

# 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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## 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.

## 11. Cripples

[This essay is mostly about credulity, especially regarding miracles and witches. The title Montaigne gives it becomes relevant only on its last two pages, which he admits may be 'off the point'.]

·THE IMPERFECTIONS OF HUMAN REASON·

[B] Two or three years ago they shortened the year by ten days in France. What changes were supposed to result from this reform! It was literally moving heaven and earth at the same time. Yet nothing has been shoved out of place. My neighbours find the time for sowing and reaping, the opportune moment for their business, harmful and propitious days, at precisely the same point ·in the year· to which they have always been assigned. The error of our ·previous· practices was not felt, and the amendment in them is not felt now. So much uncertainty there is everywhere, so gross is our ·faculty of· perception, [C] so darkened and so blunt.

[B] [Then a paragraph about how the calendar adjustment could have been made 'less inconvenient'.] Years are our only measure for time. The world has been using this measure for many centuries, yet it is a unit that we have not succeeded in standardising; we live in daily uncertainty about the various forms given to it by other nations, and how they apply them.

And what if (as some say) the heavens are contracting in on us as they age, throwing us into uncertainty even about hours and days? And about months, since Plutarch says that even in his day *l'astrologie* [here = 'astrology and astronomy'] had not been able to determine the motions of the moon? A fine position we are in to keep chronicles of past events!

I was just now letting my mind range randomly (as I

often do) over what an unfettered and imprecise instrument human reason is. I see that when you put 'facts' before men, they usually prefer to spend time finding reasons for them rather than finding whether they are true. They ignore the things and devote themselves to the causes. [C] Comical prattlers!<sup>1</sup>

The knowledge of causes belongs only to him who has the guidance of things, not to us to whom things *happen* and who have the perfectly full use of them according to our nature, without penetrating to their origin and essence. Wine is no more delightful to the man who knows its primary qualities. On the contrary, both the body and the soul disturb and spoil their right to make use of the world by mixing into it the pretensions of learning. Determining and knowing are—like •giving—the province of rule and mastery; enjoying and •accepting are the province of inferiority, subordination and apprenticeship. Let us get back to that custom of ours.

[B] They skip over the facts but assiduously examine their causes.<sup>2</sup> They normally begin by asking 'How does this come about?', but they ought to be asking 'Does this come about?'. Our reasoning power has power to fill out a hundred other worlds and discover their principles and construction! It has no need for matter or foundation; let it run on; it can build as well on the void as on the plenum, on space as on matter: 'Suited to give solidity to smoke' [Persius].

I find that in almost every case we ought to say 'That's just wrong!'; I would often make that reply, but I don't venture to because they cry out that this is an evasion produced by weakness of intellect and by ignorance. I am usually obliged to play the fool for company's sake, and to discuss trivial subjects and tales that I totally disbelieve. Besides, it is a

<sup>1</sup> [The French is *Plaisants causeurs*, in which *causeurs* means 'speakers' but also plays on *causes* = 'causes'.]

<sup>2</sup> [The original says *consequences*, but this is presumably a slip.]

bit rude and quarrelsome to flatly deny a factual statement. And few people fail—especially in matters where it is hard to convince others—to assert that they have seen it themselves or to cite witnesses whose authority puts a stop (·they think·) to our contradiction. In this way we know the foundations and causes of a thousand things that never were; and the world scuffles over a thousand questions of which both the pro and the con are false: [C] ‘The false and the true are so close to one another that the wise man should not trust himself to so steep a slope’ [Cicero]. [B] Truth and falsehood are alike in form of face and similar in bearing, taste and movement; we look on them with the same eye.

·SPREADING BELIEF IN MIRACLES·

I find that we are not merely slack about guarding ourselves from deception but anxious to fall on its sword. We love to be entangled with vanity [see Glossary], since it corresponds in form to our own being.

I have seen the birth of several miracles in my time. Even if they are smothered at birth, we can still predict the course they would have taken if they had lived out their full age. It is only a matter of finding the end of the thread and then unwinding as much of it as we want. And the distance between •nothing and •the smallest thing in the world is greater than the distance between •the latter and •the largest.

Now, the first people who are convinced of a strange initial fact, when they come to spread their tale abroad, can tell by the opposition they arouse what it is that others find difficult to accept; they then cover that gap with some false patch. [C] Moreover, ‘by man’s inborn tendency to work hard at feeding rumours’ [Virgil], we naturally feel scruples about returning what has been lent to us without adding some interest from our own stock. At first the individual error creates the public one; and then in turn the public error

creates the individual one. [B] Thus, this whole structure is padded out and reshaped as it passes from hand to hand, so that the most far-off witness is better informed about it than the closest one, and the last to be told is more convinced than the first. It is a natural progression.

For whoever believes anything reckons that it is a work of charity to convince someone else of it; and to do this he is not afraid to add, out of his own invention, whatever his story needs to overcome resistance to it and to make sure that the other man understands it correctly.

I myself am particularly scrupulous about lying and don’t care much whether what I say is believed or respected, yet I notice that when I get heated about a matter I have in hand—[C] either because of another’s resistance or because of the excitement of the actual telling—[B] I magnify and inflate my subject by tone of voice, gestures, powerful and vigorous words—and also by stretching it and filling it in, not without prejudice to the simple truth. But I do so with this condition: as soon as someone catches me up and demands the naked and unvarnished truth, I immediately give up the effort and give him the truth, without exaggeration, without over-emphasis and padding. [C] A lively and noisy way of speaking, such as mine ordinarily is, soon flies off into hyperbole.

[B] There is nothing that men commonly work harder at than making a way for their opinions. Where the ordinary means fail us we bring in command, force, sword, and fire. It is wretched to reach the point where the best touchstone of truth is the number of believers in a crowd where the fools so greatly outnumber the wise: [C] ‘As if anything whatsoever were as common as lack of wisdom’ [Cicero]; ‘A fine evidence of sanity is the mob of lunatics!’ [St Augustine]. [B] It is hard to set one’s judgement against accepted opinions. The first conviction, taken from the subject itself, seizes the

simple folk; from them it spreads to able people through the authority of the **a** number and **b** antiquity of the testimonies. For my part, what I would not believe when one person says it I would not believe if **a** a hundred said it. And I do not judge opinions **b** by their age.

Not long ago one of our princes, whose fine constitution and lively disposition had been undermined by the gout, let himself be convinced by the report that was circulating about the wonderful treatments of a priest who by means of words and gestures cured all illnesses—so strongly convinced that he made a long journey to go and consult him. By the force of his imagination he persuaded his legs and put them to sleep [meaning: to feel no pain] for a few hours, so that he got from them a service that they had long since forgotten how to do. If fortune had allowed five or six such events to accumulate, they could have made this miracle a part of nature! People later found the inventor of this treatment to be so simple-minded and so unskillful that he was judged not worthy of any punishment. We would do the same for most such things if we tracked them into their lair. <sup>[C]</sup> ‘We are amazed by things that deceive us by their remoteness’ [Seneca]. . . .

It is a marvel how many empty beginnings and trivial causes give rise to such celebrated opinions. That is precisely what impedes inquiry into them. For while we are looking for powerful and weighty causes and ends worthy of such great fame we lose the real causes, which are so tiny that they escape our view. And indeed such investigations require a very wise, diligent and subtle investigator, one who is not partial or prejudiced.

Up to now all these miracles and strange happenings have hidden when I have been present. I have not seen ·out there· in the world any clearer example of the miraculous and monstrous than I am. Time and custom condition us

to anything strange; but the more I keep company with myself and know myself, the more astonished I am at my misshapeness and the less I understand myself.

[A long passage describing something that happened in a village not far from Montaigne’s home: Some young people fooled the villagers into thinking they had been visited by ghosts, and the fame of this spread through several provinces and brought people pouring into the village. The deception was discovered, and the perpetrators gaoled. But, Montaigne continues:] In many similar kinds of case that surpass our knowledge, I consider that we should suspend our judgement, neither believing nor rejecting.

Many of this world’s abuses are engendered—<sup>[C]</sup> or to put it more boldly, *all* of this world’s abuses are engendered—<sup>[B]</sup> by our being •schooled to fear to admit our ignorance <sup>[C]</sup> and •required to accept anything we cannot refute. <sup>[B]</sup> We talk about everything

**the rest of the sentence:** *par precepte et resolution.*

**translated by Florio as:** by precepts and resolution.

**by Cotton:** by precepts and decisions.

**by Frame:** didactically and dogmatically.

**by Screech:** by injunction and assertion.

Take your pick!

In Rome, the ·legal· style required that even the testimony of an eye-witness or the sentence of a judge based on his most certain knowledge had to be expressed in the formula ‘It seems to me’. I hate things that are probable when they are thrust on me as infallible. I like these expressions that soften and moderate the rashness of our assertions: ‘perhaps’, ‘to some extent’, ‘some’, ‘they say’, ‘I think’, and the like. And if I had sons to bring up I would fill their mouths with <sup>[C]</sup> inquiring and undecided <sup>[B]</sup> expressions such as

- ‘What does this mean?’
- ‘I do not understand that’,
- ‘It might be so’,
- ‘Is that true?’

—doing this so thoroughly they would be more likely to retain the manners of learners at 60 than (as boys actually do) to act like professors at 10. He who wants to be cured of ignorance must first admit to it. [C] . . . Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its way of advancing, and ignorance its end.

·PRAISEWORTHY IGNORANCE·

[B] Yes indeed: there is a strong and magnanimous kind of ignorance that in honour and courage is not inferior to knowledge. . . .

[Montaigne read years ago about a trial in which two men both claimed to be a peasant named Martin Guerre. One was found guilty and sentenced to death, a sentence that Montaigne thinks was rash, given that the judge declared the impersonation to be amazing and outside the range of his or anyone else’s experience. He concludes that room should be made for a ‘verdict’ saying ‘The court understands nothing in this case’.]

The witches of my neighbourhood are in mortal danger every time some new author comes along and attests to the reality of their visions. The word of God provides us with absolutely certain and uncontrovertible examples of such things, but to adapt them and apply them to things happening in our own times—when we don’t know what caused them or how they were done—needs a different kind of ingenuity from any that we possess. Perhaps only

that almighty witness<sup>1</sup> has the role of telling us ‘This is an example of it; so is that; this other is not.’ God ought to be believed in these matters—that really is right—but that does not hold for one of ourselves who is amazed (as he must be if he is not out of his senses) by his own narration, whether testifying about others or against himself.<sup>2</sup>

I am sluggish, and tend to hold to the solid and the probable, avoiding the ancient reproaches:

- ‘Men put more trust in whatever they do not understand’ [Pliny].
- ‘The human mind’s greed makes it more ready to believe whatever is obscure’ [Tacitus].

I am well aware that folk get angry and forbid me to have any doubts about witches on pain of execrable insults. A new form of persuasion! Thank God my belief is not controlled by thumps from anyone’s fists. Let them bully those who accuse their opinion of being false; I merely accuse it of being problematic and rash; as for the assertion that it is false, I join them in condemning that, though less imperiously. . . .

Any man who supports his argument with bravado and commands shows that its reasoning is weak. In a verbal and scholastic disputation, they—those who believe in witchcraft—may have as convincing a case as their opponents do; but in the practical consequences they draw from it, the advantages are all with the opponents.

To kill people, there must be sharp and brilliant clarity; this life of ours is too real, too fundamental, to be used to guarantee these supernatural and imagined events. As for witches whose means are not supernatural but drugs and poisons, I leave them out of account; they are homicides, and of the worst sort. Yet even there it is said that we should

<sup>1</sup> The Holy Ghost who, for Montaigne, was the author of Scripture. [note by Screech]

<sup>2</sup> [The personal pronouns in this sentence should be understood as covering women as well as men.]

not always be content with the confessions of such folk, for they have been known to accuse themselves of killing people who were later found alive and well. As for those other extravagant accusations, I want to say that any man—no matter how highly esteemed he is—should be believed only about human matters; in the case of whatever is beyond his comprehension and produces supernatural results he should be believed only when supernatural authority confirms it. That privilege that it has pleased God to grant to some of our testimonies should not be cheapened or passed around casually. My ears are battered by stories like this:

Three men saw him on such-and-such a day in the east; three saw him the following morning in the west, at such-and-such a time, in such-and-such a place, dressed thus and so.

I would certainly not trust my own testimony over such a matter. How much more natural and probable it seems to me that •two men should lie than that •in twelve hours one man should go like the wind from east to west! How much more natural that •our understanding should be pulled from its moorings by the volatility of our mind [*esprit*] going off its tracks than that •one of us •humans•, in flesh and blood, should be sent flying on a broomstick up the flue of his chimney by an **external** spirit [*esprit*]! We, who are perpetually agitated by our own home-grown illusions, should not go looking for unknown ones **outside ourselves** . It seems to me that it is excusable to disbelieve any wonder, at least in so far as we can divert it and explain it in some non-miraculous way. I am of Saint Augustine's opinion, that in things hard to prove and dangerous to believe it is better to lean towards doubt than towards confidence.

•THE PUNISHMENT OF WITCHES•

A few years ago I was passing through the domains of a sovereign prince who, as a favour to me and to beat down my incredulity, graciously allowed me to see, in a private place when he was present, ten or twelve prisoners of this kind, •i.e. ones accused of witchcraft•. Among them was an old woman, truly a witch as far as ugliness and deformity were concerned, who had long been very famous in that profession. I saw evidence and voluntary confessions. . . .; I talked •with her• and questioned •her• all I wanted, bringing to bear the soundest attention that I could—and I am hardly the man to let my judgement to be muzzled by preconceptions, In the end, and in all honesty, I would have prescribed not hemlock for them but hellebore.<sup>1</sup> [C] 'It seemed to be more a matter of insane minds than of delinquency' [Livy]. [B] Justice has its own remedies for such maladies.

As for the objections and arguments that •honest men [see Glossary] have put to me on that and many other occasions, none ever seemed to tie me fast: all seemed to have a solution more convincing than •their conclusions. It is true indeed that I don't try to disentangle proofs and reasons based on experience and on fact; they have no ends; so, like Alexander with his knot, I often slice through them. After all, it is putting a very high value on one's surmises to roast a man alive because of them.

[A passage in which Montaigne vigorously expresses his opinion that no-one should be punished for being a witch, and equally vigorously declares that this is only an *opinion* on a topic on which he has no expertise. He continues:] [C] I warrant you no certainty for whatever I say, except that it was indeed in my vacillating and disorderly thought at the time I spoke. I talk about everything by way of conversation, about

<sup>1</sup> [That is, not a drug used in ancient times to execute criminals but one used to cure insanity.]



nothing by way of advice. 'Nor am I, as those other fellows are, ashamed to admit that I do not know what I do not know [Cicero]. [B] I would not be so forthcoming with speech if it were my right to be believed on this matter. When a great nobleman complained of the sharpness and vehemence of my exhortations, I replied thus:

'Knowing that you are braced and prepared on one side, I set out the other side for you as thoroughly as I can, not to compel your judgement but to give it some light. God holds your heart, and will provide you with options. I am not so presumptuous as even to *want* my opinions to tip the balance in a matter of such importance; my fortune has not trained them for such powerful and exalted decisions.'

I have not only many character-traits but also quite a few opinions that I would willingly train a son of mine (if I had one) to dislike. The make-up of a man (-including my supposed son as an adult-) is so *sauvage* [= wild, barbarous, untamed] that even the truest opinions are not always the most appropriate for him.

·CRIPPLES·

On the point or off the point, no matter: it is said as a common proverb in Italy that he who has not lain with a crippled woman does not know Venus in her sweet perfection. Fortune, or some particular incident, long ago put that saying into the mouth of the people; and it is said of males as well as of females, for the Queen of the Amazons retorted to the Scythian who courted her 'The crippled man does it best.'<sup>1</sup> In that feminine republic, to escape the dominance of males, they disabled them from childhood—arms, legs, and

other parts that gave males an advantage over them—and made use of men only for the purpose for which we make use of women over here.

I would have said that the erratic movements of the crippled woman brought some new pleasure to the business and some spice of sweetness to those who try it; but I have just learned that ancient philosophy itself has decided the question. It says that the legs and thighs of crippled women do not receive (being imperfect) the nourishment that is their due, so that the genital organs that are sited above them become more developed, better fed and more vigorous. Or else that since this defect discourages exercise, those who are marked by it dissipate their strength less and so come more whole to Venus' sports. Which is also the reason why the Greeks disparaged women who worked at the loom, saying they were lustier than others because of their sedentary occupation which is without much physical exertion. At this rate, what can we not reason about! Of those women weavers I might also say that the shuttling to and fro that their work imposes on them while they are squatting down stimulates and arouses them, as the shaking and jerking of coaches arouses the ladies ·who ride in them·.

Do not these examples serve to prove what I said at the outset,<sup>2</sup> namely that our reasons often run ahead of the facts and extend their jurisdiction in such a limitless way that they exercise themselves and pass judgements even about inanity and things that don't exist? Not only are our inventive powers agile in creating reasons for all sorts of idle fancies, but our imagination finds it just as easy to receive impressions from the very unreliable appearances given by falsehood. For on the sole authority of the ancient

<sup>1</sup> [This is a Greek proverb. Montaigne gives it first in Greek—*arista cholos oiphei*—then in French.]

<sup>2</sup> [[This refers to the passage starting 'I was just now letting my mind range randomly' on page 136.]

and widespread currency of that saying ‘that cripples do it better’, I once made myself believe that I had received more pleasure from a woman because she was crook-backed and counted that as one of her charms.

In his comparison between France and Italy, Torquato Tasso says he has noticed that we have skinnier legs than the Italian gentlemen, and says the cause of this is our continually being on horseback; which is the very same ‘cause’ that leads Suetonius to the opposite conclusion, for he says on the contrary that Germanicus had made his legs stouter by continuing this same exercise!

There is nothing so supple and erratic as our understanding. [Montaigne develops this thought with an obscure half-page of ancient quotations and anecdotes. Then:] Aesop was put on sale with two other slaves. The purchaser asked the first what he could do: he, to enhance his value, promised mountains and marvels; he could do this and he could do that. The second said as much or more of himself. When it was Aesop’s turn to be asked what he could do he said, ‘Nothing! These two have taken possession of the whole territory; they know everything!’

That is what has happened in the school of philosophy. The arrogance of those who attributed to the human mind a capacity for everything produced in others—through **a** disdain and **b** emulation<sup>1</sup>—the opinion that the human mind has a capacity for nothing. Some went to the same extreme about ignorance as the others did about knowledge; so it can’t be denied that man is immoderate in all things, and has no stopping-point except one forced on him by his being *unable* to go any further.

## 12. Physiognomy

[This essay’s title is appropriate only for its pages 155–157.]

·THE GREATNESS OF SOCRATES·

[B] Virtually all our opinions come •through authority and on trust. That is no bad thing: at a time as feeble as the present, we could not do worse than to choose •through ourselves. The version of Socrates’ sayings that his friends have left us receives our approval only out of respect for the general approval ·of them·, not on the basis of our own knowledge. They do not square with our tastes and practices; if something like them were produced nowadays there are few men who would prize it.

The only graces we appreciate are ones that are sharpened, puffed out and inflated by artifice. Ones that flow along •naturally and simply easily escape the notice of a sight as coarse as ours is. They have a delicate and hidden beauty; we need a clear and well-purged sight to detect this secret light. For us, is not •naturalness akin to stupidity and a matter for reproach?

Socrates makes his soul move with the natural motion of the common people: thus speaks a peasant; thus speaks a woman. [C] He never has anything in his mouth but carters, joiners, cobblers and masons. [B] His inductions and comparisons are drawn from the most ordinary and familiar of men’s activities; anyone can understand him. We would never have discerned the nobility and splendour of his admirable ideas if they were presented to us in such a mean form—we [C] who consider flat and low any ideas that are not **hoisted** by learning, and [B] who perceive richness only in pomp and show. Our world is formed only for ostentation: men are filled with nothing but wind, and bounce around like

<sup>1</sup> [That is: **a** contempt for the ‘know everything’ opinion, and **b** a desire to match its proponents by saying something equally sweeping.]

balls. This man ·Socrates· did not deal with empty fancies; his aim was to provide us with things and precepts that serve life really and more intimately: ‘To keep the mean, to hold fast to the limit, and to follow nature’ [Lucan].

He was always one and the same, and raised himself to the highest level of vigour not by surging up but by his disposition. Or—to put it better—he did not **raise** anything, but rather brought vigour, sharpness and complications **down** and back to his inborn natural level, and subjected them to it.

In the case of Cato, we clearly see that his pace is strained far above the ordinary; in the brave actions of his life and in his death we always feel that he is mounted on his tallest horses. Socrates keeps his feet on the ground, and at a gentle and ordinary pace deals with the most useful subjects, and behaves himself, both in death and in the thorniest difficulties that can occur, in the ordinary way of human life.

It is a good thing that the man most worthy of being known and of being set before the world as an example was the one of whom we have the most certain knowledge. We have light on him from the most clear-sighted men there ever were; the witnesses we have of him are admirably faithful and competent.

It is a fine thing that he could take the pure notions of a child and—without spoiling or stretching them—order them so as to produce the most beautiful achievements of our soul. He portrays our soul as neither elevated nor rich; he portrays it simply as healthy, but certainly with a very lively and pure heath. From these commonplace natural sources, from these everyday ideas, he constructed—without excitement or fuss—beliefs, actions and *mœurs* that were not simply the best regulated but also the most sublime and most forceful there ever were. [C] It was he who brought human wisdom back down from heavens, where it was wasting its time, and

returned it to man, with whom lies its most proper, most demanding and most useful business.

[B] See him state his case before his judges; see what reasons he uses to rouse his courage for the hazards of war; what arguments strengthen his endurance when against calumny, tyranny, death, and against his wife’s bad temper; there is nothing ·in all that· that is lifted from the arts or sciences; the simplest folk recognize in it the means and powers that they already have; it is impossible to go back further or **lower** . He did a great favour to human nature by showing how much it can do by itself. We are each richer than we think.

#### ·THE RISKS OF LEARNING·

Yet we are trained to borrow and beg! We are taught to make more use of other men’s goods than of our own. In nothing does man know how to halt at the limit of his *need*; he embraces more pleasure, wealth, power than he can hold; his greed is incapable of moderation. It is the same, I find, with ·his· desire for knowledge: he cuts out for himself much greater tasks than he needs or has any reason to pursue, [C] taking it that *all* knowledge is useful: ‘In learning as in everything else, we suffer from lack of moderation’ [Seneca]. And Tacitus is right to praise Agricola’s mother for having restrained in her son too boiling an appetite for knowledge. Looked at steadily, it has in it—as do men’s other goods—much inherent vanity and weakness. And a high cost.

Acquiring this ·food for the mind· is more hazardous than acquiring any other food or drink; for in other cases whatever we have bought we carry home in some container—which gives us time to think about its worth, and about how much of it we shall take and when. But learning can from the outset be put into no container except our soul; we swallow it

as we buy it, leaving the market-place either already infected or else improved. Some of it only burdens and hampers us instead of nourishing us; some, under pretence of curing us, poisons us.

[B] I have enjoyed seeing men somewhere being led by piety to make vows of ignorance. like vows of chastity, poverty, penitence. It is a castrating of our disordered desires to •blunt the cupidity that goads us towards the study of books, and •deprive the soul of the pleasurable self-satisfaction that tickles us with the opinion that we know something . [C] And it is to fulfil the vow of poverty abundantly by including in it poverty of the mind.

[B] We need hardly any learning to live at our ease. And Socrates teaches us that this learning lies within us, as well as how to find it there and how to get help from it. All the ability of ours for exceeding what is natural is pretty much vain and superfluous. The best we can hope for from it is that it won't burden and bother us more than it serves us. [C] 'Little learning is needed to form a good mind' [Seneca]. [B] They are feverish excesses of our mind, a tempestuous and unquiet instrument.

Survey yourself. You will find within you nature's arguments against death—true ones that are fittest to serve you when you need them. They are the ones that make a peasant, and entire nations, die as steadfastly as a philosopher. [C] Would I have died less cheerfully before reading the *Tusculan Disputations*?<sup>1</sup> I think not. And now that I find myself confronting death, I realise that my •tongue has been enriched •by reading this work• but not at all my •courage. This is as nature made it for me, and arms itself for the

conflict in a common and ordinary way. Books have been useful to me less for instruction than for exercise.

[A passage holding forth against the ways in which books try to arm us against natural ills but actually make those ills seem worse by dwelling on them. Empty as most of those arguments are, Montaigne won't attack them in detail, because they are not entirely worthless. Still, in treating them patiently] [B] we must be careful not to call *strength* what is only good breeding, or *solid* what is only clever, or *good* what is only handsome. Not everything that entertains us sustains us [*Tout ce qui plaist ne paist pas.*]

[B] Seeing the exertions a Seneca imposed on himself to be prepared for death—seeing him sweat from the exertion of steeling and reassuring himself and defend himself for so long on his perch—would have shaken his reputation with me if he had not maintained it so valiantly as he was dying. His burning emotion, so often repeated, [C] shows that he himself was ardent and impetuous<sup>2</sup> and also [B] shows that he was to some extent hard pressed by his adversary. b Plutarch's manner, being more disdainful •of death• and more relaxed, is in my view correspondingly more manly and persuasive: I could easily believe that his soul's movements were more assured and more regulated. a One, sharper, pricks and startles us, touches the mind [*l'esprit*] more. b The other more sedate, constantly forms us, settles and fortifies us, touches the understanding [*l'entendement*] more. [C] The former delights our judgement; the latter wins it.

I have likewise seen even more hallowed writings which, in their portrayal of the conflict sustained against the prickings of the flesh, represent them as so sharp, so strong and

<sup>1</sup> [A work of Cicero's, the first book of which concerns contempt of death.]

<sup>2</sup> [Montaigne inserts here: 'We must convict him out of his own mouth', and quotes Seneca as saying 'A great soul speaks with more calm and assurance' and 'There is not one colour for the intellect, another for the soul']

invincible, that we who are of the common herd have as much to wonder at in the strangeness and unheard-of power of their temptation as in their resistance to it.

[B] Why do we go on protecting ourselves with these efforts of learning? Let us look on the earth and the poor folk we see scattered over it, heads bowed over their toil, who know nothing of Aristotle or Cato or example or precept. From them nature every day draws deeds of constancy and steadfastness that are purer and stricter than those we so carefully study in our schools. How many of them do I see routinely ignoring poverty? How many desiring death or meeting it without panic or distress? That man over there who is digging in my garden—this morning he buried his father or his son. The very names they give to maladies soften them and sweeten their bitter taste. For them any lung disease is ‘a cough’, dysentery ‘a looseness of the bowels’, pleurisy ‘a cold’. And as they give them mild names they endure them better too. Illnesses have to be grievous indeed to interrupt the habitual toil of these folk. They take to their beds only to die: [C] ‘That simple and open virtue has been converted into obscure and subtle knowledge’ [Seneca].

·THE HORRORS OF THE PRESENT TIME·

[B] I was writing this around the time when a huge burden from our civil disturbances settled down for several months with all its weight right on me. I had the enemy at my gates on one side and on the other side a worse enemy, marauders—[C] ‘The fight is not with arms but with crimes’ [Livy]—[B] and I was being tried by every kind of military outrage all at once. ‘To right and left a foe is to be feared; on either side immediate danger threatens’ [Ovid].

[A paragraph exclaiming against the consequences of France’s civil war. This passage is a bit obscure: it says things one naturally takes to concern how *France* is harming

itself, but they are worded in terms of how *the war* harms itself. Montaigne throws in three quotations, one from Catullus: ‘Right and wrong, all shuffled together in this wicked fury, have deprived us of the gods’ protection.’]

At the start of such an epidemic, one can distinguish the healthy from the sick; but when it drags on as ours does, the whole body politic is affected; from the head to the heels no part is free from corruption. For no air is so greedily inhaled, or spreads and penetrates so much, as the air of licence. Our armies are bound and held together now only by foreign cement; one can no longer make up a reliable and disciplined army out of Frenchmen alone. How shameful! There is only as much discipline as hired soldiers show us; as for ourselves, we follow our own lead—each making his own choice—rather than being led by our commander, who has more trouble with his own troops than with any enemy. Everyone is free and dissolute—except for the commander, who must follow, court and bend; he alone has to obey.

It pleases me to see how much baseness and faint-heartedness there is in ambition, and how much abjection and servility it requires to achieve its goal. But it displeases me to see—as I do all the time—decent natures that are capable of justice growing corrupt in their management and command of this disorder. Long tolerance begets habit; habit, acceptance and imitation. We had enough ill-born souls without spoiling the good and generous ones. If we go on this way hardly anyone will be left to whom to entrust the health of this state, should fortune restore it to health. . . .

[C] What has become of the ancient precept that soldiers have more to fear from their commander than from their enemy? And of the wonderful example of an apple tree that happened to be enclosed within the limits of a Roman army camp, and was still there when the camp was struck the next day, leaving its owner with his full complement of ripe and

delicious apples? I wish that our young men, instead of the time they spend on less useful travels and less honourable apprenticeships, would devote half of it to watching the war at sea under some good Captain-Commander of Rhodes, and half to observing the discipline of the Turkish armies, for it has many advantages over ours. One is this: *our* soldiers become more disorderly during campaigns, *theirs* more restrained and timid; because offences or thefts against the common people that are punishable by the bastinado in times of peace become capital in time of war. There is a pre-established tariff:

- for one egg taken without payment, fifty strokes of the cane;
- for anything else (no matter how trivial) that cannot be used as food, immediate impaling or beheading.

It amazed me to read in the history of Selim, the cruellest conqueror there has ever been, that when he subjugated Egypt, the wonderful gardens surrounding the city of Damascus and abounding in delicacies remained unsullied by the hands of his soldiers. Yet those gardens were all open and unfenced.

[B] But is there any illness in a government affliction that it is worth tackling with such a fatal medicine ·as civil war·? According to Favonius, not even the tyrannical usurpation of a state. Similarly, Plato does not allow that violence be done against the peace of one's country even to cure it, and accepts no correction that costs the blood and ruin of the citizens, ruling that it is a good man's duty in that case to leave things alone, simply praying to God to bring his supernatural hand to bear. . . . I was a Platonist in that way before I knew there was a Plato in the world. And if

this personage [Plato] must be completely excluded from our communion—

he who by the purity of his conscience had enough merit with the divine favour to penetrate so deeply into the light of Christianity through the general darkness of the world of his time

—I do not think it well becomes us to let ourselves be taught by a pagan. How impious it is to expect help from God that is his alone with no cooperation on our part! [[The opening part of this sentence must be meant semi-sarcastically, as is shown by the indented part that follows it.]]. . . .

[Then a page expressing, in vivid—almost rapturous—detail, Montaigne's hatred and contempt for people who think they can improve the state by doing wicked things. He stresses the harm that the civil war is doing to the common people, present and future. He quotes Livy: 'Nothing is more deceitful than a depraved piety by which the will of the gods serves as a pretext for crimes.']

·MONTAIGNE'S TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS·

In addition to that attack,<sup>1</sup> I suffered others. I incurred the penalties that moderation brings during such ·civil· disorders. I was thumped by everyone: to the Ghibelline I was a Guelph, to the Guelph a Ghibelline. (One of my poets says just that, but I do not remember where.) The location of my home, coupled with the experience ·of me· that the men of my neighbourhood had, presented me in one aspect, my life and actions in another.<sup>2</sup> There were no formal accusations, for there was nothing they could get their teeth into. I never break the laws; and if anyone had proceeded against me, he would have come out of it worse than I would.

<sup>1</sup> [This presumably refers to the troubled time mentioned on page 145.]

<sup>2</sup> Montaigne lived in a region dominated by the Reformed Church; he was an active Roman Catholic who never hid his allegiance. [Note by Screech.]

There were unspoken suspicions circulating underhand, for which there is never a lack of pretext in so confused a chaos, any more than there is a lack of envious minds or silly ones.

[C] I usually help any harmful presumptions that fortune strews against me by the way I have always had of avoiding justifying, excusing and explaining myself, reckoning that to plead for my good conscience is to compromise it. As Cicero wrote: on a point that is self-evident and admitted by everyone, 'argument would only diminish its clearness'. And—as if each man saw into me as clearly as I do—instead of retreating from an accusation I advance towards it and enhance it by an ironic and mocking admission of guilt; unless I flatly keep silent about it as something unworthy of a reply.

**a** Those who take this for an over-haughty confidence are hardly less hostile to me than **b** those who take it for the weakness of an indefensible case; especially **a** great lords for whom lack of submissiveness to them is the ultimate offence, and who are harsh towards any righteousness that is recognised and felt not to be abject, humble and suppliant. I have often bumped up against that pillar!

Be that as it may, over what happened to me then [see footnote 1 on this page] [B] an ambitious man would have hanged himself; so would an avaricious man. I am not interested in acquisition—'Let me keep what I have now, or even less, so that I may live for myself whatever remaining life the gods grant me' [Horace]—but losses that I suffer through others' wrong-doing, whether by theft or violence, pain me about as much as they would a man who is sick and tormented by avarice. The affront is immeasurably more bitter than the loss.

A thousand different kinds of trouble assailed me, one after another; if they had come together I would have borne them more cheerfully. I had already thought about whom

among my loved ones I could entrust with a needy and disgraced old age, but after letting my eyes rove over all my affairs, I found myself stripped to my shirt. To let oneself fall plumb down from such a height, it must be into the arms of an affection that is solid, vigorous, and favoured by fortune. There are not many of those, if there are any at all. In the end I realised that the surest way was to entrust myself and my needs to myself, and that if I should chance to be coldly treated by fortune's favour, I should recommend myself even more strongly to my own 'favour', clinging to myself—and looking after myself—all the more closely. [C] In all things men rely on support from others, so as to spare their own resources, which are the only ones that are (for anyone who can arm himself with them) sure and powerful. Each man rushes elsewhere and towards the future, since no man has reached himself.

·WHAT HE LEARNED FROM THEM·

[B] And I concluded that that these were useful troubles.

**(i)** Firstly, because bad students must be taught by the rod when reason proves inadequate, [C] just as we use fire and hammered-in wedges to straighten wood that has become warped. [B] For such a long time I have been lecturing myself about holding to myself and keeping apart from external things; yet I still go on turning my gaze to one side: I am tempted by a great person's bow, his gracious word or his encouraging face. (God knows there is a scarcity of those nowadays, and how little they mean!) I still hear without frowning the seductions of those who want to draw me into the market-place, defending myself against them so feebly that it looks as though I would really rather succumb to them. Such an unteachable mind requires flogging; I am a cask that is splitting its seams, cracking up, and falling completely to pieces; it needs to be knocked together and its

hoopd tightened up with good whacks from the mallet.

(ii) Secondly, because my misfortune served me as practice to prepare myself for worse—

if I, who through the generosity of fortune and the nature of my *mœurs* hoped to be among the last, came to be among the first to be caught by this storm

—teaching me in good time to limit my way of life and to order it for a new state. True freedom is to be able to do anything with oneself. <sup>[C]</sup> ‘Most powerful is he who has power over himself.’ [Seneca] <sup>[B]</sup> In an ordinary tranquil time one prepares oneself for moderate and common ills; but during the disorders we have lived through these last thirty years, every man in France. . . . sees himself at every moment on the verge of having his fortune entirely upended. All the more reason to keep one’s courage supplied with stronger and more vigorous provisions. Let us be grateful to our fate for having made us live at a time that is not soft, languid and idle; a man who would not otherwise have become famous may do so because of his misfortunes.

<sup>[C]</sup> I seldom read in history books about such commotions in other states without regretting that I could not have been present to study them more closely; so too my curiosity leads me to find at least some satisfaction in seeing with my own eyes this remarkable spectacle of our public death, its symptoms and its form. Since I cannot hold it back, I am happy to be destined to be present and to learn from it. After all, we eagerly seek to witness the tragic ups and downs of human fortune as portrayed fictionally on the stage. It’s not that we lack compassion over what we hear ·there·, but the exceptional nature of those pathetic events arouses in us a pain that gives us pleasure. Nothing tickles that does not pinch. And good historians avoid peaceful narratives—as though they were stagnant water and dead sea ·with no wind to fill the sails·—in order to get back to the seditions and

wars to which they know we summon them.

I doubt if I can decently admit how little it has cost me in terms of the repose and tranquillity of my life to have passed more than a half of it during the collapse of my country. I purchase a little too cheaply the patience with which I confront misfortunes that do not affect me personally; and before complaining on my own behalf, I consider not so much what has been taken from me as what inner and outer goods I still keep safe. There is some consolation in dodging, one after another, the successive evils that have us in their sights, only to strike elsewhere around us. Moreover, where public misfortunes are concerned, the more widely my compassion is spread the weaker it becomes. To which add •that it is certainly more or less true that ‘from public ills we feel only as much as touches us directly’ [Livy], and •that our original health was such as to diminish any sorrow we ought to have felt for its loss—it was ‘health’, but only by comparison with the sickness that followed it. We did not have far to fall.

Least tolerable, it seems to me, are the corruption and brigandry that enjoy dignity and established status. . . . There was a universal conjunction of organs rivalling one another in corruption, and most of them afflicted with age-old ulcers which no longer admitted of cure or asked for it.

<sup>[B]</sup> This collapse stimulated rather than crushed me, thanks to my conscience which bore itself not merely peaceably but proudly, and found nothing to reproach me with. And since God never sends men unmixed evils any more than unmixed blessings, my health held out better than usual throughout this period; and just as without health I can do nothing, with health there are few things I cannot do. Health gave me the means to arouse all my resources and to put out my hand to ward off the blow that would ·otherwise· have wounded more deeply. And I found •that with my endurance I had some foothold against Fortune, and •that it would take



some great shock to throw me from the saddle.

I do not say this to provoke Fortune into making a more vigorous attack on me. I am her servant; my hands are raised to her; let her be satisfied, for God's sake! Do I feel her assaults? Of course I do. Just as those who are overwhelmed and possessed by grief yet allow some pleasure to fondle them from time to time and to release a smile, so too I have enough hold over myself to make my usual state a peaceful one, free from the burden of painful reflections; yet I allow myself occasionally to be ambushed by the stings of those unpleasant thoughts that batter me even while I am arming myself to drive them off or struggle against them.

·PLAGUE·

Following hard upon the other calamities, a worse one befell me: both inside my home and around it I was accosted by a uniquely virulent plague. Just as healthy bodies fall prey only to the most serious of illnesses, because those are the only ones that can get a hold on them, similarly •the very salubrious air around my estates—which in human memory had never given a foothold to contagion, even when contagion was in the neighbourhood—once •it was corrupted produced strange effects indeed.

I had an absurd situation to put up with: the sight of my house was terrifying to me. Everything inside lay unprotected, abandoned to anyone who wanted it. I, who am so hospitable, had a lot of trouble finding a refuge for my household—a group of castaways, a source of fear to its friends and to itself, and of terror wherever it sought to settle, having to change quarters as soon as one of the group started to feel pain in the tip of a finger. ·At such a time· all •illnesses are taken to be the plague: people don't allow themselves time to diagnose •them. And to top it off: according to the rules of the ·medical· art, after any approach

to danger you have to spend forty days in extreme anxiety about that illness, while your imagination has its own way of agitating you, making even your health sweat with fever.

All this would have affected me much less if I hadn't had to •feel for the sufferings of others and •spend six wretched months as guide for that caravan; for I carry within me my own preservatives, namely resolution and patience. The prospect of being *taken*—which is particularly feared in this illness—does not oppress me much; and if I had been alone and had sought this, it would have been a more cheerful and more remote escape. It is a death that doesn't strike me as one of the worst: it is normally short, marked by numbness and lack of pain, consoled by the public situation, without ceremony, without mourning, without a crowd around.

As for those who lived in our neighbourhood, not one in a hundred escaped: 'You can see the abandoned realms of the shepherds and, far and wide, the deserted pastures' [Virgil]. Here my income is mainly from labour; land that once had a hundred men working on it has long lain idle.

·MORAL BENEFITS OF THE PLAGUE·

At that time what examples of resoluteness did we not see in the simplicity of all those folk? Each one—*each* one—gave up worrying about his life. The grapes, the principal produce of the region, remained hanging on the vines, since everybody was calmly awaiting death, that night or the next morning, with voices and faces so little terrified that it seemed they had made a pact with that unavoidable evil, and that the sentence upon them was universal and inevitable. That sentence always is! Yet our resoluteness in the face of death hangs on so little! Its being delayed by a few hours, or the mere consideration of having company, make us conceive of death differently. But just look at these ·simple· folk! They are no longer stunned, no longer weep for one another, over

the fact that they all—children, young people, old people—are to die in the same month. I saw some who were afraid of being left behind, as though in some dreadful wilderness; their only worry seemed to be about their burial; it upset them to see corpses scattered over the fields at the mercy of the beasts that promptly swarmed in there.

([C] How divergent human notions are! The Neorites, a nation subjugated by Alexander, abandon the bodies of their dead deep in their forests, there to be eaten—for them this is the only satisfactory form of sepulture.)

[B] One man, in good health, was already digging his grave; others lay down in theirs while still alive. And one of my labourers used his hands and feet to pull soil over himself as he lay dying; wasn't he sheltering himself so as to go to sleep more comfortably? . . .

In short, a whole nation was, at a stroke and **a** as a matter of usage, put on a footing that was as firm of purpose as any **b** studied and premeditated steadfastness.<sup>1</sup> Most of the instructions that learning uses to encourage us are more showy than powerful, and more ornamental than effective. We have abandoned nature and want to make it our pupil—nature that used to guide us so happily and surely. Yet some traces of its teaching and a little of its image remain—thanks to ignorance!—imprinted on the life of that crowd of uncultured country-folk; and erudition is compelled every day to go and borrow this from them, in order to supply models of constancy, innocence and tranquillity for its own pupils. It is fine to see **•**that those pupils, full of so much beautiful knowledge, have to imitate that stupid simplicity, imitating it indeed in the most basic acts of virtue; **•**that

our wisdom must learn from the very beasts the lessons most useful for the greatest and most necessary parts of our life—how we should live and die, manage our goods, love and educate our offspring, and maintain justice. . . .; and **•**that our reason (which we manipulate as we will, always finding some variety and novelty) leaves in us no apparent trace of nature.

Men have done with nature what perfumiers do with oil: they have adulterated it with so many arguments and far-fetched reasonings that it has become varied, different for each man, and has lost its own constant and universal countenance, so that we have to go to the beasts for testimony about it, testimony that is not subject to bias, corruption or diversity of opinion. For while it is indeed true that even they don't always exactly follow nature's road, they stray so little from it that you can always see nature's rut, like the rut left in a mud road by a wagon wheel. It is just the same **•**with horses: when they are led by hand they leap and prance about but not beyond the length of their halters, meanwhile always following the steps of the man who is leading them; and **•**with the hawk that takes to flight but always under the control of its tether.

•LOOKING FORWARD TO ONE'S DEATH•

[C] 'Meditate on banishments, torments, wars, diseases, shipwrecks, so as not to be a novice in any misfortune' [Seneca].

[B] What is the use to us of that curious desire to anticipate all the ills of human nature, laboriously preparing ourselves to encounter even those that may perhaps never touch us?

[C] 'The possibility of suffering makes one as unhappy as the suffering' [Seneca]. We are struck not only by the blow but by

<sup>1</sup> [Montaigne is saying here that anyone who had engaged in **b** philosophical preparation for acting well would not be more firmly resolute than the 'whole nation' was in acting well by **a** just getting on with it.]

the wind and the noise of it! <sup>[B]</sup> Or why go right now, like the most feverish (for it certainly is a fever), and have yourself whipped because it *may* happen that fortune will have you whipped some day? . . . ‘Throw yourself into experiencing •such ills as may befall you, especially the more extreme ones; test yourself against them,’ men say, ‘make absolutely certain.’ On the contrary, the easiest and most natural thing would be to keep •them right out of one’s thoughts. They won’t come soon enough (•these men seem to think•), their actual reality doesn’t last long enough for us, so our mind should •extend and prolong them, •incorporate them into itself and •dwell on them beforehand—as though they did not weigh sufficiently upon our senses. <sup>[C]</sup> ‘They will weigh heavily enough once they are real,’ says one of the masters, not of some tender sect but of the hardest. ‘Meanwhile favour yourself; believe what you like best. What good does it do you to welcome and anticipate your ill fortune, losing the present because of fear of the future, and being miserable now because you must be so eventually?’ [Seneca] Those are his words.

<sup>[B]</sup> [This little paragraph is presumably said sarcastically.] Learning certainly does us a good service by instructing us very precisely about the dimensions of all evils, ‘Whetting with cares the minds of mortal men’ [Virgil]. It would be a shame if a little of their size escaped our sensations and our knowledge!

It is certain that for most people preparations for death have caused more torment than undergoing it. <sup>[C]</sup> It was once said truly, by a most judicious author, ‘Our senses are less affected by **a** suffering than by **b** the thought of it’ [Quintilian]. [The Latin is *Minus afficit sensus a fatigatio quam b cogitatio*. There is no way of reproducing the rhyme in English.]

The feeling that death is **present** is sometimes enough to stir us to a quick resolve to give up seeking to avoid the inevitable. Many gladiators in former times were seen, after

fighting in a cowardly fashion, to accept death most courageously, offering their throats to their opponents’ swords and welcoming them; but contemplating a **future** death requires courage that is steady, and therefore difficult to come by.

<sup>[B]</sup> If you don’t know how to die, never mind! Nature will tell you how to do it on the spot, fully and adequately. It will do this job perfectly for you; don’t worry about it: ‘In vain, O mortals, do you seek to know the uncertain hour of your death and what road it will come by’ [Propertius]; ‘It is less painful to undergo sudden and sure destruction than long to anticipate what you fear the most’ [Maximianus].

•OBSESSIVE WORRIES ABOUT DEATH•

We disturb life with worries about death, and death with worries about life. <sup>[C]</sup> One annoys us, the other terrifies us. <sup>[B]</sup> It is not *death* that we are preparing to meet; that is too momentary a matter. <sup>[C]</sup> A quarter of an hour of feeling, without after-effects and *sans nuisance* [here = ‘with nothing specially unpleasant about it’], does not deserve any precepts of its own. <sup>[B]</sup> The fact is that we prepare ourselves against our preparations for death! Philosophy

•commands us to have death ever before our eyes, to foresee it and think about it beforehand, and then it

•gives us rules and precautions to secure us from being harmed by this foresight and this thought.

That is what those doctors do who make us ill so as to have something on which to employ their drugs and their skill.

<sup>[C]</sup> If we have not known how to live, it is wrong to teach us how to die and make the end incongruous with the whole. If we *have* known how to live steadfastly and calmly, we shall know how to die in the same way.

They may boast about it all they please. ‘The entire life of philosophers is a meditation on death’ [Cicero]. But my

opinion is that death is indeed the ending [*bout*], not however the goal [*but*], of life; it is its finish, its extremity, not however its object [meaning 'not what it is *about*]. Life ought to be its own aim and design. Its rightful study is to regulate, conduct, and put up with *itself*. Among the many duties included under the general and principal heading *How to live* there is the sub-section *How to die*; and one of the lightest, ·or would be· if our fears did not give it weight.

[B] Judging by usefulness and naïve truth, the teachings of •simplicity are not much inferior to the contrary ones preached to us by •learning. Men differ in taste and ability; they must be led to what is good for them, each according to his own nature and by different routes: 'Wherever the tempest drives me, there I am carried as a guest' [Horace].

[B] I never saw a peasant in my neighbourhood embark on thoughts about what countenance and steadfastness he would show in his final hour. Nature teaches him not to think about death until he is dying. Then he does it with better grace than Aristotle, who is doubly oppressed by death: by death itself and by his long anticipation. That is why Caesar held that the happiest and least oppressive death was the one least thought about in advance. 'He who suffers before he needs to suffers more than he needs to' [Seneca].

... [C] We are always tripping ourselves up in this way, trying to anticipate and overrule nature's prescriptions. It is only for the learned, when they are quite well, to dine less well because of the thought of death, glowering at it. Common folk need no remedy or consolation except when the blow falls; and then they consider precisely as much as they feel, that much and no more. [B] Isn't this what we say, that what gives common folk their power to endure present ills, as well as their profound indifference towards inauspicious future events, is their insensitivity and lack of understanding? [C] and that their souls are less open to

penetration and disturbance because they are thick and obtuse. [B] If that is how things stand, then for God's sake let us from now on adhere to the school of animal stupidity! It leads its pupils gently to the ultimate profit promised by learning. We shall have no lack of good teachers, interpreters of natural simplicity.

·THE EXAMPLE OF SOCRATES·

Socrates will be one. For, as far as I can remember, he says something like the following to the judges who are deliberating about his life.

·START OF SOCRATES' SPEECH· I am afraid, sirs, that if I ask you not to put me to death I shall impale myself on the charge of my accusers, namely that I claim to be wiser than everyone else because I have some more hidden knowledge of things above us and of things below us. I know that I have had no association or acquaintance with death, or known anyone who has experienced what it is like and can inform me about it. Those who fear death presuppose that they know it. As for me, I do not know what death is or how things go in the other world. Perhaps death is something indifferent, perhaps desirable.

[C] (However, if it is •a migration from one place to another, it's likely that there is some improvement in going to live among so many great men who have passed on, and to be free from having any more to do with unjust and corrupt judges. If ·on the other hand· it is •an annihilation of our being, it is still an improvement to enter upon a long and peaceful night. We know of nothing in life sweeter than quiet rest and deep dreamless sleep.)

[B] Things that I know to be bad—such as harming one's neighbour or disobeying one's superior (whether God or man)—I scrupulously avoid. I cannot go in fear of things when I do not know whether they are good or bad.

<sup>[C]</sup> If I go off to my death and leave you here alive, the gods alone know with whom it will go better, you or me. So, as far as it concerns me, you will decide as you please. But following my way of giving just and useful counsel, I do say that unless you see more deeply into my case than I do, for the sake of your conscience you will do better to set me free; and if you make your judgement in accordance with

- my past deeds, public and private,
- my intentions,
- the profit that so many of our citizens, young and old, daily derive from my conversation, and
- the profit I bring to all of you,

you cannot properly discharge your obligation to my merit except by ordering that I be maintained in the Prytaneum—at public expense, given my poverty—something I have often seen you grant, with less reason, to others.

Do not take it as stubbornness or disdain if I do not follow precedent and approach you begging and moving you to pity. . . . I have friends and relatives who can appear before you in tears and mourning, and I have three weeping children to move you to pity. But I would bring shame on our city if, at my age and with the reputation for wisdom that I am now charged with, I were to stoop to such cowardly behaviour. What would people say about the other Athenians? I have always told those who listened to me not to redeem their life by a dishonourable action. And in my country's wars—at Amphipolis, at Potidaea, at Delium, and others I have been in—I showed in practice how far I was from securing my safety by doing something shameful.

Moreover, I would be compromising your sense of duty and soliciting you to do something ugly; for you should not be persuaded by my pleas, but by pure and solid reasons of justice. You have sworn to the gods to abide by the law; ·if I begged you to acquit me· it would seem that I wanted to bring

you under suspicion and accuse you of not believing that there are any gods! And I would be testifying against myself that I also did not believe in them as I should, distrusting their governance and not committing my case entirely to their hands. I have complete trust in them; I am convinced that they will act in this matter as will be best for me and for you. Good men, living or dead, have nothing to fear from the gods. ·END OF SOCRATES' SPEECH TO HIS JUDGES·

Is that not a sober, sane plea, as well as being

- natural and lowly,
- unimaginably sublime, and
- incomparably truthful and open?

and made in such an hour of need! <sup>[C]</sup> He was right to prefer it to the plea that great orator Lysias had written out for him, excellently couched in lawyers' language but unworthy of so noble an accused. Should one hear a supplicating voice from the mouth of Socrates? Should that proud virtue strike sail at the height of its display? Should his rich and powerful nature have entrusted his defence to *art*, and in his highest test have renounced truth and simplicity (the ornaments of his speech) in order to deck itself out with the cosmetic figures and fictions of a memorised address?

He acted most wisely, and like himself, in not corrupting the tenor of an incorruptible life and such a saintly model of human nature in order to add a year to his old age and betray the immortal memory of that glorious end. His owed

- his life not to himself but to be an example to the world. Would it not have been a public public loss if he had ended
- it in some idle obscure manner?

<sup>[B]</sup> Indeed such a detached and quiet way of considering his death deserved that posterity should consider it all the more on his behalf; which it did. In the whole of justice nothing is more just than what fortune ordained for his glory. The Athenians held those who were responsible for

his death in such abomination that they shunned them like excommunicated persons; everything they touched was held to be polluted; no-one would wash with them at the public baths; no-one greeted them or owned to acquaintance with them; so that finally, no longer able to bear such public hatred, they hanged themselves.

·THE NATURAL ATTITUDE TO DEATH·

If anyone thinks that •among so many examples of Socrates' sayings that would have served my purpose I did badly in choosing this one, and •that Socrates' reasoning here is far above the opinion of common men—well, I chose it on purpose. For I judge otherwise and hold that his reasoning here. . . . in an unstudied and childlike boldness, exhibits nature's pure and primary stamp and simplicity. For it is credible that we naturally fear pain but not •that we naturally fear dying as such; it is as essential a part of our being as living is. For what purpose would Nature have given us a hatred and horror of death, seeing that •she gives it the status of something extremely useful in maintaining the succession and substitution within her works, and that •within this universal republic it is more conducive to birth and increase than to loss and destruction. 'Thus is the universe renewed' [Lucretius]. [C] One death gives rise to a thousand lives' [Ovid]. [B] The failing of one life is the gateway to a thousand other lives.

[C] Nature has imprinted on the beasts a concern for themselves and their own conservation. They go so far as to be afraid of being injured, of knocks and wounds, of our tying them up and beating them—these being events that are within the scope of their sense and experience. But they cannot fear our killing them; they don't have the capacity to imagine death or to think about it. . . .

·MONTAIGNE'S BORROWINGS·

Besides, isn't the style of argument that Socrates uses here equally admirable for its simplicity and its vigour? Truly, it is much easier to talk like Aristotle and live like Caesar than to talk and live like Socrates. In him is lodged the highest degree of perfection and of difficulty; it can't be achieved by mere *skill*.

Our own faculties are not trained in that way. We do not exercise them or recognise them; we give great weight to those of others and allow our own to lie unused. For example, someone could say of me that here I have merely gathered a bunch of other men's flowers, offering nothing of my own but the string to tie them. I have indeed bowed to the taste of the public with these borrowed ornaments that accompany me. But I do not intend them to cover me up or to hide me; that is the opposite of my design. I want to display nothing but my own, what is mine by nature. And if I had taken my own advice I would have spoken absolutely alone, come what may. [C] I load myself with them—these borrowings—more and more heavily every day, beyond my projected design and the way I started, following the fancy of the age and the urging of others. If that is unbecoming to me, as I think it is, never mind: it may be useful to somebody else.

[B] There are men who quote Plato and Homer without ever looking at them. I too have taken plenty of passages not from the originals but from elsewhere. Since in the place where I write I am surrounded by a thousand volumes, I could (if I wanted to) borrow without trouble or competence, from a dozen of the botchers whose pages I hardly ever turn, quite enough to put an enamel gloss on this treatise about physiognomy. To cram myself with quotations all I need is the preliminary epistle of some German! That is how we go seeking tidbits of glory to deceive this foolish world!

[C] Those concoctions of commonplaces by which so many people eke out their studies are almost useless except for commonplace topics; they serve to show us off, not to guide us—a ridiculous fruit of learning which serves as rough amusement for Socrates against Euthydemus. I have known books made out of materials that have never been studied or understood, the author entrusting to various learned friends the research for this and that material for constructing the work, contenting himself for his part with having planned the project and piled up by his industry that bundle of unfamiliar materials. At least the ink and paper are his! Honestly, that is buying or borrowing a book, not writing one. Someone who does this shows men not that he can make a book but (in case they were wondering) that he cannot make one. [B] A magistrate boasted in my presence that he had crammed about two hundred quotations from others into a single decision he had written as a presiding judge. . . . [B] A petty and absurd boast, in my opinion, for such a subject and such a person.

[C] Among my many borrowings I enjoy being able to conceal some of them, disguising them and reshaping them to serve a new purpose. At the risk of letting it be said that this shows my failure to understand their natural use, I give them a particular application with my own hand, so that they may to that extent be less purely someone else's. [B] Those others put their thefts on parade and into their accounts, thereby acquiring a better claim in law than I do! [C] We naturalists reckon that the honour of discovery is greatly, incomparably, preferable to the honour of quotation.

[B] If I had wanted to speak from knowledge, I would have spoken sooner; I would have written at a time closer to my studies, when I had more intellect and memory, and would have trusted myself to the vigour of that age more than I do now, if I had wanted to make a trade out of writing. . . .

[B] Two of my acquaintances, men of great scholarship, have in my opinion lost half their value by declining to publish at 40 and waiting until they were 60.

Like youth, maturity has its defects—worse ones. And old age is as unsuited to work of that scholarly nature as to any other. Anyone who puts his decrepitude into print is mad if he hopes to squeeze out of it any humours that don't stink of a man who is out of favour, wandering in his thoughts, and half-asleep. As our mind ages, becomes constipated and thick. I reveal my ignorance with copious pomp; I reveal my learning meagrely and pitifully—[C] the latter as an accessory, a by-product, the former as explicit and primary. Strictly, I treat nothing except *nothing*, and I treat no branch of knowledge except that of lack of knowledge [*ny d'aucune science que de celle de l'inscience*]. [B] I have selected the time when my life (which I am to portray) is all laid out before me; whatever remains has more to do with death. I would willingly give the public on my way out an account of my death, if I found it to be loquacious as others do.

·BEAUTY·

It vexes me that Socrates, who was the perfect exemplar of all the great qualities, should have chanced to have (as they say he did) a body and face that were so ugly and incongruous with the beauty of his soul [C]—he who was so madly in love with beauty. Nature did him an injustice. [B] There is nothing more probable than the conformity and correspondence of the body and the mind. [C] 'It matters much to souls what sort of body they are lodged in; for the body has many qualities that sharpen the mind, and many that blunt it' [Cicero]. The author here is talking about unnatural ugliness and deformity of limbs. But we also use 'ugliness' to refer to an immediately recognizable unattractiveness that resides chiefly in the face and and often arouses our distaste

for quite trivial causes: for its colouring, a spot, a coarse expression or for some inexplicable reason even when the limbs are well-proportioned and whole.

In that category was the ugliness that clothed the very beautiful soul of La Boétie. Such surface ugliness, imperious though it may be, is less harmful in its effects on a man's mind and of little certainty in people's opinion. The other kind—'deformity' properly so-called—is more substantial and more inclined to turn its effects inwards. The shape of the foot is not revealed by every shoe of fine polished leather but it is by every close-fitting shoe. <sup>[B]</sup> As Socrates said of his own ugliness, it would have revealed his soul as ugly if he hadn't corrected it by training. <sup>[C]</sup> But in saying this I hold that he was joking as usual; never did so excellent a soul make itself.

<sup>[B]</sup> I cannot say often enough how highly I rate beauty, a powerful and beneficial quality. Socrates called it a 'brief tyranny', and Plato 'nature's privilege'. We have no quality that surpasses it in repute. It holds the first place in human relations; it presents itself in the forefront, and seduces and preposses our judgement with great authority and wondrous impact. <sup>[C]</sup> Phryne would have lost her case even in the hands of an excellent attorney if she had not in opening her robe corrupted her judges by the brilliance of her beauty. And I find that Cyrus, Alexander and Caesar, those three masters of the world, did not forget beauty in carrying out their great affairs; nor did the older Scipio. . . .

Aristotle says that the right to command belongs to the beautiful, and that when there are any whose beauty approaches that of the portraits of the gods, veneration is due to them too. When someone asked him why men keep company with beautiful people longer and more often, he replied: 'Only a blind man should ask that.' Most philosophers, and the greatest, paid for their tuition and acquired wisdom by the

favour and agency of their beauty.

<sup>[B]</sup> Not only in the men who serve me, but also in the animals, I consider beauty to be within two fingers' distance from goodness. Yet to me it seems that those facial traits and features—and those lineaments from which inner dispositions are inferred as well as our future fortunes—are things that do not fall very simply and directly under the headings of beauty or ugliness. Any more than in time of plague every pleasant smell and clear air promises health, or every closeness and stench promises infection.

Those who accuse women of contradicting their beauty by their *mœurs* do not always hit the mark. A face that is not very well-shaped may yet have an air of probity and dependability; just as, on the contrary, I have read between a pair of beautiful eyes threats of a malicious and dangerous nature. There are favourable physiognomies; in a crowd of victorious enemies you will immediately choose, from among men unknown, one rather than another to surrender to and to entrust with your life; and beauty has no part in the choice.

Looks are a weak guarantee, yet they have some influence. If my task were to whip the wicked, I would do so more severely to those who belie and betray the promises nature had planted on their features; I would punish more harshly malice in a man who had a kindly appearance. It seems that some faces are lucky, others unlucky. And I think some skill is needed to distinguish

- the kindly face from the simple one,
- the severe from the unpolished,
- the malicious from the upset and humiliated,
- the disdainful from the sad,

and other such pairs of neighbouring qualities. There are beauties that are not merely proud but haughty; there are others that are gentle; and further along the line others that



are insipid. As for forecasting the future from them, such matters I leave undecided.

As I have said already, I have simply and crudely adopted this ancient precept:

We cannot go wrong by following nature; the sovereign precept is to conform to it.

Unlike Socrates, I have not corrected my natural disposition by the power of reason, and I have not made the slightest use of artifice to trouble my inclinations. I let myself go as I came: I combat nothing; my two ruling parts of their own accord live together in peace and harmony; but my nurse's milk, thank God, was moderately healthful and temperate.

<sup>[C]</sup> Shall I say this in passing? There is a certain idea of scholastic morality—virtually the only one current—that is held in higher esteem among us than it is worth; it is a slave to precepts and bound by hopes and fears. I like the morality that laws and religions do not •make but •perfect and •authorise, that feels it has the means of sustaining itself without help, that is born in us from its own stock, through the seed of universal reason stamped upon every man who is not disnatured. This reason that corrects Socrates' inclination to behave badly makes him •obedient to the men and the gods who command in his city and •courageous in death not because his soul is immortal but because he is mortal. Any teaching which convinces people that religious belief alone, without morality, suffices to satisfy God's justice is destructive of all government and is far more harmful than it is ingenious and subtle. Human conduct reveals an enormous gap between devoutness and conscience.

·MONTAIGNE'S ADVANTAGES FROM HIS 'BEARING'·

<sup>[B]</sup> I have—well, anyway I *had*—a bearing •that is favourable, both in itself and in what others make of it, and •that has an appearance contrary to that of Socrates. It has

often happened that on the mere credit of my presence and manner, people who have had no previous acquaintance with me have put great trust in me, whether for their own affairs or for mine. And in foreign countries I have received singular and rare favour because of it. But the following two experiences are perhaps worth narrating in detail.

**[I]** A certain person planned to take me and my house by surprise. His scheme was to come alone to my gate and press fairly insistently to be admitted. I knew him by name and had reason to trust him as a neighbour and a distant relative. <sup>[C]</sup> I ordered the gate to be opened for him, as I do for everyone. <sup>[B]</sup> There he was, looking quite terrified, with his horse winded and quite exhausted. He told me the following tale:

He had just encountered an enemy of his half a league away. (I knew that man too, and had heard of their feud.) This enemy had followed remarkably close on his heels. He, having been surprised in disarray and weaker in numbers, had rushed to my gate for safety. He was greatly troubled about his men, whom he supposed were dead or taken.

I tried quite naively to comfort, reassure and refresh him. Soon after, up came four or five of his soldiers, looking equally frightened and wanting to be let in. More came, then still more, until there were 25 or 30 of them, all armed and well-equipped and pretending to have their enemy at their heels.

<sup>[C]</sup> This mystery-play began to awaken my suspicions. <sup>[B]</sup> I was not unaware of what sort of time I was living in, or of how much my house might be coveted; and I knew of several cases where acquaintances of mine had had similar bad experiences. Nevertheless, I considered that nothing would be gained by starting in a pleasant way if I did not go through with it; so, not being able to get rid of them without

smashing everything, I allowed myself to take the simplest and most natural course (as I always do) and gave orders for them to be admitted.

·An aside·: Besides, the fact is that by my nature I am not very suspicious or distrustful; I am apt to lean towards the kindest excuse and interpretation; I take men according to the common order, and do not believe in the perverted and unnatural inclinations—any more than in portents and miracles—unless I am forced to do so by some major piece of evidence. Furthermore, I am a man who readily commits myself to •fortune, and throws myself headlong into •her arms. Up to now I have had more reason to congratulate myself on this attitude than to pity myself, and I have found fortune to be both better informed <sup>[C]</sup> and better disposed towards my affairs <sup>[B]</sup> than I am. There have been a few deeds in my life the handling of which could rightly be called difficult or, if you wish, prudent. Allow even a third of those ·successful outcomes· to be due to me; certainly two-thirds were abundantly due to fortune. <sup>[C]</sup> We go wrong, it seems to me, in not trusting ourselves enough to Heaven and in claiming more from our own conduct of affairs than rightly belongs to us. That is why our schemes so often go awry. Heaven is jealous of the scope we allow to the rights of human wisdom, to the prejudice of its own; and the more we extend them, the more it cuts them back.

<sup>[B]</sup> ·Returning to the narrative·: Those armed men remained mounted in my courtyard; their leader, who was with me in my hall, had not wanted his horse to be stabled, saying that he had to withdraw as soon as he had news of his men. He saw he was master of the situation, and that the moment had come to carry out his plan. Subsequently he often told me—for he was not afraid to tell this tale—that what snatched his treachery from his grasp were my face and my frankness. He got back into the saddle; his men,

watching to see what signal he would give them, were amazed to see him ride out and surrender his advantage.

**[II]** On another occasion, trusting to some truce or other that had just been proclaimed between our forces, I set out on a journey through particularly ticklish territory. As soon as wind of me got about, three or four groups of horsemen set out from different places to catch me. One of them made contact with me on the third day, when I was charged by fifteen or twenty masked gentlemen followed by a wave of mounted archers. There I was, captured; having surrendered, I was dragged off into the thick of a nearby forest, deprived of my horse and luggage, my coffers ransacked, my money box taken, horses and equipment divided among new owners. We haggled for a long time in that thicket over my ransom, which they pitched so high that it was obvious that they knew little about me. They started a big dispute over my life. Indeed there were many threatening circumstances that showed the danger I was in: <sup>[C]</sup> ‘Now you need all your courage, Aeneas, now a steadfast heart’ [Virgil].

<sup>[B]</sup> I kept standing on my rights under the truce: to let them have only what they had gained by despoiling me (not a trivial amount), with no promise of further ransom. We were there for two or three hours when they •set me on a horse that was unlikely to bolt away, •committed me individually to be brought along under the guard of fifteen or twenty harquebusiers, and •dispersed my men among other such soldiers, with orders to escort us as prisoners along different routes. I had already been taken the distance of some two or three harquebus shots. . . . when a sudden and very unexpected change came over them. I saw their leader ride over to me, using most gentle words and taking pains to search among his troops for my scattered belongings, which he returned to me so far as he could find them, even including my money box. The best gift they gave me was my

freedom; the rest did not concern me much <sup>[C]</sup> at that time.

<sup>[B]</sup> I truly do not really know even now what the true cause was of such a novel about-face and change of mind with nothing apparently driving it, of such a miraculous reversal of intent at such a time and in the course of an operation that had been thought through and deliberated upon and that custom had made lawful (for from the outset I openly admitted which side I was on and what road I was taking). The most conspicuous among them, who took off his mask and let me know his name, then told me several times that I owed my liberation to my countenance as well as to the freedom and firmness of my speech, which made me unworthy of such a misfortune; and he asked me to promise to return the compliment ·should the occasion arise·. It is possible that God in his goodness wanted to use such trivial means to preserve me. (He protected me again the following day from other and worse ambushes that these very men had warned me about.)

The man in the second of these incidents is still alive to tell the tale: the man in the first was killed not long ago.

If my face did not vouch for me, if people did not read in my eyes and my voice the innocence of my intentions, I would not have lasted so long without feud and without harm, given my indiscreet freedom in saying, rightly or wrongly, whatever comes into my mind and in judging things rashly. This style may reasonably appear discourteous and ill-suited to our usage; but I have never found anyone who considered it injurious or malicious, or who took offence at my frankness provided he had it from my own mouth. Reported words have a different sense, as they have a different sound.

Besides, I don't hate anyone, and I am so squeamish about hurting people that I cannot do it even to serve a rational end. And when circumstances have required me to pass sentences on criminals, I have preferred to fall short

of justice. <sup>[C]</sup> 'I wish the only crimes committed were those I really had the heart to punish' [Livy]. Aristotle is said to have been reproached for having been too merciful to a wicked man. He replied: 'I have indeed been merciful to the man, but not to the wickedness.'

Ordinary judgements are inflamed towards vengeance out of horror for the crime, which is precisely what cools mine: my horror at the first murder makes me fear a second, and my hatred of the first cruelty makes me hate any imitation of it. . . .

### 13. Experience

·AGAINST LEGAL MINUTIAE·

<sup>[B]</sup> No desire is more natural than the desire for knowledge. We try all the means that can lead us to it. When reason fails us, we make use of experience—<sup>[C]</sup> 'By various trials experience created art, example showing the way' [Manlius]—<sup>[B]</sup> which is a weaker and less dignified means; but the truth is such a large thing that we should not disdain any method that leads us to it. Reason has so many forms that we don't know which to resort to; experience has no fewer. The inference we want to draw from the likeness between events is uncertain because they all show unlikenesses. When collating things, no quality is as universal as diversity and variety! The Greeks, the Latins and we ourselves use *eggs* as the most explicit example of likeness; yet there was a man in Delphi among others who recognised the signs of difference between eggs and never mistook one for another; <sup>[C]</sup> when there were several hens, he could tell which one an egg came from. <sup>[B]</sup> Dissimilarity intrudes itself, uninvited, into our works; no art can achieve ·perfect· similarity. . . . Likeness does not make things *one* as much as unlikeness

makes them *other*. [C] Nature is obliged to make nothing *other* that is not unlike.

[B] That is why I am not pleased by the opinion of the one who sought to rein in the authority of the judges by multiplying laws, cutting up their meat for them.<sup>1</sup> He didn't realise that there is as much scope and freedom in interpreting laws as in making them.

(And those who think they can diminish and stop our disputes by referring us to the express words of the Bible—they must be joking! Our mind finds the field no less spacious in registering the meaning of others than in presenting its own. As if there were less animus and virulence in commenting than in inventing!)

We see how wrong he was. For we have in France more laws than all the rest of the world together, and more than would be needed to rule all the worlds of Epicurus. [C] 'As formerly we suffered from crimes, so now we suffer from laws' [Tacitus]. [B] Yet we have left so much to the discretion and opinion of our judges that there was never such a licentious and powerful freedom. What have our legislators gained by isolating a hundred thousand categories and particular cases and making a hundred thousand laws apply to them? That number bears no proportion to the infinite diversity of human actions. By multiplying •our imaginary cases we'll never match the diversity of actual ones. Let there be a hundred times as many of •them, it will still never happen that even one future case will so completely match one of the many thousands of cases already isolated and codified that no detail in it will require separate consideration. There is little relation between our actions (which are perpetually

changing) and fixed unchanging laws. The most desirable laws are the rarest, simplest and most general; and I even think it would be better to have no laws at all than to have them in such profusion as we do now.

Nature always gives us happier laws than those we give ourselves. Witness the Golden Age portrayed by the poets, and the conditions of life we see in nations that have no other laws. There's one where they take as the judge in their disputes the first traveller who comes journeying across their mountains; and another where they choose one of their number on market-days and he decides all their suits on the spot.<sup>2</sup> What danger would there be in having the wisest men decide our cases for us

**the rest of the sentence:** *selon les occurrences et à l'oeil, sans obligation d'exemple et de consequence?*

**literally meaning:** according to the details and at sight, without being bound by **a** example or **b** consequence?

**what he is probably getting at:** looking straight at each case, attending just to its details without being bound by **a** facts about how previous cases have been decided or **b** worries about what precedent they might be setting?

For every foot its proper shoe. When King Ferdinand sent colonists to the Indies, he wisely stipulated that no-one should be included who had studied jurisprudence; he was afraid that lawsuits would *breed* in the new world, law being of its nature a branch of learning subject to faction and altercation; he judged, with Plato, that it is bad for a country to have lawyers and doctors.

Why does our common language, so easy for all other purposes, become obscure and unintelligible in contracts

<sup>1</sup> Tribonian, the 'architect of the Pandects' of Justinian. He 'cut up their meat' by carving up the Roman laws into gobbets. [Notes 1 and 2 by Screech.]

<sup>2</sup> Given Montaigne's assimilation of Indians to happy primitive tribes in the Golden Age, those nations are doubtless to be sought in the Americas.

and wills? Why is it that a man who expresses himself so clearly in everything else he says or writes cannot find ways of declaring himself in contracts and wills without sinking into contradictions and obscurity? I think it is because the princes of that art—applying themselves with particular attention to selecting solemn words and contriving artificial phrases—have weighed every syllable and examined every sort of combination so intently that they end up entangled and bogged down in an infinitude of grammatical functions and in sub-clauses that are cut so fine that they can no longer fall under any rule or prescription—or any definite interpretation! <sup>[C]</sup> ‘Cut anything into pieces and it becomes a mass of confusion’ [Seneca].

<sup>B]</sup> Have you seen children trying to divide a mass of quicksilver into a set number of segments? The more they press it and knead it and try to constrain it to their will, the more they provoke the independence of that noble metal; it escapes their skill, and proceeds to scatter and break down into innumerable tiny parts. It’s the same here; for by subdividing those subtle statements they—lawyers—teach men to increase their doubts; they start us off extending and varying our difficulties, they stretch them out and spread them about. By sowing questions and then pruning them back, they make the world produce abundant crops of uncertainties and quarrels, <sup>[C]</sup> just as the soil is made more fertile when it is broken up and deeply dug: ‘It is learning that creates the difficulty’ [Quintilian].

·AGAINST COMMENTARIES·

<sup>[B]</sup> We were perplexed by ·reading· Ulpian, and are still perplexed by Bartolo and Baldus. We should have wiped out the traces of that diversity of innumerable opinions, rather than wearing them as decorations and cramming the heads of posterity with them.

I don’t know what to say about this; but experience leads one to feel that so many interpretations dissipate the truth and break it up. Aristotle wrote to be understood: if *he* could not succeed, still less will another man who is less than Aristotle and who is not treating his own ideas as Aristotle was. By diluting the material, we allow it to escape and spill; we turn one subject into a thousand, and by proliferation and subdivision we end up with ·something like· Epicurus’s infinitude of atoms. Never have two men judged alike about the same thing, and it’s impossible to find two opinions that are exactly alike, even opinions of one man at different times. Ordinarily I find matter for doubt in what the gloss has *not* condescended to touch on; like certain horses I know which trip on a level road, I stumble more easily on the flat.

Who would deny that glosses increase doubts and ignorance, given that no book that men toil over in either divinity or the humanities has had its difficulties cleared up by interpretation? The hundredth commentator passes it on to the next one in a thornier and rougher condition than the first commentator had found it in. Do we ever agree among ourselves that ‘This book already has enough glosses; from now on there is no more to be said about it’?

This is best seen in ·legal· quibbling. The force of law is given to countless legal authorities, countless decisions, and just as many interpretations. Yet do we ever find an end to our need to interpret? Do we see any progress, any advance towards tranquility? Do we need fewer lawyers and judges than when law was still in its infancy? On the contrary, we obscure and bury the meaning; we find it only when we are allowed to do so by all those enclosures and palisades.

Men fail to recognise the natural sickness of their mind; it does nothing but ferret and quest, incessantly whirling around, building, and (like our silkworms) becoming entangled in its own works, being suffocated by it. . . . It thinks it

sees from a distance heaven-knows-what appearance of light and imaginary truth; but while it is running towards that its path is strewn with so many difficulties, obstacles and fresh questions that they lead it astray and bewilder it. . . .

[B] It is only individual weakness that makes us satisfied with what has been found by others or by ourselves in this hunt for knowledge; an abler man won't be satisfied with it. . . . There is no end to our inquiries; our end is in the next world. [C] When the mind is satisfied, that is a sign of diminished faculties or weariness. No spirited mind stops within itself; it is always stretching out and exceeding its capacities. It makes sorties that go beyond what it can achieve. If it is not advancing, pressing forward, getting driven into a corner and coming to blows, it is only half-alive; [B] its inquiries are shapeless and without limits; its nourishment consists in [C] wonder, the hunt and [B] uncertainty, as Apollo made clear enough to us by his speaking (as always) equivocally, obscurely and obliquely, not satisfying us but keeping us interested and busy. It is an irregular activity, never-ending and without pattern or target. Its discoveries excite, pursue and produce one another. 'Thus do we see in a flowing stream water rolling endlessly on water, ripple upon ripple, as in its unchanging bed water flees and water pursues, the first water driven by what follows and drawn on by what went before, water eternally driving into water—ever the same stream with its waters ever-changing.' [La Boétie; the original is in French]

It is more of a business to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the texts, and there are more books about books than about any other subject; all we do is gloss one another. [C] Commentaries are swarming everywhere; there's a great shortage of authors.

Is not learning to understand the learned the chief and most celebrated thing that we learn nowadays? Is that not

the common goal and ultimate goal of all studies?

Our opinions are grafted onto one another. The first serves as a stock for the second, the second for the third. So we climb the ladder, step by step. The one who has climbed highest often has more honour than he deserves, since he has only climbed one speck higher on the shoulders of his immediate predecessor.

[B] How often and perhaps stupidly have I extended my book to make it talk about itself! [C] Stupidly, if only because I ought to have remembered what I say about others who do the same: namely that the way they keep looking at their work tells us that their hearts thrill with love for it, and that even those rough disdainful blows they beat it with are only the love-taps of maternal fondness (following Aristotle, for whom praise and dispraise of oneself often spring from the same sort of arrogance). My excuse is that I should have more freedom in this than others, since I am writing *about* myself and my writings, along with my other activities; my theme turns in on *itself*. But I am not sure that everyone will accept this, which is why I may have been stupid about this matter.

[B] I have observed in Germany that Luther has left behind as many discords and disagreements over the uncertainty of his opinions as he ever raised about Holy Scripture—as many *and more*.

Our controversies are verbal ones. I ask what is *nature*, *pleasure*, *circle* or *substitution*. The question is one of words, and is answered in the same way. 'A stone is a body.' But anyone who pressed on—

'And what is a body?' – 'Substance.' – 'And what is substance?' And so on

—would eventually drive his respondent to the last page of his lexicon. We exchange one word for another, often for one less known. I know what *man* is better than I know what

is *animal, mortal or rational*. In order to satisfy one doubt, they give me three; it is a Hydra's head.

Socrates asked Meno what virtue is. 'There is', said Meno, 'the virtue of a man and of a woman, of a magistrate and of a private individual, of a boy and of an old man.' 'Splendid!', cried Socrates. 'We were looking for a single virtue and here is a swarm of them.'

We put one question and are repaid with a hive-full of them. Just as no event and no shape is completely like another, so also no two are completely unlike. <sup>[C]</sup> Nature's ingenious mixture. If our faces were not alike we could not tell man from beast; if they were not unlike we could not tell man from man. <sup>[B]</sup> All things are connected by some similarity; yet every example is lame, and any comparison drawn from experience is feeble and imperfect; nevertheless, comparisons are always held together by some corner. That is how laws serve, being fitted to each of our affairs by means of some twisted, forced and biased interpretation.

·DEFECTS IN LEGAL PRACTICE·

Since the moral laws concerning each person's individual duties are so hard to frame (as we see they are), it's not surprising that the laws governing collections of individuals are even more so. Consider the form of justice that has ruled over us: it is a true witness to human imbecility, so full it is of contradiction and error. Wherever we find undue leniency or severity in our justice—and we find so much of them in it that I doubt whether the mean between them is met with as frequently—they are sickly parts and unsound [*injustes*] organs of the very body and essence of justice.

Some peasants have just rushed in to tell me that a moment ago they left in a wood of mine a man with dozens of stab-wounds; he was still breathing, and begged them for pity's sake to bring him some water and to help him to get

up. They say that they didn't dare to go near him and ran away, fearing that officers of the law would catch them there and hold them accountable for this incident (which is what happens to those who are found near a man who has been killed). That would have ruined them, since they had neither the skill nor the money to prove their innocence. What ought I to have said to them? It is certain that this act of humanity would have got them into difficulties.

How many innocent parties have been discovered to have been punished—I mean with no blame attached to their judges? And how many have never been discovered? Here is something that has happened in my time: some men have been condemned to death for murder; the sentence, if not pronounced, is at least settled and determined. At this juncture the judges are advised by the officials of a nearby lower court that they were holding some prisoners who had made a clean confession to that murder and thrown a decisive light on this business. They deliberate whether they should intervene to postpone the execution of the sentence already given against the first group. They consider the novelty of the situation, the precedent it would constitute for granting stays of execution, and the fact that the sentence has been passed according to law and the judges have no powers to change their minds. In short, those poor devils are sacrificed to judicial procedures.

[Then an ancient case that was similar, but not as bad because it did not involve loss of life. This paragraph ends with:] <sup>[C]</sup> How many sentences have I seen more criminal than the crime!

<sup>[B]</sup> All this reminds me of certain ancient opinions: •that a man is forced to do wrong in detail if he wants to do right in gross, to commit injustices in little things if he wants to achieve justice in great ones; •that human justice is formed on the analogy of medicine, according to which

whatever is effective is also just and honest; •that nature itself goes against justice in most of its works (the Stoics); <sup>[C]</sup> •that nothing is intrinsically just, justice being a creation of custom and law (the Cyrenaics); and •that the wise man may justifiably commit larceny, sacrilege and any sort of lechery if he knows that it is profitable for him (the Theodorians).

<sup>[B]</sup> It cannot be helped. My position, like that of Alcibiades, is that I shall never, if I can help it, submit to being judged by any man on a capital charge, where my honour and my life depend more on the energy and care of my attorney than on my innocence. I would risk a kind of justice that would take into account my good actions as well as bad ones, and give me as much to hope for as to fear. Lack of punishment is an inadequate reward for a man who does better than merely doing no wrong. Our justice extends to us only one of its hands, and the left one at that. Anyone who is subjected to it, whoever he may be, comes out of it with a loss.

<sup>[C]</sup> In China—

a kingdom •whose government and sciences, without having had any contact with or knowledge of ours, surpass ours in many kinds of excellence, and •whose history teaches me that the world is more abundant and varied than the ancients or we ever realised

—the officials sent by the prince to inspect the state of his provinces, even as they punish those who act corruptly in their posts, also out of pure liberality reward those who have performed better than the average and better than the requirements of their duty. People appear before them not only to defend themselves but to gain something, and not simply to receive their pay but to be granted bounties.

<sup>[B]</sup> Thank God, no judge has ever spoken to me as a judge in any case whatsoever, my own or a third party's, criminal or civil. No prison has had me inside it, even for a visit. Imagination makes the sight of a prison, even from the outside,

distressing to me. I so hunger after freedom that if anyone forbade me access to some corner of the Indies I would live slightly less at ease. And I shan't cower anywhere in hiding as long as I can find earth or sky open elsewhere. My God! How badly would I endure the condition in which I see so many people—pinned to one region of this kingdom, banned from entering our main cities and our courts and from using the public highways—because they have quarrelled with our laws! If the laws that I obey *threatened* as much as the tip of my finger, I would immediately go and find others, wherever they might be. All my little acts of prudence during these civil wars of ours are aimed at preventing the wars from interfering with my freedom to come and go.

Now, laws remain respected not because they are just but because they are laws. That is the mystical basis of their authority—they have no other. <sup>[C]</sup> It serves them well. They are made

- often by fools,
- even more often by people who fail in fairness because they hate equality, but
- always by *men*, vain and irresolute authors.

There is nothing so grossly, widely or regularly faulty as our laws. . . . <sup>[B]</sup> Our French laws, by their irregularity and lack of form, contribute somewhat to the confused and corrupt way they are seen to be applied and executed. Their commands are so confused and inconsistent that there is some excuse for our disobeying them and for our faulty interpretation, application and enforcement of them.

Whatever benefit we may get from experience, what we get from •foreign examples won't do much for our education if we get so little from such experience as we have of •ourselves, which is more familiar to us and certainly enough to inform us of what we need.



## ·SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS THE ROUTE TO HUMILITY·

I study myself more than any other subject. That is my metaphysics; that is my physics. . . . In this universe of things, I ignorantly and negligently let myself to be governed by the general law of the world. I shall know it sufficiently when I feel it. My knowledge could not make it change its path; it will not modify itself for my sake. It is folly to wish it to, and greater folly to be troubled about it, because it is necessarily uniform, public, and common. The goodness and power of the ruler of the universe should absolutely and totally free us from concern about his government.

Philosophical inquiries and meditations are good for nothing but to feed our curiosity. The philosophers very rightly refer us to the laws of nature, but these have nothing to do with such sublime knowledge. They—the philosophers—falsify them and show us nature's face painted in too high a colour and with too much make-up, which is why there is such a variety of portraits of this one subject. As nature has provided us with feet to walk with, so it she provided us with wisdom [*prudence*] to guide us in our lives. That wisdom is not as clever, strong and showy as the one they have invented, but it is pleasantly easy and beneficial; for a man who is lucky enough to know how to conduct himself simply and in an orderly way (that is, naturally), it *does* very well what the other *says* it will do. The more simply we entrust ourself to nature, the more wisely we do so. Oh what a sweet and soft and healthy pillow is ignorance and incuriosity, on which to rest a well-made head!

[B] I would rather be an expert on myself than on Cicero. I find enough in my own experience to make me wise, if I were a good student. Whoever recalls to mind his last bout of anger and the excesses to which that fever brought him sees the ugliness of that passion better than he can see it in Aristotle, and conceives an even more justified hatred

of it. Anyone who recalls the ills he has undergone, those that have threatened him, and the trivial incidents that have moved him from one state to another, is preparing for future changes and for recognising his condition. Even the life of Caesar has no more to show us than our own; a life whether imperial or plebeian is always a life affected by everything that can happen to a man. Just listen! We tell ourselves all that we chiefly need to know.

Someone who remembers having been so often wrong in his judgement—isn't he a fool if he doesn't become deeply distrustful of it thereafter? When I find myself convicted of a false opinion by another man's reasoning, what I learn from that is not so much

- the new thing he has told me or
- how ignorant I was of some particular matter (there's not much profit in that), but
- my weakness in general and the treachery of my understanding.

That helps me to reform the whole mass. I do the same with all my other errors, and I think this rule is of great use in my life. I don't regard a class of errors or an individual example of it as merely one stone that has made me stumble; I learn to distrust my gait in general and set about improving it. [C] To learn that one has said or done something foolish is nothing; one must learn that one is nothing but a fool, a much broader and important lesson.

[B] The slips that my memory has so often committed, even when it is at its most insistent that it is right, don't vanish without doing any good. It's no use *now* my memory's swearing to me and reassuring me; I shake my ears! The first opposition given to its testimony makes me suspend judgement, and I would not dare to trust it over any weighty matter or to stand warrant for it in another person's affairs. And I would always accept the truth in matters of fact from

another man's mouth rather than from mine, if it weren't for the fact that what I do from lack of memory is what others do even more often from lack of integrity.

If each man watched closely the effects and circumstances of the passions that dominate him, as I have done the ones that hold sway over me, he would see them coming and would somewhat slow down the violence and speed of their assault. They do not always leap straight at our throat: there are warnings and degrees: 'At first the gale whips up the foam-topped wavelets, then gradually the sea begins to heave, raising the billows higher, and surging from the deep to the very heavens.' [Virgil]

Within me, judgement holds a magisterial seat, or at least it earnestly tries to do so. It lets my feelings go their own way, including hatred and love (even my love for myself), without itself being worsened or corrupted by them. If it cannot reform the other qualities to align with itself, at least it does not let itself be deformed by them: it plays its role apart. The advice to everyone to *know himself* must have an important effect, since the god of learning and light had it planted on the front of his temple—the temple of Apollo at Delphi—as comprising all the counsel he had to give us. [C] Plato too says that wisdom is nothing but the executing of that command, and Socrates in Xenophon proves in detail that it is true.

[B] The difficulties and obscurity of any branch of learning are perceived only by those who have access to it; for some degree of intelligence is needed for one to become aware of not knowing something; to know that a door is shut against us, we must push it. [C] Which generates that Platonic subtlety:

those who know need not inquire, because they know already; neither is inquiry for those who do not know, because to inquire you need to know what you are inquiring into.

[B] Thus, in this matter of knowing oneself: the fact that each man is seen to be so sure and satisfied, that each man thinks he understands himself well enough, signifies that each man understands nothing about it—[C] as Socrates teaches Euthydemus in Xenophon.

[B] I, who make no other profession, find in myself such boundless depths and variety that my early learning bears no other fruit than to give me a sense of how much there remains for me to learn. It is to my weakness (so often admitted) that I owe my tendency to

- modesty,
- obedience to the beliefs that are prescribed for me,
- constant coolness and moderation in my opinions, and
- hatred for the pushy and quarrelsome arrogance that believes and trusts only in itself—a mortal enemy of discipline and truth.

Hear them pontificating! The very first idiocies they put forward are couched in the style in which men found religions and laws. [C] 'There is nothing more shocking than to see assent and approval dashing ahead of cognition and perception' [Cicero].

[B] Aristarchus said that in former times there were scarcely seven wise men in the world, whereas in his own days there were scarcely seven ignorant men.<sup>1</sup> Would we not have more reason than he did to say that in our time? Over-confident affirmation and stubbornness are express

<sup>1</sup> [This refers to the literary critic and editor Aristarchus of Samothrace, not the astronomer Aristarchus of Samos. Montaigne evidently, and perhaps rightly, took him to mean that there were scarcely seven men who would admit to being ignorant.]

signs of animal stupidity. This man over here has fallen on his nose a hundred times a day; but there he is on his *ergots*, as positive and unshaken as before.<sup>1</sup> You would say that some new soul, some new mental vigour has been infused into him. . . . The unteachable, stubborn fool! Does he think he acquires a new mind with which to start a new dispute?

·HUMAN IGNORANCE·

It is from my own experience that I affirm ·human· ignorance, which is in my judgement the most certain fact in the school of the world. Those who will not be convinced of their ignorance by so vain an example as me—or themselves—let them acknowledge it through Socrates, [C] the master of masters. The philosopher Antisthenes said to his pupils: ‘Let us go, you and I, to hear Socrates; I will be a pupil there along with you.’ And when he was maintaining the doctrine of his Stoic school that virtue was enough to make a life fully happy, with no need for anything at all—‘except’, he added, ‘the strength of Socrates’.

[B] This attention that I have long given to studying myself trains me also to judge passably well concerning others; there are few things on which I speak more aptly or acceptably. I often see and analyse my friends’ attributes more precisely than they do themselves. I told one of them things about himself that were so apposite that he was astonished, and I have informed [or warned, the French is *adverti*] him about himself. Having trained myself since boyhood to see my life reflected in other people’s, I have acquired a studious bent in that subject; and when I give my mind to it, few things around me that contribute to it escape my attention: looks, temperaments, speech. I study them all for what I should avoid and what I should imitate. Thus I reveal to my

friends their inner dispositions by their outer conduct. I do not *classify* this infinite variety of actions, so diverse and so disconnected, into sharply distinct sections and divisions, . . . ‘for there is no numbering of their many categories or of the names given to them’ [Virgil].

The learned mark off their ideas more specifically, and in detail. I, who can see no further than practice informs me, with no method, present my ideas in a general way and tentatively, feeling my way; as in my practice of giving my judgment in disconnected clauses, as something that cannot be said at once all in a lump. Relatedness and conformity are not to be found in low common souls such as ours. Wisdom is a solid and integral structure, each piece of which has its place and bears its mark: [C] ‘Wisdom alone is entirely self-contained’ [Cicero].

[B] I leave it to the *artistes*—and I do not know if they will get to the bottom of it, in a matter so confused, intricate and accidental—to arrange this infinite variety of features into groups, pin down our inconsistencies and impose some order. [Here *artistes* refers to people with high-level trained skills of some kind.] I find it hard not only to link our actions with one another but also to give any one of them a label of its own, based on some principal characteristic of it—so ambiguous they are and so multicoloured in various lights.

[C] What is commented on as rare in the case of Perseus, king of Macedonia—

namely that his mind, settling on no particular mode of being, wandered about among every kind of existence, manifesting such vagrant and free-flying *mœurs* that neither he nor anyone else knew what ·kind of· man he really was

<sup>1</sup> ‘Montaigne’s word *ergots* means the spurs or hackles of a gamecock. But it may also mean “ergos” or “ergotisms”, the quibbling use of Latin *ergo* (therefore) by a choplogic.’ [note by Frame]

—seems to me to apply to nearly everybody. And above all men I have seen one man of his rank [King Henry IV of France] to whom I think that conclusion would even more properly apply: no middle position, always carried from one extreme to the other, for undiscoverable reasons; no kind of course without zig-zagging and back-tracking; . . . so that the most true-to-life portrait anyone will be able to sketch of him one day will show that he strove and studied to make himself known as unknowable.

[B] Good strong ears are needed to hear oneself frankly judged; and since there are few who can undergo it without being hurt, those who risk undertaking it perform a remarkable act of friendship, because to wound and offend a man for his own good is to have a healthy love for him. I find it a rough task to judge someone in whom the bad qualities exceed the good. [C] Plato requires three attributes in anyone who wishes to examine the soul of another: knowledge, good will, boldness.

·LOVING CRITICISM·

[B] I have sometimes been asked what I thought I would have been good at if anyone had decided to employ me while I was at the right age. . . . My answer has been: 'Nothing!' And I cheerfully excuse myself for not knowing how to do anything that enslaves me to others. But I would have told my master some home truths and would, if he wanted me to, have commented on his *mœurs*—not wholesale by reading scholastic lessons to him (I know nothing about them and have observed no improvement among those who do), but by pointing things out as he went along, judging by running my eyes along each incident one at a time, simply and naturally, bringing him to see what the public opinion of him is and counteracting his flatterers.

(There is not one of us who would not be worse than our kings if he were constantly corrupted by that riff-raff as they are. How could it not be so if Alexander, that great king and philosopher, could not protect himself from them?)

I would have had enough loyalty, judgement and frankness for that. It would be an office without a name, otherwise it would lose its efficacy and grace. And it is a role that cannot be played as well by one man as another. For truth itself is not privileged to be used at any time and in any circumstances. The telling of it, noble though it is, has its boundaries and limits. The world being what it is, it often happens that someone lets a truth slip into a prince's ear, not merely doing no good but doing harm, and indeed committing an injustice. No-one will ever convince me that a perfectly righteous rebuke may not be offered wrongly, or that the interest of the substance should not often yield to the interest of the form.

For this occupation, I would want a man who is content with his fortune—'Who would be what he is, desiring nothing more' [Martial]— and born to a middle rank. For one thing, his middling station would make it easier for him to communicate with all sorts of people; for another, he would not be afraid to strike deep, lively blows into his master's mind for fear of losing his chance to rise higher. [C] And I would want *one* man to be appointed; for to scatter the privilege of such frankness and familiarity over *many* would create a damaging lack of respect. Indeed, I would require that one man to be someone who could, above all, be trusted to keep quiet.

[B] A king is not to be believed when he boasts of his steadfastness as he waits to encounter the enemy (in the interests of his glory) if he cannot (in the interests of his own virtue and improvement) tolerate the frank words of

a friend, words that have no other power than to make his ears smart, any other effects of them being in his own hands. Now, there is no category of man who has as much need of such true and frank counsels as kings do. They sustain a life lived in public and have to suit the opinions of a great many spectators: yet, since it is customary to conceal from them anything that disturbs their plans, they discover that they have, quite unawares, come to be loathed by their subjects for reasons that they could often have avoided (without even any loss to their pleasures) if they had been warned in time and corrected. Usually their favourites look out for themselves more than for their master; and this serves them well, for in truth most of duties of real friendship are hard and dangerous to attempt towards the sovereign, so that not only much good-will and frankness are needed but also considerable courage.

·SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE MEDICAL PROFESSION·

This jumble that I am scribbling here is nothing but a record of the *essais* [see Glossary] of my life; where the mind's health is concerned, it is exemplary enough if its instructions are taken in reverse! But where the body's health is concerned, no-one can supply more useful experience than I, who present it pure, not at all corrupted or worsened by art or by theorising. In the case of medicine, experience is on its own dunghill, where reason yields the whole field to it. Tiberius said that anyone who had lived for twenty years should be responsible for knowing, without medical aid, which things are harmful to his health and which are beneficial. [C] He might have learned that from Socrates, who—advising his followers to attend assiduously and devotedly to their health—added that if a man of intelligence was careful about his exercise, eating and drinking, it would be difficult for

him not to know better than any doctor what was good or bad for him.

[B] Certainly medicine professes always to have experience as the touchstone of its performance. So Plato was right to say that for someone to be a true physician he must have passed through all the illnesses he wants to cure and through all the symptoms and conditions he has to give an opinion on. It is reasonable that they should catch the pox if they want to know how to cure it! I would truly trust one who did; for the others pilot us like a man who remains seated at his table, painting seas, reefs and harbours, making a model boat 'sail' over them in absolute safety. Pitch him into the real thing and he doesn't know how to go about it. . . .

I have lived long enough to give an account of the regimen that has led me this far. Should anyone want to try it, I have tasted it first as his cupbearer! Here are a few items as memory supplies them. [C] I have no practice that hasn't been varied according to circumstances, but I note here those that I have most often seen at work and that have had most hold on me right up to this moment.

[B] My regimen is the same in sickness as in health: I use the same bed, same timetable, same food and same drink. I make absolutely no adjustments except for varying the amounts according to my strength and appetite. For me *health* means maintaining my usual condition without disturbance. . . . There is nothing I believe so certainly as this: that I cannot be harmed by practices that I have so long been accustomed to. *Habit* is what gives shape to our lives, whatever shape it likes; it is all-powerful in such matters; it is the cup of Circe,<sup>1</sup> which changes our nature as it sees fit. How many nations there are, at no great distance from us, who regard as ridiculous the fear of night dew that we find

<sup>1</sup> [In the *Odyssey*, supposedly by Homer, Circe was a sorceress who turned Odysseus's crew into swine.]

obviously harmful; and our boatmen and peasants laugh at it. You make a German ill if you put him to bed on a straw mattress, as you do an Italian on a feather one, or a Frenchman without bed-curtains or a fire. The stomach of a Spaniard cannot tolerate the way we eat: nor can ours the way the Swiss drink.

I was amused when a German in Augsburg attacked our open hearths, emphasizing their drawbacks with the same arguments that we ordinarily use against their stoves. And it is true that •their stifling heat and •the smell produced by the materials they are made of gives headaches to most of those who are not used to them; not to me. But on the other hand this heat is even, constant and general, without flame, without smoke, and without the draught that our open chimneys bring us; it has plenty of grounds for standing comparison with ours.

(Why don't we imitate the architecture of the Romans? For it is said that in antiquity fire was lit only *outside* the houses and at the foot of them; from there hot air was drawn into all the house through pipes built into the thickness of the walls surrounding the areas to be heated. I have seen that clearly indicated somewhere in Seneca, I forget where.)

That man in Augsburg, on hearing me praise the comforts and beauties of his city (which indeed merited it), started to pity me because I had to leave it; among the chief inconveniences he cited to me was the heavy-headedness that the fireplaces elsewhere would cause me. He had heard somebody make this complaint and linked it with us, custom preventing him from noticing it at home.

Any heat coming from a fire makes me weak and drowsy. Evenus said that fire was life's best condiment; but it is my

least favourite way of escaping the cold.

We are afraid of wine from the bottom of the barrel; in Portugal its aroma has them in raptures; it is the drink of princes.

In short, each nation has many customs and practices which another nation not only does not *have* but regards as barbarous and a cause of wonder.

•AN ASIDE ON BOOKS AND TRADITION• What are we to do with this populace that will receive only printed testimony, that won't believe men if they are not in print, or truth unless it be properly aged? [C] We set our stupidities in dignity when we set them in print. [B] For it—this populace—there is far more weight in saying 'I have read. . . ,' than in saying 'I have heard tell. . . .' But I—

- who do not disbelieve men's tongues any more than their pens, who
- know that people write as injudiciously as they speak, and who
- esteem this age as much as any past one

—am just as willing to rely on a friend of mine as on Aulus Gellius or Macrobius, and on what I have seen as on what they have written. [C] And just as they say that virtue is not greater for being longer, I similarly reckon that truth is no wiser for being more ancient.

[B] I often say that it is pure stupidity that sets us chasing after foreign and scholarly exemplars. They are as fruitful now as they were in the times of Homer and Plato.<sup>1</sup> But aren't we trying to impress people by our quotations rather than by the truth of what they say? As though it were a greater thing to borrow our proofs from the bookshops of Vascosan and Plantin than from what can be seen in our

<sup>1</sup> [Two previous translators took Montaigne to be saying that they are as *abundant* now as etc.; but the French speaks of their *fertilité*, which doesn't mean 'abundance'; and the sentence in that meaning of it is silly, and doesn't contrast with the next sentence (starting with 'But').]

village! Or is it that we don't have the wit to select and evaluate what happens in front of us and and to judge it keenly enough to draw examples from it? For if we say that we lack the authority needed to produce faith in our testimony, we are off the point. Because in my opinion the most ordinary, commonplace and familiar things, if we could present them in their proper light, can form the greatest of nature's wonders and the most amazing examples, notably on the subject of human actions. ·END OF ASIDE ON BOOKS AND TRADITION·

·DIVERSITY IN WAYS OF LIFE·

Now, on this topic of mine (leaving aside the examples I know from books <sup>[C]</sup> and what Aristotle said of Andro of Argos, that he crossed the arid sands of Libya without drinking), <sup>[B]</sup> a nobleman who has performed honourably in several occupations said in my presence that he had journeyed without drinking from Madrid to Lisbon in the height of summer. He is vigorous for his age, and there is nothing extraordinary in his way of life except that he can go for two or three months—indeed, for a year, he has told me—without drinking. He feel thirst but lets it pass; he holds that it is a craving that easily weakens by itself. He drinks more on impulse than from necessity or for enjoyment.

Here is another example. Not long ago I came across one of the most learned men in France, a man of more than moderate wealth, studying in a corner of a hall that had been partitioned off for him with tapestries; and around him the racket of his undisciplined menservants. He told me—<sup>[C]</sup> and Seneca said much the same of himself—<sup>[B]</sup> that he found their hubbub useful: it was as though when battered by that din he could withdraw and close in on himself so as to meditate, and that those turbulent voices hammered his thoughts right in. [An account of how he had acquired this

habit in his student days, and an anecdote about Socrates' ability to think amid noise, with the comment 'I am quite the opposite; my mind is delicate and easy to distract; when it is absorbed in itself, the least buzzing of a fly murders it.' Followed by remarks about Seneca's attitude to luxury, ending with:] That which the customs of his day led him to count as an austerity our own make us think of as an indulgence.

Look at the difference between my farm-labourers' life and mine. Scythians and Indians have nothing more remote from my powers or my ways. I know I have taken some boys out of begging and into my service; soon afterwards they left me—both my cuisine and their livery—just to return to their former life. I came across one of them gathering mussels from a ditch for his dinner; neither by entreaty nor by threats could I pull him away from the sweet savour he found in poverty. Beggars have their distinctions and their pleasures as do rich men, and, so it is said, their own political dignities and orders.

·THE POWER OF HABIT·

These are effects of habit. It can it can shape us not only

- to whatever form it pleases (which is why, say the wise, we should choose the best form, which habit will promptly make easy for us), but also
- for change and variation (which is the noblest and most useful of its teachings).

The best of my bodily qualities is that I am flexible and not very stubborn; some of my inclinations are more proper to me than others, more usual and more agreeable, but with very little effort I turn away from them and easily slip into the opposite style.

A young man ought to shake up his rules in order to awaken his powers and stop them from getting mouldy and

stale. And no way of life is more feeble and stupid than one guided by rules and instilled habit: 'Does he want to be borne as far as the first milestone? Then he consults his almanack to find out the best time. Has he got a sore in the corner of an eye? Then he consults his horoscope before buying some ointment.' [Juvenal] He will often plunge even into excess, if he takes my advice. Otherwise, the least debauch will ruin him; he will make himself disagreeable and clumsy in society. The most unsuitable quality in an honest man [see Glossary] is to be over-fastidious and tied to one idiosyncratic way of life—one with his individual stamp on it. And it is idiosyncratic if it is not pliable and supple. It is shameful for a man to keep from doing what he sees his companions do, because he cannot or dares not. Such men should stay in their kitchens! In anyone else it is unbecoming; but in a military man it is vile and intolerable; he, as Philopoemen said, should get accustomed to all kinds of life's changes and hardships.

Although I was trained as much as possible for freedom and adaptability, nevertheless as I grow old I have carelessly let myself become fixed in certain forms. (My age is past training, and now has no other concern than to hold its own.) Without my noticing it, custom has imprinted its stamp on me in some things, doing this so well that I regard as *excess* any departure from it. I cannot, without great effort,

- sleep by day,
- eat between meals,
- eat breakfast,
- go to bed after supper without a considerable interval  
[C] of about three hours,
- [B] make children except before going to sleep, or make them standing up,
- remain soaking with sweat,

- drink either water or wine unmixed,
- remain for long with my head uncovered, or
- have my haircut after dinner.

[He adds some further *molleses* [= 'niceties' or 'weaknesses'], mainly concerning the conduct of meals.]

·BODILY NEEDS AND MEDICAL INTRUSIONS·

[B] I owe many such *molleses* to habit, but nature has also brought me some, such as not being able to stand more than two full meals a day without overloading my stomach, or to have no meal go without filling myself with wind, parching my mouth and upsetting my appetite; and suffering from too long exposure to evening dew. During these last few years when military duties involve (as often happens) a whole night on some military task, my stomach begins to bother me after five or six hours; I have a splitting headache and don't get through the night without vomiting. Then while the others go to breakfast, I go to bed; and after a sleep I am as cheerful as before.

I had always understood that evening dew formed early in the night; but for some years I was often closely in touch with a nobleman who is imbued with the belief that such dew is more severe and dangerous two or three hours before sunset (when he carefully avoids going out) and he regards the night-time dew as negligible. He imprinted this on me—not so much his opinion but his feeling.

What are we to make of the fact that even doubt and research strikes our imagination and changes us? Those who yield suddenly to these propensities bring total ruin on themselves. I am sorry for several gentlemen who, through the stupidity of their doctors, they shut themselves up indoors while still young and healthy. It would be better to suffer a cold than to lose the enjoyment of social life forever, through disuse, by giving up such a general practice



·as going out at night· . . . Let us extend our hold on things by every means. Usually if you stubborn things out you toughen yourself, correcting your constitution, as Caesar did his epilepsy, lessening it by treating it as negligible. We should conform to the best rules, but not enslave ourselves to them except in such cases (if there are any) in which such slavery is useful.

·ASIDE ON MOVING ONE'S BOWELS.· Both kings and philosophers excrete; and so do ladies. Public lives are devoted to ceremony; mine, obscure and private, avails itself of all the natural ways of relieving oneself; also, being a soldier and a Gascon are qualities that somewhat tend towards openness. And so of that activity I shall say that it needs to be •consigned to a set **time** at night to which we should subject ourselves by force of habit, as I have done; but not (as I have done as I grow old) •subject ourselves to a concern for a particularly comfortable **place** and seat for this function and •make it tiresome by slowness and fastidiousness.

All the same, is it not somewhat excusable to require more care and cleanliness for our dirtiest functions? <sup>[C]</sup> 'By nature man is a clean and neat creature' [Seneca]. Of all the natural functions, that is the one I am least willing to have interrupted. <sup>[B]</sup> I have known many military men inconvenienced by the irregularity of their bowels. My bowels and I never fail to keep our rendezvous, which is when I jump out of bed, unless some urgent business or illness disturbs us. ·END OF ASIDE ON MOVING ONE'S BOWELS.·

So, as I was saying, my only judgment about how the sick are best treated is that they should keep to the pattern of life in which they have been brought up and trained. *Any* change is disturbing and hurtful. . . . Yet the sick are prescribed a way of life that is not only new but contrary ·to their old one·, a switch that a healthy man could not endure. Prescribe water for a 70-year-old Breton; shut a sailorman

up in vapour-bath; forbid a Basque manservant to go for walks! They are deprived of motion and finally of breath and the light of day: 'Is life worth that much?' someone wrote, And: 'We are compelled to deprive our souls of what they are used to; to stay alive we must cease to live! Should I regard as still alive those men for whom the air they breathe and the light they are guided by have become a burden?' [Maximianus] If the caretakers of the sick do no other good, they do at least prepare their patients early for death, gradually undermining and cutting off their enjoyment of life.

When healthy and when ill, I have willingly let myself follow my urgent appetites. I give great authority to my desires and inclinations. I do not like curing one ill by another; I hate remedies that are more burdensome than the disease. Being •subjected to colic [see Glossary] and •made to abstain from the pleasure of eating oysters—that's two ills for one. The illness hurts us on one side, the diet on the other. Since we are at risk of being wrong, let us risk what gives us pleasure! The ·social· world does the reverse, thinking that nothing does you good unless it hurts; it is suspicious of ease.

In many things my appetite has of its own accord quite happily accommodated and adapted itself to the well-being of my stomach. When I was young I liked the tartness and pungency of sauces; my stomach being subsequently troubled by them, my taste for them at once followed its lead. <sup>[C]</sup> Wine is bad for the sick: it is the first thing I lose my taste for ·when I am unwell·, my tongue finding it unpleasant, invincibly unpleasant. <sup>[B]</sup> Anything the taste of which I find unpleasant does me harm; nothing that I swallow hungrily and with zest harms me. I have never been harmed by anything I have done that was really pleasant to me. And that is why I have to a large extent made medical prescriptions give way to my pleasure.

·ASIDE ON MONTAIGNE'S ENTRY INTO SEX:· When I was young—when shining Cupid flew here and there about me, resplendent in his saffron tunic' [Catullus]—I yielded as freely and as thoughtlessly as anyone to the desire that then held me in its grip, 'and I fought not without glory' [Horace], though more in continuation and endurance than in brief intensity. . . . There is indeed some worry and wonder in confessing at what tender an age I chanced to fall first into Cupid's power. It was indeed by chance, for it was long before the age of choice and knowledge. I do not remember anything about myself back then. . . . ·END OF ASIDE·

The physicians usually adjust their rules, beneficially, to the violence of the sharp cravings that come upon sick people; no great desire can be thought of that is so strange and vicious that nature is not involved in it. And then, what a great thing it is to satisfy the imagination. In my opinion that faculty is all-important, or at least more important than any other. The most grievous and frequent of ills are those that imagination loads on us. From several points of view I like that Spanish saying *Defienda me Dios de my* ['God save me from myself']. When I am ill, what I lament is that I have no desire that gives me the satisfaction of satisfying it; ·if I had such a desire·, medicine would hardly stop me from attending to it. And when I am well; I now have scarcely anything left to hope for or to want. It is miserable to be slack and feeble even in one's wishes!

The art of medicine is not so fixed that we cannot find some authority for doing whatever we do. Medicine changes according to the climate, according to the phases of the moon, according to Fernel and according to Scaliger [physicians to Henry II]. If your doctor does not find it good for you to sleep, to use wine or some particular food, don't worry; I will find you another who does not agree with him. There's no limit to the variety of medical arguments and opinions. I saw a

wretched patient, weak and dying of thirst as part of his cure, who was later laughed at by another doctor who condemned that treatment as harmful. Hadn't his suffering been to some purpose? Well there is a practitioner of that trade who recently died of the stone, and who had availed himself of extreme abstinence to fight his illness; his colleagues say that on the contrary this fasting had dried him up and baked the gravel [see Glossary] in his kidneys.

I have noticed that when I am wounded or sick, talking excites me and does me as much harm as anything wrong that I do. Speaking takes it out of me and tires me, since my voice is loud and strained, so that when I have needed to have a word in the ear of the great on weighty affairs, I have often put them to the trouble of asking me to lower it.

The following tale is worth a digression. Someone in one of the Greek schools used to talk loudly as I do. The master of ceremonies sent word to tell him to speak lower. 'Let him send me', he replied, 'word of the tone he wants me to adopt.' The master replied that he should take his tone from the ears of the man he was addressing. That was well said, provided it is taken to mean: 'Speak according to the business you have with your hearer.' For if it means 'It is enough that he hears you' or 'Be guided by him', I do not think he was right. The tone and movement of the voice contribute to the expression of my meaning; it is up to me to control them so as to be understood.

There is a voice for instructing, a voice for flattering, a voice for scolding. I want my voice not only to reach the man but perhaps to strike him or pierce him. When I am barking at my footman with a rough and harsh voice, a fine thing it would be if he said to me 'Speak more softly, Master. I hear you quite well!' <sup>(C)</sup> 'There is a kind of voice that impresses the hearer not by its volume but its peculiar quality' [Quintilian]. <sup>(B)</sup> Speech belongs half to the speaker, half to the hearer. The

latter must prepare himself to receive it according to how it moves; just as among those who play hand-ball the receiver steps back and makes ready according to the movements of the striker and the form of his stroke.

·URGING PATIENCE WITH ONE'S ILLNESSES·

Experience has also taught me that we are ruined by impatience. Evils have their life and their limits, <sup>[C]</sup> their maladies and their good health.

The constitution of illnesses is formed on the pattern of the constitution of animals. They have their fortune and their days limited from their birth; anyone who tries imperiously to shorten them by forcefully interrupting their course lengthens and multiplies them, stimulating them instead of quietening them down. I am of Crantor's opinion that we should neither resist illnesses stubbornly and rashly nor succumb to them out of weakness, but give way to them naturally, according to their condition and our own. <sup>[B]</sup> We should give free passage to diseases, and I find that they stay less long with me, who let them go their way; and I have rid myself of some that are held to be the most tenacious and stubborn, doing this through their own decline, with no help and without the art of medicine, and against its prescriptions. Let us allow Nature to do something! She understands her business better than we do.—'But so-and-so died of it!'—So will you, if not of that illness then of some other. And how many with three doctors on their tails have nevertheless died of it? Precedent is a hazy mirror, reflecting all things in all ways. If the medicine tastes nice, take it; that is always that amount of immediate gain. <sup>[C]</sup> I will not jib at its name or colour if it is delicious and whets my appetite for it. Pleasure is a principal kind of profit.

<sup>[B]</sup> I have allowed to grow old and die a natural death within me: colds, gouty discharges, diarrhoea, palpitations of the

heart, migraines, and other ailments; I lost them just when I had half-trained myself to harbour them. They are conjured away better by courtesy than by defiance. We should quietly suffer the laws of our condition. We are born to grow old, to grow weak and to fall ill, despite all medicine. That is the first lesson the Mexicans teach their children when, on leaving their mother's womb, they greet them thus: 'Child, you have come into the world to endure; endure, suffer, and keep quiet.'

It is unjust to moan because something has happened to one that can happen to anyone: <sup>[C]</sup> 'If anything is unjustly decreed against you alone, that is the time to complain' [Seneca]. <sup>[B]</sup> Look at this old man praying God to keep him entirely healthy and strong—that is to say, to restore his youth. 'You fool! What do you hope to gain by such useless, childish prayers?' [Ovid]. Is it not madness? His condition does not allow it. <sup>[C]</sup> Gout, gravel and indigestion go with long years just as heat, wind and rain go with long journeys. Plato does not believe that Aesculapius was at pains to provide remedies to prolong life in a weak and wasted body, useless to its country, useless to its vocation and useless for producing healthy robust sons. He does not find such a concern consistent with divine justice and wisdom, which should guide all things to utility. <sup>[B]</sup> My good man, it is over; nobody can put you back on your feet; at most they will bandage and prop you up for a bit, <sup>[C]</sup> prolonging your misery an hour or so. . . .

<sup>[B]</sup> We should learn to endure what we cannot avoid. Our life is composed, like the harmony of the world, of contrary things as well as of different tones—sweet and harsh, sharp and flat, soft and loud. If a musician liked only some of them, what would he have to say? He should know how to use *all* of them and blend them together. So too should we with good and ill, which are of one substance with our life. Our

existence is impossible without this mixture, and one strand is no less necessary for it than the other. . . .

I do little consulting about the ailments that I feel, for those ·medical· fellows are domineering when they have you at their mercy: they take over your ears with their prognostics. Once, taking advantage of me when I was weak and ill, they treated me insultingly with their dogmas and their masterly frowns, threatening me now with great suffering, now with imminent death. I was not floored by them, or dislodged from my place; but I was jolted and jostled. If my judgement was neither changed nor confused by them, it was at least preoccupied. It—·medical consultation·—is always agitation and struggle.

Now, I treat my imagination as gently as I can, and would relieve it, if I could, of all trouble and conflict. We should help it, stroke it, and deceive it if we can. My intellect is suited to this service: it never runs out of plausible arguments for anything. If it persuaded as well as it preaches, it would help me out most happily.

·MONTAIGNE'S INTELLECT MAKES LIGHT OF HIS KIDNEY-STONES·

Would you like an example? It—·my intellect·—tells me:

- that it is for my own good that I have the stone; that structures as old as I am are naturally subject to seepage (it is time they began to totter apart and decay; that is a common necessity, otherwise would not some new miracle have been performed just for me? I am paying the debt due to old age and could not get off more lightly);

- that the company I have should console me, since I have fallen into the most routine illness for men of my age (on all sides I see them afflicted by the same kind of illness, and

their companionship honours me, since that malady likes to go after the aristocracy: its essence is noble and dignified); and

- that few of the men who are stricken with it get off more lightly—and they pay the penalty of a nasty diet and unpleasant daily doses of medicine, whereas I owe everything to my good fortune. . . . For that easy and abundant discharge of gravel which I have often been granted by the kindness of nature, those men had to pay a thousand vows to Aesculapius and as many crowns to their doctor. [C] (Even the propriety of my behaviour in ordinary company is untroubled, and I can hold my urine for ten hours at a time—as long as the next man.)

[B] ‘The fear of this illness’, it says, ‘used to terrify you when it was unknown to you;’<sup>1</sup> the cries and despair of those who make it worse by their lack of fortitude created a horror of it in you. This illness afflicts the parts of your body by which you have most sinned. You are a man with some sense of right and wrong: ‘Only undeserved punishment comes with cause for anger’ [Ovid]. Reflect on this punishment; it is mild indeed compared with others, and shows fatherly kindness. Reflect on how late it appeared; it occupies with its vexations only the season of your life that is wasted and barren anyway, having held off, as if by agreement, from the excesses and pleasures of your youth,

‘The fear and pity felt by people for this illness gives you material for vainglory. You may have purged your judgement and cured your reason of this quality, but your friends still recognize a tincture of it in your make-up. There is pleasure in hearing them say about you: “There’s fortitude for you! There’s long-suffering!” They see you sweating under the

<sup>1</sup> [From here to the mention of the Styx on the next page, Montaigne’s whitewashing intellect is speaking to him; mostly using the familiar *tu*, which occurs hardly anywhere else in this essay.]

strain [and he lists various fairly horrible signs of the illness], while you converse with those about you, keeping your usual expression, occasionally joking with your servants, holding up your side in a tense argument, making excuses for your pain and minimizing your suffering.

‘Do you remember those men of past times who greedily sought out troubles so as to keep their virtue in trim and to practise it? Put the case that nature is carrying and pushing you into that glorious school, which you would never have entered of your own free will. If you tell me that yours is a dangerous and mortal disease, what others are not? For it is a doctor’s trick to pick out some which they say do not go in a direct line towards death; what does it matter if they only lead there incidentally, floundering along by-ways in the same direction as the road that leads us there?’

[C] ‘You are not dying because you are ill; you are dying because you are alive. Death kills you well enough without help from illness. In some cases illnesses have postponed death, the sick living longer precisely because it seemed to them that they were dying. Just as some wounds are medicinal and salutary, so too are some illnesses.’

[B] ‘Colic is often as tenacious of life as you<sup>1</sup> are; we know of men in whom it has lasted from childhood to extreme old age; and it would have gone along with them further if they had not deserted it. You kill it more than it kills you. And if it did present you with the idea of imminent death, wouldn’t it be doing a good turn to a man of such an age ·as yours· to bring him back to thoughts about his end?’

[C] ‘And, what is worse, you have no reason left to want to be cured. Come what may, the common fate will call you any day. [B] Reflect on how skilfully and gently your colic makes you lose your taste for life and detaches you from

the world, not compelling you by •tyrannical subjection—like many other afflictions that you see in old people, which keep them continually fettered, with no relief from infirmity and pain—but by •warnings and instructions repeated at intervals, interspersed with long periods of relief, as if to give you the means to meditate on its lesson and to go over it again at leisure. To give you the means to make a sound judgement and to conduct yourself like a brave man, it shows you the state of your whole condition, both good and bad, and on a single day a life that is now very joyful, now unbearable. If you don’t embrace death, at least you shake its hand once a month. [C] That gives you more reason to hope that death will snatch you one day without warning, and that with death having so often brought you as far as the jetty, and with you trusting that you are still on the usual terms ·with it·, you and your trust will have crossed the water [the Styx] unawares. . . .’

·THE ‘BLESSINGS’ OF KIDNEY-STONES·

[B] I am obliged to fortune for so often using the same sort of weapons to attack me; it forms me and trains me for them by use, hardens me and makes me used to them. I now know pretty well what it will cost me to be quit of them.

[C] (Lacking a natural memory, I make one from paper; and when some new symptom occurs in my disease, I write it down. So that now—after I have gone through virtually every kind of episode—when some appalling crisis threatens me, I am no longer at a loss to find, by flipping through my notes (which are disconnected like the leaves of the Sybils), something in my past experience to cheer me up by offering a favourable prognosis.)

<sup>1</sup> [This is *vous*, which can be plural; and twice more in this paragraph. Its last sentence reverts to *tu*.]

[B] Familiarity serves to give me better hopes for the future; this way of voiding ·the stone· has continued for so long now that it is probable that •nature will not change this way ·of doing things· and that •nothing worse will happen in it than what I already feel. Besides, the nature of this illness is not ill-suited to my hasty and impetuous disposition. When it makes mild assaults on me, it frightens me; for then it is ·settling in· for a long time. But by nature it has vigorous and violent spurts; it gives me a thorough shaking up for a day or two.

My kidneys held out for an age without deterioration: it will soon be another age since they changed their condition.<sup>1</sup> Evils have their period, like good things; perhaps this misfortune is at its end. Old age reduces the heat of my stomach, so that it digests things less perfectly and dispatches undigested matter to my kidneys. Why could it not be the case that the heat of my kidneys has. . . .been similarly reduced, •making them unable to continue to petrify my phlegm and •obliging nature to find some other means of purging it? It is clear that the passing years have made some of my rheums dry up; why not then those excretions that provide the raw material for the gravel?

But is there anything as sweet as that sudden revolution when I pass from the extreme pain of voiding my stone and recover in a flash the beautiful light of health, full and free, as happens in our sudden and sharpest colic attacks? Is there anything in that suffered pain that can outweigh the joy of so prompt a recovery? How much more beautiful health seems to me after illness, when they are such close neighbours that I can study each in the other's presence, each in its full armour, defying each other as though intending to have a head-on battle. Just as the Stoics say that the vices are

useful for making virtue prized and helping it along, we can say—with better justification and less risk of error—that nature has lent us suffering for the honour and service of pleasure and painlessness. . . .

The worst thing I see in other maladies is that they are less grievous in their immediate effects than in what comes later: one spends a year convalescing, all the time full of weakness and fear. The route to recovery is so hazardous, with so many levels, that it is never done; before they have unmuffled you of a scarf, and then of a cap; before they have allowed you to return to the enjoyment of

- fresh air,
- wine,
- your wife,
- melons,

it is quite something if you have not relapsed into some new misery. My illness has this privilege: ·when it leaves· it makes a clean break. The others always leave some imprint and change for the worse, which makes the body susceptible to some fresh woe; they lend each other a hand. We can condone illnesses that are content with their own possession of us without extending it or introducing their sequels. But those whose journey through us produces some useful result are ·not merely condonable but· courteous and gracious. Since my colic ·began·, I find myself freed from other ailments—more, it seems to me, than I was before. I have not had a fever since! I reason that the frequent and extreme vomiting I suffer purges me, and that the losses of appetite and unusual fastings I go through digest my morbid humours, and nature voids in those stones its superfluous and harmful matter.

Do not tell me that this is a medicine too dearly bought.

<sup>1</sup> [In one of the manuscript sources the two 'ages' are given as 40 and 14 years respectively.]

What about those stinking potions, cauterizations, incisions, sweat-baths, diets and those many forms of treatment that often bring death upon us because we cannot withstand their violence? So when I have an attack, I regard it as medicine; when freed from it, I regard that as a lasting and complete deliverance.

Another blessing of my illness in particular is that it pretty much gets on with its own business and lets me get on with mine unless I lack courage. In its greatest throes, I have held out for ten hours on horseback. I could have said to myself: 'Just put up with it! You need no other regimen; play, dine, ride, do this and then do that if you can: your indulgences will do more good than harm.' Say that to a man with syphilis, the gout or a hernia! The constraints of other illnesses are more all-embracing: they restrict our activities, upset our way of life, and require every aspect of our lives to take account of them. Mine only pinches the skin; it leaves your understanding and your will at your disposal, and your tongue, and your hands, and your feet. It awakens you rather than putting you to sleep. It is the soul that is attacked by a burning fever, floored by epilepsy, dislocated by an intense migraine—and, in short, struck senseless by all the illnesses that hurt the whole body and the noblest organs. Here (in my colic) it is not attacked. If things go badly for it, that is its own fault; it is betraying, surrendering and disarming itself.

Only fools let themselves be persuaded that this solid, massy substance concocted within our kidneys can be dissolved by draughts of medicine. So, once it starts to move, there is nothing to do but to give it passage; it will take it anyway.

I notice also another particular advantage: it is an illness in which we have little to guess about. It spares us the infinitely distressing turmoil into which other ills

cast us through uncertainty about their causes, properties and progress. We have no need listen to the opinions of specialists; our senses show us *what* it is and *where* it is.

With such arguments, both strong and feeble, I try, as Cicero did with the affliction that was his old age, to benumb and delude my power of thought and to put ointment on its wounds. And tomorrow, if they grow worse, we will provide other escape-routes for them.

[In a <sup>[C]</sup>-tagged paragraph Montaigne reports a more recent change—a nasty one—in his illness, and says that he 'got much the better of it'. Then:] Can I feel something crumbling? Do not expect me to waste time having my pulse and urine checked so as to take some botherome precaution; I will be in time to *feel* the anguish without prolonging it through the anguish of fear. <sup>[C]</sup> Anyone who is afraid of suffering is *already* suffering fear.

Besides, the uncertainty and ignorance of those who presume to explain the workings of nature and its inner processes, and the many false prognostications of their art, force us to recognize that nature has utterly unknown ways of its own. There is great uncertainty, variability and obscurity in its promises and threats. Except for old age (which is an undoubted sign of the approach of death), in all our other ailments I see few signs of the future on which we can base our predictions.

<sup>[B]</sup> I judge myself from actual sensation, not from reasoning; what good would reasoning do, since I intend to use only waiting and endurance. Do you want to know how much I gain from that? Look at those who act otherwise, and who rely on so many different persuasions and counsels: how often their imagination oppresses them without help from the body! Many times when I was safe and free from these dangerous attacks, I have enjoyed consulting doctors about them as though one was just starting. I endured the doom

of their horrible conclusions in great comport, and remained that much •more indebted to God for his mercy and •better instructed in the vanity of that art.

[A paragraph about the importance of activity for the young, and the dangers to everyone of having too much sleep.]

·HOW MONTAIGNE COPES WITH OLD AGE·

I like a hard bed all to myself, indeed without my wife (royal fashion!), pretty well covered up. My bed is never warmed, but since I have grown old they give me, whenever I need them, coverlets to warm my feet and stomach. . . . If I am fastidious about anything in my way of life, it is more about sleeping than anything else; but on the whole I yield to necessity, and adjust to it, as well as anyone. Sleep has taken up a large part of my life, and even at my age I sleep eight or nine hours at a stretch. I am ridding myself of this propensity towards laziness, and am obviously the better for it. I feel some effect of this change, but after three days it is gone. And I know hardly anyone who can live with less sleep when the need arises, who keeps working more continuously, or for whom drudgery is less of a burden.

My body is capable of sustained exertions but not of sudden, violent ones. These days I avoid activities that are violent and make me sweat: my limbs get tired before they become warm. I stay on my feet for a whole day, and I don't weary of walking. Over paved roads, however, I have since my youth preferred to go on horseback; when on foot I get muddy right up to my buttocks; and in our streets small men are liable to be jostled and elbowed aside, for want of an imposing appearance. And I have always liked to rest, lying or seated, with my legs at least as high as the bench.

No occupation is as enjoyable as soldiering—an occupation both noble in its practice (since valour is the strongest,

most magnanimous and proudest of all the virtues) and noble in its purpose: no service is more just and universal than protecting the peace and greatness of one's country.

You enjoy

- the comradeship of so many noble, young and active men,
- the regular sight of so many sublime dramas,
- the freedom of straightforward companionship,
- a manly, informal mode of life,
- the diversion of hundreds of different activities,
- the heart-stirring sound of martial music which delights your ears and arouses your soul, as well as
- the honour of this activity, even its severity and hardship,

[C] which Plato rates so low in his Republic that he allocates a share in them to women and children. As a volunteer soldier, [B] you •assign to yourself particular tasks and risks according to your judgement of their brilliance and their importance; and •see when life itself may justifiably be sacrificed to them: 'It is indeed beautiful, I think, to die in battle' [Virgil].

To be afraid of the common risks that beset so great a throng, to not dare to do what so many kinds of souls dare, is for a heart immeasurably weak and base. Comradeship gives confidence even to children. If others surpass you in knowledge, in grace, in strength or in fortune, you have external causes to blame; but if you yield to them in fortitude of soul, you have only yourself to blame. Death is more abject, lingering and painful in bed than in combat; fevers and catarrhs are as painful and as fatal as volleys from harquebuses. Anyone who could bear with valour the mischances of ordinary life would have no need for more courage to become a soldier. . . .

[B] I was born with all my senses intact and virtually perfect. My stomach is comfortably sound, and so is my



head; both usually hold up during my bouts of fever. The same applies to my respiration. I have exceeded the birthday that some nations have not unreasonably laid down as the termination of life, one so just that nobody was permitted to go beyond it.<sup>1</sup> Yet I still have remissions which, though short and variable, are so flawless that they lack nothing of that pain-free health of my youth. I am not speaking of liveliness and vigour; it is not reasonable that *they* should accompany me beyond their limits: 'I can no longer endure waiting on a doorstep in the pouring rain' [Horace].

My face immediately betrays me, and my eyes; all changes in me begin there, and seem a little worse than they really are. My friends often pity me before I am aware of any cause. My looking-glass does not alarm me, because even in my youth I would sometimes have—as I do now—a muddy complexion and an ill-omened look, without serious consequences; so that the doctors, finding inside me no cause for that outward deterioration, attributed it to my mind and to some secret passion gnawing away within me.

·THE SOUL IN A SICK BODY·

They were wrong. My body and I would get on rather better if it obeyed my orders as much as my soul does! Back then, my soul was not only free from muddiness but was full of joy and satisfaction—as it usually is, half because of its intrinsic nature and half by its design. 'The illnesses of my mind do not affect my joints' [Ovid].

I hold that this disposition of my soul has often helped my body to get up after its falls. My body is often knocked low whereas my soul, even when not merry, is at least calm and tranquil. I had a quartan fever for four or five months, which quite disfigured me; yet my mind still went on its way not merely peacefully but happily. Once the pain has

gone, the weakness and languor do not distress me much. I know of several bodily afflictions which are horrifying even to *name* but which I would fear less than hundreds of current disturbances and distresses of the mind that I see at work in others. I go along with my inability to run; it is enough that I crawl. Nor do I lament the natural decline that has me in its grip. . . .any more than I regret having a life-span that is not as long and massive as an oak's.

I have no cause to complain of my thought-processes; few thoughts in my life have ever disturbed even my sleep, except when concerned with desire (which woke me without distressing me). I do not dream much; and when I do, it is of grotesque things and of chimeras usually produced by pleasant thoughts, more ridiculous than sad. I hold that dreams are indeed faithful interpreters of our inclinations, but it takes skill to classify them and understand them. [C] 'It is not surprising that men find again in their dreams things that occupy them in their lives, things they think about, worry about, gaze upon and do when they are awake' [Accius].

Plato says, furthermore, that it is wisdom's task to extract from dreams information telling of future events. I see nothing in that, except for the wondrous experiences related by Socrates, Xenophon and Aristotle—great men of irreproachable authority. Historians say that the Atlantes never dream. (And that they never eat anything that has been slaughtered, a fact which I mention because it may be why they do not dream; since Pythagoras prescribed a certain preparatory diet designed to encourage appropriate dreams.) Mine are gentle, and do not bring on bodily agitation or talking in my sleep. I have known in my time some who have been astonishingly troubled by their dreams. Theon the philosopher walked while he dreamed. . . .

<sup>1</sup> [A [C] -tagged clause says that this was the 50th birthday, and that Montaigne was six years beyond it.]

·FOOD·

[B] At table I rarely exercise a choice, tackling the first and nearest dish; I do not like shifting about from one taste to another. I dislike a crowd of dishes and courses as much as any other crowd. . . .

I frequently eat salted meats but prefer my bread unsalted; the baker in my own kitchen (contrary to local custom) serves no other at my table. When I was a boy I was corrected mainly for refusing things that are usually best liked at that age: sugar candies, jams and pastries. My tutor opposed this hatred of dainty foods as being itself a kind of daintiness. And indeed it is nothing but finicking over your food, whatever it applies to. Rid a boy of a particular and obstinate love of coarse-bread, bacon or garlic, and you rid him of a finical taste. [The paragraph continues with some rather obscure remarks attacking those who ‘find ordinary everyday foods insipid’. That theme is one strand in what follows:]

·ASIDE ON BRINGING UP BOYS· If I had sons I would readily wish them a fortune like mine. God gave me a good father (who got nothing from me apart from my acknowledgement of his goodness—one cheerfully given); from the cradle he sent me to be brought up in some poor village of his, keeping me there until I was weaned—longer in fact, bringing me up to the commonest and humblest way of life. . . .

Never take on the responsibility for their upbringing yourselves, let alone giving it to your wives; let them be fashioned by fortune, under the laws of the common people and the laws of nature; leave it to custom to train them to frugality and austerity, so that ·in due course· they’ll have to move away from rigorousness rather than struggling to achieve it.

His attitude in this matter also had another goal: to bring me closer to the common-folk and to the class of men who need our help; he reckoned that I was obliged to attend to the man who extends his arms to me rather than to the one who turns his back on me. And the reason why he gave me godparents at baptism drawn from people of the most abject poverty was to bind and attach me to them.

His plan has turned out pretty well. I like doing things for lowly people, either because there is more glory in it or else from natural compassion, which has infinite power over me. [C] The side that I will condemn in these wars of ours I will condemn more harshly when it is flourishing and prosperous; I will be somewhat reconciled to it when I see it wretched and crushed.<sup>1</sup> How I love to reflect on the fine spirit of Chelonis, daughter and wife of kings of Sparta! While her husband Cleombrotus had the edge over her father Leonidas in the conflicts in her city, she acted as a good daughter, rallying to her father in his exile, in his misery, and opposing the victor. Did the odds switch? There she is!, her will changed with the change of fortune, courageously taking the side of her husband, whom she followed wherever his downfall drove him, having, it seems, no choice but to rush to the side where there was more need for her and where she would better show her compassion. . . . ·END OF ASIDE ON BRINGING UP BOYS·

Long sittings at table [C] annoy me and [B] disagree with me, since—lacking better self-control—I go on eating as long as I am there; I probably formed this habit as a boy. That is why at home [C] (even though our meals are among the shorter ones) [B] I like to sit down a little after the others, in the manner of Augustus, though I do not imitate him in leaving before the others. On the contrary: I like to stay on a

<sup>1</sup> [Why ‘will condemn’? Presumably because this concerns the future of the boy whose early upbringing has been under discussion.]

long time afterwards listening to the conversation, provided that I do not join it since I find it tiring and painful to talk on a full stomach, whereas I find it a very healthy and pleasant exercise to shout and argue *before* a meal. [C] The ancient Greeks and Romans had more sense than we: unless some other quite unusual task intervened, they assigned to eating (which is one of the chief activities of our lives) several hours a day and the best part of the night, eating and drinking less hastily than we, who do everything on the run; they prolonged this natural pleasure with greater leisure and enjoyment, interspersing with it various useful and pleasant social duties.

[B] Those who must take care of me could easily deprive me of what they think harmful to me, for in such matters I neither want what is not there nor notice its absence; but they are wasting their time if they lecture me on abstaining from anything that is served. So that when I resolve to diet, I have to be set apart from the other diners, and served precisely what is needed for the prescribed meal; for if I sit down at table I forget my resolution. . . .

·OLD AGE AND THE APPROACH OF DEATH·

God is merciful to those from whom he takes away life a little at a time; that is the only benefit of old age. The final death will be all the less total and painful; it will kill only a half or a quarter of a man. Look! There is a tooth of mine that has just fallen out with no pain, no effort; that was the natural end of its duration. That part of my being, as well as several other parts, are already dead; others that are half-dead include the ones that were the most energetic and uppermost in my prime. That is how I melt and slip away from myself. How stupid it would be if my mind felt the last topple of an already advanced decline as though it were the

whole collapse. I hope that won't happen.

[C] In truth, I get one principal consolation from thoughts of my death, namely that it will be right and natural, and that from now on any favour I could demand or hope for from destiny would be illegitimate. People convince themselves that in former times men weren't just taller but lived longer. Yet Solon, who belongs to those times, sets our extreme limit at 70 years. Shall I, who have in all things so greatly honoured that *excellent mean*<sup>1</sup> of former ages, and have taken moderation as the most perfect measure, aspire to an immoderate and prodigious old age? Anything that goes against the current of nature *may* be harmful, but what accords with it *must* always be pleasant. 'Whatever happens in accordance with nature must be counted among the good things' [Cicero]. That is why Plato says that whereas death caused by wounds and illnesses is violent, the death that ambushes us as old age leads us to it is the easiest of all and in a way delightful. 'Young men lose their lives by violence, old men by ripeness' [Cicero].

[B] Everywhere death mingles and fuses with our life: our •decline anticipates its hour, and even shoulders its way into our •rise. I have portraits of myself aged 25 and 35. I compare them with my portrait now; in how many ways is it no longer me! My present likeness is *much* more unlike them than it is unlike what I shall be like in death. It is too much an abuse of nature to drag it along so far that it has to give up on us and abandon our guidance—our eyes, our teeth, our legs and so on—to the mercy of external remedies from the •medical• art, weary of following us.

·MORE ABOUT FOOD AND DRINK·

. . . . Since my youth I have occasionally missed a meal, either •to sharpen my appetite for the next day. . . .or •to conserve

<sup>1</sup> [Montaigne gives it in Greek: *ariston metron*.]

my vigour for the sake of some action of body or mind

(for in me both of these grow cruelly sluggish through repletion: and I hate above everything the stupid coupling of such a healthy and vivacious goddess [Venus] with that little belching dyspeptic god [Bacchus], all bloated by the fumes of his wine);

or •to cure my sick stomach, or •for lack of appropriate company

(since I agree with Epicurus that we should care less about what we eat than about whom we eat with. . . .

No recipe is so pleasing to me, no sauce so appetizing, as those that derive from the company.)

I believe it is healthier to eat more slowly and less, and to eat more often. But I give precedence to appetite and hunger: I would take no pleasure in dragging out three or four puny meals a day, regulated as if I were taking medicine. . . . [C] Let us—especially we old men—seize the first opportunity that comes our way. Let us leave the daily diets to the almanack-makers and to the doctors.<sup>1</sup>

[B] The greatest benefit that good health gives me is sensual pleasure; let us cling to the first pleasure that is present and known. I avoid the regularity in these dietary laws. A man who wants a regimen that serves him must not allow it to go on and on; we become hardened to it; our powers go to sleep in it; after six months you will have so degraded your stomach by it that your only 'profit' will be merely to have lost your freedom to safely depart from it. [[The mid-sentence switch from 'we' to 'you' is Montaigne's. The five occurrences of 'it' in this sentence all refer to the supposedly helpful regimen.]]

·MONTAIGNE'S MANAGEMENT OF HIS ELDERLY PHYSIQUE·

I do not keep my legs and thighs more covered in winter than in summer; silk hose. nothing else. I did allow myself to keep my head warmer to help my rheum, and my stomach warmer to help my colic [see Glossary], but within a few days my ailments grew used to this and disdained my ordinary precautions. So I escalated from a cap to a head-scarf and from a bonnet to a lined hat. The padding of my doublet now only serves as decoration: it is pointless unless I add a layer of rabbit-fur or vulture-skin, and wear a skull-cap under my hat. Pursue that escalation and you will have quite a journey! I'll do nothing of the sort, and would willingly reverse what I have already done if I dared to. Are you falling into some new ailment? That reform of yours is no longer doing you any good; you have grown used to it; look for another! This is how men are undermined when they let themselves become entangled in restricted diets and cling to them superstitiously. They need others, and then others after those; there is no end to it.

For the sake of both work and pleasure, it is far more convenient to do as the ancients did: go without lunch and, so as not to break up the day, put off the feast until the time comes to return home and rest. That is what I used to do; but I have more recently found from experience that on the contrary it is better to eat at lunchtime and that digestion is better when one is awake.

I rarely feel thirsty when I am in good health—nor when ill, though I do get a dry mouth then, yet without a thirst. Normally I drink only for the thirst that comes as I eat, far along into the meal. . . . I water my wine, sometimes half and half, sometimes one-third water. When I am home, by an

<sup>1</sup> Medical astrological almanacks (a legal monopoly of the medical profession) marked particular dates as propitious for certain foods, treatments and so on. [Note by Screech]

ancient practice that my father's doctor prescribed for him (and for himself), what I need is mixed in the wine-cellar two or three hours before serving. <sup>[C]</sup> They say that this custom of mixing wine and water was invented by Cranaus, king of the Athenians—I have heard arguments both for and against its usefulness. I think it more proper and more healthy that boys not drink any wine until they are 16 or 18. <sup>[B]</sup> The most current and common way of living is the finest; in my view all eccentricity is to be avoided; I would hate a German who put water in his wine as much as a Frenchman who drank it pure. The law in such things is common usage.

I am afraid of stagnant air and go in mortal fear of smoke (the first repairs I hastened to make in my place were to the chimneys and privies; defects in these are the usual flaws in old buildings, and are quite intolerable) and I count as hardships of war the thick clouds of dust that gather during a long day's ride in summer. . . .

The rigour of summer is none of an enemy to me than that of winter, for—apart from the discomfort of heat, less easily remedied than that of cold, and apart from the sun's rays beating down on my head—my eyes are affected by any dazzling light; I could not lurch now facing a bright and flaming fire. At the time when I was more in the habit of reading, I used to place a piece of glass over my book to deaden the whiteness of the paper, and I found it quite a relief. Up to now I have no acquaintance with spectacles, and can see as well at a distance as I ever did or as anyone can. It is true that towards nightfall I begin to be aware of blurring and weakness in my reading, an activity that has always strained my eyes, but especially in the evening. <sup>[C]</sup> That is one step backwards, though a barely noticeable one. I shall take another step back, the second followed by a third, the third by a fourth, so gently that I shall have become quite blind before I feel the decadence and old age of my eyesight.

So skilfully do the Fates untwist the thread of our life. I am similarly unwilling to admit that I am on the point of becoming hard of hearing, and you will find that when I am half-deaf I shall still be blaming it on the voices of those who are speaking to me. We must really strain our soul to make it aware of how it is ebbing away.

<sup>[B]</sup> My walk is quick and firm, and I do not know which of the two, my mind and my body, found it harder to fix in one place. Any preacher holds my attention throughout an entire sermon is indeed a friend of mine! On solemn occasions when everyone else maintains a fixed expression and where I have seen ladies keep even their eyes still, I have never succeeded in stopping one of my limbs from jiggling about; although I am seated [*assis*] there, I am hardly settled [*rassis*] there. . . . <sup>[C]</sup> People could have said of me since boyhood that I had craziness in my feet, or quicksilver, so fidgety and restless they are, wherever I place them.

<sup>[B]</sup> It is bad manners, as well as being bad for health and indeed for pleasure, to eat ravenously as I do. In my haste, I often bite my tongue and sometimes my fingers. . . . By this I lose the leisure for talking, which is such a fine seasoning at table—provided that the remarks are appropriate, pleasant, and brief.

There is jealousy and rivalry among our pleasures: they clash and interfere with each other. Alcibiades, a connoisseur of good living, banned even music from his table, lest it interfere with the sweetness of conversation, <sup>[C]</sup> justifying this (according to Plato) by saying that it is the practice of commonplace men to invite players and singers to their feasts since they lack the good talk. . . . with which intelligent men know how to entertain each other.

<sup>[B]</sup> Varro asks this for a banquet: an assembly of people of handsome presence and agreeable conversation, who are neither mute nor garrulous; cleanliness and delicacy in the

food and in the place; serene weather. [C] An enjoyable dinner requires no little skill and provides no little pleasure; great war-leaders and great philosophers have been willing to learn how to arrange one. I happen to remember three such feasts that occurred during my more flourishing days, and that chanced to give me sovereign pleasure because each of the guests contributed to such sovereign delight according to the degree of good temper of body and soul he happened to have. My present condition excludes me from this.

·THE RIGHT ATTITUDE TO PLEASURES AND PAINS·

[B] I, who operate only close to the ground, hate that inhuman ‘wisdom’ that would make us disdainful and hostile towards the care of our bodies. I reckon that it is as injudicious to set our heart against natural pleasures as to set our heart too much on them. [C] Xerxes was a fool to offer a reward to anyone found some new pleasure for him when he was already wrapped in all human pleasure; but hardly less of a fool is the man who cuts back the pleasures that nature has found for him. [B] We should neither hunt them nor run from them; we should *accept* them. I do so with more gusto and better grace<sup>1</sup> and more willingly allow myself to follow a natural inclination. [C] We need not exaggerate their emptiness; that makes itself evident enough, thanks to our kill-joy mind, which disgusts us with them as well as with itself; it treats itself and everything it takes in. . . . according to its own insatiable, erratic and unstable<sup>2</sup> nature: ‘If the jug is not clean, all you pour into it turns sour’ [Horace].

I, who boast of embracing the pleasures of life so sedulously. . . . find virtually nothing but wind in them when I examine them in detail. But what of it? We are all wind. And the wind (wiser than we are) loves to make a noise and move about, and is content with its own role, without wanting stability or solidity, qualities that don’t belong to it.

Some say that the greatest pleasures and pains are those that belong exclusively to the imagination. . . . No wonder! It shapes them to its liking and tailors them for itself out of whole cloth. Every day I see noteworthy and perhaps desirable examples of it. But I, whose constitution is composite and coarse, cannot cling to this single indivisible object so completely as to keep me from grossly pursuing. . . . present pleasures that are sensed through the understanding, understood through the senses. . . .

[This paragraph has seven switches between [B] and [C], silenced in this version.] There some who—from savage stupidity, as Aristotle says—are disgusted by bodily pleasures. I know some who do it from ambition. Why do they not also give up breathing? . . . , Why do they not reject light because it is free and costs them neither ingenuity nor effort? Just to see what happens, let Mars, Pallas or Mercury sustain them instead of Venus, Ceres and Bacchus.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they’ll try to square the circle while perched on their wives! I hate being told to have our minds up in the clouds while our bodies are at the table. I don’t want the mind to be nailed to it—i.e. to the dinner-table—or to wallow at it, but I do want it to attend to it—to sit there, not to go to sleep there.

<sup>1</sup> [This and the next clause require a ‘than’ completion; it may be ‘than I ought’ or ‘than most people do’; take your pick.]

<sup>2</sup> [‘unstable’ is a poor translation of Montaigne’s *versatile*, which the Robert dictionary explains as meaning ‘given to easily changing opinions’; we seem to have no English word for this. All previous translators have used the English ‘versatile’, which is flatly wrong.]

<sup>3</sup> That is, let them live on war (Mars), wisdom (Pallas) or eloquence (Mercury) instead of on sexual intercourse (Venus), corn (Ceres) and wine (Bacchus), the second three representing bodily ‘necessities’. [Note by Screech]

Aristippus championed only the body, as if we had no soul; Zeno embraced only the soul, as if we had no body. Both were wrong. They say that Pythagoras practised a philosophy that was pure contemplation, Socrates one that was all *mœurs* and action, and that Plato found the balance between the two. But they are just making up a story; the true balance is to be found in Socrates; Plato is far more Socratic than Pythagorean, and it better becomes him.

[B] When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep; yes, and when I walk alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts are occupied by other things for part of the time, for another part of the time I bring them back to the walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of this solitude, and to myself. Nature has in a maternal fashion arranged for the actions it imposes on us as necessities also to be pleasurable, urging us towards them not only by reason but by appetite. To infringe its laws is wrong.

When I see Caesar and Alexander, in the thick of their great endeavours, so fully enjoying pleasures [C] that are natural and consequently necessary and right, [B] I do not say that this is relaxing their souls; I say, rather, that it is toughening them, employing the vigour of their spirits to make those violent occupations and burdensome thoughts take second place to the usages of everyday life. [C] ·How· wise ·they would have been· if they had believed that this was their ordinary occupation and the other one—the military one—extraordinary.

We are great fools! ‘He has spent his life in idleness’, we say. ‘I haven’t done a thing today.’—What! Have you not *lived*? That is not only the most basic of your occupations; it is the most illustrious.—‘If I had been set to manage some great affair, I would have shown what I could do.’—Have you been able to think out and manage your own life? ·Then· you have performed the greatest task of all. . . . Our duty is to

compose our *mœurs*, not to compose books; to win order and tranquillity in our conduct, not to win battles and provinces. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately. All other things—ruling, accumulating, building—are at most little appendages and little props [*appendicules et adminicules*].

[B] I delight in coming across an army general, at the foot of a breach that he means soon to attack, giving himself wholly and freely to his dinner and his conversation, among his friends; [C] and Brutus, with heaven and earth conspiring against him and the liberty of Rome, stealing an evening hour from his rounds to read and annotate Polybius with complete composure. [B] It is for little souls, buried under the weight of business, to be unable to detach themselves from it, to leave it and pick it up again: ‘O you strong men who have often undergone worse trials with me, banish care now with wine; tomorrow we shall again sail the vast sea’ [Horace].

Whether as a joke or in earnest, ‘theological wine’ and ‘Sorbonne wine’ have become proverbial, as have their feasts; but I find that the faculty are right to dine all the more comfortably and pleasantly for having used the morning profitably and seriously in the work of their school. The awareness of having used those other hours well is a proper and savoury sauce for the dinner table. That is how the sages lived; and that inimitable straining for virtue that amazes us in both the Catos, severe to the point of rudeness, was a disposition that submitted meekly and contentedly to the laws of the human condition and of Venus and Bacchus; [C] following the precepts of their sect—the stoics—which require the perfect sage to be as expert and versed in the use of the natural pleasures as in any other duty of life: ‘To a discriminating mind let him ally a discriminating palate’ [Cicero].

[Now a couple of pages giving details about the conduct of Epaminondas, Scipio and—especially—Socrates, all de-

scribed as militarily brave and energetic while also giving time to playing with children, collecting sea-shells, writing plays, learning to dance and play musical instruments, and so on. This anecdote about Socrates is memorable: 'He put up for 27 years with hunger and poverty, with loutish sons, with a cantankerous wife and finally with calumny, tyranny, imprisonment, leg-irons and poison. Yet that very man, when the dictates of courtesy made him a guest at a drinking-match, acquitted himself better than anyone else in the army.']

·AGAINST EXTREMISM·

[B] Popular opinion is wrong. It is much easier

- to go along the margins, where the outer edge serves as a limit and a guide, than to take the wide and unhedged middle way; and
- to go by art than to go by nature.

But ·as well as being easier· it is less noble and less commendable. [C] Greatness of soul consists not so much in pressing upward and forward as in knowing how to govern and circumscribe oneself. Such a soul regards as great whatever is adequate, and shows its elevation by preferring moderate things to outstanding ones. [B] Nothing is so fine and so legitimate as playing the man well and properly; no knowledge as hard to acquire as knowledge of how to live this life well [C] and naturally. [B] And the most barbarous of our maladies is to despise our being.

If anyone wants to set his soul apart, let him have the boldness to do so (if he can) while his body is ill, to free it from contagion; at other times, on the contrary, his soul should assist and favour the body, and not refuse to participate in its natural pleasures, bringing to them (if it is wiser than the body) moderation, lest those pleasures merge into pains

through lack of discretion. [C] Lack of temperance is the bane of sensual pleasure; temperance is not its scourge but its seasoning. Eudoxus (for whom pleasure was the sovereign good) and his companions (who rated it at so high a price) savoured it in its most charming sweetness, doing this by means of temperance, which in them was outstanding and exemplary.

[B] I so order my soul that it contemplates both pain and pleasure with a gaze [C] equally self-controlled. . . .and [B] equally steady, yet looking soberly at the one and cheerfully at the other,<sup>1</sup> and, according to its ability, as anxious to extinguish the one as to extend the other. [C] Looking sanely on good things brings with it looking sanely on bad ones. Pain has something unavoidable in its mild beginning, and sensual pleasure has something avoidable in its excessive ending. Plato couples them together and claims that it is equally the duty of fortitude to stand against pain and to stand against the immoderate and seductive fascinations of sensual pleasure. They are two springs ·of water·; whoever draws the right amount from from the right one at the right time—whether city, man or beast—is very fortunate. We should take the first as a necessary medicine, more sparingly; and take the other to slake our thirst, though not to the point of drunkenness. Pain, pleasure, love, hatred are the first things a child feels; if when reason develops they are guided by it, that is virtue.

·TAKING WELL-BEING SERIOUSLY·

[B] I have a vocabulary all my own: I 'pass the time' when time is bad and unpleasant; when it is good, I do not want to *pass* it; I savour it, I hold onto it. We should run through the bad and settle on the good. This ordinary expression 'pastime' or 'pass the time' represents the conduct of those *wise* folk

<sup>1</sup> [This switches 'soberly' and 'cheerfully', to make the clause fit with the rest of the paragraph.]



who don't think they can make better use of their life than to let it slip by and escape, by-pass it, side-step it, and do their best to ignore it and run away from it, as something irksome and contemptible. But I experience life differently, and find it to be both agreeable and worth prizing, even as I grasp it now in its final waning; nature has given it into our hands adorned with such favourable conditions that we have only ourselves to blame if it weighs on us and slips uselessly from us. <sup>[C]</sup> 'It is the life of the fool that is graceless, fearful, and given over wholly to the future' [Seneca]. <sup>[B]</sup> Nevertheless, I am reconciling myself to losing my life without regret, not as troublesome and annoying but as something that by its nature must be lost. . . . It takes management to enjoy life; I enjoy it twice as much as others, because the measure of enjoyment depends on the greater or lesser *attention* that we bring to it. Especially now, when I see my *remaining* span to be so short, I want to increase its weight; I want to arrest the speed of its passing by the speed with which I grasp it, compensating for the haste of its ebb by the intensity of my use of it. The shorter my possession of life, the deeper and fuller I must make it.

•Others feel the sweetness of some satisfaction and of prosperity; I feel it too, but not in passing, as it slips by. We should study it, savour it, think it over, so as to give proper thanks to him who grants it to us. •They enjoy other pleasures as they enjoy the pleasure of sleep, without being conscious of them. . . . There was a time when I found it worthwhile to have my sleep broken into so that I could catch a glimpse of it. I deliberate with myself on any pleasure. I do not skim over it; I plumb it, and bend my reason—now grown peevish and hard to please—to accept it. Do I find myself in some tranquil state of calm? Is there some sensual pleasure that tickles me? I do not allow it to be pilfered by my senses; I bring *my soul* into it, not to implicate itself but to

enjoy itself, not to lose itself in the pleasure but to find itself. I set it to observe itself in that happy state, to weigh that happiness, gauge it and increase it. It measures how much it owes to God for being at peace with its conscience and its other internal passions, *and* for having its *associated* body in its natural state, enjoying. . . . appropriately the sweet and pleasant functions by which it pleases him, through his grace, to counterbalance the pains with which his justice in its turn chastises us; my soul gauges how precious it is to have reached a point where the sky is calm all around it: no desire, no fear or doubt disturb the air for it; nor is there any hardship—<sup>[C]</sup> past, present or future—<sup>[B]</sup> over which its thoughts may not pass without anxiety.

This consideration gains a great lustre when different people's conditions are compared. Accordingly, I set before myself in a thousand forms •those who are carried away and tossed about by fortune or their own errors, as well as •those who accept their good fortune with such languid unconcern. (The latter kind are closer to my own case.) They—meaning people of the former kind—really do 'pass their time': they pass beyond the present and the things they have, in favour of •slavery to hope and of •shadows and vain images that fancy dangles before them—'Like phantoms that are said to flit about after death, or dreams that delude our slumbering senses' [Virgil]—and that hasten and prolong their flight the more they are pursued. The fruit and goal of these people's pursuit is to pursue. Just as Alexander said that he worked for work's sake, 'Believing he had not done anything, while anything remained to be done' [Lucan].

[This paragraph involves eleven switches between <sup>[B]</sup> and <sup>[C]</sup>, silenced in this version.] As for me, then, I love life and cultivate it as it has pleased God to grant it to us. I do not go about wishing

- that it didn't involve the need to eat and drink; . . . or
- that we could keep up our strength by merely putting

- into our mouths a little of the drug that Epimenides used to quell his appetite and keep himself alive; or
- that we could, without sensation, beget children by our fingers or our heels (but rather, speaking with due respect, that we could also do it voluptuously by our fingers and our heels!); or
  - that the body should be without desire and without titillation.

These are ungrateful and unfair complaints. I accept wholeheartedly and gratefully what nature has done for me, and I am pleased that I do and proud that I do. One does wrong to that great and almighty Giver to refuse his gift, to nullify and disfigure it. Entirely good himself, he has made everything good: 'All things that are in accordance with nature are worthy of esteem' [Cicero].<sup>1</sup>

[B] I most willingly embrace the opinions of philosophy that are most solid, that is to say, most human, most ours; my arguments, like my *mœurs*, are lowly and humble. [C] Philosophy is very childish, to my mind, when it deploys its *ergos* to preach to us •that it is a barbarous match to marry the divine to the earthly, the rational to the irrational, the strict to the permissive, the honourable to the dishonourable; •that sensual pleasure is a bestial quality, unworthy of being enjoyed by a wise man; •that the only enjoyment the wise man gets from lying with his beautiful young wife is the pleasure of awareness that he is acting rightly—like pulling on his boots for a useful ride! May philosophy's followers bring to deflowering their wives no more right and sinews and sap than its lesson has!

That ·lesson· is not what Socrates says—philosophy's tutor and ours. He values bodily pleasure, as he should,

but he prefers pleasure of the mind, as having more force, constancy, ease, variety and dignity. And, according to him, that pleasure by no means goes alone (he is not so fanciful!); it merely has primacy. For him temperance is not the enemy of our pleasures; it moderates them.

·NATURE AS A GUIDE·

[B] Nature is a gentle guide, but no more gentle than wise and just: [C] 'We must go deeply into the nature of things and find out exactly what it demands' [Cicero]. [B] I seek its footprint everywhere; we have confused that with with the tracks of artifice, [C] which makes it hard to delimit and portray that sovereign good of the Platonists and Aristotelians, which is to *live according to nature*, and also that of the Stoics, which is a neighbour to it, namely to *consent to nature*.

[B] Is it not an error to reckon some actions to be less worthy because they are necessary? No, they will not knock it out of my head that the marriage of pleasure with necessity. . . . is a most suitable one. What are we up to when we dismember by divorce a structure woven of such close and brotherly corespondence? On the contrary, let us tie it together again by mutual services. Let the mind arouse and quicken the heaviness of the body; let the body check the lightness of the mind and anchor it. [C] 'He who praises the nature of the soul as the sovereign good and condemns the nature of the flesh as evil is fleshly both in his love of the soul and his hatred of the flesh, since his thought is based on human vanity not on divine truth' [Saint Augustine].

[B] There is no part unworthy of our care in this gift that God has given us; we are accountable for it down to a single hair. . . . [C] Commonplace intellects can be persuaded by authority alone, and it has greater weight in a foreign

<sup>1</sup> [In this passage, two sentences evidently about God are sandwiched between two about nature. The middle two cannot be about nature, because their nouns, adjectives and pronouns are all masculine, whereas the French *nature* is feminine.]

language! So at this point let us make another charge at it: *Stultitiae proprium quis non dixerit, ignave et contumaciter facere quae facienda sunt, et alio corpus impellere, alio animum, distrahique inter diversissimos motus?* [Seneca] ‘Who would not say that it was really foolish to do in a slothful, contumacious spirit something that has to be done anyway, thrusting the body in one direction and the soul in another where it is torn between totally conflicting emotions?’

[B] Go on then, just to see: get someone to tell you some day what pastimes and musings he puts into his head, for the sake of which he diverts his thoughts from a good meal and regrets the time he spends feeding himself. You will find that no dish on your table tastes as insipid as that fine entertainment of his soul

(it would usually do us more good to fall asleep completely than to stay awake for whatever we stay awake for)

and you will find that his arguments and concepts are not worth your stew. Even if they were the raptures of Archimedes himself, what of it? Here, I am not alluding to those venerable souls who, through ardent devotion and piety, are raised to a constant and scrupulous meditation on things divine; [C] souls who

(enjoying by the power of a quick and rapturous hope a foretaste of that everlasting food that is the ultimate goal, the final destination, that Christians long for)

scorn to linger over our beggarly, watery and ambiguous comforts, and easily assign to the body the bother and use of sensual and temporal fodder. [B] That endeavour is a privilege; and those folk are not to be confused with the scrapings of the pot that *we* are, distracted as we are by vain longings and musing. [C] Among the likes of us, two

things have always appeared to me to chime particularly well together—supercelestial opinions and subterranean *mœurs*.

[B] That great man Aesop saw his master pissing as he walked along. ‘What next?’ he said, ‘Shall we have to shit as we run?’ Let us manage our time; there will still be a great deal idle and ill spent. Our mind likes to think that it does not have enough hours to do its own business unless it dissociates itself from the body for the short time when the body really needs it.

They want to get outside themselves and escape from their humanity.<sup>1</sup> That is madness: instead of transforming themselves into angels they transform themselves into beasts; instead of raising themselves they lower themselves. [C] Those soaring humours frighten me, like lofty and inaccessible places; and for me nothing in the life of Socrates is so hard to stomach as his ecstasies and his daemonizings, and nothing in Plato is as human as the qualities for which he is said to have been called divine. [B] And of our branches of knowledge it is those that ascend the highest which seem to me to be the most base and earth-bound. And I find nothing so abject and so mortal in the life of Alexander as his fantasies about being immortal. [B] Philotas stung him wittily by his congratulatory answer to a letter reporting that Alexander had been placed among the gods by the oracle of Jupiter Ammon: ‘As far as you are concerned, I’m delighted,’ he said, ‘but there is reason to be sorry for the men who will have to live with and obey a man who trespasses beyond, and cannot be content with, the measure of a man.’ . . .

[B] The nice inscription by which the Athenians honoured Pompey’s visit to their city fits with what I think: ‘You are a god in so far as you recognise that you are a man’ [quoted by Plutarch].

<sup>1</sup> [‘They’—who? Montaigne does not say, but we get the idea as the paragraph continues.]

It is an accomplishment, absolute and as it were God-like, to be able to enjoy one's being rightfully. We seek other attributes because we do not understand the use of the ones we have; and we go outside ourselves because we do not know what is going on in there. <sup>[C]</sup>It's no use our getting up on stilts, for even on stilts we must still walk with our legs. And on the highest throne in the world we are still seated on our behinds.

<sup>[B]</sup>The most beautiful of lives, to my mind, are those that

conform to the common pattern, <sup>[C]</sup>human and orderly, but <sup>[B]</sup>without miracles and without eccentricity. Old age, however, has a little need to be treated more tenderly. Let us commend it to the god [Apollo] who is the protector of health and of wisdom, but merry and companionable wisdom: 'Grant, O son of Latona, that I may enjoy the things I have prepared; and let me, with my mind intact, not degenerate into a squalid senility in which the lyre is lacking' [Horace].