

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 17



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Of Fear

Obstupui, steteruntque comae & uox faucibus hæsit.

*I was amaz'd, struck Speechless, and my Hair
On end upon my Head did wildly stare.*

I Am not so good a Naturalist as to discern by what secret Springs *Fear* has its motion in us; but I am wise enough to know, that it is a strong Passion, and such a one, that the Physicians say there is no other whatever that sooner dethrones our Judgment from its proper Seat; which is so true, that I my self have seen very many become frantick thorough Fear; and even in those of the best settled Temper, it is most certain, that it begets a terrible Astonishment and Confusion during the Fit. I omit the Vulgar sort, to whom it one while represents their Great-Grandsires, risen out of their Graves in their Shrowds, another while *Hob-Goblins*, *Specters*, and *Chimæra's* but even amongst Souldiers (a sort of men over whom, of all others, it ought to have the least Power) how often has it converted Flocks of Sheep into armed Squadrons, Reeds and Bull-rushes into Pikes and Launces, Friends into Enemies, and the *French White* into the *Red Crosses of Spain!* When *Monsieur de Bourbon* took the City of *Rome*, an Ensign who was upon the Guard at the *Bourg St. Pierre*, was seiz'd with such a Fright upon the first Alarm, that he threw himself out at a Breach with his Colours upon his Shoulder, and ran directly upon the Enemy, thinking he had retreated toward the inward Defences of the City, and with much ado, seeing *Monsieur de Bourbon's* People, who thought it had been a Sally upon them, draw up to receive him, at last came to himself, and saw his Error; and then facing about, he retreated full speed thorough the same Breach by which he had gone out; but not till he had first blindly advanc'd above three hundred Paces into the open Field. It did not however fall out so well with Captain *Julius* his Ensign at the time when *St. Paul* was taken from us by the Count *De Bures* and *Monsieur du Reu*, for he, being so astonish'd with Fear, as to throw himself and his Fellows out at a Skyt-gate, was immediately cut to pieces by the Enemy; and in the same Siege it was a very memorable Fear, that so seiz'd, contracted, and froze up the Heart of

a young Gentleman, that he sunk down stone dead in the Breach, without any manner of Wound or Hunt at all. The like Madness does sometimes push on a whole Multitude; for in one of the Encounters that *Germanicus* had with the *Germans*, two great Parties were so amaz'd with Fear, that they ran two opposite ways, the one and the other to the same place, from which either of them had fled before. Sometimes it adds Wings to the Heels, as in the two first, and sometimes nails them to the Ground, and fetters them from moving; as we read of the Emperour *Theophilus*, who, in a Battel he lost against the *Agarens*, was so astonish'd and stupified, that he had no Power to fly; *adeo pavor etiam auxilia formidat*, so much does Fear dread even the means of Safety; till such time as *Manuel*, one of the principal Commanders of his Army, having jogg'd and shak'd him so as to rouze him out of his Trance, said to him, *Sir, if you will not follow me, I will kill you: for it is better you should lose your Life, than, by being taken, to lose your Empire*. But Fear does then manifest its utmost Power and Effect, when it throws us upon a valiant Despair, having before depriv'd us of all sense both of Duty and Honour. In the first pitch'd Battel the *Romans* lost against *Hannibal*, under the Consul *Sempronius*, a Body of ten thousand Foot, that had taken a Fright, seeing no other Escape for their Cowardice, went, and threw themselves head-long upon the great Battalion of the Enemies, which also with wonderful force and fury they charg'd thorough and thorough, and routed with a very great slaughter of the *Carthaginians*, by that means purchasing an ignominious flight at the same price they might have done a glorious Victory. The thing in the World I am most afraid of is *Fear*, and with good reason, that Passion alone, in the trouble of it, exceeding all other Accidents. What Affliction could be greater or more just than that of *Pompey's* Followers and Friends, who, in his Ship, were Spectators of that horrid and inhumane murther? Yet so it was, that the Fear of the *Egyptian* Vessels they saw coming to board them, possess'd them with so great a Fear, that it is observ'd they thought of nothing, but calling upon the Mariners to make haste, and by force of Oars to escape away, till being arriv'd at *Tyre*, and deliver'd from the apprehension of further danger, they then had leisure to turn their thoughts to the loss of

Tum pauor sapientiam omnem mihi ex animo expectorat.

*My Mind with great and sudden fear opprest,
Was, for the time, of Judgment disposses'd.*

Such as have been well bang'd in some Skirmish, may yet, all wounded and bloody as they are, be brought on again the next day to charge: but such as have once conceiv'd a good sound Fear of the Enemy, will never be made so much as to look him in the Face. Such as are in immediate Fear of losing their Estates, of Banishment, or of Slavery, live in perpetual Anguish, and lose all Appetite and Repose; whereas such as are actually poor, Slaves and Exiles, oft-times live as merrily as Men in a better Condition: and so many People, who impatient of the perpetual Alarms of Fear, have hang'd and drown'd themselves, give us sufficiently to understand, that it is more importunate and insupportable than Death it self. The *Greeks* acknowledge another kind of Fear exceeding any we have spoke of yet, a Passion that surprizes us without any visible Cause, by an impulse from Heaven; so that

whole Armies and Nations have been struck with it. Such a one was that, which brought so wonderful a Desolation upon *Carthage*, where nothing was to be heard but Voices, and Outcries of Fear, where the Inhabitants were seen to sally out of their Houses as to an Alarm, and there to charge, wound, and kill one another, as if they had been Enemies come to surprize their City. All things were in strange Disorder and Fury, till with Prayers and Sacrifices they had appeas'd their Gods: and this is that they call a Panick Terror.