them neglectable by readers who aren't interested in those details. Sometimes they are crucial. —The footnotes are all editorial. —Montaigne's spellings of French words are used in the glossary and in references in the text to the glossary. —In the original, all the quotations from Latin writers are given in Latin.

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## Glossary

**braverie:** Courage, usually thought of as swaggering courage.

**colic:** This is used to translate *colique* on page 44 and in essay 37; the OED defines it as ‘Acute episodic abdominal pain, especially one arising from the twisting, spasm, or obstruction of a hollow organ’; but as essay 37 proceeds it becomes increasingly clear that Montaigne’s affliction was from kidney stones.

**coutume:** Where the *coutume* is social it is translated as ‘custom’; where it is individual, as ‘habit’, especially in Essay 23.

**esprit:** Mind, intelligence, wit—take your pick.

**essai:** An *essai* (French) may be a test, or an attempt, or an exercise, or a certain kind of literary production. The last meaning came solely from Montaigne’s way of labelling these ‘attempts’ or ‘exercises’ of his, and occasionally in the text there is some play on the word.

**fatal:** Translating *fatal(e)*. As used on pages 94 and 121, the word means ‘destiny-setting’, applicable to something that *settles* how some later course of events will unroll.

**fever:** The varieties ‘continual fever’ and ‘quotidian fever’ mentioned on pages 121 and 124 belong to a classification that was old in Montaigne’s time and still has some currency today.

**gentleman:** This is sometimes used to translate *gentil-homme*; but in Montaigne’s time it tended to mean something stronger than that—a man of *very* good family, perhaps a nobleman.

**(im)patience:** Mostly translated as ‘(not) putting up with’ or the like; but in some places, especially the paragraph on

page 124, that translation wouldn’t work very well, although the meaning is the same.

**magistrate:** In this work, ‘a magistrate’ is any official who applies the law; ‘the magistrate’ of a given nation is its system of such officials.

**moeurs:** The *moeurs* of a people include their morality, their basic customs, their attitudes and expectations about how people will behave, their ideas about what is decent. . . and so on. This word—rhyming approximately with ‘worse’—is left untranslated because there’s no good English equivalent to it. The Oxford *English* dictionary includes it for the same reason it has for including *Schadenfreude*.

**prince:** Like the English ‘prince’, this in early modern times could refer to any rank up to that of king (or monarch; Queen Elizabeth I referred to herself as a ‘prince’). It is translated by ‘prince’ throughout.

**regimen:** ‘A prescribed course of exercise, way of life, or diet, esp. for the promotion or restoration of one’s health’ (OED). Translates *régime*, which means the same thing.

**science:** Translated as ‘branch of learning’ or simply ‘learning’, except in a few cases where those seem stylistically impossible. Then it is left untranslated, or translated as ‘science’, though it never means anything much like ‘science’ in our sense.

**speculum:** ‘An instrument used to dilate an orifice or canal in the body to allow inspection’ (OED); *speculum matricis* on page 126 refers to the inspection of the vagina.

**vice:** Translates *vice*, meaning bad behaviour, not necessarily of any of the kinds that would be called ‘vices’ today. Similarly ‘vicious’ [*vicieux*.]

## 11. Cruelty

·A VIEW ABOUT VIRTUE AND DIFFICULTY·

[A] [This essay starts to fit its title on page 47.] It seems to me that virtue is something other, and nobler, than the inclinations toward goodness that are born in us. Souls that are in control of themselves and well-born follow the same path as virtuous ones and show the same countenance in their actions. But *virtue* has a resonance of something-or-other greater and more active than letting oneself be gently and quietly led in reason's footsteps by a happy disposition.

Someone who through natural mildness and easygoingness disdained injuries done to him would be doing something very fine and praiseworthy; but a man who, outraged and stung to the quick by an injury, armed himself with the weapons of reason against this frenzied appetite for vengeance and finally mastered it after a great struggle, would undoubtedly be doing much more. The former would have acted well, the latter virtuously; one action might be called *goodness*, the other *virtue*. For it seems that virtue—properly so-called—implies difficulty and opposition, and cannot be exercised without struggle. Perhaps that is why we call God 'good', 'mighty', 'generous' and 'just' but do not call him 'virtuous'. His operations are wholly natural and effortless.

Among the philosophers take the Stoics, and even the Epicureans—

and I use 'even' to reflect the common opinion, which is wrong, . . . for truly in firmness and rigour of opinions and precepts the Epicurean sect yields nothing to the Stoic . One Stoic

(showing better faith than those disputants who, to oppose Epicurus and load the dice in their favour, put into his mouth things he

never even thought of, twisting his words and using the rules of grammar to make his words express senses and beliefs different from those they know he had in his soul and his *mœurs*)

declared that he gave up being an Epicurean because he found their path too steep and unapproachable; [C] 'and those who are called *φιλήδονοι* [lovers of pleasure] are in fact *φιλόχαλοι* [lovers of honour] and *φιλοδίχαιοι* [lovers of justice], cultivating and practising all the virtues' [Cicero].

—[A] among whom many judged that it was not enough to have our soul in a good state, well regulated and well disposed to virtue; that it was not enough to have our decisions and reasonings out of reach of all the attacks of fortune; but that we must also seek opportunities to test them. They want to seek pain, hardship and contempt, so as to combat them and to keep their soul in trim: [C] 'Virtue gains much by being put to the proof' [Seneca].

[A] That is one of the reasons why Epaminondas, who belonged to a third sect [the Pythagorean], rejects the wealth that fortune puts in his hands in a very legitimate way, in order—he says—to have to duel with poverty; and he remained extremely poor up to the end. Socrates, it seems to me, tested himself even more roughly, keeping for his exercise the malignity of his wife, which is a test with the naked blade!

The Roman senator Metellus Numidicus, at a time when he was in danger, . . . said to his friends: 'To act badly is too easy and too cowardly; to act well when there is no danger is something anyone can do; but to act well when there is danger is the proper duty of a virtuous man.' That presents to us very clearly the thing I wanted to prove: that *virtue* will not keep company with *facility*, and that the easy, gentle slope that guides the measured steps of a good natural

disposition is not the path of real virtue. Virtue demands a rough and thorny road: it wants to struggle either against external difficulties. . . .or against inward difficulties created by the disordered appetites and imperfections of our nature.

·RETHINKING THE VIEW ABOUT VIRTUE AND DIFFICULTY·

I have come this far quite easily. But at the end of this argument it comes into my mind that the soul of Socrates, which is the most perfect to have come to my knowledge, would be by my reckoning ·in the account I have been presenting· a soul with little to commend it; for I cannot conceive in that great man any power of vicious desires. I cannot imagine any difficulty or constraint in the progress of his virtue; I know his reason to have been so powerful and so much in command of him that it would never have let a vicious appetite even *start*. I cannot put anything up against as lofty a virtue as his. It seems that I can see it striding victoriously and triumphantly along, stately and at its ease, without being blocked or disturbed by anything.

If virtue can shine only by clashing with opposing appetites, are we to say then that it cannot do without help from vice, and that it owes to vice its repute and honour? And what would become of that bold and noble-minded pleasure of the Epicureans, which prides itself on nursing virtue gently in its lap and making it romp there, giving it as playthings shame, fevers, poverty, death and tortures? If I assume that perfect virtue is recognised by its fighting pain and bearing it patiently, bearing attacks of gout without giving way; if I say that it must involve hardship and difficulty; what becomes of the virtue that has climbed so high that it not only despises pain but rejoices in it, and feels as *tickling* the stabbings of a bad colic [see Glossary]? Such was the virtue established by the Epicureans, many of whom have left us by their actions absolutely certain proof of it. As have many others

whom I find to surpass in their actions the very rules of their discipline.

Witness the younger Cato. When I see him dying and ripping out his entrails I cannot settle for believing simply that he then had his soul totally free from trouble and dismay; I cannot believe that he merely maintained himself in the attitude that the rules of the Stoic sect ordained for him: sedate, without emotion, impassible. That man's virtue, it seems to me, had too much vigour for it to stop there. I am convinced that he felt pleasure, voluptuous pleasure, in so noble a deed, and that he delighted in it more than in any other action in his life: <sup>[C]</sup> 'He departed from life as though rejoicing that he had found a reason for dying' [Cicero]. . . . Witness the younger Cato. When I see him dying and ripping out his entrails I cannot settle for believing simply that he then had his soul totally free from trouble and dismay; I cannot believe that he merely maintained himself in the attitude that the rules of the Stoic sect ordained for him: sedate, without emotion, impassible. That man's virtue, it seems to me, had too much vigour for it to stop there. I am convinced that he felt pleasure, voluptuous pleasure, in so noble a deed, and that he delighted in it more than in any other action in his life: <sup>[C]</sup> 'He departed from life as though rejoicing that he had found a reason for dying' [Cicero]. . . .

Philosophy has given me pleasure by judging that so beautiful an action would have been unbecoming in any life other than Cato's—that it was for his life alone to end in that way. So it was according to reason that he ordered his son and the senators who accompanied him to make some other provision for themselves. . . .

Every death should be of a piece with its life. We do not become somebody else because we are dying. I always interpret the death by the life. And if I am told of a seemingly strong death linked to a feeble life, I maintain that it was

produced by some feeble cause that matches the life.

[A] So the ease of this death of Cato's, the facility he had acquired by the strength of his soul, shall we say that it should diminish somewhat the splendour of his virtue? And who that has a brain even slightly tinctured with true philosophy can be satisfied with imagining a Socrates who is merely free from fear and passion in the circumstances of his prison, his chains, and his condemnation? And who does not recognise in him not merely firmness and constancy (that was his ordinary state) but some [*je ne sçay quel*] new joy and a playful cheerfulness in his last words and actions? . . . Cato must please forgive me: his death is more tragic and more tense, but Socrates's is somehow [*je ne sçay comment*] more beautiful. . . .

·THE HIGHEST KIND OF VIRTUE·

In the souls of those two great men and in those who imitated them (for I very much doubt that anyone actually rivalled them) one sees a habit of virtue so complete that it became a part of their character. It is no longer a laborious virtue, a virtue ordained by reason and maintained only through a stiffening of their soul; it is the very essence of their soul, its natural ordinary way of proceeding. They have made it so by a long practice of the precepts of philosophy coming upon a fine rich nature. The vicious passions that are born in us find nowhere to enter them; the force and rectitude of their soul extinguishes lusts as soon as they begin to stir.

It cannot, I think, be doubted that this:

(i) preventing the **birth** of temptations by a lofty and god-like resolve, being fashioned to virtue in such a way that even the *seeds* of vices have been uprooted is finer than this:

(ii) using active force to preventing their **growing**; after letting oneself be surprised by the first stirrings of

the passions, arming and tensing oneself to halt their progress and conquer them;

or that (ii) is finer than

(iii) being simply provided with a nature that is easy and affable and has an inborn distaste for debauchery and vice.

For it seems that (iii) produces an innocent man but not a virtuous one, exempt from doing evil but not apt enough to do good. Furthermore, (iii) is so close to imperfection and weakness that I do not properly know how to draw the line and distinguish them. That is why the very terms 'goodness' and 'innocence' are to some extent terms of contempt. I note that several virtues—such as chastity, sobriety and temperance—can come to us through bodily failing. Firmness in the face of •danger (if 'firmness' is the right name for it), contempt for •death, and patience in •affliction can and often do come to men through misjudgement of •these accidents, failure to conceive them as they are. Failure of uptake and stupidity sometimes counterfeit virtuous deeds. I have often seen men praised for things that deserved blame.

[Then a paragraph about 'bravery' in battle and its relation to stupidity, leading to the thought:] That is why, when we judge a particular action we should not name it until we have considered many circumstances as well as the man as a whole who performed it.

·MONTAIGNE'S VIEW ABOUT VIRTUE IN HIMSELF·

Now a word about myself. [B] I have sometimes seen my friends call wisdom in me what was really luck, and consider as an advantage of courage and endurance what was really an advantage of judgement or opinion—attributing one quality to me instead of another, sometimes to my gain, sometimes to my loss. Meanwhile, [A] so far am I from having reached (i) that first degree and most perfect degree

of excellence where virtue becomes a habit that I have given hardly any proof of **(ii)** the second. I have not made much of an effort to curb the desires by which I am pressed. My virtue is a virtue—or rather **(iii)** a state of innocence—that is accidental and fortuitous. If I had been born with a more unruly disposition, I fear it would have gone pitifully with me. I have experienced almost no firmness in my soul to withstand passions that had even the slightest intensity. I do not know how to sustain conflicts and debate within me. So I cannot congratulate myself much on finding myself exempt from many vices: ‘If my nature is sound except for a few trivial flaws, like a few moles on an otherwise beautiful body’ [Horace], I owe that more to my fortune than to my reason.

Fortune had me born of a stock famous for integrity, and of a very good father. I do not know whether he infused into me some of his humours, or whether examples in the home and the good education of my childhood insensibly contributed to it, or whether for some other reason I was born so. . . .; but the fact is that of myself I hold most vices in horror, . . . out of a native conviction so thoroughly my own that I have retained—with nothing being able to make me change them for the worse—the instinct and impression that I bore away with me when I was weaned. Not even my own arguments, which in some things have broken away from the common road, would easily give me licence for actions that my natural inclination makes me hate.

<sup>[B]</sup> I am about to say something weird, but I will say it all the same. Because of this natural inclination, I find in many cases more rule and order in my *moeurs* than in my opinions, and my appetites less depraved than my reason.

<sup>[C]</sup> Aristippus laid down such bold opinions in favour of sensual pleasure and riches that the whole of philosophy was in an uproar against him. But as for his *moeurs*: when the tyrant Dionysius presented him with three beautiful wenches

to choose from, he said he chose all three, since things had gone badly for Paris when he preferred one woman to her companions. But after bringing them to his home he sent them back without touching them. . . .

And Epicurus, whose doctrines are irreligious and favour luxury, was very devout and industrious in his way of life. He writes to a friend of his that he lives on nothing but coarse bread and water, asking him to send him a bit of cheese for when he wants to have a lavish meal. Could it be true that to be wholly good we must be so from some hidden, inborn, universal property—without law, reason, or example?

<sup>[A]</sup> The excesses I have found myself involved in are not, thank God, of the worst. I have condemned them in myself, as they deserve, for my judgement has not been infected by them. I accuse them indeed more rigorously in myself than in anyone else. But otherwise I bring too little resistance to bear on them, letting myself too easily come down on the wrong side of the balance; except that I do control my vices, preventing them from being contaminated by other vices, which for the most part hold together and intertwine, if you are not careful. I have pruned my own vices and trained them to be as solitary and simple as I could. . . .

(As for the opinion of the Stoics, who say that when a wise man acts he acts through all his virtues together, though one of them is more in evidence depending on the nature of the action. . . .: if they want to infer from this that when a bad man does wrong he does so through all his vices together, then I do not believe them, . . . for I know by experience that the contrary is true. <sup>[C]</sup> Such are the insubstantial pin-point subtleties that philosophy sometimes lingers over! I go in for some vices, but I flee others as much as a saint could do.)

Furthermore, the Peripatetics do not accept this indissoluble connection and bond between moral belief and conduct: Aristotle maintains that a man may be wise and just yet

intemperate and lacking in restraint. <sup>[A]</sup> Socrates confessed to those who recognised in his face some inclination towards vice that this was indeed his natural propensity but that he had corrected it by discipline. <sup>[C]</sup> And the close friends of the philosopher Stilpo said that he, having been born susceptible to wine and women, had by study made himself very abstinent from both.

<sup>[A]</sup> My own case is the reverse of that. Any good that I have in me I owe to the luck of my birth. I have not received it from law or precept or any other apprenticeship. <sup>[B]</sup> The innocence that is in me is an unfledged innocence: little vigour, no art.

·THE VICE OF CRUELTY; THE ‘VICE’ OF SEXUAL PLEASURE·

<sup>[A]</sup> Among other vices I cruelly hate cruelty, both by nature and by judgement, as the extreme of all vices. But this is to such a point of softness that I do not see a chicken’s neck wrung without distress, and cannot bear to hear the scream of a hare in the teeth of my dogs, though I enjoy the hunt enormously.

Those who have to combat sensual pleasure like to use the following argument to show that it is entirely vicious and irrational: at its greatest pitch it dominates us to such an extent that reason can have no access; and they cite the experience of it that we feel when lying with women—‘as when the body already anticipates its joy, and Venus is about to scatter seeds broadcast in the woman’s furrows’ [Lucretius]—where it seems to them that the pleasure transports us so far beyond ourselves that our reason, entirely paralysed and enraptured by it, could not perform its function.

I know that it can go otherwise, and that one will sometimes, if one wants, cast the soul back to other thoughts at this very moment. But for this the soul must be tensed and stiffened vigilantly. I know that one can master the onset of this pleasure; and <sup>[C]</sup> I am well versed in this and have not

found Venus to be as imperious a goddess as many chaster men than I am testify to her being. <sup>[A]</sup> I do not take it for a miracle—as does the Queen of Navarre in one of the tales of her *Heptameron*. . . .—or for an extremely difficult thing to spend whole nights with a mistress long yearned for, in complete freedom and with every opportunity, while keeping one’s promised word to her to be content with simple kisses and caresses.

I think a more appropriate example of reason being pushed aside would be the pleasure of the hunt; it involves less pleasure but more ecstasy and more surprise, so that our reason, stunned, does not have time to prepare itself for the encounter <sup>[A]</sup> when, after a long chase, the quarry starts up suddenly and reveals itself in a place where we were perhaps least expecting it. This shock and the ardour of the hue and cry strike us, so that it would be hard for those who love this sort of hunt to withdraw their thought elsewhere at that point. And the poets make Diana victorious over Cupid’s torch and arrows. . . .

To return to my subject, I have a most tender compassion for the afflictions of others, and would readily weep to keep others company if I could weep for anything. <sup>[C]</sup> There is nothing that tempts my tears but tears—not only real ones but all sorts, even the feigned or painted [*feintes ou peintes*]. <sup>[A]</sup> I hardly pity the dead; I am more inclined to envy them; but I greatly pity the dying. I am less upset by savages who roast and eat the bodies of the dead than I am by people who torment and persecute the living.

·CRUELTY IN PUNISHMENTS·

Even lawful public executions, however reasonable they may be, I cannot witness with a steady gaze. [Two anecdotes about Julius Caesar’s punishing with ‘simple death’ people he might have had tortured. Then:] As for me, even in the



case of justice, anything beyond simple death strikes me as pure cruelty, and especially for us who ought to be concerned to dispatch souls in a good state, which cannot happen when they have been agitated and driven to despair by unbearable tortures.

[A quite long <sup>[C]</sup>-tagged report of something that happened 'a few days ago'. A soldier under sentence of death clumsily and painfully tried to commit suicide so as to avoid torture. When he learned that he was merely to be decapitated, this 'seemed to him like a deliverance from death'.]

[Picking up from 'unbearable tortures.'] My advice would be that exemplary severity intended to keep the populace to their duty should be exercised on the *corpses* of criminals; for the common people would see their being deprived of burial, boiled and cut into quarters, as being virtually as bad as the pains inflicted on the living, though they really amount to little or nothing, <sup>[C]</sup> as God says, 'they who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do' [Luke 12:4]. And the poets bring out remarkably the horror of this picture, as something worse than death. 'Alas! the remains of a half-burnt king, his flesh torn to the bone, and spattered with mud and blood, dragged along in shame' [Ennius].

<sup>[A]</sup> I happened to be in Rome one day when they were doing away with Catena, a notorious robber. When he was strangled, the crowd showed no emotion; but when the executioner proceeded to quarter him, each blow he struck was followed by a plaintive cry and exclamation from the crowd, as if each of them had transferred his own feelings to that carcass. . . .

I live at a time when we abound in incredible examples of this vice of cruelty, thanks to our civil wars; nothing in ancient history is more extreme than what we experience of it every day. But that has not reconciled me to it in the least. If I had not seen it I could hardly have made myself believe

that there are souls so monstrous that they would commit torture and murder for the mere pleasure of it [and he gives details]. For there you have the uttermost point that cruelty can reach: <sup>[C]</sup> '... that a man should kill a man not in anger or in fear but merely for the spectacle' [Seneca].

·CRUELTY AND SPORTS·

<sup>[A]</sup> For myself, I have not even been able without distress to see hunted and killed an innocent animal that is defenceless and is doing us no harm. . . . 'It was, I think, by the slaughter of beasts in the wild that our iron swords were first spattered with warm blood' [Ovid]. Natures that are bloodthirsty towards beasts testify to a natural propensity towards cruelty.

<sup>[B]</sup> In Rome, after they had grown used to watching the slaughter of animals, they proceeded to men and to gladiators. I fear that nature itself has attached to man some instinct for inhumanity. No-one enjoys watching beasts play together and caress one another; everyone enjoys watching them tear apart and dismember one another.

<sup>[A]</sup> Lest anyone should mock my sympathy for beasts, ·I point out that· theology itself orders us to show some favour towards them. And, considering that the same Master has lodged ·them and· us in this palatial abode for his service, and that they are members of his family as we are, theology is right to enjoin upon us some respect and affection for them.

[Then a page about the belief (ancient Egypt, Pythagoras) that at the death of a body its soul enters another body, and the belief ('our ancient Gauls') that after a man's death his soul may enter an animal's body, *which* animal depending on how the man has conducted his life. After this intrusion, Montaigne returns to the thesis that we and the animals are members of one family:]

## •FRIENDSHIP WITH THE BEASTS•

As for that cousinship between us and the beasts, I do not put much stock in it; or in the fact that many nations, notably some of the oldest and noblest, not only received beasts into their society and company but even ranked them far above themselves, sometimes esteeming them as intimates and favourites of their gods, holding them in more than human respect and reverence. And other nations recognised no other god, no other divinity, but them: <sup>[C]</sup> 'Beasts were sacred to the barbarians because of the blessings they bestowed' [Cicero]. <sup>[B]</sup> 'This place adores the crocodile; another dreads the ibis, feeder on serpents; here shines the golden image of the sacred ape; . . . here men venerate the fish of the river; there whole towns worship a dog' [Juvenal].

<sup>[A]</sup> And the well-conceived interpretation that Plutarch gives of this error is to their honour. For he says that it was not the cat or the bull (for example) that the Egyptians worshipped; what they worshipped in those beasts was some image of the divine attributes: in the bull patience and usefulness; in the cat •liveliness—

<sup>[C]</sup> or, like our neighbours the Burgundians along with the whole of Germany, •impatience with being shut in, which they took to represent the freedom that they loved and worshipped above any other divine attribute—and so for the rest.

<sup>[A]</sup> But when among more moderate opinions I come across arguments that try to show our close resemblance to the animals, how much they share in our greatest privileges, and how plausibly they are likened to us, I certainly pull down our presumption considerably and willingly resign that imaginary kingship over other creatures that is attributed to us.

Even if there were nothing in all that, there is a certain respect and a general duty of humanity that attaches us not

only to the beasts, which have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. To men we owe justice; we owe gentleness and kindness to the other created things that can receive them. Between them and us there is some interaction and some mutual obligation. <sup>[C]</sup> I am not afraid to admit that my nature is so tender, so childish, that whenever my dog offers (or asks) to play, however unsuitable the occasion for this, I cannot easily refuse.

<sup>[A]</sup> The Turks have charities and hospitals for animals. <sup>[A]</sup> The Romans had a public duty to care for geese, by whose vigilance their Capitol had been saved; the Athenians commanded that the mules that had been used in building the Hecatompeton temple should be set free and allowed to graze anywhere without hindrance.

<sup>[C]</sup> It was the usual practice of the citizens of Agrigentum to give solemn burial to the beasts they had loved—horses of some rare merit, to working birds and dogs, or even those that their children had played with. . . . The Egyptians buried wolves, bears, crocodiles, dogs and cats in sacred places, embalmed their corpses and wore mourning at their deaths. <sup>[A]</sup> Cimon gave honourable burial to the mares with which he had three times won the prize for racing at the Olympic games. In antiquity Xantippus had his dog buried on a coastal headland which has borne its name ever since. And Plutarch had scruples, he says, about sending to the slaughter-house, for a slight profit, an ox that had long served him.

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Essay 12. 'Defence of Raymond Sebond', about 200 pages long, starts from Sebond's 1434–6 *Natural Theology*, but soon moves away from that into a somewhat rambling series of meditations on faith and reason and their provinces.

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### 13. Judging someone else's death

[A] When we form an opinion about someone else's steadiness when he is dying—and dying is without doubt the most noteworthy action of human life—one thing should be taken into account, namely that it is hard for anyone to believe that he has reached that point. Few people die convinced that this is their last hour; and nowhere are we more distracted by the deception of hope. It never stops trumpeting into our ears: 'Others have been more ill without dying', 'The case is not as desperate as they think', and at worst 'God has certainly performed other miracles'.

This happens because we set too much importance on ourselves. It seems ·to us· that the universe somehow suffers from our annihilation, and that it has compassion for our state. Especially since our deteriorating vision represents things to itself as likewise deteriorating, and in proportion as it fails them we think that they are failing it, like travellers at sea for whom mountains, countrysides, cities, sky and land all go by at the same speed as they do. . . .

[B] Who ever saw an old person who did not praise former times and condemn the present, blaming his own misery and disappointment on the world and on men's *moeurs*? 'Now the old ploughman, shaking his head, sighs and compares present times with past, often praises his parents' happiness, and talks of the old race as full of piety' [Lucretius]. We drag everything along with us; [A] from which it follows that we reckon our death to be a great thing, something that does not happen easily or without solemn consultation among the stars: [C] 'So many gods in a tumult over one head!' [Seneca]. [A] And the higher we rate ourselves the more we think that way.

[C] What! Should so much learning be lost, bringing so much harm, without the special concern of the

fates? Does it not cost more to kill such a rare and exemplary soul than to kill a plebeian and useless one? Is this life—•which protects so many others, •on which so many other lives depend, •whose activities give employment to so many people, and •which fills so many places—to be displaced like a life that is attached ·to the world· by a single knot?

None of us gives enough thought to his being only *one*.

[A] Hence come these words of Caesar to his pilot, words more swollen than the sea that was threatening him: 'If you decline to sail to Italy under the God's protection, trust to mine; the only just cause you have to fear is that you do not know your passenger; sail on, secure in my guardianship' [Lucan]. And these: 'Caesar now believed the perils to be worthy of his destiny: "What a great labour it is for the gods to topple me", he said, "seeking me out where I sit on a huge sea in a tiny boat!"' [B] And that public daydream that for a whole year the sun's face was in mourning for Caesar's death! . . . , and hundreds of similar ones by which the world lets itself so easily be tricked, reckoning that our troubles can harm the heavens. . . .

[A] Now, is not reasonable to judge concerning the resolution and constancy of a man who is not yet sure that he is in danger, even if he is; it is not enough that he did die in that posture [of resolute constancy] unless he adopted it precisely for that purpose [i.e. to die in it]. It happens to most men to stiffen their countenance and their words so to acquire a reputation that they still hope to live to enjoy. . . .

·THE DESIRE FOR A QUICK DEATH·

[A] And even among those who killed themselves in ancient times there is a great distinction to be made between a quick death and one that took time. That cruel Roman Emperor who said of his prisoners that he wanted them to feel death

would comment, if one of them killed himself while in prison, 'That one got away!' He wanted to prolong death and to make it felt through torture: <sup>[B]</sup> 'We have seen in tortured bodies no gift of a mortal wound—only the fierce cruelty of keeping men alive while making them die' [Lucan].

<sup>[A]</sup> It is no great thing for a healthy and composed person to resolve to kill himself; it is very easy to play tough before coming to grips. [Montaigne cites the example of 'Heliogabalus, the most effeminate man in the world', who planned various elegant ways for him to end his life, and remarks sardonically:] The luxuriousness of his preparations makes it likely that when it came to the crunch he would have had a ·fear-caused· nosebleed.

But even in those more forceful men who have decided to carry it out, we must (I say) look to see if it was to be by a blow that would leave them no time to feel its effect. For if they saw their life slowly ebbing away, the body's awareness mingling with the soul's, keeping available the means for a change of heart, it is open to question whether they would have remained constant and stubborn in such a dangerous act of the will.

[Montaigne now cites several episodes, six ancient and one recent, of people who tried to kill themselves but failed or needed help, usually through failure of nerve. Then:] Death is a food that must be swallowed without chewing unless one has a leather-lined throat! The Emperor Hadrian had his doctor mark and encircle on his nipple the mortal spot to be aimed at by the man he ordered to kill him. Which explains why Caesar, when asked what kind of death he found most desirable, replied, 'The least anticipated and the quickest.' <sup>[B]</sup> If Caesar dared say it, it is no longer cowardice for me to think the same.

<sup>[A]</sup> 'A quick death', says Pliny, 'is the sovereign blessing of human life.' People hate to recognise death. No man can

claim to be resolute in death who is afraid to negotiate it and cannot go through it with his eyes open. Those we see at the gallows running to their end, hastening and urging the carrying out of the sentence, are not doing this because they are resolute; they want to deprive themselves of time to think about it; they are afraid not of being dead but of dying. . . . I know from experience that I could attain to that degree of firmness, like men who dive into dangers as into the sea—with their eyes closed.

·'STUDIED AND DIGESTED DEATHS'·

<sup>[C]</sup> In my opinion there is nothing more illustrious in the life of Socrates than his having had thirty whole days to meditate on his death-sentence, digesting his death as a certainty through all that time, without fuss, without alteration, and with a course of actions and words that was subdued and relaxed, rather than strained and exalted, by the weight of that thought.

<sup>[A]</sup> When he was ill, Pomponius Atticus (to whom Cicero addressed his epistles) summoned his son-in-law Agrippa and two or three other friends and told them that—having found by experience that he had nothing to gain from trying to be cured, and that everything he was doing to prolong his life was both prolonging and increasing his suffering—he had decided to end them both. He begged them to approve of his decision, or at least not to waste their efforts on trying to dissuade him. Well, then, he chose to kill himself by starvation, and *voilà!* his illness was cured! The remedy he had chosen to end his life restores him to health. The doctors and his friends, celebrating such a happy outcome and rejoicing over it with him, found themselves much mistaken; for they could not get him to go back on his decision, despite his cure. He said that one way or another he would have to cross that line some day, and that having gone this far he

wanted to save himself the trouble of starting all over again on another occasion. That man, having looked death over quite at his leisure, was not merely undismayed but even eager to meet it; for once he was satisfied by his reasons for entering the fight, he spurred himself on by *braverie* [see Glossary] to see the end of it. It is to go far beyond not fearing death to want to taste it and relish it.

[C] The story of the philosopher Cleanthes is very similar. His gums were swollen and rotting; the doctors advised extreme abstinence. After two days of fasting he is so much better that they declare him cured and allow him to return to his usual way of life. He, on the contrary, already tasting some sweetness in his failing powers, decides not to retreat and to cross the line towards which he had advanced so far.

[A] Tullius Marcellinus, a Roman youth, wanting to anticipate the hour of his destiny so as to rid himself of an illness that was battering him more than he was prepared to put up with, although the doctors promised him a certain cure but not a quick one, called his friends together to consider the matter. Seneca reports that some gave him the advice that through cowardice they would have chosen for themselves; others, out of flattery, the advice they thought would be most pleasing to him; but a Stoic said this to him:

‘Do not toil over it, Marcellinus, as if you were deliberating over something important; it is no great thing to be alive—your servants and beasts are alive—but it is a great thing to die honourably, wisely and with constancy. Think how long you have been doing the same things—eating, drinking and sleeping; drinking, sleeping and eating. We turn incessantly in that circle; not only bad and intolerable mishaps but merely being sated with living gives us a desire for death.’

...Marcellinus needed neither blade nor bloodshed; he undertook not to run away from this life but to take leave of

it; not to escape death but to experience it. And to give himself time to deal with it, he gave up all food; three days later he had himself sprinkled with warm water; he faded away gradually, not without some pleasure, so he said. Indeed those who have experienced such fadings of the heart brought on by weakness say that they felt no pain from them but rather a certain pleasure, like dropping off to sleep and resting.

Those are studied and digested deaths. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Essay 14. ‘How our mind gets tangled up’ is one page about puzzles in logic, philosophy, and geometry. Montaigne does little more than mention them. He concludes that ‘they might be adduced to support the bold saying of Pliny: “The only thing that is certain is that nothing is certain, and nothing is more miserable or more arrogant than man.”’

\* \* \* \* \*

## 15. Difficulty increases desire

[A] There is no reason that does not have an **opposite**, says the wisest school of philosophers [the sceptics].

I have just been chewing over the fine saying that one of the ancients adduces as a reason for despising life: ‘No good can bring us pleasure except one that we are prepared to lose’ [Seneca]; [C] ‘Grief for something lost is equal to the fear of losing it’ [Seneca]; meaning this to prove that the enjoyment of life can never be truly pleasing if we are afraid of losing it.

But it could be said—going the **opposite** way—that the less securely *ours* we see life as being and the more afraid we are of losing it, the more tightly and affectionately we clutch and embrace it. For it is evident that just as fire is

stirred up by the presence of cold, our will is sharpened by opposition—<sup>[B]</sup> ‘Danae would not have had a child by Jupiter had she never been shut up in a tower of bronze’ [Ovid]—and <sup>[A]</sup> that by nature there is nothing so contrary to our enjoyment as the satiety that comes from ease of access, and nothing that sharpens it as much as rareness and difficulty. ‘In all things pleasure is increased by the very danger that should scare us off’ [Seneca]. ‘Galla, say No ·to me·; love is soon sated unless joys meet torments’ [Martial].

To make love exciting, Lycurgus ordained that married couples in Sparta should have sexual relations with each other only by stealth, and that it should be as shameful for them to be discovered lying together as lying with others. The difficulty of arranging trysts, the risk of being caught, the embarrassment on the next day—and listlessness, and silence, and a sigh fetched up from the depths’ [Horace]—that is what gives a tang to the sauce. <sup>[C]</sup> How many lasciviously enjoyable frolics arise from the modest and shamefaced way of talking about the works of love! <sup>[A]</sup> Even sensual pleasure seeks stimulation from pain. It is much sweeter when it burns and stings. The courtesan Flora said that she had never lain with Pompey without making him bear the marks of her bites: ‘The object of their desire they tightly hug, hurting each other’s body; they sink their teeth into each one another’s lips; some hidden goads prick them on to hurt the very thing, whatever it is, from which spring the seeds of their ecstasy’ [Lucretius]. It is like that everywhere; difficulty gives value to things. . . .

·SEX, THE REFORMATION, DIVORCE, PUNISHMENT·

**[A]** Our appetite scorns and passes over what is right there for it, so as to run after what it does not have: ‘He leaps over what lies fixed in his path, to chase after what runs

away’ [Horace]. To forbid us something is to make us want it: <sup>[B]</sup> ‘Unless you start to guard that girl of yours, I shall soon stop wanting her’ [Ovid]. <sup>[A]</sup> To hand it over to us completely is to breed in us contempt for it. Want and abundance create the same discomfort: ‘The excess pains you; the want pains me’ [Terence]. Desire and enjoyment make us equally dissatisfied. Coldness in mistresses is annoying, but the fact is that ease and availability are even more so; that is because the discontent and anger that arise from the value we give to the desired object sharpen our love and heat it up; whereas satiety engenders distaste; our passion then is blunted, hesitant, weary and half-asleep: ‘If she wants to go on reigning over her lover, let her scorn him’ [Ovid]. ‘Scorn her, lovers; then she will come today for what she refused yesterday’ [Propertius]. . . .

Why have they veiled, right down to the heels, those beauties that every woman wants to show,<sup>1</sup> that every man wants to see? Why do they cover with so many impediments, layer on layer, the parts in which our desire and theirs principally dwells? And those defence-works with which our women have just taken to arming their flanks—what are they for if not to allure our appetite and to attract us to them by keeping us at a distance? ‘She flees into the willows, but wants first to be seen’ [Virgil]. . . .

What is the use of that artful maidenly modesty, that poised coldness, that severe countenance, that professed ignorance of things that they know better than we who instruct them in them, except to increase our desire to conquer, overwhelm, and subdue to our appetite all this ceremony and all these obstacles? For there is not only pleasure but also triumph in making that sweet gentleness and that girlish modesty go mad with sensual desire and in

<sup>1</sup> Taking it that *que chacun desire montrer* was a slip for *que chacune desire montrer*.

subjecting a proud and commanding gravity to the mercy of our ardour.

There is glory, they say, in triumphing over coldness, modesty, chastity and moderation, and anyone who counsels ladies against these attitudes betrays both them and himself. We need to believe that their heart trembles with fear, that the sound of our words offends the purity of their ears, that they hate us for it and yield to our persistence with an enforced fortitude. Beauty, all-powerful as it is, has no way of making itself savoured without such preliminaries. . . .

**[B]** It is an act of God's providence to allow his holy Church to be agitated by so many troubles and storms ·involved in the Reformation·, in order by this opposition to awaken pious souls and bring them back from the idleness and torpor in which such a long period of calm had immersed them. If we weigh •the loss we have suffered by the numbers of those who have gone astray against •the gain that comes to us from our having been brought back into fighting trim, with our zeal and our strength restored to life for the battle, I do not know that the benefit does not outweigh the harm.

**[C]** We thought we were tying our marriage-knots more tightly by removing all means of undoing them; but the tighter we pulled the knot of constraint the looser and slacker became the knot of our will and affection. In ·ancient· Rome, on the contrary, what made marriages honoured and secure for so long a period was freedom to break them at will. Men loved their wives more because they could lose them; and with full liberty of divorce, more than five hundred years passed before anyone took advantage of it: 'What is allowed has no charm: what is not allowed, we burn to do' [Ovid].

**[D]** We could add to this the opinion of an ancient philosopher [Seneca] that punishments sharpen our vices rather than blunt them; <sup>[B]</sup> they do not engender a concern to do well—that is the work of reason and discipline—but only a

concern not to be caught doing wrong: 'With the infected spot cut out, the contagion spreads wider' [Rutilius]. <sup>[A]</sup> I do not know whether that is true, but I do know from experience that no society has ever been reformed by such means. The order and regulation of *moeurs* [see Glossary] depends on some other method.

<sup>[C]</sup> The Greek histories [here = Herodotus] mention the Argipaeans, neighbours of Scythia, who live without rod or stick for offence; not only does no one undertake to attack them but because of their virtue and sanctity of life any man who seeks refuge with them is quite safe—no-one would venture to lay hands on him. Recourse is had to them to settle the disputes that arise among men of other countries.

·PROTECTING ONE'S HOME IN WAR-TIME·

<sup>[B]</sup> There is a nation where the gardens and fields that people want to protect are closed off with a cotton thread, which proves to be much more secure and reliable than our hedges and ditches. <sup>[C]</sup> 'Locked places invite the thief; the burglar passes by what is open' [Seneca].

It may be that one of the things that protects my house from the violence of our civil wars is the ease of access to it. Defence attracts enterprise, and mistrust ·attracts· offence. I have weakened any designs soldiers may have on it by removing from their exploit the elements of risk and military glory that usually provide them with a pretext and an excuse. At a time when justice is dead, anything done courageously brings honour. I make the taking of my house cowardly and treacherous for them. It is closed to no-one who knocks. My entire protection consists of an old-fashioned courteous porter, who serves not so much to block my door as to offer it with more decorum and grace. I have no guard or sentinel except what the stars provide for me.

A gentleman [see Glossary] is wrong to make a show of being defended unless his defences are complete. Whoever is exposed on the flank is exposed over-all. Our fathers had no thought of building frontier forts! The means of storming and surprising our houses—I mean without cannons and armies—increase every day, exceeding the means of defending them. . . . My own house was a stronghold for the time it was built. In that respect I have added nothing to it, fearing that its strength could be turned against me. Moreover, peaceful times will require that houses be defortified. There is the risk of not being able to retake them; and it is hard to be sure of them. For in a civil war your valet may be on the side that you fear. And where religion serves as pretext, even kinsmen cannot be trusted under the cloak of justice.

Our home-garrisons will not be paid for out of the public exchequer, which would be exhausted by doing so. We have not the means to maintain them without ruining ourselves or—more harmfully and unjustly—ruining our people. I would hardly be worse off if I lost my house. . . .

The fact that so many protected houses have been lost while this one endures makes me suspect that they were lost *because* they were protected. That provides an attacker with both the desire and the excuse. All protection bears the aspect of war, which will descend on my house if God so wills it, but which I shall never invite to come there. It is my place of retreat, to rest from the wars. I try to withdraw this corner from the public storm, as I do another corner in my soul. Our war may change forms all it will, and multiply and diversify itself into new factions; as for me, I do not budge.

Amid so many fortified houses, I (alone of my rank as far as I know) have entrusted mine purely to the protection of heaven. I have never removed from it plate or title-deeds or hangings. I will never fear for myself, nor save myself, by halves. If the fullness of my gratitude brings God's favour, it

will see me through to the end; if not, I have already survived the religious civil wars for long enough to make my duration remarkable and worth recording. What! It has been thirty years or more!

## 16. Glory

[A] There is the name and the thing: the name is a spoken sound that designates and signifies the thing; the name is not part of the thing or of the substance; it is an extraneous piece attached to the thing and outside of it.

God, who is himself all fullness and the ultimate of all perfection, cannot himself grow and increase; but his name can be made to grow and increase through the blessing and praise that we bestow on his works, which are external to him. We cannot incorporate that praise into the substance of God, in whom there can be no increase of good, so we attribute it to his name, which is the extraneous piece nearest to him. That is why glory and honour belong to God alone. There is nothing so unreasonable as for us to go seeking them for ourselves; for since we are intrinsically wanting and necessitous, our essence being imperfect and continually in need of improvement, *that* is what we should be working for.

We are all hollow and empty; it is not with wind and sound that we have to fill ourselves; to restore ourselves we need more solid substance. A starving man would be a simpleton if he went in search of fine clothes rather than a good meal; we should run to our most pressing needs. As our ordinary prayers say, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace toward men' [Luke 1:14]. We have a scarcity of beauty, health, wisdom, virtue and such essential qualities; external ornaments will be sought after we have provided for



the necessities. Theology treats this subject fully and more pertinently, but I am hardly versed in it.

Chrysippus and Diogenes were the first and firmest exponents of the disdain for glory; they said that of all the pleasures none was more dangerous or more to be avoided than the pleasure of being approved of by others. In truth, experience makes us aware of many harmful betrayals at its hands. There is nothing that poisons princes more than flattery, and nothing by which bad men can more easily gain credit in their courts; nor is there any pandering so fitted and so common for corrupting the chastity of women as feeding and entertaining them with their praises.

<sup>[B]</sup> The first enchantment the Sirens use to deceive Ulysses is of this nature: ‘Come hither to us, O admirable Ulysses, come hither, thou greatest ornament and pride of Greece’ [Homer]. <sup>[A]</sup> Those philosophers ·whom I mentioned· said that for a man of discretion it would not be worthwhile even to stretch out a finger to acquire all the glory in the world—

<sup>[B]</sup> ‘What is there to the greatest glory if it is merely glory?’ [Juvenal]

—<sup>[A]</sup> I mean, to acquire it for its own sake; for it often brings with it many advantages that can make it desirable: it brings us good-will, makes us less exposed to insults and injuries from others, and the like.

It was also one of the principal doctrines of Epicurus, for that precept of his school, CONCEAL YOUR LIFE, which forbids men to burden themselves with public affairs and business, also necessarily presupposes a contempt for glory, which is the world’s approbation of actions of ours that we make public. He who . . . does not want us to be known to others is even further from wanting us to be held in honour and glory by them. So he advises Idomeneus not to regulate his actions even slightly by common opinion or reputation, except to avoid the incidental disadvantages that

men’s contempt might bring him. Those lines of thought are infinitely true, in my opinion, and reasonable. But we are in some way intrinsically *double*, so that what we believe we do not believe, what we condemn we cannot help doing. Let us look at the last words of Epicurus, said when he was dying: they are great words, worthy of such a philosopher; yet they bear some sign of •a concern for his reputation and of •that attitude he had denounced in his precepts. Here is a letter that he dictated a little before breathing his last:

‘EPICURUS TO HERMACHUS, GREETINGS! I wrote this during the last day of my life, a happy day though accompanied by pain in the bladder and intestines— pain that could not be greater. But it is made up for by the pleasure brought to my soul by the remembrance of my discoveries and teachings. You now should welcome the task of looking after the children of Metrodorus, as required by the affection you have had since childhood for me and for philosophy.’

That is his letter. What leads me to conclude that the pleasure he says he feels in his soul from his discoveries has something to do with the reputation he hoped they would bring him after death is a clause in his will asking his heirs Amynomachus and Timocrates to provide such money as Hermachus should require for •the celebration of his [Epicurus’s] birthday every January and for •a gathering of his philosopher-friends on the twentieth day of each month to honour the memory of himself and of Metrodorus.

Carneades was the protagonist of the opposite opinion, maintaining that glory was desirable for itself, just as we embrace our descendants for themselves though we have no knowledge or enjoyment of them. This opinion has not failed to be more commonly followed ·than Epicurus’s·, as those that most suit our inclinations are apt to be. <sup>[C]</sup> Aristotle gives glory the first rank among external goods: ‘Avoid,

as two vicious [see Glossary] extremes, immoderately seeking glory and immoderately fleeing it.' <sup>[A]</sup> I believe that if we had the books that Cicero wrote on this subject he would have spun us some good ones! For that man was so frenzied with a passion for glory that, if he had dared, I believe he would readily have fallen into the extreme that others fell into—namely, the view that even virtue is desirable only for the honour that always attended it, an opinion so false that it irks me that it could ever have entered the mind of a man who bore the honoured name of philosopher.

If that were true, we should be virtuous only in public; and it would be pointless to keep the workings of our soul (the true seat of virtue) under rule and order except insofar as they would come to the knowledge of others.

<sup>[C]</sup> Is it then only a matter of doing wrong slyly and subtly? 'If you know', says Carneades, 'that a snake is hidden in a place where a man who is unaware of it and by whose death you hope to profit is about to sit down, you act wickedly if you do not warn him, all the more so if your deed could be known only to yourself.' If we do not draw the law of right conduct from within ourselves, if for us impunity is justice, how many kinds of wickedness shall we daily abandon ourselves to?

What Sextus Peduceus did in faithfully returning the money that Caius Plotius had entrusted to him, he alone knowing it—something I have often done in the same way—I do not find as praiseworthy as I would find it execrable if we had failed to do it.

And I find it good and useful to recall in our time the case of Publius Sextilius Rufus, whom Cicero condemns for having accepted an inheritance against his conscience, not only *not against* the law but *through* the law.

And Marcus Crassus and Quintus Hortensius who had been invited by a foreigner to share in the succession of a forged will, so that their authority and power would enable

him to be sure of his own share in it; they contented themselves with not having a hand in the forgery, and did not refuse to profit by it, feeling sufficiently covered if they kept themselves sheltered from accusers, witnesses and laws. 'Let them remember that they have God as a witness, that is to say (as I believe) their own conscience' [Cicero].

<sup>[A]</sup> Virtue is a really vain and frivolous thing if what makes it worthwhile is glory. ·If that were so·, it would be pointless for us to try to give it a separate status and to detach it from fortune; for what is there more fortuitous than reputation? <sup>[C]</sup> 'Truly fortune rules in all things; it makes things celebrated or obscure by its own whim, not by truth' [Sallust]. <sup>[A]</sup> Bringing it about that actions are known and seen is purely the work of fortune.

<sup>[C]</sup> It is chance that brings glory to us, according to how it throws its weight around. I have very often seen it going ahead of merit, and often outstripping it by a long distance. The man who first noticed the resemblance between shadow and glory did better than he intended. Both are pre-eminently empty things. . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> Those who teach noblemen to look to valour for nothing but honour—<sup>[C]</sup> 'as if what is not noted were not honorable' [Cicero]—<sup>[A]</sup> what do they achieve by this except teaching them never to hazard themselves unless they are seen, and to take care to ensure that there are witnesses who can bring back news of their valour? Whereas there are a thousand occasions for acting well without anyone noticing! How many fine individual actions are buried in the throng of a battle! Anyone who spends time checking on others during such a melee is not very busy in it himself, and produces against *himself* the testimony he gives concerning his comrades' conduct. <sup>[C]</sup> 'True and philosophic greatness of spirit regards the moral goodness to which nature most aspires as consisting in deeds, not in fame' [Cicero].

All the glory I claim for my life is to have lived it tranquilly—tranquilly not according to Metrodorus or Arcesilas or Aristippus, but according to me. Since philosophy has not been able to discover a route to tranquillity that would be good for everyone, let each man seek it individually.

[A] To what but to fortune do Caesar and Alexander owe the measureless greatness of their renown? How many men has it extinguished at the start of their careers—men we know nothing about—who would have brought to their enterprises the same courage as those two if the misfortune of their fate had not stopped them short at the outset! I do not remember reading that Caesar, in the course of so many and so extreme dangers, was ever wounded. A thousand have died from lesser perils than any he passed through.

Countless fine actions must be lost without a witness before one shows to advantage. A man is not always at the top of a breach or at the head of an army, in sight of his general as on a stage. He is ambushed between the hedge and the ditch; he must tempt fortune against a hen-roost; he must root out four wretched musketeers from a barn; he must separate from his unit and go it alone, as necessity requires. And if you watch carefully you will find by experience that the least spectacular occasions are the most dangerous; and that in the wars that have happened in our own times, more good men have been lost on minor and fairly unimportant actions—fighting over some shack—than in places of honour and dignity.

[C] Anyone who holds that his death is wasted unless it is on some conspicuous occasion, instead of making his death illustrious is probably casting a shadow over his life, while letting slip many just occasions for hazarding himself. And all just ones are illustrious enough; each man's conscience trumpets them sufficiently to himself: 'Our glory is the testimony of our conscience' [2 Corinthians, 1:12]. . . .

[A] Whoever acts well only because people will know it and think better of him, whoever is unwilling to act well unless his virtue will come to the knowledge of men, is not a man who will be of much use to anyone. [Montaigne now offers eight lines of Italian verse from Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, about the hero Orlando [= Roland], who 'was always more ready to do valiant deeds than to relate them afterwards'.]

[A] One should go to war as a duty, expecting as a reward the satisfaction that a well-governed conscience derives from acting well, which cannot fail any noble actions—even virtuous thoughts—however hidden they are. One should be valiant for one's own sake, and for the advantage of having one's courage firmly grounded and secure against the assaults of fortune. [B] 'Virtue ignores all squalid slights: it gleams with unstained honour; it neither accepts nor lays down the insignia of Consul at the whim of the plebs' [Horace].

[A] It is not for show that our soul must play its part; it is at home, within us, where no eyes but our own can penetrate. There it protects us from fear of death, of pain, of shame even; it arms us against the loss of our children, of our friends, and of our fortunes; and when the opportunity arises, it also leads us to the hazards of war: [C] 'Not for any reward but the beauty of merit itself' [Cicero]. [A] This benefit is much greater, and much more worthy of being coveted and hoped for, than honour and glory, which are nothing but a favourable judgement that people make of us.

·AGAINST GIVING WEIGHT TO THE OPINIONS OF 'THE MOB'·

[B] To adjudicate an acre of land we have to select a dozen men out of an entire nation; yet when it comes to adjudicating our propensities and our actions—the most difficult and most important matter there is—we have recourse to the voice of the common people and of the mob, the mother of ignorance,

of injustice and of inconstancy. <sup>[C]</sup> Is it reasonable to make the life of a wise man depend on the judgement of fools? 'Can anything be more stupid than think that people we despise as individuals can amount to something collectively?' <sup>[Cicero]</sup> <sup>[B]</sup> Whoever aims to please them will never finish; it is a shapeless and elusive target. <sup>[C]</sup> 'Nothing is as unpredictable as the mind of a multitude' <sup>[Livy]</sup>. Demetrius joked that he set no more store by the voice of the people when it came from their tops than when it came from their bottoms. Cicero wrote: 'My judgement is that even when something is not shameful it cannot be entirely free from shame when it is praised by the multitude.'

<sup>[B]</sup> No skill, no mental agility, could direct our steps in following such an erratic and unregulated guide. In that windy confusion of rumours, reports and popular opinions pushing us around, no worthwhile course can be fixed on. Let us not set ourselves a goal so fluctuating and wavering; let us steadily follow reason; let public approval follow us there, if it will; but since that depends entirely on fortune we have no reason to expect it more by any other route than by this one. Even if I did not follow the right road for its rightness, I would still follow it because I have found from experience that when all is said and done it is usually the happiest one and the most useful. <sup>[C]</sup> 'Honourable conduct is the most profitable; that is Providence's gift to men' <sup>[Quintilian]</sup>. . . .

<sup>[B]</sup> I have seen in my time a thousand supple, two-faced, equivocating men, who no-one doubted were more worldly-wise than I am, ruined while I was saved: 'I laughed when I saw how trickery could fail' <sup>[Ovid]</sup>.

<sup>[C]</sup> When Paulus Aemilius set out on his glorious Macedonian expedition, he warned the people of Rome above all to restrain their tongues concerning his actions during his absence. Freedom of judgement—what a great trouble-maker

it is in affairs of public concern! Inasmuch as not everyone has Fabius's firmness in the face of universal, hostile, and abusive clamour: he preferred to let his authority be torn to shreds by men's vain fancies, rather than earning popular support by carrying out his responsibilities less well.

<sup>[B]</sup> There is an indescribable natural sweetness in hearing oneself praised, but we make far too much of it. 'I am not afraid of being praised; my heart is not horn-hard; but I deny that the final goal of right conduct should be "Bravo!", "Well done!"' <sup>[Persius]</sup>.

<sup>[A]</sup> I do not care so much about what I am to others as about what I am to myself. I want to be rich through myself, not through borrowing. Those outside us see only upshots and outward appearances; anyone can put on a good outward show while inside he is full of fever and fright. They do not see my heart; they see only my bearing.

·FAKE BRAVERY·

We are right to denounce the hypocrisy that is found in war; for what is easier for a practical man than to dodge the dangers and play the fierce fighter while his heart is full of softness? There are so many ways of avoiding occasions for exposing ourselves to personal risk that we shall have deceived everybody a thousand times before getting into a dangerous situation; and even then, finding ourselves stuck in it, we can quite well hide our game for the moment with a good face and a confident word, though our soul trembles within us. . . . That is why all those judgements that are based on external appearances are so uncertain and dubious, and why there is no witness as reliable as each man is to himself.

On those ·dangerous occasions that we are known to go through·, how many clods do we have as companions in our glory? The man who stands firm in an open trench, what is

he doing there that was not done before him by fifty wretched trench-diggers who open the way for him and protect him with their bodies for five sous a day? . . .

·THE WISH TO BE TALKED ABOUT·

We call it ‘making our name great’ when we spread it around and sow it in many mouths; we want it to be favourably received there and—the most excusable element in this urge—to profit from this increase ·in fame·. But the excess of this malady goes so far that many seek to be talked about no matter how. Trogus Pompeius says of Herostratus, and Livy says of Manlius, that they wanted a *wide* reputation more than they wanted to have a *good* one. That is a common vice. We care more that men should talk of us than *how* they talk of us. . . . It seems that to be known is in some way to have one’s life and duration somehow in the keeping of others.

As for me, I hold that I exist in myself [*chez moy*]; and as for that other life of mine that lies in the knowledge of my friends, <sup>[C]</sup> considering it naked and simply in itself, <sup>[A]</sup> I am well aware that I feel no fruit or enjoyment from it except through the vanity of a fanciful opinion. And when I am dead I shall feel it even less, <sup>[C]</sup> and I shall lose completely the use of the real benefits that sometimes happen to come with it; <sup>[A]</sup> I shall no longer have any handle by which to get hold of reputation or or by which it can have any effect on me.

As for expecting *my name* to receive it, well. . . . [and Montaigne launches into a half-page diatribe about the unimportance of names].

·COURAGE AND POSTHUMOUS FAME·

Moreover, in a whole battle in which ten thousand men are maimed or killed, there are not fifteen that are talked about. For a personal deed to be appreciated—whether a mere infantryman’s or even a general’s—it must have some towering greatness, or some important consequence that

fortune has attached to it. For to kill a man or two, or even ten, to expose oneself courageously to death, is indeed *something* for each one of us, because everything is at stake; but for the world in general these are such ordinary things, so many of them are seen every day, and so many are needed to produce one notable effect, that we can expect no individual commendation for them. <sup>[B]</sup> ‘An incident known to many, now well-worn, picked from fortune’s heap’ [Juvenal].

<sup>[A]</sup> Of so many myriads of brave men who have died sword in hand in France over the last fifteen centuries, not a hundred have come to our knowledge. The memory not only of the leaders but of the battles and victories lies buried.

<sup>[C]</sup> The fortunes of more than half the world, for lack of a record, stay where they are and vanish immediately. If I had in my possession all the unknown events, I think I could easily supplant [here = ‘improve on’] the known ones, in examples of every kind. <sup>[A]</sup> Why, even of the Romans and the Greeks, amid so many writers and witnesses and so many rare and noble exploits, few have come down to us! <sup>[B]</sup> ‘There scarcely wafts to us a thin breath of their fame’ [Virgil]. <sup>[A]</sup> It will be a big thing if a hundred years from now people remember in a general way that in our time there were civil wars in France.

<sup>[B]</sup> On going into battle the Spartans sacrificed to the Muses, so that their deeds would be well and worthily written about; they thought that it would take a divine favour, not an ordinary ·human· one, for fine deeds to find witnesses who could give them life and memory. . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> We have not a thousandth part of the writings of the ancients: it is fortune that gives them life, shorter or longer according to its favour; <sup>[C]</sup> and it is permissible to wonder whether what we have is the worst part, since we have not seen the rest. <sup>[A]</sup> Histories are not written about minor events; it takes being the leader in conquering an empire

or a kingdom; it takes winning fifty-two pitched battles, always with smaller forces, like Caesar. Ten thousand good comrades and many great captains died in his service, valiantly and courageously, whose names lasted only as long as their wives and children lived. . . .

Even those we see acting well are no more talked of, three months or three years after their bodies were left on the field, than if they had never been. Anyone who considers soberly and without bias what kinds of people and actions have their glory maintained in the memory of books will find that very few actions and very few men of our century can claim a right to such remembrance. How many valiant men we have seen outlive their own reputation, suffering the extinction in their presence of the honour and glory most justly acquired in their early years! And for three years of this fanciful and imaginary life are we going to lose our true and essential life and commit ourselves to an everlasting death? The sages set themselves a finer and juster end for such an important undertaking: <sup>[C]</sup> ‘The reward for acting properly is to have done so’ [Seneca]; ‘The recompense for duty is duty done’ [Cicero].

<sup>[A]</sup> It might be pardonable for a painter or other craftsman, or even for a rhetorician or a grammarian, to drive himself so as to acquire a name through his works; but the actions of virtue are too noble in themselves to seek any reward other than their own intrinsic worth, and especially to seek it in the vanity of human judgements.

·FALSE BELIEFS WITH GOOD EFFECTS·

However, if •this false opinion serves the public good by keeping men to their duty—

<sup>[B]</sup> if the people are incited to virtue by it; if princes are influenced by the sight of men blessing Trajan’s memory and abominating Nero’s; if it affects them to

see the name of that great criminal, once so fearsome and so dreaded, cursed and insulted so freely by the first schoolboy who takes him on

—<sup>[A]</sup> then let •it grow boldly and be fostered among us as much as possible.

<sup>[C]</sup> And Plato, employing every means to make his citizens virtuous, advises them also not to despise the esteem of the nations. And he says that through some divine inspiration it turns out that even the wicked can often soundly distinguish—in speech and thought—good men from bad. This person and his teacher ·Socrates· are marvelous and bold workmen at bringing in divine operations and revelations wherever human power fails. Perhaps that is why Timon insulted Plato by calling him a great maker of miracles: ‘As the tragic poets have recourse to a god when they cannot unravel the end of their plot’ [Cicero].

<sup>[A]</sup> Since men, because of their inadequacy, cannot be sufficiently paid with good money, let false money also be used for that. This method has been employed by all the lawgivers. There is no polity in which empty ceremony or lying opinion has not served as a curb to keep the people to their duty. That is why most of them have fables about their origins and have beginnings enriched with supernatural mysteries. That is what has given credence to bastard religions and led them to find favour with men of understanding. [Now Montaigne launches into a scornful list of some of the peoples, religions, and ‘men of understanding’ who have been culprits in this sort of thing. He ends with a distinction:] <sup>[C]</sup> Every polity has a god at its head, •truly so for the one drawn up by Moses for the people of Judaea on leaving Egypt, •falsely so for the others.

<sup>[A]</sup> The religion of the Bedouins. . . . held among other things that the soul of any of them who died for his prince went into another body—happier, handsomer and stronger than the

first; on account of which they risked their lives much more willingly. 'The minds of these warriors defy the iron blade; their hearts embrace their deaths; for them it is cowardice to save lives that are to be given back to them' [Lucan]. That is a very salutary belief, however empty it may be. Every nation can provide its own similar examples; but that subject would merit separate treatment.

To add a word on my first topic: I do not advise ladies to call their duty 'honour'. [C] 'In common parlance, the term "honourable" is used only for what is glorious in the opinion of the people' [Cicero]. Their duty is the core; their honour is only the rind. [A] Nor do I advise them to pay us for their refusals by citing honour as an excuse; for I suppose that their intentions, their desire and their will (which are qualities their honour has nothing to do with since they do not appear on the surface) are even better regulated than their acts: 'She who does not do it because it is not allowed really does it' [Ovid]. The offence against God and their conscience would be just as great in the desiring as in the doing. So we are dealing with actions that are intrinsically hidden and secret; it would be very easy for a lady to hide one of them from the knowledge of the others on whom 'honour' depends—if she did not also have regard for her duty and for the affection she has for chastity for its own sake.

[C] Any person of honour would rather lose her honour than lose her conscience.

## 17. Presumption

[A] There is another kind of glory, 'vainglory', which is a too-good opinion we form of our own worth. It is an unthinking affection by which we cherish ourselves, presenting us to

ourselves as other than we are; in the way passionate love lends beauties and graces to the person it embraces, and makes its victims, with muddled and imperfect judgement, find what they love to be other and more perfect than it is.

I do not want a man to misjudge himself for fear of erring in this direction, or to think himself less than he is; judgement should always maintain its rights. It is right that it should see, here as elsewhere, what truth sets before it. If he is Caesar, let him boldly judge himself the greatest captain in the world.

We are nothing but ceremony;<sup>1</sup> we are carried away by it, and neglect the substance of things; we hang onto the branches and abandon the trunk, the body. We have taught the ladies to blush at hearing the mere mention of something they haven't the slightest fear of doing; we dare not call our 'private' parts by their proper names yet are not afraid to use them for all sorts of debauchery. Ceremony forbids us to express in words permissible and natural things, and we obey it. Reason forbids us to do illicit and wicked things, and no-one obeys it. Here I find myself blocked by the laws of ceremony, which do not allow a man to speak well of himself or to speak ill of himself. I shall put it aside for a while.

People whom fortune (good or bad, call it what you will) has caused to spend their lives in some exalted position can testify to what they are by their public actions. But those whom fortune has set to work only among the crowd [C] and whom no-one will talk about unless they do it themselves [A] may be excused if they have the temerity to talk about themselves for the sake of those who have an interest in knowing them, following the example of Lucilius: 'He used to confide his secrets to his notebooks as to trusted friends; turning to them and nowhere else, whether things went well

<sup>1</sup> *ceremonie*; one previous translator rendered this by 'etiquette', which seems better for the last occurrence in this paragraph.

or badly; so that the old man's entire life lay revealed as though on votive tablets' [Horace]. He committed his actions and his thoughts to paper, and portrayed himself there as he felt he was. . . .

·AN ASIDE ON MANNERISMS·

I remember, then, that from my tenderest childhood people noticed in me some indefinable way of holding myself and some gestures testifying to some vain and silly pride. But let me say this at the outset: it is not unbecoming to have characteristics and propensities that are so much our own, so incorporated into us, that we have no way of sensing and recognising them. And the body easily retains, without our knowledge or consent, some mark [*ply*, literally = 'fold'] of such natural inclinations. It was a certain mannerism appropriate to his beauty that made the head of Alexander lean a little to one side, and made Alcibiades speak softly and with a lisp. Julius Caesar used to scratch his head with one finger, which is the conduct of a man full of troublesome thoughts; and Cicero, I seem to recall, had the habit of wrinkling his nose, which is a sign of a mocking nature. Such gestures can arise in us imperceptibly.

There are other gestures that are artificial; I am not talking about them. For example salutations and bows, from which one acquires a reputation for being very humble and courteous—usually wrongly: <sup>[C]</sup>one can be humble out of vainglory! <sup>[B]</sup>I am fairly lavish with raising my hat, especially in summer, and I never receive this salute without returning it, whatever class of man it comes from, unless it is someone in my pay. I could wish that certain princes whom I know were more sparing and discriminating over such salutes; for when they are thus spread about indiscriminately they no longer have power. If they are ·given· without regard ·for status· they are without effect.

Among odder affectations <sup>[A]</sup>let us not forget the haughtiness of Emperor Constantius, who in public always held his head straight, not turning this way or that, even to look at those who were saluting him from the side; keeping his body fixed and unmoving, without letting himself move with the swaying of his coach, without venturing to spit or blow his nose or wipe his face in the presence of people.

I do not know whether those gestures that were noticed in me were of that first ·non-artificial· kind, meaning that I really did have some hidden propensity to that fault, ·vainglory·, as may well be the case; I cannot answer for the movements of my body. But as for the movements of my soul, I want to confess here what I know about them.

**[A]** ·OVER-RATING ONESELF·

In this kind of 'glory' there are two parts: namely, **[A]** rating oneself too highly and **[B]** rating others too low. [Montaigne will reach **[B]** on page 76.]

As for the former, <sup>[C]</sup>It seems to me that first these considerations should be taken into account. **(i)** I feel myself oppressed by an error of my soul which I dislike as unjust and even more as troublesome. I try to correct it, but I cannot eradicate it. It is that I under-value the things I possess, and over-value things that are foreign ·to me·, absent, and not mine. This humour spreads very far. Just as the prerogative of authority leads husbands to regard their own wives—and many fathers to regard their own children—with wicked disdain, so it is with me: out of two equal achievements I will always decide against my own. It is not so much that •eagerness for my progress and improvement disturbs my judgement and keeps me from being satisfied with myself as that •domination, of itself, breeds contempt for what one holds and controls. Far-off governments, *moeurs* and languages impress me. . . . My



neighbour's domestic arrangements, his house and his horse are better than mine only because they are not mine.

(ii) Also, I am very ignorant about myself. I wonder at the assurance and confidence everyone has about himself, whereas there is almost nothing that I know that I know [*que je sçache sçavoir*], or would dare to give my word I can do. I do not have my abilities catalogued and arranged; I find out about them only after the event. I am as doubtful about my power as about any other power. The result is that if I happen to do well in a task, I attribute that more to my good fortune than to my work, especially since I plan them all haphazardly and in fear.

Similarly, <sup>[A]</sup> this is generally true of me: of all the opinions that antiquity held about man <sup>[C]</sup> as a whole, <sup>[A]</sup> the ones I embrace most readily and adhere to most firmly are those that despise, humiliate and nullify us most. Philosophy seems to me never to have a better hand to play than when it battles against our presumption and vanity; when it honestly admits its uncertainty, weakness, and ignorance. It seems to me that the nursing mother of the falsest opinions, both public and private, is man's over-high opinion of himself.

These people who perch astride the epicycle of Mercury, <sup>[C]</sup> who see so far into the heavens, <sup>[A]</sup> are a pain in the neck.<sup>1</sup> For in the study that I am doing, the subject of which is *man*, I find such extreme variation of judgement, such a deep labyrinth of difficulties one on top of another, so much disagreement and uncertainty in the very school of wisdom, that you may well wonder—

since those fellows have not been able to reach any knowledgeable conclusions about themselves and their own state (which is continuously before their eyes, which is within them), and since they do not

understand the motions of what they themselves set in action, or know how to depict and decipher for us the springs that they hold and manage themselves—how I should believe them about the cause of the rise and fall of the Nile! The curiosity to know things was given to man as a scourge, says the Holy Scripture.

But to come to my particular case, it seems to me that it would be hard for anyone to esteem himself less—indeed, for anyone to esteem *me* less—than I esteem myself. <sup>[C]</sup> I regard myself as an ordinary sort of man, except in considering myself to be one; I am guilty of the commoner and humbler faults, but not of faults disowned or excused. I value myself only for knowing my value.

If there is vainglory in me, it is infused in me superficially by the treachery of my nature, and has no body of its own to appear before my judgement. I am sprinkled with it, but not dyed.

<sup>[A]</sup> [Picking up from '... than I esteem myself.'] For in truth, as regards products of the mind, whatever form they may take, I have never brought forth anything that satisfied me. And the approval of others is no reward. My taste is delicate and hard to please, especially regarding myself. I feel myself floating and bending with weakness. I have nothing of my own with which to satisfy my judgement. My sight is sufficiently clear and controlled, but when I put it to work it grows blurred, as I find most evidently in poetry. I have a boundless love for it; I know my way well enough through other men's works; but when I try to set my own hand to it I am like a child—I can't bear myself. One can play the fool anywhere else, but not in poetry. [Montaigne now devotes more than a page to that theme, including Martial's statement: 'No-one is more assured than a bad poet.']

<sup>1</sup> *m'arrachent les dents* = 'pull my teeth out'.

## ·MONTAIGNE'S ATTITUDE TO HIS OWN WORK·

<sup>[A]</sup> What I find excusable in my own work I find so not for itself or its true worth but in comparison with other and worse writings that I see getting credit. I envy the happiness of those who can rejoice and feel gratified in their work, for this is an easy way to give oneself pleasure because one draws it from oneself.

<sup>[C]</sup> (Especially if there is a little firmness in their self-conceit. I know one poet to whom the strong and the weak, in the crowd and in the drawing-room, heaven and earth, *all* cry out that he does not know his business. For all that, he does not reduce one bit the status he has carved out for himself. Start something new! Revise! Persist! All the more set in his opinion because it is for him alone to maintain it.)

<sup>[A]</sup> My own works are so far from smiling on me that they irritate me every single time I go over them again: <sup>[B]</sup> 'When I read it over, I am ashamed to have written it, because even I who wrote it judge it worth erasing' [Ovid].

<sup>[A]</sup> I always have in my soul an idea that presents me with a better form than the one I have put to work; but I cannot grasp it or make use of it. And even that idea is only middlingly good. I infer from this that the productions of those great fertile minds of former times greatly surpass the utmost stretch of my imagination and desire. Their writings not only satisfy me and leave me replete, but astound me and transfix me with admiration. I judge their beauty; I see it, if not the whole way through, at least beyond anything I can aspire to follow.

Whatever I undertake, I owe a sacrifice to the Graces to gain their favour. . . . But they abandon me at every turn. Everything I write is coarse; it lacks charm and beauty. I cannot give things their full worth; my style is no help to my matter. That is why I need the matter to be strong, with

plenty to get hold of, and shining by its own light.

<sup>[C]</sup> When I seize upon more popular or more cheerful themes it is •to follow my own bent (I do not like solemn and sad wisdom, as people in general do), and •to cheer up myself, not to cheer up my style, which prefers grave and austere matters. (If indeed I should give the label 'style' to a formless and undisciplined way of speaking, a popular jargon, proceeding without definitions, without divisions, without conclusions, and confused, like that of Amafanius and Rabirius.)

<sup>[A]</sup> I have no idea how to please, or delight, or titillate; the best story in the world withers in my hands and loses its sparkle. I do not now how to talk except in good earnest. I am quite devoid of that facility that I see in many of my acquaintances of entertaining the first comer and keeping an entire crowd in suspense, or tirelessly holding the attention of a prince on all sorts of topics—never running out of things to say, because of their gift for knowing how to use the first topic that comes along, adapting it to the mood and ability of those they are dealing with. <sup>[B]</sup> Princes are not very fond of serious talk, nor I of telling stories. <sup>[A]</sup> The first and easiest arguments, which are commonly the best received, I do not know how to deploy; <sup>[C]</sup> a bad popular preacher! On any topic I am apt to say the deepest things I know about it. Cicero reckons that the hardest part of a philosophical treatise is the beginning. If that is so, I am wise in sticking to the conclusion.

<sup>[A]</sup> Yet the string has to be tuned to all sorts of notes; and the most penetrating note is the one that least often comes into play. There is at least as much perfection in enhancing an empty subject as in sustaining a weighty one. Sometimes things have to be treated superficially, sometimes deeply. I am well aware that most men keep to that lower level because they grasp things only by the outer bark; but I am

also aware that the greatest masters, Xenophon and Plato, can often be found tuning their string for that lower, popular style of speaking and treating things, sustaining it with their never-failing graces. [In this paragraph the two occurrences of 'lower'—*bas(se)*—refer to the level that Montaigne has called 'superficial', not to its opposite that he calls 'deep', *profond*.]

·THOUGHTS ABOUT STYLE·

Meanwhile there is nothing fluent or polished about my language; it is harsh and disdainful, with a free and unruly disposition. And I like it that way, <sup>[C]</sup>if not by my judgement then by my inclination. <sup>[A]</sup>But I am well aware that I sometimes let myself go too far that way, and that in the effort to avoid artificiality and affectation I fall back into them from another direction: 'I try to be brief and become obscure' [Horace].

<sup>[C]</sup> Plato says that length and brevity are not properties that add to, or subtract from, the value of one's language.

<sup>[A]</sup> If I tried to follow that other style that is even, smooth and orderly, I could not achieve it. And although the concision and cadences of Sallust are more to my humour, I find Caesar both greater and less easy to imitate. And if my inclination leads me more to imitate Seneca's style, I nevertheless esteem Plutarch's more. Whether or not I am speaking, I simply follow my natural bent, which perhaps explains why I am better at speaking than at writing. Movement and action animate words, especially with those who move about briskly, as I do, and who get excited. Bearing, face, voice, clothing and posture can give some value to things which in themselves are hardly worth more than chatter. . . .

My French is corrupted—in pronunciation and in other ways—by the barbarism of my home soil; I never saw a man from our part of the world whose accent was not clearly marked and offensive to pure French ears. Yet that is not

because I am immersed in my Perigordian, for I am no more fluent in that than in German, and that does not worry me much. . . . Above us towards the mountains there is indeed a Gascon dialect that I find singularly beautiful, dry, concise and expressive—indeed a language more truly manly and soldierly than any other I understand, <sup>[C]</sup>as sinewy, powerful and direct as French is graceful, delicate and ample.

<sup>[A]</sup> As for Latin, which was given to me as my mother-tongue, I have through lack of practice lost the readiness I had for talking it—<sup>[C]</sup>yes, and for writing it too, for which I once used to be called Master John. <sup>[A]</sup>That is how little I am worth in that direction!

·PHYSICAL BEAUTY·

In dealings between men, beauty is a quality of great value. It is the prime means of conciliation between them; no man so barbarous and uncouth as not to feel himself at least a little struck by its sweetness. The body has a great part in our being; it holds a high rank within it; so its structure and composition are well worth consideration. Those who want to separate our two principal parts and sequester them from one another are wrong. On the contrary, they should be coupled and joined together again. The soul should be commanded not to withdraw and entertain itself apart, not to despise and abandon the body (not that it *can* do so except by some counterfeit monkey trick), but to rally to it, embrace it, cherish it, be present with it, control it, advise it, and when it strays set it right and bring it back again; in short, marry it and serve as its husband, so that the actions of body and soul should not appear different and opposed but harmonious and uniform.

Christians are particularly instructed about this bond, for they know that divine justice embraces this fellowship and union of body and soul, even to making the body capable

of eternal rewards, and that God watches the whole man in action, and wills that he in his entirety receive punishment or reward according to his merits.

[C] The Peripatetic sect, the most sociable of all the sects, assigns to wisdom only one task, namely to provide and procure the common good of these two associated parts. And it shows that the other sects, through not focussing enough on this *combination*, have taken sides, one for the body, another—equally erroneously—for the soul; and have pushed aside their subject, which is man, and their guide, which they generally say is Nature.

[A] The first distinction that existed among men, and the first consideration that gave some of them pre-eminence over others, was probably the advantage of beauty: [B] ‘They divided up their lands and granted them to each according to his beauty, his strength and his intelligence; for beauty had great power, and strength was respected’ [Lucretius].

[A] Now, I am a little below medium height. This is not only an ugly defect but also a disadvantage, especially for those who hold commands and commissions, because it deprives them of the authority given by a fine presence and bodily majesty. [C] Gaius Marius was reluctant to accept soldiers who were not six feet in height. ‘The courtiers’ manual-*Il Cortegiano* is quite right to desire, for the gentleman it is training, a medium height rather than any other, and to reject for him any peculiarity that will make him conspicuous. But failing that medium, I would chose that he should be taller rather than shorter than the medium if he is to be a military man.

Little men, says Aristotle, may well be pretty but not handsome; as a great soul is manifested in its greatness, so beauty is known from a body great and tall. [A] When the Ethiopians and Indians select their kings and magistrates, he says, they take account of the beauty and height of their

persons. They were right, for a man’s followers feel respect and the enemy feels dismay upon seeing a leader with a splendid beautiful stature marching at the head of his troops: ‘Turnus himself, outstanding in body, is in the foremost rank, weapon in hand, head and shoulders above the others’ [Virgil].

Our great and holy heavenly King, all of whose particulars should be noted with care, devotion and reverence, did not spurn the advantage of bodily beauty: ‘fairer than the children of men’ [Psalm 14:3]. [C] And as well as temperance and fortitude, Plato desired beauty in the guardians of his Republic. [Now some anecdotes showing the disadvantages a man suffers if he is ugly = short: ‘Other beauties are for women: the only masculine beauty is beauty of stature.’]

·MONTAIGNE’S BODILY QUALITIES·

[A] Summing up: I have a strong thick-set body, a face not fat but full; a temperament [B] between the jovial and the melancholic, moderately [A] sanguine and warm;. . . . Sound and vigorous health until well along in years, rarely troubled by illness. That is how I *was*, for I am not considering myself as I am now that I have entered the approaches to old age, having long since passed 40: [B] ‘Little by little, age smashes their vigour and their adult strength, and they drift into a diminished existence’ [Lucretius]. [A] What I shall be from now on is no more than half a being; it will no longer be me; I daily escape myself and go into hiding from myself: ‘One by one, things are stolen by the passing years’ [Horace].

Skill and agility I have never had; yet I am the son of a very agile father whose energy lasted into his extreme old age. He found hardly anyone of his rank to equal him in any physical exercises, just as I have found hardly anyone who did not surpass me (except in running, at which I was about average). Of music—whether vocal (for which my voice is quite unsuited) or instrumental—they never succeeded in

teaching me anything. At dancing, tennis and wrestling I have been able to acquire only a slight, commonplace ability; at swimming, fencing, vaulting and jumping, none at all. My hands are so clumsy that even I cannot read my writing, so that I would rather re-do what I have scribbled than to give myself the trouble of unscrambling it. [C] And my reading aloud is hardly better: I can feel myself boring my audience. Otherwise, a good scholar!<sup>1</sup> [A] I cannot close a letter the right way, nor could I ever cut a pen, or carve passably at table, [C] or saddle a horse, or properly carry a hawk and release it, or talk to dogs, birds or horses.

·HIS SOUL'S QUALITIES·

[A] My bodily qualities, in short, are very well matched with my soul's. There is no agility, merely a full, firm vigour. I stand up well to hard work, provided that I set myself to it and as long as I am guided by my own desires: 'The pleasure hides the austerity of the toil' [Horace]. Otherwise, if I am not lured to the task by some pleasure, and if I am being guided ·in it· by anything other than my own pure and free will, I am useless for it. For I have reached the point where except for life and health there is nothing [C] I am willing to chew my nails over, nothing [A] that I am willing to buy at the price of mental torment and constraint: 'At such a price I would not buy all the sand of the muddy Tagus or the gold it carries down to the sea' [Juvenal]. [C] Extremely idle and free, both by nature and by art, I would as soon offer my blood [*mon sang*] as offer to take trouble [*mon soing*].

[A] I have a soul that is all its own, accustomed to acting after its own fashion. Having never had a commander or master forced on me, I have gone just as far as I pleased and at my own pace. That has made me soft and useless

for serving others—no good for anything but myself. And for myself there was no need to force that heavy, lazy, do-nothing nature. Finding myself since birth with such a degree of fortune that I had cause to remain as I was—a cause that many people I know would have used as a plank on which to pass over into questing, tumult and disquiet—I have sought nothing and taken nothing either: 'I do not scud with bellying sails before the good north wind, nor does an adverse gale from the south stay my course: in strength, wit, beauty, virtue, rank and wealth I am the last of the first and the first of the last' [Horace]. All that I needed was enough to be contented ·with my lot·

[C] (which if you take it rightly is an ordering of the soul that is equally hard in every kind of fortune, and can be found more readily in want than in abundance, perhaps because (as with our other passions) the hunger for riches is sharpened more by having them than by needing them, while the virtue of moderation is rarer than that of patience [see Glossary].)

And all I needed was [A] to enjoy pleasantly the benefits that God in his bounty had placed in my hands. I have never tasted any sort of tedious work. [C] I have had hardly anything to manage but my own affairs; or if I have, it was in circumstances that let me manage things at my own times and in my own way, commissioned by people who trusted me, did not pressure me, knew me. For experts get some service out of even a skittish broken-winded horse!

[A] Even my childhood went along in a mild, free fashion, exempt from rigorous subjection. All of which gave me a delicate disposition, unable to endure worry—to the point where I prefer to have any losses and disorders in my

<sup>1</sup> Frame suggests that this puzzling remark may be 'a reminiscence of Clément Marot's well-known line, "Au demeurant, le meilleur fils du monde" ("For the rest, the best lad in the world"), which follows an impressive enumeration of the vices of his valet.'

affairs hidden from me. Under the heading 'Expenditure' I include whatever my nonchalance costs me for its board and lodging! . . . I prefer not to know the account of my possessions, so as to feel any loss less exactly. <sup>[B]</sup> I ask those who live with me, if they lack affection for me and for honest dealings, to cheat me and pay me with decent appearances. <sup>[A]</sup> For lack of the fortitude to endure the annoyance of the adverse events that we are subject to, not being able to brace myself to control and manage my affairs, I do my best to foster in myself this attitude: abandon myself to fortune, always expect the worst, and be resolved to bear that worst meekly and patiently. That is the only thing I work at, and the goal towards which I direct all my reflections.

<sup>[B]</sup> When I am faced with danger, I think less about how to escape than about how little it matters whether I escape. If I remain in danger, what of it? Not being able to control events, I control myself, and adapt myself to them if they do not adapt themselves to me. I have little of the skill needed •to cheat fortune—to escape it or compel it—and •to direct and lead things foresightedly to serve my purpose. I have even less power to endure the arduous and painful care needed for that. And the most painful situation for me is to be in suspense about urgent matters, tossed between fear and hope. Deliberation, even about the slightest things, bothers me. And I feel my mind more hard-pressed in suffering the shocks and ups and downs of decision-making than in remaining fixed, resigned to whatever results once the die is cast. Few emotions have disturbed my sleep, but the slightest need to decide anything disturbs it for me. Just as on roads •I avoid the sloping and slippery shoulders and go for the muddiest and boggiest beaten tracks •in the centre•, from which I can slip no lower, and seek security there, so also •I prefer pure misfortunes, ones that do not try me and worry me further once the uncertainty about mending them

is over, and which drive me at a single bound directly into suffering: <sup>[C]</sup> 'Uncertain evils torment us most' [Seneca].

<sup>[B]</sup> When things happen to me, I bear myself like a man; when I am conducting them, like a child. The fear of falling gives me more anguish than the fall. The game is not worth the candle. The miser's passion makes him worse off than the poor man, and the jealous man than the cuckold. And there is often less harm in losing your vineyard than in pleading for it in court. The lowest step is the firmest; it is the seat of constancy. There you need only yourself. Constancy is founded there and leans only on itself. . . .

•AGAINST AMBITION•

<sup>[A]</sup> As for ambition (which is presumption's neighbour, or rather its daughter): for me to have advanced, fortune would have had to take me by the hand. Taking pains for an uncertain hope, submitting myself to all the difficulties faced by those who •ambitiously• try to push themselves into favour at the start of their careers? I could not have done it! <sup>[B]</sup> 'I do not purchase hope with ready cash' [Terence]. I cling to what I see and hold, and I do not go far from port: 'Let one oar row in the water, the other on the shore' [Propertius].

And then, few achieve such advancements without first *risking* their goods; and I think that if a man has enough to maintain the way of life to which he was born and brought up, it is folly to let go of it on the mere chance of increasing it. A man whom fortune denies the means of settling down into a calm and tranquil life can be excused if he stakes all that he has on chance, since either way necessity sends him questing: <sup>[C]</sup> 'In misfortune dangerous paths must be taken' [Seneca]. <sup>[B]</sup> And I excuse a younger son for casting his inheritance to the winds more than I do a man who is responsible for the honour of a household and who cannot fall into want except through his own fault.

<sup>[A]</sup> The advice of good friends in former times to rid myself of this desire and to keep quiet has certainly led me to the shorter and easier road, 'someone whose happy lot is to enjoy the prize without the dust' [Horace], also making a healthy judgement that my powers were incapable of great achievements. . . . <sup>[B]</sup> 'It is shameful to take on a too-heavy load and then bend one's knees and drop it' [Propertius]. . . .

Misfortune does have some use. It is good to be born in a deeply depraved century, for then by comparison with others you are reckoned virtuous for a cheap price. In our time anyone who is merely a parricide and sacrilegious is a good and honourable man: <sup>[B]</sup> 'These days if a friend does not deny that you entrusted money to him, if he returns an ancient purse with all its rusty coins, he is a prodigy of trustworthiness, meriting a place in the Tuscan books and deserving to be celebrated with a sacrificial lamb' [Juvenal].

And there never was a time and place where princes' generosity and justice was rewarded more, or more certainly. The first one who tries in that way to push himself into favour and credit—I am much mistaken if he does not easily outstrip his fellows. Force and violence can achieve something, but not always everything.

<sup>[C]</sup> We see merchants, village justices and artisans keeping up with the nobility in valour and military knowledge. They fight honourably in open combat and in duels; they do battle and defend cities in these wars of ours. A prince's distinction is smothered amid such a crowd ·if it depends on his courage and military prowess·. Let him shine by his humanity, truthfulness, loyalty, moderation, and above all by his justice—marks that are rare, unknown and banished. It is only through the will of the people that he can do his job; no other qualities can attract their will as these can, because no others are as useful to them. 'Nothing is as pleasing to the people as goodness' [Cicero].

<sup>[A]</sup> [Picking up from 'good and honourable man.'] By that comparison I would have found myself <sup>[C]</sup> great and rare, just as I find myself dwarfish and ordinary in comparison with some former times in which it was commonplace. . . .for a man to be <sup>[A]</sup> moderate in revenge, slow to take offence, punctilious in keeping his word, not double-dealing or shifty, not accommodating his faith to the will of others and to circumstances. I would rather let affairs go hang than to bend my faith to serve them.

·DECEIT AND DISSIMULATION·

As for this new-fangled 'virtue' of hypocrisy and dissimulation that is now so much in favour, I loathe it utterly; among all the vices I find none that testifies so much to cowardice and baseness of heart. It is a cowardly and seville attitude to disguise and hide oneself behind a mask and not dare to let one's real self be seen. In that way men of our time are trained for perfidy. <sup>[B]</sup> Being used to giving their word falsely, they do not scruple to break it. <sup>[A]</sup> A generous heart should not belie its thoughts; it wants to reveal itself all the way through; <sup>[C]</sup> everything there is good, or at least everything there is human.

Aristotle considers it the function of magnanimity to hate and to love openly, to judge and speak with total frankness, and to think nothing of others' approval or disapproval compared with the truth. <sup>[A]</sup> Apollonius said that it was for slaves to lie and for free-men to speak the truth. <sup>[C]</sup> Telling the truth is the first and fundamental part of virtue. Truth must be loved for itself. Someone who tells the truth ·only· because he has some external obligation to do so and because it serves him, and who does not shrink from telling a lie when it does not matter to anyone, is not truthful enough.

My soul by its nature shuns lying and hates even to think of it. I have an inward shame and a stinging remorse if a lie

escapes me—as it sometimes does when occasions take me by surprise and get me to act without premeditation.

[A] We should not always say everything, for that would be stupid. But what we say must be what we think; otherwise it is wickedness. I do not know what people expect to gain by constantly pretending and lying, unless it is to be disbelieved even when they tell the truth! It may deceive people once or twice; but to *profess* dissimulation, and to declare as some of our princes have done. . . . that a man who does not know how to dissemble does not know how to rule, is to forewarn those who have to deal with them that what they say is all deceit and lying. [C] ‘The more crafty and artful a man is, the more he is loathed and mistrusted when he loses his reputation for honesty’ [Cicero]. . . .

[C] Those writers nowadays who, when drawing up the duties of a prince, have considered only the good of his affairs of state, preferring that to a care for his fidelity and conscience, would have something to say to a prince whose affairs fortune had so arranged that he could establish them for ever by a single breach and betrayal of his word. But that is not what happens. One stumbles again into similar bargains, making more than one peace, more than one treaty, in one’s lifetime. The gain that lures them to the first breach (and nearly always some gain is on offer, as with all other wickednesses; sacrilege, murder, rebellion and treachery are undertaken for some kind of profit) brings after it endless losses, putting that prince beyond all negotiations, beyond any mode of agreement, because of his first breach of trust. . . .

[A] Now, as for me, I would rather be troublesome and indiscreet than flattering and dissembling.

[B] I admit that a touch of pride and stubbornness may play a part in my remaining forthright and outspoken without consideration for others. And it seems to me that I become

a little more free when I ought to be less so, and that when *respect* would tone me down I become more heated. It may also be that I let myself follow my nature for lack of art. When I display to grandees that same freedom of tongue and manner that I bring to my household, I feel how much it sinks towards indiscretion and rudeness. But besides the fact that I am made that way, I do not have

- a supple enough mind to twist a sudden question and escape from it by some dodge, or to construct a lie, or
- a good enough memory to remember the lie, or, certainly,
- enough confidence to stick by it;

and I put on a bold face because of weakness. Thus, I give myself up to candour and always saying what I think—doing this by temperament and by design—leaving it to fortune to determine the outcome.

·MONTAIGNE’S MEMORY·

[A] Memory is a wonderfully useful tool, without which judgement can hardly do its work. In me it is entirely lacking. If someone wants to propound something to me, it must be done piecemeal, for it is not in my power to respond to a proposal in which there are several different headings. I could not take on any commission without my writing tablets. And when I have something of importance to propound, if it is at all long-winded I am reduced to the abject and pitiful necessity of learning by heart, word for word, what I am to say; otherwise I would have neither manner nor assurance, fearing that my memory would play a dirty trick on me. [C] But for me that method is no less difficult. It takes me three hours to learn three lines of poetry. And then, in a composition of my own, an author’s freedom to switch the order and to change a word, forever varying the matter, makes it harder to retain in the memory. [A] Now, the more



I distrust my memory, the more confused it becomes; it serves me better by chance encounter; I have to solicit it casually; for if I try to force it, it is stunned; and once it has started to totter, the more I probe it the more mixed up and embarrassed it becomes; it serves me when it is ready, not when I am.

(What I feel in my memory I feel in several other parts. I flee command, obligation and constraint. What I do easily and naturally I can no longer do if I order myself to do it with a strict and explicit command. Even as regards my body, the parts that have some freedom and jurisdiction over themselves sometimes refuse to obey me when I bind them to a certain time and place for compulsory service. This tyrannical and preordained constraint repels them; they go limp from fear or spite and become paralysed.) . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> My library, which is a good one as country libraries go, is situated at one corner of my house. If I get an idea that I want to look up or write down there, I have to tell someone about it in case it escapes me even as I cross my courtyard. If in speaking I am rash enough to digress however little from my thread, I never fail to lose it; which is why in speaking I keep myself constrained, dry and brief. I have to call my servants by the name of their job or their territory of origin, because it is hard for me to remember names. . . . And if I lived for a very long time I do not doubt that I would forget my own name, as others have done. <sup>[B]</sup> Messala Corvinus went for two years without any trace of memory; . . . and I often think about what sort of life that was, and whether without that part of me I shall have enough left to support me in comfort; and from a close look I am afraid that this defect, if it is complete, ruins all the activities of the soul. . . .

<sup>[A]</sup> More than once I have forgotten the password for the watch, having given it to (or received it from) someone else only three hours before; and have forgotten where I had

hidden my purse, despite what Cicero says about that, namely that 'I never heard of an old man forgetting where he had buried his money'. Anything I hide away privately I am helping myself to lose! <sup>[C]</sup> 'It is certain that memory is the only receptacle not only of philosophy but of the whole of life's practices and all the arts and sciences' [Cicero].

<sup>[A]</sup> Memory is the receptacle and store-box of knowledge; mine being so defective, I cannot really complain if I know almost nothing. I do know the generic names of the arts and what each of them deals with, but nothing beyond that. I leaf through books; I do not study them. What I retain from them is something I no longer recognise as anyone else's; it is simply the material from which my judgement has profited and the arguments and ideas in which it has been steeped; I immediately forget the author, the source, the wording and other details.

<sup>[B]</sup> I am so outstanding a forgetter that I forget my own works and writings as much as I forget anything else. People are constantly quoting me to myself without my realising it. Anyone who wanted to know the sources of the verses and examples that I have piled up here would put me to great trouble to tell him; and yet I have begged them only at well-known and famous doors, authors, not being content with rich material unless it came from rich and honourable hands; in them, authority goes in step with reason. <sup>[C]</sup> It is no great wonder if my book follows the fate of other books, and if my memory lets go of what I write as of what I read, and of what I give as of what I receive.

<sup>[A]</sup> Besides the defect of my memory, I have others that greatly contribute to my ignorance. My mind is slow and dull; it cannot penetrate the slightest cloud, so that, for example, I have never offered it a puzzle easy enough for it to solve. There is no subtlety so empty that it will not stump me. Of games in which the intellect plays a part—such as chess,

cards, draughts and so on—I understand nothing but the barest rudiments.

My apprehension is slow and muddled, but when it once grasps something it grasps it *well*—embracing it all, tightly and deeply—for as long as it grasps it at all. My eyesight is sound, whole and good at distances, but is easily tired and burdened by work; which is why I cannot have long sessions with books except by the help of others. . . .

There is no soul is so wretched and brutish that *no* particular faculty can be seen to shine in it. . . . How does it happen that a soul that is blind and asleep to everything else is found to be lively, clear and outstanding in some particular activity? We shall have to ask the experts about that. But the fine souls are the universal ones, open and ready for anything; <sup>[C]</sup> untaught perhaps, but not unteachable. <sup>[A]</sup> And I say that to indict my own: for whether by weakness or indifference

—and it is far from being part of my beliefs that we should be indifferent to what lies at our feet, what we have between our hands, what most closely concerns our daily lives—

no soul is as unfit or ignorant as mine concerning many commonplace matters that it is disgraceful to be ignorant of.

I must relate a few examples. [He devotes a paragraph to them.]

·DEFENDING SELF-DESCRIPTION·

From these details of my confession others can be imagined at my expense. But whatever I make myself known to be, provided that I do make myself known such as I am, I am carrying out my plan. So I make no apology for venturing to put into writing matters as mean and trivial as these; the meanness of my subject restricts me to them. <sup>[C]</sup> Condemn my project, if you will, but not the way I carry it out. <sup>[A]</sup> I

see well enough, without other people telling me, how little value and weight all this has, and the folly of my plan. It is already something if my judgement, of which these are the *essais* [see Glossary], does not cast a shoe in the process: ‘Go on: wrinkle your nose—a nose so huge that Atlas would not carry it if you asked him—mock the famous mocker Latinus if you can, yet you will never succeed in saying more against my trifles than I have said myself. What use is there in grinding your teeth? To be satisfied you need to sink them into meat. Save your energy. Keep your venom for those who admire themselves: I know my work is worthless’ [Martial].

I am not obliged not to say stupid things, provided that I am not deceived about them and recognise them as such. It is so usual for me to go wrong knowingly that I hardly ever go wrong any other way—I hardly ever go wrong accidentally. It is a slight thing to attribute my silly actions to the rashness of my disposition, since I cannot help commonly attributing my really wrong actions to it.

One day in Bar-Le-Duc I saw King Francis II presented, as a memento of René, king of Sicily, a portrait that the latter had made of himself. Why is it not permissible for each man to portray himself with a pen, as he did with his pencil?

·MONTAIGNE’S INDECISION·

So I do not want to omit this further blemish, unfit though it is to be brought out in public, namely *irresolution*, a failing that is very harmful in negotiating worldly affairs. When there are doubts about an enterprise I do not know which side to take: <sup>[B]</sup> ‘My inmost heart will not say yes or no’ [Petrarch]. I can easily *maintain* an opinion, but not choose one.

<sup>[A]</sup> That is because in human matters whatever side we incline to we find many probabilities to confirm us in it—

<sup>[C]</sup> and the philosopher Chrysippus said that all he

wanted from his masters Zeno and Cleanthes was their tenets; for *he* would supply enough proofs and reasons without their help

—<sup>[A]</sup> so in whatever direction I turn, I always provide myself with enough causes and probabilities to keep me going that way. Thus, I maintain within me my doubt and my freedom to choose until the circumstances press me to make a choice; and then, to confess the truth, I most often ‘toss the feather to the wind’ (as the saying goes), abandoning myself to the mercy of fortune; a very slight inclination or circumstance carries me away. . . . In most cases my undecided judgement is so evenly balanced that I would willingly resort to deciding by chance, by dice. And I note, with much reflection on our human weakness, the examples that even sacred history has left us of this practice of entrusting to fortune and chance the making of choices in doubtful cases: ‘The lot fell upon Matthias’ [Acts 1:26, about choosing an apostle to replace Judas].

<sup>[C]</sup> Human reason is a two-edged and dangerous sword. Even in the hand of Socrates, its most intimate and familiar friend, see what a many-ended stick it is.

<sup>[A]</sup> Thus, I am fitted only for following, and easily let myself be carried along by the crowd. I do not trust my powers enough to undertake to command or to guide. I am quite content to find my path trodden out for me by others. If I must run the risk of an uncertain choice, I prefer to make it under the guidance of someone who is more sure of his opinions and more wedded to them than I am to mine, <sup>[B]</sup> the foundations and grounds of which I find slippery.

And yet I am not too easy to change, since I find equal weakness in the opinions that are contrary to the ones I have opted for. <sup>[C]</sup> ‘The very practice of assenting seems to be dangerous and slippery’ [Cicero]. <sup>[A]</sup> Notably in political matters there is a fine field open for vacillation and dispute. . . .

Machiavelli’s arguments, for example, were solid enough for the subject, yet it was extremely easy to combat them; and those who did so left it just as easy to attack theirs. In such an argument there would always be materials for answers, rejoinders [*duplications*], replications, triplications, quaduplications, and that infinite web of disputes that our lawyers have spun out as far as they could in favour of long lawsuits—‘We are beaten about, trading blows we weary our foe’ [Horace]—for the reasons have almost no foundation except experience, and the diversity of human events offers us infinite examples in all sorts of forms.

. . . . In arguments about politics, whatever role you are given your game is as easy as your opponent’s, provided you do not collide with principles that are too plain and obvious.

That is why to my mind in public affairs there is no system so bad (provided it is old and stable) that it is not better than change and commotion. Our *moeurs* are extremely corrupt and remarkably tending to get worse; many of our laws and customs are barbaric and monstrous; yet because of the difficulty of improving our condition and the risk of complete collapse, if I could put a block under our wheel and stop it at this point I would cheerfully do so. <sup>[B]</sup> ‘None of the examples we cite is so infamous and shameful that there are not worse to come’ [Juvenal]. <sup>[A]</sup> The worst thing I find in our state is instability, and the fact that our laws—like our clothes—cannot take any settled form. It is very easy to accuse a political system of imperfection, for all mortal things are full of it; it is very easy to instill in a nation contempt for its ancient observances—no-one ever tried that without succeeding—but as for replacing the structures one has pulled down by better ones, many who have tried to do *that* have failed.

<sup>[C]</sup> In my own conduct I give my prudence only a small share; I readily let myself be led by the public order of the

world. Those who do what they are commanded to do without tormenting themselves about 'Why?', who let themselves gently roll with the rolling of the heavens, are happier than those who give the commands. Obedience is never tranquil or pure in someone who reasons and argues.

·GOOD SENSE, JUDGEMENT, UNDERSTANDING·

<sup>[A]</sup>To get back to myself: the only quality for which I reckon I am worth anything is the one that no man ever thought himself deficient in; what I commend in myself is plebeian, commonplace and ordinary, for who ever thought he lacked sense [*sens*]? That would be a proposition implying its own contradiction. <sup>[C]</sup>It—i.e. lack of sense—is a malady that never exists where it is seen; it is tenacious and strong, yet the first glance from the sufferer's eye pierces it and dispels it, as the face of the sun dispels a dense mist. <sup>[A]</sup>In this matter, to accuse oneself would be to excuse oneself; and to condemn oneself would be to acquit oneself. There never was a porter or silly woman who did not think they had sense enough for their needs. In others we readily acknowledge an advantage in courage, in physical strength, in experience, in agility, in beauty; but an advantage in judgement [*jugement*] we concede to no-one. And when others come up with arguments that come from simple natural reasoning, it seems to us that we only needed to look at things from that angle for us to have discovered them too. We have no trouble seeing that the works of others surpass ours in knowledge, style and such qualities; but as for the simple products of the understanding [*l'entendement*], each man thinks that he has it in him to hit on things just like them, and finds it difficult to perceive their weight and difficulty <sup>[C]</sup>except when they are incomparably beyond him, and hardly even then. <sup>[A]</sup>So this ·book· is a kind of exercise for which very little commendation and praise should be expected, and a kind of writing with little renown.

And then, whom are you writing for? [At the start and end of this paragraph, Montaigne is addressing himself.] •The learned men who have jurisdiction over the world of books recognise no value but that of learning, and admit no activities for our minds except erudition and knowledge of rules. If you have mistaken one Scipio for the other, what is left for you to say that is worth saying? According to them, anyone who does not know Aristotle correspondingly does not know himself. •Common, ordinary souls do not see the grace and the weight of an agile argument. And those two species fill the world! •The third species, the one that falls to your lot, of souls that are intrinsically orderly and strong, is so small that we have no name or rank for it; labouring to please *them* is time half wasted.

<sup>[A]</sup>It is commonly held that good sense is the gift that nature has most fairly shared among us, for there is nobody who is not satisfied with the share of it that nature has allotted him. . . . I think my opinions are good and sound, but who does not think as much of his? One of the best proofs that I have of their being so is ·their including· my **unfavourable view of** myself; for if these opinions had not been very firm they would easily have let themselves be duped by my singular **affection for** myself, being one who concentrates nearly all his affection on himself, not squandering much elsewhere. All the affection that others distribute to countless friends and acquaintances, to their glory, to their greatness, I devote entirely to the peace of my mind and to myself. Whatever escapes from me in other directions is not properly under the command of my reason: 'Trained to live healthily and for myself' [Lucretius].

Now, as for my opinions: I find them infinitely bold and tenacious in condemning my inadequacy. I am indeed a subject on which I exercise my judgement as much as on any other. People always look at one another; I turn my gaze

inwards, fixing it there and keeping it busy there. Everybody looks before himself: I look inside myself; my only business is with myself; I continually watch myself, I take stock of myself, I savour myself. . . .

My capacity—such as it is—for sifting the truth, and my free attitude of not easily enslaving my beliefs, I owe primarily to myself; for my firmest and most general ideas were, so to speak, born with me; they are natural and all mine. As I boldly and strongly came out with them, they were raw and uncomplicated but a little confused and unfinished. Since then I have confirmed and strengthened them by other men's authority and by the sound examples of the ancients with whom I found my judgement in agreement. These men have given me a firmer grip on my ideas and a clearer enjoyment and possession of them.

<sup>[B]</sup> The recommendation that everyone seeks for liveliness and promptness of wit, I aspire to for orderliness; what they seek for some brilliant and notable action or some particular talent, I aspire to for the order, consistency and tranquillity of my opinions and *mœurs*: <sup>[C]</sup> 'If anything is becoming, nothing is more so than the even consistency of one's whole life and individual actions, which you cannot maintain if in imitating other men's natures you neglect your own' [Cicero].

**[B]** ·UNDER-RATING OTHERS·

<sup>[A]</sup> So there you have the extent to which I feel guilty of the first characteristic I attributed to the vice of presumption [**A**] on page 63]. As for the second, **[B]**, which consists in not thinking highly enough of others, I do not know that I can plead so innocent to that—for, cost me what it will, I am determined to tell the facts about it.

Whether my continual association with the characters of the ancients, and the idea of those rich souls of past times, give me a distaste for others and for myself; or whether we

are indeed living at a time that produces only very mediocre things; at any rate, I know nothing ·today· worthy of great admiration. Also, I know hardly any men intimately enough to be able to judge them; and most of those whom my circumstances commonly bring me among are men who have little concern for the culture of the soul and to whom one can suggest no blessing but honour and no perfection but valour.

Whatever I see that is fine in others I am most ready to praise and to value. Indeed, I often go further than I really think, and permit myself to go that far in lying (I cannot invent an entire falsehood). I gladly testify for my friends to the praiseworthy qualities I find in them; and of one foot of value I am liable to make a foot and a half. But what I cannot do is to attribute to them qualities that they do not have; nor can I openly *defend* their imperfections.

<sup>[B]</sup> Even to my enemies I straightforwardly render the testimony of honour that is due. <sup>[C]</sup> My sympathies change; my judgement, no. <sup>[B]</sup> And I do not confound my quarrel with other circumstances that have nothing to do with it. And I am so jealous for my freedom of judgement that I find it hard to give it up for any passion whatsoever. <sup>[C]</sup> By telling a lie I do more harm to myself than to the person I lie about. A laudable and noble custom is observed in the people of Persia: in speaking of their mortal enemies and in waging total war against them, they do so with such honour and equity as their virtue deserves.

<sup>[A]</sup> I know plenty of men with various fine qualities—

- intelligence,
- courage,
- skill,
- conscience,
- eloquence,
- knowledge of some kind

— but as for an all-round great man who has so many fine qualities all at once, or has one of them to such a degree of excellence that we should wonder at him or compare him with those from times past whom we honour, I have not had the good fortune to meet even one. And the greatest man I have known in person—I mean great for the inborn qualities of his soul—was Etienne de La Boétie. He was indeed a full soul, handsome from every point of view; a soul of the old stamp, who would have achieved great results if fortune had willed it, having greatly added to this rich nature by learning and study.

I do not know how it happens <sup>[C]</sup> (though it certainly does) <sup>[A]</sup> that there is as much triviality and weakness of understanding in those who profess to have most ability and engage in the literary professions and tasks that depend on books as in any other kind of person. Perhaps it is that we cannot pardon everyday defects in them because we demand more from them and expect more than we do from other people, or perhaps the opinion that they are learned emboldens them to show off and reveal too much of themselves, whereby they ruin and betray themselves. A craftsman gives surer proof of his stupidity when he has some rich substance in his hands and prepares it and mixes it contrary to the rules of his art than when he is working on some cheap stuff; and we are more offended by defects in a statue made of gold than in one made of plaster. So too with the learned: when they display materials which in themselves and in their right place would be good, they use them without discernment, honouring their power of memory rather than their understanding. It is Cicero, Galen, Ulpian and St Jerome that they honour: themselves they make ridiculous.

I gladly return to the subject of the ineptitude of our education; its goal has been to make us not good and wise

but learned, and it succeeded. It has not taught us to seek and embrace *virtue* and *wisdom*; but it has imprinted on us the derivation and etymology of those two words. We know how to decline the Latin word for virtue; we do not know how to love virtue. If we do not know what wisdom is by practice and experience, we do know it by jargon and by rote. With our neighbours, we are not content with knowing their family, their kindred and their intermarriages; we want to have them as friends and set up some association and understanding with them. It—our educational system—has taught us the definitions, divisions and subdivisions of virtue as though they were the surnames and the branches of a family-tree, without any further concern for setting up between us and it any practice of familiarity or personal intimacy. It has chosen for our instruction not the books that contain the soundest and truest opinions but those that speak the best Greek and Latin, and amid its beautiful words it has poured into our minds the most worthless humours of antiquity. . . .

<sup>[C]</sup> The least contemptible class of people seems to me to be those who because of their simplicity occupy the lowest rank; and they seem to show us relationships that are better ordered. The *moeurs* [see Glossary] and talk of peasants I find to be commonly more in conformity with the principles of true philosophy than those of our philosophers: ‘The common people are wisest, because they are as wise as they need to be’ [Lactantius].

<sup>[A]</sup> The most notable men I have judged—doing this from outward appearances, for to judge them in my own preferred way I would need to see them more closely in a better light—are in war and military ability, the Duc de Guise who died at Orleans and the late Marshal Strozzi; and for ability and uncommon virtue, Olivier and l’Hôpital, chancellors of France. It seems to me that poetry too

has flourished in our century. We have a wealth of good craftsmen in that trade: Daurat, Beza, Buchanan, l'Hôpital, Montdoré, and Turnebus. As for those writing in French, I think they have raised poetry to the highest level it will ever reach. Ronsard and Du Bellay, in those qualities in which they excel, I find virtually up to the perfection of the ancients. Adrian Turnebus knew more, and knew it better, than any man in his own time or for many years before that.

[Now a [B]- and [C]-tagged paragraph with encomiums for the 'noble lives' of the duke of Alva and 'our Constable Montmorency' and the 'constant goodness' of Monsieur de La Noue.]

[A] The other virtues have been accorded little or no value these days; but bravery has become common through our civil wars, and where that is concerned there are among us souls that are firm to the point of perfection—so many of them that no selection is possible.

That is all the uncommon and exceptional greatness that I have known up to this moment.

## 18. Giving the lie

[The title of this essay announces a topic that starts at ■ on page 79.]

[A] Someone will sceptically tell me that this plan of using oneself as a subject to write about would be pardonable in exceptional, famous men whose reputation had had created some desire to know them. That is certainly true, I admit; and I am well aware that to see a man of the common sort, an artisan will hardly look up from his work; whereas to see at a great and famous personage arriving in town, men leave workshops and stores empty. It is unseemly for anyone to make himself known except someone who has qualities worth imitating and whose life and opinions can serve as a

model. In the greatness of their deeds Caesar and Xenophon had something to found and establish their narrative on, as on a just and solid base. . . .

That rebuke is very true, but it hardly touches me: 'I do not read this to anyone except my friends, and even then they have to ask me; not to all men or everywhere. Some men read their works to the public in the Forum or in the baths!' [Horace].

I am not preparing a statue to erect at a town crossroads or in a church or public square: [B] 'I do not intend to puff up my pages with inflated trifles; we are talking in private' [Persius]. [A] It is for some a nook in a library, and as a pastime for a neighbour, a relative, a friend who will find pleasure meeting up with me again and keeping company with me through this portrait. Others have had the courage to speak of themselves because they found their subject worthy and rich; I on the contrary because I find it so sterile and meagre that I cannot be suspected of showing off. . . .

What a satisfaction it would be to me to hear someone tell me in this way about the *mœurs*, the face, the expressions, the ordinary talk, and the fortunes of my ancestors! How attentive I would be! It would indeed come from a bad nature to despise even the portraits of our friends and predecessors, [C] the style of their clothes and their armour. I still have the handwriting, the seal, the prayer-book and a special sword that they used, and I have not banished from my study the long canes that my father ordinarily carried in his hands. 'A father's clothes or ring are dearer to his descendants the more they loved him' [Augustine of Hippo].

[A] However, if my own descendants have different tastes, I shall have ample means for revenge, for when that time comes they cannot possibly have less concern for me than I shall have for them!

The only dealing I have with the public in this book

is borrowing its printing-tools, . . . to free myself from the trouble of making several manuscript copies. [C] In return for this convenience that I have borrowed from the public, I may be able to do it a service: I can provide wrapping-paper to stop some slab of butter from melting in the market: [A] 'Let not wrappers be lacking for tunny-fish or olives, and I shall supply loose coverings to mackerel' [Martial].

[C] And if no-one reads me, have I wasted my time entertaining myself through so many idle hours with such useful and agreeable thoughts? Modelling this portrait on myself, I so often had to fashion and compose myself to bring myself out, that the original has grown firm and to some extent taken shape. By portraying myself for others I have portrayed my inward self in clearer colours than my original ones. I have no more made my book than my book has made me. A book consubstantial with its author,<sup>1</sup> concerned with myself, an integral part of my life; not concerned with some third-hand extraneous goal, like all other books.

Have I wasted my time by so continuously and carefully taking stock of myself? Those who go over themselves only in their minds and occasionally in speech do not go as deep, as does one for whom self-examination is his study, his work and his trade, who brings all his faith and strength to an account of his whole life.

The most delightful pleasures are inwardly digested; they avoid leaving any traces, and avoid being seen by the public or even by any one other person.

How often has this task diverted me from tiresome thoughts! And all trivial thoughts should be counted as tiresome. Nature has presented us with a broad capacity

for entertaining ourselves when alone; and often calls on us to do so, to teach us that we owe ourselves in part to society but in the best part to ourselves. To train my fancy even to daydream with some order and direction, and stop it from losing its way and wandering in the wind, all I need is to give it *body* by registering all the thoughts, however minor, that come to it. I listen to my daydreams because I have to record them. How many times, when irritated by some action which politeness and prudence forbade me to reprove openly, have I unburdened myself *here*—not without ideas of instructing the public! And indeed these poetic lashes—'Wham! in the eye, wham! on the snout, Wham! on the back of the lout'<sup>2</sup>—imprint themselves even better on paper than on living flesh.

What if I lend a slightly more attentive ear to books, being on the lookout to see whether I can steal something from them to adorn or support my own? I have not studied at all in the interests of writing a book, but I have studied somewhat in the interests of this book that I have already written, if it counts as 'studying somewhat' when I skim over this author or that, pinching him by his head or his feet; not in the least to form my opinions but, long after they have been formed, to help, back up, and serve them.

[A] ■ But in this debased age whom will we believe when he speaks of himself, given that there are few if any whom we can trust when they speak of others, where they have less to gain from lying? The first stage in the corruption of *moeurs* is the banishing of truth; for, as Pindar said, being truthful is the beginning of any great virtue, [C] and it is the first item that Plato requires in the governor of his Republic.

<sup>1</sup> This is a half-joking echo of the Christian doctrine that the *three persons* of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—are all *one substance*, i.e. are consubstantial with one another.

<sup>2</sup> From a poem by Clément Marot against his enemy François de Sagon, exploiting his name's likeness to *sagoin* = 'lout', rhyming with *groin* = 'snout'.



[A] Our truth nowadays is not •what is but •what others can be brought to believe; just as we call ‘money’ not only legal tender but also any counterfeit that gets by. Our nation has long been reproached for this vice; for Salvianus of Massilia, who lived in the time of the Emperor Valentinian, says that for the French lying and perjury are not a vice but a manner of speaking. Anyone who wanted to go this testimony one better could say that at the present time it is for them a virtue. People form and fashion themselves for it, as for an honorable practice; for dissimulation is one of the most notable qualities of our age.

So I have often reflected on what could have given birth to our scrupulously observed custom, when we are accused of that vice that is so commonplace among us, of feeling more bitterly offended than by any other accusation; and why for us it should be the ultimate verbal insult to accuse us of lying. On that question I find that it is natural for us to defend ourselves from •accusations of• the failings we are most tainted with. It seems that in resenting the accusation and being upset about it we unload some of the guilt; if we *have* it in fact, at least we *condemn* it for show. . . .

Lying is an ugly vice, which an ancient paints in shameful colours when he says that it gives evidence of contempt for God along with fear of men. It is not possible to express more fully its horror, its vileness, and its disorderliness. For what can be uglier than cowering before men and swaggering before God? Since our •mutual• understanding is brought about solely by means of the word, anyone who falsifies *that* betrays public society. It is the only tool by which our wishes and our thoughts are communicated; it is our soul’s interpreter; without it we no longer hold together, no longer know one another. If words deceive us, that breaks up all our relations and dissolves all the bonds of our society. . . .

. . . . I would like to know *when* the custom began of weighing and measuring words so exactly, and attaching our honour to them. For it is easy to see that it did not exist in ancient times among the Romans and the Greeks. It has often seemed to me novel and strange to see them giving each other the lie and insulting each other, without having a quarrel. Their laws of duty took some other path than ours. Caesar is called now a thief, now a drunkard, to his face. We see the freedom of invective that they use against each other—I am talking about the greatest war-leaders in both those nations, where words are avenged merely by words, with no further consequences.

## 19. The Emperor Julian

[Montaigne entitled this essay “Freedom of conscience”, but that topic is confined to its last two paragraphs.]

[A] It is quite ordinary to see good intentions, if pursued without moderation, push men to very wicked actions. In this controversy that is currently agitating France by civil wars, the better and sounder side is undoubtedly the one upholding the former religion and government of the country. However, among the good men who support that side—

for I am talking not about •people who use it as a pretext for settling private scores, satisfying their greed or courting the favour of princes but about •those who support it out of true zeal for their religion and a sacred desire to defend the peace and status of their fatherland

—we see many whom passion drives beyond the bounds of reason, making them sometimes adopt courses that are unjust, violent, and even reckless.

It is certain that in those early days when our religion began to be backed by the authority of law, zeal armed many

of those people against pagan books of every sort, which was a staggering loss to men of letters. I reckon that this excess did more harm to letters than all the bonfires of the barbarians. The historian Cornelius Tacitus is a good witness to this. His kinsman the Emperor Tacitus expressly commanded all the libraries of the world to be furnished with copies of his works, yet not a single complete copy could escape the rigorous search of those who wanted to abolish them because of five or six casual sentences contrary to our belief.

They also had this habit of heaping false praises on all the emperors who favoured us, and condemning absolutely *all* the actions of our adversaries. It is easy to see this in their treatment of the Emperor Julian, surnamed by Christians 'the Apostate'.

He was in truth a very great and rare man, being one whose soul was steeped in philosophical argument by which he claimed to regulate all his activities; and indeed he left behind notable examples of every sort of virtue. His whole life affords clear testimony of his chastity, including a practice like those of Alexander and Scipio: of the many very beautiful women captives, he refused so much as to look at one. And that was in the flower of his manhood, for he was only 31 when the Parthians killed him.

As for justice, he took the trouble to hear the disputants himself; and although out of curiosity he informed himself about what religion was professed by those who appeared before him, his hostility towards our own weighed nothing in the scales. He personally enacted many good laws, and severely pruned the subsidies and taxes that his predecessors had levied.

We have two good historians who were eyewitnesses of his actions. One of them, Marcellinus, in various places in his history sharply blames that ordinance of his by which

he barred the Christian schools and forbade teaching by all the Christian rhetoricians and grammarians, and says that he could wish that action of his to be buried in silence. It is likely that if Julian had done anything harsher against us, Marcellinus would not have overlooked it, being well disposed towards our side.

Julian was an enemy harsh towards us, it is true, but not cruel. Even our own side tell this story about him:

When he was walking one day about the city of Chalcedon, Maris, the bishop of the place, dared to call him a wicked traitor to Christ. He simply replied, 'Go away, you wretched man, and lament the loss of your eyesight!' The bishop retorted: 'I thank Jesus Christ for having taken away my sight; it stops me seeing your insolent face!'

In allowing this, they say, Julian was simply acting the patient philosopher. In any case what he did then cannot be squared with the cruelties he is said to have used against us. According to Eutropius, my other witness, he was an enemy of Christianity but without shedding blood.

To return to his justice: the only reproach to be made against it is the severe treatment which, at the beginning of his reign, he meted out to those who had supported the party of Constantius, his predecessor.

As for sobriety, he always lived a soldierly life. In times of total peace he ate like someone training and accustoming himself to the austerities of war. [Then a paragraph about Julian's use of night-time—less for sleep than for military matters and for study ('among his other rare qualities he was outstanding in every sort of literature').]

As for military ability, he was admirable in all the qualities of a great commander; and indeed he spent most of his life in the constant practice of war, mostly with us in France against the Germans and the Franks. There is hardly a man

on record who experienced more danger or who more often put his person to the test.

His death has something about it like that of Epaminondas; for he was struck by an arrow and tried to pull it out, and would have done so if the arrow had not been so sharp, cutting his hand and weakening his grasp. He kept insisting that he be carried, just as he was, back into the battle to encourage his soldiers. . . .

To philosophy he owed his remarkable contempt for his own life and for all things human. He firmly believed in the eternity of souls.

In matters of religion he was bad throughout. He was called ‘the Apostate’ for having abandoned our religion, but the most likely opinion seems to me to be that he had never had it at heart, merely pretending to do so and obeying the law until he held the Empire in his hand. In his own religion he was so superstitious that even contemporaries who accepted it made fun of him, saying that if he had been victorious over the Parthians his sacrifices would have exhausted the world’s entire stock of oxen! He was besotted with the art of divination, and gave authority to every sort of augury.

When he was dying, he said among other things that he was grateful to the gods and thanked them for not wanting death to take him by surprise (having long since warned him of the place and time of his end), and for not giving him a soft relaxed death more suitable for idle delicate people, nor yet a languishing, long and painful death; he thanked them for having found him worthy of dying in that noble fashion, in the course of his victories and the flower of his glory. He had a vision like that of Marcus Brutus, which first threatened him in Gaul and later re-appeared to him in Persia when he was on the point of dying.

[C] These words have been attributed to him as he felt himself struck: ‘You have conquered, Nazarene!’ or according

to others ‘Be satisfied, Nazarene!’ But if my authorities—·Marcellinus and Eutropius·—had believed that, they would not have overlooked them; they were present in his army, and noted even the slightest of his final gestures and words. Nor would they have overlooked certain other miracles now associated with his death.

[A] To come to the subject of my discussion: Marcellinus says that Julian had long nursed paganism in his heart but dared not reveal it because his army were all Christians. When at last he found himself strong enough to dare to proclaim his intentions, he ordered the temples of the gods to be opened and tried in every way to set up idolatry. To achieve his purposes, having found the people of Constantinople at odds and the bishops of the Christian Church divided, he had them appear before him in his palace, insistently admonished them to damp down these civic dissensions and ·ordered· that every person should follow his own religion without hindrance and without fear. He made this solicitation very urgently, hoping that this freedom would increase the schism and factions that divided then, keeping the people from uniting and thus strengthening themselves against him by their harmony and unanimity. For he had learned from his experience of the cruelty of some Christians that *there is no beast in the world so much to be feared by man as man*. Those are his words, near enough.

It is worth considering that the Emperor Julian, in order to stir up civil strife, uses the same recipe of *freedom of conscience* that our kings have just been employing to quieten it. It could be said on one side that to give factions loose reins to hold on to their opinions is to scatter and sow dissension; it is almost lending a hand to increase it, there being no barrier or legal constraint to check or hinder its course. For the other side it could be said that to give factions loose reins to hold on to their opinions is to soften and relax them through

facility and ease, and to blunt the goad, whereas rareness, novelty and difficulty sharpen it. Yet I prefer to think, for our kings' reputation for piety, that having been unable to do what they wanted, they pretended to want to do what they could. [That is: they piously didn't want to allow freedom of conscience at all; but finding that they could not get away with suppressing it, they pretended to favour it in the interests of civil peace.]

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Essay 20. 'We do not taste [or enjoy the taste of] anything that is pure' devotes three pages to some theses about mixtures: •the best pleasures have a touch of pain, •there is some pleasure in sadness, •even in the best of men virtue has a 'human admixture' of something lower, •the laws of justice inevitably involve some injustice (he quotes Tacitus: 'Every exemplary punishment is unfair to individuals; that is counterbalanced by the public good'). And one thesis about unpureness that does not involve a mixture: •pure intellect is less apt for good management than intellect that is somewhat blunted and thickened.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 21. Against indolence

<sup>[A]</sup> The Emperor Vespasian, though ill (with an illness that eventually killed him), nevertheless wanted to know about the state of the Empire; even in bed he ceaselessly dealt with many matters of consequence; and when his physician scolded him for this as a thing harmful to his health, he said: 'An Emperor should die standing.' There you have a fine statement, in my opinion, one worthy of a great prince. The Emperor Hadrian used it later in this same connection. And

kings ought often to be reminded of it, to make them realise that the great task they have been given of commanding so many men is not a leisurely one, and nothing can so justly make a subject dislike exposing himself to trouble and danger in the service of his prince as to see the prince himself meanwhile loafing about in base and frivolous occupations, and to concern himself with the prince's protection when he sees him so careless of his subjects' interests.

<sup>[C]</sup> If anyone wants to maintain that it is better for a prince to conduct his wars through others, fortune will provide him with enough examples of ones whose lieutenants successfully concluded great campaigns, and also of ones whose presence would have done more harm than good. But no virtuous and courageous prince can tolerate being given such shameful advice. Under colour of saving his head (like the statue of a saint) for the welfare of the state, the advice degrades him from his office, which consists entirely in military activity, declaring him incapable of it.

I know one prince who would much rather be beaten in battle than sleep while others fought for him, and who never saw without jealousy even his own men do anything great in his absence.

And it seems to me that Selim I was right in saying that victories won without the master are not complete. How much more readily would he have said that the master ought to blush with shame to claim a part in them for his own renown when he had contributed to them only his voice and his thinking—and not even *that*, seeing that in such tasks the only counsel and commands that bring honour are the ones given on the spot in the midst of the action. No pilot can do his job on dry land.

The princes of the Ottoman race (the first race in the world in the fortunes of war) have warmly embraced this opinion. Bajazet II and his son, who departed from it and

spent their time on the sciences and other stay-at-home occupations, thereby gave severe blows to their empire. And the one who reigns at present, Amurath III, following their example, has made a pretty good start at coming out the same way. . . .

And don't include me among those who want to count the kings of Castile and Portugal among the warlike and great-souled conquerors because they made themselves masters of the East and West Indies, doing this through the actions of their agents, while *they* were in their idle abodes twelve hundred leagues away! One may wonder whether they would even have had the courage to go there and enjoy them in person.

[A] The Emperor Julian went further, saying that a philosopher and a gallant man should. . . .grant to bodily necessities only what cannot be refused them, always keeping the soul and the body occupied in things that are fair, great and virtuous. He was ashamed to be seen spitting or sweating in public. . . .because he reckoned that exercise, continuous toil and sobriety should have cooked and dried up all such excess fluids. What Seneca said fits here, that the ancient Romans kept their youth standing; they taught their children nothing, he said, that had to be learned sitting down.

[C] It is a noble desire that even one's death should be useful and manly; but whether it *is* depends more on good luck than on good resolution. Hundreds have proposed to conquer or die fighting, and have failed to do either, wounds or prisons blocking this design and compelling them to stay alive. . . .

Moulay Moloch, king of Fez, who has just won against King Sebastian of Portugal that battle famous for the death of three kings and for the transfer of that great kingdom of Portugal to the crown of Castile, was already gravely ill when the Portuguese forced their way into his territory; and

from then on he grew steadily worse, moving towards death and foreseeing it. Never did a man employ himself more vigorously and splendidly. He realised that he was too weak to endure the ceremonial pomp of the entry into his camp—which according to their fashion is full of magnificence and crammed with action—so he surrendered that honour to his brother. But that was the only duty of a commander that he gave up; all the others, the necessary and useful ones, he carried out very strenuously and exactly; keeping his body reclining but his understanding and his courage standing and firm until the last gasp and, in a way, beyond that, as I now explain. He could have undermined his enemies, who had advanced indiscreetly into his territory, and it grieved him terribly that for lack of a little life and also for the lack of a substitute to manage that war and the affairs of his troubled kingdom, he had to go in search of a hazardous and bloody victory when a certain and clean one was within his grasp. However he made a wonderful use of his remaining time. [Montaigne admiringly gives details about the battle, and the dying king's energetic conduct in it. Then:] He started out of his swoon; to warn that his death must be kept quiet—the most necessary order he still had to give, so that news of his death should not arouse some despair in his men—he died holding his finger against his closed mouth, the common gesture meaning *Keep quiet!* (He gave the order in this way because he found himself physically unable to give it in any other.) Who ever lived so long and so far forward into death? . . .

The ultimate degree of treating death courageously, and the most natural one, is to face it not only without being stunned but without concern, freely continuing the course of life right into death. As Cato did, who spent his time in sleep and study while having in his head and heart a violent and bloody death, and holding it in his hand.

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Essay 22. 'Riding post' is a bit more than a page of anecdotes about feats of speed in conveying messages over long distances, with horses, homing birds, litter-bearers.

\* \* \* \* \*

### 23. Bad means to a good end

<sup>[A]</sup> There is a wonderful relation and correspondence in this universal government of the works of nature, which well shows that it is neither accidental nor controlled by a variety of masters. The maladies and conditions of our bodies are seen also in states and governments; kingdoms and republics are born, flourish and wither with age, as we do. We are subject to a useless and harmful surfeit of humours, whether good humours—

for the doctors also fear a surfeit of those; because there is nothing stable in us, they say that too sharp and vigorous a perfection of health should be artificially reduced and cut back for fear that our nature, being unable to remain fixed in any one place and having no room for further improvement, may retreat in disorder and too suddenly; which is why they prescribe for athletes purgings and bleedings to draw off ·in a more orderly and gradual way· this superabundance of health

—or bad ones, the surfeit of which is the usual cause of illness.

·BAD WAYS OF REDUCING SOCIAL/POLITICAL PRESSURE·

States are often seen to be sick from a similar surfeit, and various sorts of purges are customarily used for it. Sometimes, to take the load off the country, a great multitude of families are let go to seek living space elsewhere at the

expense of others. That is what happened when our ancient Franks left the depths of Germany and came and took over Gaul, driving out its first inhabitants; when that endless tide of men poured into Italy under Brennus and others; when the Goths and the Vandals and also the peoples who are now in possession of Greece abandoned their native lands to settle more spaciouly elsewhere. There are scarcely two or three corners in the world that have not experienced such migrations.

That was how the Romans built their colonies; seeing that their city was becoming excessively big, they relieved it of the people they needed least, sending them off to occupy and farm the lands they had conquered. Sometimes they deliberately kept up wars with certain of their enemies, not only to keep their men in condition, for fear that idleness, mother of corruption, might bring some worse trouble upon them—<sup>[B]</sup> We suffer the ills of a prolonged peace; luxury, more savage than war, is crushing us' [Juvenal]—<sup>[A]</sup> but also to serve as a blood-letting for their republic and to cool off a little the over-excited heat of their young men, to prune and clear the branches of that stock growing rampant from too much energy. They once used their war against the Carthaginians for this purpose.

In the treaty of Bretigny, King Edward III of England would not include in the general peace he made with our king the question of the contested duchy of Brittany; this was so that he could have a place to unload his soldiers, and not have the crowd of Englishmen who had served him on this side of the Channel rushing back into England. That was one of the reasons why our King Philip agreed to send his son John to the war in Outremer—to take with him a large number of the hot-blooded young men who were in his armed forces.

There are many today who reason in this way, wishing that this heated passion among us could be diverted into some war against our neighbours, for fear that these noxious humours that currently dominate our body, if they are not drained off elsewhere, may keep our fever still at its height and eventually bring our total ruin. And in truth a foreign war is a much milder evil than a civil one; but I do not believe that God favours so wicked an enterprise as our attacking and quarrelling with a neighbour simply for our own convenience. . . .

·OTHER KINDS OF BAD MEANS TO GOOD ENDS·

Yet the weakness of our condition often pushes us to the necessity of using bad means to a good end. Lysurgus, the most virtuous and perfect lawgiver there ever was, came up with a most iniquitous way of teaching his populace temperance: he compelled the Helots, who were their slaves, to get drunk, so that the Spartans should see them lost and wallowing in wine and so hold the excesses of that vice in horror.

Even more wrong were those who in ancient times allowed that criminals, whatever kind of death they had been condemned to, should be cut up alive by the doctors, to let them see our inner parts in their natural state and so establish more certainty about them in their art; for if we really must indulge in depravity, it is more excusable to do so for the health of the soul than for the health of the body. The Romans were doing the former when they trained their populace in valour and in contempt for dangers and death by those furious spectacles of gladiators and swordsmen who fought to the death, cutting up and killing each other while the people looked on. . . . It was indeed a wonderful

example, and very fruitful for the education of the people, to see every day before their eyes a hundred, two hundred or even a thousand pairs of men armed against one another, hacking each other to pieces with such extreme firmness of courage that they were never heard to utter a word of weakness or of pity, never turned their back or even made a cowardly movement to avoid their opponent's blow, but rather extended their necks to his sword and presented themselves for the blow. Many of them, covered with mortal wounds, sent to ask the spectators if they were pleased with their service, before lying down and giving up the ghost on the spot. They had to fight and die not only steadfastly but even cheerfully, so that they were booed and cursed if they were seen to struggle against accepting death.

<sup>[B]</sup> Even the girls urged them on: 'The modest virgin is so delighted with the sport that she applauds the blow; and when the victor plunges his sword into the other's throat, she rejoices and gives command, thumb down, to rip the bosom of the fallen man' [Prudentius].

<sup>[A]</sup> To provide such examples the first Romans used criminals; but later they used innocent slaves and even freemen who sold themselves for this purpose. <sup>[B]</sup> Eventually they came to include Roman senators and knights; and even women: 'Now they sell their heads to die in the arena: when all is at peace they find a foe to attack' [Manlius]. 'In these tumultuous new sports the gentle sex takes part, unskilled in arms, immodestly engaged in manly fights' [Statius].

<sup>[A]</sup> I would have found this very strange and incredible if we had not become accustomed to seeing daily in our wars many thousands of foreigners engaging their blood and their lives for money in quarrels in which they have no stake.