

MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

ESSAYS



Book 2 · Chapter 6

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On Practice

'Tis not to be expected that argument and instruction, though we never so voluntarily surrender our belief to what is read to us, should be of force to lead us on so far as to action, if we do not, over and above, exercise and form the soul by experience to the course for which we design it; it will, otherwise, doubtless find itself at a loss when it comes to the pinch of the business. This is the reason why those among the philosophers who were ambitious to attain to a greater excellence, were not contented to await the severities of fortune in the retirement and repose of their own habitations, lest he should have surprised them raw and inexpert in the combat, but sallied out to meet her, and purposely threw themselves into the proof of difficulties. Some of them abandoned riches to exercise themselves in a voluntary poverty; others sought out labor and an austerity of life, to inure them to hardships and inconveniences; others have deprived themselves of their dearest members, as of sight, and of the instruments of generation, lest their too delightful and effeminate service should soften and debauch the stability of their souls. But in dying, which is the greatest work we have to do, practice can give us no assistance at all. A man may by custom fortify himself against pain, shame, necessity, and such-like accidents, but as to death, we can experiment it but once, and are all apprentices when we come to it.

There have, anciently, been men so excellent managers of their time that they have tried even in death itself to relish and taste it, and who have bent their utmost faculties of mind to discover what this passage is, but they are none of them come back to tell us the news:

memo expergitus extat
Frigida quern semel est vitai pausa sequuta.

No one wakes who has once fallen into the cold sleep of death. • LUCR., 3.942

Julius Canus, a noble Roman, of singular constancy and virtue, having been condemned to die by that worthless fellow Caligula, besides many marvellous testimonies that he gave of his resolution, as he was just going to receive the stroke of the executioner, was asked by a philosopher, a friend of his: "Well, Canus, whereabouts is your soul now? what is she

doing? What are you thinking of?" — "I was thinking," replied the other, "to keep myself ready, and the faculties of my mind full settled and fixed, to try if in this short and quick instant of death, I could perceive the motion of the soul when she parts from the body, and whether she has any sentiment at the separation, that I may after come again if I can, to acquaint my friends with it." This man philosophizes not unto death only, but in death itself. What a strange assurance was this, and what bravery of courage, to desire his death should be a lesson to him, and to have leisure to think of other things in so great an affair!

Jus hoc animi morientis habebat.

This mighty power of mind he had dying. • LUC., 8.636

And yet I fancy, there is a certain way of making it familiar to us, and in some sort of making trial what it is. We may gain experience, if not entire and perfect, yet such, at least, as shall not be totally useless to us, and that may render us more confident and more assured. If we cannot overtake it, we may approach it and view it, and if we do not advance so far as the fort, we may at least discover and make ourselves acquainted with the avenues. It is not without reason that we are taught to consider sleep as a resemblance of death.

With how great facility do we pass from waking to sleeping, and with how little concern do we lose the knowledge of light and of ourselves.

Peradventure, the faculty of sleeping would seem useless and contrary to nature, since it deprives us of all action and sentiment, were it not that by it nature instructs us that she has equally made us to die as to live; and in life presents to us the eternal state she reserves for us after it, to accustom us to it and to take from us the fear of it.

But such as have by violent accident fallen into a swoon, and in it have lost all sense, these, methinks, have been very near seeing the true and natural face of death; for as to the moment of the passage, it is not to be feared that it brings with it any pain or displeasure, forasmuch as we can have no feeling without leisure; our sufferings require time, which in death is so short, and so precipitous, that it must necessarily be insensible. They are the approaches that we are to fear, and these may fall within the limits of experience.

Many things seem greater by imagination than they are in effect; I have passed a good part of my life in a perfect and entire health; I say, not only entire, but, moreover, sprightly and wanton. This state, so full of verdure, jollity, and vigor, made the consideration of sickness so formidable to me, that when I came to experience it, I found the attacks faint and easy in comparison with what I had apprehended.

Of this I have daily experience; if I am under the shelter of a warm room, in a stormy and tempestuous night, I wonder how people can live abroad, and am afflicted for those who are out in the fields: if I am there myself, I do not wish to be anywhere else.

This one thing of being always shut up in a chamber I fancied insupportable: but I was presently inured to be so imprisoned a week, nay a month together, in a very weak, disordered, and sad condition; and I have found that, in the time of my health, I much more pitied the sick, than I think myself to be pitied when I am so, and that the force of my imagination enhances near one-half of the essence and reality of the thing. I hope that when I come to die I shall find it the same, and that, after all, it is not worth the pains I take, so much preparation and so much assistance as I call in, to undergo the stroke. But, at all events, we cannot give ourselves too much advantage.

In the time of our third or second troubles (I do not well remember which), going one day abroad to take the air, about a league from my own house, which is seated in the very center of all the bustle and mischief of the late civil wars in France; thinking myself in all security and so near to my retreat that I stood in need of no better equipage, I had taken a horse that went very easy upon his pace, but was not very strong. Being upon my return home, a sudden occasion falling out to make use of this horse in a kind of service that he was not accustomed to, one of my train, a lusty, tall fellow, mounted upon a strong German horse, that had a very ill mouth, fresh and vigorous, to play the brave and set on ahead of his fellows, comes thundering upon full speed in the very track where I was, rushing like a Colossus upon the little man and the little horse, with such a career of strength and weight, that he turned us both over and over, topsy-turvy with our heels in the air: so that there lay the horse overthrown and stunned with the fall, and I ten or twelve paces from him stretched out at length, with my face all battered and broken, my sword which I had had in my hand, above ten paces beyond that, and my belt broken all to pieces, without motion or sense any more than a stock. 'Twas the only swoon I was ever in till that hour in my life. Those who were with me, after having used all the means they could to bring me to myself, concluding me dead, took me up in their arms, and carried me with very much difficulty home to my house, which was about half a French league from thence. On the way, having been for more than two hours given over for a dead man, I began to move and to fetch my breath; for so great abundance of blood was fallen into my stomach, that nature had need to rouse her forces to discharge it. They then raised me upon my feet, where I threw off a whole bucket of clots of blood, as this I did also several times by the way. This gave me so much ease, that I began to recover a little life, but so leisurely and by so small advances, that my first sentiments were much nearer the approaches of death than life,

*Perche, dubbiosa ancor del suo ritorno,
Non s'assicura attonita la mente.*

For the soul, doubtful as to its
return, could not compose itself •
TASSO, GERUS., 12.74

The remembrance of this accident, which is very well imprinted in my memory, so naturally representing to me the image and idea of death, has in some sort reconciled me to that untoward adventure. When I first began to open my eyes, it was with so perplexed, so weak and dead a sight, that I could yet distinguish nothing but only discern the light,

*come quel ch'or apre, or chiude
Gli occhi, mezzo tra' sonno è l'esser desto.*

As to the functions of the soul, they advanced with the same pace and measure with those of the body. I saw myself all bloody, my doublet being stained all over with the blood I had vomited. The first thought that came into my mind was that I had a harquebus shot in my head, and indeed, at the time there were a great many fired round about us. Methought my life but just hung upon my lips: and I shut my eyes, to help, methought, to thrust it out, and took a pleasure in languishing and letting myself go. It was an imagination that only superficially floated upon my soul, as tender and weak as all the rest, but really, not only exempt from anything displeasing, but mixed with that sweetness that people feel when they glide into a slumber.

I believe it is the very same condition those people are in, whom we see swoon with weakness in the agony of death we pity them without cause, supposing them agitated with grievous dolours, or that their souls suffer under painful thoughts. It has ever been my belief, contrary to the opinion of many, and particularly of La Boétie, that those whom we see so subdued and stupefied at the approaches of their end, or oppressed with the length of the disease, or by accident of an apoplexy or falling sickness,

*vi morbi saepe coactus
Ante oculos aliquis nostros, ut fulminis ictu,
Concidit, et spumas agit; ingemit, et tremit artus;
Desipit, extentat nervos, torquetur, anhelat,
Inconstanter, et in jactando membra fatigat.*

or hurt in the head, whom we hear to mutter, and by fits to utter grievous groans; though we gather from these signs by which it seems as if they had some remains of consciousness, and that there are movements of the body; I have always believed, I say, both the body and the soul benumbed and asleep:

Vivit, et est vitæ nescius ipse suæ.

And could not believe that in so great a stupefaction of the members and so great a defection of the senses, the soul could maintain any force within to take cognizance of herself, and that, therefore, they had no tormenting reflections to make them consider and be sensible of the misery of their condition, and consequently were not much to be pitied.

I can, for my part, think of no state so insupportable and dreadful, as to have the soul vivid and afflicted, without means to declare itself; as one should say of such as are sent to execution with their tongues first cut out (were it not that in this kind of dying, the most silent seems to me the most graceful, if accompanied with a grave and constant countenance); or if those miserable prisoners, who fall into the hands of the base hangman soldiers of this age, by whom they are tormented with all sorts of inhuman usage to compel them to some excessive and impossible ransom; kept, in the meantime, in such condition and place, where they have no means of expressing or signifying their thoughts and their misery.

As a man that now opens, now shuts
his eyes, between sleep and waking. •
TASSO, GERUS., 8.26

Often, compelled by the force of
disease, some one as thunderstruck
falls under our eyes, and foams,
groans, and trembles, stretches,
twists, breathes irregularly, and in
paroxysms wears out his strength. •
LUCR., 3.485

He lives, and does not know that he
is alive. • OV., TRI., 1.3.12

The poets have feigned some gods who favor the deliverance of such as suffer under a languishing death:

*hunc ego Diti
Sacrum iussa fero, téque isto corpore solvo.*

both the interrupted words, and the short and irregular answers one gets from them sometimes, by bawling and keeping a clutter about them; or the motions which seem to yield some consent to what we would have them do, are no testimony, nevertheless, that they live, an entire life at least. So it happens to us in the yawning of sleep, before it has fully possessed us, to perceive, as in a dream, what is done about us, and to follow the last things that are said with a perplexed and uncertain hearing which seems but to touch upon the borders of the soul; and to make answers to the last words that have been spoken to us, which have more in them of chance than sense.

Now seeing I have in effect tried it, I have no doubt but I have hitherto made a right judgment; for first, being in a swoon, I labored to rip open the buttons of my doublet with my nails, for my sword was gone; and yet I felt nothing in my imagination that hurt me; for we have many motions in us that do not proceed from our direction,

Semianimesque micant digiti, ferrumque retractant.

so falling people extend their arms before them by a natural impulse, which prompts our limbs to offices and motions without any commission from our reason:

*Falciferos memorant currus abscindere membra,
Ut tremere in terra videatur ab artubus id quod
Decidit abscissum; cum mens tamen atque hominis vis
Mobilitate mali, non quit sentire dolorem.*

My stomach was so oppressed with the coagulated blood, that my hands moved to that part, of their own voluntary motion, as they frequently do to the part that itches, without being directed by our will. There are several animals, and even men, in whom one may perceive the muscles to stir and tremble after they are dead. Every one experimentally knows that there are some members which grow stiff and flag without his leave. Now, those passions which only touch the outward bark of us, cannot be said to be ours: to make them so, there must be a concurrence of the whole man; and the pains which are felt by the hand or the foot while we are sleeping, are none of ours.

As I drew near my own house, where the alarm of my fall was already got before me, and my family were come out to meet me, with the hubbub usual in such cases, not only did I make some little answer to some questions which were asked me; but they moreover tell me, that I was sufficiently collected to order them to bring a horse to my wifewhom on the road, I saw struggling and tiring herself which is hilly and rugged. This should seem to proceed from a soul its functions; but it was nothing so

I bidden offer this sacred thing to Pluto, and from that body dismiss thee. • VERG., AEN., 4.702

Half-dead fingers grope about, and grasp again the sword. • VERG., AEN., 10.396

They relate that scythe-bearing chariots mow off limbs, so that they quiver on the ground; and yet the mind of him from whom the limb is taken by the swiftness of the blow feels no pain. • LUCR., 3.642

with me. I knew not what I said or did, and they were nothing but idle thoughts in the clouds, that were stirred up by the senses of the eyes and ears, and proceeded not from me. I knew not for all that, whence I came or whither I went, neither was I capable to weigh and consider what was said to me: these were light effects, that the senses produced of themselves as of custom; what the soul contributed was in a dream, lightly touched, licked and bedewed by the soft impression of the senses.

Notwithstanding, my condition was, in truth, very easy and quiet; I had no affliction upon me, either for others or myself; it was an extreme languor and weakness, without any manner of pain. I saw my own house, but knew it not. When they had put me to bed I found an inexpressible sweetness in that repose; for I had been desperately tugged and lugged by those poor people who had taken the pains to carry me upon their arms a very great and a very rough way, and had in so doing all quite tired out themselves, twice or thrice one after another. They offered me several remedies, but I would take none, certainly believing that I was mortally wounded in the head. And, in earnest, it had been a very happy death, for the weakness of my understanding deprived me of the faculty of discerning, and that of my body of the sense of feeling; I was suffering myself to glide away so sweetly and after so soft and easy a manner, that I scarce find any other action less troublesome than that was. But when I came again to myself and to resume my faculties,

Ut tandem sensus convaluere mei,

When at length my lost senses again
returned. • OV., TRI., 1.3.14

which was two or three hours after, I felt myself on a sudden involved in terrible pain, having my limbs battered and ground with my fall, and was so ill for two or three nights after, that I thought I was once more dying again, but a more painful death, having concluded myself as good as dead before, and to this hour am sensible of the bruises of that terrible shock. I will not here omit, that the last thing I could make them beat into my head, was the memory of this accident, and I had it over and over again repeated to me, whither I was going, from whence I came, and at what time of the day this mischance befell me, before I could comprehend it. As to the manner of my fall, that was concealed from me in favor to him who had been the occasion, and other flim-flams were invented. But a long time after, and the very next day that my memory began to return and to represent to me the state wherein I was, at the instant that I perceived this horse coming full drive upon me (for I had seen him at my heels, and gave myself for gone, but this thought had been so sudden, that fear had had no leisure to introduce itself) it seemed to me like a flash of lightning that had pierced my soul, and that I came from the other world.

This long story of so light an accident would appear vain enough, were it not for the knowledge I have gained by it for my own use; for I do really find, that to get acquainted with death, needs no more but nearly to approach it. Every one, as Plinysays, is a good doctrine to himself, provided he be capable of discovering himself near at hand. Here, this is not my doctrine, 'tis my study; and is not the lesson of another, but my own.

And if I communicate it, it ought not to be ill taken, for that which is of use to me, may also, peradventure, be useful to another. As to the rest, I spoil nothing, I make use of nothing but my own; and if I play the fool, 'tis at my own expense, and nobody else is concerned in it; for 'tis a folly that will die with me, and that no one is to inherit. We hear but of two or three of the ancients, who have beaten this path, and yet I cannot say if it was after this manner, knowing no more of them but their names. No one since has followed the track: 'tis a rugged road, more so than it seems, to follow a pace so rambling and uncertain, as that of the soul; to penetrate the dark profundities of its intricate internal windings; to choose and lay hold of so many little nimble motions; 'tis a new and extraordinary undertaking, and that withdraws us from the common and most recommended employments of the world. 'Tis now many years since that my thoughts have had no other aim and level than myself, and that I have only pried into and studied myself: or, if I study any other thing, 'tis to apply it to or rather in myself. And yet I do not think it a fault, if, as others do by other much less profitable sciences, I communicate what I have learned in this, though I am not very well pleased with my own progress. There is no description so difficult, nor doubtless of so great utility, as that of a man's self: and withal, a man must curl his hair and set out and adjust himself, to appear in public: now I am perpetually tricking myself out, for I am eternally upon my own description. Custom has made all speaking of a man's self vicious, and positively interdicts it, in hatred to the boasting that seems inseparable from the testimony men give of themselves.

Instead of blowing the child's nose, this is to take his nose off altogether,

In vitium ducit culpæ fuga.

The escape from a fault leads into a vice. • HOR., ARS P., 31

I think the remedy worse than the disease. But, allowing it to be true that it must of necessity be presumption to entertain people with discourses of one's self, I ought not, pursuing my general design, to forbear an action that publishes this infirmity of mine, nor conceal the fault which I not only practise but profess. Notwithstanding, to speak my thought freely, I think that the custom of condemning wine, because some people will be drunk, is itself to be condemned; a man cannot abuse anything but what is good in itself; and I believe that this rule has only regard to the popular vice. They are bits for calves, with which neither the saints whom we hear speak so highly of themselves, nor the philosophers, nor the divines will be curbed; neither will I, who am as little the one as the other, If they do not write of it expressly, at all events, when the occasions arise, they don't hesitate to put themselves on the public highway. Of what does Socrates treat more largely than of himself? To what does he more direct and address the discourses of his disciples, than to speak of themselves, not of the lesson in their book, but of the essence and motion of their souls? We confess ourselves religiously to God and our confessor; as our neighbors, do to all the people. But some will answer that we there speak nothing but accusation against ourselves; why then, we say all; for our very virtue itself is faulty and penetrable. My trade and art is to live; he that forbids me to speak according to my own sense, experience, and practice, may as well enjoin an architect not to speak of building according to his own knowledge, but according to that of his neighbor; according to the

knowledge of another, and not according to his own. If it be vainglory for a man to publish his own virtues, why does not Cicero prefer the eloquence of Hortensius, and Hortensius that of Cicero? Peradventure they mean that I should give testimony of myself by works and effects, not barely by words. I chiefly paint my thoughts, a subject void of form and incapable of operative production; 'tis all that I can do to couch it in this airy body of the voice; the wisest and devoutest men have lived in the greatest care to avoid all apparent effects. Effects would more speak of fortune than of me; they manifest their own office and not mine, but uncertainly and by conjecture; patterns of some one particular virtue. I expose myself entire; 'tis a *skeleton* where, at one view, the veins, muscles, and tendons are apparent, every of them in its proper place; here the effects of a cold; there of the heart beating, very dubiously.

I do not write my own acts, but myself and my essence. I am of opinion that a man must be very cautious how he values himself, and equally conscientious to give a true report, be it better or worse, impartially. If I thought myself perfectly good and wise, I would rattle it out to some purpose. To speak less of one's self than what one really is is folly, not modesty; and to take that for current pay which is under a man's value is pusillanimity and cowardice, according to, Aristotle. No virtue assists itself with falsehood; truth is never matter of error. To speak more of one's self than is really true is not always mere presumption; 'tis, moreover, very often folly; to, be immeasurably pleased with what one is, and to fall into an indiscreet self-love, is in my opinion the substance of this vice. The most sovereign remedy to cure it, is to do quite contrary to what these people direct who, in forbidding men to speak of themselves, consequently, at the same time, interdict thinking of themselves too. Pride dwells in the thought; the tongue can have but a very little share in it. They fancy that to think of one's self is to be delighted with one's self; to frequent and converse with one's self, to be overindulgent; but this excess springs only in those who take but a superficial view of themselves, and dedicate their main inspection to their affairs; who call it mere reverie and idleness to occupy one's self with one's self, and the building one's self up a mere building of castles in the air; who look upon themselves as a third person only, a stranger.

If any one be in rapture with his own knowledge, looking only on those below him, let him but turn his eye upward toward past ages, and his pride will be abated, when he shall there find so many thousand wits that trample him under foot. If he enter into a flattering presumption of his personal valor, let him but recollect the lives of Scipio, Epaminondas; so many armies, so many nations, that leave him so far behind them. No particular quality can make any man proud, that will at the same time put the many other weak and imperfect ones he has in the other scale, and the nothingness of human condition to make up the weight.

Because Socrates had alone digested to purpose the precept of his god, "to know himself," and by that study arrived at the perfection of setting himself at nought, he only was reputed worthy the title of a sage. Whosoever shall so know himself, let him boldly speak it out.

MONTAIGNE'S SOURCES

Hor., Ars P.	Horace, <i>Art of Poetry</i>
Luc.	Lucan, <i>Civil War</i>
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>On the Nature of Things</i>
Ov., Tri.	Ovid, <i>Tristia</i>
Tasso, Gerus.	Tasso, Torquato, <i>Jerusalem Delivered</i>
Verg., Aen.	Virgil, <i>Aeneid</i>