

Essays, Book III

Michel de Montaigne

1588

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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. —Montaigne kept adding to this work. Following most modern editions, the present version uses tags in the following way:

[A]: material in the first edition (1580) or added soon thereafter; there is none of this in Book III,

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

[C]: 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. —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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Contents

1. The useful and the honourable	1
2. Repentance	9
3. Three kinds of association	18
4. Diversion	26
5. Old age, love, and sex	32
6. Fear. Royal liberality. Conquistadors	63
7. The disadvantage of greatness	74
8. The art of discussion	76
9. Vanity	90
10. Restraining your will	122
11. Cripples	136
12. Physiognomy	142
13. Experience	159

Glossary

colic: Translates *cholique*. Severe abdominal pain, perhaps accompanied by diarrhoea. In Montaigne's case it was essentially connected with his **stone**, q.v.

Conquistador: A leader in the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Peru in the 16th century (Spanish for 'conqueror').

coutume: Where the *coutume* is social, it is translated as 'custom'; where it is individual, as 'habit'.

Cupid: Several occurrences of this, especially in Essay 5, are translations of *amour*.

dare: This translates *oser*, which can also be translated less strenuously as 'venture'.

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.

friendship: Translates *amitié*. Sometimes, for example on page 108, it means something much stronger, such as 'loving relationship'. Similarly with *ami* and 'friend'.

gravel: Translates *grave*, *gravele*, and *sable*, which could be 'sand'. It means about the same as **stone**, q.v.

honest man: Used as a stop-gap substitute for *honneste homme*, which Montaigne is using in an old sense: 'man of the world, agreeable and marked by his manners and also by his intelligence and knowledge' [Petit Robert dictionary]. Perhaps 'honest women' (*honnestes femmes*) on page 22 should be understood in the same way.

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*.

munificence: Splendid liberality in giving [OED].

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'). The word is translated by 'prince' throughout.

science: Translated as 'branch of learning' or simply 'learning', except in a few cases where those seem stylistically impossible. Then 'science' is used, but it never means anything much like 'science' in our sense.

spiritual: Translates *spirituel*, an adjective whose cognate noun is *esprit*, which can mean 'spirit' but also mean 'mind' or 'intellect'. So occurrences of the adjective should be viewed with caution.

stone: This refers to kidney-stones, an affliction from which Montaigne suffered grievously; a major topic of the final essay.

vanity, vain(ly): Regularly used to translate *vanité* and its cognates, though in Montaigne's usage *vanité* means 'emptiness', 'triviality' or the like more often than it means what 'vanity' does to us. See especially Essay 9.

7. The disadvantage of greatness

[B] Since we cannot attain it, let us get our revenge by speaking ill of it. Not that finding defects in something has to be speaking ill of it; there are defects in all things, no matter how beautiful or desirable they are. In general it [= greatness, high rank] has this evident advantage that it can step down whenever it wants to, and that it is virtually free to choose either condition, ·high or low·. For not all heights require a *fall* if one is to come down from them; there are more from which one can descend without falling.

It does indeed seem to me that we overvalue it, and also overvalue the resolution of people whom we have either seen or heard of who despised it or laid it down of their own accord. Its essence is not so advantageous that it takes a miracle to reject it!

What I find hard is striving to bear ills, but as for being content with a middling measure of fortune and avoiding greatness, I find very little difficulty in that. That is a virtue that I think I—who am only a fledgling—could achieve without much exertion. What may be done, then, by men who would also take account of the glory that accompanies such a rejection! There may indeed be more ambition in *that* than in the desire for and enjoyment of greatness. Ambition is never acting more in accord with its nature than when it adopts some out-of-the-way and unused path.

I sharpen my courage towards endurance; I weaken it towards desire. I have as much to wish for as the next man, and I allow my wishes as much freedom and indiscretion; yet it has never occurred to me to wish for imperial or royal rank, or for the eminence of those high and commanding fortunes. My aims do not tend that way: I love myself too much for that.

When I think of growing—of *going up*—it is in a lowly way, with a constricted and timid growth appropriate to myself, a growth in resolution, wisdom, health, beauty, and even wealth. But my imagination is oppressed by great renown or mighty authority. Quite the opposite to that other man,¹ I would rather be second or third in Pîç½rigueux than first in Paris—or at least, to be quite truthful, I would prefer being third in Paris to being first, the one in charge. I want neither to be •a wretched nobody arguing with a doorkeeper nor •one who causes crowds to part with awe as I pass through. I am trained to a middle station, by my lot and also by my taste. [C] In the conduct of my life and my enterprises I have shown that I have avoided rather than otherwise stepping above the degree of fortune in which God placed me at birth. Anything established by nature is equally just and easy. . . .

[B] I dislike all domination, both active and passive. [C] Otanes, one of the seven who had rightful claims to the throne of Persia, took a decision I would gladly have taken. To his rivals he abandoned his rights to be elected or chosen by lot, on condition that he and his family could live in that empire free from all authority and subjection except to the ancient laws, and enjoy every freedom not prejudicial to those laws, since he found it intolerable to give or to accept commands.

[B] The toughest and most difficult job in the world, in my judgement, is worthily to act the king. I excuse more of their shortcomings than men commonly do, out of consideration for the horrifying weight of their office, which stuns me. It is difficult for such an immoderate power to observe moderation. Yet even for men of less excellent character it is a singular incitement to virtue to be lodged in a place like that, where you can do no good deed that is not noted

¹ [Julius Caesar, reported by Plutarch as saying that he would rather be first in a tiny village than second in Rome.]

and chronicled, where the slightest good action affects so many people, and where your talents, like those of preachers, are mainly addressed to the populace—not an exacting judge, one easily duped and easily contented.

There are few matters on which we can give an unbiased judgement because there are few in which we do not have in some way a private interest. Superiority and inferiority of position, mastery and subjection, are tied to each other by natural rivalry and competition; they need to be always pillaging each other. I do not believe what either says about the rights of the other; when the issue can be settled, let it be done by reason, which is inflexible and impassive.

Less than a month ago I was leafing through two Scottish books on this subject; the people's man makes the king's position worse than a carter's; the monarchist lodges him a few yards higher than God in sovereignty and power.

Of the disadvantages of greatness, the one I want to talk about here—because of an event that has just called my attention to it—is the following. In all our dealings with one another there may be nothing more enjoyable than those contests we have as rivals for honour and worth, whether in exercises of the body or of the mind; in which a sovereign can take no real part. Indeed it has often seemed to me that our respect for high rank leads us to treat princes disdainfully and insultingly in these matters.

In my boyhood I was immeasurably offended when those who played sports against me spared themselves from taking this seriously because they regarded me as an opponent not worth the effort. We see that happening to princes every day, because each opponent considers himself too low on the scale to beat them. Whenever a prince is seen to have the slightest desire to win, every opponent will labour to see that he does, preferring to betray his own glory rather than offend the prince's, putting in just enough effort to enhance the

prince's reputation. What part do princes have in a friendly skirmish where everyone is on their side? I seem to see those paladins of times past who entered jousts and combats with enchanted bodies and weapons. Racing against Alexander, Brisson pretended to run his best; Alexander rebuked him for it, but he ought to have had him whipped.

That is why Carneades said that the only thing the sons of princes learned properly was horsemanship, because in all other sports the opponent yields to them and lets them win, whereas a horse is neither a flatterer nor a courtier, and will throw a king's son as soon as a porter's.

Homer was compelled to allow Venus, sweet and delicate as she was, to be wounded at the siege of Troy, so as to endow her with boldness and courage, qualities of which no trace is found in those who are exempt from danger. The gods are made to get angry, feel fear and flee, to be jealous, sorrowful and passionate, in order to honour them with virtues which among us are built of these imperfections.

No-one can claim to a share in the honour and delight that follow dangerous actions if he has no part in the danger and difficulty. It is pitiful to have such power that everything gives way to you. Your lot removes you too far from society and the companionship of men; it plants you too far to one side. That unchallenging and facile ease of making everything bow down before you is the enemy of every sort of pleasure; it is sliding, not walking; sleeping, not living. If you imagine a man endowed with omnipotence, you throw him into an abyss; he has to beg you for obstacles and opposition, as a charity; his being and his welfare are at risk.

Their good qualities are dead and wasted, for qualities are known only by comparison, and such men are out of comparison; they have little experience of true praise, being battered by such continual and uniform approval. In dealing with the stupidest of their subjects, they have no way of

getting the advantage over him. He can say 'I did that because he is my king', and it seems to him that this says clearly enough that he contributed to his own defeat.

This royal quality stifles and consumes their real and essential qualities; these are sunk in royalty, which leaves them with no way of showing their worth except actions that directly touch on their royal state and contribute to it, namely the duties of their office. Such a person is so entirely a king that he has no other existence. That extraneous glare that surrounds him hides him, conceals him from us; our sight breaks and is dissipated by it,¹ being overwhelmed and stopped by this strong light. The Senate awarded the prize for eloquence to Tiberius; he declined it, believing that even if it were justified he could get no satisfaction from a judgment so unfreely reached.

As we concede to them every advantage of honour, we confirm and authorise their defects and bad actions, not only by approval but also by imitation. Each of Alexander's followers kept his head tilted to one side, as he did; the flatterers of Dionysius bumped into each other when he was present, stumbled on and knocked over whatever was under their feet, signifying that they were as short-sighted as he was. . . . I have known men pretend to be deaf; and Plutarch knew courtiers who repudiated their wives, whom they loved, because their lord hated his.

What is more, lechery has been seen in fashion among them, and every kind of licentiousness; as also disloyalty, blasphemy, cruelty; as well as heresy; as well as superstition, irreligion and decadence; and worse, if worse there be. Mithridates yearned to be honoured as a good doctor, so his flatterers offered him their limbs to be incised and

cauterised; the 'worse' I am speaking of is the conduct of those others who allowed a nobler and more delicate part to be cauterised—their soul.

But to end where I began: when the Emperor Hadrian was arguing with the philosopher Favorinus about the meaning of a word, Favorinus quickly let him win the argument. When his friends criticised him for this he replied, 'You are joking! Would you want him to be less learned than I am, he who commands thirty legions?' Augustus wrote some verses against Asinius Pollio. 'And I', said Pollio, 'am keeping quiet; it is not wise to be a scribe against a man who can proscribe.'² And he was right. For Dionysius, because he could not match Philoxenus in poetry or Plato in prose, condemned one to the quarries and sent the other to be sold as a slave on the island of Aegina.

8. The art of discussion

[B] It is a custom of our justice to punish some as a warning to others. [C] To punish them for having done wrong would, as Plato says, be stupid; for what is done cannot be undone. They are punished to stop them from repeating the same wrong-doing or to make others avoid the example they have set. [B] We do not correct the man we hang; we correct others through him.

I do the same. My defects are by now natural and incorrigible; but just as worthy men serve the public as models to follow, I may serve it as a model to avoid: 'You can see, can't you, how wretchedly Albus' son is living and how poor Barrus is? A good lesson in not squandering

¹ [This reflects the then-current view that that we see objects by means of rays leaving our eyes.]

² [*ce n'est pas sagesse d'écrire à l'envy de celui qui peut proscrire.*]

your inheritance' [Horace]. By publishing and indicting my imperfections I may teach someone to fear them. The parts that I most esteem in myself derive more honour from self-accusation than from self-commendation. That is why I so often return to self-accusation and linger over it. Yet, when all is said and done, you never talk about yourself without loss. Self-accusations are always believed, self-praise never is.

Perhaps I am not the only one who is temperamentally given to learning better by counter-example than by example, by avoiding than by following. The Elder Cato was thinking of that sort of instruction when he said that the wise have more to learn from the fools than the fools from the wise. . . .

My horror of cruelty pushes me deeper into clemency than any example of clemency could pull me. A good horseman does less to improve my seat in the saddle than does the sight of a lawyer or a Venetian on horseback; and a bad use of language corrects my own better than a good one does. Every day someone else's stupid deportment warns and counsels me. What stings us touches and affects us better than what pleases us. The only way of improving ourselves these days is by stepping back, by disagreement more than by agreement, by difference more than by similarity. Having learned little from good examples, I make use of the bad ones, which are everywhere to be found. ^[c] I tried to make myself as agreeable as I saw others being unpleasant; as firm as I saw others being flabby; as gentle as I saw others being sharp. But I was setting myself unattainable standards.

^[b] The most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind, in my opinion, is conversation. I find the practice of it the most delightful activity in our lives. That is why, if I were forced right now to choose, I think I would rather lose my sight than my powers of hearing or speech. The Athenians and the Romans too kept this exercise in great honour in

their academies. In our own times the Italians retain some vestiges of it—greatly to their benefit, as can be seen from a comparison of their intelligence and ours.

The study of books is a languishing and feeble activity that gives no heat, whereas conversation provides teaching and exercise at the same time. If I am talking with a strong and solid opponent, he attacks me on the flanks, prods me right and left; his ideas launch mine. Rivalry, competitiveness and glory will drive me and raise me above myself. In conversation agreement is the most boring quality.

Just as our mind is strengthened by contact with vigorous and well-ordered minds, so too it is impossible to overstate how much it loses and deteriorates by the continuous commerce and contact we have with mean and sickly minds. No infection is as contagious as that one. . . . I love arguing and discussing, but with only a few men and for my own sake. For to serve as a spectacle to the great, and make a competitive parade of one's wit and chatter, is in my opinion a very unbecoming trade for man of honour.

Stupidity is a bad quality; but to be unable to endure it, to be vexed and ground down by it as happens to me, is another sort of malady that is almost as troublesome as stupidity; and that is what I now wish to accuse myself of.

I embark upon conversation and argument very freely and easily, because opinions do not find in me a ready soil to penetrate and take deep roots in. No proposition shocks me, no belief offends me, however contrary to my own it is. There is no fancy so frivolous and so extravagant that it does not appear to me to be quite suitable to the production of the human mind. Those of us who deprive our judgement of the right to pass sentence look gently on opinions different from ours; and if we don't lend them our approval, we do readily lend them our ears. When one scale in the balance is quite empty, I let the other go down under the weight of

an old woman's dreams. And it seems to me excusable if I choose the odd number rather than the even, or Thursday rather than Friday; if I prefer to be twelfth or fourteenth at table rather than thirteenth; if when travelling I would rather see a hare skirting my path than see one crossing it, and offer my left foot to be booted before the right. All such idle fancies, which are believed all around us, deserve at least to be heard. For me they outweigh only emptiness, but they do outweigh that. Popular and unfounded opinions have a weight that counts for *something* in nature. Someone who does not let himself go that far may be avoiding the fault of superstition by falling into the fault of obstinate dogmatism.

·LEARNING FROM BEING CONTRADICTED·

So contradictions of ·my· judgements do not offend me or do me any harm; they merely arouse and exercise me. We avoid correction; we ought to come forward and accept it, especially when it comes in the form of conversation rather than of instruction. When we encounter opposition, we look to see not •if it is just but •how we can get rid of it, whether it is right or wrong. Instead of stretching out our arms to it we stretch out our claws.

I could put up with being roughly handled by my friends: 'You're a fool!' 'You're dreaming!' Among gentlemen I like people to express themselves boldly, their words following wherever their thoughts lead. We ought to toughen and fortify our ears against being seduced by the sound of polite words. I like a strong, intimate, manly fellowship, the kind of friendship that delights in sharp exchanges, as love does in bites and scratches that draw blood. ^[C]It is not strong or magnanimous enough if it is not quarrelsome, if it is civilised and artful, if it fears clashes and moves with constraint. . . .

^[B]When someone contradicts me, he arouses my attention, not my anger. I go to meet the man who is contradicting

me, who is instructing me. The cause of truth ought to be the common cause for ·us· both. What will he—the angry man—answer? The passion of anger has already damaged his judgement. Turbulence has seized it before reason can ·get a hold·. It would be useful if we bet on the outcome of our disputes, and kept a written record of our losses, so that my manservant could say: 'Last year your ignorance and dogmatism cost you one hundred crowns on twenty occasions.'

I give a warm welcome to truth, in whatever hand I find it; when I see it approaching from afar, I surrender to it cheerfully, laying down my defeated weapons. ^[C]And provided it does not come with too imperious and schoolmasterish a frown, I will offer my shoulders to ·the whips of· the criticisms people make of my writings; I have often made changes more out of politeness than to improve them, preferring to please and encourage people's freedom to criticise me by my readiness to give way—yes, even when it costs me something. Yet it is difficult these days to get men to do that. They have no stomach for correcting, because they have no stomach for being corrected, and never speak forthrightly among themselves.

I take so much pleasure in being judged and known that I hardly care which of the two forms this takes. My thinking so often contradicts and condemns itself that it's all one to me if someone else does so, especially seeing that I give his criticism only as much authority as I please. But I break off with anyone who conducts himself as high-handedly as a man I know who regrets having given advice if it is not accepted, and feels insulted if one balks at following it. . . .

^[B]I really do seek the company of those who treat me roughly more than of those who fear me. It is an insipid and harmful pleasure to engage with people who admire us and defer to us. Antisthenes ordered his children never to

thank or be grateful to a man who praised them. I feel much prouder of the victory I win over myself when in the heat of battle I make myself give way beneath my adversary's powers of reason than I feel gratified by the victory I win over him through his weakness.

In short I receive and acknowledge any attacks, however feeble, if they are made directly, but I am cannot put up with ones that are not made in due form. I care little about the subject-matter, all opinions are the same to me, and I am almost indifferent about which opinion wins. I can go on peacefully arguing all day if the debate is conducted with due order. [C] What I ask for is not so much forceful and subtle argument as order—the order that is seen every day in the disputes of shepherds and shop-assistants, never among *us*. If they go astray, it is through incivility; so indeed do we. But their turbulence and impatience distract them from their theme: their arguments keep on course. If they get ahead of one another, if they don't wait for one another, at least they understand one another.¹ For me any answer is excellent if it is to the point. [B] But when the argument is turbulent and disorderly, I give up the •subject-matter and cling angrily and indiscriminately to the •form, throwing myself into a style of debate that is stubborn, ill-willed and imperious, one I have to blush for later.

•THE HARM IN ARGUING WITH FOOLS•

[C] It is impossible to deal in good faith with a fool. Not only my judgement is corrupted in the hands of such an impetuous master, but so also is my conscience. Our disputes ought to be forbidden and punished like other verbal crimes. Always driven and governed by anger, what vices do they not stir and heap up? We feel hostility first against the reasons and then against the men. We learn to argue only in order to

contradict; and with each participant contradicting and being contradicted, the upshot of the debate is the destruction and annihilation of the truth. That is why Plato in his *Republic* prohibits this exercise to ill-endowed minds not suited to it.

[B] You are in quest of the truth. What's the use of walking that road with someone whose pace and style are no good? We do no wrong to the subject when we pull back from it in order to examine the way to treat it—I do not mean a scholastic and artificial way, I mean a natural way, based on a healthy understanding. ·But· what will come of it in the end? One goes east, the other west; they lose the fundamental point, mislaying it in the crowd of incidentals. After a tempestuous hour they don't know what they are looking for. One is wide of the mark, another too high, another too low. One fastens on a word or a comparison; another no longer sees his opponent's arguments, being too caught up in his own train of thought; he is thinking about following himself, not you. Another, realising he is too weak ·for this debate·, is afraid of everything, denies everything and, from the outset, muddles and [C] confuses the argument, or else, at the climax of the debate he falls into a rebellious total silence, affecting. . . a haughty disdain or an absurdly modest desire to avoid contention. [B] This one doesn't care how much he drops his own guard provided that he can hit you. Another counts his words and thinks they are as weighty as reasons. That one merely exploits the greater power of his voice and lungs. [He mentions three other kinds of misconduct in debate, before moving on to the one that upsets him most; he pursues it for several paragraphs.]

Lastly, there is the man who sees nothing in reason, but holds you besieged within a hedge of dialectical conclusions and logical formulae. Who will not begin to distrust learning,

¹ [The second and third occurrences of 'one another' are expressed in the original simply by *s'*, a convenience that English lacks.]

doubting whether we can extract from it any solid profit of practical use in life, considering the use we make of it? Who has acquired understanding through logic? Where are its fine promises? [C] ‘Neither for living better nor for reasoning more fitly’ [Cicero]. [B] Is there more of a hotchpotch to be seen in the cackle of fishwives than in the public disputations of professional logicians? I would rather have my son learn to speak in the tavern than in the schools that teach speaking.

·‘LEARNED’ FOOLS·

Take a Master of Arts; converse with him. Why does he not make us •feel the excellence of his ‘arts’ and •captivate the women and the ignoramuses—such as we are—with admiration for the solidity of his arguments and the beauty of his order? Why doesn’t he overmaster us and sway us at his will? Why does a man with such advantages in matter and style combine his thrusts with insults, recklessness and rage? If he strips off his hood, his gown and his Latin, and stops battering our ears with pure uncooked Aristotle, you will take him for one of us—or worse! This complication and interlacing of language with which they beset us remind me of sleight-of-hand tricks: their dexterity has compelling force over our senses, but makes not the slightest difference to our beliefs. Except for this jugglery, everything they do is ordinary and base. Being more learned does not make them less stupid.

I love and honour learning as much as those who have it; and when used properly it is man’s noblest and most powerful acquisition. But in the countless people who •make it the base and foundation of their worth and achievement, who •appeal from their understanding to their memory—[C] ‘hiding behind other men’s shadows’ [Seneca]—[B] and •who can do nothing except by book, I hate it, if I dare say so, a little more than I hate stupidity.

In my part of the country and in my lifetime, learning amends purses, rarely souls. If it encounters dull souls, it weighs them down and suffocates them, as a raw and undigested mass; if they are very fine-grained, it is apt to purge, clarify and subtilise them into vacuity. Learning is •a thing of almost indifferent quality—a most useful adjunct to a well-endowed soul, pernicious and harmful to another; or rather, •a thing of very precious use that will not allow itself to be possessed at a low price: in one hand it is a royal sceptre, in another a fool’s bauble. But let us get on.

What greater victory do you expect than to teach your enemy that he is no match for you? When you get the better of him by your argument, the winner is the truth; when you do so by your order and style, the winner is you ! [C] I believe that in Plato and Xenophon, Socrates debates more for the sake of the arguers than for the sake of the arguement, and to instruct Euthydemus and Protagoras in their own incompetence rather than the incompetence their art. He seizes hold of the first subject that comes to hand, as a man aims at something more useful than throwing light on it, namely enlightening the minds that he undertakes to manage and exercise.

[B] Our real quarry is the agitation of the chase; there is no excuse for our conducting this badly or incompetently; failing in the catch is quite another thing. For we are born to *seek* the truth; it’s for a greater power ·than ours· to *possess* it. Truth is not (as Democritus said it is) hidden in the bottom of abysses, but elevated to an infinite height in the divine knowledge. [C] The world is but a school of inquiry. [B] The question is not who will spear the ring but who will make the best runs at it. The man who says what is true can act as foolishly as the one who says what is untrue, for we are concerned with the manner of speaking, not the matter. My humour is to consider the form as much as the substance,

and the lawyer as much as his case, as Alcibiades told us to. ^[C] Every day I spend time reading authors without caring about their learning, looking not for their subject-matter but for how they handle it. Just as I seek the company of some famous mind, not to be taught by it but to get to know it.

^[B] Any man can speak truly; few men can speak with order, wisely and adequately. What offends me is not error that comes from ignorance, but ineptitude. I have often broken off discussing a bargain, even one advantageous to me, because of the incompetent bickering of those I was bargaining with. As for those who are subject to my authority, I do not lose my temper as much as once a year over their mistakes, but we are daily at each other's throats over the stupidity and obstinacy of their assertions, excuses and asinine defences. . . .

Yes, but what if I myself am taking things for other than they are? That is, what if my servants are not as stupidly obstinate as I find them to be? That may well be; but I still blame my impatience, and hold **(i)** that impatience is equally a defect in the one who is right and the one who is wrong, since there is always a tyrannical ill humour in being unable to tolerate a way of thinking different from one's own; and that **(ii)** there is in truth no greater, more constant, or more bizarre absurdity than to be provoked and enraged by the world's absurdities. For it mainly gets us upset with ourselves; and that philosopher of old [Heraclitus, who wept at the world's folly] would never have lacked occasion for his tears if he had concentrated on himself. . . .

·WHAT DISQUALIFIES ONE MAN FROM CRITICISING ANOTHER?·

How many statements and replies I make every day that are silly by my standards—and surely even more by the standards of others! ^[C] If I bite my lips for them, what must the others be doing! To sum up, we should live

among the living and let the stream flow under the bridge without worrying about it or at least without being upset by it. ^[B] Indeed, why can we encounter a man with a twisted deformed body without getting upset, but cannot tolerate a deranged mind without flying into a rage? This vicious harshness owes more to the judge than to the fault. Let us always have Plato's saying on our lips: ^[C] 'If I find something unsound, may it not be because I myself am unsound?' ^[B] Am I not the one at fault? Can't my criticism be turned against me?' A wise and inspired refrain that chastises mankind's most common and universal error. ^[C] Not only can the reproaches we make to each other be regularly turned against us, but so also can our reasons and our arguments in matters of controversy; we run ourselves through with our own weapons. Antiquity has left me with plenty of weighty examples of this. ^[B] As it was ingeniously and aptly put by the man who first said it: 'Everyone's shit smells good to himself' [Erasmus].

^[C] Our eyes see nothing behind us. A hundred times a day we make fun of ourselves in the person of our neighbour, detest in others the faults that are more clearly in ourselves, and wonder at them with amazing impudence and heedlessness. Only yesterday I saw a man of understanding and good birth making jokes, as funny as they were pertinent, about the silly way another man went bashing everyone's ear about his family-tree and his family alliances, more than half of which were false; that kind of man being most inclined to launch out on such stupid subjects when his escutcheon is more dubious and least certain; yet he too, if he had turned back on himself, would have found that he was hardly less extravagant and boring in broadcasting and extolling the distinctions of *his wife's* family. What a pushy presumption in which a wife is seen to be armed by the hands of her own husband! If they understood Latin we ought to say to such

people: 'Come now, If she is not mad enough of herself, urge her on!' [Terence; Montaigne quotes this in Latin].

I'm not saying that no-one should make accusations unless he is spotless, for then no-one would make them. My point is that when our judgement brings a charge against someone else over a matter then in question, this does not exempt us from judging ourselves. It is a work of charity for someone who cannot weed out a defect in himself to try nevertheless to weed it out in others in whom it may have a less malignant and stubborn root.

Nor does it seem to me an appropriate answer to someone who warns me of my fault to say that he has it too. What of it? The warning is still true and useful. If we had a good nose, our excrement ought to stink worse to us because it is our own. . . .

[B] The senses are our proper and primary judges, which perceive things only by their external features; so it is no wonder that in all the working parts of our society there is such a constant and universal admixture of surface ceremonies and appearances; with the result that the best and most effective part of our politics consists in those. It is still *man* we are dealing with, and his nature is amazingly corporeal.

Those who in recent years have tried to construct for us a system of religious practice that is contemplative and spiritual should not be astonished if there are folk who think that religion would have melted and slipped through their fingers if it did not hold fast among us less for itself than as a mark, sign and means of division and of faction.

As in discussion: the gravity, the gown, and the social status of the speaker often give authority to empty and inept remarks. No-one would presume that a personage so redoubtable and with such a retinue has no talents that aren't merely commonplace, and that a man to whom so many

commissions and offices are given—a man so disdainful and so arrogant—is not abler than this other man who bows to him at such a distance, whom nobody employs! Not only the words of such people but the facial expressions they put on are watched and taken into account, each onlooker working to put some fine and solid interpretation on them. If they condescend to join in ordinary discussions and are presented with anything but approval and reverence, they beat you down with the authority of their experience:

- they have heard. . . .
- they have seen. . . .
- they have done. . . .

you are overwhelmed with examples. I would like to tell them that the fruit of a surgeon's experience lies not in a recital of his cases—he has cured four patients of the plague and three of the gout—unless he can •extract from them material for forming his judgement and •convince us that he has been made wiser by the practice of his medical art. . . .

If these people have been improved by their travels and their missions, that should appear in the products of their understanding. It is not enough to *count* one's our experiences; they should be *weighed* and *sorted*; and they should be digested and distilled so as to extract the reasons and conclusions they contain.

There never were so many historians! It is always good and useful to listen to them, for they provide us with an abundance of fine and praiseworthy instruction from the storehouse of their memory—a great help, surely, in the service of our life. But that is not my present topic; I am concerned with whether these narrators and collectors are themselves worthy of praise.

I hate every sort of tyranny, both in speech and in action. I am glad to brace myself against those trivial incidentals that delude our judgement through our senses; and by keeping

a close watch on men of extraordinary eminence, I have discovered that most of them are just like the rest of us: 'Common sense is rare enough in that high station' [Juvenal].

Perhaps we esteem them ·less than they deserve· and perceive them for less than they are, because they undertake more and are more on display; they do not match the burden they have taken on. There should be more vigour and power in the bearer than in the load. Someone who has not exerted his full strength leaves you to guess whether he has any more in reserve, whether he has been tested to the breaking point; one who succumbs under the weight reveals his measure and the weakness of his shoulders. That is why so many of the learned are seen to have inadequate souls—more than other people. They would have made good farmers, good merchants, good craftsmen; their natural forces were tailored to such proportions. Knowledge is a very weighty thing; they collapse under it. Their mind has not enough energy or skill to display and distribute that noble material, to use it and get help from it. It takes a powerful nature to do that, and there aren't many of those. [C] And weak minds, said Socrates, corrupt the dignity of philosophy in handling it; badly sheathed, it appears both useless and harmful. [B] This is how they grow rotten and make fools of themselves: 'Like an ape, that imitator of the human face, which a prankish boy dresses up in precious silken robes, leaving its backside bare, to amuse the guests at table.' [Claudian]

Likewise for those who rule and command us, who hold the world in their hands: it is not enough for them to have an ordinary intelligence, to be able to do what we are able to do; they are far beneath us if they are not far above us. As they promise more, so they owe more; so that for them *silence* is not merely courteous and grave but also often profitable and economical. For when Megabysus went to see Appelles in his studio, he long remained silent and then began to talk about

the works of ·Appelles's· art, for which he received this rough reprimand: 'As long as you kept silent, you seemed to be a great somebody because of your chains and your retinue; but now that we have heard you speak, there is no-one in my workshop—right down to the mere apprentices—who does not despise you.' Those magnificent trappings, that grand estate, didn't allow him to be ignorant in the ordinary way and to speak incompetently about paintings; he should have kept quiet, maintaining that outward presumed competence. For how many stupid souls in my time has a cold, taciturn mien served as a title to wisdom and ability!

·JUDGING KINGS BY THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR REIGN·

Inevitably dignities and offices are bestowed more by fortune than by merit; it is wrong to hold this against kings, as people often do. On the contrary, it is a wonder that they do so well at it [i.e. at assigning dignities and offices], having so little skill in it. [C] 'A prince's greatest virtue is to know his people' [Martial]. [B] For nature has not given them a vision that can extend over a whole populace so as to detect pre-eminence and see into our bosoms where is lodged the knowledge of our will and of our best worth. They have to select us by conjecture and by groping; by family, wealth, learning, the voice of the people—all very feeble evidence. Anyone who could discover how to judge men justly and choose them reasonably would, at a stroke, establish a perfect form of government.

'Yes. But he successfully carried out that great affair.' That says something ·in his favour·, but it doesn't say enough; for we rightly accept the maxim that plans should not be judged by results. [C] The Carthaginians punished bad planning by their commanders even when they were put right by a satisfactory outcome. And the Roman people often refused a ceremonial triumph for great and very profitable

victories because the commander's conduct did not match his good luck. [B] In this world's activities we commonly see that fortune rivals virtue, showing us what power it has over everything and delighting in striking down our presumption: since it cannot make the incompetent wise, it makes them lucky. It likes to take a hand, favouring performances whose course has been entirely its own. That is why we can see, every day, the simplest among us bringing great public and private tasks to successful conclusions. And just as Siramnes the Persian replied to those who were amazed that his enterprises turned out so badly, given that his plans for them were so wise, by saying that he alone was master of his plans while the outcome of his enterprises was up to fortune, so also these people could make the same reply but with an opposite twist.

Most of the world's events just *happen*: 'The Fates find a way' [Virgil]. The outcome often lends authority to very inept management. Our intervention is little more than routine, a matter of tradition and example more often than of reason. Once, astounded by the greatness of a venture, I inquired from those who had brought it to a successful conclusion what their motives and methods were; I found nothing but ordinary notions; and the most ordinary and usual ones may also be the most reliable and the most suitable in practice if not for show.

What if the flattest reasons are the most solidly founded, if the lowest, loosest and most threadbare are the best adapted to affairs? To preserve the authority of the

next phrase: *Conseil des Roys*,

translated by Frame as: King's Council,

by Screech as: Privy Council,

by Cotton as: counsels of kings.

[Cotton is nearest to right. Montaigne is talking about the credibility

of kings (plural) as a class. He imagines them as gathered together in a single committee or *Conseil* (singular, missed by Cotton), this being a fiction that lets him make his point. To resume:] To preserve the authority of the Council of Kings, there is no need for outsiders to take part in it or to see into it further than the first barrier. If we want to maintain its reputation it must be taken on trust, as a whole.

In my deliberations I outline the topic a little and consider it sketchily in its first aspects; as for its heart and core, I usually leave that to heaven: 'Entrust the rest to the gods' [Horace].

·THE ROLE OF CHANCE IN HUMAN AFFAIRS·

Good luck and bad luck are in my opinion two sovereign powers. It is unwise to think that the role of fortune can be played by human wisdom. And it is a vain undertaking if someone presumes to embrace both causes and consequences and to lead the progress of his action by the hand—vain especially in deliberations of war. There was never more military circumspection and prudence than there is today; are they perhaps afraid of getting lost en route, reserving themselves for the climax of the drama?

I say further that our wisdom and deliberation are themselves mostly led by chance. My will and my reasoning are moved now in one way, now in another, and many of these movements are directed without me. My reason is daily subject to incitements and agitations that are due to chance: 'The phases of their minds are changed; the emotions in their breasts are driven hither and thither like clouds before the wind' [Virgil].

Look and see who wield most power in our cities, who do their jobs best; they will usually be found to be the least able. There have been cases where women, children and lunatics have ruled their states just as well as the most

talented princes. ^[C] Coarse-minded men, says Thucydides, succeed in such things more commonly than subtle ones do. ^[B] We ascribe the effects of their good fortune to their wisdom! ^[C] 'Each outstanding man is raised by his good fortune; we then say that he is wise' [Plautus]. ^[B] That is why I insist that, in all our activities, their outcomes provide meagre testimony of our worth and ability.

The point I was about to make was this: we need only to see a man raised to great dignity for our opinions to become insensibly suffused with an image of greatness, of ability, and we convince ourselves that by growing in status and authority he has grown in merit, although three days earlier we knew him to be an insignificant man. Our judgements of him are based not on his worth but. . . .on the powers of his rank. Let fortune turn again, let him fall and rejoin the crowd, and everyone will wonder what had made him soar so high:

'Is this the same man? Is *that* all he knew when he was up there? Are princes satisfied with so little? [Sarcastically:] We *were* in good hands!'

That is something I have seen many times in my time. Why, even the mask of greatness put on in plays affects us somewhat and deceives us.

What I worship in kings is the crowd of their worshippers. All deference and submission is due to them, except that of the understanding. My reason was not made for bending and bowing, my knees were. . . .

One day when Antisthenes urged the Athenians to command that their donkeys be used for tilling the fields, as their horses were, he was told that donkeys were not born for such a service. 'That doesn't matter', he retorted. 'You just have to give the order; for the ignorant and incompetent men you put in command of your wars suddenly become most worthy of command because you employ them for it.'

[Now a paragraph on peoples—notably the Mexicans—who downright worship their kings, crediting them with keeping rivers flowing, the sun shining, and so on.]

I differ from this common fashion of inferring worth from rank, and I most doubt a man's ability when I see it accompanied by greatness of fortune and public esteem. We should bear in mind how much of an advantage it is to a man to be able to speak when he wants to, to choose the right moment, to break off the discussion or switch the subject with the authority of a master, to defend himself against objections with a shake of the head, a smile or a silence, in the presence of a company that trembles with reverence and respect. . . .

In debates and discussions, when someone says something that we think is good we should not immediately accept it as his own work. Most men are rich with other men's abilities. A man may make a fine remark, a good reply or a pithy saying, advancing it without recognising its force. ^[C] That we do not *grasp* everything we *borrow* can doubtless be proved from my own case! ^[B] We should not always give way to it, no matter what beauty or truth it may have. We should either seriously attack it or else, under pretence of not understanding it, retreat a little in order to feel out on all sides how it is lodged in its author. It can happen that we run onto the point of his sword, helping his blow to carry beyond his reach.

Sometimes when pressed by necessity in the duel of words I have made counter-attacks that struck home more than I ever hoped or expected. . . . Just as in a dispute with a vigorous man I enjoy anticipating his conclusions; I save him the labour of explaining himself; I try to foretell his ideas while they are still unfinished and being formed (the order and competence of his intelligence warn and threaten me from afar); so also with those others—the ones I suspect

of parroting without understanding.—I do just the opposite; we should understand nothing of what they say except what they explain, and we shouldn't presuppose anything about it. If they judge in general terms—"This is good; that is not"—and get it right, find out whether it is luck that gets it right for them. ^[C] Make them circumscribe and restrict their verdict a little: 'Why is it so? How is it so?'

·GENERALITY AS A COVER FOR STUPIDITY·

These general judgements that I find so common say nothing. They are like those who greet people as a mass or a crowd. Those who truly know them greet them by name and distinguish them as individuals. But getting down to details is risky: I have seen it happen, more than daily, that someone whose mind has a weak foundation tries to play clever by pointing out some beautiful detail in the book he is reading, making such a bad choice of something to admire that instead of revealing the excellence of the author he reveals his own ignorance.

After hearing a whole page of Virgil it is safe to exclaim 'Now *that* is beautiful!' The shrewd ones play safe in that way. But to undertake to follow a good author line by line, trying to indicate with precise and selected examples where he surpasses himself and where he rises high, doing this by weighing the words, the sentences, and the inventions one after another—don't try that! 'We should not only examine what each one says, but also what he thinks and why he thinks it' [Cicero].

Every day I hear stupid people say things that are not stupid. ^[B] They say something good; let us discover how deeply they understand it, let us see where they got it from. We help them to *use* that fine saying or that fine reasoning, which they don't own but are only looking after. They will probably have come out with it by accident, gropingly; we

then give it authority and value for them. You are lending them a hand. What for? They are not grateful to you for it and it makes them all the more clumsy. Do not support them; let them go; they will handle that material like men who fear getting scalded; they dare not change its setting or or its lighting, or go into it more deeply. Shake it ever so little and it slips away from them; they leave it to you, strong and fine as it is. They—the good sayings of stupid people—are fine weapons, but badly shafted. How often I have seen this by experience!

Now, if you clarify and confirm what such people say, they promptly take advantage of your interpretation and rob you of it: 'That's what I meant to say', 'That is exactly my understanding of it', 'If I didn't put it that way, it was only because I couldn't find the right words'. Bluster! We should not be gentle in punishing such arrogant stupidity. ^[C] The doctrine of Hegesias that we should neither hate nor blame but instruct is right elsewhere but not here. ^[B] It is not right or humane to help a man to get up who doesn't know how to use your help and who is all the worse for it. I like to let them sink deeper in the mire—so deeply that, if it is possible, they recognise themselves at last.

Stupidity and senselessness are not curable by a single admonition. ^[C] Of that sort of repair work we can properly say what Cyrus replied to the man who urged him to give an exhortation to his troops on the point of battle, namely that men are not made courageous warriors on the spot by a good harangue, any more than one can become a good musician by hearing a good song. There are apprenticeships that must be served in advance by long and sustained education.

^[B] We owe this care—this assiduity in correcting and instructing—to our own folk; but to go preaching at the first passer-by, and to play schoolmaster to the ignorance or clumsiness of the first man we come across, is a practice

I greatly dislike. I rarely do it even during discussions I am involved in; I would rather give up on the whole thing than resort to such remote and pedantic lecturing. ^[C] My nature is not suitable, in speaking or in writing, for beginners. ^[B] But however false or absurd I judge things to be that are said in company, I never leap in to interrupt them by word or gesture.

Moreover, nothing in stupidity annoys me more than its being more pleased with itself than any reasonableness could reasonably be. It is unfortunate that wisdom forbids you to be satisfied with yourself and trust yourself, and always sends you away discontented and anxious, whereas obstinacy and recklessness fill their hosts with joy and assurance. It is the least able men who look always look back at others over their shoulders as they return from the fray full of glory and cheer. And this arrogance of language and gaiety of countenance usually win them victory in the eyes of the bystanders, who are generally weak in and unable to make good judgments about who won the argument. ^[C] Obstinacy and heat of opinion is the surest proof of animal-stupidity. Is there anything as certain, resolute, disdainful, contemplative, grave and serious as an ass?

^[B] Perhaps we may include in the category of conversation and discussion the sharp, abrupt bouts of repartee that happiness and intimacy introduce among friends, bantering and joking wittily and keenly with one another. That is an exercise for which my natural gaiety makes me rather well-suited; and if it isn't as tense and serious as the other exercise I have just been speaking of, it is no less keen and ingenious. . . . For my part, I bring to it more freedom than wit, and have more luck in it than inventiveness; but I am perfect in forbearance, for I put up with retaliation—not

only sharp but even discourteous—without being disturbed. When I am attacked, if I have no brisk response to make on the spot I do not waste my time pursuing the point with boring argumentativeness akin to stubbornness. I let it pass, and cheerfully lowering my ears postpone my revenge to a better time. No merchant wins in every deal. . . .

In this cheerful verbal fencing we sometimes pluck those secret strings of one another's imperfections that we cannot *touch* without offence when we are calm; usefully, we warn each other of each other's faults.

There are other games, played by hand and not by voice, thoughtless and harsh in the French manner, which I mortally hate. I am touchy and sensitive about such things: in my lifetime I have seen two princes of our royal blood laid in their graves because of them.¹ ^[C] It is an ugly thing to fight in play.

·BORROWING·

^[B] Another matter. When I want to judge someone, I ask him to what extent he is satisfied with himself, what in his sayings and doings pleases him. I want him to avoid those fine excuses:

- 'I was only playing at it',
- 'It was taken off the anvil only half-finished' [Ovid],
- 'I spent less than an hour on it',
- 'I have not seen it since'.

Well, then, I say: let us leave those pieces aside. Show me something that represents you entirely, something by which you are happy to be measured. And then: What do you think is finest in your work? Is it this part or that? Is it the charm, or the subject-matter, or the originality, or the judgement, or the erudition? For I notice that men are ordinarily as wrong in judging their own work as other people's, not only

¹ [Henry II was killed while jousting; Henry, Marquess of Beaupréau died of wounds received in a tournament.]

because their feelings are involved but also because they lack the ability to understand it and to analyse it. The work itself, by its own power and fortune, can favour the author beyond his inventiveness and knowledge; it can outrun him.

There is no work that I can judge with less certainty than my own: the Essays I place—very hesitantly and with little assurance—sometimes low, sometimes high.

Many books are useful for their subject-matter; their authors derive little glory from them. And there are good books which—like good works of other kinds—shame the workman. I may

- write about our style of feasting, about our clothing, writing it gracelessly;
- publish contemporary edicts and the letters of princes that pass into the hands of the public without displaying any talent in doing this;
- make an abridgement of a good book that is then lost (and every abridgement of a good book is a stupid one);

things like that. Posterity will find such compilations extremely useful, but what honour would I get from them except for being lucky? A good proportion of famous books are like that.

When reading Philippe de Commines a few years ago—a very good author, certainly—I noted this remark as uncommon: ‘One should take care not to do such great service to one’s master as to make him unable to reward it justly.’ I should have praised the idea, not him; I came across it in Tacitus not long ago: ‘Benefits are pleasing as long as they seem to be repayable; if they go much beyond that, they are repaid with hatred instead of gratitude.’ [C] And Seneca says vigorously: ‘He who thinks it shameful not to repay does not want there to be any man alive whom he ought to repay.’ Quintus Cicero, in a weaker vein: ‘He who thinks he cannot

repay you can by no means be your friend.’

[B] A man’s subject-matter can give him a reputation for learning and a good memory; but to judge the qualities that are most his own and are the most worthy—the strength and beauty of his soul—one must know what is really his and what is not, and in what is not his how much is due to him in consideration of the selection, disposition, ornamentation and the literary quality of what he had contributed. He may have borrowed the matter and spoiled the form, as often happens. Those of us who have little experience of books, have this problem when we come across some fine example of ingenuity in a modern poet or some strong argument in a preacher: we do not dare [see Glossary] to praise them for it before we have learned from a scholar whether it is their own or someone else’s. Until I have done that I stand on my guard.

•EVALUATING TACITUS•

I have just read through at one go Tacitus’s *Histories* (something that rarely happens to me: it is twenty years since I spent one full hour at a time on a book). . . . I know of no author who combines a chronicle of public events with so much reflection on individual *mœurs* and inclinations. . . . This form of history is by far the most useful. Public events depend more on fortune’s guiding hand; private ones on our own. This—the *Histories* of Tacitus—is more a judgement on historical events than a narration of them. There are more precepts than stories. It is not a book to *read*, it is a book to *study and learn*. It is full of maxims, some right and some wrong. It is a seed-bed of ethical and political arguments to be used—contentfully or as adornment—by those who hold high rank in the managing of the world. He always pleads his case with solid and vigorous reasons, in a pointed and subtle fashion, following the affected style of his

time. (They were so fond of a high style that when they found no point or subtlety in the •things, they borrowed it from the •words.) He is not very different from Seneca; he seems me more meaty; Seneca more sharp. Tacitus can more properly serve a sickly troubled nation, as our own is at present; you would often say it is *us* he describing and decrying. [Then a paragraph saying that Tacitus is uncharacteristically unfair in his account of Pompey's character.]

That his narratives are sincere and straightforward can perhaps be argued from the very fact that they do not exactly fit his concluding judgements. He is led to these judgments by the bias he has taken, which often concerns things that lie outside the narrative evidence he provides us with. He has not deigned to slant this evidence even slightly, which explains the failure of fit, and why that failure shows the sincerity of the narrations. He needs no defence for having assented to the religion of his day, in accordance with the laws requiring him to do so, and for being ignorant of the true religion. That is his misfortune, not his fault.

I have chiefly been considering his judgement, and am not entirely clear about it in every instance. For example, take these words from the letter sent to the Senate by the aged ailing Tiberius:

'What shall I write to you, sirs, or how shall I write to you, or shall I *not* write to you at this time? I know that I am daily nearing death; may the gods and goddesses make my end worse if I know what to write.'

I do not see why Tacitus so confidently ascribes this to a poignant remorse tormenting Tiberius's conscience; at least when I encountered that passage I saw no such thing.

It also seemed to me a bit weak of him when he had to mention that he had once held an honourable magistracy in Rome to explain defensively that he was not *boasting* about

this. This seems to me rather shoddy for a soul of his kind. For not daring to talk roundly of oneself shows some lack of heart. A stout and lofty judgment which judges surely and soundly uses its own examples on all occasions, as well as those of others, and testifies frankly about itself as well as about others. Those everyday rules of etiquette should be passed over in favour of truth and freedom.

[C] I dare [see Glossary] not only to talk about myself but to talk *only* about myself. When I write of anything else I am wandering off the point and depriving myself of my subject-matter. I do not love myself so indiscriminately, nor am I so bound to and involved in myself that I cannot distinguish and consider myself separately, like a neighbour or a tree. It is as much a fault not to see how far one's worth extends as to report it as extending further than one can see. We owe more love to God than to ourselves, and we know him less, yet talk about him till we are glugged.

[B] If Tacitus's writings tell us anything about his character, he was a great man, upright and courageous, whose virtue was not of the superstitious kind but philosophical and magnanimous. You could find some of his testimony rather rash [examples are given of reports of two miracles]. In such cases he was following the dutiful example of all good historians who keep a chronicle of important happenings: included among public events are popular rumours and opinions. Their role is to give an account of popular beliefs, not to account for them. The latter part is played by theologians and philosophers, directors of consciences. That is why his fellow-historian, as great a man as he was, most wisely said: 'I do indeed pass on more than I believe; for I cannot affirm things that I doubt, or suppress what I have heard' [Quintus Curtius]. [C] And this other: 'These things are neither to be vouched for nor denied: we must abide by reports' [Livy]. Writing in an age in which belief in miracles was on

the wane, Tacitus says that he nevertheless does not want to neglect to include in his *Annals*, and so provide a foothold for, things accepted by so many decent people with so great a reverence for antiquity. ^[B] That—the passage quoted from Quintus Curtius—is very well said. Let them deliver history to us more according to what they receive than according to their own estimate.

Though I am monarch of the subject I treat and not accountable for it to anyone, I do not believe everything I say. I often launch out with sallies that I mistrust ^[C] and with verbal subtleties that make me shake my ears; ^[B] but I let them run free to take their chance. ^[C] I see that reputations are gained from such things. It is not for me alone to judge them. I present myself standing up and lying down, from front and back, from right and left, and in all my natural postures. ^[B] Even minds alike in power are not always alike in application and taste. . . .

9. Vanity

^[B] There is perhaps there no more obvious vanity than writing so vainly about it. [For 'vanity' and 'vain(ly)', see Glossary.] What the divinity has so divinely expressed about it¹ ought to be carefully and continuously meditated by people with understanding. Who doesn't see that I have set out on a road that I shall travel along, without stopping and without effort, for as long as the world has ink and paper? I cannot keep a record of my life by my actions; fortune places them too low ·for that·; I keep it by my thoughts. I knew a gentleman who gave knowledge of his life only by the workings of his belly; you would see on display at his home a week's worth of chamber-pots. He thought about them, talked about them;

for him any other topic stank.

Here you have (a little more decently) the droppings of an old mind, now hard, now loose, and always undigested. And when shall I make an end of describing the continual agitation and change in my thoughts, whatever subject they happen on, given that Diomedes filled six thousand books with the sole subject of grammar?. . . .

A certain Galba in days gone by was criticised for living in idleness. He replied that everyone should have to account for his actions but not for his leisure. He was wrong, for justice has authority over those who are on holiday.

But the law ought to impose restraints on silly useless writers as it does on vagabonds and idlers. Then I and a hundred others would be banished from the hands of our people. This is not a joke. Scribbling seems to be a symptom of an unruly age. When did we write as much as ·we have· since our dissensions began? When did the Romans write as much as they did at the time of their downfall?. . . . This idle occupation arises from the fact that everyone goes about the duties of his vocation slackly and takes time off.

Each one of us contributes individually to the corruption of the age: the more powerful contribute treachery, injustice, irreligion, tyranny, avarice, cruelty; the weaker—who include me—provide stupidity, vanity and idleness. When harmful things are weighing down on us, it seems to be the season for vain ones. In an age when wickedness is so common, doing what is merely useless is virtually praiseworthy. I console myself with the thought that I shall be one of the last they will have to lay hands on. While they are dealing with the more urgent cases, I shall have time to improve. For it seems to me that it would be contrary to reason to punish minor offences while we are infested by great ones. The physician

¹ [A reference to *Ecclesiastes* 1:2.]

Philotimus recognised the symptoms of an ulcerated lung from the features and breath of a patient who brought him his finger to be dressed. ‘My friend,’ he said, ‘this is not the time for you to worry about fingernails!’

Still on this topic: I saw some years ago an important man whom I remember with special esteem, in the midst of our great disorders—when there was no justice, or law, or magistrate doing his duty, any more than there is today—publicly proposed some puny reforms or other in dress, cookery, and legal procedure. These are tidbits on which an ill-governed people is fed, to show that they are not entirely forgotten. Others do the same when they focus on prohibiting certain ways of speaking, dancing and playing, for a people sunk in detestable vices of every kind. When one has caught a real fever, that is not the time to wash and clean up. . . .

As for me, I have this other worse habit: if one of my shoes is askew then I let my shirt and my cloak lie askew as well; I scorn reforming half-way. When my condition is bad I cling violently to my misfortune; I abandon myself to despair and let myself slip towards the precipice. . . . I persist in growing worse, and think myself no longer worth my care. Either entirely in good condition or entirely in bad.

It is a boon for me that the desolation of this ·French· state coincides with the desolation of the age I have reached. It is easier for me to accept that my ills are increased by it than that such good things as I have should be troubled by it. The words I utter when wretched are words of defiance; instead of lying low, my courage bristles up. Unlike others, I find myself more devout in good fortune than in bad, following Xenophon’s precept, though not his reasoning, and am more ready to make sheep’s eyes at heaven in thanksgiving than in supplication. I am more anxious to improve my health when it smiles on me than to restore it when we have parted company; prosperous times discipline

instruct me, as rods and adversities do others. ^[C] As though good fortune were incompatible with a good conscience, men never become moral except when fortune is bad. ^[B] For me good fortune is a singular spur to moderation and modesty. Entreaty wins me over, threat repels me; ^[C] favour makes me bow; fear makes me stiffen.

^[B] Among human characteristics this one is common enough: **a** to be better pleased with other people’s things than with our own, and **b** to love movement and change: ‘Even the daylight pleases us only because the hours run by on changing steeds’ [Petronius]. **a** I have my share of that. Those who go to the other extreme, who are happy with themselves, who esteem what they possess above all else and who recognise no form as more beautiful than the one they see, if they are not wiser than us they are truly happier. I do not envy their wisdom but I do their good fortune.

·TRAVEL·

b This greedy appetite for new and unknown things helps to foster in me the desire to travel, though plenty of other circumstances contribute to it. I gladly turn aside from governing my household. There is a certain satisfaction in being in command, even if only of a barn, and in being obeyed by one’s people; but it is too monotonous and listless a pleasure. Also, it is inevitably mingled with many troublesome thoughts. You are distressed when your tenants suffer from famine, when your neighbours quarrel among themselves or encroach on you: ‘Either the hail has ravaged your vineyards, or the soil deceives your hopes, or your fruit trees are lashed by the rain, or the sun scorches your fields. And there are the rigours of winter’ [Horace]. And the fact that barely once in six months will God send you weather which totally satisfies your steward and which if it is good for the vines does not harm the meadows. . . .

Then there is that shoe of the man of yore: new and shapely, but pinching the foot;¹ no outsider ever understands how much it costs you, and how much it takes out of you, to keep up that appearance of order to be seen in your household, which perhaps you have bought too dearly. I came late to the management of a household. Those whom nature had given birth to before me long relieved me of that burden. I had already acquired a different bent, one more suitable to my disposition. Still, from what I have seen of it, it is an occupation more tiresome than difficult; anyone who has the ability to do other things can easily do *this*. . . . Since I [C] aim only to acquire the reputation for having acquired nothing, and squandered nothing either (in conformity with the rest of my life, which is as ill-suited to doing evil as good), and [B] since I seek only to get by, I can do it, thank God, without paying much attention.

'If worst comes to worst, forestall poverty by cutting down expenses.' That is what I try to do, changing my ways before poverty compels me to. Meanwhile I have established enough gradations in my soul to allow me to do with less than I have—and I mean contentedly. [C] 'Your degree of wealth is to be measured not by your income but by your manner of living and your culture' [Cicero]. [B] My real need does not so wholly take up all that I have that fortune has nothing of mine to sink its teeth into without biting into the flesh.

My presence ·in my household·, ignorant and uninterested though it is, give a strong shove to domestic affairs. I do take part in them, though grudgingly. And you can say this for me at home: while I do burn my end of the candle privately ·and moderately·, the other end does not have to cut down on anything.

[C] My travels hurt me only by their expense, which is considerable and exceeds my resources. Used as I am to travel with a retinue that doesn't merely meet my *needs* but does me *honour*, I have to make my journeys shorter and less frequent, spending only the froth of my savings, temporising and postponing as the money comes in. I will not have the pleasure of wandering spoil the pleasure of repose; on the contrary, I intend them to feed and favour one another. Fortune has helped me in that; my chief aim in this life has been to live it comfortably and in a relaxed rather than a busy way, and fortune has spared me the need to multiply my riches to provide for a multitude of heirs. . . . Following the example of Phocion, each man provides enough for his children if he provides for them insofar as they are not unlike himself. I emphatically don't endorse what Crates did: he left his money with a banker, with this condition: if his children were fools, the money should be given to them; but if they turned out to be clever, it should be distributed among the simpletons in the populace. As if fools are better able to use money because they're less able to do without it!

[B] At all events, the harm that comes from my absence ·from my household affairs· does not seem to me to warrant my refusing to accept—as long as I can afford to—the opportunities that come up to turn away from the troubles involved in being present ·in them·. Something is always going awry. The affairs now of this house, now of that, pester you. You pry into everything too closely; your sharp-sightedness hurts you here, as it does often enough elsewhere. I avoid occasions for annoyance, and turn away from learning about the things that are going wrong; yet not so thoroughly that I don't keep bumping into things that displease me in my

¹ [This refers to a story by Plutarch: a Roman who has divorced his wife is defending himself against friends who say that she faithful, beautiful, and fruitful; he holds out his shoe, saying that it is new and well-made, but 'None of you can tell where it pinches me.']

home. ^[C]And the knaveries they hide from me are the ones I know best. There are some that one has to help to conceal from oneself so that they hurt less! ^[B]Vain pinpricks—^[C]vain sometimes but always pinpricks. ^[B]The slightest and pettiest cuts are the most piercing; just as small print hurts and tires the eyes most, so do small concerns sting us most. . . .

^[C]I am no philosopher. Evils crush me in proportion to their weight, and their weight depends as much on their form as on their their matter, often more. I have more experience of them than common people do, so I bear them better. In short, they weigh with me if they do not hurt me.

Life is a delicate thing, easy to disturb. From the moment I am inclined to bad humour—^[C]‘No-one can stop himself once he yields to the first impulse’ [Seneca]—^[B]however stupid the cause that brought me to be so, I goad my humour in that direction. Then it nourishes itself, provoking itself under its own impetus, drawing to itself and piling up matter upon matter to feed on. ‘Water dripping drop by drop makes fissures in a stone’ [Lucretius]. These everyday drippings eat into me. ^[C]Everyday irritations are never slight. They are constant and irremediable, particularly when they arise from household cares, which are constant and unavoidable.

^[B]When I consider my affairs from a distance and as a whole, I find—perhaps because my memory of them is hardly exact—that until now they have prospered beyond my projections or calculations. It seems to me that I get more out of them than is in them; their happy state misleads me. But once I am involved in the job and watching the progress of all the details. . . , a thousand things give me reason to desire and fear. It is very easy for me to abandon them completely; dealing with them without worrying I find very difficult. It is wretched to be in a place where everything you see makes work for you and concerns you. It seems to me that I am happier enjoying the pleasures of someone’s

else’s house, and that I bring a more innocent taste to them. ^[C]When asked what kind of wine he thought best, Diogenes replied in my vein, ‘Oher people’s’.

^[B]My father loved building at Montaigne, where he was born; and in all this management of domestic affairs I like to follow his example and his rules, and I’ll bind my successors to them as far as I can. If I could do better for him I would. I glory in the fact that his will is still effective through me. God forbid that I should allow to fail in my hands any semblance of life that I could give to so good a father. Whenever I have taken a hand in completing some old section of wall or repairing some botched bit of building, it has certainly been more out of regard for his intention than for my satisfaction. ^[C]And I reproach my own laziness for not having gone on to complete the fine things he started in his house, especially since I am likely to be the last of my stock to own it and put the finishing touches on it.

^[B]As for my own inclinations, neither the pleasures of building (which are supposed to be so attractive) nor of hunting nor of laying out gardens, nor the other pleasures of life in the country, can entertain me much. I think ill of myself for this, as I do for all opinions that are disadvantageous to me. I do not so much care about having vigorous and informed opinions as having easy ones that are convenient to live with; ^[C]they are true and sound enough if they are useful and pleasing.

^[B]Some people, when they hear me declare my incompetence in household occupations, whisper in my ears that I am guilty of disdain, and that I neglect to learn

- what tools are used in farming,
- its seasons and succession of tasks,
- how my wines are made,
- how grafting is done,
- the names and shapes of plants and fruits,

- the ways of preparing them for the table, and
- ^[C] the names and prices of the materials I wear,

^[B] because my mind is full of some higher knowledge. They do me mortal wrong. What they accuse me of would be silly, stupid rather than vainglorious. I would rather be a good horseman than a good logician: ‘Why do you not do something useful, like making baskets of wickerwork or pliant reeds?’ [Virgil].

^[C] We confuse our thoughts with generalities, universal causes and processes that proceed quite well without us, and leave behind our own concerns and Michel [i.e. this or that individual person], who touches us more intimately than *man* ·in general· does.

^[B] Now, I do remain at home most of the time; but I wish I were happier there than elsewhere: ‘May it be my final haven when I am weary of the sea, of roaming and of war’ [Horace]. I do not know whether I shall accomplish this. I wish that my father had bequeathed to me, instead of some other part of his inheritance, the passionate love for his household that he had in his old age. He was most successful in limiting his desires to his means, and in being content with what he had. Political philosophy can, for all I care, condemn me for the lowliness and sterility of my occupation, if only I can once acquire a taste for it, as he did. I do believe that the most honourable vocation is to serve the public and to be useful to many. ^[C] ‘The fruits of intellect and virtue and of all outstanding talents are best employed when shared with one’s neighbour’ [Cicero]. ^[B] For my part, I stay out of that, partly from self-awareness (which enables me to see the weight attached to such employments and what little qualification I have for them). . . . and partly from laziness. I am content to enjoy the world without being all wrapped up in it and to lead a life that rises only to the level of being excusable, of not being a burden to myself or to others.

No man ever entrusted himself more fully and passively into the care and control of someone else than I would do if I had someone ·for this purpose·. One of my wishes now would be to find a son-in-law who would spoon-feed my final years and lull them to sleep, into whose hands I could resign the control and use of my goods, with complete authority to do with them as I do, getting out of them what I do—provided that he brought to this a truly grateful and loving affection. Well, yes, but we live in a world where the loyalty of one’s own children is unknown.

Whoever has my purse when I travel has full charge of it without supervision. He could cheat me just as well if I kept accounts; and unless he is a devil, my reckless trust obliges him to be honest. ^[C] ‘Many by their fear of being cheated have taught others to cheat, and have justified their wrong-by throwing suspicion on them’ [Seneca]. ^[B] The surety I most usually have for my servants is my own ignorance. I never assume defects until I have seen them, and I trust the young more, reckoning that they are less corrupted by bad example. I would rather hear after two months that I have spent 400 crowns than have my ears battered every evening with 3, 5, or 7. Yet I have been as little robbed as anyone by larcenies of that kind. True, I lend my ignorance a helping hand. I deliberately keep my knowledge of my money somewhat vague and uncertain; up to a point, I am pleased to be unsure about it. You should leave your manservant a little room for improvidence or dishonesty. If it leaves enough for us to do our business, let us allow the surplus of fortune’s liberality to flow on as fortune chooses. . . . Oh, what a servile and silly care is care for your money, loving to handle it, weigh it, count it over! That is the way avarice makes its advances.

In eighteen years I have been managing an estate, I have not managed to persuade myself to look into title-deeds

or into my principal affairs which ought to pass within my knowledge and attention. This is not a philosophical contempt for transitory and mundane things; my taste is not as purified as that, and I do not value such things at less than their worth. But it certainly is inexcusable and childish laziness and negligence. ^[C] What would I not do rather than read a contract, rather than shake those dusty piles of papers, a slave to my affairs; or, even worse, a slave to other people's, as many folk are paid to be! For me nothing is expensive save toil and worry: all I want is to slump nonchalantly.

^[B] I was better fitted, I think, for living off the fortune of others, if that could be done without obligation and without servitude. And when I look at it closely, I am not sure whether, for a man of my temperament and situation, what I have to put up with from business and agents and servants does not involve more degradation, bother and bitterness than there would be in following a man born greater than myself who would lead me in some sort of comfort. . . .

When Crates, to rid himself of the cares and indignities of his home, jumped into the freedom of poverty, he made things worse. I would never do that (I hate poverty as much as pain), but I would indeed exchange that first sort of existence for another less grand and less busy.

When I am away from home I strip off all such thoughts; I would then feel less if a tower collapsed than I feel, when I am there, the fall of a tile. Once I am away, my soul easily achieves detachment; when I am there, it frets like a wine-grower's. ^[C] A twisted rein on my horse or a stirrup-strap knocking against my leg can put me out of humour for an entire day. . . .

^[B] I am responsible when anything goes wrong at home. There are few masters—I mean of my middle station—who can rely on anyone else without retaining most of the load. If

there are *any*, they are luckier than I am. That ^[C] somewhat detracts from the way I treat visitors (though I may have made the odd one stay on, as bores do, more for my cuisine than for my charm); and it ^[B] considerably detracts from the pleasure I ought to take in visits and gatherings of friends in my house.

A gentleman in his own home never looks so stupid as when he is seen to be preoccupied with the arrangements, having a word in a manservant's ear or threatening another with his eyes. The arrangements should flow unnoticed and seem like a normal process. And I find it ugly to discuss with your guests the way you are treating them, whether to excuse it or to boast of it.

I love order and cleanliness—I see my reflection in tankard and plate' [Horace]—as much as abundance; in my house I give careful attention to what is needful, little to ostentation.

When you are in someone else's house, if a servant brawls or a dish is spilled you simply laugh; you sleep while the master arranges with his butler tomorrow's arrangements for your entertainment.

^[C] I am speaking only for myself, not failing to appreciate what a pleasant occupation it is for certain natures to run their households quietly and prosperously, all done with regularity and order. I do not wish to attribute my own mistakes and shortcomings to the thing itself, or to contradict Plato's contention that the happiest occupation for any man is to manage his private concerns without injustice.

^[B] When I travel, I have to think only of me—and the use of my money (and one command can see to that). To accumulate money, too many talents are needed; I know nothing about all that. I know a little about spending and about making a good show of my expenditure—which is indeed its principal use. But I strive too ambitiously over it,

which makes my spending uneven and shapeless, as well as being immoderate in both directions. If it makes a show, and is useful, I let myself be carried away injudiciously; and just as injudiciously I close up tight if it does not shine and does not please me.

Whether it is art or nature that stamps on us this disposition to live with reference to others, it does us much more harm than good. We defraud ourselves of our legitimate advantages in order to conform our appearances to the common opinion. We care less about what we are in ourselves and in actuality than about how we are perceived by the public. Even the joys of the mind, and wisdom, strike us as fruitless if we enjoy them by ourselves, not parading them before the approving eyes of others.

There are men whose gold flows in great streams through great caverns underground; others spread theirs out into sheets and leaf; so that for some farthings are worth crowns, for others the reverse; *·actual* value doesn't come into it—because the world judges means and value by the show they put on.

All anxious care about riches smells of avarice, as do spending when it is too systematic and generosity when it is too contrived. They are not worth troublesome attention and care. Anyone who wants to make his expenditure just right makes it constricted and confined. Keeping and spending are in themselves indifferent; they take on the colour of good or evil only according to how we apply our wills to them.

The other cause that invites me to travel is my dissent from the *mœurs* of our country. As regards the public interest, I could console myself for this corruption. . . ., but with regard to my own interests, No. I in particular suffer from it too much. For in my neighbourhood the prolonged

licence of our civil wars has already hardened us to a form of government that is so riotous—'Where right and wrong are interchanged' [Virgil]—that it is a miracle that it can survive. 'Men bear arms while ploughing the fields, thinking only of grabbing fresh plunder and living by rapine' [Virgil].

In short I see from our example that human society remains cobbled and held together, whatever the cost. No matter what position you place them in, men will jostle into heaps and arrange themselves in piles, just as ill-matched objects dumped into a sack find their own way of fitting together better than art could ever arrange them. King Philip made a pile from the most wicked and depraved men he could find, and settled them all in a city that bore their name.¹ I reckon that out of their very vices they wove for themselves a political fabric and an advantageous lawful society.

It is not one deed that I see, not three, not a hundred, but *mœurs* now commonly accepted that are so monstrous—in their inhumanity and above all in their treachery (which is for me the worst kind of vice)—that I have not the heart to think of them without horror; and I marvel at them almost as much as I detest them.

The practice of these dreadful villainies bears the mark of vigour and power in the soul as much as of error and unruliness. Necessity reconciles men and brings them together. Afterwards, that fortuitous bond is codified into laws; for there have been societies as savage as any human opinion can produce that have nevertheless kept their structures with as much health and longevity as those of Plato and Aristotle could do. And indeed all those fictional and artificial accounts of government turn out to be ridiculous and unfit to be put into practice. Those long solemn debates about the

¹ [Poneropolis, Greek for 'city of the wicked'.]

best form of society and the laws most suitable for bonding us together are *useless* except as mental exercise. Several of our arts disciplines are like that: their *essence* is controversy and dispute; they have no life apart from that.

Such accounts of government would be appropriate in a new-made world; but we take men who are already fashioned by and bound to particular customs; we don't *beget* them anew. . . . Whatever power we have to correct them and set them up afresh, we can hardly wrench them out of their accustomed bent without destroying everything. Solon was asked whether he had drawn up the very best laws he could for the Athenians: 'Yes indeed,' he replied, 'the best of those they would have accepted.' [C] Varro pleaded a similar excuse: if he had to write on religion as something new he would say what he believed, but since it is already fashioned and accepted, he will talk about it following custom rather than nature [i.e. rather than following the facts].

·AGAINST THE DESIRE FOR INNOVATION IN GOVERNMENT·

[B] Not in theory but in truth: the best and most excellent government for each nation is the one under which it has been sustained. Its form and essential fitness depend on custom. We are apt to be displeased with the present state of affairs. But I nevertheless hold that to yearn for an oligarchy in a democracy, or for another form of government in a monarchy, is wrong and stupid. . . .

Nothing presses a state hard except innovation: change alone provides the mould for injustice and tyranny. When some part works loose we can prop it up; we can resist being swept away from our beginnings and our principles by the spoiling and the corruption natural to all things. But to undertake to recast such a huge lump, to change the foundations of so great an edifice, is a task for those for whom cleaning ·a picture· means effacing ·it·, who want

to reform individual defects by universal disorder and to cure illnesses by death. . . . The world is clumsy at curing itself: it is so impatient of its affliction that it aims only at breaking loose from it without counting the cost. We know from hundreds of examples that it normally cures itself at its own expense. Getting rid of a present evil is no cure unless the general condition is improved. . . . [C] Anyone who proposes merely to remove what is biting him falls short, for good does not necessarily succeed evil. Another evil can succeed it—as happened to Caesar's killers who threw the republic into such a state that they had reason to regret interfering with it. The same has happened to many others down to our own times. My own contemporaries here in France could tell you a thing or two about that! All great revolutions shake the state and throw it into disorder.

Anyone who was aiming straight for a cure, and *reflected* on it before taking action, would soon cool off about setting his hand to it. Pacuvius Calavius corrected what is wrong in that procedure ·of aiming straight for a cure without thinking about means and consequences·, by providing a notable example. His fellow-citizens were in revolt against their magistrates. A person of great authority in the city of Capua, he found one day the means of locking the Senate in their palace; calling the citizens together in the marketplace he told them that the time had come when they were fully at liberty to take their revenge on the tyrants who had so long oppressed them and were now in his power, isolated and disarmed. His advice was that these men should be brought out one at a time, by lot, and that the citizens should decide about each one individually, and that if he was condemned he should be executed on the spot; provided that they should at the same time decide to put some honourable man in the place of the condemned one, so that the office should not remain vacant. No sooner had they heard the name

of the first Senator than there arose shouts of universal disapproval. 'Yes, I see' said Pacuvius 'that we shall have to get rid of that one; he is a wicked man; let us have a good one in his place.' There was an immediate silence, everyone being at a loss over whom to choose. The first man rash enough to name his choice was met with an even greater unanimity of voices to refuse his candidate, citing a hundred defects and just causes for rejecting him. As those opposing humours grew heated, the cases of the second and third senators fared even worse, with as much discord over the elections as agreement over the rejections! Having uselessly exhausted themselves in this quarrel they gradually began to slip out of the meeting—one this way, another that—each going off convinced in his mind that an older, better-known evil is always more bearable than a new and untried one.

^[B] Although I see we are in pitiful disarray (for what have we not done?)—

'We are, alas, disgraced by scars and crimes and fratricide. In this cruel age, what atrocities have we not committed? Have our young men ever stayed their hand for fear of the gods? What altar have they spared?' [Horace]

—I do not immediately jump to the conclusion that 'Even if the goddess Safety *wanted* to save this family, she *could not* do so' [Terence]. Perhaps we are not on our last legs, for all that. The preservation of states is probably something that surpasses our understanding. ^[C] As Plato says, a civil government is a strong thing that is hard to dissolve. It often holds out against mortal internal diseases, against the injury of unjust laws, against tyranny, against the immorality and ignorance of the magistrates and the licence and sedition of the people.

^[B] In all our fortunes we compare ourselves with what is above us, looking toward those who are better off. Let us

take our measure from what is below: there is no one so ill-fated as not to find hundreds of examples to console him. ^[C] It is our weakness that we are more unhappy to see people ahead of us than happy to see those who trail behind. ^[B] Yet Solon said that if all ills were gathered into a pile, there is nobody who would not rather •take away from that pile the ills he now has than •arrange to divide them equally among all men and take his fair share. Our government is in bad health; yet some have been sicker without dying. The gods play pelota with us, batting us about in every direction: 'To the gods we are indeed like balls to play with' [Plautus].

·THE EXAMPLE OF ROME·

The stars fatally decreed that Rome should be the example of what states are capable of in this way. In it are comprised all the forms and vicissitudes that affect a state, all that order can do, and disorder; all that good fortune can do, and misfortune. Seeing the shocks and agitations that shook Rome and that it survived, what state should despair of its own condition? If the well-being of a state depends upon the extent of its dominions—

which I utterly reject, ^[C] liking as I do what Isocrates taught Nicocles, not to envy rulers who rule over wide dominions but those who know how to keep in good condition the lands they have inherited

—^[B] then Rome was never more healthy than when it was sickest.

One can scarcely recognize the features of any kind of government under the first few emperors: it was the densest and most dreadful confusion that can be conceived. Yet Rome endured it and survived it, preserving (not a single monarchy confined within its own borders, but) all those nations, so diverse, so scattered, so disaffected, so chaotically governed and so unjustly conquered. . . .

All that totters does not collapse. Such a great body holds together by more than a single nail. Its very antiquity can hold it up, like old buildings whose foundations have been worn away by age, without cement or mortar, live and support themselves by their own weight: 'No longer does it cling to the earth with its mighty roots; it is saved by its own weight' [Lucan].

Furthermore, it is not a good procedure to reconnoitre only the flank and the moat; to judge the security of a place one must see from what direction it can be approached and what is the condition of the attacker. Few ships sink of their own weight and without outside violence. Now let us look in all directions: everything is crumbling about us; in all the great states that we know, in Christendom and elsewhere, if you look you'll find a manifest threat of change and collapse. . . . It is easy for the astrologers to warn us of great and imminent changes for the worse; what they foretell is present and palpable: we need not look to the heavens for that!

We should not only *console* ourselves for this universal fellowship in evil and menace, but should derive some *hope* that our state will endure, because naturally when everything falls nothing falls. Universal illness is individual health; uniformity is a quality hostile to disintegration. Personally I am not reduced to despair, and it seems to me that there are ways of saving us. . . .

Who knows whether God won't decide that the same should happen to our states as happens to bodies that are purged and restored to a better condition by long and grievous maladies that bring to them a clearer and fuller health than what they took away?

What gets me down most is that when I count up the symptoms of our malady, I find as many natural ones—as many sent by Heaven and due to it alone—as ones brought

by our disorder and imprudence. ^[C] It seems that the very stars ordain that we have lasted long enough beyond the normal term. And something else that gets me down is this: the most immediate evil that threatens us is not •change for the worse within the whole solid lump but (our ultimate dread) •its coming apart, falling into pieces.

•FEAR OF MEMORY-LOSS•

^[B] In these ramblings of mine, what I fear is that my treacherous memory should make me inadvertently record something twice. I hate going over my writings, and only unwillingly reread something that has been cut loose from myself. Now, I am not bringing in here anything that I have just learned; these are •my• normal ideas. Having perhaps thought of them a hundred times, I am afraid that I may have already mentioned them. Repetition is boring everywhere, even in Homer, but it is ruinous in works that only make a superficial and passing impression. I hate •repetitive• instruction, even in useful things, as in Seneca, ^[C] and I dislike the practice of his stoic school of repeating copiously and at length, for each individual subject, the principles and postulates that apply over-all, always restating their their common and universal reasons.

^[B] My memory is growing cruelly worse every day: 'As though my parched throat had drunk long draughts of the forgetful waters of Lethe' [Horace]. From now on—for nothing has gone wrong so far, thank God—whereas others seek time and opportunity to think over what they have to say, I shall have to avoid any preparation for fear of assuming an obligation that I shall have to rely on. I get lost when I am under an obligation, as I do when I rely on an instrument as feeble as my memory.

I never read the following story without indignation and a personal and natural resentment.

Lyncestes was accused of conspiring against Alexander. On the day that he was brought to appear before the army, as was customary, to be heard in his defence, he had in his head a prepared speech of which, hesitating and stammering, he pronounced a few words. As he became more and more confused, fumbling and struggling with his memory, he was struck dead by blows from the pikes of the soldiers nearest him, who regarded him as convicted. His confusion and his silence was to them as good as a confession: he had plenty of time in prison to prepare himself, it was not his memory that was defective, they thought, but a case of guilt bridling his tongue and making him so feeble.

What a splendid argument! Even when a man merely aims to speak well, he can be dazed by the place, the audience and their expectations. What can he do when it is a speech his life depends on?

For my part, the mere fact of being tied down to what I have to say makes me lose hold of it. When I have wholly committed and entrusted myself to my memory, I lean on it so heavily that I overwhelm it: it takes fright at its load. As long as I rely on it, I place myself outside myself, till I risk fumbling and stumbling. Some days I was hard put it to hide the slavery ·to a prepared speech· in which I was bound, whereas my plan in speaking is always to display extreme carelessness and ·seemingly· casual and unprepared gestures arising from the actual circumstances. For I would as soon •say nothing worthwhile as •show that I have come prepared to make a fine speech—something especially unbecoming for people in my ·military· profession. . . .

I have promised myself never again to accept the task of speaking in formal situations. As for reading from a prepared script, that is not only a monstrosity but greatly to the

disadvantage of those who by nature are capable of managing something impromptu. And as for throwing myself on the mercy of my improvisation, that is even less acceptable: my powers of improvisation are stolid and confused and could never respond to sudden emergencies of any consequence.

·IMPERFECTIONS IN THE *Essays*·

Reader: just let this tentative essay, this third prolongation of my self-portrait, run its course. I add but I do not correct. **a** Firstly, if someone has peddled his work to the world, he no longer—it seems to me—has any rights over it. Let him express himself better elsewhere, if he can, not adulterate the work he has already sold. From such people—i.e. ones who keep wanting to improve their work—nothing should be bought until after they are dead. Let them think about it carefully before publishing. Who is hurrying them?

^[C] My book **is always one**; except that at each reprinting, so that the purchaser won't go away quite empty-handed, I allow myself to tack on some additional ornaments, as though it were merely a piece of badly joined marquetry. That is no more than a little extra thrown in, which does not condemn the original version. . . .

^[B] **b** Secondly, I am afraid of losing by a 'correction'. My understanding does not always go forwards; it goes backwards too. I distrust my present thoughts hardly less than my past ones, and my second or third thoughts hardly less than my first. We often 'correct' ourselves as stupidly as we 'correct' others. ^[C] I first published in the year 1580; in the long stretch of time since then I have grown old but not an inch wiser. Myself now and myself at some other time **are certainly two**, but I have nothing to say about which of the two is better. It would be fine to be old if we travelled only towards improvement. ·But in fact· it is a drunkard's progress, formless, staggering, like reeds that

the wind shakes as it fancies, haphazardly. . . .

[B] The approval of the public has made me a little bolder than I expected; but what I most fear is to surfeit my readers. I would rather irritate them than bore them, as a learned man of my time has done. Praise is always pleasing, from whomever and for whatever reason it comes; but to get genuine delight from it one needs to discover its cause: even defects have ways of finding favour. Common folk rarely make good choices, and in my own time I am mistaken if it is not the worst books that get the best share of popular favour. I am indeed grateful to those honest men [see Glossary] who deign to take my feeble efforts in good part.

Nowhere are defects of style more obvious than when the subject-matter itself has little to commend it. Do not blame me, reader, for the faults that slip in here through the caprice or carelessness of others; each hand, each workman, contributes his own. I do not concern myself with the spelling (merely telling them to follow the old style), or with punctuation: I am expert in neither. When they—my editors—completely destroy my meaning, that does not worry me over-much, for at least they relieve me of some responsibility; but when (as so often happens) they substitute a false meaning and twist me to their own opinion, they ruin me. However, when the thought does not measure up to my standard, an honest man should reject it as not mine. Anyone who knows how little I like to work, and how far I am cast in my own mould, will easily believe that I would rather •dictate as many essays again than •subject myself to going through these ones again to make schoolboy corrections.

. . . . •In my circumstances•, not only am I a deprived of

close contact with people whose *mœurs* and opinions differ from mine and unite them by a bond that allows no other, but also b I am not free from danger among people who think that all deeds are equally lawful, most of whom are prone to the extreme degree of licentiousness because their standing with regard to the law could not be made worse.¹ When I add up all the details that concern me, I find that there is no man hereabouts to whom the defence of our laws costs more than it costs me, 'in gains forgone or damages incurred' (as the law-clerks say). . . .

My house is always open, easily accessible and at anyone's service—

for I have never let myself be persuaded to turn it into a tool for war, which I take part in most willingly when it is furthest from my neighbourhood

—so it has deserved a good deal of popular affection, making it hard •for anyone• to challenge me on my own dunghill. And I think it is a wonderful and exemplary achievement that it is still virgin of blood and pillage, during so long a storm and so many upheavals and changes in the neighbourhood. For, to tell the truth, a man of my disposition could have escaped any constant and continued form of danger; but the conflicting invasions and incursions, and the alternations and vicissitudes of fortune around me, have up to now hardened the temper of the local people rather than softening it, and burdened me with insurmountable dangers and hardships.

•AVOIDING PERSONAL OBLIGATIONS•

I escape, but it displeases me that I do so by fortune, and indeed by my prudence, rather than by justice; it displeases me to be outside the safeguard of the laws and under any

¹ [This sentence reflects the facts that a Montaigne, a catholic, lived surrounded by protestants, and b his locality was the scene of much violence in the long-running civil war.]

protection other than theirs. As things stand, I live more than half by the favour of others, which is a harsh obligation. I do not want to owe my safety to the •bounty and good-will of great men who allow me my legality and liberty, or to the affable *mœurs* of my forebears and of myself. For what if I had been different? And if my conduct and the frankness of my dealings do impose obligations on my neighbours or their allies, there is cruelty in their being able to pay off this debt by •letting me stay alive and •being able to say: 'We allow him ^[C] to continue freely to have divine service in the chapel of his house, now that we have pillaged and smashed all the neighbouring churches; and ^[B] to keep his property and his life, since he protects our wives and our cattle when the need arises.' . . .

Now, I maintain that we ought to live by right and authority, not by ^[C] reward and ^[B] favour. So many gallant men have preferred to lose their life rather than to owe it to anyone! I avoid submitting myself to any sort of obligation, but especially to any that binds me by a debt of honour. For me nothing is as expensive as **a** what is *given* to me and for which my will remains mortgaged under the title of gratitude; I prefer to receive **b** services that are for sale. And rightly so: for **b** the latter I give only money: for **a** the others I give myself. The tie that binds me by the laws of honour seems to me tighter and more oppressive than the tie of civil constraint. A notary ties me down more gently than I do myself. Is it not reasonable that my conscience should be much more firmly bound when anyone has simply *trusted* it. In other cases my fidelity owes nothing, for nothing has been lent to it; let them seek help from the trust and security they have taken independently of me. I would much rather break the restrictions of walls or of laws than those of my word.

^[C] I am scrupulous to the point of superstition in keeping my promises; I prefer to make them uncertain and condi-

tional, whatever they are about. To ones that don't *have* weight I *give* weight by jealous regard for my rule, which torments and burdens me on its own account. Yes, even in undertakings in which I alone am concerned, when I say what I plan to do it seems to me that I have ordered myself to carry it out, and that by letting others into the know I have imposed it on myself. It seems to me that when I *say* what I'll do I *promise* to do it. That is why I do not give much wind of my projects.

^[B] The sentence I pass on myself is sharper and stiffer than that of the judges. They consider me only with respect to common obligation; the grip of my conscience is tighter and more severe. I am lax in performing duties that would be forced on me if I did not accept them voluntarily. ^[C] 'Even a just action is just only in so far as it is voluntary' [Cicero]. ^[B] If the deed has none of the splendour of freedom it has neither grace nor honour. 'You will not easily get me to do what the law says I must' [Terence]. When necessity compels me, I like to slacken my will, 'because when anything is commanded, gratitude is given to the one who issues the order not the one who obeys it' [Valerius Maximus]. I know some who follow this vein to the point of injustice; they would rather give than give back, would rather lend than repay, doing good most meanly to those to whom they are most beholden. I do not go that far, but I get close to it.

I am so fond of throwing off burdens and obligations that I have sometimes counted as profit the ingratitude, affronts and indignities that I had received from people to whom I owed—by nature or accident—some duty of affection, taking their offence as so much towards the settling and discharge of my debt. Although I continue to pay them the courtesies that society requires, I find it a great saving ^[C] to do for justice what I used to do for affection and ^[B] to alleviate a little of the inward stress and anxiety of my will—

^[C] 'Wise men should stop a rush of benevolence as they would a runaway chariot' [^[C]Cicero]

—^[B] which, when I yield to it, is rather too impulsive and pressing, at least for a man who wishes never to be under any pressure; and this economy ·with my friendship· somewhat consoles me for the imperfections of those who are in contact with me. I am really sorry they are less worthy of my friendship; still, in this way I am spared something of my diligence and engagement towards them.

I approve of a man who loves his son less if he is mangy or hunchbacked—

not merely when he is wicked but also when he is ill-favoured and ill-born (for God himself has taken off that much of his natural value and estimation)

—provided he bears himself in his coolness towards him with moderation and scrupulous fairness. In my case, closeness of relationship does not lighten defects; it makes them worse.

After all that, insofar as I understand the subtle and most useful science of beneficence and gratitude, I see no-one more free and under less obligation than I am so far. What I owe, I owe to ordinary and natural obligations. These is no-one more absolutely clear of any others: 'The gifts of powerful men are unknown to me' [^[C]Virgil]. Princes ^[C] give me plenty if they take nothing from me, and ^[B] do me enough good if they do me no harm. That is all I ask of them. Oh, how obliged I am to God that it was his pleasure that I should receive all I have directly from his grace, and that all my debt should be to him alone! ^[C] How earnestly I beseech his holy mercy that I may never owe a fundamental 'Thank you' to any man! Blessed freedom, which has guided me thus far! May it continue to the end!

^[B] I try to have no express need of anyone. . . . This is something that anyone can do for himself, but it is easier for those whom God has protected from urgent natural

necessities. It is pitiful and hazardous to depend on someone else. Even our own selves (which are our most proper and secure resource) do not provide adequate security. I own nothing but myself, and even my possession of that is partly defective and borrowed. I cultivate myself—^[C] both my fortune and (the stronger assistant) my courage—^[B] so as to find there the wherewithal to satisfy me if everything else should abandon me. ^[C] Hippias of Elis not only

- furnished himself with learning, so as to be able in case of need to withdraw cheerfully from all other company into the lap of the Muses, and
- learned philosophy, so as to teach his soul to be content with itself, manfully doing without all external goods when fate so ordains; but also
- carefully learned to be his own cook and barber, to make his own clothes, shoes and rings, so as to be as self-sufficient as he could and to escape from dependence on outside help.

^[B] One enjoys more freely and cheerfully the use of borrowed goods when one's enjoyment of them is not forced and constrained by necessity, and one has in one's **a** will and one's **b** fortune the **a** strength and the **b** means to do without them.

^[C] I know myself well, but it is hard for me to imagine anyone's liberality so pure, any hospitality so free and genuine, that it would not seem to me ill-favoured, tyrannical and stained with reproach if I had become involved in it out of necessity. Just as giving is an ambitious quality, so also receiving is a quality of subordination. . . . [He gives two examples of monarchs who were angered when gifts were brought to them.]

. . . .A man I see so freely making use of one and all, and putting himself under obligation to them, would not do this if he weighed the bond of an obligation as carefully as a

wise man should: perhaps it is sometimes paid, but it is never dissolved. Cruel fetters for anyone who likes to give his freedom elbow-room in all directions.

Those who know me, both above and below me, know whether they have ever seen a man less demanding of others. If I am like that beyond all modern examples, that is no great marvel, since many elements in my *mœurs* contribute to it:

- a little natural pride,
- inability to endure refusal,
- limitedness of my desires and designs,
- clumsiness in any kind of business, and
- idleness and freedom (my very favourite qualities).

All that has given me a mortal hatred of being obliged *to* or *through* anyone but myself. Before I avail myself of someone else's kindness, whether in a trivial matter or an important one, I make vigorous use of every means of doing without it. My friends upset me greatly when they ask me to ask a favour *for them* from a third person. It seems to me hardly less expensive to *release someone who is indebted to me by using him than* *than to bind myself for my friends' sake to a man who owes me nothing.* But I am easily accessible to each man's need, so long as it doesn't *involve asking others for help or* *put me to trouble and care* (for I have declared war to the death against all care).

[B] But my desire to give is not as intense as my desire not to receive, which Aristotle says is the easier choice. My fortune has not allowed me to do much good to others, and the little it has allowed me it has been directed to the very poor. If it had brought me into the world to hold some rank among men, I would have been ambitious to make myself loved, not to make myself feared or admired. Shall I express it more plainly? I would have been as much concerned to please people as to do them any good. . . .

What I mean to say, then, is that if we must owe some-

thing it should be

- by a more legitimate title than the one I am speaking of now, to which I am held by the law of this wretched war, and
- not for the overwhelming debt of our entire preservation.

I have gone to bed in my own home a thousand times thinking that someone would betray and kill me that night, bargaining with fortune that it—*my death*—should not be terrifying or long drawn-out. And after reciting the Lord's Prayer I have exclaimed, 'Shall a godless soldier possess these well-tilled fields?' [Virgil]

What remedy is there? I was born in this place and so were most of my ancestors; they set on it their love and their name. We become hardened to everything we are accustomed to. And in wretched circumstances such as ours, becoming-accustomed is a most kindly gift of nature, one that deadens our sense of suffering many evils.

Civil wars are worse than other wars because they put each man on sentry-guard in his own home. 'How pitiful it is to protect one's life by gates and walls, and to be scarcely safe in one's own home!' [Ovid] It is a great extremity to be hard-pressed even in one's own house, in the quiet of one's home. The region where I live is always the first and the last in the battles of our troubled times; peace never shows its full face there: 'Even in time of peace they tremble for fear of war' [Ovid] 'Whenever fortune strikes at peace, that is the road to war. It would have been better, fortune, if you had settled me in the remote east or in nomads' tents in the frozen north' [Lucan].

Sometimes I find in nonchalance and laxity a way of strengthening myself against such reflections; they too, to some extent, lead us toward fortitude. It often happens that I await mortal dangers with some pleasure; I plunge head

down, stupidly, without thinking about it or recognising it, as if into some silent dark deep that swallows me up at one jump and in an instant overwhelms me with a powerful sleep entirely lacking any sensation or suffering. And what I foresee as the consequence of those short and violent ·imagined· deaths consoles me more than the reality of death disturbs me. ^[C] (Life, they say, is no better for being long: death is better for not being so.) ^[B] I do not shrink from being dead as much as I become reassured about dying. I wrap myself up and nestle during the storm that must with a sudden and numbing attack blind me and sweep me away in its frenzy. . . .

^[C] Robbers, of their courtesy, have no particular grudge against me. Do I have any against them? I would have to hate too many people! Through different kinds of fortune, similar consciences harbour similar cruelty, treachery and robbery; and it is all the worse when it is more cowardly, more secure and dark, in the shadow of the laws. I hate open injustice less than treacherous injustice, warlike less than peaceful. Our fever has occurred in a body that is hardly the worse for it: the fire was there, the flames have sprung up; the noise is greater, the evil little greater.

·BACK TO REASONS FOR TRAVELLING·

^[B] When I am asked the reason for my travels, I usually reply that I know what I am escaping but not what I am looking for. If I am told that there may be just as little soundness among foreigners and that their *mœurs* are no better than ours, I reply that that is not easy, ‘There being so many shapes of wickedness! [Virgil]; and that there is always gain in exchanging a bad state for an uncertain one, and that the ills of others should not sting us as our own do.

I do not want to forget this, that I never rebel so much against France that I don’t look with a friendly eye on Paris:

it has had my heart since boyhood. And it has happened to me with •Paris—as it does with ·other· excellent things—the more beautiful other towns I have seen since, the more •its beauty gains power over my affections. I love it for itself, more in its essence than overloaded with irrelevant ornaments. I love it tenderly, even its warts and stains. It is only this great city that makes me a Frenchman ·as distinct from a Gascon·; a city great in population, great in its the felicity of its ·geographical· situation, but above all great and incomparable in the variety and diversity of the good things of life—the glory of France and one of the world’s noblest ornaments. May God drive our divisions far from it! When it is entire and united, I think, Paris is safe from other violence. I warn it that of all parties the worst will be the one that brings discord into Paris itself. I fear nothing for it but itself. And I certainly fear as much for it as for any other part of this state. As long as Paris endures, I shall not lack a retreat where I can withstand those barkings that assail me, sufficient to make me lose any regret for any other retreat.

Not because Socrates said it but because it really is my feeling (perhaps excessively so): I consider all men as my compatriots, embracing a Pole as I do a Frenchman, giving this national bond second place after the universal and common one. I am scarcely infatuated with the sweetness of my native air. Acquaintanceships that are entirely new and entirely mine seem to me to be worth quite as much as those other common chance acquaintanceships of the neighbourhood. Friendships purely of our own achievement normally outweigh those to which we are bound by sameness of climate or of blood. Nature launched us free and unfettered; we imprison ourselves in certain narrow districts. . . .

^[C] What Socrates did at the end of his life—considering a sentence of exile against him worse than a sentence of death—was something I don’t think I shall ever be so broken

or so strictly accustomed to my country as to do. These heaven-marked lives have plenty of **a** traits that I embrace more with esteem than with affection. They also have other **b** traits so lofty and extraordinary that I cannot embrace them even with esteem, because I cannot understand them. That was a very fastidious attitude in a man who considered the whole world his city! It is true that he despised wanderings and had hardly set foot outside territory of Attica. What are we to say about **•**his sparing his friends' money with which they would have saved his life, and **•**his refusal to escape from prison by the intervention of others, so as not to disobey the laws at a time when they were so thoroughly corrupt? Those examples fall into **a** my first category; there are others to be found in this same person that fall into **b** my second one. Many of these rare examples surpass **a** my power of action, but some surpass even **b** my power of judgement.

^[B] [Picking up from '... in certain narrow districts.'] In addition to such reasons, travel seems to me to be a profitable exercise. It keeps **•**the soul constantly exercised in observing new and unknown things; and (as I have often said) I know of no better school for forming one's life than to set before it constantly the variety found in so many other lives, ideas and customs, and to taste the perpetual variety in the forms of our nature. **•**The body is neither idle nor over-worked; the moderate exercise keeps it in good trim.

Even suffering from the stone [see Glossary] as I do, I stay in the saddle—without dismounting and without pain [or 'without boredom']—for eight or ten hours, 'Strength beyond the lot of old age' [Virgil]. No weather is inimical to me except the harsh heat of a blazing sun, for those parasols that Italy has used since the ancient Romans burden the arm more than they disburden the head. ^[C]I would like to know how much work it took for the Persians, so long ago at the very

birth of luxury, to produce at will cool winds and patches of shade, as Xenophon says they did. ^[B]I like rain and mud like a duck. Change of air and weather does not disturb me; to me all skies are alike. The only things that assail me are the internal troubles that I produce in myself, and they occur less during my travels.

It is hard to get me moving, but once I have started I will go on as far as I am wanted to. I balk at little undertakings as much as at big ones, at preparations for a day-trip to visit a neighbour as much as at preparations for a real journey. I have learned to do each day's journey in the Spanish style, all in one stage—long but reasonable stages—and when it is extremely hot I travel by night, from sunset to sunrise. (The other way—stopping to eat en route, in chaos and haste over your post-house dinner—is disagreeable, especially when the days are drawing in.) My horses are the better for it. No horse that could get through the first day's journey with me has ever let me down. I water them everywhere, merely taking care that there's enough road left for them to work it off. My laziness about getting up gives my attendants time to eat at their ease before we set off. I myself never dine very late. Appetite comes to me only with eating; except at table I never feel hungry.

Some people complain at my pleasure in continuing this practice, married and old as I am. They are wrong. The best time to leave your family is after you have set it on course to proceed without you, when you have left it in an order that does not belie its former character. It is far more imprudent to go off leaving your home in charge of a less reliable protectress who will take less trouble to provide for your needs. The most useful science and honourable occupation for a wife is the science of housekeeping. I know some who are thrifty but few who are good managers. Yet to be one is a wife's chief virtue, the one we should look for first

as the only dowry, the one that will save our households or ruin them. [C] Don't lecture me about this! Experience has taught me to seek one virtue above all others in a married woman: the virtue of sound housekeeping. [B] I put my wife in a position to exercise this when by my absence I leave the government of my house in her hands. It irritates me to see in many households Monsieur coming home about noon, all grimy and tetchy from the mill of business, while Madame is still in her dressing-room, dolling herself up and doing her hair. That is for queens to do—and I am not sure even about that. It is ridiculous and unfair that our wives should be maintained in idleness by our sweat and toil. [C] No-one, if I can help it, will have a more serene enjoyment of my goods than I do, one more more quiet and more free [*plus quiete et plus quitte.*] [B] If the husband provides the matter, nature itself wills that the wives provide the form.

As for the duties of marital love that are thought to be infringed by such absences, I do not believe it. On the contrary, it is a relationship that is readily cooled by too continuous a presence and is harmed by assiduity. Every strange woman strikes us as charming. And every man knows from experience that seeing each other all the time cannot match the pleasure of parting and coming together at intervals. [C] These interruption fill me with a fresh love for my family and restore me to a more agreeable use of my home. Alternation warms my appetite now for the one choice, now for the other.

[B] I know that friendship [see Glossary] has arms long enough to be held and joined from one end of the world to the other; and especially this kind—marital love—where there is a continuous exchange of services that reawaken the bond and memory of it. . . .

Enjoyment—possession—belongs mainly to the mind. [C] It more ardently and continuously embraces whatever it looks

for than anything we actually have at hand. Note how you spend your time every day: you will find that you are most absent from your friend when he is present to you: his presence relaxes your attention and gives your thoughts freedom to absent themselves at any time, for any reason. [B] From the distance of Rome, for example, I keep and control my household and the goods I have left there. Just as when I am there, I know within an inch or two how my walls, my trees or my rents are growing or declining. . . .

If we enjoy only things that we touch, then goodbye to our golden sovereigns when they are in our money-chests, and to our sons when they are out hunting. We want them nearer. In the garden: is that *far*? Is half a day's journey *far*? What about ten leagues? Is that *far* or *near*? If *near*, what about eleven leagues, twelve, thirteen and so on, step by step? Truly, if any wife can lay down for her husband how many steps take him to the end of *near* and how many take him to the start of *far*, I think she should make him stop somewhere in between. . . . [Then a passage, with quotations from Horace and Virgil, about the impossibility of precision in such matters, e.g. delimiting much and little, long and short, light and heavy, near and far.]

[B] Are they not still wives and mistresses of the dead, who are not at the end of this world but in the other world? We embrace not only our absent ones but also those who *have* existed or *will* exist. When we married each other, we did not contract to be continuously harnessed to one another. . . . [C] And a wife should not have her eyes so greedily fixed on her husband's front that when the need arises she cannot bear to see his back.

[B] This jest from a most excellent portrayer of their humours might be in place here, to describe the cause of their complaints: 'If you are late coming home, your wife assumes that you are in love with somebody, or somebody

with you, or drinking, or following your inclination; that you are having a good time without her while she feels miserable.’ [Terence] Or might it not be that opposition and contradiction are themselves meat and drink to them, and that they are comfortable enough provided they make you uncomfortable?

In a true friendship [see Glossary]—which I have experienced—I give myself to my friend rather than drawing him to me.¹ I like doing him good better than having him do me good; but I would also rather have him doing good to himself than to me; he does me most good when he does himself good. If his absence is pleasant or useful to him, it is much sweeter to me than his presence; and it is not strictly *absence* when there is a way of keeping in touch. I used to get advantages and pleasure from our separation. By going our separate ways we possessed life more fully and widely. It was for me that he lived and saw and enjoyed things, and I for him, as fully as if he had been there. One part remained idle when we were together; we were merged into one. Being in different places made the union of our wills richer. This insatiable hunger for physical presence reveals a certain weakness in the enjoyment of souls.

As for my old age, which they bring against me, it is for *youth* to be enslaved by common opinions, restraining itself for the sake of others. Youth can provide for itself and for others; it is all that *we* can do to provide merely for ourselves. To the extent that natural comforts fail us, let us sustain ourselves by artificial ones. It is unfair to excuse youth for following its pleasures while forbidding old age to look for any. [C] Young, I covered my playful passions with prudence; old, I disperse my gloomy ones by dissipation. Though the Platonic laws forbid *foreign* travel before the age of 40 or 50, so as to make the travel more useful and instructive, I

would more readily agree to the second article in those same laws, which prohibits it after 60.

[B] ‘But at your age you will never return from such a long road.’ What do I care? I do not set out on it either to return from it or to complete it. I set out merely to keep on the move while moving pleases me. . . . My itinerary can be interrupted anywhere; it is not based on great hopes; each day’s journey brings it to a *possible* end. My life’s journey is conducted the same way. Yet I have seen enough far-off places where I would have liked to be detained. And why not, if so many men of the surliest sect [i.e. the stoics]—Chrysippus, Cleanthes, Diogenes, Zeno and Antipater—abandoned their homeland, having no cause to complain of it but merely wanting to enjoy a different atmosphere? Indeed what most displeases me in my wanderings is that I cannot accompany them with a resolution to settle down wherever I please, and that I must always be thinking of returning home so as to conform to common attitudes.

If I were to afraid of dying anywhere but where I was born—if I thought I would die less at my ease when far from my family—I would scarcely go out of France, and would be afraid to go out of my parish. I feel death continually, clutching at my throat or my loins. But I am made differently: death is the same for me anywhere. If I were to allowed to choose I would, I think, rather than dying in my bed die in the saddle, away from home and far from my own folk.

·TREATMENT OF THE DYING·

Taking leave of one’s friends involves more heartbreak than consolation. I willingly neglect that social duty, for of all the offices of friendship it is the only displeasing one; and I would equally willingly forgo making that great eternal farewell. Although some advantage may be drawn from the

¹ [Montaigne is thinking here of his love for Étienne de La Boétie; see page 29 above, and essay 28 in Book I.]

presence of others, there are a hundred disadvantages. I have seen many men die most wretchedly, besieged by all this throng; they are suffocated by the crowd. It is undutiful (·they think·), and a sign of slight care and affection, to let you die in peace! Someone torments your eyes, another your ears, another your mouth; you have no sense or bodily part that they are not badgering. Your heart is racked with pity at hearing the lamentations of those who love you, and perhaps with anger at hearing other lamentations, feigned and hypocritical. Anyone who has always had fastidious tastes has them still more when he is weak. In such great straits he needs a gentle hand, suited to his feelings, to scratch him precisely where he itches. Otherwise he should not be touched. If we need a 'wise-woman' [meaning 'midwife'] to bring us into this world, we need an even wiser man to get us out of it. . . .

I have not reached the disdainful vigour that fortifies itself and that nothing can help, nothing disturb. I am a peg below that. Not from fear but by design, I want to burrow and hide as I pass away. It is not my intention to test or to display my constancy during that action. For whom would I be doing that? That time will bring to an end all my right to reputation and all my concern for it. I am satisfied with a collected, calm and solitary death, entirely my own, in keeping with my retiring and private life. Contrary to Roman superstition, which held a man to be wretched if he died without speaking and without his closest kinsfolk to close his eyes, I have enough to do to console myself without having to console others; enough thoughts in my mind without getting new ones from my circumstances; enough matter to ponder on without borrowing it. Dying is not a role for society; it is a scene with one character. Let us live and laugh among our own folk, and die and scowl among strangers. You will find, if you pay for it, someone who will turn your head and

massage your feet, who will not attend to you more than you want—showing you an unconcerned face and letting you reflect and lament in your own way.

Every day I argue myself out of that peurile and inhuman frame of mind that makes us want our misfortunes to arouse compassion and mourning in our friends. To bring on their tears we exaggerate our troubles. And the steadfastness in supporting ill-fortune that we praise in all men we condemn and reproach in our near and dear when the ill-fortune is ours. We are not content with their *sympathising with* our ills unless they are also *afflicted by* them.

We should spread joy, but cut back sadness as much as we can. ^[C] He who evokes pity without reason will not be pitied when there is reason for it. To be always lamenting for oneself is the way never to be lamented ·by anyone else· . . . He who acts dead when he is living is apt to be treated as alive when he is dying. I have seen some ·invalids· •become irritated when they were told they had a healthy colour and a regular pulse, •restrain their laughter because it would betray that they were cured, and •hate good health because it aroused no compassion. And these are not women that I'm talking about!

^[B] I present my maladies, at most, just as they are, and I avoid words of foreboding and contrived exclamations. If not cheerfulness, at least a composed countenance is appropriate for those attending a wise man who is ill. He does not pick a quarrel with health just because he sees himself to be in the opposite condition; he delights in contemplating others' having strong and whole good health, at least enjoying it by association. He does not reject all thoughts of life or avoid ordinary conversation, just because he feels himself sinking. I want to study illness when I am well; when it is present, it makes a real enough impact without help from my imagination. . . .

·MONTAIGNE'S OPENNESS ABOUT HIMSELF·

I realise that there is an unexpected benefit from going public about my *mœurs*, ·as I do here·: to some extent it serves me as a rule. Sometimes the thought comes over me that I should not prove disloyal to the story of my life. This public disclosure obliges me to stick to my path and not falsify the picture of my qualities, which are on the whole less disfigured and distorted than might be expected from the malice and distemper of present-day judgements. The consistency and simplicity of my *mœurs* produce an outward appearance that is easy to interpret; but because the manner of ·my account of· it is rather novel and unusual, it gives slander too easy a time. Yet anyone who wanted to criticise me honestly would, it seems to me, find in my known and admitted imperfections plenty to get his teeth into and to satisfy him without fencing with the wind. If it seems to him that by getting in first with accusations and revelations I have made his bite toothless, it is reasonable that he should •exercise his right of amplification and extension (attack has rights beyond justice) and •take the defects whose roots in me I have revealed and magnify them into trees, using for this not only such defects as have a hold on me but also those that threaten me. Both in quality and quantity they are iniquitous; let him beat me with them.

[C] I would gladly follow the example of Bion the philosopher, whom Antigonus was trying to provoke on the subject of his origins. He cut him short and retorted:

‘I am the son of a butcher—a branded slave—and of a prostitute whom my father married because of the baseness of his fortune. Both were punished for some misdeed. When I was a child an orator found me attractive and bought me. When he died he left me all his possessions. I transferred them here to Athens and devoted myself to philosophy. Biographers need

not struggle to get information about me; I will tell them how things stand.

Free and generous confession weakens reproach and disarms slander.

[B] Yet it seems that—all in all—I am as often praised as dispraised beyond reason; just as it seems to me that I have since my youth been given a degree of rank and honour above rather than below what I am entitled to. [C] I would feel more at ease in a land where such rankings were either regulated or despised. Among men, as soon as an argument about the order of precedence in processions or seating goes beyond three replies, it is uncivil. To avoid such churlish disputes I am never afraid to take or yield precedence unjustly; no man has ever challenged my right to go first without my yielding precedence to him.

[B] In addition to this profit that I derive from writing about myself, there is another that I hope for, namely that my humours happen to please and suit some worthy man before I die, and he tries to bring us together. I am meeting him more than half-way, since all that he could have gained from many years of intimacy with me he could get more reliably and minutely in three days from the present account.

[C] A pleasing fancy: many things that I would not tell to any individual man I tell to the public, and for knowledge of my most secret thoughts I refer my most loyal friends to a bookseller's stall! . . .

[B] If on equally good evidence I knew a man who was right for me I would certainly go far to find him, for in my opinion the sweetness of well-matched and compatible fellowship can never cost too dear. . . .

·BACK TO THE TOPIC OF DYING·

[Picking up from ‘lament in your own way.’ on page 109]. To get back to my theme: So there is no great evil in dying far off and

alone. [C] Indeed we reckon that it is a duty to seek seclusion for natural functions less unsightly and less repulsive than that one. [B] But also those who are reduced by their sufferings to drag out a long existence ought perhaps not to wish to burden a large family with their misery. [C] That is why the Indians in one province thought it right to kill anyone who had fallen into such distress; in another province they abandoned him alone, to save himself as best he could.

[B] Is there anyone who does not find them—i.e. those who are dying in a long-drawn-out way—in the end an intolerable burden? Ordinary duties do not extend that far. Inevitably you teach cruelty to those who love you best, hardening your wife and children by long habit not to feel or pity your afflictions any longer. The groans of my colic [see Glossary] paroxysms no longer cause emotion in anyone. And even if we were to derive some pleasure from their company, . . . is it not too much to take advantage of this for an entire age? The more I saw them generously constraining themselves for my sake, the more I would regret the trouble they were taking. We have a right to lean on others, but not to lie so heavily on top of them, supporting ourselves by their collapse. Like that man who had little boys' throats slit so as to use their blood to cure an illness of his, or like that other man who was supplied with young girls to warm his old limbs at night and to mingle the sweetness of their breath with the heavy sourness of his own. As an asylum for such a condition and so feeble an existence I would prescribe myself Venice.

[C] Decrepitude is a solitary quality. I am sociable to the point of excess; yet it seems reasonable to me that henceforth I should withdraw my troublesome self from the sight of the world and brood over it by myself, shrinking and retiring into my shell like a tortoise. . . . It is time to turn my back on company.

[B] 'But on such a long journey you will have to stop

miserably in a hovel where you will lack everything.' I carry with me most of the things I need. Anyway, we cannot escape fortune if it undertakes to attack us. I need nothing extraordinary when I am ill; what nature cannot do for me I do not want to be done by a pill. At the very onset of any fever or sickness that strikes me down, while I am still in one piece and almost healthy, I reconcile myself to God by the last Christian rites; I find myself more free and unburdened, seeming to have achieved by them the upper hand over my illness. I have less need of lawyer and counsel than of doctors. If there is anything that I do not settle when in good health, don't expect me to settle it when I am ill. What I intend to do to prepare for my death is done already: I would not dare to put it off for one single day. . . .

·BACK TO THE TOPIC OF SELF-REVELATION·

I write my book for a few men and for a few years. If it had been on a lasting subject, it would have needed to be put in a more durable language. Judging from the constant changes of our own tongue up to the present, who can hope that its present form will be current fifty years from now?. . . .

That is why I am not afraid to put in several personal details that are useful only to men who are alive today, and that touch on things known by some folk who will see further into them than the general public can. When all is said and done, I do not want to have happen something that I often see troubling the memory of the dead, namely people debating

'This is how he thought'

'This is how he lived'

'If he had spoken when dying, he would have said. . . .'

' . . . he would have given. . . .'

'I knew him better than anyone else.'

Here in these essays I make known, as far as propriety allows, my feelings and inclinations; but I do so more freely

and readily by word of mouth to anyone who wants to know them. Nevertheless if you look into these memoirs, you will find that I have said everything or suggested everything. What I cannot express ·in words· I point to with my finger: ‘Those slight traces are enough for a keen mind, and will safely lead you to discover the rest’ [Lucretius]. About myself I leave nothing to be guessed at by people wanting to know. If people talk about me, I want them to do it truly and fairly. I would willingly come back from the next world to contradict anyone who portrayed me other than I was, even if he did it to honour me. (I know that even the living are spoken of otherwise than they really are.) If I had not with all my might come to the defence of a friend whom I had lost [La Boétie], they would have torn him into a thousand different appearances.

·DEATH AGAIN·

To finish talking of my foibles, I admit that I hardly ever arrive at my lodgings ·during my travels· without having the thought that I might fall ill and die there, comfortably. I want to be lodged in a place that I have entirely to myself, not noisy or dirty or smoky or stuffy. By these trivial details I try to humour death, or rather to relieve myself of all other impediments so that I can concentrate on death alone; it will weigh heavily enough on me without any other load. I want it to have a share in the ease and comfort of my life. Death forms a big part of it, an important one. . . .

Some forms of death are easier than others; death takes on qualities that differ according to each man’s way of thinking. Among natural deaths, the one that comes from enfeeblement and stupor seems to me gentle and pleasant. Among violent ones, I find it far harder to picture falling from a precipice than being crushed by a falling building, a piercing sword-thrust than a arquebuse shot; and I would

rather have drunk Socrates’ potion than stabbed myself like Cato. And although it is all one, my imagination feels as great a difference between throwing myself into a fiery furnace and into the channel of a shallow river as between death and life. So absurdly does our fear consider the means more than the result! It is only an instant, but it is of such gravity that I would willingly give several days of my life to go through it in my own way.

Since each man’s imagination finds more or less harshness in it, since each has some choice among ways of dying, let us try a little further to find one free from all unpleasantness. Might we not even make death luxurious, as did Antony and Cleopatra, those partners in death? I set aside the **a** harsh and **b** exemplary results produced by **a** philosophy and **b** religion. But among lesser men there have been some—like a certain Petronius and Tigillinus in Rome, who were required to kill themselves—who have put death to sleep, as it were, by the comfort of their preparations. They made it flow and glide past, amid the laxity of their customary pastimes, among girls and good companions; no talk of consolation, no mention of a will, no pretentious show of constancy, no conversation about their future state; but amidst games, feasts, jokes, common everyday conversation, music and love-poetry. Could we not imitate their resoluteness, with more decent behaviour?

Since there are deaths good for fools and deaths good for wise men, let us find some that are good for people in between. . . .

·MONTAIGNE’S CONDUCT AS A TRAVELLER·

[B] In my lodgings I do not look for grandiose size—I hate that, rather—but a certain simple rightness that is more often met in places where there is less artifice and which nature honours with a certain grace that is all its own. . . .

Moreover, it is for those whose business drags them up over the Grisons in midwinter to be ambushed by death on the road. I, who most often travel for my own pleasure, do not direct myself so badly. If it looks ugly to the right, I turn off to the left; if I find myself unfit to ride my horse, I stop. And in so doing I truly see nothing that is not as pleasant and comfortable as my home. It is true that I always find superfluity superfluous, and feel uneasy even amid delicacy and abundance.

Have I left something unseen behind me? I go back to it; it is still on my road. I follow no definite line, whether straight or crooked. Do I go to a place and not find there what I was told to expect? As others' judgements often do not agree with mine, and more prove to be wrong, I do not regret the trouble I have taken: I have learned *something* by it, namely that what they told me about is not there!

My physical disposition is as adaptable and my tastes as ordinary as those of any man in the world. The diversity of fashions between one nation and another affects me only with the pleasure of variety. Each usage has its reason. Let the dishes be

- pewter, wood or earthenware,
- boiled or roasted,
- butter or chestnut oil or olive oil,
- hot or cold;

it is all the same to me. . . .

[C] When I have been out of France and people have courteously inquired whether I want to eat French cooking, I have always laughed at the idea and hastened straight for the tables most crowded with foreigners. [B] I am ashamed at the sight of our Frenchmen besotted by that stupid disposition to shy away from fashions contrary to their own; once they

are out of their village it seems to them that they are out of their element. Wherever they go, they cling to their ways and abominate foreign ones. If they come across a fellow-Frenchman in Hungary, they celebrate this coincidence: see them rallying round and joining forces, condemning every custom in sight as barbarous. The customs are not French, so *of course* they are barbarous! And those are the abler ones, who have ·at least· noticed those customs, in order to abuse them. Most ·Frenchmen· go abroad only for the sake of returning home. They travel covered and wrapped in a taciturn and uncommunicative prudence, defending themselves from the contagion of an unknown atmosphere. . . .

I on the contrary, travel as one fed up with our customs, not looking for Gascons in Sicily—I have left enough of them at home! I rather look for Greeks or Persians. I make their acquaintance and study them. That is what I devote myself to and work on. And, what is more, I seem hardly ever to have come across any customs that are not worth as much as our own. I don't risk much ·by saying that·, for I have hardly been out of sight of my own weathercocks.¹

For the rest, most of the chance acquaintances that you meet on the road are more of a nuisance than a pleasure. I don't latch onto them, especially now when old age sets me somewhat alone and apart from the common ways. . . . It is a rare stroke of fortune, but inestimably comforting, to have as a travelling companion an honest man who has a sound understanding and *mœurs* that conform to your own. I have greatly missed one on all my travels. But such a companion must be selected and secured from the outset.

No pleasure has any savour for me without communication; no merry thought occurs to me without my being vexed at coming up with it when I am alone, with no-one to offer it

¹ [His travels were all confined to western Europe.]

to. ^[C] 'If wisdom were granted me on condition that I shut it away unspoken, I would reject it' [Seneca]. This other raised it a note higher: 'Supposing it were granted to a sage to live in every abundance, his time entirely free to study and reflect upon everything worth knowing; still, if his solitude were such that he could never see another man, he would abandon life' [Cicero]. . . .

·BACK TO REASONS FOR TRAVELLING·

^[B] 'Do you not have easier ways of spending your time? What do you lack? Isn't your house set in a fine healthy climate, adequately furnished and more than adequately spacious? ^[C] The King's majesty [Henry of Navarre] has stayed there more than once. ^[B] Aren't there many more families below yours in orderliness than ones above it in eminence? Is some extraordinary and indigestible domestic worry giving you an ulcer ('and which, rooted in your stomach, burns you and distresses you' [Ennius])? Where do you think you can ever be without fuss and bother? 'Fortune never sends unmixed blessings' [Quintus Curtius]. You should see that nobody is in your way but yourself, and that you will be sorry for yourself wherever you go, for there is no satisfaction here below except for souls like those of beasts or gods. If a man has no contentment when there is such a sound occasion for it, where can he expect to find it? How many thousands of men aim no higher than circumstances such as yours? Just reform *yourself*, for in that your power is unlimited; whereas in face of fortune you have no right but to endure. ^[C] There is no peace and quiet except what reason has contrived' [Seneca].

^[B] I see the reasonableness of such counsel, and see it very well; but it would have been quicker and more to the point simply to say to me '**Be wise!**' This resolution [i.e. the indented one above] lies on the other side of wisdom: wisdom makes it and produces it. Offering it is like a physician yelling at a wretched, languishing patient to be cheerful; he would be prescribing a little less stupidly if he said '**Be well!**' As for me, I am only a man of the lower sort. 'Be content with what is yours, i.e. with reason'—that is a salutary precept, definite and easy to understand; but the wisest men cannot put it into effect, any more than I can. It is a popular saying, but terribly far-reaching; what does it *not* cover? . . .

I am well aware that, taken strictly, this pleasure in travelling bears witness to restlessness and irresolution. Those are indeed our ruling and predominant qualities. Yes, I admit that I see nothing, even in a dream or a wish, to which I can hold fast. The only things that satisfy me are variety and the enjoyment of diversity—at least if anything satisfies me. When on my travels I am encouraged by the fact that I can stop without hindrance and have a place in which I can comfortably divert myself.

I love living a private life because I live it¹ by my own choice, not because of unfitness for a public one, which is perhaps just as well suited to my character. I serve my prince more cheerfully because I am doing so by the free choice of my judgement and of my reason, ^[C] without personal obligation, ^[B] and because I am not forced into his service by being unacceptable to all the other parties or disliked by them. Similarly with the rest. I hate the morsels that necessity carves for me. Any advantage I had to *depend on* would have me by the throat. 'Let me have one oar in the water, and with the other rake the shore' [Propertius].

¹ [The original has *je l'ayme* = 'I love it'; presumably a slip.]

A single cord never holds me in one place. 'There is vanity', you say, 'in this pastime ·of travelling·.' But where is there not? Those fine precepts are all vanity, and all wisdom is vanity. ^[C] 'The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain' [1 Corinthians 3.20]. ^[B] Those exquisite subtleties are only good for sermons; they are arguments that seek to drive us in harness into the next world. Life is material motion in the body, an activity that is by its very essence imperfect and irregular. I work to serve it on its own terms. . . . 'We must act so as not to oppose the universal laws of nature in general; but with these safeguarded, let us follow our own nature' [Cicero].

·HAUGHTY MORALISING·

^[B] What is the use of those high philosophical peaks on which no human being can settle and those rules that exceed our practice and our power? I often see patterns of life being proposed to us that neither the speaker nor the hearers have any hope of following or (what is more) any wish to follow. The judge filches a bit of the paper on which he has just written the sentence on an adulterer in order to send a billet-doux to the wife of a colleague. ^[C] Just after you have an illicit tumble with her, a woman will in your presence be screaming against a similar fault in her friend harsher condemnations than Portia would. ^[B] Some condemn men to death for crimes that they do not regard even as mistakes. When I was a youth I saw a fine gentleman offering to the public

- with one hand **a** verses excelling in beauty and licentiousness, and at the same moment
- with the other **b** the most quarrelsome work of theological reform that the world has feasted on for a long time.

[Theodore Beza, **a** erotic poet and **b** successor to Calvin.]

That is the way men behave; we let laws and precepts go their way; we take another way—not only because of unruly *mœurs* but often because of contrary opinion and judgement. Listen to a philosophical argument; its inventiveness, eloquence and relevance immediately strike your mind and move you; ·but· there is nothing there that tickles or pricks your conscience; the argument wasn't addressed to your conscience, was it? Yet Ariston said that neither a bath nor a lecture is any use unless it scrubs and cleanses. You can linger over the hide, but only after extracting the marrow, just as we examine the engravings and workmanship of a handsome cup only after drinking the wine it contained.

In all the barracks of the ancient philosophers you will find that a single author publishes rules for temperance and at the same time publishes works of love and debauchery. ^[C] And Xenophon wrote against Aristippus's sensuality, while lying in the lap of Clinias. ^[B] It's not that there was a miraculous conversion intermittently sweeping over them. Rather, it is that Solon presents himself at one time as **a** himself and at another as **b** a lawgiver, speaking at one time for **b** the crowd and at another for **a** himself; and for himself he adopts the free and natural rules, being certain of ·having· firm and entire ·moral· health. . . .

^[C] Antisthenes permits the sage to like and do in his own way anything that suits him, without heeding the laws, because he has a better judgement than the laws do and more knowledge of virtue. His disciple Diogenes said that we should counter perturbations by reason, fortune by confidence, nature by laws.

^[B] Delicate stomachs require strict artificial diets; ^[C] sound stomachs simply follow the prescriptions of their natural appetite, ^[B] as do our doctors who eat melons and drink new wine while requiring their patient to be restricted to syrups and slops.

'I know nothing of their books,' said Lais the courtesan, 'or of their wisdom and philosophy, but those fellows knock at my door as often as anyone.' Since our licentiousness always takes us beyond what is lawful and permitted, men have often made the precepts and laws for our lives stricter than universal reason requires. 'No-one thinks it's enough to break the rules only as much as he is allowed to' [Juvenal]

It would be better if there were more proportion between the command and the obedience; and a goal we cannot reach seems unfair. No man is so good that if he subjected all his deeds and thoughts to legal examination by the laws, he would not deserve hanging ten times in his life—even the kind of man whom it would be a very great loss and a very great injustice to punish and destroy. . . . And one who deserves no praise as a man of virtue [C] and whom philosophy could most justly cause to be flogged [B] may well break no laws, so confused and uneven is this relationship between law and virtue.

We have no wish to be good folk according to God; we cannot be so according to ourselves. Human wisdom has never lived up to the duties it has prescribed for itself; and if it had achieved that, it would have prescribed for itself more duties still, towards which it would continually strive and aspire, so hostile is our condition to consistency. [C] Man commands himself to be necessarily at fault. It is not very clever of him to tailor his obligations to the standards of a different kind of being. To whom is he prescribing what he expects no-one to do? Is it wrong of him not to do what it is impossible for him to do? The very laws that condemn us to be unable blame us for being unable.

[B] At worst, this deformed licence to present oneself in two aspects—actions in one fashion and speech in another—may

be conceded to those who tell of things; it cannot apply to those who tell of themselves as I do; I must go the same way with my pen as with my feet. Life in society should have some relation to other lives. Cato's virtue was excessively rigorous by the standards of his age; and in a man occupied in governing others and destined to serve the commonwealth, his justice could be said to be—if not downright unjust—at least vain and unseasonable. [C] My own *mœurs* deviate from current ones by hardly more than an inch, yet even that makes me somewhat shy and unsociable for this age. I do not know whether I am unreasonably disgusted with the world I frequent, but I am well aware that it *would* be unreasonable if I complained that the world was more disgusted with me than I am with it. [Here and below, the word 'disgust' may be too strong; the French *degousté*, could concern merely losing a taste for . . .]

·VIRTUE IN WORLDLY AFFAIRS·

[B] The virtue assigned to the world's affairs is a virtue with many folds, angles and elbows so that it can be made to fit human frailty; it is complex and artificial, not straight, clear-cut, constant, or purely innocent. To this very day our annals criticise one of our kings for allowing himself to be too naively influenced by the persuasions his confessor addressed to his conscience.¹ Affairs of state have bolder precepts: 'He who would be pious should quit the court' [Lucan].

In my private life I use, if not conveniently at least surely, opinions and rules of life that were born in me or instilled into me by education—rough, fresh, unpolished and unpolluted ones, constituting the virtue of a schoolboy or a novice. I once I tried to use these in the service of some public manoeuvrings, and found them to be inapplicable and dangerous. Anyone who walks in the crowd should step

¹ [Probably Henry II, whom the Cardinal de Lorraine persuaded to persecute the members of the Reformed Church.]

aside, squeeze in his elbows, step back or advance—even leave the straight path—according to what he encounters; he must live not so much by his norms but by those of others; not according to what he proposes but according to what is proposed to him, and according to the time, according to the men, according to the business.

[C] Plato says that anyone who escapes with clean breeches from the management of the world's affairs does so by a miracle. He also says that when he lays it down that his philosopher should be head of the government, he does not mean a corrupted government like that of Athens, much less ones like ours, faced with which wisdom itself would waste its Latin, Just as a herb transplanted into a soil ill-suited to its nature conforms itself to that soil rather than reforming the soil to suit itself.

[B] I am aware that if I had to prepare myself thoroughly for such occupations, I would need a great deal of change and remodelling. Even if I was able to do that to myself (and why couldn't I, given time and trouble?), I would not want to. From the little experience I have had in that profession, I am just that much disgusted with it. Sometimes I feel the fumes of certain temptations towards ambition arising in my soul, but I tense myself and obstinately resist. . . . I am hardly ever summoned to public service, and I just as seldom volunteer for it. [C] My dominant qualities, liberty and laziness, are diametrically opposite to that trade!

[B] We cannot distinguish men's faculties from one another; their borderlines and boundaries are fine-grained and hard to determine. To infer a man's competence for public affairs from the competence of his private life is to make a bad inference. One man guides himself well but does not guide others well, [C] and produces Essays [see Glossary] but cannot

produce results; [B] another directs a siege well but would direct a battle badly, and speaks well in private but would make a bad job of addressing a crowd or his prince. Indeed, a man's ability to do one may be evidence not that he can do the other but rather that he can't.

[C] I find that higher intellects are hardly less suited to lowlier matters than lowly intellects are to the higher. Is it credible that Socrates gave the Athenians a good laugh at his expense because he was unable to count up the votes of his tribe and report them to the Council? Truly my veneration for that great man's perfections makes it appropriate that his fortune provides such a magnificent example to excuse my chief imperfections!

[B] Our competence is cut into little bits. Mine own has no breadth, and its pieces are wretchedly few. Saturninus said to those who had made him supreme commander: 'You have lost a fine captain, comrades, to make a poor general.'

If in a sick time like ours someone boasts of bringing a pure and sincere virtue to the world's service, either •he has no idea what virtue is, since opinions are corrupted along with *mœurs*—

indeed, just listen to them portraying it, glorying in their behaviour and formulating rules; they portray simple injustice and vice, which they present under the guise of virtue in the education of princes

—or else •he boasts wrongfully and (whatever he says) does many things for which his conscience condemns him. I would believe Seneca's¹ account of his experience in similar circumstances, if he was willing to talk to me about it openly. The most honourable mark of goodness in a predicament like his is to acknowledge freely one's own defects and those of others, doing all one can to resist and slow down the slide

¹ [Seneca was a morally serious essayist and playwright, and an advisor to the emperor Nero.]

towards evil, descending it unwillingly while expecting and wanting improvement.

During the divisions into which we are fallen, tearing France apart, I notice that each man labours to defend his cause, but even the best of them do it with deception and lying. Anyone who wrote openly about the situation would do so rashly and harmfully, because inadequately and ill-advisedly. The most just party in this civil war is still a limb of a worm-eaten and maggoty body. Yet in such a body the least affected limb is termed healthy—rightly so, since our qualities are valid only by comparison. Civil innocence is measured according to the places and the times.

I would greatly like to see Agesilaus praised as follows in Xenophon. Having been asked by a neighbouring prince with whom he had formerly been at war for permission to pass through his domains, he granted it, allowing him passage through the Peloponnesus. And not only did he not imprison or poison him, despite having him at his mercy, but he welcomed him courteously without doing him injury. Given the characters of people then, such things were taken for granted; **a** elsewhere and **b** at other times men will tell of the frankness and magnanimity of that deed. But **a** here and **b** now the wretched monkeys in our schools would laugh at it, so little does our French ‘innocence’ resemble that of the Spartans!

We do nevertheless have men who are virtuous, but only by our standards. Someone whose *mœurs* are based on rules above the standards of his time must either •distort and blunt his rules or •draw apart and have nothing to do with us. I would advise him to take the latter course. If he took the former, what would he gain from it? ‘When I come across an outstandingly moral man, he seems to me like a kind of freak, like a two-headed child, like fish turning up under the farmer’s ploughshare, or like a pregnant mule’

[Juvenal]. We can regret better times but we cannot escape from the present; we can wish for better men to govern us but despite that we should obey those we have. And perhaps there is more merit in obeying bad rulers than in obeying good ones. As long as the image of the accepted and ancient laws of this monarchy of ours shines in some corner, you will see me planted there. If those laws unfortunately come to contradict and interfere with each other, presenting a hard choice between two factions, my choice would be to slink away and hide from that tempest. In the meantime, nature may lend me a hand; so may the hazards of war.

Between Caesar and Pompey I would have declared myself openly. But among those three robbers who came after them—Mark Antony, Octavius, Lepidus—I would have had either to flee into hiding or to go the way the wind blew, which I judge to be legitimate when reason no longer guides. . . .

·DOES MONTAIGNE RAMBLE?·

This padding is rather off my subject. I stray, but more by licence than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, though sometimes at a distance, and look at each other, though with a sidelong glance. ^[c] I have run my eyes over one of Plato’s dialogues [the *Phaedrus*], a fantastic motley in two parts, the beginning part about love, all the rest about rhetoric. The ancients are not afraid of such changes, and have a marvellous charm when letting themselves be blown along by the wind in this way, or appearing to be so. ^[b] The titles of my chapters [= essays] do not always encompass my subject-matter; often they merely indicate it by some sign. . . .

I like the way poetry moves, by jumping and skipping. ^[c] Poetry, says Plato, is an art that is light, capricious, daemonic. There are works of Plutarch’s in which he forgets his theme, in which the treatment of his subject is found only incidentally, quite smothered in extraneous matter. See

his sprightly *The Daemon of Socrates*. Lord, what beauty there is these lusty sallies and in this variation, especially when they appear fortuitous and casual.

It is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I. There will always be found in a corner a phrase that is adequate despite being squeezed in tight. ^[B] I seek change indiscriminately and chaotically. ^[C] My pen and my mind go roaming together. ^[B] If you do not want more dullness you must accept a touch of madness, ^[C] so say the precepts—and even more the examples—of our masters.

^[B] A thousand poets drag and droop prosaically, but the best ancient prose ^[C] and I scatter it here indifferently as though it were verse ^[B] shines throughout with poetic vigour and boldness. . . . We should certainly cede to it mastery and preeminence in speech. [Two previous translators understand ‘it’ here to be poetry; another who takes it to be prose seems to be right.] ^[C] The poet, says Plato, seated on the tripod of the Muses, pours out in a frenzy whatever comes into his mouth, like the spout of a fountain, without chewing and weighing it; and from him there escape—in an intermittent flow—things of different colours and contradictory substance. Plato himself is entirely poetic; and the scholars say that the ancient theology was poetry, as was the first philosophy. It is the original language of the gods.

^[B] I want the matter to make its own divisions; it shows well enough where it changes, where it starts, where it ends, where it picks up again, without interlacing it with words—links and seams for the benefit of weak or inattentive ears—and without explaining what I am doing. Who is there who would rather not be read at all than be read sleepily or in haste? ^[C] ‘Nothing is so efficacious that it can be helpful while it is being shifted about’ [Seneca]. If picking up [*prendre*] books were taking them in [*apprendre*], if glancing at them were seeing *into* them, and skipping through them were

grasping them, I would be wrong to make myself out to be quite so totally ignorant as I say I am.

^[B] Since I cannot hold my reader’s attention by the weight of what I write, it is no bad thing if I hold it by my tangles. ‘Yes, but afterwards he will be sorry he was perplexed over them.’ I suppose so; but he will go on being perplexed by them! And there are natures that despise anything they understand and will rate me more highly because they won’t know what I mean. They will infer the depth of my meaning from its obscurity. Joking aside, I strongly hate obscurity, and would avoid it if I could avoid *myself*. Aristotle somewhere boasts of affecting it: a depraved affectation! . . .

·THOUGHTS FROM ROME·

I have already seen elsewhere—i.e. other than in Rome, where I now am—ruined palaces and sculptures both divine and human; and they are always the works of men. True though that is, I could not revisit the tomb of this great and mighty city so often that I wouldn’t wonder at it and revere it.

We are enjoined to care for the dead. Now, since infancy I was brought up with the dead of Rome; I was familiar with the affairs of Rome long before I was with those of my own house; I knew the Capitol and its site before I knew the Louvre, and the Tiber before the Seine. I thought more about the characters and fortunes of Lucullus, Metellus and Scipio than those of any of our own men. They are dead; and so is my father, as completely dead as they are; and he has moved as far from me and from life in 18 years as they have done in 1600; despite which I embrace and cherish his memory, his friendship and society, in a union that is perfect and very much alive.

Indeed, as a matter of temperament it is to the dead that I am most dutiful; they can no longer help themselves, so it seems to me that they need my help the more. That is where

gratitude shows in its proper lustre. A benefit is less richly bestowed when there is reciprocity and return. Arcesilaus, visiting the ailing Ctesibius and finding him badly off, gave him money by slipping it under his pillow. By concealing it he was also releasing him from gratitude. Those who have deserved my love and thanks have never lost anything through being no longer there; I have repaid them better and more punctiliously when they were absent and unaware of what I was doing. I speak all the more affectionately of my friends when they no longer have any way of knowing it.

Now, I have begun a hundred quarrels in defence of Pompey and for the cause of Brutus. Friendship still endures between us, and there's nothing weird about this, because even things present to us are grasped only by the imagination. Finding myself useless for this present age, I fall back on that one, and am so bewildered by it that I have a passionate concern for the state of ancient Rome, free and just and flourishing (for I don't like its infancy or its old age). That is why I could never so often revisit the site of their streets and their palaces, and their ruins stretching deep down to the Antipodes, without lingering over them. ^[C] Seeing places that we know were frequented and inhabited by people whose memory is held in honour moves us somewhat more than hearing a recital of their deeds or reading their writings; is this by nature or by an aberrant imagination? 'Such is the power of places to call up memories. And in this city there is no end to this; wherever we go, we walk over history' [Cicero].

^[B] I like thinking about their faces, their bearing and their clothing. I chew over those great names between my teeth and make them resound in my ears. ^[C] 'I venerate them, and always leap to my feet to honour such great names' [Seneca]. ^[B] When things are great and admirable in some parts, I admire even their ordinary parts. I would enjoy seeing them talk, walk and eat. It would be ungrateful to neglect the

remains and images of so many honest and valiant men whom I have seen live and die, and who by their example provide us with so many instructions, if only we knew how to follow them.

And then this same Rome that we see now deserves our love as having been so long and by so many claims an ally of our crown—the only universal city, the only one that all men have in common. The sovereign magistrate [see Glossary] who commands there is equally acknowledged everywhere; it is the metropolitan city of all the Christian nations; the Spaniard and the Frenchman are both at home there. To be a prince of that state you need only to belong to Christendom, no matter what part of it. There is no other place here below that heaven has embraced with such favourable influence and such constancy. Even its ruin is glorious and stately: ^[C] 'More precious for her memorable ruins' [Sidonius Appollinaris]. ^[B] Even in the tomb, Rome retains some signs and image of empire. ^[C] 'That it may be manifest that in one place Nature delights in her work' [Pliny].

^[B] Someone might condemn himself and inwardly rebel for being tickled by such a vain pleasure. Our humours are not too vain if they provide pleasure. . . .

·AN ASIDE ON MONTAIGNE'S GOOD FORTUNE·

I am deeply indebted to Fortune in that up to now she has done nothing hostile to me, at least nothing beyond what I can bear. Might it not be her style to leave in peace those who do not pester it? 'The more a man denies himself, the more he will receive from the gods. Poor as I am, I seek the company of those who want nothing. Those who want much, lack much' [Horace]. If she continues in this way, she will send me hence content and well satisfied: 'For nothing more do I harass the gods' [Horace]. But watch out for the crash! Hundreds are wrecked within the harbour.

I easily console myself over what will happen here when I am here no longer; present concerns keep me busy enough, and 'The rest I entrust to Fortune' [Ovid]. Besides, I do not have that strong link that is said to bind a man to the future by offspring who bear his name and rank;¹ and if *that* is what makes them desirable, I should perhaps desire them all the less. I am—of myself, ·i.e. without any influence from having sons·—only too bound to the world and to this life. I am content to be in Fortune's grip through circumstances strictly necessary to my existence, without extending her jurisdiction over me in other ways; and I have never thought that not having sons was a lack that should make life less complete and less contented. There are advantages too in the vocation of childlessness. Sons are among the things that do not have much to make them desired, especially these days when it would be hard to make them good. [C] Nothing good can be produced now; the seeds are so corrupt' [Tertullian]. And yet once they have been acquired, there is reason to regret them if they are lost.

He who left me in charge of my house predicted that I would ruin it, seeing how little I was inclined towards domesticity. He was wrong. Here I am, just as I inherited it, or perhaps a little better off, yet without public office and without benefice.

Still, though Fortune has done me no violent and extraordinary injury, neither has she done me any favour. Any gifts of hers in our home were there more than a hundred years before I was. I don't owe one solid essential good thing to her generosity. She has done me some honorary titular favours, all wind and no substance; and (God knows!) she did not *grant* them to me but *offered* them to me ·unasked·—to me who am wholly material, who seek satisfaction in realities,

and very massive ones at that; and who, if I dare admit it, think that

- ambition is nearly as bad as avarice,
- disgrace is no worse than pain,
- learning is no better than health, and
- noble rank is no better than riches.

[In that list, the items on the left are ones Montaigne sees as windy and insubstantial, the ones on the right as realities.]

·MONTAIGNE IS HONOURED BY ROME·

Among Fortune's vain favours, I have none more pleasing to that silly humour in me that feeds on such things than an authentic bull of Roman citizenship that was granted to me recently when I was there. [Montaigne devotes a page to describing the elegant formalities of this presentation, and quoting it in full. Then he continues:]

Not being the citizen of any city, I am delighted to be one of the noblest city there ever was or ever will be. If others looked attentively into themselves (as I do), they would find themselves (as I do) full of inanity and nonsense. I cannot rid myself of these without getting rid of *myself*. We are all steeped in them, each as much as the other; but those who realise this get off a little more cheaply, as I know.

The common attitude and habit of looking elsewhere than at ourselves has served our affairs well! Our self is an object full of dissatisfaction: we can see nothing there but wretchedness and vanity. So as not to dishearten us, nature has very conveniently directed our sight outwards. We go forward with the current, but to struggle back towards ourselves is a painful movement; thus does the sea become troubled and turbulent when driven back against itself. 'Look', says everyone, 'at

- the motions of the heavens,

¹ [He means sons; he had one daughter and no sons.]

- society,
- this man's quarrel,
- that man's pulse,
- this other man's will and testament';

in short, always look upwards or downwards, or sideways, or before or behind you.

It was a paradoxical command that the god at Delphi gave to us in ancient times:

Look into yourself, know yourself, keep to yourself; bring back your mind and will, which are being squandered elsewhere, into themselves; you are draining and frittering yourself away; consolidate yourself, rein yourself in. You are being betrayed, dispersed, and stolen away from yourself. Don't you see that this world keeps its gaze bent inwards and its eyes open to contemplate itself? . . . Except for you, O man (said that god), each thing first studies itself, and according to its needs sets limits to its labours and desires. Not one is as empty and needy as you, who embrace the universe: you are the Investigator with no knowledge, the judge with no jurisdiction and, when all is done, the jester of the farce.

10. Restraining your will

^[B] In comparison with most men, I am •touched by few things—or, to speak more correctly, I am •held by few things. for it is right that things should touch us, provided they don't possess us. I take care to extend •by reason and reflection this privileged lack of emotion, which is •by nature well advanced in me. I am wedded to few things, and so am passionate about few. My sight is clear, but I fix it on few objects. . . . I do not easily get involved. As far as possible I

employ myself entirely on myself, but even on that subject I prefer to rein back my emotion so as to stop it from plunging in too far, since this is a subject that I possess at the mercy of others, and over which fortune has more rights than I do. Thus, even with health, which I value so highly, I ought not to desire and seek it so frantically as to find illnesses unbearable. ^[C] One should moderate oneself between hatred of pain and love of pleasure; Plato prescribes a middle way of life between the two.

^[B] But the emotions that distract me from myself and tie me up elsewhere—those I oppose with all my strength. My opinion is that one should •lend oneself to others but •give oneself only to oneself. If my will did find it easy to mortgage and bind itself •to others•, I could not persevere in that: by nature and habit I am too fastidious, 'Fleeing from affairs and born for untroubled leisure' [Ovid].

Stubborn earnest arguments ending in victory for my opponent. . . . might well cruelly gnaw at me. If I were to bite off as much as others do, my soul would never have the strength to bear the alarms and emotions that attend those who embrace so much; this inner agitation would immediately put it out of joint.

If I have sometimes been pressed into the management of other men's affairs, I have promised to

- take them in hand, not in lungs or liver,
- take charge of them, not incorporate them into me,
- take trouble over them, not get worked up about them.

. . . I have enough to do to order and arrange the the domestic pressures on my vitals and my veins without having there a crowd of pressures from other folk's affairs; I am concerned enough with my essential, proper and natural affairs without bringing in other people's. Those who understand how much they owe to themselves, and how many self-regarding obligations they have, find that nature has given them a full

enough commission and by no means a sinecure. You have plenty to do **at home**; don't go away.

Men put themselves up for hire. Their talents are not for themselves but for those they have enslaved themselves to. They are not **at home**; their tenants are there! This common attitude does not please me. We should husband our soul's freedom, and mortgage it only on proper occasions—of which, if we judge soundly, there are very few.

Just watch people who have been taught to let themselves be seized and carried away; they do it all the time, over small matters as over great, over things that don't affect them as well as over ones that do; they push in indiscriminately wherever there is a task and obligation; and when they are not in tumultuous agitation they are without life. ^[C] 'They are busy so as to be busy' [Seneca]. They seek occupations only so as to be occupied. It's not so much that they *want* to move as that they *cannot* keep still, exactly like a rock that has been shaken loose and cannot stop its fall until it lies on the bottom. For a certain type of man, being busy is a mark of competence and dignity. ^[B] Their minds seek repose in motion, like children in a cradle. They may be said to be as useful to their friends as they are bothersome to themselves. No-one gives his money to others, everyone gives them his time and his life. There is nothing we are more profligate with than the only things that it would be useful to us and laudable to be miserly with.

I have a completely different attitude. I keep myself to myself, and usually want *mildly* anything that I do want; and I don't want much. My involvements and occupations are similarly rare and calm. ·As for others·, whatever they want and do, they bring to it all their will and passion. There are so many bad spots that the safest way is to glide rather lightly over the surface of this world. ^[C] We should slide over it, not get bogged down in it. ^[B] Even sensual pleasure is

painful in its depths: 'You are walking through fires hidden beneath treacherous ashes' [Horace].

The municipal council of Bordeaux elected me mayor of their city when I was far from France, and even further from such a thought. I declined; but I was brought to see that I was wrong, since the King had also interposed his command. It is an office that should seem all the finer for having no salary or reward other than the honour of doing it. It lasts for two years; but it can be extended by a second election, which very rarely happens. It happened in my case, and for two others previously—some years earlier for Monsieur de Lanssac and more recently for Monsieur de Biron, Marshal of France, to whose place I succeeded; and I left mine to another Marshal of France, Monsieur de Matignon. Proud of being in such noble company: 'Each a good minister in peace and war' [Virgil]. . . .

As soon as I arrived ·in Bordeaux· I spelled out my character faithfully and truly, just as I know myself to be—with

- no memory,
- no vigilance,
- no experience,
- no vigour,

but also with

- no hatred,
- no ambition,
- no greed,
- no violence

—so that they should be informed ·about my qualities· and instructed about what they were to expect from my service. And since the only thing that had spurred them to elect me was what they knew of my late father and his honoured memory, I very clearly added that I would be distressed if anything were to press on my will as heavily as the affairs of

their city had pressed on my father's while he was governing it in the same position that I now held.

I remembered seeing him when I was a boy: an old man, cruelly troubled by the worries of office, forgetting the gentle atmosphere of his home—to which he had long been confined by the weakness of advancing years—as well as his household and his health, thinking little of his own life (which he nearly lost, having taken long and arduous journeys on their behalf). That's the kind of man he was; and this disposition in him arose from great natural goodness; there was never a soul more kindly and public-spirited.

This approach to life, which I praise in others, I do not like to follow myself, and not without some justification. He had heard it said that one should forget oneself on behalf of one's neighbour, that the individual is of no importance compared to the general.

Most of the world's rules and precepts do take this approach of pushing us out of ourselves and driving us into the market-place in the interests of the public. They thought to achieve a fine result by diverting and distracting us from ourselves, assuming that we were clinging too much to ourselves by a bond that was all too natural; and they left nothing unsaid that would favour that end. It is no novelty for sages to preach things as they serve, not as they are. ^[C] Truth has its difficulties, its awkwardnesses and its incompatibilities with us. We must often be deceived so as not to deceive ourselves, hooding our eyes and dazzling our minds so as to train them and cure them. 'It is the ignorant who judge, and they must often be deceived lest they fall into error' [Quintilian]. ^[B] When they tell us to rank three, four or fifty things above ourselves in order of preference, they are imitating the technique of the archer who, so as to hit his target, raises his sights a long way above it. To straighten a bent stick one bends it back the other way.

I reckon that in the temple of Pallas (as we see in all other religions) there were **a** open mysteries, to be revealed to the people, and **b** other hidden mysteries—higher ones—to be revealed only to initiates. It is likely that the true degree of friendship [see Glossary] that each man owes to himself is found among **b** the latter. Not a false friendship ^[C] that makes us embrace glory, learning, riches and the like with a paramount and immoderate passion,

next phrase: *comme membres de nostre estre*

rendered by all previous translators as: as (though they were) members of our being

probable meaning: as though they were organs or working parts of our bodies,

and not a friendship ^[B] that is easy-going and indiscriminating, acting like the ivy we see cracking and destroying the wall it clings to, but a healthy, measured friendship, as useful as it is pleasant. He who knows its duties and practises them. . . . has reached the pinnacle of human wisdom and of our happiness. Knowing precisely what is due to himself, this man finds •that his role includes taking account of the practices of other men and of the world; and •that to do this he must contribute to society the offices and duties that concern him. ^[C] He who does not live at all for others hardly lives for himself: 'Someone who is a friend to himself is a friend to all men' [Seneca].

^[B] The main responsibility that each of us has is for his own conduct: ^[C] that is what we are here for. ^[B] Just as someone who forgot to live a good and holy life himself and thought that he had done his duty by guiding and training others to do so would be a fool, so also anyone who gives up a healthy and cheerful life for himself in order to provide one for others makes (in my opinion) a bad and unnatural decision.

I don't want anyone to refuse to bring to the tasks that he undertakes his attention, deeds, words, and his sweat and blood if need be: 'Himself not afraid of dying for those he loves dearly or for his country' [Horace] But this a kind of incidental *loan*, the mind still remaining quiet and healthy—not without activity but without distress, without passion. Simply to be active costs him so little that he can do it in his sleep. But it must be set in motion with discretion; for whereas the body accepts the loads that are placed on it according to their real weight, the mind expands them and makes them heavier, often to its own cost, giving them whatever dimensions it thinks fit. We do similar things with different degrees of effort and tension of the will. Neither of these implies the other. For how many folk put themselves at risk every day in wars that are of no concern to them, and press forward into the danger of battles the loss of which will not disturb their next night's sleep! Whereas another man, in his own home and far from that danger (which he would not have dared to face), is more passionate about the outcome of the war, and has his soul in greater travail over it, than the soldier who is shedding his life-blood there. I have been able to engage in public duties without going a nail's breadth from myself, ^[C] and to give myself to others without taking myself away from me.

^[B] This fierceness and violence of desire hinders more than it helps the carrying out of our projects; it fills us with •impatience towards results that are slow to come or are not what we want, and with •bitterness and suspicion towards the people we are dealing with. We never conduct well the thing that obsesses and conducts us: ^[C] 'Violent impulses serve everything badly' [Stattius]. ^[B] Anyone who employs only his judgement and skill •and not his passions• proceeds more joyfully. He feints, he bends, he is comfortable about postponing when there's a need for that; he misses the target

without torment or affliction, ready and intact for a new undertaking; he always walks with the bridle in his hands. In a man who is intoxicated by a violent and tyrannical purpose, we inevitably see a great deal of imprudence and injustice; the *impetus* of his desire sweeps him along; these are reckless movements which do little good unless fortune lends them a great hand.

Philosophy tells us that when we are punishing injuries we have received we should avoid anger, not so as to lessen our revenge but (on the contrary) so that its blows may be weightier and better aimed; philosophy sees violent emotion as an impediment to that. ^[C] Anger doesn't only confuse; of itself it tires the arms of those who chastise. That fire numbs and consumes their strength. ^[B] When you are in a hurry, 'Haste causes delay' [Quintus Curtius]; haste trips itself up, hobbles and stops itself. ^[C] 'The very haste ties you in knots' [Seneca]. ^[B] For example, from what I can see to be usually the case, avarice has no greater hindrance than itself: the more tense and vigorous it is, the less productive it is. It commonly snaps up riches more quickly when masked by a semblance of generosity.

A gentleman, an excellent fellow and one of my friends, nearly drove himself out of his mind by too passionate a concern and attention to the affairs of a prince, his master; yet that master—Henry of Navarre—described himself to me as one who sees the weight of a setback as well as anyone else but who quickly resolves to put up with it in cases where there is no remedy; in other cases he orders all the necessary measures to be taken (which he can do promptly because of his quick intelligence), then quietly waits for the outcome. Indeed I have seen him doing it, remaining very cool and casual in his actions and demeanour throughout some important and ticklish engagements. I find him greater and more able in ill fortune than in good; ^[C] he gets more glory

from his defeats than from his victories, from his mourning than from his triumph.

^[B] Consider how even in activities that are vain and trivial—chess, tennis, or the like—the keen and burning involvement of a rash desire at once throws the mind into a lack of discernment and the limbs into confusion. . . . Someone who bears himself more moderately towards winning or losing is always **at home**; the less he goads himself on, and the less passionate he is about the game, the more surely and successfully he plays it.

Moreover we impede the soul's grip and grasp by giving it so many things to seize. Some things should be merely shown to it, some affixed to it, and others incorporated into it. It can see and feel all things, but should feed only on itself, and should be instructed about what properly concerns it and what is properly of its own possession and of its own substance. The laws of nature teach us what we rightly need. After the sages have told us that no man is poor by nature's standards, and that every man is poor by opinion's standards, they then subtly distinguish between **a** desires that come from nature and **b** those that come from the unruliness of our thoughts; **a** those whose limits we can see are nature's, and **b** those that flee before us and whose end we can never reach are ours. To cure poverty of possessions is easy; poverty of soul, impossible. . . . ^[C] [There follows a mostly ^[C]-tagged string of quotations and anecdotes concerning the frugality of various ancient personages. Then:]

^[B] If what nature flatly and basically requires for the preservation of our being is too little. . . ., then let us grant ourselves something further; let us also call *nature* the habits and condition of each of us; let us rate ourselves and treat ourselves by that **measure**; let us stretch our belongings and our accounts that far. For ·in going· that far we have, it seems to me, some justification. Habit is a second nature

and no less powerful ·than the first·. . . . I would almost as soon be deprived of my life as have it reduced and cut down much below the state in which I have lived it for so long.

·MONTAIGNE ON 'THE WAY OUT'·

I am no longer suited to great changes or to throwing myself into some new and unaccustomed way of life—not even a better one. It is too late to become someone else. And just as, if some great stroke of luck fell into my hands now, I would complain that it did not come at a time when I could have enjoyed it—'What is a fortune to me if I am not able to use it?' [Horace]—^[C] I would similarly complain of any new *inward* acquisition. It is almost better never to become a good man than to do so tardily, understanding how to live when one has no life ahead. I am on the way out; I would readily leave to anyone who comes along whatever wisdom I am learning about dealing with the world. I do not want even a good thing when it is too late to use it. Mustard after dinner! What good is knowledge to a man who no longer has a head? It is an insult and unkindness of fortune to offer us gifts that fill us with just indignation because they were lacking to us in their season. Guide me no further; I can go no further. All we need of the qualities that make up competence is *patience*. Give the capacity for an outstanding treble to a chorister whose lungs are diseased, or ^[B] eloquence to a hermit banished to the deserts of Arabia! No skill is required for a fall. ^[C] At the conclusion of every task the ending makes itself known. My world is done for, my form is empty; I belong entirely to the past; I am bound to acknowledge that and to conform my exit to it. . . . ^[C] [Then a paragraph in which Montaigne declares that he cannot adjust to the recently introduced reformed (Gregorian) calendar.]

Even if health, sweet as it is, happens to come to me in occasional episodes,

the rest of the sentence: c'est pour me donner regret plustost que possession de soy.

literally meaning: it is to give me regret rather than possession of it.

the thought expanded: it's not to give me the pleasure of being healthy for a while, but to make me look sadly back to my younger years when I was healthy most of the time.

I no longer have any way to take possession of it. Time is forsaking me; without time, nothing is possessed. How little I will care about those great elective dignities that are bestowed only on men who are ready to leave ·this life·! ·In awarding these positions· attention is paid not to how *well* but to how *briefly* the recipient will perform his duties. From the moment of his entry thought is being given to his exit.

[B] Here I am, in short, finishing up this man, not making another one out of him. By long usage this form of mine has turned into substance and ·my· fortune into nature.

So I maintain that each wretched one of us is excusable for counting as his own whatever is comprised within that **measure** [see page 126]. But beyond those limits, there is nothing but confusion. It—namely the sum-total of •what is habitual to us and •our basic condition·—is the widest extent that we can allow to our claims; the more we increase our needs and possessions the more we expose ourselves to adversities and the blows of fortune. The range of our desires should be circumscribed, restricted to the narrow limits of the most accessible and contiguous pleasures. Moreover, their course should be set not in a straight line ending somewhere else but in a small circle that starts and finishes at ourselves. Any action carried through without such a return on itself. . . is wayward and diseased—for example, the actions of the avaricious, the ambitious, and so many others who rush on and on.

Most of our occupations are low comedy: 'The whole world plays a part' [Petronius]. We should play our role properly, but as the role of a character we have adopted. We must not make a real essence out of a mask and appearance, or make our own something that comes from outside us. . . . [C] It is enough to put make-up on the face, without putting it on the heart. [B] I know some who transform and transubstantiate themselves into as many shapes, as many new *beings*, as the roles they undertake; they are prelates down to their guts and livers, and take their official positions with them even into their privy. I cannot make them see the difference between the doffing of hats that are for •them and those that are for •their commissions, their retinue or their ceremonial mule. 'They allow so much to their fortune that they unlearn their own natures' [Quintus Curtius]. They inflate and swell their souls and their natural speech to the height of their magistrate's [see Glossary] seat.

The mayor and Montaigne have always been *two*, with a very clear separation ·between them·. Just because one is a lawyer or a financier, one should not ignore the knavery there is in such vocations. An honest man [see Glossary] is not accountable for the crime or stupidity of his trade, and they should not make him refuse to practise it; it is the custom of his country, and there is profit in it. We must make our living from the world and make the most of it such as we find it. Yet the judgment of an emperor, ·even·, should be above •his imperial power, seeing it and thinking of it as an extraneous accident. And the emperor should know how to enjoy himself independently of •it, and to reveal himself—at least to himself—like any Jack or Peter.

·AGAINST PARTY ZEAL·

I cannot get so deeply and totally involved. When my •will makes me side with one faction, it's not with such a violent

bond that my •understanding is infected by it. In the present turmoil of this state, my own interest has not made me unaware of the laudable qualities in our adversaries or the reprehensible ones in those I have followed. ^[C] People *worship* everything on their own side; for my part, I don't even *excuse* most of the things on mine. A good book does not lose its grace by arguing against my cause.

^[B] Apart from the kernel of the controversy, I have kept my equanimity and utter indifference. ^[C] 'And I have no special hatred beyond what war requires' [Pliny]. ^[B] I am pleased with myself about that, because it is usual to fail in the opposite direction. ^[C] 'Let him make use of passion who cannot make use of reason' [Cicero]. ^[B] Those who prolong their anger and hatred beyond the affair in question (as most men do) reveal that their emotion arises from something else, from some personal cause; just as when a man is cured of his ulcer but still has a fever, this shows that the fever had another more hidden cause. ^[C] The fact is that they feel no anger over the general cause's harming the interests of all men and of the state; they resent it simply because it bruises their private interest. That is why they are stung by it into a private passion that goes beyond public justice and reason: 'They did not carp about the terms as a whole but about the ones that affected them as individuals' [Livy].

^[B] I want the advantage to be on our side, but I do not fly into a frenzy if it is not. ^[C] I am firmly attached to the healthiest of the parties, but I do not want to stand out as an enemy of the others

the rest of the sentence: *outré la raison generale.*

which could mean: beyond what is generally reasonable.

or it could mean something more like: beyond the central cause that is at issue amongst us.

I absolutely condemn this bad form of arguing:

- He admires the grace of Monsieur de Guise, so he belongs to the League;
- The the activity of the king of Navarre amazes him, so he is a Huguenot;
- He finds such-and-such lacking in the *mœurs* of the king, so at heart he is a traitor.

I did not concede even to the magistrate himself that he was right to condemn a book for having included a heretic among the best poets of the age.¹ Wouldn't we be willing to say of a thief that he has a good leg? Must a whore have bad breath?

^[C] In wiser ages did they revoke the proud title Capitolinus that they had previously awarded to Marcus Manlius as the preserver of public liberty and religion? Did they smother the memory of his generosity, of his feats of arms and the military honours awarded for his valour, because he subsequently aspired to kingship, to the prejudice of his country's laws?

If they have formed a hatred for an advocate, by the next morning they think he is a poor speaker! (I have touched elsewhere on how zeal has driven decent men to similar errors. For my part I can easily say 'He does this wickedly, that virtuously.') Similarly, when the outlook or the outcome of an event is unfavourable, they want each man to be blind and stupid in his own cause, and our judgement and conviction to serve not the truth but the satisfaction of our desires. I would rather err towards the other extreme, so much do I fear being suborned by my desires. Added to which I have a rather delicate mistrust of things I hope for.

I have seen in my time amazing examples of how much and how indiscriminately peoples have let their beliefs and hopes be led and manipulated in whatever way has pleased and served their leaders, despite dozens of mistakes piled

¹ [The magistrate in this case was a papal censor; the book was Montaigne's *Essays*, books I and II.]

one upon another and despite illusions and deceptions. I am no longer surprised by those who are hoodwinked by the monkey tricks of Apollonius and Mahomet. Their sense and understanding is entirely smothered by their passion. Their power of discernment is left with no other choice but the one that smiles on them and favours their cause.

I noticed this to a supreme degree in the first of our feverish factions; this other, born subsequently, imitates and surpasses it. I noticed this to a supreme degree in the first of our feverish factions; this other, born subsequently, imitates and surpasses it.¹ Which leads me to think that this is a quality inseparable from popular errors. All opinions tumble out after the first one, whipped along like waves in the wind. If you can change your mind—if you don't bob along with all the rest—you do not belong. But it is certainly *wronging* the just parties to try to help them by fraud. I have always opposed that. It only works with sick minds; for healthy ones there are other ways of sustaining courage and explaining setbacks—ways that are not just more honest but also more effective.

[B] The heavens have never seen strife as grievous as that between Caesar and Pompey, and never will again. Yet I think I detect in these ·two· noble souls a great moderation towards each other. Theirs was a rivalry over honour and command, which •did not sweep them into frenzied and indiscriminate hatred and •was free of malignity and detraction. Even in their harshest deeds I discover some remnant of respect and good-will, leading me to conclude that each of them would have wished—if it were possible—to achieve his ends without the downfall of his fellow rather than with it. How different things were between Marius and Sylla! Take warning.

We should not rush so frantically after our emotions and

selfish interests. When I was young I resisted the advances of love, which was getting too much hold over me, and took care that it should not be so pleasing to me that it eventually overpowered me and held me entirely at its mercy; I do the same on all other occasions where my will is seized with too strong an appetite. I lean in the opposite direction. . . . and avoid fuelling the advance of the appetite's pleasure so far that I cannot regain control of it without loss and bloodshed.

[Two paragraphs about steadfastness in face of adversity: that it involves a partial blindness and is not *wholly* admirable; and that 'to measure steadfastness we must know what is suffered'—a person may be enduring something that is for him a great adversity though it might not be for us.]

·AVOIDANCE VERSUS CONFRONTATION·

[C] I have likewise deliberately avoided confusing my interests ·with those of others·; I have not sought properties adjoining those of close relatives or those to whom I am to be linked by close friendship, which usually gives rise to estrangements and dissension.

[B] I used to like games of chance with cards and dice. I gave them up for just one reason: no matter what a good face I put on on my losses, they nevertheless gave me a stab of pain. A man of honour, who must take it deeply to heart if he is insulted or given the lie, . . . should avoid letting doubtful affairs and stubborn quarrels run their course.

I shun like the plague gloomy dispositions and surly men; and as for matters that I cannot treat without self-interest or emotion, I do not get involved in them unless duty compels me to. . . . The safest way, then, is to prepare for the occasion in advance. I am well aware that some wise men have adopted a different course and haven't been afraid to grapple with many subjects, engaging themselves to the utmost.

¹ 'First, the war-party of the Reformed Church; then their confederate Roman Catholic opponents in La Ligue.' [note by Screech]

Those folk are sure of their strength, under which they take cover in all kinds of adverse events, wrestling against evils by the power of endurance: 'As a great rock, jutting out into the vast expanse of ocean, exposed to furious winds and confronting the waves, braves the menaces of sea and sky and itself remains unmoved [Virgil]. Let us not try to follow such examples: we wouldn't come up to them. These men obstinately determine to watch resolutely and unmoved the destruction of their country, which once held and governed all their affection. For our common souls there is too much effort, too much harshness, in that. It led Cato to abandon the noblest life there ever was; little men like us should flee further from the storm; we should aim to avoid feeling it, rather than aiming to endure it patiently, and •avoid blows that we would not be able to •fend off. . . .

Socrates does not say 'Do not surrender to the attraction of beauty; resist it; struggle against it.' He says, 'Flee it; run from its sight and from any encounter with it, as from a potent poison that darts and strikes from afar.' ^[C]And his good disciple [Xenophon], •reporting on the rare perfections of Cyrus the Great (or •imagining them, though I think this less likely), portrays him as distrusting his ability to resist the attractions of the heavenly beauty of his captive the illustrious Panthea, and assigning the tasks of visiting her and guarding her to a man who was less at liberty than he was. ^[B]And from the Holy Ghost the same thing: 'Lead us not into temptation.' We do not pray that our reason may not be assailed and overcome by lust, but that it may not even be tested by it. . . .

•AGAINST LETTING EMOTIONAL STORMS START•

•He who wishes his country well (as I do) without getting ulcers or growing thin over it will be unhappy but not stunned when he sees it threatened with ruin or or with

conditions of survival that are no less ruinous. . . .

•He who does not gape after the favours of princes, as after something he cannot live without, is not greatly stung by the coldness of their reception or by the fickleness of their wills.

•He who does not brood over his children or his honours with a slavish fondness still lives comfortably after he has lost them.

•He who acts well mainly for his own satisfaction is not much upset by seeing men judge his deeds contrary to his merit. A quarter of an ounce of patience provides for such annoyances. I do well by this recipe: *at the outset* I buy myself off at the cheapest price I can; and I am conscious of having by this means escaped much travail and hardship. With very little effort I stop this first movement of my emotions, abandoning the subject that is starting to weigh on me, before it sweeps me away.

•^[C] He who does not prevent the start has no chance to prevent the race.

•He who cannot slam the door against emotions will never chase them out once they are in.

•He who cannot rid himself of the beginning will not rid himself of the end. . . .

^[B] I feel in time the little breezes that come to test me and murmur within me, as forerunners of gales: 'The mind is shaken long before it is overwhelmed' [Seneca]

How often I have done myself a very evident injustice so as to avoid the risk of receiving even worse injustice from the judges after years of vexations and of vile and dirty practices that are more hostile to my nature than the rack or pyre!

^[C] 'It is proper to shun lawsuits as much as is permissible, and perhaps even a little more than is permissible. To waive one's rights a little is not only gentlemanly but also sometimes profitable' [Cicero]. If we were truly wise we should

delight in it and boast about it, like the innocent son of a great house whom I heard happily welcoming each guest with ‘Mother has just •lost her lawsuit’, as though her lawsuit were a cough or a fever or something else troublesome to •keep. Even the favours that fortune might have given me—kinships and ties with men who have supreme authority over matters of that kind—I have very conscientiously and insistently avoided using to the detriment of anyone else or to inflate my rights beyond their rightful worth.

[B] In short, I have managed so well by my daily efforts that I can proudly announce *Here I am, •virgin of lawsuits*—though they have often offered themselves to my service with just title, if I had been willing to listen to them—and *•virgin of actions against me!* So I shall soon have completed a long life without serious offence received or given, and—a rare gift of heaven—without having heard •applied to me• anything worse than my name.

Our greatest agitations have ridiculous springs and causes. What a disaster our last Duke of Burgundy suffered because of a quarrel about a cartload of sheepskins! And wasn’t the engraving on a seal the original and dominating cause of the most horrifying disaster that this machine—the world—has ever suffered? (For Pompey and Caesar are only the offshoots and the sequel of the other two •rivals, Marius and Sulla•.) And in my own day I have seen the wisest heads in this kingdom assembled with great ceremony and public expense to make treaties and agreements, while the real decisions depended absolutely on talk in the ladies’ drawing-room and on the inclination of some little woman.

[C] The poets understood this well when they put all Greece and Asia to fire and sword for an apple.

[B] See why that man over there takes his sword and dagger and risks his life and honour; let him tell you the source of the quarrel: he can’t do it without blushing, the occasion

being so trivial. At the outset, all you need is a little reflection; but once you have embarked, all the ropes pull tight. There’s a need then for great precautions, much more difficult and important ones.

How much easier it is to *keep* out than to *get* out! We should begin gently and coolly, saving our breath and our vigorous efforts for the culmination of the business. We guide affairs in their beginnings, holding them in our power; but once they are under way it is *they* that guide *us*; they sweep us along, and we have to follow them.

[C] Yet this is not to say that •this plan has relieved me of all difficulty, and that I haven’t often had trouble curbing and bridling my passions. They are not always governed according to the importance of the occasion, and even their beginnings are often harsh and aggressive. Nevertheless there are fair savings and some profit to be derived from •it, except for those whom no profit can satisfy if •their• reputation is not involved. For in truth such an upshot is valued only by each man in himself. If you reformed yourself before you joined in the dance, before the matter came into •public• view, you are happier for it but not more admired •by others•. Not merely in this but in all life’s other duties, the road of those who aim at honour is very different from the one followed by those whose goal is order and reason.

[B] I find some who enter the lists heedlessly and furiously only to slow down during the charge. Just as, according to Plutarch,

those who are led by false shame to be soft and easy in agreeing to anything that is asked of them are afterwards easy in breaking their word and recanting, so also

anyone who enters lightly upon a quarrel is liable to be equally light in getting out of it. The same difficulty that stops me from getting into it would

spur me on once I was heated and excited. . . . ^[B] From lack of wisdom men fall back into lack of courage, which is even more indefensible.

•FEEBLE AND DISHONEST PEACE-SEEKING•

These days most settlements of our disputes are shameful and dishonest: we merely seek to save appearances, while betraying and disowning our true intentions. [Take what follows as addressed to this situation: I call you a liar; you are indignant, and a nasty quarrel seems to be brewing; I try to calm it down by saying 'No, I didn't call you a liar; that's not what I meant', and so on. In the interests of peace, I am feebly lying about myself.] We plaster over the deed; we know how we said it and what we meant by it; the bystanders know it; so do our friends whom we wanted to sense our superiority. We disavow our thoughts and seek bolt-holes in falsehood so as to reach a conciliation; and we do this at the expense of our frankness and our reputation for courage. We give the lie to ourselves, so as to avoid admitting that we gave the lie to somebody else.

You ought not to be considering •whether your action or your words may be given a different interpretation; from now on it is *your* true and honest interpretation that you should maintain, whatever it costs you. Your virtue and your conscience are being addressed; these are not parts to be protected behind a mask. Let us leave •these vile means and expedients to the chicanery of the law-courts. The excuses and reparations that I see constantly being made to purge an indiscretion seem to me uglier than the indiscretion itself. Offending your adversary again would be better than offending against yourself by making such amends to him. You defied him when you were moved to anger; now that you are cool and more sensible, you are going to appease him and flatter him! That way, you retreat further than you had advanced. . . .

For me passions are as easy to avoid as they are hard to moderate: ^[C] 'They are more easily cut out from the mind than tempered' [attributed to Seneca]. ^[B] He who cannot attain to that noble Stoic impassibility, let him take refuge in the bosom of this plebeian insensitivity of mine. What the Stoics did by virtue I train myself to do by disposition. The middle region harbours the tempests; philosophers and rustics—the two extremes—concur in tranquility and happiness. 'Blessed the man who can find out the causes of things, who can trample down all fears of inexorable fate and the howls of Acheron. And blessed he who knows the rustic gods, Pan, old Sylvanus and the sister nymphs.' [Virgil]

All things are feeble and weak at their birth. However, we must keep our eyes open at their beginnings; just as at that time we don't find the danger because it is so small, once it has grown we don't find the cure. In an ambitious career I would have encountered, daily, thousands of irritations harder to digest than the distress I had in putting a stop to my natural inclination towards ambition. . . .

•MONTAIGNE'S CONDUCT AS A MAYOR•

All public actions are subject to ambiguous and diverse interpretations, for too many heads judge concerning them. Now about this municipal office of mine (and I am glad to say a word about it, not that it's worth it, but to exhibit my *mœurs* in such matters): some say that I conducted myself as a man who exerts himself too weakly and whose zeal is too slack. And they are not at all far from having a case. I try to keep my soul and my thoughts in repose: ^[C] 'Always tranquil by nature, I now am now even more so with age' [Cicero]. ^[B] . . . But from this natural languor of mine one should not infer •incompetence (for lack of assiduity and lack of wit are two different things), let alone •ingratitude or of lack of appreciation towards those citizens •of Bordeaux• who did

everything in their power to gratify me, both before they knew me and after—for they did much more for me in renewing my appointment than in giving it to me in the first place. I wish them all possible good; and indeed, if the occasion had arisen, there is nothing I would have spared in their service. I bestirred myself for them as I do for myself. . . .

People also say that my administration passed without ·leaving· a trace or mark. Good lord! I am accused of inactivity at a time when nearly everyone was convicted of doing too much! I stamp around vigorously when my will sweeps me along; but that trait is an enemy to perseverance. If someone wants to use me as I am, let him give me tasks requiring vigour and freedom as well as straightforward, brief and even hazardous conduct. In those I can do something. For a task requiring subtle, laborious, artificial and tortuous handling he had better ask someone else.

Not all important commissions are difficult. I was prepared to work a little harder if there had been any great need for that; for I am capable of doing somewhat more than I do or than I like to do. To the best of my knowledge I never left undone any action that duty genuinely required of me. I readily forgot those that ambition mixes up with duty and covers with its name. Those are the ones that most often fill men's eyes and ears and satisfy them; they are bought off with the appearance, not with the thing itself. If they do not hear a sound, they think you are asleep!

My own humours are opposed to noisy ones. I could easily quell a disturbance while remaining undisturbed, and punish a riot without losing my temper. Do I need anger and fire? I borrow it and wear it as a mask. My *mœurs* are mild, tame rather than fierce. I do not condemn a magistrate who dozes, provided that those who are under him doze too; ·that is how· the laws also doze.

Personally I favour a gliding, obscure and quiet life,

[C] 'neither submissive and abject nor overbearing' [Cicero].
[B] That is how my fortune wills it; I was born into a family that has flowed on without glamour and without turbulence, a family always ambitious for integrity. Nowadays men are so conditioned to agitation and ostentation that there is no longer any sense of goodness, moderation, calmness, steadfastness and ·other· such quiet and unpretentious qualities.

- Rough objects are felt; smooth ones are handled without sensation.
- Illness is felt; good health little or not at all.
- We feel things that charm [*oignent*] us less than those that harm [*poignent*] us.

If we postpone something that could be done in the council-chamber until it is done in the market-square, if we keep back till noon something that could have been done the night before, or if we are anxious to do ourselves something that a colleague could have done just as well, then we are acting for the sake of our own reputation and for private advantage, not for the good. . . .

·AGAINST AMBITION·

Ambition is not a vice fit for little fellows or for enterprises such as ours. Alexander was told: 'Your father will leave you wide dominions, peaceful and secure.' That boy was envious of his father's victories and of the justice of his government. He would not have wanted to enjoy ruling the entire world softly and peacefully. . . .

Ambition is doubtless a pardonable malady in such a strong and full soul ·as Alexander's·. But when petty, dwarfish souls start aping it, believing they can scatter their renown abroad by having •judged one matter rightly or •continued the order of the guard at one of the town gates, the higher they hope to raise their heads the more they bare

their behinds. Such petty achievements have no body, no life; they vanish at the first telling and travel only from one street corner to the next. Entertain your son or your valet with them boldly, like that ancient who, having no-one else to listen to his praises or acknowledge his value, boasted to his chambermaid: 'Oh, what a gallant and clever man you have for a master, Perrette!' Entertain yourself with them, if that's the best you can do, like a councillor I know who, having (with extreme exertion and matching ineptitude) disgorged a boatload of paragraphs, withdrew from the council chamber to the palace urinal, where he was heard devoutly muttering through his teeth: 'Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the glory' [from Psalm 115]. Anyone who cannot get it from anyone else, let him pay himself from his own purse.

Fame does not play the whore for so low a price. The rare and exemplary deeds that deserve fame would not tolerate the company of that innumerable crowd of petty everyday actions. •Marble will boast your titles as much as you like for having had a stretch of wall repaired or a public gutter cleaned, but •men of sense will not. Reputation does not follow a good deed unless there is something difficult and unusual about it. Indeed, according to the Stoics, mere esteem is not due to every action born of virtue; they would not allow bare thanks to a man who for temperance's sake abstains from a blear-eyed old woman. . . .

We have pleasures appropriate to our lot; let us not usurp those of greatness. Just because ours are more humble, they are more natural and more solid and certain. If we don't reject ambition out of a sense of right and wrong, let us at least do it out of ambition! •Ambitiously seeking fame or reputation is actually bad for one's reputation•. Let us despise that base beggarly hunger for renown and honour that makes us beg abjectly for them from all kinds of people,

no matter how vile the price: [C] 'What kind of praise is it that you can order from the butcher's?' [Cicero]. [B] To be honoured thus is a dishonour.

Let us learn to be no more avid for glory than we deserve. Boasting of every useful or blameless action is for men in whom such things are rare and unusual: they want them to be valued at what they cost them! The more brilliant a good deed is the *less* value I put upon it, because of my suspicion that it was paraded more for brilliance than for goodness. . . . The most graceful deeds are those that slip from the doer's hand casually and silently, and that some honest man later picks out and saves from obscurity, bringing them to light for their own sake. [C] 'Personally I always find more praiseworthy whatever is done without ostentation and without public witnesses' says the most vainglorious man in the world! [Cicero]

•RETURNING TO MONTAIGNE'S CONDUCT AS MAYOR•

[B] [Picking up from, perhaps, '. . . better ask someone else.' on page 133.] All I had to do was to preserve things and to survive, which are dull and unnoticeable tasks. There is splendour in innovation, but that is under a ban at the present time, when we are hard-pressed and must defend ourselves *against* novelties. [C] •Abstaining from doing is often as noble as doing, though it is less in the daylight; what little I am worth is virtually all on •that side.

[B] In short, my opportunities while in office accorded with my temperament, for which I am most grateful to them. Is there anyone who wants to be ill so as to provide work for his doctor? And shouldn't we whip a doctor who wished us the plague so as to put his skill into practice? I have not had that wicked and quite common attitude of wanting trouble and malady to infect this city's affairs so as to exalt and honour my government. I heartily lent a shoulder to make

those affairs smooth and easy.

Anyone who will not be grateful to me for the gentle, quiet calm that accompanied my administration must at least grant me the gratitude that belongs to me by title ·not of my virtue, but· of my good fortune. And I am so made that I like as well to be fortunate as to be wise, owing my success to God's grace rather than to the intervention of my labours.

I had proclaimed elaborately enough to the world my inadequacy for handling such public affairs. I have something worse than inadequacy: that I hardly mind it and, in view of

the kind of life I have designed for myself, hardly try to cure it. I was not satisfied, either, with my conduct of affairs: but I did accomplish pretty much everything I promised myself I would, and I far exceeded what I promised to those I was to deal with, since I prefer to promise rather less than I can do and hope to do. I am sure I left no injury or hatred behind me.

As for leaving regret ·over my absence· and desire for me ·to return·. I know that I never much cared about that. . . .