

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 2



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Of Sorrow

No Man living is more free from this Passion than I, who neither like it in my self, nor admire it in others, and yet generally the World (I know not why) is pleas'd to grace it with a particular Esteem, endeavouring to make us believe, That Wisdom, Vertue and Conscience, shroud themselves under this grave and affected Appearance. Foolish and sordid Disguise! The *Italians* however under the Denomination of *Un Tristo*, decypher a clandestine Nature, a dangerous and ill-natur'd Man: and with good reason, it being a Quality always hurtful, always idle and vain, and as cowardly, mean, and base, by the Stoicks expresly, and particularly forbiden their Sages: But the Story, nevertheless says, that *Psammenitus*, King of *Egypt*, being defeated and taken Prisoner by *Cambyses*, King of *Persia*, seeing his own Daughter pass by him 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 at the miserable sight; yet he himself remain'd unmov'd, without uttering a Word of Discontent, with his Eyes fix'd upon the Ground: and seeing moreover his Son immediately after led to Execution, still maintain'd the same Gravity and Indifference; till spying at last one of his Domesticks dragg'd away amongst the Captives, he could then hold no longer, but fell to tearing his Hair, and beating his Breast, with all the other Extravagancies of a wild and desperate Sorrow. A Story that may very fitly be coupled with another of the same kind, of a late Prince of our own Nation, who being at *Trent*, and having News there brought him of the Death of his elder Brother, but 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 suffer'd his Constancy to be overcome by this last Accident; and parting with his Courage, so abandon'd himself to Sorrow and Mourning, that some from thence were forward to conclude, that he was only touch'd to the Quick by this last Stroak of Fortune; but, in truth, it was, that being before brim full of Grief, the least Addition overflow'd the Bounds of all Patience. Which might also be said of the former Example, did not the Story proceed to tell us, That *Cambyses* asking *Psammenitus*, *Why, not being mov'd at the Calamity of his Son and Daughter, he should with so great Impatience bear the Misfortune of his Friend?* It is (answer'd he) *because only this last Affliction was only to be*

manifested by Tears, the two first exceeding all manner of Expression. And peradventure something like this might be working in the Fancy of the ancient Painter, who being 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 successively as many Daughters, to be at last transform'd into a Rock,

Diriguisse malis,

*Whom Grief alone
How Pow'r to stiffen into Stone.*

Thereby to express, that melancholick, dumb, and deaf Stupidity, which benumbs all our Faculties when opprest with Accident 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 our selves surpriz'd, stupefied, and in a manner depriv'd of all Power of Motion, till the Soul beginning to vent it self in Sighs and Tears, seems a little to free and disengage it self from the sudden Oppression, and to have obtain'd some room to work it self out at greater Liberty.

Et uia uix tandem uoci laxata dolore est.

*Yet scarce at last by struggling Grief, a Gate
Unbolted is for Sighs to sally at.*

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; unknown, highly commended, and as much lamented, being left Dead upon the Place: But by none so much as by *Raisciac*, a German Lord, who was infinitely enamour'd of so unparallell'd a Vertue. When the Body being brought off, and the Count, with the common Curiosity coming to view it, the Arms were 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 woful Object, stood fixtly contemplating the Body of his Son, till the Vehemency of Sorrow having overcome his Vital Spirits, made him sink downe stone-dead to the Ground.

Chi puo dir com'egli arde è in picciol fuoco,

*What Tongue is able to proclaim
How his Soul melted in the gentle Flame?*

say the *Inamorato's*, when they would represent an insupportable Passion.

*misero quod omnes
Eripit sensus mihi. Nam simul te,
Lesbia aspexi, nihil est super me
Quod loquar amens.
Lingua sed torpet tenuis sub artus
Flamma dimanat sonitu suoapte
Tinniunt aures, gemina teguntur
Lumina nocte.*

*all-conquering Lesbia, thine Eyes
Have ravish'd from me all my Faculties:
At the first Glance of their victorious Ray
I was so struck I knew not what to say;
Nor had a Tongue to speak, a subtle Flame
Crept thro' my veins; my tinkling ears became
Deaf without noise, and my poor eyes I found
With a black Veil of double darkness bound.*

Neither is it in the height and greatest Fury of the Fit, that we are in a condition to pour out our Complaints, or to sally into Courtship, the Soul being at that time over-burthened, 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 willing Lover, and that Frigidity which by the force of an Immoderate Ardour, so unhappily seizes him even in the very lap of Fruition: For all Passions that suffer themselves to be relish'd and digested, are but moderate.

Curæ leues loquntur, ingentes stupent.

*His grief's but easie, who his grief can tell,
But piercing Sorrow has no Article.*

A surprise of unexpected Joy does likewise often produce the same effect.

*Ut me conspexit uenientem, & Troja circum
Arma amens uidit, magnis exterrita monstis,
Diriguit uisu in medio, calor ossa reliquit,
Labitur & longo uix tandem tempore fatur.*

*Soon as she saw me coming, and beheld
The Trojan Ensigns waving in the Field,
O'er-joy'd, and ravish't at th'unlook't for sight,
She turn'd a Statue, lost all feeling quite;
Life's gentle Heat did her stiff Limbs forsake,
She swoon'd, and scarce after long swooning spake.*

To these we have the Examples of the Roman Lady, who died for Joy to see her Son safe return'd from the Defeat of Cannæ; and of *Sophocles*, and of *Dionysius* the Tyrant, who died of Joy; and of *Talva*, who died in *Corsica*, reading News of the Honours the Roman Senate had decreed in his Favour. We have moreover one, in our times of Pope *Leo* the tenth, who upon News of the taking of *Milan*, a thing he had so ardently and passionately desir'd, was rapt with so sudden an excess of Joy, that he

immediately fell into a Fever and died. And for a more authentick Testimony of the imbecility of Humane Nature, it is recorded by the Ancients, that *Diodorus* the Logician died upon the Place, out of an extream Passion of Shame, for not having been able in his own School, and in the presence of a great Auditory, to disingage 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 discourse, I every day harden and fortify more and more.