

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE
ESSAYS

Book 1 · Chapter 9



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Of Lyers

There is not a Man living, whom it would so little become to speak from Memory as my self, for I have none at all; and do not think that the World has again another so treacherous as mine. My other Faculties are all very ordinary and mean; but in this I think my self very singular, and to such a Degree of Excellence, that (besides the inconvenience I suffer by it, which merits something) I deserve methinks, to be famous for, and to have more than a common Reputation: though, in truth the necessary use of Memory consider'd, *Plato* had Reason when he call'd it a great and powerful Goddess. In my Country, when they would decypher a Man that has no Sense, they say, such a one has no Memory; and when I complain of mine, they seem not believe I am in earnest, and presently reprove me, as tho I accus'd my self for a Fool, not discerning the Difference betwixt Memory and Understanding; wherein they are very wide of my Intention, and do me Wrong: Experience rather daily shewing us on the contrary, that a strong Memory is commonly coupled with infirm Judgment: and they do me moreover (who am so perfect in nothing as the good Friend) at the same time a greater Wrong in this, that they make the same Words which accuse my Infirmary, represent me for an ingrateful Person; wherein they bring my Integrity and good Nature into Question upon the account of my Memory, and from a natural Imperfection, unjustly derive a defect of Conscience. He has forgot, says one, this Request, or that Promise; he no more remembers his Friends, he has forgot, to say or do, or to conceal such and such a thing for my sake. And truly, I am apt enough to forget many things, but to neglect any thing my Friend has given me in charge, I never do it. And it should be enough, methinks, that I feel the Misery and Inconvenience of it, without branding me with Malice, a Vice so much a Stranger, and so contrary to my Nature. However, I derive these Comforts from my Infirmary: first, that it is an Evil from which Principally I have found reason to correct a worse, that would easily enough have grown upon me; namely, Ambition; this Defect being intolerable in those who take upon them the Negotiations of the World, an Employment of the greatest Honour and Trust among Men: secondly, that (as several like Examples in the Progress of Nature demonstrate to us) she has fortified me in my other Faculties, proportionably as she has unfurnish'd me in

this; I should otherwise have been apt implicately to have repos'd my Wit and Judgment upon the bare Report of other Men, without ever setting them to work upon any Inquisition whatever, had the strange Inventions and Opinions of the Authors I have read, been ever been present with me by the Benefit of Memory: thirdly, That by this Means I am not so talkative, for the Magazine of the Memory is ever better furnish'd with matter than that of the Invention; and had mine been faithful to me, I had ere this, deaf'd all my Friends with my eternal Babble, the Subjects themselves rowing and stirring up the little Faculty I have of handling, and applying them, heating and extending my Discourse. 'Tis a great Imperfection, and what I have observ'd in several of my intimate Friends, who, as their Memories supply them with a present an entire Review of things, derive their Narrative from so remote a Fountain, and crowd them with so many impertinent Circumstances, that though the Story be good in it self, they make a shift to spoil it; and if otherwise, you are either to curse the Strength of their Memory, or the Weakness of their Judgment: and it is a hard thing to close up a Discourse, and to cut it short, when you have once in, and have a great deal more to say. Neither is there any thing wherein the Force and Readiness of a Horse is so much seen, as in a round, graceful, and sudden stop; and I see even those who are pertinent enough, who would, but cannot stop short in their Career: for whilst they are seeking out a handsome Period to conclude the Sence, they talk at random, and are so perplex'd, and entangled in their own Eloquence, that they know not what they say. But above all, old Men, who yet retain the Memory of things past, and forget how often they have told them, are most dangerous Company for this fault; and I have known Stories from the Mouth of a Man of very great Quality, otherwise very pleasant in themselves, become very troublesome, by being a hundred times repeated over and over again. The fourth Obligation I have to this infirm Memory of mine, is, that by this means I less remember the Injuries I have receiv'd; insomuch, that (as the Ancient said) I should have a *Protocole*, a Register of Injuries, or a Prompter, like *Darius*, who, that he might not forget the Offence he had receiv'd from those of *Athens*, so oft as he sat down to Dinner, order'd one of his Pages three times to whoop in his Ear, *Sir, Remember the Athenians*: and also, the Places which I revisit, and the Books I read over again, still smile upon me with a fresh Novelty. It is not without good Reason said, That he who has not a good Memory should never take upon him the Trade of Lying. I know very well, that the *Grammarians* distinguish betwixt an *Untruth* and a *Lye*, and say, that to tell an *Untruth* is to tell a thing that is false, but that we ourselves believe to be true; and that to *Lye*, is to tell a thing which we know in our Conscience to be utterly false and untrue; and it is of this last sort of Lyers only that I now speak. Now these do either wholly contrive and invent the Untruths they utter, or so alter and disguise a true Story, that it always ends in a Lye; and when they disguise and often alter the same Story according to their own Fancy, 'tis very hard for them at one time or another to escape being trap'd, by reason that the real Truth of the Thing having first taken Possession of the Memory, and being there lodg'd, and imprinted by the way of Knowledge and Science, it will be ever ready to present it self to the Imagination, and to shoulder out any Falshood of their own contriving, which cannot there have so sure and settled Footing as the other; and the Circumstances of the first true Knowledge evermore running in their

Minds, will be apt to make them forget those that are illegitimate, and only forg'd by their own Fancy. In what they wholly invent, forasmuch as there is no contrary Impression to jostle their Invention, there seems to be less danger of tripping; and yet even this also, by reason it is a vain Body, and without any other Foundation that fancy only, is very apt to escape the Memory, if they be not careful to make themselves very perfect in their Tale. Of which I have had very Pleasant Experience, at the Expense of such as Profess only to form, and accommodate their Speech to the Affair they have in hand, or to the Humour of the Person with whom they have to do; for the Circumstances to which these men stick not to enslave their Consciences; and their Faith being subject to several Changes, their Language must accordingly vary: from whence it happens, that of the same thing they tell one Man, that it is this, and another that it is that, giving it several Forms and Colours; which Men, if they once come to conferr Notes, and find out the Cheat, what becomes of this fine Art? To which may be added, that they must of Necessity very often ridiculously trap themselves; for, what Memory can be sufficient to retain so many different Shapes as they have forg'd upon one and the same Subject? I have known many in my Time, very ambitious of the repute of this fine piece of Discretion; but they do not see, that if there be a Reputation of being wise, there is really no Prudence in it. In plain Truth, Lying is a hatefull and an accursed Vice. We are not Men, nor have other Tye upon one another, but our Word. If we did but discover the Horror and ill Consequences of it, we should pursue it with Fire and Sword, and more justly than other Crimes. I see that Parents commonly, and with Indiscretion enough, correct their Children for little innocent Faults, and torment them for wanton childish Tricks, that have neither Impression, nor tend to any Consequence: whereas, in my Opinion, Lying only, and (what is of something a lower Form) Stomach, are the Faults which are to be severely whip'd out of them, both in their Infancy and Progress of the Vices, which will otherwise grow up and increase with them; and after a Tongue has once got the Knack of lying, 'tis not to be imagined how impossible it is to reclaim it. Whence it comes to pass, that we see some, who are otherwise very honest Men, so subject to this Vice. I have an honest Lad to my Taylor, who I never knew guilty of one Truth, no not when it had been to his Advantage. If *Falshood* had, like *Truth*, but one Face only, we should be upon better Terms; for we should then take the contrary to what the Lyer says for certain Truth; but the Reverse of *Truth* has a hundred thousand Figures, and a Field indefinite without Bound or Limit. The *Pythagoreans* make *Good* to be certain and finite, and *Evil*, infinite and uncertain; there are a thousand ways to miss the White, there is only one to hit it. For my own part, I have this Vice in so great horror, that I am not sure I could prevail with my Conscience to secure my self from the most manifest and extream Danger, by an impudent and solemn Lye. An ancient Father says, *That a dog we know is better Company than a man whose Language we do not understand. Ut externus non alieno sit hominis vice. As a Foreigner, to one that understands not what he says, cannot be said to supply the Place of a Man*, because he can be no Company. And how much less sociable is false Speaking than silence? King *Francis* the First bragg'd, that he had, by this means, non-plus'd *Francisco Taverna*, the Ambassador of *Francisco Sforza*, Duke of *Milan*, a Man very famous for his Eloquence in those days. This Gentleman had been sent to excuse his Master to his Majesty about a

thing of very great Consequence; which was this: King *Francis*, to maintain evermore some intelligence in *Italy*, out of which he had lately been driven, and particularly with the Dutchy of *Milan*, had thought it (to that end) convenient to have evermore a Gentleman on his Behalf to lie Leiger in the Court of that Duke; an Ambassador in Effect, but in outward Appearance no other than a private Person who pretended to reside there upon the single Account of his own particular Affairs; which was so carried, by reason that the Duke, much more depending upon the Emperour, especially at a time when he was in a Treaty of Marriage with his Neece, Daughter to the King of *Denmark*, and since Dowager of *Lorraine*, could not own any Friendship or Intelligence with us, but very much to his own Prejudice. For this Commission then one *Merveille* a *Milanois* Gentleman, and a Querry to the King, being thought very fit, he was accordingly dispatch'd thither with private Letters of Credence, his Instructions of Ambassador, and other Letters of Recommendation to the Duke about his own private Concerns, the better to colour the Business; and so long continued in that Court, that the Emperour at last had some Incling of his real Employment there, and complain'd of it to the Duke, which was the Occasion of what followed after, as we suppose; which was, that under Pretence of some Murther by him committed, his Tryal was in two days dispatch'd, and his Head in the Night struck off in Prison. Signior *Francisco* then being upon this Account, come to the Court of *France*, and prepar'd with a long counterfeit Story to excuse a thing of so dangerous Example, (for the King had apply'd himself to all the Princes of *Christendom*, as well as to the Duke himself, to demand Satisfaction for this Outrage upon the Person of his Minister) had his Audience at the morning Council; where, after he had for the Support of his Cause, in a long premeditated Oration, laid open several plausible Justifications of the Fact, he concluded, that the Duke his Master had never look'd upon this *Merveille* for other than a private Gentleman, and his own Subject, who was there only in order to his own Business, neither had he ever liv'd after any other manner; absolutely disowning that he had ever heard he was one of the King's Domestick Servants, or that his Majesty so much as knew him, so far was he from taking him for an Ambassadour. When having made an end, and the King pressing him with several Objections and Demands, and sifting him on all hands, gravell'd him at last, by asking, why then the Execution was performed by Night, and as it were by Stealth? At which the poor confounded Ambassador, the more handsomly to disingage himself, made Answer, That the Duke would have been very loath, out of Respect to his Majesty, that such an Execution should have been perform'd in the Face of the Sun. Any one may guess if he was not well school'd when he came home, for having so grossly trip'd in the Presence of a Prince of so delicate a Nostril as King *Francis*. Pope *Julius* the Second. having sent an Ambassadour to the King of *England*, to animate him against King *Francis*, the Ambassadour having had his Audience, and the King, before he would give a positive Answer, insisting upon the Difficulties he found in setting on foot so great a Preparation as would be necessary to attack so Potent a King, and urging some Reasons to that Effect, the Ambassadour very unseasonably reply'd, that he had also himself considered the same difficulties, and had represented as much to the Pope. From which Saying of his, so directly opposite to the Thing propounded, and the Business he came about, which was immediately to

incite him to War, the King first deriv'd Argument (which also he afterward found to be true) that this Ambassadour, in his own private Bosom, was a Friend to the *French*; of which having advertis'd the Pope, his Estate at his Return home was confiscated and himself very narrowly escap'd the losing of his Head.