

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

# ESSAYS

**Book 1 · Chapter 3**

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## That our Affections carry themselves beyond us

SUCH as accuse Mankind of the folly of gaping and panting after future things, and advise us to make our benefit of those which are present, and to set up our rest upon them, as having too short a reach to lay hold upon that which is to come, and it being more impossible for us, than to retrieve what is past; have hit upon the most universal of Humane Errours, if that may be call'd an Errour to which Nature it self has dispos'd us, who in order to the subsistence, and continuation of her own Work, has, amongst several others, prepossess'd us with this deceiving Imagination, as being more jealous of our Action, than afraid of our Knowledge. For we are never present with, but always beyond our selves. Fear, Desire and Hope, are still pushing us on towards the future, depriving us in the mean time of the sense and Consideration of that which is to amuse us, with the thought of what shall be, even when we shall be no more.

*Calamitosus est Animus futuri anxius.*

*A Mind that anxious is of things to come,  
Is still abroad, finding no rest at home.*

We find this great Precept often repeated in *Plato*, *Do thine own Work, and know thy self*. Of which two Parts, both the one and the other generally comprehend our whole Duty, and consequently do each of them complicate and involve the other; for, who will do his own Work aright, will find that his first Lesson is to know himself: And who rightly understands himself, will never mistake another Man's Work for his own, but will love and improve himself above all other things, will refuse superfluous Employments, and reject all unprofitable Thoughts and Propositions. And, as folly on the one side, though it should enjoy all it can possibly desire, would notwithstanding never be content; so on the other, Wisdom does ever acquiesce with the present, and is never dissatisfied with its immediate Condition: And that is the reason why *Epicurus* dispenses his Sages from all Fore-sight and Care of the future. Amongst those Laws that relate to the Dead, I look upon that to be the best, by which the Actions of Princes are to be examined and sifted after their Decease. They are equal at

least, while Living, if not above the Laws, and therefore what Justice could not inflict upon their Persons, 'tis but reason should be executed upon their Reputations, and the Estates of their Successors; Things that we often value above Life it self: A Custom of singular advantage to those Countries where it is in use, and by all good Princes as much to be desired, who have reason to take it ill, that the Memories of the Tyrannical and Wicked should be us'd with the same Reverence and Respect with theirs. We owe, 'tis true, Subjection and Obedience to all our Kings, whether good or bad, alike, for that has respect unto their Office; but as to Affection and Esteem, those are only due to their Vertue. Let it be granted, that by the Rule of Government we are with Patience to endure unworthy Princes, to conceal their Vices, and to assist them in their indifferent Actions, whilst their Authority stands in need of our Support: Yet, the Relation of Prince and Subject being once at an end, there is no reason we should deny the Publication of our real wrongs and sufferings to our own Liberty and common Justice, and to interdict good Subjects the Glory of having submissively and faithfully serv'd a Prince, whose imperfections were to them so perfectly known, were to deprive Posterity of so good an Example; and such as out of respect to some private Obligation, shall, against their own Knowledge and Conscience, espouse the Quarrel, and vindicate the Memory of a faulty Prince, do a particular Right at the Expense, and to the Prejudice of the Publick Justice. *Livy* does very truly say, That the Language of Men Bred up in Courts, is always founding of vain Ostentation, and that their Testimony is rarely true, every one indifferently magnifying his own Master, and stretching his Commendation to Grandeur: And'tis not impossible but some may condemn the freedom of those two Soldiers, who so roundly answer'd *Nero* to his Face, the one being ask'd by him, *Why he bore him ill Will? I lov'd thee*, answer'd he, *whilst thou wert worthy of it, but since thou art become a Parricide, an Incendiary, a Waterman, a Fidler, a Player, and a Coachman, I hate thee as thou dost deserve*: and the other, *Why he should attempt to kill him? Because*, said he, *I could think of no other Remedy against thy perpetual Mischiefs*. But the publick and universal Testimonies that were given of him after his Death (and will be to all Posterity, both of him and all other wicked Princes like him) his Tyrannies and abominable Deportment considered who, of a sound Judgment, can reprove them? I am scandaliz'd, I confess, that in so sacred a Government as that of the *Lacedæmonians*, there should be mixt so hypocritical a Ceremony at the Enterment of their Kings; where all their Confederates and Neighbours, and all sorts and degrees of Men and Women, as well as their Slaves, cut and slash'd their Foreo-heads in Token of Sorrow, repeating in their Cries and Lamentations, That that King (let him have been as wicked as the Devil) was the best that ever they had; by this means attributing to his Quality the Praises that only belong to Merit, and that of Right is properly due to the most supream Desert, though lodg'd in the lowest and most inferior Subject. *Aristotle* (who will still have a hand in every thing) makes a *Quære* upon the saying of *Solon*, *That none can be said to be happy untill he is dead*. Whether then any one of those who have liv'd and died according to their Hearts Desire, if he have left an ill Repute behind him, and that his Posterity be miserable, can be said to be happy? Whilst we have Life and Motion, we convey our selves by Fancy and Preoccupation, whither and to what we please; but once out of Being, we have no more any manner of

Communication with what is yet in Being: and it had therefore been better said by *Solon*, *That Man is never happy, because never so till after he is no more.*

*Quisquam*

*Vix radicitus è uita se tollit, & eicit  
Sed facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse,  
Nec remouet satis à projecto corpore sese; &  
Vindicat.*

*No dying Man can trust his Baggage so,  
But something of him he must leave below:  
Nor from his Carcass that doth prostrate lie  
Himself can clear, or far enough can fly.*

*Bertrand de Glesquin*, dying before the Castle of *Rancon* near unto *Puy* in *Auvergne*, the Besieg'd were afterwards, upon Surrender, enjoyn'd to lay down the Keys of the Place upon the Corps of the dead General. *Bartolomew d'Alviano*, the *Venetian* General, hapning to die in the Service of the Republick in *Bræscia*; and his Corps being to be carried thorough the Territory of *Verona*, an Enemy's Country, most of the Army were of Opinion to demand safe Conduct from the *Veronese*, supposing, that upon such an Occasion it would not be denied: but *Theodoro Trivulsio* highly oppos'd the Motion, rather choosing to make his way by force of Arms, and to run the hazard of a Battel, saying it was by no means decent, and very unfit, that he who in his Life was never afraid of his Enemies should seem to apprehend them when he was dead. And in truth, in Affairs of almost the same Nature, by the *Greek* Laws, he who made Suit to an Enemy for a Body to give it Burial, did by that Act renounce his Victory, and had no more Right to erect a Trophy; and he to whom such Suit was made, was, whatever otherwise the Success had been, reputed Victor. By this means it was, that *Nicias* lost the Advantage he had visibly obtain'd over the *Corinthians*, and that *Agesilaus* on the contrary, assur'd that he had before very doubtfully gain'd over the *Bæotians*. These Proceedings might appear very odd, had it not been a general Practice in all Ages, not only to extend the Concern of our Persons beyond the Limits of Life, but moreover, to fansie that the Favour of Heaven does not only very often accompany us to the Grave, but has also, even after Life, a Concern for our Ashes: of which there are so many ancient Examples (waving those of our own Observation of later date) that it is not very necessary I should longer insist upon it. *Edward* King of *England*, and the first of that Name, having in the long Wars betwixt him and *Robert* King of *Scotland*, had sufficient Experience of how great Importance his own immediate Presence was to the Success of his Affairs, having ever been victorious in whatever he undertook in his own Person; when he came to die, bound his Son in a Solemn Oath, that so soon as he should be dead, he should boyl his Body till the Flesh parted from the Bones, and referre them to carry continually with him in his Army, so often as he should be oblig'd to go against the *Scots*; as if Destiny had inevitably grapled Victory even to those miserable Remains. *Jean Zisca*, the same who so often in Vindication of *Wicliffe's* Heresies, infested the *Bohemian* State, left order that they should flea him after his Death, and of his Skin to make a Drum, to carry in the War against his Enemies, fansying it would much contribute to the

Continuation of the Successes he had always obtain'd in the War against them. In like manner, certain of the *Indians*, in a Day of Battel, with the *Spaniards*, carried with them the Bones of one of their Captains, in consideration of the Victories they had formerly obtain'd under his Conduct. And other People of the same new World do yet carry about with them in their Wars the Relicks of valiant Men who have dyed in Battel, to incite their Courage, and advance their Fortune: of which Examples, the first reserve nothing for the Tomb, but the Reputation they have acquir'd by their former Achievements; but these proceed yet further, and attribute a certain Power of Operation. The last Act of Captain *Bayard* is of a better Composition; who, finding himself wounded to Death with an Harquebuze Shot, and being by his Friends importun'd to retire out of the Fight, made Answer, That he would not begin at the last Gasp to turn his Back to the Enemy; and accordingly still fought on, till feeling himself too faint, and no longer able to sit his Horse, he commanded his Steward to set him down at the Root of a Tree, but so that he might die with his Face towards the Enemy, which he also did. I must yet add another Example equally remarkable, for the present Consideration, with any of the former. The Emperour *Maximilian*, great Grand-father to *Philip* the Second, King of *Spain*, was a Prince endowed throughout with great and extraordinary Qualities, and amongst the rest, with a singular Beauty of Person; but had withall, a Humour very contrary to that of other Princes, who for the dispatch of their most Important Affairs convert their Close-stool into a Chair of State, which was, that he would never permit any of his Bed-Chamber, in what familiar degree of Favour soever, to see him in that Posture; and would steal aside to make Water as religiously as a Virgin, and was as shy to discover to his Physician, or any other whatever, those Parts that we are accustomed to conceal: and I my self, who have so impudent a way of Talking, am nevertheless naturally so modest this way, that unless at the Importunity of Necessity, or Pleasure, I very rarely and unwillingly communicate, to the Sight of any, either those Parts or Actions that Custom orders us to conceal, wherein I also suffer more Constraint than I conceive is very well becoming a Man, especially of my Profession: but he nourish'd this modest Humour to such a degree of Superstition, as to give express Orders in his last Will, that they should put him on Drawers so soon as he should be dead; to which methinks he would have done well to have added, that he should be hoodwink'd too that put them on. The Charge that *Cyrus* left with his Children, that neither they nor any other should either see or touch his Body after the Soul was departed from it, I attribute to some superstitious Devotion of his, both his Historian, and Himself, amongst their great Qualities, having strew'd the whole Course of their Lives with a singular Respect to Religion. I was by no means pleas'd with a Story was told me by a Man of very great Quality, of a Relation of mine, and one who had given a very good Account of himself both in Peace and War; that coming to die in a very old Age, of an excessive Pain of the Stone, he spent the last Hours of his Life in an extraordinary Solicitude about ordering the Ceremony of his Funeral, pressing all the Men of Condition who came to see him, to engage their Word to attend him to his Grave, importuning this very Prince, who came to visit him at his last Gasp, with a most earnest Supplication, that he would order his Family to be assisting there, and withal presenting before him several Reasons and Examples to prove that

it was a Respect due to a Man of his Condition; and seem'd to die content, having obtain'd this Promise, and appointed the Method and Order of his Funeral Parade. I have seldom heard of so long-liv'd a Vanity. Another, though contrary Solitude (of which also I do not want domestick Example,) seems to be somewhat a-kin to this; That a Man shall cudgel his Brains at the last Moments of his Life, to contrive his Obsequies to so particular and unusual a Parsimony, as to conclude it in the sordid expence of one single Servant with a Candle and Lanthorn, and yet I see this Humour commended, and the Appointment of *Marcus Æmilius Lepidus*, who forbad his Heirs to bestow upon his Hearse even the common Ceremonies in use upon such Occasions. Is it yet Temperance and Frugality to avoid the Expence and Pleasure of which the use and knowledge is imperceptible to us? See here an easie and cheap Reformation. If Instruction were at all necessary in this Case, I should be of Opinion, that in this, as in all other Actions of Life, the Ceremony and Expence should be regulated by the Ability of the Person deceas'd; and the Philosopher *Lycon* prudently order'd his Executors to dispose of his Body where they should think most fit, and as to his Funerals, to order them neither too superfluous, nor too mean. For my part, I should wholly refer the ordering of this Ceremony to Custom, and shall, when the time comes, accordingly leave it to their Discretion, to whose Lot it shall fall to do me that last Office. *Totus hic locus est contemnendus in nobis non negligendus in nostris*; The Place of our Sepulture is wholly to be contemn'd by us, but not to be neglected by our Friendss; and it was a holy Saying of a Saint, *Curatio funeris, conditio Sepulturæ, pompa Exequiarum, magis sunt uiuorum solatia, quam subsidia mortuorum*; The Care of Funerals, the Place of Sepulture, and the Pomps of Exequies, are rather Consolations to the Living than any Benefit to the Dead. Which made *Socrates* answer *Criton*, who at the Hour of his Death ask'd him, how he would be buried, *How you will, said he*. If I could concern my self further than the Present about this Affair, I should be most tempted, as the greatest Satisfaction of this kind, to imitate those who in their Life-time entertain themselves with the Ceremony of their own Obsequies before-hand, and are pleas'd with viewing their own Monument, and beholding their own dead Countenance in Marble. Happy are they who can gratifie their Senses by Insensibility, and live by their Death! I am ready to conceive an implacable Hatred against all Democracy and Popular Government, (though I cannot but think it the most natural and equitable of all others) so oft as I call to mind the inhumane Injustice of the People of *Athens*, who, without Remission, or once vouchsafing to hear what they had to say for themselves, put to death their brave Captains newly return'd triumphant from a Naval Victory they had obtained over the *Lacedaemonians* near the *Arginusian Isles*; the most bloody and obstinate Engagement that ever the *Greeks* fought at Sea; for no other Reason, but that they rather followed the Blow and pursued the Advantages prescribed them by the Rule of War, than that they would stay to gather up and bury their Dead: an Execution that is yet rendred more odious by the Behaviour of *Diomedon*, who being one of the condemn'd, and a Man of most eminent, both politick and military Vertue, after having heard the Sentence, advancing to speak, no Audience till then having been allowed, instead of laying before them his own Innocency, or the Impiety of so cruel an Arrest, only express'd a Solicitude for his Judges Preservation, beseeching the Gods to convert this

Sentence to their own Good, and praying that for neglecting to pay those Vows which he and his Companions had made (which he also acquainted them with) in Acknowledgment of so glorious a Success, they might not pull down the Indignation of the Gods upon them; and so without more Words went courageously to his Death. But Fortune a few Years after punishing them in the same kind, made them see the Error of their Cruelty; for *Chabrias*, Captain-General of their Naval Forces, having got the better of *Pollis*, Admiral of *Sparta*, about the Isle of *Naxos*, totally lost the Fruits of his Success and Content with his Victory of very great Importance to their Affairs, not to incur the danger of this Example, and lose a few Bodies of his dead Friends that were floating in the Sea, gave opportunity to a world of living Enemies to sail away in Safety, who afterwards made them pay dear for this unseasonable Superstition.

*Quæris quo jaceas post obitum loco?  
Quo non nata jacent.*

*Dost ask where thou shalt lie when dead?  
With those that never Being had.*

This other restores the sense of Repose to a Body without a Soul:

*Neque sepulcrum, quo recipiat, habeat portum corporis:  
Ubi remissa human vita, Corpus requiescat a malis.*

*Nor with a Tomb as with a Haven blest,  
Where, after Life, the Corps in Peace may rest.*

As Nature demonstrates to us, that several dead things retain yet an occult Sympathy and relation to Life; Wine changes its flavour and complexion in Cellars, according to the changes and seasons of the Vine from whence it came; and the Flesh of Venison alters its condition and taste in the powd'ring-tub, according to the seasons of the living Flesh of its kind, as it is observed by the curious.