

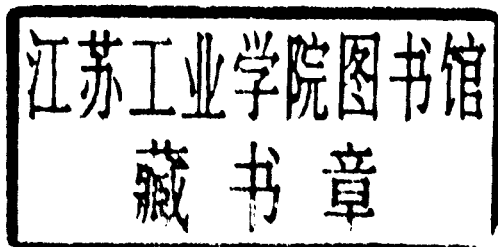
Montaigne's Essays

Michel de Montaigne



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THAT MEN BY VARIOUS WAYS ARRIVE AT THE SAME END

The most usual way of appeasing the indignation of such as we have any way offended, when we see them in possession of the power of revenge, and find that we absolutely lie at their mercy, is by submission, to move them to commiseration and pity; and yet bravery, constancy, and resolution, however quite contrary means, have sometimes served to produce the same effect.

Edward, Prince of Wales (the same who so long governed our Guienne, a personage whose condition and fortune have in them a great deal of the most notable and most considerable parts of grandeur), having been highly incensed by the Limousins, and taking their city by assault, was not, either by the cries of the people, or the prayers and tears of the women and children, abandoned to slaughter and prostrate at his feet for mercy, to be stayed from prosecuting his revenge; till, penetrating further into the town, he at last took notice of three French gentlemen, who with incredible bravery alone sustained the power of his victorious army. Then it was that consideration and respect unto so remarkable a valour first stopped the torrent of his fury, and that his clemency, beginning with these three cavaliers, was afterwards extended to all the remaining inhabitants of the city.

Scanderbeg, Prince of Epirus, pursuing one of his soldiers with purpose to kill him, the soldier, having in vain tried by all the ways of humility and supplication to appease him, resolved, as his last refuge, to face about and await him sword in hand:

which behaviour of his gave a sudden stop to his captain's fury, who, for seeing him assume so notable a resolution, received him into grace; an example, however, that might suffer another interpretation with such as have not read of the prodigious force and valour of that prince.

The Emperor Conrad III. having besieged Duke of Bavaria, would not be prevailed upon, what mean and unmanly satisfactions soever were tendered to him, to condescend to milder conditions than that the ladies and gentlewomen only who were in the town with the duke might go out without violation of their honour, on foot, and with so much only as they could carry about them. Whereupon they, out of magnanimity of heart, presently contrived to carry out, upon their shoulders, their husbands and children, and the duke himself; a sight at which the emperor was so pleased, that, ravished with the generosity of the action, he wept for joy, and immediately extinguishing in his heart the mortal and capital hatred he had conceived against this duke, he from that time forward treated him and his with all humanity. The one and the other of these two ways would with great facility work upon my nature; for I have a marvellous propensity to mercy and mildness, and to such a degree that I fancy of the two I should sooner surrender my anger to compassion than to esteem. And yet pity is reputed a vice amongst the Stoics, who will that we succour the afflicted, but not that we should be so affected with their sufferings as to suffer with them. I conceived these examples not ill suited to the question in hand, and the rather because therein we observe these great souls assaulted and tried by these two several ways, to resist the one without relenting, and to be shook and subjected by the other. It may be true that to suffer a man's heart to be totally subdued by compassion may be imputed to facility, effeminacy, and over – tenderness; whence it comes to pass that the weaker natures, as of women, children, and the com-

mon sort of people, are the most subject to it but after having resisted and disdained the power of groans and tears, to yield to the sole reverence of the sacred image of Valour, this can be no other than the effect of a strong and inflexible soul enamoured of and honouring masculine and obstinate courage. Nevertheless, astonishment and admiration may, in less generous minds, beget a like effect: witness the people of Thebes, who, having put two of their generals upon trial for their lives for having continued in arms beyond the precise term of their commission, very hardly pardoned Pelopidas, who, bowing under the weight of so dangerous an accusation, made no manner of defence for himself, nor produced other arguments than prayers and supplications; whereas, on the contrary, Epaminondas, falling to recount magniloquently the exploits he had performed in their service, and, after a haughty and arrogant manner reproaching them with ingratitude and injustice, they had not the heart to proceed any further in his trial, but broke up the court and departed, the whole assembly highly commending the high courage of this personage.

Dionysius the elder, after having, by a tedious siege and through exceeding great difficulties, taken the city of Reggio, and in it the governor Phyton, a very gallant man, who had made so obstinate a defence, was resolved to make him a tragical example of his revenge; in order whereunto he first told him, "That he had the day before caused his son and all his kindred to be drowned." To which Phyton returned no other answer but this: "That they were then by one day happier than he." After which, causing him to be stripped, and delivering him into the hands of the tormentors, he was by them not only dragged through the streets of the town, and most ignominiously and cruelly whipped, but moreover vilified with most bitter and contumelious language: yet still he maintained his courage entire all the way, with a strong voice and undaunted counte-

nance proclaiming the honourable and glorious cause of his death; namely, for that he would not deliver up his country into the hands of a tyrant; at the same time denouncing against him a speedy chastisement from the offended gods. At which Dionysius, reading in his soldiers' looks, that instead of being incensed at the haughty language of this conquered enemy, to the contempt of their captain and his triumph, they were not only struck with admiration of so rare a virtue, but moreover inclined to mutiny, and were even ready to rescue the prisoner out of the hangman's hands, he caused the torturing to cease, and afterwards privately caused him to be thrown into the sea.

Man (in good earnest) is a marvellous vain, fickle, and unstable subject, and on whom it is very hard to form any certain and uniform judgment. For Pompey could pardon the whole city of the Mamertines, though furiously incensed against it, upon the single account of the virtue and magnanimity of one citizen, Zeno, who took the fault of the public wholly upon himself; neither entreated other favour, but alone to undergo the punishment for all; and yet having in the city of Perugia manifested the same virtue, obtained nothing by it, either for himself or his fellow-citizens.

And, directly contrary to my first examples, the bravest of all men, and who was reputed so gracious to all those he overcame, Alexander, having, after many great difficulties, forced the city of Gaza, and, entering, found Betis, who commanded there, and of whose valour in the time of this siege he had most marvellous manifest proof, alone, forsaken by all his soldiers, his armour hacked and hewed to pieces, covered all over with blood and wounds, and yet still fighting in the crowd of a number of Macedonians, who were laying on him on all sides, he said to him, nettled at so dearbought a victory (for, in addition to the other damage, he had two wounds newly received in his own person), "Thou shalt not die, Betis, as thou dost intend;

be sure thou shall suffer all the torments that can be inflicted on a captive." To which menace the other returning no other answer, but only a fierce and disdainful look; "What," says Alexander, observing his haughty and obstinate silence, "is he too stiff to bend a knee! Is he too proud to utter one suppliant word! Truly, I will conquer this silence; and if I cannot force a word from his mouth, I will, at least, extract a groan from his heart." And thereupon converting his anger into fury, presently commanded his heels to be bored through, causing him, alive, to be dragged, mangled, and dismembered at a cart's tail. Was it that the height of courage was so natural and familiar to this conqueror, that because he could not admire, he respected it the less? Or was it that he conceived valour to be a virtue so peculiar to himself, that his pride could not, without envy, endure it in another? Or was it that the natural impetuosity of his fury was incapable of opposition? Certainly, had it been capable of moderation, it is to be believed that in the sack and desolation of Thebes, to see so many valiant men, lost and totally destitute of any further defence, cruelly massacred before his eyes, would have appeased it; where there were above six thousand put to the sword, of whom not one was seen to fly, or heard to cry out for quarter; but, on the contrary, every one running here and there to seek out and to provoke the victorious enemy to help them to an honourable end. Not one was seen who, however weakened with wounds, did not in his last gasp yet endeavour to revenge himself, and with all the arms of a brave despair, to sweeten his own death in the death of an enemy. Yet did their valour create no pity, and the length of one day was not enough to satiate the thirst of the conqueror's revenge, but the slaughter continued to the last drop of blood that was capable of being shed, and stopped not till it met with none but unarmed persons, old men, women, and children, of them to carry away to the number of thirty thousand slaves.

2

OF SORROW

No man living is more free from this passion than I, who yet neither like it in myself nor admire it in others, and yet generally the world, as a settled thing, is pleased to grace it with a particular esteem, clothing therewith wisdom, virtue, and conscience. Foolish and sordid guise! The Italians have more fitly baptized by this name malignity; for 'tis a quality always hurtful, always idle and vain; and as being cowardly, mean, and base, it is by the Stoics expressly and particularly forbidden to their sages.

But the story says that Psammenitus, King of Egypt, being defeated and taken prisoner by Cambyzes, King of Persia, seeing his own daughter pass by him as prisoner, and in a wretched habit, with a bucket to draw water, though his friends about him were so concerned as to break out into tears and lamentations, yet he himself remained unmoved, without uttering a word, his eyes fixed upon the ground; and seeing, moreover, his son immediately after led to execution, still maintained the same countenance; till spying at last one of his domestic and familiar friends dragged away amongst the captives, he fell to tearing his hair and beating his breast, with all the other extravagances of extreme sorrow.

A story that may very fitly be coupled with another of the same kind, of recent date, of a prince of our own nation, who being at Trent, and having news there brought him of the death of his elder brother, a brother on whom depended the whole support and honour of his house, and soon after of that of a younger brother, the second hope of his family, and having

withstood these two assaults with an exemplary resolution; one of his servants happening a few days after to die, he suffered his constancy to be overcome by this last accident; and, parting with his courage, so abandoned himself to sorrow and mourning, that some thence were forward to conclude that he was only touched to the quick by this last stroke of fortune; but, in truth, it was, that being before brimful of grief, the least addition overflowed the bounds of all patience. Which, I think, might also be said of the former example, did not the story proceed to tell us that Cambyzes asking Psammenitus, “Why, not being moved at the calamity of his son and daughter, he should with so great impatience bear the misfortune of his friend?” “It is,” answered he, “because only this last affliction was to be manifested by tears, the two first far exceeding all manner of expression.”

And, peradventure, something like this might be working in the fancy of the ancient painter, who having, in the sacrifice of Iphigenia, to represent the sorrow of the assistants proportionably to the several degrees of interest every one had in the death of this fair innocent virgin, and having, in the other figures, laid out the utmost power of his art, when he came to that of her father, he drew him with a veil over his face, meaning thereby that no kind of countenance was capable of expressing such a degree of sorrow. Which is also the reason why the poets feign the miserable mother, Niobe, having first lost seven sons, and then afterwards as many daughters (overwhelmed with her losses), to have been at last transformed into a rock —

“Petriified with her misfortunes.”

—Ovid

thereby to express that melancholic, dumb, and deaf stupefaction, which benumbs all our faculties, when oppressed with ac-

cidents greater than we are able to bear. And, indeed, the violence and impression of an excessive grief must of necessity astonish the soul, and wholly deprive her of her ordinary functions; as it happens to every one of us, who, upon any sudden alarm of very ill news, find ourselves surprised, stupefied, and in a manner deprived of all power of motion, so that the soul, beginning to vent itself in tears and lamentations, seems to free and disengage itself from the sudden oppression, and to have obtained some room to work itself out at greater liberty.

*“And at length and with difficulty is a passage
opened by grief for words.”*

—Virgil

In the war that Ferdinand made upon the widow of King John of Hungary, about Buda, a man — at — arms was particularly taken notice of by every one for his singular gallant behaviour in a certain encounter; and, unknown, highly commended, and lamented, being left dead upon the place: but by none so much as by Raisciac, a German lord, who was infinitely enamored of so rare a valour. The body being brought off, and the count, with the common curiosity coming to view it, the armour was no sooner taken off but he immediately knew him to be his own son, a thing that added a second blow to the compassion of all the beholders; only he, without uttering a word, or turning away his eyes from the woeful object, stood fixedly contemplating the body of his son, till the vehemency of sorrow having overcome his vital spirits, made him sink down stone — dead to the ground.

*“He who can say how he burns with love, has little
fire.”*

—Petrarca

He who can express in words the ardour of his love, has but little love to express. say the Innamoratos, when they would represent an insupportable passion.

*“Love deprives me of all my faculties ;
Lesbia, when once in thy presence ,
I have not left the power to tell my distracting
passion ;
my tongue becomes torpid ;
a subtle flame creeps through my veins ;
my ears tingle in deafness ;
my eyes are veiled with darkness.”*

——Catullus

Neither is it in the height and greatest fury of the fit that we are in a condition to pour out our complaints or our amorous persuasions, the soul being at that time over – burdened, and labouring with profound thoughts; and the body dejected and languishing with desire; and thence it is that sometimes proceed those accidental impotencies that so unseasonably surprise the lover, and that frigidity which by the force of an immoderate ardour seizes him even in the very lap of fruition. For all passions that suffer themselves to be relished and digested are but moderate;

“Light griefs can speak ; deep sorrows are dumb.”

——Seneca

A surprise of unexpected joy does likewise often produce the same effect;

“When she beheld me advancing, and saw, with

*stupefaction, the Trojan arms around me, terrified
with so great a prodigy, she fainted away at the very
sight;*

vital warmth forsook her limbs;

*she sinks down, and, after along interval, with
difficulty speaks."*

Besides the examples of the Roman lady, who died for joy to see her son safe returned from the defeat of Cannae; and of Sophocles and of Dionysius the Tyrant, who died of joy; and of Thalna, who died in Corsica, reading news of the honours the Roman Senate had decreed in his favour, we have, moreover, one in our time, of Pope Leo X. , who upon news of the taking of Milan, a thing he had so ardently desired, was rapt with so sudden an excess of joy that he immediately fell into a fever and died. And for a more notable testimony of the imbecility of human nature, it is recorded by the ancients that Diodorus the dialectician died upon the spot, out of an extreme passion of shame, for not having been able in his own school, and in the presence of a great auditory, to disengage himself from a nice argument that was propounded to him. I, for my part, am very little subject to these violent passions; I am naturally of a stubborn apprehension, which also, by reasoning, I every day harden and fortify.

3

THAT THE SOUL EXPENDS ITS PASSIONS UPON FALSE OBJECTS, WHERE THE TRUE ARE WANTING

A gentleman of my country, marvellously tormented with the gout, being importuned by his physicians totally to abstain from all manner of salt meats, was wont pleasantly to reply, that in the extremity of his fits he must needs have something to quarrel with, and that railing at and cursing, one while the Bologna sausages, and another the dried tongues and the hams, was some mitigation to his pain. But, in good earnest, as the arm when it is advanced to strike, if it miss the blow, and goes by the wind, it pains us; and as also, that, to make a pleasant prospect, the sight should not be lost and dilated in vague air, but have some bound and object to limit and circumscribe it at a reasonable distance,

*“As the wind loses its force diffused in void
space,*

unless it in its strength encounters the thick wood.”

—*Lucan*

So it seems that the soul, being transported and discomposed, turns its violence upon itself, if not supplied with something to oppose it, and therefore always requires an object at which to aim, and whereon to act. Plutarch says of those who are delighted with little dogs and monkeys, that the amorous part that is in us, for want of a legitimate object, rather than lie idle, does after that manner forge and create one false and frivolous. And we see that the soul, in its passions, inclines

rather to deceive itself, by creating a false and fantastical a subject, even contrary to its own belief, than not to have something to work upon. After this manner brute beasts direct their fury to fall upon the stone or weapon that has hurt them, and with their teeth a even execute revenge upon themselves for the injury they have received from another:

*“So the she—bear, fiercer after the blow from the
Lybian’s thonghurled dart,
turns round upon the wound,
and attacking the received spear,
twists it, as she flies.”*

—Lucan

What causes of the misadventures that befall us do we not invent? what is it that we do not lay the fault to, right or wrong, that we may have something to quarrel with? It is not those beautiful tresses you tear, nor is it the white bosom that in your anger you so unmercifully beat, that with an unlucky bullet have slain your beloved brother; quarrel with something else. Livy, speaking of the Roman army in Spain, says that for the loss of the two brothers, their great captains:

“They all at once wept, and tore their hair.”

—Livy

’Tis a common practice. And the philosopher Bion said pleasantly of the king, who by handful pulled his hair off his head for sorrow, “Does this man think that baldness is a remedy for grief?” Who has not seen peevish gamesters chew and swallow the cards, and swallow the dice, in revenge for the loss of their money? Xerxes whipped the sea, and wrote a challenge to Mount Athos; Cyrus employed a whole army several days at work, to revenge himself of the river Gyndas, for the fright it

had put him into in passing over it; and Caligula demolished a very beautiful palace for the pleasure his mother had once enjoyed there.

I remember there was a story current, when I was a boy, that one of our neighbouring kings having received a blow from the hand of God, swore he would be revenged, and in order to it, made proclamation that for ten years to come no one should pray to Him, or so much as mention Him throughout his dominions, or, so far as his authority went, believe in Him; by which they meant to paint not so much the folly as the vainglory of the nation of which this tale was told. They are vices that always go together, but in truth such actions as these have in them still more of presumption than want of wit. Augustus Caesar, having been tossed with a tempest at sea, fell to defying Neptune, and in the pomp of the Circensian games, to be revenged, deposed his statue from the place it had amongst the other deities. Wherein he was still less excusable than the former, and less than he was afterwards when, having lost a battle under Quintilius Varus in Germany, in rage and despair he went running his head against the wall, crying out, "O Varus! give me back my legions!" for these exceed all folly, forasmuch as impiety is joined therewith, invading God Himself, or at least Fortune, as if she had ears that were subject to our batteries; like the Thracians, who when it thunders or lightens, fall to shooting against heaven with Titanian vengeance, as if by flights of arrows they intended to bring God to reason. Though the ancient poet in Plutarch tells us—

*"We must not trouble the gods with our affairs;
they take no heed of our angers and disputes."*

—Plutarch

But we can never enough decry the disorderly sallies of our minds.