

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 20



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Of the Force of Imagination

FORTIS *imaginatio generat casum*, A strong Imagination begets Accident, say the School-men. I am one of those who are most sensible of the Power of Imagination : Every one is justled, but some are overthrown by it. It has a very great Impression upon me; and I make it my Business to avoid, wanting force to resist it. I could live by the sole help of healthful and jolly Company. The very sight of anothers Pain does materially work upon me, and I naturally usurp the Sence of a third Person to share with him in his Torment. A perpetual Cough in another tickles my Lungs and Throat. I more unwillingly visit the sick I love, and am by Duty interested to look after, than those I care not for, and from whom I have no expectation. I take possession of the Disease I am concern'd at, and lay it too much to heart, and do not at all wonder that Fancy should distribute Fevers, and sometimes kill such as allow too much Scope, and are too willing to entertain it. *Simon Thomas* was a great *Physician* of his time : I remember, that hapning one day at *Tholouze* to meet him at a rich old Fellows House, who was troubled with naughty Lungs, and discoursing with his Patient about the method of his Cure; he told him, that one thing which would be very conducing to it, was, to give me such Occasion to be pleased with his Company, that I might come often to see him, by which means, and by fixing his Eyes upon the Freshness of my Complexion, and his Imagination upon the Sprightliness and Vigour that glowed in my Youth, and possessing all his Senses with the flourishing Age wherein I then was, his Habit of Body might peradventure be amended, but he forgot to say that mine at the same time might be made worse. *Gallus Vibius* so long cudgell'd his Brains to find out the Essence and Motions of Folly, till by the Inquisition, in the end he went directly out of his Wits, and to such a Degree, that he could never after recover his Judgment; and he might brag that he was become a Fool by too much Wisdom. Some there are who thorough Fear prevent the Hangman; like him whose Eyes being unbound to have his Pardon read to him, was found stark dead upon the Scaffold, by the Stroak of Imagination. We start, tremble, turn pale, and blush, as we are variously mov'd by Imagination; and being a-bed, feel our Bodies agitated with its Power to that degree, as even sometimes to Expiration. And boyling Youth when fast asleep, grows so warm with Fancy, as in a Dream to satisfie amorous Desires.

*Vt quasi transactis saepe omnibus rebus profundant
Fluminis ingentes fluctus vestemque cruentent.*

*Who fancy gulling Lies, enflamed Mind
Lays his Loves Tribute there, where not design'd.*

Although it be no new thing to see Horns grown in a Night on the Fore-head of one that had none when he went to Bed; notwithstanding, what befell *Cyppus*, a noble *Roman*, is very memorable; who having one day been a very delighted Spectator of a Bull-baiting, and having all the night dreamt that he had Horns on his Head, did, by the Force of Imagination, really cause them to grow there. Passion made the Son of *Cræsus* to speak, who was born dumb, by that means supplying him with so necessary a Faculty, which Nature had deny'd him. And *antiochus* fell into a Fever, enflam'd with the Beauty of *Stratonissa* too deeply imprinted in his Soul. *Pliny* pretends to have seen *Lucius Crossitius*, who from a Woman was turn'd into a Man upon her very Weddingday. *Pontanus*, and others, report the like Metamorphosis that in these latter days have hapned in *Italy*, and through the vehement Desire of him and his Mother.

Vota puer solvit, quae foemina voverat Iphis.

*Iphis, a Boy, the Vow defray'd
That he had promis'd when a Maid.*

My self passing by *Vitry le Francois*, a Town in *Champagne*, saw a Man the Bishop of *Soissons* had in Confirmation, call'd *German*, whom all the Inhabitans of the Place had known to be a Girl till two and twenty Years of Age, call'd *Mary*. He was at the time of my being there very full of Beard, Old, and not Married, who told us, that by straining himself in a Leap, his male Instruments came out; and the Maids of that Place have to this day a Song, wherein they advise one another not to take too great Strides, for fear of being turn'd into Men, as *Mary German* was. It is no wonder if this sort of Accident frequently happen; for if Imagination have any Power in such things, it is so continually and vigorously bent upon this Subject, that to the end it may not so often relapse into the same Thought, and Violence of Desire, it were better once for all to give these young Wenches the Things they long for. Some stick not to attribute the Scars of King *Dagobert*, and St. *Francis*, to the Force of Imagination; and it is said, that by it Bodies will sometimes be removed from their Places; and *Celsus* tells us of a Priest whose Soul would be ravish'd into such an Extasie, that the Body would, for a long time, remain without Sense or Respiration. St. *Augustine* makes mention of another, who, upon the hearing of any lamentable or doleful Cries, would presently fall into a Swoon, and be so far out of himself, that it was in vain to call, hollow in his Ears, pinch, or burn him, till he voluntarily came to himself; and then he would say, that he had heard Voices as it were a-far off, and did feel when they pinch'd and burn'd him : and to prove that this was no obstinate Dissimulation in defiance of his Sense of Feeling, it was manifest, that all the while he had neither Pulse nor Breathing, 'Tis very probable, that Visions, Enchantments, and all extraordinary Effects of that Nature, derive their Credit principally from the Power of Imagination, working and making its chiefest Impression upon vulgar and more easie Souls, whose Belief is so strangely impos'd

upon as to think they see what they do not : I am not satisfied, and make a very great Question, Whether those pleasant Ligatures with which this Age of ours is so fetter'd, that there is almost no other Talk, are not mere voluntary Impressions of Apprehension and fear; for I know by experience, in the Case of a particular Friend of mine, one for whom I can be as Responsible as for my self, and a Man that cannot possibly fall under any manner of Suspition of insufficiency, and as little of being enchanted, who having heard a Companion of his make a Relation of an unusual Frigidity that surpriz'd him at a very unseasonable time; being afterwards himself engag'd upon the same Account, the Horror of the former Story on a sudden so strangely possess'd his Imagination, that he ran the same Fortune the other had done; and from that time forward (the scurvy Remembrance of his Disaster running in his Mind, and tyrannizing over him) was extreemly subject to Relapse into the same Misfortune. He found some Remedy, however, for this Inconvenience, by himself franckly confessing, and declaring before - hand to the Party with whom he was to have to do, the Subjection he lay under, and the Infirmary he was subject to, by which means the Contention of his Soul was in some sort appeas'd; and knowing that now some such Misbehaviour was expected from him, the Restraint upon those Faculties grew less, and he less suffer'd by it, and afterwards, at such times as he could be in no such Apprehension, as not being about any such Act (his Thoughts being then disengag'd and free, and his Body being in its true and natural Estate) by causing those Parts to be handled and communicated to the Knowledge of others, he was at last totally freed from that vexatious Infirmary. After a Man has once done a Woman right, he is never after in danger of misbehaving himself with that Person, unless upon the account of a manifest and excusable Weakness. Neither is this Disaster to be fear'd, but in Adventures where the Soul is over-extended with Desire or Respect, and especially where we meet with an unexpected Opportunity that requires a sudden and quick Dispatch; and in those Cases, there is no possible means for a Man always to defend himself from such a Surprise as shall put him damnably out of Countenance. And yet I have known some, who have secur'd themselves from this Mischance by coming half sated elsewhere, purposely to abate the ardour of his Fury, and others, who by being grown old, find themselves less impotent by being less able; and particularly one, who found an Advantage by being assur'd by a Friend of his, that he had a Counter-charm against certain Enchantments that would defend him from this Disgrace. The Story it self is not much amiss, and therefore you shall have it. A Count of a very great Family, and with whom I had the Honour to be very familiarly intimate, being Married to a very fair Lady, who had formerly been pretended to, and importunately courted by one who was invited to, and present at the Wedding, all his Friends were in very great Fear, but especially an old Lady his Kinswoman, who had the ordering of the Solemnity, and in whose House it was kept, suspecting his Rival would, in Revenge, offer foul Play, and procure some of these kind of Sorceries to put a Trick upon him; which Fear she also communicated to me, who, to comfort her, bad her not trouble her self, but relye upon my Care to prevent or frustrate any such Designs. Now I had, by chance, about me a certain flat Plate of Gold whereon were graven some Cœlestial Figures, good to prevent Frenzy occasion'd by the Heat of the Sun, or for any Pains of the Head, being applied to the Suture; where, that it might the better remain

firm, it was sowed to a Ribban to be tyed under the Chin. A Foppery Cozen-German to this of which I am speaking, and by *Jaques Pelletier*, who liv'd in my House, presented to me for a singular Rarity, and a thing of Sovereign Vertue. I had a fancy to make some use of this Knack, and therefore privately told the Count, that he might possibly run the same Fortune other Bridegrooms had sometimes done; especially some Persons being in the House, who no doubt would be glad to do him such a Courtesie, but let him boldly go to Bed, for I would do him the Office of a Friend, and if need were, would not spare a Miracle that it was in my Power to do, provided he would engage to me, upon his Honour, to keep it to himself, and only when they came to bring him his Cawdle, if Matters had not gone well with him, to give me such a Sign, and leave the rest to me. Now he had his Ears so batter'd, and his Mind so prepossess'd with the eternal Tattle of this Business, that when it came to't he did really find himself tied with the Trouble of his Imagination, and accordingly at the time appointed gave me the Sign. Whereupon, I whisper'd him in the Ear, That he should rise under Pretence of putting us out of the Room, and after a jesting manner pull my Night-gown from my Shoulders, throw it over his own, and there keep it till he had perform'd what I had appointed him to do, which was, that when we were all gone out of the Chamber he should withdraw to make Water, should three times repeat such and such Words, and as often do such and such Actions : that at every of the three times he should tye the Ribban I put into his Hand about his Middle, and be sure to place the Medal was fastened to it (the Figures in such a Posture) exactly upon his Reins, which being done, and having the last of the three times so well girt and fast tyed the Ribban that it could neither untye nor slip from its Place, let him confidently return to his Business, and withall not to forget to spread my Gown upon the Bed, so that it might be sure to cover them both. These ridiculous Circumstances are the main of the Effect, our Fancy being so far seduc'd, as to believe, that so strange and uncouth Formalities must of necessity proceed from some abstruse Science. Their Inanity gives them Reverence and Weight. However, certain it is, that my Figures approv'd themselves more *Venerean* than *Solar*, and the fair Bride had no reason to complain. Now I cannot forbear to tell you, it was a sudden Whimsey, mix'd with a little Curiosity, that made me do a thing so contrary to my Nature; for I am an Enemy to all subtle, and counterfeit Actions, and abominate all manner of Fraud, though it be but for Sport; for though the Action may not be wicked in it self, yet 'tis done after a wicked manner. *Amasis*, King of *Ægypt*, married *Laodicea* a marvellous beautiful Greek Virgin, who, tho famous for his Abilities elsewhere, found himself quite another Man with his Wife, and could by no means enjoy her; at which he was so enrag'd, that he threatned to kill her, suspecting her to be a Witch. As 'tis usual in things that consist in Fancy; she put him upon Devotion, who having accordingly made his Vows to *Venus*, he found himself divinely restor'd the very first Night after his Oblations and Sacrifices. Now in plain truth, Women are to blame to entertain us with that disdainful, coy, and angry Countenance they commonly do, which extinguishes our Vigour, as it kindles our Desire; which made the Daughter-in-Law of *Pythagoras* to say, That *the Woman who goes to Bed to a Man, must put off her Modesty with her Petticoat, and put it on again with the same*. The Soul of the Assailant being disturb'd with many several Alarms, is easily astonish'd, and soon loses the Power of Performance; and whoever the Imagination has once put this Trick

upon, and confounded with the Shame of it, (and she never does it but at the first Acquaintance, by reason Men are then more ardent and eager, and also at this first Account a Man gives of himself, he is much more timorous of miscarrying) having made an ill Beginning, he enters into such Indignation and Despair at the Accident, as will in following Opportunities be apt to remain, and continue him in the same Condition. As to what concerns Married People, having the Year before them (as we say) they ought never to compell, or so much as to offer at the Feast, if they do not find themselves very ready : and it is better indecently to fail of handselling the Nuptial Sheets, and of paying the Ceremony due to the Wedding-night, when a Man perceives himself full of Agitation and Trembling, expecting another opportunity at a better and more private Leisure, when his Fancy shall be better compos'd, than to make himself perpetually miserable, for having misbehav'd himself, and been baffled at the first assault. Till possession be taken, a man that knows himself subject to this Infirmity, should leisurely and by degrees make several little tryals and light offers, without obstinately attempting at once to force an absolute conquest over his own mutinous and indispos'd Faculties; such as know their members to be naturally obedient to their desires, need to take no other care but only to counterplot their Fancy. The indocile and rude liberty of this scurvy Member, is sufficiently remarkable, by its importunate, unruly, and unseasonable tumidity and impatience, at such times as we have nothing for it to do, and by its more unseasonable stupidity and disobedience, when we stand most in need of his vigour, so imperiously contesting the authority of the Will, and with so much obstinacy denying all sollicitation both of hand and fancy. And yet though his Rebellion is so universally complain'd of, and that proofs are not wanting to condemn him, if he had nevertheless feed me to plead his Cause, I should peradventure bring the rest of his fellow - members into suspicion of complotting this mischief against him, out of pure envy at the importance, and ravishing pleasure particular to his Employment, so as to have by Confederacy arm'd the whole World against him, by malevolently charging him alone with their common offence. For let any one consider, whether there is any one Part of our Bodies that does not often refuse to perform its Office at the Precept of the Will, and that does not often exercise its Function in defiance of her Command. They have every one of them proper Passions of their own, that rouse and awake, stupifie and benum them, without our Leave or Consent. How often do the involuntary motions of the Countenance discover our inward Thoughts, and betray our most private Secrets to the Knowledge of the Standers by? The same Cause that animates this Member, does also, without our Knowledge, animate the Lungs, Pulse, and Heart, the sight of a pleasing Object imperceptibly diffusing a Flame thorough all our Parts with a febrifick motion. Is there nothing but these Veins and Muscles that swell, and flag without the Consent, not only of the Will, but even of our Knowledge also? We do not command our Hairs to stand an end, nor our Skin to shiver either with Fear or Desire. The Hands often convey themselves to Parts to which we do not direct them. The Tongue will be interdict, and the Voice sometimes suffocated when we know not how to help it. When we have nothing to eat, and would willingly forbid it, the Appetite of Eating and Drinking does not for all that forbear to stir up the Parts that are subjected to it, no more nor less than the other Appetite we were speaking of, and in like manner does as

unseasonably leave us. The Vessels that serve to discharge the Belly have their proper Dilatations and Compressions, without, and beyond our Intelligence, as well as those which are destin'd to purge the Reins. And that which to justify the Prerogative of the Will, St. *Augustine* urges, of having seen a Man who could command his Back-side to discharge as often together as he pleas'd, and that *Vives* does yet fortifie with another Example in his time of one that could Fart in Tune, does nothing suppose any more pure Obedience of that Part; for is any thing commonly more tumultuary or indiscreet? To which let me add, that I my self knew one so rude and ungovern'd, as for forty Years together made his Master-Vent with one continued and unintermitted Hurricane, and 'tis like will do till he expire that way, and vanish in his own Smoak. And I could heartily wish, that I only knew by Reading, how oft a Man's Belly, by the Denial of one single Puff, brings him to the very door of an exceeding painful Death; and that the Emperour, who gave Liberty to let fly in all Places, had at the same time given us Power to do it. But for our Will, in whose Behalf we prefer this Accusation, with how much greater Similitude of Truth may we reproach even her her self with Mutiny and Sedition for her Irregularity and Disobedience? Does she always will what we would have her to do? Does she not often will what we forbid her to will, and that to our manifest Prejudice? Does she suffer her self any more than any of the other, to be govern'd and directed by the Results of our Reason? To conclude, I should move in the Behalf of the Gentleman, my Clyent, it might be consider'd, that in this Fact, his Cause being inseparably conjoyn'd with an Accessary, yet he is only call'd in Question, and that by Arguments and Accusations, that cannot be charg'd, nor reflect upon the other : whose Business indeed is sometimes inopportunately to invite, but never to refuse, and to allure after a tacite and clandestine manner; and therefore is the Malice and Injustice of his Accusers most manifestly apparent. But be it how it will, protesting against the Proceedings of the Advocates and Judges, Nature will, in the mean time, proceed after her own way : who had done but well, if she had endow'd this Member with some particular Priviledge, The Author of the sole immortal Work of Mortals, A divine Work according to *Socrates*, and of Love, Desire of Immortality, and himself an immortal *Dæmon*. Some one perhaps by such an Effect of Imagination may have had the good luck to leave that behind him here in *France*, which his Companion who has come after, and behav'd himself better, has carried back with him into *Spain*. And that you may see why Men in such cases require a mind prepar'd for the thing they are to do. Why do the Physicians tamper with, and prepossess before - hand their Patients credulity with many false promises of Cure, if not to the end, that the effect of imagination may supply the imposture and defect of their Aposeme? They know very well, that a great Master of their Trade has given it under his hand, that he has known some with whom the very sight of a potion would work : which Examples of Fancy and Conceit come now into my head, by the remembrance of a story was told me by a domestick Apothecary of my Father's, a blunt *Swisse* (a Nation not much addicted to vanity and lying) of a Merchant he had long known at *Thoulouse*, who being a valetudinary, & much afflicted with Fits of the Stone, had often occasion to take Clysters, of which he caus'd several sorts to be prescrib'd him by the Physicians, according to the accidents of his Disease : one of which being one time brought him, and none of the usual forms, as feeling if it were not too hot, and the like, being omitted, he was laid

down on his Belly, the Syringe put up, and all Ceremonies perform'd, injection excepted; after which, the Apothecary being gone, & the Patient accommodated as if he had really receiv'd a Clyster, he found the same operation and effect that those do who have taken one indeed; and if at any time the Physician did not find the Operation sufficient, he would usually give him two or three more after the same manner. And the Fellow moreover swore to me, that to save charges (for he pay'd as if he had really taken them) this sick mans Wife, having sometimes made tryal of warm Water only, the effect discover'd the Cheat, and finding these would do no good, was fain to return to the old way. A Woman fancying she had swallow'd a pin in a piece of Bread, cry'd out of an intollerable pain in her Throat, where she thought she felt it stick : but an ingenious Fellow that was brought to her, seeing no outward Tumour nor alteration, supposing it to be only Conceit taken at some Crust of Bread that had hurt her as it went down, caus'd her to vomit, and cunningly, unseen, threw a crooked Pin into the Bason, which the Woman no sooner saw, but believing she had cast it up, she presently found her self eas'd of her pain. I my self knew a Gentleman, who having treated a great deal of good Company at his house, three or four dayes after brag'd in jest (for there was no such thing) that he had made them eat of a bak'd Cat; at which, a young Gentlewoman, who had been at the Feast, took such a horror, that falling into a violent vomiting and a Fever, there was no possible means to save her. Even brute Beasts are also subject to the force of Imagination as well as we; as is seen by Dogs, who dye of grief for the loss of their Masters, and are seen to quest, tremble, and start, as Horses will kick and whinney in their sleep. Now all this may be attributed to the affinity and relation betwixt the Souls and Bodies of Brutes, but 'tis quite another thing when the Imagination works upon the Souls of rational men, and not only to the prejudice of their own particular Bodies, but of others also. And as an infected Body communicates its Malady to those that approach, or live near it, as we see in the Plague, the small Pox, and sore Eyes, that run through whole Families and Cities;

*Dum spectant oculi laesos, laeduntur & ipsi :
Multaque corporibus transitione nocent.*

*Viewing sore eyes, eyes to be sore are brought,
And many ills are by transition caught.*

So the Imagination being vehemently agitated, darts out Infection capable of offending the stranger Object. The Ancients had an opinion of certain Women of *Scythia*, that being animated and inrag'd against any one, they kill'd them only with their looks. Tortoises and Ostriches hatch their Eggs with only looking on them, which infers, that their Eyes have in them some ejaculative vertue. And the eyes of Witches are said to be dangerous and hurtful.

Nescio quis teneros oculus mihi fascinat agnos.

*What Eye it is, I do not know,
My tender Lambs bewitches so.*

Magicians are no very good Authority for me : but we experimentally see, that Women impart the Marks of their Fancy to the Children they carry in their Wombs; witness her that was brought to Bed of a Moor : and there was presented to *Charles* the Emperour, and King of *Bohemia*, a Girl from about *Pisa*, all over rough, and cover'd with Hair, whom her Mother said to be so conceiv'd by reason of a Picture of *St. John Baptist*, that hung within the Curtains of her Bed. It is the same with Beasts, witness *Jacob's* ring-streaked and spotted Goats, and Sheep, and the Hares and Partridges that the Snow turns white upon the Mountains. There was at my House a little while ago, a Cat seen watching a Bird upon the top of a Tree, who for some time mutually fixing their Eyes upon one another, the Bird at last let her self fall as dead into the Cats Claws, either dazled and astonish'd by the Force of her own Imagination, or drawn by some attractive Power of the Cat. Such as are addicted to the Pleasures of the Field, have, I make no question, heard the Story of the Faulconer, who having earnestly fix'd his Eyes upon a Kite in the Ayr, lay'd a Wager, that he would bring her down with the sole Power of Sight, and did so, as it was said; for the Tales I borrow, I charge upon the Consciences of those from whom I have them. The Discourses are my own, and found themselves upon the Proofs of Reason, not of Experience; to which every one has Liberty to add his own Examples : and who has none, (the Number and Varieties of Accidents consider'd) let him not forbear to believe that these I set down are enough : and if I do not apply them well, let some other do it for me. And also in the Subjects of which I treat, *viz.* of our Manners and Motions, the Testimonies and Instances I produce, how fabulous soever, provided they are possible, serve as well as the true; whether it has really happen'd or no, at *Rome* or at *Paris*, to *Peter* or *John*, 'tis still within the Verge of Possibility, and humane Capacity, which serves me to good use, and supplies me with Variety in the things I write. I see, and make my Advantage of it as well in Shadow as in Substance; and amongst the various Examples I every where meet with in History, I cull out the most rare and memorable to fit my own Turn. There are some Authors whose only end and Design it is, to give an Account of things that have hapned; mine, if I could arrive unto it, should be to deliver what may come to pass. There is a just Liberty allow'd in the Schools, of supposing and contriving *Simile's*, when they are at a Loss for them in their own Reading : I do not, however, make any use of that Priviledge, and as to that Affair in superstitious Religion surpass all Historical Authority. In the Examples which I here bring in, of what I have heard, read, done, or said, I have forbid my self to dare to alter even the most light and indifferent Circumstances : my Conscience does not falsifie one Tittle, what my Ignorance may do I cannot say. And this it is that makes me sometimes enter into Dispute with my own Thoughts, whether or no, a Divine, or a Philosopher, Men of so exact and tender Wisdom and Conscience, are fit to write History : for, how can they stake their Reputation upon the Publick Faith? how be responsible for the Opinions of Men they do not know? and with what Assurance deliver their Conjectures for current Pay? Of Actions perform'd before their own Eyes, wherein several Persons were Actors, they would be unwilling to give Evidence upon Oath before a Judge; and cannot be so familiarly and thoroughly acquainted with any for whose Intentions they would become absolute Caution. For my part, I think it less hazardous to write things past, than present, by how much the Writer is only to give an Account of things every one knows he must of necessity borrow upon Trust. I am

sollicited to write the Affairs of my own Time, by some who fancy I look upon them with an Eye less blinded with Prejudice, or Partiality, than another, and have a clearer Insight into them by reason of the free Access Fortune has given me to the Heads of both Factions : but they do not consider, that to purchase the Glory of *Salust*, I would not give my self the Trouble, being a sworn Enemy as I am to all Obligation, Assiduity, and Perseverance : besides that, there is nothing so contrary to my Stile, as a continued and extended Narrative, I so often interrupt, and cut my self short in my Writing only for want of Breath. I have neither Fancy, nor Expression worth any thing, and am ignorant beyond a Child, of the Phrases, and even the very Words proper to express the most common things; and for that Reason it is, that I have undertaken to say only what I can say, and have accommodated my Subject to my Force. Should I take one to be my Guide, peradventure I should not be able to keep Pace with him, and in the Precipitancy of my Career might deliver Things, which upon better Thoughts, in my own Judgment, and according to Reason, would be criminal, and punishable in the highest degree. *Plutarch* would tell us of what he has deliver'd to the Light, that it is the Work of others, that his Examples are all, and every where exactly true, that they are useful to Posterity, and are presented with a Lustre that will light us the way to Vertue, which was his Design : but it is not of so dangerous consequence as in a Medicinal Drugg, whether an old Story be so or so.